Stay With Me

by Niji_Hitomi_Iscariot

Summary

When he took the job at the dive bar just off Red Line Ave, Sanji Noir really didn’t know what he was getting himself into. Life was hard growing up the second son of the most famous riverboat chef on the Four Blues, but surrounded by the craziest people he’s ever met, he’s found himself sucked into chaos, intrigue, and romance? Just what kind of bar is Luffy running here?
Sanji looked down at his phone with a small frown, "Thousand Sunny right, bone man?"

The device chimed back, the words [yes indeed sanjisan yohohoho] popped up on the screen.

The blond cook frowned harder, and took a final drag on his cigarette.

In front of him the small bar was both ostentatious and out of the way at the same time somehow, with a bright red and yellow lion's head above the door between the two words in the name. The figure looked like it had been something else before the addition of a flower petal-shaped mane, and the rest of the store front was plastered with posters for bands, both big names and indie groups. It was tucked onto the corner lot between Windmill Avenue and Raftel Street, just a few blocks' walk from where Red Line crossed Grand Line at the center hub of the city.

Not the nicest of neighborhoods.

Most of the rest of the buildings around it were apartments, rowhouses, and the occasional small mom-and-pop type stores. Like the clothing boutique across Windmill Ave; Pappagu's Crimin Designs. Sanji suspected from the gap between the letters the second word was supposed to be 'criminal' but someone had stolen the lights and metal from the A and L.

He took a breath and tossed the butt of his smoke—one more wouldn't be noticed among the rest of the litter. With some misgivings he pulled open the door and was immediately assaulted by chaos!

Somebody was banging on a drum set, somebody else seemed to be banging a counter-rhythm with a hammer, there was the sound of a third person wailing about something unintelligible, and just as he dared stick his nose into the entryway, a man who couldn't have been older than twenty bounced, literally, across his path dressed in a bright red, sleeveless hoodie, and of all things, a straw hat!

Sanji blinked, wondering just what his downstairs neighbor had gotten him into. He couldn't turn
back though. He needed the job. That shitty cafe with its stupid closed-minded manager and—*that shit was illegal, jackass!* He shook himself and wandered through the collection of tables just in front of the bar itself. It granted him a chance to look into the kitchen—small, but manageable. He could work with that easily. Then, following the logical path around the end of the counter, he approached what he assumed was the managerial office, tucked behind the stairs that led to the stage that took up the entire wall opposite the door.

"For the last time, Zoro, no!"

The woman was beautiful, and clearly done with the conversation. Her long red hair was bound in a loose tail that curled and cascaded down her back past a shirt that was too short to be fair and jeans that were almost too low to be legal! Sanji felt himself start to noodle, he'd kill to have a figure like that! Of course, anyone who saw him would assume he was attracted to her, and that was just how he liked it.

"Nami, I have fucking rent to pay! I've been here six months! A dollar won't send the bar into the fucking poorhouse!" The man who was pursuing the woman was... well, very, VERY different. He was the definition of rough-hewn power; shoulders broad and thick, with muscles that rippled under his sleeveless black shirt that read "SECURITY" as he gesticulated with both hands, a tendon in his neck standing out as he bared his teeth. His hand movements chimed a set of three golden earrings in his left ear, his dark green eyes bright and hard.

"You're already paying me almost a CRIMINALLY low amount and you know it! And don't tell me again to take it up with Luffy! We all know you are the financial officer around here so he doesn't spend it all on weird furniture and additions!"

"My hands are tied! Minimum is all I can give you until you've been here a year! I didn't make the rules! Garp did when he signed the place over to Luffy!" She planted both hands on her desk, the papers in her left wrinkling slightly, "We all have rent to pay, damnit! You just have to find a way to make do! Get your guitar or something and jam with Sabo for tips!"

"I can't afford strings! Which is why I need a raise, surely there's a loophole in the rules?! If anyone would find out it'd be you, come on!"

Both his hands buried in his hair—his bright, lime mixed with grass, green hair! What the actual fuck?! It wasn't a threat against the woman, but certainly not calm in any form because he was *yanking* on it.

"Don't you think if there was a loophole in the rules I'd have used it myself?! I'm not making that much more than you, you know!" Her bangles clanged in almost response to the irritated jingle of the green haired man's earrings.

"What can we do then? I can't AFFORD to work here another six months, Nami, I'll be shit outta luck and on the street and too dirty to come to work! What the hell are we supposed to do?!"

"For a start, calm down, Jesus!" Sanji stepped into the other guy's personal space only because the office was so small and cut off whatever Nami had been about to say. "If things are so bad, I lend you the money to get strings, don't go off on the lady like some kind of ape!"

The man stopped, and his brow furrowed. Slowly, like it was a struggle, his eyes turned to the strange blond currently butting his nose in, the left with noticeable lag thanks to the wicked scar that bisected the lid from above his eyebrow to almost the ridge of his cheek bone. He blinked at him a couple times, tilting his head slightly to the side.
"...Do I know you?"

"No. I just can't stand to see people like you trapping women in a corner like that." The blond's visible eyebrow twitched and the opposite edge of his lip curled.

Blinking again, the bouncer then looked at Nami. "...are you trapped in a corner?"

Again the redhead opened her mouth to respond, only to have the newcomer cut her off, with an edge in his voice that spoke of something more than the current altercation, "You've got her behind the desk and you're filling the entire rest of the damn office with your shitty muscles! Of course she's trapped! What else is she gonna do? Climb over you to get out?"

"Last time somebody wouldn't get out of her way she kicked him in the balls. Besides, of course she's behind the desk. She was probably gonna shove the contract fuckin' Garp drew up for this place in my face again. Or beat me with it like a dog with a newspaper, whichever’s more appealing."

His body had moved entirely sideways to face the stranger, who he was eyeing up and down. Every so often, his gaze flicked to Nami. She'd been cut off twice, a recipe that often led to disaster, and was starting to put him on edge.

"Look," Nami hopped over the desk between them, angling the blond back out into the hallway, and thus proving that she hadn’t ever really been trapped in the first place. "Sanji, right? The guy Brook said was coming about the bar-tending job?" At his nod she continued, her voice as sweet as honey at the way his nose flared, "We're good. Why don't you just go check out the kitchen and whip something up for me? I don't much care what. Consider it your interview, ne?"

Then, without even bothering to find out if he'd done as she asked, she turned back around to face Zoro, and poked him in the chest.

"The discussion is over. I can't do anything about it, and you know it! I don't know how many times I have to tell you before you get it through your head. There's nothing I can do! Now go catch our 'boss'" she rolled her eyes, "before he gets it in his head to try swinging from the stage lights again! We can't afford the paperwork involved with Franky fixing them!"

The bouncer sighed, then his whole body relaxed as he pouted, crossing his arms over his chest. "Fine. But tell blondie the White Knight over there I'll hold him to that offer for a set of strings," he grumbled, slipping past her with a surprising amount of agility for a man his size and through the doorway to go collect Luffy—

"LUFFY! WHAT DID WE SAY ABOUT THE LIGHT RIG?! GET DOWN FROM THERE!!"

Nami inhaled deeply and barely resisted whimpering. If the rest of the day was like this she was seriously gonna needed one of Vivi's special baths just to unwind. And there was still the band to replace after talking to Law earlier. Ugh... She could feel the headache pounding between her ears already.

Then there was a tall glass of something lightly orange and poured over chopped ice with a twist of what looked like mikan on the rim in front of her. She blinked at it, following the arm that put it down up to a rolled cuff at a slender, if toned, bicep.

She frowned, "I thought I said cook something. This is a drink."

"How true it is, Mellorine~!" Sanji chirped, sounding like the sarcastic comment was a true compliment thanks to the way he fluttered his eyelashes at her. "Your assignment is not quite ready, I
was delayed and thought one of my father's signature headache cures could help you forget the meathead from before."

She took the glass and used the provided straw to stir it, though it was quite well stirred (perfectly blended, actually), mostly for something to do with one hand while the other massaged her temple.

"Trust me, he's not the worst of my worries. The idiot he's chasing off the light rig is," she pointed at Luffy, mouth turning down. "Zoro is just a little desperate. He doesn't have anywhere to go if he loses his apartment, and they've raised the price of rent the last three months in a row without any explanation."

She sipped the drink, letting the tangy, cooling juice slip over her tongue and down her throat, and almost like magic just the taste of it seemed to dissipate some of the headache.

"But we've lost the band we'd had booked for the week, and our revenue already isn't exactly six digits thanks to our location. No, Sanji, I have far, far greater headaches to deal with than one panicking bouncer."

The cook was taken aback by the explanation, though he still didn't like the way the other man had loomed over the pretty manager. "Well," he shifted ingredients around in a bowl with a flick of his wrist that was as much show as it was function, tossing the whole thing in the air while he thought for a moment, "you could try an open mic night, half the tips goes to the house for the use of space, invite all the locals for a chance to jump up in front of the lights. And half the kitchen equipment is superfluous if you hire me. You could sell it easily at the swap shop down in Loguetown and get back at least as much as you paid for it."

The whole time he was talking, he was working, moving around the square room as though it was his own already. The fire on the stove flashed as he caught the juices from the pan into which his previous bowl had been poured, and the scent of something downright sinful wafted across the dining room, catching the attention of all who smelled it. A shift of his hips had him pulling something out of the toaster oven that looked like baked haddock, but that was impossible in the amount of time he'd been there. Then a timer went off, he flicked his wrist to bank the flames, spun to grab another dish of vegetables and what could have been cheese from the other side of the kitchen with barely a step, and brought everything back over to the metal counter just below where the taps stuck up next to the door.

His eyes flicked up, scanned the room in an instant and the next thing Nami knew there were enough plates for everyone lining the bar. Each had a portion of the fish and the meat from the pan he'd seared, a topping of vegetables steamed with an aromatic sauce, and rolls that had originally appeared too stale to eat, toasted and topped with cheese and spices. He cleaned himself up as he went, making the plates, the counter, and the kitchen spotless but for the sink of dirty dishes waiting for the end of the meal.

Then he gave a shrug, "Though if things are going as poorly as you think they are, I won't press you for a job. If you can't afford to give the mossball what he needs to pay his rent, you certainly can't afford to hire me. Better to keep a roof over his head."

Nami chewed on her pencil as the others, drawn in like magic to the food, each stationed themselves in front of a plate, running calculations in her head. As such, she almost wasn't paying attention when she put down the pencil to pick up the roll and bite into it—at which point the thought of absolutely anything else vanished from her mind.

It was glorious and perfect and she closed her eyes for a moment as appreciative sounds erupted all around her, but she was lost in the pure flavor of something that tasted so good, something that tasted
so much like _home_, it made her ache for Vivi's arms.

Even Zoro's sour expression had softened, his left eye slipping shut as he quietly ate another bite of the fish.

Sanji smiled, leaning back against the opposite counter. He knew each dish was perfect, had sampled them all in the process of making them, and was pleasantly full having done so. With the exception of the sight from earlier rocking his core, the cook was quite happy with how the day was shaping up. Even if the gorgeous Nami didn't hire him, he was satisfied that he'd at least helped her out somehow.

Then a voice cut across his thoughts, "SANJI! JOIN MY CREW!"

"DON'T JUST DECIDE THESE THINGS!!" Another cut across the bar.

The first, Luffy, jumped to his feet, his fists high in the air, "Yosh!"

The second, a man of African descent with a nose like Pinocchio, waved his hand at the other, "Oi oi oi! Have you even talked to Nami?! You know everything has to go through—"

Nami held up a hand to stall him. More accurately, so she could swallow. "What the idiot said. You're hired. See, Sanji, if you cook one meal every day, that mitigates food costs for all of us sufficiently not only that I can pay you as much as the contract allows me, but gives everyone else enough leeway to afford rent. Or... more food, in Luffy's case, because he's a bottomless pit."

There was a smacking sound to their right to illustrate the point.

"Ow! This is my plate, Luffy, and I know it is un-SUPER of me, but I'm not letting you snitch off mine tonight!"

Luffy jumped back with barely a yelp and snatched the roll from the kid who'd been drumming earlier—looked like he couldn't have been more than seventeen, if that, all lanky and unfinished. He pouted at the black-haired man. The statuesque woman with ebony hair and Asian features next to him somehow reached around Luffy to grab the roll back, and winked at the younger boy. Sanji thought that should have been comforting but for some reason the kid blushed and swore at her. The guy to the other side, bigger than the mosshead from before, laughed out loud and tossed his own roll at the 'captain', in spite of what he'd said before. And Sanji once again had the thought of just what he was getting himself into cross his mind.

Inexplicably, his attention was drawn to the bouncer from before, Zolo or something like that. Big guy, heavy muscles, wicked scar on his face, in a violent profession? Yeah... Sanji knew his type, and he shuddered. At least the other guy in the security shirt looked relaxed and personable. Mosshead looked like he wanted to punch something. It made the blond push himself unconsciously closer to the counter, hands gripping the edge hard, and a scowl between his brows.

He was eating though, with the slow, methodical bites that let him savor the flavor of each individual bite, but did not let the food have time to get cold. And though his expression had softened some, it had not completely gone away. He occasionally took small sips from his water glass, his thick Adam’s apple bobbing.

Fuck he was hot too! Sanji cursed mentally. His father would smack him senseless if he brought another one of those home. So, instead he forced himself to look away and smiled winningly at Nami, suddenly aware he hadn't actually answered her yet.

"I'd be glad to exchange my services to offset the costs accrued by raising everyone's salary. And I
think you'll find everyone works that much more efficiently with a balanced meal before the doors open. Are you expecting anyone else this evening?"

She shook her head, swallowing before answering. "No, Brook and Vivi are off today. You'll meet her tomorrow, and Brook said he lives in the apartment below you right?"

He gave a nod.

"Good, then that's everybody—"

"Unless Luffy’s brothers show up." The long-nosed man pointed out.

Sanji looked at him, confused, "Brothers?"

Nami nodded, gesturing with her fork again, "Sabo and Ace. They live with him in the apartment above the club. If nothing else you’ll meet them on Wednesday when Ace comes in to paint the walls again."

The seventeen-year-old piped up, "Don’t forget Law!"

A frustrated scowl crossed her brow at the name, "He’s usually here later, when the bands play. And only when he’s off. Or isn’t called in because somebody else called off."

She huffed and the dark-haired woman patted her shoulder comfortingly. Sanji surmised that whoever Law was must have been part of the band she’d been talking about earlier and sympathized with her via nearly visible hearts as he happily replaced her drink before serving one of the same to the other woman.

Speaking up for the first time, her violet eyes sparkled with mirth at the cook’s actions, "Why, Cook-san, it appears you already have a knack for predicting what your patrons enjoy. A remarkable talent. One might even say you’ve sanded it down to a sharp point."

A smile played about her lips, and she tucked a section of hair behind her ear, as Sanji stared at her. There was something about her, some energy that was familiar. The motion shortened her hair on that side so that the ends brushed her jawline—a clearly deliberate gesture—and the cook’s eyes went wide.

"Robin!" He snatched up her hand in a pirouette of smiles, kissing the back of each knuckle with a chirp of praise. "I have not seen you in so many years, my precious flower! Even more radiant than you ever were! Please tell me you are not just passing through, and that I might be granted the boon of working with you again, no matter how undeserving the setting!"

She laughed, taking her hand back, and sipped at her drink, quiet and mysterious as always.

"Robin is one of our two waitresses." Nami supplied, rolling her eyes at the declarations of love. "And this is Franky, our other bouncer and handyman. Usopp works wherever we need him basically, and doubles as our resident tech guru. Luffy technically owns the place but mostly gets in the way." The dark-haired man grinned unashamed when she pointed at him, so she moved on, "Chopper is your busboy, basically he’s there to—"

Sanji held up a hand, "I grew up in a restaurant. Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll be glad to work him into the floor."

He gave the teenager a dark smile that had Robin chuckling, so Nami didn’t respond to it, or being cut off. Again. That was a habit she was going to have to break before he caught her at the wrong
“Anyway, Vivi and Ace also wait tables when they’re here. Sabo fills in anywhere. Brook usually runs our sound board, and you already met Zoro earlier. So, this would be the usual gang to be fed. Usually no more than eight or nine of us at a time, except on weekends, though he," she jabbed her fork into Luffy's side, "really counts as more like ten people all by himself."

The owner giggled a strangled sound through his teeth, a finger under his nose.

Zoro snorted on the end, because if anything that was an underestimation and it was amusing. Still, he didn't stop eating to say anything, and didn't put his fork down until he cleared his plate.

A snarl crawled up Sanji's back at the sound, but he forced himself to ignore it, grinning at Luffy instead. "You're the Rubberman aren't you?"

"Yup!" The young man grinned, unabashedly still with a mouthful of food pushing his cheeks out like a chipmunk.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ow! His old man owned the place." The blue-haired bouncer answered for their captain. "Left it to him when he died."

Sanji frowned, confused, "How can you manage touring the country and still managing the club?"

Zoro burst out laughing. "Oh my god. Luffy! Managing!" He hunched up in his seat, head almost hitting the bartop as he fairly howled at the thought. "Nami did you hear him?! LUFFY! Managing this place!"

Embarrassment climbed his face as the blond took in the same mirth pouring from all of those gathered around the bar, and he cleared his throat, beginning to gather up the dishes. He made an elaborate show of picking up Nami's and spoke deliberately, even though the words were flowery.

"Then I must assume you are the one in charge, my beautiful mellorine, for obviously the rest of these muscleheads wouldn't know management if it bit them in the ass. I'm sure we are in capable hands, between you, Miss Robin, and your stunning sister, Vivi."

He took the dark haired woman's hand and kissed her knuckles again before she could do anything else about it, but let her go again equally as fast, not want to encroach on her personal space. And he was making assumptions about the third lady to be subjected to the boorish crew, having caught a glimpse of a vivacious woman a few years older than Nami herself in a photograph on the manager’s desk before.

Beside Robin, Franky raised an eyebrow. He'd have said something but he caught a couple of things about the situation that made him elbow Usopp. Without Sanji's knowledge, they exchanged a look with the woman and she nodded, stifling their own reactions to his statement. So, Franky merely slid his arm around her back surreptitiously to soothe his own ruffled ego, even if he didn’t honestly think the new cook meant anything serious in flirting with his long-time girlfriend.

On the other hand, Zoro couldn't stand it, he just laughed so hard he wheezed and fell off the chair. Sisters?!! He knew it was an honest mistake, he did, but now that he'd started laughing he couldn't seem to stop!

A twitch rumbled down the cook’s spine. He carefully put all of the dishes in the sink before he cracked one. This was a new job. He needed to get along with his co-workers. This wasn't the
Baratie! He couldn't wail on the guy! No matter how much he wanted to. He was trembling with rage when the seventeen-year-old came up to him and started babbling.

"Thanks for the food, Sanji. I'm Tony, but everybody calls me Chopper, on a count of how I'm studying to be a surgeon. I'm your busboy and gopher and whatever I guess, which Nami already said, but I wanted to just—Are you okay?"

He looked worried, with bangs that fluffed out over his forehead like the shaggy mane of a reindeer. His eyes were too sharp for a kid his age as they flicked over the taller man from head to toe, taking in the cold sweat drying on the back of his neck, the beat of his pulse under his ear, the shiver of his long muscle groups, the way he kept leaning slightly onto his left leg like he was going to kick something with his right. The prodigy's mind clicked off the symptoms like a checklist: acute anxiety built upon probable PTSD and undoubtedly personal boundary issues, judging by the drape and hang of his clothing.

"Ah. I'm fine! Really." The blond smiled, tense, and unconvincingly. "Think you could stack the stuff in the dish machine for me. I gotta grab a smoke." 'Before I kill someone' was left unspoken between them.

"That stuff'll kill you, you know."

Sanji waved off the kid's concerns, intentionally pretending that all Chopper was talking about was his smoking addiction, focused on getting his fix and relaxing. So focused in fact that he didn't notice until he'd run his shoulder into the wall of muscle that was Zoro, and the way it happened looked like it was on purpose.

The green-haired man coughed, his laughter having tapered off, and raised his eyebrows at the other. "You really wanna fight, don'tcha, blondie?" He tilted his head to the side and grinned. "Fine then. Let's take it outside."

"I could mop the floor with you but I don't want it to catch your brand of stupid. Lime doesn't work so well on hardwood." Now that the ladies were out of range, the cook didn't bother hiding the sarcasm in his voice, his weight on his back leg.

"I've never had to wipe the floor yet, and that's why I said outside," Zoro snarked back, hands playing with his belt like there was supposed to be something there. "Afraid you'll look stupid in front of your precious 'ladies', are ya? Too proud to take a loss?"

"Loss? Hasn't been a meathead that could take me since I was twelve! You really wanna do this, mossball? Fine! Bring it!" Sanji growled, hands clenched into fists. By way of demonstration, he kicked the door open with a bang. "Age before beauty, shithead."

"I thought it was ladies first, fuckass," was shot back at him as the bouncer ducked under that long leg to get out the door.

"LADIES?!!" Sanji shrieked, and spun, the heel that had been on the floor spun around and clocked the bouncer between the shoulders. "SAY THAT AGAIN MOTHERFUCKER! I FUCKING DARE YOU!"

Somehow he'd performed a full 360 degree pivot at a 90 degree angle to the floor using the foot with which he'd opened their way into the alley, and he was furious!

Zoro was thrown back into the wall, but once he recovered from his initial surprise and caught his breath he bared his teeth in mimicry of a grin. "That's what I'm fucking talking about. Do it again,
Mr. White Fucking Knight. Do it again."

Sanji’s upper body was loose, fists up to use his forearms to guard his head, and his weight balanced on one leg. The first punch was easily ducked around, wild and more force than aim, and something about it combined with his temper, a voice in his head telling him to wait. The fucker was baiting him.

"Yeah. Sure. Gimme a challenge and we'll fucking see if you can still talk so big after I've knocked the fucking teeth out of your shitty mouth."

They circled each other, both bouncing on the balls of their feet, and Sanji recognized the bandana gracing the grass-head’s upper left bicep. Recognition lit up in his eyes and he let himself take a step back, putting distance between them for a moment, before rushing him with a roundhouse that would have taken his block off if Zoro hadn’t rolled his shoulder up to catch it. The motion was matched with a slide of his left foot in a pivot to bring his right knee into what he thought was Sanji’s open spot. A shin like steel met the attack instead. Sanji’s elbow followed his body around to clock a slightly stunned Zoro in the temple, making stars explode across his vision.

Holy hell, the cook was out for blood! What the hell was his problem!? Zoro didn’t even know the guy, and he shook his head trying to clear both the thoughts and he stars in the process, in the hopes that he could get some kind of read on where the fury was coming from.

All he had was a heartbeat before the blond was back in his face, feet flying, and he could barely keep up. His hits were like Luffy on a bad day with the speed of Usopp’s paintball gun. Hip, knee, heel, shoulder, elbow, shin, fuck! Zoro blocked them all, keeping the fight going in a circle around the square lot behind the club’s building and the rowhouse next door, but damn if he wasn’t accruing bruises like he never did with the D brothers.

Sanji, on the other hand, only saw red. Lady?! Fucking LADY!? He’d kill him! He’d murder him! He didn’t even care about the job anymore, all he knew was this clearly abusive motherfucker had no respect for women, and saw them as a lesser race, useful for attacking his fellow men because the worst thing they could possibly be was a woman! Well, fuck him! He could unlearn his transphobic, misogynistic ways under the steel of Sanji’s shoe!

He advanced on him, flying kick to the face followed up with a knee to the bread basket and an elbow to the back of the head. He caught a punch across his jaw and spat blood to the side mid-leap. Then Zoro got in a lucky hit, a certain hard edge in his eyes, and caught the cook in the side, just between his stomach and his arm, where the ribs began.

An explosion of pain rocketed across Sanji’s mind and he went down, lashing out with a final heel as his hands and arms caught on the ground. The sole of his shoe connected with Zoro’s jaw, and the marimo went flying backwards into the door to the club with a resounding CLANG! that meant his head landed first.

“What the HELL is going on out here?!” Nami screeched from the doorway—apparently the door opened inwards as well as outwards.

Sanji heard Zoro groaning from where he fell, but the cook was far more focused on the way his body was having trouble taking in oxygen. The pain in his side blossomed with every inhale, and the back of his mind supplied that he’d need to strip down to take a full breath. He knew that intrinsically, but no! Not here! He couldn’t! That was what had gotten him fired from his last job!!

He coughed several times, “N-Nami, my dear! No need to… to worry. Just a lesson between…” he broke off coughing again, pushing himself to his feet unsteadily, “between co-workers. Provided I
am allowed to throw myself upon your…” another round of coughing, though he found himself supported on both sides, “your mercy to beg for my job?”

“Ugh!”

She had her hand over her eyes, but her outlines were a little fuzzy. Was his eye swollen? He blinked a few times, yes… it sort of felt like it was going to be, even if it wasn’t already.

“Just take them both to the ER. Law’s on shift. Tell him he owes me for canceling.”
3 October - Part 2

Chapter Summary

While Sanji pounds Zoro into the pavement outside, Sabo gives Ace some TLC after a long, stressful day.

Chapter Notes

Ahhh, I am an indecisive person, and didn't like how it flowed. So it's all back to being one fic again. Sorry for any confusion, minna!! Hopefully, this'll be the last time I change things.

Special thanks to the diligent beta work of my wonderful kouhai, The Red Harlequin On the Luna, over on FF.net!

Ace here is played by Jenna.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ace didn’t pay much attention to his surroundings as he kicked open their shared bedroom and stomped inside. He didn't look at Luffy or Sabo, simply kicked off his sandals and threw himself face down onto the bed with a groan.

And just lay there, unmoving.

He didn’t even care about the red jasper beads around his neck that were currently digging into his collar bones. So much for ‘energizing the body’ and ‘strengthening the energy field’. He was downright wiped out. He could barely even feel the push and pull of his hoard of stones scattered on every flat surface about the room. Even the crystal wind chime currently above his head was silent tonight. That was just how drained the art student felt.

Sabo looked up as soon as he entered, stilling the strings of his guitar and tilting his head. He waited for a minute or two, and then kicked the third of their trio in the thigh. Luffy batted at him and shifted further over, absorbed in his game—as he had been since bounding upstairs after Sanji’s amazing dinner. He was one Jet Gatling Gun away from the end of the boss battle! Sabo glared, stretched out and kicked him again.

"Nngh! Sabo!" Luffy whined.

"Lu!" The blond forcibly pulled the younger brunette's head back so that he could look at the bed. And subsequently died on his game.

"Aww." He tossed the controller to the floor at the base of the TV set, and then bounced to his feet so he could pounce onto the bed, bouncing his brother, "What's a matter, Ace?"

Sabo snickered, and took a moment more to put his guitar and tab notes away in the case carefully
before joining the other two. He ran a hand down Ace's spine, rubbing little circles around the knob of each vertebra. Whatever was going on, he knew the other would at least enjoy the petting.

The brunet let out a soft 'oof' when he was moved with the force of Luffy's bounce, and shivered a little as he felt Sabo's hand. With a soft groan, he pillow his head with his arms and tilted his head to pout at his brothers.

"I have just had a shiiiity day. Though..." He sighed. "Not really 'shitty', just... meh. Bad things happening, tired as shit, almost passed out on the way here... same-old, same old."

"Would it help if I told you Koala sent you one of those cinnamon thingies you like?" Sabo tried, still rubbing their oldest member's back.

Luffy sprawled out on his back touching Ace from shoulder to hip though he had his arms folded above his head. "Or that I hired Dadan's replacement?"

Ace's eyes widened and he sat up, excitement on his face. "She did?? And you did?? That's great news, Lu! Who are they?"

"Guy's name is Sanji Nur or something. He makes the best meat."

"Do you ever think with anything other than your stomach, Luffy?" Sabo shook his head, moving with Ace to continue massaging the tension out of his back with both hands.

The youngest grinned, "Nope!"

Ace's eyes fell to half-mast and his smile softened, pressing back into Sabo's touch once again. "Mmm good 'Bo... But really, asking that of Luffy even after so long? Should know he never changes." He twisted his head to grin at the blond. "But anyway, that's good. Can't wait to taste what he can cook."

"Yeah. Nami said it'll be good too cuz he can do drinks too. Though she hit me over the head when I told her I'd hired him." Luffy seemed to scrunch up his entire face in a grumpy pout.

Sabo left a kiss on the back Ace's neck, and leaned his chin on the other's shoulder, "Well you didn't talk to her about it. She's the business manager for a reason, you know. Jii-san wouldn't have hired her to manage the books if he didn't intend for her to have some power over what gets done with them you know."

"But she was just gonna hire him anyway! He's filling in for Dadan and Dogra!" The expressive 'captain' flung his arms up and then out, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, and why didn't Nami get that he understood that!?

Ace let out a loud laugh, carded a hand through his hair to get some of the more annoying strands out of his face, and nudged Luffy's knee with his toe. "Still gotta run things by her, Lu."

"Hmph!"

Sabo joined in the laughing, dropping his arms to wrap around Ace's waist, "How'd the others take it anyway?"

Luffy bounced up into a sitting position with his legs crossed under him and grinned again, "Usopp almost had his face kicked off cuz Zoro and Sanji jumped at each other and Usopp jumped at them. Chopper almost fainted from it. And then Robin goes," he schooled his features in mimicry of the quiet woman, "I hope he doesn't lose too much blood before he gets out of the way; he might
bleed out like that.’ And Franky just gives her this look, you know, like he's not really sure why he's dating her. I don’t think Sanji and Zoro even noticed! It was awesome! He's gonna be perfect!!"

"Nah, they'll be great together!" Luffy waved him off.

"It sounds like they tried to kill each other, and Usopp! How is that 'great together'?"

"Like Usopp. Shishishishishishishishishi!" Luffy laughed through his teeth and Sabo groaned.

"Yeah, like Usopp almost was. I mean, you don't want anyone sent to the hospital, yeah?"

"I dunno... Traffic's on shift tonight." The youngest leaned back on his hands, his eyes and nose pointed up towards the ceiling in mock-innocence.

"Oh...?" Ace shoved Luffy off the bed with his foot.

"You know that's not gonna hurt him, Ace. He bounces like he's made of rubber."

"Could get you hit by another car, 'Bo." Luffy suggested, not even joking.

"Mmm no, we wouldn't want anything to happen to this perfection, now would we?" grinning, Ace turned a little and stroked Sabo's cheek and then flicked the tip of his nose.

"Oi! This face is gonna be famous! You just watch! I've got the one that's gonna get me on the radio in the works right now!! I was working on it before you got here. Wasn't I, Lu?" Sabo turned to the youngest for support, but got none as he was clearly trying to think up some other reason to see the sexy surgeon. "Hmph." The middle of the trio huffed, and confirmed himself, "Well, I was."

"I'm sure you were, 'Bo." Grin never fading, Ace pecked his cheek and then shifted out of his arms to flop back down onto the bed with a yawn. "Why not play it now? Show me~"
Sabo very wisely stayed out of the argument as he moved over to get his guitar anyway. Luffy was right, of course, but calling Ace out on it wasn't really fair when the oldest brother had classes most of the day.

The brunet just let out an irritated grumble and scooted up to the headboard. "Look, I ain't layin' down anymore, not gonna nod off so easily now."

When Luffy didn't say anything else, Sabo sat between them, glancing back and forth and wondering slightly if that was how the youngest was going to get himself to the hospital—pick a fight with the oldest. He cleared his throat about to say something about his song, when Luffy popped back up above the bed, leveling Ace with the look that meant he didn't want to hear anything against what he was about to say.

"You need a deliberate nap so you don't fall asleep in the middle of dinner later."

And Sabo winced.

A scowl creased Ace's face and he crossed his arms over his chest, staring right back at Luffy. "Dinner's hours away. I can nap after the song."

"Nap now and Sabo can play the song after."

Ace grit his teeth. "No."

"Yes." Luffy started to scowl.

"No." Ace's scowl darkened.

Luffy clenched his fists. "Yes!"

Sabo felt like he was at a tennis match.

Ace didn't move. "No."

"Y—"

Sabo clapped a hand over both of their mouths to stop himself from getting any dizzier. His guitar was balanced carefully in front of him and he sighed.

"How about I play until Ace falls asleep." sensing both of them about to protest, he spoke over them, "AND after until dinner's ready. I could use the practice anyway."

Ace pulled his head back and huffed out, "Fine, fine, whatever… go ahead. But I ain't gonna sleep for at least another ten minutes. Cause I wanna hear it."

"NYAHH!" Luffy licked Sabo's hand to make the blond pull back with an expression of disgust. "Heathen."

"Stuffy mediator."

The younger brunette kicked back, flopping back onto the floor, clearly frustrated. Though whether that was due to losing the argument or because he hadn't been able to goad Ace into really fighting with him so he could have a legitimate reason to go see Law wasn't clear.

In either case, Sabo just sighed and pulled his instrument into his lap. He gave Ace a patient look, "At least lay down a little further, so you don't fall over by accident. I know we're looking for ways
to get hurt, but I don't wanna have to pick lamp pieces out of your hair. Again."

The brunet huffed again and scooted down a little so that he was mostly lying down. "There, is that better?"

"Yeah." The one in the middle smiled, gave a glance at the youngest, and without any further ado, began strumming out a steady chord change with a soft plucking over-melody that was played during the resonance of the chords.

"Baby, sing me to sleep. Painful memories when you say that you need me. You save me from leaving things that I might need, but the missing piece is out of my reach. I don't mind if you can't be with me all of the time. So, be on your way. No, that is not what I wanted to say. I just want you, no, I need you to stay."

Ace let out a soft hum of content and allowed Sabo's voice to wash over him. As usual, it caused a tingle to run down his spine, but it was muted due to the exhaustion he was feeling. He really... probably wouldn't last long.

But he just... wanted to hear Sabo. Hearing Sabo after coming back from class was one of the best times of the day. He actually really disliked falling asleep through his music... especially his new stuff.

"Baby, sing me to sleep. Drunken melodies when you say that you love me. Well, maybe I just need a guarantee, cuz the way you speak, you're scaring me. Well, I don't mind if you can't be with me all of the time. So be on your way. No, that is not what I wanted to say. I just want you, no I need you to stay."

The budding music artist changed up his rhythm going into the bridge, the speed a little bit different, and he could pick up Luffy in the background tapping his foot to the beat.

"And I know, I know, that it won't be long 'til you come a runnin' righting the wrongs, ignoring the light, swallow the fright, to make it in time to keep me safe tonight."

Ace's eyes slipped closed against his will, and he hurriedly blinked them open again at the change of speed. He rolled onto his side, blinking at Sabo tiredly, watching him. He smiled softly and curled closer.

The guitar slowed down considerably to put more emphasis on the next line, "Baby, sing me to sleep. No apologies when you say that you love me. But I don't mind if you can't be with me all of the time. So be on your way. No, that is not what I wanted to say. I just want you, no I need you to stay."

When the last word hung in the air, the street performer gave a final pluck to his strings and let the sound die away on its own rather than silencing the instrument. Luffy had moved over to lean his head on the bed, watching them both with a certain soft smile. Sabo reached out and ruffled his hair before glancing at their third.

Ace managed a wide grin at the blond. When he spoke, his voice was slurred. "S'very good 'Bo. It'll def'nately be... the one..."

He barely managed to finish what he was saying before sleep took a hold of him and dragged him under.

Sabo smiled, shifting his hands on his guitar so he could reach out and smooth the oldest's hair too. His voice was soft, even though both brothers knew once Ace was under, even the crashing of a car outside the window wouldn't wake him.
"Thanks, D."

Several hours later, Ace had a very nice nap, one that wasn't plagued by any nasty dreams, and he managed to wake himself up. He really did like it when he could, because it felt... natural. For a few seconds, he could pretend he didn't have narcolepsy.

Except when he was still tired. Times like that sucked majorly. But at least this time he felt refreshed, and that made him happy, and he thought he really should show Sabo his appreciation for that amazing song.

The blond was still next to him, apparently he hadn't noticed that Ace was awake, and with a soft smirk, the brunet reach out and slid his fingers under the hem of Sabo's shirt and slowly slid down his body.

"Morning, Mr. Fingers, and where do you think you're going?" The blond snickered, shifting one page to the next over his head.

He was lying on his back, looking over the notes he'd made about that newest song. He wasn't sure about the bridge. It seemed off. But laying any other way hadn't given him any answers, so now he was stretched out, knees up, head practically at the edge of the bed, with the sheet music hovering above him thanks to one arm while he made notes with the other against his palm. His worn graphic tee rode up above the waist of his jeans high enough that his belly button was exposed, and the edges of his boxers peeked out on the South end.

"Mmmm I think you mean 'evening', 'Bo." Ace purred, voice still laced with sleep.

He trailed his fingers teasingly over the exposed skin, and he shifted down a little more so he could press his lips against it.

"And I want to show you just hooooow much I appreciate that song..."

"Mmm. Morning, evening, does it really matter all that much?" Sabo slid the leg closest to the brunette down so that he'd have an easier access, as he made another notation on his opposite wrist. "Oh, Luffy's buggered off by the way. Said something about finding a whale, so I'm assuming he's off to Brook's, or at least off to find a way to see Law."

The brunette let out a soft snort and licked a small stripe across Sabo's belly button, one of his hands moving to undo the button to Sabo's pants.

"Of course he's tryn' ta see Law... Don't blame him really, but still..." He nibbled on a small patch of skin with a soft hum.

The younger, by a month damnit, shivered, "You're gonna make me stop workin' aren't ya?"

"No one's makin' you do anything." Ace snickered and managed to get the button and zipper undone, and slipped his hand in to massage his length. "You can keep workin' all you like~"

"Nnghyeah, sure. I'll believe that when you aren't manhandling my junk like you want its attention." Sabo peeked out from under his music to smirk at the other. "It's attached you know."

"Oh of that I'm very aware." His lover smirked right back at him… and suddenly bit down on a patch of skin just under his belly button sucking hard, while his touch on Sabo's crotch suddenly became very firm.

"NGH!" All of his abs curled up in reaction to both stimuli, the papers flew over his head and his
hands gripped the edge of the bed. "Holy shit, Ace!"

But the blond was laughing, if a bit strained from the sudden rush of blood to his nethers.

"Whaat~?" The other grinned up at him and licked at the rapidly darkening mark that he'd made, removing his hand. He gripped at Sabo's pants and boxers with both and purred, "Lift your hips a little."

The nimble guitarist did so, heat pooling in his groin, and the flesh stiff enough to bulge the fabric of his plaid boxers through the open fly of his jeans.

Ace tugged Sabo's pants down just enough to expose his length fully, and settled in between his legs with a low laugh. He wanted to tease him, but at the same time he just wanted Sabo to be reduced to a moaning, incoherent mess as quick as possible. Still grinning, Ace reached beneath the blond to grab a handful of each ass-cheek and swooped down to run his tongue across the underside of the heated length.

"AAANGH!!"

Slender hips bucked into the air as all thought flew from Sabo's head. His toes curled in the blankets to either side of where his lover settled between his legs. The muscles of his lower stomach fluttered and his dick only got harder from the direct stimulation.

Trying to contain his laugh—he did so love Sabo's reactions—Ace took his time licking around the base and running his tongue over his balls, sucking absently and nipping at the sensitive skin. Removing one hand from Sabo's ass, the brunet circled his fingers tightly around the base of his cock and trailed his lips all the way to the tip where he wasted no time in taking the head into his mouth and sucked harshly.

All that the blond could do was pant and moan, bucking—or at least trying to—into the other's mouth, needing more! Damn him, his ability to take him apart like that! It just wasn't fair! In any sense of the word! And if he could've thought more clearly, Sabo would have been promising himself to sick Luffy on the sexy narcoleptic!!

Ace simply kept sucking on the head of Sabo's cock for a few moments, delighting in the taste that was purely Sabo, while he slowly worked his hand up and down the blond's length, his grip tight. Relaxing his throat, the brunet began to take in more of him bit by bit, and hummed softly in delight and looked up at Sabo, eyes glinting mischievously.

"Nnnnnggh!!" Propping himself up on his elbows, the guitarist's eyes crossed hard when Ace's nose met his tangled bush, and then the bastard swallowed! Not fair!

Now that Sabo's length was comfortably situated in his mouth and throat, the other returned his hand to its place gripping Sabo's ass... hard. He swallowed a couple of times, getting properly used to the feel of it again, before drawing back a little, and sinking back down.

He wouldn't be able to take too many of those. Every time his lover's nose met his groin, Sabo's balls drew up, the shaft twitched, and heavy drops of precome leaked from his tip into the brunette's throat. His chest heaved with panting moans, and his normally crystal clear eyes were blown cloudy with desire.

'Come on, 'Bo...' The brunet thought and his body shook with a laugh. He decided that he'd keep doing this, at this same torturous pace, until Sabo came hard. Again and again and again...

Twice. That's all the more it took. And Sabo was throwing his head back, spine arched into the
sucking pressure that felt like it was drawing his seed straight from his gonads, like a direct connection between Ace's mouth and his core. God DAMN that man was good at this!! The blond whimpered with the force of it, quiet contrast to the window-rattling moans from before.

His lover held himself steady through Sabo's orgasm, humming softly and swallowing to help him along. He released his tight hold on the blond's ass and gently ran his hands up and down his sides, before pulling back and licking him clean.

Grinning in satisfaction, he purred, "Good?"

"God.... damn... sexy... ass..." The other panted, limp-limbed and noodle-jointed across what had been his working space.

Snickering softly to himself, Ace crawled up Sabo's body, not bothering to tidy him back up, and lay down on top of him. Planting a kiss on the blond's jaw, he murmured, "That I am~"

With a great heaving effort, the guitarist flopped them both over so he could capture the artist by the mouth with a laugh.

There was a yelp at the sudden change of position, but the older man didn't flail. He clutched at the back of Sabo's shirt tightly and moaned into the kiss.

"I swear, D," Sabo nipped at his lover's bottom lip, "you're a nympho on top of the other stuff."

The brunet hummed and shivered, then slid his hands down the blond's back and underneath his shirt to caress the skin. "N-nympho? Naah... 'M not that bad..."

"Sure you are. Cuz you aren't gonna let me get back to my song until I screw your brains out. And you know it." The blond bit the underside of his lover's chin, growling playfully.

Ace's breath hitched in his throat and he tilted his head back to give Sabo more access. "H-hehehe, d-do I know it? I dun' think so..." He squirmed against the blond and wrapped his legs around his waist. "May just have'ta pound it int'a me maybe?"

"Uh huh... that's sorta the plan. " The next bite was just above the brunet's pulse point, and hands with nimble calluses found the darker man's skin, skipping fire around the edge of his shorts.

The painter let out a shuddering breath and shifted a little, a large grin stretching across his lips. "'S-sorta' huh? Mind... explainin'?"

"Nnnope!" Sabo snickered, biting down on the cord of muscle that connected neck to shoulder and sucked hard while grinding his re-awakening hard-on against the bulge in the brunet's shorts.

"Anghg..." Ace hissed and bucked up against the blond. "Y-you're being a tease..."

"Says the one that insisted on sucking me off when I was trying to work."

Working his hands up, the guitarist ducked over his lover's shirt to follow the pattern of biting onto the rise of pectoral muscle over his heart, sucking again to make a bruise blossom under his lips, and then in the natural path to one of two red jasper studded bars pierced through Ace's nipples. He bit one, drinking in the delicious gasp, and then the other, before returning to the bruise to make it darker.

"I-I wasn't teasing jus' thanking you..." The brunet groaned softly, slightly out of breath, and brought one of his hands up to grip Sabo's hair. "Bein' mean, 'Bo..."
"You love it."

Sabo shimmied the other's shirt up, taking his mouth for a deep kiss as soon as the fabric was above his pouting lips. He moaned, linking their hands together so that Ace was temporarily blinded by his own clothing.

He did. He really, really did. Love it that was.

Ace whined when his vision was taken from him, but he squeezed Sabo's hands kissing him back with fervor. He tightened his legs around him and ground up into him, his motions becoming a little desperate.

He had to let him go, but having his often needier lover under him like this was just delicious, the feeling of him squirming had Sabo's veins singing. He released one hand to flick open the fly beneath him so he could wrap the same hand around both of their shafts, pulling with a tiny twist that squeezed them together perfectly. He couldn't help but moan, he'd always been vocal unconsciously, even when it was his own touch.

Ace's breath caught in his throat, and he let out a loud, pleading moan. His groin tightened and the hot, simmering pleasure surged through his veins, and he bit down on Sabo's lip by accident—hard.

The blond didn't seem to notice, mounting his second orgasm quickly. His rhythm sped up and stuttered the closer he got, crying and whining for it against Ace's mouth.

Moving his hand back up to clutch tightly at Sabo's hair, the narcoleptic gasped for breath when he released his lover's lip. He tasted just a hint of copper—must have broken the skin—and vowed in the back of his head to make it up to Sabo again later. Later. Much later on, after this, after... after they come...

Ace let out a needy whimper as the coil in his gut tightened abruptly, and then shattered and his body seized up, tugging Sabo's hair tightly and splattering his seed across his stomach and the blond's hand.

It only took a pull or two before Sabo was following him, hot and shuddering, the mess dripping between his fingers onto the brunette's stomach. His hand rubbed at them until they'd both stopped spasming, their hearts beating hard, and then he pulled away onto his heels to grab his own shirt from his own shoulders to mop them both up with. He was trembling in afterglow while he did it though, tracing the dips and curves of Ace's hips and abs and playing with his belly button ring. He held himself upright with the other arm in spite of the protest in his muscles.

Ace lay there, breathing heavily and dazed, trembling under Sabo's touch. Not bothering to move from his current position, he blinked up at Sabo dazedly and licked his lips, again tasting the copper, and his eyes fell to the small cut on the blond's mouth.

The brunet wondered whether that'd be a valid reason to go see Law... Probably not... But then again, they did have all night to come up with one.

Chapter End Notes

Song: Lullaby - Julia Nunes
"You're a shitty bastard and you fucking suck." Sanji grumbled, shifting the ice pack slightly to rest a little more comfortably on his eye.

He hurt. His ribs, his head, his arms, his legs, everywhere! He was pretty sure his entire body was one solid bruise. The shiner developing under the ice pack was threatening to cut off his vision, and worst of all he wasn't allowed to smoke. Yeah, yeah, that would only have made things worse, but it was the principle of the thing. He wasn't allowed. And not just because he and the shitty mossbrain were seated in one of the exam rooms at Four Blues Community General either! The nurse—the beautiful, stunning, articulate, immaculate, angelic, nurse—who'd taken his x-rays said that until he spoke with Dr. Trafalgar he wouldn't even be allowed to go outside and smoke. He needed to make sure the bones weren't actually broken.

And thank God for binders that only had metal on the zipper.

He hadn't had to take it off to get his x-rays done, which meant he hadn't had to try and wiggle back into it so that the marimo wouldn't notice. The last thing he needed was that idiot douchebag thinking of him as a girl! He wasn't a girl goddamnit! Anyone who thought so deserved the whatever-it-was he'd done to the asshole's thick skull. He was perfectly justified, as far as he was concerned.

His good eye slid over to the bastard, leaned back in his chair, neither one of them willing to get up on the bed, and on opposite sides of the room. They were just far enough apart that he could shove at Zoro's foot with his own.
So he did, with a tired growl.

Zoro shoved back, equally tired and growling in return, as he gave himself yet another pinch on the arm. His head felt fit to split at the temples and the nurse was positive he had a concussion, so he was under strict 'no napping' orders until he'd been given a once over. And an MRI, which they hadn't done yet because someone else was in it. She had also tentatively suggested his eye socket might be busted, which would be a bitch because they couldn't even splint that. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and try to escape the throbbing with a nice nap... and he wasn't allowed.

When the door opened, Zoro's eyes snapped up—and then he winced.

Law had had the day from Hell. Uncooperative patients, a constant stream of threatening injuries that needed IMMEDIATE attendance, he'd been kicked in the chest—twice!—by a brat of a child who didn't want the crayon broken off in his nose touched, and the icing on this ten-hour shift out of the bowels of Satan's digestive tract was the fucking coffee machine was broken and the others were out of stock.

He was about ready to kill someone and LOOKED like it as he stomped over to the green-haired idiot—who was in here for the third time this week—and yanked him up by his pierced ear to march him over to the door and the waiting, snickering, orderly.

"MRI room, concussion symptoms and possible broken facial bones, make sure there's no internal bleeding or intracranial pressure, if he needs a bore hole I want to fucking know BEFORE he loses half of his precious pair of brain cells," he said as he handed him over none too kindly and spun to glower at his other patient.

"You, on the table, ditch the shirt, if your ribs are broken or cracked I have to be sure your lungs are alright and I need to put this stethoscope directly on your skin, anything on your torso take it off unless it's imbedded in your skin."

He didn't look like someone to argue with; there were circles so dark they could have been black makeup under his eyes, his hair was in ragged disarray, his expression was haggard and worn, and his mostly dark skin seemed to have a pallor underneath that came part and parcel with aches and aggravation. His gaze was sharp, focused like an eagle or a hawk. The set of his mouth, downturned at the corners and bitten raw where it was clear he used his teeth to stop his words, spoke to his no-nonsense demeanor. His scrubs were immaculate bright yellow, painting him a member of the ER staff, though he wore a standard physician’s coat over them. The snakebites and tattooed DEATH across the fingers of both hands was a little rebellious, but in a good way as far as Sanji was concerned, and having both ears pierced with rainbow-hued plugs just the size of the pad of his index finger made him wonder if the doctor’s earlobes were sensitive. But what really caught the cook’s attention, what drew him in like a moth to a flame, was the pattern of pearly spots splashed across one cheek and part of his nose. Often vitiligo could make a person look unnaturally painted, like someone had smacked the person with a paintbrush. But this... even under the heavy glower, was breath-taking. A mottling of color that looked no different than patterns of spots on a well-bred Great Dane or a wild snow leopard.

It made Sanji want to know how far the spots went, and whether he could taste the different colors of skin.

Then he realized the doctor had caught him staring!

He blanched, nearly dropping the ice pack. "You... uh... must be Law?"

Climbing to his feet with barely a look at the departing Zoro, he set the blessed bag of frozen water
on the table next to the bed. Tie and jacket already on the arm of the chair behind him, he was quick to bring his hands to his buttons. But he hesitated for a moment. Doctors weren't supposed to be judgmental, and there were laws protecting his private information from being spread around, but that was little comfort when such knowledge could affect his employment opportunities, regardless of the consequences he could bring down on the physician.

"Um..." He winced again when the glower only deepened at his pause. "I just... could you shut the door?"

The doctor paused in his glowering scowl. "Oh. Right. Sorry."

He turned to it and shut it quietly, gratified to see Zoro already being bundled down the hallway, and locked it. Patient privacy was not something he meant to let lapse, but it had been a long shift and he still had a few hours to go. And lack of coffee. Oh gods what he would give for coffee right now. He let his forehead lean against the door for a minute like it would somehow help his headache and then straightened up to get a proper look at the x-rays, or at least get them up on the board while his patient finished disrobing so he could double check for cracks or breaks.

"And yes," he realized belatedly he'd never answered the first question, "I'm Law. Trafalgar D. Water Law. I would say it's a pleasure but you caught me on a bad night, Mr. Noir."

"Sanji. If it's all the same." He finished unbuttoning his shirt and laid it across the arm of the chair with his jacket and tie, and almost started to pull his binder off when the movement caught and he hissed loudly. "Merde!"

Law was there in just seconds, shoving his hand away and taking the zipper's tab himself. "Don't strain yourself; I swear to God I get the stubborn ones on my shift! No, no I'll do it, Jesus Christ if you have a broken rib that could puncture something! Don't TWIST for the love of every fucking deity!"

"You said to take it off!! You look exhausted! I'm not being stubborn, I'm doing what you told me to —oh fine!" The blond huffed, letting the doctor manhandle him. "And it's not broken. I know broken. At worst I've bruised the bones, which is a bitch, but it won't kill me."

He got the binder off and winced at the red-raw skin beneath as he put it on top of his shirt.

"I sincerely hope it's not bruised, but I'm going to listen to your lungs anyway," the brunet said as he pulled the stethoscope up to his ears. "There's always a chance of fluid buildup, especially in smokers. And... I'm sorry to be short and testy. I'm meaner than hell when I haven't had coffee, and our break room pot is broken and all the machines for patients' families are being restocked. There's not a drop of caffeine in the entire hospital."

Sanji deliberately didn't look down at what Law was doing with his chest. Though that was more psychological than anything else. The shape clearly betrayed just how long he'd been binding and discolorations around both sides of his ribcage spoke of years where he hadn't been doing it safely. He wasn't entirely sure where to put his hands, so when the brunet moved around to the back, he crossed his arms over the offensive sacks of fat.

"Is your night at least almost over?"

"Yes, in... an hour and a half," Law replied absently around listening the other's breathing—clear of fluid, but definitely a smoker's lungs, which on principle he hated to hear.

The breast tissue had no damage or even bruising aside from that which came from binding, so he
didn't pay that much attention as he came around and picked the x-rays back up to put on the board. Both showed what he'd hoped not to see, dark spots within the borders of the bone, and he winced.

"Yeah, it's cracked and bruised. No marrow leakage," he traced the bone's outline, "which is great, it'll heal much faster, but the pain is going to really be nasty for a while. I'll write you a mild prescription for Tramadol, that'll make it easier to function, but I can't recommend anything constrict your ribs or this could easily turn into a full-fledged break."

He glanced at the binder and turned to Sanji.

"Do you have any looser binders? Putting that much pressure on this rib is a bad idea with how tight that one is."

"I... think I know where I can borrow one."

The cook flipped his hair to the other side of his face to cover the bruise around his eye and cringed at the x-rays. His brother was going to beat his head in for this; he could hear the older chef's rant now. So, instead of following that line of thought, he tilted his head coyly to the side and smiled.

"I know it's probably unethical, but when you get off, would you wanna grab a drink? I know a great little cafe not too far from here, there's a street musician too, always sets up right in front of the tables. Next to my own, it's the best coffee in the city."

Law paused in taking down the x-rays, glancing over at him questioningly. "They'll be open this late?"

He finished putting them back in the folder and leaned on the counter, honestly considering it. After all, it wasn't like he was unavailable.

"...I will agree, but only on the condition that by the time you come back here to meet me for the walk to the cafe you have already gotten into the looser binder. As a doctor I cannot in good conscience let you take me out in that one," he pointed to the offensive binder lying innocently on the chair.

Sanji chuckled ruefully. "I don't think I could get back into that one. Not until some of the swelling goes down at least. But it's a deal. And yeah. Koala's open nearly twenty fours. I think Old Man Hack only closes the shop for like two hours around four a.m. Didn't much think of the time though. Guess it is kinda late for some folks."

He rubbed the back of his neck, the swelling in his bruised cheek making his smile lopsided.

"Growing up in a restaurant messes with your sense of 'late' and 'early'."

The brunet put the ice pack back in his hand and gently pulled it up to his swollen cheek. "So does being an ER doc. I'll have nights I walk out of here at three in the morning and I'm surprised there are no cabs or buses or diners open. Your eye, by the way, will have a spectacular shiner in the next twenty four hours, but the swelling will go down and there's only bruising as far as the damage runs. And it's a deal then."

"You have talented hands, doc. I feel better already." Oh, what his father would say if he could hear him now! Shameless flirt! And the blond was loving every minute of it. "See you in an hour and half."

Law shook his head and clicked his tongue, but he also cracked a smile for the first time since clocking in. "Yeah, yeah, see you in an hour and a half. Now excuse me while I tend to Luffy's
regular idiot. He hasn't even got his stitches out and he's already back, I swear to god I'll chain him to a hospital bed if he keeps on like this. I'm sick of him in my ER!"

Sanji couldn't help it, the curl of disdain for the green-haired man cut through his good mood, "He asked for it."

He hopped off the bed and started pulling his shirt back on. He couldn't exactly make everything look right per say, but he could at least cover up with the layers if he left the jacket unbuttoned and used a bigger tie knot than his standard half-Windsor. The binder he folded up and tucked into the small of his back where the shirt and jacket both covered it. Out of the way, protected, invisible, and safe should anyone try anything between here and his brother's apartment. Hopefully the man would be there at least long enough for him to get what he needed and leave without too many questions being asked.

"He's always asking for it. Idiot can't help it, I suppose. I mean really. Most people when they see a knife in somebody's hand move either away or to get rid of the weapon. Who fucking THROWS themselves onto the knife to keep it away from the person he's protecting?! I'd call him suicidal if I didn't know he has goals he's determined to reach," the other complained grumpily, and sighed, rubbing the back of his head, "Then again he knows how Nami gets about extortionists."

"Hmm. How's she feel about misogynists?" The cook muttered, pulling his jacket a little harder than necessary to straighten it.

"She usually puts them in my ER," Law replied blandly. "That is if Zoro doesn't throw them out first. Which he tries to, because Nami is one frightening woman when she is angry."

"Most females are." There was more to that sentence but he left it hanging in the air, the blond’s choice of words specific. Then he flashed another winning smile. "I'd gather if you know her well, she undoubtedly trusts you to help instill the message that they're wrong, ne?"

The brunet raised an eyebrow. "Oh no. She trusts me to stitch them back up so they live to learn their lesson about thinking of women as lesser. And she also trusts me not to tell where they needed to get stitches or perhaps how many valuables seem to have gone missing from their persons." He smiled a bit wickedly as his black eyes gleamed. "However, we need to put that aside a moment; as I understand it, from the way it sounds in the notes," he picked up the clipboard to flip to them, "it seems you were provoked into a fight by Zoro? I'm required to ask if you'd like to press charges and if you'd like the documentation of your injuries in case you'd like to take him to court. Would you?"

"Yes, I was, and no, the stupid, mossbrain," Sanji deleted several expletives from that description, "should've learned his lesson. And if he's in jail, I can't make sure he has. Besides," he fiddled with his tie a little, a shadow crossing his face as he looked away for a minute, "police tend not to want to help people like me."

The same shadow crossed Law's face before he shook his head. "Yes, I'm aware, and it's bullshit, but I am required to ask. Though I'm not sure what lesson he was supposed to learn by having his skull kicked in. He's barely got two brain cells to rub together, you know. Fight and sleep."

The blond laughed, chasing away the darkness, "Oh I'd gathered that much. He didn't even ask how I fight before jumping into it. Of course, even if he had I wouldn't have held back, but it's a really stupid move to challenge a Gold Glove Savate practitioner."

He didn't like bragging but... well, if it made him look better to the doc, what was the harm? And if Law knew Luffy, then Law knew about Luffy, and as such Sanji was banking on him knowing the fact that a busted eye socket and a concussion was the least of what the cook could have done to the
muscleheaded idiot. He'd like to say he'd been holding back, but he could say that the last strike was unplanned and a reaction to his own injury instead of a deliberate move. It actually worried him a little, not much because he was confident in his skills, but a little. He hadn't been holding back. He'd been going all out. Granted the mossball was mostly defending himself, but still. He'd been able to take everything Sanji had thrown at him until the cheap shots at the end, where the bastard had tricked him into going down because of the one part of his body where he was weakest.

"Oh he'll be so proud to know he went against someone the best in their style. That's his favorite pastime after all." The doc said dryly, then stopped and blinked. Then, he amended, "Actually don't tell him, he'll be after you to spar with him constantly. And I'll have to keep patching you two up. Anyway, you're all good, here are your discharge papers, and now I have to see to the mossball idiot's prescription. God, I hate having to give him pain meds. Something in his system... ah, that's—well, I'm sure that's not something you care about anyway," he gave Sanji a little hand flutter, shooing him. "You go on and get that looser binder and get comfortable again, Mr. Sanji. I'll meet you after my shift."

"Count on it." The blond took his papers and gave the doctor a wink on his way to the front desk to sign out.

In another room, Zoro held the ice against his face, scowling at the images on the desk waiting for Law. Broken eye socket and a definite concussion! None of his other bones seemed to be bruised, cracked, or broken though, which he was glad for... taking injuries out of a simple block would have been humiliating on a personal level. Still, constant monitoring and—he winced when moving his bad eye, which was already dim and a pain in the ass, made the whole side of his head throb. Fucking. Peachy.

The laughter of his best friend and technical boss was not helping, especially because the bouncy brat kept shifting from sitting to leaning on the desk to pacing. "You know, you should've seen your face right before Sanji clocked you in the jaw! Priceless! Better than that time Usopp got you in the groin! Remember? With the mock AK he suped up! It was AWESOME!! You and Sanji should spar more often. You're a good match!"

"Luffy..." he gritted his teeth with his eyes closed, ice pressed a little too hard against his face, "why are you here again? Other than to poke at me and keep me awake because we both know that's not the real reason?"

"Ace went down on Sabo when he woke up from his nap." The position the younger man was currently in had him hanging off of the chair upside down, his feet on the wall, and attempting to balance a tongue depressor between his lips and his nose. "I don't mind, I just didn't wanna be there and not involved. Messes with my concentration and I was in the middle of trying to beat OP Red Unlimited. Y'know that one fighting game where you can beat up the marines and stuff?"

"I've heard of it. I guess there's even a villain that lets you kick people when they're down, which sounds like a pretty fun game, and I can see why you'd bounce if you weren't involved. Those two usually do go at it like rabbits after all," Zoro sighed, leaning his good cheek in his hand and wincing again. "Did you get far on it?"

"About to beat up some asshole named Kurohige. Reminds me of that guy from POTC, the one with the government that branded Jack for saving the slaves. But he's tough as hell! Gonna take at least another round to kick his ass." Luffy dropped the tongue depressor and he looked up at the other man, "So how long were you guys out there anyway? I went up to Sabo after dinner, and it was like... two hours or something when Ace crashed out. Finally." The last word had a dark growl under it, betraying his worry over his brother's sleeping habits. "When I came back down was right
before Nami opened the door. Should'a told me you were sparring. I'd've joined in! He's like wicked strong!"

"To be honest, I think I pushed him too hard and got a real fight instead of a spar," the bouncer said ruefully, with a gesture to his eye. "He came at me like I was a training dummy or punching bag, didn't hold back at ALL. But it was great," he smirked, "I can hardly wait to do it again!"

The captain laughed again, somersaulting onto his feet with a small bounce, "That's awesome! I wanna get a chance at him. If he can throw you across the lot like that, I wanna feel it!"

"I'm sure he will if you ask him to," Zoro replied dryly, wincing again and rubbing his temples. Ugh, he'd give his left nipple to make this headache go away!

Just then the door flew open, not quite banging off of the wall behind it, but certainly loud enough to convey the message the man in front of it wanted to get across. He spared the enthusiastic brunet a long-suffering, but slightly grateful, look, and the Rubberman bounced his way out.

“Catch ya later, Zoro!”

Undoubtedly, he'd find someone to pester until Law could meet him after his shift was over. The doctor made a mental note to inform the youngest of his boyfriends he was going on a date. He knew it wouldn't be a problem, but announcing to a potential partner that they had to share him with three other men was a little much to take in on the first date. It wasn't that he was particularly secretive about it. He was just wise enough to know that polyamory was something that needed to be discussed at a time when he wasn't severely caffeine deprived and Sanji wasn't hopped up on pain killers. And it was just coffee. No matter how pretty the blond was, there was no guarantee there would be anything after this.

As such he turned to his patient, “You had better not have popped your stitches, Mr. Roronoa. I’m not fixing you up a third time this week for the same injury all because you let a pair of gorgeous legs and a smart mouth get the better of your temper.”

Zoro coughed. "I... don't think any popped?" he offered with a half-smile, voice nervous. "And I don't even know what I said to piss him off so much, but HE started on ME when I was badgering Nami about the pay grade, I was hoping she'd be able to find SOME loophole. Fucking landlord raised the rent again."

"The way Chopper told it makes me wonder if he has a history with sexism." The dark doctor carefully protected his first patient's confidentiality, while advancing on the other one. "Now off with the shirt, I know you better than to believe you let anyone check your laceration before I got here."

Mouth curling out in a pout as he pulled his shirt over his head, the green-haired man grumbled. "Dammit. Fiiine..."

Yep. Two stitches popped, right in the vent where he'd taken a hit.

Law tsk'd, once for each stitch, and poked the blossoming bruise next to it under the guise of checking for infection drainage. "I'll have to redo them both. Up on the bed. You know I hate working bent over."

Zoro groaned, but climbed up to plant his ass on that hard seating, wincing at the poking and glaring. He had an assorted collection of bruises steadily darkening all over his torso. He looked like a purple leopard.

The brunet gave an appreciatively drawn out whistle.
"You look almost as spotty as I do. Good job." His tone dripped with entertained sarcasm as he moved over to the cabinet on the wall to gather his materials. "And your landlord is a dick. You need to move. I believe I make the fourth person to say that to you." He turned back to the bouncer with an expression that was as close to sympathy as he got after a day like today, "Why do you not take Luffy up on his offer?"

Zoro winced. "I really don't think it could... uhm, I don't think getting drawn into your guys' relationship would be something I'd do well at, and you know Luffy, Ace and Sabo. If I moved in with them, something would start up with someone, and all for one and one for all, y'know... and I'm okay with that part, really I am, I just... I don't think I'd include everyone as much as I'd want to, I'd get frustrated, and I really don't want bad feelings. Not to mention I'd go nuts with Luffy bouncing around the house all the time and wind up stomping off to look for a new apartment with everyone fuming. I wanna move, I'm looking for a place, but I just can't move in with Luffy and them."

As much as he was loath to admit it about his beloveds, the other had a point, which Law conceded with a nod, "True. As attractive as you are, Zoro, I have to say that you and I would be a poor match. All for one and one for all. There. Now let me see your eye."

The doctor sat back, wrapping the whole bundle of gauze, used needle, snipped thread, and paper drape into the ball of his gloves to be disposed of in the sharps/biohazard container on the wall. A new pair of gloves and he was pulling his pen light out of his pocket to check the reflection on the back of Zoro's retina. His other hand steadied his patient's chin with a firm but gentle grip, carefully avoiding the discoloration of the skin where Sanji's shoe had left its imprint.

"So, why not Usopp or Franky? I know they might not be the best of long-term roommates, but it would be something closer to the Sunny and away from your landlord. Until you found a new permanent place."

"They're inventing at all hours of the night, when would I sleep? No, they're out, especially since I intimidate Usopp and sometimes Franky has Robin back to his place. I'm a pretty persnickity assholish roommate. I couldn't stand the grease and oil stains," Zoro admitted with a sheepish smile that was only on his good side.

"I know personally better than to suggest Chopper or myself. Or any of the girls." Law snickered at him, clicking the pen light off, and sitting back. "What about Brook?"

"I... maybe. Aren't all his rooms rented? I know he and I get along most of the time..."

"Last I heard his basement was open." With a pop of his spine, the brunet's eyes darted to the clock on the wall, and pulled his script-pad from his pocket. "I'm guessing we have to go with Dilaudid again if we're gonna get any pain relief at all for you, aren't we?" His tone carried the weight of how much paperwork that would entail, but the certainty that nothing less would work for his friend. "The Vicoden did nothing last time, right?"

The bouncer winced again, he hated being trouble for his friend. "Ah... yeah. I really wish it did, Law, I really do, but... it did about what an aspirin does: nothing. I'm sorry, man. I'll look into Brook's basement," he promised.

"Yeah," Law waved him off, already writing out the prescription. "You're better than trying to dose the Pink Bastard." He tore the sheet off the pad and held it out, but didn't let go right away. "Standard bone procedure. Let Franky handle tossing assholes for at least two weeks. No punches to the face. Call me or Chopper if you get spots, blurred edges, stars, dizziness not connected to the meds, or memory loss. Don't sleep until after you talk to Brook tonight. You got a way to get there, or do you need my cell?"
"I can walk, I know my way from here," Zoro asserted, pouting again. Throwing them out the door was his favorite part damnit!

"Uh huh, last time I let you tell me that you wound up back here a couple of hours later with a busted nose." The doctor was laughing at him, quietly, while he dug his cell phone out of his back pocket. "Here, call Usopp. He'll be done with the show by now, and Nami's gonna want to make sure you don't get lost again."

Though Zoro's infamous sense of no-direction was usually the butt of all of their nakama's jokes, he really did have a point. Technically, no matter how fast the bushido bouncer healed, he was still concussed and risked passing out if left entirely on his own. At the same time though, the brunet knew he wouldn't take kindly to the industry standard approach for such situations, and he certainly wouldn't appreciate more of the mothering attitude all of the ER nurses and orderlies tended to take with concussion patients. Which was why the long-nosed jack-of-all-trades was the best choice. Zoro could intimidate him into shutting up and Usopp's sharp eye for detail would still be able to keep close watch on him for trouble. His accuracy with a rifle wasn't the only thing the dark man could zero in on.

The green-head sighed, but took the phone and dialed him up. "Thanks. One day, when I've been there long enough to earn actual money, I'll pay you back for all the bullshit you go through for us. I swear, Law—Usopp, yeah, can you pick me up from the ER? I got a concussion again, m'not allowed to walk to your place. Yeah, stitches too. No, he hasn't clouted me; he didn't have to, had a blond bastard kick me in the face for him and break my eye socket. No, no, the bad side. Yes, the bruising is all over, yes I'll let you sketch it. Fine. Just come get me, sniperboy," he growled, hanging up.

Law snickered a bit louder, moving over to pull the discharge papers from the file, and jotting down a few notes for the medical assistant that was going to be organizing everything for him. He kept one eye on his patient, the other kept drawing his attention to the clock. He'd spent a good forty-five minutes with Zoro. Ordinarily, no, that was a long time to spend on one ER patient, but frankly, the hospital board could suck his dick for all he cared at the moment. His official shift was supposed to have been over four hours ago! And that was just because he'd agreed to cover for Drake!! He hadn't originally been scheduled at all!! AND WITH NO COFFEE!! So, less than two hours away from the end of second shift period, he could spend as much time as he felt was necessary with his patients and everyone else could just piss off.

It surprised him a little how much he was looking forward to the date, and without his knowledge a certain smile pulled up the corners of his mouth as he wondered if that 'street musician' would be there too. That would be entertaining to say the very least. And at that, the image of the two blonds in the same bed at the same time shot straight through his spine. Oh that was pretty!

Zoro recognized it.

"Meetin' Luffy after work, Law?" He gently bumped shoulders with him, grinning a little bit lopsidedly as he tried to distract himself valiantly from the throb in his head.

"No, actually." The other resolutely did not jump when the silent bouncer appeared next to him the same way his father always did. Therefore the breath he took to school his features was born of exhaustion, not to calm his thumping heart! Still, he glared sarcastically down at him, "NRE if you must know, and the possibility that coffee may become something more. One for all, as you said."

The bouncer nodded and gave him a friendly squeeze to the shoulder, careful to moderate his strength. "Best of luck to ya, then. You guys could use at least one more level head."
"Why thank you, Zoro, but I fear even if all of the level heads in our nakama got together, we still wouldn't out weigh Luffy alone, nevermind adding Ace into the mix." His dark eyes sparkled with the affection he held for his partners, no matter how irritating they could be. He offered the discharge papers, "Here you are, check in with Vivi at the desk, and I'll take a look at you again tomorrow at the Sunny. Chopper will want to know what you did."

Zoro wilted and sighed. "Do we have to tell him? Again? But alright, I'll check in with Vivi..."

Law didn't answer, he merely smiled with the promise that if the green-haired man didn't tell their friend, he was going to, and they both knew that wouldn't end well for anyone. They didn't know where he got it, but when it came to his nakama's health the little seventeen-year-old could suplex even Franky into submission. With the right motivation, Chopper appeared to be physically stronger than literally any of them put together. Though whether that was because nobody could stand to hurt the kid or because he was just as strange and weird as the rest of them was uncertain. All that mattered was that if he didn't get told about the outcome of what had happened between Zoro and Sanji, the soon-to-be doctor would make sure both cook and bouncer remembered it.

"Nghaaaaa... oh alright. I'll tell him," the patient grumped, collecting his jacket and his bag of ice, since that was all he could use until his prescription was filled. "Enjoy your date. And do I hope that 'street performer' does 'just happen' to be playing right when your shift gets off. Maybe he'll even have a coffee too hot for him to drink he's willing to share," he teased good-naturedly.

The doctor let himself be glad of that, especially as the discharge had taken another fifteen minutes. He gave an honest smile about it, and waved his goodbye over his shoulder as they parted ways; Zoro heading for the front desk, Law for his office to burn the last thirty minutes on paperwork. He had a hot blond he didn't want to keep waiting.
The paperwork took Law almost ten minutes overtime, and he was still struggling into his coat when he stomped outside, the heels of his boots clacking loudly on the sidewalk as he cursed himself inventively for losing track of the damn time. Again! Oh if he'd entirely blown it by making him wait, accidentally—dammit!

He found said 'hot blond' leaning against the wall of the hospital, near where the staff parked their cars, smoking lazily. He'd completely changed his clothing, a band hoodie and more comfortable jeans over a pair of well-loved Converse sneakers. He gave the doctor a smile, snubbing out his cigarette in the provided ashtray. He exhaled to the side so that the toxic gas wouldn't be between them, and popped a mint in his mouth before pushing off the wall.

"Paperwork's a bitch, huh?"

Law smoothed back his hair and finally succeeded in putting his arm through the second sleeve of his coat with a lopsided smile. "Yes. Especially when you're deliberately writing slower and clearer than usual to make it cover the last half hour of your shift. I'm so sorry, I let the time get away with me, thank you for waiting. For all it's only been a couple hours, I've been looking forward to this since we set the date."

"Well, that makes the lecture from my brother worth it." Sanji grinned up at him; he'd always had a weakness for guys taller than him. He shoved his hands in the pocket of his hoodie, and fell into an easy pace next to the doctor, "So, from what Nami was saying earlier, you're a musician too?"

"Yeah. I play piano and strum some guitar. I play sporadically sometimes, mostly I only use the guitar to help out a friend who composes so he can compare chords. Primarily I do accompaniment for the other guitarists and the singer in my group."

"Sounds like fun. You any good?"

"On the piano yes. I'm quite skilled on the piano."
"And your voice? Because just speaking it's sinful." The blond gave him a wink, hair over his shiner again.

The other grinned back playfully. "I've been told it doubles in dripping sin when I sing."

"Well, then that is certainly something I won't want to miss. If you're performing at the Sunny, I might just have to challenge you. Only two artists have been able to distract me from my job when they were on stage. Considering how you're able to make me sound like some hopeless over-the-top flirt without even trying, I almost worry for my culinary skills when you are trying."

"Then perhaps I should only perform when you AREN'T working," Law teased back. "Otherwise Luffy may decide to extract vengeance for interfering with his food, hm?"

"Is he really as bad as they say he is?" Sanji almost sounded worried, a nervous laugh accompanying their steps down the sidewalk.

"When it comes to food? Every bit. Or worse. He is a living black hole for food and consumes as much meat per day as a well-fed tiger as long as funding permits."

The cook laughed and shook his head. "I don't follow his career as closely as some of my uncles, but... they say he's crazy. I mean, he didn't seem that bad today, other than inhaling everything that wasn't nailed down. But... I guess if he's my new boss I should know something about him, yeah?"

"Oh." Law paused, curling his tongue against the roof of his mouth, hands shoving deep in his pockets. "He is perfectly of sound mind, if rather protective of his brothers, nakama, and partners," he said carefully. "In the ring, his habit is to fight aggressively but also defensively, he refuses to let himself get hit if he can help it, which is how he earned the nickname 'Rubberman'. He may fight semi-instinctively, but I can assure you that in no area of his life, personal, professional, or public, is he 'crazy'."

"I... I didn't... it wasn't... I don't think he's... wow, some date I am." Sanji drew his hand through his hair with a sigh. "I'm sorry. Lemme start over."

There was a small space between them now, and the blond could feel himself trying to hunch away from the sexy doctor as he mentally berated himself for letting his mouth get away from him. He'd actually been comfortable with Law until just then. Fuck, he was such a spazz. The other probably thought he was some psychopath or something, only interested because of Law's connection to the bar. Maybe even a rabid groupie, in spite of his attempt to downplay his question. Really, he'd only asked because he knew Patty and Carne would when the Baratie docked at Loguetown on Sunday.

"No, no, you would be... surprised how often I get the question, considering I'm his league-registered doctor. People often accost me after watching him fight to be sure the public is 'safe from him' and other such questions." The brunet inclined his head and tried to give him a reassuring smile. "The answer is more or less rote by now so people won't ask again."

"I... actually didn't know that. Like I said, my uncles, they're bigger into that whole scene than I am. I used to be, but Luffy wasn't a big name when I was competing, and I never got any further than our supposed hometown."

The blond tried to squash his remaining nerves, and took the appearance of the cafe, a collection of patrons hanging outside even at that late hour, as a boon of good fortune. He donned his public persona with well-practiced ease and executed a small turn to open the door for his date.

Though he raised an eyebrow, Law went first, chuckling at the other's theatrics. "Thank you ever so
much, kind sir," he teased with a tilt of his hat.

Sanji drifted in after him, all smiles again, the slip of mask seemingly long-forgotten as he slid up to the counter to take the barista's hand. He clutched it to his cheek, "Koala, my pet, you must help me! You see I have brought a poor soul in dire need of your delicious, life-giving coffee." Just as quickly, he moved back to Law's side, "Just look at him, deprived! All day! Only your beautiful skills can save him~!"

The short, brown-haired girl laughed brightly at the cook's antics. "Oh no! Whatever shall we do!? He needs our finest espresso STAT!"

The black-haired man laughed and rubbed at his face to emphasize his eye bags. Then he leaned against Sanji's shoulder lightly, and grasped his chest, putting as much drama into his voice as he could, "At LEAST a double my fine fellow doctor, and I cannot tell you how it will save my life."

"A double and a half for my ailing patient, and your usual, Sanji hun?" Koala laughed more, smiling brighter. Somehow.

"You always know just what to serve, my darling! Make it soy and almond this time though." The blond man slipped his hand across his stomach and ribs covertly on his way to making the appearance of keeping his date on his feet.

She gave a short nod, and moved down the short counter to start the process on both of their drinks. In the middle of pouring almond milk into the steamer, she looked over her shoulder at the two, "Sabo's in the back, Law, did you want me to get 'im? Think he was picking through treats for that sleepy boy of his."

The brunet man snickered. "Maybe. I was considering performing with him a bit tonight."

His eyes flicked to Sanji and back to Koala. Sanji did not know, and he wasn't saying anything yet. It was a little much to lay on someone at first.

"Sabo?" Sanji blinked. "Luffy's Sabo? The one that lives with him? Helps at the Sunny? That Sabo?"

Koala was quick on the uptake, which was why she'd phrased it like that, and she gave Law an acknowledging nod as she put his double on the counter in front of him since it didn't take as long as Sanji's caramel mocha. Especially on high-nerves nights. Within the privacy of her own head, she sighed at all of the unspoken language that surrounded the group she affectionately thought of as 'her boys'. If Law was on a date that meant Sabo belonged exclusively to Ace and Luffy, and if Sanji was on a date that meant his stomach couldn't handle cow's milk. And judging both from the roll of Law's shoulders, the part of Sanji's hair, and the way they leaned on each other, she had to make a mental note to send Sabo home with a tall black coffee straight from a pot that had been sitting for at least a couple of hours. Even if her favorite guitarist hadn't been involved, she was sure his green-haired friend was. In fact... if Sanji knew about the Sunny now, that meant he'd likely gotten the job, and well, that just made the world a bit smaller didn't it.

Law laughed. "Yes, that Sabo. He's that songwriter friend I told you about! He'll make it big someday," he sighed. "And then he can afford to feed Luffy the kind of diet he wants to eat!"

"Oh cool." The blond sipped his mocha after the barista moved back away from the counter again, presumably to let Sabo know what was going on outside. "Wait if he's here, then he's the guy I was telling you about!" He pouted lightly, "You're mean, letting me go on like that. I didn't know you knew this place!"
"And ruin all your fun taking me out and letting you lead? That would have seemed cruel," the taller replied around a smile poorly hidden by his cup.

"Hmph. I get the feeling you're laughing at me, Dr. Trafalgar." But Sanji made sure to keep his tone light and teasing.

"A little. The town is comprised of relatively small social groups: you'll find quickly that most all the people YOU know, know all the other people you know."

Koala gave them another kilowatt smile as Sanji paid for their drinks, and slipped them a plate with a light, gentle on the stomach sort of pastry in the middle of it, already cut into bite sized pieces. The cook almost said something but she winked, so he just sighed a little and escorted his date to a table outside in the comfortable night air.

"Just one more thing to get used to I suppose. I grew up on the Baratie. We never really had a specific home port, traveling the East Blue River with the seasons, you know. Officially we were registered with Sabaody but," he shrugged, "that was mostly so the Old Man could make sure the CPS folks would stay off his back. Point is I'm not used to having a group of people who all know each other." That came with a sheepish laugh that was covered partially by his cup.

Law smiled and chucked a little bit. "Yes, that sounds like a rather different mode of life, to be sure, much more eventful. Then you move someplace small like this and everyone knows everyone else and it's almost alarming. You go to introduce your friends and they just laugh because they know each other."

"Something like that." Sanji sighed with another snicker, "As long as somebody doesn't come along and tell me we're related somehow I'll be good. I have the feeling I'll be meeting everyone in this group all at the same time when I'm at work anyway. Provided Nami doesn't fire me for getting into a fight the first day."

"Oh, she won't. Didn't I tell you I've stitched up the green idiot three times this week? He started that shit BEFORE he worked there, she doesn't really object to fighting. Just don't do it IN the bar." The doctor smirked and drained his coffee.

"Dare I ask what the mossbrain did for a living before Nami was gracious enough to put up with him?" The cook couldn't keep the color of fury out of the word he used to describe Zoro.

"It was very dangerous. That is all I know. The only thing of his previous profession of which I am aware are the marks it left on his body, some of which are horrific indeed. Whatever he did, it put his life in severe danger." The tone was a bit flat.

Law couldn't break patient confidentiality but this unsubstantiated hatred was starting to get annoying.

Sensing something amiss with the conversation, Sanji quickly shifted the subject, "So what kind of music do you like?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that... and classical. I'm very fond of soothing melodies and chords," the answer came with a gentle smile and a deep breath in. "And I like singing haunting tunes, ballads and the like."

"The kind that send chills down your spine, yeah?"

"Just that kind. I love them. Dunno why, I just do."
"My favorite band leans towards that kind too. A lot of... hmm... almost operatic songs."

"Ah, I'm not so good at those, though I like listening to them. I don't have that kind of, ah...lung power," Law snickered softly.

"I'm sure anything you can do is better than me. At best I sound like a cheesy lounge singer, and that's when I can stay on key. So, don't feel too bad. I couldn't get up on stage at all. I have to admit I am a little curious though." The blond sipped his coffee for a pause, "Is it a hobby that you use to distract from work, or is medicine what you went into because music isn't a 'stable' career?"

"The former. I only got into it as a hobby after being turned out of the hospital for having too many high-stress indicators," the other laughed softly as he turned his empty cup around in his hand. "Then when I discovered a modicum of talent I just started playing and singing with the locals."

"Well, I look forward to hearing you play. And sing." The cook waggled his eyebrows, though only one spiral was visible.

"Oh I'm sure. Excuse me for a second, and you just might hear both tonight. I'll be right back," Law promised, rising to dispose of his cup and slip into the back to see another sexy blond, one he was much more intimately familiar with.

Sanji nodded to him, still sipping at his own drink, and silently glad that he hadn't been asked any questions about why he'd only taken small bites of the pastry as well. It wasn't a conversation to have on a first date. As he watched Law walk away, he wondered what the brunet's policy was on first date blowjobs.

When the doctor entered the back of the store, courtesy of Koala opening the counter-door with a small shake of her head and amused exasperation, he found the lights off, and almost didn't have any warning before arms were wrapping around his waist and a mouth was on his neck, nibbling at his hairline.

"Holy shh—Sabo! Jesus Christ don't DO that you were an inch away from an elbow in the ribs!"
But he leaned back into the touch anyway, his shoulders relaxing as his voice lowered to a low, throaty purr. Yes... that felt so nice, and his arms went back to wrap around one of his three partners. "Why's it all dark back here? Practicing a new sound?"

"Nope, figured you'd come lookin' when I didn't show up. Who's the new blondie?" He trailed his tongue up Law's skin to a pierced ear, and tugged gently on the lobe, snaking his fingers up under the brunet's shirt to play guitar chords in his happy trail.

"Mmm, yeah, met him in the ER, new guy from Sunny. He's cute. And flirty. And once I got the thought of him in mind with another fuck-handsome blond I know I just HAD to come out for coffee... especially since the work machine's broken," the taller man made a face before his back arched because DAMMIT the E chord always did things to him.

"He the guy Nami was screeching about right before I left?" Sabo snickered, plucking his lover's belly like his favorite ax. "Oh you did, did you? And it had nothing to do with the fact that Luffy told you I'd be here? I know he went to see you after Ace got home."

"Ah, he really didn't stay long. Left me to his idiots," Law gasped softly, back arching more and his fingers set into the back of Sabo's neck. "But yeah that's the guy. How's Ace doing?"

"Grumpy as usual. Didn't want to let me leave after he woke up the second time. He's probably back in his work now though. You know how he gets when he's got a project." The blond leaned his
forehead against the other's shoulder, dropping his teasing as the near fight Luffy and Ace had earlier replayed through his head. "I swear I don't know how you put up with us sometimes. I don't know how I put up with us sometimes."

"Patience, care, and insane amounts of coffee," the doctor replied, as he always did when he turned his head to kiss his cheek. "And because I love you. You're idiots sometimes, but you're my idiots." He gave Sabo a squeeze and grinned.

"Hmm. The voice of sanity and reason in the chaos. Doesn't hurt you have an ass like whoa." Sabo captured his mouth with a grin for a short kiss, then pulled back, "However, I am not one to stand between you and the possible double blond threesome you have running around that genius head of yours. So, lead on, Dr. Heartstealer, my guitar is yours for your serenade."

"Wanna make it a duet? I promised to show him my sexy singing voice. And I think between the two of us we can manage to make him turn into a puddle on the floor, we've done it to many a stronger man," Law grinned mischievously, black eyes gleaming in the dark.

"Oh you are evil."

The smile on face said otherwise, though, and he dashed off behind the shelf of expensive coffee brands and filters to grab his mottled case—at one point it had been white, now it was so many different colors that it was impossible to tell if the still white spots were actually the original surface, or white paint added later thanks to his often over-zealous artist boyfriend.

"I'm thinking, Addicted? I've got my mini."

"Oh hell yes. Let's do it. I want to see him SQUIRM with his legs crossed," Law purred, just as wicked as his boyfriend as he licked his lips. "Got a spare mic? I know you usually do, but I want to do that gritty thing that makes your spine prickle since I get quiet when I do that." He grabbed up the amp to help him carry it.

"Check the back. Should have Angel tucked up in the corner." The guitarist popped his case and slung his baby around his shoulders with practiced ease. He'd almost brought his acoustic for tonight and was suddenly quite glad he hadn't.

"Oh perfect," the brunet licked his lips again. "Have I mentioned lately I love the fact that we can share music? Because I do."

The blond ducked in to steal another kiss before they were out in public. It wasn't that he was ashamed of Law or keeping their relationship a secret, but he was sure springing the depth of what was going on behind the curtain, so to speak, was definitely more than what the often more stoic man was willing to dish out on a first date.

"Anytime, babe!"

Then he was striding out through the cafe, to the sound of some of his regular fans applauding, to set up in front of his favorite light pole. It was the only one on the block that had an electrical outlet that wasn't either shorted out or locked behind police glass, and coincidentally right in front of Sanji's table. Considering Sabo was certain Law had allowed the other blond to pick the seat, he took it as kismet, and tucked his pick between his teeth so he could offer his hand to shake.

"Sabo D. Grey. You must be Sanji Noir, Luffy told me you're his new cook."

The slightly shorter blond started to his feet, taking the other's hand with a warm smile, "Yes. I'm sorry I never introduced myself before, I love your music. It's not what I normally listen to, but I
think that's what makes it unique. It's definitely one of the reasons I kept coming back, besides Koala's absolutely delicious coffee!"

"Ah? Well then, you'll probably hear a good bit more of it if you're working at the Sunny. Nami regularly has me fill in when certain doctors cancel on her at the last minute. I was there tonight, in fact, apparently while you and Zoro were rabble rousing out back. Was quite a row I hear."

They were getting along. Marvelous! Law approached them both with a small cough, his smile one that Sabo knew well, covering the thoughts running through his mind. With the amplifier set up, and his microphone plugged in, the doctor was more than ready to begin their set, but watching his lover and potential new mate bond was entertaining to say the very least.

He handed the cord for Sabo’s guitar to him, and addressed the café itself, his mic up at his mouth, “I don’t know how many songs I’ll be able to perform, but considering the audience, I’d like to at least get one out of my system.”

A cheer went through the crowd and around them windows began to open as the word travelled among the apartments on the upper floors of the shops. It was a regular thing for Sabo to play in front of Hack’s Coffee Shoppe, to the point that often the blond musician was told they were going to miss him when he made it big. And he was going to make it big! Everyone from Kokoyashi Village, the part of the city from Grand Line to the East Blue River, swore that someday, sooner or later, the videos of him on Youtube would reach the music execs and he was going to get discovered.

Sanji took this anticipation as a cue to re-take his seat, and he smirked at Law over his coffee cup, rolling the sweet drink over his tongue while he waited.

The two took a short minute to make sure the guitar was in tune, and for a few warm ups for Law’s throat since he’d been talking most of the day. Then they turned, the doctor slightly further forward than his guitarist.

“I’m so addicted to all the things you do. When you’re going down on me in between the sheets, or the sound you make with every breath you take. It’s not like anything. When you’re loving me.”

Sabo’s fingers danced almost lazily over the strings, picking out a walking melody that was both haunting and enticing. It matched Law’s rough baritone perfectly, and the way they meshed together made it clear to the cook that they’d played together often.

“Oh boy let’s take it slow. So as for you, well you know where to go. I want to take my love and hate you till the end.”

Then the guitarist cut in with a hard chord progression, augmented by a small pedal that had been tucked up inside of his amp.

“It’s not like you to turn away from all the bullshit I can’t take. It’s not like me to walk away. I’m so addicted to all the things you do. When you’re going down on me in between the sheets, or the sound you make with every breath you take. It’s not like anything. When you’re loving me. Yeah!”

Backing off a little for the next verse, Sabo rocked in time to the beat, and Law traveled the length of his mic cord without actually pulling it tight, the hand not on the microphone itself holding the wire so as to give him a physical reminder of how much distance he had.

“I know when it's getting rough. All the times we spend when we try to make this love something better than just making up again.” The singer made his way back to Sanji as the chords picked up again, “It's not like you to turn away. All the bullshit I can’t take. Just when I think I can walk away,
I'm so addicted to all the things you do when you're going on me in between the sheets or the sound you make with every breath you take. It's not like anything!

The song was clearly reaching its climax. Sabo’s guitar grew stronger, and Law’s words gained that growling edge that meant he was pleading for the object of his song to throw him a bone.

“I’m so addicted to the things you do when you're going down on me~! Or the sound you make with every breath you take! It's not like anything when you're loving me! Yeah! When you're loving me!”

All at once Sabo cut back, presumably for emphasis, and Law leaned in, both hands on the mic, eyes intent on Sanji, “How can I make it through all the things you do? There's just got to be more to you and me?”

He pulled back just as the cook was starting to lean in, his hand on his cup white-knuckled and his mouth dry. Shit Law was good! The buildup of repeated choruses as the song approached its final climax was almost exactly like the rest had been foreplay! Sanji was panting without realizing it, blown wide open and wanting. Especially with how suggestive the song was.

Then for a third time the guitarist brought back the haunting walk across his strings, deviating from the normal pattern if Law’s moment of concern was to be believed, but he rolled with it, putting more emphasis on the last two lines, soft and pleading.

“I’m so addicted to you. Addicted to you.”

“W-wow…” Sanji sounded breathless, his hands gripping the mug of his coffee, and the last several mouthfuls were completely forgotten.

All around him the café and neighborhood went wild, cheering and applauding. Several had cell phones furiously trying to be the first one to post the new video. Koala and her boss, a big blond haired man with a fighter’s build and deep set eyes—the one and only Hack—stood in the doorway proud of their little busker on the corner with his homegrown fanclub. Sabo kicked into a new song right away, flipping a switch with his toes to change the mic from Angel in Law’s hand to Butterfly, a portable headset on his right ear.

That was the doctor’s cue to put Angel down in the back of the amp where he’d gotten it. Then he made his way back over to his date. He smiled suggestively at the expression on the stunned cook.

“Y-y-yeah. You’re not allowed to sing when I’m cooking. Luffy’ll have both our heads for it, and I’ll have to answer to my dad for burning something for the first time in nearly twenty years.”

“I gather you enjoyed it then.”

“Understatement of the fucking year. Holy shit, Law!”

Sabo was getting a little enthusiastic, in spite of the late hour of the night, and the brunet looked over his shoulder. Hidden from view, he mouthed that he was leaving and the musician covered his acknowledging nod with a couple of headbangs, making his wavy, chin-length hair flop about for show.

“Should we take this conversation somewhere we can hear each other a little better?” Law asked, offering his hand.

Sanji nodded enthusiastically, and was only able to restrain himself until they turned the corner leading back towards his own apartment building. As soon as they were out of sight and the music faded into the background, he pounced his date, capturing his mouth with a hunger that surprised
even himself! But he didn't let himself think, and it felt, as Law met him kiss for kiss, that the doctor
didn't have any intention of doing so either.

Law definitely didn't mind being jumped as he was. A little startled, sure, but at the same time a part
of him had expected it - and welcomed it. Coherent thought pushed aside for much—much—better
things, Law hummed into the kisses, drawing Sanji closer to him.

More familiar with nighttime hookups than he'd like to admit, the blond maneuvered them into an
alley between two apartment buildings and backed the doctor up against the wall, sucking on his lip
—and those damn piercings—with a coffee and caramel flavored tongue. His hands slid into the
thick black curls, under the spotted cap, and he absently traced a splotch of pale pink on Law's
temple with his thumb, humming into the kiss.

The brunet let out a heavy breath and trailed his hands down Sanji's sides, tugging him in and
pressing his body flush against his own. With one hand pressed firmly to the small of the blond's
back and the other settling on his waist, Law was content to match the kisses. Sanji tasted rather
divine after all, and when he released his lip, Law's tongue darted out to catch more of it.

Aware of just how close they were, Sanji didn't grind against him, no matter how much he wanted
to; the last thing he wanted to do was lead Law on. So, he concentrated on using his mouth, kissing
the breath from the other's lungs, and then nipping along his chin scruff. He'd have worried about his
own, but the doctor already knew about his little biology problem, so the idea that he drew on his
goatee to help further his masculinity on a body that wouldn't cooperate wasn't all that important.
Instead he gave into the desire to taste the different colors of the taller man's skin, tracing the line of
brown to pink with his tongue and sucking on it to bruise both sides lightly.

The doctor let out a soft noise, eyes fluttering closed at the sensation of Sanji's mouth on his skin.
There was always something sensual about having those spots traced by his lovers, and this was
certainly no different… just as sweet and pleasurable, and he let out a louder groan. The hand on the
blond's back lowered a little to sneak under the hoodie and shirt to skirt across skin.

The little voice in the back of Sanji's head flared up, but skin was okay. It was his waist, he was still
okay. He was teasing Law's skin after all, it was only fair. He did squirm a little when those talented
fingers reached a semi-ticklish spot, but otherwise he concentrated on moving on with his mouth,
taking the lobe of one pierced ear between his teeth and tugging on the metal there. His own hands
dropped from Law's hair to his chest, smoothing out the doctor's scrub shirt to feel the lithe definition
of muscle underneath.

Law's other hand moved to join the one palming Sanji's skin, and his fingers pressed firmly into
muscle and then back up the blond's sides to settle on his waist once again. Still not having moved
out from underneath the shirt.

"Mmmm." The cook purred, breathing into the taller man's ear.

He was having a hard time holding himself away. He really, really wanted to lean in, bury himself in
Law's arms, but he couldn't. Even if the other did know. To make up for it he curled his spine,
dropping his lips to the jut of collar bone poking out from Law's scrubs, tucked under the edge of his
coat. There was another spot there, so he licked it, mapping the outline like he would an ice cream
treat.

The doctor gasped at that, and he moved one of his hands to touch Sanji's head, his fingers sliding
into the blond strands of hair to grip them lightly. His collar bones were sensitive, and he was
discovering that Sanji seemed to have a devilish tongue.
Sensing he was onto something, Sanji nipped at the places he was licking, then moved away a little, following the line of color change up over the rise of tendon to his pulse point. No need to overwhelm the man all at once after all.

Law's head tilted back and another louder noise escaped him. This just wasn't fair... Sanji was doing all the work, and Law was never one to let a partner have all the fun. He brought his other hand up to the cook's neck and pulled him up gently, his mouth latching onto Sanji's in a consuming kiss. He edged the other around, switching their position so Sanji was now against the wall, and the doctor's hands moved from the cook's shoulders and down his chest.

The blond didn't register it at first, it wasn't until Law actually pressed his palm to the front of his body that the voice from before lit up his mind. NO! Hoping the other took his shudder as a shiver of pleasure, he ducked, a move almost too fast to be seen; down, out, and around, ignoring the way the bricks pulled on his hoodie. As per Law's order, and with significant suggestion of his brother, Sanji wasn't wearing anything around his chest under his shirt, so the doctor had gotten himself a full grope in on the one part of the cook's anatomy that he hated to have touched. They didn't belong there, and they shouldn't be messed with.

But...

He was hoping he could salvage this by literally blowing Law's mind. So he reversed them back, voraciously attacking the doctor's sensitive spot, just above his collar bone, with both hands on the front of his pants. He massaged the brunet's hips, and worked his way inward, aiming for his groin.

Law's hands instantly moved to clutch Sanji's shoulders and he bit down on his own lip harshly, unable to help but buck into the blond's touch a little. His head fell back, meeting the brick wall a little harder than intended, but the pain was nothing in comparison to the way Sanji’s mouth on that sensitive spot was making him feel. He hadn't really had time to think over the reaction he had gotten from Sanji when he had touched his chest, but pleasure shoved those thoughts to the back of his mind for later analysis.

Sanji followed the line of collar bone to where it met the doctor's shirt, his hands snaking into the other's pants below. He didn't dive right in exactly, but he certainly made his intention clear. If the brunet was going to stop him, he needed to do something now.

In an attempt to get across that he was perfectly fine where things were heading, Law pushed up against the blond's hands and moaned.

The cook smiled and sank, skipping over parts of the taller man's body that he'd go back to explore at some point he was sure. For now though, he fell to his knees and mouthed over the bulge of erection through the doctor's scrub pants. He mapped it, just as he had with his collar bone, length, width, thickness, all through the fabric to further the teasing sensations. His hands came around the waistband of Law's pants to both hold his hips still, and subtly ask permission to pull them down—since scrubs didn't come with a convenient fly he could just open to get at his prize.

Law managed to nod, not really caring that they were still in a public place, no matter how late or away from things they were. All he really cared about at the moment was feeling Sanji's mouth on an important, aching part of his anatomy.

That devilish smile grew. The blond walked his fingers down the elastic, pulling the cotton down, scrubs and boxers at the same time, until the dark man's phallus sprang free. Then he was on it. His sinful mouth at the base, tugging at the ring nestled between scrotum and shaft with his tongue. He couldn't say he was exactly surprised by piercings, but he was definitely delighted by them. Once he had Law's pants down far enough that they wouldn't fall into the dirt of the alley, but still completely
exposed him, Sanji pulled back. He kissed his fingers, then pressed them to the tip of the bi-color cock—and oh didn't THAT just tickle his inner aesthetics.

At the look of confusion, the cook dug into his back pocket to pull out a condom. He winked, implying that he'd been semi-planning to blow the doctor all night, before tearing it open and blowing gently into the ring of latex. The voice in the back of his head made a thankful note that he'd paid attention to where the gloves Law wore came from earlier, so he didn't have to worry about an allergy, but the rest of him was far more interested in rolling the protective sheath over what he was rapidly considering his dessert for the night.

His mouth followed, tonguing at the ring in Law's frenulum even before he fully had the condom on, and using his lips to pull the plastic tight in ways that had always driven his other partners crazy.

The back of the brunet's head hit the brick wall again, much harder than before, and the noise that escaped him was somewhat strangled. It took a great deal of concentration not to fight against Sanji's hold and move.

As soon as his hand hit the base, the cook was devouring him like he didn't have a gag reflex. Or at least like he'd been doing this for a lot longer and more often than his appearance gave him credit for. He sucked and pulled, bobbed and tucked the hand not steadying himself into Law's waistband to fondle the orbs below his cock. He hummed happily, uncaring about anything else at the moment. His entire concentration was on literally blowing Law's mind.

Law swore and one of his hands gripped Sanji's hair tight, and again he fought the urge to snap his hips forward into the blond's mouth. Damn but he could give Ace a run for his money...

He really wouldn't be able to last long. But he wanted to hold out, not wanting to come too soon...

The gold silk of his bangs fell over both eyes as he looked up, intense blue trained on the quivering breaths, his ears drinking every moan and curse, and he downright purred around his mouthful when his nose met dark curls. He undulated the muscles of his throat, swallowing around the tip of Law's dick. Mentally, he chanted for the doctor to come. To let loose.

There was definitely no way Law could hold out. It was all simply too much… the heat and constricting pleasure of Sanji's mouth and throat sent him over the edge, and he doubled over a little, letting out a loud and long drawn out moan as liquid heat curled up his spine and his muscles quivered as his release tore through him.

Sanji made the motions like he would drink him down except for the rubber between them, helping the taller man riding his orgasm as long as he could. Then he pulled back, sitting on his heels, and gently removed the condom. His hands were soft as silk, the touch barely pinching. A knot in the latex and he tossed it further down the alley where people were unlikely to stumble over it.

He licked his lips, looking up Law satisfied.

The doctor slumped against the brick wall, chest heaving and body shaking a little from the aftershocks of his release. He blinked the stars from his vision and peered down at the blond with a lop-sided grin. The hand that was still in Sanji's hair pulled gently, clearly indicating that he wanted the blond up.

To say he crawled up the doctor's body wouldn't have been a fair description. More like he climbed, hand over hand, until he was mouth to mouth with the brunet again. He laughed easily, with the tenor of a contact high.
"Good?"

"Oh... better than good..." Law purred and grazed his lips over Sanji's own. "I'd say 'divine'..."

The other chuckled, "Good. I haven't lost my touch." He drew lazy circles in the center of the mottled man's chest, "Do you have your sea legs, or should I carry you back to the hospital?"

The love-drunk brunet slung his arm over Sanji's shoulders and let out a soft, breathy laugh. "Legs are steady, no need to carry me..." He grazed the cook's lips again. "But is there anything... you'd like me to do in return for such a wonderful treat?"

"You did that with that amazing voice of yours. This was me paying you back." Sanji shook his head. "Though, I wouldn't be adverse to a second cup of coffee sometime. No real dinners though. I hate restaurants. Most of them can't compare to me." He laughed. "At least as long as you don't sing while I'm cooking anyway."

The doctor let out a low laugh and planted another, more firm kiss on Sanji's lips. "Very well then. We will definitely need to have another cup of coffee..."

The blond happily returned the kiss, sucking on the metal rings again, then blinked over Law's shoulder, and groaned, burying his head against the taller man's neck. "Tell me that isn't dawn."

Law blinked and looked up. "Oh. 'Fraid I can't, because then I'd be lying."

"Damnit. I was afraid you were going to say that. Unfortunately, that means I need to bid you good... well, I guess good morning. I have roughly six hours to catch some sleep before needing to face the music with Nami."

"Understood. And I wish you the best of luck." He said with a grin and a nod. "And I should perhaps try and get some sleep myself..."

"That would probably be a good idea." Sanji smiled up at him, stealing another kiss. "Good morning, Law. Sweet dreams."

"Mmm, good morning to you too." The other purred softly, pecking the blond's cheek in return. "Sweetest of dreams for you, Sanji."

At that the cook reluctantly pulled away, and sauntered off such that he knew his ass was on display until he was around the corner and out of sight. Then he pulled in on himself. He'd have to have a conversation with Law about boundaries, the ghost touch of the other man's hand on his br—chest! —still sent shivers down his spine. It brought back memories best left buried under the fuzzy haze of Ativan and Effexor and the other host of pills he had to take just to hold down a job and maintain some semblance of sanity. Speaking of... he pulled his phone out of his pocket for the time and picked up his pace. He was almost a half an hour late for the one that kept him from throwing up everything he ate.

Chapter End Notes

Song: Addicted - Saving Abel
4 October - Part 2

Chapter Summary

Mysterious messages and a mosshead moving in?

Chapter Notes

Since it's after midnight here, technically I'm posting on time. X''D

I just wanna make a note about the swords in this chapter, traditionally, according to my research, a samurai's katana were always considered female, both in the same idea as ships in the West, and not, because they had different reasons for assigning that gender to them.

Silva is here as Nami and Zoro this time. And Tsuris was kind enough to Beta for me while Kouhai's on break. ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seven hours, a scalding hot shower, and a dry piece of toast to help his morning meds stay down until he got to work, Sanji felt like himself again. Almost, because the memories of the night before played his in mind some, specifically the touch of Law’s hand on his chest. But at least by the time he was straightening his tie, and fussing over the way that the borrowed binder didn’t quite give him the long lines he preferred, he felt stable enough that he could pick up his phone and head out.

At least until he saw the message he’d received.

[Heys, heard you were in a scuffle. Need me to beat somebody up for you, Baby?]

That had been several minutes ago, when he was still in the shower, and the cold chills that ran down his spine as he realized there were more messages below that one only made him grip his phone tighter.

[Baby?]

[You there?]

[Aw, come on, Baby, I haven’t been away that long. You know you’ve missed me.]

[Seriously, where are you? Why aren’t you answering?] The last one had been seconds before Sanji picked up the device.

He was frozen, staring at it, trying to will himself to keep ignoring the text messages, but it was getting harder and harder to do so. The tension crawled up his back, hunching his shoulders, drawing him unconsciously tighter around himself.
It grew, and grew, and grew… and grew!

Until…!

—DINGDONG!—

He nearly dropped the thing as it went off in his hand, and he fumbled with it to get the screen back on so he could read what he already knew was going to be there.

[Guess you just don’t have time for me anymore. I miss you, Baby. You’re the only one who ever really cared about me, but if you don’t even care anymore, then who do I have? No one. I love you, Baby. There’s no point in going on if you don’t love me back.]

“No! No, I’m here! I’m sorry! I was in the bathroom. I have work. I’m sorry. Please don’t go! I’m here!” Sanji texted with shaking thumbs.

[Baby! I knew you’d never leave me!]

[You have work?]

[Where you working?]

“That new place my neighbor told me about.”

[Downtown? Baby you know I don’t like going that far from the river.]

“I’m sorry. They wouldn’t let me wear my binder at the other place.”

There was silence for a while. Heavy and oppressive, and Sanji read his last text over and over, a growing pit of cold nausea in his stomach. He felt like he could count the seconds by the way his heart hammered in his chest.

He was in the process of typing out another, “I’m sorry”, when the DINGDONG came again.

[Well, as long as they treat you right. Maybe I’ll make an exception and come see you in action. Wear that little number I got you for your birthday. You know I love when you show off those legs of yours.]

Relief flooded him, and sagged back against the pillows on the bed, knees tucked up to support his hands while he typed.

“When are you coming in?”

[Sunday. Riding with your old man. He picked me up in Sabaody. I told him I’d mop the floor for him if I could hitch a ride to come see you. Think he knows how much I miss you.]

“He probably knows how much I miss you too.” He held onto that one for a while, hovering over the send button as he thought about the night before.

No, it was fair! Dr. Kaya said that he was allowed to date other people. They’d broken up when he left town. That meant he wasn’t at the other man’s beck and call anymore, and he had no right to be jealous. But no matter how many times he went over it in his head, Sanji still couldn’t make himself quite believe it.

So he sent the text, along with another one that said he couldn’t wait to see the other when he got
Then there was silence again. Not oppressive, but it felt like he was on hold. Waiting for a response. And somehow paralyzed into just sitting on his bed when he knew he needed to get up, get his stuff together and head to the Sunny. Nami and the others were waiting for him, and after yesterday’s fiasco with the Marimo, he didn’t want to be late.

But he couldn’t risk missing a text message either…

He wasted another ten minutes, biting his lip, constantly turning the screen of his phone back on, and staring at the clock before he finally gave a heavy sigh and wrote one more message in spite of the fact that his last two hadn’t been answered.

“I love you. I g2g or I’ll be late. See you soon. <3”

Arriving at the Sunny in record time, he was out of breath and overheated in the heavy afternoon sun. He still had a few hours before the bar itself opened, but he needed to open the kitchen and get something on to feed the crew before then. So he’d run most of the way, forgoing even his typical ‘walk to work’ cigarette in favor of taking shortcuts through back lots and down alleys to make up the time he spent waiting for his phone to ring.

So, it came as no surprise to him that his hand was shaking as he reached for the door to the club. He glared at it, willing it to stop, along with the urge to just grab a smoke before walking in. He couldn’t. He didn’t have time! He had to clock in and get started! Nicotine could WAIT DAMNIT!

He shoved the craving aside, ripping the door open with more force than necessary, and immediately blushed heavily as it drew the attention of… what were their names again? Franky and U— something… He couldn’t remember. He was shit at that sort of thing. He always had been ever since he was fresh out of high school; it was like all of his short term memory just poofed! Anyway, he waved at them sheepishly, and they, obviously able to recognize him better than he was able to recognize them, just waved back, going back to whatever they were doing with the lighting and boom mic on the stage.

The cook escaped further encounters by ducking into the kitchen, intent on making something both hearty and filling, since he doubted any of them had gotten much better sleep than he had after the nonsense with Zoro—funny, he could remember his name just fine now. The thought made him pull the flour and eggs from the cabinet and fridge respectively. Bread. That was always good for working out tension, and he had a quick-rise secret the Old Man taught him that cut hours off the time it took to make it without sacrificing taste or nutrition.

He was just ready to punch it down for the second time when the one person who could undo all of his precious relaxation strolled, more like ambled ungracefully, into his kitchen. He sneered, still not having had the chance to grab his first cigarette of the day.

“What do you want, Marimo?”

“Tch. What crawled up your nose and died, shit cook?”

The bouncer, in all of his surly grace, snagged a mug from the top shelf of the dish rack, above where the customers could see into the kitchen proper, and plunked it down in front of the coffee maker. Like the man himself, the mug spoke of hard work, long nights, and a certain endurance, most prominently displayed by the three mended cracks around the outside. It had been dropped at least twice and glued back together then shellacked to reinforce the mending.
And Zoro wrapped his meaty hand around it with hard fondness that just ticked the cook off more.

“Nothing!” He growled, punching the dough harder than he needed to.

There was a scoff, and he snarled at the Marimo, daring him to speak his thoughts aloud. In return, green eyebrows rose as Zoro lifted the mug to his lips, sipping gingerly at the steaming black drink. They seemed to be in a standoff for a few moments, the energy heavy and anticipatory all around them. Neither willing to back down while the other was watching them.

The dough remained unkneaded, the coffee undrunk.

Then a soft voice cleared its throat in the doorway, “Excuse me, Zoro. I’d like some coffee before the bar opens, if you don’t mind.”

“Eh, sorry, Vivi.” The bouncer shifted to the side, around the edge of the counter and out of Sanji’s personal area.

In his wake stood the most fetchingly familiar woman with powder blue hair the cook had ever seen. He blinked a couple of times and a slow smile curled the corner of his mouth.

“You’re the gorgeous nurse from the ER last night!”

She grinned, “Guilty as charged, I’m afraid.”

Today she was dressed as Robin had been the day before, a simple tee-shirt with the bar’s logo and a pair of jean shorts, rolled up to above mid-thigh over stockings that pretended to be fishnets but really weren’t. Her earrings were bright green and cyan peacock feathers dangling from polished turquoise stones, and her long hair was pulled up into a smart ponytail that gave her that ‘just out of high school’ look that was sure to bring her plenty of tips.

“So,” the cook began, turning back to his bread while the waitress reached down her own mug, “is this your day job, or is that your hobby?”

Her laughter was musical when he waggled his eyebrows at her, pulling the dough out onto the floured counter to begin kneading it in earnest. She poured her wake-up call like a pro, sprinkling just a touch of sugar, and a dash of cream.

“I’m actually something of a volunteer over there. They do pay me, but only for half of my time. It’s a sort of… trade off for something I did when I was younger.”

Sanji glanced at her, the frustration from dealing with everything evaporated like the morning dew. “I’ve had a couple of those. My first job in fact. The Old Man caught me into something I shouldn’t have been, and the rest of that month was spent peeling potatoes. And my thumb, but that’s sort of beside the point.”

Vivi laughed again, and nodded. “Mine wasn’t quite so bold as that. I just got tangled up with the wrong crowd for a while. Things are better now.”

“That’s good to hear. You’re too pretty to wear orange.”

“Don’t let my girlfriend hear you say that.”

