Sequel to Same Song, Different Verse:

“GODDAMMIT THIS IS JUST LIKE ZORO AND HIS FEET. YOU CAN’T FIGHT IF YOU’VE JUST HACKED OFF AN APPENDAGE YOU MORONS.”—Nami, lamenting all the decisions she has ever made.

Monkey D. Lucy and Roronoa Zoro are still only halfway to their dreams, but at least they have each other. The New World is hard and dangerous, but like all great things, it’s wonderful too, and nothing has ever stood a chance against them anyway. They're the Pirate King and the World's Greatest Swordsman, after all. The rest of the world just hasn't quite caught on yet.

In which things are still very much do or die, and love is exactly the same.
Hello and welcome, my friends! If you're a newcomer to this series, you can...probably? Follow along with the plot, but I fear the characters and especially the characters' relationships will make...no sense to you. Like, at all. I do suggest going back to read the first story in the series, but if you can't be arsed to read the whole thing, maybe pick it up around Thriller Bark or Enies Lobby, and go from there. I take more liberties with the characters after that point, so. Yeah. If you don't want to read that much, at least go back and read the post-time skip chapters so you have some idea of what's going on with Lucy and Zoro. Otherwise this is all going to be very confusing for you.

If you're not a newcomer, WELCOME BACK I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU WANT TO KEEP READING THIS FIC, FRIENDS. I LOVE YOU SO MUCH.

Alright! Onward!
“Oh come on. Please?”

“Nope. Only Zoro.”

“I want to knooooowww.”

“Zoro can tell you if he wants. I’m not spilling.”

“Zooorrroo—”

“Not a chance.”

Lucy giggles, leaping up on the Sunny’s railing gracefully, and Zoro eyes her carefully, ready to pull her back if she loses her footing. The New World waters are dangerous in a way Paradise wasn’t, and retrieving her from the ocean is more of a pain than it used to be.

“I want to know what Lucy’s tattoo is going to be too!” Chopper interjects, innocent and unknowing.

Lucy looks like she genuinely regrets having to deny Chopper, unlike her glee over teasing Usopp. She rocks a little on the rail, and Zoro sighs, removing his katana from his hamarki preemptively.

“Sorry buddy. Only Zoro gets to know.”

“I don’t have to see it,” Usopp begs. “I just want to know.”

“DON’T GO ASKING LADIES ABOUT PERSONAL BUSINESS!”

“OW! Don’t kick me, you jerk, I was just—”

“STOP ASKING LUCY-SAN ABOUT HER POSTERIOR.”

There were, occasionally, times when the cook did useful shit. Not often, and generally not enough to overshadow all the annoying bits, but every once in a blue moon the cook came through.

Just now was one of those times.
Lucy hops down from the rail, running over to chat with Franky as he tinkers with something for the engine. Zoro leans against the main mast, letting his eye slide shut. It’s a nice day out, for once. Weather in the New World, at least on the sea itself, is truly insane. They’ve dealt with flaming seas and cyclones that do loop-de-loops, and sea kings the size of the Red Line, and lightning rain, among other things. According to Nami they’ve entered a low-pressure zone created by two nearby islands with opposite seasons.

“It’s only calm for now,” she insisted when asked. “Tonight there’ll be a hurricane.”

Zoro is pretty sure that Nami would try and sail straight for one of those islands if it wasn’t for that. One week in the New World, and they’ve barely had time to eat, let alone sleep properly, and whatever island they’re tracking, it doesn’t have many neighbors. They’re all pretty out of it, with the exception of maybe Lucy, but even she’s less boisterous than usual.

A finger pokes his cheek, right where his scar tapers off. He cracks his eye open, glaring at the offender. Lucy is before him, leaning over with a grin on her face, completely unrepentant.

“Are you gonna take a nap?” she asks, head canting to the side and dark hair falls forward, even more disheveled than usual by the play of wind and seawater. It’s a little sun-bleached, actually. Her hair has reddish tints in it now, especially the ends unprotected by her hat.

“Yep,” he answers. He has to work at it to keep memories of tangling his fingers in the dark strands at bay, or to avoid recalling the breathy sounds she makes when he pulls just right.

Napping. He’s supposed to be napping.

“Hm. You’re getting sunburned,” Lucy tells him, and fingers sticky with grape juice skip across his cheekbones and nose. Zoro gives her a look that’s meant to be exasperated and annoyed but judging by the giggle and her fond grin, probably just comes off sappy and affectionate. Lucy seems to be interpreting it that way, at any rate.

She touches him all the time now. He hasn’t stopped feeling ridiculously happy about it.

Stupid warm and fuzzy feelings and shit.

(He can’t quite regret them when Lucy looks at him like that, though.)

“Luuucccyyy,” Nami whines, waving the triplicate log pose at the captain. “Can’t we go anywhere else? Please?”

Lucy turns to face Nami, and she’s got her annoyed/petulant/I-am-actually-a-five-year-old face on.

“No. The exciting one,” she insists.

“Give it up, Nami,” Usopp says, resigned. “Lucy’s only gotten more stubborn.”

“And more inclined to throw us headlong into danger,” Nami grumbles, but she’s obviously resigned herself to fate, and sets about adjusting their heading, complaining about their lack of a helmsman.

“We have a helmsman,” Lucy chirps, straightening and twisting to face the rest of the crew. “It’s Jimbei.”

“I think Nami is simply requesting assistance,” Robin tells Lucy with a small smile, and a flick of her wrist sees a pair of hands blooming at the helm, so Nami can properly navigate.

“Usopp!” Chopper cries, excited over something in the water. “Usopp, let’s go fishing!”
Their sniper looks up, adjusting his goggles. “Okay!”

“Me too!” Lucy cheers, and without warning she turns back to Zoro and smashes her lips to his, rough and urgent. Zoro grunts in surprise, trying to react even as she pulls away. He blinks at her, shocked for a second too long as she giggles and slams her hat on his head, then dances away before he can reach out and drag her back.

He sighs, and then tips the hat down low so no one can see the stupid grin on his face. He leans back against the mast, folding his hands behind his head, and even though he kind of wishes he was holding Lucy right now, he can’t help but radiate a little smugness as he settles in for his nap.

He still isn’t sure he believes how good his life is right now, but he can smell Lucy in the dusty, worn straw and thinks maybe he might be starting to.

Brook notices him relaxing, and strikes up a lullaby that won’t get the others too excited. Zoro hums in appreciation. They’re all exhausted, and sleep has been hard to come by with the volatile weather and endless, furious challenges from the sea. Zoro loves a good fight more than most, but he likes sleep, too.

It’s nice out today, though, full of sunshine and calm waters. Even the wind is the warm sort that feels soft against one’s skin, sweeping through his clothes. Lucy giggles on his right, and Usopp yells at her for tangling the lines while Chopper hums uneasily, distressed at their squabbling. The cook is making lunch in his kitchen and Franky is below deck in the storage room, working on the renovation he won’t tell anybody about. Brook’s playing gets slower, and softer with every measure, and he hums a harmony alongside the melody, soft and quiet and Zoro feels content.

It’s a good feeling. One he hopes will last, and one that sets his dreams at ease, fills them up with light and laughter.

As the sun begins to descend from its zenith, Lucy finds herself looking for something to do. Most of her nakama are either busy, or taking a little time to rest and relax. Nami and Sanji are the only ones actively working, with the redhead plotting a course through an upcoming reef and her cook preparing for dinner. The New World has been challenging—thrilling—so far, and Lucy knows most of the crew is pretty well exhausted—would have to be, considering the level of sleep deprivation.

Quickly, nearly instinctively, Lucy checks the whereabouts of her nakama. Zoro is the only one napping, leaning against the main mast, where he can watch most of the crew. He’s still got her hat, and she can see the cord trailing around his neck so the wind doesn’t pull it away. Brook is keeping Chopper company as the very diligent little reindeer fishes, still trying to catch something Sanji can serve even in this barren stretch of sea. Usopp gave up on that half an hour ago, and is now tinkering in his workshop below deck. Franky is running extraneous maintenance checks down there, too. Before her, Robin reclines on the deck with a book in her hand. There’s a tray with iced tea nearby, and she has sunglasses over her eyes.

Between Robin and the others, it’s a sight and atmosphere so familiar it hurts, but it’s the first time Lucy’s seen it in two years.

Robin gives her as smile as Lucy walks toward her. Lucy still isn’t quite used to the new haircut, but she likes it. It makes her look much more open. Like she’s not hiding anymore. Not so wary or edgy. Lucy thinks Robin might have been really girly, had life happened differently for her.

“Whatchya reading?” Lucy asks. The title is half-hidden behind Robin’s hand, and in a font that
Robin holds up the cover for Lucy’s inspection. “It’s a collection of stories. They’re considered by most to be fictional, but some scholars believe them to be first-hand accounts of individuals living in a now-extinct culture.”

Lucy cocks her head to the side. “What do you think, Robin?”

The woman’s grin turns sly. “I think that I’ve never read anything quite like these stories before.” She slips her sunglasses back to rest on the crown of her head. “I do think, however, I’ve lived something quite similar.”

Lucy looks at the book curiously. “Really?”

Robin looks close to laughing, like she’s enjoying some private joke. “Mhmm. It’s quite thrilling to read.”

Lucy plops herself down on the edge of the chaise and grins. “Teach me?”

The look on Robin’s face melts to something tender and fond. “Of course, Sencho.”

It takes some doing, but eventually they settle the book between them. Lucy frowns down at the page, and she knows she’s going to need lots of help from Robin just looking at the text. It’s a fine print with lots of big words Lucy’s pretty sure she’s never even heard before.

But that’s fine. That’s what Robin does, after all. She explains the things the rest of them could never understand.

“‘There was once a child,’” Robin begins. “‘One known to both the sky and sea.’”

“‘Her name was Orla, of the family of…’” Lucy squints at the page. “I can’t read it. It’s smudged.”

“It’s an old book,” Robin says sedately. “These things happen, when they don’t have proper care.”

Lucy grins at her archaeologist. “Good thing you have it now, Robin!”

Robin looks amused. “Indeed. And the next sentence?”

“‘The child, whose name means ‘first to step’, was strong-willed, and committed to the sea, for she knew her dreams would be re-re-wreck-owned?’”

“Reckoned,” Robin supplies patiently.

“‘For she knew her dreams would be reckoned upon the waves.’” Lucy scrunches her nose. “What does that mean?” Most everyone dreams of going out to sea. Even the shmucks who don’t want to be pirates. It’s not like it’s unusual, or anything.

“Hmm.” Robin muses. “I think it means she had a dream that could only be completed by sailing across the sea.” Robin smiles a little more mischievously. “Perhaps she had her own One Piece.”

Lucy frowns at the book. “I don’t want to read it if it’s going to tell me that.”

Robin laughs softly. “I don’t think that will be the case.”

Lucy gives the book one last skeptical look before deciding to trust Robin. If anyone knew, she did, after all. “Alright. ‘So one day, when Orla had come of age, she took to the sea alone, in search of
dreams…”

Zoro watches in horror as Lucy slips off a scaffold merrily, unwilling to save herself. He reaches for her and shouts, screaming “Lucy, no—”

Zoro wakes, and sees the planked ceiling of the boys’ quarters in the Sunny. He releases a quiet, slow breath, and mentally catalogues his nakama’s whereabouts. All the guys are here in their quarters. Sanji is awake too, probably disturbed by his unconscious spike of Haki, and the cook at least doesn’t embarrass the both of them by acknowledging he woke up, or that he noticed, or that he was obviously keeping track of the crew via Observation Haki just like Zoro. The girls sleep above them, and Zoro can hear Robin and Nami’s voices humming at a low frequency, meaning they’re still asleep. Lucy is…

…not in her room.

There’s a brief flash of something close to panic, and then he realizes she’s on Sunny’s figurehead, awake and probably keeping watch, and he relaxes, holding back a sigh.

Well. It’s not like he’ll be going back to sleep anytime soon.

Zoro hops out of bed, his suspended hammock creaking softly as he does. Chopper, sleeping beneath him, turns over in his sleep but doesn’t wake, and Zoro leaves quietly, shutting the door behind him and leaving his nakama to rest.

It’s still nice outside, the sea nearly motionless in a way it rarely is this far from land. The night sky is clear except for the horizon behind them, where the very edges of the hurricane Nami promised earlier rages.

Actually, now that he thinks about it, the ocean should be nowhere near as calm as it is this close to the hurricane. Whatever, the Grand Line is weird. He’s seen stranger things.

He climbs up to the helms deck, and then clomps up the stairs to the figurehead, making sure he doesn’t surprise her if she somehow missed his arrival. She doesn’t say anything, but he does sense the little spike in her attention through Observation Haki.

In one easy motion he grips one of Sunny’s spikes and vaults over it, landing on the other side as softly as he can.

Lucy blinks up at him and grins, and for a moment he just takes her in.

The moonlight makes her tan skin look alabaster pale, and her sun-bleached hair like ink. Her eyes glitter, reflecting starlight off the water, and her smile is bold and warm. She’s wearing nightclothes—a t-shirt bearing her midriff and cotton shorts—and she looks beautiful.

She scoots over, patting the space next to her and looking up expectantly.

Zoro complies, and Lucy immediately crawls into his lap, settling between his legs with her back against his chest and the hat half-squished between them. Zoro wraps his arms around her waist, and she sighs in a contended sort of way that makes him feel pathetically warm inside.

Only Lucy does this kind of thing to him. Her and literally no one else. It’d be frustrating if he hadn’t long ago accepted it.

“What’re you doing up?” She asks, voice low and quiet. There’s something about the stars and the
sea and the distant storm that makes it seem like breaking the peace is taboo.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he tells her, equally quiet. There’s no reason to inform her of his nightmare. He’s been having similar ones for almost two years now, of Lucy dying at Marineford or in any number of scenarios his paranoid subconscious cooks up. If he was still at Kuraigana, he’d get up and do some training before breakfast, try and wear the anxiety and frustration out through his muscles. Here he can touch her, which is infinitely more reassuring. “I thought Usopp had watch tonight.”

“I couldn’t sleep either,” she admits. “I told him to go to bed since I was going to be up anyway.”

Zoro supposes Lucy has probably gotten used to nightmares too.

He doesn’t ask about it, trusts she’ll tell him if she wants to, if he can help. Between the two of them, she’s definitely better at opening up her vulnerabilities on a regular basis, so he’s sure she’d tell him if it would help. Instead he just leans down to plant a kiss at her temple, and lets a comfortable silence bloom between them as she laces her hands in his over her stomach.

It’s nice, just holding her like this. They haven’t had a lot of free time since entering the New World, and certainly not a lot of time to themselves. It gives him an opportunity to study her, watch the expression on her face as she watches the sea.

It’s not quite her thinking face, the one she used to get when staring out at sea. This version is a touch more solemn. Not quite melancholy, but it something with similar weight. There’s less childishness in her aura.

He’s noticed the changes a little more, now that they’ve been together longer and the novelty of their reunion and their relationship has worn off a bit. Lucy is absolutely still Lucy, laughing her head off every few seconds and being generally too loud and getting into everything and anything to satiate her endless energy and eating way more than should be physically possible. But there are little changes he’s noticed, little shifts in how she behaves that betray the trauma she’s endured.

She sometimes grips his hand too tight—or tighter than seems necessary, at any rate. He hasn’t figured out what sets her off, what triggers the need for reassurance, but he does his best to provide it. Occasionally she’ll look around the ship with a glint of protective determination in her eyes so great it borders on wrath, like she’s just waiting for someone or something to come along and try to hurt one of her nakama, like she almost wants something to happen just so she can prove nothing stands a chance against her.

Zoro might be projecting a little, but he’s pretty sure it’s true. He and Lucy are pretty similar that way.

There’re other things, too, like the way she avoids being alone if she can help it, the way she sometimes presses a fist to the center of her scar, a faraway look in her eyes, or how she just looks older. It speaks of trauma, and pain he wasn’t there to bear with her.

(He’s pretty sure he’ll never forgive himself for that.)

Thanks to Mihawk and that stupid paper the Revolutionaries distributed, he has an idea of what she went through in the war, at least broadly. The rest of their missing time is almost blank.

Even though he wants to, it’s not something he’s going to ask about. He already knows more than he should, and he doesn’t really have the heart to ask about it right this second. He’s a little less confident that she’ll share the details about that one though, and it makes him uncertain.

“You’re staring,” she mumbles, and there’s a smirk on her lips.
Zoro doesn’t bother denying it. “Mhmm.” He ducks down, grazing her left cheekbone with his lips, right over the scar under her eye. She gives a small shiver, probably not related to the cool breeze, and tilts her chin back at an awkward angle, searching.

Zoro eagerly obliges her, and he turns more to catch her mouth with his, a warm, tingly feeling radiating from the contact as they meet. Lucy matches him easily, massaging his lips with hers—though maybe not quite as gentle or precise in her movements. Zoro smirks into the kiss a little, thinking about the first few times they did this, and how Lucy made up for inexperience with enthusiasm and a complete lack of embarrassment regarding what she wanted and what felt good.

Quick learner though, he thinks, as his captain suddenly switches from slow and gentle to heated and determined as she sucks his lip between hers, grazing sharply with her teeth, and then Zoro is gone as he’s completely lost in the act of kissing his captain.

She feels—perfect, like this. It feels like she belongs right here, in the circle of his arms, their fingers twined and Lucy straining for a better angle. The little encouraging noises she makes only spur him on, make him think she feels it too, that she wants to get closer, as close as possible.

She smells like the ocean, like sunlight itself, like her hair and skin soaked up the very essence of life on the sea and if there was room here he’d lay her out beneath him, see if he could get her to make those same breathless noises he did when he worried her pulse point that one time. His hands move over her stomach a little, and the feel of her soft skin under his fingers drives him a little crazy, makes his head feel fuzzier, makes him kiss her a little harder than he really meant to until she gasps under his mouth. Their positions give him the advantage as he swipes his tongue against hers.

Lucy leans into him, pressing her shoulder blade into his chest and the new angle gives her better access. She pushes into his mouth, aggressive and demanding, and that’s about when Zoro’s head explodes into white noise.

Nothing Zoro’s ever done feels like kissing Lucy does. Not even kissing other people, which he’s done before, and it never felt quite like this. There’s too much in his head, too much energy buzzing under his skin, and everywhere they share contact feels like fire. There’s this never-ending greed inside him demanding more, more, more, and he’s not sure what he could ever do to satisfy it, kind of hopes it never will be. Holding Lucy like this feels like the closing of a circle, the connecting of a circuit.

Eventually, however, his neck begins to protest the odd angle, and he’s not so sure Lucy’s actually breathing, so he slows down, trying to express his reluctance, and pulls back.

He loves watching Lucy’s face right after they’ve kissed. She always takes a second or two to surface properly, her mouth still pursed slightly and her expression open and vulnerable as she blinks back to reality, right before her lips twist in a pout.

Something very masculine in Zoro is proud of that expression, and the fact that he put it there. It makes him smirk, and he tightens his hold on her, pulling her flush against him, possessive and jealous, wrapping around her as best he can. There are times when he thinks he wants to hide Lucy behind his ribcage, a magpie-like desire to keep her all to himself and protect her so well she never has to lift a finger in her own defense again. Not that he wants to stop her from fighting. Just. He likes the idea of Lucy only ever doing it on her own terms because he’s managed to make sure no threat can touch her.

He knows Lucy can protect herself. He knows she’s stronger than him. He still wants to protect her though. Always. And he made sure he’s strong enough to do it, too.
Lucy, for her part, seems content enough to simply cuddle. She gives a soft hum, resting her head on his shoulder and running gentle fingers over his forearms. They have conversations like this, sometimes. Wordless ones communicated entirely through touch.

He touches her every chance he gets. He thinks maybe he’s making up for lost time. It’s not like Lucy’s any better, so maybe she is too.

At the thought he turns to graze his lips along the column of her throat, tempted to leave a mark there. Half the crew freaked out last time though, when they finally noticed. They had to explain what a hickey is to Chopper, which was just plain uncomfortable for everyone, especially when he started asking Robin really clinical questions about human sexual practices.

Curly-brow’s reaction was hilarious though. And every time Zoro looked at Lucy he remembered how she felt in his arms, breathing heavy in his ear and he’d feel smug. And sometimes when he’d catch her looking she’d dart her eyes to the long scratches she carved with her nails over his left shoulder and he just knew she was thinking of the same moment.

Lucy lets out a soft sigh, sleepy and content, and Zoro decides she maybe needs the rest, considering how sleep deprived they’ve been. He plants his chin on her shoulder instead, curling around her as his hands stroke her waist, and pulls her back so she’s leaning against his torso, happily acting as a mattress.

Lucy hums, sounding amused, and relaxes over him like her bones have turned to jelly. He hitches her a little closer, his arms crossing over her waist, and he makes a contended sound low in his chest that’s nearly involuntary.

He’s just—happy. Just happy. It’s kind of weird.

“Nami says we’ll get to the island tomorrow evening,” Lucy mumbles. “What d’you think we’ll find?”

Zoro shrugs his left shoulder, the one Lucy isn’t leaning against. “I dunno. That’s half the point of going, isn’t it?”

Lucy gives a soft laugh and she twists a little in his grip to burrow deeper into his chest. “Heh. Knew there’s a reason I love you.”

Zoro’s breath catches. He hasn’t grown used to this, hasn’t been able to take it as natural yet. He still has a moment of shock and disbelief every time she says it, has to force it aside.

He still hasn’t been able to say it back yet. He’s not sure he ever will.

Lucy smiles though, unbothered, and settles just a little bit deeper into him. He releases a breath slowly, kissing her shoulder again. “Go to sleep,” he tells her. “I’ll keep watch.”

Lucy makes a noise that sounds a lot like a purr. “Hm. You’re the best.”

Zoro rolls his eye. “Uh huh.”

“Had a nightmare about you,” Lucy whispers, and he tenses. “You died the same way Ace did.”

Zoro releases his breath slowly. “I’m fine. So are you.”

He squeezes her hand once, brings her scarred palm to his lips.
You’re alive. I am too. You’re not in Marineford anymore. You never have to do it alone again.

Lucy’s breath hitches softly, and she turns just enough to kiss the underside of his jaw.

I know. I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad I am too.

Her breathing evens out a few seconds later as she drops off to sleep, and Zoro takes a deep breath, relishing the moment until the horizon turns pale pink and the sun peeks over the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

The name Orla is Irish, specifically Jewish Irish. It really does mean “first to step,” or rather “the first to do anything.” The story draws on all kinds of fan theories about One Piece. Mostly the ones I liked. If you want to rant about that type of thing, please message me or comment, and I will be MORE THAN happy to rant about these things.

Again, I am not giving Lucy a butt tattoo. It's a joke, and Lucy is using it as a reminder to Zoro that she loves him, too.
Chapter Summary

The gang arrives on a burning island, and has the darndest time getting their captain to take this seriously.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Lucy are you sure?” Nami asks warily.

Lucy looks away from the burning island, glowing under stormy skies, and glances at her navigator quizzically. “Huh?”

“It’s on fire,” Usopp squeaks. “It’s on fire. Of course it is.”

“It looks fun, doesn’t it?” Lucy asks eagerly.

Nami scowls. “Are you forgetting the mysterious call we had just now? The one where a guy got straight up murdered?”

Lucy shakes her head, denying it. “Yeah, that’s why we gotta go. We’d have to even if the island was boring.”

Zoro snorts behind her, and Franky chuckles.

“You may as well give up, Nami-san,” Sanji sighs around his cigarette. “Lucy-san seems quite determined.”

“I’m sure the island is quite interesting,” Robin says curiously. Lucy beams at her.

“I’m not sure how well bones mix with flames,” Brook mutters uncertainly.

“Or fur,” Chopper grumbles.

“It looks fun, doesn’t it?” Lucy asks again, giggling.

There’s a collective groan around her. Lucy beams in the face of it.

“Let me go make a Pirate Lunchbox,” Sanji capitulates reluctantly. Lucy almost tears up in gratitude. It’s been years since she had a Pirate Lunchbox. She misses Sanji’s bento.

“Yeah, yeah, off with you shit cook,” Zoro goads.

Sanji scowls at him. “At least I can provide for the ladies, shit swordsman!” He calls before disappearing into the galley.

Lucy pats Zoro on the shoulder—mhm, Zoro has nice shoulders—and gives him a sympathetic look. “I can’t provide for anyone either. That’s why we have Sanji.”
Zoro gives her an exasperated look, but seems unbothered, otherwise. “Whatever. Everyone draw straws,” Zoro orders dryly, digging out a handful of straws from his robes.

Lucy frowns. “I want to go though…”

Nami rolls her eyes. “We know. This is for the rest of us.” She draws one of the straws, and gives a sigh of relief when it has no red marker.

“Oh, it’s me,” Robin says neutrally. She looks dully pleased.

“And me,” Zoro asserts. Lucy grins, because this is going to be so much fun. Zoro likes taking the same sort of challenges and risks that she does, and Robin is always happy to go along with their antics.

“I—I—” Lucy turns to Usopp, who’s tearing up a little with a red straw in his hand, “I’m not afraid!” He declares, shaking a bit.

Lucy grins, and thumps him on the back. Usopp is so brave. “We’re going to have so much fun!”

“Yay…” Usopp groans. It kind of sounds like a whine, but it makes Lucy giggle anyway, and the island burns invitingly before them.

In retrospect, Zoro probably should have thought through the fact that walking through a burning island would involve shedding a few articles of clothing.

For him and Usopp it’s not much of an issue. He just slips out of his robe and lets the top half hang over his hamarki, careful to retain easy access to his katana. Usopp wasn’t wearing a shirt in the first place, but he does tie his hair up off his neck.

For the girls it’s a bit more difficult. Robin is wearing a dress, and somehow manages to look unaffected even as she starts sweating bullets. Lucy removes her jacket, ties it over her hat, and sweats just as much as the rest of them in her black leather and denim and fishnets and shit Zoro can’t stop staring.

Two years of training paid off.

It’s more obvious like this, with the glisten of sweat highlighting every curve, every vein, every flex of lean muscle. The scar on her chest is more visible without the jacket, the lacing of her band tied so that the shiny red skin over her sternum is easily visible, the contours of her scar clear as sweat drips down behind the leather. The line of her abs disappears under her shorts.

He's supposed to focus under these conditions.

Unfair. Completely, totally unfair.

His only consolation is that Lucy seems to be having similar problems regarding him. Sometimes he catches her eyes and there’s something molten and wanting there, and then he’s glad he can blame his flush on the environment.

They haven’t slept together yet. Chopper served them both a very long lecture on the importance of using two methods of birth control and the two weeks it will require for the injection he sicced on Lucy to take effect. Also, they’re both pretty inexperienced when it comes to sex. Lucy wasn’t Zoro’s first kiss, but he was hers, and Zoro’s few and infrequent sexual encounters have been…fine, at best.
He has a feeling that with Lucy it would be...different. Especially when she looks like *that* and looks at *him* like that.

They haven’t really talked about it. The timing has been poor since arriving in the New World, and things have been hectic at best. Any alone time they’ve had has been brief, or they’ve been exhausted, and frankly they’re both still getting to know each other again.

Zoro doesn’t think it’ll be long before it comes up, though, considering how blatantly she’s checking him out. He’s probably just as obvious. They should probably talk about this soon.

And okay, maybe thoughts of this are still lingering in his head when they run into the dragon, and maybe he wants to show off a bit. Maybe he wants to show her some of what he’s learned in the past two years, and see what she’s brought to the table as well. If he does, and if he takes a smug sort of pride in the hungry way she eyes him while he cooks the dragon, well he’s not exactly complaining.

Falling into the icy water, Lucy experiences a second of pure panic. It’s been a long time since she’s fallen into water unintentionally while conscious—she had to be more careful than that on Ruskaina, since Rayleigh refused to fish her out. Full submersion is terrifying. She’s paralyzed by the curse of the Devil Fruits, and too shocked by the cold to even preserve her air.

Then a large hand curls around her hip, and she’s pulled up into the broad expanse of bronze skin and muscle, the forearm across the small of her back pressing her stomach to his, and through half-lidded eyes she sees heavy knuckles snatch her hat back from the black depths of the lake.

*Oh*, she remembers, feeling silly. *Zoro*.

If she wasn’t already limp from the effects of water, she would probably melt into him, boneless and comforted. If Zoro’s here, she’s safe. And he’s warm. So, so warm. If she could move she’d wrap around him a few times, burrow into his heat like she was made to be there.

He kicks furiously for the surface. Lucy starts to fall back and away from him as he does, water dragging her away from his chest, but then the hand holding the hat comes up to cradle her to his shoulder.

*Safe*, she thinks, dizzy from the lack of oxygen and disoriented from the water, *Zoro means safe*.

She knows that. She’s always known that. For some reason though, it’s this moment—ears popping from water pressure with her swordsman easily dragging both of them to the surface and thoughtful enough to bring her hat along too—that makes her kind of want to tear up, just a bit. Everything since they’ve met up again has happened so fast that she’s hardly had time to adjust to having a crew again, or having Zoro within arms’ reach. She spent six months alone on Ruskaina before meeting up with her nakama in Sabaody, and that was only a week and a half ago. Her instincts haven’t readjusted yet.

They break the surface, and she hears Usopp and Robin splashing nearby. She’s shaking so hard from the cold she almost can’t see anything, and Zoro doesn’t seem much better off.

Lucy grins at him anyway, as wide as she can. “My h-hero,” she coos, delighted.

Zoro rolls his eye, his teeth chattering. “N-need to ge-et out.”

Lucy and Robin are no use in this task, so Lucy just presses her face into Zoro’s neck, trying to warm him and show her appreciation at the same time as he swims, one of his hands still clutching
The panicked tension in her chest eases as her instincts accept her safety, despite the circumstances.

Zoro may have thought she was joking, about him being her hero. She wasn’t really. Zoro’s one of the best people she knows. And the strongest. And he only proves it every time he deftly assuages all of Lucy’s fears with the grace of a bull, whether he knows it or not.

But seriously, this water is *holy-mother-of-God cold.*

“I owe that guy my life,” Lucy says quietly, eyes locked on the Shichibukai. Zoro’s already mentally tagged him with Lucy’s nickname for him, mostly because it seems to annoy him, and Zoro finds his frustration at Lucy’s irrepressibility entertaining.

“You said thank you. Not much you can do if he doesn’t want anything.” He leans back against the icy cave wall, both hands behind his head. He figures he may as well take a nap while he can. With proper gear the cold is comfortable enough.

Lucy takes a sip from her hot cider, somehow provided by the cook. He was apparently concerned enough about the girls’ health to make some even while freaking out about being in Nami’s body. For once the stupid perv’s concerns were spot on—Lucy’s stopped shivering for the first time since falling in the lake.

Across the cave, Chopper-in-the-cook’s body speaks quietly with Trafalgar, probably regarding the children Nami forced the rest of them to rescue.

Well. Forced is probably a strong word. There’s not a single Straw Hat that would have felt okay with leaving them behind, even if they don’t really have the means to do much for ‘em. Nami just… put her foot down.

It does raise the question though, as to what kind of doctor could go along with an operation that put those same kids at risk. He doesn’t seem too concerned even now, really, not that it matters much so long as he doesn’t work against them from here on. It’s a bit bewildering, but not really an issue Zoro particularly cares about. Trafalgar seems like a complicated sort of person, and Zoro isn’t paid for his people skills. That’s more Lucy’s job, and she seems to like the guy well enough.

“He’s a good guy,” Lucy says after a moment, like she’s reading his mind. He raises an eyebrow at her, taking in the thoughtful expression on her face. She shivers and presses into his side, clutching the cider with her left hand and rubbing her chest absently with her right. Zoro doesn’t comment. He’s noticed she seems more sensitive to cold than she used to be.

It’s odd. Everyone is so similar to how he remembers them, enough that they all slotted into their old patterns instantly, but there are little changes that keep throwing him. Like Lucy suddenly hating colder temperatures, or Robin smiling more often than she used to.

He shifts a little, making more space for Lucy. She takes advantage of it immediately, making a small happy noise that sets off a fond glow deep in his chest.

Zoro returns his gaze to Trafalgar. He owes the guy for Lucy’s life. She thanked him already, but he’s still curious as to why he saved her, especially now that he knows the two of them didn’t meet up again after Sabaody.

“I’m gonna be his friend,” Lucy declares blithely, heedless to the object of her friendship’s wishes as usual.
“I have a plan to take down one of the Yonko.”

The grin on Torao’s face is wicked and violent, but it doesn’t scare Lucy. Doesn’t even daunt her. Torao just doesn’t scare her. Maybe because it’s hard to fear someone who fought for her life, maybe because her “uncanny ability to read the character of others,” as Rayleigh put it, is telling her Torao isn’t so bad.

He wants her to ally with him. He must be desperate if he’s asking a near-stranger.

Lucy doesn’t mind helping him. Especially since he turned away her thanks when she gave it. He’s not lording anything over her, just offering.

It’s a good start to a friendship.

And then there’s the prize he’s so giddy over. The take-down of a Yonko. Another person at the top, one Lucy has to fight. This is a guy as powerful as the old man Ace was so fond of, the kind of person capable of wrecking islands on a whim.

It sounds like fun. It sounds like a challenge.

But she’s got to be careful about this. Shanks is a Yonko. She can’t approach him untested.

“Which one?” Lucy asks.

“Kaido,” Torao responds bluntly. “I have a plan, but it has a pretty low chance of success.”

“Hm. Well that’s fine then.”

Torao cocks an eyebrow, and it disappears under his fuzzy hat. “You’re in?”

Lucy considers it for a second more. This really, really wasn’t the plan most of her crew had in mind. Mostly they were just going to wander around the New World the same way they did Paradise, going from island to island until they found what they were looking for and having adventures along the way. This plan is…much more aggressive. Intentional. It tries to control the whims of fate instead of ride them.

But it’s not a bad idea either. And after everything…Lucy would much rather be proactive than reactive this time around.

Plus, she can’t shake the feeling that Torao needs her. Bad. There’s something about this that’s dark and personal and a howl against her senses when she uses Observation Haki. Regardless of what he said earlier, Lucy does owe Torao. And she’d like to be friends with him anyway.

“Yeah, I’m in.” She says with a grin. Torao looks blandly impassive.

Nami-in-Franky’s-body groans. “You idiot.”

Lucy just sends her a grin. “It’s fine. You’ll see.”

“Look, all I’m saying is, the captain may be strong and independent, but she’s still a woman, and as such it is your responsibility as her woefully inadequate paramour to—”
“Would you shut up already?” Zoro growls, stomping through the snow. It’s the kind with the thin crust of ice and soft stuff underneath. It’s annoying, and it isn’t improving his mood for this conversation. “I don’t need your advice, pervert. And stop staring at Nami’s boobs. You’re going to trip, and then she’ll fine me when her hands get all cut up from the ice.”

It’s taking a lot of Zoro’s self-restraint to refrain from hitting the cook-in-Nami’s-body, but he does it because Nami would probably whip out a signed contract of indentured servitude if he actually damaged something.

“Obviously not, since it took you this long to get together in the first place. You suck at wooing.”

“I do not,” Zoro growls, affronted. He tries to think of an example of a time where he wooed. He fails. “Shut up.”

Sanji gives him a look that clearly states his skepticism. It’s eerily effective on Nami’s face. “Now I may admit that my previous attempt was…misguided, if well-intentioned—”

Zoro feels himself twitch with remembered fury. “You described in excruciating detail which positions we should use with adjustments for Lucy’s size and body type.” He wrote that stupid note like a goddamn itinerary.

“—and I admit that was, in hindsight, a smidge too involved. I had concerns about a delicate flower like Lucy-san and a brute like you, and sought to improve her experiences specifically.”

Zoro stares, deadpan. “Lucy, delicate.”

“Lucy-san is a gorgeous woman who deserves only the best!” Sanji declares, and that look on Nami’s face is just bizarre. He feels vaguely uncomfortable witnessing it. “When I joined the crew, I swore to protect her! Provide for her! Assure her happiness!”

“You knew her for like a day at that point.”

“All women are worthy of my attention and care!”

“Get a life, shit cook.”

“I’m sure Zoro-san is perfectly capable of adequately romancing our captain, Sanji-san,” Brook mediates sedately. “And Sanji-san, like the rest of us, has more than enough reason to worry over Lucy-san’s welfare. She does seem to injure herself quite a lot.”

Zoro huffs, not really able to argue that point. Not like he’d ever claim his nakama shouldn’t worry over Lucy anyway. That would be just fucking stupid. “She’s strong,” he defends. Then, because the cook’s annoying, “and I would only take your advice if I wanted to scare her off.”

“What was that, asshole?”

“I for one don’t understand how three strong warriors like yourselves could stand to submit to a woman’s authority. Especially her suitor.”

Zoro trains a glare on the samurai, and feels Sanji does the same. “Nobody asked you.”

“Lucy-san is strong and worthy of respect! Her beauty is only rivaled by Nami-san and Robin-chan!”

Kin’emon gives Sanji a skeptical look, like he can’t quite believe the level of idiocy spewing from
the cook’s mouth. Zoro can sympathize. “You know you’re using the wrong honorifics, right?”

Sanji just stares. “No?”

There’s an awkward beat where everyone stares at each other.

“I’m told wooing is an important aspect of any romance,” Kin’emon says after a moment. Zoro groans.

“See! It’s not just me! That guy convinced a girl to have a kid with him.”

“Yes! I have reproduced!”

Sanji’s face grows vaguely reverent at the idea, and Zoro gives him a disgusted look.

“Fuck off, both of you,” Zoro growls, stomping off into the snow.

“You must have at least one idea for a date,” Sanji goads.

Zoro rolls his eyes. “The vast majority of our lives are spent running around beating people up. At what point do you think we have time to go on a date.”

“We have down time,” Sanji counters. “And as Lucy-san’s cook, I feel it is my duty to ensure her happiness and satisfaction, which now includes the health of her relationship with you.”

Zoro glowers. “It’s none of your business, shit-cook.”

“The ship’s not that big, shit-swordsman.”

Zoro rolls his eyes again, and instinctively checks on Lucy and the others back at the cave using Observation Haki. She seems like she’s contemplating something pretty serious—something important, if the tension in her voice is anything to go by. He wonders what changed since they left. She doesn’t seem panicked or in danger or anything, and even if she was she probably wouldn’t need his help.

Wooing. Pfft. He can woo. Zoro can totally woo. He just…hasn’t had a lot of opportunities to do so. Most of their lives are spent on the ship. When they do make landfall it’s usually a fight for their lives for a few hours or days, and then recovery, and then usually a mad scramble off the island. He supposes they could have gone on a date on Fishman Island, but they hadn’t actually figured anything out by then.

He wonders if Lucy even wants to be wooed, and if so, how he should go about it. Then he hates himself a little for wondering. Can’t be giving the shit cook any credit.

“Like I’d ever take advice from a guy that wore a dress.”

Sanji’s face turns beet red. “I told you, that never happened.”

Kin’emon splutters. “A man should not adorn a woman’s attire!”

“Oh fuck you, I didn’t know samurai were bigots.”

“Are you sure you reproduced?”

Occasionally, the cook was on the same page as him. Zoro just wishes he’d stop commenting on his love-life.
It’s funny, but the New World seems pretty intent on making Lucy watch her nakama—and that’s her boyfriend twice in a row now, dammit—fight for their lives over a Den Den Mushi. Ironically, Lucy’s the one in the cage this time.

Zoro, Sanji, Brook, and some other people sprint for their lives away from the billowing purple cloud, and even through the screen Lucy’s instincts are screaming that they cannot be caught by that.

“Oh, Sanji-kun is…” Robin breathes, and then Lucy realizes what she’s talking about.

Sanji’s not in his own body, where he could just fly away and probably drag the rest with him. He’s in Nami’s, who’s strong, but not the same way Lucy and Zoro and Sanji are.

Shit. They might actually be in trouble.

Lucy experiments with the idea of unleashing all her Conqueror’s Haki. She knows her friends would be okay, including Torao and Smokey. She’s not certain it would really work though. Caesar’s a weasel, and pathetic, but he isn’t bereft of power. A mean, one-trick pony kind of power, but power nonetheless.

The screen winks out just as Zoro looks back over his shoulder at the cloud of gas, his face creased in disbelief and irritation. He’s too far away to pick up on his Voice in detail, but she would be able to tell if he died.

Lucy relaxes. Zoro will be fine. He’s strong. He’s always been strong.

That doesn’t mean Lucy’s going to take an attack on her nakama lying down though.

She yanks against her chains once, and grins.

“Right. Time to stop messing around.”

“What? Caesar beat Lucy?”

He says it sort of disbelievingly, like he’s hearing it underwater. Usopp looks a little apologetic for having delivered the news, and Zoro scowls, gritting his teeth.

Then Zoro does something he almost never has before. He walks away from a fight, to go do something more important.

“OI! LUCY!”

Lucy is an idiot. Zoro knows this, and has always known this, and has never really expected any different from her. She gets carried away, occasionally fails to grasp consequences as well as she should, and sometimes that comes back to bite them all in the ass.

He’s not going to lose her because she was being irreverent. He thought she’d learned a little better. He knows she has. He’s seen the scars that lesson has left on her, physical and otherwise.

“Lucy! Get over here!”

He’s searching the railing still, trying to figure out where she went. There’s a flash of red a few posts down from him, and her face peeks over the railing, her cheeks raw from cold and wind and her eyes alight with purpose, but adventure too.
It makes something clench in his chest, makes him a bit angrier than he already was. She does not get to be so selfish anymore. She risks more than her own line when she risks it all. Zoro expects that much from her, wouldn’t follow her if she didn’t risk everything for her dream, but he expects her to do it with care, too.

“Hey, Lucy! Get a grip and take this seriously! This is only the beginning of the New World! We can’t afford to be careless!”

Lucy blinks a few times, obviously surprised, and then she grins, a smile breaking over her face like the sunrise.

“Sorry, Zoro. I let my guard down, and we haven’t even had sex yet!”

And just like that, his previous frustrations make way for a tidal wave of embarrassment and his face burns.

“Lucy.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll win! See you in the tower!”

Goddammit, this girl is way more trouble than she’s worth.

But he can’t quite hide the amused smirk on his face, and the cook snorts when he sees it.

“Well that was a rude way to tell her you were worried,” Sanji comments. Zoro glares, still a bit tongue-tied.

“He probably just needs to get laid,” Usopp agrees, giggling.

“How uncouth,” Kin’emon sniffs, “a woman speaking in such a manner.”

“Shut up, you chauvinistic pig,” Nami growls. Nothing gets Nami’s temper up like people speaking ill of Lucy.

Zoro snorts as Nami puts the samurai in his place, and he watches men in hazmat suits fly unceremoniously off the catwalk Lucy’s tearing through. He smirks a little, unbidden.

Honestly, only Lucy could reassure people by humiliating them.

Chapter End Notes

It’s so cute how utterly loyal to Luffy the gang is in the Punk Hazard arc. Like, both Sanji and Usopp at one point face someone and go “you’re the kind of person my captain hates the most.” The implication being, of course, that because their captain hates this type of person, they’ve begun to do so as well, perhaps even more than they would have otherwise. It’s just cute. They’re all adorable.

Can I just say, I definitely underestimated what publishing a sequel would do to my inbox? Jesus. You guys are amazing. Thank you for your support.

Also, I’ve had a really shitty week, which is why I’m posting this now. Let me know how it is?
Chapter Summary

Lucy and Zoro both fight Monet, with the respective difficulties that entails.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Snow Harpy is annoying, because she’s cutting Lucy off from her real target. But she’s also not inconsequential. Snow Harpy makes for a good wall, and Lucy’s fists aren’t well-suited to deal with her.

“I wonder what it’s like, to be a female captain on these seas,” Snow Harpy muses quietly. “I bet it’s exhausting, fending off all the men who want a piece of you.”

Lucy raises an eyebrow as she punches her way through another layer of this snow dome. “I hit people who bug me.”

Snow Harpy giggles, and when she pops out of the snow wall behind her, Lucy sees the tip of one feathered wing cover the woman’s mouth, a surprisingly dainty gesture considering the size of her wings. “I’m sure. Possessing enough strength to assure one’s own safety is impressive.”

“Thanks, I trained a lot.”

Lucy can’t break through all the layers at once. Just the first two with a strong punch, and the first four if she uses Gear Second. It closes up immediately though, and Lucy knows this woman is just as determined to keep her here as Lucy is to leave.

Snow Harpy’s not fighting to win. She’s fighting to stall.

It’s not the type of fight Lucy likes.

“I prefer being part of a group that protects me, rather than doing the protecting, personally. I do whatever my master tells me to do in exchange.” Snow Harpy observes sedately.

Lucy growls. “I don’t have time for someone as pathetic as that.”

The woman giggles again. “Pathetic? How rude. Are you getting cold yet?”

Yeah, actually, she was. The edges of her scar ache, and the chilled air sweeps across her skin. She probably should have kept the coat from earlier. “Just fight already!”

And then a quiet whisper in her ear, voice smooth and confident. “I am.”

Wings wrap around Lucy before she can react, her Observation Haki muffled and hindered by the snow, and her face is pressed into Snow Harpy’s shoulder. Lucy tries to move but—can’t.

She can’t move.

Snow Harpy coos, stroking her hair like a mother might comfort a crying child. “What a fighter you
are. So strong. In a normal situation I’d never win. But the strongest is not always the one who wins the fight, you see?"

The world seems still, quiet, and so, so cold. Lucy can’t feel her fingers. Her head feels heavy and her body weak.

“Just go to sleep now,” Snow Harpy croons, “Just go to sleep. It’s quiet.”

I shouldn’t, Lucy thinks fuzzily, I can’t fall asleep. I’ll die.

But it’s cold, and the cold hurts as it creeps up her neck and seeps into her skin, leaving nothing but numb, unfeeling ice behind.

“There’s no need to fight now. Just sleep.”

But…that’s not right, is it? She always needs to fight. Always, every day, every moment, because that is the life she was born to and the life she chose. That’s part of what being a pirate is. Part of being alive.

If she’s not fighting…she’s…dead?

Lucy can’t be dead. She can’t die right now. She has people depending on her, people she needs who maybe need her in a similar way. She isn’t the Pirate King yet.

The cold seeps so deep it starts to feel warm. Her eyes slip closed. Her body, as if made of living ice and stone, slumps forward.

“Get a grip and take this seriously! We can’t afford to be careless!”

Oh. Zoro.

A jumble of memories flit through her head—the first time Zoro fished her out of the ocean, grumbling but not letting go of her until she was safely back on their little dinghy, the first time she heard him laugh and the last time she did, the moment she realized she liked him, pinned uncomfortably under his sleeping frame, and every gentle touch between them, every time they kissed, his warm breath against her ear as they spoke late into the night, and the ambitions that bind them together so intractably.

Zoro. She can’t die because Zoro would—would—

Zoro would live. Become the World’s Greatest Swordsman. But he would be so, so sad.

Her eyes snap open. Something hot pools in her gut, travels up her spine and warms her just enough to actually use the Conqueror’s Haki howling in her chest. The Snow Harpy is before her, still cocooning Lucy with her wings. The numbness hasn’t faded from Lucy’s body—if anything it’s even more powerful. The terrible absence of sensation wakes her more, infuriates her and she will not be overcome.

She moves.

Her hand snaps up, wrapping around the Harpy’s throat as the woman gasps in shock, eyes rolling back in response to the blast of Conqueror’s. Immediately it gets easier to move, and Lucy sucks in a breath, warming half-frozen lungs. She jumps, uses the woman as a counterbalance so harshly that the Harpy falls to her knees, gagging, and Lucy breaks a hole in the floor with her feet.
It’s an escape, which seems shameful in some ways, but Lucy doesn’t care about this woman, and she needs to find Caesar as quickly as possible. Her nakama need her.

She throws Harpy away from the hole just as Lucy starts to fall. The woman is trembling, sweating bullets in response to the blast of Haki, looking utterly unable to move. Protected by others indeed.

Lucy thinks, as she falls into a black pit with no bottom to speak of, that she’d never gather a crew so weak as that, and that Snow Harpy’s boss is probably a pissant.

Zoro lets Robin, Chopper, and Nami through the snow wall Chicken Bitch erected, and turns to face his opponent.

She touches down on the snowpack before him, wings tucked into her side and a thoughtful look on her face.

When she speaks, her voice is light and soft, like the snow. It’s incongruous with the deadly gleam in her eye. “Are you like your captain, then? One of the ‘protectors?’”

Zoro stares her down, saying nothing.

Chicken Bitch is not dissuaded. “You’re the Pirate Hunter, Roronoa Zoro. 110,000,000 Beri. You must be a protector. You’re the second most-valuable member of your crew. Not like Cat Burglar and Devil Child.”

Zoro frowns harder. “You wanna fight or what?”

Chicken Bitch giggles, and it sounds sort of like ice breaking. “You really are like your captain. Straw Hat Lucy called me pathetic when I told her I prefer being protected to doing the protecting.”

Zoro flicks his wrist, spraying melted water droplets from Shusui’s blade onto the snow. “Well she’s right.”

That information does raise a question, though. If Chicken Bitch ran into Lucy and Chicken Bitch still made it here relatively unharmed, then where is Lucy right now? He can feel her using Observation Haki, can sense her nearby and sense that she’s still breathing, but she’s also…muffled, somehow. Not in an injured sort of way. More…distance. But he’s pretty sure she’s unharmed, if maybe a bit frustrated at the moment.

“My, my,” Chicken Bitch hums. Zoro’s not exactly sure what she’s so happy about. “You Straw Hats are really something, aren’t you? I think I’d like you all if you weren’t working against my master.”

Zoro scoffs. “Our captain wouldn’t have any interest in someone who conscripts herself to another like that.”

Chicken Bitch raises a wing, gleaming like metal under the harsh lights of the nursery. “Oh? Does that mean rumors of your loyalty to Straw Hat Lucy are exaggerated, then?”

Zoro raises his blades slightly, ready to move. “Lucy’s our captain. Not our master.”

Chicken Bitch blinks, seemingly surprised by his answer, and then the wicked grin is back, and her gleaming wing arcs forward in a diagonal slash toward Zoro. Shusui and Kitetsu swing up in a block. Chicken Bitch grunts and disengages, leaping back, and Zoro follows her, unrelenting.
Zoro swings forward, about to cut her in half, but she brings a wing up to block, feathers covered in a solid block of diamond-hard snow. She swipes for his head with her free arm, intent on decapitating him, and he’s forced to duck down and roll away, because she has a very significant height advantage due to her ability to fly.

Zoro rolls to his feet, frowning. This woman is going to be troublesome. It’s not that she’s particularly powerful. Rather, she’s just good enough to make dealing with her a chore. The thing is, unless he’s willing to kill her, he’s got to keep her distracted until the others have a chance to catch up to the kids. That or otherwise injure her badly enough to keep her down permanently, but with the gas fast approaching, that’s as good as a death sentence.

He’s…not certain he wants to kill her.

It’s been a while since he killed anyone. Last time was Enies Lobby, with giraffe guy. That was over two years ago now, and before that he’d been seventeen and much less skilled than he currently was. He hadn’t had much choice about it then.

And here’s the thing—Zoro’s never been fond of slaughter. It’s too easy. He doesn’t mind killing when necessary, and has never managed to muster much or any guilt over any of the choices he’s made, but slaughter isn’t something he’s ever done before. It’s a quality he and Mihawk share.

Killing this woman would be slaughter. Not a fight, not a challenge, just boring and useless.

So. Distraction it is. When the others have had enough time to get to the kids, he’ll use—that on her, and make her stay down.

She comes at him again, a flurry of snow-blades and easily predicted movement, and he sighs, unimpressed and a bit disappointed.

Right. This is going to take a while.

When the Dart-brow comes through with the Navy on his heels—following, not chasing, apparently—he’s more than a little annoyed. Partly because the shit cook exists, and partly because this means he’ll have to stall this woman even longer than he was expecting to let the others go through.

Then the Copy-Cat shows up, and the situation is immediately ten times worse.

Seriously, what the fuck. Why does this girl exist, and why does she look exactly like Kuina.

“I think you need my help here!”

And who the hell does she think she is?!

“Look, get out of my way or I’ll make you, Navy chick!”

The woman doesn’t react at all, her eyes locked on Chicken Bitch. “You can’t hurt me.”

“Say that again.”

“More accurately, you won’t. And you won’t hurt that woman either.”

Bizarrely, Chicken Bitch giggles. “I was just thinking the same thing, Navy-chan.”

Zoro just blinks at both of them, bewildered. “Uh…yes I will.”
“Then why haven’t you?!” She demands, so furious she’s trembling. “It’s because you view women as inferior, isn’t it? You’d never respect one of us in battle!”

“The fuck are you talking about—”

“We fought in Loguetown. Or did my sex make me too insignificant for you to remember?”

Now that wasn’t fair. Zoro would have remembered Tashigi even if they hadn’t fought. She helped him pick out Kitetsu, and she looked too much like Kuina to forget.

“I told you—you were an insignificant opponent because you were weak. Not because you’re a girl.” Zoro flicks his gaze casually to Chicken Bitch. “Same goes for you, Harpy.”

Copy-cat scowls, grip on her katana turning white-knuckled. Zoro kind of wonders what happened to tatter her gloves like that, the fabric in twisted ribbons around her fingers. “If that were the case, you would have done to her what you did to me.”

Zoro vaguely recalls an easy fight that ended with a show of dominance and being really pressed for time.

Actually, this isn’t that dissimilar.

“I was going to,” Zoro huffs. “I needed to buy time for the others first.” He frowns at Tashigi. “Didn’t you listen to a thing I said last time? It doesn’t matter who holds the katana if they’re weak.”

Tashigi shakes a little harder. “I am not weak.”

Zoro shrugs. “You were last time. But fine.” He gestures to Chicken Bitch, who’s been surprisingly obliging about this whole conversation. “Be my guest. I’ll guard the exit.”

And with that, Zoro takes a seat by the huge-ass door, hands on his katana as he smirks at Copy-cat expectantly.

He’s not going to let Copy-cat get hurt, but he’s pretty sure navy girl can handle it. She has Haki, after all, which means she must have trained pretty hard since they last saw each other. She’s capable of fighting a logia like Chicken Bitch. And this is as effective a stalling technique than anything.

She makes a noise sort of similar to a strangled cat and glares. “So you’re just going to sit there?”

Jesus, women who aren’t Lucy make no sense.

“Isn’t that what you wanted in the first place?”

Tashigi makes a frustrated noise and whirs to face her actual opponent, and with a quick feint and a dart to the left, the two women begin to fight.

Tashigi’s gotten a lot better since Zoro last saw her fight. Loads better. Her movements are smoother, her technique more advanced, and she’s skillfully weaving Armament Haki into her blade to strengthen it, but it doesn’t appear to be developed into a coating yet. Had he fought this Tashigi two years ago, she would have trashed him, instantly.

She’s still not on his level. Not even close. She’s pretty evenly matched with Chicken Bitch, actually, even when she’s using all of her Devil Fruit abilities. Copy-cat isn’t strong enough to beat Zoro, but he kind of wants to fight her when she is. She seems clever and agile, which are the two
qualities his swordsmanship most lacks—he’s more of the skill and brute-force type.

He watches the fight carefully, ready to help if his temporary ally gets overwhelmed. It’s not necessary though—neither of them can quite get the upper hand on the other, and they’re caught in a struggle for endurance and luck more than anything.

It goes on like that for a while—nearly ten minutes, which is a long time for any fight. They’ve both gotten a few strikes in, but nothing debilitating, their luck holding equally well.

But suddenly the tide shifts—the groan of metal creaks from deep within the facility, and the Marine glances away from her opponent in a split second’s distraction. Chicken Bitch lunges for her knees, and Tashigi trips, despite her retroactive efforts to dodge. Her katana flies across the room, and all her careful footwork betrays her as she overbalances right into Chicken Bitch’s teeth.

Copy-cat screams as blood runs down her shoulder and ice spreads from the wound. A furious expression creases her face, and Zoro knows she’s probably angrier with herself than she is the woman trying to take a chunk out of her shoulder.

Zoro would normally never interfere with someone else’s fight. Especially not someone with as big a chip on her shoulder as Copy-cat seems to have. He understands pride better than that. But, well, Tashigi interfered first anyway. And frankly he can’t listen to someone who looks so much like Kuina scream like that. Can’t watch her lose so stupidly, either.

He stands, carefully applies Haki to his katana, and aims.

Chicken Bitch rears back, blood pouring from the cut across the bridge of her nose, and she yelps in pain.

Copy-cat looks up at him accusingly, like she’s mad about the interruption. He gives her an unimpressed look, but tries to help her salvage her pride. “We’ve stalled her long enough, don’t you think?”

Tashigi’s scowl deepens, but her eyes betray a little more uncertainty.

This girl can’t be Kuina. She’s way too expressive about everything and not nearly smug enough.

Zoro turns his attention back to the logia, stalking forward slowly, with purpose. He grins a little, seeing the terror in her expression as she realizes he’s not restraining himself any longer. “You underestimated me, you know.” He taps on the terrible well inside him, lets it leak into his aura and sees the woman flinch when she senses it. “I’ve never seen a wild animal that wouldn’t bite. Have you?”

The harpy trembles, clearly fighting the instinct to run, and Zoro remembers days he spent hungry in the streets, that time he got jumped by a gang of children who hated foreigners—whose parents hated foreigners—the satisfaction of a proper, blood-letting fight, the fury of a true battle, every time he thought Lucy was seriously hurt or dead, the feeling right after Mihawk delivered the news of Ace’s death and Lucy’s tragedy. He brings everything forward, on and on until bloodlust wells and the memories tinge red with the absolute ferocity of his own dark presence. Kitetsu howls at his hip, and Zoro uses the rage there, fuels his own with it.

He cuts his opponent in half, unhesitating. Bisects her from head to groin.

Zoro lets out a huffed breath, reigning himself in. It’s a useful move. It just…takes a lot out of him. Mentally speaking. But it’s easier to pack those thoughts away now than it’s ever been before. He suspects reuniting with his nakama—particularly resolving things with Lucy—has something to do
with that.

“Did you just…scare her into paralysis?”

Tashigi sounds one part awed, one part horrified. Zoro supposes that’s as good a reaction as any.

“Yah,” he huffs dryly. It’s time they caught up to the others. The gas is going to leak in soon, and they have to get to R 66. Lucy better be there with Caesar, completely unharmed, or so help him Zoro is going to cut the building in half out of spite. This island has been straight up annoying ever since they crossed the lake.

“Well that’s humiliating,” Tashigi huffs. “It would have been kinder to kill her.”

He hears the crunch of snow behind him, and knows she’s following. “Killing her would have been the same as murder, considering the difference between us. I would do it if I had to, but I didn’t.”

Tashigi makes a noise that could definitely be considered a frustrated growl. “Why do you always act like you’re better than me?” She asks angrily.

Zoro strides forward, shaking his head. “Eh? What’re you talking about, Copy-cat? I wasn’t talking about you.”

“You always talk down to me,” she grumbles. “Tell me, do you do this to your captain, too? I wonder how she stands you, if that’s the case.”

“Oh for the love of—I’m stronger than you, but Lucy’s stronger than anyone. Get over yourself already.”

“So you do think you’re better than me,” Copy-cat growls.

This is…possibly the stupidest conversation Zoro has ever had. “Yes. Because I am.” At the very least he doesn’t bait near strangers into weirdly misconstrued arguments on sexism.

“You are not.” There’s a pause as they cross the door’s threshold. “She lost to Smoker in Loguetown,” Tashigi says smugly, and Zoro hesitates for a fraction of a second, because he actually didn’t know they fought then. But whatever. The Straw Hats got away in the end, thanks in no small part to Dragon. The bastard.

Then she gasps, and he hears her drop to her knees behind him. He turns to see her clutching her shoulder, breathing hard. “Eh? You hurt?”

She scowls at him even through the pain in her face. “I’m fine. Go on without me.”

Zoro rolls his eyes. This woman is stupid-stubborn. She might be even worse than Lucy, and that’s saying something. At least Lucy asks for help when she needs it.

He’s about to say so when Tashigi collapses face-first into the snow.

Great. Just great.

Oh well. Not like there’s much to be done about it.

Zoro hefts her over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, and takes off down the hall. His crew better have fixed the kids by now, or Zoro’s going to cut something.
Caesar is the kind of person Lucy hates the most.

That’s all there is to it, really.

When most of her nakama arrive in the R 66 tower, Lucy goes forward to greet them, grinning. She’s been keeping a subtle eye on them with Observation Haki, so she knew they were safe and getting closer, but it’s good to see them regardless. Zoro looks particularly irritated, if the frown creasing his eyebrows is any indication. Lucy’s pretty sure the shrieking Marine lady he’s hauling over his shoulder has something to do with that though.

Lucy waves to them, and she sees Nami and Sanji’s shoulders drop in relief. Robin smiles and waves too, and Zoro’s face softens, just a little. He sets down the Marine lady into the waiting arms of one of her subordinates, and she doesn’t seem any happier to be handled by them than she was by Zoro.

Lucy meets Nami and Robin first, instantly throwing her arms around them in a quick hug. “I knew you guys would be fine!” She cheers. Lucy doesn’t miss the way all four of them soften toward her at the words, even as the boys approach.

They’re all still a bit sensitive from being torn apart. Lucy’s job as captain is to make sure they all understand that it’s never going to happen again, that they’ll never be torn apart like they were, not ever. Lucy’s not going to let it happen, and she’s strong enough now to back that promise up.

A quick glance tells her that her nakama are all unharmed. She knew they would be, has too much faith in them to think otherwise, but she’s glad to see it all the same.

She releases Nami and Robin, who follow closely as they approach the boys. Still sensitive. It’s alright. Lucy’s going to prove it to them.

It happens by chance, but from the corner of her eye Lucy sees the Marine lady glare at Zoro, and there’s so much emotion there—most of it revolving around frustration and irritation, but also a grudging respect and admiration that makes something dark and unfamiliar rear its ugly head in Lucy.

Impulsively, Lucy reaches out to snatch Zoro’s hand in hers. She just barely refrains from sending the Marine a challenging look, but she can’t stop the thought from bubbling up that mine, Zoro is mine, and you can’t have him—

Oh. She’s. She’s jealous.

That’s…odd.

Zoro raises an eyebrow at her, his silver eye sharp with confusion. Neither of them are exactly opposed to public displays of affection, especially around their nakama, but doing stuff around strangers makes them both uncomfortable. She’s not usually clingy, either, except when they’re alone. Zoro probably thinks something happened to her, or thinks she thinks something happened to him. Either way, he squeezes her hand once, and doesn’t let go as she flits around him to give Sanji a quick, encouraging punch to the ribs, grinning when he does nothing but wince through it.

She has to fight the urge to glare at the Marine lady when she spies her behind Zoro. It’s not the first time that woman inspired jealousy in Lucy. It happened in Loguetown, too. Lucy didn’t know what it was then, didn’t have a good enough grasp on her feelings toward the swordsman to figure out what was going on, but she distinctly remembers harboring an instant and largely undeserved sense of dislike toward the woman before she completely forgot about her.
It's renewed now.

Shit, maybe she’s sensitive too.

Hm. No wonder Zoro freaked that one time. Jealousy is a very unpleasant feeling. Maybe she should try and convince Zoro to get a tattoo too. Like, a tattoo of her hat or something. Was that too pimpish? It might be too pimpish. Especially if it was on his ass. Or the small of his back.

The thought makes her snort, and Zoro looks even more confused by her behavior than ever. She shakes her head, letting him know it’s nothing, and she sees the gears turn as he decides to let her be.

He hasn’t looked away this whole time though, and it makes the jealousy still choking her throat ease away. She’s being silly. Marine lady is nearly irrelevant. So she grins at him in lieu of an explanation, and the little, barely-there smile on his lips, his expression a bit softer than normal, lets her know he understood. She laces their fingers together, and enjoys the way his callouses fit with hers.

“How is it possible that they’re disgustingly cute even when they’re not doing anything?” Nami complains, making an emphatic gesture at Lucy and Zoro while Sanji sighs and Robin giggles. “I thought them getting together would make it better, not worse.”

“We may have forgotten to account for their mutual penchant for tactile communication,” Robin adds. Lucy gets the distinct impression that Robin sometimes makes comments just to watch the metaphorical fireworks.

“At least if they do it in public we know he’s not being inappropriate with Lucy-san,” Sanji grumbles.

“Eh? What was that?” Zoro asks, irritated. Lucy grins as the two of them start up an argument, both of them clearly enjoying it more than anyone should be enjoying a fight, and snickers.

She makes the mistake of looking up toward the door, hoping to see the rest of her nakama arrive, and accidentally sets eyes on the Marine lady, who is looking at her and Zoro’s joined hands like it’s the most astounding thing she’s ever seen, questions swimming in her eyes.

Lucy takes a step closer to Zoro, her shoulder pressing into his side, and tries not to project that she’s staking a claim.

The questioning glances she receives from Robin and Nami let her know she did not succeed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is a couple days late, I haven’t had internet for the last week and I’ve been busy graduating. You are now reading the stress-relieving words of a recently graduated, unemployed adult. Yay.

I am aware that the members of CP9 are alive and well. The Straw Hats are not, however, and are totally justified in thinking most of them died.

I’ve never really understood the issues people had with the Monet fight. Like, it’s weird that Oda backtracked that aspect of Zoro’s character—he’s never expressed or displayed an issue with fighting women before Punk Hazard, and his entire backstory is him a)
losing to a girl and b) encouraging said girl to become his rival—but I definitely didn’t read/see it as the testosterone-fueled power trip most people seem to. Like, obviously I disliked some aspects of it because I changed a lot, but if I was going to complain about sexism in One Piece, that would definitely not be the example I’d point to. In part I think maybe people saw the whole thing as undercutting Tashigi’s character and agency, but…she never really had that? Like, I’m all for characters that call out the patriarchy, and the way her subordinates treated her was awful, but we have literally never seen Tashigi win a fight. While she definitely has a strong moral compass, she doesn’t exactly have great strength of character—and by that I mean, the ability to push through adversity and improve. Nami is, in my opinion, a way stronger female character than Tashigi, and Oda has half-relegated her to fanservice at this point. I can’t see this whole Monet/Zoro/Tashigi fight as an undercutting of Tashigi’s character, because she’s not strong in the first place. It’s the same problem I have with her arguments about sexism. It’s not sexist for someone else to win and spare your life if you’re that much weaker than them. I have more of a problem with the fact that Oda clearly wants us to think Tashigi is the epitome of a strong female character when she just…isn’t. In any respect. In fact she’s almost the complete opposite. Her insisting that everyone take her seriously despite her lack of strength isn’t feminist, it’s elitist and entitled. To me that’s a way bigger issue than Zoro intimidating someone out of a fight.
Chapter Summary

Much to Law’s dismay, the Straw Hats do what they do best—party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The meal Sanji serves everyone after they make it out of the lab is as delicious as it always is, even considering its simplicity. Lucy gets the distinct impression that he’s trying to impress the Marines, but she’s a little confused as to why, considering the way they all seem to worship him already.

Most everyone is enjoying themselves, and the party in general. Torao is off sulking somewhere, and Lucy’s not exactly sure where Nami and the Marine lady got off to, but she’s sure they’re fine. The rest of Lucy’s nakama are mingling with the Marines, who seem kind of rough and hardy for the Navy. She likes them. She thinks they’re the type of Marine her grandfather must get along with well.

Only Smokey doesn’t participate. He looks grumpy. Lucy’s reasonably certain Smokey always looks grumpy, at least when he’s in any sort of proximity to her person, but that doesn’t mean she’s not going to try and make him less grumpy.

She bounces over to Sanji, requesting a bowl of the soup. He obliges when she explains it isn’t for her, but someone who won’t eat otherwise, and his gaze flicks first to Torao, who looks at anything resembling bread like it had personally denounced his gods, and then to Smokey. Sanji nods seriously, tells her he’s counting on her with a smile, and compliments her people-reading skills.

Lucy grins at him, and weaves her way through the crowd of Marines to Smokey, holding the bowl close to her chest so it stays warm. She huddles a little into the scarf Zoro lent her earlier, after they made it to the ships. The wind off the sea is cold, and it cuts through her clothing a little too well. The scarf helps though, covering the gap between her collar and her chin. Plus it smells like Zoro, so. Win-win.

Lucy gets the feeling Zoro likes seeing her in his clothes. She’ll have to keep it in mind.

It’s a minor miracle that she makes it to the Vice-Admiral without tripping or otherwise spilling the soup—or eating the soup, because Sanji can cook, what the hell did Iva-chan teach him, how is it possible he’s even better than before—but she does, easily enough, and grins as she approaches the wary man. He watches with highly suspicious eyes as she presents the soup, clearly thinking she’s up to something.

“Whaddyawant, Straw Hat?” Smokey grunts. He’s kind of tense.

It occurs to Lucy that the last time they were this close, he’d managed to pin her to the ice of Marineford, growling something about having finally caught her or some such. She frowns a little, remembering. She’s pretty sure it was Hancock that threw him off of her.

But that probably just means it’s all the more appropriate that they reunite here, on Punk Hazard. It’s
just as cold. And this time they’re sort-of-kind-of on the same side. They all want the kids safe, at any rate. So Lucy smiles wide again, and wafts the soup under his nose. If his Devil Fruit affects him in any way similarly to the way hers affects her metabolism, he’s got to be starving right now.

“I brought soup!” She declares cheerfully.

She sees his nose twitch, and then flare in irritation. “Not hungry, Straw Hat.”

Lucy frowns. “Sanji’ll be mad if you don’t eat it.”

Smokey makes an abortive motion toward rolling his eyes. “I’m not afraid of Black-Leg.” Then he gives her a sort of judgmental, questioning look. “Are you? He’s your cook.”

Lucy gives a solemn nod. “Sanji is scary.” But then she shrugs. “But not to me. If I make him mad he’ll take it out on you.” She pushes the soup toward him a little, prompting. “So eat! It’s good!”

Smokey huffs a little. “I won’t eat anything made by pirates.”

Lucy frowns harder, offended on her cook’s behalf. “Sanji would never poison food. It’s sacred.” She gives him a wide grin, reassuring. “And I like you, remember? I wouldn’t either.”

The memory of Alabasta seems to anger him, more than anything, which is stupid considering how well it all turned out. Lucy’s kind of done arguing about this though, and the soup is getting cold, so she more or less drops it in Smokey’s lap, forcing him to catch it or risk it spilling all over his trousers. A risky move, considering Sanji’s probable wrath in the event of wasted food, but she’s confident in Smokey’s reflexes.

It pans out the way she expected, with Smokey catching the bowl with a few choice curses and a gnashing of his cigars. He probably has a nicotine addiction to rival her cook’s.

Smokey looks up, expression dark. Lucy just grins in response, raising both hands in the air and leaning away from him. “No take-backs!”

Smoker huffs, looking supremely irritated, and turns his glare to the bowl in his hands, looking like he’s very much contemplating just dumping it out on the snow beneath his feet.

Lucy hopes he won’t do that. Sanji would be upset. Plus he needs to eat. But she has a feeling telling him that won’t help anything, so she changes the topic instead. “D’you poop when you’re all smoky like that, Smokey?”

Smokey just stares at her, face blank. “What.”

“I heard what you—” Smokey looks like he wants to shoot things. Possibly Lucy. She cocks her head to the side, innocent. “You know what? Leave. You’re irritating me.”

Lucy raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, but you’re not chasing us right now, so when else would we get to talk?” A particularly strong blast of wind cuts through the bay, and Lucy huddles a little deeper in Zoro’s scarf, frowning and absenty pressing fisted knuckles to the center of her scar.

Something about the action seems to sober Smokey, because he sits back a little, soup forgotten in his hands. “Why the hell would you want to talk to me. You’re a pirate. I’m a Marine.”

Lucy shrugs. “So’s Gramps. I’d still talk to him.” And if doing so would be harder than it used to be,
it isn’t because Gramps is a Marine.

The scar aches a little more. It’s got nothing to do with the cold, but it’s manageable all the same. Nothing like it used to be.

Smokey raises an eyebrow, looking somewhat skeptical. Lucy plops herself on the bench beside him. Smokey is a big guy, and his torso is nearly triple the length of hers, so he has to kink his neck down to glare at her. Lucy figures he might actually eat the soup if she isn’t standing in front of him, distracting, but she wants to keep an eye on him so she stays where she is.

Before them, their respective crews are intermingling. Nami and Tashigi are…on the bow of the Marine tanker. She can sort of sense Nami, but it’s fuzzy, and she mostly only knows because she can see the Marine lady’s pink coat even from here. Sanji is still passing out meals, expertly divvying up portions among the remaining hungry, and the strange samurai father-son duo are finishing up their own meals behind him. Franky and Robin are fixing the ship, and Brook is challenging a Marine to…well it looks like they’re having a fiddling contest. Torao is sulking off to the side, probably still upset that she declared this would have to be a fast feast rather than that there be no feast.

Honestly, all that running and no feast? She deserves better. Her crew deserves better.

Plus, if they left before the kids were safe, Nami and Chopper would be upset.

Usopp and Zoro are seated across from each other in a circle of the most drunken, rowdy Marines. Usopp is swaying a little, and there’s a flush high on Zoro’s cheekbones from the alcohol he’s consumed. She looks around for the usual three barrels required to get him tipsy, and isn’t disappointed when she finds two on their sides behind him and one that’s clearly been smashed over the Marine’s head.

Zoro laughs at something one of his drinking partners says. His smile is broad and satisfied and it makes her smile in return.

“It’s not a good idea you know.”

Lucy blinks, and turns her attention back to Smokey. “Huh?”

Smokey grunts and uses his chin to point to Usopp and Zoro. “That. It’s not a good idea to get involved with subordinates.”

His eyes stray up to the tanker’s balcony, and Lucy is pretty sure he isn’t thinking about Nami.

(There might be a tiny unclenching in Lucy’s chest, one where jealousy just unkinked.)

“Zoro’s not my subordinate. He’s nakama.” Honestly, first Jimbei, now Smokey. People should really get their terminology straight. At least Jimbei figured it out.

Smokey huffs, and cigar smoke wafts from his cigars, right into Lucy’s face. She wrinkles her nose, disgusted. She’ll never understand people’s addiction to these things.

“Doesn’t matter,” Smokey growls, and Lucy notes the way he raises the spoon in his bowl consideringly. “You’re still captain. He’s not. It’s bound to cause problems.” Smokey glares at the soup like it’s withholding the meaning to life. Or the One Piece. Same difference. “I’ve seen plenty of crews go up in flames over something like that.”

“Must not be very good crews then.”
“Some of them were plenty good. You’d know ‘em if I named ‘em. Most were as close-knit as yours.” Smokey gives her a pointed glance. “The effect is worse when the woman is the captain. Makes men feel emasculated.”

Lucy scoffs. “That’s stupid.”

Smoother puffs his cigars in a manner that could be interpreted as agreement. “It’s true though.”

Lucy thinks of Jaya, about how angry it made Zoro to be restrained from defending her. She wonders if he was angry when she made him wait two years to comfort her. She hadn’t thought to ask.

It’s not the same as what Smokey’s talking about though. He’s acting like Zoro is like Sanji, which, yeah, Lucy could see how that would be a problem. Sanji likes caring for people, especially women, too much. He’d feel…cheated, in a way, if his partner forced him not to.

She and Zoro aren’t like that though. She and Zoro are two protectors, and they’re highly independent people with a relationship built on mutual respect. Yeah, sometimes Lucy issues orders, but she expects Zoro to stand up to them if he doesn’t like them, regardless of their newfound relationship, just like he’s always done. He makes her better.

The balance, admittedly, is a bit delicate, but it’s not that hard to navigate. Not for them.

“Zoro’s not like that.” Smokey gives her a skeptical look. Lucy shrugs. “He’s strong.”

Smokey huffs again, maybe a little amused this time. “No wonder Tashigi hates him then.” Lucy gives him a questioning look, not understanding at all, but Smokey doesn’t elaborate. “Marines have regs against it, you know. Too volatile for proper ship function.”

Lucy grins wide. “Good thing I’m not a Marine then.”

Smokey looks somewhat pained at the thought. “No, thank God. We don’t need another Garp.”

Lucy giggles. “Gramps wanted me to be. I always wanted to be a pirate.”

“The hell is so appealing about that?”

Lucy gives him a pointed look. “We can be with whoever we want, for one thing.” Smokey’s default glare intensifies. Lucy softens a little, watching Chopper play catch with one of the children. “But mostly to be free.”

Smokey doesn’t say anything to that. He seems a little stumped by her answer though.

They’re quiet for a moment. Lucy watches Torao try and fail to fend off Sanji’s attempts at feeding him. Poor Torao. He clearly had no idea what he was in for when he asked to be her friend.

Torao grumpily rooms himself to the other side of the gathering. It doesn’t help him at all though, because Sanji just orders the Marines to hold him down as he storms over, and informs him in no uncertain terms that Torao will eat or Sanji will not be responsible for his actions.

Aw. Sanji likes him. Lucy thought they would get along pretty well.

Zoro sees the whole thing and peals of laughter ring out over the crowd. Lucy smiles when she hears it, and considers going over to party with him and Usopp in a bit. They look like they’re having a lot of fun.
“Oi. Are you just going to sit there?”

Lucy looks up, a bit startled. She forgot about Smokey. That was rude of her.

“Nope! It’s a party!” She cheers, standing. She looks at the soup in Smokey’s hands, her reason for coming over in the first place. “You should eat that. Sanji’ll get mad.”

Smokey looks more than a little irritated. “So you’ve said.”

Lucy stares at him a moment more, then shrugs. His funeral. “See you later, Smokey!”

She turns to go find someone else to bother, but the Vice-Admiral stops her. “Straw Hat!” Lucy turns to him, curious. Smokey’s face is deadly serious. “You know this doesn’t change anything, right? I’m still hunting you.”

Lucy blinks at him a few times, because duh. “Of course!”

Smokey looks at her a second longer, and then sighs, apparently coming to some important conclusion about something. He makes a shooing motion with his hand. “Off with you, then.”

Lucy grins. “Enjoy the soup!” Then she turns and bounds back to the crowd.

Smokey. What a weird guy. But a good one. If he wasn’t a Marine she’d ask him to join her crew.

Lucy’s next target is Torao. She finds him aggressively eating Sanji’s soup near an empty fire pit.

