While You're Gone

by Dangit

Summary

One week after Zoro leaves with Mihawk, Sanji is ready to start his new life in Raftel. Halfway across the world, Zoro trains under the watchful eye of his rival and counts the days until he can go back home.

Notes

Hey guys! Sorry for the delay, real life caught up with me!!
Chapter 1

Sanji can’t stand being at the penthouse anymore, so he rents a room at one of the hotels in Sabaody. He talks to Nami about putting his place and his cars on sale, and Robin helps him look for an apartment in Raftel.

Franky tells him they can start construction on the first of July, but that’s still a week away, and Sanji wants to leave now.

He feels a bit bad because Kid and Bonney’s wedding is next month and he promised to be there, but the couple assure him that they’re fine, they understand. So when he receives the news about a room opening up in an apartment complex in Hilltop, he immediately rents it. Zeff also promises to take over the catering for the couple’s wedding, so at least Sanji’s conscience isn’t too guilty.

The rent is a little overpriced on the new apartment, but the landlord only accepts people who work at Hilltop, so Sanji is sure to find a lot of connections there. There is a waiting list, but Sanji manages to get the apartment by paying the deposit and a year’s rent in advance. He gets an email with a couple of pictures of the place, and it looks pretty simple: two bedrooms, one bathroom, kitchen, and living room. It’s on the fifth floor out of thirteen, but at least it’s in a corner, so he will only have a neighbor on his right.

He hires some of Franky’s workers to move the few belongings he’s going to keep (i.e. his wardrobe and cooking ware), but he decides to stay one more day, because he wants to see Chopper before he leaves.

“Sanji!” the little kid exclaims excitedly, jumping to hug him. “Hi!”

Chopper doesn’t live with him anymore. The day after Zoro left, about a week ago, Usopp came by and helped the little boy pack up and move in with him. Usopp lives the closest to the University other than Sanji, so it makes sense that Zoro would pick the long-nose. He’s also the most responsible one after Nami, but the red-head doesn’t have enough time to take care of Chopper.

“How are you?” “How are you?” “I’m great! I’m almost done with all of my CLEP Exams!”

“I’m great! Dr. Kureha said I definitely can enroll in some of the more advanced courses if I do well on my finals!”

“That’s amazing,” Sanji praises. Chopper told him that he wanted to graduate early and head on to medical school by the time he turns ten. Once he’s done that, he will slow down and take the time to learn as much as he can before he hits the professional ground. That means graduating from NWU in two years, but if anybody can do it, then Chopper can. Sanji wants Chopper to come with him, but since the boy signed up for multiple classes during the summer, that won’t be possible.

“When are you leaving?” Chopper asks, a bit sadly.

“Tomorrow,” Sanji sighs. “Franky’s guys already moved all of my stuff up there. I leave early in the morning.”

“Are you going to visit me?” Chopper asks, his lower lip trembling. “Or are you not coming back now that Dad left?”
Sanji ignores the mention about Zoro. He has been very careful not to think about the other man.
“Don’t worry, Chopper. Of course, I’ll come visit you,” Sanji promises. “And if you want, you can come and stay with me during your breaks. You’re always welcome in my home, Chopper.”

“Really!? That’s great! Because I’m sure gonna miss you, Sanji. Can I call you every day?”

“You better,” Sanji says with mock sternness. “Raftel is three hours ahead, but remember you can call me at any time if you need something.”

Chopper smiles and sighs. “I know. Don’t worry too much, Sanji. I’ll be fine.”

“Hmm. Just tell Usopp I’m holding him completely responsible if anything happens to you. By the way, have you eaten yet?”

“No. Can you make me a chocolate cake?”

Sanji does make him a chocolate cake though he uses cacao and yogurt to make it healthier and spends most of the day with him before he leaves.

Sanji leaves the next morning before it is lights out, getting on the first Sea Train to Raftel. The city is actually a small island though it is still part of New World. It stands at the farthest northern corner of the continent, connected to the mainland by a long concrete bridge.

Sanji wonders why it’s called The End of the World when, technically since it’s in the north, it stands at the beginning. Maybe whoever named it was looking at the map upside down.

New World is the largest country in Grand Line, but only its southern side borders with any other countries, so most of the major cities are located in the south. Like Sabaody and Joha. But for times when you want to head up north and explore the large country, it’s always best to travel by Sea Train. You don’t have to stop as much since the Sea Train only has three checkpoints compared to the dozens that line the route cars have to take, and so only takes a fraction of the time it takes to travel by car. Because of it, Sanji arrives in the dark, early morning two days later. He immediately falls asleep and wakes up four hours later, around 8 a.m.

The few belongings he kept are stacked in the middle of the living room, and Sanji goes through them to make sure everything arrived safely before putting everything up in their correct spot.

His new kitchen is nothing fancy, but there’s a gas stove, so it’s good enough. There are a full-sized bed and a dresser on his bedroom, and the bathroom has only a shower, no bathtub. The second bedroom has already been equipped with all of the furniture Sanji had in his old closet, so he has no problems while putting his clothes up.

It’s nothing compared to his penthouse in Joha, more like what a normal person working a nine to five job would rent, but the place is empty and that’s all Sanji needs.

He doesn’t have a sofa anymore, but he can always go buy one later. And maybe a desk? He’s going to need that, especially when he begins to plan a menu. And maybe buy some potted plants to add a little life to the white-washed walls. Some essential oils to get rid of the smell of fresh paint, a splash of color here and there…this can be a nice place.

The smell of paint is bothering him, so he opens all of his windows (he only has three: one in each bedroom facing the museum in front of the apartment complex, and the other in the living room, which faces a taller, red-stone building. His stomach growls to remind him that he hasn’t eaten anything but a small sandwich since yesterday on the train, but his fridge is empty, so he heads out to buy some groceries.
When he comes back with just the essentials, he sees a tall, dark-haired man dressed in a simple white t-shirt and jeans knocking on his door.

“Can I help you?” Sanji asks loudly, and the guy turns to face him, surprised. He’s a bit older than Sanji, maybe in his early thirties, and there are huge bags under his eyes. But he’s holding what looks like a baked spaghetti casserole.

“Oh, hey,” the man greets nervously, and he eyes the paper bags in Sanji’s arms. “Sorry, I was just—I’m Gin, your next door neighbor. Just came to say hi and offer you a welcome gift. That’s what you’re supposed to do, right? My experience in these types of things extends to sitcoms.”

Oh, well that’s nice of him. Sanji’s experience with neighbors extends to the odd families that lived in Zoro’s apartment—since he never met his—and none of them were this nice.

“I’m Sanji. It’s nice to meet you, Gin. And thank you for the casserole. Would you like to have breakfast with me?”

It’s polite to invite him in, right? And besides, Sanji needs to start making new acquaintances. Gin smiles and nods, and follows Sanji inside his apartment. Sanji sets his groceries on the kitchen island, which doubles as his dinner table, and takes out a couple of plates for him and Gin.

“Sorry about the mess. I just got here, and didn’t get much chance to clean up,” Sanji apologizes as he puts away his perishables.

“No problem, man,” Gins shrugs. “I saw you come in this morning. Looks better than my place to be honest.”

Sanji smiles and takes out a couple of glasses. He just bought some orange juice, which doesn’t exactly go with spaghetti, but it’s all he has on hand. The baked spaghetti casserole looks surprisingly tasty, and once he serves himself and Gin and takes the first bite, he’s even more surprised when it tastes fucking amazing.

“Wow, Gin, this is really good,” he praises, taking another bite. “You cooked this?”

“Nah. I work at Jordan’s over in Upper Mil. My boss gave it to me yesterday since it was a wrong order, and I just reheated it.”

Jordan’s. He’s going to have to check it out, especially if their food tastes this good even when reheated.

“So what about you? Do you already have a job?” Gin questions.

“Actually, I’m opening a restaurant,” Sanji says, smiling when Gin looks at him in surprise. “We start construction next week.”

“Your own restaurant? What are you doing at Ridgeway, then?” Gin asks, and Sanji frowns.

“Ridgeway?”

“That’s the name of the apartments,” Gin explains. “We’re all workers, but all the rich folks live either in Upper Mil or Little World. If you’re really rich, then you get to live in the Valley.”

Sanji shrugs easily. “I’m gonna be working in Hilltop, makes sense to live in it too, right?”

“If you say so,” Gin says, shrugging.
They continue to have the easy conversation. Gin has been living in Raftel for about five years now, he’s an East Blue native, but spent most of his life in West Blue. He’s been working odd jobs all over Raftel, and his newest is at Jordan’s, which he has been in for four months.

He’s a cool guy, a bit closed-off and serious, but essentially nice. Sanji gets the feeling that Gin hasn’t lived an easy life and is a little guarded because of it, but he gets a good vibe from the man. He offers to show Sanji around during his time off, and because Sanji needs to be doing something, needs to keep his mind busy, he agrees.

All in all, it’s not a bad start to his new life.

Since Sanji hired Galley-La for the construction of his restaurant, Robin and Franky move up to Raftel as soon as construction starts. Their life is in Water 7, but the company will pay for their hotel room for as long as In Fine is under construction. Sanji also hires Nami, offering to give her a 30% raise if she leaves her job as a banker and takes over the financing of his restaurant. And Vivi happens to own a loft in Raftel, so that plays out.

“So what’s the plan from here?” Nami asks, staring at Sanji from over the rim of the coffee he bought her.

Construction has been under way for a week now, and Sanji has settled pretty comfortably in his new life. Robin arrived with Franky on the first of the month, but Nami and Vivi barely got here last night, and Sanji wanted to wait until she was here to have this meeting.

“Well, the next step is creating the menu,” Sanji explains. “I want to incorporate food from all over the world, but give it a unique twist. I’m going to be going around the city, trying out the food, and creating new recipes from the most popular dishes around.”

“Mmh. I was thinking on contacting a couple of distributors around the world to create a partnership, but I guess I need to wait until the menu is ready to know what type of ingredients you’ll need,” Nami frowns.

“I want locally grown products,” Sanji says. “But the wine is another deal. The Baratie had a limited collection, since Zeff only bought from the surrounding areas, but I want everything. Especially West Blue—their alcohol is divine.”

“We’re going to have to work on advertisement, too,” Robin reminds him. “My goal is to have the first month booked even before you open. That means working on your image, Sanji.”

“What’s wrong with the way I look?” Sanji asks, feeling a little insulted.

“I don’t mean physically,” Robin explains, smiling softly. “But Zeff didn’t give you much exposure. You’re one of the best cooks I know, but your name is hardly known around the circuit.”

“And when do you want to start working on the inside design?” Vivi asks, speaking for the first time. “Nami mentioned you wanted to create a worldly atmosphere, and I’ve been doing a little research on how to help you.”

“Well, I’m not planning on buying anything for the inside design until we’re past the halfway mark, but it’s never too early to start planning,” Sanji says. “My plan is to wait a month after construction is done to open so I can smooth out the final touches, which is also when I’m going to hire my staff.”

“You should start a bit earlier than that,” Nami suggest. “After all, your staff will be the soul of your restaurant. You need to make sure they’re capable.”
“Of course, Nami-swan! You’re so smart!”

“Franky has estimated five months of construction,” Robin says, studying her planner. “He’s usually very good about keeping on schedule…if we add the month of preparation…I think the restaurant can very well be opening on New Year’s Day.”

“That’ll be amazing!” Nami exclaims. “Do you know how well that will work on marketing?”

“Hmm, yes. Sanji, how quickly do you think you can have your menu ready?” Robin asks curiously.

“Give or take three months,” Sanji shrugs. “It’s going to take me the first month to find the dishes I want, and around two months to fix them up. Why?”

“I was thinking we could have a test day,” Robin explains.

“Robin, that’s amazing!” Vivi exclaims.

“Test day?” Nami asks, confused.

“It’s basically like a study group to see if the dishes will be a hit,” Vivi explains. “Sanji can prepare a few of the dishes he will offer in his menu, then offer them for free during a promotional dinner.”

“That’s excellent,” Sanji beams. “Robin, you’re a genius!”

“Thank you,” Robin says, smiling. “It looks like we have a steady outline of what we all should be doing. Vivi, you will work on the interior design. You and Sanji should agree on it by September; that will give you around three months to buy everything you will need. Nami, you will speak to the world’s top distributors of alcohol around the world and negotiate contracts with In Fine, and once Sanji has the basic outline of his menu, you will also negotiate with the multiple providers here in Raftel. I will work on getting Sanji some more exposure and will create a marketing plan that will be put into motion as soon as we hit the three month mark. Sanji, you will work on your menu. Remember, everyone, the end goal is to give Sanji the best Grand Opening ever, as well as reservations going through the first month.”

“Robin-chwan, you’re the absolute best! I’m so glad to have you three beautiful ladies in my life!”

Sanji exclaims elaborately.

Vivi giggles, Nami rolls her eyes, and Robin smirks. None of them mention Zoro, and for that, Sanji loves them all the more.

If anybody had told Zoro two weeks ago that he would be in a boat with Mihawk sitting in petulance silence, he would have laughed. Or maybe just walked away.

But that’s how it’s been for the last two week. Zoro doesn’t know why the man has to live so fucking far away from everybody—they’ve been sailing for two weeks and they barely saw the outline of the island around two hours ago.

The island is called Kuraigana. It’s completely isolated, a waste of space if Zoro ever saw one. The sky around it is cloudy and misty, cold and clammy. He doesn’t know what Mihawk sees in the place, but Zoro needs to get used to it if he’s going to be staying there for the next…well, he doesn’t know how long he’s going to stay, exactly.

When they set foot on land, it’s already starting to get dark. Well, it was dark to begin with, but this is nightfall dark. The dark that’s supposed to happen, not the gloomy, depressing shit Mihawk seems
Zoro follows behind the taller man, determined not to let the moving trees distract him from his path. He can’t afford to get lost out here or Mihawk might just leave him and wait until he finds his own way out. Zoro doesn’t want to admit it, but he could get lost in this forest for months.

They don’t stop until they arrive at the ruins of a large castle. The place is large and dark, made of stone and built to last. Once they get inside, Zoro isn’t surprised to be assaulted by the smell of dampness and oldness. It’s not too overpowering, it is clear Mihawk keeps the place as clean as he can, but it still makes Zoro want to sneeze.

“There are many empty rooms in the castle,” Mihawk speaks—the first time he’s done so since almost eight days ago, when he ordered Zoro to keep the boat going west before he fell asleep. The man gave no explanation for his silence, though Zoro thinks it has something to do with the fact that he woke up, checked his compass, and immediately turned the boat to the right—opposite to where Zoro was leading it.

“You may pick whichever you want.”

“Thank you,” Zoro says stiffly. He takes a step forward, then falls to his knees as a horrible, empty hole opens inside of him and eats away at his every emotion. “I don’t deserve to be born,” he gasps, feeling completely useless. What kind of man is he? Left behind his son, his friends, the man he loves. “I’m sorry I was ever born.”

“Perona. How many times have I told you not to set the ghost on guests?”

“Uh, none? We don’t get guests.”

Slowly, the hollow feeling fades away, letting Zoro struggle to his feet. He glares at the pink-haired girl floating above them, near the curling stairs. She’s dressed in a red mini-skirt with black and white striped tights. She’s young, still in her teen years, though her make-up suggests she wants to appear older.

“Roronoa, meet my daughter,” Mihawk says, voice as detached as always. “Perona, Roronoa will be staying with us for a while.”

“Your daughter?” Zoro gasps incredulous at the same time Perona exclaims “What!?”

“You have a daughter?” Zoro asks again, staring at the older man. Well, Mihawk is definitely old enough to have a daughter, but Zoro never imagined he would be interested in those type of relationships. He seems to cold, to aloof, to ever be intimate with someone else. He suddenly wonders if Perona’s mother is around. He kind of wants to meet her.

“Is he really going to stay with us? Hmm, I guess he’s kind of cute,” Perona says, studying Zoro.

“Show Roronoa to an empty room, Perona,” Mihawk orders, ignoring both of them. “It’s getting dark and we should all go to bed.” His tone of voice is familiar…it’s the same voice Zoro uses when he’s upset with Chopper. It’s clear Perona was supposed to be in bed already.

“Fine,” Perona sighs heavily, as if forced to do some unspeakable thing. “Follow me.” She floats and disappears through a wall, her body going through the thick stone easily.
“She ate a Devil’s Fruit?” Zoro asks curiously.

“She’s a ghost human,” Mihawk explains. “Be careful of her ghosts. They are…depressing.” With that, the other man turns his back on Zoro and walks away.

Zoro stares after him just for a moment, studying his gait, then climbs the stairs and follows in the general direction Perona left. Though, did she turn right or left in the hall? Or did she keep going straight? How is Zoro supposed to know when she can phase through walls!

“Hey, you! Where are you going?”

Zoro turns around and frowns at the pink-haired head poking out of the wall. Perona is looking back at him with an annoyed expression on her face, her hair falling to the side since she’s sideways.

“I’m following you!” Zoro snaps back. “Where are you leading me?”

“To your room, duh,” Perona says as the rest of her body appears. “You’re gonna be in the same hallway as me. Papa likes to stay in the North Wing, so don’t bother him.”

Zoro only makes a dismissive sound and follows the girl. The castle is pretty large, entirely made out of stone, and decorated darkly. She leads him until they stop at two large double doors, and when Zoro opens them to look inside, he sees a large but empty room. There’s an old-fashioned canopy bed, the wood painted a dark reddish brown and the bedding made out of entirely dark colors. There’s an ornate wardrobe against the wall (useless, since Zoro only brought the clothes on his back and one more change), and a standing mirror in the corner. There’s a thin layer of dust everywhere but the bed, and one large window that only shows the dark forest surrounding the castle, and farther off, the shadow of curling mountains.

“I’ll come in the morning to show you to the kitchen,” Perona says, floating inside. “Papa likes to eat breakfast very early, and if you miss it, he won’t cook more. So make sure you wake up early.”

“I’ll be on time,” Zoro promises, placing his small bag on the bed. He’s going to have strip the bed if he wants to sleep on it, since it’s so fucking dusty. Hopefully, there’s a river nearby where he can wash them. He thinks it’s too much to hope for a washing machine.

“Why are you here?” Perona asks suddenly, and Zoro turns around to see her still floating near the door, studying him with a curious expression. She’s a teenager, maybe sixteen—definitely nowhere near her twenties, though her makeup is heavy. He wonders how much she knows about the life her father is living, about how much danger he encounters on a daily basis.

It suddenly makes a lot more sense why Mihawk chose this island as his home, if he has to protect his daughter.

“I’m here to train under your father so that one day I may kill him and take his title,” Zoro answers honestly, still studying her.

To his surprise, she smiles widely. “Another one? But you must be pretty strong if he actually brought you here. You’re kind of cute, so don’t die too soon, alright?”

Zoro snorts and turns away from her to start stripping the bed. “Don’t worry. I won’t.”

Zoro soon grows restless. He’s been living with Mihawk for two weeks now, and the man has yet to teach him anything of importance. All he does is tell Zoro to train alone and watch him, always
turning down his challenges for a sparring session.

Zoro does learn a few things, though none he wishes to learn.

For example, Perona hates to be giving orders. She’s childish, even more so than Chopper, and her ghosts are a menace. More than once, she has set them against Zoro when he makes her upset or refuses to play dress up with her (he’s a grown man, he’s not going to wear a stupid bear suit!). Strangely, the ghosts don’t affect Mihawk at all, despite Perona threatening to use them on him every time he gives her an order. Zoro doesn’t know how he does it, but he hopes to learn that trick soon.

Despite the lack of training (other than the physical training Zoro does every day to become stronger and faster), his day is pretty busy. He decides to explore the castle, though there isn’t much to see. There’s about a dozen halls, but they all look the same. Some even have the same paintings. It takes him a couple of hours to find his room after all, and he definitely doesn’t have to follow one of Perona’s ghosts to find his way.

He also has yet to find where Mihawk keeps his weapons. The older man allowed him to borrow one of his swords, since Zoro uses three and Yubashiri is broken. However, he never told Zoro where he kept them, and Perona still refuses to show him the way.

Seriously, Chopper is a lot better behaved than her, and he’s half her age.

Finally, during the second week of July, Mihawk calls him to the front doors. The man doesn’t say anything, but Zoro is already used to the silence. The other man doesn’t speak unless he has to, and Zoro has found that he actually enjoys the silence. Besides, just because he doesn’t talk doesn’t mean that Mihawk isn’t saying anything, and Zoro has found a new challenge trying to decipher his body language.

“Nine years ago, there was a kingdom in this island. We now reside in its ruins,” Mihawk begins staring out into the mist. “It was a bloodthirsty battle that laid waste to the entire island. And from it, these beasts have risen.”

Zoro doesn’t need to ask which beasts Mihawk is referring to. He can see shadows moving in the mist, slowly becoming solid forms.

“The Humandrills are incredibly intelligent animals,” Mihawk continues. “They have the ability to imitate any trait they witness. They were here during the great war, so they have learned nothing but war. You must defeat them all. If you die, your body will be buried in the forest. Do not speak to me until you have defeated them all.”

Mihawk doesn’t wait to hear his answer. Zoro doesn’t really care, either way. He came here to grow stronger, and if he has to defeat these beasts to do that, then so be it. He takes out Wado and Kitetsu, grinning when he sees the first Humandrill. It’s large, taller than Zoro, wielding two swords.

At the very least, Zoro can find a new sword from this.

If he thought this would be an easy win, he is soon proven dead wrong.

From the very first attack, it is made clear that this animals are powerful opponents. Zoro can hardly see the first baboon-like creature move before his natural instincts force him to bring up his swords and block the first attack. But he doesn’t even get a second to breathe before the baboon is parrying with another attack, moving to a headstand and holding his swords on his legs. The next movement reminds him of Sanji, though the man would never be able to wield swords like this animal does.

The other baboons approach him, and Zoro sees that they’re not all holding swords. He sees some
with guns, other with bows and arrows. There’s one holding a spike, another with a huge mallet in his hands.

He isn’t given much time to study them, still trying to fight off the first baboon, the one with the swords. Zoro goes for one of his better attacks, holding his two swords in front of him like the horns of a bull, and strikes forward.

The baboon screams, but doesn’t go down. Zoro turns around to deliver another wound, but the sound of metal hitting metal rings out and Kitetsu is suddenly snatched out of his hand.

That fucking monkey shot the sword out of his hand. Zoro glares at the baboon holding the long pistol as he shakes back the feeling into his hand. Damn, if he hadn’t let go of the hilt, his fingers would’ve snapped clean in half. Kitetsu is buried in the rock a couple of feet away from him, trembling slightly.

Another inhuman cry rings loudly, and Zoro is only able to bring Wado up just in time to block the slash meant to take his head off. The baboon doesn’t stop there, immediately switching to a strike that hits home. Zoro yells outs as he feels pain bloom in his leg, where the baboon stabbed him.

It’s not deep, but it’s gonna bother the hell out of him.

“Fucking shit,” Zoro snarls, “I’m not gonna lose—.”

His words are cut short as the baboon attacks again, another wound appearing in the underside of his arm. It stings, but Zoro still has the strength to block the next few strikes. Unfortunately, he’s forced into the defensive, only able to keep himself from being shredded to pieces.

He kicks back as one particular slash hits too close to be of comfort, but something strikes him from behind. It feels like when Luffy slams against him, except this is a thousand times worst. He coughs, feeling his mouth get wet with something other than spit, but before he can get back to his feet, the first baboon strikes him again.

Zoro only feels the sharp sting of pain in his arm before Wado is ripped away from him to sink easily into the hard rock, as far away from him as Kitetsu. Zoro falls to his knees in front of the armed baboon, breathing heavily. His mouth feels thick and coppery, and when he spits out, he sees blood.

The screams are getting louder, and Zoro can sense something dangerous walking towards him.

If he’s about to die, he won’t do it facing the ground. He struggles to his feet, looking up into the large baboon that knocked him down. He can see the large mallet in the Humandrill’s hand, an ominous threat.


He can’t move, the first hit of the mallet strong enough to make his legs shake, but he stares up at the baboon defiantly. If he falls now, he will stand up again. If he’s defeated here, he will fight again.

He’s not going to give in so easily. Not again.

The mallet hits, but Zoro doesn’t wince as his body is sent flying back into the cross-shaped tree. He coughs up blood, and the wound Daz reopened twinges painfully. He’s sure it reopened again, and he might have broken a couple of ribs. He can’t see out of his right eye, blood covering his field of vision. Everything is starting to get fuzzy now.
“...you idiot! You’re gonna die!”