The cook’s visible eyebrow shot up. “Oh!”

“See you later, Sanji,” the Arabic woman laughed some more as she made her way back out of the
kitchen.

Now relaxed, it took until the rolls were in the oven and timing before his nicotine craving hit him again, and by then it was less a niggling at his mind and more a punch to the gut. So he slipped out with the timer in his pocket to lean against the back wall of the club, contemplating his morning and what that meant as far as working at the Sunny went. His phone was silent, as he’d expected it to be, but he couldn’t help the pang of disappointment when he checked.

Both before his cigarette, and after.

Deciding he needed a second smoke to deal with the bundle of nerves in his stomach, the blond cast his gaze out across the vacant lot where he’d kicked the Marimo’s ass yesterday. He was surprised to see the proprietor of the Sunny rolling and bouncing against an unseen opponent.

The Rubberman flung himself from the chain link fence to the ground, his arm out in a clothesline, only to tuck and roll at the last minute back up onto his feet where he spun, throwing a punch at the air hard enough to send the sweat flying from his skin, and making his muscles stand out in stark relief for a few seconds. The intake of breath was all the longer he held the stance before pulling back and lashing out with a foot instead, dropping to a crouch as though to sweep his opponent’s feet out from under him. That turned into a back hand spring, and a ricochet off the solid brick wall of the club.

He was barefoot, but for a supportive wrapping around the arch of each foot and up to his ankles. His hands were similar; wrapping between the fingers and around the knuckles to protect from splitting, then around the wrist to support the tiny bones. His hoodie was sleeveless and hung open, revealing a nasty X-shaped scar that took Sanji several minutes of staring to catch entirely thanks to the way the brunet bounced around the lot. A two pendant necklace hung to the bottom of the top two points like a pair of dogtags, but instead of an identical metal tag the second looked to be a thick green stone cut through with red. Both sported big + signs in the middle of them, though the stone was a natural pattern between the colors and the metal had a hole cut out of it. And the shorts he wore were tattered blue jeans that, judging by the edges, had been torn off at the knees rather than bought that way.

Just as the cook was about to call out to his boss, another door, further down the wall, opened for a tall brunet in a mini-skirt, torn stockings, high-heeled sneakers, and a cropped button-up tied at his ribs. He said something, but Sanji couldn’t make it out, and Luffy stopped mid-stance to bend all the way backwards to see the other man. A grin lit up his face unlike any other expression the blond had seen so far, and with a back somersault, the Rubberman flung himself into the taller brunet’s arms.

The sounds of a kiss filtered through the afternoon city noises, and Sanji took that, plus the end of his second cigarette, as his cue to return to his kitchen. He gave a chuckle as he walked back inside, shaking his head at the pair’s blatant affection.

His good mood was almost immediately ruined by the sound of the Marimo’s voice though. He glared heavily, which really wasn’t fair. All the man was doing was helping Usopp and Franky haul a lighting boom back up to the ceiling. Sanji assumed they’d had to replace the bulbs or some other technical thing about it. He didn’t know stage work. At the moment all he cared about was the fact that the goddamn green-haired bastard’s voice was just loud enough that he could hear it over the sounds of Brook improvising on his keyboard, and Vivi and Robin laughing over something the dark haired woman had just said. Even listening to Usopp’s nervous complaining or the clacking of Chopper’s computer keys would have been better than the fucking mosshead’s stupid, rumbling, idiotic tones!

It just made his skin crawl!!!
Thankfully, just then a flash of orange caught his eye.

“Ah, Ms. Nami dear, uhh…” Sanji forced his attention away from the shitty bouncer and found himself having to actually chase after the brilliant manager slightly.

She never looked at him, but hummed in acknowledgement, giving a slight tilt to her head to indicate she was listening. She had a huge file of papers in her arm and was leafing through them while she walked.

Following her into her office, the cook paused at the door then pushed it around so that no one else could hear their conversation. The last thing he needed was for certain bastards to pick up on things. Especially when he was expecting That Person back in town.

“What is it, Sanji?”

Nami broke through his thoughts, and he realized he’d been watching the green-haired idiot through the crack in the door as though the mere thought of him would summon his stupid ass back into Sanji’s personal space. With something of a jolt, he ripped himself away from the opening and noodled a little to cross the space up to Nami’s desk.

“My most beautiful, brilliant, generous, thrifty manager! No one can balance books and sort out schedules like you can. It is a gift truly marveled by your—“

“Yes, I get the point. What is it you want, Sanji?” There was a note of irritation in her voice that called him up short.

He folded his hands in front of him and looked down at the desk, “I need a few days off.”

“Already!?”

The cook winced; he didn’t need to look up at her to know her bright, amber eyes were wide with shock. He’d only been working there a couple of days. He really didn’t have enough clout to even ask for this, but what else could he do? He absolutely couldn’t have That Person around the bigoted asshole. Someone would wind up dead! Most likely the Marimo! Not to mention Nami’s whole ‘no fighting inside’ rule. Things would definitely get broken.

He had to have the time off. Spend it with That Person, and then when He left, Sanji would go back to work like nothing had ever happened. The crew of the Sunny didn’t need to know what was going on, and He wouldn’t be upset by how Sanji dressed. It wasn’t as though He approved of the suits and ties and trousers and… he was getting off topic, and not paying attention again.

Nami was regarding him with some concern when he looked up. “Is this because of Zoro? Because I told the musclehead to apologize for whatever it was he said that pissed you off the other day.”

“No. Well, he hasn’t apologized, but he isn’t why I need the time.” Sanji was quick to assure her, and he paled under her gaze as the thought that part of him wished it actually was the Marimo crossed his mind.

“Are you okay? You seem different from yesterday.”

“Ha ha ha, no! I’m fine! See?” He grinned, albeit wanly. “My father’s ship is coming in next week. I just was hoping to have a few days off to spend with him is all.”

It wasn’t entirely a lie.
She narrowed her eyes at him, like she could tell he wasn’t saying everything, but slowly, she nodded. “Alright. Which days?”

“Really? Um, the Baratie’s due to dock on Sunday.”

Already the manager was sitting down and pulling out her scheduling book. She flipped the pages open, and looked back up at him. “Yes, really. I’ll just call in a favor from a friend of mine. Do you need the whole week, or are three days enough?”

“Three days is plenty! Thank you! You really are the most wonderful, kind, gener—“

“Save it.” She leveled him with an exasperated look, though there was warmth in her eyes and a hint of smile around her mouth. “Just enjoy your time with your dad. We’ll see you again on Wednesday.”

He thanked her again, backing out of the office, with flowering praise for her until he was beyond her line of sight. Then he whipped out his phone, nimbly stepping around the tables and some debris Luffy had left in the middle of the open space in front of the stage.

“Eh, what’s with him?” Usopp frowned down his nose at the cook’s preoccupation.

Zoro shrugged, “Who knows. He’s had a stick up his ass all morning. I went to grab a cup of coffee and he damn near bit my head off.”

“Have you apologized yet?”

The bouncer squirmed, but scowled at his friend and co-worker, sending the darker man scrabbling back behind Franky wailing about how he was going to die at the hands of the green-haired man, and how his thousands of fans would get revenge for him, but could they please not hurt his face, he wanted his precious Kaya to be able to recognize his body when they fished it out of the sewers later!!!

Chopper gasped, tears in his eyes, “WAHH!!! ZORO!! YOU’RE NOT REALLY GONNA KILL USOPP ARE YOU!”

Zoro and Franky rolled their eyes at the same time, and turned back to wrapping the ropes that kept the stage beams aloft. Robin chuckled behind her hand, while Chopper clung to Usopp and both of them cried at the tops of their lungs.

“At least if he listens to you, Usopp, once you’re deceased, you’ll be part of the Grateful Dead. Yo ho ho ho ho!” Brook chortled from his corner of the stage.

The long-nosed man jumped to his feet with an affronted, if unsupported, growl, “THAT’S NOT EVEN FUNNY, OLD MAN!! I COULD REALLY DIE!”

“Perhaps you’ll drive your blood pressure high enough to make the vein in your neck explode. That should kill you quicker than Zoro could.”

The entire group winced as one, and Franky leaned over his girlfriend with a nervous waver in his voice, “Babe, do you have to be so morbid?”

The Asian woman merely smiled, continuing to wrap silverware in paper napkins while next to her Vivi snorted into her hand.

Ah, it was good to be at the Sunny!
Sunday morning, which was really more like two o'clock in the afternoon, came warm but breezy; it was a perfect day for moving large heavy objects and furniture. When they'd discussed it Friday night, after what the crew of the Thousand Sunny was calling Sanji’s Welcoming Party, Brook was only too happy to help his Nakama get out from under his current landlord.

There were advantages to leasing month to month, including being able to move out whenever one wanted, but when the owner of the building was someone as skeevy as Flint Bluejam, it also meant that unless one paid one's rent in advance, nothing would ever get repaired or improved. Plus there were the added bonuses of Brook having a car and living closer to the Sunny.

So, since the bar was closed on Sundays, it was only natural that he, Franky, Zoro, and Usopp would move the green-haired bouncer from one apartment to the other as soon as all four were awake and available that day.

The older musician didn't have much room, but he did have his old practice room and the 'storage' room that was his part of the building's basement. There was even already a bed set up down there from when Franky had busted his legs and couldn't manage steps too well. Since the rest of the tenants of his building only ever went down there to use the on-site Laundromat, it meant that Zoro would virtually have the entire floor to himself. He'd have to come up to Brook's apartment proper for showers, but there was a small water closet next to the laundry room. So, really it was perfect.

A fact which had pleased the would-be swordsman immensely.

Naturally, once he'd put his mind to DO it, it didn't take long to actually get done. It helped he owned only a few truckloads of stuff in all, three boxes and minimal furniture; his armoire, which had been the only piece of furniture he'd ever bought since coming to work at the Sunny; and his sword stand.

The wardrobe was an artisan’s work, made of real cherry wood and every inch of it hand-carved beauty. He'd gotten that with the idea of passing it on in mind, something to really LAST. It took up the entire bed of Usopp’s truck when he and Franky had hauled it out of his old place.

Of course, getting back out of the truck and into Brook’s spare room was something else again.

“Oi! Watch it, Franky! I need those fingers, you know!” Zoro groused, rubbing the back of his left hand.

The massive clothes container was wedged half in and half out of the front hall leading into Brook’s apartment. The tight turn from one door to the other made it next to impossible to get anything wider than the door itself in from the outside. As such, the two bouncers had attempted to take the turn as sharply as possible in the hopes that the blanket protecting the armoire’s finish would protect it when—not if, when—it scraped on the doorjams.

“Yo ho ho ho ho. It seems we’ve something of a—”

“Don’t you dare, you old bag of bones!”

“—stiff situation here.” The middle-aged stoner finished his corpse pun in spite of Zoro’s growl.

“Ugh! That was worse than the last one.” Usopp groaned, leaning his head against the wall like he was physically injured by the bad joke.

“Would you say I killed you, Usopp-san? Yo ho ho ho ho!”

“Somebody shut him up!” Zoro grumbled a third time, to the sound of Franky laughing. “Why did I
agree to move in here again? Was I brain damaged at the time?” His eyes cut to Usopp, “Don’t answer that!”

The darker man just covered his mouth, not at all hiding the grin behind his hand.

“C’mon, bros, let’s get this thing inside. Some of us have dates later. One… Two… Three… SUPER!!!”

They all heaved with all of their might, which considering the size of both bouncers really was quite a significant amount of raw strength. But physics was always more powerful, and the wardrobe simply wouldn’t budge.

“Okay… okay… new plan… Somebody just…”

“Just what?”

“I don’t know!” Usopp wailed, “I’m in too much pain to think!”

“What if we tried backing it out again and getting a different angle?” Franky leaned against the side, his thick forearm visible from where Zoro and Usopp were draped against the front.

“AFTER ALL THAT SHOVING?! ARE YOU CRAZY?!”

“Hmm.” The green haired man merely grunted, thinking.

A five minute break, counted out by the number of songs Brook was able to pluck out on a rubber band he’d found in his pocket, refreshed both bouncers enough that Zoro kicked Usopp back to his feet. Together the four of them shifted so that Franky and Brook were pushing from within, and Zoro and Usopp were pulling from without. Opposite of the way they’d been working at the wardrobe for an hour.

Naturally, according to the long-nosed man, their progress getting the armoire out took less time than all of their attempts at getting it in, and for that he just cursed Murphy’s Law with yet another wail of pseudo-exhaustion. So, once the thing was back out onto the sidewalk, balanced carefully on the steps thanks to the way Zoro leaned against it, Franky and Usopp were pulling from without. Opposite of the way they’d been working at the wardrobe for an hour.

“Hey.” Zoro raised the eyebrow over his good eye, “at least it’s not raining.”

“SHHHHHH!!!!” Usopp batted his hands at the other. “Don’t say that! It will!!”

“All I know is the sun don’t shine, and the rain refused to fall. And you don’t seem to hear me when I call.” Brook’s soft tenor filtered through the echo in the hallway.

Franky grinned at Zoro, and both of them supplied the next line, “Wind inside and the wind outside, tangled in the window blind.”

“Tell me why you treat me so unkind!” Usopp joined the others with a laugh, the song a bit more upbeat than normal, “Down where the sun don’t shine, lonely and I call your name. No place left to go, ain’t that a shame?”

The music broke the tension and drained the stress of the last couple of hours, and they laughed together for a bit at just how fitting the lyrics were to the current situation.
“C’mon, let’s get this fucker moved in! Ow!” Franky clapped his wrists together, capitalizing on the renewed energy.

After that it was a breeze. The armoire slid into the hallway straight on perfectly, and turning from the opposite direction, with Zoro and Brook inside the apartment and Usopp and Franky outside, proved to be the key to getting the expensive wardrobe into place.

While Zoro looked it over, Brook and Franky went back for the last of the green-head’s boxes, and Usopp carried what was left of the odds and ends in his truck down to the basement where Zoro would be sleeping.

A few seconds later he poked his head around the corner, “Hey, where do you want your—oh, something wrong?”

The bouncer was crouched down, peering at the door handle on the front of the chest, and running his hand over something. He grunted.

“Yeah. Found why it wouldn’t move.”

“Oh?”

“Look.” Zoro pointed, standing up.

The latch of the handle was skewed, bent and scratched along the wood so that it sat at an angle to how it was supposed to go. Usopp sucked his breath through his teeth and darted forward.

“Oh shit!”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t fix it right now, but Franky’s got a sander back at the Sunny. That handle’s gonna have to go through.” The darker man dropped down in between his friend and the furniture, opening the door to check the extent of the damage, “I could probably get one like it at the swap shop, but it’s touch and go as far as what Paulie’s got in stock. I’m heading out there tomorrow. Once I get it, it shouldn’t be… Zoro?”

He was staring at him a little shocked, “You can fix it?”

“Well… yeah. Probably. I mean it won’t be perfect, but it’ll be good as.”

Usopp raised an eyebrow as the tension drained from Zoro’s shoulders. He clapped the sharpshooter on the shoulder with a relieved laugh.

“What did you think? That you’d have to jury-rig it? Fuck, man, you know me and Franky wouldn’t leave you hanging like that!”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Just not used to being part of a team yet, I guess. Takes a bit.”

Popping back up to his feet with a grin that was a dead giveaway for the next words out of his mouth, Usopp leaned into the other’s arm, “Well, naturally not everyone can have ten thousand followers all depending on you to be there to get them out of any scrape they could ever get into! Have I ever told you about the time I rebuilt the entire city? By hand! I did! It was after the Agua Luna when I was five…”

It was a short time later when the other two guys came back with the last van-load of boxes and junk.
The pinnacle of that was the ornate sword stand—the only other piece of furniture the bouncer simply couldn’t bear to leave. It held his single most precious possessions: a set of three, authentic, Japanese katana. He had four, technically, but the last was not put on display. Ever. To do so would insult the White Lady in the worst way imaginable.

Zoro spent the better part of another hour inspecting them to insure all four were safe and intact. He trusted Franky, and especially Brook, who had his own passion for sword work, but these were his children, his partners, an extension of his body. Even if he couldn’t wear them all the time in public, or use them in competition, it didn’t change the fact that Zoro alone held the title of Master of the Santoryu Style; handed down from his sensei just before the man had returned to Tibet a year ago.

Satisfied that they’d been transported safely, he ran through a short kata series with each of them, starting with Yubashiri. The oldest blade in his set, her tsuka was loose, and her edge was long past the point of being able to be sharpened. Her wrapping was newer than her blade, and the ebony of her hilt could only be polished to a dull glow, instead of the regal black it had once been. She could no longer handle cutting anything except air, but that was fine. Zoro took her out regularly to let her breathe and feel the power of his art, even if she would never taste the sweet thrill of victory ever again. She had been both the first blade given to him by Sensei Mihawk, and the last. Her steady spirit, tempered by centuries of experience, was a perfect teaching tool for a young, over-enthusiastic, swordsman, and her retirement had been his reward when, after nearly a decade of study under the raptor-like man, Zoro had finally defeated him.

Next came Sandai Kitetsu, his problem child. The sword was cursed, the merchant had said, but he and she had an understanding. They had flabbergasted the sword-seller in their first meeting—Zoro having thrown her into the air, daring her to cut him. Never in their time together had the Crimson Valkyrie ever tasted his blood, but for once, when he had given it to her freely. In exchange, she was only made to defer to her older sister, as the Ebony Matron had seen more battle and earned her respect. As such, the merchant hadn’t been comfortable taking money for her. Secretly, they both believed he was as happy to be rid of her as she was to have found a master that would match her wild ambition. The flames along the second daughter’s edge still burned bright and true as the day she’d been forged, and her strike was swift and deadly through the air in the swordsman’s hand. With her kata were a dance, hard and fierce, demanding the attention of all who would watch, the blade herself drawing people in with an ethereal song as her steel vibrated with the remembered thrill of violence.

It took longer to change to Shusui, because her elder sister’s thirst for blood insisted on full stance and follow through. But the Flower Princess, with the peace symbols on her scabbard, was patient and understanding, in spite of the heavy, foreboding attitude her dark-steel blade implied. She was happy to jump to her master’s hand when he drew her from her sheath. She flowed like water over rounded stones, an extension of his arm rivaled only by the White Lady. Where the middle child was hard and cold, the youngest sister was sweet and warm. She followed her master’s design with absolute confidence that he knew what he was doing. She had been a gift from Sensei Ryuma before his death, bequeathed to Zoro on the condition that he surpass Sensei Mihawk before the hard man returned to Tibet, as he had been planning when Ryuma fell ill. It had been a hard time for the teenaged swordsman, but he had succeeded. And he credited most of his emotional stability to the pacifist sword.

Finally, because she was owed the most of his time, his soul mate, the one who had been with him since he was a child himself swinging bokkan around like a maniac in his sensei’s garden, Wado Ichimonji. The White Lady. She had belonged to the only person he considered family beyond his sensei. More like a sister than any other person ever had been, Kuina was Zoro’s rival, his inspiration, his drive for perfection, his goal, and he believed with every ounce of his heart that she lived on in the ivory blade. Sensei Koshiro, her father, had been the first stable adult in Zoro’s young
life, and the green-head took their separation the hardest.

When Kuina died, Koshiro could no longer bear to continue living in Four Blues City. Knowing how difficult it was going to be for Zoro, he gave the young boy Kuina’s sword, which had been handed down through the sensei’s family for generations, never aging, never dull, and never weakened. It was as good as saying that Koshiro had adopted him. But he still left, he had to, and it broke Zoro’s heart far more than even Kuina’s death itself. Abandoned and lost, the foster child didn’t touch his swords for four years, and in the end, it had been Sensei Ryuma, Sensei Mihawk’s partner, that had challenged him to stand up! Move forward!

To this day Zoro could still hear the elderly man’s words, reverberating in his ears, "Abandon your fear. Look forward. Move forward and never stop. You'll age if you pull back. You'll die if you hesitate."

When he finished, the swordsman-turned-bouncer sheathed Wado, and tucked her under their new bed, safe and secure where he could reach her should anyone enter their home unbidden. He gave the whole area a once over, nodding in acceptance of the energies in the place. Then he climbed the stairs two at a time to return to where the others were milling about in the hallway outside of Brook’s door.

His reappearance sparked a discussion about the possibility of getting food delivered when the front door to the building opened with a grunt and a bang. Standing, framed in bright sunlight like some kind of Heavenly being, was the Sunny’s brand new cook, his hair fluffed up from the wind, and his cheeks rosy with exertion. He had a full armload of grocery bags, two paper tucked into his chest and at least three plastic hanging from each elbow. For a second he looked stunned to see them. Then his face clouded as his eyes landed on Zoro under his fringe.

"Oh no. No no no. You are not. Brook, tell me he's not. It's bad enough I gotta stare at your ugly mug all day at work, I'm not putting up with running into it in the laundry room when I'm off!" He glanced pleadingly at the eldest of them.

The older man smiled and shrugged. "Sorry, Sanji, but I'm afraid so, yohohoho!"

Zoro snorted. "Hardly. Y'all know where I spend my time when at home and it certainly isn't doing laundry." He migrated to the side of the hall, as the others were doing, to clear a path, then after a second (and three very pointed looks) he paused and swallowed. "Uhm. Want me to carry some of those bags? You oughta have at least one hand free to hold the stair rail."

The offer was awkward as hell, but hey, he tried!

Sanji glared at them all, making Usopp shiver and wince. Making his way past them, he sniffed. The very idea of letting the mossbrain help him made his skin crawl. What did he think? That Sanji was too weak to handle groceries?! Didn't he have any clue?! The cook had grown up with this sort of hauling. First on the Baratie and then with his brother when he’d first moved away from home! And walking up a gangplank with armloads of precious groceries was a hell of a lot more dangerous than a few flights of stairs! The steps weren't moving!!

He even had the dexterity to ‘accidentally’ press Zoro into the wall as he started to climb. He called back, tone dripping with how ridiculous the idea sounded.

"If I'd wanted my meat bruised I'd have bought it that way, shitty Marimo."

"Fine! Just fuckin’ excu—"
He was elbowed sharply by the sniper, right in the healing stitches, and had to gasp a second before glaring back at them. He got three hands pointing him upstairs and the demand was clear: APOLOGIZE. NOW. He bared his teeth, but turned and started climbing the stairs after him.

"Wait the fu—wait up, cook!"

Great, now Zoro was following him. The grasshead would know which apartment was his! Well, he supposed it couldn't be helped if the asshole was living there now. He just didn't have the time to deal with his bullshit at the moment. He had a dinner to fix! He was expecting someone!! So he didn't answer, just kept climbing. Four flights up, the second apartment on the fourth floor, and the only one in the entire building that still had the original crown molding around the frame.

Juggling his keys was a difficult task but one that he managed well enough. He was just shutting the door when the Marimo ascended the last steps.

"I said wait a goddamn second you idiot cook!" Frustrated from the climb, and being ignored, Zoro lunged forward to hold the door open. "How the fuck am I supposed to apologize properly if you won't stand still for two goddamn seconds?!!"

"You know how to apologize? That's rich." Sanji scowled, but didn't push on the door, merely holding it so the bouncer couldn't get it any further open. He didn't want him to see inside, "I'd like to see you attempt, but I don't have time right now. Save it."

"Honestly? You don't have time for 'I'm sorry for being an ass and I don't know what I said but I'm sorry'? Really?!?" Teeth flashed and green brows furrowed. Was this just a way to keep from accepting his apology? He didn't even know for sure what he had said!

Just as the blond opened his mouth to retort, a sound came from inside his apartment. The distinctive two-toned ring of a doorbell—DINGDONG!—and the cook froze, his knuckles white on the door. Whatever easy sarcasm he'd had on his tongue died. He glanced quickly around, first over his shoulder, presumably at his phone, and then around the hall beyond Zoro like he was looking for something.

Or someone.

Fixing his gaze back on the Marimo, he shook his head, harder than necessary, his hair flopping. "No. I don't. You need to go. I'm busy."

Zoro's good eye flicked across Sanji's features; tight cornered mouth, white knuckles, back up to the eyes where there was suddenly an emotion he didn't want to acknowledge lurking. He nodded stiffly, teeth digging into his bottom lip to halt the immediate reaction. Forcing himself to nod again, he spoke—though not the words he wanted to say.

"Alright. Another time."

The words themselves were clipped, though it took several more seconds before he removed his hand from the door and took a single step back. He knew that sort of look. From guarded to tense in an instant, like Sanji knew danger was coming. Whatever was going on was not right here. It wasn't his business, he told himself; he wasn't going to stick around to make it his business. It was clear enough that the blond wanted to keep it to himself, and as much as he wanted to bang on the door with one fist he was going to stick to that. He was not going to make it his business. He was not!

Even IF the insistence on it and painfully clenched jaw was all that kept him moving towards the stairs instead of going back for the door.
It slammed shut like the reverberation of a gunshot, final and absolute. Whatever was going on with the cook, he was intent on keeping everyone else out. And it was clearly loud enough to be heard all the way down the stairwell if Usopp's confusion was any indication.

He looked up to Zoro as the green-head made his way down the last flight. "That didn't sound like it went well."

The bouncer shook his head. "No... there's something else. He's... I dunno. Not my business, but whatever it was made him slam the door so hard, wasn't me," he said tense and unsettled, looking back up the stairs. "...I'm goin' to bed."

With that abrupt statement, he slipped down the basement steps, taking them two at a time as his hand tightened around an invisible hilt.

"Told you there was something going on yesterday." The sharp-eyed man crossed his arms over his chest and frowned up the stairs, "And I don't like it."

"Ain't our problem, bro. Cook-bro's got a right to his privacy just the same as the rest of us. Anybody what can fight with Zor-bro like that's got a past he don't like sharin'. And you know it." Franky looked down at the others over his sunglasses, the message to think about their own sordid issues clear in his long-lashed eyes.

In the basement, there came the sound of something being hit, repeatedly and hard. Good thing Franky had used his strongest chain to hoist the heavy bag from the ceiling. Still, the sound was loud and angry as it echoed in his ears and up the steps.

Those eyes... the look in them... Zoro knew they were going to haunt him, he knew it down deep in his gut, which churned with rage and sadness for the man he barely knew. But that LOOK... He slammed his knuckles in harder and bared his teeth.

Brook winced as he felt the floor beneath them shudder, "Perhaps we should give Zoro-san some privacy. Grab some food to bring back instead."

"And supports for the building." Franky muttered; his eyebrows climbed nearly to his electric blue hair.

Usopp nodded, following the older two out onto the street again with just another look over his shoulder. Something was going on. Something Zoro understood, at least insofar as it had made him back off from confronting Sanji. And the cook? True, they didn't really know him, but there was just an off quality to the way he'd reacted just now. The part-time sharpshooter couldn't put his finger on it, but he had a crawling sensation like the feeling of a scope on the back of his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Song: So Many Roads by Grateful Dead

Extra kudos to anybody that gets to reference I made with Ryuma's advice for Zoro. ^_^
8 October - Part 1

Chapter Summary

Sanji's first Painting Day, and Law!! That is entirely too extravagant for a second date!!!

Chapter Notes

Didn't want to sit on this until the weekend, so merry early Yule to you, minna!!! As usual, Silva-love, is here as Law, and Jenna returns as Ace. Beta-read by the wonderful Ember.

There's some implied stuff here, so folks who are a bit... squeamish about darker relationships should mind the tags as they come up in a couple of chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Back at the Sunny, Wednesday morning, the Baratie long pulled out of port taking That Person with them, Sanji had finally relaxed after three very intense days. He actually surprised himself, the tension he’d been carrying since Sunday seemed to be drained from his body, and all but for his side where his ribs were still bruised, he was virtually ache free. Well... mostly. He could ignore it. Bruises tended to be slow-healing type things after all. He figured that probably had something to do with how he felt as he moved about the kitchen whipping together breakfast for dinner.

Already he had a buffet lined up on the bar so that people could come and go as they pleased. Nami had warned him that Wednesdays were Painting Days, whatever that meant, and that they weren't open to the public. So, that meant a sit-down dinner with the crew before the public descended on them was literally off the table. Thus he had a mountain of pancakes, bacon, sausage, friend potatoes, and at current moment he was scrambling enough eggs to feed an army platoon. Or at least one Luffy.

What he didn't realize, in the hustle and bustle of the early afternoon, was that he was humming, mumbling words lightly under his breath. "Je ne sais, ne sais, ne sais pas pourquoi on s'aime comme ça, la seine et moi..."

Ace peeked into the kitchen, muffling a yawn with his hand and then practically pranced inside. The new guy was distracted by his cooking and... singing? Nice. He was pretty up close too. Very, very nice. Ace grinned, opening the fridge door, snagging up an energy drink and then moved to stand behind their new cook and bartender. That close he could actually make out the words, even if they weren’t strictly loud enough to be understood.

"Ooooh you're French? Lu never told me that!"

"AHH!"

The blond jumped nearly three feet, egg flying out of the pan for a moment. He had just enough wits about him to hold out a plate to catch the flying breakfast, before turning back around to the stranger.
He muttered something and exhaled slowly.

"Yeah. My family is entirely French, as far as I know. Maman, that is, my mother taught me both languages. And you are?"

"Mm." Ace hummed in understanding and opened the can, taking a small sip. He held out his free hand to the blond, and bangles of citrine and sunstone jingled together against a suspended lavender quartz pendant wrapped around his wrist. "Portgas D. Ace. Sanji, yeah? Pleasure to meet ya!"

The cook shook it, with a nod and a small laugh. "I guess you're the other one I'm supposed to guard my fridge against? The last of the infamous D brothers?"

Ace grinned, squeezing the hand before releasing it. "That'd be me, though honestly I'm nowhere near as bad as Lulu is. Honest."

"Pardon my rudeness, but oh thank God! I don't think I could handle more than one of him!" Sanji laughed harder, going back to his eggs to mound them high on the plate he'd used just a moment ago to catch the escaped bits.

"He is a rather excessive eater." Ace leaned back against a counter, sipping slowly at the drink and fighting another yawn. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I can eat a lot, but nowhere NEAR as much as him."

"Heh. Then I guess I'm gonna become your new favorite person. I already know I'm Luffy's."

"Of course you are, you can cook." Ace snickered.

"Oh I'm not just a cook, Ace-chan," Sanji teased, snagging a piece of bacon with a fork and holding it out for the artist to taste, "I'm the cook."

"Oh?"

The brunet raised an eyebrow and leaned in to take the bacon into his mouth, slid it off the fork, and chewed on it thoughtfully. He let out a small delighted sound.

"Mmmm, yes... very, very nice, Sanji-kun!" He pulled back with a grin. "But that's just bacon. I've had a looooot of bacon in my life, and admittedly while it is delicious, it's nothing special."

"Is that so?" There was an air of affected insult about the blond, and he gestured to the bar, "Then by all means, try what you'd like. I stand behind my food."

Ace pushed himself up from the counter and made his way over to the bar. He placed down his drink and snatched up a plate and some utensils to pick and choose from it all.

"Don't mind if I do~! Haven't eaten since lunch yesterday..."

Something made a high pitched whine and it took a moment to realize that something was the cook. His eyes wide, though only one was visible, his face pale, and a storm of confusion reigned all over his expression.

"Good heavens, WHY?!"

Looking up from the plate of sausages he was eyeing, Ace blinked at the cook in confusion. He tilted his head, the light glinted on a red tiger’s eye shaped like a spade hanging from his ear. "Something the matter?"
"Y-you can't just not eat! It's not..."

He bit his tongue. Sanji had no right to judge. He didn't know a thing about the other man, and frankly, he wasn't a saint about it either. If he didn't snag bites from what he was cooking as he went, he simply didn't eat all day long.

He seemed a little green at that, "Nevermind. I just... I'm not used to people taking it so casually."

Ace blinked again.

"Aaaah... um." He grinned sheepishly and stabbed a sausage with his fork and dumped it on the plate. "'S not like I didn't eat deliberately, I don't skip meals if I can help it. Nothing to worry about. Was just sleepin'."

"Oh." And then things started to click a little, taking in the brunet's appearance, "Oh! You're the painter! The one that does the murals, right?"

"Yep, that's me." Plate now piled high with different foods, Ace made his way back to his spot at the counter. "Paint 'em whenever I can on Wednesday's, since it's basically a free day for everyone."

"Hmm." Sanji tapped his chin thoughtfully, "I think maybe everyone has a free day because you paint. I haven't been here long, but even I can see the way Miss Nami manipulates everything. Crafty and beautiful. It's a good thing she's got a heart of gold, or I'd be worried for everyone's safety."

The artist tilted his head in the other direction, which revealed a duplicate spade in the other ear. "Huh. Never actually thought about that before. But now that you mention it, it wouldn't surprise me... Nami can be terrifying..."

He took a bite of the sausage and let out a hum of approval, and then tried some of the fried potato.

"An' I gotta say, Sanji-kun, you do cook really well~"

The cook allowed himself to preen a little. It always felt good to have someone appreciate his food. It felt even better when the someone was a freckled cutie in a jumper two sizes too big and splattered with paint. Call him a sucker, but the blond had a thing for the off-the-shoulder, peek-a-boo singlet look. And the legs... Sanji had good legs, they were one of his favorite features, but he couldn't pull off tights like that. Not and retain his masculinity. He let his eyes wander for a second, dancing happily from labret piercing to ear studs to the top of a bold letter A tattooed on his left shoulder, and shook his head, pretending to be responding to the artist's comment.

"This is just simple fare. Something to warm the belly and energize the body for whatever work the day, or in this case night, has to offer."

"Then I can't wait to taste something that's 'not so simple'."

Ace grinned and then started to scarf down the food in a similar fashion that Luffy did. And it was a wonder that he didn't choke. Soon, the plate was clean, and he once again had his drink in hand, sipping at it in content.

Sanji chuckled. "You really are Luffy's brother." Something about the bob of the brunet's Adam's apple and the curve of his neck caught in the cook's mind though. He frowned briefly, "Though... I gotta ask... you're not actually related right?"

"Hmm?" Ace looked at the blond and laughed, before making his way over to the sink to deposit his dirty dishes. "Not really... well... we're cousins. Grew up together."
"There aren't any... other leggy brunets with fantastic asses and adorable freckles hanging around are there?"

"Mmmm nope. That'd just be me." Ace licked his lips with a sassy smirk, hands on his hips in a way that betrayed hidden piercings under his sweater. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, see I saw this really hot kiss the other day, and I was pretty sure it was Luffy getting kissed, but y'know... I didn't exactly stick around long enough to really find out too much." The blond smirked back, his nerves about the whole thing hidden deep below his casual at-work mask of two parts flirt, one part ego.

The artist frowned for a moment, thinking, before his expression brightened.

"Ah! When Lu was training? Yeah, that was me, guilty as charged." he sipped at the can, and made a face as he discovered it was almost empty. "Anyway, what about it?" He raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. "...Something wrong with it?"

Sanji shook his head.

"Unconventional. I don't think I'd be able to do it, growing up with somebody like that and then taking it that way... eh, the guys I did grow up with were just disgusting enough to turn me completely off of them! But hey, it's not like there's any worry for birth defects or whatever, cuz you're both... well, I assume you're both... Ah fuck."

Where had his confidence gone??

"I'm babbling. I always babble when I'm nervous. Sorry."

Why was his mask slipping?! Shit! He could feel it, the way he wanted to be genuine with the freckled brunet. Maybe it was an effect of the last couple of days, having to hide things from That Person all the time.

"No, there's nothing wrong with it. Not to me. I'd just worry about what other people think. I mean, not that I'm not... er... That didn't come out right."

Ace stared at him for a good, long moment, his face blank. He swished the remaining liquid around in the can, before throwing his head back and downing it. After he placed the empty can down on the counter he turned back to Sanji with a grin.

"Hey, no worries! Sorry 'bout that. If it was me that made you nervous that is. I get where you're coming from too, so just relax." He moved over to the fridge and pulled out another can. "I just get a little defensive sometimes. Like you said, I worry about what other people'd think too. It's not like we keep our relationship a secret, but we don't really broadcast it either. But since you're cool with it, really, nothin' to worry about."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. It's not my business. I was curious, though that's no excuse. I should've just... let's go back to flirting and pretending that I'm not a complete and total spazz, y—!"

Ace laughed, and leaned in and silenced him with a kiss—just enough to take him by surprise. With a small flick of his tongue across the cook's lips, Ace pulled back with a snicker.

"Like I said, nothin' to worry about, Sanji-kun."

"Nnnngh..."
The blond melted a little. Yup, was definitely a reaction from the weekend. He was still all geared up from seeing That Person he'd forgotten he didn't have to walk on eggshells with everybody else. As such his next response was both too soft, and too high, compared to his normal tone, "...'kay."

"Great then." Calmly, Ace opened his new can and took a sip. "Need any help in here? For... anything?"

"Yeah, I... no, I'm..." The cook shook himself a little, color on his cheeks, and stepped back, pretending to check that the stove was off completely, and gathering little tidbits of things he really didn't need to do. "I'm fine. Thank you. I'm glad you liked dinner. It-It was nice meeting you."

Ace's smile softened and he nodded. "Alright then. Best start painting now before the shakes come on..." He stepped closer to Sanji again and kissed his cheek. "Thank you very much for the food, Sanji-kun. It was delicious."

With that, he turned and exited the kitchen, a bounce in his step.

Sanji watched him go, feeling a bit colder than before now that the bright brunet wasn't filling the room with his personality, and his hand drifted to his cheek absently. "Yeah..."

The feeling didn't last long because just as soon as the sexy artist was out of his sight Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper descended on the bar, having only just then come in from the back lot. The cook assumed from the state of their clothes that they'd been sparring, though he had no idea how Usopp, with his skinny build and cowardly attitudes, could hold his own against the Rubberman, let alone little Chopper.

"Oi! Assholes! Go wash your filthy mugs before you even lay a finger on the food!!"

He loomed over them and for a split second it looked like they were going to listen, but then Luffy, trying to be sneaky, inched his hand towards the plate of bacon. Sanji moved faster than all except Zoro had seen before. One second the captain was disobeying orders, the next he was picking himself up off the floor, having crashed through a table in the process.

Both Usopp and Chopper screamed. Then Nami joined them.

"Sanji's trying to kill us!!"

"My table!!"

This drew the attention of the other girls, as well as Sabo and Franky, who had been messing around with the sound booth only a minute before. Even Zoro looked up from his nap against the steps of the stage. Tension mounted as everyone took in what had happened and began to turn to the suddenly popular cook. One by one they started to draw a not altogether wrong conclusion but just as the furious manager was about to round on Sanji something cut her off.

"Shishishishishi!!!!"

Luffy was laughing.

A hand on his head to make sure he still had his hat, the Rubberman picked himself up off the floor and out of the splinters of table to reveal a grin so wide it made his whole face look stretched out.

"Now that's more like it!" He clapped the cook on the shoulder and headed off to the bathroom to wash up, subtly fixing his necklace.
Sanji turned to Nami, who was the only one still watching him. “I-I-I… Miss N-Nami, I can explain I-I-I… it’s…”

She held up a hand, bangles jingling, and shook her head, clearing her face with a deep inhale.

“I’ll pay for the damages, if… if you want.” He tried again.

“Luffy said it was fine, then it’s fine. This isn’t the first time someone’s broken something inside. How do you think the ‘No Fighting Inside’ rule came into existence, if not for things like this.” She sighed again, making her way to the broom closet. “BROOK!! Come give me a hand with the table!”

“Yo ho ho ho! On my way, Nami-san! Perhaps this time you’ll be gracious enough to let me see your panties after?!” The hippie chortled, dancing off the stage with a graceful leap—

Right into the broomstick in the manager’s hand.

“NOT ON YOUR LIFE!”

Whatever response Brook had for her, Sanji didn’t hear. He’d already ducked back into the kitchen, heat on his face, and the feeling that someone was watching him closely. He needed to get out of sight. Hide. Get away. Lose himself in his cooking and forget about the ball of anxiety churning in his gut. Maybe a cigarette would help? No, he’d probably anger the beautiful manager further if he stepped outside now. It was better that he just… do what? The food was cooked. Ah! Wash dishes, and it was tucked around behind the wall that had the shelves of alcohol on display for the patrons too. Perfect!

Outside in the dining room, Zoro, Robin, and Ace exchanged a look.

Hours and about two dozen cans of paint later, Sanji wrapped his arms around himself more tightly, marching quickly towards Hack’s Café. He was supposed to have met Law almost twenty minutes ago, but Luffy, chasing Chopper because the little doctor-to-be had the last of the cotton candy treats Sanji’d made, had tripped over Ace’s ladder, sending the entire bucket of bright blue paint cascading over one rather jumpy and very unaware cook.

The captain had apologized, though Sanji doubted his sincerity, and Nami assured him that damages to his suit would be taken care of by Luffy. Whether that meant the Rubberman would be buying him new clothing, or the money would be added to his paycheck, or they were simply going to clean the one they’d damaged? Sanji didn’t know. All he did know was that the stunning manager had sent him home without his suit coat. Fortunately, Ace loaned him a jacket, but it wasn’t very warm, and it was covered in glitter and sequins. If he hadn’t been shivering, his skin would have been crawling.

In any case, all of that meant he had to go home and change before he could meet up with Law, and since he couldn’t wear his favorite binder because of the bruises on his ribs, it meant layering more intelligently.

Truth be told he didn’t really want to go out, but he’d promised the handsome surgeon another cup of coffee on Monday night via text message. That Person hadn’t been happy about that. Which meant Sanji was all the more determined to go through with it, no matter how he felt at the moment.

Jogging the last block, the blond gave Sabo a wave before ducking inside to give a look around.

Law was seated at one of the tables near the wall, his hat hung with his jacket on the back of the
chair as he worked on a mess of papers, a pair of thin-framed glasses on the end of his nose and his legs crossed under the table as his pen moved rapidly over the papers. Scattered around him was the real indicator of how long he'd been here; five empty espresso cups stood stacked neatly, lids stuffed inside the cups, next to three much larger mixed coffee cups. From the foam still clinging to the rim of one and the thick smell of chocolate near his table, they had been some sort of mocha. He'd arrived early so as to make up for being late last time and had been there almost forty five minutes.

The line of his back seemed longer, the knobs of his spine visible through his shirt as he practically crouched over the table to get his face closer to... whatever he was working on. His hair was also a mess, rather thrown about even worse than the hat hair Sanji had seen last time, and it became apparent why exactly that was when he lifted his right hand from the papers to shove it into the fluffed black mass and massage his scalp, making it tangle further.

From the way he was camped out, it seemed he was prepared to wait at least an hour or more for his date to arrive. Of course, being an ER doctor made one much more aware how easy it was to fall out of time and wind up running quite late.

The blond didn't even look at the counter as he crossed the shop, "I am so sorry! Luffy spilled the paint, and then Nami tried to mop it up, and I barely got out of there with my shirt on let alone intact to come here, so I had to go home, and I really hope you haven't been waiting that long."

He wasn't blind, he could tell how long it'd been, but it was polite to say that, to pretend that he didn't know. He was also careful not to look at the papers, certain that they were most likely carry over from his shift at the hospital, and though Sanji wasn't entirely confident on what exactly was legal about reading someone else's medical files, he knew on a personal level that they often contained things he most certainly wouldn't want anyone else to find out about. So he turned such that Law would have a chance to gather up the sensitive ones while he unwound a scarf from under his hoodie, and draped both layers over the back of his chair.

Underneath he had a long sleeved tee-shirt that was baggy on his skinny frame, and layered over with a second slightly tighter tee with his favorite band's logo across the front. Even if the shadows hadn't given him away, the way he hunched his shoulders did; he was being good and not wearing his binder. Or anything actually. It felt weird, but he'd rather deal with being on edge from people he didn't know than risk a lecture about how he was going to aggravate his bruising.

Unfortunately what he didn't notice was that turning like that revealed several new dark spots. Things the average person wouldn't recognize, but being a medical professional, the brunet knew how to judge the age of a bruise just from coloration alone. And the line of the blond's jaw, a circle on his wrist, and something that looked suspiciously like a bite mark just above his collar were all less than four days old.

Law quietly filed that information away, but he had no proof; not even a suspicion to go on that it wasn't merely a bit of rough play. Or another fight with Zoro. Or Luffy not watching his strength as he hauled the newest Nakama around. He had absolutely no proof of any of it and no basis for suspicion, though he was suspicious as he began piling the anatomical sketches he'd been reviewing together to put in his bag. It wasn't exactly sensitive information, mostly just review he liked to indulge in to keep his mind sharp, but he found most people were uncomfortable with the graphic nature.

"Ah, it hasn't been long at all, no worries," was what he actually said as he tucked the sketches away. "And there is almost always something that goes wrong on Painting Day. If one outfit doesn't get completely ruined then Ace has had one hell of a bad day and Luffy was probably out sick."

He leaned back and uncrossed his legs under the table to clear the space between them for Sanji to
get some coffee if he wanted it, or some pastry or the like.

"Does that actually happen? Luffy getting sick I mean." The cook laughed, taking his seat gratefully. As soon as he was off his feet he let out a half-squashed groan, and he reached down to rub the back of one calf. "I swear that boy is like a living hurricane. Or a tornado? I'm fairly certain I still have bacon stuck to the ceiling."

"To be honest, he doesn't really get sick, thankfully. And yes, he is a living tornado and you probably do have bacon on the ceiling, but I can promise it'll be gone by morning," Law grinned a bit as he drained the last of his current drink and set the cup aside.

"Good, at least that way it isn't wasted." The doctor was good for him; Sanji could feel the left over tension leaving his shoulders. A romantic interest that already knew the details under his clothes? It made the flirting thing so much easier. "I hate to see good food in the trash. Especially my food! And I'm not trying to sound egotistical here, but I make damn good food."

"Oh I know. I've had Luffy telling me every spare moment he has about how good your food is," he laughed softly. "He's been telling everyone he knows... everyone that will listen, and even some strangers who seemed rather alarmed at suddenly being screamed at that 'Sanji makes the best food in the worlddddd'."

His grin stretched wider on one side than the other as he elongated the word to convey the enthusiasm with which Luffy proclaimed his skill.

"Oh God." Sanji covered his mouth with his hand, laughing and grinning. "That would explain the text my brother sent me this morning."

"Oh dear me, what did he hear? I'm almost afraid to ask."

"He said one of his customers told him to hire me because a... hang on, I'll read it to you."

Snagging the phone out of his hoodie pocket unwittingly revealed another of those bite marks, this time on the other side, and the skin had clearly been broken in a few places because there was a ring of slight scabbing in the center of the bruise.

But the blond seemed not to notice as he pulled up the message, "He says, 'Prince, heard you were making an impression at your new place. Being told to hire you because a strange bouncy man in a straw hat keeps complimenting your food. Something you need to share?'"

Law added that to his mental catalogue even as he burst out laughing. "That's exactly what he's doing. I almost feel sorry for your brother, he's going to get a lot of that. However, do warn him not to feed Luffy under any circumstances, otherwise it'll be his turn next."

"Oh, trust me, Alex already knows about Luffy." Sanji shook his head fondly, "It's because of Luffy the place is even doing as well as it is. He goes there after every match when he's in town."

"Oh! Your brother is at Rain Dinners? Be careful, or Luffy might just adopt you to get access to excellent food. Not that he hasn't already adopted you, but much moreso." The brunet realized his cup was empty only when he tried to take another drink, and blinked down at the little smears of chocolate on the bottom. "Did you want anything to drink? I appear to need a refill."

"I would kill for a caramel mocha that I don't have to fix myself."

"Soy or almond milk, yes?"
He remembered from the last time. He was a doctor, after all, and assuming an allergy of some sort, had added it to the growing 'file' in his head about the handsome blond.

"Yeah, that's probably smart." The cook blushed lightly, and internally blinked at himself because he hadn't even been thinking about it. He'd been wrapped up in the conversation.

Law smiled again and nodded, pacing up to the counter.

"Koala, I have to impose on your excellent coffee-making skills yet again," he began, the edges of his eyes crinkling in a grin, "I simply must throw myself on your mercy, I cannot live without another of your large mochas, and Sanji is in need of a caramel mocha with soy and almond milk. Please," he added on the end with the best begging eyes he could make. He had, after all, bothered her almost ten times in less than an hour for more coffee.

The barista laughed merrily, "Anything for my two favorite workaholics!" She brought the order over in almost half the time, having started Sanji's the moment he walked in the door, and gave Law a winning smile, "Why if it weren't for your caffeine addictions, I might just be out of business."

The brunet chuckled, his lip ring glinting when it pulled to the side. He was only wearing one today, instead of both because he'd lost the end to the other one this morning and still hadn't found it.

"Ah, but it is my pleasure to support your excellent skill. Also, how bad is my tab? I know I forgot to pay at least three times over the last couple weeks."

"Not too bad until tonight. If you want I'll take it out on the lay-about on the curb." She winked, knowing he was going to pay, but wanting to tease Sabo for stalking the couple.

He looked out at said 'lay-about' and his eyes danced. "As tempting as that is, I'd better settle up myself. Otherwise he's likely to tattle on me and I'll wake up painted green. Or purple. Or blue. Again. I don't think I ever got all the blue paint out of my hat the last time."

"That's just because he thinks you wear too much black. Picking on Sabo is an excuse to give in to the urge." The register dinged with the printout for Law to sign. "Are you covering Sanji's too?"

"Of course. I asked him out for coffee, not the other way 'round. He can pay next time, presuming there is a next time," he chuckled gently. "Besides, if I give him a 'gift' of the coffee, maybe it won't be such a large shock when I give him the present I already got him for today."

Koala shook her head, adding the caramel mocha, "Someday, Mr. Crow, your shinies are going to come back to bite you in the rear. If he kicks you, I am not picking you up off the floor."

"If he kicks me I better pick myself up off the floor, otherwise Daddy didn't teach me a damn thing," he replied simply as he picked them both up in his hands after handing over the cash to cover his tab and headed back to the table.

He couldn't even dispute the 'crow' or 'shinies' comment. It was all too accurate really.

Sanji looked up from his phone like Law was a godsend, pouncing on the drink as soon as the darker man handed it to him. The first drink was accompanied by a moan that really had no place being legal in public, his eyes closed and phone forgotten on the table. It vibrated twice, but he didn't even notice, too enthralled with his mocha.

The surgeon chuckled as he sat down and sipped his own, just luxuriating in Sanji's obvious enjoyment. He used the hand in his pocket to carefully adjust his pants before pulling the small velvet box out and turning it in his hands.
"Hmmmm." The blond melted, and sighed happily, then all at once said, with an embarrassed chuckle, "Yes. By the way. About Rain Dinners and Alex. I hadn't answered you before. Too focused on coffee."

"Oh, don't worry about it. It happens," Law replied easily, smiling again.

A muscle in his cheek twinged and he realized he probably hadn't smiled this much in such a short time span since he'd first dated Luffy and Ace and Sabo. Not that he didn't smile while with them, but that giddy first-couple-dates energy that made smiles come easier was gone from the comfortable, loving relationships he already had. There really wasn't anything quite like New Relationship Energy.

"But yeah, have you been there? You said you're Luffy's league official doctor." With both hands wrapped around his cup, Sanji tucked his feet up on the rung of the chair, pointedly ignoring the phone as it vibrated again.

"Once or twice. My hospital shifts don't leave as much time as I'd like for leisure dinners, not even for my friend's championship dinners. Or sponsor dinners. Or any of the myriad other occasions Luffy comes up with to eat there," Law crossed his ankles and sipped his own drink, fingers still idly spinning the box on the tabletop.

Like a flare, the thing caught the blond's attention, "What's that?"

"A present for you." A flick of his clever fingers and it slid across the table to gently bump the other's elbow. "I figured it wouldn't get in the way when you cook. I would have got you something much nicer but everyone I know says I way overdo it with my starting gifts so I tried to dial it back. Some."

"But we've only... ahh?"

Color lit up his cheeks as he opened it, and the moment his eyes landed on the charm was obvious. His mouth moved but no sound came out. Gaze darting from necklace to... were they boyfriends now? Was that what this meant? Sanji didn't know, but... wow... It was... wow... Was that real gold?! And... and... sapphires?! ON A SECOND DATE?! The cook's inner child squealed at the magnitude of the present, lifting it gently from the box so he could watch the light reflect from it suspended on his fingers. He brought it back down, thumb tracing the S-shaped charm tenderly.

"A-are you sure?!? It's... it... I... you... for me!?!" He actually looked like he might cry.

"I... yes, was I wrong? Will it get in the way when you cook? I wanted to get you a bracelet or ring, but I thought those might get in the way," he almost stammered, taken aback (as always) by the reaction. "And well, people with one allergy tend to have others, so I figured real gold was safest to prevent a possible skin reaction, but if it's no good—" Law was babbling, he knew he was, but he couldn't seem to help it.

Instead of trying to come up with some kind of answer, Sanji just surged across the table and kissed him, hard! What? It had worked when Ace did it to him that morning! And he really did like the necklace. He was perfect!

Yep, that worked, and Law settled into kissing him back easily, his hand coming up to cup his jaw gently.

A brush of thumb across brand-new bruise though made the blond wince, breaking their kiss. He pulled back trying to subtly shift the doctor's hand back up his cheek so that they could continue the
touching, but away from where it hurt on his jawbone. The tiny flare of pain shot the memory of
how he'd received said bruise through his mind. He desperately wanted to just continue the
impromptu making out, even if they were in danger of spilling their coffee.

Law paused, something was... off. Something was off in Sanji's posture. He was listing. Just a little,
anyone else would never have noticed. But Law was a doctor, and Sanji was... favoring. He pulled
back all at once, his eyes darting down to his side. Yes, his arm on that side had the elbow tucked in
protectively, not by that much, but he was clearly favoring his bruised ribs.

After several days, the pain should have abated enough he no longer needed to favor, and his eyes
found Sanji's again with concern and worry, and an undercurrent of anger. Of 'what did you do to
that rib'. Not the kind of anger that would have him lashing out, but the anger that said he knew he'd
been hurt further.

"Ah, sorry, I ran into my door this weekend. The mosshead is apparently living downstairs now, and
he sort of chased me up the steps, and I tried to close the door, but he's a wall of bricks, I swear to
God!" The cook's lip tucked up between his teeth, and his eyes immediately darted away to the floor.
"I must've... made it worse. I haven't been binding though! I promise! I didn't even wear... um..."

"Sanji." The doctor's voice held a quiet firmness that cut through the excuse. "Something has put
pressure on that rib. I can see you favoring it. The only reason it would still be hurt is if there was
pressure. If you didn't bind, you did something and running into a door wasn't it."

"Can... can we not do this? Here? At least..." The tone of his voice was small, defeated, "Can we
just... go back to me kissing you about the necklace?"

Law’s face softened.

"...Okay. I hear chefs are excellent with their tongues maybe if you distract me really well I'll forget
the question," he proposed in an attempt to lighten the air.

"I certainly try to be." Sanji ghosted a smile and shifted carefully around the table to recapture Law's
mouth.

Law let him lead, bringing his hand to his cheek where Sanji had put it earlier and breathing deeply
of his scent as he parted his lips in invitation.

After a few minutes of memorizing the surgeon's flavor, the cook pulled back again, this time smiling
and gloriously kiss-flushed. "We didn't quite make it that far last time, but... would you like to come
back to my place for a drink or something?"

His question wasn't at all subtle, but he hoped that Law could read the undertone of 'yes, we can
finish that conversation to a certain extent once we're in private'. He even allowed the curtain of his
bangs to fall back so that both sapphire blue eyes could look up into gold hopefully.

The brunet rubbed their noses together with a soft little croon in the back of his throat. "Yes. Why
don't we do that," he took his hand in his own and kissed him again, just a little peck. "Don't forget
your coffee," he added as he picked up the box, still open, to hand to Sanji.

"Yes. Coffee. Right."

Sanji's thoughts collided a bit as he took the box and stood quickly. There was a moment's pause
before he clasped the brilliant gold and sapphire S around his neck, just long enough that he could
look down and see it where it rested on his shirt. Then he covered it with his hoodie, wrapped the
scarf around his neck, and tucked the box into his pocket. Now that Law was aware of it, it was clear
that all of the blond's movements were favoring his right side. Including the somewhat muted dance
erover to Koala for a refill on his mocha.

Law observed it carefully, and noted he might want to get a shorter chain. That one hung a tad low.
Another note to add to the file as he waited patiently for Sanji's refill and ruefully accepted one of his
own. As it was his mouth was probably still going to taste like coffee and chocolate when he woke
up tomorrow.

The cook barely flirted with the pretty barista, causing her to glance worriedly at the doctor when
Sanji turned his back, and as they made their way out of the cafe, Sabo looked up from his acoustic,
ever breaking song, to watch them go, also touched with worry. It was likely the two had different
reasons, but then again, the vibrant gentle-cook had wormed his way into the middle of their group
with the same sort of delicacy and grace as he'd displayed in his food. Though it wasn't yet obvious
to him, the entire extended staff of the Thousand Sunny saw him as Nakama. Regardless that it had
been less than a week since he'd joined them.

Law tried to signal to Sabo that it was alright, but he wasn't sure he managed it as he hurried to keep
up with Sanji's quick stride. They had legs of comparable length, but Sanji was definitely much faster
on his feet, so it took real concentration to keep up.

It took a couple of blocks before the cook realized, "Oh! Sorry." He slowed his pace a little and gave
a little shrug, another sheepish smile, "Kitchens. You move fast or you get run over."

Law smiled back. "Indeed. Surgeons, on the other hand, have to be perfectly still; shifting at the
wrong moment unconsciously can be lethal. But thank you for slowing."

"You should've said something sooner. I'm forever outpacing my friends, either by being taller or
faster. I honestly don't notice I'm doing it anymore unless I'm specifically concentrating on keeping
pace with them."

The brunet sipped on his mocha and shrugged.

"I'm used to running to keep up, actually. I'm used to following after people with much longer legs," he said a little carefully as he offered his hand to Sanji's, thumbs barely brushing.

Sanji gladly wove their fingers together, and brought the inked knuckles up to his lips to press a
careful kiss to them. "Still. It's only considerate to walk with one's date." A twinkle of desire curled
in the corner of his mouth over Law's hand, "Especially when inviting someone up for the first time."

"I wouldn't call it the first… well, perhaps it's more accurate, considering you brought me to my
knees the last time we were out on a date," Law teased back, his own eyes having a low glitter of
their own. "Though I admit I like you at my side much better."

"That was entirely your own fault, Mr. Sexy Voice! You give me that kind of serenade, even if you
don't know how much of a romantic I am, and then expect me to just walk home?! That. Just.
Wasn't. Fair." The blond leaned into his arm, using his shoulder to take pressure off of his ribs, "You
can't blame me for needing to return the favor."

The other laughed gently. "Indeed. However I think I might have to return the favor to you, as well. I
admit not having gotten such excellent… and surprising… rewards for my singing in a long time and
I do desire to give you a similarly exciting experience."

"Hmm..." Sanji sounded coy. "We'll see." Then he danced away a little and up the three steps that
was the front of his apartment building, "This is me, fourth floor. Still wanna come up?"
"I am no stranger to stairs, I promise," Law replied, not letting go of his hand as he skipped up the stairs after him.

"There is an elevator but it's been broken for so long I don't think anybody even remembers it's there half the time. Mostly we use it as a message board for the landlord." The cook laughed, gesturing to the poster-littered corner of the entranceway beyond the door leading to the basement and mounted the first flight up.

Part of him hoped the marimo was listening, since the hallway echoed and noise was always filtered down to the laundry room, but he didn't poke too hard at that feeling. It almost felt like he wanted the green-haired bastard to be jealous! But that was just ridiculous!! If anything, the pain in his ass should have been pissed off that he was happy! See, asshole? Trans people can have healthy dates with sexy doctors too! He didn't have to be a 'lady' to get laid! Or be worth someone's time!

And money!

His hand drifted over the necklace with a fond smile at Law. He really didn't want to admit how long it had been since someone had given him something like that. Well, someone outside of his family. Not since That Person had first started taking interest in him when he was nineteen! Almost... he did some quick mental math... seven years ago! It floored him a little, and on the final flight of stairs, he leaned into Law's shoulder again. He had no idea what they'd been talking about, but he was so, so, so grateful that the doctor had thought him worthy of presents.

Law leaned back on him and kissed his cheek, unaware of Sanji's thoughts but watching him touch the necklace made the ball in his guts feel fuzzy and happy. He'd made someone happy with a present!

He hummed as they reached the landing of the fourth floor and dropped another kiss on him with a little squeeze of his hand.

Unlocking the door revealed a neat, well-lived-in home. It was clear the cook had been living here for a while. The first room had two large, plush couches framing a decent, if second-hand, television set. A few shelves around it had movies on them, and the entire runs of Iron Chef, Good Eats, and Hell's Kitchen. Beyond that was an island, bar stools on one side, and the kitchen... oh the kitchen! Stainless steel appliances, spotless pale blue counters, honey-tone maple cabinets of every shape and size, and a walk-in pantry that looked like it used to be the coat closet from where it was positioned between the front door and the kitchen. That certainly explained the row of hooks on the other side. If Sanji had plastered over the original door to the closet so he could access it from the other side, he would have had to put up something to cover the change on the side next to the entrance of the apartment. Bookshelves lined the other wall between the kitchen and a door that Law could only assume was the bedroom, or possibly bathroom? It was hard to tell, but there was only one other door, so it had to be both somehow.

"Can I offer you anything? Tea, coffee, something to eat? Wine?" Sanji pulled his hoodie off and tucked his shoes in the corner under the hook.

Law lifted his coffee. "No, unless you happen to have some chips or something else around, because you're favoring even more than you were and I would prefer you not stand too long so I can examine you… in the purely professional sense for the moment… and see what, exactly, you did to your ribs."

"Right…" The blond winced, and sighed, knowing he wasn't getting out of it. "I do. Give me a moment."
He stepped off to the kitchen, pulling a box of something out of his fridge. The way he moved in his element was no less graceful, but he was definitely favoring his right side. And he seemed to avoid one end of the island. He skirted it around the other side multiple times in his path back and forth warming up the snack. Though it only took five minutes exactly from Tupperware box to plate, he was obviously dreading the examination.

Setting the plate down on the table that had been hidden behind the back of the couch that faced the door, Sanji sighed again, "Just shirtless, or do you need to look me all over?"

Oh how he wished that question was actually as lewd as it sounded in his head.

"My main concern is your ribs, but if I find anything else there, I will need to give you an entire once over," Law replied as he nibbled at the snack between sips of his coffee.

He was perfectly willing to give Sanji all the time he needed to come to terms with his exam and even stall on getting undressed as much as he liked, but he definitely wasn't letting him wriggle out of it.

"Might as well start there then..."

Chapter End Notes

---

Song: Vanessa Paradis and M - La Seine
8 October - Part 2

Chapter Summary

Trouble in paradise? Law overreacts and Sanji doesn't react enough. And sex isn't enough to smooth this over, not when it's this complicated for the cook.

Chapter Notes

Hey, minna~! We've got some heavier stuff in this chapter, a panic attack, some references to some not-so-nice history for both boys, and from some angles you could call the end dubious consent. Or at least consent that would have been retracted if Sanji moved faster. So, if any of that bothers you, tread carefully. but rest assured, Law isn't actually raping his boyfriend!!! If he could read Sanji's mind none of these issues would have ever cropped up.

Law here was my beloved Silva, and was once again Beta'd by Tsuris. Thanks guys!

Ja ne~!

Sanji stepped around the coffee table, already pulling his shirts off. True to form he wasn't wearing anything under them, though there was a third shirt, a racerback, under the two tees. However, that wasn't what drew the doctor's attention. Sanji's entire right side, from armpit to hip, was black and blue, deep purple in the center where the corner of something had scraped him, and a telltale line around the crease under his breasts spoke of having worn something while he wasn't supposed to.

Once again, he crossed his arms over his chest, hiding the parts that shouldn't have been there, and the angle of his body screamed that he wanted to hunch his shoulders away from his date's expert eye.

Law's mouth dropped open and he almost dropped his coffee. As it was he set it down with a shaky THUD. "Oh my god, Sanji! What happened?! The last time I saw bruising this bad a motorcycle rider had had his FULL DRESSER fall on him! And is that a—you used a bra? That's worse than BINDING; it puts literally all that pressure on your ribs!"

His hands were roaming, pressing and palpitating as gently as he was able, and his expression displayed utter fear for his date.

"This is bad, from the look of this you might even need surgery if any of your ribs have been pushed out of place, which from this kind of damage they very well might have been!"

"No. No, I know they aren't. It's fine. I just... need to take it easy. I'll be fine. Honest. I know I'm not a doctor, but please, trust me. I'm fine."

Sanji's voice wavered with the flinches he was squashing. He could refuse his body's unconscious response to pain, just how often did he have to put up with it?! He was shaking his head, and he
sounded confident that he knew what he was talking about in spite of it.

"It was the door. I told you, the mosshead's gotta be made of solid steel or something."

"That didn't fly the first time and it won't this time either! The deepest part of the bruising is the spot here," Law passed his hand over it, but ceased to press, satisfied that he felt no breaks, "and a door would have made uniform bruising. Do not bullshit me! I have SEEN these signs a hundred thousand times."

While he talked, he moved. Until his hands came down to grip the counter, one pulling tight over the corner—the corner that was about at the perfect height to put that bruise on the blond's side.

"It was the door." Sanji wouldn't look him in the eye, but his tone was cold.

He kept his eyes firmly on the doctor's chin. If there was something in the apartment that would betray his lie, the blond made no sign that it existed. It was infuriating, but really, what right did anyone have to pry into Sanji's private life. Law himself had only been on two dates with him, and the others probably didn't even know what kind of stress relief the cook enjoyed. It was likely they hadn't thought about it yet either. He'd only been working at the Sunny for just under a week. Even in a small part of the city like Kokoyashi, it was hard to know everyone. Koala might not even know what was going on.

And it was clear the cook was in no mood to share.

"...Very well." In a moment, the doctor had his phone out and was texting rapidly. "I don't like to do this, but for the sake of your health I have to. And I apologize in advance for this, but you're about to get some paid vacation days. About..." he looked up again to evaluate. "Four days. And if you protest," he held up a hand, "there will also be a guard dog."

"You have no right!" The blond growled, fury in his eye. "You aren't my doctor. You aren't on the clock, and the only reason I let you look at all is because I thought I could trust you." Though he was shorter, and injured, Sanji drew himself to his full height, barely able to keep his mouth from turning into a snarl. "You make that call, all you'll do is prove I was wrong." His hand touched the necklace, bright against his pale skin, "Was I wrong, Law?"

Law looked at him steadily, but the corners of his mouth were tight.

"And trusting me means I have to let you go to work like that without so much as a warning to Chopper not to let you lift heavy shit? ‘Trusting me’ means I have to deliberately go back on my oaths as a doctor and a person and let you hurt yourself further through sheer stubbornness? You fucking tripped into this counter with your full bodyweight at the very least! Slipped or whatever the fuck happened to you, you fell on this corner with force, Sanji, I can see that if I was fucking blind, and I have to watch someone I motherfucking care about try and fucking WORK on ribs ONE TAP away from BREAKING like a goddamn champagne glass?! Is that what you're fucking demanding of me?"

He couldn't help the way his voice rose, nor help when it broke, his hands fists on the countertop. This was like watching his father with bruises after Chemo and still trying to pretend he was 'fine'. Watching his uncle crying at his twin's bedside but still trying to paste on a smile when he noticed the doctor in the doorway. Just the thought of watching another person he cared about push themselves until they strained at the seams pretending... it got underneath his skin and sent heat prickling up to his eyes.

"No! It means you trust me to know the limits of my own body!! I'VE HAD BROKEN RIBS..."
BEFORE! I've had that surgery! I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING! I DO NOT NEED TO BE BABYSAT LIKE SOME CHILDISH WOMAN!!" Sanji screamed the last word. "You think I don't know what I look like? That I don't know about the bruises? That clearly, I can't POSSIBLY know how far to push myself! I'm just some dumb blond, right? How could I have even survived the rest of my life without your expertise, Doctor-sama, please, enlighten me to the limits of MY OWN BODY! I may hate it most of the time, but goddamnit it's mine! And... and fuck..."

His hand flew to his mouth, the crawling feeling of his emotions trying to overtake his bodily functions had him shaking his head, and striding quickly towards the closed door on the other side of the living room.

"This isn't over." His teeth were clenched against the nausea. "I know..." he hiccupped, "I know what I'm doing."

"And I know what you're doing and I can't watch this a second time! I can't fucking do it, I can't—I can't watch this happen again, I can't stand watching another blond bastard trying to be strong and getting hurt. I can't fucking do this again! I saw the aftermath of this once, I can't fucking watch this anymore, Cora!"

Law’s eyes shrank in shock the same moment his hands clapped to his mouth.

"I... I... Shit! Shit! FUCK," he strode over to the window and stuck his head out of it. "FUUUUUCKKKK!"

Talented hands pulled at the brunet's shoulders, forcing him back inside with more strength than he looked like he had. Then there was a glass of water in front of his face, and two pills. Someone was talking to him, the words were muffled in the distance. They fought for a while, Law wanting nothing more than to go back to the window, until the floor came up to meet him and he had some kind of weight on his chest.

A single sentence broke through the madness, "GODDAMNIT TAKE IT BEFORE I SHOVE IT DOWN YOUR SHITTY THROAT DRY!!"

Dry swallowing pills could erode the lining of the throat, the information popped in with no context, unattached, out of the ball of white noise that seemed to be all that filled the empty space inside him. A tangled ball of a million colors, but he held to the only thing that had emerged out of it. Dry swallowing pills could ruin the esophagus. A little more struggling and he managed to connect this to the two white pills being shoved against his hand and jaw, and to the glass of water nearby. He mustn't swallow those dry, but he was threatening to make him...?

There should have been another thought. A solution between these two things. Eventually, that came to him too, though sluggish and slow, as though something else was trying to snatch it away from his grasping.

Take the pills. Yes. Take the pills and swallow the water, that wrapped the whole thing up quite nicely. Yes. Why hadn't he already done that? Why not? Why... not. Law found himself with the pills on his tongue and the water in his hand without any recollection of actually causing either of those things, but he was at least conscious of sipping the water and swallowing the pills. Yes. Yes now that was wrapped up nicely.

Now could he go back to screaming out the window?

The weight on his chest didn't move, if anything, it got heavier as the whatever-it-was settled back onto its heels, holding him down against the wall. That much was clear. He wasn't exactly lying on
the floor as he'd previously thought. Which sort of explained why he was able to drink without choking or spilling water anywhere. At least as far as he knew. The something was talking again, though the words were spotty and not really filtering through. It sort of sounded like an apology? Why would the weight be apologizing?

There was a *shnkt* and *fwoosh* of a lighter, then the scent of cigarette smoke wafted through the air.

"Smokin'll kill you."

The thought popped into his head like the last one, out of context, but this time it also made its way casually out of his mouth, which he wasn't sure how he did it because his mouth felt wooden and immobile.

"Throat cancer almost killed you once already. Smokin' kills. Kills slow and nasty. Suffers. Smokin'..."

His eyelids fluttered as he made an effort to string a line of thoughts together. It was surprisingly hard, though it was becoming possible, slow and laboring.

"My head hurts. And my throat. And my hands," he said slowly, able to connect these together but not sure why they went together or how.

He looked down and turned his hands over to show the palms. The middle was red and raw, though he wasn't sure how they came to be that way. Didn't much matter right now, that was why it hurt. One thing explained.

"You back with me, doc?" The voice wasn't rough or tinny like it should have been. It was a smooth tenor, touched with concern and the eyes... blue... deeper than Cora's. "Tch. You call me the idiot. Stay put."

The weight moved for a moment, but was back before he even fully realized it was gone. Then something cold washed over the painful parts of his hand.

"You need yours as much as I need mine you know. My Old Man woulda kicked you senseless for that. He's stickler for protecting your hands. Always has been. Taught me to fight with my feet so they wouldn't be risked when I had to defend myself. He'd have told you the same thing growing up if you'd been around. " The voice dropped in mimicry of someone else, "If you're gonna break a window, use your shoulder, dumbass, he'd say. Keeps you from fucking up your grip. And you need your grip to be a good surgeon, little fruit bat."

"I broke a window? Shit." He blinked a few times, and then squeezed them shut. "And... not a fruit bad. Bat. Snow leopard. 'Cuz of the spots. Where's Cora?"

He still had a nagging sense he was missing something, and he wanted his dad. He felt like shit. Hell, either of his dads would do. He had a feeling like the floor and wall were rocking around him, and he needed an anchor. Though the blond in front of him was doing really well at that.

"At home."

Sanji didn't know that for certain, but he definitely recognized a panic attack when he saw one. It was *likely* given that it was almost four a.m., but some people might not yet. The cook prayed that he was right. It was important to keep the brunet as calm as possible until the meds kicked in. Probably not good drug behavior, but the surgeon wasn't due at the hospital for at least twelve hours.

"And fruit bats have spots too. Just like the ones on your knuckles."

He tried to remember date and time. If Cora was out of the hospital was he with Croc or Don? Was Law on shift? No, no that didn't feel like the right missing space in his memory.

"I'm sure they're all at home, probably sleeping, yeah. Now c'mon, sexy boy, I'm not so good at this side of the situation. Look at me. Really look at me."

A hand tapped his cheek, trying to get him to focus, and worried that two might have been too much. They had the same build though, and when Sanji was that far gone he always needed two.

Law did his best to do as asked, his eyes narrowing as he took in the features of the person in front of him. Strong cheekbones... narrow build. Unique eyebrows... His eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"...Sanji? What are you doing in the cancer ward?"

"We're not at the hospital, huny. We're in my apartment. You had a panic attack. Look around. Careful now. Don't need you getting dizzy or some shit like that."

Law sat forward to look around a bit, blinking in confusion. "I had a... oh dear." He put a hand to his head. "It appears the therapist was wrong about having figured out how to manage those flashbacks if I broke a window. And screamed, from the feel of my throat."

Sanji waved him off, leaning over to stub out his cigarette. "Can't predict triggers. It just happens. Don't worry about it. I mean, bring it up to your therapist, but I can't fault you for something I know all too well personally. I have the kettle on the stove waiting to be re-heated whenever you think you can handle getting up. I've found tea to be therapeutic to both the body and the mind." Here he bit his lip and frowned a little, "I hope you don't have any kind of allergies or adverse reactions to Ativan... it's all I had on hand."

The brunet shook his head. "None. I'm lucky in that I've got no known allergies to medications. And tea sounds very good. Very good indeed. Getting up, on the other hand, sounds a bit harder."

He managed a weak little smile as he rubbed the goose egg on the back of his head.

"Ah... yeah... that, uh..." The blond blushed harder, backing up and standing with a guilty smile. "I may have... kicked you... away from the window. I don't have a fire escape, and you seemed intent on climbing it anyway."

"Oh. Well I can't fault you for that, my mother's apartment had a fire escape I would shimmy down whenever she got... difficult to bear. But perhaps some ice is also in order." Law rubbed his forehead to try and smooth away the ache.

"Sure." Sanji was across the apartment and back again with an ice pack in a flash. How long had he been out of it that the cook was so well-prepared?! He wore an understanding smile, "For me it was my bedroom. The Old Man was fair, but he had a heavy hand, and you know how kids blow everything out of proportion. I had a hell of a temper, and anytime he cuffed me I'd run off to my room at the top of the ship. Maman would come find me after awhile. She always explained what I'd done wrong. Think that was what I missed most after she died."

He crouched down to offer the ice and spoke easily. The tone of his statement about her death suggested it had been a long time ago, meaning he had come to terms with the loss.
"Ah, you were a lucky one, then. Mine didn't want me at all and kept impressing on me that I was an accident and if I wasn't an excuse to extort my biological sire for money she would have either aborted me or drowned me in the river like an unwanted dog." Law replied

He wondered vaguely why he couldn't seem to watch his mouth or moderate what he said. He was usually gentler and less explicit than that on this particular topic. He took the ice and applied it.

"Then when I started developing the spots she screamed 'disease' and dropped me on his doorstep without a look back. He could deal with his 'defective accident' and pay for my care, she said."

"Well, I may not be able to undo the damage she did, but for what it's worth, I think your spots are damn sexy." Sanji rolled onto his knees fluidly and kissed the one on Law's temple that he'd played with on their first date. "Is Cora your dad then? You... um... You called out for him during your flashback."

"Ah, yeah, that's his name. Well, no, it's not, his real name is Rocinante, but he hates that name so everyone who knows him calls him Cora. And thank you for finding them sexy, I was quite glad to find out they weren't, in fact, a virus I could pass on to anyone," the other smiled a bit more and decided trying to get up was a good idea. It was going to hurt, but it was worth the attempt.

Sanji snorted, "I know very little about medicine outside of my own experience, but even I know vitiligo isn't contagious!"

The blond let him move on his own, and when he was certain that the other wasn't going to fall over, he stood himself so he could grab the tea kettle for them both. Law's cup was chamomile with honey and lemon, Sanji's was mint with a touch of ginger. When both were relocated to one of the big couches, he leaned in—from the left—with his feet tucked up on the cushion in such a way that had he been any less flexible would have put serious strain on his ribs.

"I'm sorry about before. And I know it's a stupid question because this kind of thing never really is, but are you okay?"

Law smiled around his cup. "I'm sorry too, I didn't mean to push. And I'm... I'll be alright. Dad is actually in remission now, I just... the Chemo almost killed not only him, but everyone who had to watch him struggle. And he tried so hard to pretend it was all just fine, it was ok, the bruises didn't hurt and it wasn't next to impossible to hold down food, and just watching him pretend... that hurt worse than knowing he was in pain, really."

He sipped at his cup again and kissed Sanji's temple.

"Believe me, I'm not pretending. This hurts like a bitch! I just know how to handle it. Like I said, I'm used to rib issues. I've been binding since I was thirteen, and not always safely." Sanji cringed, knowing how bad that was now. "I didn't get my first real binder for almost a year and a half, and it took my brother smacking me across the back of the head after my third broken rib to actually get me to wear it. I didn't think it did as good a job. I thought if I could still see them, everybody could, but I know better now! Honest! It's just doing that, I know how far to push my body before it can't take any more. All I meant earlier, and I admit when I'm pissed off my words come out shitty as hell, was that I trust you, don't you trust me?"

Law leaned his head on his companion's. "Yes, I trust you to know your own limits. But I'm a doctor; I know how weak and fragile humans are. I have to live with how easily humans die every day. I scare very, very easily."

Sanji was quiet for a moment, then he smirked and licked his lips, tongue chasing the taste of mint
from his upper lip, "Want me to show you just how alive I am?"

"Finish your tea first," the other nudged him playfully. "I'm still letting the Ativan kick all the way in. But after that, yes, most certainly."

"I find Alton Brown to be a very good cure for residual panic, and it gives me a good timer for how long I need to wait to see if I need to take another one."

The interest wasn't gone, but if Law wasn't ready to move past it yet, Sanji was all for finding distractions. He leaned forward and snagged the TV remote from the table basket without spilling a drop of his tea.

"Sounds like a plan. And cuddling. My dad's very affectionate, cuddling helps a lot," Law leaned into Sanji and tucked his own feet up after kicking off his shoes.

"Cuddling is my middle name!"

The cook popped on the show, snuggling deep into the cushion with a happy sound. He wrapped both hands around his mug after the episode started to play and used both the physical contact with the brunet and the heat from the tea to soothe what was left of his own issues. Focusing on Law was a good distraction as long as his adrenaline was still high, but once it wore off entirely, Sanji knew all of his previous anxiety would hit him like a ton of bricks. Though hopefully not as bad from his own dose of Ativan and pain killers for the bruises.

Law let the meds do their work, purring into Sanji's shoulder as the episode subsided, and by the end of the dvd he was gently caressing Sanji's shoulder.

"Mmmm. I think I'm good, I feel much better now."

"Hmmm, good."

Tea long since gone and meds kicked in, it was time to forget about the stupid fight and its consequences.

Sanji left the TV on for background noise as he turned to press his lips against Law's throat, savoring the doctor's taste. His hand skittered over the other's chest letting his nimble fingers trace the contours through his shirt. He slid his hips around to straddle a leg and put himself into the brunet's lap. He wanted to chase any remaining negativity away with a vengeance.

That idea appeared to be shared between both men, as Law helped the other into his lap, hands coming up his back to sneak under the shirt that had somehow reappeared on the blond's lanky frame. The brunet chalked it up to the gap in his memories that he now knew had been his panic attack and flashback, but regardless, it needed to go! He wasn’t about to let his gorgeous date do all the work this time.

Hands in his hair, hands on his hips, and very little space between them as Sanji’s mouth met Law’s. Again and again and again, both aiming to make the other breathless.

The doctor reached down after pulling the offensive article of clothing from the cook’s body and massaged the amazing muscles of his hips. This was Sanji’s powerhouse! Where all of that damage had come from! And oh did that turn him on like nothing else! He wanted to worship it, and all of the cords of muscle he could feel shifting as Sanji’s spine curled.

So flexible! It was almost like fooling around with Luffy, but with some other quality that was just… Mmmm!!!
When had Sanji’s hands wormed their way into his belt? He wasn’t sure but damn if it hadn’t arrested his thought process when those amazingly talented fingers wrapped around his shaft.

It took until Law realized the blond was shifting and squirming to get down before he remembered he wasn’t going to have Sanji do all the work. So, he tightened his grip on the other’s rear end, drawing a sinful sound from his lips, and twisted his torso to line them up on the couch. It was both better for Sanji’s ribs to be supported, and made it easier for Law to duck below the blond’s breasts.

He knew better than to mess with them this time. He remembered from before that Sanji had pulled away, and that combined with the way he held himself when he was shirtless added up to a no-fly zone as far as Law’s explorations were concerned.

So, instead he focused on the other’s stomach, nipping and sucking gently, tracing the lines of abdominals hidden beneath a layer of softness that he was sure the cook only carried because of his biological sex. Regardless of what Sanji thought of it, Law found it delicious! He left matching hickies to either side of the blond’s navel, and kissed further down towards the waist of the pyjama pants he wore.

The skimming of his hands around Sanji’s lower half had told him there wasn’t anything between him and his prize except those pants, so when hands clenched in his hair, he began to pull them down.

Above him, Sanji bucked and squirmed, toes digging into the cushions where his legs were technically pinned down. Truth be told he had enough strength in his legs that he could have thrown Law through the wall if he really didn’t like what was going on, which, in the back of his mind, he rationalized was why he didn’t actually do anything to stop the brunet.

It was clear where he was going! And yeah, there was a large part of the cook that wasn’t so sure he liked the idea of someone being down there, even if that someone did already know what to expect. The thing was they hadn’t talked about this. He hadn’t even gotten the chance to tell the other about… certain things… that had happened. Like That Night.

Oh God, now he was thinking about it!

He needed to stop Law, he needed to pull away, he needed to… to… “Ohhhhhhhhh!!!!”

The moan shot straight down the doctor’s spine to his groin, and his eyes flashed up over the thatch of gold curls to catch the sight of Sanji’s back arching up off of the couch, his face contorted in pleasure, and his hands gripping the cushions to either side of his head. Smiling around his mouthful, Law sucked gently on the tiny button like he had before, and each time he did it, he was rewarded with more of that moaning.

He felt the slick beneath his chin and risked swiping his tongue through the hot folds for a taste. Salty, and a little on the bitter side, but still honey as far as the doctor was concerned. Especially when it came attached to that insanely illegal-sounding voice!

Sanji’s mind stopped processing what was going on internally, overwhelmed with pleasure, and drowning in the growing coil of heat between his thighs.

He barely registered when the doctor’s thumbs pulled him further open so he could dive deeper into the cook’s slit.

Too hot. Too heavy. Too much, too fast!! Sanji was losing himself, and couldn’t bring himself to actually care about doing anything about it.
Law felt him quivering, thighs and pelvis all in the same rhythm. So he matched it, licking and sucking in pattern with the blond’s natural rising pulse. When it seemed like, after a while, the high wasn’t going anywhere else, he shifted his hand around.

Wait! What was he doing? Sanji’s body screamed at him for trying to be distracted at a time like this!!

The pads of two fingers touched a stretch of silky smooth skin, slick with natural juices and saliva.

No! NO NO! NO DON’T!!

The body below him arched up into his tongue as he sucked down hard on Sanji’s clit and pressed inside…

“AHHHHNNAAHH!!!!”

The cook cried, actual tears escaping his tightly closed lids as pleasure pulsed through his body, the internal muscles clenching around Law’s fingers in time with the waves of his orgasm. The doctor coaxed him through it, thrusting his hand just a little, just enough to pulse pleasure through his body. Each aftershock drew another tiny, whining moan from him until he was actually able to pull away, drawing his legs up and closed.

Law frowned a little, “Sanji?”


The cook forced himself to roll over, onto his knees, but doing so made him wince, a brand new source of pain, bright and fresh in his mind. Fortunately, Law assumed it was his ribs hurting him, and immediately leaned in to make it easier to reach him. They kissed several times, Sanji trying very hard not to focus on the taste of his own snatch on Law’s tongue and lips. He was even able to make himself run his fingers through the doctor’s thick hair.

But he was shaking, and he couldn’t actually force the words out to offer to return the favor. He kept trying to put it off by kissing the other. But it just wasn’t working.

Eventually, Law pulled back. “You’re hurting.”

“Yeah.” Sanji couldn’t even deny it.

“Then we should call it a night. You really do need to take it easy or you very well might end up on my operating table. I do trust you know the limits of your body, but trust me, and my expertise, when I say that if you push yourself tonight you will have to take tomorrow off. And since we already had this conversation, I really do not wish to have it a second time.”

“But… you?”

Law shook his head. “I am fine. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had to take care of such things on my own. And I would much rather go home and do so than impose on you when you should be resting. Come see me when your Tramadol runs out and I’ll get you a new script. And perhaps,” he smiled with a touch of color on his mismatched cheeks, “we should take a week apart? To let you heal. Since we seem to be…”

“Enthusiastic?” Sanji supplied, still shaking a little, though he was leaning back on the couch cushions instead of trying to sit up.
“Yes, that.”

Law smiled wider, and stood. He stretched his arms up over his head, revealing a glimpse of pale pink at the top of one hip bone, and his back cracked in a few places. He rubbed the back of his head, giving the bulge in his jeans a semi-frustrated glare, then laughed. Leaning over to capture another kiss from his date, he seemed to purr.

“Like I said, snow leopard. I’ll see you in a week, Kitten. Be good this time. Okay?”

Sanji nodded, and the doctor took it as sign that everything was fine. If the blond was too quiet, too docile, too accepting, he wrote it off as him having been working all day, plus dealing with his panic attack, and then the clearly mind-blowing orgasm having put strain on his bruises. Because surely if there was something else wrong, Sanji would say something about it.

Right?
Chapter Summary

A moment of Ace/Law in which the doctor spoils his artist lover the only way he knows how.

Chapter Notes

Ahhhh, minna! I am so sorry this is late, I got tied up in doing other things, and Saturday just came and went without me realizing it! X''D Here's hoping steamy blowjobs will make up for it.

However, I do have something important I want to share with you all, so I hope you won't skip over this because it's a little longer of an Author's Note than I usually write.

Since I got a review with some questions in it, I wanna take a moment to address something. Sanji is transgender. This means he was assigned “female” at birth, and has female anatomy, but he uses male pronouns and refers to himself as a man, because he is one. The fact that his anatomy doesn’t match his gender causes him significant stress and trouble known as dysphoria. Please, if this is confusing, feel free to message me privately and I’ll be glad to help you understand.

The second thing was that there hasn’t been much ZoSan here yet, and you’re right. But this is a slow burn fic. As of right now, it’s 32 chapters long, and growing. I know that sounds daunting!! But I’m sure you’ll love it! So the ZoSan is coming!! I promise! Just gotta be patient for a bit.

As for the rest of the review, that stuff’ll be revealed in time. *wink* No spoilers, but it gets a LOT worse before it gets better. Trust me.

As usual, Ace here is played by the wonderful Jenna and Beta'd by the amazing Ember. Ja ne~!

"I fucking hate eBay."

Law leaned over, "Why don't you just let me take you to my piercer? She sells just about any kind of ring you want."

Ace shivered and looked at him with a smirk. "She does, does she? Well then I think I'd like to take a look..."

"Gladly, but there's a price you know." The doctor side-eyed him with a matching smirk.

He closed his laptop and leaned forwards slightly. "Oooh~?"

"One kiss, and an evening with you all to myself. You've been working too hard, I can feel it in your
Pursing his lips, because the project was almost complete, the artist glanced over his schedule app on his phone. There were still several weeks before it was due. He just hated to have things hanging over his head, especially with Luffy hanging around all the time. It was just asking for trouble. But... One night? Alone? Just him and Law? He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened.

So, he smiled slowly, squirming closer to the older man, “I think that can be arranged..."

The laptop was shoved off the bed onto the floor quickly, if carefully, and Ace pounced him, capturing his mouth in a fiery kiss. Hands skirted up his back, pushing up his shirt to get skin on skin contact because Luffy had run off with Law’s again. A shiver ran between them and teeth found somebody’s lip ring, tugging on the metal with a purring growl at the same time that somebody else’s thumbs found nipple rings to tweak.

"Oh purrrr, Mr. Portgas, do I sense you've missed me?" Law deliberately reached down to grope Ace's rear through his leggings.

"Feisty tonight." Law chuckled and did it again, "Now I know you're working too hard."

"Uh huh. Bad boy." The other chided with a sly smile.

Pulling back a little to pout at him, though a cheeky smirk played at his lips, Ace let his voice drop coyly, "Yes, yes, I've been bad... You gonna punish me for it?"

"Maaybe~ Maybe I'll just take what I want from you and leave you needy on the bed all done up in that blue rope you like."

The artist went all still and a shudder ripped through his body. But to experience that... he definitely wouldn't protest much... maybe... "... That'd be a little too mean, Lawsie."

Law pulled him back down to nip at his ear, "Convince me not to, bad boy."

"Hnn..." He raked his nails down his lover's chest. "I'll be... a good boy... do whatever you want..."

"Gimme that mouth first. Then we'll see." The doctor rolled his hips again.

"Ngnn..." Ace licked his lips and his eyes fluttered for a moment, his thought process short-circuiting at the surge of pleasure from the contact between them. "Wanna... be more specific~?"

"Oh is that how it is tonight?" Law smirked, his voice a little rough, "Suck. My. Dick. Acey."

"Oooh..." The shudder that ran through Ace's body was a lot more powerful this time—because fuck
did Law's voice do things to him. Ace let out a low moan and began to squirm down Law's body. "Your wish is my command..."

The surgeon's hands followed him down, resting in Ace's hair, eyes alight with want.

Ace wasted no time in undoing Law's pants, pressing kiss after kiss across the surgeon’s stomach, tracing the lines of the spots and tattoos as they came across his path, and when he finally had the prize free... Ace teasingly ran his fingers across it, not moving his mouth to it just yet.

"Nnghh. Love your touch." Law propped himself up on one hand to watch, the other tracing a line of freckles down the side of Ace's temple.

The younger brunet hummed and pressed into it, always loving it and feeling more confident when he was told something like that. He gripped Law's cock gently and finally brushed his lips over the heated skin, his tongue darting out to taste it, and moaned at the familiar musky scent and flavor. Eagerly, Ace traced his tongue over Law's dual-colored shaft, wasting no time in zoning in on the head to flick at the slit with his tongue, keeping one hand at the base to hold it steady.

Law moaned, barely holding his hips still, the urge to buck into his lover's mouth was nearly overwhelming. His toes curled in the blanket, his knees drawing up to help him hold himself back. The hand in Ace's hair could only hold on as he fought the urge to close his eyes.

The artist snickered to himself and tongued the piercing at Law's frenulum for a moment, eyes drawn on the surgeon's face, watching for his reactions. He did so love watching his lovers come undone... it was one of the biggest ego boosts he could get. So he wasted no time in opening his mouth and sucking on the head.

Gold eyes popped wide open, damn that sexy tongue! "NNNGH!!"

Humming, Ace just continued sucking the head like a lollie, making no move to take any more into his mouth, and trying very hard not to grin.

"Ahhhhaaaa, Acey, pleeeasse!" Law pleaded. The coil of pleasure was so hot he couldn't relax enough to come, tugging on his frenulum always did that, and it just wasn't fair!

Ooooh Ace loved to hear them beg! And Law's voice was just so fucking sexy!

Finally relaxing his throat, Ace instantly began to take in more of Law's cock, drawing down until the head was down his throat and his nose was touching the coarse black hair at the base. He moved one of his hands to lightly play with his lover's balls, and he hummed.

"ANGH!"

The older couldn't keep his eyes open, no matter how much he wanted to, the relaxation nearly sent him over. If Ace flicked his scrotum ring, he'd be gone, the orbs tight and tense, his thighs shivering with his willpower, and both hands held him up now because otherwise he'd be pulling Ace's hair out.

Greatly pleased by this reaction, and knowing what would send Law over the edge but simply wanting to draw this out, just to torture Law a little, Ace bobbed his head, swallowing and humming and generally just taking his time.

But Ace had never really been patient himself. Nope. And only after a few teasing bobs did he flick the scrotum ring, and gave it a barely there tug.
The doctor curled in around his lover's head, all to keep from thrusting deep into the artist's throat, as his whole body spasmed with the pulse of his release. Hot, heavy, and breath-stealing. Oh yeah! Nobody's mouth was as good as Ace's, no matter how sexy the cook was. Nearly bent in half, Law rested his forehead on the top of Ace's hair, panting with a soft giggle at the tingle in his toes.

Ace remained very still, swallowing to help the surgeon through his release, and once he was sure Law was done he pulled back with a wide smirk, and began licking him clean. Oh yes, he did so love bringing them to ruin...

"Did I do good? Is... that enough to be a 'good boy'?"


"Excellent..." Ace purred and turned to bite down on one of Law's inner thighs and sucked.

"AHH!"

All of Law's nerves were still fiery after that, and his reaction was to press in closer to the bite. The cheeky bastard just kept sucking on that one spot, aiming to leave a dark, dark mark that wouldn't go away for days.

"Y-your g-gonna make the oth-thers je-ELL-ous, you keep that up."

"Mnm?" Ace pulled away just for a moment. "And... why is that a bad thing?" Then he grinned wildly and bit down again.

"Cuz then AHH! Then they'll want to-OOOH leave others. And you kno-OH! Stoppit! You know how Luffy does it."

The artist snickered loudly and decided to move to the opposite thigh, intent on giving it the same treatment. "Yeah, yeah I do... but again... why is that a bad thing?"

He bit down and sucked.

"NNNNNNNGH!!!! Acey that's not fair!" Law actually whined a little, bastard always took advantage of him when he was jelly-kneed and tingly to give him more spots than he already had! "S-Sanji doesn't... doesn't know yet."

"Aaaah..." At that, Ace pulled away with a pout. "Right. Sorry."

"We've only had two dates, love." Now able to breathe, the taller of the two pulled the shorter up into his lap to give him a gentle kiss. "It takes a bit to ease into if you remember. I wasn't all that sure about it at first, and I grew up with a polyamorous home. I don't think he did."

The pout faded, and Ace gave a solemn nod, and settled comfortably in the surgeon's lap. "Yeah, I understand..."

"I don't think he's ready for it, if I'm honest." Law rested his cheek against the other's hair, drawing absent circles down his spine. "I shouldn't talk about this, but since we were off the clock, he had new bruises the other night. Stuff he should have healing. They aren't. Did he and Zoro have another fight I don't know about?"

Ace frowned. "That's... No, not that I'm aware of. But I heard he had a few days off before, so... maybe something happened during that time?"
"Yeah, that was right before I saw him. He mentioned Zoro was living in his building with him." Law paused to hold the artist closer, "And that he ran into a door."

Ace wrapped his arms around Law's waist, leaning into him. "Really? I..." He chewed his lip. "That just doesn't sound that likely..."

"Yeah, it's nearly textbook. You know what I mean."

"...Yeah." The artist rested his head on Law's shoulder, frowning.

The doctor curled in closer, playing with one of the tiny spades dangling from his lover's ear. He wanted to help. Badly. But... unless he had an opening, he couldn't. Sanji was a grown man; it wasn't like if he'd been a child. Which was in all honesty the reason why he was in Ace's arms instead of at home. He couldn't stand to be alone with his thoughts tonight; he'd be up all night from it. So, instead, he placed another kiss on his artist's head, and changed the subject.

"How'd the mural go? Sanji mentioned paint being thrown?"

"Mmm." Ace hummed and relaxed in the surgeon's arms. "Luffy's fault, like usual, but some progress's been made at least..."

"That's good. You're still planning on using it as your final?"

"Mnhmm." Ace puffed his cheeks out. "So long as it's not ruined..."

"Ah, you'll get it fixed, even if Mugi faceplants into it. You did last time, remember?" Law nuzzled his ear with a smile.

"Yeah, but I was still pissed off. And panicked." Ace snickered, and it had a slightly hysterical edge to it. "Don't really need the stress of that, no matter how easily fixable it can be."

"Shhh, love, it hasn't happened and Mugi knows better. Nami booted him in the head with her stiletto while you were panicking."

Ace nodded and slumped against the surgeon. "Yeah... still worry sometimes though. Can't help it."

"I know. But you'll do fine." Law fell quiet for a while, just rubbing his cheek on the other's hair. Then he stiffened, "Oh! I was out to get that necklace for Sanji and I picked up something for you."

The artist blinked and pulled back, an excited smile coming to his lips. "Oh??"

"Yes. I remember the last we all were together, you were complaining to Sabo that everyone was going digital and leaving you behind."

Law couldn't help the smile that broke on his face as he scooted back to stand up. He didn't bother fixing his jeans other than to tuck himself back inside for protection. Then he ducked out of the bedroom to the small common room at the top of the stairs that led to the Sunny proper. A rustling sound came back to the artist's ears, and a moment later the doctor was back with a large square black something in an opaque plastic bag.

Ace moved up to his knees, leaning forwards in eager curiosity, practically bouncing on the bed. And when he saw what was is in Law's arms his eyes widened.

"Is that a... is that a fucking..." He made to bolt off the bed but his foot got caught, and he fell flat on his face.
"Ah! Are you alright?" Law set the present on the bed and bent down to help his lover off the ground.

"Y-yeah, yeah, I'm fine, all good." Ace clung to Law, staring at him with wide eyes, and then at the gift on his bed. "Is that… is that a fucking…?"

"Why don't you open it and find out?"

Ace pounced on it immediately, pulling at the packaging with careful hands, despite his rabid eagerness, and when he did, his eyes were wider than they'd ever been. "A fucking Cintiq? Are you… are you fucking kidding me?!"

"Is... that not what you wanted?" Law came back to the bed as well, sitting far enough away that he wouldn't be in Ace's way, but close enough to still look at it. "That was the biggest one they had, and the picture shows up on the screen itself. Unlike the others that seemed to be a bit confusing. I'm uncertain how you would be able to draw with them if you can't see what you're doing, but the girl at the shop assured me that this should work well for you. If it doesn't—"

Ace latched onto Law, dragging him down onto the bed with a ferocious, all-consuming kiss.

That was the second time that week he'd been assaulted mouth-first, and if asked the surgeon had to admit, he kind of liked it. When he had control of his mouth again, he smiled and asked, "So I did good then?"

"Good!? 'So I did good then' he asks me!" Ace rolled, pinning Law to the bed beneath him. "Yes. You did good. You did amazing. A fucking Cintiq? Law they're… they're worth thousands!"

"You know price doesn't matter! This is about making sure you have the tools for your trade! I wouldn't dare operate with substandard instruments and if it's within my means to get you top of the line equipment I'll do so!" Law was not pouting.

"But…" Ace flailed for something to say. He was completely, utterly overwhelmed. "A-a simple tablet would have been fine, you... y-you didn't need to go out of your way to… I mean…"

Yes, Ace was at a complete loss for words.

"I wanted to." Tattooed fingers threaded through wavy black hair with the kind of smile he saved specifically for his beloveds. "You have a great talent, and you deserve the best. I can give that to you. Now, c'mon! Let's open it! I wanna see how it works!"

Ace swallowed, a red stain covering his cheeks - and then he was squirming down Law's body again. "Let… let me suck you suck you off again."

"You already did that! Draw for me instead!" Law caught his hands and nudged his head towards the tablet.

Ace let out a soft groan and chewed his lip, and hesitantly crawled back over to the Cintiq. "Alright, but I'm gonna suck... So damn badly, just... just so you know..."

"You will still be better than me. Of that I have no doubts. My doodles are crude at best."

The artist let out a shaky laugh, and set out taking the Cintiq out of the box with careful fingers. He was afraid he was going to break it.

"You'd… be surprised. I tried with a tablet once and it was terrible. Takes practice." His grin grew a
little more firm, happy again. "That… that's where the challenge lies. Oh this is something *new...*

Law draped himself around his lover, arms lightly folded around Ace’s waist, and his chin on the
other’s shoulder to watch. He could have kept repeating himself, but they both knew it wouldn't do
any good. Ace would still think his art was shit until he worked at it, and Law would still think the
very idea of Ace putting color onto a page, digital or otherwise, was amazing. So, the often stoic
doctor merely settled in to watch his workaholic beloved prove to himself that he wasn't shit.

Ace really did have no idea what he was doing. He barely glanced at the instructions, only reading
so far to see how thing turned on and what button did what. Though he disliked being watched in
general, if it was one of his lovers he was usually ok. Law’s presence comforted him, and the
surgeon deserved the chance to watch him experiment. And this was just for the fun of it anyway...

So once it was on, Ace scribbled.
Chapter Summary

Apanic attack at the bar reveals that Sanji and Ace have a bit more in common than they first thought. Law wants "to talk". And Zoro argues about FASHION!? 

Chapter Notes

OTL oh my gods, minna, I am so terribly sorry for letting this go for so long! Life just got away from me, and before I knew it a month almost had passed. I wanna say I'll be better from now on, but Feb, March, and April are my worst months mental health wise. So, I'm gonna try my best, in between working on the other stuff I'm doing too.

As usual, Ace here is played by the wonderful Jenna, my beloved Silva is here as both Zoro and Law, and Beta'd by the amazing Ember. Ja ne~!

A week later. A long, chaotic, stressful, amazing week later, Sanji was yet again cooking for the crew of the Sunny. He was beginning to think that was all he did because when the bar opened to the general public most people wanted drinks. He still filled the orders, but mixing alcohol was nothing compared to properly balancing the flavors and textures of a full meal. So, generally speaking, the meal he prepared before the doors opened was a far more demanding task. More demanding, but more rewarding! After Ace's comment about wanting to taste something 'not so simple', he was expanding his repertoire. A week and a half, and he was really starting to crank up the flair! Stretching his knowledge base and combining recipes he hadn't cooked since his time on the Baratie seven years ago!

Almost every afternoon he had company too. Sometimes Nami with her books, or Robin and Vivi with the silverware. Sabo liked to sit on the bar to practice his guitar, especially if he was playing that night. Half an hour before open often found Usopp, Chopper, and Brook crowded at one end of his domain, nibbling on whatever he had available and plotting out how the entertainment for the night was going to go. Franky occasionally had a doo-dad to tinker with, and fortunately the marimo tended to avoid him entirely! Preferring to nap next to the stage except during dinner.

Oh that guy got under his skin! Not once since last Sunday had the mosshead tried to apologize again; though Sanji had to give him credit, he never did run into him in the laundry room all week.

Still it was just as well that his current company was his most frequent. Ace had some huge project due at school, though what exactly the artist's major was the cook didn't know, but it meant more often than not Ace was painting, or drawing, or doodling, or recently, playing with some kind of semi-portable electronic sketchbook thing. It all looked very complicated and Sanji didn't ask too many questions, not beyond identifying that it wasn't something he knew anything about. So, in order to facilitate the dark-haired man, the cook cleaned up from supper quickly anytime Ace was around to eat in order to give him as much space as he needed to work.

Except for today.
Today, the artist was literally passed out in his food. Well, he had been. Smack dab in the middle of dinner he'd face-planted into his plate, and if that wasn't unnerving enough, no one around him seemed to have any trouble with it! Robin and Nami had lifted Ace's head from his plate gently, and Sabo had appeared suddenly with a pillow, and though everyone had moved off to give the artist privacy, Luffy hung around inside rather than heading out for his daily spar.

But that was as concerned as anybody got.

Sanji couldn't help but be confused by the whole thing, and he found himself hovering around where Ace was sleeping, like some sixth sense was drawing him in. He couldn't explain it, but he didn't feel right leaving the freckled man at the bar by himself. There was just something about the way his muscles twitched and his brow creased that smacked Sanji between the eyes with familiarity.

After a short while, Ace's breathing began to pick up and grow labored. His expression grew pained, anxious, and the twitching increased. Caught in the grips of a nightmare that was steadily growing worse by the second. One that struck deep within his subconscious and played on his innermost fears.

The cook glanced around at the rest of the bar, no one else was paying attention. Even Luffy, who'd been hovering almost as much as Sanji himself, had finally given up and gone to take his spar, Franky and Brook going with him. The mosshead was once again napping, the ladies were all huddled in Nami's office discussing something Sanji couldn't hear over the sounds of Usopp and Chopper testing the resonance of the drum set or something having to do with meshing the sounds of that and Sabo's guitar. It left the cook, the newbie, the inexperienced one, with the task of watching the passed out brunet.

He'd have gone for a cigarette if he thought he could get away with it, but the way Ace's face contorted in fear and pain… He knew that feeling; he knew what it was like personally. He had specific medications to prevent that from happening! But… but… he couldn't… he barely knew the other man!

He bit his lip and drew himself up, then made his way over to where Ace was sleeping. It took him another glance around and a moment of internal pep talk before he could reach out and touch the artist's shoulder. But he shook it gently. Somebody needed to bring him out of his dreams and back to the real world.

"Ace?"

At the touch, Ace's entire body went tense. A loud, strangled noise escaped him, one that sounded fearful and panicked, and he flew up and out of his seat before his eyes had even opened. When they did, they were clouded, unaware, still caught in the grips of the nightmare he'd been having.

He was holding onto the bar, scrabbling away from Sanji as fast as his weak legs allowed him, and he was speaking too, more like babbling, a string of words over and over again that took a moment to decipher.

"L-Law, Law, Law I'm sorry, please, I'm sorry, please forgive me I d-didn't mean to Law please Law I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!"

"Ace! Ace, hey! Hey, wake up! Hey!"

Hands caught him as the artist started to fall off of the barstool. He was pulled into a tight hug, pressing body heat against him as much as possible. The same hands rubbed his arms, and the voice murmured the same sentence, over and over, in his ear. All geared towards bringing the panicking
brunet out of his nightmare and back into the real world.

And how eerie it was for the cook to be on the comforting side of things twice in only a week.

Ace's hands clawed at Sanji's back, pulling at the material of his clothes. He was shaking, practically hyperventilating, but somehow Sanji's voice managed to pierce through the fog. That, and the tight hold that he had the artist in were enough for Ace to gain some sort of ground, and the repeats of the apology, of Law's name, slowly stuttered to a halt.

He kept shaking though, close to the edge of plummeting off the abyss into panic once again, and he whispered hoarsely, "L-law, need t… Law... Where..."

"He's at work, hun. C'mon, talk to me. Tell me what you can see. Do you know where you are?" Sanji kept up the rubbing, anchoring and trying to pull a focus in the panic.

"Hhh..." Ace let out a tense breath, clutching at Sanji tighter. "I'm… home. The... the bar?"

"Yeah. Yeah, you are." What had the Old Man always said? Oh! "I need you to think for me, hun, can you do that for me?"

There was a slight hesitance in the nod that Ace gave because Sanji asked him that, but it was really, really difficult to get his thoughts straight. He really wanted to see Law to… apologize but… couldn't... "Y-yeah. I… can..."

"Okay. That's great. Can you tell me if you have something you take when you panic like this?"

Sanji was barely aware of some of the others paying attention to him, but his attention was focused on Ace.

"Uh..." The artist swallowed thickly, blinking tears from his eyes. Did he? He couldn't quite... Ah. Yeah. "I-I do... They're..."

Somewhere. Damn it. He couldn't remember where...

"Does Sabo know where they are, do you think?"

The cook glanced up at the very worried guitarist, and was given a quick nod right before the other blond took off running for the stairs. Nami moved carefully around them to grab a glass of water from the kitchen, and Robin made a discreet exit to the back lot to inform Luffy what was going on. Sanji noted all three, and then re-focused on Ace.

"Y... Y-yeah, he... should." Ace nodded weakly and pressed his face to Sanji's neck, trying to take deep, even breaths and stop more tears from coming. "...Stupid… forgetting where..."

"It's okay. You're okay. I got you. It's okay." Sanji rubbed his back with steady motions, rocking slightly, like his Old Man always had for him.

Ace couldn't stop the sob that escaped him, and he just clenched his eyes shut tighter, and remained limp in Sanji's arms. Just... just one of those stupid, fucked up dreams...

"Shhh." The blond just held him. After a short while, blue eyes flicking to the steps every so often to check for Sabo, Sanji asked, "Can you talk about it?"

Ace choked back another sob nodded, though he couldn't answer for a good few moments. Sucking in a shuddering breath, he pulled back far enough to scrub at his eyes, trying to clear them of the tears. "Just... I… broke the... The Cintiq..."
"Oh. The drawing thing? Is it expensive?"

A loud, hysterical laugh came from the artist then. "E-expensive? You c-could… fuckin' say that..."
He chewed on his lip and wheezed out, "D-depending on... the size… a-and the one he got me's the b-biggest... d-dunno the exact price b-but that's around t-three thousand dollars t-there..."

Sanji whistled. "I can see why that would be a nightmare! I had one like that once. Shattered the Old Man's porcelain cutting board. The one Grandpappy brought back from France for him when he opened the Baratie. Think I tiptoed around it for a week terrified I was gonna knock it off the counter."

"T-they're terrible." Ace laughed again, and it ended in a hiccup. "...I disappointed him." Ace whispered and the tears came back again, and he brought his hand up to cover his eyes. "H-he was... so..."

"I'm sure he won't be. Even if it broke. I know he wouldn't."

The cook wasn't one hundred percent sure who 'he' was, but from the clues he figured it was Luffy or Law. The one definitely wouldn't, it seemed like nothing could tick off the Rubberman once he had decided that he liked someone, and the other? Well, Sanji was currently working wasn't he? If that fight hadn't damaged things between them, then he was pretty sure that a broken Cintiq wouldn't do it either.

Ace just laughed again and pressed his face against Sanji's shoulder. The blond could say that dozens of times and the doubts and fears would never leave Ace's mind. "H-he... I'm such a failure, I didn't... 'M not good enough, a-and when I broke it I... T-tried so hard to be careful but..."

"When something gets broken, we just fix it. I'm pretty sure if it's that expensive, it's gotta be pretty sturdy right? I don't know much about art stuff, but I know the really good knives come with lifetime warranties in case something happens to them. Why don't you ask him if he got one on it?"

Sabo touched the cook's other shoulder, holding out the medicine. Sanji nodded at the bartop, so the other blond put it down next to the glass of water and moved back to stand with Luffy. When the Rubberman had appeared was uncertain, but he also wasn't acting like himself. He was quiet, a tilt to his chin and a set to his eyes that spoke more of a man older than he was than of the childish goofball he always seemed to be.

"I..." Ace shuddered, not really noticing anyone else beyond Sanji before him. "I guess... guess so... I'll ask L-Law when I can... see him again..." Or he could call him. But Law was at work and Ace didn't want to distract him with his stupid worries...

Something about that nagged at Sanji, but he pushed it aside in favor of the current situation, "That's a good idea. Think you can take your meds for me? Sabo brought it and I've got a glass of water here. All you have to do is turn enough to reach it. I won't let go. Promise."

"...Okay." Ace took a deep breath and turned to see the meds and the water. He reached out a shaking hand to grab the meds, and dared to release his other hand from Sanji's shirt to unscrew the lid and shake out two of them. He almost dropped it, but managed to replace them on the bar without any hassle, and when he popped them into his mouth he grabbed the water as well, taking a large mouthful to swallow them down.

Then, practically slamming the glass back onto the surface, he clutched at Sanji again.

True to his word, the cook held him tight, rubbing his back again, keeping him stable for as long as
he needed. "Great job. I got you. Thank you for doing that."

Ace swallowed thickly, body slowly beginning to relax. "Th... Thank you, S-Sanji..."

"Hey, no worries. Nightmares suck. They know just how to reach in and tear you apart, and there ain't shit you can do about it."

The blond didn't see the way his easy smile was reflected around the room. Most of the others were trying to appear aloof with mixed results. Zoro was the most successful, his eyes closed, though he was listening closely, there was something about the cook's words that sounded too personal to be standard reassurance. Sabo, Usopp, Chopper, and Brook had taken up their instruments again—guitar, keys, drums, and bass respectively—and were playing around with a soothing melody from one of Sabo's newest songs; something about a lullaby. Nami and Robin had Vivi bring the papers they'd been working on in the office out to the other end of the bar, and were discussing it again. Franky hovered somewhere in the background unable to truly walk away, which meant the only one still actively watching them was Luffy. He was relaxed though, an air of approval about him. Especially with Sanji's easy dismissal of Ace's worries.