He notices her approach, raising his head from the food. He’s facing away from the firepit, legs splayed out in front of him and he leans against what is probably a relatively warm rock. She stops in front of him, and takes a squat so they’re on eye level. He raises an eyebrow.

“Can I help you?” He asks when she doesn’t speak, the corners of his mouth curled in irritation. He’s probably still grumpy about the whole feast thing.

Lucy stares, her own eyes narrowing.

She trusts Torao. More than she should, Nami would probably say. She’s not exactly sure what it is about him that makes her think he won’t betray her, but it’s an instinct sort of thing. It’s never led her wrong before, and she’s not going to start doubting it now. She’s growing quietly certain that he needs help. And Lucy’s his friend now. She’s not going to turn her back to him.

But there are still boundaries. Lines that need to be drawn, and things Lucy will not tolerate.

Torao frowns a little harder at her silence. “Well? Are you just gonna stare, Straw Hat-ya?”

“You’re the one who cut the factory in half, right?”

She sees his face slack with surprise for a moment before he covers it up, his expression set to characteristic blandness. Lucy can sense his wariness though, and maybe a little defensiveness. Observation Haki is useful, sometimes.

“And if I did?” He asks carefully. His eyes are a bit sharper with calculation than before.

“It was you,” Lucy says confidently. She asked Zoro about it earlier, before Torao and Smokey
arrived. He said it wasn’t him, and Lucy is pretty sure Torao is the only other swordsman around with the power to do something like that. His reaction confirmed it. “It was cool.”

Torao still seems suspicious, even with the bland expression. “Uh huh.”

Lucy raises a hand to her hat, and presses it down over her eyes. “Was it necessary?”

“...what?”

“Was it necessary?”

No answer.

“I figured we’d end up destroying the factory sometime,” Lucy admits. “And I figured that’s what you meant when you said you wouldn’t be able to guarantee everyone’s safety after two hours.” Lucy looks up at him, and his expression is almost the definition of a void but for the small trace of bone-deep shock around his eyes. “It’s okay if you did it the way you did because it was necessary. But if not...” Lucy is careful to make sure her breathing doesn’t betray her rage at the thought. “If it wasn’t necessary then you endangered my nakama for no reason, Torao.”

At the time, none of them had even made it to the tower. Lucy was there waiting with Brownbeard, and it was nowhere near the time limit given to everyone at the entrance. She’d been scared. Worried. Only the fact that she could sense them all alive, if frantic, held her in place.

Before her, something in Torao seems to soften in understanding, for all that he maintains his general guardedness. Lucy thinks he must be a good captain, one who understands stuff like this. She doesn’t think someone as cool as a polar bear would follow someone who didn’t.

“I won’t ask any more about it,” Lucy tells him. She doesn’t want to talk about it much either. “But Torao...if you ever endanger one of my nakama unnecessarily again, we’re not gonna have an alliance anymore.”

Lucy doesn’t want to do that. She wants to be Torao’s friend, and in no small part because she thinks he needs one. But her nakama come first. Her nakama *always* come first. Being a pirate is dangerous—it’s about risking one’s life for a dream, and there’re no guarantees—but it’s Lucy’s job as their captain to make sure her nakama aren’t risking themselves pointlessly, or sacrificing things for causes that aren’t worth it.

*You have to guarantee my life*, Nami demanded on Skypiea. Lucy hasn’t forgotten. She won’t forget. It’s why they waited two years to meet again.

“Isn’t that what this whole thing is about?” Torao asks quietly. “This alliance. It’s an unnecessary risk for you, isn’t it?”

Lucy shakes her head, a little annoyed that he doesn’t seem to get it. “You can risk me all you want,” she explains. “But not them.”

Torao’s green-grey eyes widen, just a little, and then she senses it as he realizes what she’s saying.

Lucy takes friendship seriously. Really seriously. And she’s Torao’s friend now, so she’s going to do whatever it takes to make sure he has whatever it is he needs. She’s still not sure, exactly, what that is, or how the stupid clown fits into all of this, but it’s fine. She’s with him until he doesn’t need her anymore, just like she would be for any friend. She’s strong now. Strong enough to beat up anything that comes their way, and come hell or high water she’s going to beat up the shadows in Torao’s eyes. She doesn’t like them.
But that all changes if Torao asks for what she isn’t willing to give up. She will not tolerate anyone hurting her nakama. That was true in the beginning, and even more so now.

Torao needs to get it. Nothing happened this time, but she won’t tolerate it again.

“I see,” he says quietly. Lucy has a feeling he does.

She nods to him sternly, kind of like she’s trying to do a handshake with her forehead. He frowns—blinks in response, and Lucy stands, offering him a wave as she walks away.

“Straw Hat-ya,” Torao calls. Lucy stops and turns back. He hasn’t moved but he looks a little more…animated. There’s some kind of determination in his spine that wasn’t there before. “It was necessary.”

Lucy blinks twice, and then grins at him. “Good. It was really cool.”

Torao snorts, and leans back against his half-warmed rock, the suspicion in him finally seeping away. “Glad you thought so.”

Lucy turns, eyeing the center of the party, and throws a wave and a parting comment over her shoulder. “Enjoy the soup! Sanji’s the best cook!”

“We need to leave soon, Straw Hat-ya.”

“Oh huh! Just as soon as everyone’s finished!”

“Eating?”

“Partying!”

“Ugh.” Torao sounds properly disgusted.

Lucy giggles, and feels her chest lighten when she sees Zoro throw a Marine who went for his sake over his shoulder one-handed.

Right. Now she can have fun.

Leaving Punk Hazard is good. Zoro’s spent more than enough time in the mad scientists’ lair, thanks. But at least the partying was good. Really good. Sake. Yes.

He may be a bit tipsy.

But it doesn’t matter because a small gloved hand is twined with his and Lucy is leaning into him a little as they walk, taking shelter from the cold. Her cheeks are red from the wind, her eyes bright. Her hair whips around her, tangled as usual, and it’s only the fuzzy yellow earmuffs that keep it out of her face.

Zoro kind of wants to kiss her. It’s too bad she’s pulled his scarf over the lower half of her face.

Actually, it’s not. He’d rather she stay warm. He’ll kiss her when they get back to the ship.

“Did you have fun?” Lucy asks, and her eyes are crinkled at the corners, like she’s laughing. Zoro wants to kiss her again.
“Mhmm. Sake was good.”

Lucy’s smile is easy to detect, even with the scarf over her face. “I’ll bet!”

“Straw Hat-ya,” A low, irritated voice calls. Both Zoro and Lucy turn to look at the other captain. “Don’t dawdle. We stayed too long as it is.”

Zoro stares at him, deadpan, and a little nonplussed at the order. Lucy just waves at him sort of reassuringly and nods. “Yeah, we’ll leave soon.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow. “We?” Lucy didn’t manage to recruit another crewmember, did she?

“Uh-huh. We’re in an alliance with Torao. We’re going to take down Kaido!”

Zoro blinks at her, sobering almost instantly. “You…have a plan?”

“Torao does!”

“You. Plan.”

“We’re going to kick Kaido’s ass!” Lucy cheers, seeming entirely oblivious to the absurdity of that statement. Trafalgar looks bored, and maybe a little irritated. Zoro supposes that makes sense, considering the fact that he’s been trying to get Lucy to obey anything other than her whims all day.

“Huh,” he says after a moment, staring at Trafalgar. The captain stares back at him, expression bland.

“Oi! Lucy! Come over here for a sec, Chopper found a frozen tide pool!”

Lucy’s eyes light up like the freaking sun and she’s off like a shot to where Usopp and Chopper are kneeling over the ice.

Zoro looks at Trafalgar.

Trafalgar looks at Zoro.

“You poor bastard,” Zoro says after a moment. It’s the only thing he can think to say.

Trafalgar’s face looks vaguely wan. “Why does everyone keep saying that? Why does her crew keep saying that?”

“Pity, mostly.”

“Ugh.”

Well at least the comments about not being able to trust Lucy made sense now. Trafalgar is definitely a schemer, in the same way Lucy is an agent of chaos and good cheer. This is a disaster waiting to happen, and Trafalgar clearly came into this thinking Lucy’s previous successes in Paradise were the result of careful planning, rather than brute force and luck.

Judging from his facial expression, Trafalgar is just now figuring out he done gone fucked up.

“You poor bastard.” It bears repeating.

“Yeah, thanks for that.”

Zoro frowns at him. “We’re going after Kaido?”
Trafalgar’s irritated expression melts into a bland one. “Eventually.”

Zoro sort of regrets not being completely sober for this conversation. “Right. Sounds like the sort of thing we do.”

“I’ve got it all planned out.”

Zoro has never in his life pitied someone this much. “That’s nice. Lucy probably won’t follow any of it.”

Trafalgar stiffens and scowls. “She agreed to it.”

Poor, poor bastard. “She agreed to beat up Kaido. She couldn’t care less how it’s done.”

Trafalgar looks vaguely like someone made him swallow a pickled egg. Zoro notices Lucy, still with Chopper and Usopp, now punching the frozen ice, probably to try and get at the creatures encapsulated in the tide pool.

“How did you people even make it this far?” Trafalgar despairs. Good. Seems like he’s finally getting it.

“Fate, luck, and brute force, mostly,” Zoro admits. Then his eyes narrow, because something about this whole thing seems…off. “Why Kaido though?”

Trafalgar stiffens, and starts walking toward the ship. It’s an easy pace, unhurried, but Zoro’s pretty sure he’s still dodging the question anyway. “One of his suppliers. I know him. Know how to take ‘em both out.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow, following the other captain. Not for the first time, he notices the sword leaning against Trafalgar’s shoulder, and he wonders if the guy can use it. “You’re playing ‘em off each other?”

Trafalgar scoffs, nodding to Lucy. “We are.”

Zoro chews on that for a moment, and the two of them cross the frozen bay to the gangplank in silence. Kaido is a Yonko. He’s not to be underestimated. Lucy is strong, and she will be Pirate King one day but she’s not yet, and he doesn’t know if she’s strong enough to start knocking at the door of the greatest pirates on the seas yet.

In the same way, Zoro knows he has to grow as well. He’s strong—stronger than most, even in the New World—but he still has peaks to reach before he can claim his title.

Lucy lost to Caesar the first time they clashed. He doesn’t hold it against her—she won in the end, came off the island with zero injuries for once—but with that as their latest mark on their track record…well, are they really ready to take on a Yonko?

“You don’t think we’re biting off more than we can chew?” Zoro asks lowly. From the deck, Nami hollers something at Franky, but the wind catches her words and it’s impossible to make out.

Trafalgar raises an eyebrow. “Gotta admit, I didn’t take you for the cautious one.”

Zoro rolls his eye. “I’m not.” Then his gaze shifts involuntarily to Lucy, now giggling with Chopper at the apparently soaked state of Usopp’s clothes, and he mentally amends except when it involves them.
Trafalgar considers him for a moment more, and then turns away. “I informed her that the chances of success are low.”

“Hm.”

“Straw Hat-ya didn’t seem fazed.”

“Of course not.” Zoro scoffs. Expecting Lucy to be cautious of a fight would be like expecting a lion to fear a deer. “Those are her usual odds.”

Trafalgar seems a little amused at this, even if his expression doesn’t change. “I figured.”

They’re close enough to the ship now that Zoro can hear Sanji cooing over Robin and offering her excessive amounts of coffee and cake. He can also hear her polite refusals, and the humor in her voice.

Lucy laughs off to their right, and Zoro looks at her, feels himself soften helplessly. “You’re not going to screw her over, right?”

Trafalgar hesitates for a moment before responding. “No more than I will myself.”

“Mhm. Well, that’s all there is for it then.” Zoro claps him on the shoulder, and starts climbing the rigging up to the deck. “Welcome aboard, Torao.”

“I’m not joining your crew,” Trafalgar mutters petulantly. “I’m a captain. What is with you people.”

Zoro smothers a grin. Having this guy on board is going to be fun. The entire crew is going to haze him. Poor bastard. He probably didn’t bargain for a passive-aggressive onslaught from the crew when he offered Lucy an alliance.

He catches a downright predatory glance from Nami as Trafalgar makes it over the rail. Zoro can’t really blame her for being overprotective. And defensive. They just reunited a week and a half ago, and Zoro is nowhere near ready to split again. He knows the others feel the same. It’s no wonder they’re all so wary of the newcomers they’ve picked up on Punk Hazard, and especially Trafalgar, who targeted Lucy specifically.

At least now Zoro is pretty sure Trafalgar isn’t out to achieve Lucy’s demise. She’s just a means to an end for him, and probably not one he’s willing to sacrifice ahead of himself. It’s good to know. It does make him wonder what that goal is, but. That’s what they have Lucy’s gut instincts for anyway. If Trafalgar intended her harm she couldn’t handle, she wouldn’t have accepted the alliance. The guy did save her life after all. He probably isn’t interested in undoing all that work. It seems especially unlikely considering the way he’s now wandering around the deck, looking at the Mikan trees with reluctant interest.

This plan, whatever it is, is dangerous. Zoro can see that. Maybe the most reckless thing they’ve ever done. That’s not exactly a deterrent for them—actually the idea of taking on a Yonko has Zoro kind of giddy in anticipation—but it is a...consideration. It has to be, now, especially since Lucy’s already picked a fight with Big Mam. This is the New World. If they’re going to make Lucy Pirate King like they plan to, they need to actually plan. Take new challenges carefully.

Lucy understands this, he knows. He’s seen it in the intentionality of her actions in the last week or so, and in the fact that she accepted any sort of alliance at all.

Set the foot down with distrust on the crust of the world - it is thin, Sensei used to say. This feels like one of those times it’s particularly applicable.
Lucy vaults over the edge of the ship, Chopper wrapped in one arm and a hollering Usopp is left behind on the ground. Lucy’s got a wide, childish grin on her face and his displaced scarf wrapped around Chopper’s antlers, for some reason. There’s a high flush on her cheeks from the cold and also her amusement and there’s a mischievous light in her eyes that he’s missed.

It’s not that he distrusts Trafalgar exactly. He doesn’t trust him, but Lucy seems to, so it’s fine. It’s more that he distrusts the situation, and he’s not sure Lucy is stepping carefully enough.

But that’s fine. That’s half his job as her First Mate. It’s why they make a good team.

Usopp heaves himself over the rail, and Lucy sprints for Zoro, giggling like mad, and he heaves a great, disaffected sigh as she hides behind him with Chopper still under one arm. She peeks out from under his elbow and squeaks as Usopp charges, snow still melting on his collar. Then the three of them are circling Zoro frantically, with Lucy using him as a human shield.

He puts an end to it by snatching the back of Lucy’s collar and yanking her up to eye level. She gives him a blinding grin while Chopper trembles with hilarity in her arms. He gives a panting Usopp a warning look, and receives a satisfactory yelp in return.

“We should get going,” he tells her.

Lucy’s eyes light up the way he’s come to associate with anticipation of a good adventure. “Alright!”

He sets the two of them down, and half expects Lucy to run off again. Instead she sets Chopper on the deck with a grin, the little reindeer still giggling at whatever they did to Usopp, and she unwinds the scarf from Chopper’s antlers.

“That was fun!” Chopper cheers.

Lucy’s grin widens impossibly. “Of course!”

Chopper giggles again and runs off. Lucy turns back to Zoro, still grinning, and he could swear her heart is in her eyes when she offers him the scarf again. The light catches her perfectly, reflecting off of glaciers and seawater and she seems to glow a little, her freckles standing out against her cheekbones, dark hair sweeping around her face.

God she’s pretty. Zoro has to look away to avoid flushing.

“Keep it,” he grunts. “You’re still cold.”

Lucy’s smile turns a bit softer, and she wraps the scarf around her neck again. “You’re always watching out for me, Zoro.”

Zoro’s not sure what expression is on his face right now. He’s having a hard time beating down his simultaneous embarrassment and satisfaction. “It’s my job, isn’t it?”

He said it with a casual, accidental sort of intensity, and Lucy’s cheeks redden a little. If Zoro wasn’t so busy staring, he would probably roll his eyes at her apparent embarrassment. Lucy likes to spout ridiculously frank statements, but she can’t take the same treatment, he’s found. Lucky for her he finds it more difficult to say stuff like that than she does.

Unexpectedly, her hand snatches out to take his, twining their fingers together. It’s a bit awkward and stiff because they’re both wearing gloves, but Zoro doesn’t mind because he can feel the warmth of her hand through the fabric and it’s nice.
A strong gust of wind washes over the ship and she shudders, leaning into him a little for the body heat. Her free hand absently floats toward her chest in a fist, and Zoro closes his hand around it, massaging the fist loose with his thumb, and releases her hand when it goes slack.

“Go inside,” he tells her. “We’ll be away from the island soon. You can stay there until then.”

Lucy shakes her head, scrunching her nose. “Everyone’s out here.”

Ah. “Let’s go then, we’ve been here long enough.” And he wants her to stop shaking, but he figures that’s a given.

Lucy nods. “Hm. Nami! Set sail!”

A chorus of “Ayes” can be heard around the deck, and Brook helpfully starts playing an energetic riff on his guitar. Most of the rigging is already prepared, and it’s just a matter of navigating away from the shore at this point—something Nami has well in hand if her precise instructions to Franky are anything to go by.

“Hey, Zoro.”

He looks down at her, his attention having drifted to the activity on deck, and waits for her to speak.

“You know it’s my job to protect you, too, right?” She asks, face earnest.

Some part—a large part—of Zoro rejects that. He hates the very idea of Lucy sacrificing anything for him. He never wants to see a day where she makes the same choice he did on Thriller Bark. He isn’t sure he’d survive such a thing, and he will never, ever be okay with it, even if he knows he’d make the same choice for her in a heartbeat. Again.

But he knows she’s not just talking about a hypothetical fight where he can’t defend himself. He knows she’s talking about more than her duty to the crew as their captain, and how her role is kicking the ass of whoever the biggest asshole in town is. She’s talking about the little things, like making sure he doesn’t cut himself off from their nakama, like he’s prone to do, or keep his problems to himself. She’s talking about the small, unthinking things they do for each other, how she stays nearby if she knows he’s had a nightmare, but not close enough to tip the others off, or how she sets his favorite brand of sake aside at a party. She’s talking about…comfort and companionship and the textures of a relationship that make it special and intimate.

“Yeah,” he tells her quietly. His voice is a little gruff. “I know.”

Lucy beams, and frankly Zoro just doesn’t have it in him to refrain from kissing her right then.

Chapter End Notes

Lucy uses the present tense for Garp being in the Marines because, and correct me if I’m wrong, but Luffy doesn’t actually know his grandfather is retired, right? Like, he was cut off from news for two years, he definitely missed it.

I get the feeling Smoker actually does care about what happens to Lucy/Luffy (especially Lucy, because she looks small and in need of protection, especially when Smoker first meets her in Loguetown). Not in any sort of genuine relationship sort of way, but because Smoker’s a good man who doesn’t like to see children suffer. He
unlike most Marines seems to realize pirates aren’t all bad. Smoker also wants to catch Lucy when she’s at her best, not because she had a fight with Zoro. If I could have done that scene from Smoker’s POV I would have, but I tried to make that pretty clear.

The quote Zoro recalls (“Set the foot down with distrust on the crust of the world—it is thin.”) is from Edna St. Vincent Milay. I’ve used it in other fics before, but I thought it fit here.

I’ve been writing like mad, so I actually got a lot of Dressrosa written. There’re going to be more Dressrosa chapters than any other arc in this fic, and that’s true for a couple of reasons: one, Dressrosa is the longest arc in the series by, like, a lot. And I’m talking individual arcs, not arcs that share storylines, like Water 7/Enies Lobby, or Amazon Lily/Impel Down/Marineford. If we included Punk Hazard in that, it would still be number one or two. Second, a lot happened in Dressrosa. Especially in the early bits. Oda really didn’t dwell on this stuff as much as he could have. Chinjao’s bringing up Garp was a really interesting way of drawing a parallel between him and Rebecca, and tied it back to familial themes as well, in preparation for Sabo’s arrival. I would have loved to see that fleshed out more, especially if we were going to spend around 100 chapters in Dressrosa. I think it would have been a lot more interesting than the endless running we got later, and it’s something that’s…well, desperately needed, considering the lack of focus on the Straw Hats in general since the New World. They get brief forays into character development/progression and then we back off. It’s frustrating, especially since so much time has been spent fleshing out other characters. Three: There was stuff I wanted to change. Like, Rebecca’s whole personality. Girl drives me up a wall. Four: I spent a lot of time in the set up/transition period, because I wanted to. So there. Five: For all that Zoro was present in Dressrosa, Oda really didn’t spend much time with him. So I invented stuff. Six: I’m trying to cut the chapter lengths back to their original target range of 3-4k. That got all kinds of screwed up after Marineford, so I’m trying to fix it, unless ya’ll have some kind of problem with that....?

So anyway, I have lots of runway. I still may not post super frequently because I just had to take my laptop in to get fixed.

Please let me know if you liked it! Or if you didn’t!
By the third day of their voyage to Dressrosa, it has become readily apparent that Torao is a bit of a sourpuss.

By this Lucy means nothing at all, except that he’s really grumpy. Even grumpier than Zoro when he loses an argument with Sanji, and Torao’s like that, like, all the time.

The Sunny is currently harboring a lot of guests—it’s fine though, because Franky is awesome, and built the ship with guests in mind. They managed to set up some cots in the library for Kin’emon and Momonosuke, and Caesar isn’t ever untied from the mast except to use the restroom and eat, so that’s where he sleeps, and whoever’s on lookout duty keeps an eye on him as well. As for Torao, there’s an extra bed in the boys’ quarters.

Or he’s supposed to sleep there, at any rate. Sanji informed her today that Torao hasn’t even set foot there once, and apparently just keeps staring Caesar down until he nods off during the night. According to Usopp such rest could be described as fitful, at best, with the added information that it was “creepy as fuck” to observe.

Probably due to sleep deprivation, Torao has been napping—again, restlessly—during the day. Usually right across from Caesar, like he’s afraid the guy will escape or something if he leaves.

By the third day of their week-long trip to Dressrosa, Lucy’s had enough. This ‘Mingo guy seems like a piece of work. Torao has to be well-rested when they meet him, especially since he hates the guy so much. Plus, Chopper is starting to worry himself over the other captain, so it’s time for Lucy to intervene.

“What’cha doin’?” Lucy asks, squatting in front of an obviously dozing Torao. He blinks awake instantly, but honestly he couldn’t have been sleeping that well considering how tense he was.

“Sleeping.” Torao grouses—lies—shifting a little on the deck. He’s leaning against Sunny’s rail, portside. It offers a good view of the main deck of the ship, and the comings and goings of people on both ends. It’s one of Zoro’s favorite spots too. It’s also right in front of Caesar, who’s been complaining vociferously about Torao’s behavior. Lucy doesn’t really care about his feelings—like, at all—but it does make life on the ship more irritating when they have to listen to him talk.

“Not well,” Lucy points out bluntly. “Why don’t you sleep at night, like everyone else?”

Torao glares, and then tugs the hat down over his eyes.

Lucy kind of wants to play with the hat—it looks fuzzy!—but she’d never touch another person’s hat without permission, especially when it’s obviously so important. “Is the bed not comfy? I bet Franky can fix that.”
Lucy’s almost certain the bed isn’t the issue.

“The bed’s fine,” Torao grunts, irritated. “Now leave me alone.”

Lucy frowns at him. “No.”

He peeks one eye under the brim of his hat to glare at her, and then lowers it again.

It’s been creeping up on her over the last couple of days, what exactly makes her feel so compelled to help Torao. Part of it is her own life-debt, she’s sure. She’s grateful for what he did after Marineford. Even if he waved the favor off, she wants to help him in turn.

But it’s more than that. There’s something about him that’s familiar. Something painful and old and missing.

It’s Ace, of course. Torao reminds her of Ace, back when they were kids and he was angry all the time, or even when they got a little older and sometimes he’d slip and she’d notice—notice but not understand, not until the end—the anger and doubt and the lingering sense of worthlessness still lurking in his heart.

Torao reminds her of that. She kind of doubts he’s the long-lost son of an infamous pirate, but there’s a similarity about him in the way he brushes off her inquiries and the heaviness in his eyes.

“Hey Torao,” she asks, “What’s your dream?”

Torao starts a bit—nearly imperceptible in his body language, but his inward reaction is so visceral she feels Sanji and Zoro, neither of them particularly adept at sensing emotions through Haki, start in response.

Torao sits up, glaring at Lucy full-on now. “What the hell?”

“What’s your dream, Torao?” Lucy repeats. Ace always seemed to feel better when they talked about going out to sea. Maybe Torao would feel better too?

It doesn’t look like he’s feeling better. He just stares, looking for all the world like he can’t believe his life at the moment. Lucy stares back, unashamed.

Torao looks away first. “Unbelievable.”

He gathers his sword and stands, clearly off to find another, Lucy-less spot to nap. Lucy stands and follows him a few feet behind.

He notices of course, and immediately whirls on her, temper etching itself across his face. Jeez, you’d think she offered him bread or something. People only made that mistake once. The guy throws fits. Silent, sulky fits. Sanji couldn’t even kick him out of the kitchen because he hadn’t eaten yet.

“Leave me alone, Straw Hat-ya.” He says lowly, almost warningly. It’s unfortunate for him she can sense how tired he is, and how much he is really not up to a fight right now, no matter how much fun it would be.

“Does it have something to do with Mingo?” Lucy asks. She’s not fazed in the slightest by his temper, and frankly if he didn’t get some sleep soon he wasn’t going to be able to do anything on Dressrosa.
Torao’s whole body tenses. Lucy’s a little surprised at the intensity of the reaction—Torao doesn’t usually react to things outwardly. He’s all internal and stuff. It’s why she had such a hard time reading him when they met.

“Leave it, Straw Hat-ya,” Torao warns.

Well, if he’s that sensitive about it, it’s probably not anything particularly aspirational. That’s… worrying. But asking about it probably won’t do anything good. “Alright.” Torao seems to relax a little, so she plows on. “What’s your favorite color, Torao?”

Torao makes a noise like a very frustrated cow. Lucy observes with admiration, wondering how she’d even come close to replicating it.

“That was a cool sound,” Lucy says seriously. “Do it again!”

He does. Lucy gets the feeling he isn’t doing it for her sake though.

Behind her, Zoro snorts, amused. She frowns over her shoulder at him. He’s relaxing with his hands behind his head as he leans against the rail, a lazy smirk on his face that broadens into a grin when he catches her looking.

He looks good, damn him.


The crewmembers on the deck all snort, clearly listening in. Zoro is the exception. He chokes.

“Wait, no it isn’t, you said yellow before,” Usopp objects.

It was. Lucy doesn’t know how to tell them that she turned her favorite color into a flag with her now-dead brothers. Green is a lot more...well she associates it with Zoro.

“It’s green now,” Lucy says definitively. Up by the helm, Nami snickers. She’s probably embarrassing Zoro again. Whatever, he’ll probably still kiss her later.

That thought almost derails her enough to go pester Zoro into making out with her (she’s pretty sure it won’t be too hard), but then Torao reclaims her attention.

“Why does that even—you know what, no, I don’t want to know,” Torao declares. Then he stomps away, probably to try and find a better napping spot.

“But what’s your favorite color?” She calls, following him.

“Gah! I don’t have one! Stop following me!”

“Nah, can’t let you fall asleep,” Lucy says blithely. “Not until I’m sure you’ll go to bed for real.”

Torao just stares in horror. “You’re going to follow me all day.”

Lucy nods. “Uh huh.” Then she hesitates. “Well, no, I’m going to eat eventually.” And make out with Zoro, probably. And cuddle. “But until then, yeah.” She pats him on the shoulder, a grin on her face. “That’s what friends are for!”
“We’re not friends!” He says desperately. Lucy thinks his voice is doing the equivalent of tearing hair out by the follicle. “We’re allies! Not friends! Not the same thing!” Torao makes a big gesture where he crosses his arms over his chest and sweeps out.

Lucy considers that for a second. “Nah, we’re friends.”

The frustrated cow noise comes back, this time tinged with a vague sort of terror. Man, how does he do that?

“I’d probably just give up, Torao,” Sanji warns, looking like he’s trying to smother a smile. “Lucy-san looks cute, but she is very persistent.”

“You can hide in the guys’ room,” Franky offers, probably remembering his own attempts to deny her overtures of friendship if his glares at Robin are anything to go by. “Aneki never goes in there.”

“Nami says it’s inappropriate,” Lucy agrees, wrinkling her nose. She still doesn’t really get that. Yeah, she gets why it’s a good idea to have boys and girls change separately and sleep in different rooms and not shower together, but it’s just a room, right? Plus, they’re all nakama. And Zoro is Zoro, so she wouldn’t even mind if something happened with him in the guys’ room. Hell, the hammock-bunks would probably be a good place to—

“Fine,” Torao declares, clearly frustrated. Lucy nods in sympathy. Poor guy must be tired. He’s barely slept in three days.

“Sleep well!” She calls as he slinks off to the boys’ cabin. She can feel his agitation scraping the air, but his exhaustion too.

The door shuts behind him and the whole deck breathes a sigh of relief. The grin on Lucy’s face melts off as she stares at the door.

“Thank goodness,” Kin’emon mutters. “I thought he’d never sleep.”

“I thought he’d never leave,” moans Caesar. Then he glares at Lucy. “Took you long enough, you stupid—”

Sanji kicks him in the face before he even finishes the sentence, which. Honestly that probably saved his life, if Zoro and Nami’s glares are anything to go by.

“He’s been awake almost three days,” Chopper says forlornly. “I’m surprised he hasn’t passed out.”

“He’s stubborn,” Brook says quietly, contemplatively plucking one of the strings on his guitar. “And he has a mission he wants to see through.”

“At least we know what that is, now,” Usopp grumbles. He mutters something that sounds suspiciously like ‘stupid captains, going in blind.’ Lucy decides to leave it alone for now.

“Well we’re not tripping over him anymore,” Nami says distractedly, leafing through her maps. “Directing him to the boys’ bedroom was a good idea, Franky.”

Lucy says nothing. She just frowns after the door.

Torao…there’s something wrong there. Something wrong inside. It reminds her of Ace, but also… also of Robin, that day in Enies Lobby, when she was convinced she wanted to die.

“I’m gonna be his friend,” Lucy promises quietly to the door. That was, after all, the only thing that
actually helped Ace and Robin in the end. She had to prove herself. Prove she loved Ace by
crawling through a warfront. Prove she was Robin’s friend by burning down a flag. Retrieve katana
for Zoro and a restaurant for Sanji and a flag for Chopper. Torao needs her to prove something so
he’ll trust her to take care of his dreams too. She just hasn’t figured out what it is yet.

“Oi. Roronoa.”

Zoro’s right eye cracks open, unamused. He sees a tall dark shadow and a fuzzy white hat and just
barely bites back a smirk.

“Buzz off.”

Zoro shifts a little, trying to get comfortable again. Lucy snuffles into his shoulder, pinned under his
arm. She’s tucked in close against him, drooling on his robe and her left hand is curled on his chest.
Her right is fisted in his hamarki at the small of his back, in the space between the deck and rail.
She’s warm, and judging from her breathing, completely asleep.

He’s leaning up against Sunny’s stern, Nami’s mikan trees swaying before them. He’s got one hand
tangled in the knots of Lucy’s skirt, his fingers brushing against denim and soft skin in turn. His right
hand rests easily by his hip, his katana laid out a few inches away.

It’s warm. Lucy is warm and Zoro would much rather be sleeping than speaking with Trafalgar right
now.

“She’s not awake, right?” The irascible captain asks pointedly. Zoro glares, baleful.

“I was asleep too, a second ago,” he grouses.

“Yeah, later. First tell me what the hell is wrong with you crew.”

Zoro just barely keeps his face neutral, fighting back a laugh. “What d’you mean?”

“You people won’t leave me the fuck alone,” he accuses. Dark eyes slide to Lucy’s deceptively-
innocent form. Zoro is deeply amused to see Trafalgar twitch. Actually fucking twitch. Keeping a
straight face is next to impossible. “She’s the worst of ‘em, but I haven’t had a moment to myself in
two days.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow and leans back into the stern. “The horror. I can’t imagine what it’s like to
be you, Torao.”

“I know you know my name.”

At that Zoro barely, just barely, manages to keep from bellowing in a full-bodied guffaw. “What’s
your point, Torao?”

Trafalgar glares, his gaze venomous. Zoro’s so unintimidated his hand doesn’t even twitch toward
his katana. It’s kind of like being glared at by a wet cat. One just can’t see the guy as intimidating
after one’s seen him throw a fit about fucking bread.

“Why,” Trafalgar deadpans. “Why are you like this. Why are you all like this.”

Zoro looks over the grumpy, slightly frazzled captain, looking vaguely disheveled, and figures the
quickest way back to nap time is to just get this over with. “You targeted Lucy.”

The captain just stares. “What.”

Which, of course is perfectly true. Nami keeps “practicing” with her Clima Tact, and “accidentally” striking about two inches away from Trafalgar any time he spends too much time glaring. Which is always, generally. He’s also pretty sure she’s run up a staggering debt on him over the last few days. Robin has taken to sitting next to him while he was trying to relax on deck and detailing the many, many ways in which one could kill someone with a spoon, sans powers of the Op Op fruit, which included a graphic description of eyeball removal. Usopp claimed to see Trafalgar staring at Robin’s breasts, which led to Sanji challenging him to a duel every five minutes, which were invariably geared to favor the cook because Nami said she’d fine him every time Trafalgar destroyed anything on the ship. Franky built a robot dog that actively chases him, and occasionally bites him, if he lets his guard down long enough, and any time the guy isn’t occupied by one of the others, he’s been treated to Brook screeching out highly irritating music on his guitar.

Huh. Well, maybe the guy had a point. They had terrorized him pretty thoroughly over the last few days.

It couldn’t be helped. They couldn’t haze him the first three days of their trip because Trafalgar hadn’t slept since Punk Hazard, presumably, but now that he’s actually rested some it’s open season.

Well. Open season except for meals—the interruption of which Sanji wouldn’t stand for—and when he was actually, genuinely asleep. Dude still looked like he hadn’t seen a bed in three years, and the Straw Hats aren’t heartless.

They are protective though. More so now than they were before. Some suspicious newcomer shows up explicitly stating his intention to take advantage of Lucy, and Lucy lets him on board? Zoro really would have been surprised by any reaction less dramatic.

“I didn’t target her, you guys showed up on Punk Hazard and it was convenient.” Trafalgar bemoans. Zoro nearly pities him for his innocence lost. Lucy is anything but an expedient means to an end, unless that end is the devouring of raw meat.

“Uh huh. Doesn’t matter.” Especially now that they were forcing him into a regular sleep schedule, taking their cues from Lucy’s new habit of showing up when Trafalgar shows even the slightest sign of falling into a nap on deck. Insomnia wasn’t going to be tolerated by them, and apparently their solution was to exhaust him into a proper night’s rest. Sanji has taken to drugging Trafalgar’s tea with a mild sedative during their late-night snacks. Zoro’s pretty sure he hasn’t noticed yet. “Lucy’s decided you’re friends, so they’re warning you not to screw her over.”

“I’m not planning to,” Trafalgar says tiredly. “I would have thrown myself off the ship by now if I had another option.” A pause. “And we’re not friends.”

“Hmm.” Zoro hums. “Good to know. Thanks. I’ll relay that.”

Trafalgar pinches the bridge of his nose, frowning tiredly. “Would you?”

Zoro refrains from snorting, and goes back to glaring. “If you were going to ask for favors, you shouldn’t have woken me up, dumbass.”

He probably will tell the crew to lighten up though. Trafalgar looks close to throwing himself overboard, regardless of options, and that would probably make Lucy sad. No one wanted Lucy sad. Fucking Caesar probably didn’t want Lucy sad.

“No choice,” Trafalgar grumbles. “You’re the only one who hasn’t attempted assault of some kind.”
Trafalgar’s gaze sharpens on the arm he has around Lucy, still snoring softly, completely undisturbed by the conversation. “Why is that, by the way? I thought you’d be the worst of ‘em.”

Zoro rolls his eyes. “Lucy trusts you, so I will too.” Doesn’t mean he won’t gut the guy if he betrays her, but he’s willing to trust Lucy’s record on this one. Then he frowns as a realization happens upon him. He can’t be the only one who hasn’t bothered Trafalgar because… “Chopper?”

Trafalgar stiffens. “He…I just finished my third physical in two days.” Zoro gives him an incredulous look. Trafalgar just looks deeply uncomfortable. “He was…thorough. And hard to say no to.”

Zoro stares as he registers **exactly** what that means. Then he snickers. Then he chuckles. Then he’s laughing outright, so hard Lucy squirms against him and makes a sleepy noise of protest as her pillow shakes uncontrollably and tears bead in his eyes.

“Fucking asshole,” Trafalgar growls, embarrassed. “I’d like to see **you** say no to that guy.”

Zoro just laughs helplessly until Trafalgar stomps away, the red strip of his neck just visible under the hood. Zoro just considers how ironic it is that the formidable Shichibukai was brought low by a fluffy reindeer with big eyes. Fuck, Lucy sure did know how to pick her friends. Law will fit in well around here.

There are a few things in life Zoro finds more satisfying and pleasurable than all the rest. Booze, for one, with sake being his favorite liquor. A good fight, especially if there’s bloodshed and he learns something. Sliding home another weight on his barbells.

Kissing Lucy has rapidly flown to the top of Zoro’s list though. Way to the top. So much so that it’s like its own list entirely.

Technically, he’s supposed to be on watch tonight. But he was conducting his watch from the observation deck, intending to work out, and then Lucy showed up with the shadows of a nightmare clinging to her eyes and now here they are, with Lucy straddling his waist and hovering over him, his fingers tangled in her hair, dragging her close as he fuses his lips to hers.

She’s warm beneath his hands and squirming above him, warm and **enthusiastic** and Zoro has never wanted anything the way he wants her. Needs, maybe. He needs her.

Lucy’s mouth parts against his eagerly, and he takes her lower lip sharply between his teeth. A small, breathless noise catches in the back of Lucy’s throat, and he would **bottle** that sound if he could.

Lucy’s hands are settled on his shoulders, her nails digging into flesh and it’s **amazing** how he just **doesn’t mind at all** that she’s gripping so hard he’s sure she’s drawing blood. The position leaves her whole torso open for exploration, and Lucy’s loose-fitting sleep shirt gaps across her stomach as Zoro’s hand trails over her ribs, her hips, grazes the line of her cotton shorts as his fingers slide across the flat expanse of her stomach…

Lucy shivers and pulls back a little, perched above his hips. Her face is flushed pink and her eyes are bright and she’s biting her lip through a smile.

He sits up, leaning on one elbow while keeping one hand curled around her waist. Not touching her always feels like a missed opportunity.

Lucy raises one hand to his hairline, trailing her fingers across it. The look in her eye is suddenly
incredibly fond. Zoro doesn’t know why she seems to have such a fixation on his hair, but if the reward for letting her play with it is *that* reaction, he’s more than alright with it.

Lucy grins a little, a quirk of mischief in the corner of her mouth. “You’re good at fighting nightmares.”

He blinks, not quite following, then remembers their conversation from right before she tackled him.

*Nightmares are easier when you have someone to fight them with,* she said.

Then he took her hand and—

Yup. That’s. That’s how they ended up on the floor.

He pushes himself up using his elbow, and Lucy falls back in his lap a little as he does. She squeaks in surprise and then her arms are around his neck in an instinctive bid for stability. Zoro smirks, his own hands settling firmly on her waist, locking her against him. Surprising Lucy usually beget great consequences.

She leans back a little, lower lip jutting out in a pout. Zoro’s smirk softens to a (probably dopey) smile, and he leans his forehead against hers. Lucy melts into him immediately, relaxed and loose and calm.

It’s a far cry from the way she was when she came here, and Zoro slides his thumbs across her ribs, feeling the slight ridges and crevices of muscle and bone beneath her shirt. He can feel the heat beneath his hands, and he can’t stop himself from wondering what would happen if he took this a step farther, if he slid his fingers under the hem of her shirt.

And, like she’s reading his fucking mind, Lucy hums and asks, “Zoro? Why haven’t we had sex yet?”

Zoro makes a choking noise not dissimilar to a strangled elephant.

Lucy leans back, her weight settling a little deeper in his lap and Zoro makes another choking noise as Lucy flicks her hair out of her face, frowning. “What? Do you not want to, or…?”

What the fuck is his life right now. “Yes,” he grits out, emphatic. “I want to. I just.” He takes a deep breath, not quite able to meet Lucy’s eyes as he asks, “Do you?”

And he has to ask because she’s never said, and she clearly hasn’t picked up on his desire so maybe…

“Oh huh.” Lucy tilts her head to the side, clearly pondering. “Since, like…I dunno. Maybe Loguetown? Or Alabasta. Not sure. It was a while ago.” Lucy peers at him through her lashes. “Your new ‘practically shirtless’ policy doesn’t help.”

Now hold up, that’s just unfair. “You wear black leather all the time,” he protests. It has to be said, after all. She wears black leather *all* the *time*.

Lucy’s lips twitch in smug satisfaction. Zoro has to resist the urge to kiss it off. Then her eyebrows furrow and she seems uncertain, her thoughts clearly taking her to a different place. “So…why haven’t we?” There’s a small, *meaningful* twist of her pelvis as she says this.

Zoro refrains from groaning pathetically and reaches out to still her hips.
Lucy pouts and holy shit, this girl is going to be the death of him.

‘I just…thought we should take it slow,‘ he lies. ‘Y’know, get used to each other.‘ He squeezes her hip. ‘Used to touching each other.‘

Lucy’s expression softens, and then turns a little shy, suddenly, as one of her hands drifts absently to her chest, right over the scar. ‘That’s it?‘

Zoro narrows his eyes at the tiny gesture, cataloguing it to deal with later. ‘That and birth control.‘

It’s not—*exactly*, true. They’ve gotten as much, uh, *practice* as they can in over the last week and a half, but Lucy’s still kind of new to this. She’s surer and more creative every time they kiss but she’s still inexperienced and he doesn’t want to push her too fast, wants to savor the experiences almost as much as he wants to drag her into an empty room with a bed every time she laughs.

And, hell, it’s not like he’s particularly experienced. He’s had a few one-night stands, all before he met Lucy. He’s out of practice, and he’s never…led the way before. He wants to enjoy it with her, not worry about hurting her or have the potential awkwardness as a barrier.

“And you…want me? Like I want you, I mean.”

Oh lord, why does she have to be so fucking blunt all the fucking—

“Yes,” he grits out, because honestly he doesn’t know what he fucking expected.

But Lucy seems satisfied with his answer, and tilts her head to the side. ‘Chopper said it’d take two weeks to kick in. That’s…” Lucy frowns. “Eh…three days from now?” The hair on the back of Zoro’s neck stands up, and his hands tighten around her hips.

And then, fuck, Lucy’s not exactly a master of seduction, but she looks at Zoro with a stunningly carefree smile on her face and her thighs clamp around his waist, and she says, “do you think we’ll be used to touching each other by then?”

Holy mother of *God.*

“We don’t—” he grunts, trying to control himself. It takes *effort.* “We don’t *have* to do anything by a certain time, y’know?” He pointedly mouths the soft spot behind her ear he only discovered tonight. “The better you know someone, the better it generally is.” Lucy shivers delicately. “Especially when neither of us, uh, have a lot of experience.”

Lucy hums, sounding a little dejected. “So…that’s a no then, or…?”

He growls and he can feel the way her pulse jumps beneath his lips. “Does it *look* like I’m saying no?”

“But…”

“Just—there’s not a time table. We can do whatever the fuck we want, when we want.”

Lucy leans back in his lap, a pout on her face. “But I want you. *Now.*”

The things this girl *does* to him are going to convince him of God’s existence, one day, if only because there’s no way she could be the product of anything other than a deity’s perfectly designed plan to torment him.

He must stare at her just a little too long because the pout starts to deepen to a frown and her lips start
He hooks one of his arms behind her back and one hand reaches up to cradle her head as he throws her down on one of the mats. She gasps in surprise as he pins her and Zoro takes advantage of it to kiss her hard and desperate. She squirms beneath him a little, but only so she can grab the collar of his shirt and drag and him closer, her legs locking behind him and shit this girl is going to kill him.

In an effort to control himself but mostly because he wants to touch her, his free hand—the one that was wrapped around her back—seeks hers, and he finds it. Their fingers twine together and then he takes her hand back, presses it down into the mats by her head and she whimpers a little, her free hand roaming over his chest and tugging at his haramaki insistently.

Fuck, they need to calm down. Like, now. Riiight the fuck now.

Zoro pulls away, reluctant, but he doesn’t dislodge himself entirely. He’s still hovering above Lucy, just a few inches between them. Their chests brush a little as they breathe. Lucy’s eyes are blown wide and eager, and her hand still twists in the fabric of his clothes. There’s a flush on her cheeks and something dark and wanting in her eyes, and it takes every ounce of Zoro’s willpower to keep from kissing her again when she twists her hips suggestively.

But he can’t keep from touching her, won’t restrain himself that far. He ducks down to plant light kisses along her jaw, her throat, and when she arches into him and leaves her neck open he hums a little as he sucks bruises into her pulse point.

“Want you,” he whispers into her skin, and he knows she hears because she gasps at the words, high and sweet. “So much.”

Lucy breathes his name into his ear, her free hand roams everywhere, seems like she’s touching every part of him at once, and fuck, seriously, she’s not helping.

Eventually, Zoro’s lips graze the cotton of Lucy’s high, crewneck t-shirt, and he backs off, thwarted by the fabric. Lucy is sprawled beneath him, her hair fanning out behind her and both hands by her head—one is still pinned there by Zoro’s hand, and the other is wrapped around the wrist he’s been using to support himself. He shifts a little, moving his weight to both his elbows, and Lucy’s hand immediately slips into his.

She’s beautiful like this, all disheveled and breathy and her eyes are dark, plain with lust. It’s beautiful because she’s always so carefree, and Zoro likes pulling this side of her out, likes seeing her focused so intensely on him. It’s heady and makes him want to do things, a thousand ideas coursing through him on how fuel the fire inside them both.

But he’s not wrong, either, about waiting just a little longer. For one, they don’t have protection at the moment, would have to run down to the infirmary to get some, but also...they’re still new to this. Still reacquainting themselves with each other, still mapping out each other’s bodies.

And then there’s something that’s even more important than that—the fear that if they move too fast right now, they’ll regret it. That they’ll sleep together because they’re afraid of separation again, consciously or not, and that the urge to be closer, closer, bury her beneath his skin, is partially born of that fear. With Lucy he wants it to be more than that. Needs it to be, really.

“So...the feeling’s mutual?” She asks after a moment, a strange hesitance in her eyes.

Zoro leans his forehead into hers, shifts a bit so the lengths of their bodies are aligned and she can feel— “What do you think?”
Lucy’s mouth drops open, and her flush grows darker, eyes wide. “Oh.” Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. The movement is fascinating.

“Thank you,” Lucy tells him suddenly, and Zoro blinks, a little thrown, and then she adds with a quick grin, “For waiting on me to catch up.”

Affection bursts in his chest even as he leans down to kiss her. It’s a soft kiss, one full of promise and mischief, and maybe a little reverence, too.

“’t’s not just you,” he growls into her neck when they part. “It’s me too.”

He’s known from the beginning that the two of them are the same this way—neither of them are good at doing things by half-measures. They believe in commitment, in pursuing what they want without hesitation or many intermediary steps at all. It’s why they never needed to have a conversation about what their relationship is, or where it’s going. Lucy is…it, for Zoro. He knows that. He’s known that for years. It’s maybe part of why it was so hard to admit his feelings in the first place.

But in this, in this one thing, he has to pump the breaks. He thinks they’ll be better for it in the end.

Beneath him, Lucy releases a soft, breathy sigh, and leans up to nuzzle into his neck just a bit.

“I love you,” She whispers, her voice thick with emotion. “So much.”

His heart jumps to his throat as he blinks into the black strands of her hair and knows he will never be used to her saying that. “Lucy, I—” He cuts himself off, unable to continue.

Lucy’s nose grazes the side of his neck. “Shh, shh.” she soothes. “I can hear you, remember? I know. I know.” He feels her lips quirk into a smile as her cheek lifts. “Just kiss me already.”

He complies.

Chapter End Notes

The Straw Hat Pirates are passive aggressive little shits and let me tell you why:

When it comes to Luffy and actually remembering people’s names, it tends to be hit or miss. Mostly only his crew and really important people (like Rayleigh and Shanks) are called by their real names. Mostly, he uses nicknames, usually based off of a humorous characteristic or negative trait. I may be wrong about this, but I can’t recall a single instance in which the rest of the Straw Hats unanimously adopted the same nickname Luffy has graced whoever it is with, except for motherfucking Law. When it comes to Law, Luffy just fucked up the pronunciation and then clearly just gave no shits about changing it. Then the straw hats, in a show of solidarity, all started using the same annoying, possibly diminutive nickname that Luffy gave him. I interpreted that as the Straw Hats clearly not trusting Law at all, and trying to express nonverbally how very much they would fuck him up if he betrayed their captain. Then by the time they realized they actually liked the guy, it was too late to change the nickname. Poor Law. I love these assholes so much. They’re adorable.

So as for Zoro and Lucy’s not-sex scene, hopefully Zoro explained why they’re holding
off as long as they are. Basically, Zoro’s aware that they may be going too fast for their own good because they fear another separation. While they’ll probably never be completely over that, Zoro’s point is that they should wait until everyone calms down a little—Lucy’s noticed this anxiety too, pointed it out in the last chapter, in fact. And Lucy would probably acknowledge it herself if she wasn’t so single-minded. But that’s part of what makes Zoro a good first-mate to Luffy/Lucy—he points out things Luffy/Lucy would rather ignore.

Also, for anyone who’s worried, the rating on this fic will remain T. Like I said before, Lucy and Zoro often communicate best through touch, which is why a lot of their best conversations seem to happen when they’re touching or just sitting beside one another. It’s just how they are.
Chapter Summary

"To the land of passion!"
"Shh, no one tell Sanji that women murder you here if they're displeased."
"But I don't want a new cook."
"Needs must, Lucy, needs must."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite the exciting and numerous guests on their ship, Lucy makes sure to spend time with her nakama. She’s missed them after all, and she hasn’t stopped feeling a little thrill of joy in her chest when her senses register all eight of them on the ship, going about their business.

Mostly, Lucy doesn’t have to think about it to make time with her friends. She just does. Robin teaches her to read and she plays games with Usopp and Chopper and sometimes Franky if he’s up to it, and listens to Brook play and tell jokes as she watches Sanji cook and Zoro seeks her out almost as often as she finds him to kiss in spare corners of the ship or sometimes just be in each other’s presence for a while or spar or sometimes he just wants to hold her while he naps, because Zoro gets grabby when he’s sleepy, though he’d never admit that.

(The only time she minds is when she’s really not tired and none of her other nakama are around to entertain her.)

With Nami it’s a little different though. She has a much more active job on the ship than most of them do, one that requires her near constant attention, and a million little adjustments to course as she gets new information. Lucy has no idea how Nami charts a course from the little twitches of her fancy log pose, and wind speeds and sometimes the shape of a single wave on the horizon, but she does. And because her job is so demanding, Nami sometimes spends the whole day up in the navigation library, only coming out to shout instructions to the crewmembers on deck and eat at least one meal in the galley with the rest of them at Sanji’s—enforced through Lucy’s—insistence. Lucy usually only sees her in the bedroom they share with Robin after they’ve weighed anchor, on nights like those, and then Nami’s usually too frazzled and tired to do anything but sleep.

So sometimes, Lucy feels an itch, as it may be, to go and seek out her navigator, and make sure she’s alright. She can’t have Nami falling into the same trap as Torao, after all—they need everyone in top shape as they approach Dressrosa.

And maybe, just maybe, she wants to continually reassure herself that she still knows her crew, still has their dreams rightly in her heart.

It’s been two years, after all. Things could have changed for any of them.

So Lucy swings into the navigation library five days into their journey to Dressrosa. Nami’s been working hard for most of the journey, lost in a pile of books and tracing routes on charts with a compass—a mathy one, not a spinny one—in precise strokes. Lucy doesn’t understand any of it, wouldn’t be able to read a chart if she was handed the step-by-step instructions on how, but it just
makes Nami cooler every time she does it.

She seems more relaxed today though, which is part of the reason Lucy bothered to interrupt her at all. Lucy learned way back on the Merry that she’s more likely to get thrown to the foremast than anything if she drops in while Nami’s in a frenzy.

“Whatchya doin’?” Lucy asks from the doorway, head cocked to the side. Nami’s leaning over the desk with a look of intense concentration on her face, her eyebrows furrowed and her lower lip between her teeth as she makes slow, careful strokes with her fancy pen. She doesn’t look up when Lucy walks in, but she doesn’t throw her out, either, so Lucy figures it’s safe.

“Drawing a map,” Nami mumbles. She checks a list of figures on a pad of paper beside her chart, and makes another careful line. Lucy sits down in the chair opposite her, and watches with rapt interest. “Don’t touch anything,” she orders absently.

Lucy knows better than to do that, too, so she just nods and watches curiously as Nami makes little notations in the margins.

“You’re like Robin, aren’t you?” Lucy asks, suddenly. Nami looks up from her map, and just barely avoids dripping ink on the parchment when she starts a little in surprise. “You’re a genius.”

Nami’s expression warms and a smile pulls at her lips as she puts the pen in its ink pot. “I’m pretty good with numbers, yeah.”

Lucy shakes her head, grinning. “I can tell! Even if I knew all the math rules and stuff I’d never be able to do what you do. You’re amazing, Nami!”

Nami flushes a little at the praise. “Thanks, Lucy.” Then she looks a little wary. “Uh...you don’t want me to teach you math, do you?”

Lucy wrinkles her nose. “No thanks. Reading’s hard enough.”

Nami lets out a sigh of relief. “Thank God. That’s just a disaster waiting to happen.”

Lucy nods in complete agreement. Lucy and math do not mix. She can count and stuff, and do basic things like adding and subtracting and, if the numbers are small enough, multiplication and division, but anything else is kind of beyond the scope of Lucy’s grasp. Maybe one day, waaaaaaaay off in the future, when she’s learned how to read to Robin’s satisfaction, Lucy will ask Nami to teach her more math. For right now, that’s what she has her navigator for.

“What’s that a map of?” Lucy asks curiously, nodding at the chart between them. It’s about three-quarters of the way finished, but Lucy doesn’t recognize it at all.

“The western coastline of an island we passed yesterday,” Nami tells her. “Didn’t get close enough to get a full read on it, unfortunately, but I got enough for this much.

Lucy eyes the map in awe, because she doesn’t remember seeing any islands so that means Nami’s drawing the map entirely by the little twitches of her log pose. “Nami you’re amazing,” she repeats, meaning it. Then Lucy frowns. “But wait, you want to make a map of the whole world, right? So shouldn’t we go back and get all the numbers for you?”

A pleased flush crosses Nami’s face. “You remember.”

Lucy frowns, making sure Nami can see the solemnity in her eyes, and the offense. “Of course I do.” Her nakama’s dreams are just as important as her own, after all. Lucy hasn’t forgotten about any of
it, not All Blue or Laboon or the True History of the world or her promise to take the ship to Raftel and back to Water 7.

“Well it’s not like I run around ranting about it like some people I know,” She snips defensively. Then she shrinks back in her chair, looking a little embarrassed. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have thought otherwise.”

Lucy frowns at her, a little dismayed. Clearly they’ve been leaving Nami up here alone too often if she thinks Lucy wouldn’t remember something like her dream.

“Show me,” She demands. “Your map. Show me what you have so far.”

Nami blinks at her for a second, then nods in agreement, a little light of pride showing in her eyes. “All right.” Then she reaches into a drawer of the desk, pulling out a big leather-bound book. It’s about three inches thick, and the cover is about a square foot in total. It looks big and heavy and impressive.

“I incorporated some of my log in the maps, sometimes,” she warns, handing Lucy the book. “Be careful.”

Lucy nods, solemn. She’s holding her nakama’s dream in her hands. Her treasure. She sets it across her lap, feels the leather stick to her thighs, and eases the book open slowly, with the reverence it’s due.

The first map is one she recognizes, even after years away.

“Orange town?” Lucy asks, a little bewildered. Lucy always got the impression Nami didn’t really want to remember her life before Arlong Park was destroyed.

Nami coughs, clearly embarrassed. “I. Uh. Wanted to make sure all our journeys together were recorded properly.” She smiles, and the expression is a bit softer than usual. “They made for some pretty good memories, after all.”

Lucy remembers sunshine and sea on two swaying boats, and Zoro’s gruff voice and Nami’s haughty interjections, and agrees wholeheartedly.

The next is a map of Gaimon’s island, which Nami generously titled after the odd little man.

“Guy spends twenty years in a box waiting for treasure that doesn’t exist, he at least deserves to have the island named after him,” Nami observes dryly. Lucy giggles in response.

The next is Syrup Village, and Lucy notices a note on the back of that one, detailing that they picked up another crewmember, and a proper ship there, and a list of the potential allies they still had in the village, as well as potential future enemies. Lucy finds it pretty doubtful that they’ll ever run into Kuro again, but she supposes it didn’t seem that unlikely at the time.

The next map is a broader shot, detailing the journey they took between the three previous islands, the currents, other small water features, and the time of year they sailed. Lucy’s no navigator, couldn’t follow a map to save her life, but even she’s aware she’s holding exquisite work in her hands.

It went on. The map of the Baratie included the monthly route the ship took in order to stock up on supplies and make itself available to as many seafarers as possible. Lucy wonders if Sanji helped after the fact, or if Nami asked about it on the ship.
Then there’s Cocoyashi, with the ruins of Arlong Park demarcated in ink as a smoking pile of rubble. Then Loguetown, and then another wide shot detailing the previous three stops on their journey, before an even wider shot of East Blue at large, a bobbing line swaying from Orange town down to the City of the Beginning and the End, with the Reverse Mountain marked the lower left-hand corner.

“Wooooaahh I didn’t know the Reverse Mountain looked like that!” Lucy says eagerly, observing the four conveniently placed canals.

“I figured it had to be something like that, considering how strong the current was and the general impossibility of it. But the three other sides of it are from reliable maps I found. No measurements then,” she says, holding up her log pose.

Lucy blinks in realization. “Oh yeah, you were still using a compass.” It’s even more impressive, honestly.

Lucy looks through the book slowly, taking in each map with care. Nami was obviously careful—very careful—to take very precise measurements with each island and each stretch of seawater. Everything is drawn perfectly to scale and, maybe even more impressively, it’s all consistent. The maps of some islands, like Alabasta, required more than one page, with Nami drawing first one half of the island, then the other to her normal scale, and then a zoomed-out version of the whole thing, the geographic features expertly drawn and marked with care. The back of the big map explains Vivi’s story, and ultimately, her decision to stay behind.

It almost has Lucy tearing up, the obvious care in Nami’s words. Lucy still misses Vivi too.

It goes on and on. Every island they’ve visited, every stop along the way. Their course is perfectly charted, perfectly recorded in this beautiful labor of love Nami’s crafted with her own two hands and a few measurements.

Then she gets to Sabaody, and the maps just stop, the book blank.

“Nami…?” Lucy looks up curiously, and sees Nami look down.

“I left eight pages blank. I figured we might end up at the places everyone was sent to one day and I —” Nami blinks rapidly. “I figured I would add those islands then. Whenever we got to it.” She reaches over to turn the page a few times, and Lucy is treated to a map of Weatheria, the island Nami spent the last two years on. It’s from a birds’-eye view, but unlike the others it also includes a side-view, and an indication of the island’s average height and general location.

“Oh,” Lucy says quietly. She can’t imagine a reason they’d go back to Ruskaina, but maybe if they visit Hancock sometime Lucy will bring Nami out to the island for her map. She smiles at her navigator. “I like it.”

Nami smiles back, and Lucy flips to the next filled page, which is, of course, Fishman Island. Here, too, Nami had to get creative. The first page is a birds-eye view of the main bubble, the second a map of the palace, and the third a view of the island from the side, and on the back a list of instructions on how to get down there in the first place, and how to navigate the ocean from underwater.

“Jeez, Nami, no one’s going to have another adventure again after reading this,” Lucy says with a frown, unsure if she should be impressed or kind of sad at the idea of being the last discoverer of...anything.
Nami smirks. “Oh, I think they’ll still find some adventure in it yet.” Nami gives Lucy a wink. “I may have left out a few important details.”

Lucy gapes, then laughs. “Nami that’s mean.”

“They’ll sink or swim, it’s not my fault either way.”

Lucy giggles, and moves on.

Then there’s a couple of maps like the one on Nami’s desk right now—just unnamed coastlines, without much context. Then Punk Hazard, and a map of how they got there, whales and all. Punk Hazard is the last map in the book, but Lucy has a feeling several more coastlines will be added soon, if the pile on Nami’s desk is anything to go by.

“It’s amazing, Nami,” Lucy tells her seriously. “It’s like being in all those places again!”

Nami’s smile turns proud. “I’ve still got a long way to go.”

Lucy nods vigorously. “Yep! We’ve got lots of adventures still.” Then a thought occurs to her, and she cocks her head to the side. “Hey, Nami, didn’t you see any islands while you were on Weatheria?”

Nami coughs. “I. Err.” She flushes. “I...I still want to make a map of the world, but…” She shrugs, a little helpless. “I want to do it with the islands we see together.” Nami’s flush gets deeper. “That’s why we don’t need to go back to the islands,” she says, gesturing at the coastline on her desk. “We’ll get ‘em next time around. When you’re Pirate King.”

Lucy blinks at her, feeling very...emotional, all of a sudden. Then she nods, a grin on her face. “Yeah, of course!”

Nami smiles in response, carefully replacing her treasure in the drawer on her left. “Now go bug someone else. I’ve got a map to finish.”

Lucy nods, grins, and bounds away, but the knot of knowing unease in her gut is gone, faded into the ether, and knows all is well with her navigator.

———

“Lucy, for the last time, you cannot pull off a beard.”

Lucy frowns behind the fake beard, turning to Zoro with a pout on her face. It doesn’t exactly help the gluing process, but Zoro deserves a pout.

Zoro is unimpressed by her bearded pout, if the raised eyebrow is any indication.

Obviously Zoro doesn’t get it. The beard is essential. She’s in disguise, after all.

It’s pretty clever if she does say so herself. She’s running around Dressrosa as an old man. She’s too slight to pass for a boy, especially when she’s inevitably forced to fight, but with enough stuff covering her face and (very subtle, practically nonexistent) curves, she can probably pass for a once-athletic old man who’s gone frail with age. So she’s done everything—she’s covered her hat with another, less conspicuous one, and got longer shorts out of storage, left her skirt and jacket on the ship. The shorts are loose—too loose for Lucy, but she has them staying up with an extra pair of Usopp’s suspenders, so even though it’s annoying, it’s not a problem. And then she filched one of Zoro’s old shirts, too, from before Sabaody—a black, short-sleeved button-up with cheerful yellow
and orange sunflowers printed all over it.

Honestly, it probably wouldn’t even fit him now—he’s too broad in the shoulder and chest—but it swamps Lucy, covering everything from her elbows to her upper thighs. She’s still wearing the black leather underneath, because she’s grown used to it and there’s always a danger of the shirt getting ripped. Or ripping it up herself, if she’s outed as a girl and gets sick of it swishing around her midriff, like she already is. She’s pretty sure Zoro won’t mind much if it’s destroyed.

Judging from the way he is oh-so-carefully not eyeing her shirt, he certainly doesn’t mind that she grabbed it. At all.

He really does have a thing for seeing her in his clothes. At least it’s an easy kink to satisfy, and it’s not like Lucy minds. It’s usually pretty beneficial on her end, at any rate, even apart from the many benefits of getting him turned on.

“Seriously, no one’s going to buy that you’re an old man.”

Lucy sticks her tongue out at him and is rewarded with a mouthful of artificial beard-hair. Gross. “They will too! No one looks twice at a beard! They’re inherently trustworthy!”

Zoro snorts, leaning back on the Mini Merry’s rail behind him. “I think you might be overstating it.”

“Am not!” The adhesive on the beard is finally starting to bond to her skin, thank goodness.

Zoro rolls his eyes and looks her up and down. Lucy suddenly feels kind of tingly and excited. The way she does when they kiss and their bodies start moving on their own and she can hardly think about anything except him and his hands everywhere and her hands everywhere on him.

It’s not fair that Zoro gets to look at her like that when he’s wearing a tux.

Zoro looks good in a tux.

Zoro looks amazing in a tux.

It makes her want to strip it off of him. With her teeth.

She thinks about their conversation the other night, the look in his eye when she asked him about sex, the desperate way he touched her, and burns a little, low in her belly.

…honestly, she gets why Zoro told her they should hold off just a little more. She does. She even agrees. Lucy still doesn’t know what she’s doing half the time when they kiss, and she imagines the effect will only be amplified during sex. But when Zoro runs around looking like that and looking at her like he wants to eat her, it’s really hard to care about anything but jumping him.

(And it’s second-nature to trust Zoro. With everything, anything.)

“…I guess you can maybe pull it off. So long as no one looks too close. Apparently people dress pretty bizarrely here anyway.”

Lucy nods, remembering the frilly dress Nami showed her back on the Sunny—a find she picked up in Fishman Island which was, apparently, originally from Dressrosa. It was way too elaborate and girly for Lucy, which is why she ended up in Zoro’s shirt and oversized shorts.

Lucy shuffles toward him, intending to present her beard for inspection. Zoro’s arms open up for her automatically, which is a good thing because she manages to trip over some rope and nearly pitches
into the sea—would have, if Zoro didn’t catch her by the elbows and yank her back before him. Lucy’s upper lip itches, and she tests the beard carefully.

“You look like a girl wearing a mustache, not an old man,” Zoro complains. Lucy purses into a stubborn pout. He sighs.

“We need to disguise her somehow,” Sanji protests from behind. Zoro looks up to glare at him and, probably unconsciously, pulls her a little closer, possessive and clearly annoyed at the interruption. Lucy can feel the beard start peeling away, and presses it back to her lips as Sanji continues. “She’s even more recognizable than Torao.”

“That’s right, Cook-bro!” Franky agrees, “The others will bring the ship around tomorrow and drop Caesar off on the island at noon. Until then we gotta lay low, which means” Franky says meaningfully, flicking Usopp’s nose, “we gotta cover up our most recognizable traits.”

“What exactly do you think you can do about my nose?”

“My arm has a buzzsaw feature.”

“Oh ha ha ha, good one. Like I’ve never heard that before.”

“You can’t chop off Usopp’s nose!” Chopper protests, horrified. The little reindeer throws himself at Usopp, tears beading in his big brown eyes. Lucy just hopes he’ll be able to steer the Mini back to the ship after they’re through. “At least not without antiseptic and a sterile surgical environment!”

“Oi, didn’t you go along with that a little too quickly?” Usopp asks, irritated. Then blinks. “Hey wait, what about, like, pain stuff?”

“Unnecessary.”

“Oi, aren’t doctors supposed to minimize pain?”

“Relax, Chopper, Franky’s teasing,” Sanji chides. Lucy smiles, because even Sanji isn’t immune to Chopper being cute.

Usopp pries Chopper loose with a glare at the cyborg. “Yeah, he’s just not very funny.”

“Me and my many manly hairstyles resent that.”

Lucy takes her hands away from her face slowly, carefully testing the adhesive. Zoro eyes it skeptically when it stays up, and then he reaches over to tug at it gently with one hand.

“There’s got to be a disguise that doesn’t involve gender reassignment,” Zoro muses, looking a little resigned at this point. The mustache comes off when he tugs a little firmer, and Lucy reaches up to try and set the glue again.

Lucy frowns up at him, a little annoyed. Her costume is awesome, obviously. “Don’t I look nice, Zoro?”

He freezes, and Lucy feels a flash of panic from him that seems sort of disproportionate considering the question.

Behind her, Franky snorts and Sanji snickers with Usopp. Lucy turns to look at them quizzically, and sees Kin’emon nod in solemn pity. Possibly for Zoro, possibly for the Straw Hats in general.

“Yeah, Sword-bro,” Franky chuckles. “How does your cross-dressing girlfriend look right now?”
Lucy doesn’t really get it, but for some reason she senses him panic more at Franky’s question.

“I didn’t know Lucy-san was devious enough for a trap like that,” Sanji says admiringly. “She must have taken advice from Nami-san or something.”

“Nah, Lucy’s not like that,” Usopp mutters, snickering. “She just does things like this on accident.”

“Zoro?” She asks, thoroughly confused. She’s more concerned about his panic than his fashion opinions at this point.

“I. Uh. Good?” He stammers. Coughs. “I. Um. Like the shirt.” Then he blushes furiously, probably because he finally admitted he likes when she wears his clothes.

Lucy grins at him, still a bit bemused, but willing to move on now that his panic has subsided into embarrassment. “Thanks, Zoro! You look good too!”

Then, because she can and he looks really good and also a bit embarrassed, she tugs on his collar—perfectly cut to tease his collar bones and muscle underneath, the white and black striking on his frame and damn, Zoro needs to wear suits more often—and he lets her pull him down obligingly. Kissing through the beard is a little weird, but Zoro’s mouth finds hers and tastes like sake and something kind of dark and spicy, just like always. Fingers press gently against her jaw, and she lets him angle her mouth against his a little harsher, leans into him eagerly, and she stands up on her tip-toes to press into him better.

“Public displays of intimacy and erotic interest are entirely inappropriate outside of brothels and concubine houses!”

“Oh shut up you old perv,” Usopp rebukes.

“Jeez, who would’ve thought it would be worse after they got together?” Sanji complains.

“They smell weird.”

“Chopper, either stop smelling hormone changes or stop telling us you smell them. It’s weird, man.”

“You two can’t do that in town, you know. We don’t know how open-minded this place is and Aneki’s supposed to be a guy!”

Lucy pulls back, grinning. Zoro rolls his eye at her, but she doesn’t need to hear his Voice or feel his heartbeat beneath her palm to know he’s anything but irritated with her.

“Here, Zoro, you get a disguise too.” Usopp shoves a moustache and a pair of sunglasses in his hand. Zoro sighs, shoving the glasses on and ripping off the paper to expose the sticky backing.

“Franky, you gotta do something about your shoulders.”

“My shoulders are beautiful, Nose-bro. Beautiful.”

“Your shoulders are noticeable. And you skip leg day.”

“Do not bring up leg day, Nose-bro. Not cool.”

“Sanji should probably wear a hat,” Lucy adds absently, tugging at her beard to test. Zoro looks good with the moustache, which miraculously goes on in one try. Lucy is almost jealous of his clearly superior adhesive. “His cool eyebrows are swirlly.”
“Thank you for your consideration, Lucy-san!”

The little boat bumps against the shore and the six of them about to depart stand in anticipation.

“Alright, we’re off!” Cheers Usopp, waving a goodbye to Chopper, who’s settling himself behind the Mini’s stern.

“To the land of passion!” Sanji declares, jumping to the rocky beach, and Franky follows him with a caution to be quiet on his lips as he makes too much noise himself.

Zoro makes to follow them when Lucy stops him, reaching out. He looks down at her, waiting for an explanation, an eyebrow rising above his dark sunglasses.

She doesn’t have a reason for stopping him, exactly. Just a very important piece of information to depart.

Lucy lowers her voice, forcing him to lean in and making the gravity of her statement known, and has the gratification of watching his pupils dilate in surprise when she whispers, “You look good in a tux.”

And then, before he can react, she reaches around and slaps him on the ass.

“Oi!” He protests, but Lucy just sprints away, giggling like mad and she can hear Zoro spluttering in either shock or irritation as he gives chase.

“Lucy! Get back here!”

Lucy just bellows in laughter, pushing her speed up the path to the village, and just manages to catch it when Chopper grumbles, “Oh, sure, I’m the weird one. Human mating rituals make no sense at all.”

Chapter End Notes

So, confession time, I’m an asshole who forgot to link a piece of fanart of Lucy 2.0 in the story for, like, several chapters now. To the creator (AKA, still my favorite person of all time) I'm so, sooo sorry. I thought I posted the link a while ago, but due to shenanigans, this did not occur. But! You all can find it here. Please go look at it, maye is amazing.

Seriously, when was the last time Nami’s dream was mentioned/brought up? Like, she’s frequently complimented on her skills as a navigator, but her dream is to make a map of the whole world, right? So she basically wants to make a world atlas. But we never see her do any mapmaking or any evidence that she’s done that kind of thing in the past. I’m hoping that with the road poneglyphs, she’ll make a “map no one has ever made before” or something. I’m just hoping she gets a role in that.

It’s my head canon that Luffy really did steal Zoro’s shirt during Dressrosa. Not in a shippy kind of way, just in a friends sort of way. I don’t know if guys usually do that (?) but Luffy actually has done just that before, back on Skypiea. He runs around with a bracelet and armband the whole arc he stole from Usopp and Sanji, and that’s according to Oda. Plus, that shirt really does look like the type of thing Zoro would wear pre time-
skip. I think in the same interview where Oda confirmed Luffy was wearing Usopp and Sanji’s stuff (btw, it’s SO FUCKING CUTE that they lent him their stuff), Oda also said neither Luffy nor Zoro had any sort of fashion sense. So yes, I think Luffy stole one of Zoro’s old shirts. It certainly doesn’t look like the type of thing Luffy wears.

Well. Let me know what you think. There are many, many Dressrosa chapters, so good things are on the horizon.
Zoro and Lucy kind of have a date. Lucy enters the colosseum and meets a friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It takes a fair bit of running and hissed reminders that they have to be quiet, dammit, for Zoro to finally catch up with Lucy. When he does he grabs her ‘round the waist from behind, and her legs kick the air a little as she laughs. He’s tempted to spin her around or throw her over his shoulder or something, but he’s wary of making too much noise or drawing any more attention than they already have, so he sets her on her feet instead.

Lucy turns around in his arms, still huffing with giggles, and her eyes are huge and shining with laughter, the apples of her cheeks red from the wind and honestly, what is Zoro supposed to do in the face of an expression like that? Even the stupid beard can’t hide how beautiful it is. Not kissing her feels like a waste.

But they’re in the middle of the city now, strangers among a sea of colorful natives and animated toys. They can’t call attention to themselves by kissing or being otherwise disruptive. Franky was right when he warned them off of too much PDA—Lucy’s meant to be a guy, and they have no idea how open-minded Dressrosa is or isn’t.

“C’mon,” Zoro tells her, clearing his throat and stepping away, removing the temptation. “Let’s explore a little.”

Lucy pouts—the beard somehow just makes it more obvious—but seems to get why he backed off. Her attention turns to the world around them, and they take their time strolling through the streets.

Because Nami has incredible skills with navigation and the wind was with them—and Nami coerced it when it wasn’t—they actually arrived at Dressrosa a day earlier than expected. Trafalgar quickly turned this into an opportunity, and sent the six of them ahead as a scouting party. Apparently it’s safe so long as they go unnoticed, because Doflamingo is notoriously bad at Observation Haki and can’t stand having people around him who are good at it, like any true narcissist.

Trafalgar has a suspiciously detailed knowledge about Doflamingo and his crew. Zoro didn’t ask, but he did notice. It could just be due to extensive research. In theory.

Lucy trusts him. Zoro’s pretty sure she’s right to.

Lucy walks beside him, and their hands brush every few steps due to how wildly she swings her arms. It’s absurd how tempting it is to take hers in his own, but Zoro focuses his attention outward, on the city itself, and tries to stick to the mission.

Normally, the six of them really wouldn’t be anyone’s first choice for an espionage mission. Well, Sanji would be, actually, and maybe Usopp, but he, Lucy, and Franky, in particular, are possessed of a general inability to keep quiet or any sort of low profile. But part of the objective for this scouting
mission is to take out some of Doflamingo’s top lieutenants while they have the element of surprise, and the guy’s not expecting them. They needed people with a lot of firepower on the island. And Usopp, who, in Nami’s words, would “be the brains of the operation.”

Fair assessment, honestly.

So now the six of them are spread over Dressrosa in pairs, trying to assess the general condition of the island and maybe take out some of the enemy along the way, if it can be done inconspicuously. Zoro can sense Kin’emon and Franky a few blocks away, and Sanji and Usopp are together somewhere far to the north—far enough north that he can’t pinpoint where they are, exactly.

Dressrosa itself is…interesting. The atmosphere is warm and lively, with lots of street performers and spontaneous cries of laughter and boisterous greetings between friends and lovers. The streets are decorated in bright colors, usually bold bolts of cloth strung from buildings seemingly hewn from the rocks ringing the island’s shores. Flowers fill most of the window-boxes, and the people are dressed colorfully as well. The clothing is varied enough that he and Lucy don’t stand out much, but the women seem to favor long dresses with fitted bodices, loose skirts, and lots of ruffles. The men typically wore a leather vest of varying lengths over loose, long-sleeved shirts and dark trousers.

The toys add another wash of color to the island. They were each unique and seemed completely independent of anything but their own intentions.

Yeah the toys are…odd. Zoro’s not sure what to make of them. Lucy seems simultaneously interested in them and uncomfortable, which is pretty unlike her. It makes Zoro wary of the little…creatures…but none of the toys bother either of them, or call out, and that almost makes it stranger, because they certainly interact with everyone else.

Still, despite the vague sense of wrongness itching at Zoro’s senses—and if he’s getting it, he knows Lucy’s Haki must be screaming at her right now, since she’s the one with heightened empathy and shit—Dressrosa seems…vibrant. Both the scenery and the people. Kind of pleasant.

It’s the type of place he might take Lucy for a date, if he thought about it. And he has been, ever since the stupid cook brought up wooing.

The fuck even is wooing anyway? Isn’t it for trying to convince someone to like him in the first place? He’s pretty sure he and Lucy have that covered. Right?

“Hey! Handsome boy with the green hair! You and your pretty date come here, yes?”

Zoro turns around, eye settling on a little old lady with a flower cart. She’s dressed like she doesn’t have much in the way of money—a blue-gray burlap dress, her leathery skin pulled back over uneven teeth and broad, rough features. Her steel-gray hair is pulled back in a neat bun, revealing once-brown eyes clouded with cataracts. A toy shaped like a dog with a slinky for a belly hops around her feet.

