Summary

Few things in life are certain, save one. There are no choices without consequences, no decisions without repercussions.

Sequel to alternate alternate Crossfire.

Notes

Let me begin by stating that I didn't expect to be returning to the Crossfire universe with more than an occasional drabble much less a full-length multi-chapter sequel-of Sorts. I was, in fact, pretty adamant that the assorted alternate and alternate alternate drabbles were as far as the story would go, despite numerous reader comments asking for Luffy and Zoro to give it one more try in hopes of having a girl. I should've known better; never, never ever say never.

A few months ago, I started roleplaying as Zoro for a group of very special, wonderful people that I met via both tumblr and facebook. Several of them - Luffy, Robin, Nami, Chopper - had read the original CF fic and convinced Sanji and Usopp to check it out too, and we somehow ended up rp'ing according to the alternate alternate ending. Then Luffy decided the Roronoa-Monkey family wasn't quite large enough, and lemme just say- that captain's one persuasive, MANIPULATIVE motherfucker.

Because I never intended to take the story further and therefore didn't have any particular plans, I gave Luffy's player almost full creative control over this round and promised that I'd run with whatever she wanted as canon to what I started to jokingly refer to as Crossfire-to-the-third-power. Crossfire-cubed, if you want to be specific. We originally planned to attempt a real time scenario, spanning a literal nine months, because we'd never heard of anyone taking an rp to such an extreme and thought it might be interesting if challenging, but things got complicated due to offline events and I decided that dropping out of the rp for personal reasons was in my best interests.
While it was still going full-force, however, I got hit with a serious case of writer's block which I attempted to combat by starting a writing challenge. One pairing, one sentence per theme, fifty themes per set. I decided to use LuZoLu as my pairing and the rp scenario as background for what finally ended with 141 sentences and nearly 8,000 words of material which slowly started to take shape as a specific narrative rather than the series of isolated events it resembled when I first started.

I originally planned to leave my work unpublished outside the rp group and I never did finish the last nine prompts, but now that I'm writing an entire piece based on this stuff, I'm not sure it's necessary. If anyone's interested in seeing how the sentences evolved into what's likely to become another sprawling monster of a fic, I'll probably include them with my closing remarks when I eventually wrap this thing up.

This one's dedicated to my rp crewmates: Nami, Usopp, Sanji, Chopper - both of you - Robin, Franky, Brook and especially Luffy. Guys... what the hell can I even say. I had a lot of fun, and I'm glad most of us still talk on a regular basis. Thank you for everything. Also, a nod of special thanks to Ewim for taking a moment to read over my sentences when I was attempting to put them in chronological order and for humoring my ridiculous, awkwardly-worded messages. And the biggest thank you of all to my husband, who's graciously agreed to beta another multiple-chapter fic of this utter nonsense.

If you haven't already read Crossfire's alternate ending and the accompanying drabbles, I highly recommend doing so before you start reading this fic, which directly references those. The standard warnings apply here as well: mpreg, implied non-con, potentially graphic medical descriptions, etc.
"Yeah, she figures we'll spot land within the next hour. Oh, and Sencho said we should probably- OI, Sabo, I said NO."

Grimacing, Zoro carefully pries his younger son's damp fingers off the panic-stricken Den Den Mushi and shifts the scowling toddler to his other hip. "Shit. Sorry, Jinbei. Kid's got another tooth coming in and he's trying to chew on anything he can cram in his mouth. Now what the hell was I- oh, right; Luffy only wants us docking a few ships at a time so we don't take over the whole bloody port."

He pauses, listening, with the agitated snail hoisted safely out of reach.

"Ba," Sabo insists, wriggling determinedly in his grasp and reaching for the mollusk again. "Ba-ba-ba!"

"Look, I know it's kind of round but it's not your damn ba-ba, so will you quit-" The swordsman responds without thinking and then breaks off, flushing and clearing his throat, because the fishman's clearly abandoned any attempt at conversation in favor of low chuckling. "Son of a-"

He's interrupted by the dining hall door swinging open and brightens immediately at the sight of the tall brunette stepping into the room. "Hang on a second, okay? Robin, do me a favor and distract this little monster so I can finish talking to Jinbei without sounding like a freaking idiot? Or more of an idiot than I already have, anyway."

"Certainly. I thought you might require an extra hand," the historian teases, amused by her crewmate's sigh of relief – and the sight of the Den Den on his palm visibly relaxing – as he passes the squirming child to her. Sabo, clinging reluctantly to his father's coat, utters a string of babbled protest that dissolves into repeated cries of "dada" before he's abruptly sidetracked by the long black tresses that are suddenly dangling tantalizingly within reach. Robin tries not to wince as he tugs a fistful happily, lifting him higher so she can free her hair and sweep it back over her shoulder. "My goodness, someone's getting rather heavy."

"Tell me about it- I can't wait 'til that blasted tooth comes in and he decides to stop being so damn clingy," Zoro grumbles, although the expression on his face is somewhat wistful, forcing his nakama to hide a broader smile because she's certain he's thinking quite the opposite.

"Go ahead and finish briefing Jinbei-san, and we'll be waiting for you and Luffy on the lawn deck," she informs the swordsman, deftly diverting the small hand that Sabo's attempting to plunge into her cleavage as they head towards the exit.

"Jeez, I swear that kid's worse than the ero-cook, grabbing at tits all the time," Zoro muses to himself when she's out of earshot- and nearly drops the snail when it utters a loud, sputtering cough. "Ah, sorry, Jinbei. I would've snagged somebody to watch him earlier, but everybody else was busy fucking around with the rigging and shit, and Nami's got Sencho cornered in the library, going over receipts or supply lists or something."

He doesn't bother telling the fishman that he briefly considered letting Sabo roam the dining hall floor, only to immediately dismiss the idea when he realized he was likely to spend most of his time scrambling under the table or behind the kitchen counter to retrieve the kid. While the little guy still spends a lot of time clinging to stationary objects while trying out his feet – something Franky laughingly coined as "furniture cruising" – he's capable of getting from point A to point B
pretty damn fast crawling on his hands and knees.

"There's no need to apologize," Jinbei assures him, voice still holding a clear note of amusement. "But, yes, in regards to Luffy's orders, I agree that we ought to exercise a certain measure of restraint. Should I assume that the Sunny will be leading?"

"Sure- sounds like a plan. You know how he gets when it takes this long between islands and the cook's gotta start rationing the damn meat supply. Although at this point, I think we'd all be happy for a chance to stretch our legs."

xxx

Much to Luffy's dismay, he doesn't escape Nami's clutches, or what he considers the claustrophobic confines of the observation room, for a good hour and a half after reluctantly agreeing to take a look at the inventory lists she was clutching when she intercepted him and Zoro on the lawn deck, seized him by the scruff and dragged him bodily inside.

He's not entirely sure why the navigator bothers keeping such detailed records on everything, considering they're definitely not short on money – nowhere near it, in fact, and they haven't been for some time now thanks to the steady trickle of other pirate crews eager to pledge their support to the Pirate King, not to mention his steadfast refusal to abandon adventuring – but she's determined to make every beli count. And for some reason insists on making sure that he's aware of exactly where it's all going.

While he doesn't mind the opportunity to get his hands on Sanji's grocery lists, even if no one's liable to mistake his sloppy scrawling for the cook's neat penmanship or agree that they really need quite that much meat, the rest of it-

"If we need repairs and stuff, why don't we just get 'em done?" He asks petulantly, drumming his heels against the side of the desk he's perched on. "I don't see why you gotta tell me. I mean, Franky's the shipwright and you're the one who handles all the money, so it really doesn't have anything to do with me, right?"

"You-" Nami buries her face in her hands momentarily before slapping them both palm-down on the desktop forcefully enough to make him jump. "YOU'RE the one who damaged the bloody ship in the first place, fighting with Zoro when-"

"I told you, we weren't fighting. It was an accident," the captain mumbles, refusing to meet her eyes.

"Luffy, you nearly knocked him through the men's quarters wall!"

"Yeah, but-" He scratches his head sheepishly, searching for a way to explain, because it honestly HAD been an accident, but really- how was he supposed to know his first mate was going to get so pissed off over such a trivial matter? Seriously, using Gomu Gomu no Fusen as an impromptu trampoline had been a stroke of pure genius; Ace himself had said so – thought it was a GREAT idea – and everything had been perfectly fine right up until Zoro had stopped yelling and tried to actually grab him.

Being unexpectedly manhandled had forced all the air out of him in one giant "FWOOOSH" and the resulting impact had sent the swordsman flying while Luffy himself had bounced off in the opposite direction with his arms wrapped tightly around their son.

"We were lucky-" Nami growls, "-that Franky had enough lumber to replace the paneling and
repair the doorframe right away, but now we need to replace it, and Adam wood is expensive."

"But Nami, we've got plenty of."

"Expensive and RARE. It's not something you just stumble across on any old island! And besides, I've been saying it for years- as captain, you should be taking an interest in our financial affairs, not just blithely running around having adventures and stuffing your face."

"But Nami-"

"Not to mention, you need to decide what we're going to do about the fleet. It's getting larger every time we pass through the Grand Line, and that means more mouths to feed, more repairs, more bloody paperwork-"

"But."

"No more buts!" The navigator snaps, then snorts and smacks her nakama's shoulder because he's snickering at her. "Luffy, I'm serious. It was different when it was just us and the Sunny, but now we've got all these guys showing up, insisting it's their dream to follow the Pirate King, and-"

"I know, I know…" He sighs, absentmindedly trailing a fingertip along the wood-grain in the desk's surface. "Zoro keeps saying it too. That I gotta figure out what I'm gonna do with them. He swears there's new faces showing up almost every day, and he thinks some of them have pretty big bounties too. Not like ours, of course, but-"

The captain glances up, brow furrowing. "I think it freaks him out a little. Not knowing everybody, I mean."

Nami's expression softens a bit. "That doesn't surprise me. But he's right, you know. We- YOU- need to be more involved with… well, a lot of things. Which is why you're going with Franky to check the local shipyard for lumber, although I doubt you're going to find anything."

"What about you?"

Gesturing to the small mountain of paperwork piled haphazardly on her chair, the red-head favors him with a weary smile. "I've got plenty to keep me busy right here. Hopefully I'll get through it before this evening, but I suppose there's always tomorrow."

"You're not gonna ask Brook for help?"

"Sanji's already claimed him and Chopper to help carry everything we need to restock the kitchen, and they're definitely going to have their hands full this time. We're down to the last of the citrus, and the mikans won't be ripe for at least another two or three months. The last thing we need is someone coming down with scurvy."

Luffy wrinkles his nose, nodding in silent agreement. His crew's been fortunate, having a cook and doctor both fanatical about ensuring everyone avoids vitamin C deficiency, but he's seen others who aren't quite so lucky. Bleeding gums, jaundice and fever make for some unpleasant if easily diagnosed symptoms.

Another thought abruptly occurs to him, but Nami's speaking again before he can do more than open his mouth. "Usopp offered to stay behind and take watch so I can get some work done. It's going to take the log pose about 72 hours to recalibrate, so we'll just wait and go ashore tomorrow."

"Ah, okay."
There's not many things the captain demands from his crew, but the idea of his nakama - any one of them - either setting out or remaining on the Sunny alone still bothers him after all these years. Bad things tend to happen when he and his crewmates are separated from each other, and although he hasn't outright mentioned it to anyone, he agrees with his swordsman; being surrounded by ships sailed by fellow pirates he doesn't know very well has done little to ease his mind.

While he prefers to see people in light of their virtues and strengths rather than their vices and shortcomings, personal experience has taught him again and again that it's in his – and his crew and family's – best interests to remain guarded at best.

It hasn't been all that long - only five or six weeks, maybe a couple of months at most - since that mess with one of Zoro's challengers, and while the swordsman certainly hadn't been alone during that fiasco, Luffy hasn't forgotten Sabo's nearly hysterical reaction to the tense atmosphere. He also hasn't forgotten the toddler's instantaneous calm at Usopp's abrupt return before anyone else was even aware the sniper had boarded the ship again following his unplanned side trip.

It was kind of weird. Almost like he knew we should've been- that we NEEDED- to be together. That we wouldn't be okay while we were still missing somebody. And that wasn't the first time either.

He hasn't mentioned his growing suspicions to Zoro yet, but-

"Go on, get out of here," Nami laughs, derailing his thoughts. "It's pretty obvious you're like a million miles away, and I guess I've kept you long enough. I'm sure Ace has driven Sanji up the mast by now."

Luffy bolts for the door before she can change her mind; he'll worry about repair bills and the growing fleet and small children exhibiting signs of Haki later, but right now he just wants to get outside because the weather's nice, there's an island to explore and he can hear his family's raised voices drifting up from the lawn deck.

"Gah, leggo my face, you little-!"

When the curious captain peeks over the balcony, an enormous grin immediately surfaces on his face at the sight below.

Sabo is giggling madly, one flailing hand repeatedly smacking his swordsman father in the nose as they lie face-to-face in the grass, and as Luffy watches, Zoro abandons his attempts to fend off the blows and rolls onto his back with their younger child clutched against his chest, struggling to muffle poorly concealed laughter as he declares himself soundly defeated.

Ace, sitting at the top of the stairs and looking somewhat torn between going down and joining in or staying put and maintaining his dignity, glances over at the slap of sandals coming up behind him. "You finally got away, huh?"

"Ungh," Luffy groans, dropping down beside him. "Yeah, I got lucky she didn't make me stay in there for at least another hour. Oi, so I guess I gotta go with Franky to check out the shipyard- you wanna come along, look at guys building boats and stuff?"

"Sure! What about Dad- is he going too?"

"Dunno. I didn't ask him yet." He straightens up slightly. "OI, ZORO!"

On the lawn below, the swordsman sits up, narrowly evading the fingers Sabo's trying to jam into his left nostril and brushing bits of grass from his hair as he peers up at them.
"WHERE YOU GOING AFTER W- ow!"

"Oops," Sanji hums, casually replanting the foot he's just used to boot the younger pirate in the buttocks. "Didn't see you there, shitty Gomu. Must've mistook you for some bloody seagull screeching its damn head off."

Ace snickers.

"If you wanna talk to Marimo, why don't you go down there and do it instead of screaming at him from here?" The cook shifts the small drink- and snack-laden tray he's balancing to the opposite hand. "She hasn't yet graced us with her presence, so I'm guessing our lovely Nami-san is still hard at work?"

"Yeah, she's digging through old records and-" Luffy eyes the silver platter overhead, nostrils flaring with interest. "I could eat that, you know. Since she's busy. So it doesn't get wasted."

"Keep your shitty fingers to yourself unless you want me to tie 'em in a knot around your neck."

"Aww, c'mon, just one little-"

"I said hands off, you greedy bastard! It's never just one little anything with you. Now go tell that shitty swordsman of yours that he'd better be careful rolling around on the lawn like that or he's gonna end up with grass seed sprouting on that fuzzy green head- or would you rather explain to Nami-san why her tea's gone cold?"

"Nah, no thanks- she's all yours," the captain grimaces, envisioning his afternoon vanishing in a flurry of parchment and ink. He loops an arm around his son's waist. "Hang on, okay? Going down."

Long accustomed to the rubber man's preferred method of travel - stairs are overrated - Ace calmly grabs hold of him with just enough time to shoot Sanji a broad grin before Luffy flings them both over the railing. While he isn't quite sure how his father manages to judge distances so well with barely more than a cursory glance, they've done this often enough that he's fairly confident they won't land on anyone below, and sure enough they land a safe distance from his other father and little brother and he's set down without incident.

Wide eyes fixed on them, Sabo squeals and waves both arms in excitement when Luffy hurries over and bends down to scoop him out of Zoro's lap, earning a bemused smile from the swordsman.

"I think somebody missed you."

"Yeah, no wonder- I was in there for HOURS." He bumps his nose gently against the toddler's, eliciting a giggle. "Were you watching me and Ace? You wanna go for a ride too?"

"Da!"

"I'm sure he does, but-"

"Not 'til you're a little older," Luffy informs Sabo, voice distorted because the little boy's seized his lower lip and started tugging on it furiously. "I think Zoro's afraid I'm gonna rattle your brains or something."

"More like accidentally throw yourselves overboard or into the mast or some shit." Zoro winces as the sound of his voice causes Sabo to twist around to look at him, letting go of the captain's face
and causing it to snap back to its normal shape. "Damn, he's been really grabby with people's faces lately..."

"Maybe he's doing it 'cause he wants to talk and can't?" Ace suggests, then brightens as he remembers what brought them down to the lawn deck in the first place. "Oi, Dad, you gonna come along to the shipyard with us?"

"Shipyard? Why would-? Oh. Nami."

"She's still mad about the other day," Luffy explains morosely, hugging Sabo closer and running fingers through the child's hair as he pops his thumb into his mouth and leans his head against his father's chest. "I tried telling her it was an accident, but she didn't wanna hear it."

"I'M still mad about the other day." Bundling his katana and slipping them back into his sash, Zoro climbs to his feet and shakes out the skirt of his coat, surreptitiously inspecting it for grass stains. "One of these times, somebody's actually gonna get hurt. I think you keep forgetting that the rest of us aren't made out of rubber like you."

"I'm always careful with them," Luffy protests. He shoots a sidelong look at Ace, seeking support, and the older child shrugs.

"See? Everything's fine. So, you going with us?"

"Ah, I would, but I already told Brook I'd hunt down more rice paper and finishing powder and the rest of the junk we- uh- couldn't get last time." There's an awkward moment of silence. "Oh, and I need to look for a new maintenance kit box. The one I've got must be a piece of shit, 'cause it's falling apart. I dunno what kind of wood it's made from, but the humidity and the salt water's warped the damn thing so bad I can barely get the lid closed right."

"Okay, so who's-?"

"Robin wants to find a book she hasn't already read - if that even exists - and Jinbei said he'd tag along too, maybe look for material for a new kimono or something." The older pirate reaches out to tuck a stray wisp of hair behind Sabo's ear. "I'll take the squirt here with me, leave your hands free. Otherwise you'll end up too busy dealing with him to pay attention to anything else, and then Nami'll get even more pissed off."

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The toddler blinks up at him, then yawns enormously around the finger in his mouth.

"Heh, looks like you need a nap, kiddo. Here, hand him over, Sencho. We got, what, half an hour yet until landfall?"

"Something like that," Luffy agrees, planting a kiss on Sabo's forehead before passing him to the swordsman. "You gonna nap with him?"

"Thinking about it."

"Well, just in case we're gone before you guys wake up-" The captain leans in to give Zoro a quick peck on the cheek, prompting a scandalized groan of dismay from Ace.

"Dad~! Ugh, really, do you have to do that out here?"

"What's wrong with out- mMPH!" Luffy's cut short by his smirking first mate, who's freed one hand to grasp him by the jaw and guide him into a deep, very sloppy and thorough open-mouthed kiss.
His actions prompt distant cheering and laughter from a few of the nearest ships as the crews aboard them notice what's going on, and while both Pirate King and World's Greatest Swordsman are determined to ignore them in favor of a far more interesting pursuit, the whole exchange becomes that much more desperate because neither of them can keep straight faces at the gleeful suggestions suddenly being hurled across the water.

"DAD!"

"Hnn, maybe you better get going-" Luffy warns when Zoro finally releases him, amusement dancing in his eyes as he wipes one corner of his mouth with the heel of his hand. "-or you might not get that naptest.."

"Oh my god, c'mon, there's people WATCHING." Ace complains, pointing to where Usopp and Chopper have just emerged from the dining hall and are standing at the railing, struggling not to laugh.

"What's your point?" Zoro waves at their nakama, who lift hand and hoof in unison to return the gesture. "It's nothing they haven't seen before."

"Gross..."

"In fact, I'm pretty sure they've seen worse."

"Double gross."

"GO," Luffy insists, forcibly unclenching the fingers he's knotted in his swordsman's coat. "Really, I mean it, or you're gonna have to tell Brook to get his own damn paper and Nami's gonna throttle me."

He eyes the older pirate speculatively. "... pretty sure it'd be worth it though..."

"Maybe later." Zoro flushes as someone on a nearby ship shouts a suggestion that he's fairly sure is physically impossible even with his captain's unique stretching ability, although he can't help feeling smugly pleased as well, given the incredulous look that's just come over Luffy's face.

"I wonder if-"

"OI, STOP SAYING THAT SHIT IN FRONT OF MY KIDS, ASSHOLE! YOU WANT ME TO COME OVER THERE?"

There's scattered laughter and the culprit raises both arms, palms out, in supplication and hollers an apology along with a flowery plea for clemency.

"Bunch of morons," the swordsman grumbles, but the corners of his mouth are twitching uncontrollably.

"C'mon, go nap. You can kick their asses later, but- look, he's doing that eye-rubbing thing and you know how cranky he gets when he doesn't get enough sleep." Luffy gives Zoro a none too subtle nudge. "He gets like you, actually."

"Funny." He shifts the sleepy toddler in his grasp to one arm, leaving a hand free to ruffle their older son's hair. "Oi, remember what I told you, alright?"

Ace shakes him off, obviously embarrassed by what he considers a gesture towards a little kid – something he will usually loudly and repeatedly explain to anyone in earshot that he is most
certainly NOT – but he's also grinning again, too excited by the prospect of exploring a new island to find himself legitimately annoyed. "I know, I know- stay out of trouble and don't let Dad do anything dumb."

"Good, 'cause he's-" Zoro breaks off, glaring. "Don't give me that look, Sencho. You're worse than Sabo when it comes to getting into freaking everything, especially if there's food involved. We get enough shit with those damn wanted posters still floating around- the last thing we need is some goddamn merchant flipping his shit and making a call because you forgot you didn't have enough beli on you before you ate everything in his stand."

Then, turning back to Ace. "And no pickpocketing or stealing shit. It's not that big a deal here on the ship when I can just give it back and everybody thinks it's pretty funny and just laughs it off, but you start pulling that crap on people we don't know and they get pissed- we don't need that kind of trouble. I don't know what the hell Nami was thinking, teaching you-"

"He's getting pretty good at it, though."

"Shut up, Luffy. Most of what he steals ends up feeding your face." The swordsman sighs as Sabo utters a low whine and starts wiggling animatedly, head-butting him in the collarbone. "Damn it. Okay, look. The shitty cook yells a lot and starts throwing stuff, but he wouldn't really hurt you, right? But you pull a stunt like that on the wrong person, you could end up losing a hand or-"

"Oi, do you smell something?" Ace demands, wrinkling his nose.

"Yeah. Shit." Zoro scowls, eyeing the whimpering toddler. "I better get going, but-"

"We'll be fine," Luffy tells him firmly, discreetly elbowing their older son, who nods in agreement.

"Alright," the swordsman sighs. "I'll see you guys later."

He turns his attention back to Sabo, who – having resumed sucking his thumb – blinks up at him innocently. "C'mon, kiddo, let's go change that diaper. You're pretty freakin' ripe."
Chapter Notes

I probably won't put these at the beginning of every update, but I just wanted to say thank you to everybody who read and reviewed already, because I was pretty damn nervous about posting that first chapter. I also completely forgot to mention – and was fortunately reminded by gofuckingnuts on FF.net – that it's probably going to take me a lot longer between chapters for this fic than it did for Crossfire (she types as she's about to post the second chapter less than a week after the first). Between my almost nine-month-old daughter – who, no lie, was chewing on my calf and then randomly spit up on my bare foot as I wrote this intro – and new job, I'm finding it a lot more difficult to concentrate on fic these days. Most of this is getting written on my iPhone notepad at ungodly hours of the morning when I wake up and can't get back to sleep and then later transferred to my laptop for editing...

"Damn," Franky mutters, massive arms crossed before him as he surveys the shipyard with a judgmental eye. "Knew it was a long shot, but I was still kinda hoping..."

"No luck, huh?" Luffy raises a hand to block the sun hitting him in the eyes as he peers up to where Ace is perched on the cyborg's shoulder, his much-smaller limbs mimicking their older nakama's pose as he squints against the bright light.

"Nope, but it was worth a- heh, here, little bro. You'll look even more super with a pair of shades to go with that." Franky plucks his sunglasses free using the normal-sized hand embedded in his palm and passes them to the seven-year-old. "Bet Haramaki-bro would be flipping his lid if he saw you sittin' up here though."

"Nah, Zoro worries, but he's not that bad."

The shipwright snorts. "Right. Last I heard, he was complaining you don't worry enough."

Luffy struggles for a response, finds himself mentally grasping at straws, and settles for a shrug. It's not that he doesn't care, and anyone more than passingly familiar with him knows it's the complete opposite; he cares a great deal, but- his swordsman worries enough for both of them. More than enough.

While he's always presented himself as a carefree sort of soul, determined to place his nakama's needs before his own concerns, dealing with Zoro – especially when it comes anything related to the kids – can sometimes prove a particularly complicated balancing act. Sometimes it seems as though every time he thinks his first mate's finally starting to act and sound like his old self again, they suffer some sort of major setback.

He wishes emotional wounds healed as fast as ones caused by blades and bullets.

And then, of course, sometimes it's his own fumbling attempts to make the older pirate smile that backfire in his face. Usually, he reflects with a wince, when he doesn't think things through thoroughly enough. Like the trampoline stunt that landed him in this shipyard.
It's a good thing the log pose won't reset for a few days, Zoro finds himself thinking as he, Jinbei and Robin slowly make their way past lane after lane of fruit and vegetable booths in search of the sprawling hard goods section they've been assured lies beyond, because he's got a sinking feeling what was supposed to be a quick trip is going to take a hell of a lot longer than he originally anticipated.

As soon as they left the Sunny, Sabo unexpectedly decided that being carried in the harness - a clever contraption developed by the joint efforts of Franky and Usopp - was unacceptable and protested loudly and at length until the swordsman freed him.

To his father's aggravation, he also quickly made it clear that being carried was out of the question, leaving Zoro with the awkward predicament of shepherding him along in little fits and starts, because while he's essentially ambulatory, he's still unsteady enough to require a helping hand. Which means inching their way along because he keeps getting sidetracked by random noises and sudden movements, forgetting to put one foot in front of the other and nearly falling on his face. Granted, although it's a serious pain in the ass, it's probably preferable to listening to the child screaming his head off until he's put down again. Nobody wants to hear that shit.

"Sorry," Zoro apologizes helplessly for what he's sure is the fifteenth or sixteenth time as his son stumbles and immediately shakes off his grip to latch onto his leg, grinding their progression to a halt once again. "I guess I could've left him on the ship with Nami and Usopp, but-"

Jinbei waves him off, sharing an amused glance with the historian who's halted beside them. "He needs to learn sometime, doesn't he? I suppose now's a good a time as any."

"Yeah, but at the rate we're going, everybody's gonna beat us back to the ship." The green-haired pirate sighs, peering down at the toddler clinging to his coat's skirts. "Sabo, are you sure I can't just carry you?"

"No-" Sabo insists, shaking his head so furiously that only his grasp on the fabric keeps him from tumbling over. "No-no-no-no!"

"Second goddamn word he learned..."

Robin chuckles. "And I wonder where he might have possibly learned it."

"Kid only hears us saying it from the time he wakes up to the time he goes to bed." Zoro sighs, extending his good hand. "Alright, squirt, go ahead- but if we miss dinner because your dad eats everything before we get home, you're not blaming me."

"Foo?" Sabo asks, seizing the proffered fingers.

"That's right. Food. Food that we won't get to eat if you keep playing around." He can almost see the gears turning as his son considers this and - to his amusement - starts forward again with new resolve, tongue poking from one corner of his mouth while he glowers at the ground ahead with new determination.

After a moment's hesitation, Zoro offers his other hand as well, scooting Sabo in front of him where it's easier to steer him straight ahead and keep him moving down the aisle.

"Intelligent boy," Jinbei remarks as he and Robin fall in step with them again.

The swordsman snorts. "Maybe, but he's gonna be mad as hell when he eventually realizes he's not
getting food NOW."

He casts a discerning eye over the stalls ahead, gratified to see they've finally reached the outskirts of what looks like the sector for which they've been hunting— and also scanning the area for anything resembling a threat.

They're attracting considerable attention and a few blatantly open stares from people unaccustomed to seeing fishmen, much less a startlingly large blue fishman accompanied by humans escorting a young child, but he senses nothing more than curiosity and possibly a trace of unease from the shoppers. Nothing worth stressing over, although he decides on the spot that if it gets any more crowded, he's going to pick Sabo up and carry him regardless of how much fussing ensues.

They lose Robin to the first stand of books, where she immediately becomes immersed in browsing stacks of leather-bound tomes, ignoring the middle-aged vendor's attempts to flirt with practiced ease.

Zoro and Jinbei find a relatively empty corner to wait, corralling Sabo between them and taking turns distracting him.

"Damn, Franky and Usopp should've made us a harness and leash instead of a carrier," the swordsman muses as he diverts his son's attention by dangling his sash above him like a fishing lure. "Oi, why the hell does that guy keep staring at me?"

He doesn't detect any ill intent, but-

*Jeez, what a fucking creeper.*

"I suppose it's possible he recognizes you from your wanted poster-" his nakama speculates. "-although I think it's far more likely he's wondering why you're not, ah, defending your territory."

Zoro favors him with an uncomprehending frown. "My what?"

"Nico-san." Jinbei nods towards the historian, who's carefully examining a book that looks as though it weighs nearly as much as the toddler playing at their feet and is – at least to all appearances – oblivious to the attention she's garnering.

"Wha- oh." Zoro snorts. "Screw that. Robin can take care of herself if he gets too pushy."

People mistaking the dark-haired woman for his girlfriend or lover or wife or whatever when they spot him holding or even just talking to one of the kids in her presence has become a relatively routine thing that he supposes makes sense and usually lets slide because it's easier than explaining the truth, although it also annoys the hell out of him.

*Just because both of them ended up with Luffy's-*

He gives his head a brief shake, drawing a curious look from the fishman beside him.

*Probably better off that way anyway- I can just hear the damn cook making some smart-ass comment about how "the marimos are multiplying"…*

XXX

"Oi. Oi, Dad?"

"Hmm?"
"You know that new guy that showed up the other day? The one who kept saying he'd give us all that stuff if you let him join, but you said we didn't have any room and Nami-aneki got mad?"

Luffy grins as he and Ace wander along behind Franky, remembering. Following the disappointed pirate's departure, the Straw Hat's navigator had been furious, insisting they should have claimed the loot and just dumped the hapless bastard at the nearest port. "Yeah, what about him?"

"He asked you something else before he left, and I couldn't hear, but you started laughing and Dad walked away with this funny look on his face, like he was trying not to laugh too. What were you guys talking about?"

"Oh, that." Idly scuffing a line in the dirt with the toe of his sandal, the captain glances down at his son. "He wanted to know if me and Zoro were "official" or-"

He pauses, searching for another word because the guy's actual question - "are you two official or are you just fucking" - isn't exactly something he wants to repeat verbatim. Not that Ace hasn't already heard that particular expletive, along with countless others, about a million times before; they're pirates, not saints, although even Zoro's been trying to keep his language relatively tame around the kids. Not always successfully, but nevertheless-

"Official?"

"He wanted to know if we got married."

"Oh." The seven-year-old considers this briefly. "Like the lady with the blue hair and that guy in Ara- Arb- Arabsta- damn it! Like the people in that country with all the sand?"

"Arabasta. Yeah, like Vivi and-" Crap, he's drawing a complete blank on the man's name. "-that guy."

"Why'd he wanna know?"

Luffy shrugs. "Said something about a bet."

"So are you?"

"Eh?"

"Are you and Dad married like Vivi-sama and that guy?"

"Well-" He scratches his head. "-yeah, I guess? I mean, it's not like we did that whole thing where you dress up and kiss each other in front of a whole bunch of people and throw a big party afterwards. But Robin says captains can perform weddings and confirm marriages and stuff, and I'm the captain, and me and Zoro aren't interested in being with anybody but each other and we promised that neither of us would ever leave, so- yeah, I'd say we're married."

"Aren't you supposed to wear rings or something? Then people could just look and know without having to ask."

"I don't think you have to- but I guess I'd get one for Zoro if he wanted. It'd be kind of dumb though, if it's just him wearing one, since-" Luffy demonstrates by stretching his ring finger and then letting it snap back. "-I dunno if I could wear stuff like that without losing it."

He studies his empty finger for a moment, then shrugs. "Stuff like that's not what's important anyway."
"It's not?"

"Nope." He taps his scarred chest over his heart, hoping what he's about to say makes sense because he's well aware that he's not always very articulate at explaining himself. "It's what's in here that matters, okay? And besides, I don't need that kind of stuff to know Zoro loves me- I've got you guys."

"Right..." Ace agrees hesitantly, still looking somewhat perplexed. Then, with absolute sincerity and solemnity. "So... if you're the Pirate King... does that make Dad your Pirate Queen?"

xxx

Hours later, when the sun's settling lower in the sky:

"Alright, it looks like we've got everything on the list except-" Sanji squints down at the slip of paper in his hand. "... never mind, that's not my handwriting."

"Sencho trying to add shit to your grocery lists again?"

The cook turns to find Zoro and Jinbei approaching, Sabo dozing in the crook of the fishman's arm and Robin trailing behind them as she turns the tissue-thin pages of the book in which she's buried her nose.

"Oh, good- since you turned up, you can help us get all of this back to the ship." He gestures to the stacks of wrapped parcels and towering pile of crates and barrels behind him, and the swordsman raises an eyebrow.

"Hell of a shopping trip."

"Considering how empty the freezer and pantry got since our last one, I'd rather be safe than sorry. C'mon, Marimo. Looks like Jinbei's doing just fine watching your brat, so roll up your sleeves and get to work."

Zoro mumbles something about domineering assholes under his breath, but he shrugs off the top portion of his coat and joins Chopper and Brook, and together the three of them start the slow process of transferring everything to the docks.

Robin, still engrossed in her book, accompanies them back to the ship during the first trip and opts for taking advantage of the last span of daylight to read in her lawn chair while a production line of disembodied hands sprouted up the portside and across the deck into the kitchen steadily unpack and shelve their purchases.

"Whew, I wish I could multi-task like that," Chopper, muses enviously as he waits for someone to relieve him of his latest load. "There's a new medical journal I've been wanting to flip through, but-
"

He sags in relief as Brook unstraps the oversized, overstuffed pack and wrestles it off his back. "Ah, would you mind putting that in the infirmary for me? Most of it's medicinal herbs and-"

"Here, lemme get that before you bust your ulna and the cook kicks you in the teeth for drinking all the milk he just bought." Zoro steps in to assist his fellow swordsman, grabbing the bag and hefting it onto one shoulder with a grunt. "Jeez, Chopper! How the hell does a bunch of dried plants and shit weigh that much?"

"I might've- uh- bought a few books of my own. There was this really interesting medical text on
"Gotcha," the older pirate interjects before the doctor can launch into an enthusiastic discussion about something like open wounds or, god forbid, intestinal parasites. "I'll leave it next to your desk."

They're standing on the weather-worn dock an hour later, stretching aching limbs and keeping a watchful eye on Sabo as he makes fumbling efforts to chase the seabirds squabbling over sleeping spots on nearby posts, when Luffy returns with Ace and Franky in tow.

"Cook says dinner in half an hour," Zoro announces, spotting the way the captain's craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the dining hall door. "Oi, you guys are covered in sawdust."

He sweeps up Sabo in one arm - much to the relief of the harassed gulls - and grabs Ace with the other before the seven-year-old's got the chance to dodge him. "C'mon, you two. Off to the bathhouse or that bastard claims he won't feed us."

"Dad, put me- OH, YUCK, YOU'RE ALL SWEATY!"

"What the hell are you complaining about when you're already covered with dirt anyway?"

Luffy starts to follow them and then hesitates, looking up at the ship. While he can't quite remember when it started, he's developed a habit of taking a moment to just silently appreciate everything about it from stern to bow whenever he and his crew return after any time spent away from its familiar decks, his eyes drinking in the Jolly Roger snapping briskly overhead and his ears attuned to his nakama exchanging laughter and innocuous insults.

Home. This is home. This is where I- where we belong. This is where I want to spend the rest of my-

"Luffy, what the hell are you waiting for- get your ass moving or you're gonna miss dinner!"

He blinks, pulled from his thoughts by the voice of the green-haired swordsman who's stopped and turned back to see what's keeping him behind, toting a flailing child under each arm – one giggling and one still insisting that he's not only perfectly capable but probably MORE capable of finding the bathhouse on his own – and that- THAT is the expression he's been waiting to see on Zoro's face.

Slightly perplexed and a trace amused, yes, but ultimately happy.

Home. He feels it too- I know it. Maybe-

The captain's sprinting after them almost before he realizes he's moving, straw hat bouncing behind him on the cord securing it around his neck. "O-Oi, Zoro, wait for me! Don't eat all the meat!"

"Tch. You gotta be kidding."

xxx

Most meals taken at the table in the Sunny's dining hall tend towards loosely organized chaos, and this one's no exception. In reality, it's a bit more raucous than usual, because everyone's been looking forward to the prospect of fresh food after so many weeks of thawed comestibles, because while Sanji's capable of performing culinary miracles with the most basic ingredients, he'll be the first to admit that working with fresh is far superior to frozen.
"Oi, can somebody pass the- oi, oi, Luffy, I was gonna eat that!" Usopp groans, staring forlornly at the empty platter.

"Shitty Gomu! Quit hogging everything and leave some for everyone else!"

"It's not for me- it's for Ace!"

Nami pauses with her fork half-way to her mouth. "Luffy, that's ridiculous. You know he can't finish a piece that big all by himself."

"Well, I was gonna help-"

"Nami-swan~! Would you like another slice of roast, perhaps? I've another almost finished baking in the oven, just waiting to grace your delicate palate, my ang-"

"Goddamn it, cook, give it a rest- there's people trying to eat here."

"You got a problem, shitty Marimo?"

"Yeah, I got a problem with your-"

"Foo!"

"-face. Hang on, kiddo, I'm working on it, alright?"

"That's so super sweet of you, Haramaki-bro, cutting his food into itty bitty pieces for him. I think I'm gonna-"

"Yohohoho! Wipe those tears away, Franky-san and please pass those mashed potatoes! They certainly look filling- as though they'd really stick to my ribs!"

"Brook-san, where does the food go when you eat it?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"... Chopper?"

"Don't look at me," the doctor mumbles through a mouthful of candied yams. "I've watched Brook eat and drink for years and I still don't know how his body works."

"It's gotta go somewhere. I mean, he poops, doesn't he?"

"LUFFY-"

"Well, he does!"

"I must admit that Sencho's correct. One assumes that the ability to consume food and defecate the undigested remains involves-"

"ROBIN-"
"Oh god, that's nasty- can we please talk about something- ANYTHING else?" Usopp shudders.

"Whassamatter, Jinbei? Aren't you hungry? 'Cause if you don't want that-" An arm shoots down the down the table and several people instinctively yank their plates out of the way, but the former Shichibukai's reaction is a fraction too slow.

"Ah… I was actually about to eat that, Luffy-kun."

"Here you go, Kimono Shark-bro. Have half of mine."

"… must you insist on referring to me by that-"

"FOO!"

"Okay, okay, here! Oi, no- NO- you're supposed to eat that, damn it, not throw it across the-"

"Eww."

"Shit. Sorry, Ace."

"S'okay. I don't like carrots either."

"Marimo-"

"Don't even start, cook. I didn't tell him to throw the blasted thing."

"Control your children, shitty swordsman. Wasting food is-"

"Here, give me the fucking carrot and I'll eat it myself."

"Language, Zoro- that'll be 500 beli."

"…"

"You can stop glaring at me like that, because you're the one who asked for suggestions to help you stop cursing around the kids."

"Nami-san's such a shrewd business-woman-"

"Bastard. Okay, squirt, let's try this again. No, I'm not giving you the spoon. If you're just gonna throw shit, you don't get to feed yourself."

Luffy, moments from cramming a rack of ribs slathered with sauce into his mouth, paused to watch his swordsman patiently waiting for their younger son to stop grabbing for the utensil in his hand and lean forward with his mouth open. To everyone's relief, this time the glazed carrots make into the toddler's stomach instead of sailing over the tabletop.

"See? Didn't I say you'd like 'em?"

Sabo responds by drumming his palms excitedly on his tray table and loosing a string of incomprehensible babble before accepting another bite, and the captain temporarily forgets about the food in his own hand because he's too busy staring at the triumphant grin on Zoro's face. "Zoro's really good with babies. We should definitely have another one."

He doesn't realize he's spoken out loud until the droning conversation around them screeches to a halt.
"Oh my."

"Yohohohoho~!"

"Not this again," his first mate grumbles, unable to hide the flush spreading across his face because their crewmates are now studying them with intense and poorly concealed interest- with the exception of Ace, who rolls his eyes and continues picking apart his dinner roll.

"But it's true," Luffy protests. "And you promised you'd at least think about it."

"O-Oi! Thinking about it and agreeing to it are two completely different-"

Nami elbows Usopp, voice low and threatening. "I'll accept bills in either one-thousand or five-thousand beli denominations. I'm not choosy."

"Damn. Okay, but you'll have to wait 'til I get it from-" the sniper leans down the table. "Franky?"

"Sugar tits. Ah, Bone-bro-"

"OI!" Zoro barks again, dropping the spoon and whirling on them. "What the hell do you all think you're doing, betting on whether or not-"

"So you guys are okay with it?"

"Oi Oi Oi! It doesn't matter if they're okay with it- I'm not!"

"But Zoro-"

Extremely conscious of their rapt audience, Zoro occupies himself with passing Sabo an unfolded cloth napkin to distract the toddler from his animated attempts to climb out of his high chair to retrieve the spoon laying on the floor below. "Look, can we not talk about this right now?"

"Kenshi-san's correct. This is neither the time nor the place," Robin says gently. "Also- I'm afraid you're dripping sauce on the tablecloth."

"Oh. Oops." Luffy hurriedly shoves the ribs into his mouth, swishes them around a bit, then spits the striped bones into a small untidy heap on his empty plate. He licks his fingers, eyes still locked on his swordsman, who's now taking an inordinate amount of time finding the utensil he dropped-presumably to avoid eye contact with their nakama. "Since we're already talking about it though-"

"Sencho, just don't, okay?"

"Oi, you and Nami were the ones that said I should pay more attention to stuff that affects the crew!"

"... he's got a point, Zoro," the navigator admits reluctantly.

"I-" The first mate finally emerges from beneath the table with spoon in hand, keeping it well out of Sabo's reach. "No, you don't want that- it's dirty."

He drops back into his chair, glaring at Luffy. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. How about we figure out what we're doing with the people we've already got before we go MAKING MORE."

"He's got a point too..."
"I'm curious how Ace-kun feels about the prospect of another sibling."

The child in question shrugs, leaning back in his seat and toying with the edge of the tablecloth. "I don't know. Isn't that what married people do? Have lots of babies?"

Several events happen simultaneously. Usopp chokes on his ale and sprays it over the top of his mug. Nami drops a cherry tomato into her cleavage. Franky, previously lounging back in his chair, goes over backwards as he somehow inexplicably breaks its base free from the floor.

Zoro blinks, brow furrowing slightly as he finds seven pairs of eyes and one set of empty sockets staring at him and Luffy. "Uh... did I miss something?"

"I was about to ask the same thing-" Nami grumbles, fishing between her breasts for the suddenly elusive fruit. "-but you just answered my question. Luffy, what in the world-?"

"Ah, wait- Sencho, does this have something to do with the other day and that guy asking us if-" The swordsman's confusion abruptly fades, replaced by an odd, unreadable expression that makes the younger pirate wonder if he's screwed up again. "... you never did answer him."

"M-Maybe." He realizes he's fidgeting with his sleeves and forces himself to stop. "Ace wanted to know too and since Robin said captains can- well, I just thought... I mean- I think of you as-"

"Is that supposed to be a proposal or something?"

Luffy didn't think it was possible for the room to get any quieter, but it suddenly does. Even Sabo, picking up on the unexpected tension, falls silent and watches them curiously as he chews on the napkin he's still clutching.

"I- yeah?"

"Okay, good, fine, then we're official. Now gimme a clean spoon so I can finish feeding our kid."

"Z-Zoro-"

"That doesn't mean I'm agreeing to anything else though- you got that? But- we'll talk about the other stuff later. When we don't have a whole goddamn room of people gawking at us."
"Okay, now that the kids are asleep and we don't have the whole damn crew staring at us like we're the most interesting thing that happened since Franky installed those blasted rockets in his shoulders and got himself stranded up the foremast—" Zoro kicks off his boots and drops them near the foot of the bed where he's draped his coat before flopping down on the mattress and tucking his arms behind his head. "You wanted to talk- so talk."

"You're promising to listen? Not just yell?" Luffy asks cautiously as he sheds shirt and shorts, leaving both articles of clothing and his sandals strewn haphazardly across the carpet. He pads barefoot to his side and scrambles in, shoving his pillow against the headboard and leaning back against it.

"Yeah, because I wanna know exactly why you're so dead set on us having another kid. Oi, take that thing off- you look fucking goofy as hell wearing it when you're naked." The swordsman rolls onto his side, reaching out to seize the straw hat so he can hang it on the nearest bed post. "C'mon, Sencho, seriously. Give me a good reason why we should do this."

"It would be so much fun, Zoro. Another baby to cuddle and play with and-"

"I'd point out that you could do that with the two kids we've already got, but I'm guessing I'd be wasting my time." An exasperated sigh. "Come on, Luffy, I need a better reason than that. We're talking about bringing another life into the world for fuck's sake."

"More people on our ship would be more fun," the captain insists stubbornly. "But-"

He captures Zoro's hand in his own and pulls it up to rub his cheek against the knuckles- then colors abruptly, gaze sliding away and remaining averted, studying the rumpled bed sheets with rapt fascination. "I- I wanna see if we can make a baby that- that looks like Zoro. Maybe one that's even got your hair, and-"

The swordsman blinks, feeling a smile threatening to tug at the corners of his mouth because – if he's not mistaken – Luffy's actually embarrassed and he's pretty sure he can count the times that's happened on one hand and still have a few fingers le-

"-and I want to share the other part with you again too. Making something- making SOMEBODY special. Somebody who's the best parts of Zoro and the best parts of me. The best parts of both of us- just like Ace and Sabo." Luffy hesitantly raises his eyes, lips brushing the back of Zoro's hand as he nuzzles against it, determined to find the right words.

"And what if- what if the kid wouldn't? E-End up looking like me…"

"Well, then we'd try again, obviously!" He states this like it's the most sensible thing in the world, and Zoro nearly chokes on his own saliva. "But even if it- if he or she doesn't look like you, that's okay, because… if it's a baby with Zoro, then it's-"

Can't- I can't breathe. When I asked him to explain- I didn't know exactly what he'd say, but I never expected anything like-
"I just really, really love you," his captain offers helplessly. "I love everybody else too, but Zoro— Zoro was the first one to trust me, to follow me—"

"Sencho—"

"-didn't even have to because- Zoro, you could've left in the beginning or pretty much any time you wanted and you probably would've gotten lost right away and ended up somewhere weird because you're stupid like that- but you probably would've been okay without the rest of us—"

"Sencho—"

"-but you stayed and you followed me and- shit, I was so busy chasing my dream that I didn't realize what I wanted, what I needed, was right there all along. I didn't figure it out until I almost lost it- until I almost lost YOU and Ace and everything that was- is—"

**What the hell is he trying to—**

"Luffy—"

"Zoro, you're- all I can say is you're really important, okay. I wanna share everything with you- my life and- everything." The younger pirate's looking distinctly misty-eyed and his voice is husky but he's refusing to let sentiment overrule his need to speak. "I don't know what I'd do without—"

His grip on the swordsman's hand has been getting progressively tighter, and when Zoro twitches his cramped fingers, he releases his hold, looking startled and a little ashamed of himself. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you or Ace or Sabo. You guys are- everything. If something happened, if I couldn't protect you guys- …I wouldn't deserve to—"

"Stop." Zoro's head is reeling as his brain struggles to process everything he's heard. "Just stop. Nobody's going anywhere. You're stuck with us, with me, whether you like it or not. You got that?"

Luffy releases a shaky breath.

"And if you want to share everything, then it's not just on you, alright? We protect each other, we protect the kids and we protect the crew. We do whatever it takes to keep everybody safe."

His captain's nodding, calm slowly overtaking the distress on his face.

"And I'm… sorry I've been freaking out so much over this whole baby thing, but—"

"No, I… I get it. I know it's not easy and it's kinda scary too and you're worried about stuff. I just- I guess I'm being selfish even asking and I don't wanna push you, okay? So if you really don't wanna do it again- don't wanna go through it again, I'll stop—"

"Luffy," Zoro hesitates, determined to make himself clear, because he doesn't want any misunderstandings between them. "-if I- if WE decided we wanted to do this, you know there'd be no guarantee, right? Even if we figured out how we managed to—"

"I know. I'd just- I'd be happy that Zoro was okay with it. At least wanted to try." The younger pirate's suddenly regarding him with cautious optimism, apparently wary of appearing too enthused.

"Huh. Maybe you're just excited about the idea of getting to top me all the time until it sticks…” He's joking, of course, because it doesn't really matter. He's never particularly cared which end he's on – receiving or otherwise - and Luffy knows it, and besides- for all they know about how this shit
works, it might not even fucking matter anyway. He's complained more than once that, knowing his luck, even with things reversed and his captain bottoming to him, he'd still somehow be the one getting knocked up again.

Because, debate over mystical mumbo jumbo or just plain old medical oddities aside, the truth remains that even after Chopper's and - much to Zoro's annoyance and chagrin - Law's insistence on performing all manner of tests and exams on both him AND his lover, they're still no closer to understanding the mechanics of it than they were in the very beginning.

Which leaves everything to trial and error, and while he doubts either of them would be too dismayed about the trial part of it, the thought that he might disappoint this man whose happiness is so important to him, even unwittingly-

"There's a chance it just might not happen... you sure you're okay with that?"

Luffy doesn't exactly sigh, but he does utter a faint huff of exasperation as he leans over to cradle the older pirate's face between both hands and stare intently into it. "Yes, I know. And I meant what I said. Just knowing you wa-"

A faint line creases his brow. "You- you are saying you want to, right? You wouldn't just-

Now it's Zoro's turn for indignation. "No, I wouldn't agree just to make you happy without actually wanting it myself, if that's what you're asking."

He slides his arms around Luffy's waist and pulls him closer, tucks his forehead against his captain's neck- because he's not sure he's capable of explaining this while maintaining eye contact. It's far too emotionally loaded and- fuck, if he doesn't just go ahead and say it now, he might not be able to make himself do it later. "Look, I love you, okay? And I love our kids. The ones we've got and-

He swallows, struggling for the right words. "And-"

Luffy's gone completely still in his arms, almost as though he's stopped breathing, although he can feel warm exhalations tickling his ear.

Oh, quit being an idiot and just fucking say it already!

"-and I'll- I'll love whoever we haven't met yet too."

Wow, that was downright poetic. Nice job, Roro-

"So, yeah, I do. Want to do this." He blurs over that obnoxious voice in his head- the one that sounds disturbingly like the Heart Pirate captain, although he'll be damned if he knows why. "I-yes, okay? Yes."

HIS captain makes a noise not unlike a tea kettle on the verge of exploding and pulls back just long enough to look at him with wide eyes before squeezing him around the neck damn near tight enough to choke him. "Zoro- ZORO!"

"G-get off me, you idiot; I can't breathe!"

"I LOVE YOU TOO and I love Ace and I love Sabo and I'm gonna love whatever other kids we have, whether it's one of them or NINE or-!"

"Wha- Luffy, what the fuck- no, NO- we are not having NINE-"
"One, nine- it doesn't really matter, does it, Zoro? It's just numbers!"

Luffy's squashing him against the headboard, attempting to both talk and smother him with kisses at the same time, plastering them all over his face, and his heart gives a panicked lurch in his chest, because even though he's amused – and yes, okay, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't maybe just a little excited too – there's suddenly not enough room to breathe.

His fingers dig unconsciously into the younger pirate's shoulder, trying to lever him away, but Luffy's already easing back, already lowering his voice, before push turns to shove.

"Sorry," his captain murmurs in a voice greatly reduced in volume, petting the air above his shoulders and chest but stopping short of actually touching him. "Guess I got a little too carried away."

"It's okay. Just-" Zoro forces himself to close the gap between them, feeling his pulse quicken at the contact and then, to his relief, gradually slow to a slightly more sedate beat. "… try not to get so grabby without warning me."

Luffy nods, cautiously reaching for his right hand and – when he doesn't protest or pull away – tugging it to his lips so he can kiss the pads of scar tissue. "I didn't mean to scare you. I'm just really- really really really happy 'cause-"

He twines their fingers as best he can, giving a brief but firm squeeze as he presses their palms together, eyes studying Zoro's face intently. "-it's only good if you want one too, right? Another baby. 'Cause I don't think doing it's gonna be a problem. You getting pregnant again, I mean."

"Err-" Not quite sure how to react, he feels his mouth caught writhing somewhere between laughter and a grimace. "Is this one of your- one of those-"

His captain shrugs. "Dunno, it just feels that way, you know?"

Later he will know; in fact, he'll know exactly what the younger pirate means, but right now it's just weird and awkward and also kind of embarrassing even though it's just the two of them and even though he's well aware that neither his faults and personal flaws nor this strange thing his body seems to be capable of doing will make him any less of a man in Luffy's eyes.

They've had that conversation before, more than once, especially back in the very beginning and now years later he can still remember the resolve on his lover's face and the no-nonsense tone of his voice: *I don't care if it seems weird- it's just something else that makes Zoro special- and I won't let anybody give him a hard time about it.*

So instead of arguing, he merely gives a helpless nod and reciprocates, first hesitantly and then with growing confidence, when Luffy leans in to kiss him, even if his cheeks feel rather warm.

True to his word, the captain exercises what others who know him might find a surprising degree of restraint, moving slowly and deliberately until the remaining tension dissolves and it's Zoro himself who quickens the pace, taking hold of Luffy's hand and guiding it to the waistband of his trousers with fingers now trembling from anticipation rather than trepidation.

The younger pirate unbuttons and wrestles them free, then sits back and surveys him silently for a moment, eyes trailing down his body. Neither of them speaks.

They've been far from celibate over the last few months, more than ready to take advantage of a private moment in the bathhouse or the opportunity to send the kids above-deck for an hour or two on an afternoon on the rare occasions their respective duties haven't called them elsewhere. And
sometimes even when they have, Zoro recalls distractedly, remembering – not without a certain smugness – the time a few weeks ago when Luffy unabashedly delayed a meeting with the visiting delegate from another crew in favor of rolling around naked on the crow's nest floor.

But this is different.

This time there's no need to be careful, no worrying about accidents or surprises, because they know exactly what they're trying to do. What they've just agreed they want to happen- and it produces a strange sense of vulnerability for which he was completely unprepared, and his breath catches in his throat.

_I- the way he's looking at me, I-

Luffy leans forward and raises a hand to stroke his fingers down the side of the swordsman's face, brushing and causing his earrings to jingle softly, before continuing down his neck and over his collarbone. Along the ridge of scar tissue dividing his pectorals, lingering briefly over his heart as though seeking reassurance that it's still beating.

_I-

"Zoro-" Both hands on him now, moving over his ribcage and forcing him to inhale because it's just shy of ticklish, sliding down his sides to grasp his hips and draw him gently but insistently closer, thumbs rubbing slow circles on his lower belly. "Zoro, can I-?"

He's breathing again but unable to speak, wanting to demand that his captain stop treating him as though he's so fragile he'll break but holding back because he's a little afraid he might break anyway – doesn't trust his own voice to hold steady – so he answers by curling his fingers around the base of Luffy's skull and dragging him down to crush their mouths together.

The younger pirate utters incredulous muffled laughter but refuses to let himself be rushed, deliberately slowing the pace even further, and they've been lying curled around each other, exchanging slow deep kisses and soft caresses for what seems like an incredibly long time when he finally pulls away to reach for the stoppered bottle they keep in the top drawer of the nightstand.

Only to be caught short by Zoro's hand snagging him by the wrist as his first mate nods pointedly towards their closed bedroom door.

Frozen in a half-crouch, Luffy tilts his head, listening- and then dejectedly slumps over, bypassing the pillow to thump his forehead against the headboard. "… shit."

"Yeah," Zoro grumbles, uncomfortably aware that his body's all but demanding an explanation for the sudden interruption- and then snorts, burying his face against Luffy's collarbone and squeezing him around the middle. "Are we SURE we want another one?"

"Maybe he'll go back to sleep on his own…"

Any hope of escape from parental duties abruptly vanishes as they hear the faint squeak of hinges and footsteps in the hallway outside.

"Damn it. I knew you were being too fucking loud earlier."

"I couldn't help it! Zoro finally agreed to-"

The argument's interrupted by heavy knocking, loud and arrhythmic, and Ace's irritated, sleep-slurred voice. "Dad? Dad!"
They look at each other.

"DAD."

"... yeah?"

"Sabo's awake, and he woke me up too."

"... okay, we'll be right there."

"Oi, what's this 'we' stuff."

"Mmm, I don't know- maybe everything?" The captain hums, scooting down enough to locate Zoro's mouth so he can kiss it soundly, and for a few minutes they get completely sidetracked again- at least until their older son comes back and starts banging on the door in earnest, demanding to know what the hell's taking them so long.

Much to his dismay, Zoro finds himself bombarded with curious glances and knowing smiles throughout breakfast the next morning, which means the kids weren't the only ones disturbed by Luffy's goddamn loud mouth. And whoever was on watch - no one will admit to working that particular shift - told at least one other person, which means the whole fucking crew knows.

And they sure as hell aren't keeping quiet about it either.

If the goddamn cook cracks one more shitty joke about happy newlyweds, I'm gonna punch the bastard right in his stupid smug face.

Granted, the outcome of their discussion would've been blindingly obvious anyway, given Luffy's beaming smile and sparkling eyes and the way he's being suddenly extra solicitous of his first mate, sharing food – at least the dishes he's less interested in – and volunteering for diaper changes without being pestered into helping like usual.

The swordsman, on the other hand, is in a downright horrible mood, frustrated and impatient after last night's interruption. To be perfectly honest, he just wants to escape his crewmates and daily duties for a while. He'd give a lot for an afternoon alone with his captain and no untimely interruptions, but that means finding someone to watch the boys, because while Ace is old enough to entertain himself and typically smart enough to stay out of trouble without his less responsible father's interference, Sabo literally needs constant supervision when he's not sleeping.

He meant everything he told Luffy, he doesn't regret his decision and he's certainly not about to go back on his word, but Zoro can't help feeling apprehensive about the prospect of not one but two children that aren't potty-trained, not to mention the plethora of restrictions Chopper's likely to levy on him before double diaper duty even becomes an issue.

Sure enough, the ship's physician asks him to stay behind after the meal, and when he wanders into the infirmary after Luffy heads outside with Ace and Sabo, he's greeted by a large jar of suspiciously familiar-looking capsules.

"What the hell is that."

"Prenatal vitamins," the reindeer replies, pushing the container into his hands and letting go so he's forced to take it or risk dropping the entire thing on the floor. "I want you to start taking these right away. One capsule every morning at breakfast. Or every night at dinner- it doesn't matter as long
as you're taking them with food."

"But I'm not-"

"It doesn't matter. You might be recovered from the last laparotomy, but there's a chance you're still vitamin-deficient."

"I feel fine."

"Maybe, but if-" Chopper catches himself, looking slightly guilty. "I mean, when you get pregnant, the fetus is going to start depleting your body of nutrients as it grows, and if you've already been taking these, you're less likely to end up anemic."

He draws himself up to his full height, which – to Zoro's amusement – doesn't amount to much seeing how he's currently in Brain Point, but he's got that look. The one that makes their captain grumble about bossy doctors and the swordsman himself want to vacate the premises because he or one of the kids is likely to end up getting jabbed by a needle or three. "If you and Luffy want another baby and are going to start trying to conceive, I'm making sure we do it the right way this time instead of playing catch up after the fact."

"Well, at the rate we're going, you've got plenty of time to plan or whatever other shit you wanna do, because whatever's getting fucked around here, it sure as hell ain't me."

"Ah… that- that was a little more information than I needed…"

And probably a little more information than the swordsman intended to offer, but- he's having a bad day. And besides, Chopper already knows enough details about their personal shit that this particular tidbit's not going to break his brain. Not when he survived listening to Luffy complain at length about certain problems associated with rubbermen utilizing latex-based methods of protection during sex.

*Thank fucking god for doctor-patient confidentiality and Sencho keeping his blasted mouth shut for once, because if the rest of the crew found out, we'd never hear the end of THAT one.*

Zoro gives the jar in his grasp a slight shake, eyeing it dubiously because it sure seems like an awful lot of pills, and then stuffs it into his haramaki with an air of resignation. "Fine."

"That means taking them- not just tossing that bottle in a drawer and forgetting about it," the Zoan tells him sternly. "If I ask Luffy or Ace and find out that it's still full or you've been dumping them somewhere-"

"Okay, okay- look, I'll take the damn things.” His captain and son chasing him around the ship and harassing the shit out of him is the last thing he needs.

*Although, if this works, I'm eventually gonna get too damn fat and slow to outrun 'em anyway,* he thinks and utters a mental sigh. *Oh well- here we go again.*

"Oh, and before you go, there's a few other things I'd like to discuss."

*Shit.*

<center>xxx</center>

The crew takes advantage of the time needed for the log pose to recalibrate and spends most of the second day either relaxing on the ship or tinkering with various projects, although when Zoro exits
the dining hall following his conversation with Chopper, he discovers that Nami and Usopp have finally headed ashore and taken Robin with them.

Franky's busy puttering around in his workshop and Sanji's pacing the deck outside the kitchen, plotting menus for the next few weeks now that their food stores are fully stocked again. Jinbei – their informal delegate for promoting amicable relations with the few ships of fishmen in the mostly human fleet – has been called elsewhere to deal with an ongoing dispute.

On the lawn deck, Luffy and Ace are playing a rather half-assed game of tag with Sabo, flailing their arms and pretending they're rooted to the grass and can't move when the toddler comes stumbling clumsily after them because he keeps losing his balance and plunking down on his backside or doing little forward rolls when his feet don't want to keep up with his body.

Brook's seated cross-legged on the ground outside the men's quarters where he's less likely to have anyone tripping over him, polishing and testing the edge on his blade. As Zoro watches, the skeleton casually swishes at a fallen leaf that's drifting down from the tree overhead, slicing it into neat, almost perfectly proportioned quarters.

The green-haired swordsman briefly debates wandering over to request a sparring session – their styles vary enough that a friendly duel gives them both a serious workout – but almost immediately reconsiders.

*Mood I'm in, that might not be such a good idea. Not sure I trust my control right now.*

Likewise the idea of heading to the gym. Weight training will only remind him of other ways to get sweaty and horizontal- ones that are far more enjoyable than slinging around a bunch of two-ton barbells.

*Fuck. Get ahold of yourself, man- where the hell's all your discipline?*

He can't help it. Not when he knows that the next time he gets laid won't involve dealing with those goddamn little rubber things and the inevitable frayed nerves when they break or pop off or he and Luffy just plain fucking forget.

No awkward fumbling at the last minute.

No getting doused with ridiculous amounts of lube.

*No obnoxious SQUEAKING NOISES.*

Just him and his captain's-

"Oi, gimme a hand with this?"

Startled out of his increasingly lurid thoughts, Zoro can't decide if he wants to deck Usopp or thank him for providing the distraction that's just derailed his brain from the kaleidoscope of pornographic imagery that's sure to start making his trousers even tighter than they already are if he doesn't quit daydreaming. "Huh? Yeah, give it here. I thought you guys just left."

The sniper passes him a wheel of fishing line from the tackle box he's plunked down on the grass. "Nami forget something- said she needed to come back, and I didn't get much sleep last night so-

"You were the one on watch." He knows he's right by the way Usopp twitches visibly at this proclamation.
"I most certainly was n- … okay, maybe I just happened to be walking across the lawn deck and maybe I just happened to hear Luffy yelling and maybe I just happened to mention in passing – IN PASSING, I SWEAR – that somebody sounded really happy when I ran into Sanji in the kitchen this morning when my shift ended. Don't hurt me- I have a very delicate disposition and faint at the sight of blood."

"… shut up and tell me why I'm standing here holding this damn thing."

"… right. So, anyway, Nami and Robin headed back out, but I decided there wasn't anything I really needed that bad to make it worth elbowing my way through all those people. It's really crowded today and at least half of 'em are from our ships."

"Those aren't our ships."

Usopp grimaces. "You know what I mean. I decided I'd rather hang out here and see if I can't hook a fish or two."

He gives the rod protruding from beneath his arm a wiggle. "Sanji said he overheard a bunch of guys talking about lots of weird fish being in the harbor this time of year. Maybe we can catch something new for the aquarium."

"Kids would probably like that," Zoro agrees as he unwinds a length of line and gives it a curious tug. "Oi- this stuff's pretty tough."

"I got tired of the other kind breaking all the time. These bloody New World fish- oi, prep this for me?" He stoops to rummage through his tackle box while the swordsman snaps the spool into the reel and threads the loose portion through the guides. "So, uh, you guys are really gonna try for another kid?"

"Sounds like that's the plan." The older pirate settles onto the grass, leaning his back against the railing while he watches his nakama baiting the hook.

_Maybe I'll just catch a nap before lunch._

There's a short silence broken only by the whir of the line being cast, and then: "… think it'll happen?"

_Or not._

"Beats me. Chopper's on the fence right now- says it could go either way," he responds without bothering to open his eye. ".-but you know Luffy's philosophy. Do or die trying."

He's rewarded with a choked sputtering noise, and it takes Usopp several tries before he's able to ask, "D-Doesn't it bug you though, still n-not knowing how the whole thing works? I mean, if it was me, I- I think it'd drive me nuts trying to figure it out."

"Usopp… we live with a talking reindeer and a skeleton that eats and shits. The shipwright's a cyborg that's probably more robot than human at this point, the archeologist can duplicate not only body parts but her entire freaking body, and our captain can shoot himself around like a rubberband, tie himself in knots, and give himself giant fists by blowing air into his bones."

"…"

"Seriously. Me popping out a couple of kids isn't a whole hell of a lot weirder. I don't know- I guess most of the time I just try not to think about it too much." He elbows the sniper's leg. "And
anyway, you're the one who tells the bullshit stories about monster goldfish and all that other crap."

"My goldfish isn't bullshit," Usopp retorts, eyes leaving the bobber briefly so he can glare down at the swordsman. "That's always been one of Ace's favorite- oh, oi, I got a bite!"

"That was fast," Zoro snorts, tucking his arm back behind his head. "Guess the fish aren't too-"

Shy, he's about to finish, but there's a loud squawk of alarm before the word can leave his mouth, and he opens his eye just in time to see his startled crewmate yanked bodily over the railing. A frantic grab for the airborne sniper's boot leaves him clutching nothing but air – those fucking missing fingers, goddamn it – and he rolls onto his hands and knees, peering between the balusters just in time to see Usopp go plunging headfirst into the water below.
Chapter 4

A few yards away, Luffy stops so abruptly that Ace runs into him, nearly falling on his face and taking his father with him when Sabo finally catches up and latches onto his leg. "Uh, what just happened to Usopp?"

"Bloody fish must've yanked him right off the-" Zoro tenses, bolting upright just as his captain stiffens and comes racing over to the railing after hurriedly instructing their older son to keep an eye on the younger. The swordsman hurriedly yanks his sash loose and pulls his coat off, dropping it to the grass and slipping his sheathed katana directly into his haramaki. He'll be better able to maneuver underwater without the extra layers.

"Zoro-san? Luffy-san?" Brook calls from across the lawn, sheathing his blade and rising to his feet. "Is everything alright?"

"Dad, what-?"

"Stay there!" Zoro barks at Ace before he can take another step. "You heard the captain- stay put, goddamn it, and watch your brother!"

Luffy doesn't tell his first mate to be careful - refuses to undermine his authority like that in front of their crewmates and children - but he lets his concern for the older pirate show briefly in his eyes, and Zoro gives a slight nod of acknowledgement before diving over the side, gripping the handle of one sword in preparation for drawing it.

A loud splash – the second in less than a minute – as he enters the water, followed almost immediately by a flurry of activity that produces massive amounts of spray until the participants move further below the surface.

"LUFFY?"

The rubber man looks up to find Sanji hurrying down the stairs, having just emerged from the kitchen. The cook's head is swiveling back and forth, scanning the decks for signs of the threat he's just sensed, even as he charges across the grass towards them.

"Zoro's taking care of it."

Brook joins them by the railing. "May I ask what's happening?"

"Something in the water," the captain explains, peering over the side to where the disturbance is now kicking up a churning mess of bubbles. "Dunno what exactly, but it's really pissed. Sanji, when they come up-"

"Got it."
"Brook- the kids?"

"Absolutely. I'll gladly keep Ace-kun and Sabo-chan out of the fray," the skeleton assures him and immediately moves off to where the seven-year-old, holding the toddler under the armpits to keep him from wandering off, is standing on tiptoe and straining to see what's going on without disobeying orders.

As they're watching, an unseen impact far below causes the ship to shudder almost imperceptibly and the froth that's roiling up from the seabed is suddenly tinged pink. Gritting his teeth and cursing his inability to swim, Luffy finds himself squeezing the railing with fingers gone white.

Blood, that's definitely blood. Come on, damn it- COME ON. Zoro, Usopp-

The commotion on the surface slowly dies down, leaving the surface calm beyond the bloody foam drifting back and forth on the sea swells- and then a long, snaking grey and black-speckled body rises to the surface, oozing dark ichor into the water surrounding the ship.

The damn thing's a good forty to fifty feet long and nearly twice the width of his torso, and his first impression is that it's a giant python. Something bigger than Hancock's snake yet still smaller than the one that ate him whole a long time ago on Sky Island – maybe somewhere in the middle – but then he spots the flappy thing sagging open on the one end and realizes he's looking at a fish.

Where the hell-

To his relief, their crewmate's heads burst into view a moment later, both of them coughing and spitting, and Zoro swearing exuberantly.

"Oi, Luffy, get us the fuck out of here!"

The captain complies, flinging down a hand to haul them aboard- and Sanji's forced to grab him around the waist to keep him from tumbling down head-over-heels into their crewmates' faces, because they're unexpectedly heavier than he anticipated.

Gritting his teeth, Luffy pulls hard, hauling Zoro and Usopp back onto the ship- along with the unconscious and badly wounded fishman that the first mate's clutching by the ankle and drops to the deck with a careless thump and look of disgust.

"Holy shit!" He hears Ace exclaim somewhere behind him, but he ignores his son's excitement, reaching down to yank aside the torn shirt lapel that's obscuring the other half of a very familiar tattoo.

"I fucking told you-" Zoro snarls, dashing blood and water from his face, and Luffy's startled to see that his lover's bleeding from not only the vivid scrape on his temple but also a series of narrow but deep cuts running almost parallel to the scar on his chest. "-there's too many goddamn people we don't know following us!"

"I- recognize- that guy," Usopp volunteers, bent double with his hands on his knees and panting as he struggles to catch his breath. The sniper's nose is running, snot tinged with streaks of red as though he's been forcefully slapped, but he appears otherwise unharmed. "Saw him- on one of the other ships."

"Throw him in the aquarium bar with somebody watching him and-" The captain breaks off as Zoro steps into him, dripping frame crowding him against the railing.

"Bedroom. Now." The older pirate growls. "We need to talk."
Luffy hesitates, considering what to do, because judging by his swordsman's lower body brushing against him and his awkward stance, his anger isn't the thing that's been roused. He can feel frustration of two very different types literally radiating from Zoro, and it doesn't take him more than a few seconds to guess why. If they head below-decks now, he knows there's a good chance they won't be back for a while. "Sanji, get Chopper to look at this guy so he doesn't die or anything before Jinbei comes back and gets a chance to talk to him and find out what the hell he was doing—but tie him up or something too, 'cause I don't want him wandering around the ship whenever he wakes up."

He turns to Brook and Usopp. "If you guys could watch the kids...? And, uh, maybe they should sleep in the men's quarters tonight..."

"I claim top bunk," Ace interjects immediately, still staring at the comatose fishman as he tightens his hold on his furiously wriggling younger sibling.

"What about the eel?" Sanji asks, patting his shirt pocket in search of a cigarette. "It looks edible enough- assuming it's already-"

"It's dead, alright," Zoro mutters. "Fucker tried to ambush me, nearly got me run through with the trident that bastard was carrying, and then Usopp here crammed an impact dial up its nose and blew off half its damn head."

"Nice."

"Yeah, fucking lovely. Sencho-"

"Okay, I'll be back later to find out what's going on, but if you guys could just leave us alone for a while, that'd probably be a really good idea." Luffy stoops to retrieve his swordsman's coat and sash from the grass, bundling it under one arm. "C'mon, Zoro, let's go."

xxx

Thankfully the older pirate's calmed down quite a bit by the time they reach their room, and he doesn't seem quite so ready to fly off the handle when his captain coaxes him to sit on the edge of the bed so they can peel off his wet clothing.

"Chopper's gonna kill me." He raises his hips to help Luffy wrestle his sodden haramaki over his ass and down his legs to avoid aggravating his injuries rather than pulling it off over his head as usual, his expression still dark but now merely annoyed rather than furious. "Pretty sure I lost that goddamn jar of pills he just gave me. Forgot I had them on me until I was already in the water."

"He can give you more. And it's not like you did it on purpose," the captain murmurs, fingers carefully probing the fresh wounds on his first mate's chest. "How'd that guy even manage to scratch you?"

"Freaking eel came out of nowhere- I'm facing off against that bastard, ready to cut him down, and then I suddenly got this angry fish trying to take a chunk out of me. Guy I was fighting wasn't expecting it either, judging by the look on his face, but he sure as hell took advantage of it. Would've been a completely different story on land, but... I'm pretty sure Usopp saved my ass down there." Zoro makes a face. "World's Greatest Swordsman gets bailed out at close quarters by the long distance fighter. Jeez, talk about embarrassing."

"Zoro's the one who was talking about people working together to keep the crew safe," Luffy tells him reassuringly, leaning in to inspect the scrape on his face and then giving it a kiss. "And... you
were right about the other stuff too. We need to get away from everybody that's following us."

"Less chance of shit like this happening again."

"Yeah." He uses the hem of his shirt to dry his swordsman's face, prompting a sputtering laugh of protest.

"Oi. I'm not one of the kids, damn it."

"No," the rubber man grins, nudging his way between Zoro's knees so he's standing almost on top of him, still-clothed pelvis bumping his bare one. "Mmm, you're definitely not..."

He slides his fingers through damp green hair, shivering a little as his shirt's eased open and warm lips ghost over the starburst on his chest, hands sliding around his back to pull him closer. "I'll- ah-talk to Nami then- about figuring out a way to ditch the fleet- when we leave after the pose resets."

"Good, 'cause-" A pause as teeth rake lightly against the roughened texture of the old burn. "-it's one less thing we've gotta worry about nine months down the road or whenever the hell we're having this baby we didn't make yet."

"You saying you wanna start trying- get to work- right now?"

"Work?" Zoro complains, abandoning the nipple his mouth's been exploring to glare up at him. "Is that what this is? Work?"

"O-Oi, I meant that in a good way!"

"Yeah, well, I think you're a little overdressed for this kind of work..."

"That can be easily- hnnn~ wait, Zoro, I thought you wanted to talk!"

The swordsman's fingers have slipped inside of his waistband, trailing across his skin as they wiggle his shorts down his hips. "I did. And we did. You said I was right and that we'd take care of shit as soon as we get the chance. But right now there's nothing else we can do about it, and everybody up there has shit under control, so-"

Calloused thumbs graze the soft flesh in the junctures where his thighs meet his groin.

"All I could think about- all goddamn morning- was getting you alone for a while, and-"

Kisses are now being dropped steadily along one edge of his scar, where the damaged skin's got greater sensitivity than the shallow crater at the center.

"-I want you to finish what you started last night."

A tongue joins the lips, warm and wet and sending shivers quivering up and down his spine. That already growling voice goes even lower and throatier, reverberating in his chest and setting every nerve ending ablaze.

"I want you to make love to me."

"Zoro-" He can't finish – can barely think – because that particular proclamation does funny things to his stomach that a less eloquent demand of "fuck me" - while no less enticing - never could accomplish, and his throat turns traitor, refusing to allow even the simplest response.

But maybe that doesn't matter. Maybe he doesn't need to say anything anyway, because maybe
actions will speak louder than words.

He taps Zoro's shoulder, taking care not to push him down but applying just enough force to ensure that he lies back on his own, legs hanging over the side of the bed. The swordsman's hands leave him reluctantly, fingers splaying in the rumpled sheets as he props himself on his elbows to watch.

Luffy exhales slowly and reaches down to trail his fingertips across the older pirate's parted thighs, applying just a hint of pressure with his nails as he moves his own lower body closer so they're pressed firmly together.

He slides his palms higher, caressing his lover's abdomen and torso, tracing old scars as well as the new thin raw marks on his chest. Then higher again, leaning forward to keep his thumbs moving gently up the muscular neck, and to his immense gratification, Zoro unhesitatingly tilts his head back to expose his throat. It's a display of trust that nearly overwhelms him, and he can't stop himself, bending down to nuzzle his first mate's Adam's apple, kissing under his chin and along his jaw.

"That tickles, damn it," Zoro murmurs before his mouth's claimed, hooking both ankles behind his back and digging them into his buttocks to draw him closer, one hand leaving the bed to tug awkwardly at his sleeve in a fruitless attempt to remove the shirt he's still wearing.

The captain hums delightedly, giving a little rock of his hips because he can feel his swordsman rubbing warm and hard against his own eager body. He licks across Zoro's bottom lip, the pads of his thumbs stroking lightly, inquiringly, at the corners of his mouth as he cradles his face between both hands, and the older pirate opens to him immediately, allowing his tongue access with a soft groan.

Heart hammering steadily faster in his chest, Luffy kisses him thoroughly until they're both close to struggling for oxygen, and when he finally pulls away, breathing somewhat raggedly, he's pleased to see his swordsman looking nearly as stunned as he himself feels, eye half-lidded and face flushed.

He struggles out of his shirt, dropping it to the floor without looking, and reaches for the nightstand, nearly yanking the drawer straight out of the frame in his haste, and Zoro starts laughing at him, sounding both winded and dazed, and giving him shit until he finally pauses to remove his hat from where it's dangling behind him, but that's okay.

I'd rather see him smiling than mad any day. I love when he smiles- he needs to look like that more often.

The lubricant's slick and cool on his fingers but reaches body temperature quickly, so the older pirate doesn't jump when it's applied but merely makes another low guttural noise of interest, fingers knotting in the sheets as he curls his body, wrestling a pillow under one elbow to push himself higher in an attempt to see what's happening below his waist.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I just- I wanna watch. Your face... and everything else."

He wants to watch me- inside him, Luffy realizes- and needs to remind himself to keep breathing.

He introduces one finger and then another with relative ease, swallowing forcefully as he registers the tightness and heat of Zoro's body. His swordsman's relaxed, pliant and malleable under his touch, and he finds himself thinking that maybe they need to do this more often. Take their time,
take it slow, instead of rushing straight to the finish as they've been prone to do thanks to the
constant threat of interruption by kids, crewmates, sea kings, other pirate vessels, Marines and
everything else that might pop up in a given day and necessitate the use of fifteen-minute quickies
as a distressingly frequent habit.

Need to make this last, make it good, just in case we DON'T get the rest of the day to ourselves.

Even so, it's not easy restraining himself. Not when his entire body feels as though it's thrumming
uncontrollably, his pulse especially strong in his groin, because from this angle-

I- wow.

He's got a good view- an excellent view- of his lover's erection, thick and firm and leaking a thin
strand of clear fluid down his side, not to mention his own rubbing firmly along the older pirate's
inner thigh and leaving sticky smears as he glances down to watch his sliding fingers scissoring
and delving deeper. But the best part is looking up to Zoro's florid face, seeing his brow furrowed
slightly in concentration and his tongue darting out to moisten his dry lips.

Thorough. He needs to be thorough and make absolutely sure that the older pirate's ready for him,
but it's hard as hell. HE'S hard as hell, aching and wanting.

Now. I need to- I need-

"Zoro-" He means to ask for permission to proceed, but his hesitation prompts a soft snarl of
exasperation.

"Luffy, don't stop- I swear, if you stop, I'm going to kill y-"

He spreads his embedded fingers wider and uses his free hand to press himself between them
before pulling them completely free. There's not much force behind it and definitely not enough
maneuvering room with his wrist in the way, so he's barely able to nudge more than an inch or
possibly two inside, but the reaction is instantaneous. His swordsman arches off the bed, body
apparently trying to propel itself in two directions at once – both towards him to drive him deeper
and backwards up the wall to escape – one arm flailing out, hand latching onto the headboard.

Despite his violent reaction, the expression on Zoro's face is pure longing and impatience, and the
strangled noise that bursts from his throat goes straight to Luffy's groin. The younger pirate pulls
back, a faint hiss escaping his clenched teeth as the feverish stricture around his tip vanishes and
leaves him close to pain with its absence, and quickly withdraws his fingers.

Fumbling to coat himself with more lubricant, accidentally dropping the bottle on the floor when it
squirts out from between his fingers and not caring that it's probably spilling all over the carpet
because his partner's squirming and cursing at him, heels skidding on his buttocks.

"Damn it, Luffy, will you- quit fucking teasing me and put it in already!"

"Okay, okay!" He slides his hands under Zoro's knees and lifts, shifting the older pirate's rear
higher off the bed to gain a better angle of entry and helping him hook both legs over his shoulders.

It's his intention to watch their bodies come together in slow satisfying inches, to savor the
moment, but the second he starts pressing inside and feels himself sliding into that tight heat,
instinct takes over, and he buries himself before he can remember he wanted to hold back.

"F-Fuck-" Zoro groans, hand tightening reflexively on the headboard and making it creak. He's got
himself braced, pushing off it without letting go so he can lean forward to peer down to where
they're joined, and his arm is quivering slightly, the muscles bulging and tendons standing out in clear relief.

The captain bites his lower lip, staring down as well as he eases back out, transfixed by the sight of his swordsman's body hugging his lubricant-slicked shaft. His eyes dart upwards to study Zoro's face, and the expression of need- of desperation- of vulnerability that he finds there drives him forward again, deeper.

So deep that he rocks his first mate's hips even farther off the mattress, bringing their faces close enough that their noses are bumping and he strains forward to kiss him, knowing they're skin-to-skin with nothing between them and he won't need to hold back or pull out when the time comes. And while he's never minded doing that - has never made a secret of the fact that he enjoys painting his lover's skin with his release - the thought of finally being able to do it inside again, with all this snug, clenching heat surrounding him-

Zoro's mouth smothers the whimper escaping from his own, rendering it barely audible.

Hips rocking, nudging insistently, Luffy squeezes a hand between them, groping and palming the older pirate a bit more roughly than he intended, and there's another ominous squeal from the headboard.

*Franky's gonna get so mad if he-

Thrusting faster, harder, because the idea of Zoro breaking part of their bed- the idea of MAKING Zoro break the bed- refuses to go away. And he sort of wants it to happen. Wants to see the wood buckle, hear it snap as the rail tears loose from the struts. Wants to make the entire bedframe bang repeatedly against their bedroom wall.

The younger pirate doesn't realize just how carried away he's getting until Zoro, increasingly strident sounds of protest muffled by his mouth, twists under him sharply. One leg slips off his shoulder, locking around his waist and dragging him closer so it's harder to move and they're trapped groin to groin.

Releasing the headboard, he braces his hand on Luffy's collarbone and pushes, forcibly parting their lips. "O-Oi, slow- slow down; you're being too-

Blinking sweat out of his eyes, the captain leans back to look at him and feels as though he's been punched in the stomach. Zoro's panting and struggling not to grimace, spread thighs trembling uncontrollably, and while he hasn't gone completely limp in his lover's grasp, he's obviously in some discomfort.