Zoro only sees a flash of pink before he loses consciousness.

When he wakes up, he’s in his room. He’s covered in head to toes in bandages, so much so that it’s almost impossible to move. He manages to rip off a couple of layers, enough to sit up on the bed. His body aches everywhere, but he’s alive. Wado and Kitetsu are resting against the wall, and the sky outside is that less-depressing dark that means it’s daylight somewhere nearby.

“...You’re not supposed to be up yet!”

Zoro glances at Perona as she floats inside. She’s wearing a layered black dress than only reaches to her knees, though she has covered her legs with black tights again. The dress has an upper layered in stripes, and a large fluffy bow. Zoro doesn’t know enough about clothes to name it all, but he knows it looks complicated.

How long does it take for her to get dressed, anyway?

“...You’re going to reopen your wounds!” Perona chides again. She’s not as cute as Chopper when she does it, though she’s equally as annoying. “What were you doing, fighting the Humandrills? You’re lucky you didn’t face their leader! He’s been copying Papa for years—I swear, you’re not supposed to die this early!”

“There’s a leader?” Zoro asks, latching on to that bit of information. So there’s one of those monkey freaks that fights exactly like Mihawk? He grins, suddenly eager. If this is how Mihawk will test him, then he will not lose.

He ignores Perona’s insisting nagging and gets to his feet. He grabs his swords, breathing out a satisfying breath when his skin touches their hilts.

He will not rest until he’s defeated all of the Humandrills. Including their leader.
Sanji creates a routine that leaves very little time for idle thinking. He wakes up every morning at sunrise—around five a.m.—and goes for a run. He usually runs for two hours, more if he has the energy and gets home around seven to shower. By the time he’s done with that, most restaurants are open and Sanji takes his little black book (not that little black book) and goes out to eat breakfast. Sometimes, when Gin works in the afternoon, he goes with Sanji. More often than not, Sanji doesn’t see his neighbor until late evening, when he comes back home to sleep.

Since he can’t spend the entire day just eating, Sanji fills his spare time visiting all of Raftel’s attractions. The city truly is a marvelous place. And not only Nighton, which is the youth center of the island.

There is so much culture, so much to do! Museums, parks, bars, clubs—and that’s not all. There are so many squares around the city—hubbubs where tourists gather—and each one is always fill with entertainers. Full orchestras playing in the middle of the road, contortionists that wow the crowds, dancers practicing in the middle of the park, book clubs that gather under the shade of Sandoraya, the biggest cherry tree in the world, which stands in the center of Upper Mil. Singers that give impromptu concerts in Little World’s Ronian Colosseum. Circuses that block that Charlian Bridge, connecting Upper Mil to Little World. Fighting contests at the foot of the Marine Headquarters. Markets that move around from place to place. Impromptu soccer games in the fields of the Valley, or tennis matches in the Prague Parks of Upper Mil. Sanji can’t possibly see it all.

His favorite thing to do, however, doesn’t come until late July.

He’s with Gin in one of the rare moments where their schedules coincide, and Sanji has invited him out to eat. He’s at Lourdes, a rather quaint restaurant at the edge of Upper Mil that gets a lot of clientele for its wonderful view of All Blue, despite the rather lacking food.

“How’s the menu going?” Gin asks curiously. Gin has been of great help, directing Sanji to the most famous restaurants in Raftel. It’s because of him that Sanji has so many ideas written down.

“Excellent,” Sanji grins. “I’m switching my focus to South Blue cuisine next. And I still haven’t seen many restaurants offering traditional dishes from New World.”

“Not many of them make them,” Gin shrugs. “New World food is a little heavy.”

“Well, there’s a lot of substitutes that can make it healthier. New World is known for its crappy weather, so not a lot of produce grows there naturally. Add a few greens, lower the fat quantities… the taste is there, you just have to look for it.”

“Bring healthy New World food to Raftel, and you’ll be loved,” Gin grins.

“Gin! Oh, Gin!”

Sanji and Gin look up in surprise as a young woman, maybe in her late teens, runs up to them to hug Gin tightly. Sanji raises an eyebrow in surprise. Gin doesn’t exactly look like the friendly type.

“Adelle! Hey, what are you doing here?” Gin smiles and gets to his feet, still hugging the pretty girl.

“Shuraiya brought me,” Adelle grins, and nods back to where Sanji can see a tall man with the same sandy hair as Adelle and a tattoo of what looks like a long fish hook on his upper cheek. They look too much alike to be anything but siblings, and the man—Shuraiya—greets Gin warmly, too.
“Who’s your friend?” Adelle asks, looking at Sanji curiously.

“My name is Sanji Black, mademoiselle,” Sanji greets, getting to his feet to bow and kiss Adelle’s hand. “Enchanté.”

“Sanji is my neighbor,” Gin explains when the siblings raise identical eyebrows. “Shuraiya is one of the local fishers, along with Adelle.”

“Fishing? In All Blue?” Sanji asks curiously. As far as he knows, no boats are allowed to set sail in the sea.

“Yeah, I know what you’re thinking,” Shuraiya says, grinning widely. “We don’t actually set sail. You’ve never seen a Fishing Hunt, have you?”

“Sanji has been here a month,” Gin explains. “Why don’t you two join us so you can explain it a little better?”

“Ah, Miss Adelle, let me get your seat,” Sanji says immediately, pushing the chair back for Adelle to sit.

“What a gentleman,” Adelle giggles.

“She’s seventeen, man,” Shuraiya says, glaring at Sanji.

“Just because I’m a gentleman, doesn’t mean I want to date her,” Sanji rolls his eyes. “Women are to be treated with respect. Has no one taught you that?”

“Be quiet, Shuraiya. It’s better than all the fishermen down at the Valley,” Adelle scolds. “Now, tell him about the Fishing Hunt.”

Shuraiya rolls his eyes but takes a seat next to his sister. “Just because no boats are allowed on All Blue, it doesn’t mean that people aren’t,” Shuraiya explains. “If you can swim, you’re allowed to do so in All Blue as long as you understand the dangers. And because All Blue is so dangerous, the people that risk fishing in All Blue are rewarded with their catch. The Marines don’t interfere at all.”

“So however many fish you catch, you can keep them without having to pay the usual fishing tax?” Sanji asks curiously, and Shuraiya nods.

“Yeah. But like I’ve said, fishing is a dangerous job,” Shuraiya repeats. “So not that many people do it. I fish for a living, and Adelle here cooks the fish I catch.”

“Adelle is a genius with seafood,” Gin adds excitedly. “They both work for this little seafood stand down at the Valley.”

“The pay is horrible, but the owner is nice,” Adelle shrugs. “We don’t get that many customers.”

“Which is why I find it so weird that you guys are eating in here,” Gin says, glaring at the siblings.

“We’re not eating here,” Shuraiya denies. “I heard from one of the others that there is a Sea King around. Lourdes has the best view to All Blue, so we’re here to keep an eye out.”

“A Sea King? You’re even allowed to fish those?” Sanji asks, pleasantly surprised. He’s killed a few Sea Kings in his life. It’s vastly satisfying, to be completely honest.

“The Sea King Hunters are the most praised,” Adelle says excitedly. “Sea King food sells for a lot, and when we get our hands on some of that, our little stand always does well. Shuraiya has caught
three. He’s one of the best!”

“You know… I’m opening a little restaurant on Hilltop. If you’re really as good as you say you are, I can offer you a job,” Sanji says carefully, catching Shuraiya’s eyes.

“I got a job,” Shuraiya says firmly.

“You’ve just said the pay sucks.”

“Yeah, but it’s stable. Do you know how many restaurants go under? Nah man, I have a sister to raise,” Shuraiya says, shrugging.

“You can always think about it,” Sanji insists. “I would love to taste Miss Adelle’s cooking. I can offer her a job as well. Besides, I’m not opening until New Year’s Day.”

“Yeah, not gonna happen.”

Sanji frowns, but before he can keep arguing—Sea King meat really is the best, and having a professional fisherman would be of great help—there’s a shout of surprise from the tables near the balcony, and Shuraiya and Adelle rush forward.

Gin and Sanji follow more slowly and as they grow nearer, Sanji is able to see what has caught the attention of everyone.

An eel. Or at least, it looks like an eel. But the bright orange and black colors, along with its enormous size mark it as a Sean King. And it’s gigantic. The thing is easily a hundred feet long—and that’s only what’s on the surface. It’s far out at sea, maybe 500 feet, and there’s a crowd on the beach watching it.

“Damn it,” Shuraiya curses. “It’s too far out.”

“Well, look at its size!” Adelle exclaims. “I’m surprised it’s so close to the shore at all!”

“Look how far out it is… it’s probably another hundred feet long underneath the water,” Gin gasps. “You can’t catch something like that!”

“Do you need like a license or something to fish?” Sanji asks curiously.

“Hmm? Oh, nah. You just gotta have guts,” Gin shrugs. “Not everyone is brave enough to face that sea, you know.”

Yeah, he knows better than anyone how dangerous All Blue is. But this Sea King isn’t the biggest Sanji has seen—there are some whose teeth are bigger than Sanji. This is one is maybe about twice the size of a blue whale.

“How about this,” Sanji proposes. “I catch that eel for you, and you think about maybe joining my restaurant.”

Shuraiya and Adelle glance at him, surprised. “What?”

“It’s a great deal,” Sanji shrugs. “I’m just asking you to think about the possibility of becoming part of my team. I can guarantee the pay will easily double what you make now.”

“So you’re saying you’re gonna catch the Sea King for us?” Shuraiya scoffs.

“Sure,” Sanji says, and takes out another cigarette. Hmm, is he smoking more than before? Probably.
Who gives a fuck? “You can sell it, keep it, I don’t care. But you gotta give me your word that you’ll think about my proposal.”

Adelle laughs. “Mr. Sanji, I’m sorry, but you’re not very smart, are you?”

“You’re going to get killed out there!” Gin hisses.

“Alright, blondie,” Shuraiya smirks. “Get me that eel, and I won’t just think about it, I’ll work for you. Done deal.”

“Don’t rile him up, Shuraiya!” Gin snaps, but Sanji is already taking his jacket off.

“Be a man of your word, Shuraiya,” Sanji warns, grinning, and hands his jacket to Gin. “Hold this for me, Gin.”

“Sanji, wait—!”

Sanji ignores Gin’s shout and runs forward. He jumps over the balcony and hears people screaming in fear but he catches himself, kicking at air to propel himself forward.

Geppo—or Skywalk, as Sanji calls it—is one of the very first things he learned working for CP9 with Robin. Of course, he perfected it by adding his Diable Jambe to it, using the force of the flames to add speed and power to the walk.

He runs on air, feeling the wind slash at him with the speed he’s running with, until he’s right behind the giant eel.

“Best way to kill an eel, bash it’s head in,” Sanji says to himself, grinning. Sanji is powerful, but he knows Sea Kings are formidable foes. Just because they’re animals, it doesn’t mean they are stupid.

His point is further proven when the eel feels him coming and screams—really, Sanji is sure the sound shakes the whole city—and twists its body around to slam against Sanji. Unfortunately for the eel, this is not Sanji’s first rodeo. He evades the eel easily and climbs high into the air, forcing the Sea King to stretch his body out of the water to try and reach Sanji. He’s so fucking long, but Sanji doesn’t let the fact dissuade him. The air is beginning to thin out but by then, Sanji is sure most of the eel’s body is out of the water, so he rushes down.

With his speed, he quickly reaches the Sea King’s mid-body and using his momentum, he twists in midair to place a debilitating whip kick. It rips another deafening scream from the creature and the force of it creates a powerful surge of wind that would’ve knocked a lesser being out of the air. But to the spectators watching the fight in awe, Sanji seems to disappear from the eel’s side as the monsters begins its descent into the water. Only a few catch the cook reappear underneath the eel’s body, his body stretching into a perfect 180 degree split kick that sends the eel into the air. And isn’t that a sight—a 170 feet long eel kicked into the air by a man six feet tall. The form of it blocks the sun, the only light coming from the ball of fire that is Sanji as he delivers the final blow.

It’s sudden, the way the fire spreads throughout the eel’s body, and the heat of it reaches the crows watching on Hilltop—and then, people scream as they realize that the eel is falling towards them.

But Sanji calculated the force of his kicks correctly, and he stands on air and watches as the eel falls. The splash of water momentarily creates a wall in the ocean and then it rains down as the eel settles, dead with its head resting on All Blue’s white beach.

Sanji lands on the eel’s head, cups his hands around his mouth, and yells in the direction he hopes Shuraiya is “Oi! How about a city-wide feast, Shuraiya!?”
He strains his ears, and grins when he hears the response: “Hell to the fucking yeah!”

“You know, Sanji, when I said you needed exposure I didn’t mean to kill Sea King and make a feast for the whole city,” Robin says as she studies the crowd sitting on the beach.

“But I managed to get my hands on a fisher and a cook,” Sanji grins. “Besides, this is good, right?”

“I wish I could’ve gotten it on tape,” Vivi sighs.

After the whole killing a giant Sea King incident, Sanji, Adelle, and about a dozen other cooks had set on the arduous task of cooking an eel. Not only is it gigantic, its meat enough to feed the entire city for a couple of days, but it’s an eel. Meaning it had to be peeled before they cooked it. Not only that, it had to be peeled quickly, because eels become a thousand times harder to peel once they dry out and the skin toughens. To make matters worse, despite being a Sea King, the beast is still, technically, an eel, so it came with the unfortunate nervous system that kept it twitching and trashing well past death as the dozen of swordsmen and cooks tried to fillet it.

Finally, after hours of bone-breaking work, the eel was eviscerated and ready to cook. However, because of the time-consuming task, it was easy for the news to spread around the city, and it didn’t take long until dozens of cooks had come down and volunteered to help. And so Sanji had led the dozens of cooks as they roasted the eel in multiple bonfires lit across the expanse of the white All Blue beach.

“Sanji, you are one crazy motherfucker!” someone yells, but Sanji has no idea who it is.

Everybody seems to know his name now, which he guesses it’s good. Now he definitely won’t have any problems trying to gather a crowd for his restaurant. He knows a couple of reporters took pictures of him while he was cooking, so he’s already getting his name out there.

Robin thinks it’s good for publicity, so he lets them. It doesn’t hurt that people seem to prefer to get their food from the bonfire Sanji is manning.

“Oi, I need more food over here!”

“Anybody has extra pepper?”

“I’m running low on this end!”

“Send someone to cut another slab!”

“What are you going to do with the leftover body? The bones, I mean?” Vivi asks curiously.

“You can eat every part of an eel,” Sanji says. “The bones can be make into broth and the marrow can be roasted. I talked to a couple of Marines, and they assured me that any leftover meat would be sent to the neighboring city. In fact, a couple of the people from Yeza have already come down to get their share.”

“Wait, you cook bones?” Nami gasps. “Sanji, please tell me you have never given me bones!”

Sanji looks away from Nami and starts to whistle, hands in his pockets.

“Sanji!”

“But you liked it, Nami!”
“Aargh!”

“It’s quite delicious,” Robin agrees. “I wonder if my bones taste good.”

“Robin, no.”

Sanji smirks and continues mincing the garlic and red onion he needs to sauté. He can see Adelle manning the next bonfire, Shuraiya and Gin working hard on keeping her stock full. She’s a great cook, too. She still has much to learn, but for a seventeen year old, she’s impressive.

“Mr. Black I have more meat!”

“Ah, thanks Bartolomeo,” Sanji says, nodding to the gushing green-haired man.

“You can call me Barto, Mr. Black!”

“And you can call me Sanji, Barto,” Sanji reminds.

“Ah! Yes, Mr. Sanji!”

“Hey, you, stop flirting with him, stupid!”

Sanji rolls his eyes. When he had caught sight of green-hair, his heart had stopped—but then, it simply turned out to be Barto. One of the local fishers, Bartolomeo seems to have developed some sort of fanatical admiration towards Sanji. He’s a strange man—with a large, green mohawk and bangs, not to mention the large fangs and gold bull ring, he doesn’t look the type to blush and gush over anyone else—but he seems like a good person.

What amuses Sanji and the girls the most, though, is that Barto is dating a blonde swordsman who just happens to be a little too full of himself.

With long, brilliant gold, wavy hair, deep blue eyes, and delicate, feminine features, Cavendish can stand in the dictionary for the definition of beauty. And the guy knows it, too.

Despite his obvious arrogance, the man is an exceptional swordsman, and Sanji is sure he can beat Zoro—at least, at the level Zoro was when he left.

“You keep your hands off my boyfriend, you bottle-blonde!” Cavendish yells at Sanji, poking him in the chest with a bony finger.

“Who are you calling bottle-blonde, Mr. Extensions?! My hair is real!” Sanji yells back. “And who the fuck is even flirting with your boyfriend!? It’s called being nice.”

“Oi, Dish, stop fighting with Sanji,” Barto interrupts, placing a placating hand on Cavendish’s shoulder.

“Hmph! Fine! But I’m warning you—don’t mess with my honey-boo!”

“Dish, for the last time, you’re the only one that finds Barto attractive,” Gin interrupts, Shuraiya at his side. “Sanji, the eel is already done with and Smoker said his men would get the rest to Yeza.”

“Ah, thanks Gin,” Sanji smiles. “I guess we should start the cleanup, then head home. Otherwise, the whole island will smell like fish for ages.”

“Sanji, you’re so smart!” Barto praises. “I’ll help you clean up!”
“Thanks, Barto,” Sanji replies, a little uncomfortable to be receiving so many compliments.

Nami and Vivi giggle, and Robin hides a smile. As everyone finishes eating, they begin cleaning up. It doesn’t take long since everyone joins in, and it’s only a little after midnight by the time Sanji and Gin are heading back home.

“That was really amazing, Sanji,” Gin praises as they wait for the elevator to take them up to the fifth floor. “You’re fucking strong.”

Sanji grins and leads the way out when the elevator doors open. “Of course I am. And hey, the offer isn’t just for Shuraiya and Adelle. If you want, once the restaurant is open, I’ll give you a job.”

Gin copies his grin. “I’d be stupid to turn that offer down.”

“Yes, yes you would,” Sanji jokes. “Good night, Gin.”

“Good night, Sanji!”
Sanji waves and turns his back on the dark-haired man. As he unlocks his door, he feels eyes on him but when he turns around Gin is no longer there, having already entered his home.

He shrugs and shoulders his door open, whistling as he begins to undress on his way to his room.

Back in his apartment, Gin sighs and sags against his door.

“That was close,” he mutters.

Zoro keeps his eyes closed even as Perona’s voice gets louder. He’s supposed to be mediating and usually he can tune out even the most annoying sounds (i.e. Luffy), but it’s kind of difficult to stay relaxed when Perona keeps sending her ghosts through him when he doesn’t pay attention to her.

“What!” he finally snaps, turning to glare at her. He can still feel the hints of a deep, debilitating sadness inside but it’s quickly fading.

“Talk to me,” she whines. “You know how long it’s been since I talked to somebody that wasn’t Papa?”

“No, and I don’t care.”

Despite her annoying habits—which are too many to count—Zoro kind of likes the younger girl. She has her moments, times when she sits next to him to read a magazine in companionable silence. She’s also the one who bandaged him throughout his fights with the Humandrills, and she cheered loudly when Zoro finally beat the last of the Humandrills last week.

The leader still remains undefeated, however, but Mihawk doesn’t expect Zoro to defeat the beast. After all, the leader has been mimicking Mihawk for years. But Zoro is confident that he will soon be able to kill that damn baboon.

Zoro has an array of new scars now, and it took almost all of his strength to defeat the damned baboons but at least his real training has started. This is one of the few moments of peace he’s able to get since Mihawk is working him harder than Zoro has ever been worked in his life. Even his own personal regime, called torturous by everyone that has ever met him, doesn’t compare to the work Mihawk puts him through.
However, Mihawk also understands the value of meditation.

A swordsman, no matter how strong, is nothing if he doesn’t possess a strong mind as well. And as somebody who just recently discovered a couple of flaws in his mindset, Zoro is determined to get himself back to the state of confidence and self-assurance that he possessed before Mihawk’s attack.

Never again will his will break. Never again will he give up on his dream.

“You’re no fun. Help me pick a new dress. Papa will let me travel to the mainland during his next trip, and I want to buy as many dresses as I can.”

“The mainland?” Zoro asks in spite of himself. This is the first time he’s heard about a mainland…he thought the island was in the middle of nowhere.

“Yeah. The nearest coast to here is Rubeck, a city in North Blue,” Perona explains. “It’s about nine days from here.”

North Blue. That’s where Sanji was born. Zoro scowls and shakes his head free of the thought. He needs to concentrate and kick Perona out, not think about his—the, not his—blonde.

“You know, if you help me pick a dress, I can convince Papa to let you join us,” Perona tries again, her voice going even higher as she tries to convince him.

“I’m good, thank you,” Zoro murmurs, closing his eyes and breathing in deeply.

“C’mon! We can even go on a date!”

Zoro’s eyes snap open to look at the young girl. “What?” he says, a little more harshly than he expected.

“There’s the cutest little coffee shop near the docks! And their cemetery is—.”

“Perona, I’m ten years older than you,” Zoro interrupts, still glaring at the girl. “I will not take you out anywhere.”

“What?” Perona whines. “I’m old for my age! Mother was seven years younger than Papa when they met.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Zoro says firmly, and closes his eyes again. “You’re a child. Damn, you’re just eight years older than my own son.”

“You have a son!? You’re married?”

Zoro ignores her—or at least tries to.

“What’s her name? How did you two meet? How long have you been together? How old is she? Is she pretty?”

“I’m not married,” Zoro finally answers, stopping Perona before she can keep asking questions.

“Did she die?”

Zoro growls, but Perona isn’t bothered.

“So you’re a single father? What’s your son’s name? Did you ever remarry?”
“Perona. Shut. Up.”

“Is she pretty?”

“He is very pretty,” Zoro finally snaps.

Perona stares at him with wide eyes, then “What his name?”

Zoro stares at her for one tense moment then gets to his feet and walks away. It takes him maybe half an hour but he soon finds Mihawk in his study, reading a newspaper.

He looks up as soon as Zoro walks in, face impassive. “Yes?”

“I’m done meditating,” Zoro says. “I’m ready to train again.”

Any torture that Mihawk can dish out, Zoro will welcome it. It’s much better than to suffer through Perona’s incessant questioning.

August comes with one major event: Robin and Koala’s baby shower. Robin has been working hard these past months helping Sanji, so he plans to throw her and Koala the best baby shower ever. Sanji and Vivi planned most of it, since Robin and Nami have been too busy to pay the shower any mind.

Franky, too, helped a lot though he was also too swarmed with work to be of much help. He assures Sanji that construction is going well, despite the small snag they hit trying to install the reinforced glass.

Kaya, Koala, Sabo, Ace, and Marco arrive one day before the party. Since Chopper has a couple of major tests that week, the little boy can’t afford to travel, and Usopp offers to stay behind and watch over him.

Sanji offers his apartment to the others, willing to sleep on the couch and give any of the girls his bed but in the end, Ace and Marco are the ones who end up rooming with him.

“Wow, Sanji. This is a lot different from your old home,” Ace says as Sanji opens the door to his apartment.

“This looks like the apartment I had when I was in college-yoi,” Marco agrees. “Though much cleaner.”

“I don’t need a huge house when I’m living alone,” Sanji shrugs.

“You lived alone for years and your old place was pretty large,” Ace says, and hisses when Marco punches him in the arm.

Sanji ignores him, moving to unfold the sofa-bed. He bought it like this with Chopper in mind. He turned his second room into a closet, so once Chopper comes visit him during the summer, Sanji will take the couch and let the little boy take his bed.

“You guys can sleep here,” Sanji says, nodding to the plain bed. “It’s pretty comfy…but it’s loud, so don’t do anything perverted in my house. I’ll go get you some blankets and pillows.”

He leaves the couple alone, though not fast enough to miss Marco hitting Ace in the back of the head again.
It’s true that Sanji’s old place was much larger than this apartment but when Sanji rented this place, he did it for its availability. But it’s also true than Sanji has been living in Raftel for almost two months now and he hasn’t looked into any more permanent homes. Part of him insists it is because living in Hilltop gives him a strong network. All of his neighbors work in Hilltop, and he’s even met a few of them that work in the surrounding restaurants.

He also knows that isn’t the only reason why he hasn’t bought a more permanent home.

