Crossfire (Redux)

by thricepiercedpirate

Summary

Following a shocking revelation shortly after their entry into the New World, the Straw Hat Pirates discover the painful truth- the more they gain, the more they have to lose. LuZo/ZoLu; au mpreg darkfic. Please see opening author's note for specific warnings.

Notes

Opening Author's Note

The summary of this fic states it's mpreg, but I'm willing to bet it's one unlike any other you've encountered- or at least that's what I've been told by many of my readers. The reason for this is likely because I'm quite different from the majority of mpreg authors in that I'm a married transgender man with two biological children, and my work's beta-read by my cis husband.

The original version of this story was written before I came to understand my gender identity or got pregnant for the first time, but it was instrumental in both of these events. The research I completed for the original version and its subsequent development allowed me to explore and confront a lot of conflicting feelings I had about pregnancy and childbirth- which stemmed largely from what I hadn't realized was severe body dysphoria.

I wrote the revision after coming out to my husband and several close friends, starting before
my second child was conceived and concluding about a year and a half after his birth. Although I briefly contemplated rewriting Zoro as transgender like myself, I ultimately chose to leave his anatomy as depicted in the first version, namely because so much of this fic is based on my personal experiences, I couldn't handle writing a character with whom I identified so strongly as trans in addition to undergoing all the trauma and resulting problems I myself struggle with on a daily basis. The story was just as difficult to write as some people have told me they found it to read, and the sliver of representation I would have gained wasn't worth the damage I might've caused myself in the process.

That said, I'm immensely satisfied with how I depicted the following situation(s). I set out to write a fic that handled these topics in a way I hadn't previously seen dealt justice, and I feel that I've done so fairly well, although it's ultimately up to you- the reader- to agree or disagree as you see fit.

Warnings include: mpreg, sex, violence, medical/surgical imagery, torture, sexual assault, ptsd, post-partum depression, anxiety and panic attacks, self-harm, discussion of suicide, and character death.
Standing on the lawn deck's starboard side with white-knuckled fingers clutching the railing as though he expects the Sunny to suddenly lurch out from under his feet without warning, Zoro stares down at the water churning alongside the ship. His mind's in a similar state, tumbling from one unfinished thought to the next, all with the same underlying current of thought surging beneath.

This is a dream. It's GOTTA be a dream- just some fucked up nightmare I'm having 'cause I drank too damn much before bed. It's not real. It CAN'T be real. Just too much booze on top of too much-

Unfortunate choice of thoughts; the bitter taste of alcohol's enough to leave him retching these days, but apparently just THINKING about it's more than enough to turn his stomach, because while faint chatter's reaching his ears - members of the crew greeting one another as they emerge from various doors and hatchways - he's oblivious to their banter, eye squeezing shut to block out the rolling waves because he can feel his gorge rising thick and acidic in his throat.

"Zoro?" A voice abruptly questions within centimeters of his ear, accompanied by a body colliding energetically with the rail beside him. "Oi, Zoro!"

Luffy's abrupt appearance at his elbow startles the hell out of him. His natural reflexes, not to mention his blasted observational haki, have been distressingly unreliable during the last few weeks. Extremely annoyed and feeling somewhat sheepish about his lapsed sense of awareness, Zoro automatically raises a hand to deliver a half-hearted swat to his captain's shoulder.

The ship chooses that moment to drop with a sickening plunging motion into the shallow trough between two swells, and the green-haired man staggers, bumping against the younger pirate and groping frantically for a new handhold. For a second or two, he's convinced he's definitely going to puke - either down the Sunny's Adam wood planks or, if he's really unlucky, on his own boots - but to his vast relief, all that emerges from his parted lips is a smothered, watery-sounding belch.

"Jeez." Blinking down at the fist knotted in his shirt front, Luffy withdraws the arm he's thrown instinctively around his swordsman's waist and gives him a cautious pat on the back. "I thought you were gonna go headfirst over the rail! Or just spew all over the place. Or maybe that and THEN go over the-" He gives his head a slight shake. "Everybody's headed to the dining hall, and Chopper said he's ready whenever you are, so..."

"Guess I can't talk you guys out of this, huh?"

"Zoro-"

"I know, I know." He wets his lips and casts one last look over the sea before pushing away from the railing and heading towards the staircase, motioning for his concerned lover to follow. "C'mon. Let's get this over with before I lose my fucking nerve."

xxx

At least Sencho held off 'til after breakfast and didn't just blurt it out first thing in the damn morning, Zoro grudgingly admits to himself as he watches their nakama claim chairs at the table as well as a stool or two at the counter while the captain fidgets with the den den mushi perched on the stand beside the sofa bench where he and his swordsman have chosen their seats.

Luffy's gaze keeps darting between the harried-looking snail, the man sitting stiffly beside him, and the anxious reindeer hovering just inside the open infirmary door. The dark-haired pirate's
uncharacteristically quiet but undeniably excited, unable to prevent the corners of his mouth from periodically twitching upwards into a smile.

It's an expression that's wearing on Zoro's already frazzled nerves, making him want to seize the rubber man by his neck and shake him violently.

**OF COURSE** he's smiling. **HE's not wondering if he's gonna make it to the fucking trash can if the shitty cook gets too close.** He grits his teeth, willing the turbulence in his gut to subside, but his nostrils can detect the stench of tobacco clinging to Sanji's suit from even a yard away. The blond smells like an ashtray, and combined with the ship's gentle but steady swaying-

He glances over the sofa's arm for the fourth or fifth time, assuring himself the waste basket's still there and hoping like hell he doesn't need it.

Chopper creeps into the room, armed with the same thick sheaf of papers from the night before, when he'd cornered Zoro in the otherwise deserted men's quarters and turned the entire known world upside-down with a few nervously-spoken words. He deposits them on the table, disappears into his office once more, and emerges with a rack of equally familiar test tubes that clatter softly in his trembling hooves. Every vial contains the same blue liquid, which glows brilliant cerulean in the sunlight streaming through the porthole windows.

Zoro exhales shakily at the sight, resting his elbows on his thighs and leaning slightly forward to rub his face into his palms.

A hand grips his knee, squeezing, and he raises his head to find his captain peering over at him, every trace of ill-concealed smile banished and countenance now utterly serious.

"What is all this?" Nami asks, extending a finger to tap one well-manicured nail on the stack of parchment. Beside her, Robin's studying the array of phials with an expression of keen interest, brow slightly furrowed. "Chopper?"

"It's- well, you see-" The doctor's wringing his hooves in agitation as he struggles for an explanation, shooting a pleading look towards the only other people in the room who understand his difficulty. "I- I don't know how else to say this, but-

"Zoro's pregnant," Luffy announces without preamble, giving the swordsman's knee another firm squeeze. "Chopper ran a whole bunch of tests and they say Zoro's pregnant and he's got a baby-OUR baby- growing inside him."

His abrupt proclamation's greeted by silence and blank stares.

This isn't happening, Zoro thinks again numbly, but he can't pull his gaze away from those blue tubes. For the first time in his life, he's too uncertain- too EMBARRASSED- to look into his crew mates' faces, although he's not sure what he's more afraid he'll see there: amusement, disbelief or disgust. They all seem equally disheartening, and with every second the silence stretches on, he can feel more heat flushing his cheeks. I knew this was a mistake.

"Very funny." Nami says finally, shaking her head. "Zoro looks so mortified, I'd almost believe you if that wasn't biologically impossible." Sounding bemused, yes- but mostly exasperated.

"Well- yeah, I mean, he's a guy and guys don't usually do that, and I don't know how it happened and neither does he, but Chopper's tests say we made a b-"

"Luffy." Their navigator's voice is deceptively soft but rife with irritation. "I've got a lot of work to do. These currents won't chart themselves. So unless you'd like to stop playing games and tell us
"I'm not playing! I'm serious!" The captain insists, rising with arms spread in a gesture of frustration. He points towards his increasingly red-faced swordsman's midsection. "There's a baby in there, and I dunno exactly how it got there, but it's mine! Mine and Zoro's!" He whirls towards Chopper, scowling indignantly. "Tell 'em!"

"I- I'm afraid Luffy's r-"

"Marimo," Sanji begins, leaving his spot behind the bar to wander closer, arms folded contumuously across his chest. "What the hell's going on? What kind of stupid stunt are you and this shitty Gomu trying to-"

The pungent scent of cigarettes precedes the cook, wafted forward by the movement of his body, and Zoro twitches back, trying to escape the odor, but it's too late. His diaphragm spasms and he gags, flailing wildly over the sofa arm for the waste basket and sending it rolling across the floor when his fumbling fingers knock it sideways.

Lightning quick, Luffy whips out an arm to catch and reel it back, turning his head away with a grimace as the older pirate unceremoniously shoves his face below the circular rim and begins to vomit, although he stubbornly refuses to relinquish his grip. "See?" He turns his defiant gaze on Nami, whose mouth is gaping in dismay and surprise. "The BABY's what's been making him sick!"

"I thought he had a stomach bug," Usopp protests weakly from where he's risen to stand beside Franky. "Or-"

"Don't you dare say food poisoning," Sanji interrupts coldly, his visible eye twitching as he glares at the sniper. "Like I keep telling Chopper, there's nothing wrong with my cooking, so if you're suggesting-"

"It's not a bug, it's a baby! My baby!" Luffy protests, scowling with indignation at Usopp, who's raising both hands in a submissive gesture on finding himself under simultaneous attack.

"I NEVER use expired ingredients, and I always- ALWAYS- follow proper culinary procedures preparing meat so even you ungrateful, shitty bastards don't end up with worms or w-"

Worse, the cook's clearly about to conclude, but his rant's disrupted by a strangled "oh god" from Zoro that's immediately followed by another bout of noisy, violent expulsion.

Franky raises his shades with a finger, staring at their green-haired nakama's heaving shoulders in horrified fascination. "Damn. You okay, Haramaki-bro?"

"I must admit, from what little I know, I believe Zoro-san's providing us with- ah- quite a convincing display," Brook offers hesitantly.

"It- it's not a display." The crew's doctor takes a deep breath, gathering himself. "He's exhibiting a typical symptom of pregnancy, and it's NOT food poisoning OR any other known malady. I'm sure of it! I ran tests for EVERYTHING."

"Your investigation has been rather thorough, hasn't it?" Robin remarks, drawing the attention of everyone save the choking, sputtering man on the sofa and his partner, who's rubbing his back while murmuring softly enough to be rendered inaudible and regarding him with worried eyes. The historian's been leafing through the packet of documents she's pulled across the tabletop. "Your notes indicate you performed quantitative studies in addition to the initial qualitative tests?"
"YES." Chopper straightens, confidence bolstered by the familiar terminology. "When the urine tests all showed positive results, I drew another blood sample and ran a beta hCG analysis."

"Wait, I'm confused." Nami's shaking her head, struggling to process what the physician's telling them. "You did what?"

"Human chorionic gonadotropin is a hormone that's produced by both sexes, but it's normally found in extremely small quantities. Just a few milli-units per milliliter."

Robin raises the sheet of parchment she's been scanning, indicating a handwritten number that's denoted by several exclamation marks. "And this is the concentration of hCG you discovered in our swordsman's most recent blood sample? It's very high."

"It's ASTRONOMICALLY high," Chopper agrees, eyes wide. "In a sexually active human female, anything higher than a twenty-five's considered proof of a potentially viable pregnancy." He rises on tiptoe to place a hoof just below his own printing. "Zoro's hCG tested at almost THREE THOUSAND TIMES THAT VALUE."

"Seventy-five thousand, correct?"

Nami raises her head from peering at the paper in Robin's hand to smile weakly at Brook. "Pretty darn close."

"In the beginning I was concerned about the possibility of a tumor," Chopper admits hesitantly in a much lower voice after glancing over his shoulder to make sure neither swordsman nor captain are listening too closely. "-because high hCG levels are a common side effect of testicular cancer, but I've been tracking them for nearly a week and they're continuing to double every forty-eight hours. That's NOT consistent with cancer, although it IS consistent with pregnancy. And in conjuncture with his other symptoms?" He sighs, shoulders drooping in helplessness and confusion. "I don't understand how or why it's possible, but the results are irrefutable."

"How far-" Nami runs the fingers of both hands through her unbound hair, ruffling the fringe framing her face. "Ugh. I can't believe I'm asking this." She clears her throat. "How far along is he?"

"Can't be that far gone," Sanji mutters and shrugs unapologetically when heads turn. "I mean, Marimo doesn't look any different than usual. So if he's really-" He snorts. "Well, you'd figure it would start- y'know- showing eventually, right?"

Forefinger running down the right-hand column of the chart she's discovered on the following page, her lips moving as she reads silently to herself, Robin pauses as she quickly reaches a conclusion. "I'm afraid we won't find any answers here. The ranges vary rather widely."

"Yes. Based on his hCG levels, we're looking at a first trimester pregnancy dating anywhere between seven and twelve weeks." Chopper utters a small frustrated huffing sound. "A difference of more than a month."

"Great. So what the hell do we do next? Start planning a freaking nursery? Throw him a goddamn baby shower?"

The reindeer doesn't answer the cook right away, choosing instead to shuffle awkwardly through his remaining paperwork. "... I don't- I don't know. If he decides to have it- well- there's a lot to consider. And there's no way he'd deliver naturally, so..."

"If he- oi?" Usopp prods, sounding a little taken aback. "If?"
"I know Zoro might not-" The reindeer looks away, ears flattening slightly. "There's... another option... if he decides he doesn't want to go through with-" He bites his lip. "I promised him, whatever he wanted to do, I'd-" His gaze drops to the floor.

"I understand how you feel," Robin tells him. "-but Kenshi-san needs to do what's right for him." She reaches down and touches her younger crew mate's cheek, gently guiding him to turn and look at the sofa, where their captain's finally discarded the waste basket to take Zoro's closer hand in one of his, lacing their fingers together as he solicitously blots beads of sweat from the discomposed swordsman's face with the sleeve he's tugged over the opposite wrist. "Although, unless I'm greatly mistaken, I think his decision's going to surprise you."

xxx

Shaken by the ferocity of his nausea and claiming a desperate need for some fresh air, Zoro exits the dining hall shortly thereafter, Luffy following close at his heels.

The majority of their crew mates follow, still reeling from the unlikely revelation, and it's not long before the day's earlier pursuits have been completely forgotten in favor of determining how their katana-wielding nakama's very muscular, very MASCULINE body is inexplicably harboring the beginning of new life.

"Ah, Franky, I'm afraid that's actually highly unlikely," Robin states from her seat near the bottom of the staircase without looking up from the thick medical textbook resting in her lap. "-given our swordsman is still capable of swimming."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess you're right." The cyborg frowns, scratching his head. "Alright people, I'm open to suggestions."

"Oi, Marimo, you didn't happen to meet some weirdo with purple hair and a really big head, did you...?"

"Hell no. I don't make it a habit to hang out with mutants like your freaky okama friends, you shitty cook."

"Those people are not my-"

"Nah, if Zoro ran into Iva-chan, he'd have boobs like Nami and Robin. Probably smaller 'cause he's all muscle, but he'd still be- y'know- bouncy 'n stuff," Luffy explains, making grabby cupping motions at his own chest to demonstrate. "And he'd be missing some other bits too, but those were definitely all there and working the other night when-"

"OKAY," Usopp interrupts loudly. "So we know he definitely didn't accidentally eat some weird new devil's fruit or get himself gender-swapped." The sniper frowns at the swordsman, stumped, then raises an eyebrow in consideration. "Maybe he's budding like a hydra. Or part of him- a finger or toe or something's gonna fall off and grow into another Zoro. Like a sea star."

"Or like a moss ball, perhaps?" Brook asks, chortling.

Sanji bursts into laughter. "Oh shit, why the hell didn't I think of that?"

"I hate you guys. You're a bunch of fucking assholes," Zoro grumbles, slinking away to join Robin on the lower steps because she's currently the only one not making jokes at his expense. The historian smiles encouragingly upon his approach and shifts over to make a bit more room beside her, patting his arm reassuringly before she returns to her reading.
Relocating to the staircase also increases the distance between him and the terrible reek of the cook's freshly-lit cigarette, which is making his empty, queasy stomach continue doing nasty little flips and flops like it's full of tiny but rambunctious sea kings. He rubs his temple, grimacing. *Shit's giving me a killer headache too.*

Luffy, guiltily stifling his snickering and casting a marginally reproachful look at the other men, hurries after the swordsman to scrunch himself between the older pirate's feet, wrapping his arms around one black-clad leg and resting his chin on the knee. "Zoro, you don't really mean that, do you? That you hate us?" Concern's once more clouding his normally bright gaze. "You don't- Zoro doesn't hate ME, does he?"

"No, why would-? Look, it's not like you knew this was gonna happen. It's just-" He sighs, rubbing his forehead with the heel of one hand and wishing his captain didn't sometimes take things so literally. "It's just really hard to wrap my brain around, okay? I mean, I'm thinking I've got the flu or food poisoning or something 'cause I feel like crap, but it keeps dragging on and on and not getting any better, so Chopper runs a shitload of tests, and then he tells me I'm- nrrgh, I mean, what the hell? HOW the hell?"

They all know the Grandline, and the New World especially, is a fucking strange place where incredibly bizarre shit happens. They've all heard the stories and they've all personally witnessed it again and again during their travels, and so much of what they've seen and been told defies any rational explanation. And after all that, the odds of finding a rational explanation for THIS-?

Zoro grimaces, wishing his crewmates would stop speculating about how he and Luffy broke the laws of science and start showing a little more interest in helping him decide what to do about it. Not that it seems like there's a whole lot of options available. While he's seriously hoping this little wrinkle in the fabric of his reality will just conveniently go away on its own, he doubts he'll get that lucky. Which leaves him with only two real choices; he can either accept his situation and see it through to its conclusion- or refuse and insist that Chopper remove the organism that's developing inside him.

It's a more difficult decision than he anticipated.

*I didn't ask for this, and I didn't- okay, I DON'T know if I really want this, but... it's not like fighting some other guy with a sword. The thing in there- it can't fight back. It's just a-

"Neh, Zoro?" Luffy asks, startling him from his morbid thoughts. "Would-" To the swordsman's amazement, the rubber man breaks eye contact and stirs uneasily, color rising on his face as he traces circles on Zoro's thigh with his pointer finger. "I- I'm kinda- well, okay, I'm actually really happy, but I know that's probably not how you feel right now, so... I just wanna know... would Zoro be mad if I said I want him to have the baby?"

"You want-" The older pirate's breath catches in his throat and he raises a hand to run unsteady fingers through his hair, thinking it's unnerving how often his captain seems capable of reading minds.

Since reluctantly breaking the news to Luffy last night - largely at Chopper's insistence - Zoro hasn't quite known what to make of his lover's reaction to their situation. He'd expected- and dreaded- a great deal of over-exuberant flailing and shouting, but he'd gotten the exact opposite. His captain had responded with thoughtful deliberation, bombarding their doctor with a stream of surprisingly serious questions that he, in his lingering shock and confusion, hadn't thought to ask.

In all honesty, his partner's unexpectedly mature reaction - aside from his amusement with Franky, Sanji, Usopp and Brook's crackpot theories - has been extremely reassuring. Zoro himself has spent
yesterday evening and this morning feeling as though he's taken one too many of the dartboard brow
cook's most potent kicks directly to the head, and he doesn't think he could stand Luffy treating his... condition... with the same mindless enthusiasm that the rubber man devotes to exploring new islands and gorging himself on obscene quantities of meat.

"... yeah, I do. I really- I really want Zoro to have it. To have our baby," the younger pirate's
mumbling shyly as he picks distractedly at a loose thread, and when he finally raises his head, he
looks so uncertain but hopeful that Zoro's heart stutters in his chest, and even though there's a small panic-stricken voice inside his head incessantly shrieking that he cannot be seriously considering this - namely because it can't possibly be happening to him in the first place - not once does he think of insisting on the unpleasant alternative.

"I- no. No, Luffy, I'm not angry." He swallows, his mouth suddenly very dry. "I've got no idea how
the hell this is supposed to work or what's gonna happen, but- if it's what you really want-" His
heart's no longer merely thumping forcefully but flat-out galloping, given the gravity of what he's
declaring. "Okay."

Luffy's anxious face breaks into a huge relieved smile. He flings his stretchy arms in several
haphazard loops around the older pirate, who grunts as he's flattened against the stairs and kissed
with desperate enthusiasm, and Robin drops her book when their combined weight nearly bowls her
over. She watches them fondly as she retrieves the heavy tome from the step below, bursting into soft
laughter when the horrified captain realizes what he's done and immediately loosens his grip, leaping
to his feet to begin frantically patting his hands up and down Zoro's front to make sure he's
unharmed. "It's alright, captain; I can assure you he's not that delicate yet, although I certainly
wouldn't advise tossing him overboard or into the rigging."

"No, definitely not! No more roughhousing, and Nami's helped me write a detailed list of other
restrictions Zoro needs to follow if he wants to keep himself and the baby healthy."

Hearing the stern tone of Chopper's voice as the reindeer emerges from the dining hall on the level
above, Zoro's not sure whether to feel consoled because the doctor seems to have everything under
control or indignant he's being given an actual LIST on the proper way to conduct himself.

Seriously, it can't be THAT complicated, can it? I mean, people have- people do this all the time,
right? Trying valiantly to ignore the fact he's sporting some major anatomical differences from the
type of people who normally serve as walking incubators for creatures like the one Chopper insists is
developing somewhere below his navel. Trying valiantly- and failing miserably. Ah, who the hell am
I kidding. I don't know shit about this kinda stuff.

Thoroughly unnerved by his own ignorance but unwilling to admit the depth of his dismay, he settles
for diffident interest and motions for Nami to bring him the neatly written sheet she's glancing over.
"Oi, lemme see whatever you guys think's so damn important."

"You're not going to like this," the navigator warns as she starts down the stairs. "And neither is San-
OW!"

Luffy, eager to learn more and evidently displeased that she's not moving faster, has just flung out an
arm to yank the parchment from her grasp.

"Damn it, Luffy- that hurt!" She winces, shaking her fingers, and Sanji smacks their captain's head
on his way past as he rushes up the stairs to inspect her fresh paper cuts. "You don't just grab at
things like that!"

"No raw meat, no raw eggs, fine, whatever," the swordsman mutters, scanning the bulleted list as he
and Luffy – who's making a disgruntled face and rubbing his skull – hold it between them. "No booze and- wait, you can't be serious. No booze, no soaking in the ofuro, and no- oi, what the hell, Chopper? How the fuck am I supposed to weight train without using my WEIGHTS?"

"No heavy lifting," Chopper states firmly. "The increased progesterone levels during pregnancy are loosening your joints and tendons in preparation for other physical changes. You're more susceptible to injury."

"Oh. Wow, there's sure a lot more stuff here than I figured..." Luffy remarks hesitantly as his eyes continue trailing down the list. He shoots a sideways glance riddled with chagrin at his lover. "Zoro's still sure he's not mad?"

Forcibly relaxing his grip on the parchment that's beginning to crumple in his tense fingers, the older pirate exhales slowly through his nose. "You- you really wanna have this-" Unwilling- or rather UNABLE- to speak the b-word, because to do so makes this real. REALLY real. "You really wanna do this, don't you."

"... yeah."

"Let's just- let's just take it one day at a time, okay?"

While he thinks there's a good chance he's going to be bored out of his mind for the duration of this insanity, Zoro's distress at the prospect of being denied the majority of his favorite hobbies is somewhat mitigated by the sloppy, overjoyed kisses his captain's plastering all over his face.

And the expression on the swirly-brow cook's face when Nami plucks the lit cigarette from his lips and coolly informs him that he's just quit smoking because secondhand smoke's bad for their impending new crew member? Priceless.
"C'mon, Chopper," the Straw Hats' swordsman groans, staring morosely at the small heap of capsules and tablets the doctor's just placed on the table before him and silently cursing this new addition to his morning routine. "Do I really need to take that many of these things every freaking day? This is at least twice what you give everybody else!"

"Yeah, well, that's 'cause everybody else eats their damn vegetables," Sanji snaps testily as he passes by Zoro's seat on his way to the sink, a small woven basket piled high with freshly-picked mikan cradled between his hands. "Even Luffy, although it's probably only because he's too busy stuffing his shitty face to even notice what the hell he's swallowing. And you heard Chopper- you've got a lot more to worry about than a mild case of scurvy. Just take the bloody vitamins already before I come over there and shove them down your throat."

"He's right," Chopper sternly informs the green-haired pirate as he turns away from their captain, who's just received his own daily dose and – much to Zoro's disgust – promptly inhaled it sans water, mouth looking remarkably like Franky's shop vac in the process. "Without a missed menstrual period to identify potential fertilization and implantation dates and nothing more than vague estimates based on hormone levels, I have no way of knowing exactly how many weeks pregnant you might be, so it's critical that you get enough folic acid in your diet now because-"

"I know, I know- that fetal neural tubular developmental whatsit." Thanks to Chopper and Robin, who have both spent the last week pouring over every medical text in the library, the entire crew has been learning more about human biology and reproduction than they ever had a need or desire to know- although much of it's incomprehensible to anyone but a physician. Or a highly intelligent individual fascinated by whatever discipline of research materials fall into her hands. "God, you keep using all these big fancy words and I swear it just sounds like blah blah blah blah."

"He holds up a hand to halt the reindeer's protest. "No, I get it, okay? It's stuff the- it's stuff the kid needs."

The swordsman scowls, poking condescendingly at the nearest lozenge, which he's positive looks big enough to choke one of Water Seven's yagara. "But I still fucking hate these things.

"If you 'accidentally' drop them on the floor under the table again, I'll kick your ass," Luffy warns and then frowns as he realizes he won't be able to follow through with this particular threat. "Or I'll- I'll make Zoro sleep on the couch by himself tonight!"

It's taken very little time for the captain to become downright fastidious about ensuring their doctor's instructions are followed to the letter, following his aggravated lover around the ship so he can chase him into the men's quarters when Chopper announces that he's been sleeping in the sun too long or repeatedly remind him not to attempt turning the heavy capstan when they're preparing to drop anchor for the night.

Zoro supposes he ought to appreciate the concern, and yes, it definitely IS reassuring to know his partner's so interested in his health and overall well being- but he draws the line at the younger pirate's attempts to serve as escort on his increasingly frequent trips to the head. He doesn't need an audience every time he needs to take a piss.

Luffy's now scowling, lower lip protruding disturbingly far, and making exaggerated gestures with his index finger at the untouched cluster of prenatal vitamins. "Take 'em or you get the couch!"

"Okay, okay." Zoro grumbles. "But at least give me something to wash them down with so I don't fuckin' choke, alright?"
and Nami, who's just joined them at the table. "I meant water, you idiots! I'm not stupid!"

Of course he knows WHY they're raising such a fuss. Who wouldn't after hearing that horrifically descriptive lecture about the complications associated with heavy or even moderate drinking during pregnancy?

Their reaction's ridiculous though- he's already been forced to quit cold turkey thanks to his body's insistence on vigorously rejecting even the tiniest sip, and there's no hard liquor to be found on the ship now ANYWAY; following a lengthy discussion regarding his new dietary requirements and restrictions, Sanji took Chopper's advice and traded their remaining supply for other goods during the crew's most recent restocking venture just a few days ago.

Sure there's a bottle or two of wine left, but it's that nasty shit he uses for cooking.

To be honest, Zoro's angry that anyone – ESPECIALLY the goddamn cook – believes him incapable of exercising a little personal restraint given the current situation, and it's become an extremely touchy subject.

Luffy scoots closer, pressing himself against the swordsman's back as he slides both hands over his stiffened shoulders and kneads until he feels the furious tension start draining away. "Noo, Zoro's not stupid, but Chopper said he really needs to take care of himself right now, 'cause it's not just him he's taking care of anymore..."

Mollified by the massage if not necessarily by his captain's words, the older pirate closes his eye and leans into the fingertips digging into his taut muscles, feeling a hint of amusement because Luffy's the absolute LAST person with any right to tell someone else to be mindful of their personal safety. "Yeah, right, whatever you say, Sencho."

"Idiots." Sanji grumbles from behind the counter. "Oi, Nami-san, what made you decide to share these with that dumb bastard? OI, I SAW THAT MIDDLE FINGER, YOU SHITTY MOSS HEAD. DON'T MAKE ME COME OVER THERE." There's a series of quick dull thunks as the cook slices his blade through the first mikan, which falls into neat segments despite his disgruntled attitude because he can't help striving for perfect presentation regardless of who he's serving. "I mean, it's common knowledge that citrus is extremely high in vitamins B and C, but he can get that from those pills without stripping half the fruit off your poor trees."

"Mmm, I suppose I was feeling generous this morning," the navigator hums, leaning her elbows on the table and resting her chin on her laced fingers. "He took my watch last night, and I know how much he hates taking those pills since he insists on reminding us every morning, so..."

"I didn't hear you get up! Why-" Chopper demands, glaring up at Zoro, "-weren't you in bed, sleeping?"

"He went out a few hours after you came back from watch. I found him on deck, barfing over the side," the captain chimes in, scruffing his fingertips through the older pirate's hair and laughing when the swordsman inadvertently utters a low groan of pleasure at the sensation of nails raking his scalp.

Flushing, Zoro clears his throat. "Yeah. And I'll do it again, right here on this table, if I try to swallow those damn things without a hell of a lot of water. They're frickin' huge."

"You throw up on my nice clean tablecloth and I'll punt you from here to the men's quarters."

"Like to see you try, shitty curly-brow."

"Both of you, stop it right now. Sanji, you know better, and Zoro- Zoro, stop smirking at him! Don't
think for a minute that I won't smack you upside that green head of yours just because Chopper suddenly says your belly's off-limits."

Ignoring the swordsman's muttered assurance that he's going to aim for her lap instead of the tablecloth if he pukes, the navigator glances over her shoulder as Usopp stumbles in, yawning and rubbing blearily at his half-closed eyes. He's accompanied by Robin, who looks considerably more cheerful and coherent, and Franky, who makes a beeline for the cold bottles of cola waiting for him on the counter.

Sanji temporarily abandons his mikan-littered cutting board to offer the historian a brimming, steaming mug. "Coffee, Robin-chwan!"

"Ah, thank you."

"You didn't get any sleep either?" Nami asks Usopp as he collapses apathetically into the chair beside her. "You look like death warmed over."

"There I was, slumbering peacefully beneath the stars on the lush green grass of the lawn deck, when I was woken by the heinous gurgles of moon beasts!" The sniper exclaims, as though he's about to launch into a grand tale describing how he defended the sleeping crew from invading extraterrestrials, but then he groans, rubbing the back of his neck. "Or I guess I might've just overheard Zoro regurgitating his left lung. Oi, Chopper, I thought they called it morning sickness for a reason. So why's he puking in the middle of the night?"

"Well, nausea during pregnancy's not restricted specifically to mornings, but even though he might start feeling sick at any time of day, it's likely to be worse if he hasn't eaten anything for a while. Also, he's particularly sensitive to certain odors right now," Chopper explains, turning to cast a suspicious eye on Sanji as he emerges from behind the counter. "I trust you didn't light any cigarettes during your watch? If you came back to men's quarters smelling like smoke-"

"No," the cook growls, stalking over to slam a bowl of mikan wedges down on the table in front of Zoro. "You threw out all the packs in my locker, and somebody else found my emergency stash. There you go, shithead, and you better eat the peels too. Don't look at me like that- they're full of fiber."

"Taping valuables to the underside of your bunk is one of the oldest tricks in the book, Sanji-kun."

Gnawing furiously on his lower lip, the blond's evidently not sure whether to mourn the loss of his treasured cigarettes or applaud his mellorine's genius. He settles for favoring her with a weak smile. "O-Of course, Nami-san."

"No wonder you're so touchy, asswipe." Zoro grumbles. "You're not happy unless you got something in your mouth."

"Says the idiot Marimo who got himself knocked up by our captain. Guess there's no doubt now who bottoms."

"Not always," Luffy supplies cheerfully and protests when Usopp punches him. "Ow! It's true, though- we take turn- OUCH. ZORO. Why'd you hit me too?"

"A-At least I'm getting laid," the swordsman retorts, glaring murderously at Sanji, although he's now turning crimson. "How's your right hand been treating you these days?"

The cook turns crimson. Luffy, Usopp and Franky snicker. Nami slumps forward in her seat with a sigh of exasperation, crossing her arms on the tabletop and burying her face against them, muffling
her voice. "Sanji, go wash your cutting board. Zoro, just shut up and eat your bloody mikan."

"He started it," Zoro mutters. He selects a piece, peering dubiously at the still-attached rind before shrugging and popping it into his mouth- and almost immediately making a noise of disgust and spitting a wad of chewed pulp back into his palm. "Eat the peels too, my ass! They taste like shit!"

"THAT GOES RIGHT BACK IN YOUR MOUTH-" Sanji roars, water sloshing over the rim of the glass he's delivering from the sink. "-OR I'M GONNA SHOVE YOUR HEAD SO FAR UP YOUR OWN ASS YOU CAN SAY HELLO TO YOUR SHITTY BRAT BEFORE IT'S BORN."

Usopp and Franky both choke on their own saliva and start wheezing and coughing helplessly. Nami heaves a sigh and reaches across the table to steal a slice of fruit. Robin raises an eyebrow and murmurs a faint "oh my" before taking another cautious sip of hot coffee.

Luffy's glaring suspiciously at the cook, ready to intervene if it looks like he's serious about following through with his threat. "Why's he gotta eat 'em like that anyway?"

"In one ear, out the other," Nami observes, rolling her eyes. She selects another slice and tears the fleshy segments out of the rind so she can dangle the empty peel before the captain's nose. "Most people throw this part away because they think it's just disposable natural packaging and because it tastes pretty bitter-"

"Damn right, it does."

"-but it's really high in fiber and vitamin C. You guys have actually eaten them plenty of times before, whenever Sanji-kun makes marmalade or mikan-flavored glaze or desserts."

"Fine, then I'll eat a friggin' jar of marmalade- but I'm not touching this shit." Zoro shakes the glob of partially-masticated mikan off his hand onto the tabletop, prompting a growl of outrage from his blond crew mate.

"O-O-Oi, just add it to my composter and I'll use it for Pop Green fertilizer."

"Yeah. What he said."

Muttering under his breath, the cook uses a napkin to scoop up the mess and disappears out the dining hall door with it held fastidiously between thumb and forefinger. Usopp gives a sigh of relief and relaxes.

"So what's the deal with the fiber?" Reluctantly poking the smallest tablet into his mouth, Zoro takes a gulp of water and swallows, earning an approving smile from Chopper and a quick hug from the captain, who then flops into the empty seat beside him. "Guh." He stirs the remaining vitamins with a finger, debating which is the next smallest. Maybe if he works his way up to the big ones... "I eat rice and bread and that kinda shit. There's fiber in there, right? Why the hell's it so important?"

"Constipation!" Their doctor announces brightly. "Your digestive system's slowing down to absorb more nutrients from the food you eat, so if you're not getting enough fiber, you're going to get constipated. And straining too much during bowel movements might cause hemorrhoids, which-"

"Okay-okay-okay! Jeez, forget I asked." The swordsman grimaces, glad Sanji wasn't present for that particular tidbit of information. "Can't drink or use my good weights. Feel like puking all the time. Gotta take fifty-gazillion pills. Now I might get backed up and get fucking HEMORRHOIDS 'cause it's too hard to take a shit?" He shoots an incredibly venomous look at Luffy, who's squirming uncomfortably in his chair. "And why the hell did I agree to this?"
"... 'cause .. 'ove Zoro," the younger pirate replies very quietly, slouching lower and eyes straying to where he's playing with the tablecloth's overhanging edge. "... 'n 'cause .. 'oves me."

"Yeah," Zoro mutters. "Well, that's what got us into this mess in the first place, isn't it."

xxx

Despite continued confusion and the clashing excitement and trepidation of the various parties involved, however, life eventually settles back into a relatively normal routine, because there's islands to explore and Marine vessels to outrun and ambitious rookie crews that keep foolishly assuming that the Straw Hat captain's somehow bribed his way to a higher bounty, although they learn otherwise quickly enough.

xxx

"Oi, Brook, pass me a piece of that rice paper?"

"Certainly, Zoro-san."

Seated cross-legged on the lawn with the various components of a maintenance kit spread out between them, the two swordsmen fall back into a comfortable silence as they clean blood and grime from their weapons, listening to the steady chatter of Franky and Usopp while they work nearby, punctuated by the occasional splash of a spent cannon ball being tossed overboard.

Luffy, sprawled on his stomach at Zoro's side, rolls over and rests his head in the older pirate's lap, lazily watching his meticulous treatment of the katana.

"Powder ball?" Brook offers.

"Yeah, thanks."

The captain sneezes violently as a strong breeze wafts fine dust into his upturned nostrils, hands flying up to cover his mouth and nose, and Zoro cautiously raises his sword a bit higher to keep the razor-sharp edge safely out of range. "Sencho, that's probably not the best place to be laying right now. You're gonna lose most of your face if I drop this."

Scrubbing furiously at his watering eyes and runny nose with the backs of his hands, the younger pirate shrugs unconcernedly. "Meh, I trust Zoro."

"Could've fooled me, with all that fuss earlier," the swordsman mutters. "Now scram before you end up covered in polishing powder and track it all over the damn ship, 'cause I'M the one who'll hear about it."

He's been slowly growing accustomed to his captain's new overprotectiveness, and he understands that Luffy means well, but trying to fight effectively without accidentally slicing off one of his own limbs is a lot more challenging when he's got someone yelling at him to avoid incoming cannon balls he's already spotted and unexpectedly intercepting blows he's already moving to counter. He doesn't like thinking about how many times the younger pirate nearly got his fool head removed by his own swordsman's blade in the process of leaping to a rescue that wasn't strictly necessary.

And if having the vast majority of his opponents slammed out of reach by his anxious lover's fists wasn't frustrating enough-

It's become long-standing tradition for the crew's swordsman and cook to engage in fierce competition for the pointless yet highly coveted title of "Most Enemies Defeated," which is bestowed
according to tallies earned not only during the current battle but accrued over time and grants the victor supreme bragging rights. Usually the score's fairly even, but today Sanji took gleeful advantage of Luffy's constant interfering to claim more than his fair share of opponents, and while Zoro was far too distracted to keep an accurate count earlier this afternoon, he's almost certain he's now trailing far behind.

\textit{Gonna get harder and harder to catch up too, if Sencho keeps pulling this shit. Though I guess I'm screwed anyway, 'cause eventually I'm gonna get too fucking fat to fight.} He sighs and resumes tapping the powder ball when Luffy vacates his lap and slides behind him to wrap snug arms around his torso. \textit{Guess it could've been worse.}

He'd been afraid Chopper might insist on his weathering out the fight in the men's quarters, but thankfully the doctor had merely given him a firm glare and told him to be very, very careful. He recalls hearing the "very" squeezed in there about twenty times, as though the reindeer couldn't emphasize it enough.

"Marimo. It's unusual to see you looking so... immaculate... after a fight."

"Well, in case you didn't notice, some ASSHOLES kept stealing my thunder," the swordsman grunts, glaring at the cook who's just dropped to a crouch in the grass beside Brook. He continues polishing Wado's blade. "Today doesn't count, okay? I'm not losing my lead just 'cause you guys wouldn't let me cut loose."

"Take it up with Robin; she's the one keeping score," Sanji snorts, flicking a well-nibbled toothpick in the green-haired man's direction.

"OI. Keep your spitty twigs to yourself, you oversized rodent."

"Ex-CUSE me?"

"Yeah, you heard me. You look like a friggin' hamster gnawin' a stick when you got one of those damn things shoved in your mouth." He smirks. "I'm gonna start checking the table legs for tooth marks next time I'm in the dining hall."

"You're gonna be BANNED FROM THE DINING HALL, YOU SHITTY-"

"Oooi-" They both look up as a huge shadow falls over them, to find Franky glaring down at them. "Guys, I hate to break up your moment, but just in case you forgot, I'm pretty sure our navigator said something about throwing all of us overboard if anybody woke her up."

Another squabble immediately breaks out when Sanji accuses Zoro of disturbing Nami-san's rest, and the swordsman insists the stupid cook's being just as noisy - if not noisier - and brandishes his unsheathed katana threateningly.

"Go back to the kitchen, you loudmouth dumba-"

"Ah, gentlemen-?" Brook cautiously interjects. "That might not be a good-

Luffy, who's been dozing despite the commotion, lulled by the swordsman's body heat and the deep voice rumbling beneath his ear, snaps abruptly awake and throws out a hand to catch the incoming heel before it can connect even as the cook belatedly realizes his mistake and tries to pull his kick. "Sanji, NO."

"Shit-!"
"Wanna watch where you're aiming, asshole?"

"Idiots," Franky mutters, leaving his nakama staring uneasily at each other as he heads back across the deck to where an exhausted Usopp's straining to heave one last cannon ball over the railing.

"I, uh- I didn't mean to..." Sanji trails off, almost wishing that one of them would hit him or at least start yelling, because it'd be a hell of a lot less awkward than their matching inscrutable expressions. He's used to exchanging blows with Marimo over petty shit - hell, they usually go all out trying to kick each other's asses - and he's reacted automatically, forgetting that the rules of engagement are no longer the same.

Luffy pushes away the foot he's intercepted inches from Zoro's midsection, eyes boring into the cook's over the swordsman's shoulder. "We didn't get lunch yet 'cause those guys showed up and wanted to fight, and I'm really hungry 'n Zoro's gonna get sick if he doesn't eat soon. Go make food."

It's a clear dismissal, and Sanji meekly accepts it as such.

"Sorry," he mumbles as he rises to his feet. "Sorry, I just- got a little carried away."

He glances back once when he reaches the stairs to find his green-haired crew mate pointedly ignoring him, industriously rubbing his freshly re-oiled blade with a new sheet of rice paper. Their captain, however, is still staring at him, one hand now resting casually but possessively on the swordsman's abdomen, and the cook feels the hair rise on the back of his neck at the tenebrous mien of Luffy's face. He looks away quickly, hastening his step.

"Quit freaking him out." Zoro mumbles as he covertly watches Sanji beat a hasty retreat. "He's a douche, but he knows he fucked up." He's not sure why he's defending the cook, but he can't deny the man looked notably shaken by his oversight.

"Mmm?" The arm draped over his hip slides further around his waist, hugging him closer.

The older pirate squints at his sword, runs the rice paper down its length one last time and decides he's satisfied. "It's gonna take everybody a while to adjust, right? Hell, part of me's still waiting for Chopper to jump out and tell me it's a goddamn joke, even though he's got all those test results and shit." He shifts uncomfortably. "A frickin' baby. GOD. It feels like my skull might explode if I think about it too much."

"I must say, Zoro-san, you actually seem rather calm given the circumstances," Brook observes, returning his cane sword to its sheath with a faint clink and laying the weapon beside him.

Zoro snorts, mouth quirking in a satirical smile. "Glad to hear it seems that way. Guess that means nobody but me can hear that high-pitched screaming in my head." He sheathes Wado and reaches for Kitetsu's hilt, but his captain's sliding back into his lap before he can draw the cursed blade. "Oi, Luffy, I'm not finished yet. Why don't you go help Franky and Usopp?"

"They're almost done," the rubber man protests, curling his fingers over the top of the swordsman's haramaki. "-and 'sides, I wanna stay right here with Zoro."

Uttering an exasperated sigh - there's no use arguing, not with those round puppy-dog eyes peering up at him - the swordsman lies back and folds his arms behind his head, closing his eye and resigning himself to a lunch eaten in quick bites in the kitchen. He certainly doesn't mind sparing a few moments for his partner, but he can't justify leaving one of his swords unattended in favor of sitting down for a meal, and while Brook proposed assisting him with the maintenance when they first
brought the kit outside, there's no way he's taking the skeleton up on the offer.

It's not that he doesn't trust the other man, but Kitetsu is finicky and doesn't take kindly to being handled by strangers, even if they're his own nakama.

He waits for the younger pirate to settle down beside him, but the captain apparently has other ideas, because there's fingers tugging at his clothing and a sudden draft blowing down his belly, and he reluctantly opens his eye to find Luffy stretching out his haramaki and peering inside while patting curiously at his exposed abdomen, as though the idiot expects to find something. "Care to tell me what the hell you think you're doing?"

"Watched pots-" Usopp states sensibly as he flops down beside them. "-never boil."


Luffy briefly glances up but he's too busy fending off Zoro's persistent attempts to bat his hands away to bother disputing their well-intended comments. Neither Usopp nor Brook, nor any of their other crew mates besides Chopper have noticed anything different about their expectant nakama - other than the fact that he's sleeping a bit more and, thankfully, not throwing up quite so much - because lately Zoro's stubbornly discouraged all but the most casual contact. As his lover, however, the captain's exempt from this ruling and therefore far more familiar with his body.

There might not be a whole lot to see yet, but his fingertips register subtle changes every time he touches the older pirate. Zoro feels softer in certain places, particularly his pectorals, belly and flanks, and while that's probably partially due to the stringently enforced restrictions on his weight lifting, there's also a small, firm mass evident under his abdominal muscles if Luffy presses hard enough in the right place. Almost as though his swordsman's swallowed one of Nami's mikan whole- but he knows better.

Zoro doesn't like it when he does this, flinching and complaining that their meddling doctor's already groping him enough without the captain doing it too, and the younger pirate tries to be more gentle after being accidentally dumped off the couch and deliberately booted from their hammock a few times, because he's developed a sneaking suspicion that what he's doing might actually hurt, even if Zoro's reluctant to admit it.

"Oi, Zoro, you gonna show the baby how to use all this stuff?" Usopp, who's been curiously poking through the open maintenance kit, asks suddenly. "When it's- he or she's- old enough, I mean."

Zoro pauses yanking on his captain's collar and blinks up at the sniper. "I- I don't know. I guess I didn't really think about that..."

"Perhaps you could teach your child Santoryu." Brook suggests.

Luffy and Usopp take one look at each other and burst into excited laughter, agreeing that this is an awesome idea, but Zoro's dumbfounded, struck by a wave of confused dismay and blinding terror as it truly occurs to him, perhaps for the first time, that this won't end when Chopper does the lapo-laopora- argh, whatever the hell the doctor called that procedure. It's not as though this is simply a defunct organ he'll have removed a few months from now; they're going to be dealing with ANOTHER PERSON. A unique individual with his or her own likes and dislikes and-

"B-But what if it-" The swordsman gulps. "What if it doesn't LIKE swords?" He demands helplessly, and Usopp's laughter dies, because he doesn't think he's ever seen the older pirate look so thoroughly unnerved.
"Then we'll teach it something else." Luffy grins. "Like navigation or medicine-

"..."

"-or cooking."

"Fuck no. Luffy, we're not letting our kid spend all its time hanging out in the kitchen with that stupid eyebrow-"

He flails in surprise as his captain swoops down and silences his diatribe by kissing him with thorough intensity. Usopp rolls his eyes and returns to tinkering with the powder ball he's plucked from the narrow wooden box also containing rice paper and oil, but Brook guffaws loudly, having deduced the reason for the rubber man's amorous response.

From the opposite side of the deck, Franky whistles and hollers something about getting a room, then winces and claps one huge hand over his mouth, eyes darting towards the closed women's quarters' door as he recalls their napping navigator.

"W-What was that all about?" The swordsman asks the younger pirate breathlessly when he's eventually released, clothing badly rumpled and face flushed with self-conscious knowledge that they're being closely watched by grinning, amused nakama.

"Our kid?" Luffy repeats, beaming down with delight dancing in his eyes. "That was the first time Zoro said it; that the baby's his and mine!"
Chapter 3

Dinner's been a noisy affair, with yet another round of Usopp and Franky competing to suggest the most elaborate and preposterous theories they can imagine might be responsible for their crew mate's unexpected pregnancy. They've covered a broad spectrum of subjects this evening, proposing everything from tantric sex rituals to haki to abduction by flying saucers. What started as legitimate attempts to identify a cause has quickly devolved into an ongoing game of one-upmanship, much to the great amusement of some crew members and the dismay of others.

Following an incident earlier in the week that ended in the utter destruction of an innocent chair, Zoro's been banned from bringing his katana into the dining hall, but being weaponless doesn't prevent him from trying to throttle Usopp with his bare hands when the somber-faced sniper asks him if he's absolutely certain he's never been violated by an extraterrestrial's anal probe.

"Aliens," Nami grumbles to Brook as he sits beside her in the library, the desk before them strewn with an assortment of paperwork and receipts. "Ridiculous."

"I imagine he intended to discuss the potential connection between little green men and Zoro-san's hair."

"Probably- only Zoro tried to kill him before he got that far. Bunch of brainless idiots." The redhead rolls her eyes. "The crap that comes out of their mouths sometimes, I swear. Although-" she muses suddenly, "I can't stop thinking about that one idea Franky brought up. I mean, wouldn't it be really funny if Luffy actually did somehow- oh, I don't know- accidentally WILLZoro pregnant using haki?"

The skeleton, who's found himself roped into helping the overjoyed navigator balance the budget ever since she realized the extent of his aptitude for numbers and calculations, regards her thoughtfully. "I take it you're referring to Haōshoku. The so-called King's Haki?" He scratches his head, bony fingers producing a screeching nails-on-chalk sound that makes his crew mate flinch. "Ah- my apologies, Nami-san. It's an interesting theory, but it seems to me that particular technique's more likely to cause concussions than produce babies, so I very much doubt it has anything to do with their current situation. Not that I have more than a very basic understanding about exactly how haki works- perhaps you might ask Robin-san to let you know if she discovers any possible connections during her reading-?"

"No, she already looked and didn't find anything." Nami sighs. "And you heard Luffy's reaction when Franky first mentioned it. He just laughed and said Rayleigh never mentioned anything like that during his training." She waves a hand in dismissal. "I know it was a dumb idea, but Luffy's so excited and happy he's going to be a father, I couldn't help wondering if he ever thought about starting a family before this. I figured- maybe if he was thinking about it and somehow used his haki when he and Zoro-" She shrugs and starts shuffling documents into a neat pile. "Oh well. Knowing how this sort of thing usually goes, we'll probably never know how it happened- not that it really matters at this point since the baby's already on the way."

"Indeed."

"... alright, I guess we better get back to work or we're going to be here all night."

But before they're able to return to the task at hand and attack the heaps of pending paperwork, the quick slap of sandals on the deck outside reaches their- or at least Nami's- ears, and moments later their captain's tousled, dark-haired head pops into view around the door frame. "Oi, Nami?"
"Hmm?"

"Sooo, Robin says she's gonna be up real late reading, aaand-"

"And I've got last watch." She sighs. "Fine, go ahead- but don't you dare leave crumbs on my pillowcase this time!"

"Sure, no problem," Luffy agrees without a second thought, grinning as he turns and sprints past the main mast to yell down over the railing. "OI, ZORO! WE GOT THE BED AGAIN TONIGHT!"

As Nami and Brook watch, the rubber man launches himself off the upper deck and disappears from sight. There's a startled shout and brief string of foul language from the swordsman waiting on the lawn deck below - he evidently wasn't expecting Luffy to suddenly drop out of the sky - which is followed by the low droning of a conversation that concludes with the captain's abrupt outburst of "Oi, I almost forgot! THANKS, NAMI!" before he turns his attention back to Zoro.

The navigator can't help smiling as she listens to her nakama's voices fading as they head towards the staircase at the bow.

"Ah, Nami-san, may I ask what-?"

"They're just borrowing the bed for a few-" He tilts his head, curious, and realization dawns on her. "Oh, that's right- you usually spend the night at the helm or in the crow's nest instead of the men's quarters, don't you."

This practice initially seemed a curious habit, given the skeleton's history of solitary exile, but made more sense after his hesitant explanation that he's troubled by the idea of lying in a box hammock because it reminds him too much of lying in a coffin. Franky, moved to excessive and tumultuous tears, immediately offered to find a solution, but Brook's continued insisting that he's grown to enjoy resting beneath or at least within sight of the stars after so many years of drifting through endless fog in the Florian Triangle. He never feels lonely despite the lack of company, he's explained, because he's fully aware his crew's sleeping safely nearby.

"Chopper told Zoro to start spending the night on the sofa because he doesn't want him climbing in and out of the hammocks and it's better for his back than the floor, but Luffy won't stop complaining they can't sleep together because they don't fit side-by-side anymore. He says Zoro's stomach keeps knocking him off the sofa."

Brook tilts his head again questioningly, and the navigator laughs. "Well, that's what he SAYS anyway. I have no idea how much he's exaggerating, because Zoro's wearing that damn coat every time I see him."

"Yes, it does seem to have become a permanent piece of Zoro-san's attire."

"So Luffy kept grumbling about having to sleep by himself, and Robin thought they might like some time together without the other guys around, so we talked it over and agreed they could use our room for the night whenever neither of us plan to be in it."

"Ah, Nami-san? Doesn't that mean-?"

"Oh, I'm SURE they're doing a lot more than just sleeping. It can't be a coincidence our captain's been looking so smug lately, although I certainly haven't heard Zoro complaining." The redhead eases out of her chair and straightens up, stretching her arms over her head. "Mmph. It's alright, I don't mind. They're really good about washing the sheets afterwards, and Zoro's almost always pretty mellow the next day, so I don't have to worry about him picking fights with Sanji and racking up
more damages to repair at the next island." She grins at Brook. "And of course they pay handsomely for the privilege as well."

"I see."

"I just wish I could convince Luffy to stop sneaking food in there. The last thing we need is having the ship overrun by mice."

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Flopping haphazardly onto the nearest bed, sprawling on his stomach with all four limbs thrown spread-eagle so his hands and feet are dangling off both sides, Luffy utters an exaggerated sigh of contentment. "Aaah, this is so comfy. I wanna sleep in a bed like this ALL the time."

"You're the captain, dummy," Zoro snorts, reaching down to cuff the younger pirate's shoulder. "Just tell Franky you want him to do some remodeling."

"I should! Maybe I will..." He scrambles upright and sits cross-legged on the mattress, lunging out to snag the sash tied around the swordsman's waist so he can reel him closer while struggling to unknot it. "Oi, why do you keep wearing this stupid coat? It makes you really hard to undress."

"I get enough weird looks from everybody when they think I'm not looking, okay. I don't need them staring at my gut too." The older pirate glances away, lapsing into uncomfortable silence as Luffy's hands slide under his haramaki to explore the developing curve he's refused to show to anyone but his partner- and Chopper, because although Zoro hates suffering through biweekly checkups, the doctor won't take no for an answer. "They'll just laugh at m-nng," he grunts, breaking off mid-protest as his captain's fingers abandon suggestively tracing the waistband of his trousers to delve inside and wrap firmly around him.

"Mmm, Zoro's so hard already and I barely touched him," Luffy murmurs, hand exploring the rigid flesh he's discovered. He ducks his head to nuzzle amorously against his swordsman's belly, grinning when the gesture produces a gasp and a choked curse. "He's really, really sensitive right now, huh."

Cheeks flushing at his body's eager response - it's been downright embarrassing how fast minimal contact can leave his pulse racing and his synapses misfiring lately - Zoro bites the inside of his cheek to hold back a low groan as his lover's warm, wet mouth travels along the first few inches of the scar crossing his torso, kissing and biting and sucking the roughened skin on its way to his left nipple.

"You got darker here," Luffy pauses his ministrations and lifts his head to remark, studying the areola he's now lightly circling with the pad of his thumb. He brushes over the nipple itself and watches it stiffen under his touch. "Huh. I think they got a little bigger too. They sure stick out more when you're cold." His voice takes on a huskier note as he addresses the opposite side of the older pirate's chest in similar fashion. "And when I play with 'em too..."

"C-Careful, I'm-" Zoro shudders, head dropping back on his shoulders and eye falling closed as his first nipple's slowly but thoroughly laved by a swirling tongue while the other's teased and rolled between thumb and forefinger, and he moans wordlessly when his captain begins applying gentle suction, because even though it makes his hips surge forward with instinctive, undeniable need, it also hurts. There's been a deep, throbbing ache in his pectorals for at least a couple months now, similar to when he's overstretched the muscles during strength training, but this is different. This is mingled pleasure and pain that's almost too much to bear. "L-Luffy- aah-"

His partner's excited by the desperation in his voice, and it's only a matter of minutes before he finds
himself stripped of both trousers and haramaki and lying supine on the mattress with his coat still partially draped over his shoulders and crumpled in a dark puddle around him, clutching at the bedding as Luffy strokes his chest and stomach and aching erection with one hand while the oil-slicked fingers of the other move insistently in and out of his tense body, coaxing him towards release.

He can't tear his gaze away from his captain's hunger-filled eyes, which are wide and watching his squirming with focused intensity, and the sight of the younger pirate's tongue darting out to moisten his lips sends a violent tremor through his entire frame as his control abruptly snaps, and he writhes and cries out, toes curling and heels skidding against the bed.

The overwhelming magnitude of his orgasm leaves him panting and shivering under the hand still petting and stroking his oversensitized, sweat-dampened skin, his pulse throbbing in his groin and thighs.

"Wow, that didn't take long at all," Luffy laughs, his voice rough with arousal. "You came really hard too." He pulls his fingers free, grinning when their retreat prompts a dazed mumble of protest, and slips both hands under the swordsman's knees, lifting and tilting his hips so he can more easily press himself into his lover's waiting body. "Mmm, Zoro feels r-really good..."

Back arching as his captain slides home with one smooth, powerful thrust and then pauses to collect himself, Zoro groans, letting his head loll to the side as he struggles to catch his breath. The rubber man poised above him continues holding still with great effort, giving him a bit more time to recover, and after a few moments he's able to slowly relax his fingers where they've been gripping tight fistfuls of his coat and the sheets.

"Lemme know when- it's okay. To move?" Luffy reminds him, voice strained. His hips give an involuntary nudge and he bites his lower lip, inhaling sharply through his nose. "Cause if you're n-not ready, I might hafta pull out instead 'cause I'm not sure I can hold still a whole lot longer."

"Y-Yeah, okay- just- gimme a second yet."

He's still catching his breath and basking in the tingling afterglow of his release when the other man, who's been stroking his neck and collarbone and quietly studying his expression, suddenly decides to kiss him and bends down, inadvertently crushing his chest and stomach beneath his own folded legs while straining to reach his face.

"Ow- mmph- ow, Luffy, stop. Oi, I said stop! Don't lean on me, it fucking hurts!"

To his relief the captain backs off immediately when he realizes the distress is genuine, rubbing his belly lightly in apology, and after a bit of squabbling and awkward maneuvering, they finally get themselves situated with Luffy spooning Zoro's back and ardently kissing, licking and mouthing his shoulder and the back of his neck as he pulls the older pirate more firmly into his shallow thrusts.

"B-Better?"

"Nngh, y-yeah. Ah-"

The swordsman's leaning his head back, turning it to aid his lover's second attempt to join their lips, when they both register a strange, barely perceptible popping sensation where Luffy's fingers are clutching his abdomen and they both freeze, staring uncertainly into each other's faces.

The faint stirring repeats itself, more easily felt now that they're motionless and consciously anticipating it, and Zoro utters an odd wheezing noise as it finally occurs to him that the sporadic
internal fluttering and bubbling he's been noticing over the past few days has probably not been gas or indigestion like he initially thought.

"What was that?" His partner demands, eyes huge. "It was something inside you, wasn't it? I felt it!"

"I- I'm not sure," The older pirate lies, his voice sounding slightly strained. He needs time to process what he's just realized, because if the bizarre feeling like coffee percolating in his guts really came from the- the- oh god, the baby moving inside him-

He feels suddenly lightheaded and drained of strength, as though he's been thoroughly pole-axed or maybe taken one of the cook's most powerful kicks directly between the eyes, because everything- the pregnancy- their entire situation- has just become far more real and a hell of a lot more personal. Chopper's tests and the nausea that's now thankfully receding and the damn prenatal vitamins and the fact that his trousers don't fit properly and will need to be let out again soon- he can ignore that stuff or even pretend there's another reason for it if he's feeling particularly overwhelmed, but this- this is different.

"Well, it definitely wasn't Zoro's stomach growling." Luffy concludes matter-of-factly. He rests his chin on the swordsman's shoulder and presses his fingertips more firmly against the swell of his lover's stomach, laughing delightedly when there's another faint flicker of movement and promptly spreading his hand wider in hopes of feeling further activity. "Zoro- Zoro, check it out!" He peers down, fingers tapping hopefully. "Oi, are you saying hello to us, little guy?"

"Luffy- jeez, don't- don't talk to the kid when we're-"

"Why not? It's not like he's gonna talk back or anything," the captain asks, puzzled, and snickers when Zoro's head whips around so the older pirate can shoot him an incredibly disturbed glare. "Besides, I guess this is how we made 'im, right?"

Unable to argue with this logic but still finding the situation incredibly disconcerting - he can't help feeling as though they've gained an unexpected and inescapable audience - the swordsman moves to roll away, his face blazing. "O-Okay, look- this is seriously weirding me out, so maybe we should just call it a night and go to slee-"

"Mmm, we will." The arm draped over his side tenses, preventing his escape. "After I make Zoro feel good again."

"But- but what if the kid knows what we're-"

"Shhh, it's okay- just relax." Lips brush his ear. "He doesn't. Here, lemme-"

"Oi, wait- Sencho, I'm not sure-" But his resolve's weakening, because Luffy's beginning to rock gently against him, hand clasped firmly to his belly as the younger pirate murmurs silly but earnest endearments in his ear, and Zoro's protests cease and his sudden, startlingly defensive concern that what they're doing might not be safe for the baby goes unvoiced because he's realizing this is no longer just about sex. His captain's making love to him, protectively cradling the life quickening inside his body, and the staggering emotion that's building in the swordsman's chest renders him breathless and completely incapable of or even interested in continuing the argument.

xxx

Fuzzy-headed and groggy after a long, incredibly boring night in the look-out tower, Nami doesn't bother knocking when she pushes open the door to the women's quarters, assuming her male crew mates have already vacated and turned the room back over to Robin.
To her surprise, her bed's still occupied; Zoro's bare back and - she bites back the strong impulse to giggle - a good three-quarters of his buttocks are visible from the doorway.

The swordsman's deeply asleep, his ribcage rising and falling steadily in time to his slow breathing, and she feels a stab of powerful curiosity, but knows she won't catch a glimpse of his belly from this angle without edging closer, even if she stands on tip toe, because his arm's in the way and the sheet's heavily bunched and rumpled where it's draped over his hip.

Luffy's awake, however, and sprawled stomach-down on the far side of the older pirate with his chin propped on his folded arms and his feet kicking lazily. The navigator hears the low murmur of the captain's voice and frowns, momentarily confused about why the younger pirate's addressing Zoro's midsection rather than his face if he's trying to wake him up, and then she catches a few words and abruptly realizes that he's NOT talking to Zoro-he's talking to their unborn child.

She's walked in on such an incredibly private moment that she feels like an intruder in her own quarters and immediately starts backing out, but when her fumbling hand rattles the doorknob too loudly, the captain finally registers her presence and lifts his head, favoring her with a broad smile.

"Oi, Nami!" He's trying to be quiet, but he's also Luffy and therefore incorrigibly noisy, so the greeting comes out quite a bit louder than necessary, and Nami flinches as Zoro twitches in his sleep and then slowly relaxes again, muttering haltingly for Sanji to quit being such a bastard and bring him a beer.

"I'm sorry- I didn't know you guys were still here," she hisses, extremely embarrassed that she's been caught gawking, but the captain just laughs and resettles his chin on his forearm.

"Nah, s'okay. I was just telling the baby how Zoro threatened to kill me when I saved him from the Marines. You hadn't shown up yet, Nami, so you didn't see it, but he was all dirty and bloody from getting beat up and tied to the pole and he hadn't eaten anything for like nine days, and he STILL wanted to kick my ass when I told him he was joining my crew and after I got his swords back, he took out a whole crapload of Marines! He was so cool!"

The navigator has no idea how to respond to this statement, although she supposes it's typical of Luffy to select such an... inappropriate... story, even if that's how her nakama's first encounter really did go down. She's heard the two of them joke about it frequently enough to know he's telling the truth. "You couldn't think of a more pleasant memory to share with your child?"

The younger pirate immediately sits up and stares at her like she's gone mad. "What are you talking about? That was one of the best days of my life, 'cause I met Zoro!"

"I understand that, Luffy, but-" It occurs to Nami that she's still standing in the doorway with her hand grasping the knob, and it's now bright enough outside that the early risers - chiefly Sanji and Franky at this point because Zoro hasn't been getting up for crack-of-dawn weight training for quite some time now - will be emerging from the men's quarters soon. She slips inside, closing the door behind her, and heads for the nearest sofa. "Look, Luffy, I'm exhausted. I don't really care if you want to stay 'til he wakes up or if you both want a couple more hours of sleep, but-"

"Did Zoro ever tell you how he got caught?" Luffy demands as he watches her sit and sink gratefully into the cushions.

"No, but-"

Leaning forward, his annoyed expression softening into one of surprising tenderness, the captain brushes gentle fingers over Zoro's cheek, smiling and shifting closer when the swordsman stirs
drowsily and reaches for him. "He turned himself in to protect a kid. A little girl."

"I see..." She's trying very hard to stay conscious long enough for him to finish talking, because this is obviously extremely important to him, but she can't seem to keep her eyes open.

"If he agreed to let somebody way weaker hurt him and tie him up and starve him for a month to save somebody else's kid-" Luffy's voice catches in his throat, and when he looks up, his expression is fierce. "Zoro's gonna be an awesome dad."

Not like mine. Not like my brother's, and not like Usopp's, 'cause Zoro's gonna be right here with me, keeping OUR kid safe, the rubber man's thinking, although he doesn't bother saying it out loud because Nami's fallen asleep on the sofa and Zoro's settled down again as well, one hand hidden beneath the pillows and the other laying lightly against his own abdomen.

Luffy's eyes are drawn once more to that distinctly round shape, studying the curvature where just a few short hours ago he felt his offspring's first tentative interaction with the outside world.

He has no idea what the future holds for his crew beyond the loosely definitive and rather broad term of "adventure" - that's inevitable, given the goals they share - but he knows with absolute certainty that both he and his swordsman will do everything in their power to ensure their child doesn't grow up scrounging in a city dump or restlessly watching the sea for a ship that never returns.

Reaching out, he trails his fingertips tenderly across Zoro's belly, quietly addressing the baby inside. "We're gonna take really good care of you, okay? Me and Zoro. And I promise- neither of us're gonna go ANYWHERE without you."
Teeth tightly clenched, Zoro slams the dining hall door shut behind him and trudges across the room to the sofa bench, which he surveys with ill-concealed disgust before unbelting his katana and dropping onto the cushions. *Might as well take a nap. Sure as shit don't have any OTHER plans.*

His crew mates are still faintly audible through the Adam wood walls. Luffy mostly - the captain's whooping like an overexcited, hyperactive five-year-old - but his ears also pick up Brook's unmistakable yodeling laughter and Franky's periodic yowls. The others are harder to identify, but he recognizes a sudden shriek of surprise and alarm as Nami's voice.

_Goddamn it. I should be out there too._

But no, the green-haired swordsman's been ordered by physician and captain alike to cool his heels inside while the others defend the ship from this island's peculiar denizens until the log pose recalibrates.

He snorts, a smirk stealing across his face despite his irritation. Who would've guessed they'd find themselves accosted by a horde of beetles the size of small houses. The look on Sanji's face when they'd first spotted the insects in the distance-

The privilege of watching the cook's distressed squirming is almost worth being cooped up in here. ALMOST- but not quite. After nearly five weeks with nothing more eventful than a brief skirmish or two, not to mention his crew mates repeatedly refusing to spar with him no matter how much he's pestered or goaded them, he's itching for some action as well as the opportunity to test his shifting, much lower center of gravity.

And speaking of itching-

He glances up to make sure the door's firmly shut and no one's likely to suddenly wander in, then tugs his coat open and digs his fingers into his haramaki, scratching his belly through the fabric. This isn't as effective as directly addressing the bare skin itself, of course, but he's not making THAT mistake again. Not after discovering how tender the flesh along the sides of his stomach's becoming as it stretches to accommodate his growing passenger.

Recalling Luffy's last attempt to help relieve his itchiness, Zoro grimaces. *I got enough of those nasty purple lines and shit already- I don't need claw marks all over me too.*

Despite the discomfort caused by dry, distended skin and the ongoing commotion outside, however, it doesn't take long for him to start slouching in his seat. Sometimes he swears he does nothing but sleep these days, although he supposes it makes sense given how much energy Chopper says his body's using to support both him and the baby.

He yawns, scratching fingers gradually slowing and then coming a stop so his hand's merely resting against his stomach. The kid's wiggling again somewhere beneath it, producing that weird sensation that feels like soap bubbles popping inside him, but he's too sleepy to pay it any mind-

-until a deafening boom shakes the sofa beneath him, rattling the lamps in their fixtures, and his unborn charge reacts by delivering an unmistakable kick that's detectable inside AND out, poking hard against his palm.

Zoro jumps, startled by the sudden movement within his body as much as by the explosion itself. The shouting of his unseen nakama has intensified, and his instinct's telling him to get out there and
see what's happened, but for a moment he finds himself simply staring at his own belly in stunned amazement.

Lurching to his feet involves greater difficulty than he'd like to admit. Rebelting his coat, he grabs his weapons and heads for the door at a quick trot with one katana drawn. Orders or not, if the crew's in danger-

He exits the dining hall just in time to witness Luffy using an oversized Gear Third fist to slug a giant beetle- which promptly detonates in a blast of fiery liquid and flying chitin, legs and mandibles.

This second explosion rocks the Sunny so violently the swordsman's forced to grab the door frame with his free hand. Evidently spooked again by the sudden noise and shaking, the baby gives another hard jab to his inner abdominal wall, and a sharp gasp of surprise escapes his throat before he's able to contain it, drawing the attention of the people still on the ship.

"Zoro, get back inside!" Chopper's immediately rushing up the staircase towards him, transforming to Heavy Point as he waves frantically for his older crew mate to retreat. "It's not safe!"

"Oi, quit pushing!" The swordsman protests as he's crowded back inside by the doctor's larger frame, gesturing towards the chaos with the sword still held firmly in his grasp. "They need help!"

"Not from you- and not with that!" The reindeer insists. "Brook cut one and it blew up right on top of him!"

Craning impatiently past the reindeer's shoulder, Zoro glimpses Franky helping their bony crew member back onboard. The skeleton's clothing is hanging on him in tatters and he's patting tearfully at the smoking remains of his much-loved feather boa. Standing beside them, Usopp's drawing back the cup of his Kabuto, preparing to fire a few fresh Pop Greens to cover Luffy's retreat from the battlefield.

There's already several ferociously snapping plants studding the rocky ground, but they're dwarfed by the beetles' immense size, and this time the sniper's selected a different seed.

"Take Javelin!"

Bamboo shoots spring from the earth, forming a botanical blockade between the Sunny and its six-legged assailants. One insect, closer than the others, is directly above the emerging spikes and explodes in grandiose fashion as its armorless underside's pierced in multiple places.

"DID YOU SEE THAT?" Luffy exclaims at top volume, bouncing onto the deck, shaking and blowing on his scorched knuckles. "THEY'RE SO COOL! I WANT ONE."

"They're trying to EAT us!" Nami snarls, shifting her Clima-tact to one hand so she can push the captain towards the steps. "Or chew us to pieces, at the very least. Now go let Zoro know you're alright before he decides to come down here!"

"Right, right! ZORO- ZORO, CAN WE KEEP A BEETLE?"

"Honestly," the navigator groans as the rubber man rushes off to join his waiting partner.

Beside her, Robin chuckles. "Did you expect any less? Ah- here comes our cook." She hesitates. "Oh dear, he looks rather unhappy."

Sanji returns smelling strongly of burnt rubber, cursing and energetically bemoaning his ruined footwear. "Goddamn shitty bugs! This was my favorite pair!" Pausing to pry off his shoes, he turns
to head for the familiar, insect-free sanctuary of his kitchen- and recoils as he comes dangerously close to stepping barefoot on a disembodied bristled leg that's twitching on the lawn. "SHIT!"

Above, Zoro's snickering hard enough for Chopper to easily steer him further inside and out of the way, giving the doctor room to bolt for the infirmary and his medical bag.

"Didja see, didja see? They BLOW UP!"

"Yeah, Sencho, I saw."

"Wow. WOW. Imagine if you nailed one with a CANNON BALL. OR THE GAON CANNON, OH MY GOD, GUYS, WE SHOULD TOTALLY-" The captain breaks off, frowning. "Oi, Zoro, what's wrong?"

His swordsman's wincing repeatedly, one hand knotted in his sash beside his katana and the other making frantic shushing motions.

"What-"

"You're being really loud," the older pirate hisses. "-and somebody doesn't like it."

Luffy blinks, puzzled, and then his eyes widen and his mouth forms a round "o" of comprehension. "You mean the-" Delighted, he steps closer and reaches for his lover's haramaki, meaning to slip a hand inside, but then Chopper comes bustling back into the room and Zoro promptly sidles out of reach and heads for the sofa.

Although he's definitely far more comfortable saving the cuddling and belly-kissing and all that other disgustingly sugary shit for when they're in private, he truthfully doesn't mind his captain's recent overabundance of affection. In fact, if he's honest with himself, he's relieved Luffy WANTS to snuggle and touch him so much, because while he generally doesn't spend much time admiring his reflection - that's the cook's province, not to mention Franky's when he's contemplating another bizarre new hairstyle - the last few glimpses he's gotten of his own body have left him torn between loathing the sight of himself and wanting to stare in disbelief.

I'm getting fucking FAT.

Actually, no. Only part of him's getting fat: his increasingly protruding belly. Everything else looks pretty much the same, save a small degree of muscle loss in his pectorals and biceps. But the sight of his thickening midsection bothers him, makes him feel awkward and ungainly and just downright weird.

Sencho thinks it's CUTE, the swordsman thinks glumly as he watches the ship's doctor gingerly inspect Luffy's reddened knuckles before applying a thin layer of burn ointment.

"Now don't wash or wipe this off."

"Yeah, 'kay," the rubber man agrees thoughtlessly, shrugging free to join Zoro. He throws himself onto the sofa beside the older pirate, leaving translucent smears everywhere as he worms a hand inside his coat to cosset his abdomen and then leans down to address it. "Oi oi, sorry if all the noise scared you and Zoro, but we hadda chase the monsters away!"

Seeing his work undone in a matter of seconds, Chopper opens his mouth to protest, then closes it and turns away with a badly-contained giggle of amusement at the disconcerted, exasperated expression their green-haired nakama's wearing. The reindeer gathers his supplies, collects his bag and heads outside smiling to himself.
"... you really gotta do that in front of people?" Zoro asks after the door clicks shut and they're alone.

"Mmm?" Luffy's now curled against him with one sandaled foot hanging off the sofa bench and the other resting on its arm, face nuzzling happily into his haramaki. "I'm not doin' anything- I'm just telling the baby what's going on since he can't see it!"

*Still calling it a boy, eh?* He debates commenting aloud on the probability of this, but the hand gently rubbing his belly feels good, and arguing about fifty-fifty odds seems like entirely too much bother. It's quieted considerably outside, and the kid's apparently settled down too because it's no longer poking irritably at his guts and making him jump. And with exhaustion once more stealing over his mind and body, his captain's touch is making him increasingly drowsy, until staying awake becomes a struggle he's unable to keep fighting.

Preoccupied with his search for any potential movement he might discover within Zoro's middle, Luffy doesn't realize the older pirate's fallen asleep until he hears a quiet tinkling of metal followed by the faint rasp of snoring and glances up to find his partner's head tipped back, gold earrings swaying and face slack with lips slightly parted.

"Shishishi- Zoro sounds like he's purring," he tells the baby, closing his own eyes as he nestles closer to listen.

There's not much to hear besides the steady "lub-dub lub-dub" of his swordsman's heart and the liquid gurgle of various digestive processes, but he's found a warm, comfortable pillow and it's not long before his own breathing deepens.

xxx

"-says it'll be more than a week 'til the damn pose resets, so it looks like we're- oh. Shit. I didn't know anybody was still in here."

"Oh jeez, look at 'em, Swirly-bro; isn't that the sweetest thing you've ever seen?"

"Sweet. Sure." The cook mutters with distinct disgust, noting the thin trickle of drool escaping one corner of Zoro's open mouth and dribbling down his jaw. "Oi- don't call me that, okay? Bad enough I hear that shit from Mama Marimo over there."

Roused by the conversation, Luffy reluctantly raises his head and peers up at them, blinking blearily.

"Morning, captain," Sanji hails, voice thick with sarcasm. "Maybe you better wake that moss-headed idiot of yours up before he gets a crick in his neck."

The captain yawns and doesn't so much sit up as ooze upright, smacking his lips and stretching.

"Ngh... Zoro sleeps so much, just being around him makes me sleepy too!" He gives the swordsman's shoulder a little shake, but although the older pirate's faint snoring sputters briefly and he makes a muffled noise of protest, he remains otherwise unresponsive. "Wow, you're really out of it, huh."

"Maybe you oughta let Haramaki-bro sleep if he's that tired."

"Yeah, but-" Taking his comatose lover's elbow, Luffy tugs insistently until the other man finally stirs, allowing himself to be guided down until he's lying with his head in the rubber man's lap. "There. Now you're not gonna wake up all stiff." He snorts at his own choice of words. "Well, not unless you get a boner or something while you're sleeping, anyway."

Franky coughs.
"Pretending I didn't hear that," Sanji mutters, dropping into a nearby chair. "Might as well fill you in since it doesn't look like you're going anywhere any time soon." He fishes a toothpick from his pocket. "According to Nami-san, we're gonna be dodging bugs for the next eight days. Usopp's fence looks like it'll hold for now, but we can't leave the ship, and if those six-legged shits keep piling up against the damn thing and knock it down..."

"Then we find out what happens if we blast 'em with the cannon," Luffy says, eyes glinting mischievously.

"Yeah, and probably blow ourselves up in the process. Anyway, it looks like we're stuck using long-distance attacks to fight those things, so Nami-san, Usopp and Franky here said they'll take watches in shifts 'til we can get out of here. But until then?" The blond wrinkles his nose. "Our little trio-" Gesturing with the toothpick to himself, Luffy, and the somnolent swordsman whose hair the captain's stroking. "-is just wasting time and space."

xxx

"Wow, you're both up early," Nami remarks a few days later as she and Robin enter the aquarium bar to discover it's already occupied. "How's Zoro feeling this morning?"

"He's fiine," Luffy responds listlessly from where he's sprawled face-down on the bench, gesturing to where the swordsman, wearing his long-sleeved toggle coat securely fastened despite the warm weather, is standing on the other side of the room and peering intently into the fish tank. "Is breakfast ready yet, or is Sanji still throwing stuff?"

"Luffy, why is Sanji-kun-?"

"Sencho," Robin interrupts, frowning. "What in the world is Zoro-san doing?"

Nami takes another look and realizes the older pirate's not actually staring at the strange New World fish Luffy and Usopp added to the tank earlier in the week like she initially thought but rather examining the glass itself, brow slightly furrowed. As she watches, he raises an arm and starts scrubbing furiously at the surface with his coat sleeve. The navigator blinks. "Ah, Luffy-?"

"He said something about the fingerprints on the glass bothering him. I dunno why, but I think he's bored 'cause Chopper won't let 'im use the gym or go chop up a bunch of beetles," their captain groans. "Naaami, I'm sick of doing chores and I'm hungry!"

"I don't know what the hell's going on," Sanji grumbles as he appears in the doorway between the two women. ":but apparently the other guys threw these two out of the men's quarters because Marimo woke up a few hours ago and decided the entire room needed cleaning."

He drops a loaded plate onto the bench beside Luffy and watches as the captain lifts his head, nose twitching, and then bolts upright, cramming pancakes and eggs and toast into his mouth slightly faster than he can swallow them. "I'll bring you more when I finish the next batch- as long as you promise to stay down here and keep that crazy bastard out of my kitchen."

The swordsman turns away from his task to glare at the cook. "I TOLD you, the floor was dirty."

"Bullshit. My floor's clean enough to eat off, you shitty asshole!"

"Bullshit yourself," Zoro snarls. "You dripped batter all over it. And while I was down there cleaning up YOUR mess, I found fucking COBWEBS under the stove!"

Nami bites the inside of her cheek, trying not to laugh, because the older pirate – who frequently
needs to be goaded or even threatened into helping with chores and cleaning or performing maintenance on the ship because he'd rather be napping on the lawn deck or messing about in the gym - looks positively offended by the possibility of spiders in Sanji's kitchen. She exchanges an amused glance with Robin. "Sanji-kun, was he seriously crawling around on the floor underfoot while you were trying to make breakfast?"

"I kept tripping over him. I swear he's lost his goddamn mind."

"It's not my fucking fault you can't clean up after yourself!"

Luffy, befuddled by his first mate's sudden intense interest in cleanliness, fidgets until he catches their amused navigator's attention and then solemnly lifts a hand to twirl a finger next to his temple in the universal sign for crazy, and she bursts into giggles, earning a fierce glare from Zoro, who's missed the exchange because the captain's on his blind side.

xxx

Later that morning, the Straw Hats' doctor finds himself unexpectedly cornered by a pair of baffled, aggavrated crew members while making his way across the lawn deck on his way to the infirmary.

"Chopper. WHAT-" Usopp demands, "-IS WRONG WITH ZORO. BEYOND THE OBVIOUS."

"Haramaki-bro's actin' real weird," the cyborg towering over the reindeer agrees, removing his sunglasses. "Wakin' everybody up, bangin' the locker doors, bumpin' into the hammocks-"

"Oi, Franky, he knows- he was there," the sniper interrupts. "Chopper, he REORGANIZED my art supplies. I can't find ANYTHING."

"Well, it's possible his behavior's related to the pregnancy."

Usopp snorts. "So the baby told him to put all my jars of paint in the wrong order? Yeah, right."

"No- no, it's a documented phenomenon! Pregnant women sometimes experience a strong psychological urge to clean and organize their surroundings," Chopper explains. "A lot of publications refer to it as nesting, because the mother's subconsciously preparing herself and her environment for the baby's arrival."

A few feet away, Robin slowly lowers her book.

"Nesting," Usopp repeats. "You mean like a bird?" He and Franky exchange a mystified glance. "Zoro's NESTING. Like a BIRD." The corners of his mouth are starting to twitch.

"Haramaki-bro's gotta be the biggest parrot I'VE ever seen." The shipwright attempts to say with a straight face, but the tears of amusement beading in the corners of his eyes give him away.

They walk away laughing so hard Franky nearly drops and treads on his sunglasses in the process of returning them to his face, because Usopp keeps crashing into him.

Shaking his head, Chopper turns back towards the staircase to the upper deck.

"Chopper-sensei? Might I have a word with you?"

"O-Of course!" He hurries to where the dark-haired woman's awaiting him on her lawn chair, book now closed and set aside. "Is everything alright?" He's a bit confused at her tone of voice; it's somewhat reproving despite her placid expression.
"I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with our crew mates just now. *Pregnant women,* Robin says slowly, reciting words spoken by the doctor earlier. "Kenshi-san is not a woman."

"Well, no, of course not!" He's smiling, because the idea's absurd; Zoro's probably the most masculine, testosterone-driven person he knows. "But considering I haven't found a single recorded instance of male pregnancy in my-"

"I understand your desire to discuss his case in clinical terms, but Kenshi-san is a crew member and nakama, not a statistic. He's already well aware his situation's highly unusual, and he doesn't need that fact reinforced by constant textbook definitions discussing a gender with which he doesn't identify."

His smile's faded, replaced with stunned shock. Although the historian hasn't raised her voice once, there's no mistaking her stern disapproval, and at first he's too overwhelmed to speak, crushed that she's disappointed in him but also horrified because she's right- and until she brought it to his attention, it hadn't even occurred to him that he might be unintentionally alienating one of his closest friends. He swallows. "Did Zoro- d-did he mention anything?"

"Certainly not to me, and unless he's felt comfortable voicing his concerns to our captain, I highly doubt anyone else has recognized the extent of his insecurity even though he's been exhibiting a high degree of stress signals."

"I should've noticed," Chopper whispers. He's recalling the dozens of clues he somehow overlooked: the frequent nervous tics, the averted gaze whenever he happily rattled off another medical fact. "I should've known-"

"I only noticed because I learned to read such signs long ago- as a matter of survival," Robin assures him gently. "I'm afraid our swordsman's very adept at masking his emotions."

"Still, I should've-" The doctor takes a deep breath, raising imploring eyes. "R-Robin, what should I do? How do I fix this?"

"Kenshi-san trusts you, and he'll continue looking to you for answers. Perhaps he'll feel a bit more at ease if you simply deliver the information he needs in a more neutral fashion." She pauses, considering. "I would advise you do so regardless of whether he's present or not. The crew's perception is no less important, and even though he might argue otherwise, our judgement means a great deal to him."

Chopper's nodding, relieved, and agreeing that, yes, that's exactly what he'll do- not to mention delicately suggest to Zoro that he's willing to lend an ear whenever it might be needed- when he realizes the swordsman in question is hurrying across the lawn towards them. Carrying an overflowing laundry basket tucked under one arm and looking so angry that the reindeer's tempted to crawl under the lawn chair despite his firm resolution to be more supportive.

"Chopper," the green-haired pirate growls, flinging down the massive load of clothing. "What the HELL did you say to Usopp and Franky? The stupid bastards keep following me around talking about birds and nests and flapping their goddamn arms and making fucking CHIRPING NOISES."

xxx

"I don't care what you were doing," Nami's scolding elsewhere, arms crossed over her breasts as she glares at the two men sheepishly sporting fresh lumps on their skulls. "Keep antagonizing him and I won't rescue your sorry asses next time he pulls a blade on you!"
"Funny method of rescue," Usopp mutters, gingerly fingering his injured head.

"Excuse me?"

"N-Nothing!" The sniper waves his hands, laughing nervously. "I just said thanks for the rescue!"

"I'm sure," Nami tells him dryly. "But seriously, stop pestering Zoro. Spring cleaning or cabin fever or nesting or WHATEVER you want to call it, I don't care- but if he's suddenly volunteering to wash the entire crew's dirty laundry without being bullied into it, I am sure as hell not stopping him and neither are you."
Nearly two weeks later, while waiting impatiently for the damn swirly-brow cook to quit farting around adding garnish and excessive finishing touches to Nami and Robin's dishes and finally get dinner on the table, Zoro finds himself trapped in his chair between his captain and the ship's doctor.

"There you are!" Chopper exclaims. "I've been looking everywhere; I thought I'd find you napping in the men's quarters or the aquarium bar."

"Nah, I'm hungry. Starving, actually." He twists in his seat to glare behind him. "What the hell's taking that shitty cook so long?"

"I honestly doubt you're in any danger of starving," Nami murmurs without looking up from the article she's reading. "It's only been a few hours since lunch."

Luffy slaps a hand down on the table, glaring across it indignantly. "Zoro's gotta eat for two people, remember? 'Cause he's feeding the baby too!"

"That's not exactly how it works," Chopper informs the scowling rubber man. He stoops to rummage through the bag he's deposited on the floor and begins removing an assortment of medical paraphernalia. "He needs more calories, yes, but only about three hundred more per day in addition to his usual dietary intake. Zoro, could you please roll up your sleeve?"

The swordsman reluctantly complies, allowing the reindeer to check his blood pressure, but he's rather taken aback when his sash is unceremoniously tugged loose and he realizes Chopper intends to conduct a more thorough physical exam on the spot. "O-Oi, can't we do this somewhere else? The goddamn infirmary's right over there," he grumbles unhappily as the reindeer reaches up to unhook the toggles of the coat he insists on wearing whenever he's in the presence of their other crew mates. "You could've just asked me to stop by later."

"Yeah, but Zoro hates check-ups and always hides whenever he knows Chopper's looking for him," Luffy points out, tightening his hold around the swordsman's shoulders and upper arms as he tries to squirm away from the hooves invading his personal space. "And you got out of the last one 'cause everybody was too busy freaking out 'cause of those cool giant beetles."

The green-haired pirate grimaces, glad it didn't take longer for the log pose to record and lock onto the next island. Eight agonizingly long days of twiddling his thumbs and watching his crew mates defend the ship from those damn bugs - eventually identified by Usopp as a highly combustive, mutated variety of bombardier beetle - was MORE than enough, especially with the captain insisting repeatedly and at length that they needed one as a pet.

Zoro's STILL slightly peeved that he wasn't allowed to fight, but no amount of bluster and threats had swayed Chopper. The sting of humiliation hadn't been quite as severe knowing that his captain, the cook and their other close-range combatant crew members had also found themselves sitting uselessly on the sidelines, but he'd also known it was temporary in their cases. In the next battle, they'll be back to kicking ass and taking names, business as usual- but HE will almost certainly find himself once again bustled off-deck.

And it's not that he truly begrudged Nami and Usopp their excitement over playing instrumental roles in defending the ship, but they've been awfully vocal about it. And everyone else seemed to have a million and one things to occupy their time, while he'd been reduced to quietly fuming and washing load after load of laundry. LAUNDRY.
Alright, so maybe his fuming hadn't been so quiet after all.

"Leggo, damn it!"

"C'mon, just let him check stuff, okay?" Luffy whines petulantly in Zoro's ear. "It's not a big deal or anything new anyway, right, 'cause Chopper's already seen you naked a bunch of times. And I see you naked ALL the time!"

"If you think I'm gonna strip at the fucking dinner table-"

"Nobody's getting naked! I just want to perform an external manual palpation!"

"It's not either of you guys I'm worried about," the older pirate growls, shooting a dirty look at Nami, who's folded her newspaper and set it aside, her gaze keen with interest because she's been trying to snatch a peek at his expanding waistline ever since the first time he grudgingly demanded that she lend him her sewing kit. She's been subtle about it for the most part, yes, but she's certainly not being subtle NOW. And Franky and Brook, who have just joined them at the table, aren't even ATTEMPTING to hide their curiosity. "Can't you at least kick these nosy assholes out first?"

"Oi!" Sanji turns from the stove to level a smoldering glare and dripping spoon across the countertop. "I don't give a shit what you call those two, Marimo, but you better not be including Nami-san with that vulgar remark. You don't need to be such an uncouth bastard."

"Talk about the pot calling the kettle black," Franky mutters to Brook, who chortles into his fresh cup of tea.

"Dumbass cook." Zoro struggles again briefly in Luffy's restraining arms as Chopper pushes his coat open, revealing the haramaki beneath, which is now stretched snugly around his middle and covering a distinct bulge, and then rolls down the broad elastic band itself to expose his bare belly and the shallow cup of his navel. The swordsman huffs angrily as Nami leans forward on her elbows to peer across the table at him.

"So that's what you've been hiding under there," the navigator muses, ignoring the menacing scowl aimed in her direction. "Usopp mentioned you'd gotten a little funny about using the bathhouse with the other guys around. I wondered if this might be why."

"Usopp needs to keep his fucking mouth shut." The older pirate growls, watching his red-haired crew mate cautiously as she slides out of her seat and comes around the table for a closer look. "Oi! Quit staring and go read your damn paper, woman. I'm not here for your amusement!"

"For heaven's sake, Zoro, quit being so bloody dramatic- everybody already knows you've got a baby bump."

"I'm gonna bump your fucking FACE with my FIST, you-"

"MARIMO. Finish that remark and, so help me, I'll cram this goddamn spoon down your shitty throat!"

Franky raises an eyebrow. "Jeez, the kid's gonna curse like a seasoned sailor from the moment it starts talkin', growin' up on this ship."

"Indeed. My very ears are burning! Or they would be, if I had ears. Yohoho-!"

"Ow! Goddamn it, Chopper, quit poking so hard! You're gonna leave fucking hoof prints on me!"
"Sorry, sorry," the doctor apologizes distractedly, backing up a bit and transforming to Heavy Point so he's able to palpate the swordsman's belly more gently. He quickly locates what now feels like a papaya-sized lump just on the other side of the abdominal wall and frowns when the older pirate flinches again. "I'm a little concerned that you're so-

To everyone's surprise, the reindeer abruptly gives a loud, high-pitched squeak of alarm that seems extremely out of place coming from his larger form and flails backwards, stumbling into the unoccupied chair behind him, knocking his medical bag to the floor and landing beside it with a thump. "Wha- what-?"

"What the hell'd you expect, with you frickin' jabbing at it and then getting all grabby?" Zoro snorts, rubbing gingerly at his stomach. "Kid doesn't like being poked or squeezed any more than I do."

Nami's eyes widen enormously with sudden understanding, her tone incredulous. "Are you serious? Did the baby really just-?"

"Uh-huh! He's been moving around and kicking and stuff for a while now," Luffy laughs, hugging Zoro's shoulders so tightly that he grunts in protest. He leans forward to rest his hands on his lover's belly, hooking his chin over the swordsman's shoulder to peer down. "Zoro's been reeeally grumpy 'cause it keeps waking him up."

"It's your fault, idiot. You won't let EITHER of us sleep because you keep poking my gut trying to make the little shit move."

"Zoro! Don't call the baby that!"

"Well, what the hell else am I supposed to call it, Nami? Yeah, sure, me and Sencho talked names and stuff, but even though he keeps saying it's a boy, we don't KNOW that, and I'd feel really fucking stupid calling it the wrong thing." He rubs his forehead. "Saying "it" all the time's really goddamn weird too, though- I mean, I sure as hell wouldn't want somebody calling ME that."

Luffy hums thoughtfully in the older pirate's ear. "Well, okay, so Zoro says we can't use names yet 'cause he doesn't believe me that it's definitely a boy - even though it is - but we can't use "it" either. And we still don't know how I got Zoro pregnant. Right? So let's just give him a nickname; we can call him MB, short for Mystery Baby!"

"Oi oi, I'm not calling our kid-"

"Oh, I don't know, I think our captain's onto something," Sanji interrupts as he emerges from the kitchen with a large steaming pot held in oven mitt-covered hands, pausing to casually kick aside the limb Luffy immediately flings in his direction. "MB makes me think of lots of other things related to you two. Like Marimo Boy. Or Meat Bo- get your dirty fingers out of there, shitty Gomu!"

"Why didn't you tell me you were feeling fetal movement?" Chopper demands from where he's still sitting on the floor, yanking furiously on Zoro's trouser leg to get the swordsman's attention. "That's really important!"

"Look, I didn't know for sure it was the kid kicking me, okay? I mean, it's not like I've done this before." In reality, it's been just another thing - like the baby's prospective names - that Zoro's been hoping to keep private between himself and Luffy as long as possible. He's honestly surprised either secret's lasted this long, considering the captain's tendency to unwittingly blurt out information of a highly personal nature on a ship where everybody always seems to know everyone else's business anyway. "I thought it might've been the cook's shitty food giving me indigestion."
"-might be further along than I initially suspected..."

"Oi, watch your mouth, asshole. There's nothing wrong with my-"

"Sanji-kun- Sanji-kun, were you listening? They said the baby's actually moving now! Kicking!"

The cook, placing the dish on the table, nearly slops stew down the front of his suit when Nami, who can no longer contain herself, unexpectedly flings both arms around his neck and plants a huge smacking kiss on his cheek before bounding away. "Oh, I can't wait to tell Robin; this is so exciting!"

"Oi-" Zoro protests weakly, grimacing and waving a hand as though fanning away the bright pink hearts he can easily imagine drifting up from where the love-struck moron's melting into the floorboards, although in reality he's merely trying to catch the redhead's attention. "Oi, Nami, you don't need to-"

"Nami-swaaan-! Aah, she's so ADORABLE when she's cooing over babies! Even if it's yours, shitty moss-for-brains."

Chopper, lost in mental calculation, barely notices when their navigator nearly trips over him as she sprints for the open doorway leading to the deck, grabbing the railing to keep from falling over it in her excitement as she shouts to their nakama on the lawn below. "Robin, Usopp! Luffy says Zoro's been snapping at everybody so much lately because the baby's kicking!"

"Wha- REALLY?" Usopp's voice drifts back. "Oi, I wanna feel it move! You think Zoro'll let me feel it move?"

"He's not too happy right now, so he'll probably break your fingers if you try." Nami calls down, "-but you should at least come and take a look at his tummy before he hides it again!"

This time it's Robin who answers, sounding amused. "Oh my, you're saying someone actually coaxed Kenshi-san out of that coat? We'll be right up."

"Fuck," Zoro groans. "Now look what you guys-"

He breaks off, startled, when Chopper suddenly scrambles to his knees, reaching out to probe his abdomen firmly enough to force a stifled grunt of pain past his clenched teeth, because it feels like the doctor's trying to wrap both hands around his kidneys. The intense pressure sets off a flurry of activity from the equally alarmed fetus, which has apparently decided it's going to imitate the goddamn eyebrow cook by kicking the daylights out of him.

Thankfully, although the sensation is incredibly bizarre - sort of like there's a live eel performing a tango directly over his bladder - it hurts marginally less than the fingers digging around in his gut. "OW, OW, FUCK! Chopper, give it a rest already!"

Luffy, who's also aware of the wild fluttering and periodic sharp jabs because he's still got both palms resting just above where the reindeer's poking and prodding, utters an awed "holy crap" in the swordsman's ear. "Oh, wow, you feel that, Zoro? He's really pissed!"

"SO AM I." Discomfort increasing by the second, the green-haired pirate's actually raising a hand to grab the Zoan by the face in hopes of prying him loose when Chopper eases back on his own, reverting to Brain Point and looking simultaneously elated and terrified as he cranes his head towards the door. "Nami? Nami!"

"What's wrong, Chopper?" The navigator's returned with Usopp stepping on her heels in his haste to
join them and the far more sedate historian trailing behind them, and then Sanji staggers upright from where he's been sprawled on the floor, dabbing at his bloody nose, and to his great annoyance, Zoro finds himself and his captain and doctor surrounded by a small mob of eager, agitated nakama all trying to talk at the same time.

"How far."

"-this big now, is he gonna look like he swallowed a cannon ball when-?"

"-wonder if that hair's hereditary... Nami-swan, Nami-swan! If WE had a child, do you think it would be blonde or- OW!"

"-do you feel, Kenshi-san?"

"Oi-" Give me some goddamn space because I feel like you're all suffocating me, he wants to say, but he's distracted by Luffy patting his aching abdomen and gleefully assuring the baby that its crew mates can't wait to meet it, and nobody's listening anyway.

"Nami, how far-?"

"Is it still moving now? Can I-?" Usopp asks eagerly, already spreading his fingers beside the rubber man's before Zoro can tell him to keep his fucking hands to himself. "Ooh, I felt that! Sanji- Sanji-kun, you gotta-"

"I think I'll pass, thanks," the cook snorts, tucking a fresh toothpick between his teeth as he eyes the swordsman's face, which is growing steadily darker with anger and embarrassment. "And maybe you oughta just leave Marimo alo-" He nearly inhales his cigarette substitute as the sniper does the unthinkable and actually presses his cheek and ear against the side of Zoro's belly, drawing an outcry of jealous protest from Luffy before the captain's forced to intervene and prevent the infuriated older pirate from strangling their oblivious crew mate.

"Oi, Nami-?"

"USOPP, GET YOUR GODDAMN NOSE OUTTA MY BELLYBUTTON BEFORE I BREAK IT OFF YOUR GODDAMN FACE!"

"Okay, okay! Ow, quit shov- YOW! UNCLE-UNCLE-UNCLE! LEGGO BY DOSE!"

"-GONNA FUCKING KILL YOU!"

"Settle down, Marimo, we get the hint. Usopp, the bump's off-limits and quit that blubbering. Didn't Nami-san just warn you-?"

"-BREAK IT OFF AND SHOVE IT UP YOUR ASS, I SWEAR TO-"

"NAMI, HOW FAR ARE WE FROM THE NEXT ISLAND?" Chopper roars, going momentarily Heavy Point again as he shouts over the others to be heard, and everyone freezes and turns to stare at him, Sanji and Luffy pausing in their attempt to pry a whimpering Usopp free from Zoro's iron grip on his nose.

The navigator glances at the log pose strapped around her wrist. "As long as the weather holds and we don't run into trouble, we should reach it in the next day or so. Why, what's the hurry? I know we're running a little low on food supplies, but we've got more than enough to reach port, right, Sanji?"
"Of course, Nami-san. Even taking into account the special ingredients and extra portions for you and Robin-chan and numb-nuts here, nobody's going hungry anytime soon."

Zoro relinquishes his hold on Usopp - ignoring the relieved sniper as he stumbles away clutching his nose - and jabs the cook in the ribs, scowling up at him. "Don't call me numb-nuts, shithead."

"I'd rather not feed you at all and just let you photosynthesize," Sanji growls, "-but women and children eat first. As soon as you pop that baby out, you're going right back to getting the same burnt scraps I give these other shitty bastards. Fine cooking's totally wasted on you uncultured."

"So this next island's occupied with people, and not just an empty rock covered with giant bugs?" Chopper interrupts, prompting a brief exclamation of protest from Luffy because he doesn't understand why everybody's still making such a fuss. Try to catch one little beetle and-

"Yes, supposedly there's a decent-sized city by the port. Which means there may ALSO be a Marine outpost nearby, so we'll have to make this a very discrete-" Nami pinches the captain's cheek and yanks on it forcefully, interrupting his studious nose-picking. "-DISCRETE stop. If my information's correct, the log pose should only take a few hours to set, so you and Zoro can stay here. I will take care of the shopping."

Sanji beams. "I'll gladly chauffeur Nami-swan!"

"No, you're going to stay and watch the ship, because I want those two kept out of sight. Their faces are too well known and we've already had enough trouble with their bounties drawing unwanted attention. And since Zoro can't fight-"

"Only 'cause HE won't let me," the swordsman grumbles, poking a finger at Chopper. "I told you, I'm-"

"Great, the last place I possibly want to be. Stuck here with both of you."

"All my calculations have been based on guesswork, because there's absolutely NO case histories regarding this sort of thing. I was initially hoping to discover Zoro's body contained some sort of rudimentary uterus-"

Sanji's low snickering dissolves into muttered curses as he's punched repeatedly in the hip, although he stifles his protest when Robin touches his elbow, inclining her head towards the dining hall door as an invitation to step away for a word or two.

"-doesn't seem to be the case, and the most similar situation I can find is ectopic pregnancy, which means the fetus is growing directly inside his abdominal cavity," Chopper's explaining. "That would explain why I can feel the head, arms and legs so easily when I'm manipulating him, because there's no uterine walls and potentially very little amniotic fluid to provide a cushion."

"Huh. So that's what you were doing. I thought you were trying to tear out my spleen or something."

"The pain's another reason why I suspect that this isn't so straight-forward as I was hoping. Mild discomfort - sometimes even severe discomfort for short periods - is normal, but he nearly goes through the roof whenever I touch him, even if I use the slightest amount of pressure, and I want to know why." They watch as the doctor paces a bit, his nose wrinkled with distress. "And if we can get access to a decent medical center, I can also confirm where the placenta's attached."

He reaches out to tap the swordsman's belly, nodding to himself when Zoro automatically flinches away from his hoof. "I don't want you fighting because, depending on where implantation occurred, too much strain on your body could rupture the amniotic sac prematurely or even tear the tissue loose"
and cause internal hemorrhaging. I need to know if the placenta's attached to one or more organs, the abdominal wall or somewhere else."

"Alright," Nami sighs. "I suppose there's no helping it then, but you'll have to get him checked out and back to the ship as soon as possible."

"Yosh," Luffy agrees, one hand squeezing his partner's shoulder reassuringly. "Chopper and I'll-

"Not you, just Zoro and Chopper. You're staying out of sight, where Sanji can make sure you stay out of trouble."

"I'm going with Zoro."

"Luffy-"

"If Zoro's going, then I'm going too! 'Cause I don't get half of what Chopper just said, but if he thinks Zoro or our baby might be in trouble, I can't NOT go." The captain insists, eyes flashing as he folds his arms across his chest, and when Nami continues protesting, he sets his jaw and glares at her.

Zoro, who's been readjusting his clothing and quietly panicking at the thought of being dragged somewhere public where he's sure to have more people - and complete strangers at that - staring at him and possibly trying to touch him, feels a flood of relief when the rubber man digs his heels in and refuses to be swayed by logic and threats alike. Luffy's already been downright adamant about being included in every one of the swordsman's appointments with the Straw Hats' own doctor, and although he's not too keen on admitting he's getting seriously nervous thanks to Chopper being so concerned about possible complications, the older pirate doesn't like the idea of getting gawked at and poked by somebody he doesn't know, physician or not, in an equally unfamiliar setting without his captain present.

_I swear to god I'll fucking clobber the first person who calls him my security blanket, but- yeah, okay, I guess it's SOMETHING like that..._

Unnerving as he finds the prospect of visiting some foreign medical center or hospital or clinic or wherever Chopper intends to drag him, the green-haired pirate's unease abates somewhat when his empty stomach begins to growl with growing intensity, and it dawns on him that there's now food within easy reach. _Screw it, I'm hungry._

"Not waiting for the rest of us?" Nami asks, amused, as she watches him lunge for the ladle protruding from the stew pot.

"You gonna tell the kid it's gotta wait?" He retorts, free hand indicating his abdomen, now once more safely hidden beneath his haramaki and coat.

Evidently not, because the navigator smiles in response and passes him a basket of dinner rolls.

Sanji and Robin return while Zoro's halfway through wolfing down his first plate of food. Feeling the cook's gaze on him, he tenses, steeling himself for a confrontation- but to his surprise, the blond merely studies him for a moment, smacks the captain who's stuffing his mouth full of misappropriated rolls, and then busies himself serving the women their plates.
While the anchor's being lowered and the sails safely tied down, the crew surveys their new surroundings with a cautious air that begins to dissipate once they see the harbor's relatively quiet and their Jolly Roger isn't drawing any unusual attention, and Brook and Usopp rush off to the shopping district as soon as docking's complete, the sniper to find more gunpowder and the skeleton in search of replacement guitar strings.

Despite the island's peaceful appearance, it's agreed to follow their original plan of leaving Sanji aboard to guard the ship. The cook scrawls down a rather lengthy shopping list which he reluctantly turns over to Nami, who glances at it briefly before tucking the parchment into her jeans and shooting down his desperate last ditch attempts to join her.

She insists on accompanying Chopper, Zoro and Luffy to the local medical center to deal with the billing and on bringing Franky along as well - the navigator claims it's in case they run into trouble, but the cyborg grumbles that he's just her second choice as pack mule since the doctor's told her she can't make their swordsman carry the groceries - and then Robin offers a few extra sets of eyes, so in the end, what's supposed to be a two-person outing evolves into a six-person mission.

xxx

Chopper's relieved to discover the city's health clinic is fairly modern and equipped with far more advanced medical devices than anything he's had access to on the Sunny. Most small town facilities and even his mentor's accommodations are downright primitive compared to this, although he privately thinks that only makes Dr. Kureha even more amazing for working so well with what little she's got.

The disparity's a little strange though, because the reindeer's noticed the closer they get to the end of the Grand Line, the more technologically advanced the islands seem to be, and he can't help wondering what they're going to find on Raftel, especially considering what Franky's told him in private about Dr. Vegapunk's old laboratory. It's a thought he pushes aside, however; he'll ponder it later when the crew's navigator isn't hurrying them along, eager to get their more recognizable members back to the Sunny as soon as possible.

He's slightly boggled and a little jealous the clinic's large enough to rate a receptionist - a nondescript, casually-dressed woman seated at the front desk - because he's been long accustomed to his nakama casually strolling into his infirmary and interrupting him and each other or helping themselves to various supplies over his stringent protests. Unfortunately, impressive as it might appear, the desk is also where the trouble starts; not only does the receptionist refuse to let him use their equipment or even acknowledge that he's actually a doctor, claiming she's never heard of Drum Island or the Isshi-20, but she also insists they can't be seen without an appointment and won't be troubled to search her registry for an opening.

The Straw Hat's navigator takes this obvious reluctance to assist them as both a personal affront and a challenge, nudging Chopper aside to wade into verbal battle, and the two women argue for nearly fifteen minutes before Luffy's patience finally wears thin and he decides it's time to take action.

Whipping an arm past the desk to grab a passing doctor by the collar, the rubber man hauls over the hapless individual and insists rather loudly that if they won't let Chopper mess around with the funny gadgets with the blinking lights, then HE needs to examine their pregnant crew mate.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have other patients to-"
"This'll just take a second! He's right over here."

Not surprisingly, the annoyed physician fails to process the masculine pronoun the Straw Hat captain assigns to this statement, because he immediately begins looking between Nami, who quickly begins turning a bright shade of pink, and Robin, who holds up both palms in denial and tries not to laugh.

"Which of you ladies-?"

"Not THEM," Luffy grumbles, exasperated. Taking his partner's arm and pulling him closer, ignoring the resulting "oi" of protest. "HIM."

"E-Excuse me?"

"Here." He grabs the doctor's hand and pushes its palm insistently against the firm swelling concealed by Zoro's coat.

Outraged, the swordsman promptly hurls his lover into the nearest wall, cursing the younger pirate colorfully and at length as he reaches for Wado's hilt, and Nami realizes too late that no one, including herself, thought to insist that he leave his weapons behind on the Sunny.