What the hell am I doing? This isn't making love, this is-

Feeling ashamed as well as disappointed and angry with himself for being so thoughtless- so careless- mere minutes after congratulating himself for not rushing, he tries to pull away-

Back up, give him some space, you idiot. You're lucky he didn't punch you right in your stupid face, 'cause you sure deserve it.

-but Zoro refuses to let him go, both legs tightening around him. "You don't have to stop- hell, I don't want you to stop but- n-not so rough."

He nods, staring down at where his swordsman's drooping under his fingers. He relaxes his grip, touch turning soothing. "Sorry..."
"Oi, don't- don't look like that." The other pirate tugs him back down and kisses him reassuringly. "Keep going, just slower, okay? You tear me up and we're not gonna be able to spend all day in bed- we're gonna spend it in the infirmary 'cause I won't be able to fucking walk."

"Y-Yeah." He takes Zoro's words for the subtle plea they are, because even though he's unlikely to come right out and say it, that's clearly what he means: I'm trusting you, so don't hurt me. "I just-"

Want you, need you. But- no, this isn't about what I want.

He starts again, slow, gentle, exceedingly thorough. Focusing more on Zoro this time rather than himself, petting and stroking him all over, kissing not just his mouth but the rest of his face as well, lingering over his scarred eye and he knows he's doing it right this time, because his swordsman's fairly melting under him and once more going hard and soft in all the right places.

His lover's still got one leg resting on his shoulder and the other wrapped over his hip- a position that's not only left him fully exposed, making it easier for Luffy to reach the rest of him, but also giving them both more room to move.

He braces his arms on the bed on either side of Zoro's torso and leans forward, changing to short thrusts that prevent him from pulling out very far, and his first mate's hand slips under his arm, coming up to grip his shoulder and reduce his range of motion even further, until he's remaining fully sheathed and just rocking their bodies back and forth.

There's droplets of moisture sliding down his bare skin, dropping free to join those already beaded on the swordsman's chest, and Luffy leans their foreheads together, closing his eyes, because he's afraid that he's going to lose control again if he keeps looking. There's a warm liquid sensation bubbling in his stomach, threatening to boil over, and he doesn't want that- not yet- not until-

Zoro needs to- we need to- together...

Last night, he reflects dizzily, he told Zoro that he wants to share everything, and he means it. Everything, including this. Especially this. He's never been so certain of anything in his life.

Shifting his weight to one arm and balancing above the older pirate, he uses his free hand to squeeze and caress and stroke him between their bodies, moaning when the tightness surrounding him increases.

"I'm- uhn-" Zoro squirms, arching his back, trying to buck against him. "Faster- but not-"

Luffy complies, switching to quick plunging strokes, although this time he's careful to restrain himself, determined to prevent his movements from degenerating into nothing but frantic pounding. Eyes fixed on his swordsman's contorting face, he searches almost frantically for the angle capable of bringing them both together, because if he keeps this pace- there's no way he can hold back for very long, no matter how determined.

xxx

Luffy's hips tilt mere degrees and the next thrust bows his back, thumping the headboard clutched in his grip hard against the wall.

Oh- oh, shit- I'm so-

He wants to tell his captain that he's close, but he can't think, can't breathe, can't even fully articulate the words spilling from his mouth, because he's lost in the younger pirate's eyes and that piercing gaze has reduced his vocabulary - currently limited to Sencho's name and assorted forms
of broken assent consisting mostly of *fuck yes please now NOW* - to barely coherent gasps.

And apparently he's not the only one rendered incapable of coherency at the moment, because-

"Z-Zoro- I-I'm g- ah, c-can I-?"

Knowing exactly what Luffy's trying to say despite his broken query, Zoro's no longer poised on the edge but falling past it, driven to orgasm not only by the repetitive pressure against that sensitive spot and by the hand stroking him insistently but also by the thought that his lover's asking permission to come inside him.

He lets go of the headboard, scarcely conscious of the fact that he has indeed cracked it, and clutches for the younger pirate instead, wrapping both arms around his neck and clinging there, back bowing as he muffles a cry against his shoulder.

Luffy follows a moment later, shuddering from head to toe and trying to push deeper despite being already buried to the hilt, and even though the swordsman can't actually feel his pulsing release, he's intensely aware it's happening because his lover's hips are molding themselves skintight against his rear with each surge, rocking his entire body.

Letting go of him to brace both hands on the bed, unable to keep his balance on one arm that's gone wobbly, his captain pulls back for another thrust, face contorting, and Zoro feels wet warmth escaping and dampening the sheets beneath him. He convulses, raking his lover's back hard enough to leave marks - although neither of them will notice until later - and digging his heel against the small of his back, clumsily gathering him in again.

This time Luffy stays put, forearms quivering as he fights to keep from collapsing. He exhales forcefully and slowly eases himself down until his forehead's resting lightly on his first mate's chest, his body leaning awkwardly to one side to avoid crushing the older pirate's bent knee into his own face.

Little aftershock spasms of pleasure are shivering through Zoro's spine, and he's glad he's already lying down because his head is spinning and he can't seem to stop shaking. The leg he's still got propped up on his captain's shoulder is trembling uncontrollably, trapped inside the circle of his own arms, and it takes him several tries, but eventually he manages to untangle his limbs and slump bonelessly backwards against the mattress.

"Ow, my neck…" And with far more interest and amusement. "Heh, Zoro, you're all twitchy."

"… my damn leg fell asleep…" The swordsman mutters, although he's not entirely sure how much of this is jittery, cramped muscles and how much is actually nervous energy. He rubs his nose and cheek into Luffy's hair, swallows dryly and then gives the rubber man an impulsive and very firm squeeze.

"Oof! Zoro, what-?" The younger pirate raises his head to peer at him quizzically, and then comprehension floods his eyes. "Oh."

Elaboration's unnecessary; the slightest movement's enough to remind them both that while they're no longer actively engaged in anything, they're still intimately connected. Furthermore, now that a few minutes have passed, it's become more than evident that Zoro's lying in one hell of a wet spot.

"You're sleeping on this side tonight-" He states with a bravado he doesn't feel, because gravity's making itself known in form of whatever's running down the inside of his left leg now that he's no longer got his ass hoisted in the air. ":-if that shit doesn't dry before then."
"Zoro made just as much of a mess as me!" Luffy protests, then laughs and kisses him. "But if it means we can do this more often… I'd sleep in the wet spot every night..."

"O-Oi..." The swordsman stammers, giving him a shove- and tensing, biting back a gasp, as the movement dislodges him- and produces a minor flood. "Damn it, Luffy, what are you- a fucking lawn sprinkler? Jeez..."

"Sorry, I couldn't help it," his captain explains, looking anything but apologetic as he crawls the rest of the way onto the bed and flops down at Zoro's side, snuggling against him and resting his head on his shoulder. "It's been a little while, so..."

"Tch. Like you don't jerk off whenever you get the chance."

"That's different."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Now budge over," the swordsman tells him, swinging his legs up so the two of them are stretched out full-length on the mattress, and they've been lounging there in comfortable silence, lost in their thoughts and soaking up each other's body heat for a good fifteen minutes – a veritable record of quiet for Luffy – when he finally speaks again. "Oi..."

"Hmm?"

"You think it was a coincidence- that guy showing up right after Jinbei left?"

"... probably not. Kinda fishy."

Zoro raises his head slightly to fix the younger pirate with wry expression of disbelief, but he's apparently oblivious to his own horrible pun because he just raises an eyebrow and stares back. "What? I mean, it was weird timing, wasn't it?"

"... nevermind."

"Guess we'll find out, right?" Luffy shrugs, one fingertip now doodling idly on his bare skin, tracing the pads of muscle lining his abdomen and straying with undisguised interest towards his crotch. "So... did you mean it, when you said that about spending all day in bed?"

_one-track mind, I swear-

"Enough talking, huh?" The swordsman snorts, then grins and flips over, pinning him flat on his back in the damp, tangled sheets. "Yeah, I did- but I think it's my turn."

"Shishishi- Zoro, you know that's not gonna-"

"Maybe not, but- ...what's that shit they say? About all work and no play?"
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Alright, a real quick comment about the last chapter before we get started, since deadhemoglobin raised a great point in her last review. When I was writing last chapter's sex scene, I was having fits about the whole "making love" line and nearly took it out because I felt it was a little too OOC. My beta, however, insisted that I leave it in to emphasis the point that they've been together for so long and been through so much shit that they've got a slightly different perspective when it comes to sex. And he's generally pretty anal retentive about characters being IC and has been in the One Piece fandom a hell of a lot longer than me, so I went ahead and followed his advice. Gotta say though- it was definitely deliberate on Zoro's part; he knew exactly what he was doing when he phrased it that way.

And at least I didn't use the "asdfghjkl omfg LuFFY MAKE ME PREGNANT" line that I jokingly threw into the actual rp when it was going down and things got a little more cracktastic than we expected.

Ahem. Good, now that you're laughing - or at least snorting quietly under your breath - you're ready for the emotional yo-yo that the following chapter somehow became. Goddamn Straw Hats won't cut me a break.

"What are they gonna do with him?" Ace asks solemnly, fingers clutching the railing as he watches the ship that's now carrying away yesterday's unwanted guest move steadily towards the horizon line.

"Well-" Robin closes the book she's just opened and lays it on the table beside her customary lawn chair so she can join him on Sunny's starboard side. "-your father requested that Jinbei-san handle the situation, and it would appear that he's opting to leave the final decision to King Neptune."

And rightly so, considering the unfortunately high probability of stirring dissent between fishmen and humans in the event of, heaven forbid, an execution. I doubt Luffy-san would agree to such, but even declaring a nonlethal sentence could potentially mean losing what little ground we've gained in combating the old prejudices.

"The king's Shira's dad, right? The mermaid with the three brothers that are all littler than her, even though they're older?"

She smiles. "Neptune-sama is Princess Shirahoshi's father, yes."

The seven-year-old opens his mouth, only to close it and look cautiously around them, presumably to check if there's anyone else in earshot. "Oi, Robin-san, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I heard-" Another suspicious glance over his shoulder. "I heard Sanji-aniki telling Nami-aneki that there's people saying Dad should've killed that guy. That letting somebody like that go was really dumb and they didn't realize the Pirate King was too scared to take care of stuff like that by
himself."

"I see. Although, in response to their concerns, he didn't exactly let him go; the situation's just a bit more complicated than they realize. And in any case, being hesitant to end a life is not a weakness. Showing mercy is often the more difficult choice, especially if there's a potential for... repercussions." The historian pauses to collect her thoughts, studying the child beside her and recalling the consequences of a similar judgment made in an unfamiliar medical center some time ago. "Our captain prefers to stay his hand in these matters whenever possible, but you can trust me when I say it's not a decision lightly made."

Not after he almost lost you and Kenshi-san.

"He's done it before, though, right? 'Cause I hear you guys talk about that man sometimes. The Marine who killed his brother- the one I'm named after? And I know-" Ace tightens his grasp on the railing, suddenly reluctant to meet her eyes. "I know Dad has... 'cause... that guy. The one that he- with all the swords..."

"Yes," she says gently. "Although I'm sure he would have preferred otherwise."

"It's not- it's not my fault, is it? That Dad gets really upset sometimes and-" He takes a deep breath, regarding her with suddenly teary, troubled eyes that are startling in their resemblance to Luffy's on the rare occasions when he allows his crewmates a glimpse at the internal conflict he's so often skilled at hiding. "-does stuff that..."

Gives him nightmares unpleasant enough to wake the entire ship?

"-because he was okay until I-" The child angrily swipes his sleeve across his eyes, wiping away the moisture threatening to brim over. "... but now he's doing that thing again, where he worries about everything - even dumb stuff that doesn't really matter - and I'm not sure he knows it, but Dad does and- hell, I'm pretty sure MY BROTHER knows there's something going on and he's just a baby."

"Ace-kun," Choosing her next words carefully because she's profoundly aware that it's not within her rights to explain the source of her crewmate's emotional issues to his son. "Have you ever spoken to your father about this?"

"I- no... I don't wanna make him mad."

"I believe that's extremely unlikely," Robin assures him soothingly, restraining the impulse to reach out and smooth his hair. Since the arrival of his younger sibling, he's been far less willing to let anyone - particularly the female members of the crew - coddle him. "In fact, I think it's quite the opposite. Zoro-san may not express his feelings quite as quickly or easily as Luffy-san, but... your parents both care very much for you and your brother. If there's certain... information... they haven't chosen to share with you yet, it's not because of you or anything you've done. I'm certain they'd be willing to answer your questions."

It's highly probable that Zoro-san's been stalling and hesitant to address the situation first because he's concerned how you'll react. While he might insist that he doesn't care what others think, there are select people whose opinions matter a great deal to him- and, unless I'm mistaken, you're near the top of that particular list.

Ace has fallen silent, mulling over her words, although the disheartened expression on his face makes it quite clear that he's talking himself out of it, and she's about to suggest that he at least broach the subject with their captain, when-
"Robin, oi, Robin!" Usopp's hurrying towards them across the lawn from the men's quarters, managing to exude so much distress and disgust that the historian's almost expecting him to start wringing his hands. "Can I- ah, I mean, can Sanji and I BORROW you?"

"Certainly, but what-?"

Turning to Ace, the sniper waves his arms in exasperation. "How the hell does your dad – either of them – change your brother's diaper when he won't hold still and keeps tryINGING TO SIT UP AND CRAWL AWAY-?"

Robin utters a short chuckle of amusement at her nakama's verbal sputter. Ace, on the other hand, gives him a look disturbingly similar to the one Zoro tends to give Luffy when he spouts off something incomprehensible, and she's forced to cup a hand over her mouth to restrain the soft peal of laughter threatening to burst free.

"You got arms, don't you? And besides, there's two of you…"

"Yeah, I know, but seriously- how the hell do you get the damn thing pinned if he keeps-?"

"Oi, Usopp, don't worry about it. I'll go give the shitty cook a hand." The three of them look up to find Zoro coming towards them down the staircase at the stern of the ship, having clearly just emerged from the bathhouse because he's barefoot, dressed in nothing but a pair of trousers, and there's a damp towel draped over his shoulders.

Oh my. Our swordsman's certainly looking rather... relaxed. Perhaps someone ought to congratulate Sencho on a job well done, Robin observes, her smile widening. "Ah, good morning, Kenshi-san."

"Morning, Robin."

"We missed you at dinner last night. And lunch before that. And breakfast this morning?"

Zoro clears his throat, eyeing his son. "Uh, yeah, well- about that… we kinda lost track of time, 'cause- y'know, so much first mate-captain crap to do- I mean- discuss-"

"Dad, it's okay. I'm pretty sure I know what you guys do when you've got the door shut. The walls aren't THAT thick- and sometimes you get kinda loud."

"Err," the green-haired pirate responds intelligently, scratching the back of his head and suddenly proving so interested in the grass beneath his feet that Robin's once again thankful for her ability to maintain an excellent poker face. "… maybe Luffy and I need to talk to Franky about doing something about that…"

Usopp, looking as though he'd rather be anywhere else, shoots his nakama a withering glare. "Oi, MAYBE if you go help Sanji with that diaper, he won't try to kick you overboard like he's been threatening to do all morning. We spent breakfast listening to him pitching a fit about the mess you guys left in the kitchen whenever you decided to sneak in there last night."

"Oh shit, I thought we- uh, cleaned up most of- that-"

To their surprise – and Usopp's consternation – there's a faint flush of color surfacing on the swordsman's cheeks and across the bridge of his nose.

"What the hell did you- NO, NEVER MIND, I DON'T WANNA KNOW."
"DIAPER. GOTTA GO CHANGE THAT DIAPER. TALK TO YOU LATER." Zoro blurts, whirling and making a beeline straight for the men's quarters at a remarkably fast clip.

"Oi," Ace asks slowly, frowning slightly as he stares after his retreating father. "Is he limping?"

"Oh god, I think you're right..."

"It certainly appears that way," Robin replies cheerfully. "I must confess, I'm rather curious to discover what sort of shape our captain's in this morning."

xxx

Grumbling under his breath and trying to ignore the way his face feels like it's burning hot enough to fry an egg or two, Zoro steps into the room- and stops dead in his tracks, biting his tongue to prevent himself bursting into laughter.

Sanji, rear in the air, is cursing profusely as he tries to drag Sabo, naked and giggling hysterically, out from beneath the table in the center of the room.

"Oi, Swirly-brow, need a hand?"

The cook, who's been too preoccupied by the toddler to notice his crewmate's entrance, jumps and bangs his head against the underside of the table. "Ow, shit! Damn it, Marimo, will you get over here and do something about your kid?"

Grinning smugly but deciding to take pity on his irate nakama, the swordsman stoops to fish around under the furniture for his errant offspring, hiding a grimace when his lower back gives a warning twinge.

Fuck- looks like I'm sure as hell not hitting the gym today. Sencho and I gave each other one heck of a workout between yesterday and this morning.

Ignoring- or at least trying to ignore- the discomfort radiating from his pelvis and backside, he seizes Sabo around the waist and pulls him clear. "C'mon, kiddo, enough already. Get your ass out here before you end up pissing under the table. Or on one of us."

"Last thing I need, after dealing with your bullshit first thing this morning," Sanji growls, sitting back to watch as Zoro carefully pins the wriggling child against the floor with his right forearm and proceeds to diaper him with practiced patience if not necessarily with ease. "So that's how you've been doing it. I thought about doing something like that but I was afraid I'd hurt him."

"Nah, it's fine. He's tough." The swordsman surveys his work judgmentally, shrugs, and turns the toddler loose. Sabo immediately grabs onto him and struggles to his feet, babbling excitedly and trying to climb into his lap.

"I suppose I should be glad you guys actually thought to stop banging like rabbits long enough to eat something yesterday- but you could've ASKED before you TURNED MY BLOODY KITCHEN UPSIDE DOWN."

"Oi oi, we put everything back." He protests, hoping that it's true because he's a little fuzzy on that particular detail and not about to explain that he and his captain had dodged the night watch - he makes a mental note to give Franky hell later for not spotting them - and raided the kitchen after their first trip to the bathhouse. Luffy hadn't bothered getting dressed save for his hat, and he himself had opted for going commando under his coat, too lazy to bother with anything more when it was likely to end up getting pulled right back off anyway as soon as they got back to their room.
Except we never made it back to bed, he recalls, trying not to grin because Sanji's glaring murderously at him. Failing, because his aching body's more than happy to remind him of how he'd interrupted Sencho mid-bite by shoving him into the nearest chair, straddling his thighs and-

"Quit daydreaming and listen when I'm talking to you, shitty bastard!"

"We threw the tablecloth in with the dirty laundry," he mutters, chewing furiously on the inside of his cheek to keep from smirking, because that had been during their SECOND trip to the showers. Following which, they hadn't even made it out of the library, and thank god he'd had the foresight to bring along that bottle they'd swiped from the kitchen, because by that time he would've been starting to feel pretty damn sore without-

"That was my best cooking oil, you-"

Good thing that stuff wasn't too hard to clean off the window seats or Robin, Nami and Franky would all wanna kick our asses too. And I don't know about Luffy's, but MY ass needs a break.

"-left fingerprints all over the goddamn fridge and-"

A distinct memory of pushing his captain chest-first against the steel door, listening to his excited breathless laughter and watching his fingers skidding across its surface in search of somewhere to cling-

… I wonder how long he's gonna be talking to Jinbei...

Hunting Luffy down and initiating another round is a compelling thought, but in all honesty he's just too fucking tired to do more than think about it. If it wasn't for them both falling asleep in bed for an hour or two after the first couple of times and then dozing off again for about forty-five minutes on the library window seat before their third and final shower of the morning, he's almost positive he'd be falling asleep on his feet right now.

"MARIMO-"

"Huh? Were you saying something?"

The toddler yanking resolutely on the bath towel hanging around his neck is probably the only thing that saves him from a foot in the face- infuriated as he might sometimes get, Sanji's incredibly careful not to let the fists and feet start flying if there's a chance of one of the kids getting hurt. Having Sabo clambering in and out of his lap does not, however, prevent the cook from delivering a firm, open-handed smack to the back of Zoro's skull.

"You got moss in your ears, shit for brains?"

"Fuck you, curly-brow, I was just waiting for something actually intelligent to come out of your mouth."

"Fuh?" Sabo inquires, abandoning his interest in his father's towel in favor of gnawing furiously on several of his own fingers.

"No," Zoro tells him sharply. "Don't you dare."

"No! Fuh fuh!"

"NO. No fuh."
"FUH!"

"... shit."

"Good luck with THAT," Sanji snickers. "You knew one of them was gonna pick it up sooner or later."

"Shut up, cook, it's not funny. If Nami starts charging me every time HE says it too-"

As though merely speaking the navigator's name is enough to summon her, there's a high-pitched shriek of pure outrage from outside, and they're both on their feet and moving out the door before it tapers off.

"Where the hell-?"

"Up there." Arms full of squirming toddler, the swordsman responds with an upwards gesture of his chin.

Nami's leaning out the changing room porthole, hands braced on the window frame, her shoulder-length hair plastered to her scalp with shampoo suds. She's so angry, she doesn't realize that she's close to falling out of her haphazardly-wrapped towel, and Zoro hears a garbled cry of "Mellorine!" erupt from the cook standing beside him.

"ZORO-"

He's got a bad feeling about this, and sure enough-

"ZORO, I'M GOING TO KILL YOU AND LUFFY- YOU'RE GOING TO OWE ME FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIVES, YOU INCONSIDERATE BASTARDS. WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO ALL THE HOT WATER."

xxx

"Sounds like someone isn't too pleased with you..." Jinbei murmurs, addressing the Pirate King where he's sprawled stomach-down on the aquarium bar bench with one arm dangling over the edge so his knuckles are dragging on the floor.

"She'll live- Franky's got that thing rigged so it heats up again pretty fast." Luffy stifles a yawn. "I'll tell you what's cold, though. The freezer door's REALLY cold."

"... I see." Mentally adding this to the growing list of subjects to avoid, which started this morning during Sanji's tirade about shitty crewmates leaving all the cabinet doors hanging open and waltzing off with his cooking supplies when he's sure they've "got a shitload of perfectly good cheap lube" and, now that he's speaking with Luffy, also includes the captain's bleary eyes and the large semi-circle shaped bruises on his bare shoulder that very closely resemble the top and bottom sets of teeth in a bite mark.

"You're coming with us, right?" Despite the inflection at the end, it's clearly a rhetorical question judging from the expectant expression on the younger pirate's face.

"I debated accompanying the ship back to Fishman Island after I was unable to obtain any direct answers from our young adversary, but it occurred to me that I ought to wait for direct orders. While I trust the men I left in charge, if you'd prefer I speak to Neptune-sama myself, I could always request that another ship-"
"Jinbei. It took me too damn long to get you on my crew- there's no way I'm letting you leave now."

"Understood," the former-Shichibukai acknowledges with a slight incline of his head, not bothering to hide the smile spreading across his broad face. "Then I suppose all that remains is addressing the crew and determining a plan of action."

xxx

"Okay, so you guys all know what happened yesterday, right?"

Nods and murmurs of agreement from the pirates gathered on the Sunny's bow, looking up to where their captain's perched at the top of the ladder leading to the lion-shaped figurehead. Zoro crosses his arms over his chest where he's leaning against the railing with his good eye trained on Sabo playing at his feet, watching the toddler hide under his coat's skirt and periodically peek out to blow loud raspberries at anyone who glances their way.

It leaves his blind side turned towards the other ships and open sea, but his hearing in that ear's gotten a bit sharper over the years to compensate, and he's listening intently for any unusual noises. Thus far, there's been nothing but occasional shouts from the crews sharing the harbor with them and the incessant squawking of squabbling gulls.

_Goddamn feathered rats have been hanging around looking for handouts since the cook butchered that eel. I wish they'd pick another ship- all that bloody noise is getting on my nerves.

"-agree with Zoro and Nami that we gotta do something about all these people following us," Luffy's saying. "Not just 'cause of yesterday, but also since-Nami, what'd you tell me again?"

The navigator, standing with her hands on her hips and the log pose catching the sunlight where it's clasped around her wrist, glares at him - _guess she's still pissed about this morning_ - and clears her throat. "The larger the fleet, the greater the strain it puts on the resources of the islands where we stop. Docking in waves keeps everyone from tripping over each other and clogging up the harbor, but it doesn't really help reduce the demand for goods."

"Wait, isn't that a good thing?" Usopp asks. "Aren't we helping support their economy or something?"

"People need to eat." Sanji replies before Nami can speak. "-and beli make a poor meal when your stomach's empty."

The navigator's nodding in agreement. "Most of these towns are pretty small and grow their own crops; while they don't have any trouble feeding themselves and the occasional ship or two-"

"-they're unable to produce sufficient supplies for a fleet of this magnitude, which often leads to a certain degree of resentment between residents and seafaring visitors." Robin finishes. "It was a common problem for both Gol D Roger and Edward Newgate, as well as an ongoing issue for-"

She hesitates, unsure of whether or not she ought to continue, but the rest of the crew is waiting expectantly. "-the Revolutionary Army."

Luffy's eyes narrow slightly at the mention of his father's organization, but he's apparently opting to treat it as nothing more than a contextual reference, because a moment later he's grinning easily. "So, yeah, if people get tired of dealing with everybody following us, they might not want to feed US either!"
"I'm not saying we're going to find ourselves chased out of town by angry farmers with pitchforks, but I've definitely been hearing more grumbling every time we dock." Nami explains, running a hand through her hair and heaving a sigh. "Luffy, Zoro, while you two were, ah... busy... yesterday, there were a couple of fistfights. No one we knew- all new people- but they came from ships that've been sailing with us."

"Shit," Zoro mutters, stooping to retrieve Sabo, who's abruptly lost interest in playing peek-a-boo with their nakama as soon as he realized they were busy talking- and started chewing on the calf of his boot. "We looking at any damages?"

"A few broken bones- none of my own, thankfully," Brook assures him. "And a very lovely young lady who was most grateful for my assistance in restoring order to her booth, yohohoho- although I'm afraid she misunderstood my request, as she directed me to one of her fellow vendors."

He turns sorrowful eye sockets towards Franky and Sanji. "Such a wonderful selection, yet none of them in use..."

"ANYWAY. I think it's clear we've got a problem. The question is- what are we going to do about it?"

"Can't Dad just tell them to go away?"

"It's a nice thought, Ace, but assuming anybody will even listen, we're more likely to lose the people we don't mind following us and end up stuck with the ones we do."

"Yeah, a lot of these guys don't really give a shit about any of us." Zoro drops onto the curved bench beside the seven-year-old and settles Sabo in his lap, keeping him well out of reach of the helm. "They're just tagging along hoping we'll do something interesting."

*Problem is, just about everything we fucking do ends up attracting a hell of a lot more attention these days.*

The first mate's uncomfortably aware that while the majority of pirates sailing with the fleet have joined it seeking the general notoriety associated with the Pirate King, there's also a growing number of up-and-coming swordsmen eager to test their skills against the World's Greatest. He's not particularly worried about the ones who've been around the longest, several of whom he's already dueled and defeated more than once, because he's been on respectful if not necessarily friendly terms with them for some time now, but he can't say the same for many of the newer faces.

*If I end up having to announce I'm not taking challengers for nearly a year again- and Sencho's not only convinced it's gonna happen but that it'll be sooner rather than later...*

There's still a slight stiffness in his left bicep, where Chopper removed the bullet that lodged there during the- well, he supposes he can't really call it a fight considering he quite literally took the other guy apart before he even had a chance to draw his sword.

*What a goddamn mess.*

Somewhere in the background, his crewmates are still talking and discussing their limited options, but he's not paying them much mind, quietly brooding over the last time he faced a challenger, albeit unwillingly.

*Of all the times to lose my shit, I had to go and fucking do it right in front of the kids. And cut some stupid pathetic bastard to ribbons in the process. I would've been tempted to kill him anyway for*
pulling a gun on them, but it's a bloody miracle they're not AFRAID of me.

At the time, he'd been too overwhelmed and incoherent to understand just how brutal his response to the attack had been, but he'd later bullied Brook into telling him exactly what had transpired, and what the skeleton had reluctantly revealed still sends chills down his spine.

Asura. Goddamn Asura.

He's come to seriously hate the technique. The manifestation is dangerous enough by itself, but when combined with the panic and disorientation that overtakes him given certain... triggers... it's downright lethal to anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves within striking range.

While he no longer lives in constant fear that something - be it a certain sound or smell, or sudden movement or unexpected contact - will send him into mindless panic, he's extremely wary of putting his family and crewmates in a situation where they might be unwittingly injured. Or worse. Hence his insistence on accepting challenges only when he's certain that his dueling won't endanger innocent bystanders.

There's a distinct and extremely unfortunate irony to the fact that in achieving his dream, he's made all their lives just a bit more complicated.

Luffy too. If he hadn't become the Pirate King, we wouldn't be out here trying to figure out how to disband a fleet. I don't think either of us expected things to turn out this way. I KNOW we weren't expecting to find ourselves looping around the Grand Line with a couple of brats in tow, making plans to have another one.

He can't help wondering if he's not a bit touched in the head to have agreed to go through it all over again. Actively pursuing it, no less. But at the same time, he keeps recalling everything his captain said.

I never believed in that soul mate bullshit, never had any reason to- but if that kind of thing actually exists... 'cause he was right. We're like two halves of the same whole, and what we make when we come together-

"Dad. Oi, Dad-?"

Startled out of his reverie by Ace tugging his sleeve, Zoro looks up to discover that his crewmates are dispersing, having evidently concluded the discussion. If they've reached an answer to their dilemma, he's completely missed it.

Jeez, I can't concentrate for shit this morning. Thought that was supposed to be a joke- the whole fucking your brains out thing.

Luffy hops down from the figurehead and squeezes onto the bench beside him on the opposite side from their older son, ducking under his arm and snuggling against his side.

"Damn, you're clingy today," the swordsman snorts, but he's smiling, and when he and the toddler in his lap are caught up in a tight hug, he laughs out loud. "Oi, what gives?"

"I'm happy, 'cause-" Luffy nuzzles amorously behind his ear, making him shiver despite his exhaustion. ",we might've made a baby last night."

"Or this morning," Zoro reminds him. Then, eyebrow quirking. "Might've?"

His captain's grinning slyly as he leans in for a kiss, dodging Sabo's waving hands before they can
grab him by the nose or lower lip. "Mmm hmm. Guess the only way to make sure is to just keep having lots and lots of-"

"I'm gonna go see what Franky-aniki's doing," Ace announces, hastily vacating his seat and retreating towards the stairs to the lawn deck.

"Oi," Zoro calls after him, evading Luffy's mouth before it's able to render him incapable of speech. "Be careful, okay? Don't get in the way if he's fooling around with those damn rockets again."

"I wo-"

"And don't touch anything in his workshop. Last time I was down there, he had scrap metal laying all over the place, and you don't wanna cut yourself on-"

"I won't!"

"And-"

"DAD!"

"Zoro, it's okay- he'll be fine," Luffy insists, torn between laughter and exasperation as he guides the older pirate's attention back to him with soft patting on his cheek. "Jeez, I know you get mad when Sanji teases you about the whole mother hen thing, but-"

"Do I look like I've got fucking feathers?" Zoro demands, bristling. "I'm just being cautious, okay?"

"I know, I know, but-" Whatever his captain's about to say - probably gonna tell me I'm being silly or some shit and maybe I am but - remains unstated, because they're both turning at the sound of approaching boot steps. "Oi, Robin, what's up?"

"Luffy-san, Zoro-san, might I have a word with you?"

"… don't think I didn't notice your sense of timing. Okay, what'd the kid do this time?" The swordsman grimaces. Hoping he hasn't misinterpreted the historian's purpose in waiting to join them until Ace moved well out of range.

*If this ends up being about the damn leather seats-

"Mmm. Actually, I'm afraid it's concerning something he hasn't done."
"You're shitting me. THAT'S the plan?"

"Yep."

"That- that's so-"

"Idiotically simple? I know. But sometimes simple can be better, and Zoro-" Nami pauses to give him a knowing look. "Tell me, did you honestly think he'd go to the trouble of giving them some sort of farewell speech?"

"Not really," the swordsman sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Guess I should've known better, but- this whole thing's been such a major pain in the ass."

Glancing up from the desk where she's unrolled a partially-inked parchment depicting the island where they're currently docked and its surrounding currents, Nami frowns. Her nakama's got a tense, stressed air about him that she's certain wasn't there just a few hours ago.

Franky will be arriving shortly to discuss their departure, but for the moment they've got the library to themselves, and while she supposes it's technically none of her concern-

"Is everything alright?"

"Why wouldn't it-"

She cuts him off with a glare. "Don't give me that line of bullshit, Zoro. You know better, and you look like you're five minutes away from giving yourself a damn nosebleed if you don't quit pawing at your face like you're trying to sand it off, so spill it."

*I hope Luffy's not stressing you out over this baby business.*

The older pirate grimaces, but to her relief, he stops the nervous gesture and drops onto the nearest section of bench. "Fine."

Nami nearly raises an eyebrow when he covers a wince and shifts himself to a more comfortable position, but she restrains herself. Judging by the little satisfied smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, whatever's bothering him certainly isn't whatever their captain's been- no, stop right there, you most definitely do NOT need to imagine THAT.

"Robin said she needed to talk to me and Luffy. Told us Ace is asking questions." Just like that, his smile's gone. "Stuff about me and- why I'm-"

*Fucked up,* he wants to say; the navigator can see it in his face.
"-the way I am."

"I guess it was just a matter of time," she responds cautiously. "I know you guys have tried to be careful about how much he hears, but..."

"Nami, tell me the truth, okay? Did I screw up somehow with him, being too overprotective and shit? He used to be a lot more like Luffy, laughing and goofing around like an idiot, but now he's so damn serious all the time."

Zoro...

Abandoning her map, the redhead takes a seat beside him, instinctively maintaining a distance that's close but not quite touching.

*It's not just you- we've all had to find ways to cope with what happened in that prison,* she thinks, resisting the urge to fiddle with the cropped ends of her hair because he's looking at her expectantly, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know. Maybe he's getting it from you. Maybe it's just a phase he's going through. And maybe you'll only find out for sure if you talk to him and ask him."

"... that's pretty much what Robin said. That and... something about how growing up living like this – on a ship, doing the whole pirate thing – is a lot different than living in some quiet village in the middle of nowhere." He clears his throat. "She- uh- didn't go into detail, but I'm pretty sure she was thinking about herself as a kid. She just had this kind of funny look on her face."

"She's right. I... I had to grow up pretty fast too. Most of us did."

"Oh shit, that's- right. Sorry if I-"

"No, it's okay, because you reminded me of something else. Something I learned from Bell-mère."

Nami pauses, not sure what she's about to say is exactly what he wants to hear but hoping it might help anyway. "Raising children isn't easy, whether they're yours or someone else's. Sometimes you might not have a clue what you're doing-"

Zoro snorts wry laughter. "Sometimes?"

"Okay, so maybe you never have a clue. Anyway, just listen, alright? Whether you know what you're doing or not, the point is that you can only do your best. The navigator turns her head to look at him. "You would do anything for those kids. We all would, of course, Luffy and the rest of the crew, but-

*The sacrifices you've already made- I don't know if I could have been that strong.*

Her eyes are automatically drawn to her nakama's maimed hand, but she refocuses her gaze elsewhere, not wanting to stare. Her own slender fingers are a safer option. "You're good parents, you and Luffy. When I met you guys, I never in a million years would have guessed either of you would be good with kids, much less actually have any of your own, but now I can't imagine either of you without them."

"I can't either, and- I don't want to."

"See? So don't feel like you need to second guess everything you do or beat yourself up if things don't happen exactly the way you were hoping."
There's a heavy rapping on the outer wall beside the doorframe, and they look up to find Franky peering cautiously through the entry at them.

"Oi- okay if I come in?"

"Yeah, you're good. I better go see if Sencho wants any help with Sabo, so I'll let you guys get to your map and planning and shit. And Nami… thanks."

"Of course." She watches him stand, and can't resist commenting this time when he curses softly under his breath as he straightens. "Tell Luffy I said he better not wear you out too much. And tell him I said to think girls! Both of you, think girls."

"This again, huh?"

"Ow," Franky agrees enthusiastically. "Baby girl would be super, Haramaki-bro. Little girl with your hair, right, and our captain's eyes?"

"And listen to the cook crack freaking Marimo-chan jokes all the time? No thanks," Zoro grumbles, but he's evidently pleased at the prospect, because he's fighting to hold back a grin as he heads out the door. "See you guys later."

"Idiot." Nami sighs, joining the cyborg at her desk and unfurling the parchment once more, shuffling a small paperweight onto each corner to hold it down.

"Hmm?"

"He's got himself half-convinced he's a lousy dad." She gestures to a point on the map, tapping a neatly-labeled set of wavy lines with her index finger. "If we land here, this current should carry us well out of range before the other ships have chance to follow."

Franky extends a hand from his oversized palm and rubs his chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowing as he judges the distance. "High-power Coupe de Burst oughta do it, long as the wind doesn't change while we're still in the air. Could always make it two if we gotta- engine room's fully stocked but I can squeak in another barrel or two just in case. And what the hell gave him that idea? Kids look great to me, always runnin' around and gettin' into all kinds of trouble."

Making a quick notation of the coordinates for her log entry - whenever she's got time to sit down and write one - the navigator folds her arms and stares down at the mapping implements cluttering the desktop. "Apparently Ace is asking questions. About things related to Impel Down."

"Oh. Damn."

"I know. We knew it was going to happen sooner or later. I mean, he's usually alright, but there's definitely times when Zoro's not exactly…"

"Stable, she's hesitant to say, but she doesn't need to because the shipwright's nodding.

"Kid's smart. Doesn't surprise me that our little bro's pickin' up on stuff like that, even without-well, I'm pretty sure nobody forgot about what happened the other month."

Nami rubs her upper arms briskly, unable to repress a shudder. "I know I definitely haven't."

She's seen their swordsman face off against hundreds, potentially thousands of opponents since
they first met, but she's never witnessed an altercation that escalated so quickly into an almost literal bloodbath. One moment she'd been groping frantically for Ace, cursing herself for letting him slip from her grasp, and then the gunshot and then-

She sees the bullet make contact with her nakama's shoulder. Sees him surging forward despite the force of the impact, a snarl exploding from between his clenched teeth, and that weird dark aura rising around him, dancing around his head and torso as the presence normally hidden inside unfurls itself, and his blades – all of them, not just the ones he carries strapped to his side – creating a shining blur that terminates in a hot splash of gore.

It takes what seems like forever to recognize the ringing in her ears as Sabo's shrill wail of distress and the arms around her waist as the clinging embrace of his silent but equally terrified older brother, because their dark-haired father's left them both in her care to go after his first mate, shaken but determined as he strides towards where the swordsman's quickly rendering his opponent's body unrecognizable as human.

There's more goose bumps rising on her skin despite the warm early afternoon air.

Zoro was screaming too when Luffy took him down. No words, just that- that NOISE. He sounded like a goddamn animal…

"I wasn't there, but I'm guessing it was pretty bad," Franky says quietly, studying her. "You okay?"

Nami utters soft, tremulous laughter, then sighs, running her fingers through her hair. "Y-Yeah, I'm alright. And yes. It was bad. But you know what's worse?"

"…"

She collapses into her chair, staring up at the shipwright. "He scared the shit out of me, and probably Luffy and the kids too, but- I think he scared himself the most. Being out of control like that, not knowing what he was doing or maybe even who- who he was-"

She can't finish, because she's remembering the sharp prick of a scalpel and a slurred, disoriented voice shouting in her ear, calling her a sadistic bitch. But she's also remembering the expression of agonized comprehension on his face. Full of regret and fear and self-condemnation, as though he's betrayed her. As though he's betrayed them all.

Even though he's one of the strongest people I know, stronger than he realizes, strong like my mother- if he ever accidentally hurt one of US, one of the crew or- … I don't think he'd ever forgive himself.

xxx

They've opted to inform a few select followers - all trustworthy minor league captains - of their impending departure, so there's laughter and a few shouts of farewell in addition to the general cries of confused alarm when the Sunny exits the harbor- and promptly becomes airborne.

Zoro, recalling Robin's reiteration of his son's words, limits himself to one gruff admonishment of "don't get blown off the godforsaken ship" and then proceeds to watch Ace like a hawk while holding Sabo tightly against his chest. He can feel his pulse in his throat - while he's never personally been bothered much by heights, it's such a long way down and the kids are so damn small - but the maneuver goes off without a hitch and in short order they've caught the expected current and begun to put a more than respectable distance between themselves and the unprepared fleet.
Luffy, of course, finds the entire thing both hilarious and exciting, and for days afterwards can be heard bursting into spontaneous snickering as he recalls the expressions of complete surprise on most of the other pirates' faces.

The entire Straw Hat crew, however, agrees on one thing: it's much easier to breathe and far less difficult to relax when they're surrounded by nothing but open ocean. With the wind at their backs and hurrying the ship along its course, they're finally at leisure to enjoy themselves.

"Gotcha!" Usopp roars triumphantly, prompting a shriek of delight from the toddler he's just discovered ensconced under the dining room table with Chopper.

Robin, who'd been found tucked under Nami's desk in the library, with her legs curled gracefully beneath her and an open book in one hand, neatly scoops up Sabo before he can scramble away on all fours.

"You gave us away!" Chopper laughs, mock-scowling up at them from the floor where he's sprawled in Heavy Point. "He doesn't know he's supposed to be quiet."

"Da?"

"That's a good question." Usopp scratches at his goatee, frowning. Most of the crew's accounted for- he's found Brook in a locker in the men's quarters, Nami perched in the branches of a mikan tree, Jinbei - who'd initially tried to turn them down but finally capitulated when he saw everyone else was participating - in the fish tank behind a trailing display of seaweed, Sanji and Ace hiding in the dry goods storage behind some barrels, so- "Where the hell are Luffy and Zoro? It's been like an hour and I haven't seen either of them."

"Perhaps they've-" Robin's mouth forms a small "o" of surprise then curls into a smile, and she opens her eyes, abandoning her covert search of the ship. "It appears they've fallen asleep in the back seats of the Mini Merry."

"What? But I looked there- I should've seen them!" Usopp protests, heading for the door. "Most of you people suck at hiding, by the way; you pick the most obvious-"

"Ah, it might be best to wait until they wake up and reappear on their own."

"Why would- oh."

"Where the hell were you guys?" The sniper demands when his crewmates eventually emerge from the lawn deck hatchway, bleary-eyed and noticeably disheveled and stretching cramped limbs. "I know I checked that part of the dock too after I found Franky in the shark sub; I even climbed in the damn boat!"

"Yeah, I know- we saw you." Luffy's grinning as he stoops to lift Sabo, who's tugging repeatedly on the hem of his shorts in search of attention. "You checked behind the seats and everything- but you didn't look up!"

The sniper, dumbfounded, peers at them with incredulity. "You were on the CEILING?"

"Sencho had himself stretched across the room like a goddamn hammock."
"The dock system makes lots of noise when you open the doors, so we heard you coming a mile away. Then we just waited and came back down after you left." The captain casts a sidelong glance at Zoro. "… eventually."

"Uh huh." Usopp decides he's not going to ask, intrigued as he might be by the fact that the swordsman's responding smirk has just made the Pirate King flush rather noticeably. "Well, you're lucky you finally came out. Sanji was just saying he wasn't gonna bother saving you any leftovers if you were too lazy to show up for lunch."

"Food!" Jubilantly passing Sabo to his first mate, Luffy's off like a shot, making a beeline straight for the dining hall.

"Damn it, why do I always get left holding the baby," Zoro grumbles, then sighs and looks down at his son. "Come on, kiddo; we better get going too before there's nothing left but crumbs."

Ahead of them, Luffy's bounding up the stairs three and four at a time.

"Looks like someone sure worked up an appetite," Nami remarks as she passes them, headed in the same direction as the captain. "Still thinking girls, right?"

"Jeez, Nami, will you quit it?" The swordsman groans as he and Usopp fall in step behind her. "It's fucking awkward enough with everybody knowing what we're doing without you harassing the shit out of me, asking if I'm pregnant yet every goddamn day."

There's a snort of amusement from the sniper beside him, because despite Chopper's growing reservations after a few months' worth of negative tests, Luffy's consistent optimism has spread to the rest of the crew, resulting in their nakama trying to be helpful in highly embarrassing ways. Just last night at dinner, Sanji had been gleefully rattling off a list of foods most likely to increase sperm count, outshouting Zoro's desperate attempts to silence him, and then the swordsman had nearly choked on his baked chicken when Robin had casually mentioned reading that remaining prone for half an hour following sex in the missionary position was rumored to increase the likelihood of conception.

"And besides, it's not like picking a date on the calendar and BAM, we've magically got another one on the way."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. I just thought a bit of encouragement-?"

"Encourage this," Zoro mutters under his breath, momentarily freeing his left hand to make an obscene gesture behind the navigator's back.

"I'm sorry, what'd you say?"

"Nothing." He glares over at Usopp, who's snickering under his breath. "Oi, Nami, if you want another girl on the ship so bad, maybe you should try having one yourself. I bet Sanji or maybe USOPP HERE would be more than happy to give you a hand."

xxx

Everybody keeps talking about girls, Zoro muses, tightening his grip on the katana handle to keep it from slipping from between his fingers. And I know Sencho said he'd be happy no matter what, but-

He rotates his wrist, bringing the blade up to block his opponent's strike with disappointing ease.
considering how often he mentions Vivi's daughter, I think he really does want a girl.

Pulling his sword free, he takes a lazy swipe at the younger swordsman he's facing. The guy's got some potential, but nowhere near enough to provide a serious challenge; when he dodges and attempts to double back under the Straw Hat pirate's guard, he's holding back, almost as though he's afraid of taking a direct hit.

What do you even do with a girl though? If we have one and she wants to learn swordsmanship, I can handle that, no problem- but what if she's like the one from Usopp's old village.

He's got nothing against Kaya; the doctor's pleasant enough and she fussed over Ace and Sabo quite a bit during the crew's last visit - a sure way to win the first mate over, if any - but she's fairly reserved and a complete pacifist. Nothing like his female crewmates, and definitely nothing like either Kuina OR that obnoxious Marine woman- her eerie look-alike.

"Oi, is that all you've got?" He goads his adversary, turning aside the blow aimed at his ribcage. "Here, I'll teach you something useful."

Although it's pretty hard to believe Luffy and I would end up with a daughter like that, all shy and quiet and shit. Not with us as parents, and not on this ship. But still, a girl? I don't know how I feel about changing diapers and toilet training and all that shit when it comes to girls.

Driving forward, he disregards the sharp sting as the other man's blade glances off his collarbone, reversing his own sword to catch him in the solar plexus with the pommel. His opponent doubles over, gasping soundlessly, takes a stumbling step backwards and goes down on his ass. Zoro's pleased to see, however, that he doesn't drop his weapon.

Definitely got potential, but-

Backing away slowly, eye still locked on his fallen foe because caution is second nature even though it's quite obvious the fight's over, he can feel a tickling trickle of warmth leaking down his right pectoral as he returns his blade to its sheath. He doesn't bother looking down at himself; he can already tell the injury's mostly superficial and not even worth stitches.

"You're never going to be the best unless you're not afraid to shed a little- sometimes a lot- of blood."

xxx

He hears the crew before he sees them as he approaches the rocky shoreline where the ship's docked. One voice in particular's much louder than the others; Sabo, fussing and struggling in Luffy's arms, is making one hell of a racket.

"He's been freaking out since you l-OUCH!" The captain yelps as he's head-butted forcefully in the jaw.

"Quit bitching- that hurts you a heck of a lot less than it hurts me," Zoro mutters, reaching out to run his fingers through the irate toddler's hair. "Oi, what's the matter, squirt?"

"Dadada!"

"Yeah, I'm back, okay?" He takes a step backwards, evading the outstretched hands grabbing for his coat. "Ah, no- if I hold you, I'm gonna get blood all over-"

Evidently rejecting his reasoning and further incensed by the sight of him retreating, Sabo looses a
high-pitched squeal of dismay and redoubles his efforts to escape the rubber man's grasp.

"Zoro- maybe you better-" Luffy grimaces, tossing his head to dislodge the fingers that have just hooked his left nostril. "Gah! Here, take him before I drop him!"

"Here. Oi. Oi oi oi, settle down!" Cradling the one-year-old against his chest and trying not to flinch when one flailing hand claws his wounded collarbone - the kid's fingers might be small but his nails are fucking sharp - the swordsman bounces him resolutely until he calms down and stops twisting like an agitated python. "Jeez, what the hell got into you?"

"Da," Sabo insists tearfully, reaching up to pat his face.

"Okay, okay, I won't put you down."

"Oi, you're back! How'd it-" Ace, who's just popped up beside them, pauses, eyes narrowing slightly. "Dad, you're bleeding."

"What- this? No big deal. I'm fine. Just trying to make a point to some dumb rookie."

It's sadly ironic that, as he's finally starting to relax after a few months filled with nothing but minor skirmishes, Ace has been getting steadily more and more concerned with his well-being. Sabo's not the only one unhappy with his ongoing acceptance of challenges; his older son's been regarding each one as a recipe for inevitable disaster.

Every time I come back, I've got both of 'em climbing all over me like they thought they'd never see me again. Ace is just a little less dramatic about it. Goddamn it… I knew that whole thing shook him up pretty good but I was hoping-

His son's still staring up at him, eyes fixed on his bleeding collarbone and full of consternation.

Shit. I don't wanna deal with it right now- or ever, if I'm being honest- but we really gotta sit him down and talk about this goddamn stuff.

But although Robin's taken to periodically giving him questioning looks whenever they cross paths, Nami's outright told him to quit stalling and even Luffy himself has hesitantly suggested more than once that they better do something about it and soon, every time he finds the words on the tip of his tongue, he can't bring himself to actually speak them.

How the hell do you tell your kid that one of your own fighting techniques scares the shit out of you because you almost fucking killed him with it before he was even born. Or that the reason you damn near jump through the bloody ceiling sometimes when somebody who doesn't know any better grabs you by the shoulder's because some woman-

He leaves the thought unfinished, pushing it aside even though he knows he'll eventually be forced to face it head on.

"Yeah, I don't like it when he gets hurt either, but Zoro's okay, I promise. He used to get cut up a lot worse than that, back when we first started," Luffy's telling Ace. "The big scar on his chest from the Hawk guy probably looks the worst, but he's got lots of other ones that don't stand out as much unless you look really close."

"Tch, tell me about it. Chopper told me once, if most of the shit hadn't healed so well, I'd probably look like one of Nami's goddamn Grand Line maps with the screwy currents going all different directions."
"Not much of anything on your back though," his captain points out, leaning against his side and bending forward a bit to rub noses with their younger child, who's sensed Zoro's distraction and started squirming unhappily again.

"Nope."

"And that's 'cause-" Ace squints in concentration. "A wound on the back's a swordsman's shame, right?"

"Yeah. You take a hit like that, it almost always means you were running away from your opponent."

"And you don't run from anything, right, Dad?"

"No," Zoro answers, uncomfortably aware of Luffy's eyes on him, although the captain doesn't say anything.

_Not from a fight, anyway, but... I feel like such a fucking hypocrite._

"Sanji-aniki told me about the scars on your ankles," the seven-year-old says doubtfully. "Did you really try to cut your own feet off?"

"Can we not talk about that, please. It was a long time ago, and I already got enough shit about it to last a lifetime, thanks," Zoro grumbles. He fires a withering glare at Luffy, who's trying not to laugh.

"Oi, I like your feet just like they are- attached to you."

"I was doing it for you, asshole. And also so Nami, me and Vivi wouldn't DIE, while you were busy fu-" He catches himself, casting a wary eye on the toddler in his arms, who's clinging to his sleeve and listening with rapt interest. "-screwing around."

"Your feet though?" Ace asks. "Don't you need those to fight and walk and stuff?"

"Like I'd let something like missing feet stop me."

"Kind of like your hand, huh?"

"Mmm."

"... Sanji-aniki wouldn't tell me how that happened. He said I, uh, needed to ask you."

Slowly, not entirely sure he wants an answer to the question he's about to pose to his son and conscious of how still Luffy's gone at his side. "And is that what you're doing? Asking?"

"Well, I-"

"ZORO, YOU'RE BLEEDING!"

Whatever Ace was about to say goes unspoken, because the raging whirlwind that's the Straw Hat doctor in full panic has descended upon them, and before Zoro's got a chance to protest that he doesn't need any goddamn medical attention – just a quick trip to the bathhouse to rinse himself clean – he's being whisked away and hurried up the staircase towards the dining hall, Sabo plucked from his grasp and hurriedly transferred to his captain.

Sitting in the infirmary, grudgingly cooperating as Chopper plasters him with disinfectant and far
more bandages than strictly necessary, the first mate finds himself bombarded by a deluge of conflicting emotions.

Relief that he's gotten an unforeseen reprieve. Guilt at the disappointment in his son's eyes.

Embarrassment and disgust with himself for not dealing with this shit earlier, before it got out of hand.

Outright shame at the distress in Luffy's eyes.

*He could explain everything himself but- he won't. He won't, because he thinks I should be there. He thinks I NEED to be there- need to do this. And he's probably right. I do. I just-

Exhaling shakily, he blinks in confusion when the Zoan perched on the stool beside the bed offers a hasty apology for being too rough with his wound.

*Tomorrow. I'll- I'll take care of it tomorrow.*
Chapter 7

Riding low in the water and listing slightly to one side, its bullet-riddled flags dangling limply and masts splintered by cannon fire, the smaller vessel presents a pitiful if not particularly trust-inspiring sight.

"Sure as hell LOOKS like somebody shot the shit out of them," Zoro mutters, hand resting casually on Kitetsu's handle as he stands by the lawn deck railing, studying the wreck where it's drifting several hundred yards from the Sunny. "What you think, Sencho?"

Luffy takes the spyglass he's being offered and scans the entire thing again himself from bow to stern, brow furrowed as he chews contemplatively on his lower lip. "Don't see anybody moving."

"Well, it can't be completely deserted. Somebody sent that distress signal." Sanji glances over his shoulder. "Oi, Nami-san! Anything else coming through the line?"

"Nothing but empty air and bursts of static for the last few hours," the navigator calls down from the balcony outside the dining hall door. "The Den Den's not happy that I keep checking."

"Thanks for your hard work, Nami-swan~" The cook coos back loudly, earning an eye-roll from Zoro, because from his point of view, sitting on your ass in the dining hall and periodically poking a snail doesn't truly qualify as WORK. Or at least not anything worthy of inspiring that disgustingly sugary tone. "Maybe whoever sent it's unconscious?"

"Or dead," the first mate adds grimly. "Or it's a goddamn trap."

"Either of you guys picking up anything funny?" Luffy asks hopefully. He sighs when they shake their heads in unison. "Damn, me neither."

"I don't know- either it's legit or somebody's just really fricking good at hide-and-seek."

Sanji's mouth quirks. "Trust you to make that analogy, Marimo."

"Stuff it, Swirly-brow." Then, eye still locked on the other ship. "Luffy?"

"Yeah, yeah, gimme a second, okay- I'm still thinking," the captain grumbles, jabbing Usopp - who's just halted beside him - in the armpit when the sniper mutters that he's positive he smells something burning. "Ah, what the hell, let's go check it out. If it was us, we'd want help, right? And if somebody attacks us, we'll just kick their asses."

He cracks his knuckles with an anticipatory air that leaves his crewmates hiding knowing smiles as they glance towards each other. "Oi, Franky! Can you get us closer?"

"Right on it," the shipwright hollers back from the helm. "Gimme two waggles of a sea king's tailfin."

Luffy's patience lasts until they're within about fifty yards or so, and then he grabs hold of the railing, preparing to fling himself across the diminishing expanse. "Zoro, Sanji- you guys coming?"

Sanji clenches his cigarette tighter between his teeth and gives his heel a tap against the lawn as
though testing his footing, but to the captain's surprise, Zoro merely draws back to give them running room.

"Think I'm gonna stay, keep an eye on things here." He gives a pointed nod towards the men's quarters, and Luffy's confusion immediately clears. While sending the kids there in an emergency's probably safer than trying to hustle them below-decks, given the steep ladder and Sabo's distressingly strong fascination with the inner-workings of the docking system, the room's still a lot more vulnerable to attack, especially direct impact from cannon balls. And while he trusts their nakama – every one of which has proven his or her worth time and time again – to defend the children like their own, and he's aware Zoro does too, he also knows exactly what his first mate's thinking.

Our kids, our responsibility. Asking somebody to watch 'em for a few hours to give us some time alone's one thing, but expecting somebody to cover for us while we go running off looking for a fight? That's kind of a different story.

Sanji raises the one curly eyebrow that's visible. "And here I figured you could jump that no problem, Marimo. Or you afraid you might end up going for a swim?"

Zoro snorts, a combative smirk tugging at one corner of his mouth. "Nah, gonna watch your ass fall in instead, get your fancy suit all wet. And put out that goddamn cancer stick too. Then maybe you won't reek so freakin' much."

But Sanji doesn't-

There's a faint jingling of recollection in the back of the captain's head, not unlike the sound a certain set of earrings make when he runs his fingers over them, because although he's having trouble putting a finger on it, he's got vague memories of other times when his swordsman's complained about-

... oh. OH.

His heart gives a hopeful lurch in his chest, and he's so thrown off-guard, at first he doesn't realize that his crewmates have ended their banter and are staring at him quizzically, waiting for orders.

Although the siren song of adventure is still calling, demanding he satisfy his curiosity, he's now forcibly torn between going and staying. He wants to throw his arms around Zoro, drag him off to the infirmary where he knows Chopper's puttering busily about making preparations in anticipation of potential patients depending on their findings- but if he DOESN'T go, it'll end up being tomorrow morning and they'll still be debating what to do about what's looking more and more like an abandoned ship.

But if it's NOT abandoned...

He swallows his excitement. The crew's safety- his family's safety- comes first, regardless of whether both crew and family are in the first stages of growing a bit larger or not. Once he's made sure they're not in immediate danger, THEN he can corner Zoro and start asking questions.

"Yeah, Zoro's right- it's probably a good idea if he stays here. But we'll be right back, 'kay?"

His swordsman offers him a brief nod and falls into a defensive position that somehow manages to look relaxed yet capable of springing into action at a moment's notice, and Luffy can't help grinning as he rockets away because - although he could be wrong, only seeing what he wants to see - he's almost positive there's something very familiar about that stance.
"Beli for your thoughts?" Sanji asks after they've touched down on the other ship's deck.

"Nah, I'm good." The rubber man laughs, casting a quick glance back at the Sunny before he turns to follow the cook towards the nearest doorway. "Let's try and make this really quick."

"Oh? Got somewhere you need to be, captain? It better not be my kitchen- I just fed your gluttonous face a few hours ago."

xxx

"That's really weird..." Usopp mutters, eyes narrowing as he mentally calculates trajectories.

"Hmm?"

"It doesn't make any sense, but- it sure looks like that damage came from their own-" Frown deepening, he leans further over the rail for a closer look. "Why the hell would they fire on their own ship?"

"There appears to be no one onboard, alive or otherwise," Robin announces, opening her eyes and flashing a brief smile towards Zoro as he hesitantly lowers his guard. She steps aside to make room for him to join the group clustered on the starboard side. "But while there are no bodies… there is a fair amount of blood and-

She blinks, expression growing slightly puzzled and allows her eyelids to drop closed again to take another look. "Most of the ship, particularly the inner hallways, is splattered with some variety of… unidentifiable mucus? Also, the lifeboats are missing, so perhaps they abandoned ship after all."

"Rather unusual, considering we're miles from land. I certainly don't envy them, striking out for the nearest island in nothing but a rowboat. But- slime, you say?" Jinbei asks, frowning.

"Yes, rather dark in color and- oh dear. It's apparently quite slippery; our cook's just taken a bit of a tumble."

"Heh. How much you guys wanna bet the poor bastard's gonna come back bitching about his shoes." Zoro is sniggering as Nami reaches them.

"Somebody take him up on that, please, so he can give me the beli he owes me. Usopp? Brook?"

"Ah, I'm afraid his shoes are the least of-"

"My apologies, Nami-san, but I'm afraid I'm as beli-less as-"

"Wait'll he gets knocked up, Nami, and in a few months he'll have plenty of-"

"USOPP. You know that's not what I-"

"Oi, shut up a second, all of you. What the hell was that?" Zoro demands, cutting everyone short as he scans their surroundings, instantly alert because he's positive he heard a small splash somewhere between the two ships. Robin's talking about slime, and in his sea-faring experience, that usually means dealing with some gigantic squid-thing with too many tentacles.

His crewmates obviously agree- which is why everyone's staring intently at the water and completely unprepared for an incursion originating from above.

xxx
"Of all the shitty- goddamn it, Marimo's never gonna let me live this down." Lying flat on his back in a large puddle of what feels increasingly like cold gelatin as it slowly seeps through the back of his suit jacket and trousers, Sanji stares around the unfamiliar kitchen in disgust. Identical to the nearby hallway and the staircase they descended to reach it, there's blood - as well as that same damn mysterious black shit - splashed on multiple surfaces, including the front of the stove and the tiles on which he slipped as they entered.

There's also a discarded frying pan laying on the floor beside him. He instinctively reaches for the handle and recoils when he realizes the bottom of the pan's stuck to the tile with the same nasty goop that's beneath him. "Well that's a waste of perfectly good cookware."

That's odd though; it almost looks like somebody was using this as a-

"Oi!" Luffy interrupts, pausing in the process of reaching down to help the grimacing blond to his feet so he can address the disembodied face protruding from the wall beside him. "Robin, did you hear that? It sounds like it's-"

xxx

"Holy shit!"

"What in the world-?"

"GAAAHHH!"

"Ow! Usopp, keep your damn elbows out of my eye!"

"OUT! GET IT OUT!"

"Then hold still, you idiot!"

"Yohohohoho!"

Holding an arm over her head to protect her face, Robin takes a bemused look around and addresses both parties of nakama simultaneously. "I believe it's raining-"

xxx

"Toads?" Luffy demands. "It's raining TOADS? That's so COOL- c'mon, I gotta see this!"

Seizing the protesting cook by the collar, the captain bounds up the galley stairs and bursts outside-just in time to have a large, squat toad collide with his forehead and fall sprawling between his sandaled feet.

"What the hell-?"

"I don't know, but Sanji- look- it's RAINING TOADS." He stoops to capture the animal before it can hop away and raises it for a better look. "Shishishi, wow, you're huge!"

Sanji, digging painstakingly through his shirt pocket in hopes of finding a cigarette not spattered with black sludge, regards the sight of the disgruntled amphibian struggling and kicking in the younger pirate's grasp with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, although he can't help being startled by the size of it. The warty, brown and grey-mottled toad's large enough to fill both of Luffy's hands.

"You wanna-"
"Oh please tell me he's not gonna ask that thing if it shits or wants to join the crew or I swear I'll-
"-come home with us? I bet Ace would love one of you guys as a pet!"

"More like YOU'D love one of these things as a pet," the cook mutters, leaning slightly to one side to avoid another flailing four-legged missile and staring uncertainly at the deck. "Damn- there sure are an awful lot of 'em."

xxx

"Well, that was unexpected," Nami says from where she, Robin and Usopp have taken cover beneath the sun umbrella, which periodically bulges inwards as toads continue to plummet from the sky above. Across the deck, she can see Zoro, Franky and Jinbei standing around the tree swing, watching in complete bafflement as a mass of hopping forms move this way and that across the grass, and Brook's bony face is peering at them from beneath the staircase leading to the helm.

"Unexpected? How about insane?" The sniper's peering suspiciously into the depths of his overalls, as though fearful he'll find them brimming with bug-eyed amphibians.

"If I recall correctly, it's not all that unusual."

"Robin's right. It happens more often than you'd think. Storm picks up frogs or fish from a pond or lake or even the ocean itself, and then when it dies down..." She shrugs. "It could be worse- at least they're not frozen. That happens sometimes too."

"Wonderful." Usopp groans. "So it's another one of those wrong place, wrong time kinda things?"

"They're just toads," the navigator insists, amused exasperation clear in her voice. "You're crazy about beetles and those big hairy spiders that Sanji hates so much, so what's wrong with a few toads?"

"Tarantulas are NOTHING like toads, and you didn't have one down your trousers, with those clammy little webbed feet scrambling all over your-" He shudders, glaring at her with injured dignity and gesturing towards the overrun deck. "AND DOES THAT LOOK LIKE A FEW TOADS TO YOU."

Across the lawn, Jinbei utters a startled oath as a small toad drops onto him from the tree branches above and nearly wriggles into the breast of his kimono before he plucks it free.

"I bet Luffy's turning fucking cartwheels," Zoro mutters, watching as the fishman carefully deposits the squirming creature on the grass.

Franky, frozen in place beside him, clucks his tongue unhappily as he peers at the ground beneath his feet. "Scoot along, little toad-bros! Grapes wouldn't be so bad but little croaks popping between my toes? Ah, hell no, that ain't super at all!"

"Whoa! Oi, Dad, where'd they come from? Can we keep one?"

The infestation of toads is accompanied by a growing clamor of croaking and trilling in addition to the ongoing thumps and plops, and at first they mistake the men's quarters door creaking open for a particularly raucous individual, but then-

"Zoro spins to find Ace peering out at the deck, his younger brother clinging to the doorframe beside him, thumb crammed his mouth, and both of them regarding the invaders with bewildered fascination.
"Dad, can we-?"

"Shit! Shut that door before the bloody things-!" Intent on keeping the interior of the ship as amphibian-free as possible despite the strong urge to pop one of the most loathsomely large specimens into a certain someone's bunk as a bedtime surprise, the swordsman's moving towards them when his foot brushes against a nearby toad- which promptly turns and latches onto the toe of his boot.

"Oh, wow, they BITE?" Ace asks incredulously, hauling Sabo back inside by the collar before he can make a grab for one of the thick-bodied shapes hopping past. "Oh. Eww. Dad, look. I think that one over there just ate one of the littler ones, 'cause there's a leg hanging out of his mouth…"

Brow furrowing, Zoro gives his foot a firm shake, and to his astonishment, the animal refuses to let go even though he's lifted it completely off the ground. It's much heavier than he expected, potentially a good three to four pounds.

"Bloodthirsty little bastard, aren't y-

"OW!" Franky yowls, loudly enough to make him jump because the cry's filled with shock and pain rather than the shipwright's usual playful humor. "Shit- that REALLY ain't super!"

Across the deck, their other nakama's voices are also rising in alarm, and when he glances over his shoulder for just a second, his eye widens at the sight of Usopp hoisting Nami onto one shoulder to hold her clear of the toads making clumsy leaps at her bare calves, while Robin employs a multitude of extra hands to slap away her unlikely assailants.

When he turns back, there's a huge toad - possibly the largest he's seen in his life - bouncing determinedly toward the men's quarters door, which is still open despite Ace's frantic attempts to close it because Sabo's reversed directions, crowding up against his older brother's legs and yanking on his shirt and shorts in a desperate attempt to climb him like a tree.

The swordsman doesn't think twice; he rears back and punts the damn thing as hard as possible using the same foot that's got a toad still clinging vehemently to it, and both amphibians are suddenly airborne and flying towards the starboard side. One clears the railing and goes somersaulting out of sight. The other-

The other toad hits the railing forcefully enough to rupture, leaving a large splotch of black slime behind after it slides free and drops to the deck.

Everyone falls silent, staring, and for several moments there's nothing but the sound of several hundred bulging throats uttering discordant croaks.

"Ah, now I see," Robin says calmly, disembodied limbs continuing to toss toads over the side as she pauses with one dangling from her hand, held by a rear leg to prevent it from twisting in her grasp and sinking sharp teeth into her flesh. "Perhaps our missing friends were eaten alive."

"TOADS?" Usopp shrieks. "ARE YOU SERIOUS- THEY WERE SHOOTING AT TOADS?"

"Okay, I'm pretty sure we're not keeping one of these things," Zoro tells Ace dryly before pushing both children further inside and slamming the door shut behind them. "Hang tight, guys. Be back soon as we take care of this."

xxx

Rocketing back across the divide with Sanji in tow, sending precipitous toads ricocheting in all
directions, Luffy returns to discover his ship embroiled in chaos. While he and the cook encountered a fair number of toads on the opposing vessel, it seems the vast majority are landing on or around the Sunny, because the deck is literally swarming with them.

He'd been startled when the creature in his grasp had squirmed around and latched onto his fingers with a surprisingly painful bite, promptly attempting to hurl it away- and failing, because it'd clung tenaciously to his hand until he'd whipped his arm out and smacked it solidly against the nearest wall.

The resulting charcoal-hued smear, darkly vivid on the chestnut panels and distinctly recognizable after their glimpse at the rest of the empty craft, had prompted an immediate double-take, and they'd been gaping at each other in confusion, trying to work out the logistics, when they'd heard the first shouts.

Skidding to a stop and narrowly avoiding a full-length belly flop onto the grass as he stumbles over a passing toad, the captain surveys the scene with consternation, noting the whereabouts of each crewmember as he automatically searches for his first mate.

Nami and Robin are holding their ground near the lawn deck's center, defending Jinbei and Chopper while the doctor hurriedly treats a ring of deep punctures in the fishman's left calf. A thick dark cloud, spawned by the navigator's Clima-tact, is hovering above them, periodically ejecting small but deadly accurate lightning bolts to stun toads still falling from overhead, and providing Jinbei with more than enough moisture to fire devastatingly powerful water shots at anything that comes too close to the reindeer's unprotected back.

As he hurries past them, he ducks beneath the navigator's staff to avoid being clobbered in the head as she swings it and slams the furthermost ball into a toad, sending it arching dramatically through the air- until it smashes headfirst into the foremast.

On the bow, Brook's clearing a width swath around the helm, tirelessly performing strike after strike to allow Franky to concentrate on ship's controls. The cyborg's watching closely and upon seeing Luffy and Sanji's return, he bellows for everyone to grab onto something.

Most of his nakama immediately scramble for a handhold, dodging snapping toads as best they can, but the captain refuses to budge until he's located the remaining members of his crew.

He spots Usopp when the sniper takes out a target falling towards him from above; he's tensing to side-step it when a well-aimed Kabuto shot knocks the amphibian out of range, and when he looks up, he finds the other pirate clinging to the rigging below the crow's nest, where he's found cover as well as an excellent vantage point for picking off their diminutive yet troublesome foes.

But he still hasn't seen-

"ZORO- ZORO, WHERE-"

"Will you get down, goddamn it, so we can get the hell out of here?"

The relief he feels at the sound of his swordsman's voice is exceeded only by the older man's sudden appearance at his elbow.

Zoro's holding a katana in each hand, their blades dripping, but he quickly wipes them clean on his already black-spattered coat's skirt and shoves them back into their sheaths so he can grab the railing with one hand and Luffy's waist with the other.

"Zoro, what-?"
"Just hang on!" His first mate insists, dropping into a crouch and pulling him down as well, cursing as a fat toad hits him in the temple, scrabbles fruitlessly for a foothold and goes rolling to the grass.

At the bow, the petal-shaped blades of the lion figurehead's mane shift and then erupt into motion, whirling furiously as they propel the Sunny backwards, away from the vacant vessel- but more importantly, away from the downpour of toads.

Zoro's language gets progressively worse as their hunched backs are pelted with soft-bodied flying objects, until the older pirate's rattling off a steady stream of profanity in his ear, and Luffy's snickering under the arm he's got folded protectively over his eyes.

Wow, it's a good thing Nami's probably not paying attention.

Franky slows the ship only when he's positive they're completely clear, and turns with undisguised reluctance, slowly removing his shades to survey the damage with his naked eyes.

They've gotten lucky; the Chicken Voyage has largely cleared the decks of live and dead toads alike, although there's still a decent number of stragglers that evaded being blown overboard because they've either fetched up against the outer walls of the men's and women's quarters or gotten caught in the tree branches.

Straightening, Zoro swipes sweat from his brow and grimaces in disgust because he's succeeded in smearing something repulsive across one cheek. "Shit!"

He tears off his coat, flipping it inside out so he can scrub his face with the lining, which now appears to be the only part not streaked with toad guts.

Luffy gives him a consolatory pat on the shoulder, glancing around. Behind them, the rest of the crew's wearing similar expressions of dismay and halfheartedly dispatching anything that looks as though it might still be hopping.

"I think I've developed a rather sudden fear of toads," he hears Usopp announce to anyone within earshot.

"Bufonophobia," Robin responds sagely.

"Is there anything you DON'T know?" The sniper demands.

Chuckling, the captain turns back to find Zoro fussily inspecting his haramaki for stains and grumbling something about not needing extra loads of laundry, and he nearly laughs out loud, but then he notices the older pirate's hand lingering over his abdomen a little longer than necessary while smoothing the fabric, and his breath catches in his throat.

And any doubts he's still harboring after witnessing THAT particular gesture vanish when his lover abruptly pales and raises the arm not clutching his wadded up coat to gag furtively into the crook of his elbow. He tries to disguise what's clearly a surge of nausea with a cough, but it's not enough to fool someone standing so close to him.

Especially not me.

Heart pounding harder in his chest, Luffy reaches out to splay trembling fingers over Zoro's stomach, his voice pitched low but filled with elation as he presses his palm flat against his swordsman's lower belly and leans closer to catch his gaze. "Zoro- Zoro, you're-

xxx
"How did-" He nearly drops the coat he's holding wedged into his armpit, quickly looking around to check if anyone else is watching, but Luffy's body is blocking their interaction from sight and their nakama aren't paying attention anyway, too busy picking their way across the lawn that's become a minefield of the macabre. "I don't- look, I'm not sure, okay?"

It's not a lie, not exactly, because his suspicions haven't been medically confirmed, but the truth is that he's already convinced he knows what the results will show. Until this afternoon brought what he's certain is the first hint of morning sickness, between the cook's goddamn cigarettes and now the fucking toad entrails – both of which positively reek – he couldn't explain it, couldn't put a finger on why he'd been so sure.

But ever since last week, when he drifted out of sleep in the middle of the night with his captain snuggled alongside him in bed, snoring faintly against his shoulder and clutching him possessively around the middle, he's been feeling slightly off.

He remembers lying there, staring into the darkness while listening to Luffy's breathing and then slowly reaching down to slide tentative fingers over his side until they were cupping his abdomen. Remembers being suddenly wide awake, his pulse racing in his throat, because he was recalling their exchange a few months ago:

"Is this one of your- one of those-"

"Dunno, it just feels that way, you know?"

He remembers the moment he understood exactly what Luffy meant.

Frustrated, the swordsman wets his lips. The last thing he needs is everybody getting all excited over nothing, because regardless of what he thinks, there's a chance he might be imaging the whole thing. Accidentally making himself sick because of that whole psychososis- psychostomic- that psycho-whatever thing Chopper warned him could happen.

I didn't forget the "psycho" part of it, at any rate.

"Sencho-"

"Zoro moves different when he's-" The younger pirate's still touching him gently, even reverently, eyes shining with exhilaration. "Especially when you're fighting. It's sort of like you've got a glass of water and you're trying really hard not to spill it. Oh, and you rub your stomach a lot too, even though you don't notice you're doing it."

"… I…" He's honestly not sure how to respond.

I knew Luffy always paid a lot closer attention to stuff than anybody realized but-

"How long do you think you've been-? Zoro, you didn't say anything! When did Chopper last-?"

"C'mon, Sencho, you were there. It was only a couple weeks ago, and it was negative. And even if I am now, it's probably still way too soon to-"

Luffy's already craning his neck, looking anxiously around for the doctor. "We need to-"

"Hold up, Luffy, jeez! We need to finish dealing with this shit first." He gestures with his armful of coat to the lawn around them, which has definitely seen better days. The grass is dark with slime, and the ground along the wall concealing the men's quarters is littered with dead and dying toads. "Gotta check on the kids too. Ace opened the door to see what was going on and they almost got
attacked by one of those things."

He starts to shrug his captain's hand away, then changes his mind, seizing it in his own and giving a firm squeeze while pressing both to his midsection. "I'm not saying I won't go, okay? But I promised them I'd be right back."

"And then we're gonna see Chopper."

"Sure. AFTER we do something about the deck. I don't want Sabo out here if I can't keep an eye on him, not when he's still putting his damn fingers in his mouth all the time. And he'd probably be pissed about being stuck inside, which means we'd end up hearing about it from whoever agreed to watch him."

"Well… okay." Luffy hesitates, eyeing him thoughtfully. "Oi… maybe you should just wait with the kids while we clean up the ship."

"Uh, you sure I shouldn't help-?"

"Not if you're gonna end up barfing everywhere."

Zoro flushes. "Oh. You noticed that too, huh."

**Guess I should've known I wasn't gonna hide it from him for very long.**

He doesn't protest when the younger pirate herds him impatiently towards the men's quarters, although he finds himself fighting not to gag when opening the door scoots an ankle-high pile of… biological debris… across the grass, and despite his insistence that he's not going to vomit, he nearly loses it anyway when he pauses to remove his soiled footwear so he doesn't track the mess across the carpet.

Snatching the boots and holding them well away from his body by the tops, Luffy gives him a reassuring kiss before stealing his coat as well and chasing him inside- where he's immediately waylaid by two anxious children, one of which is demanding to know what they've missed while the other keeps up a steady stream of "dadada" and "uhp-uhp-uhp" until the swordsman relents and scoops him up.

Holding the sniffling toddler cradling against his chest, Zoro pauses to watch his captain jogging back across the deck, zig-zagging to avoid toads- and bits of toads- to where their nakama are puzzling over how to remove a very lively, very angry amphibian that's somehow gotten lodged in Brook's ribcage during the escape.

_Damn, I've had enough excitement to last me a week and the day's only half over_, the first mate muses as he pulls the door tightly shut, cautiously scanning the floor and the shadows beneath the bunks for signs of movement to make sure that nothing hopped over the threshold while he was distracted. And then, _fucking hell, listen to me. I sound like I'm in my fifties or something, not my late twenties…_

Turning towards the interior of the room, he shifts Sabo to his hip so he can put an arm around his older son and nudge him towards the sofa.

"Dad, what HAPPENED?" Ace asks again, grabbing onto the waistband of his trousers and nearly tripping him. "You said we should stay inside, so we did, but then everything started shaking and I could hear stuff falling in the lockers and Sabo bumped his head but I got him to stop crying by making faces at him like Dad does and- is everybody okay? Are there still toads outside? Are you sure we can't keep one? Or are they all bitey like the big one that-"
"Dadadadadadadadada-"

"Oi, where's your coat-robe-thingy? And why aren't you wearing your- did a toad EAT YOUR BOOTS? Dad- Dad-"

Collapsing onto the cushions with both kids clamoring for his attention and the younger one attempting to scramble higher on his lap, coming dangerously close to kicking him in the balls, Zoro lets his head drop back so he's staring upwards at the ceiling- and then closes his eye, stifling a groan of dismay as another bout of nausea ripples through his gut.  

"Dad-?"

*Oh, yeah. This is gonna be fun.*

Chapter End Notes

I'm tacking this on at the end to avoid spoilers for the chapter, but I need to offer a brief nod of acknowledgement to Stephen King for beating me to the idea of man-eating toads. I highly recommend his "Rainy Season" which has always been one of my favorite short stories. The toads encountered by the Straw Hats are also loosely based on the Central and South American cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) and the African pixie or bullfrog (*Pyxicephalus adspersus*), both of which are capable of reaching up to four pounds and nearly a foot in length.
Sluicing the lawn deck clean with buckets of water isn't effective or efficient enough for a mess of this magnitude, so Franky and Usopp rig up an old spare pump that's been taking up space in the shipwright's workshop, and the crew resorts to hosing the grass with desalinized water from the bathhouse.

Unfortunately, the Adam wood planks themselves require a bit more attention and need to be attacked with stiff-bristled brushes to remove the remaining residue from the grain.

"This just might be the most disgusting thing I've ever seen," Nami declares, pushing her hair out of her face with her forearm to avoid touching it with her fingers.

"Oh, don't worry, they're just toads. It's just a few toads," Usopp, who's working beside her, replies in a voice pitched with mocking falsetto. He yelps when the navigator threatens to smack him with the increasingly foul suds-laden sponge she's been using to wipe down the rails.

"Do that again and I'll jam this sponge down your-" 

"Alright, alright!" The sniper backs away, hands raised defensively, and she snorts, turning her attention back to the stubborn patch of sludge that's resisting her attempts to remove it from the nearest post.

"O-Oi, Nami-san, you don't need to do that; here, give me that and I'll-"

"I can work as well as anybody, Sanji-kun." The redhead scans him from head to toe, noting his badly soiled suit, and wrinkles her nose. "Why don't you go clean up in the bathhouse and then make us some cold drinks? I'm sure everyone's going to be thirsty by the time we're done."

"Of course, Nami-san! Right away, Nami-swaaan!"

"There, that'll get rid of him for a little while."

"He certainly is persistent," Jinbei remarks, stooping to retrieve yet another dead toad by its hind legs between webbed thumb and forefinger.

"I've had plenty of time to get used to it. Ah, here." Nami passes him a bucket that's just been emptied overboard. "Before that thing drips all over everything we just scrubbed."

During the already unpleasant task of dropping the small warty carcasses overboard, which the fishman's told them is the fastest and most efficient method of disposal given the iron stomachs of most New World fish, they've discovered yet another unpleasant aspect of their amphibian invaders. Whether or not it's related to the altitude or temperature as Nami suspects or just some weird characteristic of this particular species, they may never know, but one thing's become distressingly clear.

The dead toads are disintegrating. Melting into repulsive puddles of black goo that Sanji instantly identified as the substance he'd slipped in while exploring the unoccupied vessel.

Luffy wrinkles his nose as he watches Jinbei attempt to gingerly lower the remains into the bucket-only to recoil as the body sags free and lands with a plop, leaving him holding nothing but a pair of disembodied legs.
Yeah, this is definitely pretty gross. It's a good thing Zoro's not out here or he really would be throwing up all over the place...

"Like the teeth and the biting wasn't bad enough." Usopp shudders, fastidiously wiping his hands on the legs of his overalls. "Who the hell ever heard of carnivorous toads in the first place?"

"Toads will attempt to engulf anything that fits in their mouths, although they don't typically possess teeth," Robin remarks as she sets a pan of fresh soapy water beside the sniper. "Certain frogs, however, do have a bony ridge capable of drawing blood."

"Robin, how in the world DO you know so much about reptiles and amphibians?"

"She worked for Crocodile, didn't she?" Luffy says absentmindedly, sidetracked by the thought of his swordsman and the conversation they shared less than half an hour ago.

*Baby. We're having a-

"-be stupid, Luffy. That was his NAME."

"I know that, but he also had those banana weenies or whatever they were called."

*We're having another baby.*

"-ana WEENIES." Usopp is sputtering, slapping a hand repeatedly against his thigh.

"Banana WHATS?" Franky demands warily.

*We're having another baby 'cause Zoro's- Zoro's-

"Bananawani," the historian corrects them, unable to restrain a chuckle although Nami's rolling her eyes in exasperation at her male crewmates' immaturity. "And yes, the library in Rainbase had a rather extensive collection of-"

"ZORO'S PREGNANT," Luffy blurts and immediately moves to clap a hand over his mouth as they turn to look at him, but lowers it just as quickly when he remembers it's filthy. "I mean- he says he's not sure but he thinks so and I told him to stay inside with Ace and Sabo 'cause all this gooey black stuff was making him sick even though nothing makes him sick and that's why we need to go see Chopper, to make sure, so we need somebody watch the kids for a little bit while we… do that…"

He snaps his jaw shut, riddled with chagrin under the gaze of his gaping nakama.

*Oh man, Zoro's gonna kill me.*

"Then it wasn't my imagination," Robin murmurs. "I thought Kenshi-san seemed a bit preoccupied this morning."

Nami's staring at him, confusion and disbelief writ large on her face. "Luffy, if he thinks he's pregnant, then what are you doing out here, fooling around with a scrub brush and toad guts? Why aren't the two of you in the infirmary right now?"

"Zoro said-"

"Never mind what Zoro said; go get him and get your asses up there to see Chopper! Sanji can watch the boys after he gets back."
"Curly-bro's gonna love that," Franky mutters.