"...Yeah." Ace nodded and gave the blond a shaky smile, before pulling away. Though at the moment he wanted physical contact to keep him grounded more than anything, he didn't want to impose on Sanji more than he already had. He clutched at the bar with one hand, leaning his weight against it and trying to stop the last of his shakes. "They can be... really terrible."

"You alright over there? Think Nami's probably still got the door locked, and my niece says I'm a really good teddy bear. Almost as good as her favorite plushie." Sanji let his gaze drift to the side, and a small smile curled his mouth again, "Unless there's someone else you'd rather have holding you."

Ace's smile stretched into a grin, though it was somewhat strained. "H-hope I don't offend, but..." His gaze darted to Luffy.

"Nah. I know that feel too." A strange light colored the cook's expression and he stepped away to let his boss take his place. "Hey, just, if you ever wanna curse nightmares... or panic attacks... my door's open, yeah?"

Luffy was right there, arms wrapped around his brother tightly, one might even say possessively, though he was smiling at Sanji gratefully.

The artist instantly relaxed in Luffy's hold, clinging to him just as tightly as he had Sanji before. With an easier smile, Ace nodded at the blond. "I would... Like that, yeah. Thanks again, Sanji..."

"Anytime."

The captain nodded, but didn't say anything. His singular focus was on the older brunet, and like that he steered Ace towards the steps with careful movements. Sanji wasn't entirely sure, but there was something about the way the Rubberman held himself. Something that made a visceral, internal, part of the cook cry out in want, and images of That Person jumped to the forefront of his mind. The memories were only reinforced when, as the pair reached the bottom of the steps, Luffy took a hold of Ace's hair to turn his head and bit down on the muscle there.

Ace's moan was audible, loud and needy, and a different kind of shudder wracked his body. He seemed to cling to Luffy even tighter, eyes falling closed and... surrendering, completely at the smaller brunet's mercy.
Sanji's eyes went wide as the sheer command Luffy had over his lover hit him in the gut. He wasn't even aware of the way he leaned on the barstool or the tiny sound that escaped his own throat when they disappeared. Color flooded his cheeks when Sabo brought him back to himself with a clap on the shoulder and knowing smile.

"Yeah. He's got that effect on people." He leaned over to pick up Ace's medication, shook it a little, "Thanks for being there."

"Y-yeah..." Sanji sounded strangled, and it made Sabo laugh again as he headed in the same direction as the other two.

Now that the situation was over, the others were actually turning back to their jobs, and honestly no longer paying attention. At least most of them were, but Sanji didn't feel the weight of the bouncer's eyes on him. He was too wrapped up in his own head. That power. That... dare he think it? Dominance. It was natural really, if he thought about it logically. Luffy was the Rubberman, second only to Marshall "Blackbeard" Teach on the East coast! He dominated the ring every time he fought! It only made sense that would carry over into his personal life, but... Sanji had been thrown for a loop by the man's goofball behavior. He'd been fooled completely into thinking the captain was just an airhead outside of the ring.

But now...?

Nngh! His mouth had gone dry, and his pants were rubbing him the wrong way. The silicon equipment couldn't display what was going on down there, but fuck if it didn't slip like hell when he was this worked up. And then Sabo's words?! He was that obvious?! It hadn't even been a week since he'd seen That Person! Why was he craving it so badly?! Was it just Luffy? No. There was more to it than that. Some level of care and love that Gh—

"OI!" He glared at the face that was suddenly all he could see.

"Oi yourself, cook. I see those eyes you're making." Zoro reached past him into the fridge as he spoke; pulling out a beer, cracking the top off with his molars and spitting it into the trashcan. "Nothing wrong with it. Just... mmm... maybe talk to Law about it?"

His offer was awkward. He was attempting to be... companionable? Or friendly? One of them. Of course by now he knew the cook was dating Law; everyone in their social group did. Luffy was involved, that meant it was front page news.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, shithead, but that was disgusting!" Sanji was quick to defend, and wrinkled his nose at the bouncer, "I know you don't care about laundry, but if you hate your teeth that much, lemme get rid of 'em for you."

"I like my teeth fine, thank you very much. And I do laundry! What makes you think I don't? I don't like to stink any more than the next person," the bouncer replied around a drink, mildly offended if the downturn of his lips was anything to go by. "Besides it keeps me from breaking the bottles trying to twist 'em off."

The cook slammed a tool onto the stainless steel counter, "It's called a bottle opener, Neanderthal! And you do not! I'd have seen you! You're here when I'm here, so you can't be using the laundry room while I'm at work, and that damned washer makes so much noise not a one of us can sleep while it's running and you know it!"

Zoro raised an eyebrow slowly. "I do so do laundry. Just not when you do. You sort your darks and lights weird and I wanna open my mouth watching you and that'll just lead to a fight, so when you
"Hmph. I bet you just throw everything all in at once." Sanji sniffed. Why were they arguing about laundry?! He didn't know, but he couldn't stop himself. "You'll ruin everything that way, you know. Not that you care, obviously. You wouldn't know fashion if it came up and bit you on the ass."

"I really wouldn't. The fashion industry is a misogynistic institution of torture where people make fun of the models for being anorexic and disregard them as ugly and fat if they can't see their ribs. I will have nothing to do with it," he replied, tone of voice never changing despite the content of his speech. "For your information even I know to separate the whites from the colors and the darks from the lights. But I only ever have to do two loads. ...Maybe three. I wear the same thing every day. White poet's shirt, black training pants, green haramaki. Or this," he gestured to his all-black bouncer's uniform and shrugged. "Not a lot of variety to worry about."

"Just because the industry's rotten doesn't mean you can ignore it! If we don't pay attention to it, the whole thing's just gonna get worse! It's consumers like me and—well, like me, that make a difference, you know! What we buy affects what they sell." Dear god, now they were arguing over clothing?! "Besides, I don't think you could look good even if you tried. Everything you own looks painted on anyway. And that hair! Who the fuck dyes their hair GRASS green!? At least use neon or something that shows up under the blacklights if you're trying for the whole punk-rock cliché. Jesus."

Zoro met his gaze, two eyes looking steadily into his, dark green to blue. He wasn't even mad. So many people had made that assumption so many times he just expected it now. If anything this part of the argument made him tired. Couldn't the cook find anything else to bitch about besides his clothes and his hair?

"I'm not going for the punk-rock or any other look, and I don't dye my hair. And while you do have a point about the fashion industry, they don't exactly MAKE suits or any other fashionable wear for men built like me. And if I couldn't afford rent before moving to Brook's, what makes you think I could afford a tailor?" He raised an eyebrow again.

"Uh-huh. Sure. And I'm the Prince of Pop." Somehow the distance between them had shrunk, and Sanji wasn't quite sure how that happened. "Prove it, mossball!"

Zoro shrugged, setting his beer down on the counter. "Alright."

And if the blond had any doubts about whether he was a man of his word, the Marimo immediately shot them out of Sanji's head. He pulled his hands down to the lower hem of his shirt and in one motion pulled it up over his head and off with practiced ease. Underneath lay chiseled planes of bare chest and a thick, but well-groomed path of hair one shade darker than the spikes on his head that started between his pectorals and led straight down into his pants.

Holy shit fuck Jesus! The cook thought his eyes might bulge out of their sockets, and he had to dig his nails into his palm to remind himself not to touch. No wonder the bouncer had done a number on his ribs. Sanji wasn't a slouch but... he couldn't develop muscles like that! Hell! He wasn't even sure his brother was stacked like that! He felt all of the blood in his body run in two directions at once. Half South, half to his face! He was vaguely aware of the cigarette between his lips, that had been hanging out waiting for his next smoke break, falling to the floor.

"Holy sweet mother of God." His voice was awed, and it didn't seem like he knew he was talking out loud.

Zoro bent down to retrieve the cigarette and offered it back to him with a little grin. Oooooohhhhh it
was nice when he bent over because his back was a gleaming plane of muscle lines, not chiseled like the front but visible nonetheless, and the way he *rippled* on the way back up was enough to make a straight man's mouth water.

And Sanji was about as far away from straight as a guy could get.

"I know. Most people can't figure out what the fuck genetic combination could possibly lead to *green* body hair. Even I don't know how it happened. But no need to lose your cigarette over it." Zoro's eyebrows pinched together, more weary than offended by the whole situation.

Needing to prove the natural state of his own hair was something that came up more often than he liked. But there was something… he caught a vibe from the cook that kept him from just shoving his shirt back on again.

"Yes, well." Sanji coughed tightly, taking the cancer stick back. "It isn't every day you see a literal walking mossball in your kitchen. You've a real talent there. Growing algae. Pity it's not edible."

What the *fuck* was he saying?! He turned around abruptly trying to dismiss what he knew was going to be tattooed on the backs of his eyelids for the rest of his life. God DAMN that muscleheaded idiot. He needed a drink! A long one! AND NOT THAT KIND! Goddamnit! He needed to get his head out of the gutter was what he needed!

"I think I'm glad it's not, otherwise I would lose what little body hair I have. The same genetics that make it green make it sparse." The bouncer noticed a note of—was that disappointment?—in his own voice when the cook turned his back.

He gave another shrug, intent to poke at it later, and struggled back into his shirt. And it was a struggle too because it just *CLUNG* to him like a second skin. But while the seams stretched, they didn't burst, which was good because the bar didn't have any bigger shirts at the moment.

Sanji did not, under any circumstances, did *not* 'gnee' when he heard the cotton stretching. And it was entirely Zoro's imagination when his words came out clipped and strained.

"It's not like you have room for it under that tortured fabric. I can hear it screaming for help."

"Yeah, I know. They don't make things for men built like me. All pecs and big, broad shoulders. And bodybuilder shirts, which have the room, don't hardly cover anything since they're workout shirts. It sucks."

"I... might know a guy." Was he really offering to help the marimo!? Yes, yes he was. Fuck! How did that happen?! "He does all the work for my brother. Comes cheap too. Prefers to trade labor for labor rather than money. He's uh... got a bit of a thing for guys built like you."

Zoro tilted his head to the side, more interested than he wanted to let on, "...I am amenable to trading labor for labor. And if he's got a thing for guys like me, all the better, he'll know how to tailor it just the way I need."

"Here." Sanji dug into his wallet and pulled out a card without looking. Now that he'd seen it, he couldn't *stop* seeing it. "His name's I zou. He's on the corner of Fifth and Spruce, down in Kamabakka. Izzie's Tailor Shoppe. If there are Okama hanging around, you're in the right place." He paused for a second, indecision clear on his face, "And every other day he goes by she. Don't insult him, bastard, or I'll give you another introduction to the door via my heel. *Capisce*?"

The marimo made a noncommittal noise. "Hey, if some days it's 'he' and some days it's 'she' ain't none of my business except which I'm supposed to use. Doesn't matter to me, person's a person. No
need to insult them over what they identify as. Though which is the other day so I know which he is when I go?” He seemed unalarmed and undisturbed at the news, and merely filed it away as 'ask before addressing pronouns' in his mind. "I should be able to go over and see him on Saturday."

That made Sanji turn back around, and the visible curly cue rose in skepticism, "He should be he on Saturday. Unless he takes Friday off. There's a thing at my brother's place, and if he needs something, Izzie'll be with him. Call first."

"Fair enough. I can call when I get home?" Zoro got back from work around ten tonight, so that latter was phrased as a question. If not, he could call tomorrow morning. He could adjust to either way.

The cook gave a nod. "Yeah. Should be fine."

There was a heavy pause after that, expectant, like both assumed something was going to happen between them. Or maybe it was just Sanji's nerves getting the better of him. Whichever it was, the blond glared suddenly, and pulled himself up, stalking to the fridge.

"Now get the fuck outta my kitchen, before I get sick from helping you, shitty Marimo!"

Zoro laughed. "Fine, love-cook. I'll just go back to helping on the stage."

He ducked out of the kitchen quickly, anticipating something being thrown. He wasn't sure why he anticipated that, but he did. Metal clanged with the wall as soon as the door sung closed again, confirming his suspicions.

He laughed again, absurdly pleased to be right, as he climbed back onstage and grinned at the others. "Y'know, I think I'm on the way to a beautiful friendship with the shit cook."

As soon as Sanji was alone, he whipped out his phone. The first few texts went to That Person, apologizing for having been distracted, and working, but immediately after he pulled up Law's number.

"Sexy, thought you should know Ace had a panic attack about you today. Something about a Cinteek—Cintiq?"

The reply was so fast it seemed almost instant. Several messages right after one another.

[The Cintiq?]
[Is he ok?]
[Were you able to calm him and get his meds in him?]
[He has that nightmare a lot where is he now?]

"Yeah. Luffy took him upstairs." The cook typed with one hand while moving through to the backdoor and out. His other fished for his lighter in his jeans pocket.

[Oh good. Good.]

[What about you?]
[Are you ok?]
That's two panic attacks in one week, how are you holding up?

Letting his head fall back against the bricks, he laughed, and took a drag on his smoke, "Yeah. I'm fine. Nearly had a heart attack thanks to the shitty Marimo," why did that auto-capital in his phone? "But yeah I'm okay. Somehow it's easier being on the outside, you know?"

[Yes. I understand exactly.]

[...perhaps we should get together.]

[You, me, Luffy, Ace, and Sabo.]

[There's something we ought to talk about.]

[Like why he had a panic attack centered on me.]

"Um... Okay? Tonight after your shift?"

A ball of anxiety appeared in his gut, the kind that he knew was going to fuck with his head the rest of the day. Really it would fuck with his head, and his insides, until they had that conversation. He didn't like to admit it though, so he said nothing about it in his messages.

[That works perfectly. I get off at midnight for a change.]

[It really is nothing bad, Sanji. I just think we'd better talk about it.]

"Heh. Okay. Grab me a mocha on your way here? I'll make something for snacking on."

Damnit, he needed two hands to type that and still sound somewhat normal. 'Nothing bad' he said, ha! The cook knew how these sorts of conversations went, and fuck if it didn't shake him to his core, no matter how nice Law tried to put it.

[Sure. Carmel?]

"Yes, please. <3"
Chapter Summary

**Polyamory**: pol·y·am·o·ry /ˌpälē ˈamərē/ noun - the philosophy or state of being in love or romantically involved with more than one person at the same time.

Chapter Notes

IT HASN'T BEEN A MONTH!!! A little late than I had planned but NOT A MONTH!!! Cheer with me! X"D You're all gonna hate me for the ending. Mwahahaha!

We had both of our guest voices in this one—Silva as Law, and Jenna as Ace—and Ember was my trusty Beta as usual!

Enjoy, minna! <3

Law emerged from the coffee shop at the end of his shift with drinks for the whole group. Koala had been very gracious and given him a bag with a flat bottom to keep them from tipping and keep them warm in the night air as he made for the bar. Bundling in closer to his scarf, he shot a text off to each of them to confirm they were all together, or at least on their way.

Ace had calmed down a lot during the hours that had passed. With the help of Sanji before, and then after, with his lovers, Ace was feeling… better. Thick leather wrapped around his neck left over from his romp with Luffy, and one of his very first, most comforting, crystals afforded him a modicum of security that conventional medicine had never been able to supply. He still felt paranoid, had checked the Cintiq twice just to make sure it actually was intact, and when they'd received word that Law wanted to chat—with Sanji—he relaxed further. He'd be able to see Law and just...

Just double check. That was it. Just to see that... he wasn't a disappointment and that things really were alright.

So now he was waiting with Sabo and Luffy, and craving caffeine but not really daring to get any. To stave it off he was playing with a chunk of amethyst as big as his hand, enjoying the sound of the quartz on his wrist ringing every time it met the bigger stone.

The sound of a rubber ball bouncing against the ceiling made Sabo's ear twitch every time Luffy did it. The captain was sprawled out on the edge of the stage, one knee tucked up, and the other leg hanging off the side swinging absently. It was best not to ask how he was able to reach the ceiling with the ball, but it made "bong bong bong" sounds as it bounced from light to vent to light and back to his hand. The blond sighed heavily, turning his attention back to his chord notes and trying to play the melody in his head. He hadn't made it out to Hack's today because of Ace's panic attack. So he was almost as twitchy about sitting still as Luffy was.

Intimidating. That was the word Sanji kept hearing over and over in his head whenever he looked...
out at the trio. The hours of mindless drink fills and snack requests had been able to lull him into a
daze of affected ignorance, but now? Now it was time to face the music. He just hoped not literally.
He took a deep breath, picked up the tray of takoyaki with its various dipping sauces, and marched
with false confidence over to the table where Ace and Sabo were sitting.

"Either move your shit, or I'm kicking it off." He growled without much heat.

Sabo grinned, gathering his papers. "See, now I know it's serious. Law had him cook."

"WOO!! SANJI FOOD!!" Luffy literally fell off of the stage with a plop onto his feet, the ball
bouncing away to be caught later.

The cook’s foot came up to the middle of his chest, the stone pendant bouncing against the toe of his
shoe, with a hard scowl, "Wait for Law, damnit!"

"Waiting is unnecessary," came the amused voice from the door as the aforementioned man brought
in the bag of drinks and chuckled. "However, defending a portion put aside for me would be
appreciated while I unpack these."

He put the drink bag on the table and unzipped it to reveal the five cups, each wafting up a
tantalizing aroma.

Ace perked up in his seat, eyes instantly alighting on Law. He sat up a little straighter, tucking the
amethyst into his lap, and gave the surgeon a shaky smile, wanting to appear at least a little confident
and in control of his emotions.

Sanji also smiled, but something held him back from taking his customary hello kiss.

Luffy ducked around the cook’s foot to snag a handful of the hot, deep-fried, octopus anyway, while
Sabo laughed. It just wouldn't be a date with all of them if Luffy wasn't trying to steal food, and Ace
wasn't anxious about things. Sanji was a surprise, but from what he knew of the older blond, it
probably shouldn't have shocked him as much as it did. He remembered having this conversation
with Law in the beginning, and the doctor had been a bundle of nerves too. A surreptitious glance
around told the songwriter the others were just as nervous in their own ways. He hoped that things
went well.

"Gladly." The cook took a seat across from the others, his jacket and tie discarded in the kitchen and
his sleeves rolled up.

Law passed out each drink; the chocolate mocha for him, the caramel for Sanji (soy and almond
milk, he could already smell it), strong black coffee for Sabo, sweet tea for Luffy, and heavily
sweetened espresso for Ace. Then he took a seat next to Sanji and reached over to take his hand and
give it a gently reassuring squeeze.

Ace took his happily with a murmured 'thank you' and instantly began sipping at it, perking up just a
little more. Again, caffeine was… probably very bad for him at the moment, but he was finding he
didn't care. And there was nothing in Law's stance that spoke of disappointment in any way, so that
was an added bonus.

Sanji glanced at the doctor, squeezed his hand back, then sipped his mocha with a glance around the
table.

Luffy nearly took half his cup in his first drink and grinned licking the sugar from his lips before
popping another takoyaki straight into his mouth without sauce. He seemed to be acutely aware that
the cook was distracted. As such he took a few liberties with the food. Nothing was better than
Sanji's food! Not even Crocky's!!

The last of their party blew a kiss to the doctor with a wink. He slid a napkin of takoyaki wrapped up in it over to him, the corner of which had a little smiling musical note and a heart. It wasn't that he was trying to flaunt his own claim on the sexy darker man, but—okay, fine, he was! He didn't want things to change; he hated change!! So what better way to bring the equally sexy cook into the fold than by being obvious?!

As far as Sabo was concerned, there wasn't one.

Law took it and started eating almost without looking at it, merely trusting in his boyfriends as he leaned slightly into Sanji's shoulder. "We should probably begin with the absolute basics of this conversation. First thing, Sanji, there is nothing wrong with our relationship. You didn't do anything wrong, there's no problem. And secondly, what do you know about polyamory?"

Ace settled back in his chair, the nervousness coming back and he kept his eyes trained on Sanji. The hand not holding his coffee cup thumbed over a facet of the heavy crystal in his lap for stability.

"Uhm..." Sanji looked from man to man. "I... know something about it. My brother... um..."

"I don't want to kiss you, Sanji, just have you cook for me." Luffy grinned, a certain light in his eye. Then he winked, his hand snaking around Ace to do something out of sight to the artist. "Trust me, you're better off not kissing me."

Sabo laughed as Ace jumped, but it sounded tense. He was clutching his cup tightly, eyes trained on Sanji with some intensity that just spoke of thoughts inside the musician's head being something he didn't want to share.

It made the older blond unconsciously sit further back. At first he scooted closer to Law, but meeting Sabo's eyes unsettled something in his stomach so he moved back, clearing his throat. "My brother is married to three men. At the same time. Not legally, of course, but the twins are... and his... um... wh-what does that have to do with this though?"

Law's other hand grasped Sanji's. "Well, being as you have an idea of the basics... Sabo, Ace, Luffy and I are in a polyamorous relationship. The, erm, primary pairings are Ace and Luffy, and me and Sabo, though that's not to say Ace and I don't have fun on occasion and we're all very much in it together, affection and love freeform between us all. It's just the physical relations that are a bit complicated."

Ace leaned forward, placing his half-empty cup onto the table and reached for some of the food. He still kept his gaze on Sanji, watching and waiting anxiously for the blond to relax. He apparently wasn't against polyamory, but... how did he feel about this? If he thought it would help, and he didn't need it as much as he did, he'd have offered to let Sanji hold the big purple gem.

Luffy seemed to sense something in the way the older brunet was sitting, so he moved from his chair to Ace's, scooting in behind him on the wooden seat with his arms wrapped around his brother loosely and his chin on the exposed freckled shoulder to nose and kiss at the collar.

"So... It's... but where does that leave me?"

Sanji hated to focus on himself, but that really was the main question going through his head. Where did he fit in? Was there space for him? He and Law had a lot of fun on their dates, miscommunication notwithstanding, but... sharing the darker man with three other partners? Or at least... wait... He was confused, eyes shifting from person to person trying to piece it together
without talking, which was a fault, he got that he did, but he just... Gah! His head hurt.

"Hey, Sanji, dude. Breathe. It's okay if you don't know yet. We can play it by ear, right?" Sabo looked at the others.

Law squeezed his hand again. "Ideally, you would be involved with me and any of the others you were interested in, and you would be an equal partner as all of us are. Not that you aren't our equal now... I mean equally invested in all of us, or at least connected to us, though if that never happened I believe we could work it out. Not everyone in every polyamorous relationship has equal involvement and attachment with all the others involved."

Ace gave a short nod and tried to smile encouragingly. "It's alright if you can't decide, and it's alright if you don't want to. None of us will hold it against you or anything."

"I..."

The cook couldn't stop his thoughts racing. Questions he couldn't ask burned on his tongue refusing to be spoken aloud, and his eyes jumped from one hopeful face to the next. What if...? But they didn't... And he was... What about...? And then there was... Ngh!!! He didn't know! He didn't know!! Too much, too fast, too soon, too... too... too...

A hand gripped his chin and he was forced to look up. Luffy had that same quiet expression on his face from when he'd managed Ace, and the fingers gripping his non-bruised cheek were gentle, if firm. They didn't hurt, at which some part of Sanji's mind marveled.

"Talk, Sanji." The captain said simply, and everything clicked.

"I want to. I don't know about everything yet, but I want to. I like you guys. I like Law, and Ace kisses really well," Oops, he hadn't said that out loud before, oh well, too late now. "Sabo's voice is amazing, almost as good as Law's, and... you... but..." He trailed off as flashes of another person, in a similar position over him broke through his thoughts, "Just please not all at once?"

"Of course! Of course, Sanji," Law looked around at his boyfriends and back to Sanji. "We want to be with you, overwhelming you all at once wouldn't be... wouldn't be right, wouldn't be fair. That would demanding much too much of you unless you tell us that's ok to try out. Right, Luffy, Ace, Sabo? We wouldn't do that to Sanji, would we? We can just... work with it all one on one for now?"

Ace gave a happy nod, his smile coming a little more easily and the tension draining from his body. "Mmhmm. We'll go as slow as you like, Sanji-kun."

"Definitely." Sabo added with an easy smile, leaning his elbows on the table. "No fun in rushing into things, yeah? Exploring is half the adventure."

"Yeah. Yeah." Sanji sounded a little vague, and he shivered at the sheer brilliance of Luffy's smile.

"Good."

The captain bounced back to Ace's chair, wrapping his arms around the older brunet's shoulders again. He murmured something in the other's ear that Sanji couldn't hear, and the cook didn't think he could process it, even if he'd been able to. He looked back over at Law, somehow embarrassed by the way Luffy had been able to order his confession out of his confusion. He tried to speak a few times, but now that he wasn't under Luffy's control, his tongue seemed to be stuck to the roof of his mouth.

Law shook his head, merely scooting closer. "Take your time. You don't have to make any serious
decisions tonight."

"Do we have a calendar or something?" Sanji blurted all of a sudden, reddening further. "You know, so we don't... run... um..." It was then that it occurred to him that Sabo had been there for both of their dates, and his attention snapped to the other blond, wary. "You weren't stalking us, were you?"

Sabo blinked and raised his hands placatingly. "No, no of course not! I just… play at the cafe when I'm not playing here. Honest."

He grinned and looked to Ace, who was nodding silently to what Luffy said and looking at Sanji with curiosity. Sabo shrugged to himself, wondering about what exactly their smaller lover had said, but reasoned he would be told later.

Sanji couldn't say he was completely relieved but that was more on his own tied up insecurities than anything Sabo said or did. He fingered the necklace Law had given him for a moment, grateful for another thing. The soy and almond.

Looking to the doctor he asked, "So, the Cintiq was like my necklace?"

"Partially. It was something Ace needed. The fact that I had the means to buy it for him is what makes it like your necklace. I was raised by several very generous people, and taught that to demonstrate your love for someone is to supply what they need when they need it. Or at least shower them with pretty gifts that set off the color of their eyes every time I look at them." Law gave a small blush along with his smile, and squeezed Sanji's hand again.

"Mm. He's very good at it… giving gifts." Sabo said with a grin.

Law’s cheeks colored more, and he tried to wave the other off. It really was nothing to him. Just the natural progression of things as far as taking care of his lovers went. He actually already had an idea for the next thing he was going to give their newest partner; he just needed to do a bit of research before he could. As he’d said to Ace, they deserved the best. So, the doctor needed to know what exactly that was when it came to Sanji’s profession.

At the mention of the Cintiq, Ace squirmed a little and had to resist the urge to go see if it actually was perfectly fine—for the fourth time that night. He looked at Law and pressed his lips together, and then picked up his espresso to drain it and leaned into Luffy. Everything was perfectly fine, damn it...

Luffy bit his ear in reprimand, tracing a hand around the thick black collar on his neck; the other pressed the amethyst into Ace’s hand again. The collar had been a gift from Law too, to Luffy, for use on any which one of them he needed to at any given time.

He whispered, "It's fine. Tell him."

A shudder rippled down Ace's spine and he swallowed thickly, gripping the stone hard. He gave a shaky nod of his head in response to Luffy’s order, then spoke.

"A-ah, Law... Um..." He thought for a moment, trying to figure out how to word it. Without conscious thought, he blurted out, "I'm sorry!"

Having been engaged in conversation with the two blonds, one playing footsie with him under the table and the other leaning on his shoulder, Law looked up from his mocha, eyebrows high. "Hmm? For what, Acey?"
A flush came to the artist's face, lighting up his freckles, and he chewed his lip. "Um... t-the dream. I... broke the Cintiq a-and you were..." He struggled to find the right word. "...Disappointed. In me. Because I screwed up..."

"Didn't we have that conversation when I gave it to you?" Law's smile was soft and he lifted his arm from around Sanji's shoulders to reach across the table for Ace's hand. "If it breaks we'll just replace it. Depending on the time of the week, it might have to wait a few days, but if something like that actually happened all you need to do is tell me. I'll take care of it."

Luffy nudged Ace as if to say 'see, told you it was fine'. Sanji sipped his mocha again and Sabo winked at him reassuringly.

"Y... Yeah." Ace let out a tense breath and smiled shakily.

Even though he was still fearful because three damn thousand dollars and Ace had money and Law definitely wasn't wanting for any but damn it that wasn't the point! He squeezed Law's hand in return and nodded, and pouted at Luffy.

"So..." Sanji sat up and leaned on the table, "Where do we go from here? Nobody did answer my calendar question. Are there specific days that somebody's with somebody else or...?"

Sabo shrugged, "It's fairly random for me. I..." he blushed over his coffee, nursing the last couple of swallows, "I might have molested your date the first night you were out because I hadn't put it together and he was just too fuckin' sexy. It's a problem I have. I get handsy."

"That is not a problem, and you know it, Sabo!" Law was quick to jump to his defense. "I admit I should have said something right away, but it is really an issue? Sanji?"

"Uhh. I don't... think so?"

Luffy looked between the cook and the doctor then grabbed the entire rest of the takoyaki on the plate and shoved them all in his mouth at once.

"SHITTY BRAT!!" Sanji growled, but the captain only laughed and waggled his eyebrows at Ace suggestively.

Ace choked on his drink and ended up snorting some of it up his nose, and proceeded to collapse onto the table laughing… and struggling to get his airways clear.

"I think we've reached the end of Mugi's patience, Sanji-love. So, maybe it's best if we just all make sure you have our contact info outside of the Sunny, and if something comes up when we already have plans, you'll have someone to talk to about it. Though, if I'm honest, usually what happens is me having to work a double in the ER because someone," and the way Law put emphasis on the word it implied that somebody was Luffy, "has gotten himself into trouble."

Luffy himself simply grinned, his hands below the table, clearly wandering on Ace to distract the freckled man. Sabo laughed into his coffee, shaking his head in agreement with Law. Ace shivered and bit down on his lip to stifle a noise, and then coughed to clear his throat.

"I think we've reached the end of Mugi's patience, Sanji-love. So, maybe it's best if we just all make sure you have our contact info outside of the Sunny, and if something comes up when we already have plans, you'll have someone to talk to about it. Though, if I'm honest, usually what happens is me having to work a double in the ER because someone," and the way Law put emphasis on the word it implied that somebody was Luffy, "has gotten himself into trouble."

Luffy himself simply grinned, his hands below the table, clearly wandering on Ace to distract the freckled man. Sabo laughed into his coffee, shaking his head in agreement with Law. Ace shivered and bit down on his lip to stifle a noise, and then coughed to clear his throat.

He sent Luffy a side-ways glance and shivered again, then started, "W-well when I don't have a project or class I'm always here. I can give you my number if you want."

"I'm actually on Skype more than anything else. If that's alright with everyone else?"

Sanji glanced around, pulling his phone out. He looked down at it with a frown, then pressed a few
buttons before pulling up the app.

"I use Twitter mostly, but Skype's good for me." Sabo also reached into his pocket for his own device. "Luffy doesn't have anything though. He's kinda hard on phones in general, so we just handle it for him."

The captain rubbed the back of his head, not looking contrite at all, as he said, "Sorry. They just get in the way. It's always falling out of my pocket and getting lost."

"Maybe if you didn't hang upside down on everything you can think of to climb it wouldn't be a problem, Lu." The younger blond chided fondly.

"You already have my cell number, but my Skype is DrHeartStealer, Sanji-love." Law intoned with another of those small blushes, his eyes dancing over to Sabo. "I didn't choose it."

"No worse than mine." Sanji laughed. "My brother's husband hacked my account once and changed it to BabyLoveCook. I haven't been able to figure out how he did that so I can change it back."

Ace pulled out his own phone with a soft snort. "I'm fine with whatever program really. Pretty sure I have Skype on my phone... I know it's on my laptop though, and since I generally have that with me wherever I go..." He shrugged and began flicking through his phone's programs. "I'm pretty sure my Skype name's Firestarter though."

"Alright." Sanji snickered, sending off the requests.

[Where are you?]

The cook frowned again, harder. He tilted his phone away from where Law was leaning on his shoulder, though the doctor was busy with his own. In fact, all but Luffy seemed busy with their phones when he glanced up. Probably in the middle of adding his contact info. And as for the captain he was in the middle of drinking Sanji's barbeque sauce, which ordinarily he'd have been smacked for, but seeing as how Sanji wanted a distraction at the moment, he let it slide so he could text back.

[Out with friends. Nothing's happening.]

[You've been ignoring me all day, Baby.]

[And don't tell me work again, because we both know that's BS.]

[You always had time for me before. Do I need to remind you how much you love me?]

[No no, I'm sorry. No, it's fine. I'm just out with friends. I didn't hear my phone.]

[Come home.]

[Now!]

Sanji looked up and noticed they were all staring at him. He swallowed hard and tried to smile, but it came out shaky. "M-my brother. Needs me to get home. Sorry. I didn't tell him I was staying late."

It was almost too easy to lay it on Alex, and something twisted in his gut while he lied. It made him sick. He leaned over and captured Law's mouth for a kiss after a moment of hesitation. Then he stood, gathering the empty containers and coffee cups. His pocket buzzed several times while he did it, and every time it did, he seemed to flinch. Sabo and Law exchanged a look, and they both turned
to Ace as the cook made his way back to the kitchen. The door closed and Luffy frowned.

Sanji held it together until the others left, each one giving a good night on their way up the stairs. Briefly Sanji wondered if he hadn’t mentioned needing to go home if they would have invited him up to join them for the night, but making his way briskly down the street his phone interrupted his thoughts and shattered his precious control. He barely made it into an alley behind a dumpster before his body purged him of both the deep fried octopus and the sweet latte. He shuddered heavily from the violent spasms and though he knew it would only make it worse, he didn’t answer the call until he was back on his feet and nearly to his home.

By then he’d missed four, and knew without a doubt That Person would be even angrier with him.

At the beginning of the rant he was expecting, his mind drifted to the basement of the building. Would the Marimo be down there to hear him? Or would he already be asleep? Not once did he question why the mossball appeared in his thoughts, or why he gained enough comfort from it to actually talk back.

On nights like this, he needed all the support he could get…

495… 496… 497…

“Please, just let me explain! I swear it’s not—“

The front door slammed shut, echoing down the steps to the basement thanks to the way the hallway had no carpeting to muffle any sounds. It meant that things like this were crystal clear for a certain bouncer currently living in the tiny room just off the landromat.

Zoro shook his head, trying to ignore it.

514… 515… 516…

“It’s not like that! You’d know if you were here! They’re just friends, I don’t care what Pearl told you.”

That sounded like the love cook? And why his voice in particular caught Zoro’s ear he didn’t want to think on too hard, but something was off about it. It sounded… strange. More than just the distortion of his words around the tiled entryway.

Whatever! Not his problem. They may not have come to blows today, but that didn’t mean they were the sort of friends that could just unload their problems to each other. Zoro wasn’t like Luffy, able to pick up friends wherever he went.

530… 531… 532…

He could hear Sanji making his way upstairs now, still talking—arguing really—with the person on the phone, and he shook his head again to clear it. What would Kuina say if she knew he was getting distracted by a handsome face and a sexy ass! Yes, he could admit those things to himself. He didn’t know that he’d ever let the cook know, God only knew the blond bastard’s ego was bad enough as it was, but in the privacy of his own—borrowed—room, Zoro could freely admit that he wondered what the cook was like in bed. Was he wanton and wild, or was he as stuck up and prissy there as he was in his kitchen?

Lowering himself into another push-up, Zoro let his mind wander on that. His lips curled into a smile, and heat pooled in his groin. Battling an erection while his heart rate was already elevated? Fuck, the cook was helping him train without even knowing it!
A shudder ran through him all of a sudden, breaking him out of his trance once again, and he frowned at the floor beneath him, still counting unconsciously as he pushed towards six hundred. Something felt off. Like something had happened that he had only picked up on in his peripherals. Damnit!

He felt himself slowing down, not because he had to, but because that feeling of ‘not good’ was growing, crawling up his spine like a thousand slimy tentacles pulling at his mind. It made him grit his teeth and growl loudly through the last three push-ups, then he was on his feet. He didn't go back down at the end of number 600, he just jumped up on his toes.

Wado was in his hand before he even knew what he was doing!

A sprint up to the first floor brought him face to face with Brook, the middle-aged fencer’s own estoc in his hand, at the ready, and his dark eyes more clear than they had been for months. A nod between them was all it took for the green-haired swordsman to start climbing the stairs.

Though not typically named as katana were, Brook’s longsword bore the name Soul Solid for the chill drawing it brought. When in a sadistic mood, the hippie musician often told the tale that it was haunted by the souls of every man it had ever slain; it brought the frigid wind of the Underworld along with it in its perpetual thirst for evil. Brook refused to reveal just how many souls it supposedly carried, leaving that up to the imagination—much to Chopper and Usopp’s horror. Zoro didn’t know if he truly believed that, but on nights like this one, every fiber of his being prayed that it was true.

They swept the first and second floors in silence. Only their barely audible breathing gave any indication that they were alive at all. The third was more oppressive than the last, but still clean, though a low rumble began to grow within the stockier man’s chest. At the stairs to the fourth, Brook reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. Both shared the same thought, their Nakama lived on this floor. If whatever it was had gotten that far… was Sanji in danger?

Zoro squashed the growl, climbing the steps one by one on reticent feet, Wado raised with a deadly song on her blade. The White Lady was attuned to her Master’s senses, and she too felt something very wrong about the whole situation.

Tension reigned until something clinked under the bouncer’s foot.

He looked down.

Glass?

Curved, and polished on one side. Like a drinking glass. Like one of the tumblers Sanji used at the Sunny! His eyes met Brook’s, then they both turned towards the cook’s door, holding their breath for fear of what they saw.

It was shut tight, but there were obvious scratches on the lock, and something that looked suspiciously like a knife hole was bored into the center of the number. All over the floor in front of it was more of the broken glass, several tumblers’ worth. Zoro spied the curved rims and etched sides to at least three, possibly four.

Just as Brook was about to knock on the door, it opened, revealing the cook himself.

“You look like shit.” Flew out of Zoro’s mouth before he could think. It was true, but he winced
because he hadn’t meant to say it aloud.

For once Sanji had his hair pulled back, up in a small topknot at the crown of his skull that couldn’t keep all of the wisps and clumps contained, but it revealed the slowly healing black eye Zoro had given him to its full beauty. Though the puffiness of his lids was off. If he had to pinpoint it, the bouncer would have said it looked like he’d been crying. His lip was raw, his nose red around the nostrils, and he was dressed in what could only be called grubbies. They were grungy, worn to being almost threadbare, hung unflatteringly on the slender blond’s frame, and permanently stained in multiple places with substances about which Zoro didn’t want to think too hard.

“Yeah, well, fuck you and the shit-train you rode in on, Marimo. Get the fuck out of my way, and maybe I’ll forget you even exist for the rest of the night.”

Sanji pushed between the two swordsmen, a dustpan and brush in his hand, and bent down to start sweeping up the broken glass. His movements were sharp, jittery, and anxious; like he expected them to attack him when his back was turned. Given that they both still had bladed weapons drawn, it wasn’t all that outrageous of an assumption, but Zoro got the feeling they weren’t why the other was so jumpy. A quick glance at his compatriot informed him that Brook felt the same way.

As one, they sheathed their weapons. Wado slid home on Zoro’s belt, and Soul Solid disappeared back into the wooden casing to become Brook’s cane once more.

“Is there anything we can do to help, Sanji-san?” The hippie asked quietly.

“No.” Sanji bit off the word, though not quite as sharply as his comment to Zoro. “Just go back to whatever you were doing before I lost my temper.”

“You sayin’ you did this, cook?” Zoro intoned, surveying the door and hallway again. The window next to the fire escape was open at the other end of the hall. It caught his attention as somehow being out of place. “By yourself?”

“Yes. Now go away.”

Brook followed his gaze while Sanji cleaned up the glass, and nodded, making his way down the hall slowly to inspect the window and fire escape for clues. Zoro, on the other hand, didn’t move.

“How many tumblers did he break?” He asked conversationally.

“I know what you’re doing. Stop it. I broke four of them. I dropped the box I was carrying when I got to my door because I was getting my fucking keys out of my shitty ass pocket.”

“You gouge your door like that tryin’ to open it too?”

Sanji glared at him, standing back up. “Yes.”

“Hmm.”

“Hm? What the shit is hm, idiot Marimo?!”

“Hm is I didn’t think you were this abusive towards your knives.” The mossball lifted a finger to trace the mark in the middle of the door.

“Don’t touch my shit, moss for brains! And I don’t! That’s always been there!”

“Has it?”
“Yes, and I’ve lived here a helluva lot longer than you, now move! And go away! I see enough of your fucking shitty ass face at work! I said it the day you moved in, I’ll say it every day if I have to, I don’t wanna have to run into you outside of work. Now scram, asswipe, before I lose my temper again!!” The blond shoved his way inside his apartment, and slammed the door in Zoro’s face so fast that it caught the end of his nose with the sharp point of the number in the middle.

Which was now loose.

It hadn’t been the day Zoro moved in, and both he and Brook knew it as they exchanged another glance before moving off downstairs again.

The feeling of wrongness about the place was gone now. As expected the fire escape had shown no signs of anyone messing with it, or even anyone using it. The bottom most ladder was even still tucked up safe and secure. So even though that had to have been how the whole thing had happened, there was no proof.

However, as he dropped into the seiza position next to his bed, Zoro was absolutely convinced that what had broken his trance earlier had been the intruder Sanji claimed didn’t exist. The marimo hadn’t grown up with Smoker as a mentor for nothing, and it would have been an insult to Sensei Mihawk’s name if he let those details just slide.

Someone had broken into their home, either startled Sanji into dropping the tumblers, or had deliberately smashed them, stabbed a knife—approximately the size of a chef’s knife, judging by the hole—into Sanji’s door, and attempted to break the lock. What order that all happened in was beyond Zoro’s ability to decipher, but it was clear that either they had delivered their message or the sounds of Zoro and Brook coming up the stairs had scared them off. Meaning they’d fled out the window and down the fire escape before the two swordsmen had reached the fourth floor. If he had to guess, Zoro would have said that they’d delivered their message. Sanji was too shaken to have simply fought off the intruder and that had been the end of it. Vaguely, the marimo wondered if there had been a note on the door, pinned there by the knife, but there had been no paper fibers that he could see in the gouge.

A voice that sounded suspiciously like Smoker’s popped up in his head that it didn’t have to be paper to be a note. Perhaps the knife itself had been a message. Something specific about it. Zoro couldn’t know without seeing the knife in question, and even if he did, he doubted he knew enough about Sanji to make a guess at what the message would have been anyway.

The green-haired man shook his head. He was getting all wound up in circles, and there was nothing he could do if the cook didn’t let him examine all of the evidence! He couldn’t even report it to Smoker because what could the cop do that he hadn’t already done? Get a search warrant for Sanji’s place? No. Any evidence of the break-in would be cleaned up before the detective showed up, Zoro was sure of that. It just wasn’t worth the time and effort he knew Smoker would put into it if he did call.

The question was why? What was the blond hiding? And why wouldn’t he accept help from his friends?
17 October - Part 1

Chapter Summary

"It's Battle of the SUPERNOVAS!"

Luffy and company are going on tour, but where does that leave Sanji when Law goes with them? Especially when he's left behind with the Marimo, who's determined to— "JESUS FUCKING CHRIST GET OFF THE GODDAMN COUNTER BEFORE YOU BREAK SOMETHING!"

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this time there's a bit of serious gender dysphoria at the end, and Sanji's reaction is prime reason why eating disorders are serious affairs here, minna. If you're squicked by people throwing up, best skip it. I try not to go into too much detail with it, but it's still a thing that happens. So... better safe than sorry in my book.

Anyway, Law and Zoro are my lovely, Silva, and Beta'd by my kouhai, Luna, this time. Enjoy, minna! X3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Sanji arrived at the Sunny for work Friday afternoon, everything was in chaos. He had to skirt around behind the building to get up to the door because of the massive tour bus parked out front. It was bright red and yellow, with Sunny's signature lion on the side wearing Luffy's straw hat, and his name in big, bold letters ran from the nose to the tail. Their sleepy little neighborhood was crawling with fans, all screaming for Luffy. The cook noted that Smoker and his partner were holding a police line across both sides of the bar, attempting to keep the crowd under control. But that didn't stop them from snapping photographs with their phones, or screaming for Luffy to come sign things.

A little wary of the whole thing, the blond ducked inside through the back door, and leaned against it for a moment. "What in the name of every fucked up thing that could happen is going on out there?!"

"Ah, Sanji! Just the man I wanted to see." Nami beamed at him, grabbing a hold of his arm to drag him towards the kitchen. "Battle of the Supernovas is about to kick off and we are going to be so amazingly busy that you really can't even imagine it, so, what I need is for you to give me a hand by working a couple of extra hours... every day. For... oh... the next month?"

"WHAT?!"

"It's really not that big a deal, we just open a little sooner and close a little later—"

Robin cut in as they passed her, "Or a lot later."

Nami glared over her shoulder, but conceded, "Or a lot later. Usually that only happens when Luffy himself is fighting and it's a long match. Like the one against Urouge last year! I don't think we get
out of here until dawn! But there shouldn't be many of those this year! Honest, it only happened once, and we were closed the next day anyway because Luffy was travelling, and—"

"Ms. Nami, my precious, beautiful, sweet, caring manager, what exactly is going on?!” The cook felt as lost as the Marimo on Shopping Day!

"It's Battle of the SUPERNOVAS!” Usopp's voice boomed through the microphone like the announcer from a 90s boxing match.

Sanji stared at him like he'd grown a second head. Robin was starting to catch on, but the long-nosed handy man hopped off the stage with barely contained excitement just as she was about to open her mouth.

"It's the tour for the title match. Luffy and the other top thirty-one fighters from all over the country will go on tour to determine who's fighting who for the Supernova Championship! There's some really tough ones this year! I still can't believe Urouge retired though. OHHHH MY GODDDD THAT MATCH!” Usopp dragged his hands down his face remembering it.

The cook tilted his head to the side and frowned a little. He vaguely remembered his uncles, the Old Man's sous chefs, going on and on and on about some Mad Monk they'd put money on, because they were sure if anyone was going to take down the Rubberman it was going to be him. And how sorry they were when he lost! He and the Old Man had laughed about it for weeks afterwards. If Sanji remembered correctly though…

"Luffy didn't get to the final last year though, did he?"

"Oh, so you do know something about it?” Chopper piped up from where he had been packing the mic Usopp used away safely.

"My uncles watch. I'm not as big a fan."

"You will be by the end of the month, cook-bro! It's SUUUUPER popular around here!” Franky crowed, posing with his arms above his head.

Sanji was starting to feel like he was being pulled in all directions when suddenly he had lips on his own, and his brain short-circuited. He leaned into the kiss instinctively, because to do otherwise was to incur That Person's wrath, and his eyes closed before he got a good look at who exactly it was he was kissing.

Then they bounced away, "Nah, still don't wanna kiss you much, Sanji. But Law does. You better go see him upstairs before we have to leave."

"Uhh.” The cook blinked, blushing, "Yeah… uhh, sure, Luffy."

A chorus of giggles followed him as he made his way over to the stairs that led up to the D brothers' apartment above the bar. Ascending it brought him face to back with Ace, who was bent over a suitcase, apparently trying to fit the whole of his wardrobe into one bag on top of the Cintiq and his laptop. He glanced over his shoulder at Sanji and jerked his head towards the bedroom.

With a nod, the blond stepped carefully around the struggling artist, then over a passed out Sabo that he hadn’t even seen. The guitarist was sprawled out under a spiral-bound notebook with hand-drawn music notes all over the cover in various colors of ballpoint pen. He gave the whole scene another blink, his confused frown a bit deeper, before actually entering the bedroom itself.

He wasn't really sure why he was surprised by the sheer level of chaos. The bed had a huge suitcase
in the middle of it, and there were clothes everywhere. Blankets had been thrown to the floor, someone's underwear hung from the ceiling fan, a bare hook swayed lightly above the head of the bed, game systems looked forlorn and lonely without controllers that weren't usually unplugged—if the shadows of wear on the plastic were to be believed—and it looked like Sabo had torn through all of his musical equipment—several amplifiers, four microphones, a veritable cascade of sheet music—looking for something specific. Whether he found it or not was unclear, but the acoustic guitar sitting in its case just outside the door seemed to suggest he had. But above all else what caught the cook's attention was the myriad obsessive collection of stones and crystals littering every flat surface, and hung from the walls. It made him double take before the doctor in the eye of the storm caught his attention.

"Ah… Luffy said you wanted to see me? Before you, uhh… go? Or something?" Sanji carefully picked his way across the floor through clearly discarded clothing towards his boyfriend.

"Oh! Sanji, you made it!"

Law bolted upright from a scatter of paperwork and clothes. He carelessly scattered them all more, off the bed and onto the floor, in order to sweep Sanji up in his arms and twirl him a bit. He lowered him only to kiss his mouth, not as gently as usual in his haste to make lip-to-lip contact, and managed to bang their teeth a bit but he didn't care because his heart was bursting. He'd been afraid he wouldn't get a chance to see Sanji before Nami made them all get their asses in gear and had deliberately been stalling on his packing until the chef got here. The kiss was accompanied by an unusually powerful hug as well. He didn't mean to come on so strong, but in the adrenaline rush of the start of this year's tour he'd forgotten to take it slow and careful. Thus, his under-eye shadows were twice as bad as usual.

Biting down on the flash of pain the hug caused, Sanji smiled a little overwhelmed. "You could have texted. I was only dragging my feet because I accidentally broke my favorite coffee mug two days ago. Is there time for food before you go, or do I have to send something with you to make sure you all eat properly tonight?"

Law let him go to snuggle under his chin and kiss his beard. "Sorry, it's been a little hectic, since I lost track of the time and thought I HAD time before we left. And I don't actually remember if any of us have eaten but there should be time before we leave. I think. But if you can only do one we should take dinner with us 'cuz it'll be our last chance to eat your cooking until the tour's over." He stroked his own beard and looked out over the mess. "You might have time to do both."

"Hey hey, you'll smudge it." The blond lifted his chin a little awkwardly, but laughed. Barely. "I'm sure I could persuade Ms. Nami to give me the time were I actually in my kitchen and cooking, but if you're going to be barnacled to my side it makes cooking a little harder. Especially up here, instead of down there. I think for starters, maybe breathing would be a good idea?" He pulled back enough that he could look up into Law's face, "And then sleep once you get on the bus. You look like the only thing keeping you upright is the espresso I can smell on your breath."

The doctor shoved a hand into his messy hair. "Ah. Yeah. I pulled a double shift last night because I didn't remember the tour started this morning, I think my blood volume is probably point-four pure espresso by now," he laughed a little, finally removing himself from Sanji to start sorting and packing his papers in earnest. And when he bent over he realized he was barefoot, so he straightened up to call out the door, "Ace, where the hell are my boots? And my socks?"

"Ace's downstairs." Came the slurred, half-awake response. "Check under the bed."

Sanji winced a little. "Is it always like this?"
"Only on tour days! Thanks Sabo—you might want to wash that ink off your face BEFORE the fans see you," Law added as he padded back to his papers, swept them aside, and got on his knees to check under the bed. "I found one sock and Luffy's shirt that we couldn't find, no boots."

He sat back and pulled the sock on. It had a hole in the toe and he wiggled his toe in it before shrugging and putting his papers into a plastic binder to sort on the bus.

The cook moved around to the other side of the bed, absently looking over a collection of bi-colored crystals scattered across the bookshelf, "How often does he go on tour, dare I ask?"

He bent down and pulled something out from under the covers where they'd been bunched up. Holding it for a minute he actually yelped before dropping it again. And of course that was the moment when Sabo peeked in through the doorway, face half washed, and hair mussed up on one side. His own eye bags looked almost as bad as Law's.

"Oh hey! There's that dildo Luffy wanted last night! Thanks, San-babe." He blinked at Law's foot. "I swear you had two of those the last time I saw you."

"Hell if I know where the other one is. And we'd probably better pack the dildo, I'll give it a proper wash and pack it in a bag," the surgeon leaned over the bed and grabbed it up, sticking it in his back pocket until he could get it washed and clean while he continued to comb the floor for his other sock and boots. "He only goes on tour like this once a year. Or twice. I think once. OW!"

He scrunched his eyes shut and clapped his hands to his head where he'd banged it on the bedframe.

"I... think I had best head back downstairs and get started on food for you guys..." Sanji inched back closer to the door.

Chaos was fine; he could handle it... in the kitchen. Everywhere else in his life it tended to be a little bit more difficult, and when Sabo fully entered the room, everything was suddenly way too cramped. Having a third body in the not-exactly-large bedroom, plus clothes and clutter everywhere that could be tripped on, and suitcases waiting to either be packed or moved downstairs, and the bed, and the bookshelves, and the TV, and the game systems, and the stones, and... He REALLY couldn't breathe! Too close, too tight, too confined. He needed to get out!

Sabo looked up at him curiously from next to Law, and nudged the brunet to pay attention.

Law looked up and caught the look on Sanji's face and frowned. "Sanji? Are you alright?"

"I-I-I... I'm f-fine... just f-fine..." The cook was still backing up steadily, trying not to let on how badly he was affected by the close quarters. "B-But Nami'll want you guys to l-leave soon yeah? Sh-should get started on... um... that... right. Yeah. Be downstairs. Bye."

He got as far as feeling the door behind him and bolted, skidding through the living room and nearly tripping down the steps as his body heaved for breath now that he was free. He stumbled around the edge of the wall that marked where bar ended and apartment began, and ran face first into what felt like a carved marble statue. Except that it breathed, and brought both hands up to catch him so he didn't bounce off onto his ass. His breath was still too short to say anything, so all he did was glare—though there was very little heat in it thanks to the panic in his chest.

"Oi, cook. Breathe. C'mon, let's get out of the way."

Zoro moved him sideways, almost picking him up bodily to do so, and brought them both into the kitchen and out of the direct line of chaos that was within and without the Sunny. The kitchen was, in fact, the only calm place at the moment, because though the coffeepot gurgled and there were
mugs and dishes in the sink, they all knew this place as Sanji's Area and had kept it relatively quiet and tidy even in today's chaos.

"Breathe, Sanji. You came down those steps almost fast enough to break your neck, breathe."

Once inside his sanctuary, the blond batted at his favorite pain in the ass with a knee that came quite close to the other man's groin. "Lemme go, you overgrown seaweed cluster! I'm fine!"

He tugged on his suit jacket and straightened his tie, exhaling sharply. He was fine. He was back where he belonged, away from that close... tight... no! Not gonna think about it! He was FINE! He gave a shake of his shoulders and turned his back on Zoro. He didn't much want to think about their last confrontation either, and staring at the marimo was bringing that night back into focus again. So, instead he started off towards the refrigerator, intent on cooking away the last of his nerves since going outside for a smoke was absolutely out of the question until the tour bus left and the crowd thinned a little.

Pulling a head of cabbage from the drawer everything almost seemed normal, until he got to his knife block. His hand skittered over the space where his favorite chef's knife was missing as though he either didn't notice, which was impossible, or he didn't care, which was ridiculous. Meaning that he both knew, and cared, and was deliberately not making a big deal about it, which meant he knew where the knife was, which meant...

The growl that rumbled out of Zoro's chest sounded like the snarl of a thunderstorm in the sky, and he couldn't tear his eyes away from that empty spot. He couldn't stop fixating on what it meant.

The intruder that had violated the sanctity of their apartment building and Sanji's door had used his own knife, confirming that it was a message. That intruder had been here, in the Sunny. Here, in Sanji's sacred space WITHIN the Sunny! The intruder had violated Sanji's safe places AND Zoro's only home! They had waltzed in like they had a fucking right to and used Sanji's own tools, his favorite knife, in order to THREATEN HIS NAKAMA!

But Sanji wasn't admitting it. He was still, still, pretending nothing had happened. Nothing. That none of this meant what Zoro damn well knew it meant. And it left Zoro clinging to the counter, shaking with rage he just barely kept in check, his shoulders bulged so large and hard under his shirt the straining seams popped—first the left sleeve, then the right—RIIIIIIP and there went the sleeves and the shoulder seams screamed. His nails were bent against the marble counter, breaking and bending and tearing as he sucked in air through his teeth.

Someone had threatened his home, someone had invaded his safe spot, and this someone was terrorizing the newest member of his Nakama. But so long as Sanji refused to talk, refused to admit there was a problem, what could he do? It left him a boiling-over pot of seething, but impotent, fury.

By the time Sanji responded to the oppressive air of rage permeating his kitchen the cabbage, three carrots, and an onion were all chopped finely and sizzling in a wok on the stove. And when he did, his voice was far calmer than it should have been.

He turned around and regarded his rival as though he was bored. "If you're going to strip down in my kitchen again, at least have the decency to take the shirt off before shredding it. I thought we'd already discussed your shitty habit of abusing cotton the last time you were shirtless."

Zoro's tongue worked against his clenched teeth a minute or two, scraping the tip harshly before he managed to unlock his jaw. He straightened up to yank the sleeves down and off over his hands. The jerky motion betrayed his fury.
"It's not... exactly... intentional... The stuff I get through Izou shouldn't... Have this problem... Said something 'bout spandex seams or somethin'." He struggled with his anger, trying to pack it away, to save it for later—for his swords, for the punching bag, something. Not here, not now.

The cook hummed, flipped a knob on the stove, covered the wok, and slid the whole thing in the oven before turning around. He gave the bouncer a once over, calculating, with his visible eyebrow lifted. He couldn't quite believe he was about to suggest it, and he knew what Law would say about it. But... A part of his mind told him that he owed the braindead muscle-freak for getting him out of the public before he'd actually collapsed into a panic attack.

He jerked his head toward the door that led to the basement where he kept the big containers of bulk, easily stored, foods—flour and the like.

"C'mon. You're useless like that, and unlike the rest of them, you know I can take you." Then he smirked, challenging him, "Or d'you think I'll give you a concussion again?"

"You can't. Storage room doesn't have enough space for full leg extensions, ain't no point fighting in there," the other returned, frowning and rubbing his arms. "Don't care 'bout the concussion. Hate small spaces. Can't fight in there. Not properly." He forced his shoulders down from around his jawline and squeezed the back of his neck with both big hands. "No. Wanna fight, take it somewhere ya can fight."

"The back lot then? There'll be spectators there though." Sanji hadn't thought about the tight space down there, but now that Zoro had pointed it out... he suppressed the minor shudder that ran down his spine by nodding definitively.

Zoro shook his head, agitated. "No. I know a place. It's even set up for big one-on-one fights." He squeezed his neck again. "I know the place. You got a guy for clothes. I got a guy for fights." He nodded once, firmly. "But it can wait. Til the bus goes. I won't be needed for anything other than hauling 'til after that."

"Alright." The end of the cook's santoku appeared an inch away from the bouncer's nose, "Back here, half an hour after closing. You're late? I'll take back my offer. Now get! You're stinking up my kitchen, mossbrain."

That managed to startle a laugh out of the bouncer. The cook was… playing? With him?

Ohh this was perfect! He felt his lips spread into a mad grin—his rage put on the back burner as neatly as Sanji had handled the wok—and he drew his tongue across the flat of the blade obscenely. Just because he could.

Then he ducked out of the kitchen, knowing that as soon as the cook registered what he'd done with the marimo idiot! A shiver ran down his spine and he gripped the knife a bit harder, glaring at where the shitty bastard had the nerve to lick the blade.

Zoro was right, he wanted to throw something.

A growl escaped him as he crossed to the sink. Strictly speaking, since he was going to be frying the meat to safe temperatures anyway, any germs the mossball had put on his knife would be killed anyway, but he couldn't risk Luffy catching the musclehead's stupidity. Really, he'd needed to wash it after chopping the vegetables anyway, but DID HE HAVE TO LICK IT LIKE THAT!?
While the water gathered, he pulled out his phone, "Get down here, I need a kiss to clear my head. Fuckin Marimo idiot LICKED MY KNIFE!"

There was a burst of laughter from upstairs and then the sound of one socked and one bare foot slapping down the stairs before Law slipped into the kitchen to come wrap his arms around Sanji from behind and nuzzle behind one ear.

He purred teasingly, "So he licked your knife did he? Should I bring out Kikoku to meet the White Lady? It's a very bold move, you know, to lick a chef's knife. Do you want to kick his ass or can I get a shot?"

"He's to meet me after you all hit the road so I can kick his ass anyway. And it's cook." Sanji was sautéing the chicken by the time Law got there, and he smirked over his shoulder in a cocky sort of way. Then he sobered, remembering the almost flirtatious way they'd agreed to meet later. "I suppose that counts as a date, huh?"

"If you want it to. Fighting can be as intimate as anything else," Law teased back, kissing that spot behind his ear before bending around to meet his mouth.

"Hmm." Answering the kiss meant he wasn't looking at the stove, but the flick of his wrist that flipped the cubes of chicken apparently didn't need his sight on them anyway. "How much longer do you have?"

"At least two hours. Maybe three. Though we did find one of my boots! ...From last year." The doctor drooped against Sanji's shoulder and yawned, so wide his jaw popped loudly.

"You seriously need a nap." Since the cook's hands were busy packing the chicken and cabbage mixture into small bundles of seaweed to be wrapped further in sticky rice, he rubbed his boyfriend's head with his own. "If it helps you can borrow my shoes until you get somewhere you can buy new ones? We wear about the same size, if I remember correctly."

"Mmmm I need more coffee. And that might work, but only if we can't find them. I swear to Athena I had both of them on when I came in here this morning. Oh, wait! I know. I can check the local seller's list. If anyone stole my boots to pawn online they'll be listed. That's how I lost a pair on the last tour. And how we managed to lose four of Luffy's shirts and two of Shanks' jackets."

Law shuffled over to the coffeepot and poured himself a cup to which he added liberal amounts of sugar.

Sanji's eyebrows disappeared into his hair and he whistled softly. "Dangerous business walking out your front door..."

Then he moved across the counter, packing the bundles of meat and veggies into their nests of rice, and drizzled ample brown sauce over all three. On Luffy's, he garnished with a piece of bacon cut such that when it cooked it curled into a flower. On Ace's, the rice was dyed yellow, blue, and red with a few touches of food coloring and spices. On Sabo's, the meat bundles were strung together like a guitar with bits of his favorite pickled horseradish. And finally Law's was spotted; the rice, the meat, the veggies. He stacked them in their bamboo boxes, tied the ribbon tight to hold them together and lifted the whole thing into a bag with pre-packaged foods he hadn't needed to cook that day.

"Here, bento lunch for the weary travelers on their journey." He smiled softly, setting the whole thing next to Law on the counter. "Don't let Luffy have Ace's, there's saffron on the rice and I know he's allergic. Sabo's is spicy so make sure you don't get it by accident. And for pity's sake, nap before
you eat so you don't choke on it. Please?"

Law put the coffee down to kiss him, purring softly.

"I will. Minute I step onto the tour bus and shove my suitcase and briefcase into their spots I'm out like a light, I promise," he told him gently, eyes falling half-lidded as he took Sanji's hands and massaged them. "I kinda wish you could come with, but there'd be no cooking facilities and frankly I think you'd be appalled at what we eat on tour sometimes," he chuckled, mouth pulling into a lopsided smile.

"I don't even want to think about it. I would probably sabotage the bus." Sanji closed his eyes and shook his head, laughing. "And besides, who would cook for the rest of these idiots if I left with you? They wouldn't even last a day before they would be calling me up crying about missing my food, or worse yet, telling me that Ms. Nami has taken over my kitchen."

"Nami isn't allowed to cook after the molasses on the ceiling incident," the brunet returned swiftly with another kiss. "Alright, I'm going to actually go see about if my boots got snatched so you'll know if I need to borrow your shoes—"

"I have 'em," Zoro said from the kitchen doorway. "Caught some chick in a 'Monkey For The Win' shirt trying to sneak them out the back door. They're on the stage."

"Oh thank god, I don't have to break in a new pair!" Grabbing up his coffee, Law hustled out to get those.

Sanji sighed against the counter, watching him go for a moment, before his attention snapped back to the bouncer. His eyebrow rose, as if gauging where the marimo's mind was now that he'd had a moment or two to calm down again. Judging himself safe enough within his kitchen, he wandered back around to the fridge to start pulling out the pounds of hamburger he'd set down to thaw before he left on Wednesday.

"You look ridiculous without sleeves." But there was a touch of color across the back of his neck that he didn't notice.

"I know. But they popped off, what can I do?"

The bouncer shrugged—bad move, because then the shoulder seam on that side, already overstressed, went RIIIIIIP and he was left with his shirt hanging halfway down his chest and barely clinging to the collar by the other shoulder seam.

"Oh dammit."

The cook gave a snort that was barely covered by a cough, and the plop of ground meat into the biggest stainless steel bowl he had. "I figured that someday your muscles would take over. I think if you went outside you could probably get enough people fawning over them to ignore your 'I got in a fight with a weed whacker and lost' look."

"Ugh! Why would I even want that?!!" The revulsion came faster than his mind's grasp of the insult, but a split second later, Zoro smirked. He yanked the rest of the shirt off, trashing what was left still sewn together and held it out for the cook, "Need any kitchen rags?"

"And risk contaminating all of the food with your stupidity?! Now I know you're idiot, shitty mossball."

The other laughed. "Well, I figured you could get first dibs, otherwise Franky and Usopp always
need more oil rags."

"Right. Because antagonizing me by standing shirtless in my kitchen never crossed your mind? If you believe that, I've got a bridge to sell you."

Sanji rolled his eyes, punching the meatball mixture together. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and inadvertently showing off that even though he fought with his legs, his arms were well-defined because of his profession.

Zoro blinked. Once, then twice, his attention pulled back from that delicious hint of strength. He licked his lips, and donned an air of innocence, "That's antagonistic? Really?"

Unaware of the show he was putting on, the cook turned to level the bouncer with a deadpan scowl, "Really? You're standing. In my kitchen. With your sweaty, over-worked muscles all on display. For all the world to see! What if Ms. Nami or Ms. Robin saw you! You're a lump of gnarled flesh and algae! And the overpowering stench of Ode du Marimo is the first thing to hit the senses on every inhale! I absolutely refuse to believe that you were completely unaware of this. What few brain cells I was sure you had are rapidly disappearing, I swear to God!"

The stockier man scratched the back of his head.

"One, Franky's like even more ripped than I am, Robin won't bat an eye, and two, Nami's a lesbian. She was staring at this," he gestured to himself, still playing up the guileless act, "for two months before we got a uniform shirt that didn't rip when I put it ON. They won't care. As for sweaty and overworked, I haven't even done my katas today! It's tour day, nobody's late to tour day!"

Just to further rile up the punchy blond, Zoro leaned into his personal space, smug and teasing.

"So, I can't stink! Plus…" he drew back again, spreading his hands in pseudo-helplessness, "well… can't help it. I never used to wear a shirt because of this problem 'til Nami figured a uniform might make us look more approachable to customers."

He shrugged again, and that delicious ripple of muscle movement was almost as good as watching him bend over.

"Gnee." Sanji squeaked, and tried to cover the sound with irritation. "All the more reason to go find another fucking shirt instead of standing there doing nothing!" His back was ramrod straight and the motions of rolling the ground sirloin mixture into balls was sharp and rigid, easily played off as temper but for the color on his ears. "Some of us actually have work to do and don't have time to be standing around showing off!"

"Pffft! I'll show you showing off, love cook!"

Zoro reached behind him, braced both hands flat on the table—and Lord have mercy—the man then proceeded to pick his entire body off the floor onto just his hands, shoulders bulging, and folding his legs to get his foot onto the counter strictly so he could boost himself into a proper handstand. At that point his back was facing Sanji and he curled his spine into an arch that defined every rippling muscle to perfection.

And then the bastard shifted all his weight to one hand and bent his fucking arm to make all of those muscles stand out as well. Trembling minutely as he extended his other arm to keep his balance, the Adonis winked at him.

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST GET OFF THE GODDAMN COUNTER BEFORE YOU BREAK SOMETHING!"
The blond was absolutely NOT staring at the way the bronze skin rippled and pulled. He wasn't! He didn't care what anybody thought if they came in to find him pressed up against the opposite counter, his weight on his hands. It meant absolutely nothing that his entire pelvis was open to the way the Marimo lifted himself. NOTHING! Body language be damned, it meant nothing! As such he most certainly did not make the 'gnee' sound again when Nami stuck her head through the door.

"Sanji hun, could you—Oh. You're busy. I'll come back later." Then she was gone again with some sort of smirk on her face before the cook could even say anything.

The bouncer somehow transferred his weight to the other arm AND turned at the same time and he grinned upside down at the cook as he bent his knees and arched his back again, his entire chest presented in one long arch like an offering. "Gonna make me?"

Oh that was IT!

Goddamned, son of a sea plant, torturous, FLIRT! Sanji snapped his hips up and caught the side of those beautifully exposed obliques with the instep of his left foot. Time stopped for all of a moment where they were hovered there, the cook entirely off the ground in a 360 spin and the Marimo frozen in mid-air just an inch above the stainless surface. Their eyes met, blue on green, vicious pleasure radiating from them both under a mask of outrage and shock. Then it all slammed together again, as though making up for the lost heartbeat, and Zoro went flying through the door to the kitchen, across the lacquered surface of the bar and all the way across the dining room to slam his back into the stage.

In the next second Sanji appeared in the door and bellowed, "AND KEEP YOUR DAMN SHITTY FEET OFF MY COUNTER TOO!"

Zoro was laughing too hard to reply, even as Law worriedly checked him over for cracked ribs or concussion (neither of which he had. For a change), holding onto where Sanji had kicked as his eyes sparkled with naked pleasure.

Franky took one look at Sanji, then at Zoro, and led Usopp, Chopper, Brook, and Luffy in laughing at the mirthful bouncer. Robin covered her mouth with her hand, clearly hiding a smile, and she let her eyes drift over to Nami, who merely shook her head.

The humor in her voice was poorly disguised, "At least nothing got broken this time."

"What did you even do, Zor-bro?" Franky wiped a tear from his eye.

"He said I was showing off. So I showed off." The bouncer got to his feet a bit wobbly, then grinned. "It was so worth it."

Now that the cook had disappeared back into his domain, Usopp hopped down off the stage with a laugh that was only slightly tinted with nerves, "That's good, cuz I was gonna have to rough him up if you hadn't deserved it. And he wouldn't want to see the Great Captain Usopp when he's angry! None of you would like me when I'm angry!"

"Ohh? Really?!" Chopper shivered, clinging to the older man's arm. "Do you hulk out like in the movies, Usopp?!"

"Oh, he hulks out alright." Sabo grinned, ruining the fabrication with a scruffle of the sharpshooter's kinky ponytail. "He hulks himself right behind Zoro, and has him do all the up close fighting."

"Sabo!" Usopp pouted, batting at him, "Watch the 'do!"
Brook chortled, giving the blond a good-natured elbow, "Didn't you hear? He's enlisted it in the hair force! YOHOHOHOHO!"

A collective groan drowned out the older hippie's laughter, and the front door opened, allowing the sound of screaming fans to filter in, bringing the last of Luffy's crew inside. The bright red-haired manager was flanked on either side by a pair of similarly middle-aged men, approximately the same height, though the one to the right was significantly broader than the one to the left. The one on the right had thick black hair, streaked in white at both temples, the sort of rounded middle that came with good food and strong laughter, and a quiet Zen air about him. He was Aisan, with Maori tattoos peeking out from around his shirt. The one on the left was entirely silver-haired, had wire-frame glasses on his nose, and announced them all by laughing loudly at whatever his partner had just said. All three were dressed in jeans and tee-shirts with Hawaiian-style button-ups over top that declared them "Rubberman Crew" across the back.

"Getting into trouble again, Zoro?" Shanks grinned, a twinkle in his eye.

"When am I not?" The bouncer bared his teeth in a grin as he came up and clapped his hands together. He gave a small bow, "Ohisashiburi, Rayleigh-san, Jinbe-san."

The dark-haired man started to bow and respond, but was cut off.

Rayleigh laughed and hauled Zoro in for a rough hug, smirking at the sound of his back popping. "Boy, how many times I gotta tell you to just call me Rayleigh?"

"Old habits die hard." Zoro gave a single chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck like the shadow of a much younger version of himself. "And yourself, Rayleigh-s—ah," they both laughed when he caught it, "keeping the good stuff to yourself?"

"You know that's exactly what I've been up to! What fun is this town without some rumbles here and there?" The older man's grin was shameless.

"Oh don't you go starting that again." Vivi commented from behind them, before reaching up to flick the older man in the earlobe. "The last time you got to talking about 'good rumbles' I wound up having to borrow money from Shakky to bail you three and Dad out of Smoker's holding cells. I promised Shakky the next time I caught you talking about it, I'd call her, and you know you don't want me to do that, do you?"

Jinbe chuckled and stepped slightly to the side, almost as though he was getting out of the way, but the big Asian man covered it nicely by looking to Sabo, "The bus is ready whenever you all are. I assume Xiaolu is packed?"

"Isn't he always?" The blond laughed, pointing over his shoulder at where the Rubberman was trying to pretend he wasn't at all interested in the bagged lunches Ace was guarding.

Nami caught the gesture, "LUFFY! Leave that alone before Sanji throws you through a table again! Dinner is soon!"

"SANJI! FOOD!" Came the immediate reply, as he danced out of both manager and brother's reach towards the kitchen.

Not a minute later, just as Nami had predicted, he came barreling back out of the kitchen followed by a flying soup ladle, that had more dents in it than bowl anymore, and another bellow at the top of the cook's lungs, "WAIT YOUR FUCKING TURN, YOU SHITTY RUBBER BASTARD!"

"Oh ho ho ho!" Shanks' eyebrows climbed into his hair, "Finally hired a cook that compares with
Dadan, eh Nami?"

She smiled. "He does. AND he can cook enough to actually feed the man on what we can afford to buy. Not to mention he can go toe-to-fist with Zoro and come out of it better than mosshead did."

"I HEARD THAT!"

"I meant for you to, Mr. In-Debt-To-My-Eyeballs!"

Law popped in then. "Zoro, we finally got the bags all packed, will you haul them to the bus for us?"

The mosshead grunted and nodded, getting up to trot up the stairs while Rayleigh, shameless even now, peeked into the kitchen.

"Not to be rude, Sanji-san, but do you think there'll be enough for a few extra guests as well? Whatever you're making smells divine."

"Ah, I have no idea who you are, but no one ever leaves hungry when a Noir is in the kitchen." The blond was bright smiles and cordial again with no sign of the previous explosions of temper, or the blush that had so very nearly given away his inner thoughts.

He spun the bowl he was holding on his palm throwing spices into it as he walked down the line of jars on the counter. A timer dinged, and he actually balanced the thing on his head to bend over and pull the fourth tray of meatballs from the big oven. Besides that, he had four large pots with various amounts of boiling water, and in the sink the older man could see traces of rolled out dough and flour on a traditional wooden pin. Another scoot of the hot pan and the bowl went spinning up into the air, the contents revealed as being a tossed salad—literally—since gravity pulled the metal basin down before the fluffy lettuces and Frenched raw veggies. He managed to catch it on the turn back, not dropping a single leaf.

"Though I'd be grateful for a number. It makes it easier to measure."

"Four extra. Me, Jinbe, and Shanks. And I count as two people. There's never been a Noir I wouldn't eat out of house and home if I could." The older man grinned, his glasses slipping down his nose a little before he pushed them back up. "Me and the captain. You might ask Baratie's owner about the 'Gold and Silver bastards' if you don't already know the title."

Sanji's eyes widened. "...Shit."

He gave his best smile to cover his slip, and slid across the kitchen to grab the flour again. Then passed by the sink and flipped the rolling pin back up into his hand. He spun and wielding it like sword, pointed it at the older man.

"You leave here hungry and the Shit Geezer'll have my head. Go sit your ass down with the rest of 'em, and tell Luffy to leave those lunches alone or I'll saffron his noodles!" He flipped the pin again, pouring a whole cup of flour onto his counter and breaking an egg in the middle. "In fact, call the Old Man and let him know you're here. I'm about to show him up!"

Rayleigh laughed, outright, and tilted an imaginary cap to him. "Feel free to try me! I've never left hungry, but rarely full up, either," he winked. "I'll give Zeff a call if you like, though. He probably doesn't know I'm still alive and kicking, I always seem to miss when Baratie's in town."

He retreated then, tugging Luffy along by the back of his shirt.

"Wait for it patiently, Rubberman! Some of the good things in life you gotta wait for, you know
that!

A full ten minutes later, Sanji re-emerged from the kitchen with a kick to the door, plates balanced on both arms, and a bowl on his head. He spun them, sliding them one after the other down the bar with a flourish he’d never used before, a smug sort of air about him. Fifteen plates piled high with fresh pasta, a tomato sauce from scratch, meatballs that looked ready to melt in their mouths, a thick slice of hot, crusty bread, and a different vegetable for each of his regulars. Zoro, Franky, Chopper, and Robin got mushrooms. Shanks, Rayleigh, and Luffy's were piled with enough cheese to look like snow. Nami, Usopp, Law, and Sabo had extra garlic and lima beans. Brook, Vivi, and Jinbe found broccoli on theirs. And Ace's came with carrots. The bowl contained the salad—multiple kinds of lettuce greens, cucumbers, leftover tomatoes from the sauce, carrot shreds from cooking for Ace, large mushroom pieces that could be pulled out, olives, sweet peppers, and a rack of dressings the cook plunked down in the middle of the bar like a foodie's centerpiece.

He stood back, his hands behind him, and gave a small, proud bow, "Bon appétit."

It was Rayleigh that got there first—boney elbows made for one hell of a crowd-paring tool, and he had those. He snatched up his plate with an expression that would not have been out of place on a demon that had just sealed a contract.

"Mr. Noir, I can honestly say I think I am going to enjoy this meal more than any I have had in the last year.” He made sure to nab a hearty helping of salad on his way through before letting the others take his spot.

"LUFFY, SIT YOUR ASS DOWN BEFORE I KICK IT THROUGH THE WALL!" Sanji snapped, nearly knocked off his feet by the enthusiastic fighter.

Brook and Zoro got there next, by sheer luck, because Usopp tried to use the rigging and got stuck, tripping both Sabo and Ace in the process. Of course when that devolved into a shoving match to get back on their feet, Vivi very neatly stepped over them, her hands on her girlfriend's waist to help the pretty redhead hop the boys. Robin joined them and the three women sashayed up to the bar, guarded by Franky in the hopes that the blue-haired bouncer could get his own before the chaos behind him snagged the best bits of the salad. Chopper made the mistake of stopping to help Usopp out of the wires, and between that and Luffy's enthusiasm, it let Shanks and Jinbe take theirs with a laugh. Law, being the smartest out of them all it seemed, took his time, confident the cook would save him some even if he got there last.

Ah, dinner at the Thousand Sunny.

With a bit of sorting, a lot of cursing, and two kicked asses—literally, by pointed boots no less—everyone had a plate and was settled around what passed for a dining room. Most were sitting cross legged on the stage with their drinks—tea, coffee, water, soda for Luffy, Chopper and Usopp, an energy drink for Ace, beer for the five booze hounds, and a tall glass of pure white, ultrapasturized milk for the bone man.

As they all settled in, Rayleigh held his hands up for quiet.

It took a minute, but when he got it, he smiled. "Today we come together in good company and good food to send Luffy off on tour with a bang and some luck. As tradition dictates for this occasion, everyone... The well-wishes, please."

Sanji leaned against the bar watching mostly, and sipping at a mug of what could have been coffee, but if it was it had enough milk in it to make it almost white.
Nami cleared her throat first, "Luffy, you know we'll love you whether you win or not, but—"

"How much you got on him, money-wench?" Zoro cut in with a laugh.

"Three thousand, not that it's any of your business, Mr. I-Can't-Pay-The-Interest!" She'd have tossed her bread if it wasn't Sanji's while a laugh broke out among the others.

"Not that my boo isn't totally wrapped up in her bets or anything," Vivi leaned on Nami's shoulder with a giggle, "But we really do hope you beat 'em all, Luffy!"

"Yes, show them what you're really made of, Mr. Rubberman." Brook agreed.

At the same time, Franky shouted, "OW! SUPER KICK THEIR ASSES!"

Chopper squeaked around a bite of his salad, "Just don't get hurt!"

"Here, here!" Sabo agreed, toasting with his mug of amber beer. "No repeats of last year!"

"Oh please, no." Law put his head in his hand, "As much as I enjoy my craft, I really don't want a repeat of last year."

Sanji was about to ask what that meant when Shanks cut in with a paper from his pocket, "Akainu's not even in the running this year, no worries, gang."

A cheer rang out from all of them that spoke volumes for what had gone down with the Rubberman the previous year. The cook tried to wrack his brain for what they were talking about, but could only remember that the whole thing had been cut off short because someone had gotten seriously injured? He wasn't confident exactly, but he could recall Carne going around grumbling for weeks about some 'no-good, dirty, cheating, dog'. Sanji could only figure that was whoever this Akainu person had been, and he gave a small shrug to himself.

Now that the schedule was out, Nami, Vivi, Usopp, and Franky were pouring over it, having yanked it from Shanks' hand as soon as they realized what it was. Clearly from the names on it the pretty manager was sure she was going to have to re-think some of her bets, and she was making notes on Vivi's arm in black marker.

Robin glanced at them, then smiled, "I should hope that all of Luffy's opponents have significant injury with which to weed out the boring competition. After all, what's a match worth if there isn't any need for medical attention at the end?"

"Babe! Morbid!"

"Oops?" She didn't sound at all apologetic to her boyfriend's tears as she gave a small shrug and took a drink of her blood-red wine.

"Well, I for one, hope that the Great Sniper Sogeking appears to totally turn the tournament upside down! Then he could defeat all of the opponents and walk away with the title clean out of nowhere like he did ten years ago!" Usopp boasted.

"NO!" Luffy wailed, leaping to the top of the table, his hands in fists in the air, "I'M GONNA BE THE SUPERNOVA!"

"Luffy, sit down!" Ace pulled at his brother's shorts to get him off the table before Sanji could kick him. Again.
Usopp was about to say something else, but Luffy jumped him, sending his plate flying. Only the cook's quick movement caught both plate and leftover food as the pair tumbled past, end over end until Usopp had skittered away and taken off running across the bar. He screamed for dear life, but everybody knew he was playing it up to help Luffy relax before his first fight tomorrow. Sanji shook his head, setting the plate down and moving out of the way.

Jinbe rumbled, "I should hope for fair, even matches. Though with Moria sending six fighters this year, I have my doubts."

"Surely you don't think he'd try anything explicitly against the rules do you?" Vivi asked, her arm nearly covered in black now that Nami was going over the line-up a second time.

"One can only hope, Vivi-san."

"Tiger's got a couple of good ones in here too though." Franky chimed in. "That'll help balance it out."

"True, provided that they're able to make it past the first and second round. I'm not holding much hope for some of these guys. Jinbe, what do you know of Kuroobi?" Nami frowned.

"Fair fighter. Tends to use karate exclusively. But if you're to put your eye on any of them, Nami-san, I'd go for Arlong." The older man commented.

A shudder ran through the group, and Sanji felt again like he was missing something. He glanced around, picking up a tense air at the mention of the name, and he noticed most people were focused on Nami. Subtly the cook slid his bar stool a little closer, giving an unspoken support, though he didn't know what he was supporting or why.

The pretty manager nodded her head, "It's good to see he's cleaned up his act then. I had worried about him after..."

"It's entirely understandable, Nami-san. I would not have even brought it up, but for if there is one to back besides Luffy. He is the one." Jinbe apologized, bowing his head deeply until she waved him off.

Slowly the chaos filtered back in again after that, with Chopper breaking off to join Usopp and Luffy in rough housing beyond the tables. Ace leaned on Sabo's shoulder, happily satiated and nursing his second energy drink. Shanks was drawn into the conversation with Nami and Franky about the line-up, their heads together over the paper, and their voices hushed. Zoro leaned back mostly observing rather than participating, and at some point Sabo and Brook had gotten a couple of guitars from the instrument storage under the stage with which to play around. Refills came and went, the cook appearing and disappearing almost before people realized they needed him, until even Rayleigh and Luffy were satisfied.

"I have to admit, boy, I didn't think you could do it." The silver-haired trainer leaned back in his chair, his hand on his stomach and the other on the handle of his beer mug. "You do Zeff proud. Though I didn't realize he had two sons. I thought his second was a daughter."

Sanji shuddered, and he barely covered a glance around at the rest by bending over to gather a few more plates onto the stack in his arms. "Ah, that would be a common mistake, Mr. Silvers."

"Call me, Rayleigh."

"Rayleigh then." The cook agreed with a short nod, trying to drop the subject.
"I could have sworn, when I was there last, he had his boy, the orphan from Italy he picked up in Alabasta, and a daughter by his wife. Pretty little thing. Looked just like her mother, rest her soul." Sharp, piercing grey eyes watched his every move.

"I'm the Old Man's biological son, Rayleigh, I don't know what you heard, but as you can see..." Sanji gestured to himself, "I am no woman. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

The cook made his way stiffly back to the kitchen, and Shanks nudged Rayleigh's arm to share a bottle of whiskey for good luck, neatly distracting the older man. Within the confines of his kitchen, Sanji leaned against the door, listening to the raucous party outside. He felt tears sting his eyes, and he blinked rapidly to chase them away. It didn't matter! It didn't matter! He wasn't that person anymore. He was Sanji. He was Zeff's son!

Then why did it hurt still?

Fuck, this was supposed to be a happy send off. Get the hell over it! He set the dishes in the sink and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, his gut churning, and the feeling of wrong crawling all over his skin. He wasn't a girl! He WASN'T! He was a man! No matter what they said or how they thought or what they believed! The only opinion that mattered was his own! No one else's! He wasn't broken, he wasn't wrong, he wasn't...

He sucked in a shuddered breath, feeling the pull of his bruises under his binder. Law would kill him if he knew, but no matter what else he did, he simply could not work without binding. He tried to play it safe though, taking frequent breaks, unzipping it when he thought he could get away with it, and if he knew he was going to be alone in the kitchen for a while, he actually took it off completely between cigarettes. But he simply could not go without it entirely.

Reaching for the bottle of Tramadol above the sink was a mistake though. It clenched his diaphragm into his already volatile stomach, and even though he'd been good, even though he hadn't eaten more than a couple of bites of any given thing all throughout the day, he knew he couldn't stop it. He only just made it to the dirty dishes sink in time, before his stomach heaved and what little he had consumed all came back up again. The taste made him gag several more times, until he was leaning against the stainless steel, panting heavily.

He shoved the water on, grateful the mess was mostly liquid, and with shuddering hands, shoved his sleeves back up to scrub the whole thing; dishes, counter, sink, and drain.

Chapter End Notes

**Gender identity disorder (GID)** or gender dysphoria is the formal diagnosis used by psychologists and physicians to describe people who experience significant discontent with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth.
Chapter Notes

Un-Beta'd because y'all have been so bloody patient with me I wanted to get it out ASAP!!

Zoro is Silva-love as usual.

Zoro watched the bus roll away. Only after it was out of sight and hearing range did he let himself prowl back into the Sunny. No matter how much he wanted to just take off with the cook and work everything out, they still had a bar to run and it was Friday night. On one hand, because the Rubberman himself wouldn’t be there, they weren’t all that busy, but on the other hand, it was Friday night, so they did have a decent crowd. Nami had Franky help him pull out the big flatscreen TV that she would be using over the next several weeks to showcase Luffy’s fights, and Usopp hooked it up to his laptop. Since there wouldn't be any actual fighting until tomorrow, he set it to play a montage of Sabo's music. Brook had edited the singer-songwriter's Youtube channel into a single video specifically for situations like this. The bar wouldn't suffer without their primary entertainment and Sabo gained exposure without having to be there in person.

Still, the shift passed easily. By the end of it, he wasn’t sure if his anticipatory attitude kept people in line, or if they were just all excited for the tour to really kick off and thus didn’t want to risk being banned from the Sunny for tomorrow night. Whatever the case, Zoro was grateful for it because it meant clean up at the end of the night was easy.

When Franky gave him the ‘all clear’, the younger bouncer nearly exploded out of his skin. He was still thrumming with held-back anger and frustration. The place was empty but for employees, the brand new security system was installed and armed, Usopp and Chopper’s things were set up in Luffy’s apartment, even Nami waved him off when he stuck his head into her office.

He grinned with a feral quality. Now was the perfect time to take Sanji up on that offer of a fight.

Every one of his nakama recognized the panther-stalk when he crossed the bar, winding his way toward the kitchen and licking his teeth. With the D brothers happily, if not exactly safely, on their way to Loguetown, there was no one in the crew who was willing to come between the feline bouncer and his prey. As such he had a clear path to the kitchen—though he noted with an unconscious sort of glee that Usopp and Chopper ducked behind Franky on his way past, and the girls had vacated to Nami’s office.

"Oi. Cook." His voice was a predatory rumble.

"Hey look at that you didn't get lost. Imagine." The blond was up to his elbows in dishwater, scrubbing what appeared to be the sink itself.

He had an odd air about him, a subtle vibration, and only the curtain of hair over his face kept the bouncer from being able to tell if he was just a touch off color. It could have been the lighting, or maybe the hint of odd scent under the cleaning products? Maybe there had been something bad in the fridge?
Whatever it was, Sanji pulled the plug on the drain and flicked the tap on to rinse away the suds in the same fluid motion. Then he grabbed a towel to dry himself and turned to flash a challenging smirk in the bouncer’s direction. His body language was conflicted, mostly smug confidence, but underneath, invisible to most people, a tiny shiver of nerves tried to give him away.

Zoro tilted his head in a considerate gesture, if something was wrong he wanted to at least give the appearance of providing an out for the volatile blond, though the way his eyes narrowed likely gave away his true intentions. "Is there anything left to do? Coffee to set up for morning, leftovers to put in the fridge?"

He wanted nothing to get in the way of his fight.

"Well, I've this shitty ball of seaweed I need to tenderize but otherwise I think I'm good for the night."

The Marimo couldn't help the razor's edge grin that took over his face—all teeth and bundled aggression—but then again, he didn't even try.

“Oh, really? You’re sure you’re not mistaken?” Anticipation, a sort of jittery energy, deepened the edge of that last word.

A curl of the cook’s lips preceded his next words, “Oh, I’m sure it needs a good beating. This variety tends to useless otherwise.”

“Shall we then?” The return of that dangerous play did things to Zoro’s expression that betrayed his inner monologue.

Sanji slid his jacket back on and tucked a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, "So where is this mythical fighting space you know about, mossbrain? Better not be the river with the rest of your ilk."

The bouncer rolled his eyes. "Why? Are you afraid you’ll drown in anything deeper than a sink? Come on. Your trash talk is dated, ‘moss’ and ‘grass’ got stale years ago. Or maybe you just can’t do any better?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets, tone barely hiding the anger he was still holding back under a layer of forced easiness. He shouldered his way out of the back door, reasonably sure the cook would follow.

"Sorry it's kind of hard to get over, seeing as how usually herbs don't get up and walk around. You'll have to pardon a simple cook being mystified by talking ingredients." The flick of his lighter punctuated his pause, "And I don't know if I trust following you, I've been warned that you get lost looking for your own ass." But he kept pace, letting Zoro lead anyway.

The other glanced over his shoulder and bared that sharp grin again. "Better! Cooking insults are new, if a bit expected from a shitty cook. On getting lost... I can be man enough to admit it. It happens a lot, but there’s two places that I’ll never get lost going to. The Sunny and the dojo."

Sanji took a deep inhale, "And yet somehow you've yet to stay lost when I tell you to, why is that, I wonder?"

"I don't take orders from anyone but my sister. And only because she knows how to pinch my piercings just wrong," Zoro fought to suppress a shudder, a losing battle. Hopefully it wasn’t indicative of what was going to happen when they got there; he couldn’t afford another loss like the last one. He found his hand drifted up to his bad eye and covered the motion with a long-suffering sigh, dragging his fingers through his hair. "She doesn't care about fighting fair, either!"
He frowned a little at that, recalling some particularly embarrassing incidents involving bear suits and running around the dojo trying desperately to avoid having his picture taken. Roronoa Zoro was no coward, but there were just some things that crossed the line!

"You've a sister? How horrid for her! I can only imagine what growing up with you would have been like for a precious flower."

"Actually, Perona’s more like a Venus flytrap in a very pretty dress. We're not blood related, so half the time she doesn't even think of me as kin and thoroughly trounces me. Or treats me like one of her 'pets'. I mean, she can be a Domme all she wants, but I do NOT appreciate her trying to use command words on me! It makes her usual guy terribly anxious."

The cook resolutely did not shiver, he didn't! It was a shudder! Of revulsion! Right! Which was why what he said, didn't mean what it sounded like, "It's not like you would understand being dominated anyway."

"Ah, no, no, I do, oh my God I do. But well… she's my sister," Zoro’s voice had a touch of fond exasperation. "But no, I've had that good-good adrenaline rush in battle against an opponent you know you're not quite strong enough to beat but God, the fight all the way through is amazing, and then you get beat and it's just—ugh, and then comes the time you finally—finally!—finally win and the fucking thrill! I had to dunk in the lake to calm down considering it was my Sensei I'd just won against. And it was January. But he has his lovers and I didn't have anybody and I turned Perona down cold, so into the lake it was." He chuckled and rolled his shoulders. "It's always a thrill to win, but the domination aspect tickles something in the lizard brain."

"Hmph." Sanji sniffed, unwilling to poke at why Zoro's obtuse fighting connection made him huffy. "Lizard brain is right. What kind of idiot throws himself into the water in January? It's called a shower, asstwat." He booted him in said ass as punctuation of the word.

"We were up in the fuckin' mountains! There WAS no shower, and like hell could I wait an hour for the baths to fill up!" He laughed, and the cook thought he was the oblivious one! Then he stepped around a corner and grinned at the little house-turned-dojo as he beelined through the doors.

"JOHNNY! YOSAKU!"

"So much for one on one," Sanji muttered, pausing to stub out his cigarette on the sidewalk out front. He slipped out of his shoes in respect, and entered the dojo proper with a sideways glance at the two puppy-like men hovering around the Marimo. "Thought we were gonna do something, dino breath, didn't know it was gonna be a gangbang."

Zoro looked up from giving Johnny a noogie. "Ah, we are fighting one on one. These two," he lifted them both up and put them on his shoulders while they whined and flailed dramatically, "took over the place after Sensei moved suddenly. Since they're old friends of mine, I get a free pass to train and fight here whenever!" His grin this time was less razor sharp, more happy than aggressive.

"Without interference," Yosaku added from over Zoro's bicep.

And Johnny curled himself to look at Sanji upside down around Zoro’s other arm. "Yeah, Aniki hates having other people in his fights!"

"Tch, then let's get to it. It's not nice to keep a gentleman waiting, you know." The toss of his head was to resettlee his sunshine hair; it was resolutely not because he was at all jealous!

Zoro laughed in a strange, unrefined, hearty way Sanji hadn't heard before and dumped the pair he
was holding. Both shot to their feet unharmed and leapt to open the doors to the main dojo—the biggest one of the three rooms.

One was for relaxing and living in—set up something like a studio apartment with a tiny walled-off corner for a bathroom, sink and small stove next to a mini-fridge, and a closet that most likely held a fold down bed as well as their linens. Sanji recognized the style after having grown up on a ship; everything had a place and it all folded away to make the single-room dwelling feel bigger—not that they actually had everything put away.

The second was used as a storage room for equipment. The door even had a sign on it, dated and worn, that said, “Storage Room. Employees only.” And there was a padlock latch screwed into the wall across the doorjam. It was unlocked at the moment, the heavy lock itself hanging from the part that folded over the screws as an extra safety measure.

And then there was the arena. It had once been a separated kitchen, dining room, and the master bedroom, but the walls had been knocked down and there were several sturdy support poles instead, leaving a wide, open space in which to fight where the ring was marked out by a circle carved painstakingly into the wooden floor.

Sanji moved forward with purpose, not waiting for an invitation. As far as he was concerned being brought there was invitation enough. He walked the perimeter of the ring, letting his toes spread out over the fibers of the tatami mats; his hands in his pockets and his spine relaxed. When he was certain that Zoro was once again distracted by his 'brothers', the blond bent forward into a walkover, stretching out his calf muscles. That became a twist with a sideways kick in slow motion, his foot flexing at full extension. He also wiggled the toes of the foot he was still standing on, his balance impeccable. All in all, he seemed to be working a warm up into the air of a cat inspecting his brand new home. Aloof and slightly disdainful, he came to the middle of the ring.

"It'll do." He sniffed in that same vaguely feline fashion.

Zoro, currently stretched out between his 'brothers', grinned back at Sanji as he slid out from between them pair and into a glorious stretch of calves and shoulders. "I should hope so. Now the only question is, swords or no?"

Sanji threw him a smug smile, "Depends on whether you're any better with 'em than you were without 'em. Doc Heart isn't around to patch up your eye socket again."

"I know," the Marimo complained lightly. "But I think your kicks would shatter the bokken, and I'm not about to ask you to pull your kicks, so I think without is probably better. Just aim for sparring and not murder this time, ne?"

"As long as you keep your tongue in your mouth, I won't want to actually knock it off your face." Sarcastic and the wrong kind of sweet, the cook dropped into his ready stance—weight on his right leg, the left knee loose and slightly bent, his hips tilted into his center of gravity.

"Hey, a little trash-talk to get the blood boiling is traditional and if my Sensei never managed to cut it out of me why would you?" Zoro sniffed; shoulders set, hands up, knees loose, and both eyes focused in on Sanji.

Like before the blond kept his elbows up to guard his face and neck, "Because I'll take your jaw with it, and you already know I can break your skull." He stepped in, light and wary, "You want first shot this time?"

“Nah. Defending is fun. Ain't met somebody that strong since I beat my Sensei, 'cept Luffy, and he
can't fight for real outside the ring." The other grinned, all sharp teeth and bright eyes. "Push me again. Right up to the limits."

Again with the flirting?! The growl in response was more for how Sanji felt himself enjoying their banter than for anything the Marimo said. He shook his head.

“Your funeral, mossball!”

Sanji gave a small hop and snapped his left leg up to bring the heel towards Zoro’s hip, pulling back slightly at the last second to go for the bouncer’s forearm instead. Zoro ducked with a gleeful growl and a flash of toothy grin, leading Sanji’s momentum to carry him too far. Only quick reflexes and sure hands kept the cook’s upper body from meeting the ground. The jolt of impact ricocheted up one arm, and he threw a sharp glare over his shoulder, bright blue through his bangs.

But Zoro hadn’t stopped moving.

He twisted to follow Sanji, throwing a punch with his right fist meant for those amazingly extended legs. If he was lucky, it’d shove the blond off-balance even more than he was already. They’d only just started and that rush that had been building since Sanji’s initial offer was surging through his veins.

He brought a foot up to shove down at Sanji’s exposed torso while the other was starting to get up, but the damn flexible bastard swerved, choosing to sacrifice strength for speed as the movement brought him almost into the line of Zoro’s punch. The curve of Sanji’s spine meant that the thick span of knuckles barely grazed his stomach—though it still forced air out of his lungs.

He growled, “Oi! Watch the ribs or Law’ll have both our heads on a platter!”

Still, he followed it up with a twist of his hips that that brought his left shin around for Zoro’s knees.

An arch backward over the kick called to mind the graceful movement of a breakdancer, and led easily into shoving again towards Sanji with a foot as soon as the bouncer was steady enough to risk it.

“I’m trying! You’re not making it easy!” There was a flicker of teeth as he barked the words. “There aren’t any holes in your form!”

“That’s the point, shithead!” Sanji laughed, meeting the kick with his hip. The bunched muscles of his thigh sent the impact rebounding at his opponent. He snapped his heel around, driving it into Zoro’s ass cheek. “Unlike you. You’re full of ‘em. Might call you a cheesehead from now on instead.”

“Ahhh but here’s the trick! I absorb it!” Zoro crowed back, twisting to slam into Sanji’s shin. The foot planted on his ass inadvertently helped him keep steady on his hands and provided a good target. "I can handle it unless it's enough to move at least five hundred pounds."

It wasn’t easy, keeping his own balance while making an attack at the other man—especially considering how much force Sanji could pack into one foot.

“I dunno, you took a pretty nice arch in that door last time.”

Again, Sanji was able to twist enough to get onto Zoro’s leg and use it against him—this time planting a knee in his stomach. Their noses were inches apart for a split second before he twisted into gravity and a springing handstand; following that up with another of those flying roundhouses.
Finally having gotten the chance to be back on his feet, if winded a bit, this time Zoro blocked the roundhouse with his forearm and pushed against Sanji. That was the key to winning against someone that used Savate. Break their perfect balance, make them miss. If he could do that, he could win. He’d done it as far as he could tell, and that rush surging through his veins vaulted into a roar as he pressed the advantage he swore he had.

The cook wind-milled his arms in response to the shove, and his other foot fell out as if he had lost track of the ceiling. It was catching sight of the mat mid-turn that gave him the focal point to launch into a scissor lock around Zoro’s forearm and regain some momentum. Not enough to move the bouncer, but enough to make sure that when Sanji went down he’d be able to catch himself. Again he landed on his hands—harder than normal this time—and the pull of fabric on skin came with the punishment of an accidental rug burn.

“Fuck!” Zoro’s yelp came edged with a growl, his eyes narrowing. “Indian burns are cheating!”

He tore his arm back, both to reclaim it and to yank Sanji back off balance. He brought his other hand—open, rather than balled into a fist—down to pin Sanji by his middle while biting down a hiss at the stinging from his arm.

“Not like I did it on purpose!” Sanji let Zoro push him over and into a backwards somersault, shoving one foot into the shoulder trying to pin him down. “You think it felt good on my end? Ha!”

Zoro leaned both his weight and his strength into the leg against his shoulder.

“Point.” He grinned down at Sanji, all teeth. “It’s in the more sensitive areas on your end!”

The irrational temptation to strike a pose almost took him, but he knew giving in would cause a loss of his own rooted stance and he’d be on the floor under those strong legs before he could wheeze out ‘fuck’—so he resisted the impulse. The rush singing through him certainly helped!

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’re getting off on my pain.” Sanji hissed, bucking his hips and digging his knee into Zoro’s side.

The Marimo grunted as the air was forced out of him, though he continued to bear down on that leg with everything he had.

There was another flash of teeth before he spoke. “I get off on the fight, not the pain!”

Sanji started, making a face. “Oh my god, I did not need to know that!”

Snapping out into a kick with his left leading, it looked like he was walking on thin air for the briefest moment to come at Zoro with his right. It was a sacrifice, twisting the bruised half of his body, and his ribs screamed at him for doing it. Even still, it was worth it for the split second it took Zoro to realize the reversal.

By the time the bouncer was shifting to block, the leg had already slammed into him and he found...
his root broken—sending him into a sprawl as he landed on the left side of his body. There was a thunk as his head banged into the floor. Even with the somewhat soft tatami down, it rattled the healing bone enough that he had to raise a hand in the universal signal for ‘hold on’.

"Shiiiiit. Holy shit is this still tender!"

More than happy to pause, the cook backed off a ways, and only because the marimo had given into his own injury did Sanji let himself rub a hand over the spot where he’d met the counter the week before. He hissed without realizing it, stars blossoming over his vision.

Zoro rolled sluggishly into a sitting position with his legs crossed.

"I... Ow. I think you win. Ringing ears and fuzzy vision usually means I have a concussion and I have to stop now." Despite the undercurrent of pain and the remaining adrenaline from the fight, Zoro’s tone was largely matter-of-fact.

"Only if winning still counts if..." Sanji broke off in a wet, hard cough, sinking to his knees still holding his side, "...when I throw myself... ah fuck, call it a draw. Ow. Shit."

Johnny appeared at Sanji’s side and Yosaku at Zoro's like ghosts, handing each of them ice packs, having patiently waited until they officially brought their fight to a close with supplies ready. Zoro gratefully held his to his throbbing head.

"Think I could get a glass of water?" Sanji asked, voice straining to keep himself from coughing. He held the ice pack against his side with one hand and dug into his pocket with the other for his Tramadol—he'd been doing fine until he decided to fight the Marimo. Heh, what Law would say if he could see them now. He'd kill them… slowly, maybe strap them down in beds for the rest of however long he was pissed off, and frankly, Sanji didn’t know which was a worse fate.

Johnny disappeared and reappeared with the requested water and a little smile. "That was a good spar, if kinda short, cook-bro. Good match."

"Ah… yes, good match," Zoro echoed blearily, his good eye blinking rapidly.

"Hmm." The blond popped a pill in his mouth and swallowed nearly the entire glass before he tried to actually answer, "Have to do it again when we aren't compensating for injuries. Then again, I dunno if you wanna risk your friends' place getting damaged. Kinda lucky I couldn't do much from the right. But yeah, sure, good match."

"I know. Sucks how much I'm compensating for my left side. It's like the eye all over again," the bouncer groaned a little bit and leaned on Yosaku's leg. "Sucked then too, learning how the fuck to do things with my vision on that side nearly gone."

"Your left, my right. Together we're a whole idiot." Sanji unconsciously leaned to the left, trying to stretch out the side that was bruised and keep his under-layers from bunching there.

"Which means we also make a whole fighter. ...I think." Zoro reached out his leg to nudge Sanji’s. "Don't stretch that out too far, you'll strain it there. Law'll have our hides."

"Yeah, like you have room to talk." The leggy blond nudged him back. "As if you aren't dying to catch a nap, lazy ass."

"Oh Great Buddha, I am," he moaned miserably as Yosaku nudged him again and he outright pouted. "Not to mention the socket is fucking THROBBING."
"You need somethin’?" Sanji shook his bottle.

"Ah, I have something, I think..." he patted in his pockets until he found the bottle and pulled it out, grimacing. "I probably need two... Yosaku open this for me," he offered it and his brother obliged him.

"Oh! Law gave you the stuff that works," The darker Asian commented as he put two pills in Zoro's hand and twisted the cap securely back on. "I thought that required extra paperwork."

"It does," Zoro mumbled blearily as Johnny left Sanji's side momentarily to bring him the refilled water glass.

"Lemme guess, you're one of them freaks like my brother's husband. Can't take normal drugs for shit. Pink bastard ends up on the heavy shit every time he gets hurt. Drives his doc crazy trying to get him treated." Sanji didn't really know why he was feeling so amicable towards the mosshead, but... maybe he wasn't so bad. Maybe.

"Yep. Got a... a... super-metabolic-consumption of opiates and all their derivatate... derivatives," Zoro took the pills and swallowed them gratefully with the water. "Docs won't believe how fast my system eats through it, s'why I always go to Law. He knows. The rest think I'm drug seekin'."

"He's good." The other nodded. "Little overprotective though."

Zoro snickered much louder than he meant to, making himself wince. "Lookit his primary patients! An MMA fighter, an adrenaline junkie, a cook that could break steel with a shoe! Any wonder he's protective and hovers?"

"Ahahahaha—ow! Fuckass don't make me laugh!" Sanji fell over, holding his side, and threw his toes out half-heartedly into Zoro's thigh, laughing uncontrollably. "Bastard! Ow... hee hee hee... why the fuck is that funny?? Shit ow! Heh heh heh... I hate you!"

The bastard grinned, unfazed by the kick. "Awww, I hate you too, handsome," he teased back like it was the sweetest flirt, himself grinning madly. "And it's funny cuz we're not Law and don't have to handle all three of us!"

"Yo, Johnboy, or whatever your name was, the dumbass really have a concussion?"

"Yep," he replied cheerfully. "He's glassy eyed."

"And his forehead dimple is gone, that only happens when he's concussed cuz he gets giggly," Yosaku added helpfully.

Sanji snorted, letting himself fall over on the mat. "Y'know, there are better things I could give you, Marimo. Collecting concussions doesn't sound healthy for the what? Five? Brain cells you have left?"

"You already feed me," Zoro replied groggily, and Yosaku patted him awake again, much to his continued displeasure. "Food and fights, what more could I ask for?"

"I feed you because Ms. Nami says I have to, and my Old Man would kick my ass from here to Goa City if I didn't. Can't leave a starving mouth..." Sanji was drifting himself as the meds kicked in, alleviating the reason he was even still conscious in the first place.

The blond snapped awake with a hiss of pain and curled in on himself, his whole right side pounding at his senses. His mouth felt full of cotton and his hands and feet were freezing! Where was he? Oh
right, dojo, kicking the marimo’s ass… Gritting his teeth through the pain he pushed himself into a sitting position, keenly aware of the mat under his fingers. Reality wasn’t quite solid just yet, the ghosts of his nightmare crawling over his skin like the echo of a thousand cockroaches. He shuddered hard, and groaned into the motion to get his feet under him.

“Easy, cook-bro. Tatami’s a good bed, but it ain’t as comfy as other stuff.”

Somebody put a hand under his right arm to give him something lean on. He blinked into the dark-haired man’s face. Joe? Jack? Josh? Something with a J, he remembered that much. Oh! The guy was still talking!

“Bro took off a bit ago. Said to tell you anytime you wanna hit him up for another go ‘round, all you had to do was ask.” The guy was grinning broadly. “Haven’t seen Bro that psyched up since Cap told him he could help out down at the precinct.”

“You’re a cop?” Sanji blinked, somehow surprised.

Johnny’s—that was it!—face fell into an almost horrified expression. To be honest, he kind of reminded the cook of Usopp’s dramatic overreactions. “Aw, cook-bro! You wound me! I’m an upstanding citizen! Just look at me!!”

The blond snorted, “Yeah, with ‘fish’ stamped on your cheek.”

“FISH!? Really?! The guy said it was ‘justice’!!”

He looked about to cry, but Sanji was pretty sure it was an act. Either way it was funny. “Isn’t your partner like Chinese or something? Didn’t he ever tell you?”

“Naw, man, Yosaku’s Micronesian. He’s born here though. Native FBC! Don’t think he even speaks anything but English.” Johnny laughed, clapping him on the back, the tattoo mistranslation seemingly forgotten. “Hey, you hungry or anythin’, cook-bro? We’ve got some leftovers and maybe some coffee? I think.”

“Thank you, but no. I should get home. What time is it anyway?”

“’Bout oh-five-hundred.”

“Wow.” He felt his eyebrows shoot up into his hair. “Sorry about that. I hadn’t meant to pass out like that.”

“No worries, cook-bro. It happens. When Bro comes at me and Aibo, it’s all we can do to make it to the bed before we’re out.” Johnny grinned, easy and comfortable.

And still touching him.

Part of Sanji’s mind picked up on that and the fact that he was speaking loud without shouting, demanding all of the cook’s attention. Did the younger man know…? He was a cop. That meant he had some training with trauma didn’t it?

“That offer from Bro, by the way, that means us too, you know. You’re a helluva fighter, cook-bro. I’d love to see how I fare against you.” That was followed by a snort of laughter, and another clap on his shoulder, “Though I bet you’ll trounce me if the way you kept up with Bro’s any indication, yeah?”

“Heh. Maybe. What’s your style?” Sanji was aware that they were walking through the arena into
the ‘house’ part of the dojo, and when he looked down he had a cup of coffee in his hands, warm.

The cop only moved away from him to grab his own cup from Yosaku’s hand. The dark Asian smiled and gave Sanji a nod, shuffling about the room in nothing more than a pair of sweats and a headband.

“Most of what I know I learned from Bro, but there’s some hand-to-hand basic stuff we got in the academy when we joined the force, right Aibo?”

Yosaku, in the middle of taking a drink, only nodded before he could swallow. “Luffy’s shown me a thing or two about whatever it is he uses, but I’m not as flexible as he is.”

Sanji chuckled, “He’s double jointed or something. I don’t think even I’m as flexible as he is.”

The coffee wasn’t the best, but it was hot and soothing. The bitter taste was enough to stave off the cook’s shakes; something he only noticed now that they were being stopped. And the atmosphere of the place eased the lingering shadows in his mind. He was immensely grateful that neither of the others asked about his reaction or why he was a bit out of it. Though it wasn’t until much later that he realized they were intentionally talking to him to root him in reality.

They kept up the small talk until the coffee was drained and the sun was fully above the horizon. Then Sanji bid them farewell, energized enough to get home so he could grab a nap before getting back to the Sunny for the big first round of fights party Nami had planned.

Luffy was fighting some guy hailed to be near impossible to beat. He apparently had some massive attack he used from which no one had been able to recover. The cook may not have been working with the Rubberman’s home crew long, but even he knew enough to know that Luffy would never let something like that stop him from getting the title. Still, it made for a good show, and Nami, the enterprising lady that she was, planned on capitalizing on the underestimation. Sanji was sure she and the Sunny were going to make a mint on tonight’s fight.
18 October

Chapter Summary

Luffy's first fight, but Law's a bit distracted. What is Sanji hiding?

Chapter Notes

I swear I'm not forgetting about this! I just have a day job now, so finding the time to sit down and work on it is tough. ^_^0 Also, for fun, imagine the song Luffy's humming is *Centuries by FOB*. XD lol

*Silva-love* had Law this time, and beta'd by my awesome *kouhai*!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I wanna have your babies, get serious like crazy. I wanna have your babies, see 'em springing up like daisies~!"