He looks down at Lucy, who stares at the little old lady with curiosity, and Zoro can see the questions building behind her eyes. Well. Alright then.

Zoro sighs. “How’d you—"

“There’s no fooling old Alvera. I may be blind, but I can still see, ya see?"

Zoro raises an eyebrow, and looks at Lucy for confirmation. She nods.

So the old bat has a natural affinity with Observation Haki, just like the little girl on Skypiea. He
wonders if she knows.

“Now come, pick your flowers you two. I’ve done this for every couple on the island, mmhhm.” She nods to herself and sets the cart down, right there in the street with a no-nonsense gesture to bid them over.

Zoro looks down at Lucy. She shrugs, curiosity shining in her eyes.

Ah what the hell, it’s not like the old lady hasn’t blown their cover already.

“It’s ten berri for a bouquet,” the little dog-slinky warns. It’s the first time one of the toys has actually spoken to them, and it’s weird. Lucy actually shivers a bit beside him. Haki tells him it’s out of discomfort. Or maybe revulsion.

Zoro fishes the money out of his pocket, knowing Lucy wouldn’t have thought to bring any with her. It seems cheap for a bouquet, but Zoro’s not sure what the economic conditions on the island are like. The people seem wealthy enough, nothing like Alabasta at the peak of their drought and post-war economic devastation, but…

“You two are strangers to this island, yes?” Zoro, figuring there isn’t much point in hiding it, nods. Lucy chirps in the affirmative beside him. “Then let me tell you how the tradition works, children.”

“You’ll never believe what goes with it,” the dog interrupts. “You have to tell the story, Nan!” The toy’s voice is high and reedy, like that of a young child. Zoro wonders why one would make a sentient toy sound like that. Lucy is looking at the dog with an increasingly troubled expression.

“Oh, yes, the story. Well, it’s said that once, long ago, a young girl travelled through this place, during one of the dark periods of our history.” The old lady’s expression turns sort of blank, like she’s restraining some great emotion. “This country is one comprised of peace-loving people, strangers, but it is also a people of great passion. We enjoyed a long stretch of peace under the previous dynasty, but it ended in violence and bloodshed. There have been many dark periods before that, and I’m sure many will come.” The old lady’s expression clears, turning less serious. “But at any rate, the story goes—a young girl, one seeking the secrets of the world, travelled to this island and saved us from a terrible fate—the character of which no one living knows. While here, she fell in love. Her affections were returned, but her lover knew she was not meant for life on our quiet island. The young traveler was a seeker of adventure, and belonged to the sea. He felt himself inadequate for her, and unsuited to her life. So he went out and picked her a bouquet of flowers, rested them beside her as she slept, and hung himself from a tree to force her to leave and meet her destiny. The young traveler woke and was horrified to discover her lover’s death. She wept inconsolably over the bouquet, heartsick and grief-stricken, and kept the flowers alive for ages with just her tears.

“The girl understood, however, why her lover did what he did. Though she did not agree with his assessment or his actions, she wanted to respect his wishes. Besides, even in the deepest throes of her grief, the sea called to her blood. So eventually, when she finished her time of mourning, she planted the still-blooming flowers under the tree he hung himself from, and watered the flowers in a spray of her blood as she swore to live as he wished for her. She went to sleep that night in the bed they shared, planning to leave the next day. But as she dreamed, a miracle occurred. The flowers grew and bloomed under the light of the full moon, until from their buds emerged the body of her lover, whole and healthy.

“It had been a year since his death, and his corpse should have long-since rotted in the earth. But instead he stood on well-muscled legs and, knowing he had been long-absent, walked to his lover. She woke immediately, and the two were reunited joyfully. They soon left our island for the sea,
where they remained sailing until their deaths and after, their destinies reckoned upon the waves.”

The old lady grins, her smile toothy and yellow. “It is said here in Dressrosa that the man
discovered the exact conversation of flowers which would give two lovers a second chance, given
enough grief and love. His actions, though misguided, were born of a selfless sort of love, one
preoccupied only with his lover’s best interests. Likewise, though it would have been easy to run to
the sea to escape, or bury her grief instead of experiencing it, the girl expressed her own depth of
emotion in the long year of his absence. And, even after experiencing such grief and loss, she
forgave her lover, which takes courage and character and a willing heart.” The old lady’s eyes
sharpen somehow, even blind as she is. “Which of you, I wonder, has lost everything and yet been
willing to forgive?”

Both he and Lucy shuffle a bit, uncomfortable. There are a few…obvious similarities between them
and the couple in the story. He assumes Lucy’s feeling a bit of guilt over their two-year separation.
He’s remembering Thriller Bark, and the absolute certainty that her life is worth more than his.
Lucy’s hand finds his, and he doesn’t have the heart to tell her off.

“The point of the bouquets my dears, is twofold—one, to honor a love so great it conquered death
itself, and two, to rediscover the arrangement which begets love a second chance, even from death.
Each of the flowers has a different meaning, you see, and speaks a different message when placed
properly with one another. They say a couple’s bouquet can channel the fate of the participants, and
even predict the success of their relationship, and if you pick the same arrangement as the lover from
the tale did, you can never be separated from your true love ever again. Not even by distance or
death.”

Lucy smiles. “That’s a nice story. Is it true?”

The old lady chuckles, “Well it’s fun to think so, isn’t it!”

“I think it’s definitely true,” the little dog toy says with surprising vehemence. “People can come
back from the dead for sure.”

Lucy looks at the dog intently, confusion and concern written all over her face. The little old lady,
too, seems pained. “Of course, dear,” she tells the dog. Then she straightens, beckoning Lucy and
Zoro closer, to peer at the cart. “Now, over time, the tradition has evolved. The flowers’ recipient
picks most of the flowers, and then her lover picks the last. So, my dear, please go ahead, and
choose wisely. The first is most important.”

Lucy leans over the cart with her brows furrowed in concentration, eyes squinting. Zoro squeezes
her hand once, because he can, and he likes the feel of her palm sliding under his.

“This one!” Lucy decides, pointing to a white star-shaped flower bending gracefully over a thick
green stem.

“Angrec,” the boy repeats in surprise. Alveda gives nothing away and deftly plucks it from her cart.

“And that one. And that one there. And that. That. Oh! And that one!”

pitching in confusion more and more as Lucy goes. Zoro has to admit he’s a bit surprised too. He
expected her to go for the really gaudy flowers, the ones with the most color and biggest petals. But
mostly she’s picking…bunches of leaves and white flowers.

Well, whatever. It’s Lucy’s bouquet. She did say her favorite color is green now.
“Uh…that one. And that one. Also that. And that.”

“Ivy. White Oak. Tulip. Red Carnation.”

Zoro gets the feeling this is going to be more than ten berri.

Well, whatever. He would tell her to slow down, but she…actually she seems really into it. Sort of focused. He’s pretty sure she’s picking everything with a reason in mind, not just pointing to things at random.


There’s a pause as Lucy considers the cart. Then she gives herself a serious nod. “Yep. I’m done now.”

“Alright, handsome boy.” Alvera turns to Zoro with a gruff gesture. “Come here and pick your flowers.”

“I thought I only pick one?” He asks, almost rhetorically. He’s already scanning the cart.

“Not today boy, not today. Pick the most important one last, ya hear?”

“Yeah yeah,” he waves off the old lady. Fuck, he has no idea what he’s doing. Whatever, he’s pretty sure Lucy won’t care much. “Uh. That. That. Whatever that is. And that. And that. And…yeah, that. That’s it.”


Alvera collects the flowers and branches, and adds them to Lucy’s picks. She ties a gold ribbon around it and shoves the whole thing in Lucy’s arms, who fumbles it a bit before catching them. He’s pretty sure a branch of something gets caught in her beard.

“How much?” Zoro asks, already fishing more out of his pockets. Lucy picked a lot of flowers, no way ten berri covers it.


“Err…you sure?” He’s not against free stuff but…well the old lady has to eat, right?

“Positive. You two are going to change things around here, right?”

Both of them freeze, uncertain. Alvera doesn’t give them a chance to respond.

“I remember how it was in the old days, before this king. The others may have forgotten but I have not.” Alvera taps her eyes, and gives them a gruff nod. “I can see things others can’t. I know things they don’t. This king is a bad one, no matter what anyone tells you.” An old sort of grief crosses Alvera’s face. “Dressrosa isn’t free. All of us are enslaved, even if no one knows.”

“How can that be?” Lucy asks, confused. “Are there Celestial Dragons here?”

“It’s not like that,” Says the dog, his high, child’s voice thick with emotion. “It’s not like that. We’re —”

“It’s something everyone must discover for themselves,” the old lady interrupts with a quelling look at the toy. It’s…strange.
“At any rate,” Alvera continues, “Your bouquet is the most fascinating I’ve ever made. The two of you are meant for great things, I believe.”

“We’re going to be the Pirate King and World’s Greatest Swordsman,” Lucy says absently, shifting the bouquet to one arm.

Zoro smacks his forehead with his palm. “You’re not just supposed to share that.”

Lucy blinks, and the dopey expression is only heightened by the beard. “Oh. Right.” Then shrugs. “But we are.”

Zoro gives a long-suffering sigh, and the old lady chuckles. “Well. Off with you then. Go see the rest of the island. Discover its secrets. Have an adventure.”

“And—and remember the toys!” The dog begs. “Look at them, see if they seem strange to you, or sad, or—”

“That’s enough dear,” Alvera says firmly, and she goes to the handles of her cart to lift it away. “Enjoy the island! Look with everything but your eyes! And enjoy yourselves—no form of love is ever discouraged by the people of Dressrosa!”

And then she’s gone, with the downtrodden toy dog at her heels.

Zoro stares after them. “Well that was…weird.”

Lucy sniffs her bouquet, curious. “Well at least we have more money for meat now.”

Zoro smirks and leads her down the street by her hand, taking the old lady’s words as advice and permission. “Maybe they’re vegetarian here.”

Lucy freezes, horror dawning over her expression. “That would explain so much. No wonder everyone’s depressed! Zoro! We have to save them!”

Zoro laughs, utterly amused, and the sun beats down upon their shoulders and the streets and dust kicks up around them as performers dance and move crowds and hearts. Dressrosa is beautiful, colorful, and loud, and it’s easy to slip into the lull of the place, set at ease by the atmosphere. It’s a great place for a date, and Zoro wonders if they have the money for some of the nearby vendors.

But there’s a low thread of discontent, one that has his katana humming in uneasy response, and judging by the tight grip of Lucy’s hand in his, he’s not the only one who feels it.

Things on Dressrosa are…strange, to say the least. Lucy keeps getting bombarded with assaults to her senses, a level of desperation she’s only felt in the midst of atrocities, or at least attempted ones. She can’t pinpoint the source, either, which is…weird. And the whole atmosphere feels strangely familiar. Lucy almost feels like she knows Dressrosa but she doesn’t and it’s…odd.

She and Zoro met up with Franky and Kin’emon not long ago at a café, where they met a weird old gambler with no eyesight. Lucy’s not sure why she keeps meeting badass blind elders today, but she does. Then Zoro took off after one of his swords when—and she’s not kidding here—fairies stole it. At least, that’s what the locals all said when Zoro freaked out. They seemed bizarrely calm about the existence of invisible thieves.

Kin’emon went off after Zoro in an attempt to retrieve him—or maybe retrieve the katana, it wasn’t clear. So Franky was the only one with her when she discovered what ‘Mingo had been so certain
she would want.

Ace’s *Fruit*.

He was right. She wants it.

Not to eat, obviously, but. She can’t let just *anyone* have it. She has to find someone who’s worthy of it. Someone good and brave and who Ace would approve of.

Several of her crew members come to mind. Sanji especially, since he already uses fire in a lot of his attacks. Zoro wouldn’t want it, would think of a Devil Fruit as cheating. She’s not sure Usopp is suited. Franky might be a good choice, but he already rejected it. Robin has a fruit. Nami *might* want it, but she kind of doubts that, since Nami loves swimming.

So she doesn’t know exactly what she’s going to do with it, but. She can’t just stand by while someone else takes it away. It’s *Ace’s Devil Fruit*. His legacy. It’s a part of him.

“You okay, Aneki?” Franky whispers lowly. He’s been a really good sport about this. She knows it’s…a less than ideal deviation from their goals. But she needs this, and Franky seems to understand. Franky gets brothers, especially the kind you don’t share blood with.

“I’m fine,” she whispers, frowning down at the paperwork. It’s slow going, because Lucy’s still not great at reading. Robin’s taught her a lot, and she learns more all the time, but it’s slow going. At least she’s not dyslexic, like Ace was. Then she’d *never* figure any of it out. She always though it was impressive, how good he was even with a barrier like that in front of him. Ace always said things like that are meant to be overcome.

The woman tending the booth seems to grow impatient with her, and snatches the papers to fill it out herself.

“What’s your name?”

Annoyed, Lucy starts to answer unthinkingly. “Lu-uff! Hey!” Lucy rubs the back of her head, right where Franky just smacked her. She sends him a petulant glare. Franky seems unbothered, and tucks the bouquet she got with Zoro under his arm in huffy impertinence.

“Luffy? Your name is Luffy?”

Oh. Right. Disguises.

Well, Luffy’s kind of a dumb name, but it’s not like it matters.

“…yes?”

“Great! Just step right in and try not to die,” She tells Lucy cheerfully, and hands her a card with a competition number and her pseudonym on it. Lucy nods at her and turns to wave a goodbye to Franky.

“Be careful, Aneki,” he mutters, casting suspicious eyes at the other participants and attaching the number to her shirt. “Most of the people here don’t have much honor.”

She grins at him. Franky is always trying to take care of everyone. He’s got a big heart, her cyborg. It’s a common quality on her ship.

“I’ll be fine,” she promises. She’s not concerned. None of the people here pose much of a threat to
her. “See you after I get the Mera Mera Fruit.”

Franky nods, a grin and glint of pride in his eyes. “Good luck!”

And Lucy enters the arena without even a glance behind her.

As it turns out, the contestants in the tournament are all pretty rowdy and kind of fun. Lucy is attacked five times in as many minutes, and even though none of them even so much as touch her, it makes her feel kind of at home. People who are too free with their fists are her kind of people. Or they used to be, before she had to restrain herself in order to avoid killing most.

While normally she might be a bit disappointed with the general quality of competition, it’s actually a good thing this time around. She needs to get the Mera Mera Fruit as quickly as possible, and get back to the task at hand, so Torao knows she’s his friend.

In the armory she collects a helmet and a cape. Mostly because they look cool, but also because they’ll help disguise her more. She assumes there’ll be a lot of attention on her, and it’s going to be too obvious she’s a girl if she doesn’t have the help in hiding her face and shape. She also meets the blonde prince guy that wants to kill her, and even though he seemed stronger than most of the people here, she found him kind of boring, too.

Eventually she makes her way to a quieter part of the arena. There’s a statue there with a big muscly guy called Kyros, and he looks out over the lobby in almost regal solemnity.

Lucy tilts her head to him, noticing the similar design of their helmets. She wonders if Zoro knows of him. The guy has a sword, and the date on the statue is from about twenty years ago. If the guy was good enough, Zoro probably heard stories about him as a kid. His sensei was fond of motivating his students with tales of the greats, apparently. Lucy bets it had a similar effect on Zoro as hearing about the Pirate King did on her.

“Are you…interested in that statue?” A meek voice asks. Lucy turns to face a helmeted girl with long pink hair braided down her back. She’s dressed almost exactly like the gladiator in the statue, with a cape and helmet, and uses the same sort of sword.

She’s also missing a shirt and pants, clad only in glinting, flimsy cloth covering her most important bits. The only thing that looks properly protected other than her head is her feet and hands, clad in thick leather gloves and knee-high metal boots.

Lucy tilts her head toward the stranger, curious. She must be really good if that’s all she fights in. The people here really like swords.

“He must be pretty important if he gets his own statue,” she responds. The girl walks forward, and Lucy notices her boots have a heel on them.

Damn. She must be really good. Like, as good as Nami and Robin are at running around in heels all the time.

Except…Lucy can hear her Voice, and it’s not exactly weak, but…well there’s no way she has any Haki. Which means she really is as unprotected as she looks.

“Gladiator Kyros is a legend, here in the pits,” the girl tells her, and green eyes shine oddly when she sets her sights upon the statue. “They say he won his freedom by defeating three thousand opponents without a single loss, and only one hit.”
“That’s impressive,” Lucy agrees, and makes a mental note to ask Zoro about him when they meet again. She bets her swordsman has heard of this guy. His story is exactly the kind he likes best—an underdog achieving something spectacular.

“It’s just a story,” the girl tells her, strangely despondent. “No one’s ever met him before, or even heard of him. It’s a fairytale for us gladiators. Something to tell ourselves when the sun doesn’t warm our cells.”

Lucy frowns at the girl. It sounds like…well that sounds like the girl can’t leave. How strange.

“I like this statue though!” Lucy tells her, trying to remain encouraging. The girl looks…very tired.

Her new friend smiles, the expression a little wobbly on unpracticed lips. “…me too. It’s a story worth believing in.”

Lucy grins at her, and opens her mouth to ask a question when two shirtless gladiators interrupt.

“Rebecca-chan!” One of them coos, “you look lovely today! The armorer outdid himself this time!”

Lucy frowns in consternation at the man, confused, and his partner chimes in, a touch more serious.

“You won’t win today, invulnerable woman. You and your cursed line will end on the tip of my sword.” His voice is steady and filled with wrath unlike anything Lucy’s heard in the arena today. Even the blonde guy earlier didn’t hate Lucy as much as this guy hates Rebecca.

Lucy raises an eyebrow at both of them, turning to see what the other girl’s reaction would be.

Rebecca doesn’t indicate that she heard them. Instead she just stares serenely at Kyros’ face, her expression blank and calm. Only the clench of her fists, the creak of her leather gloves as her fingers press together, gives her away.

“Oi! You hear me girl?” the angry one takes a menacing step toward Rebecca. “You and your ilk have cursed this land long enough. I’ll—”

“Gladiator Alejandro,” Rebecca interrupts, voice level. “You will not beat me today, just as you have not beaten me on any other occasion. You still have not corrected your footwork, and you are weak on your left side. Perhaps you may present a challenge when such flaws have been improved. Until then,” Rebecca gives the two men a cold, almost haughty glare over her shoulder, “be gone from my sight.”

Alejandro shakes, his hand grips his sword, and then he calms.

“You’ll die on someone’s blade soon enough,” he finishes. Rebecca flinches slightly, so subtly Lucy wouldn’t have caught it if she weren’t right beside her. “I’ll see you in the arena.”

Then he and his friend retreat, heading deep into the bowels of the colosseum.

“Wow, they hate you,” Lucy comments when they’re gone.

Lucy was kind of aiming to lighten the mood, and is terrified she achieved the exact opposite when Rebecca sniffs, wiping her forearm over her eyes, her helmet bumping across it.

“O-oi,” Lucy tries, hoping to calm her.

Rebecca shakes her head and sniffs one more time. “I’m—I’m fine. That always happens.” Then she straightens, and her gaze sharpens on Kyros’ statue.
“…why?” Lucy asks, utterly confused. Rebecca seems like a nice girl. There’s no reason people should hate her this much.

Rebecca gives Lucy a bewildered look, and then chuckles. “You’re not from around here, are you, Luffy?”

Lucy shakes her head in the negative. “I grew up in East Blue.” No point lying. Her accent gives her away. The question reminds her of the old lady with the flowers though, and how she kept talking about the island’s history and stuff. Like there’s something wrong with the island now.

“I’ve heard that’s the calmest sea,” Rebecca says dreamily. Lucy decides not to tell her about the realities of her childhood, or that the Grand Line seems to be far more functional on the whole than any of the Blues. The government certainly gets away with less here. Or at least there’s enough powerful people around to stop bad things from happening, or fix them, as the case may be. Rebecca’s expression pinches warily as she casts a careful gaze at Lucy. “My grandfather…was the king before the current one.”

Lucy’s mouth drops open. “So you’re a princess?” She grins. “Cool!” She wonders if Rebecca would get along with Vivi and Shirahoshi. Oh! And Hancock! She’s a queen, but Lucy thinks it’s not so different.

Rebecca’s mouth quirks up at the corners. “Unfortunately…it’s done me more harm than good. My grandfather…the people believe he committed a terrible crime against them. He was deposed by Doflamingo ten years ago. Three years ago, they found me, and I was taken here so the people might express their lingering rage by aiming it at me.”

Lucy blinks at her, the conversation sounding sickeningly familiar. It was the same with Ace, wasn’t it? Taking rage out on the object’s children, on people innocent of their crimes.

At least Ace was a pirate though. Rebecca…well she’s a gladiator now, but what harm could she have done barely past puberty? She looks several years younger than Lucy, even considering how developed she is.

A realization dawns on Lucy as she thinks about it. “The armorer…dressed you?”

Rebecca winces, and crosses her arms. “After I came here, I became a woman, in their eyes. They say it adds to the entertainment.” Rebecca scowls. “The age of majority on Dressrosa is twenty-one, but that does not seem to matter to anyone but me and Soldier-san.”

Lucy shakes her head in disbelief, and feels a spark of rage curdle in her heart on Rebecca’s behalf. “What did your grandpa do?”

“Nothing!” Rebecca snarls, whirling on Lucy, and there’s vehement indignation written all over her face. “Nothing, I’m sure of it! The Grandpa Riku I remember…” Rebecca takes a deep breath, calming herself. “The people accuse him of…terrible things. Starting fires. Senseless murder. Theft. They say he just snapped one night, and begged them to hand over all their savings. Then he slaughtered hundreds of Dressrosi.” Rebecca’s hand curls in a fist over the hilt of her sword. “But Grandpa Riku was a pacifist, just like my mother. Just like everyone on Dressrosa used to be. He’d never…not even if he was mentally ill…”

Lucy gets the feeling Rebecca isn’t talking to anyone but herself at the moment. “Your grandpa must have been a cool dude if you still think that.” Lucy likes to think she’d have felt the same about her own, if she was in Rebecca’s shoes. Lucy thinks, even if everyone told her otherwise, she’d always know Gramps was a good and well-respected Marine, that he’d never do anything that
wouldn’t be in line with that. It isn’t in his nature. Hell, he proved that, didn’t he? At Marineford. This conversation is reminding Lucy of too many sad things.

Rebecca smiles, her expression warm and not for Lucy at all. “He was. My mother, too.”

Ah. They were both gone then, probably. Well, it was none of Lucy’s business, at any rate.

“So if it wasn’t him, who was it?” Lucy asks, hoping to distract her new friend.

Rebecca’s eyes go sharp, her expression cold. Her Voice sounds like the whistle of a sharp blade. “The one who stood to gain the most, obviously.”

Lucy blinks rapidly in confusion, utterly lost. “…who?”

Rebecca shakes her head, and the mood around her dispels. “Nothing. No one important.”

Lucy looks at her skeptically. “…right.”

“Block B, please approach the arena.” A voice on the speakerphone calls. “The winner from Block A has nearly been determined.”

Lucy perks up, curious. She meant to watch the other groups too, but…well whatever. She can watch the rest.

“The wanna come watch with me?” Lucy asks, a little restless. She wants to see what she’s up against. Also…Dressrosa seems more dysfunctional than Lucy initially realized. She thought it was just the toys, but clearly…if Rebecca’s being treated like this, and no one’s speaking up for her…

There’s something wrong with this place. Something dreadfully, dreadfully wrong. And it’s so familiar, somehow, a similarity that seems just out of reach.

Rebecca gives her a small smile, but waves her on. “Go ahead. Maybe I’ll join you later.”

Lucy shrugs, and trots away. “Alright. See ya!” But at the entrance she stops, and turns to her newfound friend. “Hey Rebecca?”

The girl turns away from the statue to face her. “Yes, Luffy?”

Lucy offers her the biggest grin she can. “You seem pretty cool to me.”

Rebecca blinks in surprise, and then her eyes water a bit, but this time Lucy doesn’t think she needs a hug.

“…thanks, Luffy.”

There. That feels better.

Lucy gives her a quick salute, and bounds toward the viewing platforms.

Chapter End Notes

So, it’s not listed on the OP wiki that either Trafalgar or Doflamingo have any ability
with Observation Haki. I took that and ran with the idea. Narcissists are notorious for
not being able to stand it when someone’s better at something than them. Doflamingo
literally thinks he’s a god, so…

The story the old lady tells is meant to be about the same person as the one in the book
Robin and Lucy read together in the first chapter. Lucy, obviously, would never put that
together, but if she ever told Robin...

Okay, all the flowers Lucy chose have meanings in Victorian Flower Language, and
they are:

Angrec: Royalty
Black Poplar: Courage
Bay Tree/Laurels: Glory
Box Tree: Stoicism, Constancy
Carnations, Red: Yes
Chamomile: Energy in adversity
Fennel: Worthy of all praise, strength
Honeysuckle: Bonds of Love, generous and devoted affection
Hemp: Fate
Hollyhock: Ambition, Fecundity
Ivy: Friendship, Fidelity, Marriage
Live Oak: Liberty
Liverwort: Confidence
Locust Tree: Affection beyond the grave
Passion Flower: Faith, Belief
White Oak: Independence
Osmunda: Dreams
Pink Dianthus: Boldness
Queen Anne’s Lace: Regal, Sanctify
Tulip: Love, Fame
White Violets: candor, innocence
Zoro’s picks:
Juniper: Succor, Protection
Four Leaf Clover: Be mine
Lucern: Life
Oak Leaves: Bravery
Statice Stinuata: Loyalty
Forget-me-nots (In Japanese Flower Language): True Love

I WAS going to have Zoro pick Red Camellia for Lucy, because it means love in
Hanakotoba. But then I discovered that Samurai hated Red Camellia because they felt it
has a poorly lived life. Apparently as they die, the whole blossom of a red Camellia
flower falls off the branch at once, and this was undesirable. They much preferred
Sakura blossoms, which bloom and then die, petal by petal, in a matter of days.
Obviously, Zoro was Oda’s original Samurai-esque character. For a long time he was
the only character in the series which seemed to take inspiration from Japanese culture,
and he’s a samurai. I couldn’t just pretend I didn’t know. So instead I went with forget-
me-nots, which, according to Wikipedia, mean “true love” in hanakotoba, rather than
“don’t forget me,” as they do in Victorian Flower Language. I assume the name in
Japanese is probably different. I wanted the last flower to have a Japanese meaning
because Zoro, so here we are.
Also: Four-leaf clover apparently means “be mine” in Victorian flower language. He followed this with Lucern, which means “Life”, and thus he asked “be mine for life.” Lucy preempted Zoro by including the Red Carnations, which mean “yes.”

The whole bit where Rebecca is dressed as she is in order to further subjugate her is actually grounded in canon. There’s a line where the announcer is talking to his assistants, and they’re asking if she’s cheating with extra gear or something. The announcer responds that they already restrict Rebecca’s weight limit more than any other contestant. I took this to mean Rebecca basically had to choose to fight in her skimpy outfit in order to at least keep a helmet and her sword and shield. The cape she chose for its full-body protection and also, probably, the similarity to Kyros’ statue. I took the idea a step farther, and said the armorer actively dressed her in a way that was objectifying in an attempt to minimize her agency, influence, and power. Rebecca is having none of the shit though, and the fact that they keep trying to further oppress her is proof, in her eyes, that she’s having an effect. So she still gives her speech every time she fights, hoping the people will remember that Riku was a good king to them, and that Doflamingo has changed much about their country, mostly for the worst.

(IT’S AN EASY FIX, ODA. YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT TOO. YOUR PRETTY CHARACTERS CAN BE BADASSES. I’M NOT EVEN MAKING YOU GIVE THEM SHIRTS. GAH.)

Lucy’s views on the Grand Line being “less dysfunctional” than East Blue are largely influenced by the events of her own childhood, the adult population’s inability to fix any of the problems she witnessed, and a blind spot where she does not realize most pirates don’t run around performing acts of charity for every other person they meet.

Let me know if you liked it! Let me know if you didn’t! Let me know if you’ve decided to dye your hair green, because that sounds pretty cool and I’d like to congratulate you on an individual basis!
Lucy kicks ass and takes names, then 'Mingo shows up and it's all downhill from there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“…I’m not blind you know.”

Lucy freezes in recognition, and turns to face an old enemy.

Well, she says enemy. Lucy remembers Bellamy as being a particularly vitriolic wannabe pirate that made her have a fight with Zoro. Or that made her do stuff that made her have a fight with Zoro. Whatever.

“…Oh?” She asks carefully, not quite willing to confirm his statement.

“Not like I’d ever be fooled by a dumb moustache,” he tells her. It’s weird how jovial his tone is. How easygoing. “I’m not likely to forget a woman who never showed me any fear.”

“That’s because you aren’t scary,” Lucy responds, ignoring the implication that this guy’s scared lots of women into submission. It isn’t exactly news, given how he spoke to her in Mocktown. “Why’re you here?” She asks, eyeing the Donquixote Pirates crest tattooed on his chest. There’s a scar bisecting it, one obviously left by a sharp blade. It reminds her of the one Mihawk left in Zoro’s flesh.

Bellamy snorts. “I don’t live on Jaya. I can be where I want, and Doflamingo wants me to win the tournament,” he says casually. He’s definitely in ‘Mingo’s crew then.

“I’ll beat you,” Lucy says confidently. She’s pretty sure she’s still way out of Bellamy’s league--she denied herself her nakama for two years to make sure she’s out of everyone’s league.

Bellamy gives her a fierce grin, a glint of competitive relish entering his eyes. “You didn’t last time. Had to send your stupid swordsman to take care of me. I owe ‘im a good beating for that one. He left me a reminder, too.” He taps the scar on his chest casually, like Zoro didn’t nearly kill him.

“Zoro volunteered,” Lucy says absently, “I had more important things to do.” And, as she recalls, Zoro needed to hurt Bellamy a lot more than Lucy did. “He’d wipe the floor with you if you challenge him, just like he did back then. It’s be worse, even.” Especially since Bellamy had the balls to talk to her in the first place

Bellamy doesn’t seem all that intimidated. “We’ll see how you do without him around to protect you. I’m not the same as I was back then, at any rate,” he warns. Then his voice lowers, and he looks at Lucy over his sunglasses. “I went to Sky Island, Straw Hat.”

Lucy’s eyes widen, genuinely shocked.

“Lost my crew,” Bellamy says casually, like that doesn’t weigh on him heavily enough to steal his
breath forever. “But when I got there my whole world turned upside down.”

That…would explain why Bellamy seems so different. Less needlessly aggressive, maybe. “You didn’t hurt them, did you?”

Shit, and they’d all been so tired when she and her nakama left, exhausted from the long-term stress of Eneru’s observation and the lengthy battle, and, though excited, fatigued by the rising prospect of integration.

“You’ll certainly never know,” Bellamy snorts. “But anyway, I’ll see you in the arena, if you win your block, that is.” He turns to walk up to the arena proper, waving casually as he goes. “Later, Straw Hat.”

Lucy watches him go, and narrows her eyes.

There’s something different about Bellamy. Something changed. He’s still callous and violent and proud, still dark and unfriendly, but...he didn’t try and threaten her—not physically, not verbally, and not even with her own identity. Instead he seemed almost...cordial. Like they were old acquaintances. Even his trash talk about Zoro wasn’t...malicious, exactly.

There are some people in the world that are hard to like. Bellamy’s certainly one of them, but...she thinks there might be something worthwhile about him. Something….something good.

Lucy hopes she’s right. She’d much rather there was one more decent person in the world than otherwise.

Cabbage needs to chill. Seriously. She never did anything to him, probably, and she’s pretty sure none of the others did either.

“So how’s Garp doing, Straw Hat?”

“Haven’t seen him in a while. How d’you know him?” she answers unthinkingly. Then freezes, eyes widening as Cabbage stiffens in shock and sudden killing intent beside her.

“Garp beat me once in the past,” the large man with the misshapen head answers cordially, but his voice slips into something chilling at the next words. “I decided to hate him through our grandchildren’s generation.”

“You’re Straw Hat?” Cabbage queries angrily, checking her face against his wanted poster.

“Nope! Luffy. I am definitely, definitely Luffy.” Normally she wouldn’t care, but Torao needs her to care, needs her to keep her secrecy, so here she is.

“As his granddaughter, you’ll have to make up for the injury he dealt me,” the giant of a man says calmly, stroking his beard.

“If you’re mad at Gramps, take it up with him,” she growls. Seriously, what is with people taking out their grievances on innocent parties? It’s not like Lucy ever did anything to the big guy.

“So you are Straw Hat Lucy,” Cabbage presses.

Lucy puts up her palms defensively. “Nope! I’m a dude named Luffy!” Her voice screeches up at the end, way too high-pitched for a guy. She coughs. “I mean—” She pitches her voice low,
tightening the muscles in her lungs. “Hey. I’m a man. Named Luffy.” She flexes, and tries to channel Franky. “Grr.”

Cabbage blinks at her. Lucy holds the pose.

“Aw screw it, I don’t want to wait until the arena to hit you,” the big man growls. He draws back a fist, and Cabbage draws a sword, so Lucy leaps up and out of the way, escaping both blows.

…huh. Cabbage seems pretty good with a sword. She should tell Zoro, so they can have a duel, and he can get that much closer to being the World’s Greatest.

“IF I’D DISCOVERED YOUR FATHER’S MISERABLE EXISTENCE YOU’D NEVER HAVE BEEN BORN!” The big man howls. Lucy frowns down at him from the roof of their platform.

“I don’t think he did anything to you either,” Lucy sighs. “It’s Gramps you’re mad at. Take it up with him.”

Below her, the big guy and Cabbage clash, the two of them struggling against each other in a test of nearly equal strength.

They’re both assholes as far as Lucy’s concerned.

“I’M TRYING TO WATCH THE MATCH,” Lucy howls, and drops to the floor between them, only to deliver a swift kick to the giant’s jaw.

The big man flies up, hits the roof, and drops. Haki swirls around him though, and Lucy knows he’s nowhere near finished.

“…You could only be Garp’s blood,” the giant growls, and something in his Voice tells Lucy that he has will, has power, and her own will stirs in indignant response.

“Take it up with him if you got a problem,” she repeats.

“You make enemies just by existing,” Cabbage muses, his expression predatory.

“I’m Luffy, not Lucy,” she insists, trying to salvage this.

“Grandfather! We must not get disqualified! We have a mission to accomplish, a mission!” Two men who look sort of similar to the big guy barrel in, crowding him back and away from Lucy and Cabbage.

Finally. Someone speaks sense.

“I’ll kill you, Straw Hat!” Cabbage howls.

Lucy flips over the edge of the platform, holding onto the ledge with just her fingers.

Great. Just great. She’s going to have to hide here until her round starts, isn’t she? It’s too bad Cabbage is so nutty. She was starting to like him.

Lucy turns to look over her shoulder at the mess of an arena, covered in carnage.

…well at least she has a decent view.
Lucy’s finally getting annoyed. Here she gets a chance to fight, and this old geezer just wants to live his revenge fantasies through her.

Chin Jao stands, and wipes blood from his mouth with a grin, eyes glinting. “Only his bloodline could produce a fighter like you. What a scary family.”

Lucy trembles in rage. “**FUCK YOU.**” she howls, and a lash of Conqueror’s rises inside her, cracks the stone of the arena, pushes everyone but her opponent into the water. “If you’re gonna fight me, fight me ‘cuz you want to!” She growls at the old man. “Don’t fight me because you hate Gramps!”

**“GARP WILL WEEP AT YOUR DEATH THE WAY I DID WHEN I DISCOVERED MY TREASURE OUT OF REACH!”**

Conqueror’s Haki spreads and heats and cracks, and Lucy spins into a low stance, coiling to strike as Haki turns her arms black.

She’s warmed by it. Feels the electric lash as her will crashes against and surpasses Chin Jao’s own.

**“YOU DON’T KNOW THAT!”** She screams, and she meets his fist with her weak hand as her Haki-black elephant gun slides home, slamming straight into his forehead.

Chin Jao slumps to the stone, the ring cracking clean in two as he impacts it, and the dust settles as she heaves. A tear runs down her face, and Lucy wipes it away quickly, before anyone can see. Instinctively she seeks her nakama out with Observation Haki. Most of them are way too far away to feel, but Sanji’s nearby, and Zoro’s on his way back. And she can sort of feel Franky at the very edge of her range, though the way his Voice trembles in horror and righteous indignation doesn’t offer much reassurance.

She lets out a slow breath, frowning at herself. She thought she was over this. She thought she resolved her issues with Gramps and his decisions back on Ruskaina.

Except...except there’s still that little voice inside her that sometimes rears its head, the one that asks *how could he? It was Ace.*

Gramps couldn’t save Ace without betraying his dream. It’s confusing, because Lucy understands--she knows what giving up a dream would mean, would never ask someone to do so, and yet…

...part of her wonders if some dreams aren’t more worthy than others.

Lucy would never make herself the arbiter of such a thing though, and that’s why she has to forgive Gramps. Or at least keep trying. She’s discovering that some things are harder to forgive than others, that sometimes it takes a lot of forgiveness, over and over and over again, until it sticks. It’s possible, she knows, that it never will, and it’ll still be just as hard to forgive him in ten years as it was the first time.

Maybe her frustrations are simply rising again now that she’s beating her way towards a memento of her dead brother. Maybe memories she thought she’d long-since laid to rest are sharpening again, now that she’s expecting Gramps to seek her out soon.

Or maybe she isn’t, if her outburst is anything to go by. Maybe she’s just fooling herself and hoping she might get the chance to speak with him, but never will because Gramps no longer wants anything to do with her.

Chin Jao groans and stills, his breath the only indication of life.
“Luffy WINS!” The announcer crows. Lucy shrugs and turns to the edge of the arena. Chin Jao wasn’t bad. Definitely stronger than she was expecting to find here.

She’s gonna get that Fruit. Then maybe one day she’ll tell Gramps about it, and they can share a cup of sake to remember.

____________________________________________________

“Seriously, can’t we just cut the damn thing open?”

“That, too, would qualify as strange behavior.”

Zoro heaves a sigh. He’s not cut out for this subtlety shit. And meanwhile, Lucy’s inside fighting. He still can’t believe she didn’t call him back to enter the thing with her. He lives for shit like this.

“Perhaps we can ask the man who’s been staring at you for the last ten minutes and crying softly to help?” Kin’emon suggests, a little doubtful.

Zoro shrugs. The dude Kin’emon is talking about is…odd, sure, with his shitty green hair, but he’s also probably their best bet.

Zoro would appreciate it if he would stop crying with that weird smile on his face though.

“Oi! You!” Zoro calls.

The green guy squees.

Whaaaatt the fuck.

“ZORO-SENPAI HAS SPOKEN TO ME!” He screams through thick tears, expression rapturous. “I CAN NOW DIE IN PEACE, HAVING WITNESSED THE GLORY OF LUCY-DONO AND HER SWORDSMAN.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow. Oookkay. “How’d you know our names?”

“What uncultured swine doesn’t know the names of the greatest pirate in history and her crew?” His face is a mask of indignation. Zoro blinks at him in utter bemusement.

The guy seems to realize who he just yelled at and then immediately begins an exercise in self-flagellation, banging his head against the bars in a facsimile of a full kowtow. “FORGIVE ME, ZORO-SENPAI, YOUR HUMILITY TOOK ME OFF GUARD.”

Yeah, whaaaaaat the fuck.

“I do not think that was his point of confusion,” Kin’emon mutters. Then louder, “Do you think you could retrieve Lucy-dono for us? Do you know where she is?”

The green guy’s eyes go round and wide, the size of dinner-plates. “The way you just referenced Lucy-dono…are YOU an acolyte as well? And so close to their radiance! Please, teach me your ways!”

Zoro shares a look with Kin’emon, and they decide, mutually, that they’re going to ignore that bit.

“…Look, can you just find Lucy for us? We need to talk to her.”
The guy’s eyes lock onto Zoro, his mouth dropping open in shock.

“You’re…you, in particular, are looking for Lucy-dono, Zoro-senpai?”

Zoro has no idea what is going on. At all.

“…yes?” He’s pretty sure, anyway. He’s not sure why that feels like admitting to murder when it comes to this guy though.

Green-hair freezes. Then he trembles. Then his expression becomes practically manic and he screams in nonverbal syllables of ecstasy.

“What is wrong with him?” Kin’emon asks, flinching back.

Zoro looks on, nonplussed. “…I have no. Idea.”

“IT CAN ONLY MEAN ONE THING!” Greenie shouts to…no one, apparently. The sky, maybe? Some deity? “THE SHIP OF ZOLU HAS FINALLY SET SAIL.”

“Why is he expositing his inner thoughts to the sky?”

“Beats me.”

“IS IT TRUE, ZORO-SENPAI? ARE YOU AND LUCY-DONO ROMANTICALLY INVOLVED?”

What the hell is his life.

“I—yes? Why am I telling you this?”

“I can assure you, Lucy-dono and the thief of the treasure of Wano are indeed romantically involved. They express their ardor quite frequently, physically, and in full view of others. It is indecent.”

There’s more inarticulate screaming. This time the guy screeches so hard his voice cracks and Zoro swears he spits up blood.

“Dude, what is wrong?”

“YOU’RE MY OTP!”

Zoro…doesn’t know what that means. “What.”

“I’VE WRITTEN FANFICTION ABOUT YOU!”

Zoro’s still lost. “What?”

“YOU TWO MAKE PASSIONATE LOVE TO EACH OTHER. I’M VERY THOROUGH IN MY DETAILS. AND GENEROUS ABOUT YOUR VIGOR AND STAMINA.”

Okay, he got that bit. “What?”

“So you may properly please Lucy-dono.”

And that is Zoro’s first-ever interaction with what is commonly known as, a “fan.”

It’s amazing how quickly the crowd’s mood sours the moment they catch sight of Rebecca. It’s like
she’s poison.

It’s just as ridiculous as Chin Jiao taking his hatred toward Gramps out on Lucy, or the rest of the world hating Ace for Roger. Rebecca’s not her grandpa. She’s just a girl.

Down the arena, the gladiator holds herself with a sort of regal pride that reminds Lucy of Vivi. There’s some kind of gentle strength in her, something Lucy could never achieve if she tried her whole life. Lucy’s strong in other ways instead.

“If I might make a recommendation,” the announcer says snidely, “it’s that Block D concentrate their efforts on defeating—or better yet, killing or permanently maiming—the hated princess—the gladiator, Rebecca!”

The whole crowd cheers in bloodthirsty agreement. Lucy feels it through Haki, and it makes her stomach drop in a sick swoop.

Her brand of Observation Haki can be more trouble than it’s worth, sometimes.

“If the laws of this kingdom, conscripted gladiators are afforded the right to make a statement at the beginning of a fight!” Rebecca shouts, her voice strong. The crowd boos almost violently. A few people throw things at her. The other contestants sidle away from her, obviously hoping to avoid association.

“Yes, yes, make your statement little girl, it’s not like you don’t say the same thing every time,” the announcer grumbles. Rebecca takes no heed, and removes her helmet to let the crowd see her face.

“King Riku is innocent!” Rebecca declares. Her voice is high and clear and determined. The crowd howls in furious response. “The previous dynasty practiced nonviolence, and pursued peace at every opportunity. It is a tradition passed from parent to child in my family, and as Riku passed it to my mother Scarlett, whom you all loved, so too did she pass it to me!” Rebecca replaces her helmet and raises a fist in the air. “To prove this I will injure none of my opponents, and yet I will still win! I swear it! One day you will see, and remember, Dressrosa!”

The crowd gets impossibly louder, and their rage nearly chokes Lucy with its potency. Rebecca steps back into line, and most of her opponents are giving her skeptical or pitying looks. Some look disgusted by her.

“Yes, yes, the king everyone saw attack us is innocent, yada yada yada. It’s the same every time with you, isn’t it? And might I say, you’re looking particularly ravishing today, Gladiator Rebecca. Our armorer always does such a good job with you.”

Lucy can see Rebecca flush in embarrassment or indignation even from here, and from under the helmet.

“Patriotic brat, isn’t she,” a gladiator on Lucy’s left mutters. “Facing that kind of ridicule and she still gives that speech like she believes it every time.”

“I wonder if she still thinks it’ll make any difference,” says another gladiator behind Lucy. “She’s been saying the same thing for three years now.”

Down in the ring, Cabbage proves her right—he’s a decent sort that doesn’t tolerate bullying or ridicule, and shames the crowd into backing off of Rebecca.

“Oh, it has,” Lucy tells the two gladiators. She gives them her broadest grin. “I believe her.”
And, as Lucy expected all along, Rebecca keeps her promise.

Lucy is approached by the simpering—crying?—green-haired rooster guy who beat Bellamy a while back, and is led, very accommodatingly, to a window, where she finds Zoro and Kin’emon.

“Oh hey guys!” She waves cheerfully, happy to see them. Zoro relaxes a little at the sight of her, in a way she’s pretty sure is unconscious. Kin’emon gives her a nod of acknowledgment.

“Lucy-dono,” the man says gravely. “Have you managed to keep your identity concealed?”

“Er…” Well there’s Bellamy, and Cabbage, and Chin Jao, and Rooster and… “Yeah, let’s go with that.”

“Oi, if there was a tournament, you should have called me,” Zoro says waspishly, looking very irritated indeed.

And, yeah, he’s right. Zoro loves stuff like this even more than she does. “Sorry Zoro! There wasn’t time!”

Zoro gives a little scoff, and judging from the twitch of his fake mustache, just barely refrains from pouting.

…eh, he’ll forgive her eventually. Probably. She’ll make it up to him by siccing him on Cabbage, or something.

“Your mutual and unhealthy obsession with competition is not currently the most salient issue!” Kin’emon interjects. “The others are trying to hail us,” he explains, holding up a vibrating Den Den Mushi.

“Sanji here. We’ve got Nami, Chopper, Brook, Momonosuke, and Caesar on the Sunny.”

“It’s Franky! I’ve got Robin, Usopp, and the rebel army with me. We’re under a tree.”

“I was there earlier,” Zoro mumbles. “It’s where I found out my girlfriend was in a tournament and didn’t invite me.”


Lucy shrugs at him apologetically. “You can have Cabbage.”

“Cabbage? Why would I want cabbage?”

“I’m here with Lucy-dono and the thief!” Kin’emon tells the snail.

“Hey guys!” Lucy greets cheerfully. “I’m trying to get Ace’s Devil Fruit!”

“Wait what?” Nami asks, sounding startled and a touch concerned.

“So we’ve got everyone on the line but Torao,” Franky says. “Where is he, anyway?”

“Confronting Doflamingo,” Sanji explains heavily. “Pink Bastard discovered us somehow and attacked the ship. Torao roomed him away. Dunno where he went.”

Lucy’s about to search him out, see if she can find his Voice through Haki when—
It happens in a sort of blur, a crunch of concrete and stone as dust rises and one figure emerges from the debris, dressed in a feathery pink coat and loud striped pants.

Lucy’s seen him before. At Marineford.

He looks bigger now, away from other giants.

He’s got a gun in his hand, and before him, at the center of the cracked and broken earth is—

“Torao!” She yelps, surprised and concerned. Dammit, he didn’t try and get ‘Mingo on his own, did he? He was supposed to wait for her if they were going to fight. Or actually, they weren’t supposed to confront him at all, were they?

Zoro and Kin’emon both drop to an offensive stance, turning their backs to Lucy and clearly intending to try and separate ‘Mingo from the prone captain they’ve spent the last week trying to befriend.

“The boy pushed his luck…” whispers the cruel, low voice of their enemy. Then he raises the pistol to Torao, cocks the gun and—

There’s a blur of green and black as the pistol fires, and when the moment passes there’s Zoro, standing over Torao with two swords drawn, and staring down ‘Mingo with cold calculation in his eye.

“You’re a quick one,” ‘Mingo purrs. The smooth rage in his voice makes Lucy tense. “Redirecting bullets. It’s a neat trick for a swordsman.”

“I learned from the best,” Zoro replies. Lucy sees Torao’s hand twitch, and hopes he’s about to wake up. They’re going to need his help if they’re going to get out of this with all their parts intact.

Then there’s a low tap on the earth as a man with scars over his eyes and dressed in purple approaches, his gait easy.

“The guy from the café…” Lucy whispers, not taking her eyes off of Zoro and ‘Mingo’s stand-off.

“My my, such a ruckus you youths are making.” He taps his cane on the ground once more, and the air around them trembles with weight.

“Kin’emon!” Lucy orders, and the samurai complies immediately, rushing ‘Mingo in an attempt to aid Zoro as he lunges toward their opponent.

The purple guy steps between them, catches Zoro’s strike on the same blade he stops Kin’emon’s, and then—

“I am an Admiral,” the man says regretfully. “I must protect our assets.”

There’s a groaning in the earth, a separating as a perfectly round hole opens beneath Zoro and Kin’emon, and they helplessly fall into it.

Lucy cries out for them, for Torao, and puts her hands on the bars to peel them away—

Weakness fills her, saps her strength. She slumps limply to the ground, utterly useless.

“No,” she mumbles in denial. “I’m—I’m here.” And she swore she’d be there for the people that needed her, that she’d never let them down again.
There’s a sharp report of a gun, a low, unconscious scream from Torao, and then the Admiral’s, ‘Mingo’s, and her friend’s Voices disappear from outside.

But Zoro rallies, his Voice filled with irritation and concern and determination, and Lucy latches onto it, uses his strength to bolster her own as she stands on shaking legs.

Self-loathing won’t help anyone now, least of all Torao. She needs to go after him, help save him, not moan in frustration over missed chances.

“Guys? Guys, what’s happening, what’s wrong, where’s Torao—”

“Shut up, shit-cook,” Zoro groans, and Lucy eyes his heaving frame carefully, trying to detect any injuries. She sees and senses none, thankfully, but Zoro seems frustrated with himself—a sentiment Lucy shares.

“Doflamingo just arrived with Trafalgar. Thief-kun managed to prevent him from shooting Trafalgar, but then the new Admiral arrived. Doflamingo escaped with our ally.”

“He shot Torao,” Lucy says quietly. “When you guys were in the hole. He shot him even though he didn’t need to.”

Zoro glances at her, and she knows he’s checking her over, just like she did for him. “Lucy, those bars—”

“Sea Stone,” she confirms. “I think… I think they never intended to let the competitors out.”

“…It was a talent mine,” Robin states after a moment. “The tournament. Doflamingo probably expected his subordinate to win, but he’d be able to keep some of the strongest in the New World as a slave-labor force.”

“He’s probably turning them into toys,” Franky disagrees. “Easier to control that way, and he takes out some of the underworld competition either way.”

“Turning them into…?” Lucy starts, uncertain.

“Toys,” Franky confirms. “No one’d even remember them. Look, Aneki, there’s a lot to fill you in on, but… this country is one of extreme light, but it’s built on foundations of extreme darkness.”

Oh. That’s. That’s why it felt so familiar here, in a sickening way. It’s like Goa. A glistening city that dumps trash on the poor and sets them ablaze when they decide it’s unbecoming.

“Wait, so, the flower lady with the dog…” Lucy locks eyes with Zoro, and sees him come to the same realization.

“…it was probably her grandkid,” Zoro whispers quietly. He looks as disgusted as she feels.

“Aneki, I know we were going to leave Doflamingo alone, but… Robin and Usopp and I, we’re sitting with a bunch of really brave rebels right now. People willing to fight, no matter their chances.” Franky sniffs loud enough that the Den Den Mushi picks it up. “What will happen to them if we don’t take Doflamingo out?”

Lucy wants to respond. Wants to tell Franky that yes, of course they’re not going to just let ‘Mingo be. But she knows there are things Franky’s prepared himself to say. Things that take courage to speak, and she wants to honor that.
“I want to fight with them, Sencho!” Franky cries. Lucy blinks rapidly in surprise. Franky almost never calls her that. “I have to, no matter what you tell me!”

Oh, that’s what this is about?

Lucy wants to hug her cyborg. Like she’s ever been able to deny her crew anything she can possibly give them. She’s certainly not going to kick him off the crew over it. They’re pirates—the whole point is doing whatever the hell they want.

But…but maybe Franky wasn’t around long enough before Sabaody to know that. Maybe he never learned that he doesn’t have to beg Lucy for what he wants, or risk getting left behind. Maybe he doesn’t know that the agony of her fight with Usopp on Water 7 was unusual, and the only time such a thing occurred in her crew’s history.

“Franky…” Lucy takes a deep breath. “Remind me to tell you how we met Usopp sometime.”

“Aneki…?”

“We’ve never been able to turn our backs on people brave enough to fight,” she says with a wry grin to Zoro, who smirks in response. “…screw the plan. Go HAM.”

Franky sniffs again on the other end of the receiver. “…Thanks, Aneki.”

“Don’t thank me. We’d be doing this anyway,” she tells him, fingering the edge of the window. It looks like they have Sea Stone plating all the way through the arena. It’s amazing she didn’t sense it before. “’Mingo shot Torao.” She lets a little steel enter her voice. “No one hurts our friends. And that includes your rebel army now, right?”

She’s surprised when seven voices respond with an enthusiastic affirmative over the receiver. “Aye, Sencho!”

“C’mon, Lucy, we’ll meet out front.” Zoro tells her, facing the entrance of the colosseum. There’s a glint in Zoro’s eye that indicates he’s unlikely to refrain from property destruction much longer.

“Wait, Lucy-san, we need to meet up—aw, shit.”

Lucy runs after Zoro and Kin’emon, keeping pace with the receiver. “Sanji?”

“Are you kidding me?” Nami screeches, “Big Mom is after us now?!”

“Just her ship, although that won’t make us less dead, yohohohoho!”

“The guys from Fishman Island are there!” Sanji’s voice calls. “The ones who were threatening the candy makers!”

…which means they were the ones present when Lucy threatened Big Mom. Great.

“They’re after Caesar!” Robin says urgently. “Sanji-kun, Nami, you have to get the ship away!”

“But you can’t lead a freaking Yonko to Dressrosa!” Franky interjects. “The country is already under the thumb of a Warlord, and they’re about to get caught up in a conflict between two of them, an Admiral, and the future Pirate King—they won’t survive a Yonko too!”

“Torao said to send him on to the next island before he left with Doflamingo,” Sanji says. “Next island—he didn’t mean Dressrosa, did he?”
“We can’t go back there,” Nami says suddenly, and there’s steel in her voice. “Lucy, listen—we have two things Doflamingo wants here on the ship. Caesar and Momonosuke, for whatever reason.” There’s a pause, and all Lucy hears is the slap of her sandals against concrete. “We should protect those things.”

Lucy blinks in realization. “You’re saying—”

“I’m saying we need to split up. Temporarily.”

No one speaks, but the ringing in Lucy’s ears is horribly loud.

“Those of us on the ship, we’ll go ahead to Zou. We have the Vivre Card Torao left us, so it should be fine.” When Lucy doesn’t answer, Nami continues. “Lucy, I don’t know why Torao is so hellbent on taking out Doflamingo, but he was willing to lay down his life just to prevent him from even getting an advantage. There’s not much we can say in the face of that.”

No, she wants to scream, no no no no no, I’m not letting you leave, we’re not splitting up again, I won’t survive another two years, stay, please stay, please—

Nami’s right.

Her stomach gives a nauseous roll, sickened by Lucy’s acquiescence, but Nami’s right. Nami’s always right.

Lucy wants to be Torao’s friend. That means proving he can trust her. She won’t manage that if she goes and wastes his sacrifice like that.

Dammit. She just got them back.

“But, Nami…we just got back together. Are we really…?” Chopper’s voice echoes her own sentiments unknowingly, and Lucy steels her jaw.

“Chopper, Nami’s right.” She forces a smile. “It won’t be like last time, anyway. It’s on our terms, and it won’t be long. Alright?”

“A-aye, Lucy!”

Lucy swallows a lump in her throat and pushes steel into her voice. “Sanji! Chopper! Nami! Brook! Take the ship to Zou! We’ll meet you there!”

“Aye, Sencho!” Her soon-to-be wayward crew replies.

“Right. Lucy-san,” Sanji’s voice calls. She can feel the smirk even from here. “Permission to fire upon the ship of a Yonko?”


“Aye, Sencho.”

“Great. See you in Zou. Get Torao back in one piece,” Nami bids them. “Oi! Sanji-kun! Don’t antagonize them—” The receiver clicks off, and just like that, Lucy’s ship and half her crew are out of reach.

Fuck, she hates when people leave.

“…They’ll be fine,” Usopp says wobbily. Lucy wonders if he thinks he’s telling a lie or not.
“Of course they will,” Zoro scoffs. “It’d take a lot more than a Yonko’s ship to take them out.”

Which was, of course, Zoro’s way of saying he thinks Sanji’s strong. Her boys. Always pretending to hate each other.

“We’ll take care of the sabotage mission. Just get Torao back.” Robin says, voice soothing.

“Right. Be safe, everyone.” And Lucy scowls deeper, remembering the gunshot and Torao’s pained cry. “Now let’s kick ‘Mingo’s ass!”

There’s a roar of approval from the other end of the receiver, more noise than her crew could possibly make on their own, and it dawns on Lucy that her crew is leading armies now, rather than stopping them or being one.

How’s that for irony?

Chapter End Notes

Zoro is hands down my favorite character. In Dressrosa he’s been led around by his hair to a tree trunk in the middle of a sunflower field for 95% of the arc to that point, and then he sees Luffy fighting in the tournament and his first reaction is “dammit, why didn’t he tell me? I live for this shit.” Please never change, Zoro.

Don’t lie. Bartolomeo=all of us. Also, yes, this was written in part to poke fun at people who write fanfiction and make racy fanart of real people. And I do mean real people, not just actors as characters in fictional series. It is for this and many reasons, but primarily this one, that I’m very glad I am not a member of One Direction. Before you get offended, I’m also making fun of myself here. I am almost 200k words deep in a story about fictional characters. I clearly have no life.

The phrase “go HAM” is shorthand for “go hard as a motherfucker,” which I just thought you all should know.

Alright! Things are getting heavy! Sorry there was no Sabo this chapter but it was already pretty long. Next time, kay? Let me know what you thought-constructive criticism is welcome!
Dressrosa 5

Chapter Summary

Reunions of many kinds occur.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“LUUUUUUCCCCYYYY-DOOOONNNNOOOOOOOOO!!”

Lucy wheels around, turning from endless dark hallways and earthy brick to face the guy who brought her to Zoro and Kin’emon earlier. He’s carrying…Bellamy? On his shoulder, and the big blonde looks a lot more beat up than when Lucy saw him last.

“Oh, it’s you,” she says in surprise. “You don’t know where the exit is, do you?”

Tears well in Rooster-head’s eyes. “Lucy-dono! I regret to inform you I do not!”

The lump of bloody flesh that is Bellamy gives a groan. “It’s a trap, idiots. Of course there’s no exit.”

Lucy stares at Rooster’s head a few moments longer, trying to figure out why the guy looks so anguished and, ultimately, fails.

“Bellamy you work for ‘Mingo, right?” She asks after a moment. “You must know a way out then.” Lucy takes an eager step toward them, thinking of gunshots and the agitation in Zoro’s Voice, the faint terror in Kin’emon’s. “Tell me, my friends need my help!”

“Like I’d betray Doflamingo,” Bellamy growls, choking on a gob of blood. “Nothing’s worth my pride.”

Rooster growls at him, “Oi! Don’t speak to Lucy-dono in such a manner! She asked you a question!”

Lucy blinks in the face of the unexpected support. “Er, no, it’s fine.” Lucy locks eyes with Bellamy, tries to figure out why she still thinks there’s a nugget of something worthwhile inside of him. “I can bust my way out of here somehow, I’m sure.” And that way she doesn’t have to make someone give up their treasure.

Bellamy’s eyes narrow in suspicion, but there’s something like respect there too. Respect and general apathy, which is a bit worrisome.

“...we’re leaving,” Bellamy grunts, with a rough cock of his chin toward Rooster. “If you follow us, I guess that’s fine.”

“Thank you!” She says with relief. Bellamy scoffs and spits blood at her feet, but says nothing in response.

“But...Lucy-dono...the Mera Mera Fruit…” Rooster interjects. He looks preeminently concerned for
her welfare.

...Lucy still isn’t exactly sure who this guy is but he seems cool enough.

“My friends are more important than a fruit,” she tells them. It’s amazing, actually, how much she absolutely does not care about it now with Torao’s screams still ringing in her ears and the yawning gap between her and the nakama on her ship grows ever-wider as the seconds tic by.

She can’t think about her fleeing nakama too much. The howling in her chest won’t subside if she does.

She’s needed by people here, on Dressrosa, people who are still alive. Ace’s Fruit is important, but not more important than that.

“But...you still want it?” Rooster queries hesitantly.

“Of course,” Lucy tells him, turning toward the fountain she’s pretty sure is the exit. “Can’t be helped though.”

Then Rooster drops Bellamy in a bloody heap on the floor and whirls to face her with a manic expression.

Lucy takes a step back in shock. “Er…”

“I WILL GET THE FRUIT FOR YOU, LUCY-DONO!” Rooster says eagerly. Green hair bobs in equal enthusiasm.

Lucy blinks, then her eyes widen in surprise. “Wait, really?”

Long canines flash in the dim light as Rooster speaks. “OF COURSE! I HAD PLANNED TO GIVE IT TO YOU ANYWAY, IN THE EVENT I WON!”

Lucy doesn’t really know why he would do such a thing, but hey, if he’s offering help he’s offering help. “Awesome, thank you!”

And for some bewildering reason, this causes Rooster to curl up in the fetal position on the floor and start...whimpering?

“Er...you okay?”

Lucy only picks up what he says because his hoarse whispers echo off the stone. “Lucy-dono, the future Pirate King and love of my life, has thanked me. Me! Bartolomeo! I am unworthy of her presence, let alone her praise! My life is truly complete!”

Lucy blinks at him again and scratches the back of her neck. This is taking too long, seriously. “Look, I appreciate your help, but could we get—”

“You won’t get the Mera Mera Fruit, Straw Hat Lucy.”

It’s a new voice, one that aches with familiarity. One that lances open long-healed scars, one that brings memories of forests and promises and tiger-hunting to mind.

She doesn’t move, doesn’t even look up to see the voice’s owner.

Rooster has no such qualms, and is immediately off the floor confronting the stranger. “AND WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, TALKING TO LUCY-DONO SO RUDELY? HER BROTHER
WAS THE LEGENDARY FIRE FIST ACE, AND SHE WILL BE THE PIRATE KING!
WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO STAND IN HER BLESSED PRESENCE?"

Lucy hears the stranger take a step forward, brushing Rooster aside with ease. “...I already know all
that,” he says, his voice soft. Then he stops, doesn’t approach any further.

Lucy turns around—slowly, carefully, knowing that if she’s wrong, if she’s wrong, she might be
broken forever, but she can’t not look. She has to see.

Before her stands a tall man with curly blonde hair hidden under a top hat with goggles around the
brim. He’s dressed like an old-fashioned gentleman, with a waistcoat and a jacket with tails. His
features are older and sharper than she remembers, but they’re still familiar, achingly familiar. The
only real difference is the scar covering his left eye, a mottled red mark across his tan face.

His eyes are filled with some terrible wealth of emotion that reflects her own.

“You see…” he says softly, emotionally, his voice wavering just a little. “…the two of us go way
back.”

And then Lucy listens, not with her ears but with Haki, and she finds herself hit with the trembling
presence of her brother. Her brother, who she thought long dead, who is now before her filled with
dread and anticipation and fear—fear of her, and what she will say, a concern over her possible
rejection—and love, so much terrible, wrathful, joyful love from her long-lost brother, so much Lucy
thinks she could burst from it second-hand.

Lucy understands. She’s feeling it pretty strongly herself.

She sniffs, and belatedly realizes her eyes are filled with tears. “Sabo,” she whispers, agonized.

Her brother grins, a roguish smile that used to be far more innocent, and raises one gloved hand to
wave, and Lucy sees the pipe strapped to his back. “Long time no see, little sister. I bet you can
hold Dadan’s sake a bit better now, huh?”

It’s him. It’s him, it’s him, it’s really—

She throws herself at him, and she doesn’t do it gently—doesn’t hold back like she would with
almost anyone else. Instead Lucy comes at her big brother unreservedly because he can take it,
could always take it, was always stronger than her, could always be relied upon to catch her if she
fell. So she wraps her arms around his waist and squeezes as hard as she can, butting her helmeted
head into his chin heedlessly as usual and sobs, the tears so thick she can’t see at all.

Sabo grunts, and rocks a step back with the force of her momentum, but doesn’t make any sort of
move to peel her off. Slowly, like he’s not sure he’s allowed to do so, he raises his arms to wrap
around her. She can feel him trembling, can hear his breath catch in disbelief and awe and the
terrible sense of reverence about him speaks of another wave of love so intense Lucy thinks she
might get swept away by it as well.

Sabo makes a gentle shushing noise, patting her back. “Hey, Lucy, don’t cry, you know Ace and I
could never stand it when you did that.”

“Liar,” she sniffs. “You two loved making me cry. And Ace called me a crybaby all the time. And
you laughed.”

This earns a soft chuckle from Sabo, and Lucy thinks he maybe sounds a little choked up himself.
“Yeah, I guess we did.”
Lucy wonders if he’s remembering Ace, just like she is, and the love in her chest bursts open again as she realizes—

“Ace would be *so happy* you’re alive,” she tells him, clutching his jacket a little closer.

The arms around her tighten a little and his breath hitches. “I like to think so.” There’s a slight tremble of doubt in is voice that Lucy can’t help but notice.

“I’m happy you’re alive,” she sobs. Sabo’s going to have to replace his jacket after this. “*So happy.*”

Sabo gives a soft, painful-sounding chuckle, and cradles her head to his chest, swaying softly. “Me too, Lu-chan. Me too.”

The childhood nickname makes her chest clench painfully, and Lucy sobs a little harder.

“I—I let Ace die in front of me,” Lucy confesses, because if there is one person in all the world who would understand what a crime that was, it’s Sabo. She’s been aching for both of them for *years* now, offering apologies every night before she sleeps. “He was *murdered* and I—”

“You *lived*, Lucy.” Sabo’s grip turns almost painful. “And I’m so, so glad you did. I would have woken up alone otherwise. Ace’s death wasn’t your fault. You know that.”

Lucy sniffs, loudly, and in the most unladylike way possible. Sabo snorts, and the rocking motion he’s doing starts to soothe her. Lucy leans into him, lets him stroke her tangled hair and the familiar scent of him puts her at ease.

Lucy wonders how it’s possible he still smells like the forests of Goa, but she’s grateful he does nonetheless.

“W-where,” she starts after a moment, unsure if she should ask. “Where’ve you *been*?”

It’s almost—*almost*—irrelevant to Lucy. She doesn’t exactly care where he’s been, only that he’s here now. But she needs to know in case there are people whose asses she needs to kick, or people who kept her brother away from her.

“Ah, it doesn’t matter. I found you as soon as I could,” he explains, evasive. Lucy accepts the answer, trusts that everything is well with him. It’s hard to care with her brother so obviously *alive* and *here*.

Sabo seems to feel the same. He won’t stop petting her hair, and he’s holding her like she’s going to fly away. It’s almost terrifying because she doesn’t remember Sabo being this indulgent of her clinginess, or reciprocating it to this degree, but it’s a relief all the same. She doesn’t want to let him go. Not until she’s sure he won’t disappear again.

Her brother. Her *brother*. She can’t believe—her *brother*—

“Oi, Lucy, I have a question for you.” He pulls back, and Lucy loosens her grip on him to accommodate. The expression on Sabo’s face is kind and earnest as always—terribly familiar in a face that she thought long gone. “Is it okay if I eat Ace’s Fruit?”

Lucy blinks, tears filling her eyes again as she recognizes the request for what it is—a nod to the ten years of Ace’s life Sabo missed, and an uncertainty as to whether Sabo knew Ace in the end as well as he thought. Like he’s bowing to her authority on the issue, or something.
Stupid. Ace was too stubborn to change. Especially when they lived in part for Sabo, or what they thought was Sabo’s ghost.

“Yes of course!” She nods through the tears. “That’s the best possible way for it to go!”

Something like relief bleeds into Sabo’s eyes. “Good. Off with you then. I’ll take your spot in the tournament.” He gently removes Lucy’s helmet, and sets it on his own head, tossing the top hat aside.

Lucy blinks up at him in confusion, still crying. “Sabo…?”

Her brother grins, and Lucy sees an image of the boy he used to be. “You’ve got some friends to save, don’t you?”

Lucy’s heart seizes hard in her chest. That’s right. Torao needs her. And Zoro’s about to tear the whole colosseum apart if his increasing concern and irritation are anything to go by. It’s probably a good thing he can’t feel emotions yet the way she can. This place would have been gone the moment she heard Sabo’s voice if he could.

Still, she hesitates, just a moment. It’s...difficult to believe this is anything but a dream. Five minutes ago she was the last of her siblings alive. Now…

“I’ll see you later,” Sabo tells her, his voice gentle and his expression warm. “Go help your crew.”

Lucy nods determinedly but can’t exactly stop the tears flowing down her face. She has to go though, has to leave and fight and save, and so she gives him her beard and cape, and with one final hug, makes for the exit with Rooster and Bellamy, vision still blurred with tears.

Zoro waits outside the colosseum impatiently, fingers tapping on Shusui’s hilt. Kin’emon distracted half the Marines that came after them, and Zoro defeated his portion, but it’s taking Lucy a long time to get out of the building. Longer than it should, at any rate. Trafalgar’s life is on the line here, shouldn’t Lucy have busted herself out by now if she couldn’t find a reasonably placed exit?

Something must be wrong. Or she got distracted somehow which, honestly, is not that unlikely.

She’s well within his range still, so he knows she’s alive. He probably would have cut the colosseum in half by now if he couldn’t sense her. And she’s finally moving again, after a pit stop of some kind.

Then he feels her from a side entrance Zoro never would have noticed without the exploding and the very loud sobbing of the person who runs through it.

Zoro blinks in surprise as his captain, now free of the beard and helmet and cape she wore just a few minutes ago, emerges from the dust and wails in great, heaving sobs.

“Lucy?” he asks incredulously, because yeah Lucy sometimes cries at things that are completely unnecessary to cry over—like the last time Sanji tried to offer a vegetarian course for dinner—but she rarely sobs like this, and usually she can be distracted with whatever the next interesting thing is.

He has a feeling it won’t be a matter of distraction this time.

Lucy turns to him, her hat whipping around her neck on its cord. “Z-Zoro!” She sobs, and then she’s running at him full-speed, so quickly Zoro just barely has time to brace to catch her.
Lucy, of course, is heedless and tackles him, hard, but he manages to stay standing and winds his arms around her instinctively. She just buries her face in his shoulder and sobs.

“Lucy, what the hell?” Was she this upset over the others moving on to Zou? Because yeah, that sucked, but it isn’t the end of the world, not by a long shot, and it’s not going to be long at all if Zoro has anything to say about it.

Lucy trembles. Clutches the back of his shirt so hard it threatens to rip. Zoro grips her tighter, holds on to her as her breath heaves and catches in her throat.

“He’s alive,” she hiccups. “My brother’s alive.”

Zoro nearly drops her, he’s so stunned. “Ace is—”

“No, Sabo. Sabo’s alive.” She squeezes him around the shoulders impossibly tighter.

“Who the hell is Sabo?” Zoro asks, still bewildered.

“My brother,” Lucy insists. Hiccups. Zoro can feel her tears staining the collar of his jacket. “I thought he died years ago.” Then she sobs harder, shaking as if to fly apart. “Him and his stupid hat, Ace and I thought he died at ten!”

Oh. Oh. So Ace wasn’t—

Ace wasn’t the first brother Lucy lost.

He keeps thinking Marineford and everything that happened because of it can’t get any worse, and yet.

Dammit.

“But he’s alive?” He asks. He pats her back awkwardly, trying to soothe her. “Where the hell has he been?” And, better question, why did he leave Lucy all alone, especially after Marineford?

“Yes,” Lucy sobs, and Zoro feels her shudder as she sucks in a breath of badly-needed air. “Yes, he’s alive. He was in the Colosseum. Not for twelve years, I don’t know where he was all that time.”

Zoro blinks. “So the Fruit—”

Lucy gives a slightly hysterical giggle. “Sabo’s going to eat Ace’s Fruit! It’s perfect!”

Zoro’s glad she thinks so, but a quick look at the sky tells him they’ve wasted too much time already. “Good. But, I’m sorry Lucy, we need to get a move-on to rescue Law.”

Lucy nods into his shoulder. “Y-yeah.” She doesn’t let go though, and neither does Zoro. They can’t leave until Kin’emon shows up anyway.

“He’s exactly like I remember,” Lucy whispers, and Zoro’s not sure he’s meant to hear. “He’s so strong and kind, and—” Another hiccups. “All that time we were growing up, and I didn’t—I didn’t know I could miss him that way.”

Oh, Lucy.

“He’s your brother. You’re allowed no matter what.” Zoro tells her, rubbing circles in her back. Slowly she relaxes, and eventually he feels confident enough to set her back on her feet, despite the
hiccups.

She steps back, blinking up at him with tear-stained cheeks and puffy red eyes and a trembling smile on her lips. Clumsily, Zoro wipes a few of the tears away with his thumb, his callouses pressing into soft, freckled skin. Lucy leans into the gesture, and her smile broadens a little, becomes a little steadier.

“Salutations, my hedonistic acquaintances!” Kin’emon’s voice calls from Zoro’s left. “I have created suitable costumes!”

Zoro looks up and is horrified to see a giant frog running towards them with two swords strapped to his hip.

Lucy blinks in surprise, still a bit teary. “Kin’emon? I didn’t know you could become a frog.”

Zoro snorts, and waves Lucy’s teary, questioning glance away.

“My magic allows me the ability to change objects into clothes! Here! For your disguises!” The giant frog tosses Zoro a cat costume, and Lucy a fish.

Zoro frowns down at it. “This is the opposite of inconspicuous.”

“Have more faith in me, Thief of Wano’s Treasure!” Kin’emon shouts. Zoro feels his eyebrow twitch involuntarily. “I saw others in such costumes earlier! We will assimilate as natives!”

Zoro looks at Lucy and discovers her already donning the costume, even as she sniffs. He sighs in resignation.

“You two better not tell the cook about this.”

Because yeah, Sanji will never live down the dress, but Zoro’s pretty sure this qualifies as an equal level of ammunition.

They start running the moment they have the costumes on, and Zoro can hear the little whimpers as Lucy continues to cry. Zoro lets Kin’emon pull ahead as he sidles closer to her.

“Hey, Lucy,” he says lowly, trying to be gentle. “It’s okay, he made it this long, I don’t think he’s going anywhere.” He better not, at least. They clearly didn’t have a proper reunion.

Lucy sniffs again. “It’s not—it’s not that,” she hiccups. Then she looks up at him, her face just barely visible inside the ridiculous costume. “I’m—I’m happy.”

Her eyes are swollen and red with tears, her cheeks wet and her chin wobbles with her trembling smile, but somehow, Zoro believes her.

Affection and fondness well in his chest, and he can’t help the soft expression on his face.

This Sabo guy better not let her down. Zoro will fucking murder him otherwise.

Getting into the castle is relatively easy, with a guide in the form of the castle’s real owner. Zoro considers running into Viola more evidence for the idea that Lucy is just straight-up lucky, most of the time. To further the point, it’s only ten minutes into enemy headquarters when the walls start moving and bending around them that they run into any kind of issue.
Like he said. Lucky. They’ve even lost Kin’emon somewhere in the basement.

Zoro feels a little less lucky, however, when the walls start swinging swords at their heads.

“Lucy! Get going, I’ll handle it!” He calls, splitting one of the walls in half.

“Swordsman-san!” Viola protests. Lucy yanks her onward with a quick nod over her shoulder. There’s an implacable sort of trust in her eyes that stokes the determination in his gut.

“Beat ‘im up, Zoro!” She calls back.

Zoro curls a smirk over Wado’s hilt. Kitetsu fairly purrs in his palm.

“Aye, Sencho.”

Lucy really has no idea what’s going on when the hallway outside Torao’s prison starts to glow with gold-white light, but when it’s over there’s a big muscly guy with one leg where the one-legged toy soldier used to be. The absence of his leg looks like it will slow the big guy down about as much as it impeded the toy soldier.

Lucy recognizes him, actually. He’s—

“Kyros,” Viola whispers beside Lucy. There’s a sick kind of horror reverberating in her Voice, laced with guilt and terror. “I—I forgot—”

“It’s not your fault,” the gladiator grunts, pushing himself up and his broad knuckles wrap around the hilt of the sword on his hip. “It’s—it’s his.” He snarls, dark eyes welling with rage and hatred.

And then—oh look at that, having only one leg really doesn’t slow this guy down.

Three bounds in and Torao’s Voice resonates in delirious shock and then Kyros just decapitates Doflamingo.

Lucy almost pouts. She at least wanted a shot at the guy.

...but dead is better than not, so.

Lucy bounds into the room, making a beeline for Torao. He’s covered in blood, bound to a chair by his wrists and he doesn’t look like he’s capable of moving much. But even though his eyes are a bit glassy, a bit unfocused, they widen in genuine horror when he sees her.

“S-Straw Hat-ya?” He slurs, trying to prop himself up more in her presence. “What’re you doing here?”

“We came to rescue you!” Lucy tells him brightly, trotting over to his chair. “I’m glad you’re not dead!”

“But why?” He asks again, which reminds her a little too much of Ace, and the light in his eyes becomes a little manic. “Did you—Straw Hat-ya, I swear, if you came here before you destroyed the factory I’m going to kill you.”

Lucy frowns up at him. “Wait, so do you want me to untie you or not?” It’s a rhetorical question, she’s already examining the cuffs. Sea stone. Dammit.

“Straw Hat-ya.”
“Don’t worry, Usopp and Robin and Franky are on it,” she tells him. “And I came because we’re friends. Duh.”

“WE’RE NOT FRIENDS! THAT’S NOT WHAT AN ALLIANCE IS, AND THAT’S OVER, ANYWAY!”

Aw, poor Torao. He seems distressed.

Lucy takes the key from Violet. “I’ll decide when our alliance is over, shut up.”