"Oh, I'm sure he won't mind. Especially if I ask him nicely." The navigator exchanges an amused look with Robin. "Either way, somebody will take care of it. Luffy-"

She doesn't need to tell the captain twice; he's already bolting for the men's quarters door- only to do an abrupt about-face and speed off in the direction of the bathhouse when Usopp hollers after him, asking if he's really planning on dragging his nauseated first mate around the ship when he's still got toad entrails smeared on his shorts.

"I, ah, do hope he remembers to dress himself before he comes hurtling across the lawn again."

"You and me both, Jinbei," the sniper grumbles, blanching when Nami crouches to wring out her sponge and the clean water and suds in the basin darken to a distinct and murky shade of grey. "Ugh. Damn those lucky bastards, getting out of this."

He shoots a sideways glance at Nami. "Oi. Oi, maybe I'm not feeling so great either."

"Usopp, please- don't even start; it sounds like Zoro's got a legitimate reason and, to be honest, Luffy wasn't being much help either, not daydreaming like that with his head stuck in the bloody clouds. Although it's no wonder…"

"I'm afraid I must regretfully tender my resignation from this task. You see, I have an illness-"

"Usopp."

"Maybe Zoro's not really pregnant. Maybe it's something else making him sick. Maybe it's- THE TOADS. WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE FROM SALMONELLA."

"Usopp."

"Nami."

"You're going to have my fist in your face if you don't shut up and start scrubbing."

The sniper takes one look at her scowling face and throws both arms over his head. "AHAAHAHAHA, IT'S A MIRACLE- I'M CURED."

xxx

Luffy's not entirely sure how his swordsman's going to react to his hasty apology - "sorry, I kinda just told half the crew the odds are really good that I finally knocked you up" - but Zoro's apparently too relieved at the distraction his sudden reappearance provides in diverting the children's attention to do more than grumble halfheartedly for a few minutes.

In fact, he's so eager to escape the men's quarters that he nearly forgets to don the clean boots the younger pirate's brought him and merely gives Nami a wan smile when she mouths "girls" at him as they pass her on their way across the lawn deck. Which, to the first mate's delight, is already a hell of a lot cleaner than the last time he saw it.

"Ace wouldn't shut up about the damn toads, and every time he said something about 'em, I kept picturing that one I kicked that exploded all over the-" He breaks off, stopping dead in his tracks in the dining hall doorway with one hand groping unsteadily for the frame and his lips tightly pressed into a firm line.
"Crap…" Luffy takes an uneasy step away from him. "Are you gonna…"

Zoro inhales and exhales slowly through his nose before cautiously relaxing his jaw. "Nngh. I think I'm good. Just- damn. It wasn't that bad this morning, but then-"

"Sanji. And toads."

"Yeah."

The Straw Hat doctor's sitting at his desk, muttering to himself as he digs through his medical bag to determine which supplies need replenishing and making notes on a scrap of paper when Luffy raps on the wall and pops his head around the corner, but he immediately bounces out of his seat when the captain nudges Zoro into the room ahead of him.

"Oi, Chopper- I got another patient for you."

"Oh no, Zoro, I didn't realize you were injured! Where were you bitten?" The reindeer demands, anxiously craning his neck as he visually scans his nakama for tooth marks.

"That's, ah, not why we're here," the swordsman explains haltingly, flushing and scratching the back of his neck when Chopper takes one look at Luffy's enormous grin and utters an outright squeal of excitement.

"Sit! Sit sit sit and- no, wait, I need-" Exploding into a frenzy of activity, the doctor accidentally upends his satchel in the process of grabbing the items he needs from the shelf over his desk, sending rolls of gauze unraveling across the floor and a spool of medical tape bouncing under the hospital bed. His hooves aren't the most ideal for handling glassware to begin with, and in his agitation, he nearly throws the beaker at Zoro while trying to hand it to him. "Urine sample."

"He almost threw up on the way here," Luffy announces, hopping onto the stool and riding the swiveling cushion around for a few rotations before pulling his legs up so he's perched cross-legged on the seat. "That's a good sign, right?"

"Nausea's a symptom, yes." Turning an expectant gaze on the first mate, who hasn't budged. "Zoro?"

"… can somebody at least close the fucking door?"

"Ah, sorry!"

"I think the crew's already involved enough with this whole thing," Zoro grumbles, face flaming as he turns away from them. "They don't need to watch me pissing in a jar."

xxx

"What do you think we should do with it?"

"Easy- toss the damn thing overboard."

"You really got a thing against toads, Uso Nose-bro."

"Oi, one of those things tried to bite off my-!"

"Poor thing was probably scared half to death down there, especially if the carpet matches the drapes." Nami blinks as the shipwright and sniper turn to stare at her in disbelief. "What? I'm just saying that maybe a jungle's not its natural habitat."
"NAMI!" Usopp screeches as Franky bursts into uproarious laughter, tears squirting from the corners of his eyes.

"Yohohohoho," Brook chortles. "My apologies, Usopp-san, but-

"Oi, don't you laugh at me, you bony bastard! Your hair's even bushier than mine!"

"Ah, yes, my friend, but sadly-

Whatever insight the musician's about to offer regarding the contents of his trousers goes unshared, because the shout of triumph emanating from the infirmary startles him so badly that he drops the bucket he's holding and his nakama immediately scatter as the infuriated toad inside comes leaping out.

"Holy shit, was that Luffy just now? Gah, grab it, grab it!"

"From the sound of it, I'm guessin' we got somethin' to celebrate tonight. Aww, that's so su- whoa, settle down, little toad-bro!"

"Perhaps Sanji-san should bake a cake?" Brook suggests as he lunges to catch the vehemently snapping toad, which promptly whirls and attaches itself to his skeletal fingers.

Forced to ignore his ringing ears in favor of fighting to keep his balance as Luffy hugs him repeatedly and covers his face with ecstatic kisses, Zoro scrutinizes the blue-tinged vial resting on Chopper's desk with a mixed sense of relief and uncertainty.

I knew it. I knew it wasn't just- what'd Chopper call it again- that psychosomatic bullshit.

While he's glad to know he's not going crazy – not suffering from nothing but a bunch of imaginary symptoms he's inflicting on himself in his desire to please his captain – he can't help wondering yet again how he's- no, how THEY are going to handle caring for a newborn with two young boys already taking up so much of their time and energy.

Getting ahead of yourself a little, aren't you though, Roronoa? You gotta make it through the next nine months first.

"-anywhere between four to six weeks. And I can only say that based on your latest urine test, because without a menstrual cycle to determine ovulation, there's no way to predict it with better accuracy. I mean, I still don't know if you even ovulate!" Chopper's saying, regarding them both with baffled but thoughtful eyes and prompting the swordsman to embarrassed, shaky laughter. "Or how a normally-developing fetus implants in your abdominal cavity when ejaculation occurs in the-!"

"Let's just not go there. And... I'm sure all that shit's important, but can you not stare at me like you're thinking about dissecting my body for science? Or at least save it for when I'm not looking."

"Oh!" The reindeer dances helplessly in place. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel that way... it- it's just that-"

"Zoro's special," Luffy states firmly, leaning back to let them both see his stern expression. His attitude's clear: he won't tolerate his swordsman's unique ability falling under question if being put on the spot's making him uncomfortable.
"O-Of course!" Chopper agrees. He takes a deep breath. "Alright, while I've still got you here, there's a few things we need to discuss."

"No more booze for Zoro for a while, huh?" The captain asks abjectly before taking his lover's hand and bringing it to his lips so he can kiss the knuckles.

"The ofuro's also off-limits. And while we're on that subject, no more turning the shower so hot that it steams up the whole bathhouse," the doctor insists, voice growing more confident as he lapses into lecture mode. "I'll talk to Sanji about modifying your diet. Keep taking your prenatal vitamins. The ones I already gave you won't last the entire pregnancy, but I can make more capsules when those start to run out."

"Wonderful."

"And no losing them overboard again."

"Oi, I didn't-"

"Shhh." Luffy hushes him with another kiss, snuggling against his side and giving his abdomen a comforting pat that turns to a soft caress, and even though he wants to point out that losing that bottle a few months ago wasn't entirely his fault and definitely wasn't intentional, he quiets anyway, dissuaded from arguing by the sheer bliss evident in the younger pirate's smile.

He looks so freaking happy... I don't think my heart can handle this shit.

To his embarrassed amusement – or rather complete mortification, because Chopper's still watching and hiding a huge smile behind his hooves – his captain pesters him to sit on the stool, dropping to his knees beside it and leaning forward to address his midsection.

"Oi, hello, whoever's in there; it's gonna be a while yet 'til we meet, but I'm gonna talk to you every single day!"

Oh my god.

"D-Damn it, Luffy, will you-"

Stop being so fucking cute.

Their doctor's struggling unsuccessfully to maintain his composure, but a faint squeak escapes him before he clears his throat and attempts to adopt a slightly more professional attitude. "Th-there's just one or two more things."

"Mmm?" Zoro asks, even more flustered than before, because Luffy's just tugged down his haramaki to plant a kiss on his bare stomach and then hugged him around the hips with a burst of joyous enthusiasm. "Sencho, will you STOP? Chopper doesn't wanna see that."

"Weight lifting restrictions," the reindeer continues shyly over the captain's protests. "I know you heal fast, but it hasn't been all that long since the last laparotomy. And you've had two now, so there's more scar tissue built up inside your abdominal cavity. Until we get a scan done and find out where implantation occurred, I'd like to play it safe."

Oh, great, something new to worry about- like I didn't already have enough-

"No no no, it's not likely to be a serious concern. I'm just thinking ahead and trying to cover all the possibilities," Chopper assures Luffy, who's turned to look at him with genuine alarm. "With any
luck, everything will go as easily as it did with Sabo."

"So... you're saying we DON'T gotta worry about Zoro's guts falling out or anything, right?" Luffy asks suspiciously- and winces as his swordsman makes a strangled choking noise and shoves him out of the way to dive for the waste basket sitting beside the desk. "Oops. Sorry, Zoro..."

"Nothing like that, but he is at higher risk for an incisional hernia due to the increased intra-abdominal pressure during pregnancy."

"Wha-"

"Which sounds a lot worse than it actually is and the odds are against it anyway, I promise!" The doctor hurriedly amends upon seeing his crewmate's concern. "Trafalgar-san's an excellent surgeon and-"

"Shit." Zoro wheezes from where he's sitting splay-legged on the floor, slumped forward over the can wedged between his thighs. "I forgot we'd end up dealing with that smug asshole a- agai-"

Shoulders convulsing, he shoves his face below the rim again.

Cringing at the awful sounds emerging from the older pirate's throat, Luffy crouches beside him and conscientiously rubs soothing hands up and down his spine and along the back of his neck. "At least this part shouldn't last too long though, right? A few weeks, a couple months maybe, and you'll feel better?"

His first mate gives an inarticulate moan in response and throws up again.

xxx

It's well over an hour later when they return to the men's quarters to relieve the exhausted cook and collect their anxious and highly frustrated offspring, who haven't taken well to being cooped up inside while the rest of the crew finishes restoring order to the ship.

Zoro's ready to lie down and quietly expire on the nearest sofa- or at least grab a long nap- but Ace takes one look at his father's washed-out complexion and slumped shoulders and latches onto him like a starving leech, and when he inadvertently reverts to calling the swordsman "Daddy" again regardless of his vow to avoid it, they exchange a look over the seven-year-old's head and the first mate nods tiredly.

We- I can't push this off anymore.

He hopes he's not going to sound as tired as he feels. "Oi, cook. You mind watching Sabo a little longer?"

Sanji opens his mouth to protest and then closes it, visible eye widening slightly in understanding. "I- okay. No problem. And I'll make sure everybody knows to stay out of here too, so just- come out and lemme know when you guys are done."

Sabo, picking up on the sudden tension, clings reluctantly to Zoro's trouser leg and starts to shriek in protest when the blond reaches for him.

"Oi oi, shhh," Luffy croons, scooping him up and bouncing him a few times before passing him to the cook. "Sanji's gonna take you outside, okay? Just for a little bit and then me and Zoro will come and get you, okay?"
"Take him in the bar, let him look at the fish or something," the swordsman mutters, avoiding Sanji's gaze. "Or maybe go get that toy Usopp made him for his birthday that he likes so much. That stupid bird with the wheels and the pull-string."

He bends down a bit to put himself at eye-level with the teary-eyed toddler. "Be good for Sanji. Please?"

Sabo stares at him for a moment before popping his thumb into his mouth and nodding enthusiastically.

Zoro gives him a somewhat crooked smile, leaning closer to gently bump their foreheads together and dropping his voice so Ace, who's been effectively wrangled by Luffy, can't hear. "You're not gonna be the youngest anymore. So you gotta help me out, right?"

_reaching out to pat his chin – with the hand he's just pulled away from his mouth, of course – Sabo nods again, and the swordsman sighs._ "I have no idea if you even understand what I'm telling you."

"Damn, so you really are-" Sanji hesitates, brow creasing with concern. "Marimo. Zoro. You sure now's a good time to do this? Maybe you should wait, at least until you're feeling better-you look like shit warmed over."

"Nah, I think it's waited long enough. Probably too long. But thanks."

"Yeah. I just-" The cook glances over at Ace and Luffy before flashing his pale-faced nakama another worried look. "Good luck. I mean it."

xxx

"How do we do this?" Zoro mumbles as he and his captain sit stiffly on either end of the sofa with their son in the middle, looking cautiously back and forth between them. "What do I say and what parts do I leave out? Because some of it-

Some of it's stuff I don't wanna share. Stuff I can't share. Like the way she-

Well-manicured fingernails rake delicately down his chest, first tracing the scar dividing his pectorals and then scraping more roughly over the bulge of his stomach, digging threateningly into his flesh, and she smiles, purring his name as she constricts her opposite hand where it's clutching him, determined to wring a cry from his throat.

He takes a deep breath, struggling to draw air past the sudden tightness in his chest.

_Don't you dare. Don't you dare have a fucking panic attack- a fucking EPISODE- right in front of him when you're supposed to be making things BETTER not WORSE._

"Robin said-"

"I remember what Robin said," he snaps, more sharply than he intended, and he's immediately sorry because now Ace is staring at the floor and refusing to look at him. "Damn it. Look, I- I'm not any good at this shit."

"..."

"Zoro's not mad at you, he's just-" Luffy casts an apologetic grimace in the swordsman's direction before continuing. "Zoro's scared."
That gets their child's attention like nothing else, and he looks up, frowning slightly. "Wha- what are you talking about? Dad's not scared of anything."

Another breath, so deep it starts to feel as though his lungs are going to rupture before he finally lets the air escape.

*Come on, Roronoa, you can do this.*

"Yeah, yeah I am." Forcing himself to make eye contact. "There's a lot of times I've been scared. I was scared of losing the first time I faced somebody with a real blade. And that I'd screw up when I went after my first bounty."

Old memories. Old enough that he's starting to forget the details. But there are plenty of others much newer, still fresh in his mind.

"I was scared when I thought Luffy- when I thought everybody- was gonna die on that floating island where we met Brook. I was scared when I woke up in the middle of fucking nowhere after that bastard Kuma kicked our asses. I was scared when I thought I was never gonna see Luffy again when the reports started coming in from Marineford."

At the opposite end of the sofa, his captain twitches visibly.

"And I was fucking terrified when I found out I was gonna have a goddamn baby. Scared out of my mind- and mad as hell."

"..."

"It was like the whole freaking world got turned upside down, and I was pissed off at everything. Pissed at Chopper for telling me I couldn't do any of the shit I was used to doing. Pissed at Luffy for being so happy about the whole thing and doing something like that to me in the first place, even though there's no way he could've known. And at the rest of the crew for being so goddamn curious, making me feel like a goddamn bug in a jar. And I was really pissed at my own body, for doing something it wasn't supposed to-" He swallows forcefully. "... but then I- I saw you for the first time on that monitor and everything changed. Everything. Changed."

"Dad-?"

"When those fucking admirals attacked, all I could think about was keeping you safe. And when they took me to- to Impel Down, I told myself I'd do anything- I'd do whatever I needed to do to keep you safe."

There's a thick bubble of nausea trying to rise in his esophagus but he swallows it, forces it back down.

Luffy, clearly shaken, has pulled Ace - who's too distracted to protest - into his lap and buried his nose in the boy's hair, hugging him tightly.

"In the prison, there was this guard- this woman-" He can feel his lower jaw beginning to tremble and comes very close to raising a hand and slapping himself in the face, because while he's not sure if it's from the emotional upheaval of watching that test register positive on Chopper's desk just a couple hours ago or just his usual reluctance, he knows if he can't get his shit together right now, he's never going to be able to broach this subject again.

The only thing holding him back from hitting himself is knowing that seeing it's likely to scare the shit out of his son.
Balling his hands into fists on his thighs, highly conscious of the right's missing joints, he stares down at the floor and his boots.

*Come on. COME ON, YOU F***ING COWARD.*

"I knew Luffy would come after us-" He can't see his captain nodding because the younger pirate's on his blind side now that he's turned away, but he's aware of the movement all the same. "-but I didn't know how long it'd take him and the crew to find us, so I- I-"

"Zoro kept you safe-" Luffy says quietly, hugging Ace closer. "-the only way he knew how."

"You were gonna ask me that other day. How I lost my fingers." He raises his right hand, flexing the remaining digits and staring at them, because it's easier to look at the old injury than to meet his son's horrified eyes. "She had a knife. She told me to choose which one I wanted to keep: you or my fingers."

"You-" Ace's voice is so low, it's barely audible. "You picked me..."

"Yeah. I picked you."

"Even though it meant you might not-" The rest is spoken so softly it's nearly incomprehensible.

For the thousandth time, he's blown away by the fact that the child he and Luffy have produced is so goddamn observant and intuitive, even at such a young age. It's just as his captain said; this is undeniably the best of them both, packed into one small boy who's currently huddled in the protective circle of one parent's arms and regarding the other with a mixture of shock and awe.

*If he's like this now- what's he gonna be like in a few years? I wanna know. I wanna watch him grow up and find out what kind of person he's gonna be when he's my age. Or Luffy's.*

Knowing that they nearly lost the opportunity to discover this-

"Yeah. Even though it meant I might never hold a sword in that hand again. That didn't matter. You were more important."

Luffy, most of his face hidden where he's nuzzled it into their son's hair, is staring at him, eyes bright with unshed tears, and the swordsman's forced to look away or risk losing verbal momentum.

"You're probably the only thing that kept me from going crazy. Talking to you, and knowing Luffy and our crew were out there looking for us- because every time she came into my cell and every time she t-touched me-" His stomach gives a discomfiting lurch and he pauses, the back of one hand pressed to his mouth as he wills the turmoil in his gut to settle down.

Ace, having deducted from his tone that there's a definite difference between casual touching and the sort of touching to which he's referring, has gone rigid in the captain's embrace. He looks back and forth between them with anxious, frightened eyes. "Is- is this like- when you said I should tell you if anybody ever tries to-?"

"Yeah, it's like that," Luffy confirms, unable to keep a trace of anger from entering his voice, and the seven-year-old utters a very small "oh" before going completely silent again.

When Zoro finally lowers his hand, it's shaking uncontrollably. His voice is equally unsteady. "I just kept telling myself to hang on until Luffy came for us, that everything would be okay. And he did- he brought the ship and the whole crew and a goddamn Kracken after us as soon as he figured"
"I should've gotten there sooner. I should've gotten there before- before Zoro was-"

"You got us out alive."

His captain frees an arm to swipe furiously at his wet cheeks. "Yeah, but not-"

Not whole. Not undamaged, in more ways than one. It hangs in the air between them like the promise of violence.

"You know how I got most of my scars," The swordsman tells Ace, motioning to his own eye and chest before holding up his maimed hand. "And now you know about this one too. But-"

"Sometimes things happen that mess you up inside your head. Stuff that leaves scars on the inside," Luffy finishes. "And even though you can't see 'em, they hurt a lot more than the ones you CAN see."

He's unconsciously touching the starburst on his chest as he says it, eyes distant, and even though he's talking about what happened in Impel Down on the SECOND occasion he passed through its gates, it's obvious he can't help thinking of the first.

"Scars on the inside?" Ace asks hesitantly.

Zoro's brow furrows as he struggles to find words that will adequately explain the concepts of triggers and flashbacks in a way that their child will understand. "Even though I know Luffy got us out of there and even though it's been a really long time, sometimes I forget, and I get... really scared. And angry."

"Is that what happened when you... um, went after that- that guy with the gun? Even though you told him you weren't gonna fight him?"

The swordsman nods. "Yeah. That's exactly what happened."

"Part of it. Yeah. I panicked and used it when you were still-" He starts to tap his stomach and touches it gently instead, as though he's wary of disturbing the new life inside even though he knows it's not yet advanced enough to register the contact. "I didn't know it right away, but it fucked me up inside- made me start bleeding really bad, and as much as I don't like the guy, if Law hadn't shown up when he did, I think both of us probably would've died."

Quietly, muttering darkly to himself more than anyone else: "I should've waited, let her do whatever the hell she wanted, but I just-"

*I was tired and I was in pain, but mostly I just wanted it to stop because I was afraid.*

Ace opens his mouth, closes it and fidgets against Luffy briefly before opening it again. "Dad?"

"Yeah?"
"I wanna- Dad, can- can I hug you?" His son asks plaintively, visibly steeling himself when his bottom lip begins to quiver. "Because I really really want to but I don't wanna scare you if talking about all this stuff's making you upset and I don't wanna-

Whatever else he's saying ends up muffled by his father's chest, because Zoro's already at the other end of the sofa, wrapping his arms tightly around both members of his family and struggling to hold back the tears threatening to overflow the eye he's just squeezed shut.

**Ace-** Ace, what did we ever do to deserve- how the hell did we end up with a kid like you?

Drifting up from where his child's face is buried against him. "Daddy, where is she now? What happened to her? The lady that-"

"I killed her."

"Oh." Then, in a voice choked with emotion because the seven-year-old's starting to cry. "G-Good."

"Good is right," Luffy agrees somewhat brokenly, leaning his forehead against his swordsman's neck and hugging them both a little harder.

xxx

It takes Ace a while to settle down, but eventually he leans back, wiping tears and mucus from beneath his nose with his forearm and looking extremely embarrassed at his loss of control. "Ugh... s-sorry, I got snot on you."

"Wouldn't be the first time. Or the worst thing you ever plastered all over me," Zoro assures him calmly. "Between you and your brother, you guys have probably nailed me with just about every disgusting thing imaginable. Puke, piss, shit, you name it."

"Zoro's not the only one," Luffy adds ruefully.

Their son looks as though he's about to laugh, but then his expression turns seriously thoughtful. "Dad, can I ask you something else?"

"Sure." Hoping desperately that it's a question he's willing and able to answer.

"The bad dreams you get sometimes. I mean the- the really, really bad ones, where you yell a lot and I'm not supposed to try to wake you up by myself. Are they about- are they because of the stuff you just told me?"

It's been well over a year since Zoro had the type of nightmare that the boy's describing, but one particular dream of that nature was so disturbing that he still remembers most of it and finds himself suppressing a shudder at the thought. "Yes."

"You had a bunch of those when-" Glancing down as he places a careful hand over the center of his father's haramaki, Ace bites his lower lip. "Is that gonna happen again? Is this baby gonna make you have those dreams too, like Sabo did?"

Startled, the swordsman shoots Luffy a questioning look but his captain's shaking his head in denial, appearing equally surprised.

"I know you're having one," their son protests, evidently misunderstanding the exchange. "Dad, I'm not blind- you almost threw up like a million times today, and you NEVER get sick, but you
threw up all the time when Sabo was still in here, so it's gotta be 'cause you're having a baby."

"You okay with that?" Zoro asks cautiously.

"Uh huh. And I know Nami-aneki thinks I need a little sister, but-" He gives the haramaki a pat, smiling bashfully. "I hope it's another boy."

"Yeah? Well, what if it's a girl?"

"Eh, I guess that'd be okay too. Oi, can I sleep with you guys tonight?"

His parents exchange a puzzled glance.

"Sure!"

"Fine by me, but why-?"

Ace gives an indignant scowl down at where his hand's still resting on his green-haired father's midsection. "Well, somebody's gotta make sure you don't have bad dreams, and he's definitely too little yet."

"Where does he come up with this stuff?" The swordsman asks helplessly. "Ace-"

"Or she! Or she's definitely too- oii, Dad- DAD- leggo, you guys are squashing me!"

xxx

Blaming physical and mental exhaustion, not to mention a stomach that's still churning turbulently enough to negate any genuine interest in dinner, Zoro retires early, acknowledging his nakama's congratulations with a tired smile and wave of one hand before he departs the dining hall.

He dozes fitfully through most of the early evening and wakes to the rest of his family scrambling into bed with him, trying to be quiet and not disturb his rest- and failing miserably.

Either the mattress is too goddamn small or they just take up too much space, crowding him away from his side and into the middle where he's surrounded by a tangle of sprawling limbs.

Sabo won't hold still or stop giggling and, when he eventually wears himself out, insists on using the swordsman as a pillow.

Luffy and Ace, whose feet are fucking FREEZING, cuddle up on either side of him and start an animated discussion over his belly about the toad that unexpectedly detonated like a live grenade when Usopp, who'd grudgingly agreed to lend them his largest bug box as a temporary cage, offered the amphibian a dish of water via – much to Sanji's outrage – the longest pair of salad tongs he could find in the kitchen. Which is undeniably interesting but does nothing for his queasy stomach.

They're too noisy and they keep bumping into him and they won't stop fussing affectionately over his middle and the toddler slumped snoring against his chest is drooling into his armpit- but as he lies there, watching them through one half-lidded eye and gradually falling asleep again despite the commotion, he knows he wouldn't have it any other way.

And despite the day's events and despite the conversation that's stirred ghosts in places he's fearful to tread, and although he doesn't have a clue if it's just a lucky roll of the dice or if it really is his son's proximity banishing the unwanted female presence normally lurking in his head, he doesn't
dream.
"Ah, good morning, Luffy-san."

"Oi, Jinbei," the captain mumbles as he wanders into the dining hall with Sabo clinging around his neck, babbling happily, and Ace trailing behind him.

"By yourself again this morning?" Sanji calls from where he's standing at the stove, spatula in hand.

Easing the toddler in his arms into the highchair and dropping into the seat beside it, Luffy lets himself sag forward until his forehead hits the table with a soft thud. "Zoro's curled up under the covers and won't come out. When I said he was gonna miss breakfast, he made this really horrible noise and told me to- uh..."

"Fuh ufuf," Sabo supplies helpfully, banging both hands on his tray table and prompting a loud snort from the cook.

"I'm just gonna pretend I didn't hear that, kiddo, but you better not let Nami-san know you're still picking up that foul-mouthed Marimo's bad habits."

Luffy waves a dismissive hand. "I dunno why anybody even cares- even if he's only a year old, he's still a pirate."

"A pint-sized one, anyway," Sanji amends, breaking into a grin when Ace giggles. "Well, morning sickness or not, you need to find a way to drag that shitty swordsman's ass out of bed so we can get some food into him."

"I TRIED," the rubber man groans into the tablecloth. "But he hit me with a pillow when I said he should eat something. He won't even touch those cracker things Chopper gave him for right after he wakes up."

He wrinkles his nose. "I kinda don't blame him though- they're really, really dry and they taste like sawdust."

"They're supposed to be bland, dumb-ass, so he gets something in his stomach without a whole bunch of spices and shit that might make him puke."

"Is it normal," Jinbei asks cautiously, "-for Zoro-san to be this sick?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot we didn't run into you 'til later, so you didn't see him last time 'til after he was already done with that part. I dunno, I thought he barfed a lot before, but Chopper wasn't kidding about how every time's different. It's like everything makes Zoro sick right now. EVERYTHING."

Luffy throws himself backwards so he's slouching in his seat, managing to look both confused and annoyed at the same time. "And he's all weird about a bunch of other stuff too. See, he woke me up in the middle of the night 'cause he wanted-"

A furtive glance at the children beside him. "- S-E-X but then-"

"Oi. Dad. I know how to spell."

"-but THEN he made me stop 'cause he said getting bounced around so much was making him feel"
like hurling. Right in the middle too, so even though HE rolled over and went back to sleep, I couldn't 'til I, uh, did something about it."

"Okay," Sanji mutters as he turns back to the skillet he's just returned to the stove. "Well that's way more than I needed to know."

"And I keep getting stuck doing all the diapers 'cause they make him sick too- even if they're not the poopy ones!" The captain rakes both hands through his uncombed hair with a groan of frustration, leaving it sticking up even more than before. "And THOSE? He always runs off, 'cause he says he can smell 'em from the other side of the room!"

"Don't complain to me; you're the one who talked him into- oi, get your grubby little hands out of there. You're as bad as Luffy."

"I'm hungry," Ace protests, cramming the strip of bacon he's plucked from the platter resting on the bar counter into his mouth while dodging the cook's attempt to seize him by the scruff.

Sensing an opportunity while his son's unwittingly providing a distraction, Luffy flings an arm across the room, snagging several pieces for himself and motioning with a finger held to his lips for Jinbei to keep quiet.

The fishman succeeds in keeping a relatively straight face, but he's given away by Ace, who can't contain his laughter and immediately steals another slice when Sanji whirls at the snapping sound of the captain's arm readjusting to normal length.

"SHITTY GOMU!"

"I don't know what you're yelling about-" Words garbled by a mouthful of meat. "I didn't do anything!"

"EVEN IF YOU WEREN'T TALKING WITH YOUR MOUTH FULL, THERE'S GREASE ON YOUR FACE, YOU FOOD-THIEVING BASTARD!" Their blond nakama roars, hurling the spatula he's been brandishing with increasingly threatening vigor.

Luffy, chewing furiously, ducks and the utensil goes whizzing past him- right out the open dining hall door.

Chopper, in the process of wandering innocently inside with his head raised to sniff the welcoming aroma of breakfast, gives a yelp of alarm and scrambles for cover, although he's lucky there are no additional projectiles because he's mistakenly thrown himself into the room instead of heading for the safety of the deck outside.

"Goddamn it," Sanji grumbles, shoulders slumping. "Ace, would you go get that for me? Shit, I hope it didn't hit Nami-san or Robin-chan..."

"Sure." The seven-year-old reluctantly abandons his barstool seat, standing on tiptoes to make one last not-so-stealthy grab before bolting for freedom, and the cook utters another shout of outrage at the sight of one of his freshly-baked iced croissants disappearing out the door.

Surveying his surroundings cautiously before peeling himself off the wall and venturing further into the dining room, Chopper claims the chair beside the captain's. "Luffy, where's Zoro? He was supposed to meet me in the infirmary over an hour ago. I promised him we'd try to hear the heartbeat this week."

"He was sleeping when me and the kids saw him last. Or trying. Either way, he had the cover
pulled over his head. I dunno, I kinda think he just wants to hibernate like a bear 'til the baby's ready to come out."

"Fatigue's normal right now. How's the nausea?"

"Chopper, all he does is puke. ALL THE TIME. And he's been trying to take those pills you said he needs, but it's like they make it worse- can't you give him something else instead?"

The reindeer sighs, glancing up as Ace comes trotting back inside with the missing spatula dangling from one hand and Nami, Robin and Brook close on his heels. "I suppose I could look into a few alternatives. I'll let you both know. But he really needs to stop by the infirmary at some point today- at least long enough for me to check his blood pressure."

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything unless I go grab him and actually carry him up here," Luffy says dubiously. "And if I do that, I'm pretty sure he's probably gonna hurt me."

He grimaces. "Or barf on me."

"I was about to ask you how Zoro was doing-" Nami addresses the younger pirate across the table as she takes her seat. "-but I suppose that answers my question."

Robin smiles at the toddler waving enthusiastically in her direction as she claims the chair on the opposite side of the highchair. "Ah, good morning, Sabo-kun."

"Wababa!"

"Perhaps a bit of fresh air would do Zoro-san some good?" Brook suggests from the kitchen, where he's now poking through the overhead cabinets while munching a stolen slice of buttered toast and ignoring Sanji's threats to brain him with the newly washed spatula. "Or possibly a nice warm cup of tea?"

"Get out of there and go wait at the table, shitty skeleton!"

"Are the boys giving you trouble this morning, Sanji-kun?" The Straw Hat navigator asks, expression sympathetic as the harried cook shoves their bony nakama out from behind the counter with promises to bring him the aforementioned cup if he'll just sit the hell down and stay out of trouble.

The fact that she's referring to someone approximately seven decades her senior as a "boy" doesn't seem to trouble her, and Brook himself neglects to bat a non-existent eyelid.

"Bunch of impatient grabby shitheads," Sanji growls, slapping Luffy's hand away from the dishes he's attempting to transfer unscathed to the table. "OI! WHAT'D I SAY ABOUT STEALING FOOD, YOU RUBBER ASSHOLE."


"I hope, for Sanji's sake, that you're saying "uh-oh" and not what I think you're saying." Nami tells him in a tight voice that causes everyone in the room to cringe. With the exception of Robin, who's laughing behind her hand. And the toddler himself, who stares back at her for a moment and then says with very careful deliberation:

"Uh-oh."
The navigator's mouth twitches, but when the small target of her ire pops the last three fingers of one hand into his mouth, coming dangerously close to poking his index finger up his own nose, and tilts not just his head but his entire torso sideways as he waits for a response, she can't contain herself, uttering an outburst of laughter rather than anger.

"Damn, it's almost creepy how much he looks like Luffy when he does that shit," Sanji mutters. "Just wait 'til he eventually catches up height-wise too, and we won't be able to tell 'em apart."

"What about me? Don't I look like Dad too?"

"Yeah, but you're a lot more serious, so you might look like our captain, but you act more like- oi, Marimo, you made it out of bed. Congratulations on your grand achievement for the day."

"Shut up, Swirly-Brow; I couldn't sleep. I kept waking up," the swordsman grumbles as he stalks inside- and abruptly freezes while he's still framed by the doorway, nostrils flaring and the color draining from his face. "Oh shit."

"Zoro, you missed your appointment this morning!" Chopper scolds, but he's talking to empty air, because their first mate's already gone, fleeing the dining hall in a rush of clomping boots and badly muffled gagging noises. "Oh. Oh no."

"I got it." Luffy pushes up from the table, reluctance warring with the concern on his face. "… I sure hope he makes it over the side this time…"

"Okay, I know he can't help it," Nami groans when the captain's disappeared through the door and gone from earshot. She pushes away the plate of scrambled eggs that Sanji's just set before her, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "-but just watching- just LISTENING to him do that turns my stomach."

"I've heard it said that excessive nausea during early pregnancy could indicate a higher amount of estrogen present in the body due to the presence of a female fetus," Robin tells them thoughtfully. "Perhaps that's why Kenshi-san's been so ill? It may very well be that our captain's getting the girl he wanted."

"Oh, I hope so," the navigator sighs, just as there's a low groan of despair from the opposite side of the table.

"Eww, no, a boy would be better."

"Honestly, Ace, what do you have against girls?"

"What do YOU have against BOYS?" The seven-year-old demands, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Nothing, but Robin and I could use some company, you know. Surrounded by you ridiculous men all the time." She smiles when Ace fails to hide a smug grin at being included with the men. "Mostly I just think it'd be great to fuss over her the way Luffy and Zoro never let us do with you guys."

"Put her in ribbons and dresses and crap, right? Who says we'd let you do that even if Dad does have a girl?"

"Oh, I have a feeling that no matter how much Zoro protests, he'd still be head over heels at the sight of his little girl in a sundress with-"
"Jeez, maybe Dad's right- maybe you should just ask somebody to help you have your own baby."

Robin chuckles, Sanji makes a choking noise, and Nami's still gaping soundlessly and struggling to format a response when Luffy returns, brow slightly creased in a concerned and determined frown. Before anyone can ask the captain if everything's alright, he marches directly to the table, grabs the platter of bacon and upends the entire thing into his mouth.

"YOU-"

"That's what made Zoro throw up this time." The rubber man insists when he's swallowed enough of the meat to speak around what's still making his cheeks bulge ridiculously, ignoring the thunderclouds gathering on Sanji's face as the fuming cook stabs an accusatory finger at the empty dish. "Now he doesn't have to look at it when he gets back from brushing his teeth again."

xxx

Hours later, trudging across the lawn deck with his teeth clenched and both arms folded firmly over his midsection as the sun sinks below the horizon, blending lengthy shadows into the gathering darkness, the World's Greatest Swordsman doesn't think he's ever felt so miserably ill in his entire freaking life.

He's starting to wish he'd stayed in bed today, because the morning started badly and the afternoon and early evening brought one disaster after another. Crawling back under the covers and forgetting everything exists for at least a few hours, if not the rest of the night, is a prospect more welcoming than he'd like to admit- if his mind and body would cooperate long enough to let him rest.

Instead, his sleep's been populated with weird dreams that he can't remember when he wakes to find himself tangled and struggling in the bed sheets, covered in sweat and highly conscious of the ship's subtle rocking and the lapping noises outside the hull.

His first action of the morning had involved groping frantically not for the package of nasty-ass crackers on the bedside table but rather the pail sitting on the floor beside it.

While Luffy chased Sabo back and forth between their rooms, trying to wrestle the toddler into a fresh shirt, the swordsman had stayed curled around what Ace has gleefully dubbed the barf bucket, answering their older child's nonstop questions – "How do you feel? Are you gonna throw up again? Can I come along when you go see Chopper-aniki?" – with noncommittal grunts.

Eventually his captain had succeeded in getting both kids dressed and herded into the hallway, then ducked back inside long enough to pop his head under the covers, brushing sympathetic lips over his temple and promising to see him later before finally departing and leaving him in blessed silence.

When Zoro eventually gathered himself enough to slither out of bed and shrug into attire appropriate for the public eye before stumbling blearily for the ladder to the deck with his stomach see-sawing and his bladder aching something fierce, he'd called it a goddamn miracle. Although his feeling of accomplishment vanished as soon as he reached the washroom, evicted the cyborg striking poses in the mirror, pissed, and then attempted to brush his teeth.

Whatever training he's used to suppress his gag reflex for the purposes of Santoryu is largely useless right now. Anything touching the inside of his mouth, from food to those goddamn pills to the fucking bristle head of the toothbrush is liable to start him choking and sputtering like an oversized feline with a particularly stubborn hairball.
And once he loses control, forget it. The taste of bile in his mouth makes him keep puking and then dry heaving until his abdominal muscles are screaming bloody murder and his throat's sore and he can't see for the tears streaming from his eye.

Brushing, throwing up, brushing again, throwing up again in a revoltingly vicious cycle. Brushing AGAIN and hovering uncertainly over the sink for nearly ten minutes until he's finally convinced it's safe to walk away.

Off to the infirmary, knowing he's more than fashionably late at this point but not caring that Chopper's never going to let him hear the end of it because he's too busy dreading what it's going to smell like in there, so close to the kitchen and dining hall.

Stopping at the bottom of the staircase leading to the upper decks and nearly turning right back around.

He'd been tired then, eyeing the open doorway to the dining hall as though it was floating miles above in the fucking sky instead of being a mere deck level away. Now- now he's just plain exhausted.

Stairs. Why's this ship gotta have so many freaking stairs and ladders and shit. Why can't Franky invent a bunch of steps that move on their own, that you don't gotta actually climb. Why can't we install a bunch of giant dumbwaiters like the little one that sends stuff between the kitchen and the aquarium bar.

First there'd been the goddamn bacon, sitting there in a puddle of grease that he's sure his captain would've been happy to lick right off the plate – nnggh, don't think about it, don't think about it – if he hadn't been more interested in following Zoro and Chopper into the infirmary.

A complete waste of time, because the Doppler Den Den hadn't picked up shit. A blip or two, maybe, and a whole lot of whooshing and rumbling noises likely produced by his empty stomach, but nothing resembling a steady heartbeat. Which Chopper had of course quickly assured them was still perfectly normal at this stage – between ten to twelve weeks, he claims, if his calculations are correct – although that hadn't made it any less disappointing.

The doctor hadn't, however, been at all pleased with his blood pressure, talking at length about some crap called gestational hypertension and urging him to reduce his sodium intake and stress levels.

Which is a fucking joke, really, considering I'm more interested in keeping the blasted food down in the first place let alone deciding whether or not it's got too much goddamn salt in it.

And so far as reducing stress... he's been failing pretty spectacularly at that too.

While he's complained a time or two- or okay, maybe a bit more often- about Luffy slacking on diaper duty and the million and one other kid-related tasks necessary in a given day, he also hates dumping ALL parental responsibility on the younger pirate. Relying on somebody else to do things he knows he'd be perfectly capable of dealing with himself if he wasn't so damn sick makes him feel useless.

Like the fifth wheel on a godforsaken row boat.

When he'd tried to make up for not helping get both children dressed and to the dining hall this morning by giving Sabo an early dinner in hopes of getting him to bed faster, his effort had unexpectedly backfired in his face. Although he'd miraculously managed to keep a tight rein on his
nausea despite the horrific mess caused by allowing the toddler to feed himself using a spoon, the swordsman's struggle to keep his stomach under control hadn't fared so well after Sanji walked in, took one look at the mashed sweet potatoes splattered everywhere, and promptly flipped his shit.

Zoro, who'd every intention of taking care of it himself and had already been searching for something to clean up the chunky orange mush decorating the tile and a decent portion of the lower cabinets, hadn't taken kindly to the cook bitching at him. Already worn out and grouchy but now feeling cornered as well, he'd raised his own voice in protest, the argument had escalated, and they'd been only a few decibels from outright screaming at each other when his body abruptly decided enough was enough and he'd thrown up on the floor.

Sanji, infuriated and disgusted, had flung a dish towel in his face and stalked straight out of the dining hall without another word, clearly determined to avoid kicking him in the jaw, although by that time Zoro was so frustrated and angry that he'd been moments away from following and planting a boot in the blond's retreating ass in hopes of prompting a scuffle and venting some steam.

But there'd been no point, not with the cook refusing to let himself be goaded into a physical confrontation, and instead of getting the fight he wanted, he'd ended up with a mop and bucket and a far larger mess than the one with which he'd originally started.

He vaguely remembers Luffy slinking in at some point while he was scrubbing and cursing and struggling not to vomit again, silently casting a nervous glance in his direction before darting over to rescue Sabo and whisk him away, presumably for a much-needed trip to the bathhouse.

Now, hair still damp from his own visit to the showers, where he's spent the last few hours avoiding everyone and waiting for them to vacate the deck, he's tired and irritable and doesn't know what to do with himself.

Half of him wants to seek out his captain for some badly needed affection, because he knows the younger pirate will be more than happy to spend a few hours cuddling and making a huge ado over him before they turn in for the night. The other half is so revolted by the idea of human contact that he's almost considering jumping overboard and swimming in the opposite direction until the ship disappears over the horizon.

Obviously that's not a valid option.

_I hate feeling this way. Like I can't get enough air in my lungs no matter how hard I try._

If he doesn't find some way to relax, he just might explode like one of those goddamn toads from a few weeks ago.

Normally he'd head to the gym in the crow's nest and just sling his weights around for a while, but Chopper's been getting stingier and stingier with his weight lifting allowances, and he's not a hundred percent sure he's up to tackling the rigging and discovering the current effect of heights on his finicky digestive system. Which leaves one option.

He slides his palm down Kitetsu's handle, wrapping his fingers loosely around it and sliding the blade free with a smooth ringing sound.

Practicing his sword forms is mindlessly soothing; the katana feels right in his hand and he's done these drills thousands upon thousands of times since he first took up a sword, until he's so accustomed to the movements that he doesn't need to think about what his body's doing but merely flows from one stance to the next.
He supposes it's a bit like meditation, although his captain's told him on more than one occasion that it looks a lot like dancing. Distinction aside, it's familiar and cathartic and it's helped keep him sane during more than one rough patch over the last few years.

It's also the perfect distraction from his body's unhappy clamor over all the strange changes happening inside it. Slowly, surely, his awareness of the churning in his stomach recedes, driven back by the calm stealing over his mind, and he pours his consciousness into the weapon in his hand until it's nothing more than an extension of his arm.

He draws Shusui.

"Nice to see him doing something other than dragging himself around, groaning about how sick he feels and puking on everything," Sanji grumbles as he stands at the railing, arms crossed while he watches the swordsman on the lawn below.

"Oi oi now, I'd say Haramaki-bro cleaned up your kitchen pretty good, considering how bad you said it looked before dinner."

"Yeah. I feel a little bad now for going off on him like that." At Franky's chuckle, the cook's face breaks into a glower. "But only a little. If he and his brat hadn't made such a mess in the first place-"

"Awww, settle down, Curly-bro. We all know you're really a big ole softie." Grinning at his nakama's immediate sputter of denial, the shipwright stretches both massive arms over his head, then extends the smaller hand from his left palm to cover a yawn. "Looks like it's bed for me. You have a super watch, you hear?"

"Yeah, yeah, now get out of here." Sanji waves him off, grinning.

As Franky heads across the lawn towards the men's quarters, giving Zoro and his bared blades plenty of space, the cook taps his fingers restlessly against his forearm, contemplating the pack of cigarettes he's got stashed in the top cabinet behind the tea cups.

It's late, his nakama's children are nowhere nearby and most likely tucked safely into bed, there's little to no wind, and smoke rises…

He's reaching for the dining hall door when he changes his mind and turns back to the railing.

Forget it. If Marimo's freaking out about stinky diapers and cooking bacon and Nami's perfume and Usopp's paints and the oil Franky uses on his joints and Chopper's wet fur and just about every other goddamn thing on the ship that's got any kind of odor to it, he's gonna smell smoldering tobacco in a heartbeat, and I've seen enough vomit in the last few weeks- hell, in the last DAY- to last me a lifetime.

Zoro's only vaguely aware of his crewmates' presence during the watch changes, and they've seen him doing this frequently enough to know better than to disturb him, so he's not exactly sure how much time has passed when he finally sheathes his swords. Still only two of three, because while his nausea's largely passed for the moment, he doesn't trust holding his third and newest katana's handle in his mouth.

He is aware that he's practically dead on his feet and also that his coat's clinging with sweat.
Practicing or dancing around or whatever anyone wants to call it may not be as strenuous as hefting weights, but it's still a serious work-out.

*Jeez, maybe now I can sleep.*

There's no way he'll make it to the bathhouse tonight- this morning- whenever the hell "now" is supposed to be; he'll do it tomorrow- later today- whatever.

*If I smell, Sencho can just deal. I'm too tired.*

In fact, he's so focused on making it down the hatch ladder without falling on his ass that it doesn't register how damn cold he's gotten until he tries to untie his sash with hands that won't stop shaking.

*Sh-Shit, why won't- … ah, fuck it.*

At least his feet are still working. Well, sort of- or- okay, maybe not at all. Apparently he's more tired than he realized because his feet are definitely not working; they're trying to dump him face-first on the carpet, and he doesn't have the energy or the confidence to bend over and unlace his boots. Thankfully he's been wearing those on the loose side lately anyway, so he manages to scrape them off before collapsing into bed and burying himself beneath the comforter.

xxx

Stirring as he feels the mattress dip beside him, Luffy stretches and rolls over, groping sleepily to wrap an arm around his swordsman and pull him closer. "Mmm, Zoro finally came to bed?"

He blinks groggily, stifling amused laughter, when he's answered with a low wavering grumble as the older pirate tugs clumsily at the covers, dragging them off him and burrowing under them. "Oi, quit stealing the-"

Several things register simultaneously as he digs into the bedding, trying to take his half of the sheets back, and finally lays a hand on Zoro. His first mate's shivering, curled into an awkward fetal position and trembling so violently that when the captain scoots upright and bends over him, alarmed, he's positive he can hear teeth chattering. But that's not nearly as disturbing as his realization that Zoro's bare skin is burning furnace hot under his fingers.

The last time he remembers anybody being-

He's clambering to his hands and knees before he realizes what he's doing, leaning over to fumble for the bedside lamp and shouting for Ace, not knowing the time or who else he's disturbing and not caring.

The last person he remembers being all too warm and shaky like this, he's thinking as he runs tentative fingers down his swordsman's flushed face, prompting a weak groan of protest- that was their navigator.

Nami - back a long, long time ago that now feels kind of like forever - shortly before his crew found Chopper and when they'd still been sailing with Vivi.

When he'd been concerned about his nakama, yeah, but hadn't realized how bad it was- how SICK she was- until Chopper's scary lady doctor-teacher told them all about the weird bugs on Little Garden and how Nami could've DIED if they hadn't gotten her to the castle when they did.

Staring down at Zoro, barely conscious of their son's running footsteps in the hallway because he's
suddenly seeing a hundred and one different things he hadn't noticed before, like just how goddamn dark the shadowed circles beneath his swordsman's eyes look and how sharply defined his cheekbones have gotten, he hopes he hasn't made the same mistake twice.
Shoving open the door to the men's quarters after narrowly avoiding a collision with it at top running speed, Ace can't help thinking of the last time he came pelting across the lawn deck in the middle of the night as he makes a beeline for Chopper's bunk.

_Dad said this was- something different- that it wasn't the same, but_

Out of breath, arms aching from exertion because while the hatch above the capstan ladder's on pistons to make opening it from the inside easier, at roughly four feet tall and fifty-five pounds, he's still not quite big enough to get it started without a struggle.

He doesn't bother reaching over the side to shake the physician awake; he simply scrambles in, sending the hammock and the one above it swaying. Overhead, there's a startled exclamation from Usopp as the sniper flails upright, demanding to know if they're being invaded by cannibalistic toads again, but the seven-year-old ignores him in favor of dragging the reindeer he's jostled awake out of bed.

"A-Ace? What-?"

"I'm s'posed to get you. There's- there's s-something wrong with Dad." He's trying to sound brave because he's sure that's how his parents – either of them – would deliver this sort of news, but he can't contain the tremor of uncertainty in his voice.

"Zoro?" Upon seeing him nodding vehemently, Chopper wriggles out of his grasp, taking a deep breath and noticeably fighting the urge to panic, and Ace is grateful when he doesn't do the thing where he runs around yelling for a doctor because while it's usually pretty amusing to watch, he doesn't think it would be very funny right now. "Alright. Stay here and I'll-"

"No! I'm going with you," he insists, gripping the physician's arm. "I wanna be there too, in case-"

_In case he- in case Dad needs me._

"Okay, just-" Slipping free of the rows of hammocks where their other nakama are stirring, pushing back their blankets and demanding to know what's happening, the Zoan takes Walking Point and bends a leg to help him aboard. "Hang on, alright? I don't want to drop you!"

Wrapping both arms around the reindeer's neck and digging his hands into the furry ruff covering it, the boy squashes his surge of elation as Chopper glances back to make sure he's secure; he's always liked being taken for rides, still secretly likes it now even though he's been telling everyone he's getting too old for it, but this isn't the time to get mentally sidetracked.

_Dad wouldn't be busy thinking about silly things like this; he'd be- he'd be-

But honestly, he's not sure what his father would do in this situation, where cutting or punching or even talking about the problem won't make it go away, and try as he might to hide it, his distress is obvious to the crewmates gathering around them.

"Ace?"
"You okay, little bro?"

"What's going on? Do you guys need a hand?"

"Let me find out what I'm dealing with first," Chopper tells Sanji and the others who've vacated their bunks, and then hesitates. ". . .but maybe somebody could come along and wait in the hallway, just in case? I'm pretty sure Luffy wouldn't have sent him up here unless it was really important."

"Usopp?" The cook asks and smiles tightly when he receives an immediate nod. "Okay, good. We'll pop the lawn hatch, then we'll be right behind you. It's okay, Ace; I'm sure your dad's gonna be fine."

xxx

Standing well out of the way but still close enough to keep a eye on what's happening, Ace hopes Sanji's right, because he's pretty sure he's never seen his dad acting like this before, and where he was previously just a little nervous - or so he'd been trying to tell himself - now he's getting really scared.

Zoro's shivering even more violently than before, when Ace first came running in to find him huddled under the covers, and he's now lying curled up with his head resting on their captain's lap and one hand bunched in the fabric of his shorts.

Expression pinched with concern, Luffy's stroking the swordsman's hair as he watches Chopper attempting to coax him into accepting the thermometer he's clutching in one hoof.

"Lemme 'lone... wanna sleep..."

"Zoro's gotta let Chopper check his temperature first. He needs to know how sick you are, okay?"

"Nnn- I'm not-" The older pirate makes a gagging noise as the doctor takes advantage of his distraction to pop the thermometer's business end into his mouth.

"This will just take a second or two, I promise."

"Nnn-no, I'm g- g-"

"Oi, Chopper-"

"Hold it right there, under his tongue, and don't let him spit it out unless you definitely think he's going to vomit," the reindeer orders. And then, as their crewmate's jaw tenses- "And don't let him bite it in half either!"

"Zoro, don't; Nami's gonna be mad if you break Chopper's stuff and we gotta buy more!" Luffy urges, although his tone lacks much of his usual humor. He grimaces as Zoro wretches again more forcefully, cautiously stroking his temple and cheek in an effort to relax him. "Ah, crap- how much longer, Chopper, 'cause I really think he's gonna-"

The doctor plucks the thermometer free, turning it to check the display, and the rubber man sighs, rubbing his coughing, sputtering first mate's back through the multiple layers of bedding wrapped around it. "See, that wasn't so bad, huh?"

"Luffy-"

Ace twitches involuntarily, as though ice water's just been poured down his spine, because the
change that comes over his father's face at the concern and fear in Chopper's voice-

"Luffy, I'm getting a reading of a hundred and FIVE. We need to get those covers off and move him to the infirmary right now. If we can't bring down his fever-

The captain's already moving, working to peel his weakly protesting lover free from his protective cocoon. "Zoro, c'mon, we gotta go."

"Tired... I wanna SLEEP." Squirming away from the hands touching him, the swordsman gives an exasperated growl. "...won't lemme- just go-"

"OI-!"

Wherever Zoro's planning to head to escape their meddling, they never discover because the moment he's completely vertical after struggling upright and gaining his feet while fighting to keep the comforter wrapped tightly around his shoulders, he wobbles, utters a very distinct "oh fuck" and collapses with his one remaining eye rolled back to expose nothing but white.

"Dad!" Ace yelps, rushing forward, but Luffy's already caught the older pirate under the arms and eased him backwards onto the bed. "Dad- Dad, is he-?"

"Shit!" Sanji blurts from the doorway, where he decided that discretion's no longer the better part of valor- or at least privacy- and threw open the bedroom door after hearing the commotion inside. Somewhere behind him, they can faintly hear Usopp's efforts to calm Sabo, wide awake and vocalizing his disapproval of everything.

"It's alright," Chopper assures them, although he doesn't sound particularly convinced with his own assessment. "He fainted. Remember how I was warning him about getting light-headed if he stands up too fast? The increased blood volume makes him already prone to it, but now the hyperthermia's making it worse."

Taking Heavy Point, the doctor reaches down and carefully scoops up the unconscious swordsman, shifting his body free from the sheets and cradling it gently against his chest to keep his head from lolling back. "He'll be easier to move while he's like this, so let's get him to the infirmary before he wakes up."

xxx

"Shouldn't we put him in cold water with ice or something?" Luffy asks nervously, tugging his first mate's arm out of his coat sleeve with hands that won't stop trembling because Zoro's complete unresponsiveness is starting to seriously worry him. "He's really, really hot."

"That's actually the last thing we want to do. He's definitely got a high fever, and that's bad, but bringing his core body temperature down too fast is just as dangerous, especially for the baby."

The doctor, who's been rummaging through a crate that he pulled out from under his desk, straightens up with an odd-looking blanket draped over one arm. "I knew this would eventually come in handy! Here, get the rest of that off and help me with this."

"Chopper, he's-" Luffy glances down at Ace, hovering anxiously beside him, and then plunges ahead. "If he wakes up naked, without his swords, not knowing where he is, and he doesn't remember taking his clothes off, I dunno what he'll do, but it's gonna freak him out."

"O-Okay. You can leave his pants for now, but at least unbutton them and roll the legs up- and the haramaki needs to come off. I need as much bare skin as possible."
Wrestling the stomach band down his swordsman's legs when he's not awake to help is a chore, and when it's done, the captain feels a rush of dismay that's echoed by their son's quiet comment that Zoro "looks funny without it, but not in a ha-ha kind of way."

He knows exactly what Ace means, and when Chopper returns from the kitchen sink with the unfolded, saturated spread in tow and helps him bundle the green-haired pirate into it, he's a little relieved to see that unusually bare midsection disappearing beneath the padded material.

"It's a cooling blanket. It'll help lower his core temperature gradually without chilling his skin and causing more shivering, so it's much safer than immersion in cold water or ice," the reindeer explains and then falls quiet as he measures the carotid pulse in their nakama's neck, winces at his findings, and frees an arm to check again at the radial in the wrist.

"Why are you pinching him?" Ace demands a few moments later, sounding betrayed and taken aback.

"Ah, I'm not trying to hurt him! I'm checking if he's- look, you see how his skin's staying like that instead of going back to normal?"

"Y-Yeah?"

"It means he's extremely dehydrated. He needs fluids, and since he can't drink-" Chopper pushes away from the infirmary bed and begins collecting various items from around the room. "Does anybody know where he's been or what he's been doing for the last few hours? Luffy-?"

"I dunno," the rubber man admits sheepishly. "He woke me up, but I'm not sure how long he was there."

"He was just going to bed," Usopp volunteers from where he's sitting just outside in the dining hall with Sabo sprawled in his lap and leaning sleepily against him. "He got done practicing with his swords or whatever he was doing when my watch ended. I tried to tell him good night, but he didn't answer, so I figured he didn't hear-"

"He was still out there?" Sanji demands, whirling to stare at the sniper. "He was out there during my entire watch!"

"Wha- when Jinbei told me he'd been there for a while, I thought he meant-"

"Chopper, what you need to know is the shitty swordsman here spent the last six hours on the lawn deck, swinging his sharp pointy things and hopping around like a goddamn idiot."

"I told him no weights," the doctor groans. "He probably thought-"

He takes a deep breath, looking up at the saline bag he's just hung on the iv pole. "Okay. Okay, it could be worse. I'm going to run a few tests just to be sure, but it sounds like he overexerted himself, which means heat stroke and not an active infection."

"Oi, Luffy, I thought you said Marimo wanted to hibernate, not train himself to death."

"I THOUGHT he did," the captain protests, scowling down at Zoro's deceptively placid face and touching his overly warm cheek with the backs of his knuckles. "If I didn't know he'd get really mad at me, I'd tell him we're gonna tie him to the bed so he doesn't do anything dumb again!"

"Yeah," Sanji mutters. "Somehow I don't think that would go over too well."
"Nnngh... the hell-?"

Luffy stirs at the sound of hoarse, familiar cursing near his ear, lifting his head from the mattress and rubbing furiously at his eyes as he slides off the stool beside the bed. "Oh, oi, you're awake!"

He quickly lowers the volume of his voice when Zoro flinches and groans, eye going fully closed again as he frees a hand to rub clumsily at his forehead and then immediately blinks it open once more to stare in bewilderment at the iv connection taped to his wrist.

"Zoro passed out, so he doesn't remember us bringing him to the infirmary." The captain presses his palm to the older pirate's forehead. "You're still really warm but not as bad as before, I think?"

"... what happened?"

"You got a fever. Oi oi oi, no, Chopper says I'm not supposed to let you get up- you gotta stay in the blanket 'til you stop feeling like you're gonna burst into flames or something."

"But I don't- I'm cold," Zoro tells him dumbly. "My-"

He pauses, frowning, and touches his own brow. "This thing hurts."

"Your head? Your head hurts?" Struggling to stay calm and increasingly glad that Ace fell asleep on the sofa in the dining hall shortly after Sanji and Usopp carried Sabo off to the men's quarters, Luffy pushes a hand into the blanket's folds to pet his swordsman's chest and stomach. "Chopper can probably give you something if you want it."

"Why don't the words work?" Another pause and another frown, and this time when he speaks, it's very slowly and deliberately. "I mean... what the fuck's wrong with me?"

"Your disorientation's from a combination of the fever and severe dehydration," Chopper announces as he enters the room carrying a stack of tomes nearly as tall as himself and hops onto his chair to deposit the increasingly leaning tower of literature on his desk, squeaking as the top volume goes sliding past his head. "Ah-! Oh, whew, thanks, Luffy."

"Ace just fell asleep," the captain scolds softly, returning the book to the top of the pile. "He wanted to sleep in here, with Zoro, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea."

"Can't I just go back to room?" The swordsman grumbles. "This one's too small. And there's not enough goddamn covers; I keep telling you I'm too warm but you're not listening."

"Zoro..."

"You're not going anywhere. Especially not if you're still talking like that, confusing your words." The doctor exchanges a dismayed look with Luffy before he busies himself exchanging the empty saline bag for a new one and verifying that the drip's performing properly. "That should stop happening as soon as his electrolyte levels increase and his fever goes down a bit more."

"Good, 'cause seeing Zoro like this is really-" The rubber man bites his lower lip. "Oi... if he's all messed up, what's going on with the baby?"

"It's difficult to say," Chopper answers hesitantly. "I'm hoping we caught this and started treating him early enough that it didn't cause complications, but... well, the first trimester's risky enough without a dangerously elevated temperature..."
His shoulders sag, and he gives his nakama a pained and apologetic smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "I'm sorry, Zoro- this is my fault. I assumed you were dealing with typical nausea, but I'm starting to suspect it's actually hyperemesis gravidarum. I should've recognized that such an acute case of hyperolfaction-"

Luffy gives a groan of desperation. "Chopper, I don't understand half the stuff you're saying."

"The sensitivity to odors," the doctor expounds, his disappointment with himself visible on his face. "It's a classic symptom of nausea and vomiting so severe it's debilitating enough to require hospitalization. And here I was pushing the vitamins on him too, and that probably DID make it worse, because the iron-"

"I don't care about the-" Zoro's face contorts briefly as he apparently searches for the word "pills" and comes up empty. "-those goddamn shitty little round things. Just tell me if I'm gonna lose the-"

Another struggle for the proper vocabulary, and this time the substitution makes Luffy's mouth twitch uncontrollably even as he seizes his swordsman's hand and gives it a tight squeeze.

"Fuck, that's not what I-" Gritting his teeth. "BABY. Quit talking about that other crap and tell us if we're gonna lose the baby... or if we already did."

Chopper, agitated and near tears, finds himself forced to admit that he doesn't know. "Without a scan, I-"

"Get the damn-" Slimy thing with the round shell "-snail and let's try to find the heartbeat again."

It's a long shot, he already knows even without the doctor's recalcitrance, but the hope surfacing on his captain's face matters more than his sinking conviction that they're going to end up empty-handed for the second time.

But to his surprise, after a few tense minutes of watching the snail glide back and forth with seemingly no luck and just as Chopper seems about to reluctantly suggest that it's time to give up, their ears register a fast-paced, repetitive rhythm that he can't fail to recognize despite his exhaustion and jumbled thoughts, because it's the same sound he remembers hearing with both Ace and Sabo.

"Zoro! Zoro, listen, it's-" Luffy releases an enormous sigh of relief, instinctively reaching out to touch the older pirate's exposed abdomen where the blanket's now lying open around it, much to the annoyance of the Den Den perched there. "THERE you are... you had us really worried when we couldn't find you!"

He's intercepted by Chopper, who's listening with fierce concentration and swats his hand away before his fingers make contact.

"Oi, what-?"

"Shh! I'm trying to count!" The reindeer gives his head a little shake and starts over, silently mouthing the numbers to himself this time. He falters, tries a third time and then a fourth, and finally sits back with a perplexed expression.

"Chopper-?"

"I was trying to count the number of beats per minute, but there's something-"

Don't say wrong, goddamn it, please don't say there's something wrong...
"-odd about the baby's heart rate. It might be my imagination, but I swear it sounded extremely erratic the second time- but then it seemed completely normal again. Luffy, Zoro- I know we scheduled the ultrasound for a couple months from now, but I think we should contact Law again and talk about having it done as soon as possible."

The captain's already nodding in agreement, and although he's not pleased by the prospect of dealing with the Heart Pirate surgeon sooner rather than later, Zoro doesn't argue. While he didn't notice anything unusual about that frantic thumping noise, Chopper's the doctor, and he's not entirely sure he trusts his own judgment at the moment anyway. Not with how badly his head's swimming and how much trouble he's having formulating a complete, coherent sentence.

"Regardless of when that might be, you're on bed rest. At least until your temperature goes back to normal, and probably for a few days after that- and when I say bed rest, I mean I don't want you even thinking about getting off that mattress. COMPLETE BED REST. The whole nine yards, INCLUDING the bed pan."

"But."

The physician visibly inflates, clearly prepared to engage in verbal battle if it's warranted. "And if there's anything you need from your room, LUFFY will go get it."

"… my swords?"

Chopper's glaring at him. "As long as you promise not to USE them."

xxx

"We're gonna stop for a while, as soon as we find an island that's safe enough," the captain announces from where he's leaning against the wall outside the closed infirmary door, addressing the crew gathered in the dining hall later that morning. "... oi, Nami, why are you staring at me like that?"

"I'm sorry, it's just- hearing both of those words coming out of your mouth in the same sentence..."

Luffy offers her a wry and somewhat weary smile. "Yeah, I know, but Chopper thinks Zoro might not be so sick if we can get him off the ship and somewhere that's not moving around all the time. And Law says he'll be able to find us quicker if we stay in one spot."

"Luffy-san... you do realize dropping anchor for an extended period of time makes it more likely that others will find us as well." Jinbei warns softly. "I'm still waiting for a response from the palace concerning the unwanted visitor from our previous stop."

"I know, but-" The rubber man rubs his face with both hands, trying to dispel his fatigue. "I'm not sure we've got a choice."

He turns despairing eyes on Sanji and Usopp. "When you guys saw him last night- this morning- whenever that was- he wasn't really talking that much before he passed out, but when he woke up again, he kept saying all this stuff that didn't make any sense. Like- he kept mixing words up and saying he was hot when he meant cold and-"

Brow furrowing and mouth quirking in a mixture of concern and amusement, he scratches his head. "He called the baby a bean?"

The cook coughs. "I- I see. Well, that answers one thing I've always wondered about..."
"Huh?"

"What Marimo would sound like if all that booze he normally puts away actually made him drunk."

"Sanji!" Nami hisses, aided by Usopp kicking their nakama's shin- just as Franky flicks the back of his skull.

"Ow- ow! Guys, stop, I'm sorry. It's just all this shitty tension's making me crazy."

"You could be a little more considerate!" The navigator chides, nodding towards the captain, but the younger pirate's not paying them any mind because he's turned away to find out why Ace is tugging on his sleeve.

"Oi, if Dad said that and the baby ends up having his hair, wouldn't that make it a green bean?"

There's a moment of silence as Luffy stares incredulously at his son, and then he dissolves into slightly hysterical laughter, biting the inside of his cheek to stifle the noise so he doesn't disturb his convalescent first mate, sleeping in the other room with Chopper hovering dependably over him.

"My goodness, Sencho, perhaps you'd better sit down before you fall down," Robin admonishes, taking him by the elbow and steering him towards the nearest unoccupied chair.

"Green bean," the younger pirate wheezes, leaning his elbows on the tabletop and burying his face in his hands. "Green bean. Zoro's gonna- I gotta tell him when he wakes up again. Or maybe you can tell him since you didn't get to talk to him yet."

Ace- Ace, I love you. I think I might've really needed that.

"Mugiwara-bro, maybe you should go to bed. You been up with Haramaki-bro all this time?" Their shipwright asks from the floor, where he's leaning against the couch with Sabo sitting in his lap and very reluctantly allowing himself to be distracted from his absent father by the game of patty-cake Franky's initiated with his much larger hands.

Luffy sighs, slouching back in his chair and resisting the urge to rub his eyes. "Yeah, I- I'll take a nap or something later. Anyway, Chopper says it's a good thing we got him up here as soon as we did last night because he and the baby could've- it could've been bad. Really bad."

He doesn't want to say it in front of his children- doesn't want to hear the doctor's words coming out of his own mouth, but what Chopper had told him- after Zoro finally drifted into restless sleep was that-

"Luffy, people can DIE from heat stroke, and that's when they're in good health. I don't think a single one of us, not even Zoro himself, realized the nausea was taking such a heavy toll on him. I knew he was having trouble keeping food down, but I didn't realize how much weight he'd lost until I picked him up."

I don't know how I missed it either, the captain thinks, glaring down at his lap as he pops his knuckles and wishes desperately that this was one of those situations where he could just clobber a few bad guys with his fists and make everything better. Usually I notice stuff that's going on with him right away, but I've been so busy with the kids and- he's so damn GOOD at hiding just how crappy he's feeling. And it's gotta be automatic too, like he doesn't even know he's doing it, 'cause-

"-uffy? Oi, you falling asleep on us?"
He raises his head to find Sanji seated beside him, head tilted slightly to one side and eyebrow raised as he leans forward to catch his attention. "Nah, I was just- thinking. About stuff."

"Don't think too hard- you don't wanna hurt yourself." Despite the teasing words, the cook’s tone is meaningful and entirely without humor – don't get wrapped up in that could've, would've, should've bullshit – and he's deadly serious when he continues, lowering his voice. "Do me a favor, and let me know when Marimo thinks he's ready for company other than you and the kids. Pretty sure I owe him an apology."

"Why do you- wait, are you talking about that whole thing with Sabo and the kitchen? 'Cause even if he was mad when it happened, I don't think he cares about that anymore."

"Maybe, maybe not, but I think this whole thing's partly my fault. I was so pissed, I wasn't thinking, and when we were yelling at each other, I might've threatened to-" Mumbling now, embarrassed and obviously irritated with himself. "… throw his swords overboard."

Oh.

"I was trying to make some stupid point about the kitchen being my personal haven or some shit like that and asked how he'd feel if somebody trashed something that was important to him, and I just-" Sanji grimaces, pounding a fist against his thigh. "I'm such a shitty asshole. It didn't even dawn on me 'til after I walked out, and I wanted to say something last night when my watch ended, but- I figured maybe I better just stay the hell away from him."

Oh jeez.

"Uh… well… you wouldn't have really tried to throw 'em overboard, right? I'm pretty sure Zoro knows that. But, yeah, you should probably talk to him or something, since Chopper's gonna ask you to start bringing him pitchers of water and soup and stuff. He said he won't take the iv doohickey out until Zoro can drink and eat enough by himself- and you know how much he hates being hooked up to those things."

"I'll never understand," the cook muses, "-how somebody who's perfectly fine with being cut and stabbed and shot, not to mention stitching up his own wounds with a sewing kit, can be such a pansy when it comes to a doctor sticking him with a needle."

"Beats me. But talk to Zoro, okay? I don't want you guys fighting."

I don't want ANYBODY fighting. I want everybody to be happy and Zoro to get better. I wanna find out where Law's at so we can make sure the baby's okay, and then I want everybody else to just leave my crew alone for a while. I wanna play with the kids and eat lots of really good food and talk about names and stuff with Zoro and maybe tease him a little about the bean thing and just not worry about anything – strange fishmen or exploding toads or heat stroke or WHATEVER – for a really, really long time.

He's well aware that the odds of getting everything he wants are probably against him, because it's never that easy, but he's not intimidated, and he's definitely not dissuaded from doing whatever it takes to ensure that at least the majority of those things happen, even if that means temporarily giving up the freedom of the sea.

And if worse comes to worst and Jinbei's right, well…

He's never been afraid to fight for his dreams.
Writing this chapter turned out to be a lot more awkward than I expected, because while I had it planned months ago, I did NOT plan on getting hands-on experience with a severely dehydrated person in the emergency room. For those of you who didn't catch my posts on tumblr, my mother was admitted a few weeks ago, suffering from confusion and disorientation after she collapsed at home. They thought there was an infection or something else going on at first but quickly narrowed it down to lack of fluids, and thankfully she bounced back pretty quickly. While she was dehydrated though? Wow. At one point she asked if they couldn't give her oxygen because she felt like she couldn't breathe, only she called it "air medicine" and she also kept telling everyone that she was too warm when she meant she was cold. At one point, she asked for a pencil and paper because she couldn't talk, and she wrote nothing but "AAA" over and over again. Long story short, lack of proper hydration seriously screws with your head.

Sanji and Zoro's confrontation in the kitchen over Sabo making a mess actually happened in roleplay, and I was all but rolling around on the floor freaking out, because at the point it happened, Sanji's player hadn't read Crossfire yet and therefore had no idea of the irony involved. And yeah, the bastard really did lose his temper and threaten to throw Zoro's swords overboard.

Regarding the previous chapter, issues with morning sickness while brushing one's teeth is unfortunately from my own experience. Most of the times I threw up while pregnant with my daughter involved puking in the sink while either brushing or rinsing. One time it took me at least four tries until I finally managed to get the job done. My husband got to that part while reading beta and was like "aha, I remember that..."
"CANNONBALL!"

"OH SHIT, LOOK OUT!"

"WHAT THE HELL'S HE THINK HE'S DOING?"

Straw Hat pirates dive in multiple directions, swimming madly away from the ship in a desperate attempt to put the most distance possible between themselves and the Sunny as Franky throws himself off the bow and hits the surface with a massive splash.

Luffy, escape impeded by the inner tube in which he's been resting with only his buttocks and ankles dangling in the water, utters a yelp of alarm as the gigantic ripple caused by the cyborg's impact turns his suddenly unsteady perch sideways before flipping it over entirely.

He manages a brief struggle and an expulsion of bubbles before his body fails to respond and starts sinking, but there's someone already angling through the sunlit depths toward him, hand outstretched to seize him by one motionless wrist.

xxx

"Thanks, Jinbei," Zoro grumbles as he watches the fishman deposit their sputtering, panting captain beside him on the blanket beneath the oversized beach umbrella he's sharing with Robin, who's opted for a few chapters of her book rather than spending the afternoon sunbathing with Nami.

"Certainly, Zoro-san. Ah, I suppose I'd best go and make certain Franky-san didn't- ah- actually land on anyone?"

"Sure, knock yourself out."

"You shouldn't glare at him like that, Zoro," Luffy tells his swordsman after the former Shichibukai's beat a hasty retreat, when he can finally breathe again. "It's not Jinbei's fault that Chopper won't let you go more than knee-deep in the water."

"Says the guy who turns into a limp noodle when HE's more than knee-deep in the water and- oi, Robin, what the hell's so funny?"

"You seem rather disappointed with your inability to come to the rescue as usual, Kenshi-san. Perhaps you're a bit-?"

"I'm not jealous, so you can just-"

"Ah-ah-ah," the historian chuckles. "Your words, Zoro, not mine."

"Shut up," the first mate mutters, flushing, and pokes his grinning lover in the ribcage. "And you, don't even start."

"I could go roll around where it's ankle-deep and yell and wave my arms a lot and you could pretend to- oof!" He paws at his head to remove the wadded t-shirt Zoro's just stripped off and slapped over his face and raises an appreciative eyebrow at his exposed torso. "Oi oi, or if you wanna go find a nice quiet spot, we could-"
"YOU can go find yourself a nice quiet spot, Sencho. I'M gonna go play with the kids," his swordsman snorts, although he's grinning as he ducks from beneath the umbrella and heads for the ludicrously-detailed sand castle Usopp and Ace are attempting to build as Sabo gleefully knocks towers down faster than they can be repaired.

"He's like a million- a BILLION times better than he was a couple weeks ago," Luffy sighs happily, flopping over onto his stomach to oogle Zoro's retreating rear- and narrowly avoiding a sudden spray of sand in the face as their alarmed doctor rushes past in hot pursuit, shouting warnings about jellyfish and sunburn and - he can't suppress a slight shudder - heat stroke.

_Been there, done that. Once is enough!_

"And I understand the baby's recovered nicely as well?" Robin asks, laying aside her text.

"Yeah, it looks that way. Chopper thought he picked up that funny thing with the heartbeat again, but only once or twice and he said everything else seems pretty good, so he's gonna talk to Law about the Den Den. Maybe it needs a new speaker or something."

"I see. Well, I'm sure there's nothing to be worried about," she tells the younger pirate, but he's no longer listening, frozen on the blanket where he'd previously been kicking his heels with careless abandon, now wide-eyed with his mouth slightly agape. Concerned, the dark-haired woman follows his gaze and smiles. "Oh my. Do you think he's noticed?"

"I dunno how he couldn't." Luffy scrambles upright to a sitting position, excitement audible in his voice as he continues studying his swordsman's profile. "His pants gotta feel like they're getting tighter."

The developing roundness in Zoro's lower belly wasn't readily distinguishable with his somewhat baggy shirt hanging over his shorts or even while he was sitting with his knees pulled up against his bare chest, but now that he's silhouetted against the sky with his arms folded as he stands conversing with Chopper, the captain can see the way it's just barely starting to stretch the waistband of his swim trunks.

_That's our baby in there, making him look that way._

He remembers telling himself this years ago with Ace and then more recently with Sabo, and he's pretty sure it wouldn't matter if this child was their third or their hundredth, because the thought that it's a whole new person growing inside, one they've made together, is always going to take his breath away.

Giddy and ecstatic and scared silly all over again, he wants to race over and hug his first mate tightly - but carefully, very carefully and very gently - around the middle and maybe kiss him all over too, regardless of who's watching, but for a moment, just a moment, he rolls onto his back and sprawls spread-eagle, grinning enormously at the underside of the umbrella.

Robin's peering down at him, laughing softly. "You're not fooling anyone, Luffy, especially not me. You might as well go rescue him before our doctor talks his ear off."

To her amusement, his grin widens impossibly before he bounces up and darts off towards where Zoro and Chopper have joined the group near the edge of the swash zone, just as Nami ducks inside the large patch of shadowed sand for a brief respite from the sun, toweling sweat from her neck and shoulders.

"Hmm? Where's he going in such a hurry?"
"Off to admire Kenshi-san's expanding waistline, I imagine."

"His-" The navigator turns to look and does a double-take. "Oh! When on earth did that happen?"

"Approximately ninety-eight days ago, when our captain-"

"ROBIN, you know that's not what I-" Shaking her head and biting back a giggle, Nami cups both hands to her mouth. "OI, LUFFY! ACE! Give that bump a pat for me since you're probably the only ones he'll let get away with it!"

"For the love of- …thanks a lot, Nami," Zoro hisses under his breath, face blazing to the tips of his ears, because the navigator's outburst has just ensured that he's the center of attention when Luffy sidles up behind him and cuddles solidly against his back, arms slipping over his hips to wrap snugly around his waist. "I should've just kept my goddamn shirt on..."

His captain nuzzles between his shoulder blades. "Kinda surprised me that you took it off. Usually you're pretty funny about keeping your tummy covered."

"It's too damn warm, and I guess I figured it wasn't really anything new this time around. NOT that I'm gonna start running around on deck with everything just hanging out all the time," the older pirate warns. "So don't get used to it."

Truthfully, he's also got a serious case of itchiness and wearing anything against his skin is making him want to claw himself bloody. His sides and belly especially have been driving him nearly mad, but their nakama will think he's lost his mind for sure if he gives in to the temptation to strip and drop and roll around in the sand, so he settles for shifting uncomfortably in Luffy's grasp until the younger pirate catches on and starts rubbing soothing circles over his midsection.

"You might as well put sun screen on him while you're doing that," Chopper states peevishly, presenting them with the bottle he's been clutching. "He's more sensitive to direct sunlight right now and like I was telling him, he's going to be really miserable if he gets burned."

Luffy's suitably horrified by the idea that a grumpy, sun-burnt swordsman is also a swordsman he can't touch, so Zoro's forced to suffer through the ordeal of being enthusiastically slathered with far too much lotion.

"What the hell are you-? SENCHO! That's enough to do like two or three people; I'm not that fucking fat yet, alright?" Squirming to escape fingers trying to daub him with even more, the first mate lunges out to grab the seven-year-old who's abandoned sand castle construction in favor of pointing at him and laughing. "Oi, c'mere!"

"Dad, what-" Ace flails, shrieking, as he's yanked into a slippery but tight full-length embrace. "NO, LEGGO, PUT ME DOWN! EWW, EWW, YOU GOT IT ON ME!"

"What's your problem- I'm just sharing." Releasing his wriggling son, who falls back giggling wildly and scrubbing at his face, Zoro snorts and surveys his front with dismay. Grimacing, he hooks a large glob of sun screen out of his navel and reaches back to smear it on his snickering captain's nose. "Apparently I got a lot to share."

"EWW, ZORO, DON'T WIPE IT ON ME!"

"You put it there. I'm just giving it back."
Too busy howling with laughter, Ace completely misses the thinly-veiled innuendo as well as the smug looks they're exchanging. "DAD- DAD, THAT'S SO GROSS! IT WAS IN YOUR BELLY BUTTON AND YOU PUT IT ON DAD'S-"

Sabo pauses his demolition to stare hesitantly at the rest of his family, decides he's not missing anything particularly interesting and goes back to inspecting the clump of wet sand clutched in his fist before casually attempting to stuff it into his mouth, prompting a scuffle as Usopp, who's started humming loudly to himself and pretending he hasn't noticed his nakama leering at each other, tries to take it away from him.

Chopper, however, is regarding them suspiciously. "Oi… just for your information? I don't know if you've heard otherwise, but sun screen is not an acceptable form of lubri-"

"OI, ACE, SABO. You guys wanna go for a walk?"

Unfortunately, changing the subject doesn't do him much good because the doctor merely shifts gears and starts lecturing him on how to avoid another incident of heat stroke.

"-make sure you take a canteen or a jug of filtered water along because even though Brook and Jinbei found those freshwater streams while they were collecting firewood, we can't rule out bacteria or parasites until I get some samples under the microscope, and right now you need to-"

"Chopper."

"-AT LEAST sixty-four fluid ounces a day, but honestly I think-"

"CHOPPER. Settle down, will you? You've already got me drinking so much water, my teeth feel like they're floating. You start pushing for another glass or two, I'm gonna end up spending all day either camped out by the head or constantly running off looking for a freaking bush to piss behind."

"I know, but-"

"Look." He drops to a crouch beside the fidgeting reindeer, planting the knuckles of his left fist in the sand between his knees, because while his center of gravity hasn't shifted that dramatically yet, it's still changed enough to affect his balance. "I got caught off-guard."

"But, Zoro, I should've-"

"We ALL got caught off-guard. But it's not gonna happen again, right? You've been all over this shit, reading everything you can get your hands on and driving that scruffy asshole up the walls of his sub, calling him every other damn day even though he's already on his way here."

Chopper's nodding reluctantly.

"Okay. Now… I'll do whatever the hell you want. I'll bathe in this shit-" He gestures to a smudge of sun screen still decorating his forearm. "-and I'll festoon myself with canteens and drink water til my frigging bladder explodes, but I'm not gonna just spend the next six months sitting on my ass."

Behind him, Luffy and Ace exchange broad grins on hearing the older pirate's adamantine tone, which isn't surprising in the slightest. After five straight days of being confined to the infirmary bed and then an additional week and a half of having his every move, every cough and sneeze scrutinized to the point where the captain had finally been forced to put his foot down and declare their quarters off-limits to keep the peace, the swordsman needs a break.
I know he feels partly responsible for that whole mess, and I know he's just trying to help, but he's being ridiculous. And I'd never say it to his face, but he's driving me fucking insane.

"I'm going for a walk. Down the beach. I'm not hunting for treasure or wrestling giant snakes or rescuing countries torn apart by civil war or doing any of the other crap we normally end up doing in a given week, and I promise that if anything comes out of the jungle and tries to eat one of us, I'll let Luffy take a swing at it first."

"Oi, maybe we'll bring back dinner," the rubber man laughs, and Zoro nearly hangs his head in despair.

**SHUT UP, Sencho. If he thinks we're likely to get attacked by giant lizards or some shit, he's never gonna let us go without sending somebody else along- or insisting on coming himself. Talking nonstop and asking every five minutes if I need to sit down and rest.**

"Well..."

*Say yes, goddamn it, or I swear I will break down and cry all over your fur and blame the whole thing on rampaging hormones.*

It's a testament to how badly he wants to spend some time alone with his family without his primary physician clinging to his leg that he's willing to resort to tears, feigned or otherwise, but thankfully turning on the waterworks isn't necessary; after squinting at him in consideration for several moments, Chopper finally acquiesces.