Bouncy humming, and lots of gold and sunshine, punctuated by bright, clear blue sky, Law drifted, cushioned by blankets of fuzzy pastels, soft and sweet. The scent of baby powder filled his nose, but he didn't sneeze. Something grabbed his beard, and suddenly there was a tiny blond bouncy baby in his arms. He felt a smile on his lips, and he looked around, the child had to have a mother around somewhere.

There!

He spotted her, and the distance between him and her closed instantaneously. She turned, laughing and smiling, big bouncy curls just like the baby's downy hair framed her face, covering one eye. Her dress matched the bright pink of the ground, which seemed to be made of baby blankets instead of grass. Though Law could have sworn he was standing on the ground and not a floor of any kind. He looked around confused a little, and he saw her mouth the words 'what's the matter, Daddy?' but he couldn't hear her voice. His memory supplied that this was Sanji, and as soon as that happened his eyes went wide.

He could feel his body move to take her in his other arm, circling her waist, the hand that had been holding the baby was suddenly free to stroke a belly that hadn't been there literally a second before. Inside he could feel the pull of the information that he was dreaming trying to break the illusion but it didn't quite make it. Because if he was honest with himself it wasn't that bad of a dream. Sanji had a woman's body no matter what gender he was... that meant he could conceivably carry a child, couldn't he? Mmm, and how pretty she was!

Dream!Sanji turned to him and spoke again, "Traffy?!

"Huh?"

"Traffy! We're here! Wake up, sleepy head." Luffy giggled, and laid his entire weight across the air
mattress that was their bed on tour.

Right, tour. Bus. Sleep. Gotcha!

The younger brunet chuckled again, nipping at the doctor's jawline. His hands wandered under the edge of the other's pants—where was his shirt?—and tickled the curls of dark ink just over his hip bones before dancing from spot to spot across his stomach to the line of coarse black hair below his navel. By then, Luffy's mouth was on his ear, and the Rubberman's teeth were pulling at his piercings.

"Wanna suck you off before I fight. Lemme deal with your problem, Traffy?"

A shift of Luffy's thigh between his legs brought to his attention very much that 'yes, indeed, there was a problem to be fixed down there' and wow, he had a lap full of eager lover nearly demanding to take care of it.

There was something lingering in the back of his head that was bothering him, something about Sanji… and… their goodbye kiss? In his still sleep-muddled state he couldn't put his finger on it, and he was all too willing to push it aside in order to kiss Luffy instead. A good-luck blowjob had never been a bad idea, he decided, because if this thing was worth being bothered over he was damn sure it would be back to bother him again when there was NOT a lover in his lap tending his ramrod erection.

Luffy's grin and the bite he left on Law's neck were almost muffled by the sounds of their other partners deciding yes, now would be a good time to get seats in the audience, don't you think Ace, yup totally, Sabo, and their footsteps receded into the background as the youngest of their quadrangle nipped and bit his way down a line of spots from collar bone to nipple to ribs to belly button to hip bone, his nimble fingers freeing the surgeon's shaft and sack to roll the orbs in one palm while the other stroked up to thumb the slit in his glans. Law relaxed under the confident touches, hands going up over his head almost entirely out of habit as his eyes tracked Luffy's progress and his cock twitched hard against his lover's hand watching him.

Already touched with the seriousness of the fight to come, Luffy's eyes were intense and focused. He nosed through Law's curls, his tongue wetting even the hair with no regards for it. He tucked his nail into the slit at the same time he pulled the doctor's scrotum ring into his mouth.

"Luffy...."

Law's head dropped back with a soft moan, and his eyes fluttered shut despite his mental protests that he wanted to watch. He felt it too much.

"Hmm?"

It had to be deliberate. He simply could not have accidentally sent vibrations through that ring as he tugged on it with his teeth. Especially as he moved his thumb to press deeper and curled his middle finger to pull on the matching metal at Law's frenulum.

"AH! Luffy!" He squirmed a bit, already hurtling toward 'oversensitive' from that fierce stimulation, chewing his lower lip raw.

Hearing the desperate note, Luffy pulled back, both thumb and teeth, to lick a broad stripe up the underside of his lover's shaft, right where the colors met in a dark line. He snickered when he reached the top, letting his breath flow over the wet parts, before wrapping his hand around the base so he could safely take Law's glans into his mouth without the doctor blowing everything on the first
suck.

Law's hands were shaky when he pushed them into Luffy's hair. He didn't like it when he came fast like that either, it always felt... unsatisfying to say the least, and frustrating besides, which was not something he should be feeling going into a fight where he needed to be ready to help his partner. He purred instead, thighs parting to give Luffy more room as he groaned. That was much more satisfying.

The younger man sank down slowly, a steady, experienced, slide from slit to base. His eyes only drifted closed when his nose met his hand and that was more so he could concentrate on the undulation of his tongue than anything else. Luffy had a thing he could do with the muscles of the back of his jaw, it pulled and gripped at the same time, without cutting off his air so he could hum, but that would come later, after he'd worked Law's pleasure as high as he could get it.

The little spot started to form between his lover's eyebrows and Luffy knew that meant he was having trouble thinking. Law's hand in his hair tugged gently as he inhaled deep and hard.

"Luffy... Jesus. More, please, babe..."

With the hand not holding his lover's orgasm at bay, the fighter kneaded at the doctor's thigh, running circles around one of his favorite spots. Around and around and around in time with the swallowing movements of his throat. Luffy pulled back just enough to look up at Law and wink, 'That's right, Traffy, beg for your climax.'

The older man gulped, audibly, because they both knew he was a prideful man and didn't usually consider begging until he had already started losing his grasp on words. Or when he was so close to climax things hurt being pent up. Not that either state took long to reach with Luffy at the helm. His eyelids fluttered again and his backarched restlessly.

"Nnggh... Luffy..." His voice rose on his lover's name in a whine.

Again Luffy pushed him, drawing breath past his mouthful for a moment of cold among the heat. Then he moved his other hand so that both were gripping Law's thighs. He stilled for a moment, watching the nerves and muscles bunching with need just above his lover's groin, and when he was confident Law had adjusted to the new sensations, he hiked the other's hips, sliding his own knees under Law's back so that he could look down, literally, into the darker man's face.

He wanted to watch him come apart.

Law swore, as he usually did, when Luffy stretched his spine and he snarled, baring his teeth, pupils dilated as his nails dug into whatever was beneath him. Thighs twitching, his breath came in hard, quick pants as his diaphragm was pushed up.

"FUCK! Luffy! C'mon, don't—Luffyyyyyy!"

Luffy grinned—actually grinned—around Law's dick. That was what he'd been waiting for, and he moaned into the heated flesh in his mouth.

"Nggghaaa! LUFFY!"

His lover's back arched and his lip curled back, his toes flexing and his ass clenching as his shameglobes started to pull tight. His breaths became needy, whining pants.

Sucking him down, the Rubberman hummed his favorite song, and after balancing one of those delicious thighs on his shoulder, he snuck his hand under his chin to flick the exposed scrotal ring in
time to the beat. His eyes latched onto Law's face, he adored doing this to his lovers, especially for
the adrenaline rush the power gave him. Which was the whole reason he usually pounced one of
them before every big fight.

"Ah, Luffy, Luffy, PLEASE!"

Law’s expression was open and broken, from the dint in his eyebrows to his hanging-open mouth
and the near-painful squint of his eyes. Shudders rippled over him in time to the flicks and the beat of
his humming, his toes popping loudly as both hands clenched the pillow above his head.

Ah! There it was! Luffy chuckled, deep and low, gripping the ring in Law’s frenulum with the back
of his tongue, and tugging on both rings at the same time. The result was a howl loud enough to rock
the bus and beneath him, Law bucked, clinging to his lover and closing his eyes.

And Luffy drank him down, swallowing in time with the pulses of seed running down his throat to
perpetuate Law’s orgasm until he was a boneless puddle draped over his shoulders. Then, and only
when he was sure he had gotten it all, did he pull off, slowly, carefully, licking and savoring the taste
all the way back until his lover was splayed out on the sheets. A Cheshire grin on his face, Luffy
crawled over Law, smug and satisfied.

Law didn’t have the strength to even wrap around Luffy as he wanted to and purred to him instead,
sleepy-eyed, spotted little leopard curling up on his mate’s lap.

The one and only time Luffy did not inhale all edible foodstuffs put in front of him was now, just
before a fight. When asked, he couldn’t put down a specific reason for why he felt that way, he just
did. As such, he shifted the both of them around so that Law was leaned against his chest, and pulled
the precious On Tour Bento Sanji had made them before they left. It had been kept fresh thanks to a
mini fridge tucked into the back of the first floor of the bus, and reheated just before Luffy had
pounced on his sleepy lover. The second he lifted the lid on the box the scent of Sanji’s cooking burst
from inside in a cloud of ‘home’.

"No time for sleeping, Traffy. Eat. So I can fight."

"Nnngh. Alright, alright," the other groaned a little as he brought himself to full consciousness,
reluctantly.

He reached forward, knowing it was needed, and took the bento to place before them on the bed.
Inhaling the scent of home and Sanji (homemade food with the slightest hint of tobacco smoke), he
smiled.

"Alright."

Luffy nuzzled his neck, reaching over and pulling the clincher over to where the doctor could see it
—double-shot espresso, dark chocolate mocha—courtesy of Koala and Hack with best wishes for a
successful tour. It steamed, promising life-giving caffeine.

"Eeee!"

The doctor would later claim no such delighted squeal ever escaped him, but for now, he grabbed the
cup with both hands and nursed it with undisguised pleasure as he wiggled in Luffy's lap.

Outside the bus, Shanks smirked up at Rayleigh in the driver’s seat as their prize fighter’s laughter
echoed loud enough that several of the spectators, skulking about hoping to catch the fighters before
the match, jumped and scrambled away in fear of being caught. The redheaded manager joined in the
mirth, and thumped the highest step he could reach.
"C'mon, lovebirds, we've a cock to beat, and I'm not talkin' about Luffy's!"

"Son of a bitch, Shanks! DO YOU HAVE TO LISTEN IN ON EVERYTHING?! You're his manager, not his cock-monitor!"

"I've been to sign us in and back again. You wanna bitch at a peeping tom, ask Ray what he's been doin' since you woke up. Now, c'mon, Luffy! You need to warm up! Let's go!" Shanks chuckled but his tone meant he wasn't above coming up there and hauling the two of them out by the scruff of their necks.

So, Luffy laughed again, stealing a kiss from his lover, "See you after, Traffy." Then he extracted himself from where they were cuddling, threw his hands above his head as he barreled down the steps, "YOSH! I'MMA KICK HIS ASS!!"

Law sputtered, "RAYLEIGH SILVERS I AM GOING TO CASTRATE YOU AND WEAR YOUR BALLS FOR NEW EARRINGS!"

Rayleigh tilted an imaginary hat at Luffy and Shanks. "And THAT is my cue to skedaddle. See you ringside, Rubberman."

The transition from bus to ringside was something of a blur. Before they knew it, Shanks was rubbing Luffy's shoulders just outside where he was to enter the stadium proper. To the outside onlooker, it looked like the redhead was beefing him up, but really, if he didn't have his hands on him, the younger man would be literally bouncing in anticipation. As per usual, all he wore were his protective gloves, a pair of shorts that reached his knees, and wrapping on his feet to keep himself from breaking any of the tiny bones in any of his limbs. Only during a match did he leave his Positive necklace with his brothers. If he didn't it ran the risk of it being broken, and besides it and his hat were against the regulations anyway. For this fight, he didn't even have a mouthguard—in spite of Law's cringing about it.

He was ready. The rhythm of the crowd thumped through his veins, and his mind settled into 'all-business' mode. Sharp, dark eyes cut to the stands, picking out Ace and Sabo with the kind of precision Usopp prayed for, and then to Law and Rayleigh at the side of judges’ table, apparently discussing something inaudible over the noise. The commentators' booth was set higher than most of the audience, so they had a better angle to watch, and TV cameras ringed the outside edges.

The announcer was saying something but Luffy didn’t hear him. Having located his nakama, he only had eyes for the cage. He shuffled his steps, bouncing to an internal rhythm, his muscles loose and warm. As soon as he crossed into view the screaming started. People climbed out of their seats to try and press up against the chain-link fencing around the ring. One too many spectators falling into the wrong place at the wrong time had the result that there was a five foot ring fenced off between them and the actual six-sided ring itself.

And that was on top of the cage.

Luffy D “Rubberman” Monkey never fought without a cage. It was in his contract. Six panels of solid steel, waffle-crossed bars bolted to the sides of the ring itself, and topped with a matching roof. The holes were big enough to wrap his hand around, and it was how he got his moniker.

But climbing the three steps to the single door, he tilted his head. He didn’t think he was going to need to bounce around all that much for this one. “Axe-hand” Morgan wasn’t one to dance around the ring. A big man, heavyweight, with a titanium plate in his jaw that most people thought was an edge over his opponents. The assumption was that if he was hit there, the person hitting him was more than likely to come away with a broken hand. But really, what a fighter had to look out for was
his famous knife-hand strike, for which he had earned his reputation. Though trained primarily as a judo and taekwondo fighter, Morgan was famous for hanging styles and just waiting for an opportunity to use his signature move.

In Jinbe’s opinion it meant he was lazy and would most likely resort to whatever he had to do to get Luffy into that position. Plus, he was sponsored by Gecko Moria, CEO of Thriller Bark Industries, and while nothing had ever been proven on paper (where it mattered) it was common scuttlebutt among the IMMAF members that all of his fighters took steroids and other drugs to ‘enhance’ their strength. In short, it meant that Luffy’s manager and trainers were watching the match very, very, closely from the sidelines.

They’d never actually crossed gloves before, but Luffy took his sport seriously. He and Shanks had studied all of the opponents on the Supernova Tour before leaving. He could still see the way Morgan had taken down “Black Cat” Kuro in the last of the pre-qualifying rounds—a single chop from that ‘axe hand’ of his and the lithe Drunken Master had toppled like a Jenga tower.

So, when he looked his opponent in the eye, the most he gave was another slight tilt to his head.

Again the announcer was cheering at the crowd, riling them up. The referee stepped between them, looked at them both, re-stating the rules of the match: no outside weapons, no groin shots, no performance enhancers, blah, blah, blah. Luffy had heard it a thousand times.

Still, when he was prompted, he agreed, soft and deadly, “Ah.”

It sent a shiver through the audience, and Morgan roared, “BRING IT ON, LITTLE CIVILIAN!”

Then the ref ducked out and the buzzer sounded for the match to begin.

Luffy cracked his knuckles and his face split into a grin. Morgan was going to rush him, he could read it in the larger man’s body language. So he dropped, throwing his foot out just as his opponent took a step forward. If he was surprised when Morgan jumped backward, he didn’t show it, following up the move with a right hook aimed at the big man’s jaw.

His fist met Morgan’s in a clash of barely padded bone on bone.

Outside the ring the crowd winced at the sound, and Shanks sat forward in his seat. He and Law focused intently on Luffy’s expression. If the Rubberman had broken skin…

But no.

Luffy looked up from his fringe and grinned wider.

“WHAT, PUNY BOY?! YOU THINK YOU CAN TAKE ON ME?!! I AM AXE HAND MORGAN!!” The bigger man bellowed.

“I’m Luffy. Nice to meet you.”

The Rubberman’s glib response, just barely loud enough for the microphones to pick up, enraged Morgan all the more and he jumped back and up, his other hand raised in a high ready that held just long enough for the crowd to shout ‘AXE HAND’ before crashing down where Luffy had been standing not two seconds ago. The smaller man gripped the cage behind him, grinned for a second while his opponent realized he had missed, then he brought both feet, wrapped in protective gear, smashing into Morgan’s face.

Momentum made the big man flip backwards and he almost landed on his chest on the mat, but for
the way he caught himself on his hands. Then he was back up, his hand raised to do his signature again.

Luffy spun off the side of the ring, tucked in tight for a full 360 degree rotation, then snapped his leg out to bring the inside of his right leg across Morgan’s so-called impervious jaw.

Again Morgan went flying, his head knocked to the side, and he crashed into the wall, just barely holding himself up. Because contrary to popular belief, Luffy knew a replaced bone meant a weak spot, a place where, if hit just the right way, it would vibrate all the way through his skull. Thus, Axe-Hand Morgan was dazed, trying to clear the fuzziness from his head when the Rubberman bounced over the crack in the floor to grab him up by his sleeveless shirt. A single jab to the face was all it took to knock him over after Luffy pulled him away from the wall.

The ref slid to the ground, watching for any sign that Morgan was going to get up again as he counted him out. He reached ten, slammed his hand on the mat of the ring, and blew his whistle.

Luffy threw his hands up yelling with the crowd, his back to Morgan.

The ref had escaped the cage to give his testimony to the judges, and there came a loud roar from the defeated fighter. Morgan surged to his feet, intent on throttling Luffy, and the whole stadium screamed. Referees and other officials scrambled for the cage. Judges yelled for the security to do something. The commentators jumped to their feet with the rest of the crowd, narrating a mile a minute for the telecast.

And Luffy glanced over his shoulder just in time to bring his opposite hand up. The camera zoomed in on his face clear enough to read his lips, “Gumu Gumu no… "PISTOL!” He shouted, throwing the cross hook at the same moment Morgan crashed into him.

The bigger man’s face caved. His nose erupted in blood, four teeth flew to the side, and his own inertia snapped his head back. Watching in slow motion it was like seeing a crash test dummy hit a brick wall. Luffy never even flinched. For the second time Morgan went down, and again the crowd went WILD!

After giving both fighters a once-over for injuries, Law directed a couple of big EMTs with a stretcher to take Morgan out of the ring to get cleaned up. He gave Luffy’s arm a squeeze on his way out of the ring, hidden from the cameras’ view, and focused on reporting his findings for the physician’s assistant. Since neither fighter had any real significant injuries as soon as the ring was clear and clean they could begin the next match, which meant Law couldn’t personally attend to patching up Morgan. He had to be on the floor in case one of the other six fighters got into serious trouble.

So, Shanks sent a surreptitious nod to him from the exit, ushering the rest of Team Rubberman out to the bus for food, victory drinks, and other time-wasting activities. They’d have stayed to watch the rest but Luffy was always too wound up to sit still when he won. Law nodded back, already distracted.

Through the other three fights he was to attend as Federation Medical Official, Law was lost in his thoughts, frowning. His dream, though he couldn't remember most of it now, had left him... unsettled, and it got him thinking about Sanji, which wasn't a bad thing except... except... the dream had been odd in that he had seen Sanji pregnant and while he could chalk that up to having one of HIS fathers go through a similar experience, the thought he'd had during the dream, that it was a possibility so the dreaming was okay (it was not, one TALKED about that sort of thing, bad brain damn it!), but... there had been such easy affection, such closeness.
And it made him realize that before they left, Sanji had been fidgety. Hadn't let him kiss him on the mouth. Had been shaky the moment he stepped out of his sacred land, the kitchen. Law knew an anxiety reaction when he saw one, but that left him at a loss for what, or who, or how he had been triggered into an anxiety attack, and if it had been him, completely without any way to know what it was, make it up to him, and never do it again.

Loath though he was to avoid celebrating the win, Law found himself still distracted when the time came to pack up the bus and head for Long Ring, thoughts about his dream and the way they'd departed from the Sunny and just what exactly had been wrong with Sanji kept playing over and over, around and around in his head. Until he could stand it no more and excused himself from the revelry on the top floor of the bus. He sought solace among the peace and quiet of the card game between Rayleigh and Jinbe, and the solitude of the empty seats behind where Shanks was driving. He gave a sigh, and then acquiesced to the urge of his subconscious to ring the Sunny.

The phone rang and rang, clearly hard to hear over the party that was sure to be going on, but eventually it was answered.

"Thousand Sunny, home of the Rubberman, this is Sanji, can I help you?"

His boyfriend's voice was honey on his ears, and he melted a little hearing it, unable to actually form words until the cook repeated himself.

"Hello?"

"Sanji, it's Law. Not business, and no there hasn't been an emergency, I just... I knew you'd still be there and I wanted to hear your voice," he admitted, tone a little shy as he crossed his ankles and tried not to fidget. It didn't matter Sanji couldn't see him, Rayleigh and Jinbe could and he had no doubt they would report to Luffy. They tattled on him all the time.

"Oh. Hey~" There was relief in the blond's voice, and the sound of the kitchen door came in the background, cutting off the thumping music someone was playing in the dining room. "We saw the fight. Luffy looked good. That shot at the end... I think Franky and Usopp are still imitating it."

"To be honest, if there hadn't been a cage there wouldn't be enough pieces left to be patched together by his quack doctor. Rayleigh looked like he was going to tear the man's head from his shoulders, and that was after Luffy sent him down the second time." Law smiled a bit when Rayleigh gave him the finger without looking away from his cards.

Sanji laughed, "I bet." He was quiet for a moment, just listening to Law breathe in his ear. "So... Where's your next stop?"

"To be honest, I forget the towns. I know the next fight is against whoever came out on top of the other tier match tonight. Which I only remember one of the combatants of, because he's under my jurisdiction in the league. Bellamy. Since I had to be here with Luffy I missed his match... hope he hasn't gotten hurt much."

He frowned a little, and started to chew on a knuckle. He hadn't smoked since Cora got... sick. Why did he suddenly want tobacco smoke on his tongue? Seeming to be on the same wavelength as his distant other half, the shnkt of a lighter put a pause in their conversation.

"I think he’s fine? Chopper was watching it earlier, flipping back and forth between him and Luffy cuz of somebody in the background. Hogsworth or something? I had about a hundred orders at the time, I couldn't hear him clearly, but he seemed agitated with whoever it was."
"Hogback. They let fucking HOGBACK doctor one of mine?!!" Law's voice went straight to as deep as it could and breathing fury. "Who fucking approved that? I will cull that board with my own two hands!"

"I have no idea I was cooking I'm sorry!"

There was a clatter of plastic on cement, which translated into the door closing having been the one to the back lot, not the one to the kitchen, and Sanji had just dropped his lighter in reaction to Law's anger. If the hurried way he'd responded hadn't been clue enough, the sudden tension in the air between their phones was a loud, sharp reminder to the topic of the doctor's thoughts earlier. Just because the cook sounded fine, didn't mean he actually was; many anxiety patients learned how to slap a smile over their nerves because life just didn't stop to let them recover after an attack.

So, he moderated his tone. He had to, he'd learned how because if he didn't he could send patients into cardiac arrest.

"No, no, Sanji, I know, I know. I don't actually expect you to know the answer who on the governing board for the league approved Hogback's presence at the match of one of my patients instead of one of my list of approved stand-ins. How the hell would you know that? No, it's alright, Sanji, it's alright. I'm angry at them for ignoring my explicit directions not to let Hogback touch my patients, I'm not mad with you."

Law felt himself rocking back and forth in his seat, one hand clutching his other elbow worriedly as he tried to lean into the phone. The questions he wanted to ask—who did this, are you okay, what caused this panic attack, can I help—they weren't going to help. Not right now.

"I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm okay." It sounded like a mantra, like he was trying to convince himself, not Law. "I can—the fuck did it go—I can ask Chopper about it... tomorrow... or something? I really don't know what happened. I just... I need to find my lighter... Um... The board on the mirror, Nami put it up, said something about Foxy? So I guess that's who's next or something? Um... I know Bellamy won. If that helps. Heard a couple of redheads talking about it right before one of them ruined her Louis Vuitton and wasted a double of Jack being stupid drunk. Just asking for someone to come along and—AHA! There it is!"

He was rambling, stream of consciousness. Every thought that entered his mind at the moment came burbling out through his lips. That could have been a symptom of the attack, or a side effect of his medication, or possibly even just having spent too long between smoke breaks, which, if they'd been as busy as Sanji made it sound like they had been, was entirely possible. On the upside, at least he wasn't shut down and catatonic.

Keep him talking, keep him talking!

"Bellamy won, that's good, I'll see him then, and soonish. That'll be good. Foxy... I can't remember but that might be who he was fighting? Or something. But you found your lighter, yes, that's good. And what did she do, throw up in her purse? There's a perfectly good toilet and alleyway."

"No, worse." Sanji paused to actually light his cigarette, as he'd been about to do when Law startled him. "She flung herself at me. Her tits landed in the purse, the double was in her hand. She dropped it. Deliberately!" His tone sounded scandalized by the idea that she poured the whiskey into her designer bag, and then he shuddered, audibly, "Told me to reach in and get the glass. Marimo took her to dry out."

"Oh gross. I've had women pull stunts like that on me, offer me a body shot and have the shot just 'happen' to slip down into their bra. Zoro usually takes them to the diner up the street, sits 'em down
with a cup of coffee and toast and tells the waitstaff not to let 'em leave until they can walk without slurring. We're just lucky the waitstaff at the diner really like Zoro," Law chuckled, leaning so far into the phone he was in danger of falling off the seat as he tried to get physically closer to Sanji to comfort him.

An expectant silence fell between them, then Sanji mumbled something, sounding ashamed and like he wanted to hide.

"I'm sorry, Sanji. I can't hear you. Could you say that again, please?" Please don't be an apology. Don't be an apology, please, he prayed silently.

"I... I said I'm out. My... um... My Ativan... Fucking with my head. Sorry. More tired I get... Thought I had... Sorry. I'm sorry." The cook sounded like he expected to be yelled at about it, or like he already had been and was bracing for another round.

"Oh. Do you still have refills? I know a clinic nearby the Sunny that does emergency prescription refills and can give you what you need for the day while they fill it. When does your shift end? They're open twenty four hours."

"Y-yeah. Talk to me? Call me back on my cell? And talk? Just... I don't care what. Everything's... Please? Ghin wouldn't. Said he was busy. Please?"

"Yeah, of course, no problem. Now or when you get off? And do you want me to call ahead to the pharmacy for you? A friend of mine should be working tonight, I think, I can call her to tell her to expect you if you want."

"Now. N-need it. Can't go back in there. Was fine, but..."

Unspoken was the break in his rhythm meant everything he had been shoring up to get through the end of his shift had come crashing down on him. And suddenly, as they changed phones, it was clear why he had waited so long between cigarettes. Not that they weren't busy, Law was sure of that, tonight had been one of Luffy's fights after all, but if Sanji had been using the busywork to keep his mind from cracking without his anxiety med... well, everything just made a little bit more sense. Except for one thing...

"Sanji... who is Ghin... and why isn't he helping you when you reached out to him?" The doctor kept his voice soft and gentle, as gentle as he could, but he suddenly had a cold chill in his gut that told him who he was afraid Ghin was.

Rayleigh and Jinbe watched Law. They couldn't hear most of what he said, but his body language was enough to abandon the cards. Now that he was no longer rocking in his seat, he was hunching into his phone, hands white-knuckled and his eyes hard; they were concerned.

"No, no, it was my fault. Time difference. It's later where he is now. He works first shift. He needed to get to bed. Couldn't talk. It's okay. I shouldn't have called him. I should've... I've got you now, it's okay."

"That doesn't explain who he is, Sanji, and frankly I think that's a poor reason for not helping a friend in need, but that aside. Who is he, Sanji?"

"My friend. He works with the Old Man, scrubs floors and stuff." The sounds of footsteps meant the cook was heading for the pharmacy he passed on his way in every day. "I've known him since we were like... eighteen or something."

"The kind of friend you call when you have a panic attack and he tells you no, sleep is more
important?" The corners of his mouth were tight and he couldn't help it. "Even after six years of being friends?"

"It's not like that." There was something in Sanji's tone, undefined and poorly hidden, "He's just really bogged down with stuff. He's really focused on trying to be the best he can for my Old Man because he knows if he lost the job he'd be letting me down. I got it for him. I shouldn't have called him this late. I know better. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Sanji. Your old man would understand Ghin losing an hour or two or more, of sleep, helping his son without taking away his job. You were thinking you needed help, and you turned to a friend, someone you trusted to give you help. And he said no. You say it's not like that, but it sure does sound bad."

"You just don't know him like I do. Trust me. It was my fault." A door chimed, indicating the blond had made it to the pharmacy. "Should I mention you, or do you wanna talk to them, or... um... I've never come here before. I usually go through Hirluk's on Drum. That gonna be a problem? Or...?"

"No, it should be fine. There'll be a lady with green hair and some feather tattoos on her arms. That's Monet, just tell her you need an emergency refill and give her your name. The clinic has access to all the city records so she can give you a dose to hold you over and fill your prescription on the spot. And it cannot be your fault. Remember what you told me? We can't help it when something triggers us. We don't always know what will. We need help when it happens, not admonishments."

"It's fine." Sanji vocally waved him off, then clearly was addressing the woman at the counter, "Yes, hi. Sanji Noir. I'm... I ran out of my Ativan, I have the bottle..." The sound of fabric against the microphone indicated the cook was digging in his pockets. "Here. I just—oh, okay, thank you. No, I... Well, if you insist. How could I turn down an offer like that from a lady as beautiful as you?"

Law sighed out through his nose. That was a pitiful excuse for flirting (given he knew Monet was telling him he was covered, no charge), especially with how over the top Sanji was usually. He wasn't even doing that 'noodle thing'. He chewed his lip and tried not to growl. How was he going to get any more info before Sanji clammed up again?

The tell-tale smack of a gentle kiss proved that even if the normally intensely romantic cook was off his game, he wasn't shut down completely, "You are a life saver, my dear. I hope your evening goes better than mine has."

Then there was minor silence, the jingle of the door, a few footsteps, Sanji's breathing in his ear, the rattle of the paper bag, and a clatter of tablets.

Another small, suspicious silence was followed up by the lighting of another cigarette, and a deep couple of inhales before the cook's voice came back through the phone's speaker, "Still with me?"

"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD LUFTY HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU NOT TO SWALLOW THEM DRY?! NOT EVEN ACE DOES THAT!!" Sabo's voice filtered, crystal clear, through the phone on Sanji's end.

The younger blond chased their over-excited partner down the stairs of the bus and into the formerly peaceful lower level. The brunet bounced away cackling madly. They ringed the tiny table in the middle of what passed for a 'kitchen', Luffy just one step ahead of Sabo. He stuck his tongue out, indicating that the medication he had just taken was gone and there was nothing the guitarist could do about it. So, he gave a frustrated growl, looked to Law pleadingly with a gesture of helpless irritation at the Rubberman.
Law tried to wave them away, putting his finger in his other ear, and tucking his feet up on the bench, "Of course, Sanji. However I really have to tell you dry swallowing will burn holes in your throat. I hope you do it as little as possible."

Before he could hear Sanji's answer, Shanks bellowed, glaring in the mirror above his seat, "ENOUGH! Jesus! That fight wasn't long enough for you to be this wound up. The hell did you buy him for dinner, Jinbe?!"

The large Asian man put his hands up, his eyes wide with innocence.

Ace draped over the steps with a large yawn, "He got into my leftover bento. Had to give him Benadryl."

"Well, shit." The redhead cursed, his frown deeper. "Tie him the fuck down before I gotta pull over and do it myself!!"

At that moment, in a combined effort of a clothesline from Rayleigh and a tackle from Sabo, the youngest of their crew went down, crashing to the carpeted floor with a cackle that, for all indications, meant he hadn't felt a thing; too high on the antihistamine to focus on it. He squirmed under the blond, his hands dancing up Sabo's sides to where he knew the other was ticklish, and that was all Law could take.

He stormed into the bathroom at the back and plopped down on the closed toilet. "Sorry. Luffy got into the—"

"I heard." Sanji chuckled, sounding infinitely calmer than he had twenty minutes ago. "I can let you go if you need to."

"No. No, it's fine. Once Sabo gets him upstairs and holding still for five minutes he'll be out like a light. Don't worry about it."

"If you're sure. I mean, you're there all for professional reasons and stuff. The last thing I wanna do is keep you from it if he needs you."

"No. Right now I'm focused on you. You need me more. The greedy brat," this was said with love coloring the words, "has four other handlers able to take care of him. It's part of why we all go with him when we can. Now tell me more about this Ghin that has you thinking it's your fault for having a panic attack."

Sanji was quiet for a while, obviously picking through his words carefully now that he was back on more stable ground. "What's there to tell? We picked him up South of Mobile, he was starving, needed a job and a roof over his head. Never told us where he came from exactly, but the Shit Geezer's got a habit of picking up strays. So he was with us until I jumped ship here in FBC. Stayed with me and my brother for a bit, then took off wandering. We kept in touch via Skype on his phone. Occasionally he'll show up in Raftel or Sabaody, work with the Old Man 'til the end of the river and leave again. He's a hard worker, always puts his nose to the grindstone." The shrug was audible, "I should've remembered he was up near Raftel now. That's two hours' time difference from here. I mean, how'd you like it if I caught you in the middle of going to bed when you had to be in for a double in a couple hours?"

"Hmm."

Law didn't like it, but damnit, the blond was closed off about it. Oh sure, that sounded like a lot of information about the guy, but really it wasn't. And it carried the note of finality that the doctor had
come to associate with Sanji being finished with a subject. Still... he couldn't help himself. That cold feeling in his stomach was only getting worse the more his boyfriend talked about this guy.

"What's hmm?" The cook sensed something.

So he pushed ahead with a small cough. "He's never hurt you, right?"

"No! Never! Not on purpose or anything like that. Shit, Law! The guy's got a right to a good night's sleep before work!"

"I just had to—"

"No, you didn't. Fuck! And the rest of you wonder why I don't share my history with you! I panicked for stupid reasons, I called the wrong person, let go of it already!" Sanji huffed, stamping out his cigarette butt, "Look, I'm back at the Sunny, my med's kicked in, I gotta finish out my shift, and make up for the hour I spent on the phone when I was supposed to be working. And I don't care if Ms. Nami won't mind, I mind. Have a good trip; I'll talk to you after the next fight." The sound of a kiss came through the phone and then the cook hung up.

Well, that went over like a lead balloon.

Just like the pit of Law's stomach. He pulled his knees up to his chest and sighed deeply, clutching the phone with both hands. Outside his little bubble he could hear quiet again, meaning Sabo and Ace had been able to get Luffy back upstairs and presumably into bed. Which was good! According to a flick of his thumb through the calendar app on his phone, they had three days until the next fight, and at least half of that was going to be spent on the bus travelling.

God, he hoped this didn't set the tenor for the whole tour.

Chapter End Notes

Song: [I Wanna Have Your Babies by Natasha Bedingfield](http://example.com)
Chapter Summary

Tragedy at the Thousand Sunny, but Zoro meets someone new. She fun and easy to get along with and smart and strong, but is she all that she seems?

Chapter Notes

Got bored, and decided to update un-Beta'd. Y'all know the deal with Zoro these days yeah? I should hope so. X"D It's been the same every chapter. lol

“Good God, Chopper, have you been watching that thing all night?” Nami yawned, rubbing the side of her face to wake herself up a bit more.

Usopp’s voice, bedraggled and exhausted, came from the end of the bar nearest the stage, “I told him he was gonna strain his eyes if he kept it up, but he’s…”

“I gotta get all the details for Law!” The teenager was huddled on the floor in a sleeping bag where he’d been camped out all night with his iPad; the fight between Bellamy and Blueno playing over and over and over again.

The scene in particular he was focused on showed the final blow. Blueno stepped to the side like he was going to duck Bellamy’s punch, but at the last second his arm lashed out and all four fingers caught the burly blond in the temple. What exactly he’d done couldn’t be seen from the angle of the camera. All that was visible was a spray of blood, accompanied by Bellamy’s scream. Fortunately, pain was something the Krav Maga fighter used for motivation. So the split-second it took for his brain to register the wound, he was already releasing the coil of his left arm into Blueno’s stomach. At that point the video got even messier because the brunet upchucked right into Bellamy’s face as a direct result of the force being driven into his organs.

After that the ref called them off and because Bellamy could still stand, in spite of the mess in his face, he took the match. But then Hogback entered the ring, clearly more concerned for Blueno than Bellamy, and had to be coerced into looking the man over. He did, but then the camera cut to the commentators giving a recap of the fight and a summary of the other three that had shared the same ring in Sabaody.

So, Chopper was playing, and replaying, that one clip of about five minutes of video incessantly.

Nami watched it over his shoulder and shook her head, a little green around the edges when Blueno puked. Then she moved over behind the bar to erase last night’s standings and mark out the matches coming up in Long Ring and Little Garden. Half the fighters had been eliminated, and of the remaining sixteen, only eight of them would go on to the quarterfinal in a week and a half.

“Hmm.” She chewed on the end of the wet-erase marker, eyeing the competition. “I really didn’t expect that Rebecca girl to win. I’m amazed. Then again, with how old Diamante is, it’s a wonder
the IMMAF let him compete in the first place.”

“This was his farewell shot.” Usopp appeared at her elbow with coffee.

They were the only three in the dive at the moment, so the techie hopped up on the bar, lightly swinging his feet as he sipped his morning java.

Nami snickered at him, “Better not let Sanji catch you up there. He’ll kick your ass, and I’ll let him.”

“WAH! Nami!! Inside?!”

“Yup, and the damages’ll come out of your paycheck.”

She laughed brighter when he started crying big, fat, crocodile tears at her. Giving his nose a gentle flick with the end of her marker, she reached over for her own coffee. The first mouthful was Heaven. It didn’t matter that the grounds had sat in the pot overnight because it was their cook’s coffee; set up especially for the early morning crowd before he left the night before. Her eyes closed, she silently congratulated herself for hiring him. In the privacy of her own mind, she’d even admit that she was willing to do just about anything to keep him… including raises.

“So, what do you think of Enel?” Usopp broke her internal monologue.

She savored her mouthful before answering, her burnt umber brows drawn together. “He’s tough, but cocky. That’s gonna bring him trouble. Especially against a powerhouse like Bellamy. That guy starts coming and he just doesn’t stop until his opponent’s on the ground. Enel’s too stand-offish to defend against that.”

“That’s if Bellamy can fight.” Chopper squeaked from behind them.

They both turned to look at the doctor-to-be questions clear on their faces.

“Look, here,” he hopped up on a stool and laid the iPad down in front of him. “See how the blood sprays here?” He tapped on the screen to enlarge the image, “That means he’s at least got a four to five inch laceration over his brow ridge, and then,” he tapped it once to make it play, and a second time to pause it just as Blueno let loose, “the ruminate hits him square on. If that wound wasn’t cleaned right away, he could easily be on the way to a serious infection.”

He closed the window, knowing full well it wasn’t something most people wanted to see, especially over coffee. Glancing between the other two, he noted both were clenching their jaws against an internal reaction to the images, and he nodded gently.

“And if I know Hogback like I think I do, he won’t have done much of anything to ensure Bellamy recovers completely. At the very, very least I know he’ll have a nasty scar there. Hogback has a fetish for them. He leaves huge gaps of skin between each stitch to guarantee that the tissue will knit together poorly. You can see it in his full-time patients. Morgan’s jaw, Enel’s nose, and don’t get me started on Oars.”

The teenager was clearly agitated, clenching his hands into fists. So, Nami set a tall glass of orange juice in front of him. She smiled softly at him, and big brown eyes teared up a little with his heavy sigh. He wanted so badly to follow in Law’s footsteps. The thing was he didn’t see it, but he was on a path to be even better than Law! The polka-dotted surgeon had admitted it to most of the rest of the Sunny’s crew. At Chopper’s age, Law had still been a punk kid with too many tattoos and a bad attitude, something that only got worse when his dad got sick. So, really, the seventeen-year-old genius had about six years’ head start on him.
“Don’t worry, Chopper.” Nami ruffled his fluffy brown hair with a wink, “I’m sure Kureha’ll look him over before he fights tomorrow. She won’t let anything get past her, and you know it.”

“Yeah, Doctorine is really good at that.”

Usopp watched with a smile as Chopper hopped off the stool, glass of rapidly disappearing OJ in one hand, iPad in the other. Just before he reached his little sleeping bag nest, he teetered slightly to the side, almost overcompensated to adjust back the other way, and finally plopped into his cushions with a small squeak.

The dark man slid his eyes over to his companion, “And just what would you tell his vicious grandmother if she knew you gave him a screwdriver?”

Nami tossed her hair, “She’d congratulate me for getting him to sleep after he spent all night obsessing over something he can’t change.”

“You’re incorrigible.” He shook his head with a small laugh.

Comfortable silence spread over them like a warm blanket, only punctuated by Chopper’s tiny squeaking snores. Eventually Robin and Franky drifted in, immediately shushed when the statuesque woman caught sight of the sleeping teenager. By then Usopp was tinkering with a subwoofer and Nami had her ‘Big Book of Bets’ out on one of the tables, working through the numbers now that she knew which eight fighters were in the next round.

Seeing her boyfriend off to play with the techie, Robin dropped gracefully into the chair next to Nami, “I see Arlong made it.”

“Mm.”

“Thoughts?”

“Not really.”

“Bets?”

“He’s a near shoe-in for the quarters, but if he wins tomorrow, he’s up against either Alvida, who I don’t know, or Hatchan.” The redhead didn’t look up from her figures. She knew what her sister-in-all-but-blood was doing and she refused to acknowledge it.

“They shared equal part in things, did they not?”

“Hatchan was Arlong’s subordinate.” Nami’s voice had gone tight, and Robin laid a hand on her shoulder, reminding her it was over. The redhead cleared her throat, giving a small nod, “Right, well I doubt the judges will want to let that go because they’re both sponsored by Otohime’s Sunshine Corporation, and they also train with Fisher Tiger. So there’ll probably be a reshuffling if they both win their matches. So, if what you’re looking for is whether to bet on one of them, I would advise choosing one to back instead of both.”

Robin’s gentle alto removed the rest of the expectation from the conversation when she agreed, “In that case, Madam Manager, please put myself and Franky down for twenty on Arlong. I wish to see if he has indeed turned over a new leaf as Jinbe-san seemed to believe.”

Nami made the notation with a swift underline on the entire exchange, leaving what was unspoken to remain buried in the past where it belonged. It was also a decisive agreement that once the bet was paid out, if Robin didn’t receive the outcome she was looking for, none of the Sunny’s crew would
ask questions regarding her retribution.

At times like these it was hard to forget that Nico Robin Orusande got her start in life as the child bride of a rather powerful Yakuza political agent. She was twelve when the man was brought to justice and his splinter cell eliminated, but rumor had it that when the police got there, the man was already dead. His spine was broken in four places, bent backwards so far that the disks themselves had ruptured inward puncturing his lungs and heart with bone fragments. There was an investigation into Robin’s hand in it, and the papers had labeled her the Devil Child of O’Hara, but ultimately her name was cleared. The authorities in charge were unable to conceivably explain how a twelve-year-old little girl could have caused such extensive damage. It was written off as an intra-gang crime and the case closed.

Robin herself would not speak of either her time with Spandam or the years afterwards until she obtained her work visa through an, at that time, up and coming restaurant.

The crew of the Sunny would have simply written it off—they all had sordid pasts after all—but for the fact that what Robin wanted to have happen, got done. Not too often, but occasionally, she’d make an off-hand comment regarding politics or city law or some such other topic that was popular among bar-goers. And before the others could even fully understand that she’d said anything, the change would be in the process of being implemented. Usopp found this amazingly wonderful for his story-telling, but when pressed about it, it was the first thing he admitted was a lie. There was just something about the percipient woman that spoke of power beneath the surface, and hands in far too many pies to count.

With a small comforting shiver, Nami smiled up at her, “Sure thing.”

Robin moved off, and the door opened revealing a fuming Zoro, followed quickly by Brook, who was clearly trying to pacify the green-haired man.

"Someone had the motherfucking audacity to touch my swords, Brook! I don't care if I have to call in every favor Smoker owes me I will FIND them and I will SKIN THEM ALIVE," he roared, so far beyond mere fury, beyond rage, to a point where he was red in the face and his scarred eye was closed by the pressure of the blood in his cheeks and the throbbing vein in his neck. "I will hunt that scurvy bilge-sucking RAT down and I will GUT him from groin to throat! The middle daughter will drink again—HE FUCKING SHATTERED HER!"

"I know. I know, man." The old hippie winced, his hands up in deference, "But we can't just go hog wild and tear up the city. We have to get a lead first. Even the fingerprints you lifted won't be worth anything unless we got something to compare them to. Now c'mon, we gotta tell Nami what happened to Sanji-san."

"Right. Right," Zoro hissed through his teeth, grappling with his anger and his grief. "Robin, Nami in th'back?"

"Hm... she had been going over her books just a moment ago..." Though her tone was light, she had a small smile on her lips as she pointed just around the edge of the bar where Nami was clearly visible.

Zoro gestured for Brook to come over and explain, because if he tried he was going to start screaming and swearing in tongues again. The way he had when he’d found Yubashiri on the floor in front of the door to Sanji’s apartment.

Brook glanced nervously at the waitress, and she giggled back at him. She really couldn't help herself; Zoro was just too much fun to pick on, even when he was wearing the 'Death Glare' across
his brow. The older man shook his head. He had to admit the fact that Zoro hadn't seen Nami sitting there was entertaining, and he made a mental note to laugh about it later, when things weren't quite so tense.

By the time he got over to the table where their manager was attempting to listen to Zoro's recounting of the tale, she had her hand at her temple and a frown between her brows. "For the love of God, Zoro, have you taken your meds? You're cursing in Japanese again. I can't follow what you're saying if you don't stick to a language I know. I'm sorry, I can't."

Zoro growled unintelligibly and dug his nails into his arms, barely noticing he'd already drawn blood until Brook put his hand on his arm and directed him toward the bathroom. He ducked in to clean up while Brook took a deep breath to begin.

"I'm not sure what exactly went down, but this morning when we got back from the Sunny, Yubashiri, the oldest and most fragile of his swords, was gone from the rack and there was an evil feeling in the apartment. The feeling of an intruder. We investigated floor by floor, but it took us most of the morning. You know how his sense of direction gets when he’s frantic. Zoro eventually found her on the fourth floor... In pieces. And half of her shoved all the way through Sanji-san's door."

"Oh my God!" Jumping to her feet, Nami arrested herself a little, knowing there really wasn't anything she could do to help him. She let her eyes trace over the bathroom door for a second before looking back to Brook, "Other than that, is everything okay? Nobody was hurt, right? Sanji left after you guys. I don't know if he had somewhere else to go this morning before going home, but he couldn't have been there when it happened. Have you guys seen him?"

She felt cold when Brook shook his head, and was unaware of the shiver running through her shoulders until Robin's hands appeared on them. Her arms were wrapped around her torso unconsciously. The women exchanged a glance, and the older of the two nodded. Then she moved off to the door of the bathroom. She needed to know exactly what Zoro had seen and if there were any details he was leaving out. And it had to be Robin, because of the whole Crew she was the only other person who could speak Zoro's specific dialect of Japanese; so it didn't matter if he slipped up while recounting the tale.

Nami watched her go with a heavy sigh. It all sounded far too familiar. It brought back memories of ducking into houses and stealing valuables and punishments... oh God the punishments! She shuddered again, waving Brook off. Some people needed outside comfort when dealing with their demons. Nami wasn't one of them. She packed up her betting book, clutching it to her chest, and ducked into her office just in time for the phone to vibrate on her hip.

"Thousand Sunny, home of the Rubberman, this is Nami, how can I help you?"

"Ms. Nami?"

"Oh my God, Sanji! Sanji, where are you? Are you okay?" The note in her shriek grabbed everyone's attention, and she dashed back out to where the base for the phone hung on the wall next to the kitchen door.

Pressing a button on it put the cook's voice out through the speaker instead of the hand set, "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Where are you?!" Usopp demanded; from the worried look on his face it was clear Brook had informed the others. Or Robin had.
"I'm—Ms. Nami, did you put me on speakerphone?"

"Yes! We're all worried about you, Sanji! Come to the Sunny so I can look you over!!" That was Chopper, all but climbing on the bar to get closer to the phone.

Franky had his arms crossed over his chest, his heavy glare only enhanced by the sunglasses he had yet to take off, "Ow! Cook-bro, lemme get a look at that door of yours, I'll rig it so that nobody can fuck with you ever again. It'll be super."

"No! No, really. I'm fine. I wasn't even there." Sanji mumbled something, the tone somewhere between mournful and angry, "No, nothing was damaged that can't be replaced."

Whether a sound went through the group or the cook realized what he said exactly was unclear, but he hurried to continue before anyone could actually comment.

"Except the Marimo's sword, I mean." He sounded like he was sorting through something. "Lemme know if it can be fixed, yeah? I'll take care of it."

"You don't have to do this alone, Sanji. Please come to the Sunny?" Nami cut in again, and there were murmurs of agreement from the rest of them.

"No. I actually can't..."

Usopp shoved his way to the phone, pulling the receiver off the hook. He shot a glare at the others when they tried to protest. Being a liar by trade, the long-nosed man sensed there was something the cook actually couldn't say out loud with everyone listening in. He knew something of needing privacy when feeling his lowest. A lesson he'd learned early in life when his mom got sick, and they couldn't get in touch with his dad.

"Sanji, listen, it's just you and me. What's going on?"

"I..." the other hesitated, something between a whine and a growl in his voice. "I really can't tell you."

"Will it make it worse?"

"Probably. Just, trust me, I can handle this. Please let Ms. Nami know I might need a day or so to organize things."

"Yeah, sure. Do you need a hand replacing stuff? Franky an' me'll come by if you want. We got that alternator put in my truck a couple days ago. Might make it easier to get your stuff. I don't even mind —"

"No, I'm good. Well, I'm okay. Most of what they got was my laundry. That's why I can't come in. I've got next to nothing I can actually wear that I'm willing to be seen in public in." Sanji actually scoffed at the idea. "Just let everybody know I'm fine. Thanks."

Then the cook hung up, and Usopp took a deep breath, scowling even darker at the rest of them. His eyes flitted from one unhappy expression to the next. They'd all heard him. Lying, after all, was the sharpshooter's specialty.

What broke the silence first was Zoro's snarl from the back with Robin. "Whoever did this has done it before. Come in the building and threatened Sanji. But last time whoever it was came here and used Sanji's favorite chef's knife to threaten him."
He related the details of that incident as well, Brook chiming in when he lost the ability to speak English. Franky just about threw a fit when they were done. Somebody had broken into his Sunny?! He didn’t even stick around to hear what they had to say about Sanji hiding it; he had a security system to rig up. Robin nodded to him when he stormed past to grab a seat at the bar, texting furiously with someone… or possibly several someones, if Nami was honest with herself. The redhead made a mental note to procure a replacement for the missing knife, and Usopp shivered, feeling violated in a way that he hadn’t felt for a long time.

"S-so... what do we... do?" Chopper sniffed, trying to put on as tough a front as Zoro and failing somewhat.

"We—" Zoro found his mouth abruptly covered before he could finish that thought and growled under Nami's hand.

"We support Sanji, first and foremost. He is our Nakama. He's pulling away from us but we won't let him go through this alone. When it's safe for him to return to us, we'll make sure he's perfectly safe with us, and that we support him."

"Just like we always have!" Usopp was strangely confident about it. "Did we back down when it was Robin? Even when Franky went off on his own to find her? No. Did we fly off the handle when it was Nami?"

"Actually..."

"WE MADE SURE YOU WERE SAFE FIRST!! You know what I mean!!"

Chopper looked between them, eyes wide, but feeling a little better. He chewed on his lip though, "What do we tell Luffy?"

"...what do we tell Law?"

"For now. Nothing." Robin spoke for the first time since they returned from the bathroom. "Luffy-san has his tournament to focus on, and needs Law-san at his best to ensure his safety. If Sanji-san has spoken with them, we will know before we can say anything. So, for right now, we focus on supporting our cook and our captain as best we can. Once the tour is over, in a few weeks, and they have returned to us, then we will worry about how to discuss this. I have been in conversation with Sanji-san's niisama, trust me."

Franky leaned over his diagrams to plant a kiss on her temple, "Always, babe."

Slowly the others nodded too, when Robin said to trust her, that was what people did. But with that, and the decision not to move forward, that left one person entirely lost, and he crumpled to a chair. There was no direction to go in; no place he could direct his anger and no action he could take, and it left him bereft of the anger to be swamped by his pain.

And he wasn’t ashamed to admit he was crying for her. "Yubashiri..."

"Zoro-san..." Brook flattened his hand softly in the middle of the bouncer's back. "Perhaps some air would help to clear your head? It is what any of us would do, had we lost a family member so tragically."

He looked up and spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Where can I go I won't focus on her? The dojo is where I met her; home is where she died. Even here, I've performed with her on that stage so many times..."
His eyes felt hot and he could barely breathe through the lump in his throat—everywhere he looked, there were more memories of her. She did not deserve such a dishonorable death!

"You have never had trouble letting your feet take you where you need to go before." Lost among perverted and often morbid jokes, and heavily quoted song lyrics from the 70s, it was easy to forget how much older Brook was. "Take your phone with you, when you are tired, someone will come pick you up, no matter how far you wander, my friend."

The pained man looked up into the tall other's face and then nodded slowly and took a deep breath and swallowed, then stood and put on his jacket and checked to make sure his phone was in his pocket.

"Yeah. I... I'm sorry, Nami. It might be a while 'til I... find where I'm wandering."

"Yeah. Sunny isn't opening today anyway. Luffy's fight isn't for another two days, and it's only Sunday. We wouldn't have that big a crowd anyway. Go on." Her tone made it clear that she was just as shaken by everything as he was, though not for current events. More in the manner of ghosts from her past come back to haunt her, the manager kept rolling her left shoulder like it ached.

He stopped next to her to press his hand to the joint—not over the spot the phantom pain was centered, not there, not when she was bothered. "You too, Nami. Call me, I'll come. Promise."

"Yeah." She smiled and covered his hand. Then she shoved his shoulder, not anywhere near hard enough to actually move him, "Now get outta here before Vivi shows up and sees you sniffling like Chopper just called you Dad or something."

He was able to muster up a little chuckle at that and nodded, then ducked out the door and let his mind go blank. His feet carried him where they would; the compass at the core of him that took him where he needed to wander would lead him (down the alley, past Crinin, deeper into the city, toward and through the residential district into steadily nicer and nicer parts of town where he was not normally inclined to roam) and he could deliberately not think.

Over streets, past cars and people, and shops, and houses, and on and on in a mindless amble that wasn't unaware, just inwardly focused. He never ran into anything. The pickpocket that brushed him got half a step away before the phone was pulled back from the girl's hand. She got a stern glare, but he kept walking. All the way to the strip mall beyond Grand Line. It wasn't exactly ritzy, but the shops there had always been outside of his pay grade.

Ten steps and—

CRASH!!

The flying body pulled him up short. In the rubble of a potted plant a young man, maybe thirty if he let his stubble grow in some more, groaned, unable to even hold his head. He was dressed in smart clothes, so it seemed a little odd that he'd been flung... halfway... across... the mall???

From the angle of his trajectory, the bouncer caught the movement of his assailant. She was tall for a girl, but not incredibly so. Long dark brown hair held back with a lace-trimmed bandana. Sharp blue eyes behind modern frames in a tiger-brown. Her mouth was set in a snarl that would have been deadly had she not looked like she was about to either cry or pout, or both. There was a proud cant to her chin over a swan-like neck trimmed in a black velvet choker that only made her more fiery. She wore a short, burgundy dress that clung to her curves in the 'right' places, ruffled around her elbows, and was trimmed in lace at the hem, though she had apparently attempted to lengthen the skirt with a shawl that matched her bandana. Unfortunately all it did was make her hips look more
attractive by hanging off to one side.

But what really caught his attention were her legs. Long, toned, shaved smooth, and amazingly powerful.

She was very carefully lowering one, making it obvious that she'd kicked the man at Zoro's feet, and from the look of her heels it was probably a good thing she hadn't been stronger. Even though they weren't exactly stiletto, they were very thin; thin enough to cause actual damage to somebody.

Zoro's feet pulled him in that direction. It was like his entire body, everything in him, had locked on that one woman. He didn't know why. There was nothing about her particularly remarkable to his eye, beyond her root. She seemed to be strong, and she was conventionally pretty, though that had never interested him before. It was strange, but looking into her face, he was sure he'd seen her before. The angle of her nose, the point of her chin, even the dotting of freckles over her cheeks, and there was a slight puffiness to her right eye—invisible from a distance, but up close he could tell her make-up was heavier on that side—like she was covering up a bruise.

On one hand that bothered him. Society having ingrained the idea of the battered woman hiding behind cosmetics to cover for her abusive lover. But Zoro had a strict policy of 'not my business' regarding literally everyone, even his Nakama. If they didn't want to share their secrets, he wasn't one to push for them. As long as nothing was hurting anybody else, at least. When it came to strangers, he was even more hands-off. He didn't know them, he didn't care. But this woman…

So he didn't know what prompted him to ask, "So, what did the asshole do to warrant a fifty-five-foot ride down a floor?" Acutely aware of how prying that question was, he added, "I'm lookin' for a reason to kick somebody, and 'e seems good enough."

"I can take care of myself thank you." She tossed her head a little, brushing a thick curl back over her shoulder, "But if you really need to know, he got handsy. He had been attempting to flirt with me and didn't believe I have a boyfriend."

She'd had her eyes closed for the moment, apparently trying to clear her mind of the situation, but then she opened them, and looked at him. She blinked and stumbled back, suddenly having lost balance on her heels, and unthinkingly her arm flailed out to catch his shirt. Strangely though, she didn't grab the shoulder seam, like she knew the sleeve couldn't handle anything tugging on it. In fact her whole grip was such that none of the seams were stressed.

His hand came under her elbow to tug her back to stable footing, and his eye dropped to the floor to look for the cause of the slip at first before coming back up to her face—probably dust or something he couldn't see.

"I have no doubt you can take care of yourself, but I was hoping to find a reason to give him an extra thumping. Though I can't imagine why he wouldn't believe you. Logically, if it isn't the truth, then you are deliberately telling him you are not available so he will leave you the fuck alone, in which case the thing to do is leave you the fuck alone. And presuming you are telling the truth, pressing further will likely result in an ass-kicking, if not from the harassed person, then from the boyfriend."

"I..." She seemed to not have thought he could think like that. Her hand shifted to hold his arm instead of his shirt, and she glanced down at it before looking back up into his eyes. "Would you stay with me? I mean, if you're busy it's fine, but... when I'm out like this they always flock all over me, and... I'd just be more believable if I actually had a guy that looked like he could be my boyfriend when I told them to get lost."

He blinked, then nodded. "Sure. Though can I please kick the ass of every other one? You get first
dibs but I'd really like to thump a few."

"Sure!" She grinned, and stuck her hand out at him, "I'm Baby."

He put his hand in hers with a firm grip. "I'm Zoro. Nice to meet you, Baby." Then he chuckled. "Wow that sounds strange in my mouth. I've never called a grown person 'baby' before."

Her hand in his felt calloused—not like his, differently. There were little scars under his fingertips, dozens of them, in various lengths and positions, like she worked with her hands on a regular basis doing something that exposed her to knives. And the squeeze she gave his hand was strong.

"Trust me; it's better than my full name." She didn't let him focus on it too much, laughing lightly.

Digging into her shawl—which had pockets somehow?—she took out a pack of Death cigarettes and a slim gold lighter. She had her smoke lit and the pack put back in her pocket before she seemed to catch herself. Turning to him, the brunette withheld the smoke of her first inhale in her lungs. It gave her voice a familiar strained quality.

"I didn't even think, do you mind?"

He waved it off. "Go ahead, I don't mind. Most of my friends are smokers. I find the smell comforting." He offered her his hand. "I know you don't hardly know me, but people tend to mysteriously wander off if they don't hold onto me. It's weird. So if you don't want to suddenly find me about fifty feet away looking confused, you gotta keep me leashed."

Her laugh was bright, "Alright." She laced their fingers together, and shivered when their palms touched. "So warm..."

He grinned. "Yep. M'a living heater. My manager likes to say if we ever get trapped in a storm they'll just all huddle around me with heat-reflector blankets and we'll be fine."

"Should bring you into the kitchen then. It's the most insulated room in the place." She commented without thinking, still snickering while she took a drag on her smoke.

"Mmm. You've been to the Sunny then? We must be getting popular. Fight enthusiast or there for the music or...?"

As Luffy had climbed the ranks in his sport, more and more people had come to know about the place. So, it wasn't so unusual that people had been to the Sunny anymore. After all, it was one of the only places in town you were guaranteed to get a prime view of the Tournament.

"Hmm something like that." Her eyes held a secret, but she drew them up to the door of the next shop, shoving her cigarette butt in the stand next to it. "Here, I need talk to manager here. I swear this is the only place in this whole shitty city where a person can get a decent fitting with a rack like mine!"

The windows were filled with mannequins dressed in tailored outfits. At first glance they seemed normal. Suits on one side, dresses on the other, some gender neutral stuff in the middle of the floor. But upon closer inspection the store seemed to have dressed the wrong display in the wrong clothes. The mannequin wearing the ball gown just to the right of the double door had shoulders too broad and waist too square to be female, and the one to the left, in a suit that the Sunny's cook would utterly slay if he wore it, the neck was too long, the hands too delicate for a male. Naturally real people could look like that, but Zoro wasn't naive enough to not know manufacturers gear their products specifically towards certain, stupid, stereotypes. So, there was really only one conclusion he could come to about the place...
And it was confirmed when the flamboyant manager came around from the back. She was in a slinky, more suited to a nightclub, dress covered in ruffles, and outrageous heels over thigh-high stockings. Her hair was even bigger, bright copper red, and teased like crazy, barely contained by the pink headband just behind her bangs. She put a perfectly manicured hand to her cheek, and shrieked, nearly losing her white cat-eye glasses in her hurry to greet them.

"BABY!!" She squealed.

Next to him, Baby seemed to tense a little, but wailed back at her, "Caroline! It's horrible! All of my precious clothes!!"

Zoro merely blinked, both at Baby and at... 'Caroline'? Yes that was what Baby had called her, Caroline, then decided to firmly keep his nose out of this business because it was not his business and returned to looking around the store, wondering idly if the suits Izou tailored looked anything like these.

The girls exchanged a look, and Caroline not-so-subtly eyed the bouncer. Baby shook her head, and the bigger woman relaxed.

Up close the store manager was much bigger. Taller and more broad than even Zoro, and that was without the heels. She also had a sizable definition to her chin and a five o'clock shadow the green-haired man would kill for given his inability to grow a full beard. Even the shitty cook had better facial hair than he did!

Something seemed to click though, because the large woman wrapped her arms around them each. "Tiger-boy, why don't you go on and take a look at our catalogue. It's on the counter there. I'm sure something in there'll catch your eye. We don't carry your size here in the store, but all of our stuff is custom tailored right here by our own people, even the ordered stuff. So, you just go drool over it while I take care of Baby here. Won't be long."

Caroline gave him an exaggerated wink, and steered the slender brunette around the wall where she'd emerged not a minute ago.

"I… uh… okay," he said, a little bit helplessly, and padded over to the catalogue.

Maybe if there was something practical... he felt almost guilty coming into a store this fancy and not buying anything, so he might as well browse. Perhaps if they had any really nice-looking yukata...

He found a chair and settled in it with the catalogue, content to wait for his companion and look over the fashions. He wasn't even sure why, but he just felt no urge to stray from Baby's side. His feet didn't have the itch. And well, he trusted the wandering itch. So he would wait. And hope to find at least one design not covered in glitter, because the middle daughter would be much too offended if he got sparkles on her hilt.

The front have was geared, obviously, towards Caroline's taste, but towards the middle the fancy dresses became more practical women's clothing, even pantsuits—though clearly feminine. The very center was full of underthings, everything from boxers to stockings. There were harnesses and strappy things that didn't seem like the kind of underwear shown in other catalogues. How exactly was that supposed to work anyway? Was it a thong? It looked too small to actually cover anything. And the sizes were amazing! The stocking size chart covered all the way up to seven feet tall! After that the clothes became decidedly more masculine, ending in an entire section dedicated to the kinds of suits Sanji wore. In fact there were a couple that looked identical to the ones the cook wore. Again there were notes about sizes that broke the mould.
A very sharp dark charcoal Italian cut, three-button style jacket and trousers over a deep green silk shirt with a Mandarin collar leapt off the page at him. The jacket itself was open, showing a hint of matching waistcoat, and revealed that the top button of the shirt was open just enough to be breathable without looking sloppy. And best of all, the chest measurement went all the way up to ninety inches! There was no way he'd accidentally rip seams in something like that!

"Told you something would catch your eye, Tiger-boy." Caroline's voice came out of nowhere next to his ear on his good side.

He jumped, though not so much he bumped into her or tore the catalogue, but his eye glanced over the price and winced.

"It might have caught my eye, but it rather outshines my wallet," he replied, sighing a bit. "And I have nowhere to wear such a nice suit anyway. I don't go anywhere and I have to wear a uniform at work. Couldn't justify the expense without at least a reason to wear it somewhere."

His thumb brushed over the waist though, it looked like it could double as a haramaki... maybe for a tournament...? Maybe wearing that would get Crocus to okay him going back to actually competing.

She shifted a little to glance at Baby, who was browsing through a rack of button-down shirts, and gave a small nod, "Maybe to take somebody out?"

He looked at her, then shook his head.

"I hardly know her. Just met her today, just agreed to help keep harassers off by accompanying her. And I couldn't afford to take a date anywhere this fancy either," he chuckled, but he couldn't seem to pry his eye—or his thumb—away from the image.

"Then it was fate! Everybody comes into our lives for a reason. Just look, you met her, she brought you here to meet me, and now you're head over heels for one of my designs. And between you and me, Tiger-boy," she dropped her voice to a stage whisper, "if you need a reason for clothes, maybe you haven't thought that the reason is the clothes." One brightly lacquered nail tapped the page, "Just think how powerful you'd feel lookin' that good. And, honey, you'd look damn good in that. Always trust an Okama about these things."

"...Sensei Mihawk always did say one should always dress well if you wish to be thought well of and respected as a fighter," he said slowly, groping his way along to a decent excuse. "And IF I was going to get back into professional swordplay it would be well known I am his student... and if I showed up anything like I look now he'd turn me over his knee but something like this... this he'd approve of."

Caroline smiled with the same air as a cat, and her tone took on an air of aloofness, "We work with credit, too. By the way. Pay it off as you go."

"Ahhhh dammit skin me and call me a tiger-skin rug. I'll get it on a payment plan. What do you need, measurements?"

"Yup~!" The flash of a tape measure accompanied the redhead's standing up straight. "Up on the turn-around, Tiger-boy, and shirt off! Pants can stay, but only cuz you're too cute to make blush~!"

Baby's laughter, bold and again familiar, cut across the shop. The slender woman came forward, arms full of clothes, "Talked you into it, did she? Caroline's got a way with that sort of thing. C'mon, Marimo, let's see~!"

Zoro blinked, mid-strip. Had she just...? He watched the graceful brunette out of the corner of his
eye as he climbed up onto the platform as directed. It felt a little bit like he was collecting tiny bits of a picture that didn't quite make sense yet. So he didn't acknowledge it, choosing instead to finish pulling off his shirt and flash a winning smile at the seamstress.

"She did. However, I assure you, Caroline, I do NOT blush at being naked. I could lose these pants here and now and stand here in my boxers in front of these big beautiful windows of yours without an OUNCE of shame or a drop of blush," he smirked, standing powerfully with his feet wide apart.

"Oh ho! That sounds like a challenge, Tiger-boy! Drop 'em!" Caroline crowed with a toss of her amazing hair and a decisive point of her finger.

Baby curled herself into the chair Zoro vacated, clothes on her lap, and settled in with the air of one intent on watching a good show. She didn't say anything though, her tongue between her teeth.

"Done," he purred back.

And in one slick move he pushed the waistband over his trim hips (oh god the v-lines. They were CHISELED), off one leg and the other extended so they slid off his ankle and pointed foot to the floor (when had he toed off his boots?!?) to stand there in his black-green boxer shorts which hugged him like a dream, firm and tight and downright edible. Jesus Christ the man was a statue of a Greek God come to life. It wasn't fair. His legs were every inch as sculpted and built as his upper half, indicating he believed in a balanced training routine, and from ass to thighs to calves every perfectly delineated muscle was mouthwatering.

And he knew it, too, because he was wearing a smug grin that said 'I have nothing to be ashamed of and I damn fucking well know it'.

"Ohhh, Lord help me, Baby, where did you find him! AND HE'S LETTING ME SEW FOR HIM!!! THERE IS A GOD!" Caroline danced the distance between the counter and the turn-about, with its three mirrors that reflected back the planes of living marble that weren't visible from the front. The other woman tucked her knees higher and partially hid her face, her eyes wide as she stared. There was no other word for the hungry way she traced the lines of his body. She was staring, and from the looks of things, having a hard time concentrating on anything else. A bright blush colored her ears and cheeks where they peeked over the mound of fabric, and it only got deeper when the seamstress dropped to her knees to start taking the measurements; waist, hips, calf and thigh circumference, arm length, chest width (that drew a whistle), shoulders, neck, back length, and finally the one they were both waiting for... the instep. From ankle to the top of his thigh, and the redhead was ashamed to admit, her hand shook when she got close to his groin. DAMN he was fine! He held perfectly still for her, moving only so she could get each measurement, and as boasted, never gave in to a blush. If anything, he preened under the attention, wiggling his toes a little when she took the instep. It was his pride that he looked better out of clothes than in them, but if he could look AS good in clothes as he did naked (and the suit Caroline was going to make would) he might never wear another outfit.

After taking that fateful measurement, the redhead sat back on her heels, and sighed, though it sounded more like a swoon, "Well, Tiger-boy, you were right. I'm not so proud as to not admit defeat. Does anything make you blush?"

"Well, one thing does," he admitted, smile going a bit wry. "You see, I'm famous for getting turned around and lost. Getting CAUGHT getting lost... that'll turn me bright candy red. Every time. But no body stuff. I know I've got a build to be proud of, after all!"
"That you do. Well, you ever find yourself lost out this way, honey, you call me up, and I will be more than happy to find that booty anywhere you lose it."

"Caroline!" Baby squeaked, "Stop drooling over him! I'm sure he gets people fawning all over his body all the time. Yeah?"

Though still bright red, she looked to Zoro for confirmation.

He shrugged. "Most people never see this much'a me. Don't go in for fittings oft...en...?" Having been about to climb down, he realized abruptly that there was a crowd plastered up against the windows almost five deep. "Uhm. Caroline are those yours?"

"Oh Jesus!"

Somehow the brunette's face got redder, and before Caroline could chase them, she threw the clothes on the chair, stormed to the door to stick her head out, "GET LOST YOU LOUSY BUNCH OF HANGER-ON SHIITY GROUPIES!! HE'S TAKEN! SHOO! BEFORE I START KICKING ASSES!"

For a second, just as she said that, it looked like all of her weight shifted to her left leg, the right knee loose and cocked slightly forward. Then the crowd of mostly women seemed to realize Baby wasn't joking and started to disperse. A couple hung back, a few Okama who rivaled Caroline's build, but something Baby did with her chin that had her hair falling over part of her face made them glance between her and Zoro. They gave an apologetic head shake, one or two saying things that couldn't be heard through the glass, and most of them had their hands up, palms out, as they backed off.

"Hmph!" She only came back in when they were all gone, and crossed her arms over her chest, using one hand to fix the lock of hair that had covered her eye, even as she returned. "Shitheads."

That fighting stance—he knew that stance. He'd fought against that stance. Twice now. Ferocious and powerful. No wonder she'd been able to knock that pansy-ass misogynist halfway across the mall. Another piece of that picture slid into place as he recognized it, but there still wasn't enough to really patch it together. So he tucked it away and kept it locked up tight.

"Thanks. I don't think I've ever seen that many people staring at me before," he rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish grin. "At least not at one time."

"AHA! So you do blush!" Caroline poked his cheek good-naturedly. Then she turned to Baby, "Why don't you take that stuff around to the back with the other stuff, yeah?"

Confusion flooded her expression, but the brunette agreed, slowly. "All... right..."

She glanced between them, and frowned, reaching over to gather up her purchases.

Zoro helped her gather them, then sliding into his pants and picking up his shirt. "Got everything you need there?"

"Yeah." Baby smiled up at him, open and warm. In sharp contrast to her previous attitude. "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere?"

"I have a chair and I will sit in it," he promised, plopping into said chair and shrugging into the too-tight shirt.

That was one of the things that kept throwing him off. So familiar, and yet... Baby was open, expressive, warm and welcoming. She seemed almost the polar opposite of the one who kept tugging
at his thoughts. His instinct was telling him something, but he couldn’t see it yet. Maybe it was just because of the break-ins? He didn’t know, but he resolved that he was going to find out. And soon.

"Here, Tiger-boy." Caroline handed him a tee shirt two sizes bigger as soon as Baby was around in the back again. "Consider it a loan." Then the Okama woman sat herself in the other chair next to him, "Now, I saw that look. Talk to me, Tiger-boy, what's going on in that head of yours?"

Her eyes flicked to where Baby had left them for emphasis.

As he changed, he used that few seconds to think how to phrase it. "I recognize that fighting stance. I've fought it. I know that shift to the left leg and that particular loosening of the right knee. And it makes a couple things make sense. But. It is also not my... I want to say not my business except it's Nakama. But it's also private and my nose should stay out of it."

"She isn't who you think, Tiger-boy. Trust somebody who's known her since she cut her teeth. Just let her tell you who she is. You catch my meaning?"

She looked legitimately concerned for him. Worried about the girl would have made sense, especially if they really had known each other since Baby was little, but this was more for his well-being.

"I am. I take people at their word, Caroline. She says her name is Baby and I trust her word. Wouldn't mind sparring sometime, all the same. Savate is one ass-kicker of a fighting style."

"That it is. It's a favorite of mine." The shopkeep grinned, then patted his knee with a subtlegrope to his thigh muscle. "All put back together?"

"I think so. Didn't have much to put together." He didn't mind the grope, it was subtle enough. As long as it didn't pinch was his rule.

"Then let's get you set up, and scoot Baby out before she winds up buying my entire fall line in one go! I tell you that girl spends far too much time on her appearance. I keep telling her to just relax and wear what she wants, but she's got this idea that if she doesn't look perfect nobody'll need her for anything. Like they'll think she isn't any good at what she does! Hmph! Little girl's better than anybody in this damn city. It's their fault they can't see it. But ignore me," Caroline got to her feet again with a little 'oof', using Zoro's leg for leverage—and maybe to get another feel of that quad muscle, purr. "I'm just a silly old woman that worries too much. C'mere."

The big woman pulled him for a tight hug.

“You’ve got a good heart, Tiger-boy. Stick with that and nothin’ anybody does will matter. No matter how much it hurts. A’ight?”

Zoro tensed for a heartbeat—how could she know?!

Then again… his feet always took him where he needed to go, and damn if all of this with Baby hadn’t gotten his mind off of his tragedy. So, he relaxed into Caroline’s embrace, glad to take the support the older woman was offering.

She pulled back after a moment, moving over to the counter. “Right,” she laid a form on it with a pen, “fill this all out with your info, Tiger-boy, and I’ll fill in the rest. Pay as much as you can as often as you can, but gotta be at least once a month or my boss’ll come down on me for picking up strays again. I’ll give you a call when it comes in so we can fit it to you, and after you get half paid, you can take it home.”
Baby came back out again, sans armload of clothes, and glanced between them again, certain that they’d done *something* without her. But she didn’t say anything, just came over to the counter to lean against it, her arms crossed loosely over her chest.

As soon as Zoro was done, she took his hand again, leading him out of the shop with a wave at Caroline. “See you in a couple of weeks, I’m sure.”

“Be good, Baby-girl! Your papa’d have my head if I didn’t keep an eye on you!” The big Okama woman waved back, and the door shut with a jingle. “Bye, Candies! Come again soon!”
"So, I'm starved." Baby lit up another cigarette as soon as they were outside. "Wanna grab like some ice cream or something? My treat! Since I hauled you in there where Caroline could sink her claws into you." She laughed a little, gesturing with her smoke, "She means well. She's just really enthusiastic. You should see her fight."

"I think it would be amazing to see, and I don't mind. She's a lovely person. I'm happy to give her my business," Zoro replied, mind straying back to the comfort of the older woman's arms and her perceptive insight into his day. "And maybe some ice cream. Something that'll go down easy… I can't say that I could handle a meal or anything heavier than a milkshake, really. Not right now..." he wrenched his mind back to his companion. "Did you have a particular place in mind?"

"No no, I couldn't either. Not after that... ugh. I don't even wanna think about it. That guy I kicked? He wasn't the first today. You're the only reason there haven't been any since." She actually leaned in and wrapped her arm around his close enough that her hair brushed his shoulder. "No, I know this little creamery at the end of the plaza. They've got the BEST soy caramel frozen yogurt I've ever had!"

He leaned into her a little bit to equalize their weights and nodded. "I've never tried soy frozen yogurt, but that is supposed to be easier on your system than straight up dairy, so I'm willing to give it a shot. Except the caramel. I'm not one for sweets much," he chuckled a little. "And not that it's cool for people to harass you, but I was hoping to scare some arrogant little shit into pissing himself today."

She giggled. "Well, maybe you can intimidate the counter guy. He always likes to stare at my chest when I order."

The walk to the shoppe wasn't all that long, just down the block and tucked around the corner where the parking lot turned to make room for the driveway. It had an outrageous cartoon frog on the sign.
in garish colors, but the inside was a more pastel, almost modern retro—if such a thing could actually exist. The tables were all linoleum and ringed in chrome, most had matching stools fashioned after the type found in a classic diner, and the few that didn't had benches that looked like they'd been pulled from a train car with mini jukeboxes tucked into every booth. A big one stood between the doors to the bathroom in the back, and the counter had a big case with a wide glass front so people could actually look at the ice cream while the employees dished it up.

Standing behind the counter, the teenager who worked there looked like he would literally rather be doing anything else than serving ice cream to needy children and overtired parents. His flame red hair stuck up, gelled into points and held there with a pair of what looked like decoration welder's goggles. He was fairly well-built, with the kind of frame that meant if he kept his figure he'd eventually turn into Zoro, but for now his clothes didn't look entirely painted on at least. The pastel color scheme of his uniform clashed with the rest of him though, his nails were painted a deep purple, he had dark lipstick permanently stained across his mouth, and \textit{he'd shaved his eyebrows!}

Baby clearly couldn't understand the reasoning behind that, and she had history with the guy because she tensed, clinging tighter to Zoro's arm, as they approached the counter. She nearly sneered with the amount of venom on her tongue.

"Eustass."

"Th'name's Kid." He, however, flashed her a broad, expectant smile, as if this time it would win her over in spite of the large man to which she was attached.

Zoro's eyebrow slowly crawled its way up his forehead.

Oh. Really. Now.

His muscles rippled in Baby's hold as his fingers wiggled and stretched. He just might kick some ass today after all.

The redhead behind the counter didn't even seem to see the other man, his eyes were roaming over Baby's body like she belonged to him. "Should've called and told me ya were comin', Baby. I'd've put yer favorite aside for ya. Free of charge for a kiss."

He waggled his \textit{shaved} eyebrows. Again... why?! And Baby turned to Zoro, putting on the cutest pout she could muster to play up the 'big, strong boyfriend' angle, and pitched her voice so that she seemed even more girly and feminine than she was, ignoring Kid's comment.

"You think about what you want, huny?"

"I'll try whatever you 'ave, luv," the bouncer laid on a thick accent, not his own, but it made his already deep voice deeper. Almost vibrating. "Even tha' 'orrible carmel stuff yeh git."

He then put a hand on top of hers to let their fingers lace on top of his bicep, taking all of her weight and looking down into her eyes like she was the center of his universe. How he managed that expression with one bad eye that didn't move right while trying not to laugh, don't ask him, but he did.

The blush that lit up her face was entirely real, and she actually had to blink a couple of times before she could continue her act, laying her cheek against his shoulder.

She gave Kid a dreamy smile, "Gimme my usual and a green tea single soy for my boyfriend please?"
Now Kid looked over at him, his nose wrinkling. He sneered, punching the order into the cash register harder than he needed to, "Ya new in town, homie?"

"Mmmmahhh. I work security on th'shit sida town, s'all," Zoro replied, keeping his own vocal tone easygoing, if a bit smug.

Kid would take it as 'ha ha I have this little lady and you don't', but really it was that he was having FUN showing this young punk up. He couldn't be old enough to drink, much less properly court a lady.

"Best job inna world, throwin' ass'oles outta bars an' inta alleys nex' door. But m'partment's not far from where I work, yeah? So's I don' bother wit' th'clean side'a town much. But Baby wan'ed me 'a 'ave a suit, an' what Baby wan's, Baby gits."

Oh hoooo he was laying on thicker than molasses but dammit watching the kid turn as red as his hair was fucking great!

Baby turned her squirming into a bashful giggle. "Aww, huny, you spoil me so bad!"

The counter boy looked like he wanted to suck raw eggs. "Thirteen sixty."

He very blatantly looked to Zoro for the payment, and actually inhaled sharply when Baby pulled her wallet out of her sash. He looked between them, a certain air of smugness coming back into his expression. It curled the side of his mouth and made his naked brow ridge waggle again. Leaning in to take her bank card, he brought her hand to his lips.

"Lemme show ya how a real man takes a looker like ya out. I'll make it worth yer while. C'mon, Baby. Dump the musclehead an' come out with me t'morrow."

"I'd back off if I was you, kid," Zoro warned, holding Baby's hand. He gave it a little squeeze that said much more than his words as his eyes sparkled with a wicked intent. "Not only ain't you a man when ya ain't even outta yer short pants yet, you couldn' 'andle a woman like Baby. She's more'n jus' a looker, yanno."

He positioned his arm just below counter level. Just in the spot that would put Baby's long, long legs at full extension less than an inch from Kid's nose... and smash right into the bridge if she so chose.

"As amazingly entertaining as it is to watch you boys fighting over me, I think I'm gonna have to decline, Eustass. It's illegal you know." She leaned in.

From Kid's point of view, it seemed like all she was doing was letting him get a better look down her shirt as a consolation for turning him down. But from Zoro's... Her foot was on his arm, her knee bent, and the muscles of her leg were fully coiled from ankle to hip. If he pressed his luck again, there was no doubt she was about to knock his block off.

In either case though, the young redhead backed off, a goofy grin on his face as he moved about to get their ice creams.

"It's a shame. Still think yer wasted datin' a lunk like him. I'mma be eighteen in a couple weeks. I'll look ya up then. Cuz it won't be illegal no more." He set Zoro's on the counter but handed Baby's to her.

The thing was a veritable sundae, piled high with whipped cream, and enough cherries to form a heart in the fluffy white stuff. Baby took it with a gracious smile, and used her other hand to tuck her credit card into her cleavage. Then she turned and sauntered away from the counter, her hips
swishing for Zoro's benefit. She could've used the power in those legs, but she hadn't. She'd deliberately chosen to spare the kid's life, and damn if that didn't make her sexier.

Kid seemed to think so too, because he whistled after her just loud enough for Zoro to hear. "Fuck, man, ya're damn lucky ta be tappin' that. I'd give my left nut to split that ass in half."

Zoro looked at him quite seriously as he scooped up his own. "Kid, an' I mean this as 'onest advice, yer listenin' ta too much Robin Thicke. Fer one thing, anal sex wit'out proper prep, lube, an' a condom can give ya a disease that can kill yer partner and make yer own dick fall off, an' fer another, she's a lady. Not a sex object. She exists outsida when an' if she feels like 'avin a romp. She 'as a life outside'a fuckin' men. Fer all I know, she's regularly bangin' the chick in the 'partment across from ours, but she's got a life outsida that too. Talkin' to, an' about, women the way ya 'ave been will only guarantee two things, Mr. Eustass Kid: one, yer only gonna get laid by women wit' low self-esteem an' low standards if ya get laid at all, an' two, women WILL see you, an' treat ya as, a threat ta them. 'Cuz th'way yer talkin', ya sound like a threat. As someone who evaluates threats on people fer a fuckin' livin', trust me on this one. A woman o' class like Baby? She ain't never gonna give anybody talks like that a second glance; an' if they keep on, they'll find themselves in th'ER."

He stuck a spoonful of the creamy frozen yogurt in his mouth.

"Ya'll be surprised wha' a woman what feels threatened by a male's tough talk will do ta 'im if 'e won't leave 'er alone. Some carry knives, some carry mace. Some carry both an' brass knuckles that can gouge out yer eyes besides. Brush up on seein' women as real people, Kid. They are. An' anyone fergets it, they'll find they asses blind an' missin' fingers."

That done, he walked over to Baby and offered his arm. He wasn't sure why he felt the need to deliver that speech, which the arrogant little shit probably wasn't going to actually process a word of because Zoro was a 'rival', but... well, instincts were instincts.

"Didja wanna eat this in th'park in the middle of the mall or on the move?"

Baby glanced over her shoulder, between them, and bit her lip, speaking quietly. "On the move for now."

Kid looked like he'd swallowed a lemon whole. His mouth was screwed up like he wasn't sure if he wanted to puke, or scream vulgarities, but a plush woman with a bouncing eight-yr-old approached the counter just as Baby and Zoro left the shop, so he didn't get the chance to do either.

As soon as they were far enough away from the windows of the creamery, Baby pulled a little ways away from Zoro, moving over to a trash can to scrape the whipped cream off into it. "You'd think the first thought people have when you ask for soy was a milk allergy or something, but no, little prick assumes I'm on some kind of diet and don't need to be. So it's full fat cream, and whipped dairy products, and fucking. Ugh! I can't stand embalmed fruit!"

She was shaken, her hands tight on her spoon and dish, and the only reason her tremors were visible was the subtle vibration in the curls of her hair where they bounced away from her head.

He offered the unadorned thing she'd ordered for him. "You can have mine. It's not nearly as sweet, I'm sure, but I'd rather you not have to deal with an allergy attack."

"Oh it's not allergies. I'll be alright. It's just he makes assumptions about it. The wrong assumptions about it."

She shook her head, sucking on her spoon now that the whipped cream monstrosity was gone.
'Besides it's the caramel that's the part I really wanted. It's..." she blushed a little, "If you don't mind me rambling a little, it's something my dad used to make for me. When I was little... well, I won't bore you with the reasons why, it's just he'd take me into the kitchen, sit me on a stool next to the stove and let me watch him fold sugar into caramel. Straight white sugar would go into the pan, then with heat and something I've never been able to recreate, he'd make magic with it. And after he'd roll a spoon in it, blow on it to make it hard, and I'd suck on that until the nightmares went away. So it's... um... it's a comfort thing." 

"Ah. That sounds like me and swordfighting. Right after my parents died I was fostered with a man who owned a dojo and had a daughter. When I had nightmares, she'd get up and we'd just whale on each other with the practice swords, which some months later turned into spars with real, if dulled, blades. I can still shadow-spar with her memory and it calms me down like nothing else. Katas are good for centering, but when I'm in a really bad place the only comfort I can find sometimes is in those old matches. Ironic, considering I lost every time and they were a source of INTENSE frustration at the time."

His mouth tilted upward in one corner as he took another bite of his own. It was quite good. 

"I was wondering what gave you all those rippling pectorals Caroline was drooling over." Baby teased, biting the spoon so that her nose wrinkled up. 

"It was not my pectorals Caroline was admiring most," he muttered with a little light blush into his yogurt. "But yeah. Swordfighting has been my focus for most all of my life. I had to give it up when I moved here; nobody else to challenge me." 

"Well, you must do something to keep in shape. You can't possibly tell me that just being a bouncer at the Sunny keeps that looking like it does." She very blatantly dragged her eyes down his frame and gave a bite to her lip. Caroline hadn't been the only one drooling over him. "You've got to at least spar with some—"

"It would be more prudent to ask who he doesn't fight with. Am I wrong, Roronoa?" The voice was soft as silk and cut through the surrounding noise like a hot knife through butter.

Baby paled some when she took in the newcomer. Shorter than Zoro, and her by an inch or so, with a sharp, manicured beard, and even sharper eyes. He wore a dark pink poet's shirt, fitted beige trousers over low-heeled boots, and a black vest. Nestled in the V of his collar a thick gold cross glinted against his skin in pleasant contrast. He walked up to them with the grace of a wild cat, seeming to move like he was on the hunt, and stopped just far enough away so as to be out of Baby's kick range but still close enough to be heard easily. If Kid's gaze made her shudder with revulsion, when this man looked her over, she shivered with the anticipation of a fight. Falling into stance was an unconscious move, and she found herself calculating what sort of move she'd have to make to save her ice cream and still attack him.

He waved her off like he could read her mind though, "Relax, Samantha, I have no desire to incur your father's wrath. Though I must admit, I almost did not recognize you with your hair dyed. It is good to see that your burning soul has never faded. You look well."

"They call me Baby now." She muttered, looking away with an unreadable expression. 

One sharp, dark brow rose lightly, but he didn't follow up on her comment, choosing instead to return his attention to the man at her side. Though his expression never changed, he seemed somehow worried and disappointed at the same time.

"And you, Roronoa. Something has happened. Your heart screams for revenge."
"I... yes. This morning."

Zoro found his attention slipping and sliding away, barely able to register the exchange between Baby and his Sensei as the morning's discovery started to crawl up his throat and he did his best to push it down. Please, please, please, this one time, Mihawk, please, don't ask it. He couldn't hold it in if he did. He'd never been able to refuse answering Mihawk, not once in his life.

He breathed, deeply. "It is... unfocused."

Sensing something was very wrong, Baby looked between them, chewing on her lip. "Hey, uhh... I'm gonna go grab a smoke. It... It was nice to see you again, Uncle Mihi. I'll be... uh... over there." She pointed to a little stand of trees and a bench. "When you're done, just... um... wave at me. Or something..."

Then she bolted.

Mihawk quirked his eyebrow at her again, then returned his gaze to his student, speaking in Japanese to offer a modicum of privacy for a painful subject, "Fresh, unfocused pain is often the stone that blunts to blade. Is there nothing you have found to hone your intent?"

"None. Not yet. But I will. I will if I have to call in every favor Smoker owes me and return to bounty hunting. I will wear that fucker's skin for a belt and make him regret the day he ever laid hands on that which he neither knew nor respected, never earned, could never have understood, and destroyed."

Zoro's hands were clenching into fists again, shaking as the bile tried to rise in his throat, the scene dancing in his mind's eye.

"No."

That word. That single word. His eyes only widened by a fraction, but it was clear the Master knew. From the years of dedication under his tutelage, Zoro saw how heavily affected Mihawk was. He never expressed himself much externally; he just wasn't built for it. But that minute jolt, small as it was, meant that the older man felt like someone had taken a cheap shot to his gut, his breath short, and his heart pounding. For all that his body remained relaxed, he slipped his hands into his pockets, disguising the tremor across his knuckles at the inability to raise a blade against the information.

"Which?"

His student's eyes both closed and his breath hissed out through his teeth.

"The only one too weak to slice the intruder's hand off for the impudence to touch her. Too tired and stressed from her long years of service." His eyes opened again and tears were pooling there again as he faced Mihawk, head on, not allowing himself to cower away from the horror of it by not saying her name. "Yubashiri."

Just saying it slammed it all home. How her gentle guidance had been abused by someone too ignorant to even feel her wrath and her refusal when she was brought to bear against the door of one of her student-master's nakama. How her every fracture and crack had been pushed until they broke. How she had denied the offender his victory in her breaking and then he dishonored her by shoving her through the door like a common ice pick, abused her as a spiritless blade to crudely hack and slash and then the final indignity of leaving her there in dishonor while her spirit was forced out of the aged steel.

He crumpled to the floor like a wet, cheap napkin. His knees hit the concrete first, followed by arms,
and finally his forehead in full bow before the feet of his Sensei. His voice was raw, torn with agony so heavy as to inhuman.

“MŌSHIWAKE ARIMASEN DESHITA, SENSEI!”

People around the mall froze dead, held in terror by his words, though they couldn’t understand them. The meaning was so raw and so potent with the pain held within them. Many stopped to stare, pulling closer to their companions and only moving on when met with the sharp hawk’s eye glare Zoro’s Sensei cast about.

From Baby’s perspective it seemed as though Mihawk was uncaring, cold and distant, refusing to touch his student. Zoro’s pain lanced through her, and her mind wandered back to earlier that day.

But Mihawk...

He just stood there, stock still. Unflinching to the wave of grief before him. What was invisible to the brunette woman across the quad, were the silent tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes, dark and melted into his beard almost immediately. His mouth moved, but his words were too soft for her to hear.

"For the murder of a daughter, may the perpetrator's house fall into ruin and his line lay barren in the field."

Zoro looked up then, and his own eyes were rimmed in red. "And I hope it's one of us who finds him. I hope he doesn't get the mercy of a quick death from some mobster or even his own boss. It's too quick. Not dishonorable enough. She was broken to shards and shoved through a door, Sensei. A door of one of my nakama! She denied him and he—"

His throat choked off into a growl of wrenching fury and agony.

"Ahhaa, inhale the scent of victory, remove the veil of loss. The eagle cannot hunt with clouded eyes." Mihawk’s voice was soft, like the swish of steel against a sheath. "Deep the chasm drives but from it comes the wellspring of resolve. Your fury has always been your weapon, my student, do not allow this filth to dull your edge."

The pupil took deep, heaving breaths, but with a little time and a little concentration he was breathing deeply instead.

"Yes. I won't." He had joined him in the native tongue, it felt soothing to his raw nerves. "I did what I could to… to lift prints, check for DNA; I had hoped she'd gotten a chance to bite him, but not a drop- but I know there were things I missed about the situation, details I know would probably help Smoker and even me search. All I can go on at this point is he's done this before, he's in the habit of sending messages, and he's harassing one of my nakama. My fury will burn hot and deep until that person roasts alive in it."

"Then you have done all you could do for now, my student." The Master repeated that phrase as though it was a chant, or a focus point for Zoro’s wild thoughts.

Then he neatly folded himself into the lotus position, bringing his hands to his knees with his middle fingers touching his thumbs. It didn't matter that they were in the middle of the mall, where anyone could come up to them, and there was chaos all around. He closed his eyes, and brought in a deep breath through his nose to be released through his mouth.

Fully expecting Zoro to join him, Mihawk wasted no effort informing the green-haired man of his intentions. He merely began to chant, soft and quiet, “Tayata Om Bekandze Bekandze Maha"
Zoro recognized the breathing pattern and was himself folding into the matching lotus—which was surprising for someone that brawny to be that flexible—and finger form, feeling his own rampant inner energies already start to circle instead of wildly throwing off and outside every which way. He was able to join in the chant, when he recognized the tune, and quietly, the world began to creep back in past the grief of losing one of their mutual life-partners.

“Tayata Om Bekandze Bekandze Maha Bekandze Radza Samudgate Soha.”

The pair's resonance affected the mall around them. People walking past walked more slowly, their voices hushed in reverence to something that they didn't quite understand. The animals stilled as well, birds stopped chirping, a dog waiting for his owner outside one of the stores laid down with his head on his paws, even the insects, what few were out in the early fall sunshine, fell still, as though listening to the impromptu funeral. Baby curled her legs up on the bench, a hand over her heart, and tears on her lashes that she hadn't noticed forming. An understanding was beginning to blossom within her, and as she watched, she too felt herself mourning with them.

“Tayata Om Bekandze Bekandze Maha Bekandze Radza Samudgate Soha.”

In time, Zoro felt her shadow. Uncertain if it was really her or his memories, he almost lost his rhythm. Were it not for his sensei and his desire to respect her just in case, he might have broken the chant entirely. So his face lifted to the sky, tears free to flow as they would, and his voice continued in harmony with Mihawk's.

“Tayata Om Bekandze Bekandze Maha Bekandze Radza Samudgate Soha.”

The spirit stroked over his hair and then moved to her former master to clasp his shoulder. She had had a long run, for a blade that had toppled an empire. She was ready to rest, now. She could move on to join her first Master, her dead ronin wanderer, at last. But... for the dishonorable thief who had sullied her last? Bring him down. Make him pay. Bite for the blade that could not.

“Tayata Om Bekandze Bekandze Maha Bekandze Radza Samudgate Soha.”

And Zoro, even knowing it was probably his own grief-stricken mental projection, smiled a little. He would, he promised.

“Tayata Om Bekandze Bekandze Maha Bekandze Radza Samudgate Soha.”

As the song came to a close, so too did Mihawk's meditation, and the sounds of the world filtered back into their bubble of peace. His eyes opened in the same moment as Zoro, locking their gazes together.

He spoke again in Japanese, though his chant had been in Tibetan, "As the viper waits among the stones to strike, so too must we. And when the time is right, our fangs will teach the foolish man the folly of his ways. He will learn how wrong he has been in the moments before Enma Dai-ouh claims his soul for the nether world, and our patience will be rewarded with honor."

Zoro breathed in slowly, then out again. "Faith in that may be all that helps me hold my position some days. But it will be worth it."

He breathed again.

"In the meantime… how long are you in town?"
"Only for today, I'm afraid. I am due to appear in Little Garden tomorrow for the tournament. My layover between trains is actually almost over. I had hoped to stop in and see your new home, but as that seems to be something of a poor choice at the moment, I am going to have to say I am pleased to have run into you here. Though I apologize for having disrupted your date."

The color of Mihawk’s eyes and the shift of his moustache belied his amusement regarding the last statement.

The younger man chuckled and shook his head. "It's not a date. She asked me to help keep assholes away and my wandering feet brought me to her so I said yes."

"Ahh. Well, even so. The universe enjoys bringing together those who are meant to help each other. Just as I had no intention of shopping when I left my train car this morning, and yet, here I am. Nevertheless, I have," The Master pulled a pocket watch from the left side of his vest and glanced at it, "approximately four hours before I must return to my train car, and if I do not stop to see your sister on my way through my phone will be ringing incessantly until I return."

He flowed to his feet like water pouring backwards.

"Tell Samantha to give her father my best. I look forward to seeing you both again sometime soon."

Zoro nodded, not correcting him because time was too short, and replied, "I will. You tell the Onna she needs to call me up sometime when she DOESN'T need somebody beat up."

"An ant may change the direction of the world, but even I have no effect on your sister."

And for the first time in the entire conversation Mihawk actually smiled. It was small and barely visible, but it was a smile!

The other chuckled. "That is true. She does what she wants, when she feels like it, and if you'd like to argue... well that's usually when she calls me in, but otherwise she'll ignore you."

"Hai. Peace and tranquility guide your steps, my student. Sayonara." Mihawk bowed slightly, his hands folded before him.

"Peace and tranquility follow your footsteps, Master. Especially considering where you're visiting. Sayonara." Zoro bowed back, the deeper being as he was the student, hands also folded.

Baby waited until he'd moved off before stepping back in, offering a tissue. "I won't ask if you don't wanna talk about it."

"It's... hard to understand for someone who isn't a swordsman. Most people think we're nuts. But certain blades... after enough time and bloodshed, and care, they get a spirit. Or grow one. And when such a blade is broken badly enough... that spirit is forced to... move on. They die. And this morning I suffered such a loss, and Yubashiri was a very old blade, passed from master to student, and so he, my master, shares in my loss." He wiped most of his face as best he could, blew his nose in the slightly soggy tissue, and then tossed it, and what was left of his now-melted ice cream, in the nearest wastecan. "Oh, he said to give your father his best."

She snorted. "That means he wants me to kick the Old Man's ass." Then she sobered again, "I'm sorry you lost... her? I... don't know much Japanese, only what I've picked up from watching TV, but I think you used the female pronoun right?"

"Yes. Both of Sensei Mihawk's swords are female. Well, ALL swords are. But the Black Sword, she's just plain—you don't touch her unless you're Sensei Mihawk. She's, ah, prickly. And stabby.
And bitey. But the others are the Three Daughters. Yubashiri was the eldest, and she came from him.

"I'm sorry." She said again, something heavy in her eyes and the pinch of her brows. She searched his face, trying to think of something to bring the conversation back onto better topics and coming up short.

He smiled, soft, and sad but sincere. "Thank you. Actually, going around the mall with you, I haven't had time to dwell on it most of the afternoon. I forgot entirely for a while back at Caroline's."

"Oh good." Her face brightened with an answering smile, "Is there anything you actually need? I'm mostly done, but... well... would it be bad if I said I like hanging out with you?"

"I don't really own much. Don't need much. But it's been fun hanging out with you. So I can't say I think it's bad," he admitted.

"The last thing I need isn't sold here. Did you need a ride back to the Sunny or something? Much as I don't wanna say, what was it? Sigh-oh-nar-la?" She closed one eye fumbling with the foreign accent and a touch of something other than English in the way she said her vowels.

"Sayonara, and I can walk with you wherever you're going. When my feet stop itching I'll call someone to take me home."

"Alright then." She beamed at him. "To the bus stop!"

She linked her arm in his and marched them down the sidewalk with comedic purpose.

Dracule Mihawk was not one to spy on his pupil during an afternoon outing, but he couldn't help watching the pair of young adults moving off. The girl—he refused to use that ridiculous nickname—pulled his student along by the arm, laughing and lifting his spirit. The pain was heavy in his heart, but eased by the two-fold reminder that those who pass on do so into the next life, guided on the Great Path. Even blade spirits.

He reached a hand to the tiny sword hidden in the cross around his throat, and silently promised her they would take time on the train to mourn her fallen sister.

Then he moved off to his next destination.

Chapter End Notes

The place in the middle where Zoro apologizes to Mihawk, I was uncertain which Japanese apology to go with, as I'm still learning the nuances of the language. If there's a native speaker among my readers, please, please, send me any corrections I need to make. Thank you. ^_^

Song: Medicine Buddha Healing Chant (This is literally the most powerful meditation music I have EVER heard!!! Seriously, y'all should try it!)
**Chapter Summary**

A surprise at Little Garden for both Mihawk, and his guest. Ohhh Law will *not* be pleased.

**Chapter Notes**

Hey! Look at that! It's only been a week! I was updating the others, particularly on DA, and noticed it had been, so here y'all go! ^_^ Enjoy~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was Monday evening by the time the train pulled into Little Garden, and Mihawk was all too ready to be done with travel for several hours. Perona had been her usual self, which left him to board a busy rush-hour train with a splitting headache and no opportunity to indulge in a nice cup of tea before arriving in the small city where the next round of the Supernova Tournament was to take place.

He gave the stadium a heavy glare, centering himself with a long breath.

So when a heavy arm dropped across his shoulders out of nowhere, the tranquil man nearly bit his tongue in an attempt not to squawk like a startled chicken.

"AH HA HA HA HA HA! Mihi, you're hilarious when you aren't paying attention!"

A dark gold eye regarded his assailant with little humor. "I am always paying attention, Shanks."

"Sure you weren't!" The redhead guffawed again, already pulling on the swordsmaster's neck so that he had no choice but to walk or be dragged away from the entrance of the arena.

"Dare I even bother asking what you are doing here? Your team is supposed to be in Long Ring tomorrow."

"That's tomorrow. This is tonight."

"Adrien Shanks, it is utterly impossible to get from Little Garden to Long Ring in twenty-four hours, and if your fighter is not in the ri—"

"Relax, Mihi!" Shanks' hand covered his mouth, and the blasted redhead was grinning like he had a secret. "The rest of 'em are in Long Ring. I came out here to scope out the competition. Doin' my managerial duties, so to speak."

"Mhmphfnkhnmph."

"What was that?"
The hand didn't move, so Mihawk glared harder.

Unfortunately, unlike most people, when the brunet glared at Shanks, the other swordsman only laughed harder, entirely impervious to the boiling fury tucked under sharply contoured brows. This led to Mihawk growling like his best student, and feeling a good bit like taking the dagger from his neck and gutting the other man.

He never would though. Which was probably how Shanks was able to shake off the famous Hawk-Eye Glare.

Still, it didn't stop him from wanting to.

When Shanks realized he wasn't going to get a repeat performance of garbled words he finally did let the brunet go. "So, maybe I knew you were going to be judging this round and wanted to drop by for a drink or five? Can you blame me? All this time, and still the most fuckable ass from here to the East Coast."

"Only the East Coast, Shanks? I think I might be hurt if I wasn't so disgusted by your vulgarity."

That made the redhead laugh harder, holding onto Mihawk's shoulders for balance. He was wheezing the next time he tried to speak. "Oh my God, Mihi! You crack me up! C'mon, the fights don't start for another hour, that's enough time for a quickie behind the busses like we used to."

"You have been incapable of a 'quickie' for a decade and a half." Mihawk refused to allow the man the satisfaction of seeing him roll his eyes. So, he focused on the other reason he had to turn him down, "Besides, I have a prior engagement to which I was unable to attend on the train."

Ever as astute as the swordsmaster himself, Shanks sobered abruptly. "What happened?"

"Walk with me, this is not a conversation to be overheard by prying ears."

They made their way through the gathering crowd, around the curve of the great round building, and up the steps where Mihawk had to sign in for his position on the judges' panel, before he finally broke his silence. He was grateful for the respect Shanks gave him, as, truthfully, the news had hit him as hard as it had his beloved student.

"There has been a death in the family." And he touched his cross with gentle fingers.

Shanks eyes dropped to the gold pendant, and back up again, "You have my deepest condolences. Who?"

"Yubashiri."

"No!"

For a second, the span of a heartbeat, the redhead thought the worst, and his companion read it on his face with a tightening of his hand on his cross. But then it cleared, argued away by the logic that if *that* had happened, he would have been contacted by Smoker, as Luffy was listed as the greenhead's next of kin. And other than foul play, only Zoro's death would have meant the blade could be broken.

So, foul play it was.

Shanks drew a deep breath through his nose, not unlike Mihawk's earlier. "Do we have details yet?"
"No, from what Roronoa was able to tell me, the apartment building was infiltrated during Rubberman's last match and the damage was done by the time he arrived home. He has sent all the appropriate information to the authorities. For now, there is nothing more we can do, but lay the lady to rest. She has earned that much in her long life, if nothing else."

"C'mon then. Let's get you signed in and we'll drink a toast to her honor before fight."

They gathered a bottle of high quality sake, Mihawk's traditional blue willow ochoko, and a pair of incense sticks from a nearby New Age shop. Then the two made their way quietly to a local park. Under the branches of a large oak tree, Mihawk knelt in the seiza stance to place and then light the incense. He inched back some as Shanks joined him. Both bowed their heads to the ground, apologizing silently to the fallen spirit that they could not bury her shards where they could rest in peace.

Upon sitting back up, Mihawk, as her former master, drew the tiny blade from his throat and pierced the palm of his right hand with it. Thirteen drops of blood he squeezed onto the ground, one for each of the thirteen Buddha.

In reverent silence they sat, reflecting on her life, her victories, and finally what they knew of her death. Until the incense had long burned out and the world was insisting they move on.

Shanks cracked the seal on the sake, and they drank.

When they could delay no more they stood again, leaving the burnt incense sticks as a token of remembrance, though it was a shoddy replacement for the memorial she deserved. Both made a mental promise to see to helping Zoro create a true grave for the Ebony Matron when next they crossed paths with him.

In contrast, the stadium was loud, ignorantly boisterous, and ferocious. Mihawk took his place among the judges, and Shanks found a seat in the stands. The first two fights went down without a hitch, their winners taking a surprisingly easy victory out of both of their opponents. And for a moment, the redhead thought maybe things were starting to look up.

Then he got a good look at Bellamy.

Shanks hadn't been entirely honest with Mihawk when explaining why he was in Little Garden without his team. Law had relayed to him what Sanji said on the phone, and because the surgeon needed to be with his team, Shanks had come in his place to check out the damage Hogback had inflicted on the injured blond.

It was gruesome.

The judges actually called to the attending physicians when both Bellamy and his opponent entered the ring. From the blond's hairline to his ear, around his temple, the flesh was puckered and inflamed. His right eye squinted every so often, usually when he tried to look out of the corner, or if he moved his head too fast. The stitches were uneven, ragged and rough.

Kureha, the doctor representing Joker Inc, was called in to double check Hogback's work, and Shanks winced hard as he watched her yank Bellamy's chin around, glaring at the wound. She shouted something at Hogback, but the portly physician merely stuck his nose in the air and refused to answer her. She pulled a stethoscope from the back pocket of her skinny jeans and took the fighter's vital signs; heart, lungs, temperature…

Then she shook her head and brought Bellamy's attention back to her face, instead of her—
admittedly—rather impressive chest. It would have been laughable if the situation wasn't so tense. To see a barely five and a half foot woman hauling the nearly seven foot tall behemoth that was the Krav Maga fighter around by his chin, and having him intimidated enough that he listened without even blinking. Maybe when it was all over, and they were sure Bellamy wasn't about to be knocked from the standings for Hogback's shoddy patchwork… maybe then Shanks would allow himself to laugh at the blond's behavior. But as it was, he very nearly fell off of his seat from how close to the edge he was.

Because if Bellamy was disqualified for injuries sustained fighting Blueno, and Blueno couldn't take his place because of his own injuries from the same fight, it meant the entire standings were out of alignment and Luffy could very well end up having to fight more matches to even it back out again. On top of an already very nearly back-to-back schedule. Shanks didn't know if his almost-son could take that, he was pushing himself far too hard as it was, and then there was that new rep from Tenryuubito snooping around.

The redhead was starting to wish he'd indulged a little bit more on the sake he sent with Mihawk. He was gonna need it for the headache he was building.

Eventually, Kureha seemed satisfied. Or at least as satisfied as she could be given that she couldn't go back in time and fix Hogback's disgraceful stitching. But she nodded to the judges, and the announcer came over the speakers.

"He's okay, folks! It looks ugly, but it's not a problem."

Then they launched into the typical spiel. Who the fighters were, what discipline they used the most, a recitation of the rules of the match, a couple of words from the big name sponsors involved with setting up the venues, and finally the crow to begin the fight!

Shanks watched closely, noting Bellamy's stances and how he, for good reason, favored his right side. A couple of times he thought the big blond was going to go down, but they didn't call him the Hyena for nothing. He bounced back, laughing at his opponent, and in the end, it was a literal jump from the wall, Luffy-style, that brought both of his meaty fists into the other guy's chest and face. He was flung back, and a loud CLANG rattled the cage where his head hit the metal bars.

The ref counted him out, and declared the match Bellamy's.

After that Shanks didn't much pay attention. It wasn't his place to go down and make sure Bellamy was alright. He was sure Sarkies and the rest of his crew would do that. So, to stave off the desire to stick his nose in where it really could get them in trouble, he busied himself with jotting down the mental notes he'd taken during the fight. Including a crude sketch of the damage on Bellamy's temple. Then he texted Law the results of the match and that Bellamy came away from it without any further injury.

He was so absorbed in his work it was his turn to stifle a squeak when Mihawk appeared in front of him.

"Now who is not paying attention?"

"That's different! I was working!" The redhead pouted.

Mihawk dared to let himself smile some, meaning if he had been any other person he'd have been laughing his head off, and he held up the bottle of sake from earlier. Shanks' eyes lit up, his notes and his phone disappeared into his pocket, and he tilted his chin in a silent question.
The hawk-faced man returned the head tilt, "Still interested in that 'quickie'?"

Chapter End Notes

If I get enough people asking for it, I'll write out the "quickie" between Shanks and Mihawk to make up for how short the chapter is, but I only wanna do that if people wanna read it. So lemme know. ^_^
Wednesday afternoon found Zoro with itchy feet. Two days after Luffy fought Foxy, with expected results, and the bouncer’s first day off since Sunday. Nami had expressly forbidden him from going into the Sunny since he couldn’t keep his head around the cook.

They’d been sparking off of each other all week—even worse than normal. Nami had actually smacked him with a rolled up newspaper when she sent him home the night before, screaming at him to stop baiting Sanji. His eye was just healed enough that he wanted to spar again, he knew he could get the blond to open up if they crossed—well, fist to shoe, and the way the infernal bastard kept shrugging off—denying—what had happened on Saturday night…

Ooh just thinking about it was enough to get his blood boiling again!

With a frustrated growl that was echoed back at him from the Middle Daughter, Zoro threw himself to the floor of his apartment for push-ups until he reached muscle failure. At the very least it would burn off his excess energy.

Unfortunately, six hundred push-ups later, he felt no better. So he switched to sit-ups, then to chin-ups on the doorframe with only his fingertips to hold on to the metal-reinforced rim. He gave a mental note to thank Franky for that. But six hundred of them later…

He growled louder, Sandai Kitetsu answering him again. Rounding on the sword stand, he bared his teeth at her, “No! There’s nothing we can do, now stop!”

Predictably the sword said nothing.

So, the man grabbed his leather jacket for later, shoved a pair of well-loved steel-toed boots on his feet, dumped his phone and keys in his pocket, and stormed out of the basement intent on dealing with the growing urge to wander. He gave Brook a wave on his way past. The stoner shot a message off to Franky and Usopp to let them know he might call one of them for a ride later—once he was thoroughly lost.

Immediately Zoro felt better, just wandering, vaguely people-watching, and simply enjoying the
falling night. He only noticed time passing when there started to be fewer and fewer others out and about, but paid it no mind. If he wandered all the way to morning it didn’t really matter. He could still grab a nap before going into the Sunny tomorrow.

And Nami could shove it if she wanted him to take it off too! The cook didn’t work Thursdays!

He was suitably lost, near some friendly looking all-night deli-type place, and distracted when his phone went off. Digging it out, he actually surprised himself by smiling warmly at the name—the newest on his list.