"Ah! No-" His name's on the tip of her tongue but she swallows it before it manages to escape. "H-Here, maybe I'd better hold those for you."

"When I said no lifting over twenty-five pounds, that includes flinging around crew mates," Chopper mutters, although he supposes that he shouldn't be surprised, considering how many other times he's scolded Zoro for weight training or undoing his neatly wrapped bandages when he's supposed to be convalescing after a fight. At least the swordsman's taking his current concerns somewhat seriously, however; no one had to pry his fingers off the anchor capstan when they docked earlier this afternoon, although he'd still hovered in the doorway offering advice to his straining, puffing nakama until Sanji lost his temper and snapped something about back-seat steersmen.

"Our apologies," Robin tells the flustered doctor as Franky restrains their infuriated crew mate and Luffy pries himself free with much ado because he's been thrown hard enough to produce a sizeable body-shaped crater in the plaster. "We'll cover the damages. I'm afraid he's a bit sensitive about his condition."

"U-Understandable." The middle-aged physician's encountered some oddities during his career, but he's learned that there's almost always something stranger waiting right around the corner. At the very least he'll have an interesting story to share around the staff table tomorrow. At best, if these people aren't pulling his leg, he might get his name in a critically acclaimed medical journal or two. That is, if the angry green-haired man with the swords doesn't make mince meat out of him first.

There's something familiar about that combination, but he's hard-pressed to remember what given the commotion and the prospect of seeing his byline in print, so after a bit of negotiation, he concedes to allow Chopper and Luffy to join them in the examination room, and Zoro reluctantly agrees to leave his blades in the lobby with Franky and the women.

XXX

Half their number escorted beyond the desk and its sharp-tongued guardian, the remaining Straw Hats sit for a long time in silence broken only by the rustle of the receptionist's paperwork and the periodic flutter of Robin turning and smoothing another page in the text she's brought with her. Franky, who hates inactivity almost as much as their captain, plays with his nose until Nami hits him with her armload of swords, snarling that she's sick of listening to the robotic monotone that
accompanies his assorted styles of hair springing free.

"I imagine Kenshi-san would be quite perturbed to see his katana used in such a manner," Robin murmurs to the navigator as she reaches the final paragraph and closes her book, a slightly regretful expression crossing her face because if she'd correctly anticipated the length of the visit, she'd have brought more reading material.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him. I wonder what's taking so long?"

"It has been quite some time," the historian agrees. "Perhaps they're investigating potential causes for the pregnancy." She's eyeing a nearby bookcase, wondering if she'll have enough time to get through one of the shorter volumes - they're not likely to let her borrow one, and she hates leaving a book unfinished - when there's an enormous crash.

Franky, who's been experimenting with how far he can tilt his seat back and still maintain his balance, hits the floor with a muffled curse and nearly sends Nami flying with one oversized forearm. The cyborg springs to his feet, kicking the flattened remains of his chair away. "Whoa! What the-?"

The sound of something heavy screeching across tile and colliding forcefully with the wall is accompanied by a loud cry of dismay and voices raised in alarm.

"Zoro, put him down!"

"L-Listen, I'm only telling you the truth! Please don't kill m-!"

"I've had enough of this bullshit!" They hear the painful thump of a body being hurled to the floor.

"Both of you, come on, we're getting the fuck out of here."

A door just beyond the desk and its startled occupant bursts open as Zoro slams through it violently enough to tear it loose from the hinges. The swordsman stalks out to join them in the waiting room, his face livid as he ignores the hysterically babbling Zoan following closely on his heels and trying to grab the hem of his coat.

"Zoro, what in the world-?" Nami's mouth drops open as she looks past him to see Luffy, his face pinched with concern and no small degree of anger, picking his way around the overturned examination table and several broken stools. The captain spares a backwards glance for the man cowering on the floor with both hands clasped over his bleeding mouth and nose, but he doesn't say anything.

"Get up. We're leaving," the older pirate growls as he rips his bundle of swords from the navigator's arms, slipping the sheaths into his sash and - with a violent, careless yank - cinching it so tightly across his belly that she flinches in sympathy, but he doesn't seem to notice because he's already striding for the exit, dragging their own diminutive doctor behind him.

"O-Oi, is that guy okay?" Franky asks nervously, squinting at the injured man. "I think he just passed out or died or somethin' but I can't tell which..."

"Luffy, Chopper, what is going-"

"We better get out of here," Luffy mutters, grabbing her arm and nodding his chin towards the front desk, where the now terrified, pale-faced receptionist is shrieking pleas for assistance at an equally alarmed-looking den den mushi.

They find Zoro and Chopper in the street outside, drawing startled glances from passersby because the swordsman is shouting angrily at the reindeer, who's resorted to Heavy Point and grabbed him by
the coat collar to prevent him from disappearing into the crowd.

Nami drags them all down the nearest alley, away from prying eyes that might start to notice a resemblance to certain wanted posters, and stops Zoro dead in his tracks with a hand braced against his chest when he immediately attempts to storm back out, jabbing a finger into his scowling face. "Now, somebody tell me just what the hell is going on! You were told we needed to keep a low profile, and here you are picking fights! Unless you're actually TRYING to bring the Marines down on us. Is that what you want?"

The older pirate clenches his jaw, his nostrils flaring as he grinds his teeth and altogether ignores her demands for answers. "You better get that finger outta my fucking face, woman, unless you wanna lose it. MOVE."

"Don't you DARE talk to me that way." She fouls his second attempt to barge past, resorting to both hands to hold him back, and this time he shoves her away hard enough to make her stumble. "I said get the hell out of my way! And keep your goddamn hands off me!"

"Why you-"

"Nami, don't!" Chopper cries, catching the navigator's wrist as she reacts automatically, her hand flying towards Zoro's face. Ignoring her startled oath at being prevented from landing the blow, he whirls back towards the swordsman. "Zoro- Zoro, listen! You heard what that doctor said! You need to calm down or-!"

"He's not likely to do so with everyone shouting at him." Taking their arms, Robin guides both navigator and doctor gently but firmly aside, opening a gap Luffy immediately squeezes into, molding himself against the older pirate's rigid body as he wraps shaking arms around him.

The green-haired man tenses, looking for a moment like he's going to protest and jerk away, but then he exhales forcefully and raises both hands to pull his captain into a tight hug, burying his face in Luffy's hair, and Nami's animosity over her injured dignity begins to fade, replaced by chagrin when she sees that her nakama's fingers are trembling where they're knotted in the back of the rubber man's vest.

She's no closer to learning why he assaulted the attending physician and turned what was likely a two hundred pound steel table upside down, but she's positive she's never seen him so clearly distressed. "I-I'm sorry- I wasn't thinking."

Zoro lifts his head to regard her silently over their captain's shoulder, and she's startled by how exhausted the swordsman looks now that he's no longer aiming glares promising slow dismemberment at everyone and everything in sight. "Guys, please, what happened in-"

"Oi, we've got company," Franky calls softly from where he's standing near the alley's mouth, peering cautiously around the corner. "Robin?"

"One moment." The historian closes her eyes, concentrating. "Marines, but only a few men and- I believe we're in luck; they seem to believe the disturbance was a simple altercation over payment. If we leave this area quickly and quietly, we should be able to avoid drawing further attention to ourselves."

"Okay, let's-" Nami glances back to find Zoro and Luffy already heading further down the alley, the rubber man's hand rubbing the older pirate's lower back as they walk side-by-side so close their hips brush. "Ah, hold on!"
"Nami, I don't think they're going to wait; we better-" Realizing she's not inclined to wait either, Chopper hurries after the navigator, closely followed by Franky and Robin, the cyborg guiding the historian to prevent her from stumbling into the buildings on either side as she concentrates on ensuring they're not being followed.

xxx

"The doctor wanted to admit him," Chopper mumbles, avoiding the redhead's eyes as she stares across the table at him. "Nami, please- it's really not my place to tell you what happened, especially if they decide they don't want us discussing it."

"I know, but-" She glances over her shoulder at the group seated behind them, watching with unease as their captain completely ignores the menu Robin's perusing in favor of cajoling Zoro into sipping some water. "Luffy's really scaring me, and if whatever you were told is really that serious, I think the rest of the crew needs to know. We're nakama, aren't we?"

"Y-Yes, but Nami-" Chopper takes a deep breath, scrubs moisture from the corners of his eyes. "I'm sorry, but I can't-"

"Go ahead and tell her," Zoro mutters without turning around, and it's the first he's spoken since snapping at the navigator back in the alley. "They'll find out soon enough anyway, if that guy's right and I keel over dead in the middle of the lawn deck."

"He said you'd WHAT?" Nami whirls in her chair, horrified, but the swordsman ignores her, rubbing the side of his head and glaring back at Luffy's scowling face because the rubber man's just boxed him in the ear.

"You shouldn't say stuff like that," the captain grumbles, shoving the glass at him vehemently enough to slosh water over the rim. "That guy was a jerk, and he didn't know what he was talking about. And he DOESN'T know Zoro."

"He sure sounded like he knew what he was talking about. Even if he was an asshole."

"I don't care, I didn't like him!" Luffy swivels around to address Nami, whose expression is now warring between worry and curiosity. "He kept using really big words and staring at me and Zoro like we were stupid whenever we asked him to repeat stuff we didn't get."

The older pirate snorts, flicking wet fingers at him. "You just pissed him off 'cause you kept ignoring him and asking Chopper every time you had a question."

"I didn't WANNA ask that guy anything! Chopper's a million times better and he's OUR doctor!" The indignant pride in the captain's voice leaves the reindeer squirming in his chair and biting his lower lip to keep from telling them that he doesn't appreciate compliments from assholes. "And he doesn't act like my questions are dumb, even though he's a lot smarter and knows a lot more stuff than me."

"DON'T ASK ME ANY MORE QUESTIONS, YOU BASTARD! I HATE ANSWERING THEM!"

Nami chuckles as she pats the blushing doctor's head, relieved to see that her crew mates are grinning as well. "Now what's this about keeling over on the lawn deck?"

Luffy and Zoro exchange a cynical look, and Chopper clears his throat. "Ah, well-"

"That stupid Doctor-ossan thinks Zoro's gonna rupture something and bleed to death." Luffy scowls.
"I tried to tell him Zoro's really, really strong, but he wouldn't believe me." The younger pirate brushes his fingertips down the scar sealing the swordsman's left eye and continues downward to trace the older flaw across his chest with such affection and reverence that their embarrassed crew mates glance elsewhere, with the exception of Robin, who merely smiles as she cradles her coffee cup in both hands. "Zoro's gotten sliced up and stabbed and shot and even tried to cut his own feet off, and he's still here, right?"

"He does seem to have more blood than anyone I've ever met, considering how much trouble he's got keeping it where it belongs," Nami muses, resting her chin on her arms where they're crossed over the back of her chair.

"I know you guys didn't want to hear it, but it's a real concern." Chopper sighs as his protest produces identical scowls. "I'd be a lot less worried if the placenta was anchored directly to the abdominal wall, but according to that scan, it's attached to both the jejunum and ileum and their surrounding mesentery."

"Err-"

"Ah, sorry- those would be parts of the lower intestine." The doctor clarifies, and Franky nearly drops his bottle of cola.

"Jeez, th-that just ain't right."

"Yeah," Zoro mutters, "so they get a good look at the screen and then both start freaking out tossing around all this crazy medical jargon, 'cause apparently the kid's all tangled up in my guts or something. That's what they said, anyway, but it just looked like a whole bunch of shadowy blobs to me." He hesitates, expression unreadable. "Well, except for the baby anyway. Could see THAT pretty clear."

Luffy's face brightens with excitement as he turns back to the navigator. "Chopper's really, REALLY good at reading those scan things! He was pointing out all kinds of neat stuff on the screen, like this weird little blip that he said was the baby's heart beating, and-"

His partner sets his glass down with a sharp clack and the younger pirate flinches, smiling fading. "Uhm, but then Zoro kinda broke the scanning thingy off the ultrasound den den when he flipped the table and tried to kill the doctor..."

Momentarily distracted by the bizarre mental image of her crew mate with a snail crawling back and forth across his belly, Nami blinks in confusion at the way the tension's suddenly returned, thicker than ever. "What-"

"I wanted to hit him too, but Zoro got him first," the captain declares sullenly, color rising in his face, and she's alarmed to see tears welling in the younger pirate's eyes before he's pulled off his chair into Zoro's rough embrace and buries his face against the swordsman's neck. No, not just alarmed but outright scared because their green-haired nakama never encourages such displays of affection in public, much less prompts them himself. NEVER.

"This is why I didn't want to discuss this in front of them," Chopper murmurs unhappily, motioning for Nami and others to join him as he abandons his chair and retreats to another seat out of earshot.

"What the hell'd that asshole say to them?" Franky demands quietly once he's squeezed his bulk into a new chair, his hands balling into fists where they're resting on the tabletop. "'Cause it's got 'em all
freaked out!"

The doctor, eyes locked on the other table where Zoro's trying to comfort their unhappy captain despite his own obvious distress, sighs. "He told us there's very little chance of Zoro carrying to term without a serious, life-threatening hemorrhage. We're- we're talking single digit numbers." The color drains from his crew members' faces and he takes a deep breath before continuing. "Of course, Luffy wouldn't accept the diagnosis, and when he tried to argue with that man, h-he wasn't very sympathetic. He recommended an immediate laparotomy."

"You mean that surgical procedure right? But isn't it still way too early for-?"

"Viable preterm's considered anywhere between thirty-four to thirty-six weeks, but the development visible on the scan only puts Zoro around twenty-three weeks. And even if I put him on bed rest for the next two and a half to three months, there's no guarantee the fetus- the BABY- won't have problems." The doctor can't bring himself to keep using the clinical term, not after witnessing the stunned amazement on his nakama's faces at seeing their offspring for the first time, blurred, grainy image or not. "The placenta's just attached in a bad place. Not only could it tear free, but there's also a possibility it may not be delivering enough blood and oxygen to the baby. It looked healthy enough on the scan, but...

"Shit."

"I don't know," Nami says slowly, determined to remain optimistic. "I mean, Luffy's right, this is Zoro we're talking about."

"That's what I said too, but that doctor didn't want to hear it." Chopper mutters, glaring down at his hooves. "He- he told Luffy that he better decide who's more important - Zoro or the baby - because he said refusing to terminate the pregnancy's going to kill them both."

"That's-"

"What the hell?"

The reindeer nods miserably. "Luffy went white as a sheet, and Zoro- Zoro- well, that's when he starting throwing things and threatening to break that man's neck..."

"Damn doctors are always telling me shit I don't want to hear. That's why I fucking hate check-ups."

They all glance up to find the swordsman standing beside their new table with one arm draped around their sniffling captain's shoulders.

"Zoro..."

"I'm going back to the ship for a nap," Zoro announces, nudging Luffy towards them. "Do me a favor and feed this idiot before he implodes."

"I'm not hungry," the rubber man argues, although his protest is nearly drowned out by the whining rumble that his stomach emits. He latches onto the older pirate's coat collar and pulls him closer until they're touching, his lover's curved belly pressing firmly against his own flat one through the layers of fabric between them. "I wanna go with Zoro. We could nap together!"

"You'll just keep me awake with your gut making all those weird noises and- mmph," he grunts as he's kicked hard enough that Luffy feels it faintly too, and they both glance down. "See, the kid agrees. It's two against one, so shut up and stuff your damn face and then help Franky carry all that shit the eyebrow cook wants."
Their crew mates are watching, but he kisses the captain's scowling mouth anyway, and it's worth the embarrassment because the younger pirate is finally smiling again when he draws back.

"Are you sure? If you don't mind waiting a bit, we could make a side trip, double-check if there's anything else Sanji needs that he didn't write down," Nami offers.

"Or I could go with you, use Walking Point so you wouldn't have to-"

The swordsman waves a dismissing hand. "Nah, I'd rather walk. Try to clear my head without you guys hanging all over me and talking my ear off. I'll be fine. The dock's right on the other side of that street."

Luffy slides a hand into his coat and down the side of his haramaki to cup his bare stomach, thumb stroking the warm, distended skin. He peers skeptically up at the older pirate. "You're gonna walk really slow and find somewhere to sit down if you get tired, right?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll-"

"Promise!"

"Okay okay, I prom- oh!" His expression's now one of bemused exasperation beneath the brim of the straw hat that's just been plunked unceremoniously on his head, and he rakes it free, running a hand through his hair and aiming a halfhearted glare at the navigator and historian as they exchange a knowing smile.

"Take that with you 'n watch it for me. And don't get lost, okay?"

"Of course I won't, idiot. I'll see you later," Zoro mutters, giving Luffy a tight squeeze and another quick kiss before he pries the younger man's clinging arms loose and heads for the door with one hand resting lightly on Wado's hilt and the captain's hat dangling from the fingers of the other.

"Tell Sanji we'll bring back that stuff he wants!" Luffy calls after him. "And tell him I said hi!"

"Sure thing, Sencho. I'm sure the curly-brow cook will be thrilled to see me," he tosses over his shoulder as he crosses the threshold, sparing one last glance back at his captain's smiling face.

The younger pirate laughs, accepting the menu Franky's waving at him, although his eyes are still glued to his lover's retreating form. It's not until that familiar green hair disappears from sight, lost amidst the crowd outside, that he finally turns his attention to the entries Chopper's trying to point out to him, blissfully unaware that the next time he sees Zoro, he'll find himself cursing his own show of restraint in dealing with the Doctor-ossan because it might've all turned out differently if he'd simply stood aside and let his swordsman kill the other man.
Chapter 7

When Zoro eventually staggers onto the Sunny's lawn deck, puffing hard through his mouth and nose and mentally berating himself for not accepting Chopper's offer of a ride, he's too drained of energy to walk the last few yards to the men's quarters door. Collapsing into one of Nami and Robin's sun bathing chairs seems like it'd involve a hell of a lot less effort, so he stumbles to the closest one and nearly goes head over heels trying to sit down. Every muscle and joint below his waist aches with maddening intensity, thighs and calves burning and knees and ankles popping protest as he pulls his legs up.

He drops Luffy's hat onto the grass beside him, trailing his fingertips across the woven straw. "Don't-get lost. Blasted- captain- must've- jinxed me."

The swords strapped against his side feel abominably heavy and he's overheated and drenched with sweat from trudging around wearing so many layers on such a warm day, but when he attempts to untie the sash holding his coat shut, he discovers it's knotted far too tightly. "Oh, COME ON."

He's sprawled there, fighting unsuccessfully with the fabric and getting steadily more and more infuriated that he's so damn WEAK after doing nothing more strenuous than walk a few blocks, when the dining hall door opens and a blond head pokes out.

Sanji glares down over the railing at him, gesturing violently with the sudsy frying pan he's clutching. "You know, you could've yelled or something. Let me know you were a shitty bastard that BELONGS on the ship and not a shitty bastard trying to HIJACK the ship."

"Supposed- to be in the- look out tower," the swordsman pants, yanking again at his sash and cursing brokenly because his fingers are shaking too hard to cooperate. "-damn eyebrow-

Fuck it. He gives up and goes limp on the chair, closing his eye and thinking he should have dragged himself to the men's quarters anyway- at least gotten through the door if not necessarily all the way to the sofa. If he's going to pass out, he'd prefer to do so in private, not outside with the swirly-shit cook gawking at him. He hates feeling helpless, sure, but he positively DETESTS showing weakness in front of Sanji. He's supposed to be stronger than this.

For a moment there's nothing but silence and the muted sounds of the harbor - seagulls, water lapping against the hull and a far-off shout or two from the closest ship - but then he hears footsteps on the stairs and a few moments later, a shadow falls over him.

"Oi. You still conscious?"

"No. Go away, asshole."

There's a harsh sigh and a rustle, and Zoro stifles a squawk of surprise as something cool and wet drops onto his face. He lifts a hand, pushing the moist towel up so he can direct a one-eyed glower at the cook, who's frowning down at him disapprovingly. "Lemme 'lone. Don't need your help."

"Actually-" Sanji murmurs, dropping to his knees beside the chair. "It looks like you do."

Zoro tenses as hands reach towards his middle, but when the cook ignores his apprehension and merely starts picking at the knotted fabric constricting his belly, he bites back the insult hovering on the tip of his tongue and watches the other man in bad-tempered silence.

"Damn it, Marimo, how in the world did you manage to tie this shitty thing in a fisherman's bend?"
"If you can't get it, just cut the damn thing and I'll buy another one before we leave," the swordsman mumbles noncommittally. "Oh yeah, Luffy says I'm 'sposed to tell you that they'll be back with your crap. And he says hi."

"Captain's got you truly and utterly whipped. Guess he just needs to get you barefoot in the kitchen since he covered the other part already," the blond snorts, smirking at the way his crew mate's already flushed face deepens in color. "But why the hell'd he let them send you back by yourself, on foot? I won't even ask how long you were wandering around before you finally found your way back here."

"I needed some time without those idiots fussing over me. It was just a little farther than I thought," Zoro grumbles, refusing to admit that he's probably just walked two or three times the distance between the diner and the dock. It's not his fault this stupid town's goddamn streets all look the same, and he doesn't want to suffer through another tirade about his poor sense of direction.

He's physically exhausted. He's emotionally exhausted. And unfortunately, it seems he's managed to escape the embarrassment of having Luffy and the others hovering around him only to find himself under the fussy care of the absolute LAST person whose face he wants to see right now. It's downright humiliating.

"Right, because god forbid I even SUGGEST you get lost finding your way from point A to point B," Sanji agrees dryly, finally tugging the sash open and lifting the sheathed weapons free, despite the swordsman's ardent protests. "Settle down, moss-head, I won't drop 'em." He sets the trio of katana carefully aside. "See? No harm done. Jeez, you'd think this kid on the way's actually number four, considering how much you coddle these blasted swords. Here, lemme help with-"

"Oi, wait- I don't need-"

The fingers busily undoing Zoro's coat toggles slip as he tries to shift away, bumping firmly against his haramaki-bound belly, and he instinctively shoves the cook's hands away and scoots further upright in the chair. "That's good enough- don't fucking touch me!"

He's had far too many people poking and prodding at him today, and after all the bullshit that doctor tried to feed them, he just wants to curl up - preferably with Luffy snuggled against his back - and sleep for a few weeks until the confused clatter in his head dies down.

"F-Fine," Sanji stammers, backing away and feeling genuinely surprised, because he's been one of the few crew members to purposely AVOID invading the swordsman's personal space. Following his brief conversation with Robin, he's been highly conscious of the distress and sheer panic that flashes fleetingly across his green-haired nakama's face when well-meaning but less perceptive crew mates insist on squeezing him like they're testing the ripeness of a piece of fruit. In all honesty, merely glimpsing Zoro's growing belly seriously freaks him out; he's still trying to wrap his brain around the fact that there's another person, albeit a very small and helpless one, developing in there, and he can't IMAGINE how the other man must feel.

Tugging his coat fully closed again over his stomach, Zoro lurches to his feet, grimacing as stabbing pain twinges somewhere inside his abdomen. It's gone just as quickly, leaving him wondering if he's imagined it, but he can't help glancing down uneasily because of what the doctor - the quack, he reminds himself darkly - said.

He takes a deep breath, ignoring the urge to span both hands across his stomach - he's not entirely comfortable touching himself like that in front of someone other than Luffy, and it won't tell him what's wrong anyway - and glares at the cook, pointing down at his swords. "Oi, grab those for me? And that too." Reluctant to stoop down to retrieve them himself, because he's afraid he might fall on
his face. He doesn't trust his balance when his legs still feel this stiff and rubbery.

"Marimo, are you sure you're alright?" Sanji asks as he bundles up the swords, topping them with the straw hat, and rises to his feet, eyeing the other pirate suspiciously. "Did everything check out okay?"

"Just fuckin' peachy." Zoro snarls, snatching for Luffy's hat and his weapons. "Go flambe something, or whatever the hell it is that you do in that kitchen."

"Can't. No alcohol."

The swordsman snorts and turns away, unaware that he's being closely scrutinized by the cook. He's still extremely tired, but at least he doesn't feel like he's going to black out at any moment now that he's finally caught his breath. "Whatever. I'm gonna go lay down for a while. Let Luffy know I'm in the women's quarters when he gets back. Oh, and don't believe anything Chopper tries to tell you. It's just a bunch of bullshit."

"Oi-"

"Look, don't throw a fucking fit, okay? Nami's not gonna care," he growls, glaring back over his shoulder. "-not after today, anyway. I'll probably be lucky she and our damn doctor don't tie me to the freaking bed."

"Oi- Zoro-?"

He's so surprised to hear his given name that he forgets to snap. "What?"

"I don't care about the damn bed if Nami-san's really okay with it- even though I DO think you guys should just ask Franky for your own instead of kicking her and Robin-chan out of their own room all the- no, no-no-no, Marimo, quit it with the one-eyed death beam thing! Look, I'm sorry. That's not really what I wanted to say."

Zoro's glower falters as Sanji abruptly looks away, scuffing at the grass with one well-shined shoe while his face turns brilliantly red, which the swordsman finds incredibly weird and somewhat alarming, because the cook normally only gets like this when there's a pretty face and pair of breasts involved. Or a pair of panties. Last time dartboard brow looked that flustered, he'd been trying to explain to the navigator how he'd somehow ended up with a laundry basket full of her undergarments.

The swordsman still hasn't made up his mind whether his crew mate wanted to oogle them because they were Nami's or wanted them because he wanted to WEAR them. Sanji hasn't been quite the same since Momoiro Island.

"What the hell are you-"

"Shut up and listen, okay? You mention this to anybody else and I'll deny it and beat the shit outta you 'n throw you overboard - after the kid's born anyway - but I- I think what you're doing is pretty goddamn amazing. You've got a lot of guts going through with this, and I thought somebody should tell you that."

For a few seconds Zoro's too stunned to speak, but eventually he finds his voice again. "... I sure as hell didn't see it coming, that's for sure. If I thought something like this could happen back when I first met Luffy, I probably would have gutted him on the spot," he says slowly, glancing down the hat in his hand. "But I- well, he's happy. He really wants this.-" He swallows. ".-baby. He really wants this baby, and I guess we've got you idiots looking out for us, so..."
He's still more than a little terrified at the prospect of dealing with- of being responsible for- a child and also uneasy about what might happen if Chopper's concerns prove true, but for the first time since he's left the medical center, he's got the feeling that everything's going to be okay. He's got friends- no, he's got nakama- family- on the Sunny, and he can do this. Backed by the rest of the crew, even the cook with all his obnoxious bravado and constant teasing, there's no way he and Luffy can fail.

"I-" Wow, this is fucking awkward. "Thanks... Sanji."

"N-No problem. And- oi, I'm- I'm sorry about that crack I made. You know- the barefoot in the kitchen thing? It was pretty shitty and I shouldn't've said it."

They stare at each other for a few moments.

"Shit. What the hell is this? Male bonding?" Sanji finally coughs, looking embarrassed but amused. "Don't worry, Marimo, I'm not gonna ask to hold your hand or hug you or anything."

"Just try it," Zoro laughs, "-and I'll slice you julienne style."

"Shitty smart-ass swordsman." They're still grinning at each other and exchanging friendly if rather mean-spirited banter when a deep, unfamiliar voice hails them from the dock below.

"Roronoa Zoro?"

xxx

While Luffy wouldn't take back his earlier declaration that Zoro will be fine despite the doctor's concerns – his swordsman's proved again and again that he's pretty damn durable if not necessarily invincible – the captain can't quite escape his uneasy feeling that something's wrong. In fact, the sense of discomfort that surfaced unexpectedly about fifteen minutes ago is so intense he actually feels a little ill- although it could also be due to his inhaling enough food to satisfy five or six people despite his earlier claim that he wasn't hungry.

He's picking halfheartedly at the remains of Franky's plate, trying to identify the cause of the tight knot in his stomach and listening to Nami and Robin discuss the most efficient method of locating everything on Sanji's shopping list when the ground shudders violently beneath their feet, throwing the diner and the street outside into chaos.

"The hell?" Franky demands. "Joint's rockin' 'n rollin' but there ain't no music!"

Robin's already rising from her seat, calm and collected despite the pandemonium erupting around them. "Perhaps that's our cue to exit."

Nami throws a handful of beli notes and coins onto the table as they hurry for the door, pausing to scoop up Chopper when a series of tremors shakes the building violently enough to send the reindeer staggering sideways into her leg.

"Sounds like explosions, but I sure don't think it's fireworks," Franky mutters, pushing up his sunglasses and frowning at the crowd surrounding them, people stumbling into each other, screaming and shouting in panic as yet another quake forces them to clutch at each other for balance and causes bricks and pieces of masonry to shake loose overhead and rain down.

Cursing in surprise, the cyborg raises both massive arms to shield the others from the falling rumble, grunting as an unseen heavy weight glances off his shoulders, and Luffy dodges unconsciously as part of a steaming rooftop slides past, his wide, horror-stricken eyes focused on the sky overhead.
"Z-ZORO!"

"Oi, Mugiwara, wait!" The cyborg shouts, but it's too late; the rubber man's already gone, running full tilt down the center of the street and knocking people off their feet when they don't clear out of his way fast enough. "Shit! Are you guys okay?"

"I think so," Robin coughs, clearing dust from her lungs. "Ah, Nami, you're bleeding."

"Oh my god-" the navigator gasps, struggling upright with Chopper in her arms and ignoring the wet warmth trickling down the side of her face because she's already seen where their captain's going. "LUFFY!"

"Luffy-san, wait for us- we're coming with you!"

The rubber man ignores his female crew mates' cries, flings both arms skywards to grab a patio railing and launches himself over the buildings blocking his view of the harbor, unable to tear his gaze from the enormous billowing cloud of black smoke rising from where they've left the ship. In his panic, he misjudges the distance and clips one calf against a chimney protruding from the roof he's sailing over, and the impact sends him crashing to the ground.

He lands on his chest and stomach in ankle-deep water because nearly three-quarters of the dock is gone, scattered in burning heaps like so much kindling, but immediately scrambles to his feet when he sees most of the vessels in the harbor have been reduced to floating wreckage and plunges forward, splashing through the mire and nearly colliding with a huge, jagged chunk of concrete, eyes too busy searching for a familiar vessel to pay attention to where he's going.

For a moment he's relieved, because their ship's still intact, straining against the anchor as it rocks wildly in the surge, but then he gets closer and realizes that the Sunny's burning.

The Adam wood is smoldering, stubbornly resisting the flames, but the sails and Jolly Roger aren't fairing so well, and when Luffy swings onto the lawn deck, colliding with what his dazed mind sluggishly identifies as a sun chair, he's slow to extricate himself from the heat-twisted frame because he's temporarily paralyzed by the sight of Nami's mikan trees blazing on the upper deck.

Fear's icy fingers sink deeper into his chest, squeezing his heart, and he tears his gaze away and sprints towards the bow end of the ship. Because while they're only trees, he knows- and more importantly, every member of the crew knows and appreciates the emotional value that small grove holds for their navigator. And the fact that neither Zoro nor Sanji's out here fighting the flames-

The men's and women's quarters are both deserted, beds and bunks alike unoccupied and either still neatly made or filled with crumpled but empty sheets. There's no one in the dining hall or kitchen either, and when he shoves open the door to the aquarium bar so forcefully it nearly rebounds in his face, a large, gasping fish flops out past his sandals because the entire tank has ruptured, littering the tiles with broken glass and limp strands of kelp.

Luffy's brain is struggling hopelessly to process the fact that there's no water, just a few solitary puddles, even as he begins frantically shouting Zoro and Sanji's names while he searches the rest of the ship. He knows Franky's told them the tank holds a few thousand gallons, but it's just- gone.

Every window in the library is shattered, the floor scattered with burning pages, and when the captain scales the ladder to dash into the bathhouse, slapping distractedly at the embers trying to ignite the seat of his shorts, he finds the room full of scalding steam from the ruptured water pipes and the ofuro completely empty.
The entire ship's filled with the same hot burning stink, an odor that seems vaguely familiar, although he's currently too agitated to recognize it and barely notices when he gashes one forearm in the process of rocketing himself out the broken window up onto the crow's nest. The metal floor's too hot to walk on, and there's hissing and popping noises coming from the damaged megaphone, but there's no one up there either.

Usopp's room and the docking system are equally empty, and he doesn't get more than a few steps into Franky's development room before turning back, because the entire room - which is lined floor to ceiling with metal plating - is glowing like a furnace. There's also things exploding in there, and he's forced to duck to prevent an oversized cog from decapitating him when it whistles by his head.

But there's no reply to his shouting, which is rising in volume as he returns to the main deck, and he's forced to conclude that neither of them are on the ship. He's torn between relief and terror because he's hoping desperately that maybe they weren't here when it - whatever it is - happened, but his gut instinct tells him otherwise, so he leans over the rail and starts scanning the wreckage surrounding the ship.

Luffy's heart nearly comes to a standstill when he recognizes the shapes of several bodies floating nearby, surrounded by hazy red clouds, but none of them have green or blond hair.

As he paces along the railing, now nearly frantic with the need to find his swordsman and cook, the thought occurs to him that they could be trapped under the ship as well as alongside it, and he's seconds away from jumping overboard when Chopper arrives at a gallop, Walking Point hooves skidding crazily as he finds himself skirting the edge of an enormous crater in the earth beside the dock.

"Don't go in the water, you idiot!" Nami screams, throwing herself free from the reindeer's neck as soon as he's slid to a halt and racing for the rope ladder, knowing she's going to reach the rubber man too late, but then Robin - still seated on Chopper's back - summons an array of arms that restrain the captain and transfer him to the relative safety of the ground beside them.

"Let go!" Luffy growls, struggling, and the navigator shoots him an exacerbated look as she kicks off her sandals, cursing her luck at being surrounded by nothing but devil's fruit users because Franky still hasn't caught up with them.

"Stay here, damn it! Even if they're down there, you'll drown too trying to bring them up!"

"I don't care! Let- GO!"

"Captain, please let Nami take care of-" The historian winces, involuntarily losing control of her extra limbs as the younger pirate's teeth sink into the forearm wrapped around his neck, and she steels herself as she raises both arms again, determined to hang on this time even if she's bitten again, but to her vast relief Luffy doesn't try to follow when Nami dives into the water.

Robin cautiously releases him and turns her focus inwards, intending to search the inside of the Sunny even though she's sure he's already done so, but there's too much heat and smoke and the ship isn't quite as she last saw it, so she's forced to give up, blinking and resisting the urge to rub her stinging, watery eyes.

"Where are they?" Chopper asks fearfully, reverting to Brain Point after the older woman slides from his back. "They wouldn't have left the ship..."

Luffy stalks past them, muttering under his breath as he paces back and forth, face twisted with fear and anger and confusion. He's edging closer to where the dock ends in jagged timbers, trying to
catch a glimpse of anything but floating debris and dark water, when his foot strikes something that clatters and rolls away. He crouches, lips parting and brow furrowing in disbelief as he stretches trembling fingers towards it.

"Luffy, what did you-" The historian halts as he slowly raises the object he's retrieved into view and turns his head to look at her, fixing her with enormous horror-filled eyes that demand she tell him it's a mistake, and Robin doesn't protest when Chopper whimpers and clutches at her, even though his hooves are pinching her leg through her skirt.

"Nothing!" Nami gasps as her head breaks the surface, treading water and clumsily pushing wet hair out of her face. "Visibility's really bad and I'll go back down if you want, but I'm pretty sure there's nobody down-"

When the harsh sound reaches her ears, she hauls herself from the water in a panic, expecting to find a sea king bearing down on them, because she doesn't recognize the ragged cry of despair bursting from Luffy's throat as human in origin, much less identifiable as the younger pirate's voice. Instead, she finds their captain howling into the smoke-filled sky as he kneels on the splintered dock, heedless of the blood dripping from his lacerated fingers where they're desperately clutching the jagged remains of Wado's shattered blade and partially melted hilt.
Chapter 8

Nami isn’t sure whether she feels relieved or more concerned when Luffy, who finally quiets down when he realizes he’s getting blood all over what remains of Wado, doesn’t immediately bolt off in search of whoever’s attacked the ship and their nakama but simply collapses into a sitting position, staring numbly at the damaged hilt cradled in his injured hands and emitting occasional hiccuping sobs.

He looks up at her tentative approach, studying her with distant, unblinking eyes leaking clean paths through the soot obscuring his face as he begins trying to wipe the broken sword clean on his shirt, and doesn’t speak as she drops down on her knees beside him, but when she tries to gently pry the weapon from the younger pirate’s fingers, afraid he’s going to accidentally stab himself in the chest, the teary-eyed rubber man tightens his grip and bares his teeth at her.

She lets him keep it and settles for slinging an arm tightly around his shoulders, leaning her forehead against his cheek and closing her eyes as she struggles to keep her own distress under control.

Franky rushes onto the dock moments later, his shouting cut abruptly short at the sight of the devastation. The cyborg slows to a walk and stares up at the vessel into whose creation and maintenance he’s poured his heart and soul and who’s been their only real home since departing Water Seven, tears welling in his eyes and spilling down his cheeks, but when he registers the small despondent group surrounding their shivering captain, he reluctantly turns his back on the Sunny and joins them.

"We should do something about the ship," Robin murmurs as she strokes Chopper's bowed head, looking over to meet Nami's eyes, and the navigator nods in silent agreement but neither of them move from where they're huddled on either side of Luffy, not until Usopp and Brook appear, running as fast as they can and shrieking at them to explain what the hell's going on.

"What- what HAPPENED? Where's Sanji? WHERE'S ZORO?"

"I'm afraid we- we don't know."

At the historian's faltering words, Luffy utters a choked sobbing noise, and the sniper falls to his hands and knees beside them, while the musician remains standing beside Franky but solemnly removes his hat.

"Luffy-san, I-"

Something detonates deep within the ship, and everyone flinches, surprised by the sudden explosion.

"I think-" Franky mutters, removing his sunglasses to swipe his forearm across his wet face. "I think that came from Ch-Chanel Two."

Their captain takes a ragged breath. "Somebody- somebody go put out the fire."

No one moves, and when Luffy lifts his head, his eyes aren't quite as unfocused although they're still full of pain and swimming with tears. "Franky, Usopp, go take care of the ship. We don't have anywhere else to go."

"Mugiwara-"

"Luffy, what about-"
Barking a choked order for his distraught crew to stop badgering him and concentrate on extinguishing the Sunny before more of it's consumed by the fire ravaging its decks, Luffy staggers to his feet and pushes away from them, swaying slightly.

He refuses to let Chopper bandage his wounded, badly bleeding hands until he's thoroughly combed the wreckage for every last shard of Kuina's katana he can find. His determined searching also uncovers Kitetsu and Shuusui, their edges now dull and chipped. Shuusui is bent nearly in half, and Nami looses an inadvertent gasp of shock at the sight because they've all heard their green-haired swordsman noting the sword's unmatched strength.

"Zoro'll want 'em back. We'll just hafta find somebody to fix 'em," the captain mutters when Brook asks him what he's doing, and the skeleton doesn't have the heart to tell him that even if they take the damaged weapons to a tradesman skilled enough to re-forge them, they won't truly be the same blades. He suspects the younger pirate already knows this.

Franky, in the process of maneuvering the floating wreckage of a smaller ship closer to their own to use as a platform from which to combat the flames, utters a shout of disbelief when he unexpectedly discovers Sanji's battered body half-buried amidst the split timbers. The cook's burned and bloodied and only semi-conscious, but he insists on speaking with their captain before he'll allow his wounds to be treated.

"Stupid stubborn bastards," Nami whispers thoughtlessly, and it sounds so much like something that their swordsman might say that she bursts into fresh tears.

"L-Listen," Sanji chokes, fist gripping the collar of Luffy's vest and yanking him closer until they're almost touching noses. "Marines. A-Ambushed us and-" The cook coughs explosively, blood spraying from his lips, but the captain doesn't flinch as it spatters his face. "T-Tried to stop 'em- b-but they took Marimo."

"Which Admiral?" Luffy demands, nostrils flaring, although something inside him already knows the answer. There's few people capable of surviving a match with his swordsman much less strong enough to defeat and abduct him, and even though Zoro's no longer in top fighting form due to second-trimester pregnancy, there's no way he'd be taken by anyone weaker than an Admiral.

"T-Two of them." Chopper's tugging at the rubber man's arm, tearfully demanding they stop talking because he's convinced Sanji has a punctured lung in addition to his other injuries, but they both ignore him, the blond fighting the darkness stealing into his vision because he's determined to tell Luffy what he needs to know before the pain overwhelms him and he passes out. 

"-that skinny g-guy with the glasses- from Sabaody- and some huge t-tattooed asshole I've never seen b-before with-"

Huge glowing fists, he's about to say, but the expression of pure, undiluted rage that sweeps over his nakama's face tells him that the younger man already knows the second Admiral's identity.

"Akainu," Luffy snarls, pupils constricting to pinpoints as he finally identifies the pungent odor that's been haunting him since he first started searching the burning ship. It's the same smell of volcanic sulfur and brimstone that lingered in his nostrils after Marineford, where he lost someone else he loved to the magma man's wrath. Where his brother died in his arms with a gaping, bloody hole in his chest.

And now this same man- this same cold-hearted BASTARD-

_Took my swordsman. Took Zoro and our baby. Took my-

His control snaps then, and his crew mates watch in stunned silence as he lays waste to the dock's
remains, blood-smeared knuckles reducing concrete to powder and timbers to splinters until Franky - following Nami's fearful urging that somebody do something before their captain inadvertently causes more damage to either himself or the Sunny - reluctantly knocks him into the harbor with a cautiously applied Strong Right.

The younger pirate's far more subdued after the cyborg and Usopp fish him out, quietly accepting the slightly squashed but otherwise unharmed straw hat that Robin passes him, his head bowed as he listens to her softly spoken explanation of how she found it caught and fluttering on a bent nail in the wreckage.

For the first time, the sight of Shank's gift turns Luffy's stomach and raises a painful lump in his throat, because in this moment, as he sits dripping on the hard ground with its wide brim crumpled in his trembling hands, he'd gladly trade it for the far more significant treasure that's been stolen from his grasp.

xxx

The log pose resets that evening, calculating and displaying a selection of new routes, but Nami spares it no more than an inquisitive glance and no one broaches the subject of setting out for the next island. They're all aware that the Sunny's not going anywhere and that their captain - perched on the ship's figurehead and staring forlornly at the horizon, where the sinking sun's reflected on the calm water - is, for once in his life, looking back instead of forward.

xxx

Several miles away, on a Marine vessel where chore boys are lighting lamps against the coming night and exchanging awed whispers regarding the distinguished visitors and their notorious prisoner, two of the most powerful military men in the world exchange private words behind the locked and heavily guarded door of the ship's brig.

"I thought someone was pulling my leg when the order came down, but it looks like it's true. Goddamm pirates. It's bad enough we've still got Level Six escapees on the loose two years after that fiasco with Teach, and now this?" A heavy boot nudges the unconscious swordsman's belly, and the two men watch as their captive instinctively curls his body into a defensive fetal position, uttering a faint groan of protest.

"Oooh, I suppose it's a bit unusual," Kizaru muses, stroking his chin. "-but stranger things have happened, and their crew's certainly developed a reputation for doing the unexpected."

"Exactly, which is why I still say we should kill him now, before this blows up in our faces."

"Now, now, are you suggesting we disobey a direct order? The World Government wants Roronoa alive. At least until he's no longer needed, anyway, and judging by his current appearance, we shouldn't have long to wait." He adjusts his glasses, eyeing the shorter Admiral. "You nearly jeopardized our mission, you know, trying to punch him like that. It's a good thing that blond man got in the way."

"I wasn't expecting him to pull that Kyutoryu stunt. It's surprising he still had that much fight in him, considering how exhausted he looked when we tracked him back to his ship but- the bloody bastard actually nicked me." Akainu growls, referring to the shallow wound one of his beleaguered opponent's katana left across his collarbone and shoulder. Cutting right through the brilliant tattoo emblazoned on his skin. Goddamn pirate. He draws back his foot, intending to deliver a much sharper blow to the swordsman's soft middle.
"Ah-ah, Sakazuki- I wouldn't do that. It's not polite to kick a pregnant wo- man? Oooh, oh dear, I'm not quite sure of the proper idiom in the given situation."

"I'm surprised at you, getting sentimental over-"

"Don't be ridiculous. But if you crack a hatching egg, you run the risk of damaging the chick inside, correct? We both know the Gorosei insisted I tag along to protect their investment because they don't trust your temper, especially in regards to the Mugiwara pirates."

"Bunch of fools," Akainu sneers, but he lowers his foot. "We should've ordered a Buster Call as soon as they received the positive identification from that clinic."

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times- while they consider Monkey D. Luffy a dangerous future element, the World Government's far more concerned with the whereabouts of his father these days, and this-" Kizaru lifts his own foot to lightly tap his heel on the swordsman's hip. ",may be the opportunity they've been waiting for, if the news lures him into revealing his current location."

"They can't seriously be expecting Dragon to give a damn about where his son spends his seed. I think it's clear the man views his own boy as nothing more than another potential pawn of the Revolutionary Army, just like a typical-"

"Oooh, but tell me, Sakazuki- what better pawn will he find than his own grandchild? The issue of two ridiculously powerful Supernovas, both of which have proven themselves quite adept at causing the World Nobles such an ongoing headache? Besides, if Sengoku's theory is correct, that child could inherit the Will of D, and although Garp's family tends toward male offspring, I don't think I need to tell you the fairer sex could be equally problematic. Just look at Devil Child Nico Robin, hmm?"

"Enough with your long-winded mumbling- it takes you forever to say what's on your mind." The muscular man kneels to rattle the thick chain links holding Roronoa's hands behind his back, checking that they're secure for the fifth time since they dragged the insensate swordsman into the cell. "Garp. Demoted or not, that old man's going to be a problem. Hasn't been quite right since I exterminated Roger's brat, and he's still far too interested in matters that shouldn't concern him."

Like that little pink-haired upstart who stepped out of line and challenged me at Marineford two years ago, the Admiral deliberates darkly. He's well aware that Garp's maintained contact with Coby following completion of the young Marine's haki training.

"And that would be why Roronoa's condition needs to remain classified until we reach our destination." Kizaru sighs, shaking his head as he glances towards the cell's fourth occupant. "Some people are just far too nosy for their own good. If you would be so kind as to drop that body overboard on your way out, I'll re-stress the importance that the petty officers not disobey orders to steal a quick look at our... guest." He chuckles, sounding amused. "Why, if we're forced to continue eliminating our own men, there won't be anyone left to sail the ship."

Grumbling, Akainu reaches out to rip the insignia from the corpse's uniform before he hauls the body upright by the collar, lips pressed firmly together. Utterly disgraceful. A man unable to follow simple orders certainly doesn't deserve to bear the emblem of his rank. "I still can't believe they're sending him THERE, after what happened the last time. Like I've said already-"

"I've been told it's not a concern. They finished the reconstruction twelve weeks ago, and besides, there's no one to sneak the Mugiwara captain inside this time. If he somehow finds his way back to Paradise, we'll be waiting for him- and in any case, he'd never make it past the Gates." There's a
sharp knock at the door, and the taller man smiles. "Oooh, I do believe dinner's ready. Shall we go?"

Akainu spares one last glance of disdain for the swordsman curled on the floor before he follows Kizaru out the door, tightening his grip on the dead Marine he's holding at arm's length to keep the blood and brain matter from the man's crushed skull from staining his white suit. Tough luck, Roronoa. You and Dragon's son, both caught in the crossfire between the World Government and the Revolutionary Army. Nobody on either side really gives a shit whether you live or die; they're far more interested in how to utilize the tool you've unwittingly provided for them.

He's somewhat perplexed why the other man hadn't done the sensible thing and insisted on having the abomination he's carrying aborted, but apparently the former Pirate Hunter actually wants his captain's child. Otherwise he wouldn't have been so desperate to protect his vulnerable abdomen during their fight on the Straw Hat's ship. His black-clad crew mate had seemed equally determined to thwart their efforts, and judging by the conversation Akainu overheard...

"-he's happy. He really wants this baby, and I guess we've got you idiots looking out for us-

It's odd and almost touching, as though the swordsman and his captain actually thought they were starting a goddamn family- on the Grand Line of all places, the Admiral muses as he slams the steel door shut behind him.

He might actually feel sorry for them- if they weren't pirates.

xxx

It's almost three weeks before the news finally reaches them, but one afternoon Luffy returns to the Sunny with a broken harpoon impaled through his left shoulder in addition to a myriad of lesser injuries and limps into the dining hall clutching a gore-smeared eternal pose, his voice tremulous with fear and hope as he addresses his alarmed crew. "He's alive. Zoro's ALIVE."

While his nakama repair the ship and struggle to keep Sanji - who's recovering from several fractured ribs and second-degree burns - from overexerting himself, the captain's been restlessly combing the city and surrounding towns for information. To his consternation, when he returns to the medical clinic intending to confront the doctor who surely reported their presence and identities to the authorities, he finds the building gutted and the tile floor in the lobby stained dark with patches of dried blood, and although he's not quite sure what this means, he doubts it's good.

Much to his nakama's distress, their young leader's also been raiding incoming ships - military, pirate and civilian alike - because he's convinced someone who's recently entered the New World might be carrying news of whatever's going on at Marine Headquarters. They've moved the Sunny down the coastline eleven times now in an attempt to avoid drawing too much attention to themselves, but it doesn't deter other vessels - particularly those belonging to the Marines - from following, and Luffy's accepted the increasingly frequent attacks with casual disdain.

The other Straw Hats have been terrified he's going to get himself killed, because his normally careless attitude towards his opponents has gotten downright suicidal, but no one has the heart to stop him, even though they've quietly agreed he's punishing himself unjustly for allowing Zoro to return to the ship alone. And even if they did attempt to forcibly restrain him, it's painfully clear it'd take nothing less than kairoseki bars or shackles to prevent him breaking free.

"He's alive," Luffy says again, as though finding cold comfort in the words. "And I know where to find him." Dropping onto a slightly blackened bar stool and slumping back against the cracked counter, he tosses the pose to Nami, who snatches it out of midair and wipes the red smears from the plaque so she can read the inscription: Fishman Island. "People're saying the Marines caught
Roronoa Zoro and sent him to Impel Down."

Usopp flinches. "Luffy, what about- what about the baby?"

"Nothing." The rubber man looks away, grunting as he rips the wooden shaft loose from his shoulder. "Nnngh. I- I don't think anybody knows." He drops it to the floor, where it clatters and rolls under his dangling feet, and stares stonily at the wall while Chopper rushes into the infirmary to fetch his bag. "But there's no way- I mean, he couldn't hide it, 'specially not if they took his coat off. He's already too big, right? And... they gotta know it's mine, even if Zoro won't say so."

The two men have never bothered keeping their intimacy a secret: "Why the hell do you even care what they think?" Luffy remembers the older pirate protesting a long time ago when Nami chastised them for getting overly friendly with each other under Nefertari Cobra's dinner table back in Arabasta. "Luffy doesn't give a shit, and neither do I. Besides- we're pirates, not monks."

The majority of their friends and far too many of their enemies know they're lovers. Hell, there's probably extensive notes about their relationship somewhere in whatever official files the government's keeping on them - he knows there's gotta be files, 'cause those guys keep files on EVERYTHING - so it'll be pretty damn obvious to anyone with two brain cells to rub together whose child former Pirate Hunter Roronoa Zoro's carrying. Even if they can't figure out how or why it's possible.

Although he's avoided saying anything that might cause his already shell-shocked crew more distress, Luffy's been agonizing over this fact ever since Sanji told him Akainu was involved in Zoro's disappearance, because he considers this entire mess of his own making.

He's well aware the Admiral hates and wants to kill him, but he doesn't take that personally; he's known since the beginning that declaring himself a pirate was tantamount to asking the Marines to slip a noose around his neck. It's not surprising either, considering how his exploits have pushed him steadily closer to the top of the World Government's shit list.

Being directly attacked wouldn't have bothered him quite so much. Annoyed and concerned him, yes. But he's furious Akainu would stoop to covertly striking at his swordsman in everyone's absence instead of simply coming after the entire crew or Luffy himself. He's never before considered their intimacy a liability, but he's utterly convinced it's his affection that endangered his partner and made him a desirable target.

And then there's the fact that Zoro might have possibly held his own against the Marine - at least until the others returned to the ship - if not for the baby and his compromised health. Which are technically also the younger pirate's fault...

Luffy slams his fist against the counter, causing several of his nakama to jump and eye him nervously. They're not comfortable with this new captain, who rarely laughs and loses his temper over trivialities.

Marshaling his composure, the rubber man turns to address his remaining crew. "I'm going back, but I can't ask you guys to come with me," he tells them, his unsmiling face challenging them to stop him. "I've got that pose thing, so I just need to find a ship and-"

"Luffy," Nami sighs, offering him a sad smile. "You KNOW there's no way you'll be able to follow it without my navigational skills."

"But-"
Franky snorts. "Are you really telling me that you trust another ship to get you there and back, Mugiwara?"

"But-"

"Don't be stupid," Sanji growls, snapping the toothpick clamped between his teeth. He's strongly aware of the fresh pack of cigarettes tucked into his shirt pocket but, despite knowing smoking will undoubtedly help him deal with his current overabundance of stress, he can't quite bring himself to light one, because he keeps telling himself that he'll just have to quit again after they rescue their swordsman and his priceless cargo. "Of course we're going. That wayward Marimo's our nakama too, you idiot, and I've been looking forward to pissing him off by spoiling your kid rotten, so let's quit talking about it and go get 'em back."

xxx

Zoro watches the guards carefully for an opening- any opening- but he learns very quickly that they're taking no chances; although he's unarmed and his wrists cuffed behind his back and securely chained to the wall behind him, they keep their distance. Only the woman dares come within range, and when he automatically tries to hook a leg around her ankles and drop her to the floor, ignoring the spasm of pain that ripples through his midsection, she sidesteps neatly- and slams his head against the stone blocks so violently he sees stars.

"They tell me you're strong," the Chief Guard breathes as she leans over him, forcing the butt of her trident under his jaw to lift his chin higher, and he finds it unnerving when her eyes remain hidden beneath her hair, because it makes her face extremely difficult to read. "Very strong and very resistant to pain..."

The swordsman rumbles low in his throat, resisting the urge to flatten himself against the wall to escape her free hand as she reaches for him, long polished nails delicately mapping the scar on his chest. The unexpectedly gentle contact leaves his skin crawling in revulsion, because he's never allowed anyone but his captain to touch his old wound like that, and no one else has ever dared try until now.

His discomfort must show on his face despite his best efforts to conceal it, because she's laughing softly when she ducks her head to lap tacky, partially-dried blood from his chin and the corner of his mouth. "But that means I'll just need to try harder, hmm-?"

Her only warning's the faint tensing of his jaw muscles against her cheek, but Sadi-chan's wise to the methods of attack often employed by restrained prisoners, and she jerks her head back as Zoro tries to bite her despite the trident butt jammed against his windpipe, and his teeth snap shut like a steel trap on empty air scant centimeters from her nose and lips.

"My, my- you certainly have a temper, don't you?"

"Fuck y-!" He coughs, tears beading in the corners of his eye as she increases the pressure on his hyoid.

"Mmm, and such a foul mouth. Don't you think you're setting a bad example for someone...?"

Her fingers trail lower, nails pressing more firmly into the swordsman's flesh and leaving thin red marks as she traces the curve of his distended belly, and the green-haired pirate abruptly stops breathing, panic flaring inside him as the baby shifts under her hand. He wets his dry lips nervously. "Oi, d-don't-" Alarmed by the apprehension in his own breaking voice but helpless to prevent it.
"Don't? Don't what?" She draws back to run a single finger along the underside of his abdomen, just above his groin, and although her touch is gentle - almost a caress - her sinister smile says she's imagining gutting him, and he's dimly aware his mind is shrieking at him that this isn't right- she's not right- because she's a WOMAN, for god sakes, and women are supposed to create and nurture life, so how can she be looking at him like she wants to find out if his unborn child's blood runs as red as his own?

Someone standing beyond the bars clears his throat. The sound's both reminder and threat, and Sadi-chan hesitates, expecting the Admiral to reiterate what he said to her earlier. Instead there's the sound of heavy footsteps receding from the room and then he's gone, leaving her alone with Roronoa save for the two guards stationed outside the cell.

The sadist's smile has faded somewhat. She's disappointed with Akainu's orders, aware the swordsman's safe from the worst she can do- but HE doesn't know that, judging from the pulse racing high and fast in his throat. His growing unease is intoxicating. Arousing. Licking her lips, she slips the hand not holding her weapon between his legs to cup his groin, imaging his heart pounding faster and faster in his chest as he begins to comprehend there's no one to prevent her doing whatever she pleases.

He understands. She can tell by the way he's suddenly trying so very hard not to cringe against the wall, his single eye dilated with horrified disbelief and outrage. Utterly fascinating.

"Do what you want with Roronoa," she recalls Akainu telling her earlier. "-but nothing that might endanger the brat, unless you want to find yourself impaled on your own trident."

She decides then and there that Roronoa doesn't need to know the details regarding her orders, because if he won't beg her to spare his own life, perhaps he'll beg her to spare someone else's, and after hearing the rumors and seeing the scars with her own eyes, she wants very badly to find out exactly how much pain and humiliation this man can endure.

Her supervisors have promised to give her what's left of him when they've taken what they want, although she knows he won't be nearly as... enthusiastic... after they cut the baby out of him a few months from now, even if she's fairly sure she can keep him alive for quite a while afterwards.

But until then, his body contains a living gambling chip she intends to exploit for as long as the game might last, because there's no telling WHAT he might allow thinking he's protecting his captain's unborn child.

There's no telling- but she intends to find out.

Fingers kneading, stroking, patiently coaxing an unwilling response from her demoralized captive, she leans closer to press her leather-clad breasts against his chest, and to her delight, he does shrink backwards this time, emitting an unmistakable noise of distressed protest that tightens her body and hardens her nipples and oh god, if the swordsman sounds like this now, how will he sound if- when- she makes him scream?

Sadi-chan's breath catches in her throat and her grip tightens, rough and unrelenting between trembling thighs fighting to simultaneously twist away and nudge closer, because making Roronoa Zoro scream - a plea, her name, a wordless howl of agony and denial, anything really - suddenly seems like the most important thing in the world.

Her smile's returned, curling her pink lips into a leer filled with dark promises. "We're going to have- mmmmm- so much fun together, aren't we?"
Slumped sideways against the wall where he's chained, Zoro startles upright with a muffled expletive when his head nods low enough for his chin to brush his sternum, waking him from the uneasy doze into which he's fallen. He's severely fatigued, and even the recurrent ache in his abdomen, the baby's occasional movements and the strain on his back from sitting upright for hours at a time haven't been capable of causing enough discomfort to prevent him from slipping under despite his best efforts to stay conscious.

Although he's suffering from constant exhaustion and struggling to keep his eye open, he doesn't dare sleep; the absence of natural light makes it impossible to judge the hour, so he's left with little hope of guessing when the sadistic bitch - he still calls her this in his head, even though he learned very quickly not to say it to her face - might suddenly decide he'll enjoy her company. And the instincts that normally propel him to wakefulness when danger threatens haven't been cooperating since the pregnancy began, making him sluggish and too deep a sleeper to register the Chief Guard's approach.

An involuntary shudder passes through his body as he remembers the time he woke from a particularly vivid dream, disoriented and aroused by the fading mirage of his captain's heated gaze, only to find a completely different and entirely unwelcome face smiling up at him from between his legs. There's still a vivid ring of teeth marks healing on his inner thigh from when he panicked and tried to kick her in the face.

The bitch enjoys anything that causes him pain or draws blood, but she's especially fond of biting.

At least she bit your leg and not your dick, he tells himself wearily- and feels an instant rush of shame and self-loathing, because he knows very well why she's avoided damaging that particular piece of his anatomy. If she emasculates him, she won't be able to-

Another memory. A memory of being buried in wet warmth of a different kind, his body responding against his will- betraying him- instinctively wanting to move despite the pitchfork tine pricking his throat and the mingled hate and revulsion surging through every fiber of his being. Being terrified she might lose control and drive the weapon straight through his neck into the floor during her climax. Some dark, horrible part of him almost hoping she does, because the abuse will finally end.

No. NO- god, no, don't think about it. Don't think about the things she's done to you. Don't think about the things she's made you do to her. And DON'T think about how long you've been here. You'll go fucking crazy if you think about ANY of it for too long, and she'd love that.

He's repulsed and he's anxious and badly shaken, but remaining in a constant, static state of fear and agitation is difficult if not impossible, and it's not long before the sleepiness returns. Accompanied, ironically enough, by boredom.

Not much to do when you're 'cuffed and chained to a goddamn wall all day...

Tuning out the aching muscles in his shoulders and arms, the swordsman arches his back until there's a faint popping sensation as his spine realigns itself. To his dismay, the movement causes his coat to slip off one shoulder, and he wastes the next five minutes struggling to grab the wayward collar with his teeth so he can tug it back into place.

Because Sadi - even after nearly two months, he still refuses to use her full given name, no matter how often or strenuously she demands it - shredded the ridiculous striped uniform in which they
dressed him within the first few days of his incarceration, slicing it off him in pieces with a small knife in a deliberately careless process that left him cut and bleeding in multiple places, he's naked beneath the coat. He hadn't honestly expected to see any of his own clothing again, suspecting that the prison's staff most likely burned the personal effects of incoming prisoners, but the Chief Guard brought him the garment during one of her visits and hasn't actually taken it away yet, even if she's threatened to do so repeatedly.

The green fabric smells strongly of sweat and also- *don't go there*- and it's stiff with dried blood from his numerous cuts and scrapes as well- *I said don't fucking go there or the crew's gonna find nothing but a basket-case swordsman when they show up to rescue you-* but it's familiar and he'd rather be wearing it than sitting with his bare ass on the rough cement floor. Unfortunately, his tormentor's a quick study at recognizing what discomfits him, and she knows he detests when she makes a production of undressing him by undoing the coat toggles with slow deliberation, which is likely why she's allowed him to continue wearing it.

At least they stashed him somewhere the temperature's reasonable, if a bit warm - one of the reasons he's had so much trouble staying awake - instead of Level Five. He's heard the junior guards complaining bitterly amongst themselves, although never within earshot of their superior, about freezing their balls off during their shifts there.

The guards don't talk to him, don't even glance in his direction unless absolutely necessarily, and he fluctuates wildly between wishing someone would recognize him as more than a caged animal to be fed and water and being desperately relieved by their disinterest. The relief's always strongest directly after Sadi exits the cell, more often than not leaving him struggling to throw off a nauseating haze of pleasure and pain. In those moments, lying curled on the floor with his eye squeezed tightly shut, knowing he's helpless to do something as simple as cleaning himself off and unsure whether he's going to vomit- or possibly burst into mortified tears- he doesn't want ANYONE acknowledging his existence. In those moments, he doesn't want to acknowledge his OWN existence. In those moments, he sometimes wishes he'd died on the lawn deck.

But regardless of what the daily rotation of men standing outside the cell think of what's being done to him, no one talks to him except the Chief Guard, and after the constant clamor of living on the Sunny with eight nakama, some noisier than others, the silence of Impel Down's lowest level - which currently appears to be unoccupied except for himself - is deafening. He misses Chopper and Usopp's constant chattering, Robin's gentle teasing, Franky's horrible and usually off-color jokes that earn him snickers from their male crew mates and sharp rebukes and punches from Nami. He misses the rich, dulcet song of Brook's violin, and hell, he even misses the swirly-brow bastard's snide commentary.

But most of all, he misses the sound of his captain's voice, and while their two-year separation nearly drove him mad with waiting and hoping and wanting, at least he had Mihawk's training to distract him and people to interact with who weren't interested in nothing but fucking him without his consent and making him bleed. Well, at least not interested in shedding his blood the way the bitch is interested, anyway. And he certainly wasn't chained to a wall and spending his days listening uneasily for the sharp click of heels echoing down the stairwell outside his cell.

And, of course, there's this other small thing now shared between him and Luffy...

"D-Don't worry, kiddo. We just gotta hang on- just a little bit longer, and when Sencho gets here, he'll kick their asses. He'll kick HER ass. 'Cause he's gonna be really pissed somebody tried to hurt us, and I know you've never seen him mad before-" The swordsman smiles grimly. "-but he gets pretty fuckin' scary."
Talking to himself makes him feel extremely self-conscious and somewhat unhinged, but he can't shake his need for communication, and there's no one else. Or at least no one worth holding a conversation with, because he sure as hell doesn't want to talk to the bitch, even though she tries very, very hard to get more than one or two word answers or muffled grunts of protest from him. So he holds one-sided conversations with the baby. Even if the kid can't answer and doesn't understand a word he's saying, it makes him feel better when his unseen passenger stirs and shifts, reacting to the sound of his voice. It's also a relief because there's been a lot less movement lately, and he can't remember if that's supposed to be normal or not.

His stomach growls loudly, prompting a rare series of kicks and punches - his rumbling gut must sound loud as thunder in there - and he watches in fascination as his belly visibly twitches with each blow, wishing not for the first time that his captain was here to see and touch his jouncing abdomen because he can imagine the rubber man's initial astonishment transitioning into excited squeals of delight.

Of course Luffy would also start yelling for their crew mates to come and check it out, and he'd almost certainly end up surrounded by a flock of excited nakama all gaping like fish out of water and trying to touch him in their eagerness to feel the baby kick - but that doesn't seem quite so bad now, compared to his current predicament...

There's another audible rumble from his midsection, and he winces, grimacing, as an especially hard jab puts extra unwanted pressure on his bladder. "Mmph, settle down, damn it. It's your fault I'm so hungry."

Back when he first arrived - before realizing the Marines intended to keep him alive rather than kill him outright - he'd briefly refused the food they brought, but despite his fears of poison, he'd eventually eaten it. There hadn't been much of a choice; he hasn't forgotten Chopper and the eyebrow cook's lengthy lecture on appropriate calorie consumption and why he needs more than usual. If it wasn't for the baby, he wouldn't have minded going without food - he's done it many times before, albeit not always willingly - but that's obviously not an option now. Not with someone else's needs coming before his own.

To Zoro's relief, the meals they brought didn't make him sick - although the Chief Guard nearly did the first few times she insisted on feeding him by hand. Voluntarily accepting anything that woman's offering turns his stomach, but his concern that vomiting whatever he's forcing himself to eat will do far more harm than good outweighs his pride, so he continues choking it down despite her amusement and disparaging remarks.

It's also easier than contorting himself to eat from a tray placed on the floor. Between his bulky belly and being unable to use his hands to support himself, he's lost track of the times he's fallen face-first into whatever they're feeding him - and been forced to wait for Sadi to wipe his face clean because the guards won't come near him.

Although it falls pitifully short of the cook's high standards, the food's surprisingly plentiful, and while he doesn't understand why they're feeding him so well when they're just going to execute him eventually anyway, he's not going to argue, because he's determined to walk out of this hellhole on his own two feet when Luffy and the others storm the prison, and that means conserving his strength.

It's just a matter of time, really. He knows his crew won't find reaching Impel Down an easy endeavor, but there's no doubt in the swordsman's mind that somebody somewhere is going to seriously regret this, regardless of how it all turns out in the end. The Marines and World Government have paid the price in the past for their incredibly poor judgement in dealing with the Straw Hats and their captain, friends and families, but they obviously haven't learned from their
mistakes. And once again, they've made a grievous error.

We knew it'd happen eventually. Robin's always saying that thing about people not learning from history being doomed to repeat it. There's a sudden intense pressure as the baby braces a foot or fist against his abdominal wall and PUSHES, turning inside him, and Zoro inhales sharply and watches a small area of his abdomen bulge further outwards. We knew- but we never guessed-

None of them ever imagined there might be so much at stake.

xxx

"-wouldn't be a problem if your ship wasn't in such bad shape."

"But we can't wait that long!" Luffy argues, clenching his fists, and Franky grabs the furious captain around the waist and hauls him backwards before he loses control and punches the bewildered man who's just explained that it's going to be at least a week before he can finish coating the Sunny. Unfortunately, while the cyborg's got a good hold on the younger pirate, there's nothing stopping his MOUTH, which is now spouting such alarming words as "baby" and "Zoro" and "Marines" and prompting Nami to make frantic throat-cutting motions as she envisions having an entire armada of enemy vessels bearing down on them at the worse possible time.

Franky shifts his hand, cutting off the rubber man's tirade with one enormous finger clamped securely over the lower portion of his face. "Sorry, look, he's a little stressed out right now," the shipwright explains apologetically. "His, ah- his girlfriend ZORA's got a bun in the oven. She's- uh-stayin' with her brother - guy's a Marine stationed on other side of the Red Line - and our friend here's 'sposed to meet her over there before she pops, but he's worried he's not gonna make it in time."

"I- I see." The mechanic stares at the irate dark-haired pirate thrashing in the cyborg's grasp. Having discovered that pounding forcefully on the limb restraining him won't convince his nakama to release him, Luffy's now attempting to chew through his way through it. "First one, eh? Gotta be, he's this worked up. Well, I'll see what I can do. Though I don't know what he's worrying about- ladies've been popping out babies for way longer than any of you've been around." He nods towards Brook. "Including that one."

"Yeah, uh, just- sooner better than later, right?"

Beside them, Sanji's making a strangled noise that he's attempting to disguise as a cough, and Nami's put a hand over her face in exasperation, but Luffy's too absorbed in trying to escape Franky's grasp to bother disputing the incorrectly assumed gender of his partner, and the workman finally walks away scratching his scalp, casting one last puzzled look back at them before he returns to his task.

Ah, well, I suppose it's a good explanation as any, Robin muses, considering their shipwright's fast thinking has probably saved them from a skirmish with the Marines, although their missing crewmate is going to pitch a fit if - when, more likely, from the expression on the cook's face - he hears he's been relegated to girlfriend status. Hopefully Sanji forgets the details of this conversation; otherwise she might need to have another word with him.

Assuming there's still something worth having a word about...

Even with the eternal pose allowing them to sail directly back to the Red Line without needing to stop at every island for resets, it's taken them nearly seven weeks to backtrack the distance they've traveled since first departing the underwater island to which they're now returning.
Seven weeks— not including the time it took to discover Zoro's location and render the ship once more capable of sailing. The historian does some quick addition in her head, watching as Franky finally decides that Luffy's settled down enough to set the younger pirate back on his feet, patting his shoulder in silent apology and sympathy.

It's now roughly ten weeks since having their world turned upside down by Akainu's attack and that means thirty-three, nearly thirty-four weeks total since the crew entered the New World, and she hasn't forgotten the diagnosis Chopper gave them that afternoon in the diner. And they've heard no more news regarding their swordsman, just speculation over whether or not the Marines will hold a public execution for the Pirate Hunter and when as well as a few whispered rumors that the World Government's redoubled its efforts to locate the Revolutionaries' leader Monkey D. Dragon.

Robin knows her crew mates have tried to remain optimistic, but she can't help wondering if it's not already too late and they're launching a suicide mission for a man who's already dead.

xxx

"Take your time, Roronoa. I know it's- ah, mmm- a rather- difficult- decision," the Chief Guard purrs, delicately tracing the tip of the blade across her full lower lip before darting her tongue out to lick the weapon's spine in a fashion that's far more familiar to Zoro than he'd prefer. Judging by the way she's smiling, she knows it too.

The swordsman takes a deep breath, acutely aware this is nothing more than a game to her, and she'll likely do what she wants regardless, but precisely BECAUSE it's a game, he's afraid to give the wrong answer. Will she actually honor his—well, calling it a request's laughable, considering she intends to make him bleed either way. But will she do as he asks? Or will she do the OPPOSITE, gleefully taking the action she knows he fears more?

"I don't trust you," he states flatly. *You fucking sadistic bitch.*

Her smile widens. "Mmm, and that's very wise of you, but I promise- no tricks this time. No traps. Just one choice. If you need a few hours to think about it, I can-"

"No. I don't," he growls, fighting back the sick feeling that's reduced his stomach to a churning pit, because this will change everything, and his utmost regret's that he's breaking the promise he made to his captain.

When he declares his decision and glares at her, jaw clenched and eye blazing with hate, silently vowing he's going to kill her for forcing him to participate in his own mental and physical torture—and for even suggesting he'd choose differently—she bursts into mocking laughter filled with sheer delight and leans down to plant a deceptively gentle kiss on his forehead, and he wants to vomit.

The guards stationed outside the bars exchange dubious glances when their superior demands they remove the prisoner's restraints, but their hesitation makes Sadi-chan angry and they're more afraid of her than the poor bastard chained in the cell, so they do as they're told and unchain the swordsman, shoving him down on his back and pinning his arms against the floor.

Neither of them will look him in the eye.

"Last chance to change your mind." Kneeling at his side, she playfully taps the knife's flat edge against his abdomen, licking her lips when he jumps despite himself at the touch of cold steel on his bare skin.

While he's fairly certain he could throw off the men holding him down, Zoro's well aware the Chief
Guard will have plenty of time to incapacitate him before he can gain his feet. He's seen how fast the bitch moves, and right now he's about as agile as goddamn upended turtle thanks to his protruding belly. So although he wants very badly to wrest the knife from her hand and drive it directly between her eyes, he allows the muscles in his arms to relax and takes a deep breath, hoping it'll be over quickly. "Stop fucking around and just do it already."

"You asked for it," she teases. "Remember that when you start screaming and begging me to stop..."

But he'd rather die than give her the satisfaction, so he doesn’t scream or beg or even make a sound when she tightens her grip on the hilt and starts drawing it slowly through his flesh. Worse- I've been through - I've been through w-worse. The pain's making it difficult to think; he's pouring every ounce of willpower into keeping his jaw clenched tightly shut to prevent himself crying out.

The knife's razor sharp, and Sadi-chan's made seven deep, penetrating cuts before she realizes he intends to hold his tongue indefinitely and begins losing her temper. "Scream, damn you!"

He refuses to answer, breath hissing through flared nostrils, his gaze distant and clouded with the pain he's refusing to acknowledge.

"I TOLD YOU TO SCREAM!" The guards scatter like startled mice at her snarl of outrage, releasing Zoro's arms, and he's immediately struggling to his knees, slipping clumsily in the spreading puddle of his own blood as he gropes for the knife she's tossed aside, when her trident's steel shaft catches him in the temple hard enough to send him sprawling.

He's seeing double when he reaches out to grab her by the ankle, trying to pull her down in hopes of getting a hand around her throat, and she retaliates by grinding the trident butt into the bloody open wounds she's made.

To her indignation, he doesn't even flinch. He just glares up at her with that one slightly unfocused, hateful eye, and she can't take it anymore, because he should be howling in pain and rolling around on the floor clutching himself and bleeding. He's on the floor and he's bleeding alright, but he's not groveling or screaming or begging for mercy, and she's so furious that everything Akainu said goes straight out of her head.

The first hint that Zoro's in serious danger comes when the panicking guards flee at the sight of the rage burning in Sadi-chan's eyes, completely neglecting to lock the cell in their haste to escape. The enraged Chief Guard raises the trident she's gripping just below the tines and swings it, and the swordsman's forced to abandon his goal of knocking her to the ground long enough to strangle her in favor of desperate self-defense as she slams the shaft into him forcefully enough to knock the wind from his lungs.

He's doubled over, struggling to crawl away on his knees and elbows because he's hugging his belly with both arms to protect it from the blows raining down, when- realizing that despite being beaten mercilessly, he's still not making the noises she wants to hear- his assailant abruptly changes tactics and finds a creative new use for her weapon, thinking that perhaps THIS will loosen his tongue.

N-No, please, not th-! Now clawing helplessly at the floor, he tries to drag himself away from the cold metal forcing its way between his buttocks, but the Chief Guard pins him to the concrete with a spiked heel jammed against his lower back and gives the shaft a vicious twist. No no NO NO NO! Distended abdomen compressed painfully under his own weight, Zoro arches, unable to prevent the tears beaded in his eye from spilling over and wetting one side of his face as she uses the opportunity to ram the trident's blunt end home with short ruthless thrusts.

It fucking hurts, like she's ripping his insides to pieces, and he can't seem to stop making the guttural
sounds of protest now escaping his throat, but a cold dispassionate voice in his head's telling him it's still nowhere near as excruciating as when he took Luffy's pain following the bargain with Bartholomew Kuma back on Thriller Bark, so he grits his teeth, squeezes his eye tightly shut and tries very hard not to feel the distressed baby's turbulent kicking.

Some of his last thoughts before he loses consciousness are that he's going to die at her hands in one of the most horrible and goddamn humiliating ways he could ever imagine. And that he hopes like hell they dump his body for the sea kings instead of doing some dramatic shit like hanging it on the front gates, because he doesn't want his captain or their nakama to see it.

He's fading fast, shock and pain and fatigue shutting out the world around him like a thick, smothering blanket. The woman looming over him's saying something- probably still shouting at him to scream- but it sounds muffled and very far away.

_Sorry. I'm sorry. I tried, but I couldn't- I couldn't hold on until he came for us._

And then just before the darkness claims him:

_Sencho- Luffy- I- I love-

xxx

Nami and Robin quickly abort their hushed conversation when their captain - who's finally fallen asleep curled in a ball between them on the bed in the room the Straw Hats have been renting while their ship goes through the last stages of coating - stirs, whimpering loudly enough to wake the reindeer dozing in the navigator's lap.

The historian strokes her fingers through Luffy's tousled hair, exchanging a glance with her crew mates when the younger pirate fumbles blindly for her hand, tears leaking from beneath his closed eyelids as he kicks at the sheets twisted around his feet and lower legs.

Sanji rises from his chair, laying the open newspaper face down on the table and moving to join them at the bedside. "The dreams again? I don't think he's slept more than a few hours in the last two months..."

"Can you blame him?" Nami scolds softly, but her irritation melts away when the cook reaches down to gently squeeze their captain's shoulder, brow furrowed with unmistakable disquiet and empathy.

Coming violently awake at his nakama's touch, Luffy cries out their missing swordsman's name as he bolts upright, knocking away Sanji and Robin's comforting hands. Still caught in the throes of his nightmare, he stares uncomprehendingly at everyone's troubled faces with enormous eyes, his entire frame quivering, and when he tries to speak- to respond to the flurry of concern and questions- he bursts into tears because his reeling mind's full of fire and blood and darkness and Zoro's pain and despair.

xxx

The Chief Guard stumbles to her feet, panting rapidly and smearing blood in her hair as she wipes sweat from her face with her forearm, her other hand shaking uncontrollably as it clutches the trident butt she's just pulled from her victim's limp, unresisting body. She glares at the vivid streaks of crimson coating the shaft and her trembling fingers, breasts heaving in their leather harness, and then flings the weapon across the cell with a shriek of rage and frustration.

Who and what the hell is Roronoa Zoro, that he won't scream no matter what she does to him?
She stares down at her handiwork, and when she realizes that he's not moving, her anger dwindles and subsides into trepidation and the first subtle threads of fear. If she's accidentally killed him, Akainu will-

Taking a step back, she reaches out to brace an unsteady hand against the stone wall and nudges the slumped pirate's hip with one pointed shoe tip, breathing a sigh of relief when he twitches and utters a weak, barely audible noise of complaint. Good. He's alive, even if he's a bit worse for wear. She never meant to lose control; she only wanted to toy with him a little, see how far she could push him, but his consistent refusal to cry out or beg her to stop just made her so angry...

He's a terrible mess, and the floor beneath him's slick with blood. But he's alive.

Her lips slowly curl into a smile. Maybe, just maybe, he won't be quite as dull a plaything after they're done with him as she originally thought.

"Sadi-chan, I've got four guards who've abandoned their post and claim they refuse to return until you- WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU DONE?"

"Oh, calm down- he's still breathing, isn't he?" The Chief Guard laughs breathlessly, stroking blood-smeared fingers down her cheek. "Mmmm, I've never met anyone so... so durable."

Hannyabal shoots her a glare of disgust as he stalks into the cell for a closer look, and to his amazement, she's right. Roronoa's an absolute ruin, but he IS still breathing, and when the newly promoted Warden stoops to check the swordsman's pulse, trying to avoid looking too closely at certain aspects of the damage, it's too fast but also surprisingly strong considering the intense abuse the man's obviously just endured.

"Yes, well, you'd better hope that durability's hereditary or we're both finished." He takes one last, hesitant look and can't help shuddering. Sadi-chan's good at what she does, but sometimes he thinks she enjoys her job a bit too much. "Tell Domino to alert the medical staff that we're transferring him to the infirmary. Effective immediately."

"Mmm, yes, of course." Voice rich with amusement at her superior's discomfort.

"And go clean yourself up."
Chapter 10

Luffy's too absorbed in his own thoughts to pay attention to the startled fishmen and merfolk who stop to stare, exchange perplexed glances or even point webbed fingers when they recognize the pirates marching through their midst, and he's equally oblivious to the low-pitched argument occurring directly behind him.

"Where the hell's he going?" Usopp demands. "I thought we were headed straight to Impel Down!"

"I don't know, but I really doubt he's fooling around sightseeing- not after last night," Nami hisses back at the sniper. "We'll just have to trust he knows what he's doing."

"I sure hope so. I mean, he was in such a hurry this morning and then oh, nope, never mind- FIELD TRIP."

The entire crew's exhausted and more than slightly ill-tempered because after waking panic-stricken and teary-eyed for the third night in a row, Luffy spent the hours until sunrise pacing the small room and inadvertently making enough noise to keep everyone else awake as well. Then, as soon as the first rays of light broke the horizon, he'd insisted on leaving immediately for their destination, even as the coating mechanic applied the finishing touches to their ship. He's been anxious and unusually terse all morning, not to mention brimming with nervous energy. He's also given orders involving a brief detour immediately following their arrival on Fishman Island. Apparently there's somebody he's looking for who'll be able to get him something he needs- which isn't very specific, but it's all the information anyone can get out of him.

As a result, he, Nami and Usopp have been wandering around Coral Hill for nearly an hour now while Franky and the others assist Tom's brother Den with making some badly-needed repairs and applying a fresh coating to the Sunny, but the younger pirate's repeatedly ignored their repeated questions about who or what he's trying to find, and the navigator - sympathetic to his moodiness but starting to lose her patience regardless - is seconds away from grabbing the collar of the rubber man's shirt, intending to SHAKE some answers out of him if necessary, when he finally spots a familiar face gaping at him and bolts towards it.

"Luffy-chin? What are you doing here?"

"Keimi! We've been looking all over for you!"

"Keimi! We've been looking all over for you!"

Nami blinks, wondering what in the world Luffy could possibly want with the mermaid. She's certainly sweet-tempered although not exactly the brightest fish in the sea and probably one of the last people the redhead would call on to accompany the crew into battle, and honestly, she's a little surprised the captain hasn't marched straight to the palace to demand assistance from Princess Shirahoshi or her father. If anything, he seems inclined to AVOID the royal family, and thus far he's made a point of dodging for cover whenever he's spied a member of the Neptune Army headed in their direction.

But regardless of what he's thinking, Luffy's surely got SOMETHING in mind that requires Keimi's help, because he's pulled her aside for what looks like an entirely serious conversation, his face shadowed by his straw hat as he gestures hurriedly in the direction they've docked their ship.

She and Usopp watch as their friend reacts to what she's just been told, her large expressive eyes glistening as she throws both arms around their captain's shoulders and hugs him tightly- and then stiffens when he murmurs something in her ear. She pulls back to hold him at arm's length, her face
filled with wonder and her eyes now impossibly wide.

Luffy nods, not quite grinning but obviously pleased with the news he's just shared, and the mermaid utters a little shriek and hugs him again. He squeezes back briefly before launching into an impassioned discussion that Keimi joins without reservation, looking simultaneously delighted and concerned.

Waving towards the location of the Sunny once again, the captain rattles off a series of quick questions, his excitement visibly growing when she responds with enthusiastic nodding.

"What's he up to?" Usopp muses. "He's got that look..."

"You mean the one that means he's about to drag us into something really crazy?"

"Yep, that loo-" Beyond them, Luffy's beckoning frantically for his crew mates to follow as he grabs Keimi's hand before whirling and charging back the way they've come, pulling the mermaid with him. "O-Oi- NOW where's he going?"

"I don't know, but maybe we're about to find out what's going on. Come on, before he leaves us behind!"

xxx

Zoro's confused and disoriented when he regains consciousness, good eye fluttering open only to quickly snap shut. He groans as the throbbing in his head's instantly multiplied a thousand-fold by the light shining directly in his face; it seems exceptionally bright after the darkness of his cell. Squinting painfully, he can barely make out a landscape of blurry shapes around him, but he still has no idea where the hell he's found himself.

But while he may not know his location, he most certainly does know he aches all over- especially somewhere he'd rather not think about right now.

It takes a few minutes for his vision to adjust, but eventually he's able to see his surroundings: a large room filled with gurneys, monitors, other more unidentifiable equipment, and white-coated doctors bustling back and forth carrying clipboards, some of them accompanied by bored-looking guards.

Either everyone's too preoccupied to notice he's awake or they simply don't see him as a potential threat given his condition, because no one's paying him any attention.

Sure don't feel like a threat. I FEEL like somebody fuckin' beat me half to death. Which isn't far from the truth, he reflects bitterly. Guess they figured I wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. He shifts slightly and winces.

Sure they're right.

The swordsman's lying on his right side surrounded by beeping, flashing contraptions similar to what he saw in that clinic back before everything went to shit, and when his left hand moves automatically to touch his belly - he's a little surprised to find his wrists free, which tells him that his captors DEFINITELY don't view him as a threat - he discovers a broad belt-like band strapped around his midsection and connected with wires to one of the chirping boxes. There's a small screen on one side, and for several moments he stares transfixed at the green line bouncing across it, not quite sure what he's seeing because Chopper sure doesn't have anything like THIS in the Sunny's infirmary.

Summoning his courage, he eases a leg off the cot and slowly sits up- only to feel crippling pain flare through his rear and lower back. Dark spots swim around the edges of his vision, and he bites the inside of his cheek to muffle a gasp and then again, even harder, to prevent himself crying out as he hunches over, groping for the iv pole beside him. His sudden movement pulls free a few of the
cables tethering him to nearby machines, which start emitting high-pitched shrills of alarm, but he doesn't notice because he's too busy fighting to keep his balance.

Who knew a couple of missing fingers would make it so goddamn hard to hold onto something?

He's reached for the pole automatically, body and brain alike expecting a firm grasp capable of supporting his weight. Instead, he's gotten an awkward grip with thumb and forefinger- the only unscathed digits remaining on his right hand. Because the Chief Guard wanted to cause as much pain and mental anguish as possible, she'd opted to sever them one joint at a time, and as a result had only taken his pinky, ring finger and the very tip of his middle finger before losing her temper.

He should probably consider himself lucky, he thinks glumly as he's grabbed by unfamiliar gloved hands and pushed back onto the thin mattress before he can fall to the floor, because she'd intended to remove ALL of them.

If he survives long enough to get out of here, and if Sadi-chan doesn't decide to come back and finish the job, maybe- just maybe- he'll eventually learn to hold a sword in his right hand again.

xxx

"Let's go, let's go, let's go," Luffy chants impatiently from the Sunny's figurehead where he planted himself with much ceremony after herding the crew back onto the ship and chasing Franky into the energy room to replace their spent barrels of cola. To his nakama's relief, he's been a lot more like himself since his meeting with Keimi, hounding Sanji for food like he hadn't done in weeks- for once, the cook hadn't argued, because they're all going to need their strength for what's ahead- and begging a surprised Usopp to repaint the Jolly Roger they'd previously been too dispirited to hoist.

The sniper was initially confused by the request, because it seemed a trivial matter compared to their other preparations, but when the steely-eyed captain insisted he wanted the Marines to know exactly whose nakama they'd made the mistake of messing with, Usopp had merely nodded and headed straight for the men's quarters to retrieve his paint and brushes.

When they ran the finished flag up the mast, however, he'd sheepishly declared it wasn't his best work; along with the rest of the ship, his art supplies hadn't fared too well, and he'd been forced to use a darker shade of yellow than he'd liked because the contents of several paint tubes had exploded all over the inside of his locker from the fire's heat. Luffy, on the other hand, had taken one look and proclaimed it perfect, explaining, "I want Zoro to see it when he walks out the front gate."

Now, with the most essential repairs complete and his own mysterious plans in motion, the captain's so eager to set sail that he's overlooking one crucial detail.

"Oi, get down here unless you wanna get smothered by the damn bubble!" Sanji shouts up to him.

The younger pirate reluctantly returns to the deck where his crew's gathered. "Keimi said we gotta bring the baby to visit after he's born." He utters a short laugh. "She wanted to know if Zoro's part seahorse!"

"Well, I guess you can ask Marimo when we find him. It'd certainly explain a few things."

xxx

No one will answer Zoro's questions when he eventually gets irritated and concerned enough to ask; they're far more interested in talking ABOUT him than TO him, but the swordsman finally learns through eavesdropping on numerous conversations between doctors that the bitch succeeded in giving him a concussion in addition to making it damn near impossible for him to sit upright for more
than a few minutes at a time.

Apparently he's also been unconscious for nearly seventy-two hours, which doesn't particularly surprise him. His body's always had a tendency to heal faster when he's sleeping, hence his habit of crashing for multiple days following severe injuries.

Beyond that he's not entirely sure what's going on, because they're all using a lot of advanced technical and medical jargon that he doesn't understand, and it's not like he can ask them to repeat it in layman's terms. He's pretty sure they're discussing the baby with some frequency though; he recognizes a few of the phrases from Chopper and Robin's coaching, although the doctors continually refer to his and Luffy's unborn offspring as a fetus, which is kind of ridiculous at this point. "Fetus" makes him think of something the size of a peanut or possibly a mikan, but the kid's a hell of a lot bigger now.

Usopp might've unwittingly hit the nail on the head with that stupid cannon ball joke, because Zoro swears he's actually gotten rounder in the few days since the last time he got a good look at himself. The dark vertical line running from just below his navel to his pubic bone's intensified, making his abdomen bear a strong resemblance to an extremely large ripened apricot. Frickin' fuzzy like one too...

Given Sadi's conspicuous absence, he's been trying to catch up on sleep, but he can't seem to get comfortable enough to doze more than an hour or two; his cramped lungs already make it hard enough to breathe these days without also being sprawled on his side with his hands now securely re-cuffed behind him, and there always seems to be someone disturbing his rest to palpate his belly or take another blood sample. But the padded table in the medical bay's still a million times better than the hard cement of his Level Six cell.

A thorough bathing at some point during his somnolence's also left him cleaner than he's been in weeks. Unfortunately, his coat's gone, replaced by an open-fronted cotton hospital gown worn so thin it serves little purpose other than making him uncomfortably aware he's naked beneath it.

He doesn't like the doctors touching him and abrades them with verbal abuse whenever their gloved fingers poke his abdomen too hard or stray too close to places where he most definitely doesn't want them, but at least they go about their tasks in a cold, clinical fashion that's nothing like the bitch's crude advances, so the medical procedures are mostly tolerable too- although he could certainly do without so many needles. In reality, it's no worse than anything his own doctor was already doing- although their intense interest in "the fetus" bothers him for reasons he can't explain.

Maybe he's imagining things because he's tired and- okay, fine, he'll admit it- frightened of what might happen if the crew doesn't appear soon, but the interest of his callous custodians seems like more than just curiosity for a highly unusual case. Because despite all the constant monitoring - sometimes he feels like one of those squiggly bacterium-things he knows Chopper likes to peer at through his microscope while he's researching the effectiveness of new medicines - they're obviously far more interested in the baby he's carrying than the swordsman himself.

Why's the kid so damn important? Why do they suddenly care so much NOW, when they could've just let that bitch kill me and saved themselves the trouble of an execution?

It feels almost like he's missing the most important piece of some strange puzzle.

xxx

Luffy initially wants to go through the G-1 Gate because it's closer and therefore in his mind faster, but after much arguing, an unexpected fist fight and a black eye or two, the crew finally manages to
convince him it's a bad idea. Ever since the former Marine Headquarters was rebuilt, there's been an excess of ships docked in its harbors, and before the Straw Hats' departure, Keimi and Den warned them that the base's residents have gained a dubious reputation for firing first and asking questions later, probably because they're determined to prevent their new establishment from ever suffering the same destruction and humiliation as Marineford.

The captain, impatient and still spoiling for a fight, declares he'll gladly kick all their opponents' asses, no matter how many ships the G-1 Marines want to send after them, but he eventually agrees to using the Enies Lobby Gate because Robin promises him that, by using Nami's navigation skills to ride the edge of the Tarai Current, they'll reach their target faster without being drawn into pointless exchanges of cannon fire or having overeager recruits attempting to board the Sunny in hopes of making names for themselves.

Besides, although the World Government's been quick to establish a new stronghold and rebuild their maximum security prison, they've been less concerned with the remaining point on their triangle of power. The structure's always been little more than a pretense anyway, considering they've never had much use for fair trials, so Enies Lobby is still under heavy construction thanks to the Straw Hat pirates' last visit, even though it's now more than two years later.

Fewer opponents, a faster route, and although he's continued being aggravatingly tight-lipped about his plans, Luffy's assured them repeatedly they'll have absolutely no trouble getting through the Gate itself, so what could possibly go wrong?

Unfortunately that old adage of "too good to be true" is alive and well. The smaller currents sweeping off the Tarai are far stronger than either the historian or the navigator anticipated, and when the gyres start pushing the Sunny far enough away that Nami's afraid she'll lose her bearings entirely, Franky's forced to pull some drastic stunts that leave everyone clinging to the ship and each other as the cyborg fights to hold the ship's wheel steady.

Alternating between half-powered Coup de Burst and Chicken Voyage blasts to weave back and forth through the powerful currents makes for a very bumpy and nauseating ride.

"Franky, if you ever do that again-" Nami moans from where she's bent over the railing and struggling valiantly not to vomit down the port side after they've finally bounced around the last turn and found themselves skirting the Judicial Island. "-I swear I'm going to stuff you in one of your own cola bottles and toss you out to sea."

Usopp slowly releases the staircase railing he's clutching over by the foremast, takes one wobbling step back and promptly falls on his rear, nearly sitting on the reindeer who's sprawled spread-eagle on the grass, whimpering for the sky to stop spinning. "He got us here, didn't he? Oh god, I think I'm gonna be sick..."

Moving unsteadily, the crew gathers along the railing to stare at the tall fence between them and the hazy outline of the gigantic door they'll need to breach once they get inside Enies Lobby.

"Gaon Cannon?" Franky inquires, glancing over at the captain, who's peering down into the shadowy depths below them, squinting and shielding his eyes from the sun's glare reflecting off the water. "Or we could use the Coup de Burst again too, but we're prolly gonna need to fire it twice to get over that thing. Ship's not in great shape and we'll probably lose some more paneling, but she'll hold together." He pats the railing affectionately. "This babe's built to last."

"Nah, you can save the cola 'cause we got company," Luffy replies, grinning suddenly, and when he looks up his eyes are dancing with excitement and amusement. "Shishishi- check this out!"
"We've got- company?"

"Yeah, like I said- just watch!"

To the crew's amazement, the nearest section of fence quivers, twists and crumples inward on itself and then abruptly vanishes from sight as it's yanked beneath water that's suddenly churning and bubbling, leaving an empty gap far wider than the Sunny actually needs to pass through unhindered.

The rubber man smirks at the stunned expressions on his nakama's faces, spins on his heel and heads for the Sunny's bow to gleefully reclaim his customary seat on the lion's head, gesturing towards the giant doors awaiting them. "Okay, NOW shoot us over there!"

"What the-? What just happened?"

"Luffy, what the hell's going on here?" Sanji calls up from the lawn deck. "You still haven't told us-"

"Come on, come on!" The captain urges impatiently, flailing both arms in agitation. "I guess it took Keimi a lot longer to find him than she thought it would, but he's here now, so we can go!"

Robin closes her eyes briefly, concentrating, and utters a bewildered chuckle as she finally comprehends why Luffy's waved away their questions about exactly how they're going to open both gigantic sets of doors and why he's been so unconcerned about pitting a meager eight people and one battered ship against whatever's waiting for them on the other side of the Impel Down Gate. Ah, good thinking, Captain.

"Wha-? HE? He who? Who's down there?" Nami demands, tightening her grip on the railing as Franky reaches for the controls, but Luffy just grins over his shoulder at her and erupts into wild laughter, grabbing a tight hold on the figurehead and clapping a hand to his hat to prevent it from flying off his head when the ship lunges forward.

Thanks to the danger posed by the enormous waterfall ring, there are no vessels patrolling inside the now defunct fence, but the Sunny's performed a full-strength, three-barrel-powered maneuver this time, and the resulting noise of the blast- as well as the sight of a brig sloop sailing unexpectedly through the air- immediately catches the attention of the few ships stationed near the scaffold-laden entrance gates of the island.

"Oi, you there, what do you think you're-? OOOI, IT'S MUGIWARA!"

There's a frenzy of activity as the startled Marines race to turn their ships after the invading pirates, but no one onboard the Sunny pays them much mind because, despite their shipwright's best efforts, the Coup de Burst's set them down mere feet from the waterfall, and they're being swept along by the water cascading down the sides of the precipice.

"Franky, we're too close to the edge!" Nami shrieks, ducking as several empty cola barrels bounce past her to disappear into the seemingly bottomless chasm. She throws out an arm to make a desperate grab for Chopper's scrabbling, wailing form before he can follow, seizing the reindeer by the collar and praying his shirt doesn't rip as he dangles from her hand with both hooves covering his eyes. "We need to-!"

"NO! NO, HOLD IT STEADY!" Luffy screams at the cyborg, flinging his arms in tight coils around the figurehead to avoid being thrown overboard as the Sunny lists more violently, tilting nearly sideways over the sink hole, and for a moment the navigator's absolutely convinced they're going over. But then there's a hard bump against the hull and the ship rights itself, timbers groaning, and the centrifugal force produced by the current just outside the fall's edge shoots the vessel into the
calmer waters beyond it.

"Damn, that was close," Sanji groans, extricating himself from Usopp and Brook where they've landed in a tangle of limbs at the base of the slide. Intent on reaching Nami, the cook doesn’t notice when he accidentally treads on the sniper's nose, producing a string of curses. "Nami-san, are you-?"

"You should be more worried about yourself," the navigator scolds, waving away the hand he's offering as she struggles to her feet, giving the trembling reindeer in her arms a tight squeeze before she sets him on his feet. "I know those ribs aren't completely healed yet, not with the way you've been running around instead of resting like Chopper told you."

"Ahhh, Nami-swan's so sweet being concerned about my health-!"

Usopp, sitting cross-legged beside Brook - who's just declared rather cheerfully that he's sufficiently rattled, seeing as how he's nothing but bones - and clutching his face, interrupts both skeleton and cook as he glances up and immediately forgets all about his injured proboscis. "Uh, g-guys-?"

Several yards away but closing fast, the occupants of the first Marine vessel to pass the damaged fence stare dumbfounded as the Straw Hats abruptly realize their predicament and most of the pirates promptly panic- except for the tall, dark-haired woman standing on the starboard stern and peering back at them, one arm raised to shade her eyes from the sun, and the captain who's-

"KEEP GOING!" Luffy's shouting at his crew, stabbing a finger repeatedly towards the obstacle before them. "IT'S OKAY, SO QUIT FREAKING OUT AND KEEP GOING!"

The volume of his voice carries across the water to the pursuing ship, loud enough to make him heard over the waterfall's roar and the uniformed men shoot confused, disbelieving glances at each other and their superior officers.

"What the hell is he thinking? That Gate's not going to open on its own!"

"I don't know, but I don't like this. Get on that den den mushi and call-"

"-clutch," Robin murmurs, the corner of her lips turning up in a grim smile as she watches disembodied limbs sprout to snap the necks and backs of the unsuspecting Marine captain and his men. A drastic measure, perhaps, but there's a nakama's life at stake. Two lives, really, given the baby he's carrying, and does the historian deem those two lives worth the lives of all the people she's just permanently incapacitated? Some might question her judgement, but yes, she does. During her years as a trained assassin, she'd never been afraid to dirty her hands during the completion of an assignment- and Zoro and his unborn child are no assignment. They're family.

With no one left to man the helm, the Marine vessel slips from the current, caught in the powerful tug of the waterfall, and hovers momentarily on the edge before plummeting out of sight.

The metallic tang of fear flooding her mouth, oblivious to what's just occurred behind her, Nami stares up at the barrier they're approaching far more quickly than she expected, knowing that they're going to plow headlong into the Gate unless they execute some kind of evasive maneuver in the next few seconds. "LUFFY!"

"I SAID HOLD!" The captain bellows, releasing his grip so he can rise to his feet, swaying dangerously as he glares up at the closed doors, straw hat flopping wildly behind him on the cord secured around his neck. There's no turning back now, no time for doubt- just blind trust that their friend lurking below the surface won't let them down. "NOW, SURUME!"

At his command, massive tentacles erupt from the depths surrounding the ship to slap against the
Gate with a thunderous boom, hurling seawater high into the air, and Robin laughs aloud in delight, taking cover under the overhang of interlocking hands she's just sprouted from the outer dining hall wall, while the rest of the crew backs nervously towards the center of the lawn deck, gasping in shock as they're soaked by the water cascading from the sky.

Luffy stands his ground as a monstrous eye emerges beside the Sunny, grinning hugely as the colossal orbit rolls towards him. "Shishishi- been a while, huh, Surume? You're gonna help us get Zoro 'n our baby back, right?"

Now safely cradling the brig sloop with the few arms not wriggling bonelessly against the Gate, Surume responds by firing a brief jet of water past the captain.

"Wasn't sure we'd find you, 'cause I thought you might be with your brothers but Keimi said you came back to visit 'hoshi." He points up at the sealed doors. "Think you can bust that thing open?"

The socket surrounding the huge eye constricts, giving the impression their aquatic ally's squinting in concentration as he gives a cautious tug, testing his grip.

"Luffy! Luffy, we've got company!"

As though to punctuate this announcement, a series of loud bangs go off behind them. One cannon ball whizzes past to rebound off a sliver of Gate visible between Surume's tentacles. Another crashes through one of the observation room's rear windows, and a third takes out a large section of railing near where Robin's standing.

"Luffy, we're goddamn sitting ducks!" Sanji shouts from below. "If he's opening that shitty door, he better do it now!"

"Ship can't take direct bombardment!" Franky roars. "Structure's been weakened by the fire- we gotta get her outta here!"

"Okay, Surume, c'mon- PULL!" Luffy orders, but Surume's already moving, and the rubber man staggers as the elastic mass beneath them actually lifts the ship clear of the water, only the slender hands blossoming from the lion's head to grab his ankles keep him from tumbling overboard. He barely notices, too absorbed by the sight above him, but Usopp, clinging to the staircase rail with both arms, looks back to mouth a silent thank-you to Robin.

There's a few deafening reports as several suction cups pop loose from the Gate's slick surface, but then the kraken surges forward, carrying the Sunny with it, and plasters the foremost portion of its body against the doors, tentacle tips groping determinedly along the crack down the center.

The Gate creaks ominously under the assault and Luffy utters a shout of approval, immediately echoed by Usopp, Chopper and Franky- who rounds out his own holler with a joyous "YOW!" that draws an incredulous smile from Nami.

"Oi," the shipwright grins, nudging her. "Calamari-bro's lendin' us some tentacles, right? Figure it doesn't hurt to give 'im a cheering squad."

"We need all the help we can get," the navigator agrees. "-but Luffy could've at least given us some warning! And you-! How long have you known?"

Robin, having just joined them on the lawn deck, raises her hands in silent appeal, laughing softly. "Not much longer than the rest of you, I promise."

"Look!" Chopper squeals suddenly, pointing to where Surume's efforts have finally paid off and a
thin line of light's become visible down the center of the Gate. The doctor flings his arms around Nami's leg and hugs it happily, once again adding his voice to Luffy's exuberant yelling and his crew mates' sudden excited exchanges, because there's no longer any doubt in his mind that they're doing it, they're really going to-

"Yohohohohoho!"

"Alright!" Franky whoops, punching a fist into the air. "Next stop, Impel Down!"

"Oi oi, let's go! Let's go get Zoro and our baby!" Luffy barks down at them, looking back over his shoulder as the doors groan open before them, and Chopper falls momentarily silent amidst his cheering, embracing nakama at the sight of their captain's austere eyes gleaming brightly above his muted but confident grin, awe stopping the reindeer's breath in his throat because he's distantly but instinctively aware that he's being granted a glimpse of the future Pirate King, the great man Luffy intends to become.
Chapter 11

It's late afternoon when Zoro's startled from restless sleep by the sound of heels clicking briskly through the medical bay doorway, unaware that the Sunny - aided by Surume's powerful arms - has just breached the first of the two Gates separating him from his nakama and entered the chaotically churning waters of the Tarai Current's center.

Apparently satisfied with the results of their tests, the doctors haven't troubled the swordsman with their presence for the last day or so, relying on the fetal heart monitor still strapped snugly around his middle to notify them of any sudden changes in the baby's health. They've also sent someone to periodically shove a bedpan under his ass. Largely to no avail- between stress, round-the-clock napping and his stomach feeling as though it's being crushed against his lungs by advanced pregnancy, he hasn't eaten much since the evening the Chief Guard damn near beat him to death.

His constant thirst, however, makes life a living hell every time he needs to urinate. Unlike his cell, there's not even the guise of privacy, and relieving himself into a basin held by a somber-faced technician with averted eyes is not only humiliating but frequently IMPOSSIBLE. Regardless of how badly his bladder's screaming for release, his body often flat-out refuses to cooperate until the aid wedges the damn thing - always cold as ice - against the mattress and retreats, leaving the green-haired pirate to attempt using the pan without pissing on himself. A task not easily accomplished, given his prone position and the arms restrained behind his back.

Sometimes he's successful. Other times he's not- and covers his embarrassment by making angry promises to hose his reluctant, silent assistant in the face next time he comes around with the pan. They both know it's a futile, empty threat; without a free hand, there's no way for him to aim.

Exhausted by week after week of forcing himself to stay alert with minimal rest and also by the energy his body's expending simply supporting the baby's growth, he's spent most of his time sleeping regardless of the hour. Or, rather, trying to sleep. It seems like each time he dozes off, he's awakened by his unborn charge's frenetic kicking and wriggling and somersaulting. The pummeling this increased activity's giving his inner organs is uncomfortable but undeniably reassuring, because from what he overheard the doctors saying, there'd been little to no movement during the three days he'd been unconscious. There's also no denying the affectionate, possessive way it makes him feel, and as long as the kid's not stomping on his bladder or punching him in the lung, he can't deny he's sort of grown to like it.

Right now, however, he's wishing the baby would just settle down for a little while, unpleasantly aware the tremors shaking his abdomen are readily distinguishable- because even if he can't see the eyes studying him thanks to the mop of hair obscuring half her face, he can feel them crawling across his skin.

"Hello, Roronoa. Did you miss me?" Sadi-chan's smiling widely as she stalks towards his bed, and while the doctors exchange nervous glances, no one moves to stop her. Instead, they quickly find tasks with which to occupy themselves at the far end of the room, where she's less likely to notice their presence.

It's the first time Zoro's seen her since- his mind shies away from the memory of being viciously and mercilessly violated by cold, hard metal. She's perpetrated a veritable litany of demeaning acts, doing all sorts of things to his body he'd rather not acknowledge, but none of it- not even the removal of his finger joints- caused pain so severe as being penetrated by that trident's shaft.

Hate, wariness, the desire to wrap both hands - missing fingers or not - around her neck and squeeze
until his thumbs rupture her windpipe. He's expecting those- but he's NOT prepared for the way his heart speeds up and his mouth goes bone dry and chills sweep through his body at the sight of her. And this time it's not just concern for what she could do to the baby that sends turmoil rampaging through his head, although that's certainly near the surface, but fear- genuine, staggering fear- of what else she might do to him.

The pirate's faced a lot of intimidating opponents in the past few years, many of which have been strong enough to severely injure him and several who've left him for dead, but none of them - not Mihawk, not Kuma, not even the Straw Hats' own sharp-tongued navigator who's inexplicably capable of delivering a blow powerful enough to leave his ears ringing - have made him so anxious, so uneasy, that his innermost desire is to slide down to the floor and hide beneath the padded table on which he's been lying until she finally loses interest and goes away.

He's afraid of her, and she knows he's afraid and knows HE knows. It makes him angry. "Don't you have somebody else to fuck around with, you psychotic bitch?"

"Mmm, don't hurt my feelings, Roronoa," she murmurs, reaching out to run her hand down his chest, middle finger trailing suggestively over his left nipple. Chuckling when the swordsman recoils with an unintentional soft mewl of distress, she traces the thick diagonal scar marring his torso, lingering along the lower half that's been distorted by his distended midsection. "And here I thought you'd been enjoying our time together..."

"I'd rather-" Zoro's furious retort ends in a sharp inhalation as her fingertips slide down his belly's underside to dip into his groin and she closes her hand around him, kneading and squeezing in hopes of provoking an erection. He clenches his teeth, cursing the inevitable aroused state such stimulation's sure to produce- but, to his surprise and relief, for once he remains soft and indifferent beneath her palm, the swirling whirlpool of disgust and muted terror in his head overriding his body's natural response.