Torao yanks against the chains. “I’LL FUCKING MURDER YOU, STRAW HAT-YA.”

“Get in line,” she mutters, and then key slides home in the sea stone cuffs.

Before Torao can try and strangle her—good luck with that by the way, she’d definitely win in a fight—the floor warps and twists beneath her feet and she freezes in sickening familiarity as she realizes—

—she can’t feel anything but the man inhabiting the castle.

Everything outside the room is fuzzy, a blur. She can’t sense Zoro or Kin’emon or anyone—just the people standing right beside her and the large, looming presence of the man with the Stone Stone Fruit.

He’s fine, Lucy remembers. It’s Zoro, so he’s fine. He’s probably more annoyed that his prey left the fight than anything. No way Zoro would lose to a guy like this.

“Oh fuck me gently with a chainsaw,” groans a familiar voice.

Lucy freezes, and then crouches in front of Torao and Violet, defensive. “Mingo is—”

“—very much alive, thank you for the astute observation, Straw Hat.” Lucy stares at the still-detached head, bewildered and maybe a bit disgusted, but also—why didn’t she sense him before? Are her senses really that skewed with stone man surrounding her?

Doflamingo looks almost bored. “You people are annoying, but I guess there’s no other choice about it.” His smile becomes sadistic and wide, and Lucy feels Torao stiffen behind her as the madman’s gaze locks on him. “You remember the birdcage, right, Law?”

Torao’s Voice trembles in what Lucy can only call terror, but he says nothing, and Lucy doesn’t turn around to observe his expression.

Lucy decides, right then and there, that she doesn’t like the way Doflamingo looks at her friend. Not at all, if it inspires that kind of fear. Hate. Rage.

“Oh! Can it!” She calls, stomping her feet in an effort to recapture Pinky’s attention. “Shut your face and fight!”

“Straw Hat-ya, no—”

But Lucy isn’t listening, is already dropping into Gear Second as the familiar burn screams through her blood. Haki fuels her steps as she charges forward, heedless of everything except the fact that there’s a friend she needs to protect at her back.

A clawed hand swipes before the headless body, and Lucy just barely manages to duck beneath the whistling strings as they sweep for her head. She coils to spring into an attack, but then Lucy looks
up and there are two of him.

Two terrible smiles. Two arms descending with razor-sharp strings. One Voice.

Shit.

She dodges one, but as she twists out of the way another cuts across her back and she feels the skin burst open before she can harden herself with Haki.

Lucy grits her teeth but doesn’t scream, steadies herself on shaking legs to face the two monsters before her.

“It’s time for a tragedy,” Doflamingo muses, his voice almost breathless with laughter, a showman’s smile creasing his face. “Away with you, Straw Hat.”

Wire wraps viciously around Lucy’s ankle and she hardens her leg instinctively as she’s hauled through the air with devastating speed—so harshly it would have taken her foot off, sans Haki. As it is, Lucy flies through the window, shattering glass as she finds herself scrabbling helplessly through the air in uncontrolled freefall.

Above her the castle rumbles and shakes and Lucy is suddenly, furiously aware that she left a friend and three of her allies alone before the enemy without protection.

She reaches for the window, her arm stretching across the distance, but just as her fingers brush the broken glass of the sill, Viola and Torao are expelled, the other captain still in his chair.

Lucy changes targets, teeth clenched against the whistling of the wind in her ears, and she wraps an arm around them both as the three of them plummet. Using them like ballasts she angles herself beneath Kyros and the man he was so desperate to save.

Fuck, Lucy’s really starting to dislike this ‘Mingo guy.

“Gomu Gomu no balloon!”

It’s a ridiculous technique—enough people have said so that Lucy can’t exactly deny it—but it’s a useful one, and that’s infinitely more important.

Lucy’s four allies bounce harmlessly off of her inflated belly. It hurts a little, kind of like getting punched in the gut, but she doesn’t let them know that as everyone but Torao stands. That makes sense—he’s been in the cuffs long enough to render him immobile.

At the top of the castle, Doflamingo glares down at them, manic smile ever in place. The headless clone kneels beside him, string shooting up from his neck into the very sky.

“Th-the birdcage…” Torao whispers from the ground. He’s staring up at the spiraling strings in abject horror, and Lucy can practically taste his terror on her tongue.

It worries her. If whatever ‘Mingo is doing is enough to scare a tough guy like Torao this bad…

Lucy kneels next to him, and tries to carefully slip him out of the now-loose cuffs without touching them. “What’s wrong, Torao?”

“He’s going to kill everyone on the island with that,” Torao whispers, not even taking heed of the fact that Lucy’s wrestling with his arm. It relieves her a little that Torao’s still himself enough to speak with his characteristic bluntness.
“Keep a watch out,” Torao warns, his voice dark and fierce. “Don’t let anything touch you.”

“I’ll look out for you all,” Viola offers, and Lucy watches with curiosity as the woman seemingly does nothing but stare at the rock in front of her.

The white strands shoot up, up, and out, and Lucy can hear them whistling from here.

“How let’s play a game, people of Dressrosa and guests! A game of life and death!” Doflamingo’s voice crows from above, thick with dramatic anticipation. But Lucy hears it echo through the town below, and knows it’s not just them he’s speaking to. “I’ll give you one hour to kill me. Just one. Or, if you think that too difficult, you may kill your would-be saviors. Bring me their heads at the end of the hour, and I’ll release you from this hell.” Lucy sees a flash of white teeth. “It’s kill or be killed, Dressrosa! Which will you choose?”

Lucy’s fists curl at her side, and she squares her jaw toward the enemy.

A game. A game? Lucy knows he’s being dramatic for the sake of it, that maybe, to him, that’s just a figure of speech, but it isn’t. Not to her, and not to the screaming people in the village below.

Those aren’t for threatening people, Shanks said once, low and confident and terrifying. Lucy’s never forgotten, and she thinks Shanks would disprove of this as well, because it wasn’t just about the gun, then. It wasn’t just about the bandit’s bluster or their treatment of Lucy as a child. It was about life, and how preciously short it is, how precious in general. It was about a threat made on shaky resolve, and false hope, on the other side of the coin. How the ending of life is not something done without cause, how it is not something done recklessly, for pride or gain. It is done with care, with the knowledge that actions once taken cannot be undone.

It’s not a fucking game, to kill someone. It’s especially not a game to kill her nakama.

Lucy stares up at Doflamingo, feels Torao still trembling beside her, and knows she’s looking at a dead man walking.

Zoro is, admittedly, a little miffed that his opponent just up and left before their fight was over (he’s counting it as a point to himself, concession by forfeit), but he’s more than a little shocked when the castle they were climbing just walked away after depositing his captain and allies outside of it.

Talk about avoidance strategies. Fucking cowards.

Somehow buildings moving on their own is still something he hasn’t seen following his batshit girlfriend around on this adventure of theirs. Considering all the other shit they’ve witnessed, he’d have guessed moving buildings would have shown up sooner.

Luckily though, he’s not the only one who was left behind by the wandering castle. Lucy and Trafalgar are across the plateau. Zoro wanders over, Wado leaning sheathed against his shoulder, and finds Lucy crouched in front of an increasingly irritated Trafalgar, poking him in the chest as he sits up with a palm pressed to his eyes.

Below them Dressrosa burns, and the screams can be heard ringing throughout the island.


Trafalgar’s expression is hilarious, and on Lucy’s next attempted poke his hand snaps out to catch her fingers.
“You,” he starts, his voice tight with irritation, “are not right in the head.”

Lucy does nothing but blink at him a couple of times, and then her free hand comes up to poke him in the shoulder again, on the side that’s not sporting a bullet wound. “But you’re okay, right?”

Trafalgar makes a slightly broken noise that could be terror. Zoro snorts.

Lucy whirls around immediately, smile bright on her face and her eyes lighting up. “Zoro! Did you see that castle move?”

“It was hard to miss,” he says dryly. So too was the giant cage over their heads.

Zoro doesn’t like it. He’s never liked being confined.

Lucy stands to greet him, and despite her carefree affect there’s a tightness to her frame that lets him know she feels the suffocation of the cage as well, and a glint in her dark eyes that speaks of rage and wrath.

Fuck Feathers. Guy’s not gonna know what hit ‘im.

He’s glad she doesn’t look teary now, though. She’s either put her brother out of her mind or gotten over it.

(His money’s on the former.)

“I thought you might still be in the castle,” Lucy tells him. Her eyebrows furrow, and there’s a metallic spike of frustration from her. “My Observation Haki…”

...is not her strong suit. Right. “Pica ran off before I could finish him,” Zoro recounts, and a fresh wave of annoyance hits. Who runs from a fight? “You got Torao free.”

Lucy wrinkles her nose, and a fresh wave of rage crosses her face. “They put him in sea stone.”

Which, combined with the blood loss…

...no wonder Lucy’s concerned about the guy. Zoro frowns at him over Lucy’s head as well, in a reflexively curious sort of way. Trafalgar notices and glares. Hard.

Zoro is unintimidated.

He does look around at the others though, and notices a big guy getting ready to depart. One is obviously their guide from earlier, a deposed princess or something, but the others…

“Who’re they?” Zoro asks, gesturing.

Lucy squints at them. “Nice lady. Soldier dude.” She points to the elderly man. “I dunno, but those two wanted him.”

Behind her, Trafalgar gives a long-suffering sigh reminiscent of Nami, but with more anger. “He’s the king, Straw Hat-ya.”

...well that did make sense.

“Huh.” Lucy says, unconsciously agreeing.

The Den Den Mushi in Zoro’s pocket starts to ring, and Zoro blinks, pulling it out with surprise,
Zoro quirks a grin. “No wonder Doflamingo’s pissed at him.”

“Oi, Robin, did you say Rebecca’s there with you?” Lucy asks, peering down at the Den Den Mushi in his hand with a pinched expression he’s long-since associated with Lucy at her most stubborn. “I want to talk to her.”

“Luffy?”

Lucy swipes the snail out of Zoro’s hand and stomps off, her whole demeanor almost comically irritated.

Zoro rolls his eye and turns to the strangers—the big soldier and would-be-king.

“You any good with that?” Zoro asks, nodding to the blade at the soldier’s hip.

The big guy pauses in his preparations to give Zoro a blank stare.

Zoro stares back, nonplussed.

“...I do not think that would be most people’s first assumption,” the man allows after a moment.

Zoro raises an eyebrow, not following.

The king beside the man coughs, interjecting. “What I think Kyros means is, he only has one leg.” "With an almost regretful, apologetic shrug in the younger man’s direction, he continues. “Most would not assume capacity with swordsmanship, let alone skill.”

Ugh, people are too complicated for their own good. “He’s got a sword, doesn’t he?” Then he turns back to Kyros. “So you any good?”

For a second, Zoro thinks the big guy’s not going to answer. Then he scratches the back of his head, like he’s absolutely befuddled. “Er. Yes, I suppose.”

Zoro nods. “We should spar sometime.” He taps Wado’s sheath across his shoulder absently.

Kyros looks down at the king, bemused, then back at Zoro. “I am occupied at the moment.”

Zoro heaves a sigh. “Not now, obviously.” Zoro gestures to the giant cage circling the island. “Later, when this shit’s taken care of.”

Something shifts in the man’s dark eyes, and the king is staring at him too. “You are confident in victory.”

“Got no reason not to be,” Zoro drawls. “So, spar?”
Perhaps,” he allows. “But for now I must take my leave.” He draws his sword from its sheath and holds it at his side in the ready position. His thigh bulges and he springs forward, hopping on one leg with ludicrous ease.

“See? One leg’s not such a big deal,” Zoro tells the king, waving Wado’s hilt at the soldier’s back. “Could definitely still fight like that.” Hell, he had a vague plan to fight with no legs, once. He maintains that it would have been successful, too.

The king chuckles a bit, and Zoro looks down with a raised eyebrow. The old man waves him off.

“Nothing, sorry, it’s just,” The man’s eyes are warm. “I can tell you are not a native of these lands.” Dressrosi seem weirdly preoccupied with who lives here and who doesn’t. “I’m not.”

The king’s eyes warm and despite the fatigue and agony on his face, Zoro senses something else. Longing, maybe. Or wistfulness. “There was a time, once, when the people here believed in nonviolence.”

A country of pacifists, huh? That worked out well for them. “Sounds boring.”

The king barks a laugh. “So it might seem to you!” He absently turns a heavy gold ring around his index finger. “But the path of nonviolence is difficult. Dressrosa has a long history, and is home to passionate people. Restraint is hard for us. We decided there was a better way to use our passions than violence, and worked to uphold that as a value. That’s all.” The king smiled. “It is not an easy path, to hold one’s lesser nature at bay. But it is a worthwhile one.”

“Lesser nature, huh?” Zoro mutters, and doesn’t remember beady eyes and bad stars. Then he raises an eyebrow, thinking of the scantily-clad gladiator in the colosseum. “That girl was saying something similar, before her fight in the tournament.”

The king’s expression turns agonized, bewildered. “Rebecca,” he whispers, and the name comes out tormented on his lips. “My granddaughter.” He looks down at his hands, awe and confusion staining his voice. “She never lost faith in me, somehow. Or her parents’ teachings.”

Zoro looks at the old man, feeling a little sympathy, but not really knowing how to relate. His concept of family is atypical. “Must have been difficult.”

The old man’s face turns fierce with pride. “Years she spent in that pit, and never once has she injured an opponent, and yet never once has she lost.”

Huh. Maybe Zoro should ask her for a fight. “She was asking Dressrosa to remember.”

The king nods. “Remember nonviolence, remember who we are. Dressrosa, the land of passion and love. Revenge and death have no place here.” The king quirks a smile. “It is a lesson Rebecca’s father learned quite well.” Then the man’s whole affect droops. “That was before Doflamingo, though.”

Shit, Zoro’s not a shrink. “Lucy’s going to kick his ass,” he offers. It’s about the only comfort he can give.

“I’m going to kick ‘Mingo’s ass!” Lucy corroborates, shouting unnecessarily into the Den Den Mushi at whoever’s on the other end.

Oh, shit, wasn’t she talking to—
“King man!” Lucy shouts, stalking up to the old man. “Where’s Soldier guy?”

“K-King? You don’t mean—”

“He left. To go make things right, I believe.” The old man smiles at the Den Den Mushi. “For you, Rebecca.”

“Grandpa…”

“You remember our creed, don’t you?”

The girl hiccups, her voice strained. “Yes, Grandpa. Of course.”

“War is upon us, child,” the old man says kindly, and there’s an air of tradition about the words that isn’t lost on Zoro.

“I shall not lose myself within it,” Rebecca replies, and her voice is stronger now.

The old king closes his eyes, and a tear runs down his face. “That is all I ask.”

Chapter End Notes

This was two chapters but the number of Dressrosa chapters I have is honestly ridiculous and I figured combining them wouldn’t hurt, so here we are.

Just in case you’re getting confused, Lucy and Zoro’s particular abilities when it comes to Observation Haki are still very distinct and separate—Lucy has a very narrow range to her ability, while Zoro can’t sense emotions or intentions nearly as well as she can. They both have the capacity for growth in these areas (as well as general detail and precognition), but for now they still have these limitations. However, because they’re so familiar with each other, their abilities are stronger when it comes to one another, and to a lesser extent, the rest of the Straw Hats. It helps that they both have very vibrant presences. But in Lucy’s case, her range with Zoro (and to a slightly lesser extent, the rest of their nakama) is wider than it is with others, and in Zoro’s case, he can sense her emotions/intentions a little easier than he can with anyone else (which is to say, he can sense them at all).

“Fuck me gently with a chainsaw” is a Heathers reference. The movie, not the musical, although that’s great too. Great cult classic. Great line. Heather Chandler and Doflamingo would get along swimmingly. Or murder each other. It kind of wrote itself in there, and since I see Doflamingo as being a really melodramatic drama queen right up until he looses his shit and goes terminator on whoever’s nearby, I let it stay.

I always thought Viola should learn Observation Haki. With her powers it would practically make her omnipotent. She’d be the perfect counter to Eneru, if he ever shows up again like I think he will.

Let me know what you think! Thanks for reading!
Lucy and Zoro chase the boss to the final battlefield, and meet up with their opponents.

“Do yourself a favor and go put "In the Hall of the Mountain King" on right now. Go on. I'll wait.

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“Do yourself a favor and go put "In the Hall of the Mountain King" on right now. Go on. I'll wait.

“You know what you’re doing, Straw Hat-ya?” Trafalgar asks quietly. “You kill Doflamingo, and all Kaido’s wrath over SMILE turns on us.”

They’re still on the plateau, and haven’t quite decided what to do yet. Lucy’s not being particularly helpful in this regard, her general planning ability ending somewhere around “I’m going to kick ‘Mingo’s ass,” but the details on how, exactly, are unclear.

Which, really, Zoro never expected any different. Watching the others beat their heads against the brick wall that is Lucy is amusing though.

Trafalgar’s comment is the first time anyone’s suggested backing out, however, which makes sense given present company.

Lucy turns to the other captain, the look in her eye dark the way it sometimes is when she’s genuinely pissed. “So?” she asks dismissively, and Zoro wonders, absently, if it’s inappropriate to feel attracted to her right now.

“So, we’ll have to face an angry Yonko, head-on.” Trafalgar’s eyes grow sharper. “Are you prepared for that?”

Lucy’s expression is like stone, that perfect poker face she gets when her anger goes through the roof. “If I wasn’t, I’d do this anyway.”

Zoro slides Wado into his haramaki because yeah, that sounds about right.

Trafalgar, however, was clearly not expecting that answer, and stares, disgruntled.

Lucy takes a couple steps toward the other captain, and Zoro spies the fist clenching at her side. “Take a good look around, Torao,” she hisses. “I can’t leave this country where it is.” And then a little kinder, “I don’t think you can either.”

Trafalgar shuts up, which is probably for the best.

“Right. We’re leaving,” Lucy decides. Then she hooks an arm under Trafalgar’s armpits, while her other snakes out to Zoro, and suddenly he’s hauled uncomfortably close to their ally, both of them
pinned to one side of Lucy’s waist.

Trafalgar reacts immediately, squirming away. “WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING, STRAW HAT-YA?”

“KICKING ‘MINGO’S ASS. I SAID THAT.”

Zoro sighs. “This is not the most embarrassing thing I’ve ever done with you.” The fucking chimney would probably never be topped. He hopes.

“SHE’S YOUR GIRLFRIEND MAN, STOP HER.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow as Lucy makes to leap off the plateau, bracing himself for a rough landing.

“How?”

“AT LEAST DO SOMETHING.”

Zoro considers, and asks, “How’re we gonna get there?”.

“How?”

“Go straight!”

Fair answer. Zoro accepts.

“THAT’S NOT AN ANSWER.”

“You should watch your blood pressure man, you’re leaking.” From his bullet wound, which is why Lucy’s refusing to let the guy walk anywhere until they have to fight.

“HOW CAN YOU BE SO CALM?”

“I’m resigned to our inevitable victory.”

“What?”

“I’M COMING FOR YOU PINK BASTARD.”

Then his girlfriend jumps off a cliff.

Lucy knew Dressrosa would be full of enemies when she launched herself off the plateau with Zoro, Torao, and Torao’s sword under her arms, but she may have underestimated how annoying the general population would be when they were trying to hunt her. Them and ‘Mingo’s crew. Lucy’s a bit limited in what she can do, still carrying Torao, but Zoro cuts a path for her, doesn’t let anything near her, and if she wasn’t so pissed she’d be a bit more distracted by him because damn he looks good in that suit.

At any rate, the fact that the entire population of Dressrosa and then some stand between Lucy and Doflamingo’s reckoning is largely irrelevant, for the most part. That is, until the blind admiral shows up again.

Lucy drops Torao immediately, and Zoro steps closer to help her guard him as her friend swears at her from the ground.

“I regret that I must do this,” the admiral laments, “but duty bids me forward.”

Lucy lunges, fist winding up. The admiral is formidable, a terrible enemy to have. She can tell, with
her Conqueror’s Haki whispering of his will. And he must be skilled, or the Marines would not have taken him.

Her fist is stopped with a sword and Lucy’s instincts scream as she flings herself back and away from the old man, keeps herself between him and Torao’s prone form. He can’t help them fight—he’s still recovering from the sea stone, hasn’t even gathered the energy to heal himself—so it’s up to her and Zoro to keep him protected for now. Zoro rushes forward, two katana drawn, and trades quick blows with the man, dodging nimbly as the earth shakes and craters beneath his feet.

It occurs to Lucy that this is the first time she and Zoro have fought together against the same opponent since their reunion. The time apart doesn’t seem to matter though—the energy between them flows as it always has, their movements precise and in sync, just as they’ve been since that day in Shells Town.

It’s almost fun, honestly, and the part of Lucy that relishes a good fight, that likes fighting alongside someone as strong as Zoro against someone as powerful as this admiral is nearly joyous. She’d enjoy it more though, if most of her wasn’t so furious at Doflamingo and irritated with this man’s interruption.

Then the earth rumbles and the island coughs up a man, which pretty much brings an end to the fight.

Along with actual Krakens and islands in the sky, a literal mountain of a man is not something Zoro ever expected to see in his lifetime. But, well. Here he is.

The fact that his voice is apparently caught in an eternal register only dogs can hear only adds to the absurdity, but it does make Zoro a little less miffed about the guy running off without finishing their fight, earlier.

Lucy giggles on his right, clutching at her stomach. “What the hell? His voice is--”

“Straw Hat-ya, shut up!” Trafalgar hisses. “That’s Pica!”

Lucy just laughs harder, grabs Zoro’s arm to support herself in her mirth. “No seriously, what the hell?”

“He will murder this entire quarter of the island if you don’t shut up, Straw Hat-ya!”

As if to corroborate the statement, Pica lifts his right arm, nearly blocking out the sun, his eyes locked on Lucy’s still-laughing form.

Zoro sighs. “Lucy, you have to stop antagonizing your enemies.”

Lucy, too busy reaching down to grab Trafalgar again, gives one last burst of laughter. “But his voice!”

“MAY YOU ROT IN HELL, STRAW HAT!” Pica squeaks.

Zoro slaps a hand over his mouth as he runs, determined not to laugh aloud.

Lucy catches it though. “See, you want to laugh too!” She accuses, gleeful.

“What is wrong with you two?” Trafalgar complains, once again hoisted under Lucy’s arm.

“Nuthin, we just thing funny things are funny. What’s wrong with you, Torao? Why aren’t you
laughing?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe the THREE THOUSAND TONS OF ROCK ABOUT TO CRUSH US?”

“You need to relax Torao, that much stress can’t be healthy.”

“YOU’RE THE CAUSE OF ALL MY STRESS, STRAW HAT-YA.”

“Lucy,” Zoro warns with a glance behind him. The giant fist is descending fast, the shadow already upon them. “Less talking more running.” But he’s not that worried. They shouldn’t have a problem outrunning the fist. The guy’s big and heavy, not agile, and at their current pace it simply shouldn’t be an issue.

Or so he thinks, anyway, until Lucy fucking trips.

Zoro’s too far away to do anything by the time he realizes. When he does he shouts her name and takes two steps back to Lucy and Trafalgar, but then the giant fist closes the gap between earth and sky and the shockwave sends Zoro soaring.

It’s fine though—he senses Lucy and Trafalgar shoot in a vaguely similar direction, which means they’re both fine and will remain so, and when he lands he just follows his Haki over to their signatures.

When he arrives Lucy’s crouching over Trafalgar, checking his bullet wound again, while Trafalgar tries, unsuccessfully, to swat her away. They both look fine, and a knot of tension releases in him.

“C’mon, just let me see it,”

“I’m a doctor, Straw Hat-ya, I know what a bullet wound is supposed to look like. It’s fine.”

“I think Chopper would question your cognitive capacity for diagnosis at the moment.”

“Where the hell did you even learn a phrase like ‘cognitive capacity’?”

“I dunno. Robin, probably.”

Zoro steps up to them, looking down at their ally. Trafalgar looks terrible, which is probably to be expected considering the fact that he got shot in the shoulder about an hour ago. His adrenaline’s probably worn off, and he’s probably going into shock now, if Zoro’s remembering Chopper’s rants correctly. And if he was in sea stone cuffs, that’s probably affecting him too.

“Zoro, you made it!” Lucy cheers. She stands to greet him with a huge smile on her face. “I could kinda sense you, but not really, either.” She makes a face. “Stupid Haki...”

He cocks his head to her, a little amused. “I’m not the one who nearly got crushed.” He looks around, trying to get his bearings. “I think the castle’s that way,” he decides, pointing to his left.

Lucy squints at him. “No, that’s the way we came.” She frowns, and points in what seems to be a mostly random direction. “That’s straight,” she declares, suspiciously definitive.

“You people are too dumb to live,” groans Trafalgar. Zoro glares down at him. “How hard can it be to find the giant castle?”

“Pirate Hunter? Trafalgar Law?”
Zoro looks up, hand going to his katana. It’s a guy in a white cape with long, perfectly curled blonde hair. He looks like Sanji, just a bit, with the nose and eyes, and Zoro wonders if this guy was born in North Blue too.

“Cabbage?” Lucy asks, surprised. Zoro blinks at her in confusion.

“Trafalgar…” the man growls lowly, “DIE!”

The guy takes a gouge out of the pavement, right where Trafalgar was a second before.

“Hey! Paws off!” Lucy protests, her left hand hauling the other captain around by his collar. “He’s my friend!”

“I am not!”

“Oh?” The blonde guy blinks in surprise, and sheaths his sword. “I see. My mistake.” He bows to Lucy, who blinks in general confusion.

Zoro understands the feeling. He is also very confused.

“I thought you hated us for taking your popularity, or whatever?” Lucy asks, and the look on her face says she can’t believe that’s a question she has to ask.

“You know this guy?” Zoro asks, a little disbelieving. Lucy makes friends with everyone, but usually they’re not quite this unstable.

Lucy nods. “In the colosseum. His name’s Cabbage.”

Zoro frowns, and then turns to Lucy with wide eyes, stomach dropping with growing disgust and horror. “Wait, then what the hell did you mean earlier when you said I could ‘have Cabbage?!’”

“Too much information,” Trafalgar complains, looking sullen and vaguely disturbed.

“Oh, he’s good with a sword,” Lucy says, gesturing to the guy’s hip. “See?”

Zoro sighs, relieved. “Lucy, we really need to work on your word choice.”

“What? What’d I—”

“That’s not my name, anyway,” Cabbage snips, irritated, “And yes, I’m still displeased with the amount of attention you and your cohorts have received, but I owe you Straw Hats,” the man proclaims, tone turning reverent. “God Usopp saved my life. I owe you all a great debt.”

Lucy looks at Zoro.

“Er, you sure it was Usopp?” Zoro asks, curious. Not that he doesn’t believe the guy is capable of something like that, but. He’s a bit surprised.

“I shall never forget the image of him when he saved us all—nay, when he saved the world itself!”

Lucy shrugs, and presses her hat to her head, grinning bemusedly. “Well, I’m always happy when people compliment my friends, I guess.”

“And I have a gift for Trafalgar,” blondie says, tossing the guy’s white hat before him. Zoro doesn’t
miss the way the guy’s eyes widen in surprise when he sees it, or the way Lucy gets an almost maternal look on her face in response to whatever Trafalgar’s feeling. “And now I’m off to repay my debt to you, Straw Hat!”

Lucy looks up at Blondie, wary. “Er, how?”

“By killing Doflamingo for you, of course!”

Lucy’s expression immediately goes petulant and angry. “What? No! I’m gonna kick Doflamingo’s ass. Me! I said so earlier!” She looks at Zoro, her expression expectant.

“It’s true,” he agrees, amused at the way Trafalgar twitches. “She said so earlier.”

“See? So I’m gonna!”

“GARP’S GRANDDAUGHTER. HALT.”

Lucy scowls. “Shit.”

Zoro crowds closer to her, defending her back as she reaches down to pick up Trafalgar. It says something about Lucy’s general tenacity that the guy just sighs, shoves his hat on his head, and lets her carry him again. Zoro smirks a little when he asks, “More colosseum friends?”

Lucy makes a face as they take off running. “He’s not my friend. He’s obsessed with Gramps.”

“Wait, Straw Hat! I’m killing Doflamingo!” Cabbage calls.

“No! We are! For the great favor Garp’s granddaughter did for me, Chin Jao, founder of the Happosui army!”

Zoro raises an eyebrow. “I don’t think he wants to kill you.”

“What favor?” Lucy complains, nose scrunched as she leaps over debris. “I punched him a lot, but not much else.”

“I’M STILL HERE, YA KNOW,” Cabbage yells from somewhere behind them. “NOTICE ME.”

“GARP’S GRANDDAUGHTER, YOU MISUNDERSTAND! I NO LONGER HOLD A GRUDGE AGAINST YOUR FAMILY, AND WISH TO KILL DOFLAMINGO AS A FAVOR!”

“What?!” Lucy shouts, annoyed. “You too!?”

“I HAVE BEEN RELIEVED OF MY QUEST FOR VENGEANCE.”

“How lovely for you,” Trafalgar drawls.

“What was that?” Zoro asks.

“Nothing.”

“I’M KILLING DOFLAMINGO,” Lucy shouts, glaring. The two of them take the next corner hard, and Lucy nearly overbalances with Trafalgar hefted over her shoulder. Zoro would carry the guy instead, but. Katana. “ASK CABBAGE, I ALREADY TOLD HIM.”

On their left, a building collapses, and from the dust, a broad, hulking figure emerges with a helmet
and beard that reminds Zoro of the giant back on Little Garden.

“Oh, it’s him,” Lucy says in surprise.

“Let me guess,” Zoro drawls, “another colosseum friend?”

“I punched him in the face?”

“Straw Hat,” the giant says solemnly. His massive strides let him keep pace easily, and Zoro pushes for more speed. “let us forget what happened in the match. I now owe God Usopp my life, and wish to repay both of you with Doflamingo’s head.”

“Cut it out already! I'M killing ‘Mingo!”

“We of Prodence are long-time allies of Dressrosa! WE shall kill Doflamingo!”

“Nay, WE shall dethrone Doflamingo!” Says a really big guy in a red coat.

“My debt will be repaid in blood!” Says a long-arm guy.

“No, me!”

“I called it first!”

“My honor demands it!”

“SO DOES MINE!”

“Lucy,” Zoro sighs, shaking his head. “You have too many egomaniacal friends.”

“Not like either of you are much different,” complains Trafalgar. “Like I said, I can walk.”

“Nah, you’re bleeding, and you want to help me kick ‘Mingo’s ass, so you have to be awake when we get there,” Lucy informs him.

“I never agreed to this plan in the first place?” Trafalgar protests hal-heartedly.

“STOP FOLLOWING US! I’M KICKING ‘MINGO’S ASS, AND THAT’S IT!” Lucy shouts, the look on her face adorably irritated.

Fuck, when did he start describing things as adorable? What was it, the first time he saw Lucy asleep or some shit?

...actually, yeah, that’s. That’s probably it.

“SHUT UP YOU IDIOTIC SAVIOR.”

“WHAT KIND OFHERO DOESN’T LET PEOPLE SAY THANK YOU?”

But Lucy is distracted by something up ahead. “Oh hey, it’s Moocy!” Lucy calls gleefully, blithely ignoring the stampede behind them. Zoro looks up to see a heavily bandaged bull, missing a horn. Zoro’s not even surprised when the bull snuffles Lucy eagerly.

“You’re ridiculous, you know that?” He tells her fondly as she leaps onto the animal’s back with a friendly pat. Zoro settles himself behind her, guarding the rear as she dumps Trafalgar between them, not even allowing him to sit up properly.
“I hate you both so much,” he grumbles.

“Let’s go, Moocy!” Lucy cheers. The bull brays happily and Zoro laughs a little as the army of would-be debtors scramble behind them.

“This isn’t even the craziest thing that’s happened this month,” he marvels. Lucy shoots him a windblown grin over her shoulder.

“I’m gonna have to work harder to impress you, then!” She shouts over the wind.

Zoro laughs. “Sure, but I gotta warn ya—” Zoro nods to the fleeing soldiers before them. “They won’t be able to keep up if it gets much crazier.”

Between them, Trafalgar makes a pained noise. “Please. Do not try harder. No one can survive you trying harder.”

Lucy laughs and so does Zoro and they charge a castle on a one-horned bull with an aggressively honorable gang of fighters at their backs and soldiers fleeing before them.

Fuck, he’s missed shit like this.

Pica rises in human form before them, and one look at the savagely thrilled smile on Zoro’s face tells her his bloodlust just went through the roof.

It makes sense. This opponent ran away from him earlier, and Zoro doesn’t take too kindly to that. Lucy feels her own excitement rise in time with his, gleeful on his behalf.

Lucy lifts the bull up on her shoulders, leaps, and carries the creature and Torao over to Pica’s other side as Zoro leaps off.

Moocy lands, and she swings up to his back with his horns, not even looking behind her as she feels Zoro rush his opponent.

“I’ll see you later!” She calls, grinning. Zoro’s gonna be happy when this is all over. He loves a challenge.

“Yeah, leave this to me!” He replies, and from the corner of her eye she sees him holding Pica back easily, two swords crossed as he grins in the face of his opponent.

Damn. How did she get so lucky again?

“I have business with Straw Hat! Leave!” Pica squeaks, and Lucy almost laughs because if he thought Zoro would just step aside to let Pica aim at her back, the guy is sadly, sadly mistaken.

“Our captain has no business with a worthless rock like you,” Zoro sniffs, a sliver of protectiveness in his voice, cutting through his excitement. “Live with it, you soprano-voiced dumbass.”

Shit. Lucy’s going to have to kiss him when this is all over.

“Is he going to be alright?” Torao asks, his voice quiet and kind of hesitant. Lucy looks down at him over her shoulder, confused. “Pica is strong.”

Aw. He’s worried.

“Zoro’s the strongest person I know.”
He stares for a moment more, and then huffs. “I guess he’d have to be to put up with you.”

Lucy blinks down at him. “Huh? Did you say something, Torao?”

“No.”


They’re much too far away to see Zoro now, but they can still feel the stone shake as they exchange blows. Torao looks behind them, where Zoro’s Voice is fading out of sight.

Lucy really needs to improve her range.

“Straw Hat-ya,” Torao says after a moment, “The original plan was to get others to hurt Doflamingo, to take him down with as little involvement as possible. But…” Torao’s eyes narrow. “I want to be the one to hurt him.”

The admission is quiet, and it doesn’t surprise Lucy at all. Gently, she asks, “He hurt you, didn’t he?”

Torao swallows. His expression remains bland, but he presses his fingers into his bullet wound with punishing pressure. “There was a person I adored. Doflamingo killed him.” Lucy breathes out harshly, her breath stolen in sympathy. “Donquixote Corazon. Former top executive of the Donquixote Family. He saved my life. And…” Torao hesitates, like this part is the most painful bit to say. “He was Doflamingo’s biological younger brother.”

Lucy’s eyes widen involuntarily, and she doesn’t dare look away from Torao’s face, or the determined, wrathful expression upon it.

Shit, and she thought she hated this guy before.

Lucy has a soft spot for older brothers, she knows. Good ones especially, who love their younger siblings and take care of them and sacrifice for them. She can’t help it. It’s one of Ace’s legacies—Ace’s, and Sabo’s too. She can’t imagine the kind of person who kills a brother. She can’t imagine it at all.

“We’re going to take him down,” she promises Torao. His eyes search hers and she makes sure her face books no room for argument.

“...We have no choice at this point, Straw Hat-ya.” He says eventually.

“Yeah.” Lucy agrees, and she looks ahead, rage and determination curdling in her gut. “But we would do this anyway.”

Pica is an irritating enemy.

It’s not because he’s powerful. He’s got strength of a kind, but he’s no swordsman—there’s no connection between him and his blade, no understanding of how a sword can be an extension of the body. To Pica his sword might as well be a thin club, and nothing more.

Rather, Pica is irritating because his ability allows him to turn cowardice into an art form. Zoro cuts him in half, he absorbs himself into the rock, and he’s throwing a bothersome—but-not-problematic attack at Zoro again. If anything, fighting Pica is sort of tiring—cutting through endless stone as this
battle demands would have exhausted him two years ago—but it’s far from a test of skill or even endurance. It’s more like playing whack-a-mole than anything.

Ten minutes in and Zoro turns to the bastard, raising an unimpressed eyebrow. “Did you really think you had a chance against my girlfriend?” Honestly, if the guy had nothing on him, there’s no way he’d have posed a threat to Lucy.

Pica wails in high-pitched rage and just his stone head flies toward Zoro. The swordsman cleaves the guy in half lazily.

“Zoro?” A familiar voice calls. “What’re you doing down there?”

Zoro looks around in surprise, spotting one of his nakama some distance away. “Robin? Why are you flying?”

“Rebecca-chan wanted to fight.”

“Z-Zoro-senpaiiii!”

Oh, it’s the green dude. “Yeah, but why are you flying?”

“Nevermind, just make sure Pica doesn’t get us!”

Zoro shrugs. Robin can explain later. “Will do.”

“I won’t let anyone pass!” Pica squeaks, and then absorbs himself into the giant stone shell beneath his feet.

...well that’s annoying.

Zoro looks up just in time to see the human head in the center of the neck he cleaved apart earlier. The massive fist above them clenches, begins to move, and Zoro grins, because this is getting fun again.

Zoro runs for the edge, gaining speed and power and leaps. Wado rings with purpose as he sets the blade between his teeth. Kitetsu wails, unbalanced and bloodthirsty, and Shusui moans a heavy void.

“Three-sword style…” he mutters, his voice only slightly muffled by his katana after many years of practice. “One-Thousand and Eighty Pound Phoenix!”

Zoro twists, pressing deep into the movement as the air splits and moans around him. Pica’s mountain of a body groans at it is cleaved in two, his high voice wailing as his right side crumbles to the island below.

Zoro smirks around his katana. He smells blood.

Finally.

“Let’s see you run away from that, coward,” he challenges, and lands easily on the left arm that was just poised to hurt his nakama.

Interesting. The right side crumbled but the left didn’t. Which means…

Thirty yards ahead of him, Pica’s head emerges from the stone. He’s panting heavily, with blood on his lips.
“You bastards seem to be forgetting something,” he complains casually. Pica yelps, realizing he’s been found, and his eyes, round with terror and shock, lock on Zoro. “The Straw Hats aren’t just Straw Hat Lucy and God Usopp,” he grins, lets his aura flare with intimidating bloodlust that has Pica flinching. Wado screams with clarity and drive, high-pitched and aching. “I’m destined to be the World’s Greatest Swordsman one day.”

“You gotta be okay from here?” He asks. He’s kind of in the middle of a fight right now but Lucy’d never forgive him if he let one of their nakama get hurt. Hell, he’d never forgive himself.

“We should be fine now!” She replies, her feet touching down on some rubble. She pushes hard off the remains of Pica’s arm, and floats to the next boulder, her companions close behind.

“Later then!” He agrees. Robin’s not soft. She can take care of herself.

“I...I’m nowhere near finished!” Pica squeals. Zoro turns back to him, eyebrow raised.

“Oh?” He smirks, lets himself lean into his darker urges as his aura flares. A good fight is always a good time. “Good. It’d be pathetic if you were, you soprano-voiced bastard.”

A facsimile of Usopp’s head flies past her and concusses a green-haired little girl.

It’s weird, sure. But Lucy doesn’t really care.

She grabs Torao’s shoulder—he declared he was ready to walk on his own once they got to the sunflower fields, operated on himself to eject the buckshot in his body and everything. He still looks kind of pale, but not like he’s about to keel over, so Lucy figures he’s ready as he’s gonna be.

She grabs his shoulder, shoots a hand up to the top of the castle, and leans into it as the ricochet pulls them up.

They sail high over the ledge, wind whistling in her ears, and Torao, now used to the motion of her jumps, lands beside her easily.

There is a storm here, and wind buffets them, but as Lucy looks up Doflamingo appears, sitting relaxed and languid on a throne too big even for him. A man in a bulky blue overcoat stands behind him, staff whirling. Doflamingo’s smile is wide and joyless, his chin propped nonchalantly on his fist.

He doesn’t look concerned.

He should be.

“Mingo!” She calls, angry and vengeful. “I’m here to kick your ass!”

“Same here,” echoes Torao. There’s a determination in his stance that wasn’t there before, and Lucy feels the thrill of a fight echo around in her heart beneath the general rage Doflamingo has inspired within her.

And then she sees the trembling man at Doflamingo’s feet, sees who it is, and all the world could burn for the fury it ignites.
“Bellamy!” She shouts, and Torao reaches out to grab her arm, hold her back as she unconsiously steps forward.

“Oh, are you two friends?” Doflamingo asks, his horrible smile wide. “I thought I was doing you a favor. A peace offering if you will, after your fight in Mocktown.” The man’s teeth seem sharper, suddenly. “He threatened to let every member of his crew rape you, if I recall. Threatened to make your crew watch. He beat you and one of your precious nakama—the Pirate Hunter. I thought this would help clear the air between us.”

The smile on his face says he knew destroying Bellamy would give Lucy no such satisfaction. But beside her, Torao is steady and agitated, waiting to see what her response will be.

“He did those things,” she allows. “But he’s different now. Let him go.”

Doflamingo chuckles, low and humorless. “What a weakling you are.” He shakes his head, directing his remarks to Torao. “You could have done much better than this one, Law. A hotheaded dumbass like her was never going to get you what you need.” His face looks disappointed, despite the ever-present smile. “What is it? Do you want to fuck her or something? You were less impulsive than that even as a child. More cunning. More ruthless.”

“I was saved,” Torao snarls, and he lets go of Lucy as he forgets himself. “I was saved. And I’m never going to be like you.”

Doflamingo’s lip curls. “Pity. At any rate…” his foot digs into Bellamy’s side, and from the way he moans she knows there’s a wound there. “Perhaps the winner shall decide his fate?” Doflamingo’s heel grinds deeper into Bellamy, and Lucy hears him whimper, just a little. “This one lost in the colosseum, then refused to assassinate you, Straw Hat, and then came here to accept death at my hand.” The smile is cruel and mocking as he looks down at Bellamy. “Oi. You’re pretty pathetic, ain’t ya? Killing you would practically be a mercy.”

Bellamy whimpers, but says nothing. Lucy can see the tears on the concrete, from pain or humiliation or both.

She knows, now, what she noticed before. There’s loyalty in Bellamy. A kind that’s rare. It’s a quality Lucy understands and values, one that reminds her of the Whitebeards and the way they bled gladly for their captain, her burgeoning Observation Haki making her own eyes water in unconscious empathy, at the time. She wonders if Doflamingo knows what he has in Bellamy. She wonders if he’s capable.

He’s not worthy of it. Doflamingo never was. But Bellamy believed in him, and maybe still does. Bellamy is willing to die for him, was willing to follow him, and Doflamingo is not allowed to make a mockery of that.

“You call yourself a pirate?” She asks, and her voice is low and dark, even to her own ears. She feels Torao turn to her in surprise.

“I don’t call myself anything but God,” Doflamingo chuckles, and he reaches down to pull Bellamy’s face from the ground, so she can see the blood and dirt and tears, the swollen flesh making him look inhuman. “Being a pirate was just convenient.”

She growls low in her throat and takes a menacing step forward. Conqueror’s Haki slips and cracks against the confines of her skin, and the concrete beneath her feet splinters in response, but she does not let it go. She’s not certain she has the control to avoid hitting Bellamy.
Torao notices her advance, and flings an arm out to stop her. She does not turn away from Doflamingo, and glares at him out of the corner of her eye in question.

“Straw Hat-ya, calm down,” he whispers urgently. “Remember, don’t show your anger, your hatred. He’s too good at using it.”

*Oh, but this isn’t anger or hatred, she wants to tell him. This is far, far worse.*

Lucy knocks his arm away—not hard enough to hurt him, but hard enough to make her point. “You’re the one who fed Bellamy that crap about treasure and shit, aren’t you?” Doflamingo raises an eyebrow, and Lucy presses forward. “About pirates and the age of dreams being over?” She curls her lip in disgust. “What a crock of shit.”

“Straw Hat-ya—”

“You send your crew to fight in your place, and you don’t value loyalty.” She takes another step forward, Haki building in her like a high-pressure valve. “Let Bellamy go. You don’t deserve him.”

Doflamingo chuckles, humorless. “I never thought I’d see a *woman* defend a thug like him, with the kind of things he’s probably done, but here you are.” He clicks his tongue at Bellamy, shaking the man like a ragdoll. “She’s wrong, though, isn’t she Bellamy? You’re just scum.”

Bellamy’s misshapen face is wet with tears. “Just...kill me...already…”

“I think you’re just a coward,” Lucy accuses bluntly. “And you’re certainly no pirate.”

Doflamingo’s face darkens into his smile. “A *coward*, you say…?” He laughs again, and it is a shivering sound. “I don’t think I’ve ever been accused of that before.”

“Straw Hat-ya…” Torao warns, and she realizes why the moment before it happens.

Doflamingo rears back, Bellamy’s head still clutched between his fingers, and slams him into the ground. Bellamy lays there, limp and unmoving after a drawn-out moan. Lucy snarls, inarticulate with rage, and a coil of Conqueror’s Haki slips from her grasp, lashes against the rooftop on her right and cracks the cement.

No one seems to notice except the blue blob of a man behind Doflamingo.

“A *coward*…” Doflamingo muses again. Then he smiles, the showman’s glee returning. “Says the woman who sent half her crew away. What, were you afraid they couldn’t hack it against me? Against my Family?”

Torao starts beside her, and she realizes he didn’t know. Lucy lets the grin on her face speak her rage at the reminder of her missing nakama. “We’ll still kick your ass.”

Doflamingo’s smile deepens, curls in rage. “Oh, Law. What a choice you made. Truly, this was suicide, wasn’t it?” The man shakes his head and stands, kicking Bellamy aside. Lucy’s fists clench. “That brat’s got a curious ability, see. One that can turn the tides of war. She did the same in the War of the Best, rallying all manner of people to her side. Including you, if memory serves. She’s just a brash idiot though, liable to get herself and others killed.” Lucy’s chest tightens at the reminder of Ace and she releases a hissed breath. Doflamingo’s fingers grip the armchair so hard the knuckles turn white. “And with your antics, Law, you two have made me very, very angry.”

Lucy steps forward again, but Torao snags her collar, pulls her back. “Wait, Straw Hat-ya—”
Doflamingo’s fingers dance, and string coils before them into a perfect copy of the man. The clone lunges for Torao, and he draws his sword, parrying every blow. Lucy sees Doflamingo before her and charges, only to be met with Bellamy wielding two swords inexpertly, dully, and with tears streaming down his face as he attacks her clumsily. She dodges with ease, not even bothering to roll out of the way of his strikes.

“Please, Straw Hat...stop me…” he weeps. Lucy sees three filaments glinting in the sunlight above Bellamy’s head, and understands.

She looks at Doflamingo, snarl on her face to meet the cruelty of his smile, and stops Bellamy’s next attack with her forearm, not even bothering to watch.

“A clone and my friend?” She demands looking him right in the eye, and the roaring in her ears drowns out everything except the ring of Torao’s blade and Bellamy’s soft weeping. “I knew you were a coward.”

Chapter End Notes

As funny as that whole sequence with Luffy running through Dressrosa with Law and Zoro under his arms is, I actually thought it was really bizarre that Zoro didn't protest at least as much as Law. But it was fucking funny, and it WAS pretty cute to see Zoro's general resignation, so I kept it. I hope you enjoyed "In the Hall of the Mountain King" as the soundtrack for the chase scene.

My favorite all time Law line is "the bull had more room." This is when he was on Cavendish's horse Farul and was complaining about the lack of space. He's just, so done at that point he's not even fighting it anymore. I unfortunately couldn't include it because this is already damn long and it was just an unnecessary scene.

So I recently discovered there's a fan theory that says Zoro became the world's greatest swordsman while training with Mihawk in the time skip. I really, really hope that's not true because damn, that would be one hell of a letdown after nearly twenty years of buildup, Oda. But! There's this line in Dressrosa, where Zoro's fighting Pica, and he specifically says he'll be the world's greatest swordsman "one day." So, unless he beat Mihawk but decided he couldn't become the world's greatest until Luffy was the Pirate King (which, I admit, that would be pretty fucking adorable and not exactly out of character), I think it's safe to say that a badass Zoro vs. Mihawk fight is still in the works.

"What a crock of shit" is one of my all-time favorite swears, just saying. This might be one of those really regional ones but it's a goodie. Especially since, in-dialect, it's actually an iamb, and sounds like "wudda crock a shit." Fun facts. Batshit, too, is a good swear.

Hope you enjoyed! Let me know what you thought!
After Pica tried to crush Zoro—again—only to realize it was kind of futile to do so—*again*—the guy escaped into the castle plateau and started making trouble for other people.

Honestly, he’s making Zoro look bad. His power is annoying though, and even though Zoro’s got a handle on it now, he’s not quite clear on how he’s supposed to put it into use. It’s not like he can cut the freaking mountain in half.

...well he *could*, but that carries a pretty big risk to their allies, and it’s not guaranteed that Pica would retreat to the top half rather than the bottom. Not to mention Lucy and Torao, who are currently battling at the top of the castle. He can sense them, and Robin too. There’s a coppery taste in his mouth that is not his own bloodlust, but Lucy’s rising fury.

Because of Pica’s tactics, Zoro’s been reduced to making himself more annoying to Pica than Pica’s being to their side. This mostly involves cutting his face off of the mountainside a lot.

Annoying as this is, it’s giving him a chance to observe the people that followed them here. They’re not half bad. They’re not as strong as *him* or even, maybe, the love-cook, but they’re not *weak* by any stretch of the imagination. And hell, no one’s going to beat a giant in an arm-wrestling contest except, possibly, Lucy. Even that’s a little doubtful though, because no matter how Lucy uses Gear Third, a giant’s always going to have better leverage.

(He watches them for another reason too—they’re allies now, but tomorrow the tides may change, and knowing about them in advance may save someone a limb. Or at least a trip to the infirmary.)

Honestly, even if these guys aren’t quite on his or Lucy’s tier for sheer firepower, they make up for it in frank, audacious *will*. Hell, if he’s not mistaken, he’s pretty sure the giant just broke every bone in his body to chuck the bowling ball guy into the birdcage.

“Take a rest,” he assures the giant as the man fights his inevitable blackout. “That cage will be down when you wake.”

*Lucy’ll take care of it. You’ll see.*

It’s a good thing Lucy and Usopp managed to get these guys on their side though. This whole endeavor would have been...significantly more challenging if Zoro and Robin were left to deal with all these assholes by themselves. Not that they *couldn’t*, in theory, just. It would be hard. *Very* hard. And while Zoro *does* love a challenge, there’s a lot at stake this time around. Like a country. And his girlfriend. And the wrath of a Yonko, with another waiting in the wings because Lucy threw a temper tantrum at a greedy lady who takes candy too seriously.

If the whole crew was here, it would be different. But they’re not, so Lucy’s bizarre ability to make
loyal friends out of random strangers is convenient.

She was the most formidable individual on the battlefield, he remembers. His mental version of Mihawk sips wine smugly, his point proven once again. Zoro mentally flips him the bird.

Thirty meters to his left, a spike of stone attempts to impale twenty men. Only one of them was an ally of Zoro’s, and the guy managed to get away clean.

Pica’s attacking at random, which can only mean…

...Pica’s a piece of shit.

“Attacking your own people?” He demands, slicing Pica’s face out of the rock. The guy appears just above his old position, undaunted. “That’s low.”

“Screw you!” Pica squeaks. The earth under Zoro’s feet shakes and he leaps to the next piece of stable ground as it writhes into a spear behind him.

“Bring it on, Shit Brick.”

Pica pushes the entire section of the plateau Zoro’s standing on off the main mountain. People scream around and below him, and Zoro just jumps across the falling rock to solid ground. He stares at Pica, curious, not even bothering to drop into an offensive stance, despite Kitetsu’s howls. Wado rings in haughty disdain.

Pica stares back, dark eyes roving in the stone.

That...wasn’t even an attack. And Pica knows a fall isn’t going to take Zoro out, that he’ll just come back, so why…?

He’s stalling. But what for?

Above him a white cape flutters across the edge of the plateau, the glint of steel visible to sharp and knowing eyes.

“The annoying one?” He wonders aloud. Except the guy seems different. His Voice is the same, but...it’s not. Not at all. It’s less human. More bloodthirsty.

Huh. Lucy might’ve been right about Cabbage after all. He’d probably be a pretty interesting opponent like this.

A large, round man in a cape, crown, and boxing gloves appears on Zoro’s left. “Want some help?” He asks. Zoro vaguely recalls him from the frantic race across the island. “I’ve got a pretty strong punch. I can only use it once an hour, but…”

Well that’s a...weirdly expositional thing to say. “Nah,” he responds. “I’ll take care of him. And save your trump card for later, we might need it.”

The guy shrugs and turns away, moving on to the next group of people. Zoro glares up at Pica, and hopes he saves his punch. After all, whatever Pica’s stalling for has to be big. Something unexpected.

Zoro takes out his frustrations on any sign of moving stone, and settles in to wait.

Fighting Doflamingo is hard. He’s good, and she and Torao aren’t used to fighting together.
They’re managing, but really, their styles are very different and they need too much communication to coordinate easily.

That isn’t to say they’re losing, exactly, just that it’s a hard fight, and Doflamingo is the kind of guy who can take Red Hawk full force and get up two seconds later.

At the moment, though, Lucy will concede that they may not be exactly winning. She’s lying on her bleeding stomach, hog-tied with razor-wire, and Torao was just stabbed through the chest with a bunch of Doflamingo’s strings. They’re both down—for the moment—and Doflamingo is twitching.

It occurs to Lucy that he may be losing it.

“You kids. Even thinking you could beat me was a terrible insult. Beat me? Me? I am descended from the noblest bloodlines in the world! The Celestial Dragon! I am a god among you mortals, banned from heaven, and you thought you could beat me?”

“What?” Lucy breathes, her eyes locked on Doflamingo’s writhing form.

For so much of her life that title has inspired horror and disgust within her. There was the one who killed Sabo—killed him in her childhood, even if he managed to live—and he remains nameless to her, a faceless, empty force of nature that took her brother away.

She tried to forget about it. Tried to move on. But it’s like Ace said, they’re something opposed to freedom and she can’t—

There are many reasons to kill Doflamingo. The fact of his birth is not one of them. He’s not that special.

“That’s how you got around the trap,” Torao pants, his breath coming in short supply. “You’re a fucking Dragon.”

“I was,” Doflamingo corrects irritably. “Until my worthless bastard of a father took us down from heaven, cast us into this shit-stain of a world forever.” A vein pops on his forehead, and his smile is manic and his aura violent. “I took his head to the gates of Mary Geoise! But the Celestial Dragons in heaven would never accept the blood of a family that rejected them! So I knew the only way out of this hell of a world would be to burn it down.” Doflamingo cackles, his fingers twitching madly, “Live like a human being? What a joke! Only the weak want such a thing!”

“Cora-san was…” Torao seems almost pained, his face pale from more than blood loss.

“My younger brother was a weakling, just like my father.” Doflamingo snarls. The reminder of Torao’s precious person seems to get to him more than just about anything else they’ve done. “They didn’t understand. They didn’t get it. People are all cruel, no matter who they are or where they’re born.” He lunges for Lucy suddenly, and she tries to dodge but then his Voiceless double slams into her back, hard enough for her body to punch through the roof and into the floor below.

“Straw Hat-ya!” Torao calls. The fake flits down, and Bellamy is dragged by his hair, still weeping and crying.

“Just hold on, Torao! I’ll be right there!” She replies. She can hear the faint whistle of Doflamingo’s attacks, the metallic clink of Torao’s sword as he parries.

The fake laughs darkly. “Will you?”

Lucy stands facing them, her hands still tied with unbreakable string behind her back. She has to get
back up there—Torao isn’t weak, but he’s hurt and stands a better chance with a partner, especially since Doflamingo knows the ins and outs of his abilities. In a fight like this one, every second counts. “I will.”

Fake-Mingo rushes her, and Lucy dodges with care. Observation Haki works with him but it’s harder to deal with than a person with a Voice. She can still hear the whistle of vibrating strings and the faint whir of the double’s ever-spinning body, but it’s difficult to pick out and there is no intention about it. He’s just a doll, keeping her occupied while Doflamingo fights Torao.

Bellamy, pleading endlessly for his own death, is still chasing after her, blades swinging wildly. Fighting the two of them splits her attention too much, especially since she’s keeping a distant awareness of the battle above their heads in mind.

Torao is angry, and there’s something desolate about him too.

Lucy feints, ducks, and rolls her way to a corner, away from her attackers, and pulls against her restraints so hard blood slips down her wrists. It does nothing though, the glowing strings she’s bound with are like steel and even using them to parry Bellamy’s blades left no dent.

She crouches a little, jumps backward through the loop of her arms to bring her wrists before her and coats her arms in Armament Haki to break the ties. They’re so tight it still burns through the metallic skin, but at least she has her arms back.

Bellamy gets the first run at her, calling out as he moves unwillingly. Lucy wishes she could free him, but she can’t, she can only dodge or knock him out, and the idea of hurting someone she calls a friend is unpalatable.

Bellamy begs her to kill him anyway.

“You should just kill him, you know,” Fake-Mingo says conversationally. “He’s too pathetic to live.”

“He’s not the one who’s pathetic,” Lucy snarls in return, backflipping over Bellamy to deliver a kick to Fake-Mingo’s head. “You just suck.”

Bellamy sobs wrenchingly, and Lucy ducks under his blades to swing a Haki-laden fist at Doflamingo. He blocks it with his strings, and she rolls out of the move as Bellamy comes for her again and again. Lucy runs for Fake-Mingo, pressing knees to her chest as she shoots both feet at him in a stamp. She twists aside, not letting Bellamy anywhere close, and blocks out his apologies as she tries to focus on Torao.

His Voice is fainter than she would expect. Like he’s above the rooftop, somehow. Him and Doflamingo both.

“I am a force of nature, girl,” Fake-Mingo cackles. “Someone like you can’t deter the likes of me from my goals.”

She growls, low and determined. “I don’t care what you want.”

“Straw Hat DUCK!”

Lucy does.

A blade catches in her side and she screams.
Fake-'Mingo chuckles darkly, humored. “That wouldn’t have happened if you just killed him.”

Lucy’s not going to kill him. She’s gonna murder Doflamingo though.

She struggles up, limbs shaking and feels the wet squelch of her blood as Zoro’s shirt clings to her belly. The wound aches and stings, but it is not debilitating. Not when her rage is so deep.

Then above her, there is Torao’s fear. Torao’s pain. Agony.

Oh God, her arm—

Not her arm. Torao. Torao just lost his—

“JET GATLING!” She bellows, and Fake-'Mingo does not have time to stop her, does not have time to respond as she wails on him, blasts him up to the ceiling and higher, higher, higher.

He lands in a pile up above, smoke billows from the heat she generated, and she glares up at the hole, her fists clenched and instinctively black with Haki.

“MINGO!” She screams. “GET AWAY FROM TORAO.”

Silence. The Voices above wait in shock. Torao’s seems dazed, confused, numb in a way that’s worrying after an injury like that.

“DID YOU HEAR ME FUCKER?” She screams again. “I SAID—”

Soft steps from above. Heavy, but quiet.

Lucy waits, and though blood roars in her ears as her rage smolders, she stands steady and firm.

Pink feathers peek out over the rim. A shock of platinum hair and horned glasses.

“MINGO—”

“Would you look at that,” Doflamingo muses, whistling in awe. “Bellamy, you’re still alive then? I didn’t expect it.”

Behind her, Bellamy whimpers.


“Hmm. Well, since you’re not being merciful and executing him yourself…” He snaps his fingers. Bellamy drops to the ground, and she turns to see him lying on his stomach, horror in his face and his body nothing more than a mottled bruise. “...there. You’re free, Bellamy. Just as you always were.”

For some reason this causes the man’s expression to contort in agony and shame. Lucy doesn’t have time to dwell on it though, because above her, Doflamingo has turned away, and Torao’s Voice spikes with attention and wariness.

“HEY!” She bellows, gearing up to launch herself to the top again. “MINGO! GET BACK HERE!”

She’s ignored. Behind her, Bellamy struggles up, and she turns to him bewildered. “Hey, sit down, you’re gonna die if you move too much.”
“Straw Hat…” he coughs, and blood comes up. She leans down, wiping his face with the corner of Zoro’s shirt.

“Look, just stay here, I gotta go help Torao. He’s alone with Doflamingo and Snot.” She looks up at the hole in the ceiling, and shifts to the balls of her feet to prepare for launch.

Lucy’s not prepared for it, when it happens. She’s not watching Bellamy, isn’t paying much attention to him at all. So when he tackles her—more by sheer force of his weight than any sort of skill or speed—she grunts in surprise as he lands on her heavily.

“Bellamy, what the hell?” She yells, and she pushes him off instinctively, her knees working with her hands to shake him loose.

He falls to the ground beside her in a heap and moans in pain. There are tears streaming out of his eyes.

“Straw Hat…” he croaks, and Lucy moves to her knees and watches in disbelief as he tries to stand again. “I’m comin’ for ya.”

“What?” She breathes in disbelief, and she stands as he does, her hands reaching out to catch him if needed.

“I...I made a vow. To follow Doflamingo.” He gasps. “He’s been my hero since I was a kid. Surely you got one too?”

*Shanks*, she realizes. *Doflamingo* is *Bellamy’s Shanks*.

He forces himself upright, and Lucy can hear a whistling that can only mean a rib is ruptured.

“You’re going to die if you move around like that,” she pleads.

“I admired the wrong person,” He weeps, “I know that. But honor...my pride...I have to see it through to the end. To the *very end*.” He raises his fists, and takes a lurching swipe at Lucy. She sways out of it easily.

“I won’t help you kill yourself,” she warns.

“They just stand there and take it!” He shouts, and he steps forward, quicker than she’s expecting, and just misses her head when she ducks.

The worst part is, she understands. She does, really, really does. Bellamy is *loyal* above all else. And whatever he might have said on Jaya, his dream was clearly standing at Doflamingo’s side.

It says a lot about him, that he should have such a dream—that he would want to serve under someone so cruel.

It says a lot more that he’s grown past that. That he wants more, but doesn’t yet know how to find it.

She thinks of Gramps, torn between Ace and his own dream.

She thinks of herself, deciding for him as she scraped her way to her brother.

Above her, Torao’s Voice is waning fast, and she can feel his energy draining. Above her there’s a monster she needs to lay to rest.
Lucy makes another decision.

If it was just her life and just Bellamy’s at stake, she wouldn’t do it. She would let him go until he exhausted himself, until he could no longer stand, and then take him down as gently as possible, to keep his pride intact and maybe save his life. She knows what pride is, what honor is, she knows those things are more important than one’s own life. She knows what it is to have a dream, a treasure in the heart. She understands why Bellamy is rushing her even now.

It’s not just his life though. It’s Torao’s and Rebecca’s and flower lady and everyone else who’s suffered under Doflamingo’s thumb. It’s Lucy’s nakama and the cage far above their heads.

Choices, choices. There are always choices.

“Bellamy…” she whispers, and she ducks under another blow. “I’m sorry.”

And she punches him in the face as the sharp report of a gun echoes in her ears.

As it turns out, “something unexpected” is a big and fuck you too, from the giant stone face in the mountainside.

“Oi! Get back here, dumbass, we’re not finished!” He shouts, but Pica’s already smoothing into the rockface, away from Zoro’s reach.

“Shit,” he growls, frustrated. This fight is taking longer than it needs to. Pica’s only advantages are his sheer size, the strength that offers him, and his ability to escape pretty much any attack. He’s slow though, agonizingly so, even with his smaller, more precise movements. And he doesn’t have a shred of pride or he wouldn’t have hidden in a fucking mountain for the last twenty minutes.

“Come on out, Shit Brick!” Zoro hollers. “Don’tchya want to fight?”

“What the hell would want to fight you?” One of Doflamingo’s nameless underlings moans not too far away. Zoro glares briefly, and ignores Kitetsu when the katana makes his hand itch to slit the man’s throat. His problem child is even more erratic than usual due to the long, unsatisfying fight.

There is a brief, but heavy moment of silence. Zoro closes his eye, focuses entirely on his Haki, and senses Pica as a terrible mass of stone before him.

Great. He’s still in the plateau. And he still can’t cut that in half because there are people that actually matter on the top—like Lucy and Robin—not to mention the people in the city below who probably don’t deserve to die under a zillion tons of rubble.

The mass of energy moves slightly downward. Which is annoying, because Zoro’s gonna have to move to get Pica in his range again if the guy’s moving back to the lower levels—

The lower levels.

Shit, that’s where they’ve been sending the wounded—

Zoro takes off running, slicing lone pillars of stone out of his way as he goes.

“You bastard,” he growls, “Going after the wounded? I knew you were a coward but that’s fucking low.”

A level down—too far away—stone closes around one of the Happosui men, and Zoro does the only thing he can to get him to stop.
“HEY!” He shouts, and uses Shusui to carve a gash in the mountainside six meters deep, spanning the width of the plateau, a warning of what he could do but hasn’t yet. “HAVE SOME FUCKING HONOR YOU SOPRANO-VOICED, COWARDLY, TWO-BIT, SQUEAKY—”

The wall shakes behind him, pressing outward to form a face.

“There you are,” Zoro growls, stalking forward. “We’re having a fight, aren’t we? So leave other people—”

“Don’t you think it’s unfair?” Pica squeaks, and to Zoro’s surprise, he seems to be interested in a conversation of all things, not a fight, which is frankly unacceptable. “Doffy took over this kingdom ten years ago, and yet the people still refuse to recognize him!”

Zoro cocks a brow at him, resting Kitetsu on his shoulder. “Well, yeah. He enslaved half of them and the other half didn’t even know it.” And below them right now Zoro can still hear the screams of the civilians Doflamingo’s conscripted to incite chaos.

“Doffy was a good King! He is the only King!”

Zoro stares at the stone face disbelievingly, then shakes his head. “Look, this ain’t gonna be an issue much longer,” he tells the stone man, and almost lackadaisically he cuts Pica’s serpentine head in two, knowing it won’t actually kill the guy. “My captain’s about to kick Doflamingo’s ass.”

“Doffy will never lose!” Pica declares loyally. It’s unfortunate for the guy that nothing he says in that voice carries any sort of weight, and also that the prospect of Lucy actually losing is nil.

Zoro just snorts instead. “Yeah, we’ll see about that. If Doflamingo beats Lucy I’ll shove a sword up my—”

Pica disappears into the ground.

“Fuck, where did you—”

The statue behind him groans.

Zoro whirls around in horror, staring away from the plateau, and at the giant, creaking statue of a man hellbent on destroying something.

It can’t be the castle. Doflamingo’s up there and Pica’s too loyal to interfere. Slapping people off the plateau would bother Doflamingo and Lucy’s fight, too. So where—

The statue groans and inches forward. Zoro’s gaze slides to the plateau—the old one, where the castle originally was.

Shit. Shit, Usopp’s over there. And the king, and Viola, and probably loads of other people, and—

Zoro starts running.

Pica’s terrible form rises, bigger than he ever was, and then the mountain of a man is on his feet, and he starts to walk.

Shit.

The island shakes every time Pica moves, and Zoro wonders if it’s possible to crack the damn thing in two.
This is why Pica drew the fight out so long, isn’t it? Why he went into the plateau in the first place? It wasn’t just to escape Zoro, it was to clear a path to somewhere else. Create an opening to kill the king.

“Fuck this bastard,” Zoro growls. “I’m gonna cut him.”

How, though?

Long-distance slash?

Nah, too far away already, won’t do enough damage.

He could…take a running leap and get closer?

…still too far away, dammit.

He could just scream really loudly to try and warn Usopp and the others.

…distance is really a recurring issue here.

Oh wait, fuck, he has a Den Den Mushi, he can just call them.

…except he lost it somewhere. Shit.

…well it’s not like they really have time to run anyway, so it’s not like losing the stupid snail is really going to make that much difference in the long run.

There’s a flash of color up ahead—two swatches of bright red, a purple dress and green. A misshapen head.

…Perfect.

Shit, this is gonna be fun.

“What’re you smiling about, Pirate Hunter?” The caped king of somewhere-or-other asks, boxing gloves glowing faintly. “My friend’s about to be killed!”

“No he ain’t,” Zoro retorts. He nods to the gloves, remembering the man’s attack is a one-hit wonder. “Put those away, I’ve got it covered.”

The big blonde guy with the missing navy looks down at him, eyebrows raised in skepticism. “…you do?”

Zoro smirks, sticks Kitetsu and Shusui in the earth, and pulls out his bandana, tying it around his head. “Gimmie two minutes.”

Pica is closer to the other plateau than he is to Zoro. He’s pretty sure he can hear Usopp screaming from here.

That’s good. It means he’s still alive.

“I don’t think you got that much time, son,” The big guy with the crooked head replies.

“Don’t worry, it’s plan five.”

The king of somewhere-unimportant looks on curiously. “Plan five?”
Zoro’s grin becomes just a bit vicious and even Kitetsu’s thrilled enough to harmonize its wailing to Zoro’s aura. “Fly in the sky and chop him up.”

The girl who attacked Franky on Punk Hazard—apparently she’s a defector?—is the first to speak. “Er. That’s plan five?”

“That’s plan five,” he agrees, and he’s too keyed up to care much about their opinions. Well. Except the ones he needs, which do not include the possibly-traitorous girl. “Oi. Director. You can throw people really far, right?”

The big blonde guy’s jaw drops. Then snaps shut. “I’m a Commodore.”

Zoro does not care. “But you can throw people really far, right?”

There’s a collective moment of silent disbelief, and Zoro, way too thrilled with this decision, just grins in their faces, his teeth like knives.

“You’re not serious, Pirate Hunter?” King number two asks. Zoro just raises an expectant eyebrow at Blondie.

The guy sighs. “Yes, I ‘can throw people really far.’ But people generally aren’t meant to survive it.”

Zoro tightens the knot on his bandana. “I will.”

He’s not trying to be arrogant. He’s just stating a fact. If he wasn’t so keyed up and pressed for time, he might be a bit more tactful about it, but that’s just not happening this time around.

Luckily, the others seem to realize this is the case. Blondie looks at king-dude. King-dude shrugs. Blondie sighs.

“Fine. Hold still while I grab you.”

Zoro collects his katana, crossing them over his chest. Blondie grabs the back of his jacket.

“You’re gonna die,” traitor-girl mutters, deadpan.

“Let ‘er rip,” Zoro orders. Blondie draws his arm back, and Zoro hunches into position.

“Remember you asked for this,” the guy mutters. His shoulder tenses. There’s a rush of energy. Blondie grunts. And then—

—Holy shit.

Zoro can feel himself breaking the sound barrier, can feel it as shockwaves smash off of him and he’s met with resistance as the air parts reluctantly around his body, a veritable bullet over Dressrosa. Wind wails mercilessly in his ears, pulls at his skin, and exposes his gums to the world as his eyes water.

He’s grinning too hard for it to matter, anyway.

He rolls out of a compact ball in a ripple of air and looks up to see Pica fast approaching. With difficulty, he removes Wado from the pearly leather sheath, and the g-forces threaten to crush his lungs as he grasps the hilt between his teeth.

**Zoro concentrates** and pulls his Haki to the fore as it spreads and solidifies over the blades, each of
them black with the solid, metallic evidence of his will, a dark ribbon of energy twisting in a double helix around all three katana. It’s easy as breathing, but breath is scarce with the wind ripping out of his lungs.

He can do it without air, underwater, beneath an avalanche if he has to. He made sure.

*The nine mountains and the eight seas constitute one world,* he recites mentally, because he has no chance to speak with Wado in his mouth and the wind in his lungs. *A thousand of them form a small chiliocosm.*

He drags Shusui and Kitetsu into position, and like this, with his Haki streaming through and around the blades, echoing and resonating with them, they are indistinguishable to the eye, and even their voices meld together in his mind, a tense, anticipatory harmony rising as his will bolsters them higher.

*And when I gather and cube that chiliocosm, there’s nothing I can’t cut!*

Zoro’s flying at the speed of sound and his mind is blank and calm. There is the vicious, clean edge of blades, the song of blood and victory whistling between his spinning katana, but Zoro himself is a vessel of perfect form. He is the arc of a truly-aimed arrow, the mirrored reflection of placid water, and he is also the roaring tide, the cresting wave, the tectonic shift of earth and magma, the rise and fall of the sun and moon, the deliberate breath of all of nature’s harmonies.

The resonance of the world around him fills his senses, echoes against his own Voice. There is the sharp whistle of air against his body, the terrible screams of those below and those before him. There is the creaking, groaning body of Pica, aloft on moving stone, and the infinite imperfections of his golem form.

“Santoryu, Secret Technique: The Billion-Fold World Trichiliocosm!”

His three blades descend a thousand times at once, and Pica is severed in half. The force is so great that Pica’s top half *ascends* a hundred meters, and Zoro himself sails easily through the gap he’s carved, bloodlust singing in his veins.

He looks up to check, and finds Pica’s roving eyes in the statue’s face.

*Nowhere to run now, fucker.*

He hits the plateau easily, Blondie’s throw having just begun its downward descent, softening the landing. He kicks off the wall immediately, refusing gravity’s hold, and leaps up toward the grotesquely large face.

Pica catches sight of him, and squeaks his name. Two thrusts—one with Kitetsu and the other with Shusui, and Pica is halved once more.

Behind him Usopp wails in relief but Zoro pays him no mind. He just waits for the dust to clear and watches his opponent closely.

*C’mon, c’mon, where’d you go.*

The eye on Zoro’s right blinks open, and Zoro reacts immediately, slashing off the arm.

And shit, he’s too far away.

He uses falling rock and debris to launch himself higher, closer to his target. Zoro hopes the people
below have the good sense to run away, because there’s not much he can do for them at the moment.

The hand of the severed arm twitches. Zoro cuts off the fingers at the knuckles.

“Come on out, Pica!” He demands around Wado’s Haki-black hilt. “You’ve only been going after those who don’t want to fight, it’s time to pay the price!”

Nothing. The fingers don’t move and neither does the arm.

They’re still falling, but he’s played this waiting game before, and Zoro is fucking done with this cowardly bullshit.

He carves the arm in five pieces, leaping up on a closer stone. “How long you gonna hide, Shit Brick?”

“You think you’ve won because you cornered me?”

The squeaking voice comes from the stone second on the right, and Zoro grins around Wado’s hilt as Pica emerges from it, human.

“You won’t look so smug when I’m clad in Haki!” Pica declares. Zoro goes huh, because he thought Pica would have pulled that trick out earlier if he had it all along. “I don’t need stone to win!”

“You’ve needed it up to now,” he retorts, unimpressed even as purple-black Haki spreads over Pica’s form—his entire form, which Zoro admits is an accomplishment.

“I’m going to knock you down!” Pica squeaks, taking up a ready stance.

Zoro smirks, crouching with Shusui forward, ebony light still whirling around his blades. “Only if your will is stronger than mine.”

“It is!” Pica’s shrill voice carries a certainty it should not.

Zoro’s lips curl in anticipation and he raises his swords, the triangle of their hilts forming before him.

*Of the nine mountains and eight seas,* he intones. His mind clears easily, that blank space inside him already close to the surface, and even Pica’s childishly high-pitched voice cannot pierce the calm within. His katana hum in transcendent harmony beneath the resounding echo of his will, their blades a perfect ring of black lightning before and around him.

Pica leaps forward, sword drawn, and Zoro pours his will into the blades, the terrible weight of the promises on his shoulders, the inevitable bloody trap of his destiny. He will be the Greatest, his katana will serve the Pirate King, he will not lose—

*There is nothing I can’t cut.*

The arc of black lightning burns brighter and Zoro leaps forth to meet his opponent mid-air. “Three-Thousand Worlds!”

He slashes through Pica, navel to scalp, the man’s Haki practically paper beneath the deafening clangor of his own.

*There is nothing to your will,* he thinks. *How could you not know?*

Pica gasps, blood spewing from his wounds and Zoro growls at him around Wado. “Now stop
bugging people walking on the straight and narrow!”

Pica says nothing—Pica’s possibly dead, if Zoro misjudged the amount of blood Pica had to lose, but honestly he can’t say he’s too bothered by the prospect—and Zoro leaps back to the platform’s outer wall using falling debris.

Falling debris. Right.

Above him a quarter of Pica’s massive form descends upon the platform and while Zoro could survive its fall, cut his way out, the people on the platform…

_C’mon, king whatsyername. Your turn._

There is a terrible boom of light and fire, so great Zoro squints against its radiance as energy burns through the air, burns through stone and oxygen and matter itself.

Then it’s over. Zoro looks out to the far plateau and grins. “Good work, King number two.”

*Plan five, accomplished.*

He snorts to himself and grins as he carves the words into the bulging outcrop of the plateau with Shusui’s long blade. He said it would work. Take that, traitor-girl.

He releases the Haki on his blades, the black metal film receding back into his palms. With a smirk he gives Wado a quick once-over, checking the edge for imperfections, and is relieved to find none. The blade rings high and clear, Shusui a void several octaves lower, and even Kitetsu hums in satiation in the back of Zoro’s mind, Pica’s blood still on the blue-white metal.

He looks up, and half an island away, a storm brews atop the castle, and if Zoro concentrates, he can faintly sense the echoing bell of Lucy’s Voice.

He smirks. *I got mine,* he challenges. _Your turn._

Lucy enters battle with Doflamingo with wrath in her fists.

She’s angry. She’s angry over Bellamy, over Doflamingo’s unworthy hold on him. She’s angry over Torao, and all the pain this man has caused him. She’s angry over Rebecca, who lost everything to him, and she’s angry for all the people wailing below as Doflamingo bids them to his will.

She’s not gonna put up with this fucker anymore.

But just as she readies herself for another bought, Lucy takes a step back, and her sandal slips in something wet and red.

She almost knows what she’s going to see before she turns around.

_“Torao,”_ she breathes in horror. _“Torao, no.”_

She knew Torao was up here somewhere. She knew he was hurt bad, his presence faint and weak. But looking down at him, bullet holes in his back and a pool of blood _too much blood_ beneath him, Lucy can’t help but think _he’s dead, he’s dead, I’m too late—_

For a moment it is not Torao before her but Ace. There is ice and snow around them as cold seeps into her bones and she is bathed in blood, and _no, I can’t have failed again—_
She hasn’t. It’s not Ace, it’s Torao, and this is not Marineford. Torao’s alive and he’s going to stay that way because she is not today who she was then.