--BabyLoveCook[BLC] began skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer[TSW] at 02:10--

BLC: hey tigerboy
BLC: whats up tonight
BLC: was bored at work and thinking about you earlier
TSW: Oh really
TSW: Do tell
BLC: there's this guy was pissing me off so bad
TSW: If it's Kid I will thoroughly enjoy taking his eyes and possibly his balls this time
BLC: like seriously he wouldn't get out my face and i just thought how much fun you'd have kicking his ass
TSW: As for what's up I can't say it's much
TSW: Out and about really
TSW: Just started thinking about what the fuck I'm going to shove in my stomach to make it shut up
BLC: lol nah kid's just a punk this guy's the kind that just don't know when to shut up you know
BLC: i'm out for nomz myself
BLC: wanna meet up
BLC: there's a deli on 22 that's got sandwiches almost as good as mine
TSW: If they have pimentos I'm in
TSW: If I'm not there in ten minutes which is a definite possibility start without me
TSW: I've sometimes been lost for hours don't ask me how
BLC: it's the city
BLC: it moves i swear

--BabyLoveCook sent file IMG_140068935.jpg--

BLC: that's the front
BLC: and obligatory selfie
TSW: Do me a favor and look behind you to your left.
TSW: in the picture I mean
BLC: ???
TSW: Now look up. ;)

--BabyLoveCook[BLC] ceased skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer[TSW] at 02:15--

Baby threw her napkin at him, "You punk! Why didn't you come say something!??"

"It didn't look like you from behind and I'm not in the habit of approaching strange women calling 'Hey baby!'" He protested, laughing and snatching up the napkin.

"Somehow I think that's a good thing." She snickered and bit her tongue. Then she reached over and pulled her purse-shawl from the table. "Sit, sit! I haven't decided yet. My feet were killing me when I got here. I had to sit for a bit first."
Tonight she was dressed in a pair of grey leggings and a wine colored sweater-dress with a wide black belt around her waist. Her shoes were strappy stiletto sandals over painted toenails with a touch of glitter on both. Her hair was pulled back halfway in a butterfly clip so that the shorter pieces framed her face, but it still covered the back of her neck. The same choker graced her collar bones as the last time, the silver locket catching the light of the counter with a gentle shine.

He sank down into the chair and rubbed the back of his neck absently. "I understand, I really do. Sometimes when I get off work, I flop down in the chair and become thoroughly useless the rest of the night, rising only to shower. And sometimes make it to the bed, but not always on those nights."

The brunet woman snickered hard, "Oh I know that feeling! I live about halfway up my building, and I swear on nights like these I hate those stairs. The lift's broken, you know, because of course it is! So it's like I come in the front door and just stand there glaring at the steps for a bit. Worth it though, on the days when I'm not dead on my feet. Cuz see, the other apartment on my floor's empty, has been for years because the place isn't fit for people to live in. Something with the electricity that can't be fixed without rewiring the whole damn building. It's why the lift's busted too, but anyway, it means I've got the whole floor to myself. No noisy neighbors to keep me up when I get in." She snapped the gum in her mouth, "I was surprised you answered though. You work second too?"

"Second-to-third depending. Bounce at a bar, remember? I wasn't kidding when I said that I have the best job in the world; throwing assholes out of my workplace," he laughed, leaning slightly on the table and making the long muscle between neck and shoulder joint bulge up. He wasn't fair. "I'm also lucky enough to live in the basement apartment of my building, right beneath the owner. I literally have nobody bother me, ever. Even though all the apartment's washing machines are literally one thin wall from my living room, for some reason the noise, even when they're running, seems barely audible. It's weird. I'd accuse him of putting in a soundproofed wall if I didn't know how damn expensive them things are."

"Ha! Lucky you! I'm right over ours, and that is usually what wakes me up in the morning! I swear the pipes that feed it go through the wall at the head of my bed. Augh! I could bitch about it all night." She adjusted her glasses to read the menu above the counter across the dining room from them. "Hungry for anything specific with your pimentos?"

"You said they have good sandwiches here. I'm not picky. I just really like my sandwiches with pimentos. I like the bite-tart-brine flavor better than pretty much any condiment." He picked up a spare menu and flicked through it, glancing over what was offered. "I'm lucky in that we have a really good cook at work. He makes at least one meal every day and some days two or three, and it's always perfectly balanced. Everybody, including me, has almost entirely stopped getting cravings for... anything. Not counting our boss. The day he stops craving meat he's either sick or dying."

Baby was quiet for a moment, while he was behind his menu, a soft blush staining her cheeks, but she covered it when he looked up again, "Hmm then I'd say... roast beef, sharp cheddar, on rye bread, and a slice of tomato to keep it from getting too dry. Whatcha think?"

He inclined his head and put it down. "Yeah, that sounds pretty balanced. I just wish tomatoes didn't squirt and slide everywhere when I bite into them," he mock-pouted a little and clicked his tongue. "But beef and cheddar go perfectly well with pimentos so I see no reason not to."

"Could have them seed it. That's what I always do. The healthy stuff's in the skin anyway."

He blinked. "Seed it?" He tilted his head slowly to the side. "What's that?"

"It's where you take the seeds out of the middle. Gets rid of the part that makes it slip. Didn't you say your cook at work was really good? His tomatoes ever slip off of his sandwiches?" She almost
seemed smug, like she already knew the answer to that question. 

"I don't usually pay attention to what he does. I just eat it and don't question, but none of the
sandwiches he's ever made has fallen apart on me, so no, they don't. Kinda feel bad asking them to
do extra shit for me though. Especially when I know how irritating picky bastards can be from
work." He rubbed the back of his head a bit.

"Pssht. Asking a cook to seed a tomato isn't being picky. In all honesty if he isn't doing that anyway,
he's just being lazy. And trust me, he wouldn't last a minute with my Pape. Old Man can't stand lazy
cooks." Then she reached over and flicked the end of his nose, "And you should pay attention when
he cooks for you! You said sometimes he cooks three full meals for you and all the crew right?
Think of how much time and energy he's putting into it! At least appreciate what he's made!"

He blinked. "I do appreciate it. That's why I eat what he puts in front of me, when he's made it fresh
and hot… or cold… and never question it. Or examine it all that much." He rolled his shoulder in a
shrug and smiled lopsidedly. "My appreciation for his skill and cooking is absolute trust in
everything he cooks. And from someone who's picked nails out of his bread and cut mold off cheese
to eat what remained, my absolute trust in his cooking is the highest compliment I can give. I can
only imagine what he'd do to Franky and Usopp if one of them ever let a nail fall into a pot or onto a
countertop."

He paused and laughed. "Actually, he'd probably do what he did to me last time I annoyed him…
kick them right over the counter into the main area of the bar!"

This time she couldn't stop the blush, and he was looking right at her. All she could manage was a
squeaky, little, "...oh!" She reached out and smacked his arm lightly, “Hey! Don’t laugh!!”

He grinned and rested his chin on the palm of his hand, completely ignoring both the hit and her
complaint. "I can't help it; you're adorable when you blush. You've been told that before, I'm sure, a
million times, but you really are. It lights up your face. You said you were a cook too, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Pape taught me. It's what I do now actually. Why I was on my feet all day." She couldn't
help it, she blushed harder. "And... not so many people as you'd think. I don't count assholes that just
want a quick fuck. But even if I did, most of 'em talk about my... other parts. Not my face."

His face contorted. "Really? Ew! Why the fuck would anyone think that's appropriate! I mean…
regardless of whether it's true or not, which is a subject that by the way I am decidedly not touching,
how in the name of fuck is it okay to say that to someone you barely know?! Are people really stupid
enough to think that sounds like a pickup line?"

She shrugged. "I guess so. It's been like that since I was eleven and first started... you know.” Her
eyes and chin pointed down towards her chest with something a sneer. "They see 'em and just lose
their minds or something. I don't know."

Literally everyone has them. I mean, I get the theory that males are instinctively attracted to potential
childbearers and thus find large breasts and wide hips extremely attractive, but haven't we gotten past
'oh look boobies' by the time we're, I dunno, fifteen maybe?!!"

Squirming, Baby wrinkled her nose, "Can we just... go back to talking about food and cooking?
Misogynist assholes are the best way to kill an appetite."

"Fair enough,” he agreed. "Makes me restless, wanna go find a couple and kick their heads in. So
let's order. And I'll do that... ask for the tomato 'seeded' right?"
"I got it. I've been sitting longer than you." Baby stood and winked at him, strutting her stuff over to the counter.

The guy behind it was big, portly type of Italian. He had a butcher's apron on over his probably-used-to-be-white tee shirt and pulled a pencil from behind his ear to take their order. His face was open and warm with a no-nonsense set to his brow. He laughed and smiled at Baby like he knew her well, and disappeared into the back calling out in Italian to someone Zoro couldn't see from his seat.

Zoro tilted his head and shrugged, accepting it. "Cool. You know Italian and French AND English. I'm only good with English and Japanese."

"I don't know enough to talk in it, but cooking is a language all its own." She laughed, "And when you're talking food, native language doesn't matter. But..." She frowned, "How did you know I spoke French? I've never used it with you."

He nodded to her face. "You roll your R's the way a native French speaker does. It's one of the most distinctive accents."

"Ah. Well, I've never lived in France, so I probably sound a little different than people who were actually born there, but Maman and Pape raised me bilingual. Pape studied in Paris when he was a young man. It's where he met Maman, and she was there for the same reason actually." Her eyes were misty and warm talking about her parents. "The way Maman told it, they absolutely hated each other at first. They were in competition for the top spot in their graduating class, but they were also evenly matched. Pape swears he lost to her in their final competition, but Maman told me that she was absolutely convinced that her dishes wouldn't have even passed if he hadn't been her partner."

She shrugged, pausing to thank the butcher and grab their sandwiches. "The rest is history. Maman made Pape chase her until she caught him."

His smile was soft and maybe a touch wistful. "They sound like wonderful people, and like they were perfectly matched. Serendipity and fate. I bet they've been very happy together." He took his sandwich and paused a moment to close his eyes and inhale- the slight sting of the pimentos, the indescribable smell of fresh Italian bread. It soothed some part of his brain he didn't understand.

Her smile turned nostalgic, "Yeah. They really were. Maman was killed... when I was young. We never really found out what happened, my brother and I. Pape knew, but... he didn't share it. And I think it's better that way. She paused to take a bite of her own—a pita stuffed with something aromatic and crunchy—and she had to chase a runaway shred of lettuce before she could swallow and speak again. "I get to remember her as she was, without thinking about how she died."

He nodded. "That is the better way. I wish I'd had that luxury when it came to mine. I was too young, though. All I do know about them is how they died."

Taking a bite arrested his thought process, and his shoulders visibly lowered. Ooohhh yeah, that was good stuff! Baby watched him, happy to let the subject drop.

"Told you it was good." She sipped a tall glass of water with lemon in it. "There's an advantage to growing up with Pape, I know all of the best kept secrets the city has to offer."

"Mmm I'm sure. Cooks see a different side of the city, after all." He grinned and leaned back in his seat a bit, humming at the bite.

With a wink, she answered his grin with one of her own, "You know it! I can show you the best of the best on most of the East Blue, and with a couple places, I can take you backstage too. It's like an all-access pass to a rock concert for your tongue." Then she snorted, "Okay that was cheesy as hell.
You should stop me when I get like that."

He grinned wider. "Why? It's sweet, and I like listening to you ramble. Plus it's a good parallel. I've never experienced either so they're equally abstract and unimaginable!"

He laughed and realized he was scratching his neck again only when he put his hand back on his sandwich to have another bite.

"You just like watching me blush! It's not fair!" She smacked his arm lightly, affecting a pout but far too happy to actually be upset. Pulling a piece of carrot out of her sandwich she waved it at him, "I'll get you back, Tiger-boy, just you wait."

"Mhm. I'm looking forward to see how you do it. Though if you push me in the river I assure you I will simply strip and trudge home in my boxers. Or to the police station, whichever's closest to where I climb out. People have tried that one before." He smirked proudly. "I caused two bike accidents, three people to walk into poles, and one car to brake so hard he burst a tire. It was fucking glorious."

"And ruin the chance to have all of that manflesh to myself?! Are you kidding?!" She sucked on the carrot like she did her cigarettes, "Of course... seeing that car crash could have been hilarious. Don't think that'll be a thing at this time of night though. Not many people out riding bikes to gawk at you."

Laughing again, the sound free and easy, he finished off his sandwich (when did it disappear? wow) and sucked his fingers clean. "True. It was great though. Law will never let me live down the two broken noses he had to treat that day either."

She had to cover her mouth with both hands to avoid losing the mouthful of lettuce and bread she'd just taken while she laughed. After several breaths, she shook her head, "You just make a scene everywhere you go, huh?"

Zoro spread his hands and then wiped them on a napkin. "What can I say? It's a specialty. And not to mention, it's fun. You should see what happens if I walk downtown with my shirt off in daylight hours."

"Shameless!!" She threatened him with another carrot. "But if you ask me, I prefer this time of night. Less people, more freedom."

"Yeah, I like it. S'quiet. Comfortable." He lifted his nose up as if scenting the air. "Air's clearer. Always did my best hunting at night."

"They say tigers are nocturnal in India, you know." She glanced down at his plate, flushed slightly and tucked a foot up under her other leg, "Were you still hungry?"

"Mmm... a little. Not so much I'd order dessert, but I wouldn't object to anything you don't want," he offered, swinging his foot on the rung of the chair as his head twisted, nose twitching.

She promptly tore what was left of her pita in a little more than half and pushed the bigger piece at him. "I hate wasting food."

His head came back around, forgetting whatever it was he had smelled in favor of the pita and taking what she didn't want. "Me too. Especially good food. It's just an injustice to let any go to waste."

"Yes! Somebody gets it!! So many people look at me like I'm nuts when I say that. Like, I can't eat much all at once, especially after working all day, but I can't just throw it out! It's still good! Usually I go looking for someone homeless to give it to if I can't save it." She sat back in her chair absently chewing on the straw of her drink.
"Good plan. I've never thought of that. I usually just clean my plate- even if I wind up with a gut-ache from it," he said with another sheepish smile.

"Well, you're lucky enough that everything you eat goes into making that physique you're so proud of." Her tone was teasing, and she stuck her tongue out at him. "If I stuff myself it winds up coming back up again." She wrinkled her nose and shrugged, "Better it go to someone who can use it better."

He nodded. "Yeah. Not everyone can have a stomach of cast-iron. I'm lucky that I've never reached a limit where I ate myself sick. I hear about it a lot from Law. He hates it when people do that, it drives him nuts. Especially when he has to pump their stomachs."

She shuddered, "Guess I'm lucky that I have an internal reaction then." Deliberately directing the conversation away, she leaned into the table, "So, I don't wanna go home yet, wanna take a walk down by the river? I promise I won't push you in until we're almost back."

"Sure. Let's pay and take a walk. It's fairly nice weather, sky's clear." He laughed.

"The stars have a way of making stress go away." She smiled, getting to her feet so she could reach into her sash-purse better.

It hung on her hips like a secret, pretending to be the shield she hid behind, but the shift of cotton over spandex gave the bouncer an excellent peek at the power she withheld. Disarming and yet deadly.

She was amazing, and laughing at him. "Getting lost already, Marimo?"

He blinked and cleared his throat. "Maybe a little. Trying to figure out if we've got split checks or what for the bill. I'm not even sure how much that sandwich cost."

"Don't worry about it. I got paid tonight. If you ever decide to take me out, I'll let you be all chivalrous or something." A couple of bills were thrown on the table, and she made her way over to the counter again to give the butcher her bank card.

"What? That ain't fair though, you invited me out, I should at least pay my half since it was unplanned!" Zoro pouted at her—literally pouted at her as he followed her up to the counter.

The Italian man looked between them a little bored and expectant.

Baby shook her head, "Exactly. My idea, my treat. Now shush."

"...damn. Can't argue with the logic. Next time I call paying though," he cross his arms over his chest and bumped her shoulder lightly.

"Heh. Okay." She nudged him back, laughing, and then laughing harder at the comment the butcher made when he lumbered off to run her card. Her cheeks and ears were lit up in a fierce blush, and she called after him, "No! No, no! Ahh... I should only be so lucky."

He smiled. "Should I ask, or don't I want to know?"

"He implied we were dating... or at least that's what I think that meant. It had something to do with love." She blushed harder, licking her lips and trying to laugh it off.

"That wouldn't be such a bad thing." Zoro leaned on the counter a bit.
"Yeah, but if it happens it happens. It's not something to be forced into things, you know? I wanna be with a guy who needs me as much as I need him." She took her card back and gave the butcher a smile in spite of anything.

The big Italian, in turn, very obviously, looked between the two of them, held his hand up in an OK gesture, gave a nod, and winked at her.

Baby sighed fondly, blushing still, and shook her head. But she took Zoro's arm anyway to direct them out of the deli. "It's a matter of timing. The last thing I'd wanna do is pressure anybody into getting involved with me. No matter how natural the chemistry is."

He sighed, a little mournfully. "Yeah, I know. Nobody can force emotions. You can fake them, ignore them, and bury them, but you can't force them to exist. But damn if the wait ain't a pain in the ankles sometimes, innit?"

His arm in hers was a comfortable, warm weight of muscle and bone, and suddenly a thought, unbidden, popped out of his mouth.

"Hey, if you're still walkin on sore feet, I do a half decent foot massage."

"I would die! Between work and training to keep my edge, I think I probably abuse my feet worse than anything else." She melted into his shoulder, uncaring if the few people that were still out thought the same thing as the butcher. In fact, she was starting to think maybe the butcher wasn't wrong. "I know a little park just a bit up the river from here, the benches are actually comfortable."

"That'll work. And sounds WAY less creepy than suggesting we go to my apartment," he chuckled, taking her weight and balancing it easily with his own. "I'm not exactly a professional, but I can help a little."

"Just don't break me and I think I'll probably be putty in your hands."

Baby didn't exactly lead them to the river, but she did subtly pull on Zoro's arm if he drifted in the wrong direction. Most people were in bed, the city was as quiet as it ever got, and once they reached the bank of the East Blue the sounds of late summer insects still trying to stave off fall layered over the gentle lapping of the water itself. There was very little breeze, so the surface was only broken by the current, and being the largest of the three that fed into the South Blue, it made for a near mirror reflection of the stars above. A sliver of a moon was on its way to setting, and the lights of Marejois, where it sat in the hub of the four rivers, danced at the edge of their vision.

The bike and pedestrian path was fenced off from the river itself—too many idiots trying to swim in it—and not very well maintained at that point. Litter cluttered against trashcans that were overflowing. The surface of the path was broken in places where the grass and other plants had tried to reclaim it. Graffiti adorned the concrete retaining wall. And the streetlights above their heads shone on the road beyond the wall, not on the path itself.

But Baby liked it that way. Quiet, secluded, and okay, maybe not completely safe, but between her Savate and Zoro's muscles anybody who tried anything was sure to end up regretting their life choices by the end of the interaction. So, she gladly walked beside him in silence, just taking in the night air, and the supposed-to-be-strange comfort of just being with him. She didn't ask about his thoughts or pester him about his day. They simply existed together. In peace. If she had to put a word on it... wonderful.

When Zoro found a spot that was relatively clean and dry, he didn't need words to tell Baby to sit down and relax. He took two steps forward into the spot and sank down, crossing his legs beneath
him, almost purring at the soft grass. A patch of undisturbed clover made a few little flowers, one of which he picked and offered to his companion, taking one for himself to nip off the bottom of the individual petal 'cups' to drink the nectar. He'd even remembered that the purple flowers tended to have more and sweeter nectar than the pink ones and he grinned at her with one of the petals peeking out of his fingers.

She blinked at him, leaning her head slightly to the side. Looking between his flower and hers, she blinked again. "Um...?"

He also tilted his at the confused cook. "What's the matter?"

"I've never... what did you do to it?" The look on her face was analytic and curious, mentally dissecting the flower with the same kind of wonder with which she approached all food.

"You pluck the petals. Because of the cone shape of the petals, each individual petal collects a tiny bit of nectar at the bottom to attract pollinators. You pull a petal," he demonstrated, putting the flower itself down, and showing Baby the green anchor stem at the bottom of the petal. "This acts like a plug to keep the nectar in. Naturally, there isn't a lot of nectar in it considering it's absolutely tiny, but if you nip off the green part with your teeth you can get the nectar out of it. My foster father called it clover honey without the bees. Kept myself busy half the year until the clover stopped growing," he grinned. "We couldn't really afford sweets, but clover was free!"

"Huh." She blinked down at the tiny flower, drawing a nail through the petals gently. Then she tugged one off, frowning in concentration. "I don't think I'm doing it right. Just suck on it?"

"Suck on it... and bite off the green stem part. And you can spit out the petal or eat it, I don't think there's anything poisonous about it or anything, but I usually spit it out when I have that little drop of sweet. Ain't more than a touch, no more than a grain of sugar, but it's so much—I can't describe it, it's way way nicer than table sugar or that god-awful manufactured honey in the store because it's natural. I just wish there was a way to collect it in volume. I've tried squeezing the petals, but the amount per petal is so negligible it doesn't even leave a smear on your fingers."

"That's why you need to know beekeepers. Pape's honey was never manufactured, just harvested." She lifted the petal to her tongue and it was like watching a kitten with tuna for the first time. She nipped the end, then touched the tip of her tongue to it, her eyes lit up, and she pulled the whole petal into her mouth. "Mmmm."

He grinned back at her, his face alight from inside with simple joy and pleasure that he could introduce someone to something that made them so happy. "It defies description, doesn't it? It's not honey, but it's not sugary, but it IS sweet, and it's just—it's lovely. Like I said, I wish I had a way to harvest it!"

"Hmm. I gotta be selfish though. If we even do find a way to harvest it," she sucked on another petal, holding into the tiny plant pieces for as long as she could imagine getting flavor out of them, "I'd wanna keep it all to ourselves. Some tastes you just don't share."

He chuckled and resumed picking on his own flower. "Well, my best guess is that this particular nectar is what makes clover honey in the highest demand, among manufacturers and beekeepers alike, really. It's just a bit of a shame the flavor morphs into something heavier in the process. I like the light taste better. And it's ok to be selfish sometimes. But if I could harvest it I could have it year round instead of half the year!"

Leaning back on one hand she twirled the partly decimated flower between two fingers, mind running in her eyes, "The scarcity makes it special, I think. Something inherently connected to the
moment in which you learn about it. But... if I could make a syrup out of this... I would spin it, like sugar, into snowflakes."

Zoro sucked on, and swallowed, three petals at once. "Mmm. Possibly, if you pulled the petals, used a knife to nip the green ends, and boiled the petals to get the nectar... you could, theoretically, make a syrup out of it. Possibly. It would take most likely an entire field of clover just to get enough nectar to make a few tablespoons and you'd wind up doing a hell of a lot of boiling down... but that's theoretically. I have no idea if it would work if you tried to implement it."

At her look, he put his flower to his mouth defensively.

"I tried to make homemade ink once for a school project and wound up using clover- which is stupid by the way, it didn't even come close to being anything you could write with- and I've spent a lot of time thinking on possible ways to have clover nectar without tearing apart a million flowers," he scratched the back of his neck, blush dark over his cheekbones.

"Guess it's just one of those things you have to leave up to Mother Nature then. Wonder if I took raw honey, if I could dilute it back out to the original nectar flavor." She considered it for a little bit longer, then followed his example, popping the whole thing into her mouth to suck on. "Either way, thank you. You've given me a project to play with when I'm not swamped at work."

He smiled again, and even with the clover flattened against one side of his teeth he looked adorable and open and sweet. "I'm glad I could give you a hand. I'm surprised; I forget sometimes that not everybody knows about clover nectar. I can't imagine not ever having tasted it, honestly."

"Well, the way I grew up, there wasn't much time to stop and play with clover. Usually if Pape needed to keep me busy, especially after Maman died, he'd stick me in a corner with potatoes to peel or dishes to wash or some other chore that meant I wasn't under his feet while he was cooking." The way she said it was fond, and she answered his smile, color touching her cheeks again.

"Ah. I was an annoying little shit five times too big for my britches and always getting underfoot at the dojo, so they sent me outside to find shit to do," he laughed, leaning in a little to bump shoulders. "I was always bragging how I was the best even though I was six and Kuina kicked my ass without breaking a sweat and she was only a few years older."

"Now that reminds me of me and Alex. My brother. He's a good bit older than me, bigger too." She laughed, leaning on him. "It was fun though. He always kicked my ass, mostly literally, since he was learning from Pape then. I wasn't old enough yet, but I still thought I could take him. I didn't actually start learning Savate 'til I was twelve. And then he STILL kicked my ass."

He smiled out at the water, and this time there was a tinge of sadness there as he spit out his now-flavorless clover. "That's really nice. I like to think Kuina could still kick my ass when I was twelve, probably... she had almost six years of training on me after all... but... I never will know. Mihawk might never have taught me if she were still alive. I wouldn't ever have had to leave the dojo."

"Oh..." Baby leaned in a little closer, sucking absently on her flower more for comfort than anything else. After a bit, out of respect for the dead, she looked up at him with a playful smirk, "For what it's worth, I'm sure she could. Then maybe you wouldn't need your cook to do it for you."

"Ha! Now that's a thought. But it wouldn't be any FUN if I couldn't spar with him," he leaned forward, eyes glinting with a familiar edge of excitement. "He's as strong as I am, just in a different way, and fighting against him is one of the most satisfying things I'd ever done, Baby! It's nothing like fighting another sword user... I know exactly what kind of limits they have, the sword reach, the hilt grips, the angles and speeds and the counters. Putting me up against Savate, though, I don't know
a goddamn thing about his limits—other than what injury creates—and there's something just so fucking perfect fighting against someone who has no known limit. I can go all out and not feel guilty because I know somewhere deep in my gut he can handle it because he damn near took me down once. I don't have to hold back! Oooh, Baby, even if Kuina were still around to kick me across the river every day, I don't think I could ever give up fighting with Sanji."

"Careful, Marimo, if was a different sort of girl, I just might get jealous." She bit her lip and poked him in the ribs, grinning. "Should go up against me sometime. Might teach you a thing or two to use against him."

He gently poked her back, in the shoulder. "Naaaah. You wear heels. Adds more force to your kicks because you have a slightly longer reach and that lets you gather more pounds per inch on your kicks. I wouldn't stand a chance."

She sniffed a little haughtily, "I bet I could kick your ass even without 'em."

"Mmmm. Maybe. Don't really wanna find out. I like relaxing with you, don't really need the energy and spark a fight feeds on. Your presence is quite enough. Calming and soothing."

"Gnee." "Turning her face into his shoulder, she mumbled something about 'not fair' into his shirt, and pretended to hit him. Then she looked up, beet red and fighting the smile, "You bastard, you're not allowed to be hot and smooth at the same time!"

His chuckle was low and rolling as he gently hugged her shoulder with his arm around her back, smiling down at her. "Ahhhh, nobody told me that before I became both, too late," he teased.

She plopped her chin on his shoulder to look up at him over her glasses, "Then I'll have to go find the guy that taught you and beat him up cuz he broke the rules."

Without the glasses blocking his vision, he could see her eyes. They had... an almost hypnotic depth to them. He'd never understood the phrase 'get lost in his/her eyes' but all of a sudden he did. They were like two tide pools, two small oceans, with miles and miles of depth, colors and waves of shifting moods and light that danced or raged in tune with their owner. There were what felt like a hundred shades of blue, and he forgot he was supposed to come up with some sort of reply as he watched their stunning beauty.

Blinking slowly, she found her mouth was dry, and she had to swallow to remember how to breathe, "H-hi..."

"Hi," he drawled back, and he didn't realize he was leaning in toward her 'til his nose bumped her glasses and the frame tilted upward just right—

He whipped away clutching the still-slightly-soft spot on his eye socket swearing in his native dialect as the eye watered uselessly.

"Ah! You okay!?!" She jumped back, up onto her knees to give him the space he needed. "Here!" She dug into her shawl-purse for a couple of tissues, "I'm so sorry!"

"S'okay, s'okay," he grunted, voice strained even as he took the tissue and dabbed his eye. "The eye still waters in reflex sometimes. Your glasses just banged my break, that's all. Ow. It didn't catch the eye itself, it's fine."

"Still not good! You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," he laughed a little and leaned back on his hand, still wiping, "it's only a bit of plastic. It's not
like it can re-break what's still broken."

"That's why it's not good, musclehead!! What if it hurt you?" A note of temper snuck through her worry, "Lemme see."

She closed the distance between them again, kneeling over his leg to get a good look at his eye. Her fingers were delicate and gentle as they walked around the ridge of his cheekbone, feather-light over the break itself. Then she sighed. Sitting back on her heels—and consequently over his thigh—she followed the line of his sideburn, eyes on her fingers as they drifted down to his pulse. Her energy changed, some of what had been there before leaking back into the touch, as though she marvelled at the fact that she was doing it.

The damaged eye, which had closed for her inspection, slid back open when he felt that energy change, and his hands found her waist without his permission. When did that happen? "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" And she made the mistake of looking up into his eyes again, her breath caught in her voice.

"Mess with my head and my energies and make me forget what I was doing," he replied fuzzily, hands starting to knead softly without moving.

"Z'at a bad thing?" She swallowed, both hands on his shoulders, absently smoothing the fabric there. She shifted a little, sitting more into his lap. "Cuz if it is... y'should know... you do it aussi."

The way his smile broke out was nothing short of blooming. "You're gettin' thicker in your accent."

"Ahh. You adore making me blush. I swear!" She spoke a little clipped to ensure she was enunciating the words correctly, but her smile matched his, and at this distance he could see the scattering of freckles highlighted in the pink of her embarrassment.

He gently leaned their foreheads together and closed his eyes. "Yeah. You're cuter when you're blushing."

His voice and aura were soft before something started to bother him. He drew back, starting to frown, and began to look around. Something felt wrong. But what?

Baby shivered, and her eye caught the flash of something off to Zoro's bad side. She licked her lips and pulled away some. "Gettin' chilly. Wanna head back?"

His head kept turning to the left, searching, even as he stood and offered her his hand. "Yeah. Gotta work tomorrow, too, should get some sleep."

This time when his senses flared his whole torso turned, and his hand played at his waistband like it was itching for a sword hilt as his good eye narrowed.

She jumped into that arm under the impression of trying to keep warm, "Yeah. I'm off but I've got some shit I gotta do anyway. Wanna split a cab? They should be running by now, I think."

He grunted, eye still seeking to penetrate the darkness. "It'd be faster than walking, so s'not a bad idea. An' I should have enough cash on me. So... yeah... ok."

Once they got back up to the road level again, and while Zoro was leaning out to hail the taxi, Baby turned back to look at the path. She shivered again when a shadow moved from one side to the other, and even the screech of well-worn tires couldn't cover the sound of a camera shutter to her ears. She
closed her eyes, clinging closer to Zoro, and said nothing as they climbed in.

The bouncer couldn't shake the ugly feeling until after the taxi sped away and they were almost to his apartment building, and only then was he able to relax a little. "Sorry about not ever getting to the foot massage, Baby."

"It's alright. The clover thing is more original. Massages can be bought. Inspiration? That's special and priceless." She smiled up at him, happily still leaning on his shoulder under the guise of being chilly.

He smiled again. "True. And like I said, glad I could help you out. It's nice to help someone make instead of tear down for a change."

"Oh I dunno. You're pretty good giving people things to make."

He blinked and tilted his head.

"Caroline with your suit. Your brothers' dojo, you told me yesterday they were taking students again. I'm sure your cook is always looking for ways to one up you the same way you are. And now me. I feel like I'm in an exclusive club." She grinned, "You're our muse."

He laughed gently as the taxi rolled to a stop. "Well, glad to be of use then! Hope you have a good..." he glanced at the mild hints of dawn, "morning, Baby."

"Sleep well, Tiger-boy! Skype me later so I can tell you about all the stupid idiots just begging for you to kick their asses." She winked up at him before directing the taxi to take the first right at the end of the block.

He chuckled all the way inside the apartment, into his bedroom, where he put a hand on Sandai Kitetsu in her spot to calm her. "Soon, cursed blade. He taunts us now. Soon we will feel him near and we will hunt him like the rat he is. But not now. We both must save our rage."

She quieted, for now. She was still angry he dared intrude into her master's senses while he was unarmed and away from where he could call on her to taste the blood of her sister's killer, but for now she would wait. Her master had never failed to deliver on his promises.

Chapter End Notes

I know this looks like just fluff, but squint a little, there is plot in there. I promise. ;p
Chapter Summary

Shanks returns to Team Rubberman!

Chapter Notes

I know I know!! But uploading is SUCH a hassle, and I have been SO low on spoons lately. So this is completely un-beta'd. Like I didn't even do my usual read-through before posting. Just C&P from the word doc to here. So if you find something that's wonky, lemme know? I'll fix it.

Reuniting with the Sunny-Go and the rest of the Rubberman team in Skypeia took four days. Well… the trip itself took two, but Shanks had spent a day and a half with Mihawk, helping the older man set aside his grief over Yubashiri for a while. It meant the redheaded manager climbed onto the bus with dark circles under his eyes, and a set of fantastic bruises on both sides of his neck.

Jinbe eyed them with the sort of smile that meant there was no way he was going to be able to get away with claiming he got into a fight. He winced at the big Asian in the driver’s seat before turning to face the music. Or at least, to face Rayleigh.

Rayleigh had the paper folded in his lap and his knees crossed—not a good sign when the man wanted to face someone head on instead of half-hidden behind some object or another. It meant all of his attention was on his target. But his usual half-smile was there, so he was, at least, not upset.

"Law had a conniption and required all three of the others to calm him down and I believe Sabo wound up drugging him with his own sedative, so it seems you were right to investigate Bellamy’s injuries. However, come next match we MAY have to tie Law up in the corner or he might get charged with premeditated murder because he’s been plotting what he’s going to do to Hogback for three days."

Then he leaned in and raised one eyebrow. "And how did your catching up with Mihawk go?"

"Ehhh, perhaps I should have taken up his offer to bring the sake back with me." The redhead gave a bright smile that had maybe a touch of nerves. "How’d we do against Foxy?"

"We won. Bastard played dirty, though. Luffy broke a few things. He wanted to break his nose but Law told him it was already malformed and besides, blood would get all over the arena." Rayleigh leaned forward a bit. "The good sake?"

Shanks skirted the tiny table, aiming for the cupboard with the coffee in it. "Of course it was good sake, I bought it for him."

"Oh ho! You were there long enough to buy sake AND it's two days of travel time. Quickie my left testicle," the older man laughed, slapping the paper to the table as his eyes twinkled.
"If Mihi is to be believed, I have been incapable of a quickie by definition for quite some time. So..." That time the manager's smile was unashamed and wide open, only the most experienced could see that he was covering for something.

"While that is true, it's not the whole story, Shanks. What else happened? It's rare for Mihawk to indulge you so long, too, and don't tell me you're just that good at charming still." Steely eyes turned serious, and he adjusted his glasses.

Shanks took a breath and turned his back, focusing on fixing his coffee, the sound of the spoon against the ceramic mug scraped soothingly over his ears. "Where are the boys? Luffy and Law specifically?"

"Luffy's out getting something to eat and Law's been sedated again and is tied to his bunk. Sabo's watching Luffy to make sure he doesn't eat all the stuff he was going to bring back and Ace is asleep on top of Law." The silver fox rose and joined him at the counter.

"Someone broke into Zoro's apartment five days ago. They destroyed one of the swords. You know how Mihi is about swords." The younger man specifically left out that he, too, was driven to find the person who murdered Yubashiri and give them a taste of their own medicine, but in front of Rayleigh, he didn't really have to say that.

Rayleigh's hand clamped down on the countertop so hard it cracked loudly. "I... do. Which one...?"

"The eldest."

The counter broke.

Rayleigh only realized he was still holding onto the chunk of Formica when the red cleared from his eyes, panting hard and one of his hands gripping hard to Shanks'.

The redhead sipped his coffee, not looking up. "So, right. Good sake."

It passed unspoken between them that Law, and especially Luffy, couldn't know. Not yet. Not when the boy still had two major fights to get through. Not when there was nothing he could do for his nakama at home. The anger would make him reckless, and none of them had to bring up what Luffy being reckless would mean for all of their careers, and the lives of the other competitors. From the driver's seat Jinbe murmured a soft prayer in deep, rumbling Mandarin.

Rayleigh looked down at the broken counter and put the piece aside—some wood glue or something a little later. Or Franky could fix it.

"Yeah. Should have brought some back with you. I could use a drink or ten." He shoved his hand into his hair, then snorted softly. "How the hell are we gonna explain the counter this time?"

Shanks shrugged, "Punch me?"

His fist was already up before the other paused. "I assume this has to do with our excuse for breaking shit, so black eye or fist-shaped bruise on your chest?"

"Either. Just lemme put my coffee down. This is my favorite mug."

He did so and stepped back into place so that it would look like his falling against the counter was what broke it. Jinbe chuckled and turned around shaking his head. Better a jealous lover than a murdered friend, he supposed, but either way when they got back to FBC, a certain blue-haired bouncer wasn't going to be pleased with replacing the counter. Again.
"Chest I think. You can hide it for the interviews and yet the people who see you half-naked at home will figure what it connects to." Rayleigh nodded, then let it fly.

And Sanks DID slam into the counter, right in the groove, as the spot blossomed red and dark to the right of his sternum.

"Ah fuck! Ow! Shit, Ray! I deserve apology blowjobs for that!" Shanks coughed, and waved his hand at Jinbe, who was laughing. "You hush! If you'd have done it, I'd have a cracked rib or two right now!! Augh..." He rubbed at the spot, pouting at his older lover.

Rayleigh laughed and pulled him in, tenderly rubbing in the small of his back. "I will concede to AN apology blowjob, my dear, but you forfeited the others when you neglected to bring home that good sake!"

Shanks pouted harder then, "I couldn't! We drank it all!"

Jinbe had to clutch the steering wheel to keep from falling out of the driver's seat laughing so hard. "I think you miss the sake more than the sex, Laoshanks."

"So? It was good sake!"

The eldest laughed as well and leaned in to nip his lover's ear. "And you don't think I brought a little stash along for the road when we're traveling with YOU?"

"My Rayray loves me so!" The redhead wrapped his arms around Rayleigh's neck dramatically, purring like a big cat.

He would have reciprocated the affection more honestly but for the crashing sounds of the return of their prize fighter and his blond partner. Luffy, in mimicry of his mentor, sported a big red mark in the center of his chest, visible thanks to the way his shirt was wide open, but he was laughing, a hand on his hat. He nearly tripped over his feet climbing into the bus, drawing a raised eyebrow from Jinbe.

"Xiaolu..." He started, but was interrupted by an irritated Sabo.

"Next time I say 'hold something' and it's edible, and you eat it... so help me!"

"Sorry?"

"DON'T SAY THAT WITH A GRIN IF YOU REALLY MEAN IT!!" The blond launched himself at his lover, tackling the brunet to the floor, and tickling him viciously.

Luffy wheezed for breath, squirming and flailing, while behind them the third of their managerial team gave a fond sigh and lumbered out to pick up the discarded bags of take-out Sabo had abandoned in favor of attacking their prize fighter.

Shanks chuckled, nuzzling under Rayleigh's chin, "So much for blowjobs, eh?"

"The rugrats have gotta sleep sometime. We'll just have to gag you so you don't wake 'em up," Rayleigh muttered back into his partner's red hair, thumb playing at his waistband for a moment as he let the 'children' have some 'playtime' before supper.

They had to blow off steam SOMEHOW.

They were oddly shy about their usual mode of stress relief when Rayleigh was in the vicinity.
They'd go at it like rabbits if it was just Shanks (probably because when possible Shanks drank himself into a VERY deep sleep) but flat out refused if Rayleigh was there.

And since they still had another fourteen hours to burn before the fight Saturday afternoon, anything that helped the often over-excited foursome settle down was a welcome activity in the books of the older trio. Even if it did often get them in trouble with Franky.

Saturday morning dawned far too early for Team Rubberman. Shanks threw his alarm clock across the bus, bouncing it off of Jinbe’s head. It elicited a grunt from the big half-Maori man, but he didn’t move from his seat on the floor. Shanks huffed and turned to poke Rayleigh. The silver-haired man grumbled in an unconvincing fashion and snored loudly.

“I am not going up there! One of you two do it.” The redhead resolutely buried his nose back under the covers…

And five minutes later was staring down at the tangle of limbs that was the D brothers’ foursome—named for the fact that all four of them had D for their middle initial. Luffy was on top, as usual, spread out somehow across all three of the others, and still pillowed on his own shoulder. Ace, because of his sleep disturbances, was granted the inside most spot, pinned in near comatose positioning by Sabo on one side and Law on the other. The blond among the sea of variegated brown and black snorted, mumbling incoherently while sucking lightly on Luffy’s elbow. And finally their fourth, most recent, member was tucked up in a ball, his feet pressed tightly against Ace’s leg, his knees up near his chest, and his arms wrapped around his shoulders like he was holding something to his heart. In today’s case, that something was Sabo’s arm, somehow stretched across Ace and under Luffy.

It was too adorable. The pile of twenty-something-year-old puppies. Shanks had to snap a picture. And that of course meant that Rayleigh, Jinbe, and Twitter all got a copy of it. He captioned it with “Team Rubberman pre-quarterfinal dog pile” and instantly received a tweet back from Nami declaring it was going in the yearly calendar because all four somehow still had their clothes on. For once.

Having recorded the moment of peace for posterity—and potential blackmail—Shanks slipped his phone back into his pocket, took a drink of his coffee, and stepped gingerly to Law’s side of the large mattress. “MMM, THIS MEAT IS REALLY GOOD, GUESS LUFFY DOESN’T WANT ANY~”

“MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAATTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The youngest of the foursome bolted upright, and flounced out of the bed before he even fully had his eyes open.

A foot landed in Law’s hip, an elbow clocked Sabo’s jaw, and the whole mess nearly bounced Ace off the entire mattress, resulting in an even more tangled mess of blankets and limbs among the three remaining men.

All of whom glared at Shanks.

The redhead sauntered down the stairs without another word at any of the three of them, following his charge so as not to miss the look on Rayleigh’s face when the Rubberman pounced him demanding meat for breakfast. It would serve the faker right after making Shanks do his dirty work.

“Law, pass the razor.”

“’Bo, that’s my foot!”
“GET BACK HERE AND BRUSH YOUR TEETH, LU!”

“Somebody tell me there’s more coffee?”

“Only if you promise not to dull it.”

“In the kitchen, D.”

“Owowowowow!! SABO!”

“SORRY!”

“I DON’T WANNA!! IT GETS RID OF THE MEAT TASTE!!”

“I swear to God if the next city doesn’t have a hotel…”

“Oh hush.”

“No, I mean it this ti—mmph!”

“Mmmm~!”

“HEY!!!”

“Where’s my pants?”

“Those are yours, these are mine.”

“ARE NOT!”

“Hehehehehehe~!”

Outside the bus, Jinbe, Shanks, and Rayleigh sat in a line. All three had cups of coffee. As one they took a drink of it, closed their eyes, and sighed.

It was going to be a long day…

“The crowd is pumped up tonight here in Skypeia, folks! Welcome back to the Battle of the Supernovas Twenty-three! We’ve got about ten thousand people pouring into the stadium behind me, and I’m telling you! This show is gonna be CRA-AZY!” The reporter outside of Upper Yard Arena chatted merrily into her microphone, smiling brightly at the camera.

Behind her the lines to get inside were wrapped around the building and down the block. The air was cool, crisp with the promise of an early winter. Skypeia was about as far north as the Eastern tournaments ran, and since the Supernova title match was set for spring, if the big city was going to participate the latest it could be in the tour was the quarterfinal matches. Like tonight.

“As it stands right now, everyone who isn’t here is either glued to their television sets, or down in Jaya. Tonight’s match will determine which four fighters will move on to the semifinal in Enies Lobby in two weeks…”

Her voiced faded into the background as the crowd roared, and the fighters took their places.
25 October

Chapter Summary

Rubberman vs The Hyena! But wait?! What is Law doing?! CHOPPER GET DOWN OFF THE TABLE!

Chapter Notes

Beta by the AMAZING Ember once again, as I actually had the time to sit down and work on it this week, and I have news for you lovelies~ Fufufu~ I have all of Stay With Me written! ON TO NEVER SURRENDER! HAHA! ;3c

"Oh and that's a nice right hook from the Rubberman, Bellamy's gonna feel that tomorrow." The commentator laughed into his microphone, a hand on his earpiece.

The other leaned over, grinning, "I don't know, Tom, I think he is feeling it now!"

There was something of a collective groan from the audience nearby as Bellamy drove a knee into Luffy's stomach, but the brunet was grinning just as hard as the blond. Having crossed gloves multiple times in their MMA careers, this fight was fun for both - more about seeing how far they'd come since the last time than actually winning, even though both had their eye on the Supernova Belt. They rolled across the wall of the cage, and the camera followed their movements.

"And another hard hit! I'm telling you, Jerry, I would not want to—"

"What the hell is that?!" The second commentator cut the first off with a smack to his shoulder.

The camera followed Jerry's point to find Dr. Hogback slammed up against the wall of the ring with Law in his face. The portly older physician looked smug and had an air of assumed innocence about the smile on his face, in spite of the rage with which he was being cornered.

Tom snapped at the tech crew to get a microphone over the two, and people scrambled to catch what was going on. The audience caught wind of it when the scene popped up on the big broadcast screens hung from the center of the stadium, displaying the unscheduled fight in full clarity to both them and the viewers at home.

Law was speaking rapidly and getting redder in the face with every breath, and nobody but Hogback would know what he said before the microphone was brought close enough. But then it was, and he was well into his tirade.

"—I've always known you didn't like Joker's fighters but I never thought you'd be so fucking STUPID as to actively let harm come to MY PATIENT in a fucking RING where there's VIDEO PROOF of your treachery! You deliberately not only scarred his scalp and possibly fucked up his eye movement on that side for life, you didn't give him a fucking drop of antibiotics to ward off the infection and putrefaction you KNEW was going to come from having bile splashed into an OPEN
At that point he actually pulled Hogback forward, then slammed his head back into the metal of the cage, loud enough that it made the entire frame tremble and clang like a bell.

"I should use your guts for Ace's garters and your nose for a new pick for Sabo's guitar, I should flay you alive and make you watch while I stitch your skin into a fucking new suit," he snarled, lip curled, teeth bared with outright violence, bypassing malevolence completely to straight up murderous as he slammed Hogback's head a second time.

At that someone in the officials' booth above the audience alerted security, and the fighters in the ring stopped. Luffy had his arm around Bellamy's neck, the bigger blond grappling the Rubberman's waist in return. They looked at each other, then turned to Law, and blinked at the same time. The audience was stunned speechless, and the commentators were scrambling to find something to say to the viewers at home.

Hogback's laugh was strangled and nervous, "I performed appropriately given the circumstances... there was no sign of infection, and prophylactics have been... considered... ill-advised... for years!"

"HE GOT BILE AND PARTLY DIGESTED FOOD SPRAYED INTO AN OPEN AND BLEEDING WOUND AND YOU HAVE THE MOTHERFUCKING AUDACITY TO SAY THERE WAS NO SIGN OF INFECTION?!!"

Law’s voice was a roar that carried through the stadium even without the help of the mic, and the steady tightening of his hands on Hogback’s throat made him think for a second he was about to crush his larynx with the heel of his thumb. Much as he would have liked to, he adjusted to his collar instead, but slammed him up against the cage a third time. The metal vibrated to the tune of his anger.

"And then you! You didn't even flush the wound before stitching it, I fucking KNOW you, you figured the blood was good enough. And you had the fucking ill-conceived notion of stitching him like you would your own patients instead of one of mine."

The flare in his eyes from the camera glare and the lights had clouded Law’s vision until all he saw was Hogback in a colored haze.

Then hands were on Law's arms, pulling him back. At first it felt like security until his back was pressed against something large and soft, and a rumbling voice was in his ear, "Xiaolaw, it's not worth it. Let it go. Luffy needs you to win this."

Jinbe glared over Law's shoulder at Hogback, who was suddenly looking far less confident.

Against one skinny young adult, the quack knew he could just let the boy's temper get the best of him. But with the older, far more experienced, trainer involved, it meant he was up against cooler heads. A glance to the sides caught the other two thirds of the Rubberman's management team holding the security guys back—not that it was hard considering Hogback's reputation. And a little further on, one of the judiciary committee from the IMMAF was on the phone. No doubt that she was speaking with her counterpart in Jaya to get Kureha's side of the story, which meant Hogback really didn't have any ground on which to stand.

He took comfort in one thing though, as he felt Law start to let him go, "I did my job. More than I can say for you, Trafalgar. Who's going to look after your diseased fucktoy now that you've assaulted me in cold blood?"

The world went red and Law roared a series of Spanish curses as his pupils blew all the way out in
sheer, unadulterated rage. If Rayleigh and Jinbe hadn't BOTH grabbed his arms, he would have choked Hogback to death on the spot. The pair actually had to set their feet into the floor and haul back on him as he screamed threats in Spanish vile enough to set any native speaker cringing and cupping their privates as he shoved forward, boots at almost a forty-five degree angle as he strained to get to and murder this self-serving *hack!*

That would have been bad enough had not Bellamy needed to react in the same fashion as Luffy *LAUNCHED* himself at the cage with a roar of rage! Still, the sheer force with which the Rubberman tore towards the unsuspecting hack, it pulled them to the metal bars anyway. They landed with a silence shattering *CLANG!* It was plainly obvious from the look on the fighter's face, if that cage hadn't been there Hogback would have suffered the full effects of his fist, instead of just having his glasses flung off.

Fortunately Luffy's hand hadn't actually connected with the doctor's face, the kinetic energy of the impact against the ring-side had sent the rotund man flying first, but it was enough. The middle-aged man wound up sprawled at the official's feet, and she was looking down at him with a raised eyebrow. She had heard every word, along with the entire rest of the stadium—most of which was on its feet screaming en masse.

Luffy himself was talking so fast it was impossible to tell exactly what he was saying, only that it wasn't in English.

Bellamy looked a little lost, clinging to his opponent's waist, and searching the crowd around the ring for Sarkies or at least Shanks.

Up in the stands, Sabo wasn't faring much better, "**D! SIT THE FUCK DOWN BEFORE YOU FALL!!**"

"**CARALHOS TE FODAM, FILHO DA PUTA!!!**" Ace screamed in Portuguese, the same language as Luffy though his was more fluid, as he nearly toppled from the stands.

His blond lover manhandled him, in spite of his continued flailing and screaming, over to the stairs. The slightly younger man knew none of their tempers would be soothed until all four were reunited and their bond reassured. That kind of slur had the possibility of slamming straight through Luffy's mental strength. His *one* weakness, and Hogback had just exploited it on national television! If not for the fact that everyone else was losing their heads, Sabo could've spit wooden nickels.

Law started responding to Luffy in the same language at the same rapid-fire speed, curling his fingers through the bars to feel his lover's touch because if he didn't he was going to follow Hogback down and finish what he'd started.

Shanks looked to Bellamy and cautioned, "Don't let him go, not yet. Neither of 'em are gonna be coherent until Hogback is out of sight, probably."

The cameras picked up Hogback being escorted to the official's booth, and almost cut back to the touching connection between the two brunets but for the way Ace, with Sabo on his heels, burst through the doors in the opposite direction. With the skill of a pair long-used to evading capture, the two crashed into Law against the cage, Ace cutting in between the two of them faster than either of the others, and all in all leaving Sabo looking lost.

He waved at them, "**GUYS!! NO COMPRENDE! Remember?!!**"

Luffy grabbed his hair, kissing him soundly through the bars, if only because he'd already answered both Law and Ace. Both blonds, Sabo and Bellamy, mostly froze. Bellamy looked to Shanks, and
Sabo had to flail to keep from losing his balance. His hand landed on Ace's shirt and fist the fabric to pull him into his shoulder. When Luffy let him go, he tilted into Law's back, kiss-dazed, and only blaringly he recognized the same treatment being given to Ace, and then Law.

The last of Law's rage didn't bank until Luffy's mouth muffled him, and then he finally calmed enough to sag gently between cage and lovers, blinking dazedly and then sighing.

"I'm still going to make a summer coat out of him," he grumbled, but it now lacked the murderous intent of the first time he'd said it.

"That's all well and good, boys, but we've got bigger problems at the moment." Rayleigh quirked the corner of his mouth and made a small circle at the audience and cameras with his finger.

Shanks was smiling in a way that suggested his mind was going a mile a second, and Jinbe sighed heavily. The four D boys had just outed both themselves and Luffy's condition. And the world was watching. Sabo winced, pulling Ace against him. Luffy rubbed the back of his head, but his grin wasn't nearly as wide as it should have been given his usual response to remorse. Though his eyes were closed, to the people who knew him best, it was clear the Rubberman was worried.

Then through the milling about of officials and spectators came a loud, dark, laugh.

"ZEHAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

Ace froze, eyes wide and panicked. His hands clung to Sabo's jacket as Luffy pressed himself even harder against the bars, actually growling out loud. Sabo glared in the direction of the commentator's table among the stands. He put himself physically between the large, black-haired man with the gapped teeth, and his lover, gripping the oldest D brother tightly against his unconscious shaking.

"I came out to scope out my competition. I didn't expect to get this kind of show, Rubberman! You're gonna be a laugh and a half to fight after I trounce the winner of the catfight. Make sure you turn Arlong into sushi for me." The man laughed again.

All three of them bared their teeth and Law had joined Sabo in physically separating him from Ace.

"There is no guarantee that either you or he will win your fights and be the ones going head-to-head," The surgeon countered, hand still holding hard to Luffy's. "And this is hardly a show. If it were, I would not still want to rend Hogback's flesh from his bones, which I very much do."

"Law!" Sabo hissed.

The other man just laughed some more, and focused on Luffy, the microphone in his hand brought up to his greasy mouth so that everybody would hear him, "Oh I'll win my match just like I have all of the others. The pussycat's got nothin' on me. I'm just makin' sure I get the best for the final. Don't disappoint me, Rubberman. Dreamers like you are what make the world go 'round. See ya in Marineford."

Then he dropped the mic to the table, and still laughing pushed his way back into the crowd of the audience to prepare for his own match a little later.

Shanks had joined Sabo and Law at that point, and he pushed on the blond's shoulders, whispering, "Get him out of here. The last thing he needs is the world watching him during a panic attack."

Sabo nodded vigorously, already encouraging Ace to move. He was murmuring into the brunet's ear; his eyes cast over to Luffy with a single message, 'win.'

The Rubberman gave a single nod of acknowledgement, though he was still growling at the man
who'd taunted them all. He almost said something in return. Only Bellamy's hand on his shoulder and a look from Jinbe held his tongue. It wasn't worth it. They'd all known they were going to see him in the competition at some point, but they'd foolishly hoped he wasn't as good as Moria, his sponsor, boasted. If anything, the truth was turning out to be far worse. Luffy took a breath, mentally hoping that Lucci put the bastard in his place, but not really confident in that desire.

Law took several long, deep breaths, letting Sabo escort Ace because Law was required here in case Luffy should sustain and injury, and turned back to them.

"I… uh… Sorry for interrupting your fight, guys."

Bellamy shook his head, "S'fine... as long as..."

The same judge from before approached the team after Sabo, Ace, and Rayleigh were out of the stadium's public area. She cleared her throat, her face impassive and hard to their emotional issues, "Mr. Monkey, pending the investigation into Dr. Hogback's treatment of your opponent, it is within your rights as a competitor of this tournament to suspend this fight until such a time as it has been determined that Mr. Bellamy is of sound mind and body, able and capable of participating fully in his part against you. Do you wish to exercise this right?"

"Huh?" Luffy blinked, confusion clear on his face.

Law cleared his throat. "Luffy, because I have publicly accused Hogback of being a hack, you are allowed to postpone the match to make sure Bellamy's really okay to fight, and not merely what Hogback declares is okay to fight. The judge would like to know if you want to do that." He looked from Luffy to Bellamy, pointedly saying asking Bellamy's opinion might also be a good idea.

"Oh." The only way Law could tell Luffy actually took his suggestion was the barest hint of movement in his eyes, before he spoke again, "Belly's fine! Let's fight!"

"So help me boy when I get my hands on the both of you after the match—!" The doctor facepalmed.

The official was not as convinced, and looked to Bellamy, who laughed. "He's right, I'm fine. As long as Law says it's okay, I'm okay."

"Let me get a look up close. I'm gonna re-stitch it anyway to minimize your scarring after the match, so lemme see what I have to work with." A single finger beckoned the blond fighter over.

Bellamy knelt next to the cage bars, tilting his head as he had for Kureha in the town before this, and looking suitably sheepish because he knew it was pretty bad. Several places that had been clotted before were torn again thanks to the few hits Luffy had landed on him already. The worse part was what looked like a place where the skull had been exposed. A piece of synthskin was grafted poorly into it, and the fact that Bellamy was up and moving at all with it out there in the open meant Hogback had severed at least a handful of the tiny nerves in the area, cauterizing the seam between synth and real flesh.

Law hissed a few choice oaths in Spanish, but then sighed and tugged at his own hair. So help him if Hogback had severed any nerves... "Alright. You're good for this fight, but after this I'm taking you to the operating room here and fixing that-that monstrosity he put on you."

The official nodded, and marched straight to the commentator's booth. They conferred for a short while, the microphones turned off. Once a consensus was reached, the official moved off to the judge's box again, and the cameras turned back to Luffy and Bellamy in the ring. The ref, who had
been waiting in the corner opposite all of the chaos, gave a nod and counted them in for a second time that evening.

"And we're back, folks." Tom grinned at the camera in his face.

Jerry leaned into him and snickered, "You never know what you'll see here at the Battle of the Supernovas!"

"For what it's worth, I totally think Dr. Law should be given a chance at the title. Did you see that choke hold he had, Jerry?"

"That wouldn't be very fair there, Tom. After all, the Rubberman's worked long and hard against some tough odds to get here, to have him be shown up by his own team's doctor...? Well, that just would be the nail in the coffin I'd say..."

By the time the match was over, the whole incident had been edited six ways from Sunday and posted to Youtube more times than any of them wanted to count. However, the fight itself didn't air at the Sunny until several hours after it finished because of how far away Skypeia was from FBC. As such the crew waiting for news back home didn't understand when their viewing party was all sitting on the edges of their seats as soon as the commentators' voices came out of the big surround sound speakers to either side of the stage.

Nami had rented a flatscreen TV for the whole event and as this was the quarterfinal, the Sunny was packed. It was crowded enough that even Robin, who seemed to be able to reach anywhere, was having trouble serving drinks and getting between tables. Sanji didn't have a moment to think between orders. Zoro and Franky couldn't move an inch from the doors. And everybody else was crowded to either side of the stage, watching at an angle.

And that was before the program even started!

The first punches were thrown, and the manager noticed everyone leaning in closer. She exchanged a shrug with Vivi, who'd been called in to help with the crowd, and didn't think anything of it until "What the hell is that?!" echoed out of the speakers across the bar. Then they all watched in horror as Law outright assaulted the other doctor on camera. Just as Jinbe moved up to grab onto Law, Chopper jumped onto a table in the middle of the room. How he got there, Nami had no idea but, she was stunned as the usually passive teenager bellowed at the top of his lungs.

"KICK HIS FUCKING ASS INTO NEXT WEEK AND DON'T LET IT STOP 'TIL THE MOTHERFUCKING SON OF A HORSE'S SHITHOLE IS MORE DEAD THAN THE CELLS IN HIS FATHER'S BRAIN!!!"

“CHOPPER?!” Nami shrieked.

The little doctor-to-be had the decency to flinch, and blushed as he took in the space people had made around him thanks to his outburst. But he refused to back down.

“I don’t care! Hogback’s a quack! He should have his license stripped! Lookit what he did to Bellamy!!!” He flung his arm at the screen as it showed an up-close shot of the half-healed injury; the corner was playing the scene where Bellamy had been hurt in the first place as a reminder for people at home. “In that condition that’s asking for infection! And you can’t stand there and tell me Hogback didn’t plan that! They’ve been cheating since Teach wound up matched against Burgess! You said so yourself!”

“Let’s talk about this later, lil bro.” Franky frowned, not liking the line of thinking Chopper was
Zoro grumbled, just short of growling. He’d made the connection too, and exchanging a look with his crewmate had the blunet scowling harder.

Very few people knew about Luffy’s condition. It was kept quiet on purpose. If the press was to know, they’d have a field day, not to mention the paranoia it would cause among the other fighters. He’d been cleared, they had approval for it thanks to the host of medications he took every day to manage it, but the truth was if he got cut, he was a health risk. It was part of how he’d developed his fighting style. It borrowed elements of about a dozen different disciplines, and was choreographed to maintain his speed and agility. All to the point of avoiding spilling his blood. Even the way he wrapped his hands and feet was to keep his knuckles from getting split open on someone’s chin or teeth. Team Rubberman went above and beyond the basics to keep the rest of the world safe from the thing that Luffy carried.

It wasn’t his fault. He’d been born with it, had been an infant when it allowed a simple cold to steal his mother’s life. But it didn’t control his life. And he had never once had an actual infection scare; either his own or because of someone else coming in contact with him. Which was really something of a marvel when anyone thought about his teenage years. He’d been really reckless back then.

But the fact of the matter was that if the rest of the world find out about it, it was more likely than not that they would call for him to be forced into retirement.

Vivi put a hand to her mouth when the subject was brought back up after closing time, “Chopper, you don’t think he did that on purpose do you?”

The eight regular front of house staff were gathered around one of the bigger tables between the bar and the stage, each nursing a drink of choice, and a platter of mostly eaten sandwiches lay in the middle of them. It wasn’t often they got to eat in peace thanks to Luffy’s black hole of an appetite, so they took the opportunity gladly to enjoy a post-shift snack courtesy of Sanji. He’d had to use up the leftovers from the flood of orders earlier anyway. It just made sense to serve it to the exhausted crew. Especially as it was almost dawn, Sunday morning.

“I do.” The sandy-haired youth looked among his nakama. “I think he left the stuff open specifically because he knew Bellamy would be fighting Luffy. I’m certain more now than before that Enell took a dive during that fight! He’s stronger than that. I went back and watched his qualifying match against Kikyo! He annihilated her! He let Bellamy win so that he’d go against Luffy!”

“But Hogback couldn’t know Luffy was going to win. He could’ve lost against… okay I see your point.” Usopp rolled his eyes, that lie was too much for even him.

“The trouble is,” Robin folded her hands in her lap, “we can’t prove any of it. All we have is conjecture based on the fact that Hogback knew about Luffy’s positive status, and the fact that he was given the opportunity to manipulate Bellamy into being exposed.”

“True, but look,” Chopper insisted, “Bellamy was up against Blueno in the first round. His primary sponsor had been the same as Luffy up until about six weeks before the Supernova registration.” He pointed to an article on his iPad, “Then he signed on with Moria!”

Nami glared at the information, tapping her finger on the table. The others had similar expressions on their faces. Collectively they had come to the same conclusion, but none of them wanted to voice it aloud. Whether out of superstition that it would come true if they did, or out of the inability to form coherent words, as the storms on Franky and Brook’s faces seemed to imply, was unclear. So heavy silence reigned until Chopper couldn’t take it anymore.
“I think the whole thing has been rigged for Luffy to have to fight T—“

“Oi, where’s the cook?” Zoro cut him off and changed the subject abruptly, a meaningful look at the youngest.

Gladly latching onto the subject, the others all raised their heads casting about the bar for the often vulgar blond head. He didn’t seem to be anywhere.

“Has anyone seen him since the match ended?” Vivi asked, getting up from the table.

“Not since he gave us these delicious snacks.” Brook also stood, gathering the empty mugs.

Both made for the kitchen, but Robin shook her head, “He went for a cigarette some time ago. I did not see him return.”

“Goddamnit!” Zoro swore, launching himself from his chair towards the door. “And you didn’t think to say anything, Robin!?”

Franky and his girlfriend exchanged a look that was half-amused. Chopper looked between them, confused, and then turned to Usopp, who shook his head with a chuckle. The teenager frowned, not quite pouting. Nami reached over and ruffled his hair, making him bat at her in the fashion of ‘I’m too cool for this’.

Then Zoro returned and their mirth disappeared. “He’s gone. Dunno where. Almost took off down the block but figured I should let you guys know before I left.”

Knowing it was futile for them to even bother, Nami merely waved at him. He gave a nod and exited without another word. As soon as the door shut, the entire crew burst out into laughter, much to Chopper’s continued confusion.
Chapter Summary

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you."

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by my wonderful ducky, Ember, again.

Nine times. The most recent appearance of the mossheaded moron made for nine times that he'd passed under Sanji's window. The cook knew that not because he had started looking for him after the sixth time, and not because he was paying attention to the musclebound... hotter than hell... bastard either! He only knew because he was sitting in the window bench behind the curtains enjoying a nice cup of tea and reading! It didn't matter that every time the marimo had gone passed Sanji had to re-read the entire last three pages to make the current section make sense! He was absolutely not drawn to the way those—sinful!—muscles moved under Zoro's—skin tight—bouncer's uniform. Dear god the chill had made his nipples hard! The cook obviously hadn't noticed that, just as he hadn't noticed that the name on the back of his shirt, up near the collar, was Izou Designs.

That was it! He was done! The tea was gone, and he resolutely refused to watch the algaebrain's ass retreat into the darkness for a ninth time! He slammed his book shut, uncaring if he lost the page—he needed to re-read the whole fucking chapter thanks to that meathead—and stormed off to the bathroom to get dressed for bed...

And maybe jack off to the memory of Zoro's physique on display in Caroline's shop.

Zoro wasn't even aware that he'd passed the apartment building, or had gone under Sanji's window, again letting his mind go blank and his itchy feet take him where they would as he looked for the cook, or at least checked to make sure he'd made it home alright. At times his body would shift into a hunting stance and his mind would sharpen, for a moment; but even the gutter rats knew better than to mess with one of the Sunny Boys, on or off the job. Bad things happened to those who did.

He didn't like admitting he thought so much about Sanji, but he did, because Sanji was in definite danger and under threat. The others could tease and laugh behind his back all they wanted, but Zoro was the security of the Sunny, and he took that very seriously. The crew and all on it were his responsibility to protect—even the Captain. Few knew Luffy was very strictly not allowed to fight outside the ring, and Zoro stepped in to make sure nobody pushed for one. And he refused, outright refused, to neglect that in any form.

But Sanji was especially frustrating. He wouldn't admit there WAS a threat. Physically, he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself, and yet his inaction in response to two clear threats had made it clear to Zoro that he was emotionally or mentally either unable or unwilling to fight back against this particular person. Zoro understood. He did. After he'd been turned over to the foster care system it had been one trial after another with unsuitable homes and broken homes and homes he still
couldn't really talk about to Dr. Crocus. He understood not fighting back to keep it from getting worse.

But Sanji had friends to support him, nakama to keep him safe and make sure he had a place to go if he felt threatened or unsafe, if only he would trust them! If only he'd admit the problem!

Zoro's foot bumped a curb and he realized, looking up at the door to a familiar cafe, he was cold and a little thirsty. So he went inside, hearing the bell jingle, and made for the counter.

Maybe Koala had seen the blond idiot.

The bubbly barista looked up and blinked, clearly having been expecting someone else, "Zoro hun! Haven't seen you around in a while. Want your usual?"

They weren't busy, but it really wasn't all that surprising. With Sabo out of town, and the big party for Luffy's fight at the Sunny, most people were already in bed or at least on their way home. As such only a few stragglers, and a couple of the Grey Terminal homeless that needed a warm place to get out of the wind, hung around in the corners of the shop. Even Hack had gone home since it was obvious Koala could handle the shift on her own for the night.

"Yeah," he said softly, leaning on the counter and scratching at one ankle, which was still 'itching'... though at that point it MIGHT have been windburn because of his exposed skin and the night wind. "Sanji kinda left early from the Sunny, I was looking for him and I'm kinda cold, tall, black and strong, and hot, sounds real nice right now. Have you seen Sanji tonight, by the way?"

"No, I haven't." She turned back to the pot she always left sitting specifically for her 'extra dark' regulars. "Thought you might've been him for a sec when you came in, but I actually haven't seen him for a couple days. Not since the D boys left." Pouring with skill only Sanji could duplicate, and even then not with the same kind of flair, she sighed a little, "Thought maybe he'd gone with them until I heard Amalia talking about the party food. The way she was raving, it couldn't have been anybody except Sanji." She came back and plopped the tall cup in the middle of the counter, "Somethin' going on since...?" Her eyes drifted to his hip and her expression fell into sympathy.

He breathed in and wrapped his hands around the cup, ignoring the sting as blood rushed back to his hands. "No... not that I know of. I don't like this... it's not like him to not be social. The man practically thrives on socializing with people, especially women. I don't think I've seen him throw better than a kiss to the knuckles at a woman since... then. Gives me a bad feeling, Koala. Real bad feeling."

"Hmm..." The shorter chestnut-haired woman tilted her head, something on her face, "I wonder about that... but you are right, if he isn't following his normal patterns, no matter what they are, I would definitely say something was up. Have you tried knocking on his door? I understand Franky replaced it didn't he? At least, Usopp mentioned he was going to when he and Kaya were in the other day."

"No, I..." He closed his eyes as the shudder shook him from shoulders to toes and he had to blink rapidly to clear a sheen of tears. "I haven't... set foot on his floor since then. It... I don't know if I even could."  

She looked up from wiping down the stainless with a challenging look. "Wouldn't that make all the more reason why you should?"

Roronoa Zoro? Backing down from an obstacle? Wasn't he the one who'd stood on two solid feet and talked her into actually contacting Hack again? She'd been a child when she and the retired
fighter had known each other last. Two 'homes for troubled kids' and a shared set of foster parents who'd cared even less for her than they had for Zoro, and she was eighteen when Hack had returned to FBC. He'd been her Koshiro. More than, if they were all honest with each other. Zoro knew that.

Move forward, he'd said. So now here she was giving it back to him.

The corners of his mouth tilted up. "Heh. I suppose you've got a point there. And I am worried about the blond idiot."

He rocked from foot to foot, starting to feel them burning, and took a long drink of his coffee before pulling out the necessary bills from his wallet. Battered thing was more duct tape than leather.

"Alright. I'll go there and at least knock. It's late, so I don't wanna wake him. I think he'd kill me if I did," he chuckled.

She smiled at him brightly. "Yeah, I'd wait 'til morning. Wouldn't want Law to come home to you having ruined his hard work after all. Don't think I didn't hear about your eye, Mister!"

He winced. "Damn. Does EVERYONE know I got my eye socket kicked in half?"

"Well it is something of a feat." Leaning her chin on her hands over the counter, she stuck her tongue out so that it wrinkled her nose at the pun.

He laughed softly and stuck his tongue out back at her. "Alright, fair enough. Though in my defense I had no idea he was a Savate user."

"Didja ask?" Her voice did that sing-song thing that meant she knew he hadn't. Then she giggled, and stood back up, "How is it anyway? I don't see much bruising, but you've always healed through those faster than anything else."

"Ah, it's maybe half-knitted now. Here, have a poke," he traced his fingers over the spot where the break was, slowly fitting itself back together. "The really ugly one was the stitches I popped."

She reached out and walked her fingertips along his cheekbone the same way he had and up over his temple with a hum and a nod. "Alright, lemme see the other one." Her other hand on her hip. "Somebody's gotta watch out for you boys when Law's out of town."

He snickered, but put his coffee down and obligingly hiked up his shirt almost to his shoulders to let her get a good look at it. The stitches were out (at LAST) and it was healing pretty well now. As long as he didn't overstress it.

She still poked at it. Deliberately where she knew he was ticklish to watch him jump, and smirked impishly. "Suppose that deserves some praise that you actually finally let it heal."

"Well I haven't picked a fight with the cook, and Luffy's outta town, plus Franky and Chopper put me on... housemedicalarrestagain," he mumbled, crossing his hands over his chest once his shirt was back where it belonged.

Koala outright cackled, making several of the folks across the shop look up in confusion. Then she poked his shoulder, "Serves you right! Making Lawly have to stitch you up three times in the same week!" Then she winked, "Not that it's stopped you from catching attention. Iva was in yesterday going on about Caroline's new project. Some musclebound hunk she had put up on display in her window for everyone and their mother to see? Hmm?"

"Iiiii may or may not have boasted I don't blush," he admitted with a sideways little grin. "The suit, though, ngh, I'll be paying it off for a year but it's so fucking worth it Koala! Have you seen it? It's
"I haven't. I don't get out there much." The barista snickered, finally moving back to pick up where she left off in her cleaning, "But it's one of Inazuma's designs. They always have excellent taste."

"They do. Really, really really they do."

Moving through the aisle between coffee machines and pastry case, Koala subtly shifted the counter door open, and started off towards the back with an implicit invitation for Zoro to follow her.

"So, how'd the fight go anyway? I couldn't get the box to pick it up here."

"Ah. It was... there were a few unexpected events," he said evenly as he followed her easily, snatching up his coffee on the way because dammit he was still cold.

The mop bucket and a sturdier version than she usually used appeared in front of him, the barista herself further down the shelves opening a box. "Complications?"

"You uh, you could say that," he chuckled as he took the mop and bucket. "It's all over Youtube a hundred times over. Law... got his hands on Hogback."

"Oh my God! No!" She dropped a bag of beans, eyes wide. "Well that certainly explains Vin's story from earlier. She was saying something about someone pissing their pants on camera and I couldn't catch who or what she was talking about because that was when Locke, you remember him right? Skinny guy from GT, sounds like Deadpool. He about took a nosedive off the fence out front into traffic, and I swear, Zoro, I am going to end up white haired from shock one of these days."

She was gesturing with the retrieved coffee beans like it was a weapon.

He shrugged. "Sorry? He didn't skin him alive on camera, Shanks and Jinbe got him first. But he would have... after the comment he made. Even Luffy slammed into the cage bars hard enough to send Hogback flying. It was a spectacular match, Koala... but a bad fucking day. Teach was there. At the match."

She didn't actually say anything to that, but the bag in her hands split open.

"Yeah. Law and Sabo both blocked him off but..." His mouth was hard as he twiddled with the mop handle and looked to the side. "He outright challenged Luffy in particular. Called him out to be the one Teach'll be against."

"We'll just have to hope that Bonney wins." Her voice was tight, and she knelt stiffly to scoop up the fallen coffee. "It's not that much of a long shot I don't think. Nami knows better than I do though. We... can hope... right?" She looked up, worried deeply. "Could you see? How he was?"

"He was almost knee-deep in a panic attack and physically frozen. I couldn't see much else, but Sabo almost had to carry him out of the arena ringside," Zoro relayed softly, his knuckles tight on the mop.

"Fuck." Koala's hands were still shaking as she stood back up. "How are they gonna handle the final? I mean, we can hope all we want, but if he wins... Luffy's gonna... and then... Zoro what do we do!? We can't pack up the whole goddamn Sunny and go with them! Even if we do have all winter to plan for it!"

"I think we might just have to trust them and hope. Outside interference could throw the whole tournament. And that's if someone doesn't start calling for Luffy to drop or objecting to their foursome. They wound up exposing themselves because if they hadn't come together all at once at
least one person might have died on the ringside today."

"I believe it." She gave a shiver. "You don't think they'll find out about..."

"They might. Hogback knew. That's what set all four of them off so badly."

"Fuck."

Unable to make any more conversation about it, her mind running in circles over the fact that everything was blown wide open, Koala focused on gathering what she needed to restock for the next day. The silence fell comfortably around the two of them, both fully aware that should they need to say something they could. A few of the stragglers came up for refills and as soon as they left, she locked the door. Hack would understand closing up an hour early. Truthfully, the little woman who watched over them all wanted to go home, curl up in her bed and listen to her platonic life-partner snoring next to her until she fell asleep.

And it showed in how she moved about the store while Zoro mopped.

Zoro made the job as quick as possible, then put it away and pressed the keys into her hands. "Go home. Get some sleep. Nothing we can do will change it, so we have to focus on what we can do. And that means I'll go pound Sanji's door in the morning. Promise."

Koala nodded, walking with him to the door. She flipped off the lights, locked the building, and then gave him a huge hug. "You need me to drop you off?"

He shook his head. "The walk'll be better for me. Maybe I'll catch somebody lurking."

"Alright. Take care, 'Ro. And you need to come by more often!" She punched him lightly. "Don't get to see your mug enough anymore."

He smiled a little lopsidedly. "I'll drag the cook in. Then maybe your shop will stop shifting blocks."

"But then where would the fun in finding it be?" She giggled and gave him a wave over her shoulder, walking to her car.

He had to laugh at that one and finally turned toward his apartment, feet no longer itching. Guess this was what he needed.

Arriving back at the apartment building took far less time than it should have, given Zoro’s memory of how long it took to get to the coffee shop, and he paused for a moment. His eyes found Sanji’s floor. All it took was a little mental calculation to land on the cook’s window. There was a book and a mug just barely visible from his vantage point on the steps. Either his target had been there all along, which was possible considering the infuriating way he slipped by undetected, or he’d at least gotten in while Zoro was out. He couldn’t be sure, but he was fairly certain the personal items hadn’t been here the first couple of times his feet had brought him there. After round four, he’d stopped looking up for signs of life, and as all of those times, the windows were dark around the edges.

With a huff, because the wind was beginning to bite into his neck, he hunched his shoulders and stomped off to bed, not noticing the figure on the staircase just above the first landing.

The silent blond had nearly dropped his basket of laundry in his haste to get up the stairs. Discovering one’s PJs were filthy and in need of washing right before bed was bad enough, but nearly being caught by his co-worker—the co-worker he fought with most, the co-worker that had no clue about his biology problem, the co-worker who had so horribly misgendered him during their second conversation—was far, far worse. His heart was still pounding, and beneath the spaghetti
strap shirt he’d thrown on because he thought he’d be the only one in the laundry room at that hour his chest heaved with his breath. Though he refused to acknowledge that it was at all because of having been replaying that slow turn around the marimo did with the sun making his skin look like bronze.

Once he heard the cat-like man settle into his bed and the door close, Sanji finally was able to gather up his clothes again to finish climbing the steps.

He didn’t get any sleep though. His mind kept supplying the question of ‘what if he’d let Zoro catch him?’ What would the mosshead have done? What would he have done? Barefoot, pyjama pants, tank top that belonged on another person—not the cook. Sanji the cook was tall, strong, sharp-tempered, and a ladies’ man! But… his mind kept asking, what about Samantha?

So noon found him in the kitchen of the Sunny, playing with food—in spite of the fact that they weren’t actually open to the public because it was Sunday. He had five or six different recipes he wanted to practice, and knew that at least somebody would be around eventually to play guinea pig. By the time they started showing up, he had the dishes figured out to the point that he knew he could pull them off without needing to think first.

If Nami had been surprised to see him when she came in the ginger-haired manager didn’t comment on it. She just grabbed her coffee, nodded at him, and disappeared into her office. Usopp and Chopper came next since they were house sitting for the D boys while they were on tour, but both seemed to follow Nami’s example, leaving him to his own devices. It made for a very peaceful morning.

Sanji’s tranquility abruptly came to a disrupted head when the door of the kitchen banged open half an hour after the coffee was ready. He glared at the man in the doorway, his hand tight on the potato he’d been about to peel, and if he’d been raised by any other man, he might have thrown it at the demanding mosshead. The green—sexy—asshole should have counted his lucky stars that the cook was more wary of his father’s heavy pegleg than any retribution the marimo could dish out. The Old Man would probably skin him if he wasted food. So, he just growled low, his knuckles white around the innocent vegetable.

Zoro growled back, voice a dark rumble. "You have been avoiding me all fucking morning, Cook! I even pounded on your damned door for an hour before coming here! How am I supposed to have a fucking conversation if you won't stand still long enough to talk?!!"

"I'm a cook, idiot! If I don't move around the fucking kitchen, shit gets burned! Why do you even want to talk to me anyway!?" Throwing that potato was sounding more tempting by the minute.

"Because you—" the bouncer paused, lowered his voice, and stepped further into the kitchen. "Because you sure's hell don't wanna talk about what needs to be talked about but this talk HAS to happen otherwise it endangers the whole of the Sunny," he said in a more discreet tone, mouth tight.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Sanji scowled harder, putting the spud down before it really did become a weapon, and he turned to move further into the kitchen, to keep the distance between them. "There is nothing jeopardizing the Sunny. Franky's new security system is there for that."

"The fucker who got into the Sunny and shoved your chef's knife into your door knew where you work and where you live, which makes all of us vulnerable," Zoro snapped, shoulders tight.

"And Franky made sure that can't happen anymore. Drop it!" The blond skirted the dish machine, heading for the kitchen door now that that the marimo wasn't filling it. "There's nothing to talk about,
mosshead."

So, the marimo blocked it again. "Yes, there is. Franky can't protect every inch between the Sunny and our various residences. It just doesn't work. There is a danger out there and you've got a target on your back."

"Get out of my way, asshole." The inch in height difference had never felt so far as it did in that moment.

"No." There was a part of Zoro’s mind that felt guilty even to say it, but there was a wave of angry frustration rising in his gut that muffled it. "Just because you won't admit the problem doesn't mean it isn't fucking there."

What?! Sanji froze, backing up slightly. His mouth was dry suddenly, but he covered it with a deeper glare, "You tryin' to look down on me, mosshead? Thought I proved my first day I could kick your ass, and keep going! Need me to re-break your eye socket?"

Zoro felt his body inclining forward though he had never consciously decided to do so. "This is not about you and if you can or cannot take care of yourself. This is about whoever the fuck came into your kitchen and broke your favorite knife, then decided he was FUCKING allowed to come into MY FUCKING HOME, take MY KATANA from her revered spot where she got her well-deserved rest AND MOTHERFUCKING SHATTER HER AGAINST YOUR DOOR! This is about that fucking murderer! YOU are not fucking taking care of any of it if he had the fucking audacity to threaten you twice and KILL MY PARTNER!"

He hadn't meant to start yelling, but once he did he couldn't seem to help himself. He couldn't help the breaks and strains in his voice either. He still hadn't managed to build her a shrine he felt truly honored her.

Fuck! Now he was on the retreat! The blond inched backwards with every word, feeling his hands trying to come up to his chest, his breath short.

"I-I have taken care of it! I can't give you back what was stolen! Just trust me it-won't happen again! I know how to deal with it! It doesn't need to include anybody else! It shouldn't have included anyone else in the first place, but you wouldn't BACK OFF! I told you to leave me alone!!! I didn't need your apology and I don't want you getting any further into this than you already are!!! I'M HANDLING IT!"

Once they were far enough from the door, Sanji cut to the side and ducked under Zoro's arm. As a Savate user heavy on offense he shouldn't have been able to skirt past like that, his whole body language was wrong, and rather than advancing as he had during their first two fights, the blond was avoiding touching the bulkier man at all. He escaped into the dining room, around the bar, and into the corner between the door and the wall before Zoro caught up with him.

"You are NOT fucking handling it! You're avoiding the problem, or rather doing what exactly the fucker threatening you wants! Koala told me she hasn't seen you since that day, and nobody else has seen you ANYWHERE around the city! Not even shopping for fucking groceries! And I became deeply involved the second somebody touched my swords! No I don't expect you to be able to fix her and she could never be replaced, I wouldn't ask you to try! But somebody fucking came in and used my sword to threaten YOU and I will not stop until I have that fucker's vertebrae are spurting blood between my fingers!"

He had his teeth bared and he had gone completely predatory, chasing, cornering, his metaphorical claws out to prevent Sanji's escape. In respect to Sanji's wishes he'd been backing down and letting
sleeping dogs lie. But they had gone too far, and the wound was still too fresh: this wasn't just hurting Sanji anymore, and he refused to let him pretend it wasn't a problem now.

Too far, too close, too loud, too angry! The blond's hips tensed, his hands pressed hard against the wall behind him. Talking in this situation never solved anything, the only thing he'd ever been able to do when dealing with someone bigger than him, stronger than him, faster than him in this situation was use their advantages against him. His eyes darted to the floor, then back to Zoro's eyes in a nanosecond, and he inhaled. There was a small sound of preparation and then his legs were wrapped around the marimo's waist twisting with a solid shove towards the bar itself.

"AUGH!" That one was entirely made of pain as both Zoro's hipbones were clenched in that powerful hold and he found his vision going a little fuzzy as he stumbled back toward the bar, reaching behind him to get a grip… if he could get a grip on the counter, he could lift his body and use his superior weight to fall on Sanji, bend him in half, force him to let go.

"Do us both a fucking favor, mossy shit for brains, and just. Let. Go!" Sanji growled pushing off from the wall in an attempt to do the same thing.

The problem was Zoro did have a definite advantage in the weight department... especially lately.

The marimo snarled, the pain digging into the part of his brain that had been sharpened with training with Mihawk, and he lifted his body on his arms, taking away Sanji's connection to the wall and then slamming himself down to pinch him and make him let go.

"NGH!"

The blond's back cracked against the hard wood, and a flail of arms sent an entire row of tumblers to the floor in a shattering crash of glass. Instinctively Sanji bucked his hips, trying to kick up, but all it did was grind his groin against Zoro's. And while the bulge in his dress slacks was made of silicon, the flesh underneath it wasn't. The slip of harness and pull of straps across that area made his whole body jump away from the contact, eyes wide, and color high on his cheeks. Anger should not have that kind of reaction, fucking dammit!

That... didn't feel right. Something was... slipping against him? In his confusion, he let up the pressure, looking down to where it felt wrong. Sure, there was a bulge there where he expected one, given Sanji's hips were right up against his—and the bulge was sliding off to the side? What the hell?

That hesitation was all the cook needed to get his knee up into the space between them, and he shoved! His other heel on the edge of the bar sent his hips over his head and into a backflip over the bartop—onto the glass below but—away from Zoro.

He waited only a moment to scream, "JUST LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE GODDAMN ASSHOLE!"

Then he bolted for the kitchen and slammed the door behind him. A second later something loud, and heavy, crashed against the wall across the entrance with the shudder of having been kicked across the small room.

Zoro growled. "WHEN THE Fucker WHO KILLED YUBASHIRI IS IN SMOKER'S HOLDING CELLS I'LL LEAVE YOU ALONE! IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT YOU ANYMORE! AND BESIDES THAT HOW ARE WE FUCKING SUPPOSED TO SUPPORT YOU IF YOU WON'T LET US KNOW ANYTHING!?"

"Just go away, Marimo." Muffled through whatever it was against the door—probably the dish
Snarling and pulling at his own hair again, Zoro stalked out of the Sunny entirely. He wouldn't be coherent until he'd fought Kuina’s shadow a few dozen times and gone through all his katas with his three remaining swords.

After a little time, there came a soft, timid knock on the door.

"Dinner's going to be a little late, I'm sorry." Came the response, though there had been absolute silence since Zoro stalked off.

"That’s, uh… Not what I'm worried about, Sanji," the tech wizard's meek voice came just barely through the barrier. "I just... wanted to let you know that any time you want to talk, I've got two good ears. I know Zoro can be pig-headed and frustrating at his best, and lately he hasn’t... exactly been his best," he trailed off weakly.

"It's fine." The words sounded strangled, pitched oddly. "I never expected anything from an asshole like that anyway. I've known enough of them. I was stupid to think he was different."

He leaned on the door; his slight weight not nearly enough to move it or rather what was behind it. "He's not... really like that. He... Yubashiri was a family heirloom, handed down through the generations from swordmaster to student. She was his most valued connection to the foster father that stuck, not to mention he loved her spirit all by herself. He would do... anything to get his hands on the one who killed her. Including harass his own nakama. He can't help it. The prints he lifted, and the other evidence, came to nothing. His only lead on whoever it was is you."

"I know. I... I saw them. Him and-and the other guy. Mi-something. Sorry. My memory is shit for that kind of thing. I know... it doesn't matter. It won't happen again. I... I just have to obey the rules.” Sanji hadn't meant to let that slip, but he was beyond caring. The heavy thing slid out of the way of the door, and there was a small crash, like a bucket being tripped over. "L-let Franky know I'm sorry...?"

"Ah, he knows. It'll be alright as long as we don't have to buy a new one. And Mihawk's the name you're thinking of. That's the guy I mean… the foster father that stuck." He was quiet for a minute, rolling that slip of Sanji's on his tongue. "...can I come in?"

"It's kind of a mess... the Old Man would kill me if he saw it." The cook's voice dropped such that he probably didn't mean for the rest of that to be heard.

"That's okay. I help Franky, remember? I can get started on the tinkering."

"...alright."

Sanji hadn't been kidding. The dish machine—because that was what had been across the door—was in four pieces, the heaviest of which had been shoved to the side so the door could at least open. There was a solid imprint of the blond's shoe in the metal of the casing, and there was water everywhere. Pots and a rack of utensils that had been in the machine at the time were scattered across the floor, two of the pans dented beyond repair. There was also, under the scent of soap and spices, the scent of sick.

As for the cook himself, he was stripped down to his shirt, the sleeves rolled up, and drenched such that the light blue cotton was see-through. He figured he was about to be fired for destroying their kitchen anyway, so what did it matter if the sharpshooter knew? Food and whatever else that had
been in the machine when he kicked it was splattered all over his left leg, and he as mopping halfheartedly with the air of a dead man walking.

Usopp let out a slow whistle and picked up the smallest piece—the one exploded outward with the footprint in it.

"Hooo boy. Good thing we have some spare sheet metal from the last project. Yeah... I think Franky's gonna have to build a new one," he chuckled a little weakly and pushed another scrap to the side with his foot. "Ah well, you can tell him any bells and whistles you want it to have so he can make one that's bigger and better."

He then made his way over to the spot behind where the dish machine had been and did something back there that brought the leaking water to a halt.

"Good thing we had the shutoff valves back here or we might have had to cut the building's water and that would have sucked."

He didn't comment on the clearly visible binder and judging by the way he was talking, he expected no, or minor, repercussions from this.

"It... wasn't supposed to go like this. I... should just go. Before I cause you guys any more trouble." Sanji gripped the mop handle tighter, "Even if Miss Nami doesn't fire me, Zoro's never going to leave me alone about Pearl. It was bound to happen sooner or later. I get a job, start to make my way without him, and forget to follow the rules. Didn't think it was that bad this time. At least he doesn't know about Law yet. Pearl is sneaky but he's stupid. He never watches Koala's. Guess it's only a matter of time though... s'why I stopped going. I don't want her caught in this. Don't want anyone caught in it. It's my problem. It's my fault. I broke the rules." The tone of the cook's voice made it clear he wasn't aware he was babbling.

"Sanji... Sanji." The sharpshooter gently touched his elbow to get his attention, to focus him. "Sanji, even if you were to leave the Sunny, we'll simply follow you. You're family now, Sanji. You're part of the crew. Luffy picked you himself; and trust us, his instinct is never wrong. And whoever is giving you rules that hurt the people around you, that can get people 'caught' in it... this person is not good for you. We're willing to protect you, Sanji. But you have to let us. We're not scared of him, or Pearl. We'll hide you if that's what you need. But we can't help until you let us in and allow us to. And Zoro...? Zoro can't stand it. He can't stand seeing a nakama in pain. It's just who he is. So you're right about not leaving you alone. But instead of leaving, why don't you just kick his head in a couple more times?"

He gave him a wry little smile.

"Might knock some of the anger up there loose."

The cook shook his head, "He won't listen to me. I was... the first day he saw through all of this. I know he did. Fighting with him gets me nowhere. And—"

He jumped about a foot when his pocket went off—DING DONG!—and a completely unconscious whimper escaped his throat.

"I... I... I gotta..."

DING DONG!

"He's gonna be..."
"I just can't!!! I'm sorry!!" Sanji was in tears, overwhelmed, oversensitive, exhausted, and every time his phone went off he flinched like he was shocked.

Usopp considered for a minute or two. Then he held out his hand. "Sanji, can I have your phone?"

"W-why?! Wh-what are you gonna do? You can't answer him! He'll know!"

"I'm not going to answer him. I'm going to do what I do best. I'm going to lie. But I need his number to do it."

"Nonononono!" The mop fell to the floor and Sanji was clutching his phone to his chest protectively.

"What are you gonna tell him? You can't! He'll know! He knows everything!"

"I'm gonna tell him you have been assaulted by a coworker. Which you have. He doesn't know anything. Whatever spy he's got, I'll take care of."

"Trust me, he already knows. It's why he's texting me. Just... just lemme handle it... please? I know how to talk to him. Please?"

Usopp regarded him calmly, then nodded. "This time, you handle him. Then you tell me the names and descriptions of any spies you know about. Neither Franky nor I am about to tolerate anyone spying on us or you."

Looking between the dark man and his phone a few times, Sanji nodded his head. He wasn't happy about it, but if it kept his job...

Then he hunched over the phone, typing with both thumbs and thanking God for autocorrect when his grip slipped. Whomever-he-was responded back a couple of times, and though the techie couldn't read what was being said, he saw how it affected the blond he'd come to think of us his nakama. Sanji's shoulders were tight, his spine curled defensively, his elbows tucked in submissively, and worst of all he stood with his feet turned slightly pigeon-toed. For a Savate user, there was no worse stance to start from, as all of his balance was on the outer most edges of his heels and toes. Any move he tried to make from that position would end in him taking a hit first, and Usopp had sparred with Luffy enough to know that the difference between winning and losing a match was quite literally who could get their hit off first.

Usopp filed this all away, quietly, because if he didn't make himself be quiet he'd blab to Zoro or someone just to destroy the person on the other end and break their hold on Sanji. But Sanji wasn't ready for that. So he took notes down instead, waiting patiently.

The cook looked up from his phone, shivering, "H-he wants to talk to me, um... for a bit. Should I just write it down? The stuff about Pearl?"

"Yes. And when he's done talking you can talk to me and I'll make up an artist's sketch so we can scope him out when he's nearby."

"Okay." Sanji nodded, and moved quickly over to his soaked jacket. Shrugging into it, he hovered near the door, and bit his lip, "I'm sorry. Again. For... everything."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for. Not even Yubashiri. Only Pearl can pay for that one. I'm sure nobody TOLD him to go to the basement and steal a katana. Just let us help you, Sanji. That's all we want."
The blond was halfway out the door before his words drifted back, "People who help me end up dead."

Then he was gone through the bar and out into the cool fall afternoon where everything was too bright, his body hurt, and his heart felt like it was in a million pieces. He wandered around the side of the building, hoping to have some time to himself. That Person didn't really want to talk to him. In truth, He'd brushed Sanji's excuses off like they meant nothing. He hadn't even asked if the blond was okay. Sanji had expected it though, he was still in trouble. He needed to go out looking the way That Person wanted him to a few more times before He'd forgive him. His gut churned from having lied to Usopp like that, but that was empty, having purged itself as soon as the adrenaline from his fight with Zoro wore off.

He leaned against the side of the bar, wondering why he didn't just go home. No matter what Usopp said, Nami was sure to fire him. The Old Man had nearly thrown him off the Baratie when he'd done something similar to the ship that had been his home for most of his life. He let his head fall back against the bricks.

"Why were you so nice to Baby, but you hate me?"
26 October - Part 2

Chapter Summary

In the wake of the storm, who better can you turn to than the rock?

Chapter Notes

Un-Beta'd and a TAD late this week, minna. Sorry! I totally blanked on Tuesday while working on a thing for Never Surrender, and wanted to get this up before I got distracted again. lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sanji pulled out his phone, staring at the screen. He couldn’t even bring himself to light a cigarette, his hands were shaking so badly. He thumbed through his contacts on Skype. Law? Ace? That Person? He wanted to talk to someone, but none of them were what he was craving.

He sank to his knees, curled in on himself, and pulled up the newest name on his list. They hadn’t chatted much, but the conversations had been fun.


BLC: hey, u there?

TSW: I’m a little busy
TSW: About to run through my katas again
BLC: oh nvm then
TSW: You sound weird is something wrong?
BLC: u could say that
BLC: think i’m about to lose my job
TSW: Sounds like it’s been a shitty day all around
BLC: lol that’s the understatement of the year
BLC: no the century
TSW: It can’t be that bad
BLC: maybe the millennia
TSW: …wow
TSW: That sounds about the way my morning’s gone
BLC: yeah
BLC: but if ur busy i can just let u go
BLC: sorry

Idiot! Why had he sent that?! Sanji smacked his forehead, leaning back against the Sunny’s wall again. The Marimo was sure to know it was him! He could just tell!! Just how long did he think he
could keep this up!?

TSW: Give me half an hour to an hour, okay?
TSW: Then I’ll be level-headed enough to be able to listen
TSW: Baby?
BLC: yeah
BLC: yeah thats fine
BLC: just poke me when ur done k?
TSW: Yeah be back in a bit
TSW: ;)

--ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] went idle at 16:27--

Sanji stared at the little winky face that was the only emoticon the Marimo ever used. Why did even that tiny snippet of conversation make the world more stable?! He’d been the one to set him off not two hours ago! It made no sense!

He let his head thunk against the bricks, “I’m a fucked up masochist is why. Yeah, dumbass, just throw yourself at the next meathead asshole that throws you around. That’ll solve your problems!”

With nothing else to do, because he absolutely was not going back inside the Sunny right then, he pushed himself to his feet and shot off a text to Nami that he was headed home to change. His mood didn’t get any better when the message he got back was to just take the day off. Of course she’d say that! He’d just destroyed her dish machine. It’d be a wonder if she didn’t tell him to just never come back!

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared up at the sky. He needed a distraction. Headphones! Perfect! Shoving the little buds into his ears, he thumbed through his music until he settled on an old favorite. One he hadn’t listened to in a while because it wasn’t exactly his normal style. But the lead singer’s voice reminded him of his mother’s.

Letting the words just wash over his senses, he just wandered, not really paying attention other than heading vaguely homeward. He held onto himself until the chorus, then he felt hot tears escaping over the corners of his eyes, his heart aching in rhythm to the lyrics.

“Cowboy, take me away; fly this girl as high as you can into the wild blue. Set me free, oh, I pray. Closer to heaven above and closer to you closer to you…”

He had to actually stop walking, face turned towards the sky again, letting the agony of everything just wash over him. He tried to live by the rules. He tried to stand on his own two feet. He tried to serve his boss and the crew faithfully. He tried to be true to himself. He tried to do so many, many things. Pulled in all directions. Every person in his life wanted something from him, expected him to bend and stretch and reach for different things. He felt fractured and caged all at the same time. He wanted to escape it all. Just let go and drift.

When the song ended he played it again, just existing in the pain.

After several more repetitions, he felt lanced open. Like a boil. The pus and sick drained from under the surface. He ached in a different way, the clean sort, the kind that meant he’d been scooped out and washed with alcohol. In his lashes he felt the bubbles of peroxide tears, but he didn’t dare bring his hand up to wipe them away. It was hard enough to let himself cry without washing his contacts out, if he gave into the urge to rub now he really would lose them.

He did blink though. Looking around to get his bearings, and found himself thoroughly shocked
when he realized he was standing in front of his own door. The crown moulding and brand new hardwood still glistened with the fresh laquer Franky used to make them match. Sanji didn’t even remember entering the building, let alone climbing the stairs. Still, he guessed that was what he got for dwelling on things he couldn’t fix.

Digging into his pocket, he brought out his keys, and took note that his hands weren’t shaking anymore.

The path into the apartment took him first to the bathroom to remove his contacts, then to the bedroom to strip out of his soaked suit and binder, then back to the bathroom for a dose of Ativan, Zofran, and Imodium because he knew what that kind of breakdown meant as far as his digestive tract was concerned, and finally through the kitchen for a mug of mint and chamomile tea before booting up his computer. He turned on his favorite TV chef, Alton Brown, for background noise, and tucked himself into a corner of the couch to wait for the Marimo to come back from his katas.

Again he poked at why he specifically wanted to talk to the very same person who had triggered his panic attack, but couldn’t come up with a reason. He wasn’t sure if it was because of the reaction headache building in his still somewhat blocked sinuses, or the fact that his mind was just blissfully blank. Either way, he sipped at his tea, letting Alton’s voice soothe the last of his ruffled senses, and played a mindless puzzle game while he waited.

At almost exactly an hour after the last message, Zoro messaged again, and, despite the distance and not being able to physically see him, he seemed calmer somehow.

--ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] began skyping BabyLoveCook [BLC] at 17:30--

TSW: I have finished my katas
TSW: And am now ready to calmly offer a listening ear and if solicited an actual levelheaded opinion/advice
TSW: So let's talk, Baby
BLC: theres this guy
BLC: i know i know theres always some guy but really this one was different
BLC: well i mean i guess it isnt really his fault cuz im the one that broke the thing
BLC: but i wouldnt have if he hadn't scared me
BLC: sorry that sounds weird
TSW: Well it kind of does
TSW: What did he do to scare you
BLC: i pissed him off
TSW: That doesn't tell me what /he/ did, Baby
BLC: he just got up in my face and was yellin and stuff but it was my fault
BLC: i shouldve just i dunno answered his question or somethin
TSW: I dunno I think maybe you shoulda kicked him.
TSW: And you said this was at work right
TSW: So kicked him and left the kitchen door swinging from his passage
TSW: What even was the question??

Sanji cuddled the couch pillow to his chest, staring at his blinking cursor. How was he supposed to answer that?!! It wasn't like he could just say 'oh well you know he wanted to know what I was hiding from him because my stupid problems got one of his swords broken'! He laughed mirthlessly at himself.

BLC: it doesn't matter i still shouldn't have done what i did anyway
BLC: him gettin in my face doesn't excuse me takin it out on my workplace
TSW: I beg to differ
TSW: If you're taking it out on your workplace
TSW: You're not killing your coworker
TSW: And bosses usually like that
BLC: lol i couldn't kill him anyway
TSW: Like literally couldn't??
TSW: You've got a kick that could probably dent aluminum siding
TSW: How strong is this fucker?
BLC: hella
BLC: and i can dent steel tyvm
BLC: but no hes...
BLC: hes special
BLC: kinda like u

The other side was quiet for several minutes, and the desire to meet-fight-CHALLENGE was almost palpable in the innocent question Zoro posed.

TSW: Hey where do you work and what's this guy's name?
BLC: oh no no no
BLC: u r NOT goin in there and pickin a fight with him
BLC: rest assured mr muscles ur place is secure if i hadnt met u MAYBE ud have to worry

Sanji found himself laughing, his smile wide and bright. He felt the tension gone from his shoulders and he bit his lip tucking his feet up next to his body so he could get closer to the screen. As Baby he'd discovered this... other side to the surly bouncer, and... he could almost have felt guilty about the way it made him warm inside, except that it was too good of a feeling to be weighed down by anxieties.

Which was why he had insisted on getting the Marimo’s Skype name. If he was honest, he was surprised the other had one; he seemed too concrete for digital escapism. But Sanji supposed not everyone had a reason to hide behind a screen. Maybe all he used it for was to keep in touch with his Sensei. No matter the reasoning, chatting with the Marimo was quickly becoming one of his favorite ways to wind down at the end of the night.

He really didn’t want to poke too hard at why that was exactly. Especially as their relationship in person had clearly not gotten any better when he was himself. But when he was Baby, behind the mask of the computer screen… Zoro had a completely different attitude with him. One might even have called it flirtatious.

TSW: Awwwww c'mon! I haven't had a really good fight in AGES
TSW: I am not counting the one that broke my eyesocket and popped two stitches when the new cook started work
TSW: That wasn't a fight that was an asskicking
TSW: And I cannot properly challenge him either until the damn thing heals
TSW: Socket still fucking throbs all the time I can't concentrate enough to fight like this
TSW: Not to mention he's got a fucked up rib and it's just not honorable to actually challenge him when he can't twist properly to give me another asskicking
BLC: lol all the more reason why i wont tell you! XD
BLC: maybe *I* dont want u any more beat up than u r already either

The first time they'd had this conversation, the cook surprised himself by actually feeling what he was saying, especially after their attempt at sparring. There were a lot of mixed up emotions involved in interacting with the Marimo. Sanji almost hated the bastard, wanted to kick his face in most of the
time, but Baby... Baby had the biggest crush she'd ever felt on him. The trouble was it seemed Zoro had the same feelings. He antagonized Sanji like no one else ever did, baiting him into lashing out, and deliberately doing things that set him off. But with Baby he was flirty, laughed often. He seemed to genuinely enjoy talking to her. Which left the cook both torn down the middle and worrying about just how things would play out when the secret was exposed.

Firmly shoving those thoughts aside, because he'd had quite enough of a rollercoaster today if he did say so himself, Sanji sighed and stretched out on the couch, switching to his phone so he could be closer to the screen without having to cuddle the computer.

**BLC**: and besides he wouldnt be much of a challenge u could beat him easy
**TSW**: Damn. Oh well.
**TSW**: I can always try our cook again when we're both better
**TSW**: Oh! Did I tell you? I had to go in to Caroline's to get the fabric of the suit fitted a couple days ago
**TSW**: I don't think I've ever been so thoroughly groped and stabbed with a needle simultaneously before
**BLC**: AHAHAHAHAHA! XD
**BLC**: pics or it didnt happen

--ThreeSwordWnaderer sent 3 files--

**CAROLINE.jpg**
**OW_THAT_HURTS.jpg**
**This_suit_better_be_fucking_worth_it.jpg**

**BLC**: oohhhhh hot DAMN boy
**TSW**: Hey hey NEEDLE POKES not muscles thank you
**TSW**: Though I am very proud of them
**TSW**: That's not the point
**TSW**: Caroline has gone from mildly discreet to *absolutely no shame*
**BLC**: i warned u~ hee hee hee
**BLC**: these are goin in my private stash jsyk
**TSW**: Oh hell.
**TSW**: It's kind of a shame I didn't see anything else I really like in her catalogue
**TSW**: She does good work
**TSW**: But none of the other stuff reall suits me
**BLC**: :p thats just her fall line the spring catalogue usually has more work clothes and shes got deals with teeshirt companies and jeans
**BLC**: she just doesnt advertise them cuz not as many people want them
**BLC**: im sure u noticed her usual customers
**TSW**: I was too busy getting STABBED WITH NEEDLES
**TSW**: Though I did have some strange people I assume were other customers sneak in gropes with slightly more shame than Caroline
**TSW**: I couldn't tell if any of them were helping her tailor though
**BLC**: they probably werent
**BLC**: but yeah most of the ppl she serves r trans so the girls all want slinky sexy dresses and the guys want the kinds of suits that make u think theyre in power
**BLC**: u know
**TSW**: Eh, not really
**TSW**: Well sorta dresses are nice sometimes but I can't pull them off really
**TSW**: I could if it was one of Caroline's except suit first
**TSW**: I will be paying that one off for a year
TSW: But like I've never paid much attention to clothes in general or styles I mean so it's just...clothes

Wait! What?! Marimo in a dress?? Sanji dropped his phone laughing too hard. Which resulted in his next line being nothing but keys mash nonsense autocorrected into even worse nonsense.

BLC: assf free d had the gig
TSW: What???
TSW: What did I say?!
BLC: sorry!
BLC: dropped my phone XD
TSW: Fair enough
TSW: I was concerned for a minute there
BLC: y
TSW: That's how my doctor friend types when he's skipped sleeping for two weeks without telling anyone again
BLC: oh really that bad huh
TSW: He's got such bad insomnia he's on like ten ban lists in his own hospital concerning sleeping meds
TSW: He's not allowed to prescribe them if a patient needs them one of the other docs has to write the script
BLC: wow
BLC: u know y
TSW: He started writing himself multiple scripts and combining them to force himself to sleep
TSW: It got pretty bad at one point he was sleeping for days at a time
TSW: Then the pharmacy and his dad figured out what was going on because his dad saw empty bottles and took them in to see which one he was supposed to refill, thinking some of them were old scripts that didn't work
TSW: And that's when they figured out he was combining five different meds to force himself to sleep
TSW: Now he just lets his boyfriends exhaust the living hell out of him and that makes him sleep
BLC: huh
BLC: its a wonder he still has a liscense
BLC: they fire ppl for doin stuff like that u know
TSW: His dads fought for it in court
TSW: Long and hard
TSW: He had to go through like nine kinds of therapy and retake most of his exams and get three kinds of medical clearance and prove he was taking a working recourse to sleep meds
TSW: He doesn't even keep them anywhere near him anymore just not to be tempted
TSW: But he did get his license back
BLC: this is the same guy that gets u the 'good stuff' right
TSW: Yeah
TSW: He has to do a shitton of paperwork to get it for me
TSW: But he's also the only one that's been seeing me long enough to know I need it and nothing less will work
TSW: Though I'm game, I've tried
BLC: the whole thing just sounds all kinds of fucked up cuz i bet they jump all over him every time hes gotta do it huh
TSW: Yeah they do
TSW: I've told him he doesn't have to give me pain meds at all
TSW: I know how to cope without them
TSW: But every time he tells me it's his duty as a doctor to make his patients as comfortable as
possible while recovering
TSW: And that thickheaded swordsman count
BLC: geez yeah
BLC: wow i mean idek what to say cuz like wow u know

Sanji stared at the screen, frowning deeply. Recovered addict, almost lost his license? No wonder Law was so jumpy about him working with his bruises. And the bit about the pain meds and Zoro? It blew the cook's mind. He was vaguely aware that he probably should be saying something more productive but he really couldn't think of what else to say that didn't include 'sorry I broke your eyesocket'.

He let his head flop back onto the pillows, holding the phone above his face with an elbow on the back cushion of the couch, and let out a deep sigh.

TSW: Yeah.
TSW: I'm lucky to have a friend like him
TSW: Much less a doctor friend.
BLC: especially with that cook of urs at work yeah
TSW: ???

Shit shit shit! Had he said too much!? Sanji typed furiously.

BLC: i mean with the guy
BLC: the cook
BLC: that broke ur eyesocket
BLC: thought u said u wanted to fight with him again
BLC: doesnt that mean ull probably need doc feelgood when ur done
TSW: OH
TSW: I thought you were referring to the doctor dating the cook and me getting in trouble for fighting with him
TSW: And I was trying to remember if I'd told you they were dating or not
TSW: But yeah that's true I probably will get another trip to Dr Feelgood after I fight the cook again
BLC: no u didnt mention they were dating thats hilarious
BLC: bet doc feelgood cuts him off when he finds out u 2 fought again XP
TSW: I don't know, probably. I don't ask for their personal details
TSW: Our doctor is a very private person
BLC: thats not all that surprisin with a history like that
BLC: wonder if his boytoy knows about it
TSW: Boytoy??
TSW: Which of his boyfriends would that one be, the newest?
BLC: yeah
BLC: i assume the others have known him longer
BLC: unless hes in the habit of pickin up short tempered cooks on a regular basis
BLC: in which case i gotta say ur cooks got poor taste to be just a flavor of the week
TSW: Oh, no
TSW: Law's a long-term kinda guy
TSW: Probably because of how close he's come to losing everything he loves at one point or another
TSW: Anything he cares about or in this case anyone he likes and asks on a date
TSW: He's looking into the long haul
TSW: As for what the cook knows about Law's life I really couldn't say
TSW: They just had the polyamory conversation not long ago he probably wouldn't want to spring any big stuff on him for a little while
Mulling things over in his head, Sanji frowned, wondering if that 'long-haul' deal included being asked instead of doing the asking, and whether it meant Law was willing to play by the rules to keep him. The last one that had... well it was better to not think about what happened to him.

He yawned, blinking with the sort of slow realization that it was starting to get dark outside. They'd been talking for hours. The words 'long haul' echoed in his eyes making his stomach twist in discord with the fact that he hadn't noticed how long they'd been chatting.

BLC: thatd make sense i guess
BLC: u think ur cook feels the same way
TSW: Other than our fight and his skills as our cook to be honest I hardly know him
TSW: But he strikes me as the kind to like or at least be open to a long-term relationship
TSW: Provided it's the right person because he doesn't seem like he would settle for less
TSW: Then again I may be stereotyping because he's French and talks like he believes in true love
BLC: true love is important!! XO
TSW: Never said it wasn't
TSW: Just that not everybody believes in it
BLC: do u
TSW: I do
TSW: I've seen the looks in the faces of my friends and coworkers when they look at those they love
TSW: However cannot say the thunderbolt's ever struck me yet
BLC: heh
BLC: bet when u do get it u wont know it XP
TSW: Au contraire friend
TSW: I don't feel attraction on a regular basis so I'm gonna know
BLC: ohhh ur demi another friend of mines like that
BLC: sometimes i wish i was that way then maybe i wouldnt notice guys hittin on me so often
BLC: or at least maybe it wouldnt bother me so much
BLC: ahh! but what if it bothered me more! DX
BLC: i feel like i just ate my foot
BLC: u could tell me to shut up any time now really
BLC: ur laughin at my arent u
BLC: *me
TSW: Maybe a little
TSW: It's cute when you ramble
TSW: You remind me of a friend of mine.
TSW: But in my case being hit on is not so much irritating as sort of confusing at times
TSW: After all I'm not really expecting to be hit on so I usually figure it's just being nice until someone tells me so
BLC: ur lucky ur cute urself i dont usually let ppl get away with that X''D

Sanji covered his face with his hand, blushing hard. Marimo thought he was cute!