The other part of him—much bigger than Sanji likes to admit—is waiting. When he thought Zoro would be coming with him, Sanji had started looking at homes to buy. He didn’t get the chance to pick one, but the dream is still there.

He wants to wait to choose his home with Zoro. If Zoro ever comes back.

The thought is stupid, ridiculous even. Zoro didn’t give him a timeline—hell, Zoro gave no sign that he was ever coming back. But there’s always the possibility that if Zoro does come back, he will come back to Sanji. Maybe appear in his front steps and declare his love.

It’s a stupid dream. But Zoro’s touch is still fresh, Sanji can still close his eyes and remember that tantalizing scent of steel and musk, something so masculine and strong that it surprised Sanji every time he realized he loved it. It still hurts to think Zoro’s name, and he hasn’t uttered it out loud since the man left.

Will he start to forget soon? Will a day come when it doesn’t hurt to think of him?

Ace tries to apologize when he comes back to give them their pillows and blankets, but Sanji stops him before he can get a word out. He doesn’t want to think about it and it’s best for everyone if they just let it go.

It’s only until next morning when Sanji is preparing breakfast and Ace is hovering over his shoulder waiting for the bacon to be ready that Sanji realizes Luffy is missing.

“Oh, he left,” Ace says when Sanji brings it up.

“What do you mean, left?” Sanji asks, surprised. “Left where?”

“I have no idea,” Ace shrugs. “Luffy has always wanted to travel, and I guess Sabo’s picture albums weren’t enough to satisfy him anymore. Two weeks after Zoro left, Luffy just packed his bags and said he was going on an adventure.”

“And you let him?”

“He’s twenty-three, Sanji. I can’t tell him what to do.”

“But…wasn’t he dating Law?” Sanji asks. He’s done with the bacon and sausage and Ace pauses for a moment to stuff his face. Marco gives him a slightly exasperated look, but Sanji can see fondness in his eyes as well.

He averts his gaze.

“I’m sure Luffy talked to Law before leaving,” Ace says, though he doesn’t sound too sure. Sanji frowns, knowing he will have to call his friend and check on him.

After they eat their light breakfast, Sanji, Ace, and Marco leave for Vivi’s place. Her father owns a Loft in Upper Hill near the edge and since she’s the only one who doesn’t have neighbors that will
complain about the noise, they decided to have the baby shower at her place.

The place is decorated in shades of pink and blue, a large banner with Koala’s and Robin’s name greeting them at the entrance. Sanji immediately heads to the kitchen, where he starts getting ready all of the food he prepped yesterday. He definitely made more than necessary, thinking Luffy would be here to eat it all but even if they have leftovers, it won’t go to waste.

“Sanji, do you need any help?”

Sanji turns around and smiles at Koala. “Not at all, mon amour. This is your day! And just look at you!”

Koala is one week ahead of Robin, but her belly is much smaller than the raven-haired woman’s. Then again, Robin is having twins. But Koala is also short and petite, which makes her look much bigger than she actually is.

Despite her swollen feet and the small dark bags under her eyes that tell Sanji the large belly isn’t letting her sleep well, she looks gorgeous. She’s positively glowing, and the smile on her face is softer and brighter than anything Sanji has ever seen.

He didn’t lie to Zoro when he said pregnant women are the most beautiful thing ever. They’re practically walking miracles!

“Thank you, Sanji,” Koala blushes. “Sabo tells me all the time but it’s hard to feel pretty when your shoes don’t fit, your nipples hurt like a bitch, your best friend becomes the toilet, and you start getting gas!”

Sanji stares at Koala, a little taken aback by her outburst. And then, to his utter horror, she starts crying.

“Koala!” Sanji exclaims, his heart squeezing in sympathetic pain and his feet moving him towards the woman in the same moment. “Oh my dear, don’t cry!” he exclaims desperately, hugging her. He has to wrap his arms around one shoulder since it’s kind of hard to get closer to her with her belly on the way. But he’s not stupid enough to say any of that out loud. “Ma cheri, tu es tres jolie! There’s a baby inside of you! A life! Of course that will come with hardship. And you are so strong, so brave, for carrying that life with you! Mon ange, there is nothing in this world that can make a woman any less beautiful than she already is. And you, my sweetest Koala, are as beautiful as the All Blue!”


“Man, I need to learn how to do that,” Sabo says from the doorway, catching their attention. “I can never make her stop crying.”

“That’s because you only start apologizing,” Koala snaps, still hanging on to Sanji.

“Well, that’s because you always scream ‘you did this to me!’ when you’re throwing up!”

“Sabo, perhaps it isn’t the smartest to fight with your pregnant wife,” Sanji says testily. “Just know that she’s right. Even when she’s wrong, she’s right. You were never, or will ever, be right. You don’t argue with a woman because….”

“She’s always right?” Sabo says tentatively and Sanji grins.

“Ah, you get the concept.”

“It’s fine, my dear.”

Koala isn’t the only one to lose her composure that day. The baby shower is something simple, only an event for the ten of them, but Robin still bursts into tears when Franky presents her with the two cribs he build when he heard they were having twins. The two rocking cribs are beautifully carved, made out of Adam Wood, the strongest type of wood in the world. They are simple in design, the most ornate thing the two matching plates that read the names they have chosen for the twins: Tom, after Franky’s foster father and Oliver, after Robin’s mother.

Of course, a crying Robin means a crying Sanji and a crying Franky. So then Koala starts to cry, and so does Vivi…and Nami…and soon they are all crying. Well, except for Ace, who fell asleep in the middle of dinner.

“I’m gonna be the happiest father ever!” Franky declares tearfully.

Robin smiles at him and she squeezes Sanji’s hand. He’s sitting next to her, pressed so closely that he can feel the curve of her stomach against his own flat belly. Robin sighs happily and rests her head against Sanji’s, their noses almost touching.

“I’m really happy you convinced me to say yes,” Robin murmurs, recalling the day when she told Sanji that Franky had proposed. It was the first personal thing she told Sanji and it was the thing that brought them from simple colleagues to friends—and eventually, best friends.

“If I remember correctly, I told you to leave him and run away from me,” Sanji reminds her, smiling softly.

“After that,” Robin says, waving her hand. “You told me I’d feel it in my gut. You said to only say yes if I could close my eyes and imagine myself of age, with him by my side.”

“Well, then, I’m glad,” Sanji says. “He might not ever be worthy of your attention…but he’s as close as it’s ever gonna get.” Robin laughs delicately, and they both gasps when they feel a kick. “Was that…?”

“It’s been happening more often,” Robin nods. “They’re eager to come out.”

“And I’m eager to see them,” Sanji says. “Can I?” he asks, nodding to her belly. Robin nods and Sanji places a soft hand on her clothed stomach. It feels strangely hard, harder than he expected it to feel. His hand easily follows the curve of her belly until he feels one of the babies kick again. He grins and leans in close until his lips are brushing the soft fabric of Robin’s blouse.

“Hey, little guys,” he whispers softly. “It’s Sanji, your godfather.” He doesn’t feel any more kicks, but the feel of Robin’s fingers running through his hair is comforting. He looks up at her and grins when he sees her smiling.

A lot of people think of Robin as cold. Zoro, for example, never really understood why Sanji thinks of her as his best friend—the only woman he will ever only see as a friend. But it’s not that Robin is cold; she’s simply reserved. When she does open up and reveal her true nature, she’s one of the most affectionate people you will ever meet.

And it seems her babies are bringing that aspect of her personality out. Sanji leans back against the sofa again, his shoulder brushing against Robin. Sabo is talking excitedly with Franky, looking at the cribs and asking if he can make one for his little girl. Koala is looking over the presents Vivi and Nami got her, gushing over the cute clothes. Marco has Ace on his lap, the man still sleeping.

Sanji sighs and leans closer to Robin, content for the first time in two long months.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

So I finished with this chapter a little early and decided to post it ahead of time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was his choice to leave. He was the one who walked away. He was the one who broke things off.

But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care. Zoro cares very much. He worries about Chopper, about how school is going for him. He worries that Chopper may be going to sleep too late or that he’s stressing too much over his studies. He inherited Zoro’s drive and ambition, something Zoro is usually proud of, but it also means that Chopper will often work on something until it becomes perfect, putting little thought into his own health.

Once, Chopper stayed up all night reading a book Kaya had assigned. She gave the students a two weeks to read it but Chopper did it in nine hours. Zoro had been called to school from work after Chopper fainted from lack of sleep and since then, he’s made sure to keep the little boy from going overboard.

Usopp knows this, but Zoro still worries. It doesn’t matter that Usopp is the most responsible person he knows, other than Nami. The thing with Usopp is that once you pair him with Luffy, he becomes a child. And he also likes to tell all those made-up stories that Chopper believes. Like when he told Chopper he met a scary beast that liked to sleep inside closets and Chopper got so scared he made Zoro ‘defeat’ the scary beast.

He’s also worried that Chopper will become upset with him. Zoro knows that Chopper understands more than a regular eight-year old, but he’s still a child. He’s naïve and he already lost one parent. Zoro doesn’t want him to think that he will never come back or that Zoro decided to leave him behind. Zoro is being selfish right now, going off to complete his dream but he knows he will become a better person for it in the long run.

He worries about Sanji as well, especially with the way he left things. With Chopper, it was different. Zoro could leave and promise to come back without a worry. Chopper was his son, so Zoro could ask him to wait.

But he couldn’t ask Sanji to wait for him. No matter how much Zoro loves him, how much the thought of Sanji with another person—any person—kills him. He knows it’s a possibility. Maybe it will take a month, maybe a year, but Sanji is bound to start dating soon. Zoro broke up with him, gave him no hope for the future…he can’t expect the blonde to wait for him.

But he has hope. Those words that Sanji spoke before Zoro walked out, that promise to see each other again…it makes Zoro believe that maybe he will be able to face Sanji again. Tell him how much he loves him, how he wants to spend the rest of his life with the blonde.

Only a couple of months have passed since Zoro left, and already he aches for Sanji.

The only thing that makes him forget is training. He trains until he’s sweating blood and breathing steel, until his arms scream at him and his mind wipes clean. He trains until he drops—literally.
Training is what brings him closer to his goal. Training is what makes him be able to face the leader of the Humandrills, the one who mimics Mihawk, and stand his ground. He can see his improvement in the way they both fight—and even the other baboons that Zoro left alive have come back, now wielding three swords like Zoro and copying him. He compares his strength to them, and finds himself coming on top. And so he trains.

The month of September comes with great news. Not only does it mark the halfway point in In Fine’s construction, but it’s also the month when Sanji finishes his menu and starts getting ready for the taste test day. They have to move it towards the end of the month since they all travelled back to East Blue to celebrate Kaya’s birthday. Sanji gets the chance to spend the day with Chopper, who he misses dearly despite talking to him every day on the phone. He also visits Bonney and Kid, who came back from their honeymoon in Dressrosa with the news of Bonney’s pregnancy.

“Two months!” Bonney cheers. “It’s gonna be an April baby!”

“Congratulations!” Sanji exclaims happily.

“Thanks! We’re really excited!” Kid grins, almost shaking with happiness.

Sanji spends the day with them, and returns to Raftel that night feeling a lot better about the future. All of his friends are happy, their families are extending, Sanji’s dream is coming true…his life is a lot better now than it was two years ago. And he’s gotten very good at pretending to be completely fine.

On the last week of September, the taste test day starts. Sanji and the girls are put in charge of preparing the dishes and packing them while Franky and his crew deliver them. Adelle is helping them in the kitchen, but Shuraiya, Gin, and Barto are helping Franky deliver the meals.

“Vivi, how many are you counting over there?” Nami asks, looking at Vivi who’s in charge of the dessert section.

“246 plates,” Vivi says. “Robin?”

“432.”

“And I have 322…so this is the thousand that needs to be delivered to Nighton,” Nami says. “Franky and his crew are still in Upper Mil, right?”

“They’ve finished the Valley and they’re almost done with Little World, but yes….they are nowhere near done delivering the thousand plates to Upper Mil,” Robin nods.

“So that means we’re going to have to deliver these,” Nami sighs.

“It’s not that bad,” Vivi shrugs. “That’s 200 plates between the five of us…”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare make any of you lovely ladies—.”

“Sanji, we’ve got this,” Adelle cuts in. “Though I think Robin shouldn’t work too much. Your due date is very close.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Robin assures them. “Nighton is not very big to begin with. I won’t have to do much walking.”
“No, Adelle is right,” Nami frowns. “We don’t want to induce your labor, Robin. Sanji can take the most, then Adelle since she actually knows her way around Nighton. Vivi, Robin, and I will set up a table in the Apricot courtyard and hand them out to whoever wants one.”

“How, Nami-swan!”

It doesn’t take them long to take everything down to Nighton. Nami rented a car, one of the few available in the city where everyone prefers just to walk, and it only takes them about half an hour to gather in the front courtyard and set up shop.

Sanji decides to take the east side of Nighton while Adelle takes the west, and despite the hard work, he finds himself having fun.

Raftel really is a great city. Most of its wealth comes from wealthy tourists but the people that actually live in the city all are down to earth. Raftel is the type of place where people actually open their doors when strangers knock, where it isn’t weird to sit down next to someone on a bench and start talking about the weather.

Every person that answers the door when Sanji knocks greets him with a kiss to the cheek, and none of them slam the door in his face when he starts talking about In Fine and inviting them to the Grand Opening.

“Oh my god, this is really good,” Emma praises, taking another bite of the slice of chocolate and raspberry cake Sanji gave her. Sanji is trying very hard to keep from blushing, but the sounds she’s making while she eats aren’t the most…innocent. And it doesn’t help that she’s drop-dead gorgeous.

“So you says your restaurant is going to be called In Fine?”

“That’s right,” Sanji answers with a smile. “We’re planning for the grand opening to be on New Year’s Day.”

“If everything tastes as good as this, then I’m going to have to check it out,” Emma smiles. “Did you cook this?”

“Yes, it’s a new recipe I’ve been working on for weeks,” Sanji says. “I’m really glad you like it.”

Emma smiles widely. “Oh, I definitely like it. I’ll be seeing you soon, Sanji.”

Sanji tries not to jump when the goodbye kiss she gives him lands a tad too close to his lips. He simply gives her a nervous smile and continues delivering the rest of his plates. When he comes back to Apricot courtyard, the sky is getting dark and the girls are already done.

“Franky called. He’s done with Upper Mill,” Robin says as he approaches them. Her eyes narrow then she points to his cheek. “You have a little…”

“What? Oh.” Sanji wipes his cheeks and frowns at the red mark on his hand. Lipstick. “People here are very friendly,” he says, avoiding her gaze.

Robin doesn’t react at all. “Of course.”

People are very friendly, and Emma wasn’t the first or the last person to kiss him goodbye. It’s just a weird cultural thing here. Even the men kissed him goodbye!

But for some reason, he can’t help feeling guilty.
A carrier bat brings good news. Zoro is a bit surprised to see the strange animal land by his feet, drop a small package, and take flight again, but he recognizes the animal. He’s seen Sabo use them before to deliver news, though he never expected to receive one himself.

“What’s that?” Perona asks, looking down him. She’s on her stomach on top of one of the large flat rocks Zoro uses as weights, dressed only in a small bikini since she’s taking advantage of the miraculous rays of sun shining down on them to tan.

Zoro ignores her and wipes the sweat off his forehead before he picks it up. It looks like a letter, and it’s very thick. It’s addressed to him from Sabo. Curiously, he opens it and empties its contents on the ground in front of his crossed legs.

There are a couple of folder documents and pictures. He picks up one of the photos and smiles when he sees a smiling Chopper sitting on Usopp’s shoulders. He’s in his hybrid mode, that tiny-raccoon-like creature that Sanji likes. He picks up another picture, again of Chopper. In this one, he’s fast asleep on a sofa he recognizes as Kaya’s. His sucking on his thumb, something he hasn’t done since he was three and sad about Alice dying.

Chopper misses him. He sighs and picks up the folded documents. One of them is a letter, handwritten by Sabo. The other one looks like an official Marine document, but he doesn’t read it to figure what it’s about. Instead, he reads Sabo’s letter.

Dear Zoro,

Good news! I am happy to inform you that on October 2, 2015, Koala gave birth to a bouncing baby girl! I know, I’m excited, too! She’s so pretty, man. I included some pictures of her just so you can know the face of the goddess you have to start worshipping from now on. Kidding. Nah, I’m not.

Anyway, I know you probably threw away that Marine document. Well, go to the trash and pick it out, it’s the form you need to fill out to be recognized as Alexia’s Legal Guardian. I may be a Revolutionary, but you’re not! Send it back as soon as possible.

Chopper is fine. He’s graduating early from NWU…I don’t know where he got it from, to be honest. No offense, but neither Alice nor you were that smart. He’s probably going to be done with college in two years. He misses you, but he won’t say it aloud. Usopp is doing the best he can, but Chopper is as stubborn as you. I think he thinks he needs to be strong for you or something.

Sanji came to say hi to Alexia. I think she fell in love with him. No, seriously. She cried every time someone tried to take her away from him. He looks okay. A bit tired, but Nami says he’s been working hard on his restaurant. He’s a lot harder to read than Chopper, though, so I can’t tell you much else about him. He seems to be moving on just fine.

Sincerely,

Sabo

p.s. Seriously, Zoro. I need that form. Don’t just throw it away. Send it back ASAP.

Zoro re-reads the letter a couple of times. He’s happy about Sabo, of course. He can wait to meet little Alexia and hold her. He’s upset about Chopper. He knows how self-sacrificing Chopper is, and Sabo is probably right. Chopper will stay quiet about whatever is bothering him until it becomes too much for him to handle.
He doesn’t know how to react to the tidbit about Sanji. He’s happy to hear about his restaurant, but part of him is upset that Sanji doesn’t seem more…brokenhearted?

That’s ridiculous! Why should Zoro be upset that Sanji isn’t sad? He should be happy! He should be glad that Zoro leaving didn’t hurt Sanji… but he’s not. He sighs and folds the letter. He will come back to that later. It’s not like he can fix anything from here.

He picks up the rest of the pictures. Most of them are about Alexia. Zoro can see how happy Koala and Sabo are—exhausted, but happy. Ace is in a couple of them, as is Marco, Kaya, and Usopp. There’s one of Chopper looking down at Alexia, his eyes as wide as the baby’s, and it melts his heart a little bit.

There’s one of Sanji, and it leaves him breathless.

He’s standing in the middle of what he recognizes as Sabo’s living room. He’s dressed in his usual suit, except he only has a charcoal vest on above his sky blue shirt. His hair is a bit longer than he remembers it, long enough for Sanji to be able to put it into a small ponytail and keep it from falling on Alexia’s face. Because that’s who he’s holding in his arms. The baby looks tiny in his hands, especially the way he’s holding her: like she’s something precious and delicate—which, she is. He is smiling gently, the type of smile he reserved only for when he put Chopper to bed. Zoro can’t see his eyes very well in the picture, but he can remember their blueness perfectly. It’s a color he doesn’t see in this island often, but no matter how much time passes, he won’t be able to ever forget that particular shade of blue.

“What’re you looking at?” Perona asks, peering at him from above her sunglasses.

“Sanji,” Zoro answers quietly, and puts the picture away in his haramaki. “The man that I love.”

With the news of Alexia’s birth, Franky becomes a tad…frantic. So much so that he asks Vivi if they can move in with her and Nami so that Robin doesn’t have to be alone while he’s at work. Robin thinks it’s stupid, but Vivi and Nami are more than happy to welcome the couple inside Vivi’s family villa. And since apart from helping Sanji, the girls spent most of their time buying baby stuff for Robin, the couple are very prepared to welcome their children when the time does arrive.

But the fact that Robin’s due date is almost upon them also means that the restaurant is almost finished, so Robin orders Sanji to start looking for people to hire. It’s not a difficult process, since Sanji’s reputation means that the best of the best in Raftel are all clamoring to join his crew.

Franky also tells him about a couple of his workers, which he hired off the streets, that are going to be without a job once the restaurant finishes construction. Sanji offers them a job as waiters, since with 60 tables, he’s going to need at least ten waiters to be working at any one time, and so far he only has Barto, Gin, and Shuraiya. Cavendish proves his worth as a bartender, of all things, and Adelle, of course, is in the kitchen.

He does meet a pink-haired woman named Carmen that shows off her skill in the kitchen and she receives the title of Sous Chef.

Two weeks after the news of Alexia’s birth, Sanji and Franky find themselves in front of the almost-completed In Fine. The whole restaurant already has shape and consistency, and Franky has already started on the finishing work: flooring, plastering, facing, painting, glazing—the works.

The only place that is finished is the kitchen, which is the reason why Franky and Sanji are there. Sanji enters the room, eyes immediately taking everything in: from the charcoal poly-crete floors to
the chrome stations, to the commercial-grade appliances.

“What do you think?” Franky asks him, following quietly behind Sanji.

“Franky, this is—this is just like I imagined!” Sanji exclaims excitedly. He can already see it: his kitchen, busy with expert chefs, all working together to prepare the most exquisite foods. Waiters rushing back and forth from the cooking line, getting the beautiful dishes out to the wide dining room.

“The kitchen was the first thing I finished,” Franky says proudly. “I wanted to make sure it was just what you wanted. You won’t be able to stock it until I get out all of the rubble outside for health reasons, but once this place is filled—then it’ll look like a real kitchen.”

“You did an amazing job,” Sanji murmurs, still imagining his dream restaurant.

“Thanks. Wait until you see the—.”

Franky is interrupted by the sound of loud ringing. Both men stop, and it takes a moment for Sanji to realize that his phone is the one making the noise.

“Sorry,” he says to Franky, who nods at him and allows him to answer the call from Nami. “Yes, Nami?”

“Sanji, is Franky still with you?”

“Uh, yes. He’s right here.”

“Put me on speaker.”

Frowning, Sanji obeys. “You’re on speaker.”

“Franky! Why the fuck is your phone off?! We’ve been trying to reach you for ages! Robin went into labor about an hour ago! We’re at the hospital already!”

“What?” Franky and Sanji gasp at the same time, staring at each other horrified.

“Get you fucking ass over here!”

Nami’s yell works wonders in getting them out of their shock-induced stupor, and both men scramble to be the first out of the restaurant.

“Robin!” Sanji yells. “Wait for me, my beautiful goddess!”

“Don’t be born without me, kids!” Franky roars, charging after him.

It’s a good thing they’re both fast runners, and it isn’t long before the two of them are yelling at the nurse (it’s a guy, otherwise Sanji would never yell) to let them through.

“Franky, over here!” Vivi yells, catching their attention. “The doctor is with her already. Hurry!”

Franky scrambles forward, but Vivi stops Sanji before he can follow after him. “Only two people can be inside, and Nami is already in there,” Vivi tells him.

“Shit,” Sanji curses. “Is she going to be alright? Who’s her doctor? How can we be sure he’s any good?”
“Sanji, calm down,” Vivi says firmly, grabbing his hand. “Doctor Parrish has over thirty-years of experience, and Robin herself picked him. Besides, this is Robin—she’s gonna do great. Let’s just calm down.”

“You’re right. Like always, Vivi.”

But calming down is easier said than done. Vivi and Sanji take a seat together in the waiting room, but after almost two hours with no news, Sanji goes off to the cafeteria to pick up a coffee for him and Vivi. When he returns, he sees a new father telling his family the news—but still not word from Nami or Franky.

“At least we’re not getting news of a C-section,” Vivi tells him when Sanji voices his concerns. Sanji sees how nervous Vivi really is, though she’s trying to downplay it to help Sanji. Just the fact that a woman is putting her own emotions on hold for him is enough to rid Sani’s of his anxiousness, making sure not to inconvenience Vivi anymore.

Instead, he texts Ace, Chopper, Usopp, and Kaya about Robin. Ace tells him that Koala already informed him and Marco, and assures him that yes, Koala and Alexia are both fine. Chopper calls him excitedly and spends a couple of minutes talking about the miracle of life before he remembers he has to get to a class. Usopp and Kaya freak out with him in excitement until a nurse tells him to quiet down and is forced to hang up.

Sanji’s finger hovers over Zoro’s number. He hasn’t called the other man…he isn’t even sure whether the call will even go through. He doesn’t know whether Zoro still has his phone with him…Sanji certainly didn’t cancel the line.

Should he call Zoro?

“Vivi! Sanji!”

Sanji immediately puts his phone away as Nami rushes forward. He and Vivi rush to their feet and stare at the orange-haired girl as she tries to get her breath back.

“Nami, what happened?” Vivi hurriedly asks as Nami gasps for air.