"As long as you take plenty of water with you. And something to eat, just in case you need to sit down for a bit, because you know it's best if you-"

"Keep something in my stomach. Yes. I know. I know because you've told me every day, multiple times a day, for the past two weeks." Despite his frustration, Zoro can't hide a smile as he reaches out to pat the reindeer's head reassuringly. "Oi, it's okay, Chopper. You're a good doctor, and you know what you're doing."

"... not making me happy, you asshole," his smaller nakama mumbles, upper lip disappearing beneath the lower as he blinks suddenly moist eyes.

"You've been so busy taking care of me and everybody else, you haven't been following your own damn rules. And if YOU end up getting sick, we're ALL shit out of luck," the swordsman insists, rising to his full height and crossing his arms over his chest so he can glower down imposingly. "So, as the first mate of this crew, I'm telling you to go help Usopp with his goddamn sand castle since I'm borrowing his construction foreman here."

***

"You think we're gonna be able to tell if it's a girl or a boy?" Ace asks sometime after they've made their escape, turning to walk backwards so he can address his parents head-on as they meander along the shoreline. "I get to be there too, right? To see the baby?"

"Yeah, if you want. As long as Law doesn't have a problem with it. And I have no idea- we didn't see you or Sabo until you were a lot bigger than this." Freeing his hand from his captain's grasp, Zoro thumbs his waistband and the sash he's tied over it down to a level where they don't feel so uncomfortably tight across his stomach, although he knows they're going to ride right back up within a minute or two. "Speaking of bigger... can one of you guys remind me to bug Nami for her sewing kit when we get back to the ship? Even if we weren't spending the day out here, I would've
ended up wearing these things anyway, 'cause I couldn't get my damn pants buttoned this morning."

Laughing, Luffy shifts the toddler balanced on his opposite hip and edges closer to slip his unoccupied arm around his swordsman's waist to rub his lower back. "I'm pretty sure Zoro didn't look like that last night- I think you kinda just popped out all at once!"

"Jeez, tell me about it."

_I knew I was finally gaining weight since Chopper and the cook got all that shit straightened out with my food but I sure wasn't expecting pants I wore yesterday to suddenly not fit today. Fucking weird. I don't remember that happening with the other two, and Robin was telling us all that stuff she read about girls carrying different than boys, so maybe- MAYBE Nami's gonna have a reason to finally quit harassing me._

"-do you think you're going, huh?"

"Dah. Dah!" Sabo's insisting, wriggling with increasing determination in his father's grasp and bending himself backwards, until the rubber man's forced to take him in both arms or risk dropping him.

"Oi oi, gimme a second!"

"Dah!"

"Okay, okay!" Stopping in his tracks, he lowers the toddler to the ground. "There. Happy?"

"Dah," the younger child cheers, immediately squatting and grabbing for a handful of sand, which he studies with intense interest as it trickles out from between his fingers.

"Oi," Zoro warns, giving his offspring's rump a gentle nudge with his bare toes. "I catch you eating that shit again, I'm gonna swat your ass."

"Little dirt never hurt anybody," Luffy remarks breezily, dropping down beside Sabo and patting the space next to him as an invitation for the swordsman to join them. "So, you glad we finally got away from the ship for a while?"

"And Chopper," the older pirate grunts as he takes a seat, slipping his sheathed katana free of his sash and laying them carefully aside where they're well away from small questing fingers. He pauses to take a healthy gulp from the large canteen the doctor insisted he carry along, grimaces and swipes his mouth clean with his forearm. "God, I hate water- it doesn't taste like anything. No, seriously, I know he means well, but-"

Wedging the open water bottle between his thighs to keep it upright, he makes a low exasperated noise as they watch Ace wander down to splash in and out of the surf. "Anyway, I guess we gotta start talking names, 'cause I don't care WHAT I said while I was all delusional and half out of my frickin' mind- we're not naming the kid after a food that gives people gas."

"Don't be stupid, Zoro; I meant as a nickname until we decided on something else! Besides, you're the one that brought up the whole thing about beans and farts. I just thought it was kinda cute, even if he or she or whatever's probably a lot bigger than a bean by now anyway."

"Yeah, Chopper was talking about lemons the other- oi, what the hell do you mean, WHATEVER? It can't be a whatever; it's gotta be a girl or a boy."
"I meant WHICHEVER one, boy or girl. I never met anybody that's both," Luffy snorts and then frowns, looking slightly puzzled. "Although some of them can be kinda confusing though—especially the guys that hang around with Iva-chan."

"..."

"Do you think Iva-chan counts as a guy or a—"

"Sencho, I'm pretty sure we were discussing the baby, not okama."

Luffy shrugs. "If it's a boy, he could decide he wants to be an okama."

Fixing his captain with a deadpan stare and holding it even as he rescues his canteen strap from Sabo's jaws, Zoro exhales noisily through his nose. "Names. We're discussing names."

"Right. Okay, you go first."

"..."

"..."

"I got nothing."

"ZORO-"

"Oi, I've been trying to come up with ideas, but I just keep drawing blanks."

"What about Kuina?" Luffy asks curiously, reaching out to seize Sabo and pull him into his lap where he's less apt to cause trouble. "We talked about naming Ace after her, before we found out he was gonna be a boy. And Sabo too. Maybe we can finally use that?"

"Yeah, I guess we could… but what if we take one look at her — if it's a girl, I mean — and she doesn't LOOK like a Kuina?" He takes another swig of water. "Besides, it's really kinda weird, isn't it? Naming somebody you've never met before? And hoping the name fits? I mean, yeah, I couldn't see Ace or Sabo with any names besides the ones they've got, but I just— what if the name just doesn't fit? Or what if she gets older and decides she hates it?"

"... Zoro... if I ask you something, can you promise you won't get mad?"

"Mmm."

"You never cared about anything like that before. Does this have anything to do with us talking to Ace? And the dumb stuff Sanji said? Does— does it have something to do with Wado?"

"Why would—" He honestly doesn't intend to snap, but the sharp pang of loss that stabs through him at the thought of the velvet-lined case resting in the trunk at the foot of their bed makes him angry, although he immediately bites his tongue when his harsh tone prompts a whine of distress from the child sitting in his captain's lap. "I'm not sure. Maybe. Probably."

"..." Wrapping his arms more snugly around Sabo and leaning his cheek against the toddler's head, Luffy regards his swordsman sympathetically. "It's okay if you don't wanna use that name. We can pick something else."

"I don't know. Lemme think about it? I guess we've still got a while before we really gotta start worrying about having something picked out."
"Okay."

They've been sitting in silence for a few minutes, each lost in his respective thoughts, when Sabo abruptly decides he wants a change of scenery and vacates one adult's lap for the other, forcing Zoro to recap and relocate his canteen.

The toddler begins to make himself comfortable but pauses when he encounters the bump that's preventing him from settling back against his father's torso. He peeks behind him, wiggles experimentally, tongue protruding slightly from his mouth, and blinks when his efforts fail to move the obstacle. Scowling at it proves equally ineffective.

_Uh oh. What's he gonna do…_

Zoro watches cautiously as his son squirms around to stare at his stomach, patting it tentatively before pressing both hands against it and peering up at him with questioning eyes.

"Look, he wants to know why your tummy's getting bigger!" Leaning closer to splay his own hand over one of Sabo's, Luffy grins up at his first mate as he stage-whispers in their child's ear. "There's a baby in there!"

"I don't think he's got a clue what you're talking about," the older pirate mutters, trying to ignore the heat suffusing his face. "But I bet he's gonna be pissed as hell when he can't fit in my lap anymore."

"No more lap," the rubber man relays to the toddler, smile widening. "-and you gotta be careful, 'cause you can't just jump on him or climb all over him or anything, but Zoro's tummy turns into a great big snuggly warm pillow, and he gets really easy to cuddle 'cause he's too sleepy to chase anybody away!"

When Zoro raises an eyebrow, he coughs and amends his statement. "Okay, so he wouldn't let just ANYBODY cuddle him. He'd probably throw Sanji overboard-"

"Damn straight."

"-but you and me and Ace'll be safe."

Frowning slightly, Sabo bats Luffy's hand away so he can explore Zoro's lower belly without interference. He resumes patting the slight curve, looking exceptionally serious and contemplative for his age, then leans his forehead against it and starts jabbering animatedly.

"Any idea what he's saying?"

"Nope. But I swear, the kid's too damn bright for his own good."

"Yeah, about that..." Luffy scratches his head. "I've been wondering about something, but I didn't get chance to talk to you about it, 'cause stuff's been all crazy lately. First with the fleet, and then the baby and you getting really sick, and I kinda forgot about it for a while there too, but I think-"

"Oi, look what I found!"

"What the hell is-"

"Wow, it's like a giant green version of your sword belt thingy."

Bounding up the beach towards them, Ace is trailing an enormous strand of kelp several times
longer than his own height. "Check it o-

When he gets within a yard or two, Zoro's reaction is instantaneous; his head jerks back as though he's been slapped, and the color doesn't simply drain from his face- it's literally there one second and gone the next. He doesn't quite actually shove Sabo from his lap into his captain's arms in his desperation to avoid puking on the poor kid, but it's a near thing as he scrambles away from them to hunker down on hands and knees, curling over his seething stomach and gagging violently enough to make his eye water.

"Get rid of it!" Luffy's yelling at their older son, having correctly deduced the seaweed as the cause of the problem. He's rather bewildered, however; his nose can't detect more than the faintest trace of briny decay, but his swordsman's reacting as though he's been unexpectedly presented with an open barrel of dead, rotting fish.

Stammering apologies, Ace goes charging back the way he came, taking the offending vegetation with him.

Distracted from his surroundings by the nausea gripping his guts, Zoro jolts when his lover touches his back, uttering a groan of misery and retching again as even that slight movement fuels his discomfort.

"It's okay," the rubber man assures him, moving closer to rub up and down his spine. "It's gone- Ace took it away."

He leans forward to nuzzle Zoro's quivering shoulder, murmuring comforting nonsense as he slips the other hand under the older pirate to cradle his belly. The abdominal muscles beneath his palm are rigid and painfully tight, so he kneads his fingertips against them, working in small circular motions until they eventually begin to unknot and his first mate slumps forward with a choked, muffled curse.

"Dada?" Sabo's worried little voice pipes up beside them. "Dadadadada?

"Dad, are you okay?" Ace shouts from several yards away, returning at a sprint and now empty-handed. "I dunno why a plant would make you barf, but I'm really really really REALLY SORRY!"

Increasingly and uncomfortably aware that he's poised with his face mashed into his arms and his ass hiked in the air, Zoro eases into an upright position and takes slow deep breaths until he's reasonably certain that he's miraculously NOT going to empty his stomach's contents all over the sand.

*Nice to have some good luck for once.*

Moving after repeated dry heaving hurts. It's nowhere near as painful as ten or twenty other things he could name, most of which involve excessive blood loss, but it's still irritating enough to make speaking difficult. "Why- does everything that comes out of the ocean- gotta smell so goddamn nasty…"

Curious, Ace sniffs his own fingers. "It smelled? I thought you freaked out 'cause it looked kinda like that stuff in shrimp. You know- the line of gunk that's supposed to be their p-"

"Ungh, Ace, d-" He breaks off, choking back the impulse to gag and coughing instead. "DON'T."

"… oops."
"Jeez," Luffy murmurs, ducking lower to address his swordsman's midsection. "You're sure giving Zoro a hard time, aren't you..."

"I know, right?" The swordsman snorts tiredly. He sits back on his heels, grimacing as the abused muscles in his abdomen protest, then giving an appreciative sigh when Luffy resumes rubbing his belly in an effort to massage the tension away. "Kid's already causing this much trouble, it's GOTTA be a girl."

"Better not let Nami-aneki hear you say anything like that," Ace mutters. "She'll probably hit you."

xxx

"How does your nose even do that?" The captain's demanding as they skirt a long stretch of shoulder-high dune grass on their approach to the sheltered bay where the Sunny's anchored, puzzled by although not actively disputing Zoro's insistence that Sabo needs a diaper change. "I mean, I'd have to stick my face right up to him and sniff to tell if he peed, and you just kinda LOOK in his direction and know he's wet!"

"Wanna trade? I sure as hell don't WANT my sense of smell to be this good," his first mate grumbles, scratching furiously at one side of his ribcage. He's trailing well behind the others, wrestling with the hem of the shirt that he's starting to seriously regret putting back on. "Oi, meet me in the bathhouse when you're done? If I don't get this blasted sand off me, I'm gonna fu-"

"You're gonna-?" Luffy asks, turning back to eye him quizzically, which is the only reason he catches sight of the older pirate's flared nostrils and expression of surprised recognition seconds before he's yanking Kitetsu and Shusui clear of their sheaths to block the much longer blade of the opposing swordsman who's appeared seemingly out of nowhere and launched an attack furious enough to drive him to the ground.

"OI!"

"Dad!"

Zoro curls his body, transforming his fall into a rather clumsy backward roll that turns his stomach upside metaphorically as well as literally, and pops up with his swords crossed protectively in front of him, swearing colorfully. "GODDAMN IT, WHAT'D I FUCKING TELL YOU ABOUT PULLING THIS SHIT AROUND MY KIDS?"

As though punctuating his father's outrage, Sabo gives a piercing squeal and wraps himself around Luffy's leg, forcing the rubber man to nudge him loose because while he normally doesn't interfere with his first mate's battles without asking – especially not with this particular adversary – after the trouble they've been through over the past month or so, he's inclined to make an exception to the rule.

"Dad, what's he doing here? How'd he find us?"

The captain's ignoring his older son's frantic queries and raising one Busoshoku-coated fist to punch Zoro's assailant in the head, deciding it'll be easier to act now and tender apologies later if necessary, when the tall, dark-haired man stands down on his own, returning his weapon to the clasps on his back and regarding both adult Straw Hat pirates with unblinking golden eyes.

That piercing gaze flits momentarily to the green-haired swordsman's middle and narrows speculatively before flashing back to his face. "It appears we must postpone this engagement until further notice. How disappointing."
"Oi!" Someone's shouting, running up the beach towards them. "OI!"

"Dad, is that-?"

"OI, Takanome! Luffy's doctor says you better leave Roronoa alone! They got another one on the way!"

Sabo reattaches himself to Luffy's leg and hides behind it, uncertain of the newcomer, but Ace lets out a whoop of excitement, goes pelting across the sand and tackles him to the ground.

"OOF! Dahahaha! Ace! You got bigger since the last time I saw you!"

"I would like a word with you, apprentice. At your convenience." Without another word or backward glance, Mihawk stalks off, bypassing both the seven-year-old and his own sailing companion – who's now laughing uproariously – as he strides towards the Sunny and the crew that's gathering on the deck, drawn by the shouting.

Zoro slowly slides his katana back into their sheaths. "Shit. SHIT."

"He's still calling you that?" Luffy asks as he scoops up Sabo and they make their way to where their older son and the beaming red-haired pirate he's hugging around the neck are waiting for them. "Even though you kicked his ass?"

"Yeah. Bastard's probably gonna call me that 'til the day one of us dies. I think it AMUSES him."
Chapter 12

I originally planned to sit on this chapter until I was finished with the next, but I've fallen behind thanks to dealing with a sick baby, not to mention being knocked on my own ass by a bad cold immediately followed by a nasty stomach virus, so I'm just going to go ahead and post anyway. Hopefully I'll get back on track this week, now that I can finally look at food again without nearly ejecting my left lung.

Uh, warnings for discussion of potentially disturbing material. Also, much thanks to cherrybearypanda for the headcanon regarding Rayleigh, whom she also rps to great and entertaining effect. Luffy's still sorry about your sword, Ray, but what did you expect bouncing it hilt-first off someone made of rubber?

First time writing Mihawk and Shanks to any real extent. Crossing my fingers.

Sitting on the aquarium bar bench, fishing dried bits of mikan out of the trail mix he's picking through and trying to ignore how badly his skin's itching as he watches his former swordsmaster sipping wine from a long-stem glass is the LAST situation in which Zoro expected to find himself this afternoon, and he can think of more than a dozen places he'd rather be than mentally squirming like an unfortunate insect under that pale gaze.

The bathhouse, for one, rinsing away the sand and sweat he's accumulated over the last few hours. Instead, he's steadily reducing the level in the bowl Chopper shoved unceremoniously into his hands as soon as he and Luffy boarded the ship. Feeding his face. And waiting for the gloomy bastard seated across the room to start berating him for treating his title so flippantly.

"I'm never going to hear the end of it," he'd muttered to Luffy while trudging back to the ship earlier. "Just like last time."

"Well, I guess you gotta talk to him at some point," the younger pirate had reluctantly replied. "I mean, if you try to go hide in a closet or under the bed or something, he'll probably just camp out on the deck 'til you come out to pee, so you might as well get it out of the way."

His captain's now elsewhere, talking to Shanks.

*Probably shooting the shit, telling each other stories and getting drunk.*

Leaving him in awkward silence with the former World's Greatest Swordsman, who seems inclined to spend another hour staring at him without speaking.

He feels scruffy as hell running around barefoot and dressed in ill-fitting swim trunks and a t-shirt, compared to his mentor, who's immaculate as always. The man doesn't appear to have either a speck of sand on him or a single hair out of place despite their earlier altercation. And combined with that chilly, judging air? Zoro might've, as Luffy said, "kicked Mihawk's ass" and claimed his title, but the well-dressed Shichubikai still makes him feel like a ragtag stowaway on his own ship.

*Will you stop it, Roronoa- quit letting your fucked-up irrational pregnancy bullshit mess with your
head. It doesn't matter to Sencho what you're wearing, and anyway, the guy looks like a douche in that stupid plumed hat.

Finally, when he thinks he can't bear another minute of listening to nothing but the hiss of the aquarium pumps: "I approached unannounced, yet you still sensed my presence moments before I struck. May I ask how that was possible, given my skill at concealment?"

Great. Here we go.

"Almost didn't," he admits. "-but the smell gave you away."

Mihawk raises an eyebrow a fraction of a degree.

"You smell like those goddamn candles you burn on that floating coffin you call a boat."

"Interesting. It was my impression that those particular tapers were odorless."

"Yeah, well, my sense of smell's gone through the fucking roof since Luffy knocked me up again." Tone defiant, pushing the issue because he doesn't feel like dancing around it anymore. "You stink like smoke and wax."

"A curious observation," the dark-haired swordsman muses. "One I shall need to take under serious consideration for the future."

He takes a sip from his glass, raises it slightly to examine the contents. "Your cook stocks a tolerable vintage. A pleasant surprise- I must confess I expected that awful swill you and Akagami prefer."

Zoro holds his tongue, refusing to be baited.

"Although I suppose you must be abstaining even from that, given your... condition."

"Chopper says it's bad for the baby, so- yeah, you're right. I'm not drinking."

Although I WANT to, he almost adds and then doesn't. He hates wine, considers it pansy-ass shit, but he's still tempted to walk over, grab the bottle resting on the service elevator table at Mihawk's elbow and drain it. Watching someone else drinking when he can't is downright infuriating.

"A rumor reached my doorstep," the older man continues, eyes admiring the ruby-hued liquid in his glass. "A rather fascinating rumor. According to this rumor, a swordsman resembling Roronoa Zoro not only slew but decapitated and dismembered his opponent in the marketplace of a small port. Imagine my surprise when, in a bid to satisfy my curiosity, I found eyewitnesses willing to verify that the rumor was indeed reality."

"... he pulled a gun on my-"

"Ah, yes. The individuals to whom I spoke were adamant in defining your behavior as a direct response to your family's peril."

"..."

"They also brought to my attention the exceptionally polite refusal that prompted the actions of the... gentleman in question." He sets his half-empty glass down on the table, turning those eerie eyes towards his former apprentice. "Roronoa, I did not agree to train you, to give you the means to surpass me, merely to watch you consistently refuse your challengers and throw everything away in
a fit of rage."

"I-"

"This is not the first rumor of this nature that I have stumbled upon. Merely the first verified. Roronoa-"

"STOP CALLING ME THAT."

"... as you wish."

Zoro raises a hand - his left - to rub his temples and momentarily shield his face, embarrassed by his outburst and the way Mihawk's now regarding him with impassive patience. "Sorry. I- sorry... it's kind of complicated."

"You have made it complicated. Forming such a deep emotional bond with your captain and this crew. Bringing children into the equation." The older swordsman's mouth twitches. "Zoro. Men like us do not mix well with others. We may serve higher authorities from time to time, but we are not meant to settle down or... start families."

Zoro's already rising to his feet, voice choked with anger. "Oi, don't lump me in with you. I didn't ask you for help back then just to win some stupid fucking title. And I didn't keep pushing myself to beat you because I wanted goddamn recognition, even if I got it. I did it for HIM, and I did it for THEM. I did it because I needed to know I could protect them. That there wasn't anybody better-somebody who could hurt them or take them away from-" 

In the space of a heartbeat, his rival's closed the space between them and seized him by the collar, narrowed golden eyes capturing his gaze. "There is always someone better."

"Let go of-"

"You are not the same young man who challenged me from the deck of the Baratie, nor are you the same man who bowed his head and begged my assistance in aiding his captain. What you have become and what you will become, I do not know, but one thing is certain." The grip at his throat tightens warningly. "I do not know where it originated, but if you do not conquer the fear I sense in your every movement, your every breath, you risk losing not only your title and likely your life but also everything you hold dear."

"... you think I don't already know that?"

"And yet you insist on making the situation more complicated by providing your Kaizokuo with yet another heir." Mihawk releases him and steps back, cloak swirling around his ankles. "You speak of defending your family, yet how do you expect to do so when you will not- and when you eventually cannot- fight?"

Unaware that he's raised a hand to splay damaged fingers over his midsection, Zoro speaks through clenched, bared teeth. "I'll do what I need to do."

"That may be the case, but given the circumstances and your obvious lack of control, who will protect them from you?"

Hearing one of the things he fears most voiced aloud by another human being and not merely echoing inside the confines of his own skull is akin to being torn open by Yoru all over again, because while the older swordsman's communication skills leave something to be desired, his insensitive delivery doesn't make his words any less true.
"Ah, Roronoa, you decided to join us!" Shanks roars, trying to throw his arm around Zoro's shoulders as the swordsman joins him and Luffy on the lawn after exiting the aquarium bar with quick determined strides.

"Zoro," the green-haired pirate mutters, dodging both the embrace and the bottle the older man's gripping. "Don't touch me."

His blunt rejection prompts a slight frown of concern from his captain, who shoots him a somewhat anxious and definitely questioning look before casually transposing himself between them. "Oi, Zoro; I was just telling Shanks about us getting rid of the fleet and what Chopper said about when he thinks the baby's due."

He reaches for his first mate's belly, intending to caress it gently, and blinks in surprise when Zoro twitches away from him.

*What's wrong with him? Was it something Hawkeyes said? 'Cause he was fine earlier- or at least he didn't mind too much when I was touching him in front of other people.*

Maybe it's being touched in front of someone not part of their crew, he decides and resolves to keep his hands to himself for now– or at least while either of their visitors are watching.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Zoro's asking Shanks grumpily, arms crossed over his chest. "Mihawk didn't say, but I'm assuming you've got some reason for showing up unannounced. Unless he really did come just to give me shit and you're tagging along for the ride."

"Ah, well, I'm afraid you're right– this isn't exactly a social call." The redhead pauses to throw back his head, drinking noisily and then barking laughter at the swordsman's envious expression. "Dahaha, sorry, Roronoa. Guess it's pretty mean, huh? Me drinking in front of you right now?"

"Yeah," Zoro grunts and refuses to elaborate, although later he'll mutter something to Luffy about how being required to abstain from consuming alcohol while witnessing someone else repeatedly tipping back a bottle is something like being stranded and dying of thirst in the fucking desert while some asshole dangles a dripping canteen just out of reach. "And I told you, call me-"

He stiffens as he's bumped lightly on the belly.

"Neh, Shanks, leave him alone, okay?" Luffy asks hurriedly, snatching the offending item and flinging it overboard before his lover loses his temper and does something crazy – like grabbing the bottle from Shanks and bashing him over the head with it – because the swordsman's now glowering murderously at the older man.

"Oi, I wasn't finished with that," Shanks protests, sighing mournfully as he peers over the rail to where his alcohol's vanished into the water below.

The Straw Hat captain ignores him, turning to cautiously stroke Zoro's side while blocking their guest's view of his actions with his own body, and to his relief, this time the green-haired pirate allows it. "I'll get you all the booze you can drink after the baby gets here, I promise. Barrels of it."

"Gonna hold you to that promise." Zoro murmurs, mouth quirking briefly into a faint smile before he shifts away to address Shanks. "Now what the hell brought you guys out here, hunting us down in the middle of bumble-fuck?"

He doesn't bother asking how they've accomplished this; his captain's not the only one who's
displayed an unerring knack of ending up exactly where he needs to be, at the exact moment he needs to be there.

"Ah, right." Turning to lean back with his elbow propped on the rail, their elder adopts a far more serious demeanor. "Like I already told Luffy, we're docked on the other side of the island, so there's no need to worry about Takahome's puddle-jumper drawing attention to your ship. Coming through the jungle was a pain in the ass, but I wasn't taking any chances with someone following us, not with the stuff I've been hearing and knowing you've always got the kids here onboard with you. Didn't get any news gulls, so 'course I didn't know about this latest, but now I'm definitely glad I took the precaution."

They're too busy exchanging a look of dismay to pay any mind to the index finger gesturing towards Zoro's middle.

"Does whatever you heard have anything to do with fishmen?" Luffy asks cautiously. "Or Oolong or the New Fishman Pirates or any of those guys?"

"Arlong," Zoro coughs.

"Yeah, him."

"Fishmen? I suppose it's possible." Shanks pushes off the railing so he can scratch thoughtfully at his stubbly beard. "Didn't get specifics, but then the government's playing this one real close to the chest."

"Shit."

"What've they gotta do with us?" Luffy asks uneasily, resisting the temptation to lay a reassuring hand on his swordsman, who's gone from being merely disquieted to undeniably alarmed at the mention of anything potentially involving the Marines.

"Maybe nothing, but I thought it was a little suspicious coming so soon after they made you another offer. I'm assuming you turned them down again?"

The Pirate King nods, tugging the brim of his hat a bit lower so his old friend can't see the distress in his eyes. "Those people haven't got anything I need. Or want."

The World Government was exceedingly polite with its first few offers to make him a Shichibukai, but the messages have been getting increasingly insistent. The last few overtures were backed by a disturbingly open military presence and sounded more like demands- or outright threats- and more than one encounter's resulted in a fight. Some of which have ended badly. Particularly for the Marines involved.

As much trouble as it caused otherwise, the fleet's presence helped deter enemy captains from getting too zealous in their endeavors. And now that the fleet's been disbanded…

I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't.

"I figured as much when Takanome and I finally tracked you down here." Shanks snorts. "Of course he thinks you're a fool for not taking advantage of an alliance with them, even if it's technically in their favor. And I gotta admit, you'd be under a lot less pressure, not having to worry about the Marines. Coming and going as you please?"

Seeing the expressions of distaste on their faces, he raises his hand in a bid for clemency. "Oi oi, I get it- you'd rather be your own man than a dog of the government."
Of course, in reality, it's far more complicated than that, but-

"Grandpa says we're better off just staying away from them. 'Cause if I agreed to what they want, I'd get called in for stuff like Hawkeyes and Buggy, and I really don't want the kids anywhere."

"Fuck that," Zoro interrupts, tone ripe with rancor. "Fuck the World Government, fuck the Marines."

*Oh man, why'd Shanks hafta go and bring this up. I'm pretty sure Zoro would cut their throats before he'd cooperate with any of 'em.*

"Okay," Shanks whistles, raising both eyebrows and shooting Luffy a grimace that's clearly asking for the source of his swordsman's antipathy. "Didn't realize you had that much of a thing against--"

"Uh, so what exactly did you hear that made you decide to come find us?" The younger pirate asks, deciding it's time to steer the subject back to a topic slightly safer than the road they're headed down.

"Nothing concrete. Just some whispers here and there, saying there was something big in the works. You know how vague information gets when it filters down from the people at the top. But I'm thinking you should watch your back. The Gorosei are very interested in you and your influence, and you've made it pretty clear that you can't be controlled. And what those old men can't- or think they can't control..."

Zoro's fingers close on Kitetsu's hilt. "Sencho, if he's right and that guy Jinbei sent to Ryugu has something to do with this..."

"Yeah, I know. Sooner or later SOMEBODY'S gotta get back to us." The rubber man gives a sigh of frustration and pushes his hat backwards until it's dangling between his shoulder blades and he can scrub the fingers of both hands through his hair. "I'm gonna ask Law when he gets here, see if he heard anything."

"Good thinking."

Overhead, the dining hall door swings open and Sanji leans out, calling for "the ladies and the rest of you shitty bastards" to head in for dinner.

"Guess you guys are eating with us, huh? Or do you gotta leave already?"

"We should have time. Had plans to head for Sabaody, meet back up with my crew and spend a few nights hitting the town with Rayleigh, but a couple hours shouldn't hurt. Besides, that old goat's probably wandered off and gotten lost again, invited himself into some lady's house 'til he figures out how to get home. I don't know how Shakky puts up with him," Shanks is shaking his head, but he's also laughing. "And if we're a day or so late getting back- eh, I'm sure Benn's got everything under control. Sure, we'll stay for dinner!"

"Great," Zoro grumbles, clearly envisioning an evening spent with his former tutor staring across the dining table at him.

"Ray-san gets lost almost as much as Zoro," Luffy teases, nudging the green-haired pirate's shoulder in hopes of coaxing a snort or at least an eye-roll from him. "Maybe that's a thing with guys who use swords?"

"Oh!" Shanks exclaims, snapping his fingers. "That reminds me; there was one other thing I wanted to mention."
He nods towards Zoro, grinning. "There's some pretty, ah, creative stories flying around about your first mate here."

"Yeah," the swordsman mutters. "Mihawk told-"

"Crazy isn't it, even after all these years- people still thinking you were actually in Impel Down, of all places? Even though the government released that statement?"

Luffy freezes, breath catching in his throat and heart plummeting.

Mistaking his widening eyes for disbelief, Shanks turns to face him. "It's ridiculous, I know, but apparently now there's somebody claiming they found evidence the statement's a lie, meant to cover up the fact the Marines captured him but then somehow lost him."

"Oh yeah?" Zoro asks in a voice that only those who don't know him well would consider normal.

"Sanji's gonna yell at us for being late and I'm hungry," the Straw Hat captain blurs, grabbing for his crewmate's elbow, but the swordsman wrenches it loose. "Zoro-"

"Oi, Sencho, knock it off. Shanks is trying to tell us a really interesting story here."

"Not much to tell, I'm afraid, since nobody seems to know how in blazes he got in or out of the place. That hasn't changed. But supposedly- SUPPOSEDLY some friend of a brother of a friend of an uncle of some guy-" Shanks waves his hand with a flourish, showing how much credence he lends to this source. "-stationed in G-1 CLAIMS he stumbled across some grainy video footage of some poor bastard that he THINKS looks like Roronoa here."

"Sanji- dinner-" Luffy manages, making another desperate attempt to end the conversation NOW, because he feels as though he's going to be sick, and if HE'S feeling that way-

Zoro's mouth has formed a thin bloodless line, and his fingers are wrapped so tightly around Kitetsu's hilt that the younger pirate's surprised he can't hear the katana's blade rattling in its sheath.

"Obviously the guy was mistaken. Or maybe he's another one of those nutty conspiracy theorists who keep trying to blame your crew for everything from the sea king attack that destroyed the prison to that island that got firebombed by rival pirate crews a few weeks before. Remember that?" He snorts. "Whatever the case, I'd know it was a hoax even if you hadn't already confirmed it. 'Cause if I've got the dates right - and I'm pretty sure I do - this would've been right around the time Ace was born. So the whole thing's just-"

"Fucking ridiculous," the swordsman finishes with a cold smile, and Luffy's horrified to see a thin trickle of crimson escaping the corner of his mouth.

"Oi, Roronoa- you alright?"

Zoro blinks, rubs at his lips and stares at the blood smeared on his wrist. "I'm fine. Must've bit myself trying not to laugh."

More like trying not to scream. Damn it, Shanks, the captain thinks numbly.

In an effort to protect their first mate and his family, the Straw Hats decided long ago to vehemently deny any involvement in the unexpected collapse of Impel Down. Even those who aided them, either in rescuing Zoro as well as his and Luffy's yet unborn son from their captors or providing a safe haven for the crew as they struggled to pick up the pieces and reassemble their disrupted lives, don't know the full extent of the story and have been sworn to secrecy.
Trafalgar Law knows more than most, but – like Keimi, Surume and Iceberg and a select few of his Galley-La men who witnessed scenes that couldn't be otherwise explained – he solemnly agreed to meet the inquiries of curious parties with puzzled looks, raised eyebrows and deprecating snorts.

The Marines, not to mention the World Government itself, are continuing to unwittingly aid their efforts by holding the firm stance that they've never laid hands on the man who's now the World's Greatest Swordsman- although they'd be more than appreciative to anyone looking to cash in his bounty.

So far as Luffy understood until now, the interest in the rumor had mostly died out, despite a few individuals stubbornly maintaining their reports regarding alleged sightings of the Straw Hat pirates near Fishman Island, Enies Lobby and Water Seven around the time of the prison's ruination. They've been largely ignored thanks to the government's statement and the Pirate King's attitude of casual disregard, and it certainly hasn't hurt that many of the people directly involved are dead, killed either during the incident itself or a few years later during the struggle on Raftel.

And regardless of their level of intelligence or which side of the issue they're on, Luffy's come to understand over the years that people will believe what they want. Hence Shanks' amusement and blithely flippant stance while he's heedlessly remitting news capable of causing them more pain than he'll ever know.

The rubber man's struggling for words that might salvage this situation even though he's already aware there's probably nothing he can say to make it right, but the only thing that keeps coming to mind is how his attempt to keep his swordsman's healing wounds – the ones on the inside that can't always be seen, as he recently explained to Ace – from reopening has backfired beautifully.

Zoro's staring at him now, expression fraudulently aloof for their guest's benefit, but Luffy's known his first mate long enough to recognize the dazed look in his single eye as unmistakable bewilderment.

*He doesn't even know what to do- he's just…*

The idea of Zoro being lost isn't funny anymore, not in the slightest.

The captain finds himself filled with self-reproach, but he's guiltily relieved when Sanji emerges from the dining hall and starts shouting at them from the balcony to hurry the hell up and come inside before the food gets cold, because it means he doesn't need to formulate a response to address his swordsman's silent plea for direction.

Because the truth is, unfortunately, that he doesn't know what to do either.

   xxx

Zoro can't concentrate on the dinner conversation or the grilled fish filet he's halfheartedly scooting around his plate. Across the table, Mihawk won't stop glowering at him, and Luffy keeps shooting him worried looks between answering Shanks and dealing with a toddler who's showing signs of working himself into a full-blown tantrum, while the rest of their nakama chatter ceaselessly away around them.

He's on his feet and walking away before he even realizes he's moving.

"Zoro?"

"Gotta take a leak," he manages, forcing himself to maintain a nonchalant and even bored air as he heads for the exit, and he's relieved because his voice sounds almost normal.
"Zoro pees a lot 'cause the baby's sitting on his bladder!" He hears his captain tell Shanks with far too much enthusiasm and false cheer just before the door closes between them, and he flinches when he bites the already sore inside of his mouth to keep from bursting into helpless laughter, because he's afraid that if he starts, he won't be able to stop.

The swordsman's tempted to lean back against the Adam wood wall and try to catch his breath, but he can feel every muscle in his body beginning to twitch uncontrollably and he knows if he stops now, his nakama and their guests are likely to find him huddled on the deck with his face buried in his hands.

This is not acceptable.

Overhead, the sails and Jolly Roger are beginning to snap briskly as he forces himself to keep moving around the outside of the dining hall towards the ladder hatch to the observation room at the ship's stern, and he remembers belatedly that Nami said something about expecting another storm this evening.

Rain starts pelting down around him even before he reaches his destination - the weather changes fast here, just like any other area in the New World and the Grand Line in general - but he doesn't care. Maybe it'll wash some of the crud off him, and besides, it suits his shitty mood.

All this time and I never thought about them. The surveillance Den Dens.

He supposes he knew they were there, monitoring prisoners' activity and preventing blind spots in the guards' patrols, but he'd probably assumed whatever images they broadcast were restricted to Impel Down's control room. But even that-

What the fuck was I thinking? That somebody- what- had the courtesy to turn them off because I was naked and-

The idea that someone- possibly multiple people- might've been watching while she-

Watching. RECORDING.

He needs to stop and collect himself halfway up the ladder because his hands are shaking so badly that he's afraid he's going to fall, his face hot with shame and his vision suddenly swimming with unshed tears, because the thought that's just occurred to him is so distressing, so goddamn HUMILIATING, that the chill it sends through him raises gooseflesh over every inch of his body.

If Impel Down was transmitting to the G-1 base, or anywhere else for that matter, and those transmissions were saved in a computer somewhere and just waiting for some nosy bastard to stumble across- then ANYBODY might see them. And while the idea of someone like Mihawk or Shanks or Law or even one of his many challengers catching a glimpse of him being not just tortured but... sexually abused... makes him feel like slithering under a rock and never coming out-

I've always been glad that- at least my nakama didn't see me like that, with her crawling all over me. At least he didn't- at least Luffy didn't see her f-fucking me or ramming that goddamn trident handle up my ass.

He struggles the remaining feet up the ladder, throat clenched so tightly that it hurts, and collapses into the chair behind Nami's desk, fingertips digging against the armrests.

If there's really footage- if there's really photographic evidence of what the Chief Guard of Impel
Down did to him over a span of several months during his incarceration, he wants to find it and destroy it before anyone else sets eyes on it. Because while the thought of someone he doesn't know seeing all of his painful secrets laid bare is horrible enough, the thought of his CAPTAIN seeing the source of all the nightmares and panic attacks and the reason why he sometimes hits or comes very close to hitting people who touch him unexpectedly-

*I would rather throw myself on my sword.*

Of course, there's something vitally important preventing him from just waltzing off to hack the G-1 computers into small smoking pieces. In addition to the fact that his crewmates- and most notably his captain and oldest son- would chain him to the main mast before they willingly agreed to let him anywhere near a Marine base alone.

He supposes his old mentor would scathing refer to his unborn charge as a complication, but…

"Oi…" He presses a hand to his abdomen, pushing the hem of his shorts lower so his fingers are curled over bare skin, protectively cradling the developing life inside him. "Don't worry; I'm not gonna do anything stupid and risk losing you again."

To his surprise, there's an extremely faint and barely perceptible flutter somewhere between his pelvis and navel, and he lifts his hand slightly, staring suspiciously beneath it and debating whether or not it's merely his mostly empty stomach growling noiselessly. For a while there's nothing, but then just as he's starting to think it was just his imagination, he feels it again – more insistent this time – and a faint smile tugs the corner of his mouth despite his distress. "Yeah, you heard me. No matter what, you come first… bean."
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Zoro's so focused on what he might be feeling inside him that he doesn't hear the door hatch creaking open below, and when it slams shut, accompanied by the sound of his captain's anxious voice calling his name, he nearly leaps from his seat, heart giving a startled lurch in his chest.

_Goddamn it, I'm gonna be jumping at shadows next._

"Zoro?" Luffy asks again, bypassing the ladder entirely in favor of rocketing up to join him. "I saw you go past the portholes, so I thought you were just gonna pee off the stern, but then it started raining really hard and you didn't come back."

The younger pirate's soaked to the skin, and only now does the swordsman realize that he can hear the rain outside, pounding furiously at the window panes. He eyes the water streaming off Luffy with dismay as it pools on the floor beneath his sandals. "You're dripping all over the place. Nami's gonna have a shit fit if you ruin any of her maps."

"I don't care about the maps. I care about Zoro. Are you okay?"

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Luffy looks as though he'd like to bite off his own tongue for asking something so idiotic, and although he knows the rubber man's not to blame and just worried about him, Zoro is suddenly incredibly, unconscionably angry with him.

Maybe it's the emotional upheaval caused by the hormones and the unending morning sickness and all the other stressful shit turning his body upside down. Maybe it's because he was entertaining this irrational notion that everything in his head would be miraculously straightened out after they finally talked to Ace- that he could shove all the unpleasantness behind him and forget it ever happened.

Or maybe he just needs to finally vent what he was feeling earlier, when he couldn't find a way to explain his questionable actions to Mihawk and could barely speak in front of Shanks for fear of letting something slip.

Whatever the cause, he's nearly beside himself with rage.

"I don't know. What do you think, huh? Your buddy down there told us there might be pics of me being RAPED getting passed around by the Marines. Do you think I'm okay?"

His captain winces, mouth working soundlessly as he struggles for a response, and the tiny corner of the swordsman's brain that's still rational is instantly sorry for his outburst but he forges ahead anyway, unable – and perhaps, yes, unwilling – to hold his tongue now that it's been loosened.

"He had it right though, didn't he? 'Cause it's a real riot, isn't it? A laugh and a half?" He throws himself out of the chair, almost shouting as he spits the words in the younger pirate's face. "Roronoa Zoro, the Pirate Hunter, turned into some sadistic bitch's fuck toy?"

"Zoro-"

"She'd love this, you know. Probably get off on it too, knowing that I know this stuff's out there. That you might see it and-"
"I don't CARE," Luffy protests and immediately pales when he realizes he's chosen the wrong words again and quickly amends his statement. "I care about ZORO. It doesn't matter if there's-

"It doesn't MATTER?"

"I mean, it does but-

"It does or it doesn't? Make up your goddamn mind."

"Zoro, don't. You know I'm not good at knowing how to say stuff like-

"That's okay- you don't need to say anything. I think we both know how disgusted-

"ZORO, STOP." The command's desperately harsh, unintentionally strengthened with Haki, and the swordsman stumbles back a step.

"...

"Crap!" Luffy blurts, reaching for him. "I'm sorry- I didn't mean to-

A choked "nngh" of denial escaping his throat, Zoro starts to jerk away from the hand on his arm and abruptly realizes that he's running away. Again.

He's getting so tired of running. Tired of feeling the panic that he knows is written on his face, because Luffy's no longer groping at him, but now facing him with palms out and fingers spread to show he's not a threat as he apologizes again.

"Sorry- sorry, Zoro, I'm-" The captain's raised hands are trembling. "I was trying to say it doesn't matter 'cause it doesn't change how I feel about you. But it does matter, 'cause I don't like seeing you upset and- I don't know how to explain it. I'm sorry, I know I'm stupid and I'm always messing stuff up when I try to say things, but- Zoro, I love-

That's why I can't let you see me like that.

The swordsman doesn't stop- won't LET himself stop to think about what he's doing; before that panicky breathless sensation in his lungs can send him fleeing from the room, he closes the gap between them, hands closing on the collar of Luffy's shirt and dragging him into a clumsy, frustration-fueled kiss.

Clearly confused by the sudden reversal, Luffy plants a hand against his chest and pushes him back just enough to separate their mouths. "Zoro, what-?

"I- I don't know. Just let me- I need-

I need you to hold me. I need you to leave me alone. I need everything to just stop spinning, because it's all getting away from me, slipping through my hands, and I don't know how to make it stop but maybe you can-

He has no idea how to explain what he needs or why he's convinced that charging headlong into his lover's arms will combat the constrictive band tightening around his chest, but apparently it doesn't matter because after a few moments of carefully studying his face, Luffy relaxes the arm holding them apart. "As long as you're sure. And if you gotta stop... just tell me, okay?"

xxx

Wet clothing that insists on clinging like a second skin isn't the easiest to remove, and Zoro refuses
to stop kissing and touching him all over in the process of peeling him out of it, so by the time he's finally divested Luffy of shorts and shirt and hat and struggled out of his own attire and the rubber man's belatedly remembered to toe off his soggy sandals, the older pirate's breathing is so ragged that he sounds almost as though he's hyperventilating.

Keeping his own caresses gentle but constant, the captain helps where possible, cautiously guiding him without forcing his hand and keeping up a steady stream of dialogue until a point when he eventually can't respond with anything but terse one- or two-word remarks and badly muffled groans.

In his desperation for some semblance of control, Zoro's rough nearly to the point of ferocity, leaving bruises and bite marks in his wake, but the younger pirate doesn't protest his poor restraint and calmly offers what comfort he's able, trying not to flinch when his swordsman gets a little too carried away.

Afterwards, when they're lying on the floor surrounded by rumpled articles of damp clothing, an upturned bottle of mapping ink that's thankfully still corked and a few sheets of crumpled blank parchment, his first mate's quietly apologetic, tracing a particularly vivid ring of tooth marks with chagrin and looking guilt-stricken when his touch prompts a sharp inhalation. "I hurt you."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I-"

"Zoro." Luffy sighs and shifts under him, toes curling as he stretches aching muscles. He reaches up to stroke the older man's furrowed brow. "Don't worry about it, really. You make me feel good, and if this-if this helps… then, yeah, I'm okay with that part too."

To be truthful, despite the discomfort involved with bottoming to someone who tends to forget that being resilient and pain-resistant doesn't make him invulnerable, he's relieved by occasions like this, when the other pirate loses his hesitancy and displays the same unswerving passion for sex that he used to have years ago, before a casual touch was sometimes capable of making him flinch away with unease.

And if he sometimes uses his teeth a bit more often than the captain might prefer, at least he understands why. While Zoro's no longer absolutely adamant about maintaining complete silence, he's still frequently reluctant to let his voice be heard and tends to muffle it by any means possible.

And even when he's freaked out and can't think too straight, he's still way more careful with me than with himself. WAY more careful. I'd rather have him bite me than end up dragging him to the infirmary 'cause he nearly took a chunk out of his arm again…

He slides his fingers into his swordsman's hair, combing them soothingly through the green locks, and he's rewarded with a soft hum of satisfaction and a few moments of comfortable silence before Zoro starts wriggling against him and trying to sit up, face filled with sleepy annoyance that's far preferable to the strained dismay from earlier. "You okay?"

To his relief, this time he's answered by a tired half-smile instead of unbridled fury. "Yeah. Just getting kinda uncomfortable. Looks like I'm not gonna be laying on my stomach for a whole lot longer."

"The bean's getting bigger," he teases, unable to resist a grin when his words prompt a snort of dour amusement. "Oi, I don't wanna move yet. Spoon?"
"Okay, for a few minutes, but then I'm getting a shower and- ugh- you should probably get one too."

Luffy grimaces. "Your nose, huh? Oh- big or little?"

"Uh… little, I guess," his swordsman decides, somewhat to his surprise, and stretches out beside him, hugging the arms that immediately wrap around his middle as the younger pirate rolls over and curls around his back. "And yeah, everything smells kinda like that shit Franky uses on the ofuro every couple of months to keep it from getting mildew."

"The cleaning stuff? That's gross. I didn't get some up your nose or something, did I?" The captain asks suspiciously.

"I don't think so, but it sure as hell smells like it. Sencho-" Zoro raises his head slightly, turning back just enough to catch his gaze. "Before you came up here looking for me, did you say anything to anybody about-"

"NO," Luffy answers before he can finish, hold tightening reflexively around him, and then again, more softly. "No. And I'm not gonna. Not unless Zoro's okay with it."

"…"

"And Shanks won't say anything either. I could tell- he thinks you're just mad that people are saying dumb stuff about you, but he won't bring it up again."

"… what do you think we should do?"

Swallowing hard, the rubber man tucks his nose behind his first mate's ear, closing his eyes and sliding both hands down until his laced fingers are spanning the slight swelling in his lower belly. "… what does Zoro wanna do?"

"What do I WANT to do? I wanna get my hands on whatever Shanks says that guy found, make it disappear and kill anybody who saw it. I wanna find a way to drop the fucking Reverse Mountain on Mariejoa and Marineford. Just wipe all the shit in that whole area right off the map so those assholes can never bother us again," his swordsman responds promptly before turning in his arms so they're lying face-to-face. He leans his forehead against Luffy's collarbone. "But I guess we both know the chances of that happening."

"Zoro…"

"I'd be willing to settle for everybody being safe. The crew, you, the kids." The older pirate takes his hand and guides it back to his abdomen. "Our bean here."

Choked laughter bubbling up in his throat, the captain kisses his lover's forehead before burying his face in his hair, overcome by emotion. He wants to tease Zoro for finally caving in and referring to their unborn child by that silly pet name after giving him such a hard time about it, but he doesn't trust himself to speak; he feels all funny, like his heart's suddenly too big for his chest and a massive weight's been lifted off his shoulders.

I don't know what I thought. I think- I think part of me was scared that he might just try to leave, go after them on his own, even though I knew better.

"I'm sorry," Zoro murmurs into his chest. "I'm sorry I flipped out on you, and I'm sorry I'm so screwed up, and I'm sorry dealing with all kinds of stuff ends up being harder than it should because of me."
"And I'm sorry I let you go back to the ship by yourself that day," Luffy tells him quietly. 
"Sometimes I wish I could go back and change that. 'Cause maybe if I'd been there- and if none of 
that stuff ever happened to you."

*If we weren't bent. Not broken, not really, but bent so badly that sometimes we forget we're not.*

"Yeah, and if you'd been there, one or more of us might be dead because I sure as hell bet nobody 
would've backed down from that fight. We could've lost nakama; the cook might've actually died 
instead of just getting the shit beaten out of him. Or maybe the crew would've been fine, but- what 
if we'd lost Ace?" His swordsman asks in a low voice, face still hidden from view where it's buried 
against him. "And what about Sabo? What about this baby we're having now? What happens to 
them- if the other stuff changes, do they even still exist?"

He doesn't ask it aloud, but they can both feel the next logical question hovering in the 
infinitesimal gap that persists between them even when they're huddled together like this, skin to 
skin. The gap that they're constantly struggling to bridge and that sometimes, when they're very 
lucky, temporarily vanishes while they start to confuse their personal boundaries during the heat of 
passion.

*Or is it a trade? I have to choose either our children or my sanity, but I can't- we can't- have both?*

The older pirate lifts his head, gaze filled with resignation. "Trust me, nobody's thought the whole 
thing over more than me, and as much as I hate it- as much as I fucking HATE saying this, I don't 
know if there's a better way it could've ended. Everybody's alive, and I wouldn't trade you or the 
kids for anything. ANYTHING."

*Then I wish I could fix you.* Luffy thinks, reluctantly moving his hand from Zoro's lower belly and 
sliding it over his hip so he can pull his first mate into a tight hug. *I wish I knew how to fix 
whatever's broken- whatever's BENT inside you.*

*xxx*

The rest of the evening passes uneventfully and Zoro's grateful when Mihawk and Shanks 
withdraw without imparting any further wisdom, although the latter hugs Luffy and Ace, ruffles 
Sabo's hair and promises to let the crew know if he hears anything definite regarding the World 
Government's supposed plans of action.

The red-haired pirate does NOT attempt to hug, ruffle or otherwise harass the Straw Hat's first 
mate, who opts to view the proceedings from a safe distance because he's already uncomfortable 
enough with Mihawk silently analyzing how he's hidden his burgeoning belly under his coat. It's 
overly warm and he's resorted to using his haramaki to hold up the trousers he can't button, but at 
least he doesn't feel quite as exposed. Or underdressed.

He's so obviously relieved by his former mentor's impending departure that Sanji and Usopp 
immediately take note and start quietly badgering him about how tense and awkwardly formal he 
gets whenever the man - who the cook claims is the only person grumpier than Zoro that he's ever 
met - shows up. Which thankfully isn't often, given the dark-haired bastard's poor opinion of the 
children and penchant for provoking impromptu duels, not necessarily because he's desperate to 
reclaim his title but because he finds his successor interesting.

It's a preoccupation the green-haired pirate could honestly do without. Mihawk's far too intelligent 
and observant, and given the time and opportunity, he's likely to start cobbled together the scraps 
of information he's acquired during his travels and previous visits and recognizing them as puzzle 
pieces to the larger picture.
I don't know what the hell he'd say if he knew. Probably nothing, but then I guess he wouldn't need to because he'd probably just fucking stand there and stare at me with those creepy yellow eyes. Radiating chilly disappointment and judgment without a single word.

Weak. He probably wouldn't say it, but he'd be thinking it and I'd see it in his eyes and that would be enough. He wouldn't even need to open his mouth.

"I probably shoulda asked if they wanted to stay here tonight and go back in the morning," Luffy admits after they've finally successfully hustled two sleepy-eyed children off to bed, tucked them in and retired to their own room. "But I didn't know where they'd sleep and I, uh, figured you'd be happier if they left instead of hanging around longer."

"Mmm. Can you imagine though?" Zoro snorts. "That pretentious bastard trying to cram himself and that big-ass sword into one of the box hammocks in the men's quarters?"

He scowls down at the open fly of his trousers. "Shit. I never got around to bugging Nami for her sewing kit so I can actually wear these without worrying about the damn things ending up around my ankles while I'm walking across the lawn deck."

"Lemme see." The captain reaches out to give either side of his waistband a curious tug and tries not to laugh when it's immediately clear the button can't reach the loop even when the older pirate makes a futile attempt to suck in his gut. "I dunno- they seem kinda like they're too tight to just fall off even if you don't fasten 'em."

"Okay, okay- leggo, I can't breathe."

Tilting his head slightly, Luffy surveys him with some consternation. "… Zoro, did you get bigger since this morning? Or even since a few hours ago? 'Cause-"

The swordsman flushes as his lover wrestles his pants further down his thighs to better explore his belly, dropping to his knees to peer intently at his lower abdomen. "Oi. OI, will you quit it? That's not-"

"You don't just look bigger- Zoro, you feel bigger too!"

"I told you," Zoro growls, swatting at the younger pirate's hands. "Beans fucking give you gas. And I'm not just talking about the kind you eat either. Oi, will you QUIT POKING AT ME?"

"You mean you're-" Luffy's suddenly laughing too hard to make much sense, although the words that slip out sound suspiciously like "full of gas and babies" as he wraps both arms around his first mate's hips and muffles hysterical giggles against his stomach. "Z-Zoro, does that mean- will you fart, if I hug you?"

"Don't you dare. Oi- Luffy- I SAID NO."

The rubber man doesn't let go, but – to Zoro's vast relief – he does stop squeezing and, when his laughter eventually dies down, leans against him with a sigh and murmurs something so low that the older pirate almost doesn't catch it. "- you."

"Hmm?"

"I said thank you," his captain repeats, sitting back on his heels to look up at him while one hand continues affectionately petting his side. "For going through all this again. The throwing up, I mean, and the gas and the itching and all the other nasty stuff that I know drives you nuts. If I
knew it was gonna be so bad this time, I don't know if I woulda-

"Sencho." He sighs, no longer concerned with the trousers that are slowly slipping down his thighs because Luffy's regarding him with solemn, searching eyes. "I told you. I'm not doing this just 'cause you asked me for another baby. I'm doing it 'cause I WANTED to give you one."

And that's one thing Mihawk, smart as he is, will never be able to wrap his brain around, he thinks as he watches the smile brightening his lover's upturned face. I'm not doing this for the Kaizoku or even for my captain. I'm doing it for Luffy, and I'm doing it for me. I'm doing it for US.

Hokey and cliché and idiotically romantic as it might sound, and although he'd never willingly admit to something so incredibly sappy, he's doing it for love.

xxx

Neither the first mate nor his captain are particularly surprised to spend a long and rather exhausting night being repeatedly startled awake when Zoro's subconscious insists on dredging up an array of dreams that leave him shaken and wringing with sweat each time he flails upright in bed, teeth tightly clenched to prevent himself from crying out. After the fifth or sixth time, they give up on sleep entirely and resort to lying curled in each other's arms, staring into the darkness until they hear their crewmates begin to move about on the lawn deck overhead.

As a result, the swordsman's groggy and disoriented as well as queasy when he precedes Luffy through the hatch opening and emerges onto the grass to discover another obnoxiously familiar face waiting for them topside.

Damn it. I was hoping it'd take him another day or two at least.

Chopper's spent the last week babbling enthusiastically about his upcoming opportunity to discuss the latest medical journal publications with Trafalgar Law, but Zoro's been regarding the Heart pirates' arrival with a mixture of uneasy anticipation and dread.

Like the rubber man who's just bounded over to greet their new guest, the first mate's been anxiously albeit quietly awaiting proof that his illness two weeks ago passed without causing any complications for their unborn progeny. The continuing symptoms have been reassuring despite their disagreeable nature, and his suddenly expanding waistline is another positive sign that all's well, but until he actually sees that damn scan with his own eye-

If it wasn't for that weird shit with the kid's heartbeat…

While he's still eager for reassurance, he's also exhausted, and dealing with Law's smug attitude so soon after his swordsmaster's cold reproach and Shanks' unwelcome news leaves him silently grinding his teeth and almost wishing they could save this drama for another day.

His reluctance doesn't go unnoticed. Luffy's forced to practically peel Sabo off the swordsman's leg after they decide to leave the toddler aboard the Sunny with the rest of the crew, and Ace unexpectedly insists on holding his hand- not a request but a demand that leaves him slightly taken aback, because the seven-year-old's long since taken to eye-rolling and steady grumbling if prompted to do the same by either of his fathers.

When Zoro automatically offers his left even though it forces him to reach awkwardly across his own body, his son fixes him with a surprisingly mature and exasperated glare and takes his un-proffered right without hesitation. "Come on, Dad, before he changes his mind and says I can't go on the sub with you."
"Just don't touch anything," the surgeon remarks mildly as he passes them to take the lead with their own doctor practically treading on his heels. "And, yes, Mugiwara-san, that goes for you too. I hope I don't need to remind you what happened last time."

"Yeah, how about we NOT set off any alarms this time," Zoro remarks somewhat testily, rubbing the bridge of his nose with the hand Ace isn't clutching. "I've already got a goddamn migraine, and I don't know about anybody else, but I'd rather not get trampled by panicking polar bears in jumpsuits."

"My crew won't disturb us- as long as your captain keeps his hands to himself and doesn't get the sudden urge to yank any plugs or push any shiny red buttons."

*Sometimes I swear I don't know who's worse. Sabo- or Luffy.*

Law ushers them into the medical bay and immediately takes charge with a casual yet expectant demeanor that's both heartening and bloody aggravating. "Roronoa-san, lie down. The stomach band can stay if you pull it up but you need to drop your trousers to mid-thigh. Privacy sheet's on the table. Mugiwara-san, don't wander off. Kid-

"Ace."

"Right. Ace, don't let him touch anything."

"Oi," Luffy protests, offended. "I was just looking."

Ace stifles a giggle. Zoro snorts.

From the brim of his hat where it's been perching comfortably, Chopper produces the Doppler Den Den, which exchanges a long-suffering glance of boredom with its slightly larger comrade who's resting on a nearby rolling cart.

"Alright, let's see what's going on with our little bug-eyed friend here." The surgeon gives the mollusk a brief inspection before dropping it onto Zoro's exposed belly. Crossing his arms, he steps back to watch the animal work, making room for his fellow physician to scale the stool beside the table. "Sometimes the wiring in the speakers they attach to these guys goes bad and-

"THERE." Chopper states triumphantly as the steady quick-paced beat emitting from the straight-faced snail suddenly goes staccato. "THAT's what I keep hearing."

Law listens, head slightly tilted and brow furrowed. "That's not the speakers. There's no static and-

"It's gone again."

"Alright, let's take a look and see what's going on in there." The Heart captain carefully plucks the Den Den free, prompting a moue of revulsion from his patient as the snail's broad foot peels away from his lower stomach. "Oi, don't wipe that off. The more mucus, the better the readings I'm gonna get."

"Easy for you to say," Zoro mutters, twitching involuntarily as the larger, heavier snail's lowered onto his belly. "It feels like somebody frickin' sneezed all over me."

"It does look like snot," Ace agrees, wrinkling his nose.

"Well, that snot improves conductivity. Hang on, let me bring this into focus on the monitor here,
and then I'll bring it up on the- oh."

Chopper utters a faint squeak that's barely audible as his clipboard hits the tile floor with a loud clatter.

"What do you mean, oh?" Zoro demands, hand flailing out to yank the screen towards him. "What the hell's wrong with-"

His ability to read ultrasound scans hasn't necessarily improved since the last time he got a good look at one, but the technology to which Law has access certainly has, even in the last year, and as soon as the Straw Hats' first mate registers what's causing the doctors' comically similar expressions of surprise, he's scrambling for freedom before the Heart pirate surgeon can snap at him to be more careful with the delicate electronic equipment, nearly throwing the startled Den Den to the floor in his haste to accost his equally stunned captain. "No. NO. No fucking way. NO. Luffy- I can't- WE CAN'T-"

Luffy stares at his swordsman, flabbergasted, as he struggles to process what he glimpsed on the screen for mere seconds before the older pirate rolled off the table and seized him by the lapels.

"Of course, OF COURSE!" Chopper's squealing, sounding elated and terrified all at once. "This explains so many things I didn't- this explains EVERYTHING!"

"Zoro- Zoro, it's gonna be okay. We'll figure it out." The rubber man promises weakly, hoping he's right, because while he's feeling pretty shocked himself, the other pirate looks as though he might be about to suffer heart failure.

"Figure it out? FIGURE IT OUT? I agreed to ONE MORE. I said- I said yes to ONE MORE. ONE. As in SINGULAR. I-" Releasing the captain he's been bodily shaking to emphasize his words, Zoro gropes for the edge of the table he vacated a few moments before, face paling. "I need to fucking sit down."

"What?" Ace demands. He's been watching his parents with growing alarm, and he's now looking from one to the other as though they've both gone mad. "O-Oi, why are you guys freaking out?"

"I think somebody got a little more than he bargained for this time around." Law sighs. "Roronoa, must we seriously go through this same goddamn song and dance every time we run into each other. Get your ass back on that table so your tanuki and I can determine where the embryos implant- OI, Mugiwara, help him get his head between his knees and make sure he can reach that waste basket if he needs it. I don't want vomit on my nice clean floor."

xxx

It takes a few minutes, but eventually they cajole Zoro into lying back down and coax the disgruntled snail into cooperating for a second, far more thorough scan.

"Oh my god," the swordsman says in a strangled voice, after staring incredulously at the screen for some time while Chopper and Law hold an exchange full of so much medical jargon that ninety-percent of it flies right over his and Luffy's heads. Not that they're listening anyway. "They look like- peas. They look like f-fucking peas in a fucking pea pod."

Clutching his hand, the captain repeats him in a tone that's dazed but sounding more and more excited. "Peas. PEAS. Zoro- you said we had a bean, but we've got PEAS!"

He bends lower, eyes still glued to the flickering image, to rub his cheek against his first mate's knuckles and the fingers in his grasp squeeze back almost painfully tight.
Wow, I just- wow. WOW.

"They look kinda funny," Ace pipes up from where he's wedged himself in under Luffy's arm so he can see too. "Their heads are really big."

"YOU look funny. YOUR head's really big," the rubber man retorts, using his free hand - the one that Zoro's not threatening to wrench right off his wrist - to noogie the seven-year-old.

"Dad!"

"O-Oi," Zoro protests as their roughhousing jostles him in the side. "Will you guys watch what you're-"

"Oh!" Ace exclaims. He backs into Luffy, eyes widening at the sight of the disturbance they've inadvertently caused; on the screen, one of the two small shapes is wriggling and kicking furiously.

"Did we scare him? Her. Umm, it?"

"Oops. I don't know- that looks more like mad than scared to me."

"You'd be pissed too if you were minding your own business and somebody poked you in the ear," Zoro snorts, sounding a great deal more like himself, much to his captain's relief, as he rubs his midsection. "Oi oi, settle down in there. You're gonna freak out your …uh- goddamn it, Chopper, are you SURE you can't tell if they're girls or boys yet?"

"I know what I think they each look like right now, but that doesn't mean they might not look like something else in a few weeks!"

There's another sudden flurry of activity, drawing everyone's attention back to the display, where the first baby's redoubled his or her efforts, squirming insistently until he or she's turned completely in the opposite direction, head down and mostly blocking the other fetus from view.

"... it's ONLY two, right?" The green-haired swordsman asks with the utmost reluctance, as though he's afraid of the answer. "I mean, there's not ANOTHER ONE in there, hiding behind my liver or something?"

Law utters a derisive snort. "Lucky for you, Roronoa, not everything comes in sets of three."

He crosses his arms, studying the monitor with narrowed eyes. "Although how the hell you conceived multiples this time, when we haven't even figured out how you managed singletons..."

"Exactly!" Chopper exclaims. "If we didn't know for sure that Luffy's somehow involved, I'd almost be convinced he's-"

"-ever consider donating your body to science after you die?"

"Oi, that shit about cacti budding doesn't leave this room or the cook's never gonna let me hear the end of it, and Law, so help me..."

The surgeon smirks. "Can't blame me for trying. You know I'd love to get my hands on your internal organs. In a strictly medical curiosity-satisfying sense, of course."

"Law better keep his hands to himself," Luffy mutters before his first mate can respond, eyeing the Heart captain judgmentally as though expecting him to produce scalpels from both shirt cuffs at a moment's notice. When the surgeon shrugs and returns to comparing notes with Chopper, however, it's not long before his attention's pulled back to the swordsman who's resumed staring at the
monitor with an air of exhausted resignation.

Zoro looks so tired... first all that stuff yesterday with Shanks and Hawkeyes, and now this morning we find out-

Twins. TWINS. He swallows, fingers brushing past the Den Den to the small swelling in his lover's lower stomach as he tries to wrap his brain around the idea that there's not just one but two new lives tucked inside. Pressing down gingerly, he kneads abdominal muscle that his fingertips are finally registering, now that it's not cramped tight from the older pirate's determined efforts to avoid vomiting, is losing tone and density to make way for the belly expanding beneath them.

On the screen, the visible baby reacts to the contact by batting and kicking reflexively at what looks like one of Sanji's sponge cakes but what the rubber man guesses is actually Zoro's insides before rolling out of the way to reveal its sibling, which stretches lazily, and there they are again, now curled neatly head-to-rump.

One. Two.

"Can you feel it when they wiggle around like that?" Ace asks curiously, leaning his elbows on the table so he can peer at his father's stomach as though searching for signs of movement.

"Yeah- well, I think so? I thought I was imagining it at first last night, since it seemed really early," the swordsman admits, grimacing at Luffy's expression of disappointment. "Sorry, Sencho. Would've told you yesterday but... we got, uh, kind of sidetracked and-

"There was a lot of stuff going on," the Straw Hat captain finishes, giving the hand he's still clapping a reassuring squeeze. "It's not just big bubbles of gas or something though? It's really-?"

"He probably just recognized it sooner this time because he knew what to expect," Chopper assures them. "-and because two babies take up more room than one."

"Yeah, about that... how the hell's there gonna be enough room for both kids in there?" Zoro casts a somewhat dubious glance towards his own midsection, prompting a sniff of disdain from the snail still perched on him.

"Ah, well..."

"There's good news and there's bad news. The good news is that according to my- sorry-" Law corrects himself at a muffled cough from his shorter colleague. "-according to OUR calculations based on what's visible on the scan, you're carrying two apparently healthy fetuses. Each with its' own umbilical cord, so there's no chance of twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome, and both are attached in locations which shouldn't do them or you any harm."

"And the bad news?" The first mate asks cautiously.

"Even though I'd technically already consider this a high risk pregnancy given that you're, well, male and completely lacking the right physiology, hence the increased likelihood of placental abruption, which was the problem you had with him-" The surgeon gestures casually towards Ace, who blinks. "-the fact that you're carrying two fetuses means twice the potential complications. Your circulatory, digestive and immune systems are all working overtime, trying to support the three of you."

"The three of-" Zoro's abruptly lost so much color, he's nearly the shade of starched parchment.

"Oi, Roronoa, quit freaking out about the numbers and listen to me," Law barks, snapping his
fingers near the swordsman's ear and nodding in satisfaction when his actions earn him a glare as the blood floods back into his patient's face. "You need to start paying closer attention to how you're feeling. You get light-headed or dizzy, you need to sit the hell down and get your head between your legs or as close as you can manage, because if your brain decides it's out for the count, you're going down no matter how much you fight it, and nobody- including your captain here- is gonna have an easy time keeping you from hitting the floor like a ton of bricks."

"I caught him okay when he passed out the other week," Luffy challenges.

"That's great if you plan on sticking to him like a shadow and following his every bloody move, but I think he might have something to say about that-"

"Damn right, I do."

"-and in a few months there's a good chance he'll just take you down with him and flatten your scrawny ass, because whatever weight he put on with that one." Jabbing a finger at their oldest child. "-or with your other kid- is gonna be nothing compared to this."

Turning towards Zoro, who's gone from indignation to dismayed disgust. "And speaking of weight, you need to eat more. Whatever your tanuki worked out with your cook is sufficient for you and one fetus, but definitely not you and two, and he says you're already off to a slow start thanks to the hyperemesis gravidarum, so you've got a lot of catching up to do unless you want those two coming out weighing less than your son here did at delivery."

"I- wait, less than-" The green-haired pirate struggles upright, pushing away the Den Den and not noticing when it retreats sulking to the corner of the table because he's too busy regarding Law with alarm. "Ace was freaking TINY. Are you saying they're gonna be SMALLER?"

Luffy, who's been privately entertaining thoughts of what his lover might look like near full term in another twenty-four or twenty-five weeks, feels the bemused smile slipping from his face. While not much scares him, the idea of caring for not one but two babies each weighing less than their prematurely-delivered firstborn is downright terrifying. "H-How small?"

"That depends entirely on whether your swordsman here starts eating enough, stays hydrated and doesn't end up on a goddamn saline drip in your infirmary again." The surgeon nods to Chopper.

"If we keep a close eye on everything and there aren't any complications…" The reindeer hedges, shuffling his notes nervously and stammering when Zoro makes an impatient "go on" gesture with the arm their captain's not gripping. "The- the average birth weight for twins is slightly over five pounds... delivered at an average of thirty-five weeks."

"You said average," Luffy blurts before anyone else can speak. "That means they could weigh more though, right? And stay in there longer?"

"Yes, but he's concerned about Roronoa-san's blood pressure. Premature labor's not really an issue- he'd need a uterus for us to worry about controlling contractions- but you'll still need to monitor him closely for signs of pre-eclampsia."

"What-"

"Condition involving hypertension- that's the high blood pressure- plus excess protein in the urine. Shit can eventually lead to seizures or worse if it's not treated, and an emergency c-section's the only cure if that happens, so-" Law gives a helpless shrug. "Guess you're gonna be pissing in a lot of cups."
"Wonderful." Zoro bends forward to rub his face into his hands. "What else."

"Let your tanuki here know if you notice excessive swelling in your hands or feet. Frequent severe headaches. Rapid weight gain."

"Hold on- you said you WANT Zoro to eat a lot and get fatter though, so how do we know if it's this pee-clampy- ow!" Luffy releases his first mate's elbow to rub his throbbing shin.

"He said gain weight, you bastard, not get fat." The swordsman grumbles, voice muffled by his palms. "Not that there's gonna be much of a difference, because- jeez, even if they only end up weighing what Ace weighed… that's like eleven freaking pounds of-"

Raising his head, he shoots his captain a look of sheer despair. "I'm gonna be fucking huge."

"Yeah, probably."

"… shit."

"…"

"Sencho, I-"

"Oi, Zoro, don't be stupid," Luffy scolds, ignoring his lover's sputters of embarrassed protest as he swoops in and strives to kiss the chagrin from the older pirate's flushed face, much to the amusement of their surrounding audience. "I'm gonna love you no matter how big you get, even if it's the size of a sea king."

Chapter End Notes

This is what happens when you let your role-playing partner make important decisions regarding plot and utter those fateful words: "Yeah, anything you want and I'll make it canon."

I lvoe you, man, so fuckign much but omsdgf I also WANT TO STRANGLE YOU.
I'd respond to every single one of your reviews if I had the time, not to mention the energy, but I absolutely had to mention EmiEma here because- seriously, you're twin sisters, you're both One Piece fans and you're both reading my fic. HOLY CRAP. And then there's the coworkers who discovered they had a mutual love for One Piece and that they'd both read my junk, and who started reading this fic together (and sending me horrible song recommendations- you know who you are, lmao, and I hope you caught the lyric reference in the previous chapter). Seriously though. HOW DO THESE THINGS HAPPEN. I NEED TO KNOW.

Lunch is already being served by the time the small troupe of Straw Hat pirates leave the submarine and enter the Sunny's dining hall to find themselves the recipients of a very enthusiastic greeting from the toddler who's been impatiently awaiting their return.

Zoro masks a grimace of discomfort as he caves to Sabo's repeated demands of "uhp uhp" and feels the ligaments in his lower belly tug sharply when he straightens with the one-year-old in his arms. It's a discomfort that he recognizes immediately from his previous pregnancies, but he's dismayed to discover it's making itself known this early.

Shit, Luffy's probably right about that whole big-as-a-sea-king thing. I bet I'm gonna be Laboon-sized before this is over.

Ace, practically vibrating with excitement because they've agreed to let him break the news to the rest of the crew, goes bounding for an open chair, but Luffy hangs back despite his obvious interest in the artfully-composed platters resting on the tabletop, hovering by his swordsman's elbow until the older pirate reluctantly turns over their younger son.

"I got him," the captain states firmly, balancing Sabo on one hip so he can touch his first mate's lower back, guiding him over to join the others. "Zoro needs to eat."

Which might be true, but it doesn't change the fact that what Zoro wants most at the moment doesn't involve sitting down to a meal with their curious nakama but rather bolting for the quiet and solitude of their private quarters, crawling into bed and hiding under the covers while he sorts through the jumbled chaos inside his head. He's learned enough in the last twenty-four hours to leave him mentally reeling, but this most recent revelation is currently overriding his previous concerns about whether or not the Marines are in possession of footage placing him in Impel Down near the time of its collapse.

Twins. For fuck's sake, what are we gonna do with TWINS? He wonders despairingly as he takes a seat- and immediately finds himself under the scrutiny of the redhead peering down the table at him.

"So did you find out what you're having?" Nami asks brightly, and the swordsman's briefly too tongue-tied to answer because even though he knows the navigator's referring to the sex of the single child she and his other crewmates believe he's carrying, for a moment he can't think of...
anything but numbers.

"T-" He nearly chokes on his own spit and covers his confusion with a coughing fit, amazed when neither Luffy nor Ace burst into laughter at his near verbal blunder. "Too be honest, no. And Chopper wouldn't tell us. Said he wanted to wait until the next scan."

"Fourteen weeks is really too soon to accurately distinguish between external male and female genitalia," their doctor explains as he claims a chair. "The only way to know for sure would be to perform an amniocentesis, but I don't know if I’m comfortable with the risks of doing that procedure, and I doubt Zoro would agree to it anyway."

"Oh?"

"Well, it involves taking a tiny sample of amniotic fluid via a very long, thin needle inserted through the abdominal wall and-"

"Forget that." Zoro says before the reindeer can finish, blanching and resisting the urge to wrap both arms snugly around his middle, because the idea of what Chopper's suggesting makes him want to squirm in his seat. "You can keep your needles- I don't need to know that bad."

"Yeah, besides we're just gonna find out at the next scan anyway," Luffy agrees, favoring his first mate with a brilliant grin as he pops Sabo into his highchair. "Shishishi, 'cause Zoro gets another one in a couple weeks."

"So soon? I hope everything's alright." Nami's smile has faded somewhat, tempered by concern. Across the table, Ace is practically writhing with the effort of containing himself long enough for Usopp, Franky and Brook to find their seats, hands gripping the chair beneath him as though he might explode from it at any moment.

What the hell's he waiting for? Jeez, just tell 'em and get it over with already!

Luffy pauses from fiddling with Sabo's harness straps - a necessity to prevent the toddler throwing himself free in his eagerness to get both hands on the food awaiting him - to duck down and nuzzle Zoro affectionately, one hand stealing into his lap to pet his belly. "Everything's fine. Everything’s MORE than fine."

There's an emphasis in that statement meant solely, he knows, for him, and he can't help flushing slightly because while the prospect of the next few months and then what comes after has left him feeling completely unnerved, it's clear the rubber man's already wholeheartedly embraced their situation. Only when their younger son starts loudly demanding the fruit tray he can't reach does his captain stop fussing over him, although he's still grinning enormously while he passes the child a mikan wedge.

He's so damn happy. I don't know how we're gonna do this, but he's-

That weird sensation not unlike a butterfly's wings brushing his bare skin, only on the inside, interrupts the swordsman's rumination and he sits up a bit straighter in his chair.

I wonder which one of you just did that, he muses. Probably the one who kept bouncing all over the place on the scan. And Sencho says that shit's not supposed to be hereditary…

He supposes he should eat something – maybe the kid's so antsy because she-he-it's hungry – but the thought of consuming hot food right now's more than a little repulsive; his stomach's doing that nauseous roiling thing again. Which both doctors have warned him is likely to last all the way into
the third trimester, he reflects gloomily as he searches the table for something unlikely to send him rushing outside, because the cook will probably threaten to murder him if he throws up on the dining hall floor again.

There's a plate of cheese, crackers and cold cuts nearby that doesn't look quite as repugnant, however, and as soon as Luffy realizes he's peering at it, an out-flung arm's yanking it closer and sending hors d'oeuvre flying in all directions.

"Oi oi, shitty Gomu!" Sanji protests as he approaches, shifting a platter to one hand so he can snatch a small triangle-shaped wedge of cheese from midair before it ends up on the floor. "You're destroying my arrangement!"

"Well, we're just gonna eat it anyway. Who cares if it's squashed or not?" The captain points out, pushing the now disorganized mess towards Zoro, who hesitantly selects a few pieces. "It still tastes the same and Chopper and Law both say Zoro's gotta-"

"I know, I know- Marimo's eating for two," the cook grumbles, reluctantly backing down because their first mate's gone from cautiously picking at the contents of the plate to demolishing them upon discovering that his first tentative bites aren't going to make him sick. "But you're still-"

"THREE," Ace shouts- and immediately ducks so low that only his eyes and the top of his head are visible above the table when he realizes everyone's turned to stare at him.

Oh god.

There's a long, stunned silence during which the crew continues gazing blankly at the seven-year-old, with the exception of the captain who's beaming radiantly, the swordsman who's contemplating sliding under the table, and the doctor who already knows what's going on. And Sabo, who's more interested in the pulpy chunk of fruit he's clutching than why his older brother's biting back hysterical giggles.


"Dad's eating for three." Index finger pointing towards his father's chest. "One-" Angling downwards to indicate the right side of his midsection. "Two-" Shifting slightly to indicate the left. "Three."

Zoro slouches in his seat, shoving another piece of cheese into his mouth and refusing to answer the unspoken question evident in his nakama's startled faces and widening eyes, but his reddening cheeks and Luffy's rather smug little "nee hee" is acknowledgment enough to cause pandemonium.

"YOHOHOHOHOHOHOHO!"

"Oh my. Well, that certainly explains quite a few things…"

"Oh man, bros, that's so super but- WOW."

"TWINS?" Usopp demands. "Really? You're not pulling our legs?"

"… coming from you, of all people-"

"Oi oi oi-"

"Ah, congratulations, Zoro-san, Luffy-san."
"T-Two? You're having-" Nami breaks off, expression contorting into a bizarre conglomeration of horror and delight. "I- I'll need to completely revise our budget for next- IF THERE'S TWO, AT LEAST ONE OF THEM BETTER BE A GIRL."

Upon hearing the redhead, Ace makes a startled noise of protest around the filled sweet bun he's just bitten into and begins chewing furiously.

"Holy shit," Sanji breathes, dropping into the unclaimed chair beside their first mate and staring with unfeigned awe at the slight convexity beneath the green-haired pirate's haramaki. "Marimo, you realize- you guys are gonna have FOUR kids?"

Zoro offers the cook a tight half-smile that more resembles a grimace of pain. "The thought occurred to me, yeah."

"Wait- WAIT. What if one IS a girl? What if they're BOTH girls? Am I still gonna have to share my room with them?" Ace demands, casting anxious glances at both his parents. "Dad- Dad, I don't wanna share my room with girls- that's just weird!"

"Fuck, I didn't even think about-" Rooting through the heap of crackers and rolled slices of meat sitting before him, the swordsman occupies himself with searching for another piece of cheese in hopes that no one notices how badly shaken he's starting to feel. "Sencho, he's right; how are we gonna- no matter what these two end up being, we can't cram all f-four of them in the same room."

So much for not letting anybody see how much I'm freaking out but- shit- SHIT. Jinbei joining us and now finding out it's gonna be TWO more people instead of just one- that brings the crew to fourteen and- NEARLY HALF IS-

At some point- somehow- he's gone from a lone wandering swordsman and bounty hunter to one of two fathers in a family of six, and with that thought, he can't help recalling Mihawk's words and his own lurking fear that one day the life he's unexpectedly made for himself is going to come crashing down.

That tight-chested sensation's back, making it difficult to breathe and twisting his stomach into a painful knot that instinctively prompts him to wrap an arm around his middle, abandoning the half-nibbled cracker he's been clutching.

Sanji's now eyeing him with alarm. "O-Oi, you alright? You're not gonna puke, are you?"

"I'm-" He tries to say "fine" but he's thinking "tired, freaked out, overwhelmed, fucking pick one" and what comes out of his mouth is a tangle of gibberish.

"Oh shit- hang on, I've got an empty dish pan you can- just not on the table!"

Zoro inhales deeply through his nose, belching low in the back of his throat – one of the few methods he's discovered that's actually effective at fending off impending nausea – and snorts as he watches his crewmates relax when they realize he's not going to vomit. "Nah, I'm okay. I'm just- it's been a really interesting day. And for the second freaking one in a row too."

He scans the tabletop, locates the half-eaten cracker he dropped and pops it into his mouth, poking it into one cheek with his tongue so he can speak around it. "Think I'm gonna go take a nap. Didn't get a whole lot of sleep last night. Sencho can tell you why."

"Oi oi, wait- did Zoro eat enough? 'Cause Law said-

"Luffy, he just inhaled nearly a whole pound of cheese," Sanji interrupts, surveying the decimated
platter and raising an eyebrow when the swordsman snags the last few pieces on his way out of the chair. "Alright, never mind the nearly. What gives, Marimo? You don't even like that kind."

"I don't," Zoro grumbles in agreement as he heads for the door. "I hate it, and I've got no idea why the hell I'm eating it."

"Your body wants the calcium and the protein," Chopper calls after him. "Listen to it!"

Seeing the curious looks his nakama are giving each other, the doctor turns his attention back to the table. "The babies' skeletal systems are beginning to develop actual bone mass, and they're also starting to put on more weight, so he's getting cravings for certain foods."

"You mean it's not Zoro that wants the cheese- it's them?" Luffy asks, glancing up from the apple slice Sabo's attempting to pry from his hand. "Eeh, that's so weird! It's like they're telling him what they wanna eat!"

Chopper giggles. "It doesn't really work that way; normally babies just take what they need and it's up to the mother- or in this case, Zoro- to replenish the nutrients or vitamins to keep from ending up deficient."

"Jeez, Reindeer-bro, you make it sound like Haramaki-bro's totin' around a pair of squinty-eyed vampires instead of a couple of cute little bambinos."

"Well, a fetus does technically behave like a parasite," the doctor explains, apparently mistaking the way his nakama's nose is wrinkling for confusion instead of recognizing the disgust it's meant to convey. "While the umbilical cord doesn't provide a direct connection to the maternal body, the placenta allows for the transfer of."

Nami utters a moan of desperation. "Chopper, please. Not while we're trying to eat."

"I find the human body fascinating." Robin states complacently, smiling as she folds a slice of ham between a small scrap of cheese that their swordsman overlooked and a cracker.

"... why am I not surprised."

"Yohohoho, I wish I had Robin-san's cast-iron stomach!"

"Dad?" Ace, who's decided the conversation's getting further and further from his original concern, reaches out to tug his father's sleeve. "Can I have my own room again? Like I used to, before Sabo got here?"