"Mmm... that's disappointing, but I suppose it happens," the Chief Guard sighs, lips twisting into a displeased pout. She gives a rough tug that makes him wince, but he ignores her brusque jibe about inefficient, disarmed swordsmen, desperately hoping she'll give up and leave him alone.

Unfortunately, it seems she's nowhere else to be and nothing better to do, because she doesn't budge from where she's standing over him, relinquishing his limp penis to return to his abdomen, cupping its curve firmly as she gauges the fitful movements within. "Not too long to wait now, hmm?"

"Wha- what the hell do you-" He stops breathing, lungs paralyzed by fear as her free hand pushes between his thighs, and she leans closer to smile down at the growing alarm on his face at the unmistakable sensation of his buttocks being forced apart. One searching fingertip probes deeper to teasingly circle an orifice that's still painfully tender, and the dam straining to contain the teeming reservoir of dark terror and hysteria inside the swordsman's head bursts.

Zoro loses control, thrashing wildly as he fights to simultaneously kick her away and throw himself backwards off the table, not caring that landing on his back and rear will probably hurt like hell because all he can think about is escaping her touch. The equipment to which he's tethered registers the disturbance as his panic increases more than just his own heart rate, the machine's steady beeping rising to a more fervent pace and his abdomen rippling beneath her hand when the baby lashes out, startled by whatever's happening outside the warm, safe confines of his body.

"Ah-ah, excuse me, Roronoa- where do you think you're going?" Sadi increases the pressure on his belly, lacquered nails digging painfully into his skin on either side of the monitor band, and the swordsman's struggling slowly subsides until he's merely trembling under her hands, wide-eyed and biting his tongue to keep from whimpering and regretting all the times in the past he's hounded
Usopp or anyone else about being a man and growing a pair, because he finally knows what it's like to feel smothered by fear and inadequacy.

Everything's ceased to exist besides the woman looming over him, so he jumps, badly startled, when a tremulous voice suddenly speaks up beside him.

"S-Sadi-chan, p-p-perhaps you could- ah- I'm- I'm afraid Hannyabal gave us orders to- to-" The doctor who's finally worked up the courage to approach, timidly protesting his superior's actions and seeking to remind her she's technically banned from the medical bay while their subject's recuperating, abandons the attempt and scuttles away when she glares at him, making it quite clear that there'll be no rescue coming from that quarter.

The Chief Guard turns her attention back to Zoro, giving his stomach one final warning squeeze before she relaxes her grip, watching in delight and fascination when his clenched jaw tightens to stifle a hiss of pain, the tears he's fighting to hold back spring free and roll across his face to drip off his nose as she forces two fingers into him. Unsurprisingly, his still healing body resists the intrusion—until she adds a rough twisting motion, and this time he can't fully contain an agonized cry. Blood makes an unpleasant but effective lubricant.

"I asked you before, but you never gave me an answer-" She leans down to nuzzle her lips and cheek against his quivering shoulder, savoring the way he flinches at her touch but doesn't quite dare resist. "Did the Mugiwara captain touch you like this, hmm? Did he ever make you feel as good as I do?"

"D-Don't." He chokes as her fingers curl sharply, digging against his prostate, and she responds by sinking teeth into the junction between his neck and shoulder. "Nngh!"

There's blood on her lips when she raises her head, smiling slyly at the revulsion on his face at the sight of her licking them clean like a cat with cream caught in its whiskers. "Did you discuss names for your child while he fucked you?"

"Don't." He wants to tell her to leave his partner out of this - he doesn't want to think about Luffy, not right now, not with her fingers applying continuous, massaging pressure right there - but his protest emerges as a garbled whine. The stimulation she's providing is sending unwanted flashes of pleasure through his body despite the pain, making her touch far worse than being assaulted with her trident. That'd hurt a lot more- but at least it hadn't given him that disconcerting sense of impending release, coiled hot and heavy in his groin and lower stomach.

"Did your captain have any suggestions, mmm?"

Her fingers withdraw only to plunge forward again, twisting and unerringly locating the spot that curls his toes and bows his spine, and he slams the back of his skull hard against the table, nearly crying out in frustration when the padding muffles the blow and doesn't knock him senseless like he's hoping. Oh god, don't do that- please, I can't- I don't want to-

"Did he ask you to name it after Fire Fist if it's male?" That hits a nerve far closer to home than he cares for, although it was actually his own hesitant suggestion rather than Luffy's and well worth the expression of stunned gratitude on the younger pirate's face, but Zoro's not going to let the bitch know that, not even though she's got him helpless and so close to the edge, and when his gaze slides away, Sadi-chan frowns.

"You're not going to find the answers on that monitor, Roronoa. Look at me, not the screen."

The swordsman ignores her, nostrils flaring and pulse jumping visibly in his sweat-streaked neck, so
she produces a familiar blade from her sleeve and taps the hilt threateningly against his belly. "It's RUDE not to give someone who's talking your full attention. LOOK AT ME unless you want me using this on something other than your fingers."

He reluctantly obeys, hatred and fear transparent on his face, and she can't help the peal of laughter that escapes her lips, because he still hasn't figured it out. He still doesn't understand it's all pretense, that he's not just GIVING her this power over him but practically handing it over on a silver platter.

"Now, that wasn't too difficult, was-" She's interrupted by the sudden wail emitting from the surveillance den den mushi clinging to the wall over the door and looks up, attention automatically drawn to the sound's source.

Even before the announcements begin, Zoro knows. They're here. His crew's here. His captain's here. They're here to take him back.

"ATTENTION. ATTENTION. ALL PERSONNEL REPORT TO EMERGENCY STATIONS. REPEAT- ALL PERSONNEL REPORT TO EMERGENCY STATIONS."

The Chief Guard's lips compress into a thin, bloodless line, and she scowls down at the green-haired pirate who's now glaring up at her with renewed fight blazing in his single hate-filled eye, his teeth bared in a snarl as he struggles to catch his breath.

"Nakama- coming. S-Sencho- gonna kill you-" He utters a choked bark of laughter, detesting the strained, husky pitch of his voice. While he's not sure of the validity of his own statement because he knows how Luffy feels about permanently dispatching even the most dire and bloodthirsty opponents, the swordsman thinks his captain might make a special exception for the bitch.

xxx

Hinged to open towards Impel Down rather than the whirlpool from which they're approaching, the second Gate gives way much more quickly than the first, doors buckling under Surume's unforgiving weight and then bursting wide open to admit the kraken and the ship carried in its grasp.

The prison's a formidable sight to Luffy's crew. At first glance, the high wall built from enormous stone blocks arranged in a protective ring around the main structure appears impenetrable, and there's several Marine battleships docked along the outside.

"We gotta go through the front on foot," the captain insists before turning command of the Sunny over to Nami. He's ordered the navigator to remain onboard with Sanji and Brook because there's no way to take the brig sloop beyond the outer wall; the moat's too narrow to land in via Coup de Burst, and even if by some miraculous chance they manage to pull it off, blasting back OUT is an entirely different story. "And there's another door past this metal grate thing plus lots of guards 'n monsters 'n stuff inside too, so it might take a while to get to Zoro. Make sure you guys stick close to Surume 'cause he'll keep other ships away, and you can come get us at the dock when we're ready." He points to the portside where the crew's sniper is studying their new surroundings with unease.

"Usopp said he'd hang onto the den den."

"Right. Ah, Luffy, are you- are you sure he's going to listen to me?" The redhead asks nervously, peering with hesitation over the side at the huge eye staring up at her.

"Sure!" The rubber man replies blithely, grinning as he watches their tentacled friend casually snatch up and crush a Marine vessel that's wandered too close and completely missing the way the navigator's face blanches at the sight. "Why wouldn't he? Oh, hang on a second, okay? I gotta-" He turns aside to draw Franky into an animated discussion on breaking through the portcullis barring
them from the prison's entrance, leaving Nami exchanging a skeptical look with the kraken.

"Err, let's both do our best, shall we?"

xxx

Despite his anger and fear and humiliation, Zoro can't help barking mocking laughter at the dumbfounded expression on Sadi-chan's face when an anxious guard returns to the medical bay bearing news that the Straw Hat pirates have been accompanied through the Gate by some kind of giant octopus that's systematically destroying every ship in the harbor.

*Only Luffy could talk a goddamn SEA KING into joining our crew for a rescue mission.*

The Chief Guard seems slightly disconcerted by her victim's amusement, but the swordsman stops laughing when she whips her weapon-wielding arm out without so much as a backwards glance, viciously cutting the throat of the man now apologetically insisting he's been given orders from Hannyabal himself to escort her to the control room. Clutching with frantic but ultimately useless desperation at the gaping gash in his neck, the mortally-wounded guard utters a wretched choking sound as he staggers and collapses, one hand pawing blindly for the table's edge, and Sadi-chan lashes out, kicking him to the floor and watching his dying convulsions with all the enthusiasm and compassion one might spare for an incapacitated cockroach.

"Idiots," she mutters, examining the wet crimson smeared along the length of her blade and smiling at the renewed consternation surfacing on Zoro's face. "I have no intention of leaving you- mmm, unattended."

Her victim bares his teeth in a snarl and spits forcefully in her direction, emphasizing the opportunity she's missed to push him to the breaking point. He's wary, yes, but the prospect of imminent rescue's dulled his terror. How disappointing. If she wants to recapture that fear, she'll need to play her cards right...

"If they make it inside, it's very possible your crew will come HERE," she purrs, scissoring the fingers she's just plunged back into his body, hoping to remind him he's still at her mercy regardless of whatever's happening outside. To her delight, he arches with a muffled curse, bare heels skidding on the table. "What will they think- mmm, what will your CAPTAIN think if you're discovered- ah, enjoying yourself so zealously?"

"Sencho's- gonna- k-kick your ass," Zoro growls, but from her widening smile, he knows she heard the stutter of alarm in his voice. He can't help it. The idea that one of his nakama- that LUFFY might stumble in to find him being used as the sadistic bitch's plaything- stop it. STOP IT. You're giving her what she wants, he scolds himself furiously, crushing the disturbing little voice in his head that's saying maybe it's better to stop fighting and just scream and beg and cry and do whatever the hell else she wants because maybe she'll stop hurting him if he makes her happy. While not familiar with the clinical term for the condition, he's uncomfortably aware it might not take long for the desire to please his captor to change from reluctance to eagerness if it means less pain and fewer threats. That voice is dangerous.

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," Sadi's murmuring. "In fact, I'm rather curious what your captain might do if he bursts in here and I threaten to skewer your belly with THIS." She watches in amusement as he pales, struggling to hold motionless under the flat edge of the knife blade sliding delicately across his abdomen and leaving a trail of the guard's still-warm blood on his skin. "Mmm, I don't know what YOU think, but if he came all this way to save the two of you? Well, I think he might just turn himself in..."
Surrender is antithetic to Luffy's very nature, but the swordsman's seen how the younger pirate routinely places himself in harm's way to protect others, even people he doesn't know or necessarily want joining his crew, and it's entirely possible that he might willingly trade his own freedom if the Marines promise to spare his lover and child.

Zoro's not gullible enough to believe they'd honor such an exchange; he's well aware the second his captain allows them to slap Kairoseki handcuffs on his wrists, it's all over. And they're not gonna just throw him in a cell either, not after he broke into AND outta this place. They'll-

At the spike of intense emotion produced by the knowledge they'll likely behead his partner when hanging proves impossible, a brief burst of static passes over the screen of the monitor beside him, and a chill ripples across his skin at the implications, raising goose bumps as though he's been doused with ice water, because he recognizes the feeling washing over him. Shit, no- no no- calm down, you idiot! You don't know what'll happen this time if you-

"You agree?" Sadi-chan laughs, mistaking his horrified expression for a reaction to what she's saying. "I wonder what else Mugiwara no Luffy might be willing to do to keep you and his child safe..." She smiles suggestively, flashing white teeth as her sliding, curling fingers continue pushing him closer and closer to the edge he doesn't want to fall over, and he understands exactly what she's implying and it's getting much harder to curb the frenzied emotions building inside him along with the orgasm.

C-Can't- I CAN'T!

"Mmm, I'm not sure you're going to hold out until he gets here," the Chief Guard purrs, eyeing the color rising in the swordsman's grimacing face. "But that's quite alright, because I'm sure he'll be more than happy to- mmm, ACCOMMODATE me- when he understands the situation." Her fingers cease thrusting and simply flex, pressing hard. Her voice drops to a sensuous whisper. "Imagine it, Roronoa- your captain fucking you while you're inside me? And after you're both spent- well, I suppose my subordinates could take turns with the two of you, mmm?"

His already nebulous control slips a little more at her words. Shit, shit, SHIT-

Ignoring the murmurs of confusion from her peers as they stare anxiously about when every monitor in the room suddenly spits static and goes dark, Sadi-chan laughs excitedly, hearing the growing rasp in Zoro's breathing, and decides now- NOW- she'll give him a hint at what the future holds. "Maybe- MAYBE- if your captain asks me very nicely, I'll convince Hannyabal to let him see what you've spawned before it's turned over to the Admirals. But I promise you this-" She leans closer. "I'm going to play in your guts, Roronoa, after they cut you open. And when I finally get tired of doing that, I'm going to tear out your heart while we fuck, and I'm going to make your captain watch."

The swordsman's been suspecting they're going to kill him eventually, probably without the public broadcasting and fanfare that would normally accompany the execution of a Supernova - not after their monumental mistakes at Marineford - but still with enough pageantry for his demise to serve as a warning for others regarding what happens to bounty hunters turned traitor, so as unpleasant as he might find it, the idea of being tortured to death doesn't particularly surprise or even frighten him- at least not for his own sake. In fact, if it wasn't for the baby, he might've forced her hand weeks ago, just as he'd inadvertently done without considering the consequences in his cell a few days prior.

But because he's also well aware his lover's child will die with him, he's been resigning himself to enduring whatever torments the Chief Guard devises in hopes of staying alive long enough for Luffy to reach them. And now- after what he's just been told- the doctors' intense interest in his swelling belly's beginning to make sense, as well as a number of other variables. But- ADMIRALS? It's something he's never even considered. Luffy- Luffy, what the hell do the ADMIRALS want with our
"...mean nothing to them. Ironic, isn't it?" Sadi-chan laughs, mesmerized by the raw emotion twisting the swordsman's features. "I have to say, I'm looking forward to- mmm, letting loose when I don't have to worry about damaging their precious pawn anymore."

Her admission that the government considers Mugiwara no Luffy and Roronoa Zoro's improbable offspring as nothing more than a bit of dangling bait intended to hook a much larger fish falls on deaf ears, because she's finally pushed him too far, and in the end, it's not her promise of death by rape and vivisection that causes his rage and frustration and self-loathing to finally boil over but rather the comment about her superiors taking the child to whom he's grown so emotionally attached.

It's nothing like a few months ago, when Zoro's desperation prompted a brief, partial transformation shortly before Kizaru's foot caught him in the temple and knocked him out. He has no idea what the technique might do to the baby inside him, but it's too late to force Asura down, and this time he's helpless to do anything but welcome the darkness expanding inside his head, drowning out the last traces of fear and humiliation with pure, unadulterated rage, welcome the sensation of emptiness that swallows the unwanted pleasure surging through his loins- and welcome the extra unrestrained limbs flickering into existence around his torso.

The chaotic energy roiling through the air around him causes the nearby monitor to explode before spreading through the rest of the room's equipment, showering them with sparks and bits of flying debris, and Sadi-chan's lips curl into a elated sneer as the swordsman's thighs lock around her forearm and tense, preventing her from pulling away, because she's no intention of following those cowards currently fleeing the room.

The sneer becomes a snarl as a groping hand swarming with darkness seizes a handful of her thick hair and pulls, yanking her head down at a painfully awkward angle, but the Chief Guard's not afraid. She's still holding the blood-smeared knife in her free hand, the swordsman's not even attempting to protect the large, vulnerable target presented by his bulging abdomen- and she's never cared very much for mindlessly following the World Government's orders anyway.

xxx

Luffy's fully prepared to deal with the pair of guards sprinting towards him as he steps through the splintered, hanging doors he's just hit with a haki-enhanced Gear Third fist very much like the one he used to subdue Surume when they first met, and he's certainly not expecting them to run straight past him.

"Oi, where you going?" He calls after them, scratching his head in confusion. "Don't you wanna fight?" They don't answer, don't even glance back, just run right out the door- and immediately fly back in, launched through the air by the powerful blow of Franky's right fist.

"What's going on?" The cyborg demands, joining the bewildered captain and tilting his head as he watches more people flee past, many of them dressed in white lab coats- and all of them utterly terrified.

Luffy meets Franky's equally puzzled gaze and shrugs. "Dunno, maybe somebody scary broke outta their cell? Anyway, I don't really care as long as they don't get in my way. I'm gonna go find Zoro. Wait here and- I don't know- kick their asses or something?"

There's a few scattered cries of "Mugiwara!" when he wades in, and a few of the harder, less shell-shocked guards collect their scattered wits and attack the rubber man, but they're easily put down with a few punches and leg sweeps, and he's almost disappointed when he pushes through the next
set of doors, because the hallway leading to the cell blocks and lower levels is deserted.

Level Six- that's GOTTA be where they put him, 'cause even without his swords, they HAVE to know he's still dangerous. I don't care if he's the size of a house. They gotta know it- and if they don't, they're stupid. Despite his confidence, however, the thought never occurs to him that his swordsman might have caused the panic he encountered near the entrance. According to Chopper, their missing crew mate's now eight months pregnant, and no matter how hard he tries, the captain can't imagine him staging an escape, especially at this late stage. Not when it might put their unborn child at risk. I know he was still kinda nervous 'n freaked out 'n stuff, but- I saw the way he looked at the screen back then. The way he looked at our baby.

He's scanning the hallway for the nearest stairwell, wondering if he's going to find Zoro in Ace's old cell and trying to decide how he feels about the idea, when the smell of something burning reaches his nostrils.

For a moment, he's frozen in place by a powerful sense of deja vu, remembering that horrible day in the harbor and fighting back the fear that he's going to discover something far worse than empty rooms this time, because he suddenly knows that wherever that odor's coming from is where he'll find his lover. Whether it's haki or just intuition, he has no clue. He just knows, and the sense of dread that accompanies this knowledge frightens him.

Another, more careful examination of his surroundings reveals thin tendrils of smoke escaping a doorway near the end of the hall, and when he spots the placard posted on the wall beside it, his breath catches in his throat. Stupid, stupid, stupid- I'm the one who's stupid! How the hell did I miss-

His thoughts are interrupted by a sudden, explosive "BOOF" that nearly sends him leaping through the ceiling. It's followed by a series of pops like miniature fire crackers, and then his paralysis ends and he's moving, tearing towards the room from which the sounds and acrid scent are originating. His feet crunch on glass as he skids through the infirmary's doorway, and that nearly sends him into further panic because it reminds him of bursting into the aquarium bar and witnessing the ruptured fish tank.

In any case, he doesn't need Kenbunshoku to tell him whatever happened here's already over; he can see it with his own eyes.

The room's strewn with smoking, sparking machines and a handful of dead or unconscious people, most wearing blood-spattered white coats similar to the ones he saw back near the entrance. One body, slouched in a chair beside a small bank of mostly broken surveillance screens just inside the door, has large shards of glass protruding from its face. Luffy shudders and takes another step, reaching out to cautiously poke a finger at one of the flickering monitors that's still miraculously intact- and the sudden crash somewhere behind him as a piece of tottering equipment finally succumbs to gravity startles him badly enough that he nearly puts his fist through the thing instead.

A quick glance over his shoulder reveals nothing except some guy in an ill-fitting lab coat, who's slumped sideways against an overturned table and-

"Zoro!" Luffy cries, tripping on a bundle of cables and nearly falling headlong into the damaged medical equipment scattered around the older pirate as he rushes over to drop down beside him, ignoring the broken glass and fragments of metal that bite into his knees as he reaches out. "Oi, Zoro, I found-!"

He falters, choking on his greeting, because the green-haired pirate's motionless, face slack and lips slightly parted, and there's no response when the rubber man's trembling fingers brush his cheek. And his eyes finally register what he's seeing despite his brain's best attempts to convince him
otherwise.

Blood. There's blood everywhere. The huge wash of crimson originating at Zoro's mouth and spilling down his chin and neck has drenched the entire front of the swordsman's body, cascading over his belly where it's jutting from the oversized garment he's wearing to form a significant puddle on the floor beneath his rear and splayed legs, and Luffy's chest is abruptly full to bursting with the scream of heartbroken denial that can't escape his tightly clenchd throat.
Chapter 12

Oh god, no- no- nonononono-! This isn't happening. It's not. IT'S NOT, IT'S-

The mantra of terror-stricken repudiation racing through the Straw Hat captain's head cuts abruptly short as his brain registers that while Zoro himself isn't moving, there's a visible ripple traveling across his bare stomach.

Unaware he's making a soft whimpering sound, the younger pirate leans down, lowering his shaking hand to his lover's bulging abdomen. To his surprise, despite the gore obscuring it, the skin's smooth and unbroken and still warm, and the part of his mind that's not gibbering and slamming itself against the inside of his skull supposes that he must have been only minutes too late and- well, he doesn't know exactly what happened, but it looks as his swordsman vomited most if not all of that blood. Too much blood. Far too much.

"What- what am I s-supposed to do now?" The captain asks plaintively, tears beginning to roll down his cheeks to drip from his chin. He spreads his fingers wider, his breath hitching in his chest as a fist or foot thumps solidly against his palm, and the coldly rational voice inside his head tells him not to be ridiculous, because he knows EXACTLY what he needs to do if he's going to save the baby and he'd better start looking for a suitably sharp instrument immediately, because by the time he goes back for Chopper-

"No, I can't- I CAN'T," he moans, vision blurring as he starts to cry in earnest, sickened by the prospect of cutting open Zoro's body. Blinded by tears, he's completely unprepared for the hard object that suddenly strikes him full in the face, and he yelps loudly, hands flying up to grab his smashed, smarting nose as both nostrils spurt blood. "OW!" And then without thinking as he squints through watery eyes. "Wh-What the hell?"

The voice that answers him is weak but unmistakable. "D-Don't touch-

Luffy mops at his throbbing nose and tear-streaked chin and cheeks with his shirt sleeve, staring in wide-eyed astonishment as the man before him sways and leans back against the table with a faint groan, scrutinizing him dully through barely cracked lids.

"Zoro, you're- I thought you were DEAD! I-" He's horrified, realizing he'd been so overwhelmed by the sight of his gore-splattered partner, he'd been contemplating improvised SURGERY instead of checking for a pulse. Or simply scanning him with haki. I coulda killed him FOR REAL. By ACCIDENT. It's a thought that makes him light-headed.

"Don't t-touch-" Hesitation. A flicker of recognition in that single, barely open eye. "L-Luf-? Luffy?"

"Y-Yeah, it's- it's me..." He can't stop staring, unable to comprehend how Zoro's still alive when there's so much blood everywhere.

The older pirate's mouth twitches, trying to form a smile. "S-See? I told y-" His eye rolls back, pupil and iris alike disappearing beneath the upper lid and he topples sideways, forcing the stunned captain to shake off his stupor and make a frantic grab for his shoulders.

"ZORO!"

"Told you-" the swordsman mumbles again deliriously as he's gathered carefully into Luffy's arms and cradled against the rubber man's chest as he cautiously rises to his feet. ")-they'd f-find us. Told you he'd-" His hands, lost in the oversized sleeves of his borrowed coat, relax where they're clasped
against his belly as he loses consciousness again, his right arm slipping down to hang limply at his side.

xxx

Luffy finds a few determined-looking guards and a big, half-naked horned guy who's holding a trident and seems vaguely familiar crowding the hallway when he exits the medical bay with Zoro clutched against him. They take one look at his face and immediately fall into defensive positions, clutching their weapons at ready.

"I don't have time for this," the captain tells them angrily. "Get outta my way- Zoro needs a doctor!"

"Th-That man's a convicted level six prisoner. You can't just-"

"Watch me." Backed with Haōshoku, the words spoken in a low, furious growl send his would-be opponents crashing to the ground, foaming at the mouth and clutching their throats.

Stepping gingerly around the twitching bodies and heading for the doors to the entry hall, Luffy shifts his comatose swordsman so the older pirate's resting more comfortably in his grasp, head lolling against his collarbone. Zoro's only a few pounds heavier than he remembers, but definitely much bulkier, and although he wants to run full-speed straight for the ship and Chopper, he's terrified of dropping his pregnant partner. **No way I'm leaving him here and coming back for him, though, specially not after those guys tried stopping us.**

"Hang on, okay? We're almost outta here." He risks a worried glance at the man he's carrying, realizing for the first time that he scooped the older pirate up without considering potential complications such as spinal injuries or broken limbs. *It kinda looked like he fell off that table thing- maybe- but I couldn't just leave him there!*

"Back already? That was- holy shit!"

"We need Chopper," Luffy agrees, knowing he's seeing his own shock reflected on Franky's face.

"Go- I'll cover you guys." The cyborg plants his formidable figure between his crew mates and the remnants of the disorganized guard, still shaking his head in dismay. "Jeez. JEEZ!"

Taking care to avoid scraping Zoro's limp body on the splintery remains of the door as he passes through the ragged hole left by his own fist, Luffy finds himself facing the business end of Usopp's drawn Kabuto. The sniper's poised just outside, ready to pick off any Marines or prison personnel attempting to attack Franky from the rear, but immediately lowers his weapon when he registers he's aiming at his own nakama. "Luffy, what- oh my g- CHOPPER! CHOPPER, YOU GOTTA GET OVER HERE RIGHT NOW!"

"Good heavens," Robin murmurs as she joins them, having temporarily abandoned her post beside the twisted, collapsing frame of the defunct portcullis. "Is he-?"

"He's alive. I dunno how, but- CHOPPER?" Trying to ignore the way his knees won't stop trembling, the rubber man stoops and gingerly lowers their battered crew mate to the dock's broad planks, frantically beckoning the doctor who's hurrying towards them with medical bag in tow.

"L-Luffy, that's- that's a lot of b-blood," the reindeer stammers, far too dismayed to slip into his usual comedic hysteria. "He's- he's just- he's COVERED with it!"

"I know- but I didn't see any big cuts or- or holes or anything, so I don't think he got stabbed or shot. Oi, Usopp, can you call Nami? I wanna- I GOTTA get Zoro and our baby outta here."
"S-Sure," the sniper stammers, fumbling for the tiny den den mushi tucked in the pocket of his overalls with numb fingers and nearly dropping the snail in his haste, because he can't tear his gaze away from the sight before him: Luffy hovering anxiously as Chopper peels away the blood-stained lab coat and then the soaked, flimsy hospital gown beneath the first garment, fully baring their swordsman's torso and upper thighs so he can press the stethoscope he's clutching in one quivering hoof to the older pirate's chest. Exposing a multitude of minor cuts, scrapes, bruises- and several rings of both raw and healing puncture marks clearly made by human teeth.

Usopp's too amazed by the sight of Zoro's heavily rounded belly to take note of the doctor's sharp inhalation and the wary concern that's crept into Luffy's expression on seeing the bite marks. Holy shit, he's so- he's huge! And his stomach keeps moving on its own- is that- is that really the-?

"Usopp!"

"I- I'm on it, I'm on it!"

"Then make the goddamn call already!"

"Both of you, shut up!" Chopper interjects, voice choked with emotion as he glares up at his arguing crew mates. "I can't- I can't hear ANYTHING with all this noise!"

Zoro's returned to semi-consciousness during the dispute, a low whine of distress escaping his throat as he registers the noise overhead. Flinching away from the shouting, he swipes clumsily at the cold metal instrument bearing down on his chest, struggling to push it away, and outright panics when the reindeer beside him changes forms to pin him gently but firmly with one large Heavy Point hand, his weak struggling accompanied by inarticulate noises of protest which make it clear he's too disoriented to recognize who or what's leaning over him.

Reacting instinctively despite his growing suspicion that his partner's unusually skittish behavior might denote a type of abuse he'd never even imagined being an issue, Luffy reaches out, intending to pull his swordsman into a secure embrace- and watches in stunned horror when the unexpected contact causes Zoro to jerk away from his touch with a loud cry. Rolling onto his right side, the green-haired man knocks Chopper's hands free as he curls his body protectively around his distended abdomen, shaking uncontrollably and breathing in ragged gasps that sound distressingly like sobs, the pupil in his single eye dilated enormously. As his horrified crew members watch, tears begin leaking free and trickling down to drip off his temple and slowly soak into planks below.

The entire group on the dock's fallen silent, save the den den mushi perched on the sniper's palm as it continues issuing Nami's harsh, frightened demands for someone to tell her what's happening.

They've seen Zoro bruised and bloodied and LAUGHING following a battle. They've seen him grinning smugly over a hard-won victory despite the blood staining his torn and tattered clothing. They've seen him casually stitching his own injuries closed and squabbling with Chopper over bandages he deems unnecessary. They've NEVER seen him like this.

"Sencho. LUFFY-" Robin calls sharply, concerned because the younger pirate's swaying slightly, his face gone alarmingly pale. "You cannot afford to go to pieces now. We need you- Zoro needs you to keep a clear head."

"R-Robin, he-" The captain bites his lower lip hard enough to draw blood that he carelessly licks away a moment later, a shudder traveling visibly through his body as he struggles to regain his composure. "He was kinda out of it in there- but he TALKED to me, and now I don't think he even recognizes-"
"I know, Luffy. I'm sorry." She drops to her knees beside Chopper. "Is there anything I can do? Any way I can help you?"

"Hold him still," the doctor orders, yanking the stethoscope buds from his ears. There's no use trying to use the instrument to gauge heart rate with the occasional explosion still rocking the building behind them as Franky blasts Coup de Vents on the few guards still brave and determined enough to attempt preventing their escape.

"Will it cause him more discomfort?"

"He's extremely disoriented, and his skin's clammy. I need to make sure he's not going into cardiogenic shock, which means checking his pulse and I can't- I can't do that if he's fighting me."

Robin crosses her wrists, eyes closing briefly in concentration, and a myriad of additional arms sprout from the ground to wrap carefully around Zoro's limbs and torso, prying him out of the ball into which he's curled. She's forced to immediately tighten her hold as he starts thrashing wildly in her grasp, immobilizing him securely enough for Chopper to capture his right wrist and roll back the sleeve- only to freeze, promptly forgetting all about locating the radial artery.

Luffy makes a strangled croaking sound of disbelief, his eyes going wide, and even the generally unflappable historian falters, losing control of her ability for long enough that her extra limbs vanish. Free from restraint, the swordsman promptly folds back into an awkward fetal position, hugging himself. He tugs feebly at his bloodstained attire with his maimed hand, missing digits hindering his efforts to pull the gown and lab coat closed over his naked body.

"H-His- his f-f-fingers-" Usopp, who's drifted back over to rejoin them, stutters unnecessarily, tucking the still-squawking den den mushi he's been holding back into his pocket so he's free to clutch uncomfortably at his own overall strap while he presses the back of his opposite hand to his mouth as though he might suddenly be ill.

They're all staring helplessly at the three-fingered claw to which Zoro's right hand's been reduced when Franky bounds into their midst, waving excitedly and yelling for everyone to get their heads out of their asses and MOVE because the Sunny's now visible beyond the damaged portcullis. The boards beneath them quake as the ship surges close enough to the dock to produce a grating, crunching noise when the Adam wood hull meets and partially crushes the weaker planks, but to the cyborg's disgust, no one stirs.

"What's the hold up- let's GO!" He roars, whirling to fire one final volley through the jagged wreckage of the front door before reaching down to grab Luffy's arm and haul him upright, infuriated their crew mates aren't using the time he's bought them. "Why the hell aren't you people- oh. OH. SHIT."

The younger pirate turns slowly towards the blue-haired man towering over him, voice wavering slightly at first and then strengthening in resolve as he gathers his composure. "Franky, get Zoro on the ship. Chopper, you're gonna take care of him 'n make sure the baby's okay, right?"

The reindeer nods shakily, eyes shining with barely contained tears.

"What about you?" Franky demands, although he's already following orders and crouching to retrieve their shivering, semi-conscious crew member.

"I'm not leaving yet."

"What? Why n- o-oi, shhh, it's okay, Haramaki-bro- I ain't gonna hurt either of you, I promise," the
cyborg croons as he lifts Zoro easily in his massive arms, brow furrowed in concern because the swordsman's vehemently protesting being handled even though he's on the verge of passing out. "Whoa! Careful, careful!" There's one final burst of struggling that ends with their nakama sagging insensibly in his grasp. "Damn. Poor guy's really- oi! Where the hell you goin'?"

"-should've never rebuilt this place…” Luffy's muttering as he turns away from the waiting ship and stalks back towards the prison, joints making small popping sounds as he flexes his fingers. "Gonna make sure next time's not so easy for 'em."

Face impassive but eyes betraying the slightest hint of dampness, Robin rises to follow. Usopp hesitates just long enough to reach out and gently touch Zoro's hair with one shaking hand as Franky passes him, and then he joins the captain and historian, his eyes narrowed and his teeth defiantly clenched.

"There's still people inside," Robin murmurs as they stare up at the structure, studying the smoke smudging the sky above it. A sight that only Luffy himself recognizes as a probable testament to spreading electrical fires in the infirmary where he found his swordsman. "Guards. Prisoners. If you damage the cell blocks and they escape-"

"I don't care."

"Those on lower levels will probably survive. But anyone on the first floor? They'll certainly die if-"

"I. Don't. Care. TEAR IT DOWN," the captain orders with a murderous snarl, turning to glare at her, and the expression on his face is so terrible that she and Usopp look away, unable to meet his pain and rage-filled eyes.

xxx

Slamming oversized armament-coated fists repeatedly into the prison walls and watching Usopp's Pop Green-generated tendrils and Robin's Mil Fleur tear down nearby stones as Surume helpfully picks off fleeing guards, doctors and prisoners alike with grasping appendages... isn't enough.

Luffy doesn't flinch, doesn't so much as spare a second glance in the direction of the anguished screams and faint, horrible crunching noises emerging from the sharp beak hidden beneath the kraken's bulk, although his assisting crew mates can't hide their apprehension, the sniper gagging and nearly dropping his Kabuto and the normally strong-stomached historian going pale and involuntarily wetting her lips, both of them horrified by the sounds of defenseless human beings being devoured alive.

For the captain, however, it's still not enough.

None of it eases the seething furor in his head and heart at the knowledge his swordsman's been tortured and irreparably maimed and their unborn child's life endangered, not even being aware Zoro and the baby are now safely aboard the Sunny, under the care and protection of nakama, while those guilty for the travesty pay the ultimate price. Nothing helps. His anger and despair only continue to grow until his control snaps, and eventually his crew mates and the sea monster that far outweighs and dwarfs him in size simply draw back to watch in silence while he goes berserk on the remaining structure, howling and hurling chains and trees and chunks of mortar into the surrounding ocean, until he finally runs out of steam and collapses on the dock, panting and dashing sweat and tears from his face with one violently trembling forearm.

It isn't enough. He thinks he could personally break the neck of every single person who was responsible for his partner's capture and imprisonment- everyone who spoke to him- everyone who
TOUCHED him- every last individual in Impel Down who's heard, even in passing, the name of former Pirate Hunter Roronoa Zoro, and it would still not be enough.

*What they did to him- and what I think they MIGHT'VE done to him-* The rubber man squeezes his eyes shut, taking slow deep breaths to prevent another paroxysm of mindless fury from overtaking him.

"Sencho-san, are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I just- I need a minute, okay?"

"Perhaps it's best we-"

He waves an arm in dismissal. "Go ahead; I'll catch up with you guys in a second."

"O-Oi, Luffy, are you sure-"

"GO."

Usopp obeys without further argument, looking extremely shaken despite his willing participation in reducing the exposed portion of Impel Down to vine-covered rubble. Robin hesitates, as though she'd like to say something more, but then she offers a brief nod of acquiescence and turns to follow the sniper back to the ship.

Luffy stays behind, staring at the devastation and absentmindedly patting the tentacle that slithers onto the boards beside him to brush inquiringly at his shoulder. "I guess you're ready to go too, huh?"

He's glad they'd already asked Surume to carry them through the Calm Belt rather than attempting to travel back through the turbulence of the Tarai Current, where they could potentially find themselves trapped like bait-drawn lobsters in a cage. The kraken's presence will deter any sea kings that might consider attacking the ship, and despite his earlier bluster about kicking ass, the rubber man's now determined to avoid any Marine vessels reporting to investigate distress calls that might have gotten through to G-1. They can't afford to have anyone chasing them, not now, not with his swordsman so-

Too long. *It took us too damn long to-* He rakes a hand through his hair. *If we woulda gotten here sooner, before- before...*

The captain glances back at the Sunny, some impractical part of him hoping he'll find his partner leaning on the railing with arms crossed, hale and whole and eyeing him with fond exasperation for being so worried. Instead, the deck's empty except for the cyborg hurrying across the grass on his way to the helm. Franky catches his gaze and waves, shouting for him to hurry up and get onboard, and the younger pirate raises an arm in silent acknowledgment.

Whatever's happened to Zoro, sitting here wishing otherwise isn't going to change it. Or help him. Sighing unhappily, Luffy rises reluctantly to his feet and brushes powdered concrete from the seat of his shorts.

It's time to retreat to the ship and assess the damage.

xxx

There's a draft sliding over his bare skin, and he doesn't understand why there's cool air blowing directly on him when he vaguely recalls tugging someone's abandoned lab coat from beneath the
wreckage of the chair where it'd been hanging and slowly, painfully pulling it on over his blood-soaked clinging gown before slumping against the overturned table behind him and gazing numbly at the destruction inadvertently caused by unleashing Asura in a room full of electronic equipment.

The swordsman doesn't remember losing consciousness or being found by his captain or suffering a brief, violent flashback while lying on the dock or being carried onto the ship in Franky's arms and carefully transferred to the infirmary on a makeshift stretcher by several of the same nakama now hovering anxiously above him, and while he hears them talking in hushed voices that sound miles above him, he's too dazed and disoriented to decipher what's being said or who's speaking.

Of course, it doesn't help that they're all talking at once.

"-ere's it coming from? It looks- god, it almost looks like he just started- started throwing up, only instead of- instead of puke, it's all-" Nervous gulping. "Sanji, you should've seen him on the dock. I don't know WHAT the hell happened but-"

"-saw something like this after a fight one time, back on the Baratie. Guy got stabbed in the lung and kept coughing up blood. You think that's what happened to-?"

"-fy said he didn't notice any major injuries, and I haven't found anything yet either, but I won't know for sure until we get him cleaned up enough that I can see what I'm looking at-" There's a clatter of metal somewhere overhead as the voice's owner moves past. "-but even though he's a little pale, his color's still too good for blood loss of that volume. I'm- I'm not sure all of it's actually his..."

"Did you see his HAND? Did you see what they did to his HAND?"

"Yeah, I saw... I hope whichever shitty asshole hacked off Marimo's fingers got crushed under the building when you guys brought it down." A sudden inhalation between gritted teeth. "And what the FUCK? Are those TEETH marks? Somebody BIT him?"

"Y-Yeah, I think so."

"Unfortunately, that's correct, and... more than once, I'm afraid." A soft voice, undeniably feminine, and that sends ripples of nauseous fear reverberating through the fogginess.

"... jeez..."

"All of you stop gawking, and somebody help me move him to the bed. No, not you, Sanji- you shouldn't be lifting that much weight with your ribs still healing. Let Nami or- ah, thank you, Robin."

Startled by the hands touching him yet still too dazed to fight them off, Zoro stirs fitfully and groans his objection to being disturbed, wondering why they can't just leave well enough alone. If they're going to patch him up again just so somebody else can-

The world tilts as his body's suddenly lifted, the ground dropping away beneath him, but his yelp of surprise emerges as nothing more than a low, throaty "nnn" of protest, and his head's spinning crazily and empty stomach sloshing as he's settled on a soft, padded surface. Fingers take his left elbow, gently urging him onto his side, and even that slight movement makes him retch.

"Hold him still. If he vomits, that's fine, but I need to make sure this goes in the vein."

"Here, let me help," another distinctly female voice says. "I feel like I should be doing something besides just standing here."

Zoro flinches, face contorting at the sudden stinging pain in his hand. "Nnn- n-no..." There's a brief
"Unnngh..."

"Oh! Chopper- Chopper, I think he's waking up!" That same voice exclaims, and he feels the yielding firmness of a breast pressing against his arm as she leans over him, one hand cupping his jaw to turn his face towards hers. "Zoro? Zoro, can you hear me?"

N-No, his daze mind protests.

"Ah, Nami, perhaps you should give Kenshi-san some space. I'm not sure-"

Gossamer waves of hair tickle his skin as the woman touching him turns her head to reply to her companion, and the swordsman recoils in horror-tinged revulsion and disbelief, an involuntary cry of protest escaping his throat when he forces his eye open to find her looming over him- a dark, slender silhouette save the auburn sheen thrown around her upper body by the infirmary lamps and his own blurry, untrustworthy vision.

Fight-or-flight response triggered, his first instinct's to flee. He doesn't care that his hawk-eyed mentor of two years would deem such behavior cowardly and worthy of shame and that he himself, in his right mind, would almost certainly agree; all that matters is getting himself and the baby as far from his aggressor as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, the hospital gurney's butted up against two joining walls, which means the confused navigator's not only standing between Zoro and freedom but she's actually got him CORNERED, trapped and desperate, and he's struggling upright - an act greatly hindered by his swollen middle - when he glimpses the bloody garments he was wearing earlier laying in discarded, slashed pieces on the floor and realizes he's naked.

They're also not alone, and in his furious terror and half-blinded state, he fails to recognize a single member of his own crew. He's too busy recalling Sadi's threat to have him gang-raped by her guards, and the thought of being subjected to the odious attention of not just the Chief Guard herself but her men as well, possibly simultaneously, tears away his last shred of sanity.

There's a tray resting on the stool beside the bed, and he lunges for it, intending to throw the entire thing and its contents in her face, but the tubing taped to his wrist snags its edge and sends it flying.

Desperate for a weapon- any weapon- he makes a wild grab at the spilling instruments, and his hand - the left, thank god, thank GOD - closes on a slim, cylindrical object that turns out to be EXACTLY what he needs.

"DAMN IT, MARIMO, DON'T- SHIT! LUFFY! LUFFY, GET YOUR SHITTY GOMU ASS
The distance between the dining hall entrance and the infirmary's not very far at all- only a handful of paces in a few seconds given the swift speed with which the rubber man's crossing it, but to his beleaguered mind, it might as well be a mile. His haki's ringing deafening warning bells, shrieking at the presence of some incredibly dangerous threat to his crew, but surely that can't be right. No one's aboard the ship save the Straw Hats themselves. Unless-

_He headbutted you in the face. Yeah, he knew who you were right after, at least for a little bit, but don't forget that- you touched him and he hit you._

Pulse caught in his throat because although he's not sure what he's going to find, he's almost certainly not going to like it, the captain bursts through the doorway- and freezes with his hands clutching either side of the frame to prevent himself careening across the small room, because he's just walked into pandemonium.

The infirmary's packed with nakama, but they've scattered to the room's perimeter to clear the floor, and everyone is shouting at the top of their lungs for Zoro, who's trailing iv lines and wavering almost drunkenly as he struggles to remain upright, to drop the redhead he's holding pinned to his chest with his right elbow hooked around her throat. Nami's face is pale with shock and fear and confusion, but she doesn't dare move, not with the swordsman pressing the blade of the scalpel he's clutching to a spot just below her ribs, where one hard upward thrust will send it directly into her heart.
At the sight of Nami's terrified eyes and his partner's despair and rage-twisted features, Luffy's grip on the door jamb tightens until the Adam wood's creaking beneath his fingers.

Most of his crew's faces are displaying some degree of fright mixed with stupefaction as they venture to process the scene unfolding before them, but Sanji's positively livid. "So help me, Marimo, if you don't LET NAMI-SAN GO RIGHT NOW, I'LL-" The cook utters a short growl of frustration, his threat to do Zoro serious bodily harm left unspoken and his fingers twitching helplessly thenballing into fists at his sides. He's not confident enough in his speed or accuracy to try kicking the scalpel from the swordsman's hand; he can't- won't- gamble Nami's life OR risk accidentally landing a blow on their pregnant crew member's prominent stomach.

It's distressingly obvious the green-haired pirate's not himself; in the cook's opinion, their moss-for-brains crew mate might be an idiot, but he'd never attack one of his own defenseless nakama like this. Hell, he's never drawn a blade on Sanji himself without sufficient provocation, and they'd quit baiting each other to physical confrontations after that near miss on the lawn deck which now seems so incredibly long ago. So whatever's happened that pushed the man to react this way- well, Sanji'd be lying if he claimed it didn't scare the shit out of him.

Knowing all this, however, only makes it harder- not easier- to hold his tongue. "Drop that shitty knife, goddamn y-!"

He's interrupted by Usopp, who seizes his arm, digging fingers into his flesh. "Shut up, you idiot-" the sniper hisses. "What if he goes 'n stabs her 'cause you piss him off!"

"Zoro, what're- what're you doing?" Luffy inquires softly, hesitant to speak too loudly for fear of unintentionally exacerbating the situation. Zoro looks extremely jumpy, as though it might not take much to startle him, and wary discretion's evidently a wise decision, because the older man's gaze immediately leaves Sanji and Usopp to dart towards the sound of his captain's voice, although he gives no indication of recognizing him much less answering his question. The rubber man swallows, disappointed, but presses on. "Nami? What happened?"

"I- I don't know! I barely touched-" Nami wheezes, gagging as the elbow hooked around her neck tenses, increasing the pressure on her windpipe. The maneuver also pushes the swordsman's belly more firmly into her back, forcing her onto the tips of her toes to avoid being inadvertently strangled, and goose bumps rise and fall across her skin when she feels a series of dull impacts where his abdomen's crushed against her spine and identifies the sensation as the baby's agitated kicking in response to its parent's heightened emotions.

Zoro's breathing, already far too quick and shallow, speeds up and he utters a strange, low noise-almost a whine- that unnerves the navigator nearly as much as the makeshift weapon he's clutching, because she's never heard the older pirate sound so pitiful. So frightened. His throat's become so tightly clenched that each new inhalation contains a slight whistle, almost as if he's struggling to draw air through a pin-sized hole not wide enough to accommodate straining lungs, although there's a shaky, forceful blast of heat on the nape of her neck every time he exhales, and she knows her crew mate's not suffering from a sudden asthma or allergy attack. He's starting to hyperventilate.

"R-Robin-" Usopp hisses again, peering frantically at the historian around the furious cook to whose arm he's still clinging. "Can't you- y'know- grab him? Twist his arm or something to make him drop it?"
"I may not be fast enough," the historian murmurs. She sounds calm but her fingers are trembling when she takes hold of Sanji's opposite arm as he tries to wrench loose from the sniper, apparently now too angry to realize his actions might further endanger their red-haired crew mate. "It's very likely he'll kill her before I can disarm him."

"Sencho-" She addresses Luffy without looking back at him, unwilling to make any quick movements that might antagonize the volatile-minded swordsman into either stabbing the navigator or simply snapping her neck like a wishbone. "Talk to him. I'm not certain he understands where he is or who we-"

"How the hell are you still alive?" Zoro growls suddenly beside Nami's ear, speaking for the first time since Luffy carried him, limp and fading in and out of consciousness, from the medical bay, and there's a thread of raw, barely-restrained panic underlying the hate and fear in his voice. "I tore your goddamn throat out, bitch- so HOW THE FUCK are you still alive?"

"All that- all that blood- I was right! M-Most of it's not his!" Chopper stammers, tightening his hold on Brook's bony leg where he's been cowering nervously beside the skeleton at the opposite end of the room. The reindeer's already enormous eyes have widened yet again in realization and horror, because he's finally ascertained the origin of the tacky crimson mess drying on their crew mate's naked body. Unhinged as the swordsman might currently be, he's almost certainly telling the truth; copious hemorrhaging from a torn carotid artery could certainly be responsible for such an outlandish amount of blood. And judging by its spray pattern-

*He bit her. Whoever she is- was- There's no question the woman in question's dead. Not if she received a neck wound severe enough to leave her opponent literally drenched in her blood. *He bit her, and somehow- SOMEHOW he locked his teeth in there and hung on and he- h-he didn't let go until she bled out...*

The doctor's always known how strong and overdeveloped the muscles in Zoro's jaw and neck must be to grip and swing Wado's not-inconsiderable weight, but-

"Zoro?" Luffy calls, taking one cautious step through the doorway- and freezing in place when Nami utters a high-pitched squeal of pain as the scalpel's tip dimples into her bare skin, pressing hard enough to draw a bright bead of blood that hovers there, glistening and welling larger and larger until gravity finally pulls it downwards. Sanji strains in Usopp and Robin's grasp, swearing loudly and spitting insults until the historian claps an extra hand over his mouth, leaving the room in silence save for Zoro's renewed tirade.

"-took everything I had to let you get that goddamn close to me after the rest of your shit, but I KILLED YOU, YOU FUCKING SADISTIC BITCH!"

He's shouting in the navigator's ear by the end, tone bordering on hysteria, and she squeezes her eyes shut, unsure if she's starting to cry because there's a steady wet, warm trickle slowly worming its way down her stomach into the waistband of her jeans and she's terrified that might be just a precursor of what's to come- or because, regardless of the angry words pouring from his mouth, the swordsman sounds as though he might burst into tears himself. Despite his iron grip on her neck and torso, she can feel the thick muscle and sinew in his arms twitching and jumping beneath the skin, as though he finds the close contact so revolting that he can barely stand to keep touching her. As though he'd prefer to just drop her and bolt for freedom if he wasn't so-

*Why's he so AFRAID of us? Of ME? What did they- what did SHE- whoever she is- DO to him?*

It's getting hard to breathe again but she's afraid to move; if he interprets her actions as threatening, he might do more than poke her with that thing. Even so, it's impossible to stay completely still when
she's balanced so precariously on her toes and her calves and thighs are beginning to ache. The drying blood transferred to her back by him pressing against her's not helping matters either; it's clowing and itchy and slowly gluing them together, and when she's forced to stand a bit higher on her toes to catch her breath, it's as though someone's pulling a strip of adhesive from her skin.

Feeling her body shift, Zoro utters a low, warning growl that raises the fine hair on the back of her neck, and overhead the lamps flicker.

Across the room, Luffy stiffens and Sanji starts making frantic garbled noises into the palm covering his mouth as their haki registers the growing disturbance in the atmosphere around the swordsman before it's actually visible. There's a faint shimmer developing around his head and shoulders, as though his body's suddenly exuding a ludicrous amount of heat.

Nami can't see the looming presence of Asura beginning to manifest, but she feels something change in the man behind her that makes her blood run cold and her tears flow faster.

"Luffy, the longer he stays agitated, the more stress it's putting on his body," Robin warns, tightening her grip on the cook's arm and mouth as he goes berserk at the sight of Nami's misery and the additional limbs struggling to gain substance around her. "That's not good for him or the baby, and if he uses this technique-"

"You mean he's going to-" Chopper demands, fear momentarily forgotten. "Zoro, NO. She's right- if there's internal bleeding and you do this-! Luffy, you need to stop him!"

The captain nods quickly, shakily, mesmerized against his will by the slow downward roll of the pink-tinged droplets of sweat beaded on Zoro's blood-smeared face and heaving chest as the mirage of extra arms begins solidifying, and he edges forward a few more inches while the swordsman's distracted by Chopper- then hesitates, stumped. He's skilled at brawling and close combat, sure, but wrestling the scalpel away will almost certainly get Nami stabbed and, anyway, he certainly can't HIT Zoro. But the longer he waits, the more real the manifestation becomes, and if Zoro gets a couple more arms around her, it'll be even harder to pull them apart...

"Talk. Just talk to him," the historian urges again. "If he's trying to protect the baby, it's best coming from you. Think, Luffy- give him a reason to put it down and let her go."

Talk. He can certainly do that - Zoro's jokingly claimed he never knows when the hell to shut up - but for once he doesn't know what to say. "Wh-What should I-?"

"Anything- just let him hear your voice."

"I- okay... Uhm, Zoro?" Luffy swallows, curling his fingers into loose fists in the fabric of his shorts to prevent himself from reaching out, because while he's almost positive that everything will be alright if he can just touch the older pirate- wrap both arms around him and hug him and SHOW him that nobody's going to hurt him, not anymore- he also doesn't want to find out differently. "I don't- I don't know what happened, but I'm pretty sure Nami wasn't trying to hurt Zoro or our baby. Whoever- whoever did- whoever hurt you- they're not here now. Nobody here's gonna hurt you, okay? 'Cause we're nakama and we love you." His heart's breaking at the blatant distrust on his partner's face. "I love you."

The swordsman flinches, and when the navigator feels him start to tremble where he's pressed against her back, she blinks away the tears oozing from beneath her eyelids, exhaling slowly and willing herself to relax because she can sense he's listening even if she can't see his face. That murderous aura's slipping away, replaced by confusion and dim hope.
"We're- Zoro's on the Sunny," the captain continues, briefly meeting Nami's gaze, and he's relieved when she offers him a nervous smile. Beside him, Robin's nodding encouragingly and even Sanji's stopped struggling to listen. "You and me and our baby and everybody else. And Zoro's safe now and the baby's safe now too, and that damn prison's just a pile of busted up rocks 'cause Robin and Usopp helped me make sure, and Robin says we probably killed people but I don't care, and- and- " Please, please, just come back to-

"L-Luffy-?"

"I thought- I thought you were D-DEAD when I found you," the younger pirate whispers, and he jams both hands in his pockets because the other man's finally looking at him. Really seeing HIM this time and not some enemy- some threat to be avoided, and Luffy wants so badly to run to him and throw both arms around him- around that swollen curve containing their unborn child- and hug them both so tight and never let go, but he's still afraid to take those last few steps left between them. "Zoro was on the floor, all covered with blood and-"

"N-No, it's not mine- it's- oh god-" There's a clatter as the scalpel hits the floor and spins across the tiles, and Zoro pulls the woman he's been holding captive around to face him, pushing her hair back out of her face with his good hand so he can see her familiar eyes. "NAMI?"

"G-Good to see you too," she tells him timidly- and yelps when he hugs her unexpectedly, embracing her so tightly that once again she can barely breathe because he's crushing her lungs against the round belly she's still shocked and utterly amazed has grown so much bigger during the weeks he's been separated from the crew, and the baby's kicking repeatedly against her ribcage, and she can feel the older pirate's pulse racing erratically against her cheek where he's smashing her face into the hollow of his throat. "Ow, not so hard, y-you big lug- you're squashing me!"

Usopp, Chopper and Brook sigh in relief, and Robin slowly relaxes her grip on Sanji's arm. Luffy looks as though he might burst into tears, his hands trembling with nervous energy as he tugs them from his pockets and takes another stumbling step forwards.

"Goddamn it, Nami! I thought you were- I almost k-killed-"

The navigator's hands find his back and she pats it awkwardly. "I- I understand. It's okay, it's not your- ah, careful! Luffy, a little help here!"

The captain, who's already lost his reticence and rushed forward at the sight of the swordsman's body sagging in her arms, throws a supporting arm around the older pirate's middle before his buckling knees can spill him to the floor, and working together, they help him move backwards to the edge of the hospital bed to sit down. Exhausted and shaking, he can do little more than cling to them with the arms he's draped over their shoulders.

"Get him laying down," Chopper orders, joining them at the bedside in Heavy Point and reaching out to untangle the twisted iv lines and check the infusion spike taped to their crew mate's wrist. "No, no- not on his back! Here, like this. He'll be more comfortable on his side and it won't put quite so much pressure on his internal organs."

"O-Oi, I don't need help. I can- I can do it myself," Zoro grumbles weakly at the indignity of being manhandled, offering stubborn resistance as the doctor hooks an arm under his knees to raise his legs onto the mattress, and Nami gingerly catches and holds the wrist of the hand trying halfheartedly to push the reindeer away, fresh tears welling in her eyes and spilling over the damp lashes because it's the maimed one and he's quivering uncontrollably despite his bravado.

"Your- your poor hand-"
"It's- it's just a few fingers," he mumbles, slightly taken aback at the sympathy in the navigator's voice, and when he meets the cook's gaze over her shoulder, they share a moment of perfect, silent understanding that, regardless of the seriousness of the situation, makes Sanji cover his twitching lips with a hand that's trembling only slightly and the swordsman utter a derisive snort.

Nami-swan's so adorable when she's playing nursemaid to our injured crew mates- even if it's you, Marimo!

Shut up, shitty ero-cook!

"Just a few fingers?" Nami protests, aghast, ignoring Luffy as he disregards their doctor's exasperated reprimand and climbs into the bed from its lower half so he can squeeze himself between the wall and Zoro's back, loosely spooning the swordsman's body with his own and rubbing gentle circles on his side, murmuring comforting nonsense to both him and the agitated child that's causing a visible disturbance on the distended surface of his midsection.

"-came and got you and Zoro as soon as we could, and I know it took a really, really long time and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but Nami said we needed a pose or we'd get lost like Zoro always gets lost and it took me forever to find one and then I hadda fight a whole ship of guys to steal it and at first I was gonna come by myself but everybody else said I was being stupid and they were coming too and we hadda get Sunny coated so we could go to Fishman Island and get Surume - I wish you could see him 'cause he's huge and really cool and he helped save you and Zoro - and I missed both of you so much and I thought about you every single-"

The older pirate relaxes, losing his determination to fight off the hands touching him as his captain's steadily rambling voice gradually produces a calming effect on both him and the baby, and the tumult inside him begins to settle down a bit until the kicking's much more sporadic and not nearly so forceful. He gives the tearful navigator a grim, humorless smile and flexes his remaining fingers. "I'll deal with it. Besides, at the time it sure seemed better than the alternative..."

"What do you mean?"

"She gave me a choice. I could keep my fingers or- or I could keep-" He can't finish the thought but his good hand moves to span protectively over the apex of his belly, and there's a sharp whuff of incredulity against his ear, as though someone's delivered a very hard punch to the solar plexus of the rubber man nestled against his back, and he knows his point's been made. The fingers stroking his side falter and still, and then his partner slides closer and simply holds him, unable to speak.

"Y-You're joking, right?" Nami demands.

"No. Though I guess SHE probably thought it was pretty damn funny. Said she wanted me to decide which one was more important." He glances over his shoulder to lock gazes with Luffy. "I told her she was pretty fucking stupid for even asking."

"Zoro... you..."

"I can't believe somebody actually made you pick between-" The redhead folds her free arm around her own middle to hug herself, unable to hide her discomfort. "My god, what kind of person-"

"... you don't wanna know. Trust me."

"Nami- Nami, I need you to move." Chopper nudges the white-faced navigator aside to fussily double-check the connection of the IV catheter taped to their nakama's hand. "Zoro, I know you're tired and you probably just want to go to sleep, but-"
"I'm not tired. I smell like a goddamn slaughterhouse, and I want this shit off me. If somebody'll just
give me a hand so I don't break my neck getting up the ladder, I'll go-"

"No. You're not going to the bathhouse- or anywhere else, for that matter. You're staying right here
and resting while we take care of you. Luffy, I'm counting on YOU to make sure he stays in bed and
I don't care WHAT he says- don't you DARE let him talk you out of it." The doctor turns to address
the rest of the room. "Sanji, some food? Broth would probably be best for now. Usopp, grab a
couple extra pillows from the men's quarters. Nami- Nami!"

"Y-Yes?" The navigator asks distractedly, still appalled at what Zoro's just told them and staring
fixedly at the swordsman's damaged hand, which he's finally pulled from her grasp so he can cradle
the weight of his captain's child between his palms as Luffy resumes petting and stroking his side
with timorous fingers, the younger pirate's voice choked with emotion as he softly apologizes again
and again for making them both wait so long.

"I need towels and a basin of warm water. Warm, not hot. Brook can go with you."

"Of course, Chopper-san."

"Robin, would you please-" Unfortunately, he's drawing a blank and finds himself reduced to staring
at the historian, eyes pleading.

"Ah, I understand. Perhaps someone should check if Franky requires any assistance ensuring we're
not being followed. I could-"

"Yes- yes, thank you!"

Firmly shutting the door behind his exiting nakama as they depart on their errands, Chopper
reluctantly returns to the bedside where his remaining crew mates are curled together and exchanging
a few quiet words. Silently noting the way their fingers are now interlaced against the older pirate's
prominently bulging abdomen, he takes a deep breath, steeling himself for a conversation he doesn't
want to initiate.

"Zoro-" They fall silent, the swordsman looking up at the sound of his name, and his strained
expression says he already knows what they need to discuss and it twists the knife of guilt buried in
the doctor's heart. "I- I'm sorry for asking this, but I need to know what- exactly- what happened- in
Impel Down. What kind of conditions they kept you in, what they fed you and what they-." He stops,
but judging by the way his patient averts his gaze, there's no doubt he understands what the
reindeer's asking. **What they did to you...**

Zoro hesitates. "... well... the food wasn't anything to write home about, but they fed me enough if
that's what you mean." He's being ridiculous, dodging the more important, unspoken question, and
he knows it. The entire crew's just seen him naked, plastered chin to groin with drying blood,
freaking the fuck out because somebody touched him when he wasn't expecting it. And, assuming
they got even a halfway decent look at him while he was unconscious, wearing healing marks on his
skin that make it blatantly obvious somebody's been after him. His nakama aren't stupid.

"Zoro wasn't in a cell when I found him," Luffy murmurs. "I thought he'd be down on Level Six, but
I found him in the sick bay instead..." He trails off, looking troubled.

Chopper's eyes narrow. "I cut them off so I could examine you for injuries, but-" He points towards
the pile of white, blood-stained fabric on the floor. "-that's a hospital gown, isn't it? And a lab coat?"
The swordsman stares back at him for a moment, then nods grudgingly.
"Why'd they send you to the prison infirmary?"

"I told you, some crazy bitch cut off my goddamn finger!" He's forestalled by the doctor's raised hand.

"From what I can see, the stumps of your fingers were cauterized not long after the fingers themselves were removed. It's a procedure that would've only taken a few minutes. Non-invasive, not life-threatening. You probably would've been sent back to your cell the same-

"Who bit you?" The captain demands suddenly, voice tight with outrage. "Did they- did they do other stuff too?" He bristles at their surprised expressions. "Oi, I know about that kinda thing, okay? I grew up with mountain bandits, and not all of 'em were like Dadan, so I know what people do to each other sometimes. I saw some pretty bad stuff, and THIS-" He pokes a finger at but doesn't actually touch the shiny, semi-circular scar that hasn't yet faded from Zoro's inner thigh. "-looks like bad stuff."

"I don't know what you're-

"Was it Akainu? Did Akainu-?"

"What? NO. No. That guy- he wanted to kill me, but he didn't wanna- he didn't wanna f-fuck me." Realizing too late that his words hold the implication that someone else DID. "Wait, no, I- I didn't mean-

"Zoro, I can smell it on you." Chopper admits miserably, eyes dropping back to the floor. "S-Seminal fluid. Under the blood."

"That's not-" He raises a hand to rub his eyes, partly because his head aches but mostly because he doesn't want to see their faces. This whole discussion feels like he's being cross-examined, but he supposes it's not like either of them have ever interviewed a victim of- it's not like they've done shit like this before. Or probably suspected there'd ever be a need. "You're- you're smelling me. I must've-" The pained noise that escapes his throat's somewhere between a sob and bitter laughter. "Goddamn it..."

"I- I know this is hard, but I need to evaluate your condition. Yours and the baby's. And I can't do that unless I know everything that- everything that happened to you."

Fingers touch his hair hesitantly, and then begin to gently comb through it when he doesn't pull away. "... and I'm not gonna let anybody else hurt you." There's still a strong hint of anger in his captain's voice, but it's overshadowed by sorrow and certainly not directed at him. "Nobody's gonna touch you like that again 'cause I'm not letting you or our baby outta my sight, and if anybody tries- if anybody even THINKS about it-"

Zoro shudders involuntarily before he can stop himself.

"It's gonna be okay, and I'm- we're gonna keep you safe. Both of you," Luffy promises, hand lowering to caress the swordsman's belly again as he regards him with compassionate eyes, and the younger pirate's rarely looked quite so serious as he does now. "Whatever we gotta do, I'll make sure it happens- 'cause I love you guys."

"You're sure it's- it's definitely important? For the baby?" He asks Chopper reluctantly and takes a deep breath when the reindeer nods.

Safe. Luffy says they're both safe now, and he's back on the Sunny with his captain's arms around him and not still imprisoned, handcuffed and biting his tongue to keep from crying out and desperately hoping the bitch will tire of toying with him and just do whatever she means to do
already. And if being here and not there- if being SAFE- means talking about what happened back when he WASN'T safe-

*I can do this. I can. I CAN.*

But telling himself that doesn't ease the overwhelming sense of shame that he should've been able- should've been strong enough- to prevent the worst of the abuse yet still protect the baby at the same time. And Sadi-chan's endless fascination with his body's definitely the last thing he wants to discuss.

While the Chief Guard's lifeless corpse is surely still sprawled on the other side of the table where Luffy found him- and probably now covered with several tons of rubble, if the captain's not exaggerating- he can still hear her patronizing laughter in his head and feel her teeth sinking into and her nails raking his flesh, and although Chopper hurriedly promises him a thorough sponge bath when he broaches the subject a second time in a desperate effort to stall beginning his story, he's not sure he'll ever feel clean again. After the reindeer's revelation about the distinct odor clinging to him, he swears he can smell HER on his skin too, and even though he keeps telling himself it's just the metallic stench of blood and possibly the sour aroma of his own sweat and semen, he swears there's another scent lurking beneath them. Something musky and feral and entirely too intimate.

*He says it's IMPORTANT. So just- just tell them and get the whole thing over with and try not to think about it- about HER- too much.*

"The bitch- the WOMAN that-" He gestures helplessly with his damaged hand. "The Chief Guard. She-" Purposefully tuning out the words tumbling with gradually increasing speed from his own mouth, keeping his gaze averted from his crew mates' and focusing instead on the way the baby's nudging repeatedly against the uninjured hand he's pressing tightly to his abdomen, he describes the events of the last two months at length in a monotone, disinterested voice, almost as if he's relating something that's happened to someone else. Disassociating himself from the abuse makes it a lot easier to discuss. "-wanted me to scream, and when I wouldn't, she-

Emotionally distanced from what he's saying- and completely unaware he's referred to himself in third person in more than one instance- Zoro doesn't bother pausing when Usopp returns clutching two huge armfuls of pillows, even though he's in the middle of dispassionately describing the most horrific thing anyone's ever done to him, and by the time he finishes by recounting the first time he ever manifested Asura without swords, the sniper and doctor are in tears and Luffy looks more upset than any of the crew has possibly ever seen him before, seething with anger as he curls a protective arm around the swordsman's middle.

"-scared the shit outta me, only then it turned out to be LUFFY. And I know he says I talked to him before we got back to the ship but I- oi, are you SURE I can't just go get a shower?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Y-You're staying in bed." Chopper feels his heart sinking, because it's quite clear to him that Zoro's suppressing the true extent of his emotional damage, either deliberately or unwittingly, and the reindeer doesn't need to be a psychologist to know his nakama's doing himself more harm than good by refusing to acknowledge just how severely he's been maltreated.

He directs Usopp to drop his cache of pillows - the sniper's grabbed every single one from the women's quarters as well, from the looks of it - in the nearby corner and sends him from the room, closing the door and apologizing softly before he begins a physical examination.

Other than the painfully sensitive stumps of his wounded fingers and the raw semi-circle of tooth marks adorning his shoulder on the same side, as well as a scattering of minor cuts, scrapes and bruises, their crew mate's in surprisingly favorable shape- at least on the outside.
"There's- there's one other thing I need to check," Chopper explains hesitantly. "Zoro, I know you don't want me touching you there, but I need to make sure there's no serious internal damage. If the rectal wall was weakened and then it tore when she-" He swallows. "There's a serious risk of infection, and I don't want to start heavy antibiotics unless it's absolutely necessary because- some of them might not be safe for the baby."

"O-Okay, just-"

"I'll try to be quick but I don't want to-"

"Just- just shut up and do what you gotta do."

The swordsman doesn't protest or even make a sound when Luffy moves aside to make room for the doctor's gloved fingers, but he clutches for their captain's hand, grasping it hard enough to turn the rubber man's knuckles white, and when the Zoan glances up to assure him it'll only be a moment or two longer, there's fresh blood in the corner of their green-haired nakama's mouth where he's bitten his lower lip and his nostrils are flared and his eyelids scrunched tightly closed.

"Shhh, it's okay, it's okay- Chopper doesn't wanna hurt you," Luffy murmurs needlessly, rubbing his cheek against the older pirate's shoulder. He gives a reassuring squeeze despite his crushed fingers. "He's just doing his job- but Zoro's being really, really brave..."

_That's easy for you to say, Sencho. You're not the one who keeps getting fingers and other junk shoved up your- oh shit, Chopper, hurry up, HURRY UP- d-damn it, that HURTS-

He knows his tension's making the whole procedure a thousand times worse, but he's scared and embarrassed and so god-awfully sore that all the lubricant in the world wouldn't help much less the excessive amount Chopper's thoughtfully applied, and he bites back a whimper of relief when the fingers finally retreat, grateful for his captain's squeezing hand and partial embrace because they're all that's preventing him from reflexively punching their physician square in his blasted blue nose.

"Everything's normal," the reindeer sighs, and his crew mates both visibly relax when he backs away, gratefully stripping off his gloves and flinging them into the wastebasket by his desk while silently thanking whatever existing higher power's listening that the Chief Guard's serious lapses of judgment don't appear to have left any deep punctures or tears in the swordsman's lower bowel- at least not that he's able to identify via manual rectal examination, anyway.

"I don't know why-" Zoro mutters darkly, easing his death grip on Luffy's hand. "-everybody seems so obsessed with sticking things up my ass."

There's a moment of shocked silence, and then his wide-eyed nakama start making strangled noises that might be denial or possibly horrified laughter until they're interrupted by a knock at the door, and Usopp pokes his head into the room, glaring at them and demanding to know what the hell can possibly be so funny at a time like this before Nami pushes him aside and enters the room carrying a huge stack of bath towels.

"I- I didn't know how many you needed, so I grabbed-"

"All of them, I see." Chopper finishes. "Over there with the pillows, please."

_xxx_

By the time Brook returns, staggering under the weight of Sanji's largest metal mixing bowl because no one can locate a basin - not even in the jumbled mess of the storage room which they've packed full of everything that needs repairing or replacing - Nami's regained her composure, slapped a bit of
gauze and tape on herself and metaphorically rolled up her sleeves. Arguing with Usopp, because he wants to stay and help here but she wants him to go fetch some extra sheets, the navigator pretends not to notice Zoro flinching whenever she leans over him to sponge more dirt and dried blood from his neck and chest.

"Sorry," he mutters again guiltily when he unintentionally swats her away for the sixth or seventh time, hating the way his breath keeps catching at the sight of her hand coming closer, because it's just Nami and he knows damn well now that it's just Nami, but-

"I don't mind," she lies, smiling weakly and reminding herself to keep her disappointment from showing in her eyes, because she doesn't want to make him feel worse than he already must, especially considering what she's heard from Usopp after cornering and bullying the sniper into telling her everything he'd overheard while she was busy tearing the bathhouse apart in search of more clean towels.

In fact, the navigator's a little amazed their swordsman's so calm, because she's positive she'd be reduced to a hysterical, sobbing mess if she experienced HALF of what he's gone through in the past few weeks. But after his initial panic - she tells herself again that Zoro wouldn't have stabbed her, not really... and this time she almost believes it - he's been relatively cool and collected, reassuring their distraught captain and trying to coax a smile from the younger pirate by giving him a play-by-play of the baby's movements.

He's almost unnervingly normal- except for the apprehension he can't quite hide. Seeing him like this, trying so hard to cooperate although he's unmistakably afraid of his own nakama's touch, makes her chest ache.

"Bullshit. You keep jumping every time I move, and it's fucking freaking me out."

He must be incredibly uncomfortable if he's actually admitting she's upsetting him. "Th-This isn't working too well, is it...? I'm sorry, Zoro. Is there anything I can do to make it-?"

"Heels-" the older pirate mumbles, flushing when everyone looks at him, and he refocuses his attention on the ceiling above to avoid meeting their eyes. "I can't stand that damn clicking noise- it's driving me crazy..."

Nami's prying off her sandals before he finishes speaking, kicking them aside under Chopper's desk. "Done. What else?"

"Look, don't worry about it- just give me the damn sponge and I'll-"

"I think it's your hair," Luffy observes quietly, his brow furrowing, and several people blink at the captain in surprise, including Zoro and Nami herself.

"My- hair?"

"Yeah, I remember from when Iva-chan showed up to help me, and Nami's hair... well," the younger pirate continues, wringing out the washcloth he's been using to clean areas his lover's too skittish to let anyone else touch. They'd originally agreed to let the older pirate do it himself when he'd insisted loudly and somewhat hysterically that he didn't need help, but the captain took the wet rag away from him when he started scouring his skin raw. "-it's getting really long, kinda like- hers... and it's not EXACTLY the same color, but if I glance over and then look away real fast-"

The navigator's already rummaging through the desk drawer, searching.

"O-Oi, Nami, don't-"
"Shut up," she snaps as she gathers her unruly mane into a tight bundle and forces the scissors' blades through the mass of loose curls, staring at Zoro's stunned expression with flashing eyes while severed locks drift down to cover her bare toes and the floor tiles beneath them. "It's just hair. I don't care if she's dead- I hate that woman, and I'm glad you killed her."
"So lemme get this straight..." Zoro says slowly. "Not only did you idiots take this floating deathtrap ten thousand meters underwater and then sail it through some of the worst currents this side of the Grand Line - SOMEHOW without it breaking in half - and not only did Luffy bring that goddamn kraken along for the ride- but you're telling me the thing's still out there, towing us along like a bloody sled dog?"

"Sounds about right."

"... y-you guys are fucking crazy, you know that?"

"Yeah, well," Sanji drawls, amused by the incredulous expression on the swordsman's face. ",we didn't have much choice, did we? Since the captain was pretty damn adamant about hunting you down and rescuing your sorry ass-" The cook flinches as Nami delivers a swift, fierce kick to his shin out of sight beneath the table, shooting him an infuriated look and hissing at him to watch what he's saying, and he blinks at her in confusion for a moment or two before his poor choice of vocabulary dawns on him. "Wha- OH. Oh, shit... uh, sorry..."

It'd taken only an hour or two for the full story of what happened in Impel Down over the last few weeks to circulate among the Straw Hats in hushed, discrete exchanges, and even Chopper, who normally discourages the crew's members from discussing what he considers confidential patient-doctor information, reluctantly agreed that everyone- including Zoro himself- would be a lot safer knowing what might inadvertently trigger another full-fledged panic attack. Planning ahead will hopefully allow them to avoid a repeat of yesterday afternoon, because they now know that despite being heavily gravid, their green-haired nakama's still agile enough to severely injure or possibly even kill someone who startles him badly enough to provoke a violent response.

None of them will openly admit it, but knowing he's capable of doing so with no weapons other than his own teeth is slightly unnerving.

To the swordsman's vast embarrassment but also his unspoken relief, he'd been transferred with meticulous care and great ceremony to Nami's bed in the women's quarters immediately following the sponge bath that left a laundry bin piled high with towels and sheets stained pink by diluted blood. He's not thrilled about being confined there until further notice, but his new location's much cozier and far less discomfiting than the sterile, clinical surroundings of the ship's infirmary.

There'd been a brief emergency meeting in the dining room preceding the move, conducted in concerned tones pitched too low for him to understand. Guided by the medical advice of Chopper supplemented with a few wise words from Robin, they'd discussed Zoro's condition and, more importantly, established a strictly-enforced list of rules intended to keep their convalescent crew mate and his unborn charge as comfortable and stress-free as possible.

Conscious of his frayed nerves, they've implemented a new routine of announcing their presence before entering the room, and they're also careful to keep their hands to themselves unless he's given them a direct invitation to touch him. If physical contact's not expressly invited yet still absolutely warranted, he's warned in advance and given plenty of opportunity to accept or deny the request. No one's exempt- not even his doctor. Or his lover.

Other things they've learned by trial and error. References to Impel Down and the injuries and treatment he received while imprisoned there are best avoided unless Zoro himself broaches the subject first, and even then, the thread of conversation might require being dropped or diverted.
elsewhere if he starts showing signs of extreme agitation. Direct eye contact's profoundly awkward for the swordsman, and although it's difficult to prevent their gazes from being repeatedly drawn to that new, fantastic arch of his belly when he's hesitant to look them full in the face, they do their best to refrain from staring.

Luffy's the only person whose rapt attention seems begrudgingly but honestly welcome, and the captain's become somewhat of a badly-needed emotional anchor for his partner, who can't seem to rest comfortably without the younger pirate curled beside him with one possessive, protective arm draped over his swollen side or at least located somewhere within his immediate line of sight. They'd discovered this urgent need for security and reassurance the first time he dozed off alone in bed, when he'd begun to toss and turn and struggle with the thin cotton sheets shortly after entering the rapid-eye movement stage of sleep, making urgent, choked sounds of distress and bringing worried, frightened nakama hurrying to his side. Sluggish to regain his bearings, he'd only calmed after several minutes of a well-known voice murmuring in his ear while equally familiar fingers rubbed gentle circles on his stomach.

The rubber man now insists on staying close in case he's needed, and their crew mates realized rather quickly that they'd better avoid being caught between their captain and the bed when his services are suddenly called upon- or risk being trampled underfoot.

Zoro finds all the overt solicitousness and deference to his precarious mental state a bit humiliating, and he's grumbled at everybody repeatedly to quit treating him like a goddamn invalid, but it's difficult to believe his angrily muttered assurances that he's perfectly capable of handling anything they might do or say when particularly quick or unexpected movements and even certain vocal inflections make him tense and - unbeknownst to the swordsman himself - watch them warily, as though he's still not entirely sure he trusts his own nakama. And if that's not awkward enough-

\textit{Good job there, genius. Talking about the poor guy's ass'll make him feel SO much better,} Sanji tells himself with disgust. "S-Sorry," he apologizes again, eyes locked on the tabletop before him. "I didn't mean to-"

"Will you quit doing that goddamn walkin'-on-eggshells crap around me?" Zoro growls. "I TOLD you, I'm FINE."

\textit{Sure thing, Marimo. That's real nice, conveniently forgetting you tried to stab Nami-san in the heart. Or that you get all wide-eyed and spooky whenever somebody forgets to knock before they walk into the room. Yeah, you're FINE, alright.}

He's not sure which of these makes him angrier. Not at Zoro- god, no- the man's been through hell and obviously feels terrible about his mistake considering the miserable guilt that flashes across his face every time he glances in the redhead's direction.

The truth is, Sanji's just more than a little furious with everything right now. Particularly his inability to snap his fingers, roll back time and simply undo the events of the last few months. Maybe if he'd been more useful during the painfully short battle against those shitty Admirals and successfully repelled their attack until Luffy and the others arrived, instead of getting his ass kicked-

And while the cook certainly doesn't condone violence against what he considers the fairer sex, everything he knew- everything he THOUGHT he knew- about women has been challenged by what he's learned about his crew mate's traumatic experience. He's always believed that ladies should be adored, protected, raised on a gold pedestal of worship and forgiven their indiscretions- but seeing the way Zoro flinches at sudden, loud noises makes his stomach hurt and his chest ache. It's not right, what's been done to the green-haired pirate; it's a transgression- an atrocity- the blond can't forgive. And it's been committed by a woman.
His own confusion and discomfort makes him testy. Argumentative. "... well, if you say so, Marimo, but you sure as hell don't-"

"So WHERE'd Luffy go again?" The navigator seated beside him interrupts, tactfully changing the subject and shooting a meaningful glare at Sanji to prevent him from continuing. "I'm surprised you guys aren't still attached at the hip."

It's the first time in nearly twenty-four hours the captain's willingly left his partner's side. Although the entire crew's taking turns keeping the bedridden swordsman company - not just because they're too concerned with his psychological and physical well-being to leave him unattended but also because they feel a pressing need to repeatedly assure themselves he's been safely retrieved - Luffy's insisted on being present regardless of who's occupying the sofas.

No one's challenged his stubborn perseverance, not after witnessing Zoro spend the entire night dozing off only to wake extremely disoriented and close to hyperventilating minutes after his eye flutters closed, with only his lover's surprisingly gentle embrace and murmured assurances that everything's okay now, you're safe- you and the baby are both safe- sufficient to calm the older pirate when he finds himself yanked rudely from the edge of sleep, sweating and trembling and choking back the sounds of panic clawing their way free from his throat.

"Probably in the kitchen. I keep telling him I'm not hungry but you know how he doesn't-" His jibe about their captain's tendency to let things go in one ear and fly right out the other halts abruptly as he stifles a curse and hugs the pillow in his lap more tightly against his middle, prompting his nakama to exchange startled glances and scramble to their feet.

"Zoro-?"

"O-Oi, Marimo, you okay? You want me to go get-?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It's nothing to-"

"Are you SURE? ’Cause Chopper's probably right out-"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Jeez, don't get your panties in a knot, Curly-brow. It's just hiccups."

Sanji and Nami frown at him, perplexed, because it certainly doesn't SOUND like that's his problem, and Zoro snorts wry laughter at their bewildered expressions. "Not me, you dorks. The baby."

Mouth quirked with amusement and a trace of discomfort, the swordsman shifts his weight, leaning back momentarily to tuck the bedding down where it'll better support his belly and leave both hands free to rub unselfconsciously at his lower abdomen as he tries to ease the persistent tension and aching caused by tautly stretched muscles. "It kinda freaked me out at first 'cause I didn't know what the hell was going on in there."

He's lost a great deal of his former shyness about touching himself in front of his crew mates, too grateful he's finally got two free hands- not to mention a set of mostly unscathed fingers- capable of perceiving the baby's fitful movements to care whether or not he's got an audience. And he supposes it's ironic considering how persistently he tried to hide those startling initial physical changes from his crew mates back when he was only beginning to show and horribly embarrassed by the thought of anyone besides Luffy - or, to a somewhat lesser degree, the ship's doctor - catching a glimpse of his growing bump, but now that he's advanced well into third-trimester pregnancy and not just looking but feeling positively enormous, he doesn't give a shit. He's just too tired, too unwieldy, and too relieved to see friendly faces again to care if his belly's hanging out.

"It feels all twitchy," he explains, surveying his lower half with weary complacency. "-kinda like
there's bubbles popping in there, and if the hiccups don't wanna stop, the little brat gets pissed and starts kicking the shit out of me. Mmph. Just like he's doing right now."

The swordsman must be right, because the repeated movement rippling across the widest part of his prominent stomach is distinct enough to be visible across the room, and Sanji thinks it's definitely one of the weirdest things he's ever seen in his life.

"Is that supposed to be... normal? The, ah-" The blond makes a wiggling, jouncing motion with one hand as he addresses the doctor who's just trotted in to join them after tapping noisily at the door with a hoof to announce his entry, medical bag tucked under one small arm. "The kid's not gonna like- pop a foot out or something, right? 'Cause that's some freaky shit..."

Zoro's not listening, distracted by the foot smashing him repeatedly in the ribs. "Oi oi, enough already," the green-haired pirate mumbles to his belly, quietly enough that only the reindeer now standing beside the bed catches his words. "I know it sucks, but that's getting really fucking annoying. I can't help it you get the damn things all the time."

"Yes, it's normal," Chopper calls over to Sanji before turning back to his patient. "-and Zoro- all those hiccups at this stage are actually something very good! They're considered a sign of well-developed lung function, which means the baby probably wouldn't have too much difficulty breathing on its own if you needed the laparotomy performed right away, even though you haven't quite reached full term."

"How much longer did you say I- we- gotta wait?"

"Ahhh..." The doctor squints thoughtfully, tapping his chin. "Well, I'd still like to hold off AT LEAST three more weeks to make absolutely sure we're not rushing things, and we'll need to find some place with decent surgical equipment- oh, and somebody to help me too, because it's not exactly a SIMPLE procedure even though it's a common one. I know you're not too thrilled about being on bed rest for that long, but..."

"Damn. I was hoping I heard you wrong when you were talking to Luffy last night," Zoro mutters. "I feel like a friggin' beached whale. I feel like LABOON. Hell, I LOOK like Laboon," he groans, puffing out his cheeks briefly in frustration- and then stiffens, cursing through clenched teeth and peering down at his overly distended midsection. "Oh shit, please tell me you're not gonna-" He gasps, wincing and reaching behind him to brace one hand on his lower back when there's sudden pressure as the baby wriggles and struggles to roll over, apparently searching for a more comfortable position. "C'mon, you- urrrgh, gimmie a break! Quit rearranging my insides and just go back to sleep already- OW! That was my kidney, you little bastard!"

When he glances up again, Chopper's hiding an enormous smile behind his hooves, Nami's chuckling and Sanji looks both amused and disturbed, and the swordsman flushes, realizing that although he's been doing it for a while now, it's probably the first time any of them have really heard or seen him directly addressing his stomach at length. "O-Oi, it's not funny, okay? Seriously, the little monster's worse than Luffy on a sugar high. He's been jumpin' around nonstop ever since he kicked me awake this morning."

This time his matter-of-fact, no-nonsense use of masculine pronouns registers and Nami turns around in her seat, climbing to her knees to stare skeptically over the back of the sofa in the direction of the bed, because although their captain's been casually referring to the baby as a boy for months- "Wait a second... Zoro, did you just say- do you mean to tell me Luffy's RIGHT? How-?"

"Oh, yeah, that asshole quack doctor kept saying all this shit about the scan not being clear enough to read, but Chopper confirmed it the day we went to that medical center- said it's definitely a boy. Full
set of junk and everything. What, didn't he and Luffy tell you guys?"

"No," the redhead turns her head to glower at the reindeer. "They didn't."

"I'M SORRY!" Chopper squeaks, nervously dodging over to hide on the wrong side of the sofa where Sanji's sitting. "Luffy said we should wait, so I just-!"

"Huh? What'd I say about waiting?" The captain in question asks from the doorway, awkwardly juggling the bowl of hot broth he's holding from hand to hand as he struggles to reach back and pull the door closed behind him. To Nami's relief, he finally succeeds in using one foot to kick it shut without dumping the crockery's contents on the carpet, and the navigator makes a mental note to thump the idiot's head later for not having the common sense to use a pot holder.

"You better've left my kitchen in the same state you found it, shitty Gomu. If I find a goddamn mess in there..."

"Nah, Brook was boiling water for tea, so I just-" He gestures with the bowl he's clutching. "Look, Robin helped, okay, so don't flip out or anything." He sticks his tongue out at the disgruntled cook, then heads for the occupied bed, smiling. "Oi, Zoro, food!"

"'C'mon, Luffy, I said I wasn't hungry," the older pirate grumbles, although his reluctance to accept the dish being pushed into his hands wavers and then crumbles when his lover manages to somehow scowl disapprovingly while simultaneously give him puppy-dog eyes. "Okay, for crying out loud, fine, give it here." He balks, however, when the now-beaming younger man brandishes the loaded spoon in his direction. "Gah, NO, just- oi, gimmie that goddamn thing- you don't gotta actually feed me too!"

"Just 'cause Zoro's not hungry doesn't mean the baby isn't," Luffy insists as the utensil's yanked from his hand, his smile brightening further when the swordsman sighs and, after a cautious spoonful to test its temperature, starts obediently ladling soup into his mouth. The rubber man drops to his knees beside the bed, nudging insistently under Zoro's elbow so he can rest his forehead and one hand against the older pirate's belly to address their child, laughing delightedly when there's an answering thump. "Nee hee, see, food's here just like I promised- didn't I tell you Zoro would listen to me? Betcha he'll do whatever you want too, so you gotta let him know when you're ready to come out and meet everybody!"

"Oi, forget it. One bossy captain's more than enough- there's no way I'm letting the kid push me around too," the swordsman snorts, pausing to peer down at his own abdomen. "You hear that, squirt?" This proclamation's greeted with soft laughter, and he glances up to find their crew mates watching the exchange with identical grins, as though silently contesting his assertion that he's not going to find himself firmly wrapped around his offspring's little finger. "So you didn't tell 'em we're having a boy, eh, Sencho?"

"Oh... umm, no... I didn't." Luffy's smile goes slightly brittle around the edges. "Dunno if Zoro remembers, 'cause it was way back right before he started breaking stuff and trying to strangle that doctor, but we agreed we were gonna wait and tell everybody when they all got back to the ship for dinner. But then- well..."
There's a moment of excruciating silence as everyone looks anywhere but at each other and, surprisingly, it's the rest of them that jump when there's a loud knock on the door, while Zoro calmly continues emptying his bowl.

"Robin and our skeleton-bro just took watch," Franky announces as he and Usopp enter the women's quarters. "Pretty quiet out there right now. Some weird-ass giant mutated eely-lookin' thing with purple polka-dots and more eyes than I wanna think about showed up about an hour ago and seemed like it wanted to check us out, but Calamari-bro scared it off."

The captain glances up at this, looking a bit disappointed that he missed something so exciting, but he doesn't budge from where he's still kneeling by the bed, splayed fingers gently caressing the curve of bare abdomen that's protruding above the very loosely-knotted belt of the fuzzy blue robe Zoro's wearing. The garment, not quite voluminous enough to close completely over the older pirate's stomach, was covertly donated by Sanji after he found an anxious, frustrated Chopper rummaging through the crew's laundry in search of something that might fit their swordsman. The cook's threatened to stuff the reindeer in the kitchen's giant oven if anyone, especially Zoro himself, learns he handed it over willingly rather than having it confiscated.

"I don't know what freaks me out more," Usopp mutters as he drops onto the sofa beside Sanji. "The monsters that keep eyeing the ship like it's a floating smorgasbord, or the monster we're depending on to keep the other things from eating us."

They've been posting two sentries rather than just one because, even with Surume's confidence-bolstering presence, they're keenly aware that while they're relatively safe from inquisitive sea kings, there's an uncomfortably high likelihood of encountering one or more Marine vessels. And although the Kairoseki-plated ships might normally repel or at least evade the attention of the monstrous creatures inhabiting the Calm Belt, there's no guarantee the sudden disturbance caused by a pitched naval battle might not draw some very large fish and other animals determined to defend their territories or feed on casualties and men gone overboard, and even the kraken might find itself hard-pressed dealing with so many opponents simultaneously.

After a thorough inspection of the fresh damage accrued during the prison break, Franky's warned them the ship's in no shape for an altercation of that magnitude, and while having multiple people on watch won't necessary prevent them from sinking if they get caught in a large scale melee, hopefully the extra eyes will allow them to spot trouble coming far enough in advance to formulate a plan of retreat.

Zoro's spoon reaches the bottom of his bowl with an audible scrape, and he shoves the empty dish back into his captain's waiting hands. "There. You happy?"

"Yeah," the younger pirate allows, pleased. "See, and Zoro said he wasn't hungry!" He watches contentedly as the swordsman rearranges the mountain of pillows occupying the bed so he can lie down, fussily adjusting the ones cradling his abdomen until he's finally satisfied with their configuration and relaxes with a faint sigh, relieved the new position's taken some pressure off his disgruntled spine. Curling on his side with his knees pulled up under his belly might still feel a bit strange, but it's far more agreeable than his usual habit of sleeping sprawled on his back, which he hasn't been able to do for some time now. The baby's increasing weight makes it too uncomfortable, putting too much pressure on his bladder and lungs and making it too hard to catch his breath.

Sanji chuckles, nudging Usopp's shoulder. "Marimo really does look like he's nesting now, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," the sniper snorts. "I figured he'd want some extra pillows, but I didn't expect him to use ALL of them. I hope I'm gonna get mine back eventually."
"If looks could kill..." The navigator indicates the sleepy one-eyed glare being aimed in their direction. "Come on, don't tease him- I can't imagine how uncomfortable it must be lugging that big belly around. Chopper, are you positive it wasn't twins you saw on that scan?"

"Please-" Franky mutters, before the doctor can assure them he's quite certain there's only one fetus and that although the swordsman might look exceptionally rotund to them, he's actually quite a bit undersized considering he's got no uterus to add extra padding. "One kid's gonna be more than enough to keep us on our toes. If Haramaki-bro here starts poppin' out a whole goddamn litter, I may just jump off the ship 'n swim for it."

The cyborg's remark and Zoro's responding grumble of "sure as hell better NOT be more than one in here" eases a great deal of the tension, and Sanji and Usopp look at each other and snicker conspiratorially.

"Damn, can you just imagine? An whole horde of mini Marimos?"

"I know, right? The Grand Line'd never be the same again."

"That's enough," Nami scolds, but she's barely containing laughter herself at the mental image of Zoro swarming with miniature versions of himself, all tugging at his trousers and haramaki and clamoring loudly for attention while wearing identical scowls. "Although Franky's right- one baby's plenty. Any more than that and once they started crawling, we'd have to tether the lot together to keep them from getting lost."

"Thanks a lot," Zoro complains as his nakama dissolve into laughter, but he can't quite hide the smile tugging at one corner of his mouth because he's glad to hear their stupid banter even though they're poking fun at him. "All four of you, c'mere so I can smack you, 'cause I'm sure as hell not getting up to go over there."

"Shishi-" Luffy's doing a poor job at disguising his own amusement, but he sumsmon a sincere expression when his lover leans his head back to eye him suspiciously. "-mmph. Does Zoro want anything else?"

"Well... my back kinda hurts," the swordsman admits grudgingly, his statement holding a gruff, dismissive tone that says he doesn't want to acknowledge exactly how badly it's actually bothering him. "Dunno why, 'cause the kid can't weigh more than a few pounds. I mean- jeez- I don't even own any barbells that light."

Having already set the bowl aside and climbed into bed to curl up behind him, the captain applies gentle but firm fingers to his spine, laughing quietly and leaning forward to affectionately rub his cheek against the older pirate's shoulder blade. "Yeah, but Zoro doesn't carry his weights around in his tummy."

"Nah," Zoro murmurs, his eye drifting closed. "Just your hyperactive brat."

"Not just mine- he's Zoro's too," Luffy insists more softly. Fingers still kneading industriously, he kisses the shoulder he's been nuzzling. "He's OURS."

"Mmm..."

"Oi..." Sanji calls over reluctantly. "I'm not trying to interrupt you guys being all maternal- paternal-"

He makes a frustrated noise. "Look, whatever the hell you wanna call it when you're doing the weird lovey-dovey parent thing with each other, I'm not saying you gotta STOP doing it- but shouldn't we talk about where we're going? I mean, just exactly how long do we plan on letting our, uh,
excessively large friend out there tow us around while we hope like hell that we don't run into some shitty asshole who'll take one look at our beat-up ship and think we're an easy mark?"

"What about Amazon Lily? The Isle of Women's already right here in the Calm Belt, isn't it, and I bet-" Usopp suggests, but Luffy's already shaking his head.

"Forget it- I don't want Zoro or our kid anywhere near Hammock. She's kinda nice if it gets her what she wants- but she still thinks I'm gonna marry her or something no matter what I say or how many times I say no, and she might come up with some stupid idea that she'll - I don't know - win me over or something if she gets rid of Zoro." He refrains from giving his other reason for wanting to avoid Amazon Lily, although he suspects that Nami's guessed it from the slight tremble of the navigator's hand as she tucks her shortened hair - which Robin helped her trim to an even length last night - behind one ear.

Too many women. While Zoro's been fairly calm around the Straw Hats' male crew members unless someone other than Chopper or Luffy himself touches the older pirate without giving him fair warning first, he's definitely still very nervous around Nami and even slightly leery of Robin as well, even though the historian looks nothing at all like the late Chief Guard. And this despite their entirely self-appointed changes in attire, which include not only flat-soled sandals but also loose-fitting t-shirts rather than their usual bikini and tank tops.

While he might not be known for his sense of foresight, requesting permission from Boa Hancock to land on an island occupied by nothing but scantily-clad women doesn't strike the captain as a particularly bright idea, and the Pirate Empress might turn them away anyway when she gets a good look at Sanji, who's likely to turn to stone even if she DOESN'T immediately use her Mero Mero no Mi powers on him, but she's almost certainly going to refuse once the crew's forced to explain why they need to lie low for a while.

Hammock mighta tricked the Marines to help me sneak into Impel Down and even fought against 'em at Marineford to gimmie a hand while I was trying to save Ace- but he was my BROTHER. Zoro's- well- I guess it's kinda complicated 'cause he's my friend but he's more than a friend too 'cause we have sex and stuff- and now we're having a BABY, but... well, I definitely don't think of him the same way as anybody else, and she's gonna be mad as hell that he's pregnant with my kid, even though Zoro's- no, ESPECIALLY since Zoro's a guy 'cause she HATES guys. And she's still a Shichibukai. If she doesn't try to kill him herself or order the Amazons to do it, she might try to turn him over to the World Government instead...

The idea of his lover and, by default, their son falling back into enemy hands and ending up locked in another cell - or maybe even another weird infirmary-lab thing like where he'd discovered them inside Impel Down- greatly disturbs the younger pirate. He doesn't understand why anybody besides him and Zoro and the crew would be so interested in the baby.

It's not like he's gonna fight Marines or overthrow the government or anything. I mean, he's not even BORN yet!

But whatever the reason, apparently they ARE interested- at least according to what Zoro learned during the last few days of his captivity. Unless, of course, Sadi-chan was lying about turning their son over to the Admirals and just fishing for a violent reaction from her stubborn, tight-lipped victim.

She sure got one, alright, Luffy growls to himself- and blinks when the swordsman under his hands utters a muffled groan and goes limp, fairly melting against the mattress. It seems he's been kneading a lot more vigorously in his growing agitation than he intended. "Oops, sorry, Zor-

"Nngh. Don't stop. Don't you dare or I'll tie your balls in a goddamn knot."
"Uh, Zoro, aren't you supposed to wait 'n threaten to do that kinda stuff when you- well, no, I guess Chopper did say you're not gonna actually go into labor 'cause of the whole not having a-" Flustered, Usopp shrugs and changes the subject. "So, anyway, scratch going to the island of beautiful but homicidal Amazons who seem to hate all men except Luffy-"

"Some bastards get all the luck," Sanji interjects. "I'd still like to know how-"

"Franky, you said the ship won't make the trip back to Fishman Island without a whole lotta repairs 'n Luffy doesn't wanna get Princess Shirahoshi or her dad involved anyway 'cause of that Reverie thingie, SOOO what about-"

"Water Seven." Nami proclaims, with an air of self-satisfied finality, and the sniper shoots her a dirty look for beating him to the punch, but their shipwright's nodding enthusiastically.

"Bakaburg's got enough connections to stay pretty well informed on the Marines' movements, and he's got access to all kinds'a medical junk in case the Galley-La guys get hurt workin' in the shipyard. I'm sure he'll have whatever our reindeer-gorilla here needs to deliver that baby."

Despite his pained expression at the cyborg's choice of words, Chopper can't keep the excitement from his voice. "Do you think he's got Balfour retractors?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but yeah, probably?"

"High-grade stainless steel!" The doctor exclaims gleefully, launching into an overly detailed explanation that leaves everyone else cringing, except for Zoro, who raises himself on an elbow to peg a pillow at the excited Zoan and insist that he better stop talking about Pfannenstiel incisions and the pros and cons of overhand versus underhand grips for tissue retraction before the captain, who's turning decidedly pale, either faints or pukes.

"I- I dunno if I want anybody doing that to Zoro. Maybe I'm- maybe we're- really not ready for this-this whole having-a-kid thing." Luffy protests nervously, and the swordsman seizes the younger pirate's ear, giving him a rough shake and angrily indicating his bulging abdomen as he points out that it's a bit too late to be getting cold feet now.

Once the captain wriggles free and placates his perturbed lover with gentle kisses and a good deal more enthusiastic back-rubbing, Nami explains that while she's more than capable of navigating them to Water Seven using the sea train tracks as a guide, they'll need to pass uncomfortably close to Enies Lobby again. Hopefully without drawing too much attention to themselves this time, she notes meaningfully, so Luffy reluctantly agrees to temporarily bring down the Jolly Roger and turn Surume loose once they exit the Calm Belt and get their bearings.

After much debate and some collaboration with Robin, who's joined the discussion via an ear and pair of lips sprouted on the closet door and promised to relay the conversation to Brook when they pass each other during their deck patrol, they eventually have a simple but logical plan: ask Iceburg to use his considerable influence to hide them for the next three months or so. Long enough to give Zoro sufficient time to reach full-term pregnancy and then recover from major surgery, provide an opportunity for everyone to familiarize themselves with the inevitable changes in routines that will accompany the baby's arrival, and also ensure they've the time and assistance required to complete full repairs on the Sunny.

"Nah, don't worry," Franky laughs when the swordsman, uneasy at the prospect of being seen by an actual known acquaintance, asks hesitantly if the mayor's going to have a problem temporarily sharing his household with a newborn. "Bakaburg's a sucker for small cute critters- remember that mouse of his?"
"Assuming that whatever those two produce is legitimately cute and not a three-headed green-haired Haki-powered rubber child capable of levitating small objects with his mind," Sanji mutters a bit more loudly than he intended, and Nami hits him. "Ow. Don't worry, shitty swordsman, I'm sure your kid's gonna be positively adorable- as long as he takes after Luffy. Ow! Nami-swan's fists of love are especially potent todaaay-"

"... stupid asshole ero-cook."

xxx

Everyone breathes sighs of relief when the ship slips past the Judicial Island without incident, and when the captain ends his tense, self-appointed vigil at the helm and hurries back to the women's quarters to tell Zoro and Chopper it looks like everything's proceeding without a hitch, he's surprised to find Sanji already standing by the bed and delivering the news.

The cook's actually in the process of fluffing and carefully tucking a pillow against their nakama's lower back, his continuous grumbling and the dark scowl on his face belied by his actions, when Luffy pushes open the door, barely remembering to fling up an arm and rap his fist on the lintel before he crosses the threshold.

"Marimo wouldn't quit bitching 'til I helped remake his nest," the blond mumbles sheepishly, crossing his arms as he moves aside to make room for the rubber man. "I just wanted him to shut up."

It's a feeble excuse and not entirely truthful judging by Chopper's giggling and Zoro's expression of sleepy bemusement, but Luffy just flashes a knowing grin at the embarrassed cook and snuggles closer to his swordsman, reaching over to lace his fingers with the older pirate's where they're resting against his belly.

Taking a nap seems like an excellent idea. Nami's at the bow, ensuring they're moving towards safety, even if the steady wind filling the sails won't get them there anywhere near as quickly as Rocket Man once sent them in the opposite direction, and the captain - who hasn't gotten decent rest in weeks and none at all in the past seventy-two hours - thinks he's more than ready to sleep the entire way to Water Seven.

The ship rocks slightly, prompting a sharp intake of breath from Zoro as the sudden movement startles him from the uneasy doze into which he's drifted.

"Shh- shhh, s'okay," the captain murmurs reassuringly against his lover's neck, giving him a gentle squeeze around the middle. "S'just Surume."

xxx

Twenty-five minutes later, although it seems only moments since the swordsman relaxed enough to fall asleep in the protective arms cradling him securely against his partner, they're roused by heavy, hectic knocking and the women's quarters' door banging open against the wall as Franky bursts into the room. "OI!"

"Shhh!" Sanji, Usopp and Chopper hiss in unison, glaring at the cyborg from the sofas, but he takes no notice, bounding across the carpeted floor to drag Luffy, dazed and bleary-eyed, from the bed by the scruff.

"Oi, sorry, Mugiwara, but it's time t' wake up. We got unwelcome company- looks like a G-1 ship comin' up fast on the starboard bow."
"Damn," Sanji mutters, exchanging a disgusted look with his crew mates as he rises, loosening his tie to unbutton the collar of his shirt. "I KNEW it seemed like things were going a little too well. Alright, guys, let's-


"But-

"NO BUTS."

"Son of a-" Sanji drags the vanity chair over to the bedside and drops into it facing the wrong direction, crossing his arms on the backrest. "Guess it's just you and me, Marimo. Bloody Marines picked a hell of a time to show up."

"Unnngh, couldn't they have waited a few hours at least?" Luffy groans, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes and stifling a yawn. He twists away from the huge hand clutching his collar and turns back to the swordsman who's rolled over to stare anxiously up at him, reaching down to caress his cheek. "I'll be right back, 'kay?" Nobody's gonna lay a finger on you- either of you- ever again. Not over my dead body.

"Luffy, wait-" But the captain's out of reach and heading for the open door before Zoro's able to grab his hand, and the older pirate pushes himself up on his elbows, struggling valiantly to haul himself into a sitting position. Luffy's far too tired and- hell, they're all severely exhausted and strained nearly beyond their limits, completely unprepared to deal with an attack now. Not without someone getting seriously injured or killed. "Oi, Luffy, w-" As he forces himself upright, wincing, he doesn't register the growing discomfort in his abdomen as a tugging, tearing sensation until it abruptly ends and leaves nothing but pain in its wake, along with the distinct impression that something's given way inside him.

"Hiccups again?" Sanji teases at Zoro's small, startled cry, smirking when the swordsman clutches at himself. "Guess your kid's gonna have one really good set of lungs. Probably keep everybody awake all-" He falters. The color's draining from his nakama's face, and there's no mistaking that alarmed expression for anything but horrified comprehension.

"N-No, no fucking way-!

"... Marimo-?"

"You gotta be fucking kidding me! I wasn't doing anything! I wasn't fighting- I wasn't even lifting anything; all I did was sit up! H-How-" The baby shifts, sending a crippling spasm of pain through his gut, and everything inside suddenly feels wrong- too loose and disconnected and watery. "Hnnh-oh, oh shit."

"O-Oi, what're you-?" The blond's eyes widen as the swordsman hunches forward with both hands now clutching desperately at his belly, gasping, and when Zoro speaks again, the sound of his actual name scares the cook nearly as badly as the way his crew mate's speaking through clenched teeth and regarding him with poorly concealed terror.

"Nghh. S-Sanji-? Sanji, I don't think- I don't think we're gonna m-make it to Water Se- oh, oh fuck, that hurts-"

"LUFFY! CHOPPER! CHOPPER, WE NEED YOU RIGHT NOW!" He doesn't need to yell - they're both only a few feet away and the reindeer's already rushing over - but he can't restrain his
panic, bellowing their names again as he bolts out of the chair and kicks it aside. "GET YOUR ASSES OVER HERE, YOU SHITTY BASTARDS!"

The captain, having somehow sensed that something wasn't right even before he heard Zoro's cryptic statement or Sanji's shouting, is halfway back to the bed when he's stopped short by Franky barring his way with one massive arm. "Franky, move! Zoro's-!"

"Let the doctor do his job," the cyborg admonishes, sweeping the struggling, protesting younger pirate towards the open door. "Come on, Mugiwara! Holdin' his hand won't do either of you any good if the goddamn ship starts sinking!"

Luffy knows Franky's speaking the truth, but he still can't help clawing his way up the much larger man's torso for one last frantic look before he's forcibly ejected from the women's quarters, meeting Zoro's panic-stricken gaze as Chopper pushes the swordsman down and orders him to hold still.

Once outside, the captain can't concentrate with the persistent alarm bells clanging in his head, reaction time slowed by fear. He manages to bounce away most of the cannonballs spinning towards the ship, but he's hit directly in the head when he hears a door open behind him and glances around to see Usopp charging past in the direction of the dining hall and infirmary, and several minutes later, another plows into his chest and knocks him flat when he pauses again to watch the sniper streak back across the lawn deck carrying a long pole and an armload of mostly unidentifiable medical supplies.

He's dimly aware he'd be dead twice over if it wasn't for his unique physiology, but his preoccupation with the predicament facing his swordsman and their child's making him even more careless of himself than usual.

"SNAP OUT OF IT!" Franky roars, leaping to the helm and bashing a projectile from the air before it can hit Nami, who's clutching the wheel and struggling to follow the faint shimmer of the sea train tracks beneath the surface despite the battle raging around her. If she loses them now, there's no telling where they'll end up, and it's possible Zoro's already run out of time. "YOU'RE GONNA GET US ALL KILLED IF YOU DON'T STOP DAYDREAMIN' AND START KICKIN' ASS!"

There's a round of explosions below-decks as Robin utilizes her Akuma no Mi abilities to fire all their starboard cannons simultaneously.

Luffy can't shake the lethargy gripping his brain; he's still dazed from being woken so suddenly after too little sleep, rattled from being clouted repeatedly by the enemy fusillade, and too worried about what's going on behind the closed door he's determined to defend.

So when the Marine vessel attacking them breaks suddenly and unexpectedly in two as it's driven from the water by the submarine rising beneath it, so close that bits of splintering planks rain down on the Straw Hats' ship, the rubber man's too overwhelmed to do more than stop and stare, dumbfounded, as his confused nakama shout to him and point excitedly at the man emerging from the yellow behemoth's hatch, nodachi resting casually against one shoulder.