“She—they’re all fine! Two baby boys!”

Vivi exclaims in happiness and jumps into Nami’s arms, hugging her tightly. Sanji sags in relief, his legs for some reason getting wobbly enough that he has to squat down.

“Oh thank god,” he breathes out.

“The doctor took the twins away to make sure they’re healthy, but we can already go in to see Robin.”

“Let’s go,” Vivi says, nodding.

“Come on, Sanji,” Nami says kindly, and offers her hand.

Sanji takes it gladly, and the three of them make their way to Robin’s room.

Robin looks exhausted. Her hair is limp and her face is sweaty—but her eyes are shining and she has on the brightest smile Sanji has ever seen (and he saw her on her wedding day). Franky is next to her, quietly sobbing as he holds his wife’s hand and looks at her with the eyes of a mortal in the presence of god.
“Hi, Sanji,” Robin greets, and she extends her arm for Sanji to take.

“Robin,” Sanji whispers, awed, as he takes her hand. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” she says, but her smile widens. “I heard them cry. They sound wonderful, Sanji.”

“My baby boys!” Franky wails. “Robin, you are the most super woman I have ever met. I’m so proud of you, baby.”

“Thank you, Franky,” Robin says and moves her hand away from his slobbering mouth, but instead places it on top of his buzz-cut hair.

“The doctor says they only have to clean and do a regular check-up before they bring the babies in,” Nami cuts in, stepping next to Sanji.

“Hi, Robin,” Vivi says softly.

“Hello, Vivi. I’m glad to see you. Doctor Parrish already came in to let us know that they will hold Tom and Oliver until tomorrow morning. But you can go see them down at the baby stations.”

“I wanna go see them,” Franky says, wiping away his tears. “Do you mind, baby?”

“Of course not, Franky,” Robin says. “Go and take Sanji with you. He’s practically shaking with excitement.”

“Robin, are you sure—?”

“Go, Sanji. Meet your godsons.”

Sanji beams at the word and nods. Robin was planning on making Zoro the godfather for Oliver, but since nobody knows when he’s coming back, she decided to give that honor to Sanji. Sanji momentarily wonders if Sabo also chose another godfather for Alexia as well, before he quickly shakes the thought away. It’s best not to think too much about Zoro.

Franky opens the door and leads the way forward. It takes them a couple of turns, but they’re quickly able to find the large windows where they can see the rows of babies being monitored. It’s kind of hard to miss, considering there are about five fathers already looking at their babies.

“C’mere, Sanji,” Franky murmurs. “I think these are them.”

Franky stops in front of two identical baby boys.

They’re tiny, so small that Sanji feels like they can fit in the length of his forearm. They’re almost hairless, but for a thin sheet of baby blue peach fuzz. Their eyes are closed, tiny noses scrunched, thin lips pursed.

“This is the happiest moment of my life, Sanji,” Franky says softly.

Sanji keeps his eyes on Tom and Oliver. He’s sure that once the babies open their eyes, they will have Robin’s dark eyes. He can feel it in his gut.

“Everything I have done, anything I have ever created, it pales in comparison to this,” Franky murmurs. “My sons…I will dedicate my life to them. They are my new purpose in life.”

Sanji doesn’t say anything. Nothing seems like it’ll be enough.
Chapter End Notes

Ugh, I hate that I can't use rich format for this, I don't know why!!! Please excuse any mistakes
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I know godparents really aren't anything legal, but in this world, being somebody's godparent is the same as being their guardian if the parents die.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sanji wakes up hard and aching, Zoro’s name on his lips. He groans and glances at his alarm clock: 5:45. It’s still early.

If he tries to fall asleep again, he’s sure to have the same dream again.

He’s been doing so well, too. Almost five months without touching himself to the thought of Zoro, without coming with the swordsman’s name on his lips. But he guesses it’s inevitable.

After all, today is Zoro’s birthday.

He wants to see Zoro. He misses Zoro so fucking much, sometimes it’s all he can do to keep himself from screaming. And even though he misses him constantly, he doesn’t think about how much he misses him. Usually, he’s reminded with painful jabs—like when he says something witty and expects Zoro to reply with a sharp rebuttal. Or when he buys bitter chocolate thinking of the swordsman’s aversion to sweetness.

When did he condition his life to fit so perfectly around Zoro? When will it fade away? For some reason, the answer to the second question scares him.

“I should probably take care of this,” he murmurs, looking down at his still tall erection. He doesn’t enjoy it as much as he normally would.

He takes a cursory wash, then fully showers again after he comes back from his run. He doesn’t feel like eating alone, though, so he goes next door and knocks on Gin’s door. The door opens a gap, and Gin’s face stares at him through the small crack.

“H-hey, Sanji,” Gin says, nervously.

“Hey. You wanna eat breakfast with me?” Sanji asks, scratching the back of his neck. His hair is getting longer. He should probably cut it soon, before it reaches his shoulders.

Gin follows the movement, a strange expression on his face, then leans back to open the door all the way. “Sure.”

“What do you feel like eating? I was thinking maybe Dutch baby pancakes. What do you think?”

“That’s fine with me,” Gin shrugs.

The good thing about Dutch pancakes is that they don’t take too long to bake. Sanji heats the skillet on 450 degrees while he prepares the mixture, and once he’s let the mixture rest for twelve minutes, he pours it on the hot skillet. Now it’s just a matter of letting it bake for fifteen minutes, a time he uses to squeeze some oranges for fresh juice.
“When did you learn to cook?” Gin suddenly asks as Sanji begins to cut mango, jicama, and strawberries for a side dish.

Sanji frowns thoughtfully. “Well, I’ve always really liked cooking. I don’t know exactly when that started. My old man opened up the Baratie when I was eleven, though he didn’t let me actually cook until I was around twelve or thirteen. So sometime during that time period.”

“So your father is a cook, too?”

“Yup. One of the best,” Sanji says proudly.

“And he’s the one who bought the land lot for the restaurant, right?”

“Why the Q&A?” Sanji asks, snorting. His oven beeps, and he grabs his oven mitts to take out the burning hot skillet. He checks the Dutch baby pancake, making sure it’s cooked evenly.

“I just thought we should learn a little more about each other. That’s what friends do, right?” Gin asks, shrugging. “Like, did I ever tell you I used to be in a gang back in East Blue? Pretty messed up time in my life, but luckily, I got out of it alright. Some teenager with a straw-hat beat up the leader, and we disbanded.”


“Messy black hair, scar under his left eye, real goofy like?”

“Yup, that’s Luffy,” Sanji grins. “Man, I can’t believe he beat up a gang. Though….no, actually, it makes sense.”

He knows Luffy is the son of Dragon, the leader of the Revolutionary Army. Both Robin and Iva respect him a lot, and that in itself is enough reason for Sanji to be weary of his strength. But it’s more than that. Sanji always gets the feeling that Luffy is more than what he seems. There is depth to that kid, and a strength of will that is rare nowadays.

“How do you even know him?” Gin asks, taken aback.

“You know Koala, the girl I told you had a baby last month? She’s Robin’s best friend, as well as Luffy’s sister-in-law,” Sanji explains. “Though I haven’t known him for that long.”

“Oh. Well, now that you know this about me, what about you?” Gin insists.

Sanji dusts the Dutch baby pancakes with a little bit of powder sugar, cuts two thick slices, and hands Gin his plate. “Yes, Zeff bought me the lot. It was a birthday present. What about you, Mr. Friendship? Why did you join a gang?”

They share childhood stories through breakfast, getting to know each other a little more personally than they have up to that point. Kid and Law still know him better, but at least Sanji starts to consider Gin a real friend, a title previously given to only a select few.

After breakfast, they head out to meet Shuraiya to spar for a while (both Gin and Shuraiya can hold their own, though they don’t really hold a candle to Sanji), and after that Sanji goes to visit Robin and the babies. They’ve both grown so much in the past four weeks, but despite the difficulties of newborn babies, Robin looks as calm and composed as ever. Maybe it helps that she can literally be in two places at once.

“Oliver is a little more like his father,” Robin says as Sanji coos at the pretty blue-eyed baby boy in
his arms. “He smiles more and he’s always awake, looking at us with bright eyes.”

“So this is Oliver, and that’s Tom?” Sanji questions, nodding to the baby in Robin’s arms. “How are you sure?”

“Different clothes. Oliver always wears something blue, and Tom always something purple,” Robin says.

Sanji smiles and touches one of the little purple mittens covering Oliver’ hands to keep him from scratching himself. “How’s Koala and Alexia?” He knows Koala and Robin talk a lot, more often than Sanji ever does.

“Wonderful. Alexia looks just like Sabo, it’s so cute,” Robin grins. “Though I’ve heard that Ace refuses to leave the couple’s side, and it’s driving Sabo insane.”

Sanji laughs. “Ha, I bet Ace gives them a bigger headache that sweet Alexia. I’m just glad that my kid is so mature.”

“You kid?”

“Chopper,” Sanji says sharply, shaking his head. “I meant Chopper.”

Sanji doesn’t meet Robin’s gaze and instead focuses on little Oliver’ smile. He’s staring at Sanji, apparently fascinated by his hair. Tom, however, is fast asleep in Robin’s arms.

“I think Chopper wouldn’t mind to be called your son,” Robin says firmly. “And neither would Zoro.”

Sanji sighs. “You don’t know that.”

“You’re more important to them than you think,” Robin says.

“Robin, I don’t want to talk about it,” Sanji says firmly but politely.

“I understand,” Robin sighs and drops it. “You can really use a haircut, Sanji. Even Oliver thinks so.”

“Do you, Oliver?” Sanji coos. “You think I need a haircut?” Oliver makes a soft noise and extends his hands to Sanji’s face. Sanji grins and helps the baby boy, leaning in so that the strands of his hair brush the baby’s fingers. “Well, if you think so, I’ll get one.”

“You’re surprisingly good with kids,” Robin mentions. “It’s a good look on you.”

Sanji blushes. “Thanks.”

Tom wakes up a little bit later, but Sanji doesn’t think he’ll be able to make it through feeding time without making a fool of himself, so he leaves the mother and twins.

He doesn’t know what to do with himself after that. Vivi is somewhere in South Blue trying to get a painting she’s sure will look amazing inside the restaurant, and Nami is in West Blue trying to close the contract with the distributors that will be working with Sanji.

He stops by a hair salon and gets a trim, then stops by a coffee shop and wastes a couple of hours in there. It isn’t until he sits down in a park in Little World and checks his phone for the time that the urge hits him.

He wants to call Zoro. He wants to hear the man’s voice. He wants to wish him a happy birthday.
He bites his lip and presses down on the little call icon before he can talk himself out of it. He presses the phone against his ear and waits with bated breath.

“We’re sorry; the number you are trying to call is out of coverage area. Please—.”

He cuts off the message before it’s done. He won’t be able to talk to Zoro.

“Of fucking course,” he mutters, barely keeping himself from slamming his phone on the ground. He hesitates for a moment, then calls a second number. This one picks up on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Gin? Hey, how about I pick up some whiskey and we have a couple of drinks at your place?”

“….yeah. I get off at seven.”

Sanji checks his phone. 6:27. “Perfect. See you soon.”

“Yeah. See you.”

He picks up a couple of bottles of whiskey. He ignores the little voice in his head telling him Zoro would love spending his birthday drinking, and pays for them. When he gets home, he prepares a couple of snacks that will keep him from getting drunk too much and knocks on Gin door half-an-hour after seven. The black haired man answers with a smile, drying his hair with a dark towel. He clearly just came out of the shower.

“So what brought this on?” Gin asks after they’ve settled in, but Sanji only shrugs and hands him a bottle.

“You said it man! Friendship! C’mon, tell me more about that jackass Krieg.”

Sanji doesn’t talk much. That isn’t the point of this whole thing. He just wants to get drunk off his ass and maybe pass out until tomorrow morning. He can’t deal with this day, not alone. It doesn’t take long for him to get drunk, but he hides it well. Gin doesn’t seem to have a care in the world, quite content on just spending the time with Sanji, reminiscing about East Blue.

And when the topic turns to love, Sanji quickly keeps the ball on Gin’s side, not wanting to think about the word himself.

“You’ve got to like somebody,” Sanji says after Gin insists he has never dated anyone. “I mean, how do you go thirty years without liking anybody?”

“For one, it hasn’t been that many years. I’m twenty-nine. And secondly, I’ve liked people before. I’ve just never dated them.”

“Why not? Everybody deserves a date once in a while,” Sanji insists, his words slurring together. “What’s your type? I’m gonna get you a date!”

“I’m alright,” Gin insists. He’s not as drunk as Sanji, but he’s having some trouble enunciating as well.

“Nah, c’mon! How’d you like them?”

“Hmm. Tall. Blonde.”

“I like them blonde, too,” Sanji grins, thinking of the few blonde girls he dated. His drink spills a bit
on the table, but he manages to get most of it in his mouth. “But my favorite are red-heads. Like my sweet Nami-swan!”

“I was under the impression you didn’t have a type. Any kind of girl seems to work for you,” Gin snorts.

“They’re all beautiful, man!” Sanji defends. “They’re all...soft and pretty…and they smell good,” he mumbles.

“Yeah, well….the one I like is all firm and strong…but he smells good, too.”

Sanji grins and falls back on the sofa, looking at Gin from underneath his fringe. “You should totally ask her out. You’re…good man. Should ask her out.”

The alcohol is already starting to make him sleepy, and when he closes his eyes he can feel like he can fall asleep at any moment. He wants to change into something more comfortable, get out of his stuff suit, but he’s also too comfortable to get up.

Something soft touches his lips and when he opens his eyes he sees Gin hovering above him.

“I—I’m sorry,” Gin stammers, moving back.

Sanji licks his lips; they taste of whiskey. He sits up slowly and touches his lips. Gin is still looking at him with wide eyes, his face pale.

Sanji doesn’t know how, but he suddenly finds himself leaning in close and returning the kiss.

Whiskey. It’s strong, familiar. Strong arms wrap around his waist and a flat chest presses against his own. Sanji deepens the kiss even as the other man pushes him back down on the sofa, and he spreads his legs to make room for him. He wraps his arms around his shoulders—wrong, they’re too narrow—and the other man moves his mouth down to suck a bruise on Sanji’s neck.

“Fuck,” Sanji hisses, grinding up. Something hard presses against him and he moans at the promise that the feeling brings.

He grabs the other’s face—wrong, he has a goatee—and brings him up for another kiss.

The taste of whiskey has faded.

Wrong!!

Sanji pushes him away and suddenly the image of Zoro is gone and Gin stands in his place, his lips red and slick, his hair a mess.

Fuck! Shit! Fucking shit, he kissed Gin.

“I…I need to go,” Sanji spits out. There’s a roaring sound in his mind and his skin is prickling. The walls are closing in and his heart is beating wildly.

“Sanji, I—.”

“I’m sorry,” Sanji says, not meeting his eyes and quickly walks out. He hurries to his house, slams the door shut, and sinks down on the floor, his head in his hands.

He kissed Gin. He kissed Gin while thinking of Zoro. Oh god, how fucked up is he?
“I’m sorry, Zoro,” he whispers.

It doesn’t stop the aching.

Despite the urgency of Sabo’s letter, Zoro doesn’t get the chance to return the Legal Guardianship form until November. Mihawk only travels to the mainland every six months to restock supplies, and Zoro has no means of communications inside of the island.

He doesn’t know how, but Perona finds out his birthday is on the eleventh. He would have been more upset about the ‘party’ she tried to throw for him (who the fucks enjoys a party with only Mihawk and ghosts for company?), but she convinces Mihawk to let him go with her to Rubeck.

Sailing with Perona is torture, even worse than sailing with Mihawk since at least the other swordsman knew when to be quiet. But Zoro reminds himself that going to Rubeck will give him the chance to buy a gift for Chopper’s birthday and send it off.

Rubeck is a beautiful city. The beaches aren’t as beautiful as the ones in Raftel, but it’s a close second. Zoro gets the feeling of grace and charm all around him, the entire city giving him a painful feeling of nostalgia. He knows Sanji is from North Blue and he can easily picture the man walking these streets.

“We can go to this little café on the beach! It’s precious!” Perona says excitedly, grabbing him by the arm.

“I need to look for a present,” Zoro says, tugging his hand away. “I already told you, Chopper’s birthday is next month.”

“But what about your birthday gift?”

“I don’t care. Just buy me a bottle of whiskey or some shit,” Zoro shrugs. “Are you gonna help me or not?”

“Fine,” Perona sighs. “But only because you’ll get lost without me.”

“I don’t get lost, witch!”

He does get lost. But only because the streets move in this damn city as well. He does manage to find a perfect gift for Chopper inside a busy bookstore, though: a book listing all the known Devil’s Fruits in the world.

“Is he a Devil Fruit user as well?” Perona asks curiously, studying the book on his hands over his shoulder.

“Yeah, he can turn into a reindeer,” Zoro explains. “He’s been really interested in how they work since then.”

“I thought you said he was eight. Why would he be interested in that?”

“He’s really smart,” Zoro smiles. He looks around to see if there are any more interesting books, when one catches his attention. It’s a small book, buried a bit in the clearance section, but the title is what makes Zoro pause.

_How to say ‘I love you’ in a 100 Languages_
It’s stupidly romantic, something Zoro isn’t very good at. He’s not one for speaking his feelings, preferring to let his actions show his intentions. But as he images himself declaring his love for Sanji in every one of those languages, he gets a warm feeling in his chest. He knows Sanji would love it. Heck, the cook is a sucker for romance. Zoro knows all he has to do is say or do something stupidly cheesy, and the cook turns to putty.

He opens the book and reads the first page. *Anata ga daisuki desu.*

He recognizes the words, the language a common tongue in East Blue. It’s not used much anymore, since everybody just picked the more common New World tongue.

*Taim i’ ngra leat.*

“Oh, that’s really cute!” Perona squeals in his ear, startling him. “You should totally buy it! Sanji would love it.”

Zoro rolls his eyes, barely keeping himself from reminding her that she doesn’t know the cook. But she’s right. Sanji *would* love it. And Christmas is coming soon.

“How do you say ‘I love you’ in French?” Zoro asks curiously, thinking of the cook’s native tongue.

“Hmm. *Je t’aime,* I think.”

Zoro frowns, finding the words familiar. Has he heard them before? He’s sure the cook never said it, he can’t imagine Sanji keeping something like that from him. The cook says I love you more easily than anyone else Zoro knows, surely if he felt that—

*Je t’aime. Je t’adore.*

Shit, he remembers now. Sanji was drunk when he spoke those words. He said a bunch of other things, Zoro doesn’t even remember half of them, it was hard to understand him drunk. But he remembers those words.

*So you’re breaking up with me?*

He remembers those words clearly, too. He remembers the pain in Sanji’s eyes, the way his voice trembled as he tried to stay in control. Zoro doesn’t get to be happy that Sanji loves him. Zoro left Sanji. And it would be pretty fucked of him to send this book to Sanji, no matter how much he wants to. Because now that Zoro is gone, he has no say in Sanji’s life. The cook can date whoever he wants, no matter how much it hurts him. Zoro still has no idea when he’s coming back, he can’t send this and give Sanji hope, only to be gone for years.

No, if he wants to tell Sanji he loves him, then he’s going to do it face-to-face. He will wait until he’s strong enough to come back, and if Sanji is with somebody else, then Zoro will fight for him. If he’s still waiting for Zoro, then Zoro will work his ass off to try and make things up to him.

He sighs and puts the book down.

“Eh? You’re not gonna get it?”

“No,” Zoro says simply, and that seems enough for the teenager.

Most of what they buy is wine and food. Mihawk does most of the cooking, though Zoro helps out every once in a while. Perona cannot make toast without burning it, so the two men try and keep her away from the kitchen as often as possible.
They stay the night in the hotel, then set sail mid-afternoon.

It’s not until the moon is high in the sky that Zoro notices something strange. Perona is asleep, so he knows she has nothing to do with the mist that is slowly surrounding their small caravel. The temperature drops suddenly, and when Zoro breathes out, he can see his breath freezing in the cold air.

Something is definitely wrong.

His whole body is telling him that something is coming his way, but he can’t see much because of the mist. He puts a hand on top of Kitetsu, his body tensing as he waits for… well, he isn’t exactly sure what he’s waiting for.

“Aaaarghh!”

Zoro draws Kitetsu faster than the eye can see, but he freezes in shock when something falls from the sky and lands on deck. He can hear something crashing from below him, probably Perona waking up, but he’s more concerned with the skeleton that was just dropped on deck.

He looks at the sky, but he can only see the light of the moon. There’s something large and dark next to their ship, but Zoro really can’t see through all of the mist.

“Yohohoho! That was quite a fall!”

“Who said that?” Zoro snarls, turning around—but there’s nothing there. He quickly scans his surroundings, but there’s no one there.

“Well hello!”

“Holy shit!” Zoro yelps, scrambling back as the skeleton—the fucking skeleton—starts moving and gets to its feet. “Perona!” Is this one of her tricks? Does she have the power to possess skeletons?

“I didn’t mean to scare you!” the skeleton says quickly. Now that he’s upright, Zoro can see that it’s dressed in a ridiculous outfit. It looks like a suit from the 1900s, a bit dirty and scruffy here and there, but well-kept for the most part. That, coupled with the huge afro on his skull, make Zoro question his sanity. “My name is Brook. I ate the Revival Fruit!”

A Devil’s Fruit user?

“Oh my god! What is that?” Perona shrieks, standing by the door that leads below deck.

“Ah what a beautiful lady!” the skeleton—Brook—exclaims. “May I see your panties?”

“Hey!” Zoro snaps. “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Brook—.”

“Not that, bastard. What are you doing here?”

“Ah. I fell,” Brook says simply. “Or rather, I was thrown.”

“Fell? Fell from where?” Perona snaps.

“There,” Brook says simply, and points to the large shadow to their right. Except now it’s not a shadow anymore. It’s much closer, and Zoro can see the blurry shape of ship—and extremely large ship.
“Holy fuck,” Perona gasps. “What is that thing?”

“Thriller Bark. There’s currently a fight up there,” Brook explains to them rather plainly. “The ship is under the control of Gekko Moriah…though I doubt it will be for long. A remarkable young man is helping us defeat the dreaded man.”

“You do realize you’re not making any sense, right?” Zoro says, still suspicious of the skeleton.

“Ah, I expect not,” Brook says thoughtfully. “Though, if you’d told me a week ago that my shadow would be stolen, preventing me from continuing my journey to New World, then that a rubber man would come to help us defeat Moriah, I would not have believed you either.”

Zoro stares at Brook numbly, then “Rubber man? Don’t tell me…he was wearing a straw hat?”

“Ah yes! A most remarkable young man,” Brook smiles—or whatever he does with his skeletal face.

“Goddamn it, Luffy.”

“You know him?” Perona gasps.

“He’s an old friend,” Zoro nods. “And if left alone, he’s bound to make a mess of things. So where is he?”

“How, he’s up there!” Brook exclaims, pointing at the ship. “I was fighting my own enemy, the zombie that took my shadow, when he defeated me and threw me overboard. Luffy-san seemed rather busy fighting Moriah.”

“Zombies?” Perona exclaims, way too happily. “Ooh, let’s go check it out, Zoro.”

Zoro sighs. He’s honestly not that surprised to hear Luffy is here. He knows better than to doubt how much the monkey boy can surprise him. And he’s found that is much easier to just follow along with whatever crazy adventure Luffy has come up with.

“Fine,” he says. “But you stay in your ghost form. I don’t want to have to tell your father that you were killed because you wanted to look at some zombies.”

“Boo! You’re such a bore,” she complains, but she obeys.

Perona can fly, and Brook is extremely light, so neither have any problems climbing the large ship. Still, Zoro is the first one to make on board, and he waits on deck for the others to join him.

Brook was right when he said there was a battle up here. Now that he’s on deck, he can hear the cries and shouts of battle. The ship is large, about six times as big as their own caravel, and the deck is filled with people. Zoro can see some of them look like humans, but there are others that look nothing more than piles of rotting flesh.

Real fucking zombies.

His attention, though, is quickly caught by the powerful force on the second deck. This zombie looks better than the others. He’s wearing a white kimono, something that Zoro remembers seeing in his old history books. But what catches his attention is the black blade in his hand, the sword swinging with power.

What does a zombie want with such a beautiful katana? That blade sings to him, shouting its strength and power, and Zoro knows that it will fit perfectly in his hand. He still hasn’t replaced Yubashiri,
but this blade looks like it will be more than enough to replace the space his broken katana left.