TSW: :) What can I say this buff bod comes with SOME perks at least
BLC: AHHHH so shameless! X"D
BLC: why do i like u again
BLC: oh right muscles damnit
TSW: And my total lack of shame which has granted you a perfect view
TSW: AND pictures
BLC: SHUSH!! X'D
TSW: I will not
TSW: I am proud of this bod tyvm
BLC: and u should be
BLC: BUT STOP MAKIN ME BLUSH GDI!! X"D
TSW: Ohhhhh I have made you blush?
TSW: VICTORY
BLC: AHHH NUU!! U BASTARD!! NOT FAIR!!
TSW: Hey you ever catch me lost in the city you get payback
TSW: I blush fire truck red when caught getting lost
BLC: maybe ill have to ask u out again just to get u lost hm
TSW: Ohhh no
TSW: I've fallen for that trick before
BLC: that mean u wouldnt wanna grab somethin food wise?
BLC: i gotta somehow convince myself to get off the couch cuz theres nothin to eat here
TSW: .....I could be persuaded to venture out of my apartment for food
TSW: I'm not allowed to cook so my apartment manager made sure I don't have a stove or even a hot plate
BLC: HA! u cant be that bad

--ThreeSwordWnaderer sent 3 files--

Tried_To_Make_Soup.jpg
Lookit_My_Poor_Ceiling.jpg
Whats_Left_Of_The_Stove.jpg

BLC: holy shit yeah no u arent allowed to cook ever
BLC: Pape would have ur hide for that poor stove
BLC: AND UR CEILIN!! DX
BLC: how did u even live b4 u met me geez
TSW: Takeout
TSW: Lots of takeout
BLC: imma pretend u didnt just say that and send u this instead

--BabyLoveCook sent meetmeherein30.png--

TSW: No problem
TSW: If I'm not there in 30 you can tease me ;)
BLC: ill make sure of it XD

--ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] ceased skyping BabyLoveCook [BLC] at 20:12--

Sanji stared at the last few lines for a while, hardly believing he’d actually asked that. Half of him said he should call Law up and tell him what he was doing, but that would mean explaining Baby. The cook didn’t know if he was ready to have that conversation. It was complicated! Baby was… Baby was how he followed the rules. If Baby went out shopping, it meant Sanji could buy things. If Baby went out to dinner, it meant Sanji didn’t have to cook for himself after cooking all day—not that he minded it so much, but really, sometimes he was just exhausted. If Baby went out, it meant That Person was reassured that Baby was still there in FBC waiting for him. It didn’t really matter what Sanji did as long as Baby still existed. Because Baby belonged to Him.

And Sanji could never forget that.

His eyes slid over to the box of ruined clothing, his chest tight and he tried swallow it down. All of his favorites. His suits, his ties, his boxers, his spare binder—the tight one he’d been wearing that first day, any of his jeans that were measured from the men’s department, all of his tee-shirts and masculine hoodies. If there was one thing he had to say about Pearl, the man was thorough. He’d gone through Sanji’s entire wardrobe…
And destroyed it.

Sanji shook his head, punching the pillow he’d been holding into the couch as he stood up forcefully. It didn’t matter. Clothing could be replaced! It was being replaced! Caroline, Iva, Izzie, and the others were all making sure of that! He didn’t know if Pearl had been tailing him last Sunday at the mall, but there hadn’t been any repercussions from it. So, he was left to assume that he was allowed to replace the things that had been destroyed as long as he kept going out regularly as Baby.

So, did that mean this too?

The part of him that wasn’t rallying to tell Law what was going on, was asking if this was a date. And, as he stopped before the sink to wash his face, Sanji shook his head. No, as nice as Zoro was to Baby, Baby couldn’t date him because Baby wasn’t real! Baby was a persona. A mask he slipped on to pretend to be the woman That Person wanted him to be. Biology be damned!

He didn’t realize he was crying against until he pulled a shuddering breath through his teeth.

Baby couldn’t date Zoro. It hurt. A lot. Because he couldn’t date Zoro. Even if Law didn’t mind, and why would the surgeon mind?! He had three other fuckbuddies on the side for God’s sake! But even if he didn’t, Sanji couldn’t date Zoro because Zoro hated Sanji. That morning was obvious enough proof of that! Trapping him in the kitchen like that, after he knew he was claustrophobic, and then hounding at him! Pinning him against the bar! He back still stung where the glasses had crashed behind him!!

No. Zoro hated Sanji.

He flung his shower open harder than he needed to, stripped down to his birthday suit, contacts removed, and emotionally raw. He flipped on the water, letting it cascade over his head and down his body. He closed his eyes and breathed through his mouth, deliberately paying attention to the sensations of liquid on his skin. Down the back of his neck, over his shoulders, past his collar bones, and then drip, drip, dripped off the ends of his nipples, slightly erect from the air in the room around him. Another inhale, expanding his healing ribs as far as his diaphragm would let him, concentrating on the heft and weight of his breasts. Dysphoria tried to rattle his concentration but he dismissed the invasive thoughts, deliberately forcing himself to accept that he still had breasts.

Yes, they were called breasts. Not fat sacks, or rumble spheres, or lactoids, or any other euphemism he could come up with; they were breasts, and he had them.

His breathing was a little shakier as he moved on to the pain in his side, and followed the curve of his hip down to his thighs. Water didn’t much get to his vagina from that angle thanks to the way his spine was curled to get as much of him under the spray as possible. But he felt it all the same, naked without the weight of his packer against the front. He didn’t force himself to spend as much time on it as he had the upper half, but he did acknowledge it, its heat and openness. Like a hollow in the center of his root.

Then he moved onto his legs, tensing the muscles to feel the water drops trace the seams of power. Down his thighs, around his knee caps, over the curve of his calf to his ankles and away. He noted he’d have to wear stockings as he didn’t have time to shave again. The one part of his body that grew hair like crazy! And unlike his head, it was dark as fuck! He didn’t understand it, and he wished he didn’t have to mess with all of the nonsense of shaving it off.

But Baby was a woman. And women did those things. They kept their bodies trim and neat and free of hair in their armpits and on their legs. They carved shapes into their pubic curls to entice men into thinking it was cute. They pinched and poked and prodded and plucked. They stuffed and stacked
and stamped and strapped. The torture they put themselves through day after day to look attractive for the male gender…

It had literally brought Sanji to tears a couple of times.

He washed quickly after taking stock of his body, intentionally using coconut and vanilla to cover the scent of Old Spice. Getting out of the shower, he glanced at the clock… maybe he should’ve said an hour? He shook his head. No. He could do it in ten minutes. He had ten to spare, and the Marimo was likely to be late anyway.

To time himself, he plugged his phone into the stand on the table next to his bed. Because he was rushed, he just pushed play, and immediately regretted having forgotten which playlist he’d been listening to earlier when the Pop, happy-go-lucky, beat began plucking at his ears.

“Ok. Game face. Here we go.”

He rolled his eyes, but didn’t move to change it. He didn’t have time.

He just plunked himself down in front of his desk, the mirror and make-up case still out from roughly twelve hours ago when he’d given up trying to sleep in favor of heading to the Sunny early.

“I’ve got bi-polar disorder. My shit’s not in order. I’m overweight. I’m always late. I’ve got too many things to say.”

The comb and his wig-cap were his best friends when his hair was wet because it meant the gold silk clung to itself and behaved. Moving onto his foundation and highlights, he focused on enhancing his cheekbones and softening the slight angle of his jaw. He had to use a fair amount of concealer on his yellowish-green-brown shiner that was still left from his ‘Welcoming Party’. Eyebrows were next—concealer on the curl and a pencil through the blond strands to give shape that wasn’t his own. Eyeshadow followed that, liner, curl the lashes and mascara. He put a touch of shadow on the edges of his nose to thin the bridge so it would look better under his glasses. Then onto his lips. A dark line around the edge, filled in with a color one shade lighter to give definition, and sealed with a gloss for the wet, pouty look.

He slipped his glasses on and blinked at the reflection. Flawless… But not Sanji.

“I rock mom jeans, cat earrings, extrapolate my feelings. My family is dysfunctional, but we have a good time killing each other.”

His wig, long and curled with big Shirley Temple style rollers to keep it fresh, was stored in a drawer of his desk that had originally been for hanging files. So it was twice the depth, and perfect for his wig-stand. He only spent a few moments on touching up the hair. It was real, he’d made sure to put the expenditure into that—with a little help from Iva—and it held up beautifully with minimal brushing. So he could slide it on and secure it in the blink of an eye.

“They tell us from the time we're young to hide the things that we don't like about ourselves inside ourselves.”

He stood from the desk, face on, and strode to his closet.

“I know I'm not the only one who spent so long attempting to be someone else. Well I'm over it.”

During the chorus, he fought with a pair of stockings, dark tan with black polka dots that accented his fantastic legs in the best way, and found himself mouthing along with the lyrics.
“I don't care if the world knows what my secrets are (secrets are). So-o-o-o-o what?”

Though he couldn’t stand women’s panties, he did wear a bra. Law would kill him. But what choice did he have!? He couldn’t be going out commando with Zoro!! They weren’t a couple! And this one didn’t have an underwire anyway! It still pushed his tits up to what felt like his chin though, giving him cleavage to rival Nami’s.

“I can't think straight. I'm so gay. Sometimes I cry a whole day. I care a lot, use an analog clock, and never know when to stop.”

Now came the hard part. Deciding which of the nearly fifty cocktail and nightclub dresses that Pearl had ‘gifted to him’ as a replacement for his normal wardrobe. The message had been all too clear about it. That Person wanted to have pictures of him in all of them. So, no repeats. Which meant even though he was most comfortable in the black slinky thing he’d worn a week ago, he reached for a dark blue party dress decorated with tiny, non-functional, ivory buttons down the front and a splattering of ice blue hearts stamped all over the bodice and skirt. It was a halter top, which would be a bit chilly, but there was a black jacket to go with it.

“And I'm passive-aggressive. I'm scared of the dark and the dentist. I love my butt and won't shut up. And I never really grew up.”

The zipper was a hidden thing, and wouldn’t Bon-chan have been proud of the changements Sanji twisted himself around in trying to get the blasted thing zipped up properly. The song had gotten through the second run of the chorus and was into the bridge by the time he was finished adjusting both dress and wig again after all of that jumping.

While the music was going through its climax and fade out, Sanji donned his favorite non-purse. The white of the pocket-sash didn’t exactly match the pale blue, but a headband would help that, and he drew the ankle boots with the white zippers out of their hiding place at the bottom of his closet.

His final touches where a pair of snowflake earrings—that hurt like a bitch going through holes that were usually empty—a small clip-on heart broach just a shade or two off from the hearts on his dress, and the collar. The same velvet choker with a silver locket tag that hung just low enough to nestle between his collar bones. The final indignity and That Person had made it clear that it was to be on every time Baby went out, so that He’d know she was a good girl. Just the weight of it had him grabbing another Zofran, and on second thought, he stuck the bottle in his sash.

He gave himself a once over in the mirror in the bathroom and nodded. Yup. The girl in the mirror sure was pretty alright. And if he’d had any less practice with it, the echo of dissociation would have been a full blown slam in the gut.

Sanji wondered if part of the reason he was so steady at all was because he was meeting Zoro. His insides gave a flutter, reminding him that Zoro had called him cute. That… made things a little more worth it, and somehow he found himself smiling a little bit.

Chapter End Notes

Songs: Cowboy Take Me Away - Dixie Chicks; Secrets - Mary Lambert
Zoro's Attempt at Cooking.
AHHHHHHHH!! I almost missed this week because I got distracted at work!!! I'm being promoted so I had stuff I had to do to finalize that. As usual, my wonderful ducky, Ember, beta-read this for me. ^_^

In spite of leaving her apartment with only five minutes to spare, Baby still made it to the diner on Drum Avenue before Zoro did. She grabbed a seat at the counter, waving to the overnight cook—a big woman with thick curly blonde hair. She waved back and said something, but it was impossible to hear her over the sounds of the kitchen itself so Baby just smiled. The waiter on the counter, a college aged kid that looked like he was picking up tips for his tuition by the stress line between his eyebrows, poured her a cup of coffee, threw a handful of cream down, and slid the sugar container over from the next seat before going back to wrapping silverware behind the cash register. She'd been there often enough that the people knew her routines, and dressed as she was—she was clearly waiting for someone. So they had time before she would be ready to even look at their menu.

Zoro arrived, surprisingly on time... give or take five minutes. For once, the city hadn't moved around on him, and he'd actually managed to get there when he intended to get there. So it was on time that he moved up to the counter and leaned on it to check politely that it was really her before his face broke out into an easy smile he seemed to wear only for her and sat down.

"Hi, Baby."

"Hey!" She beamed up at him, "Look at that, not lost at all. If I wasn't so happy to see you I might be tempted to pout for cheating me out of a chance to get you back." Sticking her tongue out between her teeth was all that kept her in check. "So you wanna sit here or grab a table in the back?"

He slid into the seat next to her. "Here is fine. It has a nice feel here. Friendlier than at a table."

He couldn't have explained that if he tried; he just liked eating at counters better. His eye flicked over her, the other too sluggish and today too unfocused to see much—some days were worse than others. He rubbed the back of his neck unconsciously as he resumed leaning on the countertop.

"That and I like open space. Closer to the door."

She snickered, "Careful, somebody might think you were planning on a dine-and-ditch."

"Ah, no. I just have... a habit where I like to be close to at least one entrance and exit. A job I was doing a long time ago," he waved it off, turning on the stool to face her a little better.

"So, we never got into what made your day so shitty, you know." Recrossing her legs so that she was more turned towards him as well, she sipped her coffee absently.

"Ahhhh. I lost all self-control and lost all my shit and was an utter jackass to the cook," he grumbled under his breath, still rubbing the side of his neck.

"Why?"
"It's... Uh... It's gonna sound insane."

"Try me. It can't be more insane than me rearranging the kitchen cuz I panicked." She smiled at him encouragingly.

His hand was now scratching at his throat—not just the back, but the side and front near his adam's apple. It was completely unconscious. He didn't even realize he was doing it.

"Well... I'm the First Mate and he won't let me do my job. He's the newest crewmember, very strong, but I'm First Mate. I'm supposed to look after the crew when Captain's gone. And all the rest of the time too really. But he won't let me. He won't let me help him. He won't even let us support him in his fights."

His other hand tugged at his hair in that same frustrated gesture Sanji had seen the first time they met.

Baby reached over and took his hand between both of hers, "You wanna protect him. Any chance that's what he's trying to do too?"

"I don't need to be protected. I'm first mate. Besides, if this," he touched his chest absently, almost dead center, "didn't kill me, almost nothing will. If anyone needs protecting, it's not me. Luffy, maybe, because if he gets in a fight outside the ring he can be permanently banned for breaking rules. But not me."

She raised her eyebrow at him and with her other hand tapped his still healing cheek. "Uh huh. Might not kill you, but can you protect everybody else if you're not able to fight at your best cuz you're hurt?"

He raised his eyebrow right back. "When it counts? When it counts nothing will stop me fighting my best. Because when the Daughters and the White Lady are with me, all will fall. And when MY crew is threatened, I am a force of nature."

"You're a force of nature without all of that, but weren't you just moaning at me because your eye hinders you? I mean, look at me straight on." She held up a couple of fingers off to his bad side. "How many fingers I got up?"

He blinked; once, then twice.

"Uhm... I can't really... see. Your hand's kind of a blur. A vague blur. You're holding it too far away... it's a bad day for the eye," he explained.

"And that, Mr. First Mate, is my point." She leaned in so he could see the answer was two. "Maybe he just realizes you're human too, and wants to help. I know I do, and I don't even know what's going on past whatever that was with Uncle Mihi last weekend."

"Oh! No, my eye's been like that for years, Baby!" He closed the lid and traced the long scar. "Kitchen knife stored on a shelf above my head. Block slipped and there we are one scratched cornea later."

"So!? You're being deliberately dense." She pouted at him, and for a second the flash through her bright blue eyes was far too familiar. "I mean that you don't have to do it alone either. You're getting all mad at him for trying to fly solo, but you aren't letting him stand equal with you either. You told me yourself how he drives you crazy fawning all over the girls, and acting like he's off in his own little world or something."

He blinked, his brow furrow deepening. "How does wanting to help him and standing as equals
connect? We're a crew... we stand behind each other. I am never alone. I'm getting mad at him for not letting the crew back him up. Not any of us!"

"How long has he been working there? Does he know he's part of the crew yet? And I don't mean have you told him, I'm sure your captain has. I mean does he believe it yet?"

Zoro's frown deepened and he started picking at his throat again. "I... don't know. He should, because Luffy never picks wrong about crew, not ever, but I remember when Luffy picked me it DID take me a while to come around... but I was also a hotheaded young punk literally looking for a reason to draw blood. But we've done everything we can think of to make him feel part of the group, make sure he can feel as well as know he is one of us, but I can't speak for his emotions, not really."

"What do you know of him? Cuz that's what I've found. When a crew really comes together is when everybody starts sharing their personal shit. And especially coming from the outside, you said he came to you guys for a job, right? Not the other way around? Maybe he's feeling like this is just a passing port, someplace he'll be for a while and nobody'll miss him when he's gone again." Her voice got oddly quiet towards the end, and she found herself tracing the rim of her coffee cup, staring at the fabric of her skirt where it lay over her knee.

"He hasn't shared anything personal, no. But this is NOT just a passing port! IF he does get a better job, which we're all for, we're still not gonna let him fall out of touch! He's family now. It doesn't matter where he goes, we'll follow because he's our crewmate. If he left, we'd miss him and keep in constant contact... letters, email, Skype. Everything. Which it why it's so frustrating to watch him pull away," He growled, now scratching so hard at the side of his neck his blunt nails were ripping the skin.

"Hey! Hey, stop that." She got pulled away from herself by grabbing his hand again. Pressing a napkin to the side of his neck where he'd picked a previous scratch open, she tsk'd. "You know that. But what if he's never had family like that before? What if he's used to the world not being nice to him? You don't know. Everybody's got their issues to get over. Sounds to me like you're trying to push him. I mean, what'd you tell me about the first day? He got up in your face cuz he thought you were doing something to the manager?" She was practically sitting in his lap by then, "And then what'd he do? He tried to kill you! Doesn't sound to me like somebody who trusts people easy."

He sighed, his other hand starting to scratch the other side—this was a most unusual subconscious behavior, he'd never done this talking about Sanji before. "I suppose maybe so. I mean, that in mind I've tried to give him space, really I have, which is why I said I'm an ass. I was a complete fuckass, crowding and challenging and yelling at him. I shouldn't—I KNOW I shouldn't, I can read his body language and it tells me things that make me so angry but it means I know better! But I couldn't seem to help myself either."

"I said, stop that." She took his other hand too. "Don't make me sit on you. I know the owner here; Igaram won't care if I get all PDA on his counter." Her mouth pinched up to the side and she gave a decisive nod. "How about we start back at the beginning. He won't let you in. He's got something he's hiding. Tell me what you think is going on."

"I... it's really bad. I don't know if I should actually... talk about what the markers are telling me," he said, voice lowered to a barely-there rumble as he glanced around the public space. "In a place where anyone could listen in."

"Hmm... we could grab something to go and head back to your place if you want?" She blinked, a small blush on the bridge of her nose that got steadily darker as she babbled, "I mean, I'd suggest my place but you'd probably be more comfortable at yours, knowing the security and stuff, um... I swear this isn't me trying to get into your pants! I just thought maybe you'd be... oh God, kill me now, I am
so not meaning anything the way it sounds, I swear!"

He laughed a little. "No, I get what you meant. Trust me, if you wanted to get into my pants you would just have to say it, so I know that's not how you mean it. I'm ok with that plan if you are."

"Sure. Gimme a sec. I know the perfect take home comfort food."

She actually did plant a kiss on his nose before she thought about it. Then she hopped up and practically skipped into the diner's kitchen like she actually owned the place.

His hands returned to his neck, but the minute she left his sight the itching there that he had been scratching at so absentely, if without his notice most of the time, finally went away and they lowered back to the counter. He tried to pinpoint why his neck was itching. He wasn't wearing one of Izou's new shirts, so it wasn't the collar chafing... he hadn't eaten anything so it couldn't be an allergy... what the hell?

Baby returned with several Styrofoam boxes stacked up in a plastic bag on one arm, and a pair of tall takeout cups balanced in the other hand. She grinned, "Terry's homemade chicken noodle soup is the best for shitty days. Even better than mine, and I've got fresh bread, some hard cheese, and an order of Igaram's signature fruit salad for dessert. Good?"

He smiled again, hand scratching the back of his neck almost the minute he saw her again—goddamn itch! If he had bugs again swears to God...

"Sounds perfect, want me to carry some of it? The things I can't spill maybe?"

"Yeah, maybe it'll keep you from tearing your neck open. Geez. Is it my perfume or something? Cuz if you're allergic to it, I'll go wash it off." She frowned, worried, and shifted her shoulders little in response to his discomfort.

"I really don't know, it just itches, I'm not sure why," he replied, just as puzzled as she was and taking the packages- which did nothing to deter the burning itch on all sides of his neck. "I'll wash it with peroxide when we get to my apartment, I might just have something on my skin," he shrugged.

She nodded, shifting one of the cups of soup to her other hand. "Think we'll have an adventure getting back to your place?"

On their way out the door, Terracotta waved at them from the cash register, and Baby saluted her with one of the cups, grinning warmly.

"Probably not. Usually people get out of my way when I'm bleeding. They know it makes me... ah... antsy, I guess would be the world," Zoro chuckled.

"Well, let's try to accomplish it without bleeding, ne?" She laughed, gesturing for him to lead.

He did, and he didn't seem to have a trouble navigating to the basement he now called home. They were able to get back home and down the steps to have some of the soup while it was still hot.

She whistled appreciatively at the entrance to their building, taking in the well-loved details as though she'd never seen them before, and fought hard to pretend that she had no idea where they were going until they passed the laundry room. "Oh you weren't kidding about washers being right there! Geez, how do you sleep!? It'd drive me nuts."

"Like I said, I barely hear 'em. I seriously suspect this wall," he patted it with a foot, "must have soundproofing in it."
"Hmm... Seems too thin, but maybe." Stepping around him she let her eyes wander over the place. "Simple, but homey. I like it. Mind if I use the table there for the food?"

"That's what it's for," he chuckled, gesturing to the two-seater table where he ate most of his takeout meals. "I'll get bowls and spoons and cups and stuff. I don't have a lot of variety to drink but you can take your pick."

"Water's fine. And you never know about these things! It could've been for display purposes or something, who knows?" She shrugged dramatically then flounced over to the table itself to set the stuff down.

On her second trip she discarded her shoes at the door. She'd have done that first if she could have, but with both hands full the zippers on her boots were difficult to fix. Her third trip across the small dwelling was to bow, sorrowful and apologetic, in front of the Three Daughters—now missing their Eldest; her space empty with the void of her death. Baby wasn't a sword user, but seeing the interaction with Mihawk the week before had opened her eyes. As such, though her presentation wasn't quite correct, her heart was in the right place.

When she straightened, she brought a small wrapped package from her sash. "I don't know if this is right, but... the website I was reading said you should have a thing... um... I wanted to help, if I could."

Zoro had seen her pay her respects, and though his smile was tinged with hurt, he gave her hand a comforting squeeze before he took the package out of it. His breath caught when he opened the wrapping. It was beautiful, carved ebony with lotus petals around the incense holder, plenty of room for a flower or a candle, and a small slot in the back for a picture if he wanted one.

"Thank you. It means a lot that you understand, and even more so with this."

"Uncle Mihi never talked about it much, but then he... doesn't really talk about anything much. Anyway, I felt bad that you'd lost her, and I just... I hope it's okay. I can take it back if you already have one." At that she glanced around, specifically looking at the walls. "And I didn't know what color to use so I may have... um... done some poking around. Is black okay?"

He smiled a little again, holding the small shrine shelf to his chest like something precious. "It's perfect," he said gently. "I'll make a proper shrine for her funeral, but this I can put right above the display to honor her whenever I do my katas. Thank you, Baby. This means more than I can tell you."

"You're welcome." She bit her lip, and this time her blush was different—softer, and more controlled.

Within her head, she acknowledged that this moment, and ones like it, was the whole reason she allowed the ruse to continue. She couldn't bring Yubashiri back, no matter how much she wanted to, but maybe helping the Marimo to mourn her properly would ease some of the guilt that weighed her down. If she'd only followed the rules... maybe the sword wouldn't have... She blinked rapidly, bringing her hand up to touch the corner of her eye.

Then she smiled up at him, "Let's eat, yeah?"

He smiled as he put the shelf where he'd remember to put it up later. "Yeah! I'm still hungry and that stuff smells really good!"

"Terry and Igaram were kinda like my foster parents when I first got to the city. Their diner was the
second job I had. Granted I waited tables for them, but that was more because going to FBU didn't leave enough time for me to pick up more than a couple of hours every day." Baby was quick to unpack everything, and God did the smell just get better when she had!

The soup was thick with fat noodles, hearty chunks of chicken, carrot rounds, celery hunks, and surrounded by a broth that promised hugs with every mouthful. What turned out to be the bread was actually a full mini-loaf, torn in half with butter melting in the middle. And the fruit was a rainbow of berries, melon, pineapple, and bananas—all fresh from that morning by the look of it. When Baby had it all plated it looked like something out of a gourmet restaurant, even on Zoro's hand-me-down plates.

She only gave him a moment to marvel at her magic before tucking in with a happy smile.

It pinged his mind, that smile. Another puzzle piece to go with the ones before, but the food was far too enticing to focus on such things now.

"They sound like good people," Zoro said thoughtfully, between bites of soup and bread spread with thick cheese. He couldn't focus on much else, not right now… the flavor was like little fireworks in his mouth and it made him shiver with delight.

"Mhm!" She agreed, nodding.

Her chin caught on the upper edge of her choker when she bent to take a spoonful of the soup and she growled, debating something internally. Then she gave a huff and set her spoon down so she could use both hands on the collar.

After stowing it away she gave a roll of her neck, "Ahh. Better."

Across from her, Zoro's shoulders went down and the hand that had been scratching at the side (which was bleeding again) finally stopped and dropped to his lap as the itch went away, and he copied her, rolling his neck and making it pop.

"Mmm. Yeah. And that itching finally stopped, too."

"Huh. Must be something in my necklace maybe? Do you have a problem with velvet?" Munching a small bite of bread, she was eating more slowly than he was; practically nibbling at her food.

"No. Not really. The only fabric I find itchy is lace. It's probably psychological. My sister made me wear a day collar for a year in exchange for doing all my chores. I was bait so she could find other Doms in the area so she could make some more friends in the lifestyle."

"You really don't strike me as the submissive type." Baby laughed shaking her head. "What do you mean by day collar though?"

He blinked at her. "You... don't know? It's... it's a chain with a little lock, or a choker, like yours. A necklace that at first glance doesn't look out of place so nobody asks about it or thinks it odd... but most people in the lifestyle recognize it as a subtle symbol of position and/or ownership. In my case, it was sort of a 'Free sub here' sign since the lock had no decal and I, myself, held the key on a second, smaller chain. Comitted Dom/sub relationships usually have a symbol to indicate ownership, or a particular charm on the choker. But it's not a collar-collar, not something your Dom could haul you around by with a leash or their fingers. Chains can choke you and chokers would break under force. So it's a 'day collar'."

"...oh." She blinked back, a certain pallor that wasn't entirely fake.
It wasn't like she hadn't known that it was a symbol of That Person's ownership of her, but somehow, hearing it from someone else, learning that someone outside of their circle could recognize it as such, it just... She swallowed reflexively, forcing the thoughts down. It was fine. It was alright. Those were the rules. She had to follow the rules. And Zoro couldn't know! If he knew it'd ruin everything!

She shook her head lightly. "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't wear it then, huh? If it makes you uncomfortable."

"No, it's alright. I'll just keep itching, that's all," he shook his head a bit. "Like I said, psychological. Maybe wearing mine again would make it go away..." he rubbed the raw spot on his throat.

"And you'll end up scratching yourself raw, or setting yourself up to be propositioned. Or are you that antsy for douchebags to beat up?" She teased, trying to draw the conversation away from her.

"Oh, mine's a chain collar, quite comfy. And I don't mind being propositioned. That's how I met Law!" He snickered and realized when his spoon clinked he'd hit the bottom of his bowl, and cast about for one of the other containers.

"Here." She offered the rest of hers. "Oh really? So are you sub completely?"

He took it and didn't ask her why she didn't want any more of it. Some people had small stomachs. And some people were also generous. He’d learned early in life not to question that kind of charity, especially being best friends with Luffy.

"Nah. If anything I'd count as a switch. Both positions have their perks and drawbacks and while I'm slightly more inclined to Dom, subbing is fun as well and I have what amounts to no preference. It's just nice to get that community feeling when someone sees the day collar and gives you that slow nod, recognizes you and sees you and acknowledges you."

"That sounds really nice." Her sigh was far more wistful than she'd meant it to be, and she didn't notice she was tearing the piece of bread into crumbs on her plate.

"It is. Unfortunately..." he cringed a little, "the representations of the lifestyle are... less than pleasant at best, and a horrifying measure of slander and abuse at worst."

"Abuse?" Biting her lip, she scooted a little closer to the table, "You mean like... it's... wow I feel really dumb right now, but... I thought... like... I thought it was supposed to hurt? That being embarrassed by stuff and being told what you can and can't do was what it was supposed to be."

"Well, for some people, that's what they like. Some people really like the endorphin rush of being given pain, and some really get off on being completely at someone else's mercy... and don't mistake me, it's fine to be into that stuff!" He sipped on the last of the soup and then gently set the bowl aside. "But there is a right way to do it. You set limits, beforehand. You establish safewords and you listen to them. I can't stress that enough, safewords are sacred. That's probably what pisses me off about that Fifty Shades of Gray book, the main character uses her safeword and her 'Dom' ignores it and punishes her for using it. That is straight-up fucking abuse. Safewords are in place so nobody goes over a boundary they can't physically or mentally cross. The safeword is 'stop' or 'slow down', no matter what the actual word is that you've decided on, and you listen."

He leaned back in his chair and yanked on his hair again.

"Sorry, I'm getting on a tangent. People who like to be humiliated establish beforehand where the limit is; you can call me this, but that's a slur and it turns me off, don't use that word, and such. And
then here's the important part… their partner respects it. Pushing a limit is one thing; people do it all the time, that's why the safewords are there. But deliberately crossing a limit you were asked not to is just—it's a horrific breach of trust, that's just—it's abuse."

"So... how do you know? Like... What if you want to use the... the what was it? The word you said, and he was really disappointed. You don't wanna make him feel like that again, it's not abuse if you don't use it anymore, right? You're the one not telling him he's going too far. Doesn't that make it your fault?"

"Well..." he rolled it around for a moment, considering carefully. "It's the safeword. And if a Dom makes a sub feel bad for needing to use the safeword and encourages that they never use it again... that's abuse. That's emotional manipulation. A good Dom wants to hear the safeword… most of the ones I've met say if they don't at least get the 'slow down' safeword once per session they're not pushing the limits to satisfy their subs properly. They want the safeword used. They desperately encourage their subs to feel safe using it, to use it whenever they feel they need to. The kind that DISCOURAGE the use of safewords... they're not good Doms."

"Session?" She blinked, unintentionally letting on to more than she meant to. "You mean it stops sometimes?"

"There are two levels of intensity. Well, three, but two are in the same one." He tried not to let anything show on his face and stay neutral. "The first is those that prefer to live their regular, daily lives as regularly as possible and enjoy BDSM as a stress relief, or an outlet, and leave it behind when they are finished- I don't know the term, but they aren't in it for a 24-7 comittment; but some people ARE. There are some subs and Doms that wish the dominance structure involved in most if not all of the facets of their daily lives, at home, in clubs, on the streets, everywhere. But even for those in the lifestyle, they will amp up the intensity to have play sessions, which, yes, do stop. How they manage their daily lives is negotiated with each other through contract, which is written up as an actual legal document to protect both parties. I'm not sure of all the deals that go with that."

"What if you change your mind? What if you break up? Can't he just keep doing it? You agreed that he owns you. You can't just stop being owned if he leaves. You..." Baby snapped her mouth shut, and looked away. "Sorry. I should just go look it up if I'm this curious about it."

"No, the internet is full of shit and lies and half-truths you have to sort. It's best to ask me or someone else who actually knows," he assured her, cutting off that protest as fast as he could. "But the answer to your question is NO. Absolutely, positively Hell No. BDSM has three main tenets. Safe. Sane. CONSENSUAL."

He realized his fingers were drumming and put them on his legs where the tapping wouldn't be as loud. For a moment he almost didn't continue, but if she didn't know day collars then she needed to know the truth. So, he drew a breath and counted on his fingers instead of fidgeting.

"Safe is obvious. Always play safely. Research new things and if possible have someone with experience monitor you when you and your partner try anything new that might be possibly dangerous or could go wrong.

“Sane means everyone has to be in their right minds, everyone has to be informed of the plan and what's going on and everyone's relative positions. You have to talk and communicate and make sure everyone understands everything involved. This also means no mind-altering shit. No drugs, no alcohol, nothing that could impair someone’s judgement, especially during negotiations."

“And finally, Consensual… again connected to safewords. The 'stop now' safeword is the same as saying 'no'. It is the withdrawal of consent. Everything, and I mean everything, in a healthy
relationship, BDSM or not, really has to be consented to by both parties. If it's not, it's abuse. If you break up, you void your contract. Any sub and Dom pair that parts ways, consent has been revoked. The Dom no longer has any right to command that sub unless they Scene together again in the future, and then only during that Scene when the sub is consenting. And the sub is not obliged to obey any previous contracts or the current commands of that Dom with whom they have nullified their contract.

There was a pause as it became apparent that his hands were shaking. He tucked them between his knees. Some unidentified emotion flared over his face, and Baby got the distinct impression that he wanted to do something else entirely with his hands instead of holding them back. But before she could say anything about it, he gave himself a shake, and continued.

"Agreeing to be owned is one thing. But when a pairing breaks up, that ownership is revoked, and any Dom that continues to control and own a sub that has clearly revoked consent and ownership is a straight up malevolent abuser."

"I'm sorry. I'm clearly upsetting you talking about this. We're supposed to be relaxing after a shitty day. I shouldn't have asked. I'm sorry." Her feet somehow wound up tucked under her, her skirt covering her legs from sight, and she was pulling at the edge of her sash-purse where the lacy fringe was fraying. "I won't wear the choker when I'm with you anymore. It obviously means more than I realized and I don't wanna disrespect something you obviously care about a lot. I'm sorry."

"No, no it's not you," he promised as he listened to the rattle of a sword's sheath as she tasted his rage and shrieked for vengeance with him. "It's... abusers often use BDSM as a cover. To pick victims. Everyone in the community's aware of it and we do what we can to protect their victims and warn everyone we know when we find one. I've... I've found more than one, myself."

Her voice was very quiet when she spoke next, "Is that what you think is going on with the cook?"

"That he's being abused by someone? Hounded? Attacked? Yes. I do. He has all the physical and behavior markers of someone under constant threat. And I know them intimately." His voice, as well as his eye, was grim and dark. "Someone is hurting him. I don't know why, I could never understand why. But someone is hurting him. And they don't care what else they destroy in hurting him."

"Could that be why he's trying to keep everybody out? You think maybe he knows that people will get hurt if they try to help him?"

She couldn't look at him, feeling tears in her eyes as she fought to keep her composure. Damnit, he knew too much! She didn't know if she could do this. She thought she could just pretend that Baby was the real person for at least a little bit, but he had to know... he had to be able to see through her. She couldn't even think about how to direct the conversation so that it wasn't quite so personal. Especially as she'd deliberately sought him out for this. To get past the fight from earlier. She had to. Sucking a deep breath, she forced herself to look up, tears or not.

"No wonder you're so pent up about this. If you think he's in that kind of situation. I mean, Jesus, doesn't he know how many abusive relationships end in death of the victim?!" Yes, that was good, play it off as sympathetic anger. "I'm trying to play Devil's advocate here, but fuck, no wonder you're pushing at him."

"No, no I understand. I do. When it was Perona she kept it so secret even Mihawk didn't know. Covered it with makeup. I know. And I know pushing him makes me just as bad as whoever's hurting and crowding and intimidating him, I do, I know I shouldn't! But the fingerprints didn't turn up anything and while I know that bastard's stench well enough to pick him out if he ever passes in twenty feet of me—I have absolutely no lead other than him." There he went yanking his hair again.
He'd go bald if he kept that up. "She would rather have died than let us get hurt. But I caught him."

He pulled his shirt up and over to trace The Big One, bisecting his chest like some overexaggerated movie scar—except it was real. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen it, but being up close… and with context… made her gasp a little.

He nodded. "Yeah. He dared lay hand on her and he dared threaten her with a blade. He threatened to hurt me or Mihawk, in our sleep, dishonorably, if she didn't let him. So I showed her exactly how much she didn't have to protect me."

He thumbed the scar with a deep frown before letting his shirt fall back down to cover it again.

"But Sanji's... Sanji's too private for me to catch the sonofabitch that's doing this to him. And I can't just tell him I'd take another one of these," he gestured to the scar, "to keep my crew and nakama safe. He wouldn't believe I could do that for someone I barely know, and someone that almost killed me the day we met. But he's family. And if I ever do catch that bastard whose scent is seared into my brain, I'll make sure he never even THINKS about threatening my crew again."

"Well, first things first, Mister," Baby was out of her seat and attached to his head faster than he could blink, "you are nothing like whoever That Person is." There was a subtle emphasis on the phrase. "You are kind, and good, and rightfully scared for him. Sanji's just obviously too blind to see it."

And oh how true that had been, she drew her cheek through his hair, letting the sensation keep her from chasing the tangent.

"I think if you give him time. I know that's not something he has a lot of if That Person is really as violent as seems to be the case, but maybe he'll warm up to you. Maybe if he sees you like I do. You've been nothing but amazing with me. God, if I could I'd snatch you up myself to take you off the market permanently."

He chuckled a bit and hugged her back, arms warm around her waist and ribs, thick muscle that held gently, so very gently. "Thank you. Thank you, Baby. And I s'pose to be fair I don't spend much time talking with Sanji one-on-one like I have with you. He's been in and out of the Sunny so quick I couldn't catch a word if he stood still for ten seconds without wanting to kick my head back in," he muttered softly before sighing softly, part relief and part comfort.

"What's up with that anyway? I mean, I get the first time was a misunderstanding, but it's like you're a glutton for punishment or somethin'!" She poked his nose, holding and being held comfortably. "Do you just... get off on the wrong foot all the time?" She stuck her tongue out like she always did when she made a pun.

His eyes widened when he got it and his face twisted up, grinning lopsidedly, "Ooooh that one was BAD! But I suppose in the long run, we've been on bad, uneven footing since that first misunderstanding with Nami."

She giggled, then ran her fingers through his hair, "Have you tried flat out apologizing? Not, hurry through it and get it over with, I mean actually stopping him, and apologizing without reacting to the bad attitude you know he's going to give you."

"I... don't think so. But I should. For today as well." The forehead furrow eased a little under her ministrations.

"Yeah, that might need flowers." She nodded sagely, dragging her nails along his scalp gently.
"Flowers? I dunno, he got pretty pissed when I said something about ladies first. Wouldn't flowers be more of a fuck-you?"

"Hmm."

Truth be told she had no idea what to tell him to make it up to her because if she was honest with herself... most of her reaction had been the fact that he trapped her in the kitchen. And any held over resentment from that had been blown away entirely by the way he explained himself.

"Maybe just... go out of your way to be with him like you are with me? Honest? Open? At least I think you're being open and honest." She took his face in her hands and gave him a dramatically suspicious pout.

He laughed gently. "I'm always open and honest! No point in lying or hiding. Waste of time," he chuckled a bit, letting her move him. "I just tend to get headaches at work, so I get real quiet. Headaches make me not wanna hear my own voice."

"Ech, that really sucks." She went back to massaging his scalp, her touch tender and caring. "But then, working in a bar... kind of makes sense. He know that?"

"Mmmmm... probably not. He's like magic, if he knew I had a headache he'd make that thing that helps Nami's migranes after she balances the books," he purred under the touch.

"Hmm. Like to get me some of that. Don't get me wrong, I love my job... even if I might have to find a new one tomorrow... but kitchens are crazy during a shift. Hundreds of orders." Her voice was softer, lulled by soothing him it seemed, and she leaned in a little closer. "You're really comfy. You know that?"

"Mhm... They tell me so... all the time." His eyes were fluttering, hard to keep open, as his grip around Baby's waist almost fell away, only to tighten when he realized it. But not a minute later it was sagging again. "Mm... I'm full and warm, now I'm tired, Baby. Think 'M passin' out on ya."

She chuckled softly. "I should get home anyway. I gotta go in early tomorrow and find out if I still have a job." Feeling emboldened by the atmosphere of his place, she tilted his chin up to give him a real kiss. It was mostly chaste and soft, but it let her pull away from him. "Go apologize to your cook tomorrow. Okay, Tiger-boy?"

He smiled back at her, genuine and soft, so real and honest it hurt to look at. "Okay, Baby. I'll apologize to him first thing at work. And you get a good sleep too."

"I'm sure I will." She found herself blinking away a tear, and making an internal promise to try and accept his apology as Sanji tomorrow.

Giving him another kiss she moved back actually out of his embrace, though she was immediately cold for the loss. Nothing on the table would go bad by sitting overnight, so she just made her way to the door, not expecting him to follow her. It was when she stood up from putting her boots on that she realized he had and laughed at the sleepy, lost puppy, look on his face.

"Go to bed, silly. I can see myself out. I'm a big, tough girl, remember? I can dent steel."

"I know. Maybe I just didn't want to see you go so fast?" He took another kiss from her as she was about to turn to open the door.

She licked her lips, drawing the bottom one between her teeth, "If we don't stop, I never will."
He chuckled, "Alright. Alright. I'll be good. One more?"

"Just one. Then bed."

She wrapped her arms around his neck for the last one, half inside, half outside the door to his apartment, and within view of the steps where a shadow crossed the light streaming in from the streetlamp outside. Unaware of anything but the tingle of Zoro's lips on hers, and his hands on her waist—never straying beyond that—Baby sighed with the kind of sound that meant if she had only one more reason she'd stay with him, no matter what morning brought. Fortunately, Zoro wasn't that kind of guy. After a minute or so, he pulled back with the ghost of a second kiss, letting her go entirely.

"G'night, Baby."

"Night."

For the safety of her ruse, she left the building itself, and walked around the block twice before heading back. The sun was kissing the sky, bathing everything in pale purple and pink, and Sanji let his mind wander to the night, the things he'd learned, and the end. He hadn't meant for it to go there, but he really couldn't say he regretted it. Except... he was pretty sure that kissing Zoro, no matter how he was dressed, counted as cheating on Law. He tried to feel guilty about it. He poked and prodded at it the entire time he was getting undressed after he got home.

In the end, as he laid down to actually sleep, he had come to the conclusion that while he did feel bad about not talking to Law about it first... he still couldn't regret kissing Zoro. He was still filled with butterflies that tried to make him giggle as his meds kicked in and dragged him under.
Monday started somewhere around three o’clock for the Marimo. He couldn’t quite remember when he’d crashed out, but a shift of his shoulder told him he hadn’t bothered with unfolding the futon—he’d just slept on it like a couch after Baby left. And that was an odd reaction to have when the thought crossed his mind. He lifted the lid of his good eye, and consequently the eyebrow above it, to peer at the tent of his pants. He’d apparently foregone stripping down too, and the zipper of his jeans was making a nuisance of itself against his morning wood.

The next place he looked was the clock hung on the wall above his head for the time, and that was followed by a piercing catalogue of his entire apartment, from door to sword rack to table—with leftovers still sitting in the middle of it—to kitchenette to combination bookshelf-clothing storage that augmented his wardrobe upstairs. Everything in order the swordsman finally moved, rolling his shoulders and stretching out his muscles after being in virtually the same position all night—well, all morning long.

It was only then that the bouncer let thoughts of the night before wander back into his mind. How Baby held him, the taste of her lips on his, the sound of her laugh in his ear, the feel of her muscles under his hands. He found his breath picking up, especially as he licked his lips and found traces of her lip gloss in the cracks of them. It wasn’t often he wanted to indulge in self-pleasure, mostly he started on his morning katas to remove the problem through meditation, but this afternoon… with the memory of Baby keen in his head, he found himself reaching down his front before he’d even made the conscious decision.

A palm over his zipper brought a soft groan. He played like that for a while, tracing the length and width of his bound erection through the denim, eyes closed so he could better hear Baby’s voice. Sweet and soothing, all the way through what had been several difficult topics of conversation. He worked the button open and slipped his fingers through the open fly, teasing himself to the memory of Baby’s smile.

Ohhh, he wanted to always see that smile~!

Finally touching skin, his pants and boxers shoved down to his knees, he freely let himself think about what those lips would feel like around his dick. It didn’t do much, but the idea that she’d want to did. His hips hitched into the stroking of his hand, precum almost enough for lubrication. Unbidden, after he licked his palm to make things smoother, the image of the first time he met her...
sprang across his inner eye. Her leg, all power and grace, at full extension, and the pleasure pooled in
his groin, burning hot and high like the cherry of her cigarette.

It climbed in his veins, faster than normal, his attention kept on her, and small grunts escaped through
his nose.

That power! That strength!

Wait?

Why was she blond!?

Too high to stop, Zoro let the images in his mind go where they willed, tripping through a series of
animated snapshots of Sanji mid-kick, packing the same punch as Baby, spinning, hard and furious. He
was beautiful with purpose, and the two Savate fighters blended together in a delicious merge of
sweet laughter and blinding rage that shot straight through the bouncer’s system like an electric
shock.

He curled into his hand, crying out and panting hard as he spilled onto the cushion of the futon.
Waves of pleasure blanked out his mind in time with his racing pulse, and he found himself
whimpering a little as it began to fade.

Breathing through his mouth, Zoro used his dirty boxers to wipe up the mess. He made a mental note
to clean the couch before anybody—Baby, his mind supplied smugly—came over again. Then he
crossed to the small sink Franky put in for him. There wasn’t enough space for a full shower down
there, but he could at least wash off a bit before grabbing his things and invading Brook’s bathroom
for a real bath. And besides, before that he had katas to go through. The Middle Daughter would not
be put off much longer by his trivial human needs.

The leftover fruit and bread proved to be a filling snack before he headed to the Sunny. They had
just under fourteen days before Luffy met Arlong in the semi-final. Zoro anticipated the closer they
got to it, the more polarized the crowds would get, and the more rowdy they would be with each
other. And that was without thinking about the history Luffy’s crew had with his opponent. He
didn’t even want to think about the kinds of things that had to be going through Nami’s head. And…
oh God Nami…

The Hell was she going to say about yesterday?!

He took a deep breath, steeled his nerves, and entered anyway. She wouldn’t fire him, no matter
what the damage had been, but she could make the next several weeks Hell for him. So much for
trying to find time to see Baby more often.

However, the scene he discovered once his eyes adjusted to the light level was something out of a
teeny-bopper’s made-for-television movie. Chopper, Usopp, and Brook—of all people—were
leaning on the closed door of the manager’s office, each with a different sized glass upside down
against the wood as though that would help them hear what was going on. He felt his eyebrow arch
again, and he glanced at Franky, who was coiling cables on the stage.

“Don’t ask, bro. They were like that when I got here too.”

Robin’s throaty chuckle came before Zoro could answer, “I believe it has to do with Sanji and
your… colorful episode yesterday.”

“Ugh… don’t tell me the sea witch is going to coddle the cook after all of his fawning all over her.”
The bouncer could already feel the pulse of a headache behind the scar above his bad eye. “That’s
the last thing the bastard needs.”

“Hmm. And what do you think he needs, Zoro-kun?” The Asian woman’s expression was neutral, but behind her Franky shook his head.

In response, the green-head frowned, “Nothing. Nevermind.”

Just then the door to the office opened, toppling the three would-be eavesdroppers on their chests one on top of the other with Brook on the bottom. The cook, in all his—mouthwatering, what?—glory almost stepped out, then looked down, the visible eyebrow twitching, and a certain wary tightness around his mouth. He scowled harder, but dismissed it in favor of looking back to Nami.

“I swear you won’t regret it, Ms. Nami, I will work twice as hard to deserve your unending generosi —”

“Save it.” The manager’s voice was tired. “Just fix this.”

Fully expecting another cascade of flowering compliments, Zoro was floored when all Sanji said was, “Oui, Ms. Nami.”

His dark green eyes, both of them today thank God, followed the blond’s progress across the dining room. He took in the energy of his spine, and the set to his shoulders; the shift of his hips, and the weariness in his steps; the way his hands were tucked into his pockets in nonchalance, and the shift of his eyes as though he expected trouble out of every shadow. Baby’s words from the night before played over in his head again, maybe the cook didn’t know he was nakama. What had the world done to him to make him so solitary? And what kind of First Mate was Zoro that he needed someone else to point that out for him?

Well… time to start fresh! Baby said to apologize. So, dammit, even if Sanji kicked him hard enough to send him over the bar—again—he had to try. He gave a nod that he didn’t even notice and made for the kitchen, intent on apologizing and starting over!

His steps slowed as he actually reached the kitchen though. He didn’t want to intrude, and he didn’t want to push his way in like he had yesterday. So it was slowly that he approached the counter and leaned in over it.

"Oi, cook, got a sec?"

"That depends, shithead, what do you want?" The blond’s tone was almost lazy, and there was a different inflection in the insult than normal.

He crossed the kitchen, carrying a bowl of washed greens from the sink, and reached for the knife that wasn’t there. The hesitation over the spot was only noticeable because of how intently the bouncer had been watching his mannerisms lately. It actually seemed a little longer than it had been before, almost as though he was paying homage to it where he had ignored the space before. But he moved on to spin the santoku from two spots up in his palm to settle it and began chopping through the leaves with the same effeciency he always had.

"I wanna say I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being an asshole yesterday an' getting up in your face. And I'm sorry for actually goading you into a fight when we first met. It wasn't fair of me, and no better than harassment. I'm really, really sorry for being a bastard."

The knife stilled, though Sanji didn't turn to look at him. After a moment of consideration, he spoke in even, controlled measures. "Didn't think you were capable of actually saying something to me without being an asshole. So, thanks for that, I guess. This is probably the part where I apologize for
breaking your head too." The knife started back up again, harder and faster than before, "But I'm not ready to do that. Suffice you got off easy for it, and I'll gladly wipe the floor with you again if I need to make the lesson stick. So... why?"

Zoro blinked, head tilting to the side. "Why... what?"

"Why apologize? Why bother? What does it matter?" Sanji clenched his jaw, why did the words not want to come out right when he was himself!

"Because I'm an ass and you're nakama and it matters when you're an ass to your crewmates," the Marimo replied, voice level and serious and calm. "And you are. Nakama that is. Ask any of the other crew, you're part of the family. You deserve an apology."

A subtle tremor travelled down his spine, the bouncer's words echoing the sentiments he'd voiced the night before, and settled in a pit in his stomach that spewed venom into his mind flavored in doubt. He didn't mean for it to come out through his lips, but he couldn't control it.

"If this is some ploy to get me to tell you what I wouldn't answer yesterday..."

"No! No, no I promise, that's not, no." Zoro held up both hands in a gesture of denial. "No, that's not why. I won't ask again... or at least not like that. And I won't—well I'll try not to be an asshole again. Can't actually promise that," he said a little sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Heh. The day you aren't an asshole I'll blunt my knives." Sanji snorted. "I think you might spontaneously combust if you were actually nice for a change."

The bouncer laughed with him, eased for a moment, and gave into ribbing him back, lightly, "What can I say, it's my natural setting! And makes it easier to intimidate other assholes to toss 'em out of the bar."

"Yeah, yeah, your favorite part." The cook spoke without thinking, moving on to spreading the greens over several plates.

"Yep. Best job in th'world," Zoro replied as he moved away from the bar to see what Usopp and Franky needed hauled. He'd apologized... now to back off. Pushing for more than Sanji was willing to give was stupid and reckless.

It was several hours before the cook emerged from the kitchen again after dinner. Since the meal was more sedate without the captain around to harass everyone for food, it was usually a quiet affair, and today's was no different in spite of the announcement that Team Rubberman would be taking a break before the semi-final. It meant more work before the bar opened though, cleaning up things that weren't put away quite as inconspicuously as they should have been. All of the cables needed to be re-wrapped and stored, the big rental TV needed to be secured where a rambunctious twenty-two-year-old wouldn't damage it, the tables all needed a good scrubbing and several were missing screws, and that was on top of Franky needing to re-build the dishmachine so they could have a fully functional kitchen come opening time. Thus, the green-haired bouncer was pulled in a million directions, all innocuous by themselves, but the tilt to the manager's lips whenever she had a new job for him sent the message loud and clear: 'you fucked up, and you're paying for it."

He bared his teeth from time to time, but went where he was called and hauled, screwed in, lifted, positioned, held, and overall did as he was bid to by their tech genius and resident inventor, doing his best to get the place ship shape by opening.

And all the time the forehead furrow got deeper as his temples throbbed.
The ingenuity of the Sunny's crew had the place set to go with an hour to spare, and what did the would-be musicians in their group think was the best use of that extra time? An impromptu jam session with full amplifiers under the guise of testing the sound system to make sure it was wired up correctly. It meant Chopper on the drums, Brook playing with effects on his keys, Usopp jamming out with his bass, and Franky rounding it out with a screaming guitar solo.

Not in any way conducive to avoiding headaches.

Nami was hidden away in her office with Robin, and predictably when Sanji did show his face again, it was to make a beeline for the tiny sound-proofed sanctuary. Zoro didn't even pay attention to it, too focused on trying to sleep away the pain before the doors opened to the screaming mob that was sure to be clamoring for information about when Luffy was arriving—not until Thursday, but still. So, it caught him unawares when a foot nudged his knee.

"Oi, Marimo."

His eye peeked open, blearily taking in the cook’s anticipatory attitude.

"If Franky busted the strings on his guitar again I am not getting him a new set," he grumbled, thinking back to his own unused acoustic.

He probably should bring that back in one of these first days. Didn't the bitchy blond still owe him strings? Or something. But not today, today hurt.

"Right... I'll be sure to it write on my shoe so he'll get the message when I kick his metal head in. Here."

The cook held out a tray. On it was a highball glass filled with an almost mint green something blended. It smelled roughly citrus, but also unidentifiable, and as soon as Zoro had taken it, Sanji cleared his throat and made to walk off.

Zoro had already taken a sip or two- Sanji was like magic about making sure nobody got dehydrated, but he was barely three sips in when he realized—

"My headache! It's gone!"

"Yeah. Well. You needed it."

Dark green eyes narrowed slightly, another puzzle appearing alongside the others. How had the cook known? Not even Chopper knew about his chronic headaches. If the little doctor-to-be did, he'd hover over him. Actually, even Law didn't know just how frequent they were so... how did...?

The blond was fiddling with his lighter—a slender gold thing with an embossed design on it. He waited a second more before actually tucking the tray behind the bar, and heading outside for a pre-shift smoke, the pack already in his hand where Zoro could read the label—Death.

Zoro blinked a little. He could have sworn he'd seen that lighter design before... and the cigarettes... that wasn't a popular brand in this city. It was on the river, though, so it wasn't that unusual to see it around. Still... one more little thing to be filed away in his growing list of puzzle pieces as he leaned against the wall to continue sipping on his drink with a blissful smile of relief.

Over the next several days something odd happened with the punchy blond. Once Zoro could write off as a response to the apology, but when the end of the night came with another of those headache cures, then Tuesday came with three—one pre-shift, one mid-shift, and one after closing—and then Wednesday came with four...? The bouncer just didn’t get it.
Granted, he’d needed it each time the mysterious drink appeared nearby, especially Wednesday as the tension for the Rubberman’s triumphant return grew, but it didn’t make much sense. Part of Zoro wanted to believe that it was the cook accepting that he was nakama and therefore wanted to make for having been reclusive before. But that didn’t make much sense either, as Koala and the others around town still hadn’t seen him out and about and he continued to disappear immediately after their shift was over. More often than not over the course of those three days Zoro found himself ranting to Baby about how frustrating it was watching the cook dance on the line of acceptance.

She was quick to remind him of what they’d talked about in his apartment; how Sanji obviously had trust issues, and if he really was being abused the way Zoro thought he was, then it probably went against his abuser’s rules to be sociable. They didn’t stay on that topic long because they both knew how frustrated it made the bouncer to talk about. So, they strayed to other things, namely the way a certain green-haired man was beginning to find himself thinking about a certain kick-ass woman most of the time now. He didn’t tell her he’d jacked off twice more to thoughts of her, or that when he had, she kept getting mixed up in his head with the very same damnable cook who was the source of all of his other frustrations.

The first bit he was sure was out of line for how long they’d known each other, and the second… well, everything about the cook was irritating in a way that reminded him of the burn in his limbs after he broke one of his personal records. Jelly-jointed and aching, hard to handle and yet somehow comforting. He couldn’t put his finger on it. There was something instinctive in how he felt about the cook. The same way he knew the pain of working through the burn meant he would be stronger for it, he knew that enduring—and answering—the cook’s challenge meant whatever it was that was being forged between them would be stronger for it.

And like that it contented him.

Though he wouldn’t admit, even to Baby, that it had taken intense rounds of katas with all three of his remaining swords for the emotion to solidify itself in his mind, and when Thursday began, with a screaming mob outside the Sunny, Zoro found himself in an odd state of limbo where the cook was concerned. Wanting to get closer in a way he could only compare to the magnetism of Baby, and yet, tempered like folded steel, willing to let the cook set the terms of how that happened. It made the pre-shift rush, with all of the compounded chaos of Luffy’s return, pass without a headache for once.

As such he was actually able to enjoy the drink Sanji brought to him while he overlooked the band his captain had brought home with him.

Nami scowled at Luffy, “Where did you even pick up these guys?”

“While we were in Sabaody on Monday.”

He had his ‘trust me’ face on, but it did little to soothe the manager’s nerves. Her sharp brown eyes cut to the stage again, uncertainty plain in the crease between her brows. In short… they looked like they would be more at home on a farm than the Thousand Sunny. The shorter of the two, blond and sleepy blue eyes, wore cut off jeans, a flannel shirt over a tee, and sandals similar to Luffy’s. The taller, though only by a few inches, actually sported a pompadour. Nami really had to wonder if the guy hadn’t gotten the message about how out of style that was… The rest of his clothes were at least a little better, dark grey waistcoat over white dress shirt and fitted slacks. But the pocket watch and cowboy boots sort of ruined the effect. She had to give them that they didn’t look dirty or mussed, even if they were a little worn.

Of course, she also wasn’t sure how they, and their four back-up guys, were going to perform without anything but a drumset.
She shook her head again, feeling like she’d been doing that since they showed up, and made her way to the bar. “Sanji hun, gimme something for my headache, please?”

“Of course, Ms. Nami~!” came the cook’s response, nearly sung from beyond the open door to the kitchen.

They had a fair crowd, not enough to warrant him being out at the bar the entire time, which meant that by the end of the night, the ones who stuck around for the whole show would be treated to whatever it was he was playing with to keep himself busy. No one ever knew what exactly he had planned, but it was guaranteed to be delicious!

Zoro was on the door, Franky next to the stage, for a two-point security to both ensure swift disposal of troublemakers and to protect people out just to have a good time. Brook had the sound booth, Chopper was bussing tables, Usopp on lights, and circling among the guests Robin and Sabo were silent but ever present. The manager noted that Ace was in his favorite corner, doodling on his Cintiq balanced on his knees, clearly more comfortable with it now than he had been before the tour. Nami figured that whatever Law had told him while they were gone had soothed his nerves.

All in all, except for the band, the redhead was quite pleased with how the night was going so far.

Sanji came around the corner with her drink just as Usopp cut the lights and the shorter guy stepped up to the microphone.

“Yoi! Hey there! I’m Marco. This here’s my partner, Thatch, and we’re Phoenix Free.”

The taller, Thatch, smiled warmly at the crowd, “Thanks for havin’ us, y’all. We’ve got Jozu on drums, and Haruta, Vista, and Doma givin’ us a hand on vocals.”

Just hearing them talk was enough to get everyone’s attention. From where she sat at the bar, Nami watched the whole dive sit up and look at the stage. The soft drawling accent they both carried betrayed their origins; nobody north of Sabaody spoke like that. From the thickness of Thatch’s, Nami had been around Robin enough to be willing to bet he’d come from the mouth of South Blue. And Nami never placed a bet she wouldn’t win.

Marco counted them in with a nod of his head, but Thatch sang the first line with a three-part harmonic chord supporting him.

“Love is a burnin’ thing.”

In perfect time, Marco supplied the second, deep and soulful, “And it makes a fiery ring.”

“And bound by wild desire. I fell into a ring of fire.” After the almost baritone pitch of his first line, when Thatch sang again, it raised quite a few eyebrows because of the clarity with which he jumped octaves.

They all trailed off for a moment, holding the tension of that first four-line stanza, and with only a glance from Marco, the drummer rounded the tom-toms to pick up a steady rhythm that had most people tapping their toes. It was a pleasant surprise when the five guys singing sounded like they had guitars using only their voices.

“I fell into a burnin’ ring of fire. I went down, down, down and the flames went higher,” Thatch took lead, but the audience could hear Marco’s rich sound supporting the three higher guys, “and it burns, burns, burns. The ring of fire; the ring of fire.”

Then they switched, giving a glance between them that seemed to suggest they were singing about
each other as Marco took lead.

“The taste of love is sweet when hearts like ours meet. And I fell for you like a child, oh, but the fire went wild.”

The next chorus, Nami didn’t even hear! Her whole body was still stuck on that final note of the first verse. She swore the stool beneath her vibrated when Marco dropped his voice into his chest. She clutched her drink and took a moment to glance around, unconsciously licking her lips. Ace had stopped drawing, Robin was frozen between the tables, most of the guests had utterly locked their attention on the stage, and Sanji…?

The cook was stock still behind the bar, a shot glass in his hand, blinking rapidly.

So much for doubts about whether this band was worth the risk! Who cared if they were country styled!? They even had Zoro’s attention! Not that the green-haired bouncer wasn’t always paying attention, or that he didn’t care about music, but because of his focus on the guests, he usually didn’t have time to actually give an ear to the acts playing on their stage. But this…? Nami could see it had rocked literally everyone in the bar except Luffy, and she was pretty sure that was only because the bouncy bar owner knew what to expect.

Pulled by strings that were beyond his control, Zoro made his way over to the bar. He didn’t know why, but he rarely questioned such things. If his instincts told him to do something, he did it. So, by the time Thatch took over the lead for the next verse, he was standing next to the bar completely, somehow just beside where the touchy blond was attempting to fill drink orders. He wasn’t even aware of their proximity until someone jostled him from behind and all that filled his line of sight was deep, crystal clear, oceanic blue.

“Yeah, love is a burnin’ thing, and it makes a fiery ring. Bound by wild desire, I fell into a ring of fire.”

Behind him, the band was still singing, but Zoro’s head was filled with the thought, ‘no, not fire, deep, deep sea’. His mouth was dry, and his heart pounded in his chest, his hands gripping the bar. It took him a couple of seconds to realize Sanji was shaking his head, eyes wide, and looking just as spooked as Zoro felt. Something clicked into place just then. Something that if he prodded at it made sense. Something that made him reach his hand out to touch the volatile cook even as the other was pulling away. He didn’t know when he moved around the end of the bar, but when the last chorus filtered out through the speakers, and Thatch gave the last note in a literally floor shaking bass tone, that same something had the bouncer stumble forward, trying to catch the cook…

Only to get the kitchen door slammed in his face!

Behind that door, Sanji panted, his breath completely gone. He was clutching a tray to his chest, leaning against the entrance with his feet planted to either side of the frame, praying it was enough to keep the marimo from following him.

Damnit! Why the fuck did it have to have been a love song?!

No no no no! He shook his head. This couldn’t be happening! He was happy with Law! That Person hadn’t bothered him in weeks! Not since before the tour!

But a voice in the back of his head popped up asking why, if he was so happy with Law, he still had to get soy and almond milk for his mochas? Why did trips to the bathroom after seeing the sexy doctor often end with him purging like he was still thirteen and trying to physically erase That Night from his system? Why did every time the sweet man touch him did Sanji turn it into something
sexual just to get them to stop touching!?

And why did he keep seeing Zoro on the side as Baby?

He shuddered, knowing too well the answer to all of those questions, but not wanting to admit it, even within the privacy of his own mind.

So, the voice challenged him in another direction. It pointed out that every time he was anywhere near the mossheaded bouncer he couldn’t keep from getting into his personal space. It wasn’t always Zoro showing up where Sanji didn’t want him. No, more often than not, Sanji was the one initiating contact between them! He threw the first kicks, pushed him, shoved him, poked him. They even came nose to nose a couple of times.

Why was that okay, and Law’s touches were not?

And with a sinking feeling in his gut, Sanji knew it had nothing to do with one being part of a fight and the other being part of a date. Somehow over the three weeks he’d been working at the Sunny and gotten to know the Marimo, as both himself and as Baby, he’d gotten comfortable with Zoro in his space, touching him. When the fuck had that happened?!

Noise from beyond the kitchen caught his attention, and the cook picked himself up off of the ground. When he’d sunk to his rear he didn’t know, and he didn’t focus on it, shoving the entire issue aside when he realized the mosshead was not, in fact, on the other side of the door. He felt a bit like a kid caught with the cookie jar as he poked his nose out into the bar proper again.

Nami was behind the bar, filling a handful of beer mugs like a champ, the patrons all on their feet and screaming for encores. Apparently Phoenix Free was a huge hit, with their unique almost accapella, country style and those floor shaking deep voices the leads both had, and during his freak-out, Sanji had missed several songs.

“Oh, Ms. Nami, I am so sorry!” The cook nearly fell over himself to cross the distance between them.

She waved him off though, grinning like crazy, and slid the mugs down the bar to Sabo, who caught them one right after the other to hold above his head. He disappeared into the crowd, rocking out to the still playing band. It was something about champagne taste, or something? Sanji didn’t quite pay attention to it, too focused on making up for being absent in the middle of his shift.

Nami caught his arm to pull him down so she didn’t have to shout, much, “Zoro said you were having trouble, are you okay?”

“Ms. Nami is so sweet when she cares about her employees~!” He crowed in return, dancing away from both the manager and the topic without actually answering.

Ace quipped from his corner of the bar with a laugh, “He’s noodling like an idiot, he’s fine.”

“I guess so. Keep an eye on him.”

“Don’t even have to tell me twice.”

The freckled artist winked, and Nami moved off into the crowd to find Luffy. Again.

Sanji didn’t see Zoro for the rest of his shift, but if he was truly honest, he couldn’t see much of anyone except Sabo, Robin, and Nami through the ecstatic crowd of patrons. Somewhere in the middle of the night the house size doubled, through people’s texting others to come see the band,
Sanji assumed, and by three a.m. the extremely talented guys had sung themselves exhausted. They performed an encore of their first song twice, once when the house doubled, and then again at the end as their last number.

To the roar of cheering, Marco held up a hand for silence. It took a bit to get them to calm down, but when they had, he grinned at them, “Well, y’all have been right friendly, yo! But we gotta close it up.”

“Think these nice bar folks’d like to go home, don’tcha think?” Thatch added, smirking.

Both sounded a tiny bit hoarse, but they laughed as the crowd protested their words. Trying to regain control of the noise level got them nowhere, so Nami snuck her way around the edge to hop up on stage. She grabbed a third mic from Usopp in the wings, and strut out to center stage, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Well, now,” her voice boomed out over the crowd, “that was really something, eh guys?”

Another roar of approval answered her.

“Yeah!! Yeah!” She nodded, clapping for them, then she spoke again, cutting through the din, “But they’re right. We gotta close up. Hey hey hey! I don’t want to! It’s the law! I gotta let my boys sleep sometime!” She gave a merry laugh like she’d work them around the clock if she could. “Right, I know, but hey! If you guys want a recording of these guys singing, you all just give your names and email addresses to Robin or Sabo. We’ll hook you up! Who’s always got the best music in the Blues?!”

She held the mic out to the crowd, and in one voice, almost deafening, the response back rattled the bottles on the top shelf behind the bar, “THOUSAND SUNNY!!”

“That’s right!!! NOW! Go on, you lazy louts!! Git goin’!” Nami laughed again, winking at the patrons.

Then Brook cut the sound, and Usopp brought the house lights back up, dimming the stage.

People milled about, mostly hoping to snag one of the wait staff to give them their information. Sanji pulled a blank order pad from under the bar and sent it down the folks sitting on the stools to give the other two a hand, and Ace snuck through the fringes collecting napkins with email addresses on them. Then slowly, but surely, people started to trickle out into the early morning. After about an hour, the Sunny was empty and Nami had a list of would be patrons thick enough to need both hands to hold them all.

“That is sure nice of you, yo.” Marco croaked, nursing a cup of tea.

Thatch nodded, sipping his own, while the drummer and the others packed up the few instruments they had brought with them. The three of them—Thatch, Marco, and Nami—were clustered at the edge of the stage, and the manager was drawing up a quick contract to split the sales of the CD recording from that night’s performance. Chopper and Usopp were mixing it while they talked, their heads bent over the mixing board with heavy headphones on, isolating them from the rest of the bar.

Ace was surreptitiously hanging back, Luffy clinging to him, and Sabo was nearby wrapping silverware for tomorrow. Clearly the artist wanted to go talk to the musicians, but either didn’t have the guts to actually get up and do it, or Luffy and Sabo weren’t letting him.

If Sanji had to guess, he’d have wagered it was a bit of both. He couldn’t blame Ace. The singers were damn sexy! And those voices!! Even speaking, he could feel the resonance under his feet. And
that was after an entire night of performing!!

Then all at once, out of nowhere, Robin stalked across the dining room, tray under her arm and a storm on her face.

“Ms. Robi—” was all the further Sanji could get before the Asian woman slammed the tray on the bar and wheeled on her boyfriend, her sharp nail jabbing him in the chest.

“I won’t have you jealous of my enjoyment of things, Francis!”

“Oi! Not the full name!” Franky scowled, “And I’m not jealous! I just made a comment about it!”

“You asked if I wanted them to sing into my snatch! That is NOT just a comment! And I’ll call you what I think you deserve!!”

“You looked like you wanted ‘em to!” The blue haired man spread his hands, palms up in defense.

Robin nearly smacked him when she threw her arms open wide, “This is not the place to talk about such things! I enjoyed the music! You cannot blame me!!”

“I DON’T!!”

“Then don’t sound like you do!!”

“I…” The second he hesitated the entire bar winced, knowing he’d just hung himself.

“Uh huh. That’s what I thought. You can’t stand it, can you? I have eyes, Franky. I have ears! I can hear and see and enjoy what is around me! That doesn’t mean I’m going to just run off with the first sex-on-legs that sings his way into my ear!” Robin huffed, arms crossed over her chest.

Sanji glanced at the stage, where the others were watching the altercation. Marco and Thatch exchanged a look, both blushing brightly, and Nami laughed lightly. Even Chopper and Usopp had their headphones off now. In fact, all other movement had stopped around the bar, even the other band members, in spite of not actually being involved.

When Franky continued to sputter, trying to find something to defend himself with, Robin sniffed, turning on her heel to walk away again, clearly done with the conversation now that she’d made her point. But the big bouncer caught her arm. She spun, eyes hard, and glaring at his hand as though it was the filthiest thing she’d ever seen. If he’d looked at all like he was going to hurt her, Sanji would have been over the bar with a heel to his face, but for once, he sided with Franky.

“Look, babe,” he let her go, running a hand through his hair, “I’m a pervert, you know that! My mind’s in the gutter all the time. I don’t think I ever NOT think about sex.”

The quirk of her eyebrow said get on with it, so Franky gave a nervous laugh at himself.

“Uhh, I mean, I look. I can see ‘em, but babe… Bobby… Robin, I don’t think about anybody but you! You snuck yourself into my head that first time I saw you, and damnit if you didn’t take up house there. I didn’t say what I said to make you mad! Honest Abe I didn’t!”

He risked taking her hand in both of his, kissing the back of it, and when she didn’t immediately pull away, he stepped closer so he could run his thumb over her cheek.

“That song got me thinkin’ is what I was tryin’ to say.”

She snorted at him, making him blush, and the rest of the bar snickered, knowing exactly what he’d
been thinking, but he shook them off, ignoring the urge to give into the joke and pressing forward with something he’d obviously been trying to figure out how to say before.

“It got me thinkin’ about you,” more snickers, “about me,” yet more, “about us.” Still more had him snapping his head up at them, “Would you guys shuddap! Jesus! And I’m the pervert.”

Then he turned back to Robin, taking both of her hands in his. He kissed both sets of knuckles.

“Robin, you consumed me. Encircled me in these amazing hands, and pulled me down, and all it’s done is make me more and more crazy about you.”

Her cheeks lit up as something dawned in her eyes, and silently, Sanji snuck off to the kitchen faster than he ever moved before. The last thing he wanted to do was miss the next line. The rest of the bar seemed to sense it too because Zoro stood up from where he was leaning against the door to the back lot, alert and attentive; Ace and Luffy stopped horsing around; Nami, Usopp, and Chopper leaned in unconsciously; Brook nudged Sabo and the blond grinned, unable to contain it.

And that’s when Franky dropped to one knee, fishing in his jeans pocket for something.

“I’ve been carrying this around ever since Luffy took off for his tour, but I ain’t found a time to give it to you, or how to bring it up.” He looked up into her eyes, misty-eyed—the both of them, “Bobby, Robin-babe, would you marry me?”

The ring was silver, or platinum, with a deep amethyst marquise-cut silhouette. It had a tiny bit of pocket lint on it, which Franky pulled off frantically as soon as he noticed it. The bouncer was shaking, eyes searching Robin’s expression, and the rest of the crew (plus band) leaned in waiting for her answer. Sanji even had his thumb on the cork of the bottle he’d snagged because what other answer could she have?!

Still, the dark-haired woman drew herself up, looking down at him, seeming to judge his sincerity. Her back was straight, her pose relaxed. She even felt a little distant from the cook’s perspective, and it clearly had an effect on her boyfriend.

“I… I know it’s not a diamond, but I thought you’d… seeing as you’re more than… I can return it! If you don’t like it! It’s not hard, I can just…”

He trailed off when she put her finger over his lips.

Then she melted, a soft smile on her lips. “It’s beautiful, Franky.”

“So…?” He pressed, unable to relax until he heard it for sure.

“So, yes.”

“Really?!”

“Yes, really.”

She laughed as he surged to his feet, sweeping her up in his arms to kiss her soundly, spinning her around in circles while the whole of the Sunny cheered. Sanji popped the cork of the champagne, the bubbly alcohol spilling over his hand when he poured it into the waiting glasses he had lined up behind the bar; enough for everybody.

There was a small fumble with the ring before Franky was coordinated enough to get it on her finger, and of course, it fit perfectly.
The blue haired bouncer was openly crying with joy and relief, refusing to let her go, even when Usopp lifted his champagne glass and shouted a toast to the newly engaged couple. Robin took his face in her hands and claimed his mouth for a breath-taking kiss at the top of the toast, and nobody noticed the glance a certain other bouncer gave the cook over the rim of his glass.

Chapter End Notes

Song: Ring of Fire by Johnny Cash as covered by Home Free ((on which the band is based... shamelessly lol))
Because he’d agreed to work Thursday, because Luffy and the other D boys had come home that day, because Sanji was a sucker for someone who needed him, and because for some unknown reason the Sunny was closed tonight, the cook found himself with a unicorn opportunity.

He had a Friday off. And not just any Friday. No. Tonight was Halloween!!

He couldn’t remember the last time he had a Friday off, let alone a major commercial holiday. Not while working a full time job anyway. It just wasn’t something that happened after reaching his level of skill! Fridays were Rush Nights. No matter where he worked, the public that worked the stereotypical nine to five work week swarmed to their closest eateries. Restaurants saw an uptick of six or seven hundred customers compared to the rest of the week, and bars could bank their entire week on just the patronage from an ordinary Friday night. He couldn’t even imagine what kind of tips other places were going to get this particular Friday night!

As such, members of the service industry—like cooks and wait staff—both loved and hated it. Big crowds meant high tips, but big crowds also meant lots of work. Often more than any of the other six nights of the week combined. And they also meant those who were good at their jobs, like Sanji, never got to take them off without a significantly valid reason.

Thus, having the time to himself on a day that his internal clock said was going to be busy as hell was rather jarring. Added on top of that was that he had an appointment with Dr. Kaya as well. Normally he saw her on Thursdays, but that had to be changed to handle Luffy coming home too. So he woke up Friday morning with a screaming headache from the way his mind kept pulling him in two directions at the same time.

It was four o’clock when he arrived at his psychiatrist’s office, tired, dressed down for the lack of energy he’d been fighting all afternoon, and almost wishing he could just get back on the train and go home. But he wouldn’t be where he was, as successful as he was, if not for the sweet, gentle doctor. He wasn’t about to waste her time just because he was having an off day.

“Kaya, my sweet, I have to apologize for the truly hideous state of my clothing today. My head
insists that it’s Thursday because I am here in your stunning presence, but my body is demanding that it is Friday and I should be running around like a chicken with my head cut off, if you’ll pardon the imagery.” He flopped onto her couch.

It wasn’t anything stereotypical, just a normal couch, slightly beat up in all the right ways, and extremely comfortable. Like it had just stepped out of someone’s living room. And it had the best pillows! He grabbed one, holding it to his chest, while others cradled his head and his knees.

Though the petite doctor hadn’t said anything yet, Sanji spoke again, “I think today is a lying down day. Sitting up takes effort I don’t think I have at the moment. Is that alright?”

“What ever you need, Sanji hun. You know my office is a safe space.”

Pained blue eyes looked up at the platinum blond hair, done up in a smart bun, and he frowned a little, “I hope you don’t hide that gorgeous coiffure when you’re out with your fiancé, Ms. Kaya. If he’s half the man you deserve he should appreciate just how singularly beautiful you are, and serve to demonstrate it to you as often as he possibly can.”

Though there was a touch of pink on her cheeks, the psychologist crossed her ankles and laid her notebook on her lap, “I’ll be sure to tell him when I see him next. But I wonder, Sanji, low spoons and high compliments, has something happened you are reluctant to tell me?”

He deflated with a heavy sigh. “I haven’t heard from That Person in a while. Almost two weeks.”

Kaya made a note on her paper when his arm was over his eyes. “I thought you were moving on? Dating Law?”

“I am! But I just… can’t. He’s just always been—“

“Names, Sanji.” Her reminder was gentle.

“Ghin.” He paused, almost challenging. “Ghin has always been there. Even when I had flings before he was always there, in the background, waiting to show up whenever he wanted.”

“Isn’t that why we sat down and wrote him that letter about giving you space and understanding that you are a free man now?” She intentionally stressed the word so that he could hear it. “Thus, wouldn’t less contact with Mr. Ghin be desirable to your plans of coming into yourself as a man?”

“AUGH! I KNOW!”

“Temper.”

Sanji dragged both hands over his face, glad that he’d foregone both contacts and goatee today. “I know. Sorry. I know.” He peered up at her through his fingers, “But when I haven’t heard from him my anxiety starts climbing. I start jumping at shadows and needing to take more of the Ativan than normal.”

Kaya didn’t say anything, though he knew she was taking notes about it. He knew she had to, but he wished she didn’t. He didn’t like having it all written down where he couldn’t take it back. So, he pulled another of the pillows down so he didn’t have to look at her. They hadn’t even been talking long, and he already felt cracked open, his defensive flirting held back so that he couldn’t use it to hide his issues.

He was quiet for a while, then changed topics, “I broke the dishwasher at work the other day.”
“Oh?”

“Yeah. I had a panic attack at the Sunny. Flipped out completely. Couldn’t even think to take anything before I…” Fuck admitting he’d relapsed was hard. “I needed something to keep the Marim —“

“Names.”

“…To keep Zoro out of the kitchen, so I lashed out and flung the dishwasher against the door…” He swallowed hard. “Then I threw up in the sink. Again.”

“You’ve mentioned purging several times between last session and this one. Do you think there’s some specific cause? Is your self-image suffering?”

Immediately his mind snapped to That Person—fuck her and her fucking names, he wasn’t using it in his head—and having to go around town dressed as Baby. But that brought up the time he’d spent with Zoro as Baby and the fact that he hadn’t had any purging issues then.

So he shook his head. “No. I’m still as confident as ever.”

“Have you thought about a possible viral cause? Or an infection? Oftentimes periods of high stress can leave the body open to opportunistic bacteria.”

“I don’t have any other symptoms. No, I don’t know what it is, but I’m not back sliding into…”

“Say it, Sanji.” Kaya prompted.

“Do I have to?”

“It’s part of the recovery process, acknowledging past problems as being the things they were so that we recognize them in the future should they return.” Her tone was gentle, but steady, letting him know that she really wouldn’t let him back down from this.

“I am not falling back into deliberate purging.” He hedged, feeling her disapproval, but he didn’t change his wording or look at her. “I know I’ve been stressed but I haven’t been binging. Small bites of things throughout the day to keep my system from thinking I’ve eaten too much, and taking my Zofran as I need it.”

“How often has that been lately?”

He could hear her clicking her pen, and sighed, “It had been only once every so often, like… less than once a week. Maybe even only two or three times in the last month.”

“But…?”

“But…” He pulled his legs up and hugged the pillow over his chest, burying his face in the one hiding his eyes. “But this last couple of days it’s been almost every day.”

“Good heavens, Sanji!” Her pen fell out of her hand. “You need to see a doctor about this. If you have a significant infection or something physically wrong with your digestive tract we need to find out sooner rather than later. The longer you wait, the more damage the stomach acid being regurgitated will cause on your esophagus.”

“I know… I just… I don’t want them asking questions about when shark week was or if I missed it, or implying things.”
“Specifics, Sanji.”

“NO! I won’t say it! I’M NOT A WOMAN GOD FUCKING DAMN IT, I’M A MAN AND I SHOULDN’T EVEN HAVE A PERIOD!!” He threw the pillow in his hands across the room and it knocked over a vase of flowers. He stared at it, sitting up after the motion, and then buried his face against his knees. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have… It’s not your… I’m sorry. I can’t make it… I just want to stop. Stop hurting. Stop running. Stop chasing me. Just stop! I can’t do this. I can’t. I try and I try and I just don’t feel it. I don’t think I’m passing as a man and everyone around me can tell I can’t grow facial hair and my voice is too high and the only one who actually believes me in the stupid fucking gorgeous Marimo asshole that thinks I’m cute as hell when he sees me as a woman!”

Oops! He hadn’t meant to let that slip out.

To her credit, Kaya didn’t sound judgemental or even upset, merely curious. “You’ve been dressing as a woman again?”

Sanji couldn’t speak; his heart felt like it was caught in his throat. So he nodded.

Kaya waited for him.

It took him close to five minutes of breathing and just existing before he could talk again, and even then, he felt himself shaking with the effort. “I’ve been... shopping, going out to eat, stuff like that dressed up as Bab—Sam—a woman.” He peeked at her, and felt his glasses push into his nose, “I’ve been... Baby. It… It really isn’t as bad as it used to be. I’ve had fun. Gone out to eat and haven’t purged at all afterwards! Too busy laughing and enjoying myself, I guess.” He paused again. “But… then when I go to work I’m me. Sanji. And he’s there and he doesn’t know it’s me, and he doesn’t know he’s talking to me after work too. And he just… how can anybody be so stupid!? How can he not tell I’m Baby!?”

“Who, Sanji?”

“Zoro!”

“Zoro?” The sound of credulation in her voice had the cook looking up at his doctor, but if she’d been displaying shock she’d been able to school her expression into something more neutral before his got his glasses clear. “Are you dating him?”

“No. Yes? Maybe. I don’t know. We’ve hung out a few times. We talk on Skype. I ran into him once when I went out to Caroline’s to get a new binder.” He didn’t mention he’d ordered an entire wardrobe or why he’d needed to. “And he was sweet, and kind, and funny, and honest, and open, and the shit he did to Kid when the punk tried to hit on me… it was priceless!”

“I take it you were dressed as Baby?”

“Yes. So, we exchanged Skype names. And after that we just started talking. And it’s easy! It’s so easy to talk to him as Baby.” The lanky sunny blond flopped back onto the couch again, this time his hands played with the buttons of his shirt over his stomach and his eyes were far away beyond the ceiling. His voice took on a dreamy, wistful tone. “I’m so much closer to him as Baby. He has a sister. He was in foster care most of his life. His first foster sister died when he was little. He’s never been able to tell where he’s going except for the Sunny and the dojo. Like I’ve seen him wander off when his target was literally right in front of him. He’s that bad at finding shit. But… it doesn’t matter how lost he is in the city, he always somehow… finds me. All I have to do is snapchat him a pic of me somewhere in the city and he finds me.” He grew melancholy, blinking a few tears from the corner of his eye, “But he likes Baby. He hates me. I know he does.”
“Hm?”

“He got all up in my face last night with this weird look in his eye like he either wanted to throw me to the ground or punch me in the mouth. I didn’t stick around to find out which. When he moved, I bolted. Otherwise I think I might have kissed him.” Sanji sighed heavily. “And I don’t know what to do about Law either.”

Kaya opened her mouth to say something, but the cook’s train of thought had him. It was like that outburst had unstoppered a dam. So she merely put her pen back down and smiled a little, listening.

“I mean, he’s got that whole Polyamory thing I told you about a couple weeks ago, where he’s basically fucking all of Team Rubberman! And I still don’t know how the fuck I feel about that. Especially cuz I know what that necklace means, thank you very much, and I have no desire to be exposed to it. I like Luffy, don’t get me wrong, and I’m sure it’s not any more his fault for being sick than it is mine for my issues, but I wouldn’t want to sleep with the guy! I’m sure he’s as safe as he can be, but I just don’t want to take that risk, you know? I’ve got enough going on with me already, I don’t need to add HIV on top of it.”

“Then perhaps you should talk to Law about your feelings? If sharing bothers you this badly, then you need to tell him.”

“Yeah.” Sanji fell quiet, drained and tired from all the talking, and he let himself drift, listening to the sounds of her office.

Somebody a couple of doors down was playing sitar music that lulled him into a near meditative doze until Kaya clicked her pen loudly. The cook startled, having closed his eyes at some point, and he blinked up at her blearily.

“Time’s almost up for this week.” She said with a small note of apology. “I want you to take the next week and explore why you’ve decided to go back to dressing as Baby. Is it because Ghin has been out of contact? Is it because you’re feeling insecure in your masculine appearance? Or are you subconsciously looking for something maybe not quite so cut and dry as you first thought? Also, get your stomach issue checked out. I want to know what’s going on down there, and if we need to adjust your meds to compensate for it. Alright?”

She stood, which prompted him to get up as well.

“Thank you, Ms. Kaya. I’ll do what I can.” He shook her hand, no frills, no flirting, no fawning, just a simple handshake.

She gave him a nod, “Take care, Sanji, and remember if you need me before next Thursday don’t hesitate to email me.”

“I will. I promise.”

Then, even though he wasn’t really all that hungry, he made his way to the little bakery around the corner from her office. They had free wifi and decent bagels. So getting a plain one without trimmings, and a cup of hot tea and lemon, Sanji established himself in a back corner of the tiny dining room to pull up Skype on his phone. Maybe Law or Ace would be online…

--ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] began skyping BabyLoveCook [BLC] at 14:13--

TSW: Baby I need your advice
TSW: I know you're not on right now
TSW: But I need you to help me when you do get on
TSW: You said you had something to do today but I think I'm in trouble
TSW: The Thunderbolt.
TSW: It's hit.
TSW: There was this band at the Sunny last night and they were singing Ring of Fire and I felt myself light on fire and fall into an ocean at the same time and if this isn't love I don't know what is
TSW: And I'm scared Baby
TSW: I think I'm fucked
TSW: It's Sanji
TSW: It's Sanji and he saw it he saw the look on my face
TSW: And he bolted
TSW: I don't know if it's because I'm me, or because I'm a guy, or- or what but the HORROR on his face Baby
TSW: Love's hit me hard and fast and he immediately said "NO" the second he realized it
TSW: Slammed the kitchen door in my face and I
TSW: I'm sorry I have to
TSW: I have to run or do katas or shadowfight Kuina
TSW: Or all of them
TSW: I can't think right now
TSW: Message me when you get on please Baby

--ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] ceased skyping BabyLoveCook [BLC] at 15:01--

What?! The cook nearly spat his tea all over his phone, and his insides backflipped. Breathe. Okay, breathe. That was what he needed to do. He needed to relax and just breathe. The idiot Marimo thought he was in love with him. What?! No! He... but... No! It wasn't... Things like that didn't happen to Sanji! He felt a little like he was losing his mind, falling in a million different directions and not really sure where the ground was anymore. Because yeah, okay, he'd come to the point where he could accept that he felt for the bouncer what he did, but Zoro hated him didn't he?! Wasn't it Baby he liked?!! It was Baby he'd kissed!! It was Baby he'd been messaging and hanging out with and what was with that if he was in love with Sanji?! And what about what they'd already built!? Oh God what would he did when he found out Sanji was Baby?!

He inhaled through his teeth a few times, trying to still his shaking fingers so he could type back. It took him another ten minutes before he could come up with something to say.

--BabyLoveCook[BLC] began skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer[TSW] at 17:22--

BLC: hey tigerboy you back yet
TWS: Yeah.
BLC: soooooooo
BLC: sanji huh
TWS: Yes.
TWS: I uh. Calmed down. Sorry for leaving all those rambling messages.
TWS: I would have deleted them but because skype was shut off for about half an hour it wouldn't let me.
BLC: nah its aight was just at a thing or idve answered sooner
TWS: Yeah, you did say you'd be busy. Was youd day alright?
BLC: eh
BLC: rather not talk about it
BLC: one of those things that just doesen't matter how well it goes it still sucks balls to do
BLC: urs
TWS: I went to dhe dojo
TWS: And let my boys basically pound me for am hour
BLC: fun
BLC: soooo im tryin to be all not crazy and shit but
BLC: wheres this new revelation leave us
BLC: i mean i know i didnt dream u not wantin me to leave the other night right
TWS: No no that was definitely a ting
TWS: I just donno
TWS: I really really lije you
TWS: But that was defonately the Thunderbo;t
BLC: tigerboy u sound drunk whats goin on
TWS: I au
TWS: might have some noken finkers
TWS: I tinks
BLC: oh jesus shit have u seen law yet
BLC: r u still @ the dojo
BLC: stay there
TWS: I'm in hte back roim
TWS: And yed the doho
BLC: omw
BLC: well talk more when i get there

--BabyLoveCook [BLC] ceased skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 17:30--

Sanji took a minute and shoved his hands into his hair, not even reading to see if the idiot, stupid, self-sacrificing, meatheaded, senseless, Marimo moron texted back. Then he climbed to his feet, pocketing the rest of his bagel and made a bee-line for Caroline's to borrow a wig.

Twenty minutes later, dressed in a flowy spaghetti strap shirt layered over a long-sleeved tee, a matching pink skirt made of layered frills, black leggings, and a pair of leg warmers to disguise his favorite Converse, Sanji, as Baby, climbed out of the taxi that had brought her down from the strip mall to the dojo. She was still growling under her breath, and chewing on the straw of her caramel mocha, when she stormed up the path to the door.

A bang on the door and she shouted, "JOHNNY, LEMME AT THE BONEHEAD BEFORE I BUST THE DOOR DOWN!"

The door rolled open in slight surprise. "Uh, hi? Which bonehead would you be looking for?"

"Me," chimed a voice from somewhere far back.

"The Marimo. Yeah. Him." She sucked on her latte, hip shifted slightly to right—her left leg loose—and her bangs fell across her right eye.

"In the back," he replied. "He did say someone was coming to pick him up. I didn't expect it to be a real live lady!"

"JOHNNY! NO HITTING ON HER OR I BREAK THE OTHER FOOT!"

The dojo co-owner shifted to hide his left foot from view. "Ah, GOT IT, BIG BROTHER! Uhm, this way, ma'am." He gestured to the side room.

"AS IF I'D LET HIM GET THAT FAR, TIGER-BOY!" She called grinning with a feral edge that was all too familiar for the young man.

Then she made her way into the other room, and looked down at him with barely concealed
amusement.

He currently was holding an ice pack to his broken socket, had three of the fingers on his left hand taped together clumsily, and had the middle finger of his right hand halfway wrapped as he sheepishly looked up at her.

"But it's satisfying to make him cower after breaking almost half my fingers."

"The Hell did he do that for?" She folded her legs under her, and gracefully plopped down in front of him to finish wrapping his right hand. "And it better be a good answer, cuz otherwise I'mma have to beat a boy for wreckin' my man's hands."

"He didn't do it on purpose. I made them both spar with me, and uh. They kind of had to pry the practice sword out of my unconscious fingers. Which apparently woke me up and I punched them both? In places where there're bones I can apparently break my fingers on? I have no memory of this I just remember waking up with my hands hurting like Hell," he admitted, letting her wrap around where the break was—right between base and second knuckle—the place most exposed if he was throwing a punch.

"Dare I ask why you were so out of it? I wasn't gone more than an hour and a half, not including travel time. So, round up, about two hours with the train uptown. Tell me this isn't all over Sanji."

She pulled the tape tight, maybe a little too tight by accident, and switched to the other hand, cutting off the crude dressing he'd tried to put on himself. She was breathing harder than she meant to, and inside her head she had a war going on that translated through her shoulders into her work. If she had to put a name on it, she'd saw she felt raw.

"Mostly. Couldn't get my thoughts in order. Freaking the fuck out. Best way to handle that is usually to have them double team me so I can sort my thoughts a little. Didn't work so good."

She sighed, tucking the tape around to immobilize the ring finger of his left hand between the other two as it was the worst off. "So... talk to me, I guess? Get them out in the open. If fighting them out didn't work, maybe talking will."

He rolled his shoulders in a clear hedging gesture. "I already said it all. On skype."

"Uh huh. That's not out loud, now is it?" She leaned back, picking up her latte to sip again. "Do you like him?"

"Well of course I like him! I've liked him since he kicked my ass," he retorted, almost offended by the question. "How could I love him if I didn't like him first?"

The strength with which she rolled her eyes made her nose of exasperation redundant. "Ugh! I mean do you like him? You can love someone and can't stand to be around them! It doesn't mean you aren't head over heels for 'em. Just means trying to date 'em would be a really bad idea cuz everything would be all fucked up."

He furrowed his eyebrows at her. "...Like like?" The confusion practically dripped off the intensified repeat of words. "I don't know if I like being around him... he doesn't hang out and at work we're both too busy."

"Would you wanna take him out some time? I know you like to spar with him, even though you've only done it once, but that's not like really going out. I think before you even start wondering if he even likes you, you should figure out if you want to like him." What was she doing!?
"Well, I'd be willing to at least give it a shot," he rubbed the heel of his hand through his hair. "I've never been with him in a private setting or anything, but I'd be willing to try anything once."

Oh, right, playing the part of supportive 'friend'. Then why did it feel like every word she spoke was going against everything she wanted? "Ok, then I say you should ask him about it. Maybe 'horror' wasn't what you saw. Maybe he was scared because of the intensity of the moment. It is kind of a one-eighty from where you were relationship wise. You only just got him to start accepting he's part of the crew, it's a bit much to get thrown into 'I love you' out of nowhere like that, you know?"

He scratched the back of his head, forgetting about the busted fingers 'til he tweaked them again. "Ow. Yeah, that... that might be totally a thing that can happen and might have. It could. But shit, how do you even approach something like that?

She deadpanned at him, quoting what she'd said on what she'd come to consider their first date. "So, I'm starved. Wanna grab some ice cream or something?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "And this isn't going to sound suspicious as hell coming from the bouncer whose head he nearly kicked in on his first day."

"What's the worst he's gonna do? Throw the dishwasher at you?" She shrugged.

"He did—hold on a second, is this something that happens a lot with cooks? Or Savate users?" He squinted out of his good eye.

She affected a grin, internally cursing at herself, "Well, it's handy. Big metal box, barely secured to the wall, usually contains silverware that's easily replaced."

"And squirts water everywhere when kicked causing mass confusion," he added, "but I see your point. It would be handy if that was among my choice of everyday nonlethal weapons."

"So, less to do with cooks and more to do with people who've learned how to use their environment to their advantage, ne?" She implied he should know something about that, and tucked a leg up so she could hold onto it.

There was space between them, and now she'd put up a physical barrier. Fuzzy from the fight with his brothers or not, Zoro was still quite able to read body language. His job, his nakama, even his life at times had depended on it. There was something she was holding back. If he had to put his finger on it, he'd say for the first time since they met she looked uncomfortable with him. Though he had to give her that she was trying very hard to pretend she wasn't.

He looked her up and down, really looked, before slowly inquiring, "Baby...? Did I say something wrong? You seem a little off."

She looked away. "I want to say no."

What they had been talking about before she rushed over leapt to mind. "We didn't exactly finish our conversation, did we?"

"Not really." This time her attention was on her toes, the nails were painted but she was picking at the polish. "I don't wanna be clingy. I know you don't normally do things like this, and..." She swallowed, "If you want me to... back off... or something..."

"I don't...I really like you both. I have no intention of abandoning you. But liking both of you so much is what's made my thoughts such a jumble. But I don't want you to back off."
She smiled at him, somewhat sad, "But you're not thunderstruck with me."

"Maybe I just haven't heard the right song while standing next to you? How do I know? I could be into polyamory and just don't know it... and I don't need to be thunderbolted on my ass to enjoy YOUR company."

"I just..." Damnit! There had to be dust or something on the floor. She tried to laugh and wiped at her cheek. "This is so stupid. I just... don't... I feel like you're gonna leave me behind if he likes you back as much as I think he does."

Both his hands, so big and so strong even with four fingers busted, cupped her jaw tenderly. "No. I refuse to leave behind so good a friend, even if we didn't meet in the most usual of ways and even if sometimes I think it might be nice to be more than friends. If nothing else, I will hold onto you and our friendship until you tell me otherwise."

"Just... don't blame a girl for fallin' harder than she should, hein?" She nuzzled her nose into his palm, refusing to acknowledge the drops of liquid on his thumb.

He wiped the tears gently and leaned his head into hers. "I won't. Promise, I won't."

"So..." she gave a self-deprecatiing laugh, "you're gonna have to tell me where the line is. Otherwise I'm likely to make a fool of myself, assuming things."

Oh hell with it. He leaned in and kissed her- not her mouth, but her nose, then both eyes, then her forehead. "Okay. Is it alright if I'm not sure where the line is either?"

Her chin lifted, another tear escaping her lashes, and she made a noise somewhere between agreement and wanting. "M'not s'good at the strong thing t'day. Zat okay?"

"Yes. Yes, I do think it is," his voice was softer and gentler yet and he nuzzled their foreheads together, offering but not taken.

Baby murmured something in French and moved closer to him, wrapping her arms about his neck.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in, nothing between them but their own fragile self control.

It seemed to be soothing though. Just that. Holding and being held in return. She didn't move to do anything more, simply shifted herself so that she wasn't pinching his bruises, and molded into his lap like she was made to fit there. In return, he enclosed her in safety, his very aura washing over her mind in a way that touched the raw parts of her left open from her appointment with Dr. Kaya earlier. And she breathed him in, her tears stilling, the tension she'd been holding onto since he told her on Skype finally unknotted around her shoulders.

She still had no idea how she was going to handle the other half of this conversation. The one where he confessed to Sanji, and then dating him as Sanji. Oh God! She didn't even want to think about it at the moment. She just wanted to exist as they were. Let Baby be Baby and Sanji be Sanji, and at some point she would mesh the two, but not now. Not yet. Not until she knew if he cared about what was under her clothes.

"Stay with me." His voice rumbled in her ear, his thumb rubbing circles on her neck. “Just for tonight. We don’t have to do anything.”

She looked up even though his jawline was in the way of seeing anything, and her eyes traced the details of his skin over the rim of her glasses. “Okay..."
“Do you need to get anything? From home?”

“No. Can we get food on our way back? All I’ve had today so far is part of a bagel.”

Zoro laughed, hugging her tighter, “Yeah. Yeah, sure. I got a flier from that new Italian place in Loguetown. How’s pasta sound?”

“Only if they don’t overboil it. Can’t stand mushy pasta.” She grumbled, amusement in her voice.

They were okay. They were good even. Whatever came next would be dealt with when it came. And those were the very thoughts she repeated over and over again in her mind when she snuck out of his apartment after he’d passed out later. She wasn’t leaving, and made sure to be obvious about that by slipping his shirt on over her own.

Naturally as soon as she’d left the room he woke, but he gave her some space, sure that she had things she needed to think about. It was only after he’d counted every tile in his ceiling backwards, forwards, and diagonally that he got up to find out where she’d gone. The pit of nerves in his gut that whispered nasty things made him check his swords, but far be it from making him feel better, seeing them safe and secure only made the feeling that she’d left completely grow.

“There you are.”

She whipped around on the fourth floor fire escape with a little gasp, one hand on her chest and the other holding her cigarette out where it wouldn’t catch her wig on fire. “I swear, Tiger-boy, you really are feline! Make some noise when you come up behind a girl!!”

He chuckled, too relieved that she was still there to pick on her about being scared. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he rested his chin on her shoulder, “So why all the way up here?”

Pointing with the lit end of her smoke, she leaned against him, “The sunrise. It’s about a half hour off. Any further up and you can’t see it when it kisses the Blues.”

Truthfully, she’d come up to her apartment to grab her meds, and wash her face for a moment or so of time without her wig on. But he couldn’t know that yet. For now, he could keep the idea that she was being romantic. It wasn’t entirely untruthful; that was the reason she’d moved into the fourth floor apartment in the first place.

“Oh. Never noticed before.” He hummed against her shoulder, his nose in her hair. “It’s kinda nice.”

She snickered, “You weren’t kidding about that lack of romantic genes stuff. It’s our first legitimate sunrise together and all you can say is ‘it’s kinda nice’.”

“What do I do?”

“Nothin’. You’re adorable is all.”

“Hmph. Guess I have to let you get me back some time.”

“Since, for some reason, I can’t seem to catch you lost, yeah, you better gimme something to laugh about.” She tuckered her cigarette between her lips for a last puff then pitched the butt over the railing and dropped her hands to hold his around her waist.

They fell silent for a little while, just watching the sky get brighter. Grey-black-blue became tinted purple and pink, washing the city with fuzzy light. Somewhere a dog barked. Cabs bustled about, occasionally under them, but mostly closer to Red Line. In the distance the rush of the Grand Line
started to grow, and a tug boat down on the South Blue sounded its horn. The sounds of the city waking up were choreographed, like a symphony of nature, punctuated by the manmade jungle in which they lived.

It really was poetic.

“I gotta go in a little bit.” Baby broke their silence just as the gold of the morning sun touched the water of East Blue.

Zoro held her tighter, reluctant to think about needing to get on with the day. “Why?”

“I have work tonight, and somebody interrupted my day out yesterday. I gotta get groceries and pick up some stuff from Caroline.”

“Oi, you didn’t have to come running to patch me up, I’d’ve done fine on my own!” He protested her poking him.

So she laughed, “Nah, that’s part of the deal.”

“What deal?”

“Well see, when you fall in love with somebody, you tend to drop everything you’re doing when you think they’re hurt.” Her tone grew wistful, and Zoro got the impression she wasn’t exactly talking about him and herself anymore as she drew gentle counter-clockwise swirls on his arm. “You drop everything cuz they need you. You rearrange your life so they know how much they mean to you. And… when you’re really lucky… they do the same for you.”

“Bab—“

“It’s not something you ask for!” She cut him off. “It doesn’t mean anything if they don’t do it because they want to. And… I want to. For you.”

“I know.” He nuzzled her ear, not offering any promises in return and she was grateful for it.

By the time the sun was fully up, with a handspan between it and the horizon, Baby was nearly dozing on his shoulder, and she sighed deeply.

“I gotta go.”

“Alright.”

Wanting to end on a better note, she leaned to the side and smiled up at him impishly, “I’m keeping this shirt. So, I can think about you all day.”

His laugh was hearty and open, “Fine, but only because I know at some point I’m going to wind up with something of yours.”

“Damn skippy.” She nodded sharply, grinning.

He turned her and caught her lips for a gentle kiss. “Be good, Baby.”

“Who me? I’m an angel!” She danced away, heading inside and down the stairs to grab her shawl-purse. “You’re the one that keeps getting banged up, Tiger-boy!” Because he was taking his time coming down the stairs, she didn’t care about yelling up at him. “No more Skype messages when you’ve got broken fingers!”
“No promises!”
1 November - Part 1

Chapter Summary

HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It took Baby all of three hours to finish her errands, sneaking up to her apartment to change, and reflect that tonight was the Thousand Sunny Halloween party. She scanned her closet, her eyes caught on the costume she’d been planning on wearing, and a deliciously devious idea popped into her head. Did she dare?! It was a risk. A big one. What if they recognized her?

But, on the other hand…

She whipped out her phone.

--BabyLoveCook [BLC] began skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 11:30--

BLC: hey ur partys tonite isnt it
TSW: Thought you said no more Skype with broken fingers ;p
BLC: ur typin fine
BLC: was just thinkin
TSW: Oh?
TSW: That can be dangerous you know
BLC: ud know wouldn’t u tigerboy
TSW: Oh ha ha ha
TSW: So what’s up?
BLC: was just thinkin mebbe ud like a date
TSW: Really?
BLC: yeah y not
TSW: Thought you had work
BLC: i called off
TSW: That alright?
TSW: I don’t wanna get you in trouble
BLC: ive got a real understandin manager
BLC: besides whats special about nov 1
BLC: the big day was last nite
BLC: and they obvs didnt need me or theyd called me in
TSW: Just so long as you’re not gonna lose your job for this
BLC: that a yes
TSW: lol yes ;p
TSW: The party starts at six, but I have to be in at three to help set up.
TSW: Pretty sure I can get you in early if you want.
TSW: I’m in pretty tight with the bouncer ;p
BLC: u punk ur the bouncer
BLC: XD
TSW: See that’s why I know I can do it ;p
BLC: what’s ur costume
TSW: I hadn’t really thought of one
TSW: I was just gonna go as myself
BLC: ugh
TSW: What? I’m scary!
BLC: UGH
BLC: look u made me use caps
TSW: Then what’s your idea?
BLC: hmmmmmmmmmm
TSW: I can’t say if I’ll do it with you or not until you tell me what it is
TSW: I’m not falling for that ‘agree without hearing what it is’ either
TSW: Nami got me with that every time there was a party for an entire year
BLC: sorry sorry was double checkin with my manager in another window
BLC: she says i'm good 2 go
BLC: hows about joker n harley quinn u already got the hair 4 it

--ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] went idle at 12:45--
--ThreeSwordWnaderer sent Howsitlook.PNG--

TSW: I had some greasepaint left over from a different costume and one of Perona's lipsticks
BLC: perf
BLC: gimme sec

--BabyLoveCook [BLC] went idle at 12:47--
--BabyLoveCook sent Waitin4MistahJay.png--

BLC: does it work with brown hair
TSW: I think it looks amazing.
TSW: You pull off the checkered color scheme really well.
BLC: meet u @ ur place
TSW: I'll have the door unlocked

--BabyLoveCook [BLC] ceased skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 13:01--

And he went to do just that, adjusting the black suit jacket. He didn't have purple for the traditional Joker costume, but he looked better in black anyway.

The sounds of Sanji's Converse running down the stairs filtered through the crack in the door thanks to the way the front hall echoed, but before Zoro could react to the cook's rush, his Skype pinged with a certain cash register sound that meant Nami. The urge to avoid it was strong. Three pings in a row after the first one meant she knew he was trying to ignore her though.

--MikanPinwheel [MPW] began skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 13:02--

MPW: Zoro, Sanji called off, do you know anybody who could cover his shift? Vivi, Robin, and Ace are already going to be here, and we're expecting almost as many guests as the Phoenix Free show.
MPW: Zoro don't you dare ignore me!
MPW: I know you're sitting there listening to your phone.
MPW: You're icon's green btw, which means I know you're reading this.
TSW: I've already committed my evening to NOT working and the only one I know offhand who could cover is the one I've committed my night to so no, I don't know anyone who could take his shift.
MPW: Fuck... but you're coming to the party still right?
MPW: Or do you have a date~?
TSW: I'd like to think so. You'd have to ask her. She's coming with me.
MPW: Oooooh!!
MPW: I gtg! See ya later!

--MikanPinwheel [MPW] ceased skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 13:05--

He blinked dumbly at his phone for a moment, almost in shock. How the hell? Nami never left him alone that fast. Ooooh that witch was plotting something—but what?

A polite knock at his door broke through his thoughts.

And there she was, adorable as fuck, with big bushy pigtails done up with red and black bows, pale makeup accented with the dark eyes and blood red lips the costume required, and the same checkerboard dress she'd been wearing in the picture. Though she had red and black striped stockings and mismatched high heels in, what else, red and black, but between the height of the heels and the shortness of her skirt, all of the muscles of her legs were in fabulous relief against the stretchy fabric. She had sleeves to match, as the dress was a corset top laced with black on dark red.

"Sah, ya ready ta go, Mistah Jay?" She snapped bright pink bubble gum at him, affecting the comic book character's accent, and leaning to the side so her hip stuck out.

"Of course, my dear Harlequin honey. I assume you've put the hyenas to bed for the night first? They make such a scene when they come looking for their mama," he teased, offering her his arm in proper gentleman style. Hey, he said he'd look the part, he never said he'd play the asshole.

Baby giggled and leaned onto him, "So I finally get to see the elusive Thousand Sunny."

She hammed it up to cover her own nerves. The conversation she'd been having with the bar's manager before she actually knocked on the door said she would be fine, but there were several people at the place that didn't know, couldn't know. It'd blow her cover. The only blessing for the night was that Law would be performing, and thus wouldn't be able to look too closely at her from his place on stage.

"Naturally. I think you'll like it- well, it'll be crowded and nasty and hotter than hell, but I'm figuring we'll manage to have a good time anyway," he grinned as he locked up the door behind him and began to escort her to the stairs. "We're expecting sex-on-legs on stage and plenty of banging in the bathroom, and drinks that'll curl your toes and turn the world sideways, which is pretty much my definition of a good time, so let's hope it's as good as all that, shall we?"

"Soi-tanly, Mistah Jay!" She tossed her head and strut her way up the stairs, making her skirt bounce from side to side with an exaggerated flounce.

He bit his lip for a moment and choked on a breath just watching those HIPS move, and then the thighs, and the calves, and the heels, and.... he sent up a couple prayers to keep his libido in check for the night and followed her up, taking his sweet time so he could remain eye level with those gorgeous legs the whole way up. Pity it was only one flight of stairs, he thought idly.

A sly look over her shoulder just before she turned the corner towards the door let her know he was absolutely hooked on her, but she didn't let him know that, merely smiling happily at him.

They chatted about nothing, mostly to distract Zoro from his early morning thoughts, the whole way from the apartment building to the Sunny. Once it came into view, however, she pressed closer to his
arm, their fingers laced, and the nerves from before threatened to undermine her confidence. What if Brook or Franky or God forbid ACE recognized her! It made her hang back on his shoulder, almost resisting entering the building, and she was tense in his grip.

He gave her hand a squeeze, pausing with her. "If you don't want to we can bail," he said gently. "Crowds can be stifling and the music is loud- if you wanna just duck out I'm gonna understand, Baby."

"But, it's your party, and I said I'd be your date. I don't wanna ditch you." She chewed on her lip.

"And I don't want you to be uncomfortable. If we both ditch the party I'll get my ass kicked in the morning, but it'll be worth it."

Baby smiled, blushing slightly, and hid her face against his shoulder—proving her makeup was sealed so it wouldn't smudge—like she didn't believe he would actually do that for her until he said it out loud. And if she took two seconds to think about it, she had to admit that no, she'd never expected him to ditch with her if she had to. She looked up through her bangs suddenly hoping she wouldn't have to.

"Okay. Let's go meet your Nakama."

His face lit up, and even the garish makeup couldn't hide how genuine his smile actually was. "Alright! I really do think you'll love them," he said confidently as they turned once more to the door and he hauled it open, immediately assailed with the noise of chatter and the odd wail of an amp as it was set up and the wires crossed to produce the characteristic, horrible screech they made when mishandled.

"Ahh!" Baby winced, and blinked warily at the stage.

Usopp flailed, dropping both wires out of nowhere, and yelled something to Chopper, who had his hands over his ears, while two young men in white jumpsuits held their guitars away from the microphones. Sabo was sitting on the edge of the stage, his own axe in his lap, unplugged, and laughing as the sound managers scrambled to find what had gone wrong with their setup. From the sound booth on the other side of the bar Brook waved for both of them to stop what they were doing, and Franky dodged between tables carrying a new wire.

The door to the manager's office was open, and the lights in the kitchen were off. Baby's eyes were immediately drawn to it, the siren song of her sanctuary among the chaos was hard to resist. So she wrapped herself around Zoro's arm again, playing up being the stranger.