"Looks like you could use a hand," Trafalgar Law calls, nonchalantly kicking away a wounded man in uniform who's clinging to the side of his ship before he leaps easily across the gap separating the two captains to balance on the Sunny's railing. "Been a while, Mugiwara-ya. We've got to stop running into each other like this, eh?"
"You keep some interesting company, Mugiwara-ya. My navigator says he looked out the porthole and spotted the biggest goddamn cephalopod he's ever seen jetting away from your ship as we were surfacing, but he also could've been hallucinating in this heat. I sure as hell didn't see anything."

"Wha-? Oh- yeah- he musta seen Surume. He's goin' home," Luffy tells the Heart pirate, glancing distractedly over his shoulder as he backpedals towards the bow. Normally he'd be thrilled about running into his- well, honestly, "friend" might not be the most appropriate designation for the man, considering they're technically rivals vying for the same mysterious treasure- but regardless of their relationship's exact nature, he's desperate to get back to the women's quarters and find out what's happening with his swordsman and their child. The rest of his crew's already beaten him there- even Nami, who's been temporarily relieved of her duty at the helm by Franky lowering the anchor in accordance with their doctor's wishes.

That Chopper wanted to stop when speed was previously such a priority is seriously frightening him. Does- does this mean the baby's coming whether we're ready or not? But he's not due yet, not for a whole 'nother month- so isn't this- isn't it too early?

Whatever the circumstances, small talk will just have to wait. He needs to get to Zoro's side. "Oi, thanks for giving us a hand, but- sorry- I really, really gotta-"

"What's the rush?" Law asks, frowning as he walks faster to keep their paces even. "And what on earth's your crew been up to anyway? Hopping back and forth across the Red Line, stirring up the Marines like you're poking a stick at a bloody hornets' nest?"

"They started it," the rubber man fires back, and the surgeon raises an eyebrow at the note of outrage in the other captain's voice. Whatever's going on, it sure sounds like this crew's got a serious vendetta against someone right now. And knowing what he does about Luffy's previous clashes with the Marines and World Government, he can't help being intrigued. "Really. And you decided to finish it?"

"Crap- look, just come with me, okay? Maybe you can help..."

What the hell, why not, the Heart pirate decides. He'd thought the Straw Hat crew's sudden, irrational abandonment of their plotted course was interesting enough to follow their brig sloop all the way back to Paradise, so he might as well satisfy his curiosity and find out exactly what's got the younger man so riled up. If I hadn't lost their trail between here and G-1, I'd already know. Current shoved the damn sub right out into open ocean and it took forever to find their ship again.

Whatever they've been doing, it's clearly taken a toll, not just on the pirates themselves – the captain looks as though he's all but dead on his feet - but on the vessel as well. The hull seemed normal enough below the surface, but now that Law's onboard and getting a closer look firsthand, it's evident they've engaged in a serious skirmish or two.

"Mugiwara-ya, what in the world happened to your ship-?" He asks, glancing around at the blackened timbers and dead grass as Luffy leads him across the lawn deck towards the stairs. That's odd- I remember him talking quite a bit about his shipwright's skills. Seems strange he'd let
"The Marines happened."

"Ah."

"Luffy, what the hell's he doing here?" Sanji demands when they reach the landing outside the women's quarters. The cook's rummaging in his pocket with an unsteady hand, and the knot in the younger pirate's stomach tightens when he sees just how worried his blond nakama must be despite his attempt to hide his concern, because he's completely unaware he's already got a well-chewed toothpick dangling from one corner of his mouth.

"Mugiwara-ya told me I might be able to help." Law answers with a shrug. "I assume you've got somebody who's injured?"

"Something like that," Usopp mumbles from where he's sitting on the railing, staring down to where his trembling fingers are gripping the Adam wood. "Ch-Chopper kicked us out as soon as the fighting stopped and Franky dropped anchor- said Zoro didn't need everybody hovering all over him."

"And I told you, he's right. What Zoro needs is- OH!" A glass of water clasped tightly in one hand, Nami's emerged at the sound of raised voices outside the door, intending to berate her crew mates for not giving their ailing swordsman some badly needed peace and quiet, but she cuts short her diatribe at the sight of their visitor. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting- Luffy, what's he still doing here?"

"That's what I wanted to know," Sanji growls. "Marimo doesn't need some weirdo he barely knows STARING at him."

"Law's a DOCTOR. He helped me after Marineford, remember? And Jinbei said I probably woulda died if he hadn't," Luffy reminds them, trying not to notice how badly his hand's shaking as he reaches past the navigator to push the door open further, and his statement ends his nakama's protests, because they've all heard the story behind the huge starburst-shaped scar on their captain's chest.

"Alright, what the hell's going on here? Have you got someone who's ill or injured or not?" The Heart pirate captain's getting rather confused, because the Straw Hats keep looking at him and each other and then looking away. Maybe all that talk about their crew running into trouble with Admirals wasn't just a bunch of bored islanders blowing off steam; their ship's sure shot to shit, and it's not just Mugiwara-ya who's on edge- every one of them looks like they'd jump me if they so much as THOUGHT I might draw Kikoku.

"I- just come on, okay?"

"Careful!" Nami admonishes, flattening herself against the door to prevent the glass she's holding from spilling as the Straw Hat captain squeezes past her. "I poured this for Zoro. Chopper said he's getting plenty of fluids through the iv, but he keeps complaining his mouth is dry and I wasn't sure if I should run for ice cubes-" She trails off, realizing she's rambling and that Luffy's ignoring her anyway in his haste to get inside, and darts after him.

Law casts one last glance back at Sanji and Usopp, but they just continue staring at him with clear misgivings and don't offer any explanations, so he gives another shrug of resignation and follows the redhead and his fellow captain into the room beyond. Guess I'll find out what's going on soon enough.
Hearing their footsteps, Chopper glances over and his eyes widen at the sight of the other pirate following his crew mates through the doorway, but he doesn't leave the bedside. Instead, he moves further down the mattress until he's even with his patient's hip, scooting the iv stand retrieved from the infirmary along with him to give Luffy somewhere to stand. The doctor's glad to see the rubber man's calmed down quite a bit, because it's taken him nearly half an hour to convince Zoro he needs to lie still and rest while he determines just how dire a situation they're facing.

And considering the exam results he's procured so far-

"Zoro?" The captain asks quietly, lightly brushing his knuckles against his lover's sweat-dampened cheek, and he's far more relieved than he'd like to admit when the swordsman opens his functional eye to peer wearily up at him through lids that keep threatening to fall closed again, because his skin, having already lost most of its sun-darkened tan during the past two months in the lamp-lit darkness within Impel Down's walls, is now almost ashen in color. If not for the faint pulse visible in his neck and the slow, steady rise and fall of his chest-

Dead. He'd look dead, Luffy's mind supplies involuntarily, and he shudders.

"S-Sencho...?"

"How're you feeling?" He knows it's a stupid question even as it slips from his mouth, because if Zoro feels anything like he looks, the answer's obvious because he looks like he feels AWFUL, but stupid question or not, the older man just offers him a slightly crooked smile.

"I feel like shit. I'm getting kinda dizzy... and your damn brat won't stop kicking me," he mumbles, sighing shakily as Luffy's hand leaves his face to gently rub his belly, lingering where the baby's causing a disturbance that's palpable on the surface. A small but forceful impact - most likely an out-thrust foot from the feel of it - strikes the flesh beneath the captain's searching fingers, bracing against them and pushing hard enough to make the green-haired pirate grunt, his entire body tensing until the appendage's withdrawn and the internal pressure recedes. "Uhf. W-Way this kid likes to- use his feet- you oughta tell the shitty cook to teach him all that st-stupid fancy-ass kick-boxing shit if- if I don't make it through thi-"

"Quit it. Zoro's NOT gonna die, so he shouldn't talk like that," the rubber man scowls, petting his side. "And I found somebody who might help us. Oi, Law. C'mere and meet our newest crew member."

The Heart captain joins them, brow furrowing in confusion and disbelief as he steps close enough to see the portion of Zoro's torso previously blocked from view by the younger pirate. "Roronoa-ya, what-?" For a moment he wonders if they're playing some absurd trick on him, but a quick glance at the prone pirate's face confirms he's definitely the Pirate Hunter; there's no mistaking the scar-bisected left eye or triple-pierced earlobe. Or that grass-hued hair. "You're-" The surgeon's eyes drop again, following the equally-familiar scar traversing the man's broad chest, and his lips part in amazement as he realizes the lowest portion of the flaw's now distorted, stretched and curving across the prominent bulge on which Luffy's palm is resting. "Wait a minute- you've GOT to be shitting me. Mugiwara-ya, you- your swordsman's pregnant?"

"Don't think about it too hard," Zoro mutters, automatically lifting a hand to rub his face in undisguised embarrassment- and flinching because he's unwittingly used the injured one, which throbs nauseatingly when he accidentally jars the stumps of his missing fingers. ".-cause you'll just give yourself a headache. I oughta know."

"Yeah, Zoro's having our baby," Luffy growls, taking a step closer and straightening to his full height so he's standing defensively between his partner and the other captain. "You gotta problem
with that?"

"I- err, no-" Law shakes his head, unable to resist chuckling incredulously at the way the younger pirate's glaring at him and puffing up like a disgruntled rooster. "Settle down, Mugiwara-ya! It's just-alright, I'll admit, it threw me for a moment or two. You've certainly got one of the most interesting crews I've ever met."

"You have NO idea," Nami adds from where she's standing beside Robin, who's slipped into the room to join the navigator by the sofas while Sanji, Usopp, Franky and Brook crowd the women's quarters' doorway, too flustered to squabble even though they're stepping on each others' toes and ultimately kept at bay by repeated anxious but stern looks from Chopper. "This place is like a constant three-ring cir-" She falters, realizing she's gesturing with water glass still in hand. "Ah, I'm sorry, Zoro- you said you wanted-?"

"Just a moment," Law interrupts, waving the redhead back as he begins to more closely scrutinize the swordsman over Luffy's shoulder. "Actually-" He shrugs his nodachi off his shoulder and leans it against the back of the nearest sofa. "I'd like to take a closer look." Inclining his head towards the bed and its occupant as he rolls up first one sleeve, then the other. "If Roronoa-ya doesn't mind-?"

"Zoro. Just- call me Zoro."

"Alright, then- Zoro-ya. May I-?"

"Yeah, whatever," the green-haired pirate mutters, but he goes rigid the moment their visitor's tattooed fingers touch his belly, stifling an unintended sound of opposition that earns him a curious frown and brings Luffy leaping to the rescue with a loud "OI" of rebuke. "Ah- Sencho, no, I'm-"

"Mugiwara-ya, if you want my help, get out of my way. Otherwise-"

The Straw Hat captain moves reluctantly to one side, but he doesn't go far, lingering at the head of the bed and clutching the sleeve of his lover's robe as though concerned that someone's going to either chase or forcibly eject him from the room again. He watches the Heart pirate's hands intently as Law inches his fingertips along Zoro's abdomen, immediately tensing and opening his mouth to protest when the application of firm pressure draws a pained, apprehensive hiss from the swordsman.

"I said settle down. I'm not trying to hurt him OR your kid, but there's definitely something-" Eyes narrowing, he extends a hand towards the small figure waiting anxiously by his elbow. "Oi, tanuki, lend me that stethoscope? And give me a case history."

"Tony Tony Chopper," the reindeer passing over the instrument corrects automatically before lapsing into medical lingo because it's his only defense against the panic threatening to overtake him. "Patient is exhibiting classic signs of hypovolemia stemming from intraperitoneal hemorrhage." He's treated any number of illnesses and injuries since becoming a doctor - his crew mates have kept him quite busy in that regard - but although he's assisted his mentor with a few minor surgical procedures, the opportunity to participate in a full-scale, major operation's miraculously eluded him until now, and he's utterly terrified that dealing with this particular emergency's beyond his skill level. Happily pouring over his medical texts and plotting out a laparotomy in his head's one thing, but being required to actually perform it on someone he cares for at such short notice is another matter entirely. "Advanced ectopic pregnancy approaching thirty-six weeks in duration with placental engagement of the jejunum, ileum and surrounding mesentery. Patient also recently sustained moderate to severe phys-" He swallows. "-physical trauma resulting from torture and- and s-sexual assault during approximately two months imprisonment in- in Impel Down."

Interesting, Law muses. So those rumors about Roronoa Zoro being captured by the Marines were
true after all. As for the rest of it—well, it certainly explains his initial reaction to being touched.

Chopper’s closing remarks prompt a choked growl of anger from the Straw Hat captain and soft noises of distress from the remainder of the crew—except for the subject of their commiseration, who’s looking not just unruffled but so distant it’s almost as though he’s wondering why everyone’s so upset and what—if anything—it could possibly have to do with HIM.

"Jeez, it's not like I lost a whole fuckin' arm or anything, you morons." Zoro grumbles at them, uttering a weak but exasperated snort before turning his attention back to the surgeon and shaking his head in dismissal. "Seriously, it's really not that big a deal—just some shit that happened before they showed up to bust me out."

The faces of his nakama tell a rather different story, however, and the expression on Luffy's face is—for one brief moment—so terribly savage that Law finds himself unexpectedly and thoroughly unnerved by the younger man. Whatever's happened, it's clear there's a lot more to the story than "just some shit" as the green-haired pirate claims.

The surgeon yanks the stethoscope buds from his ears, leaving the device dangling from his neck. *I have a feeling your crew's got some rough days ahead, Mugiwara-ya, if your swordsman pulls through this...*

Pushing his misgivings aside, he inspects the iv connections and saline drip rate, humming his approval at the current flow. The supplemental hydration's likely the only thing keeping the man conscious and even remotely coherent after this much internal bleeding. "You're surprisingly calm, Zoro-ya, considering how much pain I imagine you're feeling."

"I've had worse. 'Sides, it's not like flipping my shit's gonna do any good, right?"

"Ha, nice to know you've got some brains to go with the brawn. I wish all my patients had that much common sense— from what I remember, dealing with your captain here was an absolute nightmare. Had to ask Jinbei-ya to sit on him more than once." Gaze drawn once more to the moisture beaded on his patient's face, neck and chest. "Oi, tanuki-"

This time the Zoan's too rattled to correct the mistake. "Y-Yes?"

"What was the last systolic blood pressure reading, and when did he start sweating profusely?"

"Ah, l-last reading was—" Chopper's voice wavers slightly and then strengthens as he steels himself and persists, reassured by his peer's sedate confidence.

As the conversation proceeds, the two physicians begin discussing their observations and concerns at a rapidly accelerating pace until they're exchanging statements loaded with increasingly complex medical terminology in such rapid-fire succession that they leave the other Straw Hats exchanging nervous glances. Even Robin, who's spent quite a bit of her personal time perusing the heavy tomes on Chopper's desk for simple curiosity's sake as well as a desire to be well-informed should the need arise, finds herself understanding perhaps one phrase in three, although she puts on a brave face and pats several shoulders, assuring her bewildered nakama that Chopper and Law both know what they're doing.

"-transfer him to my sub's medical bay, but—" Ears registering the sudden, muffled groan that's escaping Zoro's throat, the Heart captain cuts short his own suggestion and hurriedly replaces both earpieces. "Hold on." He frowns, alternating between the stethoscope's diaphragm and bell as he listens to the swordsman's heart and then his lungs. "Scratch that idea. Tachycardia's increasing, and so's his rate of respiration. We can't move him."
Seeing the instantaneous outrage in Luffy's eyes, he searches for the best way to explain the situation in layman's terms the younger pirate will comprehend. "Look, I'm not saying I won't help you. But you have to understand, it's likely Zoro-ya was already bleeding internally when you carried him out of Impel Down. Because you kept him off his feet as much as possible, he wasn't hemorrhaging that heavily- until he strained himself sitting up and the placenta tore loose. Your tanuki- ah, Tony-ya, right? Tony-ya bought you more time by making sure he stayed in bed, but judging by his symptoms, the bleeding's getting worse and even if we're very careful, moving him now could potentially be fatal." He turns to Chopper. "You're probably looking at stage three hypovolemic shock very shortly, possibly within the next few minutes if the detaching placenta damaged his lower intestine as severely as I suspect. I'm assuming you've got enough plasma on hand for a transfusion?"

The reindeer nods, pointing at the small frost-coated cooler resting on the floor nearby. "I've got more than enough fresh frozen XF units to handle a stage four."

Since Sanji nearly died from blood loss during their first visit to Fishman Island, the doctor's been stockpiling plasma, harassing the entire crew into donating as frequently as possible until he's acquired enough to require his own specially-marked section in the freezer of the ship's enormous kitchen fridge, because he has no intentions of repeating that frantic race to find suitable donors.

"Good, 'cause you might end up needing all of them." Law yanks the stethoscope's earpieces free once more and drapes the instrument over his shoulder. "Okay, here's the deal, Mugiwara-ya: there's a good chance your swordsman's already lost close to thirty percent of his blood volume, which wouldn't normally be enough to kill him if this was something simple like a knife or a gunshot wound because Tony-ya here could just patch it up and go from there. However, because the injury's internal, he's hemorrhaging directly into his abdominal cavity, which means there's no way to stop the bleeding without cutting him open. Understand?"

Luffy nods hesitantly.

"Surgery's pretty much the only option at this point anyway-" The Heart captain gestures to Zoro's belly, which is continuing to twitch visibly from the baby's relentless kicking, causing the exhausted swordsman to flinch when each blow's accompanied by a viciously sharp twinge of pain. "-because even if Roronoa-ya wasn't already bleeding to death, your baby's experiencing serious fetal distress. Without the placenta intact, there's no oxygenated blood passing through the umbilical cord, so you're looking at potential brain damage or worse unless someone performs an emergency laparotomy." He watches, brow slightly furrowed, as a small bulge forms on the side of the green-haired man's abdomen and slides across the surface before disappearing again. "Honestly, I'm surprised the kid's this active. Usually-"

"B-B-But I don't have the equipment here for that procedure!" Chopper interrupts with a wail, coming close to backing off the foot of the bed in his growing panic, before Law reaches out to catch him and gingerly sets him on the empty vanity chair's seat. "That- that's why we were going to Water Seven, b-because I need retractors and- and-!"

The surgeon snorts. "You don't need that fancy shit. You've got plenty of people here with good strong hands, right? And scalpels and clamps, plus the transfusion equipment?"

"Y-Yes, but-"

"That's all you need."

"But- BUT I CAN'T! Not without-!"

"Fine- then you explain to your captain why he can kiss his swordsman and their kid goodbye,
because there's absolutely no fucking way either of them will last until you get this heap of floating junk to Water Seven."

"Oi!"

"What the hell? Don't say that kind of shit in front of-!"

"WAIT." Luffy bursts out over his furious crew, mind racing. Already quite familiar with the Heart pirate's brusque but candid attitude, he doesn't join their enraged muttering at the dark-haired physician's poor bedside manner, although his hand does clench and tremble where it's fisted in the fabric of Zoro's sleeve. "What if-" He swallows hard. "L-Law saved me when he said I was probably gonna die. If Chopper's not sure he can do it- what about you? Can you-?"

"I'm not a goddamn charity... but if you make it worth my while-? Yes. Probably."

"I."

"How much?" Nami demands, her face white with fear and anger as she surges forward to grab the opposing captain by his collar, furious that he's speaking so casually about pinning a monetary value to their nakama's continued existence as well as that of the life he's carrying. "Whatever you want, we'll-!"

"... he means that much to you, does he?" Law remarks, unable to keep a note from amusement from entering his voice, because despite her firm grip and resolute tone, the redhead also looks slightly shocked at her own actions. "Touching- but forget it. Let your captain handle this- he knows exactly what I want."

"Luffy?" Nami asks, puzzled. "No. No, trust me- you want to deal with me. Luffy doesn't know how to read the account books, much less figure out how to get his hands on the kind of money that-"

"Who said I'm interested in beli? I could care less about money. Mugiwara-ya knows exactly what I want from him, and it's not yours to offer."

The surgeon's completely unprepared for the Straw Hat crew's reactions. The navigator recoils, not just letting go but releasing him as though she's suddenly discovered she's handling a venomous snake, and Sanji explodes, forcing himself between them and describing at length and in great detail the very painful and physically impossible acts that he intends to commit on the perverted bastard's person before he drops him overboard to watch him sink.

"Oi, Black Leg-ya, settle down! What the hell's your-?"

"What, he turned you down, so now you're gonna tell him he ain't got a choice?" Franky demands. "That's pretty sick, Sideburns-bro."

Confused, because they're suddenly either glaring at him or simply looking sickened, Law's about to ask if they've lost their minds when he realizes what they're implying. Still reeling over their swordsman's injuries and horrified he's been repeatedly raped and tortured, they're highly sensitive to anything that might be misconstrued as a double entendre for coerced or non-consensual sex and have apparently interpreted his statement in a way he certainly never intended.

"Wait-" Flustered, he finds himself making frantic waving gestures with both hands. "Whoa- whoa, NO, stop right there- that's not what I-!"

"Fucking shitty heartless-!" The blond before him snarls, cocking a fist.
"Sanji, no!" The Straw Hat captain, who's been silent throughout his crew's protests, flings out an arm to haul the infuriated cook away and ignores the impassioned rant that's immediately re-focused on him. "It's okay, Sanji."

"How the hell can you say that when he wants-"

"I know what Law wants, and it's not having sex with me, 'though I'd do that too if he said it was the only way he'd help Zoro and our baby," Luffy states bluntly. Jaw set in grim determination, he stares at his fellow captain with his face betraying no shame at his open admission that he'd freely trade the use of his own body to ensure his family's safety. "I told you before, but I'll say it again: I'm NOT backing down, no matter what happens. I'll beat Law 'n Kid 'n anybody else that gets between me and One Piece- even if I gotta fight 'em all at the same time with a kid tucked under each arm. So you better quit wasting time asking dumb questions and save my first mate and my son unless you want me to kick your ass right now."

There's a surprised murmur from the rubber man's crew, but Zoro - pleased by the captain's declaration and also amused it's taken Luffy so long to finally voice what they've all, from the Marines to rival crews to his own crew, known for years - starts chuckling weakly, the sound forced and dull with pain but laughter nonetheless.

*First mate. Typical stupid Sencho, waiting until NOW to suddenly tell people shit they already know. God, I love that idiot.*

"EXACTLY what I wanted to hear." Law's mouth widens to a grin, and he nudges the reindeer who's occupying himself by nervously, meticulously readjusting the IV line. "C'mon, Tony-ya, let's get started. I always carry a few pairs of gloves with me, but we'll need to use the surgical equipment you've got here. And just to warn you, I doubt there's time to haul an operating table up here from my ship, so these sheets'll probably be shot. The mattress too."

"I don't care," Nami says quickly before anyone's able to glance in her direction. "We'll get new ones."

Chopper takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, reminding himself to stay calm and remember what he's read. "R-Regional anesthesia? It might lower his blood pressure more, but I have drugs to counteract that if it happens."

"I'd recommend a general- remember, we need to do this fast. It'll hit him sooner, not to mention knock him out completely. The man's got ridiculously thick abdominal muscles and unless you plan on making the incision with one of his own swords- or mine, it'll take a lot of cutting to get through the body wall- and I doubt he'd enjoy being awake for that. We'll just need to work very quickly once he's doped up enough to not feel anything, so the anesthetic doesn't transfer to the fetus through whatever part of the umbilical's still-"

"No-" Zoro interrupts, and Chopper utters a squeal of alarm as the older pirate unexpectedly begins struggling to sit up, transforming to Heavy Point and carefully pinning him down.

"You need to hold still! The more you move, the faster and heavier you're going to bleed!"

"NO! Chopper, I remember that part; you told me you wouldn't use that shit 'cause it goes through the cord to the baby- that's what he just said too, isn't it? And you said he's already all stressed out, so no- just forget about me and get the kid out before he runs out of air."

"Nice sentiment, Zoro-ya," Law snorts. "-but you'll start thrashing all over the place the second I start cutting, and while I like to think I've got a steady hand, there's no way it'll be steady enough to keep
me from making a major mess of your guts if you're trying to crawl under the bed."

_I mean, I know you're tough- you've got to be considering the rumors I've heard about you- but you can't possibly stay detached enough to undergo major surgery without an anesthetic and still-

"It won't be a problem, I swear. Oi, Robin," the swordsman calls, fixing the historian with a steady gaze despite the increasing pallor of his face. 

"-think you got a few limbs you can lend me?"

The older woman nods without hesitation, and Nami blanches. 

"You can't possibly mean to-

"Marimo, you're INSANE." Sanji insists, squeezing Zoro's foot to get his attention. 

"Just let these guys do their job, you stubborn shit! They know what they're-

"NO. NOT if it's gonna hurt the baby. Luffy- LUFFY- c'mon, Sencho, you heard what he said too-

"-don't let 'em knock me out with some weird shit that might hurt our kid!"

Taken aback by the unmistakable fear in his first mate's voice, the rubber man's unsure how to respond. 

"Z-Zoro-

"Make up your goddamn minds, people," Law sighs, exasperated. 

"Zoro-ya might just go ahead and bleed to death while you're arguing, you know, and then it won't fucking matter."

"If you're sure, Kenshi-san..."

"Yeah, I'm sure, and he's right- you better hurry it up, 'cause I'm starting to have trouble seeing stuff." He's lost enough blood following intense, injurious battles to know that the darkness stealing into his peripheral vision is a serious warning sign, especially since he's only lying here and not even up and moving around. 

Shit, I know Luffy's right next to me- I can feel his hand on my arm, but my

"Alright. Well, if that's the plan, I need room to work, so I want everybody out except the tanuki and Nico-ya." The Heart captain gestures to the tall, dark-haired woman, eyeing her with speculative appreciation. 

"Have to admit, I never imagined I'd end up with the notorious "Devil Child" as my own private surgical nurse. Bet she'd look damn fine in a uniform...

Robin inclines her head, a faint smile gracing her lips as though she's conscious of his thoughts. 

"Just tell me how you'd like me to assist, Sen'i-san."

"Here, put these gloves on, please. Everybody else- out."

"I'm staying here," Luffy insists. 

"Cause the baby's mine 'n so's Zoro. I should be here!"

Law's opening his mouth to say otherwise, but he's preempted by Zoro himself. 

"And end up clobbering this guy while he's trying to help us 'cause you start freaking out? Forget it." He's having trouble focusing on the rubber man's face, but he doesn't need to fight back his rapidly expanding tunnel vision to know the agonized expression his partner's wearing. He knows Luffy normally shows remarkable restraint during his sword fights and would never interfere without permission, even if he's clearly struggling and outclassed- but this isn't a sword fight. This is an extenuating circumstance, his opponent is technically his own overtaxed body, and he doesn't trust his lover to just stand by and watch idly while someone cuts him open without anesthesia while one of their own crew mates holds him down. 

"Just get outta here and- I don't know- go outside and play tag with Usopp or something while you wait."

"Jeez, Marimo! What the hell's wrong with-!"
"NO, I'm not going anywhere- I'm staying with Zoro!"

"Goddamn it- oi, Franky, get him outta here!" Zoro insists. "He doesn't need to see this."

"Aw, why do I always end up being the bad guy?" The cyborg asks unhappily, watching Luffy tense and tighten his hold on their first mate's sleeve, clearly more than ready to resist.

"'Cause you're the only one tough enough to hang onto him without getting hurt," the swordsman explains, sounding exhausted and equally disquieted as he tries unsuccessfully to pry his captain's fingers loose; he doesn't have enough strength or leverage to break the younger pirate's iron grip with only three digits. "Dartboard brow's fucked up enough already, and Robin's gonna have her hands full. Get Luffy outta here, and keep him out. SIT on him if that's what you gotta do."

"Excellent advice, but whatever you're going to do, Robo-ya, please do it now."

Grimacing, Franky reluctantly reaches out one gigantic hand to enfold the protesting rubber man, who immediately begins thrashing wildly in his iron grip while hanging onto his lover's sleeve for dear life. "NO- Zoro, don't make me g- NO! ZOR-ZORO!"

Ignoring the drama playing out beside him as Luffy alternately begs and threatens and eventually resorts to ordering his nakama to let him stay, all to no avail because Zoro's now threatening to get up and throw the captain out himself if the cyborg won't do it, Law shoves a small tray of medical instruments purloined from the Straw Hat doctor's medical bag towards Robin. "Here, do me a favor and just hold this until I'm ready for you to- oh- that IS a handy ability you've got, isn't it." He pauses to select a scalpel and can't resist adding, "You know, there's always room aboard my ship for someone with talents of your caliber- if you're interested?"

"No, thank you. While I certainly appreciate the offer, I'm quite happy with this crew," the historian tells him over the purring rip of tearing fabric and subsequent ruckus of Luffy bawling Zoro's name and overturning both sofas and the coffee table in his efforts to prevent himself from being removed from the bedside.

"Hmm, well, that's a shame, but I figured it was worth a try. Okay, Nico-ya, since you seem to have plenty of free hands, please restrain his arms and legs, and I need more hands here and here and- yes, you've got it. Good, now-" There's another crash behind him, and he whirs to address the combatants. "OI! Get Mugiwara-ya outta here before he knocks over the goddamn iv pole! THANK YOU."

Alright- is that everything? Scalpels, forceps, clamps. Disinfectant. Restraints courtesy of Nico-ya. Think think think. Tony-ya's prepping the transfusion equipment. What else do we- "Oi, you, Black Leg-ya!" Law barks, pointing towards the blond's waist. "Think you can spare that belt?"

"S-Sure, just gimmie a second." Sanji joins them at the bedside, shaking hands undoing his buckle, while the other Straw Hats grudgingly follow Franky and their shouting, struggling captain outside.

Zoro flinches at the sound of wood cracking and a startled exclamation from the shipwright, because Luffy's just ripped away part of the railing from the deck above the women's quarters by grabbing hold and trying to slingshot himself back inside despite the cyborg's firm grip around his waist.

His captain's reaction scares him more than anything Law or Chopper could possibly tell him about the procedure they're about to perform. He's never seen his lover so determined to remain by his side. Or so frightened. It makes him want to call the younger pirate back, tell him he's changed his mind and he's welcome to stay, but it's too late for that- they're out of time.
He doesn't know what prompts him to say it. Maybe the fear that, should something go horribly wrong, his last words to Luffy could be nothing more than a string of curses and angry words telling him to go away. The terrifying thought that they may have wasted their last few moments together squabbling. That he's missed the opportunity to tell his partner what matters most.

Whatever the case, he doesn't care that he's addressing the last person with whom he ever thought he'd be discussing intimate details of his personal life. "Oi, cook- tell that idiot- tell Luffy I l-love him, alright? Him and- and the baby."

Sanji's mouth twists, his jaw briefly clenching and trembling as he yanks his belt free of its loops and leans forward to force the leather between the swordsman's teeth, prompting a low noise of startled protest. "Fuck you, Marimo. Tell him yourself when you dump that squalling shitty brat of yours in his arms."

"Interesting friends you've got, Zoro-ya," Law muses, glancing up from where he's mopping the exposed skin of his patient's lower belly with disinfectant to watch the stiff-backed, furious blond stalk from the room, barely restraining himself from slamming the women's quarters' door shut behind him. "You get along that well with your enemies?" He sets the sponge aside. "Here we go. On three. One- two-"

Zoro arches - or tries to - against the hands holding him down as the surgeon makes a lightning fast incision across his lower abdomen, laying open epidermis and subcutaneous fat to expose the muscle beneath. His breath escapes in an explosive gasp of pain. "F-FUCK!"

"Towel- thanks, Tony-ya. Okay, that was the easy part; it's going to get a bit more interesting from here, but I'll try to make this as quick as I-"

"Sh-Shut up and- ghh- g-get on with it," The Straw Hats' first mate growls audibly around the belt in his mouth, and even though his voice is hoarse with pain and his face slick and shiny with sweat, he's glowering fiercely enough to make Law raise an eyebrow.

"It's not just rumor, is it- you really ARE a bad-ass motherfucker, aren't you?" The surgeon muses, unable to contain a terse smile despite the seriousness of the situation. He gives his scalpel a brief, practiced twirl. "Alright- hang on, Zoro-ya. This is going to hurt. Nico-ya, if you please?"

Just relax- you c-can do this. You CAN. It's- it's not so bad; it's kinda- aah- like when Mihawk ripped your chest o- His determination to mentally overcome the discomfort- shove it way down deep and hold it there- derails the moment Robin's gloved fingers hook into the open wound and start pulling, producing a gap wide enough for Law's blade to start slicing through the thicker layer of his abdominal muscle. This is NOTHING like the master swordsman's weapon slashing diagonally across his torso; his ribs protected him from the worst of that blow, but this is different. The Heart captain's cutting into a part of him that, regardless of all his usual vigorous exercise and weight training, is soft and vulnerable, and NONE of the other severe injuries he's sustained involved someone digging around in there, pulling his rent flesh open wide.

This is fucking AGONY, possibly on par with what Kuma did to him back on Thriller Bark, and it's a good thing the historian's restraining him so tightly with a multitude of extra limbs because Law was right: his body's stubbornly ignoring his brain's demands for it to hold still, his entire frame twitching and shuddering within the unrelenting grasp of her hands in a desperate attempt to escape the scalpel's razor-sharp edge. His teeth meet with a sharp click, sheering through the leather clenched between them, and he's barely got time to realize he's going to owe that damn ero-cook a new belt before the pain drives all further thought from his mind, and now it's impossible to hold back the sort of noises he fought so hard to contain and quell and swallow during his imprisonment, and once that first cry of agony escapes his throat, it opens a floodgate and he can't stop screaming.
Chapter End Notes

To continue reading the story as originally intended by the author, please proceed to chapter 16. For the alternate ending, please skip to chapter 23.
Outside on the lawn, Luffy goes absolutely berserk at the sound of his swordsman's ragged screams, scratching and biting and cursing at the cyborg restraining him, until Franky pins the hysterical younger pirate face-down in the grass and bellows for someone to help him as he uses his free arm to defend his eyes and face from the frenzied onslaught.

"My god, LISTEN to him," Nami moans to no one in particular, voice muffled by the hands clasped over her mouth.

It's not the first time Zoro's been treated without pain killers or even a sedative; she can't help recalling a hazy memory of waiting anxiously outside another small room while Dr. Nako closed their green-haired nakama's recent chest wound with a staggering number of sutures. And following Little Garden, she watched him sew his own self-inflicted injuries shut while taking periodic swigs from a bottle of alcohol swiped from the kitchen when Sanji's back was turned. On neither occasion, however, nor any of the others she remembers, did he react with anything more than clenched teeth, firmly-controlled deep breaths and infrequent grunted curses.

To now hear him screaming loudly enough for his crew mates to hear from the lawn deck, however, not to mention through a closed door-

She can't help wondering how much of his reaction's caused by the pain itself and how much of it stems from being manhandled and subjected to another person using a blade on him so soon after everything else that's happened to him. Even knowing the people hurting him are only trying to help-well, even after more than twenty-four hours and even after showering to wash away the blood he left smeared all over her and bandaging the shallow cut on her midriff, she can still feel his trembling arms holding her captive and hear the confusion and desperation and fear distorting his voice.

She keeps skipping back to the thought that she's never heard him sound so SCARED, because the idea of Roronoa Zoro- acclaimed swordsman and member of the small group she and her crew mates have long dubbed "the monster trio" for their ridiculous strength, bravado and sheer indestructibility-the idea of HIM being genuinely afraid of ANYTHING speaks volumes about how terribly wrong everything's gone.

I hate that woman. I hate her, I HATE her. And, god, LUFFY- how must HE feel?

"If he agreed to let somebody way weaker hurt him and tie him up and starve him for a month to save somebody else's kid-"

I was falling asleep but I heard you. I HEARD you, and- Luffy, there's no way you could've known but- She closes her eyes, on the verge of tears. You did know, though, didn't you? Not what would happen- none of us did- but you knew ZORO. You knew if he'd do all that for a stranger's child, he'd do so much more for his own- for his and yours- and he did, oh god, he DID. He did so, so much more, and he's still doing it now.

In the end, it takes Franky, Usopp, Sanji and Brook working together to secure the captain's flailing limbs and thrashing body, although he continues to rage and threaten and cry and beg with helpless abandon under their combined weight- until his lover's voice abruptly falls silent, whereupon he goes bonelessly limp beneath them, quiet save for soft sniffling and an occasional chest-hitching sob. The others tense, their heads raised, listening.

"Guys, c-come on, get off. You're- you're crushing him," Nami stammers nonsensically, so addled
that she forgets what she's proposing is essentially impossible. Immensely relieved Zoro's no longer making such horrible noises but also earnestly frightened at the sudden hush, she kneels to pry unsuccessfully at her frozen crew mates until the equally stunned and appalled men untangle themselves and ease away from the rubber man.

Once freed, he immediately latches onto the navigator, smashing his face between her breasts and wrapping both arms around her waist multiple times, wringing so tightly it's not just impossible to stand up but also hard to breathe. The sudden embrace is rather startling and while normally she's never thrilled by being indecorously pawed- or, more appropriately in this case, squeezed like an oversized throw pillow- by someone else, nakama or not, Luffy's clinging to her and trembling so violently that she doesn't try to push him away.

"Marimo must've passed out," Sanji mutters, pacing back and forth across the lawn deck and scattering toothpicks into the grass when he tries to fish one from his shirt pocket. "... that's one of my favorite belts. If that bastard chewed it in half, I swear I'll- I'll-" Lost for words, he abandons the attempt and drops down beside Nami, easing a shaking arm around both her and their hiccuping, teary-eyed captain.

Similarly speechless, Usopp takes the navigator's other side. After a moment of intense debate, he hesitantly offers his own arm, and she leans against him with a tremulous sigh, fingers combing through Luffy's unruly hair as the younger pirate whimpers and tries to wedge himself further into her lap.

Franky and Brook, who've been hovering nearby and talking quietly, exchange a worried glance before they finally wander over to rejoin their nakama. The cyborg's scratching his head and looking extremely uncomfortable. "I know this probably ain't the best time to ask, but- you think we oughta- y'know- post a watch or somethin'?"

Sanji makes a rude, angry noise. "Shitty Marines show their shitty faces, they're getting what's coming to 'em, and no goddamn broken ribs'll stop me." Visible eye blazing, he turns his glare on the others. "And neither will any of you."

"Sanji-kun, don't. Please, just- don't," Nami pleads, nodding towards their bereft captain.

Brook clears his throat. "Ah, unless I'm mistaken, it's likely Trafalgar-san's crew intends to protect our ship as long as he's onboard." He points a bony finger towards the jumpsuit-clad man standing at the submarine's railing with binoculars in hand. Another member of the rival crew's sharing the lawn deck with them, but the polar bear's keeping a respectful distance even though he keeps stealing curious glances in their direction, almost as if he'd like to join the conversation but isn't sure how they'd react to his company.

"I do believe you're better off over there, my friend," the skeleton muses, shifting his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Because unless I'm mistaken, my nakama aren't feeling particularly inclined to deal politely with visitors. He clears his throat vigorously as the bear steals another peek and the animal quickly looks away when he realizes he's under scrutiny. And, truth be told, neither am I.

While he's outwardly calm compared to his crew mates, Brook's growing increasingly uneasy. As the newest member of the Straw Hats, the musician's spent far less time sailing with them and is therefore familiar with their exploits mostly by word-of-mouth alone. Seeing their current panic and dismay only drives home the point that they're accustomed to triumphing over even the most formidable odds, and the knowledge that they're seriously questioning the outcome of the emergency procedure taking place in the room above-
Ever since his fellow swordsman defeated Ryuma, freed his shadow and then miraculously survived the self-sacrificing attempt to trade his own life for their captain's head, Brook's viewed Zoro as a steady, reliable constant in his life- or his second life, to be more precise. The green-haired pirate's been an unswerving rock in a frequently chaotic world, always- often covertly- looking out for his nakama and serving as the first mate Luffy's finally named him.

Seeing that sturdy rock beginning to crack and crumble has been stirring painful memories of the past not to mention forcibly reminding Brook of his present crew's mortality.

*I* couldn't *bear it. Being alone, again, after I-

"ROBO-YA."

The voice suddenly bellowing down from the landing outside the women's quarters startles the group huddled on the lawn so badly they all jump, and Usopp utters a surprised squawk that would be funny under any other circumstances.

"ROBO-YA,” Trafalgar Law barks again. "NEED YOU UP HERE. NOW."

Franky doesn't take time to argue, and he doesn't stop to ask questions; he simply bolts for the stairs, galvanized by the sight of the surgeon's gloved hands and forearms, slicked crimson nearly to the elbows and held above his waist to prevent blood dripping everywhere.

Eyes enormous, Luffy scrambles to his feet, clearly intending to follow.

"NOT YOU,” the Heart captain roars, moving aside to let the cyborg pass through the door held open by one of Robin's disembodied arms. "SIT YOUR ASS DOWN- OR I SWEAR I'LL GO BACK TO MY DAMN SUB AND YOUR TANUKI CAN DEAL WITH THIS HIMSELF."

Shaking uncontrollably, the rubber man slowly sinks to the ground until he's crouching on his haunches, twitching fingers digging deep into the sod.

Grumbling under his breath, Law turns and nearly collides with Franky, who's stopped dead in his tracks just inside the door. Unwilling to contaminate his already blood-smeared gloves, he nudges the shipwright with his knee. "Yes. Yes, I know- lots of blood, insides on the outside, huge mess, just awful. And now, since we've got THAT part out of the way- you've got the same blood type as your first mate, correct?" Seeing the older pirate's hesitant, disconcerted nod, he raises his voice to address the pale-faced woman standing beside the bed. "Nico-ya, if you'd do the honors, please? I'm afraid Tony-ya and I are a little busy."

"What- what do you..." The cyborg trails off, unable to take his eyes off the scene before him. For a moment there, when he'd initially come through the doorway and gotten that first glimpse, his brain had simply failed to compute the horrifying sight of RED so bright and plentiful that it doesn't look real. Following the attack on Impel Down, he'd been shocked seeing his green-haired nakama covered in what turned out to be someone else's blood, but this-

Now he understands why Law thought it necessary to warn them about the bedding being ruined- and why he's so adamant about keeping Luffy out. The sheets are soaked through, the sides of the mattress dark with broad rivulets, and the man lying there looks more like a butchered animal than a human being.

He makes a strangled choking noise.

"They need more plasma." Robin's joined him, voice soft and disquieted. "K-Kenshi-san won't stop bleeding."
"I've got so many clamps jammed in there, his lower intestine looks like a goddamn pincushion, as I'm sure you can see," the Heart pirate beside them mutters. "-but he's still leaking like a sieve, and I need to start pulling the clamps if I'm going to repair the damage."

And you're gonna fix that HOW? Franky intends to demand, gaze still locked dumbly on the gore-soaked bed, but he's circumvented by Chopper, whom he's completely forgotten.

"Clumping- I've got clumping on the serum card!" The reindeer's shouting suddenly from where he's crouched in Heavy Point by the opposite bed, hulking shoulders blocking what he's doing from view. "Trafalgar-san, I've got agglutination for S... F... everything but XF! He's XF, just like Zoro!"

"Thank god for small favors- now I don't have to go back out there for your captain or anyone else." Law nods approvingly. "Good. Get the kid hooked up to that last bag of plasma and I'll deal with Zoro-ya."

Realization finally dawning that the baby's already been delivered and he's been gawking at the aftermath, Franky cranes his neck in an effort to peer past his unconscious, bloodied crew mate, but Robin's steering him towards the vanity chair where it's been pushed against the wall beside the headboard.

"Use the external jugular vein, Nico-ya," the surgeon calls as he stoops to check his patient's pulse. "You'll get faster transfer- ah, assuming Robo-ya's alright with-?"

"What? Oh! Yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah, whatever you gotta do to help Haramaki-bro," the cyborg insists, still trying to catch a glimpse of the baby Chopper's leaning over.

"Ah, Franky, I need you to hold-"

There's a sudden faint bleating cry of pain from the opposite side of the room and the Straw Hats' doctor stiffens. "AHH, SORRY, I'M SORRY!" He takes a step back, catheter pinched between thumb and forefinger, and the complaining quiets to an occasional whimper.

"Tanuki?"

The reindeer turns damp eyes and a face full of anguish towards his fellow physician. "I- I don't want to keep sticking him, but either my f-fingers are too big or I can't- my hooves- his veins are so TINY."

"Hang on." Stripping off his gloves inside out to contain the mess smeared on them, Law hurriedly washes his hands in the sink by the door. "Let's try a foot instead." Directing the younger physician to hold the baby while he searches for a vein, he dons a pair of fresh gloves and gets to work, bent low over the green and white striped bundle cradled in his colleague's arms. "... what I wouldn't give for my blasted operating theater right now..."

"O-Oi," Franky whispers, fearful of speaking too loudly or moving too much now that Robin's tethered him to the iv pole. "Is that your-?"

"My sweater? Yes," the historian murmurs back. "Both Trafalgar-san and Chopper-san agreed it was best to keep him warm, and-"

There's a soft groan beside them as Zoro stirs, either revitalized by the fresh blood entering his veins or perhaps simply responding instinctively to his son's pain-induced cries. The arm stretched out beside him on the left spasms and then lifts with effort as he gropes clumsily at the iv catheter secured to his right hand, fingers twitching ineffectively as they attempt to wrap around the hard plastic.
Hearing the sound, Law glances back and curses. "Shit, that bastard's fighting off the damn anesthetic again, isn't he."

"Sen'i-san, would you like me to-?"

"Hit him with another dose and knock his dumb ass out- and DON'T let him yank out that goddamn iv or we'll have an even bigger mess on our hands. I'll be right... there- done." Leaving Chopper to gingerly hold and whisper assurances to his tiny charge, the surgeon changes gloves yet again and races back to their older, larger patient. "Alright, you green-haired idiot, let's get this bleeding stopped and see how much of that small intestine you're actually going to keep."

xxx

"Why's it taking so long?" Luffy asks unhappily, absentmindedly tearing another handful of grass free with one hand and scattering it. He's sitting huddled in a ball with his other arm wrapped tightly around his knees, and although the tears on his face have dried, his eyes are still shiny and far too large as they stare soulfully at his crew mates. "Franky's been in there for like an hour." There's a bitter undercurrent to his tone, and he hates hearing it in his voice, but he can't help it. He's still scared and he's still worried, but he's also jealous.

I should be there. It's MY first mate and MY baby. But everybody, even ZORO, told me I hadda come out 'n wait, and then Law comes out 'n says Franky can go back in and I KNOW it's cause he's got the same blood as Zoro, but- He makes a low noise of distress and frustration. Franky, Robin, Chopper- everybody else's gonna see my son before me!

He wonders if his swordsman's seen their child yet- and rips loose another handful of grass. He wants to see Zoro too, hug and kiss him and the baby- and then take a really, really looong nap tucked into bed with them.

"It- it IS major surgery," Usopp says timidly. "That can take a while, right?"

"I'm sure everything's fine," the redhead beside them insists, offering the captain a shaky smile. "They probably just- they probably just want to, you know, clean things up. I mean, Law did say there'd be lots of- lots of blood."

"You know Marimo," Sanji mutters. "Only guy I know who turns bleeding into a shitty art form."

Their captain responds with a noncommittal grunt, hugging his knees tighter, and the others fall silent again, unsure how to bolster his confidence when they're feeling so unnerved themselves.

They're sitting there quietly watching the rubber man make a growing bare patch in the lawn as the clouds roll past overhead, unsure whether another hour's passed or merely a few minutes, when Chopper suddenly bursts through the women's quarters' door. The reindeer's crying loudly, eyes streaming such copious tears that he can't see where he's going and loses his footing on the stairs, falling head over heels.

No one rushes to catch him. They're too busy staring, faces filled with stunned disbelief.

"No," Usopp says blankly, unaware he's even speaking. "No. No, please, no."

Expression uncomprehending, Luffy sits up slowly, too dazed to realize the sniper's scrambling to his feet and continuing to make sounds of denial.

"Chopper?" Sanji asks in a strange, high voice.
The doctor doesn't try to get up when his rough tumble to the bottom of the steps ends; instead, he crawls on all fours until he's close enough to fling himself into their captain's lap, one large Heavy Point hand raking across the scar-roughened skin of his nakama's chest as he throws both arms around him, wailing. "I'm s-s-sorry- we did everything we c-could, b-b-but- I'M SORRY! I'M SORRY, LUFFY, I'M S-S-SORRY!" With this, he dissolves into hysteria and only a small percentage of what he's continuing to say is comprehensible- but those few words that slip through are enough. They're more than enough.

Luffy doesn't answer, but his head begins shaking slowly from side to side, and then all at once he's in motion, shoving his sobbing, apologizing crew mate aside and hurling himself at the staircase.

Brook moves to intercept him, thinking for one absurd moment that if they all just remain out here on the lawn deck, everything will be okay because they won't need to face what's waiting in the room above, but the rubber man kicks free and slams into the steps with enough force to rattle the banister. This time the skeleton doesn't try to stop him and simply watches him claw his way towards the top.

Law either heard Chopper's anguished shrieking or simply surmised it'd only be a matter of short time before his fellow captain stormed the women's quarters, because he emerges moments after Luffy gains the landing. The surgeon's extremely conscious of the blood drying on his tattooed arms and caked in his fingernail beds despite repeated hand-washing in addition to the final pair of gloves he's just stripped free and wadded into a soggy latex ball; the damn stuff always seems to get everywhere no matter how neatly he works- and this hastily performed laparotomy on Mugiwara-ya's first mate has been far from immaculate. Especially near the end, when he'd sworn there was more than double the blood soaking the sheets outside the man's body than actually in it.

He finds the Straw Hat captain huddled on the planks outside the door with his face buried in his arms, evidently too afraid to come inside, and surrounded by the remainder of his pale and badly shaken crew. And if there were any doubts in his mind whether the other physician's yet delivered the news, now he's positive Tony-ya's done so, because the majority of them are crying. Including, oddly enough, the skeleton.

Luffy's head snaps up at the sound of the door opening, and although his vision's half obscured by tears, he can't miss the gore-splattered Jolly Roger symbol on his fellow captain's shirt - bright red and partially dried maroon splashed on sunny yellow - which looks as though it's grinning maliciously at his misfortune, and he swallows audibly at the sight.

Robin's voice is low and husky with emotion. "Sencho-san- Luffy, I- I am so-"

"I want my- L-Let me hold my s-s-s-" He can't finish, because the historian's already gently transferring her charge into his trembling hands, and even though he's already terrified that he's going to drop the baby, he can't seem to stop shaking, his heart hammering wildly in his chest as he gets his first
glimpse of the child his swordsman's suffered through hell to protect. Son. This is my- this is OUR SON- oh my god, Zoro- oh, Zoro, look what we-!

The others watch, barely breathing, as Luffy stares down into the thick swaddle of clothing he's clutching - some disconnected corner of his mind tells him the garment looks vaguely familiar before falling silent once more - and then he looks up quickly, lips trembling as he struggles to smile for his nakama as though there aren't icy fingers clenched around his rapidly pounding heart and squeezing mercilessly tighter with each passing moment. "Black," he tells them, sounding somewhat surprised despite the congestion in his voice. "H-He's already got hair and there's a LOT of it and it's BLACK like mine, n-not- not green like-" He gives Sanji a strange, unreadable look. "Guess that answers your question, huh? 'Bout whether Z-Zoro- 'bout whether his h-hair was herd- he-"

"... hereditary," the cook supplies softly.

"Y-Yeah, that." His gaze returns to the baby. "You- you got M-MY hair."

Nami choking back a low cry, turning to bury her tear-streaked face against Sanji's lapels as their captain pushes the fabric's folds further apart to slowly count tiny fingers and toes, murmuring softly to the newborn in his arms despite the broken sobs that punctuate his speech.

The blond lays a hand on the navigator's back, and he doesn't protest when Usopp joins her, snuffling loudly and clinging to them both, because the three of them have been with Luffy and Zoro since East Blue. He's sure their newer members- those who'd met and joined the crew later in the Grand Line- are just as devastated- but he, Nami and the sniper have been there since the beginning. Not just the beginning of the crew itself, but the beginning of their nakama as partners in more than name.

They'd witnessed the first hesitant, fumbling overtures between their captain and the swordsman, watched infatuation develop into a stronger bond, until it became not just strange but downright impossible to imagine one of them without the other, so this- this-

The expression on Luffy's face causes a sharp, lancing pain inside Sanji's chest that's got nothing to do with his mending ribs, and he's too numb to care about the tears and snot that his nakama are leaking all over his jacket. *Marimo always teased me about this stupid suit anyway- told me wearing orange pinstripes made me look like a goddamn pumpkin.*

He listens to the faint, stifled noises of everyone crying around him, and he wants to go over and wrap his arms around the captain and tell him everything will be okay- but he's afraid to interrupt such a private moment, and it's painfully obvious that everything's gone horribly wrong and there's a high probability that nothing- absolutely nothing- will ever be completely okay again.

The others appear to be fighting the same internal battle, because although they're unable to take their eyes off the rubber man and the baby he's cradling carefully against his chest with trembling arms, no one moves, and in the end, it's the man who doesn't belong here, who's not part of their crew and doesn't share their grief, who finally breaks the silence.

"Oi-" When the Heart pirate's hand claps down on his shoulder, Luffy flinches, reluctantly tearing his gaze away from his son's face and the distressingly small hand curled beneath his chin. "I'm sorry, Mugiwara-ya, if that counts for anything. Try to look on the bright side, though. I know it's shitty consolation, but you could've lost both of them," Law states in his usual blunt manner- and the look of pure anguished loathing the younger pirate flashes in his direction makes the Surgeon of Death take a hasty step backwards.
Chapter 17

Nnngh... wh-what the hell hit me... and- w-wait, where am I? Dark- it's- so dark and I- god, it's really- goddamn hard to think. Waking disoriented and weak, barely able to crack his eyelids open much less lift his aching head from the pillow beneath it, Zoro's so strongly reminded of that first awful afternoon following his dramatic confrontation with Bartholomew Kuma that for a few minutes the swordsman's actually convinced it's more than two years earlier and the crew's still docked at Thriller Bark following the last event that left him half-dead and drenched in his own blood. The- the Shichibukai- is he gone? Did he keep his promise or- or did he t-take my captain's head?

Oddly enough, although he can vaguely recall being in terrible pain, there's no serious discomfort now, just a foggy haze enveloping his brain that makes it incredibly difficult to process coherent thought. Chopper will later quietly explain the Heart surgeon insisted on pumping him full of an obscene amount of extremely heavy-duty analgesics following the laparotomy- which is probably good, because he can't seem to stop shivering violently enough to make his teeth chatter.

For an indeterminate amount of time - hours, days, weeks, he doesn't know - his entire awareness narrows down to the frigid cold floating somewhere between his chin and his toes, but eventually the drugs begin to recede enough for reality to start filtering in, and he becomes aware that he's lying on Robin's bed in the women's quarters. He blinks sluggishly at the scene to his right: the second bed frame empty, coils exposed because the entire mattress is missing.

His left side's warm where Luffy's curled against him and clinging tightly to his arm, and it's not just his captain keeping him company. The entire crew's packed into the small room, all of them dozing fitfully where they're crowded into the matching sofas or sprawled on the floor, and he's relieved albeit still confused.

He did it. He- kept his word. Sencho's alive 'n everybody- everybody's okay.

His vision's slightly blurry, making it even more difficult to concentrate. When he reaches up to swipe awkwardly at his face, however-

He stares dumbly at his own right hand where it's hovering Shakily above the plastic mask strapped over his mouth and nose, startled and more than a little bewildered to see the appendage has only three fingers. What-? When the hell did? He studies his maimed hand, trying to make sense of it. Trying to remember how the bloody thing got that way in the first place, because the injuries look recent, the stumps cleanly cut beneath the cauterized tissue, and it's too neat- too tidy- to be accidental. No, somebody's done this deliberately- cut off two of his goddamn fingers and part of a third. Who-?

Not the Shichibukai. He doesn't recall Kuma carrying or bothering with edged weapons; there's no need given the enormous man's ability to fire fucking LASERS from his mouth. And these wounds definitely look like they were made by a sword.

He flexes his remaining digits, frowning groggily. No. Not a sword- a KNIFE. An extremely sharp one capable of cleaving through tendon and bone with little effort, and-

The ensuing flood of memories leaves his mind reeling:

... he's surrounded by cold, stone walls and his hands are cuffed behind his back and a taunting feminine voice is telling him to choose. Choose between the fingers required for holding the swords that will allow him to honor the vow he made to both Kuina and, just as if not more importantly, the man who will one day be the Pirate King- to choose between those fingers and the baby he's become
fiercely determined to protect at the cost of his own dignity- and possibly even his own sanity. Choose between the dream he's pursued for years and his newfound desire for a family- a life with his partner and their son- something he never knew he wanted so badly until he realized he might lose it.

The woman toys with him, smiling maliciously as she tells him to take his time, but it's not a difficult decision and he's outraged, incensed, disgusted by her suggestion that he might consider a few bits of flesh and bone worth more than the innocent life inside him; he barely restrains himself from spitting directly in her face when he snarls at her to take his fingers before he tries to strangle her, never mind that he's chained at the wrists and his forearms have long since gone numb against his spine.

Since his arrival, his world's narrowed down to one ultimate objective: doing whatever's necessary to redirect the Chief Guard's attention away from his swelling abdomen and his captain's unborn child until Luffy and the crew find their way back to his side and get him- get them- the hell out of here. At least the bitch is- for once- more interested in inflicting pain than pleasure. He can deal with pain; it's when she aims for the opposite end of the spectrum that he's driven half out of his mind with revulsion and self-loathing at his body's natural response to someone's touch. His body doesn't care that it's betraying his captain; he might hate and fear her, but his body's far too willing- too eager for her hands and mouth and the dark, wet fissure between her thighs.

No, pain is tolerable. Pain keeps him sane. And while he's not particularly eager for her to take a knife to him, better his hands than his belly.

Besides, he reminds himself, keeping his fingers won't do him much good at obtaining the status of World's Greatest Swordsman now anyway. It's rather difficult to call himself a swordsman, much less one striving for grandeur, when he's not only LOST his weapons but damaged two of the priceless blades nearly beyond recognition...

His heart skips a beat, stuttering inside his chest, when he remembers that his childhood friend's katana- Kuina's katana- the elegant blade he's carried at his side for what seems like an eternity, is-... he's deflecting the massive flaming fist aimed at his vulnerable midsection when Wado quivers and SNAPS under the heat and pressure, blade shattering into glittering shards and melting hilt searing his palm, and it's all happening too quickly for him to mourn the Meito's staggering, unexpected loss. The shitty cook- Sanji- his crew mate- his nakama- is SHOVING him backwards, frantically screaming at him to run even as he takes the decelerated blow full in the torso, and the swordsman lunges forward with a roar of outrage at the sound of his nakama's ribs snapping, intending to stab the sneering Marine with Wado's jagged remains.

Zoro's anger and dismay and fear for his son and the blond who's gone down trying to defend them both is so great that for one brief moment Asura's extra arms shimmer back into existence for the second time in mere minutes, two of them wielding identical copies of his broken katana. This time the wavering mirage solidifies, striking with such vehemence that one slashing weapon actually connects and scores a superficial wound on Akainu's shoulder, slicing through the fringe of the Admiral's epaulette and cutting deeply enough to draw a thin spray of blood before the manifestation fades out again.

His defiant but ultimately futile attempt ends abruptly when another uniformed man- another godforsaken Admiral - Zoro immediately recognizes the smug bastard who nearly killed him at Sabaody - appears seemingly out of nowhere to launch a devastating attack from behind. Thankfully his blind side's protected by the structure of the staircase beside him, so the swordsman catches a brief glimpse of the foot sailing towards his head and spins in that direction, raising Shusui to
block.

And that's when the last of his luck runs out; the frantic counter's clumsy thanks to his swelling midsection and off-kilter center of gravity, the timing horribly off, and he watches in horror and disbelief as his newest sword strains and BENDS under the impact. The blow, which would have knocked him unconscious had it connected full-force, still hits him in the temple hard enough to send him sprawling, weapons flying from his grasp as he throws both arms beneath him to avoid falling directly on his stomach.

He's lying on his side, arm outstretched and clawing clumps of sod from the lawn deck in his desperation to wrap his singed fingers around Kitetsu's hilt, but the cursed sword's laying just out of reach, the guard and part of the handle wrap obscured by the brim of his captain's hat, and when Kizaru's second, slightly more restrained kick slams into his skull, that bright coronet of yellow straw with its wide red band is the last thing he sees before everything goes dark...

He rolls his head weakly to the left, studying the younger man nestled against him, and his breath catches in his throat at the sudden recollection of another far more pleasant but equally intense memory.

"... - really like that, b-but is Zoro sure?" His lover asks softly, resting his chin on the swordsman's bare collarbone and regarding him with shy excitement, and the older pirate feels such a strong sense of rightness that he can't speak but merely nods, and then Luffy's laughing brightly despite the tears brimming over and spilling down his face, and he throws both arms around the swordsman's neck and covers his flushed face with affectionate, enthusiastic kisses. "Okay- and if the baby's a girl, we'll name it after Zoro's friend, right?"

But it's not a girl, it's a boy- HE's a boy- Chopper said so- and the crew's NOT docked outside Thriller Bark celebrating their victory and waiting for him to recover from his encounter with Kuma. They're in the New World, or at least they WERE until the goddamn Admirals came and carted his ass off to Impel Down and isolation from everyone important to him and the bitch's repeated threats to disembowel him and cut his son to pieces under his dying gaze if he didn't let her-

His heart's abruptly thrumming in his chest, threatening to gallop out of control. No. NO. S- She's DEAD. She's dead because I KILLED her, and Luffy- Luffy brought me- he brought us- back to the ship. Me and-

His retrospection's finally come full-circle, filling in the missing gaps in his memory, and he suddenly finds himself unable to breathe despite the air being forced into his lungs by the oxygen tank parked by the bedside.

The baby. Chopper and Law- they said there was something wrong with the-!

He pushes his injured hand under the covers, nearly dislodging the iv catheter taped to the back as he pats frantically at himself, suffering momentary confusion because his belly still feels considerably swollen even though he's now awake and coherent enough to recognize there's no perceptible movement within, and then his remaining fingertips brush the rough line of neat stitches spanning his lower abdomen just above his groin. He traces them gingerly, struggling to comprehend why he feels so uneasy. Obviously the procedure was successfully completed if he's still alive to wonder what the hell's going on- but then something finally occurs to him that sends tendrils of fear coiling through his rapidly mounting anxiety.

Quiet. It's too quiet in here.

The room's not completely silent; his ears register the faint hiss of the metallic-tinged air passing
through his nose and mouth beneath the oxygen mask, the soft breathing of his sleeping crew mates and the rustling of sheets as well as Usopp's faint mumbling as the sniper rolls over and hugs Chopper tighter against him where they're both curled on the carpet... but there's no fussing or crying or any of the sort of distinct sounds the older pirate imagines must be associated with newborns.

That awful, cold sensation in his middle's crept into his chest, but this new chill has nothing to do with his body's reaction to abdominal surgery or being deprived of the extra warmth he's grown accustomed to feeling from the baby's occupation of his midsection. Why don't I HEAR him? Where the hell is?

"You're awake."

Zoro jumps, a muffled grunt of surprised dismay escaping him as the sudden movement produces a strangely painless but nauseating tugging sensation on the sutured flesh under his hand. His eye widens slightly at the sight of the man standing beside the bed, whose approach he somehow overlooked, and he paws clumsily at the mask on his face, dislodging it. "Wh-wee-" His tongue's thick and cotton dry and uncooperative in his mouth, and it makes speech difficult. "Where-"

"No, don't try to talk, and don't you dare try to get up either. Your tanuki warned me you don't follow doctors' orders very well." Slouching into the chair by the bedside, Law studies the swordsman with tired, bloodshot eyes whose surrounding sockets are smudged by fatigue, his mouth set in a firm, grim line that adds to the panic clanging dissonantly in the green-haired man's head.

"Why- 'kama all here," he manages around the sand-papery texture in his throat. "Need some- somebody t-t-to watch."

"My crew's guarding your ship, so there's no need to worry about scheduling watches. You should probably go back to sleep. Your body needs rest, Zoro-ya. You nearly died."

But sleep's the last thing on the first mate's mind. "Wh-Where's my- I want m-my-" he groans, his voice sounding raspy and strained, unaware he's weakly voicing nearly the same thing as Luffy several hours earlier. "Where's- the b-baby-?"

The Heart pirate winces despite himself, his gaze sliding away. "Not just now, alright? You'll see him soon enough, I promise." He runs a hand awkwardly through his hair. "Look, I'm sorry, Zoro-ya, I really am- but- there were some complications."

Incubator, Zoro thinks with a flash of inspiration and dazed relief. Chopper said we might need one if- But if that's true, then where is it? That small uneasy voice whispers in the back of his mind. On this guy's ship? Why not HERE?

But Law's shaking his head in weary denial. "You were hemorrhaging internally from placental abruption even before Mugiwara-ya carried you back to your ship. When I opened up your abdominal cavity, there was significant new bleeding, but I also found old, clotting fluid where part of the placenta was still attached to your intestine." The surgeon sighs. "If there'd been someone
available to perform the laparotomy right away, immediately after the abruption first occurred, I think
your son would've had better odds- but it seems the umbilical cord was barely providing adequate
support even before you and your crew realized there was a problem. By the time we actually
delivered the baby, you'd already lost a lot of blood... far more than I suspected possible during my
initial diagnosis."

"..." He stares at the doctor, unconsciously kneading his fingers against his stomach as
comprehension of what he's being told filters through the numbness pervading his mind. "No. ...NO.
Quit fucking around with me! I heard Chopper; he said he had plenty of-!"

"We tried, Zoro-ya. Your doctor insisted; he wouldn't listen- refused to take no for an answer when I
told him it was already too late, and he threatened to kick my ass if I didn't help him while Nico-ya
helped me finish sewing you back up. Truth is, transfusion's often more difficult with a neonate than
an adult, even under normal conditions, and in this case- we did everything we could, but between
the blood loss and prolonged oxygen deprivation... well, I'm afraid it just wasn't enough. I'm sorry."

The swordsman lets his head drop back against the pillow, staring blankly at the ceiling and taking
depth shuddering breaths that don't help alleviate the dark flowers blooming in his blurring vision.
Law's still talking, but the other man's voice is fading to a low unintelligible hum, explanations and
excuses alike muffled by the suffocating guilt sweeping through Zoro as he struggles to process the
unwelcome news.

*I thought- I thought everything came loose when I was trying to keep Luffy from going out and
getting himself killed, but- if the baby was already in trouble before then... Asura- oh god, it
happened when I summoned Asura, didn't it. DIDN'T IT. He doesn't just feel sick with the
realization- it feels as though his sinking, shriveling heart's dissolving in the churning acidic pit of his
stomach. I knew it was probably dangerous, but all I could- all I could think about was getting away from-

"Oi, Zoro-ya! If you don't stop hyperventilating, you're going to pass out! Shit, where'd I put-" The
Heart pirate fumbles for the stethoscope that's somehow become entangled in the cords of his hoodie
and hurriedly dons it to check his patient's heart rate, but Zoro ignores him, mentally beseeching
someone- anyone- to tell him he's mistaken. That everything until now's been his overactive
imagination, and even that he's actually still imprisoned in Impel Down and simply blindly stumbling
his way through some unpleasant dream because he's unknowingly dozed off while he waits for his
nakama to liberate him and his son.

*I- I'll take it back. All of it. Please, let me take it back! She can do whatever she wants to me, even-
even the thing with the trident again, if you'll just- listen, I'll scream this time, I swear- I'll even beg,
and you can have the rest of my fingers if you want, just please- please-!

He arches, struggling to rise with no idea of where he plans to go should he be successful. To search
for his child's body, possibly, or maybe even attack the rival pirate who's delivered the news. He
doesn't know. He just knows he doesn't want to be HERE, lying in this bed feeling as though
someone's kneeling on his chest. He manages to push himself up on one elbow before Law, cursing
angrily under his breath, jabs him in the arm with a loaded hypodermic and depresses the plunger
before he can jerk away, and then all at once his hold on reality's weakening again and he's sagging
helplessly back to the mattress as his system succumbs to the sedative's effects. "N-Nnn-o-
" PLEASE- GOD-

If he's sincerely expecting some sort of divine intervention, it doesn't come, but the weight beside
him on the bed shifts, accompanied by faint rustling and a soft whimper as Luffy stirs, instinctively
groping for the swordsman's left hand and then squeezing tightly when he's got their fingers laying
laced together in the rumpled sheets.

Although clearly meant to extend comfort, the gesture rudely extinguishes Zoro's desire to fight whatever concoction's racing through his veins, and now it's an unexpected relief as the older pirate's irreversible slide back into unconsciousness accelerates, because he doesn't want to face his waking captain. *My fault, Luffy, I'm sorry, it's my fault - my fault. My fault!*

He's blacking out, but his last disconnected thoughts send a surge of painful clarity through the grogginess overshadowing his mind. He's failed them both- failed the ones he loves most- because he wasn't strong enough. Despite throwing himself body, heart and soul into his training and bowing head and knee to Dracule Mihawk and doing everything required to mold himself into someone capable of defending his captain, his crew, his family, his home- he's STILL not strong enough. Not when it truly mattered, and he bitterly accepts this as proof of what he's stated persistently for most of his life.

There is no God.

There is no higher power or all-encompassing deity capable of receiving or answering Roronoa Zoro's prayers; there's no such thing and never has been and the empty ache in his chest reinforces what he learned years ago when Kuina died: that all the garbage about a loving God and sparrows falling and the sanctified protection of innocence is just that- complete and utter bullshit.

But if the swordsman's wrong- if there really is some supreme, absolute being out there somewhere, standing aside to observe impassively as children die- then he's one fucking cruel bastard.

xxx

"What a goddamn mess," Sanji mutters to Usopp and Franky as they stand together on the upper deck outside the dining hall, quietly watching the lawn deck below where Luffy's squatting with his head down and his arms wrapped around both knees, his ongoing internal struggle visible in the trembling of his shoulders and the occasional hitching sob that seizes his entire frame.

"H-How long you think he's gonna-?"

"I don't know, but-" The cook glances skywards, shielding his eyes while he gauges the sun's current location. "I'm pretty sure it's almost noon." He lowers his hand, fidgeting uncomfortably before finally deciding to shove both hands in his trouser pockets. "God, I hate this."

"Yeah..."

There's no telling when the despondent young pirate will choose to abandon his vigil, but it's been nearly forty-five minutes since Nami and Chopper, shaking and teary-eyed, fled to the observation room at the sight of their pale-faced captain slowly emerging from the infirmary with his lower lip caught firmly between his teeth and a small bundle cradled carefully in his arms.

The others had held their ground, as had Robin and Brook, still visible at the other end of the ship where they're standing near the helm and watching in silence.

"Well," Law sighs, hefting his nodachi a bit higher on his shoulder. ":you've got to admit it's a pretty weighty matter he's got to deal with now." He frowns. "Although-" Nodding his chin towards the stitched sailcloth shroud resting on the ground beside his grieving rival. "-speaking of weight... I sure hope he added enough to keep the kid's body down when he-"

"You shut the fuck up right now," Sanji snarls, his face contorting with hostility as he seizes the Heart captain by the collar. "If Luffy HEARS you-"
"No offense intended, Black Leg-ya. I just don't want to see Mugiwara-ya or any of you guys-especially him." He indicates the cyborg blubbering noisely beside them. "-totally lose your shit if the damn thing bobs back up after he throws it overboard."

The cook clenches his teeth, reminding himself for the dozenth time that this man saved Zoro's life, even as his hands ball into tight fists within his pockets. *Marimo would've died too if this bastard hadn't been there, so don't start anything. And Luffy's already got too much on his mind; he doesn't need your shit right now. 'Cause if you lose your cool and go after this smug asshole, there's gonna be a whole sub's worth of guys all over you- if he doesn't just snap his fingers and swap out your head for somebody's ass first.*

In all honesty, though, he really doesn't care very much about that part right now. A fight would be a welcome distraction and preferable to simply standing back and watching his nakama fall apart. But even though he wants to drive his fist through the nonchalant expression on the other man's face, his concern for his captain holds him back. In part. "Listen, you scruffy shit- I don't like you. You're a prick, and you don't belong on our ship, so just keep your shitty comments to yourself."

"Look, I'm not trying to piss anybody off- I'm just telling it like I see it."

"Yeah, maybe- but it sure don't make you sound like any less of an asshole, Sideburns. I think you oughta follow Eyebrow-bro's advice 'n just shut the hell up before we drop YOU overboard 'n see how fast YOU sink."

The surgeon glances back to find Franky, who's angrily swiping tears from his face, also eyeing him with hostility. "Fine. Damn, you're a touchy bunch, aren't you."

"No, just human," the shipwright snaps, yanking off his sunglasses to glower down at Law with red-rimmed eyes. "Maybe you could learn something from-" He breaks off, his attention captured by movement on the deck below, as he pauses berating their visitor to watch as Luffy reluctantly gathers up the pitiful bundle from the grass beside him and stares at it, then changes his mind and gently lays it back down- only to immediately snatch it back up and hug the sailcloth containing his child's body tightly to his chest, bowing his head to bury his crumpling, tormented face against the rough material.

"Shit." Franky shoves his glasses back onto his face, his jaw quivering. "Curly-bro, Nose-bro, I'm sorry- I can't stand watchin' this anymore." The cyborg pushes away from the railing, none too subtly jostling the Heart pirate he's excluded from his apology out of the way, and disappears into the dining hall, slamming the door shut behind him.

The others remain at their posts, although when the cook raises his gaze from the scene below to assuage the reactions of their crew mates at the bow, he sees Robin's crossed her arms beneath her breasts, surreptitiously clutching both elbows and hugging herself. The historian's shoulders are slightly hunched, discomfort visible on her face, and with a flash of dismay, Sanji realizes why she's so upset, more so than he expected. *She was there. She- and Franky- they were both there when the baby-"

"C-Can't this- can't this WAIT?" Usopp asks suddenly, turning pleading eyes towards the cook. "Luffy's- well- I mean, just look at him! And even though Law said he's gonna be okay, Zoro didn't wake up again yet and... what if he doesn't want a- a-" He can't bring himself to say it. Burial at sea. "-THIS? What if he wants a gra- a grave to visit? Can't we at least just wait 'til we get to Water Seven?"

Sanji winces. Sometimes he forgets that despite his vast enthusiasm for the ocean- and life as a pirate in general- the sniper's spent most of his life on land and therefore isn't accustomed to the stark, inescapable necessity for certain nautical practices. To be honest, he's not entirely sure Usopp's
wrong about what Zoro might want; while he's never personally talked to either of them about his childhood friend Kuina, the girl who once owned Wado, they've heard enough snippets from Luffy to know about the swordsman's customary visits to her tombstone before he eventually left his village in search of Mihawk and the title he's sought for so much of his life.

But the truth of the matter remains that they're still quite some distance from land. There are certain... difficulties... associated with transporting human remains at sea, and while he hasn't spoken a word to the crew about it, the captain himself must recognize what needs to be done, if his heart-wrenching behavior on the lawn below's any indication. "Usopp, I get what you're saying, but-

"Look, Nose-ya; your crew's looking at another day or two before you reach Water Seven- and that's if you guys leave this afternoon and don't run into any more trouble. You'll also be sailing a summer current. At these temperatures, a body- especially a small one- isn't going to keep for long without some serious refrigeration. So if you really want to go down there and explain to your captain why he needs to put his kid in the goddamn freezer, then be my guest, but that's a bit harsh even for me," Law states bluntly, and Usopp flinches as though he's been struck and turns immediately towards Sanji as though expecting a rebuttal.

The cook won't meet his eyes. "Sorry, Usopp. I hate to say it... but he's right."

"This isn't FAIR," the sniper protests. "None of it! Why the hell does stuff like this HAPPEN?"

Why does ANYTHING happen? Sanji thinks tiredly. Why'd Marimo even end up pregnant in the first pla-?

"Son of a bitch," Law hisses suddenly, hurriedly shrugging his nodachi from his shoulder so he can rest it against the wall by the dining hall door and go sprinting for the stairs. "OI!"

Startled and angry he's causing a disturbance at a time that demands solemnity and quiet respect, two Straw Hats start to raise their voices in protest- until they see where the Heart pirate's headed.

"What the hell-? I thought you said he was unconscious!" Sanji demands, grabbing Usopp by an overall strap and dragging the sniper with him as he hurries after the rival captain.

"H-He was, I swear! They said they pumped him full of enough meds to keep him sleeping 'til we got to Water Seven 'n that's why-"

"RORONOA-YA, GET YOUR ASS BACK IN BED!" The tattooed man below bellows, waving frantically for Robin and Brook to cut the swordsman off before he reaches the top of the stairs. "OI, NICO-YA, BONE-YA! Get down there and get that dumb shit back in bed where he belongs before he falls on his face!" Why aren't those goddamn drugs working- and how the FUCK did you get past Bepo?

His patient's not only escaped the women's quarters but also managed to free himself from the iv lines and shoddily wrapped himself in one of the bed sheets, and although the swordsman's grimacing horribly at the pain of moving upright and tightly jamming one clenched fist against his lower abdomen to minimize the strain, he's still groping determinedly for the staircase railing with his free hand.

"Oi, Zoro, don't-! Nngh," Sanji gasps suddenly, clutching his torso. "Damn it!" Cursing at the painful twinge in still-mending ribs stressed by his hasty pursuit of the surgeon now hurrying across the lawn deck, Sanji shoves the sniper ahead of him. "Usopp, don't let him fall!!"

Taken aback by Zoro's unexpected appearance, Robin's slow to respond to Brook’s urging that she's
better suited to stopping their nakama quickly without injuring him further, and her hesitation costs her the chance to safely secure him on the landing. He's already made it down the first few steps, wobbling dangerously.

If she makes a grab for him now, he'll probably fall; while she's not in a position to see the effort of remaining both vertical and mobile emblazoned on his face, it's also evident in his hunched shoulders and stiff posture. Afraid the sudden touch of disembodied hands will startle him badly enough to send him tumbling, she abandons the thought of securing him with Hana Hana no Mi and hurries down the ladder to join him on the stairs. As she reaches his side and ducks under his arm to support him, Usopp arrives on the steps below and waits anxiously until they draw close enough for him to seize the swordsman's opposite arm and squeeze in beside him.

Sanji, struggling to breathe and massaging his rib cage, gives a shaky sigh of relief when the trio succeeds in descending to the lawn deck without incident. "Marimo! What the- hell were you-thinking, trying to-?"

Zoro ignores him, eye resolutely fixed on a point past the cook's accusing but concerned face, and Robin and Usopp fall away when he shrugs them off, unsure how to physically restrain him without hurting him and reluctantly obeying Law's gesture for them to stand their ground and not interfere.

"If he's that determined, just let him go and we'll see what happens."

Luffy's risen to his feet and backed a few steps away from the commotion with both arms clutching protectively around his sailcloth-wrapped bundle, and he stares up at the approaching swordsman with wide, sorrowful eyes. "Z-Zoro-?"

The older pirate ignores his partner's apprehension, gaze locked on the object cradled in his arms. When he reaches out to touch the coarse fabric with a shaking hand, fingers twitching as they make contact with and then tentatively trace the shape beneath the makeshift winding sheet, the rubber man stifles a sharp noise of confused agitation and warily tightens his grasp.

"Oi, Mugiwara-ya, don't move; stay put and let him-" Law warns, but it's too late. The Straw Hat captain's already taken one faltering step backwards, and Zoro's teeth bare in a silent snarl as he lunges forward and wrenches the baby's concealed body from his lover's arms, turning his back to avoid the desperate hands that immediately try to snatch it back.

"Shit," the surgeon mutters, rubbing wearily at his face. "That could've gone better."

The sound of ripping seams and Luffy's subsequent anguished cry sends Usopp fleeing across the dead grass into the men's quarters, while Robin calmly turns and walks aimlessly away until she finds herself standing with both hands braced against the fire-scorched trunk of the tree by the aquarium bar wall, vision obscured by tears as she stares down at the remains of the rope swing half-hidden in the grass beneath her feet.

Overhead, Brook moves towards the bow, finding himself utterly bereft of words. The musician's played and sung numerous old dirges and laments- even composed a few new ones during his years drifting alone in the Florian Triangle- but he's seldom done so since joining the Straw Hats. Those songs were never meant for this vessel- not for the Thousand Sunny, with all its rooms echoing joyous laughter and friendly banter- or its enthusiastic, determined crew.

Now, however, both ship and crew mates alike have been transformed into something he doesn't recognize, he thinks morosely as he surveys the horizon and struggles to tune out the sad spectacle below, and there's no language- no melody existing or yet unwritten that's truly capable describing the full extent of his nakama's tragic loss.
Unaware of the dry lawn crackling beneath his bare toes or the sudden gust of wind that whips the edge of the sheet wrapped carelessly about him against his cheek, Zoro's equally oblivious to his captain's pleas and frantic tugging at his arm as he stares down at the excruciatingly motionless form now laying exposed in his hands, which are no longer trembling but frozen stiff and cold as marble.

His eye keeps capturing minute, exquisitely-rendered details: closed eyes, each crowned with a frightening fine row of lashes... tiny button nose... a dark lock of hair caught and ruffled by the same passing wind that's threatening to tear loose his own precariously anchored shroud. Captivated, he ignores Luffy's continuing entreaties and absentmindedly shifts the bundle to one arm so he's free to shove the captain away when his elbow's tugged harder.

Sobbing brokenly, his lover punches him halfheartedly in the shoulder. He doesn't notice.

*Eight months- eight months I carried you, and I felt so goddamn huge near the end, so how can you be so- so small? How could my back hurt so much when you barely weigh anything at all?*

The younger pirate beside him makes a noise like a wounded animal and hits him again, harder, and this time he strikes back without thinking, nearly knocking the rubber man off his feet.

*And Chopper was wrong. He was WRONG. You're perfect- you've got the tiniest fingers I've ever seen in my life, but they're perfect, just like the rest of you. There's nothing wrong with you, absolutely NOTHING. Except- you should be pink all over. And wiggling around in my arms. And- and crying or cooing or SOMETHING. But you're not, because you're-*

As his mind skips away from the finality of the next word, grasps for something less offensive and less likely to send his sanity screaming into a downward spiral, he finds his gaze drawn back to his son's hair. *Black, huh? You might've looked a lot like your namesake when you got older, only without the freckles... but you definitely would've favored Sencho over me. I- I'll have to tell the shit- the shitty cook that he was- he was-*

The sudden, horrible urge to laugh seizes him, and he bites his tongue hard enough to draw blood, knowing if the bubble of hysterical merriment rising in his throat escapes his lips, he won't be able to stop.

*After everything- after EVERYTHING I did to protect you- after the horrible shit I let that bitch do to me to keep you safe... it was all for nothing because, in the end, I killed you myself and-*

Luffy's back, pummeling his arm and yanking at it, and the swordsman clasps the torn sailcloth and its contents more tightly to his chest, grabbing the captain by the wrist and hauling him onto the tips of his toes. They glower wordlessly at one another, jaws clenched and faces dark with resentment, each too caught up in his own personal despair to recognize they're on the verge of brawling when they should be comforting each other.

Usopp's crying soundlessly. Robin's simply staring at their crew mates in mute horror. Galvanized by fear and dismay, Sanji grabs the man standing beside him by the collar and shakes him, voice angry but imploring. "Goddamn it, DO SOMETHING- make them stop before they end up in a fucking fist fight!"

Law stares at him silently, serenely, and the cook releases him with a growl. He knows he should follow his own advice and break the two men apart before they're reduced to not just petty squabbling but outright brawling over their dead child, but he's afraid. Afraid he'll make things worse, afraid he'll unintentionally hurt Marimo or - even worse - accidentally make him drop the bundle he's clutching so obstinately.
Torn by indecision, the agitated blond's shortly joined by Bepo, who rubbing ruefully at his bruised skull and looking extremely embarrassed immediately starts apologizing to his own captain for being caught off-guard.

"You're lucky Zoro-ya was more interested in his son," the surgeon tells him with a scowl. "- otherwise he likely would have killed you."

It only takes a moment for things to go from bad to worse when the Straw Hat captain, struggling recklessly to free himself from Zoro's grip and reclaim their child's body, catches the swordsman in the side with one violently flailing foot, and the older pirate immediately releases him, doubling over and gasping as a thin red line begins seeping through the sheet stretched across his sutured abdomen.

He doesn't - thank god for small favors, Sanji breathes - drop the sailcloth bundle, although his hold loosens considerably, enabling Law to step forward, deftly pluck the entire thing from his grasp and shove it unceremoniously into Luffy's arms. "Get the hell out of here and take that with you!"

"I DIDN'T MEAN TO!" Luffy's wailing even as he hugs the baby against his chest, animosity having vanished instantaneously at the sight of his swordsman's blood. "ZORO, I'M SORRY, I DIDN'T MEAN TO-!"

"I told you, get the fuck out of here and go do what you need to do!" The Heart pirate shouts at him, grunting as Zoro utters a strangled howl of distress and plows into his back, straining to reach past him towards the rubber man, who's too shaken to heed the other captain's instructions and stopped retreating after taking only a few slow backwards steps.

"MUGIWARA-YA, GET."

"Come with me, Sencho-san," Robin calls, reaching towards the younger pirate. She's recovered much of her composure, although her face is still deathly pale and her extended hand trembling. "Chopper's on his way. Let him and Trafalgar-san take care of Zoro."

Luffy glances helplessly between her and his partner, hesitating, until the historian closes the distance between them to wrap an arm around his shoulders and gently turn him in the direction of the hatch leading down to the soldier's dock.

The coarse cry that erupts from Zoro's throat when he sees where they're going makes everyone on deck cringe- even Law. In the observation room above, Nami- left alone when the Straw Hat's doctor rushed from the room following Robin's urgent request for him to report to the lawn deck- slumps onto her elbows against her blackened survey desk and covers both ears with her hands, because the swordsman's voice holds that same inconsolable suffering she heard in their captain's months ago, while he was crouched on that dock and clutching Wado's broken hilt, unsure if his swordsman and their as yet unborn child were still among the living.

Robin, who also recalls the same heartrending sound, closes her eyes in regret- and nearly loses her hold on Luffy when he struggles to escape her guiding arm, obviously intending to return to the older pirate's side. "Come on, Luffy. He'll be alright. Let me help you."

"Robin-" The captain's voice breaks; even though he can't see what's happening behind them, he can hear Zoro's incomprehensible cries of protest and Law's sharp scolding - the surgeon sounds kind of like Nami, he thinks disconnectedly and is horrified when the comparison almost makes him laugh out loud - punctuated by muffled grunts and curses as he endeavors to hold the Straw Hats' first mate back long enough for them to close the hatch behind them. "Robin, I don't know if I can-"

"I know this must be... extremely difficult-" the historian tells him softly, lending extra arms to
support his weight as they descend the ladder so he's not forced to relinquish the firm grip on the bundle in his arms. "-and I can't pretend to imagine how it feels, but I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

xxx

If Law's hoping that sending the greatest source of Zoro's irrationality out of sight will calm him down, he's sadly mistaken. When Chopper arrives, bounding down the steps leading from the stern to the lawn deck and panting rapidly from the race necessary for retrieving his bag from the women's quarters, the swordsman's still violently resisting the Heart captain's attempts to subdue him or- at the very least- convince him to sit down.

Sanji looks on, stunned and speechless, at a scene reminiscent of the previous afternoon, when he and the other Straw Hats had tackled their captain to the ground, as the exasperated Heart pirate eventually steps back and orders his own flustered crew to bring down the uncooperative patient.

Anyone else would take one look at the surgeon's men and think twice about resisting, let alone someone already injured and suffering from torn surgical sutures, but the Pirate Hunter's never been easily intimidated and right now he's at least half-mad with grief as well, so it still takes Bepo and the others several minutes to wrestle him to the ground long enough for Chopper to jab him with the sedative-loaded hypodermic the doctor's been hiding behind his back. Zoro shoots his nakama a betrayed glare before he finally collapses under the Heart pirates piled on his back. They cautiously climb to their feet when they're sure he's unconscious, giving the Straw Hat's own physician room to retrieve him, and the reindeer's face is scrunched in misery and wet with tears as he takes Heavy Point to lift the limp, bleeding swordsman in his arms.

Law, grumbling angrily at himself for somehow underestimating the injured man's resilience despite his colleague's repeated warnings and his own observations, orders his men back to their own ship before following Chopper up the stairs and back into the women's quarters, leaving Sanji alone on the lawn deck.

The cook collapses onto the lowest step, staring glumly at the fat crimson droplets of his nakama's blood glistening on the Adam wood beside him, and he's still sitting there with his head in his hands when Luffy returns from below-decks- alone, empty-handed and uncharacteristically quiet.

Eyes hidden beneath his hat's lowered brim, the captain trudges past him without a word, and Sanji listlessly considers reaching out to touch the rubber man's arm- to stop him, share a brief word of commiseration, give a reassuring squeeze, anything really- but by the time he raises a hand, Luffy's already halfway up the staircase and out of reach, and the blond doesn't bother calling after him. He doesn't know what to say.
Chapter 18

When the Thousand Sunny finally limps into Water Seven's main port, accompanied at a distance by the submarine that's dutifully escorted the ship the remaining way because it's become quite clear to Law that the traumatized Straw Hat captain and his equally overwhelmed crew will likely find themselves boarded and clapped in kairoseki and irons by the occupants of the first Marine vessel to blunder upon them if he doesn't lend a hand, the ship's immediately recognized by members of the Galley-La yard, despite the absence of its Jolly Roger.

The pirates onboard operate on autopilot alone as they secure the rigging and go mechanically about the myriad other tasks necessary for docking, oblivious to the speculative crowd gathering below and not responding to the questions being shouted at them, but once they're anchored in the harbor, no one's quite sure what to do; it's been a long time since their last visit and following that year's record-breaking high tide, the island's undergone extensive reconstruction, so they don't recognize most of the buildings and other landmarks within eyesight.

Following a brief exchange with Sanji, who's reluctantly agreed to temporarily take charge following the others' unanimous election of him as acting captain - it's looking very unlikely Luffy will emerge from the women's quarters where he's sequestered himself with their comatose first mate long enough to give the crew the actual order to disembark - Franky vacates the ship and heads into the city in search of the man who might be the only one capable of helping them right now.

As he makes his way along the dock, the shipwright can't help cringing as he catches snippets of conversations between the people he's passing.

"-swear I've seen that brig sloop before, but I can't quite remember where-"

"How the hell can you NOT know that ship?"

"Yeah, it definitely belongs to Mugiwara Luffy, but what's it doing here? The paper said he-

"-wonder if the Marines know he's back on this side of the Red Line?"

_Damn it, Franky, why'd you hafta go 'n make the damn thing so easy to recognize? If it wasn't for that bloody huge lion head, then maybe those G-1 assholes mighta mistaken Sunny for some other ship 'n not come gunnin' for us, 'n then maybe we coulda made it here before-

The cyborg swipes angrily at the trickle of moisture escaping from beneath his lenses. _Shit! C'mon, bro, keep it together- you gotta job to do._

He hasn't gone more than a few yards from the Sunny before he spots a familiar face. "Oi, Paulie!"

The foreman- now Vice President of Galley-La if Franky's memory serves correctly- glances over upon hearing his name, starts to look away and does a disbelieving double-take. While Paulie's gotten a good look at the most recent wanted posters in both the regular newspaper and the Mizu Mizu as well, where Franky's dubious notoriety as a former Water Seven resident always earns him special consideration, seeing the man towering over him in the flesh is far more dramatic than a flat two-dimensional image printed on a piece of paper. "Fr-Franky? What the hell did you do to yourself?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean BF-37. Yeah, I know it's super 'n all, but you'll hafta wait to hear about it 'til later, 'cause right now I gotta find Bakaburg. You seen-?"
"What're you doing here? The recent papers all claim the Mugiwara crew's busy causing trouble in the New World, so why-?"

"We were there alright, but we were mindin' our own goddamn business 'n- look, some real bad shit went down and I really need to talk to-" The cyborg's keen ears detect a ripple of excitement passing through the crowd around them, and he turns to see that Luffy's standing on the balcony overlooking the lawn deck. No one wanted to disturb the captain with the news of their arrival earlier, and he's apparently finally come to see why the ship's no longer moving. Now that he's emerged, however, he's simply clutching the brim of his hat with one hand and blinking down at the strangers yelling his name, looking absolutely bewildered by the attention and so lost and unlike himself that Franky wants to burst into tears.

Don't you dare- he's got enough to deal with right now without his stupid shipwright bawlin' like a-

A chill seizes his spine and sends the hair on the nape of his neck standing on end as he realizes where his thoughts are leading him. 

"-fuckin' hell."

"You alright?" Paulie asks, frowning, because the other man's glaring at the cobblestones beneath their feet, his massive hands balled into fists.

"Just fine," Franky mutters, forcing his fingers to relax as he watches the figure on the deck turn and vanish through the women's quarters' doorway only to return a few moments later sans hat.

Guess you know where he left it, not that Zoro-bro's awake to see it or care, but who are you to judge if that's what makes him feel-

"Nmaa, nmaa- would you care to explain what you're doing here, Bakanky?" A matter-of-fact and instantly recognizable voice asks at the cyborg's elbow, and he glances down to find the Water Seven mayor- his former fellow apprentice and the man he also considers his unofficial foster brother- standing at his side with Tyrannosaurus cupped in one well-manicured hand and looking slightly puzzled as his eyes flit over the Sunny's battered frame before settling on the Straw Hat captain who's standing on the balcony, now gripping the railing and staring down at them.

"Oh, jeez, well that ended up bein' a lot easier than I expected- I thought I was gonna have to tear the whole damn city apart tryin' to find you. Got somethin' to ask you."

Iceburg looks up sharply at the joint tones of relief and desperation in that voice, all traces of amusement fading as Franky removes his sunglasses, fully revealing his haggard expression and slightly bloodshot eyes. The Galley-La president frowns, quickly depositing his pet mouse in its usual place inside his pocket and turning expectantly to Paulie.

"Don't look at me. He still hasn't told me what the hell they're doing here."

"Franky? What in the world's going on? I've never seen you look so-"

"I'll explain on the way. Let's go; I'm pretty sure Mugiwara's waitin' for us."

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Although he's reasonably shocked and somewhat confused by the brief story Franky's relayed to him as they made their way down to the ship and then across the lawn deck to the top of the stairs where Luffy's waiting for them, Iceberg's a compassionate man and he's also been a politician long enough to know the situation requires delicate handling. While his head's spinning with a million and one questions - Did you really launch an all-out attack on Impel Down with the assistance of a giant squid? Are the Marines chasing you even now, and are my citizens in danger? How the hell did you
impregnate your MALE lover in the first place? - he knows this is not the time and place to ask them, so he allows nothing more than sympathy and support to show on his face. "Franky says your swordsman's asleep, so this may be the best time to move him."

"Not sleeping." The captain mumbles, ruffling a hand through his untidy hair and refusing to look them in the eyes. "Drugged. Law told Chopper to keep Zoro that way 'til we got here."

"The Ass-hat Surgeon figured it'd be safer that way- didn't want anybody else gettin' hurt." The cyborg offers awkwardly when Iceburg flashes him a startled look, struggling for the right words to explain why they deemed it necessary to forcibly render their own nakama unconscious and finding it extremely difficult to elaborate with Luffy standing right there listening. "Y'see, Zoro-bro didn't- didn't take this thing too well, 'n-"

"Zoro freaked out 'cause I wouldn't let 'im hold our baby," the younger pirate states bluntly, and Franky winces at his crew mate's admission as he finally meets their gazes with hurt, unsettled eyes. "He didn't want me to- didn't want me to- to- and then I- Franky, I hit him when he was already-!"


The rubber man swallows audibly, his lower jaw quivering as he squeezes the Adam wood banister beneath his hands tightly enough to turn his knuckles white and draw a creak of protest from the ship.

"We didn't know where else to go. We were headed here to- but after- ah, hell, we couldn't stay out there so we just came here anyway," Franky murmurs, and Iceburg catches movement in the corner of his eye as the rag-tag crew of remaining Straw Hats who've silently gathered on the lawn below shift uncomfortably, studying their own feet, watching the waves rolling forward to lap against Sunny's hull, looking anywhere and everywhere but at their captain's tormented expression or each other. Seeing such blatant defeat in the faces of people he's watched cheerfully take on everything from Aqua Laguna to CP9 agents to the populace of the Judicial Island itself... it leaves Iceburg feeling very uneasy.

While the captain and his swordsman- first mate now, according to Franky- might have been the ones to somehow miraculously conceive the baby, their nakama obviously feel the child's loss just as strongly, and he chides himself for not remembering that, unlike most of the other pirate crews he's encountered, this crew's always been more of a family unit than just a group of individuals banding together for a common purpose. He hears the truth resonating inside the emotional distress in Franky's voice, and when he studies the group below, it's painfully evident in every cell of their tense frames and in the dark shadows in the eyes of everyone but the skeleton- and even that unusual figure exudes his own distinct air of despair.

Iceburg's well-acquainted with the heartache of losing family, but because he doesn't have children and has never really thought too much about doing so, he can't imagine how the crew feels- how the Straw Hat captain and his swordsman feel- about having the baby snatched from their grasp before they even got a chance to know it. No- HIM. Before they got to know HIM. Franky did say the child was a boy.

"Whatever you need," the Galley-La president promises, laying a hand on Luffy's shoulder. "Whatever you need, it's yours and if I don't have it, I'll find a way to get it for you."

The young pirate mumbles something, scrubbing at his eyes with the knuckles of both hands, and Iceburg leans forward, keeping his voice gentle. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I didn't catch-"

"... can't pay it back. Nami says we're broke 'cause we used everything to fix Sunny just enough so
we wouldn't sink but Sunny's still all messed up and Franky says it'll cost a lot to put everything back to the way it was- but we don't even have money for food, and we NEED food; we need MEAT."
The captain asserts despairingly, his voice cracking slightly. "'cause Zoro's gonna need something to eat when he wakes up or he's not gonna get better, but we don't have any-"

"Don't be ridiculous," Iceburg scolds softly, squeezing the shoulder trembling beneath his fingers reassuringly because the rubber man's faltering explanation's taken on the edge of pending hysteria. "What's mine is yours, and if you're worrying that I expect something in return, you need to stop that right now. I'm doing this for you because you're my friends, and you'd do the same thing for me. In fact- you already have. So don't go concerning yourself with reimbursing me."

"Ice-ossan..." Luffy stares up at the mayor with eyes growing steadily more watery, and then he throws both arms around the older man's waist and hugs him tightly albeit carefully to avoid crushing the mouse in his pocket. "-th-thank you."

"Nmaa, there's no need for that either. Now let's see to your swordsman and everyone else. I'm sure you're all exhausted."

To the crew's immense relief, their benefactor immediately takes charge, clearing the dock and sternly dispersing any curious onlookers determined to find out what business the Straw Hat pirates have with Water Seven's most influential figure.

xxx

Despite his distress at Zoro's drugged and unresponsive state, Luffy's forced to admit that Law's right. It's much easier to move the injured pirate off the ship while he's unconscious, dead to the world and completely unaware of the hands transferring him from bed to stretcher, and it's undoubtedly far safer for his nakama as well. None of them have forgotten his violent reaction to being startled awake by Nami, and even though they know he can't feel them touching him, they keep their voices low and try very hard not to jostle him more than necessary despite the surgeon's repeated assurances that he'll keep sleeping even if they accidentally dump him in the harbor.

The Heart pirate's honesty earns him several cold glares and one invitation to intimately acquaint himself with the rectal cavity of the blissfully ignorant yagara bull waiting to escort them through the city's canals- the latter courtesy of the infuriated cook- and all conversation abruptly ceases. Silence seems appropriate now anyway, with the rubber man crouching beside the gurney and clutching their crewmate's limp, unresponsive hand, reddened eyes mercifully hidden beneath the shadow of his hat.

Franky, pleased that Law's declared his intent to remain on his own ship rather than accompany them to the structure serving as both Iceburg's home and the Galley-La headquarters, barely restrains himself from presenting one large middle finger as they pull away from the dock. He's pretty sure Nami, who normally gets on his case about such rude gestures, will pretend not to notice and that for once Sanji won't make an issue of him offending the ladies, but he settles for a dark scowl. Flipping the bird seems childish and far too inadequate to describe the contempt he feels for the other man.

You mighta saved Haramaki-bro's life, Sideburns- but you're still an asshole.

Iceburg himself guides the weary crew to a pair of joined suites shortly following their arrival and, after ensuring they're well-supplied with clean bedding and other basic necessities, respectfully retreats with the admonishment that they notify him immediately of any additional needs.

Unsure how his patient will react upon waking and remembering the events of the past few days, Chopper firmly insists on clearing the room before he administers the dose that will reverse the older pirate's medication-induced slumber, and everyone accepts their banishment without complaint-
except the captain, who inadvertently reduces the reindeer to tears by insisting he isn't leaving, not considering what happened the last time he was kicked out of the room. He doesn't mean to make the Zoan cry- not really- but his outburst pays off by triggering Chopper's pervading guilt over the baby's death, and he's allowed to stay.

In the end, however, all the concerns about their crew mate inadvertently attacking his nakama don't matter. Moments after regaining consciousness, Zoro blinks listlessly at the worried faces peering down at him, sighs, closes his eye again and turns his face towards the wall, dismissing them both. Luffy spends the remainder of the evening and then the long hours until dawn curled at the swordsman's side, listening to his slow breathing and painfully aware his lover's awake but uncommunicative. Waiting anxiously for the older pirate to say something- anything- the rubber man periodically runs gentle fingers through his hair and strokes his cheek in hopes of prompting a response, but although he accepts the caresses- or rather suffers them without complaint- Zoro makes no attempt to strike up a conversation.

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He's still refusing to speak the next morning, but he does utter a faint growling noise and turn briefly and devastatingly combative despite his captain's restraining arms when Law pays a brief visit to check his sutures, prompting the disgruntled surgeon to mutter a scathing remark about wounded tigers as he resorts to addressing his own bleeding forearm with antiseptic solution and bandages. The Pirate Hunter's weapons, whole and damaged alike, might be currently residing in a long wooden storage box in the next room, but the Straw Hat's first mate obviously doesn't need them- the man's got jaws like a goddamn steel trap.

Alright, so he nailed you good, but it was your own blasted fault, Trafalgar, the tattooed man scolds himself silently as he stuffs the wastebasket to overflowing with bloodstained bandages he's unrolled from the swordsman's waist and hips, traded for a simple gauze pad that'll be less confining and much easier to change. Should've known he'd react badly to somebody poking and prodding at him and paid way more frickin' attention to just how tense he was getting. And you probably should've avoided mentioning the kid when Black Leg-ya asked you why the guy still looks pregnant.

Even without the baby's presence to stretch his flesh to maximum capacity, Zoro's belly is still distressingly distended from fluid retention caused by the abdominal surgery, and although the crew reluctantly accepts the visiting doctor's assurance that the tissue should start retracting as soon as his patient's on his feet and walking, they have a hard time looking at the reminder of what's been lost. Despite- or perhaps because of- the older pirate's disturbing insistence on ignoring his swollen midsection as though refusing to acknowledge anything below his breastbone even exists.

-unless someone makes the mistake of touching him there, at which point he reacts immediately and violently, as they've just discovered.

Law gives detailed post-operative care instructions to Chopper and refuses to leave until he secures a promise from his fellow captain to meet him at the dock in the next few days, warning the younger man he'll not only hunt him down but personally drag him out of his convalescent partner's bed if he doesn't show up before the Heart pirates' submarine is scheduled to depart.

He knows Luffy probably won't want to hear what he's got to say, but after only a brief time of watching the Straw Hat crew's increasingly awkward interactions and their captain's preoccupation with his silent first mate, he knows they've got a serious problem on their hands. Not that he particularly CARES about their emotional states, he assures himself, but someone's made him a promise and the New World to where he's planning to soon return is going to be an awfully boring place without some serious competition. He hopes it doesn't take these people too long to get their
shit together and follow- but it's looking like that will depend entirely on the rival captain.

*I've got a bad feeling, Mugiwara-ya; things like this usually get worse before they get better.*

The remainder of the day drags on for what seems like forever, and the crew spends it confined to the second floor where their rooms are located, wandering the hallways and speaking to each other in hushed, clipped tones. Usopp gets turned around coming back from the bathroom and can't help wondering how many times their directionally-challenged nakama's going to get lost when he finally abandons the bed he's thus far refused to leave.

Nami and Robin find the wayward sniper huddled on the floor only three doors down from the one he was trying to find, sobbing quietly into his elbow and clutching a small object that he quickly shoves into his overalls at their approach, staggering upright and greeting them with an enormous, tremulous smile as he assures them he was just resting his eyes for a minute.

"Liar," the navigator accuses softly, studying his damp cheeks and bloodshot eyes, but although her gaze lingers on the shaking hand pressed protectively over his pocket, she doesn't demand to see what he's hiding as she and the historian help him to his feet.

He doesn't bother disputing her accusation. He doesn't release her hand either, fingers gripping hers as though he's afraid she might shake him loose and abruptly disappear.

When Sanji emerges into the hallway several minutes later, alarmed by everyone's prolonged absence and determined to find out what's taking them so long, he discovers Usopp and Nami clinging helplessly to each other and Robin, the older woman moist-eyed and solemn as she embraces her weeping crew mates in a tangle of extra limbs.

The cook makes sure no one goes anywhere alone after this incident. Although insisting members of the crew stay in pairs or larger groups might seem excessive, he reasons he's earned his paranoia- and they seem more relieved than annoyed.

Honestly, keeping tabs on everyone ought to be Luffy's job, but the captain's been distant and quietly moody since their arrival at Water Seven. In fact, he's notably absent for most of the first day, spending hour after hour sitting with his bed-bound, closemouthed swordsman and watching him continue to stare blankly at the wall, while the other Straw Hats give them space by loitering aimlessly in the adjoining room.

The rubber man doesn't actively seek conversation with them, but he does acknowledge their presence and respond to their questions and observations, even if he's lacking his usual vigor. Zoro, on the other hand-

Despite Law's patient- and repeated- insistence that Zoro spoke to him briefly after waking following the surgery, at first Chopper's concerned the older pirate might have permanently damaged his vocal cords during the actual laparotomy, when he was screaming loudly enough to make himself heard at the opposite end of the ship. But the first night, when he bolts upright spitting curses and howling for the woman haunting his dreams to "leave me- leave US- the fuck alone," he scares his crew mates sleeping in the next room so badly that Sanji nearly kicks Usopp through the wall, and they realize the lack of communication stems from a case of "won't" rather than "can't."

Crowding anxiously around the bed to help their troubled captain wake and subdue the panic-stricken swordsman, they quickly discover that handling their wild-eyed, nightmare-spooked nakama's a difficult not to mention DANGEROUS endeavor, and there's several bloody noses, split lower lips and other minor injuries before they're able to calm him enough to stop swinging fists and kicking at them.
No one complains. Not even Sanji, who's been punched in the chest forcefully enough that he knows his still-mending ribs are likely to ache for days.

Recognizing there's no way anyone's getting back to sleep, the cook enlists Robin and Brook and slips away to procure coffee, tea and hot chocolate from the Galley-La kitchen.

When the trio returns, everyone sits next door sipping the hot liquid and holding short, stilted conversations while pretending they're not, in reality, listening intently to Luffy's futile attempts to coax Zoro into responding with more than reluctant grunts, nods or head shakes to his plaintive inquiries.

No one suggests closing the door. Like Sanji, the others are uncomfortable with the prospect of any of their number- particularly their captain and first mate- being out of sight for too long, and although Iceburg drops by in the morning and reissues his offer of private rooms for each of them, the Straw Hats refuse. The slightly cramped quarters don't bother them, and if some of them are sleeping on the floor or doubling up on the bed not already occupied by Zoro and the captain, who stubbornly refuses to sleep unless he's sure the older pirate's safely within easy reach beside him, at least they're surrounded by nakama.

A few weeks later, perched on the balcony railing outside one of their second floor rooms and staring absentmindedly at the thread he's unraveling from his pants' cuff, Luffy finds himself at a complete loss on where to go from here. They've been assured repeatedly that they're safe from curious officials, offered food and lodging and access to any medical equipment their doctor might deem necessary, but now that his immediate concerns and his nakama's basic needs have been met, the rubber man doesn't know what to do.

Zoro's not talking. Beyond an occasional muffled grunt if he's startled badly enough, the swordsman hasn't uttered so much as a word since the night he shouted everyone awake. He makes noises sometimes when he's sleeping- little choked sounds of dismay and fear the captain finds somehow worse than his previous noisy outburst. But he doesn't talk. Not to Iceburg's people, not to Law or his own nakama. Not to his partner.