Ignoring Doflamingo, Lucy kneels beside her friend, heedless of the blood that stains her knees.

“C’mon, Torao, I know you’re alive, wake up, wake up—”

“You really are like a dog, aren’t you?” Doflamingo says behind her. “A loyal beast unable to accept her master’s death. I was joking before but were you two fucking? That might explain a few things.”

Torao’s face is slack and pale. His right arm is missing—just gone—and he has a messily tied tourniquet around the stump.

She knew that happened. Felt an echo of it.

It’s worse to see it in person.

“He was so confident about your arrival, too. Kept babbling about miracles, like those exist in this world. But he shut up quick when I emptied my clip in his—”

“You’re not a pirate.”

There’s a pause from behind her, and she carefully arranges Torao with shaking hands onto his left side. She doesn’t want to put pressure on his most grievous wounds, but she’s afraid he’ll bleed out if left alone.

She wishes Chopper were here. He’d know what to do. He’d make it so Torao could save himself.

“Who the hell cares?” Snot warbles. Lucy stands, fists clenched on both sides as Torao’s blood drips down her legs.

“Bellamy was your nakama. Torao too, once.” She turns to face Doflamingo, fire in her heart and burning in her soul and Lucy can feel her Haki whipping against the confines of her skin, desperate to test itself against this monster, because she can tell he has will, and Lucy is ready to break it. “I hate people like you.”

Doflamingo stares for a moment more, and then a low chuckle starts in his belly until he’s nearly bent over with his laughter.

“You’re right! They’re mine!” Doflamingo crows. “And once they became mine, they should have known this day would come! The day they’d die for me! That was their agreement, after all!”

‘Mingo snaps upright, fingers twisting as he goes. “They should have known the cost of being the protected, that one day I’d collect on their lives!”

Something rings in Lucy’s memory. “Snow Harpy spoke like that…”

“Are you talking about Monet?” He chuckles. “She was lucky, all things considered. It could have gone much worse for her.” His smile widens. “She’s dead now. Succumbed to injuries as I asked her to blow Punk Hazard sky high. She would have done it with a smile, too.” The grin grows vicious as blood vessels bulge in his forehead. “Serves her right for losing.”

The beast inside Lucy twists and she lunges forward, arms black with Haki and the sky rages above as wailing souls beg below. She claws at him in a flurry of fists and metal, her anger on a precipice on something greater, more—
Doflamingo grabs her foot as she kicks for his head, and she’s flying forward with the fury of a relentless will on her shoulders.

“That’s not what nakama are for!” She howls, and her fist would have taken his head from his shoulders had Snot not deterred her. “You die for them, you dumbass!”

“As if I would ever shed my heavenly blood for mere mortals,” Doflamingo scoffs. “You Ds have no sense of place, no reverence.”

The beast inside her howls and claws its way to the fore as her fists descend in unforgiving judgment. “What is your flag for?” She snarls. He blocks her blows and Snot throws bombs her way, so she kicks him instead, her leg wrapping around the web of string at force. It is not a debilitating blow but it is a little satisfying at least. “If you’re a pirate, what does it mean?”

Doflamingo holds her off with infuriating ease as she rains blow after blow on his head, his spiderweb shield glowing with blade-sharp strings.

He laughs, and Lucy wants to shove her fist through his jaw.

“My flag?” He asks, smiling even as Lucy sprays her own blood against his lips. “Why, it’s a herald to the rest of the world of course! I am God, and you humans are all slaves of mine!”

Lucy pushes away from him, her body still between Doflamingo and Torao’s prone form. She wipes blood from her face with her wrist, her eyes locked on her opponent. She feels the corner of her mouth turn up in a vicious facsimile of her usual grin, the fight rising and breaking inside her as she aches to tear Doflamingo’s tongue out through his throat.

“God, you say?” She repeats, and fury makes her voice soft. Something inside her burns and aches for blood. “You’re not a pirate, then,” she declares, and there is a rumbling and shifting in the earth or maybe just in her.

Snot sneers, unimpressed. “It’s not like that matters!”

But Doflamingo looks passively curious. “And who are you to say?”

Funny you should ask, she thinks, and she places her hat atop her head, stares down Doflamingo from under the brim. “Monkey D. Lucy. I’ll be King of Pirates soon.”


But Lucy pays him no heed, is unbothered by his skepticism. All that matters is that she beats him into the earth, that she buries him so deep he can never crawl out, that he goes to bed weeping every night hereafter thinking of her fists and wrath, if he lives at all. Lucy does not care either way, and she will not feel a shred of guilt for ending him if that’s what today brings. He is something opposed to freedom, and Lucy is going to tear him down.

Inside she rages with all the feral rabidity of the beast she might be, the vicious rip and moan of her will a force all its own.

Lucy’s never had much patience for men who believe themselves God.

When he makes it to the top of the plateau, Usopp practically hauls him over the edge by his wrist, weeping.
“I thought I was gonna diiiiiieee Zoro!” He moans, and then wraps himself around the swordsman in his best impression of a barnacle. “You’re alright, aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

Zoro shifts uncomfortably, unaccustomed to anyone but Lucy and Chopper randomly hugging him. He doesn’t brush Usopp off though. Usopp’s nakama. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

“Oh my God is that him?”

“Hey, it’s the guy who just saved us all!”

Zoro looks up from Usopp’s curly head—the guy’s still clinging to his shirt—just in time to see a mob of extremely grateful Dressrosi start clapping and hollering.

It takes Zoro a moment to realize it’s him they’re cheering for.

“Well done, Zoro-dono!” Kin’emon cheers, and he walks over to clap Zoro on the back.

Zoro raises an eyebrow. Apparently saving his life means Zoro gets to escape the “thief” title now.

…thank goodness, because that shit was getting annoying. It’s unfortunate that zombie asked Zoro not to tell anyone of his fate, but it’s not like Zoro’s about to break his promise to a dead guy over something as stupid as reputation.

But the attention is…highly uncomfortable. Usually when he’s faced with a crowd like this it’s because they’re full of wary awe, rather than admiration and gratitude. He much prefers it when Lucy’s in the spotlight. All he did was cut up a statue.

Also, Usopp is now wiping his snot on Zoro’s jacket, and the guy may be nakama but Zoro has boundaries, okay? “Usopp, gerroff, I’m fine.”

“I’m just soooo relieveeeeeeexvved!”

“Yeah, yeah, I can see that. Be relieved when this stupid cage goes away.”

Chapter End Notes

And that, my dears, is how the Bellamy fight SHOULD have ended. It’s not like there wasn’t precedent.

So there’s a bit of a plot hole with Torao’s “play dead” strategy. Luffy should have been able to sense him with Observation Haki (I keep telling you guys it’s an OP ability, and this is one example). Like, we know he can sense Torao because when Torao got kidnapped in front of them back at the colosseum, Luffy specifically tells Zoro that he can’t hear Doflamingo’s, Fujitora’s, or Torao’s Voices anymore. So Luffy should have been able to hear Law, and know he wasn’t dead. I guess it’s possible that he did hear it, and was just reacting to Doflamingo’s hurting him in the first place, but yeah. It’s a plot hole. Lucy’s slightly calmer for that part of the confrontation than Luffy because she knows he’s alive.

You gotta laugh a little at some of the conversations Zoro had with the straw hat allies while fighting Pica. They were just so clearly expository, like Oda was going “yeah, I know, you don’t remember these guys because you didn’t care about them at all back
when I first introduced them, and I introduced, like, thirty of them in three chapters, so here you go, short introduction part two, I’m including motivation, name, and ability in one go.” Elizabello is probably the worst example of this. I’m not even exaggerating when I say he just comes up behind Zoro and without Zoro even saying anything he’s like “HEY I’M ELIZABELLO, KING OF PRODENCE, LONG-TIME FRIEND OF KING RIKU WHICH IS WHY I’M FIGHTING HERE TODAY. I HAVE A TRUMP CARD THAT I CAN USE ONCE AN HOUR AND I CAN PRETTY MUCH KILL ANYTHING WITH IT, WANT SOME HELP?”

Honestly, I think one of the funniest things Oda’s done with Zoro in a while is the part where he’s listing off all the plans to defeat Pica. I just. Had to include it. Oh my gawd.

Zoro’s…I don’t know what to call it. Recitation, maybe? Anyway, the “nine mountains and the eight seas” bit is built off of Buddhist cosmology. I am not an expert by ANY MEANS but from what I understand, the belief is that there are infinite worlds across all of time and space (as seen from a divine perspective, not the actual physical one in front of us). In the spatial organizational pattern I think Oda is getting at with Zoro, singular worlds (each world being the nine mountains and the eight seas, with one mountain in the center—Mount Sumeru—ringed by eight concentric mountain ranges, and each of the mountains are separated from each other by a sea) are bundled into groups of thousands. This is the small chiliocosm. A collection of a thousand times a thousand worlds (so, chiliocosm squared) results in the middle grouping, which is the medium dichiliocosm. A chiliocosm cubed is the largest grouping, and it results in the Great Trichiliocosm, with a billion worlds. I’m told Oda probably picked this because it comes in groups of three, which is kind of Zoro’s ~thing~. Special thanks to my friend SD Mode who very patiently answered all of my questions about this and then a bunch more that were unrelated.

“Stop bugging people walking on the straight and narrow” is apparently a phrase indicating a sort of honor among thieves type of code. It basically means “don’t involve people who aren’t involved, like an honorable gangster would.” Like, if it’s a fight between two people in the life, don’t involve the neighborhood grocer. It’s not cool man. Zoro is saying this because Pica did exactly that repeatedly throughout their fight. I think they changed it in later translations to make it more understandable for a wider English-speaking audience, but if you look at the initial versions, that’s what it says. It’s a very badass thing to say in Japanese, apparently. Probably because it means you’re a gangster with a code, or something. I don’t know, I’m not a translator, and I literally have no knowledge of Japanese at all. I just like the phrase.

As cool as the Zoro vs. Pica fight ended up being, I gotta say, I think if it had been Robin vs. Pica it would have been fucking amazing. Just stick with me here. Giant clone of Robin beats the shit out of Pica as a giant stone golem. You see where I’m going with this right? Yeah, the property damage would have been unfortunate but can you imagine?
Chapter Summary

Doflamingo continues to be a jerk, and Zoro continues to be Zoro

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What is that?” One of the Dressrosi cry. The woman points in horror to the castle and Zoro knows before he turns.

The sky is black and red, lightning crackling around the castle as battle rages in the epicenter. There is war and violence and perfect victory, a clash of a burning bell and screeching violin. There is a demonic chorus of the damned warring against the sonorous orchestra of a vengeful angel. There is a mad king bent on destruction and a smooth wall of careless wrath to meet him. Lucy’s will is the herald of a champion, bent on rising up, and Doflamingo’s the march of an old conqueror, fighting to keep his place.

She is a force of nature, and he is stone itself.

Around them, some Dressrosi drop into unconsciousness, foaming at the mouth. The combatants’ power wreathes the island, saturates the air and earth itself. Zoro feels the wills of Doflamingo and Lucy break against his own even this far away, but he does not so much as blink.

Beside him, Usopp yelps and covers his ears in disbelief, moaning Lucy’s name in something close to terror and burgeoning on awe. Zoro watches on, feels it as Lucy seeks to conquer the sky itself, and waits for Lucy’s power to crest and break over Doflamingo’s with the ring of an echoing belfry as he knows it will. As it must, for Lucy is going to be King—

There is Torao—prone from exhaustion, frustrated, and swearing on the outside while weeping on the inside.

There is Doflamingo—towering over him, smiling, a demon come back from the brink of death, about to trade Torao’s soul for his.

There is a foot above Torao’s head, the heel sharp enough to crush his skull.

Lucy’s body moves on its own, a blink and a something less than a thought carrying her forward. There is a single sandaled foot poised above the labored body of her friend, and it stops Doflamingo cold.

There is a moment of silence in which Lucy looks without really seeing, and there is nothing on earth but Torao’s soft swearing and choked breaths.

“How dare you stop me?”

Lucy’s foot doesn’t move at all, she doesn’t so much shake or tremble despite the strain, and she looks up at the giant of a man that hurt her friends and who wants to continue to do so.
She knows her expression is ice, but there is fire within her, burning and licking through her body and mind, and her will is stronger than it ever was.

Between them Torao whimpers—one, quietly, but it is enough. It is too much.

“I was just looking to smash Law’s head!”

He rears back, his leg glinting black and Lucy swings her own foot forward.

They clash over Torao’s body and Lucy could not hold back her will if she wanted to.

*She doesn’t want to.*

There is fire within her and fire without, a veritable storm of chaos and heat as Conqueror’s Haki rips up her spine and out from her like lightning, like destruction and creation itself. There is cold calm certainty within her, an inexorable storm of passion and fury that will lead her toward her goal, an instinctive brand upon her soul compelling her to rise, fight, defeat and *win*, one that informs her that victory is certain as *breath*, as the sun and the earth itself. She is a lightning rod of calamity and as her will rises higher, higher, seeking to crest and tide over the wall of Doflamingo’s own, she feels the floodgates unlock inside her, the caged beast within no longer constrained by the casing of a thousand seals.

Doflamingo’s will lashes cruel and electric against hers, but he is nothing, no one, not in the face of her, and as she holds his gaze unabashed and unrestrained, she knows *she will win*.

Beneath their feet Torao gasps, choking on the force of their collision, and Lucy pays it no heed.

Black-red light spews between them, arcing apart at the points where their wills do battle. Power creates a vacuum, sucks air from between them, ruffles their clothes with wind, and Lucy presses forward, forward, ever forward as the giant of a man tries to crush her with legacy and intimidation alone.

But Lucy is not a slave. *Lucy is free* and Lucy has *will*.

Power compresses matter between them, sparks light and fire, their warring souls made manifest. Torao is blown back and away by the force of it as stone crushes under their feet, and as Doflamingo leans in to try and put her down she leans up and forward to scrabble at his bloody throne.

From far away, it seems, a voice reaches her.

“And so his divine right is revealed to you, Straw Hat! His birth nurtured madness within him! His fate fed him anger! The world changed this man into a perfect demon! No less, the ultimate evil, hand-crafted by heaven and hell! Doffy is the true king who was chosen!”

She hears the words. She sees their truth in the form of the man trying to crush her with a will like a chainsaw against her skin.

But there is nothing inside Lucy capable of *capitulating*.

This one *hurt her friends* and Lucy will not rest until he is dethroned, until all his nightmarish deeds have been atoned for, and she *will not be overcome*.

*“SO WHAT?”*

There is another breaking within her, another molten well of power greater than the first and there is
the cresting tide, the flinting shale of Doflamingo’s will and he is the one who flinches back, just as she knew he would all along.

They will clash again—over and over until they are both bloody and exhausted and one of them stands victorious over the other’s broken form, nearly animal in bellicose pride, but for now she has won, and she will do it again and again, as many times as she needs.

Lucy is a king in the making. She bows for nothing and no one but her own will.

With the guillotine that is the birdcage above their heads, Zoro watches Lucy fight Doflamingo with his fist gripping Wado’s hilt so tightly his knuckles are white beneath his skin. Their fight has moved away from the castle, into the sky and city of Dressrosa, and he can still sense the continued clashes of their Haki as they beat against one another. Lucy’s in a new Gear, one Zoro’s never seen before, and he knows it’s going to take a hefty amount of restraint to not yell at her for it later. Using that much Haki that quickly and intensely isn’t…natural. It’s reckless to even try.

He can’t fault her for busting it out though—Doflamingo needs to be taken down, by any means necessary.

They’re in the final stages of the fight, he’s pretty sure. Doflamingo’s in better shape than she is from what he can tell, but Lucy’s got him on the ropes, and he can’t seem to land a hit.

Lucy chases him like a missile, and finally, after a misjudged attack that leaves Doflamingo wide open, he crashes back into the mountain of his new castle. The force of the impact cleaves the south side of the plateau apart, and as the dust begins to clear, Zoro sees Doflamingo’s pink coat buried deep in the stone.

“Did she do it?” Kin’emon whispers breathlessly behind him.

Zoro doesn’t answer for a moment. There’s nothing but silence, and it’s like all of Dressrosa holds its breath as dirt and gravel spill off the mountain, willing their tormentor to fall unconscious and return their freedom.

But then, a trembling starts. A vibration Zoro feels deep within the earth, travelling through the leather soles of his boots, and rumbling in his chest almost too light to notice, if he were anyone else.

Screams of terror begin at the edge of the island, and Zoro looks up and grits his teeth because he knows. “It’s contracting.”

Below, Lucy, too, seems to realize that their guillotine just became a noose, and she rushes Doflamingo once more, her distorted arm winding back for another punch.

But Zoro’s been watching her carefully and realizes a moment before it happens that she’s going to —

Lucy drops unceremoniously to the city below, her Voice flickering on Zoro’s awareness in weak bursts of a muffled wind chime, and he takes off running.

Lucy needs time. Or someone else needs to deliver the final blow. Either way, Zoro’s needed at her side, and that’s where he’s going to be.

He turns to Usopp, Kin’emon, and Kanjuro, clapping his nakama on the shoulder as he goes.

“You three,” he says, shoving them forward, “are going to stop the cage.”
He gets three blank stares, even as he moves them over to Kanjuro’s shitty ladder.

“Er,” Usopp says awkwardly. “…what?”

“Stop. The cage.” He orders, pointing to the birdcage above their heads. “And find Franky, have him help.” Hopefully he’s destroyed the factory by now.

“Er...how?” Usopp asks, bewildered.


“That’s not a thing a normal person can do!” He protests. Zoro shoves him over the edge unceremoniously, raising an unsympathetic eyebrow when he clings to the thick black posts that make up the ladder and doesn’t move.

“It’s one man’s power,” Zoro sneers. “Figure it out.”

Usopp moans a little, but Kanjuro and Kin’emon cajole him into moving, and they make their way down with a certain mix of resentment, bewilderment, and haste.

Zoro nods to Viola. “Get as many people pushing on the cage as you can.” There’s a glint in her eyes, as she nods in return, and Zoro suddenly understands how this woman made it for a decade living under Doflamingo. Love Cook never stood a chance with her—she’s way out of his league.

Right. Time to find his girlfriend.

Zoro draws Shusui and Kitetsu, coats them in Haki, does a quick check of the area below, and jumps off the side of the plateau.

There’s a chorus of gasps and protests from behind him, but Zoro just grins and twists in midair, and stabs his katana into the stone. The earth and brick part easily under his blades and will, offering just enough resistance to let him control his descent. A trail of gravel follows him down, the hilts of his katana biting into his hands as they protest this particular use, but Zoro ignores it and the strain in his shoulders as he holds himself in careful form. He doesn’t have time to do this nicely.

Soon the earth begins to curve away from him—inward, to the narrower base of the plateau. Zoro checks his place, draws his blades out from the stone just a little, and swings his legs back and out once—twice—

He pushes off the plateau, blades in hand, and easily clears the rooftop of the building below. He hits the terracotta tiles hard, and rolls his momentum off over his soldier. He slides a little as he goes, the rooftop vaulted and covered with poor footing, but he manages to get his feet under him before he slides off entirely. He stands up over the edge to gain his bearings.

“When did you become a ninja?” Usopp demands from the ladder. “That’s not fair, I just got muscles!”

“He’s not a ninja, Raizo’s a ninja,” Kanjuro replies.

Zoro rolls his eyes. “Go stop the cage!”

“How?”

“I believe Zoro-dono mentioned pushing.”

“That’s not possible.”
Zoro ignores them, setting his sights on the dusty streets below. This is a tall building, and Zoro guesses he’s about six stories up. Probably too high to jump without breaking something, and judging from the screams of the Dressrosi up ahead, they don’t have time to wait for Zoro to hobble around on a broken ankle.

He swears and starts running across the rooftop, straight for where he senses Lucy. He’s surprised she’s conscious, at all, with the fluttery way her Voice chimes in his senses.

At the edge of the rooftop is another—this one only a story down or so. Zoro jumps, and jumps again when he spies a balcony, two levels down. He grabs the bannister and vaults down to the street below. Dust kicks up around his feet but he hits the ground running.

The whole island shakes as the birdcage contracts. The little vibrations were obvious from the plateau but they’re even stronger here.

Doflamingo needs to die. That’s all there is to it.

The streets are confusing—they’d be unfamiliar even without all the destruction the possessed Dressrosi, Marines, and pirates have wreaked on it, but he suspects even Nami would have a difficult time navigating this. It’s all rubble and half-destroyed buildings and fire, the cobblestone cracked in places and entire neighborhoods squashed to pieces where Pica stood earlier.

It’s a good thing Zoro’s always been able to find Lucy when he needs to. It’s hard to get lost when he’s just making a beeline for her faint presence up ahead.

He whips around a corner, blades out, and nearly decapitates a surprised Marine as he hurtles over rubble.

Zoro doesn’t stop for him, doesn’t even acknowledge the almost-manslaughter, but half a block ahead a man in white and purple stands pensively amid the rubble.

He hates to do it, but he slows to a wary walk as he approaches. This guy’s an admiral, and even if Zoro’s not great at reading people, he can still sense the fury radiating off of him. If he decides to attack, there’s not much Zoro will be able to do but fight, and if that happens he’s likely not going to get to Lucy in time.

The admiral doesn’t attack. The admiral doesn’t even move, his unseeing eyes locked on something red at his feet.

The man in the gambling hall was kind, he remembers. Lucy liked him.

It must gall a kind man with strength like his to abide by the likes of Doflamingo.

“Pirate Hunter,” the admiral greets.

Zoro doesn’t respond. He’s just realized that the heap of blood and flesh at the admiral’s feet is a child, half-crushed under rubble. It’s impossible to tell what the child looked like, or even the gender. From the size…it was maybe a six-year-old. He can tell the throat was slit before rubble fell on the body though.

Zoro stops before the admiral, the dead child halfway between them, his fists clenched around his katana. Kitetsu wails for vengeance and Shusui is the maw of a void, and it takes strength Zoro did not always possess to hold himself in check, to not barrel straight past this scene and on to its perpetrator.
“I assume you are off to assist your captain,” the admiral says softly. Zoro is not stupid enough to mistake that tone for anything but righteous fury.

The kid probably bled out before being crushed. Zoro does not know if that’s better or not.

“We’re going to bring Doflamingo down,” Zoro says matter-of-factly. He takes in the trembling hands, the slight shaking of the loose stones around them, and has a realization. “You’re Navy, right? So you can’t touch him.”

The lower half of the admiral’s face is hidden behind his scarf as he ducks his head in what might be shame. “That seems to be the way of it.”

Zoro scrutinizes him a moment more. There’s a reason he never wanted to join the Marines, aside from his general authority issues. He takes oaths seriously, would never be able to bend rules to the situation as a Marine like Smoker does. He wonders if this man isn’t the same. He wonders why he took the job, if that’s the case.

“Our crew is trying to stop the cage,” he tells him. “Your duty won’t stop you from helping, right?”

Scarred eyes lock on Zoro. It feels like a test.

Zoro stands his ground.

“…I am betting on your captain, Pirate Hunter,” the man says finally. A small, tremulous smile creases the weathered face. “If she’s anything like you, I think I made the right decision.”

Zoro does not move, but the admiral does. He carefully drapes his pristine white cloak over the child’s body. Blood seeps through the cloth quickly, but it is all they can do for now.

“You pirates are absurd,” the admiral tells him, sounding almost fond. “But then, a good gamble always is.”

And with that, the admiral walks slowly past Zoro, pausing only a moment more. “I’m counting on your captain and your crew, though I suppose you do not need me to tell you that.”

Zoro huffs. Zoro takes orders from one person only, and if Lucy could ignore a situation like the one they’re mired in, he wouldn’t follow her the way he does. He wouldn’t be half as in love with her either. “Damn straight.”

The admiral snorts. “Best of luck to the Straw Hat Pirates then.”

*Not many pirates get a blessing like that from a Marine Admiral,* Zoro muses as he runs for Lucy’s weak presence. He’s not far away now, only a few blocks to go.

*Then again,* he thinks, a vicious grin splitting his face. *They’re the crew of the Pirate King. Why shouldn’t they be the exception?*

Zoro finds Lucy leaning on shaking arms, and despite the situation, despite the weakness in her frame, it sends a spike of relief through his gut.

If Lucy’s still awake and struggling to stand, then she’s still trying to fight, and that means she’s not anywhere near as bad off as she’s been before.

She doesn’t seem to sense him as he approaches, just trembles as she tries again and again to push herself to her feet. He replaces his katana to their sheaths, and she doesn’t even turn her head to look
up at him when he approaches. He kicks debris and rock aside as he kneels before her and grasps
her shoulders, pulling her up a bit. She feels too hot under his hands, like an open flame, and he
studiously ignores the tacky blood smeared across her belly, the gash on her hip exposed by the open
shirt, and the wounds that look like bullet holes scattered across her torso.

She blinks blearily at him, her eyes dull with exhaustion and horrifically red with burst blood vessels
—probably from the strain of overusing her Haki. Lucy’s head rolls back on her shoulders,
uncoordinated and nearly limp. “Zoro?”

“You’re an idiot,” he greets. He doesn’t let his concern bleed into his voice.

Her lips twitch up in response, just a little, and she leans into his hands. He can’t tell if she means to
or if it’s just her exhaustion speaking. “So’re you.”

“Yeah, but I can move,” he retorts. He leans a little closer, trying to get her attention. Her eyes
aren’t quite tracking his face, and he wonders if she has a concussion on top of everything else.
“The birdcage is still up.”

Something dark and molten flashes in Lucy’s eyes, and her right hand struggles up to grasp the lapel
of his jacket in a weak grip. “I need…ten minutes.”

Zoro nods, doesn’t feel a shred of doubt or skepticism. If Lucy says she needs ten minutes, she
needs ten minutes. “I can get you that.”

Behind him the mountain explodes again, and Zoro doesn’t even have to look to know it’s
Doflamingo coming after Lucy. The screams of the Dressrosi citizens speak for themselves. So too
does the stampede of people rushing past them in their desperation to get away. Not a one of them
stop to help their would-be savior.

They’re pirates. It’s not like Zoro expected any different.

Lucy slumps forward, her forehead bumping against his shoulder. She makes a frustrated noise as
her strength fails her again, and Zoro shifts a little, wrapping his left arm around her back to let her
lean a more comfortably against him.

Okay. Doflamingo’s coming. He needs to get Lucy to a safe place, and keep him occupied for ten
minutes while she recovers.

Shit. There’s nothing but rubble around here. He’s going to have to pick her up and run—

“Luffy?”

Zoro looks up at the voice, his right hand sliding instinctively to his katana. He relaxes when he sees
a girl with long pink hair and a green cape, the handle of one of the Dressrosi broadswords poking
out at a nearly-bare hip.

It’s the ostracized princess, and her dark eyes are wide and locked on Lucy’s exhausted frame.

Lucy twists a little, trying to look at the other girl. Zoro takes pity on her, and helps her move,
sliding her back and into his chest.

“Rebecca…?” She breathes. “What’re you…what’re you doing here?”

The girl’s fists clench at her side, and her lower lip trembles. “I—”
“Princess!”

All three of them look up to see a large man in a golden helmet throw himself into a kowtow at the teenage gladiator’s feet. Rebecca, for her part, blinks at him in shock, taking an instinctive step back and away from him. “Gyats…?”

Lucy’s fist closes around Zoro’s collar as she tries to pull herself up. “Announcer man?”

“From the colosseum?” Zoro asks absently. He’s keeping his senses trained on Doflamingo, paying attention to the line of fire and blood as it draws closer and closer.

Shit, he needs to go, get Lucy out of here—

“I am shamed, Princess!” Gyats declares, his forehead pressed into the broken earth. “For years I allowed your humiliation! I participated in your oppression! You, a member of the innocent royal family who guarded Dressrosa well for the longest period of peace our nation has ever seen!” The man’s voice breaks. “I am in a lifetime of debt, but I wish to make amends, starting now!”

Rebecca looks overwhelmed, completely bewildered. “You—I—you don’t owe me—”

“I do!” Gyats insists. “I owe you my pride!”

“Oi!” Zoro interrupts. Normally he wouldn’t interfere, but Doflamingo’s close, too close, and he is not letting that bastard anywhere near Lucy until she can throw a proper punch again. He levels his gaze on the girl, shock plain on her face. “You. What’re you doing here.”

“I—I—” She glances at Gyats, still prostrated and shaking before her. She lets out a breath, uncertainty filling her eyes. “I’m not—sure.”

Zoro growls, frustrated. “Are you here to help or not?”

Something blinks into Rebecca’s eyes. Something like hope or determination or an answer. “Yes.”

Zoro juts his chin to Lucy, still leaning against him, her eyes half-closed, like she’s close to passing out. “Can you protect her for ten minutes?”

Lucy makes a questioning noise into his shoulder, but he says nothing in response.

Rebecca’s eyes widen. “I—I—” Her shoulders slump. “I’m a pacifist.”

Zoro feels his aura darken. “You’re a what?”

“I’m a pacifist!”

“It’s true, the royal family has always—”

“And that’s worked out well for you all, has it?” Zoro snarls, and he grips Lucy a little tighter. Her head lolls weakly into his neck. He can feel Doflamingo approaching, too close, too close, too close. “Pacifism’s gonna get rid of that cage, is it?”

Rebecca goes pale, her mouth thinning in anger. “To harm another is—”

“Is that all you think a sword is for?” He asks darkly, impatient.

The girl’s eyes water. “My mother—"
“I don’t care,” Zoro interrupts. “I heard you and the king. You think you’re gonna worry about ‘losing yourself’ when you’re dead? When everybody’s dead, because you refused to protect the person you chose to save you?”

Rebecca says nothing. Gyats stares at him agog, eyes wide with shock or affront or both.

Lucy tugs weakly on his collar. “Zoro…it’s their code.”

“Yeah,” Zoro agrees, refusing to take his eyes off of the girl. “And it’s stupid. It makes them beg for other’s protection.” For Lucy’s, in particular, and it’s put her in a state so weak she can’t even stand.

He’d follow Lucy’s orders no matter what, but he disdains of the idea of protecting people unwilling to fight for themselves. He knows Lucy does too, that she wouldn’t have been so willing to confront Doflamingo if the Tontattas hadn’t planned a rebellion themselves, if Trafalgar hadn’t gone and gotten himself shot.

Rebecca flinches. Zoro holds her gaze steadily, forcing her to see reality for what it is.

Then her eyes flit to Lucy, and something steels within them. Her spine straightens, and Rebecca’s hand comes to rest on the hilt of her sword.

“Gyats,” she says, her eyes still on Lucy, and Zoro can see her watch his captain’s labored breathing. “Do you remember my family’s creed?”

The big man gulps and nods. “War is upon us, your majesty.”

“I shall not lose myself within it,” She responds. Something sets in her jaw. “Alright. I can do it. Protect her.”

“Princess!” Gyats protests. “Your promise! For years, you—”

“I refused to fight in the arena because there was no reason to,” Rebecca says calmly. “It was a game. A spectacle.” She shakes her head sharply, like she’s trying to dispel her own foolishness. “That was about reminding Dressrosa of who we once were. Who we weren’t when under Doflamingo’s reign.” Her eyes sharpen. “This isn’t a game. This is about life. About who we might be one day, if we don’t lose ourselves entirely.” Rebecca turns to Gyats, her voice rising. “I want Dressrosa to live! I want us to be free! I want us to defend that freedom, not fear another cage, or wait for another rescuer!”

The big man’s eyes well with tears. “Princess!”

Rebecca shakes her head. “If you wish to help, you can carry Luffy. I’ll make sure nothing harms her.” This last is said to Zoro, and the weight of her gaze makes him trust the words.

Gyats hesitates for a moment, uncertain. “Yes, Princess. Yes, I can—” He stands, and turns to Zoro, holding out his arms, expectant.

Zoro slides his right arm under Lucy’s legs and lifts. She feels too light, weak as she is, and the stillness about her is just wrong. She makes a faint noise of pain as he moves to the big man, and he sets her in the announcer’s arms as gently as he can, accounting for speed.

“Ten minutes, right Lucy?” He asks. Lucy blinks at him, bleary-eyed, and nods. Zoro quirks a grin. “If you’re a second late, I’m finishing him off myself.”
Lucy frowns at him, surprisingly forceful for the state she’s in. “I want to hit him,” she whines.

Zoro’s grin turns a little savage, and he reaches for his bandana. “Don’t be late then.”

Lucy pouts, but Zoro turns to Rebecca. “You. Make sure she’s safe.” There are enemies other than Doflamingo, and even if Zoro’s keeping him occupied, the shichibukai’s range inside the birdcage is…unfortunate.

The princess’ eyes flash, and she draws her sword, holding it at a casual ready position. “I’ll protect her.”

Zoro believes her, and turns his back on all three of them. “Go. He’s coming.”

“Zoro,” Lucy croaks, and he sees a little blood bubble up on her chin out of the corner of his eye. “He cut off Torao’s arm.” Lucy’s eyes dart to his katana, and Zoro understands.

If he did the same to you, he could hurt your dream. Don’t underestimate him.

It’s not a lack of faith. It’s not even concern. It’s much more visceral than that. It’s the knowledge of what an injury like that could do to Zoro and his goals. It’s a will to protect something much more important to Zoro than his life, than his limbs.

Sure, Zoro will still be the World’s Greatest if all he could use was his teeth—so long as there is breath in his body, he will be the World’s Greatest. But losing a limb would be a setback. A terrible one that would cost him the use of a sword forever, since he would refuse any prosthetics Franky could make him.

Lucy knows that. She knows that because she knows him, and remembered even when she was only half-conscious, and he loves her so goddamn much sometimes he can’t breathe.

“Got it,” he tells her, and sets Wado Ichimonji between his teeth, the flat edges of Shusui and Kitetsu facing the oncoming threat as he crouches in a defensive position, the hilts of his swords before him for ready offense.

There is fire—too close, much too close for comfort. Doflamingo is less than a block away, and the retreating footsteps behind him aren’t moving fast enough to be reassuring.

His senses flash in warning, and beneath his feet an arcing knot of razor-sharp strings burst from the earth. He jumps back and out of the way just in time, crossing his blades before him defensively to block. The strings are not tied to each other though, and they burst around his katana, forcing him back a step as he instinctively protects his face.

Zoro narrows his eyes. This is going to be annoying, especially if the strings in each spear can move individually like that. Their flexibility is a problem.

Behind him, he hears Rebecca gasp, and a grunt as the Princess tackles the announcer, deflecting a spike of bloody string as she does.

Lucy remains untouched, just as the princess promised. Zoro can sense it without even looking.

He channels Haki into his blades. Strings that sharp are bound to leave a mark.

A dark laugh bubbles up within the encroaching flames. Zoro narrows his gaze.

“Pirate Hunter, Roronoa Zoro. Demon of East Blue, and First Mate of Straw Hat Lucy.” Horned
glasses flash in the blazing light. “Didn’t you fall in a hole earlier?”

Zoro doesn’t respond. The closer Doflamingo gets, the worse he looks. He’s starting to wonder if the guy will even make it the ten minutes before Lucy comes back to kick his ass.

“It doesn’t matter, I suppose,” Doflamingo continues. His steps are slow and methodical, like he hasn’t a care in the world. Beneath his feet, a sick coil of string writhes, the white strands black with blood. “You have some skill with the sword, but you can’t beat me.” The man’s smile turns sadistic and manically gleeful. “You’d be captain of your own crew if that were possible.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow. “You’re Lucy’s opponent, not mine.” Zoro smiles around his katana. “You’d be dead already, were it up to me.”

Doflamingo presses on, like he thinks he’s gotten to Zoro somehow. “A bleeding heart, held in line out of, what, loyalty? Duty?” Doflamingo’s lip curls. “Obedience, like the rest of humanity’s drones?”

Zoro nearly laughs. He’s never been accused of being too emotional before, that’s for sure. Or obedient, jeez. “Lucy’s my captain, not my master. And I wouldn’t kill you for what you’ve done to this island.” The image of the dead and bloodied child flashes in his mind, and Zoro privately admits that statement is not quite true.

His senses scream and on his left a thick coil of string races for his head.

But he’s seen it once. He’s not going to be moved again.

He leans over at the waist, one foot back for balance, and carves the deadly strike in two with a single horizontal slash carrying enough force to cleave a mountain in half.

The string falls harmlessly to the ground, neatly cut to pieces.

Doflamingo chuckles, like he’s amused. It’s creepy because Zoro can sense the rage boiling off of him, can feel his will batter against Zoro’s own, but it does nothing, burns less than the sun on a clear day. “Oh? Then what would you kill me for?”

Zoro’s lips curl around his blade, “I’d kill you,” Zoro starts, rage bleeding into his aura and he knows in that moment he is violence personified, Kitetsu howling in echoing bloodlust alongside his heart. “Because you put bullet holes in my captain.” His blades arc in one quick slash to carve a long line in the rubble before him. It stretches across the plaza they stand in, as far as the eye can see, just a few inches deep. “But she’s claimed your head. I’m only here to buy her time.” Zoro thinks of the dead child, of the blood on Lucy’s body, and relishes in the wary pause he gets from his opponent as his aura turns into something dark and terrible, a presence even monsters would do well to fear.

“For the next ten minutes, you won’t move past this line,” the swordsman declares, and Zoro’s smile is full of ivory knives. “A single step over, and I’ll consider it a loss.”

Doflamingo cocks his head, arrogant. “You’re an arrogant one, aren’t you?”

You got a problem with that, Pirate King?

Zoro crosses his blades before him, unbothered, his blood boiling for a fight as his grin becomes something feral. “It’s simple. I made a vow.”
Zoro needed more to do in Dressrosa, so I had him go stop Doflamingo during the ten minute interim. While I totally agree that attempting to stop the birdcage and inspiring everyone else to do so is absolutely something Zoro would do, this made more narrative sense in terms of character, I thought. But to make it make even more sense, the birdcage didn’t start contracting in my version until Doflamingo got thrown into the mountain. And it was going its faster speed the whole time. There was no good way to specify that unfortunately. If I were Oda I probably would have had the other crew members all go to stall Doflamingo, but since this is, at its heart, very much a story about Zoro and Lucy’s relationship, this is what we’ve got.

If Lucy seems a lot more arrogant and careless while using Conqueror’s Haki, it’s because she is. I think that’s kind of the nature of the ability—a rock-solid belief that one cannot be beaten, and a focus on that to the exclusion of all else in a hard fight.

Just in case anyone’s curious, I imagine Doflamingo’s Conqueror’s Haki sounds quite similar to “O Fortuna,” crossed with Camille Saint-Saëns’ “Danse Macabre.” Another good one would be Prokofiev’s “Dance of the Knights.” I imagine Luffy/Lucy’s as being an unholy mix of Gustav Holst’s “Mars,” the last 2-3 minutes of Tchaikovsky’s “1812 Overture,” and the first movement of Beethoven’s 5th. Idk. Maybe Dvorak’s “New World Symphony” as well, especially the last two movements. If you could somehow then cut this mixture with a splash of death metal, I think we’d all get pretty close.

(If Law ever developed Conqueror’s Haki, his song would be Mozart’s “Requiem.” Zoro’s would be Gustav Holst’s “Mars” as well, and just that. Just saying.)

I honestly just get more and more frustrated with the existence of Haki in the One Piece universe. Like, originally it was a sense and as of Gear Four it's like it was supposed to be a well of power or something all along. But that also clearly wasn't what it originally was. I'm not crazy right? Rayleigh originally explained it as a set of heightened senses, right? Especially in the case of Observation Haki. Idk, I am very skeptical of this whole ability set from a storytelling perspective.

Let me know what you thought!
Chapter Summary

Zoro and Lucy take the fight to the pink bastard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sky is filled with smoke and ash, the coppery scent of blood assaults her nostrils, and the earth shakes beneath her as the damned birdcage contracts around the island.

Everything hurts. To move is to fire pain across flayed nerves, and the announcer man carrying her doesn’t have the luxury of being careful as they run.

Lucy doesn’t blame him—the ten minutes after using Gear Fourth are always agony, even when she isn’t being dragged away from a psychopath by a gladiator and an announcer.

The absence of Haki is disconcerting. She can’t keep her eyes open, can’t even see three feet in front of her when she does. Rebecca is a blur of pink and green, and the disturbing blankness in her awareness frustrates her. She’s blind as a newborn kitten, and it’s infuriating.

It’s her own damn fault though, for not finishing the fight. She could be happily passed out with Dressrosa and her crew safe if she’d just gotten that last punch in. Her endurance in Gear Fourth has improved, but it’s not what it needs to be, and because of that, Zoro’s got to keep a madman occupied while Lucy catches her breath and two good-hearted people try and keep her alive in the interim.

It’s not that she doesn’t appreciate it. It’s just that there shouldn’t be a need.

Between her own self-loathing, the mind-numbing pain of overextending her Haki, and her complete lack of awareness of the world around her, it’s really no surprise she doesn’t even register an impending attack until she hears Rebecca cry out in warning and the sharp ring of her blade as she deflects a too-powerful blow.

“Princess!”

“Gyats, RUN!”

“Straw Hat!” A big man bellows, “I’m here to take your Fruit!”

Lucy forces her eyes open, her gaze finding a blurry form before her that she can’t recognize. The voice though…

“You…you work for Blackbeard,” she mumbles. She feels a kernel of old rage spark inside her as she recalls the terrible man who got her brother imprisoned.

“So you do remember, Straw Hat,” Burgess replies. He’s laughing, oddly jovial considering the situation they’re currently in, especially considering the threat he poses to her. It reminds her of Blackbeard, of his laughter in hell as he taunted her on the worst day of her life.
“Run, Gyats, I’ll—” Rebecca is between them, and as Burgess rains a casual fist down on her head, Rebecca throws up a lightning-fast block, taking the blow bracing on one knee. The blade is aloft above her head, the hilt in one hand and the flat against her other, steel digging into soft leather. Even blurred and indistinct as Lucy’s vision is, she can see how the girl’s form trembles in the struggle.

Rebecca is strong, Lucy knows, and she’s skilled, but she’s spent years determined not to attack and hurt, and Burgess has never labored under such restrictions. Lucy knows that Rebecca’s no match for him, and Gyats must realize the same, since he hesitates to run.

Rebecca is not impressed though, and she turns over her shoulder to shout at the announcer. “FOR THE SAKE OF DRESSROSA, GYATS, PROTECT HER!”

The announcer takes one step back, then two, and then hesitates. “I can’t leave you, Princess, I—”

Burgess breaks through Rebecca’s block—easily, too easy—and Lucy sees a green blur fly across the street, hears the distinct thud of a body impacting rock.

“R—Rebecca,” Lucy mumbles, uncertain if she should encourage Gyats to listen to the gladiator, or stay to help instead. Rebecca’s outclassed, Lucy knows this, and she has the horrible sensation that she’s watching someone lay down on a bomb, but she’s not in any shape to stop it.

The gladiator stands. Lucy watches the green blur tilt and stumble, and doesn’t know if it’s her dizziness or Rebecca’s that makes her form sway.

“I s’pose I don’t mind killing you first!” Burgess cackles, and Lucy sees the massive blur of him lunge for the gladiator.

“GO!”

“Princess!”

“Fire Fist!”

A spray of warmth washes over Lucy’s skin, and light blinds her fragile eyes.

But Lucy knows who this is. Lucy knows it in her bones.

“S—Sabo,” she calls, a grin on her face despite her exhaustion.

A blur of purple and orange is between Rebecca and Burgess, and she sees the pale smear of his face turn to her over his shoulder.

“You’re still overdoing it, aren’t you, Lu-chan?”

You always, always, always overdo it!

The words are so fond, so warm and familiar, that Lucy nearly tears up.

She just smiles in Sabo’s general direction and gives a short, feeble nod, accompanied by a soft affirmative.

Sabo gives a short laugh, and turns his attention to Burgess. “Oi. You. I won’t let you lay a hand on Straw Hat Lucy.” There’s a note of pride in his voice when he calls her epithet.

Burgess hesitates at this, clearly recognizing her brother—though why that might be, Lucy has no
idea. “And what does Sabo the Revolutionary care for a lowly pirate like her?”

Revolutionary? Hey, wait, doesn’t her dad lead—

“It’s got nothing to do with any of that,” Sabo declares, and she sees a flaming pipe swing from his back. “I’m here as her older brother.” There’s pride and love, and so much protective wrath in his voice that it nearly takes her breath away. “If she ever needs me, I swear, I’ll be at her side no matter what.”

This last is said to her, and Lucy feels her throat tighten against the sheer joy of having him alive again. “Sabo…”

“Rebecca,” he calls. The gladiator between Lucy and her brother falls into a defensive stance at Sabo’s side, her sword at the ready, like she’s still preparing to fight. “Thank you for protecting my sister until I got here. I wouldn’t have made it in time otherwise.”

“I can help…” Rebecca dismisses uncertainly.

“Just keep protecting her,” Sabo orders cheerfully. Lucy can picture the smile on his face, handsome and charming, full of good-will. “I’ll keep this one here.”

Rebecca hesitates a moment, and then she nods, keeping up with Gyats as he begins to run again.

“You will, will you?” Burgess says, incongruously good-natured as usual.

“Of course,” Sabo responds cheerfully, but there’s an edge of steel in his voice that speaks of danger, a thing so present and forceful that Lucy can hear it even from Gyats’ retreating arms. “That’s what big brothers are for.”


Fighting Doflamingo is an exercise in frustration.

Zoro knows—that the man is at his wits end, that his opponent is practically nonfunctional at this point. It’s the only thing that even kind of explains his strategy. He’s not directly challenging Zoro, never even steps toward to the line, and instead sends bloodstained swathes of string at his form, turns the earth itself into a tool for his own use to keep him at bay.

Zoro supposes he should take it as a compliment, that Doflamingo’s too scared to get close to him. But the guy won’t shut the fuck up, and keeps forcing Zoro to dodge, move, or twist in uncomfortable, awkward ways in order to avoid Doflamingo’s attacks. And Zoro’s bound by his own promises, too—he has to refrain from taking him out. He promised Lucy ten minutes.

It makes for an irritation-inducing fight.

“What frightening skill,” Doflamingo purrs, and there’s a thread of interest in his voice that makes the hairs on Zoro’s neck stand up in disgust. “You said you learned from the best earlier…you didn’t mean Hawk Eyes, did you?”

Zoro doesn’t reply, is too busy performing an awkward lunge as he vaults between two spires of string. He could cut them, sure. But the footing is untrustworthy with this man’s power engaged, and if Zoro keeps himself moving, remains unpredictable, it’ll be harder to catch him. Turning the earth and buildings to string seems tiring for Zoro’s opponent. He only does it when he’s certain
Zoro is about to be somewhere specific for more than three seconds.

Doflamingo seems to take his lack of an answer as the confirmation it is, and laughs. “Don’t tell me *that* man trained an unruly beast like you?” The smile on Doflamingo’s face curls further, disturbingly wide. “He must not have seen in you what I do.”

A spike of white string rushes Zoro head on. He crouches slightly, and uses a hitoryuu attack to clear the path to his opponent. Doflamingo backs up a few steps, wary. He has a radius he’s maintaining, too afraid of Zoro to try a close-range battle. And he doesn’t like to attack when he’s moving. It’s a flaw, but one he can unfortunately get away with because Zoro isn’t aiming to kill him at the moment.

*But if she’s late even a second, I’m running him through,* Zoro promises himself darkly as Doflamingo runs his mouth yet again.

“Yes, you’re like Law, like *me.* I can see it in your eyes.” Doflamingo curls his fist, and two pale walls of razor blades shoot up around Zoro. He backpedals just in time to avoid being crushed between them. “There’s darkness inside you. A hunger for destruction.”

Zoro *doesn’t* trip over the stone behind him, catches himself in time, but Doflamingo chuckles like he saw the almost-fall anyway. Zoro leans on the clear resonance of Wado, balanced under his will, and takes refuge in the high ring of clarity.

“I wonder if Hawk Eye knew? Or your captain? She seems the bleeding-heart type. Merciful. Kind.” Doflamingo’s teeth draw blood from his own lip. “Pathetic, is what she is.”

“You talk too much,” Zoro complains. He jumps, and performs a *Tatsu Maki* facing the ground to shred the string writhing where he just stood. As long as it’s not directly connected to Doflamingo, Zoro noticed, the guy can’t control it. Cutting the string unfortunately only works as a temporary measure against him, because the amount of string he can make seems…infinite. And his range is at least the size of the birdcage, Zoro’s pretty sure. He hasn’t found a limit yet.

“Shall we see just how different you are from your captain? Shall we test it?” Doflamingo asks. Zoro crouches warily, eyes narrowed over his blades. Doflamingo’s smile curls deeper, crueler. His fingers twitch. “Parasite string!”

Zoro hears a choked gasp on his left. He glances over, not taking his eyes off of Doflamingo.

It’s a woman. Maybe about Zoro’s age, petite, and weeping so hard that Zoro isn’t sure she’s entirely conscious. But she keeps stepping forward, even as her feet stumble over rubble. A rock the size of a melon is clenched in her palm.

Doflamingo laughs, and Zoro understands.

*So this* is the ability that let Doflamingo gain control of the country in the first place.

How cowardly.

Idiot girl. She must have gotten too close to the fight. Close enough that Doflamingo could use her.

“How witless,” Doflamingo croons, and tosses a vindictive glance to Zoro as his fingers twitch and the unfortunate woman struggles against the invisible hold propelling him. “If you’re anything like your captain, your mercy will overrule your logic.”

Doflamingo’s fingers twitch, and the girl charges Zoro, swinging the rock up and over her head.
She’s sobbing, too afraid to even call for help.

It pisses Zoro off.

“Do I look very merciful to you?” Zoro growls, and feels Asura burgeoning underneath his skin, twisting and feeding on the darkness in his blood. Doflamingo’s smile falters, and Zoro backflips over one of the writhing strings, and slams Shusui’s heavy hilt into the civilian’s head in one smooth move.

The girl drops, passed out cold and bleeding from the temple. Doflamingo’s fingers twitch, but as per usual, unconsciousness seems to frustrate Devil Fruit abilities, a feature for which Zoro is grateful. He does not relish the idea of dancing around a wailing, helpless civilian woman for the rest of this fight. He dislikes the idea of watching her fight against her will.

“Well, well,” Doflamingo hums, and Zoro is vaguely disturbed to see something like interest flicker on his face again. “That was a risk for you, wasn’t it? You could have killed her, doing that.” Something like a disbelieving chuckle wavers from the cruel man. “You really don’t have much mercy, do you?”

There are several things he could say to that. One being, if you think I can’t control my strength, you’ve got no measure of me yet. Or perhaps, Maybe you’re just not as strong as you believe yourself to be. Or, more favorably, nothing at all.

But here’s the thing—Zoro wants Doflamingo to fear him. Zoro wants Doflamingo so terrorized by the very thought of his blades that he has to fight the urge to run. He wants the man to quiver and shake in his stupid curly shoes so that when Lucy comes back to deliver the final blow, it will be all he can do to remain standing.

So he leans into a lunge, holds Shusui and Kitetsu parallel to each other and the earth at chest height, and lets Asura flicker in and out of sight. When he speaks his voice low and firm and unwavering.

“You are not the only one called ‘Demon.’”

That horrible look of interest reappears. “I suppose not.” The gash of his mouth curls into a cruel grin. “Does your captain know of your nature? Of the cruelty in your heart? I doubt she would approve.”

Zoro ignores him, dashing forward a few steps to force the man back—he keeps a healthy distance, still wary of Zoro’s blades.

That’s good. He should be afraid of Zoro, after drawing Lucy’s blood.

“So merciful, your captain, even to her enemies. You should have heard her earlier. She begged for Bellamy’s life—a man who attacked her once! Stayed her hand even as he begged to die! Even when he attacked her again when freed!”

The name distracts Zoro for a split second, and he nearly loses his left leg because of it. He rolls back to his starting position behind the line he drew, catching his breath.

Bellamy, huh? It’s been…a while since he’s even thought of the guy. He remembers him though. Remembers what he said to Lucy. What he threatened to do to her. The near-agonizing frustration at his captain’s orders, his own self-loathing at understanding them.

Zoro remembers nearly bisecting the guy too. He hasn’t really thought of Bellamy since.

“You must have been a real asshole to him, if he gained Lucy’s pity.” Zoro retorts. He trusts Lucy’s
judgment. She’s got a knack for these things.

Doflamingo pulls back his strings, and they curl in the air above him with unsettling patience.

“Men like us wouldn’t have shown such weakness. Such frailty and indecision.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow as Kitetsu burns in his palm, outraged on Lucy’s behalf. “You’re shit at reading people, man.”

“You wouldn’t have shown such mercy,” Doflamingo insists, gesturing to the still form of the woman he dropped just a few moments prior. “You didn’t.”

Zoro narrows his eyes, and shifts to the balls of his feet, his Haki wrapped around his blades in dark, twisting light. “I know.”

Doflamingo launches another attack at him, and Zoro cuts the strings at the base of the spike, impatient, and rushes forward, pressing his opponent back once more.

“Maybe she does know,” Doflamingo rambles, clearly thinking aloud like he’s still hoping to throw Zoro off his game. He dodges deftly as Zoro lays into him with an attack pattern designed to push him back and off his toes, so he can’t slip around Zoro through his blind spots. “Maybe she knows and sends you to do her dirty work, so she can feel better about herself.”

Zoro snorts involuntarily as he leaps and spins three times in quick succession over a spear of razor-edged blades meant to pierce his heart. The thought of Lucy sending someone else to do her dirty work is absurd, and not only because Lucy doesn’t do dirty work, so much as ‘overturn rotting societies and overlords who have no business at the top.’

Given that, Zoro can see how Doflamingo might not be too fond of her.

Still, even this guy should know by now that Lucy doesn’t deputize the hard jobs to others. She shoulders them herself—sometimes when she shouldn’t, much to Zoro’s consternation.

Something must show on his face, in his frame, because then Doflamingo giggles, high and demented, and his fingers twitch gleefully as his expression becomes downright jubilant, like he’s genuinely taken by hilarity.

“Oh,” he breathes through his laughter, “So that’s it, is it? The captain and her first mate?”

Doflamingo chuckles darkly, and Zoro is forced to dance backward, scrambling as strings rise around him from all sides, ready to collapse inward and tear Zoro to shreds. “And here I thought Law was fucking her. Or wanted to. I suppose that’s still a possibility though.”

Irritation bleeds into Zoro’s stance—it’s barely present, just in the shift of his weight and the tilt of his blade—but Doflamingo reads it there anyway.

“Oh? Does the idea of Law fucking your captain upset you? Does it make you burn with jealousy?” Doflamingo clicks his tongue. “You should have heard her on that rooftop. She was so worried about him. It was touching.”

Zoro draws on Kitetsu’s outrage, on Wado’s purpose, and Shusui’s steady, infinite void.

“Three minutes,” Zoro says, forcing his breathing to steady. Strings clap together before him, and Zoro cuts the thick band of them apart in two easy slashes. “Lucy has three minutes to get here before I kill you myself.”
Doflamingo continues, relentless. “It must be stifling, working under one’s partner. Does she order you around, tell you where to be and when?” Zoro rushes him, gets closer than he has before, and multi-colored string bursts out from the man’s fingers in a horizontal slash. “I wonder if you’re a man after all.”

Zoro gives him a bland look, but otherwise doesn’t answer. Kitetsu moans high and furious at the insult, but Zoro isn’t ruled by his heart. He hasn’t been for a long time.

“Is that why you’re simply holding the line? Because she told you not to fight? What are you, slave to her will? A dog on a chain?”

Zoro, despite most people’s dissenting opinion, is not stupid. He knows Doflamingo’s just trying to goad him into action, trying to make Zoro give him ground. And it’s not like Zoro has ever given a particular damn about what anyone else thinks. About anything.

Sure, he still wants to cut him in two, but he’s wanted to do that since he saw the blood all over Lucy’s body. It’s not a new emotion. He’s too well-versed in controlling his bloodlust for that.

“Wait, let me guess—it’s love, isn’t it? You’re in love with her, will follow her to the ends of the earth and back, yada yada yada?”

Too close, Doflamingo’s suddenly too close, and Zoro dances back, trying to escape the writhing mass of string under his feet as Doflamingo convulses. The earth around him is unreliable under the man’s influence, and Haki warns Zoro to move, move, move, move—

“Love is weakness! Hasn’t anyone ever told you? You humans, always trying to make your lives worthwhile, trying to find meaning!” The three-story building on Zoro’s left dissolves into string, the mass of it arcs up to the sky, blocking out the sun and the apex of the birdcage. Zoro’s eye widens involuntarily, and he instinctively draws on that well inside him, pulls darkness and conviction to the fore, and feels agony and power rush through him as his body writhes into unnatural shape.

“This world is hell,” Doflamingo growls, “And you, like all pathetic slaves, deserve to burn.”

The sharp, descending spear is tipped in Haki, Zoro realizes, not blood.

*Of the nine mountains and the eight seas, Zoro recites, there is nothing I can’t cut!*

Zoro is a pillar immolated in motion, a moving crucible of agony and fire, but at his core there is the blank white space that breathes, and Zoro presses forward into the clash.

“Nine sword style: Demon Asura, three-thousand worlds!”

Zoro is darkness and wrath incarnate. Kitetsu sings in almost-harmony with his soul, the closest the blade ever gets to true cooperation, the closest Zoro gets to letting it control him.

String meets all nine of Zoro’s blades, Haki clashing against Haki as Zoro catches the strike above his head. The metallic film sparks into Zoro’s eyes, glints as Doflamingo roars to the heavens in the background. Doflamingo’s Haki seems to weld the mass together, reducing flexibility and the independent motion of the strings in favor of a solid, relentless force.

Zoro narrows three eyes, and leans into pain, agony, fire as Asura consumes him. He does not lose himself because there is Wado to act as beacon and guide, and conviction holds him steady.

*Suffering is welcome on the path to bloodshed.*

Like fragile skin, Doflamingo’s Haki rips under one of Zoro’s blades.
Doflamingo isn’t laughing anymore.

Zoro teeth bare in the snarl of three blood-chilling grins.

It’s a mistake, pitting something like willpower against Zoro. He has a promise to keep, and a few lives aside from his own riding on every bet.

Bloodlust that is not his own sears into his very bones, is tattooed into flesh and sinew alike. His does not back down, just moves faster even as Doflamingo roars in fury and outrage, even as the sky turns dark and the earth shakes and—

Oh.

Shit.

Zoro sees and does not in tandem, his Observation Haki is a wailing klaxon in his mind as three eyes burn holes in the pillar of black string the size of a city block, and it drives him to struggle harder, more desperately than ever. The warning is furious and brilliant and not at all helpful at the present time, because all nine of Zoro’s swords are raised above his head, locked against the most present threat, and he cannot dodge, cannot run, cannot block all of the attacks in time as three more spires of Haki-tipped string make their way to his vulnerable torso.

Zoro knows it’s coming, knows what will happen before it does, and tries to extend his Armament Haki to protect his body as he continues to fend off the blade-like string intent on blowing through his brain, but there is nothing he can do with the force of a building bearing down on him.

He protects his back, baring the whole of his torso to luck and chance because a scar on the back is a swordsman’s dishonor—

Zoro feels the string impale him, feels the gouging of his flesh and warm blood spill from him and down his legs as his hip and shoulder and ribcage pierce under the onslaught, and a roar rips from three throats as he fights to keep pushing against the inexorable force bearing down on him.

There is agony within and agony without. There is chaos and there is order. Breath, in the center.

Zoro plants his feet. The muscles in his arms bulge, and the veins in his neck and face burn as his chest moans in strain, but Zoro leans into his strikes, hard, and the Haki breaks in nine places as Zoro leans up and into agony, accepts it unreservedly to claim both victory and pride.

Nine blades blur black lightning, and the pillar of endless string falls to earth, harmless and broken.

Three heads turn to Doflamingo as Zoro’s chest heaves. Blood dribbles from his mouth, runs in vermilion rivulets down his frame.

Doflamingo’s fingers twitch, his face terribly curious, and the three spikes impaling his body press deeper, score agonizing millimeters into his flesh.

Zoro raises one arm, and the rest follow, blades at the ready. Doflamingo smiles, confident when he should not be.

Zoro moves, his blades spinning in frenetic motion, and there is a moment where Zoro realizes that the spikes piercing him were, uncannily, holding part of his weight. As they slip to the ground, harmless after their severing, Zoro nearly follows.

But he doesn’t. He doesn’t even allow himself to sway despite the dizziness and pain and blood
loss, despite the enduring agony of Asura.

Instead his teeth clench around Wado’s blackened hilt, the electric sting of his Haki buzzing against three faces, and he stares at Doflamingo from the shadows of his own bandana.

He’s panting, barely drawing breath, and pain is so deep that his mind has ceased to process it. He has retreated into the blank space of his core, the one that lets him breathe through the punctured lung.

“You might as well die, Demon of East Blue,” Doflamingo calls. He is not far away. “You will die soon regardless. You will fail to even injure me, and your captain will die by my hand. The island of Dressrosa will become a sea of blood, an altar upon which the lives of its residents were sacrificed to me, their god and benevolent master.” He cocks his head, as if expecting Zoro to agree. “You may as well die now.”

Zoro curls three grins around three katana, and raises six more to the ready. He relishes distantly in the slack surprise in Doflamingo’s face. He does not shake as he growls, low and determined, the phrase that has allowed him to accept and even relish in pain since Sensei counselled it to him in a quiet garden a lifetime away from this sea. “Suffering is welcome on the path to bloodshed.”

There’s a moment where neither of them speak or move, where Doflamingo doesn’t react at all.

Then the man laughs, pressing a hand to his bare and bloodily bruised stomach. Blood spurts from a wound on his back, above his feathered collar, and still the towering man laughs, endlessly pleased.

“Oh, you are interesting, aren’t you? This is why Hawk Eye agreed to train you, then? The quality he admired?”

Zoro spits blood out of his mouth. He would have stained Wado’s hilt if it hadn’t been for his Haki. Shusui screams the endless void in three fists. Zoro feels his wounds bleed more freely as his heart rate picks up in anticipation.

“I don’t know why humans resist their own futility,” Doflamingo continues, heedless of Zoro’s lack of interest. “You are miserable creatures, a better likeness for cattle than me and the gods of this world.” Doflamingo’s smile returns, blood vessels bulging on his forehead. “You will soon learn.”

Zoro crouches lower, readying himself. He tests his weight on his toes and finds himself mobile. Wado’s voice arcs high and demanding, and the harmony of his blades reverberates through his core. “Guess what?”

Doflamingo cocks his head, an answering question.

Zoro grins, leans into bloodlust that is his and Kitetsu’s and Asura’s, and feels darkness weep into his presence, feels his aura implode with it like a collapsing star. “Lucy’s late.”

Doflamingo takes a single step back, in fear or maybe defense, and Zoro rushes forward.

Since his early days in swordsmanship, Zoro has always relied on speed and brute force. He prefers straightforward attacks to complicated combinations and especially to feints and deceptions.

He’s lucky, as both Sensei and Mihawk repeatedly reminded him, that such tactics favor his strengths as a swordsman.

Zoro, of course, never believed it was luck. Some things are simply fate.
Sensei always rolled his eyes at that one, perhaps offered an exasperated-but-fond smile. Mihawk said luck and fate are the same thing.

These thoughts hover in the back of Zoro’s mind, distant and ghost-like as he charges Doflamingo, eyes locked on his target. The earth before him ripples and Zoro jumps, flips once, and lands on a boulder the size of a small ship. His katana extend at his sides, and Asura burns in his blood, demanding violence.

Doflamingo stares at him, wary, standing on the only patch of stable ground in a sea of tangled string as six spires rise in flexible, asynchronous threat. He is mere yards away, and Zoro has the high ground from his perch.

“Come to kill me?” Doflamingo asks. The wariness of his stance bellies the amusement in his voice. Kitetsu wails in eager abandon. “Of humanity’s vermin, you might have a better shot than others.”

Three moves. That’s all it’s going to take.

*The nine mountains and the eight seas…*

“But humans know their weakness, deep down. That’s why you all struggle and try to claw your way to power. Why you accept the ache of your necks being crushed beneath the heels of your superiors.” Doflamingo raises both arms to the sky, the birdcage trembling with its contraction. “Even the best of you can only bear the standards of humanity, the way a rat can only bear the excellence of a rat, and nothing more.”

…and when I gather and cube that chiliocosm…

“Yes, you vermin know your weakness. It is why Dressrosa bowed willingly to me, why they will again once they are bathed in their children’s blood. Once they know the cost of disobeying God!”

…and I can’t cut!

Around Doflamingo string rises in unholy vortex of razor-sharp, invisible blades, the six pillars tipped in Haki. There is a closing gap through which Zoro can still attack.

Zoro shifts slightly, and then Zoro *moves*, launching himself in a blur of speed and bloodlust and conviction most of all.

“Nine Sword Style, secret technique: Demon Asura, The Billionfold World Trichiliocosm!”

There is lightning around and before him, energy created from his very will, and he blurs through the open gap at speeds untold. Something impales his thigh and Zoro pays it no heed.

There is chaos without and a storm within, but purpose holds steady at his center, the blank space clear and resonant as water in a crystal glass. There is breath, the memory of Lucy’s bloodied body, and the hundreds of razor-sharp strings curl above and around him, closing him in like a venus flytrap.

Nine blades coated with Haki spin and spark lighting, but Zoro’s eyes are only for Doflamingo as he descends. The man’s teeth are grit in surprise, and he crosses two Haki-plated arms between them to defend against his blow.

Lucy’s bloodied face to fuel his bloodlust. Breath to calm his center.

Zoro aims for Doflamingo’s torso, intending to cut him in two from shoulder to hip. Nine blades
descend on Doflamingo’s body, three-thousand times at once.

There is a moment of resistance, where Doflamingo’s block catches against all nine of his blades, where he succeeds in holding Zoro at bay even as the ground around them is rent in infinitesimal pieces of string and rubble, the earth shredding under the force of their exchange and the fly trap bursting open.

Zoro meets Doflamingo’s gaze and finds him smiling.

Kitetsu screams in wounded pride and Zoro’s soul answers in Asura’s form. Muscles bulge and blood vessels burst and Zoro does not like this asshole.

Doflamingo cries out. Blood spurts across Doflamingo’s body, and Zoro presses deeper, roaring and giving voice to the agony of his form and body, and he hears Doflamingo do the same as Kitetsu severs muscle and bone and skin.

Zoro is thrown back by Doflamingo’s good hand. He lands on his feet but finds his leg unable to take his weight, and falls to the ground immediately. Asura flickers away in his surprise. Panting, he pushes himself up to his feet, unwilling to show the enemy his back, even when the enemy has been so thoroughly injured. He has to balance on one leg, his right thigh bleeding heavily, but he gets there.

When he looks up to Doflamingo, it is to see the man holding up his right arm, staring with something too psychotic to be horror on his face at his severed wrist. The cut is clean, and it bleeds freely. Doflamingo’s pink coat is frosted with red. Between them is the man’s twitching, severed hand.

“You…” Doflamingo whispers, and there is something horrible and unstable in his voice. “You dare…” He trembles, just a little, and Zoro knows it is not from fear but from fury. Then there is a disturbing calming in his form. An unnatural shift of emotion. “Don’t tell me this is retribution for Law?”

Zoro shifts warily, testing the limits of his injured leg. “I don’t do revenge.” He grins, and Wado’s hilt tastes like metal and blood. “That’s what they call fate.”

Doflamingo grits his teeth, and the fingers of his left hand twitch. The right hand drags across the ground for a moment, before shooting up to attach to Doflamingo’s wrist. Zoro raises an eyebrow as Doflamingo closes his right fist.

“Well,” Doflamingo says, almost conversationally, “It seems we’ve both earned the title ‘Demon.’”

Something flickers across Zoro’s senses, and he prepares to fight with an anticipatory grin on his face, three katana at the ready.

“It is an unfortunate injury. It will never heal correctly without a doctor or the power of a Devil Fruit such as Law’s or the dwarf princess’s. But I can stitch the nerves together, retain some functionality.” Doflamingo’s voice goes sharp with rage. Cold. “I will make you suffer for it, of course. You and your captain.”


Doflamingo is ten paces away. Eight. Six, and he’ll be within Zoro’s range the moment he plants his heel.
But before it can happen, before he and Doflamingo can clash again, a blur of pink and green appears behind Doflamingo’s right shoulder. There is the glint of gold and silver, and Doflamingo leans back and away to escape the broadsword swinging at his face. Zoro leaps to attack at the same moment, his blades black and spitting lightning.

There’s a faint tugging sensation in his navel. Then he’s falling, and Zoro smacks heavily into concrete, like running headfirst into a wall. He lets out a groan as his injuries suddenly make themselves known.

“Sorry,” a familiar voice drawls. Zoro looks up to see Trafalgar looking over a ledge, concentration furrowing his eyebrows. He looks like shit. “Shambles.”

Beside Zoro, Rebecca suddenly appears. She lands on her feet, and there’s a look of vicious satisfaction on her face. Zoro suspects it has something to do with the blood edging the tip of her blade.

“Thank you,” Rebecca says to Trafalgar. “I needed to get him somehow.”

The captain says nothing, but gives an absent nod of acknowledgement as he pants.

Zoro drags himself over to the ledge, returning his katana to their sheaths. Adrenaline is draining from his body fast, and his numerous injuries are making themselves known. Punctured lung. His hip. His shoulder. His leg. “You dropped me on purpose, didn’t you?”

“You occasionally irritate me,” Trafalgar agrees, his eyes fixed on the proceedings below.

Zoro follows his gaze, and finds himself looking down at a standoff between Lucy and the Heavenly Demon. There’s a cut on the man’s right cheekbone, dribbling blood down his face.

“Right,” Lucy says, standing where he had before. “I’m gonna kick your ass.”

Zoro smirks, viciously proud of the way Doflamingo’s hand protects his stomach instinctively at Lucy’s presence. It’ll be over soon, and Zoro has every faith that she will win. He glances at Trafalgar. “Got enough juice to perform surgery, Torao?”

Trafalgar looks away from the two captains below, his expression suddenly wary. “Why?”

“I think I may need it,” Zoro admits, and he just manages to catch Trafalgar’s look of dawning horror as he passes out.

Doflamingo was, it seems, waiting for her.

This is an unfortunate fact, because Lucy is exhausted.

She still fights, because of course she does. It’s her job, her prerogative as future pirate king. She has to fight and beat everyone who might be stronger than her, has to prove they aren’t and claw her way to the top. Hitting Doflamingo comes with other bonuses, of course, but she’d be fighting regardless, was never going to back down the moment he got in her way and acted like he could make her do anything at all.

Unfortunately, her fighting style requires a lot more movement and physical effort in general than Doflamingo’s. So even though he’s at least as bad off as she is—though, perhaps, not quite struggling with the same tinge of exhaustion that draining her Haki causes her—he initially gets the upper hand.
Which, of course, is how she ended up bleeding from brand new holes in her stomach and lifted on invisible strings, made to walk toward Doflamingo against her will.

Of all the man’s abilities and various means of inciting chaos and injury, this is, perhaps, the one she hates the most.

Lucy doesn’t like being controlled. She doesn’t like people trying to force her hand.

“What shall I do with you now?” Doflamingo muses. “Like this I could make you fight and kill your friends. Rebecca, maybe. You’d feel especially guilty about that, knowing she could never defend herself against you. Or perhaps Law. The two of you seem close.” Doflamingo clenches his right fist, and Lucy spots blood oozing out of the cut, dragged forward and upright by her elbows. “Or maybe your swordsman? I stabbed him a few times. It probably wouldn’t take much to kill him.”

Lucy grits her teeth, struggling against the terrible sensation of inevitability and control the strings incite as she stumbles forward, too quick to stop. Doflamingo’s trying to distract her, make her angry and scared. Zoro’s fine. She just saw that, can still feel him on the edge of her consciousness now. He caused Doflamingo significantly more damage than he received.

She moves forward another pace, but slowly this time. Resisting.

“Maybe I’ll have you kill yourself, instead?” Doflamingo muses. “That would humiliate you properly. Humble you. The Demon of East Blue would be agonized.”

A rock is in her path. Doflamingo makes her trip over it.

“Or better yet,” Doflamingo continues, his voice sparking with something other than dark malice, something closer to satisfaction. “I could make you bow.”

Lucy spits, not even dignifying the words with a proper response.

“Come,” Doflamingo demands, grinning again. “Come to me and bow. Kiss my feet. I’ll crush your skull when you do.”

Lucy’s feet are bare, and she plants them in the earth, refusing point-blank to move.

Doflamingo’s smile broadens, looking gleeful at her resistance, and the pressure to move increases tenfold, nearly bows her back.

She doesn’t move though. She trembles and shakes against the terrible push to move and keep moving, but she doesn’t give Doflamingo a single inch more as she glares.


Monkey D Lucy doesn’t fucking bow. Not to anyone or anything but her own will.

Conqueror’s Haki flushes through her, sets her blood on fire and rattles the stone around her. The strings controlling her limbs are suddenly looser, an annoyance rather than an imperative.

Doflamingo’s smile drops off his face.

Lucy raises her arm to her lips and bites through her skin.

Draining her Haki like she did is, as Rayleigh would say, inadvisable. Entering Gear Fourth again before allowing her body some rest is equally inadvisable, but she practiced enough to know it’s possible.
One hit. She just needs one hit.

Entering Gear Fourth is painful on a good day. It requires melding her Haki with her skin, reinforcing the rubber, and blowing air in as well to increase the weight of her blows. It burns, feels like her body’s melting and freezing at once. Today she’s injured, exhausted, and has already used it once.

It hurts.

But pain, agony even, is so much better than defeat. Than being controlled. It’s one and the same, with Doflamingo.

She’s not going to let anyone else die under his thumb. He’s done.

The mist generated by Gear Fourth fades a little, formed from the evaporated sweat on her body. She locks eyes with Doflamingo and, in an easy sweep of motion, breaks the strings he’s attached to her.

There’s a ghost of a recognizable sensation—the rough scrape of sandpaper against skin as Doflamingo’s Conqueror’s Haki awakens. Lucy responds with a pulse of her own, one that sends sparks of lightning through the air where their wills meet.

She doesn’t wait for him to attack. Instead she shoots straight up, her legs churning, and lets air and earth rush past her as she climbs.

The birdcage is so small now that it covers maybe a quarter of the island. There is chaos within and destruction without. Lucy swears she can hear Dressrosa’s screams of terror.

Doflamingo follows her, because of course he does. He doesn’t seem to understand he isn’t winning this fight.

There are spires of string as tall as the castle following Doflamingo. Each are the circumference of a man, and each are tipped in blood-black Haki. Lucy curls her fists, hovering near the top of the cage.

Lucy is done.

“’MINGO!” She shouts. Doflamingo chases her, smiling that terrible, not-right smile. “You always try to strangle everything with your hands and manipulate everybody! It makes me feel like I’m suffocating!”

“Blame your own birthright!” he replies. “You all, who were born as trash, are only fit to be manipulated! You humans and I are different! I give you meaning!”

“Shut up, I’ll kick your ass!”

“Do your worst, girl.”

Doflamingo raises the spiderweb shield, and Lucy knows, just knows, that Kong Gun is simply not enough.

It’s fine. She’s prepared for this.

Lucy doesn’t take her eyes off of her target, doesn’t dare look away with her Haki so strained, but she turns into her shoulder and bites the muscle there. She doesn’t even feel the usual agony of
engaging this technique, too high on endorphins and the righteous fire of her Haki and her own soul, demanding nothing less than victory.

Her right arm swells to twice it’s normal size, and Lucy cocks it back, her spine trembling in unfelt strain.

Doflamingo smiles, his strings writhing in anticipation around him.

Lucy can only think of a few people she’s wanted to punch more than this one.

She dives, her whole body locked on her target as she rushes him.

Doflamingo’s fingers twitch and the spires of thread gather in his palms.

“King Kong Gun!”

“Sixteen Holy Bullets: God Thread!”

There is something that Lucy can only call collision, something devastating and heavy and brutal. Her arm is nearly numb but she feels the pressure of Doflamingo’s attack against her knuckles, the twisting, burrowing motion of a parasite. She feels the shockwave, feels the reverberations in her chest, and she pushes forward, forward, forward.

Lightning flashes around them as their Haki clashes. It’s brighter than the sun, and the sparks leave shadows in her vision, too many to count, until she is nearly blind with afterimages.

It doesn’t deter her. On the contrary it just makes her push harder, harder, harder—

She’s screaming, or maybe roaring, giving voice to the struggle. The threads are sharp and painful against her knuckles, even without piercing her Haki and she pushes down and into them with everything she has.

But over the roaring in her ears, the challenging cry ripping from her own throat, and the sharp cracks of thunder from the storm around them, she hears something else, too.

Doflamingo speaks, and he sounds gleeful, determined, and all too certain. “I’ll destroy everything, Straw Hat! I am a god, the world should bow to my will! Trash should be so lucky to die by my hand!”

The pressure increases more, more, more and then—

His Haki pierces hers.

Shit.

No.

Her legs churn and she presses forward, harder, drains everything inside her in order to move, even as the strings splinter bone, separate muscle from tendons and—

“DON’T YOU GET IT?” She roars, and the inexhaustible fire of her Conqueror’s Haki flares up her spine again, drowns out everything else. The pain isn’t felt, exhaustion doesn’t exist and Lucy will not be overcome. “YOU’RE NOT A GOD! YOU’RE NOT EVEN A MAN! YOU’RE JUST PATHETIC!”

One final push. One last clash and—
“TAKE A FUCKING HINT!”

The spiderweb shield breaks, splintering in a hundred pieces of silvery filament around them, and the Haki-tipped spires fall away from Lucy’s fist, limp, and Lucy plants her fist in Doflamingo’s face. She feels the earth shake, sees the island rise and reject the man who tormented it, and then—

Lucy wins.

She blacks out before she can think to fall.