“Who is that?” Zoro asks Brook quietly, his eyes still on the zombie.

“Ryuma…that is the zombie that is being controlled by my shadow. He was a powerful samurai before his death,” Brook answers. “I’ve been trying to defeat him, but he is much too powerful for me. And without my shadow, I cannot touch sunlight. The only way to get my shadow back is to defeat him.”

Zoro grins and draws Kitetsu, the blade glinting with bloodlust. “Great. You get your shadow back, and I’ll keep that blade.”

“Wait, Mr. Swordsman—!”

Zoro doesn’t wait to hear Brook’s warning. He sees Perona flying off somewhere, but ignores her, too. She knows how to handle herself, and there are very few things that can harm her here.

Zoro can tell Ryuma is looking at him, despite the hollowness of his eye sockets. He feels it in the same way he feels the Humandrills before they attack. This zombie has raw power, defeating him will not be easy.

“So I hear you’re a rather powerful samurai,” Zoro greets, grinning widely. He can already feel adrenaline rushing through his veins, his whole body humming with the promise of a fight. “That blade of yours looks powerful.”

“You have a keen eye,” the zombie answers, humor in his voice. “This is one of the twenty-one Great Grade Swords, the famed black blade with a reverse wave temper line: Shusui.”

Zoro’s grin widens. “Well, aren’t I lucky? That settles it; I’m going to beat you and take that sword as my own.”

Ryuma laughs derisively. “You dare think you can take Shusui from me?”

“Well, to be precise, I will take the katana lying next to your cold, dead body,” Zoro shrugs.

“You seem confident in your skill,” Ryuma hums. “And I get a feeling from standing here, in front of you. A feeling that seems long forgotten…as if I were standing in front of a large, wild beast. Such an exciting sensation…my body is ready to dance with joy.”

Looking into Ryuma’s soulless eyes, Zoro can see reflected back at him that same electrifying rush he’s feeling through his veins.

They both attack at the same time.

Fighting Ryuma is nothing like fighting the Humandrills. Those creatures only know how to copy movements, there is no originality in their fighting. They don’t have fighting spirit, they simply act and rush towards survival. Fighting Ryuma is a battle of wills and pride. Neither give ground as they exchange flying attacks, cutting through everything and anyone that stands in their way. Zombies fall around Zoro as they get in the way, and everyone soon learns to give way for the two fighting swordsman.

Ryuma’s fighting style resembles fencing, something Zoro isn’t very used to dealing with. But that doesn’t mean he has any trouble fighting. It is clear that Ryuma was a swordsman that concentrated in his physical strength when he was alive, and Zoro feels a stab of disappointment at not being able to fight the samurai in his prime.
He’s panting with adrenaline, though, and he’s sweating heavily with exertion. He hasn’t had this much fun in months.

From the corner of his eye, he sees a flash of something yellow and red fly past. He can hear the roar of something large, but he knows better than to doubt Luffy.

Still, he needs to finish this fight quickly. Luffy has a tendency to destroy things, and he doesn’t want to still be fighting the samurai if he has to worry about Luffy and Perona drowning.

He sees Ryuma preparing for his own finishing move and he falls into his own. He closes his eyes and focuses on feeling the breath of things around him. He can feel Ryuma’s aura, thick and dead, and full of bloodlust. He grins and rushes forward, the sound of steel hitting steel music to his ears.

Zoro can hear nothing but his own heavy breathing and the rush of his blood. His lungs scream at him and when he coughs to alleviate their pain, blood splatters the deck.

“My defeat.”

Zoro turns round and stares at the zombie, his eyes on the sheathed sword he holds towards Zoro.

“This legendary swords will truly be satisfied with a master like you,” Ryuma speaks. “To allow defeat to taint this body…it’s so shameful of me.”

“As long as you feel shame, samurai,” Zoro answers, taking the swords from his hands. “It would have been an honor to face you in your time.”

The zombie doesn’t reply. Instead, his mouth opens wide and screams loudly. Zoro watches as something black and thick escapes his mouth. It flies into the air and Zoro’s eyes follow it until it lands on the floor by the skeleton. Even as he continues to watch, the shadow takes the skeleton’s form and Brook cries in happiness.

“Thank you! My shadow is back! Oh, thank you Mr. Swordsman!”

“Hey, Zoro!”

“You, stop ignoring me!”

Zoro rolls his eyes and turns around to see Luffy walking towards him. He looks a bit bruised, his straw hat cut on one side, but he’s not dead at least. Perona is flying above him, looking down on him with an expression Zoro is very familiar with: annoyance.

“What the hell are you doing here, Luffy?” Zoro snaps.

“Adventuring!” Luffy exclaims happily. “Oh, hey Brook!”

“Hi, Luffy-san,” Brook smiles. “I see you’ve been victorious!”

“Yeah! Moriah fell into the sea,” Luffy shrugs.

“You pushed him there!” Perona snaps. “How is this guy your friend, Zoro? He asked me if I pooped!”

“Well, do you?”

“Don’t ask again!”
Zoro rolls his eyes. “Where are you going now, Luffy?” he asks, moving the conversation along.

“I don’t know. Maybe south?” Luffy shrugs. “I’ll just go where the wind takes me!”

“Ah, that reminds me….do any of you know how I can get to New World from here?” Brook asks curiously.

“You have to go northeast,” Perona answers. “I have an extra compass if you need it. Zoro, we need to get a move on. Papa will be upset if we don’t arrive in time.”

“Shit, you’re right.”

“Eh? I thought you were training with Mihawk,” Luffy frowns.

“You’re training with Mihawk!?” Brook exclaims, amazed. “The legendary swordsman? Ah, but of course! After all, you just defeated Ryuma, a samurai said to have defeated a dragon in his time! Truly, you are an extraordinary man, Zoro-san.”

Zoro grins at the praise, but answers nothing. He still has a few years to go, but soon everyone will speak of him in the same way Brook does. No one will doubt his skill.

“Perona is Mihawk’s daughter,” Zoro answers instead, looking at Luffy.

“Mihawk slept with a ghost!”

“I ate a Devil’s Fruit, you goddamned rubber!”

“Shishishi!”

Zoro sighs, feeling a headache coming. Shit, and he still has over a week of travel with Perona. He better take her away from Luffy before he ruins things anymore.

“Let’s go, Perona,” he says, nodding at Luffy. “I’ll see you soon, yeah?”

“Sure thing, Zoro!”

“Ah, I should probably see if the new captain of this ship has a small lifeboat I can use,” Brook mumbles and walks away.

“You have a boat, too, Luffy?”

“Yeah!”

Luffy’s boat is much smaller than Zoro’s, barely more than a dingy. Despite Perona’s protests, Zoro gives him a bit of their food. They don’t have any tearful goodbyes or parting words; they’ve been friends too long to ever do something like that.

It isn’t until Luffy’s ship is barely more than a speck that Zoro remembers the important news.

“OI, LUFFY!”

“WHAT?”

“KOALA HAD HER BABY!”

“WHAT!? NOOOOOO! I CAN’T BELIEVE I MISSED THAT!”
Zoro laughs and watches as Luffy continues to freak out, cursing his bad luck at the skies. Perona gives him an ugly look, but Zoro ignores it. He’s feeling too happy to be bothered by her. Not only did he defeat a legendary samurai, proving that he is growing stronger, but he also ran into his best friend.

This definitely was his best birthday ever.

Sanji knows he’s in a horrible mood. This whole month has been nothing but awful reminders of everything he’s lost, starting with Zoro’s birthday when he made out with Gin and ending with the day that was supposed to be their first year anniversary.

He can imagine it clearly. If Zoro had never left, this would have been the greatest day of the year. Sanji would’ve prepared something delicious, Zoro’s favorite food probably.

They would have taken a walk on All Blue beach, maybe visited a couple of museums. Sanji would have pampered Zoro, forgetting about silly fights for the day. He would have kissed Zoro every change he got, and they would have ended the night in bed, wrapped in each other’s arms.

He would have never kissed Gin and made things awkward between them.

They haven’t talked since that night. Well, it’s more like Sanji has been evading him. He knows he’s going to have to talk to him sooner or later, but he’s dreading that conversation.

“Sanji, are you feeling alright?”

Sanji blinks and his eyes focus on the pretty brunette in front of him. He met Alyssa at the hair salon. She waited with him in the waiting room, and they had exchanged numbers. Sanji had only done so to be polite, too preoccupied with Zoro’s birthday to put much attention to it.

But when Alyssa had called him with a date in mind, Sanji was been unable to resist.

And why shouldn’t he date? He’s single. Zoro isn’t around. Why shouldn’t he try and find somebody else? He’s twenty-seven, still young. Maybe, he can go back to his old dream of marrying a beautiful woman and having two beautiful children.

Besides, there’s no way he can ever compare this beautiful lady with Zoro.

“I’m fine, my darling,” Sanji answers smoothly.

“I’m sorry. I guess you’re pretty preoccupied with work. How’s your restaurant coming along?”

“It will be finished next month,” Sanji says eagerly. “We won’t open until next year, though. I want to make sure everything is perfect for opening night, so I’m giving myself plenty of time to prepare.”

“I’ve heard rumors about your wonderful cooking,” Alyssa smiles. “I was unable to attend the Sea King Bonfire, but a friend of mine tried your food during your test date. You’re the talk of the city!”

“I don’t see why, when I pale in comparison to someone like you,” Sanji praises. He’s actually surprised at how easily it comes. It’s like riding a bike. “But I am happy to hear people enjoy my food. It is the greatest compliment you can pay a chef, you know. And you are more than welcomed to come to opening night. I will personally prepare you a dish to die for.”

“How can I say no to that?” Alyssa smiles.
Sanji notices her eyes are green, a shade too light and quickly downs his glass of wine. No, he is not going to draw comparisons.

Everyone always falls short and it just reminds him of how fucking pathetic this all is. Like he can ever hope to replace what he had with Zoro.

“Sanji? Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Hmm? Oh, everything is fine, my dear!”

The date is a success. It doesn’t take away the feeling of self-disgust he feels when he sneaks out of her apartment in the middle of the night. He showers before going to bed, and dreams of the perfect anniversary date.

The restaurant is officially done on December 1st. Sanji takes out the girls, his new employees, and Franky and his workers out to eat on Nighton in celebration. He actually prefers going to the beach better, but it’s too cold to be near the water right now.

Chopper arrives two weeks later, and Sanji bakes him a batch of cotton candy cupcakes, then takes him shopping for a Christmas tree. The one they buy is much smaller than the one they bought last year, but Sanji still invites the others to decorate it. Chopper spends all of his time worrying about the twins until Sanji drags him away and picks him up to put the angel topper.

Sanji is surprised when the others still living in East Blue send him presents in the mail. He had expected to only have a few gifts under the tree this year, since their holding the party at Vivi’s to celebrate the twins’ first Christmas, but he has quite a batch.

Chopper’s birthday is celebrated with hot chocolate, footie pajamas, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. They grab their presents from underneath the table and head out to Vivi’s early in the afternoon.

“Robin! Where are Tom and Oliver?” Chopper asks as soon as he sees the dark-haired woman.

“Franky and Vivi are trying to get them dressed,” Robin smiles. “They seem to want to give me as much free time as they possibly can.”

“I bet that’s going to end fine,” Sanji says sarcastically and Robin gives him a look that says she completely agrees.

“I’m gonna go help them!” Chopper exclaims excitedly and runs off.

“You seem…fine,” Robin mentions as they take a seat. Everyone agreed that Sanji wouldn’t cook this year, since he had to ‘prepare’ for opening day. He doesn’t particularly agree with the logic, but he can’t say no to Nami.

“I’m fine,” Sanji answers, perhaps a bit too quickly.

“Nami told me you went out on a date last month,” Robin says. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“It was fine,” Sanji replies curtly. “But we simply weren’t…compatible.” That, and Sanji kind of hated himself little because he couldn’t stop thinking about Zoro while being with a woman. He still can’t believe he was so rude towards such a sweet lady.

“Based on what you told me, Zoro ended things. You don’t have to be guilty about—.”
“I know. I’m fine,” Sanji interrupts, then winces. “Ah, I’m sorry, Robin-chwan. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s fine,” Robin says graciously. “Perhaps this isn’t the best time to talk about this. It’s Christmas after all.”

She raises her arms just as Franky hands one of the crying twins over to her, tears in his eyes. “He won’t stop crying! Robin, do something!”

“He starts crying as soon as Franky picks him up,” Robin explains as she takes little Tom in her hands. “Oliver has no problems with either of us.”

“Babies usually start forming bonds at this age,” Chopper says. “Maybe he hasn’t seen Franky as often? Or he just feels more comfort with Robin. You should try reading to him, Franky.”

“Super! Thanks, little bro! You sure are smart!”

“Bastard, that won’t make me happy!”

Sanji smiles fondly as Chopper squirms quite happily. The little boy is one of the few things that can still make him smile honestly.

Nami and Vivi surprise them all with the perfectly glazed ham. Vivi admits that she had some help, mostly Terracotta giving her step-by-step instructions through Skype. They sing happy birthday to Chopper, and then they cut the cake—this one was store-bought, since Nami got tired after she burnt the third one.

When the time to open presents comes, most of them go towards Oliver and Tom.

“They’re getting the most presents, and they don’t even know what to do with them!” Franky laughs as he unwraps Sanji’s gift. “Oh wow! Thanks, Sanji-bro!”

“They won’t be able to use them for a while, but as soon as I saw them, I knew I had to get them,” Sanji says, looking at the matching walkers. They’re shaped like fish, one a bright yellow and red, then other one a softer blue and green.

Sanji receives a picture frame with Chopper, with a picture of both of them holding Alexia. It’s the first picture he has of the baby girl, so he thanks Chopper brightly.

It isn’t until they’re almost done with opening presents that Chopper picks up the plain, nameless package.

“This is one of the ones Usopp sent,” Chopper says when Nami asks who gave it to him. He opens, revealing a thick book listing every single Devil’s Fruit in existence, coupled with an explanation of what they do. There’s a folded letter inside of the book, and when Chopper reads it, his eyes tear up a bit. “It’s from my Dad!” he exclaims happily.

“From Zoro?” Nami gasps, her voice echoing Sanji’s thoughts.

“Yes! It’s a letter from him!” Chopper says. “This is the best Christmas present ever!” He immediately opens the book and starts reading. Sanji hesitates for a second, but when he reaches for the letter and Chopper makes no signs to stop him, he figures ‘screw it’ and grabs it.

Hey Sabo,

Congratulations man! I wasn’t there when Chopper was born, but I can imagine how happy you
must be. Thanks for the pictures, by the way. I really appreciated them. All of them. And sorry this letter is so late. Mihawk only lets us travel to the mainland every six months, and I didn’t have any other way to send this letter.

Thanks for letting me know about Chopper. The package I sent with this letter is his Christmas present, so make sure he gets it for me. Let him know that I miss him and that I’ll definitely come back for him. He’ll try and tell you that he isn’t worried because he likes to pretend he’s the adult in the situation. Remind him he doesn’t have to do that. And tell Usopp that it doesn’t matter if Chopper says he’s okay, you have to make sure. That kid is good at hiding things like that.

Sorry the letter is so short. I don’t really have much to say, really. If anything happens, you know where I am. Tell Chopper I love him.

Zoro

Sanji reads the letter a couple of times, imagining Zoro writing it. He can almost picture the way Zoro bites at his lips in concentration, his scowl deepening in thought. It makes him smile.

He’s not mentioned once in the letter. Not that he expected to be, this is Chopper’s present after all, but…well, it…hurts. Still, it’s nice to know that Zoro is doing fine. At least Sanji doesn’t have to worry about the swordsman being dead.

He re-reads the letter one more time and smiles again. As long as Zoro is fine, Sanji is okay.

Chapter End Notes

I took some parts from the anime when I wrote the fight with Ryuma, if anything sounded familiar. Thriller Bark is much smaller in my story, though still pretty big. Also, let’s say hi to Brook! Now the whole gang is here, yeah!!!
Zoro doesn’t really get sick. He’s not the healthiest person in the world—mainly because of his slight alcohol problem—but he has a strong immune system. Still, it isn’t unheard of for him to get the occasional minor sickness every once in a while. He just never expected to be sick with the flu with Mihawk while Perona nurses them back to health with her poor excuse of a chicken soup. Or whatever that white meat is because Zoro doesn’t remember seeing any chickens around.

The only good thing about this is that Mihawk doesn’t make him stop training. The other swordsman is just as sick as Zoro, his nose red and his eyes bloodshot, but he works hard to keep Zoro on his toes.

And when Christmas comes, Mihawk gives him a wonderful present.

“Are you two crazy!?” Perona shouts from her perch in the air. “You’re still sick!”

“If you wish to put this off—.”

“I’m fine,” Zoro says before Mihawk can finish the sentence. “Let’s do this.”

This is the first time Mihawk has agreed to fight with him again. Zoro knows he’s improving. His fight against Ryuma not only gave him confidence, but also a new sword. Shusui works like a wonder, increasing the power of all of Zoro’s attacks. She’s not as bloodthirsty as Kitetsu, nor as elegant as Wado, but she has raw power and strength.

With Shusui in hand, it was very easy for Zoro to defeat the leader of the Humandrills. But the good thing about the Humandrills is that no matter how often you defeat them, they always keep coming back for more, twice as strong as before. Because of it, Zoro has found himself in a state of constant combat.

He’s in fucking heaven, honestly.

“You’re gonna kill each other!” Perona yells. “Don’t come crying to me when you lose a limb!”

“Perona, if you’re not going to watch quietly, then leave,” Mihawk says, shutting up his daughter pretty quickly.

Zoro grins and draws Shusui and Kitetsu. He’s not under any impression that he can defeat Mihawk, but it doesn’t matter. Living in this island not only has increased his skill as a swordsman, but it has also brought back his old confidence and self-assurance. He’s back to his old self, a rock with no self-doubt or hesitation, but now he has the skill to back it up.

His goal for the day is to make Mihawk draw Yoru and fight him seriously. And…well, not die. He’s sure that despite this being a simple sparring session, Mihawk won’t hold back at all.

Mihawk sets things in motion. Zoro only has a fraction of a second to react before he’s blocking the small knife with Kitetsu. He growls, feeling insulted that the man still chooses to face him with that sorry excuse of a weapon, but doesn’t lose control. He parries and strikes with Shusui. He feels a deep sense of satisfaction when he makes Mihawk take a step back, but he doesn’t let himself be overpowered by cockiness.
He’s nowhere near close enough to beating him yet. He pushes his attack, forcing the other swordsman to take another step back, but suffers when Mihawk suddenly turns and flicks his knife, the sharp edge slashing a thin line on Zoro’s forearm. It doesn’t hurt, but Mihawk still can claim drawing first blood.

Still, it is with a deep sense of satisfaction that he sees Mihawk draw Yoru. He ties his black bandana on and puts Wado in his mouth, knowing he has to put all of his strength and skill to the test.

The battle lasts longer than the first time Zoro faced him. He is unable to strike Mihawk, but at least he forces the other to step back a couple of times. When Mihawk strikes forward, aiming towards Zoro’s shoulder, Zoro sacrifices victory in favor of keeping his limb. The strike hits Shusui head on and he curses when the force of it disarms him.

“You have improved,” Mihawk says, taking a step back. “More than I had expected for these five months.”

“I told I would take the title from you,” Zoro replies. “That will happen sooner than you think.”

Mihawk grins and sheathes Yoru. “Yes, but you still have much to learn. Perona.”

Zoro looks at the pink girl in confusion, but before his eyes can find her, he feels as if somebody poured freezing water down his back. His mind darkens and hopelessness crowds his every thought. “I’m sorry that I was born…”

“You are still susceptible to attacks like these,” Mihawk says as the last vestiges of hollowness leave Zoro. “Have you ever heard of Haki?”

“No,” Zoro answers petulantly, glaring at the laughing Perona.

“There are three types. Armament Haki allows you to use your own spirit to defend against attacks or even increase the power of your own attacks. Observation Haki allows you to sense things often hidden, and if powerful enough, it allows you to predict your opponent’s attacks. Conqueror’s Haki is the only you cannot learn, for you must be born with it to learn it.”

Zoro frowns thoughtfully. “You know…Luffy once fought this guy Enel who could predict his movements.”

“That’s Observational Haki,” Mihawk nods. “It is very helpful. However, to you, Armament Haki would be the most beneficial. It is this type of Haki that allows you to strengthen your blades. You should learn to see every nick and scratch on their blades as a mark of shame. Haki is also the only mode of defense against Devil’s Fruit users like Perona. Your blade would never be able to harm her, but infused with Haki, it will render her powers useless. Until you have mastered Haki, you will not be allowed to touch a drop of alcohol.”

Zoro is a bit preoccupied with the thought of Haki. He’s almost sure that Sanji can use it, too. That was probably what allowed him to fight Daz’s bladed body with his feet. The words finally sink in, and Zoro splutters, glaring at Mihawk.

“What!”

The New Year comes with the Grand Opening of In Fine.

Just like Robin promised, the day is a complete success. Sanji has few chances to leave the kitchen,
loaded with requests as his restaurant stays busy from morning to closing time. It’s the first time he
gets to cook as a Head Chef, but he finds that the position fits him like a glove. Carmen is a
wonderful cook, taking control the few times Sanji hits the dining floor to talk to his guests. Keimi,
one of his hosts, happily shows him the computer program where they keep track of reservations.

“Every table! Completely booked until late March!” Keimi says happily.

“That’s great news!” Sanji exclaims. “You’re doing a wonderful job, Keimi. Keep booking until the
end of March, but don’t set anyone in for April. Put them on the waiting list. We don’t want to assure
any tables for over such a long period of time in case anything happens.”

“Of course, Mr. Black!”

Sanji smiles at the girl and takes the time to walk through every table and introduce himself. He
makes sure everyone is being well-taken care of. Back at the Baratie, Zeff had one waiter for every
ten tables. Here, Sanji keeps one waiter for every five tables. It’s more employees, so Sanji has to
pay a bigger salary, but it allows him to keep his costumers happy.

He meets Gin’s eye from across the room and smiles, receiving a slight smile in return.

He finally talked to Gin a couple of nights ago, when he asked him if he was still interested in
working for him. It had been awkward at first, but Gin was understanding.

“I get it,” he had said. “We were both pretty drunk. We’re better off as friends.”

The expression on his face told Sanji otherwise, but he took the easy way out and pretended things
were okay.

Gin turns to talk to his customers and Sanji takes the chance to study his restaurant in full, grinning
when he sees all the time and effort Vivi took into decorating the interior.

Sanji opted not to have tablecloths, since they are too much trouble to clean. Instead, his tables are
made out of black Adam Wood—less sturdy than regular Adam Wood, but very durable and light.
The centerpieces are simple, short glass bowls filled with water lilies floating in clear water. He likes
simple, elegant things, and his most ostentatious design is the full-wall aquarium that separates the
kitchen from the dining room and holds all of the fish they cook. For certain meals, customers can
choose what they want to eat straight from the tank, and it is always refilled at the end of each day. A
tall, delicate pillar stands at the center of the room and holds the glowing blue orb that Zoro gave him
during his birthday. It looks beautiful, and it makes him feel a little bit warmer. Just like Sanji asked
for, the main building materials are wood and stone, with crystal accents everywhere.

Everything is of the highest quality, and in its simplicity, it’s beautiful.

His friends have already been seated in the large table formed by putting together four tables in front
of the center pillar

To Sanji, this is one of the best spots, because not only does it view the wonderful tank, but it’s also
directly across from the large stone archway that leads into the reinforced glass flooring outside, and
it turn, provides a magnificent view of All Blue.

“Sanji, the man of the hour!” Sabo exclaims, standing up to greet him, but Sanji sidesteps around him
and falls on one knee in front of Koala.

“Koala! Your beauty is even greater than before! And how is my gorgeous Alexia?”
With wavy blonde hair and bright, baby blue eyes, Alexia is the cutest baby girl Sanji has ever seen. She’s two weeks older than Tom and Oliver, but her eyes look years wise as she stares at Sanji.

“Isn’t she the cutest little baby you have ever seen?” Ace coos, making faces at his niece. The little girl giggles and reaches out for Ace to pick her up.

“Ugh, she loves Ace more than me,” Sabo whines pitifully. “Why don’t you love Daddy, Alexia!?”

Alexia only giggles and pulls on Ace’s hair.

“So does this mean we can expect little Fire Fist babies sometime soon?” Bonney asks, smirking.