Luffy abandons the fraying fabric he's picked loose and wraps his arms around his legs, balancing precariously as he rests his chin on his knees and stares glumly at the setting sun, blinking periodically to clear the dampness beading in the corners of his eyes. He knows he should go back inside soon, check on his lover and find out what the rest of his crew's doing before Paulie comes along and scolds him for being outside in nothing but his shorts, but staying cooped up inside day after day is taking a toll on him. He's not accustomed to being surrounded by four walls for so long, and he's full of so much nervous energy he wonders if he might not explode from sheer tension, but he doesn't know how to release it. Iceburg's recommended they stay on the grounds to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to themselves, so there's really nowhere to go. Hence his lack of proper attire, because what's the point of getting dressed if he's not going anywhere.

He knows he's not the only one unsure what to do with himself. The entire crew's restless and unhappy.

Despite their agreement to stick together, they've started drifting away from each other: Sanji to the kitchens, Robin to the library, Franky and Usopp to the shipyard to supervise the repairs being completed on the ship. And the captain's slightly startled when he suddenly realizes he's got no idea where to find Nami or Chopper, although he's fairly sure that Brook's haunting the open courtyard at the building's center, plucking despondently at his guitar in the hopes of playing at least one song that doesn't sound like a funeral dirge.
Skull jokes have been few and far between these days.

As for Zoro-

Now that he's no longer confined to a bed, the swordsman roams aimlessly throughout the mansion during the day, disappearing first thing every morning, reappearing briefly for meals but otherwise avoiding everyone, and only returning to their rooms at night. He eats- sparingly- and sleeps- badly- but he does little else. Despite Chopper's fears that he'll insist on retrieving his weights from the ship and once again re-injure himself before he's fully healed, the first mate's shown no interest in resuming his training, and aside from one incident where he drank himself into a stupor and spent the entirety of the following day curled up in bed between bouts of violent illness, he hasn't touched the liquor cabinets.

Although he'll never admit it, the captain's secretly and shamefully disappointed, because he's found himself speculating more than once that a drunk Zoro might be a slightly more receptive, more talkative Zoro...

No such luck. Even while inebriated, the older pirate somehow manages to continue holding his tongue, although he reduces the room to complete shambles before finally passing out with his back propped against the wall, wedged tightly into a corner where he can see the entire room and presumably defend himself from whoever or whatever he's convinced might attack him. Iceburg, drawn by the sounds of furniture being bounced off the walls, watches in silence as Franky turns the bed right-side-up and dismisses Nami's repeated apologies about the fist-sized holes in the walls. Damage like that's so easy to repair. Fill the fissure with plenty of spackling, smooth it over and slap on a few coats of paint, and it's as good as new, the Galley-La president contemplates to himself as he watches Luffy pull the unconscious swordsman into his arms, the captain's face pinched with distress and concern as he carries his limp, unresisting first mate across the room and tucks him gently under the covers.

Patch a damaged wall well enough and no one will ever know unless they're looking for the seams- but I'm afraid a broken human heart's not quite so easy to fix.

While Zoro's avoided training and alcohol, he's found a new, far more disturbing obsession to replace his old habits of excessive exercise and overindulgence in liquor. Sanji discovers him the first time, huddled on the tile floor beneath a showerhead spraying water hot enough to fill the entire room with swirling steam and scouring his reddened skin so thoroughly he's actually drawn blood from the old scar tissue dividing his chest, and the cook burns his palm on the faucet trying to turn the damn thing off. Unsuccessful at bribing, bullying or flat out begging the swordsman to move, he resorts to physical force- whereupon he finds himself lying in a puddle, gasping for air and clutching his left side.

Realizing there's no way of dragging Marimo out of the shower by himself, the blond immediately stumbles off in search of Luffy and Chopper, convinced their nakama's given himself first-degree burns at best.

The doctor's since convinced Zoro to keep the temperature down so he doesn't scald himself again, but talking him out of the increasingly frequent showers has been another story entirely, and finding the green-haired pirate skulking in the hallway outside the bathhouse until he's got the place to himself has quickly become commonplace to both the Straw Hat crew and the Galley-La staff. No one complains, and if Usopp and Franky have both walked in on their crew mate silently examining the inflamed-looking row of stitches on his own slowly deflating abdomen, they don't mention it to each other or anyone else.

The tension builds until it's unbearable. Conversations start and die unfinished, and tempers flare and sharp words are exchanged and before long they all stop talking to each other about anything other
than superficial pleasantries, such as the weather or what's for dinner, although no one really gives a shit about such things when they're too busy watching Zoro slowly but steadily shutting himself off from the world outside his own head.

Luffy's nakama have faced and defeated any number of enemies. They've saved kingdoms and toppled evil empires. They've faced insurmountable odds and emerged not entirely unscathed but certainly victorious, and they've shared a bond and a trust so strong that after being separated by Bartholomew Kuma, they spent the next two years thinking of nothing but preparing and bettering themselves for their next meeting. And they've supported each other through many trials since then, every one of them dedicated to their captain's calling and to each others' dreams.

But they can't overcome the whispering, nagging voices of doubt and failure echoing inside their own heads. The voices which are slowly succeeding where their many enemies failed.

The rubber man climbs down from his perch onto the balcony proper and wipes his sweaty palms on his shorts before reaching reluctantly for the sliding door's handle. He doesn't want to admit it, not to the others and especially not to himself, but it's glaringly obvious that Law's prediction is proving true.

His crew is falling apart.
"Look, Mugiwara-ya... I know you don't want to hear this- but I'll say it again anyway in hopes it'll finally sink through that thick skull. You need to do something about your crew."

"There's nothing wrong with my CREW," Luffy insists, face clouded with impatience and a touch of resentment. "ZORO's the one that-" He slouches in his seat, radiating irritation. "I oughta be back there with him right now, not here wasting my-"

Law slams his hand down on the table forcefully enough to jostle the closest silverware, startling the younger pirate and making him jump. "Cut the shit, okay? I know you're upset Roronoa-ya won't talk to you, but- are you really that BLIND to what's happening right in front of you?" The Heart captain demands, his fingers twitching with the urge to reach over and shake some sense into the man sitting across from him. "You're so goddamn focused on your first mate that you're forgetting about the rest of your nakama."

"But Zoro needs-"

"What he NEEDS is a good hard kick in the ass," Law snaps. "He's being just as much of an idiot as you."

The Straw Hat captain's face darkens so dramatically the surgeon tenses, aware he's probably gone a bit too far. "Irrationally self-condemning" probably would've been a much better choice of words to explain the pair's understandable yet calamitous reaction to the situation, but he's getting frustrated with constantly feeling like he's trying to reason with a goddamn brick wall. Hence his own short temper and why he's now half-expecting to find himself on the receiving end of a fist or body-slammed into the bar stool behind him.

Thankfully, however, although Luffy's trembling all over and glaring at him with ill-concealed malice, the rubber man doesn't budge from his seat.

"You're both torn up over losing your son. I get that, and you're right- it's horrible, it's not fair, and nobody should ever have to deal with shit like this. But you've got to stop feeling guilty for something you had no control over-"

The younger pirate opens his mouth to protest, but he's cut off.

"-and you need to quit second-guessing yourself, because it doesn't matter how much you agonize over what MIGHT'VE happened. You and Roro- ZORO-ya and your whole damn crew- you guys are all so bloody busy turning this thing over in your heads and asking yourselves what you could've done differently, you're missing the big picture. What happened- happened. Playing twenty questions in your heads isn't going to change that. So deal with it."

"I don't-"

"Shut up, Mugiwara-ya. I didn't say GET OVER it, I said DEAL with it. Stop asking yourself "what if" and start thinking about where you're going from here." He leans forward, reaching across the table to jab Luffy's sternum with his forefinger. "And I'm warning you right now- this thing's way too big for you to handle by yourself; you need the rest of your people to get their heads out of the clouds. You're their captain. They'll listen to you and they'll follow your lead- but only if you wake the fuck up and start doing your goddamn job."

"But what am I supposed to-?"
“You already know what you need to do. Talk to them. Make them talk to you- to each other- and get all this shit you've got bottled up inside OUT before it eats you alive. Scream and throw shit at each other, break down and cry on each other's shoulders or- hell, I don't know- strip naked and screw each other senseless on your goddamn lawn deck-” He ignores Luffy's shocked mmph of surprise. "- if that's what it takes to get everybody square. Just do it NOW, before they start finding excuses to avoid talking to you or each other. You've already got one person building a wall around himself- you don't need seven more.”

"..."

Law slouches back in his chair, pausing to organize his thoughts as he studies the dark smudges under the Straw Hat captain's eyes. Whole damn crew's got themselves individually convinced this entire thing's their fault. Tony-ya's kicking himself for not diagnosing the hemorrhage sooner, even though there's no way he would've known without some heavy-duty scanning equipment. That redhead navigator's convinced it's her fault for not finding a faster route, and Black Leg-ya's beating himself up over not protecting Roronoa-ya from the Admirals in the first place. Even Nico-san's second-guessing herself, and I get the impression that woman normally has confidence to burn. I don't know why the hell they keep talking to me instead of coming to you- especially when Black Leg-ya and that screwy robot guy both hate my guts- but-

If the rest of you insist on holding yourselves responsible for the kid's death, who knows what the hell's going through Roronoa-ya's mind right now. At least your doctor and your navigator and Black Leg-ya and the others all tried getting it off their chests, even if they opened up to the wrong person. But Zoro-ya? It's pretty clear your swordsman's killing himself by small degrees keeping everything locked inside his head like this. I don't think he'll throw himself off the roof or commit seppuku or something quite that drastic - he doesn't seem the suicidal type - but- well, there's a lot more than just your son's death at work there, even if the issue's closely related. "Your cook said Zoro-ya keeps waking everyone up in the middle of the night. Nightmares."

It's a statement, not a question, and the other pirate hastily averts his gaze, squirming uncomfortably in his chair. "... yeah."

"He's dreaming about Impel Down. About-"

"He dreams about HER." Luffy interrupts with a growl, the words strained with distress and outrage and something that might be jealousy. Hearing the tone of his own voice, he flushes.

"He's about to remind Law that Zoro's NOT telling everybody he's fine - or anything else, for that matter - because Zoro's still not speaking to anyone, but the rubber man's distracted by the surgeon's choice of vocabulary. "Flash-?"

"Flashback." The surgeon leans forward to address him across the table. "Sometimes when a
person experiences a traumatic event, recalling that event affects them more severely than just having unpleasant memories. See, Roronoa-ya wasn't just REMEMBERING that Impel Down bitch fucking around with him; he was one-hundred-percent convinced it was happening all over again. For a few minutes, that woman wasn't just in his head- she was actually right there in the room with him, like a very strong, extremely nasty hallucination only he could see. Your navigator probably triggered it when she touched him while he was still half-conscious and disoriented, and once his fear got ahold of him, even though he might have been vaguely aware of what he was doing, he had no control over his own actions. She's probably lucky to be alive."

The younger man shifts again, studying the tabletop. "Chopper said Zoro didn't mean to hurt Nami- that he got scared and was just trying to protect himself and the- the baby."

He’s relieved when mentioning the child doesn’t prompt more than a thoughtful nod from the older man. Talking about his son always makes his chest ache, like his jagged X-shaped scar's somehow re-opened somewhere deep inside, but pretending that he- pretending that ACE- didn’t exist doesn't feel right. He wants- needs- to remember, even if it hurts. Even if the memories sometimes feel like shards of broken glass slicing his heart to ribbons.

Unfortunately, his crew mates don't share his sentiments and either pretend they didn't hear him or awkwardly change the topic of conversation when he summons enough courage to broach the subject. But while their reluctance to discuss the baby bothers him, he guesses it makes sense. They're nakama, after all, and they don't want to hurt him or see him hurt. Zoro's stubborn refusal to even look him in the eye much less respond to his burning need to talk about the loss they've both suffered, however, makes him want to punch and kick things.

I know he cares- he's GOTTA care- but he acts like he doesn't. He acts like none of this ever happened, like ACE never happened, and he won't even CRY or ANYTHING. He's just sorta... there... only he's not. Sometimes when I DO catch his eye, it's like he's not really in there even though he's looking right at me. It's like he's empty inside.

Hiding his frustration - he doesn't want to upset his already unbalanced swordsman any more than necessary - only makes it worse. Sometimes Zoro's apparent apathy makes him so confused and upset and, yes, downright ANGRY that he almost wants to slap his partner's face. Seize him by the collar and shake him and demand to know just what the hell's wrong with him. It's an urge that leaves him feeling sick to his stomach and ashamed. And wondering what's wrong with HIM that makes him believe resorting to physical abuse- that hitting and threatening somebody he LOVES- could solve problems and mend broken bridges.

"Your doctor told me how Nami-ya cut her hair." Law sighs, giving an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. "It's a very nice- very thoughtful- gesture, I suppose, but in all honesty it won't do shit to keep her- and everyone else- safe if he has another flashback, which I can pretty much guarantee will happen at some point. The problem is, there's just no way of knowing exactly what might set somebody off with post-traumatic stuff like this. Could be direct physical contact, certain sounds-"

Luffy swallows. "Zoro said something about Nami's shoes. Back before-" Pain flashes in his eyes. "Before he stopped talking..."

"Sounds," the surgeon reiterates. "Certain words or phrases. Odors. The list of potential triggers is fucking endless. And you'll need your entire crew watching each others' backs so he doesn't accidentally bump somebody off while you're trying to figure out what's most likely to make him freak out." The surgeon tosses back the last of his drink. "It's a damn shame the kid didn't make it, 'cause that might've helped with the rest of it. Kept him too busy worrying about somebody else to think about his own problems."
Instead, Roronoa-ya's not only suffering what's well on its way to developing into post-traumatic stress disorder thanks to his being used like a goddamn sex toy for nearly eight weeks, but he's also letting his guilt eat him alive for losing the baby. Doesn't matter that he's not saying it- you can see it in his face. It's no coincidence he won't look you in the eyes, Mugiwara-ya; he's probably convinced he killed your kid doing that crazy stunt with the auras when he went ape-shit and ripped that bitch's throat out, and thank god he hasn't tried talking to ME about it, because who am I to say he isn't at least partly right? The way his lower intestine looked, whatever that technique did really tore him up inside- and it's a good thing you guys showed up when you did, because if he'd tried walking out of Impel Down on his own instead of sitting down and blacking out long enough for the rupture to start clotting, he probably would've bled out on the spot.

But even then, that abruption was a ticking time bomb. He most likely started bleeding again while trying to kill your navigator, and it certainly didn't help when he strained himself sitting up in bed instead of just fucking staying put and relaxing like your doctor ordered... so in a way, yes, he really did do this to himself.

Law doesn't consider himself as particularly soft-hearted, but he does not want to be the one to confirm the swordsman's suspicions that he might be responsible for causing the hemorrhage that claimed the child's life. Quite unintentionally, of course, given the green-haired pirate couldn't have possibly known the severity of his own internal injuries- but he doesn't think Roronoa-ya will care to make that distinction.

Luffy- who the surgeon suspects likely reached the same conclusion on his own- is staring down at his hands, silently examining fingernails he's chewed to the quick.

"One last word of advice and I'll stop nagging you. Zoro-ya's got a lot of issues to work through, so don't." Law hesitates- and sighs again. He's debated whether he ought to say this, because it's really none of his business, but he's already stuck his nose this deep into the Straw Hat captain's unconventional personal life, so what the hell. "Don't push him into anything before he's ready, or you- both of you- are going to regret it."

The younger pirate blinks, looking somewhat confused. "But Zoro's the one who always wants to start training and fighting and stuff before he's better. And Chopper gets really mad at him! But I never make him-"

"I'm not talking about physical exertion- or at least not THAT type of physical exertion." The Heart pirate grimaces, wondering just how the hell anybody can be so goddamn precocious yet so bloody naive. Or just plain dense. "I meant sex, Mugiwara-ya. You know- fucking? He's not ready for it now, and he probably won't be ready for a long time, so don't push him. You've got two hands, and I'm assuming you know how to use at least one of them, so unless you'd like to find yourself picking your teeth off the floor, I'd suggest you stick to beating o-"

His well-meaning but very badly implemented and worded admonition is curtailed by Luffy's untouched and suddenly airborne water glass, which hits him square between the eyes hard enough to snap his head back.

"Get off my ship." the rubber man hisses, his face blazing with anger and disgust, but he's already on his feet- whirling and storming outside- before the sputtering surgeon can remind him that he's the one who insisted on meeting here onboard the Sunny.

"Luffy, what's-?" Usopp's voice, accompanied by the repetitive pounding of wooden mallets, drifts in before the rebounding dining hall door slams shut. "OI, don't touch that- I just-!"

Something heavy smashes against the galley's exterior paneling, and Franky's cursing is loud
enough to be heard through the wall.

"DAMN IT, Mugiwara, will you quit wreckin' the bloody ship while we're tryin' to fix 'er!"

"Shit," Law mutters, rubbing his bruised forehead as he retrieves the now empty glass from his lap, water dripping from his goatee onto his soaked hoodie and jeans. "That certainly didn't go over as well as I'd hoped."

Although he supposes it could've gone worse, given the murderous fury he'd glimpsed in the Straw Hat captain's eyes before he'd turned away.

For a moment there, Mugiwara-ya looked like he might've broken my neck just as easily as he threw this thing at me, the tattooed man thinks wryly, examining the miraculously undamaged glass in his hand.

xxx

Although he's outraged and disgusted that Law thought it necessary to issue such a crude, bluntly worded warning against an action he'd NEVER consider - the very thought of coercing his swordsman into what'd surely be unwanted intimacy for a few minutes of selfish pleasure makes him feel nauseous and cold inside - Luffy can't dispute the fact that Law's made some very good points during their rather one-sided discussion.

The crew does need to talk. And soon, because although he's been adamantly refuting it, he hasn't failed to notice the same warning signs that his rival's been observing with growing alarm. The way the other Straw Hats are gradually but undeniably withdrawing from him and each other, engaging in fewer terse conversations and spending more time in strained silence. But, as the surgeon pointed out, he's been far too absorbed by his own guilty conscience and desperate yet unsuccessful attempts to pry Zoro free of the hard shell he's deliberately constructing around himself.

Maybe Law's right. Maybe he can't do this alone. Maybe he needs help.

Trudging through the darkening city streets on his return to their temporary home, he swallows his pride and makes the decision he's been putting off. It's time to finally sit down and have a word with his nakama- "get everyone square" as his fellow captain put it. They've been stalling long enough, and if he's got a few things to say that his crew mates don't necessarily want to hear- well, he doesn't care. He needs to tell SOMEBODY how he feels- somebody other than Law, anyway- before he spontaneously combusts from the sheer stress and frustration of keeping his pain and sorrow bottled inside until his chest's full to bursting with it.

And maybe, if we're together, we can figure out how to help Zoro.

It's a good plan- a solid plan- and the first sense of direction he's had in days, but his growing air of confidence dissipates when he approaches the Galley-La headquarters only to see Chopper and Usopp burst from the front door, tongue-tied with panic as they rush towards him. Although they've left their crew mate unattended for no more than a few minutes, sure that he was finally sleeping uninterrupted, Zoro's gone missing and somehow managed to evade their desperate search for the last hour or two, and not even Robin's eyes, scanning every corridor and corner of the building, have been successful in locating him.

Their alarm's contagious, and Luffy's immediately caught up in the ensuing chaos as he joins them in turning the mansion upside down looking for the stray swordsman. By the time they finally discover the older pirate sleeping wedged between laundry bin and wall in the far corner of the bathhouse with a number of towels bundled around his body and by the time they've finally managed to coax
him, half-conscious and resistant and stiff from nodding off in such an awkward position, back to their rooms, the captain's completely forgotten his original intentions and Law's concerns remain unaddressed.

xxx

The steady decline of the crew's morale continues unabated, until– as the Heart captain warned might happen- the situation abruptly goes from bad to worse with a singular event during which the shit hits the metaphorical fan. The only difference being that the surgeon never envisioned Roronoa-ya himself accidentally instigating the sort of physical contact capable of bringing already dangerously volatile matters to the boiling point.

In any case, it's Luffy who's startled awake in the middle of the night by a warm body crushed against his back, arms curled tightly around his torso and blunt heat nudging clumsily but insistently at his rear as Zoro gropes him, rubbing his face against the younger pirate's neck and uttering a low breathy groan of blatant need in his ear.

If the captain was a bit more cognizant, he'd simply ignore the satisfying tension humming through his body and either feign sleep and wait for his drowsy crew mate to settle back into deeper slumber or shake him awake and find out what's going on. But he's not thinking clearly, confused and disoriented and aroused at being woken in such a way and it's been a long time and his own body's responding eagerly despite his stupor and even though he smells disinfectant and feels the unmistakable texture of securely-wound bandages brushing against his lower back, it's not the first time either he or his lover's initiated sex despite one or both of them being seriously wounded. So even though his cotton-muffled brain dimly recognizes his swordsman's recovering from some kind of injury that he's too groggy to identify, it's the most natural and instinctive thing in the world to roll over and pin the older pirate beneath him.

His lingering torpidity's his only excuse for mistaking the resulting sharp inhalation of shock for a sound of pleasure, and he's pressing hungry kisses against the swordsman's parted lips and caressing his scared chest, fingers tracing the raised ridge of damaged tissue left by the path of Mihawk's blade as his other hand fumbles to tug down the drawstring jogging pants barring his way, when his head finally clears enough to comprehend that the other man's gone completely still, deathly silent and no longer responsive to his touch.

The younger pirate squirms, awareness that something's badly amiss finally registering when he discovers the unexpected contrast where he's grinding their groins together; his partner's abruptly gone hard and soft in all the wrong places. Although the rest of Zoro's body feels rigid as steel, his erection's completely wilted, and when Luffy draws back to look, mystified because that's certainly unusual and also highly unexpected given ZORO woke HIM, one look at his first mate's face in the dim moonlight sends him scrambling towards the opposite side of the bed, now fully awake and offering frantic, stumbling apologies.

The swordsman's remaining eye's squeezed tightly shut, holding back tears threatening to join those already glistening on his right cheek and temple, and there's no mistaking his expression for anything other than a pained and duly terrified grimace. Even after the captain releases him, he remains prone and breathing shallowly, as though he's determined to will his conscious mind somewhere-anywhere- else while he lies there with clenched his teeth and fearfully anticipates what he's clearly accepted as the inevitable.

Feeling helpless and not knowing quite what to do - he's never seen Zoro give up so quickly, surrendering without a fight or so much as a sharp word of rebuke - the younger pirate reaches out to touch him without thinking, rashly seeking to soothe the tension that's pulled every muscle into a
tight, straining knot. When his questing fingertips brush the older man's hip and bandaged waist, however, it's as though he's flipped a switch and sent a powerful jolt of electric current through his partner's body.

Without a sound- without warning- the Pirate Hunter surges off the mattress, grabbing Luffy by the throat with his good hand and rising in one eerily smooth motion to slam him into the wall above the headboard violently enough to crack the plaster and rattle the studs.

The rubber man grunts as his head and back connect with the hard surface, the breath knocked from his lungs by the sheer force behind the swordsman's blow, but he doesn't cry out or move to free himself, too horrified and ashamed at his own carelessness to attempt prying his lover's fingers loose. "I- I'm s-s-sorry- I-"

"DON'T."

The moon chooses this moment to break away from the clouds, spilling enough light through the window and sliding door to chase back the shadows, and any hope the captain felt expanding inside his chest at the welcome sound of that low voice, rough and rusty with disuse, shrivels with one glimpse at the pure, unadulterated hatred gleaming in Zoro's narrowed eye.

"I'm s-sorry-" Luffy tells him again, struggling to make himself heard despite the excruciating pressure on his neck as the fingers gripping him spasm at the sound of his voice and then squeeze a little tighter when his crew mate shifts uncomfortably, trying to put a bit more distance between their lower halves. Despite his honest dismay and horror, the captain's body hasn't quite caught up to his brain and made the connection that the persistent erection carelessly poking his overwrought swordsman in the lower belly needs to subside IMMEDIATELY. "I- I really messed up, touching Zoro like-"

"LEAVE US ALONE-" the green-haired man snarls, the outrage in his tone contradicting the way he's trembling all over, as though that unseen live current's still surging through him. "When they find out what you've d-done, my nakama are gonna- my CAPTAIN's gonna-" He makes a thick choking sound, fingers digging deeper.

Oh. OH.

Ignoring the increasing pain in his throat, the younger pirate doesn't know whether to feel devastated that Zoro's suffering another flashback or relieved that he's addressing a ghost; while he can't stand seeing the other man trapped inside his own awful memories, he's guiltily consoled by the thought that all that overwhelming animosity and revulsion's aimed at someone else and not himself. It hurts enough that the older pirate won't talk to him and sometimes barely acknowledges his presence, but if Zoro genuinely HATED him as well-

The sorrow this thought brings washes over him like a tidal wave of freezing water, effectively killing any lingering interest his body's been displaying in response to his lover's close proximity and wilting his erection.

Unfortunately, Zoro's now too agitated to notice. "Why won't you DIE?"

"No- Zoro- ZORO, it's ME- it's not-"

"Luffy, what- OI, WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON IN HERE?"

The captain tears his eyes away from his swordsman's face to find Sanji standing in the doorway, staring at them with wide eyes, and he realizes that not only have their voices been loud enough to
wake the cook, but they've also inadvertently summoned him from the other room the moment his haki detected their altercation. "S-Sorry, Sanji, but Zoro's-

"Shit- hold on and I'll-

"NO, DON'T TOUCH HI-!" Luffy blurs, warning choked off when Zoro tenses at the blond's approach and squeezes hard enough to momentarily silence him. "J-Just go back to bed, okay? I can-

"Are you fucking CRAZY? Luffy, he's trying to-!

"It's not his fault! He- he woke me up and I did something really dumb and I scared him! H-He doesn't mean it!" The desperation in the younger pirate's voice is frightening. "He didn't mean to hurt Nami, remember? Well, he doesn't wanna hurt me either- not really- but Law said it's like- it's like Zoro doesn't know what's going on and thinks he's talking to and fighting somebody else! Like he gets people confused and-

"That won't make you any less dead if he-!

A shudder passes through their disoriented nakama's frame and the captain feels a slight slackening in the grip holding him pinned to the wall like an oversized insect.

"Zoro, it's ME- it's LUFFY," he pleads, his gaze darting wildly between the swordsman and Sanji, who's continuing to edge closer despite being ordered to stay put, and the rubber man knows that if he doesn't talk Zoro down before the cook decides making a move's worth the risk, there's a good chance of someone getting seriously hurt or even ending up dead. The other two members of the Monster Trio may be recovering from severe injuries, but they're still strong enough to cause each other- and any nakama unlucky enough to come between them because it's only a matter of time before the others are drawn by the noise and tension- serious damage, and although the captain trusts Sanji not to hurt Zoro more than necessary, he doesn't have much faith in the opposite. Not with his first mate unable to tell the difference between reality and memory. "I won't touch Zoro again, I promise. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to- I just- Zoro surprised me!

Luffy knows he's babbling, but he can't help it, and ironically enough, it's his repetitious use of the swordsman's given name that finally breaks through the hazy crimson cloud of anger and fear that's suffocating the older pirate, because Sadi never called him by his first name. He was always Roronoa to her, periodically Roronoa Zoro and sometimes Pirate Hunter or some other far more derogatory nickname, but never just ZORO.

"Oi, Marimo, you don't wanna do something you're gonna regret. Put him down, now." Sanji's latter words don't register- but the inclusion of the mossball reference does, because the Chief Guard certainly never used THAT particular epithet.

"Zoro," the blurry figure in his grasp says again, voice filled with urgency. "C'mon, Zoro, you gotta wake up before-

Sencho- Sencho and the shitty cook? What are they doing here, and what the hell am I- "L-Luffy? LUFFY?"

"See, Sanji, I told you he'd-" Luffy's relief at the clarity returning to his lover's face as Zoro blinks at him, dazed and surprised, dissolves into shock when the older man abruptly drops him as though burned and throws himself backwards, scrabbling for the edge of the bed so desperately that he slips off the mattress and crashes to the floor in a tangle of sheets. "Ah, Zoro, what's-?"
The swordsman's almost immediately upright and moving, swiping a discarded shirt from the steadily growing pile of dirty wash they've been meaning to deal with for several days now. Before either the rubber man or Sanji can move, he's bolting for the glass sliding door leading to the balcony, stumbling over his own feet in his haste to reach it, and for a moment they're both afraid he's going to collide with the pane and either knock himself unconscious or crash straight through it. Instead, somehow, he slows down long enough to fumble the lock open, nearly ripping the entire door from its track before plunging through the opening in full, reckless flight.

"Don't you dare, you stupid mosshead- we're on the second floor and you're still- DAMN IT!" The cook shouts as he and their captain reach the open door together- just in time to watch Zoro unceremoniously launch himself feet-first over the railing, and Luffy almost flings an arm after the older pirate, intent on reeling him back to safety, but when he sees the expression on the swordsman's face, he falters, and then it's too late and he's clinging to the railing to keep his balance because his knees want to buckle and he can't breathe and he feels like he's going to faint or throw up or both, possibly at the same time.

"Stupid-stupid-STUPID, what were you thinking, what've you done, did you see his FACE? You were the only one Zoro really felt safe with anymore- the only one he really trusted- and now he's AFRAID of you!"

Sanji joins him on the balcony outside, roaring for the goddamn shitty swordsman- who's somehow managed to land on his feet despite the fall- to get his stubborn ass back inside, and the blond's visually measuring the distance to the ground below, tensing his legs to jump down in pursuit, when he's stopped by the hand seizing his arm.

"L-Let him go."

"Luffy, what the hell are you saying? Somebody needs to-"

"Let him go," Luffy orders again, more firmly this time, and when the cook whirls on him to demand an explanation, the angry appeal dies unspoken at the pain and fear and regret swimming in the pale-faced younger pirate's eyes.

"Luffy-"

The captain shakes his head and nudges past him, glancing over at the confused cluster of nakama watching silently from the doorway between their rooms. Robin's brow is furrowed and Brook's quietly studying his own bony toes where they're protruding beneath his pajama bottoms, but Franky's sniffling pitifully and clutching an equally distressed-looking Chopper like a plush teddy bear, and Usopp and Nami are clinging to each others' sleeves.

"Luffy-" Sanji tries again.

"I SAID NO."

Jaw clenched, the blond steps back inside, sliding the door closed with a stiff, jerky movement that plainly exhibits how he feels without the need for words.

"Zoro- Zoro will be back," Luffy assures his audience, although he doesn't sound entirely sure of it himself, his voice wavering and breaking. "He just- he just needs some t-time by himself, okay?"

Nami steps forward to draw him into a tight hug, either too upset to notice or too upset to care he's naked and uncertain if she's doing it for him or more for herself, but the rubber man shrugs her off.

"Go," he mutters. "Everybody should go back to bed."
His tone leaves no room for argument, and after exchanging a few hesitant glances, the others wander quietly back into the other room.

Sanji stays and, when the younger pirate doesn't protest his presence, settles into the empty chair beside the bed as Luffy slowly gathers the rumpled bedding from the floor, tosses it into a haphazard pile on the mattress and burrows beneath it until only a small portion of his unruly black hair's visible among the folds of fabric near the headboard. He kicks briefly, spreading the sheets so they're no longer clumped around his calves, and then his feet retreat again as he draws his legs up.

Beside him, the cook slumps back in his seat and closes his eyes, resigning himself to yet another long, sleepless night because he's well aware there's no way either of them are getting any rest. Not with their distraught nakama out there, roaming the city streets in search of god knows what.

*If it's closure you're looking for, Marimo, I sure as hell hope you find it. Closure, redemption, whatever you need- whatever you THINK you need- just find it and get your shitty moss-covered skull back here. Because without you-* The blond doesn't want to admit it, but he's afraid. Afraid of what might happen if Zoro DOESN'T come back.

For a few moments, there's nothing but uncomfortable silence- just the steady sounds of two crew mates breathing almost in tandem while lost in their own thoughts- and then, sure enough, a faint strangled noise that might be a whimper escapes the heap of blankets on the bed and then it begins to tremble as the Straw Hat captain drags the right-hand pillow under the covers and curls himself into a tight ball around it, shaking uncontrollably and burying his face against soft fabric that still holds Zoro's scent and what might be- although it's more likely Luffy's fervent imagination and his own hot tears- the swordsman's lingering warmth.
Chapter 20

There's a fine but steady drizzle raining down as Zoro stumbles across the lawn, wrestling with his shirt because he's somehow turned the blasted thing inside-out in his hurry to pull it over his head, but the swordsman doesn't care about the moisture falling from the dark sky even though it's soaking into his clothing. The gloomy weather suits his mood.

The night air's surprisingly chilly after the oppressive warmth of the room he's just escaped, and the cool breeze wafting off the ocean surrounding Water Seven quickly raises goose bumps on his bare shoulders and back as he struggles into the jersey, ignoring the purr of ripping fabric as he tears the seam along one sleeve. He can't seem to stop shivering, although he'd much prefer to blame it on the cold rather than the way his heart's slamming wildly in his chest, fueled by adrenaline spurred by fear and guilt and anger.

He spares a reluctant glance behind him, half-expecting to see his captain running towards him or at least still watching him from above, but the balcony outside their room's now empty. He doesn't know whether to feel disappointed or relieved that Luffy's gone back inside, and his stride falters and then slows- until he realizes he's merely standing there staring up at the closed sliding door with his breath caught in his throat.

But no one's looking back, and after a moment or two, he tears his gaze away with a slight shake, turns, and walks away with his head down. He- he didn't come after me...

You DID try to strangle him, a small voice inside his head reminds him snidely. In fact, you're damn lucky the guy's made of rubber. You could've broken his neck, grabbing him and throwing him against the wall like that.

Which is entirely true, although he can't quite suppress a twinge of powerful resentment towards the younger pirate for scaring him so badly. When he'd been startled awake by someone climbing on top of him, hands tearing at his waistband and insistent tongue forcing its way between his lips, at first he'd been too dazed and confused to recognize who was groping him. But then his assailant's mouth had ceased battening on his own long enough to utter a low groan as their groins pressed together, and the first mate's panic-stricken mind had identified the sound as his captain's- as Luffy's- voice, all at once causing his brain to promptly skip the usual fight-or-flight response in favor of trying to shut down and make sight, sound, sensation and everything else go away, constricting his airways so dramatically he couldn't breathe properly much less plead with the other man to stop.

And if his lover hadn't realized something was wrong-

Zoro's not entirely sure how the idea of sex- not just intercourse itself but ANY form of sex- makes him feel right now, although "terrified" and "nauseous" certainly come to mind. In fact, he's reasonably certain he might've been suddenly and violently ill had Luffy proceeded.

While the entire crew's aware he's not sleeping well and by this point he's sure it's become common knowledge he's having nightmares, considering how many times he's woken everyone with his flailing and shouting, the swordsman's positive they don't know just what kind of fucked up shit his badly bruised psyche hits him with some nights. While there's the occasional normal and idiotic nonsense, like the dreams where he walks into the dining hall and realizes he's naked and everyone's staring at him or the one where he's back on Kuraigana Island and Perona's paralyzing him with Negative Hollows so she can tie tiny pink and yellow ribbons in his hair, most of his dreams revolve around his capture by the Marines as well as his time in Impel Down. He supposes his nakama have guessed this already, although he doubts they've any comprehension of the dark corridors his
sleeping mind often blunders down.

Because while dreaming about Wado breaking into a million pieces sometimes brings him awake with tears drying on his cheeks, and dreaming about his fingers being cut off or about the trident haft forcing its way into his body isn't just unpleasant but downright horrible, none of those nightmares make him wake up clutching his pillow and trying not to scream in horror and pure revulsion at the warmth and pressure of Luffy's arms wrapped snugly around his torso or the lips brushing his shoulder or the back of his neck as the younger pirate murmurs reassuringly in an effort to calm him, and if his crewmates knew the real reason why he's been forcing himself to stay awake until he's reeling with fatigue- and why he's become so obsessed with bathing- they'd probably never be able to look him in the face again. Luffy certainly wouldn't.

It's the OTHER nightmares that make him want to scrub himself until his skin's raw and bleeding. Or submerge himself in boiling water until his hide and muscle and the meat beneath split open so he can peel it all off his own body, leaving behind nothing but sterile, unblemished bone. The nightmares that started nearly two weeks ago when the horrible crawling sensation and the elusive feminine scent clinging stubbornly to his flesh - which is surely only in his head but never fails to turn his stomach whenever he thinks he catches a whiff of it - got to be too much again and he'd slipped into the bathhouse for a shower, only to discover someone else had gotten there first- and had just been interrupted in what was obviously a private moment of stress relief. They'd stood there wide-eyed and staring at each other for a moment, and- not thinking, not acting on anything other than instinct and routine habit- Zoro had nearly opened his mouth to ask if the rubber man needed a hand, but Luffy had moved first, lunging for a towel to hide his blatantly erect penis and bolting out of the room with a stammered apology.

Staring down at the red shirt and jean shorts laying in a crumpled heap on the tile at his feet and listening to Paulie shrieking at the Straw Hat captain for running bare-assed down the hallway outside, the swordsman had been confused and greatly alarmed by the familiar warmth kindling in his groin and lower belly and spent his shower trying very hard not to touch himself more than necessary, turning the cold faucet to full blast and wondering just what the hell was wrong with him, because he shouldn't be interested in THAT- not in SEX- not so soon after-

Maybe not ever.

He'd spent the remaining afternoon stalking from one end of the building to the other and back again while doing his damnedest to avoid everyone, plagued by a hard-on that refused to subside and far too upset and disconcerted to do anything about it. Even the thought of masturbating just long enough to make the damn thing go away made him feel sick inside, and he'd finally retreated to the one place where he knew it'd be cold enough to shrivel his arousal, send his balls crawling back into his body and just make everything below his waist quit bothering him in general.

Sanji hadn't said a word when he'd opened the door to the Galley-La kitchen's walk-in freezer and discovered the swordsman huddled between two racks of frozen goods with gooseflesh prickling his bare arms and his breath puffing out in steamy plumes. He'd simply walked over and retrieved what he needed from the shelves and then exited just as quietly, and Zoro still thinks it's a bloody good thing the cook didn't try to touch him, because at best he might've broken the blond's wrist. At worst-

There's a good reason his katana- broken, bent and whole alike- are currently stored in the adjoining room where their other crew members sleep. A very good reason.

Luffy had eyed him very cautiously when he'd eventually reappeared shortly before everyone turned in that evening, as though wondering whether he should offer to spend the night on the floor or possibly even claim a new spot in the other room, but after a few minutes of his first mate glaring at
the ceiling and waiting silently but expectantly, he'd finally crept into bed and they'd fallen asleep curled around each other as usual.

The older pirate had jolted awake close to dawn, when the sky outside had just started to brighten and begin chasing away the shadows laying heavily across the bed. He'd lain there in the tangled sheets, body drenched head to toe with sweat and jaw aching from clenching and grinding his teeth to hold back the cry of panic threatening to burst free. Somehow, he'd managed to avoid waking anyone else, but when Luffy had mumbled something unintelligible and pulled him closer, nose and lips nuzzling behind his ear, he'd gone utterly still within the arms curled around his torso and it'd taken every last ounce of his will power not to shove the other man away and high-tail it for the bathhouse. Or the freezer.

It'd been merely the first in a relentless series of nerve-wracking nights, made unbearable because of the new, horrible twist his nightmares have taken.

The Chief Guard's penchant for supplementing the ongoing physical abuse with psychological torture has done something to his head that's at least equal to if not more permanently scarring than the damage she dealt to his flesh. Broken something inside him that can't be stitched or bandaged or flushed clean with antibiotics. She forced too many associations between herself and his blissfully ignorant crew mate, breathing the Straw Hat captain's name in his ear at every opportunity and striving to duplicate his partner's touch, delightedly toying with the swordsman's mind as thoroughly as she seized control over his body. Pain and pleasure and sadist and lover all jumbled up into one tangled mess, and he'd been foolishly determined to overcome it through absenctia, banishing the notion of sex- particularly sex with Luffy- to a cobweb-strewn corner at the deepest level of his consciousness.

Because he thought that maybe if he didn't think about himself or his captain in sexual terms- if he conveniently forgot certain parts of their bodies could function for reasons other than the simple elimination of waste- if he convinced himself of those things, then maybe he'd be okay with being touched, as long as they kept it strictly platonic.

And it'd been working for the most part- until his abominably bad timing entering the bathhouse reminded him that his own stringently enforced lack of interest wasn't necessarily shared by his partner, and after that realization- that his captain still wants sex- still wants HIM- he can't stop thinking about it. Can't stop imagining their sweat-slicked bodies joined and moving together, fingers stroking and hips thrusting, and it's made sharing a bed with Luffy not just bitter sweet or frustrating but terrifying, because while part of Zoro wants everything they had before- before- BEFORE- he's also afraid. Afraid of the soft, lilting voice in his head. Afraid he'll find himself thinking about her during sex, maybe even call out her name when he comes, and while he's fairly certain the epithet would burst from his throat in protest rather than pleasure, he has no trouble picturing the shocked, hurt expression he imagines his lover trying- and failing- to hide upon hearing it.

_Sencho - Sencho knows there's never been anybody but him, and- if I- will he think I WANTED it? That I wanted HER? That I STILL want her? Because that bitch KNEW- she knew EXACTLY how to make me-

By the end, she'd discovered almost everything his captain had already known. Where to touch. How much pressure to use. She'd even found that elusive sensitive spot just below his jaw where a well-applied mouth's always been capable of reducing him to mindless, frantic bucking against his partner's body. ANY partner's body, apparently. And despite his disgust, when he thinks about feeling that overwhelming pleasure again, about plunging repeatedly into slick, clenching warmth- or being on the opposite end, his own shuddering flesh stretched wide by penetration- his body aches with the ferocity of repeatedly denied release and he supposes all he needs to do is ASK- but he's too
afraid he might just start screaming and not be able to stop if Luffy makes love to him, and because he's not sure how to separate his desire from his fear, the conflict's playing hell with his dreams.

The really, really bad dreams- the worst dreams- are incredibly vivid and disturbingly erotic and leave him horrified and repulsed by his own arousal because those dreams involve both Sadi-chan AND his captain: the two of them taking turns and occasionally sharing him, held captive and helpless between their bare, rocking bodies, and sometimes he's still heavily pregnant and sometimes he's not and sometimes it's just plain, ordinary fucking- but other times there's the knife and the trident and together they do things to him that are far worse than anything he actually experienced in Impel Down, and even though he KNOWS the real waking world Luffy would never, ever hurt him - not intentionally, never like this - the cold-eyed nightmare version of the younger pirate shows no such restraint.

To watch the same hands that have reverently cradled and gently caressed his distended belly suddenly turn traitor and cruelly tear it asunder, ripping out fistfuls of his entails in search of the child hidden within-

... it's no wonder he can't meet the rubber man's eyes, and Zoro wishes again and again that he didn't already know exactly how it feels to have someone cut him open and reach inside, because his memories of the actual experience make the dream world too real, his tormentors' actions too difficult to simply pass off as figments of his overactive imagination.

He would honestly have been far more comfortable sleeping alone- but then Luffy would have wanted to know why and asked what was wrong, and he doesn't want to tell his captain what he's seen in his dreams. What he's seen- and felt- his captain do to him in the dreams. So he's bottled it up inside, concealed his distress and tried very hard not to flinch at being touched.

After tonight, though, there's no way he can keep up the charade any longer- not after waking from one of those horrible nightmares to find himself pinned under the aroused body of the same man he'd just been begging to stop pounding mercilessly into him while crushing him stomach-down against a cold, unbearably hard stone floor as the amused sadist looked on, seated against the closest wall and offering playful encouragement while stroking her own thighs with wet fingers, spreading them wider to accommodate his face as the figure ramming him from behind forced his head between them with the iron grip knotted in his hair.

Clawing his way up from the depths of that dream to discover his captain rubbing against him, panting into his mouth and pushing his body deeper into the mattress- he'd been temporarily paralyzed by terror so strong he thought his heart might stop. Terror abruptly blended with blinding, senseless rage when the younger pirate's fingers had strayed too near his belly.

I got... confused. I thought I was still protecting-

He'd thought he still had something to protect.

Damn it, Sencho. What the hell do you WANT from me? WHY do you even still want me anyway, after-

Zoro sighs.

None of this is Luffy's fault. He knows that. Knows his partner's only done something he's done a hundred times before- something THEY'VE done a hundred times before. Acting on instinct and groggy from sleep, the rubber man had simply made a stupid mistake, and the swordsman's well aware he can't hold his captain accountable for breaking the rules when he never truly established post-Impel Down boundaries. Perhaps he SHOULD have done so, but he hadn't had the heart to
insist the younger pirate keep his hands completely to himself. Luffy craves physical contact—needs and has always needed to touch and hold and love, and it hadn't seemed right to withhold that when he's obviously hurting too, so Zoro hadn't complained about the frequent hugging and kissing and snuggling, even though it'd made him increasingly uncomfortable.

But there's touching— and then there's TOUCHING, and while there's always been much more to their relationship than sex alone, the Straw Hat captain's proved himself an enthusiastic and surprisingly sensual partner since the beginning, fascinated with taction and taste and sound, and just as interested in giving pleasure as receiving it. Apt to ambush his swordsman with hungry kisses and promises of gratification when and where least expected, and until now, Zoro's never had a reason to complain. He's never had a reason to say no.

Maybe you still don't have a reason—or at least not a good enough one. Maybe you shouldn't've freaked out. Maybe you should've just laid there and let him undress you and let him fuck you. Then at least SOMEBODY would've been getting what they wanted, he thinks miserably as he wanders off the Galley-La property into the city itself, not knowing where he's going and not caring as long as he keeps moving. He can't escape the steady stream of his own thoughts, but even if his mind's twisting in endless circles, at least he feels like he's getting somewhere if his feet are moving. Until now he's restricted his movements to the mansion, but it's better out here, where he's surrounded by open air and less likely to bump into his nakama with their pity and guilt-filled eyes.

He doesn't know what the hell they think they have to feel guilty about, because this whole damn mess is his own fault anyway. It feels like he's made one shitty decision after another, starting with his refusal to let someone escort him back to the ship after that disastrous appointment with the doctor who-

That asshole warned you. He tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen, and look where you ended up. Might as well have just agreed to let the guy do the surgery—take him—out then, before you went and got attached to it—to him—to-

He stumbles on an uneven cobblestone that he doesn't see because he's momentarily blinded by tears, and it hurts like hell, because he's stubbed several toes, only now registering that he's forgotten his boots and is traversing the streets barefoot, but he's too caught up in his thoughts to care.

There's so many things he could've-should've done differently. If he'd ignored Luffy's orders and killed the physician before the man had the chance to report the Straw Hats' presence to the Marines. If he'd swallowed his goddamn pride and let his crew mates accompany him back to the Sunny. If he'd spent less time squabbling with the cook and paid more attention to their surroundings. If he'd been more focused during his battle with the Admirals. If he'd let Sadi remove his fingers without fighting back and pissing her off.

If he'd held on for just five or ten more minutes and ignored the Chief Guard's taunting and let her finger-fuck him to orgasm instead of impulsively summoning Asura in a last ditch effort to kill her...

She's dead but she's not gone, and while his concern for his captain's child initially kept her presence at bay, now that their son's gone, he's left with nothing but feeling cold and empty and besieged by painful memories.

Can a person be haunted? Like a house?

He's passing dark windows in what's obviously a residential area, when his ears catch the unexpected, unwelcome wail of a baby as it starts crying in one of the apartments above, and the sound startles him so badly he nearly plows face-first into the light pole he's passing because his good eye's studying the building beside him in an unconscious, instinctive search for the squalling's
origin. While the poignant stab of remorse is unsurprising, he's caught completely off-guard by the pang of pure longing that lances through his chest, shortening his breath and sending his stomach into cart-wheeling nausea.

That horrible fluttering, rippling sensation reminds him so strongly of something kicking and squirming inside his belly that he's stumbling towards the canal before he's aware he's moving, wrapping both arms tightly around his middle as he drops to his knees and vomits bile into the water below, his abdominal muscles straining forcefully enough to make him continue retching long after he's got nothing left in his stomach to throw up.

*Ungh- at least it's the middle of the night-* He muses weakly, gasping for air through the awful film now coating his throat and tongue and shuddering when every movement, no matter how minuscule, sends pain flashing across his healing incision. *There's nobody around to watch you puke your guts out in the middle of the godforsaken street...*

Granted, even if there is someone watching unseen from a nearby doorway or window that his slowly-returning Kenbunshoku haki's failed to identify, they'd probably just mistake him for some dumb bastard who can't handle his alcohol. But unfortunately he's not drunk, although he's starting to wish otherwise. A bottle- or better yet a case- of rum or whisky could go a long way towards killing his pain and misery...

*Don't even think about it. Last time you tried that, you fucked up a bunch of shit. Didn't kill anybody, thank god, but they still didn't fix all the holes you punched in the wall, and Chopper had to treat your fingers again- or what's left of 'em, anyway.*

He wipes sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, grimacing. The rain's stopped at some point he's been too lost in his own thoughts to recall, and the temperature's also risen slightly, just enough to leave his wet clothing clinging uncomfortably to his exertion-heated skin.

*Tch, you're an idiot, anyway, letting yourself get caught off-guard like that just 'cause you heard a- just 'cause you heard somebody crying. This is a city, with people living in it, dumb-ass; are you really that surprised some of 'em have kids?*

There's a fountain nearby- one of those ridiculous ornamental pieces that would normally send the shitty cook into grotesque, poetic rapture in response to the intricately carved quartet of huge-breasted mermaids flaunting their sea shell-studded and barely concealed endowments. But it's got running water, which is all the swordsman gives a shit about, and he limps his way over to splash his face and rinse the foul taste from his mouth.

He's standing there with his good eye closed, clutching the edge of the bowl and still struggling to catch his breath and thinking that someone must have seen to the infant because the crying stopped- *good, 'cause that sound was making me crazy* - sometime while he was busy emptying his stomach of its meager contents, when he becomes acutely aware that the fountain's circulating water sounds like babbling laughter. Whose, he isn't sure; one moment his disconcerted mind mistakes it for children giggling at hastily murmured secrets and the next he swears it sounds like a woman's teasing voice. Either way, he's suddenly dry heaving again, whole and maimed hands alike clamping down on the fountain's rim so forcefully that it snaps under the pressure, spilling his torso into the basin. Water sprays into his face, momentarily blinding him, and when he staggers upright, pawing sluggishly at his eyes, he finds himself face-to-face with one of those god-awful stone mermaids.

The thing's all flowing hair and full, pouting lips and that damnable laughter's ringing in his ears, and he reacts without thinking, slamming a fist into the leering smile.

The carving's incredibly hard and much thicker here than the bowl's rim, but Zoro's fear and anger
lend him strength, and in the end, it's a draw; the marble succumbs to the blow, the mermaid's
delicate features obliterated by a spider's web of cracks, but the swordsman's forced to bite his tongue
to hold back a strangled cry of pain and dismay. He's punched the fountain with his right hand, and
the impact's split the healing flesh beneath the cauterized ovals where his fingers used to be. It's flesh
still tender from knocking plaster off the walls, and it fucking hurts.

The pain helps drive the confusion from his head. It's just a stupid, overly-gaudy fountain again, now
spilling water around his bare feet as he backs away, clutching his aching hand. The blood dripping
from his damaged skin looks black in the moonlight and somewhat surreal, as though he's spilled a
bucket of pitch on himself, but the throbbing in his wounded appendage tells him he's not dreaming.

*Water Seven. You're standing on the sidewalk in Water Seven- and- congratulations, you just killed a
public drinking fountain.*

A small noise escapes him that sounds suspiciously like a giggle and he bites his tongue and inner
cheek hard enough to taste copper, reining in his hysteria before it can burst from his throat in peals
of neurotic laughter.

*Get a grip, shithead, before you crack up and wake the whole damn neighborhood! If you didn't
already, that is, making so much bloody noise.*

Time to get moving again. He casts a regretful eye over the demolished fountain and the small river
that's been formed by the water running across the cobblestones and down into the canal, thinking
disconnectedly that he really needs to stop doing shit like this before Iceburg gets fed up with him
breaking things and decides to give the crew the boot before Sunny's fully repaired.

At the thought of the ship, he's struck by the sudden urge to go to it and decides on the spot that he'll
spend the night there, because there's no way in hell he's going back to the mansion, not after trying
to strangle his captain and then running away like a dog with his tail between his legs, and it's a
measure of how discombobulated his head feels from his body that he actually finds the place where
Sunny's docked within a few minutes.

*The shitty cook oughta love this*, he considers moodily as he stands studying the moon's reflection
shivering on the dark water and listening to the creaking timbers and snapping sails of the vessels tied
and anchored in the harbor. *Swirly asshole's always asking what the hell it'd take for me to develop a
decent sense of direction. I guess we've got our answer now, don't we? Simple, really- take away
everything- everything that means anything- and suddenly I know EXACTLY where I am. Suddenly I
end up exactly where I wanna go.*

But that's not quite true, because even though he's found the dock and even though he's found the
ship, he's still hopelessly lost inside his own head. And he's stunned to realize that he doesn't know
where he belongs for the first time since he reluctantly agreed to quit being a bounty hunter. For the
first time since he agreed to become a pirate and follow the skinny, black-haired teenager with the
straw hat and the huge grin. The man who's since become far more to him than he ever expected:
captain, sparring partner, best friend, lover, father of his-

For a long time now, Luffy's been everything important to him- everything driving him to succeed, to
achieve his dream, to honor vows made to the dead and living alike- but now it feels as though
they've LOST everything. The baby, their crew's camaraderie- and now each other. Zoro hasn't been
able to look the younger pirate in the face for days, and tonight- tonight-

*In his struggle to protect his captain's- to protect THEIR child, he's given up everything. His swords,
his ambition, his own body. He's surrendered everything, and while he doesn't- while he CAN'T
regret it, because they've been willing sacrifices and he knows he'd do it all over again for just one*
more brief glimpse of his son's face, all his efforts have been for nothing. For a little while, he thought Luffy's presence might salvage a little of his sanity, at least give him something concrete to cling to while he tried to collect the scattered fragments of his heart, which despite his strongly enforced detachment still feels as though it's been shattered just as neatly and thoroughly as Wado's blade- but the nightmares put an end to that and he's never felt so alone.

He's been skirting the issue for days, but tonight's finally driven the point home with unerring accuracy.

*I can't do this anymore. I've had enough.*

Admitting defeat hurts tremendously, but it's also a relief. No more struggling to hold it together so Luffy doesn't see the panic on his partner's face when he feels compelled to spontaneously hug and kiss him. No more spending every night staring wide-eyed at the wall for hours and summoning numb static inside his head to tune out his captain's sleepy voice mumbling loving reassurances in his ear. No more memories of tiny, tiny fingers loosely curled into perfect little fists - frighteningly small compared to his own large, calloused hands - whenever Luffy reaches out to touch his arm, squeezing gently and smiling comfortingly and entirely unaware of his swordsman's internal turmoil as Zoro tries not to shrink from his touch.

He closes his eyes, taking a deep, shuddering breath and blocking out everything but the sound of the ocean.

*You don't have to stay here. It'd be so easy to leave. Just catch a ride on the next ship setting sail- leave this all behind. Start over somewhere else, where you don't have to look at his face every day and wonder if your son would've had his smile.*

Not that Luffy, or anyone else for that matter, is smiling much these days, but that doesn't stop his brain from fantasizing about his- about their- child and imagining exactly which of his and his captain's individual traits and features might've shone through as their little boy started crawling, taking his first steps- and oh god, it hurts more than he ever imagined thinking about something he'll never know. Things he'll never see.

He can feel his heart's uncertain rhythm picking up speed in his chest as he listens to the waves breaking against Sunny's hull and contemplates leaving everything behind.

So simple. So easy, to just get on a ship and go. He could do it tonight.

There's a sarcastic snort somewhere in the back of his head. *Oh yeah? And just where the hell you think you're going to go? Anywhere.* While he didn't talk to himself in Impel Down for fear of losing his mind, he's pretty sure it doesn't matter at this point. In any case, there's no baby to confide in this time; he's truly and utterly alone. Anywhere but here. *I don't care, as long as it's somewhere I don't have to think about-* His fingertips slide down his front, over the soft pouch that his stomach's become, and even though he can't feel the sutures through the layers of his shirt and pants and the bandages that are slowly beginning to unravel beneath them, he knows the exact path they make across his abdomen. *Somewhere I don't have to think about what might've been- or anything that's happened over the past few months.*

*Last few months? Ha, what about the last few YEARS, Roronoa? Or do you honestly think you can handle remembering everything you've been through with this crew- everything you've been through with its captain- without remembering all of it, good and bad alike?*
Fine, he scowls, forcing his hand down to his side when he realizes that he's been aimlessly caressing the tender flesh of his lower belly. Somewhere I don't have to think about the last few YEARS.

You think you can really do it? Move on and forget your nakama just like that? Forget HIM? Just like that? After you were ready to die for him? After you spent the last two years training for his sake and lost an eye in the process? After you agreed to carry his baby- your captain's child- to term even though you didn't really want to?

Look, I kept throwing up all the time and everybody kept joking about Akuma no Mi and aliens and shit, and- yeah, okay, I didn't really want to do it at first. I just agreed 'cause it was what HE wanted. It didn't seem like such a big deal in the beginning, anyway, because it didn't seem REAL, but after a while my pants didn't fit right anymore and then it wasn't long 'til I had to start wearing the coat to hide the way my gut kept getting bigger, and I HATED it. He grits his teeth. But then- when we both felt the baby- felt him moving that first time- Sencho was so happy, and then we SAW him on that screen and I- I changed my mind.

You think he's going to be happy if you leave?

He doesn't respond to this, clenching his jaw and clutching the helm so tightly that he's forced to let go for fear of snapping the wheel.

Thought so. And wherever this imaginary destination might be, with no crew and no captain and no memories- good or bad or otherwise- you wanna tell me how you're going to get there?

On a ship-? Did you not hear me the first time or are you just that fucking stupid?

Zoro's vaguely aware he's standing there on the Sunny's bow, hands resting on the wheel while he's holding a heated dispute inside his own head and asking himself if he's stupid, and he knows the whole thing's ridiculous and more than a little pathetic, but he also knows things haven't been quite right inside his skull since Impel Down. A lot of things haven't been quite right since Impel Down.

On a ship. Of course. So tell me- which ship? The voice asks, sounding amused. Most of those are too big for one person to handle, and you suck at sailing anyway, so I wouldn't bother trying to steal a ride. And you can forget buying passage on one; as usual, you're broke - hell, you probably still owe your navigator money- although she might be persuaded to lift your debt if you threaten to kill her again. Face it, Roronoa, you've got nothing to your name but a few busted swords. Hell, you can't even say you've got the clothes on your back, because they're technically not yours- not when you're borrowing them.

So I'll work for it- lift anchors, mop decks and stuff like that. I've done it before and I can do it aga-

Oi. Seriously? Roronoa, who the hell's gonna hire you? I don't know if you've taken a good look at yourself lately. Not only are you seriously out of shape, but anybody dumb enough to take you on will throw your ass overboard the first time you try to break some guy's neck because the poor bastard slapped you on the back.

Yeah, well I bet Trafalgar LAW would- Zoro hesitates, finally recognizing that sarcastic tone as a combination of his own voice and the Heart captain's blunt drawl. What the hell are YOU doing in my head?

You might not like me, but you respect me and you also know I wouldn't bullshit you. I didn't do it when I told you about the baby, and I won't do it now. Although, I- ah- assume you understand I'm not actually here and you're really just having this conversation with yourself?
"Well, duh," the swordsman mutters. "I'd like to think I'm not THAT far gone."

Except now you're talking to yourself out loud, Zoro-ya.

"Whatever- it's less confusing this way."

Suit yourself. Anyway, my crew and I are already gone, and nobody's likely to spare you the opportunity to get thrown off their ship unless you lose that flabby beer gut.

"It's not-"

I know that, and YOU know that, but anybody looking to hire you isn't going to have a clue- and I'd strongly suggest you avoid enlightening them.

"I'm not stupid."

Never said you were, the voice tells him smoothly, and then it softens, tone placating. You're confused, and you're hurting, but you're not stupid. Not really. And I've got to admit, I'm awfully glad you're not thinking about DOING something stupid- like drowning yourself. Or eating the broken pieces of your sword.

"I can't say the thought didn't cross my mind, but it's-" Zoro's brow wrinkles slightly as he tries to find the right words. "It'd be too- it'd be kinda cruel, wouldn't it? Offing myself and making L-Luffy-" Speaking his captain's name, even to himself, hurts far more than he expected. ".-making him deal with losing us both. Me and- me and the baby, I mean. Besides, this is all my fault anyway- why should I dodge the blame by taking the easy way out just to make everything go away?"

Yes, well, he's going to be losing both of you anyway, you know, if you're serious about leaving. Why don't you just go back to Galley-La and explain-

"Fuck that! No. I'm not- I can't-" He abandons the helm, running both hands through his hair as he paces the deck.

Alright, Roronoa-ya, NOW you're being stupid. I know that bitch screwed with your head pretty good, but what do you really think Mugiwara-ya will do if you turn around and go back right this second? Are you honestly afraid he's going rip your clothes off, bend you over the nearest table and fuck you raw, just like in your dream? Or call your crew mates in and order them to-

"SH-SHUT UP- JUST SHUT THE HELL UP!" Because that's EXACTLY what he's afraid might happen, even though he KNOWS it's absurd.

Oi, okay, okay- settle down before you give yourself an aneurysm. Or rupture a pre-existing one. But in all honesty, Roronoa-ya? Come on. You know your captain better than that. It's not like Mugiwara-ya's going to just haul his dick out the second he sees you, grab you by the hair and-

"STOP IT!" In panic and desperation, Zoro slams the heel of his left hand into the side of his own head to silence the voice- and freezes, aware he's crossed a very distinct line.

... you alright there?

"God, I- I really AM going fucking crazy," the swordsman breathes, burying his face in both hands.

And no wonder- you're exhausted. You need to sleep.

"Dunno if I can. Those goddamn dreams..."
But after aimlessly wandering the ship for ten or fifteen more minutes, he retreats to the familiar heights- and safety- of the crow's nest and dozes off while sitting on the bench and staring disinterestedly at the moon's reflection in the water below.

Franky and Usopp's voices wake him when they come aboard in the morning, and as the world gradually filters back into his growing consciousness and he becomes aware of the padded seat beneath his head and the warm, brilliant sunlight streaming in the surrounding windows, he realizes he's slept through the night without interruption.

No nightmares. No waking up lathered in sweat, frightened by his own unwanted arousal and biting his tongue bloody to hold back a scream of denial. No dreams of his son, dead or otherwise, and while his neck and shoulders feel a bit stiff from sleeping slumped sideways on the bench all night, he's more clear-headed than he's been in days.

It's also the first night he's spent without Luffy tucked against his back, and it doesn't take him long to make the connection. No captain, no nightmares.

He rises slowly, gaze immediately drawn to the harbor outside- which is no longer dark and silent but bustling with noisy activity. Sailors and fishermen hurrying back and forth along the docks. New vessels arriving- and others departing.

"I don't know if you've taken a good look at yourself lately..."

He's avoided it for the most part, but he's well aware of his body's lax condition.

"Nobody's likely to spare you the opportunity to get thrown off their ship unless you lose that flabby beer gut."

I know.

It's time he stops sitting around on his ass and feeling sorry for himself. It's time for a new chapter in his life. A chapter with a new setting.

And a new cast of characters.

He drags his barbells down from the gym that afternoon despite Chopper's weak protests and spends the rest of the day on the lawn, struggling to re-tone his atrophied muscles.

xxx

"Luffy- you need to do something. About Marimo."

"Why?"

"What the hell do you mean WHY? He's down there all the time now, and when he's not popping his stitches lifting those freaking weights, he's tearing the goddamn things out jogging around the harbor- or starting fistfights with the dockworkers! Chopper keeps patching him up and telling him to slow down, but he just grunts and mutters some shit about getting ready to go. He makes it sound like it's happening soon, but you haven't said anything to the rest of us about it and Nami-san wants to know when we're-"

"We're not."

"Wh- What do you-"
"We're not. Going anywhere," the younger pirate says again softly. He turns his face towards Sanji, and he's trying to smile- trying very hard to be his old, optimistic self- as though he doesn't believe a single word of what's coming from his own mouth, but the despair and grief and fearful longing in the captain's eyes tell a different story, and his expression transforms the cook's heart into a leaden lump that lays heavy in his chest because he knows Luffy's about to verify everything he's feared. "Nobody else is leaving. Just Zoro."
"I know, but we gotta- we gotta just leave him alone for a while, Sanji."

"Are you even LISTENING to yourself? Goddamn it, you can't possibly think what Marimo's doing's RIGHT!"

"I didn't say that! But half the time he doesn't even wanna be in the same room as me, so if I keep pushing- if he thinks I'll try 'n MAKE him stay- he's gonna freak out. He might decide he's leaving NOW, even though he's not ready. Chopper says he's not healing like he should 'cause he's pushing himself too hard, and I don't-" Luffy makes a low noise of frustration and resumes pacing back and forth across the balcony, neck and shoulders rigid with tension. "I don't want Zoro getting hurt or killed 'cause I chased him away before he could get better."

"GET BETTER? Who the fuck are you kidding, Luffy? He's not going to GET BETTER, not by slingin those bloody weights around or picking fights with half the island- and not by pulling this lone swordsman shit either! I don't know what the hell that idiot thinks he's doing or where he thinks he's gonna go, but he doesn't belong OUT THERE," the cook argues, flinging out one arm to indicate the horizon before them. "He belongs HERE, with you, with me, with the whole goddamn crew!" To Sanji's disgust, the captain shakes his head, and he utters a growl of exasperation. "Can you honestly, for one second, tell me you actually WANT him to-?"

"IT'S NOT ABOUT WHAT I WANT!" The younger pirate snaps, eyes flashing dangerously as he whirls to glare at the blond, but in the next moment, his shoulders sag in defeat and he turns away to rest both hands on the railing. "What I want doesn't matter as long as Zoro's happy. Even if that means he needs to be- needs to be somewhere else instead of- instead of-" Instead of here with me. With us. He doesn't finish the thought aloud, but it isn't necessary.

Captain and crew aren't only thing Zoro intends to leave behind, and they both know it. He's also abandoning his partner. Lover. Nakama. Family.

Sanji doesn't know how to respond to this, and for several minutes they stand in uncomfortable silence, until-

"Oi... Sanji-?"

He realizes the rubber man's trembling, fingers shaking so violently where they're gripping the wrought iron that the entire railing's quivering, and when Luffy glances back over his shoulder, his expression's twisted with misery and he's crying, cheeks wet and nose leaking thick, clear streamers of mucus.

"Sanji- what am I s-s-supposed to do without him? Wh-What am I supposed to do without ZORO?"

It's not a question for which Sanji has an answer, and the cook doesn't know what to do for his bewildered, lonely captain other than reach out and drag him into a tight embrace, ignoring the copious tears and snot and holding on stubbornly when the younger pirate makes a low noise of distress and tries to push him away. Eventually Luffy stops fighting to escape and starts desperately clinging to the other man instead, both fists bunched in his shirt and forehead smashed against his collarbone as he endeavors, unsuccessfully, to muffle the harsh braying sobs escaping his throat.

Shit. Shit. This whole thing's so WRONG, the blond thinks, raising a hand to adjust his crying crew mate's straw hat to prevent it being crushed between them, unaware that he's swaying slightly,
rocking his dark-haired friend in his arms. *That shitty mossball oughta be the one here now. Not me. Goddamn it, Zoro- don't do this to us. Don't do this to Luffy.*

*xxx*

The captain may have given orders, but a few hours later when Sanji walks into the Sunny's dining hall to discover Zoro seated sideways on a bar stool at the counter, staring wordlessly out the front porthole window while the crew's doctor fretfully examines his lower belly, the blond's hard-pressed to honor Luffy's wishes and hold his tongue.

The swordsman's shirtless, damp with sweat and clearly fresh from one of his brutal training sessions- or possibly yet another fistfight, given the new bruises blooming on his collarbone and one pectoral. As the green-haired pirate shifts uncomfortably in his seat, gaze darting towards the door to see who's entering the room, the light falling across his face reveals another large contusion darkening his left cheekbone.

Although he doesn't completely relax upon identifying the intruder, Zoro loses a little of the wariness he wasn't quick enough to hide in the first place. Not that masking his expression successfully would've helped much anyway; not when the person he's trying to deceive doesn't need to rely on sight alone to catch him doing it.

*He thought I was LUFFY,* the cook realizes with growing dismay and disgust. *Guess he sensed my haki but couldn't read it, so he figured it might be Luffy checking up on him. Shit, no wonder he's so damn twitchy even when people knock- his Kenbunshoku's still all screwed up.*

His intention's to ignore Marimo and slip behind the counter to resume sorting through the scorched, broken crockery and dented pots and pans that failed to survive the fire as well as the ship's subsequent gymnastics in the assault on Impel Down, but he finds his gaze automatically drawn to where Chopper's Heavy Point fingers are swiping gingerly at their first mate's exposed abdomen with a saline-saturated square of gauze. The sutured skin he's cleaning, visible between unbuttoned trousers and rolled-up haramaki, looks painfully irritated, and Sanji can't help wincing in sympathy because the last wounds he remembers being that inflamed-

*Thing's gonna scar. Just like his chest and ankles. And his eye. And- well, anywhere he got sliced up when Chopper wasn't around to-

"Oi." Spoken in a voice so low, it's almost a growl. "Sure you haven't got anything better to do than fuckin' stare?" Highly conscious of the way he's being scrutinized, Zoro's glaring at him, body gone stiff and radiating hostility.

"I don't know. Do I?" The cook fires back, abandoning all pretense of disinterest. "You were out starting shit again, weren't you."

"Not that it's any of your goddamn business, but you might wanna keep in mind- I FINISHED whatever I STARTED."

"Zoro- Zoro, I need you to hold still," Chopper cautions his patient in a shaky, pleading tone that makes it clear he'd rather be anywhere else than caught between feuding crew members. " S-Sanji, could you please just- give us a little space?"

"Drag his ass in the infirmary then. I don't need his shitty attitude in my kitchen."

"I'm not IN your fucking kitchen," Zoro snarls, emphasizing this point by slamming a fist down on the counter separating the dining hall from the kitchen proper, and the blond flinches despite himself-
not because he's truly startled, but because the swordsman's used his right hand without consideration for his own injuries and it's impossible to miss the intense pain that flashes across his face as contact with the hard surface jars the healing wounds.

"ZORO!" The reindeer crouching beside him cries, reaching instinctively for the damaged appendage, but their first mate shoves him away and struggles to his feet.

"Don't worry- you won't have to put up with me for much longer." He spits at the cook, voice seething with venom. "In your kitchen OR your dining hall OR ANYWHERE ELSE on this goddamn ship." And then he's gone, throwing open the door with one shoulder as he barrels through it while fumbling clumsily to readjust his clothing, efforts hindered by his maimed, throbbing hand. It slams shut behind him with enough force to rattle the lamp fixtures, and there's a loud, immediate thud overheard as Franky flings his hammer in disgust and starts shouting angrily at the swordsman and anyone else in earshot, asking just how the hell he's "expected to fix ANYTHING around here when you guys keep breakin' shit!"

"Shit," Sanji mutters, running trembling fingers through his hair. "Luffy's going to kill me."

"Why couldn't you just leave him alone?" Chopper demands, throwing down the wad of soiled gauze he's squeezed into a crumpled ball, where it joins several others scattered beneath the stool. "Do you know how long it took me to get him in here? And what's all that stuff he said about Sunny?"

Too taken aback by the furious resentment creasing the normally cheerful doctor's brow to protest the mess on the floor, Sanji collapses onto the seat beside the one Zoro just vacated. "God, I think that's the most I've heard him say in weeks..."

"SANJI-

"Fine, fine," the cook sighs, slouching against the counter as he rummages in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. "Apparently Marimo told Luffy he's leaving... and I was kinda hoping the stupid moss-for-brains was just blowing steam- but it looks like he's serious."

"Zoro said WHAT?" Chopper's returned abruptly to his usual form, and his large, expressive eyes are now swimming with tears as he stares up at Sanji in confusion and horror. "He- he CAN'T! He-"

There's a thousand and one reasons evident in his trembling jaw and drooping ears, but when he opens his mouth to give them life, all that emerges is another explosive "HE CAN'T!" and then he's fleeing the dining hall as well, stumbling outside crying for Zoro to stop- to wait- to listen. To stay.

"Way to go, dumbass," Sanji mumbles aloud to himself when the reindeer's gone, taking a deep drag on his cigarette and holding the smoke in his lungs for a moment or two before exhaling noisily. "Captain says to leave the guy alone, so what do you do? Can't even make it through the bloody day before you lose your shit and bust the poor bastard's balls anyway- and if that's not enough, then you get other people hounding him too." He blinks, irritably swiping moisture from his lashes with his shirt cuff. Damn breeze, blowing smoke in my eyes. Guess I better go shut that door.

News of Zoro's impending departure spreads slowly but surely throughout the remaining crew. Gathered around Iceburg's long banquet table a few nights later to share yet another awkward meal almost entirely devoid of even the most menial conversation, the Straw Hats pick listlessly at food that turns to bitter ashes in their mouths, most of them trying to avoid meeting the eye of the swordsman who's deliberately chosen a seat that leaves several open chairs between him and them.
It's not difficult. Not with Zoro's gaze fixed on the food he's bolting down almost faster than he can chew it and his stiff frame repelling all hesitant attempts at communication, making clear his intentions to finish his meal as quickly as possible before heading back to the docks and resuming his endless drills until exhaustion forces him to retire to the crow's nest bench for a few hours of sleep. He's been spending day and night on the Sunny, determined to take full advantage of the gym and its equipment before he's forced to leave it behind, and he only returns to the mansion when it becomes absolutely necessary to refuel his aching body or to hit the bathhouse for a quick shower since Franky's still working on Sunny's plumbing.

The green-haired pirate doesn't know what they'll do with the larger dumbbells after he's gone, considering no one else but the shipwright or the captain himself's ever been able to shift the heaviest of them more than a few feet- but in a short while that won't be his problem anymore. Once he's gone, they can dump the damn things in the harbor or even donate them to the Galley-La shipyard to melt down as scrap metal for all he cares.

Kitetsu and Shususui and the remains of Wado will be coming with him, of course, but otherwise he plans to travel light. Despite the many places the crew's visited during the length of time he's served as their swordsman and first mate, he's accumulated very little in the way of personal effects. Everyone else has always managed to fill the ship with their own junk: the cook's kitchenware and his extensive wardrobe of finely cut clothing, Usopp and Franky's half-finished gadgets, Robin's volumes upon volumes of books, Nami's maps and those odd bits of treasure she deems too precious to trade or sell, Chopper's medical texts and infirmary equipment, Luffy's collection of interestingly shaped sea shells and other random shit he's collected during their travels...

But years as a bounty hunter taught Zoro to carry only what's absolutely needed, and even before the fire that scoured the ship and destroyed the majority of everyone's personal effects, his locker was empty except for a few thread-worn shirts, a haramaki or two and his katana maintenance kit.

Not that what's left of my kit'll do me much good anyway. Not with Wado in pieces and Shususui bent like a fucking boomerang.

He's concentrating so intently on inhaling his dinner, barely tasting it much less having any clue what he's even eating, he doesn't feel the two sets of eyes burning holes into him as the despondent captain stares in his direction, absentmindedly pushing barely-touched food around his plate while Sanji glares across the table at them both, angry and frustrated and seriously contemplating just grabbing them both by the hair and smashing their heads together because this whole thing's just so-

C'mon, you idiots- just LOOK at each other for more than five seconds, goddamn it! Can't you see what you're doing to yourselves? What you're doing to the rest of us?

Rather than serving the meal as usual and forgoing his own in favor of dancing attendance on the ladies, the cook's sitting with the crew, exactly as he's done for the past three days. His own thick blanket of depression's rendered him incapable of preparing anything edible for the nakama he's grown so accustomed to feeding. He'd initially attempted to continue business as usual when they arrived at Water Seven, but after days of watching Luffy push away half-filled plates, he'd found his confidence shattered.

Following his confrontation with Zoro in the Sunny's dining hall, he'd been so distressed he'd found it impossible to follow even his simplest, most familiar recipes, and when he'd finally kicked in an oven and frightened the kitchen assistants so badly they refused to continue working with him, Paulie had taken him aside and told him that the Galley-La employees would handle things from then on- and to please leave the kitchen before it suffered any further damage.

He supposes he ought to be insulted, but in reality he doesn't really care. The joy and peace he
usually finds in cooking's no longer attainable, and he's lost his interest in showering their female crew members with culinary delights, because perfectly arranged platters and artistically designed desserts don't mean shit when the first mate's on the verge of permanently ducking out and, despite crying himself to sleep every night, the captain's showing no signs of stopping him.

*We're falling apart, Luffy- don't you understand? You let HIM go, and what's going to hold the rest of us here? If HE leaves, it's only a matter of time before-

"-or shall I pass it to someone else?"

"Hmm?" The cook blinks dumbly at the salad bowl under his nose, then at the woman holding it. "Ah, Robin-chan. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Cook-san."

*She's calling everyone by their old names again- the ones she used before we rescued her from Enies Lobby...*

Sanji's not entirely sure what that means- but he knows it's not a good sign. The historian's reestablished a certain emotional distance between herself and the others, and the blond's disturbed to realize that while he doesn't remember exactly how long ago it started - days? weeks? - she's been referring to everyone by their occupational titles for quite some time now.

*I don't know, but I think- every day, it's getting worse. But even if that's true... the sooner TODAY's over, the better.*

No one's dared mention it, but he's sure his crew mates are both equally and painfully aware of the day's importance. Before circumstances required otherwise, Chopper had promised Zoro he'd do his best to perform the laparotomy around thirty-nine weeks gestation, explaining the pregnancy would be well-advanced enough at that point to ensure the baby would be born fully developed and unlikely to suffer complications from premature delivery. But the doctor had also given the bed-bound swordsman a due date tentatively based on actual childbirth averages, in hopes that having a fixed deadline- or, more aptly, a goal- might make the wait a little less stressful.

It's difficult to say how much the older pirate's affected by the knowledge that today would have marked his son's arrival, given his renewed refusal to speak more than a word or two at a time to any one of them, but there's a tension in Zoro's demeanor that makes the cook think their first mate - he stubbornly refuses to consider the man as anything else while he's still taking meals with the crew, declaration of departure aside - is set to explode like one of Usopp's Gunpowder Stars.

Luffy's a different story. The rubber man, normally notorious for his poor memory, doesn't have any trouble whatsoever remembering what was supposed to happen today, and he's spent the afternoon wavering between tearful despondency and severe agitation, barricading himself in their empty rooms only to emerge moments later to stalk the hallways with hands shoved deep into his pockets and bloodshot eyes blazing with conflicting emotions. Regardless of his location, however, his angry despair's been evident in his clenching, unclenching fingers and his tendency to snap terse words at anyone who lets their gaze linger on him for too long. Even now, he's quiet and withdrawn and hasn't eaten more than a bite or two of his food.

Sanji knows their captain's thoughts keep straying to a calendar laying somewhere onboard the Sunny, pages turned to the current month- with today's date circled repeatedly in Nami's mapping ink and marked with a badly-drawn smiley face and several fat exclamation points.

*C'mon, Sencho- just 'cause Chopper pulled that particular date outta his ass doesn't mean it's really*
gonna be the kid's birthday! I mean, I sure as hell don't wanna wait that long- I'd like to see my
goddamn feet again sooner rather than later."

"Shishishi! Zoro's so impatient."

"Damn it, Luffy, look what you- Nami's gonna wring your neck for wasting her ink. And mine for
not stopping you!" A sigh of exasperation. "Look, you made a frickin' mess- you even got it on your
FACE for fuck's sake. C'mere and lemme- oi, now what's so funny?"

"Nee hee, look, Zoro's got it smeared on his belly."

"Shit! Here, take your stupid calendar and get the hell outta here so I can take a nap before your
brat wakes up and starts kicking the crap out of me again."

The blond nudges his barely touched plate away, knowing he's completely lost his appetite.

He's leaning back in his chair with his eyes shut, listening to the click and clatter of Zoro's fork as the
swordsmen impales potato wedges with ruthless efficiency and the faint rustling that betrays his crew
mates' movements as they shift uncomfortably in their chairs, and he's wondering if every one of
them - himself included - is simply going slowly but irrevocably mad, when someone finally breaks
the silence with an apologetic clearing of their throat.

"O-Oi, Luffy?"

"... hmn?"

"Today's- well, I don't wanna say it was SUPPOSED to be important 'cause I know it's definitely
still a b-big deal even though."

Sanji's eyes immediately pop open, his gaze darting down the table to fix on the sniper who's
sweating and stammering but stubbornly persevering nonetheless. What the hell does that long-nosed
idiot think he's-?

"A-Anyway, I- I've got something for you. I was planning on giving it to you a-after, for the- but
now you won't be able to-" Usopp takes a deep breath, blinking furiously as gathering tears begin to
sting his eyes. "I-It got damaged in the fire and I figured it got thrown out while we were cleaning
out the men's quarters, but then I found it again when I was digging through my locker after you
asked me to repaint the Jolly Roger, so I saved it- and- and-" The sniper, face painfully scrunched as
he fights to keep his composure, wipes the moisture from his cheeks with his forearm. He withdraws
a small wooden object from the pocket of his overalls and offers it hesitantly to the nonplussed
captain. "I don't know what you'll do with it. B-But I still want you to have this. It's- well, I guess I
don't need to tell you why I made this and not an animal or a- a rattle or something."

"Oh," Nami says very quietly, her own first tears escaping unnoticed down her cheeks as she
bunches the tablecloth in knots between her quivering fingers. And then even more softly. "Oh."

Luffy accepts the carving in trembling hands, features largely unreadable and composed save for the
nervous tic of muscle jumping in his jaw. Unaware he's risen to his feet and swaying unsteadily in
place. Unaware that somewhere down the table, his swordsman's frozen with fork hovering between
plate and open mouth. His voice fails him completely the first time he opens his mouth to speak, so
he clears his throat, swallows, and tries again. "Usopp... th-thank-"

"WHAT THE FUCK."

That furious, disbelieving snarl's the only warning the rubber man's given before he's struck
unexpectedly from the side. He staggers, nearly biting through his own tongue and unable to finish expressing his choked gratitude as the wind's driven from his lungs, because after setting down the fork he's just bent in half and rising silently from his chair, Zoro's lunged across the empty seats to claim the object they've all been staring at with slightly widened eyes, hitting his partner hard enough to knock him not just off-balance but nearly off his feet entirely.

Mouth set in a firm line, the swordsman stares down at the slightly blackened toy sword - a dagger, really, only five or six inches from rounded hilt to blunt tip - that he's ripped from the captain's hands. For a moment his crew mates are convinced he's going to faint as the color continues draining from his already pale face, but then a hectic flush spreads across his nose and cheekbones, and he bares his teeth in a horrible grimace as he raises his knee, fingers tightening on opposite ends of the carving to bring it down with punishing force.

"DON'T!" Luffy shrieks, leaping forward to intercept him. The resulting impact sends the wooden trinket shooting out of his enraged first mate's grasp and spinning end over end across the tabletop, bouncing off plates and silverware. The younger pirate's scrambling to intercept it when Zoro's fist collides with his jaw, snapping his head back and sending dishes flying in all directions when the blow sends him careening into the table with enough force to move its heavy frame several inches across the carpet. Most of those still seated leap to their feet, shocked.

Luffy himself rises more cautiously, the blood trickling from his split lip to mingle freely with the dregs of someone's overturned wine glass dripping from his chin and collar.

In the stunned silence that follows, Robin brushes a few stray lettuce leaves from her lap onto the floor. Hand still loosely curled in a fist, Zoro stares at their captain through one slightly widened eye, momentarily startled by the overwhelming ferocity of his own actions, but then his gaze hardens and the room erupts into chaos as everyone starts shouting at once.

"SHIT!"

"Somebody, grab him before he-!"

But although the green-haired pirate's advancing on his opponent, he's stalking past and not towards him, glower fixed on the toy sword that's come to rest between Brook's water glass and the bread basket, wobbling lightly on its stubby hand guard.

"Leave it alone!" Luffy barks when he realizes where the older man's headed, his sharp order backed by enough haki to make those nearest- Sanji included- wince and clutch at their heads, but Zoro doesn't so much as glance back at him. Carelessly dashing blood from his mouth with one wrist, his eyes narrowing as his pupils constrict, the captain snatches for the swordsman's collar and knots his fingers tightly on opposite ends of the carving to bring it down with punishing force.

"Don't touch me, goddammn it! LET GO."

"NO. Usopp gave that to me- it's mine 'n I don't care if Zoro doesn't want it, but he's NOT gonna break it!"

"What the hell are you getting so goddammn worked up about-?" Zoro growls back, prying at the fist knotted under his chin and cursing when he can't break the iron grip. "It's just a fucking shitty piece of driftwood he hacked up with a bloody pocketknife! IT DOESN'T MEAN ANYTHING!"

Usopp flinches, and a snarl of outrage bursts from the Straw Hat captain. "IT MEANS EVERYTHING, YOU STUPID-!"
"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S STUPID, THINKING A FUCKING CHUNK OF WOOD'S WORTH SOMETHING WHEN IT'S NOT WORTH SHIT!" His partner roars in reply, spraying spittle as his vocal cords strain with the volume of his rebuttal. Face no longer pale but positively blazing with color.

"Oi, that's enough!" Sanji shouts, gripping the back of his chair in preparation for shoving it aside and moving forward to break up the fight, but following a quick word from Chopper, Franky takes the cook's shoulders and pushes him gently but insistently back into his seat before he can twist away. The blond struggles, unleashing a furious torrent of verbal abuse on the cyborg, but the shipwright refuses to let go because the agitated reindeer at his side's right; their nakama's liable to get himself seriously injured trying to step between the feuding pair when his body still hasn't fully recovered from Akainu's punch. At the moment they're ignoring everyone except each other in their dispute over Usopp's gift, but there's no knowing how they'll react to direct interference.

"If it doesn't mean anything, then why'd you wanna break it?" Luffy hisses venomously, tightening his grip on both fistfuls of his first mate's collar even as he jerks his own head back, narrowly dodging the vicious headbutt aimed at his face. "Zoro's a shitty liar!"

"Get your fucking hands OFF me," Zoro snarls, abandoning all attempts to pry the younger pirate's fingers loose to seize Luffy's forearms, bearing down on them so forcefully that only the rubber man's unique constitution keeps the bones within from snapping like dry twigs. The pressure required for such a crushing hold tears open the healing flesh on the stumps of the swordsman's missing and truncated fingers, painting his crew mate's arms and bunched sleeves with smears of blood as the two pirates struggle in each other's grasp, but the pain doesn't deter the older man. "You don't understand-"

"I DON'T understand! I don't understand why it's only gotta be about YOU. BECAUSE ZORO ISN'T THE ONLY ONE WHO LOST SOMETHING!" The captain screams in his partner's face, abruptly shaking him with such violence that he loses his footing and staggers sideways, nearly pulling them both down when he still refuses to let go. When he regains his balance, however, his back's slightly hunched, and after a moment or two, several bright blotches of crimson begin blossoming through his shirt and haramaki- evidence that several stitches in his abdomen have given way.

Horrified, Chopper rushes them in Heavy Point and tries desperately to pull them apart before they compound the damage already done, but he can't budge either man, and they're too busy shouting at each other to even notice his presence.

"WHAT THE HELL WOULD YOU KNOW?"

"HE WASN'T JUST ZORO'S- HE WAS MINE TOO!"

"Oh my god, Luffy- Zoro, please- just please stop," Nami groans through the fingers clasped over her mouth, stumbling backwards until her shoulders and rear bump into the wall and she slides to the floor covering her face with both hands, and then Robin is beside her, wrapping a supportive arm around the navigator's quaking shoulders, while the others strive helplessly to defuse the situation.

"Guys, c'mon, don't do this-

"Perhaps if you'd both just sit down and-

"Franky, let go of me, goddamn it- before they fucking kill each other!

"Oi, Mugiwara, don't-"
Ignoring his crew's barely-contained panic, blood dripping steadily from his mouth and nostrils, the captain slowly overpowers the older pirate, forcing him to his knees. "He was my son too, and he was- he was-" Luffy's fighting tears now, his eyes stinging furiously as he's bombarded by memories: the endless walk through the Soldier Dock to the open starboard-side hatch while the briny scent of seawater assailed his nostrils, the weight of the baby's body heavy like a stone in his arms. The sudden, shocking absence of that weight when he'd-

_I let go. I LET GO. I tried to take it back- I TRIED- but-

His hands resemble pale starfish as he plunges them through the water, lunging forward undeterred by the weakness already stealing through his flesh, because all that matters is hooking his fingers into the trailing sailcloth that's sinking further and further out of reach beneath the surface, and his mind's screaming "I LET GO I LET GO I LET GO" over and over and over, and even though he'd told himself he'd do it- he'd do this one terrible thing so Zoro wouldn't have to- HE WANTS TO TAKE IT BACK. That moment when he-

Robin's arms close around his waist, hauling him back from the edge- hauling him back inside the ship- before he can follow his son - MINE, MINE AND ZORO'S AND WHY DID I LET GO - into the ocean's depths, and the historian's embrace is gentle as she pulls him close but her eyes are wide and filled with tears and fear because he's struggling against her, groping for the hull and the water and that last faint glimmer of disappearing sailcloth and telling her "NO, NO, LET ME GO" and in that moment, he means it. In that moment, he wants to follow his child, knowing full well it means his certain death.

But she doesn't let go. She refuses to release him, her trembling arms a passive reminder that she needs him, the crew needs him, ZORO needs him- now more than ever- and that moment passes and the urge to hurl himself overboard passes, although when he buries his face against her breast to muffle the howl of regret and grief ripping its way from his throat, those words are still caught inside him and glowing like a red-hot brand seared into his mind. Let go, let go, I LET GO.

Heart aching, he'd gone back to Zoro, and now here they are, locked in combat, and he's dodging an awkward kick aimed at his groin, catching his partner's boot heel high on his thigh and loathing every moment of this. Feeling as though he's caught a tiger by the tail, because Zoro's BLEEDING, AGAIN, and it's his fault, AGAIN, but he's afraid to let go. As soon as he lets go, Zoro will probably either run away - this time for good - or try to kill him, and part of him feels like he deserves to die for being the cause of the pain and confusion and suffering visible beneath the anger on his lover's - no, I can't call him that anymore, even though I do love him, because it hurts too much, but I don't know if I can call him my swordsman anymore either or even my nakama, because he doesn't want me anymore and Zoro's not MINE anymore and oh god I hate this, I hate it so much - on the other man's face.

"Luffy, he's going to rupture more stitches," Chopper warns, hauling anxiously on the younger pirate's sleeve, but the rubber man jerks away from the doctor without looking at him, dragging the snarling, struggling swordsman with him as he moves down the table to retrieve the wooden sword.

"O-Oi, wh-what are you going to do with that?" Usopp asks nervously, so frightened and bewildered by his overwrought crew mates' unpredictable behavior that he's half-convinced Luffy intends to stab first Zoro then himself in some horrible, vindictive act of murder-suicide, but to the sniper's relief, the Straw Hat captain simply stuffs the toy into the sash tied over his shorts- presumably for safe-keeping- and releases his grip on their first mate's shirt.

On his knees, blood seeping down the crotch of his trousers to drip slowly to the floor below, the older pirate reaches out to catch the hem of Luffy's shirt with one hand to prevent him from walking
away, the other groping clumsily for the hilt protruding from his waistband. "Give it- to me!"

"No," Luffy insists, but although he's wrestling to maintain possession of the weapon, the fury and
tight's left him, leaving nothing but grief and exhaustion in their wake. "-'cause Zoro's just gonna try
to break it again. And it's- it's the only thing I have to remember Ace." And now he's crying in
earnest despite his best efforts to hold back the tears as they roll down his cheeks, hanging briefly
suspended from his chin before falling to dampen the swordsman's shirt.

Zoro flinches at the captain's use of their son's name. His pupils constrict, shrinking until they're
barely visible and his face goes deathly white as he sways slightly on his knees, fingers frozen where
they've closed on the pommel of the wooden toy- that roughly but lovingly-rendered object which
made the emotions he's sought to blunt and bury deep inside suddenly snap back into sharp, painful
focus the moment he saw it cradled in Luffy's hands with the same reverence and tenderness he
remembers the younger pirate displaying while holding their child's carefully wrapped body.

"Careful, Sencho," Robin murmurs softly from where she's sitting on the floor beside Nami, stroking
the navigator's auburn hair as the younger girl cries soundlessly against her shoulder, well aware that
whatever the captain says next will determine whether the situation ends in more bloodshed and
tears- or something slightly different.

"He had a name, and he had people who loved him and-" Luffy takes a deep breath, swallowing the
whimper caught in his throat, and when he continues, his words are punctuated by the broken sobs
he's no longer struggling to contain. "I CAN'T. I can't- make myself forget him, Zoro- I tried at first,
but it felt all wrong and- Ace didn't do anything to deserve that. So I can't- I can't do it, Zoro. I can't
forget OUR BABY." He squeezes the blood-smeared fingers wrapped around the wooden sword's
hilt. "If you gotta go, then- I won't- I won't stop you- if it's really what you w-want. But- at least- let
me keep this? Please?"

The younger pirate's cracking voice is full of such pure, raw emotion that it's surely capable of
drawing tears from stone, and as desperately as the swordsman's tried to harden his heart, it's
composed not of diamond or granite but vulnerable muscle that's now beating at a painfully rapid rate
inside him. Even so, it's strange how much an organ made of flesh can feel as though there's fine
fractures spider-webbing across its surface, splitting and widening into fissures that rush inwards
straight to his core, and while there's no audible, telltale crack within his ribcage, he feels it just the
same when the callous shield he's constructed quivers- and breaks.

"Finally," Sanji breathes, running a shaking hand through his hair and exchanging a helpless glance

with Usopp, who looks as though he doesn't know whether to be horrified or relieved that his simple gesture's miraculously breached the wall they've watched their nakama building around himself, cutting off contact with those who care about him.

Seated on the floor with his swordsman bawling uncontrollably against his chest, Luffy raises grief-stricken, imploring eyes to the watching crew, mouth trembling and twisting as he struggles to voice the one thing they've all requested of him at one time or another but that he's never asked for himself. Neither he nor Zoro. "H-" He swallows hard, now so blinded by tears he's seeing nothing but motionless blurs where they're standing or sitting. "Help?"

It's barely a whisper, but the Straw Hats move as one, answering their captain's tremulous plea.

Sanji reaches them first, stubbornly ignoring the ache in his rib cage as he kneels to enfold both men in a cautious embrace, wrapping one arm around Luffy's shoulders and gingerly offering Zoro the other, unsure of his reception and ready to withdraw if necessary. To the cook's surprise, however, Marimo doesn't push the intruding limb away but merely raises his head, bringing his flushed, tear-streaked face into view and although the green-haired pirate's sobbing too forcefully to speak, there's acceptance and gratitude in his crumpled features.

Chopper, no longer in Heavy Point, crawls into their laps without hesitation. The doctor, fur thoroughly dampened by his own tears, immediately begins working to staunch Zoro's bleeding incision and wounded hand, but he can't resist pausing frequently to hug all three of them—particularly the swordsman he's treating.

Usopp joins them next, and then Nami and Robin and Franky and Brook, until the entire crew's gathered in a tightly intertwined, companionable huddle with captain and first mate cradled securely in the center, flanked on all sides by protective, supportive nakama, and it's not long before those who weren't yet crying are also shedding plentiful tears, mourning a loss that's deeply affected each of them regardless of whether they recognized or acknowledged it.

They remain that way for a long time, and when a concerned Iceburg and overly anxious Paulie eventually enter the dining hall to find out why the kitchen staff's hovering outside, fidgeting and murmuring nervously to one another, the Galley-La's president and vice president take one look at the tangle of weary, reflective Straw Hats curled on the carpeted floor and immediately back out, closing the door quietly behind them and warning the mansion's employees to leave their guests undisturbed.
"I understand you're leaving this afternoon?"

"Yeah... Franky says Sunny's finally ready 'n we've been here pretty long now, so- it's kinda time we got going," Luffy replies, kneading his straw hat's brim as he clutches it in both hands while pacing nervously beside Iceburg and Paulie. Although he's addressing the Galley-La men, he's notably distracted, gaze fixed on the green-haired swordsman who's standing further down the dock, speaking quietly with the surrounding crew and patting Chopper's head as the reindeer hugs his leg, sniffing.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to wait another day?" Iceburg asks, frowning. The Straw Hat crew's thankfully lost most of the tension that's plagued them since their arrival, but they're clearly exhausted, and the captain himself looks exceptionally haggard this morning, dark circles smudging the pale skin beneath his puffy, bloodshot eyes. "I don't mean to be rude, Luffy-san, but it seems as though you and your nakama could use a little rest."

"Nah, s'okay." The rubber man offers him a weary, lopsided smile. "Nobody got much sleep last night, 'cause everybody stayed up talking about- well, all kinds of stuff." He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Me 'n Zoro 'n the baby- our baby. Impel Down. And what's gonna happen next."

With this last thought, he bites his lower lip, because if he's going to be honest with himself, he's not entirely sure what IS going to happen next. That's up to Zoro and whatever he's decided.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it's- well, Ice-ossan's been really great, giving us somewhere to stay, but we don't belong here and if that Smokey guy's really gonna show up like people're saying, I wanna be gone before he gets here." Luffy's expression turns slightly wry. "'Sides, Nami says we already owe you a ton of money, and we're prolly gonna end up breaking a lot more stuff if the Marines show up while we're still here."

The Galley-La president waves a hand in dismissal. Paulie snorts. "Forget it, Mugiwara- we can patch holes and buy new dishes. And fountains. Although I still think your swordsman did us a goddamn civic service destroying that horribly provocative piece of-"

"Yes, yes. We all know how you felt about the fountain," Iceburg interrupts. "-but I'm quite sure now's not the time." He turns to the young pirate standing before them. "Luffy-san, I apologize for asking this, but- your swordsman. Do I need to arrange additional accommodations, or is he-?"

"Zoro said-" The eyes that meet his gaze are full of mingled hope and fear. "He said he wanted time to think about it. That he'd let us know before we le-"

"Oooi, Luffy! Nami-san says we need to get going if we're gonna catch the tide."

"Ah, I gotta go!" The rubber man quickly dons his hat, starts turning to leave- and immediately whirs back to throw his arms around the mayor's waist in a tight, impulsive hug. "Thanks again- for everything." He breaks away before Iceburg can return the embrace, flashing the older man a sheepish grin that's a poor imitation of his usual sunny expression, but a grin nonetheless, before turning and hurrying away towards the group waiting next to the ship.
"Any time, Luffy-san. Just take care of yourself, alright?" Iceburg calls after him, but the friendly admonishment goes unheard, because when he's within a few short strides of reaching his crew, Luffy's confident gate slows to a far more uncertain walk, his gaze locked on one particular face among those now turned towards him.

The captain comes to a stop before Zoro, heart pounding painfully in his chest as he studies the swordsman's passive features. There's so much he wants to say - I love you, I need you, the crew needs you, and you need us too, we need each other and countless other poignant statements that might sway his partner's final decision and convince him that coming with them's his best choice - but his throat's suddenly too tight to let the words out and he can't do more than shuffle his feet a bit as the others gather around them. I promised. I promised I'd let you go if that's what you want, but-

He's scared. The thought of losing any one of his nakama is devastating in itself, especially when there's so many things capable of stealing them from his side. A Marine's bayonet, a rival pirate crew's cannon fire, an unexpected seaborne illness... the life they've chosen is full of constant danger from a myriad of sources. But the thought of losing ZORO- not to death, no, but losing him all the same because there's a strong possibility he might simply shake his head and WALK AWAY-

The last few months- and particularly the last couple of weeks- have been enough to deal Luffy's boundless optimism a serious blow.

Please. Stay. He can't bring himself to say it aloud, so he says it inside his head. Shouts it until the words are ringing through his skull. Stay. STAY.

The green-haired pirate standing before him shifts the long wooden box containing Shususui and the shattered remains of Wado he's cradling under his right arm, ensuring it's tucked securely against him. Once he's satisfied with the storage case's balance, his free hand returns to resting lightly on Kitetsu's hilt where the sword's strapped to his side. He looks somewhat uncomfortable with the arrangement, accustomed to wearing his sheathed weapons on the right hip rather than the left, but one glance at his damaged right extremity explains everything. Encased in black leather that hides the full extent of his injuries, his remaining digits are hooked awkwardly under the box's edge, while the glove's empty fingers stick out straight from his hand.

Despite this, however, and despite being puffy from lack of sleep and prolonged bouts of intense crying, his face is serene. More so than it's been in days, and the captain feels his heart redouble its efforts at the sight, because he knows it means the swordsman's reached a decision.

"Luffy." Quiet and gruff, but otherwise unreadable.

"Zoro..." There's so much desperation- so much helpless need- audible in their leader's voice that it compels the other Straw Hats to look away, some of them momentarily overwhelmed by tears despite the previous night's catharsis, when they thought they'd cried themselves dry.

"Better get going, before those damn Marines show up," the older man facing him chides gently, and Luffy feels the fragile hope fluttering in his chest shrivel and die, because here- finally- is the answer he's been dreading, but despite the fresh tears beginning to leak slowly down his cheeks, he can't move and he can't look away. Not when he means to memorize his former lover's face, knowing memories will soon be all that's left to him.

Brow furrowing in dismay at his emotional response, the swordsman swallows, throat clicking audibly as though he might be on the verge of breaking down himself. "I- I bet Smoker's just itching to get his hands on you, so you better-"

"Zoro..." Having no idea what to say- knowing there ISN'T anything to say. Still needing to say
something anyway, even if it's only the man's name, because- "Zoro-

"Oh, for the shitty love of-" Pushing past Usopp, who's sniffling unabashedly, the Straw Hats' cook stomps forward to yank the case from Zoro's grasp, spin and shove it unceremoniously into Franky's arms with such unexpected force the watery-eyed cyborg nearly drops it. "Will you two PLEASE quit making eyes at each other and just get on the goddamn ship already?"

"O-Oi, be careful with that!" The startled swordsman protests. "They're in really bad shape and-" He breaks off, heat suffusing his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. "Besides, I'm not sure it's such a great idea if I-"

"Don't make me kick that mossy head to knock your addled brains straight," Sanji grumbles. "You know you belong with us. And that idiot." He jabs a thumb towards Luffy, who's observing their exchange with streaming eyes and dripping nose. "Lovesick shithead'll be threatening to throw himself overboard and swim back before we clear the dock, and I sure as hell don't feel like fishing him out, so. get. on. the. damn. ship."

"I-" Gaze shifting helplessly between the blond's scowl, the rubber man's trembling lower jaw and the other crew members' hopeful expressions and eager, adamant nodding, Zoro takes a shuddering breath and scrubs his gloved hand through his hair, face reddening self-consciously. "Maybe if-"

Swallowing nervously, he glances back to the captain, mouth working soundlessly for a moment, and then his broad shoulders slump in defeat. "Can we- can we maybe just try it and- and see what happens?"

"...

"I mean, if- if that's okay with- OOF!"

"OI, WATCH IT, SHITTY GOMU!" Sanji roars, but he's grinning, trying not to laugh as he regains his footing.

Luffy's nearly trampled the cook in his frantic rush to throw himself into his first mate's arms, which have automatically risen to steady him as the older pirate stumbles backwards, awkward shyness turning to relieved, exasperated scolding as stretchy limbs wrap securely around his neck and torso and waist. "Ow! Damn it, Luffy, be careful! I don't wanna spend the first night stuck in the fucking infirmary because you-" He stops abruptly, looking anxiously up into his partner's teary, beaming face. Or trying, anyway. It's sort of difficult when he's being repeatedly kissed from one ear to the other. "That- that's if you definitely want me to-

"Yes. YES," his captain pauses long enough to reply, haphazardly-looped arms squeezing tightly enough to make him grunt. "Don't be stupid! YES!"

"Not so- hard," the swordsman reminds him. "Can't breathe- and-" His voice drops abruptly in volume, tinged with regret and shame and pitched to exclude their tearful but smiling audience. "-and it's kind of- well, I- I don't want you ending up in the infirmary either, if you get what I mean." Hoping the younger man does, because he's not sure how to explain that being physically restrained by his lover like this, even with a harmless hug, is making his pulse race and the coppery tang of fear flood his mouth. Last night's conversation may have gone a long way towards easing his paranoia- but he hasn't shared everything, not yet.

"I wouldn't CARE if I spent a WEEK in the infirmary, as long as Zoro was there with me," Luffy insists, although his grip immediately loosens so he's leaning comfortably into his first mate's arms and no longer straddling his hips or clutching him so aggressively. "We just gotta take it slow, right? And you lemme know what's okay and what's not, and we just-"
"We take it one day at a time," Zoro finishes gravely, and then, as he suddenly, unwittingly recalls the last time similar words left his lips, he's crushing Luffy against him without warning, pressing their foreheads together and clenching his teeth to suppress the soft sound of grief and loss rising in his chest.

xxx

Seated between his fellow Admirals and blatantly ignoring the smirking idiot to his right and the faint snores coming from the left - if the lanky Hie Hie no Mi user lounging beside him receives a reprimand from their superiors, it'll be the man's own bloody fault, because he'll be damned if he's going to elbow Aokiji awake one more time - Akainu adjusts his arms where they're crossed over his broad chest, brooding silently as he listens to the nearly unintelligible mutters of the Gorosei discussing the ruins of Impel Down, the unknown whereabouts of Straw Hat pirate crew and the equally elusive Revolutionary Army.

He knows there's no use issuing a formal complaint; if they didn't follow his advice to begin with, they're certainly not going to acknowledge it now that the situation's gone completely to hell- just as he'd predicted. Unfortunately, knowing this doesn't make him any less frustrated. *I swear everything moves at a goddamn snail's pace around here- it's been over a month since Dragon's son destroyed the prison they swore he'd never reach, and these old men are only now-

"Ooooh, did you hear the news?" Kizaru interjects, lips curled in that stupid smug smile that says he's fully aware he's interrupting his far more muscular colleague's pensive internal monologue, and Akainu regards him with long-suffering patience, trying not to clench his teeth.

"More than likely, but I'm sure you plan to enlighten me anyway."

As he expects, the other man's undeterred by the sarcasm in his voice.

"The word is-" He glances about to see if any of the Gorosei are listening, but the five elders are still deep in conversation with Kong on the other side of the room. ", that when Commodore Smoker-

"Man can't follow orders," Aokiji mutters, lifting his padded mask to blink sleepily at them. "I told him he was supposed to stay put at G-5 until he received a new assignment- but he skipped town and crossed the Red Line as soon as he heard those rumors that Mugiwara'd been spotted on Water Seven. I heard he took that near-sighted swordswoman with him too. Rumor has it she's still after the Pirate Hunter, although I have no idea what she'll do with him if Sakazuki here really broke all his katana."

A veritable soliloquy. "So you have been paying attention."

"Oooh, it's rude to interrupt," Kizaru scolds, eyeing them both reprovingly. "Anyway, the Water Seven mayor told our Commodore the Mugiwara pirates HAD indeed shown up and demanded that the Galley-La Company repair their ship, but he claimed he refused and his shipwrights ran them off the island. He supposedly has no idea where they went, but thinks it's entirely possible that they might've wrecked- apparently their brig sloop was in quite a state. He raises one finely arched eyebrow, looking pointedly at Akainu- who merely stares back while maintaining impassive silence. "Seems they were also rather distressed and fighting amongst themselves- something about a death in the crew, although Iceburg assured Smoker that he personally witnessed NINE pirates board the ship when they left."

"So Roronoa survived but lost the brat."

"It certainly seems that way- unless they recruited another member between the rock where we
picked up the swordsman and Impel Down, but they didn't waste much time, so I suppose that's unlikely."

"The Gorosei don't seem particularly surprised." Akainu mutters, unable to hide the note of resentment that's crept into his voice. "Or concerned."

"Oooh, well, it was a one-in-a-billion chance anyway, wasn't it? From what I heard, according to the last full medical report G-1 received from Impel Down before communications went down, the doctors fully expected a stillbirth and were prepared for Roronoa to spontaneously abort at any moment. They admitted they had no idea how he was keeping the fetus alive, especially after their Chief Guard got a bit, ah, carried away and roughed him up." Another significance glance at the scowling man beside him. "Oooh, not that it would have mattered much at that point, since the Commander-in-Chief had already received confirmation that Monkey D. Dragon wasn't taking the bait, but there WAS some very keen interest from other quarters, so the medical staff was keeping the swordsman alive just long enough for Vegapunk to get a good look at him."

"I hadn't heard we'd actually gotten a reply- but you're saying Dragon wasn't interested in his own grandson?" Aokiji asks curiously, cracking his eyelids open again. "Or didn't he believe Roronoa was actually pregnant? I know I thought the whole thing was rather far-fetched until the two of you confirmed it."