"Is the ship big enough for another one?" Luffy scratches his head, turning to look at Franky, who shrugs and makes an indecisive seesawing motion with one hand. "Or maybe you could move to the men's quarters, if you want? 'Cause somebody's usually on watch and Jinbei sleeps on the sofa, so there's always at least a couple of open bunks."

"Would I get my own locker?" The seven-year-old asks immediately.

Usopp exchanges a glance with their other male crew members. "Maybe he could have Zoro's old one? I've been using it to store my art supplies but I can move all that stuff."

"Fine by me."

"Yohoho, why not?"
"Sounds like a plan to me, Nose-bro."

"I certainly have no objections."

"That's awesome! Oh, but-" Ace hesitates, then scrambles up to whisper in Luffy's ear. "Can I…"

The rubber man listens and then laughs. "Well, yeah! Zoro would probably get mad if you didn't."

"Okay." His son settles back into his seat, evidently satisfied- and then hops right back up, snatching a second sweet bun and then a third from the heaping pile on the platter near the table's center. "I'm gonna go see if Dad's asleep yet."

"Oi, if you see Trafalgar out there, let him know I've got a few onigiri set aside if he's interested. I'd say he's welcome to bring the rest of his crew aboard, but- I'm not sure if we should be feeding half the Grand Line now that we know the shitty swordsman's toting around multiple moss balls." Sanji rubs his chin. "And speaking of food, I better take another look at our supplies, make sure we don't need to hit the nearest marketplace sooner than I planned."

"Luffy," Nami asks once the door's swung shut behind Ace. "What did Zoro mean when he said you could explain yesterday?"

The captain, who's paused from tending Sabo to cram his own mouth full of sweet buns as well as meatballs snatched from the steaming dish at the table's center, nearly chokes. He swallows forcefully, wiping sauce from his chin with his sleeve and ignoring Sanji's soft grumbling about his lack of table manners because his mind's racing, searching for the right words. "When Shanks showed up with Hawkeyes yesterday, he told us about the stuff with the government sneaking around, but he- uh- he said people are talking about the Impel Down thing again too."

His crew hushes, understanding stealing over their faces- with the exception of Jinbei, who's looking back and forth between them. The fishman frowns. "Luffy-san?"

Dropping into his chair, Luffy takes a deep breath. "You probably noticed... Zoro acts kinda weird sometimes. I mean, he's always been pretty quiet and sorta grouchy, but you know how he gets really twitchy around people we don't know? And super pissy and freaked out whenever the Marines show up?"

"Ah... yes, I suppose I have noticed he can be a bit, err, overzealous? It was my understanding that he's always been particularly concerned about the children."

"That's part of it," Sanji says slowly. "But it's more than him just being overprotective with the kids. Luffy, did something happen? Because those damn rumors have been flying around for years and nobody's paid them any mind."

The rubber man leans his elbows on the table, rubbing his face into his hands in a gesture not unlike the one his swordsman made earlier this morning. When he speaks again, his voice is pitched so low that his nakama find themselves straining to hear him. "Shanks told us that some guy thinks he found pictures of Zoro."

"Shit."

"How did-"

"Pictures of WHAT, exactly?" Nami demands, bristling with anger as she rises from her seat, fists clenched and trembling on the table before her.
"Shanks didn't say," Luffy admits, hands dropping from his face. He lowers his eyes, studying the weave in the tablecloth with glum disinterest. "But Zoro thinks- well, you can probably guess what Zoro thinks."

"The prison surveillance system," Robin says softly. "They'd be monitoring everything from the hallways to the cells themselves."

"Wait," Jinbei breaks in, before anyone else can respond to the historian's remark. "Are you saying Zoro-san was actually-?"

"In that shitty hellhole? Yeah," Sanji mutters. "-and it damn near killed him."

The whale shark isn't counting out loud, but they can see the dawning realization in his furrowed brow and narrowing eyes. "And Ace?"

"Zoro kept him safe until we got there, got both of them out. But he lost his fingers and-" Luffy bites his lower lip, the muscles in his neck and shoulders tensing as he clenches his fingers into fists, unable to continue even though his swordsman's not present.

"Haramaki-bro got messed up pretty bad protecting our little bro. We got both of 'em back though, obviously."

"Just sort of… walked in the front door." Chopper adds, smiling weakly.

"... bastards didn't know what hit 'em." Sanji mutters.

"I never knew. The World Government always said-"

"The thing about sea kings getting stirred up for some weird reason and tearing the place down? Yeah, they got it partly right. Only it was a giant squid and THAT-" Usopp slumps back in his chair, gesturing down the table to Luffy. "-was the weird reason. It'd make for one hell of a story if it wasn't for-"

"Zoro didn't sleep too good last night," the captain mumbles. "He kept waking up yelling and flopping around and stuff. He didn't say, but I think he was dreaming about- all that stuff again."

"Part of it's probably the hormones and being stressed about the baby," Chopper speculates, then winces and corrects himself. "Babies. He had a really rough time with dreams in the beginning with-"

"Sabo. Yeah."

At the sound of his name, the toddler wriggles in his highchair, holding both arms out to Luffy. "Dada?"

The captain immediately tugs the straps loose and pulls his son free so he can hold him tightly, grief and anger-contorted face hidden in his hair. "I wanna do something to make it better but I- I dunno what I should- we can't just go running off to beat up whoever found that stuff, even though I WANT to, 'cause I don't want Zoro or the peas anywhere near 'em. And I think he's really scared about having two kids at the same time, and that's kinda my fault too 'cause if I hadn't kept bugging him about another one-"

"Luffy, there's no way you could've known." Nami assures him gently, sinking back into her seat.

"Mugiwara-bro. Peas?"
"Yeah," the younger pirate agrees, and he's smiling a little despite himself when he raises his head. "Zoro said they looked like peas, 'cause they were all snuggled up next to each other like in a pod thingy."

"Peh?" Sabo inquires thoughtfully, leaning back and reaching up to touch his father's chin.

"Yeah, peas." Luffy agrees, ruffling the one-year-old's hair. "Babies like you but really really little - a lot littler than you - and they're still inside Zoro. Gonna be for a while yet."

The toddler tilts his head, contemplating this, then yawns and sags against the rubber man's chest.

"You sleepy?"

Sabo hums faintly, voice muffled by the fingers which have already found his mouth.

"Wanna nap with Zoro and maybe me and Ace? Yeah? Okay." The captain smiles as his son yawns again and tries to burrow deeper into his arms. He casts a gaze tinged with regret at the food-laden table before shifting it to his crew. "I should probably…"

"Go." The navigator makes shooing motions at him. "Take care of him, take a nap, check on Zoro or whatever you need to do, because I'm sure you guys have a lot to discuss. And I'll make sure Sanji-kun saves you a plate."

"Two plates," Luffy counters. "No, make it three- four? 'Cause Ace is probably gonna be hungry again later and Zoro gotta eat something besides cheese. Right, Chopper? Oh, and-"

He hesitates. "If you think there's anything else Jinbei oughta know… go ahead and tell him. Just-"

I don't really want Zoro or Ace or Sabo around for it. I'm not sure I wanna be around for it either.

"Go," Nami tells him again, more softly this time. "We'll take care of it."

xxx

Nudging the door open with his shoulder, Luffy pokes his head into his and Zoro's quarters and immediately raises a finger to his lips to hush the toddler who's trying to wiggle around in his arms to see where they're going.

His swordsman's sprawled on the bed, not quite lying on his stomach but rather leaning considerably to one side with one leg stretched out straight beneath him and the other bent at the knee and pulled up to prevent his lower belly being squashed against the mattress. Ace is snuggled against the older pirate's back with an arm thrown over his side, but when Luffy deposits Sabo beside him, he rolls over and pulls his sleepy younger brother into a loose embrace.

The captain makes his way around to the other side of the bed and is kicking off his sandals and hanging his hat on the bedpost when he realizes Zoro's awake and watching him through one half-lidded eye.

"Couldn't sleep," his first mate murmurs before he can ask. "Been laying here staring at the damn wall."

Not quite sure how to respond, Luffy squeezes in beside him, hoping he's not going to end up on the floor because the bed's an awfully tight fit with all four of them in it.

Six. There's six of us now, he reminds himself and brings a hand up to touch Zoro's cheek as that
bewildering mix of joy and disbelief and fear washes over him. *I never thought-

"I still can't believe-" The swordsman inhales sharply, reaching for him and wrapping both arms tightly around his neck when he immediately closes the distance between them. "I mean- I'm glad the whole thing with the heartbeat turned out to be this and not something wrong, but-"

*Law said Chopper thought it sounded funny 'cause the Den Den kept picking up the baby that's closer to the front and missing the other one, but every once in a while they moved so we'd hear 'em both at the same time.*

"I never thought it'd be fucking TWINS," Zoro tells him plaintively, and they freeze as their children stir, disturbed by the volume of his voice.

"The look on your face..." Luffy agrees, fingers seeking the hard places in his lover's bare back where the other man's muscles have formed tense knots. A moment later, he pauses, ceasing his careful but determined kneading to offer a tighter and hopefully more comforting hug. "Zoro- Zoro, you're shaking all over..."

Zoro's shivering in his arms as though the temperature of the room's suddenly plummeted, clutching his back and not just nosing his neck but burying his face against it. He licks his lips, and when he eventually speaks, his voice seems as tremulous as the rest of him. "I don't- I don't know if I c-can do this."

Concerned but gratified that his swordsman's willing to confide in him, the younger pirate squeezes harder. "Sure you can. Zoro's probably the strongest person I know; he can do anything."

"Except grow a freaking spine and quit being such a goddamn pansy."

"Oi," Luffy protests. "Zoro's one of the bravest people I know too, so he better stop talking like an idiot."

He nudges Zoro away just enough to fit a hand between them, tracing the lengthy scar dividing his pectorals before moving lower to rub his thumb in smooth little circles in the hollow between his abdomen and hip. "And Zoro's already done a lot of really amazing stuff."

"But not like- this is-"

The captain silences him with a kiss. "I'm not gonna let you do it by yourself though, okay?"

"..."

"You remember that other night? When we talked about having another baby?"

"A baby," Zoro mutters, placing a great deal of emphasis on the singular nature of the first word.

"Shh- just listen, okay? We both said how we need everybody to keep everybody safe, and it's not just one of us that's supposed to do everything." He kisses his first mate again before he's got chance to protest. "Zoro's doing a lot of the work, growing the babies-"

"Goddamn it, Sencho, you make me sound like an incubator."

"-BUT you don't gotta do everything by yourself. 'Cause YOU'RE not by yourself. Right? You got our nakama and-" He kisses Zoro a third time, slow and thorough, with that free hand now cupping his jaw. "-you got me. I'm not going anywhere. Even if I gotta keep changing all of Sabo's dirty diapers and even if you chase me up the mast and threaten to cut my balls off like that other time
and even if you get the size of a house-"

"Oi-"

"-I'm not going anywhere. I'm gonna be right here."

He takes a deep breath, heart starting to pound faster in his chest. "There was something else we talked about and- ... I know you said we're official and all that stuff, and we said we're not gonna do the ring thing 'cause we'd probably lose 'em or break 'em or something, but I wanna-"

Zoro's staring at him, no longer protesting, and he colors slightly under the intensity of that gaze.

"I wanna do something anyway, so you know I'm always gonna-"

I- wow, I did this in my head like a million times and it's still so-

"I wanna show Zoro that I mean it when I tell him I'm not going anywhere and I'm always gonna be his and he's always gonna be mine, whether we have beans or peas or whatever, and Robin told me about this thing she read, 'cause you know how she's always reading and that's how she knows so much stuff and I'd like to do it, if you're okay with that? The thing Robin told me about, I mean, not the reading- although we could do that too if Zoro wants and read stories to Ace and Sabo and the peas and each other, 'cause I think that'd be really great too, but I just, uh- would you maybe wanna marry me for real and make us officially official?"

"I- yeah, yes, okay." Zoro says helplessly, brow slightly furrowed as though his brain's still trying to catch up with his mouth. "Of course I'd- oi, where are you going?"

"I need to find a-" The captain's on his hands and knees, rummaging frantically amidst the pile of boots and coat and trousers heaped on the floor. He straightens up with his swordsman's sash clutched in one hand. "I think Robin said you usually do this with a cord or a piece of rope or something but I think this'll work better- or we could use mine instead? Zoro, which one do you-?"

"Robin said WHAT about rope?" Zoro asks warily from where he's now sitting cross-legged on the bed.

"She said you're supposed to- here, gimmie your hand. No, the other one."

"Does it matter?"

"Beats me, but she said you use your right hand, so gimmie." Luffy insists, seizing the older pirate's damaged extremity when it's hesitantly offered. He drapes the sash over their joined hands. "Okay, now help me tie it."

"WHERE did she read this again? 'Cause it kinda reminds me of the kinky shit in that book we found in Franky's locker that one-"

"Nah, she showed me. It was some big dusty thing with lots of dates and stuff. She said it's called hand-something. Oh, yeah- fasting, like when you can't eat. Handfasting?"

"More like hand-fastening." Zoro wiggles his bound fingers. "Okay, now what?"

"Oh oh oh, I almost forgot; we're supposed to have a witness! Oi. Oi, Ace, wake up and be our witness."

"Nngh... o-oi... Dad? What're you guys doing?"
"I have no idea, but apparently it's important." The first mate shrugs, although he's clearly amused, not to mention curious, because he's watching closely to see what happens next.

"Dada?"

"Ah, you're awake too. Good- we got two witnesses. Okay, so now I guess I'm supposed to tell Zoro how much I love him and how I wanna be together forever and spend the rest of my life with him 'cause he's really important and special and my swordsman and first mate and I need him and don't wanna live without him and stuff like that."

Luffy scratches his head, frowning slightly. "Maybe I shoulda written something down. I'm not really sure how to say all of that stuff without it sounding really-"

"... I'm pretty sure you just did. Say it." Zoro's grip tightens. "And it didn't sound dumb. It- it was good, okay? I love you too. And the kids, including our- uh- peas, and I can't imagine- don't wanna imagine- being without you, any of you, and I'm- I'm glad Robin told you about this and that you wanted to do it."

"Yeah, I dunno how it makes us any more official than we already were, but..." The rubber man trails off because his swordsman is regarding him with quiet intensity.

*My swordsman. Am I supposed to start calling Zoro my-*?

"You guys are really mushy," Ace adds, eyeing them suspiciously through half-closed lids and poking Sabo in the armpit when the toddler, who's been watching the proceedings with thumb in mouth, utters a sleepy giggle and inadvertently slobbers on his shirt. "Please tell me you're not gonna- ugh, no, don't- I don't wanna see you drooling all over each other! C'mon, stop already- that's so gross. Okay, that's it, I'm leaving if you're gonna keep-"

"Oi oi, would you mind- uh- taking your brother with you?"

"DAD. Eww, get a room!"

"This IS our room- unless you want us to go use YOURS."

"NEVERMIND- WE'RE GOING, WE'RE GOING!"

Chapter End Notes

To the lovely anon who sent me the message on tumblr, confessing her/his disappointment with the super vague "okay, sure, we're official" ending in the second chapter? Here's why I couldn't respond; hopefully the events of this chapter are a bit more to your liking!
"You sure you packed up everything you wanted? Though I guess it's not like you can't just run down and- nngh- grab whatever you missed if you need it."

"Yeah, I-" Hearing the faint grunt behind him, Ace whirls. "Ah, Dad, is it okay if you lift stuff like-?"

"I'm fine. OI. I SAID I'M FINE, so leggo before I drop the blasted thing! I'm pregnant, not friggin' handicapped, and besides- it's just old baby clothes. Onesies and sleepers and shit. It's not that heavy."

"… are you sure I shouldn't go get-"

"I'm gonna dump it on your head if you don't move," Zoro growls, his exasperated tone leaving his son wondering if his words were intended as a warning or a threat. "You're as bad as Luffy, fussing over me all the damn time."

Grumbling under his breath, the swordsman shifts the crate he's clutching awkwardly to one side to avoid his swelling middle and attempts to squeeze his way between two closely stacked towers of storage containers.

Oh jeez, Ace thinks, backing away reluctantly. I sure hope he doesn't get-

The eight-year-old winces as his father attempts to turn sideways to fit the load in his arms through the narrow gap and promptly bumps his haramaki-swaddled belly into the pile he's facing, effectively wedging himself in place for a moment or two until he manages to wriggle himself free, cursing.

… stuck.

The boy clamps his lower lip between his teeth to hold back a giggle, but Zoro spots his mouth twitching as he struggles to contain his laughter and flushes, muttering something about some assholes cramming the shit in the storage room way too damn close together.

"There IS an awful lot of crap in here," Ace observes doubtfully, indicating the densely packed space around them. "Does anybody ever throw anything out?"

"Not if Nami thinks we can sell it. Of course, the room used to be twice this size, but we didn't have much choice unless we wanted to keep jamming seven guys and one cranky-ass baby in the men's quarters," the first mate snorts. "Asking Franky to remodel down here was the smartest thing Sencho coulda done. That first night everybody spent without worrying about you screaming your head off at three in frickin' morning? They were so goddamn happy, I thought they were gonna cry."

He sets the crate down so he can reach out and ruffle his son's hair. "Of course, Luffy and I still got to listen to you yell all the time, but at least the cook stopped threatening to kick all three of us overboard."

Ducking away and fastidiously combing his bangs back into place with his fingers, Ace watches the older pirate pry the lid off and set it aside. "Did I cry as much as Sabo?"

"MORE. For being so small, you sure had one big mouth." Zoro surveys the folded clothing he's
uncovered with a sigh, one hand stealing surreptitiously behind him to rub his lower back. "I don't even wanna think about how noisy it's gonna get with these two sharing our room. You're lucky you're moving upstairs- I might end up trying to steal your bunk."

He stretches, arching slightly and groaning. "Shit. I think I woke at least one of 'em up when I ran into that stuff just now, 'cause it feels like I got a freaking fish or something flopping around in there. Probably not gonna be too long 'til you guys can feel it all the time too, from the outside."

"The more your stomach sticks out, the more you-" Ace makes a curving motion with his hand, imitating the disturbing shape that his father's spine is slowly taking, which is readily evident given that he's temporarily discarded his coat in favor of going bare-chested to avoid snagging the fabric or overheating while he's working below-deck.

"Yeah, and it hurts. Sometimes by the end of the day, I think I'm just gonna snap in half."

Cautiously, unsure of whether he's going to find himself chased away or welcomed, the eight-year-old puts out a hand and touches Zoro's distended side, fingertips moving gingerly and then with growing confidence when his actions don't prompt a complaint. "You want me to send Dad down if I see him? Maybe he could give you a back rub?"

"Yeah, and probably end up doing more than that," the swordsman mutters and Ace scrunches up his nose, because while the older pirate's tone sounds annoyed, the smirk that flickers briefly across his face is telling a completely different story.

_Dad's starting to look like he swallowed a cannonball, so how do they even- doesn't his gut get in the way? Ugh, why am I even thinking about them- yuck. Double, triple, quadruple YUCK.

"I'm gonna go-" He gestures vaguely towards the door. _Find something- ANYTHING to do besides think about you guys doing the- what'd I hear Franky call it when he was talking to Brook the other day? Oh, yeah- the "horizontal mambo"…

"Okay, kiddo, see you in a little bit. If not, we'll be there at dinner. Probably."

… or maybe I'll just jump off the back of the ship.

xxx

"Here, lemme just clear this junk out and you can start putting all your own stuff where you want it."

"Oi, you painted our jolly roger, right?" Ace asks curiously as he watches Usopp digging various drawing implements and paint brushes and little jars filled with pigments every color of the rainbow out of the open locker's bottom and sorting them into haphazard piles on the carpet. "I think Dad told me that anyway. I KNOW it wasn't him, 'cause even his stick people look they got that rickets thing Chopper's always going on about whenever my brother won't drink his milk."

"Yeah, I did. Both of 'em. The one we're flying now and- the, uh- the one we used to have back when we had Merry."

"... Dad told me stories about Merry. I wish I could've seen him. Her? Him?" He frowns up at the sniper, who's gazing wistfully into space. "You and Franky-aniki told me you're s'pose to talk about ships like they're girls, but Dad always says "he" when he's talking about Merry. And Sunny."
Usopp chuckles. "Well, your dad's always been kinda clueless about ships even though he's a pirate. Actually, Zoro too- either of them ever tell you about how they tried to sail for the Grand Line in a leaky row boat?"

"Yeah, Nami-aneki said they probably woulda starved if they hadn't met her. Or drowned. But-" Ace straightens up a bit. "-they didn't, and now they're the Pirate King and the World's Greatest Swordsman."

He's about to ask Usopp whether or not Luffy being the Pirate King technically makes him a pirate prince, along with Sabo and his other as-yet-unidentified siblings - or "those uncooperative little monsters" as his katana-wielding father referred to them after both babies stubbornly refused to let either Chopper or Law get a good enough look at them to report their sexes - when something colorful poking from beneath a stack of blank parchment paper in the very back of the locker catches his attention.

"Oi, what's-"

"Ah, Ace, maybe you shouldn't-"

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Just- be careful with it, okay?"

The eight-year-old nods, cautiously turning over the mask he's pulled free and studying the scrapes and chips and broken parts that have been painstakingly if inexpertly reattached. "Where'd this come from? Is it yours?"

"I- I got it from a friend."

"Huh, so it's important then. Is that why you keep it even though it's all beat up?"

His older crewmate takes the damaged disguise from him gently, grimacing as bits of plaster crumble loose in his fingers. "Yeah. It got broken a long time ago, but then it was in here during the fire too and that really did a number on it, so it's just sorta falling apart now."

"Fire? Oh. You mean the one that happened when I was still in Dad's-" He makes a cradling gesture over his midsection. "I heard Nami-aneki talking to Sanji-aniki about that one time, but they both got really quiet when they realized I was there. Does it- does that have anything to do with- when Dad was... in that place?"

"Y-Yeah," Usopp confirms hesitantly. "There was a fight while most of us were away from the ship and-"

"We got back and everything was on fire," Luffy finishes from where he's appeared in the doorway. Crossing the room, he pulls Ace into a hug that's outwardly casual but radiating enough subtle distress that the child doesn't attempt to escape but rather leans into the embrace, squeezing back. "And you and Zoro were missing and we didn't know where you were but then we found out we'd have to go to Impel Down if we wanted you back. And I- we did. Want you back. Really really bad."

"Dad..."

Giving a little shake, as though he's attempting to physically shrug off memories best left unexplored, the captain glances over at the mask in Usopp's hand. "Ah, wow, I can't remember the last time I saw that! I miss Sogeking. Too bad he's never met you, Ace- or Sabo; I think he'd like
The sniper's mouth makes a funny little quirking motion that stirs Ace's interest. "Yeah, I think he would. I think he'd like them a lot."

"If we ever run into him again, you gotta introduce the kids. All four of 'em- 'cause it's not gonna be that long 'til Zoro's ready to have the peas and even if they're still really really little and won't remember it later, they GOTTA meet him anyway," Luffy insists with utmost seriousness, but Usopp's still making that weird face like he's trying not to laugh or cry or SOMETHING, so maybe it's an inside joke.

"O-Only four months left to go, right? Or three, if Chopper ends up being right, huh-?" Their sharpshooter laughs shakily. "Hard to believe he's even got that much longer yet, 'cause he's pretty big already."

"Yeah, when he started popping out, he really started popping out fast," the rubber man agrees. "In a couple more weeks, I think he's gonna be almost as big as he was right before Ace was born. And he's got that funny dark line on his stomach already and his belly button's trying to turn itself inside out and everything; last time it didn't do that until really close to the end!"

"Poor guy must be getting pretty miserable, lugging around that much-"

"Uh, oops," Ace interjects, looking guilty. "I almost forgot I was s'pose to tell you, but Dad was asking for you."

"Eh?"

"He said his back's bugging him again, and he was wondering if-" He's abruptly speaking to empty air and falters, puffing out his cheeks in annoyance and then rolling his eyes when Luffy almost immediately reappears in the doorway, eyebrows sheepishly quirked and mouth half-open in question. "He's digging through a bunch of boxes in the storage r-"

"Got it! Oh, Nami and Robin swiped your brother to feed him some poofy dessert thing Sanji made 'em and wouldn't let me try, so you guys don't gotta watch him or anything but if somebody needs me or Zoro they should probably-"

"Knock, I got it," Usopp and Ace reply in dutiful unison as the captain vanishes once more with a "thanks, bye" tossed carelessly over his shoulder. They look at each other and laugh.

"It doesn't bother you, does it?" The sniper asks when they eventually stop snickering. "When they run off sometimes and leave you guys stuck with us?"

The eight-year-old shrugs. "Nah, not really."

When they're both happy- well, it's a lot better than Dad being all worried and scared and getting mad about everything. If getting kissed and snuggled and whatever else means he shows up smiling later, I guess they can run off all they want. As long as I don't gotta see it. Or HEAR it.

"You sure?" Usopp teases, having apparently mistaken his expression of distaste for reluctance to admit that he's less than thrilled about spending so much time with his older crewmates. "You don't think we're a bunch of boring wrinkled up old-"

"You guys are fun! And yeah, maybe you're kinda old but it's not like you're-" He struggles for a good word and finally finishes with "ancient."
The sniper makes a rude snorting sound and takes a moment to find the mask he's still cradling a safe spot in his own locker before stooping to retrieve a pile of sketchbooks from the floor. "I'm not old; I'm the same age as your dad! Well- okay, so I'm like a MONTH older."

"Like I said, old."

"FRANKY'S old. BROOK'S ANCIENT. Luffy and me, we're a sprightly- oh, damn. Oi, hand me that one I just dropped, will you?"

Unable to resist peeking into the bound sheaf of parchment before he passes it back, Ace flips it open, because even if he's old and just won't admit it, Usopp-aniki's a really good artist and draws all kinds of cool stuff like sea kings and robots and-

He pauses on a page depicting a family group of penguins, brow crinkling slightly as he stares at the sketch. "Oi…"

There's something familiar about them. The leading bird's turned away from the viewer as it bounds ahead with both flightless wings raised, but the adult at the rear, bent to nudge the smaller of the two chicks forward, bears certain unmistakable marks of identification.

"You drew us as PENGUINS?" The eight-year-old demands, delighted. "It's us, isn't it? That's gotta be Dad 'cause he's got his scars and everything and the little one's Sabo and that's me and-"

He points at the remaining animal. "If that one turned around, you could see the scar under his eye and the big X on his front, right? Right?"

"It's- I know it's kinda dumb, alright? I was just messing around and ever since Zoro started getting so- uh- wobbly, especially when he's walking around on deck when the water gets choppy…"

"It's GREAT," Ace crows. "It's perfect too, 'cause Dad does kinda waddle a little bit right now, doesn't he? Just like a-"

He breaks off giggling, nearly dropping the sketchbook because now he understands why the penguin with the missing eye looks so uncomfortable. And why it's been rendered with such an exaggerated shape. "YOU DREW THEM TOO. YOU DREW THE- that's why Dad looks so funny, isn't it? Even though you can't see 'em, there's supposed to be babies or eggs or something in there and that's why he looks so FAT. 'CAUSE YOU DREW THE PEAS!"

He turns the page- and gapes, laughter stopping short.

More sketches. An entire sheet of sloppy doodles of the captain and his first mate, although they look like themselves now and not silly cartoon birds. And the drawings - quick outlines done in broad but minimal strokes - are anything but silly; Usopp's clearly caught them unawares, snapping-shotting in charcoal more than a dozen little moments when they didn't realize anyone was watching.

"Zoro's gonna kill me if he sees those," the sniper mutters, grabbing for the book, but Ace dodges, refusing to relinquish his grasp, and continues staring at it.

His parents, holding hands. Exchanging glances when they think nobody's paying attention. Hugging. Kissing too, and although he's tempted to avert his eyes and emit not-so-furtive gagging noises, he doesn't, because even though seeing them being so affectionate makes him somewhat uncomfortable - they're his PARENTS - there's also something very right and reassuring about the way they're responding to each other.
I can- I can look at something like this- I can look at THEM, looking at each other like this, and I know that no matter what kind of dreams Dad has and no matter how much his hand bothers him, no matter what happens, he's never just gonna- he's never just gonna decide he's had enough of everything one day and- and-

The eight-year-old swallows thickly, conscious of the lump that's formed in his throat, because while he once asked the Straw Hat's historian if his father's turbulent emotions were a product of his own doing- if the anger and the fear and the anxiety were his fault-

I never told Robin-san- I never told her that I was scared something I did or something I MIGHT do- even by accident- might make him want to- to LEAVE.

After learning the story- or what he senses was likely a carefully abridged version of the story behind his father's periodic nightmares and undying hatred of the Marines – not to mention his occasional and thankfully exceedingly rare transformations into a triptych-headed being of madness and destruction – and recently witnessing his parents' impromptu and clumsy exchange of vows, Ace is no longer concerned that his actions- or anyone else's- might prompt such a departure.

It certainly doesn't hurt, though, seeing reminders of what he already knows.

Dad. Me. Sabo and our little brothers or sisters or brother and sister. Everybody else in the crew. It's like- we're like the anchor that keeps him from drifting away…

He won't stop giving them a hard time about it, he decides then and there – seeing them being kissy and lovey-dovey and shit is horribly embarrassing to the point of being downright MORTIFYINGLY embarrassing, ESPECIALLY when they do it IN FRONT OF OTHER PEOPLE – but maybe, just MAYBE, he can also be secretly glad that they love each other enough to do all that stuff.

"Figure drawing's always easier to practice when you've got models," Usopp is rationalizing helplessly, mercifully oblivious to the widely-ranging thoughts his artwork's provoked. His face continues reddening as he makes another lunge to recover his property. "I draw everybody in the crew- you know that!"

"Yeah, but-" Gaze lingering on a scribbled scene in miniature of Luffy and Zoro sprawled on the lawn deck, with the exuberant captain nuzzling the flustered swordsman's thickening midsection.

His mouth's open like he's saying something but he's looking at Dad's stomach and not his face, so he gotta be talking to-

He feels a little flare of jealousy because even though he's been telling the truth whenever anybody asks if he's alright with the prospect of sharing his parents with yet more people, there's no denying his unborn siblings are currently monopolizing them. And likely to do so for some time, given what he remembers from the first few months following Sabo's arrival.

And this time there's gonna be two of them! But-

But he also remembers what his father told him. Or rather what the CAPTAIN told him; he can still clearly recall the astringent shock of being addressed by Luffy's disappointed, outraged and Haki-enhanced voice after he accused his baby brother of being his parents' attempt to replace him. And he's now over a year older and a lot smarter and knows far more than he did back then.

Resisting the urge to touch the parchment and risk smearing the charcoal, he studies his swordsman father's averted gaze, the careless scribbles denoting his flushed cheeks.
Dad talked to me before he had me, when he was- when we were in that prison place. He said so. I wonder what he- …he’d probably tell me what he talked about if I asked, but- I don’t wanna make him think about stuff that’s gonna stress him out, especially when he’s been feeling kinda crappy already, so maybe I should just let it- 

He flips to the next page- and bursts into surprised laughter, regret-tinged curiosity about the dramatic events surrounding his birth temporarily forgotten. "Oh. OH."

"Wha- ah. Th-That one."

"I dunno, Dad might actually like the other ones, but he's DEFINITELY gonna kill you if he finds out you drew him in a DRESS."

"NAMI. IT'S NAMI'S FAULT, I SWEAR." Usopp insists, seizing the book from him. "She was so pissed they did that whole handfasting thing and then didn't say anything about it!"

Not until Luffy unexpectedly dropped the news like a bomb during breakfast DAYS later, asking Robin if he could just keep calling Zoro by his name or if there was "some rule or something about what husbands are supposed to call each other."

"Zoro's FACE, when everybody just turned and looked at him and- YOU. YOU JUST SAT THERE AND KEPT EATING. YOU KNEW AND DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING EITHER."

"Dad looked like a TOMATO," Ace wheezes. "And then when-"

"LUFFY. Well, I was trying to think of something good, but Zoro got really mad when I called him my-"

"And Dad threw that bagel and it-"

"-missed Luffy and ended up-"

"-YOUR NOSE."

"There's no way he could do that again even if he was TRYING. And the whole time, Nami's yelling about how they should've TOLD HER they wanted to actually get married 'cause-" The sniper's laughing nearly as hard now. "-nice little ceremony and- and-"

"-AND THEN SANJI-ANIKI ASKED-"

"I KNOW, I KNOW. I THOUGHT ZORO WAS GONNA STRANGLE HIM."

"YOU DREW IT."

"I KNOW. I DID. PLEASE DON'T TELL YOUR DAD- I DON'T WANNA DIE."

xxx

Given his swordsman's typical reaction to being badly startled sometimes involves unsheathed katana or a flying fist, sneaking up to peer around the doorframe might not be the brightest of ideas, but Luffy finds it impossible to resist when he hears the barely audible sounds drifting from the storage room.

Is that-? Tilting his head slightly to better catch the notes, the captain breaks into a grin. *Binks no Sake!*
Zoro's humming under his breath rather than singing - while he doesn't mind lending his voice when the entire crew joins in, he's generally not given to spontaneously breaking out into unprompted song - but the tune's unmistakable and the first mate's doing it a fair degree of justice.

Leaning against the wall beside the door that's hanging ajar, Luffy watches him for a moment through the crack, fingers unconsciously tapping along on the Adam wood paneling beside him.

*Zoro looks pretty happy. He MUST be happy if he's singing- well, humming to himself. 'Specially while he's down here, going through all these boxes and not napping on the beach.*

The green-haired pirate's decent mood is somewhat of a relief. While their extended stay and almost constant access to dry land's continuing to alleviate the worst of his nausea, he's still struggling with frequent bouts of morning sickness, and the island's increasingly hectic weather hasn't been helping. The most recent atmospheric disturbances, whose growing intensity Nami attributes to seasonal changes, are frequently accompanied by high winds and hail and keep driving everyone back to the safety of the Sunny and turning the normally calm waters of the sheltered bay into a choppy mess that tosses the ship relentlessly to and fro until the swordsman's feeling too ill for much of anything beyond curling up in bed and waiting out the storm.

*If it keeps getting worse, we're gonna need to look for somewhere else to stay and we'll probably hafta find one pretty fast so he doesn't get really really sick again,* the rubber man considers, watching Zoro shake out the blanket he's just unfolded and hold it aloft while examining the fabric suspiciously for rips or tears.

"I can tell which crates you packed, Sencho. The shit's just sorta thrown in 'em all half-assed."

"Shishishi, I was wondering when Zoro was gonna notice me."

"Right around the bit about the morning sun rising," his first mate snorts, coloring slightly. "I don't think you realized it, but you started humming along with me."

"It's a good song. Oi, you want a hand with that-" Luffy asks, sliding into the room to survey the piles of outgrown clothing surrounding the older man. "-or you wanna take a break?"

"Break." Zoro clears a heap off a nearby trunk and collapses onto it, stretching both legs out in front of him with a wince. "Damn, I keep forgetting how much my feet hurt 'til I'm not on 'em anymore."

"See, that's why Chopper said you're supposed to sit down more often," the captain scolds, dropping to the floor so he can pull one bare foot into his lap. He starts to laugh when his rubbing prompts an appreciative groan of relief, then frowns and leans lower for a closer look. "Oi, your ankles look kinda-"

"Don't even start. I can see 'em from here and they're fine. Same as yesterday. And the day before yesterday, and the day before that."

Luffy opts to ignore his swordsman's disgruntled tone and reaches for his other foot, thumbs working steadily over the inner and outer arches. He's not entirely sure how much good it's doing, considering Zoro knows a lot more about musculature and pressure points from doing so much weight training over the years, but- it's not like the other pirate can really reach his own feet at the moment. And he's certainly not complaining but rather regarding the proceedings amiably through one half-closed eye. "Ace said your back hurts again?"

"My fucking everything hurts right now. But, yeah, my lower spine's killing me."
"Hold still a second, 'kay? Here, lemme see if I can-"

But after several minutes of fruitless kneading at a torso and hips with muscles so tightly knotted that he starts wondering if he's bruising his fingertips, he sits back and frowns, cracking his knuckles. "Zoro, it feels like there's ROCKS under your skin."

"Told you."

Wrapping his arms around Zoro's shoulders and leaning against him from behind, the captain nuzzles his ear and listens intently to the soft jangling of the jewelry suspended there before speaking again. "Chopper said you can't go in the ofuro, but maybe you should go to the bathhouse, stand under the shower for a while."

"I need to finish going through this stuff or at least get everything back in-"

"I know you've got the whole bird thing going on right now, and you wanna clean and organize all kinds of junk, but it's no good if you're making yourself all tired and stiff and achy doing it. We got lots of time yet." He slips his hands down, petting his first mate's chest and belly and scowls when he finds those muscles just as tense and cramped as the others. "The warm water might make you feel better, and even if it doesn't- it'll probably loosen this up so I won't break my fingers trying to give you a back rub."

"Maybe. So you want me to what- meet you back here in an hour-?

"Mmm, and I'll put this stuff away. Ah, and maybe while he's taking a shower, Zoro could-" Lowering his voice, he murmurs the remainder of his request against the older pirate's ear and fights to hold back a grin when there's a sharp inhalation.

"You, ah, got something in mind, Sencho?"

"Kinda. Wanna try something a little different- if Zoro trusts me?" He gives the pierced lobe beside his lips a kiss followed by an encouraging flick of his tongue.

"Yeah, I- okay." The swordsman responds with a slight shudder, chest hitching. "Shit. Keep doing that and I might end up needing to lock everybody else outta the damn bathhouse for multiple reasons..."

"Oi, c'mon, it's no fair if you're having fun without me..."

Taking the reproach with the humor with which it's intended, Zoro turns to raise an eyebrow at him, voice going soft and equally teasing. "So I'm supposed to wait 'til I get back, huh? Is that an order, captain?"

Luffy's leaning closer, intent on kissing him and declaring that this is DEFINITELY an order, when there's a loud rapping on the door that's still standing partially open.

"Damn it," the rubber man's gratified to hear his spouse mutter gruffly as they reluctantly part, although he's less than pleased to see him lunging rather determinedly for his nearby coat.

There's another short round of knocking before Nami reluctantly pokes her head into the room. "Guys? Sorry if I'm disturbing you, but there's something you need to see. I think we finally got a response from Ryugu."

"You THINK we got a reply?" Zoro demands, somewhat breathlessly because he's just finished wrestling both arms into his sleeves and rather frantically cinching his sash as tightly as it'll fit
around his midsection to hide his bulging abdomen beneath a layer of clothing.

*I knew he was gonna get weird about people seeing his tummy, even though it's really dumb 'cause there's nothing wrong with the way he looks. I dunno why he thinks those stripey marks are such a big deal; they're gonna go away eventually anyway. But at least I got him to stop freaking out about me and Ace being in the room when he's half-naked.*

"-vague, and other than the royal seal, there's no signatures. It's like Neptune or whoever he ordered to send the correspondence was in such a hurry to send it off, he forgot to sign it, and that worries me," Nami's saying as she passes over a crumpled slip of parchment.

"The hell?" The first mate demands, pinching the ends of the scrap between thumb and forefinger and lifting it higher for a better look. "What'd the bloody bird do? Drag the damn thing through every mud puddle between here and the Red Line? You can't fucking read half of it!"

"I don't know, but the messenger gull's a nervous wreck. It's half-starved, covered in dirt and missing half its tail feathers. Sanji's got it on the balcony outside the dining hall with a bowl of scraps while Chopper tries to get a story out of it."

Luffy, who's craning to get a glimpse at the message, reaches over Zoro's shoulder to poke a finger at one of the few lines that's not smudged into obscurity. "What's this thing he's saying about not helping other ships?"

"*-strongly advise you to avoid responding to distress calls broadcast from unknown vessels,*" the swordsman reads, brow furrowing. "Sounds like he wants us to just stay the hell away from anybody we don't know."

"Something I'd say is good advice right now, regardless of who it's coming from." Nami gives a significant glance towards her crewmate's snugly-fitting coat and he shifts uncomfortably, lowering his arms.

"Could've used the heads-up weeks ago," he grumbles. "Skipped that whole deal with the blasted toads."

"I think the real question's whether that ship started sending out distress signals before or after its crew was attacked. Because I highly doubt Neptune was trying to give us advance warning about a shower of man-eating toads. He would've just told us about the damn things."

"And you're suggesting what exactly-? That we were wandering into an ambush and got saved by those little hopping shit bags?"

"Look, all I'm saying is that you guys thought it might've been a trap in the first place. And besides- it never made any sense. That ship was dead in the water and completely abandoned when we found it. NO BODIES. Those animals had some sharp teeth, but- really? Sharp enough to bite through bone?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know? Robin's the friggin' toad expert, remember?"

"One of those things bit Brook's hand and barely left a scratch. There's no way that entire crew was eaten alive and I still don't buy it that they just took off in a rowboat hoping to make it to the nearest island. If they weren't anywhere to be found ABOVE water."

"So you think they were under it?"

"Look, Zoro, do you have a better explanation? Because if you do, I'd really like to hear-"
"I wanna move the ship." Luffy crosses his arms, expression serious as they stop arguing and turn to look at him. "Staying here was okay for a while, but- first Shanks and Hawkeye found us and Law knows where to find us too and I know they wouldn't tell anybody we're here but it keeps raining and getting colder and Shanks said the Marines might be up to something and now we're getting weird messages and you guys are throwing around all these crazy ideas about fishmen and toads and I-"

He unconsciously hugs his arms a little tighter around himself, eyes blazing with conviction. "I don't like this place anymore. We need to leave."

"Luffy, what about-" The navigator's gaze darts towards Zoro. "If we head back onto open water-"

"I know, so you gotta find someplace good where we can get to land really easy. If not, he's gonna get seasick and start throwing up again all the time."

"That could take-" Aware of the way her green-haired nakama's gone completely silent and become suddenly reluctant to meet their eyes, Nami bites her lower lip. "Give me tonight, at least. I've got the late watch, so I'll start digging through my maps now and I'll- I'll find something."

"Thanks, Nami."

"Of course. I'll see you guys at dinner? Robin's got Sabo right now, but I might borrow him to- ah-help me look for potential islands. If that's alright with you?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Sure! See you later."

They watch her leave, pulling the door shut behind her, and then Luffy gives his swordsman's shoulder a gentle nudge. "Bathhouse."

"Oi, shouldn't we talk about this whole-?"

"BATHHOUSE." He insists, plucking the message from the older pirate's grasp and shoving it into the pocket of his shorts. "We can talk about it in a little while. After Zoro stops looking like somebody keeps jabbing him in the back with something really hard and pointy."

Later.

We've got time.

These are words that will come back to haunt him less than twenty-four hours from now when he'll abruptly realize their grace period probably ended sometime during the late afternoon while he was focused on banishing the tension from his first mate's over-stressed body and Usopp was regaling their amused eldest son with outrageous tales of the hero of Sniper Island and Nami was sitting cross-legged on the observation room floor with a wide arch of maps spread around her and their one-year-old seated snugly in her lap with his fingers in his mouth and the remaining members of the crew were going cheerfully about their business.

Time's a precious commodity; not a single member of the Straw Hats would dispute this, and over the years, through heartache and hardships, they've each learned to appreciate the time remaining to them.

Understanding the value of time, however, does not make it any easier to recognize when it's nearly run out.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I didn't write a note for the last chapter, so I wasn't able to mention a few things that I should've. One, my husband was extremely delighted by the whole handfasting ceremony, because we actually did it during our own wedding. Two, I owe a thank you to thequeenoffish for inadvertently prompting Usopp's sketch of Zoro, Luffy and the kids as penguins via a tumblr ask regarding a nature documentary. Haha, I can credit you directly now that I know it was you! Third, the sketch of Luffy talking to "the peas" aka a highly embarrassed Zoro's belly is a legitimate piece of art drawn by my rp Luffy; I couldn't resist tossing that into Usopp's drawing pad as well.

All right. Here we go.

"Zoro- c'mon, Zoro, push! You can do it!"

"Keep your knees pulled up!"

He opens his mouth to ask them just how the hell this is supposed to work, because despite the excitement and determination on their faces, they can't possibly think he can actually do this - he doesn't have the right equipment, for fuck's sake - but the cramping pain in his lower back and abdomen sharpens, stifling his protest. He clenches his teeth, breath caught in his throat, and digs his nails into the undersides of his thighs forcefully enough to draw blood, although he barely notices.

There's pressure bearing down somewhere inside him, so intense it makes his head roll back, and it's fucking bizarre because it feels a lot like needing to take a shit- only it fucking hurts- it hurts like he's trying to expel a fucking cannonball- although his pain-frazzled brain is still sluggishly insisting that something's not right. This doesn't make any goddamn sense; he can't possibly be having contractions, can't be in labor- he doesn't have a fucking uterus or any of the other shit necessary for a natural delivery, so why-

But neither his captain, who's stroking his side and crooning encouragement, nor the doctor peering intently under the thin sheet draped across his hips appear to find anything unusual about the situation, and when the cramping in his gut finally eases enough for him to clumsily wet his lips and try to speak, they shush him and tell him to save his energy.

He's sticky with sweat, enough to make whatever he's wearing - some sort of shitty hospital gown that's open in the front and doesn't afford any modesty whatsoever - cling to him like a second damp skin, but he can't seem to stop shivering, and he's still trying to wrap his brain around what's happening when the next contraction hits, bringing with it another wave of pain severe enough to drive a wheezing grunt from between his gritted teeth.

And then he feels fingers prodding him, doing something down there to his exposed bottom, and he panics, groping for the infirmary bed's edge and trying to throw himself over it, confused and hurting and wanting nothing more than to just fucking hide under the damn gurney, but there's shouts of alarm and hands grabbing for him. Hands-
-that are hovering anxiously over him when he lurches awake with a choked cry of protest, because Luffy's crouching beside him on the mattress, face contorted with concern and dismay that quickly turns to relief as he realizes his swordsman's blinking up at him through one dazed eye.

"Zoro?"

The first mate lets his head drop back with a groan- and then groans again when he realizes he's lying flat on his back with the sheets tangled around his legs and the full weight of his belly pressing down on his spine, and there's at least one knee or elbow being planted repeatedly in his lungs, courtesy of his unborn charges' discomfited squirming. "Sh-shit. Gimmie a hand, Sencho?"

The younger pirate helps him roll onto his side, watching him closely for signs of distress and then settling down beside him as he wrestles the scattered pillows into a more comfortable configuration. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I just- goddamn it, what a weird dream."

"Was it bad?" Luffy asks hesitantly, obviously not sure if he should be pushing the issue.

"I don't know, just... like I said, it was just really goddamn weird." Zoro twists awkwardly to look over at him. "Some strange shit with you and Chopper, and you guys thinking I was gonna, uh, pop babies out my ass or something."

His captain tries to raise an eyebrow and grimace at the same time, momentarily transforming his face into a horrific amalgamation of confusion, amusement and disgust. "How-?"

"Yeah, I don't even fucking know. I was trying to tell you-" He stifles a yawn. "-it wasn't gonna work, but you- mmm- didn't wanna listen. Just told me to-"

Now that he's more comfortable, arm slung loosely around a pillow and his stomach nestled against the mattress instead of flattening him into it and squashing all his internal organs, and now that he can breathe because both babies have shifted to positions that don't involve appendages jammed into his ribs, he's already drifting off again. "-said I should just-"

"If Zoro's tired…"

He wants to say he's not, but everything's gone soft and hazy and his retort of "it's only 'cause you wore me out, you bastard" emerges as a wavering hum of denial as consciousness fades.

xxx

Scooting closer until he's spooning his swordsman snugly against him, Luffy runs a soothing hand along his side while he settles back into sleep, body slowly relaxing until he's sprawled limply in the younger pirate's arms.

Smiling, the captain nuzzles his face against warm skin still carrying the mild but fragrant scent of oil, curling his arm around Zoro's waist until his palm's cradling the firm but now thankfully pliant curve of bare belly.

The skin beneath his touch gives a little shudder, pushing up against his cupped hand as one of twins either stretches or changes positions, and he draws back just enough to wiggle his fingertips over what he's pretty sure might be a foot- but stops immediately when his first mate utters a sleepy mumble of protest and makes an ineffectual attempt to wriggle away from the tickling. Much as he loves sharing these moments, Zoro clearly needs the sleep, and now that his body's no longer one rigid piece of stiff muscles and cramped tendons, he might actually get it.
He'd known he'd have his work cut out for him, chasing away the tension and relieving the aches and pains plaguing the other man, and sure enough, it'd taken over two hours, nearly half a bottle of the massage oil the ship's doctor deemed safest, and enough rubbing and kneading to make his fingers numb.

What worked best though, he's convinced, had been his insistence on thoroughly kissing every last scar and stretch mark he could find. Addressing every inch of his swordsman's skin with lips and tongue until he'd been quivering all over as though ready to explode, and then delivering the final blow by guiding the older pirate onto his side and flopping down on the mattress between his thighs, grasping the uppermost ankle to spread his legs wide enough to expose and lick, kiss and explore everything between his tailbone and the underside of his belly.

Zoro had gone wide-eyed and tongue-tied at the sensation of someone's mouth traveling over and then behind his perineum, finally fully comprehending why Luffy'd been insistent that he shower so scrupulously, and he'd nearly scrambled away in panic. Only the captain's repeated, steady reassurances had kept him from bolting, but once his initial consternation faded, he'd become so responsive- so VOCAL- that the rubber man found himself relieved they'd done this so early in the day rather than waiting for the evening, because-

*If I'd known he'd get so loud, I would've-*

He probably would've warned people about the impending noise, so they didn't think Zoro was getting murdered or something, but he's also pretty sure he would've tried it sooner. A lot sooner, because-

*The noises he made- the way he kept trying to watch me even though he couldn't see much of anything because of his belly being too big and 'cause his eye kept closing even though he was trying really really hard to keep it open and how he started laughing because the insides of his thighs kept jumping every time I licked him, but he was moaning too because it felt good, and- and for once he wasn't thinking about anything BUT feeling good and when he finally- and I finally- and we finally-*

There's a thick, heavy coil of desire beginning to stir sluggishly in his stomach and groin as he replays the past few hours, culminating in the memory of watching his partner slowly ride his hips, head tilted back and mouth fallen agape and cheeks flushed all the way to the tips of his ears, and he swallows hard.

*Ah, I really want-*

He wants to shake his first mate awake, do it all over again, but-

*Sleep, I gotta let him sleep. He probably hasn't been doing that enough, since the peas always start wiggling around and kicking him as soon as he lays down.*

It's a testament to how worn out and utterly exhausted the green-haired pirate's been, considering how quickly he's fallen back asleep after a dream that startling – *not to mention kinda gross* – and given the current amount of activity inside him.

"You guys should take a nap too," Luffy whispers, rubbing gentle circles on the spot where he can feel little twitches and tremors shaking the swordsman's abdomen. "You're gonna wake him up!"

But Zoro's still sleeping when the captain slips cautiously out of bed and tiptoes across the room to collect his clothing, clapping a hand over his own mouth when he lets out a startled yip of surprise after nearly tripping over the hazardous tangle of coat and trousers on the floor because he's too
busy looking back over his shoulder to pay attention to where he's walking. And to his relief, there's naught but brief stirring and a drowsy incoherent murmur from the mattress as its occupant tightens his grip on the pillow he's cuddling and burrows a bit deeper into the covers.

Well, I said I was gonna make sure he relaxed and- shishi, if Zoro gets any more relaxed, he's just gonna start melting like a great big glob of Sanji's green tea ice cream!

He's grinning when he creeps out of the room.

xxx

"Oi, did Marimo get lost on his way to-?" The cook hesitates, frowning. "You smell like you ate three-quarters of a tube of toothpaste. Why the hell were you brushing your teeth before dinner?"

"Zoro's napping, 'cause I-

"Actually, you know what, don't answer that. I don't wanna know," Sanji mutters dourly, automatically smacking the captain's hand away when it makes a casual attempt to procure a rack of ribs from the platter he's delivering to the dining hall table.

He perks up at Nami's entrance, however, hurriedly relieving her of the bundle of maps she's struggling to contain under one arm while she balances Sabo on the opposite hip.

"Thank you, Sanji-kun."

"Of course, Nami-swan," he trills cheerfully, cuffing Luffy's ear as the rubber man tries to take advantage of the distraction and his parchment roll-laden arms to make a second snatch at the forbidden piece of meat. "DROP IT, SHITTY GOMU."

And then without missing a beat. "Where would you like me to put these, Nami-swan-?"

"The counter's fine, as long as they're not- ah, Sabo, I'm sorry! You want your Daddy, don't you, honey.\) Upon seeing his dark-haired father, the child's started reaching for him and babbling excitedly, so the navigator reluctantly hands him over. She smiles as the toddler throws both arms around Luffy's neck and clings there, nodding enthusiastically and uttering a happy "yah yah" when the captain asks if he's been missed. "I can't believe how fast he's grown. It seems like just yesterday Zoro was carrying him everywhere in the sling, and now he's walking..."

"I know! I guess it's a good thing he doesn't wanna be held ALL the time anymore, 'cause we're gonna have our hands full with the peas!" Luffy laughs. He hugs Sabo against his shoulder, peering closely at him. "Were you good for Nami? Did you help her find us a new place to- oi oi, why are you shaking your head? Are you telling me you WEREN'T good- ... or that you didn't find anything?"

"We had a little temper tantrum earlier. I couldn't seem to convince him that my cartography quills aren't edible..."

"Sabo, don't eat Nami's pens! She needs those to draw pictures of all the new islands we find!"

"Na-ama," the one-year-old chirps back. He pokes a finger into his mouth, chews thoughtfully, and then whips his head around so fast that he nearly head-butts Luffy in the nose, eyes searching the room. "Dada?"

"Zoro's taking a nap. The peas make him really sleepy 'cause he's gotta carry 'em around all the time and they're getting heavy!" He hefts his son higher with an exaggerated groan of effort,
beaming at the giggle the action prompts. "Not as heavy as you though- you weigh a ton!"

"Peh," Sabo repeats around the finger hooked behind his lower lip. "Peh... foo?"

"Sweetie, no, he's not talking about the kind of peas you eat." Nami elbows Sanji, who's struggling to contain his laughter. "Luffy, did you and Zoro decide on names yet- for the twins?"

"Nope. We figured we were gonna wait and see what the scan said - girls or boys or both - but..." The captain shrugs helplessly.

"Sorry," sighs Chopper, who's joined them moments ago, his ears drooping and his small shoulders slumping. "I know everybody really wanted to know, especially you and Zoro, but-"

"They were turned around and all scrunched up like freaked out roly-poly bugs, and they wouldn't move even when I poked his tummy!" Luffy complains. He turns his pouting gaze on the child in his arms and frees one hand to wiggle his fingers threatening, and Sabo squeals, raising his own small hands to fend off any potential tickling that might be coming his way. "Nah, I dunno WHAT we're gonna call 'em. It was hard enough trying to pick something when we thought we'd only need to name one!"

"Aww, don't worry, Mugiwara-bro. I'm sure whatever you guys decide on is gonna be just super. Right, kiddo?" The cyborg who's wandered in just in time to catch the last part of the conversation extends one gigantic palm towards them and grins when Sabo immediately stretches out to high-five it. "See, lil bro here knows."

"Luffy?" Chopper asks, reaching up to tug the cuff of his nakama's shorts. "Where IS Zoro?"

"Bed. When I left, he looked like he wasn't gonna be getting out of it anytime soon. I think I wore him out." At this proclamation, there's a choking noise from Franky, and Sanji and Nami exchange incredulous sidelong glances. The captain frowns. "What- did I say something funny? He's really tired!"

"Did you have any luck with the oil?" The doctor demands, and the redhead utters an amused "oh no" before she can stop herself.

"Yeah, it loosened Zoro up really good!"

"Wow, way more than I needed to know, but thanks for the info, Mugiwara-bro, Reindeer-bro."

"... it's too early for this shit."

"Sanji-kun, it's almost sex- I mean SIX. IT'S ALMOST SIX."

The cook's mouth twitches. "Like I said- it's too early for this shit."

"What are you TALKING about?" Luffy demands, looking from one crewmate to the next. "Zoro's shoulders got all stiff and his back's been hurting since the babies started making it bend that funny way, and Chopper gave me stuff to help get all the knots out! Did you think I was talking about his-?"

"That's EXACTLY what we thought you were talking about, and now can we please change the subject? There's certain things I'd just rather not know about what you and the shitty marimo do in the privacy of your own-"

"It sure didn't hurt, though," the captain muses aloud, eyes distant. "Made everything all super
slippery, and he was so worked up by the time I got done using my mouth on him, it almost made me think we didn't need any."

"LUFFY-"

"THAT'S ONE OF THE THINGS I'D RATHER NOT KNOW."

"I said almost! ALMOST!" Luffy blurs, too busy withering under Chopper's glare to notice his other nakama fairly writhing in discomfort. "I know lube's really important, okay- I just meant Zoro was so turned on and wet all over with the oil, it was ALMOST like we didn't need any lube!"

"... I changed my mind- I'm not hungry." announces the eight-year-old who's just frozen in the doorway. "Anybody wanna go watch the fish in the aquarium with me?"

"...

"Ace, where are you- oi, Franky, aren't you hungry either?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake- both of you, get back here. Luffy, that's enough; we don't need any more details about your bedroom exploits." Nami scolds, giving the rubber man's ear a painful yank because she's reluctant to deck him while he's holding Sabo. "You're lucky Zoro's not hearing this or he'd string you up by your toes!"

"More like his balls," Sanji grunts. He winces as Nami stomps on his metatarsals. "Ow. N-Nami-san's feet c-certainly look lovely in those heels this evening."

Favoring his bruised foot, he manages to set the rest of the table as their remaining crewmates gradually trickle in, arriving from various locations around the ship.

Jinbei's the last to join them, and the fishman's expression becomes troubled when he realizes they're one person shy. "Ah, isn't Zoro-san joining us? I hope everything's alright."

"Kenshi-san's-" Robin closes her eyes briefly, concentrating, and she's smiling when she opens them. "It appears he's still asleep, and if I'm not mistaken, he might do so until morning."

Luffy immediately turns from the toddler he's offering a spoonful of mixed vegetables - when Sabo started fussing, the cook grudgingly declared him exempt from waiting until everyone was seated, although he's already regretting it since the captain keeps stealing bites for himself as well - and fixes the ship's physician with an anxious gaze. "Is that okay, or should I wake him up to make sure he eats?"

Chopper hesitates before he answers. "If he's that tired, it's best to let him rest. Skipping just one meal's not going to hurt him, but you'll need to get some crackers or something into him first thing after he wakes up, even if he says he doesn't want them, or he's probably going to be extremely nauseous."

"You hear that, Sabo?"

"Foo?"

"Yep- we gotta make sure Zoro eats so he doesn't feel sick to his tummy. You gonna help me?"

"Yah," the toddler says solemnly, nodding. "Dada yah yah."
It's late and beginning to rain by the time he returns to their quarters with a very groggy, somewhat
grunty child cradled in his arms and his head bursting with a scrambled array of latitudes and
longitudes to islands Nami named as likely destinations after the meal ended and they cleared the
dining hall table to unroll the maps she'd brought with her. He can't keep the darn things straight,
so it's a good thing she's such a great navigator, but he feels a lot better knowing they're got so
many options.

Zoro's still comatose, arms wrapped firmly around his pillow and chest slowly rising and falling,
and he's STILL asleep and curled in the same position when the captain returns from tucking Sabo
into bed, trying to ignore the pang in his chest because although he'd followed Ace to the men's
quarters earlier, the eight-year-old had been adamant about NOT being tucked in or kissed or
coddled in front of his older roommates.

Concerned despite Chopper's assurances, the rubber man stretches out a cautious hand to stroke his
swordsman's sleep-slackened face, relaxing when he finds it slightly warm to the touch but not
overly so.

The older pirate stirs under the fingers brushing his cheek, uttering a languid hum of inquiry that
fades into a sigh when his heavily rounded belly's kissed not just once but twice beside the almost
nonexistent hollow of his navel.

"Night, guys," Luffy murmurs before dropping a third lingering kiss on his first mate's bare
shoulder. "Night, Zoro."

Although it's become an almost nightly custom, they've both had a long day and he's too tired to
stay awake talking to their unborn offspring. He dozes off with his forehead resting between the
other man's shoulder blades and one arm draped over his side, fingers aimlessly roaming that
curved expanse of abdomen in search of little fluttering kicks.

xxx

Roused from sleep several hours later by a combination of his aching bladder being pummeled
repeatedly by restlessly kicking feet and the storm that's raging outside the hull, Zoro tries to roll
out of bed- and immediately stills, burying his face into his pillow to muffle the groan of dismay
that escapes his throat as his empty stomach registers the way Sunny's rocking with the surges
created by the wind gusting across the sheltered bay.

Oh god, I hate this fucking weather. Why can't it just stay like it did when we first got here and the
sun was always out and there were no damn waves.

There's a crack of thunder, distressingly loud even through the lawn deck overhead, and he jumps
as both babies respond to the noise and reverberation by lashing out with fists and feet alike, so he's
unexpectedly hit in what feels like twenty different places, although he knows it can only be eight
at most, as long as he's not counting jabs from knees and elbows.

Jeez, it feels a friggin' octopus just had a seizure inside me.

As he's struggling to catch his breath - and retain control of his bladder because he's been punted
there hard enough to damn near piss himself - there's a wavering cry from across the hallway, high-
pitched enough to be heard through both doors.

He listens, mentally crossing his fingers, but Sabo's voice continues to make itself known in a
continuous unhappy whine.
The swordsman debates waking Luffy, but the younger pirate's sprawled on his side of the bed with limbs flopped carelessly about him and snoring mouth gaping.

Well... I spent the whole damn day sleeping; I guess it's my turn this time.

Unfortunately, whatever magic his captain worked with his fingers - and mouth, Zoro thinks, feeling heat flare across his face - during the afternoon hours has largely dissipated, and he's painfully stiff when he clambers gracelessly out of bed, steadying himself on the night table because his ankles are tingling and stinging with that nasty pins-and-needles sensation.

Can't win, whether I'm on my feet or off 'em...

He's also abominably thirsty despite needing to urinate; his lips are dry as sandpaper and his tongue feels as though it's been replaced by a large wad of gauze from Chopper's medical bag.

Getting dressed seems to take forever. Scrounging for his clothing in the darkened room. Cursing when he trips over his own discarded boots and is forced to give a ridiculous lurching hop to keep his balance. Finally locating and squeezing into trousers that he's a little afraid he's going to soon outgrow unless he resorts to sewing elastic from one of Nami's old, discarded bikinis into the blasted waistband. Shrugging clumsily into his coat, leaving it hanging open around his protruding belly because he can hear his son's fussing growing louder and taking on that frustrated intonation that usually precedes a full-throated screaming fit.

He doesn't realize he's grabbed a sheathed katana as well until he's in the other room, making hushing noises at the aggrieved toddler and trying to figure out what the hell to do with the sword because he didn't think to grab his blasted sash and therefore has no way to strap his weapon to his hip.

And Luffy and I laughed at Chopper over that whole baby brain thing. I swear, though, the bigger my gut grows, the dumber my brain gets.

Forgetting shit. LOSING shit. Like the new maintenance kit he misplaced the other week, lost his temper and came damn close to hormonal tears trying to find, and then discovered he'd unknowingly walked right past at least three times during his search.

Sighing, he leans the katana carefully against the wall beside the doorframe and crosses the room to scoop up Sabo, who's been clutching the crib rail and whimpering at him, and the frightened child instantly throws both arms around his neck in a choking death grip and tries to climb him, voice shrill and close to panic.

"Dadadada!"

"Oi, quiet down," he hisses, wincing and sucking his breath in sharply as the scrambling one-year-old accidentally knees him in the stomach. "Oof- careful! I'm not a tree!"

"Dada," Sabo insists again, more softly this time, and buries his face against the swordsman's neck, snuffling tearfully, before pushing back to peer curiously at the bulge he's practically sitting on.

"Here, lemme put you down for just a-" His words prompt renewed flailing, and he flinches as the glancing blows striking him on the outside launch a blistering fury of protest from the inside. "Oi, no no no- everybody quit freaking out! Sabo. SABO. Okay, I promise, I won't try to put you down again. The other two of you, knock it off before you make me drop your brother!"
After a few moments of awkward maneuvering, he manages to shift the toddler to his hip and take
a bit of pressure off his much-abused bladder, which is impatiently reminding him that he'd better
deal with it shortly or risk embarrassing consequences.

"Look, kiddo, if I don't take a leak, I'm gonna be standing in a puddle. But there's no way I'm
gonna get both of us up the ladder. Hell, I'm not sure I'm gonna get ME up the ladder."

"..."

"What if I take you next door and you can cuddle with Luffy until I get back, maybe sleep with us
for the rest of the night if the thunder's too scary?"

Sabo tilts his head slightly as he considers this proposal, and then he nods enthusiastically.

"Alright. That's what we'll do then. You and Luffy and me and the peas." The first mate snorts. "I
can't believe he's got me calling them that too. Poor kids, getting nicknamed after goddamn
vegetables."

"Peh?" The toddler asks, reaching down to gently pat his belly.

"Peas," Zoro agrees, smiling tiredly.

He's beginning to wish he'd just woken his captain in the first place, because the longer he's
upright, the more uncomfortable he's getting. In addition to his previous complaints, there's a
tension headache brewing behind his brow that's only adding to the mounting nausea from the
ship's continued swaying.

_Probably 'cause I really need to eat something. But the idea of food right now's- ugh._

Moving cautiously to keep his footing - between Sabo and his own rotund middle, he can't see the
floor - Zoro makes it as far as the hallway before the stabbing pain in his forehead's joined by
fuzzy black spots that start swimming in around the edges of his vision. "Aww, crap."

"Dada yah?" His son asks worriedly.

"Sorry, kiddo, but we gotta sit down and take a break for a second. I'm getting kinda woozy."

Bracing his back against the paneling for support, he eases carefully to the floor and feels a surge
of relief as his rear touches down on the Adam wood. If he faints, at least he's not going to fall and
potentially injure himself or one of the children.

Settling between his father's thighs because the older pirate's lap is nearly non-existent these days
and previous attempts to cram himself into it regardless have taught him that his unborn siblings
are not only reluctant to share their space but also quick to defend it by kicking or punching him
until he vacates the premises, Sabo looks up questioningly.

Zoro raises a hand to rub his aching forehead and discovers his face is damp with beaded sweat.
"Damn. Well, at least we know I don't have a fever, huh? Just lemme close my eyes for a couple
minutes and then we'll go kick Sencho out of bed."

He doesn't see the toddler reaching out to pat his chin, because the spots in his vision have
suddenly multiplied, darkness swarming in to obliterate everything as he loses consciousness, and
then he's slumping against the wall and sliding down it.

XXX
His cognizance filters back at a snail's pace, and the Straw Hat's first mate doesn't register his surroundings all at once but rather in small increments, as though his awareness is a complex puzzle into which pieces are being slowly but steadily snapped.

His first thought is that his pillow's somehow transformed into concrete or maybe been replaced by a goddamn rock, but then he realizes there's something wrong with the rest of the bed too. The mattress is intolerably hard and that's because-

*I'm not in bed. I can't be in bed. I got OUT of bed, got dressed- well, mostly dressed- and I went across the hall because-*

The storm outside hasn't abated; if anything, it's intensified, and he's now aware of the rain drumming thunderously down around the ship, pelting its decks, and he knows he's still on the ship because he can feel it rocking beneath him where he's lying on the floor.

He's on the floor and there's something wet and sticky creeping across the boards under him, soaking into his coat, and when he feels the smaller body shivering against his side and hears Sabo's soft whimpering, he bolts upright- or tries to bolt upright, disoriented and blinking against the corridor lights as he levers himself into a sitting position, senses adjusting.

*How long was I out? What the hell happened? And what- what the fuck's all over my-*?

And then he remembers-

*MY SWORD.*

For one awful moment, he's convinced his son somehow got his hands on the katana and cut himself, badly, while unattended during the brief period during which he was unconscious.

But while it's a reasonable deduction because he's already caught a glimpse of where the empty sheath's lying a little further down the hallway, where he inadvertently kicked it while reaching for the toddler now clinging desperately to his swollen middle, the liquid spilled across the floor and dampening his disheveled clothing isn't blood.

And it's not urine either, one analytical corner of his brain observes dispassionately, because there's a ruptured barrel laying within sight near the capstan in the center of the docking room, although spilled cola's currently the least of his concerns, because he's located his missing blade.

The razor sharp point's hovering threateningly in the air mere inches from his collarbone, handle gripped tightly by webbed tan and white-striped fingers tipped with gleaming claws.

Zoro slowly eases backwards until his spine's pressed firmly against the wall behind him, instinctively encircling Sabo with an arm that he hopes isn't trembling too badly and pulling the toddler as close as his belly will allow, his voice choked with outrage as he addresses the group of fishmen towering over him.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing on our ship."
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Warnings for violence, gore and references to sexual assault.

Zoro's demand is nearly drowned out by the roaring rumble of thunder so ominously close that it rattles the lamp fixtures, but he doesn't quite dare raise the volume of his voice even though he knows it might wake and alert his sleeping captain. He's not sure he wants to risk it. Not when he's abruptly found himself on the business end of his own katana while his one-year-old child's cowering in his embrace, clinging to the exposed mound of his belly.

Six-to-one. Definitely not the worst odds he's ever faced. Or the first time he's been simultaneously incapacitated and outnumbered by fishmen in particular. Arlong Park seems like another lifetime ago, given everything that's happened between then and now, but he still remembers facing the sawshark warlord exhausted and hemorrhaging badly from the wound Mihawk dealt him.

"Thirty seconds," he'd told the cook, who'd been about to rescue their captain from drowning at the pool's bottom. "I won't last longer than that."

But as close to death as he'd found himself in those moments, he does not remember feeling as vulnerable then as he does now, caught unawares and weaponless below-decks on his own ship. Mere steps – a scattered handful of heartbeats – from his own quarters.

*Stay calm. They could've split you open like a goddamn watermelon with your own blade while you were unconscious- killed you and all three kids outright- but they didn't. There's gotta be something they want.*

"Roronoa Zoro. Pirate Hunter. World's Greatest Swordsman." The striped bastard's tone is scornful, taunting. "Pirate King's Whore. Did you know that's what the Marines call you?"

There's low amused chuckles from the other fishmen amidst much jostling and nudging of elbows, but if they're expecting some sort of tearfully dramatic reaction, they're sorely disappointed.

"I'm sure they call me a lot of things," the first mate replies evenly, willing his hand to remain steady as he strokes his son's hair in an effort to keep him quiet, because he's not sure what the intruders will do if the boy starts crying.

*I've heard that one before- and I've been called worse.*

Sabo hides his face against his father's scarred chest and remains mercifully silent except for faint, muffled sniffling, but he's quivering all over and clearly terrified, and the green-haired pirate feels his anger spike dangerously. How dare they-

*Don't be stupid. Keep your shit together. The longer you keep them talking-*

"I'm gonna ask you again; the fuck do you think you're doing on this ship. And how the hell did you-"

"Somebody made us an offer we couldn't refuse. Come back with Monkey D. Luffy's declaration of
allegiance or, barring that, his head. Or die trying." The fishman's gaze hardens. "I mean to live."

"You're- you're talking about the World Government."

"Give the swordsman a prize. You're actually smarter than I gave you credit for, Roronoa. That why your captain keeps you around instead of finding a more choice piece of ass? It sure as hell can't be for your face." A snort of derision. "Unless you're really just that good in the sack. Rumor says there's quite a few people left their signatures on your hide after they fucked you, so I guess something about you impressed 'em."

Zoro feels a wave of cold pouring down his back, almost as though he's been doused with freezing seawater. Although he meant to encourage conversation, he does not like where this is going.

*Luffy, where the hell are you. WAKE UP.*

"Word on the water's that Hawk-eyes taught you how to master more than one kind of sword. That you learned just as much from him about taking a dick as you did winning a fight."

Zoro nearly barks laughter despite his distress and discomfort, because the bullshit rumors about him sleeping with Dracule Mihawk are nothing new. Stupid stories about him and his former mentor have been circulating for years, and following his defeat of the Shichibukai, he's had more than one challenger raise the subject of whether or not they were lovers. Or just plain fucking.

Some from genuine curiosity, others from sheer vindictiveness following their discovery that parenthood hasn't dulled his skills with a blade.

Somehow he doubts Mihawk has ever been confronted with such ridiculous questions.

Still others have attacked his relationship with his captain. The accusations that he's the Pirate King's kept man aren't new either, but he's learned to largely ignore their close-minded ignorance; denying the rumors only convinces the idiots that he's protesting the truth.

*Kinda makes me wonder what they'd say if they found out what Sencho and I really are to each other. Probably decide somebody's pulling their legs, 'cause whoever heard of pirates falling in love and getting married.*

Or starting families, he recalls Mihawk stating with icy disapproval, and as much as the swordsman detests agreeing with him, he can't dispute that his pregnancy and Sabo's presence are seriously complicating the current situation.

His fishman foe's apparently reached the conclusion that he can't be provoked by unsubstantiated insinuations and decided to move onto the real reason they're facing each other in the Thousand Sunny's narrow hallway. "Where's your captain, Roronoa."

*Snoring away like a bloody idiot. Right fucking behind you.*

"How the hell should I know? And if I did, what makes you think I'd tell you?"

"Oh, I'm sure I can find a way to loosen your tongue. Don't worry, I won't kill you or the brat; something tells me the Pirate King's going to be far more cooperative if I've got at least one living, breathing hostage, and I have no idea how, because you're a human and not a goddamn sea horse-" The cold eyes narrow, peering speculatively at Zoro's middle. "-but from the looks of it, you're a two-for-one deal all by yourself. Which makes you worth far more to him alive and in one piece. But that doesn't mean I can't rough you up a little."

The first mate opens his mouth to snarl a retort- and bites back a startled yelp as he's slapped
forcefully across the belly with the flat of the katana that's taken a place – not Wado's place, no, because no Meito could ever do that, but a place – as his most prized weapon. The one that Luffy unceremoniously dropped into his lap while he was lounging on deck one afternoon following a shopping trip on an island whose name he already can't remember, with no explanation other than "it seemed special and I thought it'd look good with Zoro's other swords."

The blow hurts and narrowly avoids hitting Sabo, and it's a goddamn miracle it doesn't leave either of them bleeding, but it also reveals something vitally important.

Gingerly massaging his stinging abdomen with one hand in an effort to calm the kicking, squirming twins while he clutches Sabo closer with the opposite arm, Zoro studies the fishman's grip on the handle more closely.

*He's not a swordsman.*

It's a thought that's both reassuring and disturbing, because while an amateur showing off with a blade's more likely to make a mistake, he's also unpredictable and more likely to unintentionally injure someone.

*If he'd twisted his wrist just a quarter of an inch to the right, he probably would've cut me in half, and he doesn't even fucking know it.*

Emboldened by his cohorts' ugly laughter and snide comments, his aggressor takes a step back and gestures imperiously. "Somebody grab the kid so the little bastard's not in the way while I-"

"Get your fucking hands off him!"

Whatever intention Zoro still harbored for cooperating- or at least not actively resisting, in hopes of stalling for time- goes completely out of his head as the toddler, protesting shrilly, is torn from his side. They claimed they wouldn't kill him or his son because they're both more valuable as collateral for Luffy's good behavior, and this is probably true, but he's not thinking about that now, and he's not thinking about the fact that he's endangering himself or the twins as he lunges after Sabo. The only thing that matters is the bewildered fear on the one-year-old's face.

Someone backhands him hard enough to make his ears ring and send a gout of blood bursting from his nose, but he doesn't notice, and he's equally unaware of the furious snarl erupting from between his bared teeth-

-until a dinner plate-sized webbed hand grabs him around the throat and slams him spine-first into the wall, choking off both the sound and his airway.

The impact sends a monstrous bolt of pain shooting down his back, and he gags, clawing at the fingers that are wrapped around his neck so tightly they're starting to crush his windpipe. A flood of wet warmth soaks his crotch, and this time he recognizes the source instantly, but he doesn't care that his bladder's finally given up the struggle. He's too angry- too frightened for his children.

"Don't make him change his mind," the second fishman hisses in his face, giving him a rough shake that makes him wretch again. "He'd prefer not to kill you, Roronoa, because you're worth a hell of a lot more beli alive than dead to certain people, but we can use the kid just as well, so-"

"You're not leaving this ship alive," Zoro promises hoarsely.

"Keep talking like that and we'll find out if there's any truth to the rumor you like cold steel even better than your captain's cock."
Nauseous terror erupts in the first mate's chest, squeezing brutally tight and rendering him incapable of formulating a response. If he hadn't already pissed himself moments before, he's fairly sure he'd be doing so now because there's an eagerness in that tone making it abundantly clear his attacker's not just deadly serious but excited by the prospect of brutalizing someone he's identified as a helpless victim.

It's not the first time the green-haired pirate's heard someone speak like that, and although the owner of this voice is the wrong sex and a different species entirely, it doesn't matter. His heart's still slamming furiously, and his skin's gone clammy with sweat.

But despite his own fear, his gaze is still locked on Sabo's struggling form, which is vastly dwarfed by the hands wrapped around him, and any defiance still left in him drains away with the fishman's next words, which leave nothing but horror and revulsion in their wake.

"… or maybe we'll just find out how much of the sword your brat can take instead."

"NO. Don't you fucking touch him!"

"Then I'll ask you one more time. Where the hell is Mugiwara no-

The Busoshoku-coated fist bursting through the bedroom door sends pieces of broken wood flying in all directions as it plows into the fishman's skull hard enough to tear his fingers loose from the swordsman's neck, claws leaving burning trails across his throat, and send him slamming face-first into the baseboard.

Zoro's already in motion before the thin scratches on his neck start bleeding, lunging for the katana that's suddenly drooping in the surprised leader's grasp and seizing it by the blade, ignoring the pain as it slices two of his fingers nearly to the bone. He yanks the weapon free, flips it in his grasp and cuts the bastard's legs out from under him before swinging the sword upwards to messily bisect his torso.

A quick twist of his hand, a roll of his wrist, and the blade reverses to disembowel the other fishman, who's trying to crawl away with his hand clamped over his broken and gushing nose, spilling a tangle of intestines across the Adam wood. He collapses, screaming and trying to gather himself back together until the first mate clambers awkwardly onto his knees, leans over, and cuts his throat.

_I like cold steel just fine, but not the way you meant, you sick bastard._

Overkill, to be sure, but he's not taking any chances.

He struggles to his feet, clutching desperately at the wall to keep his balance and nearly falling anyway when there's a twinge of pain in his lower back.

His four remaining opponents scatter, clearly confused by how quickly the tables have turned. The fishman holding Sabo panics, dropping the toddler and fleeing in the opposite direction down the corridor, towards the engine room.

_Thank fucking god. I thought we were gonna have a stand-off trying to get him back. Sencho would've never come out swinging like that if he'd realized-

Knocking the door's splintered remains aside and striding into the hallway, face dark with unbridled fury, Luffy moves to stand protectively over his wailing son, flinging an arm down the hallway to grab the escaping figure and tear him loose from the capstan ladder before he can reach the hatch.
Hauled back down the hallway, he's dumped unceremoniously at Zoro's feet, and the swordsman, still braced against the wall, backs away several steps with his katana raised. It's wavering unsteadily- he can't even pretend at composure anymore, too emotionally compromised and drunk with adrenaline to fight off the tremors gripping his entire frame.

The captain retrieves Sabo from the floor, looks at the crying toddler's tear- and snot-smeared face. Turns his head to gaze at his first mate's blood-splattered front, heaving chest and wet, clinging trousers. At his dripping sword and the red ruin of two bodies heaped on the floor. At the fishman who's scrambling away to join his fellows, slipping and sliding in the mess.

Zoro takes another stumbling step backwards as he tries to escape the heavy coppery stink, nearly falls again when one of his bare feet skids in blood gradually being diluted with cola, and promptly vomits bile, free arm hugging his midsection as he doubles over as much as his distended belly will allow.

Apparently thinking they're both distracted, one of the remaining fishmen tries to rush Luffy, who punches him straight through the storage room door without so much as glancing in his direction.

"You keep breaking every damn thing, Nami's gonna- she's gonna kill you," Zoro informs him nonsensically and then throws up again.

"Right here on the ship," the rubber man says in a subdued, strangled voice. "While I was-"

The Pirate King's voice is soft, barely competing with the steady downpour and almost continuous rumbling of thunder, but his anger fills the close quarters like a living entity. "I was sleeping."

Sabo's twisting and thrashing in his arms, sobbing inconsolably as he reaches for his green-haired father, but when Luffy moves to hand him over, the swordsman tries to wave them away.

"I'm not sure if-" He takes a deep, shaky breath. "I'll get blood on-"

"I don't think he cares."

Zoro scrubs a sleeve across his mouth and nose and makes a few cursory swipes at his chest, cleaning himself off as best he can before hesitantly accepting the toddler with his free arm, and it's clear his partner was right when the one-year-old latches onto his neck and muffles his crying against it.

"See, he wanted you," the captain murmurs. He very gently, very carefully, very cautiously takes the katana from the older pirate's hand, wincing when he sees the deep slashes in the index and middle fingers. "Here, I'll just- I'll put this away for you, okay?"

He searches for the sword's casing, finds it, and carelessly wipes the blade clean on his own shorts before sheathing and setting it aside where the swordsman can still reach it if necessary. Then, feeling vastly relieved his first mate didn't protest the weapon being taken from him, he turns his attention back to those bleeding fingers.

"Chopper- Chopper's gonna be able to fix this, right?"

"Y-Yeah. I know it looks really bad, but they'll heal. I messed up a couple of 'em like that before, when I was younger, and it just- it just took a while."

It's the same hand on which Zoro's already missing two digits and part of a third, and he refuses to look at it, choosing instead to lean his cheek against Sabo's head as he rubs the bawling child's back. His gaze, however, stays locked on the members of their unwitting audience, regarding them
with hateful intensity.

The three fishmen, trapped just a yard or two away at the corridor’s end, are watching the scene with realization dawning on their faces, as though they’re beginning to comprehend just how seriously they’ve misjudged—how seriously they’ve UNDERESTIMATED their targets.

xxx

*While I was SLEEPING,* Luffy tells himself again numbly, releasing his swordsman's hand and reaching out to touch the narrow, straight-edged mark on his bare stomach. He hesitates, fingertips hovering centimeters from the reddened skin. Afraid. Afraid direct contact might inadvertently hurt the older pirate. Afraid he might flinch away for reasons other than physical pain.

*I don't know what they were gonna do 'cause I only caught the last little bit right there at the end when he was yelling at 'em to stop, but the look on Zoro's face while he was fighting—no, when he was KILLING those guys—*

He never does find out what might happen if he closes the distance, because in the corner of his vision, he notices that one of the fishmen's suddenly moving to fumble frantically inside his open jacket.

The captain doesn't think twice; he throws himself between his family and the intruders, earning a startled oath from Zoro and a surprised squeak from Sabo as he pushes them down so he can cover their bodies with his own, but what emerges from beneath the garment, clutched desperately in the fishman's hand, isn't a pistol but a spooked-looking Den Den Mushi.

"Where's our back up? YOU PROMISED THERE'D BE BACK UP," he shouts into the distraught mollusk's face, and the Straw Hats' first mate curses again, louder, and seizes Luffy by the shoulder with his uninjured hand.

"They said something about the Marines, Sencho— they didn't come here alone!"

Alarmed, the younger pirate sends the fishman and his comrades crashing to the floor mid-rant with a decisive widening of his eyes, reducing them to an insensate pile of twitching limbs and vacant, stunned expressions. The fourth, he discovers when he approaches and glances through the large hole in the store room door, is lying in a crumpled puddle and was probably already unconscious when he crashed into the floor.

*I hit him pretty hard."

His mind flashes to Zoro's bloodied nose and their son's tear-streaked face, and his eyes narrow.

*I should've hit him harder.*

He pries the Den Den from its prison of webbed fingers and shoves it at his swordsman, who promptly starts demanding for whoever's on the other end of the line to identify themselves, before casting a mental net over the ship, radiating outwards with himself at the center.