Marco chokes on spit and Ace glares at his boyfriend. “Hey, you know I want kids later on, right?”

Ace snaps

“Yeah…like a lot later on,” Marco coughs. “Let’s not talk about this.”

“You know, we weren’t planning on having babies either, but…they really do bring you closer together,” Kid says, giving Bonney an uncharacteristically dopey smile. The pink-haired woman is already five months pregnant, though her belly is smaller than Koala’s was at the time. She assures Sanji that it’s normal, and that Kid already worried enough to last a life time.

“Mr. Black, table twelve wishes to speak to you.”

“Thank you, Ishilly dear! Guys, everything is on the house, so enjoy yourselves,” Sanji tells his friends before following Ishilly.

There is a familiar auburn-haired beauty seated in table four, surrounded by two equally gorgeous blonde and brunette.

“My sweet Emma!” Sanji exclaims, kissing her hand. “So glad you could make it.”

“I told you I would,” Emma grins. “These are coworkers of mine, Lisa and Clara. We work at the Wano Museum on Upper Mil.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Sanji says suavely, bowing to the two lovely ladies.

“Are you the owner? You have to tell your chef that his food is wonderful,” the blonde—Sanji thinks she’s Lisa—says.

“Silly, Sanji is the Head Chef as well,” Emma says, grinning. “He’s the one who cooked our food!”

“Well, I’ve been walking the floor for a while. I’m not sure whether I prepared your food or not,” Sanji says diplomatically. “But all you have to do is ask, and I’ll be more than glad to prepare something for you personally.”

“Emma, you were right. He’s such a gentleman,” Clara praises.

“I’m only doing what a true man would do,” Sanji says. “To treat such lovely women with great care is to be expected.”

Sanji continues talking with Emma and her friends for a short while, but soon he has to excuse himself and return to the kitchen. He helps out the rushed cooks, and once things slow down inside, Sanji returns to the table in time to hear Usopp retell the story of the time he killed a four hundred feet snake with his bare hands, which nobody but Chopper believes. Honestly, even Tom looks at
Usopp like he knows he’s full of shit.

The night flies away as they all drink and eat. Sanji is seriously enjoying himself, catering to the women’s needs, ignoring the men, praising the babies.

Robin and Koala bond even more of over the beauty of babies, which causes an argument between Marco and Ace that ends up with the couple fighting outside of Sanji’s restaurant (only because the cook kicks them out as soon as they catch on fire) but ends in a heavy make-out session that Bonney and Kid quickly copy. Kaya and Nami take it upon themselves to make sure the babies are always entertained, and Sanji spends most of his time thanking Franky and Vivi over how beautiful his restaurant looks (yes, he does get a little drunk and even offers Vivi his kidney in repayment, but whatever).

Everyone is happy. Everyone is together. Sanji is laughing and cheering, extremely and genuinely happy to have his friends around in such an important day in his life.

He doesn’t think about Zoro at all.

Despite the success of his first month, Sanji doesn’t get to enjoy it much. Chopper leaves during the first week of January, and since construction is done, Franky and Robin decide it’s about time they return to Water 7 as well. Sanji manages to convince them to stay for Robin’s birthday, but it’s not a long extension. On the good side, he offers Nami the head managerial job and when Vivi is offered a job as Exhibit Designer & Production Manager in the Alabasta Museum of Arts, the two girls decide to move in permanently.

Valentine’s Day is one of the busiest days since Opening Day for Sanji, since his restaurant’s Vanishing Floor (like the outside area has been dubbed by the patrons) is a couple’s favorite. Despite Nami’s complaints, Sanji finds himself working full-time shifts, often only taking a couple of smoke breaks and the occasional lunch break. He knows Nami and Vivi worry about him, but Sanji honestly doesn’t see the problem. Cooking makes him happy, he’s living his dream, he doesn’t see what’s wrong with spending all of his free time doing something he loves.

But Nami is a force to be reckoned with and when she calls him out to the dining room and Sanji sees her seated in the same table as Emma, he knows something is up.

“Sanji! Have you met Emma?”

“I have,” Sanji says pleasantly, though guarded. “It’s nice to see you again, Emma.”

“It is very nice to see you again as well, Sanji,” Emma replies smoothly, smiling at him. “Thank you for the delicious food.”

“Emma was just telling me how her date stood her up! What a shame, don’t you think?” Nami says, looking from Emma to Sanji.

“Only the lowest of the low disappoint a woman,” Sanji agrees. He thinks he knows where this is going but he doesn’t know how to put a stop to it.

“I know! Sanji has been working hard all week…you two should go out and relax,” Nami says, grinning widely. “No woman should spend Valentine’s Day alone. Right, Sanji?”

“Right. Nami, can I speak to you…in the kitchen?”
Nami smiles at him and nods, but he can see the tightness in her smile. Sanji excuses himself from Emma and leads the way back to the kitchen.

“You need this,” Nami says as soon as they enter the busy kitchen.

“Nami, I’m fine,” Sanji says testily. “I don’t need a date.”

“You need to do something!” Nami snaps. “All you do is just…just work!”

“It is my restaurant. I like working here,” Sanji replies.

“I want you to be happy, Sanji.”

“I am happy.”

“No, you’re not!” Nami yells, startling everyone. “You’re trying and you’re pretending, but we can all see how much you fake it. You’re nakama, Sanji. I want you to be happy.”

“Oh really? Because I was under the impression that you didn’t really like me,” Sanji says, fighting to keep his voice steady. “There was always that nagging thought that you liked Saga better.”

Nami blushes and avoids his gaze. “I…I didn’t trust you. Nobody gives that much without expecting anything in return. I thought…I was worried. But I know you now, Sanji, and I know that everything you did, you did out of love.”

“No, you’re nakama to me, too,” Sanji says softly. “But you have to understand, I’m fine.”

He can’t lie to her and says he’s happy again. Because…well, he’s not. But he’s content and that’s as far as it is ever going to get. He doesn’t want to date anybody, he doesn’t want to be let down again. And truthfully, he’s a little afraid that he’ll forget about Zoro. This is the first time he’s ever been in love so honestly and he doesn’t want to lose it.

“You’re waiting,” Nami whispers.

And he is. He is waiting, even subconsciously. He’s waiting for the moment Zoro comes back. He’s waiting for their lives to start again where things left off. He’s waiting for something…he doesn’t know what anymore.

“I just…I don’t want you to put your life on hold for someone that might not ever come back to you,” Nami continues. “I love you both, but you’re the one that’s suffering the most. You deserve to give yourself a second chance, Sanji. You deserve to be happy with someone.”

Zoro might not come back. He never promised Sanji anything. In fact, he plainly told him the same thing Nami is telling him right now…don’t wait. He doesn’t know what to do with himself anymore. He doesn’t know what’s right and what’s wrong.

But…but maybe Nami is right. Maybe what he needs is a fresh start with someone new.

“Okay, Nami,” Sanji finally gives in, ignoring the ugly feeling in his stomach. “I’ll do as you say.”

Nami beams and hugs him tightly. “That’s great! You won’t regret it Sanji!”

He already does.

But he stills put on a smile, seemingly natural and easy-going, and walks back to the dining room where Emma is waiting for him.
Her hair is pulled back in a tall ponytail and she’s wearing glasses, which turn her from sexy to adorable. There’s a familiar warmth in his chest when he sees her, the kind he gets when he meets a pretty woman. This is the feeling he called love before he met Zoro: it’s warm and fuzzy and it always makes him feel like he’s walking on air.

This is a good sign.

“I’m sorry for the long wait,” Sanji apologizes. “Would you like to take a walk with me?”

Emma smiles widely and nods. “Of course. I just need to go to the powder room first.”

Sanji waits until she’s out of sight to drop his smile. There’s a small uncomfortable feeling in his gut, but he ignores it. Nami is right, he repeats to himself.

Sanji can’t wait for Zoro. Even if he wants to, he knows it’s insane to do so. Yeah, he loves Zoro, but what tells him that Zoro won’t stay away for five or even ten years? Sanji can’t waste his life waiting for somebody that might not even want him back. Heck, they barely dated for six months before Zoro left. That is nowhere near long enough time for Sanji to dedicate his life to the other man.

So no, he can’t wait. From now on, Sanji will live his own life—a life that doesn’t have room to love someone that is long gone.

Zoro has never gone more than a week without drinking. Some people might call him an alcoholic, but Zoro doesn’t think so. After all, his body processes alcohol differently. It takes quite a lot to get him even remotely buzzed; drinking a beer with every meal doesn’t really constitute as alcoholism in his mind.

At least, until Mihawk forbade him from drinking. He never realized how much his body depended on the drink, and how that he’s not allowed to drink, he’s using the opportunity to train his body against addictions.

It takes a couple of weeks for the injuries Zoro sustained during his battle with Mihawk to heal completely. They don’t keep him from fighting—nothing ever stops him from fighting—but it feels much better to walk around without bandages restricting his movements.

The days often blur together working with Mihawk. Zoro is working hard to master Haki, an ability that proves to be very helpful. He can already infuse two of his swords at the same time, though he can’t last very long with them. He can also touch Perona when she’s in her ghost form, but as soon as she sends her larger ghosts, Zoro’s Armament breaks. Observation Haki is a bit easier to learn, since it requires Zoro to get into a state of mind he’s already familiar with. He still remembers the day when he learned how to cut through steel—remembers how it felt to feel the breath of things, the life of everything around him. But because of how much he’s struggling with Armament Haki, Zoro is adamant to prove his expertise in it.

When Valentine’s Day comes, Zoro only realizes it because Perona bothers him all day about it. Despite her twisted look at romance, she sincerely thinks Zoro should put more of an effort on keeping his relationship with Sanji alive.

“You know, he’ll forget about you!” Perona yells as Zoro turns down her offer to write a romantic letter to send to the cook. “You’ll come back and he’ll be with somebody else.”
“If that’s true, then a letter will not change things,” Zoro replies firmly.

“Aren’t you…don’t you want him to wait for you?” Perona asks quietly.

Zoro sighs and moves his legs so that the ghost-girl can sit down on his bed. “Of course I want him to wait. But I still don’t know when I’ll be able to return…and I cannot ask this of him.”

“But you love—.”

“It’s not that simple,” Zoro interrupts. “I want him to be happy. He won’t be happy waiting for me.”

“But what…if he falls in love with somebody else?”

“Then…I will fight for him,” Zoro shrugs. He has thought of it. All that Perona fears, Zoro has already thought of it. He takes short naps throughout the day, so many in fact, that he doesn’t need to sleep through the night anymore. And sometimes, while he’s training in the middle of the night, or when he’s taking the time to meditate…worry comes. But it’s been almost one year since he left, and Zoro has already made up his mind. He won’t come back until he’s stronger, until he’s better. He won’t come back until he’s the best version of himself, until he’s learned everything he can possibly learn from Mihawk. “He already fell in love with me once. If I come back, and I cannot make him fall in love with me again…then that just proves that we were never mean to be together.”

This is why he didn’t send that book to Sanji, why he didn’t ask for any news of the blond. Zoro will not half-ass this. He won’t string Sanji along with half-baked promises. The man that Sanji knows was but a shadow of who Zoro truly is. Sanji only met a distorted version of him, something that was cracked and shameful. Sanji has yet to meet the man that Zoro is, the man that is aiming to be the very best, the man that will prove his skills to the heavens…he’s so much more, and Sanji deserves to know the real version of him.

So Zoro has already made his mind. When he comes back, he will fight for Sanji. Once he’s dealt with the burdens on his shoulders like a true man, when his back is clean of any regrets, once he’s a free man—then, and only then, will he come back.

After all, Sanji deserves to be with the very best—and Zoro will be the very best.

Emma is wonderful. Not only is she beautiful, she’s smart and kind. She’s a Special Artifacts Curator, so she travels often. She’s well educated and enjoys many of the same things Sanji does. They have the same taste in music, the same taste in wine. They enjoy many of the same hobbies, and they can spend hours talking about…well, anything, really. She has been to almost every place Sanji has been, and every time he raises a new topic, she has some type of knowledge on it.

She buys him a bottle of red Wine from the southern regions of West Blue for his birthday. Sanji doesn’t recognize the name, but he knows it’s good quality as soon as he tastes it. He invites her to the dinner Nami and Vivi throw for him, and the girls only have praise for the auburn-haired beauty.

“She’s very funny,” Vivi praises.

“And she knows how to handle a budget,” Nami adds.

Sanji thinks so, too. He enjoys spending time with her. She’s not one to stay at home, and Sanji finds himself exploring the large city with her. There are many things to do in Raftel, from cultural gatherings to streets shows, and she always seems to be in the know.
When April comes, Sanji makes his first major change to the restaurant and decides to close on Sundays. He’s getting a lot of good publicity, and a couple of food magazines have already written reviews of his restaurant. There is even talk that Sanji is being reviewed to receive the Lvneel Star, one of the highest honors a restaurant can receive. Even with Zeff, it took three years for him to receive his first start, and another five to receive his second. To get a Lvneel Star within his first year…shit, that would be amazing. Even more amazing if Sanji somehow is able to attain the unattainable: five Lvneel Stars. Only one other restaurant in the world has ever received that honor, and it was destroyed during the Revolution of Dressrosa seventeen years ago.

So yes, Sanji can afford to close on Sundays, and even though it moves all of his reservations down, only three parties cancel on him. The spots are quickly filled up, and no other major changes occur.

It’s on the first Sunday off that his employees plan an outing to Nighton, inviting him and Nami. Not only are they celebrating their first grouped day off, but also the fact that the nominations for the Banban Foundation Awards have already been declared. The results won’t come in until May, which is also when Lvneel will announce the names of the restaurants that will either lose or receive a Star, but the mere fact that Sanji was nominated for three awards is already a great achievement.

“Let’s be honest….we all know Sanji is going to win,” Barto says. They’re all in one of the largest clubs in Nighton—Sanji doesn’t know the name of it, but he doubts it even has one—and Vivi has offered (much to Nami’s horror) to buy everyone drinks so they can toast to Sanji’s success.

“Yeah, boss…I mean, at the very least, we should get the Best New Restaurant Award,” Carmen says.

“Hey, I think we have a pretty good chance on Outstanding Service,” Keimi says.

“You know…the only awards that Sanji will be winning is the Outstanding Chef Award and the Rising Start Chef of the Year…any others will be a group effort,” Emma says diplomatically. “Don’t you think so?”

“You’re absolutely right, ma cherie!” Sanji exclaims lovingly. “I would be nothing without my amazing employees!”

“Yeah, yeah. I came here to get drunk!” Shuraiya cheers, raising his shot. “Are we doing this or not?”

“Hear, hear!”

Sanji rolls his eyes, but he raises his own shot glass and drinks at the same time as Emma. She’s as much a lightweight as he is, so they don’t drink much.

Sanji has fun. It doesn’t come as much as a surprise to him anymore, having fun. He’s happy now, truly and continuously happy. When Nami asks him now, Sanji can honestly say the word. He’s happy.

Shuraiya and Gin convince Carmen and Kiwi to dance, and after a while, Nami and Sanji join them. They stay until well after midnight, and by that time Emma is already a little bit wasted. Sanji didn’t drink too much, but he feels the slight buzz of alcohol making him more relaxed.

“I had fun,” Emma slurs, leaning most of her weight against Sanji as he walks her home. The good thing is that she lives in Nighton, so it’s not that long a walk. “It’s cold…lend me your jacket?”

“Of course, ma cherie!” Sanji says with too much enthusiasm. It is getting cold, but Sanji has on a
long-sleeve shirt underneath and Emma’s dress doesn’t protect her from much.

The streets are mostly empty with a few stragglers hurrying home. There’s a street musician playing the violin in the corner, his song strangely melancholy.

“What a gentleman…come home with me?” she whispers, looking up at him with a small smile, her eyes slightly darker.

“I would love to,” Sanji replies honestly, pausing for a moment to put some coins in the musician’s hat.

“Yohohoho! Thank you, my good man!”

“You’re wel—aargh!” Sanji scrambles back as he takes a good look at the man—or rather, at the skeleton. Emma screams and Sanji quickly puts himself between her and the monster, his body a tad slow on the uptake because of the alcohol.

“What the hell are you!?” Emma shouts, pointing at the skeleton from behind Sanji.

“Oh, what a pretty lady! My name is Brook, and I’m a musician!” the skeleton replied, bowing low. “May I see your panties?”

“What the fuck did you just say?” Sanji growls, taking a step forward. “I’ll kill you again, you shitty musician.”

“Yohohoho! I don’t mean any harm!” Brook quickly says. “I’m simply a Devil’s Fruit user. No need to be alarm. I ate the Revival Fruit!”

Sanji stares at the skeleton thoughtfully. Now that his surprise is past him, he can see that the tall creature doesn’t look that intimidating. He’s dressed in rather old clothes and only has a cane and his violin as possessions.

“The Revival Fruit? It made you come back to life?” Emma asks curiously, coming out from behind Sanji.

“That’s right! Thought my soul got a little lost and by the time I made it back, my body was like this! Only my hair survived—strong roots, you know.”

Sanji snorts, thinking of the other person he knows who gets lost easily. “So you were a musician in your past life?”

“One of the very best,” Brook exclaims. “With the skill to play every instrument in the world. I came here looking for the children of my past friends, but it seems they all have moved away…so thank you for the tip, my good man. It will feed me tonight.”

“You eat?” Sanji asks curiously. The man is literally nothing but bones, Sanji can’t imagine him eating anything.

“Of course! I feel hunger, but I can’t die anymore—for I am nothing but a soul! Still, it would be great to eat again! Haven’t done so for fifty years!”


“Ah, are you sure, darling?” Sanji asks, feeling a little bit guilty. It’s true that he wants to feed Brook,
but he also feels a bit uncomfortable letting Emma go home by herself.

“Sure, my place is like three streets down from here. Besides, the fright sobered me up a bit,” Emma assures him. “Brook, it was lovely to meet you.”

“Ah, you too,” Brook says, a bit confused by the turn of events.

“C’mon, Brook,” Sanji says, nodding to the streets. “I’ll make you something to eat.”

“What? Really?” Brook exclaims excitedly, following him.

“Yeah, I’m a chef,” Sanji explains. “I can’t let people go hungry—even skeletons. My name is Sanji, by the way.”

“Thank you, Sanji-san! You are truly a gentleman!”

“So, you said you came looking for you friends?”

Brook tells him about his past while they walk home. Sanji is surprised to find out that the man has been dead for over fifty years. He was the leader of a battle convoy of a kingdom in West Blue, but died during one of his missions, along with the rest of his crew. He was trapped in the Florian Triangle for years, until he was able to come back to West Blue only to be shunned because of his appearance. He had heard that a couple of his old friends moved to Raftel, and had hoped that he would be able to find a home in the city as well. But fate had frowned on him once again, and his shadow had been stolen by another Devil’s Fruit user. Thankfully, two passing sailors had saved him and sent him on his way to New World. He had thought everything would turn for the better, but upon arriving at Raftel, he had discovered that his friends had left the city a long time ago. And now he’s stuck.

“That sounds like a real adventure,” Sanji says as he sets a steaming plate of shrimp fried rice in front of the tall skeleton. “So you’re what? Ninety?”

“No, eighty-nine. In fact, my birthday was but three days ago.”

“Shit, really? Well, happy birthday, man!” Sanji exclaims. “Dig in!”

To his utter surprise, instead of digging in, the skeleton man burst into tears. Sanji stares, appalled, as the skeleton cries loudly, covering his face with his thin hands.

“O-oi! What’s wrong!?” Sanji exclaims, his hands frozen in front of him as if to try to stop the other from crying, but he doesn’t know how.

“Ah, I’m sorry!” Brook sniffles. “It’s just…yours is the first kindness I have seen in this city! Truly, my heart shall be filled quicker than my stomach—though, I don’t have a stomach! Yohohoho!”

Sanji tries to smile but it comes off more like a grimace. “Eh, that’s alright. It’s just food. I’ll feed you any time you want, so c’mon, try it.”

“Thank you again, Sanji-san. Oh—may I get some milk as well?”

“Milk? Yeah, alright,” Sanji says, glad that Brook has stopped crying.

“Oh, what delicious food!” Brook exclaims happily, shoveling food inside his jaw. “I have not tasted anything like this in years!”
Sanji smiles and sets a glass full of milk next to the skeleton. He’s always enjoyed watching people eat his food—the way their faces light up, the pure enjoyment in their faces as they taste something they like, has always been one of the biggest reasons why he’s a cook. And it only feels exceptionally meaningful with Brook, knowing that it has been years since the man last ate. An idea suddenly plants itself in his mind, and he grins as it takes form.

“You know, Brook….I own a restaurant here in Hilltop, and I’ve been looking for a musician. You said you could play any instruments, isn’t that right?”

Brook pauses for a moment and stares at him, his eye sockets somehow portraying surprise and hope. “That’s right. From the accordion to the zurna.”

“Then how would you like working for me? An eight hour shift, from three to eleven, two days off, two free meals, and a starting pay of twenty Beri per hour.”

“I…I…Sanji-san, you are truly a kind man,” Brook finally answers, his voice dangerously brittle. “It seems my luck is starting to turn, to have met such kind people in my travels.”

Sanji blushes and turns his back on the musician. “It’s no big deal—you’ll be working hard, so it’s not like I’m doing you a favor. You’re expected to do requests as well, so you better practice your skill in the piano. And I’ll go ahead and pay you a month’s salary in advance, so you can rent yourself a place and buy suits that aren’t ripped.”

Sanji glances at the skeleton, expecting another thank you, but instead comes face-to-face with a crying skull again. Sanji sighs and rolls his eyes. Still, he can’t hold back the small smile that breaks through his scowling face.

Chapter End Notes

Nami's a good person. She's just sometimes slightly nosy and bossy. And poor Sanji can't say no to pretty face
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry it took so long to update. My router got messed up so I went like three days without any internet other than my phone's hotspot. It was HELL!! Anyway, enough with the excuses and on to the semi-last chapter! Just one more to go!!!

May comes with great news. It’s time to visit the mainland again, and since Mihawk never found out about the ship full of zombies Zoro and Perona encountered, he lets them go together to Rubeck again. Perona’s birthday is coming up in June, and the girl has been pestering Zoro about buying her a gift.

“I’m finally turning seventeen!” she exclaims. “You have to get me something!”

“Did you forget? I have no money,” Zoro snaps, trying—and like always failing—to ignore her. The crowd around them is giving them a wide berth since Perona is in her ghost form and Zoro is pulling on the large wagon holding all of their groceries with his bare hands. The wagon is a little over four hundred pounds, but the weight is good training for Zoro.

“Ha! I know Papa gave you a couple hundred Beri,” Perona says. “He knows how much I love presents.”

Zoro rolls his eyes. It’s true that Mihawk gave him some money, but he had hoped to buy a couple of bottles of sake for when he finally masters Haki. He’s not quite there yet, but he’s sure he’ll be back to drinking by the time his birthday comes.

“Fine,” he sighs. “What do you want?”

“A teddy bear!” She exclaims happily. “There’s a Build-a-Bear Shop near here!”

“Isn’t that for like, little kids?”

“Shut up! C’mon!”

Zoro rolls his eyes and follows the pink-haired teenager. Of course, they aren’t allowed to go inside the store with the large wagon, so Perona makes him take everything back to their ship. It takes him longer than usual to get back to the caravel, and as soon as he steps foot on deck, he knows something is wrong.

He enters the galley quietly, but there’s nothing out of place. He doesn’t bother putting up their things, since Perona always tells him he does it wrong and instead checks below deck. He doesn’t spend much time down here, but he’s sure Perona isn’t very messy. When he finds her room ransacked, he curses.

Looters.

There’s no one on deck when he climbs back up, but when he closes his eyes and expands his conscious like Mihawk thought him, Zoro can feel five beings running back to the city. They’re not very strong, but they’re fast and Zoro knows that once they get back to the city, he’ll have more
trouble picking their life-force out from a crowd.

“Fucking assholes,” he mutters, and starts the chase.

It doesn’t take him long to find them. He’s a bit surprised to see three teenagers, maybe about Perona’s age, and two older guys. Two of the younger kids have wrapped all of Perona’s belongings in two large sacks and the two are fighting over the weight of it.

“It’s your turn to carry it!” the large-eared one yells at one of the older men.

“Shut up and keep walking. And don’t drop them—these clothes are expensive!”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Zoro says, startling the large-eared boy into dropping his sack.