"Oooh no, I believe we made it quite clear this wasn't a practical joke- sent him a few photographs and abdominal scans taken back when the swordsman was first incarcerated. Offered to get him blood-typing and dna results from the fetus too, if he wanted more proof, but he claimed it wasn't necessary- said he knew as well as anybody what sort of relationship his son and Roronoa shared." "Then why-"

"I told you," Akainu growls, "-the man's a pirate." A revolutionary, yes, but first and foremost a pirate. "Do you really think he needs a reason?"

"Oooh, the issue was- ah- simple impracticality, if I remember correctly. He was certainly intrigued by the possibility that his son might've fathered another D." Kizaru leans forward in his seat, eyes twinkling with amusement. "Which, according to certain parties, now seems quite likely, considering how long the thing managed to survive given the circumstances! I suppose we'll never know for sure, but- in any case, Dragon also wanted to know exactly what we expected him to do with a baby. Said only an idiot would waste his time trying to raise a child- particularly an infant- on a ship sailing the Grand Line."

There's a moment of silence as the other men glance at each other, digesting this information, and then Aokiji says very slowly, "So let me get this straight: all that effort executing this harebrained scheme, and not only was it bound to fail from the beginning because Dragon never wanted what we had to offer, but we pissed off Mugiwara no Luffy enough to damn well OBLITERATE Impel Down in the process of rescuing his crew mate, and then Roronoa lost their child anyway and might very well be dead himself."

"That sounds about right- although Iceburg isn't the only witness who claims to have seen the Pirate Hunter alive, so it seems very likely he survived."

"... you do realize this is the SECOND of Mugiwara's family members to die at our hands? First his foster brother, Fire Fist Ace, and now his own blood. The ice man's shaking his head. "I'm no coward, but I'm glad as hell they needed me elsewhere the day you two went after Roronoa... I think it's pretty clear who those two Supernovas and the rest of the Mugiwara crew are going to hold responsible for their loss. If I was either of you- especially you, Sakazuki- I'd watch my back."
"I TOLD you we should've just killed that pregnant bastard on the spot, and taken out Dragon's son and the rest of those goddamn pirates when they came back and found the body," Akainu grumbles at Kizaru. "Saved everyone a lot of goddamn trouble." This fiasco never would've happened if I'd been in charge.

There's a scraping of chairs from the opposite end of the room as Kong and the Gorosei rise from their seats, and the Admirals immediately lapse into respectful- or at least obedient- silence and turn further thought inwards. One quietly amusing himself with random nonsense, another cold-heartedly contemplating power and the grandiose changes he might accomplish given free reign. The third schooling his face to polite, bored indifference, hiding the disquieting nature of his thoughts. Considering his much bloodthirstier peers and the men crossing the room towards them with well-masked disapproval and wondering, not for the first time, if his career with the military hasn't perhaps run a bit overlong.

xxx

Although everyone's genuinely relieved and pleased with Zoro's decision to stay, life on the Sunny's awkward for a long time, especially for the first few weeks after they set sail from Water Seven. Even though their crew mate's physical wounds begin to heal fairly quickly once Chopper convinces him to ease back a bit on the weight lifting, the psychological damage takes much longer to start mending, and he's often unpredictable and moody and distressingly close-mouthed despite their strongest efforts to keep his mind focused on the present rather than dwelling obsessively on the past. As Luffy frequently reminds him, there's nothing wrong with remembering or feeling sad about everything that's happened, as long as he doesn't forget that he's got eight nakama more than ready to share the load when the memories become too painful to bear alone.

The triggers capable of sending their swordsman's mind tumbling into depression and paranoia are, as Law warned, variable and often puzzling. Prolonged or excessive physical contact's understandable enough, but it takes them several weeks alone to determine why he's developed a sudden aversion to sea birds, until he grudgingly admits their avian calls set his teeth on edge because it sounds too much like someone laughing. They don't quite understand the connection and Sanji thinks the noise resembles nothing more than a whole lot of noisy squawking, but the cook takes to storing a bowl of scraps in the fridge to keep the news gulls quiet when they deliver the papers.

Many of these discoveries are accidental albeit memorable. Nami buys a bottle of the newly-developed Criminal perfume from Pappug's store when they make a brief stop to visit Keimi and pay their respects to Princess Shirahoshi as they pass through Fishman Island on their way back to the New World, but the navigator's shortly forced to bury the nearly full and tightly-corked flask at the bottom of her storage trunk. She doesn't dare wear it again- not after the incident during which Zoro nearly draws Kitetsu on her when they bump into each other in the entry way outside the bathhouse and the musky, flowery scent clinging to her sends him into a mindless panic.

They throw open all the windows to air out the room, but it's a day or two before he'll willingly enter the enclosed space again, and even then, he insists the odor's still lingering.

The fluctuating strain between the swordsman and his fellow crew members seems almost negligible, however, when compared to the difficulties constantly arising between him and his partner as they struggle to navigate the rocky terrain of their rekindled relationship.

Following a spontaneous- and ultimately disastrous- attempt at intimacy one morning when the men's quarters is unexpectedly deserted and their libidos overrule their better judgement, Zoro reluctantly broaches the subject of his dreams. The conversation, conducted at length later that afternoon in the lofty privacy of the crow's nest, leaves him badly shaken and reduces Luffy to tears when he finally
learns the complete truth behind why his first mate so frequently shies away from his touch yet tolerates Chopper's hugs and even the other men's shoulder pats and backslaps on the rare occasions when they forget themselves.

Sharing the nightmares- or at least vague descriptions of them, because neither of them want to hear the details spoken aloud- is nerve-wracking and humiliating, but the green-haired pirate's surprised to discover it's also therapeutic. The faster he confides in his partner, the less time he spends agonizing over the afterimages clinging to his waking mind.

This doesn't necessarily make things easier when he and his captain make the conscious decision to resume- or at least cautiously reintroduce- sex to the equation, and their fellow crew members are only hesitantly supportive given the initial shouting matches, broken furniture and fist-shaped dents in the storage lockers and bathhouse door, but Luffy's patience astounds everyone, including his frustrated lover.

"Zoro just needs more time," he insists whenever the older man's overwhelmed by self-doubt and angry with his own uncooperative body, and while he's not sure Zoro fully believes him- believes they can really make this work- the swordsman's at least willing to keep trying.

And so it's with unconcealed satisfaction and excitement that the rubber man eventually arrives more than fashionably late for breakfast one morning, sporting not a black eye or bruised cheek but a radiant grin and an announcement that he wants Franky to remodel the storage room below the men's quarters to add another bedroom to the ship. Captain's quarters.

Of course there's only one possible reason for his sudden interest in privacy, so his nakama are surveying him with raised eyebrows and poorly hidden smiles as he goes on to insist that, while the shipwright can obviously build the frame, they'll need to buy a queen-sized mattress and all the necessary bedding to go with it. Preferably before they leave for the next island. Preferably today.

Ever conscious of the budget, Nami opens her mouth to demand just where he expects her to find the money for this because beli sure as hell doesn't grow on trees, when Zoro abruptly wanders into the dining hall and proceeds to lean nonchalantly over the beaming captain's shoulder and across the table to pluck a fresh pastry from Usopp's hand while the hapless sniper's looking in the opposite direction. The swordsman's wearing a distinctly rumpled t-shirt and jogging pants and looks more relaxed than the navigator's seen him in weeks, so she gives a small mental shrug and leaves her protest unvoiced. She can spare the beli.

"Why the hell're you idiots staring at me? It's fucking rude," Zoro mumbles around his mouthful of dough and icing, a faint flush staining his cheeks when he realizes the entire crew's gawking at him with undisguised amusement- but he doesn't move the free hand that's resting with obvious possessive affection on the back of his partner's neck, and the younger pirate's now grinning so smugly that Usopp's too busy snickering to berate the first mate for stealing his breakfast.

"Eheheh, if that look doesn't scream somebody got laid this morning-!" He doesn't mean to speak this thought aloud but- much to the marksman's chagrin- it slips out anyway, and he yelps as their now furiously-blushing first mate immediately cuffs his ear, threatening to dump his ass overboard, while Luffy- who's gotten rather pink himself- laughs uproariously and the others look on with mixed disconcertion and amusement.

Resolution of the pair's sexual tension certainly leaves everyone breathing easier, especially after Franky sections off a generous portion of the storage bay and the installation of a bed provides captain and swordsman with a much greater degree of privacy, but it's not without setbacks and, passionate exchanges aside, other hurdles still remain.
Perhaps the greatest challenge is keeping a positive attitude as the ship makes its way through the same waters and stops at the same checkpoints they've seen once before. Zoro, growing once more moody and withdrawn as they retrace their steps following landmarks he associates with his pregnancy, insists on disembarking to defend the ship from some very familiar giant beetles despite the crew's repeated warnings that he should allow those with long-distance weaponry deal with the insects' attacks. He's been training persistently since their second arrival on this side of the Red Line, but this is his first time testing himself in actual combat since his short-lived confrontation with Akainu and Kizaru on the lawn deck, and his unsuspecting six-legged opponents have no idea what's hit them.

He returns to Sunny bloodied, blistered and reeking of caustic chemicals, his single battle-worthy katana quivering in his good hand, and only Luffy's brave enough to approach and gently ease the cursed sword from his grasp before steering him off to the bathhouse.

Nami, seated at her desk in the observation room with a map spread before her, listens in silence to Zoro's stifled sobbing and the captain's repeated quiet reassurances while they undress in the entry way overhead as she stares down at the twitching, spinning needles inside the glass baubles strapped to her wrist, dreading the announcement she'll soon be forced to make regarding their next stop, even though she know they're both already well aware what's coming.

Several days later, when the navigator hesitantly informs the crew that they're once again approaching THAT island - the place where they found their entire world turned upside down - the swordsman retreats to his and Luffy's quarters after making it painfully clear he doesn't intend to emerge from below-decks until the log pose resets and they're free to leave. No one tries to stop him. They don't dare- not when his white-knuckled hand's gripping Kitetsu's handle so tightly.

Before snatching up his hat and hurrying after his agitated lover, Luffy reiterates his previous order that any crew members leaving the ship to resupply travel in trios, unwilling to risk losing nakama should they encounter Marines stationed on the island. He also sends Robin to the crow's nest, where she can best use her unique ability to keep tabs on anyone or anything that might be a potential threat.

The captain finds Zoro wedged into the narrow gap between their bed and the wall separating their room from the storage section, hugging his knees and looking self-conscious but extremely unnerved, and it's nearly an hour before he's able to coax the older pirate onto the mattress itself and convince him to set down his katana. His first mate's embarrassed but unable to help himself, thoroughly disgusted with his own behavior yet unable to control his turbulent emotions, so the rubber man climbs into his lap and gently captures his tightly clenched jaw between both palms, offering passionate kisses in hopes of redirecting his swordsman's attention to something other than his own discomfort and fear.

It's a serious gamble, considering he's no idea how Zoro might react, but thankfully the innocent but clumsy subterfuge works; his partner responds with frightening urgency, grasping the opportunity to escape his own thoughts, and the captain gladly relinquishes control as he's tumbled backwards into the unmade bed, content to let the other man do whatever he pleases as long as it distracts him from the ship's current location.

The afternoon passes otherwise uneventfully, and when Franky's finally raised the anchor and gotten Sunny moving again several hours later, but neither pirate's yet emerged from their shared quarters, Chopper comes down to check on them and share the news that the brig sloop's headed for the next island, tapping hesitantly at the door and timidly apologizing for the disturbance. Luffy- awake but reluctant to rise- calls out quietly that it's unlocked, and the doctor slips inside, blushing furiously as he averts his eyes from the tangled sheets and finger-shaped bruises blooming on the captain's
shoulders and biceps- and the way Zoro’s spooning his back, one hand clutching possessively at the younger man's bare midsection despite his sleep-slackened face.

"Sorry," Luffy whispers, genuinely contrite although he makes no move to drag the comforter higher. "I didn't wanna wake Zoro up 'cause it took 'im a really long time to fall asleep."

"I'll tell everybody to keep the noise down," the reindeer promises softly, embarrassment fading as their green-haired nakama stirs, making a low urgent noise that sounds heartbreakingly like a whimper and tightening his arms around Luffy's waist, feet kicking briefly as though he's attempting to physically flee whatever's pursuing him in his dreams.

His movements inadvertently pull the bedding lower, exposing more bruises and the thin, almost parallel lines of fingernail-induced scratch marks running across his partner's flank.

Shooting their doctor another apologetic look, the rubber man leans his head back to nuzzle the swordsman's cheek and neck, reaching up to run soothing fingers through his hair and murmuring something that Chopper can't quite catch despite his sharp hearing. Whatever he's said, it makes the older pirate's tensed body relax and the deep lines of concern creasing his brow slowly smooth out as he drifts back to sleep.

xxx

The loss of the child who would've been the crew's youngest member becomes progressively easier to deal with as time passes- or at least hurts less, slowly muting from continuous stabbing pain to a dull ache. The transition's something that makes all of the Straw Hats uncomfortable, because although they're certainly no strangers to death and more than passing familiar with the grieving process given their individual losses, growing accustomed to a loved one's irreversible absence still seems wrong.

Zoro understandably takes it harder than most. The first time he somehow makes it through an entire day of helping Franky reorganize his workshop and squabbling with the cook and defending the ship from an unexpected sea king attack, only to suddenly realize he's not once thought of the baby, it feels as though he's betrayed his son's memory. He spends the evening wracked with guilt, and although Luffy quietly confesses he's been feeling the same when his first mate finally reveals the source of his distress as they're lying in bed that night, listening to each breathe and unable to sleep, it's cold comfort.

The next time it happens, he's less shocked. Just puzzled and disheartened.

But they're eventually so busy with fending off Marines and other pirate crews and simply doing their damnest not to get killed in the bizarre places the log pose takes them that there's not much time to think about anything but survival and keeping each other safe, and their child's crowded further and further towards the back of their minds.

He's not forgotten though. Sometimes the swordsman will be rummaging through his trunk for a clean haramaki or hefting one of his barbells back onto the weight stand, and suddenly it'll hit him all over again like a rough slap in the face, and he'll be startled and surprised to find tears streaming down his face.

He'd know it's also happening to Luffy even if his lover hadn't already confided in him; one moment the captain will be cheerfully stealing food off someone else's plate and causing Sanji endless aggravation at the dinner table, and the next he'll be pale and quiet and no longer interested in the meal before him, his smile dying on his lips as the mirth in his eyes fades to confusion and unexpectedly recalled hurt.
Their nakama may not always know what to say during these difficult times, but there's always acknowledgment of their emotional distress and the promise of comfort if desired: a brief hug from Nami, a pat on the back from Franky, a resolute squeeze of the shoulder delivered by the solemn-faced cook.

And so time passes, day following day, and the weeks slip into months and before they know it, an entire year's gone by.

xxx

Turning away from the news gull, Nami's sorting nonchalantly through a selection of mail that the plump seabird's just traded her for a thick-cut strip of bacon, when her roaming eyes catch the headline spanning the front page of the folded paper included with the bundle of letters- and she nearly drops the entire stack.

"Coooffee, Robin-chwan, Nami-swa-" Sanji pauses mid-pirouette. "Nami-san, what's wrong?"

"N-Nothing," the navigator stammers, moving hurriedly to fold and stuff the periodical out of sight before-

"Oi, dartboard brow, where the hell's the-" Zoro, who's just emerged from the dining hall doorway with a towel in hand because he's run out of dish detergent, raises an eyebrow at the sight of Nami's startled, pinched expression. "Eh? What's with you?"

"Oi, Zoro, so did Sanji say if we have any more- huh, what's going on?" Luffy asks from behind the swordsman, peering over his shoulder at their crew mates on the deck outside. "Nami? What's so funny? You got a really weird look on your-"

"Gas- must've been the bloody bacon!" The redhead blurts without thinking, but before she realizes what she's just said and why Zoro and the rubber man clinging to him are now staring at her with incredulous amusement while the cook threatens loudly to kick the shitty bastards overboard if they start laughing at the lady's delicate digestion, the paper's deftly plucked from her grasp by a disembodied hand. "Ah, Robin- wait, don't-!"

"What in the world's gotten you so flustered?" The historian queries, flipping the pages open after she passes the periodical to herself. "Surely the exchange rate hasn't- oh. Oh my."

Sanji, who immediately stops berating his male nakama and cranes his neck to peer over the dark-haired woman's shoulder to discover why she sounds so surprised, makes a strangled choking noise.

The first mate and captain exchange a look of confusion.

"Alright, I'll bite- what the fuck's going on?"

"Uh, whassa matter, Sanji? You didn't swallow your cigarette or something, didja?"

"Guys, I'm not sure-"

"No, I think it's best you show them now, Nami, before they hear the news elsewhere."

"What the hell's WITH you people?" Zoro demands, striding over to yank the paper dangling from Robin's fingers. "What could possibly be so-" He breaks off, staring at the front page, deaf to the faint sound of surprise escaping the rubber man who's crowding against his side in the doorway in his eagerness to see what's gotten everyone so agitated.
"Luffy, Zoro- I'm sorry," Nami tells them quietly, struggling to avoid anxiously wringing her hands by smoothing the fabric of her jeans. "I just-

"S'okay, Nami, I get it," the captain sighs, offering her a small smile as he curls an arm snugly around his partner's waist, leaning his head against the older man's shoulder and peering up at his troubled face. "Is Zoro okay?"

"Yeah, I- yeah. It just- it kinda took me by surprise..."

"Tell me about it," the blond beside them mutters, scowling down at the newspaper.

"... Vivi looks so happy," the swordsman murmurs, expression warring between gladness and melancholy as he studies the black-and-white photograph printed below the bold-faced headline. In it, the radiantly smiling princess of Arabasta's standing beside her stern but beaming consort, their gazes fixed on the tiny, sleepy-eyed infant peering from the bundle of blankets they're holding between them. The lengthy article beside the picture offers details on the royal family's new addition, but Zoro doesn't make it past the caption announcing the Straw Hats' blue-haired nakama's given birth to a baby girl before his vision's too blurred by tears to let him continue.

"Kohza better take care of 'em both, or I'll march straight back to Arabasta and kick his shitty ass," Sanji grumbles, and he's surprised when the green-haired man beside him snorts soft laughter despite the dampness in his good eye.

"Nah, I don't think you've got anything to worry about- Vivi'll keep that guy in line. And she's gonna be a great mom."

The first mate's unprepared for the choked noise bursting from Luffy's throat as well as the fingers tangled in his t-shirt tightening dramatically enough to drag the garment off his right shoulder. Mistaking the sound for muffled laughter, he's opening his mouth to ask his captain what's so damn entertaining, when the younger pirate turns to reveal eyes swimming with tears before throwing both arms around his neck. "O-Oi..."

Sanji appears equally nonplussed, unsure what's caused the emotional outburst beyond the obvious, but Nami's wiping moisture from her cheeks with trembling fingers.

_"I think I missed something, Zoro muses quietly as he instinctively returns his sniffling lover's embrace and watches with his brow furrowed in confusion as the startled cook seeks to comfort the weeping navigator, unaware his words have inadvertently summoned memories of a quiet conversation conducted early one morning in the women's quarters. Was it something I said?"_

xxx

Tears or not, time stands still for no one. There are new islands to explore, each more incredible than the last. New adversaries to face and new friends to meet. Chance encounters with old adversaries. Unexpected reunions with old friends. Treasure won and lost and reclaimed. And through it all, the Sunny sails on and time passes and the years go by.

xxx

During the last mad dash for Raftel and the highly sought One Piece, when Monkey D. Luffy, Trafalgar Law and Eustass Kid put aside their differences and pool their resources long enough to join forces against one of the largest fleet of Marines any pirate crew's ever seen, facing off in an epic battle that makes Marineford resemble a children's sandbox dispute, Zoro's far too preoccupied with keeping his head firmly attached to his shoulders to fly into a blind rage at the sight of the men
responsible for his imprisonment and subsequent torture.

While he'd like to think he owes his restraint to advancing age and wisdom, in reality he's simply too hard-pressed countering Mihawk's vicious attacks and hoping like hell his disfigured hand doesn't betray him to spare more than a hasty glance at Akainu and Kizaru.

The master swordsman doesn't appear inclined to go easy on his former pupil; in fact, it's quite the opposite, and although he's using every trick in the book- everything his cold-eyed mentor taught him- the younger man's bleeding from a dozen shallow wounds minutes after their blades engage. He simply doesn't have time to waste on revenge.

Luffy, on the other hand, catches one glimpse of the magma man who abducted his lover and killed his older brother before his eyes and goes berserk. The furious captain unleashes a haki-enhanced bellow of outrage and reckless challenge that fells nearby foes, friends and allies alike as he shakes off his current opponents and launches himself across the battlefield to attack the waiting Admiral.

Conscious of the peril his partner's facing, the green-haired pirate wants to shout for him to be careful, but he doesn't have the breath to waste on an admonishment Luffy's apt to ignore anyway, not when his former tutor's backed him up against a rocky outcropping. He's got time for a fleeting prayer to a god he doesn't believe in, and then he's too busy defending himself to think of anything other than dodging and blocking while struggling not to panic at the disturbing sensation of Asura stirring impatiently somewhere inside him, roused by the ongoing violence and bloodshed.

How long the battle rages, no one knows, but it ends rather abruptly when the surviving Marines suddenly break and flee towards their remaining ships. A number of the opposition- mostly members of Kid's crew- pursue them, but the majority of the pirates are content to lower their weapons and begin the arduous task of tending to their wounds and seeking out their nakama. And, in some cases, looting the dead.

The smoke's beginning to clear courtesy of Nami's now dented and badly scratched Clima-Tact, revealing crimson-splattered ground scattered with the casualties of both sides, when the exhausted swordsman who's limping his way through the chaos searching for familiar faces finally discovers his motionless captain sprawled beneath the bulk of the tattooed Admiral he'd been fighting.

For one heart-stopping moment, Zoro's convinced that his lover's dead, but then Luffy coughs and his eyelids flutter open, revealing unfocused pupils wide with disorientation. "Got him. I GOT HIM, ACE, I GOT HIM!"

Whether the rubber man's addressing his brother or their son, the first mate doesn't know, and as he's joined by Sanji and they roll Akainu's limp body off their captain, he decides it doesn't matter because Luffy's alive and he's alive and the shitty cook's alive and-

"We made it. WE MADE IT."

He's laughing aloud and crying simultaneously, crushing his bewildered, smiling partner against his chest and slapping the perturbed blond beside him repeatedly on the back and shoulders when the rest of the Straw Hats- filthy and bleeding and near collapse but undeniably ALIVE- wander over to join the trio.

"Zoro, what-" Confounded by the older pirate's giddy elation, Luffy stares at him incredulously. "What's so-" His eyes widen. "Zoro, did you beat 'im? DID YOU BEAT HAWK-EYES?"

"N-No-" Zoro sputters, struggling for air. "Oh my god- no- he kicked my ass. He didn't kill me, but he- he kicked my ass and then he just-" A wheezing sob. "-walked away." And then he's off again,
laughing too hard to continue.

"Marimo, what the hell-"

Their captain's mouth twitches as he tries to frown and smile at the same time, even more confused than before. "If he beat you, then why're you-?"

"Because you're alive, dumbass! WE'RE alive- ALL OF US!" His lover exclaims, seizing him by the collar and kissing him full on mouth in complete disregard of their audience. We're alive, and even though Mihawk beat me, I didn't drop my katana- and I wasn't the only one bleeding by the end either. The swordsman can feel nervous excitement bubbling in his midsection. Another year. Another year and he won't find it NEARLY so easy. I can still do it. I CAN STILL BEAT HIM.

The interaction between the Straw Hats' captain and their first mate's drawn attention from more than their crew alone. "Good to see Roronoa-ya's finally got his shit together. Had me starting to worry."

Franky glances down to find Trafalgar Law standing at his side, blood-stained spotted hat wadded in one hand. "Oi-"

"Don't mind me," the surgeon assures the glaring cyborg, smiling deviously as he sidesteps the massive hand reaching for him. "I'm just passing through."

"Hmm? Hmmph!" Luffy protests, struggling to disengage his mouth from his partner's, because while Zoro's busy trying to kiss him senseless, their grinning rival's edging away and waving the Heart pirates towards the only structure on the island constructed by humans- the same place everyone was headed before the Marines appeared and made them momentarily forget they were competing for the same prize. "Gah, leggo! One Piece! C'mon, Zoro, lemme go get One Piece 'n then you can kiss me all you want!"

xxx

Eighteen months later:

"... Zoro? Oi, Zoro, you-" One hand still gripping the knob he's just turned as he peers through the open doorway, Luffy can't help grinning at the sight before him. The green-haired pirate in question's sprawled on his back, right arm dangling off the mattress's side and the knuckles of his fore- and middle fingers dragging on the floor. His mouth's slightly agape and he's drooling a little, but that's nothing new- and the captain's far more interested in the tantalizing line of bare hip and thigh visible between the rumpled sheets.

He crosses the carpet to the bedside, pausing for just a moment to call his partner's name a third time before reaching out to brush his fingers across the dozing swordsman's chest. "Pssst. Wake up."

Six years after the events that came dangerously close to tearing the crew apart, the first mate's lost much of his jumpiness at being disturbed while napping, but it's become second nature for the rubber man to alert his lover to his presence before touching him. Despite the crew's best efforts to avoid accidentally triggering flashbacks through unexpected or excessive physical contact, there've been enough incidents to emphasize their nakama's need for extra personal space.

Luffy would honestly prefer NOT getting suddenly clocked in the face. While he isn't particularly bothered on the rare occasion something like this happens, knowing it's not deliberate, Zoro gets awfully upset over the black eyes and bloody noses and bruises that often accompany such a response.

"Zoooroooo-"
"Mmn?"

"Oi, you missed breakfast, Zoro- you slept right through it." He skitters his fingertips over the green-haired man's bare skin, tickling gently. "C'mon, wake up already! Sanji wants-"

He's silenced rather abruptly when his partner's arm lifts to snake around his neck and shoulders and insistently tug him down for a very thorough, very ardent kiss, tongue sweeping suggestively along the crease where his lips meet in a clear invitation to part them, and he complies eagerly, one hand rising to cradle the older pirate's cheek as he slides closer.

When he's eventually- reluctantly- released, the captain's jaw's aching a bit and his mouth feels swollen, but he can't help grinning enormously at his swordsman's smug, sleepy smile.

"Zoro's lucky SANJI didn't come to wake him up instead," he teases, leaning back to assist the hands tugging impatiently at his coat. "-considering he didn't look to make sure it was ME he started kissing."

"The cook never comes in here without knocking, and I'm pretty sure he woulda kicked me in the head instead of kissing back," Zoro retorts. "Plus I recognized your footsteps. You're the only person I know who scampers when he walks." He utters a faint snort of amusement. "Whoever heard of a pirate king who- nrrrrgh, goddamn it... Luffy, e'non 'n help me with this thing before I just rip it off you! What the hell's anybody need so many stupid buttons for anyway?"

"Shanks said I'd need a coat that'd make me-" Luffy squints, trying to recall his mentor's words. "Uh, what'd he say, again?"

"I THINK he said some crap about "fashionable figures of authority" but then you wear your damn hat 'n sandals all the time too, so that's kind of a joke so far as you're-"

"Don't be mean!" The Pirate King protests, squirming, although his scowl vanishes when the swordsman's hips abruptly roll beneath him, rubbing their groins together. "Mmm, do that again."

"Bossy," Zoro mutters, but he complies anyway. And grimaces when the fumbling fingers of his right hand slip off the button they're struggling to undo. "Son of a-!"

"Here, it's okay- I'll get it." Luffy wriggles, twisting impossibly as he tries to squirm out of the long garment without tearing it- or getting up again. He's hoping his antics might make Zoro laugh, but his partner's too busy glaring at his own uncooperative flesh to notice. Nooo, don't look like that- we're in bed and you're naked and we're getting me naked, so you oughta be smiling!

Determined to sway his first mate's increasingly foul mood, the captain captures the damaged appendage with his own hand and addresses the scar tissue with kisses and licks and gentle nibbling until the other man unclenches his fist. While Zoro's regained enough dexterity to successfully wield a katana despite his missing digits and doesn't have too much difficulty manipulating decently-sized objects, fine adjustments tend to frustrate him. He's also still somewhat hesitant to touch his lover's body with his disfigured hand- although he's being slowly but surely broken of that disappointing habit.

Sure enough, the promise of sex is sufficient incentive and after watching his lover shed the aggravating coat as well as the shorts beneath it, the older pirate relaxes, gently breaking the grip on the hand Luffy's resumed kissing so he's free to trail his remaining fingers down the rubber man's chest and stomach, grinning broadly at the incoherent noises of pleasure his caresses produce as they move lower. "Took you long enough to get your ass back downstairs, y'know. I fell asleep waiting for you."
"I was wondering why you were-"

"Thought you might wanna give that new stuff a try." Gesturing to their left, Zoro's no longer grinning but staring up at him expectantly, gaze heated.

A shudder of anticipation travels through the captain's body as his searching eyes alight on the small uncapped bottle resting on the bedside table and, licking his lips, he reluctantly pulls away from the hand stroking him so he can gently urge his swordsman to roll over on his stomach. There's a tiny flicker of disquiet in his partner's expression that concerns him, but this involuntary unease vanishes as quickly as it surfaced, and Luffy's own hesitation fades when he sees there's nothing but desire and honest trust in the other man's face as he raises his hips encouragingly.

Sliding a cautiously probing finger over the sensitive flesh between his lover's buttocks, he discovers Zoro's already slick and wet and more than ready, arching back into his touch with a low groan, and after a little while he stops thinking altogether as the world narrows down to their bodies moving slowly in unison and his breath catches in his throat when his lover finally comes undone below him, gasping his name and tightening around him, and it's so good he thinks he might die.

xxx

"Nmm... what's wrong with my coat?" The captain mumbles against Zoro's neck sometime much, much later when they can both breathe again and the older pirate's sprawled bonelessly under him, back rising and falling steadily beneath his chest. "I thought you said I look good in the coat..."

"Mmm, you do, but you look better out of it." His partner's smirk might be partly hidden by the pillows and rumpled sheets by his head, but Luffy can hear the amusement in his voice, and he's glad, because it's only right that his first mate sounds so satisfied and indolent.

They lie in comfortable silence for a while, until the green-haired man finally squirms free and slides out of bed, grumbling that he needs to take a leak. "Oi, you were gonna tell me something earlier? Mmmgh. Somethin' 'bout the swirly-brow cook?" He asks, stretching languidly- and trying not to cringe at the tickling sensation of the moisture suddenly running down the back of his thigh. Ugh; thanks, Sencho- not only do I gotta take a leak, but I'm actually LEAKING. God, I need a shower something awful.

"Nee hee- you need a tissue or something?"

"... why doncha just shut up 'n tell me what Dartboard wants before the bastard comes looking for us 'cause he starts wondering why the hell it's taking you so damn long."

"Ah, Sanji wants Zoro to go fishing," Luffy recalls, resting his chin on his folded arms as he openly admires the smooth play of muscle beneath his lover's skin. There's a few more notable scars criss-crossing Zoro's hide these days - thankfully nothing so dramatic as the original one running across his broad chest - but the captain supposes that's to be expected, given such frequent duels. Hopefully everybody settles down 'n quits challenging him so much when they get over Mihawk losing his title 'n all that stuff.

"Tell that asshole to get his own damn fish," the World's Greatest Swordsman grumbles as he searches the clothing-strewn bedroom floor for his pants.

"He wants Zoro to do it."

"Oh, COME ON- why me? We got a whole bloody fleet's worth of wanna-be pirate cooks tripping over each other for a chance to impress that asshole," Zoro insists. "I swear he just likes watching me
bleed. He KNOWS the sea kings are always a hell of a lot nastier here in All Blue than anywhere else." The older pirate scowls, fingerling the barely visible row of healing puncture wounds just under his rib cage. "That last fucker had some seriously wicked teeth. Tasted pretty good though."

There's a faint snort close behind him, and then arms slip over his bare hips to wrap around his waist as a warm, naked body presses firmly against his back. "Sanji says you're better at it than anybody else- which he ALSO says I'm not supposed to tell you "on pain of death" or something like that, but-" Luffy goes still against him. "... but he said he figured you'd rather do it anyway... 'cause- well, it's for dinner tonight."

"Ah. I guess it's that time again already, isn't it?" Zoro's voice is deceptively mild, but the rubber man's arms tighten reflexively around his torso, because the younger pirate hugging him from behind's well aware his lover hasn't forgotten why today's an important day, and why the rest of the crew's been particularly patient and affectionate with them both this week. And a bit more subdued than usual. The fleet's newer recruits never understand why the normally buoyant Straw Hat captain often becomes uncharacteristically quiet this time of year, or why his frequently standoffish first mate suddenly stops protesting his partner's blatant public displays of affection or unexpectedly allows the Sunny's navigator to hug him, but those who've traveled with the crew longer quickly hush their questions.

"I know it's been a whole 'nother year, but it just- it seems like it comes around faster every time," the swordsman murmurs, and feeling Luffy's fingers move down to gently trace the old scar spanning his abdomen, he closes his eye and leans his head back against the younger pirate's with a shaky sigh. "I don't know if I ever-" The captain's voice catches in his throat and it's nearly a full minute before he can speak again. "Did I ever thank Zoro? For everything he did?"

"Maybe not out loud," his first mate replies softly after a second or two. "But you never really needed to say it anyway- because I see it in your eyes every time you look at me."

"Maybe not out loud," his first mate replies softly after a second or two. "But you never really needed to say it anyway- because I see it in your eyes every time you look at me."

There's a loud sniffle in his ear and he pulls the rubber man around his body so they're standing face-to-face, reaching up to cup Luffy's damp cheeks between his hands and gently thumb away the fresh tears collecting in the corners of his glistening eyes. They stand looking at each other, solemn and silent, and then Zoro smiles. "C'mon, Sencho- let's get dressed and go catch a fish for Ace."

xxx

FIN

xxx

Chapter End Notes

This concludes Crossfire's original ending. If you'd like to read the alternate ending now, I highly recommend jumping back to reread chapter 15 and refresh your memory before proceeding to chapter 23.
Welcome to the first chapter of Crossfire's alternate ending.

If you haven't read it recently, you may wish to go back and reread chapter 15 to refresh your memory, because this chapter continues directly from there.

Law's largely unfazed by Zoro's dramatic vocal outburst, but- just as the Heart captain warned the Straw Hat crew was inevitable- the green-haired pirate's also writhing wildly in Nico-ya's grasp, overwhelmed by the excruciating pain associated with myriad fingers holding wide the incision spanning his lower belly to let the blade that's opened his flesh continue slicing through his dense abdominal muscle. Only his prone position and rapidly increasing weakness from blood loss are allowing the historian to keep him pinned to the mattress. And unfortunately, even with all four limbs and his upper torso securely restrained, he's still capable of twisting his hips and pelvis actively enough to seriously complicate the ongoing laparotomy.

The third time the surgeon's forced to hurriedly raise his scalpel to avoid inadvertently plunging the instrument straight through the body wall and striking the baby within, he curses aloud. "Tony-ya?"

"Y-Yes?" Both physicians are speaking with raised voices- almost shouting to make themselves heard over their patient's full-throated cries of pain.

"If you've still got that anesthetic handy, I think it's about time we used it. I'm through the rectus abdominis but I can't widen the incision enough to pull the kid's head through much less safely penetrate the parietal peritoneum while Roronoa-ya's flopping around like a goddamn gutted tuna."

"R-Right!" Making a final adjustment to the fresh pouch of plasma he's hanging from the iv stand, the reindeer spares a moment to jam another bag into the pitcher of warm water resting in the sink. It's certainly not the most ideal method of thawing frozen blood products and far less sanitary than he'd prefer considering Robin and Nami's toothbrush stand is sitting right beside it, but desperate times call for desperate measures, and given the severity of his nakama's internal bleeding, the delay caused by prepping a sterile water bath could mean the difference between life and death.

With these necessary steps taken, he dives for his open medical bag and deftly draws a dose from a small, glass bottle containing clear liquid - the general anesthetic Zoro refused to let them administer earlier - then advances on the bed to take hold of the swordsman's wrist, supplementing Robin's strength with his own to keep the twitching limb pinned flat against the mattress.

"Don't bother sticking him, tanuki. Just inject-"

"The catheter, yes. I know what I'm doing," the Straw Hats' doctor interrupts, Heavy Point fingers already in the process of depressing the plunger, administering the medication directly into their patient's bloodstream, and there's a surprisingly testy note in his voice that makes Law raise an eyebrow.

"So I see." More dryly amused than angry, because now that he's been provided with a task to occupy him, his diminutive colleague's suddenly all business, forgetting his previous shyness. "My...
The reindeer looks up almost immediately, eyes widening as he realizes what he's said. And potentially done. "Oh- I- I'm sorry! I didn't mean- I- I know that was really rude, but- please don't-!

The Heart captain cuts short the flustered concession with a raised hand- the gloved, blood-smeared one not holding the scalpel. "I understand, Tony-ya. It's a difficult situation. And I can assure you, I'm NOT going to walk away and leave your first mate like this just because you called me out for telling you shit you already know. I made your captain a promise, and I intend to keep it." He offers Chopper a thin, amused smile. "I suppose I'm just not used to working with such knowledgeable assistants."

"I- I'm not happy you're calling me knowledgeable, you b-b-!"

"Ah-" Robin says suddenly. "Unless I'm mistaken, I believe Kenshi-san's lost consciousness." She cautiously dismisses a few of the disembodied hands gripping his arms and legs, and sure enough, the swordsman- who's fallen silent- remains limp and unresponsive beneath those remaining.

"And not a moment too soon," Law mutters, lowering his scalpel. "All that screaming was giving me cephalalgia. Nico-ya, if you please?"

The dark-haired woman complies, fingers once more carefully tugging the incision's edges wider apart to give the surgeon room to work- and one of Zoro's hands twitches, balling into a fist.

The tattooed pirate blinks. "Roronoa-ya?"

"Told you... c-call me Zoro," his patient replies in a hoarse, strained voice. "What're... you waiting for?" His single eye's open again, but he's struggling to keep his gaze locked on Law's face; it keeps sliding away as though he's too disoriented- or simply too exhausted to hold it steady. "Robin can... let go... 'S not- not hurting anymore."

Stunned, Chopper lays his fingers against the swordsman's carotid artery to check his pulse and finds it fast but strong and steady. "You should be unconscious! But- y-you're sure you're not feeling any pain?"

"Cold. 'M cold and... kin'a dizzy but." The green-haired pirate inhales sharply. "N-No, I'm 'kay, just-" His fingers uncurl, dig into the sheets beneath him to seize a handful of them and squeeze shut again. "Feels like... try'n pull my 'pendix out but... does'n hurt."

The reindeer glances towards his nakama's midsection, where his fellow physician's resumed working, first extending the incision parting thick, glistening abdominal muscle, then trading his scalpel for a pair of slim surgical shears to delicately snip open the thin layer beneath. "O-Okay, but- tell me if you start feeling pain again!"

"'M good..."

"High as hell's more like it," Law snorts. "Although your tanuki's right- you probably SHOULD be unconscious." He returns the scissors to the tray Robin's holding and briefly laces his gloved fingers, flexing joints and cracking knuckles. "Alright, here comes the tricky part. Tony-ya, I need you to take the baby from me as soon as I get it-"

"H-Him," he's corrected groggily. "'S boy."

"Congratulations. Now- if you'll kindly shut up and let me talk-" Clearing his throat. "Tony-ya. I'll need you to take HIM right away so I can start dealing with Zoro-ya. However badly his intestine's
been damaged, the baby's compressing some of the torn tissue, so it's going to start hemorrhaging a lot more heavily once that internal pressure's gone."

Chopper's nodding anxiously as he circles to the far side of the bed while squeezing his large hands into a fresh pair of gloves, his face full of fearful elation.

After issuing a few brief instructions for the assisting historian, Law raises his eyes to meet Zoro's unfocused gaze. "That tugging you mentioned earlier? There's going to be a lot more of it, but if you can- hang on- for just a second-"

The surgeon's hands are working as he speaks, his brow slightly furrowed in concentration, and the swordsman makes a low noise of distress, teeth clenching and eye squinting halfway shut, because even though there's no pain, for a moment it still feels as though he's being turned inside out. He can't SEE what's happening below his waist, but he can imagine it far too well. Not Law's fingers but Sadi's, sliding under his skin to hook around his guts and the child curled inside him, just as she promised.

He's breathing hard, almost panting, and on the verge of genuine panic when Robin suddenly utters a short burst of soft, amazed laughter, accompanied by an audible squeak from the Zoan whose eyes have widened enormously at the sight of the squirming, membrane-covered mass Law's easing through the horizontal cut in their crew mate's lower belly.

They're unaware of Zoro's impending flashback, but in the end their innocent disregard doesn't matter; they've caught the swordsman's attention, and he clings to the knowledge he's safe and surrounded by nakama, allowing their familiar voices to drag him back from the edge of hysteria and combat the unwanted feminine presence whispering vulgar threats within his head.

The baby's first tentative, faltering cry drives her away, finishing what the others started. Not for good - he's not gullible enough to believe it's that easy - but for now he forgets her, he forgets his disfigured hand, he forgets his bent and broken swords. He even forgets his captain, now impatiently pacing the lawn deck outside, because the moment that startled wail of protest reaches his ears, everything besides that wavering, heart-wrenching sound ceases to exist.

He opens his eye in time to witness the man standing opposite Chopper straighten, gloved hands cradling the unmistakable shape of a newborn who's shockingly small and delicate-limbed but also wriggling with surprising vigor and yowling unhappily as Law transfers him into his colleague's outstretched, quivering hands.

On more than one occasion during the latter half of Zoro's pregnancy, his curiosity's led him to try imagining himself, his partner and their crew caring for a recently-delivered infant. His attempts have failed more often than not; he's had a much easier time picturing himself brandishing a katana and Luffy clutching a sandwich than either of them holding a swaddled bundle. The times he's been more successful, he's gotten vague impressions of a diaper-clad baby boy with pudgy little fists and round, rosy-cheeked features.

Whatever his expectations, this first glimpse of his son's absolutely NOTHING like he anticipated.

The blood doesn't surprise him- it's already everywhere else, soaking the bedding beneath him and even splattered on the Heart captain's shirt. But the baby's also covered in some kind of repulsive white goop that strongly reminds the green-haired pirate of the cream cheese the cook sometimes serves with breakfast bagels - good fucking luck ever talking me into eating THAT shit again - and he looks positively, unbelievably TINY in Chopper's massive hands. He's also emitting oddly feline-like cries, shockingly loud meowls of distress, and the swordsman has no clue if that's normal either, but- he sounds PISSED.
"Feisty little guy," Law remarks as he seizes another hemostat to clamp another bleeding vessel. "Go ahead and 'type him, Tony-ya, and take a sample for red cell and platelet counts, although I'm not so sure he'll actually need a transfusion. Seems pretty healthy and his color looks good."

The reindeer gingerly deposits his new charge- gaping mouth fussing loudly, limbs waving- on the mattress beside Zoro's left hip, keeping one cautious hand on the baby while the other fumbles for a clean expanse of sheet and, working quickly but gently, wipes one foot clean.

The first mate can't stop staring, his gaze roaming restlessly over the scrunched, anger-flushed little face and the tiny toes repetitively curling and spreading in Chopper's grasp- and the umbilical that resembles a heavy translucent cable protruding from the baby's abdomen and trailing out of sight to-

*It's- it's still inside me*, he thinks, dazed, when he realizes the thick blood vessels within the cord are still pulsing weakly. *He's- he's right here and I can see him and hear him- OH MAN, can I hear him, but- we're still connected...*

His eye's already moving on before he can fully process this thought, refocusing on his son's dark, moisture-slicked hair. *Luffy's hair*, his mind whispers, and now he remembers his captain and wishes the younger pirate was here to see this, because he thought- well, he doesn't know WHAT he thought, but he doesn't care because it's fucking AMAZING. Their SON is amazing. *Sencho-Sencho, wait'll you-

Law's bent over his midsection, fingers buried in his abdominal cavity and adjusting hemostats as he excises and sutures torn tissue, working tirelessly to stem the bleeding and repair damage more extensive than anyone suspected, but Zoro doesn't even notice. He's completely forgotten the surgeon's still operating on him, too enthralled by the newborn brushing his side with each fretful movement.

Fighting to shake off the stupor caused by the anesthesia, he sluggishly wills his numb, uncooperative elbow to bend, slowly inching his fingers closer until they're grazing that wet hair. Hesitantly tracing the tiny shell of an ear and then, with even more careful deliberation, the cheek beside it. Assuring himself this is real. It must be, because the baby's warm and solid beneath his hand and, to his pleasant surprise, gradually quieting under his touch.

That white gunk's everywhere, thickest in the creases and folds of tender, ruddy skin but also mixed with the blood and amniotic fluid plastering his son's hair to his scalp and caked behind his ears, waxy under the swordsman's fingertips, and he's opening his mouth to ask what the hell the stuff is and if somebody shouldn't be cleaning the rest of it off, when Chopper abruptly sticks the small heel he's gripping with a lancet.

The baby squeals with hurt incredulity, sucks in a breath and holds it for so long his face starts turning purple and his worried father's beginning to panic, and then he starts howling with such intensity that the reindeer who's blotting the pinprick inadvertently loses control of Heavy Point and reverts to his usual short-statured form, thumping to the floor with a dismayed yelp.

Jolted by the realization that his son's reacting to what's quite literally the first physical pain he's ever felt, Zoro reaches instinctively for the clenched fist trembling in the air closest to him. Seeing how enormous his own hand looks in comparison, he nearly draws back, but the moment his thumb bumps the tiny fingers, they spasm open and latch onto him, wrapping around the digit so tightly he doesn't dare pull away. "O-Oi..."

"How can- how can anybody that little be so- so LOUD?" Chopper exclaims, popping back into view with his eyes wide and his ears flattened against his skull.
"Well, yeah, he's loud! You stabbed him in the foot!" The first mate accuses, feeling so irrationally betrayed and outraged that he doesn't stutter or slur his speech once. "I'd yell too if somebody stabbed me in the freaking foot!" His gaze returns to the keening newborn attached to his thumb, his voice taking on a note of helplessness. "Oi, c-c'mon, kid- they can probably hear you outside..."

To his dismay, the baby disregards him and continues clinging and wailing. The crying bothers him a lot more than he expected; it cuts straight to his heart, makes his chest ache as though he's been viciously and repeatedly stabbed in the breastbone.

"I'm sure they can; in fact, I'm a little surprised your captain hasn't broken down the door yet," Law muses. "Maybe your shipwright took our advice and sat on him." He ties off another suture and pauses to survey his handiwork. "Tony-ya, if you'll clamp and sever that umbilical cord, I think we're almost done here."

"Oi, that's not gonna hurt him more, is it?" Zoro demands, thoroughly unnerved by the prospect of someone cutting something- ANYTHING- off the squealing child laying beside him, and he's reaching across his own body to reflexively block the scissors Chopper- having returned to Heavy Point- has just picked up, when Law's hand suddenly emerges from his abdominal cavity grasping what looks like an enormous, ragged piece of liver. "FUCK!"

"Hmm? Oh, this." The surgeon can't hide a bemused smirk at his patient's horrified expression. "Relax, Zoro-ya, it's just the placenta."

Robin, who's been watching the baby with a smile playing on her lips, leans closer for a better look. "Fascinating..."

He carefully flips the afterbirth over to show her the ruffled, almost feathery texture of the opposite side. "Human bodies are, aren't they? This surface developed facing the fetus, while the slick, shiny side was attached to Roronoa-ya's internal organs."

"OI," Zoro growls at them. "Will you guys quit flirting over my guts or whatever the hell you're doing with whatever the fuck that-"

"Done!" The reindeer beside him announces, proudly indicating the neatly clipped, sealed stump now protruding from his tiny patient's middle, and the swordsman immediately turns his attention back to his son, examining him anxiously for indicators of further discomfort. To his relief, the baby's actually showing signs of settling down again, his face beginning to lose that alarming shade of blotchy red and purple. He's showing no interest, however, in releasing the finger he's clutching so adamantly.

"Don't you want to hold him, Kenshi-san?"

"Uh..." Zoro does, more badly than he ever suspected possible, but he's also terrified. He's so damn TINY- what if I hurt him trying to pick him up? What if I DROP him? Granted, his arms don't feel quite so disconnected from his body as they did fifteen or twenty minutes ago, but- "I don't know if-"

Law snorts, shaking his head, but seeing the conflict on her crew mate's face, Robin takes pity on him, and a pair of hands sprout from the mattress to gently scoop up the infant. Before the green-haired pirate can protest, his offspring's being turned belly-down and resettled higher against his body, rump tucked between his bicep and rib cage and head resting on his chest.

His thumb's still being held captive, so the change in positions automatically pulls his left arm around the baby, but he reaches across with his right as well, afraid the kid's going to roll right off him.
because he's curling his little body right back into the fetal position to which he's been accustomed for so many months. Staring incredulously at the way he's somehow tucked himself into a ball, Zoro blurts the first thing that comes to mind. "Jeez, you look like a goddamn FROG."

Chopper giggles, nearly dropping the corner of sheet he's been using- rather unsuccessfully- to clean the newborn's back. "He won't stay like that forever! It's just 'til he gets used to having room to stretch his legs out." He eyes the soiled fabric in his hand. "I think I better go get some water. Oh, and that last bag of plasma too, just in case!"

"This weird greasy crap's gonna come off, right? And- it's not gonna hurt him or anything?"

"Vernix," Law informs him without looking up. "Acts as a natural sealant to protect the skin."

"So you're saying it's SUPPOSED to be all over him like-?"

Disturbed by the deep reverberations rumbling through his father's chest under his ear, the baby stirs, eyelids parting to reveal cloudy, unfocused eyes.

Heart thumping harder, the swordsman stares back at the small, squishy face that's drowsily scrutinizing his own much larger, scarred one from only a few inches away. "O-Oh... hi..." His breath catches in his throat when the half-lidded eyes open a bit wider. "Oi, you-" He looks up at Law and Robin standing over him and the reindeer who's returning with the thawed pack of plasma, a pitcher full of fresh warm water and a couple hand towels purloined from beneath the sink. "His eyes look funny- he's all cross-eyed and-" His gaze returns to the baby. "They're GREY. How'd he end up with grey eyes when-?"

It's the historian who answers as she comes around to the bed's opposite side to accept the pitcher and a towel from Chopper so he's free to hang the fresh plasma from the iv pole. "His vision will improve, but I'm afraid for now he can't see more than eight to twelve inches beyond his nose. In all likelihood, he can make out your face- but everything else is rather blurry. And almost all newborns have blue or grey eyes. Now that he's being exposed to natural light, which will begin producing melanin, they'll start to change." Thoroughly wetting the cloth, then wringing it out, she smiles as she begins gently sponge-bathing their newest crew member clean, starting behind his ears. "But it may be a few months until you'll know if he's got your eyes, Kenshi-san. Or our captain's."

"Here, lemme-" Zoro steals the towel from her hand and clumsily flips it to the unused side so he can wipe his son's face, first with extreme, almost overabundant care and then with growing confidence when his actions don't raise any actual protest. In fact, the baby looks more inclined to simply drift off to sleep curled in his grasp, body relaxing in the cradle formed by his elbow as those strange grey eyes drift shut.

"Alright, looks like we're done here, so let's get cleaned up and let Mugiwara-ya in before he does start banging on the door." Law announces, returning the last of his instruments to the tray Robin's abandoned at the bed's foot. "Tony-ya, since you're least likely to-" Hesitant to raise the subject of post-traumatic triggers when Roronoa-ya's finally this relaxed, he offers his fellow physician a meaningful look. "Well, I'll let you take care of this-" Indicating the brightly-hued blood slicking their patient's bare abdomen, groin and thighs. ",and then we'll move him to the other mattress so we can trash the sheets on this one."

Having located the hand gripping his thumb and occupied himself dabbing cautiously at the tiniest fingernails he's ever seen, the first mate's too distracted to care or even notice what they're doing, and before he realizes what's happened, his crew mates and the Heart captain have him washed and relocated, dozing progeny and all, and the ruined mattress flipped soiled-side down and stripped of its bloodstained sheets, which they've tied into a compact bundle and temporarily banished to the
floor beneath the bed frame.

"I'll go get Luffy!" Chopper declares, practically vibrating with excitement at being the one delivering the news, and he goes tearing out of the women's quarters- only to collide full-length with the captain himself on the deck outside.

Frustrated with being barred from the room for so long, the rubber man's abandoned the lawn deck to hover anxiously at the top of the steps, and he nearly tumbles backwards down the staircase with Chopper when the Zoan- still in Heavy Point- plows into his chest hard enough to knock him off his feet, prompting noises of alarm from the crew members gathered below. Only an out-flung hand seizing the nearest bannister prevents them from rolling down head-over-heels.

"Chopper, I heard it- I heard crying!" Luffy exclaims without preamble, struggling to untangle himself from his nakama's limbs. "Does that mean the baby's okay? What's he look like- does he have hair yet? 'Cause Grandpa said I already had hair when I was born and- what about Zoro? Zoro's okay too, right?" He's clutching the reindeer by the shoulders now, posing questions almost faster than he can articulate them. "What color hair's he got, if he's got any? I mean the baby, not Zoro- I mean Zoro's got green hair but- does the baby? DOES THE BABY HAVE GREEN HAIR?"

"STOP." Beginning to feel as though his brain's rattling around inside his skull, Chopper reaches up to seize the babbling captain's head with both hands, smashing his cheeks together so his lips are comically pursed like those of a startled fish. "STOP SHAKING ME!"

"TELL ME!" Luffy demands. Distorted by the fingers gripping his face, his voice sounds ridiculous, but none of the crew members who've scaled the stairs to gather around them are laughing. Instead, their faces are filled with varying degrees of concern and anticipation. "IS EVERYTHING OKAY? ARE ZORO 'N MY BABY OKAY?"

The reindeer takes a deep breath, intending to extend stammering congratulations, but he's preempted by a piercing wail that quickly escalates into a fresh round of howling even as the first mate's voice rises in furious agitation alongside it, clearly audible through the open doorway. "Not so LOUD, goddamn it- he was almost asleep and you ASSHOLES woke him up!"

Scrambling upright so quickly he trips over Chopper's leg and nearly smashes face-first into the wall, the Straw Hat captain saves his balance by grabbing the door frame- and clings to the Adam wood, hesitating. Earlier, he managed to not only damage a good bit of the ship but also leave sizable bruises on several people in his frenzied desperation to get back into the women's quarters, but now he finds himself stalling on the threshold, inexplicably resisting his urge to enter despite the encouraging words and friendly nudges from the nakama crowded at his back.

He's not just startled by the sound of his newborn child's crying- he's downright intimidated. In fact, he's suddenly sure he's never been so afraid of anything in his entire life, because with that continuous yowling - a positively panic-inducing noise now that it's no longer muted by a closed door - the world's suddenly turned upside-down, and his stomach's doing a funny excited flip-flop like a stranded fish and what the hell was he THINKING, assuming he- assuming EITHER of them- assuming THEIR CREW- was prepared to deal with an actual BABY?

"Oi, what the hell're you waiting for?" Sanji asks with exasperated amusement somewhere behind him, raising a leg to give the younger pirate's jean short-clad buttocks a firm push with the toe of his shoe. "You've been yelling about how much you wanna see this kid for months."

"W-Wait a second- I- I'm not sure I-!"
"Don't be silly, Captain," Robin chides kindly, taking the rubber man's hand as he raises it to run trembling fingers through his hair. He flashes her a brilliant but utterly terrified smile and when Zoro calls his name, voice once again raised to be heard over their son's caterwauling, squeezes her fingers brutally tight.

The historian laughs despite her discomfort. "I think Kenshi-san agrees."

"Yeah, c'mon, Sencho-" The swordsman's voice is hoarse, and he sounds exhausted, but there's no mistaking his tone for anything but pure impatience. "Quit screwing around and get your ass in here- I got somebody you need to meet..."

Reluctantly, his pulse racing so wildly he can feel it pulsing in his throat, Luffy allows the dark-haired woman holding his hand to lead him across the room.

"Oi oi, it's okay- you don't gotta freak out," he can hear his partner insisting more softly as he approaches the bed. "Nobody's gonna hurt you, I promise. I won't let 'em."

"M- Me neither."

Zoro's gaze is lowered to address the red-faced little creature crying shrilly against his left collarbone, but the choked hush of his captain's voice prompts him to look up.

"I- wow, oh, wow," Luffy says helplessly, pulling his hand free from Robin's grasp and reaching out with quivering fingers- only to change his mind at the last second and touch his swordsman's arm instead of the baby's scalp. He's eager to smooth those jet wisps that so closely resemble his own unruly locks but terribly aware and fearful of his own strength. And completely oblivious to Robin softly excusing herself and leaving his side to join the surgeon reclining wearily on one of the sofas. "He- he sounds really mad!"

"You shoulda been here when Chopper stuck him," Zoro grumbles. "This is NOTHING." Arms cradled protectively around their offspring, he shifts onto his side to bring the yowling infant closer, moving slowly and very stiffly and biting his tongue to contain a curse. Whatever they'd given him earlier might still be blocking the worst of his abdominal pain, but it's starting to wear off, and the throbbing ache building between his sternum and pelvis is promising a long, uncomfortable night.

At least that floaty, drunk feeling's gone.

"You okay?" His captain's euphoric, dumbfounded expression has abruptly faltered, his brow furrowing in concern.

"Y-Yeah." He takes a deep, slow breath, willing his muscles to relax and let his body sag against the mattress. "Just feels like- somebody's been digging around in my guts." Which technically, he supposes, isn't too far from the truth. "Wanna- check it out real quick- and tell me how bad it looks?"

Careful not to bump his first mate's midsection, Luffy gingerly peels back the sheet just enough to peek inside. And winces. Although Chopper's done his best to clean the incision site, the wound's still bleeding- albeit sluggishly- through the numerous sutures, and the sight of all those neatly-stitched threads holding together his lover's lacerated flesh makes a lump rise in the rubber man's throat.

"That bad, h-" Zoro makes a startled noise, puzzled, as his partner bends low to lean their foreheads together so their hair's meshing, black mingling with green. "Luffy, what-"

Caught between them, their son utters one last hiccuping cry or two before quieting again, wavering fist drooping to rest on his small chest.
The captain's wet-eyed and blinking away tears when he draws back to peer down, concerned by the sudden silence, but he laughs out loud when he sees the powerful grip the baby's still stubbornly maintaining on his swordsman's thumb. "Shishishi, he can barely keep his eyes open but he's still hanging onto you like he thinks you're gonna run away and get lost or something!"

"I think he's pinching a nerve- I can't feel my whole damn hand anymore," the older pirate complains, but he's smiling tiredly as he watches Luffy stoop to address their child, one trembling forefinger delicately stroking those tiny clutching fingers.

"Oi, Ace, you can't fall asleep yet- you gotta meet the rest of your crew!"
"I know it's probably too much to ask," Nami mutters under her breath as she sits cross-legged on the sofa, snipping a large, roughly square panel of fabric from the old t-shirt stretched across her lap before discarding the mutilated garment on the pile of outgrown, equally dismembered clothing laying beside her. "-but you've got to admit, it sure would've been nice if the crew'd actually been prepared for once, instead of doing the usual thing. You know- the whole running around in a panic at the last minute routine?" Her voice is pitched low, ensuring only the woman beside her hears her words.

Robin laughs softly, glancing up from where she's been rummaging through the vanity dresser drawers in search of the safety pins she knows are lurking amidst all the accumulated clutter. "I suspect it would also be a miracle... but our crew mates certainly don't seem to mind."

Offering the historian a wry smile of acknowledgement, the redhead twists around to peer over the backrest and can't restrain the genuine delight that brightens her face upon seeing the small crowd of nakama gathered on and around the nearby beds, all of them chattering away with poorly subdued excitement, although their voices periodically fall silent whenever Zoro glares at them for getting too boisterous.

Chopper's in his element, eager to discuss his and Law's roles during the surgery and answer the dozens of questions being posed by his astounded audience. "Yes, I know it looks painful, but the procedure's really simple and there's no nerves inside the cord so neither of them even felt it being- oi, Luffy, no- that doesn't mean you can poke at it!"

"Knock it off," Zoro grumbles, swatting the captain's fingers away from their cautious inspection of the baby's clamped umbilical stump. "He's had a rough couple of days, okay? Getting bounced the hell all over the place, then having these guys drag him out and start passing him back and forth and jabbing him with sharp shit and making him cry. He doesn't need you messing with him too!"

Sprawled on his right side with Luffy now sharing the bed, tucked solidly against his back and leaning over him to peer down at the dozing newborn nestled comfortably in the crook of his arm, the older pirate's still pale-faced and a bit shaky despite the transfusion that saved his life, not to mention groggy from lack of sleep, but- bolstered by the fresh dose of painkillers currently circulating through his system- he's fighting to stay awake and coherent. And exhibiting a fierce protective streak that bodes poorly for anyone foolish enough to disturb the child napping beside him.

"I'm not poking! 'N I'm not messing with him either!" The rubber man protests, although his hand retreats nonetheless, because while the doctor merely sounds annoyed and possibly a bit exasperated, there's no mistaking that clear warning note in the swordsman's voice. He suspects he'd better not press his luck; he doesn't want to find himself once again ejected from the room- especially now that his son's arrived. "I just wanted to see the thing that kept him alive inside Zoro!"

"It almost didn't." A voice responds bluntly. "When the placenta started detaching, it interfered with everything essential - nutrients, oxygen, waste products, etcetera - passing through the cord, just like someone putting a kink in a piece of tubing. You're damn lucky. Another thirty minutes or so, maybe less, and you probably would've lost the kid. Another hour and I doubt Roronoa-ya here would've made it either." Law, who's making a final adjustment to the IV drip, fails to take note of how several
of the room's other occupants wince visibly at his words. He doesn't, however, miss the flash of pure aggression that flickers across his patient's features when he reaches out to straighten the lines and his hand strays a bit too close to the other man's occupied elbow. "Relax, Zoro-ya, relax. I'm not going to steal your little bundle of joy for any more tests, I promise. It seems like your tanuki's got everything under control now anyway, so my crew and I'll be heading out shortly."

"Good, 'cause we've both had enough of you," the swordsman grumbles, gaze softening notably as it returns to the baby in his arms.

The surgeon doesn't appear the least bit antagonized by his terse response, merely amused, but it still earns him a brief scolding from Sanji.

"Oi! The guy saved your-" The blond hesitates, regretting his choice of words before plunging ahead anyway, because while Zoro's insisted repeatedly for everyone to quit worrying about what they say, he knows it's going to be a long time before he's able use such phrases without feeling guilty. "The guy saved your ass, Marimo, and the kid's too! You could at least PRETEND you're grateful for-"

"I AM grateful, you asshole, but I'm sick of getting stabbed by those frickin' huge needles! The guy might've saved our asses, but if he brings one more of those things near EITHER of us, I swear I'm gonna make him fucking EAT the goddamn thi-!" The green-haired pirate's getting progressively louder and at the sound of his furious indignation, the baby startles fully awake, violently flailing all four limbs away from his small body and uttering a high-pitched squeal of outrage and alarm.

Expression immediately rife with chagrin, Zoro adjusts his volume. "Ah, shit- sorry, sorry! I forgot, okay? Damn... it must be a lot noisier out here than it was in there, huh, little guy?"

He continues mumbling what he hopes sound like reassuring words, feeling horribly self-conscious under the gaze of his captain and the crew, but eventually the quiet, steady rumble of his voice combined with the heat and pressure of his body as he cradles his arm tighter against his side soothes the infant's distress. The crying wavers, softens to faint whimpering, and then finally stops altogether, leaving the swordsman relieved and slightly stunned.

"I had no idea he'd be so... wrinkly," Usopp muses from where he's kneeling beside the bed, his chin resting atop his crossed arms on the mattress. Utterly fascinated - like the others, he's seen plenty of babies but never encountered a premature newborn less than an hour after delivery - the sniper's restraining the entirely too tempting impulse to reach out and tickle their newest crew member under the chin. NOT, he tells himself, because he's worried about incurring Zoro's wrath. Of course not- that's absurd! He's merely concerned his magnificent presence might overwhelm his friend's tiny son. Fear of death by strangulation's got absolutely NOTHING to do with it. "He looks sort of like a raisin. Y'know, a really funny-shaped pink one?"

"Yeah!" Luffy laughs emphatically, then claps a hand over his mouth, looking sheepish because his outburst's earned him glares from various crew members and a threatening growl from his partner. "I mean, yeah, he's actually pruny, like my fingers get when I stay in the tub for a really long time!"

"God, I miss that damn ofuro..." There's scattered chuckles at the swordsman's wistful expression. "I haven't had a decent soak in forever. Or-" Or even just a decent shower. He'd wanted one rather badly just a few hours earlier, desperate to wash away the filth (taint) of Impel Down, and now the prospect of spending some time in the bathhouse is more enticing than ever. Not just enticing but imperative, given the strong scent of mingled blood and sweat his still distressingly sensitive nose keeps detecting. "D'you think I could-?"

"Jeez, Chopper's right- for being so freaking small and so sensitive to noise, he sure as hell makes a lot of it himself!"

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"After the sutures come out," Chopper promises.

"And- sake?" The older pirate queries, trying not to sound too hopeful. The prospect of a good stiff drink's nearly as overpowering as his need to bathe. Maybe, if he's lucky, a liberal combination of the two will do something about the persistent tension in his shoulders.

"We'll see."

"Tch. We'll see, he says," Zoro murmurs, speaking to the baby in his arms. "You hear that load of crap?" He rolls onto his back, moving slowly to avoid jostling his minute charge or dislodging the catheter taped to his hand and trying not to wince as he gingerly eases himself into a reclining position with the newborn clasped belly-down against his bare torso. "I gave up booze for you- well, temporarily, anyway- but since you're actually here now, I think we oughta crack a barrel 'n give you a proper welcome. Right, Sencho?"

"Zoro just wants to drink," Luffy teases, snuggling closer to his lover's side and reaching up to run gentle fingertips down their son's back. "Heh, even though he's all wrinkly, he feels really soft- almost kinda fuzzy! Just like Chopper!"

"Well, maybe he's not green but the kid's still technically a miniature Marimo, right?" Sanji snorts. "No wonder he's a fuzzball."

"Yeah, I guess this IS whatcha get when you cross a monkey with a mossball, huh?" Usopp quips, reasoning- hoping- Zoro won't risk accidentally dropping the baby in an attempt to clobber him for cracking jokes.

Their banter earns a bright grin and badly contained, jubilant laughter from the captain. The first mate scowls forebodingly, his disgruntled expression a silent promise to kick their asses when he's less preoccupied, but he's quickly distracted when the child curled against his chest stirs, wriggling briefly to make himself more comfortable. "Ha ha. We're just surrounded by assholes, aren't we?"

He strokes his thumb through the fine wisps of dark hair where his right hand's lightly cupping his son's crown, hating the way his missing ring and pinkie fingers make it more difficult to keep a secure grasp. Looking down at the damaged appendage sends a chill sweeping up his spine as he recalls the choice Sadi offered him, and for what feels like the hundredth or possibly even the thousandth time since Robin laid this incredible little creature in his arms, he tells himself the loss of those fingers was a small price to pay. A very small price.

But it bothers him regardless, and even the sight of his uninjured hand- splayed cautiously across the newborn's back to prevent him from rolling away- is something he finds somewhat disquieting. Rough with callouses and covered in dozens of long-healed, barely visible scars made from years worth of sword fighting, it shows a startling contrast with the unmarred, tender skin beneath it, and he knows instinctively that he'll kill anyone who dares even TRY leaving a mark- no matter how small- on this child.

He clears his throat, shaken by the strength of the complex emotions once again tightening his chest. "Seriously though, why DOES he feel kinda like he's covered in really thick peach fuzz?"

At least the kid's NOT covered with that nasty gooey white crap anymore; the swordsman already can't remember what the hell Law called it - something that started with a V, maybe? - but WHATEVER it was and whatever the surgeon claimed about the stuff being like natural waterproofing, it hadn't looked right and he hadn't relaxed until he'd wiped away the last traces shortly after his captain had reluctantly left the bedside and gone back to the door to invite the rest of the crew inside.
"I can deal with fuzzy— that's not so bad, but that shit— ugh. Never eating cream cheese again. Ever. OR cleaning a pan full of that congealed crud that's left when the cook fries meat. He can fucking do it himself.

"-called lanugo," Law's in the process of explaining when the green-haired pirate abandons his previous, unpleasant train of thought. "Normally it's shed in utero before birth, but it's fairly common to find it still intact on prematurely-delivered babies, and it's also the reason for the heavy concentration of vernix; the lanugo anchored it to his skin. Now that it's no longer needed, it should start falling out over the next week or so."

"SHED?" Luffy's peering incredulously at his son, one finger stroking the fine, downy hair in question where it's thickest on the baby's shoulder. "He's gonna SHED? Like Chopper does in the summer sometimes when it gets really hot?"

"... more or less. Oi, Roronoa-ya, I'd advise you hold him a bit higher- against your collarbone instead of so low on your sternum," the surgeon warns, ignoring Zoro's irritable grumbling as he rolls down the sheet just low enough to inspect his sutures one final time. "I know he only weighs eighty-seven ounces, and you probably think you're too doped up to feel much pain right now, but you're going to have some seriously regrets if he kicks the incision site."

"Don't worry about it- I'll be fine." Just quit touching me. But he's studying the small form in his arms with new amazement. He hadn't caught the scale's reading earlier when they'd temporarily re-appropriated the baby for a few quick measurements; he'd been too distracted by his captain's happy jabbering and the ecstatic kisses being planted all over his face. Eighty-seven ounces. Not even five and a half pounds? You've gotta be kidding; no wonder he looks so damn tiny in my hands 'n I'm afraid I'm gonna break him! He barely weighs anything!

"Speakin' of marimos," Franky mutters, speaking up for the first time because he's been too busy trying not to stare since he rejoined them a few minutes ago, having returned from restocking cola barrels in the energy room. "He's, ah, well- there's no doubt he's very much- damn, Haramaki-bro, he's sure got some balls on 'im."

"Fuckin' pervert!" Zoro snarls, aghast. "What the hell d'you think you're DOING, looking at my kid's JUNK?"

"Actually," Brook interrupts, removing his hat to scratch quizzically at his temple. "I believe Frankysan's right. Your son appears to be, err- rather well-endowed."

"Well-endowed?" The cyborg sputters. "Jeez, I think he might have a nutsack bigger'n mine!"

Usopp and Luffy, who've both been struggling to contain their laughter, burst into low, helpless snickers. Sanji coughs, sounding offended as he tries to insist the conversation's highly inappropriate with ladies present, but even he can't suppress a grin, the corners of his mouth twitching uncontrollably.

"What's WRONG with you people?" Scowling, their first mate yanks the sheet out of Law's hands, tugging it higher to conceal the baby's bare bottom from prying eyes. "What the hell are you- a bunch of goddamn five-year-olds? Quit fuckin' laughing! What if it means he's got some kinda- I don't know- weird CONDITION or something?"

His chortling crew mates are immediately contrite, their amusement replaced by obvious concern, but Chopper- struggling valiantly to keep a straight face- pats the older pirate's scarred ankle where it's resting within reach of his seat at the bed's foot. "D-Don't worry, Zoro, that's normal too! Most human male infants have an, ah, unusually large scr-scrutum when they're born- you guys all
probably did too, you know! Anyway, it's temporary; he won't look that way in a few months."

"Bunch of idiots," Zoro mutters, watching in disgust as his captain and the crew's sniper promptly erupt into hysterical juvenile giggles because of the doctor's word choice, although he's not sure if they're more or less ridiculous than Franky and Brook, who're grinning idiotically and nudging each other despite being way too bloody damn old to be laughing at shit like that - and offering the infant now fidgeting in his arms a wry smile. "Hate to tell you this, kiddo, but the rest of the family's not too bright. Including your dad. Err, not me- the other one."

He blinks, curious and amused, when the baby responds by whimpering and nosing him, rooting clumsily against his chest. "Oi, they're not laughing at you, okay? They just lost their shit 'cause Chopper said something about b- GAH!"

His body's gone through some bizarre physical and hormonal changes over the past few months, but despite a great deal of discomfort, increased sensitivity and a distinct softening in their musculature thanks to his lapse in weight training, the swordsman's pectorals haven't gained much mass. Much to his vast relief; dealing with a steadily swelling belly had been stressful enough without worrying whether he might start growing BREASTS. His son doesn't seem to care about the obvious absence of fully-developed mammary glands, however, because he's certainly NOT lacking nipples, and that small questing mouth's latched onto the nearest one with surprising force.

"O-oi! Wait, that's not-!" He automatically tries to pull away, his face burning hot with humiliation because even though his crew mates have been startled into shocked and amazed silence, they're still STARING, and the baby's hanging on with sheer stubborn determination, resisting his efforts to escape. "Let go of-!

Another tentative tug, and he's forced to relent, the fingers of his left hand twitching helplessly in the air above his offspring's back. Not merely because he's afraid he'll hurt the kid, but because trying to extricate himself by force is PAINFUL. It feels almost as though someone's seized his entire areola between thumb and forefinger, twisted and yanked, and the stinging, throbbing sensation persists even after he stops actively resisting.

"Whoa..." Luffy's gaping at him, brow slightly furrowed in perplexity. "I didn't think Zoro was really gonna be able to-"

"Of course I can't, you moron!"

"A-Actually," Chopper interrupts timidly. "It might be possible, if- if you let him nurse frequently and long enough. I read about valid cases where men not only started lactating but produced enough milk to-"

"No. Forget it. Absolutely not." Crimson with embarrassment, Zoro bristles at the sight of the bemused smile beginning to curl his captain's lips. "Damn it, Luffy, NO. Now wipe that stupid grin off your face and help me!"

"Aww-" Cringing as the glower aimed in his direction darkens considerably. "Ah, okay-okay!" A pause. "Uh... so what do I do?"

"Here." Law unexpectedly comes to their rescue, moving closer to carefully poke the tip of his pinkie finger into the corner of the baby's mouth to break the suction, and Zoro stifles a yelp, startled by the wet popping sensation as he's released.
To his dismay, his son utters an unhappy squawk of frustration and immediately resumes nuzzling at his chest, lips parted and searching.

The surgeon shakes his head, amused. "It's a primitive reflex, Roronoa-ya. He'll keep trying as long as there's a nipple in sight. They're like little lampreys in the beginning, trying to latch onto anything that comes near their mouths when they're hungry."

"..." The swordsman scoots the infant higher on his chest until that inquisitive, gaping mouth's closer to his shoulder and well away from his nipple, uncomfortably aware of his nakama's rapt, dumbfounded gazes. "Not one fucking word from any of you..."

He steals a surreptitious peek at himself to make sure the slowly-drying moisture dampening his flesh is definitely just saliva. *Shit. If I'm actually... leaking... anything-

Thankfully not. But now both his pectorals - not just the wet one - are throbbing with a deep, persistent ache that intensifies sympathetically each time the baby nosing his collarbone gives another perturbed whimper.

"I think you're making him mad," Luffy observes, still clearly intrigued.

"Yeah, but- c'mon, Sencho, I'm not a bloody COW."

"What in the world's going on over there?"

"Nothing to worry about, Nami-swaaan," Sanji calls back cheerfully, fixing the red-faced and flustered first mate with a deviously smug smirk. "You didn't miss much- just Marimo's first attempt at breastfeeding."

"His first-" From the disbelieving tone of her voice, the navigator obviously hasn't been following the conversation. "Wait- WHAT?"

"Here, hold him for a second." And, as the captain reaches eagerly for the squirming baby being thrust into his arms. "CAREFUL! Make sure you-"

"I remember what Law said- I wouldn't forget!" Luffy insists, one hand already moving to cradle the squirming newborn's head, because the visiting physician's repeatedly warned them that their son's neck muscles will be too weak to support the full weight of his skull for some time yet. "Shishishi-hey, Ace- looks like I FINALLY get to hold you again! I wasn't sure Zoro was gonna let me 'cause I don't think he wanted to put you down, but he's kinda had you all to himself since we first found out he was gonna have you, so it's about time I get a turn to- ah, where's Zoro going?"

"Roronoa-ya! Get your ass back in that fucking bed, right this second!"

"We'd sure save a shitty lot of beli if we didn't need to buy formula, Marimo," Sanji's teasing as he edges away from the swordsman stalking towards him on wobbly legs. "Maybe you oughta give it a tr-" He stumbles suddenly, tripping and nearly falling backwards over Usopp, who's scrambling madly across the carpet on all-fours to avoid being caught between them. "Watch it, shitty Long-nose!"

Zoro, in the process of swinging a fist, narrowly misses clubbing the blond's ear and nearly loses his own balance. He also comes dangerously close to losing his awkward grip on the bed sheet he's pulled off the mattress to clasp shut around his middle. "Fuck!"

"Oi oi oi, save it for later, moss-for-brains, and sit down before you hurt yourself!"
His aggravated crew mate doesn't appear inclined to take his advice. "Get back here- you- swirly-piece of shit!"

"Zoro!" Chopper, having returned to Heavy Point, is hovering anxiously beside the green-haired pirate, desperate to prevent a fight but reluctant to seize his arm for fear of badly startling him when he's already agitated. The reindeer's also privately cursing Sanji for opening his mouth in the first place when Zoro's obviously so disconcerted by his own body. "You need to lay down before you tear your sutures!"

"RORONOA-YA." Law growls again. "If I end up needing to sew your damn gut closed again-" He nudges Chopper aside. "Here, Tony-ya, let me deal with him."

"Good luck," Usopp mutters from the safety of the sofa, where he's joined Nami and Robin. "When he's this pissed, he NEVER listens to-"

"Don't worry, he'll listen alright. He just needs the right motivation." The surgeon grabs Sanji by the collar to hold him still, presenting an irresistible target, then waits patiently for Zoro to lower his guard making another lunge for the cook- whereupon he simply leans forward and jabs his knuckles against the swordsman's lower belly, thumping the incision concealed by the bed sheet. "I TOLD you- to get back in the goddamn bed!"

A strangled wheeze of pain explodes from the first mate's lungs, and he folds like a piece of parchment with one hand clutching convulsively at his abdomen, pale-faced, wide-eyed and having completely lost any interest in continuing his pursuit of the cook.

"Holy shit!" Sanji blurts, too flabbergasted by Law's actions to protest the man's tightening grip on his shirt. "You-"

"Look, Blondie," his captor interrupts, giving a slight shake to make sure he's paying attention. "I don't care if he starts squirting milk in every direction like a goddamn high-pressure fountain- if you don't quit harassing my patient, I'll feed you to my navigator."

"I- better n-no-" The patient in question grits out from between tightly clenched teeth, glaring up through one watering murderous eye from where he's still hunched over, hugging his middle.

"Even if you would, it's not likely to kill you. Now back in that damn bed or I'll pop you again."

"... jeez, I'm glad Chopper's our doctor and not YOU!" Usopp mutters quite a bit more loudly than intended, and he cringes as the Heart pirate turns a deceptively cheerful smile in his direction. "Uh, not that I'm not saying you're not a perfectly good- err, I mean, wasn't that a little- umm- harsh?"

"It's my philosophy that patients should always listen to their physicians. Wouldn't you agree, Tony-ya?"

"I- I suppose," Chopper stammers, looking almost traumatized as he eases the panting, trembling swordsman in his care back onto the mattress.

"Guy's a f-ucking- lunatic-!" The green-haired pirate gasps, as he struggles to catch his breath. He shoots Luffy a slightly betrayed look; the captain's entirely preoccupied by the baby he's laid carefully in his lap, leaving both hands free to stretch his mouth and cheeks into unnatural shapes, and it appears he's missed most of the exchange.

"Oi- oi, Ace, look! Up here!"

Zoro forces himself to uncurl, grimacing as he braces a hand against his painfully twinging
abdominal muscles. "Oi- quit making those frickin' weird faces at him- you're gonna scare him!"

"Am not! Look, he's smiiiiiling!"

"... huh, I think maybe you're right..."

Peering down at their son, he feels that sense of unreality stealing over him again. *Whoa. Even though he's all pink 'n' fuzzy 'n'-okay, yeah, kinda squishy-faced, he looks really, really goddamn cute staring up at Luffy like that. Look at 'im- he- Stunned, he exchanges a glance with his partner. He's OURS, Sencho, yours and mine- because the two of us- together, we- we MADE-!*

One look at the younger pirate's enormous, moonstruck eyes makes it clear he's thinking the same thing- and they're abruptly grinning at each other like idiots, and his stomach still hurts like a son of a bitch where the doctor with the absolute WORST bedside manner in the entire goddamn Grand Line smacked him, but he doesn't care, because his heart's thumping hard and leaping ecstatically in his chest. There's suddenly too many emotions coursing through him - he didn't know it was possible to experience this much excitement and terror and joy and trepidation and pride and nearly overwhelming euphoria all simultaneously - but whatever he's feeling, it's downright fucking amazing.

"I hate to break it to you guys," Law tells them dryly, "-but he's probably just tired. Or he might have gas. Either way, they don't smile intentionally until they're at least a few months old."

"Nope, he's smiling at me- I know it!" Luffy laughs, reaching down to stroke his thumb lightly across his child's cheek and nudging Zoro's hip with his elbow when the baby immediately turns his face towards it. "Shishishi, look, he's trying to eat my-!"

He jerks back, alarmed at the deafening wail that bursts without warning from his son's suddenly gaping mouth. "O-Oi, what's wrong- why are you crying? Zoro- Zoro, what should I do?"

"How the hell should I know? What the fuck were you doing anyway, teasing him like that?"

"I wasn't! I wasn't teasing, I just wanted to-!"

"Sticking a finger right in his face when you know he's hungry's the same damn thing as teasing him, you idiot!"

"Alright, that's my cue to exit," Sanji mutters, voice nearly drowned out by his panic-stricken, squabbling nakama and their loudly squalling offspring. "Oi, Chopper, you coming along? I need a list of everything you wanted to mix with that powdered milk crap 'til we get to Water Seven and get our hands on some real formula."

The reindeer- sensitive ears flattened against his skull- can't escape fast enough, casting Law an apologetic grimace over his shoulder as he follows the cook from the room, leaving the stony-faced Heart pirate to employ damage control.

"Alright, what are you waiting for? One of you morons pick up the kid and hold him!" The surgeon shouts over the commotion, glaring at Franky and Brook, who've abandoned him to join Usopp by the sofas, all three of them looking equally spooked and unlikely to offer any assistance.

Zoro, too dismayed by the high-pitched crying to take much offense to having his intelligence insulted, reaches for the baby at the same time as Luffy. There's a brief, extremely conservative tussle for possession that the captain wins, carefully lifting the bawling infant in his arms and hugging him securely against his chest in the same manner he saw his swordsman adopt earlier, sharing an anxious look with the older pirate as he alternates rubbing and awkwardly patting their son's small,
"Well, we certainly know he got the lungs from the same person who gave him the hair," Nami calls to Robin, raising her voice to make herself heard over the baby's cries as she passes the older woman a square of cloth clipped from a worn black shirt. The navigator's highly amused to see the makeshift diaper's still sporting a faded Galley-La logo on one side. "Here- you better help Luffy with the pins so he doesn't stick himself or the baby."

"We certainly wouldn't want that," the historian agrees, smiling broadly despite the clamor as she joins her nakama at the bedside. She glances over at Zoro, seeking his approval, and waits patiently until he offers a reluctant, somewhat resigned nod before stretching out a hand to delicately catch and hold the closer of the tiny, flailing fists which have begun tapping harmlessly against the captain's scarred chest. "My goodness- such a lot of noise from such a small mouth, Roronoa-Monkey D. Ace..."

To everyone's surprise, the baby quiets almost immediately at her touch and the sound of his name being spoken, squinting up at the dark-haired woman as he rewraps his fingers tightly around her thumb.

"Hmph- figures." Zoro snorts, unable to prevent a distinct note of admittedly absurd but powerful resentment from entering his voice upon seeing how easily Robin's charmed and soothed his son.

Luffy, on the other hand, is now sporting a broad grin and motioning gleefully for the others to take note. "Ha, look at that!" The captain crows, sounding very pleased and a touch smug. "He knows his name already, and he's not scared of anything! He's definitely my kid!"

"Really, Luffy," Nami snorts in a very unladylike manner, rolling her eyes. "Just LOOK at him. Like he could possibly be anybody el-"

"OI!"

"Oh dear..." Robin covers her mouth with her free hand to smother the escaping giggles.

"OI!" Luffy exclaims again, scowling over at his lover before peering back down at their son and his own soaked shirt, nose wrinkled in disbelief and disgust. "Zoro... he PEED on me!"

"Better you than me." The swordsman reaches out to gently caress the fidgeting, wet-bottomed baby's dark locks before leaning back against the headboard with his arms crossed over his chest. "Betcha THAT'S why he quit crying. Not 'cause SHE-" He inclines his head towards the historian. ",-did anything, but 'cause he knew he hadda take a piss."

Robin, hearing the satisfaction in his voice and believing she understands the misplaced jealousy lurking behind it, finds herself swallowing another soft noise of amusement. "Unless I'm mistaken, life's going to be quite interesting with our newest crew mate here onboard." She gives the fist still clutching her thumb a tiny shake, smiling when the baby's grip immediately tightens. "Isn't it, Ace?"

Chapter End Notes

I originally planned on posting this second chapter of the alternate ending only after completing the third, but following several weeks of finding myself not only consistently incapable of concentrating on writing fic in general but also literally reduced to tears and

heaving back.
anxiety attacks whenever I devote any amount of time to the Crossfire universe specifically, I decided I may as well make it available.

Without going into detail: I'm currently struggling to cope with an extremely difficult personal situation. One that's likely familiar to those of you who followed the author's comments I posted while writing Impact and also read that fic's closing remarks. In any case, this is the... fourth... time I've dealt with the aforementioned situation within the past year, and although I started this revision with the hopes of working through the complex feelings I've been dealing with regarding the matter, it's simply become too stressful for me to work on the alternate ending at this time.

I hope to return to it in the future, but for now, Redux is on indefinite hiatus until I'm in a better place emotionally and physically.
Roused from sleep by the soft murmur of nearby voices, Zoro wakes to find himself groggy and disoriented, body lying in a stiff, awkward curl that's left him positioned facing the women's quarters' door. An orientation he's adopted instinctively despite knowing he's safely aboard the Sunny, because in the past few months, he's learned to identify doorways as portals that can't be trusted. Potential sources of danger to both himself and the child he's sworn to protect.

Fatigue's threatening to drag the green-haired pirate back under, but disconnected thoughts of the baby stir greater awareness of his surroundings- and then he registers the soft lump trapped between his rib cage and the mattress and terrified realization jolts him fully conscious. *Fell asleep- I fell asleep holding-!!*

He struggles to sit up while patting frantically at the object laying partially beneath him, heart thumping wildly in his chest, but his groping hand discovers nothing but a tangle of blanket. The relief that floods through him is short-lived, however, and he's reaching for the bed's edge, intent on checking the floor below, when his captain's voice pipes up from the opposite side of the room.

"Zoro?"

"Wh-Where-" The swordsman's breath catches in his throat as persistent, tugging pain slices across his bandaged lower belly, spurred by his erratic movements. "WHERE-??"

"Ace? It's okay- I got 'im," Luffy assures him, easing off the sofa where he's been sitting with Nami and padding his way across the carpet at a snail's pace to avoid disturbing the baby dozing in his arms. "Right here, see?" He settles cautiously on the bed beside his first mate. "You both fell asleep 'n I thought you looked really cute taking a nap together but Chopper 'n Law said it wasn't a good idea 'cause you might- y'know- roll over in your sleep or something."

Zoro gives a faint shudder, pushing aside the rumpled bedding before reaching out to trail trembling fingertips across their son's cheek and temple. "Yeah..." He watches Ace's features twitch sluggishly in response, that tiny nose wrinkling, the mouth below it dropping open. Both men tense, but the newborn merely yawns, utters a content-sounding sigh and relaxes, hands curled into loosely clenched little fists where they're resting against his chest.

"He sleeps like a rock," Luffy observes, amused. "He sleeps like Zoro!"

"Kid's got the right idea." The swordsman stretches uncomfortably, trying not to wince when his movements send a fresh wave of nauseating pain rippling through his abdomen. Now that he's completely awake and no longer tethered to an iv pole, every abused muscle and aching inch of sutured flesh is protesting its very existence with growing adamancy.

He automatically tries to hide his discomfort but evidently makes a piss-poor job of it, because Nami takes one look at his tensed jaw and furrowed brow and immediately abandons her seat to retrieve a glass of water and a few brightly-colored tablets from the vanity countertop.

"Chopper thought you might need these when you woke up," she tells him softly. "He said they'll take a little while to kick in, but they'll last longer than that heavy duty stuff he gave you earlier, and they're safer. Do you want-?"

Zoro nods reluctantly. While he doesn't particularly WANT the medication she's holding- honestly hates the idea of being dependent on that shit- he's also not stupid enough to attempt soldiering
through his discomfort. Not when his belly's a hot, throbbing mass below his navel and it feels as though everything inside him might just suddenly fall out if he stands up too quickly.

The hand he extends to accept the glass is not only shaking badly, but he's also unwittingly used the damaged one, and the pincer-like hold created by his missing pinkie and ring fingers won't let him maintain an adequate grip. The smooth-sided cylinder wobbles in his uncertain grasp, threatening to slip from his remaining digits. "Shit. Stupid." He jerks backwards as the navigator reaches towards him again, startling violently enough to slosh water on the sheet draped across his midsection and legs, but the redhead's only curling her own fingers around the base of the glass to steady it.

He's instantly furious. With himself and with her. With his fucking useless hand. With Luffy, for seeing him reduced to such a pitiful display of weak, helpless-

"Don't you dare look at me like that," Nami tells him sharply, refusing to be cowed by the glower he's fixed on her. "There's nothing wrong with letting one of your nakama help you."

_That mean you're gonna hand-feed me the fucking pills too?_ He opens his mouth to say this. Closes it. She's right; he's never been particularly adept at accepting his crew mates' assistance even when he's fully aware he needs it, and his misplaced anger's not doing him, her or their silently watching captain any good. And if he loses his temper enough to start yelling, he's going to wake the baby.

Still, he's relieved when she doesn't attempt to administer the tablets by hand but patiently allows him to pick them one by one from her palm.

There's only three, plus a pair of large, green lozenge-shaped things that she informs him are iron supplements when he balks at their size, but swallowing the blasted medication seems to take forever and by the time he's choked down the last of it, there's a sheen of perspiration clinging to his skin and he's downright exhausted.

"Go back to sleep," Luffy insists, unwilling to overlook the way his swordsman's eyelids keep drifting shut despite the older pirate's best efforts to stay conscious. "Chopper said Zoro gotta rest 'cause he lost lots of blood even with the transfusions, so he's gonna get tired really easy." He carefully shifts Ace to the crook of his elbow, freeing a hand to run gentle fingers through his pale-faced lover's spiky hair. "Me 'n Nami 'n everybody'll take care of Ace 'til we get to Water Seven, okay? You did enough for now, so just sleep."

xxx

Unfortunately, despite the captain's stern orders and Zoro's clear interest in following them, there's someone else who's innocently determined to make actually doing so not just difficult but impossible. The crew's newest, smallest member, who's suddenly awake, wet and hungry- and not at all shy about making his displeasure known to anyone within earshot. Which they shortly discover, given his volume, is evidently everyone currently located above lawn deck level.

As a result, only minutes after the first mate dozes off, he's yanked rudely back to consciousness by Ace's distressingly loud caterwauling.

It's only the beginning of a rather unpleasant discovery; namely that caring for a newborn's a vicious, energy-sapping cycle of feedings and diaper changes, followed by a myriad of hopeless attempts to ascertain why the kid's still screaming out his prodigious little lungs after those particular needs have already been met. Double-checking for open safety pins, searching for loose strings that might've wrapped themselves around tiny fingers or toes. Back-patting, mindless cheerful babble, cautious rocking- they try it all, to no avail.
Nami, concerned because Luffy's pacing is growing consistently more stumbling and erratic as he travels back and forth across the room with his howling son nestled against his chest and shoulder, considers tentatively suggesting she might take the baby downstairs to the men's quarters for a while to give his frazzled parents a break, but she promptly tosses that idea out the porthole when a knock on the door precedes Usopp, who's been sent upstairs to find out what's happening. The bleary-eyed sniper, frizzy tendrils escaping his haphazardly bunched hair, haltingly informs them that Ace is audible through the Adam wood planks separating the rooms.

Nearly delirious from lack of sleep and foul-tempered from increasingly frayed nerves, not to mention intense pain not yet dulled by another dose of slow-acting and therefore far less potent pain medication, Zoro responds by telling their long-nosed crew mate to "go sleep in the goddamn sub or something if you've got a fucking problem." An angry retort that promptly draws fire from Nami and escalates into a short-lived shouting match that ends with the navigator storming out of her own room with a cringing, quiet Usopp in tow, leaving captain and swordsman to deal with their disgruntled offspring. Who's no longer bawling but positively howling.

The relentless, repetitive sound's suddenly too much, a painful band of pressure squeezing the overwhelmed first mate's already aching temples.

"WHAT THE HELL do you WANT? WHY THE FUCK won't you STOP CRYING?" He demands, voice raised in a roar of thoughtless rage and frustration that widens his partner's eyes and produces possibly ten seconds of stunned silence from the baby he's addressing before the now confused and frightened newborn begins squalling with renewed vigor.

Witnessing the results of his outburst and horrified by what he's done, Zoro snaps his mouth shut so quickly his tongue catches between his teeth forcefully enough to draw blood. It hurts, but he barely notices, shocked speechless by his own actions, and utterly appalled with himself. I- I just-

"Zoro-" Luffy rasps, clearly struggling to find the right words. Any words. Apparently failing, because nothing follows his strangled pronunciation of the green-haired pirate's name.

"I didn't mean to-" Mortified, he's reaching for the crying child in the younger man's arms, desperate to repair whatever damage he might've done. "I don't know why I-

His captain hesitates for only a second - far more likely gathering his own fatigue-muddled thoughts than displaying actual reluctance to entrust Ace to his trembling hands - but that single moment of hesitation still feels like a forceful punch to his already tender stomach.

Burying his nose against the baby's cheek means that high-pitched wail's deafeningly close to his ear, but he's too shaken to care- too ashamed of himself to do anything besides hug his son and murmur "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, god, I'm sorry" in a low tone choked with emotion. Never. I never- NEVER wanna do ANYTHING that'll hurt you. I'll- "I'll cut my tongue out before- before I ever talk to you that way again, I swear, I-" He's unaware of it, but he's spoken the last of this aloud as he rubs lopsided, aimless circles on Ace's back.

Whether the baby finds the combination of sound and physical contact soothing or he's simply growing tired of exerting himself is unclear, but eventually his cries begin to falter, until he's emitting nothing but quiet, snuffling whimpers where he's burrowed his face beneath his swordsman father's chin.

Seated beside them, Luffy looks relieved but still undeniably troubled while he watches, fingers nervously smoothing the sheets as though he wants to reach out but isn't sure Zoro will welcome the interruption.
"He didn't do anything wrong. He just- he doesn't know how to tell us what he wants yet. And I- I YELLED at him," the older pirate states despairingly, staring down at the small body nestled against him. "What the hell's WRONG with me?"

"Zoro's really tired...."

"Yeah, but so're you. So's Usopp and Nami and everybody else, but they didn't- they didn't take it out on HIM."

"Law and Chopper said-" The captain shifts uncomfortably. "They said you, uh- that you-" He's abruptly very fascinated with the bed sheets, picking idly at a loose thread he's discovered in the weave of the linen and unable to meet his lover's gaze. "... you might act kinda funny, y'know- not like yourself- 'cause of what... happened... before we found you 'n Ace."

Zoro's automatically opening his mouth to once again insist he's fine, that nothing happened- or at least nothing worth worrying about, but Luffy cuts him off.

"They said there's this stress thing. I can't remember what they called it, but-" The rubber man forces himself to look up, and his eyes are full of trepidation. "Law says it's why you're scared of Nami 'n Robin. And... why you don't like people getting really close. Or t-touching you..."

It's the first mate's turn to glance away.

"Maybe we should talk about it- about what happened- when you're not so tired. Just you 'n me if there's stuff you don't want anybody else hearing, but-" There's a pause, and when Luffy continues, there's a pleading note in his voice. "Zoro knows he can always talk to me, right? About anything?"

Occupied with stroking trembling fingers through their son's dark hair, the older pirate's giving the faintest of nods when they're both startled by someone tapping cautiously on the door before easing it open.

"My apologies for disturbing you-" Robin, evidently elected by the others for this task, remains standing in the doorway, unwilling to intrude more than necessary. ",but it appears we'll be arriving at our destination shortly, and Trafalgar-san said he'd like a word with our captain before he and his crew depart." There's a faint smile curling her lips. "If I'm not mistaken, I believe he's going to request that we stay in touch. He seems quite taken with our youngest crew member."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Probably wants to dissect him," Zoro mutters, arms tightening protectively around Ace.

"You just don't like Law," Luffy snorts, amused, as he scrambles to his feet. "Though I dunno why."

"You didn't see him 'n Robin oogling my guts." Then, before the younger pirate can follow the chuckling historian outside. "Oi, Sencho- do you think- maybe you could do me a favor?"

xxx

Iceburg and Paulie, already seriously puzzled by the presence of the easily-recognizable brig sloop currently anchored in one of Water Seven's smaller harbors, don't understand why Luffy's shifting agitatedly- almost dancing- from one foot to the other and glancing repeatedly over his shoulder at the ship behind him while he badgers them regarding the possibility of threats to his crew should they leave the safety of the Sunny.

If the dark smudges beneath his eyes are any indication, the rubber man must be extremely short on sleep, but he's almost surely crossed the border into giddy hyperactivity given his constant fidgeting.
Or perhaps he simply needs to urinate rather badly?

Or maybe it's neither. Because the moment the bemused Galley-La president assures him that the island is, in fact, currently Marine-free, the young pirate captain immediately spins back towards the dock, one hand rising to clasp his hat in place as he hollers up to where several of his nakama are poised by the scroll-work adorned railing and peering anxiously down at him and the men to whom he's been speaking.

"Oi, Ice-ossan says we're good!"

His proclamation's met with tired, relieved smiles and followed by a few moments of intense discussion before those standing overhead engage in a flurry of activity beginning with Nami hurrying into view, her arms supporting a small bundle of blankets with the utmost care. The navigator's beaming brightly, her eyes starry with elation and barely-contained excitement, and she can't resist returning Luffy's enormous smile as Franky gingerly lowers her and her precious cargo to the dock below, because she still can't quite believe Zoro's actually asked her- HER, specifically- to look after Ace while the others help him get situated.

She and Usopp hadn't known what to expect when they'd found themselves ordered back to the women's quarters shortly before the Sunny entered the harbor. Their green-haired nakama's awkwardly worded and slightly grudging but sincere apology, yes, perhaps that wasn't much of a surprise. But the redhead certainly hadn't anticipated the swordsman insisting she take the baby outside while the sniper helped him dress.

The captain must've known about or at least anticipated Zoro's decision because he doesn't seem surprised to see her carrying his securely-wrapped progeny, although his eyes immediately dart towards the balcony above, searching for the familiar figure of his partner.

"He's coming, Luffy. Just moving a little slower than usual because the pills haven't kicked in yet," she tells the younger pirate when she's reached his side. "-and Chopper's trying to talk him into letting Sanji and Usopp bring him down on the stretcher, but I'm sure you can imagine how well THAT's going over."

Luffy immediately holds out his arms, eager to relieve her of her drowsy, blanket-swaddled burden, and although she's somewhat disappointed with being required to hand over the baby when it seems as though she's only been holding him for a few minutes, she doesn't hold it against the rubber man. She can't- not when she sees the dopey, awestruck and largely involuntary expression of utterly absorbed infatuation that surfaces on his face the moment he's got his son carefully cradled against his chest.

"Nmaa..."

"What in the world-" Paulie asks, indignant gaze darting back and forth between them as he gestures to the child who's immediately wrapped the tiny fingers of one hand around the Straw Hat captain's much larger forefinger where it's gingerly parting the blanket's folds so he can peer inside. "-is THAT?"

"His name's Ace," Luffy explains, unable to prevent a touch of smugness from entering his voice, and Franky and Brook elbow each other in the sides, hiding wide grins behind their hands, because there's no denying their beaming crew mate looks every bit the proud father.

"Nmaa," Iceburg remarks again with goodnatured absentmindedness, stroking Tyrannosaurus's sleekly furred head and velvety ears as the mouse peeks its head from his pocket to peer inquisitively at the growing crowd of pirates.
Eyes bulging, Paulie turns his disbelieving glare on Nami, who—like the majority of her surrounding nakama—has largely forgotten his presence, too busy smiling down at the crew’s newest member to register the vice president’s reddened face and mounting agitation. "YOU!"

"Mmm?" The navigator responds, raising her gaze to blink at him.

"Did I warn you? About what happens to loose women who-!"

"EXCUSE ME?" Nami demands, struggling to contain the shriek of outrage she's tempted to let loose at Paulie's sheer impertinence, highly conscious of the newborn blinking sleepily in her captain's arms. "Do I LOOK like I've been pregnant, you imbecile?" She gestures violently to her own midsection, eyes flashing with irritation and disdain.

"I-"

"Of COURSE I don't," she hisses, infuriated because the obnoxious prude's actually averting his gaze, unwilling to let it settle on the snug-fitting slim jeans and sleeveless midriff top that she knows are doing a perfectly serviceable job of covering everything she WANTS covered. "A baby that tiny—my god, he's barely a day old! And if you had any common sense, you'd know people don't just snap back to their normal shape and weight a few hours—or even a few WEEKS—after they've given birth! Of course he's not mine!"

"Th-Then who-"

"My first mate." Luffy gently wiggles his trapped finger and laughs in delight when Ace hangs onto it with stubborn determination. "Shishishi, I'm pretty sure you got Zoro's nose 'n maybe his eyes too—but you definitely got his grip!"

"NICO ROBIN!" Paulie states triumphantly, folding his arms across his chest and leveling a stern, judging stare on the dark-haired woman who's just joined them on the dock. "Obviously y-your flimsy skirts and revealing blouses finally proved enough of a temptation for the Pirate Hunter to—"

"Good grief, you ARE an idiot." Nami grumbles, lifting a hand to rub her forehead as though dispelling a looming headache. "One, there's nothing wrong with her clothes—which I think makes it pretty obvious SHE hasn't had a baby recently EITHER—and two, even if she HAD slept with Zoro—OR Luffy, or BOTH of them—or, hell, THE ENTIRE CREW, including me—it'd be none of YOUR damn business!"

Robin's shaking her head, amused. "I'm fairly certain our swordsman has very little interest in myself—or any other woman, for that matter. Just as well, given it seems he's never had much luck with them."

This last observation, while fundamentally correct and clearly intended without malice, occurs with such poor timing considering recent events that its delivery produces an effect not unlike a large rock being dropped into a small pond. The historian immediately recognizes her error when her surrounding crew mates fall ominously silent and the captain facing her stiffens, his jaw clenching as he hugs the swaddled infant in his arms a bit closer and fixes her with dark, unreadable eyes.

"Sencho, I—I apologize. I spoke without thinking."

Luffy stares at her for a moment longer, pulse throbbing visibly along the taut muscle and tendons in his neck, but then the breath he's holding escapes in a rush and he slowly relaxes. "... s'okay. You didn't mean to—you weren't—" Lost for words, he offers her a small and painfully lopsided smile over the baby's head. "It's okay."
Iceburg and Paulie exchange a confused glance, baffled by the awkward exchange.

"Ah, Luffy-san," the mayor begins cautiously. "-may I ask exactly what's going on here? If this child belongs to neither Nico-san nor your navigator, then where in the world did-?"

"Ace is mine 'n Luffy's," a tired-sounding voice calls down from the lawn deck. "He's ours."

Flanked on either side by Sanji, Usopp and Chopper - all of them careful not to touch him yet ready to lend their assistance the moment it might be needed - Zoro's standing at the ship's port-side railing, pale-faced and wavering slightly on his feet, but although his face is wan and beaded with sweat from the effort of walking so far on his own, his jaw's set with grim determination.

It's a fierce expression that softens somewhat at the sight of Luffy holding their son, as the green-haired pirate feels the chest-tightening anxiety that started as he watched Nami leave the women's quarters with Ace finally begin to ease upon seeing she's safely delivered the baby to his captain as promised.

She'd only been doing as he asked, true, but unfortunately that knowledge hasn't made the brief separation any easier.

Iceberg's frowning, gaze shifting between them. "I don't think I understand what-"

"Zoro, you- you really shouldn't be spending so much t-time on your feet yet," Chopper interrupts, tremulous voice holding a scolding note. Hovering at the swordsman's elbow but valiantly resisting the urge to lend a hand, he's watching closely for signs of dizziness and excessive fatigue. "Law said you might rupture more sutures if you're not careful and push yourself too hard!"

His patient snorts. "Yeah, well- the asshole should've thoughta that before he sucker-punched me in the gut."

"I'm sure he didn't mean to-" Usopp hesitates. "Well, no, that's a lie. He definitely meant to, he probably just wasn't expecting you to try getting out of bed again right away after he did it..."

"I needed to PISS," the other pirate reminds him tightly. "And I sure as hell wasn't doing it in a bloody bedpan with the whole lot of you assholes watching me!"

"Right, so instead you scare the shit out of us nearly falling down the fucking staircase," Sanji snarls, slapping a hand down on the railing. "-and, yeah, maybe you didn't go heels over shitty moss, but you still ripped out a bunch of stitches catching yourself. C'mon, Marimo- quit trying to act tough and just let us get the goddamn stretcher. It'll take thirty seconds tops and then you can pretend it never happened."

"Who's acting?" Zoro growls back, shooting the cook a fierce glare before he returns his attention to the upturned faces below, gauging the distance between them and the deck beneath the boots chafing his badly swollen feet. Probably gonna hurt like hell climbing down, but I'm sure I can-

"Don't you DARE," Chopper hisses, fur bristling as though his Heavy Point form's seconds away from erupting into Guard Point. "Set one foot- one TOE- over that rail and I'll tie you to the blasted stretcher myself!"

"Gimmie a break! We're only like- ten, twelve feet off the ground!"

"More like fifteen to twenty, and YOU have multiple layers of stitches! Law had a lot of trouble repairing your abdominal muscles, and if you keep damaging the tissue, it's possible your lower intestine could herniate through the incision he made to deliver the baby!"
There's a faint but audible thump from below as Paulie loses his balance and sits down hard.

"Nmaa, are you alright?"

"Wh-What exactly is going on here?" The horrified foreman demands from his seat on the ground, one wavering arm extending a finger towards the indignant green-haired pirate above. "Are you s-suggesting that- that he-"

"Who suggested what?" Luffy asks, voice holding more annoyance than humor, because his lover's obviously uncomfortable with the attention and incredulity, knuckles draining white where he's seized the railing in a stranglehold that's surely painful given the truncated fingers of his right hand. "Zoro had a baby. My baby."

"That baby, to be exact," Nami supplies helpfully, indicating Ace. "Puzzle pieces fitting together yet?"

"But that- that's-"

"He's awfully cute," Iceburg observes serenely.

"Nee hee-! Yeah, he's."

"IMPOSSIBLE!"

The beaming captain winces, smile fading as Paulie's shout of denial startles the baby, who lets out a thin, high cry of protest.

"Oi, oi, not so loud, eh?" Franky warns, frowning. "Impossible there just said you're gettin' too damn noisy."

Still feeling immensely guilty for his own outburst earlier and pushed to his emotional and psychological limits by so much activity and the mere proximity of his crew mates, Zoro's raising a leg to scale the barrier between himself and Ace before he spares even a moment's consideration for the danger in which he's placing himself. "Don't yell at my kid, you bastard!"

"Zoro, get down from there!"

"Marimo, get your ass back h-!"

Shrinking from the hand falling heavily on his shoulder, the swordsman spins to flatten his back against the railing, instinctively lashing out even as he roars, "DON'T TOUCH ME!" at Sanji, who's already backing away with both hands held high in a show of pacifism while Chopper forces himself between them, raising his crossed forearms to block the fist swinging at the blond's face.

"G-Get- away from-" Zoro staggers sideways, frantically seeking an escape route and coming close to tripping over his own feet in his haste to distance himself from the reindeer beside him. The air surrounding him's beginning to flicker, seething with the unwitting manifestation of his fear and anger, and Usopp, reaching out without thinking to offer him a steadying arm, hastily throws himself backwards.

Recognizing Asura's unique energy signature and the growing potential for disaster, Luffy's in motion before anyone else on the dock realizes what's happened, thrusting Ace into his navigator's arms and- as soon as he sees the startled redhead's gotten a secure grip- flinging both of his own upwards to wrap snugly around his first mate's torso.
The unsuspecting older pirate has just enough time to utter one choked, panic-stricken cry of protest before he's pulled bodily off the ship and into his lover's embrace, where his trembling form's tightly enveloped and lips brush his left ear and its swaying, clinking adornment as they offer urgent words of comfort and reassurance. And repeated promises of safety.