Zoro rises to consciousness and groans immediately because fuck, fuck, fuck, he fucking hurts, why—

“You’re a goddamn idiot,” a voice on his left grumbles. Zoro pries his eyes open and tries to turn his head. He immediately regrets it, and moves to massage the tension from his neck, and winces as his shoulders move. He’s propped against a wall, and as his knuckles scrape the brick, he decides it’s simply easiest to give up on making himself comfortable.

On his left, Law is crouched over the edge of the roof, not even looking at him. His eyes are locked on the sky above.

“How am I fucking awake right now?” he questions blearily, having a vague understanding of how much blood he’s lost and a questionably intimate knowledge of how much blood-loss equates to loss of consciousness. Instinctively he reaches out, trying to locate his crew. Usopp is running around somewhere below. Robin too. Franky is by the somewhat mobile SMILE factory. Lucy—

Oh. So that’s why Law’s staring at the sky.

“I’m a good surgeon and you’re too dumb to stay unconscious,” Law replies. He’s gripping his side protectively and his hand shakes a little as it grips his blade. He looks exhausted, but his gaze is fixed with rapt attention on Lucy and Doflamingo’s fight.

Zoro agrees that it’s probably the most interesting thing happening at the moment, and follows his cue just in time to see the sky turn dark and lightning flash as trumpets blare against his senses.

He winces, clutching his head, and grimaces against the feeling of Lucy and Doflamingo’s Haki clashing. They’re both exhausted, at the end of their ropes, and they sound more like a never-ending train crash than anything.

But then there’s a cracking, a breaking of will, a riptide, and then Lucy’s voice carries like a gunshot over the island as she rages at Doflamingo to “TAKE A FUCKING HINT.”

Rebecca falls to her knees in front of him, collapsing but not succumbing under the weight of Lucy’s unrestrained will, and Zoro watches as Doflamingo slams down to earth with such speed and weight that Zoro can’t follow him with his eyes, and feels the island tremble upon his impact with the earth. The force is so great that two great plates of cityscape and stone tilt up and frame the sky as Doflamingo is buried deep, deep, deep in the heart of the island, as he’s forced from light and freedom and sky and veritably buried as the earth collapses on top of Dressrosa’s greatest tormentor.

It looks unreal. Otherworldly. Absurd.

It’s exactly the kind of thing Lucy pulls out of her ass regularly.

“The sworn enemies of the gods, huh?” Law mutters, and Zoro doesn’t really register it because—
“Lucy,” he says urgently struggling upward, trying to get to his feet and generally failing. “She’s—”

Falling. She’s falling, her body shifted out of her new, medically inadvisable form, and she’s not moving, not even conscious if Zoro’s senses are anything to go by.

Law swears and holds out a trembling hand, one eye squinting against exhaustion. “Get ready,” he orders, and a purple ball forms around Lucy’s form for the blink of an eye before she’s flung violently and quickly in their general direction, like someone shot her out of a cannon.

Zoro frowns, not taking his eyes off his captain. She’s closer now, her body clearly limp and steam and blood still billows off of her. “What’re you—”

Law grunts, a sound somewhere between a whimper and a groan, and another room appears around Lucy’s descending frame, this one including their destroyed rooftop as well.

“Catch.” Law orders, voice strained, and Lucy appears about five feet above Zoro’s head before the purple film disappears and Lucy’s falling again, dropping down right before him.

“Fuck!” Zoro yelps, and he gets to his knees just in time to have Lucy slam into him, somehow crashing more into his abused chest than anything. He falls back, his head cracking against the crumbling wall and his ankle twisted painfully underneath him, but he manages to curl his arms underneath Lucy’s knees and shoulders, and manages to protect her head.

Zoro lets out a slow breath, Lucy’s head lolling on his shoulder as he glares at Law. “Oi,” he protests, demanding an explanation from the guy who just played hot potato with his girlfriend.

“Teleporting’s hard.” Law groans, clutching his side and wheezing slightly. “Aim’s difficult. Played it safe.” He looks up just enough to glare from under the brim of his hat, nearly petulant. “Someone needed emergency medical care.”

Zoro accepts the explanation, ignores the accusation, and studies Lucy instead. The shirt’s been ripped open, so only the leather band covers her torso. There’s blood smeared across her skin, caked and dried and sourced from multiple wounds. A deep cut in her hip is still weeping, shiny with black-red liquid, and a dozen bullet holes decorate her torso. Her face is bruised and bloody, and her breath sounds labored, her mouth hanging open for air because her nose is too swollen to breathe through.

He can feel her heartbeat under his palms though, thudding loud and steady, and her Voice rings in satisfaction and contentment, no echo of danger or warning present.

She needs a doctor. Preferably not one about to pass out, like Law. But he’s pretty sure she’s not going to die anytime soon, either.

Zoro shifts back, wriggling his legs out from under him. He’s used to the seiza pose, sure, but frankly his thigh is still killing him, despite being stitched up by Law, and holding Lucy isn’t helping that much so he’s going to slump against the wall with his legs splayed out just this once.

He mentally apologizes to Sensei, clutching Lucy a bit closer, and her forehead slips to his collarbone.

He supposes he could put Lucy down. That’s probably what Law was expecting, even. But. Nah. He’s fine like this, even if her elbow is poking a possibly-bruised-but-probably-not-broken-rib.

“This is some fucking date,” Zoro mumbles absently, to no one in particular. He’s not really expecting anyone to answer. He smirks. “And the love-cook said I don’t woo.”
“I hate you,” Law groans, the thumb and forefinger pinching his temples together, like he’s trying to relieve a headache. “I hate you so much.”

Zoro just grins and closes his eyes, preparing to settle in until the rest of the crew shows up. Lucy is fine, tucked safely against him, and the birdcage above their heads is gone, evaporated with Doflamingo’s will, and all of Dressrosa roars in joy and tearful abandon around them.

But then the breath against his chest changes, a tiny hitch, and Zoro blinks awake just as Lucy’s tired voice croaks “Z’ro?”

Zoro shifts a little, trying to look down at her face without jostling her too much. She hasn’t even opened her eyes, is apparently too tired to do so, and the only sign that she’s awake is the tiny furrow between her eyebrows and the slight pout in her lips.

She’s looking for confirmation. Needs to know she did it.

“You ruined my shirt,” he greets, his hand fisting in the back of his old garment. The buttons have popped off, and half of it is gone by now, torn away by various attacks or maybe Lucy herself, if she got annoyed with it. The rest is soaked black with blood, maybe Lucy’s, maybe not, and either way it’s not something that could ever be used as a shirt again.

Lucy’s face relaxes, and her lips quirk into a tired smile, taking the flippant response for the answer it was. “…Knew he was a f’king pissant.”

Zoro snorts and settles back against the wall. Lucy sighs contently and drools a little on his collar as she drops off into unconsciousness, her hand buried in his haramaki. Zoro tries to follow her into slumber, but a soft oh of surprise has him cracking his eyes open.

It’s Rebecca. Her red-hued eyes are fixed on a green branch she’s holding before her, clasped gently between her fingers.

Her eyes water, and she clasps a gloved hand over her wobbling chin.

“What’s wrong?” Demands Law, beating Zoro to the punch.

Rebecca looks away from the branch, her eyes dangerously shiny as they lock on the three pirates.

“N-nothing’s wrong,” She stutters, and there’s a dreadful sort of joy on her face that is almost too intense to witness. It feels private. Personal. “It’s just—my mother was a flower interpreter. She taught me a few things.” Rebecca presents the branch to her audience. “It’s a palm frond.” The smile on her face is blinding, the rapture somehow only enhanced by her obvious grief. “It means victory.”

Ah, Zoro thinks, numb exhaustion filling him. Sounds about right.

Then he falls asleep, Lucy pressed safely against his shoulder as allies celebrate in the streets below.

Chapter End Notes

I think…I think I write Doflamingo like I’m channeling Voldemort. Idk why. Sorry.

Hopefully you guys didn’t feel the Doflamingo fight was too off. It was a very
complicated fight to write because Doflamingo was nearly dead, so he wasn’t attacking much in any direct fashion, since he knew Lucy would be coming soon, and Zoro is too good an opponent to simply overwhelm. Zoro himself was in a similar boat. He wanted to attack Doflamingo and did, but generally not with the intent to actually kill him because he promised to hold him back for ten minutes so Lucy could finish things. Mostly he was just trying to keep the guy’s attention focused on him, not the surroundings. This was further complicated by the fact that we generally have no idea of what Zoro is capable of in the New World. He hasn’t had a decent fight, with the exception of Pica, but even that didn’t seem to trouble him much. We’ve got no idea what the upper limits of his range are. So I had Zoro relying on some of his older techniques, and this is hopefully internally consistent when we remember that he was holding back somewhat intentionally.

Also, Doflamingo uses his powers kind of stupidly. It’s way easier to defend against a giant spike of string coming at you rather than a million tiny ones you can’t see. “Bullet String” with smaller, faster projectiles would be very difficult to deal with. Just saying. Also, the fact that he didn’t take advantage of the omnidirectional nature of the ability was frankly weird. Like, in the final attack with Luffy, he just shoots his strings at Luffy head-on. Luffy delivered a very obvious, frontal attack. Going around to hit him from behind or the side would make more sense. I tried to stick with how Oda wrote the powers though, but I added/adjusted stuff where I thought it necessary to raise stakes or just logically limit abilities in some way.

A palm frond does indeed represent victory in Victorian flower language. If I were Oda, I think I would have made the sunflower field a honeysuckle field (bonds of love, in Victorian flower language), and the one tree in the field would be a Pine or Spruce tree (meaning ‘hope in adversity’). On a side note, straw indicates an oath or union in Victorian flower language. Particularly in marriage, but the idea can be applied to other things as well, which just seems appropriate given the hat’s importance in One Piece.

If it wasn’t clear, Rebecca managed to clip Doflamingo on the cheekbone, Princess Bride style. I soooo wanted to include a "My name is Rebecca of Dressrosa. You killed my mother. Prepare to die." Line, but I couldn’t quite fit it in.

Sorry about how late this chapter is. Life stuff was kind of in the way and I just could not get Zoro’s fight scene to flow right. I’m still not super happy with it, but at this point I’m sick of working on it.

Because of life stuff, I may not update as fast as I have been previously. Sorry about that. I’ll still try and make sure my updates are pretty frequent, but please don’t hate me if it’s taking a little longer to update than usual.

Let me know what you thought!
Dressrosa 10

Chapter Summary

Sabo vs. Zoro almost happens, so. That's a thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The stars in the New World, Zoro decides, are weird. It’s not like he’s an expert or anything, but honestly there’s usually not much to do on watch, so he ends up stargazing a lot. In the New World, the stars seem brighter, absolutely brilliant as they glare down on the world below like roughly cut diamonds. Maybe there are simply fewer cities on this half of the Grand Line, maybe it’s just some weird moon thing, like Robin and Nami sometimes rant about, but the stars seem harsher here.

Zoro doesn’t mind. There’s probably a metaphor in there about journeys and destinations, but Zoro isn’t one to think about that kind of shit and frankly just appreciates that the increased light makes being a lookout easier at night. Not that he’s using his eyes so much as other senses.

In the cabin it’s dark and silent. His friend’s slow, peaceful breathing fills the room—the only one in Kyros’ home. The bed is occupied by Lucy and Robin, the two of them lying nose to toes to maximize space on the narrow mattress. Neither of them could lay on their sides, due to injuries. Franky snores on top of a table, while Law, Usopp, the samurais, Bellamy—Law insisted, claimed Lucy would want him around—and the gladiator occupy the floor. Zoro himself is curled in the windowsill as he keeps watch, feeling bizarrely awake in the quiet hours after midnight. That’s what he gets for sleeping almost twenty hours straight, he supposes.

His wounds still ache, but rest helped, and he’s using watch to meditate now. Sensei would probably be long-sufferingly exasperated at the frequency he’s used those techniques since leaving home. Zoro bets he’d be impressed at how good he’s gotten at it though.

It doesn’t smell fantastic in the cabin. They’ve all at least had their wounds dressed, but Dressrosa is not currently in possession of an abundance of showers. Or running water in general. Most everyone is homeless, and anyone who had any money is now destitute. The waterways are now clogged with debris. Half the population were slaves for varying lengths of time, so there’s that trauma to deal with. Entire sections of their culture and heritage have been rediscovered, with the return of their artisans.

The Marines are helping the people here. They’ve set up infirmaries and latrines and cannibalized their own ships and facilities for Dressrosa’s use. That’s what the Tontattas have said at least. One of the little creatures drops by every couple hours to give them an update, and also check up on Usopp and Franky and Robin. They peek curiously at Lucy, and to a lesser extent, himself and the rest of their nakama as well. They somehow seem more awed by Lucy every time they drop by, which is…a little odd, to be honest. Zoro wonders what they’ve heard about her, or if maybe they just can’t believe Doflamingo’s gone for good.

Asshole sure left a lot of devastation in his wake. Zoro’s not exactly the type to dwell on shit, but he does wonder, absently, if they’ll dig a mass grave, or bury each body individually. Maybe they cremate people on Dressrosa. He hopes that admiral remembered the kid in the street.
Lucy makes a soft noise in her sleep. The moon cuts a swath across her body, and her lips are turned up in a slight, barely perceptible smile. The bed is pushed against the wall, so it’s easy to reach down and gently sweep the hair from her face. The strands are a little oily from going unwashed too long.

Lucy turns into his hand, just a little. His fingers graze the aged scar under her eye.

She looks peaceful like this, with the moon throwing shadows across her face. He’s seen her asleep before, but she doesn’t look so calm, normally. Lucy’s always moving, somehow, with her fingers twitching or her hair blowing in the wind, or snoring. She’s not doing any of that now. It betrays just how exhausted she made herself.

He can’t see her wounds at the moment. She’s swamped by his jacket because, apparently, his shirt was the one with the fewest bloodstains on it, and Lucy wouldn’t stop shivering earlier. Underneath the open jacket, she’s wrapped in bandages. The newer ones haven’t been bleeding through quickly, according to Franky. They’re still supposed to change them every few hours, to avoid infection. The hospital was destroyed, and the Marines are, apparently, quickly running out of antibiotics.

Zoro withdraws his hand, and settles against the window frame, vaguely bored. He supposes he could doze a little while keeping his vigil, but with his injuries he might actually fall asleep, and then he’d be useless as a watchman.

He could…count the number of bonfires in the city below. Or the number of giant boulders ringing the island. Or—

Someone’s out there.

Zoro tenses, casting his senses out.

The stranger is skilled. The presence is slippery, like oil on asphalt, used to slipping into cracks to obscure his presence, only truly visible with light from the right angles. Zoro noticed because his eyes caught his shadow, not because his Haki warned him.

That’s…disquieting. Zoro’s not great at Observation Haki, but he’s not terrible. He misses details sometimes, sure, but usually not entire people.

As quickly as can without tipping the other guy off, Zoro conceals his own presence. He’s got no idea what the stranger’s skill level is, but it can’t hurt to be careful. No one can be completely invisible from Haki, and some people burn brighter and more brilliantly than others, easily identifiable to friends and enemies alike. Some are naturally obscure, protected by intruding eyes by their own characters. It’s impossible to hide completely from the competent, no matter how subtle a person naturally is, but it’s possible to mask oneself a little. The key, Mihawk repeated ad nauseum, was to think of everything at once and nothing specific. It makes getting a read on someone’s intentions difficult, if not impossible.

Zoro’s never been very good at it. Mihawk is frustratingly very adept at the skill.

Still, he masks himself as best he’s able, trying to at least make sure the other guy doesn’t know Zoro’s noticed him.

Silently, to avoid tipping him off, Zoro moves to the door, keeping track of the stranger with his Haki. Even knowing he’s out there, even with a sense of where he is, it’s hard to keep track. He’s moving to the house though—to the back, actually. The wall opposite the door.

Weird. The path up the hill leads directly to the other side.
It's a miracle the old, dried and half-rotted floorboards don’t creak beneath his boots. He’s careful, very careful, to step on the nails so the boards don’t bend, but only luck keeps the air silent as he weaves around the bodies on the floor, trying to recall all the subjects Robin has doctoral-level expertise in while also trying to remember each sword he’s ever broken and exactly how it happened. When he gets to the door, Zoro twists the doorknob slowly, carefully, willing himself to patience.

Patience…isn’t his strong suit. It’s why stealth is more the cook’s thing than his.

The doorknob clicks softly. Zoro releases a slow breath, and pulls the door open—just wide enough to slip through without brushing the doorframe. To his relief, the hinges open silently, despite the years of neglect the house suffered.

It must have been well-built, Zoro considers idly. He should compliment Kyros on it later.

The door shuts behind him with a muffled click. The presence is still at the back of the house, but he’s coming around to the front now. On Zoro’s right. He would have passed Zoro in the window, had the swordsman stayed there.

He could rush him now, use the precious seconds to preempt him in an attack. He could climb up to the roof, get the literal drop on the guy when he goes to open the door. He could hide around the opposite corner, jump him as he tries to get inside.

Zoro steps to the left of the door and leans against the rough-hewn wall, his body obscured by pitch-black shadow even in the moonlight. He loosens Kitetsu in the red sheath, and waits.

A shadow turns the corner, his silhouette illuminated by the moonlight. He wears a top hat and a long coat—maybe Zoro’s height, maybe a little taller. He has an easy, purposeful stride that speaks of battle training.

He draws closer, and Zoro tries to recall the steps to tying an anchor hitch knot, a skill he’s long-since relegated to muscle memory. He tries, too, to recall other things he’s relegated to muscle-memory, as well as the rate at which his debt to Nami grows.

The figure draws closer, seemingly oblivious to Zoro’s presence. He stops at the door. Hesitates. Zoro forces himself not to draw just yet.

The man takes a deep breath and reaches for the doorknob.

Zoro’s draw is so quick and smooth Kitetsu doesn’t make a sound, not even a whisper as the sword scrapes against the sheath.

The movement is simple—just a quick extension of his arm as Kitetsu sings. His back is still against the wall, the stranger stands frozen on his right. The blade hovers barely a centimeter from the intruder’s neck, the fine edge of the steel sharp enough to rip the fragile skin of the man’s throat with minimal effort. A child would be capable of exerting enough strength to kill him from this position.

The light is weak, especially with the shadow of the house swallowing all the moonlight, but Zoro catches the gleam of the stranger’s eyes as they slide to him.

“Pirate Hunter Roronoa Zoro, I presume.” The voice is young. Confident and smooth, maybe his age.

The hand has not moved away from the doorknob.
“What do you want,” Zoro replies. Kitetsu wails in his head, furious at the scant distance between the edge of the blade and fresh blood.

“To see the conquering hero, of course.” There’s something sardonic and testing in the stranger’s voice. “Or heroine, as the case may be.”

Zoro feels Kitetsu gnaw on his will at that, just a little harder than before. He narrows his eyes. “Back up.”

The stranger doesn’t move. His left hand is free, obscured by the night. Zoro looks him in the eye, promising bloodshed if the man didn’t comply.

“ Aren’t you going to ask who I am?” The stranger asks, his voice light. “ Where I come from, why I want to see her?”

“I don’t care,” Zoro growls. The back of Kitetsu’s blade tilts up into the man’s jaw in warning, the edge no further from that fragile barrier than before. “Back up. Now.”

The man doesn’t move. He just continues to hold Zoro’s gaze, and the air strains thick with tension. Zoro twitches the fingers of his free hand, preparing to draw another blade if he somehow escapes decapitation. The goggles on the brim of his top hat reflect the moonlight, drawing Zoro’s gaze upward for just a moment.

The stranger moves—Zoro can’t see it in the dark, but his Haki blares warnings in his mind and he leans hard into a cutting strike with Kitetsu, raises Shusui half-out of the sheath to catch the attack to his chest on the flat of the blade, and—

The door opens, and light floods the doorstep.

Both Zoro and the intruder freeze, mid-motion.

“Sabo?” Robin asks, drawing the fluffy white coat around her like a robe. “Zoro? What are you two doing?”

Kitetsu is literally pressed against the stranger’s throat, the guy only saved by his quick and minimally-used Armament. His left hand, tense in a shape like a claw, is barely an inch away from impacting Shusui’s blade.

“You know him?” Zoro asks, still unwilling to look away from the maybe-not-an-enemy-after-all. Blue eyes meet his gaze beneath a curly blonde fringe of hair. A scar mottles the left side of his face.

“Yes,” Robin replies, sounding vaguely pleased. “He’s Lucy’s brother. We met while I was with the Revolutionaries.”

Zoro gapes a little, his eyes widening. “You’re her brother?” Instinct compels him to hold his position against an attacker who hasn’t withdrawn, but he beats it back, and pulls Kitetsu away from Sabo’s neck. Shusui, however, remains in defensive resolve, and he doesn’t return either katana to their sheath. “She mentioned you.”

The blonde retracts his claw, the black film of Haki dissolving against his neck. He doesn’t drop Zoro’s gaze though. Zoro gets the feeling he’s being tested, and his gaze narrows again, ever so slightly.

It’s different now, than it was with Ace. Or it feels that way, at least. Ace hadn’t been AWOL for a decade, when he met the guy in Alabasta. He hadn’t known Lucy as well then either.
Ace showing up didn’t make Lucy cry.

It’s this guy who needs to pass Zoro’s test, brotherly instincts be damned. He doesn’t get to abandon Lucy for who-knows-how-long and then pretend like nothing happened. Not after Ace died. He doesn’t get to screw with her head like that.

“Sabo?” Robin asks again, and the man’s gaze finally turns to the tall woman.

The blonde’s gaze turns instantly warm. Zoro doesn’t trust it.

“Robin,” he greets. He’s smiling, showing off a set of pearly teeth and a dimple in his left cheek.

“Come in,” Robin offers, sending a quick, questioning glance to Zoro when his fist tightens on his katana.

It’s a small, nearly unconscious check-in. Robin doesn’t understand the quick animosity between them, knows them both separately as their friends. She interrupted what Zoro is not too proud to call a pissing match, and she’s confused, but she’d be willing to rescind the invitation if he ordered it.

Zoro doesn’t want to let him in. Something dark and protective in his chest rails against it, set off by this stranger-acquaintance’s suspicious behavior, his sudden, upsetting presence in Lucy’s life.

But Robin loves Lucy too, and she knows Sabo. She’d never let him anywhere near Lucy if she thought he was bad news.

Zoro’s willing to trust her judgment.

For now.

He returns his blades to their sheaths, and Robin steps aside at the reluctant gesture of agreement, a hint of confusion still present in her eyes.

Sabo enters the little house first. Zoro reluctantly admires the guy’s willingness to allow such a recent enemy at his back. It’s ballsy.

Inside, only Franky and Usopp are awake. Two of the kerosene lamps are lit, Robin’s disembodied hands hold them at strategic angles to keep their sleeping friend’s faces in the shadows.

“Usopp noticed something, and woke Franky and I.” Robin shrugs. “Lucy and everyone else are still asleep, but I can—”

“No,” Sabo interrupts. He’s already across the room, at the foot of the bed. Lucy has always been opportunistic, and she’s already flopped onto her back and has an arm splayed across the space Robin’s body just vacated. “No, just let her sleep.”

Zoro leans into the juncture between the bed and the wall, near Lucy’s head. “She’d want to see you.”

Sabo doesn’t look away from Lucy’s face, but Zoro sees a flash of annoyance cross it before being replaced by something...complicated.

“No,” he repeats softly. “She’s injured. Got hurt protecting all these people.” A smile creases his face, and Zoro is horrified to see something like tears gleam in his eyes. “She should rest. Heal.” A gloved hand reaches out to pull the blanket up a little more, but he pulls back at the last moment.

Zoro narrows his eyes again.
He knows guilt when he sees it. He especially knows second-hand guilt, the type that comes with accidentally screwing up, the type that happens when a friend loses something and one finds oneself helpless to protect that friend from the realities of the world. It’s guilt magnified by the knowledge that one has somehow failed to live up to one’s duties, despite one’s best efforts.

Zoro spent two years working off his own guilt, for failing his captain and the girl he loves. He imagines failing both a brother and a sister would be at least as bad.

Regardless, he can’t help but think Sabo’s being more selfish than selfless, at the moment. Lucy would want to see him. She’ll be disappointed if she wakes up and realize Sabo left without a goodbye.

Normally, Zoro would tell Sabo that. It’s too important to his girlfriend for him to just ignore it, let Sabo make his mistakes. But the blonde hasn’t looked away from Lucy yet, hasn’t even blinked, and Zoro thinks this might be more complicated than he knows.

…he’s not exactly sure how a long-lost brother coming back from the dead after a decade of absence could get more complicated, but with Lucy, anything’s possible.

“Her face is kind, still,” Sabo says. His voice is soft and dreadfully quiet, and Zoro is certain he is not meant to hear. Not when there’s so much affection and frank adoration in the man’s voice. “I wondered if it would be, after…”

There’s an awkward pause. Franky coughs lightly.

“So, you and Robin met in the Revolutionary Army?” Usopp asks, curiosity lighting his eyes. Zoro can relate to that. Zoro’s been wondering what Robin did those two years as well.

“Yep,” Sabo replies. He tears his gaze away from Lucy to look at the sniper, but even Zoro, who is not a particularly adept reader of body language, can tell where his attention still lies. “I introduced myself as Lucy’s brother, and we became friends.”

Zoro shoots Robin a questioning glance. Not accusing though, because Robin’s loyalty to Lucy is unquestionable.

Robin catches the look and sighs softly. “He asked me not to tell her. Said he had to do it himself.”

“Thank you for keeping it quiet,” Sabo tells her. His eyes are suspiciously shiny as he looks at the archaeologist. “There were…things I needed to tell her.”

Zoro remembers the way she sobbed outside the arena, and resents Sabo a little, for springing it on her like that and making Lucy such a wreck.

He wants to ask for an explanation, on Lucy’s behalf. But he wants Sabo to offer one, too. Wants him to prove himself worthy of the hold he has on her.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to head out pretty soon,” Sabo says to the room at large. “We took some…sensitive items from the warehouses. Don’t want to risk CP-0 getting their hands on them.”

“CP-0?” Usopp squeaks, a little loud considering the number of still-unconscious people in the cabin. “Like CP-9, the people who tried to take Franky and—”

“Yes,” Sabo interrupts. His calm makes Usopp look a little embarrassed. “They helped Doflamingo fool the world in thinking he renounced his Shichibukai title.” Sabo gives a slightly exasperated smirk to the ceiling. “We were keeping an eye on them, but they were doing the same to us. Like
two outposts guarding an empty valley.” He shakes himself a little. “The items we took are valuable. There will be lots of people flooding the island in a few days, looking for them. And you.” He looks to Robin, a little earnestness in his voice. “You guys should leave as soon as you can.”

Zoro tamps down a bristle of irritation. He doesn’t like the guy telling them what to do. He doesn’t like that he addressed Robin, rather than him, Lucy’s first mate, which is weird because he doesn’t usually have issues with rank light that. He doesn’t like the implication that they can’t protect their unconscious captain without his help.

Sabo probably didn’t mean to prick at Zoro’s pride, though. And he’s Lucy’s brother. “Not being actively hunted” is a pretty good state of affairs for her. A little neuroticism is probably to be expected when it comes to her general safety, even if he hasn’t quite earned it yet.

It’s not his opinion that ultimately counts when it comes to Sabo, of course, but Zoro can’t help forming one. And he plans to tell Lucy if he thinks Sabo is bad news.

“We won’t stay long,” Zoro admits. The others turn their attention to him. “Lucy’ll want to meet up with the others.”

The Straw Hats nod in collective agreement. Sabo’s expression doesn’t change, but it suddenly seems icier than before. “You know my sister well.”

The air in the room tenses. Zoro holds Sabo’s gaze, unwilling to back down. The words are innocuous, but they’re said with a strange sort of resentment filtering through the edges. The room seems to burn a little hotter, crackling with electricity and potential.

Between them, Lucy shifts a little, her right hand closing in a fist and opening again. Zoro doesn’t look away from Sabo.

His relationship with Lucy is, as far as Zoro’s concerned, not relevant to Sabo. Or anyone else but the two of them, for that matter. He doesn’t care who shows up.

Franky takes out a screwdriver, and sticks it in his half-melted face. “We had to split the crew up. Aneki isn’t a fan when that happens.”

Sabo looks away from Zoro, his eyes swinging down to Lucy’s face. “…I see.” Then he seems to relax a little, a soft smile on his face as he studies Lucy’s. “She’s a good captain then.”

“The best,” all four of the straw hats reply. There’s a beat where they all look at each other in surprise before Robin laughs softly, and Franky has to clap a hand over his mouth to avoid making too much noise.

Zoro cracks a smile, looking down at Lucy. Fondness bursts in his chest, and he knows he doesn’t quite manage to keep it from his face when he looks up to see Sabo staring at him, his brows knitted together.

Ah, screw it, this guy isn’t being very forthcoming at all. And Zoro has no desire to tell Lucy her brother decided to fuck off for another ten years without an explanation.

“She never mentioned she had another brother,” Zoro says to the room at large. He’s not a subtle guy. He prefers the direct approach. But he tries to keep the accusation from his voice, for Lucy’s sake.

Sabo relaxes slowly as Franky voices a muffled agreement from the other side of the room. There’s
something sad and wistful in his face.

“No,” Sabo agrees. He pulls the blanket up over Lucy, tucking her in just a little tighter. Zoro resists the urge to draw Kitetsu and slice his hand off at the wrist. “No, I suppose she wouldn’t have mentioned me.” He smiles, and it looks a little forced this time. “She thought I died twelve years ago.”

The other straw hats react in shock. Zoro looks down to the floorboards. That much he knows from Lucy’s confused babbling earlier. He wants to know why he let her think that.

“There was an incident,” Sabo explains. “I was running away from my birth parents, who were trying to force me into elite society.” Sabo gives a proud kind of smirk. “Ace and Lucy and I weren’t exactly cut from that kind of cloth. I didn’t want to live anywhere they couldn’t be.” He shrugs. “Anyway, the incident made the papers, which is how they found out. I was grievously injured, presumed dead. When I woke up, I had near-total amnesia. I didn’t remember anything about myself, or who I loved. Just that I didn’t want to go back to Goa.”

Franky, Zoro notices, already looks teary-eyed.

“Dragon found me after the incident, somehow.” Sabo shrugs. “I had nowhere to go, but the Revolutionary Army took me in. I officially joined the ranks a few years later.”

“But you regained your memory,” Usopp points out. He has that shrewd expression on his face he gets when he’s trying to interrogate someone.

Sabo’s face spasms with pain. “The day after the war, there was a picture of Ace. In the newspaper.” Sabo’s fists clench, and his mouth sets in a grimace. “Payback of a kind, I guess. I remembered everything, when I saw that.”

Zoro closes his eyes, bowing his head in acknowledgment of the other man’s pain. He can imagine that such an experience would be…a shock, to put it mildly.

“I think Ace helped me. I think he wanted to make sure I knew to look after Lucy.”

Honestly, Zoro wouldn’t put it past Ace. He remembers the guy in Alabasta, how protective he was. If he couldn’t be around, it doesn’t surprise Zoro that his spirit would cling to Sabo.

Zoro doesn’t believe in the afterlife, of course. But he doesn’t doubt that Lucy’s brother would be stubborn enough to avoid departing this world completely.

“Oi! What are you doing over there?” Usopp screeches. Zoro looks over to see Kin’emon and Kanjuro in the corner, clearly awake. Kin’emon seems to be chowing down on the dried meat, and also guzzling sake.

“Don’t waste all the booze!” Zoro growls. Kin’emon just shovels another slice of meat in his face.

“Lucy will want meat when she wakes up,” Robin comments uncertainly.

“Aneki eats disturbing amounts of meat,” Franky agrees.

“We’ll get food in the morning,” Kanjuro pacifies.

“And booze,” Zoro demands pointedly. Robin giggles. Lucy shifts in her sleep, her mouth curled in a smile.
“Lucy has a good crew, I see,” Sabo comments. The look on his face is equal parts proud and humored, mixed with a strange sort of wistfulness.

Zoro doesn’t know what having a sibling is like, but he can guess Sabo’s currently wishing he hadn’t missed a decade of her life.

“Anyway. I came here both for the fruit, and to meet up with Lucy again. We met in the arena. I’m afraid we were short on time, though, so we couldn’t spend as much time together as we might have wanted.” He tugs on the brim of his hat. “Lucy’s grown a lot. I couldn’t believe it when I saw her.”

“What was Lucy like as a kid,” Usopp asks curiously. Franky and the two samurai look on with interest.

Sabo smirks. “Oh, nothing like she is now. Total crybaby weakling.” Sabo’s expression morphs to something vaguely rueful. “Suicidally proud, too.” He looks a little embarrassed. “Ace and I probably shouldn’t have teased her so much. We weren’t very good role models.” He scratches the back of his neck. “Never expected her to go after the giant gator alone, though.”

Zoro snorts at the mental image of a seven-year-old Lucy trying to take down an alligator and tripping into the water immediately. Robin giggles. Usopp expresses his doubt over Lucy ever being a weakling.

“Well, I better be going,” Sabo says after a moment. He claps his hands to his knees and looks at Lucy’s face for a long moment before standing.

Then Sabo looks at him, direct and in silent request, and Zoro moves to follow him out the door.

“I’m going back to bed,” Franky declares. Usopp nods in agreement.

“I think I will as well,” Robin chimes in.

“Roll Lucy over when you do,” Zoro tells her. “She—”

“—hates sleeping on her back,” Sabo finishes. The look he’s giving Zoro is hard to decipher. Zoro’s fairly certain he sees protective brotherly instincts warring with…something like relief. And a lot of other emotions.

“…I’ll do that,” Robin assures them.

Sabo moves to the door, and Zoro follows him out. The floorboards creak beneath their feet this time, and Zoro is glad the rest of the people in the cabin are either heavy sleepers or too exhausted to be disturbed.

Zoro shuts the door behind him. He can see a square of light from the window around the corner that, tellingly, indicates the occupants inside are not bedding down just yet. The night air is cool. Refreshing, outside of the stuffy cabin. Sabo waits for him about ten paces from the door.

“You know, I’d forgotten that, until just now,” Sabo says evenly. Zoro raises an eyebrow. “That she hates sleeping on her back. Sometimes those things slip my mind.” Sabo’s mouth twists with distaste. “Sometimes that happens, where I remember something new. I think I have all the big stuff locked down—consolidated, as the doctors like to say—but the little stuff…” Sabo shrugs. “Who knows? It could just be normal memory decay. It could be amnesia.”

Zoro says nothing. Not being able to trust his own mind is one of the few things, he thinks, that could really scare him.
“I remember why she hates sleeping on her back though,” Sabo continues. He sends Zoro an embarrassed glance. “Ace and I may have told her giant snakes eat seven-year-old girls who don’t sleep on their stomachs.” He huffs a small laugh. “We were really sick of her snoring.”

Zoro grins, fond in spite of himself. Lucy is nothing if not noisy when she sleeps. Without thinking, he replies, “Fair enough.”

Sabo’s eyes shoot to Zoro, contemplative. And, shit, Zoro just implied a level of intimacy several magnitudes higher than he maybe should have.

“You’re my sister’s first mate, right?” the blonde asks good-naturedly. His gloved hand tugs at the brim of his hat.

Zoro nods, his hands resting easily at his sides.

“Is that all?” Sabo asks. His voice is low and even, maybe a few notches shy of dangerous.

Zoro snaps his gaze to Sabo’s. He doesn’t reply.

Sabo sighs. “Thought so. Here.” Sabo pulls a piece of paper out from a pocket in his jacket, and hands it to Zoro. “It’s a vivre card for her. Had it made from the hairs in her helmet.” He rips off a corner, and stuffs it into the same pocket.

Zoro nods, and folds the card down, sticking it in his haramaki. He’s unprepared when Sabo’s hand snaps out, trapping Zoro’s wrist between his fingers.

Zoro looks up at him calmly, even though he resents being detained in such a way. Sabo doesn’t seem interested in violence.

…well, not anymore, at any rate.

“Look, I know I’m about twelve years too late to give you a shovel talk, and I can tell you guys love her, so.” He breathes out slowly. “Just. Take care of her, please? I don’t. I can’t lose her too.”

Sabo’s not looking at him. His gaze is pointed to the soil beneath their feet, to the cheerful sunflowers muted in the dark. Zoro thinks this might be the closest the guy comes to bowing.

Zoro feels something in his chest soften in sympathy, despite himself. “Always.”

He doesn’t…exactly trust Sabo. It’s hard to trust someone who doesn’t seem to trust themselves. Who seems so uncertain of the bounds of his authority. But he trusts that Sabo loves Lucy. That he’s going to do everything in his power to protect her, that he’d never intentionally hurt her.

He’d never trust him the way Sabo’s trusting Zoro. But he doesn’t need to. Won’t ever need to, because his destiny is to walk beside Lucy, make her Pirate King.

Sabo’s grip on Zoro’s wrist relaxes, and he breathes out, slow and purposeful. “Thank you.”

Zoro nods, feeling awkward. He’s not good with people. And Sabo seems a lot more emotive than Ace, and even Lucy, in some ways.

“Lucy might be a bit much for you to handle,” Sabo says fondly, turning to leave. “but I leave her in your care.”

And there’s something about the way he says it, and the heavy gaze, that makes Zoro think Sabo is referring, in particular, to him, and his care.
Zoro kind of wants to be annoyed, because he’s pretty sure neither he nor Lucy need Sabo’s permission to do anything, brother or not.

…but, he supposes, any brother in Sabo’s position would be anxious about leaving his sister alone. Hell, one of Lucy’s brothers already made that farewell.

So Zoro snorts, amused. Sabo turns to him, eyes questioning.

“Ace said the same thing, you know.” Sabo’s eyes widen. “When we met him in Alabasta.”

There’s a long moment where Sabo doesn’t say anything at all, just stares.

But then something twists in his face, and he speaks. “I didn’t get a chance to ask Lucy earlier,” Sabo says quietly. “Wasn’t sure if I should, really. But.” He looks up, and can’t quite hide the desperation in his eyes. “How did he look?”

Zoro fights to keep his expression neutral. He doesn’t think Sabo would appreciate pity.

“Happy,” he replies, thinking of the pride in Ace’s voice as he spoke of Whitebeard, of his fondness toward Lucy. “He looked happy.”

The blonde’s eyes water a bit, and Zoro pretends not to notice when he turns away to wipe moisture from his face.

“Good,” Sabo breathes. Zoro is glad he doesn’t sound as emotional as he seems. “I’m glad. I wondered.”

Right. Because the last time Sabo saw Ace, they were ten. He never got to know the man Ace became.

“I’ll be off then. See you.” He lifts his hand in a wave as he walks off. Zoro watches until his top hat melts into the night.

He releases a heavy sigh, and turns back to the cabin. The emotional baggage that tends to follow Lucy around is surprisingly complicated, for such a straightforward person.

The door opens easily. Zoro is completely unsurprised to see everyone still awake, although mostly bedded down. Usopp looks up at him from his sleeping bag, frank curiosity on his face.

“That looked awkward as hell,” the sniper declares. “We weren’t sure you were coming back.”

“I told you it would be fine,” Robin interjects calmly. Zoro notices that Lucy’s been moved to her stomach again.

“No, Sabo-dono looked understandably upset to discover the close relationship between his sister and a thief like Zoro-dono.”

Zoro scowls in Kin’emon’s direction. “I thought we were done with the thief thing.”

“What did he want to talk about?” Franky asks. He already sounds sleepy.

“He gave me a vivre card for Lucy,” he informs them. “And he asked us to take care of her.”

Robin smiles softly. “Sounds like Sabo.”

Zoro walks over to the windowsill, climbing on the ledge again to settle into his watch. Robin’s
hands turn the lights out, and set the lamps on their respective tables.

“Lucy’s got a good brother, doesn’t she?” Robin says into the quiet.

Zoro presses his forehead to the cool glass of the window. “No,” he says, placing his palm over the vivre card. “She’s got two.”

Robin laughs in that quiet way she has. “Ah. I suppose you’re right.”

Lucy shifts, and her left hand wraps around the bars on the bed frame. Zoro keeps watch until morning.

“I can walk.”

“Right.”

“No, really, I’m like, sooo good at walking.”

“Law said you’d be loopy from the meds for a while.”

“Loopy? Who’s loopy?”

Zoro rolls his eyes, and tightens his grip on Lucy’s waist as she stumbles over quite literally nothing. “You. You’re like three miles high and somehow clumsier than usual.”

Lucy tilts her head back, and stumbles into him. Her face scrunches in concentration. “I could be clumsier,” she promises. “Watch! Gum Gum—”

“No,” Zoro says sternly, just barely managing to pin Lucy’s right arm to her side before she lets loose. He’s forced to nearly lift her off her feet in his attempt to still her. “No, no, we’re not doing that.”

Lucy, sufficiently pinned against him with her left arm slung across his shoulders, pouts.

Zoro rolls his eyes. “You’re lucky someone was willing to deal with you out in the open. Don’t complain.”

Lucy beams at him. “Yeah, but you’re always willing to deal with me. You’re Zoro.” She says his name like there’s something to be awed about, and he can’t help the flush that rises to his face. He reminds himself that Lucy is currently too medicated to truly understand that words strung together in a row are meant to be a sentence.

It’s not that hard, he thinks in response. It’s you. “Yeah, well. Someone has to.”

Lucy does not seem to see this as a rebuff. Instead she leans even more heavily into his side, so he’s practically dragging her along. Her face presses roughly into his armpit and she jerks away with her nose crinkling. “Ew.”

“They still don’t have running water and all the rations are either keeping people alive or washing out infected wounds. You don’t exactly smell like a peach either.”

Water is a bit of a problem, actually. The Marines are apparently expecting relief ships to arrive soon, but for now the entire island is subsisting off of the supplies in the Marine fleet. Apparently, it’s not nearly enough.
Zoro still wants a shower.

Lucy nods solemnly. “Yeah, okay.” Then she looks at him, eyes wide. “I still love you though. Even if you smell like BO.”

Too medicated to understand what a sentence is. She’s high as a kite right now. “Yeah, well, you’ve got that and also you smell a bit like rotting fish, for some reason. Not sure why.”

Lucy trips again, and Zoro nearly tumbles with her. “That’d be Snot. He was gross. Torao killed him, or something.” Lucy cocks her head. “Maybe ‘cuz he smelled?”

Zoro raises an eyebrow. He’s about to ask about it, but then Lucy sags against him, her legs suddenly giving out.

“Oi, you were the one who ‘needed to get out of the house,’ who ‘wanted to go outside,’ who nearly caused a mutiny with the amount of trouble you were getting up to with Franky’s innards.”

That had been kind of gross, to be honest. Franky has very realistic synthetic blood, which is, apparently, just cola. Zoro doesn’t know, Franky is possibly crazier than the rest of them. They voted on that once, when half of them were drunk. Fanky and Zoro tied for second place which, honesty, is saying something. Lucy, obviously, got first, and the fact that Robin placed last is honestly the most terrifying part of that whole experiment.

“That was before,” Lucy declares imperiously. Then she twists, and her chest thumps into Zoro’s, and before he knows it there’s a hand on the back of his neck and her mouth is pressed firm and hard against his.

Zoro responds, a bit blindsided but willing nonetheless. Two arms loop around his neck and he fumbles a bit as she jumps up, her legs wrapping around his hips. Zoro just bare manages to catch her before she slides straight to the ground. The angle changes, their teeth scrape, her mouth is warm and her tongue is smooth and restless as they twist together.

Lucy pulls back, ending the kiss as quickly as it began. Zoro stares up at her, and he thinks the dilation of her pupils is probably not just from the drugs.

“…Wanted to do that, too,” Lucy admits, biting her lip. Zoro can feel his eyes latching on her mouth, and he feels a little helpless to look away.

Then Lucy goes limp, like her strings have been cut, and Zoro nearly drops her again as his grip changes. Lucy’s head thunks onto his shoulder heavily, like her neck can’t bear to hold it up any longer.

“Tired now,” she mumbles into his shirt, stating the obvious.

Zoro sighs, frustrated. Clever little shit got him to carry her.

Well to be honest, he doesn’t really feel like going back to the house either. He’ll go stir crazy if he stays in there much longer.

There’s a tall linden tree about fifty feet away, an ancient, gnarled thing with sprawling branches and thick leaves, surrounded by a copse of honeysuckle. Zoro shuffles over. Lucy’s not being super helpful with this, her whole body kind of limp, but even with his injuries she doesn’t weigh anywhere close to what he’s capable of lifting.

The sun in Dressrosa is hot today, glaring down on the flower field. The wind is cool though, a
pleasant balm to the stifling heat. The linden tree offers shade, which is probably a good idea since Lucy isn’t supposed to get overheated.

He gets to the tree, and coaxes Lucy off of him so he can sit. She whines about it but complies, swaying on her feet sleepily.

Zoro huffs a breath out in disbelief. Ten minutes ago she was more or less literally bouncing off the wall. Law hadn’t been kidding when he said the drugs would work fast.

“Zoro…” she complains. She makes grabby motions with her hands, like a child whose favorite toy was just snatched away.

“Jeez you’ve been clingy,” he grouses. But he lifts her into a bridal carry anyway, and sits between two big tree roots with Lucy settled across his lap. It’s a little clumsy, but he manages to do it without jostling either of them too much. Zoro unwinds the arm under her knees to pull her torso closer and support her chest a little more. Lucy just presses her face to his neck and curls her ankles to press against his thigh as she twists her fingers in his shirt.

“Zoro,” she hums happily. Zoro finds his hand coming up to stroke her hair, because yeah, holding her like this feels pretty good.

…it’s possible he’s feeling clingy too.

Then she tenses a little, her breath just a hair too short. “You smell like blood. Different than usual. Kinda…” Zoro freezes in response, because he never in a million years expected Lucy to think— “You’re injured?”

Zoro releases a breath slowly, and resumes stroking her hair. “Yeah. I’m fine though.” He lays a kiss on her temple, trying to shake off the perceived accusation. “I’m not the one with an infected wound. And I didn’t recently have emergency surgery to ensure gangrene didn’t set in.”

The gouge in her hip was worse than previously realized. The infection—from rusty, poorly maintained metal, apparently—was worsened by the effect Gear Fourth has on her body. Using it in rapid succession, twice, is apparently a blow to her immune system.

If Zoro ever finds out which bastard used a rusty sword on her, he’s going to kill the guy. Poison’s a cowardly way to kill. That’s part of why Zoro takes such fastidious care of his katanas.

Lucy frowns into his collarbone. “I scared Zoro,” she realizes. She pecks his neck, like a child innocently believing a kiss makes the hurt go away. “Sorry.”

Zoro lets out a slow breath, and brushes some of the hair from her eyes. “Just be careful.”

Telling her not to scare him again would be a waste, after all.

Lucy hums and settles a little deeper against him. Her slowing breath informs him that she’s about to drop off to sleep.

Zoro could join her, to be honest. He stayed on watch for most of the night and he had a nap this morning but he’s still tired.

“Z’ro?” Lucy mumbles, slurring her words. “Where’re the others?”

Zoro draws soothing circles on her back. “They’re waiting on Zou, remember? Curly’s with them, they’ll be fine.”
Lucy relaxes. “…right. Sanji promised…” She falls asleep mid-sentence.

Zoro leans his head against the tree. That was what set Lucy off earlier, he remembers. She wanted to get to the rest of the crew immediately, now that everything on Dressrosa was taken care of.

They don’t have a ship yet, though. And Lucy’s still not healed enough to be awake more than a few hours at a time. They’re working on the ship, sure, and they’ll need to get going sooner rather than later, but no one on the crew is fully functional yet. It’d be best to wait until at least one of them is, just in case they have to fish someone out of the ocean.

Zoro’s eyes snap open to the sound of creaking wheels. Lucy’s still pressed against him, tucked in a ball against his form, but the sun is a little lower in the sky. An hour has maybe passed.

The wheels are coming from behind him. He senses two people—a woman and a child, and they’re close.

Zoro’s hand drops to his katana, his left hand splayed between Lucy’s shoulder blades, pulling her close. Drawing will be awkward at this angle, with Lucy in his lap, but if he can just get his feet under him—

A cart moves around the tree. An old lady with a leathery face and clouded eyes pushes it, and a young boy maybe ten years old with bright red hair and freckles stops to pick a lavender crocus flower.

“I thought I might find you here,” The old lady declares. “Oh, and the poor dear’s asleep. She must be tired.”

“Deposing an evil dictator will do that to a person,” Zoro replies absently. He blinks. “You’re the lady from earlier. The one with Observation Haki.”

“Alvera, dear, my name’s Alvera.” She sets the cart down and gestures to the boy. “This is my grandson, Arlo.”

Zoro squints at the boy. “The toy dog?”

The boy makes a face. “Not anymore.”

Which. Fair enough. Zoro supposes he would prefer it if people didn’t remember him as a toy dog, if he were in the same situation.

“So you both survived, I guess,” Zoro says awkwardly. Around ten percent of the Dressrosi population died, so it wasn’t a guarantee.

“Thanks to you two. And your friends, of course.”

Zoro shrugs. “I think Usopp took out the toy chick.” Actually he knows, because Usopp won’t shut up about this incredible shot he made to save Lucy and Law. The story sounds so ludicrous Zoro would think Usopp was exaggerating, but Kin’emon and Kanjuro both corroborated the account, and honestly even Zoro’s a little impressed with a shot like that.

Alvera makes a clicking noise with her tongue. “Well. I have a gift for you both.” Her wrinkled hand slides over the edge of the cart, her fingers blindly searching between the stems.

The boy, Arlo, comes over immediately, and plucks a bouquet from the cart. He gives her a blinding smile and chirps, “This one, Nan.”
The old woman places her hand on the boy’s head. The gesture looks intimate and familial, like a private reunion taking place in public.

The moment passes quickly. Alvera makes a shooing gesture to the boy, and he bounds over to Zoro and Lucy, placing it next to Lucy’s leg.

Zoro raises an eyebrow as he looks at the gift. Some of the flowers look a little worse for wear. “Is that—”

“We found it near the ruins of the colosseum,” Alvera replies. “It was sitting on top of the rubble. We decided it should be returned to you.”

Zoro stares at it, and thinks of the unidentifiable kid. “…thanks.”

Alvera pauses and stares at him, registering the tone in his voice. Zoro stares back, unbothered by the accusative look.

“We’ll be planting yarrow and live oak on the ridge up there,” Alvera says, pointing to the mountain Lucy battled Doflamingo on. The spikes and various craters from where Lucy and Doflamingo hurled each other through solid stone give it a strange silhouette. “It’ll be a memorial. One tree for everyone who died.” The old lady taps the side of her nose. “Recovering the dead is impossible. Grief is inadequate.” The woman shrugs in a helpless sort of way. “Remembering them is all we can do. And appreciating gifts along the way is not such a bad thing,” she says, nodding to the flowers by Lucy’s feet.

Zoro nods. He agrees. He just hasn’t figured out how to ask one of the tontattas if the kid was identified or not.

The lady seems to get the hint, and changes the subject. “You know, that bouquet is a special one. The most curious I’ve ever made.”

Zoro raises an eyebrow, and ignores the drool Lucy’s leaving on his shoulder. “Yeah?”

Alvera nods. “You remember the legend I told you? The one about the girl and her lover?” When Zoro nods, she continues. “The supposed arrangement of the flowers he left her is passed down among those of us in the craft. It’s a trade secret, you might say.” Alvera’s clouded eyes look sharp for a moment. “Imagine my surprise when you and your lovely captain pick it out!”

A gust of wind bows the flowers in the field to its whims. “Er. What.”

“There’s a prophecy or thirty that goes with that bouquet,” Alvera continues. “Most of it’s probably hogwash. But they all say it’s associated with a new age. With freedom.”

Zoro rolls his eyes. “It’s got nothing to do with some flowers. She’s going to be Pirate King. She already said all that.”

Alvera chuckles. “Indeed. Well, we’ll be off then. Arlo, let’s go. We have some marigold to collect.”

The little boy runs up to the cart, depositing several colorful flowers into their baskets. “Yes, Nan!”

Zoro leans back, watching them leave. “Thanks for the flowers,” he calls. He doesn’t particularly want them, but it was nice of her to drop them off. Then he blinks in realization. “Wait, how’d you find us?”
He hopes it wasn’t Observation Haki. The blind admiral probably knows exactly where they are, if that’s the case. The guy’s a master of the skill.

Alvera stops the cart and looks over her shoulder. “Oh that’s easy dear!” She winks, and it looks a little odd on her wrinkled face. “The tree you’re sitting under—we call it the hanging tree! It’s the one from the legend!”

And then she walks off, the boy dancing around her, plucking flowers as they went. They look odd. Otherworldly. Zoro considers her parting words with a little consternation.

Zoro believes in fate. He’s just not big on prophecies. The future is for him to decide, for him to grasp or die. He is determined to be the man who makes it all the way, he believes it will be him, but he knows it could be his fate to fail.

He’s certain of Lucy’s fate, at least. She’ll be the Pirate King. He knows because he’d never let her die. Not while he still breathes.

“We don’t need flowers to tell us what we already know,” Zoro mutters. Lucy mumbles something in her sleep that sounds a lot like ‘meat.’ He sighs, looking at her fondly. “You’re going to make me carry you back, aren’t you.”

Lucy gives no response except to knock the crown of her head against his chin to make herself more comfortable. Zoro’s not sure why, but it makes him feel like laughing.

Chapter End Notes

The reason, by the way, the tontattas get progressively more awed about Lucy is because they’ve been listening to Bartolomeo rave about her.

Just in case you were upset about this, the reason Zoro kind of got the drop on Sabo is because Sabo was really, really focused on Lucy. And he was nervous about seeing her again, this time without any emergencies to act as a buffer to the emotional fallout. Plus, despite everything, the concept of Lucy having a crew of fanatically devoted friends is still kind of foreign to Sabo. He remembers her as the dumb kid who nearly died getting eaten by various oversized animals in increasingly ridiculous ways. While he obviously sees that she’s strong, after having defeated Doflamingo, he isn’t really expecting a crew competent enough to set up a watch schedule in the aftermath. And also not a zealously protective swordsman who will let a complete stranger near his unconscious captain over his dead body.

“Like two outposts guarding an empty valley” is a Red vs. Blue reference, if you know what that is. I have not seen all of it, or even most of it, but clearly I’ve seen enough to make a reference, which is more than I thought I’d seen, to be quite honest.

The "you smell like blood" thing and Zoro's reaction to it was inspired by one of the very recent chapters. Zoro confronts this guy who definitely murdered somebody, and he's like "you smell like blood." I was kind of ecstatic about this since I have long established that to Lucy, Zoro smells like "blood, steel, and sake," and also that he's killed people before. That is also the first time Lucy tells Zoro what he smells like. Zoro thinks Lucy's calling him a murderer. Lucy's just worried about why he smells bloodier than usual.
A crocus flower means “youthful gladness,” in Victorian flower language. Yarrow means “war.” A live oak means “liberty.” The linden tree they sit under technically means “conjugal fidelity,” but I’m just using it for the last part. The honeysuckle surrounding the tree means “bonds of love, generous and devoted affection.” All of this is very cheesy, but trust me, it could have been worse. The little experiments with Victorian flower language were fun though.

Again, sorry this was later than usual. I usually write/edit on Saturdays, and I spent last weekend protesting family separations. Babies in prison takes priority over fanfiction.
Chapter Summary

Zoro speaks truth to power, Lucy asks a question, and the Straw Hats get some buddies to rule the seas with.

Chapter Notes

**HEY HI HELLO I'M NOT DEAD YET BITCHES.**

So, it’s been like more than a month since I’ve updated this. Which is kinda bad, considering my previous update speeds. I had a lot of life stuff going on and honestly I was struggling with a particular scene that ultimately did not end up in this chapter. It’s going to be in the next chapter instead, because I thought I should probably have some kind of update. Anyway, I hope you enjoy! Sorry again!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

“I’ll grab another bottle,” Lucy hears. Blearily she tugs against the thick moss in her brain. She feels floaty, kind of. Melty, if that’s a word. Warm.

Well, she’s probably warm because she’s got, like, six blankets and Zoro’s jacket and the oversized shorts on. Plus, bandages. But also, the bed is warm? Like, really warm, like actually pretty hot—

Oh. That’s Zoro, underneath her. She’s got her face pressed to his haramaki and her arms around his waist. Her ribcage is stretched over his thigh in a way that should probably be uncomfortable because of her injuries, but isn’t. He’s sitting up against the wall just as Lucy’s knees knock against it, while Zoro’s feet point toward the door.

Lucy, should, maybe, feel bad about the fact that she somehow managed to trap Zoro in bed with her. She does not. She feels the opposite of bad, actually. Especially when she notices his fingers playing with her hair, combing out invisible tangles from the short locks.

A quick check with her Haki confirms the rest of her nakama, Torao, Bellamy, the Samurai and Kyros are also in the room. The faint hum of tension eases into serenity, her friends accounted for.

She tries to move, nuzzle into Zoro and let him know she’s awake, but she can’t. Her body feels sluggish, her limbs weighted down by something syrupy and cloying and heavy, like waking up from the deepest stages of sleep but worse.

Something in her brain pings in alarm, a soft tinkle of discord, but its drowned out by the heavy black labyrinth in her head. Panicking takes too much effort, and Lucy doesn’t even know what she’d be panicking about, because everything is soft and warm and Zoro smells like Zoro and—

Lucy thinks maybe someone slipped her some more of the pain drugs while she was asleep. She feels kinda. Like. That word Zoro used earlier. Lucky. Loungey. Long-y? Louis. Loo—Loopy!

She almost wants to drop off to sleep and have sleep-hallucinations or whatever but she’s sort of awake sort of not and then Kyros’ Voice flickers with interest as he accepts something and there’s a soft clink of glass as Zoro shifts toward the gladiator a little, and then. Then. Then.

Then what? What—is she supposed to do something? Is she doing things?

Zoro’s voice cuts through the confusion, “Your house is well-built. Didn’t make a noise last night, when I was sneaking around.” It’s interesting hearing him now, with her ear pressed to his belly. It’s low and rumbly and distracting enough to let her latch onto the words. Lucy feels Zoro shift a little, his arm moving up to his mouth. Drinking! Zoro’s drinking. Probably. That’s honestly just a good guess at any given time, though.

“Thank you. I built it for my wife and daughter, oh…nearly twenty years ago now.”

Huh. That’s Kyros.

“But you’re going to leave?”

Leave? Who’s leaving? Why are people leaving? Some of her nakama already left and it’s gonna be fine because Sanji’ll take care of them and Sanji’ll be fine and everything ‘cuz Iva-chan trained him and Sanji’s super strong anyway, but she doesn’t like the idea of the rest of her nakama leaving because last time they got split up she was alone and alone is—

“…aye.”

Oh. Kyros is leaving.

“Mind if I ask why?”

Yeah, Zoro, ask him why. Kyros shouldn’t be leaving, Kyros’s got a kid, but then Dragon left and he had a kid and so did Gramps and maybe that’s not a good reason to stay, Lucy thought it was just her that gets left behind and stuff but maybe it’s just a thing that parents do sometimes?

When Kyros speaks, there’s shame and regret in his voice. “I—when I was young I committed a horrible crime. The worst one a man can commit.”

Lucy’s brain blanks out, fizzes to a halt, and she would fist her hands in Zoro’s shirt if she could move her hands but she feels like she does when a building falls on her and she can’t wriggle out of it.

Rape? Kyros raped—

Zoro must look confused, because Kyros continues. “…Murder. I killed the two men who killed my best friend. I didn’t regret it at the time. I very much do, now.”

Zoro makes a little ah sound of comprehension. Lucy’s brain jiggles free of the gridlock, and then she’s feeling melty again. “Revenge is no good. I can’t say the thought’s never occurred to me before, though.”

Lucy wonders who he’s considered avenging before. Can’t be her. She wins all her fights. Except one. Like, the most important one.

Sabo said it wasn’t her fault, so. It probably wasn’t. ‘Cept Sabo wasn’t there so he might not know
that Ace was right there—

As if in response to the thought, Zoro presses his calloused thumb down between her shoulder blades, finding and releasing pressure points as he goes. She can’t move, but the sharp alarm fades at the gesture.

“If you value your soul, you’ll never kill,” Kyros intones, low and formidable. Lucy can’t quite put her finger on why that bothers her, but she can think of lots of reasons to kill that wouldn’t be revenge or anything stupid. She was willing to kill for Dressrosa. For Torao. She’s always ready to kill for her nakama, and honestly if someone seriously threatened Chopper Lucy wouldn’t think twice.

“I have before,” Zoro says dully, frank and upfront.

Lucy’s always known he’s killed. Lucy’s killed too. Not for fun or anything, just because she had to and he was a mean lion guy who wanted to hurt Robin and all her other nakama too. She wants to nuzzle into Zoro’s stomach, press her face against the familiar haramaki as best she can because something about him seems tense and uncomfortable and she’s known he’s a good man since the moment she saw him, but Zoro doesn’t always seem to realize that about himself. Which is stupid. Because Zoro is great. And the World’s Greatest Swordsman. Or will be soon.

“…I could tell.” Kyros replies, sounding vaguely sympathetic. “Blood on one’s hands never washes off.”

Lucy kind of feels frowny, along with the floaty feeling. Kyros is weird. She’s. She’s a little not sure why he’s weird at the moment, but she’s, like, ninety percent certain he just insulted Zoro. Maybe? Possibly? She doesn’t know?

Zoro’s only response is an indifferent “Hm.”

…eh. Zoro can handle himself. He’s like. Really strong and stuff.

“That’s why I can’t be a father,” Kyros continues. He sounds forlorn. Tired. “Rebecca deserves so much better than me.”

Well. That doesn’t seem. Right? Lucy’s pretty sure Rebecca just wants to live in a house with her family. She distinctly remembers Rebecca saying something like that. And something about sunflowers.

Zoro seems to think the same. “Everybody’s got issues. Those things never have to control them.” There’s a swish sound as Zoro takes a swig of the liquor. “Riku wouldn’t have let you marry his daughter if you didn’t know that.”

Kyros says nothing in response.

Zoro surprises Lucy a little, when he continues. He sounds sort of distant. The way Lucy feels right now. “Speaking from experience…quarantining your darkness isn’t the same as controlling it.”

The frowny feeling comes back. Lucy doesn’t like that tone in his voice, and Haki whispers something undefinable in the low, echoing gong of Zoro’s heart. It makes her think of when she told Zoro that he’s hers and she’s his and he kind of not-cried for a while, like he didn’t believe her.

Zoro’s hers. Hers hers hers hers—

There’s a pause, and she feels Kyros’s eyes on the back of her head. “You and Lucy-san are…?”
Zoro brushes her bangs away from her face. Lucy kind of wishes she could figure out how to open her eyes, look up at him, because can tell what he’s feeling and she’s pretty sure his eyes are the mercury-silver they get like sometimes when she says she loves him.

“Mhmm.” Is all Zoro says in response. There's a warmth in his voice that makes Lucy feel meltier than she already did. Does. Is. Was. Were?

“How do you…accept it? She seems very…” Kyros trails off, uncertain.

Zoro seems perfectly happy to continue for him. “Childish? Lacking in impulse control?”

Lucy should, like, pinch him or something. And then cuddle. She likes cuddling with Zoro. Like a lot. It’s like meat but better ‘cuz Zoro doesn’t ever run out of cuddles.

“I was going to say something like pure,” Kyros corrects.

Zoro says nothing. Lucy is just confused because she’s never been called anything like that in the history of ever. Dadan’s favorite epithet aside from “brat” was “hellion” and sometimes “devilspawn” if she and Ace got up to something particularly troublesome.

“You aren’t afraid of…of tainting her, or—?”

“Lucy can make her own decisions,” Zoro interrupts. His thumb grazes her cheekbone, callouses dragging against the delicate beneath her eye, but it isn’t unpleasant, especially because her face feels kind of numb from the drugs her nakama probably gave her. Lucy’s pretty sure she just drooled on him. Whoops. “She’s not as naïve as she puts on.”

Kyros makes a despairing sort of noise, and Lucy hears the thunk of glass against wood as he sets his liquor down. “Rebecca is not as worldly as that.”

Oh, yeah, ‘cuz Lucy’s traveled the world and stuff. So she’s worldly. But there’s like, lots more to see and she wants to see everything. Has to, actually, so Nami can make her map. Map s. Book of maps. There should be a word for that.

Zoro surprises her a little, sounding slightly harsher than she’s expecting when he speaks. It makes her—not tense, but. Alert. Wary. She checks on the room’s occupants again, her Haki echoing against her nakama and allies reassuringly. “…no offense, but she lived in that colosseum. And even if she wasn’t actually an orphan, she believed she was one all this time.” There’s an unmistakable sound of wood groaning under pressure. Kyros’s Voice sounds like a whistling kettle, and Zoro’s rises louder in irritation. Lucy feels odd. Confused. Tense. Zoro sighs, and it seems like a conscious effort to relax as the gong eases down usual deep, calmer tone. “Look, Lucy didn’t give me much of a choice. I doubt Rebecca will either, if you ask her input.”

“She’s a child. She doesn’t know what she needs.”

“She’s old enough to fight. And if you don’t want to be her father, don’t make decisions on her behalf.”

Lucy feels like cheering, or something. She’s not sure, so she inhales slowly, and mentally recoils at the persistent stench of the cabin, but Zoro smells like blood and steel and sake under all his sweat and so she can put up with a little BO.

“I want—” Kyros starts, angry. Then pauses. Begins quiet and longing again. “I want that very much. But this is the most I can provide her with.”
“Well, I’m not a parent. I don’t know anything about it.” There’s a slurping sound, and then a dull thud as Zoro sets his tumbler down. “You can finish the sake. I’m going to sleep.” Zoro, she can tell, doesn’t like his decision. Lucy’s having a little trouble understanding why. Con—con—consistency. No, no, it’s. Context. Context is difficult, at the moment. The only thing she’s completely sure of is that they’re all safe, because Zoro is here, letting her hold him while he draws his fingers through her hair with something close to reverence, and his katana are rattling softly with every shift of the bed at his feet.

“Well, I’m not a parent. I don’t know anything about it.” There’s a slurping sound, and then a dull thud as Zoro sets his tumbler down. “You can finish the sake. I’m going to sleep.” Zoro, she can tell, doesn’t like his decision. Lucy’s having a little trouble understanding why. Con—con—consistency. No, no, it’s. Context. Context is difficult, at the moment. The only thing she’s completely sure of is that they’re all safe, because Zoro is here, letting her hold him while he draws his fingers through her hair with something close to reverence, and his katana are rattling softly with every shift of the bed at his feet.

“Wasn’t it mine in the first place?” Kyros asks, referring to the sake.

Lucy pities him. He obviously doesn’t get how much Zoro likes sake. All sake is his sake, unless Nami steals it as a matter of alleviating his crushing debt.

But Zoro must like her more than sake, even. Because he untangles her arms from his waist and shifts down on the mattress clumsily. He accidentally kneels her in the back a couple times as he maneuvers around her, but he eventually manages to claim a strip of the mattress at Lucy’s back. She would turn to him if she could, press herself into the space under his chin until they were close enough that she wouldn’t be able to distinguish her breath from his body heat.

It turns out Zoro has similar ideas, though, because then his arms curl around her waist and he pulls her back into his front. Lucy’s brain blanks out in syrupy satisfaction because she can’t be sure of where she ends and Zoro begins because she’s warm and so is he and the bed’s warm and Lucy feels herself slipping under again, falling back into true unconsciousness as Zoro’s nose shifts her hair and his knees lock into the joint of hers.

“Eh, you can keep it,” Zoro says, his voice quiet and his breath blows the hair from the nape of her neck. His lips graze the skin there when he speaks and there’s a smirk in his voice, or maybe something fond. “We should spar, next time.”

“Next time,” Kyros agrees. Zoro adjusts her arm, pulls her hand back to her stomach, and laces his fingers through her as he lays their joined hands over her navel.

Something painful blooms in her chest as she remembers that Zoro loves her. And, honestly, they’ve fallen asleep like this who knows how many times, but for some reason this feels terribly intimate, like something precious and private, and she can’t help but feel it has something to do with the waves of affection rolling off of Zoro and the vague sense that they aren’t close enough, even now. Something hot stokes in her belly, right beneath Zoro’s hand, and if Lucy weren’t drugged out of her mind right now she would blush at the realization.

But the room is quiet after that and Zoro’s breaths are slow and unbothered and calm, and Lucy wonders for the first time if he can sense her fleeting alertness, if he’s trying to intentionally lull her into relaxation. The thought is foggy though, rendered through a haze, and his steady presence at her back and the slow rise and fall of his chest is soothing, steady, the paired heartbeat of the tiny universe known only to the two of them. It is silent in the cabin, apart from Usopp and Franky’s snores, and the heavy labyrinth in Lucy’s head collapses in liquid, ebony sheets into her consciousness, the texture satiny and insubstantial as she eases deep into the dark of sleep, feeling like she’s flying and falling at once.

Zoro always did have a way of making her feel free.

“Is it weird that we’re always running for our lives when we leave islands?” Lucy asks absently, and casually leaps over a pile of rubble, dragging Robin along with her for the sake of speed. Beside her Usopp pants and Franky’s giant shoulders swing on the edge of her periphery.
“We are pirates,” Robin replies, sprinting a few strides behind her back. “It is probably to be expected.”

“There was still meat on the dining table,” Lucy complains, setting one arm over her rumbling stomach. “I could have eaten it.”

“Not without choking,” Zoro says distractedly. He’s keeping pace a few steps behind Robin and, when Lucy looks for him over her shoulder, she sees his attention on some buildings on their left.

“Don’t get lost, Zoro,” She warns. “We’re running for our lives.”

“I never get lost!” Zoro snaps. Lucy stares at him incredulously.

“Dude,” says Franky.

“Dude,” says Usopp.

“Dude,” says approximately three other people running with them who have taken it upon themselves to corral Zoro in the right direction because he kept veering off at random vectors perpendicular or opposite to the desired one.

Honestly, Lucy’s not sure, exactly, why all the guys from the colosseum are helping them out, but she’s not complaining. The little fairies, dwarves, whatever, have been especially useful with keeping her swordsman with the group.

“What?” Zoro snaps at them all, indignant.

“It is alright, Zoro-senpai! The World’s Greatest Swordsman does not need to understand trivial things like directions!”

“I can understand directions!”

Ahead of them, the path slopes down between the great boulders that ring the island, the blue of the sea glimmering before them in a slivered window between the rock. Wind funnels between the stone, up the path, and it tears laughingly at Lucy’s clothes and hair as they sprint. The air smells of salt and sea brine and it makes Lucy grin wildly as something in her gut lurches in eager response.

The sea has always meant freedom to Lucy. Somewhere along the way it became home as well.

“What ship are we taking?” Franky shouts over his shoulder. The big guy with thick yellow braids grunts in response, his lumbering steps shaking the earth with every stride.

They take the stairs three at a time, eager. Lucy’s eyes are locked on the opening horizon.

That may be why she didn’t sense the purple admiral guy until he launched an attack at her head, his sandals clip-clopping on the cobblestone installed at the beach.

She doesn’t quite sense him in time to dodge though, and so she braces herself with Haki boiling painfully on her skin—

A set of blades and a pair of familiar broad shoulders intercepts the blow instead.

“Attacking an unsuspecting opponent,” Zoro huffs. “Not very sporting.”

The entire party of their allies and nakama stop in surprise or shock or both.
Well. Except Rooster, who squeaks in something like delirious joy. Lucy’s not really sure, the noise sounds painful.

“That’s true,” the admiral agrees, still walking placidly forward. “I was expecting my opponent to sense me though.”

Lucy frowns, irritated. Completely draining her Haki like she did the other day…her senses have been a little off. She’s not great with Observation Haki in the first place, and now it feels like she has a cold.

“Go on, everyone,” Zoro urges. “I’ll hold him off while we wait for Law.”

Lucy hums, eyeing the admiral curiously. “How far away is he?”

“He’s close,” Zoro grunts, and places Wado in his mouth. “Couple minutes, tops.”

“I SHALL HOLD THIS OBSTACLE OFF!” Rooster crows eagerly, sprinting up to Zoro and Lucy with a terrifyingly eager smile on his face. “FOR LUCY-DONO AND ZORO-SENPAI!”

Lucy squints at him, feeling like there’s something she’s missing. Robin laughs softly behind her.

“It’s fine,” Lucy tells him. “There’s something I want to ask him.”

She feels the collective spike of surprise around her, and feels it ebb away just as quick.

Zoro nods. “Me too.”

Lucy looks at Rooster. “Protect everyone else, okay?”

Rooster doesn’t react for a moment, but then there are. Tears. Lots of tears. Lucy doesn’t know, she’s very confused by Rooster.

“Oi, Straw Hat,” Cabbage protests, “Don’t be stupid. He’s an admiral.”

Lucy rolls her shoulders, trying to get rid of the lingering stiffness. “So?”

“So he could kill us all in a second if he wanted to!” Cabbage yelps, irritation bleeding in his voice. “He’s an admiral! Pirates are supposed to get out of the way when we see those, didn’t you ever learn that?”

Lucy turns to look Cabbage in the eye, and she lets steel coat her voice. “Yes.”

Usopp and Franky shift uncomfortably. Robin leans closer, just enough to brush shoulders with Lucy, and Zoro says nothing at all as he stares the admiral down.

Cabbage doesn’t quite back off sheepishly, but something about the way his eyes flash says he knows he’s overstepped some invisible boundary, and Lucy takes pity on him.

“Two years ago I would have run too,” Lucy admits. “But not anymore. I’m going to be Pirate King.” She smirks. “Schichibukai and Yonko and admirals—I promised to beat them all.”

The swell of affection and pride from her nakama feels warm and effusive, with the four of them placed around her as they are.

“Yeah, Lucy’s strong enough to make sure the rest of us don’t die. And Zoro’ll make sure Lucy doesn’t get herself killed,” Usopp reassures their allies. He claps Zoro on the shoulder once. Zoro
doesn’t outwardly react, but Lucy raises an eyebrow when Usopp shrinks back at the mild spike of irritation Zoro emits at the touch.

Usopp doesn’t have…does he?

Rooster is nearly non-functional at this point. He looks very close to catatonic. Then—“I SHALL STAY IN SERVICE TO LUCY-DONO!”

“This is all very stupid,” Cabbage complains, but he backs down and Lucy sees grudging respect in his eyes.

“We’ll stay too,” Robin says quietly, and Lucy doesn’t even bother telling them no, because Franky and Usopp are just as resolute as her archaeologist is.

Their allies form a ring around her nakama, clearly hesitant to leave them be. Lucy wonders at that, but feels grateful for the show of support nonetheless.

The admiral’s cane knocks against the ground sedately, his pace never slowing. Lucy steps forward, lets Haki blaze on her fist as she edges ahead of Zoro.

“Straw Hat Lucy and her crewmembers, eh?” The man says lowly, his blank eyes calm. “I better not underestimate you.”

He stops moving forward, stops moving entirely except to raise his cane and—

A wave of dark purple energy pulses out as he lifts his arm, and suddenly the island itself shakes in response.

Lucy remembers fighting this guy with Zoro. He’s strong, powerful, and back then he was containing himself to avoid hurting the citizens of Dressrosa. Lucy and Zoro had their own handicaps at the time, but…they were equally matched. And now…

Lucy doesn’t notice what he’s doing right away. But then shadow falls over the beach, strange and unnatural—

“Whoa!” She looks up, shocked, and her hand flies back to tilt the brim of her hat up.

Above their heads swirls what must be the debris from the entire island of Dressrosa. Everything destroyed in course of the battle, everything too broken to be fixed. The admiral’s purple aura pulses out and up and Lucy hears Usopp squeak in terror as the mass of debris condenses into a heavy, unholy sphere of concrete above their heads.

“Oh wait I wanted to ask you something!” Lucy chirps, heedless of the staggering amount of kinetic force the man raised so effortlessly.

“Er, Aneki…” Franky hedges. “Maybe…”

“You’re high up in the Navy, right?” Lucy presses. “How’s Gramps?”

Usopp offers a surprised laugh, and the admiral’s face goes blank immediately. The strange sense of force and warped perception eases slightly for just a moment, then returns harsher than before.

“You…” The admiral hesitates. “That’s what you wanted to ask me?”

Lucy bobs her head in a nod, and then realizes the admiral is blind and can’t see the action. “Yep!”
She’s been wondering what happened to her grandfather for a while now, because Chin Jao mentioned not being able to find him earlier, and spoke like he was nowhere to be seen on the sea, and that didn’t exactly—*worry* Lucy, because Gramps is *super* strong, but she isn’t…sure. She wants to know if he’s…around. Or not.

“He retired from active duty after the war,” The admiral replies, seemingly out of pure shock at being asked. “He’s still with the Marines. He teaches classes at the Academy, does special assignments. That sort of thing.”

Huh. So Gramps is…retired.

…*weird.*

But it sounds like he’s fine, so…

“Cool! We can fight now.”

“Finally,” Zoro grunts, his blades poised. Gears whir in Franky’s arms as he makes to fight.

Lucy’s lips pull back into a wicked grin and she rushes forward, her fists black with her resolve.

*“The child was honored well.”*

The admiral’s parting words echo in Zoro’s ears as he looks around the deck of the *Yontamaria.* The ship is huge, probably five or six times the size of the *Sunny,* and Zoro can appreciate good craftsmanship when he sees it.

Franky seems impressed too, and he gushes with another shipwright about support structures and mast height as Rooster breaks out a set of saucers in the corner.

…huh. It almost looks like—

Beside him, Law sighs. Zoro raises an eyebrow at him, and the other man just gestures tiredly at Lucy, who’s managed to get herself stuck in the rigging.

“That’s gotta be a record,” Law mutters.

Zoro snorts, amused. “Not even close.”

Learning to abide by Lucy’s general propensity to get into anything and everything is something of a survival skill when running around with her. He is kind of hoping she doesn’t end up in the water though. Salt water does not feel good on still-open wounds. He knows this from experience.

“Lucy-dono!” Rooster calls, sounding eager. “Please come down and grace us with your presence!”

“Don’t say it like *that,*” Cabbage complains. The giant plucks Lucy out of the rope with a surprising amount of grace for someone so large.

“We have a proposition for your consideration,” the Director guy says, his language unusually flowery. He sounds like Kin’emon.

“See, we realized we actually get along pretty well, over the last few days,” The Long-arm guy explains. “And we realized we all admire you.”