Zoro stares at the five figures, noting with unveiled contempt their flimsy weapons. One of them holds a gun, two others have swords strapped to their belts, and a fourth has a long bo stick on his back. The only one that might be troublesome is the guy with the gun, but Zoro can easily take care of all of them.

“You know, Perona will bitch me out if you get her clothes dirty,” Zoro growls. “So give it back.”

“S-sure,” one of the younger kids stutters, holding out his bag for Zoro to take.

He hides his surprise at their easy give, but doesn’t lower his defenses. Because of that, he doesn’t miss the movement from his right, and he’s able to bring Shusui up just in time to deflect the bullet aimed at him. It ricochets off the Haki-infused blade and hits the sand. Zoro slowly straightens up and stares at the culprit.

“That was a bad idea,” he growls. He can see in his eyes that the man agrees. He can smell their fear, thick and acrid in the air, and sighs. Stupid children, the bunch of them. “The only reason why your head is still on your shoulders is because blood is a bitch to clean. So drop the bags, and walk away.”

There’s no hesitation this time. The two younger kids drop their bags and they all run away. Zoro sighs when he sees that one of the sacks opened and a few of Perona’s dresses spilled out, but dirty isn’t that hard to clean.

By the time he gets back to the shop, Perona is red-faced and a second away from pulling the temper-tantrum of the year.

“Where the hell were you?” she screams. “They’re about to close the shop!”

Zoro blocks a couple of her ghosts, though the last large one does give him chills. “What, and they don’t open tomorrow? C’mon, stop acting like such a child.”

She screams again and stomps her foot. “Y-you….you’re such….aargh! Fine!”

Zoro rolls her eyes and follows her stomping figure. Really, he’s so fucking glad Chopper is as well-behaved as he is. Yeah, the boy pulled the occasional temper-tantrum now and then, but they were never as bad as Perona. The worst Chopper ever did was slam the door close, and he apologized about it the next morning. He has such a good child, he never really appreciated it so much before.

“Oh…look at this!” Perona exclaims happily, forgetting about her anger as she stops in front of a magazine stand to show him one of those fashion magazines she likes looking at. She’s completely obsessed with ‘cute’ clothes, and Zoro is suddenly very glad that she will never find out what almost happened to hers. “Buy me this!”
“Alright,” Zoro gives in easily, knowing it is best not to argue. Not if he wants to prevent a headache. He stops as something familiar catches his eyes, and moves a couple of newspapers away.

His eyes fall on a picture of Sanji. He’s the main article in the food magazine in his hands, his picture taking center stage in the cover. He’s dressed in that black suit that Zoro secretly loves, the one that follows the line of his body and accentuates every single perfect thing about him—from the broad line of his shoulders, to the slight curve of his ass, down to the unbelievable length of his amazing legs.

“How’s that?” Perona asks, looking at the article over his shoulder.

“Sanji,” Zoro answers.

“That’s Sanji? I…did not imagine him like that at all,” Perona says honestly.

Zoro frowns at her. “What did you imagine?”

“I don’t know…some bulging brute that speaks three word sentences? I did not expect for you, Mr. Stoic, to be in love with someone this refined-looking.”

“Yeah, well, you were wrong,” Zoro snaps. “He’s a chef, and just because he looks like this, it doesn’t mean he’s not strong. I could never beat him in a fight back when we were together.”

He grins and imagines sparring the cook now. He’s confident he can make Sanji use his real strength now. Maybe, Zoro is already strong enough to beat him. He’s never faced off a Sanji that’s fighting seriously, so he’s not too sure about that.

Perona snatches the magazine from his hand, and Zoro pays the owner for the two magazines. He follows after her as she floats off, knowing she’ll give the magazine back as soon as she done reading it.

“Oh my…he won a Lvneel Star!”

“A what?” Zoro asks, confused.

“The Lvneel Stars are awarded by the Lvneel Kingdom of North Blue,” Perona explains. “They’re like…the highest praise a restaurant can receive. The more stars you get, the better your restaurant is, see? You can only get five, though I think no restaurant has gotten five in like, fifteen years or something. Rosewood on Dressrosa has three stars, I think, and that’s one of the best restaurants in the Red Line.”

“And Sanji got one of those?” Zoro asks, feeling the slight warmth of pride in his chest.

“Yeah. And…damn, he also won Rising Star Chef of the Year and Best New Restaurant in the Banban Foundation Awards. Winning these…Zoro, he must be a really amazing cook.”

“He is,” Zoro says softly. He can already imagine how happy Sanji will be when he hears about this, if he hasn’t already. He can picture the wide, goofy smile that makes him look like a little kid. He can almost hear his laughter, bright and happy.

His heart aches at the thought, but it strengthens his determination. He wants to be back with Sanji…so he needs to gear up and put double the effort into his training. One more year….he will give himself one more year to learn everything he can from Mihawk and return to Sanji. It will take more than one year to defeat Mihawk, but Zoro has to learn on his own as well if he wants to claim his victory.
He grins as his resolve forms: one more year, and he’ll get to see Sanji again.

Sanji formally asks Emma to be his girlfriend on her birthday, May 02. Two weeks later, he gets the news that Lvneel has awarded him with a star and that he has won two out of his three nominations. Then, on the last week of May, Chopper arrives.

The others want to celebrate the Lvneel Star, but Sanji convinces them to wait until Chopper arrives, since he wants to celebrate the honor with him. He has yet to tell Emma about Chopper, and he finds himself dreading the conversation a little bit. After all, what is he supposed to say? Oh right, Emma, meet Chopper, my ex’s son.

It’s not exactly the easiest thing to explain.

When Chopper arrives—alone, since both Usopp and Sanji decided that he’s old enough to travel the Sea Train by himself (not that Sanji didn’t have people watching over him)—he immediately starts talking about his studies.

“I’ll be able to graduate next year!” Chopper exclaims happily. “Which means I need to start looking into med schools. Did you know, Law went to Flevance Medical School? That’s the best in the world!”

“Well, you don’t have to go to the very best to be a good doctor, Chopper,” Sanji reminds him. “After all, Raftel has a medical school as well. And if you enroll, you’ll be able to live with me again.”

“Really?! I’ll have to check it out!”

Sanji smiles and grabs Chopper hand as they cross the bridge into Hilltop from Little World. He might not be with Zoro anymore, but Sanji still loves Chopper. He considers the little boy his friend—and secretly, his own son—so he would be very happy if Chopper came to live with him.

“Are we going to your restaurant, Sanji?” Chopper asks after they pass Ridgeway.

“Yes. We have a little party to get to,” Sanji explains. “You’ll get to see Nami and Vivi—and do you remember that musician I told you about?”

“The one that ate the Revival Fruit?”

“Yup. He’ll be there, too.”

“Wow! Do you think he’ll tell me about his Fruit? I read about it on the book Dad got for me, but to see its effect on a real person...! Ooh, that would be amazing!”

“I’m sure if you asked him nicely, he’ll tell you.”

Since the restaurant is now closed on Sundays, the only people waiting for them are Sanji’s employees and friends. Chopper immediately demands to be introduced to Brook, and even though he’s a bit frightened at first, he quickly warms up to the skeleton.

Sanji takes the time to go to the kitchen, where he finds Vivi and Emma talking quietly.

“Oh, hey, babe,” Emma greets, giving him a small kiss on the cheek. “We were just talking about you.”
“Nothing bad, I hope.”

“Nothing bad,” Vivi assures him with a smile. “Emma was just telling me that you got offered an invitation to be the guest judge on one of those cooking competitions they have in North Blue all the time.”

“Ahh yes. I already declined.”


“Well, it takes almost three weeks to sail to North Blue, not to mention another two weeks of the actual show…that would be two months wasted,” Sanji shrugs.

“Ahh, I guess we didn’t think of that,” Vivi says thoughtfully.

“Y-yes…thought it was a rather attractive offer,” Emma sighs. “Well, I guess other opportunities will come your way. Who knows, maybe you’ll win another Star next year.”

“Oh, if the fates followed your words,” Sanji says happily.

“Sanji, we’re almost done with the meal. Help us bring it out?” Adelle asks him, catching his attention.

“Of course, ma belle!” Sanji exclaims.

Sanji helps the other cooks bring out the feast they have prepared. Outside, the others have put together all of the tables in the Vanishing Floor. Sanji sees Chopper seated with Brook and Nami and he makes a beeline for them, Emma close in tow.

“Chopper, I want you to meet someone,” Sanji says, hoping his voice doesn’t betray his nerves. He can see Nami giving him a sympathetic look, but his eyes stay on Chopper. “This is Emma.”

“Hi, Emma!” Chopper exclaims happily, smiling at Sanji’s girlfriend.

“Hello,” Emma answers, giving Sanji a confused look. “Chopper, is it?”

“Yes,” Chopper grins.

“Chopper is…a dear friend of mine,” Sanji says, grimacing when the words come out awkward. “Chopper, Emma is my girlfriend.”

Chopper’s eyes widen, and he looks between Sanji and Emma with a small frown. “Girlfriend?”

“Yes. Of three weeks now.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Chopper,” Emma pipes in, smiling widely. “I hope we’ll be great friends, too!”

“Ah…y-yes. Sure!” Chopper says, fake enthusiasm obvious. “B-Brook—how long did it take you to find your body again?”

Sanji knows a clear dismissal when he hears one. He sighs and takes the seat next to Chopper. Nami meets his eye and shrugs, offering a weak smile.

“How old is he?” Emma whispers in his ear, glancing at Chopper.
“He’s nine,” Sanji answers.

“And he’s your friend? Where are his parents?”

“Ah…Chopper’s mom died when he was young, and his dad isn’t around,” Sanji answers vaguely. “He lives in East Blue with Usopp—you know him.”

“Long-nosed fellow?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh. Well, it’s very nice of you to be friends with him,” Emma says sweetly. “Not many men would call a child their friend.”

“I’ve known Chopper for two years now…he’s very dear to me,” Sanji answers honestly.

Despite Emma’s easy acceptance, it is soon made clear that Chopper doesn’t feel the same way towards her. Sanji has never thought Chopper to be a spoiled child, but it is clear that the young boy knows exactly how to act like one. He refuses to give Emma and Sanji any private time, he is short and curt with the other woman, and absolutely turns down any olive branch Emma extends. Sanji has always thought that Chopper and Zoro have contradicting personalities, but as the weeks go on, it is soon proven that Chopper knows exactly how to act like his father.

He’s rude. He’s ill-mannered. He becomes lazy and stubborn, and contradicts Sanji at every step of the way.

Emma, however, is a sweetheart about it.

“He’s probably jealous,” she says diplomatically. It’s late-June already, and this is the first time Sanji has gotten any private time with her. Nami somehow convinced Chopper to stay with her and Vivi for the night. Sanji doesn’t even want to start imagining how much he owns the red-head now. “He probably sees you as a father figures and doesn’t want to share you. I’ve dated a guy with children before, you know.”

“But Chopper has always been such a sweet child,” Sanji sighs. “I didn’t think he would react like this.” But he had expected it. He’s pretty sure Emma is right—but it isn’t because Chopper thinks of Sanji as a father. He probably thinks that Sanji is betraying Zoro or something like that. He quickly quiets the small part of himself that agrees with Chopper.

He isn’t betraying Zoro. Zoro broke things off. Sanji is in his complete right to date Emma.

He quickly turns to face Emma and kisses her deeply, focusing on the feel of her soft lips and the slightly strange taste of her lipstick. His fingers curl over small hips, the soft flesh giving in easily to the strength of his grip. He presses close to her and revels in the feeling of her supple breasts against his chest.

He quiets down the voice that screams wrong! and deepens the kiss, pushing her back to lay on the sofa. This is right. It has to be.

He’s slightly late to work the next morning, but only because Emma insisted on morning sex. He had to stop at his place to shower and change into a clean suit, so he’s almost an hour late to work. The good thing is that Carmen has a key to the door as well, so everyone is working hard by the time he arrives. Nami lets him know that Chopper is in his office, but Sanji doesn’t have much time to go check on the boy since the kitchen is stacked with back-to-back orders that need to be taken care of.
He either needs to hire more cooks, or tell Keimi to put more time between reservations. He does have a couple of tables that are always free for walk-ins, but they’re closer to the waiter’s area since nobody likes a place without a view.

It takes a couple of hours for orders to slow down, and Sanji finally gets the chance to go check on Chopper. He finds the nine-year-old in Nami’s office, browsing the Internet. He gives no sign that he heard Sanji come in, but there’s no way he didn’t.

Sanji sighs and leans against the door. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Chopper answers curtly, still not looking his way.

“You know, you can’t keep acting like this,” Sanji says. “You’re being childish.”

“I’m a child, what’s your excuse?”

Sanji scowls. “That’s enough, Chopper. I understand it’s a bit difficult to see me and Emma together, but I—.”

“You what? You love her?” Chopper snaps mockingly. “Well, good for you! Marry her and have a bunch of kids for all I care!” Chopper jumps off the chair and pushes past Sanji, shrugging off the hand Sanji puts out. “I’m going back with Usopp today and you won’t have to worry about me anymore! And you know what? I’ll be going to Flevance, so you can shove your crappy invitation!” he yells.

“Chopper!” Sanji snaps, grabbing Chopper’s shoulder to keep him from stomping out. A couple of the cooks look up in surprise but Sanji ignores them. “Don’t be ridiculous! You’re not going to Flevance, and you’re not going back yet! What would your father say if he saw you acting like this?”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” Chopper shouts, pushing him off. “You’re not my father, so you have no say in what I do anymore!”

“Chopper… Chopper! Roronoa Anthony!” Sanji shouts after him, but Chopper only slams the back door close. Sanji curses and follows him, taking out a cigarette and lighting it before he pushes the door open.

He’s surprised to see Chopper still in the back alley, facing the tiny sliver of All Blue that can be seen. Sanji stops and takes notes of the shaking shoulders and bowed head.

“I…I miss my Dad,” Chopper whispers, his voice brittle.

The fight leaves him and Sanji is hit with a sudden wave of longing. “Chopper…”

“I want him back,” Chopper cries, looking back at him with tears in his eyes.

And suddenly, everything falls into place and Sanji understands.

He wants Zoro back. He doesn’t need him, he’s grown too much for that. The loves that he feels for Zoro now isn’t the same love he felt before. Because before, Sanji depended too much on the affection Zoro gave him. Before Zoro, Sanji didn’t have friends, didn’t have ambition, he didn’t have hope. His whole life was just a drone of empty feelings and constant existence.

But things are different now. Now, Sanji has friends. He has Robin and her family, Nami and Vivi, Usopp and Luffy… everyone. Sanji has nakama. He has his dream to work for, he has passion and he has hope for his restaurant, he has a goal to look forward to, he has the ambition of making In
Fine a five Lvneel Star restaurant.

Sanji is happy, he really is, and he doesn’t need Zoro for that anymore. He doesn’t need the man anymore. He doesn’t *need* anyone.

But he *wants* him. He wants to kiss him and touch him. He wants to share all of his new dreams with the other man. He wants to see him. He wants to caress his hair. He wants to hear his voice. He wants to fall asleep next to him again. He wants passion and he wants anger and he wants to feel the adrenaline running through his veins every time he fights Zoro. He wants to see white with pleasure again, he wants to kiss soft lips and taste steel and alcohol. He wants to open his eyes and look into dark green eyes.

He loves Zoro with all of his heart and soul and it doesn’t matter if Zoro doesn’t feel the same way. Sanji still wants him.

“I want him back, too,” Sanji finally answers and Chopper looks at him in surprise.

“But…what about Emma?”

“That’s…a mistake,” Sanji admits and sighs. He runs a hand through his hair and stares out into All Blue. “I don’t know what I’m doing with her.”

Chopper wipes his tears and grabs his hand. “I’m sorry, Sanji,” Chopper whispers and Sanji squeezes his hand. “I just…I want things to go back to how they used to be.”

“They can’t, Chopper,” Sanji says softly. “But that isn’t such a bad thing.”

Chopper nods and sighs. “We have to be strong. Dad is out there getting stronger and we have to show him that we’re strong, too. So strong that he’ll never have to leave again.”

Like this, with his shoulders squared and his head held high, Sanji can almost imagine that Zoro is back with him. Chopper’s eyes, despite their color, are so much like Zoro’s that it hurts. Chopper may look mostly like his mother, but Sanji can see traces of the green-haired man in his features—the shape of his nose, the deep-set eyes, the curve of his lower lip—and in his personality.

He sighs and places a comforting hand on Chopper’s shoulder.

July marks the first year for Zoro. Twelve months of constant fighting, twelve months of working himself to the bone, twelve months of sweating blood and dreaming blades.

They face off again, and this time, Zoro is determined to draw blood.

He is the first to attack. Already, Mihawk recognizes Zoro’s improvement, for he draws Yoru without hesitation, immediately blocking the slash from Shusui’s blade. Zoro works him quickly, knowing that any break, any slight hesitation, will cost him his life. They have moved the fight far away from the castle, but the trees around them fall in heaps as their blades sing in the air.

It’s not fancy, it’s not long. Zoro isn’t aiming to win, he’s aiming to kill. He keeps Mihawk in the defensive at all times, ignoring his burning lungs and his screaming muscles. The grip on his swords is tight despite the blood that slips between his fingers. If Wado were of lesser quality, Zoro would worry that his teeth would sink through the hilt.

His blades cry when they clash against Yoru, but Haki keeps them from breaking—that, and their
own natural strength. Kitetsu is singing with joy, eager to taste blood—either from Mihawk or Zoro, it doesn’t care. Shusui seems eager to prove her worth, and when her blade pierces the hard flesh of Mihawk’s inner thigh, she quivers. Wado is the only that stays as composed as Zoro, true and strong despite the fact that most of Mihawk’s attacks are aimed at it. Zoro has trained his jaw, he probably can bite through rock at this time, but that still doesn’t keep the grip of his jaw from being weaker than the grip of his hands.

No matter. Zoro will not be disarmed again.

His grip slackens when Yoru pierces where shoulder meets chest, but Kitetsu doesn’t fall. Zoro is able to pull back in time, saving his limb. Mihawk doesn’t give him time to breathe, but it doesn’t matter. Zoro is already in the defensive. He evades a slash that cuts through the island, and sends back his own. He grins when he sees part of Mihawk’s coat fall to the floor.

The other man is breathing heavily as well, and he throws his hat away when the sweat running down his face blocks his eyesight, causing him to fall prey to Zoro’s flying strike.

He’s still not bleeding as heavily as Zoro is, but at least now Zoro can say he has scarred the great swordsman.

“You have grown stronger,” Mihawk praises in a short moment of quiet. “But you will not defeat me today.”

Zoro doesn’t reply, but instead rushes forward. He meets Mihawk head on, and feels a shock run through his body as he slams against the other man. The cry of steel is loud and Mihawk pulls away to attack again. Zoro blocks again, moving a step back as the strength of Mihawk’s thrusts pushes him.

Then, he sees it. An opening—small, but an opening nonetheless. His teeth gnash on Wado, and his fingers turn white as his grip tightens. Mihawk twists his body to attack again, and Zoro strikes forward—quick and efficient.

“Yes!” The word escapes his lips as soon as he feels flesh give under Kitetsu, and then—pain. A flash of black steel, a jarring sound, and pain.

Zoro stumbles back as his vision darkens. He feels something wet running down his face, and his left side is growing numb. He tastes copper in the back of his throat and the pain leaves him stunned for just a second. Then, his whole body shudders and twists, barely avoiding the strike that would have cut him in half—again. He raises his arms and stops the next attack, his whole body protesting at the abuse—but he grits his teeth and pushes forward, ignoring the pain.

“We’re done.”

The words are spoken softly, and then the pressure disappears.

“Oh my—what did you do!?” Perona screams, but Zoro can’t see her. He’s losing a lot of blood, and when he touches his face to check on his wound, it comes back drenched.

“Perona, boil water. Roronoa, this is going to hurt.”

“Wha—?”

Before he can speak the question, something hard slams against his right temple, and he loses consciousness instantly.
When he wakes up again, it’s dark. He is in his room, but something seems different. He sits up gingerly and scowls when he sees the heavy bandages wrapped around his shoulder and leg. He’s pretty sure Mihawk did this, since neither him nor Zoro feel comfortable with Perona wrapping up injuries that are close to…well, his dick. He touches the bandages on right thigh, knowing already that it will take a while for him to walk without a limp. Maybe a week, two at the most.

“It’s lucky we had extra blood.”

Zoro jumps at the words and turns to stare at Perona—who he didn’t see at all. He frowns when he notices how different his room looks again, and that’s when he realizes that he has bandages wrapped around the left side of his face. He touches them gingerly, frowning when a stab of pain shoots down his neck.

“You didn’t lose the eye,” Perona says. “But you did lose your sight. You were losing too much blood, so we had to stitch your lid close.”

Zoro nods. He doesn’t care. Injuries like this, they are superficial. It might take him a while to get used to seeing with only one eye, but it won’t push him back.

“And your father?” he asks, catching Perona by surprise.

“What about him?”

“How are his injuries?”

The frown doesn’t leave her face. “They’re okay, I guess? I mean, the worst one is the one on his thigh, but it’s not like he can’t walk—why are you grinning?”

“When was the last time your father came home injured?” Zoro asks her, his grin widening.

“I…don’t remember,” Peron shrugs. “Ten years ago? Stop smiling! You just lost half your sight!”

Zoro ignores her and flops back on the bed, laughing loudly. He’s improving. He’s halfway there. He’s so much closer to his dream now, he can almost taste it.

It’s not fair for Emma for Sanji to be with her. He’s not looking for a long-lasting relationship, he was just looking for something to distract him. As soon as he realizes it, he breaks up with her.

The first time he breaks up with a woman first.

She seems confused as to why he would leave her, but Sanji doesn’t explain things to her. He’s being a jerk, he knows, but it’s simply better to just break things off with her. He’s completely content working in In Fine all day. He loves cooking, why shouldn’t he spend his days doing what he loves?

Nami doesn’t try to change his mind anymore.

Chopper leaves on the first week of August, two days after Sanji break things off with Emma. Chopper still apologizes daily for the way he acted with Emma, but Sanji assures him that he doesn’t have to worry about anything. Honestly, there’s some part of him that feels happy that Chopper felt jealous of him. It’s unbelievably petty, but it feels good to know that Chopper loves him to that extent.
When October comes, Sanji leaves Carmen in charge and leaves for East Blue. Both Koala and Robin are celebrating their babies’ first birthday, and since there’s only two weeks difference between the two, they decide to have them on the same day.

Alexia is an excitable little girl. She’s happy and bright and she doesn’t shy round strangers. She brings up her hands for Sanji to pick her up as soon as he smiles at her and she enjoys playing with his hair for a little bit before Franky catches her attention. She has already taken her tentative first steps, and her favorite word has become ‘yes!’; but she still prefers to crawl and to show her intention by pointing at things.

The twins are two weeks behind her, but they’re both bigger than her physically. Tom is the quiet, thoughtful one. He has yet to speak a word, only ever doing slight sounds, but the doctors have assured Franky and Robin that there is nothing wrong with his vocal cords. He doesn’t cry too much, only doing so when he wants to get changed or is hungry.

He already stopped breast-feeding, unlike Oliver, and goes to bed with a bottle of whole milk. He learned how to walk at eleven months, well before Oliver and even Alexia, but he prefers to stay seated and ask for things by making grabbing motions to whichever adult is closes to him. He doesn’t smile often, nor is he as easy to warm up with strangers, but it’s not like he has an aversion to them. It’s more like he studies people before deciding whether he likes them or not. He reminds Sanji eerily of Robin, down to the too-seeing eyes.

Oliver it’s not his brother’s complete opposite, but he does seem to be farther along. He speaks more than Alexia and Tom, since his vocabulary already includes ‘mama’, ‘dada’, and ‘no’. He doesn’t know how to walk as well as Tom, but he spends more time trying to get on his feet than Alexia. He doesn’t seem to enjoy crawling, so when he doesn’t want to try and walk, he asks to be in somebody’s arms by crying until someone picks him up. He’s much more vocal than his brother, often making sounds for no apparent reason, and he’s a messier eater. He seems to be on that stage where he explores the world through his mouth, and Sanji experiences a slight moment of disgust when little Oliver grabs his hair and puts it in his mouth. His likes biting, too, which Sanji unfortunately discovers when he tries giving him some pudding, but he’s a very cheerful little boy.