The entire transfer's completed so swiftly, most of the crew's lips are still parting to issue various warnings and exclamations of alarm as the rubber man frees an arm and motions hurriedly for Nami to bring him the baby.

"You shouldn't fight with nakama," he scolds gently, tightening his hold when Zoro tries to slip away at their navigator's approach and feeling somewhat disheartened by his first mate's display of timidity but also incredibly relieved because that threatening aura's no longer clinging to him like a second skin. "But you shouldn't be afraid of 'em either!" Drawing Ace between them, he lowers his voice to a murmur. "I won't let anybody hurt him, Zoro, and I won't let anybody hurt you again either, and neither will they-" An inclination of his head towards Nami and their other concerned crew members, who've gathered at a respectable distance. ".-but you gotta trust us."

Head reeling from the shock of being unexpectedly grabbed and yanked a good seven or eight yards - miraculously WITHOUT being accidentally catapulted into a neighboring vessel or some other nearby surface, which the swordsman's dazed mind registers as a damn good thing, considering the rather horrific bodily damage such an violent impact might entail following recent abdominal surgery - Zoro's too stunned to respond with anything more elaborate than a shaky nod.

Some disconnected portion of his brain supposes he ought to apologize for taking a swing at Sanji when the man clearly intended no harm, but the words elude him and the cook looks more worried than angry anyway, so he settles for remembering how to breathe and clutching possessively at the wriggling bundle that's just been deposited in the crook of his elbow, and eventually his heart's frantic pounding begins to slow.

Despite his violent reaction to physical contact only a few minutes prior, his growing sense of calm's now being unexpectedly, vastly aided by his captain's continuous touch. Having abandoned restraint in favor of offering cautious support, the arm wrapped around his waist's now resting there loosely enough that he could easily shrug free, but he finds himself leaning gratefully into it instead, allowing the younger pirate to rub gentle circles on his side.

Nestled against his chest, their son makes a faint mewling sound, then tips his head back and opens his mouth wider, searching.

"Oi, look-" Luffy murmurs, nuzzling his lover's shoulder briefly before resting his cheek there, watching the baby's actions with something like awe. "Look, he's making that baby bird face again! I guess he must be hungry again, neh, Zoro?"

"... yeah," the green-haired pirate sighs, his lips twitching to produce a wan smile that's crooked and radiating exhaustion but a smile nonetheless. He clears his throat, dispelling the last of the lump caught there. "Damn. If he's anything like you, he's gonna be a bottomless pit."

Beaming unabashedly, the captain leans closer to address their squirming offspring. "Shishishi- you gonna get kicked outta the kitchen by Sanji all the time too, huh?"

Ace answers him with a squawking noise of complaint they're coming to recognize as the warning prelude to full-throated crying if his stomach's not filled in short order, and Zoro shoots an anxious glance around the dock, wondering if he shouldn't suggest they return to the ship, because their presence has begun to draw considerable attention from those residents and patrons of Water Seven within sight of the rather familiar Thousand Sunny and its equally recognizable crew.
He's not the only one keenly aware of the pointing fingers and poorly hushed whispers.

"Pardon the interruption, Luffy-san," Iceburg begins apologetically, ",-but perhaps you'd be kind enough to explain just what's going on here and what you and your nakama are doing here rather than in the New World like the newspapers claim?"

"Mmm?" Luffy reluctantly raises his gaze from where he's been studying the way his first mate's powerful arms have tightened protectively around Ace, shifting the baby to conceal him from curious onlookers. "Uh, well-" There's a sudden exclamation of "look, it's Mugiwara!" from several yards away, and he feels Zoro flinch and crowd closer against him. "You think we could talk somewhere else? 'Cause it's a kinda long story."
Alternate Ending Chapter 4

Brow faintly creased by the frown he's no longer bothering to hide, Luffy hesitates with his fingers curled loosely around the cool metal of the lever beneath his palm before he seizes it more firmly and shoves open the same door he's closed only moments before, thrusting head and shoulders past the frame to give the room beyond a second, far more thorough scan.

While the Straw Hat captain's fairly certain the place is empty, it wouldn't be the first time he overlooked his first mate's presence in their temporary lodgings given the distressing habit the older pirate's developed of napping wedged in the narrow gap between the bed and wall.

Concerned the poor posture his patient's forced to assume in such cramped quarters might cause complications with the still-healing abdominal incision spanning his lower belly, Chopper's tried to discourage this behavior, without much success. Rear planted on the carpet and back wedged firmly into the narrow juncture where wall and night stand meet, Zoro clearly feels more secure sleeping in this awkward enclosed space than in the bed itself.

But this afternoon there's no green-haired swordsman slouched dozing in the corner with arms crossed stiffly over his chest and the fingers of his undamaged left hand twitching periodically as though he might at any moment lunge for Kitetsu, where the surviving katana habitually rests against the wall beside him. Or pacing the darkened room, his body a featureless silhouette framed by the dim light creeping through the hanging blinds drawn across the sliding door leading to the balcony outside.

The small crib hastily assembled by Franky following their arrival on Water Seven is likewise uninhabited, which doesn't surprise the rubber man given Zoro's absence. He knows the older pirate hates leaving their son's side, his anxiety grown so severe during the last few weeks that he can barely force himself to venture downstairs to the kitchen even knowing the baby's safe under the watchful gaze of his own nakama.

_The only place he really goes without Ace is the bathhouse, but I already looked there 'n the place was deserted._

No one else he's encountered in the last hour had the baby either- not Robin, Nami or Chopper, who he'd discovered ensconced in the library, and certainly not Sanji, who'd been unabashedly terrorizing Iceburg's kitchen staff while assisting in the preparation of dinner. And while the captain hadn't thought to question the others, the idea that Usopp, Brook and Franky might've been tagged as a temporary sitters is laughable; they've been away for most of the afternoon, hard at work making much needed repairs on the Sunny.

_Zoro barely leaves this floor. He barely even leaves this ROOM unless he's gotta take a leak or get a shower or something; there's no way he'd walk outta here 'n all the way down to the docks without telling somebody- is there?_

There's no doubt in Luffy's mind; wherever his swordsman's gone, he's taken the baby with him. But if they're not in either of the rooms presently occupied by the crew, and they're not in the bathhouse, then where-?

Not exactly worried yet still unable to shake a sense of vague unease, he closes the door for the second time and turns to look up and down the hallway, unaware his fingers are now twisting anxiously in the hem of his shirt. _Where did they GO?_
He knows there's no need to fear for Ace's safety while in Zoro's presence. Ever since that exhaustion-fueled outburst on the ship and his subsequent vow to never again address their child in unrestrained anger, the first mate's proven himself a highly attentive- if rather frequently overwhelmed- parent, quick to put the baby's needs before his own.

He's also extremely protective- and therein lies the reason for Luffy's concern. *If he runs into somebody he doesn't know 'n they scare him, make him have one of those flash thingies- it could be bad. 'Specially if he's got Ace with him 'n thinks somebody might hurt him...*

As the captain and Sanji witnessed in the hallway outside the crew's rooms a few nights ago, Zoro's flashbacks don't always summon Asura, and despite their first mate's fears that he might unwittingly injure or even kill someone in a fit of hysteria, they haven't seen a repeat of the incident in the infirmary where he came dangerously close to stabbing their navigator. But that doesn't guarantee it can't- or won't- happen again, and while Luffy might not understand much of that psycho-logia stuff he's heard Chopper and Robin discussing during the last few weeks, it's pretty obvious that whatever's wrong with Zoro is getting progressively worse.

The swordsman's not only prone to flinching at unexpected physical contact and raised voices, but it's rare he'll suffer the presence of more than three or four other human beings at one time, preferring to eat- if that halfhearted picking at his plate can truly be called eating- secluded in their rooms rather than seated at the massive Galley La dining table with the entire crew and their host. He's also been showering with far greater frequency than what's strictly necessary for basic hygiene, often emerging from the bathhouse incommunicative and refusing to look anyone in the face in a futile attempt to hide lids rimmed red and puffy, his remaining eye bloodshot from what's clearly been an intense, prolonged session of crying.

Despite his best efforts, however, he can't conceal how badly he's falling apart. Not with his borrowed clothes growing progressively more ill-fitting and failing to cover the reddened patches of skin he's scrubbed almost raw or the bruised shadows of fatigue that've developed beneath his eyes even though he's sleeping- or trying to sleep- nearly as much as Ace these days.

*We used to tease Zoro about it, but- now he really does. Sleep all the time. 'N I know he's tired 'cause he's not completely done healing yet 'n 'cause we keep getting woken up so much to feed 'n change Ace, but-

While Zoro occasionally sleeps so deeply that he's unresponsive to everything and everyone, even his own offspring's shrill cries, most nights he tosses and turns relentlessly for hours, tangling the sweat-dampened bedsheets into knots, and on more than one heart-stopping occasion, he's startled awake not only the rubber man beside him and their nakama sleeping in the room next door but also the people on the floor directly below with his nightmare-induced, panic-stricken screams.

Remembering the last such incident, Luffy feels the skin on his shoulders and arms prickling with goosebumps. *He wouldn't let me touch him. I just wanted to hug him, y'know- let 'im know he was safe 'n everything was okay? But the noise he made... and then when I left him alone like he wanted 'n went to get the baby instead 'cause he was awake too 'n crying for somebody... that weird look Zoro got on his face- like he didn't want me touching ACE either...*

What the hell had caused that odd expression? That sudden intense focus, accompanied by alarming pallor and slightly parted then tightly clamped lips- as though the swordsman had caught himself about to blurt something and thought better of it. What had come so close to emerging from his mouth? Words of protest obviously. But in denial of what? Luffy's hands on their son?

*What'd he think I was gonna do?*
He'd wanted to know- but he'd also been a little afraid to ask. And Zoro hadn't volunteered an explanation either but had simply extended both arms towards the whimpering baby in a display of abject demand, face abruptly schooled to apparent indifference.

I couldn't read Zoro AT ALL, Luffy recalls as he proceeds next door to check the adjoined room a second time as well, and he thinks that's what frightens him most, even more than the threat of Asura.

I know he feels funny talking to anybody about- about what happened. I mean, Chopper's practically gotta DRAG important stuff outta him when he does check-ups 'n other medical junk, but- He bites his lower lip, worrying it between his teeth at the sight of two more empty beds and the equally deserted sofa and matching chairs. I thought I was different from everybody else. I mean, I thought me 'n Zoro- I thought we could talk about ANYTHING.

Maybe before Impel Down. But since his imprisonment and subsequent torture, the swordsman's become what Luffy fretfully equates to a walking, breathing haunted house.

He thinks there's a place inside the older pirate's head, somewhere closed to everyone, that even Zoro himself fears to tread. An abandoned wing barricaded shut with broken furniture and comprised of a dimly lit corridor studded with doors barring entrance to rooms now dark and forbidden to all- but not necessarily empty. And while whatever's lurking inside is generally limited to brushing or bumping gently against those doors, does something terrible occasionally hurl itself against one of them forcefully enough to rattle it within the frame or even cause it to burst open, revealing the horror seething within?

Luffy thinks it might. In fact, he thinks that's EXACTLY what happens when his first mate's overwhelmed severely enough to suffer a flashback. And when Asura takes over? It's like something really bad actually BROKE OUT- only it's not just walking around in Zoro's head, it's RUNNING around in there, screaming 'n laughing 'n ripping the whole place apart 'til Zoro's so freaked out he barely remembers who he is, let alone who the rest of us are...

"I tore your goddamn throat out, bitch- so HOW THE FUCK are you still alive?"

The captain shivers, and the involuntary movement jolts him back to reality.

While lost in his disheartening thoughts concerning metaphysical doors, he's wandered through the real doorway before him and found himself standing beside a bright elongated rectangle the late afternoon sun's casting across the floor through the patio window. Someone's left the curtains here thrown wide open and pushed to either side, rendering this room far brighter and less gloomy than the other he's just visited.

He kicks his sandals off and pads barefoot across the carpet to the sliding door, savoring the plush warmth beneath his toes and letting it chase away the chill of uncertainty.

Unlike the interior doors, the one leading to the balcony's locked. Although their rooms are located on the second floor, making it highly unlikely they'd be disturbed even without the security staff patrolling the mansion's grounds to dissuade intruders, no one's forgotten two of their crew mates were attacked- and one abducted- despite the supposed security of their own ship. And although Iceburg's promised repeatedly that they're safe here-

WE broke in this place once, Luffy reflects as he spins the bolt then eases the door open. When we came here looking for Robin. And if we could do it, what's stopping anybody else? I mean, we could come back after dinner 'n find somebody hiding behind the curtain with a pistol or a knife or something.
He's unaccustomed to worrying about ambushes, but he's also not used to dealing with a helpless infant and an emotionally compromised swordsman, and doing so's prompted his brain to begin entertaining a number of worst case scenarios.

Despite these morbid thoughts, the moment he steps over the sliding door's track and outside onto the balcony, he feels the tension- the full intensity of which he wasn't completely aware- begin to leave his muscles, a great deal of his trepidation washed away by direct sunlight. It's much easier to breathe out here, where it's warm and slightly breezy and his nostrils can detect the distinct tang of sea salt wafting from the harbor instead of nothing but stale recycled air.

Fingers stretching out to grip the top rail of the waist-high balustrade enclosing the tiny patio, he leans over to survey the grounds in hopes of catching a flash of familiar green between the trees and bushes separating Iceburg's estate from the city beyond. Regardless of what Sanji might claim, Zoro's hair is a distinct shade and NOT likely to be mistaken for foliage.

To his disgust, however, the balcony's too low to afford a decent view, and for a moment he considers simply hopping the railing to scout the area below on foot, in blatant disregard of Iceburg's insistence that he keep his presence outside the premises to the absolute bare minimum. He even raises one bare foot to brace his toes on the balustrade's lower rail in anticipation of scrambling over it- and then, with great reluctance, discards the idea and slowly lowers his foot.

He wants out of this damn building and back to his ship and the open ocean so badly that the thought of staying a day longer makes his teeth ache, but while he ordinarily wouldn't care if some stranger eager to claim a bounty made a discrete call after noting the similarities between his features and those on a certain wanted poster, he's not sure what might happen if the Marines show up while the Sunny's still undergoing repairs. A fight, obviously. Not a prospect that'd normally worry him; he harbors an undeniable propensity for hurling himself headlong into danger. But he's got other matters to consider these days. New responsibilities. And in the last few months he's been made brutally aware that his actions have consequences.

Despite his display of bravado while addressing Trafalgar Law only a few weeks earlier - when, in hopes of gaining the surgeon's assistance, he boldly stated he'd claim One Piece with a baby tucked under one arm if necessary - the thought of his tiny son being inadvertently caught in an altercation with enemy forces scares the hell out of him.

And while Ace's presence alone already raises the stakes unbearably high-

The odds of Zoro throwing aside all thoughts of his own safety and charging into battle even though he's still healing after a slow recovery- not to mention poorly armed thanks to the loss of Wado and Shusui- are dangerously high. In fact, such response is almost inevitable. And although the swordsman's won numerous battles in the past despite being badly handicapped, his tenuous mental state and preoccupation with the baby's welfare are apt to make him careless. Vulnerable.

Luffy's always known his first mate risks death every time he draws a blade, that life on the seas is incredibly dangerous and any one of the crew could perish at any moment, but for a long time he'd also harbored an absurd notion that Zoro was immutable, a permanent fixture in his life- until recent events brought him to the terrible realization that he'd been badly mistaken and something as seemingly insignificant as a misstep on rocky terrain or a katana lowered a fraction of a second too slowly might easily spell the end of the man he loves.

If he got distracted while he was fighting- if he couldn't concentrate 'cause he was worried about Ace or maybe just 'cause having a bunch of Marines show up scared him so bad he couldn't defend himself' n all 'cause I didn't listen to Ice-ossan 'cause I got BORED 'n- The thought of losing the green-haired pirate- of losing ZORO- due to his own selfish negligence fills Luffy with sick dread.
No, he won't leave the building. Not until he's absolutely certain his partner and their child aren't still SOMEWHERE on the premises.

He bites his lower lip in frustration, wishing not for the first time that his Kenbunshoku was sensitive enough to detect the exact location of specific individuals rather than simply identify the general presence of people and animals, because his inability to simply close both eyes and pinpoint Zoro's location is aggravating as hell.

The captain's recently begun experimenting with his haki, struggling to learn to identify his crew mates' unique energy signatures by extending his consciousness to locate each person whenever he already knows exactly where to find them, and he's sure he'll figure it out eventually with enough practice, but in the meantime he's stuck verifying every presence he senses by sight.

'N I'm not gonna see squat down here. He turns to peer up at the balcony on the level above where he's standing, then past it towards the roof and open sky, eyes narrowing in speculation. In the building or ON the building- they're pretty much the same thing as long as he's not actually leaving it, right?

If Nami was here, she'd probably have something rather disparaging to say about his logic, but she's not, so he flings an arm heavenwards to grab the slim protrusion of the gutter encircling the roof and thereby rocket himself up onto its shingled surface.

Bet I can see all the way to the docks from- his musing comes to an abrupt end, accompanied by a sense of relief so powerful it's staggering in its intensity, because there- finally- THERE is his errant swordsman. Not wandering the outer grounds surrounding the mansion, no, but seated on one of the many garden benches scattered throughout its open interior, arms cradling an equally familiar bundle.

"OOOI, ZOROOO!" the captain calls down, cupping his hands to either side of his mouth in hopes of amplifying the shout before he makes a short running dash across the roof's tiles and launches himself into empty space.

Not until he's fully airborne does he register that Zoro hasn't glanced up at the sound of his name.

It's a realization that sets off a series of instantaneous and deafeningly loud warning bells, and the moment one bare foot hits the ground, he's already positioning the other for a hasty skip backwards as the green-haired man seated before him rises, surging off the bench with one arm tightening protectively around the blanket-swaddled child he's holding and his free hand swooping to the handle of the single katana belted at his waist.

Kitetsu slides free with a harsh rasp, and Luffy crouches lower, the muscles in his thighs and calves tightening in anticipation of propelling him out of range of that flashing razor-sharp steel- but the maneuver's unnecessary.

It's not clear whether he's unwilling to trust the damaged appendage to properly support the infant clapsed to his chest or simply operating on habitual instinct, but the swordsman's sought his weapon right-handed, and as the blade's tip clears the scabbard, his insufficient grasp slips and he fumbles the draw. The handle twists within his remaining fingers, escaping despite his desperate efforts to hang onto it, and the sword falls from his hand, embedding itself harmlessly in the sod a short distance from his feet.

There's an extremely awkward, prolonged silence and for a moment Zoro's thumb, forefinger and truncated middle digit remain fully extended, frozen midair as he continues reaching for the fallen katana. Then he slowly lowers his arm, curling all three fingers inwards until they're balled into a misshapen fist that's pressed firmly against his upper thigh and hiding the shiny new scar tissue that's
now cracked and oozing blood from the strain of sudden overexertion. Face gone pale and pulse throbbing visibly in the taut muscle of his neck, he looks horrified by the realization that only an inadequate grip's prevented him from taking a swing fully capable of gutting or even decapitating his captain.

Seeing the older man's come to his senses, Luffy clears his throat, forcing himself to relax and straighten from the defensive posture into which he'd fallen, one hand lifting in tentative greeting. "Oi..."

"S-Sencho, I-" Zoro's mouth works soundlessly as he searches for words of explanation that evade capture, and then he clamps it shut, averting his gaze while color begins returning to his cheeks in the form of a deep shame-filled flush.

Unsure whether or not he ought to approach yet, the captain settles for holding his ground. "You okay?"

There's no answer but the sound of a ragged, shuddering breath being taken then shakily released.

"Zoro? Oi, are you-?"

Eye fixed resolutely on his sword - the katana's swaying lightly where it stands, nearly a quarter of its length impaled in the ground between them - the green-haired pirate interrupts the repeated query with a barely audible grunt of assent, still refusing to look up.

"I- I yelled," Luffy offers weakly, gesturing towards the roof. "-but I, uh, guess you didn't-"

"No. Dozed off. Just for a second, but-" The first mate's voice is gruff, pitched low and loaded with dismay and self-loathing. "Look, I didn't mean to-" He squeezes his eye shut, takes another deep breath. "... fuck." Then, moving with exaggerated care- as though doing so is painful- he blinks and raises his gaze. "Sorry."

"S'okay. Do you- uh- want me to- umm..." Unsure whether he should offer to retrieve Kitetsu or offer to hold Ace while Zoro does- or maybe just offer to leave them both alone again- the rubber man trails off. Hating the audible quaver in his own voice. Hating his indecision. Hating how weird even just TALKING to Zoro's gotten over the last few weeks.

He finally makes a feeble gesture towards the quivering katana, figuring- hoping- the older pirate might find that less threatening than an attempt to claim their son. "Want me to grab that?"

"Nah, don't bother. Not like the bloody thing's gonna do me any good anymore anyway- not when I'm fucked up like this." Flashing a grimace of disgusted dismay at his maimed hand, Zoro leaves the weapon where it's fallen and retreats to his previous spot, sinking stiffly into the same seat he'd occupied before their brief altercation.

The captain hangs back, watching- and feels a strong urge to put his fist through a nearby tree when he realizes he's once again allowing himself to be overwhelmed by hesitation.

"Can't believe you slept through that whole thing," the swordsman's muttering to the oblivious, peacefully slumbering baby nestled against him when Luffy joins them on the bench, cautiously leaving a good twelve-inch gap between Zoro's thigh and his own in the event he finds his presence unwanted.

To his immense gratification, however, the other man doesn't scoot farther away or wave him back but merely glances over to favor him with one of those rare, barely discernible and lopsided little smiles that's not much more than a twitch of lips. "Accidentally woke 'im up earlier this afternoon
'cause I dropped my frickin' t-shirt on the floor next to his crib. Kid doesn't make any goddamn sense. Bomb could go off 'n he probably wouldn't even blink, but if somebody breathes too hard-?"

Luffy's sorely tempted to accept these statements for the clumsily extended olive branch they plainly represent. It's been far too long since they engaged in anything resembling a normal conversation, but while Ace's perplexing sleep habits would certainly make a safe if somewhat mundane topic to once more put them at ease with one another, the younger pirate's spotted the thick crimson droplets welling steadily from the cracks crisscrossing Zoro's right hand and noted the way it's positioned stiffly in his lap, well away from the baby's blanket.

Drawing attention to it may very well ruin their chance to spend time alone together - something that's already been occurring less and less frequently these days given the growing tension between them - but he can't bring himself to let the injury go unmentioned either. To anyone else, those weeping stumps might seem insignificant in light of the extensive battle-inflicted damage the swordsman's accrued over the years, but Luffy can't look at them without recalling the sacrifice involved. Or feeling partly responsible.

He said she told him to decide between keeping his fingers and keeping the baby, and he picked the baby. He picked OUR baby. Even though he knew it meant he might never beat that Hawk-eyes guy. But there probably wouldn't've even BEEN a baby in the first place if I hadn't asked Zoro to- His hands clench involuntarily where they've been resting on either side of him, gripping the marble beneath them. When he and Chopper told me about the baby, way back when they finally figured out why he kept throwing up all the time, I definitely wanted it. Him. I wanted Ace before I even knew he was gonna be Ace, but- I didn't understand. Not really.

In the beginning, the prospect of fatherhood had been exciting in a surreal sort of way, and although he'd grown increasingly attached to the fetus developing in his partner's swelling belly, the concept of "our baby" had remained pretty abstract despite the strengthening emotional bond, and even the sight of the ultrasound screen hadn't truly registered. He'd been fascinated and delighted, sure, but ultimately he'd been looking at nothing more than a flat picture on a wall.

When he'd gotten his first glimpse of their newly-delivered offspring, however, suddenly and undeniably tangible where he lay squalling in the sheltering circle of Zoro's arms, red-faced and furious and waving those tiny trembling fists-

He was LOUD 'n he sounded so PISSED 'n he was REAL- like REALLY REAL, the captain thinks as his eyes stray to the sleeping infant and he promptly experiences that feeling of giddy elation all over again. He's real 'n he's ours. Mine 'n Zoro's. Our Ace.

He knows his lover might've simply insisted on terminating the pregnancy all those weeks ago if he hadn't spoken up and asked him to consider having the baby. And while he doesn't regret making that request - no way, not a chance in hell, not when his heart gives that same funny, helpless little lurch in his chest every time Ace crosses his mind - he can't help feeling guilty at the sight of his swordsman's mutilated hand.

He didn't lose those fingers in a fight- he let that woman cut 'em off so she wouldn't hurt our baby. But if Zoro hadn't then pregnant- if he hadn't been pregnant, he wouldn't've needed to worry about keeping Ace safe 'til I got there. He- he could've laughed in her face 'n made her eat that stupid knife. She never would've laid so much as a finger on- Luffy exhales slowly, smothering the anger that's roiling inside him and threatening to ignite at the recollection of the other atrocities endured by the green-haired pirate seated beside him. Reminding himself that while getting pissed off and breaking something might be terribly tempting, it's also a luxury he can't afford right now, not if he wants a receptive audience for what he's about to say.
Because although he might not be able to replace what Sadi stole or easily repair the emotional damage she's done, he can still do everything in his power to make sure Zoro's hand heals—hopefully well enough to properly wield a katana again. And since that involves convincing the other man those bleeding fingers need prompt treatment, losing his temper and wrecking the surrounding garden's not likely to do him any favors.

'Specially if I wake up Ace 'n he starts crying.

"Oi..." he begins cautiously, hoping his casual tone thwarts or at least delays an argument. "-d'you think maybe Chopper oughta look at that?"

The swordsman doesn't respond, but his shoulders give a visible twitch, and the injured hand in his lap curls into a tight fist that immediately begins to bleed more heavily, creating a spreading stain on the pant leg where it's resting as the small fissures in the scab-encased tissue split wider under the tension.

"Oi," Luffy protests, wincing, and for once he doesn't stop to think about what he's doing but automatically reaches out to take his first mate's hand. "Don't, okay? You're gonna make it worse."

When Zoro doesn't pull away— or try to punch him in the face— the captain gently pries open the remaining digits so he can lace his own fingers between them, preventing the hand from being curled back into a fist and causing additional trauma.

The older pirate's skin feels clammy, dampened by a cold sweat that's less obvious than the blood but just as slippery under his fingertips, and he can feel the damaged flesh in his grip trembling steadily as though there's a live current surging through it. Moving slowly to avoid spooking his partner, he turns their joined hands to make a more thorough inspection, wondering if the injury looks more severe than it actually is— and rapidly concluding he hasn't got a clue. Guess I'll just hafta see what Chopper thinks 'cause he knows way, waaay more about this kinda stuff.

"How can you-" Zoro's speaking softly to avoid waking the baby napping against his chest but there's no mistaking the underlying thread of hysteria that's rising to the surface despite his attempts to squelch it. "How can you stand touching me after wh-what-" The swordsman's voice breaks before he can finish, making him sound as though he's about to burst into tears and very much unlike himself.

That poignant, almost pleading tone's not just uncharacteristic— it's disquieting as hell.

What do I DO if he DOES start crying? Luffy wonders in horrified confusion, trying to hide his shock and giving the trembling hand he's holding what he hopes is a reassuring squeeze while he struggles to formulate a verbal response. "Why would-"

"Don't try to tell me you don't think it's disgusting, okay? That you don't think I'M disgusting after-"

"You're ZORO." There's no disguising the steel creeping into the rubber man's voice. He's suddenly too furious to pretend otherwise. "You're not disgusting, you're Zoro, and I know how I feel about Zoro, and whatever happened, THE WAY I FEEL ABOUT ZORO DIDN'T CHANGE."

"I FUCKED her," Zoro snarls in reply, whirling towards him with tears of outrage and despair spilling from one blazing eye. "She touched me and, godDAMN ME, I RESPONDED TO IT. SHE TOUCHED ME AND I CAME THE SAME FUCKING WAY I WOULD'VE IF YOU'D TOUCHED ME!"

He wrenches his wounded hand free and swipes it across his own face so viciously it's unclear if he's
merely dashing away the tears or actually striking himself as misguided punishment for supposedly betraying his lover's trust. Whatever the reason, his actions leave a broad crimson smear high on one cheek and across the bridge of his nose, and now that they're directly facing each other, Luffy's struck by how much self-condemnation and despondency his first mate's features hold.

*I knew he was getting worse, but*- For the first time since their arrival on Water Seven, the captain's genuinely afraid that Chopper's reassurances are worthless and- contrary to the reindeer's research-no amount of time or effort will EVER be enough to heal the rift that's been torn between them. Because Zoro's face screams surrender. Exhaustion so profound he no longer has the energy or even the will to keep forging ahead and would rather lie down and die than continue struggling to exist in the shadow of Impel Down.

Roused by the sudden shouting as well as his green-haired father's jarring movements, Ace is now awake and wriggling, beginning to utter those whimpering cries of distress that prelude full-volume yowling if he's not quickly soothed.

Zoro looks down at the baby, making a low choked sobbing noise deep in his throat, and then unceremoniously pushes the entire squirming bundle into Luffy's arms. "Take him. I c-can't-"

The rubber man scrambles to comply, one hand automatically beginning to pat their fussing son's back and his mind whirling as he watches his first mate slump forward to rest both elbows on his knees and bury his face in his hands. Hiding that awful expression. The one that's almost enough to convince him Zoro might just get up and walk away, not merely from this bench but from everything they've fought to call their own.

No way. *He wouldn't leave, not when it means leaving Ace behind. He LOVES Ace. He'd do anything for-Feeling as though he's unexpectedly plunged into ice water, Luffy tightens his arms around the child who's settled against him with one tiny hand clutching a fistful of his shirt. Is that what he thinks? That it'll be better- that me 'n Ace'll be happier- if he LEAVES?*

"Sometimes I think... I wasn't supposed to survive Trafalgar cutting me open," Zoro's mumbling into his palms, voice rough with the turbulent emotion he's struggling to contain. "I wouldn't- I shouldn't be here now, m-making you deal with all this- this pointless bullshit, because I was supposed to- I should've died."

No. *NO. NO-NO-NO-

The realization that Zoro's been entertaining aspirations far more dire than simply abandoning the crew strikes Luffy with such blinding terror that his rebuttal - "NO, We NEED you" - comes out in a barely comprehensible rush, and he forces himself to repeat it more slowly. "We need Zoro. Me 'n Ace 'n everybody else too 'n THAT'S why you're alive 'n you're here 'n- 'n." He can't restrain himself any longer. "I'LL KICK ZORO'S ASS IF HE EVER SAYS STUPID SHIT LIKE THAT AGAIN!!"

Startled by his volume, the swordsman flinches.

Ace also jumps, face reddening as he prepares to loose a wail of protest, and Luffy hurriedly resumes gently thumping the baby's back, although his gaze remains locked on the man beside him.

The captain doesn't particularly want to discuss what Zoro revealed just a few moments before he started talking about wishing he'd died under Law's knife, but intuition's prodding him, not only recognizing that the older pirate's sense of guilt and his potentially suicidal thoughts are likely related but suggesting that resolution of the first issue might very well help in addressing the second. So long as Zoro doesn't bolt the moment he begins speaking.
Unfortunately, he's got no idea how to ease into the topic or how to pull the emotional punch it's sure to invoke. The truth is, he's never been good at handling people with kid gloves, and he knows it. So he doesn't even try, although he's strongly aware his next words might earn him a bloody nose.

"Did Zoro ever WANT her to touch him? Or ask her to do it?"

Upon registering the nature of these questions, the first mate lifts his head from his hands with a jerk, the melancholy in his expression replaced by anger. "What the fuck? No!"

"So you're saying you DIDN'T want-"

He's cut short by Zoro snarling "NO" once more in reply, now positively livid, then calling him an asshole and a barrage of other equally unpleasant names, and that stings a little, even though he guesses he deserves it. Somebody- ANYBODY- else would know how to talk about this stuff without screwing up 'n hurting him more. I shoulda asked Chopper. Or maybe Robin.

"-fuck's WRONG with you, asking shit like-"

Luffy already regrets opening his mouth but it's too late to back out now; he's thoroughly committed himself by making such a careless, bumbling opening, so he better explain the rest, and fast: "Chopper told me bodies can do that. Not just get boners when you're not expecting it but have orgasms 'n stuff too, even if you don't really want 'em. 'N he said 'cause you were pregnant- well, the hormones probably made you way more-" Abruptly recalling his own observations regarding Zoro's increased sensitivity, Luffy glances away, unable to continue holding the antagonized swordsman's gaze. "... uh- they made it a lot harder to keep your body from doing stuff you didn't want it to do."

"What's your point."

"Just 'cause she could make you-" Clenching his jaw, the younger pirate forces himself to look up again. "Just 'cause she could make that stuff happen doesn't mean you wanted it, and just 'cause it did happen doesn't mean you did anything wrong. 'Cause you didn't. SHE was the one doing something wrong."

For a moment or two, Zoro regards his captain in frosty silence, and then sighs, irascibility slipping away until he simply looks weary. Leaning forward to rest his forearms on his knees once more, he studies the small patch of grass framed by his hands and feet, debating, and eventually says quietly, "... the guards used to joke to each other about it after she- whenever she wasn't there to hear it. How working in a prison wasn't so bad if you- if you got free shows all the time. The one bastard kept saying I was lucky, getting laid that often." He gives a small bitter laugh. "Wonder if he still thought that after the sadistic bitch almost fuckin' killed me." Reaches up to rub the bridge of his nose with unsteady forefingers. "... lucky..." This time the word's spoken so softly it's close to a whisper, with such an air of bewildered hurt that it squeezes Luffy's heart.

I hope that guy was one of the ones Surume ATE, the rubber man thinks viciously as he cuddles Ace closer to conceal the way he's trembling. Aloud, he says, "He was wrong. You weren't getting laid. Whatever she was- whatever was happening, it wasn't- it wasn't sex, okay?"

"Why'd they talk about it like then, if it wasn't-"

"I don't know, but they were wrong 'n they were stupid."

His first mate takes a slow shuddering breath. "They'd make bets 'n shit. About how long I'd last next time- before she made me- you know." Sounding extremely uncomfortable but also looking a little relieved that he's finally disclosing something that's been bothering him for so long.
"That's messed up," Luffy states indignantly. "THEY were messed up. They shoulda stopped her. Not just- just stood there 'n WATCHED."

"At least that's all they did," Zoro mutters. "At least until-" The remaining digits of his injured right hand twitch involuntarily, and he rotates his wrist to stare at the ovals of raw scar tissue where the bases of his pinkie and ring finger once met his palm. "If they hadn't been on duty, I think she might've ordered them to-" Anxiously shifting in his seat, he rubs his nasal dorsum again, this time roughly enough to abrade the skin. "They might've- might've done more than hold my arms down so she could."

"Oi, Zoro, don't-"

"She t-told me that near the end, right before everything went to hell. Said she'd w-w-wait 'til you showed up 'n then- then she 'n the guards, they'd- they'd-" He's beginning to shake uncontrollably, and when he turns his head to look at his captain, his pupil's enormously dilated, his gaze grown unfocused and distant.

"ZORO-"

"She w-wanted- Sh-she said she w-wanted to m-make you f-f-" The green-haired pirate sways, color draining suddenly from his face, and he gropes for the marble beneath him so unsteadily that for a split second Luffy's convinced he's losing consciousness and moves without thinking, shifting Ace to one side and throwing his free arm around the barrel of the reeling swordsman's chest, pulling him into a firm hug before he can topple off the bench.

Zoro reacts to being embraced as though he's been jabbed with a red hot branding iron, an incoherent "NNN-" of denial erupting from between his gritted teeth and his body fairly convulsing in protest as he tries to struggle free. One clawing hand encounters the captain's shirt and latches onto the fabric, yanking the garment askew in a desperate attempt to rip him loose.

Crap-crap-crap, not now, the rubber man groans to himself, tightening his hold on the baby who's just responded to the commotion with an outraged howl. *Gotta calm Zoro down before somebody gets hurt or he'll never forgive himself.* "Oi, everything's okay- you hear me? It's OKAY. We're a MILLION MILES from that place 'n it's just a big pile of rocks now 'n you're-" He grits his teeth as his partner's booted feet flail, the thick-treaded sole of the left striking his shin and raking down to stomp solidly on his bare foot. He hooks a leg over Zoro's knees and coils it firmly around them to avoid being kicked again, hauling him closer to shout, "YOU'RE OKAY!" in his ear, hoping his words are audible over Ace's wailing. "YOU'RE OKAY!"

Whether it's his shouts of reassurance, their son's cries of distress, or the mixture of the two that finally reach the panic-stricken swordsman, the captain never finds out, but eventually Zoro stops twisting and thrashing in his grasp and sags against him, drenched in sweat and shivering all over, the hand knotted in his shirt no longer trying to shove him away but clinging there for support.

Luffy cautiously relaxes his hold, providing the opportunity for escape if it's desired, but to his surprise his partner remains huddled in the circle of his arm, breathing in forceful gasps, left cheek mashed against his shoulder. Ace, however, continues howling against his collarbone, until a combination of rocking and nonsensical babble - namely a string of "oi oi oi"'s interspersed with "you're so noisy" and "don't you gotta stop to breathe" and "c'mon, you look a tomato" - reduces his clamor to hiccuping whimpers.

"Go back to sleep," the captain urges, adding an occasional little bounce to the back and forth motion he's making with his arm. "Everything's okay, I promise."
"... he needs changed," Zoro mumbles quietly. Having caught his breath, he's now resting his forehead in the curve between Luffy's neck and shoulder, where he's able to see the baby while keeping his own face effectively hidden from the man on who he's leaning. "... I know I just- I just scared the poor kid half to death, but he- he usually only keeps whining like that when he's got a wet diaper... 'n we were out here a while before you showed up."

"D'you got a soggy bottom?" The rubber man asks their son, peering down at him and pointedly not at Zoro. *Better give him a second or two yet- he hates when this happens. Least this time wasn't too bad.*

Sure enough, the swordsman straightens a moment later, rubbing self-consciously at his nose and jaw and looking everywhere but into his captain's face. "... sorry..."

"We're gonna figure this out. Whatever it takes, we're gonna do it and we're gonna figure this out," Luffy tells him, eyes still focused on Ace. "-but you gotta let me help. You gotta trust me."

"... yeah. Okay."

*Good. Relieved, he slides off the bench and resettles the wriggling baby against his chest, then turns to offer Zoro his hand, taking care to keep his grip loose and gentle when his first mate unwittingly reaches out with his injured right. "C'mon, let's get your sword 'n go find Chopper 'n ask him to look at this."*
"Look, I know you said you had something to show me, but where the hell are we GOING?" Zoro demands, risking yet another glance over one shoulder as he and his captain hurry along a side street leading away from the Galley La mansion a few days after their discussion in the courtyard. "I thought Iceburg wanted us to stay out of sight!"

"Yeah, but this is IMPORTANT. 'N stop worrying! Nami's got it covered 'n she's got Robin 'n Sanji 'n Chopper around if she needs 'em." Luffy reaches back to clasp the swordsman's wrist above his bandaged right hand in order to urge him along, grinning at the dubious expression the older pirate's sporting in the shadow of his jacket hood. "Ace'll be fine, I promise." He gives a light tug. "Now come on- you gotta see this! Besides, the sooner we get there, the sooner we'll get back, right?"

"Well if you'd just quit being so goddamn mysterious about where we're- oi, Sencho, slow down before I fall on my fuckin' face!"

"Chopper said exercise's good for you, remember?"

"I know what he said, but-" But there's way too many PEOPLE out here, and while it's unlikely he'll be recognized with his hair hidden from sight and one solitary sword strapped to his side, he can't help feeling self-conscious and exposed, as though he's strolling down the cobblestones naked and everyone's turning to stare at his bare ass.

\textit{Calm down, good god,} he scolds himself. \textit{You're being ridiculous. And paranoid as fuck.}

Luffy's similarly incognito, not only wearing borrowed clothing but sans his most identifiable possession, which he'd matter-of-factly ordered Ace to guard in his absence just a few moments before their departure. The sight of the baby goggling, bewildered and slightly cross-eyed, at everyone from beneath a straw brim far too wide for his tiny head had made the first mate smile despite his trepidation about leaving on this enigmatic errand.

Now almost jogging to keep up - damn this stretchy bastard and his boundless energy - he finds his eyes straying to where the rubber man's fingers are curled carefully around his forearm. After their discussion the other afternoon, he'd allowed the younger pirate to shepherd him inside to the library and turn him over to Chopper, who'd thrown a fit over the state of his bleeding hand and promptly leapt into a scolding whirlwind of salve and medical gauze.

The swordsman had suffered the doctor's ministrations in somnolent silence- until Luffy's return from the crew's temporary quarters. When the captain, cradling their sleepy, freshly diapered offspring in one arm, had indicated Kitetsu and explained at length what he wanted, Zoro had immediately balked, voicing his skepticism loudly and interspersed with a good deal of foul language.

Chopper, however, had listened thoughtfully to them both and, after unwrapping his patient's hand to give it a another, far more thorough examination, expressed what he claimed to be cautious optimism despite his obviously growing excitement.

Eye fixed on the unshapely claw attached to his wrist, Zoro had remained impressed.

They're both nuts. Learning to compensate for fucked-up depth perception after I lost my eye wasn't easy, but it was doable. This? Forget it. No matter how many strengthening exercises I do with that
damn squishy ball Chopper gave me, I'm still missing two fingers and part of a third. How the hell'm I gonna hold and swing a katana when I can't even button a freaking shirt? Irritated, he exhales sharply through his nose. It's undoubtedly pointless and a complete waste of time- but whatever. He'll give it a shot, if only to make Sencho happy. I owe him that much, at least, considering the shit he's putting up with...

"I think it's this way," the dark-haired man in question's saying, free hand casually pointing down the alley they're approaching mere seconds before he makes a sharp turn into it, and before Zoro can demand another explanation for what they're doing out here, he's dragged unceremoniously past a row of garbage cans and nearly trips over a startled stray cat that shoots out from between two bins at their unexpected shortcut through its territory.

It takes him several awkward dancing steps on his toes to regain his balance, and he's opening his mouth to inform Luffy that he's had quite e-fucking-nough of this nonsense, thank you very much, when they abruptly clear the surrounding buildings and reach what he supposes must be their destination, given the triumphant cry of "aha!" from his companion.

There's a number of vessels under construction or repair in the shipyard next to this stretch of docks, but the Sunny's figurehead is rather hard to miss, and Luffy heads straight for it without preamble, cheerfully towing him along.

High in the rigging beneath the crow’s nest, Usopp sees them approaching and gives a shout of greeting, prompting Franky's familiar visage to pop up alongside the railing as the shipwright wanders over to peer down at whoever's approaching. "Mugiwara, Haramaki-bro!" He seems surprised but pleased to see them. "Hang on just a sec, alright, 'n I'll go lower the-"

"Don't bother," the captain calls back. Holding out his arm, he gives the swordsman beside him a quizzical albeit encouraging look, nodding towards the brig sloop. "You're comin' up with me, right?"

"Oh, what the hell, why not," Zoro thinks and steps closer to hook an elbow over Luffy's neck and shoulders, stubbornly dismissing the brief surge of anxiety that tightens his chest when the rubber man coils an arm around his torso in preparation for launching them both aloft.

They gain the lawn deck without incident - thank god for small miracles - but being hurled through the air's blown the first mate's hood back and, now that they're no longer in the shadow cast by the ship, he's immediately forced to shield his eye from the sun that's blazing mercilessly overhead. Still in the process of extricating his left arm from its place around Luffy, he automatically makes the gesture right-handed- and just as quickly drops the bandaged appendage to his side when he becomes aware it's attracted Franky's attention.

The cyborg realizes he's been caught staring and clears his throat, face reddening slightly in embarrassment. "N-Not that it's not good to see y'both here, but-?"

"I wanna show Zoro what you guys've been working on. You're almost done, right?" Their captain's so excited, he's fairly bouncing in place, rocking on the balls of his feet from his toes to his heels and back again.

"Not much left but the finishing touches," Franky agrees, waving one massive arm in the direction of the bow. "Go on, check it out 'n see whatcha think."

He's speaking to their backs; Luffy's already nudging Zoro ahead, pointing across the newly re-
sodded lawn to the circular portal leading to the soldier dock and storage and engine rooms as he exclaims, "You're gonna love this!"

Upon reaching it, the swordsman watches in continued confusion as his partner bends to open the hatch. "We're going down there?" He stares dubiously at the now exposed ladder, unconsciously rubbing his maimed hand against his upper thigh. "Sencho, I don't know if-"

"I'll go first, just in case, but you're gonna be FINE. Just take your time."

Unsurprisingly, the captain forgoes the ladder in favor of simply jumping down the hole, landing easily on the capstan below. Shaking his head, Zoro follows more cautiously, gripping the rungs as best he can and cursing under his breath every time the awkward grip afforded by his right hand slips. His descent from the capstan to the floor's less than graceful and he's relieved when Luffy doesn't immediately rush to take his elbow, making a pretense of exploring the corridor leading to the engine room in order to give him ample time to regain his composure.

"Okay, you got me down here, so now what?" He asks gruffly once he's gained his footing and readjusted the katana belted to his hip.

"This way!" Luffy replies, immediately darting past him down the opposite hallway. "Sanji said last time he 'n Robin came out here, they only had stuff framed out, but if Franky says it's almost done, they musta got the walls up since then!"

The older pirate squints, following. He'd detected the scent of freshly lumber as he'd descended the ladder but hadn't associated it with whatever they'd come to see, considering their nakama have obviously been doing repairs all over the ship. But Luffy's right. There's a new wall here, just past the passage ordinarily leading to the lumber and ammunitions' storage.

"It's kinda small," the captain admits, stopping beside the doorway set in the wall. "There's not a ton of room down here 'cause the channels 'n everything else take up so much of it. But Franky 'n Usopp made it fit. Oh yeah, 'n I guess this-" He pats the as-yet-unattached door that's propped against the opposite side of the corridor. "-gotta get hung up yet so you can, y'know, close it 'n stuff."

Puzzled, Zoro peers around the edge of the empty doorframe.

His first impression's that "small" is a serious understatement, given the bed, matching pair of nightstands and storage trunk take up most of the room. The furniture's well-constructed, though, and there's a wide enough path around the bed for him to see there's wall-to-wall carpeting, just like in the women's quarters, and a curtain rod installed above the porthole window on the far wall. "What-what is all this?"

"It's Zoro's." Luffy's watching his face closely, eager to gauge his reaction. "If he wants it." He shifts nervously from one foot to the other. "We weren't sure whether you'd wanna keep your old bunk since it's kinda crowded up there, 'n- well, you know how loud Ace can get sometimes when he cries. Not," he hastens to add, "-that anybody's gonna complain if you'd rather stay in the men's quarters with-"

"I'm pretty sure they'd be happier hearing him through the floor than listening to him scream right next to their hammocks," the swordsman informs him dryly. "... or listening to me, yelling in my fucking sleep whenever I have another one of those goddamn nightmares." He rubs the bridge of his nose. "Did you know Robin said I should start keeping a DREAM JOURNAL? Some psychological mumbo-jumbo about how writing shit down'll help me- how the hell'd she phrase it-
work through it?’"

"D'you think she's right?"

"Hell if I know, but-" Zoro grimaces, shuddering involuntarily. "-it's bad enough remembering that crap when I wake up. If I write it down-" He shakes his head. "Even if I didn't plan on rereading anything I wrote - and I sure as shit wouldn't want to - what if somebody else finds it? Not that I think anybody on our crew would go snooping through my stuff, but- I mean, god, Sencho, what if OUR KID found it? When he's old enough to read? I don't think I could-"

"What if you burn the pages after you write everything down?"

"Are you kidding? Nami would fucking kill me! You know how expensive parchment-"

"If it helps Zoro get better, I'm pretty sure Nami's not gonna care."

"I don't know. I gotta think about it." Taking a few tentative steps forward, the green-haired pirate moves past the empty doorframe into the room itself for a closer look, reaching out to place a palm on the closer of the two nightstands. Unsurprisingly, he discovers it's bolted to the Adam wood planks beneath the carpet; the vast majority of furniture aboard the ship's been secured to the floors or walls to prevent it sliding around in the event of storm-roughened seas.

"Gonna need sheets 'n a curtain or something. Couple lamps too, 'cause it's kinda dark in here right now without 'em," the captain explains from the doorway, sounding somewhat anxious. "We were gonna just go ahead 'n get stuff but Usopp said maybe we oughta let you pick 'em out yourself. If you want it. The room, I mean."

Zoro gives the bare mattress a cautious prodding to test its firmness. The fact that it's queen-sized, not merely twin-sized like the beds upstairs in the women's quarters or full-sized like the one they've been sleeping in back at the Galley La mansion, hasn't escaped his attention. Likewise the fact that there's TWO nightstands. "... what about you? Are you planning on sleeping in here too?"

"Um. That- that's up to Zoro."

"... and if I decide I don't wanna share a bed?" He doesn't realize he's spoken aloud until he hears the shaky sigh behind him and stifles a curse at his own thoughtlessness before slowly turning to see the full impact wrought by his careless statement.

Sure enough, dull hurt's brimming in Luffy's eyes- but the younger pirate's also nodding, assurances already tumbling from his lips. "Then I'll stay upstairs. I- I'll start sleeping next door with everybody else tonight too, if that's what you want, just-" His fingers squeeze more tightly shut where they're curled around the doorframe, and he swallows, hard. "Stay. Please? Whatever I gotta do, I'll do it, even if Zoro doesn't wanna be together like that anymore. Just- as long as he stays."

There's an air of uncertainty about the rubber man that wasn't there earlier, on the way here or when they were on the deck above, talking to Franky. A sense of insecurity and self-doubt he either doesn't try to- or can't- hide from his first mate.

Shouldn't've mentioned the dreams. Hell, I know I said I'd trust him and I know he promised to listen to whatever I could stand sharing, but- maybe it was a mistake telling him so much about the damn things in the first place. Gotta be weird as fuck finding out you 'n your- that you 'n THAT part of you's guest-starring in somebody's nightmares. At his unwitting recollection of the last dream from
which he woke panic-stricken and close to screaming, there's a ghostly whisper of imagined feminine laughter in his ear, and he flinches, fighting the urge to hunch his shoulders. *Get out of my head, you sadistic bitch.*

Bad enough, dreaming about what actually happened. Worse, dreaming about what COULD have happened. And worst of all, dreaming the impossible. His captain, not just present as another hapless victim but inexplicably taking part as an active, eager participant in his torture and- sometimes- execution.

He's died dozens of times in his dreams, but nothing's quite so terrible as waking with images of his lover's hand wielding the knife seared on the darkness behind his eyelids or the rough phantom grip of those familiar hands lingering on his trembling, sweat-streaked body.

"Zoro? Are you-?"

*Get your shit together, for fuck's sake, you're freaking him out.* "Okay. I'm o-okay." He doesn't SOUND okay though, his voice broken and wavering, and he hates it. Clears his throat and tries again. "I'm okay." *Keep telling yourself that- maybe you'll eventually believe it.* "The room's- it's great, really. Thanks."

Luffy doesn't look entirely convinced, but he lets the segue go unchallenged. "There's... there's something else you oughta see." Slowly crossing the carpet to the room's center, he eases open the heavy iron-banded lid of the chest positioned at the bed's foot. "I saved as many p- ... I saved what I could, and Brook said this was the best way to keep it 'til you- um-" He backs away to let Zoro approach, his expression solemn and his eyes filled with sympathy.

Heart giving a sickening lurch in the confines of his rib cage, the swordsman stares for a moment in stunned disbelief at the long black box nestled in the piles of folded blankets within the trunk before stooping to reach inside and tentatively trail his fingertips across its surface. His jaw's beginning to quiver when he slides both hands beneath the case to lift it free and transfer it carefully- reverently- to the mattress beside him, breath caught in his throat as he fumbles open the latches.

The sight of his own distorted reflection captured in the mirror maze of shards that once formed Kuina's katana but now rest in nearly a dozen pieces beside its sheath on the foam padding lining the case nearly brings him to his knees, and he's groping for the handle and its jagged stump of blade before he realizes what he's doing, a soft sound of distress and denial escaping his chest.

"Careful, it's really sharp!" Luffy blurts without thinking- and immediately bites his lower lip. "Sorry... I- I guess you'd know that, wouldn't you."

Several agonizingly long minutes pass before Zoro's able to speak again because his vocal cords keep failing to produce anything remotely coherent each time he thinks he's finally ready, but eventually, in a hoarse voice, he says, "I swore an oath- MULTIPLE oaths- on this-" He sinks onto the edge of the bed, sword handle cradled in his lap as his trembling fingers absentmindedly trace the white braid beneath them. "-this blade. And now it's-"

His pale, scarred visage continues staring back at him from the flat, well-polished surface of the three or four inches of tempered steel still jutting beyond the guard and collar, and a lump rises in his throat at the expression of helplessness on his wavering reflection's face, because- *Wado and I- we're the same, we're both fucked up and shattered like- like- like a couple of empty sake bottles somebody smashed against a wall...*
His hands suddenly won't stop shaking, no matter how hard he tries to regain control over himself and cease their tremulous motion. "-b-broken. Nothing's worth shit, everything's BROKEN. My vows, my-"

He doesn't realize he's voicing his thoughts aloud until he's interrupted by a "NO" that's spoken harshly enough to make him cringe involuntarily, nearly dropping the remnants of his weapon.

"No," his captain says again, this time with significantly less force, and reaches down to brush his bicep with gentle fingers. "You kept Ace safe 'n you're alive 'n you're here with me. That's the stuff that really matters." He lowers his hand to cover both of Zoro's where the green-haired pirate's clutching Wado, not squeezing or trying to tug the katana away but merely letting it rest there. "I know- I know this is important, but- Zoro's the one who made those promises, and HE's the one who's gonna keep 'em. This- it's- it's just a sword, and yeah, I know it's a special sword and losing it hurts a lot- the same way I bet it'd hurt if I ever lost Shanks' hat... but it's still just a sword."

"Sencho-"

"You're gonna be the best, just like you promised, and you're gonna do it no matter what sword you're holding."

_How the hell can you have that much faith in me, after what happened- after what I DID._ Zoro wants to demand, but one glance at Luffy's face tells him there's no arguing with the rubber man's optimism. Instead, he turns his gaze back to the katana handle, saying quietly, "... I didn't even know you found it. I thought it was just... gone."

"I wanted to tell you a lot sooner, but when we first got you 'n Ace back- well, it just seemed like a bad time, and then everything got all crazy for a while, so I was just gonna wait 'til we got here- but-"

"But then I made it pretty damn hard to bring up, didn't I, since I wasn't really talking to anybody."

The younger man grimaces. "... well... yeah, kinda."

The urge to apologize is strong, caught on the tip of his tongue like it always seems to be these days - _sorry I'm fucked up, sorry I freaked out again, sorry I wasn't stronger._ - but Zoro bites it back with effort, knowing an offering of remorse will only distress his captain further and earn him yet another round of well-meaning but ultimately useless retorts that he's got no reason to be sorry, that he's not at fault. Because while he understands the truth of this, he still can't bring himself to accept it, and knows such placations will only make him loathe himself more for being so abominably WEAK.

"Thank you," he murmurs instead, quietly- and Luffy's hand gives a brief squeeze, as though he's heard far more than an austere acknowledgement of his actions.

And perhaps he has, the first mate's slightly unsettled to realize. _Sencho's always been pretty damn good at reading between the lines._

xxx

Following a brief internal struggle, Zoro elects to leave the case containing Wado's remaining fragments aboard the Sunny, because there's no sense in dragging the damaged weapon back to the mansion. Even if he locates a master blacksmith - someone capable of either forging a new blade or simply forge-wielding a new extension to the existing tang - who's miraculously able to complete
repairs as soon as tomorrow afternoon, he points out, he still won't be able to wield it.

He responds to Luffy's firm "not yet" at this declaration with a non-committal grunt followed by an old adage about chickens and eggs, but his partner's optimism persists undaunted, and that's how he finds himself alone in the courtyard the following week, a bokken clutched stiffly in both hands and myriad curses on his lips.

-vertical cut, cross cut. Vertical cut, one arm cross cut- "Shit!" Come ON, goddamn it. Vertical cut, cross cut. Vertical cut, cross cut. Vertical cut, one arm cr- His traitorous right hand once more fouls the strike but this time he's forced to fumble awkwardly to prevent the bokken from flying straight out of his grip. "SON OF A BITCH!"

Up until a few days ago, it'd been years since he handled a simple practice sword, but he doesn't trust Kitetsu. The cursed blade's often troublesome at the best of times, but given his current condition, its bloodthirstiness is a serious liability. And Shusui, although far more docile than its blue hamon-patterned sibling, is still bent so severely it cannot be sheathed and will remain thus until he gains the confidence to leave this bloody building long enough to find someone capable of repairing it.

Shouldn't be handling steel yet anyway, he tells himself for the hundredth time as he resumes the set. Not when you're liable to throw your fucking sword every damn time you do a right-handed cut or block.

While this is true, it doesn't change the fact that merely thinking about exiting the Galley La headquarters again spurs his anxiety to almost unbearable levels. Sometimes it even prompts one of those same blasted panic attacks he's also experienced from feeling too confined- trapped- INSIDE its walls.

In a way the place's become a prison no less inescapable than Impel Down itself. A claustrophobic cage he hates but also fears to depart much as he grew to loathe and yet perversely find solace in that dingy, nightmarish cell on Level Six. Because sometimes the hell you know is preferable to the one you've begun to imagine lies outside the bars.

He takes a half-step forward as he attempts another one-arm cross cut, as though subconsciously seeking flight from the memories clinging to him like a second skin, and a pebble caught in his boot heel's tread skids across the cobblestone walkway beneath his feet. When the subsequent scraping sound reaches his ears, registering unnaturally loud to senses heightened by stress and apprehension, it conjures a momentary flash of stone walls and heavy chain links spattered with blood he recognizes as his own, and he falters, fingers spasming, relinquishing their already tenuous grip on the bokken. It hits the ground with a thunder-like clatter that makes his entire body flinch in reverse and then slowly rolls away.

For a moment he remains frozen, disoriented and balanced precariously on the edge of panic, breath strangled by his constricted throat and heart thudding so furiously he swears he can feel it throbbing in the tips of his nonexistent fingers.

The practice sword comes to a rest against the grass beside the path but he doesn't notice, every remaining shred of concentration focused on preserving control because abruptly Asura's surging inside him, tumid and seething as it threatens to burst free.

No- NO, I won't-!

He feels it slipping away, escaping, the entity beginning to manifest in the air around him- and slams his right fist into his thigh with all the force he can muster. The pain flaring through his quadriceps and disfigured hand yanks Asura back, creating a temporary chokehold on the dark presence that
begins to fail when the physical discomfort fades all too quickly, so he does it again. And again. And again. And again.

The violent aura seeking to envelope him recedes, leaving him shaken, his knuckles and leg throbbing with an ache that promises bruises which will fade to yellow before eventually vanishing entirely. But he's still himself, still Zoro- or at least whoever that man's become since this descent into madness began.

He raises his smarting hand to cover his eyes with its remaining fingers, teeth firmly clenched to prevent them chattering because he's trembling all over, system not just laced with adrenaline but flooded. Thoughts sprinting crazily in one direction, then another, but ultimately circling back to what's almost happened. And to what he's just done. 

He's exercising every ounce of restraint to avoid striking himself again. This time in the face, because some disgusted, hateful part of him wants to know if he can punch himself hard enough to break his own nose. Or maybe his jaw.

The blatant urge to hurt himself frightens him nearly as much as Asura itself. What started as simple deflection - swallowing the malevolence, turning the anger inwards rather than risk lashing out at someone else, particularly his son - has become an honest desire to punish himself for not doing a better job of keeping his shit together.

Painful pressure stabs his temples and he realizes he's squeezing, fingertips digging into his flesh, and yanks his hand away from his face- only to slap it roughly before he can stop himself.

Nose smarting, he immediately nails his thigh again, three times in rapid succession. Hard. Literally hitting himself for hitting himself, the sad irony of which isn't lost on him; choking on bitter laughter, he shoves both hands into the pockets of his jogging pants to prevent them doing further damage and breaks into a quick, jerky stride, fallen bokken forgotten as he paces back and forth struggling to regain his composure.

Fucking idiot. Fucking stupid idiot- you start leaving marks on your damn face, they're gonna notice and they're gonna-

His crew mates haven't questioned his insistence on remaining fully clothed at all times in their presence, most likely attributing his new reluctance at exposing his body to what happened in Impel Down, and he hasn't attempted to correct their thinking. But although he can't deny that being caged like an animal and repeatedly assaulted are mostly responsible for his unwillingness to strip down in front of anyone, that's no longer the only reason he fears being seen sans shirt or pants. Not since he started beating the crap out of himself.

In any case, no one's spotted the dark blossoms that recur- sometimes layered like tattooed camouflage- on his upper legs and torso. Not Chopper or Robin, who are both highly observant. Not even Luffy. He's been too careful.

If he shows up sporting a black eye or broken nose or split lip, however, his nakama are going to figure out what he's been doing, and he's no doubt they'll be horrified. There'll be more of those silent, worried exchanges when they think he's not looking. The kind that practically scream "what could we have done differently" and hold so much fucking pity they make him doubt he'll ever be anything but broken.

And Sencho'll wanna talk.
More than anything, Zoro can't bear the thought of disappointing his captain, especially after he promised to be more forthcoming.

_You fucked up_, he tells himself. _Again. Why can't you stop fucking up? You said you'd let him try'n help but you're already hiding shit again, and this is- this is a pretty big deal, even if you don't wanna admit it, because- because-

Because each time he resorts to self-harm, whether he's fending off Asura or simply venting steam to avoid exploding like a powder keg onto which someone's just tossed a lit match, he's forced to go further than the time before.

_How long, huh? How long before decking yourself a bunch of times just isn't enough anymore and you start eyeing up sharp shit instead? How long before you start carrying a piece of Wado's blade around in your pocket?

Pretending he hasn't already thought in detail about these things. Pretending he hasn't already been seriously tempted to follow through with them.

_How long can you go on living like this?

xxx

Despite knowing quite well that he's barely existing day-to-day let alone doing anything resembling living, Zoro's still reluctant to admit he needs help. Given his desire to resolve his problems on his own, without anyone else's assistance, he might've struggled on alone in stubborn silence for quite a while longer if not for the unexpected intervention of another of his notable traits: his abominable sense of direction.

Of course, it's doubtful getting lost in itself would've had sufficient impact to bring his already turbulent mental state to the boiling point.

No, it's the dream- one of those dreams- that turns a simple wrong turn into full-blown panic.

xxx

"Mmm, harder, Roronoa. Come on, I know you can do better than-"

_No-no-NO, this isn't happening, not again! I'm not doing this, I'm NOT! I'm dr- it's just a dream, I'm DREAM-

It may be a dream- a goddamn nightmare- but Sadi's saccharine voice continues whispering filth somewhere in the depths of Zoro's skull for several moments even after he's startled awake and lying motionless in the dark with labored breathing, stomach churning, unwanted erection a searing hot stone where it's crushed between his lower belly and the mattress beneath him.

"-ARDER! You want to- mmm- make me happy, don't you? You want to-

He grinds his teeth together, inhaling sharply through his nose, dimly aware there's moisture trailing down his right cheek. Too overwhelmed to wonder if it's sweat or tears. Too preoccupied with remaining as still as possible, resisting the terrible urge to rock his hips, give those last few thrusts necessary for sending himself over the edge.
"Make me happy, Roronoa, and I'll let you c-"

A stifled noise escapes the swordsman's clenched jaw. His left hand spasms helplessly, trapped beneath his rib cage close to his wildly thumping heart, but his right seizes an awkward fistful of sheets.

"-oro?"

His captain's sleep-roughened voice, a barely articulate mumble of inquiry emerging from the darkness, is the only warning Zoro gets before a clumsy hand brushes his shoulder blade and the back of his neck.

He chokes back the scream that comes dangerously close to bursting from his struggling lungs, biting his tongue hard enough to draw blood in the process, and the pain's enough to drive the last traces of foggy confusion from his mind.

"-oro, you 'wake?" The mattress dips slightly as Luffy continues stirring beside him, outstretched fingers caressing his back now, trailing down his spine and- to his alarm and distress- fueling the relentless fire that's engulfed his pelvis. "Zor-?"

"No," he hisses through the coppery taste in his mouth. "Go back to sleep."

To his relief, after a moment or two of puzzled silence as the half-conscious rubber man contemplates this response, there's a drowsy "hnhnn" of agreement and the intruding hand withdraws as its owner rolls in the opposite direction and wraps both arms tightly around his pillow.

The warmth of its touch lingers however, the strokes of each fingertip burning like brands freshly seared into Zoro's already overheated skin.

_Goddamn it, Sencho, he curses to himself, wincing at the intensified throbbing in his groin. Of all the times to-

He doesn't blame the younger pirate though, not really.

They've tried sleeping apart, but doing so's had little effect on the nightmares. If anything, the extreme disorientation associated with waking alone somewhere he doesn't immediately recognize makes Zoro far more likely to suffer anxiety attacks than if he shares the bed with someone else. Luffy's familiar and comforting and solid, the anchor he can cling to when the line between the dream world and reality is still blurred. In most cases.

This isn't one of them. Much as he sometimes wishes otherwise, his body also recognizes his captain's touch and scent and voice as a lover and responds instinctively to those things as such when he's aroused.

_I know he wouldn't hurt me. He wouldn't, I KNOW it, and he said he still wants me- as long as I want him too- but- _But the idea of allowing Luffy to ease his sexual tension with Sadi's voice still echoing in his mind makes him want to vomit.

With effort, he turns onto his back, hoping the lack of pressure will send a clear message to his aching balls, convince his body to calm the fuck down, but it doesn't help.
It'd be so, so easy to just slip a hand under his waistband and-

No, not doing it, not when he's remembering how her lips curled into a knowing smile at the way his face contorted in conflicted disgust and pleasure at the way her muscles suddenly tightened around his-

*STOP IT.* He's out of bed and pacing the room, hands balled into fists, teeth digging into his sore tongue, hating her, hating himself more, hating himself most. *Stop it, you need to stop thinking about it.*

His angry stride takes him past the crib where his sleeping son - miraculously undisturbed by his and Luffy's voices - lays barely visible in the dim light, and the sight of the baby's swaddled form is too much. Looking on such innocence when his thoughts are crowded with vulgarity makes him feel so awful, so dirty, he can't bear it.

Out the door, down the hall, vision so muddied by tears of self-loathing he doesn't realize he's taken a right turn instead of a left. One hand knotted in the hem of his shirt, the other reaching towards the entryway to the bathhouse, mind demanding cold water and plenty of it.

Across the tile in bare feet, toes colliding with a pair of sandals someone left behind and sending them skittering across the floor, paying no mind because he's lunging for the nearest set of faucets on the wall, bending the spokes of the cold tap sideways in his desperation and rendering it useless.

With a small cry of anguish, he throws himself towards the other set and slams against the bathhouse wall, twisting frantically, and this time he's successful; the blast of freezing water steals his breath and leaves him gasping, drenches him head to toe, rendering his clothing a sodden mass plastered to his frame.

His shirt refuses to cooperate when he attempts to wrestle free of it, sticking to his slick skin, and his temper explodes. Snarling, he slaps the wall, punches it, tears furiously at material which refuses to rip in its saturated state. Why the hell didn't he think to take the damn thing off before he turned on the water? *Stupid-* "Stupid, STUPID, FUCKING STUPID! FUCKING STU-!"

One limb comes free, somehow, but then the shirt gets caught around his head and other arm, muffling him, blinding him, imprisoning him in clinging fabric and it's on him touching him she's touching him, suffocating him in grime and filth that won't wash away, and he goes berserk, no longer raging but wailing in a thin, high keening voice like a terrified child.

He headbutts the wall in his panic, slips and goes down hard, thrashing wildly in the spray drumming down on him and the surrounding tile, kicking and howling, pleading, clawing at his entangled face and torso. No conscious thoughts left now. Nothing but the animalistic instincts of fight and flight.

Severe as the attack might be, it's thankfully not accompanied by Asura, and therefore begins to quickly wane once Zoro exhausts what little energy remains after another long day of pushing himself to the limit with a practice sword in the courtyard, until he's reduced to uncontrollable shuddering on the hard floor, body curled in a fetal position, thighs clamped painfully tight to protect his genitals. Breath wheezing through the waterlogged fabric covering his mouth and nose. Too tired to keep struggling and disconnectedly supposing he might drown if the drain can't compete with the torrential downpour from the shower head, but not caring. Thinking, in fact, that such an event might be a goddamn blessing.

No such luck. The water shuts off, the hissing thunder abruptly silenced, allowing his ears to register
the nearby steady gurgle as the puddle surrounding him shrinks. The staccato dripping on the tiles behind him.

And the tremulous feminine voice somewhere overhead, asking, "Zoro? Are you-?" A pause. "D-Did you know you're in the women's bathhouse?"

xxx

If it'd been anyone else bursting in while she was lounging in the ofuro, Nami would've immediately tossed him out on his ass. She'd been opening her mouth to demand an explanation for the intrusion, hesitated when she recognized the green hair, and then watched in horrified silence as her nakama battered himself against the wall and floor.

She might've mistaken his collapse for some kind of stress-induced seizure if it hadn't been for his hysterical screaming occasionally producing coherent words, which had sent goosebumps prickling over her skin despite the heated water in which she'd been partially submersed.

"-don't touch me please don't oh god please no don't don't no not again please just kill me-"

When he'd eventually gone quiet and limp an indeterminate length of time later - it'd felt like an eternity although she supposes the attack only lasted a few minutes - the navigator had scrambled from the tub, pausing only long enough to shrug into her bathrobe and belt it haphazardly around herself before rushing across the room to assess the damage, certain he'd lost consciousness.

After shutting off the water, though, she'd been able to hear him struggling to catch his breath, panting through the wet shirt stretched across his face, and see him shivering.

When she'd spoken, Zoro's entire body had jerked in surprise, then gone unnaturally still, as though he believed this might somehow render him invisible.

_He really had no idea. I could've reached out and touched him when he came past the ofuro, but he didn't even notice me_, Nami thinks. Troubled, because it's unlike the swordsman to be so oblivious to his surroundings or the presence of other people.

"Zoro?" she asks again, more softly, not wanting to startle him further. "Do you want- ah, would you like me to go ask Luffy to-?"

The "NO!" bursting from him in response to her offer is so vehement, so sharp that she takes an involuntary step backwards.

"No," Zoro repeats, voice lowered. "Sorry. He- he's asleep 'n I don't wanna bother him with-" He hesitates, clearly unsure how to describe his current predicament. "I don't want to bother him."

The navigator's fingers twitch where they're clutching her robe shut at the throat as she resists the strong urge to lean down and thump her nakama soundly on the head while shouting "but he WANTS you to 'bother' him!" Satisfying as such an action would be, she seriously doubts its effectiveness; she's a lot more likely to scare the shit out of him than drive home the point that he's being an idiot.

Instead, she utters an exasperated sigh. "Fine. But that means letting me help you, because you've got another thing coming if you think I'm going to just walk out of here and leave you laying on the floor._ Especially after what I just saw._
"Okay. Just- help me get this damn thing off."

Hanging onto the end of his wet sleeve as he struggles to extricate himself, Nami's not particularly surprised by how much trouble it's given him. The shirt was probably already snug-fitting before being soaked through, but now it's adhering to his damp skin like it's been glued in place, and the arm he managed to free on his own, shortly before the panic attack struck, is the one with the disfigured hand. Which doesn't quite have the dexterity necessary to peel the rest of the garment over his head.

His face, when it's finally visible, is positively blazing with embarrassment.

"Here, give me that." Nami plucks the shirt from his grasp before he can protest. "Otherwise you'll just toss it in the corner of your room with all the other laundry I'm sure you guys've been letting pile up. You really need to let the maid in there one of these-" Glancing down from wringing out the excess water to where he's sitting on the floor, she stops, her amusement fading.

Zoro shifts uncomfortably under her gaze, drawing his knees up and resting his arms on them in an effort to block her view of his torso, but now that he's bare-chested, this does little to hide the vibrant splotches on his upper pectorals and along his collarbone.

The rainbow of colors is alarming. Sickly greens and yellows denoting old, healing bruises, while the more recent ones are darker shades of blue and purple.

She knows exactly what she's looking at; after years of associating with Arlong's crew, not to mention stealing from pirates quick to defend their treasure hoards, she's had many, many opportunities to witness how the human body responds to being repeatedly struck by fists with considerable force.

She also knows her crew mate hasn't left the Galley La grounds since or prior to the day their captain took him to see the new private quarters added to the Sunny. And I doubt he's been fighting with Iceburg's staff. Most of them are afraid of him.

"Zoro, did- did you-?"

"Don't say anything to Sencho, okay?" The tone of his voice borders on desperation. "He's already got enough to-"

"Let me see the rest of it."

"Nami-"

"LET ME SEE THE REST OF IT!" He flinches at her volume, and she's instantly sorry for shouting at him, but she's also not backing down. "Now, Zoro, or I walk out of here and go straight to your room and start banging on the door." Aware that threatening to wake the baby as well as Luffy is playing dirty. Not caring.

"Okay! Okay, just don't- okay." Zoro rises stiffly. His hands are shaking as he thumbs down his jogging pants. Like his shirt, they're thoroughly soaked and clinging, so it takes him several attempts to kick them loose, and when he retrieves them from the floor and offers them to Nami, she accepts and wrings them out in silence, blinking furiously.
I am not going to cry. I'm NOT.

She's glad to see he's wearing boxers, even if they are sagging dangerously under the weight of the water they've absorbed. Heaven knows the Straw Hats have gotten more than the occasional glimpse of one another's nude bodies before, particularly during their time sailing with Merry, given the caravel's single bath and toilet, but-

There's a considerable difference between being nude and being naked. This is most definitely the latter. Her nakama's battered body and fragile state of mind scream vulnerability; she doesn't think she could bear the sight of him completely exposed.

"How long have you-" She swallows around the lump that's formed in her throat. "How long's this been going on?"

"I'm- not sure. A few weeks. Maybe. A while before I started taking the bokken out, but... it... got worse, after that." He's staring at the floor, refusing to meet her eyes, arms crossed awkwardly over his chest and shoulders slumped in resignation. "It seemed like it helped at first. Brought me back whenever I started freaking out. But now every time I fuck up, I just-" He lowers his arms, mimes punching himself in the upper thigh. Fist tapping flesh mottled with overlapping bruises. Still not looking at her. "... yeah."

Nami takes a deep breath. Holds it. Exhales. Reminds herself to stay calm. Counts to ten in her head-twice, in fact- while spreading his damp clothing on the nearby bench to dry. "Alright. Alright, here's what's going to happen. First off, Luffy won't hear anything about this from me."

He glances up at this, stunned grateful surprise on his face. "Th-"

"Don't thank me yet. The only reason I'm not going to say something's because YOU are."

"No, I-"

"Yes. You're going to tell him exactly what you've been doing. He needs to know, Zoro. Not just as your-" She hesitates, unsure if "lover" is the appropriate term. She's fairly certain that although her crew mates are sleeping in the same bed, they haven't been sexually active. If they were, Zoro wouldn't be so worried about Luffy finding out about this; he'd already know, "-as whatever you two are to each other right now, but also as our captain."

Hand rising to rub across his face, he sways to one side, too agitated to remain standing still.

"You're my friend, Zoro, and you're- you're like my BROTHER, but you're also our first mate. Luffy said so himself. And he needs to know when his first mate's not alright."

At this, the swordsman emits a heart-wrenching hiccup of sobbing laughter. He's begun to pace back and forth in a wobbly, wandering gate. "I think it's pretty fucking obvious that I'm not- that I'll NEVER be alright, and nothing anybody says or does is gonna-"

Enough. I'm not letting you give up before you even try. With slow deliberation, Nami loosens her belt, letting her robe slip sideways off her left shoulder. It falls a bit farther than she intended, revealing most of her left breast as well, and Zoro backs away from her so quickly he collides with the wall behind him. Damn. Oh well, at least I've got his attention.

She turns her back on him, lifting her hair off her neck, looking over her shoulder. It's a pose she's
struck many times before, generally to torment Sanji or some other hapless victim, but this time there's nothing flirtatious in her expression. "You were there. You saw him stop me before I needed more than just a few stitches."

He stays flat against the tiles, but most of the alarm's left his face, so she continues, fingertips tracing the upper portion of the scar tissue streaked down her shoulder blade and the back of her arm. "I wanted Arlong's mark gone, but I also- I wanted to hurt myself for not protecting them. For not trying harder. For being naive enough to TRUST that bastard would keep his word."

Moisture wells in her eyes as she remembers.

_Falling to her knees in the dusty street, knowing the villagers- knowing Noriko and Genzo- knowing the people she loves- are charging to their deaths. The rage and despair as she slashes wildly at the tattoo defacing her skin. The hateful feeling of bitter joy as her blood begins to flow._

"Hacking my shoulder to bits wouldn't have changed a thing, and I'm glad Luffy stopped me," she informs him softly, adjusting and retying her robe before turning to face him once more. "What I tried to do with that knife- it didn't save anyone, didn't protect anyone, didn't do any good at all." Tears caught in her eyelashes turn Zoro's face into a sparkling kaleidoscope of green and beige against the cream and blue of the bathhouse wall as she tries to blink them away. "You did, Zoro. You and Luffy and Sanji and Usopp. When I needed someone most, my nakama were there for me."

"Nami… I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

The navigator shakes her head. "Don't be sorry. Just let me- let all of us- be there for you this time." Lifting a hand, she moves tentatively towards him until she's close enough to rest her palm against his bruised collarbone, careful to keep her touch light and nonthreatening. "This, it isn't helping anyone. Not you, not Luffy or Ace or the crew. It needs to stop."

After a moment, Zoro sighs, the rigidity slowly leaving his muscles. "I know. And yeah, you're right-about everything."

Hearing him openly acknowledge and accept the point she's been hoping to get through his head makes her want to hug him, but she knows she probably shouldn't press her luck, so she settles on a smile. "I'm going to remember you said that. And remind you next time you try to tell me I'm wrong about something."

"Funny." But he's smiling now too. It's a weary smile and slightly lopsided, but a smile nonetheless, and Nami's very glad to see it.

_Maybe it won't be easy, but whatever it takes to bring you back to us- whatever we need to do- it'll be worth it. One way or another, we're going to figure this out._
Alternate Ending Chapter 6

Nami's true to her word and keeps what she witnessed to herself, but after Zoro reluctantly approaches their captain several days later - a conversation to which she's not privy yet knows occurred with dead certainty given what's a blessedly brief amount of shouting and slammed doors - she insists Luffy call a meeting. A sort of post-intervention intervention as it were, because she reasons eight heads are better than one for brainstorming solutions to their first mate's dilemma.

While Zoro's aware of the request and grudgingly agrees with her gentle suggestion that he and Luffy share with the others whatever information the others deem necessary, barring any details too personal to voice, he makes himself scarce when everyone's actually called together.

The discussion runs late into the night and although the Straw Hats have differing opinions on how the absent swordsman's situation ought to be handled, there's one thing they can all agree on: their departure to the open sea's long overdue. The twelve weeks they'd originally planned to spend on Water Seven have stretched to almost nineteen, and the longer they remain here, the more likely word of their location will reach the Marines. It's time to go.

Luffy's so excited by the prospect of the crew's departure, he wants to collect Zoro and Ace, bid Iceburg farewell and leave for the docks immediately despite it being nearly midnight, but although Franky and Usopp have indeed proclaimed the Sunny seaworthy at last, they're forced to curtail his hasty plans.

The ship itself might be ready to sail, but supplies in the storage hold, pantry and fridge, and medical bay have been dangerously depleted and the crew also hasn't yet replaced much of what'd been damaged beyond repair by the fire. They're not going anywhere until they determine what they need and can afford to purchase now and what's nonessential enough to wait until they've acquired additional funds.

And so, tired but determined, they find themselves boarding the Sunny later that same morning to conduct a thorough inventory from bow to stern, crow's nest to bilge.

xxx

"Uh, you sure about this?" Zoro asks, wrinkling his nose as he casts a dubious eye into the steaming mug Chopper's offered him, as though he expects small tentacles to slither suddenly from the murky depths within. "No offense, but it looks kinda like somebody shit in a cup."

Stifling a chuckle at the doctor's scandalized expression, Robin shakes her head. "It's nothing but a perfectly harmless herbal blend composed of ingredients proven effective in treating anxiety and depression. I assure you, Kenshi-san, fecal matter was not among them."

"I'd sure as hell hope not," he mutters, reluctantly accepting the tea. "So in other words you're telling me it's- what, happy juice? As long as I just keep tossin' this stuff back, everything's sunshine, rainbows and butterflies?"

His nakama exchange a glance.

"I- I'm afraid that's not exactly how it works," Chopper explains hesitantly. "Drinking it three to four times a day should decrease your anxiety and may possibly help you sleep better, but it won't actually MAKE you happy."

"Figured that'd be too good to be true." Raising the mug, the swordsman takes a cautious sip- and
immediately recoils, grimacing. "PAH! Goddamn it, I was right the first time! Tastes like unwashed asshole!"

"MARIMO. Watch your language around the ladies!" Sanji scolds from where he's standing on the other side of the counter dividing the brig sloop's kitchen from the dining hall, with a slightly dented kettle in one hand.

"Perhaps we ought to add a bit more honey next time," Robin muses, unperturbed.

"Some of the necessary herbs are- are a little bitter," Chopper informs Zoro apologetically. "Once we figure out what combination works best though, you'll be able to take the doses in capsule form! But until then..."

"I'm stuck with this shitty toilet water."

"Zoro, please, that's disgusting," Nami says without looking up before Sanji can bark another reprimand. She's seated at the table across from him with several sheets of parchment laid out before her, tapping the feather end of her quill against her chin as she frowns down at the shopping lists she's editing.

"THIS is disgusting," Zoro retorts, gesturing with the mug he's just emptied in two quick gulps to avoid the taste lingering in his mouth any longer than necessary and swiping furiously at his contorted lips with the back of his free hand. "UGH."

"Heathen," mutters Sanji. "You're supposed to sip tea, not chug it."

"Yeah, well I think YOU oughta SIP this crap 'n tell me if you think it even qualifies as tea. 'Cause it sure as hell looks and tastes like-"

"Boys, PLEASE. Now, if everyone will take a seat, we can-" A quick scan of the surrounding faces, and the navigator sighs as she realizes one face is missing. Two faces, if she includes Ace. "Alright, WHERE is Luffy? I thought I told him to stay right here, not wander off."

Zoro jabs a thumb towards the infirmary door just as their captain comes bounding through it back into the dining hall, hat jouncing on its cord against his back and baby cradled securely in his arms.

"Sorry- he peed again!"

"AGAIN? I just changed him!"

At the sound of the familiar voice uttering this exasperated statement, Ace turns his head sharply towards his green-haired father and squeals in excitement at the sight of him, one small hand batting the air.

"You want Zoro, huh?" Grinning, Luffy carries the wriggling baby over, leans down, and plops him feet- and rear-first directly into the swordsman's haramaki. "There you go!"

"Oi, I'm not a damn kangaroo," Zoro protests. The corner of his mouth's twitching though, one arm already shifting to safely corral their son on his lap as he deposits the empty mug on the table- and quickly pushes it out of reach as Ace makes a grab for it. "Nah, you don't want that. Trust me, it's nasty."

"If you're both finished?" Despite her mildly scolding tone, Nami's fighting to hide a smile of her own. At close to five months old, her nakama's offspring is almost double his birth weight, growing increasingly curious about the world around him and ultimately cute as hell. He's sure going to be a
handful when he starts crawling. And walking!

Noting that everyone's now seated - she's not surprised to see Luffy's taken the open chair beside Zoro and Ace - the navigator clears her throat. "Alright, we've got a lot to do, so I'll make this as quick as I can. This morning I asked each of you to prepare a list of things needed for a designated area of the ship, as well as any items desired by you personally."

She slides a sheet of parchment bearing a lengthy list in small neatly printed lines across the tabletop to Sanji. "Everything on here's fine, so go ahead and get as many of the groceries as you're able to find in the marketplace, but see if you can buy used for whatever cookware needs replaced. And don't worry about matching sets, please- just grab whatever's in decent shape."

"Of course, Nami-san!"

"The same goes for you, Chopper. Whatever herbs, medications or bandages you've written down, make sure the infirmary's restocked with whatever we're most likely to need. Also whatever supplies you need for putting together those capsules you mentioned." She pauses, shuffling the remaining papers before her. "Brook. Sword maintenance kit supplies. Make sure there's enough for both you and Zoro. Usopp? No ornamental seeds or seedlings for now; fruits, vegetables and herbs only. Gunpowder. Clothing too, if you can't salvage what was in your locker."

"Thanks, Nami... like I said, I'll try'n wash the paint out, but... uh, they're pretty bad."

"Okay, but even if you think they're a lost cause, DON'T throw them out. We might be able to use the fabric to patch other clothing or for cleaning rags." Eyes scanning the next sheet, the redhead winces. "Franky... I'm sorry, but... I'm afraid restoring the aquarium's out of the question, at least for now. Heaven knows, I want the ship back to normal as badly as you, but a sheet of reinforced glass that large is just too expensive when we need so many other-"

The shipwright holds up one massive hand, interrupting her explanation. "Don't worry 'bout it. Knew it was a long shot but y'did say-"

"To write down EVERYTHING," she sighs. "Look, if we have enough beli left after we address the essentials, we'll see what we can do about the tank."

At the soft sound of a throat being gently cleared to draw their attention, everyone's heads turn in time to witness Robin pulling a small drawstring pouch from her bodice. "I might be able to offer some assistance in that regard," she informs them with a smile as she passes it to Nami.

Feeling cautiously optimistic but warning herself not to get overly excited over what's likely to amount to mere pocket change, navigator empties the contents onto the tablecloth- and gapes at the small drift of high denomination bills scattered before her. "Robin! Where did-?"

Zoro raises an eyebrow, curtailing Ace's increasingly determined efforts to wriggle out of his grasp. "You didn't assassinate somebody, did you? Some rival of Iceburg's or some shit? Oi, quit that before you fall on the damn floor!"

Robin laughs. "No, although I'm sure assassination would have been a far more expedient method of securing funds than text translation. A bit messier, perhaps."

"... that wasn't at all creepy," mutters Usopp. "Nope, not in the least."

Ignoring this remark, Nami claps her hands together in delight. "A commission? So that's why you've been in the library so late every night!"
"Yes, although I'm afraid writing the transcription took me longer than I initially anticipated. It's been some time since I encountered that particular dialect, and I only received final payment for the completed manuscript just before we left the mansion this morning," the historian explains. She turns her gaze on Franky, who's removed his sunglasses to stare at her with round, watering eyes. "I hope it's enough for your aquarium glass."

"I-"

"It's MORE than enough," Nami crows, looking up from where her nimble fingers have been rifling through the bills, counting as she sorts them into tidy stacks. "But Robin... are you sure?"

"Of course. Not only am I positive everyone will rest easier with our ship set to rights, but there's also extensive documentation regarding the observation of aquatic life's ability to lower the viewer's blood pressure and heart rate. An effect from which the entire crew, not just Senshi-san, could certainly benefit."

"That settles it. Franky? Whoever you need to talk to about ordering that glass, you send them a message soon as we're done here."

When the cyborg utters several snuffling sobs that vaguely resemble his female crew mates' names and then begins crying in earnest, Robin reaches out to pat the gigantic hand not scrubbing clumsily at his overflowing tears, her own face filled with gentle amusement.

"That's just- that's just SUPER," he wails, prompting a giggle from Chopper and simultaneous snorts from Zoro and Sanji.

"Didja hear that, Ace?" Luffy asks the baby beside him, leaning over to bump his nose into his son's dark hair. "We're gonna have lots of neat fish on the ship again in no time- 'n this time you'll actually get to see 'em 'cause you're not in Zoro's tummy anymore!" A remark that earns him a judiciously-aimed elbow in the ear from the swordsman in question, whose cheeks have flushed with embarrassment.

Nami coughs, trying to hide a smile. "Moving on. Barrels of cola... spare parts for the water purification system." Shuffling pages, she leans forward to rest both elbows on the tabletop, gesturing to herself. "Parchment. Ink. Quills." Her upraised hand tilts in the opposite direction with forefinger still extended, indicating Robin, and here there's a pause, followed by a sigh of regret. "Thankfully most of the maps and log books survived because I've been storing them in my trunk and the women's quarters weren't too badly damaged, but... I'm sorry to say, the- the library itself, ah..."

"Books don't fare particularly well against flames," Robin murmurs, her abruptly misty eyes closing briefly in remembrance of another library in another time and another place, and this time it's Franky's turn to reach out, his huge fingertips brushing her thumb and wrist as he lays them on the tabletop beside her hand.

After a few moments of respectful silence, head bowed, Nami resumes. "... unfortunately... books are... rather expensive. If we locate reasonably-priced copies, we can replace some of the collection, but only the most essential texts. That means medical volumes, botany and wildlife encyclopedias. Engineering and repair manuals."

Taking up another sheet of parchment, this one bearing their captain's untidy, wandering scrawl, the redhead narrows her eyes. "Luffy... I told you Sanji-kun would inventory the pantry and fridge, so more than THREE-QUARTERS of your list is absolutely out of question. However- HOWEVER-" She raises a hand to stall his immediate protest. "In addition to approving your requests for the new
sleeping quarters, I've made an addition. A wardrobe, if you- or rather- if Zoro finds an affordable piece that'll fit in the room."

She smiles at the expression of surprise on the swordsman's face. "It'll be a lot more convenient than running upstairs to the men's quarters every time you want to change. Also, you didn't give me a list, Zoro, but-" Checking the notes she's added to the bottom of the page. "A couple of shirts. At least one decent pair of trousers. A new coat, if you want one. And of course you'll need to see a smith about repairing your swords."

"You SURE you got the money for all that?" He's looking at her somewhat incredulously. "'Cause-I mean- I sure as hell don't."

"Thanks to Robin? Oh, yes. And don't worry, you can pay me back with forty percent interest from the next score the crew makes."

Despite the offended snort that escapes him at such a ludicrous offer, Zoro looks almost relieved by the declaration that she's simply extending him a loan, not extending some form of piteous charity. Just as she was hoping. The truth is, she could care less about the expenses. To see him acting- and, hopefully, feeling- like himself again would be worth every last beli. He's a proud man, however, and his dignity's been dealt so many severe blows by recent events, she has no desire to patronize him by making a public display of showering him with handouts. Basic necessities he obviously can't afford.

No, she'll just conveniently forget to collect on the debt, eventually he'll forget she quoted such a steep interest rate, and that'll be that. In the meantime, however...

"Alright, thirty-five percent then- but that's my lowest offer."

"... fine, whatever. Tightwad harpy," he mumbles, firing a cynical glare across the table at her, but there's no real malice behind it. In fact, there's a lazy, languid look to him, as though he's grown weary of the conversation and seriously contemplating a nap.

Chopper's scooted upright in his chair, his alert posture and widened eyes practically shouting for her to proceed as they discussed earlier this morning in the privacy of the women's quarters as she collected soot-smudged ledgers and maps from her storage trunk.

Nami acknowledges him with the slightest inclination of her head. Here goes. I hope you know what you're doing, and this doesn't just piss him off.

"You'll recall we agreed last night," she continues, now addressing the entire crew. "-that it'd be best if we stay together whenever we're outside the mansion. Within line-of-sight at all times, so long as we're not onboard the ship itself, and that means we'll be making supply runs in groups. While it's unlikely we'll run into trouble, it certainly doesn't hurt to be cautious."

Mindful of what occurred the last time they separated during such errands, the majority of her nakama are nodding. Zoro, on the other hand, is absentmindedly combing his fingers through his son's hair, while Luffy watches with a puzzled, increasingly concerned sidelong stare that's far from discreet yet miraculously- in fact suspiciously- going unnoticed by his partner.

"Sanji-kun, Usopp- I'd like you to hit the farmers' and import food markets before ten, when the vendors begin reducing prices to move stock but their wares are still fresh. Robin, Chopper and Brook will visit the apothecary and whatever bookshops they can find within a five-block radius. Franky, Luffy and I will stay with Ace, here on the ship." She takes a deep breath. "Zoro, I'd like you to go with Sanji and Usopp. Help them carry the groceries, and on your way back, take a look at
furnishings for your room."

"Our room," the first mate corrects disconnectedly, turning his gaze towards Luffy. "Yours and mine- that's what you wanted, right?"

"Yeah, definitely- if that's what ZORO wants, but- you feel okay? Your eye's all-" The captain makes an expansive gesture with both hands, indicating a widely dilated pupil. ".-pchooo."

Zoro blinks at him, clearly confused. "I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be-" He stops, his brow crinkling into a frown as comprehension slowly dawns. "It's that crap- that stuff I drank. Isn't it."

"It's perfectly normal, in fact, it's a very common side effect," Chopper chimes in hurriedly. "You might also feel a little disoriented or even drowsy, but nothing so severe it should impair your walking or-"

"Oi," Zoro interrupts. "I think... I get where you're headed with this. It's some kinda half-assed trial run, isn't it. Drug me up, drag me off the ship into some strange place with a whole bunch of strange people and see if I freak out?"

The diminutive doctor winces. "Zoro, I-"

"You wanna see if I flip my shit, right? Do something stupid, or have another one of those damn seizures?" His voice remains eerily calm, almost serene, but his gaze has sharpened to a knife's edge, fierce and unblinking. "I got that right, huh? Is that what you-"

"I told 'em they could ASK you to go," Luffy pipes up, reaching out to lightly lay a hand on the swordsman's forearm where it's curled around Ace, rubbing his thumb in cautious, soothing circles over the bare skin in hopes of providing adequate distraction. "But I also told 'em nobody was gonna MAKE you go if you didn't wanna. I PROMISED." He scowls about him, as though daring the rest of his crew to argue otherwise. "And I didn't know it had anything to do with that STUFF they gave you..."

Nami's been biting her tongue, telling herself not to risk further antagonizing her nakama when she's already responsible in part for metaphorically kicking the hornet's nest, but she's unable to remain silent under their accusatory stares. "You idiots, we're trying to HELP you, not-" She falls quiet again at the sight of Zoro's narrowed right eye and spasmodically twitching jaw muscles, afraid she's finally gone too far, but then he lowers his gaze, shoulders slumping as he exhales.

"I know. I know, okay? I know you guys are and- I'm grateful for it, alright? I really am. It's just- I'm not sure how you expect something like THAT to help."

"What our doctor and navigator are proposing may seem harsh," Robin explains gently. "-but it's the simplest method of determining this particular herbal mixture's efficiency, and perhaps the safest, given you won't be alone in the regrettable event it fails to perform as anticipated." She starts to reach across the table, thinks better of making such a move right now, and instead chooses to rest her hand on the surface between them where he's free to take it or leave it. "The correct blend of herbs could assist you in gaining the emotional stability- the confidence- necessary for overcoming or at the very least controlling your anxiety. But finding the proper balance requires us putting the current blend to the test while we've the opportunity to do so."

"She's right," Nami prods gently. "Once we set sail, we won't get another chance like this until we reach Fishman Island."

"Maybe, but it's still up to Zoro," Luffy insists, unswayed by their logic. He gives his first mate's arm
a little squeeze of encouragement, leaning closer to address him. "If you feel like you oughta try, then
go ahead 'n do it, but if you don't think it's a good idea, it's not a big deal. We'll just hafta wait or
figure out somethin' else or- or whatever."

"Fine by me," Sanji mutters. "Knowing Marimo, he'll get lost five minutes off the ship and by the
time we find his directionless ass, there'll be nothing left for sale but spoiled turnips."

"Sanji-kun!"

Zoro opens his mouth to respond to the cook's goading but then, to nearly everyone's surprise,
instead of snapping an angry retort or simply firing an insult, he hesitates. Bites his lower lip,
expression distant with deliberation. And eventually he shrugs. "Sencho said whatever, so- whatever.
The sooner we get this shit done, the sooner we can get the hell outta here, right?" He looks down at
Ace, who's peering up at him while chomping energetically on his own left thumb and forefinger,
and smiles, smoothing the baby's dark locks. "So let's get this shit done."

"As long as Zoro's sure."

The swordsman snorts. "I'm not sure of anything. I'm just sick of being stuck on this rock, and if
parading around town like an idiot's what I gotta do to get off it- well..."

"You can do this, Kenshi-san," Robin informs him softly. "I think you'll find you're stronger than
you realize." She slides her hand a bit closer, palm extended.

He doesn't take it- but he does place his own hand on the table close enough to hers that their
fingertips are brushing. "Hope like hell you're right."

While Zoro's gesture might not appear particularly noteworthy to a casual viewer, it speaks volumes
to those gathered in the dining hall, and after endless weeks of witnessing the green-haired pirate's
extreme reluctance to initiate physical contact unless it's absolutely necessary, Nami wants to fling
both arms in the air and cheer. Instead, she restrains her enthusiasm to a broad smile, blinking away
the tears gathering in her eyes. Maybe it's not much, but it's a start.

xxx

On the freshly-scrubbed Adam wood decks of the Sunny, Chopper's vile-tasting concoction reduces
Zoro's anxiety to the extent he's able to function almost normally, but as the doctor feared, the
crowded and horrendously noisy streets of the Water Seven marketplace are another story entirely.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Usopp leans closer to murmur in Sanji's ear as the cook pokes
fussily through a large display comprised of bins brimming with produce, examining various types of
squash for bruises and heads of lettuce for signs of wilt. "Maybe instead of me, Nami should've sent
Luf-"

"Luffy," Sanji replies just as quietly, "-would be eating every blasted thing in sight, need I remind
you, and he's also the person Marimo trusts most with the baby." He steals a glance over his shoulder
to where Zoro's standing near the end of the vendor's stall, tense as hell and doing his damnedest to
look in all directions at once for potential threats. Peering warily at their surroundings from within the
shadows cast across his face by the jacket hood that's pulled so low his eyes are barely visible. "He's
already so jumpy, it's making ME twitchy, but at least he's not worrying about who's watching Ace."

Despite his apprehension, Usopp's forced to agree, and once again offers silent thanks to whatever
deity might be listening that the pair of sheaths strapped to their uneasy nakama's hip are empty
because he not only allowed Brook to take Shuusui in hopes of locating a smith while obtaining
supplies for the maintenance kit but also reluctantly acquiesced to leaving Kitetsu aboard the Sunny.

Being sans blades hadn't prevented him from forgetting he was unarmed and going for their handles half an hour earlier however, when, upon hearing the sound of feet pounding the cobblestones at a rapidly approaching pace behind them, he'd immediately whirled and dropped into a defensive crouch while his fingers seized the empty air above his belt.

The source of the heavy footfalls had proven nothing more than a flustered butcher dashing after a chicken that'd escaped the chopping block miraculously unscathed. A harmless - at least to all those nearby beings NOT sporting feathers, beaks and scaly legs - middle-aged man who'd been so badly startled by the aggressive response to his appearance that he'd lost his balance and gone head over heels.

Zoro had ignored the chicken as it sprinted past him, disjointed gaze locked on the fallen man's blood-smeared apron, his nostrils flaring and body further tensing, and for one awful moment, his features had twisted in an expression of murderous rage so strong that Usopp had taken an involuntary step back- but then Sanji had gingerly touched their first mate's elbow, and Zoro had leapt upright as though he'd been goosed, backpedaling and colliding with several astonished bystanders.

This reaction might've been funny, save for the dismay- the pure alarm- on his face, and the way he shied away from the cluster of people into which he'd stumbled, stammering an awkward apology. In any case, no one had laughed, quite possibly because his nakama hadn't been the only ones to glimpse his face before he'd been jolted back to reality, and after regaining his feet, the butcher had made his own hasty retreat, casting concerned looks over his shoulder as he headed back in the direction from which he'd come, evidently having deciding that one runaway chicken wasn't worth the risk of violent death and dismemberment.

Sensing Zoro's embarrassment and concerned by the agitated murmurs of the townspeople and traders who'd witnessed the incident, some of whom were speculating whether or not the authorities ought to be contacted, his crew mates had hustled the swordsman down the street to their current location.

"Oi, turf-top, quit skulking over there and c'mere 'n make yourself useful," Sanji says now, glaring at Usopp and adding "knock it off, okay, I got this" a great deal more quietly when the incredulous sniper swats him forcefully.

"No, you don't! You're just being an a- AH, wait, I can help with those! Oi, Zoro, you don't need to carry all- OW! Goddamn it, Sanji!"

"Sorry, Usopp, didn't see your foot there," the cook states smoothly before shoving a third burlap sack loaded with vegetables into Zoro's waiting arms. "DON'T drop these. You dent my potatoes, I'll bruise your skull, muscle head."

"Just try it- I'll shove your fuckin' potatoes up your ass, bag and all," Zoro growls back as he hefts the three sacks of produce onto his shoulder, but much to Usopp's astonishment, the first mate looks more bemused than angry. Possibly even a touch grateful?

Sanji dismisses the threat with a snort, waving grandiously towards the next stretch of stalls. "Alright now, giddypap. Like I said, we haven't got all d-" He's forced to dodge the tail end of the bulky load that comes swinging directly towards his face as Zoro promptly turns, insincere "oops" making clear his intentions, and plods away in the direction indicated.

"What in the world are you DOING?" Usopp hisses, seizing the blond's sleeve. "You can't just keep
acting like-!

"Like shit's normal? Why the hell not?"

"Because it's-

"-not. I know. EVERYBODY knows, including him. ESPECIALLY him. But we can't keep doing this crap where we act like he'll break into a million pieces if somebody says or does the wrong damn thing. It's not helping. And besides, he hates it."

"Look," Sanji continues, lowering his voice because they're drawing closer to where the swordsman's stopped to wait, looking somewhat disconcerted but mostly exasperated that they've lagged behind immediately after he was urged to hurry. "If you won't take my word for it, trust Nami-san's judgement. She wanted to send him with our group for good reason."

"He needs to feel as though he's actively contributing to the crew's benefit, but just as importantly, he needs DISTRACTION. I know I normally discourage your squabbling, but I think falling into that routine banter could help put him more at ease," Nami had explained when she and Chopper first approached him to confidentially express their hopes of cajoling Zoro into a more social setting. "-so if he agrees to go with you, just- do your best."

"There's few things that bother Marimo more than the idea of being dead weight," the cook mutters. "And it's a shitty feeling, being convinced that you're useless." He grinds his teeth briefly together, fingertips brushing across the front of his button-down shirt, beneath which lie ribs finally mended. "I might not get a lot of what he's going through, but I know a thing or two about THAT."

Usopp nods uneasily, prevented from continuing the argument because they're now within earshot. Frustrated, because while Sanji's certainly right, he's also neglected to take into account their green-haired nakama's stubborn determination to push himself not just past but far beyond the limit with complete disregard for his own welfare. Most likely because it's one of Sanji's own failings; neither man knows quite when to quit.

And although Chopper's long since cleared Zoro's return to active duty, the delay in returning to the ship means the swordsman hasn't had the opportunity to train with anything heavier than the most basic dumbbells. Today's groceries will be the most weight he's lifted at one shot in over a YEAR, and despite his faith in the crew's doctor, Usopp can't help envisioning horrible worst case scenarios where he and Sanji are forced to stuff their friend's entrails back into his ruptured abdominal cavity before rushing him to the nearest medical center.

He shudders, mentally assuring himself that surely the man would admit to his growing discomfort and ask for help before it came to anything so drastic.

But then who's he kidding, besides himself? Zoro NEVER asks for help.

xxx

To Usopp's immense surprise, however, he's proven wrong- although not quite in the way he expected. Confronted with a much wider array of colors and textures than he expected, Zoro surveys the bolts of fabric piled around the shop they've entered with his face fixed in an expression of helpless dismay.

He moves slowly down one side of the room, absentmindedly rubbing his aching neck and left shoulder as his gaze jumps from one choice to the next. To the next, to the next, to the next, to the-
His breath catches suddenly in his throat as he realizes he's viewing everything as one gigantic smear of rainbow colors, too overwhelmed by the selection- too overwhelmed by simply being somewhere unfamiliar- to focus, and his pulse is quickening, his heart thumping faster in his chest.

_No. C'mon 'n get your shit together. You are NOT having a goddamn panic attack over something stupid like-

"-tell me you can't find ONE THING you like."

Zoro seizes on the cook's voice, fighting to follow the sound of it back to coherency. The urge to spur himself along with a slap on the face is strong, but he resists, and when his fingers start digging deeper into his shoulder than strictly necessary for massaging the strained muscles there, he forces his hand down to his side.

"Marimo?"

_I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm OKAY. I'm- "I'm- I don't know what the hell I'm doing here."

"… is your mossy memory so bad that I need to remind you?"

Irritation with the blond's quip slices through the disquieting fog surrounding Zoro's brain, and he turns to fix Sanji with a withering glare. "That's not what I meant, asshole, and you know it." His voice still sounds a little odd to his own ears, faltering and slightly breathless, but that sense of pending disaster's fading, as is the tightness in his chest.

"Well, then free to enlighten me."

"I've never done anything like this before." Zoro waves aimlessly, indicating the shop as a whole. "Like fucking literally picked out curtains with- for- somebody?"

"Oho, does that mean you're asking ME for interior design and fashion advice?"

"Hell no, I'm not asking you, so you can wipe that smug-ass smirk off your face. I follow any advice YOU give me, the place'll end up looking like some bachelor fuck-pad. Red satin sheets and gold lamps shaped like mermaids with huge tits or something." The swordsman grimaces. "I gotta SLEEP there, and I'm not sure what the hell I wanna see every time I wake up, but it's definitely not THAT." He turns his back on Sanji's sour expression to address their other crew mate, who's standing guard over the small mountain of their recent purchases heaped just inside the front door. "Oi, Usopp. C'mere 'n gimme a hand."

"M-Me?"

"Yeah, you. I mean, you're the artist. Bedsheets and curtains for Sencho's and my- for the room. What'll look, y'know, okay."

Scratching self-consciously at his chin because they've gained an audience of one - possibly a clerk, but just as likely the shop's owner, who's emerged from the back room to listen with undisguised curiosity - Usopp studies the surrounding shelves for a moment with narrowed, speculative eyes before suggesting hesitantly, "… well, the room's pretty small, so I wouldn't use anything dark. If you pick something light, that might- y'know- open it up more?"

"Light or neutral colors in solid shades or prints do tend to make rooms with limited space appear larger," agrees the woman behind the counter. "Those of our clientel on a budget often find white or beige most cost-effective, but we have a wide selection of-"
"White's fine," Zoro says quickly.

"Really?" Usopp casts another longing look at the nearest wall's riot of color. "But there's so many-"

"White. is. fine." He takes a deep breath, willing away the tightness trying to creep back into his lungs as he crosses the floor to address the shop owner directly. "The sign- there's a sign on the front window. Says you offer two-day delivery on basic clothing patterns."

"That's correct. There's a convenience fee, of course, but… I might be persuaded to waive the extra charge if-" She's smiling up at him as she speaks, undoubtedly interested in nothing more than securing a profitable sale, but his stomach's doing a lazy roll at her choice of words, the short hairs on the back of his neck bristling as a chill races down his spine.

"Talk to me, Roronoa. Tell me, mmm, how much you're enjoying this, and I might be persuaded to-"

"-alright? Sir?"

Zoro jerks backwards to avoid the hand reaching towards his forearm, nearing ripping loose the edge of the counter he's seized in a death grip and abruptly aware the woman's no longer smiling but eyeing him with concern and mild alarm.

"Oi." A familiar voice, calm and level near his left ear, alerts him to Sanji's presence on his blind side with just enough warning that this time he doesn't leap away when the cook's fingers make light contact with his shoulder blade, although he does flinch involuntarily. "It's okay."

"Sorry, could you run that part by me again? I didn't quite catch it," says Usopp on his right. "You'll waive the fee if we what-?"

"For a multiple piece commission- ah-" Taken aback by their nonchalance almost as much as Zoro nearly destroying the counter to avoid her touch, she's lost her polished edge of professionalism. "O-Ordinarily the fee applies to orders of fewer than two dozen pieces, but in this case- well, you see, we keep pre-made sets of the white bedsheets you were discussing on-hand because they're so popular. Purchase two sets to take with you now and commission a dozen pieces of clothing to pick up the day after tomorrow, and I'll waive the fee and throw in the curtains for nothing."

"It'd sure save us the trouble of shopping around," the sniper considers aloud, exchanging a speculative glance with Sanji, who gives the slightest shrug of his shoulders. "Alright, let's take a look."

"Excellent. And if I'm to honor that offer, I'd need full payment for the sheets now, plus a twenty-five percent non-refundable deposit for the commissioned items. Balance due at the time of pick-up." Pleased once more, the woman slides a leatherbound portfolio towards them across the counter. "You'll find patterns organized by type, then priced accordingly by fabric quality and complexity. Detailing is extra and there's no guarantee of two-day delivery."

"Go on, Marimo, let's not keep this lovely lady waiting. Pick out some of those tasteless shirts and boring black trousers you love so much."