Lucy, just now righting herself on the deck as the giant steps back in line with the other men, just
blinks at them, her expression blank with surprise. “Me?” She scrunches her nose. “Why?”

The sheer level of gob smacked confusion on the others’ collective faces forces Zoro to smother a grin behind his hand. On his right, Usopp and Robin do the same.

“Lucyland saved us! Beat up Doflamingo and is really nice! Usoland respects Lucyland!” The Tontatta exclaims, enthusiastic and earnest, his gold needle swishing back and forth with his excitement.

Lucy nods, almost absentminded. “Yeah, that was fun.”

“Much as it pains me,” Cabbage says dramatically, flicking blonde curls over his shoulder. “They’re right. I…begrudgingly…find myself continually impressed with you, Straw Hat.” He frowns, and behind him his horse pins his ears. “I might serve under you, but that doesn’t mean you’re going to be more popular than me.”

Lucy scratches her head, knocking the hat back. “…I don’t get it. We’re all going off apart after this, right?”

“Lucy-dono,” Rooster intones with a sort of incongruous level of seriousness. Rooster wasn’t capable of using a normal level of volume control around Lucy even two hours ago. “We ask that you exchange sakazuki cups with us, so we may become your followers!”

Lucy blinks. Once. Twice.

“You want to what?”

Oh, damn, the look on Lucy’s face. She looks like someone just told her she couldn’t be Pirate King but annoyed.

Shit, if he looks at any of his nakama, he’s going to lose it completely. He can hear Usopp laughing and it takes a hefty amount of self-control to avoid echoing the sentiment with his own bark of laughter.

“We’ve prepared the cups, Lucy-dono,” Rooster repeats. He gestures to a particularly large cup perched on a barrel, already filled with an unusually large amount of sake. “Please, drink, and you shall become our boss!”

Lucy walks over to the barrel and frowns at it, her expression something closer to dismay than anything else.

She picks it up, and liquid nearly spills over the rim. Rooster and a few of the other men trying to adopt Lucy as their overlord grin.

“Yeah,” Lucy says, a grin of apology on her face, “I’m not gonna drink this.”

It’s Robin’s turn to lose it and Zoro nearly swallows his own tongue in an effort to avoid laughing at the expression on Law’s face.

“What?” Rooster squeals, “You—”

“I don’t like this sake much,” Lucy says, setting the overlarge cup back on the barrel. “So I’m not gonna drink it.”

Zoro walks up to the barrel, just catching the strange look in her eye before it flashes away. Lucy
glances at him, a smile tugging at her lips.

Zoro cups his hand in the ridiculous trough of sake, and brings the liquid to his lips. It’s sweet and has just the right amount of burn. Zoro mentally congratulates Rooster on his taste.

“It’s not about—look, the sake is about the vow, and you *shouldn’t* be drinking it.”

Zoro looks up at Rooster. “It’s good.”

“Thank you, Zoro-senpai, I—No! Wait! You have to drink the sake!” Rooster repeats, pointing to Lucy.

“Yes, *that’s* how you get Lucy to do something,” Usopp mutters, but he still sounds a bit breathless. “You order her. That always works out well for people.”

“I don’t want to,” Lucy says petulantly, clearly a bit annoyed. Zoro shows Usopp the ridiculous saucer of sake and finds himself glad Usopp has built up his alcohol tolerance over the last two years. More drinking buddies on the crew can only be a good thing, especially since it’s usually only him and Nami that make it any decent length of time.

“But—Lucy-dono,” Rooster entreats. “After this the whole world is going to be after you! They’ll come for you and no matter how strong you are, you’ll need some help to fight them off! That’s what we want to do, as repayment for saving us this time! We want to fight alongside you again, as your subordinates!”

The crowd of colorful people behind Rooster nod in unison, and Zoro raises an eyebrow. Lucy made more of an impression than he realized.

Damn, this sake’s good.

“If I drink the sake, I’ll become the grand captain of the fleet though, right?” Lucy asks, confusion and distaste written all over her face.

Rooster grins, clearly thinking his point has hit home with Lucy. “Yes! With a fleet of 5,600 in total, there will be no one who can stand in your way!” Rooster throws up his hands in enthusiasm. “You’ll be Pirate King eventually, and soon you’ll need more followers, but if you want to conquer the world—”

Zoro takes pity on Rooster. “Oi, you better stop.” Rooster pauses, blinking rapidly at the interruption. Zoro can’t quite help the pride in his chest from leaking into his voice when he cocks his chin at Lucy. “That kind of thinking doesn’t work with her.”

The giant looks annoyed now too. “Straw Hat, it seems strange to wish against assembling such a mighty military force,” he says lowly, his deep voice booming against the oak of the ship. “I’m sure you’ll need our help one day, just as we needed yours today.”

Lucy scowls, looking terribly annoyed. “I need my space!”

The crowd of men trying to profess their loyalty to Lucy look utterly confused, and Zoro chuckles a bit even as Usopp tries to take more than his fair share of the liquor.

“Why—*Straw Hat,*” Cabbage starts. Lucy doesn’t let him finish.

“I smell meat though. There’s a banquet later, right?”
“I—you’re interested in eating right now?” Says the Director guy. He looks kind of annoyed.

“Oh screw you, Straw Hat!” Cabbage snaps. “I’m more experienced and more fabulous than you, and I’m over here saying I’ll fly your flag!”

The guy who looks like he’s been taking style advice from Usopp raises his spear. “Let’s force her to drink it.”

Long Leg guy chimes in with his own irritation. “You don’t know how strong we are, you damn liberator.”

Zoro feels a flicker of annoyance cut through his general mirth at the situation, but it fades quickly. He doesn’t like people telling his girlfriend what to do, but Lucy’s got it handled.

Usopp clearly takes similar issue with their sudden change in tactics. “You can’t talk to her like that if you’re her followers!”

“She—”

But Lucy finally snaps. “Listen, I just want to become King of the Pirates!” She yells, looking remarkably like a child throwing a tantrum. “I don’t want to be important!”

The looks of utter confusion on the would-be fleet’s faces is one of the best things Zoro has ever seen, seriously.

“What is she talking about,” Law asks him, long-suffering confusion written on his face. He at least doesn’t look as taken aback as the others. Robin and Franky look like they’re having a hard time not just bursting out in laughter as the mess breaks down further, and Zoro doesn’t even complain when they come over to inspect the giant saucer of sake with interest.

“Lucy-dono *what do you mean?*” Rooster asks, and it’s by far the most irritated Rooster has ever sounded with any given member of the Straw Hats.

Lucy loops her arms around a railing on the quarter deck, and hops up on the edge, her hands on her hips and her smile beaming over the crowd below.

It’s weird, how fast the perception of her changes between one moment and the next. One minute she’s acting like a toddler, and the next…well, she’s dressed in nothing but a red tank top and denim shorts, but she looks greater, somehow, her presence larger.

“I’ll make sure to call you when we’re in danger,” Lucy promises, the words binding in a way only a person who treasures oaths so much as to live her dreams for them can achieve. “I don’t have to be a great captain or anything, right? And it can work in reverse, too! We’ll help you guys if you get into trouble!”

Lucy grins, her point made, and Zoro can’t quite help the fierce, affectionate pride that wells up in him as he watches Rooster break down over the realization of who, exactly, Lucy is.

Lucy wants to be free. As far as Zoro can tell, she’s never wanted anything else, besides good friends to share it with.

Of course, because Lucy only seems to attract strong personalities with uniformly admirable senses of honor, the idiots drink the sake anyway.

Lucy looks close to throwing them all overboard in response, which would be rude even by Lucy’s
standards considering they’re currently using their fleet as a buffer from the admiral.

Zoro walks away from the sake reluctantly and bumps her shoulder reassuringly. “Let them be,” he advises.

Lucy looks back at him and puts her hand on her hat. Irritation melts into uncertainty, and a more vulnerable sort of confusion than she’d previously shown. “But…”

“You didn’t make them do anything. They’re doing this because they want to.” Zoro nods to the now-sobbing Rooster. “They really want to.”

Lucy lets out a huffed sigh, and then a small smile crosses her face. “Yeah, I guess.”

“We have a banquet prepared!” The big blonde guy announces, clapping his hands eagerly. Zoro should probably learn all their names, now that they’ve collectively sworn fealty to his girlfriend. “One that should even satisfy a Pirate King!”

Then they bring out several piles of meat dishes, and really, they should have opened with that. Life would have been easier for all of them.

Chapter End Notes

I will remind you that Lucy still thinks she killed Lucci. I don’t imagine she’d be too upset to find out she’s wrong, but that is what she thinks.

I found it a more than bit ridiculous that they kept referring to Rebecca as a child. Like, no, she’s not an adult, but she’s a sixteen-year-old girl who’s been through hell. Probably at least as much as Luffy at the same age, btw, and she was only a year younger than him at the start of the series. Not even consulting her opinion on whether or not she wanted to continue a relationship with her father was frankly absurd.

I skipped over the Fujitora fight because this arc has already had a lot of fighting in it and it didn’t need another battle. Not even a short one. There was more important stuff to get to.

A quick translation note. In Japanese the word “sake” is used to refer to all alcohol, which is why sometimes Zoro’s running around with a beer mug calling it sake. What English-speakers (or at least Americans) think of as “sake” is rice wine. Zoro likes that too, but a lot of the time when he says sake it’s referring to beer. Or other alcohol. I only realized this recently, so in my version Zoro just really likes the hard stuff. In canon, Zoro prefers beer, I think.

Again, sorry it’s been so long. The wait until the next chapter will be no more than a week, I promise. Let me know what you thought!
Law needs new purpose in life, Lucy and Zoro have a serious chat that's been a long time coming, Robin hates dystopian government policy, and Lucy finally succeeds in seducing her boyfriend through sparring. She really should have thought of that sooner.

Just to warn you, there is implied sexual content in the last scene of this chapter. I was very careful write it in a PG-13 sort of way, but I will remind you that this was written from the perspective of a twenty-one-year-old boy confronted with the possibility of having sex with his girlfriend. Just a heads up.

Rooster’s ship kind of explains a lot, to be honest. Lucy’s not exactly sure how she became Rooster’s…she doesn’t even know if she has a corollary relationship to compare it to…but whatever it is, it’s flattering. And also convenient, since Rooster’s offering their ship for passage.

Lucy chooses not to think about the fact that he and six others offered her a lot more, because it still kind of pisses her off.

(Rooster’s ship kind of explains a lot, to be honest. Lucy’s not exactly sure how she became Rooster’s…she doesn’t even know if she has a corollary relationship to compare it to…but whatever it is, it’s flattering. And also convenient, since Rooster’s offering their ship for passage. Lucy chooses not to think about the fact that he and six others offered her a lot more, because it still kind of pisses her off. (She pushes the whole thing aside, because it’s not really something she has much control over at this point. Besides—frustrated as she might be, she’s never been one to hold other people’s choices against them, unless it hurts her friends.)

It’s not long after they’ve settled in for the journey to Zou that Lucy notices something…off about Torao. He barely speaks. Every time someone tries to draw him into the group he finds a way to slink off and be alone. It’s odd, and not quite what she expected from him now that ‘Mingo’s gone.

Lucy knows sometimes people need to be alone. It’s why she has her special seat and Zoro has his weights and Nami her Mikan. And maybe, if she thought that’s what Torao needed, she’d leave him alone.

But that’s not what Torao needs. She knows, because Torao keeps letting himself get dragged into things without complaint, and he wouldn’t be doing that if he didn’t want to be around them.

So that first afternoon on Rooster’s ship, when she finds him staring out over the water with tension in his shoulders and a more-frowny-than-usual frown on his face, Lucy decides to check on her friend.

“Torao!” Lucy calls, bounding over to him and just barely managing to hit the brakes before pitching herself into the sea. Zoro would be mad at her if he had to interrupt a nap to fish her out of the water. Again.
“Straw Hat-ya,” Torao greets. He sounds a little annoyed with her sudden appearance, but Lucy isn’t bothered by that. “Still hungover?”

Lucy wrinkles her nose, annoyed, because she drank too much last night at the celebration on the big blonde guy’s ship. “Alcohol’s supposed to be gross, not sweet,” Lucy complains.

“That’s why you’re not supposed to drink the punch at parties, Straw Hat-ya.”

Lucy huffs, irritated. “Well did you drink the punch?”

“…I had a mug. Singular.”

Lucy snickers. “You’re a lightweight, huh?”

Torao turns to her a little, and Lucy is deeply gratified to see an eyebrow twitch. “You shouldn’t be talking, you know,” he grouches, and then continues a little softer. “And I’m not. I just don’t get drunk.”

There’s a heaviness to his words that sobers Lucy, just a little. A past she doesn’t know, doesn’t need to know. There’s lots of reasons to not get drunk. Lucy rarely does herself, because she doesn’t like hangovers and too much alcohol makes her tired before the party’s over. Sometimes people act different when they’re drunk, too, and Torao’s enough of a control freak to dislike it on those grounds alone.

“You had fun though, right?” Lucy pries. “At the party. And kicking ‘Mingo’s ass.”

Torao gives her a look she’s grown well used to—a confirmation that she was, in fact, serious about what she just said, and then disbelief, and then resignation. Or apprehension, from strangers. “Yeah, fine. Whatever.”

There’s a note in his voice that speaks of something buried though, something unsure and new. Frowning, Lucy hops up on the ship’s rail and balances on her sandals, the sea at her back as she inspects Torao.

Torao looks vaguely uncomfortable with her staring. After a few seconds of quiet he snaps a defensive “What?” in her direction.

Lucy squints, not answering right away. Something’s weird about Torao. Something different but not bad, necessarily. Haki whispers of relief, of uncertainty, of a stumbling climb from the depths of a cave into sunlight. It reminds her of when she fought ‘Mingo with her Haki, of peeling back layers to chains she didn’t know were there. But it’s weird with Torao, different, because instead of exposing purpose and will it seems like—

Oh.

Oh.

“You finished your dream, Torao!” Lucy declares excitedly, her arms pinwheeling wildly. Her feet nearly slip from the polished rail, but Lucy’s always been good with balance. Torao blinks in shock at the sudden topic change, and Lucy doesn’t let him regain footing before shoving a finger in his face, excited. “That’s why you’ve been so weird!”

Torao bats her finger away, irritated. “Well what would you do if you became Pirate King today?”

Lucy hums, uncertain, and then realizes it’s not that complicated after all. “Eat meat, probably.”
shrugs. “Then I’d find a new dream.” She slides off the railing, her sandals clicking hard against the tarred deck. “You can’t be a pirate without a dream, ya know?”

Torao huffs, annoyed. “That so?”

Lucy nods, authoritative. “Yup. And it’s gotta be a good one.”

Torao looks away, his eyes casting out to sea. “I don’t have one.”

Lucy hums, a little sympathetic. “Better find one soon.” But Lucy can’t help him with that, so she pokes him in his right bicep, right over the bandage peeking out under his sleeve. “Let me see your arm.”

“Don’t touch me, Straw Hat-ya,” he grousers, his left hand coming up to protect his arm defensively. Lucy feels a stab of guilt and then gets over it.

“C’mon, let me see,” she goads, making impatient grabbing motions with her hand.

“Why.”

“Let me see.”

“Will you leave me alone after that?”

Lucy thinks about that for a second. “…Nah.”

“Will you leave me alone for today?”

Lucy shrugs. “Not if Torao needs a friend.”

Torao hands over his arm.

She grabs him by the wrist, not at all gentle, and bends his thumb back, but not far enough to hurt.

“Done yet?”

Lucy ignores him. “It works and everything, right? Does it poop?”

Torao looks both confused and vaguely disgusted. “Why the fuck would my arm poop?”

“I dunno. Gotta ask though.” She turns his hand over and draws the arm out to the side so she can see the bandage properly. It needs changing. “Chopper will want to see your arm.”

Torao doesn’t react outwardly, but the internal howl of revulsion is clear through her Haki. “It’s fine. I’m a doctor. I can tell.”

Lucy isn’t sure why he’s so hesitant, but she’s going to have words with Torao if he thinks something’s wrong with her doctor. “Chopper’s better.”

Now Torao looks a little insulted. “What makes you say that?”

“Chopper’s the best.”

Torao lets out a soft huff of air, and Lucy thinks that might be a laugh. “You’re impossible.” There’s a pause, and Lucy guesses Torao’s getting more and more uncomfortable the longer she inspects his hand. “And your boyfriend’s going to get jealous.”
Lucy isn’t that concerned about Zoro getting jealous. More disappointing is the fact that, sewed on or not, Torao’s hand is just a hand, and therefore isn’t that interesting. “Why?”

“He’s glaring.”

Lucy looks over her shoulder at Zoro, who’s been napping on the deck in the same spot for an hour now. He is looking over at them, but he doesn’t look jealous or angry or anything. Actually, he looks amused. Zoro always did have a weird appreciation for Lucy screwing with other people.

“That’s just his face,” She tells Torao, completely honest.

“He’s going to get jealous,” Torao warns, trying to yank his hand back.

Lucy doesn’t let him and bends his middle finger back in mild retribution. “No, he’s not. ‘Cuz I’m getting a tattoo.”

Torao jerks away, muffling a yelp of pain. This time she lets him. “Huh?”

Torao should pay more attention. “I’m not telling you what it is.”

“I wasn’t—gah, you make no sense.” Torao sounds frustrated and annoyed, but not uncertain anymore, which is good.

Lucy shrugs. “Eh.”

Torao just sighs. He sounds very tired, so Lucy pats his shoulder sympathetically.

“Hey, Torao,” Lucy asks, cocking her head to the side. “What’s your favorite color?”

Torao blinks once, a little surprised, and then finally replies.

“Red,” He admits. He sounds a bit shocked at himself. “It’s red.”

Lucy grins as widely as she can. She knew he’d come around eventually.

Evening finds Lucy sitting below a figurehead of her own likeness, knees tucked close to her chest. The clouds are thick and grey, leaving the deck dark and unlit this late at night. The moon is a day shy of full, and the pale light shines in vain behind the cloud cover.

Nami would know what type of clouds they are. Nami can rant for hours about the formation of different cloud types, and such speeches have only gotten more frequent since her stint with the weather mages.

Lucy likes listening to Nami talk about the weather and her maps and navigation. Her eyes light up and she gets really happy. Lucy always likes it when her nakama are happy.

Lucy drops her forehead to her knees and wraps her arms around her legs. She’s tired of having her nakama all split up like this. It feels like she’s leaving them. Or like they’re leaving her. Which isn’t fair, but she can’t quite keep the thought away when Sabo just—

Her fingers leave bruises in her calves, her body taut and muscles aching.

An hour ago, Lucy made her nakama tell her about Sabo. They didn’t fight it or anything, were clear and concise and sympathetic about the situation and his brief appearance. Lucy pulled away not long after they finished, leaving them to the warmth of the gathering below deck in favor of the
murky dark and salt-damp air of the sea, the ocean still and devoid of relief-bringing wind.

In all honesty, Lucy isn’t sure how she’s supposed to feel about Sabo’s up and leaving again. She’s never been good about this, about letting people leave without hurting and taking it personally. But she’s so relieved, so terribly happy to have him alive again, even as she grieves the decade and change she missed with him, that the memory of seeing him again feels more like a fever-dream than anything.

He ate Ace’s fruit. He protected her from Burgess. He gave Zoro the Vivre card, the one he keeps folded in the wrappings of Wado’s silken hilt. Usopp offered to sew it in more securely, and in a show of trust that warmed her even through the uncertain shock of her nakama’s story, Zoro let him.

Lucy can’t decide if she wishes he’d given her a Vivre card for him or not. It would be nice to know he’s alive, to know she could go help him if he gets into trouble.

It would also be the worst case of déjà vu in history.

A square of orange light appears on the other side of the deck as the door to the galley slides back. A familiar silhouette cuts through the light, and the deck creaks under the weight of his boots.

It’s Zoro, of course. Zoro’s the only one who’d approach her after a conversation like that.

He doesn’t make any bones about his intentions, either, his gait sure as he moves over the tarred boards of Rooster’s ship. He stops right in front of her, but it’s so dark and the light so faint that she can’t even see his face from a few feet away.

She blinks at him, and then musters a weak smile. “Hey.”

Zoro lets out a sigh, and turns to sit beside her, his movements graceless and deft. Lucy wonders if he settles on her right to give her the illusion of more privacy, placing her in his blind spot. He’s close, but doesn’t make any move to touch her, to pull her against his side, and Lucy can’t decide if she should be grateful or faintly amused at how well he knows her, or vaguely annoyed at the same fact.

In times like this, Lucy usually wants privacy. But she almost never wants to be alone. Zoro kind of solves that issue for her.

The gratitude adds to the sick pit in her stomach, and she kind of wants to cry a little, but she doesn’t feel the tears come.

She’s so unsure of what she’s feeling, is the thing. There are too many things swirling in her head to settle on one, and the confusing mess only begets more frustration. She’s sad and she’s angry and she’s annoyed but she’s also amused and relieved and so, so happy.

“Well yeah,” Zoro says, sounding a bit confused. “I’d assume so.”

It’s only then Lucy realizes she said that last bit out loud. Zoro’s too goddamn easy to talk to, sometimes.

“It’s just—” Lucy trembles a bit, can’t quite suppress it. “—I miss him.”

There’s a pang of pure, unadulterated sympathy from Zoro, something she feels through senses too keen and too raw for her head to handle at the moment. But it comes across so strong, so easy and kind, and that it sends her over the edge, and suddenly she’s crying. She’s crying a lot.
She’s always been a quiet crier, which surprises everyone who knows her. It was something that freaked Ace and Sabo out a lot, actually, claiming that the only thing worse than a crybaby little sister was a crybaby little sister who cries *quietly*. But Lucy can’t quite help it, has never really wanted to voice her pain to the world, because it feels too much like admitting defeat. There’s no way Zoro doesn’t know she’s crying right now, there would never be a way to hide it from him, but she doesn’t mind crying in front of Zoro, so it doesn’t stop her from breaking down like it normally would.

She wishes she knew if she’s crying because she’s happy, or if she’s crying because she’s sad. It must be a bit of both, because the more she cries the more her emotions churn, peaking between highs and lows and the volatility of it makes her want to be sick. She feels grief for a childhood they’ll never now know, renewed anxiety for family lost to the sea and waves on the wings of their dreams, and so much fury directed at the Dragon that masked his life from her, that masked her and Ace from him. She feels giddy to have a brother again, thrilled to meet him on the seas as the three of them promised they would, and adoring in a way only a little sister who has spent her life chasing her older brothers’ backs can. She feels a profound sort of agony over the fact that Ace died thinking Sabo was dead, that he never gets to see their brother grown. There’s a strange, nagging question that she’s never felt the need to ask, the one that breathes *why couldn’t Dragon have taken me, too?* And at the same time a gratitude so crippling that Lucy could scream it from rooftops and rafters, a cry of *thank you, thank you, thank you for saving him.*

It’s a heady mix, and for the first time since the ecstasy of discovering that her long-dead brother is alive, she lets it out, the tears washing the jagged edges of emotion away like rain culls leaves from a tree.

It takes a while, but eventually it stops. The rain peters out and the land and sky and sea reach equilibrium again. When she looks up the deck is still dark but the moon peaks out over a break in the clouds, and a smattering of starlight spills over beside it. Beside her Zoro is still, his breath even and his right arm behind his neck as he leans against the smooth back of the figurehead, as if bored. He can’t fool her though—she can feel his attention on her, buzzing like a second skin, but not intrusive. His eye is sharp even as he doesn’t look at her, glowing silver-white as a moonbeam glances across his face, and Lucy feels a soft pang of regret for the loss of his left eye, because Zoro’s eyes are beautiful.

(The loss of his eye doesn’t make him *less,* of course. When she thinks of it, the scar makes something curl up at the base of her spine, something almost too fierce to be mere pride at her swordsman’s prowess, at his strength and willingness to sacrifice for victory.)

Lucy lets out a slow, calming breath, and unfurls a little from the ball she’s squished herself into. She leans back against the figurehead, her shoulder brushing Zoro’s, and stretches out her legs. She wipes the few remaining tears away with the back of her hand, and then folds her hands across her stomach, looking up at the stars seeking passage through the cloud cover.

Zoro is still quiet, but he feels like a bonfire beside her, warm and essential and full of the kindness that led him to save and suffer for a little girl in a middle-of-nowhere village in East Blue and eat her dirt-packed rice ball when that same girl brought him food as thanks. Zoro has always reminded her of the sun-baked stones in the desert of Alabasta, stubborn in the face of eons of grit against their surfaces, and warm to the touch.

And marimos, of course. He’d be furious over the comparison if she told him, but even with the scant moonlight bleaching his hair, there’s an uncanny resemblance.

The thought makes her lips turn up and something light and airy lifts her from stasis, the emotional
change steady and minute, this time.

Zoro must sense the shift, because he finally turns to look at her, an eyebrow raised in question. Lucy offers him a smile—a small one, but a smile—and adjusts her hat so it doesn’t get squished behind her shoulder blade.

“He seemed like he cared,” Zoro offers after a moment. Like he’s a little unsure of sending her spiraling into another crying jag, but too honorable to withhold such vital information.

The thought makes her smile a little wider, and she nods. “I know.”

The moonlight casts heavy shadows across his face, but she sees his expression soften, and feels the warm glow of his affection, and comfort rises soft and loamy within her.

They’re both quiet after that, the way people sometimes are when there’s nothing and yet too much to say. The clouds are clearing a little, the stars peeking out in patches between cotton-like reams of vapor.

Below the deck, Rooster’s crew and hers are partying, passing beer back and forth and playing cards. Usopp’s Voice sounds a little like a harmonica, and even from here she can hear the faint tones of his voice as it rises and falls around the contours of a story.

Lucy wonders, a little, what that story is. She wonders if he’ll tell her later. It won’t be the same, but that’s alright. Usopp’s tales get grander with every telling.

“When Ace died, there wasn’t a lot I could reassure myself with,” Lucy tells Zoro. It’s weird how calm she feels, speaking of this. She hasn’t spoken about it to anyone, yet. “I did think it was nice, that they were together. In wherever ‘after’ is.”

Zoro turns to her, something like compassion and pride and determination in his eyes. There’s no pity though. No pity at all, and she’s glad for that. Lucy’s pretty sure she could never handle pity from Zoro, not for as long as she lives.

“Sabo said he thinks Ace jogged his memories,” Zoro reminds her. He mentioned it before. “He thinks Ace didn’t want you to be alone.”

Sounds like Ace, of course. Something old and painful spikes in her chest, but the scar is calcified, even if an older one has been lanced open.

“What do you think?” Lucy asks, leaning against him a little heavier.

Zoro waits a beat before replying. “I think there is no ‘after,’” Zoro admits, blunt as always. “And I think you’re not alone.”

Then he looks at her, and there’s a fierce intensity in his face, the kind of look that carries an oath, a promise, a vow, the kind that speaks of devotion Lucy’s certain no one on this earth deserves from him.

Lucy will take it though, because Lucy is selfish that way, selfish of Zoro and selfish because that look is Zoro promising and you’ll never be alone, because I’m here, I’m here, I’m here, and I’ll always stand beside you.

Lucy wants to promise him things in return, but she’s already given him all she has—a place on her crew and the whole of her heart and their dreams to pursue. Only children promise to defeat the reaper, and so she has nothing to return his devotion with but her own, nothing but the open sea and
the wind at their backs and uncertainty and mystery ahead, all of which are prizes he’s already claimed. She can promise to fight harder than anyone to keep them all together, to keep him at her side, and she can promise to win.

Zoro’s taken that oath already too, and Lucy has already made it once, the vow to never give up. She doesn’t mind making it again, and so with a soft exhale she breathes between them, “Me too.”

For a moment she thinks he’s going to kiss her, because the look in his eye is like fire, makes it feel like his gaze leaves a trail across her face. But then he leans away and his face turns up, back to the sky, and he speaks again. “About there being no ‘after?’”

Lucy blinks, almost having lost the thread of their conversation. But she soon catches up, and shoves him a little for being deliberately obtuse. “No. I dunno about that.”

A smirk quirks at Zoro’s mouth, and Lucy wishes the shadows weren’t quite so thick, so she could see the dimple that sometimes shows when he’s smug. “What’s to know?”

Lucy shrugs, thinking of the little mission at the base of Mt Cuvo, just a small stone hut and nothing more. The missionary who lived there ministered in Grey Terminal, gave out food and clothing and always brought tetanus shots, and he preached to those who wanted to hear as he treated and fed the poor and reasoned with gang leaders. When Lucy asked, he said he came when he heard of the fire, when he heard of what Goa had done. He claimed it was a blasphemy against God, and he hoped to reach even the hearts of the Goa nobles one day. He claimed there was a lot to know. That there was a plan for the universe and a savior and an end of days and a life after death. He claimed there was justice to be found and punishment for the wicked, and that kindness was important and that God could bring a person peace.

Ace always thought he was a quack. He didn’t like him, didn’t like it when Lucy waved hello to him. He never explained why, but Lucy thinks it might have been because the priest always talked about respecting one’s parents and Ace hated Roger.

Lucy thought a lot of what he claimed was kind of weird, but she also thought he must be lonely, living in that hut all by himself. She went to see him sometimes, when Ace left and she was lonely too. He was a nice old man, and his stories were funny, even if they were a bit weird.

“I don’t know. I’m not that smart,” Lucy tells him, shrugging. “I don’t know anything about stuff like that. It’s nice to think people watch over us from ‘after,’ but it sounds pretty boring when you get there, too.”

Zoro huffs a laugh. “Only you would be worried about entertainment in the afterlife.”

Lucy grins a little. “I’m not cut out for eternal choir.” Lucy watches the moonlight spread across the deck as clouds shift away from its nearly-full face again. “Ace thought like you do.”

She feels Zoro turn toward her, and feels his surprise as an almost tangible wave in the air. “Yeah?”

Lucy nods. “Yeah.”

It’s nice to talk about him, Lucy realizes. Once it would have felt like ripping stitches out of her still-healing heart. Now it feels...good. Kind of warm. And she knows Zoro will guard the memory of her brother with jealous determination, knows it’s safe to tell him anything. Zoro is always safe.

She’s in that post-cry mood where everything feels raw but nothing feels untouchable, the dregs of old emotion rising up to be examined and evaluated. Thinking of Ace brings her back to Marineford, eventually, because two years down the line she still gets assaulted with the memories
sometimes. Ice and snow stained red, gore so thick she could drown in it, blood that was not hers flaking off her skin, and burgeoning senses screaming danger from every angle because the path to her brother was woven through the blades and fists of the truly strong, the ones with their full potential unlocked.

“Doflamingo was at Marineford,” Lucy remembers, and she feels Zoro’s attention sharpen. “I couldn’t touch him then.” Zoro doesn’t say anything, just waits for her to finish, and she looks up at him with something painful in her throat as she realizes—“I beat him. And I know I could have saved him now.”

She knew that before, of course. She knew it the day Rayleigh complimented her Armament, the day he mentioned the sheer potential of her Conqueror’s. She knew it when she defeated the beasts on the island, and she knew it that day in Sabaody when she embraced her nakama again.

And yet it’s different, seeing her efforts come to fruition like this. Doflamingo was an obstacle on the battlefield she didn’t have to face at the time, because others occupied him on her behalf. One she couldn’t have faced, one she couldn’t have touched.

But she beat him, not a weak ago. She beat him she beat him she beat him—

Zoro looks down at her, a little line of confusion tugging at his lips. “Well…yeah? Of course you did.”

Lucy feels the happy tears bead at the corners of her eyes as relief and flattered, embarrassed affection flush through her. “I didn’t do it alone. Torao got a good hit. And you kept him busy.”

Zoro shrugs in that one-shouldered way he sometimes does when she’s leaning on him, like he’s worried she’ll move away if he disturbs her at all, like she wouldn’t just hold on tighter next time. “I promised to be stronger too.”

There’s a flash of something hot and self-directed in his face before it’s smothered by brash, casual pride, and Lucy softens.

She wonders if there was ever a time when she didn’t understand Zoro as well as she does. She can’t imagine such a period, where Zoro was nearby and yet a stranger, but it must have occurred, no matter how brief.

“It wasn’t your fault, back then,” Lucy tells him, trying to alleviate the guilt even knowing it’s futile.

“It was, if it was anyone’s,” Zoro replies, his voice gruff. He’s tense, too, and the rising wind makes the heaviness of his voice more painful.

“It wasn’t,” Lucy insists. She reaches over, and trails her fingers across the inside of his forearm, gentle pressure encouraging him to relax the fist he’s made. “If it was anyone’s, then it was mine. I punched the Noble Asshole.”

Zoro’s hand loosens enough for Lucy to slot her fingers between his, her hand swallowed by his heavy knuckles and broad palm.

“If you hadn’t, I would’ve,” Zoro reminds her. There’s a short pause, and then his voice is soft, like he can’t believe he’s saying this aloud. “It’s my job to protect the crew. And I didn’t.”

For a bizarre second, Lucy kind of wants to punch him, but it passes quickly, to be replaced by fond affection tinged with exasperation. “It’s mine, too. My job to take on the biggest threat.” She lets out a slow breath that catches a little on the way out, because she can remember the moment Kizaru
nearly killed Zoro too well. “And I didn’t.”

Zoro’s thumb caresses the back of her hand, utterly sympathetic, but not absolving. It’s the truth, after all.

“None of us could have done it, then,” Lucy admits, and it’s still painful to say. “Sabaody…and Ace…what happened then taught me that.”

A lesson burned into her with shame and blood and death, with loneliness and brutal training and a thousand nightmares, a lifetime of pain, an ache she will never be rid of. An innocence lost she thought long since gone, and faith she will never reclaim. She learned they were not ready.

“Yeah,” Zoro agrees, but there’s a note in his voice that’s one step shy of pure agreement. “I know.”

Inexplicably, Lucy thinks of a conversation with Smokey, and the idle thought that maybe her selfishness had finally pissed Zoro off for real.

“Zoro…” Lucy hedges, unsure if she wants the answer. “Are—” She hesitates, because she knows Zoro would have told her by now if he still… “were you mad at me, when you figured out what I was…”

Zoro releases a slow breath through his nose. “…At first,” he admits. “It wasn’t rational. I understood. I agreed.” His head thunks against the wood at their backs. “It was…personal.”

_I wanted to be with you_, he’s saying. _I wanted to see you. I couldn’t stand the idea of two years apart. I wanted to do something. Anything at all._

Emotion wells up in Lucy, gathers somewhere in her chest so tightly it hurts. “I didn’t want to,” Lucy promises, and he must understand because he already knows her so well. “But we needed to.” They’d be dead already if they hadn’t, if Lucy had ignored Rayleigh that day on Amazon Lily, if she had given in to the need to see her crew, to break down with the eight of them safely around her and grieve with Zoro at her side and healing properly under Chopper’s care.

“I know,” Zoro says, a little softer this time. There’s warmth in his voice, affection and pride, and Lucy almost cries again when he squeezes her hand.

Above their heads the sky is nearly clear, the moon bright enough to wash the deck in a faint glow, to reach even the two of them, huddled as they are in the shadows of the figurehead and the mast that looms before them as a sentinel. Below them their allies and nakama grow rowdier, their laughter warming the ship, and around them the sea ripples gently with the clear, cool breeze that rises across the water.

“I haven’t had a nightmare since before Dressrosa,” Lucy says, suddenly realizing the bizarre truth of the statement. “I don’t think they’ll be so bad now.”

Thank God the sky is clear enough to see by, because the look on Zoro’s face is something Lucy wants to treasure, something that hooks her by the navel and pulls. He looks at her like she’s something precious, like she’s answered questions he’s been asking since birth. He looks at her with so much emotion it hurts, chokes her up, and Lucy can almost feel the percussive force of his heartbeat as it whispers over and over and over again that he loves her, that he’s not going anywhere, that with him she’s finally found someone whose dreams will be aligned with hers no matter where their journeys take them.

She knows all that. She sometimes thinks she’s known it from the day they met. But sometimes she can see it in his eyes, and it takes her apart in ways she doesn’t know how to deal with, in ways
she’ll never be accustomed to.

“Yeah,” Zoro agrees, his voice too heavy, full of something unrelated to nightmares, like they’re speaking of something else entirely. “I think it’s the same for me.”

It’s moments like this that Lucy realizes there’s something about Zoro that answers something in her, like a lighthouse calling to a ship, like the echo of some great, ancient secret built into their very blood, like a key and lock she never thought to rattle before Zoro.

She wonders if he feels it too.

“Lean down for a second,” Lucy orders him, a little breathless. “And close your eyes.”

Zoro gives her a look, confused, but after a moment he complies, correctly guessing she wants access to his face. Lucy acts the moment he’s in striking range and presses her lips to his cheek. He freezes in surprise at the gesture, and with something else when she moves to breathe a soft I love you, Roronoa Zoro, in his ear, teeth tapping his golden earrings as she pulls away.

The look he gives her when she pulls back—his eye gleaming silver fire and blazing, boring into her face with a carnal brand of the violent determination she’s always admired—tells her in no uncertain terms that he feels it too.

But tonight…tonight is not the night for that. Not with tear tracks still drying on her face and her emotions so high she can barely think.

Not tonight. But soon.

“We could go grab a beer, maybe,” Lucy offers. “I bet there’s plenty left.”

Zoro lets out a slow breath, and closes his eyes. Then he leans over until his forehead is pressed against hers, and she can feel his breath against her face, warm and vaguely alcoholic, the metallic scents of blood and steel strong with something strong and masculine and Zoro mixed between. Like this she’s trapped between him and the figurehead, and it feels, oddly, like a more intimate version of a hug.

“In a minute,” he agrees, his voice quiet and rough. He squeezes her hand once. “Just a minute.”

Lucy feels something flutter in her stomach, and she’s sure her eyes are the size of dinner plates when she whispers back a soft, “Okay.”

(They stay until the moon sets.)

When the newspaper comes the next morning, it brings new bounties for the entire crew.

Of course, none of them knew that until Rooster showed them the shrine in his bedroom, where he had not only the new wanted posters mounted on the wall, but also each and every one of their old ones.

“Oh, okay,” Usopp said after a moment, just taking it all in. “This is a bit weird.”

Zoro can’t help but agree. His own face stares back at him in triplicate. Lucy grins down beatifically from five separate locations. Around them is a bunch of paraphernalia that all looks sort of familiar-but-off. A ridiculously good replica of Yuubashiri sits in an honored place above the bed, with a frayed straw hat hanging below it. There are little figures of various people they’ve met, like
Vivi and Carue, and the dude on Jaya who told them about the treasure, and the entire cadre of Galley-Law. A picture of Camie and Papagu and Hachi in the latter’s shop rests on a big chest shaped like a ram’s head, and nearby is a picture of the destroyed human shop where Camie was nearly sold and Hachi nearly killed.

It’s like someone tried to cram the entire history of the crew into one room, and it’s just a little disconcerting, considering how much information this guy has clearly uncovered.

“I dunno, it’s kind of cool,” Franky says, picking up the Iceberg figurine. “Did you have to clear out a bunch of storage areas to give us all rooms?”

It is kind of cramped in here. And Rooster’s face goes a bit pink at the statement. “Well…”

Robin looks around with a slightly wary look in her eye, but then relaxes when she apparently doesn’t find anything to worry over, and plucks a purple hat off a stand, admiring it.

Zoro’s just glad the guy didn’t collect anything relating to Marineford or Impel Down.

Lucy, of course, is curious about the whole thing. She keeps looking at the shrine to Nami’s Clima Tact, where Rooster’s collected a replica of every model, so far as Zoro can tell.

“…I feel like we should be getting a cut of the profits for this merch,” Usopp admits, looking a little overwhelmed with his hands on his hips. Then he grimaces. “I’m starting to sound like Nami.”

“Ordinarily we would be legally entitled to a percentage of the earnings, since they’re using our names and faces,” Franky starts, posing on the other side of the room with a cardboard cut-out of himself. Zoro kind of forgot what Franky used to look like. Weird. “Pirate merch is a ludicrously big industry.”

“It’s very lucrative for the sellers,” Robin chimes in, donning the purple cowboy hat again. She somehow doesn’t look like an idiot. “The trade laws preclude people with bounties on their heads from earning money legally, and lose all copyright and identity protections normally afforded to citizens.”

Usopp wrinkles his nose. “That sounds…shady.”

“Yes,” Robin agrees easily, a terrifying smile on her face. She somehow doesn’t look like an idiot. “The trade laws preclude people with bounties on their heads from earning money legally, and lose all copyright and identity protections normally afforded to citizens.”

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“Yes,” Robin agrees easily, a terrifying smile on her face. It’s times like these where Zoro remembers she used to kill for money.

“Oh hey, we got bigger bounties!” Lucy realizes, bounding over to the wall where their newest wanted posters hang proudly.

“Yes, Lucy-Dono,” Rooster exclaims, “I wanted to show you! Even the members of your crew that you sent ahead have had their bounties raised!”

“Cool!” Lucy chirps, peering at all the updated photos. The others come around to inspect them as well, curiosity getting the better of them all. Zoro follows suit.

A few strides and he’s across the room, standing next to Lucy, who has a fist over her mouth to cover up the giggles she’s trying to desperately suppress.

“…What’s funny,” he asks, ducking easily under Franky’s arm as the cyborg takes a good look at his own photo.

Lucy hiccups a little, and points to his own picture. “You look so annoyed.”
Zoro squints. He does look kind of peeved. There’s a few flecks of blood on his face but there aren’t any wounds in sight, unlike his previous one. And he doesn’t look beat to hell. They got a good image of the scar, too, so he won’t be able to use the missing eye to fly under the radar, now.


“Yeah, totally.”

“That seems likely.”

Zoro rolls his eyes at his nakama, and promptly ignores them.

Nami is probably going to be upset about the new picture, having fallen for the same trick twice. Zoro has no sympathy, because she can’t have that many people coming up to her and asking for photographs. Robin’s looks as mysterious as her previous one, but her hair is pulled back. They straight up used a photo of General Franky instead of the guy’s actual face, and Usopp looks nearly dead in his. The Love Cook and Brook both got actual photos of themselves, although Curly Brow has a stupid expression on his face that probably means it was taken back on Fishman Island. Chopper’s bounty doubled, but that didn’t say much considering it was only fifty beri before. And Lucy...

Lucy looks older, in this photo. He’s grown used to the gleeful expression of mischief from her old posters. The new one doesn’t look that different, but it is more…mature, somehow. There’s something adult in her face that wasn’t there before, and seeing the two pictures compared side by side only emphasizes how much she’s changed. How much they’ve all changed, really.

“Why does Sanji’s poster say ‘Only Alive?’” Usopp asks suddenly, and Zoro turns his attention to the poster in question.

Huh. Weird.

Lucy echoes the sentiment. “That’s weird!” Then she points wildly. “And his bounty went up a lot too!”

Zoro checks it, and yeah, it did go up a lot considering where it was after Enies Lobby. “Still not as much as me, though,” he adds, smug.

“Or me,” Usopp laments. The sniper looks like he’s going to be sick.

“It’s okay, Usopp!” Lucy cheers. “It just means you’re cool!”

Usopp does not look very cheered by this, and Zoro can’t quite help quirking a grin when Robin and Franky laugh and Lucy just looks on, mildly confused.

Zoro is careful when he twists open the hatch to the deck. He normally doesn’t give much of a damn about making noise, but everyone on board is pretty tired due to a sudden storm that passed through earlier, and Zoro’s not an asshole, usually. Thankfully, the hatch opens with barely a creak, the hinges well-oiled and the metal maintained. His and Usopp’s “room” on the ship is a converted storage area, just barely big enough for the two of them to have cots laid side by side and about six inches to walk between.

Franky has his own storage compartment below the deck, because his sheer width makes sharing with anyone an impossibility. Robin and Law and the Samurai all found bunks in the Barto-Club’s regular barracks, and Lucy was afforded an actual bed in a room to herself, meant for important
Which, for Rooster, Zoro thinks as he hauls himself silently out of the little cabin, there’s probably no
guest on the planet more important to him than Lucy.

The iron hatch drops down softly, and Zoro rocks back on his heels, taking a deep breath in the salt-
soaked air.

The water is still and quiet, the earlier storm leaving no trace of its presence in the waves. For once,
dire weather does not bead and gather in the distance, and so there is nothing but the sea kissing the
star-studded horizon in every direction. The sky this night is especially clear, like the furthest reaches
of the universe—a realm known only to the gods and creatures not bound by the ties of feet to earth
and ships—could be grasped if one were to simply reach out. The heavens look like the diamond-
crusted bodice of noblewoman, the great arc of pale nebulae a sash across the fabric, and amid it all,
the full moon makes its slow way across the expanse.

He heard once that some of the stars are so far away, they still make light even though they died
before the earth began, before water filled the Blues and the continent cooled. Zoro wonders how
many stars above him are dead, and if they obscure other, smaller stars still living.

It’s a good night to practice his kendo. He hasn’t gotten the chance since Dressrosa, with the
excitement of their escape and his wounds still healing. Meditation and rest and help from Law has
addressed the latter issue, and with the island two days behind them, the former is no longer a
concern.

Zoro drops easily into a *seiza* and withdraws Wado, balancing the katana across his palms. Silver
metal glows softly in the starlight, and the edge of the blade is millimeters from biting flesh, the white
satin stark against the dark of the night and a high, clear tone rings present-and-not from the guard. It
reminds him, inexplicably, of the last time he fought Kuina, when Wado was nearly as long as both
of them.

A deep breath. The silent draw of Kitetsu, and a sweep up into the first position. He circles low,
blades locked in steady form, and he takes Wado between his teeth in the same moment he draws
Shusui, the black blade a low hum, a yawning void fit to match the fire of its partners.

When he was a child, he practiced the basic forms day in, day out, until his hands and feet bled and
his muscles burned and his legs could not hold him up as he heaved and tottered through the
motions. As he grew he adapted the forms to suit his developing style, changed positions and
motions and sequences until he had a kata repertoire all his own, suited to three blades rather than
one, and a physique that could handle more demanding movements.

It has been years since he practiced the original forms, but the endless repetitions he did as a child
have burned them into sinew and bone, and it is the originals he performs now.

Something about the echoing dance of the stars and the shimmering of moonlight against the sea
begs for tribute to the past—an honoring of ancestors he has and will never know, of those who
came before. An offering to the things as timeless and ancient as the stars themselves.

The moves come slow at first, his body unused to the old motions, and his careful efforts to keep the
boards beneath his boots from creaking make some positions awkward. But by the third repetition,
muscle memory kicks in, and then Zoro is free.

He closes his eyes, lets his senses range out and deep, until he is the soft groan of wood as the ship
bobs gently in still water, until he is the infinite droplets of the sea, the salt that cakes the hull and
froths the waves. He is the quiet ripple of the red and green flag, the laughing starlight, the stars themselves who beg eternal curiosity from beings that will never reach their ethereal plane.

It is a moving meditation, the steps to the kata ingrained in him, though dredged up from the fog of long-buried memory. Zoro’s blades wail in harmony, the edges carving the very air, the makers of truth and gifters of either death or life, depending on his inclinations. Every motion sinks him deeper into the orchestra of the turning earth, the restless currents of the sea, the eternal sameness and ceaseless change of the sky above, and the crystalline ring of the heavens. It is an homage, a tribute, and the universe itself seems to welcome it.

These katas are almost like a dance—a deadly, partner-less dance. In them there is motion and exertion and fierce, fatal beauty as he practices parting bone from marrow and severing heads from shoulders and the art of sliding a blade between vertebrae to paralyze and agonize at once. Every step brings his mind farther from the ship and waves and deeper into the motion of celestial bodies and the clean splatter of blood against a concrete wall, until it’s like his breath is synchronized with the beating heart of the universe itself. This far into the practice he is both alone and infinite, internally focused in the most outward way possible.

And then it comes grinding to a halt.

At first Zoro doesn’t even realize what’s happened. Kitetsu just shudders against an implacable resistance, and when Zoro opens his eyes it’s—

Lucy, in nothing but a pair of cotton shorts and a tank top that doesn’t reach her navel, and grinning at him with fire and starlight in her eyes. Her forearm is raised, shining black with Haki, and Kitetsu’s razor edge is caught against the block.

“Hey, Zoro,” Lucy asks, and her voice is quiet, but her face is sharp with something heavy enough to make heat curl up his spine and ancient enough to answer the stars themselves. “Want to spar?”

Zoro, still a little disoriented from the strange sensation that he is something too large and boundless for the meager body he’s suddenly found himself constrained within, just replies dumbly, “I’m training.”

Lucy does not look deterred, and Zoro finds himself deflecting a punch to his spleen on reflex, Lucy’s bare feet dancing back out of range just as quickly. “Train with me,” she whines, but something serious shadows her eyes when she adds, “You were too far away before.”

Zoro isn’t entirely sure what she means, but thinks of how he didn’t notice her arrival, of the strange, singular connection to the universe’s grand march, and thinks maybe she has a point.

“Okay,” he agrees, and Lucy beams, wisps of hair framing her grin messily and something old in Zoro wants. “First to draw blood?”

“First to win,” Lucy corrects.

“Well yeah, that’s what I’m trying to—”

But Zoro doesn’t get the chance to finish the thought, because Lucy ducks, spins, and a heel snaps out at Zoro’s knees. Lucy’s grin is broad and fierce and Zoro feels something in him rise up and answer, and so the game is on.

Immediately the spar is a brutal, wild thing, an instant melee of motion faster than eyes can follow and an onslaught of blades and fists meeting over and over as the ship itself bobs from the sheer force of their occasional impacts. They are not gentle, could not offer each other anything less than their
It is exhilarating, to meet an opponent who offers a challenge, who fights with such abandon. There is an unspoken agreement, a pact to refrain from using any of their more advanced moves, the ones they use to level cities and bring down gods. It is a spar in the most original of terms, based in good faith and skill, just fists against swords and the occasional use of Haki, special attacks tabled for when they have more room, for when fun and testing their limits is not the clear goal.

Lucy is agile, but Zoro is persistent, and every time she dodges one of his blades he counters with another. Every missed opportunity is met with a glint of challenge in their smiles and every hit is met with laughter or a breathless do it again. They do not shy away from force, intent upon displaying all their prowess to one another. They litter bruises and shallow cuts across each other’s bodies, and take joy in the display of strength, of an opponent evenly matched.

There is a current that runs deep between them, something old and glowing with the same eternal pulse as the stars and the sea itself. It is fed by want, awe, the desire to win. It takes trust to do this kind of sparring, unfathomable, irrational trust, but Zoro does not have it in him to doubt her. The spar is almost like a dance, like something from the past, done around a fire with a hundred kin to clap and stomp in time with drums and feet. They are partners in this spar as much as opponents, and Zoro would wonder who is leading, but he is far past asking such pointless trivialities.

Lucy throws her right fist at Zoro’s head, and Zoro ducks easily out of the way, but slams her arm right above the elbow with Shusui’s hilt, and rushes forward to take advantage of the opening. But Lucy is a rush of kinetic energy, as comfortable riding wind as strolling along the coast, and sways out of his attack with the motion of her arm. She rises behind him by kicking off a crate, manic glee in her face as she comes at him with Haki gleaming off her skin.

She manages to punch him in the nose—still better than letting her punch him in the teeth, where his jaw would probably fracture around Wado’s hilt—and there’s a beat where Zoro checks for fractures (not broken, just bleeding a lot) where he and Lucy just stare at one another, breathing heavily, and Zoro’s sure his eyes are just as wide as hers.

He wonders if his want is just as plain to her as hers is to him.

“You looked really good, earlier,” Lucy tells him as he presses blunt fingers to cartilage. He meets her gaze, and feels something old and predatory rising up to match the same thing in her, and Lucy must sense it because she continues, encouraged. “And it was pretty, but it didn’t look like it was meant to be done alone.”

Which is both true and not, of course. The katas themselves are a solitary practice, but kendo is meant to be used, to be practiced against and in tandem with others.

“Sparring’s fun,” he agrees, and he’s sure his smile looks truly terrible with the blood smeared across his face and the katana in his mouth, but Lucy’s eyes flash with that same heavy thing which is this time something close to a demand, and Zoro flies forward in answer.

It continues from there, the two of them inextricably locked together in a dance both deadly and ruthlessly controlled, swords flashing in the moonlight and Lucy’s laughter bright and tinkling across the water. They spar until they are both exhausted, until their bodies shake and Zoro feels the burn of muscles that haven’t been properly exerted in a week, feels the heavy rise and fall of his chest as he finally traps Lucy against the rail of the ship, her back to the water and three of his blades paused a few inches from her heart, just shy of her heaving chest and her sweat-soaked skin to match his own, glistening even in the moonlight.
Of course, Zoro doesn’t doubt her ability to get out of it, if she wanted to. She’s too fast to really be pinned, too agile to be caught with so many exit strategies available. But something shimmers in the air, the heaviness between them morphing into want and soon to need, and somehow Zoro knows the spar is over when he looks in Lucy’s eyes and sees nothing there but frank desire strong enough to match his own.

This is only confirmed when Lucy reaches out, heedless of the blades still poised at her breast, and holds her palm out expectantly below Wado’s hilt.

If it were anyone else, he would shove the blades into her heart, would snarl in warning or cut the hand off. But it’s Lucy, and Lucy is Lucy, and so he gives her a subtle nod, and she reaches out to take the blade from between his teeth. Her fingers brush the skin around his mouth and leaving hot trails in their wake.

Wado looks strange in Lucy’s hand, her fingers far more delicate than his for all that her knuckles are bloodied and bruised from the spar. But he finds no protest from any of his blades, indeed no sound at all.

Lucy takes a step forward, closer to Zoro, and he is forced to react quickly in order to prevent her from impaling herself on Kitetsu and Shusui, narrowing the angle of the blades, widening his arms. Something keeps the blades aloft, a certainty that simple acquiescence, that surrender, is not what either of them want.

Lucy’s eyes are locked with Zoro’s, and she carefully, in an unpracticed but traditionally correct motion, slides Wado home in the pearlescent sheath. She reaches for Kitetsu’s hilt next, her fingers gentle as they slowly pry his own free from the hilt. Zoro only resists as long as he does because the heat that lingers on his skin from brushing hers burns higher and higher with every second, that heavy current between them deepening and making itself undeniable and known. It only seems emphasized in the sudden quiet, the only sounds the soft rock of the ship in the waves, and their heavy breathing, which Zoro knows is not just from the exertion of the spar anymore.

Kitetsu slides home easily, and Zoro wonders if Lucy notices that his lips follows the path of hers as she turns to Shusui next, their bodies nearly flush with one blade between them. It feels, strangely, too close, too intimate, and yet like there is an infinity between them.

Her fingers are warm as they cover his, and this time she does not push him away. Instead she helps his hand along, guides the whole blade down to its sheath with his fingers still wrapped around the ebony hilt, their eyes still locked together, and it takes a second for Zoro to realize they’re close enough that their breaths mix and the heat from her skin is palpable.

The pads of her fingers linger on the back of his hand, but he’s not fast enough to catch her as she pulls her hand away, and his head is too addled to notice the glint of mischief in her eyes as she takes a step back. Zoro follows, his step matching hers, helplessly tugged along by something too powerful to name, something dark and intrinsic to human experience and tonight commanded entirely by the girl before him.

There are maybe six inches between them, and with one more half step backward, Lucy’s hips hit the railing, her hands spread wide to grip the wood and lean back almost challengingly. Zoro does not reach out and pull her flush to him the way he aches to, because something about the electricity that saturates the air around them makes him think of the spar, about how contact had to be done with the utmost care. That old and predatory thing from before guides him as he lurches forward and grips the railing on either side of her hips, trapping her in place and leveling their eyes.

He hears Lucy’s breath catch, sees her pupils dilate further, and feels something equal rise in him,
more demanding than before. The scent of her is too close, too present—salt from her sweat and sharp, woody anise and seawater and sunlight—and the familiarity makes him ache.

The moon is full and halos Lucy’s head, and the cloud of stardust and genesis that halves the sky is fading as the night passes the midpoint to morning. The black of the sky is met by the lacquered sea, so still it should be glass even as the luminary clock above offers an unearthly glow to the water. She looks fey, nymph-like, as if she belongs among the stars that laugh their gentle, irreverent song as they dance along in the absolute march of time.

Zoro wonders if he and Lucy will be like the dead stars above them, if they will still shine into eternity even after they’re gone. He likes to think so. He knows Lucy will.

They still breathe too heavily, anticipation making their blood demand more air, and they are close, so close that the magnetic pull that begs him to touch is powerful enough to overwhelm him.

And Lucy, too, it seems, because her eyes are almost swallowed by her pupils when she arcs chin down in offering and she whispers his name, so quiet he barely hears even this close.

“Zoro,” she whispers again, and then continues, demanding. “Zoro, kiss me.”

And then Zoro understands—the game is still on, still thrumming between them, and now it is as it has always been—a question of who will admit their needs first, who will be the first to surrender. And Zoro is willing to play, has always been bored by things that happen easily, and so leans into her slowly, refusing to touch her yet, but unable to ignore such a request.

His lips meet hers, and it is a chaste thing—or would be if not for the fire in his body, the trembling restraint they both exert to keep from pulling together in a more desperate way. He kisses her softly, just a barely-there press of their lips, but the want is like electricity and is quickly turning to need, and so it takes a terrible amount of control to pull back once again, the loss of contact feeling as profound as the halving of his very soul.

He can only bring himself to back off a few centimeters, and Lucy makes a noise of protest that goes straight to his core, that he would echo if he wasn’t so focused on teasing this out as long as possible, if he wasn’t so distracted by the fact that Lucy’s eyes are still closed and that her lips followed his.

“Z-Zoro…” she complains, and he doesn’t look away from her face, but he still feels her left hand release the railing and then return, and his own grip on the polished wood turns white-knuckled as he fights for his restraint.

He leans in again, his nose pressing into the flesh beneath her cheekbone as he seals his mouth to hers, just a little firmer and longer than before, a promise and a plea at once, though Zoro is not entirely sure what for. Electricity burns him, need present and plain and mutual, and only his competitive nature keeps him from indulging in the feeling, in feeding the heat that pools in his stomach and arcs up his spine until only embers remain.

He pulls back once more, but can’t bring himself to stop touching her, his nose and forehead pressed into hers, desperate, and this time it is him that keeps his eyes closed, because he knows if he looked at her he would be gone.

But Lucy, it seems, is already there.

Her left hand snakes out, fisting in the front of Zoro’s shirt with the sort of desperation that sets Zoro’s blood to fire, and a whine in her throat to match, and then Lucy’s body is pressed against his, her hips and chest flush with him as she shoves her tongue into his mouth and wraps her arms around
his neck.

Zoro has never been able to deny Lucy easily, and he doesn’t want to now.

He responds to her boldness by matching it with his own, restraint gone and smashed to dust. He crowds her against the rail, feels her gasp into his mouth when his hips pin her against the ship, but it is met with nothing but eager approval as she moves to wrap a leg around his waist and arcs into him suggestively enough that Zoro’s hands fist in the cotton of her tank top, desperate and wanting. He wonders, in the tiny portion of his brain not consumed with Lucy and seeking out the warmth in her that calls to him, if this all means he won.

It feels different, this time, from similar occasions before. The desperate edge to their hands and mouths and the single-minded way in which they pursue each other does not feel motivated by fear of separation. She did not appear here with nightmares in her eyes, and he was not practicing to lay his demons to rest. Tonight their needs feel untainted by fear and anxiety and doubt. Instead there is impulse and long-banked desire and simple joy at receiving and giving to each other. Above them, the laughing heavens spin on into eternity and all around them the sea that stretches into its own infinity, but nothing seems truer or more important than the heat of their bodies and the need to be close and close and closer.

Lucy seems to agree because when she pulls back for air and guides his mouth to her throat like she can’t bear even that small loss of contact, she whimpers his name and then, “we should…my room…”

Maybe once upon a time he would have shied away, would have doubted, but he can’t when Lucy holds him like she’s going to fly apart if she lets go, and he can only feel affection and want and a reciprocal need to touch blazing in his mind.

So he nods, mouth still latched to Lucy’s neck as he lifts her up and starts to stumble across the deck, his coordination a mess when her teeth are sinking into the juncture of his neck and shoulder hard enough to draw blood, and decides that maybe, for at least one night, there are no bad stars.

Chapter End Notes

Lol, when the riff you were planning to write about melancholy and the contradictions of grief in the face of good news mutates into a riff on ASL Marineford angst which then boils down into sexual tension as your characters hash out issues you didn’t know they still had.

“the luminary clock above,” is a reference to one of my favorite poems, written by Robert Frost. It’s called “Acquainted with the Night.” I highly recommend reading it. My penname on AO3 is also derived from it. I just didn’t want to take credit for prose that isn’t mine.

Lucy and Zoro, pursuing a sexual relationship in emotionally healthy ways. I’m proud of the children, man. So proud.

Sorry the chapter is so long. The Law scene was supposed to go in the previous chapter, but Law was being uncooperative. Let me know what you think!
Chapter Summary

"Zou is a big-ass elephant, and the elephant has a big ass."--an actual line in this story, oh my God.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucy is slow to wake. Her body feels heavy from sleep, and her head quiet. The sheets are soft, tucked up to her chin, and her skin soaks up the ambient warmth. The effervescent beams of morning sunlight graze her eyelids, and the waves roll gently against the ship’s hull outside the room.

It’s the scent that truly wakes her though. Warm and masculine and familiar. That, and the weight of a muscular arm slung across her waist, the dip in the bed that speaks of another body beside her own.

Lucy pries her eyelids open, fighting against the sleep-gunk, and finds herself face to face with a sleeping Zoro.

It’s probably not a vision of Zoro at his most attractive. His hair is a mess, his face is smushed against the pillow, and he’s snoring softly. Flakes of dried blood still cling to his face in places from their sparring. His mouth’s hanging open, and Lucy’s pretty sure she sees drool on his chin. But something about it—something about the lax, placid expression and the implicit trust involved in falling asleep beside someone and the way Zoro looks strangely vulnerable—speaks of intimacy, and it catches Lucy hard in the chest.

It’s not the first time she’s seen Zoro asleep of course, not the first time she’s woken up beside him, even. It feels new today though, feels new and good.

It’s probably the bed, Lucy reasons, still a little sleep-drunk and deliriously admiring the sight before her. Mattresses are good.

After a moment she rolls to her back, far too awake to sleep and too tempted to wake Zoro to keep staring at him. A quick, customary check on the ships’ occupants assures that everyone is safe and accounted for, an action not really born of fear or concern, for once, but affection and curiosity.

They’re fine, all of them. Lucy sinks just a bit deeper into the mattress.

The room itself is quite small, barely larger than a broom closet—so small the door doesn’t open all the way, blocked by the cot. But it’s nice, with the dark wooden panels and the serviceable window that lets in just the right amount of sunlight, and reveals the sea spread out below.

It smells like Zoro now, which is nice. Lucy kind of hated sleeping alone.

As she stares at the oaken ceiling, Zoro’s hand settles on the curve of her waist, his thumb grazing the edge of her worst scar. Absently, she covers his hand with hers, the thin line of the old scar on her palm faded with time but still raised enough to drag a little against the back of his fingers.
Zoro has mentioned a couple times that his katana have sounds, that they sort of speak to him in music and thought. He said it’s hard to explain, because katana don’t speak the way people do, and that he’s “not a fuckin’ poet. Or whatever Usopp is.” Lucy has always wondered if Kitetsu told him about how she got the scar. She’s never explained it to anyone, but Zoro sometimes presses her palm to his lips with a weight that suggests he knows the story behind it, like he’s saying I love you the way he probably never will aloud.

Her knuckles are bruised and the skin a bit broken. Her Devil Fruit will heal it within the day, along with the collection of cuts and bruises from the spar, but the damage is minimal and well worth a fight like that. And for what came after.

Lucy flushes a little, feeling a bit giggly and squirmy. She suddenly doesn’t care if Zoro needs to sleep. She wants him to be awake, so they can maybe try a repeat performance before breakfast.

But she refrains, still kind of enjoying the intimacy of waking up next to him like this. And besides, Zoro almost never looks this relaxed. He’s always on alert, even in sleep, and he’s usually a terribly light sleeper. He always wakes a few seconds after she does.

So she squashes the urge to wake him—but she does indulge in the desire to touch him.

Zoro has a lot of scars. She’s noticed it before, obviously, because it’s hard not to notice when one’s boyfriend constantly walks around half-naked. The big ones were obvious. The web of tiny nicks and cuts, most healed improperly, is a more complex thing that spans Zoro’s body like constellations and frame the more terrible things that have tried to kill him in the past, from the loss of his eye to the scar Mihawk marked him with, to the thick ropes across both his ankles from Little Garden, when Zoro tried to cut his own limbs off.

There’s a mess of tangled scar tissue on his lower belly, too. She can’t see it now because the sheets are twisted around Zoro’s waist, but she saw the scars last night. They’re usually covered by his haramaki, and Lucy knows the pale scars are from Thriller Bark, because the memory of Chopper treating them every day for weeks is burned deep into her mind. They’re hard to miss, when they stand out in such sharp relief from his bronze skin, but it’s not something she wants to dwell on at the moment.

She uses her right hand to trace along the diagonal slash across his chest. Lucy thinks of Zoro’s dream, of how such a dream is only right for someone as amazing and determined as he is. She is reverentially gentle as she traces the raised edge of the scar. It is older now, long-since healed, and the stitches that once held the parted skin together are gone, along with the angry red color. It’s still a terrible thing, pale and stark against bronze skin, but it isn’t as angry now as it was before, and the broken tissue has relaxed and softened just a bit.

But even her light touch is enough to disturb Zoro’s sleep, and Lucy is gifted the rare sight of watching Zoro wake up as his hand squeezes her hip, unconscious.

His eyebrows pinch together, the left one a little sluggish due to the severed muscle there. His mouth snaps shut, the corners twitching and Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. His right eye creaks open, gunmetal grey peeking out from beneath copper eyelids, and Lucy grins in helpless affection as she sees the bleary, sleep-driven confusion there.

Lucy rolls onto her side, her face a few inches from his, and she’s sure her morning breath is awful but it’s not like she cares. “Hey.”

Zoro still doesn’t seem fully awake, but he also seems reluctant to let go of her and the hand on her hip finds the one she rested on top of it, their fingers twining together easily. After all they’ve done
and all they’ve been through, Lucy probably shouldn’t be getting so happy over how well their hands fit together anymore, but, well. Their hands fit really well together.

“…Still dreamin’?” Zoro mumbles, his head curving closer to hers and his eye drooping closed.

Lucy grins wide because oh, she is never going to let him live that down. She can’t let the rest of their nakama find out though, because they’ll tease him mercilessly over it in about two seconds flat, and then he won’t get all embarrassed anymore when she teases him about it, which would be a damn shame.

“Not a dream,” she promises. Lucy uses her free hand to tap gently on the broken skin between his neck and shoulder, a reminder she’s a bit too proud of having left behind.

Zoro’s eye flies open in surprise, and he’s a bit more awake when he looks at her this time.

“…Oh,” he says eloquently. Lucy just grins wider, and Zoro sighs, but he doesn’t seem that mad, the easy warmth of the morning sapping irritation too quickly to form. “You woke me up,” he accuses, but again, he doesn’t sound that upset about it.

“Sorry,” Lucy says, not quite meaning it. “I like waking up next to you.”

Zoro’s gaze grows a shade heavier, and he tugs on Lucy’s hips, managing to pull them couple inches closer. He gives a low hum of approval when their pelvises press close, and Lucy leans into him a little further at the sound. “You were thinkin’ about somethin’.”

It’s not quite a question, more of an easy, open-ended observation, and it takes her a second to follow his thought. But when she does she lets her fingers trail across his chest again, just memorizing the ridges and valleys of the old scar tissue. “Just that we match.”

Zoro hums quietly, thoughtful. He slides their hands up a few inches, and his thumb brushes the skin there, grazing the bottom point of the star-shaped scar. The pad of his finger is about the width of the scar, and fits inside the corner spanning over her ribs. He was thorough in his exploration last night, but Lucy figures he has the same urge to touch and memorize that she does, and she isn’t surprised when his fingers trace the ridges and depression and knots of gnarled, shiny skin over and over again. His free hand appears from under the pillows to play with Lucy’s hair and brush it away from her face, exposing the old scar under her eye to daylight.

It’s times like these where Lucy wonders why she ever worried Zoro would be repulsed by her scars, wonders why it even crossed her mind.

“I guess,” Zoro mutters finally. He doesn’t sound too interested, or like he’s thought about it much. Lucy would not be surprised if she’s thought more about Zoro’s scars than he has. His face is a couple inches away, and despite his morning breath, Lucy really wants to kiss him.

So she does, leaning forward a little, and presses her lips to the skin right under his left eye, at the bottom edge of the scar that took it. He goes still at the gesture, and when she pulls back, he looks at her like...

Well honestly, Lucy’s never been able to figure it out. He wasn’t so open about it before Sabaody, but she still saw it from time to time, on occasions where he looked like he was about to swear fealty again, or like she’s done something strange and he’s realizing he likes it. She’s never been sure, never been able to quite understand. All she knows is that it makes her feel like she can do anything —more than she already does—and at the same time, like she’s very, very small. Not quite worthy.

It’s a bit dangerous, that look, because it makes Lucy want to do things. Risky, impulsive things that
would make her nakama either sigh or rue ever crossing paths with her or both. She likes it though. She likes it a lot.

“Sorry about the bite mark. Marks,” she amends, noticing another one a few inches from the first. She honestly doesn’t remember that one, but she’s not exactly shocked.

“‘s fine,” Zoro waives, and his face is smug when he lightly drags his knuckles over the line of her neck and shoulder, her skin shivering a little, sensitive to touch. She likes this, with his arm resting above their heads on the pillow and his other hand at her waist. It makes her feel surrounded in the best way possible. “I got you pretty good too.”

So that’s why her neck feels a little stiff. “At least your shirt will cover yours,” she complains. Her neck probably looks like an octopus tried to maul it, given the way it feels. Which, actually, is kind of appropriate considering the way people describe Zoro in a fight. Not her, of course, because Zoro in a decent fight is one of the coolest, most beautiful (and erotic) things Lucy has ever witnessed in this life, but other people have said as much.

“You bit me,” Zoro retorts. “My own girlfriend, causing injury,” he mocks. She’d probably play along, point out that actually, it was three times, because she distinctly remembers biting in a much less visible place too, but Lucy catches something she hadn’t before, and realizes she’s been not-realizing it for a while.

“You called me your girlfriend,” she breathes, something happy and fluttery playing in her chest. “You’ve been calling me your girlfriend.”

Zoro blinks, like he didn’t realize that himself, the absent caress of his thumb against her ribcage stops in his surprise. “I. Uh. didn’t notice.”

There’s a flash of something in his face that’s young, a thing she rarely sees. It reminds her almost painfully of the lazy days in the dinghy, when they were both less experienced and when they’d seen nothing of the world. Lucy wouldn’t go back if she had the choice, wouldn’t change her swordsman for anything, but there’s something almost boyish and charming about him this morning, something so utterly relaxed and comfortable even in the midst of his awkward admission that it takes Lucy’s breath away.

Lucy grins so hard her cheeks hurt, and she leans in to kiss him properly this time. It’s a brief thing, so quick Zoro almost doesn’t recover his faculties quickly enough to respond, but she tries to pour her passion and affection into the gesture anyway.

“I like it,” She reassures when she pulls back a little. “And I’ve been doing the same.”

“That’s, uh. Good.” He looks a little flustered, which is, rare and, really, more than Lucy’s poor heart can take.

“I love you,” she tells him. She’s told him a lot, but sometimes she feels it so strongly it just kind of bursts out.

His face goes soft at the words. His eye turns mercury-silver, like it does when he’s really, really happy. Zoro’s hand squeezes hers. “I. Uh. Me—too.”

Lucy blinks at him, once. Twice. Zoro’s face flushes darker than before.

Lucy can’t help it—she snickers, then outright laughs, and then curls helplessly into his chest, burying all her laughter into the space at the base of his throat and snaking her right arm under him to clutch at his back helplessly.
“It’s not that funny,” Zoro complains, sounding a little miffed. Lucy just slings a leg over his hip, so he can’t escape. Not that he seems very interested in doing so, but better safe than sorry.

“It—it is,” Lucy wheezes, “All that time agonizing over it, and you just—’me too,’” she echoes lowly, trying to copy his tone and cadence, and then cackles at her own joke when she’s pretty damn successful.

“Oh ha, ha,” Zoro returns. He rolls them over, so he’s hovering over Lucy as she giggles helplessly on her back beneath him. The way their pelvises slide together distracts her just a bit, and her breath catches on the laughter.

Zoro smirks like he meant to do that. Asshole.

She draws him down like she means to kiss him properly, and then ducks to graze the stubble on the underside of his jaw at the last moment. It’s more playful than anything, like blowing a bubble into his skin, and Zoro huffs above her, caught between annoyance and amusement.

He gets her back though, because he shifts, draws their joined hands up her side, and then it’s near impossible to ignore their distinct lack of clothes and the possibilities that offers. The realization shoots something electric and good up her spine, and suddenly she’s totally ready to follow the look Zoro’s giving her into more interesting activities.

“D’you think they’ll mind if we’re late to breakfast?” She asks, hitching both legs a little higher on his waist and clutches him a little closer when they lock together properly. It kills her to skip a meal, but. Zoro. Naked. In bed with her. She has her priorities in order.

Zoro’s eye is a bit darker when he replies, and Lucy figures he’s on the same page. “They’ll get over it.”

“They might think you’ve done something to me,” she teases, enjoying the light brush of his lips against the sensitive spot beneath her ear. “And we wouldn’t want that.”

“Yeah we would,” Zoro counters, his lips grazing the bruises on her neck. “That’s what these are for.”

Lucy snorts, amused, because she doesn’t really mind the marks—after all, she did the same and worse to him—but then he pulls back and Lucy pouts up at him, on the verge of complaining, but then he draws her left palm up to his lips and kisses the scar there, holding her gaze all the while.

It’s never fair when Zoro does this. This is one of those moments Lucy thinks she could read Zoro’s soul in his eyes, see the trust and loyalty and love and mess of protective instincts and impulsivity that makes her swordsman, and it always catches her unprepared. It’s an I love you and it’s an I’ll follow you anywhere, Captain, and a you’ll never be alone again, I promise.

With anyone else it would scare her. It does scare her, a little, how determined Zoro is to stand with her. But she believes him. She trusts him to stay, and she’s known he loves her in one way or another since he raised his blade to the cloudless sky and called her Pirate King.

She tangles her fingers in his hair, and pulls him down and into her, trying to inject as much affection and passion and desire into the kiss as she can. Zoro responds enthusiastically, and it’s sloppy and messy but it’s good too. Warm and safe and just the slightest bit desperate.

It’s decided. Lucy wants to wake up next to Zoro every day, if she can swing it. In a bed, if possible. It’s clearly the only way to do this relationship thing properly.
The next few days pass in a blur. The Straw Hats are more or less banned from working on the Barto-Club ship, which leaves them all with a lot of free time, even with his training. It’s a very pleasant, haze-filled blur, but a blur nonetheless. He spends it exploring Lucy in just about the only way he hadn’t previously, with the two of them ducking off to Lucy’s quarters whenever they get the chance (or various alcoves around the ship if they don’t make it that far). This all takes place in endless folds of time between naps on sunlit decks and meals where he mostly fails in his attempts to ignore his nakama’s constant and very blunt innuendos.

In Zoro’s defense, there’re only so many times he can be expected to hear Franky wonder aloud about what Lucy thinks of his “sword” before he snaps.

Zoro refuses to apologize. It’s not like Franky can’t replace his hand or anything. Besides, Law reattached it without much fuss.

Franky was nothing to Rooster though, because once that guy figured out what they were up to, he started asking questions. Many questions. Frankly, Zoro could have lived without suffering an interrogation over whether he was “treating Lucy-dono with the respect she deserved,” only to have that speech immediately followed by Rooster prostrating himself and offering self-flagellation in pursuit of redemption.

His nakama got a kick out of it. Lucy and Usopp in particular laughed their asses off. Zoro kicked Rooster off the ship, mostly to make him shut up. He didn’t actually realize the guy was a Devil Fruit user, but his crew fished him out quickly enough, it’s not like he drowned.

The others’ apparent interest in their relationship probably isn’t helped by how clingy they’ve been. They take any excuse to touch each other—clasping hands under tables at dinner and casual brushes that were commonplace before but now draw his attention in a whole new way, his brain all too aware of new possibilities. The newfound clinginess kind of reminds him of the time right after they got together, before Punk Hazard and even Dressrosa, where the cook kept complaining and Usopp and Chopper made gagging noises behind his back. Zoro isn’t exactly complaining. It’s not like they’ve got anywhere to be except for chasing Zou, and the itch to touch every waking moment of the day will probably fade over time, just as it has before. For now, it’s…it’s nice to express and receive the casual profundity of their relationship.

So life on Rooster’s boat is good, even if everyone is way too invested in his and Lucy’s sex-life. It’s been a non-stop ride since reuniting in Saboady, and it’s nice to…settle, for a little while. Robin is way too good at dropping innuendos that he only figures out hours later, half the crew is missing along with their ship, and Kaido hovers on the edge of Zoro’s thoughts, but the Barto-Club ship bobs across the water and they’ll deal with challenges as they come. Even if he does have an unfortunately persistent headache throbbing in his temples.

Lucy pokes him in the forehead, and he scowls, blinking up at her. She grins at him, unrepentant, and draws her fingers through his hair.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Lucy chides. She shifts a little and leans against Usopp, and Zoro’s head slides down toward her knees. “Torao said you should sleep if you want your headache to go away.”

“Maybe it’s alcohol withdrawal,” Usopp muses, looking slightly put-out. “They don’t have any on the ship because someone drank it all within two days.”

Zoro narrows his eye. “It ain’t my fault they didn’t pack enough booze.”

“They had an entire cargo hold filled with liquor, Sword-bro.” Franky tinkers with his arm, wielding
a screwdriver. Zoro thinks it’s kind of weird and kind of genius that Franky can put himself back together with nothing but a Phillips-Head, but it’s still weird, seeing the cyborg’s innards like this. Usopp doesn’t seem to have a problem with it, and keeps asking questions, but Zoro turns to look up at the sky, partially obstructed by Lucy, and the hat waving in the wind at the end of its string.