Sabo registers first, closely followed by the confusing jumble that's Zoro and the twins he's carrying, and then the tangle of unconscious fishmen, and then he's beyond them, anxiously counting heads.

*Usopp, Sanji, Chopper, Franky, Brook, Jinbei, Ace,* and on the level above them, *Robin."

He reaches towards the observation room for Nami and doesn't find her. Someone's there; he
senses a presence, but it's one he doesn't recognize. It's also low and flickering, like the enemies he's just incapacitated.

*Where. Where is she?*

He locates the navigator just as her panicked voice bursts over the crow's nest loud speaker, screaming at everyone to wake up and get themselves outside, NOW, and when he pushes his Kenbunshoku Haki further, straining it to its limits, what he finds sends his heart and stomach plummeting.

He yanks his consciousness fully back into his own body and takes off, bolting deeper into the ship and once again startling Zoro, who's wincing at the volume of Nami's voice amplified by the below-decks wall speakers and trying to cover Sabo's ears as the toddler begins a fresh round of terrified wailing.

"Oi, where the hell are you-?"

There's one broken barrel by the capstan and another in the hallway between the docking and engine rooms. He reaches the steps, scrambles up them.

*Three. Franky says it takes three barrels to-

He finds two. One whole barrel, untouched, and a second that's managed to roll into the wall and jam itself with the stopcock facing up, so it's still nearly half full when he rights it, mind racing.

*We need to get out of here. We need to get out of here right now*

Back down the corridor, to find his first mate emerging through their shattered quarters' door with their younger son clinging to his torso like a frightened monkey, made fast by the harness the green-haired man's strapped on to give himself two free hands to wield the katana now secured at his side.

"If we end up fighting our way out of here, I'm not putting him down and having somebody grab him," the swordsman insists when he sees Luffy looking at him.

"Zoro shouldn't be fighting at all."

"I know, but we might not have a-"

*Choice, Zoro's clearly about to say, but he's interrupted by the sudden barrage of cannon fire that slams into the hull, shaking the entire brig sloop so violently that they stagger and resort to clutching at each other to keep their footing.*

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Topside, everything's descended into madness.

Visibility's poor, thanks to the darkness and the precipitation that's coming down in sheets between the bay and the ocean beyond, but the Sunny's anchored near enough to the entrance for the entire crew to see the forefront of the enemy vessels waiting beyond, telltale white and blue sails snapping briskly in the wind.

Fortunately for the pirates, only the closest ships are in bombardment range, and the Marine captains seem reluctant to commit themselves to the narrow inlets that are the only way in or out.
Luffy heads straight for Franky, tilting his hat to shield his face from the driving rain.

"How the hell are they firing at us in this shit?" Zoro demands as he uses the captain's sash to tie Kitetsu's handle securely into his right hand, blinking and giving his head a shake to clear the water from his face.

It's pointless; they were all soaked to the skin the second they set foot on the lawn deck, and what's coming down is bloody COLD, but the swordsman can't help being secretly relieved.

Nobody but Sencho's gonna know I fucking pissed myself.

"Oilcloths stretched over the cannons to keep the powder dry. But the stuff's flammable, so if we're lucky, they'll blow up a few of their own guns!" Usopp shouts back. He glances over- and immediately does a double-take at the sight of his nakama's swollen nose, poorly bandaged hand and the traces of blood the rain's quickly washing away. "What the hell happened to-"

They break apart as the next volley of cannonballs comes flying towards the ship, the swordsman puffing heavily as he dodges, because keeping his balance on the wet grass isn't easy.

He's not sure if he ought to be relieved or annoyed when the shitty cook comes tearing across the deck to Sky Walk into the air and kick a couple of the projectiles back at the enemy ships.

If I could still move like that-

But he's effectively grounded by the bellyful of baby- or rather babies- that's straining his waistband to maximum capacity, and even if his body wasn't so heavy and unwieldy at the moment, he's still highly conscious of the toddler huddled against his chest.

"Marimo!"

"I got it, I got it."

He slashes at the low flying cannonball, carving it into two pieces and clenching his teeth as his wounded fingers automatically spasm open, only the fabric tied around his hand and wrist keeping the katana from soaring out of his grip.

Goddamn, that hurts.

He tries to flex the injured digits, stifles a hiss of pain and yanks the knotted cloth a little tighter.

Chopper's gonna love me.

"Why do you look like you've already been in a fight?" Usopp demands as he returns to the swordsman's side. "You shouldn't even be out here!"

"I'm afraid he's right. Zoro-san, it's probably best if you-"

"I'm not going anywhere, okay?" The first mate's aware he's speaking to the sniper and Jinbei more sharply than he intended, but he's running short on patience and now's not the time for concerning himself with observing niceties. He can apologize for being rude later, when they're not facing a few dozen Marine warships. "These assholes sent an advance guard. Somehow they got into the fucking dock system, and I think they were sabotaging the engine room when we bumped into each other."

He's stretching the truth a bit, but he'd rather not explain that they found him unconscious on the
floor, especially when his eldest son's just darted up to wrap both arms around his middle and give a relieved squeeze before quickly releasing him in case he needs to fend off another volley of cannonballs.

"Dad, are you okay?" Ace is tense but not seriously frightened; this isn't the first skirmish he's seen, and Zoro doubts it'll be the last.

Assuming we all make it through this alive.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Do me a favor, will you, and try to stay close but make sure you keep an eye on what's going on around you."

"Okay."

"And run like hell if you spot one of those damn balls headed your way and we've got our hands too full to stop it, 'cause I don't care what Luffy thinks. You guys don't stretch like him, and one of those things could flatten you- if it doesn't take your head off first."

"Got it."

"Zoro-san, wouldn't both you and the children be safer in the men's quarters?" Jinbei tries again, earning himself an exasperated glare.

"Heads up!" Sanji shouts, dashing away to meet the next volley.

Gesturing for the others to stand aside, Zoro draws Shusui and uses both it and Kitetsu to cleave an incoming cannonball into four segments, hunched forward protectively over Sabo, who glances cursorily behind him to see what's going on and then buries his face back against his father's neck, one fist gripping the collar of his coat.

Panting slightly, the swordsman turns back to Jinbei. "Luffy- Luffy's pretty sure we found everybody on the ship- that didn't belong- but I'm not screwing around. I want the kids right here where I can see 'em AND where I've got a good view of the whole damn deck and anybody trying to sneak up on us."

He doesn't say it, but the idea of being confined right now, even to a space he knows well, makes his skin crawl. It resurrects memories of being trapped in a cell, anchored to a chilly stone wall by the chains binding his arms.

"Ah, I'm afraid you might have some difficulty convincing Chopper-san that remaining on deck's the wisest option," the fishman says dubiously, and sure enough, the physician's rushing towards them.

"I smell blood," Chopper insists, eyes widening. "Zoro-"

"I WAS inside, and some cocky shithead fishman tried to use me as a punching bag. I'm not going back inside-"

He almost says "unless somebody fucking carries me" and stops himself, because the reindeer looks determined enough to attempt it, and if someone tries to manhandle him right now, he's afraid he might start swinging. Or screaming. Or maybe both.

"I smell blood," Chopper insists, eyes widening. "Zoro-"

"I said, some fucker punched me in the goddamn nose. Now can we save it for when we don't have
a friggin' fleet of Marines trying to kill us?"

He can see the wheels turning, the suspicion in his smaller nakama's eyes, but before the doctor can ask him how someone managed to get past his blades to hit him in the face, Luffy's back.

"Franky says we don't have enough cola for a Coupe de Burst and we can't use the main cannon either, but he and Nami think the Chicken thing might work." The captain turns his anxious gaze on Chopper. "We can still use that, right? It's not gonna hurt Zoro or the peas?"

"I'm not sure if-"

"Sencho, we've got two choices: either we do whatever it takes to get the hell out of here now, or we sit here and wait for them to quit screwing around and come get us. Because once they decide they're brave enough to sail down those inlets…"

"Okay, okay." Concern writ clear on his face, Luffy takes a deep breath and a moment to caress his swordsman's belly before turning to wave wildly at where Nami's standing at the helm awaiting his orders while Robin and Brook keep the air around her free of cannonballs. "DO IT, DO IT! LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!"
"Last time we did this, there were toads falling on us."

"Last time we did this, I was less than half the size I am now," Zoro mutters back, clutching awkwardly around Luffy's shoulders where he's securely wrapped in the captain's rubbery embrace. "I feel like a bloody sack of potatoes."

"Yeah, you do," comes a disgruntled snort from the eight-year-old trapped between them, his voice slightly muffled by his father's belly. "You're all lumpy and- gah, would you stop-!

His complaint that he's being repeatedly kicked in the face by his unborn siblings turns into a shout of alarm as someone at the helm activates the Chicken Voyage and the entire ship rockets backwards towards the wider of the two inlets leading to the open ocean.

Sabo lets loose a piercing shriek that, incredibly, dissolves into laughter promptly stolen by the wind whipping past and wriggles against their green-haired father's chest, craning his neck and blinking owlishly as he tries to see where they're going.

Chin hooked over the captain's shoulder and eye screwed tightly shut against the rain stinging his face, Zoro forces himself to take deep, slow breaths in hopes of calming his turbulently churning stomach, uncomfortably aware that vomiting right now could prove extremely unfortunate.

"Come on. Come on, come on, come-" Luffy gives a victorious whoop as they shoot past the rocky tower sheltering the bay where they've spent the last few weeks.

His elation dies almost immediately as the ship hits the waters outside the bay and two things register. One, they're surrounded. Two, the enemy vessels aren't budging. Instead of scattering like he, Franky and Nami had hoped, the ships directly in their path are holding steady.

"Move, damn it!" He glares back over his shoulder, aware that his swordsman's groaning faintly beside his ear. More so because he can feel the vibration in the older pirate's chest than actually hear him; the storm's still kicking up quite a bit of noise. "MOVE!"

Fortunately, they're not being fired on again yet; caught off-guard by the Sunny's unexpected movement, the Marines are scrambling to turn their cannons. But if they get snarled in the wreckage-

"EVERYBODY HOLD ONTO SOMETHING!" He hears Franky bellow distantly and tightens his grip on the staircase, feeling Zoro tense against his chest, fingers digging into his shoulder blades.

"Pit Adam wood against ordinary lumber and the Adam wood will win every time, which is one of the things that makes it so super, but you gotta take a bunch of other factors into account as well," Luffy dimly recalls their shipwright explaining. "If we hit another ship, we're not just tryin' to move that ship but the ocean under it too."

When the brig sloop's rear slams into the portside bow of the Marine craft blocking its escape route, the enemy vessel crumples under the force as the sturdier ship first shoves it sideways and then pushes it under, but the collision sends a massive jolt up the entire length of the Sunny.

The captain, partially deafened by Sabo's yowl of alarm, grunts and fights for his balance as he's nearly thrown off his feet. Momentarily crushed between one parent's hip and the other's swollen belly, Ace blurts out a single word that - was she close enough to hear him - would have the crew's
navigator insisting that Sanji withhold his dessert for a month.

Zoro utters nothing but a wordless cry of shock that's cut short as the additional weight inside his abdominal cavity rebounds, painfully compressing his lungs and knocking the wind out of him despite Luffy's coiled arms, which prevent him from being driven into the railing. Staggering, he struggles momentarily for air, stunned nearly as much by the twins' violent displeasure at being unexpectedly shaken about as by the crash itself.

Chopper's on them in a flash, transforming to Heavy Point so he can pull the swordsman free of the rubber man's embrace and force him onto the wet bench encircling the foremast, even as the ship continues grinding over the splintered timbers of the Marine wreckage. "Sit- you need to sit!"

"I'm-"

"SIT." The doctor insists, grabbing for the older pirate's wrist and then leaping out of the way as he leans forward and begins to dry heave with enough force to convulse his entire frame.

"Here, lemme-" Unbuckling the harness from his swordsman, Luffy carefully transfers their confused one-year-old to his own chest- just as Sanji and Usopp raise the alarm that they've got boarders from the sinking vessel as well as another that's pulled up alongside. "Zoro, stay here with Chopper and let him take care of you! I'll be back soon as I can!"

"Be c-careful- damn it!" The first mate calls breathlessly after him, groping for the bench's edge and pushing himself completely upright so he can track his family members' progress across the deck and reluctantly allow the reindeer to check his pulse. A task not easily completed because nausea's continuing to sweep through him every time the ship shifts, making it nearly impossible to hold still. He can't seem to stop gagging.

Ace scrambles up onto the bench to stand beside them, bare toes gripping the planks as he surveys the deck warily with a hand raised to shield his face from the rain and keep his dripping bangs out of his eyes.

"Elevated but not erratic," Chopper's mumbling to himself. Nudging his nakama to lean back, he cradles Zoro's lower belly in both hands and palpates it carefully, watching his face closely for signs of pain and coming close to panic when his touch prompts a grimace. "Where? Where does it hurt?"

The swordsman makes an exasperated noise. "Shit, more like where DOESN'T it hurt. They're- mmmph- they're really pissed off."

"I can feel that," the doctor agrees. "But is there anything that-"

"Oi!" The child standing over them barks, tensing and edging closer to his father's side.

"Think we're gonna have to do this later," Zoro grunts, pushing away the reindeer's temporarily humanoid hands so he can roll clumsily off the bench and draw Kitetsu. He pulls the length of bloodstained yellow silk free from where he stashed it earlier, inside the breast of his coat. "Here-do me a favor and tie this damn thing. You'll get it tighter than I can by my-"

"Zoro, what happened to your HAND?"

"Nothing worse than what happened to it already. Oi, don't look at me that way."

"..."
"Fine. Ace, you do it, then; you make decent knots."

"Dad, you're already hurt," the eight-year-old protests helplessly even as he obeys, looping the wet sash repeatedly around the katana handle gripped in his father's trembling fingers. "And everybody says you're not supposed to fight. YOU said you're not supposed to fight!"

"I know, and I won't unless I have to, but-" The swordsman's gaze locks onto where Luffy's dominating the battlefield, using mostly long-range attacks to clear the deck of Marines yet keep Sabo safely out of reach, while Sanji protects their backs. "Until Franky gets us free, those bastards are just gonna keep piling on, and if some of 'em make it past everybody else-"

He doesn't say it, but the implication's there: he won't run. Not just because it's against his nature to flee a battle, but also because he CAN'T run.

"I'd rather take my chances with a sword in my hand than without."

xxx

Retracting the fist that he's just used to punch a hapless Marine recruit over the railing, Luffy spares his squealing younger son a bemused grin.

"Does he think we're playing some shitty game?" Sanji asks with a snort, lowering his leg and moving so they're once more standing back to back. "I know we always say he takes after you, but this is ridiculous. YOU look ridiculous, fighting with a baby hanging off you."

"As long as he's not scared, I don't care." The captain nuzzles the toddler's hair with his nose and chin, plants a kiss on his head. "He was really freaked out earlier. This is better."

"What the hell happened? I heard you yelling something about fishmen when you guys first got up here, and-" The cook pauses to spring into a handstand so he can execute a whirling roundhouse kick that sends several of their enemies stumbling backwards with concussions and broken jaws, while Luffy crouches out of range and takes advantage of the lull to continue fussing affectionately over Sabo. "-and Marimo's a bloody wreck. Literally."

"Yeah, there's a bunch of guys I knocked out down there." The rubber man pops back to his feet as Sanji bounces upright. "And, uh, some PARTS of guys."

"WHAT?"

"Nami said some guy came after her in the library. Tried to stab her but she zapped him with her weather stick thing and then hit him in the head with it."

"Good," Sanji mutters darkly.

"She's really upset- she thinks he snuck onboard while she was looking through her maps and went to the helm and- oi, hang on a second. USOPP. USOPP!" Luffy waves both arms until he catches the sniper's attention, then gestures frantically towards a group of Marines that have just rounded the deck outside the dining hall.

Usopp, who's found a more advantageous spot on top of the enormous decorative scroll near the front of the ship's starboard side, where he's picking off unsuspecting victims - and discreetly keeping an eye on the small group clustered at the foremast's base - flashes him a thumbs-up and reloads his weapon.

"What was I- oh, right. Nami thinks the first guy let the other ones in through the dock system."
The cook shoots him a startled look. "We had Six open to let the kids use the pool while you and Marimo were-

"Yeah, she said the storm was so loud, we probably didn't hear anything 'cause they didn't need to rotate the channels to get inside, just open the hatch." The captain turns briefly towards the bow to check on their other nakama just in time to see Brook sheathing his blade after a lightning-quick strike that drops at least a dozen of his opponents to their knees moments later. "But then Zoro got up, probably to go pee or check on Sabo or whatever, and he ran into 'em outside our room."

"Well, I guess that explains the parts. Jeez," Sanji mutters, then frowns. "But he told Usopp and Chopper that somebody punched him in the face? How'd they catch him off-guard?"

"I dunno, but I think he's been having trouble sensing stuff lately. Maybe it's got something to do with the peas? Or maybe not, but- when I found him in the storage room yesterday, it took him a little bit 'til he figured out I was there. And when I try to sense HIM, it's like-" Brow furrowed, Luffy makes squiggly motions with his fingers, not sure how to explain what he experienced earlier while scanning the ship for more intruders.

The blond's still considering this when the hatch in the lawn deck bursts open, sending an unsuspecting Marine flying, and Franky scrambles out, emerging almost sideways to fit his bulky shoulders through the opening one at a time.

"It's a mess down there!" The shipwright exclaims, casually seizing another man by the collar and tossing him aside as he strolls over to address the Straw Hat captain. "Oi, we definitely haven't got enough cola for a full-strength Coupe de Burst or Gaon Cannon, but we might be able to pull off a short half-powered one just long enough to get us free."

He scratches his head, scowling. "If we still had the paddles, we could use those, but-"

"You think it's gonna bounce us around a lot again? 'Cause I don't think Zoro or the peas liked that a whole lot…"

"Beats me. Never tried doing one using anything but full barrels."

Luffy leans around the cyborg to see what's happening near the front of the ship and bites the inside of his cheek. Jinbei's joined Chopper in defending the area below the foremast, but Ace is peering anxiously from beneath the left staircase, watching Zoro lock blades with a determined opponent.

The first mate looks exhausted, the strain of active participation in the battle evident on his face, and while his crewmates keep casting distressed looks in his direction, every time they take a step towards him, they're confronted by fresh adversaries blocking their path.

Overhead, Usopp's repeatedly lifting his Kabuto and then lowering it, unwilling to make a shot that might hit his nakama rather than the intended target.

"OI," Luffy shouts, enraged, when his swordsman's white-uniformed foe abruptly lifts a foot and tries to kick the older pirate in the belly, forcing him to perform a stumbling evasive maneuver to protect himself. "OI, TRY THAT AGAIN AND I'LL KICK YOUR ASS!"

The captain tenses, ready to throw himself across the deck despite his usual refusal to interfere with his partner's swordfights - given the circumstances, he's beyond caring about aesthetics and whether or not the other man's going to get angry with him for coming to the rescue again - but then Zoro catches his opponent's cutlass with his katana, forcing both weapons' points towards the
grass, and makes a short barreling dash that drives the Marine backwards against the staircase railing with a forearm braced across his throat, crushing his larynx.

Sanji winces. "Damn, Marimo's fighting dirty."

"Trying to kick Zoro in the tummy was fighting dirty," the younger pirate replies indignantly.

"Definitely not cool," Franky agrees. "C'mon, let's go give Haramaki-bro a hand."

The first mate's leaning heavily against the railing when they reach him, shoulders sagging inside his thoroughly soggy coat and breath puffing out in small clouds, but he straightens and reaches for Sabo the moment the toddler comes into range.

Luffy fends him off. "Zoro needs to sit down first."

"Oi, Mugiwara-bro. I'm gonna go cover for Reindeer-bro, send him back to check on things."

"Gotcha. Zoro, sit."

"I'm not a dog," the swordsman protests as he's steered back onto the bench.

"No, but you're hurt, and you've been fighting with our babies inside you, and you look like you're gonna fall over if you don't, and Chopper's gonna tell you the same thing when he gets here," the captain argues, pushing him down and fussily examining his bare midsection for boot marks and other injuries. Feeling the warmth of the older pirate's skin, he shivers. "Brrr! It got really chilly- I dunno how Zoro's not cold with his belly hanging out."

"You're wearing nothing but shorts, and I've got two internal heaters."

"Dad's like a big hot water bottle," Ace agrees, having emerged from beneath the staircase to join them. Dropping onto the bench, he stretches out a leg to plant splayed toes against his father's side. "Wow, you ARE really toasty."

"Get your foot off me- it's freezing!"

"Zoro's not a footrest," Luffy scolds, batting at the eight-year-old's heel until he moves away, just in time for the crew's doctor to swoop in and start bemoaning his lack of a stethoscope.

"I should have brought my bag out here with me; I don't know what I was thinking! Not that I'd hear much with this storm and all the commotion, but-" He's practically wringing his hooves in agitation. "Zoro, until I can do a more thorough exam, I need you to do kick counts and track how much movement you're feeling. That's kicks, punches, rolls and pretty much any other- ah, what's so funny?"

"I'm supposed to count this shit? They haven't STOPPED kicking and throwing themselves around since before the last time you were poking at me."

As though emphasizing the swordsman's point, his belly not only twitches but actually goes momentarily lopsided as the twins wriggle in first the same and then opposite directions. Bracing the heel of his free hand against his lower back, he exhales noisily as a flailing foot jabs him in the ribs. "Fuck! They won't quit doing that. Kept nearly knocking me on my ass while I was dealing with that asshole."
He gestures with the sword still bound to his right hand to the unconscious body in the grass.

"They're reacting to the external stimuli. The thunder, people shouting. You overexerting yourself. That's why I want you inside, away from the noise and the fighting."

Ace is watching with disconcerted fascination. "How do they even do that when they're so little? I thought you said they only weigh a couple of pounds!"

"Yes, but even though each baby's still only about the size of a head of lettuce or maybe the length and weight of a small eggplant, without a uterine wall surrounding them and providing a cushion, it's very easy for their movements to-"

Chopper's lecture concerning fetal activity's rudely interrupted by warning shouts from their nearby crewmates and Luffy pushing Sabo into his older brother's arms so he can bound high over everyone's heads to deploy a hasty Gomu Gomu no Fusen and repel two incoming cannonballs.

"Looks like they finally got the cannons turned..." Zoro groans, leaning back against the mast to watch as their captain races off once more to assist Sanji, who's struggling to divide his attention between the renewed artillery fire and the Marines who are taking advantage of the bombardment to swarm the deck.

"Oh no- I need to finish evaluating you! Franky said he might've found a way to get us out of here, but I told him we might not be able to risk it if-"

"Chopper." The older pirate's voice is weary but full of resolve. "They came here looking for Sencho. Shanks was right. They got tired of asking and they got tired of threatening him, so they decided to try something new."

"Zoro-"

"We both know he's never gonna agree to what they want, that he'll go down fighting before he lets them get their hands on-" Unoccupied fingers straying to his belly, he turns his head to look at the two children curled on the bench beside him. "-you or me or the kids or ANY of us. And once they realize that..."

"... you think we shouldn't be here when that happens."

"You heard what I told Luffy. Whatever it takes to get out of here, we better do it, 'cause the longer we hang around-" Zoro nearly winces at his own choice of words, but it's an accurate if unpleasant assessment of the situation. Should the crew's defenses fail, given their bounties and the World Government's known animosity, anyone who's taken alive is likely to find themselves either dangling at the end of a noose or awaiting the guillotine, regardless of age or sex.

The Marines' justice makes no distinctions; a pirate's a pirate.

At the same time, he's trying very hard to avoid recalling the fishman's remark that he's worth more alive than dead to "certain people" ... because knowing what he does about Law and Chopper's relentless interest in his physiology, it doesn't take much to imagine the type of individual who'd be willing to pay that kind of beli for a medical oddity.

It brings to mind names like Hogback and Vegapunk and Caesar. It also brings to mind images of shiny laboratory tables with restraint cuffs, trays containing sharp-tipped scalpels and syringes, and surveillance cameras, and the swordsman can feel his mouth going dry.

I think I'd rather-
"Franky wants to blast the ship loose by firing the Gaon Cannon at half power while activating the Chicken Voyage." Chopper says hesitantly. "He thinks it'll probably work, but he's not really sure what's going to happen. Even if everything goes as planned, it's going to be an extremely rough ride. And I'm concerned about the amount of stress your body's already been through."

"I hate to break it to you, but the longer it takes us to get away from this place, the worse it's gonna get, and the better our chances of somebody getting stabbed or shot. I don't know if you noticed, but half the crew's still waking up. If Nami hadn't made it to the loudspeaker when she did, you guys might've still been in bed when shit really started going down."

The reindeer opens his mouth to speak, closes it. Swallows hard before opening it again. "If I- ... if I tell Franky to go ahead, I need you to do exactly what I tell you, because this could potentially be very dangerous for you and the twins."

"Yeah, okay. Just lemme know what I'm supposed to do." Yanking the sash tied around his hand free so he can sheath his katana, Zoro scoots forward to the edge of the bench and braces his uninjured hand against his belly for support as he rises stiffly to his feet, smiling grimly as he feels movement under his palm. "Sorry, you two, but it looks like it's gonna get a little bumpy again."

Across the deck, Luffy hesitates in the process of drawing his arm back to hit the Marine who's trying to impale him with a saber, casually avoiding the man's next strike as he watches his first mate moving away from the foremast with Sabo in his arms and Ace at his side. Chopper's pacing them nervously, steering all three towards the nearest men's quarters' door.

"Oi oi, Captain Oblivious- you wanna pay attention to what you're doing?"

"Wha- oh, right." The rubber man sways to avoid another stabbing motion and finally follows through with his punch, sending his opponent flailing backwards over the railing. "Sanji, I think Chopper okayed the thing Franky wants to do! I think we're leaving!"

"Seriously?" The cook asks incredulously, kicking his own antagonist in the jaw before turning to look. "I figured he'd pitch a fit since Marimo almost puked after that last time."

"I dunno, but I'm gonna find out. Can you give 'em a hand at the bow 'til I get back? Tell Robin she might wanna lend us an ear or something?"

Sanji starts to answer in the affirmative, but the younger pirate's already gone, darting across the grass to rejoin his family.

He's hiding it really well, but the poor guy's gotta be worried damn near out of his mind, trying to keep tabs on the shitty swordsman and the kids, not to mention the rest of us. Bad enough we got attacked in the first place, but with Marimo being almost six and a half months pregnant and the size of a freakin' house...

Despite the frigid temperature of the rain pelting him, the blond's involuntary shiver has nothing to do with the icy water running down his skin.

It's like some shitty deja vu, he thinks as he joins Brook, Robin and Nami at the helm. I keep expecting to turn around and see Impel Down behind us instead of that island.

"Sanji-kun!" Nami calls from where she's guarding the wheel and the dock system controls with Clima-tact in hand. "What's going on?"
"Luffy said we're getting out of here, but I've been ass-deep in shitty Marines until now, so I didn't catch the whole plan. Something about using the cannon and the propeller at the same time?"

"I thought we didn't have enough fuel?"

"Perhaps our shipwright intends to fire a smaller blast than normal." Uncrossing her arms and allowing the men she's been throttling to drop to the deck, Robin moves closer so she can address her crewmates without raising her voice quite as much. "Even so, it's a rather risky maneuver, particularly for Kenshi-san."

"Yeah, I know, but we're sort of... out of options here," the cook murmurs, unaware that Zoro's currently telling their worried captain and doctor the same thing.

"One moment." Closing her eyes, Robin turns her attention elsewhere, trusting the others to watch her back while she once again utilizes her Akuma no Mi abilities.

"How you holding up?" Sanji asks the skeleton who's joined them on the opposite side of the curved bench at the helm, bony fingers resting on the handle of his weapon.

"Fairly well," Brook replies. "Thankfully I do not tire easily. Our unwelcome company is quite relentless!"

The lack of skull jokes is a testament to the seriousness of their situation, and the cook plucks restlessly at his soggy t-shirt collar, wishing desperately for a cigarette.

*Doubt I'd get one lit. All this damn rain...*

"Franky's gone below." The historian announces suddenly without preamble. "Nami, he asks that you wait on my signal and advises that everyone hold onto the nearest well-anchored stationary object."

Brook ducks his head in assent. "And Zoro-san?"

A pause. "In the men's quarters with the children, in a lower box hammock. He says our doctor's hoping it will protect him from being jerrated too violently, especially if there's another collision, although it's still likely to make him rather ill. He- oh my."

"What?" Sanji demands.

Robin's lips are twitching. "He says he hopes we enjoy the ride, and he apologizes in advance for, ah, vomiting in your bunk."

"THAT SHITTY-" The cook breaks off, rubbing his face to hide the smile threatening to surface. *Stupid moss-head knows we're worried about him.*

"Alright, let's get this shit over with."

There's five tense, agonizingly long minutes of waiting and periodically fending off the encroaching Marines until Robin finally offers a nod to Nami, who grits her teeth as she throws the lever to activate rotation of the figurehead's mane.

The Sunny immediately surges backwards, fighting to break free of the vessel crushed beneath it.

Everyone grabs for a firm handhold, holding their breath, but after another long minute crawls by and then another and nothing happens and their perplexed enemies shrug and start moving in again,
Luffy comes rocketing up from the lawn deck to see what's happening- or rather what's NOT
happening, because although the ship's forging ahead slowly but surely, it's dragging the wreckage
along with it.

"Goddamn it, we'd have better luck if we got out and pushed!" Sanji exclaims, joining the captain
to peer over the side. "Why didn't the bloody cannon go off?"

"Maybe there just wasn't enough cola after all..."

"Shit. What the hell are we supposed to-"

"LUFFY-SAN!"

Hearing Jinbei's shout, they spin to discover a perpetual tidal wave of Marines flooding onboard
from the new ship with which they've pulled even.

"SHIT," the cook hisses again, but there's nothing they can do except temporarily abandon the
helm to aid the beleaguered fishman and the Zoan who's taken Horn Point to fight alongside him.

The men they're facing are well-rested and armed to the teeth, and later the Straw Hats will discuss
the well-planned nature of the attack and speculate that they were likely under surveillance for
hours, possibly even days, before the military force made its move, but no one realizes just how
badly awry everything's gone until Sanji glances up from his most recent - and now unconscious -
opponents to spot familiar green hair at the far end of the mob.

"What the fuck do you think you're-?"

The outraged shout dies on his lips as he realizes Zoro's backing out of the men's quarters with one
son clutched protectively against his chest and hip, the other stumbling backwards with him and
clinging to his side like a burr, and a katana gripped awkwardly in his injured hand and wavering
slightly as he holds it between himself and the double-barreled flintlock that's aimed at his middle.

"MUGIWARA," shouts the Marine holding the gun. An officer by the looks of his epaulets.

"MUGIWARA!"

The cook whirls, frantically scanning the deck for Luffy.

He finds the captain poised at the center of a circle of low-level recruits and knows immediately
that he's already seen; the rubber man's frozen, ignoring the bristling ring of edged weapons
closing around him, with his fists clenched forgotten at his sides.

Is it raining hard enough? Sanji can feel his pulse thrumming in his throat, his stomach giving a
lazy, queasy roll at the expression on Luffy's face and the way his enormously widened eyes are
locked on the pistol muzzle tracking Zoro's rounded midsection. Those things aren't worth shit in
wet weather because it's so damn hard to light the gunpowder, but IS IT RAINING HARD
ENOUGH?

A few minutes ago, he was cursing his lack of a smoke. Now he's digging his fingernails into his
palms, willing the sky to open in a deluge capable of drowning the spark that might prove the end
of their captain's sanity.

"MUGIWARA," the officer shouts again, taking another step towards the swordsman and leveling
his firearm.

Luffy scrambles towards them, heedless of the men parting to give him room, and stops less than a yard away, the effort of restraining himself clearly visible. All over the ship, the fighting's ground to a halt, and the only sounds are the muffled groans of the wounded, the rain beating against Adam wood and the steady growl of thunder overhead.

"Sorry, Sencho. Guess I'm having a pretty shitty day," Zoro says softly, his tone full of enough regret to make Sanji's chest ache. "Bastard must've snuck in the other door while everybody was—"

A series of clicks as the hammer's drawn back, and the first mate falls silent, trying not to flinch when the flintlock's barrel shoves forward past his sword hand to nudge firmly against his belly.

"Shut up. I'm interested in what the Pirate King's got to say, not his—"

Zoro doesn't react to the insult, possibly too distracted by the cold metal pressed against him, but Luffy bares his teeth in a slow soundless snarl, nostrils flaring and eyes blazing, and for a moment, the cook's afraid that the younger pirate's going to attack the officer, gun or no gun.

Sanji's own teeth are grinding together, only his fear that exploding into expletives might get his crewmate shot preventing him from verbally ripping into the officer.

You don't know him, you shitty spineless asshole. You don't know ANY of us, so don't. Just fucking DON'T.

"My superiors were wondering why you suddenly dropped off the map, Mugiwara, but once I'd seen Roronoa here, the answer was quite obvious."

"Let them go."

"Not the most effective method of recruitment, is it?"

In obvious discomfort from being forced to remain so still with nearly thirty pounds of toddler cradled against his bulging side and Kitetsu's weight dragging on his now motionless right arm, Zoro shifts involuntarily and gives a small pained grunt as his captor automatically digs the pistol deeper into his gut.

Sabo's quiet, hiding his face against his father's neck, but Ace, clutching a handful of the swordsman's soaked coat, is positively fuming and glaring up at the Marine officer as though he'd like to land a fist- or possibly the point of a knife- between the man's eyes.

Murderous as his expression might be, however, it pales in comparison to the Straw Hat captain's.

"Let them go and you can leave," Luffy promises, although the anger clogging his voice makes it clear that the offer's against his better judgment.

"Swear allegiance to the World Government and maybe they'll consider returning Roronoa and your brats, provided you're willing to make a reasonable show of good faith. But for now-" A curt gesture and several men of lower rank begin to edge forward. "-they're coming with us to ensure your good behavior."

As hard as he's trying to hide his response, there's no mistaking the sheer panic in Zoro's widening eye as unfamiliar hands reach out to grab him, and for a moment, the cook's positive there's going to be a bloodbath, because whatever happened earlier combined with what's happening now has obviously been traumatic enough to trigger a full-blown flashback. He can see it in the
swordsman's face and in the way his grip's suddenly tightening on the katana hilt despite the threat of the gun still jammed against him.

_The second they touch him, he's going to lose it. He's going to start swinging, and that asshole is going to fucking shoot him, and Luffy-_ 

But what seems inevitable never happens, because after nearly twenty-five minutes of unexplained delay, the Sunny's figurehead cannon chooses this moment to fire unexpectedly, going off with such force that the entire front end of the ship rises out of the water because there's been no stabilizing blast from the rear cannon, and gravity proves itself superior to pirates and Marines alike.

At the helm, Nami utters a short scream of surprise and hangs onto the wheel for dear life as the deck drops out beneath her feet. One flailing hand strikes the controls, reengaging the propeller and driving the stern further downwards. Below her, Robin and Brook find themselves dangling from the bench seat's back rail.

Zoro, upon finding himself airborne, barely notices when the startled officer accidentally pulls the trigger of his weapon and sends droning bullets winging past his temple like riled hornets. He's too busy staring down at the main mast that's somehow absurdly BELOW him and trying to curl himself around the screaming one-year-old wrapped around his torso.

Clinging with both arms and legs to the staircase railing he's managed to grab onto, Ace makes a desperate lunge for the older pirate's collar but neither his muscles nor the fabric are strong enough to support his father's weight, and the material tears away in his fingers.

"Oh shit," Sanji manages, staring up from where he's landed on the aquarium bar wall in a dazed pile of Marines and nakama, only vaguely registering that Usopp's tangled in the tree beside him because his gaze is locked on the plummeting man above.

_If he hits something-_ 

"LUFFY!" Chopper's shrieking, so distressed that he's inadvertently changed into Guard Point, but the warning's unnecessary.

The captain twists in midair to throw one hand towards the stairs, latching onto the railing near where his white-faced son's clinging, and then hurls himself after Zoro and Sabo.

Looping his free arm under his swordsman's chest to catch him as gently as possible, he spins the green-haired man to face him with their younger son tucked between them, ducking to avoid the blade squeezed tight in the other pirate's grasp as he turns the fall into a swing with his eyes already scanning the deck for a safe place to land.

_Zoro, looking back over his shoulder and struggling with a powerful rush of motion sickness, has just enough time to give a breathless shout of warning before the falling Marine officer's hand closes around the rubber man's elongated arm and wrenches him free from the stair railing, not only sending the limb snapping back to normal but also sending all of them hurtling over the side of the ship."

_Luffy makes a desperate grab for the lawn deck railing as they plunge over it. He misses, too entangled in his passengers' limbs to secure a decent grip, and suddenly the Sunny's falling in the opposite direction, dropping back into place heavily enough to send a gigantic wave of cold seawater washing across the deck and the people struggling to sit up._
Heart pounding, Sanji scrambles to his hands and knees, staring with disbelief at the empty railing until Ace races past him, screaming hysterically for his parents and brother, and then it's all the cook can do to catch up and wrap both arms around the eight-year-old's waist before he can climb high enough to throw himself over the side after them.
Chapter 19

Time slows to a limping crawl as Luffy's grasping fingers slip, and the first mate swears he can hear the splinterly scratching noise of the younger pirate's fingernails raking the railing before losing purchase, and then everything speeds up again and the churning expanse of ocean below is looming closer and closer at a despairingly fast pace.

While the waves aren't quite violent enough to compete with a true tsunami or a tidal event such as the Aqua Laguna, the storm's whipped them into enough of a frenzy that anyone entering the water's likely to be immediately overwhelmed and dragged down by the undertow.

Sencho can't swim. And even if we lose the fucking asshole that grabbed him, I'm not- I'm not gonna be able to hang onto him and Sabo long enough for somebody to find us. Not even Jinbei. Not even if I drop Kitetsu. If we hit the water, we're dead.

With these thoughts flashing through his mind as he falls with his panic-stricken captain trying to hold onto him and their son, claw for purchase on the Sunny's hull as it slides past AND shake off the relentless grip of their antagonist all at once, Zoro reacts without considering how much what he's about to do is going to hurt.

The swordsman kicks wildly, struggling to right himself in midair, and plunges his katana nearly full-length into the Adam wood beside them, halting their flight a few feet above the water. When the brig sloop, falling nearly even with them, hits the choppy sea a moment later, the waves are nipping eagerly at his heels.

The stop is so abrupt, so painfully jarring, that he tries to scream as his right arm's nearly wrenched from the socket by the weight of two grown adults, one small child and his own gravid body being suddenly suspended from it and his wounded hand, but the shock's also momentarily locked his lungs, allowing nothing more than a breathless wheeze to escape his throat.

Luffy's back collides with the ship, and the rubber man exhales sharply, uninjured but stunned when whatever air's left in his lungs is immediately expelled by the older pirate slamming into him and the Marine who's lost the crushing grip on his elbow stubbornly locking an arm tightly around his waist to prevent himself being pulled further under the water in which he's suddenly found himself waist deep.

The wave created by Sunny flopping back into the ocean hits seconds later, battering them into the hull until Zoro's sure his lungs will burst and nearly tearing the toddler still harnessed but no longer strapped to his chest – there wasn't time earlier, when they were struggling to escape the confines of the box hammock and the officer now wrestling with the captain – from his grasp when it finally retreats, leaving everyone sputtering and coughing up the briny taste of seawater.

Sagging as he clings to his first mate with weakening arms, Luffy braces a bare foot against their enemy's torso and struggles to lever him free. "Let- go!"

The officer's somehow retained hold of his firearm, but with no way to reload while dangling precariously amidst the currents rushing past the ship and with the pistol's internal mechanisms now flooded anyway, it's been reduced to a blunt weapon. Unperturbed, he swings it with all the force he can muster.

Keenly aware that Zoro's belly makes entirely too large a target and also that the swordsman's too preoccupied with keeping them from falling to defend himself, the captain stops pushing with his
foot and gives a frantic kick instead, creating enough momentum that the blow catches nothing but air.

Unfortunately, his actions also rock everyone's weight so forcefully that the green-haired pirate's hand comes close to wrenching open on the katana handle.

"Stop moving!" Zoro growls, jaw clenching as the weave bites into the cuts on his fingers. "I can't fucking- hold on when you're swinging around like that!"

"He's trying to HIT you!" The younger man snaps back. "Oi- OI, STOP THAT. STOP TRYING TO HIT ZORO, STUPID! WE'RE GONNA FALL!"

Ignoring him, the grim-faced officer makes another attempt, producing a squeal of pain from Sabo as the barrel clips his ankle.

"BASTARD!" Expression contorted by rage, Luffy punches the flintlock out of the Marine's hand and it disappears from sight, swallowed by the dark water below.

The captain comes very close to following it when the single fist he's got bunched in Zoro's coat starts to drag the swordsman's sleeve off his shoulder, and he's forced to grapple hurriedly for a better hold, cursing faintly as another large wave crests and breaks against the hull to wash up his back.

"If I can't take you in-" Voice breaking into a grunt of exertion as he lunges upwards, their nemesis makes a desperate grab for the first mate's sword belt. "-then I'll take you down with me."

"Are you fucking insane?" Zoro demands, stiffening at the rasp of steel being drawn. He ducks his head, grabbing one of Sabo's harness straps between his teeth and hauling the one-year-old higher so he's got a hand free to grope for Shusui's handle before the blade can clear its sheath.

"I'll be remembered," the officer snarls, fighting him for control of the weapon. "I'll be remembered as the man who killed the Pirate King and his sword-swinging-"

The wet strap in the first mate's mouth shifts as the frightened toddler in his grasp tries to escape the struggle below, and he feels his diaphragm beginning to seize at the strong taste and smell of seawater, warning him that he's about to-

"-be okay, but no matter what happens, I love you guys and Zoro does too and-"

There's a hand groping at his boot, struggling to push it away.
"Get. Off. My. Ship." He punctuates each word with a stomp of his foot, snarling them around the strap in his mouth, and just like that his nausea's gone, replaced by fury so strong that he's forgotten about the ache in his arm, in his fingers and in his belly and hips and back. "Stay. Away. From. My. Family!"

He raises his foot one last time and pauses, staring down to where he can barely see the bloody travesty he's made of the officer's face around the curve of his own stomach. "And by the way? I'm not the Pirate King's whore. I'm his husband."

The final blow from his boot tears the Marine loose from Luffy's waist and sends him tumbling into the water frothing beside the ship's hull, where he thrashes helplessly for a moment or two, searching fruitlessly for a handhold, and then he's gone.

Zoro stabs the katana clutched in his good hand into the Sunny, giving a low groan of relief as the weight he's bearing is finally distributed more evenly. He tries to gain a toehold as well, the muscles bunching in his biceps and forearms, but the wet Adam wood's too slippery and he accomplishes little more than pinning his captain briefly against it with his bulging middle before letting his body droop once more.

The unsuccessful attempt leaves him winded and puffing with exertion through gritted teeth. "...damn."

"At least we got rid of that jerk," Luffy sighs, letting his head sag forward until his cheek's leaning on the older pirate's shoulder.

"You okay?"

An exhausted-sounding chuckle tickles his ear. "I should be asking Zoro that."

"Like I said before, I've definitely had better days, that's for sure..."

"Yeah, I'm..." The rubber man trails off, and when he speaks again, his voice is very small, very quiet. "Zoro? ...I don't know if I can pull us up."

The swordsman's heart lurches in his chest, but he forces himself to respond calmly, keeping the harness strap clenched securely between his jaws. "Won't know 'til you try."

Squirming around until he's got one arm hooked over Zoro's neck and both bare feet positioned on the tops of the first mate's boots, draped along his side because there's not quite enough room directly in front, Luffy leans his head back to eye the railing situated far above their heads. Summoning his fortitude, he flings a hand towards it- only to slap his palm uselessly against the hull about a foot beyond normal arm's length.

"Give it a few minutes."

"If somebody knew we were still down here- Sanji, maybe? You think we should start yelling?"

"Could be worth a shot, but it might take a while anyway. There's probably still a shit-load of Marines up there."

Zoro doesn't want to admit it, but now that adrenaline's no longer coursing through him and demanding a fight-or-flight response, he's starting to feel the strain in his shoulders again. He's not sure if he can hang on long enough for one of their crewmates to hear them, discover their location,
figure out a way to rescue them AND fight off the opposing forces long enough to do so.

There's also a heavy, cramping pain building in the underside of his belly and lower spine that's beginning to seriously worry him, and the concern must be showing on his face or in the stiffness of his body, because Sabo's patting nervously at his cheeks and forehead, and Luffy abruptly abandons his attempts at stretching for the deck to touch his hip with tentative, uncertain fingers.

"We gotta get you to Chopper."

"Yeah, but first we gotta-"

His automatic retort that they need to get out of here - back ON the ship and not hanging OFF it like a gaggle of extremely odd barnacles - emerges as a bout of coughing and sputtering between stubbornly gritted teeth, because another large wave's just hit them, forcing stinging saltwater up his nose.

"Shi-" His captain gasps, grip loosening as fresh immersion steals the remainder of his energy. The arm clasped around Zoro's neck slithers free, and the swordsman utters a muffled cry of alarm as the younger pirate slides away.

He releases Kitetsu and grabs for something, anything.

At first there's nothing to catch hold of; shirtless, Luffy's like a wet bar of soap slipping through his damn useless fingers, but then he manages to get a fistful of the rubber man's waistband.

No, not quite a fistful.

Three fingers. Three lousy injured fingers between his close-to-comatose spouse and the ocean swirling below. Another strong wave and there's no way in hell he'll be able to hang on.

*Of all the fucking stupid times to use that hand, Roronoa- what the hell were you THINKING?*

He gives a choked laugh that emerges sounding more like a groan and tries to tell himself that it's only the strap in his mouth making his vocalization so pitiful, even though he knows better.

*Maybe if I can get him on my shoulder-*

When the cannonball smashes into the hull beside him, he nearly drops the man dangling from his hand.

*SHIP. Sencho was trying to tell me there's a SHIP.*

He can't see the Marine vessel at his back, doesn't dare turn his head to look, so he doesn't know if they're actually trying to pick him off or merely bombarding the Sunny at random, but the space between his shoulder blades begins to itch with fierce intensity.

*All it's gonna take is one direct hit and we're done. Like shooting fish in a fucking barrel.*

He forces himself to take a deep breath through his nose while he takes stock of the situation.

*Can't let go of Shusui or we'll fall. Can't draw my last katana or I'll drop Luffy. Can't pull Kitetsu loose with my teeth without dropping Sabo and I couldn't reach it anyway, 'cause my frickin' fat gut's in the way.*

No way to fight. No way to defend himself or his family without sacrificing one member or the other.
"I need another fucking-"

"NO." His rejection of it bursts from his throat with the same intensity as bullets fired from a flintlock, like the ones that came so close to striking him in the head a short time earlier. "I CAN'T."

You wouldn't have just one extra arm-you'd have four. Plenty to wield your swords and carry your captain and son safely to the deck you can't do more than stare at right now.

One of the twins kicks and he flinches. "I can't. I can't fucking do this."

If you don't, you're going to die. And not just you, but all three of your children and the man you just acknowledged to that Marine as your-

"If I hold on just a little longer-just a little longer, the rest of the crew will-"

The rest of the crew's busy fighting for their lives. There's no guarantee anyone will reach you in time, and you know it.

All of this is true, but being aware of that doesn't change the fact that he's afraid. Afraid of losing control and forgetting everything but throwing himself at the enemy vessel in a mad, suicidal charge. Afraid of what the transformation might do, not just to his mind but to his body. Afraid of maintaining his sanity only to lose the baby he can feel moving inside him as well as its less active sibling, like he once almost lost-

Do you want Ace to grow up alone?

"No, but I-"

He hates the cold logic of the voice inside his head. Knows it's himself he's arguing with and that this doesn't bode well for his state of mind and that he's dangerously close to a breaking point he always knew existed yet didn't dare truly contemplate, but that doesn't make the choice any easier.

Which mean more to you? The faces you look at every day? Or the ones you've never seen?

"I can't do this. I can't I can't I can't I can't I-"

You know you're going to lose them anyway if you don't. And really, what's the value of two lives that haven't begun in comparison to-

There's a noise escaping him. An awful keening moan of pain and despair that he doesn't recognize as his own voice, because it sounds like someone else. Something else. Either way, he knows he can't possibly be the one making that awful sound, because there's a constricting band of pressure squeezing his lungs and his nausea's back full force.

"Dada," Sabo whimpers against his cheek, one small hand twisting in his torn coat collar. "Da-Da-dee?"

Zoro squeezes his eye shut, swallows the bile threatening to surge up his throat.

No matter what happens. No matter what happens, I love-

He can't finish, not even with the words confined to the interior of his skull.

I'm sorry I'm sorry oh god I'm-
Sanji isn't sure which he finds more daunting: being surrounded by nearly five dozen vengeful Marines- or dealing with the furiously kicking, screaming eight-year-old who's repeatedly punching him in the lower back and buttocks in a frenzied attempt to escape the arm wrapped his waist and holding him off the deck so he can't make another mad dash for the railing.

In the end, to be perfectly honest, he decides he'd rather face an entire fleet of Marines than his nakama's distraught son.

"LET ME GO!"

"I already told you-" Frustration and grief makes his voice far harsher than he intends. "-not if you're gonna throw yourself off the goddamn ship!"

"DAD CAN'T SWIM!" Ace shrieks raggedly, slamming already bruised knuckles into the underside of the cook's thigh. "NONE OF THEM CAN SWIM!"

"I KNOW!" The blond shouts back, losing his temper because he knows. He knows too well. "BUT IF YOU GO IN THERE AFTER THEM, YOU. ARE. GOING. TO. FUCKING. DROWN!"

He's grateful, then, for Jinbei and Chopper's unwavering presence at his side, because the child in his grasp explodes into a full-fledged tantrum, thrashing and screaming, cursing his name, accusing him of cowardice for not going himself, and every word – "WHY, LET ME GO, BASTARD, I HATE YOU" – is far more painful than the fists pounding into his back, because the despair and desperation behind them makes him feel as though one of his cooking Santoku is stabbing him in the heart over and over and over.

Not exactly forgetting about the enemies surrounding them but choosing to ignore them momentarily - the fishman and reindeer have launched a blistering attack, and some disconnected corner of Sanji's brain notes that there are tears running steadily and continuously down Chopper's fur – he abandons what's left of his composure in favor of hauling Ace upright and hugging him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but goddamm it, Luffy and Marimo would never forgive me if I let anything happen to-"

"DAD!"
All three heads turn to look at Ace, and the cook continues backing away, alarmed, because he can't read his crewmate's face. Faces.

**Goddamn it, Marimo- Zoro. I hope you're in there. Because I really don't- I don't want to fight this- this THING that's you but not you. Especially not in front of your-**

"LET GO!" The boy he's clutching elbows him in the sternum, catching him by surprise and breaking free the moment his grip loosens, bolting for his parents and brother.

"ACE, NO." Lunging after him, Sanji curses loudly as his grasping hand catches nothing but air. He slips on the wet grass, goes down on his hands and knees, makes another scrabbling leap for his younger crewmate's legs.

Ace doesn't hesitate; he throws himself out of range, colliding into his father's belly with such force that only his hands grasping for the swordsman's open, flapping coat prevent him from bouncing off and then burrowing his face against the older pirate's torso, hugging him firmly.

Fingers rooted in the grass beneath him, Sanji feels his breath catch in his throat. Around them, the falling precipitation's gradually transitioning to a stinging mixture of sleet and freezing rain, but he's barely conscious of the tiny white puffs issuing from his parted lips.

*C'mon, you shitty moss-head. C'mon c'mon c'mon. PLEASE-

Zoro freezes, hands tightening on his weapons and the brows of all three heads furrowing as though he's struggling to process what's happening, and then recognition flashes across his features and he sweeps his son closer to his side and sets his katana in a defensive circle around them. "What- what the hell did we miss?"

Hearing his nakama's voice in triplicate is disconcerting, but the cook's too glad that he's coherent to dwell on just how strange it sounds.

Glad- and concerned. Because although the first mate's now clearly aware of himself and his surroundings, there's a stiffness to his frame that wasn't there moments before. And-

"Zoro?" Chopper asks hesitantly from where he's appeared at Sanji's side, all wide eyes and trembling legs as ice crystals begin to collect in his fur. "Zoro, maybe you should."

*Put our captain down before you-

"I- I think somebody better take Sencho before I-" The distinct outlines of the additional limbs and heads are blurring, losing consistent shape, and the second they blink out, the swordsman wobbles and drops to one knee, coming dangerously close to tilting face-first into the grass. "Shit."

Ace goes down too, fighting to keep him from collapsing altogether and casting a frightened look over his shoulder at the other adults. "S-Sanji-aniki, Chopper-aniki, what- what should I do?"

"Here. I'll get Luffy; you get Sabo," the cook tells him, already stooping to retrieve the captain who's now sprawled on the lawn deck, only to have the rubber man roll over and push him away with clumsy insistence and cold fingers.

"No- 'm fine. Get -oro outta h-here."

"Look, Chopper's getting him, so just-"

"Dad!" Ace yelps suddenly, arms tightening around his whimpering younger brother as Zoro
slumps over sideways before the doctor's able to lift him and begins to hyperventilate, gasping for
air and panting so rapidly it's not long before his chest and sides are heaving with the effort and
there's small but thick clouds of condensation rising around him.

Seeing two of their most formidable enemies so incapacitated, the Marines begin to close ranks
again despite Jinbei's fervent attempts to keep a wide space surrounding his nakama.

*Shit. SHIT. We need to get out of here NOW.*

Sanji clenches his teeth, hoping he's not making a mistake as he whirls towards the bow, icy
rainwater spraying in an arc from his dripping, freezing hair. "NAMI-SAN! START THE
PROPELLER!"

The navigator doesn't question him; she simply throws the lever.

This time, the ship rockets backwards with alarming speed, no longer caught on the wreckage, and
sends unprepared Marines flying.

Yanking Ace and Sabo down, the blond throws himself over them and Luffy while Chopper does
the same with Zoro, using his body to block their gasping, shuddering nakama's vulnerable
midsection from dropped weapons that have suddenly become airborne projectiles. Jinbei hunkers
down beside them, adding his own bulk to the shield and squinting to protect his eyes from the rain
and ice pelting his broad face.

The ship suffers several minor collisions with several Marine vessels as it speeds away from the
waters surrounding the island, but thankfully they avoid anything as dramatic as the initial crash,
and Nami keeps the Chicken Voyage activated long after the enemy ships are out of sight, until
they've outrun not just the fleet but the storm as well.

xxx

"It's okay. No no no, here, hold still and I'll just-

Ignoring the flustered doctor hovering over him and nervously debating how to move him without
causing further injury or discomfort, Zoro tries to squirm away from the surrounding cluster of
bodies. He makes it less than a foot before he curls around his belly, gagging forcefully, and then
vomits into the frost-covered grass beside him.

What the swordsman expels is little more than thin, watery bile - Chopper reckons it's been so long
since he last ate that his stomach's nigh empty - but once he starts throwing up, he can't stop, until
he's digging fingers into the lawn and heaving convulsively as tears stream down the side of his
face.

Luffy, largely recovered from his unwelcome contact with far too much seawater, exchanges a
helpless glance with Ace before wrapping both arms around his first mate and slowly, cautiously
pulling him upright. Cradling the older pirate's abdomen with his hand and forearm, he winces as
he feels the muscles and tendons under his touch jerking violently with each paroxysm and flashes
the Zoon beside them a look of dismay. "He- he's not gonna rip something inside him doing this, is
he?"

"I- I don't think so," the reindeer stammers, fighting to hide his skepticism.

*Probably not, but- it- it could've happened already though, when he was fighting or maybe when
he carried you and Sabo back to the deck, he can't quite bring himself to say, but from the fear in
his nakama's eyes, he's certain he doesn't need to speak his concerns aloud- the rubber man already*
knows.

Sagging deeper into their captain's embrace as his abused stomach grants him a moment of reprieve, Zoro utters a low groan. He's trembling all over, teeth chattering and hands shaking as he tries to clasp one over Luffy's where it's resting on his belly. "S-Sencho, I- I didn't know- what else to d-do and-

Trying to speak triggers a fresh round of retching, and he turns his face to press his forehead against the younger pirate's collarbone, scrunching his eye tightly shut and shivering.

"We- we need to get him inside. Get him out of those wet clothes so I can get a good look at him." Chopper forces himself to exhale slowly, calmly. "The infirmary would be best but- the men's quarters is closer."

*My bag's in there, and my stethoscope. If I'm lucky, I might pick up both fetal heartbeats with it, but unless that low lying anterior placenta's moved…*

"Usopp," the captain calls to the sniper standing several yards away, holding a defensive position with his loaded Kabuto between his noncombatant crewmembers and the Marine stragglers being rounded up by Robin and Brook. "Make sure there's nobody else in there?"

He turns his attention back to the swordsman slouching against him, gently rubbing his belly. "It's gonna be okay. Zoro did what he needed to do to keep us safe, but now he doesn't need to do anything but let us take care of him."

"You don't- you don't understand," the green-haired pirate chokes out against his shoulder. "I- Asura- when I used it, I might've-"

"You don't know that," Luffy interrupts immediately, fingers stilling on his first mate's swollen middle and splaying wide, waiting. "Does Zoro remember? What I told the peas? I- ah, here-"

He must've felt one of them kicking, the doctor thinks, watching as the rubber man seize Zoro's unsteady hand and guides it to the peak of his belly, pressing and holding it there so the other man's aware of whatever's happening beneath the surface of his own flesh.

"I told 'em they're gonna be strong just like their daddies... but they're pretty strong already," the captain insists. "See?"

This doesn't, of course, mean that there aren't potential complications, but Chopper's wise enough to hold his tongue. Right now, their weary, frightened crewmate needs all the assurance they're able to muster, and just as he suspected, with Luffy fully conscious to ply him with soothing words and redirect his attention to the movement of their unborn offspring, the swordsman's uncontrollable dry heaving has gradually settled into the occasional hitching of his shoulders, chest and midsection.

*I think he was so stressed out and worked up, it was giving him a panic attack…*

"Men's quarters is clear!" Usopp pants as he returns to them at a run.

"I'm going to carry you inside and lay you on the sofa," the doctor cautions Zoro this time before reaching for him. "T'll- I'll try not to bounce you around too much, but I can't make any promises."

The first mate gives a tired nod and tries to stay quiet as he's lifted, but he looses a stifled noise of misery when the ground drops away, wringing the fingers his captain's offered him over the reindeer's muscular forearm and losing what little color he'd regained as the nausea caused by
being moved brings him very close to throwing up on both his crewmates and himself.

Luffy stands his ground, eyes compassionate as he squeezes back. "It's okay, if you gotta puke. Just- it's okay."

He extends his free hand to Ace and the toddler huddled in the eight-year-old's arms, waving them closer. "C'mon, you guys too, before you turn into a couple of big, funny-looking icicles."

His eldest son smiles tremulously, gratefully handing over the younger child and immediately attaching himself to their dark-haired father's side, seeking his warmth, but when the rubber man begins following Chopper's lead and moving towards the men's quarters' door, he hesitates, glancing back at the cluster of Marines kneeling near the aquarium bar entrance with wrists bound and heads bowed against the inclement weather. "Dad? What about them?"

At first he doesn't think he spoke loudly enough to be heard, but then the Pirate King responds with a low, unhappy mutter. "... I'll deal with them later."
"I can't get my damn boots off," Zoro admits woodenly as he stares down at his feet where they're propped on the armrest at the opposite end of the sofa, only the toes visible over his belly. "They're dripping all over the-"

"It's water, Marimo- it'll dry."

"Yeah, but doesn't Jinbei sleep here?"

"It's quite alright, Zoro-san. At the moment, the state of the couch is the least of my concerns."

"See? I told you, nobody but you gives a shit, so let it go. Here." Sanji deposits the toddler he's just bundled into a clean shirt on the cushion beside the swordsman's head and takes a seat on the nearby table. "Sorry, I used the smallest one I could find, but he's still swimming in it."

"Da-dee," Sabo coos, reaching over to pat his father's cheek with the vastly oversized sleeve that's obscuring hand and arm alike.

"Little big for you, kiddo. You look cute though. Ridiculous but cute."

"I bet Nami's gonna make all kinds of- funny noises- when she sees him like- GAH!" Luffy tumbles over backwards and lands hard on his rear, clutching one of his first mate's empty boots in his hands. He drops it and bounces back to his feet, scowling and reaching back to rub his backside before taking hold of the other and beginning a second round of tugging.

"I don't like that swelling," Chopper murmurs, examining the pressure imprints left on his nakama's foot and ankle. "Let's keep your feet elevated for now and hopefully it'll go down."

Sitting on the carpet a few feet away, rummaging through the pile of clean clothing they've scavenged from the lockers, Usopp holds up a pair of trousers, eyes the waistband dubiously, then discards them. "Maybe I better just go get something from your room, 'cause none of this stuff's gonna fit."

"Good luck. Barely any of that shit fits anymore either," Zoro grumbles, shifting uncomfortably. The self-conscious flush staining his cheeks deepens as the Straw Hat's physician, still in Heavy Point, drops to his knees beside the sofa and begins attempting to wrestle him out of his sodden coat without jostling him more than necessary or wrenching his strained right shoulder. "O-Oi, do you really need to take that off?"

"The sooner we get you dried off, the better. If you stay in wet clothing, your core body temperature's going to keep dropping."

"Yeah, but-"

"He doesn't want you guys staring at him," the captain hisses more loudly than he realizes, making shooing motions at his surrounding crew until they vacate. "Here, Chopper, lemme do that."

"A-Ah, my apologies," Jinbei stammers, looking a great deal more embarrassed than the others as he retreats, having realized that his curiosity's lead him to do exactly what Luffy's warning them against.

I hadn't realized... how unconscionably rude of me.
He certainly hadn't meant to gawk, but while their first mate's pregnancy is nothing new to the rest of the crew, the fishman's unsure what to make of his first good glimpse at the green-haired pirate's swelling belly, which has spent the last few months predominantly hidden from sight.

*I had no idea his growth would be quite this… substantial.*

Having met Ace and Sabo and been thoroughly charmed by them both even before boarding the Sunny, he thinks he has a vague understanding of why Zoro agreed to go through the entire ordeal a third time. Yet, even knowing where the children came from, he doesn't think he truly appreciated the difficulties involved until the swordsman started exhibiting signs of morning sickness and the myriad other symptoms associated with the process.

And despite the heatstroke incident and learning the story behind what he's sure is still a slightly abridged version of Impel Down and the events that took place there, he knows he hadn't realized just how badly his crewmate's condition interfered with his ability to defend himself and the ship.

*After everything he's been through this morning, Zoro-san's so exhausted, he can't even undress himself,* he thinks guiltily as Luffy tosses aside a large wadded ball of wet clothing before disappearing briefly around the front of the sofa as he crouches to murmur something to the man lying on it.

When the captain reappears, he heads straight for the nearest bunk to strip it down and drapes the purloined blanket over the sofa's back, where a three-fingered hand immediately reaches up to yank it down out of sight.

His spouse's needs met for the moment, the rubber man looks to address his own, stooping to examine the clothing Usopp was rooting through earlier. "Anybody find any- oh, oi, those look comfy."

"Dad, please," Ace groans from where he's sitting on his own bunk in a fresh t-shirt and pants.

"What?" Luffy asks, gesturing to the damp shorts he's just wriggled out of and kicked aside. "They're wet and cold and it felt like they were crawling up my ass!"

Zoro's head appears above the sofa's back, followed by shoulders partially obscured by the blanket wrapped around them. "Sencho, quit flashing people and c'mere and help me. Sabo keeps trying to grab shit from Chopper's bag."

The swordsman's words are lighthearted but there's a strong undercurrent of trepidation and fear in his voice that disturbs Jinbei far more than the semi-hysterical bout of vomiting he witnessed earlier. It's as though the panic's merely been replaced by a strong sense of unease tinged with resignation.

*He's truly afraid he's harmed the twins in some way. That his own actions might be responsible for their loss.*

"Son of a bitch... I hate hearing Marimo sound like that," he hears Sanji murmur very softly to Usopp as the two pirates lean side-by-side against the lockers, watching the captain struggle into the drawstring pants he's appropriated before hurrying over to relieve Sabo of the tongue depressor he's waving. "You know exactly who he'll blame if those kids aren't okay, even if it was the goddamn shitty Marines' fault that-"

The sniper nods, scratching nervously at his goatee but keeping his eyes locked on the sofa and its occupants.
As they're waiting impatiently for what they're hoping will be good news, the men's quarters door suddenly flies open and Franky bursts inside, startling everyone and already tendering apologies before he clears the doorframe. "Sorry to interrupt, Haramaki-bro, Mugiwara-bro, but I thought I better let you know-

Moving surprisingly fast given his size and fatigue, Zoro explodes off the sofa where he's been enduring Chopper's cautious poking and prodding, groping frantically for the katana he's no longer wearing and nearly losing the blanket he's tucked around himself as he stumbles over the doctor and comes dangerously close to crashing down on the table before he's reeled into Luffy's arms and enfolded tightly in the alarmed captain's embrace.

"DIDN'T ANYBODY TEACH YOU TO KNOCK, GODDAMN IT?" Sanji roars at the cyborg, prompting a dismayed cry from Sabo that quickly escalates into full-throated wailing.

"I'M SORRY, SWIRLY-BRO, I-!"

"YOU SHOULD BE, SCARING THE SHIT OUT OF EVERYBODY, GETTING US ALL THINKING IT'S ANOTHER FUCKING SHITTY ASSHOLE WITH A GUN BREAKING DOWN THE DAMN DOOR!"

"S-Sanji-kun-"

"Ah, Sanji-san, perhaps if you lowered your voice-"

"OI OI, DON'T PIN THIS ON ME. HE'S THE ONE THAT-!

"SHUT UP, ALL OF YOU! JUST SHUT UP!"

Everyone's shocked into silence except the one-year-old who continues howling at the top of his lungs.

Expression stunned, as though he can't quite believe they've actually listened to him, Ace takes a shaky breath. "Y-You're freaking out my dad, so c-could you please just shut- I mean, please just st-stop yelling?"

Gaze darting over to find Luffy trying unsuccessfully to coax their first mate back onto the sofa, Sanji curses under his breath. The swordsman's not actively resisting, but he's got both arms locked stubbornly around the younger pirate's neck and his eye squeezed shut to block out everything else around him, and the way he's swaying unsteadily is evident even from where the cook's standing.

"I-I think I'm gonna go see if they need a hand outside," Usopp says in a strangled voice. He heads for the door, making a brief stop by Ace's bunk to give the eight-year-old's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"S-Sanji?" Chopper calls tentatively. "Would you mind making a quick run to the kitchen? Unless I'm mistaken, Zoro hasn't eaten since lunch yesterday, and if we don't get some food into him..."

The cook swipes a hand across his face. "Shit, you're right. I'm an idiot."

Zoro utters a little huffing noise that might be a snort, although it's too faint to know for sure, so the blond chooses to ignore it as he makes his exit.

"We got those other guys tied up with the Marines. The four from the Soldier Dock and the one from the library. That's what I, uh, came to-" Franky stalls, shuffling miserably in place. His eyes are watering significantly behind his shades. "I just figured you'd wanna know. I- I'm gonna go-"
He gestures aimlessly towards the floor. "There's blood and cola and stuff all over the place down there, so I guess I'll just go- yeah. Sorry. Sorry-

Perhaps it'd be best…

"Would you prefer that I also-?" Jinbei indicates the door closing behind the snuffling, fleeing cyborg. He's conflicted; on one hand, he wants nothing more than to escape this horribly uncomfortable atmosphere, but at the same time, his sense of duty compels him to stay.

Brook and Robin are standing guard over their captured foes while Nami charts the Sunny's current course, but he doesn't much like the thought of leaving the captain and first mate alone save for the ship's physician when they're already distracted and likely to become more so when Chopper finally finds the opportunity to use the stethoscope he's clutching anxiously.

"If my presence is-"

Easing cautiously away from their captain but still keeping a good grip on him, Zoro clears his throat several times before speaking, his voice rough with embarrassment. "Nah, it's okay. I just- got really freaking dizzy for a second or two."

"Perhaps you ought to lie down," the fishman suggests gently, pretending not to notice the excess moisture collected in the corners of his crewmate's eye.

"I'm afraid I'm gonna puke. Every time I put my head down, that damn acid crap starts climbing up my throat."

"Reflux. It's unpleasant but it's normal," Chopper assures him. "It's happening because the babies keep pushing your stomach higher in your abdominal cavity as they grow, along with your other organs."

"... no wonder it feels like my lungs are in my throat."

"Maybe Zoro could sit instead?"

The doctor considers this and nods, offering a steadying hand.

Ace, who's crept across the room to find a seat on the sofa's arm, watches nervously as he continues ruffling his younger brother's hair. The toddler's quieted to the occasional hiccoughing sob, but he starts fussing again when their green-haired father sinks onto the cushions beside him with a wince and soft curse, patting at the older pirate's hip before attempting to crawl into his lap.

"Sorry," Zoro tells him helplessly. "I know you want me to hold you, but there's stuff Chopper's gotta do first."

The one-year-old, whimpering unhappily, settles for nestling against his side and clinging to him, reaching out to push the stethoscope's bell mouth aside when the doctor places it on his abdomen.

"Sabo, no." Gently but firmly redirecting his son's hand, the first mate once again comes close to losing the blanket he's clutching, and this time he's the one fouling Chopper's attempts to listen to his belly in his struggle to keep the fabric in place.

Perhaps he'd be more comfortable if-

With this thought in mind, the fishman turns to his locker, ignoring the crash-induced disarray he finds within as he makes a hasty selection and returns to the sofa. His crewmate looks up,
surprised, when the kimono settles around his shoulders, but the expression that follows as he wriggles his arms into the sleeves and ties the sash is one of pure relief.

"I know it's rather large, but-"

"I'm rather large," Zoro states wryly, tugging the blanket loose and dropping it over Sabo, who abruptly stops fussing to concentrate on pulling it off his head one handful at a time. "Thanks. First I steal your bed-" He pats the sofa beneath him. "- and now I'm swiping your clothes too."

"It's no trouble, I assure you."

A smile tugging the corners of his mouth, Luffy touches his swordsman's dangling sleeve. "Zoro looks really-"

"If you're gonna say I look cute-"

"Mmm, no, I was gonna say good. Zoro looks really good."

The captain scoots closer, leaning his head on the older pirate's shoulder to watch intently as Chopper parts the garment's loosely belted front to slip his stethoscope inside and resume searching the upper curve of his partner's belly, moving slowly from the left to the right then back again with each pass a bit lower than before.

The reindeer listens, frowning, and abruptly gives his head a little shake.

"What?"

"I keep picking up gastrointestinal background noise. Your stomach growl- oh! I've got a heartbeat."

Jinbei, still standing behind the sofa, sees some of the tension leave his crewmate's shoulders.

"Steady rhythm... fast but well within normal range." The doctor shifts. "And the baby must be anterior breech, because-"

He pulls the stethoscope away to give himself plenty of room to palpate near the top of the bulge, just below the sternum. "Feel that?"

Zoro clenches his teeth. "Ugh, yeah. What the hell is it?"

"The head."

"You mean the little shit's head-butt- ing me in the ribs? Jeez, no wonder I can't-" He breaks off, gasping and gripping the sofa as his belly contorts, distending until the skin's stretched almost unbearably tight and then gradually resettling lower.

Ace is watching with enormous eyes. "What just happened?"

"I think one of the peas just did a backflip or something," Luffy responds, awed.

Reapplying his stethoscope below the swordsman's protruding navel, Chopper nods. "He or she turned head-down, because now I can't hear the heartbeat anymore- the placenta's too loud."

He puts a hand over Zoro's lower midsection just above the groin, covering the laparotomy scar. "It's right here, on the anterior of your abdominal cavity."
"What about the other baby?"

"Occiput posterior. I think. That’s head-down and facing towards me and the table, which would explain your back pain, because the back of the baby’s skull is putting pressure on your spine. But I can’t be sure, because there’s too much interference from the placenta and the first baby for the stethoscope, the den den OR manual manipulation to provide any conclusive results."

"Wait, you said-" Their first mate's face has gone pale. "You think the head's where?"

"In the curve of your tailbone. Like-" The doctor lets the stethoscope dangle while he curls one hand into a shallow cup and rests the opposite in it, balled into a fist. "With the back of the cranium resting in the curve formed by the sacrum and the coccyx. It's uncomfortable, but not particularly dangerous- although you wouldn't want to fall on-"

"I didn't fall, no. But one of those assholes slammed me into a wall hard enough to-" The green-haired pirate's gaze slides away, fear and chagrin warring for control of his face. "I-"

He mutters the rest of it, still refusing to meet their eyes, although his fingers have left the sofa’s edge to cradle his silk-swathed sides almost delicately, as though he's afraid pressing too hard might accidentally crack the taut bulge between his hands like the shell of a raw egg.

Jinbei inhales sharply.

Luffy's on his feet and stalking for the door, fists clenched at his sides, before his swordsman finishes speaking, but Zoro calls him back.

"Don't bother, Sencho. The guy's already dead. He was the second one- the one I-" He casts a sidelong glance at Ace, who's abandoned the sofa arm and scooted close enough to lay a cautious hand on his stomach. "Anyway, he's dead."

The rubber man returns reluctantly, anger lingering in his terse movements as he comes back to the sofa, but then he drops to his knees beside his first mate's left leg and wraps an arm around it, swallowing hard as he stretches out his free hand to touch the older man’s belly. He wets his lips and avoids looking directly at Chopper. "Are we gonna lose the other baby?"

"... I need better equipment. It's possible the second baby's perfectly fine, but-" The doctor bites his lower lip. "Exploratory surgery's the only way I'll know for sure without a scan, and there's a high probability it'll lead to an emergency c-section because the anterior placenta's going to start hemorrhaging the moment it's incised."

"Can the twins survive being delivered this early?" Jinbei asks quietly, voicing the question in the Straw Hat captain's eyes.

"As long as there's no complications from blunt force trauma... probably. But they'll be drastically underweight and might have underdeveloped lungs, and again, I'd need equipment we don't have in the infirmary. Apnea monitors. A ventilator."

"You need Law." Luffy says, watching his own hand where it's now caressing his swordsman's rounded midsection, parting the kimono wider so he's cupping nothing but bare skin. "Either way, you need Law."

"Yes, but..." The Zoan exchanges a rueful glance with the fishman standing overhead.

"Repeated calls for assistance could give away our location. For all we know, that might explain how the Marines tracked us down in the first place."
Zoro lets his head drop back against the sofa, staring blankly at the ceiling. "... damn it."

He raises it again upon feeling his captain slide upright to hug his belly, cheek nuzzling gently against it, and he allows it without comment instead of chasing the younger pirate away like he usually does during excessive public displays of affection over his middle.

After a moment, Luffy lifts his head, meeting the first mate's gaze, and whatever he sees in it hardens his resolve. He sucks his breath in sharply, furious tears glittering in his narrowing eyes. "Call him. I don't care if I gotta fight every last Marine the World Government's got. CALL HIM."

"Okay."

"Okay," Chopper replies simply and begins unpacking his bag. "Zoro, I'd like to take a look at your hand. There wasn't time earlier."

"Those cuts need to be cleaned, and you need stitches."

"Fine. Let's get this over with..."

xxx

In the end, it takes all three of them working together to get the job done: Chopper stitching as quickly as he dares, Jinbei gingerly offering the wastebasket every time their crewmate begins to gag, and Luffy wrapped around the green-haired pirate's back, murmuring in his ear and gripping his elbow to prevent him jerking his hand from the doctor's grasp.

"Didn't think you'd be doing shit like this when you signed on, did you," Zoro jokes weakly to the fishman seated beside him.

"Perhaps not, but I've dealt with worse."

"Yeah," the swordsman grunts. "Like that time Sencho talked you into changing one of Sabo's shitty- oi, fucking hell, Chopper, would you watch it with that thing?"

"Z-Zoro, I know it's hard, but you really need to-"

"Hold still, I know, I know. I'm trying." He squeezes his eye shut and breathes through his nose, focusing his concentration on the movement inside him, his captain's voice, anything but the stinging, stabbing sensation in his fingers. He can't seem to stop shaking, and every time the needle jabs him again, his nauseous stomach tries to climb his throat.

It's not the pain that's bothering him or even the procedure itself; he's sewn himself up enough times since he first picked up a sword that watching a threaded needle reconnecting his own rent flesh is no longer anything but a minor annoyance.

The problem's his mind, which refuses to stop envisioning what might've happened had Luffy not woken up and promptly punched a hole through their bedroom door, and dwelling on the multitude of undeniably horrific alternate outcomes is also prompting the resurrection of certain memories he has no wish to entertain.

Like being held down on a cold stone floor while his pinkie and ring fingers were methodically severed one joint at a time.

He'd been able to largely disregard it during the fighting, too hell-bent on protecting the children, the crew and himself to waste time ruminating over the similarities, but now that he's inside, surrounded by light and warmth and safety, his freshly injured hand's disturbing him more than he
realized. One quick glance at the blood welling from the deep cuts after they'd been thoroughly irrigated free of debris and he'd come close to blacking out, only his captain's secure grasp preventing him from slithering to the floor.

"Dad's still gonna be able to hold a sword, right?" Ace asks worriedly from where he's sitting on the table with Sabo perched on his lap, watching the doctor work out of the corner of one eye so he can easily look away when he decides he's had enough.

"Thankfully I was able to repair the tendons." Chopper ties off one last knot, gives his handiwork a thorough examination, and retrieves a roll of gauze from his bag, addressing Zoro directly as he bandages the sutured fingers. "They'll start stiffening as they heal, though, so you'll need to exercise them if you want to regain maximum flexibility."

"Right. I'm pretty sure I still got that squeeze ball thing you gave me somewhere." The first mate blinks his eye open cautiously, feeling an absurd sense of relief when he sees his neatly wrapped hand. "Unless Sabo hid it again."

"I told you, the ball's a physical therapy device, not a toy," the reindeer scolds, and then his ears droop. "I'm not much help, am I. You're worried about the twins, and all I can do is slap a plaster on your hand and order you to bed until the real doctor gets here."

"Chopper, don't. Even if you could tell me without a doubt that they're both fine, I'd be fricking worrying about 'em anyway. And I don't give a shit how much fancy blinking, beeping crap Law's got on that damn sub. He's not my doctor."

Their Zoan crewmate offers him a sad, shy smile. "Stop trying to make me happy, asshole. I should be the one trying to cheer you up..."

"Not sure who's the asshole here, trying to tell everybody he's not a real doctor."

There's a soft tapping on the door, and Nami peeks hesitantly inside. "Is it alright if I come in?"

When no one protests, she enters carrying a small tray. "Sanji wasn't sure if you'd feel up to eating hot food, so he sent this instead. Toast and a few pieces of that cheese you- well, the kind you can't stop eating. And I brought you a couple of mikan too. The storm knocked a lot of them off the trees, and they need to get eaten before they go bad."

"Thanks..." He eyes the fruit dubiously, wondering how he's going to manage with one hand, but Luffy snatches one off the tray and starts peeling it, passing him the segments and offering one to Sabo when the toddler starts wriggling in Ace's arms and waving an insistent arm in his direction.

"Robin and I were talking, and we've got a proposal for you. Our room's closer to the infirmary, and I know you're not too keen on all the steps, but we thought they might be easier than dealing with the ladder right now."

"And you guys move into our room, right? What about Sabo?" Luffy asks, attempting to feed the swordsman beside him the next piece of mikan by hand and looking somewhat disappointed when his efforts are firmly resisted.

"Honestly, neither of us would mind having him across the hall, but we figured you'd want to keep him with you." The navigator reaches down to stroke the one-year-old's hair. "Especially after-"

She inhales slowly, visibly steeling herself. "Zoro-"

"I'm gonna go check on stuff outside," the captain announces suddenly, passing the remaining fruit
to Ace and climbing to his feet. "Jinbei, Chopper, you guys come with me and see if anybody out there needs help with anything."

He ducks to kiss Zoro's temple. "Stay on the couch like Chopper said, okay? If you need anything, we'll be right outside, so just send Nami or Ace to the door."

"Looks like your sense of fashion improved since I saw you last," the redhead says after their crewmates are gone, nodding towards the borrowed kimono. Now that she's no longer holding the tray, she's got both hands on her elbows, hugging herself, and her jaw's trembling. "I just- I wanted to tell you that I'm-"

"Nami, come on, don't do this. I already had Chopper talking a bunch of bullshit about-"

"Just shut up and listen," she demands, her voice breaking. "It was MY watch. Those bastards got onto the ship during MY watch, and it nearly got people killed. It nearly got you killed- you and Luffy and Sabo. And now Sanji's saying you're worried you might've done something to the twins, and it's MY FAULT."

She's crying in earnest now, barely able to meet his gaze.

_Goddamn it, cook- next time just keep your shitty big mouth shut_, the swordsman groans internally, wondering what he should do. He's never been particularly apt at dealing with women, much less ones that are sobbing at him. If this was one of the other guys having a fit, he'd just swear a lot and threaten to punch him. And if it was Luffy, he'd probably shut him up by kissing him if the other stuff didn't work first. But this is NAMI.

_Shit. Well, maybe if I-

"Oi, c'mere."

He gives her an awkward hug, clumsily executed because his belly's in the way and also because he usually avoids that much contact with anyone beyond Sencho and the kids unless it's absolutely necessary.

To his alarm and consternation, she returns the gesture with enthusiasm, and he's left staring lamely at an equally nonplused Ace and clueless Sabo over her shoulder until she realizes he's not squeezing back anymore and promptly disengages, wiping at her eyes with the heels of her hands and apologizing.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to- I should've known better than to-"

"It's okay. It's just-" He fishes for an appropriate word and eventually settles on "weird" although it's not sufficient to convey the complexity of his emotions. "Uh, thanks though. For the room. And for coming to check on me." He massages his side lightly. "Us."

The foremost baby shifts under his fingers, responding to the external pressure, and when he hears Nami's awestruck gasp, he glances down to discover that there's a rather identifiable outline of a frighteningly tiny foot visible on his belly where his clothing's gaping open. It withdraws momentarily, gives a quick kick that jounces his abdomen, and then resumes pushing.

"Oh. Oh!" The navigator's hands are clutching at her jean-clad thighs as she clearly restrains herself from reaching out to touch the protrusion, her face filled with equal amazement and agitation. "Oh, it's so-"

"D-Doesn't that hurt?" Gaping, Ace watches his father tickle his unborn sibling's foot by stroking it
repeatedly with one forefinger from heel to toes until it finally retreats. He tightens his hold on the
toddler squirming in his grasp, only to flinch and quickly lower him to the floor at the resultant
screeh of outrage. "Okay, okay! Just don't bug Dad if he doesn't want you climbing all over him."

"It's not super comfortable. But, nah, it doesn't actually hurt."

"Chopper-aniki said you're supposed to keep track of stuff like that, right? When they kick and roll
around and everything?"

Zoro nods. He's still peering down, watching Sabo nudge insistently between his knees to lean
against his stomach, sucking the fingers of one hand while he finds a secure handhold in the folds
of the kimono with the other. "Problem is, I don't always know what body part belongs to which
baby. I think most of it's coming from the one in the front though, 'cause that one's always been a
lot jumpier."

"Maybe the other one just sleeps a lot?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm hoping..."

"Speaking of sleeping-" Nami's no longer staring incredulously at his belly but studying the way
he's sagging against the sofa's back and, despite the furrows of concern on his brow, fighting to
keep his eye open. "-maybe you should take a nap. You look exhausted."

"Been a long day," the swordsman admits- and sighs. "And it's barely started."

A long day, and the first of many to come, he considers morosely when Chopper returns to
announce that he's being placed on full bed rest again until cleared by Law.

The Heart Pirates' surgeon has hesitantly agreed to a new rendezvous with the Sunny and, provided
there's no more difficulties with the Marines, he'll be bringing with him not only the necessary
scanning equipment but also barrels of cola and the food supplies on which they're running low.
All at considerable cost, but they haven't much of a choice, given the remaining trunks of tribute in
the storage hold contain nothing edible or capable of fueling the ship.