"OI JACKASSES! WHEN YOU GOT THAT THING SHUT UP I HAVE INTRODUCTIONS TO MAKE," Zoro bellowed over the noise, wincing when it came again, covering his ear with his free hand. "You'd think three tech geniuses and they wouldn't have this shit happen all the time."

"Y-you don't have to... uhh..." Baby tensed again, hiding behind him more.

However, Brook immediately cut the power to the stage completely so that the noise was gone, and stood up around his mixer board, headphones around his scrawny neck. "Yohohoho! It this the lovely lady you've been texting so often, Zoro-san?"

"Yes. Guys, this is Baby. Baby, these are the idiots I work with and my landlord. Usopp, Franky, Brook," he pointed to each, then looked around and frowned. "Where the hell's Robin and Nami? And Law?"

"Where else?" Usopp thumbed over his shoulder at the manager's office. "Her, Robin, and Vivi are
holed up trying to solve the Sanji problem.”

"Sanji problem?” Baby blinked, genuinely confused.

Sabo smiled, "Ah don't worry 'bout it, hun. They'll sort it. It's not like we haven't opened without
him before. We'll manage."

She turned from him to Brook, who had painted a Glasgow smile on his cheeks. "Our cook was
supposed to work tonight and called to say he wasn't coming. So we'll be a bit short staffed."

"Oh! Well I could do it!" She offered.

Zoro looked a bit startled. "But Baby, you sure? Weren't you gonna take the night off?" It seemed a
little unfair to him to let her work on her off night just because his work was short staffed.

"Well, yeah, but..." She bit her lip and blushed a little, "if I'm allowed to use the kitchen, I have a
place I can run to if the crowd gets too big, and it's not like that wasn't what I was supposed to do
tonight anyway."

He considered a moment, then nodded. "That's fair. Having a place to hide if it gets too hot and
oppressive and crowded is good, especially in a place this small. Anyone object to Baby taking over
for Sanji tonight?"

"I only have one stipulation." Law approached them from the stage where he'd been conferring with
his band.

He was dressed in costume already, spandex and cyberpunk armor with one of Usopp's paint gun
sniper rifles on his back, and an eye patch that was supposed to be a sight for targeting over his right
eye. Red and black seemed to be a theme with his get up as well, except for a white face mask for his
nose and mouth that hung around his neck.

Baby smiled nervously; he didn't seem to recognize her.

Zoro leaned in a bit. "Oh? The High and Mighty Sniper Shot has a stipulation? Do tell," he teased.

Law rolled his eyes, and muttered, "Deadshot," then turned back to Baby, "Put everything back
where you get it. If even one knife is missing tomorrow..."

He let the sentence hang, given the threat and already missing chef's knife. His eyes flicked up to
Zoro, ignoring the way Baby nodded her head as though her answer didn't even matter. He was
placing responsibility for her respecting his boyfriend's sanctuary completely on Zoro's shoulders.

Baby felt her heart melt.

Zoro rolled his eyes. "She's a professional chef, Law. As if she'd leave another cook's kitchen out of
order or take what she knows as well as you is a cook’s heart and soul. You don't TAKE another
cook’s equipment any more than I could take Kikoku from you... or you take the White Lady from
me."

While he knew Baby could defend her own honor perfectly well, he felt absurdly insulted by the
impugning on her character. Even if Law was reasonably worried for his boyfriend's state of mind on
learning someone else had been in his kitchen.

Baby slipped away from their pissing contest, having entirely too much fun watching them fight over
her. On one hand, no Law didn't know she was his boyfriend, and that was rather nerve-wracking if
she thought about it too hard, but on the other, she was almost confident enough to consider herself Zoro's girlfriend, and... well... she supposed she probably should have felt more guilty about that than she did. Being with Zoro was just too much fun.

And if she let herself think about what he'd say when he found out her ruse, she typically didn't want to get out of bed.

So, she ducked into the manager's office to meet with Nami.

Closing the door quietly, she smiled at all three women. "So far, so good, I think? You're still okay with this right, Ms. Nami?"

She grinned. "Of course, of course. How you manage your life isn't my business unless it wins me a bet or breaks things in my bar. This does only one of those, so I have no objections. How it all looking out there for you? Everyone going along amenably?"

Robin chuckled, "I'm sure their lives are no more in danger than they usually are given that they are both swordsmen with short tempers and possessive natures. I'd hazard a guess at no more than two broken limbs by the end of the night."

She was dressed as Morticia Addams in response to her fiancé coming as Gomez, and she crossed one long leg over the other with a fitting smile for both statement and costume.

Vivi, who was perched on Nami's desk and simply dressed in her hospital scrubs, gave a small whimper, "Here's hoping it doesn't come to that. I had to pull serious favors to get tonight off, and I don't wanna have to actually put my costume to use."

Baby shook her head, laughing, "No no, they're just defending my honor. Both of them."

Nami snorted and rolled her eyes, crossing her legs. She was dressed as a cat burglar, though her girlfriend called it a tease, with a patterned black bandanna with circles on it that held her hair back out of her face, a striped blue-and-white shirt that barely stretched down past her bra line, and very short shorts that clung to her like a second skin along with soft calf-high boots that made no noise when she walked.

Vivi had been incredibly suspicious about the boots, since it took time and practice to learn how to walk silently even in soft suede, but Nami had pointed out these were also her favorite boots for walking long distances and roaming shopping malls.

"In that, I can see Alex's influence, dear." Robin smiled when her hand to her mouth. "But to keep up appearances, I think showing 'Baby' around the kitchen would be a good idea."

"Oh, I suppose so. Who knows the kitchen best, though? I'm not in it often, since you are so kind as to bring snacks to me while I do bookwork." Nami gave Baby a sweet flutter of her eyelashes, "so I don't really LOOK around the kitchen much. Robin, does Franky repair in there often? As much as WE know there is no need for a tour, but if we're going to keep up appearances we'd better go in for the whole hog."

Baby flushed, going a little wide-eyed, and she mumbled her words about how it really wasn't a trouble and she enjoyed helping Nami out as much as possible and really it was fine, she could handle it. She carried on like that until Vivi smacked her girlfriend's shoulder.

"That's not nice, Nami! Baby's still Sanji under all that, this is just a costume!"

"Isn't it." Robin intoned with the kind of eyebrow lift that carried far more than two simple words
ever could.

Baby nodded quickly, still blushing, "Uh-of course! I'm still me, it's just this is Halloween and Zoro and Law and I thought it would be fun..."

"You wear it well," Nami paused and cleared her throat when she realized her voice had dropped to a purr, and continued, "Especially the heels, those can be very hard to manage. So, since it's your kitchen anyway, who else knows it almost as well as you?"

Suddenly aware that all three of them were watching her, Baby's mouth moved trying to form words but sound didn't want to come out of it. Robin seemed to see through her game entirely, declarations of costume or not, Vivi was steadily growing jealous over the way Nami was talking, and Nami herself was flirting with her! It blew her mind away entirely! Granted she'd always known that Nami was gay, but she hadn't realized her normal presentation had been a shield against the lesbian's affections. Her eyes darted from one to the next, still slightly fish-mouthing, and feeling very much at a loss.

"Nami, your girlfriend is RIGHT FUCKING THERE for fuck's sakes," Zoro drawled from where he'd popped his head in the doorway. "Leave off on the heavy hand before you get her angry enough to finally defile your work desk- and don't try to tell me that's not exactly what you're doing."

Nami flushed out to her ears and leapt off the desk, stomping over to slug him in the arm as hard as she could, satisfied with his offended 'OW!'. "Fine then, lunkhead, why don't YOU show her around Sanji's kitchen, since apparently I flirt too much?"

He immediately reeled back. "But I ah- I don't- I'm not-"

"Don't bullshit me, Mr. Could-Have-Been-A-Marine! You have Smoker's tutelage under your belt and know where EVERYTHING belongs in that kitchen, and on the off chance Baby leaves something where it's not supposed to be you can put it back for her. Go!"

He ducked his head. He couldn't say any of it was a lie...

"Alright. C'mon Baby." Taking her hand, he pulled her out of the office and left Nami to the scolding of her girlfriend.

Baby gave a wave, and all four women laughed. As soon as they were away from the others though, Baby leaned on Zoro's shoulder, "Could've been a Marine, eh? That where all of those muscles come from?"

He grinned a bit sideways. "Naw, these come from my swordsman training. I was a nasty little teenager, a shitty little punk, so Smoker threw me into the gym where he and the other cops train to keep in condition. Once I started my regimens, I never stopped. It was incredibly calming, and indescribably soothing, and the regularity gave me something to look forward to every day where I could decompress. Smoker offered to get me into the Marine Academy, but... that's a little too authoritative for me. Too many Masters to confuse a young student."

"I see." Her tone was still teasing though; her big, dumb, jock of a boyfriend, and her eyes said it all as she danced ahead of him beyond the bar.

He only laughed, in good humor, as he chased her all the way to the kitchen, his suit stretching on his broad frame as he leaned forward into his run.

She dashed around the island in the middle, laughing and her pigtails streaming behind her, to stop with her lip between her teeth next to the dishwasher. Placing both hands on the counter, she lifted
her heel to the side of the thing, as though she was gonna kick it.

"Ooooh don't, don't! Franky will strangle me, he just rebuilt that," he chuckled, shaking his head as he leaned on the counter. "C'mon, don't I need you show you around in here anyway?"

Lowering her leg with a grin, she glanced around, "It's really not all that different than mine. He's missing a knife though."

His shoulders went tight from one end to the other all the way up the back of his neck for a split second as his eyes went to the knife block, then the muscles forcibly relaxed again as he let out a long breath, very slowly.

"Yeah. I know. M'not quite sure why he hasn't replaced it yet."

"Oh! Oh, babe, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to bring all that up! I thought it was maybe just misplaced or something." She was at his side instantly, rubbing his back and up to his neck. "You okay?"

He shook himself like a dog and bent sideways to rest his head on hers. "Yeah, I'm alright. Just a little frustrated, I guess." He sighed and shook his head, straightening back up. "No reason to dwell and ruin my evening with a beautiful lady, hm? I don't worry about what I can't fix or change."

She leaned up and nuzzled his nose with hers. "Good. This is a party! We're supposed to be having fun! Got any requests for me to warm up with?"

"Do you know any drinks that cure migraines? As bouncer I'm pretty guaranteed to get one or two tonight and I know Nami could use one before we open the doors. Sanji made out like it was some kinda super secret chef thing when I asked, so would you know how to make it?"

"Hmm... Pape taught me something. Mint for you and orange for Ms. Manager?" She moved around the island to peer into the fridge, taking stock of things.

Internally she cringed at the low supply of chicken breast and less than half a gallon of milk. Vegetables looked good. Hamburger. Cream. Her herb stock hadn't been messed with since the last time she was in. But that chicken... she'd have to send someone out to get some before the end of the night. Her boneless wings were one of the most requested items she made on a regular basis.

"Mint sounds good, yeah." His face appeared next to hers and he tsk'd. "That ain't nearly enough for a Halloween party—oh that witch! She was waiting until I'm here to play pack mule, bet you money!" He snorted. "Oh well. Gimme a list of what you cook and how much you need an' I'll run to get it before we open. It's easier on you the more shit you have cooked when we open."

Baby looked up with sardonic quirk to her mouth, "Honey, I work in a bar too. I know what I'm doing. Right now all I know is the chicken and some milk wouldn't hurt. Lemme at his spice rack, he's gotta have at least onion and garlic powders. Otherwise I'mma have to get stuff from home!"

"Give me a list," he insisted. "You're already doing us a favor here, I'll get what you want so you can make what you like!"

"Ugh fine! Find me pen and paper, but no adventures on your way to the store, take somebody with you so you go straight there and come right back, I don't wanna wind up opening and you not being here. Okay?"

He produced a pen and paper- and Usopp was dragged aside and informed he was going with Zoro to the store to pick up supplies for the party, to which the tech genius cowered and promptly squeaked his agreement.
Throughout the exchange Baby giggled, writing down various things she thought she might need, and at the bottom of the list, 'your favorite 3 alcohols ;')'. Then it was signed with a heart and 'xoxo'. Which made Usopp snicker until Zoro balled his fist.

Zoro took the list and gave Baby a kiss on the knuckles before dragging Usopp out the door, immediately assailed with "NOT THAT WAY" that could be heard wailed from down the block as Usopp's powerful lungs gave it their all.

The whole time Zoro and Usopp were gone, Baby stayed tucked away in the kitchen. Twice she heard Law's voice over the microphone, and part of her twisted inside, the question of whether she should talk to him echoing through her mind. But he was getting ready for his performance, and she had snacks and treats to make. Or rather to finish, as she had started on several of them over the course of the week and merely needed to glaze or decorate most of them. She was just setting them up on the bar for people to take as they liked when the boys returned, and that signaled a flurry of wings in four flavors of sauce.

Franky and Brook roped Zoro into helping with the set-up, which worked well for keeping him out of the kitchen and away from where he might recognize her cooking style. It also let her relax into her normal routines. Nobody knew her kitchen like she did, even if she didn't usually wear heels when working in it.

So the bar opened on time with spooky music playing over the sound system, decorations for the holiday hung around, and a cover charge for all guests that included food. After that all Baby worked on were drink orders. And the buffet would last until it was empty, Nami hung a sign indicating the kitchen was officially closed, as neither she nor Baby wanted to blow Baby's cover by having her cook things to order.

Plus, she was supposed to have the night off anyway! Nami had agreed to that before she'd even talked to Zoro about coming as his date!

Zoro had been kept good and busy setting up, and now that the crowd was coming in he did bouncer duty along with Franky- while he was supposed to have the night off, when there were five people brawling in the middle of the line it took more than one bouncer to untangle the lot of them. He also, not wanting to fight the crowd too much, was sort of waiting until he spotted Baby to go to her. Fighting the crowd calling her name would just get him hot and irritated.

Robin and Vivi took over at the bar at midnight, which inflated Baby's ego a little. They needed to have two people to replace her. But it gave her the freedom to escape into the party.

She slipped through the crowd, biting her lip and giving several handsy folks a none-too-subtle stamp of powerful stiletto heel into their toes. She had eyes for one person and one person only; the burly bouncer in the black suit jacket. And the cover of Law's band taking the stage was an excellent excuse to elbow people out of the way.

When Zoro saw her he gave Franky a shoulder-tap to let him know he was going off on his own, and moved to meet her, shouldering people aside with the kind of not-force a bouncer way too experienced at his job could, and grinning wildly when he managed to reach her.

"Finally escaped, did we? How's it been on your end, not too terrible I hope?"

She immediately wrapped her arms around his neck, "Missed you, but nah, not too bad. Wanna find a table for the show?"

He grinned and hoisted her up on his arm so she could get a good view, her heels dangling off the
floor as he settled her on his bicep. "Of course. Lead the way!"

"Ah!" One hand on his arm, the other on his head, she couldn't help but laugh and tuck her feet up. Once secure she pointed, "Over there! By the stairs! There's a free seat with a tiny table. Only one chair though. Guess I'll have to sit on you!"

"I can live with that," he told her, shoving through the crowd while people whistled and called and complimented them on their choice of costumes as well as welcoming the band on stage. He made it to the table and successfully claimed the chair with time to spare for the music to start, and sat down before settling Baby carefully in his lap.

She leaned into him, an arm around his neck, and magically a bottle of water appeared on the table with a wink from Robin just as the first chords of the song began.

One of the men in the jumpsuits, the one with 'Penguin' across his hat, fingered his guitar in a walking, easy pattern, as Law stepped up to the microphone. "I painted your room at midnight, so I'd know yesterday was over. I put all your books on the top shelf, even the one with the four leaf clover. Man, I'm getting older."

A pang in Baby's chest as the drums picked up made her cling to Zoro a little more. There was something about the song that just pulled at her. Not that his voice wasn't a reminder of that first date they had, the one where he'd sang with Sabo as back up. No, there was something more to this one. He was singing with more conviction, more emotion somehow. It stole her breath.

Zoro's breath hitched. "He's singing one of Cora's songs," he said in her ear, as soft as he could and still be heard over the music. "This was one of his longer-running hits. It's rare he performs these... it tends to make him melancholy for what could have been."

He watched Law's passion on the stage, feeling a kinship there. He put everything into every one of his father's songs he ever covered, just as Zoro put his all into every kata and competition he'd ever been in in honor of Kuina. It didn't matter Cora was alive to hear and approve himself; he understood the sentiment and it was the same.

"Your words still serenade me, your lullabies won't let me sleep, I've never heard such a haunting melody. Oh, it's killing me. You know I can barely breathe." Law leaned into the chorus, "Just like a crow chasing the butterfly, dandelions lost in the summer sky. When you and I were getting high as outer space, I never thought you'd slip away. I guess I was just a little too late~"

Penguin took a solo on that last drawn out note, playing back and forth with the big man on the drums, and they pushed the energy of the song higher through the next two repetitions of the chorus. Law reached out into the crowd, tucking his fist near his chest for the vocalizations at the end of the song, and the lights dropped to a soft blue when Penguin brought the walking melody back to a final chord.

The crowd went nuts, screaming and hollering for another song, or a repeat of that one, or something! They just needed more from him!

But Baby only had eyes for Zoro, tears in them as she felt the pain between both singer and swordsman. She took his face in her hands, claiming his mouth to pour her emotions into him. She couldn't lavish on Law right now, so she could only give to the one she could reach. In the background someone was hooting and hollering, cameras flashed, but Baby didn't notice. Nor did she notice the taste of salt in their kiss.

Zoro wrapped her up in his arms without so much as a second's hesitation and kissed her back,
giving her everything he had in return- the ache, the pain, the recognition, and washed it all away with the comfort and passion of being with Baby. Yes, she was what made life a little better. He might have gotten thunderbolted by Sanji, but Baby had pulled him in much softer and sweeter, just as deep. He too ignored the flashes and crowd. They weren't important. She was.

The band was playing again, "You know all my deepest secrets. I think you know, you know to keep 'em, but I wonder if you know I hate sleeping alone. So come and tell me what my kiss tastes like. Don't wanna miss it so turn off the lights, but I wonder if you know I hate sleeping alone."

Baby shivered at the way Law was making love to the microphone, her hands burying up into Zoro's hair, and her knees balanced on the edges of the chair to either side of his hips.

He hadn't even noticed she'd turned to straddle his hips, his hands sliding down from her face to her shoulders to her hips, massaging the powerful muscles as he met her rising passion and force.

"I have to fake it if I could. I'm not in love, but the sex is good. You can't mistake it, 'cause it's understood. I'm not in love, but the sex is good! Yeah-ee-yeah-ah~!"

The beat provided a rhythm, his hands on her hips did things to her, and she was rolling her spine in time to the music before she even realized what she was doing. Her arms stretched out behind him so she could bite at his lip, and she might have moaned somewhere lost in the sounds of the song.

He was rolling back against her, powerful little movements as his hands kneaded like a cat and he nipped back, his tongue teasing and his breath hot against her face as one hand slipped the tip of a thumb under her waistband to brush softly back and forth over the soft skin there.

The quieting of the music again nearly broke them apart, but she couldn't help it, when Law dropped into an echoing bridge, "It's not like I wanna stick around. It's just tonight I'm gonna lay you down. So now you know what my kiss tastes like. So in the morning I'll say goodbye, but I wonder if you know I hate sleeping alone."

Baby wanted more of that touching, and God did the guitar just drive her forward. Over and over with the way Penguin struck his chords, she curled her spine, practically grinding against Zoro. It was somehow both lap dance and making out at the same time.

The big bouncer was all for every ounce of this, bucking his hips up into her with short little thrusts and one hand slid down to her thigh and squeezed the heavy muscle there as he took her tongue in his mouth and sucked on it, hard.

"I have to fake it if I could. I'm not in love, but the sex is good! You can't mistake it, 'cause it's understood, I'm not in love, but the sex is good!! YEAH YEAH-AH!!" Law amped it up, repeating the chorus and dancing with the mic stand.

Literally the only thing that stopped Baby from digging in further on Zoro's lap was the abrupt cut off of the music at the end of the song. The lights came up out of nowhere, and she jumped back onto his knees away from the kiss with a loud POP! that drew attention from several guests, and Franky. The blue-haired bouncer leered at the both over his phone; he'd been taking pictures.

But it was apparently time for dancing or something Nami had planned, because everyone was being bustled out of the middle of the bar so that Usopp, Sabo, and Chopper could move the tables and chairs.

And that included Baby and Zoro's.

Zoro escorted Baby off to the side, cursing his hormones viciously under his breath and trying to
calm down his raging body even as he found a wall to lean against and did so with a long sigh. Dammit, he'd been SO CLOSE! To what, he wasn't sure, but it had been… something.

Baby leaned on him, biting her lip and trying to calm down. Now that the music's spell was broken, the reality of what she'd almost done hit her like a ton of bricks. She looked up, started to apologize, noted how kiss-flushed he looked, and whimpered a little, want in her eyes. "S'not fair, y'know..."

"I know," he moaned. "Why's it always gotta be interruptions? Ain't nice!"

He was hot and his lips felt kiss-swollen, but oh, his body was buzzing with the best kind of natural high!

"You wanna dance?" She wasn't very enthusiastic about it, but the band was taking a break, so Brook had an upbeat, club-like tune playing.

He started to say yes and then thought better of it.

"I'd better not. If I stay physically close to you and start moving again I won't be able to get a handle on my body reactions anymore," he admitted without any shame. Why should he be ashamed? Baby had almost been ready to take him in public!

She groaned, burying her face in his chest, and mumbled, "Don't say stuff like that jerk damnit!"

Pulling at his suit jacket, her ears and the back of her neck were red, indicating she was thinking the same things he was, and fuck, if it didn't sound like a really good idea right then. But if there was one line she didn't want to cross, it was that one. That was why she wasn't drinking alcohol, though she had implicitly offered to mix something for him. She wanted to keep her wits about her because if she didn't she knew she'd wind up doing something to blow her cover.

He laughed softly, holding her and kissing her hair. "Sorry Baby, but I gotta be honest!" He swayed with her a little bit, gently, mostly because it felt so good to hold her close. "You're much too passionate and beautiful to resist for a mere mortal like me."

"You say that like I'm some kinda saint or somethin'." Laying her ear against his heart, she watched while the band came back, playing another song, something with less depth just to keep the party going. "M'not perfect. Sometimes... I'm not even very nice."

"Nobody is perfect. And not everyone can be nice all the time. I wouldn't expect that, Baby. But I'm only a man of flesh and bone, I'm no saint either- and it would take one to turn you down!" He rocked with her smoothly, just watching the crowd.

"...even if..." She shook her head, wrapping her arms around his waist and forcing a smile up at him, "Nevermind, this is a party. We're supposed to be having fun! Lemme make you something. A drink or a snack or whatever, something to keep your mind off of bending me over the bar, and something to keep my mind from over-thinking things."

"Sure, Baby. Make it strong and let it burn and I'll be happy with it," he said happily as he let her go, pausing to nuzzle her forehead a moment. "And maybe a snack if there's any left. I'm good at keeping my head when I drink but food helps."

"Okay!" She took his hand so they wouldn't be separated in the crowd, drawing him over to the bar.

As the hours ticked by, Law and his band playing song after song after song, Baby made every combination she could think of out of the three bottles Zoro bought, and kept a steady supply of finger foods for him to snack on while they laughed and talked. They were leaning over the bar
towards each other by the time Nami gave Last Call notification, and though whatever it was that had popped into her head was never brought up again, a shadow ran around in her eyes any time she looked at Law on stage.

Zoro tried to pretend he hadn't seen it; it wasn't his business to probe. Not that it wasn't TEMPTING but it wasn't his business. So he tried to help distract her, help her keep up with the act that nothing was wrong, and when Last Call came he took her hands in his. "Wanna walk me home, Harley? There be monsters in the dark, you know."

"Anythin' fer you, Mistah Jay!" She laughed again, clinging to his arm. Then she gave a wave to Robin, and spoke again after the older woman's nod, "It was nice meeting everybody."

He grinned. "I think everyone liked meeting you too, Baby. Maybe you'll even come back sometime," he added with a wave to Franky as they made their way toward the door.

"Maybe sooner than you think." She teased cryptically. Once out in the night air, she breathed deeply, ignoring a small wince as her ribs expanded against her corset and bra, "Was I a good date?"

"Oh, it's been a wonderful date with you, Baby. I'm still sorry you wound up working on your night off though, even if it was only part of the night. How'd I do? I haven't been on a date in so long I don't know if I was any good."

"I wouldn't know what to do with myself on a Saturday night if I wasn't working! And you were amazing! If I wasn't head over heels before, boy, you've really done me in tonight. Especially being all noble and not taking advantage. You have no idea how many toes I pierced tonight just getting to you." Baby rolled her eyes, but grinned up at him. "Would it be bad to say I love you? I know we don't have a name for this thing, you and me, but... I really do you know. Not just because you're hot or you hang out with me, or any one thing, I just... I dunno, it just happened. I love you."

"I don't think it would be bad," he said thoughtfully, almost drawling, as he laced his fingers with hers. "Because I'm pretty sure I love you too. Just because it wasn't that same- sudden- jarring thing that happened with Sanji doesn't mean it's not the same thing, just... different. I don't think I'm explaining it right..." he shrugged. "I'm pretty dang sure this is what love feels like. If I'm wrong, then it's damn close."

She smiled, hopeful and soft. "I think you're explaining it just fine. I don't think it always has to be a thunderbolt, I think maybe it can be like a bonfire, slow to start until the right stuff catches. Yeah?"

His smile was crooked and honest, and his eyes were soft. "Yeah. That's a good way to describe it."

"I think this is where you kiss me." Baby bit her lip, leaning into him to turn the right corner instead of letting him cross the street.

He purred agreement, coming to a stop entirely to kiss her gently, as tenderly as he could, cupping her face with both hands and inhaling her.

One more time she wrapped her arms around his neck, feeling one of her feet come up behind her, all of her weight against him. It felt a little different from their other kisses, not that they did anything different, but she melted into him, for once not caring if he discovered her wig, or smudged the concealer over her eyebrows. Nothing else mattered right then. Only him. Only them. And she was immensely grateful for waterproof mascara as she felt happy tears on her lashes.

He was all too happy to meet her in her joy, align her body against his and giving her every emotion of care and love he could wring out of his soul. He wanted her to feel exactly how much he
cherished her, and know she was safe with him, always.

Only the fact that they were right down the block from their apartment building broke them apart. That and a subtle buzz from Baby's boobs.

She giggled, "My phone. I couldn't bring my sash so I stuffed it in there so I had it in case I needed it. No pockets y'know."

He chuckled. "Fair enough. They should come with pockets really, like jeans. Do you need to get that?"

"I'll get it after we say goodnight. It won't hurt to wait a few minutes. Since we're here." She glanced at the door to the building, and gave a wave to Brook, who was just entering his apartment as she spoke.

Zoro gave his landlord a nod, and smiled a little regretfully, "Guess this is it then. Talk to you tomorrow?"

"Definitely." She popped up to kiss him again, and physically pulled back so she wouldn't be tempted to follow him down to his apartment. "Goodnight, Tiger boy. Be good."

"Goodnight, Baby." And he laughed, "No promises."

Chapter End Notes

songs: The Crow and the Butterfly by Shinedown and The Sex Is Good by Chasing Abel
Law’s costume
Baby’s costume
Zoro’s costume
Chapter Summary

Never read the Youtube comments.

Chapter Notes

Everybody asking about more Dom!Luffy and ASL love? This one's for you. ^_^ 

Beta'd as usual by my ducky! And Jenna comes back as Ace for this one. Enjoy~!

**Edit:** OMG I CAN'T BELIEVE I MISSED IT!! By two days! Oh well... as of this update, Stay With Me is officially ONE YEAR OLD!!! HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!

*throws confetti*

Wow... I can't believe I've been working on this fic for a whole year. o.o Time flies!

Especially when you forget to update for weeks at a time! I mean what!? >3>

It took all of Ace’s willpower not to slam the lid of his laptop closed.

It was a good laptop. He didn’t want to lose his temper and break the screen or keyboard. Or to throw it. Though the temptation was very, very great. He could still see the words floating around in his mind’s eye. Those *damn words*. About *his* lovers. The slurs and stuff he could deal with. They always had. ‘Faggot’, ‘dickmuncher’, ‘pansy’—that was one that followed him all the way up from his school days, even the shit like ‘y’all need Jesus’ and ‘gay I could handle but do they have to be sluts too’. He could just shrug them off. People couldn’t understand and refused to even try, so it wasn’t worth getting worked up over. But... It was the ones about... how Law should have his licence revoked, how he was obviously unstable, and calling back to his addiction problems. And how Luffy should be fucking put down like an animal—

Growling, he shoved the lid back open and quickly closed the Youtube tabs, causing the comment section to disappear from sight. He should’ve known better than to read them. Number one rule of the internet: never read the Youtube comments. But did he listen?! Really, did anyone?

Fifteen or so minutes later he appeared downstairs and stomped towards the bar, sketchbook in hand and dressed up in the nicest, cutest clothes he could find in his rage. Everyone from the party had cleared out, which meant he had the place to himself for the moment, and that was just fine, as he really wasn’t looking to be sociable. In spite of how he’d dressed up. He went all out, from his favourite black leggings and knee-high, lace-up heels, to the short grey dress with sleeves that flared around the wrist—he’d even attempted to cover the dark shadows under his eyes with make-up. His head may have been completely messed up, but that didn’t mean his appearance had to be.

He needed to find a way to distract himself. With Luffy out training, Law off with his band after their show, and Sabo... somewhere, he figured the best way to do that would be to try and design what next to do on the mural.
At some point he got up to stand in front of the patch of wall where it was going to go, chewing absentley on the back of his pencil. The sketchbook was covered in doodles and notes, a couple of diagrams that hadn't helped at all, but he still wasn't any closer to finding the picture inside the canvas—or in this case, the bricks.

He’d just reached up to stick his pencil behind his ear so he could turn to a new page when he felt arms around his waist. The hands, wide with long fingers, rubbed at his lower belly possessively, sparking a tingling warmth that derived from a secret about which only one person knew. They pulled at him, pressing a hot chest and hips against his back. Lips found his shoulder where the dress exposed the line of muscle, and teeth followed shortly thereafter.

A soft growl rumbled across his skin, "Y'know dressing like that ain't fair when I'm tryin' to focus on the fight next week, Ace."

A shudder raced down Ace's spine and he instinctively pressed back against the heat. He almost dropped the sketchbook, his fingers having lost their ability to function along with his thoughts. He swallowed thickly, having to work his mouth for a moment before he could speak.

"L-Lulu..." His brother’s name was a sigh, “Sorry..." Then he let out a shaky laugh, trying to compose himself, "Was entirely unintentional... mostly..."

"Really now? Cuz your body says you're lying."

Those teeth worked at the line where his collar usually sat, nipping a progression of steadily bigger bites around his neck, and the hands massaged his stomach, rubbing gentle circles into a place he only had psychologically.

Again, the sketchbook was almost fell. A loud, shaking breath escaped Ace and his eyes fluttered shut, as he arched his neck to give Luffy more room. "W-well... happens sometimes... Subconsciously and the like..."

The younger brunet's mouth made his way to his brother's ear, and murmured, "Instinct."

At the same time, his arms tightened, one of the few times his real strength was defined on his skin. Ace could feel the rest of his body language was sturdy and open. Possessive. Dominant. Luffy had come in from his spar still humming with the thrill of the fight to come exactly one week from now. He’d seen the older male dressed to the nines, and decided he'd answer the silent call, unconscious or not. It meant, short of pulling his safeword, Ace had no choice in the matter—as per their agreed upon negotiations.

"Y-yeah." Ace could only gasp out. The arm holding the sketchbook fell limp by his side, his fingers caught in the spiraled wire were really the only thing keeping it from finally falling to the ground. He repeated breathily, "Instinct..."

Someone took the book with a chuckle, and someone else muttered something about getting lucky, but the fog of subspace was already beginning to cloud his higher functions. He could just let go. Lu would take of it. Safe. Stable. Protected. The world could just disappear for a while and it wouldn't even matter because Luffy had him.

Nami’s voice was the last thing that pierced through his growing need. "Oh dear Lord... AT LEAST TAKE IT UPSTAIRS!"

He felt more than heard Luffy's laugh, and then they were climbing the stairs. How had that happened? It didn't much matter when his Dom's mouth was back on his neck again. They barely
made it into the bedroom, kicking Sabo out in the process ("Hey! Luffy!"), before the Dom spun him and caught his mouth in a soul-devouring kiss, hands under his skirt with his thumbs still teeing that raise of muscle below his belly button.

Ace kept his mouth pliant beneath Luffy's, the skin of his stomach trembling at the touch. His hands moved to hold onto something—just… just to hold, and he let out a needy moan.

Luffy pulled back with a bite to his bottom lip, "Bed. Collar. Now. Take off what you don't want ripped."

Ace nodded and gave a soft breathy noise. He thought he could do without the dress being ripped, it was one of his favourites after all, and he set about pulling it off with shaking fingers. But despite it being one of his favourites, he still just dropped it carelessly on the ground, and set about to look for the collar.

The Dom waited, watching deliberately. He didn't actually say anything or make a sound, but the weight of his eyes, was like being sized up, tracing the way his submissive's body moved as he followed the orders. Heavy and hot, action held in tight restraint under an immense willpower that commanded obedience. No whips. No chains. No real restraints. Just the simple, black leather collar, one that had been replaced several times in the five years that they'd been doing this. And it was all Luffy needed to start the Scene.

The collar found and held almost reverently, Ace turned to face Luffy slowly. He kept his eyes lowered as he unfastened it and began to put it on. In spite of the fact that they'd been shaking earlier, now, his fingers were steady, anticipation coiling in his core to keep him from messing anything up. The black leather was placed on securely, and that done, he looked to Luffy.

"Good boy." The younger brunet smiled, reaching a hand out to stroke through the other's hair. "Tell me explicitly what you want."

Ace's eyes fell to half-mast and his lips parted as a massive shiver ran down his spine. He didn't… almost too far gone to… really wasn't sure, but... "I wanna… be wrecked..."

Luffy stepped up to him, took his chin in his hand, hard and demanding. "Safeword is meatballs."

At his brother's nod, the Dom shifted his grip to the D-ring on the front of the collar and manhandled him around onto the bed. He gave a shove, bouncing Ace in the middle of it, his legs wide and his body open. Two hands on the freckled sub's leggings tore the crotch seam wide open, and Luffy looked up as if to say 'told you I'd rip it' without actually speaking. Then he bent as though he was going to dive straight into the older brunet's groin, only to stop and bite down hard on the inside of one knee, his hand holding the leg to keep Ace from pulling away.

A loud yelp escaped Ace and his muscles jerked, his hands fistig in the sheets below. In the back of his mind he'd been counting on Luffy ripping the stockings—as much as he complained at times when it happened—he always found it insanely erotic. Like the play of raw strength with which the younger brunet could exert his control was an aphrodisiac.

Playing on the symmetry kink he knew his sub adored, Luffy repeated the bite on the other side, bruising both legs equally. Then he reached down for a handful of Ace's genitals. Not fully hard yet meant the width of Luffy's palm covered dick and most of his scrotum in a steady hold that had the flesh pulsing against his. How he was able to reach the box under the bed from that angle was just another Rubberman Mystery™, but while he looked through it on his lap he kept up a flexing of the hand holding his prize.
Ace dug his heels into the mattress and ground against the hand with a low moan. He clutched the blankets even tighter, the tremble in his body growing.

The first item the Dom brought out of the collection was a bright red ring, silicon, with a tiny motor at one point. He drew Ace's cock up straight, lined up the ring with his glans, and looked up to capture his brother's eyes while he rolled it on. The bump out of the motor nestled cleanly into the triangle of muscles just under the base of his sub's prick. He flicked his thumb over the switch, then sat back to watch the older brunet squirm as vibrations rocketed through his core.

There was some satisfaction in the way he moaned that held Luffy's attention for a little while, watching half-hard dick swell to full erection in a rush of blood that had to be dizzying. Especially as with the ring on, all he could do was get harder; there was no way for Ace to calm down until Luffy wanted him to. Which brought a smile to the Dominant's face as he turned back to sorting through the other toys.

The artist's head fell back into the softness of the sheets and he bit down on his lip. He tried to stretch his legs out wider, hips moving in small jerking motions, trying to just get more of that stimulation, and he let out a soft begging noise.

"Shishishi. You're so needy today. Hmm." Luffy considered. "Beads, or plug?" He gave Ace a once over, then smiled—that grin should not have been at the same time that dark and that hot! It just wasn't fair! "Beads."

"P-please?" Verbally begging, Ace nodded eagerly. "L-Lu..."

"Hmm?" The Dom asked absently, as though he wasn't paying absolute attention to every detail and nuance of his sub while he lubed up the string of anal beads.

"Just—Ngh! Please..." Ace whined again, glazed eyes watching Luffy's movements. "Please hurry..."

"Mmmm. No."

The word was stated simply, and Luffy gave him no opportunity to object, pressing the first in the string against his pucker with a fingertip so that the ball itself worked him open gently with the room temperature lube.

"Hhh..." It was just a barely-there-stretch, but it was something, and it was good, and Ace clenched his eyes shut and tried—and failed—not to beg again. "P-please Lulu..."

"Nope." The Dom fed the next one, a tiny bit bigger, with the same slow, steady pace that he knew was twisting his brother's pleasure like an agonizing corkscrew.

"L-Luu..." Ace groaned, back arching a little and need becoming just a little more desperate.

"Uh uh." Again the younger shook his head, beads three and four increasing the stretch without increasing the speed by much.

Biting down on his lip harder, the submissive squirmed. His head fell back again as he moaned even louder than before. Another 'please' escaped, though it was garbled, unintelligible. Words were becoming difficult to form coherently; pleasure flooding his system in a just-out-of-reach fashion that drove him crazy. His hands twisted the blankets with frustration.

"Nah."
Luffy actually grinned, leaning over him as he popped the fifth bead inside along with his finger. He wiggled it a little to make his brother squirm, rolling the balls with the tip so that all of them twisted inside of him.

"Nnnngh!" Ace's entire body jerked and he pressed back against the finger desperately. He didn't even try to speak again, much too absorbed in the sensation, his stomach clenching with the need to release.

Two more beads and the Dom actually put his other hand on the tortured erection leaking sluggishly past the ring. "Wanna come don'tcha?"

"Y-" Ace couldn't get his mouth to work, and he swallowed a mouthful of saliva quickly. "Y-yes, yes, please, L-Luffy..."

Giving a pull on his shaft and a tug on the beads, the younger smiled that dark grin again, "Then come. Now."

His toes curled and his back arched and Ace cried out loudly, his muscles tensing up and jerking almost painfully. That pleasure surged through his veins, white hot and glorious, his vision filling with stars. His cry died down to a soft whine as that... that tension still remained, his body still aching, and he blinked up at Luffy through a thin film of tears.

The Dom's grin was lopsided, higher on the side with scar under his eye than the other, "Didn't I just tell you to come?"

He squeezed, stroking and stimulating the nearly purple shaft, while at the same time he popped bead number eight all the way up to the back of Ace's prostate—meaning number nine was pressed teasingly against the entrance alongside Luffy's knuckle.

"L-LU—NGH!"

Ace's cock was twitching, aching, hurting... so oversensitive, he needed to come, needed it horribly. His passage clenched around the beads, the one against his prostate sending sharp shocks of pleasure to pool right in his tight stomach. His hands clawed at the sheets and his toes curled, false climax threatening to blow him further open.

"L-LU!"

Luffy’s smile dropped into something predatory. Being ambidextrous had its advantages when it came to Dominating his submissive older brother. It meant the hand on the beads could work numbers nine and ten into Ace’s twitching sphincter, while the other could coax another shuddering not-exactly-orgasm from the tortured phallus. He rocked up onto his knees, tugging on both in opposite directions to the tune of Ace’s whining.

Then he clamped his hand tighter around the older’s dick, and pulled a little harder on the string of beads. Pop! Pop! Pop! In gentle rhythm, Luffy removed them, feeling a spasm run through Ace’s body with each successive bead.

Mind entirely blown, the freckled brunet could only arch and writhe for more. The ring on his cock kept him stuck in that desperate almost-ecstasy, and he felt achingly empty after the string was gone. It hadn’t even been that large but that was how high his tension had been to begin with.

Then Luffy made it worse!

His toes curled so hard they cracked, and his hands found the headboard of the bed in a death grip,
as his hips flew off the blankets in a trembling arch. The pressure teasing his stretched hole promised he’d be filled and by GOD he wanted it NOW!

Overheated and flushed bright pink, the lube on the end of the plug sent contrasting cold through him. It only lasted as long as it took for Luffy to insert it, but OHHHH THAT WAS GOOD!!!!

His voice came out as a keening whine, the curve of familiar silicon pressing against his prostate in a steady throb with the beat of his racing heart.

He felt more than saw Luffy hovering over him, and couldn’t coordinate kissing for anything. There were touches on his ribs, and teeth on his nipples, pulling at the bars. Then Luffy’s voice was in his ear, whispering horribly filthy, dirty things, playing on kink he never told anyone about. Images conjured up behind his eyelids—when had they closed?—flooded his system with a special kind of pleasure that couldn’t come from physical stimulation. Except that—

OHHHH LUFFY!!!!!

Now that he was as high as a kite and strung like a longbow, the Dom removed the plug with a swift, if controlled, jerk. Ace screamed, another almost-orgasm ripping through his overworked system. The come on his groin was nearly clear, barely clouded anymore, and he was crying. Still, so close! He needed!! And his Dom heard it loud and clear in the way his muscles shook, sweat-slick skin flushed hot. His voice was hoarse and raw, begging for it, just like Luffy wanted to hear.

He extracted himself for just long enough to roll Ace up onto his side, all jelly-limbed and lost within himself. The dildo was special, modeled on his own dick, and fed through with a Cum Tube. Filling the reservoir would take a few minutes, so the Dom pulled his submissive against him, playing with his nipple piercings again, and sucking on his ear to keep him from drifting away. One eye on the syringe and using his knees to prop the thing up, he whispered encouragements he knew Ace couldn’t hear.

The submissive himself was long gone, whimpering and pleading for something he couldn’t articulate well. His eyes rolled up to meet Luffy’s and he tried to raise his arm, only for the thing to not want to move. A spark of panic cut through the fog all at once.

Luffy was right there, “Shhh, hey. I’m here. You’re just tired. See look.”

He pulled the other’s arm up so he could see that his fingers were responding as he wanted them to, just sluggishly thanks to the intensity of what they’d been just doing. Ace could feel the pain beginning to seep into the joints, and he relaxed again, letting his brother manipulate him.

“Continue?” Luffy asked, placing a soft kiss on his jaw.

Ace nodded, “Yynnn…”

He’d started to drift again, so the younger took his chin in his hand, “Hey. Look at me.”

“Nn?”

“What’s your safeword?”

Ace blinked, thoughts slow and heavy, “Mmmmmntbllls.”

“Say it for me again.”

“Mmeetbulls.”
Luffy’s expression was unyielding but encouraging. “Once more. Lemme hear it.”

“No.”

“Alright.”

“More?” Clear enough to feel the emptiness inside him sharply pressing against the residual pleasure, Ace rolled his hips back. The ring on his cock kept him hard and heavy, though not as desperate as before the moment of panic.

Luffy grinned, now that he knew his sub was alright, “Definitely. You’re nowhere near wrecked.”

“Rawr.”

Instead of answering, the Dom grabbed a handful of his brother’s ass, pulling the cheeks apart so that his pinky and ring fingers slipped into the stretched sphincter. Ace gasped at the sensation, cock twitching, and Luffy shifted his grip to gather some of the mixed come and lube on his other fingers. He pushed all four of them against the ring of muscle at once, though only three popped in without resistance. His submissive whined, trying to push back against him with exhausted limbs, and he circled his hand reclaiming the stretch from the plug before.

Once Ace was again a jabbering mess of ‘yes, please, more, come, now, Lu’ and Luffy could fit all four fingers inside him up to the knuckle, he pulled back, enjoying the jerk and spurt of come in reaction. Then he lined up the prepped dildo. The pucker kissed the silicon head, like it was only the previous orgasms that kept Ace from seating himself on the toy all at once.

But the Dominant brunet couldn’t have that!

He took his time, letting a little of the internal cumlube leak out to ease the dildo’s progress into his brother’s tunnel. Inch by torturous inch to make up for the lost desperation from before. He lined himself up, heedless of how the lubricants and bodily fluids would stain his shorts, and rolled his hips in time with his hand as though he was actually doing the fucking Ace wanted so badly. He pulled the other tight against his chest as the toy was fully seated, worming his other arm between his brother’s side and the mattress.

The Rubberman’s hand, hot and heavy, slipped over the base of Ace’s belly, rubbing with a certain kind of gentleness that tripped all the right wires! He arched into the touch, fucking himself on the phallus in his ass with the motion.

Over and over, up and down, in and out. Luffy knew just how to fuck him! The dildo flexed just like the real thing, especially with his Dom controlling it. The hand on his stomach kept him from bucking too far away. Oh deeper! Yes! More! He couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t… ahhhh, more!! OH GOD LUFFY MORE!!! And something pulsed into him, thick and hot, just as the younger brunet whispered in his ear again.

“I’m sure it’ll take this time.”

Ace cried out again, lost in a sensation of white, like the explosion of a snowbank across his vision. How long it took him to come back to himself, Ace didn’t know. He inhaled sharply first, slightly startled that reality had reasserted itself, and he shivered, his nerves oversensitized and raw in the best
way. Jelly-limbed, burning muscles, scattered thoughts… oh yeah, he was thoroughly wrecked, just like he’d asked. He heard a thumping sound under his ear. It took a minute to register that it was a heartbeat. Blearily, he looked up into Luffy’s face.

“Hi.” His Dom’s smile was wide and happy, relaxed.

Fingers ran through his hair, and he tried to get his mouth to work. The words were there but he couldn’t quite remember how they went together or what his tongue was supposed to do when he was doing it. So all that came out was a garbled, hoarse mumble of nonsense that somehow conveyed exactly what Luffy needed to understand.

“Shh.”

Nodding, he gave up. Focusing instead on the feeling of safety and peace that the lingering clouds of subspace left in his psyche. This was the one time when his anxieties didn’t bother him. Nightmares weren’t real. Teach had never existed. And the world just didn’t matter. All that mattered was Luffy, and the fact that nothing could hurt him as long as Luffy was around.

Eventually, the younger brunet spoke again, “I saw what you were reading earlier.”

“Hm?”

“The comments. I know. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Nnn!”

“It doesn’t! They can’t stop me from fighting. They can’t stop Law from being a doctor! And they can’t break any of us up! Remember what I said when we first started this? Nobody else matters. This is between you and me and Sabo and Traffy, and that’s it. Nobody else! I’m going to be Supernova! And there’s nothing a bunch of haters on Youtube can do about it! Even if they boo and throw things at us, I’m going to be Supernova!”

Luffy spoke with such conviction it was impossible for Ace to do anything but agree—just like the first time. So he nodded, lifting exhausted arms around his lover’s waist to hold him tight.

“I’m the man that’s going to be Supernova!”

It was a while later that Ace registered he had passed out, and he only knew that because he was thrown into wakefulness by Sabo banging the bedroom door open. The blond was wild-eyed, his hair a mess, and his clothes half-disheveled. He clutched something Ace couldn’t make out next to his ear, and just as he was about to put it together logically—

“Luffy! Law’s on the phone! There’s been a fire!!”
Chapter Summary

They say admitting you have a problem is the first step. Nobody mentions how hard it is to admit something's wrong, especially when you're trying so hard for nothing to BE wrong.

Chapter Notes

OTL I fail at keeping up with this. I SWEAR IT'S DONE!! I JUST HAVE TO GET OFF MY REAR AND UPDATE IT!

Anyway, FINALLY you guys get to see what Sabo meant at the end of the last chapter. Also, the knives mentioned in this chapter are SUPER expensive, like OMG I think I'd die if anyone ever bought me this set. And I'd never use them! I'd be too afraid of breaking or blunting them. x.x

Getting home Saturday night and stripping down, Sanji felt an immense weight lift from his shoulders. He was tired, but felt good. Eating with Zoro, being with Zoro—as Baby—was like everything that was wrong in the world was made right again. He didn’t understand it, but he felt it beginning to bleed over. He hadn’t been lying when he said he’d been thinking about the Marimo all day. Even when they were fighting, he wasn’t able to stop the crawl of want that dried his mouth. He supposed that was why he’d done what he had, but ohhhh it had be fun!

He spent a couple of minutes leaning against the door of his apartment, just replaying the party and the stuff that he’d done! His lips still tingled and the butterflies in his stomach threatened to fly away with him. Playing with fire, he was. And he knew it. It didn’t stop the grin spreading stretching his cheeks as he pushed off the wall though.

After his shower, he flopped onto the couch, immensely grateful that tomorrow was Sunday. AKA his day off, as Nami had closed the Sunny every Sunday since Yubashiri’s death out of respect for the bouncer who’d lost her. He sipped a bottle of water, delaying taking his bedtime meds because for once he felt like being lazy. He was feeling good, in spite of having been dressed as a woman for most of the day, and had no desire to just pass out, as he knew he would if he did take the pills.

Idly he played with his phone in the blessed silence. It had been a while since he’d heard anything from That Person. He’d worn fifteen of the fifty dresses. He had seen neither hide nor hair of Pearl either. Which was something of a feat, given that the man was nearly seven feet tall and insisted on wearing as much of his namesake as he could. Sanji wondered if he should risk texting That Person about it.

Before he could though, the device went off. Not the doorbell that was His ringtone, this was a tinkle of harpsichord notes that brought equally a sweet smile to his face, and a twist of guilt to his stomach.

[Just got done with the band, was hoping you’d still be up.]
“I’m bushed from being out all day, but you could come here if you want. I wanna ask you something.” He typed, chewing on his lip.

If they were going to have the conversation, it needed to be in person, and if he was going to continue to see Zoro as Baby, Law needed to know about it. At least… insofar as the idea of him dating someone else as well. He really hoped that things weren’t going to blow up in his face. He was just starting to feel like he might have a chance at fitting in at the Sunny.

A few seconds later the chimes came again.

Sanji texted him back an answering heart, then forced himself to get off the couch to unlock the door.

It was ten minutes later when Law, burdened with a heavy-looking shoulderbag and two tall, steaming cups of Koala’s best mocha, entered the apartment. He was exhausted, that much was clear, but at least he didn’t have the air of murder hanging about him anymore.

“Good show?” Sanji crossed the distance between them and leaned up to welcome him with a kiss. Then he took his caramel mocha.

Priorities!

Law chuckled, “It was fun, sang one of Dad’s songs, met Zoro’s girlfriend, was nearly mobbed by fans on the way out. But… yeah, I guess so.”

The blond whistled, “Geez. And I thought things would be easy without me! What’s this about Zoro having a girlfriend?! I thought the mosshead was ace.”

“Heh.” His boyfriend didn’t justify that with an answer, choosing instead to toe off his boots and hang up his jacket.

The bag, it turned out, weighed a great deal, as it THUNKED! on the carpet when he took it off. He gave a grunt picking it back up again, and it made an even louder THUD on the counter of Sanji’s kitchen island.

“Ohhhkay…? I’m game. What’s in the bag?” Ever curious about things that came near his sacred space, the younger man hovered, sipping his latte, and peering around his taller partner’s arm.

Law chuckled at him again, and turned to catch him around the waist for a nuzzle into his cheek, “You’ll see. But you said you wanted to ask me about something. Let’s get the ‘talk’ out of the way first.”

The brunet’s fingers played at the hem of Sanji’s sweatshirt, tracing the cradle of his hipbones gently with his palms over the curve of muscle just below the Savate fighter’s belly button. His ‘core of power’ so to speak. But it gave a different feeling than normal. This felt like what Law was actually caressing was deeper than that… smaller than that… something that wasn’t supposed to be there because men didn’t have them.

So, Sanji squirmed out of his arms, giving his own nervous laugh. “It’s nothing major. Well, I hope. Or at least, it’s nothing bad. I don’t think it’s bad. It could be, I guess. Depending on how you look at it, but I don’t mean it as anything bad. You’re wonderful and I care a great deal about you, and I don’t want to lose you over this, but I sort of have to know what you think about it because I’ve
never done anything like it before. And I just—mmph!”

“Just spit it out, Kitten.” Law smiled when he pulled back from the silencing kiss.

“That’s not fair you can do that.” The cook muttered, blush across his cheeks, and he was rewarded with another laugh as the doctor took his tired body and his own latte over to the couch to relax. Sanji followed, trying not to be either nervous or pouty.

“So what is it?”

“Well you know how you have Luffy, and Ace, and Sabo?”

“Yeah. Though technically you have them too. We sort of come as a packaged set. Limited edition D boys, collect all four. Hee hee.”

Sanji curled up on the opposite corner of the couch, holding his mocha with both hands between his knees. “Well, would it be okay if I…?”

Law raised an eyebrow when he trailed off. “If you?”

“Um… Not that the other three aren’t great! I just…”

“Oh!” The surgeon relaxed visibly and smiled more broadly. “That’s adorable.”

“What? What’s adorable?! Don’t laugh at me, you prick! What’d I do?!” Sanji swung out with a foot, gently, to prod Law’s thigh with toes, decidedly not pouting. “Bastard, it’s not funny! I thought you were gonna be mad!”

“Nah. Not about NRE.”

“NR—what’s it?”

“NRE. New Relationship Energy. It’s what we have, assuming you haven’t grown bored with me already.” Though he was smiling, there was something in the dark man’s gold eyes that was just a tad wary.

“Oh! No no! I love hanging out with you, and this is fun! Really! I care about you a lot. It’s just there’s this guy.” And there Sanji couldn’t help the way his mask slipped a bit, a smile Law had never seen before hiding at the corners of the cook’s mouth. “He’s sweet, and honorable, and funny, and oh God I sound like a girl with a crush! Kill me now!”

Shoving the pang of worry aside, Law pulled the blond’s hands away from his face, laughing again, “You are though.”

“What?!” Sanji went wide-eyed.

“So did Law. “What? No! No, not a girl! Never a girl! I mean you have a crush! On this guy you were talking about.” The doctor shook his head, hard, and pulled the compliant other into his arms to hold him close. He rocked them gently, murmuring into his hair. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. It was a stupid slip of the tongue; I swear I don’t think of you that way.”

Several shuddering breaths later, Sanji pushed his boyfriend’s arms down from around his shoulders, though he didn’t move from his position across the doctor’s lap. He shivered, “It’s okay. I’m okay. I know you didn’t mean it. It was a gut reaction. I’m okay. It’s fine. You’re lucky you’re you and you’re sexy, but it’s fine.”
“Heh. I am so sorry anyway.” His voice was muffled from inside the fluff of blond hair where he’d buried his nose and chin. “I feel horrible.”

“I’ll tease you about it later when you’re sucking my dick. How’s that?”

“Oh my God, Sanji!”

“Hey it’s true!”

“That’s not fair.”

“Oh~?” There was a teasing note in the cook’s voice.

“Yes.” Law rolled his hips against his boyfriend’s ass, and the cotton of his scrub pants couldn’t hide the reaction down there. “Not fair.”

Sanji laughed, smug and shameless. “Aww, does the big bad snow leopard have a kink for dirty talk? I wonder if you ever let the others top. Hmm? I can guarantee you my dick is better. It vibrates!”

“SANJI!” His name came out strangled, and he laughed harder when the arms around his waist clenched tighter.

“I can’t help it! I had to distract you somehow.”

“That’s even more not fair.” Law pulled back so that he could look down into his boyfriend’s face. “You bring it up and now you’re gonna want to back to talking. Tease! Shameless tease!”

“Hahahaha! Aww you wouldn’t want me any other way and you know it.” The blond stuck his tongue out and reached up to play with the other’s chin scruff. His expression calmed, “But I wanna know what you think. Is it okay?”

“To what? Have a crush? Of course! I can’t control how you feel or think. Crushes and squishes happen all the time. Or is there more to this?”

“Well…”

A dark brow inched up the forehead above him, and Sanji winced involuntarily at the skepticism that could easily become anger. At least according to his mind.

“I met him a couple of weeks ago, while you were on tour, and we hung out.” He deliberately left out the visit to Caroline’s and the turn around show he got. “Then we started talking on Skype, and he’s funny and intelligent and I like talking to him. So we went out for food a couple of times because oh my God he is NOT allowed anywhere near a kitchen, he’d kill the whole building if he tried! He sent me a picture of his oven after an attempt and I about died on the spot! The poor thing!”

“What’s your point, Sanji?”

Oh, the full name. The blond winced harder. “I… I… I… I wanna keep talking to him. I wanna keep hanging out with him. I-I don’t wanna have to tell him I’m—“

Seemingly oblivious to the growing panic in the man between his arms, Law began to frown. “You’re what? Taken? Seeing someone? Off the market? Because last time I checked we were a thing.”

“I didn’t mean it like that!! I swear!! I just thought, because you have the others… and you didn’t
exactly come right out and tell me you were dating three other guys when we got together! If you remember, one of your other boyfriends was there for both our first and second dates!”

“I talked to them about it first!”

“But you didn’t talk to me about it! Not until after I had Ace kissing me in the Sunny, and we’d been dating for a week!” Sanji pulled away, back to the other end of the couch again, answering scowl for scowl.

“Who goes into a relationship expecting to be exclusive from the get go?!” Law shifted so they were facing each other head on.

“I dunno! Most people, I thought! And I’m not dating him or anything! We just hung out a couple of times!”

“Then what are you asking me!? If you can?!”

“YES!”

Unaware when he’d sat up so straight, Law flopped back against the cushions, frowning over the edge of his mocha. He really didn’t know how he felt about that. On one hand, yes, Sanji shared him with Ace, Luffy, and Sabo. But he’d always thought of that as being it. If any one of them picked up another partner, they were shared among the foursome. All for one and one for all, as Zoro had said the first night he’d met Sanji.

But was that really fair to the cook?

Sanji didn’t really have any kind of emotional attachment to the others. He respected Luffy as his boss, saw Ace as a friend, and Sabo? Law wasn’t sure they’d even had much communication together, let alone built any sort of relationship. It wasn’t what he had hoped when he’d first started dating the leggy blond. So… did he really have grounds to stand on if there was another person?

Tension hung heavy in the room between them, Law’s eyes kept flicking over the Sanji while he thought. The younger man was holding his latte so tight that his hands were shaking. His knees were drawn up to his chest, and he was staring at some invisible fuzzy on the couch cushion between them.

“Alright.”

The blond head snapped up, “What?”

“I said, alright. I’m okay with you dating him.” Law held up a hand to stop him from interrupting, “But if it looks like it’s going to go somewhere, you come and talk to the rest of us so we can all sit down and have the polyamory discussion with him like we did with you. At the very least so we can meet him. If he’s gonna get to have a piece of our cook, he’s gonna have to be someone we can all at least tolerate. Okay?!”

Sanji nodded quickly, not quite smiling, but unable to stay withdrawn now that he’d been given permission to pursue Zoro. “Okay!”

Law drained his cup and pushed himself to his feet with a groan. “Right. Now for your present.”

“What?”

The doctor turned after throwing out his trash to find his boyfriend leaning over the back of the
couch with the most adorable expression of lost confusion on his face that Law had ever seen. He couldn’t help but laugh a little, any leftover worry from their previous topic gone with a single chuckle.

“Your present. Or did you forget about the bag I brought with me?”

“But we just had a…”

“An argument? Yeah, so? Even if we’d broken up, I’d still give you your present. I bought it for you, that means it’s yours whether you’ve opened it or not.”

Seriously, Sanji was acting like he wasn’t entitled to it just because they’d come to words over something. It wasn’t even a particularly big fight either. In fact, Law didn’t think he could even call it a fight! He knew the blond’s temper, he’d seen it. Albeit not directed at him specifically, but it was still a volatile and untamed beast when the cook was really riled up! Hell, Sanji hadn’t even cursed at him! As far as the ‘levels of Sanji’s temper’ were concerned, this conversation didn’t even rank as high as his altercations with Zoro.

So, Law really didn’t understand the awed look he was receiving as he came back to the couch carrying the bag. He set it as gently as he could on the coffee table, though it still made a heavy sound when he sat back.

Then he took a deep breath. “Ok, before you open it, I want to tell you this isn’t any kind of bribe. You don’t owe me anything. Alright? I bought it because you’re worth it, and it’s something you needed.”

“Uhh… okay???” Sanji blinked and slid the bag over to his end of the table.

Law seemed to be on the edge of his seat with anticipation, even though he was the picture of relaxation, and it made the blond give him a wary sort of smile as he untied the handles.

Inside the shoulderbag was another bag, this one was nondescript and unmarked—the sort of dark plastic commonly found from high end medical supply stores that usually sold exclusively to hospitals. Which told him exactly nothing about the contents. So the plastic had to go next. When he revealed plain brown shipping paper underneath, he actually growled at his boyfriend.

The sexy bastard laughed and dug his keys out of his pocket to offer his Swiss army knife.

“Ha ha ha, Mr. Wiseass.”

“That’s doctor if you don’t mind. I have an MD in sarcasm.”

“Okay fine. ‘Dr.’ Wiseass.” Sanji stuck out his tongue and slit the paper with the decisive ease that only decades of practice with a bladed instrument could give him. He didn’t even look as he tore it away.

But then he did.

And OHHHH…

The box itself was white, fairly plain, and took up roughly a quarter of the table by itself. The lettering printed on it was what caught the cook’s breath in his throat. Big, black, bold letters across the very center of the top side was stamped the word: CHEFS and under it in slightly smaller bolded print: The Best Kitchen Starts Here. His fingers traced the letters a few times, and he looked up at Law in wonder, but could only hold his gaze for a second, he was too drawn to the box.
A strange calm fell over his hands, one he hadn’t actually felt in almost five years—not since he’d tested out of the Le Cordon Bleu program at Four Blues University. Though inside his stomach was in knots, and his heart pounded in his throat, his hands were still as stone. Steady with the blade and sure as they moved to the tape holding it closed.

He didn’t dare hope. It couldn’t be! Even Law didn’t have that kind of money! Not after the fiasco at the quarterfinals, and now that Sanji knew his history, this was insane! No! He was hallucinating! He had to be!! That was not a cherrywood lacquered box looking out at him from inside its shipping container, and that most certainly was NOT the pitchfork-shaped W burned into the lid of the absolutely pristine knife case—

OH GOD IT WAS!!!

He wasn’t dreaming! It really, really was!

He dropped the pocketknife, the shake returning to his hands for a moment as he was overwhelmed by the reality of what he was holding. Somehow, even as heavy as it was, it had migrated into his lap, and he was petting the lid, frozen from opening it.

OH it just WASN’T FAIR!

Steady as a statue he opened it and cried. The sound was high-pitched, nearly mournful.

They were perfect. Folded carbon steel, seamless from tip to end, molded to fit perfectly across his palm. They were beautiful.

He lifted one—the seven inch carving knife—from its velvet bed and spun it in his palm, watching the light flicker along the polished metal. It sang in his hand. The wind cut across the blade with a special whistle, and he flipped it up to press his thumb to it, watching the layers of skin split before the razor-fine edge. He stopped before it took blood, but his eyes never left the tool.

Beneath the first level were two others—twenty-five different knives, including one to replace the eight inch chef’s knife Pearl had destroyed, and eight brand new steak knives. Below that was a diamond sharpener, kitchen shears, and a matching fork, and upon further inspection of the case it could be folded around into a knife block that would hold all but the steak knives. They tucked into a small case of velvet that wrapped up into an easily contained bundle. There were two of those, the one and then the other was obviously designed for if he needed to transport the knives without the case-block.

Sanji was breathless. No. He was breathing, but he was speechless. His mind was blank. He just kept running his fingers over the handles; tracing the W symbol like he couldn’t quite believe it was really there.

“Kitten?” Law sounded worried.

“Hm?”

“Is that right kind?”

Was it the right—the blond head whipped up, tears running down his face, incredulous. The doctor looked nervous, perched on the edge of the couch, peering over the present as though he was afraid it was damaged or broken or that Sanji didn’t like it or something. The cook couldn’t get his mind around it.

“Y-you! Y-y-you c-come here and you’re so… and you don’t get m-mad at me when I tell you ab-
bout…and then you g-give me…” He sputtered, clutching the case to his chest, and squeaked out, “Wüsthof!”

“What?”

“Law, you bought me Wüsthof!” The cook’s voice was strained with emotion. “You didn’t… but you… and I just… Wüsthof!!! Law!!!”

Thoroughly nervous and quite confused, the surgeon coughed. “I’m assuming this is like what Ace did when I gave him the Cintiq.”

“Did he want to fall down on his knees and beg you why you thought he deserved such a gift?!”

“Well, he wanted to get down on his knees…” The corner of Law’s mouth curled up in a suggestive, if still wary, smile. “I did good then?”

“You did good? YES, you shitty bastard! Oh my God! Law! Wüsthof!!!” Sanji looked back down at his brand new knives, fingers going over the edge of the case again. “God, how much this must have cost?! I don’t wanna know! If I know I’ll just try to keep adding it up in my head until I’ve paid you back, and just… Oh my God, Law! You bought me Wüsthof! Alex doesn’t even have Wüsthof!! I don’t think the OLD MAN HAS WÜSTHOF!! AHHH!!!”

He clearly didn’t want to put them down, but found himself unable to keep a hold of them and do what he wanted. So, carefully—more to save the table than anything else—he slid the whole case back where Law had set it, pushing the bags and paper and outerbox off onto the floor in front of the TV.

Then he pounced his boyfriend, capturing his mouth and sprawling over his lap like a wild thing. His body didn’t even matter; his mind was so blown by the gift. He devoured the brunet’s snakebite piercings, sucking on the lip until it was bruised pink under the dark skin, then he bit and sucked equally dark marks down the chiseled jaw line, turning spots purple and brown skin nearly black.

All the while, Law could only bring his hands up to hold Sanji’s hips, and found himself swamped with sensation because the blond was grinding on him. Actually legitimately grinding on him. Some tiny voice said that it was probably an unconscious movement, since Sanji had never done that before, had actually take steps to not do that all of the other times they fooled around, but the pleasure assaulting his senses drowned that voice out between one delicious press of friction and the next.

His hands slipped around to roll and grope the fantastic ass above him, and answering fingers dove into his hair. His hat went flying somewhere, and he had teeth on his ear, tugging at his plugs insistently. Unable to help himself, he found the waistband of Sanji’s leggings and snuck under it to grab at real flesh.

The blond yelped, clutching Law harder, and consequently pressing his face into Sanji’s chest. Logic told him not to, but hormones told him do it! So the surgeon tilted his head just a little and bit down on the mound of flesh against his right cheek, sucking through the fabric of Sanji’s shirt.

Again the cook cried out, but his spine kept doing the curling thing that was dragging their groins together.

Law flipped them suddenly, the pressure between his legs too high for his thoughts to rein him in, and Sanji landed on his back on the couch cushions. The brunet expected to be stopped; only he found hands pulling at his shirt. He sat up only long enough to remove the clothing then dove back
into his boyfriend’s mouth. His hands found the other’s waist, skirting lightly up without pressure on the bruised side, and then back down again to push at his waistband. If clothing was leaving, then he didn’t want to be the only one getting naked.

He only had the forethought for a handful of words between kisses as Sanji lifted his hips, “You don’t… have… to… if you don’t…”

“Gimme!” Was all the blond said in return.

And that was the end of it.

The next thing Law knew he was kneeling above a person he was having a very hard time remembering to call ‘him’. Full, perky breasts; trim, athletic waist; and a thatch of gold stained dark with honey he could smell without leaning over. His eyes caught Sanji’s, and there was a moment of nervousness—something hidden in the bright blue depths of his eyes. Then the cook’s arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him down and smothering his mouth with kisses.

He tasted urgency, like Sanji was desperate for it, and he couldn’t help but answer it. If he’d been in his right mind, and not driven mad by hands on his dick, Law might have realized there was more to it. That there was something darker, more painful, about the flavor of Sanji’s kisses. Like the cook had made up his mind that he was going to give the surgeon something and he needed to do it before he lost his nerve.

The rest was a blur of hot, wet, tight, amazing sensations with those incredibly powerful legs wrapped vice-like around his waist, Sanji’s arms around his shoulders, and the blond’s mouth on his neck, sucking hickies to muffle his sounds.

When it was over, and he’d pulled out, some barely audible voice in the back of his head tried to cut through his afterglow to tell him things, but it wasn’t until much, much later that the spotted doctor actually put things together. Especially because as soon as their heart rates had calmed back down, and Sanji had pulled on a set of pyjamas, a blaring breep-breep-breep echoed through the apartment from the hallway outside.

“Is that…”

“I think that’s…”

“SMOKE!”

Experience had Law grabbing his bag, his pants, and his hat before shoving his boots on and turning to look for Sanji.

“What are you waiting for!? Go!” The cook growled, clutching his brand new knives to his chest.

That was all the spur the doctor needed.

They got out, down, and across the street before either stopped to think about what was going on exactly. A plume of thick smoke curled up from the window of 4A, the abandoned apartment across the hall from Sanji’s, and there was a shattering of glass right before the bright orange glow was visible in the normally dark windows.

“Oh my God!” One of the tenants from the second floor covered her mouth, shaking her head.

Sanji shivered. Law offered an arm, but the blond shook his head, clutching tighter to the rolled up steel and trying to pretend he wasn’t standing out in the middle of the street with all of his neighbors
and several co-workers in a spaghetti-strap shirt, pyjama pants, and Baby’s white-zippered boots—as they had been the shoes closest to the door when he’d gotten there after grabbing his knives.

He felt eyes on him everywhere. Unconsciously he hunched tighter in on himself, his mind running a million miles a second, as his body tried to process the onslaught of information it had been given in the last hour. Beside him, he vaguely heard someone talking in a deep rumbling voice, and it made him gravitate in that direction, playing on memories of childhood.

Law spoke with a couple of the EMTs that arrived moments later, organizing blankets for as many people as he could get, while the firefighters took care of the blaze itself. Out of the corner of his eye he caught his boyfriend standing near where Zoro and Smoker were discussing what had happened exactly. He took comfort in it because even if they weren’t on the best of terms, it seemed the blond had finally accepted the bouncer as nakama.

The sun was completely above the horizon by the time the fire was out and everyone’s statements had been taken. Those on the first and second floors were allowed to go back into their apartments as soon as the fire marshal left. The third floor had to wait for Smoker’s team to finish sweeping the apartment below the one that caught fire, but ultimately they were released without much hassle. Above that, however…

“I’m sorry, folks, you’re gonna have to find someplace else to stay for a bit until we get the mess cleaned up.” The cop addressed the exhausted group.

Sanji tugged the shock blanket further around his shoulders, “What about our clothes? Medications? Some of us have stuff we’ve gotta take every day.”

Smoker shook his head, “There’s an emergency clinic a couple blocks away, pharmacist there is Monet. Tell her what’s happened, she’ll be glad to give you anything you need to get through today and tomorrow.”

“C’mon, cook, let’s get you to the Sunny to warm up.”

“Don’t touch me, Marimo!” The blond snarled at his co-worker, vicious and defensive.

Law put up a hand to pacify the bouncer, “Kitten, relax. It’s okay.”

“Okay?! How is ANY of this okay!?” Sanji’s voice waivered and he shook his head. “No. You all go to the Sunny. I… I’m… I’ll figure something out.”

Zoro sniffed, “And where do you think you’re gonna go? The laundry room?”

“If I have to!”

Smoker shook his head, “The basement’s off limits for a couple days too, kid.”

“DON’T CALL ME, KID!” Sanji’s rage doubled, and Law physically stepped between him and the other two, though he was surprised to find Zoro back to back with him.

“Let’s just head to the Sunny for now, get you into your kitchen—“

“I don’t think he should be…“

“Leave it, Smokey. Trust me.” Zoro rumbled appeasingly.

Law nodded, his tone soft and placating, “Into your kitchen. Where it’s safe. Yeah?”
Like a wild animal, cornered and scared, Sanji’s eyes jumped from building to boyfriend to cop to Zoro and back again before he mimicked Law’s nod.

“There we go. C’mon. I’ll walk you.”

It was a little disconcerting when the blond flinched away from the doctor’s touch, but considering things Law didn’t put too much stock into it. He was far more concerned with getting the cook to the Sunny, and then hopefully upstairs and either onto the couch in the D brother’s living room, or into their bed for some real sleep. As strung out as Sanji appeared to be, that was the only thing the ER doc could think of to ease his stress until they could get him the refills for his meds.

And a binder. Or at least some real clothes.
19 November

Chapter Summary

The present is nothing more than a reflection of the past, built upon shadows. Even the stones of the earth can tell when you're lying to yourself.

Chapter Notes

Honestly, the hardest part of writing for me anymore is updating. I'm so sorry it's taken so long guys!

This is un-beta'd because my Ducky is out with a shoulder injury that keeps her pretty well occupied most of the time. I debated posting this for a while because I wanted to have it beta'd before I did, but ultimately, I'd rather you guys get to read it, regardless of any mistakes I've missed. ^_^

Small note though!!! We've added the "nightmares" tag as of this chapter for good cause! There are also mentions of past trauma, and a reference to Please Don't Let Me Dream. If you haven't read that one, then be warned, Ace and Luffy didn't have the easiest time growing up.

Neither did Sanji.

Also, for the folks looking for some ASL/Law/Sanji interactions, I hope this gives you an idea of how they all relate to each other and their beloved cook. ^_^ I'm actually almost sorry. lol

Her breath came in short gasps, the pain between her legs worse now than when she’d been torn in two. She couldn’t help it; she gripped her bruised and bleeding sex with both hands, stumbling through the back hallways. She could hear his heavy grunting behind her and knew that if she let him catch her again, she was done for.

Getting away from him had been more luck than skill, and it was all she could do to keep moving. She cast a glance over her shoulder and gritted her teeth, begging for a cigarette. The nicotine would take the edge off and let her concentrate. That didn’t make any sense, but her body craved it anyway, with knowledge that her twelve-year-old self shouldn’t know.

Not looking where she was going, she ran into the wall with an uncontrolled yelp as the corner of her bedroom door caught the lithe muscle of her bicep just where the bastard had grabbed her. She bit off a curse and forced herself to bounce off, bare feet slamming on the polished wood floor. If she could just get to her shoes, she could end the fucker’s life, but he’d tossed them overboard the first chance he got.

Something squished between her fingers and a wave of nausea passed through her. She choked on it, and called out, voice raspy and damaged from where he’d tried to strangle her, “SHIT GEEZER!”
From behind she heard the redoubling of his heavy footsteps, and forced herself further down the hall towards the old man’s office and sleeping quarters. She didn’t even know if he’d be there at this hour. Dinner was soon, and he might have already finished the counting for the afternoon. Though she never prayed for anything since that her mother died, she prayed now that he hadn’t gone down to the kitchen already.

Another stumble around the second corner in the upstairs hallway and she reached out with a bloody hand to grasp the doorknob just as heavy, calloused fingers clasped around her other arm.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Where was the Old Man? The Old Man was supposed to be there! He was supposed to kick through door!! He was supposed to—

She whipped around, screaming and flailing, trying to kick or punch or shove her way free. Free from meaty hands and arms! Away from black eyes—no, gold eyes! No! No no no! No! Not Law! It hadn’t been Law!

“NOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!”

Sanji shot upright into unfamiliar surroundings. It was dark, the kind of hazy light of sunset filtered through heavy curtains. The couch beneath him wasn’t his own. The blanket he was clutching wasn’t either. The pillows were the wrong shape. The fabrics were the wrong texture. The scents, the sounds, the colors! All of it was wrong!! Why were there stones everywhere?! Where were his DVDs? His TV? His coffee table?!

His breath was caught in his chest; he couldn’t make it actually take in any oxygen. His heart pounded in his ears. And he couldn’t seem to make sense of the thoughts racing through his head. Law? Sex? Knives? Fire? Rape? What? Too tight! Too close! Too far! WHERE WAS THE OLD MAN!

“PAPE!”

The scream threw Ace out of the not-entirely awake state left over from an episode. His own disorientation kept him from fully grasping what was going on at first. He stumbled into the living room, blinking blearily. Then his eyes lit on the cowering blond, and like lightning seeing his own face on someone else shot through the lingering clouds of fatigue.

“Sanji! Sanji breathe!” He kept his voice low, his hands up placatingly. The other flinched, hard, and when those wild eyes landed on him, the artist stopped moving. “Sanji, it’s Ace. Lemme help you.”

"Nonono! No!” The blond’s voice was high and tight, younger than it should have been.

He flailed, still caught in the grips of his nightmare, but aware enough to realize he wasn't alone. He scrambled off the couch, clutching the blanket around him in a tangle of limbs that would have dumped a less graceful man on his face. As it was the cook's insanely strong legs nearly took out the arm of the sofa, and he pressed himself tight against the short side of it, hiding.

If the threat couldn't see him, he was safe! That was what had always helped him before. Duck away. Get low. Hide behind the big barrels of water and cooking oil. He’d pass by, not see, move on. Sanji would be safe!

He whimpered softly, "Pape... Pape... where êtes-vous, Pape...”

Ace frowned, not liking this side of things much, and tried to think back to what the other had done
for him two and a half weeks ago. Talking? He’d held him, but that seemed like a very bad idea right now. Maybe just trying to draw Sanji out of his head would help break the panic cycle?

“Sanji… I’m not gonna hurt you. See? I’m… I’m not Pape but… maybe I can get him?” Thank Heaven French tended to use similar pronouns as Portuguese; he could gather that the other was asking for someone. “Can you tell me who he is?”

"Pape is his dad." Luffy supplied from behind his brother out of nowhere.

The cook’s panic and Ace’s response had woken even the heaviest of their quadrangle. His hair was sticking up in all angles, but far be it from his normal high-energy expression, Luffy’s eyes were hard and his mouth was set in a line. Ace knew his younger brother was probably chewing at the situation, trying to figure out what he could do to help, because things ran far too close to home for the Rubberman’s comfort.

Unwilling to spare a moment to reassure him, Ace was grateful when Sabo put a hand on Luffy’s shoulder. The younger blond lifted his chin at Sanji, “Go get him.”

And Sanji flinched. Peering out around the edge of the couch with wide, terrified, eyes, he took in Ace in the doorway, Luffy behind him, Sabo behind that, and... Law... he screamed, diving for the stairs that led to the bar when his eyes met his boyfriend’s. He heard them talking after him, but Sanji only had eyes for his sanctuary.

There may have been other people in the Sunny’s dining room, the cook couldn’t tell. His hands stretched for the door to the kitchen, and he scrambled passed someone carrying a mug of coffee that yelped as he skidded to the side out of the way.

"He's gonna bust the dishwasher again, Luffy don't!" somebody called, and the door banged open after him.

"St-stay away from me!! I-I-I... I-I-I..." Sanji was shaking, fighting off some internal process.

Luffy mimicked Ace's position from upstairs, not advancing, his hands up in neutral position—though the right one held a bottle between his thumb and forefinger. "It's okay, Sanji."

"Nonono! Nnngh!" The blond gagged, jaw snapping shut on his tongue.

At that point, Ace followed Luffy, manhandling the younger brunet back out of the room. “I got this.”

The brothers met eyes, and Luffy gave him the bottle. Law came up next to Luffy, his own expression painted with hurt and fear. With a new target, Luffy could leave Sanji to Ace, and wrapped his arms around Law. Sabo joined them at the bar to wait, while Ace returned to the kitchen.

He spoke softly, and moved slowly so that Sanji could watch him, "It's alright… You're awake, and whatever that nightmare was, it's over. It's not happening now. You're safe. You're at the Sunny."

"The..." Wild blue eyes darted around the kitchen, the familiar surroundings helping almost more than the artist's voice, "The Sunny?"

"Yes, the Sunny." Ace nodded to confirm it.

"Ace...?"
Sanji blinked, squinting like he couldn't get the other to come into focus, but he continued to try and look around anyway. His breathing was still too fast, and he was sweat-drenched. His left leg was at the ready should he be startled again, but there was some clarity in his voice now. He appeared to be registering the real world somewhat.

"Wh-where is he?!"

"Where is who?" Ace kept his hands up and visible.

"J-J-J—"

He couldn't seem to get the name out, so the cook shook his head, which proved to be a bad idea because the next thing Ace knew Sanji was clutching the side of the dirty dishes sink, throwing up into it. When his body stopped dry heaving, he wiped his mouth on his arm.

"Merde." He drew an unsteady breath, shivering in aftershocks, and let himself glance over at the other man—again squinting, "D-Do you have m-my... L-Law should've... n-n-need to... merde."

Ace had taken the beginnings of a step forward when Sanji started hurling, but restraining himself from much more, he held up the bottle he'd taken from Luffy. "These? If you want me to open it I can."

"Y-yeah... water-r first though..." The cook pointed to a cabinet off to the side. "C-cup?"

“Alright,” the brunet used deliberate movements so as not to accidentally trigger a relapse into panic. Glass of water obtained and bottle opened, he spoke again before actually doing anything else, “I’m going to have to step closer. Okay?”

“Y-yeah.” Sanji shivered again, gripping the edge of the sink tightly. His jaw was still clenched.

“One?”

“No. T-two.”

Taking the glass, Sanji's first step was to wash his mouth out. Then he took a small sip to test if his stomach would let him take his meds. It was risky, the taste at the back of his throat where he couldn't remove it threatened to undo him again, but by the time he had gathered enough of himself to hold his hand out for the pills, several more sips of the water had stayed down successfully.

Ace shook out two pills, putting them in Sanji's hand with a firm press of skin on skin. If there was one thing the narcoleptic knew about panic from dreams, the more real he could make coming out of it, the better! Separating that the nightmare hadn’t been reality was absolutely paramount to breaking the terror's hold on the cook’s mind.

And since Sanji gripped his wrist with white knuckles, taking the medicine with his other hand, Ace felt a boost in confidence that he was reading the situation correctly. They stayed like that for a few minutes. Sanji holding onto Ace, and slowly drinking the water to keep the pills down. Their eyes were locked, as though beyond the physical anchor, the artist was creating a mental anchor as well.

He spared a moment to thank himself for remembering to wear his beads to bed. Red jasper always helped him ground his thoughts, and it appeared to be doing the same for Sanji now that they had come in direct contact with each other. He even offered a small smile, and was rewarded with an answering quirk of lips.

After a short time, a gentle knock came on the kitchen door. Sanji gripped Ace’s arm tighter, his
head snapped around to the sound, hyper-focused, but it didn’t open.

Instead Sabo’s voice came through the crack, “Ace, Sanji, you guys okay?”

“We’re getting there.” Ace called back, and offered a hopeful smile at the cook, “Yeah?”

“Y-yeah.” The blond shivered, forcibly pulling his attention away from the door.

“Think we can come in?” Sabo’s tone was hopeful.

Ace looked to Sanji, who nodded once. “Yeah.”

Luffy was the first one through the door. He bounced across the room intent on hugging his cook, but froze arm’s length away. The blond was shrinking back away from him. Letting his head fall to the side the captain frowned, mouth screwed up to the side. His brow furrowed deeply and blood made the whole of his cheeks and forehead turn red—his ‘thinking’ face.

“Wh-what?” Sanji growled at his stammer, his teeth chattering.

“Can’t hug you when you have boobs.”

“WHAT?!”

“Cuz I’ll touch ‘em, and you don’t want ‘em touched.” The captain explained succinctly.

Sabo facepalmed behind him.

And Law asked, “Why don’t you ask him if you can hug him?”

“I think no hugs right now, Lu.” Ace returned the cook’s squeeze, noting how tense he was at hearing their doctor’s voice.

“Mmmm. ‘Kay.”

The captain clearly wasn’t pleased with this decision, but he respected it, hopping back so he could lift himself onto the counter against the wall next to the door. He didn’t quite huff. Still, his expression wasn’t happy.

Sabo moved a little closer to the cook and the artist, uncertain but concerned more than anything else.

“Can you talk about, Ji?”

“Don’t push him, ‘Bo.”

“I’m just askin’!”

Sanji shook his head, “I… it’s not… what he d-did… I can’t…”

“It’s alri—“ Law tried, but Luffy cut him off, deadly serious.

“He raped you.”

The cook flinched, and all three of the others shot looks of exasperation at their youngest. The captain showed no remorse, staring Sanji down with a challenge written in his eyes. The way he said it meant he already knew, but he was daring the other to lie to them.

Ace stepped in when the tension got too heavy. “I was raped when I was seventeen.”
He could feel their eyes on him, but his focus was Sanji’s feet. He watched the older blond flex his
toes like he wanted to kick something, a shiver of tension traveling up through that insanely powerful
calf in response to his words.

He took a steadying breath before continuing. “They caught me after school. Trapped me in an alley.
There were like four of them. I had a… an episode… they call it catatonia. Knew what they were
doing, just couldn’t stop them. S’why I don’t like to be alone.”

Sabo appeared next to them with steaming cups of chamomile and mint tea. When he’d gotten the
kettle, the water, or the tea bags was uncertain—especially as all three things were on the other side
of the hyper-aware cook—but the warmth was a welcome break in their consciousnesses. Ace
glanced up then to note that Law and Luffy had their own mugs, and the younger blond was moving
back over to the stove, where he apparently had one of his own. Then the artist’s eyes drifted over to
their newest nakama.

Sanji clutched the cup of tea, still shaking and cold. His feet felt numb—that hadn’t happened in a
long time. Everything hurt, and was too bright. His head pounded, but the warmth of the mug was
slowly leeching into his arms. The smells of the kitchen—his kitchen, his domain, his sanctuary—
filtered occasionally through the internal pull, and he licked his lips.

“I…” God, his voice was so hoarse, “I was twelve. He was… a… a dishwasher. Came from Thriller
Bark—I mean, Baskerville. He… liked to touch me.” Sanji shuddered, “Every time he saw me he
told me I was a-a pr-pretty y-young l-l-l…”

“Take your time.”

He shook his head, forcing it out. “He said I was a pretty young lady. Said I was growing up so fast.
I should enjoy my girlhood.”

Nausea washed over him, making him clench his teeth. Ace’s hand was on his back, and it helped a
little. It gave him something to focus on through the shadows of the past. In his peripherals, Luffy
swung his feet, still sitting on the counter, and his expression was still serious. Sabo was moving
around slowly, cleaning up the tea kettle and things. That left Law sitting on a barstool in front of
him, quietly and not too close, holding a mop bucket just in case. The quiet solidarity reminded Sanji
of his brother and father.

It gave him the strength to keep going.

“When I started… developing…” he couldn’t say it, “you know. He started getting bolder. Groping
me outright when Pape wasn’t looking. Alex caught him once, but he just got sneakier. I was
learning from Pape then, menial stuff. How to fillet fish and julienne vegetables and storing herbs for
the best flavor, and other stuff like that. So it meant I was in the pantry a lot.”

Law winced, “That’s where the claus—“

“Yeah.” Sanji’s tone was hard, then he looked away, “Sorry.”

The doctor waved him off, shoving his own personal feelings down.

“Is that where…” Sabo asked, leaning on the counter nearby.

The older blond closed his eyes and hung his head, “Yeah…”

“It’s not your fault, Sanji.” Luffy spoke for the first time since Ace’s confession. “You didn’t ask for
it, and you couldn’t say yes even if you had the choice.”
“…I know…” The cook sighed, sipping at his tea.

Ace squeezed his shoulder, “You don’t have to go on if it’s too hard.”

Sanji shook his head. “No, you need… Law needs to know. Cuz it’s not his fault either, and I feel horrible.” His voice wavered, “John, the dishwasher… it’s his fault. I know that. I spent a long time blaming myself, but I know better.”

They waited in silence until Sanji was able to continue. He outlined how he’d been victimized, forced in both ways, and how afterwards there had been an investigation where the man’s body had turned up on the bank of the East Blue, sliced from groin to throat through his sternum. Some suspicion had been cast on Zeff for it, being as vengeful as he was for the crime against his son. But the medical examiner declared the slice impossible for someone to have made with a knife, too clean and quick to have been anything but a motor. Only the slightest tint of color to their mother’s favorite santoku told Sanji and Alex the truth of what the Old Man had done.

By the end of his story, the cook was drained entirely. His Ativan had helped take the edge off as best it could, and his energy was utterly gone. So it was with bleary eyes he glanced around the kitchen. A spot of bright green caught his attention above the stove, and he frowned. Setting his tea mug down on the counter, he stood to cross the space.

“What’s that?”

All eyes turned to it, and Ace flushed bright red. “Ah… You… weren’t supposed to see that until later. Heh.”

“What?”

Law chuckled, “It’s a gift, Kitten.”

As it had every time the doctor spoke, Sanji’s attention jumped to him with a sharp wariness that he couldn’t control. Thanks to the shitty nightmare, his body was associating Law with John. He felt his breath pick up again and he closed his eyes. Breathe in… 2… 3… 4… and out… 6… 7… 8… and repeat, over and over until his heart stopped again and he could look at his boyfriend, apologetic and biting his lip. So, he tore his focus back to the green thing just too far away to be seen clearly without his glasses or contacts in.

He had to pass Law to get there, and everyone in the room pretended not to notice the way he flinched. Reaching up, a tiny playing card fluttered down onto the prep counter. “It’s the—“

“Ace of Spades!” Luffy grinned.

Sanji looked up, “Ace?”

The artist flushed brightly again, “It’s jade. It’s for peace and serenity. To balance things out with your stomach and… um… open your heart to… um… love and friendship. If you carry it with you it helps to drain irritability and grants tranquility of mind.”

“So, it’s like a worry stone?”

“Yeah.”

Sabo piped up then, smiling brightly, “It helps with dreams too. I write some of my best stuff when D’s got jade on the wind chime.”
“I, too, find an easier time sleeping and working when Ace’s gifts are out on my desk.” Law spoke quietly, trying not to disturb the still touchy blond.

Sanji still flinched, but he didn’t focus on it, choosing instead to hold the stone to his chest, “Thank you, Ace.”

“Eh…” The freckled brunet grinned, blushing. “Everybody gets stones. I just hoped you’d find it.”

“Why?”

“Cuz he gets all squirmly and adorable when he’s thanked for it.” Luffy laughed.

At Sanji’s confusion, Ace explained, “It’s not really like I want to give them. The stones tell me to give them away. And who to give them away to.”

“Uhh… what?”

Sabo shook his head, “I don’t get it either.”

“I imagine it’s something like the way he pulls inspiration from thin air.” Law set the bucket down and took his own, now cold, cup of tea.

“So, you’ve got a thing for stones?” Sanji lifted an eyebrow at Ace.

The artist nodded, “When nothing else was really working, Lu took me up to this little occult shop and it just pulled me in. I can’t really explain it right. It’s just… a thing. The crystals all… it’s like energy? I can feel ‘em. And, like, the way you just know what spices to use, I get that same feeling with stones. I’ll see a crystal or a pebble or something and just know that it needs to go to someone, or at least that I need to bring it home with me.”

Luffy laughed, clapping his feet together, “Yeah! Like this one time, we’re up at Sharky’s—“

“Madame Sharley!”

“—and he just wanders over to these pendulums—“

“Pendulums.”

“—like he’s possessed or something. And he stares and he stares and he stares, right? He’s just standing there, and I’m trying to get his attention cuz the cabbage guy was across the street and he’s ALWAYS got the best bacon…” Luffy drooled a little, “SANJI MAKE BACON!!”

“FINISH TELLING THE STORY!!” Sabo smacked him across the back of the head, but the captain only laughed.

“Right! So, Ace reaches out totally ignoring me,” just like the youngest was ignoring the way his brother was getting more and more embarrassed by the narrative, “and picks up this crystal clear… uh… crystal thingy on a string—“

“It was a chain, Mugi.”

“—with these rainbow beads on it—“

“Chakra stones.”

“—And it starts going crazy!! Spinning in circles like WHEEEEEE!!” Luffy rotated his hand
clockwise with his index finger pointing down towards the floor, imitating the pendulum.

At Sanji’s confusion, Ace piped up again, “When a pendulum answers a question, according to metaphysics and energy work, it will draw a circle at the end of its string or chain. Clockwise for yes, widdershins for no.”

“And it was going crazy!!” Luffy repeated, still grinning and spinning his hand.

Ace blushed harder, “I’ve never had one do that before.”

“It was remarkable.” Law commented, sipping on his tea in spite of the temperature. “I witnessed the phenomenon. Sabo accused—“

“I asked! It wasn’t an accusation!” The younger blond pouted.

“Fine, asked then,” Law chuckled, “if Ace was making it spin, and when he didn’t believe that he wasn’t, insisted on trying it for himself.”

“Again. Asked!”

Sanji looked from one to the other, unconsciously rubbing his jade between his palm and his thumb, “So, was he?”

“No.” Ace answered. “When Sabo took Crystal she—“

“STOPPED COMPLETELY DEAD!” Luffy crowed, and both Ace and Sabo blushed hard.

Law nodded, “It held perfectly still. Sabo attempted to spin it, but each time it stills again almost immediately. It was most curious. I have yet to find a scientific explanation for it.”

“That’s cuz there isn’t one!” Ace defended. “Crystal’s energy syncs with mine. It’s why I wear her almost everywhere I go.”

“Sorry, but… her?” Sanji asked, a little lost.

“Oh… yeah… I had to buy her, I didn’t really have a choice after I picked her back up again and she started swinging yes more and more emphatically as I held her.” The artist shrugged, still blushing a little, “And after I got her home and played with her a little bit, she told me her name was Crystal and she was female.”

“What he means is he swung the thing around until it landed on a name in a damn baby book.” Sabo huffed.

Luffy snickered at him, teasing, “You’re just jealous cuz she still won’t answer for you.”

“Does… she… answer for everyone?” the cook caught the lighthearted attitude change, and was smiling a little.

“Usually.” Ace bit his lip to hold back his own laughter. “She just doesn’t like being questioned about things that people already know the answer to.”

“How else am I supposed to test the stupid thing!!?” the musician threw his hands up in the air.

Law chuckled, “It rarely answers me either.”

“It’d help if you two acknowledged her.” The artist muttered.
Sabo gave an exasperated huff, “It’s a rock! How does it have a gender?!”

Ace shrugged.

Biting his lip, Sanji drew their attention with a noise, “Um… well, gender is a social construct, so… if things like colors can be called ‘girly’ or ‘masculine’, why can’t a stone give off a gendered energy?”

“THANK YOU!”

The cook smiled more widely at his fellow survivor, and both the doctor and the musician squirmed a little while Luffy laughed outright like he’d tried to tell them that before.

“I have to admit though, I’m a little curious as to how accurate she is, if it’s… something you’re willing to share?” Sanji asked.

“Share?” Ace tilted his head, “Oh! Yeah, sure! One sec.”

The freckled brunet dashed off out of the kitchen with a certain vibration in his steps, and his excited moving around reached their ears through the floor above.

While he was gone, Law cleared his throat, “I don’t mean to bring the mood back down, but Kitten?”

“Hm?” The cook affected nonchalance.

“Was your nightmare… I mean… does it have anything to do with…?” the doctor trailed off.

And Sanji looked away, tracing the rim of the mug, “Yeah…”

“Take all the time and space you need to deal with it, alright? I’ll be here when you’ve sorted it through.”

“…thanks…”

Sabo reached over and squeezed the other blond’s shoulder, and he’d have said something but Ace danced back into the kitchen carrying the bracelet Sanji had seen him wear that very first Painting Day after he’d been hired. It drew his attention then, and did so even more now.

“Oh! What a truly stunning lady!” He swooned for her, as he did all female-gendered persons who came into his purview.

Ace giggled, “Isn’t she!?”

He held the lavender crystal point out by the matching heart at the end of the chain. Predictably it was gently circling clockwise in his hand, and seemed, on each pass, to be reaching towards Sanji. The cook found himself lifting his hand to take her before he even consciously made the decision to do so. A thought popped into his head, unbidden and confusing, and the crystal swung harder. He frowned, and so did Ace.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Well, something that hadn’t been a problem for a while, and now is becoming one.” He hedged his answer, not wanting to admit he was thinking about his purging and whether there was a specific cause to it.
He found his grip slipping a little, catching on the dark red bead at the very end of the string.

Ace’s eyebrows went up, “Sacral chakra. Well, whatever it is, it’s got something to do with sex and the root of things. I’ve never seen her act like this, she’s got a real message for you, Sanji. Any idea what she’s trying to tell you?”

“Wouldn’t you know better than he does?” Sabo grumbled, slightly put out that the pendulum was reacting for the cook.

“Not usually.” Her owner shook his head, “Usually the person asking the question is the one to make the associations with the signs that they’re seeing. I can hazard a guess based on what I know of what Crystal’s saying, but ultimately, only Sanji knows what his question was and how what she’s saying pertains to it.”

“It’s like fighting somebody for the first time.” Luffy chimed in, “I can watch their moves with other people as many times as I want, but until I’m in the ring with ‘em, I can’t get a feel for how they’re gonna fight me.”

Law brought the attention back to the cook, “So, what is she telling you, Kitten?”

This time, Sanji was able to cover his gut reaction with a sniff and a shake of his head, “I have no idea, I didn’t even think of anything specific. My mind’s still mostly mush after the nightmare and everything.” He handed her back, a little regretful, “Sorry.”

Ace gave him a skeptical look, but didn’t say anything about it. He focused instead on clasping Crystal around his wrist. Once done he took up his tea cup and shifted his weight to head for the door. Sanji took that as a cue to move beyond Sabo to his stove, and begin pulling pans out to heat up.

“I know it’s a little early, but… anybody hungry?” And the easy way he looked at Luffy meant he knew the answer to that question without even asking.

“MEAT!” The bouncy captain threw his hands up into the air.

A collective chuckle travelled through them at the youngest’s enthusiasm, and the other three took it as a cue to get out of Sanji’s way. Luffy bounced off first, calling for Usopp and Nami who were sure to be out in the bar somewhere. The artist was next, intent on getting some sketching in before food was ready.

“Oi, D, lemme see the stone again…” Sabo trailed off, following Ace out of the kitchen.

Law lingered, wanting to ask for reassurance that they were okay, but worried about upsetting the careful balance his boyfriend had been able to obtain. He coughed lightly.

“Could you get my binder from upstairs, hun?” Sanji cut him off, in the process of cracking eggs into a stainless steel bowl. “The others’ll be coming in for coffee soon and I don’t wanna be caught in just my PJs, yeah?”

“Y-yeah. Okay.”

The blond flashed him a winning smile, as fake as it had been over the phone after his last panic attack. “Thanks, love.”
Three days later, Sanji leaned heavily against the wall of the Sunny, his smoke hanging from his lips without being lit, and he rubbed his hand across his stomach. Twice that morning he’d found himself bent over, first the toilet upstairs, and then just a few minutes ago with the sink. He felt horrid. Like he could fall over at any second. His eyes just didn’t want to stay open, and his binder was making his chest ache.

He exhaled through his mouth, taking the cigarette in the hand not resting on his middle. He was still slightly queasy and the Zofran wasn’t helping anymore. It had stopped helping about a week ago, if he was honest. At least not since Wednesday, with that horrid nightmare, after having sex with Law dragged That Night all back up again.

It wasn’t fair really, but he was actually sort of glad the team was leaving today. He hadn’t been sleeping well with Luffy, Ace, and Sabo in the next room, and he knew that was just contributing to whatever this shit was that was kicking his ass. He hadn’t even had the energy to be on Skype at all, let alone do anything else.

Fuck, he just wanted a nap!

Sliding down the wall became a thing and he didn’t try to stop it, just letting gravity take a hold of him until his knees were propped up and his arms were resting on them. He pulled out his phone, re-tucking the cig between his lips.

“Hey, you busy?”

[Never for you Baby.]

[What’s up?]

He hesitated, knowing Dr. Kaya would be mad, Zoro would be mad—at both of him, Law would be hurt. Fuck, this polyamorous shit was hard as hell. But this was… And… He couldn’t help it.
“Just feeling like shit at work.”

[Aww and you thought of me to make you feel better.]

[Baby, you’re so sweet. I love you.]

“I love you too.”

[So what’s wrong?]

“I’ve been throwing up all morning. Think it’s a bug or something.”

There was a heavy pause where Sanji could feel the anxiety at the edges of his mind, clawing at his thoughts, making him doubt. The growing sense that he shouldn’t have said that. Then…

[LOL and here I thought you actually had a real problem.]

[C’mon, Baby, you know you shouldn’t eat so much, you’ll get fat again.]

Fucking ouch! The cook had to actually bite his cheek to keep from giving himself away, and he felt a heavy sob building in his chest. His hands were shaking when he responded.

“No no, this is different. I’ve been good. You got the pictures. You saw. I never finish anything more than half.”

[Baby, you know how easy it is for you to get distracted when you’re out with someone.]

“I know, but I swear I haven’t been doing it on purpose.”

[You didn’t do it on purpose before either. You couldn’t help yourself, remember?]

[You get lost in the food and the next thing you know you’re blowing chunks and your ass gets jiggly.]

[Now what’d we say about texting me with stupid problems.]

“N-n-not to…” He couldn’t see the screen for the tears.

[There’s my good girl. You just keep to the rules.]

[And don’t bother me with that puking nonsense anymore.]

[I’m tired of hearing about it.]

“Oh-Okay.”

[Bye, Baby. Next time you get groceries, wear the pink one with the slit up the side.]

[I want a panty shot.]

“Yes, Ghin.”

[Good girl, Baby.]

His phone went silent and Sanji leaned into his knees, shoulders heaving in silent sobs. He wasn’t
making it up! He wasn’t binging and purging again! He was being good! He was following the rules! Why didn’t Ghin care!? And why did it even fucking matter?! WHY WAS HE CRYING!!? HE WAS A MAN FUCKING DAMN IT! HE SHOULDN’T BE CRYING!!!

A hand on his shoulder made him lash out with arm and leg on that side, “AHHHHHHHHHHH!”

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!”

The seventeen-year-old busboy/doctor-in-training came into focus when he blinked a few times, and Sanji stopped screaming. He pushed away from the wall, shoving his phone in his pocket. Once on his feet he wiped his face with the back of his sleeve.

“Sorry, Chopper.” He mumbled.

The sandy-haired boy stepped up to him, worried, “It’s okay, Sanji. But what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing. You’ve been out here for an hour.”

The cook felt the weight of having slacked off in his duty to feed the crew settle on his shoulders. “I’m so sorry, Chopper. Lemme just… hang on, I’ll fix something. I’m sure there’s still enough time. I can make scrambled eggs and—ugh…” The thought of that made his stomach churn dangerously. “O-or maybe toast and bacon. Or… um… something… Just lemme think for a sec.”

“Sanji, are you feeling well?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. I just… haven’t been sleeping right. Since I’m not in my own bed… you know… the fire and all.”

Chopper frowned and closed the distance between himself and the taller man. “You don’t look so good, and your breath smells of vomit. I know I’m not licensed yet, but I am studying to be a doctor, Sanji.”

There was something in the way the younger kept repeating his name that made the blond think that maybe the medical student knew more than he was letting on. A small light of realization clicked in his head, and heavy dread bubbled up in his gut.

“I… said that last part out loud, didn’t I?”

“You’re a man, Sanji. But even men cry sometimes. It’s a human response to being stressed, and if you have a virus, compounded with not sleeping well, it is very likely making you more emotional than you’re used to. And given the emphasis with which you put on that particular word, I do have to say that perhaps the stress of being ill is putting an abnormal strain on your mental ability to deal with your dysphoria as well.” Chopper’s tone was soft, reassuring, and professional—he really would make an excellent doctor someday. “Maybe it would be a good idea to give your therapist a call? They may be able to at least give you a confidential ear to help you with today?”

Sanji shook his head, shoulders slumped, and exhausted. “I just saw her on Thursday. I don’t…”

He couldn’t keep up the act. He didn’t have the energy for it. If Chopper knew all of that, it didn’t really matter if he tried to pretend he was okay; the little doctor-to-be would know he was lying. So, he leaned back against the wall again, letting his eyes fall shut, and unconsciously rubbing at his stomach again.
After a few seconds of watching the cook, Chopper tilted his head. “Well… you should really see a licensed doctor for a diagnosis. If you need antibiotics or something, you should be talking to someone who can actually prescribe them. Want me to get Law? I think he’s upstairs packing again.”

“No. I don’t wanna bother him for a cold. I should be fine. Just sleep a lot while they’re gone, and take a cab to see Dr. Kaya if I’m still feeling like shit next week. Okay?”

“Hmm… do you wanna go over your symptoms with me anyway? I really think you need to see a professional about it, but I could probably tell you whether you actually will need to see one or if you can just sleep it off. Cuz unlike Zoro thinks—”

“I know, I know. Not everything is solved by sleep and meat.” Sanji chuckled. “Alright, Doc. Other than insomnia kicking my ass, and puking too much for my Zofran to stop it, my chest and hips hurt. Not like pinched by my binder, or bruised by a Marimo, or even deep inside. It’s more like… ugh… I hate talking about them.”

“Your breasts?”

“UGH! Yes. Why do you medical people always insist on using specific terms? Can’t you just get what I mean without having to say it out loud???” The cook pinched his nose, and yawned widely.

Chopper appeared to be writing something—what was it with doctors and notes too!? Jesus!—and chewed on the end of his pencil. Both notebook and pencil looked like they would fit into one of the pockets of his cargo jeans. Then he looked up and flushed a little under Sanji’s stare.

“Eep! Uhh… I mean, other than aching, are your breasts tender? Sensitive to the touch? Moreso than normal. And your hips, do you mean like a pulled muscle, or something more like into your bones?”

“Yes. Yes. And hard to explain. It’s sort of like they’re pinched. Like I’ve got something on the ridge of each side pushing down on them.” He demonstrated with his hands at his belt. “And it doesn’t matter which way I stand or sit or turn, the ache stays the same.”

“Alright. Anything else?” Chopper tucked the pencil behind his ear, looking up at the cook.

“Nope. Not unless you count that crying shit.”

“That’s been happening more often? Other moods too? Anger? Joy? Things like that?”

“Uh… mostly the crying thing, and I’ve wanted to kick the shit out of the Marimo for three days, but I don’t think you can count that as new.” Sanji smirked, cigarette once again between his lips—if he didn’t light it soon, the filter would be useless from being wet.

The younger man nodded slowly, re-reading his notes. “One last question. And… I know it’s probably a touchy subject given your gender, but…” Chopper blanched at the arched, swirled brow, “Uhhhh… I just… need to know… um… when was your last menstrual period?!”

The end of that sentence came out as a single word, squeaked and hidden behind his notebook so that only his eyes and hair stuck out. Not that the notebook was big enough to hide him anyway, but still.

Sanji blinked, pushing away the involuntary shudder because this was a doctor’s examination. He used lighting his cigarette to delay for a moment. “Um, I think it was… about two weeks before I started here at the Sunny, so… about… a month, month and a half ago? Thereabouts.”

The little doctor-to-be popped back out from his ‘hiding place’ with a wide-eyed expression,
“Sanji… I need to ask you a couple of more sensitive questions. Is that okay? And remember I’m not actually qualified to give a diagnosis yet, so I could be totally wrong, but I just need to clear this stuff out of the way, and if I do it, you can take my notes to Law and he’ll follow up with whatever tests you need without having to put you through—”

“Just spit it out, Chopper.” Sanji exhaled to the side so his smoke wouldn’t get in the boy’s face.

“Right. Yes.” The other coughed out of reflex, looking at his notes so that the blush across his cheeks wasn’t quite so bad. “Are your menstruation cycles regular?”

“Fairly.”

“Are you on any sort of birth control or hormone regulating medication?”

“No.”

“Have you engaged in any unprotected intercourse since your last menstrual cycle?”

“No—wait! Yes. With Law. The night of the fire.” Sanji shuddered, wrapping his arm tighter around his body, and concentrating on his smoke.

Chopper blinked, with a small frown between his brows. “That doesn’t fit. It would be too soon, even if you had done so on the very first night you and Law got together. Was he the only one?”

The cook stilled. “Are you implying what I think you’re implying, Chopper?”

“AHHHHHH!! It’s just the most likely diagnosis given your symptoms! I could still be really wrong though!” The younger male squeaked, again hiding behind his notebook. When he wasn’t met with one of those lethal feet, he peeked up at Sanji’s ashen face. “If Law was the only one, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about. Was he?”

“He told me it a new kind. Ultra-thin, he said. I wouldn’t even feel it between us because of how amazing it was. And I was… I was so blissed out… I didn’t… he promised! He swore he wore one! He gave me his word he’d never do that to me!! HE PROMISED!!”

The tears were back, hot, angry, hurt, and quiet; the kind that meant Sanji was boiling over inside. Two seconds later he was whipping around and heaving on the ground, clutching his ribs and trying to swallow air through gagging. Chopper was there immediately, notebook back in his pocket, and he rubbed a hand down his friend’s back. The puddle wasn’t large, mostly stomach acid from having been purged twice before with little more than water to fill it, and now that it was over again, the cook was sobbing, wretched, body-heaving sounds. He wasn’t even aware of what the doctor-to-be was doing until another pair of hands were on his shoulders, hauling him back to his feet.

He swayed, dizzy, and leaned on the bony frame. His lips were cracked and quickly drying, his contacts… he didn’t know where they were, probably washed away from the crying. They loaded him into a car, it smelled vaguely of weed and resin, and his mind supplied: Brook. Then the next thing he knew he was looking up at an old Victorian style house in a neighborhood he’d never seen before. A glance at the street sign told him they were north of Drum Street, but that was all he could figure out before Chopper took his hand and helped him out of the car.

“Chopper,” his voice sounded cracked and hoarse, “where are we?”

“This is my grandma’s house. She runs a clinic on the first floor for people in your situation.”

If he’d been a little bit more put together he might have noticed the boy’s tone being apologetic but
professional. As it was though, all he could muster the energy to say was, “oh.”

“What stray have you brought to my doorstep this time, Tony?” The woman sounded hard, and looked harder.

Sanji barely resisted the urge to flinch. Though she was stacked like a platinum supermodel, her chin could have cut glass, and her eyebrow was colder than the North Pole. Her silver hair was held off of her forehead by a pair of sunglasses, and unlike when she’d appeared on TV she was dressed more casually in a track suit over a tank top with FBU’s logo on the front.

She raised one of those glacial brows at her grandson, “You know I only treat women here. If he needs an appointment he needs to call my office in the morning and schedule one, just like everybody else.”

Chopper shook his head, “B-but, Doctorine! He needs you!!”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” She snorted, taking a swig from what looked like a wine bottle. “He’s barely conscious, severely dehydrated, his binder’s too tight, and he hasn’t slept well in four days. So? How does any of that qualify him for my clinic?”

The little doctor-to-be fumbled pulling his notebook from his pocket, “He has acute nausea accompanied with vomiting, an inability to gain energy from restful sleep, irritability and mood swings, swollen mammarys, delayed menses, and we have reason to believe one of his sexual partners lied to him regarding contraceptives.”

For several moments, the elder doctor glared, eyes scanning Sanji like she could x-ray him with just her vision. She took another drink from her bottle, but never broke eye contact. Eventually she inhaled deeply through her nose, drew her mouth up tight, and exhaled with a weary shift to her expression.

“Bring him into the living room, Brook.” She turned her on her heel and marched further into the house, “You owe me a dime next time we see each other for this, just so you know!”

“Yo ho ho ho, anything for another glimpse at those pants of yours, Rhea!”

The patient tilted his head to the side slightly when Chopper helped him over to the couch. “How did…?”

“That’s a long, involved story I’d rather not think about too hard, if it’s all the same, Sanji.” Chopper blushed.

Swirled brows climbed into his hairline when Brook grinned at him, mimed smoking a joint, and wagged his eyebrows lewdly. Then the lanky hippie flopped into an armchair, his legs spread wide, and that same perverted grin on his face. The blond shook his head and resolved to settle into the cushions behind him for a while, fighting off a yawn.

“Alright, Mr. Man, gimme your arm.”

“Wait what?” Sanji blinked. Had he fallen asleep?

The actual doctor was sitting on the coffee table, one leg crossed over the other knee, rubber gloves on her hands, and a tourniquet between her fingers. She gave him a look like he was simple, and pulled his arm over to push his sleeve up as high as it would go.

“History of weight fluctuation. Cook or a knife thrower. Tried self-harm, but it didn’t stick. Poor self-
estem. Depression. Anxiety issues. Both probably linked to acute dysphoria. History of sleep disturbances.” She muttered while prepping his arm to be punctured. “Get in a lot of fights, kid?”

“I’m 26.”

Kureha leveled him with a look.

“Some, yeah.”

“You’ve got some good muscle development since you stopped purging on purpose. You’d have more if you gave up smoking.” She looked down her nose as she inserted the needle with no warning, popped a tube onto the end of the vacutainer.

Sanji winced, but said nothing as she took his blood, preferring not to comment on her entirely too accurate description of his life.

She clucked her tongue, untied the tourniquet, and disposed of the needle while simultaneously putting a cotton ball in the crook of his arm. “Sit tight, this won’t take more than a minute.” She stood, started walking off towards a set of basement stairs, and called, “CINDRY!”