“I said what I said.” A single cargo-hold is nowhere near enough. Even the cook knows that.

“Regardless, there will likely be no available alcohol to imbibe until we reach Zou,” Robin comments lightly. She sits elegantly on a crate nearby, knees tucked daintily beneath her with a book open in her lap, and a wide-brimmed hat on her head.

“Robin, what book are you reading?” Lucy asks, her voice light and relaxed. Zoro feels relaxed too, despite the headache pulsing at the base of his skull. Her Voice feels warm and syrupy—content—and the warm comradery from his nakama seeps into him as the ship rocks gently and the wind plays over the deck.

“I am revisiting the story of Orla,” Robin replies. She nods to the cabin. “Rooster-kun had a copy of her tale in his library.”

“Again?” Lucy asks, like she can’t imagine ever desiring to read a story more than once.

Robin’s eyes are sharp and there’s something sly and amused about her smile. “Would you like me to read it for you?”

“I want to hear it!” Usopp calls, excited. Zoro waits for Chopper to echo his enthusiasm, and grows vaguely frustrated with himself when the doctor’s eager ramblings don’t appear.

They’ll join up with the others soon. The cook is with them.

“I guess it was a good story,” Lucy replies. She’s taken to playing with the fraying threads of his t-shirt, her knuckles brushing his collarbone in irregular, distracting bursts, but Zoro is suddenly too tired to swat her hand away. “Start from wherever you are, though.”

“Go ahead, Robin!” Franky trills. Zoro doesn’t think too hard about the fact that the cyborg’s fingernail just fell off.

“Very well. Orla is about to enter a ‘great and roiling sea of uncertain breadth and fathomless depth,’” Robin explained. “‘The sea itself called its child, the siren song of her dreams beckoning her forth. She said to her friends, “we shall see what there is to see, and know what there is to know,” and they answered, “we are with you, daughter of the family known across all seas.” They followed her into the great unknown, that most dangerous and unkind sea, and were happy with their choice.’”

The fog of sleep creeps over Zoro. His limbs are weightless and warm, and Lucy’s cool fingers soothe the ache throbbing at his temples, if only just a bit. He cannot recall when he closed his eyes

“None could know that day, but soon she would be known across every sea as “Orla the thunder goddess,” the first to go where no one would. She was known as a destroyer, but wherever she passed, her fires gave way to new growth, and the people she met would do nothing but insist upon her kindness.”

“This person sounds familiar,” Usopp mutters dryly.

“You think?” Lucy asks obliviously, but she sounds far away, and Zoro doesn’t quite muster the energy to snort.
“Just a bit, Aneki,” Franky adds fondly.

Robin clears her throat pointedly.

“Sorry, Robin!” Lucy laughs easily.

Usopp echoes her sentiment and asks, “How does it end?”

“Well, I think,” Robin answers, and even half-asleep Zoro can see the knowing light in her eye as clearly as he can feel the push and pull of Lucy’s lungs and the warm salt-wind across his face. “But I will not be spoiling it until we get there. You shouldn’t either, Sencho.”

“I don’t even remember the ending,” Lucy replies cheerfully, and Franky chuckles when Usopp sighs.

Robin, taking no more input from the peanut gallery, continues. “Orla did not set out to be a conqueror or heroine, though some would name her so. She wished only to live for adventure, to seek freedom and her dreams on distant shores. And on her greatest journey into the greatest of seas, she loved and lost and loved again, and forever chased her dreams.”

Six days out from Dressrosa, Lucy makes her way over to Franky and Robin, snacking on a plate of sandwiches. She feels a little bad for taking so much from Rooster’s kitchen when they aren’t sure how long it will take to get to Zou, but Lucy can’t help it—she’s hungry, and dinner isn’t for another two hours. She’ll starve if she waits that long!

Nobody quite believes her on that count, but she doesn’t care so long as she gets her food anyway. She misses Sanji. He always brings her and Robin and Nami snacks between meals.

“Hey Franky,” Lucy greets, plopping down before him. “Whatchya doin’?”

“Aneki,” Franky returns. He shows her the open plate on his right arm. “Just fixing a few things. Had to do a bit of a patch job back there.”

“Hm,” Lucy hums, peering at Franky’s arm-innards curiously. Franky’s so cool he built himself, but Lucy would never in her wildest dreams be able to tell what was going on with his arm. Franky is, like, Robin-level smart. Which is cool.

“You’re still working on that?” Usopp asks. He’s wincing, having come down with the same mysterious headache that’s been bugging Zoro since yesterday. “Are ya missing some parts?”

“Couple things,” Franky replies nonchalantly, and tests his hand’s range of motion. “One of the ball bearings cracked in half. Gotta forge a new one on Sunny.”

Usopp and Robin both make understanding noises of comprehension. Lucy nods with definitive confidence, like she has any idea what they’re talking about. Robin hides a giggle behind her book.

“How are you, God Usopp?” Robin asks teasingly, but there’s a note of genuine concern in her voice too. “Is your headache still there?”

Usopp grimaces, whether from the epithet or the reminder of his headache, Lucy isn’t sure. “Mhmm,” Usopp affirms as he fiddles with Kabuto and his supply of pop greens. Lucy knows he’s getting low on the latter, and he’s probably eager to restock. He looks off toward the prow of the Barto-Club, eyebrows drawn in frustration and admits. “It’s getting worse, too.”
Franky and Robin exchange a glance. Lucy looks to the back of the ship, where Zoro is trouncing one of Rooster’s swordsmen. He’s winning easily—so much so that the spar is more like a training session for the other swordsman rather than an actual exercise of skill—but Lucy knows Zoro, and she knows his game is ever-so-slightly off.

Torao tried to make him take pain meds, but Zoro refused. Lucy would make him, but she hates the damn things too. They make it hard to fight. Harder than a headache already does.

“Chopper’ll look them over when we get to Zou,” Lucy tells her crew. Three pairs of eyes lock onto her face and she smiles brilliantly for them. “Rooster’s navigator says the water’s gettin’ all weird, so we’re probably close. And Chopper’s the best, so they’ll be fine.”

The three of them blink, and then three fond smiles respond to her own.

She doesn’t tell them that a knot of pain’s been blooming at her temples since noon.

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It’s Zoro who realizes she’s got a headache too, of course. She didn’t really expect to be able to hide it for long, and at dinner that evening he frowns at her across the table and asks her about it.

This causes Franky and Robin to…well not quite fret, but Franky hovers and looks a little weepy and blacks out their rooms so they have somewhere dark and quiet to ride out the worst symptoms, and Robin smiles really creepily at anyone who makes an aggravatingly loud noise, which is deeply appreciated by the other three.

It’s Torao who figures out what’s going on though, and why it’s only the three of them who’ve come down with a persistent—and growing—headache.

“It’s your Observation Haki,” he explains. “Or rather, it’s Zou’s.”

“You can only sense living things with Haki,” Zoro corrects. “You can’t sense an island. And definitely not this far away.”

“Zou is…” Torao pauses. “You’ll see. But everything has a presence you can sense with Haki, right? A passive one?” Lucy nods, and notices Usopp paying close attention. “So Zou is giving off signals your brains are picking up on, but you’re having trouble…processing.” Torao shrugs. “I don’t use Observation Haki, so I don’t know, but it seems like the most likely explanation for your symptoms.”

Which is a shame, because Torao would probably be really good at it. But Lucy frowns, thinking of Sanji and how sharp his Haki is. If she and Zoro and Usopp have a persistent, if irritating, headache, Sanji probably had a full-blown migraine. “So what’ll happen when we get there?”

Torao shrugs. “No idea. You’ll probably get used to it though. The Minks wouldn’t have settled there otherwise.”

So they sail on and the waters get more and more turbulent throughout the night as storm clouds boil overhead and fog gathers cloyingly around the ship. Early in the morning, Lucy finds a perch atop the mizzenmast of Rooster’s ship, and Rooster’s crew files in to man the oars as the waves toss the ship. The roiling waters grow darker and the waves steeper and the current tries to guide them back and away from their goal.

Even Lucy can see that it’s kind of odd though. The sea is rarely rhythmic and patterned about anything. And the large waves keep coming periodically, every minute or so from off the starboard bow. It’s…it’s almost like a wake. There’s little wind, too, and for all the storm clouds threatened,
the rain is barely more than a fine mist.

In other words, this storm is no fun, which. That’s annoying. Especially since her head feels like it’s about to split open. But she stays up top anyway, seeking a break in the clouds or a lighthouse in the distance, warning them of rocky shores.

Strangely predictable though the sea might be, it still doesn’t take long for the oarsmen to tire. The current is strong, even disregarding the waves, and Rooster’s crew isn’t large enough to have multiple rotations.

“I’m telling you, draw the ship to starboard,” Torao repeats for the umpteenth time as he chases Rooster around the deck. The sun must be rising because the grey soup clinging to everything is starting to take a rosy, golden hue. “It’ll be easier on your crew.”

“He’s right, Rooster-kun,” Robin chimes in with a gentle smile. “The sea will be calmer.”

Rooster makes one of those weird squealing noises he sometimes does when Lucy or her crew directly addresses him. Thankfully he doesn’t pass out, like that time a couple days ago when Lucy asked if he wanted to spar, and instead gives the order to turn the ship to starboard.

The waves cease almost immediately, the waters going still and quiet, and the current that was pushing them back…

“It’s pulling us forward?” Usopp asks, bewildered. And then his eyes widen in realization.

“What? What is it?” Lucy pesters, jumping down from the mizzenmast. It’s no fun when there’s no big waves anyway.

“I—” Usopp starts, staring off the ship’s prow before sending Torao an uncertain look. Torao doesn’t respond, and Lucy looks between them curiously as Franky lets out a low whistle behind her, staring into the clouds with the same baffled expression that Usopp bears.

“*What*?” Lucy demands, now a little frustrated. But before they can answer, Zoro reaches out to take her shoulder and turns her around to face the ship’s prow.

There amid the ashy fog stands a pillar, right in the middle of the sea. A column so wide the clouds wrap around it like smoke, obscure it partially from view. It goes up and up and *up* until it disappears, the same color as the greying sky. Beyond the pillar something long and vaguely leathery swings into view between the strips of fog, but the image makes little sense. Her temples throb in pain, her Haki rebelling against information she can’t put together, just as her eyes do not grasp the form of the shapes she’s seeing—not the massive globe of leathery stone hanging above the sea beyond the pillar, or why the ship moves closer and closer to the pillar even without wind in their sails or even waves to carry them on.

Then the pillar *moves*, shifts forward in sudden and terrible rush of muscle and sinew, and like a puzzle piece snapping into place Lucy understands.

“It’s—It’s a Zou,” Lucy whispers in awe.

Pain in her temples spikes again, enough that she brings the heel of her palm to her head as the pain screeches higher and the giant elephant’s Voice echoes louder and louder inside her skull until—

“It’s bright,” Usopp complains. Robin makes a curious noise, but Lucy’s too busy agreeing with him to comment. In her mind’s eye, the place where Haki whispers in vibrations and music, the elephant booms like the very turning of the earth made into sound, the frictionless grind of spinning
rock in a vacuum, endless violence constrained to silence, and yet so loud she can barely comprehend it, so bright it nearly burns her eyes from her skull.

But beneath it all there is a melody—something old and as ancient as the sea, a slow, steady beat on a calfskin drum. It is this Lucy focuses on until the booming echoes subside and resolve to form the shadow of a Voice—incomplete but comprehensible, enough so that her eyes can take the strain of the elephant’s presence.

The pain throbbing in her skull peaks unbearably, then wanes. Lucy opens her eyes—she doesn’t remember closing them—to see Franky staring down at her with a concerned frown on his face. She has an arm slung over Zoro’s shoulders as he holds her up—she didn’t even notice him, she can barely hear anything at all over the elephant’s overwhelming presence—and though he seems steady he looks a shade paler than usual. Her knees feel weak and shaky, and Lucy can guess that Zoro caught her in the middle of her distraction—and his own, presumably.

Usopp—poor, untrained Usopp—leans over the ship’s railing to retch. Robin pats his back with a disembodied arm, not risking getting caught in the splash zone. One of Rooster’s nakama offers Usopp a stick of gum uncertainly, and Lucy can’t help the tired grin that crosses her lips when she sees it.

“Straw Hat-ya,” Torao calls. She looks up to see Torao raise an eyebrow at her, questioning. Lucy’s vision is a little blurry, but she’s pretty sure this is his way of asking after her welfare.

“I’m good,” She reassures. “Zou’s just loud.”

“He must be, if you were sensing him almost a day away, Sword-bro,” Franky adds he still looks concerned, but less so than a moment ago. Behind him, Kin’emon and Kanjuro restrain Rooster, despite the guy’s determined to declarations to claw his way to “Lucy-dono’s side.”

“No kidding,” Zoro grumbles. Instinctively, Lucy forces her feet to carry her—an easy task with Zoro there to lean against. When her knees stabilize, she stands on her own and Zoro releases her without prompting.

“What the hell,” Usopp complains, having recovered himself. Robin offers him a glass of water, this time without use of her Devil Fruit, and Usopp gargles it a few times before drinking eagerly even as he complains. “’It’s a cool power,’ they said, ‘perfect for a sniper,’ they said, ‘it’s useful,’ they said…”

He continues, but Lucy’s attention strays back to Zou, and notices for the first time the splash of color where the elephant’s leg sank into the sea.

“Sunny!” Lucy calls in delighted recognition. She squints at the deck, wary of using her Haki to search for her nakama lest Zou’s Voice overwhelm her again, but she can’t see anyone there.

“Guess that’s the best they could do without a dock,” Franky muses, eying the resin-soaked ropes latching the Sunny to Zou’s leg skeptically. But he’s grinning too, and Lucy figures he’s just as glad to see their nakama and home as she is.

“I suppose the others are above?” Robin asks, her gaze travelling up and up and up into the clouds, where the elephant’s back is obscured by fog.


Lucy looks up into the clouds, sees the curve of Zou’s back outlined faintly in the fog, and lets jittery excitement shift her feet. Her nakama are up there, and soon she’ll have them all within reach and
she’ll make sure Sanji teaches Usopp Observation Haki because she and Zoro aren’t that great at it and tell Nami everything she remembers about Dressrosa and give her the map she had Rooster steal so she can make her own and hug Chopper and ask Brook to sing Bink’s Sake and——

“Right,” Lucy decides, pressing her hat to her hair. Zoro shifts beside her into a battle-ready stance she’s sure is unconscious, Robin’s eyes shine with something close to eagerness, and even poor Usopp grins back at her as she sets her sights on the elephant’s back. “Let’s go see them then.”

Franky lets out a joyous *Super!* and Lucy finds that she couldn’t agree more.

Zou is a big-ass elephant, and Zou has a big ass.

The thought is kind of unavoidable as they ascend to the city of the Minks. Kanjuro and Kin’emon, who presumably know a little more about the place than even Law, fell off almost immediately of course, and after that there wasn’t a whole lot to do other than contemplate the truly epic proportions of the elephant’s backside. It was either that or focus on Lucy’s impatient squirming, and considering how close they all have to press together to even fit on the dragon, well. The elephant’s posterior was preferable to say the least.

She did finally settle down a little after Franky and Robin took pity on him and explained the physical consequences of rubber impacting water at terminal velocity. And why Armament would likely not help her at all in such a situation. She still couldn’t quite contain her enthusiasm about exploring a new place—especially a country as unique as this one—but near-constant stream of excited babbling and occasional sudden gesture of anticipation made manifest was much preferred to having her wiggling in his lap so much he was tempted to just throw her off himself.

He gets it though. He’s been long-since infected by Lucy’s love of exploration—all the Straw Hats are—and Zou is so strange and unknown that it reminds Zoro of Skypiea, just a little.

Admittedly, that might just be the ridiculous ascent up a vertical plane, but the parallels weren’t lost on him.

Spending the better part of a day climbing an elephant’s backside was not on Zoro’s bucket list, but he can admit it was cool. The sunset was…nice enough. It caught the red tones in Lucy’s hair.

Zoro was more than ready to get to the top of the elephant though—if for no other reason than he pitied the dragon.

Crying over the damn thing was a bridge too far though.

“This is ridiculous,” Zoro grumbles, watching his nakama weep over the ridiculously dramatic death of Ryunosuke.

Thankfully, Law is not nearly as quick to befriend aggrieved life forms as his nakama. “It’s just a drawing,” he agrees, vaguely disbelieving.

The others pull themselves together eventually, though. Lucy, as per her usual approach to exploring a new place, almost immediately charges past him and Law and then launches herself up to the top of the looming marigold walls. The stone bears intricate designs interspersed with vines and trees growing into the structure. No one mans the gate, apparently, because Lucy meets no resistance as she disappears over the other side of the bell tower.

It figures, Zoro supposes, that there would be no real need for defenses. If the Minks were expecting an attack, the elephant itself would act as their fortress. Picking any attackers off Zou’s legs during
the climb would be easy, and if someone made it to the top, the Minks would just attack him or her as a group.

It’s…bothersome that Zoro can’t sense anyone nearby with his Haki so handicapped by Zou. He’s going to be slower to react than usual in the event of an attack, especially on his left side. It probably won’t get any better, either, because the others would have met them at the top at Sanji’s behest otherwise. Fucking cook was good with Observation Haki.

Ah well. The Minks are meant to be allies anyway, so far as Zoro can tell, and the giant elephant defense will work just as well for them as it has for the Minks.

“Oi, Robin,” Usopp calls, frowning at the carvings in the gate as their party passes through. “Don’t these look like…?”

“So, Skypiea?” Robin asks, her eyes soaking in the etchings eagerly, her hands already filled with her notebook and pen. “Yes…and no. These are older, by about three centuries. Two hundred years before the Void Century, and yet…some of these characters are similar to the alphabet in the ruins we found…a related language maybe? Or an ancient government? The Shandorians were descendants of the people who built those ruins, but they only cared about the bell, so it is possible the cultural significance of that place was lost to them…”

Zoro tunes her out. The ruins must really be something, because Robin almost never rambles like this, but he needs to pay attention to where he’s walking with his blind spot more onerous than usual, and he kind of doesn’t care.

As it turns out, his extra attention pays off when he stops just short of tripping over two large, oxidized iron gates.

Iron gates whose hinges are shredded off their pins.

Zoro looks around, just shy of eager for an opponent to battle. The city of the Minks is large and expansive, built right into the elephant’s hide with lichen and moss and green, green trees framing the massive stone buildings. The city and forest seem merged, like they grow from one another, but above it all is a tree the size of Mihawk’s castle in the shape of a whale.

The streets are empty though. Deserted, and far, far too quiet. Not far from the gates, two structures loom—each two beams crossed in an X, dark stains mottling the wood in different places.

Zoro knows what a crucifix looks like.

So much for elephant defense.

Lucy’s disappeared on them already of course. He didn’t really expect any different, given her eagerness. But with the city seemingly deserted and an unknown attacker that could pose a threat to a civilization as old as this one possibly on the loose, the urge to go find his nakama now increases tenfold.

Also the urge to facepalm, but he ignores that bit.

“Oi! CURLY BROW!” He bellows, his left hand cupped near his mouth to focus the sound. “SEA WITCH. CHOP—”

Usopp, clearly possessed of more faith in Zoro’s ability to tell friend from foe than he has in himself at the moment, leaps gracelessly onto his back and slaps his vaguely sticky hand across his mouth.
Zoro twists away from him, but Usopp is scrappy when he wants to be—and even if he’s annoyed, Zoro doesn’t actually want to hurt him by, say, slicing his hand off or something equally permanent.

So Usopp clings to him like a slightly cowardly octopus and whisper-hisses, “what if they’re still here?”

Then Zoro will get a good fight in and take a nap after. It’s better than waiting around to get ambushed. And he wouldn’t have to keep wondering if passing out is an acceptable trade-off for figuring out where everyone is via Haki.

“Guys!” Lucy calls from the city. Their party looks up to see her bounding through one of the empty streets, a big grin fixed on her face. “This place is so cool!” But she stops a few paces away from them, a little furrow of confusion between her eyebrows. “No one’s here though. It’s all empty.”

“That’s not super,” Franky agrees gravely.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Law adds, inspecting the fallen gates and the strange footprint in the elephant-skin ground. “The Minks have lived on Zou for a thousand years and never fallen. A simple attack wouldn’t take them out. Even a big attack wouldn’t eradicate them completely.”

That would mean they’re either hiding, hoping the Straw Hats would go away, or…or they’re…

A branch snaps. Six heads flinch toward the tree line.

“Usopp-kun,” Robin whisper-warns. The sniper releases Zoro and promptly hides behind him without question.

They stand silent and ready for one heartbeat, then two. Usopp shifts his weight, uncertain. Lucy’s nostrils flare, like a coonhound scenting prey.

Zoro lets his aura spike with bloodlust. Usopp flinches behind him, but stays his ground. Lucy eyes him for half a beat, and he knows she understands his tactic—knows the strategy, is willing to go along with it, but doesn’t necessarily like it much.

Another branch breaks—this time from behind. Usopp and Franky both turn toward the noise. Zoro loosens Wado from the sheath.

Without Haki, he’s relying on instincts for battle honed sharp and fine over a lifetime, which is almost as good. His blind spot weighs heavier than usual, but his gut draws his gaze to a point behind him, and his aura will draw attention to him, mislead the attacker into thinking he’s the biggest threat.

He’d probably go for Zoro first anyways, considering the eye.

And he’ll come on my left, Zoro reminds himself, his grin promising retribution for the presumption of weakness. Wado slips another centimeter out of the sheath.

It happens in the next moment—a rush of white at breakneck speeds, the crackling of electricity, and his instincts blaring danger! danger! danger! as he sweeps into a devastating lunge aimed at cutting his opponent in half.

But his blade doesn’t land—not because he missed his mark, but because the assailant changed velocities in midair.
Right into his blind spot.

He can’t see the white blur at all, and instead reacts entirely on instinct by raising Wado to protect his face and half-drawing Shusui to protect his body as he turns to put the attacker in his sights.

A hit bears down on his blades, and Wado hums a clear, ringing tone as electricity flickers across the steel.

His assailant is strong, but nowhere near strong enough to knock him back, even with her advantage in motility. Zoro is a rock, and the slight strain in his arms, the numb tingling in his hands, it’s nowhere near enough to make him back down. His grin is a terrible gash across his face, tinged with battle-lust.

Her momentum discharges into him and she flips away. When she lands near the tree line, her eyes dart back and forth across the six members of their party, each standing with weapons and fists at the ready. She’s either a Mink or a Devil Fruit user, with her white fur and fluffy tail, but the way she analyzes them, looking for weakness, would speak of competence in battle even if she hadn’t just surprised him.

It’d probably be over in a few seconds if he had access to Haki, but at the moment they’re a little closer to an even playing field. Not by much, but. He thinks a fight against her would be fun. Good way to practice fighting blind, so to speak.

“Hi!” Lucy calls, sensing the lull in the fight because of course she does, “I’m Monkey D Lucy, and I’m gonna be the Pirate King! Who’re you?”

The rabbit mink blinks, startled. “Monkey D Lucy?” She asks, her whole face lighting with recognition. “Monkey D Lucy, captain of the Straw Hat Pirates?”

“Uh huh,” Lucy replies, casual and unconcerned and friendly. “But what’s your na—”

The rabbit disappears, gone in a flash of white against the green of her homeland. Zoro lets his bloodlust dissipate a little reluctantly.

“Huh,” Usopp mutters, lowering Kabuto slowly. “That was…”

“She recognized Lucy,” Robin adds, “And…us?”

“She’s probably going to get reinforcements,” Law growls, clearly annoyed.

Zoro nods to him, glad someone’s actually thinking here. “We should go after her.”

Lucy scratches the back of her head, her nose scrunched so that some of her freckles meet. “D’you think she knows where Sanji and the others are?”

“They’re our best bet to find out,” Franky declares, pounding his massive fists together. Still a weird habit, if you asked Zoro.

“Let’s go then!” Lucy declares cheerfully, and Zoro just barely manages to catch her by the collar of her shirt before she charged off into the forest alone.

“We shouldn’t split up,” Zoro tells her. She smooths her collar down, frowning at it, and then grins at him with far too much energy.

“Okay!” She agrees easily. Too easily. “Let’s go fast!”
Lucy’s nakama take a wary step away from her, all too familiar with Lucy’s definition of fast travel and her preferred methods of achieving it. Poor, stupid Law just blinks at them, clearly bewildered.

“Lucy, no—”

“I don’t want to die!”

“I would prefer to walk, Sencho.”

“We made a rule about this, Aneki! Remember the rule.”

Law takes all this in with a slow blink, and then sets his icy gaze on Lucy as comprehension dawns.

“Touch me and die, Straw Hat-ya.”

Lucy frowns at them all, completely uncomprehending. “But you said—”

“Lucy?”

The voice is familiar, and it’s been missing from the crew for almost two weeks. The six of them turn back to the tree line just in time to see a redheaded woman in a blue dress stumble out of the forest.

They all stare at each other for a few seconds, stunned in spite of themselves.

But Lucy is the first to react, throwing herself at their navigator gleefully just as Nami runs to meet her.

The two girls catch each other in a hug, their smiles huge as they babble eager questions that go unanswered in the face of each other’s enthusiasm, and then everyone but Law steps forward to greet their missing comrade. Zoro even lets Nami punch him, which makes Lucy smile, and he will never admit the relief—the slight relief—he feels at seeing her safe and sound.

And then Lucy asks a question, innocent and innocuous as anyone might expect.

“Are Sanji and the others going to fall out of the forest too?” Lucy theatrically puts her hand over her eyes, as if expecting the others to be hiding in the trees.

Nami’s face falls. She bites her lip.

“What is it?” Zoro asks lowly. Nami doesn’t usually…hesitate. Especially not when it comes to the cook.

“Chopper and Brook and Momo are fine, of course,” She starts. Her eyes get a little watery. “But Sanji-kun…”

“Sanji what?” Lucy asks, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion. “Is he okay?”

“He…” Nami’s face cracks, and her chin wobbles just a little as a few tears roll down her cheeks, but when she speaks her voice doesn’t waver. “He’s gone.”

Lucy’s face goes blank. Usopp and Robin share a look, and Franky asks Gone? Where to?

Zoro places a hand on Kitetsu’s hilt as the blade wails ever-louder in his head.

He has a bad feeling about this.
…I still couldn’t write Zoro saying “I love you.” That’s about as close as he’ll ever get, probably.

I know it might seem like I’m just adding in random bullshit for the sake of it, but I promise there’s actually a plot-related reason Zou needs to be overwhelming enough to people with Observation Haki to make it so they use it as little as possible while on the “island.” Plus, logically speaking, it makes sense that this ability would work this way, sort of. It’s at least arguable. Especially if the “Voice of All Things” power is what I think it is.

I’m sure y’all knew this already, but Zou’s name is a pun in Japanese. Zou is the word for elephant. Zou is an elephant. Named elephant. Get it? Cool. I do not have an explanation for why Lucy randomly knows the Japanese word for elephant, but I liked the pun. Throw your tomatoes at Oda, not at me. Although I will take credit for my own puns, thank you much.

The way Oda wrote the Ryunosuke joke is perfect. I will hear no words to the contrary. So I made sure not to touch it too much.

I don’t think it was ever suggested in the show that Robin was interested in the architecture and culture of the Minks, which honestly seems a little funky to me. Zoro repeatedly mentions Skypiea because narratively and aesthetically, Zou and Skypiea have a lot of similarities. However, I don’t necessarily abide by the idea that each new world arc has a corresponding pre-time skip arc, because frankly when a series has gone on for 20+ years, the author is bound to reuse a couple ideas. #letOdarest

Happy Thanksgiving! Sorry I’ve been absent so long. Please eat Pecan Pie for me, and leave a review if you so choose.
Zou 2

Chapter Summary

Lucy gets a surprise. She normally likes surprises, but this one is bad. Also, Zoro’s day just fucking sucks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I don’t get it,” Lucy whines when Nami finishes the story. Sanji’s letter sits wrinkled in her palms, the characters hastily, sloppily written. It’s unlike her cook, who prefers everything neat and orderly and whose script is like print. “He just…left? He didn’t blow up their ship or nothin’?”

Nami shakes her head, eyes watering again. She’s leaning against the back of the couch, too tense to sit properly. Her right hand runs over the scars beneath her tattoo in the same habitual, comforting way Zoro rests a palm on Wado’s hilt, or Brook touches his hair. A reassurance. A stabilizer. A reminder of what they’ve already survived, and of where they have to go.

Wendy and the other Minks ushered them here, all graciousness and affection Lucy had welcomed but hadn’t understood until Nami and the others sat them down to explain. The room looks like it’s been carved out of the tree trunk, with mustard-colored walls and blue-green furniture. Lucy’s sitting cross-legged on a wooden table, her back to the door. Zoro is behind her, standing guard, and the rest of her crew is scattered in tight clusters across the room.

They’re all crowding close together, craving contact. Usopp and Franky and Brook are all shoulder-to-shoulder on the couch. Robin leans against the wall on the far side, with Chopper in her arms. Nami’s shoulders brush Franky’s knees. Zoro leans into Lucy’s back every once in a while.

Sanji’s absence is conspicuous.

She doesn’t like it.

“Sanji-san threw us to safety with the note, I’m afraid,” Brook continues. His voice is soft and sad and shamed as he plucks the strings of his guitar half-heartedly. “Capone-san’s body sealed up not long after that.

In Robin’s careful hold, Chopper sniffs as big, salty reindeer tears roll down his cheeks. “He just—he just left,” Chopper warbles. “He had a chance to get out, but instead he—he—”

No one finishes the sentence. Robin changes the subject instead.

“You’re sure they said Vinsmoke?” Robin asks, directing the question to Brook. The skeleton hums quietly in affirmation.

“I suppose you would recognize the name as well, Robin-san,” Brook replies, his voice as quiet and soothing as ever despite the difficult topics. “I worked for a time in the court of Sanji’s, oh, great-grandfather, probably. I became a pirate soon after.”

Franky picks up on Brook’s tone, giving a low whistle. “That bad?” Brook doesn’t answer.
“The Vinsmokes are a well-known family throughout the world, though they’ve been on a steady decline for the last century or so. At the height of the family’s power, they ruled all of North Blue. Now, Vinsmoke Judge reigns over a floating kingdom, acting mostly as a mercenary and weapons developer,” Robin reports. There’s a look of vague distaste on her face. “I considered working with him, before. He is…an odious man. I imagine being his son would be difficult.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Lucy states bluntly, still glaring at the letter. “I wanna know why Sanji went off without us. We’ll help him beat up Big Mom or his dad or whoever. He knows that!”

It’s so…strange, too. Downright odd, even, because Lucy’s always been pretty aware don’t fuck with me is written into the very fabric of Sanji’s soul. It’s why she liked him so much, back on the restaurant. He just wanted to feed people and flirt and dream about All Blue even when everyone else said it couldn’t exist.

Plus, this is the same guy who clawed his way onto a speeding ocean train in the middle of a tsunami because he knew one of his nakama was in danger. And also, he once berated Zoro for two days straight because of an imagined slight toward Nami. Sanji is nothing if not tenacious, and it’s weird that he’d just…leave like that. Without saying anything important in the note. Without explaining things to Nami and Brook and Chopper.

“Let me see the note,” Zoro demands gruffly. It’s the first time he’s spoken since they discovered Sanji is missing, excepting a soft greeting for a weepy Chopper. Lucy hands him the note. She has it memorized by now anyway. It isn’t long.

My friends,

I have some things to take care of, but I’ll be back. Maybe I’ll even take on Big Mom for you. Please don’t worry, Lucy-san. See you in Wano.

Sanji

No horrible flirting. No dramatic oaths or declarations or over-the-top threats to the guys to keep her and Nami and Robin safe. No instructions about the kitchen or the food stores, or regretful begging to keep Lucy out of them.

Zoro frowns at the paper for far longer than it could have possibly taken to read it. He hands it back to Lucy without saying anything.

“Does he…” It sounds weird to say, but it is Sanji they’re talking about. “Does he want to marry this girl?”

Nami shakes her head, long red curls bouncing across her back. “He outright said he didn’t want to more than once. It wasn’t until…” Nami trails off, her eyebrows furrowing in consternation.

“What is it?” Usopp asks. Hesitantly, like he isn’t sure he wants to know.

“Bege’s number two whispered something in his ear,” Nami says slowly, taking special care with the words. “Whatever he said…after that, Sanji-kun looked scared. Really scared.”

Lucy frowns at the note harder, resisting the urge to punch something. She wants her nakama back, dammit. She wants Sanji to make her food and bicker with Zoro and flirt really aggressively with Nami and talk about different foods around the world with Robin and she wants him back.

She should probably punch Big Mom, right? It sounds like she’s the one responsible. Lucy has a feeling her nakama won’t like that very much, but she’s pretty sure that’ll make most of their current
problems go away.

“Well we should go to his wedding anyway,” Lucy hums with no small amount of consternation, scratching the back of her head. “We can ask him then.”

There’s a beat where she can almost hear her nakama processing, where Lucy feels determination solidifying, and then a chorus of voices echo around her in discordant shock.

“We should what?”

“Think about it, Aneki—”

“That is the stupidest—" Lucy ignores their vaguely hysterical protests and frowns at the curved walls of the pineapple-shaped Mink house.

This whole thing reeks of blackmail and manipulation. Bringing up Sanji’s family and engaging him to some girl he’s never met—all of that seems really…gross. Dark and twisted in a way Lucy can’t put her finger on.

And yet…and yet…would Sanji have really…?

“We should go on without him.”

The room drops to dead silence, the cacophony of voices trying to convince Lucy that confronting Big Mom and fetching Sanji at his own wedding was a bad idea cutting off in choked shock. Lucy turns slightly, looking up at her swordsman in surprise.

Zoro stands behind her, shoulders hunched inward and his arms crossed as he scowls at nothing in particular. The set of his mouth is stubborn, and his eye flashes gunmetal grey. She’d almost call him defensive if she couldn’t see the muscle twitching in his jaw and the fine trembling of his fists.

He’s angry. Lucy’s not entirely sure who it’s directed toward. Sanji maybe. Big Mom, possibly. Hell it could be Lucy, for wanting to go after him.

“We don’t need him anyway. We should just—"

A blur of sunset-red and purple strides across the room, and Nami cracks her palm across Zoro’s face.

Lucy’s nakama gasp as one. The air sparks with tension. Zoro doesn’t move, just glares right back at Nami without moving a muscle, his arms still crossed over his chest. Nami’s body is an aggressive arch from her toes to the roots of her hair. She’s trembling like she wants to hit Zoro and never stop.

“You’re glad, aren’t you?” Nami seethes, rage coating her voice like she’s been waiting for an opportunity to let it out. “You’re glad he’s gone, because you never liked him! You never wanted him around! You worried about him and Lucy, and you hated him because you felt threatened, were worried he was stronger than you, and—”

“Nami.”

Lucy’s voice is stern and low, uncompromising. Nami’s mouth clicks shut, instinctively obeying even as her chest heaves in barely-restrained passion.

“Go help Wanda,” Lucy orders, voice still low and powerful and intractable in a way it rarely is
toward her crew. “Find out if Pekoms is awake.”

Nami doesn’t move for a moment. She trembles instead, a rare kind of rage surging through her, and Lucy is inexplicably reminded of that day long ago in Arlong Park where Nami screamed that she didn’t want help, that she could do it on her own. The Nami standing before her now is much closer to that girl than she’s been in a long time.

“You didn’t see him,” Nami whispers finally, her eyes fever-bright. “He was—you didn’t see him.”

But before anyone can respond, Nami turns on her heel and strides stiff-backed and firm to the door. She doesn’t quite close it hard enough to slam, and the clip-clop of her sandals disappears within a few strides.

“Chopper,” Lucy calls, and the little reindeer who had been making his tentative way over to Zoro jumps a little. Lucy smiles at him reassuringly, trying to calm the terror in his eyes. “Can you help her ask around?”

There’s more than one kind of healing, after all. And Chopper is a really good shoulder to cry on.

Thankfully, her doctor seems to get it. After a moment’s hesitation and a glance at Zoro—whose face is starting to bloom bright red, but otherwise seems unfazed—the reindeer nods determinedly and wipes his tears. His hooves clop a little louder against the dry wood of the deck than Nami’s heels, but they too disappear quickly.

Lucy looks at her first mate, eyebrow raised in question.

Zoro stares back, vaguely defiant, his mouth twisted in the same angry scowl.

Nami is fast, and faster when she’s pissed, but Zoro could have caught her wrist if he wanted to. Could have dodged or triggered his Armament and maybe shattered all the bones in her hand if he wanted to be a real bastard about it, but instead he let her hit him. Nami’ll realize that on her own, eventually. And then she’ll regret what she just said, because Nami knows that Zoro and Sanji are friends in their own machismo, dysfunctional way, that they’d die stupidly brave deaths for one another in a heartbeat, that the animosity is mostly habit by now, rather than the product of any real sort of malice.

Nami knows all that. And she knows that accusing Zoro of disloyalty and conspiracy is tantamount to calling the very sea barren, or the heavens empty. And she’s going to feel really bad when she remembers.

At least Zoro’s unlikely to hold Nami’s reaction against her. Zoro’s very aware that he can be a complete bastard sometimes.

And Zoro does not want to talk about it, if the scowl is anything to go by. Maybe Lucy should push him to, but it’s likely to be counterproductive with the rest of the crew here. She kind of doubts he’d want to discuss it even if it was just the two of them. The best she can hope for is that he’ll stop putting his hackles up long enough for her to check on him later.

If she was just his girlfriend, she’d do that now. But she’s not. She’s his captain, and she needs to know what the hell he meant earlier.

He knows her well enough to start explaining unprompted.

“The cook’s coming back. He said so,” he gestures to the note as he crosses his arms, looking frustrated. “It’s not like he doesn’t have a plan.”
Which is exactly what Lucy was thinking about earlier. Sanji is almost as neurotic about having a plan as Nami is about money or Franky about Sunny’s cola supply. He makes five-step strategies to go grocery shopping half the time. Granted, cooking for the crew and around everyone’s dietary needs is complicated, but still.

Going into Big Mom’s territory without a plan? Without even trying to get away?

It’s strange. Lucy doesn’t like it, because she trusts Sanji—absolutely and completely trusts him—but she knows a thing or two about suddenly being faced with impossible choices, especially when family is involved. She knows that if Sanji was scared about something, then it means he probably wasn’t thinking straight.

Walking into an Emperor’s territory alone probably isn’t quite as crazy as sneaking into the strongest prison in the world, but the principle is probably the same.

“Doesn’t mean it’s a good plan,” Usopp grumbles. He’s eyeing Zoro with a wary sort of concern, but his thoughts are close to her own thinking and so Lucy frowns a little harder.

“And,” Zoro continues, heedless of the comment, “We can’t ignore Kaido any longer.”

Franky makes a quiet, displeased noise that might be agreement. Robin’s eyes sharpen.

“Zoro-san?” Brook asks, a little hesitant.

“Back on Punk Hazard, Kaido was the endgame. He’s why we’ve been carting Caesar around and why we went to Dressrosa in the first place.” Lucy kind of thought they went to Dressrosa because Torao had some kind of suicidal death wish to kill ‘Mingo, but hey, she’s been wrong before. “We’ve been pissing him off since we came to the New World. And Lucy picked a fight with Big Mom before that.”

“She was gonna destroy Fishman Island over candy,” Lucy objects, a little sullen. “It was stupid. She’s stupid.”

Usopp groans. Robin huffs in a way that might have been a laugh, under different circumstances. It breaks up a little of the tension in the room.

“We can’t have two Emperors after us,” Zoro finishes, now gazing hard at Lucy. “And we’ve done more than just declared war against Kaido. We’ve landed the first assault and won.”

Lucy hates it when Zoro does this. Well, kind of. She’s usually grateful later. But in the moment she hates it, because Zoro only steps in like this when he feels like she might make a mistake. When being the captain is the hardest. And he’s always, always right.

“The whole marriage thing is…weird,” Lucy counters. She can’t refute anything he’s said. “And his family…” Zoro’s eyebrow arches in surprise, and the rest of her nakama follow suit. Lucy supposes it is pretty weird for her to care about anyone’s family circumstances—she doesn’t, not even Sanji’s, not even when she has a weird feeling about Sanji never mentioning them before, but — “D’you think he wants to go back to them?”

She directs the question to Brook, who plucks a morose string on the guitar as he shakes his head. “Most emphatically not, Lucy-san.”

Lucy feels the shadow of something dark and protective twist in her gut, solidifying just a little more. If Sanji doesn’t want to leave them, that means he’s being manipulated, plan or not. No matter how strong he is or how clever, he’s still starting from a disadvantage. And without Lucy and
the rest of their nakama around to back him up, he’s outgunned and outmanned in enemy territory.

If there’s one thing she’s always promised her nakama, it’s that she’ll always stand between them and chains, no matter what form their bonds take. They do the same for her. And she can’t help but feel like Sanji’s walking back into a cage he once escaped so thoroughly he never saw fit to tell them about it.

It pisses her off—at Sanji, and at those who would try and jail him both.

She wants to ask him what the hell he’s thinking, charging off alone. And she has a sinking feeling that something is wrong, that he’s not in his right mind, that this is like Sabo coming back from the dead but bad, somehow. She doesn’t understand—can’t, really—but she wants to.

All they can do is go and ask.

But Zoro’s not wrong, either. Kaido is a problem. And Lucy vehemently dislikes the idea of letting someone get the drop on her crew the same way the Big Mom Pirates just did.

They could just…take care of Sanji and pick him up quickly. And then run to Wano. She wouldn’t get to beat up Big Mom that way, but at least she’d be able to ensure her nakama’s safety.

Or she could…she could…

No. She’s not…she’s not doing that. She’s so, so close to having them back together again.

Lucy looks at the note. The characters of Sanji’s name are shaky. Rushed. There’s a smudge of cigarette ash in the corner.

“Zoro’s right,” Lucy says slowly. Usopp and Brook both make quiet, distressed protests that are probably unconscious. “But I still wanna talk to Sanji.”

Zoro scowls at her, clearly irritated. Lucy ignores it, standing to head for the door. She has to talk to Pekoms. And Nami. Especially Nami.

“C’mon. I want to explore,” She hums cheerfully. She doesn’t need Haki to sense the uncertain looks her nakama exchange behind her back.

It’s okay. She only has half a plan right now. Mostly she just has fire burning in her blood and boiling rage just under her skin because someone took her nakama and made him scared enough to nearly misspell his own name.

Lucy’s going to make them pay for that.

Lucy strides determinedly out the door. It only takes a moment for the rest of them to follow.

The forest is dense outside the little cluster of pineapple buildings, and the elephant’s spongy skin leaves no tracks, so Lucy starts her search for Nami and Chopper by more or less following instinct and her nose. She’s semi-successful, but she only figures out how to navigate the thick copse of trees and brush when Wanda gives her a significant glance and a nod to a narrow path between two houses.

Lucy thanks her with a wave and turns, her shoulders back and her hands in her pockets, posture easy.

The path winds for only a minute or two between the makeshift buildings before emptying into a
small clearing. Nami and Chopper sit at the far end of it. Lucy takes her hands out of her pockets and strides forward, neither quick nor slow. Neither of them seems to notice her.

When she gets a little closer it becomes clear that Nami hasn’t fully cycled through her anger. She’s trembling, forehead on her knees, and Chopper’s expression is dismayed and uncertain. Lucy’s sandals squish obnoxiously in Zou’s flesh, and Nami’s shoulders tense when she recognizes her gait.

Nami raises her head, eyes defiant. She’s not shaking anymore, her frame rigid like she’s gearing up for a fight. Chopper whines softly, distressed.

Lucy would say something, normally, or send him off to do something else or just smile so he didn’t feel so unnerved. But she can’t at the moment, because Nami is too important, too angry, too stubborn to see she’s pushing away people who only want to help.

Lucy pins her gaze to Nami’s, mouth firm and hands at her sides, and doesn’t speak a word.

It takes a while, but Nami looks away first, and her shoulders hunch close around her ears.

“I’m not apologizing. Zoro doesn’t have to be so mean when Sanji-kun’s not even here.” Nami’s face fractures just a little.

Lucy says nothing.

“Sanji-kun was scared. He was so scared and we couldn’t help him. If I’d been like—if we had you or Zoro it would have—I could have—” She cuts herself off, biting her lip.

“Sanji-kun doesn’t get scared,” Nami admits finally. “And he didn’t want to leave. It was like—”

Lucy finishes in her head. It was like Sabaody.

Lucy doesn’t forget, exactly, that the events at the archipelago are seared in all of their memories in different, equally traumatic ways. She can’t forget when her crew has such a strong collective hang-up about separation, about teamwork. But sometimes it slips her mind. Sometimes she has to remember that her crew is just as protective of each other as she is of them, that shared trauma can have unexpected blowback.

She doesn’t forget that Ace wasn’t the first person she failed, back then. She can’t. But the reminders hurt sometimes, catch her when she’s least expecting it.

“And then that brute,” Nami hisses. Her eyes flash and she leaps to her feet as her earlier rage rises. She’s taller than Lucy but her temper makes her movements erratic. “Has the gall to say we should just—just—just leave him? When he’s—he’s scared and alone and—”

Tears wobble down Nami’s cheeks and accusation rises in her eyes, in the finger she points at Lucy’s chest and then thrusts toward the trees. “And don’t defend him just because he’s your—because you guys are—” Nami catches herself, but half the insinuation is out already and it makes Lucy’s mouth tighten, displeased.

Nami deflates immediately, and she hides her teary, red-splotched face in her arm.

“I—Sorry. I’m sorry. I know you don’t—” She gulps harshly, like she can’t get enough air. “And I know Zoro isn’t—that it’s Sanji-kun and they’re stupid, and—”

Lucy glances at Chopper, gaze softening when she sees him tearing up too. She cocks her chin to Nami, and the little reindeer takes the hint. Nami catches him, startled, when he throws himself
around her waist. It takes a moment for her to regain her bearings, but then she curls around Chopper’s fluffy little reindeer body, and cries in earnest. She sinks slowly to her knees, half-turned away from Lucy like she’s embarrassed.

She should be. Not because she’s crying. Not because she’s scared for Sanji or angry at her perceived inability to protect him. She should be embarrassed for believing her nakama wouldn’t care the same way she does. She should be embarrassed, just a little, for lashing out like she did, for not trusting Zoro to have his reasons, even if his presentation could be a little more polished, even if Lucy’s still not entirely clear on why he’s so willing to let Sanji fend for himself. It’s still Zoro, either way. He’s still their nakama.

The only thing Nami has to be ashamed of is forgetting that.

She must have been scared too—her and Brook and Chopper—seeing Sanji taken like that.

Lucy eases her gaze, just a little, even as she feels determination burn hotter in her gut.

The straw hat slides home over Nami’s hair easily, the brim plenty wide to accommodate the pretty beads. Lucy leaves her hand on the crown of Nami’s head, and lets her palm be heavy, firm. Her navigator looks up at her, shock in her face.

“Lucy…?”

“If you think you’re weak, get stronger,” Lucy demands. Nami’s eyes are red and her chin wobbles. Lucy lets a small smile loose in response. “And trust your nakama to do the rest.”

Nami’s breath hitches, and her arms curl around Chopper just a bit tighter, like she’s afraid to let go. The reindeer doesn’t seem to mind, not even when she presses her face to his hat and wails.

Lucy backs off. Nami’s never been weak. No one on her crew is weak. It wasn’t Nami’s fault that Lucy and Zoro weren’t around to help Sanji. That’s on Lucy, and her decisions, and it sounds like Sanji went peacefully besides.

(Whether he was willing, though, is another matter entirely, and the hot pit in her gut curls tighter and more brilliant at the thought.)

But if Nami wants to increase her firepower? If she wants to be better able to protect herself and her nakama? Lucy’s not going to stop her. Just so long as she doesn’t stop trusting them, relying on the crew in turn.

She’ll get her hat back when apologies have been made, when the plan is settled a little more firmly and doesn’t taste like ash on Lucy’s tongue. Until then…

Well. That hat has always been pretty good at hiding tears.

She’s maybe not terribly subtle when she pulls Zoro away from the group just before they get on the alligator-rhino things, but no one bats an eyelash at them. At the front of their little cohort, Nami rides with Wanda, Lucy’s hat still on her head, and the others claim seats without much thought or care.

There’s an undercurrent of uncertainty between them though, weight missing from the scale. Lucy notices it, and knows she must alleviate it soon, but she wants to extend the relative calm just a little longer, until she knows as much as she can know about Big Mom and the marriage she’s forced upon her cook.
In the meantime, her swordsman has a bruise on his cheekbone and something heavy weighing on his brow.

She tugs him one step further into the trees, swinging their hands between them. He glares down at her, his whole body tense and radiating irritation. Lucy just grins at him, her smile toothy.

Zoro relaxes, if only a little. The scowl stays in place, and his eye still flashes in alert wariness at their surroundings, but his shoulders drop. His hand squeezes hers.

Lucy’s just the teensiest bit amused at how easy that was. It’s not like she’s any better, really, but Zoro being naturally cranky makes it a little more obvious with him.

She lifts her free hand to his cheek, her thumb grazing the swelling bruise. It’s not anywhere near the worst blow he’s ever taken, and certainly not one Lucy is worried about beyond its implication for Zoro and Nami’s friendship, but she inspects it all the same.

He’ll probably put himself in a light meditation on the way to see Cat Viper. It’ll be healed by the time they get there. Zoro would consider anything less petty, especially given how guilty Nami’s going to feel once she calms down.

Lucy clicks her tongue softly when she’s finished, her smile fading into a faint frown at the heat under her fingertips. “She got you good, huh?”

His scowl deepens. “No.”

Lucy rolls her eyes. Zoro’s gaze narrows just a bit, irritated. He doesn’t look anywhere near guilty enough about gunning for low-hanging fruit.

“You,” Lucy says after a moment, lips twitching against a smile. “Are such a drama queen.”

Zoro looks downright offended, and Lucy laughs. The offense shifts to a glower.

Lucy just grins at him, undaunted, and sways into his space just a little, enough to press her lips to his blooming bruise, right where his scar bisects it. “You’re a good friend, Zoro,” she hums as she pulls back. Her voice is terribly fond when she says it.

He didn’t have to let Nami hit him, probably only did it to make her feel better. And his worry is palpable to Lucy, even without Haki. It’s present in the way he keeps tipping an ear to the rest of the crew, clearly audible behind the thin line of trees, and in the way he keeps reaching for Shusui whenever a branch in the forest breaks. Sanji’s absence is affecting him just as much as it is the others, even if he’s expressing it differently.

Zoro doesn’t betray discomfort at the compliment, but he does look heavenward, like he can’t believe he’s stuck with her. She’s grinning a little when she pokes him hard in the chest, and she doesn’t quite pull off the scolding wag of her finger, oh well, she tried. “But it’s not fair to tease Sanji when he’s not here.”

He scowls at her. Lucy rolls her eyes.

He’s such a dumbass. It shouldn’t be as endearing as it is.

But then Zoro’s demeanor shifts, just a little. The playful grumpiness seeps away, and whatever he’s been brooding on takes hold again. The hand that isn’t holding hers finds Lucy’s hip. His gaze catches her eyes, irises glinting silver.
There’s something urgent in his face.

“We need to leave him be, Lucy.”

Lucy searches his gaze for clues, for something to give her a hint on what’s going through his head. Nothing.

She really wishes she could use Haki.

“…I know you’re worried about him too,” Lucy tells him, just a little bit bewildered. She feels her eyebrows pinch together in confusion, and his scowl turns into something just shy of grinding his teeth in frustration.

“The cook’s fine, we need to—”

“There’s something you’re not saying,” Lucy realizes. Zoro blinks in shock, tries to jerk back, but Lucy’s hand is already curled around his neck and he only succeeds in pulling them closer together.

“Lucy, I—” He stops, and she feels a little bad for him because he’s traveled through about fifteen shades of frustration in the last hour or so and this seems to be the worst iteration yet.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she reassures, because she wasn’t accusing him of anything. Zoro’s allowed to have secrets. “I trust you,” she says simply, because she does.

He relaxes. It’s closer to a deliberate uncoiling than a relieved slump, but eventually his forehead meets hers, their noses brushing with each soft exhalation.

Lucy’s eyes close without her realizing. The hand at his neck slides down to curl in the fabric of his t-shirt, and she feels the steady rhythm of his heart beneath her palm.

Then Zoro takes a deep breath, a short inhale that indicates speech.

“I know,” she interrupts, her eyes still closed. “I know. Just…” Her lips press to his, the movement soft and brief. It’s more like an oath than a kiss, a promise to speak on the subject more, and soon. “Let’s just talk to Pekoms.”

Zoro hesitates for a moment, but then the hand at her hip pulls her closer and he straightens, both arms circling her torso, his right palm cradling her head. Lucy snakes her arms around his waist, content and relaxed as she presses into the space beneath his chin.

They don’t speak, but his heartbeat is steady beneath her ear, and Zoro’s breathing slows as his fingers sweep slowly through her hair. It’s enough.

The plan taking shape in her head makes her stomach clench unpleasantly in the face of it.

The others enter the infirmary eagerly, sharing speculation and ideas in rapid-fire succession amongst themselves. Lucy is the first one through the door, shouting for Pekoms and Cat Viper, and Zoro hears something crash about three seconds after she disappears inside. The others exchange fond glances and follow with only marginally less enthusiasm.

Zoro rests his katana by the doorframe, and parks himself on the bench built into it. The fit is a little close, but there’s just enough room to settle into a seiza. Habit has him reaching out with his Haki, and he pulls back with a wince.

Zou is loud. He doesn’t know how the stronger Minks stand it. Even with his Haki closed off it’s
like a subsonic echo, intangible but always present. He’s hoping meditation will make it easier to bear. He was mostly trying to heal himself on the way over here, but now…

His focus narrows on his blades, their disharmonious song ever-present and more distorted than usual. They sing and hum in the back of his mind, unconcerned with slotting together, indifferent to his comfort in the same way a blade is to the blood that soaks its edge.

He’s been agitated since they arrived. That’s probably made his katana worse.

That did not mean he was too harsh earlier though. He was just tellin’ it like it is.

The blades’ chorus rises in pitch and Zoro sinks into them, his focus deep and low.

Shusui thrums in thunderous pitch, the song a void so low it can’t be heard. His chest rises and the blade groans with thick chords, an abyss like the emptiness between the stars, a gluttonous black hole, taking as much of Shusui as it can. Zoro breathes out, slow and deliberate. Shusui’s song drops lower, inaudible except for the vibrating behind his sternum, throbbing like a heartbeat, inseparable from his own.

It’s not his fault the cook was captured. It’s not the sea witch’s fault either, or Brook, or Chopper. It’s the goddamn cook’s, and they don’t have time to wait for him to get his act together.

And it’s not that Zoro wants to leave Sanji in the hands of Big Mom and his asshole family—Zoro is not one to miss out on opportunities to gloat, and rescuing that asshole would be a perfect opportunity—it’s just that he’s really, really certain that it’s the opposite of where they need to go.

Stupid cook. Stupid cook and the cook’s stupid family.

He knew Lucy taunting Big Mom like that would come back to bite them in the ass. Even if it was pretty hot at the time.

The white blade is like a ripple in flat water, discordant and spreading. Wado’s ring is tinged in discontent, driven snow pockmarked by sleet. It’s a reprimand, a scolding, a call of duty, of honor, a reminder of where his trajectory lies—onward, upward, until Mihawk is finally deposed, and Lucy is Pirate King, until his victories are lifted high and higher, up to heaven itself.

Wano’s waiting for them. Kaido is waiting for them. If they don’t go, they’ll become the hunted, a band of unestablished pirates without a territory to call their own against an Emperor. They won’t win unless they take the fight to him, unless they use surprise and the Emperor’s expectations against him. Sidetracking to get the cook? Going against another emperor? They can’t, especially since Sanji…Zoro read the letter. Sanji will be fine.

Kitetsus howls in eager bloodlust, the blade’s ache nearly painful beside the other two, wild and thirsty like a scream scrapes throats raw. It’s Kitetsu that feels the most off-kilter, the most agitated. Zoro tastes tangy copper on his tongue, the black rush of heat and darkness the blade can sense in his heart, and he lets it weep out and into Kitetsu’s discordant harmonies, feels them flood together and grow into wailing symphony capped only by Zoro’s careful control as thoughts of hot blood spilling over metal and the black black red of life sprayed against skin.

He’s never sure if it’s his own blood that Kitetsu craves, or their enemies’. Zoro suspects it’s a bit of both.

Lucy won’t want to leave Sanji to his own devices. The circumstances of his departure are too weird, and the crewmembers that witnessed it were too concerned, too upset. And the whole crew descending on Big Mom’s territory…that’s asking for trouble. That’s like picking a fight with a
hurricane when there’s a tsunami on their heels.

There’s a solution here, but it’s…

“You’ve got a freaky aura, Roronoa-ya.”

Zoro blinks out of the meditation, his connection with the blades loosening and returning to its normal thrum at the back of his head. It’s several shades darker outside now, the torches in the yard the only means to see by. Law strides toward him, a polar bear and the entirety of his crew trailing behind him. They’re loud and dressed in horrible jumpsuits, and most of them are eyeing Zoro warily.

But Law looks relaxed with them at his back, and calmer than he thought the guy capable of. Zoro figures a crew’s a crew, even if their captain is a crabby emo bastard. He grunts in greeting.

“The others inside?” Law asks, nodding toward the building. Zoro unfolds from his seiza and stands, fixing his katana at his hip. The bruise must be gone already, or Law would have commented on it.

“Yeah,” Zoro says, rolling his shoulders. “They’ll probably be out soon.” He can’t imagine Lucy staying still much longer than that. Law’s crew relaxes as their captain edges closer, undaunted by Zoro’s “freaky aura.”

“We need to make a plan,” Law grouses. He’s got both hands shoved in his pockets, his katana resting against his shoulder and looped through his elbow. “Kaido knows where this place is.”

Zoro narrows his eyes, glaring at nothing in particular. All three blades ring in urgent song, in warning.

“The cook’s missing,” Zoro tells him. “He was probably blackmailed.”

Law’s expression doesn’t change, but the crew members behind him erupt in concerned muttering.

It’s the polar bear that speaks up though, “Whaaaat? Hey, hey Law, we didn’t know he was blackmailed! He makes really good food! And he’s super nice and strong! He helped save Zou! We should go after him and help out!”

Law shoves him off, his eyebrow ticking up in irritation.

“We’re not going into Big Mom’s territory,” Law growls. “We’ve got to take care of Kaido. He’s the biggest threat right now, and we don’t have any more time to dodge him.” He’s directing this to Zoro, like he doesn’t already know. Zoro glares right back, because he doesn’t like being told what to do by anyone, but especially not crabby emo bastards who hate bread.

Lucy bursts through the door just then, her energy as boundless and sunny as ever. It cuts through the tension like a hot knife, and Zoro finds himself relaxing, just a bit.

She whirls on Zoro first, eyes bright and the fishnet skirt flaring out with her speed. Her fingers are splayed out at her sides like she’s so pleased to see him that she can’t contain herself, and her smile is brighter than the torches that light the clearing.

Shit, a reaction like that could go to a guy’s head.

“Zoro! Zoro, didya hear all that? Sanji’s on a place called Whole Cake Island and that guy Pekoms will—” She blinks, like her brain finally caught up with her eyes, and then she turns to Law and his
crew. “Oh hey. It’s Torao’s crew. Hi, Torao.”

“Straw Hat-ya,” Law growls, and Zoro feels his back tense at the other captain’s tone. “We can’t go after the cook.”

Lucy hums, a little confused. “Well, yeah, I know you’re not going after Sanji.” She looks around Law, eyeing Bepo with a slight pout. “Hey, why do you get a polar bear on your crew? He’s so cool!”

The polar bear squeals. “Aw! Law, did you hear that? She thinks I’m the cool one!” Several members of Law’s crew snicker while the others cheer their first mate on.

“Straw Hat-ya, Kaido knows where this place is. He knows we’re here. The longer we wait before going after him, the more danger this country is in.” Law looks pointedly at the destruction that seems to litter every corner of Zou. Besides the newly-erected infirmary, there’s debris caught in and around the tree line, broken branches, and soot from the fires Jack’s men tried to light. “They can’t take another attack right now.”

Lucy frowns at him, like he’s the one who doesn’t get it. “I know all that.” She takes a deep breath, and directs the next sentence over her shoulder, her eyes firmly pinned on Zoro. “That’s why I’m going by myself.”

Zoro’s first reaction is protest, mulish and stubborn, because the last time Lucy went off by herself she nearly died and they didn’t see each other for two years and he refuses to—

He swallows the bile down, forces himself not to speak until he can be sure of what he’ll say.

He knew it was coming. There aren’t many options that let them go after Kaido and confront Sanji on his idiocy.

It still makes something unpleasant and angry twist in his stomach, something hot and furious and desperate.

Goddamn the fucking cook. He chose a hell of a time to go missing.

Lucy turns back to Law, but her stance betrays her attention, and there’s an apologetic twist in her lips.

“Straw Hat-ya,” Law growls, and Lucy’s stance widens at his tone because he sounds angry. Enough that it makes Zoro reach for Shusui’s hilt, makes him want to put himself between Lucy and the other captain. He stays himself, barely. “That is not what we agreed on.”

Lucy’s back straightens, and all her focus lands squarely on Law. Zoro tastes metal on his tongue, a faint warning of a predator in his midst.

Law’s glare only deepens, undaunted. His crew goes quiet.

“I’m not abandoning you,” Lucy promises. A faint breeze teases her skirt, her hair. There’s power in her stance, a steadiness that’s impossible not to trust, an intangible quality that skepticism can’t survive. It’s beautiful and an image of Lucy at her best and it rends something in Zoro, because goddammit it’s only been a few weeks since Sabaody, and his plan was to more or less never let her out of his sight again. “And I’m not abandoning my crew.”

Law looks at her for a moment longer. Then his posture shifts from aggressive to merely irritated, and his crew starts up their playful teasing again, muttering about how scary the new Straw Hats are.
Zoro is honestly having a hard time paying attention to anything that isn’t his girlfriend, even as a desperate sort of denial claws its way through his chest.

He understands. He really, really does. With any other crew member, under any other circumstances, Zoro would probably whole-heartedly agree with her, would laugh at the idea that they should do anything but charge Big Mom’s territory and only leave when they got straight answers from the Cook and Zoro’s had a chance to gloat mercilessly over the rescue.

But it’s not. It’s Sanji, who emphatically doesn’t need their help, and Kaido, who will come after them soon if they don’t surprise him first.

Lucy twists so that their shoulders bump, but she’s still facing Law. The other captain eyes the movement, but says nothing, and he lets his first mate distract him a moment later.

On any other subject, with any other issue, Zoro wouldn’t have to ask Lucy to trust him on this, would just explain everything outright. But here he can’t explain what he knows without telling her things that will only hurt her. Things that would only reopen wounds long-since healed.

Lucy’s fingers brush his. He tightens his grip on Kitetsu.

The rest of the crew dribbles out of the infirmary, a few of them casting unsure looks at Lucy, and semi-hopeful looks at Zoro. If she notices, she doesn’t let on, her presence still saturated in that rock-steady confidence, the same self-assured gravitas she’s brought to every adventure between here and Shells Town.

She’s good at putting people at ease. At convincing people that her way is the best one, that doubt is a stranger who never visits her.

Lucy’s aura relaxes everyone almost immediately, with the exception of himself and Nami—who would kick God himself in the balls if it meant protecting their captain—but soon even she stops shooting worried looks Lucy’s way and instead resumes glaring at Zoro.

Zoro looks away from the crew. Kitetsu burns under his palm.

Lucy reaches for his hand a moment later, more insistent this time. He nearly pulls away, furious at himself and a bit at her, but decides against it at the very last second.

Lucy doesn’t say anything, or even look at him, too busy projecting self-assured cheer and being everyone else’s north star to indulge in something private and personal. But their fingers twine together, Lucy’s slotting between his as easily as they always do.

Trust me, Zoro wants to demand of her. Trust me when I say he’ll be fine. Don’t do this.

But he knows she trusts him. That’s why Lucy’s even considering splitting up in the first place. Trust isn’t the issue here—it’s trying to choose between a hurricane and a tsunami, and plotting a course through them both knowing something must be sacrificed.

Zoro can speak to her about this later, explain what he knows without explaining the parts that will hurt her. Convince her to listen to him. Later.

Now, he smooths her knuckles with his thumb. She squeezes back.

If Zoro has learned one thing about the Minks in the few hours they’ve been here, it’s that the Minks love to party, and they’re good at it.
They have beer flowing by the keg, they make great food, and Brook provides music that blends well with the strange lutes the Minks made out of trees and the drums they beat over stretched palm leaves. The atmosphere is warm and brilliant and close, in a way their celebratory parties usually aren’t. That’s probably to be expected since this only involves a couple dozen people, not the several hundred they usually clock in at.

It’s nice. And the not-overwhelming number of people enables him to stay within earshot of Lucy, which is a plus. Even if he aches a little every time he hears her voice.

(If he’s had a few more drinks than he normally would, well, no one’s going to notice.)

The Minks are friendly, and friendlier with liquor in them. Zoro outdrinks four of them before they concede to his superior ability to consume alcohol and start to jostle around with him good-naturedly.

It’s nice after what has shaped up to be a rough day. Normally he’d go blow off steam with the cook, pick a fight or three, but. Well.

“We need to talk.”

Zoro looks over his shoulder to see Nami standing behind him with her arms crossed and still wearing Lucy’s hat. Her gaze is steady, but Zoro suspects the redness in her cheeks means she’s been drinking as much as he has.

“What about?” He asks grumpily, taking another swig. Goddamn this day, seriously. Nami’s the only asshole on this elephant who’d be a proper drinking partner, but she’s been pissed at him.

She’s not having any bullshit though. “You know what about, dummy.” Nami’s left hand comes up toward the hat, then shifts away self-consciously. “Can we just…?” She gestures helplessly to the infirmary, where there’s plenty of empty rooms to have a nice heart to heart in.

Zoro can think of few things he wants to do less right now than have a heart to heart. With anyone.

But Lucy catches his eye from across the party, glancing between him and Nami eagerly, and when she smiles at him it’s brilliant and makes his heart seize in a way that’s painful, like she’s already an island away and an ocean out of reach, but fuck it, he’s never been able to say no to that smile.

“Fine,” he agrees. He downs the rest of his beer and briefly considers scrounging around for another mug, but the impatient tapping of Nami’s foot has him reluctantly deciding against it. Sooner he gets this over with, sooner he can drink.

Nami leads the way. Zoro wonders if anyone will be particularly upset if he goes off to hack some trees into usable lumber after this, and promptly decides he doesn’t care either way.

The room Nami picks isn’t terribly isolated. It’s on the first floor, and the glow of the party is visible through the window. The walls are the same mustard color as the rest of the Mink’s houses, and there’s nothing but a cot and a small table inside. There’s no door, which is another feature the Minks seem to like in their architecture. They aren’t big on privacy, and the only doors he’s seen here have been on the outer wall of a building.

There’s a moment of awkward silence where Nami fidgets and Zoro wishes he was…anywhere else, really.

“I…” Nami mumbles, staring at the bed, which is pretty much nowhere near the door, where Zoro stands. She looks like someone shoved dirty socks under her nose. “I’m…sorry. For. Earlier. I guess.”
And oh, wow, Zoro has zero ideas on how he’s supposed to respond to this. Fuck.

“It’s not a big deal,” Zoro tells her, because it isn’t really, to him. Nami blinks a couple of times, and then her mouth firms into a thin line and her face grows ruddy with anger.

“Don’t you have something to say?” She asks pointedly, hands on her hips. Zoro has no idea what she’s talking about, but her tone pisses him off enough to respond.

“Nope,” he replies, and he’s just barely sober enough to keep the darkness of his aura away from her, but he can’t help the irritation in his frame or the exasperation in his voice.

This is apparently more than enough to set Nami off, because she starts toward him, arms waving above her head and shooting to her waist. “You’re unbelievable, you know,” She starts “I apologized and you just—ugh.” She gestures angrily to him, like she doesn’t know how to articulate her frustrations anymore.

“I don’t know what you want, sea witch,” he grouses. I didn’t do anything wrong sounds too whiny.

“I want you to apologize for talking about Sanji-kun that way,” Nami shouts, eyes flashing. “For saying we should leave him.”

Zoro scowls at her. “No.”

Nami shakes her head, disbelieving. “I just…I don’t get it. I know you care about Sanji-kun—no I know you do, don’t deny it—so I don’t—why would you say the things you did? Why would you even suggest we leave him behind?”

“Because we should,” Zoro insists, because there’s a strange dread boiling in his stomach, and it’s not going to go away until the entire crew sets foot on Wano’s soil, and Lucy’s whole and hale and within arm’s reach.

Nami stares at him in mute, frozen anger. Her fists tremble, just a bit. Zoro glowers at her, uncompromising and staunch in his position. They shouldn’t go after their cook. They shouldn’t split up.

“It’s not—not like you,” she accuses, bewildered and angry. “Even when it’s Sanji-kun, you’re usually right behind Lucy, running after him.”

“The cook has a plan,” he defends, a little angry because this is the umpteenth time today that he’s been accused of not giving a shit, and honestly, he wouldn’t be here if he didn’t. “Dunno what it is, but he’s got one.”

“So?” She demands. “How could we not help him? He would do it for us. For you,” she says, eyes narrowed. Still furious, but searching.

“That’s not the point,” Zoro growls. “Kaido doesn’t care, and he’s gunning for us.” And then, because he’s actually a little more drunk than he usually gets, he adds, “And that’s not what the cook sounds like when he gives up anyway, so—”

“…what?”

The question comes soft, surprised, just shy of hurt. Zoro looks at Nami only to see her eyes widening in understanding, the fury present but making room for comprehension.
“You know something,” she says after a moment, the soft light of realization in her tone.

Zoro scowls, discomfited, thrown by having said too much. “I know shit,” he deflects weakly, kind of hoping she’ll take the bait and tease him. The cook would take the bait, dammit.

“You asked to see the note,” she remembers, completely uninterested in bait. “Before you decided we should leave him be, you asked to see the note.”

Fuck. Lucy figured it out by way of intuition, he’s pretty sure, but with Nami…he hates how smart she is sometimes. “And?”

“I don’t know,” Nami says eagerly, like he’s just confirmed every suspicion she had. “I don’t know at all. But you didn’t say anything until you knew what he said in the note.”

Zoro shifts, uncomfortable and a little too buzzed to properly hide it. “I wanted to see if he cried.”

“Why did you ask to see the note?” Nami presses. She takes a step closer, and Zoro shifts away from the door to get away from her.

“No reason.”

“That’s a lie,” Nami refutes. She’s following his path around the room, but she doesn’t crowd him when he heads for the window. “Why did you ask to see the note?” He doesn’t respond. Nami’s voice firms in its demands. “I’ll tell Lucy about this if you don’t answer.”

Zoro closes his eyes. The breeze is humid, but it feels cool against his skin.

Lucy already knows as much as Nami does. And there’s a good chance she’ll ignore it, trust him the way she said she would. But given how hung-up Nami is on this, she’s might push him to explain in the name of healing the rift.

He is so goddamn tired of this goddamn day. “…Don’t tell Lucy.”

There’s a beat before Nami replies, baffled. “Why?”

Fucking flaming piles of snail shit in hell. “Just…”

“…fine,” Nami replies eventually, her voice full of suspicion. “What—?”

“Wanted to see if he gave up.”

“You…” There’s frank surprise in her voice, uncertainty, and she sounds completely bewildered. “Okay. You wanted to see if he gave up. Why…how do you know what…?”

Zoro seriously, really, does not want to have this conversation. His head feels cottony and his emotions are all over the place and too close to the surface under the coercion of the alcohol, and these are things long-buried, things he’s long since laid to rest.

She calls his name again, and she sounds concerned.

“You can’t tell Lucy,” He warns, turning to look at Nami over his shoulder, trying to convey the seriousness of this as best he can. “It’ll hurt her.”

Nami searches his face for just a moment, but there’s no suspicion or distrust there, only concern, confusion. Lucy has always been a point of common ground between them, a place of solidarity. Nami trusts him unequivocally to have Lucy’s best interests in mind, and maybe it’s because of that,
the steadfast fact of his love and loyalty to their captain, that there’s no doubt in Nami’s eyes when she swears, “I won’t.”

And fuck, maybe he’s drunker than he meant to be if he’s seriously considering bringing this shit up. He turns back to the window. Or maybe it’s because the goddamn elephant is shaking his brains loose.

He opens his mouth and actually tells her.

“On Thriller Bark,” Zoro admits, and goddamn he wishes he found more liquor to bring along. “I made a deal with Kuma. Idiot tried to sacrifice himself instead.”

Nami’s breath catches. Zoro doesn’t look at her.

“Fucking cook was going on and on about finding a replacement and telling everyone he was sorry and shit.” He waves a hand to indicate the universe in general. “Nothin’ like that in the note. Cook even said he’d be back.”

“What…?” Nami’s voice trails off, and he imagines she’s matching what he’s saying to her own memories. “Kuma…wanted Lucy. How did you get him to…?”

Zoro’s feet fall into the opening stance of Sensei’s favorite form. “I offered my head instead. Knocked the cook out when he tried to do the same. Made Kuma honor it with me.”

“But…” Nami’s voice is firmer now, her brain almost audibly whirring into full analysis mode. “Lucy was fully healed. How…?”

“He pushed Lucy’s injuries and shit out of ‘er.” He ignores Nami’s sharp gasp, taking it for surprise. “Said it would kill me if I took it all on myself, but he’d leave her and everyone alone.”

“Zoro—”

She grabs his arm, but he shakes her off, annoyed. If he stops to answer every single one of her questions, he’ll never get this out. “He said it was everything from the battle, her pain, fatigue—”

“Zoro!”

“What?” He demands, spinning around to glare at her. But Nami isn’t looking at him. She’s looking at the door, where Lucy’s standing with shock on her face and three mugs of beer in her hands.

Fuck.

Her eyes are wide, fixed on him. There’s a strange kind of terror in her face, something she’s never directed his way before.

It makes him feel sick.

The room is silent. Lucy’s hands shake in a fine tremble, the liquor spilling over the rim and her fingers in spasms, and she just stares and stares and stares, her eyes faintly glazed, like she’s not really seeing him, like she’s far away.

He can’t stand it.

“Lucy,” he takes a step forward. The room is small enough that he could cross it in a stride or two.

Lucy’s eyes flit down to his haramaki, to where the scars from Thriller Bark lay beneath, the tissue
pale and raised and gnarled, patterned like someone tried to pull him apart from the inside out. They’d be grotesque if either of them thought of scars that way, deep and gruesome enough to be forever etched in his skin.

He stops. The light in Lucy’s eyes changes from shock and sick terror to something else entirely.

It’s like the calm before the storm, the tension in the air before a hurricane rolls over the waves. It’s rage, and Zoro honestly can’t tell if it’s directed at him, Kuma, or herself.

It seems like forever before she speaks, but when she does her voice is low and her eyes burn. “You won.”

It’s not a question. It’s barely a confirmation of something she already knows, and for once he can’t tell what she’s thinking.

“I didn’t lose,” he corrects, because the difference means something when it comes to that fight, and he spent two years training to make sure such distinctions would no longer apply to him no matter the opponent.

Her eyes still burn. Her whole frame is stiff with tension. He doesn’t look away, lets her search for what she needs.

Finally, she nods. Zoro suspects it’s mostly to herself.

Slowly, deliberately, she turns to set the beer on the table by the doorway, her face turned away.

Nami opens her mouth, one hand reaching out. Zoro catches her gaze, shakes his head.

Lucy straightens. She doesn’t look at either of them, and even though Zoro aches to hold her, comfort her, whisper promises and reassurance, there’s some instinct that holds him back. When she turns to leave, her steps restrained and stiff and so unlike her, he doesn’t follow, doesn’t call after her again.

Her footsteps are steady even as they fade down the hallway.

“Shit,” Nami swears softly, scrubbing a hand over face.

“Shit,” he agrees feelingly.

Chapter End Notes

Alternate title: Zoro’s horrible, no good, very bad day

Um, so. Sorry? I’ve been gone for like…five months. To be honest I’m still not thrilled with this chapter, but I have tinkered with it so much that at this point it kind of feels like there’s nothing to be done. And it’s officially New Seas Ahead’s one-year anniversary, so I wanted to post another chapter. Surprise!

(But seriously, if you see any glaring mistakes, please point them out to me, I feel like this chapter is a brick wall I've been banging my head against for months and I just don't
Please forgive Nami. She’s very upset, and she feels responsible for Sanji. And because Zoro is slowly dying due to Zou doing its level best to blind him, and he’s already put two and two together about how this is going to go for the crew, he’s kind of not in a great mood (especially since he’s worried too).

Also, I just want to note, smacking your friends around is not a good thing. It should not really be treated as blasé as it was by Zoro. I wrote it this way because the Straw Hats are the Straw Hats, and Oda writes them like this both comedically and sometimes at points of serious conflict. But yeah, don’t let your friends hit you, don’t smack them around. General rules to live by.

There’s this fan theory I saw going around during WCI that Brook worked for the Vinsmokes before becoming a pirate. I kind of don’t think that’s likely to be a thing in canon—especially since the Vinsmokes are from North Blue and Brook and Laboon came from West Blue—but it was a nice, convenient tie-in that probably won’t be addressed or outright challenged in canon.

Zoro’s such a cute little asshole. Whenever he’s worried about the crew he starts to hover around Luffy from a distance. He did it back in Arlong Park, and at Water 7, and he did it again at Zou. Had he been at Marineford, I bet it would have had a similar result. He does it because he’s looking to reassure Luffy, but also so he can protect him, and everyone, from anything else happening. He’s like a pit bull. And then he acts like he doesn’t care, the twerp. I SEE YOU ZORO.

I also want to mention, I just posted another story related to this series--it's going to have some drabbles with different POVs, deleted scenes, stuff like that, all of which are related to the series. The first chapter is a deleted scene from Dressrosa 11. Enjoy.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!