Until then, there's nothing to do but make themselves scarce at the approach of potential enemy
vessels. And wait.

He's got a strong feeling he already knows which of the two will prove more difficult.
ChapterNotes

Chapter 21

It took me forever to get this damn chapter finished. There's something really unfair about getting horribly ill (flu + bronchitis) while you're writing about someone being sick. And then the rest of the damn household plus my in-laws got it too, and everyone was- or still is- on antibiotics, and- well, let's just say that sitting down and trying to write coherently was the last thing on my mind for a couple of weeks there.

Seated on the Sunny's figurehead with his head and shoulders resting against the lion's mane at his back, Luffy yawns enormously and rubs his knuckles into his closed eyes, wondering if he's got time for a short nap before someone calls him down from his perch.

If Nami hadn't said it looks like it's gonna pour, I think I'd just sleep out here tonight…

The captain's unbearably tired, having spent the previous three nights listening to his first mate cough and sneeze and curse and roll restlessly from side to side. Nothing more than a mild cold, thankfully, brought on by his pregnancy-suppressed immune system succumbing to the stress and drastic temperature changes caused by overexerting himself while soaked with first cold rain and then near-freezing seawater, but it's still enough to make the older pirate absolutely miserable.

Every time Zoro starts to fall asleep, he coughs himself awake. And he wakes up the peas too, and then he can't sleep 'cause they won't stop kicking him.

Chopper's now hesitantly- very cautiously and very hesitantly- optimistic that both of their unborn children came through the attack largely unscathed, but without a scan to provide adequate proof, his orders continue to stand as given, and between the lack of real answers and spending the last week and a half in bed, the swordsman's irritable and frustrated. Being sick and unable to rest properly just makes the mandatory confinement worse, and he's already confided to Luffy that only his concern for the twins has prevented him from throwing the bed pan in their doctor's face, getting up and storming out of the women's quarters.

Well, that and 'cause he's gigantic and every time he moves around too much or too fast, he feels like he's gonna barf.

As they feared, Zoro's nausea has returned almost constantly now that he's lost frequent access to dry land, and although he's dutifully choking down what he keeps referring to as "those god-awful piece-of-shit crackers" every morning, they're not providing much relief. He's had more luck simply lying as still as possible, eye shut and a pillow hugged against his middle, but the number of feasible resting positions are limited, and after a while he's forced to shift and stretch cramped, aching muscles.

Despite his discomfort and periodically flaring temper, however, the green-haired man's made it abundantly clear that he's determined to give both babies whatever time they need to reach adequate weight and development.

"He didn't even say anything- he just glared at me when I told him Law might decide to do the laparotomy early!" Luffy recalls their doctor fretting in the dining hall yesterday afternoon. "And I
know he's worried about it being too soon, but we might not have a choice!"

Edema. Proteinuria. The growing risk of eclamptic seizures. A potential for early placental
degradation. The captain's head is whirling with so much medical jargon he barely understands that
he's beginning to feel as though someone jammed him face-first into the head and flushed, but it all
boils down to one thing: given his current condition, there's no way his swordsman's going to make
it to the thirty-seven weeks considered full term for twins.

Thirty-one. He's only gonna be thirty-one weeks in a couple days. Chopper says the peas can't
breathe by themselves yet; they still need Zoro doing it for 'em, and it'll take AT LEAST three,
maybe four or even five more weeks until they can do it without help.

But that's only if the pee-clampy thing doesn't make it too dangerous to keep waiting. If it gets bad
enough that he thinks Zoro might start having those seizures... Chopper said he's gonna have to
operate right away, even if it's still too early. Even if Law's not here yet.

The captain runs a hand through his hair, still exhausted but no longer interested in napping.

I knew it wasn't gonna be easy, having another baby, but- it wasn't supposed to be this hard!

He doesn't regret his children; he was already head over heels, brimming with joy and excitement
long before he heard their fast-paced little heartbeats, glimpsed their developing shapes on the
monitor or felt them moving in his partner's belly. Before he knew they were two.

No, and especially now that he does know and now that he's done all of those things, he can't
regret- he REFUSES to regret their existence because they've claimed a piece of his heart that will
remain theirs no matter what the future brings.

... but he does regret being so persistent in his efforts to persuade Zoro into trying for another baby.

If I'd known he'd get so sick. If I'd known he'd end up having to fight, having to use Asura. If I'd
known he'd get hurt again, not just his body but-

Scars on the inside, he recalls telling Ace months ago. Scars with the scabs ripped off. Old, poorly
healed wounds aching and bleeding anew.

He digs his fingernails against the Adam wood on either side of him.

If it hadn't been for that Marine jerk. If it hadn't been for the water. If I hadn't been half-conscious
and less than useless. If I hadn't been SLEEPING when those guys got into the dock.

The list of variables which could've prevented their current situation is endless, but he keeps
coming back to the fact that he wasn't there when his swordsman needed him. That he was
sprawled in bed, happily dreaming about food and sex while Zoro was being held at sword-point
by his own weapon and desperately searching for a way to protect Sabo, the twins and himself.

He still won't tell me exactly what they threatened to do.

"It didn't happen, so it doesn't matter," the older pirate had told him gruffly when he'd cautiously
pressed for details. "And I don't want you regretting the choice you made."

The decision to free their captives, humans and fishmen alike, hadn't been easy, but Luffy honestly
hadn't known what else to do with them. While the Marines might've been willing to bargain for
their release, it would've meant putting his family and crew at risk once again during the contact
required for such an exchange. And he hadn't wanted them on the ship longer than necessary either.
But he'd also been extremely hesitant to order their execution.

*It's something THEY'D do. What they probably WOULD have done to us if we hadn't gotten away, but even knowing that-*

The idea of killing defenseless foes - even ones previously attempting to kill HIM - doesn't seem right. It's NEVER seemed right, and it's a line he'd prefer not to cross.

So he'd swallowed his anger and ordered the Straw Hat's sniper to produce a couple of those odd Midori Boshi rowboats, and together they and Sanji had unceremoniously tossed seven uniformed men and all five remaining fishmen into the crafts before shoving them off the portside. The Pirate King had personally shoved the Den Den Mushi confiscated earlier that morning into the front pocket of the most senior-looking but still badly shaken Marine and addressed them all with a warning: don't ever let me see your faces again, and stay the hell away from my family and my crew and my ship.

Then they'd raised the Sunny's sails and fled the area, leaving their former captives to their own devices.

His nakama hadn't questioned the decision, and Zoro had merely stared at him in silence for a few moments before sighing and nodding in agreement, the worst of his tension slipping away with the knowledge that their enemies were no longer onboard.

"Why?" Ace had asked his dark-haired father later, his tone not angry but curious. "Why not just let Dad do it, if you didn't want to kill them yourself? He hates Marines, and those other guys- the fishmen working for the Marines- they tried to hurt him too. And he did kill some of them anyway. A bunch of them, actually. I- I saw him do it. Some of it."

"I didn't wanna see any more blood," the captain had admitted quietly after a long silence. "And I don't think Zoro did either. Fighting somebody and beating 'em... that's different than cutting 'em into pieces or- or cutting their heads off or whatever. He doesn't like doing stuff like that unless he doesn't have a choice."

*And he REALLY doesn't like doing it in front of you and Sabo.*

"Well, then what if you just found some other way to do it, so there wasn't any blood?"

There'd been an even longer pause before he'd eventually said, "... no. I still would've done the same thing, 'cause... it wasn't the blood that bothered me. Not really."

"..."

Looking down into the eight-year-old's upturned face, he'd found himself searching for the right words. "Enough people died without us killing a bunch more just 'cause they were there. And besides... maybe some- maybe even a lot of those guys were only there 'cause their captains said they hadda be. Maybe they didn't really wanna come after us and they didn't really wanna fight, but they did 'cause they didn't get a choice- it got made for them."

"You make them sound like- like they're not bad, they're just... I don't know. Regular people."

Recalling his son's surprised and somewhat bewildered expression, he knows Ace was right.

*Because there's fishmen like Oolong and Hokey and those two guys Zoro killed, but there's fishmen like Jinbei too. And it's the same way with pirates. And Marines. There's ones like that officer, but there's also people like Coby and Smokey. And like Grandpa too, I guess.*
He's always held the perspective that neither side's better than the other, and also that choosing one is merely a matter of personal preference, although it's become a somewhat difficult view to maintain when the Marines are either directly or indirectly responsible for so much of the physical and emotional trauma he and his crew have survived over the years.

But the men he'd found nervously awaiting their fates on the wet grass of the Sunny's lawn deck when he'd exited the men's quarters? He hadn't recognized a single face, and as he'd stared them down one-by-one, wanting nothing more than to fling the entire lot overboard and watch them try to swim with their wrists and ankles tied for having the audacity to threaten his family and crew, he'd also found himself wondering-

*I couldn't stop thinking about Zoro and the kids waiting for me inside and wondering who those guys had waiting for them.*

xxx

In the end, he's got too much nervous energy to keep sitting there thinking about what he could've or possibly should've done differently, so he wanders off to the dining hall, where he finds the lamps still burning despite the late hour and Sanji and Chopper seated at the table, discussing their dwindling food supply.

The cook eyes Luffy warily as he drops into the empty chair across from them. "Don't even ask."

"I wasn't gonna," he insists, casting one last longing glance towards the fridge and then slumping forward to rest his chin on his arms.

"Chopper and I were discussing rationing," Sanji informs him grimly. "We're running really low on a lot of essentials, but with the ship out of fuel, it's too risky to make a supply run; according to Nami-san, there's Marines stationed on every goddamn shitty island within log pose range."

The captain straightens, opening his mouth to protest, but the blond raises a hand. "Oi, hear me out, alright? It's just a precaution, in case something happens and we can't meet up with Law like we planned. And Marimo and the kids wouldn't be subject to full rationing anyway, so don't start yelling about how they're gonna starve."

"NOBODY'S going to starve," the doctor adds quickly. "I've calculated the average number of daily calories required by each of us, given a number of variables, and like Sanji says, it's only a precaution."

"I know Usopp's been fishing every day and getting Jinbei and Franky to help him, but there's never a guarantee they'll catch something. Not to mention-

*Zoro can't even look at seafood right now without puking. And even if Sanji mixes it with other stuff or tries to make it look like something else... he can still smell it.*

Fidgeting in his seat, Luffy tries to think of a good argument against their reasoning – more because agreeing to what they're proposing means openly acknowledging just how much trouble the crew's in than because he's worried about his own stomach, although that's certainly a consideration too – but he's forced to conclude they're right. With the Sunny maintaining total broadcast silence and playing a constant game of sea king and tuna with passing vessels, they've no way of knowing how long it's going to take the surgeon's submarine to reach them, especially if the Heart Pirates encounter any difficulties obtaining the supplies their captain's agreed to deliver.

His crewmates are looking at him expectantly, waiting for orders.
"Okay. Okay, let's do it. As long as-

"Luffy, I promise, I'll make sure the kids have enough to eat. The shitty swordsman too, even though he hasn't been too interested in food lately." Sanji's right hand, resting on the tabletop, clenches into a fist. "I hate doing this, and I never would've mentioned it to Chopper if I didn't think- ... I'd rather be safe than sorry. You know that."

The cook's thinking of a shipwreck, of the sun beating down on a lifeless stony plateau endlessly battered by waves and slowly crumbling into the sea. Luffy can see it in his face. "Yeah. I do. It's okay."

xxx

As it turns out, Sanji's not the only one being tormented by old memories that evening; Zoro, who's miraculously fallen asleep despite his constant coughing, jolts awake kicking and thrashing in sweat-drenched sheets during the middle of the night, startling not just the captain and their children but also rousing the occupants of the men's quarters and bringing both Chopper and the skeletal musician whose watch has just ended running.

Uncertain what prompted his swordsman's terror-stricken shout of denial and not wanting to cause further panic if it's one of THOSE dreams, Luffy tries to keep his distance at first - not an easy feat given the narrow bed they're sharing - but he's dragged unexpectedly into the groggy man's embrace and squeezed so tightly that he's starting to have difficulty breathing before the rigid arms around him begin to loosen slightly and only very reluctantly.

Polite tapping and concerned inquiries give way to loud knocking and demands to know why he's not answering, and he's finally forced to send Ace to unlock the door because his first mate refuses to release him and he's a little afraid what might happen if their nakama panic and resort to breaking it down. Even with all three katana safely out of reach, leaning against the wall beside the closet, and his movements turned clumsy by the twins' accelerated growth during the past week, the green-haired pirate's still liable to knock someone's teeth out with a swinging fist or worse if he thinks they're being attacked.

"Zoro. Zoro, you gotta wake up. Whatever you were dreaming, it's not real."

Zoro tenses at the sound of his voice yet doesn't seem to comprehend what he's saying. Trembling hands are roaming his body, touching him all over, but there's nothing sexual in it- and everything desperate. He's still half asleep himself and badly confused, but eventually he realizes that one shaking hand keeps returning to his chest and splaying over his heart, as though seeking assurance that it's still beating.

When Chopper, who's entered in Heavy Point, tries to untangle them to better assess his patient's condition, the older pirate fights him, making incoherent noises and grappling with the reindeer so violently that only Luffy's firm grip on the bedframe keeps everyone from ending up on the floor.

"Leggo!" The captain protests, wincing as a book tumbles off the shelf above the headboard and bounces off his face. "Give him a couple minutes!"

"He's right, Chopper-san." Having followed the doctor inside, Brook's hovering at his shoulder, touching it tentatively with bony fingers. "If you give Zoro-san a chance to wake up completely, I'm sure he'll be a great deal more cooperative."

"Oi, somebody get the light? It's really dark in- ah, thanks, Ace." Blinking against the lamp's glow, which is much brighter than the cloud-shrouded moon streaming dimly through the porthole
window, Luffy peers at the swordsman clutching him and cautiously releases the bedpost to rub soothing circles on his back and shoulders. "Oi, it's okay. I'm here, okay? I'm not going anywhere."

"S-Sencho?" A massive shudder ripples through Zoro's body. "I- god. GOD. I was dreaming, wasn't I? You're-"

He seizes the younger pirate's jaw, tilting his chin up to stare intently at his exposed neck, all the air rushing out of him in a wordless noise of relief at the sight of clean unmarked skin, and this time when the doctor reaches out to touch him, murmuring a word of warning, he allows it. "Dreaming. I was just- thank fucking god."

"Fuh," Sabo echoes quietly from where he's standing in his crib, gripping the railing and watching anxiously, and although no one directly reprimands him, too distracted to catch what he's actually saying, Brook raises a finger to his lipless mouth in a shushing gesture.

"I'm- I'm okay," the first mate's insisting as Chopper checks his pulse and runs both hands carefully up and down his belly, nudging Luffy aside to gain more room. "I was dreaming about the goddamn h-hallway again, only-"

He retches, chest and stomach heaving, and there's a mad scramble to get the waste basket within range.

To everyone's mixed relief and concern, he avoids throwing up on the bed, but his overactive gag reflex triggers a coughing fit that leaves him curled on his side, panting and struggling to clear his throat and flinching as he's kicked repeatedly in the ribs.

"Chopper, can't you give him something?" The captain asks helplessly, petting his swordsman's quivering side. "To make him stop doing that?"

"Other than this, not really..." Keeping a firm grip on the half-full water glass he's retrieved from the sink beside the door, the reindeer helps Zoro ease into an upright position and coaxes him into taking small sips until the congested wheeze in his breathing abates. "Whatever I gave him would pass straight through the umbilical cords to the twins, and right now we don't want to stress their systems any more than necessary."

"Yeah, but aren't they getting stressed out every time he starts hacking like he's gonna spit up a lung?" Luffy argues, cradling the curve that's rippling steadily beneath his hand. "Look, they're kicking the crap out of him! They don't like it when he starts coughing, and they're not letting him sleep, and didn't you say he's gonna just keep getting more stressed out if he doesn't? And when he's upset, they get upset too, and that just makes him more-"

There's a low whine from the crib wedged next to the table and chairs at the room's center, and the rubber man points towards it. "Listen to Sabo- he knows it too! He's been fussing like that since the day before yesterday 'cause he knows something's not right."

Sighing, Chopper massages his temples, thinking. "Alright, you have a point. I've- I've got something I might be able to give him. In the infirmary. But I need to double-check my records first, to make sure it's safe, and if I see anything that concerns me-"

"Okay, just- at least go check? He's had like... maybe an hour of sleep in the past couple of days."

"An hour?" Zoro coughs, grimacing, and tilts the waste basket he's clutching so he can spit forcefully into it. "Felt more like I was out for five minutes. My freaking head's killing me."

Dropping the can onto the carpet beside the bed, he slumps back onto the pillow with a groan.
"Ungh, I feel like I could just curl up and-"

"NO," Luffy snaps, loudly enough to make everyone - including himself - jump. "No. Chopper's gonna find you something that'll make you stop coughing and you're gonna take it and you're NOT gonna throw it back up, and then you're gonna sleep and when you wake up again, you're gonna feel better."

"I-" His swordsman's staring at him warily, not exactly cowed but definitely not willing to argue. "Okay."

Brook, observing their exchange, reaches out to tap Chopper's shoulder. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind making a brief detour to the men's quarters as well, while I keep our nakama and their children company?"

"I wasn't serious," the first mate murmurs softly, still staring up at his frowning spouse while their crewmates step away for a brief discussion of their own. "You know that, right?"

"Yeah, but-" Luffy's brow furrows further as he touches the older pirate's cheek, traces the hollow of his throat. "Zoro shouldn't say stuff like that, even if he's joking, 'cause it's not-" He swallows, fingertip outlining the triangular-shaped portion of bare skin visible within the kimono's overlapped folds, sliding over the ridge of collarbone and across a pectoral that's lost a little of its hard definition thanks to a lack of weight training. "-it's not funny."

"No, it's not. But maybe-" Zoro's gaze darts to where Ace is leaning over the crib railing to dangle a stuffed toy at Sabo in hopes of distracting him, and he lowers his voice. "Maybe you SHOULD start thinking about what you'd do, though. I mean, just in case-"

"There's nothing to think about, 'cause nothing's gonna happen."

"Sencho-"

"No." The captain's eyes flash, intense and unrelenting- but without the added sting of Haki. He's not going to make that mistake again, especially not now, when such a blunder might prove incredibly dangerous for his swordsman and their unborn children. "We're not talking about this. The peas are gonna be fine, and you're gonna be fine too. You're gonna be right there with me when we tell everybody whatever we decide to name 'em."

"You're not gonna die- I won't let you. I'll reach into the dark and yank you back, if that's what it takes, but I'm not gonna let you go."

From the way the other man's face softens, he knows Zoro can read his thoughts in his eyes, even though he hasn't spoken them aloud, but before his first mate can respond, Chopper's bustling back into the room with a flask clutched in one hand- and Brook's violin case in the other.

"The only- the ONLY reason I can give you this remedy is because you're in the third trimester. Most of the twins' major development is complete, and now we're really just waiting for them to put on more weight and for their lungs to mature. But if it was any earlier in your pregnancy, especially during the first few weeks-" The doctor warns as he passes the instrument to the skeleton and takes a seat on the bed's edge. "This should suppress your cough and make you more comfortable, but even if you vomit, I won't be able to give you another dose for six hours. And not at all if I start seeing signs of fetal distress, although it's unlikely."

"... you're sure-?"

"C'mon, Zoro. You know Chopper's not gonna give you something that's gonna hurt you. Or the
peas."

Ace is enthusiastically nodding his agreement. "Dad, just take it."

"... it looks like- okay, okay! Quit fricking glaring at me and keep your damn fingers crossed."

The liquid's dark, almost black in color, with a disgustingly syrupy consistency, and the swordsman's shoulders begin to hitch the moment he finishes emptying the phial.

The reindeer tenses, waste basket at the ready once more, but Luffy disregards the strong probability of finding himself covered in regurgitated medication and takes his partner's face between his hands, leaning close to lock their gazes. "Zoro's not gonna throw up. He promised."

Inhaling deeply through his nose, Zoro stifles a watery-sounding hiccup and his complexion pales, but when he clears his throat experimentally, everything stays down. He doesn't quite dare to talk yet or even open his mouth, although he gives a hesitant nod.

"I'm staying for an hour or two, to make sure there's no negative side effects," Chopper warns them, discarding the used container in the sink before he reverts to his normal form and crosses the room to take a seat opposite Brook, who's producing rich but scattered notes as he tunes the violin he's lifted from its case.

"Are you gonna play something?" Ace asks curiously.

"I thought- perhaps some music might help? Chopper-san says the twins can hear our voices, so it seemed to me that my playing might calm them and help Zoro-san sleep." The musician tilts his head inquiringly. "With your permission, of course?"

"Let's try it," the captain says immediately. "Zoro, lay down."

Clearly eager for the opportunity to finally get some well-needed rest and too tired to protest being ordered about, the green-haired pirate complies, shifting gingerly until he's sprawled on his right side with his belly nestled against the mattress.

Luffy snuggles along his back, one hand slipping over his side to tuck the sheets around him and smooth the silky material of the kimono belted loosely beneath his heavily rounded middle.

"Da-dee gababa," Sabo announces to the room at large, tugs the toy from his older brother's grip and promptly burrows into one corner of the crib with it, legs tucked under him and rump hoisted in the air so he resembles a turtle.

Mystified, Zoro rolls awkwardly onto his opposite side to face his captain. "What'd he just say?"

"I think- I think he said Zoro's a good boy." Struggling not to laugh, the rubber man presses forward to plant a kiss on his nose. "See, I said he knew there was something wrong. And now he knows everything's gonna be okay, so he's going back to sleep."

"Hope you're right." The swordsman's mouth quirks. "Jeez, if he's showing signs of Kenbunshoku before he can even talk in complete sentences."

"Yeah, it's kinda scary, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it. At least it's that, though, and not one of the other kinds. Kid packs enough of a wallop without adding Busoshoku or Haoshoku to the mix." He touches his abdomen, where the twins are lying between them, now quiet except for an occasional stirring. "Makes me wonder
about these two. Especially the one that takes after you a little too much and keeps trying to smash holes through my ribcage..."

Luffy's eyes wander down to study his belly, narrowing slightly in concentration. After a moment, he raises his gaze, shrugging. "I dunno. Maybe it's 'cause there's more than one of 'em, plus they're still inside you, but they're really hard to read. And Ray-san says everybody's got the potential for it anyway. They just don't always know it's there or how to use it."

"Mmm."

They're silent for several long minutes, and the younger pirate's gratified to see that Zoro's beginning to show signs of intense drowsiness now that he's no longer coughing and getting endlessly pummeled by restless fists and feet. His first mate's eye is drifting further closed with each strain of music emerging beneath Brook's talented fingers, and although his sword's still safely sheathed, the skeleton must be employing a little of the skill he uses while performing his Nemuriuta Flanc, because Ace and Sabo have already fallen asleep, Chopper's nodding in his chair, and the captain's coming close to dozing himself.

But just when he's contemplating reaching for the lamp-

"Sencho-" So low it's nearly a whisper. "There's something I need you to-" The swordsman's half-lidded eye shuts completely, then blinks back open as he struggles to remain conscious. "-something you gotta swear you'll do for me."

"Something I gotta swear I'll do?" Luffy asks softly, combing his fingers through spiky green hair and smiling sleepily, because while he's almost positive he's prepared to do whatever Zoro wants without resorting to vows, he's certainly willing to humor him.

If he says he wants me to bring him cheese or something tomorrow morning, I'm gonna laugh.

"Yeah." Voice sluggish, now barely audible over the violin. "Ever since that other morning... I've been thinking a lot about Asura and- and what could've happened if..." Cursing faintly at his inability to stay awake. "And- after what I dreamed tonight, I need you to promise me something."

Smile slipping from his face, the captain feels a knot of unease twisting unexpectedly inside his gut.

Whatever he's gonna say, I'm not sure I wanna-

"I dreamed about the hallway, only it was all wrong. She was there, and I got her first this time- but when I rolled her over to-" There's a hand knotted in his shirt, clenched tight on the fabric to make sure he's listening. "It wasn't her. It was you, and the fishmen- well, they weren't fishmen anymore either. Not all of them." The swordsman's losing coherency fast but there's still a glimmer of trepidation visible in his barely open eye. "Promise me- promise me that you won't hold back if I ever- if I ever summon Asura and lose control and try to-"

No. No, don't ask me to do this.

"... don't let me hurt anybody."

"I won't let Zoro hurt anybody-" He can feel his heart breaking at the immediate relief and gratitude surfacing in the other man's weary face. "- but it's not gonna come to that."

"Luffy-"
"Shhh. We're gonna talk about it, but we're gonna do it tomorrow, when you're not falling asleep and coming up with really dumb ideas."
Thanks to Sanji’s foresight, not to mention his unwavering iron rule over both fridge and pantry, the crew's hungry but not yet desperate when a familiar yellow vessel finally breaks the ocean’s surface beside the Sunny more than two weeks later.

"It was the goddamn cola that held us up for so long," the Heart Pirate captain informs Luffy, sounding more annoyed than apologetic. "I'd strongly advise your shipwright find a secondary form of fuel for powering your ship, because I had a hell of a time getting my hands on the quantity you wanted. And it wasn't the easiest thing to do with the bloody Marines watching the harbors so closely either, because they know whose crew normally buys that particular beverage by the barrel."

"You got it though, right?" The rubber man demands anxiously, snatching the lengthy receipt from Law's hand and scanning it cursorily before passing it to Nami. "Oi, can you-?"

The navigator accepts the parchment without complaint, waving him off. "I'll take care of it, Luffy. Go."

"Zoro was gonna take a nap but he said we should wake him up as soon as you got here, if he's not already awake, which he probably is 'cause he's having a really hard time sleeping. He's up there." Seizing Law by the elbow with the obvious intention of dragging him straight to the women's quarters, the younger pirate gestures towards the balcony, although he almost immediately second-guesses himself and releases the surgeon to bolt off in the opposite direction, heading at a run for the stairs to the dining hall and infirmary. "Wait, I better get Chopper too!"

"Our captain and Kenshi-san have been awaiting your arrival with great impatience," Robin assures their bemused ally. "Hopefully your findings will set their minds at ease."

"Not sure what's wrong with you though," Franky's muttering suspiciously as he moves forward to take the first of several tightly-corked barrels from the jump-suit clad pirates hefting them onboard. "Cola's an excellent fuel source. Bet it's a million times more super than whatever you're dumping in your sub's engine."

"Not likely."

"Alright, what DOES your sub run on, then?"

"The blood of my enemies, of course." And then stiffly, following a prolonged moment of silence. "... that was a joke."

"Uh huh," the cyborg grumbles, peevishly adjusting his sunglasses and trying not to glare menacingly at the surgeon, which is more difficult than he expected because Robin's hiding an amused chuckle with one hand, and he can't hide his resentfulness that the slender dark-haired woman's laughing at that bastard's stupid quip.

Damn Sideburns-guy ain't even funny.

xxx
"Interesting look for you, Roronoa-san," Law muses from the women's quarters' doorway, raising an eyebrow at the Straw Hat's first mate where he's seated cross-legged on the bed with his kimono-swathed belly overflowing his lap. "Bit more colorful than your usual attire, though, isn't it?"

"I know, right?" The green-haired pirate snorts back. "But it's easier than wrestling with a pair of goddamn pants every time I gotta take a-"

He breaks off, glowering and fumbling to drag the bed sheet higher in a futile attempt to hide his midsection as the surgeon steps aside to admit a pair of Heart pirates toting large pieces of medical equipment. "What the hell."

"I hope you weren't expecting me to personally carry everything onto your ship. Don't worry-they're not staying."

"Maybe somebody oughta tell THEM that," Zoro growls, voice thick with animosity as he glares at the faces peering through the still-open door.

"Oi oi, look, it's the talking bear again!" Ace tells Sabo with delight.

"My name's Bepo," the object of their interest - and their father's irritation - protests, swatting half-heartedly at the crewmates grinning and elbowing him and nearly hitting the exiting men instead.

"Out," Law orders. "Penguin, Shachi, I find it difficult to believe the hold's already been unloaded."

"Well, most of it's-"

"You heard the captain!" Bepo exclaims, poking the nearest of the two men. "Get back to work!"

"... that includes you. All three of you, OUT. NOW." Exasperated, the surgeon moves to shut the door in their faces, only to stagger backwards as Luffy pops through the closing gap with Chopper clinging to his shoulders.

"We're here, we're here! You didn't start without us, did you?"

"No, you didn't miss anything, Mugiwara-san," Law assures the rubber man as he casually seizes Bepo by the face and shoves him back outside before forcing the door closed. "Take a seat on the other bed with your kids, so you're not in the way, and we'll find out what's going on inside your swordsman."

He turns back to Zoro, who's hesitantly loosening his sash. "I know it's uncomfortable, but you need to lie down flat for this or I won't get a good image."

The green-haired pirate complies with reluctance, grimacing when the extra ballast he's bearing shifts, redistributed so it's further compacting his internal organs and sending a spike of pain through his lower back. The strain's evident in his voice and the way his hands have gone white-knuckled, clutching the edges of the mattress. "Not sure how long I can stay like this."

"I'll work as quickly as I can," the surgeon promises, freshly gloved fingers already pressing firmly into his patient's bulging abdomen to explore the fetal contours within. "Bear with me; they're not going to like this any more than you."

"No shit."

Too agitated to keep his distance, Luffy finds a new spot on the mattress beside his partner's
shoulder, gaze alternating anxiously between the older pirate's contorted face and the twitching, shuddering apex of his belly. "Jeez, it looks like they're FIGHTING in there."

"Not surprising, considering one's occiput anterior and the other's- ah, the second baby's still occiput posterior but no longer engaged in the pelvis," Law murmurs, pressing a little harder and prompting a low grunt from his patient. "They're not quite face-to-face because the pelvic cradle isn't wide enough to hold more than one head at a time and they're both curled in the typical fetal position, but... well, watch someone trip and fall face-first into someone else who's not expecting it and see how they react..."

"They're not gonna hurt Dad, are they? Or each other?" Ace asks worriedly, arms hugging his younger brother, who's watching the proceedings with interest from his lap.

"There's not enough room for either of them to land that hard a blow. In fact, given a few more days, definitely a week at minimum, it'll be too crowded in there for much movement period. Oi, tanuki, bring that snail over here so we can take a look."

Lowering the Den Den as gingerly as possible onto Zoro's middle, Chopper winces as his crewmate utters a muffled curse at the additional weight. "Sorry, sorry!"

The twins apparently don't like the sudden compression any more than their grimacing parent; there's a sudden flurry of motion as the baby directly beneath the mollusk twists around and kicks forcefully enough to bounce the entire animal a good three or four inches higher on his torso.

The first mate makes a breathless wheezing sound, and the doctor's reaching out to correct the startled Den Den when Ace, who's been impatiently shifting his gaze between his father's stomach and the screen, bursts into loud laughter.

Law glances up and snorts.

"Dad, Dad, look! He's mooning us!"

"Shishishi, yeah, that's definitely a butt! And-"

"And that's- definitely a boy," Zoro finishes, discomfort momentarily forgotten as he stares incredulously at his unborn son's bottom. "Pretty damn obvious he couldn't be anything else. Jeez."

Luffy's trying very hard not to laugh and failing miserably. "That can happen already? EVEN BEFORE THEY'RE BORN?"

"... I fail to see what you find so entertaining about an erect penis. It's a perfectly natural-"

"Wait a second," Zoro interrupts. "Which kid does it belong to though? I can't even tell what the hell I'm looking at anymore, there's so many arms and legs and other shit in there."

"It's twins, Roronoa. There's two sets of arms and two sets of legs. You're not carrying a consortium of cephalopods."

"YOU get knocked up and then tell me it doesn't feel like there's a damn octopus or three swimming around in your guts. Now which baby's waving his junk at us?"

"I believe I'll pass." The surgeon demurs, leaning closer to get a better look at the screen. "That would be... Baby B. The twin who's occiput posterior with its- sorry, his- head and shoulder blades braced against your spine."
"The QUIET one?"

"Yes!" Chopper responds excitedly, pointing at the image. "See, this set of feet belongs to Baby A, who's dropped lower into your pelvis. Which means B's- the boy's- head should be right about..."

The reindeer nudges the Den Den lower, searching. "There!"

"He's sucking his thumb," Luffy sighs, amusement evaporating as he stares at the monitor, fingers idly stroking his swordsman's hair. "It's really, really cute watching him do that when he's still inside Zoro."

"Cuter than watching him pop a boner," his spouse mutters. "Gonna get enough of that shit when we're changing diapers and he's trying to piss in our faces. I don't need to see it when the kid's still- ugh."

"Heart rate looks normal." Law leans over to press fingers into both sides of the first mate's belly, eyes still on the screen as his cautious but firm nudging prompts a great deal of protest from both babies. "Reflexes are good too."

He steps back, stripping off his gloves. "Looks like you guys lucked out. Gotta hand it to you- you've got some tough kids."

"Well, yeah," Luffy agrees, grinning widely now. "Me and Zoro made 'em, so of course they're tough!"

"You can sit up in a minute or two," Chopper promises the green-haired pirate, who's beginning to shift uncomfortably again. "But first I'd like to check the blood supply to both placentas, to make sure they're still delivering enough nutrients and oxygen to the twins."

"Wait, what about the other baby?" Ace demands. He's also abandoned the second bed for a better view of the monitor, gripping the back of his younger brother's shirt to keep him from getting underfoot or wandering off to dig through the lower drawers of Nami's vanity desk. "Is it another boy? Or is it a girl?"

"Ah..."

Law shrugs. "No way to tell for sure, considering the way the kid's got those legs clamped together. Unless Roronoa-san here wants to go for a jog or maybe try walking across the room on his hands to shake things up a bit more, I think you'll just need to wait and find out at the delivery."

The eight-year-old, looking rather disgruntled, immediately turns to see how his parents have taken this disappointing news, but Luffy's unperturbed and merely nodding as he bends to kiss Zoro's brow, hand gently cupping the swordsman's cheek to steady him. "It's okay- it won't be a whole lot longer 'til we find out, right, Zoro?"

"I don't know, Sencho. You sure you don't wanna watch me flopping around doing a bunch of shitty-ass acrobatic tricks like a drunk sea king out of water?"

Ace starts to giggle but falls silent at the flash of anguish that crosses his dark-haired father's face.

"No," the Straw Hat captain states firmly. "Zoro ended up having to do enough crazy stuff the other morning, and it's not gonna matter anyway 'cause I'm gonna love the peas no matter if they're a girl and a boy or both boys or whatever, and so's Zoro and everybody else. We can wait."

xxx
Sentence reduced to modified bed rest in light of the ultrasound findings, the first thing the first mate does - after Law and Chopper finish laying down some basic ground rules - is head straight for the bathhouse to take a warm shower, because while sponge baths might work well enough for basic cleanliness, they haven't been doing shit for his aching back.

He's standing almost directly under the spray with both hands braced against the tile wall and his belly almost brushing it, starting to doze off, when Luffy's voice and the fingers lightly touching his shoulder startle him awake again.

"Oi, Zoro, are you-"

The rubber man's standing much closer than the swordsman expected, and when he turns, his distended abdomen collides with the younger pirate and nearly sends him sprawling.

Skidding on the wet floor, the captain makes a comical sight with his arms flailing and his eyes wide and mouth forming a surprised "o" until he regains his balance, and Zoro finds himself chuckling helplessly. "Holy shit, this thing's like a goddamn battering ram. Sorry, Sencho."

"You guys almost knocked me on my ass!" Luffy scolds, but he's smiling as he traces fingertips down the dark line dividing the older man's middle, succumbing to the urge to linger briefly at his out-turned navel. "Mmm, last time I saw Zoro totally naked and not half-covered in sheets and stuff, he wasn't this big."

"I feel like I'm gonna explode."

"You kinda LOOK like you're gonna explode. Are you really sure you wanna try to wait another week?"

"It's only-" The first mate grimaces as wriggling movement grinds what he now recognizes as their as-yet-unidentified child's head deeper into his pelvis, crushing his bladder and making him grope unsteadily for the wall. "-only s-seven more day- ow, fuck, will you stop doing that!"

Shifting his weight to the right and leaning heavily against the younger pirate, who automatically puts a supportive arm around him, he lifts his left foot off the floor and gives his leg a shake, wincing. "Little monster keeps hitting some nerve in my ass, and I can feel it all the way down the back of my thigh, like the world's biggest fricking crab's pinching the shit out of me."

"Being out of bed's not a whole lot better than being in it, huh? Poor Zoro..." Caressing the underside of his belly in a soothing circular motion, Luffy brushes lips against the corner of his mouth. "Maybe I should just spend the next week cuddling you and fussing over you and stuff."

The swordsman snorts. "More like driving me crazy."

"I could rub your back. And maybe your feet too?"

Zoro eyes him speculatively. "Yeah, and maybe you could rub a few other things too, while you're at it."

"Oi oi," the captain scolds. "Chopper and Law told us-"

"You know what they meant. They didn't say we couldn't touch each other. They just meant no-" He takes his partner's hand and curls their joined fingers into a loose tunnel, sliding the thumb of his opposite hand suggestively against the rubber man's palm.

To his amusement, Luffy flushes and makes a flustered sputtering sound. "Z-Zoro!"
"It's great that we're closer to the infirmary and that Ace wants to stay in the room with us and Sabo, but." The older pirate offers him a wry smile. "I miss having our own room. I miss our BED. I miss being able to get you alone for more than five minutes at a time." He glances down. "Well, as much as we're ever alone right now- but I guess it's not like these two really care what we're doing, right?"

"You're-" Still pink-faced but now laughing and pulling him closer to nuzzle his neck. "Zoro, I thought you were tired! And I thought you ached all over and were sick to your stomach!"

"I am and I do and I am," the first mate scowls. "But I'm also fucking horny as hell, and it's driving me crazy."

"..."

"Look, I've been wound tighter than a goddamn top, worrying about everything, and I feel like... if I could just get off, just once, then I could relax a little. Maybe even sleep without Brook having to play the freaking violin every night. I mean, it worked before, didn't it? That day you-" It's his turn for embarrassment. "-that day we spent most of the afternoon in bed."

"..."

"I'd just do it myself, but- … oh, hell, I already tried jerking off a few times while nobody was around, but it's kinda hard to reach anything without curling up like a blasted pretzel." He groans, resisting the temptation to bury his face in his hands, because even though this is Luffy, who knows damn near everything about him and has seen him at both his best and his worse, admitting his failed attempts at masturbation is still more than a little humiliating. "... god, I probably sound desperate as shit and I don't even care. Just touch me?"

Thankfully, his captain doesn't laugh at him again but quietly reaches past his hip to turn off the shower.

Squatting low enough to plant his ass on one of the benches without falling on his face is distressingly awkward given his distorted center of gravity, and he's glad they're alone, with no one to see his partner hovering anxiously over him and lending both arms to give him a secure handhold, because for a moment or two, he's afraid he's going to yank the younger pirate down on top of him and send them both sprawling on the wet tiles.

Thankfully, they avoid such a disaster.

"Zoro-?" Luffy's studying him with dubious, narrowed eyes. "Are you sure you're okay? 'Cause you're breathing pretty hard."

"Yeah, fine. There's-" He leans back a bit, wincing and pushing down on his upper belly as he stretches both legs out in front of him. "Somebody's got a foot- jammed in one of my lungs."

Kneeling and scooting up between his knees as close as his stomach will allow, the Pirate King regards his middle with concern, brow furrowing further. "I dunno HOW you're gonna last another week. You already look kinda like me when I do the Fusen thing, so if they get any bigger, where's it gonna- ow! Oi, why'd you hit me?"

"I'm not that fat, goddamn it! Your arms and legs and shit almost disappear when you blow up like that!"
"Yeah, but you're still all belly and-" His captain looks down and his frown deepens. "Uh... Zoro-how am I supposed to reach your dick when your belly's in the way?"

"YOU SHOULD'VE THOUGHT OF THAT BEFORE YOU TOLD ME TO SIT DOWN." The swordsman's shoulders sag. "Just- never mind."

"I didn't want you to fall or anything!" Luffy protests, sitting back on his heels. He slides a hand under his first mate's abdomen, scowl growing as he searches unsuccessfully. "What the hell- you gotta be under there somewhere. Oh, wait, what's-"

"Oi oi, don't, that's not-! OI, quit poking me in the nuts! I said never mind. Just rub my damn back or something instead."

"Too bad you don't stretch like me. It'd be a lot easier."

"Shut up," Zoro grumbles, although there's considerably less heat behind his words than he originally intended, because the rubber man's already moved behind him and begun kneading his back with solicitous care, working diligently to soothe the aching muscles.

"Ace was right- the bigger you get, the weirder shaped your back gets." The younger pirate murmurs, thumbs kneading down either side of his spine. "And you're all stiff too." He pauses, considering. "I wonder if we got any of that oil left..."

"Chopper's liable to kick your ass if y- o-oi, what are you-?" Grip tightening on the bench's edge, the swordsman shudders, breath coming harder and faster at the sensation of a warm, wet tongue sliding across the back of his neck and damp fingers delving between his buttocks to tease the sensitive flesh there. His hips tilt, giving an involuntary rocking thrust at nothing, and earning a low hum of satisfaction from the man now pressed firmly against his back.

"Mmm, maybe I can make Zoro relax anyway. Maybe I can make him feel good just like this."

"Sench-" The title dissolves into a muffled groan as Luffy's mouth fastens on his neck, licking and sucking and biting very gently, and his body reacts instinctively by pushing backwards to meet the alternately circling, stroking touch that's exploring him with slow relentlessness. "D-Don't-"

To his dismay, his captain takes his stammered, broken words as protest and starts to pull away.

"Don't STOP," he manages to gasp, the discomfort in his back and belly forgotten. His vision's gone nearly as hazy and discordant as his brain, which is having an extremely difficult time remembering why penetrative sex is even supposed to be such a bad idea right now; his breath's escaping him in rough, shallow panting and he's shivering all over, overwhelmed by his desire- no, his need- for Luffy to quit screwing around and finish what he started. To bend him over the bench on which he's now sitting so unsteadily and fuck the tension from his aching body.

The impulse to demand- or possibly even beg- his spouse to do exactly that is becoming frighteningly strong, and his heart's thundering in his chest and head, and it's on the tip of his tongue to ask or plead or insist, but the rubber man's gone still, voice filled with concern. "Zoro, are you okay?"

Stop asking me that and-!

"Oi oi oi, you're shaking really bad." Concern changing to alarm.

"I-" He can't think, can't formulate a response. The room's suddenly too warm. HE's suddenly too warm, his skin sticky with sweat, and he abruptly realizes that what he took for euphoria is actually
the precursors of losing consciousness: dizziness spinning his head, dark spots dancing in his vision and the strength draining from his frame, rendering him limp and dazed in his startled captain's tightening grasp.

xxx

"Extensive notes. And very thorough- I'm impressed," Law remarks, only to find himself hiding an unbidden smile as his much smaller and rather fuzzier-faced colleague promptly erupts into an ecstatic dance complete with abundant colorful language.

_Tanuki or not, he's certainly very skilled at-

Sudden rising commotion outside derails the Heart Pirate captain's train of thought, and he and Chopper turn towards the infirmary doorway just as Luffy bursts through it, staggering slightly because he's carrying his enraged first mate bridal-style.

"Put me down, you bastard, I can walk just fine on my own!"

"Stop wiggling! I don't wanna drop you and the peas!"

"If you would've let me get dressed first-!" The green-haired swordsman looks as though he'd like to punch the younger man in the head, but his hands are occupied, one clutching frantically at the rubber man's shoulder where his arm's slung around his neck- and the other maintaining a death grip on the bath towel that's barely preserving his modesty.

"You couldn't even get up without me helping you, so how were you gonna get dressed by yourself?" The Straw Hat captain barks back, stomping across the small room to deposit his fuming partner on the hospital bed- and inadvertently treating their audience to an un-obscured view of his own bare ass, because he's not wearing a stitch of clothing and hasn't got a third hand available to utilize a towel of his own.

_This crew. Law rolls his eyes towards the ceiling and closes them momentarily. Never a dull moment._

"You could've HELPED me get DRESSED-" Zoro's hissing, struggling to evade the hands patting at him. "-instead of damn near flashing my gut at half the fucking crew!"

"Nobody CARES. Everybody knows you're fat 'cause you've got babies in- OW!"

"Oi-"

"Zoro, Luffy, what-"

"OUCH!"

"Oi- OI. Roronoa, will you kindly stop hitting Mugiwara there and tell us what the hell happened?"

"Zoro fainted!" Luffy insists, dodging the next blow that's thrown at him.

"I didn't faint, I got a little light-headed and you freaked out!"

"You turned white like a ghost and couldn't breathe right and almost fell off the bench! What was I supposed to do, huh? Ignore all that stuff and stick some fingers up your butt anyway? I know you said you're horny, but-"

"SENCHO-"
Their argument's interrupted by Chopper, who's abruptly taken Heavy Point to seize Luffy by the scruff, giving him a warning shake. "Didn't Law and I explain? What part of no sex didn't you understand?"

"But Zoro said as long as I didn't use my-"  
The swordsman colors, making a helpless sputtering noise, and Law can't decide whether to start chuckling or knock both his patient's and his fellow captain's skulls together.

"My apologies for not being more specific on the definition of what constitutes sex. What your tanuki and I meant was no-" He proceeds to calmly rattle off a variety of sexual practices, mostly for the pleasure of watching Roronoa's flush darkening further with each successive technique, and finally concluding the lengthy list with, "-and no artificial... devices."

"You mean fake dicks and stuff, right?" Luffy asks, curiosity piqued. "… 'cause we-"

Zoro clobbers him again before he can elaborate.

The surgeon clears his throat. "ANYWAY. Regardless of whatever you were doing, or thinking of doing, I'd advise against it. The goal is to keep Roronoa-san's heart rate low. Anything raising it too high's likely to have a negative impact and, at the very least, prompt fainting spells- as you've already discovered."

"Great," the first mate grumbles, prodding his enthusiastically nodding partner with an elbow. "Now go get my damn clothes so I can get the hell out of here without everybody staring at my fat ass again."

"Actually, you're not going anywhere. Not until we check your blood pressure and get some blood and urine samples." Law informs him bluntly, before turning his attention to the reindeer already rummaging for a sphygmomanometer. "Might be easier just keeping him here in your infirmary in case we need to run a magnesium infusion. And I can move the ultrasound equipment in here later, if it's necessary, but we'd better put the fetal heart monitor on him anyway. Where'd I- ah, there we go."

At the sight of the electronics-laden pole the surgeon's retrieving from behind the door and the broad belt dangling from it, Zoro freezes, nostrils flaring slightly. "No."

Chopper glances up. "Wha-? Oh! Don't worry, it doesn't hurt. That stretchy part just goes around your-"

"No," the swordsman repeats resolutely, earning a confused glance from the younger pirate at his side. "You're not putting that thing on me."

"Roronoa-san, it's just a-"

"I don't care what you call it. You try to put it on me and I'll make you fucking eat it."

"Zoro, they're just trying to-"

"NO." There's steel in his voice, making it clear that he's not backing down without a fight. "You wanna listen to shit inside me, use the fucking snail but keep that damn thing away from me."

The two physicians exchange a baffled look. Law shrugs. "I suppose one's as good as the other. Either way, it's not worth him getting excited over it."
Luffy's been glancing back and forth between the band and his suddenly uncooperative swordsman with a puzzled frown on his face, but his tense expression melts to equally undisguised relief when Law pushes away the pole and Zoro slowly relaxes, lowering the hand he's been unconsciously pressing against his belly in what's clearly a protective gesture.

*His crewmates don't understand either. Interesting. I wonder if his aversion could be related to-*

Before the surgeon's able to devote more than a moment or two of speculation to the subject, however, there's sounds of a scuffle beyond the infirmary door, accompanied by raised voices.

xxx

Outside in the dining hall, Ace is arguing with Sanji and Jinbei, who've taken a stance between him and the closed door, with Sabo clinging to his side and making unhappy noises. When the door opens and Luffy peers out, the eight-year-old pushes past their older crewmates. "Dad! Is everything okay? I heard Usopp-aniki say he saw you and Dad- ... uh, why are you naked...?"

The captain glances down at himself. "Huh? Oh. Oops."

"Lovely." The cook snorts and walks away, shaking his head.

"Ah, Luffy-kun, would you like me to fetch you and Zoro-san some-" Jinbei gives his own sleeve a slight tug, eyes politely averted.

"Yeah, if you wouldn't mind." Unabashed by his unclothed state, the rubber man watches as Sabo wanders past, ignoring them all in favor of heading straight for the infirmary bed and attempting to climb up beside Zoro.

"Da-dee Da-dee!"

"Oi, squirt. You gonna hang out, make sure these guys don't do anything funny?" The green-haired pirate asks, reaching down to lift the one-year-old onto the mattress beside him and waving away Chopper before he can start raising a fuss. "Will you quit bitching? He's less than thirty pounds and it's not like I'm trying to bench press him."

"Just be careful," the reindeer admonishes him sternly, and this time Law DOES feel the corners of his mouth threatening to curl into a smile, because despite his small stature, the Zoan's glaring up at the swordsman as though ready to wrestle him into submission if the warning goes unheeded.

Chapter End Notes

My husband pretty much laughed his way through this entire chapter. He said he thought you guys would love it; hopefully you did- or at least found it amusing.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Warnings for medical squick.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm getting really fucking tired of staring at the same goddamn wall.

Lying on his left side sprawled amidst a small scattering of pillows, Zoro heaves a sigh and closes his eye, although he already knows attempting to sleep is probably futile. He's too uncomfortable, between his aching back and unwieldy belly, the leg cramps periodically over-tightening the muscles in his calves, and the ever-present acid reflex burning his throat and nostrils every time he so much as hiccups, as though his severely compressed stomach's trying to escape through his nose.

His only consolation's that the twins are now too tightly packed within his abdominal cavity to do more than occasionally wriggle and push against him; there's definitely no longer room for strong kicks or punches, much less aimless tumbling or wild acrobatics. In only a handful of days, they've put on enough weight that he's fairly certain his abdomen's swelled by a good couple of inches.

And I complained about being a bloody whale LAST time. Jeez.

He rubs the side of his bulging belly ruefully, fighting the impulse to scratch.

Luffy's elsewhere with both of their older children in tow, ostensibly to give him a chance to rest, although they both know it's really because he's so tired and miserable that he'll lose his temper with them climbing all over him. Lack of sleep's made him even more irritable than usual.

I don't think people are supposed to go this long without sleeping. I'm pretty sure I heard it can start messing with your head, make you hallucinate and shit.

He thinks another day, especially stuck in bed like this, is going to drive him insane. But another day- every additional day he's able to hold out and quell his urge to declare that he's had enough-gives his unborn charges even more of a fighting chance, and he's already been debating asking Chopper and Law to hold off for another week, even though he doubts they'll agree. The doctors have been plaguing him with frequent tests and physical examinations, eyeing the results with disapproval.

I'm starting to feel like a pincushion, he thinks sourly as he rolls to his opposite side and stretches, careful to avoid dislodging the iv taped to his wrist.

He'd argued against the saline drip, but they'd insisted he needed it, along with several others.

Magnesium sulfate to prevent seizures. A medication to lower his blood pressure. Something else that Law claims will speed up the twins' lung development and might, if they're lucky, negate the use of breathing machines, although the surgeon's brought those too. He can't remember what that one's called – something long and complicated, he's sure, and impossible to pronounce – but Chopper had been elated because it wasn't something normally stocked in their infirmary's medicinal arsenal.
He dozes off unexpectedly while he's contemplating this, exhaustion finally dragging him under.

xxx

It's about thirty-five minutes later, although the span of time seems much shorter, when he startles awake to find his captain seated on the bed beside him, murmuring reassuringly and stroking his chest and belly.

"Is Zoro thirsty?" Luffy asks cautiously, ministrations pausing as he studies his swordsman's sleep-dazed face and then immediately resuming once he sees the older pirate's coherent enough to raise a questioning eyebrow. "He was talking in his sleep, saying something about water."

"No, I-" His heart's thundering in his chest, but he can already feel it slowing as his body relaxes under the other man's touch. "I was- having some kind of screwy dream. The ship was sinking, I think. Filling up with water."

He'd been struggling down the dock system hallway, fighting against a rising surge of sea water already high enough to crest against his hips and pelvis as he'd hunted desperately through the rooms located at the Sunny's heart, following phantom voices and the inconsolable sobbing of small children and finding nothing but empty space.

_Doesn't take a genius to figure out that one._

Losing control, or even just lacking the ability to exercise it... well, that's something he hated even before Impel Down and the sadistic bitch made him fear it as well. In his current state, bedridden and uncomfortable and anxious, it's no wonder he's having nightmares.

At least it was one of the... better... dreams. I didn't end up bleeding. Or accidentally killing the wrong people, he thinks, suppressing a shudder.

His partner's apparently reached the same conclusion, because there's no enthusiastic claims that the Sunny's unsinkable. Luffy merely gives a faint "mmm" of acknowledgement and keeps caressing him, fingers moving to massage gently along his side where the skin's stretched taut beneath his borrowed kimono. "They're gonna yell if they come in and see you laying like this, 'cause they said your heart's gotta work harder when you're-"

"Yeah, I know, but I can't stand being on the same side all the damn time." He stretches, grimacing as his joints produce a litany of popping sounds, and rolls back to the left with a sigh of frustration. "I can't wait 'til I can sleep on my back again. Or even my friggin' stomach- though I guess that's gonna take a hell of a lot longer."

"You're probably gonna feel better being able to sleep at all, no matter how you're laying," his captain murmurs, hand moving to knead his shoulder in hopes of coaxing the tension from his body.

"Can't argue that." Staring at the insides of his lids is better than staring at the infirmary wall, so he closes his eye, sighing again as the rubber man snuggles against his back. "They're gonna yell at YOU, if they find you sharing the bed with me."

"Don't care. I miss sharing a bed with Zoro."

He can't argue that either; it's lonelier than he expected, sleeping by himself when he's used to Luffy and sometimes one or even two small children drooling on him and snoring and stealing the covers and bumping against him and brushing his legs with chilly feet.
"Nami says she and Robin aren't sure they want their room back. She says ours is nicer."

"The hell we're not taking ours back. I'm not squeezing us and four kids into her damn double-sized bed every time there's a thunderstorm and they all start freaking out and decide they're hiding under the covers with us."

"We could get Franky to put hers and Robin's together," Luffy teases. "It'd be an even bigger bed than ours."

"Sure, and I'd be the poor bastard getting stuck in the crack. Not to mention we'd be sharing the place with Sabo and the twins ALL THE TIME. I don't think so."

"You said you wanted to keep the peas in our room though, right?"

The swordsman snorts. "Yeah, for the first couple months or whatever, like we did with the other two, but not INDEFINITELY. It'd be nice to have a little privacy eventually, since we're sure as hell not getting it now."

"... Zoro... are you still thinking about sex all the time?"

"OI, it's not ALL the time, okay?" He can feel his face heating up. "Just... a lot of the time."

There's muffled but greatly amused laughter against his shoulder blade. "So... most of the time?"

"Goddamn it, Sencho, shut up! You don't know what it's like, being all screwed up by hormones and frigging frustrated as shit and then getting told you're not allowed to do anything about- oi oi oi- quit laughing, you asshole, or I'll tell Law to fuckin' body-swap us and YOU can deal with being almost eight months pregnant and putting up with all this crap."

While I go play with your dick until your damn body can't walk, his brain adds helpfully, and he can't decide whether he's disgusted with himself or merely intrigued by the prospect.

Unsurprisingly, his spouse is grinning, as though reading his thoughts. "Shishishi. If Zoro really wanted to swap, I'd-"

"Sorry to interrupt, but that doesn't sound like a very good idea," Law states dryly from where he's standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame. "Roronoa-san, I'm not sure I'd trust your captain with your body. Given his usual behavior, I'm afraid he'd forget your physical limitations and be a bit too enthusiastic with it."

"Oi oi," Luffy protests, twisting around to glare at the surgeon. "I'd be really careful with Zoro!" He turns back to his first mate, hand slipping over the older pirate's side to cosset his belly. "I wouldn't do anything that'd hurt him or the peas."

"Sorry, request denied, and I need you off the bed so I can check your swordsman's blood pressure."

"Aw, I just got comfy! Can't you just reach over-?"

"Mugiwara, move. Unless you want me to throw you out entirely...?"

"Okay, okay," the rubber man pouts, giving Zoro's stomach a final affectionate pat before reluctantly abandoning the mattress. "See, look, I moved."

Ignoring his fellow captain, Law moves to the bedside and accepts the arm his patient's offering. "I
need to know if you're still experiencing those dizzy spells."

"... they're not as bad as before, but... yeah, sometimes," the first mate admits hesitantly.

"Any abdominal pain? Shortness of breath?"

Zoro snorts. "What breath? I can barely get any damn air with my lungs smashed into my throat." He gestures to his upper belly, rubbing gingerly at his right side. "And yeah, I think one of the little shits has a foot jammed in my ribs right here."

The surgeon's lips thin. He tugs the pressure cuff loose and presses his fingers to the green-haired man's wrist, eyes narrowed and staring at the wall while he counts. His expression of irritation deepens as the seconds pass.

"Oi, what's with that look?"

"The medication we're giving you to reduce hypertension isn't working. Your blood pressure's far higher than I'd like, and your pulse is too fast."

"And that means...?"

"It means I need to go retrieve your tanuki so we can prep for surgery."

"What- wait a second!" Zoro protests, struggling to turn towards the Heart pirate captain and nearly tangling himself in the iv line in the process. "You said- there's still two days before-!"

"We agreed to give you a week provided you remained stable, but your readings show your health's not only unstable, it's actually deteriorating. I know this isn't what we originally planned or what you wanted, but you can't afford to fool around with this shit without risking long-term damage. Or death."

Across the room, perched cross-legged in Chopper's desk chair, Luffy's now sitting bolt upright with his eyes wide and full of alarm.

"Maybe you didn't get the right readings. Maybe they're wrong. Take them again." Fingers white-knuckled and twisting in the fabric of his kimono, the swordsman's eyeing the surgeon with distrust. "Wait, no- no, get Chopper to do it. I'd rather have him do it."

"I honestly doubt the results will vary, Roronoa, but if that's what you prefer..."

xxx

"I'm sorry, Zoro, but he's right. It's too dangerous for you and the twins for us to keep waiting when your body's under this much stress," the reindeer explains hesitantly when, just as Law predicted, his own readings yield nearly identical results. "We suspected this might happen, and that's why we started you on that new medication yesterday morning."

"It's been in your system for over twenty-four hours. Long enough to advance your children's lung maturation to acceptable levels."

"Acceptable? The fuck's that supposed to mean?" The first mate makes a rude noise of disgust and distress. He's seated on the edge of the infirmary bed the physicians have rolled away from the wall to give them access to both sides, still plucking nervously at his clothing, although the kimono's been exchanged for an ill-fitting and open-fronted hospital gown that's currently shoved up underneath his armpits to expose his bare back. His partner's seated beside him, petting his arm
and trying to distract him from the thin coil of tubing in the surgeon's hand.

"Acceptable levels mean we shouldn't need to use those." Law gestures casually with the same hand holding the spinal catheter needle to several pieces of equipment resting in the corner. "Now hold still. I don't want to hear you complaining because you kept moving and I had to stick you more than once."

"Just do it right the first time and-" Zoro flinches as he feels gloved fingers touching his antiseptic-swabbed lower back, uttering a loud, slightly panicky curse and instinctively trying to turn his head to see what's happening behind him. "Wait, I'm not-"

"Oi oi, no, Zoro needs to look at me." His own captain's moved to crouch on the floor by his knee, locking their hands together and squeezing tightly.

"I don't know what's worse; somebody jamming a fucking gigantic needle in me or-" He's talking too fast, almost babbling. Partly because he's never been partially fond of getting jabbed with hypodermics and other similar small, sharp objects, but also because he's still trying to process how they've arrived at this point when he'd been blithely debating whether or not to ask for more time.

But Chopper's already alerted the rest of their nakama, Ace and Sabo have been banished to the lawn deck despite the former's insistence that he wants to watch and the latter's temper tantrum at being briefly reunited with and then almost immediately separated from both parents- and the man behind him is seconds away from inserting a five-inch needle into his spine.

"Roronoa, quit squirming. Alright, you're going to feel a very hard pinch right-"

"OI. Don't look at him, look at me," Luffy says sharply, voice taking on a no-nonsense air of command that captures his attention and holds it like a vise, although he still makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat and wrings his partner's fingers nearly bloodless when Law sticks him, his vision greying out around the edges.

The ocular disturbance is accompanied by a wave of dizziness and vicious spike of nausea that temporarily overwhelm him, but he still knows the moment the surgeon opens the line; there's a cold, numb sensation spreading outwards from his lower back, and a few minutes later he's shivering uncontrollably as the iv line's taped securely in place.

This time the Heart pirate doesn't scold him, evidently satisfied with the procedure going smoothly- and with a lot less arguing than expected.

"See? It's okay, he did it and it's over- it's done." The rubber man kneeling below assures him, leaning up to stroke his brow and brush away beads of sweat.

"Sencho-" Throat squeezing closed on the title as he recognizes the growing unresponsiveness of his own limbs, because whatever shit Law used this time is affecting his system far more quickly than he expected. Zoro tries to resist the hands maneuvering him into a prone position, but his arms refuse to move, remaining limp beside him instead of rising to push Law and Chopper away.

"I'm right here." His spouse shoots a cautious glance towards the others, unsure whether he's about to find himself chased from the room. "You guys aren't gonna make me leave, are you?"

"No, you can stay, provided you don't interfere. But like last time, you'll need to stand up there-" Law points past his patient's head. "-and you can hold his hand if you want, but for fuck's sake, don't TOUCH anything."
He motions for Chopper, who's taken Heavy Point, to proceed and the reindeer steps up to the opposite side with a shallow pan and a large sponge dripping antiseptic.

"Sencho," Zoro manages again, seeking frantically to catch the younger pirate's gaze. "I don't know if I can- we didn't even decide on NAMES yet, so h-how can we-?"

"We'll talk about that after Chopper and Law get the peas out and make sure you guys are okay."

His captain's gripping not one but both of his hands, although he can barely feel it. Everything below his collarbone- hell, everything below his CHIN's gone numb and rubbery, as though his entire body's ceased to exist even though he can SEE the damn thing's still there. Well, most of it, anyway; his belly's a ludicrous mountain that's hiding his legs and feet and his physicians' hands from view.

Despite his best efforts at convincing himself to stay calm – you've been through this before, you idiot, TWICE, so quit flipping out and BREATHE – the abruptness of the entire situation's filling him with a sickening sense of familiar unease. It's too much like his eldest son's delivery, chaotic and uncertain.

And although he's passing familiar with epidural anesthesia from Sabo's birth, he doesn't recall being literally paralyzed. In fact, he distinctly remembers Law threatening to knock him unconscious for being too lively on the operating table. But now-

_I can't move. I can't MOVE. I CAN'T MOVE._

There's a dull pressure against his lower abdomen, a sensation that seems very far away, and when he realizes it's someone touching him- CUTTING him- down there, he instinctively tries to pull away and, of course, he still can't move and nothing happens and the scalpel keeps sliding unseen across his flesh and even though it doesn't hurt, his anxious concern erupts, peaking into a full-fledged panic attack.

"Stop. STOP. I can't- I can't do this. LET GO OF ME." He tries to sit up and accomplishes nothing more than pitching his head to the side, prompting a fresh rush of terrified anger at his own helplessness. "FUCK!"

"Zoro- Zoro, no, listen to me." Luffy's voice is fearful but insistent beside his ear; his captain's ducking down to address him, fingers still clutching his. "It's okay! Nobody's gonna hurt you. Or the twins either. I promise, they just wanna help."

"LET G-" The swordsman tilts his head back, teeth gritting as he strains to move, breath bursting from his clenched jaws in a wordless snarl of fear and rage.

"MUGIWARA," Law snaps without looking up. "There's an oxygen mask hanging on that pole beside you. Get it on his face."

"But you told me I'm not supposed to-"

"And now I'm telling you to get that damn mask on his face and calm him down before he hyperventilates or does that crazy demon-summoning shit or whatever the fuck happens when he loses it and starts freaking out," the surgeon growls, still intensely focused on whatever his blood-slicked fingers are now doing. "Son of a bitch! Tanuki, I need another set of retractors plus clamps here and here, and you'd better get some units of plasma ready to go."

Groping for the equipment beside him, the Straw Hat captain glances up and nearly knocks the entire apparatus on the floor because he can't help remembering the last time he saw his first mate
losing this much blood, but then he gets his fingers wrapped around the mask and slaps it over Zoro's mouth and nose, concerned eyes locked on the brightly-colored fluid soaking the sheets as he holds the molded plastic cup in place.

The older pirate fights him, head tossing back and forth, but he somehow manages to keep the seal intact, and eventually – after what seems like an eternity of listening to himself rambling helplessly about anything and everything in hopes of providing some reassurance – a dazed clarity returns to his swordsman's visage.

"That strap goes behind his head," Chopper explains as he rushes past with several packs of yellow liquid in hand, heading straight for the iv pole already in use. "Then it'll stay on without you holding it."

"O-Okay." Fumbling with the elastic and nearly snapping it against his own hand in his efforts to avoid snagging the green hair beneath his fingers, Luffy peers anxiously into his partner's face. "Oi oi, everything's gonna be okay. I'm right here."

"Feels like- that time with the wax," the other man tells him, voice muffled by the mask and hissing oxygen but still audibly choked with agitation. "That island with the big lizards- and the giants?"

"Yeah?"

Even more faintly and fearfully. "I can't move my legs. I can't FEEL my legs."

"Zoro, I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to-"

"Can't feel my fingers either."

Frowning, the rubber man reaches down to take Zoro's right hand. The response he gets is clumsy and uncoordinated, index and middle fingers curling sluggishly between his own as though his first mate's been soaking the entire appendage in ice water even though his skin's warm and only slightly damp with sweat. "Oi, Law-?"

"It's the spinal block. Sensation's deadened from the neck down because-" Law breaks off, cursing and snatching another clamp from the Zoan beside him. "-I couldn't afford to have him moving while I was making the incision. There's not much room to work in here, and that blasted anterior placenta's causing enough trouble without my nicking something vital. It's grown into the damn scar tissue from the last laparotomies."

"That- that's bad, isn't it?"

"Not necessary, but it does mean we need to work fast. And it'd certainly help if your swordsman didn't tend to bleed like a godforsaken hemophiliac every time someone takes a blade to him."

More than a little nervous and definitely too distracted to concentrate on their usual daily routines, the crew's remaining adult members have gathered on the lawn deck to occupy each other in idle conversation while keeping a watchful eye on both the dining hall door and their nakama's anxious children.

"Why'd I have to stay out here?" Ace asks Nami for the fifth or sixth time as he stops pacing to address her with crossed arms, determined to appear as though he's merely annoyed instead of frightened enough to hug himself tightly around the middle. "I know Sabo's too little, but I'm not-"
I'm EIGHT. I wanna know what's going on!

"I know, sweetie." The navigator reaches out to stroke his hair without thinking about what she's doing, and it's a testament to how worried he's feeling that he doesn't duck away from her hand. "So do I, but we'll just have to wait."

"Oi, Robin-san, can't you do that thing where you make eyes on the wall and tell us what's happening?"

"I have the ability to do so, yes, but I feel it's important to give our captain and swordsman some privacy right now. I'd prefer to avoid disturbing them unless it's absolutely necessary," the tall dark-haired woman explains. "And I certainly don't wish to disturb our doctor or Trafalgar-san while they're working."

The child gives an impatient huff and resumes stalking back and forth, passing Sanji and Usopp where they're sitting on the lawn with Sabo between them, amusing the toddler by demonstrating how to produce whistling sounds by blowing on blades of grass. The one-year-old's trying unsuccessfully to imitate them, the bulk of his attempts resulting in sloppy raspberries accompanied by a distressing amount of flying spittle, but he's also got both eyes glued to the balcony above.

"Relax, little bro," Franky calls to Ace from the starboard side. He's standing by the railing, giving the Adam wood a halfhearted and wholly unnecessary sanding. "Your dad's tough."

"My dad's SICK," the eight-year-old fires back. "Or he might as well be, 'cause of whatever they were saying was wrong with his blood. If he was okay, they wouldn't have made him stay in bed so long." His pretense at anger's beginning to waver, and his fear-filled eyes seem too large for his face. "None of this stuff happened with my brother!"

"No, it's more like when you were born, only Luffy's in there with Marimo instead of out here, kicking and screaming and giving people black eyes," Sanji mutters a bit louder than he intended, and Nami immediately gives him a quick but hard kick in the buttocks because if their crewmates' son looked upset before-

He knows enough, Sanji-kun. He doesn't need to know everything.

"I'm sure Zoro's fine," she says brightly, hoping she looks and sounds more confident than she feels. "It's just a little scary because it's so sudden."

Jinbei clears his throat. "Chopper-san and Trafalgar-san know what they're doing, Ace-kun. I wasn't present when you were born, but-" He hesitates, unsure, but the boy's now looking at him expectantly. "Trafalgar-san treated your father- Luffy-kun, I mean- when he'd been badly injured."

"The big scar on his chest, right?" Ace asks. He starts to say something else and pauses, mouth twitching. "It's kinda funny hearing you call me and my dad the same thing. 'Cause he's a lot older than me."

"I believe it's been quite some time since either your father or I last spoke with him, but we have a mutual acquaintance who calls him Mugiwara-boy." The fishman smiles broadly at the amused laugh his statement prompts, glad he's able to provide a diversion and not noticing Sanji's inadvertent twitch of recognition.

xxx

Blood. There's so much blood. H-How's there any left inside him?
Now clutching his swordsman's left hand, which allows him to maintain a better hold than the right, Luffy strokes his pale face with trembling fingers and tries to push memories of Thriller Bark from his mind. It's the only instance he can recall where he's seen the older pirate bleeding so badly.

Despite the transfusion equipment hastily assembled by Chopper and Law working as quickly as possible, Zoro's losing blood slightly faster than the second iv can replenish it. He's no longer the least bit interested in escaping the impromptu operating table, his head lolling to the side as he surveys his surroundings through a half-lidded eye that keeps fluttering shut.

"Tanuki. Grab this kid so I can get this damn placenta excised before our patient here bleeds to death."

The gore and vernix-coated baby the surgeon eases free and passes carefully to his fellow doctor seems terrifying small and vastly dwarfed by the reindeer's hands but begins squalling with a startling vigor at the indignation of being subjected to brisk rubbing by the blanket into which it's been bundled.

Zoro's partially-closed eye snaps open wide, his gaze instinctively drawn to the sound's source despite his obvious exhaustion, and the Straw Hat captain makes a faint noise of disbelief, squeezing his hand tighter.

Law ignores them, verbally directing his assisting colleague to clip and cut the umbilical cord as he deals with the hemorrhaging placenta. "Well, there's certainly nothing wrong with that one's lungs. When you're done, let Mugiwara-san take over."

"Don't worry too much about getting the vernix off," Chopper warns his crewmate as he hands over the crying newborn. "The skin will eventually absorb it, and keeping his temperature stable's more important right now. Even though it doesn't feel chilly to us, he's used to being a lot warmer and he can't regulate on his own, so just get that blanket wrapped nice and tight around-"

"Oi, Tanuki, we're not done here yet. Get over here and help me."

The reindeer's gone before the gaping captain can respond, rushing back to accept the second baby that's squawking vehement displeasure at being pulled from the shelter of their first mate's body.

"Oh. OH." Luffy cradles the twin he's been passed against his bare chest with unsteady hands, terrified of dropping the child — he's so little, his head fits in my hand, I think one of Zoro's BOOTS is bigger — but he can't tear his eyes away from the equally small form squirming in Chopper's grasp. He's staring, open-mouthed, too surprised to take notice of the mess he's making of himself and his unbuttoned shirt. "OH."

"Wh- what?" Zoro demands shakily, voice muffled by the oxygen mask his breath's fogging. He struggles to lift his head to find out why his spouse looks so startled, but he's clearly too tired and weakened from blood loss. "What- what's wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong! It's- I think they're- Zoro, wait'll you-" He reins in his excitement. It's not an easy feat, given his heart's pounding so hard in his chest that it feels close to bursting and he wants very badly to go running outside shouting the news to the rest of their waiting nakama, but concern for his swordsman keeps him rooted to the spot. Concern, and reluctance to further disturb their crying offspring.

"O-Oi, can you- get this damn mask off? 'm getting kinda- kinda lightheaded."
"I dunno, maybe you better keep it on 'til they tell you to take it off," he tells the older pirate nervously, wishing he had a free hand to stroke his brow reassuringly but unwilling to risk dropping his vulnerable bundle. "At least you're already laying down though, right? Maybe try closing your eye?"

Chopper glances up from where he's just finished clamping the second severed umbilical cord. "He's dizzy from losing blood, not from the oxygen, but we can loosen the mask if it'll make him more comfortable."

"Alright, I've removed all of the placental tissue and stopped the internal bleeding, so we're ready to close," Law announces, straightening to swipe one forearm across his forehead in an attempt to brush back his sweat-dampened hair without smearing blood on his face. "Mugiwara-san. Think you can handle these little guys while we get your swordsman sewn up?"

"I-" The rubber man hesitates, glancing down at the baby fussing in his arms, then over at the second one, who's wriggling and yowling in his Zoan crewmate's much larger hands. "I- I don't know... I don't wanna drop anybody!"

"Here, let's try this-" Circling back around to where Luffy's standing, the reindeer cautiously deposits his tiny charge on the bed between Zoro's chest and limp arm, gently bending the green-haired man's unresponsive elbow and resting his hand on his own chest to create a barrier capable of preventing the swaddled infant from rolling off the mattress. "I stopped the anesthetic drip, so you'll start regaining some sensation in thirty to forty minutes, but there's no reason you can't still hold one or even both of them now, until we're finished with you and ready to weigh them. Do you want-?"

The first mate's nodding groggily even before hearing the remainder of the question, attention divided between the baby settling against his side and the one whimpering unhappily against his partner's chest.

Reluctantly – but not grudgingly because even though he doesn't want to relinquish the child in his arms, he understands the older pirate's need to see their newest additions together and safe in his own embrace – Luffy gingerly lays the firstborn twin in his swordsman's unoccupied elbow and then returns to his original spot, making room for Chopper to reach up and ease the oxygen mask aside.

"So damn small," Zoro murmurs, rolling his head to look at first one and then the other. He wets his lips, gaze rising to meet his captain's. "Guess you didn't get your girl. Sorry, Sencho. Hope you're not too disappointed."

"No. No, how could you even think-" Cutting short his gentle scolding to stoop and cover the other man's face with kisses. "Zoro- Zoro, look at-!" He reaches out to touch their sons one after the other, trembling knuckles brushing their cheeks. "Did you- did you hear 'em earlier, when they were both crying?"

"Yeah."

He's not sure how to describe the emotions that gripped his heart in response to two newborns wailing in unison. "It was kind of scary, huh? Listening to two yelling at the same time? But really good too, kinda like hearing Brook playing Binks no Sake, and- they're so little but they're really loud!"

Loud, yes, although they're quiet now, laying curled and drowsy with their eyes squeezed shut and their faces partially hidden where they're nuzzled against Zoro's chest.
"Yeah, and we're gonna hear it every time they're hungry- every time one of 'em needs a damn diaper changed. Like a couple of angry cats screeching." The gruff annoyance in the older pirate's tone doesn't hold much sting, however. Not with the faint, tired smile playing across his lips and the sleepy but satisfied way he's regarding their new arrivals through one half-closed eye. "Shit, I'm having trouble staying awake. If I pass out- don't lemme drop either of 'em."

"I won't, promise." Leaning his head against his first mate's, Luffy trails his fingertips over both babies' fuzzy scalps, unable to hide a grin so wide that his cheeks ache. "Wait'll everybody sees 'em- they're not gonna believe it!"

At the opposite end of the bed, Law glances up from the sutures he's inspecting with an air of self-satisfaction. "I'd recommend keeping the visitors to a minimum. One or two people at a time, but don't try to cram your entire crew in here, and tell them to keep it quiet. Roronoa-san needs to rest, and so do they." He nods towards the twins, stripping his bloodied gloves free as he steps back to allow Chopper room to double-check his work and apply a light bandage. "I'd also like to keep your swordsman on the iv for another twenty-four to forty-eight hours, and he could definitely use a few more units of blood."

The swordsman in question makes a barely coherent grumbling noise of discontent at the prospect but evidently decides outright complaining's too strenuous a task right now, because he chooses not to raise his voice in further protest.

"Whatever you gotta do," his captain insists, tone utterly serious despite the enormous smile he can't shake. "Whatever you gotta do to make sure Zoro's gonna be alright."

That said, he turns his attention back to the twins dozing in Zoro's arms, his eyes roaming over their pink, slightly scrunched features as he leans closer to address them at a lower, more gentle volume. "Oi, you guys aren't really supposed to be here yet, but... I'm glad you are." Gaze drawn once more to those little green wisps of hair, a sight that fills him with giddy joy. "I'm Luffy and I'm your Daddy, and Zoro's the one holding you and he's your Daddy too, and that's Chopper and Law over there, and you got two big brothers and a whole bunch of other crewmates that can't wait to meet you too."

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Chapter End Notes

Not only did I squick myself out writing about epidurals and spinal blocks, but my poor husband was having flashbacks to my emergency c-section while he was beta-reading this chapter. He said he's only ever seen that much blood when his dad butchers deer during hunting season. And I didn't even lose enough blood to require a transfusion, eheh.

Also, for anybody who was really looking forward to a baby girl... uh... sorry. Twin boys was actually the plan from the start, decided back while my roleplaying group was still active. But, hey, at least Zoro's genes finally won a round, right?
"THEY REALLY DO- THEY LOOK LIKE PEAS!" Ace blurts and immediately claps both hands over his mouth when his excessive volume causes his newborn siblings to jump simultaneously, abrupt startled wails accompanying out-flung fists that narrowly avoid striking each other's noses. "Sorry, sorry!"

Oh, shit, they're really loud! How can something that little be that loud? Dad's gonna kill me!

But while Zoro utters a low, protesting murmur and tightens his grip protectively on the blanket-wrapped babies tucked side-by-side in the circle of his arms, holding them close until their crying tapers off and they resume lying quietly snuggled against him and each other, his eye stays closed.

"Dad...?" His son asks tentatively, reaching out to touch his shoulder but pausing when his fingertips are still a few inches shy of brushing the swordsman's kimono sleeve, because his father's breathing is slowing again and the slight furrows on his brow relaxing as he settles back into deeper sleep. "Wow, I can't believe that didn't wake him up. He's gonna be okay, isn't he?"

"Chopper and Law said he's fine," Luffy assures the eight-year-old. "Just really really tired, and they're gonna make him get out of bed and walk around first thing tomorrow morning, so they want everybody to let him nap right now."

Expression dubious, Ace lowers his hand, gaze dropping to regard the twins once more. "They're so little. I thought they'd be bigger 'cause Dad was so-" He puffs out his cheeks, arms making an exaggerated gesture suggesting roundness. "But they're tiny! Sabo was like twice that size when he came out, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, but it's 'cause he stayed in there longer." The rubber man gently smooths the clean sheet draped over his first mate's hip, mindful of the bandaged laparotomy incision as he touches the older pirate's lower belly, which is still noticeably distended but no longer bulging fit to burst. "And it wasn't just a couple of babies in there either, making him look fat. Law had this whole bowl full of- well, it looked kinda like raw liver or something, but I guess it was really the junk that grew inside Zoro along with the peas."

You actually saw-

"Ewww," his oldest child breathes, repulsed yet fascinated.

"Yeah, I know, right? Anyway, Chopper said that stuff with the cords and everything weighed like three pounds or something all by itself."

"What're their names?" He touches the nearest baby lightly, the tip of his index finger stroking the hand drawn up under his little brother's chin, and he bites back a yelp of surprise when the tiny digits instinctively twitch closed on it. "O-Oi, he grabbed me!"

"Shishi- you grabbed Robin's finger like that when you were just born. Right before you peed all over me. And we're, uh, still talking about it," Luffy admits sheepishly.

Giving his finger a cautious wiggle and raising an eyebrow when the grip around it tightens, Ace gives his dark-haired father an incredulous look. "They don't have NAMES?" He chooses to ignore the other bit; no matter what his parents say, he's rather certain he never did anything quite so embarrassing as urinating on anyone. Now Sabo, on the other hand-
"Oi oi oi, we're working on it!" The captain grimaces as his partner stirs again, muttering, and immediately lowers his voice. "Maybe it'll be easier deciding on something now that we can see 'em. Zoro was right, though- it's kinda weird, giving somebody a name they're gonna use for the rest of their life. Well, unless they grow up and decide they wanna tell people to call 'em something else."

"Which one's older? The one that got here first is older, isn't he, even though they're gonna have the same birthday?"

Luffy points unhesitatingly to the closer baby. "He came out first. He's bigger too, even though Chopper says it's only by a few ounces."

"So they're NOT exactly the same, even though-?" The eight-year-old tilts his head slightly, eyes moving from one brother to the other. "They LOOK the same, even if that one's supposed to be bigger, so how're we s'pose to tell 'em apart? How'd you know which one's which?"

"Well… they feel different? In my head, I mean. Zoro said the same thing before he fell asleep so maybe being able to tell's a Kenbunshoku Haki thing? I guess we'll find out if Sanji can tell 'em apart too. I dunno, but anyway, look- he's got more hair too, see? Well, a LITTLE more, anyway."

"Y-eah," Ace agrees hesitantly, not entirely positive he actually notes a discernible difference.

_Dad seems pretty sure though._

He's studying his younger siblings closely, wondering if his father also knows why they've got that extremely fine, nearly invisible fuzz - which, like the hair on their heads, bears a close resemblance to Zoro's emerald hue if Ace cranes his neck at the right angle - all over them, when there's a cautious tapping on the infirmary door before it opens just enough for Nami to lean her head and shoulders into the room.

"Sorry it took so long," the navigator stage-whispers. "-but Sabo needed a diaper change. Are you sure you want us-?"

Luffy's grin widens. "Yeah, c'mere!"

The door swings open to admit the redhead, Robin and Sanji, who's holding Sabo balanced a little awkwardly on one hip so he can bring a finger to his lips and make a hushing gesture at the toddler before lowering him to the floor.

"Oh." Nami breathes, delight suffusing her face as she reaches the foot of the infirmary bed. "Robin, Sanji-kun, look!"

The cook's jaw drops the moment he's close enough to see. "Holy shit. They're both fricking-" He grunts as an elbow jabs his ribcage.

"They're both ADORABLE."

"They certainly are- congratulations, Sencho."

"Shishishi!" Scooping Sabo into his arms, the captain holds the curious one-year-old where he's got a better view of their new family and crewmembers. "You gotta stay quiet 'cause they're sleeping and so's Zoro, but look- you're a big brother like Ace now too, 'cause you got two little baby brothers!"

"Beba?" His son stops squirming in his grasp long enough to extract a hand and wave it towards
the bed. "Beba. Hi beba."

Nami, who's crept closer, tries not to squeal. She settles for seizing Sanji's arm and dragging him up beside her, much to his combined elation and disconcertion. "That's right, Sabo, honey- say hello to the babies! Oh, Sanji-kun, look at them!"

"That's an awful lot of green..."

Luffy's practically dancing in place with excitement, hugging the toddler in his arms. "Chopper and Law were really surprised too! 'Cause they said Zoro's got-" His brow furrows a bit as he struggles to remember. "-recess jeans? Or something like that."

"Recessive genes," the historian now standing beside him corrects, laughing softly. "It means the odds have always been in favor of your and Kenshi-san's children being born with your darker hair." She indicates their crewmates. "Our navigator also carries a recessive gene, as does our cook. If either of them produced offspring with dark-haired partners – Usopp and myself, for example – the children would almost inevitably inherit our hair rather than theirs. But if they produced a child with each other-"

Nami flushes. Sanji swoons.