"H-Hold on!" Zoro's looking from one person to the next, dazed at how quickly his nakama have not only steered the conversation away from his odd behavior but also conducted all but the most trivial details of business while he was recovering his wits. "Isn't that a lot more stuff than Nami budgeted for?"

"Usopp needs a few things too," Sanji reminds him. "And neither of you were paying attention, but I saved a shitty lot of beli at that last stand- the one with the smoked elephant tuna? So go on, decide
what the hell you're getting so we can get all this shit back to the ship before we're gone so long your kid learns to walk."

"You've got a little one onboard? Oh, no wonder you look so tired!" The shop owner asserts, charmed. And abruptly far more casually conversational than anyone would have anticipated. "How old? Girl or boy?"

"Uh, five months. I mean, h-he's gonna be five months in a couple weeks..." Face reddening, the flustered swordsman drags the order book closer with unsteady hands and flips it open.

"How sweet! So tell me, has your son-"

xxx

"Anyway, I thought my damn ears were gonna fall off though, like, she kept talking about her cousin's kids and what they did when. And when I made the mistake of mentioning he was teething?"

Arms overflowing with freshly washed and dried linens, Luffy's grinning as he proceeds his exasperated first mate into their new quarters, using an elbow to hold the door so Zoro can slide past without shifting the drowsy baby snuggled against his chest. Ace can barely keep his eyes open, exhausted from rolling around the deck and getting himself hopelessly tangled in piles of bedsheets and clothing while the crew sought to tackle an amazing amount of laundry in the day's remaining light.

He immediately turns onto his belly when his green-haired father deposits him on the crib mattress, yawning enormously before wriggling into a more comfortable position. Although how he can be comfortable with his arms and legs tucked under him, his head down and his rump in the air-

"You gonna cut us a break, kiddo, maybe sleep through the night for once?" Zoro asks quietly, ruffling the dark locks before stroking his fingertips along the little arched back, marveling for the millionth time just how goddamn huge his own hand looks compared to his son's small body, even this many weeks after his birth.

The swordsman's greatly relieved everyone agreed to spend the night here despite the decision requiring several trips back and forth between the ship and the Galley La mansion and even though they won't be ready to actually set sail for at least another day or two. After this morning's stressful venture into the marketplace and an equally harrowing afternoon spent assisting in Sunny's relocation from construction yard to the dockside waters, he needs the stability of being surrounded by familiar walls, and while Iceberg's guest rooms are certainly recognizable enough at this point, they're not-well, they're not home.

The room in which he's now standing isn't exactly home either, not with the scent of sawdust still lingering heavily in the air and the crisp new sheets he can hear his captain struggling with behind him, not yet. But it could- no, it WILL be, he corrects himself with fierce intensity. It's gonna be whatever you make it, so get this shit right. Don't fuck it up.

"TADA! Check out our-" Luffy starts to announce a bit too loudly, although he immediately lowers his voice when Zoro whirls to glare at him. "Oops."

"Oops is right, dumbass! He starts yelling 'cause you got too damn loud, Sencho, YOU'RE the one who's gonna walk him up and down the hall for an hour or two 'til he settles down."

Together they spend a tense moment eyeing the crib, only relaxing when they're convinced its
slumbering occupant hasn't been disturbed.

Luffy recovers first, once again gesturing with pride to his handiwork. "Whatcha think?"

It's probably one of the worst housekeeping efforts Zoro's ever seen, but the sheets are indeed on the bed. Mostly. Not that he'd do a much better job, he's forced to privately admit; the thing's more than twice the width of the bed hammocks in the men's quarters and neither he nor the younger man currently beaming across the mattress at him kept those particularly neat.

"I think it looks like a bed," he says finally.

"EXAC- exactly!" The captain proclaims happily and, after stripping off his shirt and tossing it to the floor, he makes a series of exaggerated movements as though he's leaping off a diving board and bellyflops dramatically square in the center of the bed, sandals promptly flying in opposite directions.

The impact also pops the fitted sheet off the bottom of the mattress and knocks a pillow sideways across the night table closest to Zoro, sending him scrambling to rescue the lamp before it crashes to the floor. But when he straightens and turns with foul words ready on his tongue, his scolding emerges instead as a burst of astonished laughter that he quickly muffles with his palm before it can wake the sleeping baby behind him.

Having rolled over, Luffy's now sprawled on his back among the rumpled sheets, making ludicrous swimming motions with his arms and legs that accomplish absolutely nothing and leave him resembling a very large, very odd frog.

"What- what the hell are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable, duh!"

It's so absurd, so reassuringly normal, so undeniably LUFFY, that Zoro acts without thinking, planting his hands palms-down on either side of his captain's bare shoulders and leaning down to join their mouths.

xxx

It's difficult to say who's more startled: breath catching in his throat and eyes widening in surprise, Luffy promptly stops flailing his limbs and goes limp the moment their lips touch, while Zoro himself freezes, fingers hooking into claws amid the sheets as his mind catches up to what his body's doing.

The swordsman jerks his head back, starts to rise- but then, following a long moment of hesitation, he instead resumes contact with a second kiss, this time proceeding much more slowly and thoroughly. A little awkwardly perhaps, given their orientation means he's addressing his partner upside down and also given the fact he's obviously nervous as hell, but-

Luffy makes a low, inquisitive noise. A "hnnn?" of pleasure and curiosity as he reaches up to lightly caress the right temple and cheek of the man bent over him, wordlessly asking not just if what's happening is alright but also if he ought to participate, and Zoro answers him by deepening the kiss, head tilting for better accommodation.

Reassured, the captain begins to respond, cautiously at first but with growing enthusiasm when it's clear his efforts are welcome. He continues stroking his first mate's face, his free hand rising to comb trembling fingers through green hair, and he feels his heart leap when these actions prompt a soft groan that's muffled by his mouth.

Zoro tastes funny. Must be that stuff he's drinking. He knows Zoro's been dutifully emptying every
mug Chopper's pushed at him since this morning, despite his repeated grumbling. He darts his tongue out to better sample the flavor. It's bitter, alright. Bitter- but bearable. It's certainly not bitter enough to make him stop kissing Zoro.

The older pirate groans again and, spurred by his actions, assails his lips with increased ardor, left hand leaving the mattress in favor of sliding across his chest, toying with his collarbone and the rough edges of the starburst-shaped scar on his chest, and suddenly it's too hard to think.

His hand on Zoro's cheek moves higher, joining the other in his hair, both sliding to the back of the swordsman's skull- to the back of his neck, clinging- clutching-

It happens fast. Zoro rears away from him, tearing loose so forcefully that he's nearly dragged headfirst off the bed, left winded and gasping from the fist that slammed into his sternum during his lover's panicked escape from his grasp.

Staggering backwards from the bed on wobbly legs, Zoro narrowly avoids colliding with the crib at his back. He's breathing hard, chest heaving, hands balled into fists at his sides but held well away from his body to avoid bumping the unmistakable erection that's tenting his jogging pants. His face is flushed and full of pained embarrassment. "S-Sorry, I'm-" He sidesteps around the corner of the crib, backing towards the door. "Sorry. I'll just- I'll just go-"

Although his first instinct's to bolt upright, Luffy forces himself to remain still, even though it means craning his neck to maintain eye contact. "Go? Go where?"

"The bathhouse, to shower and-" A vague indication at his groin. "To get rid of- this. I'm sorry, I- I shouldn't've- kissed you, I just-"

"I LIKED Zoro kissing me." The captain rolls slowly onto his stomach, although he stays on the bed, reasoning it'll make him look less threatening. "I liked it a lot."

"But-"

"It's okay if Zoro liked it too. At least, I'm pretty sure he liked it, anyway, since-" He tries not to let his eyes stray back to the crotch of Zoro's pants. ".-he kept doing it."

"I got carried away. I think- I think I forgot what it was like. Kissing somebody 'cause I wanted to, not-" Zoro stops and glances away, jaw clenched, but then he raises his gaze again. "Not 'cause they had a damn knife to my throat." His expression daring Luffy to find an appropriate response, knowing very well that there isn't one.

He still thinks he's disgusting. He still thinks I should be grossed out, knowing what that woman did to him. Mad at him for stuff that only happened between them 'cause she MADE it happen. He's disgusted and angry, alright- but not with his swordsman. Damn her. Damn her for messing up his head like this.

"I could try'n help you remember what it's like," he says finally. "-kissing somebody just 'cause you wanna. But only if you really DO. Want to." Sitting up, he scoots backwards until his shoulders bump the headboard. "But whether you do or not, you don't gotta go anywhere. This is YOUR room, remember?"

The fight's abruptly gone from Zoro's face, leaving him looking incredibly tired.

"Whatever you want, okay? If you just wanna sleep in the same bed but nothing else, or if you wanna sleep together and just kiss a little sometimes too, or kiss a lot, or maybe even try other stuff, we can do that too. Or if you just want me to leave, I'll leave. But you should stay 'cause it's your
"Yours too. And you're right, I liked what we were doing. Pretty frickin' obvious, the way my dick was sticking the hell out a couple minutes ago."

"That's okay too." Luffy shifts so he's seated cross-legged, hands resting on his knees. "Zoro knows it's alright, doesn't he? That he does stuff that feels good, that there's nothing wrong with him feeling good?"

The dubious expression on his swordsman's face breaks his heart.

"It was- I mean, I think I was mostly okay," Zoro confesses quietly. "-until-" His left hand lifts to touch the back of his neck, rubbing uncomfortably at it.

"I won't do that again," Luffy promises. "I won't grab you and I won't touch anywhere you don't want me to- I won't touch you AT ALL, even while we're kissing, unless you tell me it's okay. And if I mess up and forget, you can always say so. Or just whack me again, if talking's too hard."

"Wh-" Eye widened in alarm, the older pirate returns to the bedside, dropping onto the mattress so they're face-to-face. "I HIT you?"

"Sort of, although- y'know, it wasn't really even much of a punch. More like a push, just- with your fist."

"… Sencho, I'm pretty sure 'pushing' somebody with a fist's the same damn thing as hitting 'em."
Zoro shifts closer, gently probing the faint marks left by his own knuckles. "Shit."

"It's okay, it doesn't h-" Luffy winces as the fingertips examining his sternum press harder. "Okay, maybe it hurts a little."

"Goddamn it, I-"

"Oi, shhh, c'mere." Keeping his hands on his crossed legs, the captain leans forward to brush his lips against Zoro's concern-furrowed brow. "I'm OKAY. Besides, I'm rubber, remember? It'd take a lot more'n THAT to kick my ass."

"Yeah, but that doesn't give me free reign to use you as a punching ba-"
Luffy interrupts him with another smooch, this time on the tip of the nose, prompting a disgruntled sputter of protest that he ignores in favor of commencing a veritable flurry of affection, peppering his first mate's face with quick, butterfly kisses.

The ploy works; Zoro's grumbling quickly becomes more bemused than ill-tempered, his swatting hand doing little to actually halt the barrage.

"Oi-"

"Gotcha!"

"Luff-"

"Gotcha again!"

"Will you quit-"
Grinning, he aims his next peck at Zoro's chin- and utters an "EEP" of surprise as the appendage
that's been halfheartedly fending him off shoots forward, seizing him by the jaw and guiding him to
the swordsman's mouth instead.

"Shhh," Zoro breaks away long enough to murmur. "Baby in the room, remember?" His grip
relaxes, thumb moving to gently stroke the small scar beneath the captain's left eye.

Luffy nods, too stunned to speak. Because he's just been unexpectedly kissed again, yes, but also
because it's just dawned on him why the hand cradling his cheek feels so strange. *He's using the
right one. He's using the hand that's messed up, and I don't think he knows he's doing it. And that's
GOOD, 'cause he shouldn't feel weird about touching me with it, but if he realizes-

Thankfully, it doesn't matter that he has no idea what to say, because Zoro's kissing him again,
leaning heavily enough on his legs that it's getting a little uncomfortable, but even though he could
easily push himself away from the headboard, he stays put. If letting his lover take charge puts him
more at ease, he can deal with his calves and ankles falling asleep.

Fingertips trace his collarbone, linger briefly in the hollow of his throat before gliding downwards,
and he can't help squirming as one grazes his nipple.

Pulling back, Zoro does it again, this time stroking him deliberately and watching him fidget.
Exhaling shakily at the sight. "Can- uh, is it okay if-" He flushes and looks away, clearly frustrated
with his inability to speak his mind. ",-if I just- y'know, touch you?"

"More like you just did, or do you mean all over?"

"... uhm..." Which is most certainly an answer in itself, although so indirect and uncharacteristically
shy, it's a little disquieting.

"Zoro can do whatever he wants, and I'll be okay with it, so long as he's doing it 'cause he really
does want to and NOT 'cause he thinks he's supposed to." The rubber man frowns. "Does that make
sense?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Lemme lay down though, so you're not squashing me."

"Shit. Sorry, I-"

Luffy silences the apology with a quick kiss, then inches his way farther down the mattress,
stretching each leg high in the air before letting it flop back onto the bed. He pats the rumpled sheets
beside him.

Gaze averted, Zoro slowly pries his boots off, lowering them carefully to the carpet beside the night
stand to prevent them thumping on the floor. He hesitates, as though debating whether or not to
undress further, and eventually chooses to stretch out next to his captain still fully clothed.

For a moment he doesn't close the narrow gap between them, but then his palm settles on Luffy's
chest, the pads of his thumb and forefinger lightly caressing the scar tissue. This time he's aware their
positions are forcing him to use his right hand and obviously reluctant to continue doing so. "Oi…
think we oughta switch spots?"

"Nah, I'm good," Luffy replies immediately, tucking both arms behind his head. *Maybe it's got a
couple less fingers than it started out with, but there's nothing wrong with your hand, Zoro, so don't
be stupid and make a big deal out of this.*
"If you say so…"

He tries not to wiggle too much as Zoro explores his torso, outlining the ragged starburst and circling his navel, but being touched this way after so long feels incredibly good and he can't- he doesn't WANT to hide it. When that roaming hand passes over his left pectoral, he arches into it, unable to stifle a low moan as the calloused surface drags roughly against his flesh.

"Not so damn loud!" Zoro hisses, even as his thumb returns to flick across the areola and stiffening nipple.

"How'm I supposed to stay quiet when you're-"

The fingers pinch and tug, and he nearly cries out, biting the inside of his cheek to stop himself. His entire body's becoming hypersensitive, aching for his partner's touch, and when the hand leaves his chest and drops to stroke the skin just inside the waistband of his shorts, an audible whimper escapes his throat.

"Sencho-"

"Z-Zoro, w-wait. I'm, ah-"

"Not wearing underwear? Yeah, I guessed. It was pretty damn obvious with so much of your asscrack hangin' out while we were doing laundry." Zoro's fingers tug clumsily at the fabric. "Can you-? Take 'em off. I wanna-"

"I'm hard," Luffy warns him, watching his face closely and trying to remember how to breathe. "Like really, REALLY hard."

"I know, I can see." Another tug. "But I wanna see without these in the way. Off?"

Unbuttoning his shorts isn't difficult, but skimming them down his hips and thighs is a struggle because he can't bring himself to look away from Zoro's face. He's too worried he'll see regret there. Or, at the very least, apprehension.

The expression he glimpses is neither.

"You- You said it was okay-" The swordsman licks his lips, staring. -if-"

"I want Zoro to touch me so bad, it HURTS," Luffy agrees, figuring he might as well be honest. "I feel like I'm gonna EXPLODE if he doesn't. But he should only touch me if he WANTS to touch me."

"… what would you do if I didn't? If I changed my mind?" A purely rhetorical question, considering Zoro's already reaching out to take hold of him, smearing the moisture beading at the tip as he caresses its velvety softness. "Jerk yourself off?"

"M-Maybe, or just- like- like you were g-gonna-" Talking's too hard. His eyelids flutter shut but he forces them open again, determined to watch as long as this lasts. Which may not be very long at all, if the throbbing and the tightness in his groin's any indication. "B-Bathhouse." His hips rock upwards as fingers encircle his shaft and move downwards, sliding that soft outer layer of skin over the rigid, steel-hard core of him. "COLD. Cold sh-sh-shower!"

"Quiet," Zoro orders. And kisses him, open-mouthed, while his hand settles into a steady rhythm. Stroking and squeezing and rubbing that spot on the underside of the glans. The one that makes Luffy's toes curl and the insides of his thighs quiver.
The pressure inside him crests, breaks, and he's coming, spurting hard into his first mate's awkward fist, his cry of completion swallowed by the older pirate's lips.

The hand on him starts losing its grip once the palm and remaining fingers are slick with semen, and Zoro breaks off the kiss, probably to start cursing under his breath, but stops when he raises his head and sees the final pulses spilling over his thumb and forefinger.

Dazed, heartbeat drumming wildly in his chest and groin, Luffy gasps as a pant-clad leg slides between his knees, pressing their lower bodies firmly together and allowing his lover to begin grinding roughly against his hip.

The wet hand now trying to clutch his abdomen slips in the ejaculate pooled there, gropes wildly for a better hold, and finally seizes him by the opposite hip with bruising force.

"L-Luffy-" At the sound of his own voice, Zoro promptly clenches his teeth, allowing nothing more than hoarse grunts of exertion to leave his throat.

"Here, here!" The captain protests breathlessly, twisting in his grasp and wriggling a bit higher to redirect the thrusts between their scissored thighs. "Zoro's gonna hurt himself!" After some quick deliberation, he reaches down to push the waistband of the jogging pants and the haramaki covering it just low enough to free his swordsman's erection, concerned they'll both be rubbed raw by the material. He avoids actually touching anything else down there as much as possible, but it isn't easy, not with Zoro refusing to stop long enough to help him.

"Lu-ffhhh-" His name again, but barely comprehensible, tapering into a guttural noise that's more growl than any true attempt at communication.

The hips snapping against Luffy's thighs plunge forward, driving hard flesh through the tunnel he's created with his legs. Flesh that slides against him more easily once it's coated in the moisture that leaked and smeared down his thighs from his own spent cock when he rolled himself into this position- and suddenly, without warning, Zoro is gone.

His body's still there, of course, battering itself against the younger pirate's as it strains towards release, but it appears to be running on autopilot. His gaze is fixed somewhere above him, possibly the headboard or the wall above it, and his face is abruptly displaying nothing but confusion and dissociated terror.

"Crap, NO. No, not now. Not NOW!" Aghast, Luffy seizes Zoro's face between his hands, turning it to face him. "It's okay, Zoro, it's just me!"

He's answered by a weak groan, but that single horror-filled eye continues staring blindly ahead, looking straight through him rather than refocusing on his face.

*What do I do- what SHOULD I do?*

His first thought's to shout for help. He's no longer worried about waking Ace, not with Zoro trapped in the middle of- what? An anxiety attack, a flashback, or whatever else might've caused this awful state, although he suspects a flashback's most likely the culprit.

*From what though? Touching me? Rubbing against me? Or did it happen 'cause I started messing around with his clothes?* He doesn't know. Regardless of what prompted the response, however, he knows it's potentionally dangerous and he's not sure he can shake Zoro out of it by himself.

*But he wouldn't want anybody seeing him like this, not even Chopper, and more people might make it worse. He might even use Asura if Nami or Robin show up if I yell. I COULD try dumping cold*
water on him, but I don't think he's gonna let go long enough for me to go get some. The bathhouse's
too far away, and even if I manage to drag him into the dock system, he might pull me in, and if the
water DOESN'T wake him up, we'll BOTH drown.

He continues petting his swordsman's face, too afraid to put his hands anywhere else in case his
efforts to resolve the problem are mistaken for an assault and simply pour more fuel on the fire.
"Zoro, it's ME. It's LUFFY. I'm here, I'm right here, and you're SAFE. Nobody's gonna hurt you, I
won't let 'em!"

Zoro shudders against him and makes a strangled noise somewhere between a moan and a whimper,
fingertips digging harder into his flank.

"No, d-don't-"

"He CAN'T hear me. He can't 'cause he's listening to HER!" He grits his teeth, infuriated that his
adversary's incorporeal and therefore immune to the fists he wants to throw at her. Get out of Zoro's
head, damn you! You're DEAD. Leave him alone!

There's no answer, no response to his mental raging, no sounds at all except Zoro's harsh panting and
the dull slap of their bodies colliding.

"She's not real, Zoro. Whatever she's telling you- whatever she's DOING, it's not real." He flinches
as the hand on his upper buttock spasms into a claw and almost immediately loses its grip, skidding
on the sheen of sweat collecting beneath it and raking him hard enough to draw blood and raise a
pair of stinging welts. "But I'm here, Zoro, I'm here and I'm real and it's okay." He brushes his lips
against his swordsman's forehead, his nose, his cheeks. Giving those same soft butterfly kisses from

He doesn't think he can stop Zoro, but if he can at least bring him back-

I'm so stupid. Why'd I let it go this far, let him touch me like that. The kissing was okay, but the rest
was too much. Too much, too fast. Way too fast. His eyes are stinging with tears of remorse and
frustration. I shoulda known he'd try to push himself too hard, just like he did when he started
training. Teaching himself how to hold a sword again. And I let him.

I screwed up. I gotta fix this. And I dunno if I can, but- I gotta try.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, kissing Zoro's forehead again, knowing there's a good chance their actions
tonight have destroyed any hope of rekindling the kind of relationship they had before Impel Down
and Sadi and the trauma of their son's birth opened a chasm between them. Knowing that this time
he'll let go- he'll let ZORO go, if he chooses to walk away. Not because he doesn't love Zoro,
because he does- oh god, he does- but because he can't bear to keep HURTING him with these well-
intentioned but completely IDIOTIC mistakes.

Luffy doesn't realize he's crying in earnest until his tears start falling onto his first mate's upturned
face. Blinking them away, he rubs his forearm across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. Quit it.
You can worry about Zoro wanting nothing to do with you later, but right now, you gotta help him.

The fingers of the captain's left hand slip into spiky green hair, gently stroking and combing through
it. His right stays cupped along Zoro's left cheek, supporting his head, thumb rubbing small soothing circles alongside his scar-sealed eye while the gold earrings swaying beside it with each jounce and jerky movement clink cold against his knuckles. "Zoro, you gotta listen to me. You're GONNA listen to me, right now; that's an ORDER." Feeling slightly guilty at the stern tone of his own voice, he kisses the bridge of the swordsman's nose to take some of the sting out of his words. "She's not here, she's DEAD. There's nobody here but YOU and ME." Not exactly true, but he figures it's a technicality, since Ace is thankfully- MIRACULOUSLY- still asleep.

Zoro tries to turn his head away, gasping into the palm cradling it as his rebellious body gives a particularly hard thrust that buries him to the root in the snug gap between Luffy's thighs. His face contorts helplessly, mouth writhing, an unmistakable sign that he's precariously close to the edge. No no no, don't you dare, not 'til you know who's who again. I don't know exactly what'll happen if you come when you're all weird like this, but I doubt it'll be anything good.

Throwing his uppermost leg over Zoro's hip, he digs his heel into the small of his back, reducing his movement to frantic rocking. Which is somewhat of a relief considering how forceful a pounding his pelvis and thighs have been receiving; at this rate, they're BOTH going to be sore as hell tomorrow.

His disoriented lover thrashes in his grasp, clearly unhappy with being restrained, although Luffy's unsure whether the struggling's really an attempt to escape or just a bid to regain the maneuvering room necessary to resume that frenzied, reckless plunging.

"Zoro, you're SAFE. You're-" His breath leaves him in a hot rush, his body tensing because, given the new angle, his legs are now spread wide enough that subsequent movement's allowing Zoro's length to nudge higher between their tangled bodies, sliding along his own genitals, and he can feel himself getting stiff again. "-you're okay, and I'm HERE. I'm right h-here."

He bites his lower lip to contain the groan bursting from his throat, squeezing his eyes shut, angry with his untimely arousal but unable to squelch it, not with his swordsman so rigid and slippery against him and-

The rocking motions abruptly falter, their brief cessation followed by a tentative, husky voice. "L- Luffy? Luffy, please- oh- oh god, please let that b-be you."

Luffy's eyes snap open.

Zoro's gazing back at him, looking extremely uncertain and a bit bewildered, although he's growing more focused and aware of his surroundings by the second as the fog in his mind clears.

"Zoro!"

"I'm-" Hips giving another involuntary roll, the first mate cries out before he can stop himself, turning his head to smother the rest of the sound against Luffy's palm. He's trembling all over. "It's- it's really you, r-right? I'm not just-"

"Yeah, it's-" Another thrust, and he's rendered momentarily tongue-tied and struggling to voice a coherent sentence. "It's me, I'm h-here. Just- gimme a second and I'll try'n m-move so you can get up."

"Get-? Luffy, no, I n-" Zoro breaks off, gasping, his maimed hand groping for a better hold. "-need you to- ahhh-" He clenches his jaw shut, puffing through his gritted teeth. "Hhh- hhh-"

"You- you can't stop, c-can you…"
"N-No." Panting, hips flexing. "L-Let me move."

"Are you sure you're-?"

A shaky exhalation and another desperate thrust. "Luffy, PLEASE."

"Okay, o-okay, just-" He relaxes the leg hooked over his swordsman's side, and Zoro immediately releases his hip and reaches between them to stretch thumb, fore- and truncated middle finger around both their erections, squeezing them together as best he can while his lower body settles into a rhythm far more orderly than just a few minutes ago, when he was utterly ensnared in his flashback.

Luffy can't hold completely still despite his best efforts, so he resolves to keeping his own movement to a minimum, allowing his lover to assume control and set the pace. It's not an easy task; his base instincts are screaming for him to roll onto all fours with Zoro's body pinned beneath his so he can begin pistoning furiously against it.

With such behavior not merely out of bounds but downright unthinkable, he instead focuses on his partner, petting his face and hair- occasionally straying down to lightly stroke his chest and shoulders- while murmuring encouragement. Telling him everything's alright, reminding him that it's not wrong- it's OKAY to feel good, and sometimes just repeating his name over and over and over. Whatever seems to help- whatever it takes to anchor him here in the present and prevent his troubled mind from slipping backwards into the past. Slipping back to HER.

It's not long before Zoro's face regains that expression the captain's seen dozens if not hundreds of times since he first set foot on that Marine base in East Blue in search of the notorious Pirate Hunter and discovered instead the man now laying beside him with furrowed brow, darkening flush, slackened jaw and parted, panting lips.

There's only one other person who's ever seen him like this, Luffy realizes, and she's also responsible for the presence of the single, unfamiliar aspect he's never before witnessed on his lover's countenance during sex, but that's undeniably there now.

Fear.

_Zoro's scared of what his body wants to do. Not just a little scared, but a lot._

It's never been in Luffy's nature to harbor animosity for those who've wronged him. He's pardoned more than one former enemy with ease, finding it easier to forgive and forget than hold a grudge. But he hates Sadi.

Not even Akainu, who killed his brother and was responsible for his swordsman's and, by proxy, their son's capture and imprisonment- not even AKAINU inspires the sense of abhorrence he feels every time he thinks of the Chief Warden and what she's done. He understands Akainu's actions; Marines consider it their duty to exterminate pirates, therefore making life as a pirate a calculated risk. His brother knew this, and he knows it as well.

Sadi's actions, on the other hand…

If she'd simply killed Zoro outright for being a pirate, Luffy would have raged and he would most certainly have mourned the terrible loss, but he would have also understood. Instead-

_She treated him like a toy 'n did all kinds of messed up stuff to him 'cause she thought it was FUN, 'n now he's so afraid of- of EVERYTHING. He's afraid of being touched. He's afraid of letting go and feeling good even just one time. He's afraid of HIMSELF._
Seeing the fear lurking in his lover's half-lidded eye, in his quivering jaw, in the tight knot his undamaged left hand's wringing in the bedsheets, Luffy hates her more than ever.

*He trusted me, though- scared as he is, he still trusted me 'n wanted to-*

The emotions flooding through him at the thought of exactly what he's been entrusted with are so overwhelming, so exquisite, it's too much, and his climax catches him unaware.

"L-Love you," he groans, kissing Zoro's mouth and caressing his face, even as his abdominal muscles tighten and his back arches to press his groin closer. "Z-Zoro… Zoro, I l-love you, I love-"

At his words, Zoro convulses, previous rhythm degrading into sloppy, uncoordinated lunges. His teeth clamp shut, partially bared behind his writhing lips as he wrenches his hand out from between their bodies to seize Luffy's hip and crush the rubber man to him. His entire frame's shaking, tendons standing out on his neck.

Stunned by the sight of what's surely one of the most intense orgasms he's ever witnessed his swordsman experience and reeling from his own powerful peak, Luffy's able to do little more than lay there panting, his belly and chest drenched and the sheets beneath him wet with their combined release. He can't think, can't speak, can't do anything but stare.

Pelvis giving a few last involuntary jerks, Zoro finally sags against him, exhausted, the skin of his face, neck and midriff - exposed where his shirt's rucked itself up above his navel - heavily flushed and shiny with sweat.

Oh, oh man, I hope you're not gonna pass out- you gotta be roasting, still wearing your clothes like that.

In the past, he would've just flopped his wet belly right across Zoro's middle and peeled him out of haramaki, shirt and pants alike, laughing at his grumbling protests and gleefully informing him that he'd been overdressed for the occasion anyway. In the present, he's not sure what to do.

*I don't wanna freak him out… I mean, he might not want me touching him AT ALL right now. Maybe I should just give him some space,* he thinks, already beginning to test whether or not his limbs will cooperate if he makes an attempt to roll away.

To his surprise, however, the arm curled around his waist tightens, preventing him from vacating the bed as planned.

"… can we- can we stay like this?" Zoro asks him, speaking so quietly that his request's barely audible. "Just for a couple minutes?"

*Oh, Luffy thinks inanely, letting his body sink back into the sheets. Oh. He lowers his head to the mattress so he and his first mate are once more face-to-face, scant inches from each other."

"I thought that'd wake him up for sure, but he's still out, huh."

"What?" He responds, distracted. His left hand's hovering in the air because he doesn't know where he should put it, now that he's no longer stroking Zoro's hair.

"Ace. He's still asleep."

"Oh, right…"

"Sencho, what the hell are you doing- waiting for me to high-five you?"
"I, uh-"

"… for the love of- here, just." Zoro takes the indecisively drifting hand and guides it to his side. Closing his eye, he sighs. "There."

Relieved he's been given some direction, Luffy splay's fingers over the warm, sweat-dampened skin. "You feeling alright?"

"Mmm. Yeah, just- tired. Been a long day."

It'll be another long day tomorrow, continuing to prepare the ship for their departure, but he refrains from pointing this out. He hasn't seen the older pirate this relaxed in weeks- in MONTHS- and he doesn't want to change anything to spoil that.

"I told you about my afternoon," Zoro murmurs drowsily. "What'd you do all day?"

"… well, I changed like a gazillion diapers…"

"More like nine."

"At least thirty. AT LEAST."

"Nah, it was nine. I know 'cause they-" Zoro yawns. "-all ended up in my half of the laundry."

"Whoops, sorry 'bout that."

"Mmmph. At least he isn't-" Another enormous yawn. "-shitting in every single one anymore."

"Yeah." Luffy's moving his fingers in small, languid circles on his swordsman's bare midriff, studying his face. The faint shadows under his closed eyes. Zoro's really worn out…

"Oi… Luffy?"

"Mmm?"

"-ove you too..."

The captain's hand pauses in its aimless wandering along Zoro's side. He can feel his lover's breathing, the slow rise and fall of the rib cage beneath his palm, along with a distant gurgle of digestion, and- very, very faintly- the steady thud of his heart.

"Now do something about that damn light… so we can get a little shut-eye before the kid wakes up."

"Yosh."

There's no one to see it - his son's fast asleep and Zoro's well on his way to the same state, respiration deepening and body growing heavier as his muscles relax - but Luffy's grinning as he reaches for the lamp switch.
Alternate Ending Epilogue

With the crew's preparations for their impending departure well underway, the following days are hectic but productive, the Straw Hats' enthusiasm and excitement mounting as they draw closer to the moment the Sunny will finally return to open water.

Iceburg, upon being informed of their plans, assures his house guests that there's no hurry and they're welcome to stay as long as necessary, but the mayor can't disguise his expression of relief the moment Luffy cheerfully declines the offer, and when he insists on covering the cost of the aquarium's new glass and their remaining balance at the tailor's shop, Zoro can't help wondering how much of the unexpected generosity is simply eagerness to see them gone as quickly and smoothly as possible. While Iceburg's been incredibly sympathetic to their situation, the man's patience must have limits, and he's undoubtedly having his ear bent by his weary and extremely frustrated staff, for whom their prolonged stay's been causing endless complications.

Partly my fault, Zoro contemplates as he hastily folds the last of his shirts and shoves them into the trunk at the foot of the bed. I've scared the shit out of more than one of 'em in the past few months. And they had to replace that shower faucet, and patch the hole- okay, HOLES- in the wall, and replace that one door and the lamp and those couple trees in the courtyard and- Tallying the amount of destruction he's caused since the crew's arrival, he winces. Alright, so maybe it's mostly my fault.

There's other factors too, of course, such as the necessity of washing, drying and folding the laundry of nine adults, as well as a baby who's capable of producing at least a dozen wet or soiled cloth diapers every day- and who, until recently, had also awakened wailing every two to three hours around the clock, loudly enough to make himself heard through walls and floors alike. Not to mention the chore of feeding all those additional people, which would be a hassle WITHOUT Sanji regularly terrorizing the kitchen to assure each and every meal meets his high standards. And tidying the library that Chopper, Robin and Nami had almost immediately commandeered as their base of operations in the absence of the Sunny's infirmary and library.

Yeah, pretty safe to say we've been a major pain in the ass.

The swordsman moves to close the trunk lid- and winces as it slams shut instead, having escaped his tenuous grasp. He glares at his traitorous right hand, flexing the sweat-dampened thumb, fore- and truncated middle finger before rubbing them dry against his trousers. His grip's getting stronger, sure enough, thanks to both his doctor and his partner badgering him relentlessly about using the therapy ball daily, but even the lightest sheen of perspiration's still liable to send objects either dropping to the floor or flying across the room as though his remaining digits have been smeared with butter.

"Watch out, Hawkeyes, here I come," he mutters in disgust. "Son-of-a-bitch's gonna LAUGH himself to death, I challenge him then end up flinging one of my fucking katana in the complete opposite direction just trying to draw the damn thing."

He knows Luffy would certainly scold him for this negative self-diatribe, were the captain in the room to hear his pessimistic words, but it's difficult not to feel discouraged.

Shake it off, he reminds himself, reaching out to snag his coat from the newly installed hook beside the door as he passes it on his way out, but instead of shrugging into the garment as he initially intended, he pauses with it dangling from his hand, debating.

If he pulls it on over his t-shirt and trousers, he'll probably be sweltering by mid-afternoon. But the idea of resuming his previous habit of going bare-chested beneath it makes him more than a little
apprehensive. Partly because he's become so incredibly self-conscious about being anything but, well, fully armored against wandering eyes, lascivious or not. Also, he realizes, because he doesn't want the damn thing touching his exposed skin.

Don't be stupid; it's just a coat- and not even the same coat. That one's GONE.

Zoro doesn't know what possessed him to commission a coat nearly identical to his old one. Some misguided attempt at reclaiming his old self? Some futile hope of turning back the clock to the time when he was a more confident, more carefree, less damaged person?

Whatever his reasoning, he'd been sure enough of himself that he'd flipped off Sanji when the cook had snidely asked him if he didn't want a different style or at least a different color, something that didn't clash so horribly with his hair. Now, however, he's not so sure he made the right decision.

It's not the same though. It's NOT. It's a completely different shade of green and SHE never touched-

The shivering starts somewhere in his midsection and radiates outwards into his limbs until he's forced to grip the door frame on either side with trembling hands, coat dropping to the floor to lay in a rumpled heap across his boots. His heart lurches in his chest, thumping faster. His throat convulses, the hallway lamps dissolving into impossibly bright smears as his brain begins to insist his lungs aren't getting enough oxygen.

He knows better - according to the Straw Hats' doctor, during panic attacks he only FEELS like he's drowning, when in reality his respiratory system's functioning just fine - but it's damn hard to remember when he's shaking uncontrollably, droplets of sweat beading on his face and neck and beneath his clothing as his body flushes hot all over.

STOP IT. Breathe, dumbass, BREATHE.

Clinging to the door frame, Zoro inhales sharply through his nose, holds his breath for a count of four or maybe five and then exhales out his mouth, fighting to ignore the tightness in his chest. Nothing.

Too fast. Do it right or it's not gonna work. Four, seven, eight.

He presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth, tip brushing the backsides of his teeth, and tries again.

This time his racing heart actually slows a beat or two before speeding up again, so he keeps at it. Inhale, hold, exhale. Four, seven, eight. Inhale, hold, exhale. Four, seven, eight.

It takes several more cycles of the deep breathing exercise than the mere three that Chopper claimed should be effective, but eventually Zoro's pulse slows to normal and his lungs stop screaming. He's still unsteady, quivering and now fairly dripping with perspiration, but that suffocating sense of impending dread is finally gone, leaving nothing but brute exhaustion and stinging embarrassment in its wake.

Moving slowly to avoid collapsing on his face, strained muscles protesting, he stoops to gather his coat from the floor and shake it out, relieved no one witnessed his moment of weakness.

Just tie the blasted thing around your waist if you start getting too warm. You've only done that a million times before and you should've thought of it BEFORE you started freaking out and risked making a fucking spectacle of yourself.

It's not that he truly believes any of his nakama- even the shitty cook- would belittle or think less of him. He simply wants to retain whatever little dignity's left to him.
Considering this, the timing of his recovery's more fortuitous than he anticipated, because as he's wearily shrugging into the garment, there's clanging and sudden voices audible overhead as someone lifts the lawn deck hatch farther down the corridor, and a few seconds later, Franky comes striding towards him, sunglasses pushed high on his forehead.

"Haramaki-bro! Ready to head out?"

After a moment of bemused hesitation, Zoro raises his left hand to lightly bump the massive fist that's just been extended in his direction, puzzled by the gesture but willing to humor his beaming nakama. "Sencho send you looking for me?"

"Nah, but he did say I should letcha know t' take your time if I saw you on my way to the engine room, so I figured I'd stick my head in, see if you were home. Gotta check the barrels one last time, and then-" Unclenching his fingers, the shipwright makes a swaying motion with his open hand, representing the ocean into which they'll be sailing. "-we're gone! Left the hatch open since I'm goin' right back up, so don't worry 'bout closin' it."

"Gotcha."

"See you topside!"

They part ways, Franky turning back down the hallway towards the ship's stern and Zoro making a final adjustment to the pair of katana strapped at his side before following as far as the capstan.

He's glad he won't need to fight with the hatch, clinging to the ladder with his good hand while fumbling at the handle with his bad one - a tedious maneuver he hopes will grow easier over time - but he's also relieved at the casual way in which Franky addressed the matter. Especially after his trouble with the trunk lid and the ensuing panic attack.

At least Franky didn't see me losing my shit, or he would've been a lot less blasé about trotting off and leaving me alone, he thinks wryly. It's likely, given the strength of the attack, the cyborg would've started bellowing his head off for Chopper or at the very least insisted on escorting him to the infirmary.

He supposes the fit of anxiety shouldn't surprise him. Not after he'd surrendered to that confusing maelstrom of desire the other evening and initiated sex- or whatever you wanted to call it, since no actual penetration had been involved- with Luffy.

Zoro still remembers startling awake later that same night, in the hour or two before dawn, when the surrounding world was as black as the pitch used to seal the Sunny's hull, roused from disquieting dreams that began fading to vague echoes the moment he regained consciousness, details trickling away like sand falling through his fingers when he groped for their disintegrating remnants.

The swordsman had been far too groggy to pinpoint what disturbed him, and he'd come very close to simply sliding back into sleep- until his brain had registered the drafty expanse between his pectorals and thighs. Drowsiness forgotten, he'd come instantly alert, what his senses registered catapulting him into terror as he took stock of the situation: shirt bunched up almost to his armpits, haramaki and pants floating somewhere around his knees. When his abdominal muscles had tightened in shock, there'd been the unmistakable tug of dried fluid clinging to the exposed skin of his groin and lower belly, and he'd not only immediately guessed what THAT was, he'd SMELLED it.

Coherent thought drowning in the endless, mindless repetition of "no no no no, not again, please, no," his fear so potent, he'd stopped breathing. Held his breath, in fact, so he could listen for the sharp telltale click of approaching heels, heartbeat thundering in his ears as he'd lain wide-eyed and
paralyzed, hoping-praying, even-that if he was quiet enough, then maybe, just maybe, SHE wouldn't be able to find him again in such utter darkness.

Every nerve in his body had been alive and screaming, prepared for fight or flight, and when a sudden short, sharp cry had erupted somewhere to his right, his entire body had jerked involuntarily and he'd produced a strangled gasp in spite of his resolve to remain silent. With the realization he'd almost certainly given away his presence, a nauseating wave of vertigo had swept over him, producing the sensation that his prone body was spiraling downwards into nothingness, and he'd come very close to fainting.

His bare skin had been crawling, anticipating contact with the unseen hands he was convinced were reaching towards him, but despite his dread and certainty, nothing had happened. No one lunged from the dark to assault him, and after nearly a minute passed, ticking away in agonizingly slow seconds, he'd started to suspect that perhaps no one was going to, that maybe his imagination was simply running wild.

When the sound that'd frightened him so badly repeated itself moments later, he'd flinched again but he'd also been unspeakably relieved, because once he'd no longer been hopelessly mired in his own hysteria, he'd immediately recognized it. It'd been a baby's cry- his son's cry- and not a cry protesting an empty stomach or wet diaper, but one of those brief but startlingly loud squawks that meant Ace was sound asleep and reacting to a dream of his own.

*Must've been a bad one, he'd thought, 'cause he sure sounds pissed. What the hell do babies even have nightmares about anyway? The formula running out? God, I wish that was the worst I had to worry about in my dreams…*

Zoro's lungs hadn't been just cramping, they'd been shrieking for mercy, so he'd taken first one breath and then another, until the tightness in his chest began to ease and the dizziness in his head passed. Working his haramaki and the waistband of his jogging pants back up his thighs, then tugging his shirt hem back where it belonged, he'd forced himself to make a logical analysis of what his senses were telling him so he could begin mentally assembling pieces of the puzzle in hopes of seeing the bigger picture.

Knowing his body was no longer exposed had made it a lot easier to think.

The springy, comfortable surface beneath him was definitely a bed, but not the one in the Galley La headquarters. Not with that familiar swaying motion and the faint sounds of water lapping against timber. He'd been in a bed, alright, but it'd been one on the Sunny, and judging by the size, not one of the box hammocks either. *I'm in MY bed. Mine and Luffy's. Where we- oh. Remembering, he'd felt heat flare across his face.*

Extending a hand, the first mate had cautiously patted his way across the mattress and encountered bare skin not his own, explored the warm curves with his fingertips- and nearly swallowed his tongue when he'd realized he'd been groping his captain's naked buttocks.

He'd pulled his hand back as Luffy uttered a somnolent groan and promptly rolled towards him, sliding an arm around his torso and nestling against his side.

He'd resisted the automatic urge to shove away the invasive limb and scramble free, and he'd succeeded, although the inner struggle had left his heart thumping chaotically in his chest. Which was ridiculous, he'd chided himself, considering how enthusiastically he'd been rubbing himself all over the same younger man just a couple hours earlier, but-

He doesn't seem to have any control over his body's negative reactions to being touched
unexpectedly these days. That moment of panic always seems to hit him whether it's rational or not. If he's lucky, the moment's fleeting, but if he's not-

Annoyed with himself, he'd eased his left arm between Luffy's head and the pillow beneath it, moving slowly to avoid jostling and waking him, and he'd been rewarded by the rubber man making a happy little humming noise and snuggling closer, giving his middle a light squeeze before slipping deeper into sleep.

The bed absurdly comfortable, the limb draped across his waist no longer disconcerting but a steady reassurance, a safety net anchoring him to reality, before he'd realized what was happening, his heart rate had decelerated and the tension in his spine had begun to seep away, exhaustion stealing over him once more. As his eyelids drifted shut and his body gradually relaxed, he'd found it difficult to believe he'd been on the edge of a full-blown panic attack just a few minutes before, but he'd been simply too physically and emotionally weary to retain that kind of fear, especially once he'd known where he was and who'd been laying beside him.

It IS getting easier, he tells himself. Not always- and sometimes it's not just bad but really bad, like when I first woke up that night and in the doorway just now, but…

Despite the panic attacks, despite nearly jumping out of his skin sometimes at being unexpectedly touched, he's learning how to let go and relax again. He's known this since the morning after, when he'd opened his eye to discover-

-sunlight's spilling through the curtainless porthole window and casting a bright swath across the sheet draped over his waist and covering his legs. Squinting against the brightness, he raises his left hand to block it but otherwise doesn't move until his vision adjusts and he's able to let his gaze drift around the small room.

He's alone; the other side of the bed's vacant and the nearby crib's likewise empty, although there's a large pitcher and a carelessly folded towel on his nightstand that he doesn't remember being there the night before, so Luffy must've stopped back at some point during the morning.

Sencho let me sleep in…

Grateful for the reprieve and not quite ready to drag himself out of bed, Zoro shifts from his back to his left side, drawing his knees up so he's curled in a lazy fetal position and letting his right hand stray across the sheets to where his captain slept last night.

The faint indentation in the mattress feels cool to the touch, no longer warm with retained body heat. There's no telling how long he's been dozing since the younger pirate left.

I must've been out cold though if Ace didn't wake me up, he muses. The baby tends to rise not just early but loudly, volume increasing steadily until someone retrieves him. I doubt Luffy was in any hurry to get up either, so the kid was probably yelling his head off too.

Zoro's fingertips, still roaming aimlessly along the sheets, unexpectedly encounter the edge of a rough spot in the fabric, and he pauses, heat suffusing his face as he realizes what he's touching. One night, and the damn sheets already need washed again. And, as he further examines the damage: Shit, that must've been one hell of a wet spot. That first time, I think he really-

His mind flashes back to his captain, spent and slick and pulsing in the moist tunnel of his fist, and he swallows hard, face burning all the way to the tips of his ears as he remembers being overwhelmed with desperate need at the sight. I- I don't know what came over me. I just- I needed to get off- and I needed HIM.
He inhales sharply, and it's his undoing, because even after only one evening, the sheets smell like his captain… they smell like Luffy and they smell like sex with Luffy, those scents raising that same surge of dangerous longing, and all at once Zoro realizes he's achingly, almost painfully hard.

Not doing this- I'm not doing it, I'm NOT, he thinks dizzily as he reaches out to pull Luffy's pillow to his chest, burying his nose and slightly parted lips against it to breathe in his absent lover's scent while his free hand squirms down the front of his jogging pants. I'm not gonna- not gonna fucking jerk myself off like th- oh, oh god, I'm-

Touching himself with sexual intent- actually masturbating- after stubbornly fighting his body's natural urges for so long is more than a little unnerving but also a relief, as though an old, badly healed wound's finally been lanced and drained of poison. The world hadn't ended last night when he'd taken himself and Luffy in one hand, and it's not ending now as he struggles to remaster his own flesh and reclaim the sense of self that's been stolen from him.

Eye shut, mouth hanging slightly ajar, he's envisioning Luffy's fingers curled around him, stroking, Luffy gently nuzzling and kissing his neck and shoulder, Luffy murmuring encouragement beside his ear, urging him mercilessly towards the precipice of climax, when there's a loud BANG-BANG-BANG on the bedroom door, shortly followed by the faintest creak of hinges and the raised voice of the rubber man himself.

"Oi, Zoro, wake up! I got a surprise for- oh…"

Head snapping upright, Zoro comes very close to simply throwing himself over the opposite side of the bed onto the floor in his sudden panic but somehow suppresses the urge. He freezes instead, arm hooked in a vice grip around the pillow clutched to his chest and hand buried motionless in his pants.

Luffy's gone similarly still in the doorway. "I, uh, just wanted to letcha know your- your sword's done and Brook said he'd go pick it up later today if you-" He clears his throat, cheeks pink. "Should- should I just come back later… or… umm…"

At the unspoken implications - "or can I stay, and do you maybe want some help" - Zoro's grip on himself tightens so suddenly, he voices an audible "ow" and lets go, whereupon his erection promptly starts wilting. He might've been imagining his captain in bed with him only seconds before, but the abruptness of being caught not just aroused but actively playing with himself is too disconcerting.

It's pathetic, really, considering how many times he and Luffy have walked in on each other before, and how many times those times have turned into mutual appreciation of the circumstances, but-

"Nah, I'm-" His voice cracks and he coughs, cursing. "Pretty sure I'm done."

Realizing what's happened, Luffy grimaces. "Sorry. I thought you'd wanna know. About your sword."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem."

Awkward silence ensues as Zoro, badly frazzled, tries to find a response. He sits up slowly, discovers he's still holding his partner's pillow and quickly returns it to where it belongs- which turns out to be a mistake, because now he's got no idea what the hell to do with his hands.

Fidgeting in the doorway, Luffy seems at a similar loss, crossing his arms, then un-crossing them to
shove both hands into the pockets of his shorts, only to yank them back out and hook his thumbs in his waistband, fingers tapping nervously against the denim.

For just a second or two, Zoro's sorely tempted to make a pocket pool quip - something like "why you over there playin' with yours when mine's right over here" - but he refrains, afraid the younger pirate might take him seriously, and the inane urge passes. It's the sort of habitual joke he'd have made without hesitation in the past, but- not now. Impel Down's still weighing on him too heavily to make such an offer, even in jest. And even if he WASN'T joking, well, he doubts his body would cooperate now, not with how badly his captain's knocking and the door's sudden opening have rattled his nerves. It's too soon. Maybe later. But not now.

"Ace?" He asks instead as he swings his legs off the bed to plant his feet on the carpet, self-consciously tugging the hem of his shirt lower.

"Oh, he's in the kitchen. Nami wanted to see if he'd eat some mashed up fruit 'n stuff since she figures giving him some regular food's gonna be cheaper than if we keep using all formula 'n anyway Chopper said he's old enough to-" Luffy halts, expression suddenly stricken with chagrin. "Uh…"

"What?"

"Chopper knows. About us. What happened last night, I mean." At Zoro's incredulous frown, he starts waving his hands. "No, no, no, I didn't, like, just go TELL him! Or anybody else. He just- well, he smelled you. Us. On me. So even if you're gonna go right to the bathhouse, first you might wanna-" He indicates the pitcher and towel on the nightstand.

"Oh," the swordsman replies inanely, aware he's probably approaching the hue and brilliance of a tomato. "Okay. Did he- say anything?"

"Not really? He did ask if everything was okay. If we were-" Luffy pauses, gaze dropping to the floor as worry once again creases his brow. When he looks up again, there's desperation in his eyes.

"Zoro, we're- we ARE okay, right? I mean, I think we're okay, at least I thought so last night, but now I just-"

Embarrassment forgotten, Zoro rises and takes the few steps needed to cross the room, reaching out to cup his captain's cheek as he leans in to kiss him. While it's nowhere near as ardent as the passion-starved lip-locking from last night, it's full of emotion none-the-less. More like that first kiss, the impulsive but sweet one he'd given Luffy before he'd been overtaken by his long-suppressed desire.

Luffy's hand rises to cover his, and he can feel it trembling and understands that his lover's just as uncertain and nervous about how to proceed.

"Yeah, Sencho," he says softly, voice pitched so it's understood he's uttering the title as a term of affection and not as recognition of authority. "We're okay."

"Good," Luffy sighs, giving his hand a quick little squeeze and sagging against him in blatant relief. "I thought so, but- Zoro fell asleep so fast, we didn't really talk that much 'n then I was thinking about it all morning after I got up 'n-"

Zoro silences this anxious blather with another firm kiss. "Oi. I think we- I- got kinda carried away last night, but we're okay, and we'll stay okay, long as we take it slow. If you don't mind being patient with me while I- y'know- figure this out."
"We," the younger pirate admonishing him in a tone that's gentle yet firm, leaving absolutely no room for argument. Reminding him that, no matter what hurdles await them on the road ahead, they're in this together. "While WE figure it out."

"Yeah, alright- while WE figure it o-" He sputters helpless laughter when his agreement's immediately smothered by his captain's mouth, Luffy initiating the kiss this time with happy enthusiasm. "O-Okay, okay! Now leggo so I can clean up and go shower, huh? I wanna see what Ace thinks of this 'mushed up stuff' you guys're giving him- and how many knots that damn cook's twisted himself into trying not to freak out about Nami takin' over his kitchen."

Recalling the chaos they'd discovered, Zoro finds himself snickering as he scales the ladder above the capstan, although the smile slips from his lips as he nears the open hatch, with its bright circle of breathtakingly blue sky above.

Luffy had gotten unsurprisingly- understandably- sidetracked by his concerns about the future of their relationship and therefore only brushed the surface of his conversation with the Straw Hat's crew's doctor that first morning, but-

Chopper.

As he hauls himself gracelessly onto the lawn deck, Zoro casts his gaze warily about, seeking the reindeer's diminutive form. Thankfully he's nowhere in sight.

The swordsman's immediate sense of satisfaction at this absence is accompanied by the strong sting of guilt, but he can't help feeling relieved.

Chopper.

Chopper is a concerned primary physician, devoted to aiding his patient's recovery and maintaining his health.

Chopper, since becoming aware of his patient's tentative foray into renewed sexual activity, wants to talk to his patient about condoms and adequate lubrication and regular- possibly even monthly-exams to "assure the integrity of the rectal wall hasn't been and won't be compromised during anal intercourse."

Chopper-

Chopper is a fucking nuisance.

Zoro's immeasurably sorry the second this thought crosses his mind, of course, but- the sentiment is true, if rather unkind.

Zoro does NOT want to discuss safe sex.

Zoro not only does not want to discuss safe sex, he doesn't want to discuss ANY kind of sex, and he ESPECIALLY does not want someone's fingers, gloved or otherwise, rummaging around in his ass.

He'd said as much, loudly and heatedly, when Chopper had confronted him shortly after his trip to the bathhouse that morning, and although the doctor had reluctantly agreed to drop the subject - albeit temporarily and largely at the insistence of Luffy, who'd come running at the sound of his first mate's furious, raised voice - the reasonable words have merely been replaced with concerned, speculative glances.

Made nearly as uncomfortable by the well-meaning but distressing weight of eyes following him as
by the professionally-phrased yet still incredibly invasive questions about his struggling sex life, Zoro's spent the last few days avoiding their smallest crew mate altogether whenever possible.

He supposes he WILL eventually have to talk to Chopper about such things unless he and Luffy plan on being celibate for the rest of their lives- or at least restricting their activities in certain regards- but for now, there's no real need. For now, they're both a lot more interested in determining- in relearning- how to be comfortably intimate with each other sans the added stress of intercourse.

It's not something that required much discourse in their previous history, when they could flop down together on the aquarium benches or grope each other in the bathhouse or just straight-up tumble into bed- or rather, somebody's bunk- with equal ease and little thought, but circumstances have changed. Offering feedback to one another and participating in two-way verbal communication's become a far more critical aspect of their daily interactions, particularly during their private moments.

Zoro's considering all of this as he steps off the grass onto Adam wood planks of the stairs leading to the helm, pulse rate increasing as he quickens his pace to jog upwards with his left hand trailing along the rail beside him, both physically steadying and mentally grounding himself with the sensation of the smoothly polished grain beneath his fingertips.

As he suspected, Luffy's standing at one end of the curved bench near the ship's wheel, their wide-eyed son cradled in one arm against his chest and clinging to his shirt as he points to the horizon awaiting the crew, excitedly describing the places they've been and people they've met, all of which they'll soon be encountering again on their way back to the New World.

The prospect of returning to such a dangerous place with a baby in tow is daunting, but they've little choice; the longer they remain in Paradise, near the same waters where their presence was last noted by the Navy, the greater their likelihood of running afoul of Marine forces.

"It's a damn miracle those assholes haven't found us already. Probably only thanks to Iceburg playing dumb, putting off that visit from Smoker he warned us about a couple weeks ago, but stalling's not gonna work forever. It never was, and the sooner we're outta here, the better."

Reminding himself that their departure's imminent, just as soon as Franky emerges from the engine room, Zoro forces the most distracting of his worries to the back of his mind so he can listen to what his captain's telling Ace, words accompanied by animated gestures.

"-and when we get to Fishman Island, you'll get to meet Keimi! I know she definitely wants to see you, 'cause I told her about you when I asked her to find Surume for me. And I told YOU all about HIM, remember? The big octopus guy who helped us break through the giant door? So we could get you 'n-' Luffy looks back over his shoulder to where his first mate's standing quietly at the railing, motioning for him to join them. "Oi, Zoro, c'mere 'n tell the rest of it with me!"

Taking a deep breath, Zoro complies, moving close enough to run his fingers through Ace's dark hair and plant a kiss on the baby's upturned forehead before concluding the story. "The kracken helped them take you 'n me back from- from the people who stole us." He raises his gaze to meet Luffy's. "You hear me on the stairs?"

The captain grins in response, giving a slight shake of his head.

"Then-" Zoro squints, suspicious. "The Kenbunshoku. It works?"

Luffy's beaming. "Robin's in the women's quarters 'n Usopp's in the men's, Sanji's in the kitchen with-' He pauses, mouth contorting as he concentrates harder. "Chopper aaand… oh, that's Brook. Which means NAMI'S the one in the aquarium bar."
"And Franky's in the engine room, right?"

"Ladder to the lawn deck," the rubber man corrects, delighted.

"That's pretty amazing."

"Yeah, and you know what it means?" The amusement on Luffy's face fades, then vanishes, leaving his expression serious, his eyes filled with seriousness and no small hint of regret. "I'm always gonna be able to find Zoro. As long as I can sense him, as long as I'm close enough, I'll- I'll know it's him and I'll be able to."

"Sencho… oi…" Lifting the baby from his distraught lover's arms so he can nudge his way into them, allow those now-trembling limbs to enfold both himself and Ace, hug them almost suffocatingly close.

"Zoro, I-"

"Oi," he says again softly, leaning his cheek against Luffy's temple, hesitating only a second or two before nuzzling it affectionately because they're alone, there's no one watching- and even if there was, he decides abruptly, he wouldn't care. In this moment, he's at peace, undisturbed in the tight grasp of the arms sheltering him and the child nestled against his chest.

_I could stay like this forever._

But he can hear Franky behind them, below on the lawn deck, shouting that everything's set, and he knows they need to get going. Which means, as much as he doesn't want to, he needs to move.

"Sencho, you're gonna squash us."

"Ah, sorry, Zoro." Luffy slowly relaxes his hold and leans back. His lashes are wet, caught in clumpy spikes with unshed tears, and Zoro suddenly wants to kiss him very badly.

He follows his instincts and does so, mindful of the five-month-old caught between them.

When he reluctantly breaks away, he notes Luffy's now smiling. The sight fills his chest with fierce love, and it's evident on his own face when he shifts Ace to free a hand, taking one of Luffy's and lacing their fingers together, giving a brief squeeze before altering his grip and reaching out, guiding their joined appendages to the ship's wheel, curling his captain's fingers around it. Steady for once despite the fact he's using the bad one, his right, its scarred tissue and callous-roughened palm resting comfortably atop the back of Luffy's hand, Luffy's palm resting on the helm beneath them both.

Their son perplexed with their actions but gurgling happily regardless, pleased with their presence together, waving one of his own tiny hands in the direction of theirs. Towards the wheel. Towards the horizon.

Luffy turns his head to fix Zoro with joyous incredulity, and the swordsman laughs aloud.

"I think he's telling us he's ready too."

xxx

This badly-needed atmosphere of tranquility lasts a few merciful days, past the waters of the Florian Triangle and even throughout most of their stay at the Sabaody Archipelago, where Silvers Rayleigh and Shakky gladly shelter the crew as they wait for the Sunny's coating to be completed. An expensive process but also an unavoidable one, necessary for safely descending to Fishman Island,
not to mention re-entering the New World itself- and possibly only affordable thanks to Iceburg's parting generosity.

Zoro has no recollection of his last voyage past the Red Line. He'd been in and out of consciousness for some time following his and the cook's disastrous stand against Akainu and Kizaru; the horror of seeing Sanji broken and tossed aside like a discarded toy and the shock of being not just brutally overpowered himself but taken captive, abducted, combined with the overwhelming fatigue of pregnancy and the unwelcome recent news that his body might not be strong enough to continue sustaining the baby developing inside him- well, it'd simply been too much.

Thinking back, he supposes the admirals' presence must have meant he'd been hustled straight through Mariejois itself, but he'd barely noticed, too exhausted, too sick, and- he's not too proud to admit it- too frightened to register their passage.

He's not afraid now, just tired and extremely grateful that Rayleigh's recommended the Straw Hats remain out of sight until their ship's ready. Not that anyone was inclined to argue with the older man, given Sabaody's potential to be a great deal more dangerous than Water Seven. The archipelago's crawling with Marines, as well as bounty hunters, slavers and Celestial Dragons visiting the human auctioning house.

Even Luffy, who normally detests being prevented from exploring, doesn't questioned his mentor's judgement. In fact, the captain's been exhibiting more signs of stress than his first mate and the rest of their crew combined, courtesy of several vivid dreams that've stirred memories of the first visit to their current location. The visit during which he lost not only Zoro but every last one of his nakama. Bartholomew Kuma's interference had eventually proved a blessing in disguise, but he hadn't known it at the time; he'd simply been reduced to panic and tears, left wondering if the most important people in his life were even still alive.

The nightmares make him overly concerned with everyone's welfare, but he becomes almost desperately affectionate towards Zoro, needing to constantly reassure himself by touch that his swordsman's still by his side. Mostly in the middle of the night, when he's far too groggy to trust his own senses.

Because limited space requires everyone to share sleeping quarters, there's no real privacy to speak of, but the green-haired pirate doesn't protest his lover's desire for frequent physical contact, and no one else complains either, not even on the occasions they rise to use the bathroom and find the two men curled tightly around each other on the sofa bed they're sharing beside their son's makeshift bassinet, murmuring quietly to one another and sometimes exchanging discrete caresses and kisses until they drift back to sleep.

The first time he realizes someone else is awake, Zoro's mortified at being caught, but before he can fully extricate himself from Luffy's clinging grasp, Usopp hisses a soft apology and waves at them to continue before carefully picking his way through the minefield of sleeping bodies crowding the floor.

When the sniper returns from relieving himself, he heads straight back to his tangle of blankets without a second glance towards the bed, and upon witnessing this display of such nonchalance, it dawns on Zoro that not only have most of the crew been fully aware of what's happening and quietly approved of it- or at least not minded- they've probably kept silent to avoid embarrassing him.

Sure enough, when he's caught by Sanji a few hours later, shortly before the break of dawn, when he's drowsily running his fingers through Luffy's tousled hair and trying to coax him back to sleep with soft kisses, the cook snorts and drops a snide remark about how they'll regret it in the morning if they "spend all night making out instead of doing the sensible thing like everybody else and actually,
y'know, sleeping."

This comment causes Zoro's face to flush straight to the tips of his ears, but he bites his tongue because the rubber man clinging to his torso is finally beginning to doze off again. And to his surprise, Sanji doesn't continue needling him, but only quietly warns him to "make sure you get some rest too, Mosshead" before wandering off to the kitchen.

The first mate's a little less self-conscious after that, taking less care to hide his actions, but to his extreme annoyance, Chopper begins shooting increasingly anxious glances in his direction during the day, almost as if the doctor's afraid that-

What the hell's he think we're gonna do, start fucking on the sofa right in front of everybody?

The implication infuriates him, because there's been nothing even remotely lascivious about his late-night exchanges with Luffy, so for Chopper to interpret a few kisses and some cuddling as mere preludes to sex is just-

It's innocent concern for his well-being, no doubt, but it sours his mood, spoils the calm and comfort he's found in his lover's embrace, and when the Sunny's proclaimed safely coated, he's impatient to resume occupation of his own quarters, where he'll no longer be subject to constant scrutiny.

Instead of peace, however, he finds heaviness accumulating in his chest and stomach as the ship descends. A growing sense of disquiet tinged with disorientation and dysphoria that builds and builds until, once again, he breaks.

xxx

"I KNOW he said he was gonna practice on the lawn deck, but he's not there, he's gonna right here be in the kitchen like I told-" Luffy stops in the dining hall doorway so abruptly that Sanji and Chopper, following too close behind, collide with his back.

"What the hell?" Sanji demands, pushing past the captain to take a closer look at the pots and pans and other cooking implements strewn across the floor, and the open cabinets from which they've fallen or been carelessly tossed. "Marimo, what the FUCK did you-"

An empty bottle comes rattling across the tiles, coming to rest against the cook's shoe. He picks it up, cursing, examines the label, and then curses again, louder.

Torn between curiosity and concern, Luffy joins him at the entrance to the work-space behind the counter, Chopper at his heels.

Their first mate's sitting on the floor, slouched against the fridge, with several other bottles laying around him and another clutched in his fist, all clearly as empty as the first. He gives the one he's brandishing a tap against the nearest cabinet door hard enough for cracks to spiderweb through the glass. "Oi, cook, y'got any more of-" He squints at the bottle's label and tries to sound out the brand name a few times before giving up. "-wh'ever the fuck this stuff is…"

"It's rice wine," Sanji replies in a perilously calm voice. "FOR COOKING. And no, I don't, because it looks like you DRANK ALL OF IT."

"Tastes terr'ble."

"Obviously not terrible enough to stop you from getting PISS-ASS DRUNK."

"Not drunk 'nough," Zoro mumbles back.
Luffy's simply staring, trying to recall if he's ever seen his swordsman genuinely drunk before, but Chopper's wringing his hooves. "Z-Zoro, I TOLD you, alcohol's a depressant! You shouldn't be drinking while you're taking the medication I-

"I CAN'T DO THIS SOBER!" He roars at them, and slams the cracked bottle against his own thigh-then jumps, startled, as it breaks in his hand, leaving him staring in dumbfounded astonishment at the jagged neck left in his grasp.

All three of his crew mates immediately freeze, fearful of what might happen next, but he just tosses it aside in disgust.

Reminding himself to breathe, Luffy eases slowly over to Zoro's end of the kitchen, stepping around the mess on the floor and, when his presence prompts no objections, slides down to sit beside to him and begins carefully retrieving the shards.

"I can' do this," the first mate says again, leaning his head back against the fridge door.

"Do what?" Conversationally, now plucking pieces of glass off his lover's pants and dropping them into what's remaining of the bottle's bottom. Grateful none of them have appear to have pierced the fabric.

"This whole-" Zoro raises his hand and waves it ambiguously in the air around his head. "'s too dark 'n it's-" He shudders. "Can' see the wa'er but you can-" Turning a horror-filled eye towards the rubber man, who's paused to listen. "Can' see it but you FEEL it ou'side. 'N it's HEAVY."

Luffy frowns, trying to understand. Obviously there's a connection here, but he's not quite seeing what-

"'s like being THERE-"

And then he comprehends his swordsman's distress, because there's only one "THERE" that would fill Zoro's voice with such loathing, and yes, he's been "THERE" too and he's felt it himself. The weight of the entire Calm Belt, pressing against the walls of Impel Down and heaviest at the bottom, on-

"Level Six. It's like being on Level Six, isn't it?" He asks quietly, and when Zoro makes a guttural hiccupsing sound in the back of his throat, he knows he's right. "We're not on Level Six, I promise."

"I- I know, but…"

Luffy takes his hand, squeezing it firmly to focus his attention, then relaxing his grip in case he wants to pull away. "Zoro's head knows the difference, but his body doesn't, right?" He shoots a questioning glance at Chopper, hoping he's making sense, and he's relieved to see the reindeer's nodding.

Most of the anger's drained from Sanji's face, although he still looks troubled. "I get why Mosshead's upset, but isn't this the kind of shit he should be writing about in that log book Nami gave him, so he DOESN'T end up deciding to raid my cabinets for liquor?"

"Yeah, but-"

"M not keeping a goddamn DIARY," Zoro grumbles. "It's a dumb idea, 'n I don' wanna."

"It was Robin's idea," Sanji growls, bristling. "And that book was a GIFT. The least you can do's show your appreciation by USING IT!" He's taken a step forward, hands balled into fists.
"What're y'gonna do if I don'? Chain me to the fucking desk in the library?" Abrupt fury darkening his complexion, Zoro bares his teeth. "Shove Nami's clime- climac-" He snarls, infuriated by his alcohol-deadened tongue. "-that stupid blue stick thing up my ass?"

"ZORO-"

"Or maybe y'just wanna use your dick instead," the swordsman spits. "-since I guess GETTING FUCKED is all I'm good for!" Yanking his hand from the captain's grasp, he jabs a wavering finger in Chopper's direction, rage lending him inopportune articulation. "Bring him along 'n he can make sure you use enough lube before he takes a turn!"

Luffy closes his eyes, despair like physical pain in his chest.

"… sh-shit, Marimo," Sanji eventually sputters into the stunned silence that follows. He can feel Chopper trembling against his leg, on the verge of tears. He takes a deep, slow breath. "The only- the ONLY reason I'm not gonna kick your ass is 'cause you're obviously so wasted, you haven't got two brain cells to bang together so you can think twice about what the hell you're saying. But you need to get the fuck out of my kitchen. Right. Now."

Zoro tries to rise- most likely to wade into a fight rather than make a timely exit- and promptly loses his balance, crashing sideways into the cabinets and sending more cookware flying. Before he can make another attempt, he's scooped up in Luffy's trembling arms.

"C'mon, let's- let's get Zoro to bed, so he can sleep this off."

His first mate doesn't struggle or demand to be put down. Instead, he makes a faltering declaration about first visiting the infirmary to retrieve some of those condoms their doctor's so fond of recommending, and then his face pales and he passes out, body going limp and head flopping back.

Jaw clenched, Luffy shifts him to reduce the strain on his neck, starts to carry him towards the door- and hesitates when his foot strikes a frying pan laying upside down on the tiles.

"Don't worry about it," Sanji tells him quietly. "Just get him out of here. I'll take care of cleaning this up. Chopper'll help me."

Tears glistening in his eyes, the reindeer nods.

"Can-"

"We'll make sure someone can watch Ace if Robin needs a break. Now go."

The captain bites his lower lip and obeys, cradling Zoro securely against his chest as the cook holds open the dining hall door to let him slip out.

It's kind of like carrying his son, only Zoro's a lot heavier. And - Luffy's nose wrinkles in dismay - he reeks like the bottles he's emptied.

He doesn't meet anyone else on the way to their quarters, and he's shamefully relieved, because it saves him from explaining what's going on and why he's surrounded by the heavy odor of fermented rice.

His swordsman groans in protest at being flopped unceremoniously into rumpled sheets, but he doesn't wake, so Luffy pulls off his boots and sheds his own footwear so he can climb into bed and sit cross-legged on the mattress with Zoro's head and shoulders in his lap.
Hours later, when he's stroking the older pirate's cheek and playing idly with his earrings, in serious
danger of nodding off himself, he feels a sudden tension beneath his fingers and knows his lover's
just regained consciousness.

"Oi," he calls softly. "How's Zoro feeling?"

There's a long pause as Zoro registers his surroundings, and then he pushes upright- and wobbles,
hand going to his forehead. "H-How did I get here? I was- I was in the-"

"In the kitchen, yeah, on the floor."

"On the-? You found me on the floor?"

"Me 'n Sanji 'n Chopper. Do you remember what you were doing?"

"I-" Zoro frowns, sinking back into his lap. "I know I wanted a drink."

"Uh huh. Zoro drank all Sanji's cooking wine," Luffy informs him carefully, fingers returning to his
face and resuming their soothing motions. "-and then he ripped the kitchen apart looking for more."

"Oh," his swordsman replies, having the grace to look ashamed. "... shit." That single eye's
searching his expression, recognizing there's something more. "What else did I do? What aren't you
saying? Did I- did I hurt somebody?"

"You made Sanji mad, and... well, I think you might've made Chopper cry, but- it wasn't so much
what Zoro did as what he said..."

"... goddamn it," Zoro murmurs. "Do- do I wanna know what I said, or..."

"Probably not." To be honest, he doesn't want to repeat it anyway. "But Sanji said something I think
Zoro SHOULDN'T hear again, 'cause I think it's a good idea."

"... and what's that?"

"You should start using the book Nami gave you. Writing stuff down, whether it's good dreams or
bad dreams or whatever."

"Sencho, I told you, I don't-"

"I'm not-" He swallows, forcing a note of authority into his voice, even though he doesn't like what
he's about to do. "I'm not asking. I'm telling you, you're gonna do it."

Zoro gives a mystified little bark of laughter and stares up at him. "Are you ORDERING me to write
in that damn book?"

"Yeah."

He's expecting an argument- a lot of complaining at the very least- so he's surprised when his first
mate considers this decree with thoughtful deliberation and then nods. "Fine, I'll do it. But nobody
looks in the thing but me. Not even you, unless I tell you it's okay." A flicker of uneasiness crosses
the older man's face. "I didn't mean to- I was hoping a drink or two would get me buzzed enough to
just- I don't know- not need to think for a couple hours. Relax for a little while. But after I started,
being buzzed wasn't helping at all, so I thought-"

"If you kept drinking, you'd eventually stop feeling like you couldn't breathe."
"From what you're saying though, it didn't work. Instead I blacked out. That's... I don't think that's happened to me before. Ever. It's fucking scary."

"Zoro was a little scary. I thought he might-" He breaks off, unable to describe the flash of fear he'd felt watching his swordsman brandish that broken bottle.

But Zoro's studying his face closely enough to hazard a guess. "... I made you worry." Reaching up to trail fingertips across his cheek, lightly tracing the small scar beneath his left eye. "I'm sorry. No more drinking while I'm taking that stuff, I promise. And I'll make sure I listen to Chopper if he says there's anything else I shouldn't do."

"Okay. Good. I think you should talk to him too, though, about-" Luffy can't help faltering, his face reddening. "... the sex stuff. I guess he's just trying to help, but-"

"-it's a little too-"

"Yeah. He, um- he keeps staring at me like I'm gonna tear Zoro's clothes off, 'n-"

"I've been thinking he's looking at me like I'm gonna rip them off myself. Maybe we oughta talk to him together."

"Probably." The captain makes a face. "I don't like getting glared at every time I kiss you 'cause he thinks I'm gonna do somethin' dirty! Sometimes I just wanna kiss you or cuddle a lot, that's all! 'Cause I like doing it!"

"I know, 'n-" It's Zoro's turn to flush. "... I like it too." He sighs then, color fading. "Alright, Sencho. I'll start using the book. We'll go see Chopper, get that shit straightened out. I'm assuming I also owe him an apology. Swirly-brow too, I guess."

"And no more booze, at least 'til Chopper says it's okay again."

"Yeah, that too. Not like it'll be the first time I've gone teetotaler, eh?"

Luffy raises his hand to lay it over his swordsman's, which has been continuing to aimlessly caress his cheek and jaw throughout their conversation. "Thank you." He turns his head to press a kiss into its palm. "Things're gonna get better. I know it."

xxx

Luffy and Zoro's discussion with Chopper achieves the desired affect. Once the doctor's confronted with their joint resolve to handle matters in their own time, and once he realizes the careful degree to which they've been pacing themselves, he settles down considerably. Heartfelt apologies are offered on behalf of both parties, and there are no more anxious stares following their occasional public displays of affection.

When the first mate makes a similar effort to mend bridges with Sanji, however, the cook waves him off, claiming he can't remember what was even said- if anything- in the first place. Although, he states, the shitty Marimo's certainly welcome to wash and dry the dishes for the next week's worth of meals, in exchange for turning the goddamn kitchen upside-down.

Zoro hates washing dishes with a passion and doesn't want to think about how much trouble his right hand's going to give him in accomplishing this particular chore, but he agrees anyway. Something tells him it's easy penance for- well, whatever reprehensible things he'd said in his drunken stupor, and in any case, his humility earns him a round of appreciative smooches from his captain, until Sanji snaps a towel at the two of them in exasperation and tells them to take it elsewhere.
Life carries on this manner for quite some time, month after month passing in stretches of fairly
decent days interrupted by clusters of those which aren't quite so pleasant. Both sorts are punctuated
with extremes - some incredibly good days as well as some exceptionally terrible ones - but for the
most part, the good outweigh the bad.

The log book stored in Zoro's trunk becomes dog-earred, its tattered, ink-smeread cover setting it
well apart from their navigator's immaculate volumes.

Nearly a quarter of the book's first pages are missing. Those that do remain are barely legible, a mess
of angrily scrawled text with words frequently scratched or blotted out. But at some point, this
changes. Gradually, the frequency of such entries decreases, until most of the pages are whole save
for a periodic scrap torn away here and there. The tone of the text changes as well, switching from
mostly helpless venting to a record of important events and other memories too precious or just plain
interesting to allow to fade with time, entries like:

Ace, first word: "Dada" - beats the hell out of me which one of us he meant, Sencho & I were both
there when he said it

An article torn from a newspaper and pasted into the log book, featuring a photograph of Nefeltari
Vivi cradling a tiny swaddled baby and smiling brilliantly while her consort Kohza stands beside her,
beaming.

Ace, first steps! Remind Franky, STAIRCASES GATES NEED BETTER LOCKS

Storage section across the hall framed off & walls going up tomorrow, Ace getting his own room

Letter from Iceburg this morning, word is Aokiji quit the Marines a couple months back & that
bastard Akainu's now in charge- too bad they didn't just kill each other in that fight

Ace, 3rd birthday - Shit Cook made 3 cakes

A hastily scribbled note about a broken condom written in an extremely shaky hand, the date circled
in case the incident amounts to something, although it doesn't.

Ace, lost first tooth - Chopper gave me old glass meds jar to keep the thing, weird but okay, he says
lots of people save them

And many, many more. Four years worth of entries, in fact, concluding with a line that reads:

Nami says Raftel, tomorrow or maybe the day after.

xxx

During the early evening, two days later:

Jubilant despite the lines of exhaustion creasing their soot-smeared faces, the Straw Hats bid farewell
to the equally weary forces of Trafalgar Law and Eustass Kid before all three pirate crews retreat to
their respective ships to tend their wounds, stow their weapons and make ready their departure.
Unlike his fellow captains, Monkey D. Luffy doesn't lead the way but rather walks among his
nakama, bearing aloft on his shoulders a wide-eyed four-year-old who's leaning forward over his
head to jabber at him and the first mate walking beside them so rapidly his words keep tumbling over
themselves. "-and then- and then- and then-!"
"Slow down, kiddo," Zoro chuckles tiredly, in relatively good spirits although he's not only limping but also bleeding heavily from nearly a half-dozen cuts, one or two of them probably serious enough to warrant stitches. "You still gotta breathe now 'n then, y'know."

"But DADDY, did you SEE how-" And there Ace goes again, babbling excitedly, fingers knotted in his dark-haired father's hair as he persists in describing in animated detail everything he's witnessed since they disembarked on Raftel, both before and after the arrival of numerous Marine vessels had forced the three rival pirate crews to quickly put on hold their individual disputes in favor of banding together to avoid being wiped out entirely.

His parents listen indulgently, exchanging bemused glances with each other and the rest of the crew—until he mentions the "big volcano man" whereupon their strides falter and their smiles fade.

"Oi, c'mere you," Sanji interrupts, casually plucking the child from Luffy's shoulders while the rubber man's still groping for an appropriate response. "I never got chance to make lunch earlier, and I bet you're starving. Let's get you cleaned up, then head to the kitchen and I'll find you something to eat, alright?" When his suggestion's met with an enthusiastic nod, the cook turns to the others with Ace in his arms. "Anyone else interested?"

Making tired noises of agreement, they gather their remaining energy and follow him across the lawn deck towards the stern, leaving their captain and first mate contemplating one another in concerned silence.

When they finally speak, it's in unison. "Is Zoro okay?" "You alright, Sencho?"

"You're the one who's bleeding," Luffy scolds, fingering the torn fabric at his swordsman's shoulder and grimacing when the material resists peeling free from where it's adhered to the wounded flesh under it.

"Yeah, but I didn't kill my opponent." Zoro says softly. "Not the one that cut me up, anyway."

"I know. I didn't see everything 'cause there was too much going on, but…"

"Then you know I-" The green-haired pirate's voice catches. "You know I lost." He inhales deeply, his brow furrowing as he takes both of Luffy's hands in his and stoops, legs folding beneath him as he moves to go to one knee. "Kaizokuo, I-"

"NO," Luffy protests immediately, breaking free before he's able to complete the bow and hauling him back to his feet. "No. I don't want any of my nakama doing that, but especially not you. Not Zoro, not ever."

Allowing himself to be pulled upright, Zoro sways slightly, regaining his balance with effort. "I won't lose again."

"It's okay, you don't need to explain-"

"No, Sencho, listen. I won't. Lose again." The corner of his mouth twitches, and he offers the younger man a weary smile. "I wasn't the only one who walked away from that fight bleeding."

Luffy's eyes widen. "You cut Hawkeyes?"

"Only once, and then I tripped over some asshole Marine who tried to hamstring me from the ground while I was distracted by Mihawk and I wrenched my fucking knee dodging him, but- yeah. Before that, though… we were pretty evenly matched." He catches his lower lip between his teeth, contemplating his lover's expression of growing excitement. "If I challenge him one-on-one, I can do
"I TOLD you." Luffy lifts his maimed right hand to kiss it, and frowns when he realizes it's trembling in his grasp. "Oi, Zoro, you're shaking…"

"Nerves. Leftover adrenaline, maybe, I don't know."

"C'mere, sit down."

He reluctantly obeys, allowing himself to be shepherded across the deck to the tree swing and nudged into it, a sigh of relief escaping him as the strain's taken off his injured leg.

"Should I go get Chopper?"

"Nah, let him take care of the others first. I can wait. You oughta go, though, have him put something on those burns."

"If Zoro's waiting, then I'm waiting too." Luffy moves closer to straddle his thigh on the side he hasn't been favoring, casting a wary eye towards the branch above until certain it'll support their combined weight as he settles into his swordsman's lap and drapes both arms around his neck. "Tell me if I get too heavy, okay?"

"Mmm." Tightening his grip on the ropes and adjusting the angle of his body to avoid toppling off the swing's seat, Zoro leans his face forward so their foreheads are brushing. He closes his good eye, silently willing away the faint tremors still traveling up and down his forearms and through his shoulders. "When that damn magma started coming down, I was sure-" He swallows. "I thought-"

"We're all okay," the rubber man murmurs. "Ace, me, everybody else, we're fine."

"If it hadn't been for Usopp and Robin-"

"I know." The arms around him tighten, clinging, as a shiver passes through Luffy's body. "It scared me too."

"You ran off right away, yelling, and I tried to follow you, but-"

"I couldn't let Akainu hurt anybody again. I had to-" There's pained bewilderment in the captain's voice now. "I never-"

Zoro seizes him with one hand, cupping his jaw and kissing him roughly. "Don't you dare start questioning what you did." This is what he'd feared since discovering the former admiral's broken, lifeless body on the battlefield with Luffy sprawled half-conscious beneath it. "You protected everybody." Another firm kiss, fueled by his determination to chase away his lover's self-doubt. "We're all still here, Sencho- you didn't lose anyone." Melding their mouths again with ferocity, his fingers sliding into dark sweat- and blood-dampened locks.

After a tense moment, the other man responds with equal fervor, accepting the comfort that's being offered and returning it gladly.

This, this is why I need to beat Mihawk, Zoro thinks as they find solace in one another's arms. This is why I need to be the best. Because even though he took out that bastard, Luffy's not a killer. But I am; my hands are already stained, and I'll gladly bloody them as much as I need to, to keep his clean. To keep him and Ace and our crew safe.

He bites Luffy's lower lip, gently, drawing it between his own lips, tugging, and Luffy makes a low,
desperate noise, fingers knotting in his coat, lower body pressing more tightly against him.

They're both breathing hard when they eventually surface for air.

"Bed?" The captain suggests hopefully, knowing their absence won't surprise or greatly inconvenience anyone- with the exception of Chopper, who's liable to hunt down and strangle them for not letting him tend to their wounds sooner. They've done this following significant battles before after all, disappearing for an hour or two to shed their clothes and remaining adrenaline and reassure each other that they're still among the living.

Zoro shakes his head. "I don't think I can handle being cooped up right now." He snorts loudly at Luffy's crestfallen expression. "I'm not saying no, dumbass, I'm just saying not inside."

"Oh, okay!"

He dodges the kiss that's immediately launched in his direction, nearly losing his balance and narrowly avoiding spilling them both to the ground in his haste to grab the hands trying to sneak beneath his sash. "O-Oi! Not just right out in the open either, you-! Besides, our son sits on this swing!"

Not that what Ace doesn't know will hurt him, at least in this case, but the prospect of semi-aerial sex isn't tempting enough to risk being caught mid-coitus by their unsuspecting nakama. Zoro may be more comfortable with public displays of affection these days, but that- well, that's taking it a bit too far.

"Then whe-?" Luffy's question ends in a yelp of surprise as he's seized around the waist and half-carried, half-dragged behind the tree itself, into the secluded space under the staircase and unceremoniously tumbled into the grass. "Oh." He laughs out loud, delighted, when his swordsman's coat flutters down over his head a moment before its owner drops stiffly to the ground between his feet. "Is Zoro sure he's up to this?"

"I am if you are," Zoro fires back, already in the process of wresting off his shorts. "And from what I can see, you more than definitely are." After tugging them free and discarding them to one side, he divests his partner of his shirt as well, leaving him laying bare-skinned in the grass save for his sandals.

"I dunno how much energy I got though," Luffy admits. "I used the gears and my haki a lot today…"

"That's okay." His fingertips are seeking out the bruises and small burns and shallow cuts scattered across Luffy's body, tracing them delicately, ascertaining that the damage is merely superficial. "I can take over from here, if you think you're too tired to move." He lowers his head to slide his tongue across one of several scratches marring the younger pirate's lower abdominals.

"Ah-! Zoro, I'm DIRTY."

"I don't care." Burying his face against the juncture between groin and left thigh, lips and tongue and teeth exploring the sensitive skin there until Luffy's squirming beneath him in frustrated excitement, arousal jumping every time his mouth strays dangerously close.

"Z-Zoro-?" Not an order but a plea. A whimper, in fact, emerging from the throat of the Pirate King himself, and there, in the dappled, swaying shadows cast by the afternoon sun slanting through breeze-ruffled leaves, mesmerized by his partner's eager noises and yielding flesh, Zoro forgets to be afraid.
For a little while, nothing else exists, and nothing else matters. Nothing except Luffy, firm and pulsing and slightly salty in his mouth, hips shuddering and rocking involuntarily in his grasp, and he pours into his actions all the adoration and awe that had inspired his attempt to bow earlier, turning this moment into a near act of worship, and when Luffy finally spasms beneath him, crying out, face flushed, toes curling, splayed fingers digging deep into the grass, it's a sight he considers well worth Chopper's ire and the cook's snide remarks about his managing to get lost on the ship itself when he eventually rejoins the others.

Especially since he's accompanied by his captain, who's clamoring impatiently for food - announcing to everyone within earshot that his stomach's painfully empty and he's likely to die from starvation if somebody doesn't feed him soon - but otherwise happy and relaxed beside him, because that- THAT is what's most important.

xxx

Zoro's already been making shorter, less frequent journal entries now that he's no longer suffering nightmares and panic attacks on such a regular basis, but his word count drops even more drastically following the events on Raftel, and the decline certainly isn't because there's less to report. These days, Nami's log reports are filling a staggering number of additional pages.

Wherever the news of Luffy's ascendancy has spread, the presence of the now-famous Sunny and the rubber man's own face - more recognizable than ever, thanks to the latest batch of wanted posters - guarantee him being accosted by people determined to meet the new ruler of the seas for a variety of reasons; most hope to gain personal prestige by speaking to the Pirate King, but many want to form alliances or strike bargains or beg favors, others want to join him, and a few simply want to kill him and steal his sovereignty and the secrets of One Piece.

The Straw Hats turn the majority away without too much trouble, but in some cases they're forced to take more extreme measures, namely whenever someone refuses to accept "thanks for your interest, but no" or "sorry, can't help you" for an answer- a not uncommon occurrence, given Luffy's always extremely blunt when declaring he's not interested in making deals or adding anyone to his crew, at least for now.

Zoro's established himself as the person to call upon for the removal of disgruntled supplicants. His physique and scars alone tend to make any troublemakers with a shred of common sense reconsider their odds and retreat grumbling rather than continue threatening the captain, and he's got no qualms forcibly ejecting those not bright enough to back down on their own.

To be honest, he's not particularly worried about protecting Luffy himself, who's more than capable of flattening prospective enemies on his own. His primary concern is Ace. Keeping their child out of sight- and hopefully, therefore, out of their enemies' minds- became more difficult the moment his awkward toddling graduated to jumping and climbing and flat-out sprinting across the ship's decks. The boy's scared the daylights out of the swordsman more times than he can count; Zoro's repeatedly caught himself thanking deities in which he doesn't believe for whatever destined Luffy to encounter the type of Akuma no Mi he did, because he's POSITIVE his lover's stretchy arms have been the ONLY thing saving their offspring from certain doom on a distressing number of occasions.

At least his fears for Ace's safety in regards to one particular threat have proved trivial following the decisive battle that guaranteed Luffy's ascendancy; although they're of great interest to the common folk and to other pirates, the Straw Hats have been left largely untroubled by the Marines, who sustained high casualties and desertion following the loss of their leader. Left in disarray, they've been more concerned with recovering their ranks than pursuing pirates. One day that's sure to change, but for now, the crew's free to enjoy their victory and sail where they please.
Everybody kept asking, what's the plan, what's next? Zoro writes in one of his rare, lengthier journal entries. And somehow I ended up being elected to get an answer out of Luffy - maybe they figured he'd be more likely to answer me because we're sleeping together? Like they thought I could mention it during pillow talk - or whatever else you call that thing when you're done banging each other and it's too late to do anything else but crash for the night, only you're not sleepy yet, so you end up lounging around naked talking about dumb shit for a while. I don't know. They'd be right, though, because that WAS when I brought it up. But ANYWAY - he suggested going back to East Blue for a while. It's less crazy there, and he figures Nami and Usopp and the cook could visit family, plus he wants to introduce me to Dadan. The whole thing's got this really weird 'take my fiancé home to meet my foster mother' vibe to it, but I'm probably overthinking shit, and besides, if it makes him happy, whatever.

The captain also reasons the crew's more likely to accomplish their other goals if they continue sailing. Looping back around to re-enter the Grand Line from East Blue will allow them to visit Laboon - something Brook's been looking forward for quite some time - not to mention update Nami's maps. And of course All Blue's still waiting out there somewhere too. And who knows how many islands they've yet to explore, and-

I'm not surprised. I knew from the beginning that he'd NEVER be the kind of pirate who leaves the sea to settle down on some island after making his fortune, even if he didn't have such a ridiculous bounty on his head. Foosha Village might've been where Luffy was born and raised, but he thinks of the Sunny as home, and I guess that makes it mine and Ace's too.

This earlier entry's annotated with another, shorter paragraph added later that day, reading:

Sencho called an all-crew meeting this afternoon to talk about going to East Blue, and it was pretty unanimous. Looks like we're headed back to where we started.

The swordsman's glad for his nakama, who are looking forward to seeing family and friends or - in the case of those who've never left the Grand Line - ready to venture into new territories. Chopper in particular is excited about the opportunity to study East Blue's plants and wildlife firsthand, and after the meeting's conclusion, he, Usopp, Nami and Sanji had immediately begun discussing new herbs, fruits and vegetables they might acquire for the garden plot below the main mast.

As for Zoro himself -

While he wouldn't mind catching up with Johnny and Yosaku, who were probably the closest thing he had to real friends or a family of his own before Luffy found him tied to that post in the Shells Town Marine base, he has mixed feelings about their destination.

He's admittedly curious to see where his captain grew up, and he's got no problem tagging along to Syrup Village, the Baratie, or Cocoyasi Village. But every time he thinks about returning to Shimotsuki Village to pay his respects at the Isshin Dojo, the prospect of facing Koshiro fills him with dread, because the man's immediately going to notice he's not carrying a certain white-handled katana. And then he's going to ask why Wado's missing, and Zoro knows he won't be able to lie, not about this.

No, he's not ready for that confrontation yet, and he supposes he won't be ready for a long time. Not until he can look at the shattered blade resting in his storage trunk without guilt and remorse striking him like fists driving into his chest and stomach. Four years haven't dulled the sting, so who knows how many more need to pass before he's able to forgive himself, let alone ask forgiveness from Kuina's father for failing to honor her memory.

xxx
Their destination decided and course plotted, the Straw Hats set their sights on amassing the supplies they'll need to return to East Blue.

To their surprise, they're approached by a few of the crews who've been loitering about and following them at a safe distance in hopes of the Pirate King changing his mind and accepting new crew members. When the other captains hesitantly express their interest in accompanying the Sunny, Luffy's too mystified to answer in the negative and tells them he doesn't care WHERE they go so long as they remain allies. Seeing the immediate expressions of delight on their faces, Zoro utters a slightly contemptuous snort before turning to ask his perplexed lover if he realizes he's essentially just authorized the germination of his own fleet. The others are equally amused, save for Nami, whose only concern is whether or not they're going to be monetarily responsible for the other crews.

The first mate shrugs. "They show they're willing to scratch our backs, help defend our ship 'n shit, maybe we can occasionally scratch theirs."

He's wary of the newcomers, but they're eager to please and, better yet, they're remaining on their respective vessels. Welcoming them aboard for authorized visits and feasts and the like, that's fine, but he's dead set against strangers having constant potential access to the pantry or infirmary or sleeping quarters. Or his son. And on that note, he reminds himself to pull Luffy aside later and discuss with him how they're going to handle teaching Ace what's appropriate behavior and what's not in regards to his interactions with adults. Their son's curious about their new allies, and while his overwhelming friendliness towards everyone he meets is charming, the thought of anyone taking advantage of that trust and TOUCHING him-

He watches the child's interactions with everyone but the core crew like an armed sentinel ready to draw sword at the slightest provocation, and his attentiveness doesn't go unnoticed. Their guests are extremely well-mannered when dealing with Ace, treating him with nearly the same respect they accord his dark-haired father despite Luffy's obvious disdain for such formality.

As for Zoro himself, they're cautious and they're polite and they clearly have no idea what to make of seeing the notorious Pirate Hunter escorting a small boy about the Sunny's lawn deck or exchanging discrete displays of affection with the Pirate King himself. He can see the confusion in their faces, the mental calculations as they compare the stories they've heard about a ravening demon wielding three katanas to what they're now witnessing. The sideways glances and shrugs they exchange as they decide that perhaps the rumors were mistaken and he's nowhere near as fearsome as they believed, but just an average swordsman who's somehow caught and kept the attention of the pirate who made himself king.

It's insulting, and he's sure Luffy would take offense on his behalf if the whispers were brought to his attention, but Zoro deems it too trivial an issue to raise not to mention too bothersome to correct.

And their attitudes rapidly change anyway, the next time a member of the Straw Hat crew becomes the target of a brutal attack, during a routine supply trip on a nondescript island that's amazed to suddenly find itself included as a location of interest in the history books.

xxx

As the dust settles:

Those golden eyes continue staring up at him, unblinking and no less piercing now that their owner's been bested. "Aren't you going to finish it?"

Zoro snorts. "Are you really that eager to die?" Sheathing his katana, he extends his left hand, and after a moment or two of hesitation, his opponent accepts it and allows himself to be pulled to his
feet. "Anyway, no, this is good enough for me. And besides, my son's watching, and that isn't something he needs to see."

He can hear Ace behind him, jubilant, jumping up and down beside Luffy, who's making just as much noise himself. The rest of the crew, most of the fleet, and a few passersby who recognized the duel's participants and immediately stopped to watch are cheering as well, although they're not making NEARLY the same racket.

"It's good, guys," the first mate calls, and his overjoyed offspring and captain promptly rush him. Ace throwing both arms around his middle, squealing "Daddy! Daddy, you won!" and Luffy- Luffy nearly knocking him straight off his feet, bursting with excitement and pride, and in the moment before the rubber man kisses him, dipping him- actually freaking dipping him- backwards in the process, he's rewarded by the look of pure, transparent shock on Dracule Mihawk's face, and then the Straw Hat's first mate is laughing uproariously into his partner's eager mouth because he'd somehow completely forgotten that his mentor didn't know about Ace, who'd been elsewhere under the protection of his nakama during their previous duel on the chaotic battlefield at Raftel.

Exhilarated, giddy with his victory, he seizes Luffy and kisses him back with enthusiasm, lifting him straight off his sandal-clad feet in a crushing embrace as the adrenaline still surging in his blood washes away any trace of bashfulness, ignoring the renewed shouts and laughter from those watching. He's thinking not of the title he's won or the celebration that's sure to follow, but of later, of the familiar privacy of the quarters awaiting them and the delayed release of the welcome, anticipatory tension now suffusing his body.

There's a certain, indisputable irony in this moment, because while Roronoa Zoro may finally be the undefeated champion, the World's Greatest as he's dreamed for so long, he's thinking of nothing but surrender: the one he'll make tonight, gladly and in a very different sort of way, to the Pirate King. To HIS king.

xxx

Turns out he was hanging around, waiting for us- or rather, for me, the first mate writes the next day, sometime during the early morning when the sun's risen just high enough above the horizon to fill the room with a soft glow via the porthole window. He's sitting with his shoulders and back against the headboard, legs crossed beneath him, journal balanced on his left thigh, and Luffy- who's snoring away spread-eagle on top of the covers- laying beside him. He didn't stay very long after the fight, which makes sense- he's even more of a loner than I used to be- but we're

He pauses, frowning. Friendly isn't exactly the right word to describe his odd relationship with Mihawk.

civil enough with each other that he didn't just stalk off after he realized I really wasn't going to kill him. I mean, seriously though, I spent two goddamn years living with the guy, TRAINING with him. He's gloomy as fuck except for when he's being a smart-ass, but otherwise he's not so bad? Okay, yeah, so every once in a while he wipes out an entire pirate fleet for fun, but it's always idiots looking for trouble. And besides, I knew Perona would find some way to haunt me forever if I

The quill's tip skids across the page, leaving a thin trail of ink through the words he's just written as his captain abruptly rolls towards him, arms sliding around his middle and face mashing into his side.

"Oi!"

Luffy mumbles something rendered incomprehensible by grogginess, lips brushing his bare skin and making him twitch, swatting the rubber man lightly on the head with the cover of the open journal.
"Quit it, that tickles."

The limbs wrapped around him tighten, their owner uttering a "nnn" of protest and nuzzling harder against his rib cage.

Amused as much as annoyed, Zoro pokes the quill's feathered tip into Luffy's exposed armpit and wiggles it, prompting a muffled shriek and kicking feet. He winces, glad the ink pot's on his night stand and not the mattress itself, otherwise they'd both be wearing its contents. "C'mon, leggo."

"Don't wanna."

He sighs, flipping the journal closed before tossing it into the open night table drawer and dropping the quill in beside it. He'll have to finish his entry later; now that Luffy's stirring, albeit reluctantly, it's only a matter of minutes before their son invades the room, insisting it's bright enough outside to qualify as morning, and aren't they PLEASE going to get up because he's hungry and bored and doesn't wanna climb the ladder to the lawn deck by himself because the dock system's too scary. Nevermind the fact he's NOT SUPPOSED TO climb the ladder by himself yet OR wander around the capstan, engine or storage rooms unless there's an adult with him.

_The logic of five-year-olds_, Zoro groans to himself in muted exasperation, and stretches his arms over his head, yawning and wondering how long it'll be before he regrets using this time to write instead of sleeping longer while he had the chance.

He feels Luffy tense- and immediately drops his arms before a set of rubber fingers can sneak their way into one of his armpits in retaliation. There's a muffled "aww" and he snorts, cuffing his captain's ear affectionately. "Nice try."

"Not fair. You're too quick," Luffy teases. He flops backwards, completing a luxurious stretch and gaping yawn of his own before returning to curl lazily around his swordsman's crossed legs and feet like an over-sized house cat, his fingertips seeking the faded scars circling the older pirate's ankles, slowly tracing them. "What was Zoro writing about?" His lips curl in a playful smirk. "Last night?"

"Last time I checked, I was keeping a journal, not scribbling some gay-ass romance novel," Zoro scolds, although he makes no attempt to hide the grin surfacing on his own face.

"Nami would wanna try'n sell it, if you were," Luffy snickers, then rolls onto his back so his head's nestled in his first mate's lap and he's peering at him upside-down. "Since Zoro's famous 'n all now." He grins wider. "…romance novel, huh?"

"Figure of speech, okay? I figured it'd sound better than saying 'writing porn' even if that's what three-quarters of that sort of book ends up being."

"We do a lot more than just SEX, though, right? I mean, I share food with Zoro sometimes, AND I hold hands with him whenever we take walks 'n snuggle with him whenever he lets me. Really, if you think about it, I'm pretty good at that romantic stuff!!"

"Tch. You also steal the covers, you fart in your sleep loud enough to wake the dead, and you've got horrible morning breath. Romantic? You gotta be kidding me; you're about as romantic as an old grungy sock."

Disgruntled, the captain opens his mouth to protest- and then snaps it shut, crossing his arms over his bare chest as his expression once again turns smug. "Then why don't you just kick me out 'n make me go back upstairs with the other guys?" Knowing quite well that'll never happen, not when this room's been their joint private quarters for years now. "Why're you still sharing the bed with me
every night, huh?"

"Beats the hell outta me. God knows, I'd probably get more sleep if I DID boot your ass."

"Well, you sure weren't interested in sleep last night. In fact, y-"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I remember." Zoro's smiling despite the involuntary flush darkening his cheeks, fingers tangling in his lover's dark hair as he leans down to brush their lips together in an upside-down kiss, his voice going soft and husky. "Encore, encore…"

"So-" Luffy murmurs after their mouths meet then reluctantly part a second time, a gleam of mischief visible in his half-closed eyes. "So… was Zoro joking just now, about how many times he wanted to go LAST NIGHT, or, uh, does he wanna…"

Although the first mate HAD been simply referring to his own absurd enthusiasm last night, he's about to admit he certainly wouldn't mind some variety of repeat performance this morning, when a faint rattling noise catches his attention and he straightens, muffling a snort of amusement. "Shit. Give you a rain check for later, Sencho? I'm pretty sure we're about to have company."

"Damn," Luffy groans, raising his head to look, although he's also soon struggling not to laugh at the sight of their son peeking cautiously around the edge of the door he's just opened.

"… Daddy? Are you awake?"

"Yeah, kiddo, both of us are," Zoro calls back.

Taking this as an invitation, Ace bounds into the room - leaving the door standing wide open behind him, OF COURSE - and scrambles onto the bed, happily hurling himself at his hapless parents with a careless abandon that results in him knocking skulls with Zoro and driving a knee squarely into Luffy's unprotected stomach.

"OW!" "OOF!"

"Sorry, Daddy!" Ace chirps. "Good morning!"

Resisting the urge to clutch his aching forehead, Zoro throws an arm around the five-year-old and drags him off Luffy's head and torso, uncovering the captain's wincing face. "Will you quit- jumping all over the place like a goddamn monkey?"

"But I AM a monkey," the child protests. "I'm a Ro-no-er-Monkey! Everybody says so!"

"Shishishi, you can't argue with him, Zoro," Luffy laughs, grinning as he sits up, gingerly rubbing his midsection.

"Ro-ro-no-uh." Zoro tells their son with exaggerated patience for what feels like the millionth time. "Roronoa-Monkey."

"Ro-no-no-er-Monkey." Wriggling impatiently in his grasp, incapable of remaining still for more than a moment or two.

"Close enough," he sighs, letting go, and watches as Ace immediately flings himself flat on the mattress and begins to roll around, legs flailing dangerously in the air. "How the HELL have you got this much energy this early in the damn morning?"

"If it's morning, are you getting up?"
"Do we have to?"

"DAH-ddy!" Ace pops upright. "There's 'spose to be pancakes for breks-fist this morning!"

"Oh goody," Zoro states morosely, but- little to his surprise- Luffy's already bouncing out of bed towards the open door, one arm whipping back to yank his hat off the headboard's post so he can clap it firmly on his head.

"Pancakes? C'mon, Ace, let's go!"

"Oi, Sencho?"

"Eh?"

"You forgetting something?"

"Nah, I don't think so. Wha-"

Ace points, giggling hysterically behind the hand covering his mouth, and his black-haired father looks down at himself, blinking.

"Oh. Ohhh, yeah, I guess I shouldn't go to the dining hall like this, huh?"

His son shakes his head, giggling harder.

"Not unless you wanna piss off the cook and scare half the crew," Zoro tells him dryly, sliding out of bed and rummaging through the laundry strewn across the bedroom floor until he unearths a wrinkled pair of shorts and flings them in his captain's direction. "-and get your bare ass BANNED from the dining hall 'til lunch."

Luffy catches the wad of clothing before it can hit him in the face, shakes the shorts' legs right-side out again and hops into them, looking horrified. "I'd STARVE!"

"I AM starving," Ace insists, catching his arm and dragging him into the hallway while he's still struggling to fasten his fly without pinching himself.

"It's been HOURS since I ate anything!" Luffy agrees, and together, they hurl matching indignant, exasperated glares at the green-haired man they've left standing beside the bed, masking a yawn with his damaged hand.

"Daddy, come ON!" "Zoro!"

"I'm comin', I'm comin'! Jeez!" The swordsman casts another despairing look around the room, searching in vain for a t-shirt that might have another day's wear left in it before needing washed, but he eventually gives up, reasoning he'll be decent enough in the sweat pants he pulled on shortly before falling asleep beside Luffy just a few hours ago.

Although sleeping nude still bothers him more often than not, he's no longer bothered quite so much by the thought of roaming about the Sunny bare-chested, at least when the ship's under sail with only his fellow crew members aboard. When they're docked or entertaining guests, it's another matter entirely, but for now-

Seizing his katana from where they're propped against the trunk at the foot of the bed, he hurries after his lover and their child, catching up with them just as they reach the capstan.

Luffy scales the ladder first, tackling the hatch, with Ace directly below and nearly climbing over
him in his eagerness to reach the lawn deck, while Zoro follows at a more sedate pace, watching warily in case the five-year-old's grip on the rungs fails. It's not likely, given the boy climbs like-well-a monkey, but he can't help worrying. Namely because he can't help thinking of Kuina, of how a single slip or misstep one would normally take for granted could spell disaster.

Being a parent's more stressful than he could have ever anticipated.

Once his son's safely through the hatchway, however, he's able to relax again and—once he's clambered out himself and kicked the hatch door closed again—watch with indulgent fondness as the two most important people in his life go racing towards the stern, galvanized further by the enticing aroma of frying eggs and bacon. Knowing Luffy will let Ace overtake him once they reach the staircase, scampering up the steps with the rubber man close behind.

"GO AHEAD," he shouts when they hesitate on the balcony outside the dining hall to glance down at him. "I'LL BE THERE IN JUST A SECOND."

Waving, they quickly vanish inside, leaving him alone on the lawn with the warmth of the rising sun and the cry of an airborne gull repeating somewhere far overhead.

He doesn't mind. The dining hall will be crowded, the kitchen noisy with the clatter of pans and trays and plates and the cook snapping at anyone impatient- and brave-enough to steal a serving before the table's set, and he'd like to enjoy this moment of quiet solitude before he's promptly enlisted to keep his captain and son out of trouble and finds himself threatened with a hot spatula when his best efforts inevitably fail.

Reaching the base of the stairs, he pauses to gaze briefly towards the horizon— and finds himself turning aside, laying both hands on the railing as he stops to watch the small waves breaking along the hull, churning up small patches of foam.

Five- no, six years. Has it really been nearly six years since he stood beside this same railing, acutely aware of the nausea churning in his gut and struggling to process what had happened—what had been happening inside him? He can scarcely believe this. It feels more like a million years. It feels like yesterday.

Without him consciously realizing what it's doing, Zoro's right hand drops from the railing to touch his abdomen. It's flat beneath his palm and fingertips, save for the thick pads of muscle, the same as it'd been that day almost six years ago when he'd been trying to convince himself he was dreaming.

But he hadn't been. Not then, and he's certainly not dreaming now. One look at the truncated digits currently resting against his stomach will prove it, as will the long, thin seam of scar tissue spanning his lower belly if he pushes the waistband of his pants down far enough to expose it. Or a brief glance at the handles of the swords strapped to his hip.

It's dizzyingly surreal, measuring a memory of himself against the person he's become.

But regardless of what he's lost, he can't deny how much he's gained. Six years ago, he hadn't anticipated any of it. Now, as he takes one last look at the sea before turning his attention back towards the dining hall door waiting above, he wonders, with all that's been lost, all that's been gained… how much more's awaiting him?

There's only one way to find out.

Raising his right hand to grasp the staircase railing in a firm grip despite his missing fingers, Roronoa Zoro takes a deep breath and slowly exhales, lifting first one foot, then the other, climbing the steps
slowly at first but with increasing speed and confidence as he goes to join his waiting family and friends.

xxx

FIN

xxx

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