Sanji also gets to meet Savanah, Bonney’s beautiful two-month old baby girl. Her hair is the same beautiful pink as her mother’s, but her eyes are the same reddish brown as Kid’s. She, surprisingly, is a quiet baby. She spends most of her time sleeping or simply staring at her surroundings with wide, bright eyes. She only cries when she’s really hungry or when her dirty diaper becomes uncomfortable. Sanji is not surprised at all when he hears that Kid is the one changes her diapers all the time. He always knew the man was putty in Bonney’s hands, despite his harsh and cocky attitude.

Sanji decides to stay in East Blue for the full month, since it gives him more time to enjoy with his friends, and because of it, he’s in Usopp’s house when Ace calls them to let them know Luffy came back.

As soon as Luffy sees Sanji, he wraps him up in a tight hug and begs for food.

“I missed you, too, Luffy,” Sanji says wryly. “But get the fuck off me.”

“Are you gonna cook me meat?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sanji says and only then does Luffy let go of him. He really did miss the straw-hat, so Sanji goes all out and prepares a Sea King feast—the only thing that can distract Luffy away from Alexia.
“Ah, so good!” he exclaims as he finishes his first plate.

“Ugh, I forgot how much you eat,” Law complains. “Close your mouth, Luffy.” He and Luffy are back together again, though they really never broke up. Unlike Zoro, Luffy made it very clear to Law that he was only going away for a little while before he would come back to be with his friends and his boyfriend. Besides, theirs is not a sexual relationship and they exchanged letters often during Luffy's absence.

“But Sanji’s food is so good~!”

“Thanks, Luffy. But listen to Law.”

“So, little bro, what did you do this past year?” Ace asks curiously.

“Ooh, I went on so many adventures!” Luffy exclaims happily. “I visited Jinbei in Fishmen Island, and I ate with King Neptune! Then I went to Elbaf—Ace, their feasts were gigantic! And they gave me a ship to visit Skypiea, where I met Conis’ family. They were really happy to hear about her.”

“Did you really go to Elbaf, Luffy?” Usopp asks excitedly. “With the giants?”

“Yes! And they were super nice!” Luffy grins. “I ate so much…well, I ate more with Hancock, but because she was so nice and gave me all the food that I wanted. She’s such a good person.”

“Yeah, only to you,” Nami snorts.

“Oh, oh! And guess what? I met a talking skeleton!”

Sanji looks at Luffy, surprised. “A talking skeleton?”

“Yes! Some mean guy trapped him by stealing his shadow, so he couldn’t go out into the light. But I beat up Moriah and saved him! He had a huge afro and everything!”

“Oh my god, that’s Brook!” Vivi exclaims. “You met Brook!”

“Eh? You know him, Vivi?” Luffy asks curiously.

“He works with me,” Sanji explains. “He’s my musician.”

“Really? So did he tell you about Zoro?”

“My Dad?” Chopper exclaims before Sanji can say a word. “You saw my Dad?”

“Sure thing!” Luffy grins. “He was with a strange ghost girl! You should’ve seen him, he was so strong! He fought one of the zombies, the one that had Brook’s soul, and beat him easily! But I didn’t get to talk to him that long because the girl kept yelling at him to go.”

“A girl?” Sanji asks hesitantly.

“Aha. She was a ghost! I asked her if she poopd and she hit me!”

“Idiot, of course she did!” Sanji shouts, hitting him in the back of the head. “You don’t ask ladies such crude questions.”

“Eh, Sanji, you sound just like her!”

“Well, the world truly is a small place,” Robin says pleasantly, hiding a small smile behind her hand.
“At least now we know Mihawk did not kill Zoro and dump his body in the ocean.”

“Aah, Robin, don’t be so morbid!” Usopp exclaims, shivering.

“Ooh, Usopp! Did I tell you about the dinosaurs I saw in Little Garden?”

Sanji drowns out the voice of Luffy. Despite the morbidity of Robin’s words, Sanji is glad to know Mihawk really did not kill Zoro. He hasn’t heard anything about the other man since Chopper’s birthday, so he’s really glad to know that he’s fine.

He allows himself a small smile as he thinks back to Luffy’s words. So Zoro is strong now, huh? He remembers watching Zoro training, remembers the way sweat ran down his tanned back, the way his muscles twisted and flexed, straining as the other man lifted ridiculously heavy weights. He feels heat pool on his lower regions and licks his lips. He really wants to feel how strong Zoro is now.
Chapter Notes

So here it is! The final chapter of the second installment of It's the Little Things. I have to say, I thoroughly enjoyed writing this, even though Sanji and Zoro never interact with each other. But it's nice to see them grow outside of each other...perhaps Sanji more than Zoro.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It doesn’t take long for Zoro to get used to one eye. Mihawk had already hammered the importance of not only using his sight for fighting into him. And it is with great happiness that Zoro takes his first drop of alcohol on October. He has successfully been able to deflect any attack from Perona, and Mihawk has rewarded him with the key to the wine cellar.

He’s halfway done with his third bottle when Mihawk tells him the news.

“A mission?” Zoro asks curiously.

“Yes. Where do you think my money comes from?”

Zoro shrugs. He honestly had never thought about it. He never thought Mihawk would be associated with the Marines, much less work for them. “So you do the odd job for the Marines and they pay you?”

“That’s correct. There is an uninhabited island a few weeks from here that they want to use as a base. Unfortunately, all of the scouts they have sent have not come back, making them believe that there is something dangerous living there.”

“So you want me to go check it out?”

“It is time to earn your keep,” Mihawk shrugs.

“Alright, fine,” Zoro says easily. He doesn’t really care either way, and Mihawk is kind of right—Zoro has been living off of Mihawk for a year and a half now.

“You leave tomorrow morning. Perona has asked to go with you.”

Zoro rolls his eyes but knows better than to argue. Mihawk likes to pretend like he’s a strict father, but Zoro knows Perona has him wrapped around her little finger.

Though, Zoro has to admit that he doesn’t mind Perona anymore. Yeah, she’s still a little annoying, but she’s a good girl. She listens intently the few times he talks about Sanji and Chopper, and she’s always there to patch him up when he gets really injured.

It takes three weeks to get to the island Mihawk talked about. It is a strange place, half fire, half-ice, but that in itself isn’t the worst of it.

The place is populated by strange creatures, half-animal, half-human. They, however, are not dangerous. In fact, they greet Zoro and Perona by the shore and offer them food.
When Zoro explains to them that the Marines want to use their island as a base, they tell them what they told the other scouts.

“This island is guarded by a dragon,” their leader, a large man that goes by the name of Brownbeard, explains. “We would love nothing more than to get attention from the Marines, but the dragon kills anyone who steps on the fire side.”

“A dragon? Wait, are those things even real?” Perona gasps.

“He is man-made, an old relic from a crazy scientist, but nonetheless fearsome.”

Zoro grins widely. “How strong is he?”

“Unbelievably strong,” one of the other creatures replies. “He is three times the side of Captain Brownbeard! He breathes fire from his mouth and his scales are as strong as iron. No man can defeat a creature like that.”

“Challenge fucking accepted,” Zoro grins, getting to his feet.

“Are you crazy?” Peron yells. “They just told you it was suicide.”

“Hey, they won’t pay your father unless the Marines get this island,” Zoro says. “Besides, how hard can it be? I’ll just cut it up.”

“You’re a moron!”

Despite her protests, she follows him in her ghost form, complaining loudly about the heat. Zoro hates the heat as well, but he keeps quiet and simply sheds most of his clothes.

It’s not hard to find the dragon. After all, the very ground shakes when it walks, and its roars are loud enough that Zoro can hear them from miles away. Still, it’s one thing to be told about a dragon, and a whole other thing to actually see one.

“Holy shit,” Zoro gapes, staring at the huge monstrosity in front of him. The fucking think is huge, Zoro barely the size of one of its fangs. It’s beautiful, in a twisted sort of way, with bright blue scales that turn white closer to the tip of its tail and wings. Its black, beady eye stares at Zoro, and he cannot read anything but blood-thirst and anger from it.

“We’re so dead,” Perona whispers, catching the dragon’s attention. It snarls, a terrible sound that grates at the ears, and snaps its huge jaw at her. “Zoro!” she screams, fleeing from it. “Do something, you stupid grass-head!”

“Oh, now you want me to fight it,” Zoro grumbles.

“Zoro!!”

Zoro moves quickly, jumping in the air as he draws Shusui in a wide arc. The strike hits the dragon in the neck and the creature screams as the force of it snaps his head back, but his scales are too strong.

“Zoro, behind you!”

Shit. He doesn’t have time to move before something hard and heavy hits him in the back and sends him crashing into one of the large rocks. He hears Perona scream again and quickly pushes off the large rocks that fell on top of him just in time to see the dragon open its mouth wide. He can see blue
and yellow flames licking at its fangs, saliva coating his lips and neck as a form of insulation. Its whole body is trembling and the very air around them seems to thicken and boil as the creature opens its mouth. The fire blasts out from the dragon’s mouth and Zoro only gets the chance to jump out of the way before it hits the rock he crashes into. The heat of it sears his skin and melts the hard rock, leaving nothing behind but boiling lava.

“Fuck,” he curses, wincing when his back complains at a particular movement. It hurts a hundred times worse than the time he fell asleep at the beach without sunscreen.

“Zoro, it’s coming after me!” Perona screams.

“You’re a ghost, it can’t touch you!” Zoro yells. “Distract it!”

“Eh!?”

Zoro unsheathes Wado and Kitetsu, knowing one sword won’t be enough to defeat this creature. Perona manages to keep it distracted long enough for Zoro to get close, but the creature senses him before he can strike its neck again, and turns with a loud roar. Zoro’s blades hit its razor sharp jaws and steel sings as they strain against the hardened teeth. He grunts with exertion as he tries to push the dragon back, but the dam thing is stronger than him and just as durable.

“It’s gonna shoot fire again!” Perona yells, but Zoro can already feel the heat lapping at him.

He moves just in time to avoid a direct hit, landing painfully on the ground and twisting away. He wipes the sweat of his forehead and grunts as he gets back on his feet. He sees Perona’s ghosts attach themselves to the length of the dragon, but their explosive power is only enough to disorient it.

“Get its wings!” Zoro shouts when he sees the twin appendages move. “We’re dead if it goes airborne!”

“Got it!” Perona says and Zoro sees her ghosts once again, this time on its wings. “If I want to do any real damage, I have to make them bigger, but it will take time. I can take out his wings for sure, though!”

“Just make sure you knock it down!” Zoro yells. He sees the dragon turn its head towards Perona and shake his wings, but her ghosts stay attached. It opens its huge mouth again, but Zoro strikes first. He jumps on top of one of the larger rocks, using his momentum to carry him forward into the dragon’s path, and twists in the air. The cyclone of blades hit the beast in its snout and it turns its head in pain, swallowing down his flames. Zoro twists in the air again and flicks Shusui in his grip. He only has one chance.

“Now!” Perona yells as the first ghost explodes. Zoro feels the heat and force of it in his back. He grips Shusui tightly and swings in a wide arc, directly attacking the soft underside of the beast’s neck.

The horrendous scream gets cut short as Zoro’s blade pierces its hide. Zoro watches in satisfaction as the arc of his blow cuts through flesh and bone until the creature is completely decapitated. Perona’s ghosts have destroyed its wings and when it hits the ground, the entire island shakes.

“Oh my god,” Perona mumbles. “We killed it.”

Zoro grins and wipes Shusui on the leg of his pants. “I told you we could.”

“You are such an arrogant dick.”
Zoro laughs. “Sorry if my self-confidence offends you. But tell me, you think we can eat this thing? I’m starved.”

Perona frowns thoughtfully, then shrugs. “I bet it tastes like chicken.”

Chopper spends Christmas with him again, and Chopper gives him the news that he will attend Raftel Medical School after his graduation in May.

“I want to stay with you,” is his only reason. Sanji can’t help himself from hugging the newly turned ten-year-old tightly.

When January comes, Chopper leaves but Robin arrives with news that she’s thinking about moving to Raftel.

“It’s much quieter here,” she explains, handing Tom his rattle. “People are kinder and the World Government doesn’t butt in too much. I think I want my children to grow up in here. We’re trying to see if the World Government will grant us permission.”

“I’m sure they will,” Nami says quickly. “Franky is the vice-president of Galley-La, so I don’t think they have any reason to deny you.”

“That’s what I think as well,” Franky says, absentmindedly shaking the toy keys in front of Oliver to distract him. “Galley-La does have a few contracts in here, so it might not be such a bad idea.

“That’s right. Besides, it helps if people already living in Raftel vouch for you,” Vivi adds. “Both Sanji and I are prominent names in the city.”

“I will vouch for you always,” Sanji assures her. “I would love nothing more than to have you move here with us!”

“Thank you, Sanji.” Robin smiles. “And oh, I come with more great news! Usopp and Kaya are getting married!”

“What!?”

“Oh my god!” Vivi exclaims happily. “I’m so happy for her!”

“Shit, I never thought Usopp would actually do it!” Nami grins.

“Yeah, it was super!” Franky says. “He did it on New Year’s. It was super romantic!”

“When is the wedding?” Sanji asks curiously.

“Well, Kaya is thinking about opening a new school, which takes a lot of planning. I think they haven’t set a date yet, but it’ll probably be towards the end of this year.”

Tom makes a short noise, kind of like blowing a raspberry, and Oliver giggles.

“Ooh, do you agree, Tommy?” Robin coos. “An autumn wedding would be lovely, wouldn’t it?”

Oliver makes a happy noise and claps his hands towards Robin’s face. A mostly incomprehensible drabble leaves his mouth and Tom only nods sagely.

Sanji burst out laughing at the strangely serious face on Tom’s face. “I’m sorry,” he apologizes. “I
think Tommy is the only one who can understand Oliver.” To his utter surprise, Tom raises his arms and makes grabby motions towards Sanji.

“I think he wants you to pick him up,” Vivi smiles.

“Come here, big fellow,” Sanji says, taking Tom from Robin and sitting him on his lap. “You want to be with your godfather? It’s because I’m cool, right?”

Tom looks up at him, then promptly proceeds to grab one of the buttons of his jacket and pop it in his mouth.

Nami giggles. “I think he only likes shiny stuff.”

“Tommy,” Sanji whines. “Not the Valentino coat.”

“Gyahh~”

“I think that means, *Valentino is extra tasty!*” Franky gushes. “Isn’t that right, Tommy!?”

Tom makes another unintelligible sound and Oliver decides that’s enough attention for his brother and claps his hands on Franky’s cheeks. Franky splutters and Tom starts crying.

Sanji sighs and smiles at the adorable sight. He really does like babies a lot.

Robin officially moves to Raftel a week after Sanji’s birthday. She buys a place in Little World and while helping her look for new home, Sanji starts wondering about buying his own place. It’s been almost two years since he moved to Raftel, and while he can easily afford rent, he doesn’t see the point of continuing to pay for a place that will never be his own.

Still, he has yet to find an open spot near the shore, and he really wants a house with an unobstructed view to All Blue.

There aren’t any empty houses near the shore, but Robin’s realtor helps him find an empty lot in Upper Mil near the cliff edge, facing All Blue. It gives him the perfect view, but the lot is kind of small. However, Franky convinces him to buy it, promising to build him the house of his dreams.

“You can be my first contract in here!” Franky exclaims. “And we work so well together—it’ll be even more super than your last place.”

Sanji thinks of a new home, built to his exact preferences. Something warm and comfy with a large kitchen. An comfortable room for Chopper with a built in office and plenty of room for his books. A traditional dojo for Zoro to train in.

It will be the perfect home.

Their final battle doesn’t last long. Zoro can’t say that they are equally matched, but it does take a full ten minutes before Mihawk draws blood. Perona watches from the safety of the castle, and the Humandrills have long ago learned not to come near them during these fights. Zoro wonders if they watch from the safety of their homes and try to copy their movements. It doesn’t matter if they do, Zoro passed them up a long time ago.

They both end gasping, bodies shaking with exhaustion. Mihawk has the upper hand. Zoro feels like
he can’t honestly take another step, but Mihawk stands with a firmer ground. However, they have paused in their long battle for a clear reason: they’re at a stalemate.

“It seems neither of us will come out of this unscathed,” Mihawk finally says.

“So it is a loss for the both of us,” Zoro replies. He finally drops out of his fighting stance and sheathes his swords. “Thank you,” he says simply, bowing to the other man.

“I cannot grow a tree with a seedless ground,” Mihawk answers. “Will you be able to continue to grow without me to water you?”

“It rains, does it not?” Zoro grins and to his surprise, Mihawk copies the expression. “April 16th…if you leave today, you will make it back to East Blue by the first week of June.”

“I thought it only took three…four weeks max,” Zoro frowns.

“With your sense of direction?”

“Oi!”

“Pack your things, Roronoa.”

Zoro smiles widely. “Okay.”

Perona is waiting for him in his room, her feet knocking a steady beat on the wardrobe were she’s seated. “I guess you’re leaving.”

“I have nothing more to learn from your father,” Zoro replies simply.

“Would you have said goodbye? If I weren’t here?”

“Probably not,” Zoro answers honestly.

Perona pouts and folds her hands. “I asked Papa if I could come with you…you know, to guide you.”

“I’m guessing he said no.”

“It’s not fair!” Perona exclaims suddenly. “He never lets me go anywhere! I want to meet Chopper and Sanji! Why can’t I come visit you?”

Zoro sighs and lets his few clothes fall inside his simple bag. He only has a couple shirts and a second pair of pants, but at least he has three pairs of underwear. He can always wash his clothes in the sea…and he can probably pack some soap as well.

“You’ll be turning eighteen soon, won’t you?” Zoro finally asks, looking at Perona.

“Yeah…on June.”

“I’ll be living in Raftel,” Zoro says. “If you want to come visit me, then I won’t turn you down. I am not your father.”

Perona rolls her eyes and flicks her nails. “You’re not cute at all.”

Zoro shrugs and ties a red sash around his waist to hold his three swords. “Too damn bad.”
“I’m gonna miss you, Zoro.”

“I…surprisingly, I will, too.”

Perona grins widely and folds her legs. She doesn’t say anything else, and that’s one of the things he’ll miss the most: her silence.

Chopper graduates on the last week of May with top honors. Sanji watches proudly as Chopper walks the large stage and receives his diploma from Dr. Kureha. Everyone—Bonney, Law, Luffy, Robin, Brook—absolutely everyone is present.

Except Zoro, of course.

They celebrate at Sabo’s house, since he has the largest home out of all of them.

“Ten years old with a master’s degree already,” Franky says, messing up Chopper’s hair. “I’m real proud of you, Chopper.”

“Bastard! Don’t think your compliments make me happy!”

Sanji smiles and switches Oliver to his right leg as Alexia paws at his other leg.

“Uppie!” the little girl says, holding her hands out for Sanji.

“Uppie? Well, then, come one,” Sanji says, picking her up easily. “And how’s your day, mon ange?”

“Pwetty!”

“Pretty? Yes, you are, darling!”

“No! Pwetty!” Oliver says and pulls on Sanji’s hair.

“Hey, ow. That hurts,” Sanji says, bumping his nose against Oliver’s forehead. The little boy giggles and pushes him away.

“So you’re going to be moving with Sanji?” Brook asks Chopper curiously.

“Yes! I already have everything packed up,” Chopper exclaims excitedly. “We’re moving tomorrow.”

“Ah. I’m sorry for prying, but you’re Sanji’s….nephew?”

“No, silly,” Chopper laughs. “Sanji and my father used to date!”

“Oh. And your father is the swordsman who won my shadow back, the green-haired fellow?”


Brook hums thoughtfully. “How little is the world….though I can see why you would date a man like that, Sanji. They say men of power attract each other, after all.”

“I have seriously never heard anyone say that,” Nami says flatly. “They went out together because they’re both huge, dorky idiots.”
“Nami-swan,” Sanji whines. “Zoro is the only dorky idiot.”

“And you, for some reason, found that attractive,” Nami says. “Which makes you double the idiot.”

“Hmm. I always thought everything started off as sexual tension,” Robin says thoughtfully. “Sanji did seem eager enough.”

“Robin!”

“Uhahaha, that’s so true!” Franky exclaims. “That’s why you didn’t flirt with Kalifa that day!”

“You’re an idiot,” Sanji snaps. “I didn’t flirt with her because I didn’t want to be sued for sexual harassment.”

“Nah, she never files them. The Marines don’t pay attention to her anymore.”

“Sanny!” Alexia says angrily, tired of being ignored. “Uppie!”

“You’re already uppie, darling,” Sanji says, looking down at her.

“Uppie!”

“She wants you to stand up and walk around with her,” Koala explains.

“Anything for my sweet angel!”

They don’t stay long in East Blue. They send off Chopper’s belongings ahead of time, so by the time they get home, all they have to do is pack. Since Sanji is using his guest room as a closet, he puts Chopper’s single bed in the room with his. His room is large enough that it isn’t too cramped, and all of Chopper’s clothes can go in Sanji’s closet.

It’s just a temporary setting, since Franky is starting construction on Sanji’s home in a couple of weeks. It took a while for the blueprints to be ready and for Sanji to agree on a layout, but he’s certain that once it’s done, it’ll be perfect.

He takes Chopper to Upper Mil to show him the empty lot that has already been closed off for construction.

“Franky said we can build on the cliff face,” Sanji says. “It should be done by October or November, so you’ll have to share a room with me for a while longer.”

“I don’t mind sharing a room with you, Sanji,” Chopper says.

“You need your privacy, Chopper. Especially once you start growing older,” Sanji insists. “You’re ten already... it won’t be long before you’re fifteen and want to bring a date home.”

Chopper blushes. “Nuh-huh. I’ll be too busy working!”

Sanji grins and pats his shoulder. “If that’s what you want. C’mon, let’s go grab something to eat.”

“Ooh, can you make me roast beef sandwiches?”

“Sure thing.”
In Fine is full, like always. Sanji sends Shuraiya out to fish when he notices that the aquarium is running low on fishes. In the back, the atmosphere is surprisingly laid back considering how full the dining room is, but all of his cooks have learned how to work quickly and efficiently, maximizing their time.

“Hi, Sanji,” Adelle greets. “We’re low on tuna.”

“I sent out your brother,” Sanji nods. “You can take a seat right there,” he adds to Chopper, nodding to a small barstool they keep by the wall in case someone needs a break.

“Hey, Chopper,” Carmen says to the young boy. “So I hear you graduated from college?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Chopper beams. “I’m going to Raftel Medical School in August!”

“Wow, that’s impressive!” Uriel, another one of his cooks, says. “How smart are you?”

“Chopper has a genius IQ,” Sanji says proudly, working on Chopper’s lunch. “He graduated from school at seven and entered college when he was eight.”

“You must be very proud, Sanji,” Adelle says, smiling.

“Extremely,” Sanji answers. “Chopper, go check if there’s an empty table outside. Otherwise, you’re going to have to eat in here.”

Chopper nods and jumps off the tall bar stool. Sanji cuts a few carrots and broccoli into slices for a side dish and places the two roast beef sandwiches in separate plates. He cuts both of them in half, and sprinkles a little bit of jack cheese on top. He pours watermelon lemonade into two tall glasses and garnishes them with a thin slice of lemon. He puts the two glasses and the two plates on a tray and frowns. What is taking Chopper so long?

He wipes his hands on his apron before slipping it off to go check on Chopper. He sees that a couple of tables have cleared near the host’s booth and motions for Keimi to reserve one of them for him.

The longer he looks for Chopper and doesn’t find him, the more worried he gets. Where could he have gone? Did somebody take him? Did he walk out? Or maybe he’s just in the bathroom. Sanji glances at the large wooden wall that hides the twin bathroom doors from sight. Yeah, he’s most likely worrying for nothing. All of his employees know Chopper, there’s no way someone could have walked out of here with the boy without someone noticing. Right?

“Sanji!”

The high-pitched voice is music to Sanji’s ears and he turns around almost sagging with relief.

“Chopper! I was so worried, you can’t—.”

He freezes.

His eyes can’t believe it, but the green-hair is unmistakable.

“Hey, cook.”

Chapter End Notes
An essential part of any story is a conflict and resolution. Without those two things, there's no real plot and a story sort of falls flat. At least for me.

And for me, this story is finished. Done with. Completely resolved. However....I'm also one of those people that like to look at the what-if...so the third (and truly final) installment of this series will be just that--Zoro's and Sanji's story after the big finale, if you wish. If you're one of those people that like things to end in a clear note and you don't enjoy pointless, slice-of-life kinda things, then don't even read the next story. Trust me, Sanji and Zoro end up together and live happily ever after.

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