“What’s she doing?” Sanji asked.

Chopper reappeared with a ginger ale on ice and some saltine crackers and shrugged, offering them. “She’s gonna run the tests I couldn’t do.”

They sat in silence for a while, Brook was dozing lightly in his chair, and after sipping down the ginger ale and nibbling on the crackers, Sanji found himself following the older man’s example. He couldn’t remember when he’d laid down across the couch, but it felt really nice. Soft, comfy, like the arms of a loved one. His eyes closed and images of soft green fluff made him smile. He sighed.

When he came back to consciousness, he heard voices talking in the background, muffled and distant. He tried to blink to clear his vision and remembered he’d lost his contacts sometime between talking to That Person and now. His chest hurt a lot. His binder was tighter than ever, but not in the unable to breathe fashion, in the squeezing bruises where there shouldn’t have been bruises way.

“Oh, he’s awake.” Chopper’s voice caught his attention, and the teenager leaned into his vision close enough to not be blurry. “Sanji, Brook went back to your place to grab some stuff like your glasses if you want ‘em.”

“Nyeh.” He tried, cleared his throat, and blinked hard, “I mean, yeah. Please?” He pushed himself up into a sitting position, rubbing his face in an effort to clear his head. “H’long was I out?”

“About four hours, hun.” Though her voice was softer, the brusque attitude Doctorine had mollified his reaction to the nickname. “You needed the rest, and you qualify to have it here if you ain’t got a better place.” She came over and handed him his glasses as she sat on the coffee table again. “You wanna take that binder off.”

It wasn’t a question, but Sanji nodded anyway.

“Boys, out!”

“Yipe!” Chopper scrambled for the stairs leading up to the second floor and Brook followed chuckling softly.

The blond was unbuttoning his shirt even before the last ‘yo ho ho ho’ had echoed out of the room,
“So how do I qualify, when I didn’t before?”

Kureha snorted, “That was before I knew you were pregnant.”

“What?!”

“I didn’t mince my words, boy. You heard what I said.”

“But—but how?!”

“I’m not your pappy, if you need a birds and the bees lesson at this point you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“I KNOW THAT GODDAMN IT!” He seethed, pulling the zipper of his binder down faster than he meant to. A seam complained. So he huffed, taking it and the shirt off more gently. It gave him the moment to catch his volatile temper, “I mean… well, no… obviously he lied to me.”

“Yeah. That’s another reason you qualify.”

“Come again?”

Kureha cleared her throat, “I run a women’s emergency help and wellness clinic. I take in women in abusive situations and give them the chance to get away from the assholes taking advantage of them. They can come in at any time, day or night, and I will always have a couch, a hot meal, and a free medical examination for them as soon as I’m around to give it.”

“But I’m not…”

She held up her hand, “I know. You’re a guy. As far as all of this goes, it just means you can’t stay here beyond tonight. As much as I’d like to offer it to you, the laws won’t cover it, and I’m not about to ask you to go back on your gender just because some politician can’t get it through his head that trans guys even exist, let alone that they need the same kinds of medical support as cis women. It’s shitty, it’s not fair, we’re fighting it, and for what it’s worth if I could, I’m sure you’d fit in real well with the girls upstairs. All of them have been where you are right now.” She sighed heavily, “But as it stands right now, I’d lose my funding if I let you stay.”

“No. No, I get that.” His tone was slightly more biting than he meant it to be, and he grit his teeth. “Trust me. I know how that goes.”

“The world sucks yeti balls, kid, but I can offer you prenatal care and some stuff to make it easier on you. That’s if you want to keep it. If you don’t, I can set you up that way too.”

Sanji bit his lip, resisting the urge to pull his legs up to his chest now that he was back in one of his favorite hoodies. His mind was somehow blank. Not a thought to be found. Numb and clear.

“I… I don’t know…” He felt lost.

“That’s alright too. Let’s play it safe for now, and you can talk to me if you make a decision that means we change how we work with this, alright?”

“What do I need to do?”

“Well, first, give up the smokes. If you decide you’re keeping it, they’ll give you a whole host of trouble you really don’t need. I’ll give you some gum, and a script for the patches to help you quit.” He nodded absently so she continued, “Next, you’re gonna get me a list of your meds, cuz some of
‘em aren’t good for the bean. Again, if you’re keeping it, you don’t wanna hurt it. Then, you—“

“Hurt it?! Why… why would I hurt it!? What’s it done?! It’s not its fault! W-why would I want to…? I couldn’t! What if it’s a girl? I couldn’t!” Sanji’s eyes went wide as the shock began to wear off around the edges, and the implication of what Kureha meant by not keeping it started to sink in. “No no no! It didn’t ask to be conceived! I… I couldn’t! It’s not! Oh God! No!”

“Hey! Hey, kid!” She snapped her fingers in front of his nose. “Hey, listen to me. Whatever you choose is your choice, okay? Keep it, don’t keep it, whatever, just don’t jump into this decision with two feet without thinking about it. You’ve got a right to carry that bean to term and raise it, just as much as you’ve a right to have me refer you to a colleague of mine that’ll make this whole thing seem like a nightmare. You’ve got a long road ahead of you no matter what you choose. I’m just here laying out the options.”

“O-okay.” He swallowed hard, nodding with less confidence than he wanted to have.

“Now, Tony tells me you’ve got an appointment with your shrink coming up. Good. Talk this over with her. Kaya’s a good doc. She interned for me during her residency. But you gotta be honest with her. You gotta tell her you were raped.”

“Wait what?!”

“Rape, huny. It’s what this was. No matter how nice he was, or how much you think he loves you. He had sex with you under false pretenses.”

“No, I know what rape is.” He growled in a way that made her eyebrows jump up.

“Oh boy. Didn’t see that one. You’ve got that under a nice lock and key, you do. Well, alright, lemme explain a little. You know the violent kind. The kind where you’re taken forcibly and they—“

Sanji hissed, his jaw clenched, “Your point!?”

Kureha hummed, “The other kind is worse. He lured you in, got to know you, earned your trust—quite a good deal from the sounds of it—and convinced you that he’d never lie to you or hurt you. I dunno how, I don’t wanna know. The more I know about it, the more I’m gonna want to look up some old friends to deal with it. So don’t tell me. I tell all my… patients that. But the fact of the matter is, huny, he manipulated you into having sex with him. He told you he was wearing protection and then fucked you without it. He lied to you. You’re knocked up because he didn’t tell you what was going down. Would you have consented to unprotected sex with this guy?”

“No!”

“That’s why it’s rape.”

“But I don’t… he loves me.”

“Oh, huny.” That time her voice and expression fell completely. “If he loved you, he would have given you the option to say no. He didn’t. He took it from you.”

Sanji felt very cold. “But…”

“Look, stay here tonight. I won’t say anything. The girls won’t say anything. You’re safe here. He can’t find you here. I’ll talk to a couple of my contacts and see if I can’t find a place where you can stay until you make up your mind.” She reached over and patted his knee. “You just get some rest. Leave everything to me.”
Then she left him alone with his thoughts.

He curled up on the couch under a blanket he hadn’t noticed before, tucking his feet up near his behind. Everything Doctorine had told him circled around in his head. He didn’t even have the option of thinking about going home. It was just natural that he stayed there, and if he was honest with himself, he really didn’t want to go back to Luffy’s couch either.

Almost belatedly, he pulled out his phone, shooting off text messages to Ace, Law, and Nami that something had come up, he wasn’t feeling well and was staying with his brother for the night. To Law and Ace he included an apology that he wouldn’t be there to send them off this time. And he sent an email to Dr. Kaya explaining where he was, why, and could she please, maybe, come to him tomorrow instead of their regular appointment? Because he had a lot of stuff to talk about, and really didn’t think he was going to feel up to dealing with the public so soon.

Then he pulled up Skype, for the one person who both drove him mad, and made the sun shine brighter than anyone else.

-- BabyLoveCook [BLC] began skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 18:45--

BLC: i know ur still at work
BLC: but i gotta talk to u
BLC: i
BLC: fuckin enter
BLC: i'm pregnant
BLC: it’s not urs some dude from before i met u
BLC: he lied to me
BLC: told me he was wearin a rubber but he didnt
BLC: i'm scared tigerboy
BLC: please answer soon
BLC: DX

-- BabyLoveCook [BLC] ceased skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 18:57--

An indeterminate time later, Sanji opened his eyes to a hot bowl of Terracotta’s chicken noodle soup, his meds, and an overnight bag on the coffee table. There was a note from Dr. Kureha about which ones he should avoid taking, and an extra one she said was a vitamin that he needed to start taking. He pulled the table closer, so he could sip the soup without moving from his nest, and pretended that the fogginess of his glasses was from the steam of the soup.

-- ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] started skyping BabyLoveCook [BLC] at 03:23--

TSW: I'm so sorry I wasn't on sooner
TSW: Where are you
TSW: Are you safe?
TSW: Tell me how can I help Baby
BLC: idek
BLC: and im not allowed to say
BLC: its one of those hidden for ur protection type places
BLC: deals with girls like me i guess
BLC: so stupid
TSW: You are NOT STUPID.
TSW: Get that into your head right now
TSW: You were not the stupid one, he lied to you about wearing a rubber
TSW: That means you checked, you wanted to be safe, you were being careful
TSW: He is the one at fault
TSW: And it's ok that you can't tell me I don't mind at all I'd rather you be safe Baby
TSW: Is there anything I can help with
TSW: A pet to take care of or fish to feed or anything until you get home?
BLC: no
BLC: couldn't stay at home neway
BLC: inspection thing
BLC: tell me hows work
BLC: need a distraction
BLC: feel like shit
TSW: Work was kind of eventful
TSW: Broke up three bar fights in progress, two guys trying to deal found themselves mysteriously in the back of a cop car, and almost fifteen handsy bastards made it all the way across the road into the alley
TSW: Another ten wound up in the road, my throw was off
TSW: And Nami, our manager, made me bring my guitar in today to play
TSW: Managed to break the E string
TSW: Again
BLC: hee hee need to get u better strings
BLC: or clip ur claws tigerboy
TSW: Both probably.
TSW: Don't think I've clipped my nails since I was twelve
TSW: The only problem is the better strings with the metal are way more expensive
BLC: maybe ill spoil u with em ;p
TSW: If you do I'm gonna have to play you songs
TSW: You know that rite
BLC: o3o promise
BLC: *promise
TSW: Heh yes, promise
TSW: What kinda music you like
BLC: hmmmm lotsa sutff
BLC: whats ur voice
TSW: ???
BLC: i mean do u sing high low in the middle what
TSW: Ah, mostly middle to low.
TSW: Can manage a couple high notes on a good day
TSW: But mostly I'm low register
BLC: ooooho
BLC: o3o
TSW: Though tbh I was just gonna play
TSW: Maybe get Law to sing for you
TSW: Or that Marco and Thatch from Pheonix Free
BLC: hee hee hee u do that and ull have a problem
BLC :p
TSW: Is it a problem?
TSW: Or is it a 'problem'
TSW: The kind that gets taken care of with a bullet vibe in a private corner?
BLC: definitely the 2 kind
TSW: Then it isn't a problem~
BLC: y mr roronoa i do believe ur propositionin me XD
TSW: I very well may be
TSW: I also may be hinting I am not averse to the use of bullet vibes
TSW: Damn things are handy when your fingers are tired from playing guitar gotta admit that
BLC: hee hee hee thatd be fun
BLC: eventually

There was a pause in her messages, and the Marimo on the other end found himself leaning closer to the screen until a crick in his neck forced him to realize his shoulders were all bunched up. He deliberately sat back, breathing deeply to calm the ball of worry building in his temples. He was almost fully meditating when the speakers pinged again.

BLC: tigerboy...
TSW: Yes?
BLC: what am i gonna do
TSW: I....don't know.
TSW: I can't tell you that.
TSW: Nobody can make that decision but you.
TSW: But whatever you do decide....I'm here and I'll help.
BLC: i just
BLC: i cant
BLC: but...
BLC: its not its fault
BLC: so i cant
TSW: That's alright too.
TSW: I'll help.
TSW: Anything I can do, Baby.

Zoro rolled the computer chair back to press the heels of his hands into his eyes. He couldn't go hunt down the bastard that took advantage of his girlfriend… friend… companion… whatever they were! Because that was not what she needed right now. She needed him, his support, she did not need offers to hunt down the asshole because he would not be HERE where she needed him.

He meant what he said. He meant every word.

But much like Baby, he had no idea what to do.

BLC: hows ur love cook
TSW: I don't know
TSW: Chopper whisked him away from work all of a sudden and won't tell us what exactly he's sick with
TSW: I'm worried but if it was immediately life-threatening he'd have told us that and he's so upset I haven't asked any questions
TSW: I did apologize to him tho, 'cuz you made me promise and I don't break promised
TSW: *promises
BLC: choppers worried?
TSW: Not exactly /worried/. He panicks when he's really worried
TSW: But he is definitely concerned
TSW: He keeps looking up things on his computer, muttering and taking notes
TSW: Like there's something he can defeat if he just has enough knowledge
TSW: He usually does that when he's concerned about something he thinks will be okay but he still needs to assure himself
BLC: hm
BLC: think im droppin off luv
BLC: *luv
BLC: cna i c u tmorrow
TSW: Yes of course
TSW: And if you're tired you should definitely rest
TSW: Where would you like to meet?
BLC: dun care
BLC: ur place
TSW: That'll do
TSW: And you should sleep.
TSW: Sleep well, and have good dreams, baby.
BLC: k

-- BabyLoveCook [BLC] went idle at 04:57--

Zoro was going to shut down skype, then decided he'd better not… what if Baby needed him before morning? If she needed to message him, he'd better keep it up and the sound on so it'd ping him.

Then he braced his elbows on the desk and put his head in his hands. Someone had had unprotected sex with Baby without her consent, and the implications of that made him want to tear something to pieces so badly Sandai Kitetsu *screamed* in her sheath, rocking back and forth with fury so hard she almost fell off the rack. Zoro dashed in to catch her and cradled her to his chest.

"I know, I know! We will find him and we will make him pay, I swear it, but not now. Now Baby needs me. She is more important than him. He will only be our bounty to hunt after she is safe and cared for. I know, Sandai Kitetsu, Middle Daughter of Violence. I know your anger, and we *will* taste his blood." His voice rumbled with the promise. "When Baby is safe."

Taking the sword back to the chair with him, like a serpentine safety blanket that rattled with the intent to maim, he reread Baby’s initial messages over and over again. She was pregnant. And she couldn't blame the baby, which he understood. So she was going to keep it. He would help her as much as he could… but it would be difficult. Caring for a child was hard under any circumstances, but in Baby’s position…

Zoro shook his head. Scraping up the scratch to pay for all the things necessary to care for a child was even more difficult, especially since she was a cook. Long hours, lots of time on her feet… Without even thinking about the pregnancy itself, once the child got here she'd need to hire a sitter or something for while she was working, and that was even more cost! Especially working second shift! Most daycare type places didn’t handle those hours. Did she have family, or other friends that could help her out? She’d mentioned a brother, but that didn’t mean he was there in the city. For all Zoro knew, she was on her own entirely!

Of course… he would help her where he could on his days off, maybe cut his hours if he had to, but...

He shook his head, forcing himself away from the computer again.

Tomorrow. He could worry about it tomorrow. When he could talk it over with Baby herself. Most of that was almost a year in the future anyway. They had time to work things out. And he spared himself a moment to smile, realizing that he’d never even questioned whether he was going to be a part of raising the kid. From the second he’d seen her message the first time, his focus had been on supporting her. Wouldn’t Sensei Koshiro be proud of how far he’d come.

Moving off to begin his bedtime routine, he decided he'd ask how Baby felt about maybe talking to his crew about it. He had no doubts they would help him help her. Helping people in trouble seemed to be their specialty. He knew Nami, Vivi, and Robin would enjoy having another female voice around the Sunny regularly, and Chopper would be good for Baby to have on hand in case she
needed anything medically. Franky and Usopp could probably even help her out getting the stuff for
the kid. Making it would probably be cheaper than buying it all. Hell, after it was born, the love cook
might even be willing to share kitchen duties with her so she wouldn’t have to worry about
babysitters as much.

Yeah… Zoro smiled, tucking his hands behind his head and starting to drift off… Baby would fit in
perfectly at the Sunny.
Law stared at the message on his phone, brows drawn into a deep frown. He was alone in the bed on
the bus. Luffy and Ace were downstairs playing some card game with Jinbe and Shanks. They’d
tried to get him to join in a couple of hours ago, just after they merged onto Grand Line outside of
Loguetown. But he had no interest in it. They had two full days of travel, driving around the clock,
to get to Enies Lobby for the semi-final fight on Monday. That meant everybody with a license had
to take a turn at the wheel. He’d volunteered for the six hours of flat four-lane highway they’d hit just
after midnight, and thus, had Rayleigh to stand up for him when he’d begged a nap as his excuse to
got out of the game.

He had no doubt in his mind that none of them believed him.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. The kind of wrong that had him staring at his phone for hours
after receiving the paltry excuse for a farewell instead of the amazingly hot kiss he’d been hoping for.
Such simple words: [sorry something came up I won’t make it to see you off. Love you. Have a
safe trip. <3] And they weighed on his mind like a death sentence. Logic said it was probably
something having to do with Sanji’s apartment and the fire, since he’d left before even cooking
dinner for everyone. But…

There was some instinct in Law’s gut that said otherwise.

And he didn’t even want to think about how skittish the blond had been since Wednesday. He’d
hardly touched him. Hadn’t been alone with him at all. They hadn’t even had a real conversation
since Wednesday night on Luffy’s couch.

It hurt.

His own reply: [Alright. Love you 2. <3 Call when you can?] had gone unanswered. Even now,
Sanji wasn’t on Skype, and he hadn’t texted back.

“Knew you weren’t actually sleeping, Lawly.” Sabo sat carefully on the edge of the bed, sympathy
on his face. “Wanna share what’s on your overactive mind? Or do I already know?”

“I’m just being stupid again.”
The blond leaned back on his hands, “Now that is about the only thing of which I am certain you are not. C’mon, babe, spill.”

“No, really, Sabo. I’m just laying here thinking too much and worrying over things that are probably nothing.” Law locked the screen of his phone and deliberately stuck it in the compartment built into the wall above his head.

Since that move put him on his back, it opened his frame to have his lover lean over into his face. Love and skepticism were plain on the musician’s face. He took a kiss from the doctor’s scruffy mouth.

“If it’s worrying you, it’s not nothing. You’re acting like your dad.”

Law frowned, “I’m not that bad! I at least admit I’m worrying over things!”

Sabo raised an eyebrow.

“I do! I just… know when I’m worrying needlessly.” But the darker man couldn’t hold the other’s eyes.

“Okay, assuming you are, it’s obviously bugging the fuck out of you. So, even if it is—not stupid, so just get that idea out of your head right now—you’re still entitled to worry about it, and if you’re gonna worry about it, then I, as your super hot boyfriend, get to pester you about sharing it until you do.” The blond lined himself up on his back, shoulder to shoulder with the other, fully intent on waiting him out.

Gold eyes slid over to look at the side of Sabo’s face, then went back to staring at the ceiling.

Of the four of them it was something of a competition to see which one had the longest patience, Law or Sabo. So, in silence, they stared at the ceiling, both certain the other would crack first. They counted the divets in the paint, the splintering of the fabric from the frame of the bus, circled the light at their feet seven times, and collectively sighed more times than Law wanted to count.

And the whole time, his mind just ran over Sanji’s goodbye. Again and again.

Something was wrong. Something from the nightmare. He’d been sure he could wait it out, let the cook sort through it on his own, but… that was before he hadn’t been there to wish them a safe trip. Law felt like he was looking at expensive silk being pulled from his fingers. If Zoro hadn’t been just as anxious about Sanji’s departure from the Sunny earlier, the doctor would almost have assumed he was being given the run around. But, as he swallowed that thought down with a physical motion, the bouncer had been just as confused. Chopper and Brook came back, only to leave again immediately after grabbing Sanji’s binder, his meds, and a duffle bag of overnight stuff from the apartment upstairs. All they had said was that Sanji needed to deal with something and wouldn’t be back for the night.

Now, Law knew patient confidentiality better than anyone, so he hadn’t pressed the teenager when we expressed the term, but it put a pit in his stomach that he didn’t like. Sanji was sick. And he wasn’t telling anyone about it. He and the other Ds had seen his nightmares, his panic attacks, and his jumpy anxiety reactions. Law had even had personal contact with the cook’s dysphoria—by accident!—but that meant whatever it was had to be something that was even more personal than dreaming of his sexual assault. Law tried to picture what exactly would be so intense that he would withdraw completely, and came up blank. From his perspective there wasn’t anything. Being raped was about as personal as one could get when it came to issues.
He glanced over at Sabo again, and was immediately met with bright blue eyes watching him back. His mind supplied that the musician’s were about three or four shades lighter than the cook’s, intense and burning like the center of a flame where Sanji’s were deep and overwhelming like staring into the ocean.

It made for an interesting comparison.

Without his control, his hand came up to trace a honey blond brow, halting almost in surprise when the hair stopped before he was ready. He was getting too used to tracing the curls Sanji sported. It made his breath catch and he dropped his hand, looking away apologetically.

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

“What?” Law actually jumped when Sabo spoke.

The younger man propped himself up on his elbow so they could look at each other easier, “Sanji. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“How?”

“How do I know he’s fine? He’s strong. Damn near as strong as Zoro, maybe stronger in some ways. Whatever came up,” Sabo shrugged, “he’ll deal with it and be right back.”

“I meant how did you…”

“Oh! Easy. When you’re thinking about him, you do this counter-clockwise circle thing with your fingers, and your eyes get all far away the same way they do when you’re thinking about your dad.”

Law frowned, slightly put out. “Do I have tells for when I’m thinking about all of you?”

“Yup!” The grin came easily and proud.

“And I assume you know them all, huh?”

“Yup!”

“Ugh!” He flopped an arm over his eyes. “I won by the way.”

“Nah. I got the answer out of you before I said anything.” Sabo settled himself over his lover’s chest, tapping a rhythm with his fret hand.

“You still spoke before I did.”

“So? Talking out loud doesn’t count if you’re screaming body language at me.”

Law peeked out from under his arm, “Body language, eh? And I suppose that’s supposed to be some kind of pick-up line so you can ‘read all the signs of my body’?”


“Hm, yeah I think I did.” He snickered.

“Oh that’s it you! You don’t wanna talk about what’s bugging you, then fine!” Sabo slid back, taking both wrists in his hands, “Then I’ll just have to make you sing about it!”

The darker man stayed limp, forcing his lover to pull him up like a ragdoll, and groaned wordlessly
about how much that idea did not appeal to him at the moment. His head lolled back once he was somewhat in a sitting position, and Sabo was leaning so far back that if he let go they’d both fall backwards. So, Law did nothing to help.

“You big baby, you know you’ll feel better about it if you do!” The blond grunted.

“Nnnngghh!!”

Thank God for Luffy’s inability to put things away, because just when it seemed like Sabo was going to be able to get him to actually balance sitting up on his own, the blond’s foot hit a sock or a pair of underwear or something equally soft and slippery. His heel went out from under him, and reflex meant that as he fell on his ass, his hands released Law’s wrists. The musician landed with a thud on the floor, and Law flopped back onto the blankets, laughing.

“Oh you! Fine! Be that way, see if you can resist my melodic charms.”

Even though he couldn’t see his lover, Law could just picture his face, eyes closed and mouth screwed up in pretend arrogance, nose up in the air and chin thrust forward haughtily. It just made him laugh harder.

He laughed all the way up until the solid notes of Sabo’s On-the-Road-Electric, plugged into his Mini with the volume turned down, cut him off. Then he glared over the edge of the bed.

“That isn’t fair, Sabo.”

“Don’t care. You need to vent.” The guitarist kept plucking the walking progression, keeping time until the sometimes-singer cracked.

“Playing Papa’s songs isn’t nice.”

Sabo shrugged, and played the intro again.

Law slid to the end of the bed, still glaring. It took another couple of repetitions before he gave into the rhythm, his eyes closing as the recording he had of the original artist filled in the missing instruments in his head. It choked his throat, giving his voice a deeper quality than normal.

“Heaven’s gone, the battle’s won; I had to say goodbye. Lived and learned from every fable written by your mind. And I wonder how to move on from all I had inside. Place my cards upon the table in blood I draw the line. I’ve given all my pride.”

His dark brows drew together, a familiar pain blossomed in his chest—as it always did when he covered one of his father’s songs. It only compounded itself when Sabo switched the sound of his guitar to pick up the harder rhythmic chords needed for the chorus.

“Living a life of misery. Always there, just underneath. Haunting me, quietly alone.”

Sabo cut in, “It’s killing me, killing me.”

“Dead and gone, what’s done is done. You were all I had become. I’m letting go of what I once believed.” Law looked up, taken in by the music as they both knew he would be, “So goodbye agony!”

He let himself drift for a few bars longer than normal, glad that his lover could keep pace with him. The blond just drew out the pause into a tiny solo, shifting the sound again to dance along the frets and strings in the same style Uncle Don used in the recording. That made it easier for Law to get
back where he belonged for the next verse.

“I watch the stars and setting suns. As the years are passing by, I never knew that hope was fatal until I looked it in the eye, and now I'm not sure I am able to reach the other side. I'm casting out the light.” He bobbed his head in time to the pulse of the song, “Living a life of misery. Always there, just underneath. Haunting me, quietly alone.”

“It’s killing me, killing me.” Again Sabo lent his voice to make it more powerful.

“Dead and gone, what's done is done. You were all I had become. I'm letting go of what I once believed. So goodbye agony!!” Law clenched his fist, unaware that he’d reached forward until he brought it back to his thigh to mark time. “Goodbye agony. Not alone in forgiving the faithful and the blind. Innocence is forsaken; I leave them all behind, and then I see that even angels never die!!!”

Sabo started the real solo with an echo, “Angels never die!”

He couldn’t play in the same complex patterns Law’s uncle could, but somehow that made the song a little bit easier for the mottled doctor to endure. Having his lover’s signature on the guitar bits meant he didn’t feel like he was stepping into his father’s shoes—something he never wanted to do! Cora’s voice had been amazing! A real gift to the soul of hard rock! Until the cancer had stolen it. Now it only lived on in recordings, and Law refused to jeopardize his father’s fame by letting anyone cover them professionally. Sometimes, when they played at the Sunny, he and Sabo would do one, but only under the express agreement from Nami that they never ended up on the CDs she sold of the performance.

As Sabo’s solo drew to a close, Law felt himself leaning into the final chorus harder than he usually did, “Living a life of misery. Always there, just underneath. Haunting me, quietly alone.”

“It’s killing me, killing me.”

“Dead and gone, what's done is done. You were all I had become. I'm letting go of what I once believed! So goodbye agony!” He let the blond take him out with a couple of repetitions of the last two words, pouring his anxiety and pain into it.

He wasn’t aware of the tears on his face until after the guitar had stopped and Sabo reached over to wipe one away. They stayed like that for a minute, his lover’s hand on his cheek, calloused thumb brushing through the coarse hair of his sideburn.

Then Sabo’s mouth quirked up on his scarred side. “Feel better?”

So, he punched him!

“Oi!!” the musician rubbed his arm just below his shoulder, “No bruising the merchandise!!”

“I can bruise you all I like, I’m the doctor! So I’m just making work for myself, bastard. You’re not allowed to know me so well!” Law resolutely did not pout up at the now-standing blond.

Affecting a look of proud hurt, Sabo sniffed, “I’ll just have to tell Luffy you’re beating me.”

“Yeah, and watch how fast he joins in!”

“Ah! Damn you! Why are you always right!?”

“Because I’m the doctor.” He repeated, pulling his lover down to the bed with him again. He tuck
his chin onto the other’s shoulder and sighed, “You were right though.”

“Lord be praised! It’s a miracle.”

“I’m serious, Sabo.”

“I know, but I gotta make you laugh somehow. Otherwise you end up looking like the Cryptkeeper, all morbid and gloomy, and if that happens it won’t be me trying to cheer you up.” The expression on his face implied how bad that would be, though humor danced in his eyes.

“Ugh.” Law faceplanted into the musician’s chest, “Don’t remind me! The last thing I want is another ‘Project: Cheer Traffy Up’ from Luffy. Especially on the road where Shanks can get in on it.”

“Ah, I heard my name!” The red-headed manager popped up from the stairs, just high enough that his chin cleared the floor. He grinned in spite of Law’s glare, and waggled his eyebrows shamelessly, “Zip your flys, boys, we’re just outside Water Seven, and the bossman has declared it time to eat.”

A pillow chased him back down the steps, and Rayleigh’s laughter filtered back up to them when Shanks apparently tripped over it.

After dinner, Law climbed in behind the wheel as Luffy waddled to his bunk and the others followed, poking fun at the overstuffed fighter as he whined about wishing he had more room because the food was so good. He chuckled as he shut the bus doors and adjusted the seat and mirrors—Jinbe required a lot more room than he did, and on his setting even Law’s long legs couldn’t touch the pedals. Once everything was suitably arranged, he got up again to check the inhabitants. The managing team slipped right into bed after dinner it seemed.

"Rayleigh! Gross!"

"You deserve it, youngster!"

"Hell no, I'm not a teenager I'm gonna bunk with Jinbe if you Dutch oven me again, Ray! That is disgusting are you sure you didn't have burritos instead of a steak?!"

He chuckled and checked on his lovers, content to find Luffy piling onto Ace and Sabo tucking his boots under the bed before climbing onto his other side, and he stole a kiss from his guitarist boyfriend before descending the steps again and once more taking the wheel.

Then it was time to get on the road. At first, it took all his attention. He had to get out of the tight parking spot, and navigate the close-set traffic near the stop, but once he hit the highway again he found his thoughts whirling back to Sanji. To his sparse goodbye, to what might have caused it, and how he had the most sickening suspicion it was his fault.

Sanji’s nightmare… come back to haunt him and it had featured Law… Right after Sanji and he had...

Gooseflesh rippled over his arms and up the back of his neck as he swallowed and forced himself to finish the thought.

Right after he and Sanji had been intimate. Without protection.

And somehow, despite Sanji’s enthusiasm and continuous consent, there had been almost a pressure. Like Sanji knew it would come back on him later but he wanted to follow through on it anyway.
Like he was afraid if he didn't do it, he never would. And having grown up in a household of generosity incarnate, he had been made all too aware how someone could feel... obligated to foster some return for a gift that meant as much as that knife set had meant to Sanji. And Law really hadn't been sure it was the right brand of knives until he saw the look on Sanji's face when he asked. He'd just asked his uncle's husband if he ever let Uncle buy him a knife set, which ones he would want.

It twisted his stomach in nauseous circles to think that Sanji might have done that with him as... as payment of some sort and it had been his fault for not stopping him. His fault for not protesting the strange atmosphere. And it was definitely his fault he hadn't stopped to at least roll on protection. He kept it with him at all times, for God's sake, and yet Sanji's carnal need had rolled over them both.

His mouth twisted the way his stomach did when his brain asked, for the thousandth time since it happened, "Why didn't you say something? You know better!"

"Know better than what, Xiaolaw?" When the large half-Chinese man had appeared, silently, on the seat behind the driver's was uncertain, but his voice held only mild curiosity and his expression in the mirror was slightly concerned.

"JESUSFUCKINCHRISTJINBE!!" The punchy doctor withdrew from stomping the gas pedal accidentally and clutched his heart, panting. "Fucking HELL man you know I get high strung driving at night! Don't do that!"

His head thunked against the headrest as he tried to steady his breathing. Goddamn it, with an adrenaline rush like that he wouldn't sleep 'til they got to Enies Lobby!

The older man chuckled, "My apologies. I was unaware how deeply you were lost in thought." He leaned back in his seat, his hands folded over his belly comfortably, "I thought to keep you company until dawn."

Law glanced back in the mirror. "Shanks taking the opportunity to escape the nefarious tactics of Rayleigh? Though I appreciate your company regardless."

"Sometimes it is wiser to remove oneself from potential conflict than to remain within the field of battle. Put simply, yes. My bed has been appropriated, and I don't think I need remind you how alike our team manager is to his lover." Jinbe gave a smile full of fond frustration.

"Ahhh, no, no you don't. Though I sincerely doubt it'll stop either of them. They'll probably just go on to defile your bed and we'll have to change the sheets... again. But in either case we don't have to deal with anything other than the thump of one of them being shoved out of bed," the younger chuckled, his heart rate starting to go back to normal. Finally.

"Precisely why I brought extra blankets." The other looked entirely too smug about that. "Now, about the other thing. Who knew better than what?"

Welp there went his heart rate. He could see his pulse throbbing in the mirror. Damn pulse points. And thin skin. And perceptive fucking managers.

"I uh… I made a mistake. A pretty big one, I think."

"Well. Generally when one has made a mistake the best thing to do is own it. Take the responsibility for your actions and see to any reparations that need to be made. Fortunately, I don't believe you would have intentionally hurt anyone, Xiaolaw. Perhaps you are being harder on yourself than is strictly necessary?"

His fingers drummed on the wheel. "I think maybe. But I can't help myself. I can't MAKE any of the
reparations. I'm not allowed. And it hurts, and I'm pretty sure even though it's not supposedly a big
deal, it is, in fact, a really big deal, and I'm almost equally sure it's my fault." His nail caught in the
leather and ripped, making him wince. "But since there is vocal insistence it's not a big deal I'm
stuck... stewing. And wishing I hadn't."

"Hmm." Jinbe rubbed his chin, tugging absently on the thick patch of hair on the point. "Have you
expressed your worry with the person in question?"

"I wish I could. But I can't. Because being in the same *room* makes him flinch." Law’s knuckles
popped, eight of them, and leather creaked.

"Oh dear."

"...shit. Yeah." He resisted the urge to rest his forehead on the wheel and instead breathed deeply and
eased up on the gas again.

"Perhaps a more distant form of communication then? You boys tend to spend a lot of time with your
phones, is there not a platform there that could make the conversation easier to handle?"

"Apparently not, since the last message he sent me was two lines long. He's not avoiding Sabo or
Ace or Luffy… just me. And I'm the only one in his nightmares. I'm the only one he flinches at, I'm
the one, I have to be the root cause, I have to be. It doesn't make sense if I'm not. It has to be me, and
that being the case I'm almost positive I know what I did and I know better. I *know* better! I've never
let that happen since I started having sex. I-I've never LAPSED like that, it was stupid and I was
stupid and I shouldn't have, why did I?!"

"Why did you?"

It wasn't judging; if anything the trainer suspected Law of not even remembering he was even there.
So, he kept his tone supportive, questioning in a way that would prod the younger man into letting
go of the hornets' nest buzzing around his mind.

"I just… he was so, so rushed, so… he seemed almost desperate I didn't want to tell him no, but I
should have! He didn't… he didn't even give me the time to… it would have taken three words and
two seconds! 'Gimme a sec’ and roll it on, I'm pretty much a fucking *expert* by now, and we're good
but he didn't give me the *time* and I didn't want to say anything! He seemed… not eager, not
enthusiastic, but in *need*, like if he didn't he'd die, like—and I just, I tried to… he didn't want to pause
for even a second, wouldn't let me reach for it, like he couldn't slow down! It was an intensity that
bordered on frightening and somehow I couldn't-couldn't ask, couldn't push him away, didn't tell him
no! But I should have, I know better! I'm in a relationship where it's just a basic mandatory action! I
*know better* than to have any form of sex without protection!"

The doctor’s hands were practically dancing on the wheel as he struggled with the line of his
thoughts. Thankfully, the highway was deserted this time of night and there was nobody to see the
bus wafting from lane to lane.

"Even Luffy makes mistakes sometimes. Part of trusting each other is letting everyone make their
decisions for themselves, you know."

"I would normally think that too, but that night… that *same night* he had a nightmare! And it was
me! He dreamed about something horrible that happened to him when he was young… and his mind
put *me* there!" The anguish in his eyes as he met Jinbe's in the glass was almost palpable, watery.

The older man was frowning but the set of his mouth was that of one trying to find the right words.
"The subconscious mind often creates scenarios that have no basis on what the conscious mind feels. I don't think putting much stock into a single nightmare would be wise. Any combination of traumatic events can trigger such things. I'm certain he would not blame you for something he had no control over."

"I don't think he does. But he's been avoiding me ever since and can't stop flinching when I speak or am in the room. And he didn't come see us off. He did before. He didn't this time."

"Has he given you some reason, or message at all?"

"He just said something came up and he couldn't make it. He did say he loves me and wished me a safe trip and added a heart, so I do know he's not mad at me and he doesn't blame me... but... if he's sick or hurting and it's my fault..."

"Then it cannot be your fault. Even if your actions were a catalyst for his reaction, the original trauma is not your fault, and he is wise enough to recognize that. Thus, it is something he needs to work through on his own, and it is very likely that his reason for being away had nothing to do with any action or reaction on your part. Unless you are the be all and end all of his responsibilities?" The last was accompanied by a challenging lift of eyebrows that dared Law to come up with any other reason why the cook would have been absent.

Law sighed, long and slow. "Hardly... but... he's trans. And hasn't had any surgeries. Which means there is one other complication to having unprotected sex."

"Well, how long ago did this happen?"

"Not long enough for it to be whatever held him up. Not even three weeks. No, that's not what happened this time, I just... we never had a chance to discuss something like that and I should have insisted."

Jinbe shrugged, "Then it is a conversation to have when you return. Perhaps he is using contraceptives himself. I admit I know little of that whole gabunga, but I do know that sometimes people take them to regulate their hormones just by themselves. I would trust that your lover knows what he is doing, and knew what he was doing the night you and he engaged in intercourse. If this were Luffy, would you be questioning his decisions?"

"If Luffy felt anything like he did that night, yeah, I would. I... it just didn't feel right, Jinbe. The whole thing felt wrong somehow in a skin-crawling way I can't describe."

"Then you and he need to sit down and discuss it. After you return, when you have both taken some time to relax from it. The same way you would if it was Luffy, or Ace, or Sabo."

"Yeah. That makes sense. But I still..." Law’s eyes focused on the road for the first time in fifteen minutes and he eased back into his proper lane, once again silently thanking the isolation of the road. "I still... feel at fault."

"Hm. Allow me to mix my metaphors, if you will, for a moment. You are a truly gifted surgeon. You know how to administer and perform medical procedures others in your trade would and have refused to touch because they are risky. If after you are finished, your patient needs further medical attention to fully heal, is it your fault that they do?"

"Well... no. I did what I can to the best of my ability and what is outside my skill set is better attended by someone with the proper skills."

Jinbe leveled him with a look in the mirror.
He scowled back. "Just because you're wise doesn't mean I'll let you get out of finishing your metaphor. I'm NOT doing your work for you."

The older man chuckled, climbing to his feet to stretch his back, "There's about thirty-six hours before the fight with Arlong, Xiaolaw, we all need to be doing our own work, ne?"

He blew out a long, aggravated breath. "Fine. Sure. Kick Shanks for me on your way by."

He kept his eyes on the road though, a vast improvement over when Jinbe first came up to sit behind the driver's seat.

"I've a bed to reclaim anyway. the next rest stop should give us enough time to change the sheets without putting ourselves behind schedule. Good morning, Xiaolaw, sleep well when you get there."

"Thanks. Enjoy your own accomodations in the meanwhile," he sighed. "Good morning."

The next hour, Law sat in contemplation. Jinbe was right, of course. Luffy had to face Arlong in less than a day and a half, and he needed to have his whole team on the ball in case Teach pulled something. Strictly speaking the fighters shouldn’t have the opportunity to get at each other during the semifinals—there were too many possibilities of matches being rigged by explosive personalities meeting outside of the safety of the cage—but that of course didn’t mean that it was impossible. And knowing Hogback—his hands gripped the steering wheel harder again—the way he did, he was sure to have something up his good-for-nothing sleeve. They couldn’t let anything get in the way of Luffy’s shot at the title! Not now that he’d come so far since last year!

He gave a mental apology to Sanji. It wasn’t that their situation was any less important. He fully intended on sitting down with the gorgeous blond and talking the whole thing out, getting to the bottom of that tangled mess of nerves in the pit of his stomach. But… it had to wait. Luffy’s fight was more time-constrained. After tomorrow night, they’d have all winter to work through Sanji’s nightmare and discuss what had happened between them the night of the fire. The final match for the Supernova belt wasn’t until April. After tomorrow they could relax. After tomorrow they could take their time.

He drew a deep breath as he pulled the bus into a rest stop just after dawn. After tomorrow… Yeah.

Chapter End Notes

_**Goodbye Agony - Black Veil Brides**_ (This video is what I picture for Cora's version of the song as well, btw.)
Chapter Summary

Gearing up for the semi-final, and what is Baby thinking!?

Chapter Notes

Welp! This is it folks, we're down to the last three chapters!! Two more after this one, and I've been holding off posting mostly because I wanted to get a few other things out of the way, heal from my surgeries and whatnot, but also because I've hit a bit of a writer's block with Never Surrender. So I stepped back from it for a bit. Working on some other fics, I dunno if any of you lovelies are Homestuck fans as well... but I have a couple of new things for that coming up.

REST ASSURED I HAVE NOT ABANDONED GUTI!!! Never Surrender is still a GO, but when I get stuck on something, I find the easiest thing for me to do is work on something else, let the details fade a bit, and then come back to it later. That way I can re-read what I've already written and hopefully be inspired to continue. (That's usually how it works anyway.))

So, just stay tuned! And enjoy, minna~!

"He has a right to know he's going to be a father, Zoro!" Baby glared at him, fists at her sides, and a stubborn set to her mouth.

She was so done with this argument. Twenty minutes at his place and virtually the only thing they'd talked about was how to keep her away from her ex. She understood that Zoro was worried. Dr. Kureha had been too when she left the shelter, but it didn't change the fact that as a parent-to-be the father of her child had rights. Even if he hadn't always treated her right, she still couldn't just keep the kid from him. If, for no other reason, because the child had the right to know who their father was! She couldn't understand why the others didn't see that.

"No, Baby! He's a threat to you, and right now that means he's a threat to your baby as well! What if forcing a pregnancy on you was his plan all along?! So he can better bind and control you? There are sick fucks out there who do it, Baby, please don't take the chance!"

He remained stubborn on his opinion. He in no way trusted that fucker anywhere near the developing child. Nor within a ten mile radius of Baby.

"Well, what if it wasn't! What if it was an accident? What if it wasn't some big contrived plan to manipulate me? What if he was just lazy!" She grit her teeth, "You and Kureha, both of you going on and on that he's abused me. That one little lie means he had some plot all thought out to knock me up and keep me close. Seems to me the ones trying to control what I'm doing are you guys!"

Zoro made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a snarl so deep it vibrated the floor and one hand
came up to yank brutally not at his hair, but his earrings. His English deteriorated rapidly in his frustration, "Ya know perfec'ly we-we're tryin'a give ya th'best advice we can. I seen how ugly people c'n be, I'm jus' tryin'a tell ya th'safest route if ya wanna keep that kid! Okay, say he's jus' lazy, ya tell 'im an' he says he don't want it. Tells ya, tells ya t'go get it 'taken care of'. Then what? It's dangerous, Baby, please believe me!"

"If he doesn't want anything to do with it, fine! I'll make my way! I'm not saying I'm gonna go move in with him or some shit. All I said was I want to tell him! I think he deserves to be given the choice. Same as me. Cuz it's his kid too! How would you feel if it was you!? If I just kept it to myself, never told you, just went and got it 'taken care of' and you never knew. Or worse! Say I do keep it. What if he runs into me somewhere? What would you do?"

"If it was me, it would be different. For one thing I'da been worried when ya fell outta touch an' came down sick! But if someone I'd been with, I see 'em a few years later with a little green-haired kid, I..." his face and his eyes softened without his knowledge, "I'd be astonished... surprised. Offer to help any way they'd let me. Ask if I could get to know the kid." His spasming fingers released his ear. "But that's me an' this asshole ain't me!"

"So, you're standing there telling me you wouldn't care that she didn't say anything to you when she first found out. That she skimmed you possibly years of your kid's life, all because she didn't even let you know. You don't even know him! No wonder you and Blondie got into it if this is how you think of everybody your crushes used to date! I panicked. I was scared. I never planned to have kids. EVER!" She crossed her arms over her chest, and huffed again, "Why's it gotta be 'abuse' and 'rape' and 'he's an asshole' because of ONE LIE!? People lie all the time!"

"Not to people who trust them. Abuse of trust and emotional manipulation is still abuse and manipulation. Having sex under false pretenses because you know the other person wouldn't have sex with you unless you lied is rape. And if he's lied about this once, chances are it's not the first time. And he'll lie again. As long as he thinks he can make you believe it, he will keep doing it. I know men who lie like that. And I know they will never change. They just dump you when you figure out their game and move on to the next victim they can gaslight. And, and no, I would... mind, but mostly I would mind she was afraid of my reaction rather than she didn't tell me. If someone had my kid and was too afraid to tell me, I'd be furious with myself for making her feel afraid. I would never be angry with her for doing what she felt best to protect herself and the child." His fingers dug into his biceps.

"If he's lied to me about it before, why didn't this happen before? Why does it have to be a big manipulative thing!? Why can't this have been a one time thing? Something he thought he could get away with and will fall all over himself when he finds out he got caught!? I'm not saying I forgive him for lying. I just think he has a right to know there's a kid involved! I don't even know if I have what it takes to be somebody's mom!! But what if he does have what it takes to be a dad!? And this whole thing was just a mistake? You don't know. I don't know. How can anybody know!? All we know is he lied about the condom!"

"But you don't know he didn't lie before, either. And you don't know he hasn't been trying the whole time and it just didn't take." Zoro's voice was cold and angry. "For all you know, he's been poking pin-holes in the condoms and since that wasn't working went to straight up lying so he had a better chance of getting you pregnant. And I can't advise you to trust a man who lies about important things like that to be a good parent."

"But you'll trust a workaholic with one?" She raised an eyebrow at him and crossed her legs under her, cozed in the corner of his couch. "Zoro, you know my work schedule. I can't do this on my own, and I can't go leaning on you, you work nearly as much as I do."
"That's what babysitters and family are for! That's what playrooms AT work are for! You're not going to have to do it alone, and a workaholic might not get to spend as much time with their kids as they like but what time they do have they make memorable and loving! And it's always better to be safe than sorry!"

"Okay, fine. Say I don't tell him. What if he's a really great dad and I never gave him the chance? I just arbitrarily cut him out of our lives like a tumor. How is that better than giving him the option? You're so dead set that this is the wrong thing to do. Have you even once considered things from his point of view? Maybe he just didn't have a rubber and didn't want to stop. It wouldn't be the first time I've gotten into that situation myself. And you think 'oh my God I'm such an idiot' and you get tested and you promise never to do it again. But it happens sometimes!!" She rubbed her temple, tired and hurting. "I just don't see what the problem is with telling him. Not living with. Not dating. Not even going to see him. Just telling him."

Zoro only realized blood was bubbling up around his nails when it dripped off his elbow to the floor. "...if you can't see any danger, and I can't make you see it, then there's nothing stopping you, is there?" He'd managed to school his voice, into something resembling calm even if it fell rather flat. "And I'm not the boss of you. You're a grown woman. If you want to give him that information, then you will. And I think we should stop arguing about it."

Mostly because his stomach was churning and roiling with an unnamed, instinctual fear. Something awful was going to come out of telling that man. He knew it, but he couldn't say how. He had no valid reason for this feeling. He couldn't justify it to her, clearly.

Shit. He wasn't gonna be able to eat meat for a month.

Climbing to her feet, she grabbed the washrag from the sink behind him, and took his hand in hers to staunch the blood. She looked up into his face, searching his eyes, "I know you're just worried, and I'm sorry I upset you. Are we okay?"

"Yeah. We're okay. And I'm just... we have to agree not to agree, because we'll never get anywhere arguing." There was a little burp in the back of his throat he tried to stifle that betrayed the other reason. Then he sighed and eyed the floor. "Dammit. Brook told me any bloodstains are coming out of my escrow."

"Well... maybe if we clean it up now it won't stain too bad." She brought his other hand over to hold the washrag in place and moved off to rummage through his cupboards for another one to clean up the floor. "Go sit. I'll make tea or something. Then maybe we can watch a movie, get our minds off this whole nonsense, because regardless of what I'm doing, I'm not doing it tonight. I'm too worn out just from coming over here and dealing with everybody's... that's not nice. Sorry. I didn't mean that. I just... I don't know where my head is, and talking about it out loud seems to be the only way of figuring it out, but it's okay. You know."

Finding one, she quickly wet it and brought it over to kneel down next to where he'd been standing to scrub at the carpet.

"It's my problem. I'll deal with it. And I get that everybody wants to help. I do. I just... I gotta get things straight in my head first. And I don't know what I was thinking unloading it all on you. It's not like... like we're a... y'know... exclusive or-or serious or a-anything... Fuck... JUST COME THE FUCK OUT ALREADY GODDAMNIT!"

His hand stilled hers. "I have some peroide in the cabinet that will take this out, Baby. Don't worry about it. You go make that tea. I have some herbals in the top shelf. I'll go slap a bandage on my arm and then we can settle on the couch—once YOU do the food thing, hm?"
"O-okay." She sat back on her heels, scrubbing at her face to wipe away the tears she hadn't wanted to shed. "I'm sorry..."

He nuzzled her forehead and kissed there. "It's okay. And we are a serious thing, Baby. I don't know what the fuck we are, exactly, but it's very serious. Nothing less than Nakama at the least. But if I try to make you tea on the hot plate I'll blow it up and then even Brook will kick my ass out. Okay?"

"Oh God, no! No no no! You are not allowed to even touch kitchen stuff!!" She looked comically horrified. "I remember those pictures!! So help me, if there is ANYTHING I can teach you, it will be how to make tea without blowing up the building! It's bad enough there was one fire here this week, you aren't allowed to make it two!"

"Well then you had better make the tea before I make any attempts, ne? And leave the musclehead to do the scrubbing." He grinned at her good-naturedly and offered her his hands, to help her gain her feet.

She leaned into him, just burying her nose in his shirt for a couple of minutes. "Meathead Marimo."

"And don't you forget it!"

Then she gave him a kiss and moved off to make the tea. While she was busy, he retrieved the peroxide and while it soaked into the carpet, bubbling and eating away, he wrapped his forearm in a little roll of bandage. Mostly to keep blood off his furniture. Then he sponged up the peroxide and flushed it with water, sponging that up as well to leave a clean spot in the carpeting. Lastly, he tidied up the bathroom.

By the time he got back she had two mugs of tea on the coffee table, and a plate of mildly toasted cheese and bread bites on a plate. It wasn't fancy, but at least it was something. She had her feet tucked up again, chewing on her lip while she waited for him to join her.

He did so, blinking. "...where in the name of God did you find edible bread and cheese? Or did you have to run up to Brook's to ask for some, because I swear to god I didn't have any last time I looked."

"Oh, I brought it with me." She looked at him like it was the most natural thing in the world to anticipate her whatever-they-were not having real food.

His relief was almost palpable. "Oh good. It looks delicious. Did you find an herbal tea you liked?"

She giggled. "I brought that too. Raspberry mint for me, and ginger lemon for you. Now come sit! I wanna watch something."

"Got anything in mind or are we looking at the Netflix recomendations?" He settled in beside her and picked up the cup on his side of the table with a low purr.

"How about Chicken Run?" She had the remote on her lap and pushed the button to pull up the description, leaning on his shoulder.

"I like that one. It's got beautiful animation with the clay figures and definitely has just the right touch for an adult to enjoy without terrifying kids. Let's watch that one," he agreed after a sip of his tea.

Argument forgotten, Baby cuddled into his side, sipping her tea, nibbling the snack she’d made, and trying to resist dozing off. She was successful until they got to the scene where the farmer was chasing the escapees, and screaming;
"GET BACK HERE, YOU LITTLE RUBBER CHICKEN! I SWEAR TO GOD I'MMA BARBEQUE YOUR HAND NEXT TIME!!"

Halfway across the state, Luffy dove across the bed to hide behind Law, Sabo's voice echoing up the steps of the bus with the promise of following through on his threat, but the unashamed bouncy male simply grinned, licking his fingers clean of sauce.

Law found himself jostled out of the book in which he had been lost. He blinked at the smaller man and sniffed idly to see what kind of sauce. "Chicken wings again, Luffy? You KNOW he guards those like a dragon with his jewels."

"That makes it more fun to steal 'em. Want one?" The younger pulled a plastic bag from his pocket. It was sort of sealed enough to keep the lint from getting in, but there was sure to be hot sauce in Luffy's jeans when Ace went to wash them later.

"No thank you. Too many bones and I would get sauce all over my book," The surgeon replied with a little grin and a shake of his head. "Where did he even get them from?"

"He bought 'em from the grocery shop across the street. Didn't you notice we stopped?" Sucking on a bone absently, the Rubberman pointed out the window to the now-still scenery of the hotel where they'd be sleeping for the next couple of days.

"Oh. No, I hadn't. I was appreciating my novel. Other than thoroughly wanting to gut Eric, Divergent is entertaining so far," Law said slowly, bookmarking his place and closing the borrowed young adult book.

"Have to remember to tell Robin when you get back. Sure you don't want one?" That was probably the last chance he would get, as there only three left—two in the bag, and one in Luffy's mouth.

"Hmmmm..." His hand darted out almost as quick as his lover did and snagged the least sauce-y one to tear at with his teeth. "If I'm going to have to endure his howling I might as well have some of the spoils."

Luffy cackled. "Yosh!"

He flopped back onto Law's lap, the other two wings inhaled as per usual, and the bag of bones was balanced on his chest. He watched him, focused on his beard with that quiet intensity he always had. Barely blinking. Clearly expecting something, but for some reason he didn't say anything out loud.

Law waited until he'd eaten his own bones clean and disposed of them in the bag, then disposed of the bag and retrieved handiwipes for them both. If they got sauce on the sheets Jinbe would let Shanks and Rayleigh into their bed—certainly a fate to be avoided. Then he wrapped an arm around Luffy's ribs.

"Hi." The younger brunet snickered. He didn't really need the wipe, but he used it anyway to get what he couldn't lick off.

"Hi." The other smiled at him and tossed the wipes when they were done.

"You didn't sleep today."

He blew on his fingers, and admitted, "No."

It had taken him a long, long time to be able to admit when he couldn't—hadn't—slept. A long time and a lot of coaching from all three of his lovers. And therapy. So much fucking therapy.
"I was unable to find rest today."

"Do you want to?"

He considered. "I... should. I need to be rested tonight and tomorrow for your fight. And I do have another one of my headaches. But..." But at the same time, he had a crawling feeling beneath his skin (a hallucination from lack of sleep, he knew, he was familiar with it) that made him not want to be touched.

"Hm." Luffy was entirely too perceptive. His eyes calculating for all of a minute, before he snagged the doctor's favorite hat, and somersaulted off the bed towards the steps, "HEY, ACE, WANNA SEE IF TRAFFY'S HAT FLOATS?"

"LYFFY! NOT MY FAVORITE HAT!" Law's voice was one decibel below a harpy screech and he abandoned book and bed entirely to thunder down the steps after his errant lover. "IT TOOK ME THREE YEARS TO FIND THAT SNOW LEOPARD PATTERN IF YOU RUIN IT I WILL SKIN YOU!"

"YOU GOTTA CATCH ME FIRST!!! NYAHHH++++"

Luffy bounded out beyond the bus towards a patch of grass just beyond the parking lot. It had a high fence on one side and the tell-tale sound of water rushing by was enough to give an idea of what the prize fighter intended to do with the pilfered article of clothing.

"OH HELL NO! LUFFY I DON'T CARE IF YOU CAN'T SWIM IF YOU TOSS MY HAT I AM TOSSING YOU IN AFTER IT!" The harpy screech upgraded itself to the shrieking of an enraged banshee as he leaned into his run, bolting to tackle the prizefighter and rescue his hat.

A last minute skid to the side had the surgeon eating grass to the sound of his youngest lover's laughter. The sapling just off the edge of the concrete proved to be an excellent turning pole as Luffy kicked off at an angle from where he'd started, still dancing threateningly close to that fence.

Law dug in the heels of his boots as he rose and chased again, heading between Luffy and the fence even knowing the man could throw over his head by twenty goddamn feet. Maybe if he was lucky he could snatch it. Maybe.

Luffy backtracked, throwing dirt up by the speed of his sandals. The air was cool, though not as cold as it would have been at home, and the creek beyond the fence was sure to be colder, so if he was honest, he didn't exactly want to throw Law's hat. But the temptation... He crowed, giving into the urge to jump instead of run, throwing both hands up in the air in triumph, even though he hadn't actually won anything.

That pass back towards the bus gave him the chance to catch whether his lover was out of breath yet. He was, panting little gusts of mist that were barely visible in the just-above-chill air, scrubbling to keep up with the bouncy little son of a—why did he love this man again!? He lunged for him again, this time for the sheer malice of tackling him to the soft grass.

Luffy rolled with him, still laughing, his arms pinned to his sides, untill Law was on top of him. His oh-so-talented hands on the younger's shoulders and knees to either side of his hips. He snapped back his hat and put it on his head, over his cold ears, and then resumed pinning him with both hands, leaning in with a barely audible growl.

"Even though I know what you're doing, that was still not nice."

All he got in return was a wider grin. "Sorry?"
"You aren't, you little whirligig. But thanks for pretending." He leaned in and bumped noses.

"Hee." The way Luffy was wiggling, Law would have sworn he was a tail-less dog.

He got up then, because the grass was wet here from the water so close by, and his pants were getting damp and damned cold. "Alright then, back to the bus."

"Bus, or beds?"

At that moment, Shanks was watching them from the doorway of the hotel. His expression was such that he wasn't sure he wanted to ask why two of his four charges were rolling around in the damp lawn, but knowing that Luffy was involved made the question something of a moot point. So, he stayed silent.

Law wrinkled up his nose. "Do I have to? Because I know if I say 'bus' you're gonna drag me in the hotel to bed anyway."

"You said you wanted to sleep." Luffy attempted to look innocent, though the effect was rather lost due to the devious nature of how his lips twisted up and his eyes held the promise of further 'tiring out'.

The older huffed and yanked him to his feet. "Yeah, and I still do. So fine, beds."

The younger popped off the ground with a hop and a hand to his own hat, before glomping his lover for a resounding kiss. "You go sleep, I'mma get Ace and see if Shanks' hat floats."

"Oh no you don't. For one thing, it doesn't and don't ask me how I know. For another... I'd rather you didn't go anywhere. Except with me." Damn it was still hard to be that honest, but... if Law wasn't honest, then how could they help him?

"Okay."

No questions. No whining. No bargains. Just plain acceptance. The same way he had with Ace, and then with Sabo. Luffy stretched his arms over his head, cracking his back and pulled on his head to extend the relief up into his neck, then shoved his hands in his pockets, and started walking over to the bus where Shanks was giving his usual 'behave in the hotel' speech, confident Law would follow.

As they arrived the redhead was just saying, "...about four hours to—ah! Lawly! Tamed the wild beast for the moment? Think you can get him to sit still long enough to get him his next shot?"

"Aww!!" Luffy whined, "Already? Didn't we just do that before we left?"

"This one is extra to make the judges happy, now shush." The manager yanked the brim of the fighter's hat down, making him paw at it to push it back up, pouting. "I'm sure I don't have to remind you all what happened last time? And the aftermath?" Shanks eyed all four of them to the tune of Sabo coughing while Ace squirmed a little. "Those comments won't be the only response we get, and you all know it. Enies Lobby is a pretty progressive city, but I don't want any of you wandering off. We can't afford a slip-up this close to the end."

"Unfortunately, Luffy, the precautions are necessary. And we cannot go to bed until after it is done. Still... hand over that bottle. I want to read the label myself."

Ever since a saboteur (and it had to have been Hogback! Law fucking knew only a licensed doc could get that shit and Hogback was the only one stupid enough, immoral enough, to try) had nearly
switched out one of Luffy's shots with liquid morphine and an important antibiotic with saline he had gotten into the habit of personally checking and double checking anything before it went into his lover's body.

"Naturally." Though the manager's tone was upbeat, he very clearly had his 'all business' face on, and presumably the last two members of their troupe were inside the hotel ensuring that the boys had a safe path to get to their rooms.

Either that or Rayleigh was at the bar chatting up the cocktail waitresses.

Shanks handed the bottle over and Ace gave an exasperated sigh, turning into Sabo's shoulder. Neither of them liked it either. Especially as this particular immuno-enhancer tended to make Luffy sullen and withdrawn. All of the others hoped that with a night and most of a day between taking the dose and climbing into the ring, the side effects would wear off. The fighter got a glimpse of the label and stopped arguing, his arms crossed over his chest, looking off to the side as though the pavement was suddenly the most interesting thing in the world.

But in almost tacit agreement, his sleeve was pushed up to expose his bicep.

Law double checked the label while pulling on gloves—the spelling, the sticker, the bar code—and twice confirmed it was indeed the correct medicine. Then, with the deftness of one who had been doing it for too many years, he drew up the dose, flicked and gave it a squeeze, pinched Luffy's arm and stabbed it in. A quick push of the plunger and it was done, the safety needle retracting with a satisfying click before he dropped it in the sharps biohazard box just inside the door. His gloves followed the needle and the medicine was packed away for the next time his dose was due.

Luffy rubbed his arm and shifted his weight on his feet. "Can we go now?"

While the reaction wasn't immediate, as it would take up to twenty minutes for the medicine to absorb through the subdermal layers into his system, the fact that it was coming was enough to make him want to be away from prying eyes. Ace bit his lip like he wanted to say something, but a combination of Sabo's hand on his arm, and Shanks nodding at their youngest, stilled his tongue.

"Yes, Luffy, we can go. And in fact, are. To bed. Straight to bed." Law leaned a bit on Luffy's shoulder.

In the process of pulling his lover's sleeve down he looked mildly surprised at the little plastic-sealed Band-Aid. He must have put it on the needle stick on autopilot. They were special ones. Unlike fabric or traditional Band-Aids with breathing holes, these formed a complete seal. So nobody could accidentally touch a drop or a smear of blood.

"Mm."

It was clear the Rubberman wanted to touch, but held back for Law's issue earlier. Until he got the all clear, he'd keep his hands to himself, but he did moderate his pace so that he was walking with his lover instead of ahead of him.

The insomniac man appreciated that.

Sometimes the feeling could come and go; sometimes it lasted days. At the moment... he assessed his mental faculties and physical feeling. He was still a little winded and adrenaline-laced from the chase and run, and his skin was cold and slightly stung from the wind but no longer seemed to have arachnids crawling under it. So, he took Luffy's hand in his. Yes. That felt better.

"It has passed. I'm green for touching now," he said quietly, resting his cheek on Luffy's shoulder.
That was all he needed. The Rubberman used the hand holding his to pull the taller man into his arms, virtually manhandling him into the hotel, past Jinbe for a keycard, and up into the room ignoring everything and everyone else. As soon as they were behind closed doors, Luffy plastered himself against Law's chest, face planted into the center of the tattoo.

Law wrapped him up in both his arms and kissed his hair, holding him close and kicking off his boots. He didn't say anything… just held him and rubbed up and down his arms.

It wasn't often Luffy let things get to him. He had it shoved in his face most of the time when he was dealing with official hearings and the meetings twice a month to prove he was still being safe. He was reminded of it as well any time any of his lovers wanted to be intimate, which contributed to his often lacking interest in the subject. And he thought about it far more often than he let on, the knowledge that with the right contact at the wrong time, he could potentially pass on the incurable virus, just as his mother had to him. Usually he could shrug it off. He had medicines to suppress it, boost his immune system, stave off the symptoms and opportunistic infections. He even had a supplement he took that had been shown to lower the risk of developing lymphoma! Which had previously been nearly unavoidable.

But sometimes...

When it got in the way of the fun...

And he couldn't ignore it...

"I hate it."
24 November

Chapter Summary

Quarter-final match: Luffy vs Arlong!

Chapter Notes

The only things I can say about this are: this is the second to last chapter, and I am so sorry. XD

Shanks slammed the door to their hotel suite shut with a violent BANG! He threw a handful of papers on the coffee table and flopped into one of the overstuffed armchairs, his hands coming up to scrub at his face in frustration. He let out an aggravated growl, sunk deep into the cushions.

“I’m guessing it didn’t go well then?” Rayleigh’s tone was slightly amused.

One baleful eye peered out between the redhead’s fingers, “Y’think!?” He growled again, “Bonney fights first now. Because they’re insisting on testing everything! It wasn’t bad enough he had to jump through all of these stupid hoops twice a year, now he’s gotta do it every month if he wants to stay eligible. All in the name of ‘safety and precautions’. As if they think we don’t know what they’re really saying! AUGH!”

The older man sighed, folding his newspaper into his lap. “Well, at the very least he’ll have the documentation to throw in people’s faces when they try to question him.”

“You really think he’s gonna take comfort in that!?!”

“There isn’t much we can do though.”

Shanks growled, flopping his arm across his face. “I hate it when you’re right.”

“It’s a wonder you ever like me then.” Rayliegh snickered.

“Oh don’t start!” But he felt a smile tugging at his lips. “How is he anyway? Anybody seen him yet?”

That sobered his lover right up again, “No. He’s been holed up with Law and the others since yesterday after his shot. Jinbe brought them food earlier, but Law answered the door. Don’t worry though. He’ll come around when he needs to.”

“…yeah.” Shanks sighed, peering out from under his arm at the door that led to the D Boys’ bedroom.

A few hours later Sabo appeared on the couch next to Rayleigh, across from the television. The trainer had already turned it to the appropriate channel and the droning voices of the commentators filled the outer room with an anticipatory background noise. The blond frowned at the screen, eyes
focused on the highlight reel from earlier in the competition.

“How was he even allowed to compete past the first qualifying round! Bur—erm…” He glanced at the door to make sure it was shut tight before continuing, “Burgess is on his team! You can’t fight your own teammates! Why did the judges not stop them!?"

“Near as we can figure, Xiaobo,” Jinbe intoned from behind him, “the judges were unable to find anything wrong with their match.”

Rayleigh snorted, “Yeah. I’m sure their pockets found it quite fair.”

“But as usual we can’t prove anything. I swear, if I could get my hands on that shitty cat-bastard!” Shanks promised quietly, propping his feet up on the coffee table.

“Shush! The match is starting.”

Law joined them a few minutes later, sleep mussed and clearly only watching because he was a league official. He draped himself over Sabo’s lap like an overgrown cat. A yawn preceded intense growling as on the screen Teach grabbed Bonney by the arm to fling her across the ring.

“C’MON! That’s not even legal!” The blond beneath him would have been on his feet if not for the doctor. As it was he flung his arms out wide and shouted, “GODDAMNIT, REF, CALL SOMETHING!”

The others watching with him would have laughed if not for the fact that they agreed. Granted they had anticipated the immoral man to fight dirty, and the more jaded members of their group weren’t very surprised when the officials did virtually nothing to curb his behavior. But at the same time, that didn’t mean they appreciated watching it happen.

Bonney cried out, her back slammed into the side of the cage, and she coughed up something that from Law’s perspective looked an awful lot like blood. He clenched his fist into Sabo’s jeans. The pink-haired woman slid down to the floor of the ring on her hands and knees, clearly wheezing for breath. Tension mounted, the entire crowd leaning in to sympathize with her, and as one the whole stadium and everyone in the hotel suite let out a sound somewhere between horror and fury as Teach drew back his leg to punt her across the mat. Though the microphone wasn’t close enough to hear what she had to say, it was clear that she’d been defeated by the way she rolled without even attempting to stop herself until she hit the metal bars of the cage again.

The crowd jumped to its fear, roaring in outrage, but predictably the referee did nothing but count her out. He held Teach’s arm up in victory, though no one celebrated it, and the medic team moved in to carry the fallen fighter out of the ring.

On their way past, Bonney lashed out, grabbing a hold of Teach’s shirt to pull him down to her level. Though the shouts of the gathered masses drowned her out, the camera got a good look at her lips.

“Strawhat will murder you!”

“ZEHAHAHAHAHAHAAHAHAHA!!! I’M COUNTING ON IT!” Teach boomed out through the chaos, and he slapped her away, making it obvious that she’d only gotten a hold of him because he let her.

Back at the Sunny, the madman’s laughter made Nami mute the sound on the TV. A groan of appreciation lit up around the room, and it was clear from the way the gathered patrons were rumbling among themselves that none favored the black-haired maniac. There wasn’t much of a crowd yet, only the ones who had been hoping for a Bonney win, no matter how slim that chance
had seemed. It was still several hours before Luffy took the stage. Thus the bar wouldn’t be packed until almost 10 PM.

For one transgender cook in the worst predicament of his life… it was a welcome reprieve.

He slipped out of the kitchen, popping a piece of nicotine gum into his mouth, and out into the back lot. He didn’t actually have to go outside to take care of the gum thing, but he hoped that chewing it while keeping up the routine of grabbing a cigarette would help him quit. Thus far, it only made him snap it more often. He was still debating what he and Zoro argued about yesterday.

But the fact of the matter was… Ghin deserved to know! If the positions were reversed, Sanji would want to know.

So he pulled out his phone, “Hey, need to talk to you.”

[What? Busy.]

“Remember when you came to see me? About a month ago?”

[What of it Baby I’m busy.]

“Young condom broke.”

Sanji chewed his gum like it had personally insulted him, glaring at his phone, and willing his ex to answer. Nerves, barely controlled by the change in his meds, bundled and bunched in his stomach, just waiting for an excuse to trip his all-day-not-just-fucking-morning-sickness. A second piece of the gum chewed to pieces in his mouth and spat out like a physical representation of his mood, and he came to the conclusion that Ghin just didn’t care. It wasn’t like they were together exactly. Maybe Zoro had been right after all.

He slipped his phone back in his pocket and resigned himself to spending the rest of the shift figuring out how to tell Nami what was going on. Oh, she’d known about his gender since the incident with his wardrobe a couple weeks ago, but this wasn’t something he’d ever expected to have to explain to any boss, let alone one he hadn’t yet worked even two full months for yet.

At 10:15 PM on the dot, to the tune of a standing-room-only crowd at both the Sunny and Enies Lobby, Luffy D. Monkey, the Rubberman, took the ring. He wore a compression shirt that covered his torso from neck to waist to wrists. His gloves were entirely enclosed around his fists, and his legs were wrapped from the knee down in athletic tape on top of his usual padding. He was subdued and actually had a mouthguard in for once.

His opponent took immediate notice, “Oi! Strawhat, what’s with the get up? I know it’s been a while, but I ain’t gonna bite ya that hard!”

“Save it, Arlong. Ain’t my choice.” Luffy groused, too low for the microphones to pick up.

“A’ight. Just seem tense s’all.” The big Chinese fighter screwed up his mouth, distorting the sawblade tattoos on his chin.

He was thicker and more heavily inked than Luffy remembered—the sun on his chest and the tribal shark’s head on his forearm were now connected by a massive, life-like sawshark tearing through the skin of his bicep. His nose had been broken at least once more, adding a third ridge to the already craggy cartilage. As usual all he wore in the ring was a pair of nylon shorts.

Unlike the Rubberman, the Saw didn’t see any reason to bind up his feet or his hands. His
personalized ‘Shark’ style of Northern Shaolin Kung Fu centered almost entirely on the speed of his
core and far less on the strength of his limbs. Though that wasn’t to say he was weak by any means!
One didn’t get to the quarter-final round by being all talk and no game!

And he was pretty sure if he screwed up again, Fisher would have his head.

“Yeah. Could say that.” Luffy rolled his shoulder, stretching against the fabric.

Arlong’s discontent grew as he watched until it got to a point where he snapped his fingers. “Oi!
Ref! Da fuck’s up with this shit? Somebody up and change the fuckin’ dress code on me without
warnin’s? That’s against the rules y’know.”

He snarled down through the bars, but the squat official was unperturbed. “Mr. Monkey is in
compliance with the current equipment standards for his style-class, if Mr. Reuben would like to
make a formal complaint regarding Mr. Monkey’s state of dress, he may do so at the end of the
match. Are there any further questions?”

The bigger fighter’s eyes darted to his manager, but Fisher gave him an apologetic shrug. So, baring
his teeth, Arlong growled, “No. Let’s get this shit started.”

“Very well. Fighters to your marks.” The referee raised his whistle to his lips.

The quarterfinal was slightly different than the other rounds thus far. Beyond the size of the ring-cage
itself being a third larger than the others, it was octagonal, and the two men were alone inside the
steel. The crowd itself was further back as well, and seated amphitheatre-style on all eight sides. A
collection of screens hung above the ceiling of the ring, projecting camera angles from four different
positions at floor level with the fighters. The judges’ box sat tucked up against the actual ceiling of
the stadium itself, surrounded on three sides by thick Plexiglas windows, and a floor-to-ceiling
monitor across the fourth that allowed them to change the viewpoint of the fight with the push of a
button. Very few venues were as state-of-the-art as Enies Lobby.

And it showed in the quality of picture the folks at home were able to receive!

The blow of the whistle to start the fight was nearly drowned out by the roar of the crowd packed
into the Thousand Sunny. People hooted and hollered and the two hadn’t even begun yet!

For Nami, it was surreal watching Luffy and Arlong on opposite sides of the ring. She had to take a
deep breath when they met in the middle, and the hand on her shoulder was an immensely helpful
anchor as they touched gloves like old friends. How long had it been since Luffy got them all out of
that life? Six years? Before Law had come home from medical school, that was sure. She’d never
thought prison would actually do any good for anyone, but she had to admit, now that he was clean,
her old boss looked good.

They spent the first couple of minutes circling each other, the smaller man strangely tense, even to
the ginger’s untrained eye, then Luffy hauled back and socked Arlong across the jaw. The Shaolin
fighter fell into the swing, letting his body spin across the ring. He turned the pivot into a forward
flip, bringing his right hand around for Luffy’s side. The Rubberman swerved around it, his left leg
flying out and around to catch Arlong across the ribs. Neither hit was particularly hard, and from the
perspective of the more seasoned onlookers, it looked more like a choreographed dance than a fight.
Each man flowed around the other like water, one thrust or parry leading into the next without breaks
all the way around the ring.

“They’re feeling each other out!” Vivi exclaimed quite suddenly.
Zoro laughed, “I knew they’d kept in touch, didn’t know they were baiting each other.”

“O-oi! What you mean they kept in touch!?” Usopp snapped his head to the side so fast his nose nearly clipped Chopper’s hat.

“Simple. While he was locked up, Luffy wrote to him.”

“Nami, you knew about this!?”

The tech geek sounded affronted, though whether it was because the manager knew already and hadn’t told him, or the fact that Luffy kept in touch with a former enemy itself, was unclear. If Sanji had to guess, he’d have put his money on the first option, which let him actually smirk on his way past with a tray of drinks for the other end of the bar.

His attention was pulled away from his bickering crewmates when his front pocket vibrated.

Because he ducked into the kitchen to answer the text message, the cook missed the first real shots Arlong threw. The roar of the Sunny echoed through the building though as Luffy flew off his feet to slam into the bars of the cage. He coughed around his mouthguard, his hands automatically flipped to catch the steel behind him. This let him put his weight on his shoulders to bring both feet up into Arlong’s gut. As though he coiled himself into his ankles, the Rubberman leapt into his opponent’s core, only to bounce back again into a handspring that took him out of the corner and around to the side.

The bigger man spun, throwing his arm out to catch the nerve of Luffy’s shoulder, but a sudden drop brought an unexpected heel into the back of his knee as the younger brunet pressed his own chest to the mat. Arlong’s leg buckled and literally the only thing that kept him from landing on his rear was the years of balance training atop a telephone pole outside of his prison cell. Still, he couldn’t recover enough to strike out in retaliation. So when Luffy snaked around to bring both fists into his sternum, the big Asian went down. Hard.

His teeth snapped loud enough that the entire stadium winced.

When Sanji could look at the television again, it was after Nami had to turn away. There was some strange tension going on with that fight, and somehow the whole crew knew it had nothing to do with their dust up at Arlong Park half a decade ago. No, Arlong was drawing out the fight on purpose, working Luffy harder than he needed to for a win.

Robin narrowed her eyes, her lips pinched thin.

“What’s goin’ through that devious mind o’yers, Bobby?” Her fiancé swung past to grab a coil of cable from behind the bar.

“I don’t wish to jump to conclusions, but I believe Arlong has decided to give the fight to Luffy.”

“WHAT?!”

Several heads turned to stare at them because of Nami’s outburst. She smiled too easily, and waved the patrons off with a practiced ease, allowing them to believe it was some internal affair gone wrong, rather than the truth.

As soon as she was ignored again, she snagged Robin’s elbow, “Explain to me what you mean by Arlong throwing the fight!” She hissed.

“It won’t affect your bets, Navigator-san.” The coy brunette smiled, “I do not believe Arlong will
‘throw’ the fight, as you put it. I think he is merely giving Luffy something to really fight for. A chance to stretch his muscles, so to speak.”

“By give you mean actually give, not give up?”

“Precisely.”

The redhead rolled her eyes and put a hand to her chest, “Don’t scare me like that! I thought I was going to have to guard against refunds!!”

Robin merely smiled and chuckled. “Not to worry, Nami-san, your Berries are safe.”

Then she moved back off into the crowd with another round of alcohol and fingerfoods for the guests, leaving the traumatized manager to rub her temples and sigh.

Something echoed by Zoro at the other end of the bar, though for an entirely different reason. He was stationed so that no one could sneak out without paying their tab, or sneak in without paying the cover charge. He guarded the bowl of keys for parties that had no designated driver, and was on drunk-dial duty, meaning it was his responsibility, as the night progressed, to ensure all persons got into taxi cabs safely. And this was on top of his usual security and anti-brawl-defense duties.

So the pounding between his ears was only compounded by the fact that for the last hour and a half every time the cook wasn’t working on someone’s order, he was messing with his phone. That in and of itself wasn’t so bad; they all did it. As long as he was able to keep up with the orders, he was free to text anyone he liked. Logic said he was probably talking to Law, seeing as how the doctor had a little more time during this fight than he had at any of the others.

Because this was the quarter final, all three remaining IMMA Federation physicians were in attendance. Hogback would have been there as well had a formal inquiry not been launched after his altercation with Law several weeks ago. So, with three sets of eyes on the ring, it meant that Law could relax slightly. He and Kureha had seats in the judges’ box, while Nako was actually down on the floor. They’d switched several times since Luffy and Arlong’s match began.

But Zoro, during the times that he’d seen the spotted doctor, had never once seen him pull out his phone. So, while it was possible that Sanji was only talking to him while Law was off the floor… something in the bouncer’s gut told him it was a farfetched theory. And that the truth was something far, far more sinister.

His attention was wrenched back to the TV when Luffy’s battle cry rocked through the bar, and he looked up just in time to catch his captain’s elbow land in the center of Arlong’s face. There was a crunch, audible thanks to their proximity to the camera, and the bigger man’s reaction was to try and grapple him, blood streaming down his face.

The pair rolled away from the camera such that the officials had to change views to an overhead. Luffy came out on top, his forearm pressed into Arlong’s cheek, and his opposite knee pinned the Chinese man’s leg at the pressure point. There was absolutely no space between them, and at some point Luffy had lost his mouthguard because all of his teeth were clearly visible when the camera changed again to get a frontal shot.

Arlong rumbled something the microphone couldn’t pick up, and a light sparked in Luffy’s eyes such that the crew of the Thousand Sunny finally caught on to the same thing Robin had. Then their captain was bearing down on his opponent again, and the fight was back on.

The bigger man pulled to the side, against the points of pain in his thigh and face, to slam his fingers
into Luffy’s ribs. The Rubberman buckled, losing his grip on Arlong’s leg, and they rolled again so the Shaolin fighter could get back to his feet while the younger was coughing for breath. When they stood, Luffy was wiping his mouth from spit, and the back of Arlong’s arm was stained red from his nose.

He reached up and cracked it back into place, grinning with a feral light in his eyes. “Now THAT’S more like it, Rubberman!!”

And the crowd went crazy! All over people leapt to their feet, screaming and shouting for their chosen favorite. In the Sunny’s dining room the noise was nearly deafening as chairs clattered to the floor, and somebody knocked over a table.

There was a beat, then Luffy launched himself at Arlong, fists flying and into the whirling dervish that was the Tiger-style base of the bigger fighter’s version of kung fu. Their arms met and clashed. Up, down, out, side, back, left, right, around. Give ground. Take it back. Foot, shin, heel, palm, elbow. Around and around and around! Slowly but surely the blur that was their faces came into clarity.

Luffy’s snarl melted into a huge grin that Arlong answered through the copper stains on his lips.

Robin turned to Nami, who was enthusiastically cheering from her place behind the bar, and smiled knowingly. This alone proved that Jinbe had been right. His prison time and training under Fisher Tiger again had reformed the one-time drug-addicted thug-boss. He was still hard and rough around the edges, but by God, the two of them were having fun!

Even Usopp had to admit that there was something fundamentally different about Arlong, something good. Zoro snorted when the sometimes-sniper groused about it, though the words themselves were too low to hear over the din of the crowd.

His good eye tracked the others, just checking up on them all, when a flash of pink caught his attention. Quickly tuning the rest out, the bouncer zeroed in on the teenaged doctor, trying to get a read on what was wrong.

Chopper was clearly agitated, flailing his arm at someone, but Zoro couldn’t see who, there were too many bodies in the way.

Then there was a clang of metal from the TV, and Arlong’s face met the camera. There was something wrong with his eyes, the pupils were pinpricks, and the scleras were bloodshot. He pushed off, his hand actually shoving the camera out of his face such that the glass cracked, and the viewers at home had to get a better angle from a different shot. He growled, low and angry.

Nami froze, the earlier mirth drained from her much too pale face. Usopp and Zoro moved closer, also on guard, though more logical because it wasn’t their past coming back to haunt them on the television set. She gripped the bar, a cold sweat on her neck and shoulders.

On the screen, Luffy had begun to dodge the crazed attacks. Arlong was ruthless, relentless, and wild. His form was completely broken, and off to the side Fisher Tiger was ranting at someone to call the match. Shanks was sure to be with him because this wasn’t normal! This was like what had happened at Arlong Park when the big fighter had still been hopped up on ES Juice.

Back then he’d been nearly unpredictable and insanely strong; hopped up on a combination of steroids and stimulants that messed with his head, and destroyed his rational thinking. ES was the worst parts of crystal meth, heroin, and LSD while increasing testosterone like anabolic steroids, leading to greater raw strength on top of lowered inhibitions. The frequent users of the drug were
often noted for being wildly manic and aggressive, with little concern for anything other than getting stronger.

So, for Nami, she wasn’t watching the Battle of the Supernova on TV. She was back there, in that place, watching this scrappy, mouthy kid go rounds with her sister’s boyfriend like this was some kind of game. The ring had been an abandoned pool. The gang was using it as a clubhouse of sorts and Luffy had stumbled over it by following Nami home. Oh she’d nearly gotten it good when Arlong realized that! But Luffy have been there with Zoro at his side.

That first night had been brutal. Arlong, hopped up on the Juice, had thrashed the then-teenager. Only Zoro’s sword had gotten him out of the headlock!

A gasp went up that caught the bar manager’s attention. Luffy’s face was pressed against the camera and a too-familiar shark tattoo was around his neck. Even the audience in the Sunny could hear the Rubberman’s ragged breaths. His fingers clawed at Arlong’s arm, the padding of his gloves was shredded, bitten off it looked like, and three knuckles were broken open.

Zoro cursed, and beside him, he felt Usopp shudder. This was bad.

Shanks voice broke through the others, “GODDAMNIT REF DO SOMETHING!!”

The camera angle changed, panning around to show both managers in the official’s face while the short man blubbered about how insane an idea it was to go in there. Paid to supervise the fights or not, he flat out refused to endanger his own life getting between the freakish pair. Which had both Shanks and Fisher Tiger gesticulating wildly, but the microphone had moved away as the view turned to Law, Nako, and Kureha, who were trying to figure out the best angle from which to shoot a tranquilizer into the ring.

Though which fighter they were aiming for was hard to tell, as Luffy, now free, was resorting to back alley tactics. He bit Arlong hard on the shark on his forearm, making the bigger man yowl like a cat. The reflexive loosening let the Rubberman spin around his waist, grab a hold of his hair, and haul him down using his own body weight against him. Arlong’s back hit the mat and Luffy immediately wrapped himself around the bleeding arm, flipping the other onto his stomach for the pin. However, the Chinese fighter somehow got his legs under him and without noticing the way his shoulder distorted, he rolled until Luffy was slammed into the bars of the cage.

“NGAH!” The younger brunet felt his spine crunch in several places.

Arlong kept pushing; too low for the docs, too wild for the refs, and in serious danger of permanently hurting both himself and Luffy.

So, the Rubberman made a split-second decision. He squirmed, digging his knees into Arlong’s kidneys until he got a free hand tangled in the thick ponytail at the base of his opponent’s skull. This gave him the leverage to absolutely slam the bigger fighter’s head against the steel lattice wall.

After the third strike, both fighters were screaming. The seventh opened Arlong’s temple, making Luffy’s grip slick and dangerous to hold. One more and Luffy was the only one still yelling, but it took two more to get the drugged man to go limp.

Immediately the cage was thrown open and the medical teams swarmed them, hauling Arlong off on a stretcher.

Law fell to his knees in front of Luffy, “Hey. Hey, Lu, look at me.”

The younger brunet pushed away from him, focused on Arlong, “Don’t hurt him! It’s not his fault!!”
“Luffy. Lu!” The doctor pulled on the fighter’s shoulders, “Luffy, they won’t hurt him! Luffy, you’re bleeding!”

That stilled the Rubberman. He relaxed into his lover’s arms, only just noticing how the whole medical team was dressed in protective latex sleeves and masks. He looked around, worry and frustration on his face.

Eventually his eyes met Law’s, “It’s not his fault. He didn’t do it. Somebody drugged him! He knew!”

“What?!”

The lights cut out, and somewhere overhead someone was explaining things to the audience both in the stands and at home. Bullshit to soothe fears and make it seem like everything was under control. But in the ring itself, Luffy shuddered, listing to one side as the adrenaline of the situation began to drain.

He frowned hard, concentrating. “Arlong. He knew. His water bottle. He could taste it. He told me there wasn’t anything he could do about it, he’d tried puking but he didn’t think he got rid of it.”

Some lackey brought over the bottle when Nako waved for it, and Kureha took a swig from it. She immediately spat the mouthful to the ground with a curse.

“That’s ES alright. Shitting Hell.” She crossed the ring and bellowed to the officials from the IMMA, “Nobody leaves! And get Smoker from FBC on the phone! I want his team on this!”

Someone tried to protest, and someone else argued back, but Luffy heard none of it. He leaned heavily on Law’s shoulder, hands bandaged all the way up to the elbow. He’d been so careful… but now? In the darkness of the aftermath his previous despair was oozing back into his thoughts. There was no way he hadn’t contaminated Arlong, not after splitting the guy’s head open to knock him out. And that was on top of the fact that using the drugs, even without knowing they’d been in his water, would mean it was likely the big Chinese man was headed for another jail sentence. Not to mention the reaction the IMMA people would have about the whole thing. They’d both be lucky if they ever fought professionally again after this.

“Hey.” Law drew him out of his thoughts, and he blinked at the taller man, squinting tiredly. “They can’t touch you. It wasn’t your fault. Or Arlong’s. The officials will decide the outcome of the match, and we’ll catch the bastard that did this. Okay?!”

Luffy kept blinking at him for a moment, the corner of his mouth pulling up in a lopsided smile, “You sound funny when you’re being encouraging, Traffy.”

“Yeah, well, somebody has to be when you’re worn out.” The doctor huffed, and slid his arm around his neck to haul him to his feet. “Now c’mon. Nothing’s going to be decided tonight, or even by tomorrow. Let’s get you home.”

Beyond the Rubberman’s narrow focus people were being screened for having access to the fighters’ gear before the match, as it turned out Tashigi was in the audience, having been sent to the match specifically because of the stunt Teach had pulled at the last fight. So, she, using a Skype call, was coordinating with her partner to narrow down their suspects. This meant Law was free to gather up the rest of Team Rubberman and head out.
"I'm sorry."

So I've been sitting on this since March because I didn't want to post and make people think I was gonna be putting the sequel up right away. I'm still not gonna post it right away. First, I gotta go over it, edit and re-write some stuff, and basically polish it for y'all. But more importantly... I'm not that nice. >;3c

That being said, in the spirit of full disclosure, we've added new tags this chapter: psychotic break and emotional abuse. So be careful, lovelies. I don't wanna trigger anybody.

But yeah, that's it. Stay With Me is over. I don't have a timeframe for when I'll post Never Surrender, but I do have it halfway pre-written, so it's really only a matter of finding time to edit it. Ja ne~!

“You’re lucky I was in town, Baby. Another day and you’d’ve had to wait until next summer to see me.” Ghin stepped away from the wall of the building, his hands in his pockets and a beanie pulled down around his ears. His jeans were thin, like the rest of him, and he had a sleepy cast to the features of his face.

It didn’t fool Sanji a bit.

“Yeah. Well. This couldn’t wait.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, shoulders hunched, and chewing on the inside of his lip to keep the ball of nerves in his gut from coming up through his mouth.

Ghin raised an eyebrow, “You’re wearing that shit again? Baby, I thought we talked about this. We agreed you weren’t gonna go out in public except in—”

“I was at work.” Sanji cut him off, and then winced, “Sorry. I just… didn’t have time to change. I don’t have long. I-I actually have to… to get back… there’s a… it’s a big night. Um… One of the guys… it’s his birthday… they’ll miss me if I’m gone too long… I need to…”

The olive-skinned man had stepped into his personal space, seeming bigger than he actually was, but his voice was still sweet. “I know, Baby. Gotta keep up that job and all. Cuz you’re grown up and independent. You don’t need a man to take care of you, right?”

Words he’d said almost a year ago felt like needles in his skin when thrown back at him and Sanji leaned away from them.
“But you do need a man, don’t you, Baby? You need several men actually. Doc Feelgood. Does he, Baby? Does he make you feel good? When you’re on your knees in the alley behind your apartment maybe? Bet he makes you feel real good, don’t he? Oh, but that’s not enough for Baby. She needs more than that. She’s got that punk bodyguard, Mr. Mossball. How’s he treat you, Baby? As good as me? Do you get on your knees for him too? Maybe you’ve taken up a couple others too, huh? Walkin’ the streets behind Terry’s diner again? How much you suckin’, Baby?”

Unconsciously, Sanji was backing up. He didn’t notice until his hands hit bricks that Ghin had subtly herded him into a corner between two buildings. He also didn’t notice he was shaking his head.

“No? Are you sure? Cuz see, I don’t think I can believe you, Baby. Remember you have that habit of yours to twist the truth so you look good. Like telling me you weren’t stuffing your face again. We both know different, don’t we, Baby?” Ghin took a hand and drew it down Sanji’s cheek, his tone soft and gentle, “Look at you shaking like a leaf. Cuz you know I’m right, don’cha, Baby?”

“Y-yes! Yes! I’m sorry!” When had he started crying? Sanji didn’t know. “Ahh-HA!”

The sting of the slap against his wet cheek was more startling than painful, but his shoulders dragged across the bricks, scraping the skin through all three layers of clothing. Then his scarf was ripped from his throat, and thrown into the street so Ghin could get his hand around the back of his neck.

“You’re not gonna see them anymore, Baby. You’re gonna quit that job, and you’re gonna come with me to Sabaody where you belong.” He leaned into Sanji’s ear and hissed, “Or I’m gonna take my knife and get rid of that broken condom that ain’t mine right here and now.”

Sanji couldn’t help himself, he had to insist, more tears stinging his bruised cheek, “It’s yours, I swear it’s yours! I promise! I didn’t! Nobody but you! I swear!!”

“It had damn well better be!” Ghin shoved him forward, ambling after him when he stumbled over his shoes. “Cuz if it ain’t, Baby…”

The threat itself was enough, Sanji—no, Samantha wrapped her arms around her ribs, watching her boyfriend out of the corner of her eye. He was still within arm’s reach, but far enough that the air around her was even colder than it had been when she’d left the Sunny.

And the whole time she was kicking herself for thinking she’d ever actually be able to get away from him. It was obvious now; she belonged to Ghin, and always would. Playing around at anything different was just a fairy tale.

It was time to stop dreaming now.

The next morning Team Rubberman came home. Twenty-four hours to clear the crew from suspicion of rigging the fight, and followed by two days on the road. The only thing any of them wanted was to sleep in their own beds with maybe some home cooking.

Luffy in particular kept rattling off all of the recipes he was going to have Sanji fix for him—mostly meat. So when the bus pulled up outside the Sunny, he flung himself from the doors almost before Shanks put it in park.

“SAAANJIII!!!!” He cried, swinging through the gap in the bar and sliding into the kitchen at top speed.

Normally, he’d have been met with the sole of a non-skid dress shoe in the middle of his chest, but this time, he came face to breasts with Vivi instead.
“Mah! Where’s Sanji?” He blinked at her.

She hesitated, her expressive eyebrows drawing into a wrinkled line. Tears collected in her eyes, then she looked over his head at the doorway. “I—I can’t! I’m sorry! Nami has them. I gotta go.”

Pulling away, the blue-haired woman blew past both Luffy and Law in the opening. She barely even paused to grab her coat before running out into the chill November air. This left the two men to exchange a confused look, and Law turned on his heel to head for Nami’s office.

“Pardon, Nami, but I believe you have something for us?” He asked, frowning.

The redhead looked up from a letter, saw who was talking to her, and shook her head, clearly upset. “There’s a letter for you too, but I’ll sum it up. Sanji’s gone. He left last night after Zoro’s birthday party, and hasn’t been back. Brook found these letters under his door this morning. There was one for him, one for you, and one for me, but unless yours says something more than mine… all I got was his resignation.”

“He’s not allowed to quit!” Luffy demanded. “He has to make me food!”

“Luffy… it doesn’t work like—“

“I don’t care! He’s Nakama!! He’s not allowed to quit. Tell him, I don’t accept it. He isn’t allowed to quit. I’m not letting him.” The Rubberman was insistent, and stormed off as though his word was binding.

Law looked at Nami, and Nami shrugged, handing him his letter.

Five minutes later, he stormed out into the back lot, fuming. “Mugi, fight me!”

Ace, Sabo, and Shanks, who had been playing cards off to the side, looked up in confusion. Of all of them, Law usually kept his hands out of the sparring ring. They exchanged a look, but Luffy simply dropped into a ready stance, fists up at his face.

The two circled each other for a moment, then Law ripped his shirt off, and they were grappling like a pair of wildcats, all twisting and trying to pull the other onto the pavement. Law pushed forward, Luffy slipped back. Luffy wrapped his leg around Law’s, and the surgeon grabbed the fighter’s jeans by the waist. They both tumbled, but neither lost their grip. In a rolling tangle of limbs and dark hair, they actually hit the fence, still trying to tear each other apart.

“What in all the Seven Hells…” Sabo murmured.

Ace nudged him, having rescued a paper that had flown out of Law’s pocket at the start of the fight. “This might have something to do with it.”

Sabo and Shanks both skimmed the letter, and the blond man swore again, “Of all the stupid, fucked up ideas he could have… really?”

But Shanks frowned. “I’ll catch you boys later. I just remembered I have an appointment with Smoker I need to get to.”

“Huh?” Ace blinked.

Sabo snorted, “Fine.”

And Law dove at Luffy to grab him around the waist in the background.
“So, explain it to me again?” Rayleigh was saying when Shanks entered the bar.

Nami sighed, “Sanji claims to have taken a job with his father traveling the East Blue and won’t be returning here for at least a year, if ever, but he gave Brook no forwarding address, and paid, up front, for twelve months’ rent.”

Rayleigh looked at Shanks, and both looked to Jinbe, who sighed and shook his head.

A little while later, all three were sitting across from Smoker, the letters laid out on the cop’s desk, and an increasingly frustrated atmosphere was building.

“Look, I can’t actually file a missin’ person’s report, because the boy ain’t actually missin’. He says right here where he’s goin’, and we can’t confirm or deny that he actually went there until Spring when the Baratie brings herself back ‘round this way. He could easily’ve gotten a train ticket and skipped town in the middle of the night, and frankly, with the shit that’s been goin’ on ‘round that boy this fall, I wouldn’t blame him. He prob’ly thought it’d be best ta remove himself because of it all.” Smoker sighed, folding the two letters back into their envelopes. “All’s I can promise is if the time comes ‘round that Zeff shows up here sayin’ he never made it, I’ll put Tashigi on lookin’ for him. Other than that, a man’s got a right to skip town if he wants. And he’s not required ta tell anybody where he’s actually goin’ as long as he’s not in trouble.”

“But!” Shanks tried to interrupt.

Smoker stopped him, “With the law, I mean. Whatever trouble the boy’s gotten himself into, he don’t want help with it.”

Rayleigh crossed his arms over his chest, “He’s got a point, Adrien.”

“This ain’t like when Strawhat and th’ others were kids. Yer tellin’ me this is a grown man, twenty-somethin’. If he’s in trouble, he’s gotta be the one ta come ta me. I can’t act on hunches and gut feelin’s.” The cop pinched the bridge of his nose. “I just had this conversation with Zoro a couple weeks ago.”

Jinbe chimed in then, “And if we find you proof that Sanji is having these sort of troubles?”

“I don’t wanna know about how ya found it.” Smoker sighed again.

With that Shanks surged to his feet,”You won’t.”

He left Rayliegh and Jinbe to follow if they wanted, but the angry redhead marched straight to their rental car with a purpose. The fact that Rayliegh had the keys, and thus he couldn’t actually go anywhere until the silver-haired man came out, was of no consequence. He knew there was something else going on. First the break-in, then Yubashiri, and then the fight with Arlong… Shanks could smell a rat. The trouble was where it was hiding.

By the time his partners met him at the car, he was deep in conversation on the phone, “Look, I know you can’t tell me who all comes to you, Rhea! I’m not asking for specifics… That’s not what I… He’s not even a girl!”

Shanks was quiet for a moment, and the muffled sounds of the person on the other end of the line were just loud enough that Rayliegh could hear the anger in her tone.

“Fine!” The redhead shouted, “I get it!! Jesus you don’t have to scream my ear off!!”

He ripped the phone away from his head as Kureha shouted into it, “ADRIEN SHANKS IF I
WANTED TO SCREAM AT YOU YOU’D KNOW IT WAS HAPPENING! NOW LEAVE MY GIRLS ALONE AND MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS!!"

Jinbe quickly took the device from his partner with a look, then spoke softly in Mandarin into it to soothe the volatile woman.

It wasn't long after Shanks and company left that Tashigi entered Smoker's office looking worried and holding out his phone. "Sencho..."

Smoker, massaging both temples and with the tips of six cigars smoked down to the stubs already in the ashtray, looked up and his brow furrowed. "Shit. Zoro?"

She nodded, but the voice on the other end was the swordsman's landlord, "Smoker-san... have I, ah, caught you at a bad time?"

He took as deep an inhale of his cigar as his lungs would hold and started cutting the end off a new one. "There ain't gonna be a better one. What's goin' on, Brook?"

"Well... I believe by now you've heard about Sanji-san leaving..." There was a pause and a faint banging could be heard through the phone's tiny speaker. "While no one is taking it well... some are handling it better than others. And I thought perhaps you could talk to him rather than involving anyone else?"

Faintly Zoro's voice echoed in the background, "...OUT AND FIGHT ME LIKE A MAN, COOK! COWARDLY, NO GOOD, UNDER HANDED RUNNING AWAY FROM YOUR PRO—"

"I dearly wish to not have to replace that door. Again." Brook sounded mostly worried, but with an undercurrent of irritation.

"We're coming. TASHIGI. GET THE BIG CUFFS AND FLOOR IT," Smoker bellowed out the door as he turned the phone off. He was not surprised to hear "Ready and waiting, Sir!" considering she'd been helping him round up the station wild child since his youth, and threw on his jacket with one hand and clipped the cuffs to his belt with the other as Tashigi met him in the door and followed him out. He doubted he'd need to actually lock Zoro up, but he was pretty messed up over the fight with his girlfriend... and for more reasons than he was willing to talk about, saying only it was private business of hers. There was no telling for sure and it paid to come prepared, with that kid.

When he got to the apartment building, Brook was leaning against his own door, and the pounding of Zoro's fists could be heard all the way from the fourth floor. Franky was sitting on the steps holding an ice pack to his left eye. His lip was split as well. He kept licking it unconsciously. Usopp and Robin were standing nearby, both at a loss for words. All four of them looked up the stairs, and the dark woman very pointedly held her phone in her hand, ready to call back up in case Zoro had suffered a full on psychotic break. Again.

Smoker put out his cigar and rolled up his sleeves to the sound of Tashigi murmuring something into the comm unit and took his ass up those stairs two and three at a time. "ZORO! HANDS OFF TH'FUCKIN' PROPERTY!"

"STAY OUT OF IT, OLD MAN, THIS'S BETWEEN ME AND THE COOK!!" The bouncer didn't seem to notice that either were in uniform, too focused on trying to get into Sanji's apartment.

"WHEN YA START BUSTIN' DOWN LANDLORD DOORS IT AIN'T JUST BETWEEN YA AN' HIM ANYMORE," he called back, finally coming to the landing, teeth biting hard on his cigar.

"TH' DOOR WOULDN'T BE PART OF IT IF HE'D JUST *ANSWER* IT!!!" Zoro slammed
his fist into the wood again, ignoring the pain that rocked through his still injured fingers. "INSTEAD HE'S BEING A FUCKING COWARD!!! I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING, BASTARD!!! AND YOU'RE AN IDIOT!!!"

Zoro was too irrational- the time for talk was long past. Smoker threw his jacket off- if Zoro could get a good grip on it he could throw him, he'd done it before- and grabbed him, expertly looping one arm under Zoro's armpits and hauling back, his other hand slapping the cuffs on one upraised wrist as he then shoved and wrestled the swordsman away from the door, into the wall across the hall, and then dragged his other arm down to cuff his hands behind his back just in time to get thrown off the mosshead like he was a rodeo bronco.

"GODDAMIT, SMOKER, STAY OUT OF IT!! I'VE GOTTA GEH—!!" His next word was cut off by Smoker's fist across his mouth.

The cop didn't like seriously laying hands on the young man, but there was very little that could break through his temper when he was like this. As it was he spat to the side and tried to rush him, only to be spun away into the wall again, not hard enough to hurt the plaster, but enough to make him lose his breath. Zoro coughed, trying to twist and get away again, in spite of his hands being bound behind him. Smoker was ready for him though, his knee between the mosshead's legs, pinning him against the wall with both corner and his own weight against him.

He shoved his elbow into the wall and forced Zoro's chin up with his forearm, bracing it so he had to crowd his head into the corner, facing the ceiling, or risk being choked. It was one of the most heavy-handed holds he could have used in this small space, but it was important to let Zoro have absolutely no leverage, because if he could get even an ounce, he'd try to duck and run. And given enough time, Zoro would get himself out of even their heaviest handcuffs.

Seeming to sense he was trapped, Zoro relaxed some, stilling in the way that meant he was listening, even if his eyes still looked wild and slightly unfocused.

"I got pills here, Zoro. Yer gonna take 'em. After ya do, we'll see 'bout talkin' this out down at the station," his voice pitched soothing and low, soft, as his free hand dug in his coat and he used his teeth to twist off the top and shook two pills into his hand. "Here."

For a heart-stopping moment it seemed like Zoro was going to fight him, his jaw clenched. Then his good eye landed on Smoker's face and some of the fog lifted. He couldn't speak, not the way he wanted to, but he opened his mouth so the older man could put the medication on his tongue. Immediately Tashigi was there with a glass of water, letting him get a drink from it so he didn't have to swallow them dry, but she backed away again almost as fast, if only because any further complication could result in someone actually getting hurt.

He eased up on his neck, enough so he could swallow without risking choking, and then remained dialed down as he put the cap back on and stashed it in his pocket. "Alright. Now while those kick in I'm jus' gonna talk. Did you fuckin' see wha' tha' lil shit o' yers did ta my car las' time he was here? Fucker painted spots on it. Yeh, gray spots. 'T'match my hair', he says. When he gets back off'a tour I'mma put him over m'knee an' smack his ass red like I did ya you when ya were a truly insufferable lil' shit. Strawhat might even thank me fer it."

Zoro watched his mouth move, not really processing the words, but definitely reacting to the soothing sound of his mentor. It was obvious his bad eye was giving him trouble, because it kept drifting shut, but even his good eye wasn't too focused.

Smoker kept rambling, about any subject that came to mind, the movies out at the moment, the paperwork Tashigi had ruined when her coffee spilled on the desk last week, whatever he could find
to talk about to keep his voice rolling over Zoro's ears until he was in a better spot to be processing the world around him.

After about ten minutes, the bouncer smacked his lips, working his tongue, "M'in trouble."

"Yeh, recruit. Yeh are. Let's go to th'station an' ya c'n tell me all 'bout it over sludgy coffee an' stale pastry." He withdrew, slowly, and pulled Zoro out of the corner.

"Mm'kay." While the younger man didn't exactly slump forward, his muscles were relaxed so that Tashigi could manipulate him down the stairs without difficulty.

He didn't even look up at the others when they crossed through the lobby, and easily ducked his head when the sergeant guided him into the squad car. Predictably there were several other cars outside, and a couple of the younger cops actually had their weapons drawn, as though they expected to have to take somebody out. It was chilling to think that if Smoker hadn't been able to get through to Zoro, he could easily have been their target. Especially if he'd ducked and ran.

Brook shuddered, glanced between them and the captain, "He'll be alright, right?"

"Yeah. I've had a spare script of his ever since he got these," he pulled the bottle from his pocket to let Brook see the flash of it before tucking it away again, "'an' he took two without fightin' me, which is a good sign we caught 'im early. Too much shit in too short'a time, I'll bet. Between th'fight with his girl an' Yubashiri..." he shrugged. "We'll take care'o him. I'll make sure 'e's a'right, even if I have to move him back inta my living room."

"Only if he needs it. I'd be a poor friend if I held him to task for something he can't control, and he didn't do any serious damage." Brook glanced at Franky for confirmation quickly, then nodded, "Let him know he's welcome to come home as soon as he's allowed. I'll keep it for him." The old stoner rubbed the back of his head and sighed, "And y'know, no charges or anything. I know you have paperwork you have to fill out, but just keep an eye on him until he's okay. No need to get judges and lawyers involved, yeah?"

He grinned a little sideways and nudged his arm. "Thanks. S'easier tha' way. You're good people," he said quietly, leaning on the car. "M'glad th'lil shit found y'all. Yer good fer him. He hasn't had one'a these in years. Since he met that rubber brat." He climbed into the car then, and the gathered cops began to disperse.

All the way to the station and into the holding cell, Zoro said nothing, kept his head down, and didn't look at anyone around them. He knew what he'd see, the judging looks, the fear. He couldn't handle it right then. Sanji was gone, Baby wasn't talking to him, the bullshit with Arlong, the bullshit with the break-ins, Yubashiri... his meds might have made the push of reality a little more firm, but he was still very much on edge. Like a pitbull rescued from the fighting ring. Ready to snap at anything but a select few hands.

Even to the point of flinching when Tashigi closed the door on his cell.

Smoker came in not long after, bringing with him a chair, two coffees, and a couple of the donuts from that morning.

"Alright, kid. S'time to talk to me. I know we ain't done this heart to heart shit in... fuck's it, almost ten years now? But it's time."

"Where ya wanna start?" His bad eye was still giving him fits, so he kept it closed, even as he looked up at his mentor.
"Why don't we start with what set ya off. Work from the most recent bullshit an' go backwards." He offered him one of the coffees, already sipping at his own. It was bitter and reheated too many times, but it was hot.

Zoro simply held it, not really having the stomach for anything at the moment. Even if Sanji had been in his apartment, he couldn't blame him for not answering, as snippets of his behavior appeared in his memory. "The cook took off. Back to th' guy who's beatin' him. I just know it. Even if he won't admit there's somethin' wrong." There he paused, and growled a little, "If I could just talk to him! Make him see! I know he'd understand if I just talked to him. But he won't listen!"

After that it was like the dam broke. Everything from the two months came pouring out in more detail than he had ever used while discussing it. How he felt, what he thought, how held back he was, and the relations with both Sanji and Baby, and how he really didn’t want to hurt either one but couldn’t stop himself with the first and didn’t know how to handle having done it to the second. On and on they talked, well into the night after Tashigi finished the paperwork and clocked out, and even into the start of night shift, with Kuzan giving them both a nod as he made his first rounds.

It was almost four in the morning before Smoker finally called a stop to their conversation, mostly because he needed to catch some kind of sleep before filing the day’s reports with the magistrate in the morning.

“Ya able ta find yer way home t’night, kid, or do ya wanna crash on my couch?” The grizzled cop asked, walking shoulder to shoulder with Zoro out to his personal vehicle.

Zoro rubbed the back of his head, looking a little frazzled and shocked, “I’m not getting evicted?”

“Brook said he’d be a piss poor friend if he blamed ya fer shit ya can’t control.” Smoker smiled around his cigar, puffing leisurely on it.

“Then…” The bouncer glanced from the car to the street and back again with a frown.

Plopping down into the driver’s seat, Smoker threw the passenger side door open, “Just get in, brat. I’ll take ya home.”

“Fine!” Returning to the brusque pseudo-affection was stabilizing, and had Zoro sliding into the beat-up pick-up truck without further comment.

It had been a long time since he’d had a break that bad, and he was still a little off-center, though the meds fortunately had him firmly in reality again. And he’d taken a second dose when the six hour mark passed, just to make sure he could handle being home and by himself without being set off again. Mostly, now he was tired. Drained and worn. And aching from the further loss of yet more Nakama. Especially knowing the situation Sanji was leaving them for because Zoro didn’t believe a damn word about him going off to be with his dad, nope. That was almost as shifty as pretending there wasn’t someone stalking him.

And it left Zoro pining for the simplicity of a physical opponent rather than all of this psychological bullshit.

Smoker left him at the door, and he was glad that no one else was around. He gave a glance up the stairs and sighed before descending into his own place, where he plopped into his computer chair hoping to hear from the one person who could make him smile like she was made of sunshine.

--BabyLoveCook [BLC] began skyping ThreeSwordWnaderer [TSW] at 04:45--

BLC: i dunno if ur around or if ur gonna see this or whatever but
BLC: I can't see you anymore.
BLC: I didn't wanna just disappear w nothin but
BLC: I can't see you anymore.
TSW: !!!!!
TSW: Did something happen? Baby, what do you mean? Are you okay? What's wrong??
BLC: please
BLC: *harder
TSW: I don't
TSW: I just want to
TSW: I just wanna KNOW
TSW: This is like real sudden
TSW: and you don't do shit like this
TSW: all the sudden
TSW: I just
TSW: What happened?
BLC: i
BLC: i can't
BLC: tigerboy please
BLC: i just can't

There was a pause that felt like forever as he tried to get his thoughts in order. This was the first time he'd heard from her since they fought last. This could not be about the fight, or she would have left him when they had the fight. And what it was not made him even more alarmed about what it might be. He had a bad, bad gut feeling and it was getting worse with every message.

TSW: are you okay?
BLC: What part of she doesn't want to see you anymore don't you understand? Leave her alone.
TSW: I wasn't talking to you.
TSW: If you want to fucking talk to me I'd be glad to do it in person
TSW: I'll even bring a fucking friend
TSW: Three friends even
BLC: NO!
BLC: tigerboy leave it
BLC: im fine
BLC: he's just protective im fine

He pushed away from the computer and cursed explosively, loud enough it echoed up through the vents. He shouldn't have mentioned three; she'd caught on, dammit! He socked his punching bag so hard the supports creaked before pacing back to his chair, not wanting to make her wait long.

TSW: Alright.
TSW: But just so we're clear
TSW: You're still my friend
TSW: So if you ever need anything
TSW: And I mean ANYTHING
TSW: My doors open

He hesitated a moment more, debating her safety if he said he'd also let her crash at his place if she ever should need it, then decided it would probably not be safe to say.

BLC: look ill be fine
BLC: i no this is hard
BLC: i d
BLC: wanna do this
BLC: go after
BLC: cant lie 2 u
BLC: sorry i gtg
BLC: pls...
TSW: I can't just turn myself off
TSW: But I understand and I'll let you go
TSW: No hard feelings, Baby.
TSW: Stay safe

He leaned back in his hair and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. There really wasn't anything more he could say, not without risking her punishment. Fuck! He hated being helpless! He hated it SO MUCH! He couldn't even tell her goodbye, not really, he couldn't bear to- to make it sound so final, and he couldn't tell her he loved her again either, because he knew, he just KNEW if he did that bastard that knocked her up was going to knock her around.

He jumped out of his chair with a roar of frustration, of pain, of unadulterated rage, and he set on his punching bag with such force the whole building seemed to tremble beneath his wrath.

There was a long pause, several minutes, almost long enough for Skype to consider her idle. Then it pinged one final time.

BLC: no promises

--BabyLoveCook [BLC] has disconnected at 05:00--

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!