"-their son or daughter might be born with either color, depending on their parents' phenotypes."

Ace and Luffy squint at Robin, confused, but Sanji's face lights up at the prospect, his one visible eye practically glowing. Nami casually trods on his foot, her own eyes examining the twins' green hair as she shifts her heel and ignores the resulting stifled wheeze of pain. "They're identical, aren't they? Because if they'd been fraternal, I'm guessing one of them probably would've taken after Luffy. And one of them might've been a girl. But two boys, both with Zoro's hair-?"

"It certainly appears so. I'm sure our doctor and Trafalgar-san are currently at their wits' end, attempting to determine how our swordsman's body accomplished such a feat, given the extent to which his physiology already has them baffled." She tilts her head slightly, considering. "But for such a recessive gene to emerge..."

"You mad they're both boys?" Luffy asks Nami, somewhat sheepishly because he can't stop grinning, and therefore cheerfully oblivious to Robin's quiet pondering about the possibility of an allele for green hair buried somewhere in his family's genetic history.

"A girl would've been wonderful, but-" She watches Ace, who's been examining the tiny fingernails on the hand still wrapped around his index finger, make another careful attempt to free himself while he listens to the adults talk. "I suppose this is a nice surprise too."

Sanji gives their captain a little nudge with his elbow. "Not that I'm encouraging you or anything – god only knows we'll have enough insanity on our hands with four kids on the damn ship – but do you think you guys would ever-?"

"Try to get a girl again?" The rubber man's already shaking his head in the negative. "Nah, I think we're good. I told Zoro I'd- we'd- love 'em no matter what, and I meant it, and I wouldn't change ANYTHING. I mean, I asked him if we could have another baby, and he not only gave me TWO, but they both got his hair! They're great!" Nuzzling his nose against Sabo's temple, he gazes thoughtfully at his sleeping swordsman. "... I should probably tell him that again, so he doesn't do something dumb like keep worrying about it."

"They're so tiny," Nami muses, bending slightly to bring herself nearly level with Ace. "Did
Chopper or Law mention how much they weigh?"

"Ah, yeah- umm-" Shifting Sabo to one arm, Luffy turns towards the desk to grab the clipboard laying there. He scans the top page, chewing on his lower lip and squinting at the barely legible scrawl. "Oh, here. Uh-

"Five pounds, two ounces," Robin reads aloud over his shoulder. "-and four pounds, fifteen ounces. My goodness. Another day or two, perhaps, and the heavier of the two would very likely have reached Ace-kun's birth weight."

"Was I really this little?" The eight-year-old finally eases his finger free from his brother's loosening grip as the baby yawns enormously and searches clumsily for his mouth with his thumb, unfocused eyes opening halfway to muzzily observe the room without truly seeing it before clamping tightly shut against the light.

"Yeah, you weren't much bigger than these guys," the captain explains, allowing the historian beside him to take the medical chart so his hand's free to tug the blanket more snugly around the newborn. "Aww, I guess you're used to being in the dark too, huh, besides being warmer? And everything's all bright and cold out here." He reaches across to the second baby, fingertip stroking the child's button nose and prompting a soft whine of inquiry and an open, searching mouth. "Uh oh. You're hungry, aren't you."

"Here, let me take Sabo," Nami offers. "You'd better offer him a bottle before-

"Oi oi, shh, SHHH, you're gonna wake up Zoro!" Luffy hisses, making frantic waving and shushing motions one-handed until he's got both arms free to retrieve the increasingly vocal bundle.

Too late; the faint whimpering's already risen to a loud repetitive cry that's shortly joined by a second, equally determined set of lungs.

Sanji and Nami scatter. Ace backpedals so quickly that he trips over his own feet and collides with Chopper's desk chair forcefully enough to send it rolling across the room to bounce off Law's legs as the Heart pirate pushes past Usopp, who's opened the door nearly a foot wide to peer inside with wide eyes while Brook and Franky exchange an unsettled look over the sniper's head.

"Damn it, Mugiwara- what'd I say about trying to cram your whole bloody crew in here?"

"They're not just crew, they're NAKAMA," the rubber man insists, rocking the wailing infant he's cradling while helplessly eyeing the one still lying beside his first mate. "I can't tell 'em they can't see the peas! And besides- if they're hungry, they're gonna yell anyway, whether everybody's in here or just me and-"

"Sh-Shit. That's loud." Finally roused by the high-pitched, continuous noise, Zoro rubs a shaky hand across his face and blearily regards the baby yowling up at him, the one sounding off in his anxious captain's arms, their startled audience and the annoyed surgeon who's glaring menacingly at everyone with invariable rancor. "Damn. Got kinda crowded in here." He shifts further onto his side, unable to hide a wince of discomfort as the movement tugs at his fresh sutures, and gathers the twin fussing beside him firmly against his chest. "Oi. Noise box. Settle down, will- oí oí oí, stop that. You're not gonna get anything outta there- or at least I sure as hell hope you're not."

"Oh jeez, is he trying to- oí!" Luffy, unexpectedly finding himself encountering a similar dilemma, yanks his shirt closed and watches in exasperation as the baby he's holding roots determinedly in its folds. "I don't have any milk either- I don't even have boobs!"
"You better not be calling my pecs-"

"Here here here!" To both men's relief – not to mention that of their crewmembers – Chopper bursts through the forest of legs blocking the doorway and bustles straight to the bedside, clutching a pair of stout syringes filled with formula and capped with short lengths of thin flexible tubing rather than loaded with needles.

Nami does a double-take, astonished. "No bottles?"

"Finger-feeding." The reindeer announces firmly as he passes one assembly to each frazzled parent. "Remember all the trouble Ace had latching onto an artificial nipple and learning how to nurse properly? I would've suggested this instead if I'd known about it at the time."

"Um-"

"How the hell do I-?"

"Tubing and your pinkie go in the kid's mouth," Law offers, taking a seat on the desk and crossing his arms. "Depress the plunger when he starts sucking on your finger. SLOWLY. You don't give him enough time to take a breath between each swallow, and he'll choke on it."

"There's barely anything in there!" An incredulous voice protests, and the surgeon turns his head to study Ace, who swallows hard under his scrutiny but refuses to back down. "Won't they still be hungry?"

"A newborn's stomach is generally the size of a marble; it's not capable of holding much."

"And he's talking about full-term newborns," Chopper adds as he helps his crewmates get situated. "Your brothers are more than a month premature, so they probably won't be able to handle a full ounce for a few days yet."

"Damn it! He keeps pushing the tube out with his tongue. Luffy, maybe you should do both of 'em-your fingers are smaller than mine."

_and you've got more of 'em to hold onto all this damn tubing and shit, his vexed tone adds, although he doesn't say it aloud.

"If Zoro wants, I'll- oh, crap, listen to him! He's really REALLY-" The captain cringes as he's drowned out by the baby's agitated wailing, grateful that he's not suffering the same complications, because the twin in his spouse's arms is nearly hysterical with hunger and frustration, face scrunched and turning red and fists waving where they've escaped the blanket.

The swordsman, who looks as though he's having enough trouble merely keeping his eye open and staying awake despite the noise and activity around him, casts a silent and distress-filled glance at the doctors, clearly eager for some assistance but not entirely sure how to ask.

Chopper's grimacing, ears flattened against his skull, but he doesn't budge. "Maybe kangaroo care-?"

"Skin-to-skin? It's worth a shot. I'll let you handle it, though- I think Roronoa-san's had enough of me fooling with him and his kids."

"Kangaroo what? Oi oi, what are you doing?" Luffy protests, eyes widening with alarm as their furry nakama takes Heavy Point and begins unraveling the fabric swaddled around the bawling infant. "I thought you said we needed to keep 'em warm!"
The reindeer tugs Zoro's kimono sash loose and, before the older pirate's able to do more than utter a sharp noise of surprise and consternation, slips the baby inside to rest against his bare torso. "They can't regulate their own temperature, but as long as they're staying in constant contact with you, your body will do it for them. And it should help with maintaining heart rate and respiration too. See how he's calming down already? Try giving him the tube again."

"Oi, here you- gah, no, HERE," the swordsman insists, flushing as he quickly intervenes with his pinkie before the small mouth's able to complete its single-minded search for a nipple that's decidedly NOT artificial. "I told you that's not gonna work!"

His son gives a brief squeal of outrage at being redirected, but the complaint breaks off when the older pirate cautiously triggers the syringe's plunger and administers a milliliter or two of formula, prompting the baby to swallow awkwardly and then latch onto his finger and the tube with furious interest.

"I guess we know who you really take after, even if you got my hair," he murmurs, thumb stroking the newborn's cheek as he watches one small groping hand lock tightly around his ring finger to make sure he can't pull away. "Food's serious business, eh?"

Cheerful grin resurfacing now that a potential crisis has been averted, Luffy takes a seat on the mattress beside his first mate and peers down to survey his own small charge, now snuggled securely inside his shirt with the blanket tucked loosely around him, finishing his first meal in a manner far more sedate and leisurely than his minutes-older sibling. "If Zoro carried 'em around like this in his haramaki, he really would look like a kangaroo!"

Sanji snorts audibly, and Usopp mutters something about his sketchbook, earning a poorly restrained outburst of amusement from the eight-year-old who's drawn closer to the bed again now that his youngest brothers are no longer shrieking at the top of their lungs.

Their attention's focused so strongly on the tableau before them that the Straw Hats standing in the doorway aren't aware of Bepo's presence until the polar bear comes barreling through their midst, unabashedly shoving them out of his way as he scans the room for Law. "Captain-!

Before the Heart surgeon's able to demand an explanation for the intrusion when he'd clearly instructed the accompanying members of his crew to remain outside, the ship gives a massive shudder beneath everyone's feet- and comes to motionless rest, no longer swaying gently with the ocean's movement.

"What's going on?" Nami asks no one in particular, her voice loud and insistent. "It feels like we've run aground but we're miles from land! There's no way-!"

"C-Company!" Bepo blurts, sounding slightly winded as he slouches to brace his broad paws on his orange-clad knees and ignoring the swordsman beside him who's no longer reclining but struggling into an upright position to hunch protectively over the baby in his arms. "We've got-company!"

"Is it Marines?"

"NOW?"

"Shit, can't they just-?"

Luffy, visibly on guard with his body stiff and his eyes locked on the open dining hall door beyond his angry, flustered crew, eases off the infirmary bed and cautiously transfers the child in his grasp
to his first mate so the older pirate's holding both newborns, dropping the empty syringe and tubing onto the sheets.

"Sencho?" Concern furrowing his brow, Zoro shifts his gaze quickly from his spouse to where Law's seated on the opposite side of the room, inches away from the trio of katana propped against the wall. They've shifted, slid sideways to rest against the desk itself, and the green-haired man's fingers twitch involuntarily, as though he's anticipating the blades leaping into his hands despite the twins occupying his arms. "We got a problem?"

"I dunno- he's not really doing anything now. I think he's just standing out there."

Robin's eyes blink open as she retracts whatever body parts she's briefly materialized elsewhere, her own forehead creased with a slight frown that's more curious than alarmed. "I believe he intends to wait for you on the lawn deck."

"What the hell's he want?" Sanji grunts. He's moved closer to Nami and the toddler she's clutching, putting himself between them and whatever- WHOever's outside.

The redhead exchanges a hesitant look with the sniper who's joined them. "Sanji-kun, Luffy, who-?"

"Jinbei's okay?" Their captain asks, raising a hand to forestall more questions as he takes stock of the situation. "He was out there, right? On watch?"

"Correct. From what I saw, he appears unharmed, and evidently he requested our allies refrain from attacking, although it's probably best that Trafalgar-san accompany you. His men are rather anxious."

Gnawing his lower lip, the rubber man briefly debates their options, eyes darting from the open door to the eight-year-old now gripping his sleeve to the rigid set of Zoro's jaw. "Nami, Usopp, stay here and help Zoro keep an eye on the kids. Sanji, Chopper, watch the doors." He waves Ace to the bedside, shushing his son's protest that he wants to see what's happening outside. "No, you're staying here. Franky, Brook, Robin? You're with me and Law."

"Bepo." Sliding off the desk, the surgeon motions for the polar bear to proceed him. "Let's give Mugiwara-san's family and crew some space."

xxx

Outside, Luffy finds their unannounced visitor leaning casually - almost lazily - against the lawn deck railing with Jinbei and several Heart pirates hovering nearby and keeping a wary eye fixed on him. A short distance away, more members of Law's crew line the submarine's railing, casting badly disguised nervous glances between each other and the ice that's effectively landlocked both vessels.

"Luffy-kun." The fishman's sense of relief at his approach is almost palatable. "I sent Bepo-san to find you as soon as we saw him coming. Perhaps I should've gone myself, but…"

"Mugiwara no Luffy."

"Oi. Something you need, or you just get lost?" He asks cautiously, sparing his own uneasy glance at the barrier preventing the Sunny from making a hasty escape.

"You weren't easy to find."
Staring up at the curly-haired former Admiral, the rubber man shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

Aokiji's not their enemy- or at least Luffy's fairly certain he's not their enemy; on the rare occasions they've blundered into each other during the last few years, the tall man's proven himself a neutral if not overly friendly acquaintance. Not all that different from the tattooed Heart pirate standing beside them.

Still, his unexpected presence isn't exactly welcome right now. Not with memories of the recent Marine attack so clear in the Straw Hat captain's mind. And especially not given the family members he's reluctantly left under the protection of his nakama in the infirmary behind him. The place he'd much rather be instead of out here on the grass, debating the intentions of someone who doesn't belong here and uncomfortably aware of his ship's vulnerability.

"But I suppose that's to be expected, given the circumstances," Aokiji adds softly when the younger man stubbornly maintains his stone silence. He turns his attention towards Law, inclining his head slightly in acknowledgment. "Trafalgar. I see Mugiwara no Luffy's still attracting unlikely allies."

"His swordsman presents an interesting case study," the surgeon allows stiffly. "I'll be leaving once I complete my notes." His eyes narrowing slightly, he chooses his next words with care. "Provided the sudden, ah, climate change doesn't hinder my departure?"

"Hmm?" Their visitor raises an eyebrow, then glances back over his shoulder at the frozen waves beneath them. "Ah. No need for concern; I've no intentions of holding either of you here any longer than necessary. But as I've already said," he reiterates to the Straw Hat captain, "-you weren't easy to find, and I needed to make sure you stayed in one place long enough for me to deliver a message."

Luffy frowns. Law snorts. "I'm having a tough time imagining you playing carrier pigeon."

"Like you, I keep in touch with a number of former friends and allies. Vice Admiral Coby and retired Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp, to name a few, although the letter I've been asked to give you isn't from either of them."

Garp's grandson shuffles a bit at the mention of his name.

He's gonna be really mad we didn't tell him about the peas. But he drove Zoro really crazy last time, showing up all the time and following him around and stuff, and I promised-

Somewhere behind him, there's a sudden, intense flare of energy. Strong enough to make the hair rise on the back of his neck and blot out whatever curiosity he's been developing in regards to the undelivered news, because he recognizes that energy. He'd recognize it anywhere, and the chill it sends up his spine is matched only by the sudden churning in his stomach.

Aokiji finds his audience abruptly turning tail and bolting, not for cover but for the staircase ascending to the dining hall balcony. Removing his sunglasses, he blinks slowly at the retreating pirates' backs before turning to look at those remaining on the lawn.

Only Nico Robin returns his gaze, and he's taken aback when he realizes the concern in her slightly widened eyes has absolutely nothing to do with his presence.

xxx

Heart clanging wildly inside his rib cage, Luffy finds himself unwittingly remembering the last
time he found himself close to panic-stricken and racing for the infirmary, fearing what he might find there.

But he looked okay when I left! A little freaked out, yeah, but just a little, and his Haki's not messed up anymore so he's gotta know nobody's fighting or anything, so why's he-?

"Idiot," Law growls as they pace each other for the dining hall doorway above, taking the steps two and three at a time with each stride. "Can't leave him alone for a goddamn second!"

xxx

No one's bleeding when he eases the door open wide enough to peer inside, much to Luffy's relief, but he can't deny the room's occupants look sufficiently rattled with the possible exception of the man who's responsible for their troubled expressions.

Nami's holding a kicking, whining toddler and arguing with the older child she's seized by the collar to prevent him crossing the room and interfering with his elders.

"When he asked me to hold them, I thought his arms were getting tired! I didn't know he planned on-!" Usopp, babbling apologies and arms occupied by the swaddled babies he's clutching as though he's handling a pair of oil-slicked glass vases, is doing his damnedest to stay out of everyone's way by cramming himself and his charges into the corner behind the now empty infirmary bed. The twins are miraculously quiet despite the uproar, their faces nuzzled into the sniper's chest, and their dark-haired father's got a split second to wonder if they haven't actually fallen asleep before his attention's diverted to Zoro, who's responding to Sanji and Chopper's respective curses and hysterics with uncooperative grunts and glares.

The swordsman's keeping his footing, but not without a struggle. One arm's curled tightly around his middle, fingers bracing the stitched muscle of his abdomen while he steadies himself with the hand splayed palm-down on the desk beside him.

"Will you get back in the damn bed already?" The cook hovering at his elbow hisses. "You're gonna fall on your face, and you're scaring the shit outta the kids!"

"Not without... my s-swords." Zoro's voice is strained, his face and the hollow of his throat shiny with sweat.

"You're not in any condition to fight!" The doctor behind him protests, reaching out one large Heavy Point hand to grasp their first mate's bicep- and immediately yanking it back when Asura shimmers back into existence and a ghostly hand swats him away. Another gropes determinedly for the bundle of katana leaning against the desk, and a third takes a swing at Sanji, who's apparently gotten too close, but the last latches onto the nearby chair in a desperate attempt to support the swordsman's suddenly top-heavy torso.

"Get the hell off m-!"

Convinced the older man's going to fall, Luffy throws an arm out to steady him and nearly loses the limb as Kitetsu flashes free from its sheath. Nami utters a choked, breathy little cry that's not quite a scream and then the room falls silent as all eyes fastening on the bright rivulet of blood streaming down the captain's elbow and slowly dripping to the floor.
Zoro's face has gone impossibly pale, his complexion drained of color by shock and horror, but the manifestation gripping the weapon angled towards his captain doesn't budge, keeping the unwavering blade held between them.

"Roronoa, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Law barks, choosing to ignore the heavily bleeding yet largely superficial cut on Luffy's upper arm, although he keeps a respectable distance from both men. "Get your ass in that chair before you accidentally tear your own fucking gut open."

The swordsman ignores him. Doesn't, in fact, even seem to realize the surgeon exists. Despite Asura's stern immobility, he's shivering within its protective cage of arms, his trembling fingers crinkling the paperwork strewn on the desktop, and he's locked gazes with his partner, silently imploring- demanding-

"Promise me."

"If I ever..."

"... don't let me hurt anybody."

A line's been crossed. A line the first mate didn't simply draw in sand but stubbornly etched in stone, and Luffy can see the regret and growing resolve- the sense of finality in the older pirate's pleading expression.

"Promise me that you won't hold back."

His throat constricts, tightening so abruptly that it feels like someone's slipped a noose over his head and yanked him off his feet. He wants to shout denial, slam his fists into the walls until his knuckles bleed, sprint from the room, but the fear and anger and sensation of suffocation's so strong that he can't speak, can't move, can't breathe, can't do anything but stare into Zoro's face and realize that after more than eight years of witnessing the panic attacks and the nightmares, he finally truly understands.

This. This is how it feels every time he-

It's like drowning, the rubber man realizes. Sinking into the shadows, choking and reaching hopelessly- helplessly- for the receding surface as his strength fades.

Do something, the look in that single slightly widened eye is begging. Stop this before it gets any worse, and whatever it takes- whatever you need to do to keep everybody safe, just- do it. Please?

He's struggling for words to address his spouse's unspoken request, which is poised between them just as surely as the glimmering razor sharp edge of Kitetsu's blade, but before he's able to utter anything beyond a resounding "NO"-

"Roronoa Zoro? What are you-?"

Luffy feels his stomach drop out from beneath his feet. No. No no no no NO. Not now! What the
Whether it's merely being addressed by his surname or hearing himself addressed as such by someone he equates, however unjustly, with another far more vindictive and presently deceased Admiral, Zoro sheds the last vestiges of hesitation and restraint and sanity like a molting reptile. His gaze hardens, Asura's already intimidating presence surges, and steel rings as Shusui rasps free from its sheath.

Realizing that his swordsman's no longer focused on him but eyeing Aokiji with a measure of hatred that promises slow dismemberment with little regard for anyone unfortunate enough to get caught between them, Luffy acts without thinking, throwing himself past the green-haired pirate's guard and coiling both arms around his torso as he roars at everyone to get out, NOW.

Nami and Usopp don't wait long enough for additional orders; the navigator drags Ace out the back door by the wrist, half blinded by Sabo's small hands slapping at her face but pushing the sniper and his whimpering armload ahead regardless. Even if the twins were napping earlier, they're definitely awake now, startled from slumber by their parent shouting.

Further maddened by what he obviously sees in his unstable state as the ultimate betrayal, Zoro reverses his blades and Kitetsu scores a second time, slicing viciously along the back of the Straw Hat captain's right thigh just below his buttocks before he gets a stray loop of arm cinched tight enough to pin the sword hand against their tangled bodies and send the blade clattering to the floor.

The swordsman thrashes, struggling to free the trapped limb and throw his unwilling assailant aside.

Somewhere behind him, Luffy can hear Jinbei's raised voice, anxiously persuading Aokiji to come back outside, but he's more concerned with the members of his crew still in the room and reluctant to exit.

"GET OUT." He backs the command with enough Haoshoku to make Sanji wince and send Chopper reeling for the nearest door, clutching his head.

Unfortunately, his attention's diverted just long enough for Zoro to strike another blow. The butt end of Shusui's handle, coated with hardening Haki, clips the rubber man's jaw forcefully enough to snap his head back, and he sprays bloody spittle when he screams at the lingering cook again. This time he's obeyed.

Zoro's been eerily silent except for his ragged breathing, although he makes a low noise of agitation when the desperate younger pirate finally secures the last of his arms- and strikes like a snake, teeth bared.

Luffy jerks his face out of biting range and regards his spouse wearily. The captain's panting, his nose and upper lip smeared red and leaking down his chin and neck. The cuts in his arm and leg are making themselves known as deep stinging aches, and he can feel the wet warmth of blood beginning to pool in his sandal.

"You realize you only beat him this easily because he's still weak from surgery." Law observes mildly. Apparently he's considered himself exempt from the order to evacuate, because although he's retreated a step or two towards the doorway, he hasn't crossed the threshold. "If you're going to kill him, you'd better do it now, because you're not going to get another chance."

"I'm not gonna kill Zoro."
"It's your funeral." The surgeon sighs. "Alright. Now that you've got him, what are you going to do with him? The second you let go, he'll go for your throat."

"I know." Luffy makes a snuffling noise, snorting his nostrils clear, and spits phlegm tinged with crimson on the floor. He resumes studying his first mate's face, searching for any sign that the older man's coming to his senses and tightening his grip like a python whenever the cluster of extra arms try to wriggle free. He's aware of Shusui dangling awkwardly from the set of fingers refusing to relax their deathlike stranglehold on the katana's hilt, and he knows Zoro's likely to simply cut him in two this time if he lets that limb escape.

Moving cautiously, he forces the swordsman backwards until they bump against the desk, then pushes the other pirate into the chair and stretches around to the back where he's well away from all three sets of teeth. It's like maneuvering a two-ton boulder; Zoro fights him every step of the way, and there's blood squelching underfoot and between his toes on his wounded side, threatening to steal his already precarious balance.

He sags to the floor behind the chair and tries to catch his breath, relying on gravity and the secure hold of repeatedly looped rubber flesh to keep his first mate seated. Thankfully it works; there's not enough leverage for Zoro to regain his feet without the use of his arms.

He leans his forehead against his forearm, wincing when he realizes it's the injured one. "Ow."

"... would you like me to retrieve your tanuki, or another member of your crew?"

"Nah, 's better if they stay out-" Luffy tenses as Zoro makes another attempt to fling himself from the seat, fails, and reluctantly settles back with a growl of irritation. "He's gonna get tired eventually, right? 'Cause he was practically falling asleep before, and he told me one time it takes a lot of energy doing this. Sometimes, 'specially if he's hurt, he just kinda passes out after."

"I'd suggest a sedative, but-" The Heart captain hesitates. "I'm not sure it'll have an effect. I don't entirely understand how this ability of his works."

"Yeah, I don't know either, but he sees you coming at him with a needle, he's gonna really freak out. Oi, can you stick your head outside and tell Aokiji I wanna talk to him but it, uh, might be a couple minutes?"

"I'm sure he already figured that out," Law responds dryly, but he disappears through the door, muttering something about errand boys that's drowned out by raised and extremely distraught voices as soon as he's spotted by the exiled crewmembers who've regrouped in the dining hall.

Left alone with his swordsman, Luffy closes his eyes and rests his head against the chair's back with a sigh, but he's forced to return to alertness a moment later when Zoro stirs, sensing an opportunity for escape.

"We're gonna figure this out," the rubber man promises, his own voice sounding strange to his ears because his throat's gone tight again. "I- I'm not really sure how, but we will. 'Cause I'm not gonna-" He can't bring himself to say it. "I'm not going to kill you. I'm not gonna lose you, not to this. Not to ANYTHING."

Although Zoro doesn't answer, his breathing changes slightly. As though he's listening.

Or maybe it's just the thing controlling him, biding its time as it speculates whether or not the captain's genuinely a threat to its host.

"Who am I talking to, anyway, when you're like this? Are you in there, hearing me but not
remembering any of it later, or do you just sort of... go away?"

Still no response but quick, shallow inhalations and exhalations.

He hopes it's the latter rather than the former. Zoro usually doesn't know what's happened during his loss of control and only learns what he's done after he comes back to himself, but the idea that on some level he might be conscious of his actions yet helpless to prevent them, forced to watch from a distance as his body lashes out at people he'd rather die than hurt-

Luffy shudders, and this time when his arms tighten around the older man, it's got nothing to do with the concern that he'll wriggle loose and everything to do with simply wanting to hug him and never let go.

"If you're in there, I- I love you, okay? And so do the kids and so does everybody else too. Even Sanji, even though he kinda sucks at showing it and he'd probably hit me if he heard me saying it, but- we- I-"

He clenches his teeth, squeezing his eyes closed again to prevent tears escaping them as he buries his face against his arm despite the pain it prompts from the laceration there, angry with his inability to FIX THIS.

I hate this. I hate what they did to him- what they did to US.

He's still slouched on the floor behind the chair when Law returns, rapping his knuckles on the wall beside the doorframe to announce his presence, and if his eyes are damp and a bit bloodshot when he blinks them open to see who's entered, the surgeon pretends otherwise.

"Aokiji's right; you do attract some unlikely allies, Mugiwara-san." He brandishes several slightly crumpled and refolded sheets of paper. A letter. The broken seal's visible from where the rubber man's crouching. "I took the liberty of opening it. I'm afraid your crew's not very pleased with me, but-"

He gestures towards Zoro and the chair. "You've got your hands full."

Honestly, Luffy could care less. Given what's just happened, someone opening his mail without express permission's probably the least of his problems. "What's it say?"

"I hope you don't mind if I skip the word-for-word recital. You can read the whole thing later if you want, but long story short, you've got a very grateful but anonymous-" Law flips open the letter to display the unsigned lower half of the last page. "-Marine authority falling all over himself thanking you for not killing his son." He looks up. "I'm assuming he's referring to-?"

"Gotta be one of those guys I let go..."

"Right. But listen to this; it gets better. The son's got a family of his own, and whatever he saw on your ship shook him up pretty good. He thought he was good as dead, never expected to make it home alive. Told his father that after watching you and your swordsman with each other and your kids and listening to your crewmates talking on the deck following the attack, he thinks you would've been fully justified killing every last Marine involved." The surgeon's mouth quirks slightly. "Apparently the Pirate King and World's Greatest Swordsman weren't quite what he was expecting, surprise surprise."

"..."

"Anyway, this Commodore or Rear Admiral or Vice Admiral or whatever the hell he is - somebody fairly important, and I'll bet Kuzan knows exactly who the guy is even though he's not going to tell YOU - feels like he owes you a favor for sparing his son's life. Supposedly all you need to do is
send an answer back with Kuzan, and this guy will do whatever it takes to make it happen, although he pretty much says not to bother asking for amnesty because there's no way the-

"Pictures!" Luffy blurts. "The pictures- I want the pictures!" He swallows, eyes flitting up to the swordsman who's begun to sag in his grasp, finally succumbing to his exhaustion. "The Impel Down stuff. Whatever they've got with Zoro in it- I want it to go away."

His fellow captain's silent for a long moment. "You realize this guy's put himself in a situation where you could take him for everything he's worth if he slips up and identifies himself. Because what he's doing is considered treason."

"I don't care about that. I don't want money. I want Zoro to stop having nightmares and jumping at funny noises and flinching when people touch him. I want him to stop being scared he's gonna hurt one of the kids or one of our nakama. I want-" The younger pirate takes a deep breath. "I want his fingers back. And Wado. And the way he used to smile and laugh a lot more too." There's a lump growing in his throat, and it hurts to speak past, but he won't let it stop him. "If I can't have any of that stuff, then I want this."

"What if there isn't any footage? Or the World Government's already destroyed it to support their claim they never had your first mate in custody? You'd be wasting an opportunity to-"

Luffy's shaking his head. "Don't care. That's what I want." He struggles to his feet, nearly plopping back down on his ass when his right sandal skids in the blood drying on the Adam wood planks. Zoro's slumping sideways, supported only by the arms wrapped around his torso, loosely now because Asura's extra appendages and heads have faded. The rubber man unloops himself carefully and moves around to the front, crouching between the green-haired man's knees and peering up at him. One hand gripping his swordsman's shoulder to prevent him slipping further off-center, he reaches up to gently pat his cheek. "Oi..."

Zoro blinks groggily, eye unfocused and expression confused, and then his fingers dig into the chair arms as he takes in his captain's worried- and gore-smeared- face. "Wha-? Oh, oh shit, I-"

He tries to scramble to his feet, intending to survey the full extent of the damage he's caused, but freezes when he's only partway there and then hunches over with his breath hissing between his teeth and his face contorted by pain.

"I'm fine!" Luffy insists, hastily easing him back into the seat. "And so's everybody else, so just stay there, okay?"

"N-Not- fine. You're-" Touching the younger pirate's chin with shaky fingers and grimacing at the tackiness of drying blood even as he folds an arm around his middle as though he's holding himself together. "Goddamn it, Luffy-"

"You'd better let me take a look, make sure you didn't herniate yourself," Law grumbles as he drops to a crouch beside them. "No, don't move. I promise I won't touch you until I absolutely-"

"Not- unless you look at him first."

"I said STOP MOVING," the surgeon snaps testily. "Maybe he's a little beat up, but you're in worse shape. Oi, Mugiwara, put these on. Roronoa, hold still. Don't make me call one of your crewmates back in here to hold your blasted arms behind the chair. Or Bepo, if none of them will take orders from me."

Luffy cringes involuntarily, averting his gaze from the ugly-looking laceration he's exposed by
parting his swordsman's kimono and peeling back the gauze pad spanning his lower stomach, but the Heart captain doesn't flinch, leaning a bit closer to study the stitches securing its edges.

"Feels like- somebody tried to cut me in half," his patient mumbles. He closes his eye and leans his head back against the chair, taking a few slow, deep breaths through his nose before speaking again. "Sencho, you're lucky I didn't cut YOU in half."

"Not for lack of trying," Law mutters, earning himself a horrified look. "Alright, it looks like my suturing held. There's some seepage, but nothing too excessive."

"Should I, uh, clean it off or something?" The rubber man beside him asks with uncharacteristic timidity.

"Waste of time since it's going to keep bleeding on and off until the tissue starts knitting, but-" Rising to retrieve and don his own pair of gloves, Law shrugs. "You can change the bandage if you want." He spares a moment or two to show the younger pirate how to secure a new folded length of gauze with medical tape before turning his attention to his wounded arm and leg. "Be glad Roronoa keeps his blades so well honed. These should heal cleanly."

"I told you, it's OKAY," Luffy insists once more at the expression of regret and dismay on his partner's face. Following a moment or two of searching after escaping Law's care, he locates a pitcher of water on a shelf near the infirmary bed and splashes some on his face, pulling off his shirt and using it to scrub his nose, chin and neck clean. "Man, I hope Chopper's not gonna be mad about the floor..."

"What the hell'd I do, besides hack at you like a side of beef?" Zoro asks tiredly. "Punch you in the face?"

"You smacked me before, lots of times, 'specially when we're sparring and stuff," the Straw Hat captain reminds him, reluctant to inform him that Haki had amplified the impact on this particular occasion. "It's not that big a deal. Remember that time Sanji accidentally kicked me in the- oi oi, don't- I'm okay, really!"

The first mate's leaned forward to rest his elbows on his thighs and press his face into his hands. "I feel like I're gonna puke."

"You wanna lay down?" Abandoning his damp, blood-stained shirt, Luffy reaches out to rub the back of his swordsman's neck. "Maybe you'll feel better if you take a nap. I can watch the peas for a while if you wanna-" He leans closer, frowning, as Zoro mumbles something he can't quite make out. "Eh?"

"I don't know if I can do this anymore." The other man's voice is quiet- and sounds more exhausted and defeated than Luffy's ever heard it.

"You don't gotta do anything," he says uneasily, fingers stilling on Zoro's neck. "Except sleep and eat and get better."

His words prompt short, strangled laughter that hurts his ears- and heart- to hear.

"Dunno if you noticed, but I'm not. Getting better."

Law takes one hard look at them both and excuses himself from the room, although neither of them acknowledge his exit because they're too busy staring at each other.

"Every time this shit happens, I'm scared I'm gonna wake up and find out I killed somebody. It's
like- that- thing-" Another sharp sound of amusement, brittle and ugly. "It just fucking takes over and
does whatever the hell it wants, and it doesn't- it can't tell the difference between enemies and-"

"Zoro-"

"Goddamn it, Luffy, what if I end up killing somebody? You, one of the kids?"

"You wouldn't." Although he's remembering Ace, fighting Nami's iron grip, and if he's brutally
honest with himself, he doesn't know what might've happened if the eight-year-old had managed to
yank himself free and gone running to Zoro's side. If Asura'd reacted to the child's approach as a
threat to be neutralized...

"I'm not-" The swordsman's voice breaks, and he swipes angrily at his face, biting back a curse
when the unthinking gesture tugs severed muscle. "It's not safe. The crew, you, the kids- none of
you are safe with me here."

"You're not leaving," Luffy responds immediately. "You can't- I won't let you."

"And you're not gonna kill me either, are you. Even if I completely lose my shit."

The captain crosses his arms.

"Fuck." Closing his eye again, Zoro slouches backwards on the chair.

"Oi, I told you. I wanna spend the rest of my life with you. I dunno how long that's gonna be, but I
don't care- I'm not giving up just 'cause stuff's hard or scary." He brushes his first mate's temple,
caressing it with his thumb as he combs his fingers into the spiky green hair, and he's pleased when
the older pirate leans into his touch. "We've done all kinds of things people said we couldn't, that
we never woulda done if we were too scared to try."

"Mmm."

"What about Sky Island, huh? We never woulda found it if we listened to all those people saying it
wasn't there, right?"

"Yeah, but- I think this is a little different from ignoring a bunch of assholes in a bar." His
swordsman sighs. "Luffy, we can't keep living like this, being afraid I'm gonna start swinging a
katana at somebody 'cause they SNEEZED when I wasn't expecting it." He taps his fist against the
chair arm, frustration clear on his face. "When I went after my swords, I wasn't even thinking about
fighting. I just- I wanted- I NEEDED one of them in my hand, but then everybody started freaking
out and I'm so damn tired I can barely think straight, so when Chopper and the cook grabbed me, I
just-"

"You got scared and Asura came out." He keeps stroking Zoro's scalp, drawing comfort from the
ongoing physical contact, although his mind's racing.

"He was right."

"Huh?"

"Mihawk. If I don't figure this out- stop being so fucking afraid that I'm gonna lose my shit and
accidentally summon Asura-" He grimaces, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Every time it actually
happens, it just makes it worse next time."
Luffy pauses. "What if... what if Zoro did it on purpose?"

"Did what on purpose?"

"Asura. What if you made it come out on purpose, when you wanted it to come out?"

"Are you bat-shit? I DON'T want-!"

"No, listen," the younger man insists excitedly, realization dawning. "You wanted it to come out when we went overboard and I couldn't get us back on the ship, right? So you could get us back to the deck?"

"I didn't fucking WANT to use it, but I didn't have much of a-"

"Yeah, but-" He takes a deep breath, trying to collect his scattered thoughts into a coherent statement. "You didn't get all crazy, right? Sanji said you kinda spaced out a little while you were fighting, but you knew who Ace was and you didn't hurt anybody but the Marines, and they attacked us first so they don't count."

"I guess," Zoro mutters dubiously.

"So maybe you just gotta keep doing it 'til you get used to it again."

The skeptical expression on his first mate's face makes what he thinks of this idea quite obvious, but before he can start listing the hundred and one reasons why summoning Asura deliberately can only end in tears, there's a light knock on the doorframe, and the older pirate makes a startled noise, hands tightening on the chair's arms so violently that they creak protest.

"My apologies in advance for the interruption," Aokiji offers, inclining his head slightly. "Unfortunately, I'm a bit short on time." He pauses, noting Zoro's white-knuckled grip and his displeased scowl. "Also, my apologies for disturbing your rest, Roronoa; it's been brought to my attention that my arrival was rather... inopportune. I assure you, I'll be taking my leave shortly, as soon as your captain verifies what Trafalgar Law just told me."

"The thing about the guy and the favor and Impel Down?" Luffy asks. "Yeah, that's what I want."

The swordsman beside him twitches at the mention of the prison but doesn't take his eye off their visitor. One bare foot shifts beneath the handle of the katana lying closest to the chair, ready to flip the weapon into his grasp at the first sign of trouble.

Luffy gives him a reassuring pat on the shoulder - a subtle hint to relax or at least stand down - but Aokiji doesn't seem offended.

"The gentleman in question certainly has his own resources, but if he encounters any resistance-"

The former Admiral shrugs. "I've a few strings I can pull as well."

"You're gonna help?"

For a moment, the tall man doesn't answer. When he finally speaks, his voice is low and cautious. "... I never agreed with the Gorosei's orders. I told Sakazuki and Borsalino they'd eventually regret their involvement, and I was right."

"I was protecting my family," Luffy says, and further explanation's not necessary, because his tone speaks volumes about the losses he's suffered thanks to the World Government and the aforementioned men. His brother, rescued from execution only to die horribly at Akainu's hands.
His swordsman and their unborn son, abducted and imprisoned simply for the sake of an unsuccessful and largely useless plot to snare an elusive rebel and his army.

"I think it's become quite clear that interfering with your family's ill advised."

"Doesn't stop the bastards from trying," Zoro retorts angrily. "Chasing us all over the fucking place, attacking us when we're minding our own goddamn business. Attacking us when we've got KIDS onboard."

"Regardless of their ages, your children are still considered pirates. This is something you already know."

The first mate's hands release the chair arms and ball into fists against them, but he doesn't dispute Aokiji's surprisingly gentle admonishment, because it's true.

The former Marine turns back to Luffy. "I'll do what I can. If there's documentation or footage of Roronoa still in the archives, it'll be destroyed."

"Okay, good."

"Wha-" Zoro's looking back and forth between them, confused and slightly alarmed. "What are you guys talking about? Luffy- you didn't agree to some weird deal, did you, just to-?"

"Zoro didn't hear me and Law talking 'cause he was still pretty out of it, but this guy's gonna do us a favor 'cause we let his kid go."

"Let his-" The green-haired man blinks as he connects the pieces. "You mean one of those guys you kicked off the ship in Usopp's dopey banana boats?"

"Yeah. His dad's all happy he made it home okay."

"So he's doing us a favor? Sencho, that's-" Giving his face a nervous rub with one hand. "Isn't there anything else you wanted to ask for? I mean, you don't have to waste it on- ... they're just... they're just pictures. They might not even be anything worth-"

"Nope. That's what I want." The captain insists stubbornly. "No matter what's in 'em, they're not JUST pictures. Not to Zoro. And not to me. So, yeah, it's worth it, and I'm not wasting anything." He glances back to Aokiji. "Do I gotta write a letter? For you to take back to this guy?"

"It's better that you don't. I'll speak to him directly and inform him of your-" The former Admiral stops, looking down to where a small, impatient child's pushing through his long legs, using him as an impromptu bridge under which to crawl. "Ah. Hello."

"SABO," someone in the other room calls. Sanji, from the sound of it. "What the HELL do you think you're DOING?"

The toddler turns back long enough to utter an exasperated "Go ah Daddy!" at the unseen speaker and then finishes shoving his way past Aokiji. Whereupon he scrambles to his feet and heads straight for Zoro, wrapping both arms around his swordsman father's nearest leg and hugging it tightly.

"Oi oi, careful where you're stepping, kiddo," the older pirate scolds as he swivels the chair to steer his son away from the blood smears and unsheathed katana on the floor. "We don't want those little feet missing any toes."
He looks up then, flushing, as he remembers he's got an audience. Beside him, Luffy's beaming as he stoops to gather the discarded weapons and very cautiously, very carefully wipe them on his ruined shirt before returning them to their sheaths and propping them back against the wall beside the third undisturbed member of their trio.

"How old's this one? Sabo, I believe your crewmate called him?"

"Gonna be two in like a month," the first mate answers gruffly, his face burning.

Aokiji raises an eyebrow. "I imagine you're going to have your hands full, with a two-year-old and-"

"You should leave. Chopper-aniki says Dad needs a nap," insists the stern-faced eight-year-old who's just poked him in the hip. "He was really tired BEFORE the peas got here, and now they're here and he still got barely any sleep and YOU freaked him out and made him do the thing with all the extra heads and arms, so now he's gotta be really REALLY tired." Without waiting for a response, he joins his younger brother at Zoro's side. "Oi, leave Dad alone! He doesn't want you in his lap right now; he's got stitches 'cause Law-san hadda cut him to get the peas out!"

"We've already got our hands full." Zoro mutters, trying to fend off the uplifted arms Sabo's waving at him for fear of getting accidentally clobbered in the stomach. "Twin newborns are just icing on the damn cake."

As though in response to his dry remark, there's a sudden burst of high-pitched crying from the dining hall, followed by Usopp's semi-hysterical demand for someone to "take this baby before I accidentally drop him, oh god!"

"Is he hungry again? I bet he's hungry! I TOLD Law-san that wasn't enough food but he didn't believe me!"

"Daddy uhp," Sabo chirps again.

"Oi, I told you to leave Dad alone!"

"I'm gonna, uh, go get that. I mean him. Them." Luffy stammers, nervously patting his exasperated-looking swordsman and indicating the yowling baby in the room beyond. "Before the other one starts-"

"... shit. Too late."

"Oh crap. Ahaha, they've really loud, aren't they?" The rubber man ducks to kiss the other pirate's scowling mouth, grinning weakly. "Be right back. I love you!"

Sputtering furiously, his face glowing at the blatant display of affection in front of their former-enemy-turned-tentative-ally, Zoro swats him away. "Yeah yeah yeah, just- go do something before Usopp has a freaking heart attack." He sags back in his seat, mumbling to himself as his spouse dashes for the doorway. "Let's have another baby, Zoro. It'll be so much fun, Zoro. I really really love you, Zoro. God, you're such a manipulative bastard."

Ace is staring after his dark-haired father's retreating back, visibly wincing at the noise produced by two hours-old babies yowling like agitated alley cats and the handful of panic-stricken nakama attempting to calm them. "Wow, you guys are never gonna get any sleep…"

"Keep being a smart-ass and you're moving back in with us." Grimacing, the first mate splays a hand over his eyes as he listens to the cacophony outside. "Or maybe I'm just gonna move into the...
fucking crow's nest and sleep up there."

"Fuh."

"Sabo, NO."

"Fuh fuh fuh fuuuh~"

"SABO."

"F-."

"Kid, I swear, if you finish that and Nami hears you and charges me another five-hundred beli, I'm gonna give you to the shitty cook and tell him to dice you into little pieces and bake you in a goddamn meat pie. You wanna be a pie?"

"-uh," Sabo finishes, and without skipping a beat. "Foo? Eat! Go eat!"

Ace snickers.

"..."

One corner of Aokiji's mouth twitches into a barely perceptible smile.

"Oi oi oi, and what the hell do you think YOU'RE laughing at?"

Chapter End Notes

I've been having a lot of trouble sleeping, so I was poking at fic and writing a few more paragraphs every time I woke up, and next think I knew, I had an entire freaking chapter. And it's been a rather wild ride, but it looks like we're almost at the end of our journey here...

I guess credit for the pie thing goes to tazer anon; thanks for the inspiration, lmao.

PS: My husband almost cried reading this chapter.
Epilogue

It's been a long time, a very long time, since the former first division commander of the Whitebeard Pirates - now their captain despite his adamant refusal to compare himself to the man he still refers to as "Pops" - last set eyes on Fire Fist Ace's little brother. He knows his visit to pay respects to the Pirate King is more than a little overdue, but Marco's had his hands full; the blows dealt to Edward Newgate's- no, he reminds himself, HIS crew- during their final confrontation with Blackbeard left the once-grand crew in tatters and it's required several years to gather the survivors and repair the damage.

But he held them together, and it's thanks to his perseverance and determination to honor their former captain and father figure that Jozu - now Marco's own first division commander - is a gigantic silent presence at his side while Vista and the others wait patiently on the ships anchored beyond where the Thousand Sunny's docked in a small natural harbor.

The spiky-haired blond's not quite sure what to make of the scene before him on the brig sloop's lawn deck. He glances upwards at the scowl decorating his companion's face, trying to judge the larger man's reaction. Jozu looks as though he disapproves- but it's difficult to tell sometimes, considering Jozu ALWAYS looks as though he disapproves.

"Oi, you lookin' for my dad?"

Marco turns, frowns.

"Oi oi, down here."

Luffy's son? It's got to be, because even though he's never met the child sitting in the grass beside the tree swing, there's no mistaking the tousled black hair and facial features that appear built for mischievous grins. Also, while the Whitebeard Pirates might have been busy stalking Marshall D. Teach, they didn't fail to notice the flood of news that kept pouring in following the increasingly erratic exploits of the rubber man's crew.

And there had been some decidedly... odd rumors starting a few years ago, right around the time they'd finally caught up with the gap-toothed bastard who'd killed Thatch and led to Ace's capture and execution by the Marines and caused so much heartache for the Phoenix and his extended family.

Rumors supposedly started by eyewitnesses insisting they'd spotted children on the Straw Hat's brig sloop, traveling with the crew, and although no one seemed certain just where they came from or who they belonged to, more than one person had noted their strong resemblance to the Pirate King himself.

As for some of the OTHER things he's heard- well, Marco had immediately dismissed the strangest of THOSE claims as too preposterous for truth.

Although he must admit, reality's already quite a bit stranger than he'd expected.

"If you're looking for my dad, he left a couple hours ago, but if you wanna wait, he'll be back," the boy peering up at him states matter-of-factly, and then tilts his head. "Umm, you ARE looking for the Kaizokuo, right?"

That confirms his suspicions, answers one question. Well, two questions. He'd been curious about the absence of Luffy's boisterous, very audible and very recognizable voice, which he doubts has
changed much since he last heard it.

But it still doesn't explain the two grown men chasing another dark-haired but much smaller child back and forth across the lawn deck. Or the slender woman - Nico Robin, he realizes at the recollection of her wanted poster - seated on a blanket with an open book in one hand and a chubby-cheeked, green-haired baby sleeping in her lap.

"Yes, but if he's-" Remembering there's someone else with that particular verdant shade. "Ah, what about the first mate- Roronoa Zoro, yoi? Is he-?"

"Nah, Dad went too."

Marco blinks, wondering if he's either misunderstood part of the conversation or inadvertently confused the kid. "Your father's with Luffy, or Roronoa's with your father, yoi?"

Oddly enough, this question earns him a frown that clearly states he must be brain-damaged, but before the boy's able to open his mouth and issue what's sure to be a disparaging remark regarding his intelligence, a familiar blue fishman wanders through the door nearby and stops in his tracks at the sight of them.

"Marco-kun!"

"Jinbei, where's-?" He stops short, staring, because the former Shichibukai's cradling a wriggling baby in one arm. A wriggling green-haired baby.

Doubting his eyes, he immediately glances back over his shoulder to check whether or not the baby in Nico Robin's lap is still there and hasn't, in fact, miraculously teleported across the deck. But no, the infant's still accounted for, snoozing peacefully atop the historian's thighs with one pudgy fist grasping a handful of her skirt.

Jinbei chuckles. "You're not seeing things, I promise. There really are two of them."

The older child scrambles to his feet, reaching out to tug the dangling sleeve of the fishman's kimono. "Oi, these guys're looking for Dad. I think." He gives the visitors a suspicious, dubious look.

"Ah. If you'd like to speak with Luffy-kun or Zoro-san, I'm afraid they're both occupied at the moment, but I'll be happy to talk with you until they're available. It's been quite some time, hasn't it? I imagine you've some stories of your own to tell."

Marco exchanges a look with Jozu, who stares back at him impassively. He offers a helpless shrug. "Sure, I suppose we can wait, yoi."

"Ace, would you mind taking your brother while I-? Ah, thank you."

"These guys ARE okay, right? 'Cause they're acting kinda weird," Ace mutters as he accepts his younger sibling and hugs the squirming five-month-old against him, scowling up at the startled, almost bug-eyed expressions on two of the three adults' faces.

"They're fine," Jinbei assures him, smiling. "They're old friends, and I'm sure Luffy-kun will be happy to see them."

"If you say so," The boy hesitates, giving the gaping men another searching stare. "... I'm gonna go sit with Robin-san 'til my dads get back." He glances down at the baby tugging stubbornly at his shirt in a clumsy effort to climb him. "Oi oi, hold still!"
Leaving the fishman behind to explain a few things to the confused Whitebeard pirates, he heads for Robin and her blanket, protectively tightening his grip on his small charge and scolding Sabo loudly when the wildly giggling two-year-old comes hurtling past.

Sanji slows to a walk as he draws near before stopping beside them with his hands on his hips, struggling not to puff like a locomotive as he watches Usopp continue in hot pursuit of their nakama's energetic offspring. "Shit, doesn't he ever- run out of energy?" Loosening his collar, he looks down at the baby in the historian's lap. "Maybe I'll lend you a hand instead, Robin-chan."

Ace snorts. "She doesn't need a hand. They're so little, all they do's eat and sleep. And poop. They can't even roll over yet!"

"Exactly," the cook agrees, reaching out to ruffle the sparse grass-colored hair of the twin his much younger crewmate's holding. "No running requi- oi, settle down there, pipsqueak- you'll fall on your head if you don't stop thrashing around like a fish on a line."

"He wants down." The eight-year-old deposits the baby belly-down on the blanket beside Robin and his sleeping brother, whereupon he promptly pushes himself up on both arms and starts fussing loudly. "Oh, man, lookit- he's trying to crawl again."

"I don't think you're going anywhere yet, kid. Damn, he's getting pissed, isn't he?"

"Yeah, I'll say."

Momentarily discarding her book, Robin retrieves the agitated infant and lifts him to her shoulder, patting and rubbing his back until he begins to calm. She smiles when he cranes his neck to watch Sabo and Usopp's progress across the lawn, uttering a faint whimper. "Ah, you want to join them, don't you, Tachi-chan? I know it's frustrating, but don't worry, you'll learn eventually."

"Robin-chwan's so good with babies," Sanji sighs, although the dreamy smile slides off his face a moment later. "I still can't believe Marimo, naming kids after swords. What the hell."

"Types of swords," the older woman corrects, laughing softly. "And I think it's actually quite clever." She regards the twins with gentle amusement. "The samurai of Wano often carry the shorter-bladed tonto paired with their tachi longswords."

"Yeah, I saw that letter Marimo sent Kinemon. It's just-"

"I think it's cool," Ace interrupts, glaring up at the cook. "Don't make fun of my brothers' names!"

"I'm not," Sanji replies dryly. "I'm just saying it's so damn typical of that shitty swordsman, deciding to name a baby after a blade."

"Oi, if they were your kids, you woulda just named 'em after food or something, so don't bust on Dad."

"Right. Apple and Avocado. Cabbage and Califl- wait, nevermind, califlower's not green. Ah, Cabbage and Celery? Spinach and Asparagus have a nice ring to 'em, but they don't start with the same letter."

The eight-year-old's now snickering despite himself. "I'm gonna tell Dad you're talkin' shit about their hair."

"I already talk shit about HIS hair. And don't curse, okay?"
"Oi, but you say stuff like that all the time!"

"I'm an adult. Wait ten years and then you can say whatever the hell you want." He lowers his voice. "Besides, if Nami-san hears us, I'll get fined by default since Marimo's not here."

"Hope you got some beli, then, 'cause she's right behind you," Ace states calmly, pointing past him.

The blond whirls so fast, he nearly gives himself whiplash, but the navigator's nowhere in sight and Ace bursts into hysterical giggles loud enough to prompt curious glances from Jinbei and their visitors on the other side of the deck. "You little-"

He's interrupted by a yowl. Disturbed from his nap by their banter - and possibly by his twin brother's continuous fidgeting - Tanto's fixing them with a grumpy scowl so reminiscent of their absent first mate that Sanji completely loses his composure and nearly loses his balance as well when he's overcome by helpless laughter.

Curiosity peaked by the sudden commotion, Sabo abandons his game of keep-away and meanders over to flop down on the blanket next to Robin and his younger siblings. He's shortly joined by Usopp, who looks relieved at the chance for a break as he takes a seat.

Blowing a stray curl away from his face, the sniper gives Sanji's knee a sharp poke with his forefinger, disrupting his merriment. "Oi oi- why'd you- bail on me, you jerk?"

"Erk, erk, 'An-gi gerk!" The toddler beside him echoes gleefully, prompting loud snorts of amused derision from Ace and Usopp and muffled chuckling from Robin.

"Bet you think you're the height of comedy," the blond glaring down at him mutters sarcastically, although he's also doing a poor job of masking a smile- an attempt that fails completely when Sabo flashes a cheeky, familiar grin before turning away to babble an enthusiastic greeting to his little brothers.

The kid might be a complete terror, but he's also undeniably endearing, and it's a relief to see that - potentially thanks to inheriting his dark-haired father's sunny disposition - he's been largely untroubled by the events of the last twelve months or so.

No nightmares- or at least no dreams severe enough to leave a lasting impression- and a growing desire for independence that, along with his habit of sprinting from point A to point B, keeps the entire crew on their toes.

The two-year-old's also unofficially declared himself junior custodian of the twins, retrieving whichever toys he finds worthy of their interest and - much to Zoro's dismay and Luffy's endless hilarity - trying to help with feedings and diaper changes, an unrequested offer of assistance which almost inevitably ends in disaster.

Recalling one incident that left his green-haired nakama's scowling face streaked temple to chin with diaper cream and his trousers splotched with the same white substance in the pattern of numerous small handprints, crumpled shirt clutched in one hand and howling, ointment-besmeared offspring thrown across the opposite bare shoulder as he stalked towards the bathhouse, the cook finds himself grinning like a loon.

The swordsman has, however, grudgingly acknowledged that watching Sabo dutifully restore a dropped pacifier to its rightful owner is probably "the fucking cutest thing anybody's ever seen," and Sanji's willing to bet he's right.
Brat's got us ALL wrapped around his little finger, and he knows it too.

He raises one foot to prod Usopp's ribs with his toe. "I haven't got all day to play tag with you idiots. You want lunch, don't you?"

"EAT," Sabo declares loudly upon hearing what he considers one of three magic words - the others being "breakfast" and "dinner" - and fixing him with wide, hopeful eyes. "Eat eat? 'E go eat?"

"Kid, you're just lucky you've got Luffy's metabolism, or you'd be one damn round little butterball and we'd need to roll you everywhere."

"B'uh ball!"

Ace snorts, rolling his eyes. "Well, whatever you're making, I hope you're making a lot, 'cause you know Dad's gonna be starving when he gets back."

"Yeah, they've been at it- what-" Usopp glances skywards, gauging the current position of the sun and doing a quick mental calculation. "-three, almost four hours now? And I guess we're feeding those guys now too, right?" He gestures to where Marco and Jozu are regarding Jinbei with dumbfounded fascination as the fishman articulates some point of his ongoing tale with a wave of one webbed hand.

"Shit..." Eyes narrowing as he considers the contents of fridge and pantry in regards to the necessary number of place settings, not to mention the appetites of certain ravenous crewmembers, Sanji excuses himself and heads for the staircase and his kitchen, muttering under his breath while he debates the most effective way to stretch their available comestibles until tomorrow's visit to the markets. Maybe if he just throws the meat and whatever's left of the vegetables in a pot-

...His plans for stew are momentarily delayed as he encounters Nami rounding the deck on the dining hall level, and he hastens to open the door for the navigator before she drops the large parcels of mail she's juggling under one shapely arm or the spyglass gripped in her free hand.

"TWO birds today," she exclaims cheerfully once inside, dropping the packets onto the sofa and setting the spyglass carefully on the table beside the Den Den Mushi. "I think we got three weeks' worth of letters all at once!"

Curious, the cook snaps the twine securing one bundle and fans its contents across the leather, his eyes darting over the array of envelopes. Some list return addresses, others are merely labeled with the addressee's name, leaving him wondering once again just how the gulls manage to successfully deliver messages ANYWHERE, let alone to the well-traveled Sunny.

Makes you curious how much shit just gets lost.

Nami, sorting mail briskly beside him, reaches over to snatch a magazine half-buried in the pile and add it to the others she's set aside.

"Is that all Chopper's?" He asks incredulously. "How many medical journal subscriptions does he-ah, Nami-san, this one's for you."

"Who-" Turning over the envelope, she spots the little mikan doodled next to her name on the front and smiles. "Noriko!"

"Got another one from Luffy's grandfather. No, wait- there's two from him," Sanji appends, squinting at the untidy scrawl of their captain's full name sans title before tossing both letters down and grabbing what he hopes is the most recent newspaper. "Bet he's writing about dropping in for a
visit again; Marimo's gonna be thrilled."

"I don't care what Zoro says. The man's welcome to visit all he likes, if he's willing to keep the boys in clothes. Hand-me-downs only last so long before there's more patches than original fabric. Especially when it's Sabo wearing them."

"'S right," agrees Franky, who's wandered in to catch the tail end of the conversation. "One of these days, somebody's gonna grab our little bro by the waistband and his pants are gonna tear right off him, just like an expensive hooker's cheap negligee."

Sanji promptly smacks the shipwright with the rolled-up paper, valiantly resisting the urge to ask his crewmate for elaboration concerning whatever the older man knows about such ladies and their attire.

Nami, far more amused than offended, bites her lip to avoid snorting obnoxious laughter and turns her attention back to the unsorted mail.

There's another piece for Chopper- a bulky package printed with "Tanuki-san, c/o Mugiwara & Crew" in the neat, almost anal-retentively neat letters of Trafalgar Law's hand- and now she does laugh aloud as she displays it to her crewmates. "The only doctor I've ever met whose writing I can actually READ."

"Oi oi, this one's got nothing on it," Franky says suddenly, stooping and extending the smaller hand from his right palm to pick up a slim envelope. He frowns, flapping it slightly. "Doesn't seem like there's anything in it, either. Y'think somebody forgot to- ah, hang on a sec, maybe I'm wrong."

Raising his arm so the envelope's illuminated by the early afternoon sun streaming through the porthole, he gives a confident nod at the small, square-shaped shadow inside. "Huh. Looks like it ain't empty after all. There's SOMETHIN' in there."

Amusement forgotten, Nami finds herself staring at the unmarked letter, a chill shivering up her spine. "You don't think- Franky, that's not-" She pauses, taking a deep breath. "What if it's-"

Sanji, newspaper dangling forgotten from his nerveless hand, swallows audibly before finishing with what he's sure their red-haired nakama's thinking, his gaze darting between her suddenly pale face and the envelope. "-a photograph?"

He's not entirely sure why she jumped to such a ghastly conclusion based on such little evidence, but whatever the cause, her sense of disquiet's highly contagious.

"A photograph? No, no way," the cyborg insists, looking slightly alarmed as the reason for their unease dawns on him. "Not big enough and-" He tests the envelope between thumb and forefinger. "Nope, Curly-bro, see? Got too much give."

"... negatives?" The cook asks tentatively, too rattled to make objection to Franky's use of a nickname he detests. "I mean, I don't know WHY they'd send us something shitty like that, but who the hell other than Aokiji or that guy would mail us a goddamn blank envelope?"

"Maybe as proof they found something?" Nami suggests helplessly.

"... maybe we oughta let Haramaki-bro open it. Uh, just in case."

"Are you shitting me?" Sanji hisses. "You really think it's a good idea letting Marimo see something like that? If one of those assholes got the bright idea to send us some shitty picture of him-"
"Then give it to Luffy and let him decide what to do with it!"

"And watch Marimo flip his shit anyway, seeing our captain ready to kill somebody over whatever he finds in there? No. Fuck this."

"Whoa-!"

"Sanji-kun!"

Slipping behind the kitchen counter with the envelope he's snatched from Franky's hand, the cook addresses them over his shoulder as he hunts for an old paring knife. "If it's something-" He clenches his teeth momentarily. "If I open it and it's something they don't need to see, I'll burn it. And you never saw the damn thing, either of you."

"I-I'm not sure Zoro would want you to see him like-"

"I DON'T WANT TO SEE HIM LIKE THAT EITHER." He sees both of them flinch and abruptly realizes he's shouting, the envelope now partially crumpled in his fist because the thought of seeing the swordsman- their crewmate- their NAKAMA-


Sanji feels as though he might vomit, detesting the images that flash unwittingly and most definitely unwelcome through his mind, but he stubbornly denies the impulse and chokes down the acidic taste rising in his throat. "Nami-san, I- I'm sorry, but somebody needs to make sure. So Marimo and- so Zoro and Luffy don't have to, and besides, it's-"

I can't make everything right, can't undo all the shit that happened, can't fix a damn thing, but I can do THIS, he thinks, challenging her disapproval with his gaze, direct and unshrinking. "I need to do this, okay? So they don't have to."

She doesn't respond, looking away and crossing her arms uncomfortably across her midsection, refusing to justify his decision- but Franky's nodding in agreement.

Finally locating the blade, he slides the point under the sealed flap and tugs it upwards, nearly slicing himself as well when his fingers twitch inadvertently at the unexpectedly loud rip of pulp fibers parting.

His hands are shaking when he sets down the knife and clumsily parts the envelope's severed layers to peer cautiously inside, his stomach performing a nauseating backflip.

"S-Sanji-kun?" Nami says again, voice small and tinged with fear. "Is it-" The remaining color drains from her face as the cook turns towards them, his expression unreadable, and her fear sharpens into panic. "I DON'T WANT TO SEE IT." Her own empty fingers have latched onto the hem of her tanktop, white-knuckled where they're strangling the fabric. "Just tell me- is it-?"

Motionless beside her, Franky's staring at the envelope as though it's a bomb set to detonate the moment anyone moves.

"It's a newspaper clipping." Sanji exhales slowly, trying to decide if his discovery's better or worse than the dreaded negatives. Surely even the less reputable tabloids wouldn't publish THAT kind of photograph...

He tweezes the folded scrap free with index and forefinger, and after a moment's hesitation, smooths it open.
There's no photographs, only text. Weak-kneed with relief, he gropes blindly for the stool he normally keeps tucked out of sight beneath the counter and drops onto it, nearly missing the cushion but barely noticing because he's reading, slowly at first but then more quickly as he recognizes the gist of the article. And utters a short, strangled guffaw of disbelief and shocked amusement.

"SANJI." The navigator's beginning to sound more aggrivated than frightened. "What the hell does it SAY?"

Unable to speak, the cook shoves the newspaper clipping across the counter at her, and she picks it up with some reluctance. Her mouth drops open as she scans the headline.

"Bicycle-guy musta found SOMETHING," Franky states unnecessarily from where he's reading over her shoulder.

"Yeah, well, whatever it was, it's gone now. Along with a shit-ton of other stuff, apparently."

"But why did-?" Nami lowers the article, her wide-eyed amazement settling into shrewd calculation. "It was probably easier- and safer- to destroy everything. By wiping out that much information, nobody will know exactly WHAT the saboteur wanted." She indicates the envelope and its contents. "And if the message went astray, there was no connecting it with us OR whoever sent it."

"Bet they're thinking they committed the perfect crime," Sanji snorts, reaching for the cabinet overhead to retrieve his battered pack of cigarettes from behind the tea cups. "Would've been nice if they didn't scare the shit out of us, pulling it off." He pats the breast pocket of his button-up shirt, assuring himself that his lighter's inside. "If anybody comes in whining they're hungry, let 'em know I'm out back and lunch'll be running a little late. After dealing with THAT bullshit, I need a goddamn smoke."

Outside on the lawn, Marco's regarding Jinbei with an air of incredulity as the fishman finishes relating his greatly condensed - and respectfully censored, given certain details better left unshared - explanation of what the Whitebeard Pirates have missed over the past few years.

"-and thankfully they've left us largely-" The former Shichibukai falters, searching his vocabulary for a better word because "unmolested" might not be the most appropriate terminology. "-err, untroubled- since that night."

"... that must be a relief," the Phoenix offers weakly, clearly unsure how else to respond. "-especially to Luffy and, ah, Roronoa, yoi..."

"Yes, and-" A quick glance around the deck to make sure the Straw Hat's first mate is still absent. "I recommend addressing Zoro-san by his given name. He won't be offended by the familiarity, I assure you."

"Easy enough..." Marco agrees, stealing a sidelong look at his first division commander to see how the larger man's reacted to this request. Not to mention the entire unlikely truth behind the children's presence.

But despite his astonishment earlier, upon learning the Pirate King's eldest son shares his name with their old crewmembere, Jozu's regained his grim expression.

He supposes he shouldn't be surprised.
Jozu's Akuma no Mi lets him change parts of his body to diamond, he reminds himself wryly, gaze dropping to the grass beneath his sandals. *I can turn into a bird. What Roro-Zoro- what ZORO's body can apparently do isn't really a whole lot stranger when you think about it.*

"Captain."

He straightens, attention drawn once more to the pirate beside him.

"Look." Jozu's voice is a deep, growling rumble, but his tone's soft, observant and almost regretful as he watches the playful interactions between the small cluster of children and adults on the blanket a few yards away. "If he was alive to see this-"

The group's been joined by a thick-ruffed stag Marco instinctively recognizes as a fellow Zoan and-is that a skeleton? Yes, and both of them greeted warmly by their fellow crewmates, the middle-aged boy- Sabo- and the blond certainly recognizes THAT name from Portgas D. Ace's stories of his childhood- immediately pouncing on the deer and standing on tiptoes to throw both arms around its neck while the older brother looks on, laughing, and the two infants watch with rapt, bewildered fascination from their guardian's lap, and Marco's abruptly aware his eyes are burning, stinging madly behind a veil of tears, gladness and sorrow striking a joint chord in his chest.

*Pops... Pops, this was your dream, wasn't it? Your treasure? This was what you were searching for when you gathered us together. When you named us your sons.*

xxx

"Goddamn it- Sencho," Zoro groans, flopping his head to the side so he's got a better view of the heavily panting, sweat-lathered younger pirate sprawled to his left. "I don't- think I can WALK."

"Me neither," his captain agrees breathlessly, rolling over to drape an arm across his bare middle.

"Ugh, get off-! You're all warm and soggy. Quit dripping on me," he grumbles, making a face as he gives a half-hearted shove at the elbow nestled against his ribs.

Luffy wheezes laughter. "Zoro kinda sounds like- he just got laid."

"Oi, shut up- so do you." The swordsman lets his eye drift shut. "Don't have- enough energy for that." He nudges his partner's side again near the armpit, prompting tired laughter and a weak and highly ineffectual attempt to escape the tickling sensation. "Maybe later- when I don't feel like my heart's gonna explode outta my chest."

"Mmm," the rubber man offers in wordless agreement, squirming closer until he's resting his head on Zoro's chest and tucked snugly alongside, and this time the green-haired pirate doesn't protest despite the uncomfortably sticky sensation of perspiring skin and merely runs his fingers through Luffy's damp hair, regarding him with lazy but fond contemplation.

"You got dirt on your nose."

"Shishi- I got dirt all over me. So do you."


Which isn't particularly surprising, given the chunks of missing sod, upturned soil and scattered loose tufts of grass where they're lying. Not on the lawn deck - this type of sparring's too dangerous to non-participants and the surrounding environment to take place on the ship itself, as evidenced by the fallen trees and split rocks that succumbed during their battle - but in a meadow well away
from any populated areas on the island where they've stopped.

"Do it again."

"Shit, Luffy, I'm TIRED."

"Just one more time."

"... you're an asshole," he groans, but he complies, summoning barely enough energy to bring Asura to the surface once more. "I hope you're not expecting me to do anything but lay here." The latter of this sentence is spoken in triplicate, but true to his word, he doesn't budge despite the additional limbs now present on either side of him. He's just too damn worn out.

"It's getting easier, though, isn't it? And not as scary?"

"Yeah, it's-" He breaks off, suddenly flustered as his captain leans past his ear towards the closest of the extra heads. "O-Oi, don't do that. It's weird." This time his voice emerges from only two mouths; Luffy's pressing a casual yet somehow very thorough kiss to the lips of the third. "Sencho-"

"What's weird about it? It's part of Zoro, isn't it?" The younger pirate starts to kiss him again, palm cradling the jaw of the head he's addressing, but then he dissolves into snickers. "You're not JEALOUS, are you?"

"I don't know," Zoro admits sheepishly. "I mean, it's me but it's- not- uh-"

"Fiine," Luffy huffs, rolling his eyes. "Then I guess I just gotta kiss all three of you, huh." And promptly - to his spouse's alarm-tinged amusement - he proceeds to make good on that promise, until the first mate can't remember why he was complaining.

"Shishishi... I thought you were tired."

"Wha- OH. SHIT." Face- FACES- blazing, the swordsman jerks back the hand that's crept down the seat of his partner's shorts to firmly grip his rear, only to watch its solidity waver and then fade from existence as Asura retreats. "... jeez."

Expression smug, his captain rolls off him and stretches out in the grass, arching his back like a cat begging for a belly rub, and despite his exhaustion, Zoro can't help feeling a flare of interest at the sight of the taut, sweat-slicked abdominal muscles above those low-slung shorts.

Interest- and a bit of envy. Frequent training's gotten rid of the extra pounds he gained while carrying the twins, but it's been a struggle to lose that soft pad of flab in his lower abdomen. Even though he can drink again, the shitty cook's been stingy with the booze, claiming he doesn't need more of a beer belly than he's already got.

*Luffy might think it's "cute" but I'm gonna regret it the second some Marine or some challenger tries to nail me in the abs during a fight. The gut's gotta go.*

He hauls himself upright with effort and moves over the rubber man, leaning down to kiss him- and then abruptly feigns collapse.

"OOF! Zoro, get off- you're heavy!"

"Sorry, can't move. Some idiot captain made me use my last little bit of-" He grunts as Luffy seizes him around the torso and rolls, switching their positions and pinning him flat in the grass. "Ah-"
The younger man hesitates at his muffled gasp, scanning his face closely for signs of discomfort, but Zoro's already relaxing beneath him, too drained and content to feel anxious about being trapped on his back with someone straddling him. To be honest, unease is probably the LAST thing he's feeling right now.

"You okay? Maybe I shouldn't have-" His captain stops, the concern on his face fading into a self-satisfied smile as he shifts his weight. "-oh. Zoro, you're-

"-not as tired as I thought, apparently," he snorts when his body responds to the pressure with an involuntary twitch, raising his hands to grasp the other pirate's hips. "Nah, much as I'd like to do something about this-" He gives a half-assed little nudge against the bottom pressing down on him. "I really am too worn out."

"Mmm, you sure?" Luffy gives an experimental wiggle, eyes going half-lidded at the reaction it produces.

"We should-" He swallows, distracted by the pulsing ache in his groin. "We've been gone a while; we should get back, get showered and spend some time with the kids before we go to the dojo this afternoon."

To his mingled relief and disappointment, his partner stops teasing him and reaches down to touch the old scar dividing his chest, expression now sincere and contrite and maybe a little worried as well. "Are you sure you wanna do this?"

"Yeah, it's been way too long since I visited."

"Give up Wado?" He forces himself to say it aloud, testing how it makes him feel, and while there's a faint pang of regret in his chest at the thought of surrendering the katana that's traveled with him for so long, it doesn't hurt anywhere near as much as he expected. "Yeah. I guess there's a chance Koshiro might wanna reforge it, but-"

"I'd rather just leave it with her."

"You sure you really want me to come along? 'Cause if you wanna do this by yourself-"

"Nah, I'd rather have you there." He gives Luffy a small, slightly lopsided smile. "Sometimes I wonder what Kuina would've thought of you. Guess we'll never know- but you can still visit with
The most important person in my life - other than the kids, of course - meeting the person who USED to be the most important, he thinks as he watches his captain nodding enthusiastically. Well, meeting in spirit, anyway, since we'll be standing at her gravestone.

"I wanna thank her."

"Hmm?"

"If Zoro hadn't met her and made that promise, maybe he never woulda ended up on that Marine base, and then I-" Tapping his own chest. "-might've never met Zoro. You coulda ended up on somebody else's crew." Luffy offers him a wry smile. "Or maybe you'd still be a bounty hunter or something- just another guy after the Pirate King's head."

"Maybe there's really something behind that old saying, eh? Everything happens for a reason?"

"Something like that." His captain sinks down again to wrap both arms around him with a sigh, cheek nuzzling against his chest. "And if I didn't have you, I wouldn't have the kids either. Ace and Sabo and the peas."

Zoro snorts. "They've got names. They've had names since they were like two- three- days old, and you're STILL calling 'em that."

"I know, but-" The younger pirate's smile splits into a dazzling grin. "I can't help it. Every time I look at 'em or think about 'em, I remember Zoro saying they looked like peas when we first saw 'em during the scan. And they're green too, so..."

"Guess I finally got somebody that looks like me, eh?"

"Two somebodies!" Luffy laughs, giving him a little squeeze. "Robin says we're- uh-" He squints as he attempts to recall the historian's words. "-very ass-tickly pleasing? 'Cause me and Ace and Sabo got black hair, and you 'n' the peas got green."

"That's aesthetically pleasing, dumb-ass. But, yeah, she said that to me too. Bunch of stuff about onyx and emeralds and symmetry."

Discussing the twins starts a longing ache in the swordsman's chest that's no less disconcerting for its familiarity and far more intense than anything he's ever felt for Wado. He doesn't think he'll ever get used to that sudden, impulsive desire to drop whatever he's doing and rush home to hold his children. A feat far more easily accomplished with the younger two, who're still at the age where they prefer being in someone's arms to being in a crib or on the floor.

Sabo's too damn squirmy and doesn't wanna hold still for more than a couple minutes, and Ace-forget it. He thinks getting cuddled is "so embarrassing" that he usually gets pissed and throws a fit when you so much as hug him in front of anybody.

If there's glaring similarities between his eldest son's behavior and his own typical reaction to unexpected public displays of affection, he chooses to ignore it.

"Oi, you ready to go back?" Luffy asks, mouth quirked in mirth because he's noted his first mate's wandering attention and knows exactly what it means.

"Yeah, I guess we better rescue Usopp and the cook. Sabo's probably got 'em tearing their hair out by now, runnin' circles around 'em on the lawn deck. Almost makes me wanna stay here and take a
nap while I got the chance."

"Uh huh, well, I think Zoro really just wants to go home and snuggle some babies," his captain teases, leaning forward to kiss his nose, and the amusement and joy dancing in the younger pirate's eyes state without speaking that while Mihawk was right about his needing to confront his fears, his former mentor was entirely off the mark about something else that's equally important.

It's a look of trust and placid assurance that once again brings home the realization to which Zoro's been slowly adjusting over the past few months.

_I CAN be more than just the World's Greatest Swordsman._


Despite what he's believed for a long time, they're not a frustrating array of different roles he needs to separately maintain and carefully balance. No, they're all facets of the same roughly cut gem, all things that make him Zoro, and to the people that really matter- the people that love him- he doesn't need to be perfect. He just needs to be himself.

"Sounds like a plan, Sencho. Grab a shower, raid the kitchen, snuggle some munchkins." He breaks into a smile that's easily as wide as the one now spreading across Luffy's face, deciding that he's not quite so tired after all. Not when the rest of his family- when the rest of THEIR family- kids and crewmates alike are waiting for them to return to the ship. Waiting for them to come home.

Energy revitalized by the same thought, the rubber man's already bouncing up, reaching down to grip his forearm and pull him to his feet while delivering a "shishishi" of pure delight that almost makes him want to laugh aloud himself.

He settles for favoring his spouse with an audacious grin. "Oi, race you to the bathhouse? Last one there changes the next dirty diaper."
Writing Playlist

There's a little bit of everything here, and I honestly highly recommend pretty much every song. Some fit better than others, of course, and those with special importance - the "must listen" stuff that directly influenced the fic - will be discussed following the list itself, which is pretty lengthy. You've probably also seen a bunch of these on my Crossfire writing playlist.

ABC - Be Near Me  
Abingdon Boys School - Innocent Sorrow  
Access - Doubt & Trust  
Adam Lambert - Aftermath  
Adam Lambert - Broken Open  
Adam Lambert - Mad World [cover]  
Adam Lambert - Time For Miracles  
Adam Lambert - Whataya Want From Me  
The Afters - Light Up The Sky  
The Afters - Runaway***  
The Afters - We Won't Give Up  
Alex Band - Tonight  
All Time Low - Weightless  
Amber Pacific - Poetically Pathetic  
Angels & Airwaves - The Adventure  
Avril Lavigne - How You Remind Me [cover]  
The Babystars - Hikari e  
Backstreet Boys - Climbing The Walls  
BECCA - Empty  
BECCA - Falling Down  
BECCA - Lose You Now  
Bon Bon Blanco - Bon Voyage!  
Boystyle - Kokoro No Chizu  
Brandon Flowers - Crossfire***  
Brandon Flowers - Only The Young  
Brandon Heath - You Decide  
Brandon Heath - Your Love  
Bruno Mars - Count On Me  
Bullet For My Valentine - Forever And Always  
Calvin Harris - Feel So Close  
Carolina Liar - Show Me What I'm Looking For  
Chemistry - Period  
Chicago - You're The Inspiration  
Claude Kelly - When I'm Kissing You  
The Click Five - All I Need Is You  
The Click Five - I'll Take My Chances  
The Click Five - When I'm Gone  
Colbie Caillat - Never Let You Go  
Coldplay - Fix You [strachan remix]  
Colour The Sky - Sour  
Creed - Rain  
D-51 - Brand New World
Dave Barnes - Until You
A Day To Remember - All I Want
Death Cab For Cutie - I Will Follow You Into The Dark
Death Cab For Cutie - No Sunlight
The Decemberists - This Is Why We Fight
Ellie Goulding - I'll Hold My Breath
Ellie Goulding - My Blood
Five For Fighting - One More For Love***
Folder5 - Believe
Foster The People - I Would Do Anything For You
Garbage - It's All Over But The Crying
Genesis - Follow You, Follow Me
Godsmack - Make Me Believe
Godsmack - Serenity
Goo Goo Dolls - Iris
Graham Colton - Best Days
Groove Coverage - When Life
Headlights - Put Us Back Together Right
Hedley - Perfect
Hoobastank - Crawling In The Dark
Idlewild - I Don't Have The Map
Imagine Dragons - Bleeding Out
Imagine Dragons - Demons
Imagine Dragons - It's Time
Imagine Dragons - Nothing Left To Say***
Ingrid Michaelson - Soldier
Iris - It Generates
Iris - No One Left To Lose
Iris - Sentimental Scar
Iris - Sorrow Expert
Jack's Mannequin - Bloodshot
Jack's Mannequin - Dark Blue
James Blunt - So Far Gone
Javier Colon - As Long As We Got Love
Jimmy Eat World - Polaris
Josh Ritter - Change Of Time
Keane - Bend And Break
Kelly Clarkson - You Found Me
Kerrie Roberts - Keep Breathing
Kerrie Roberts - Rescue Me
Kris Allen - Live Like We're Dying
Lenka - Trouble Is A Friend
The Letter Black - Hanging By A Thread
Lifehouse - All In
Lifehouse - All In All
Lifehouse - All That I'm Asking For
Lifehouse - Anchor
Lifehouse - Breathing
Lifehouse - Broken
Lifehouse - By Your Side
Lifehouse - Cling And Clatter
Lifehouse - Crash And Burn
Lifehouse - Days Go By
Lifehouse - Everything
Lifehouse - Mesmerized
Lifehouse - Somewhere In Between
Lifehouse - Storm
Lifehouse - Undone
Linkin Park - What I've Done
Masterplan - I'm Not Afraid
Masterplan - Sail On
Matchbox Twenty - Bed Of Lies
Matchbox Twenty - How Far We've Come
Mitsuoka Masami - Last Cross
Mr Big - Shine
The Museum - Let Love Win
The Museum - Never Look Away
Namie Amuro - Fight Together
The New Pornographers - Adventures In Solitude
News - Sayaendo***
Nico Touches The Walls - Hologram
One Okay Rock - The Beginning***
OneRepublic - Stop & Stare
Orange Range - O2
Owl City - Meteor Shower
Owl City - Tidal Wave
Palo Alto - Breathe In
Panic! At The Disco - C'mon
Phillip Phillips - Gone, Gone, Gone***
P!nk - Just Give Me A Reason***
Placebo - Running Up That Hill
Plain White T's - 1, 2, 3, 4
The Pretenders - I'll Stand By You
The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus - Cat And Mouse
The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus - Damn Regret
The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus - Your Guardian Angel
Rob Thomas - Ever The Same
Rob Thomas - Mockingbird
Roxette - Listen To Your Heart
Sam Tsui - Down [cover]
Sam Tsui - Safe And Sound [cover]***
Sam Tsui - Skylight [cover]***
Sam Tsui - Titanium [cover]
Sam Tsui - True Colors [cover]
Sam Tsui - Wide Awake [cover]
Savage Garden - Truly Madly Deeply
Savatage - This Isn't What We Meant
Scars On 45 - Heart On Fire
Shinedown - If You Only Knew
Shinedown - Unity***
SID - Monochrome No Kiss
SID - Rain
A Silent Film - You Will Leave A Mark
Skillet - Awake And Alive
Snow Patrol - It's Beginning To Get To Me
Sponge - Plowed
Stars - Today Will Be Better, I Swear!
Storyline - Welcome Home
Sukima Switch - Golden Time Lover
Switchfoot - I Dare You To Move
Switchfoot - Meant To Live
Switchfoot - This Is Home
Switchfoot - Your Love Is a Song
Sum 41 - The Hell Song
Tamaki Nami - Brightdown
TATU - How Soon Is Now
TATU - Sacrifice
Teitur - One And Only
30 Seconds To Mars - Hurricane***
30 Seconds To Mars - This Is War
Three Doors Down - It's Not My Time
Three Doors Down - It's The Only One You've Got
Three Doors Down - These Days
Three Doors Down - Pages
Three Doors Down - Your Arms Feel Like Home
Thriving Ivory - For Heaven's Sake
To Destination - Eden
Tohoshinki - Share The World
Tokio Hotel - By Your Side
Tokio Hotel - Don't Jump
Tokio Hotel - Monsoon
Tokio Hotel - Rescue Me
Tokio Hotel - Sacred
Toybox - I Believe In You
Toybox - What About
Trapt - Forget About The Rain
Trapt - Only One In Color
U2 - Magnificent
Umbrellas - Your Exit
UVERworld - Gekidou
Various Cruelties - If It Wasn't For You
Vertical Horizon - You Say
Vienna Teng - The Tower
We Are The In Crowd - Carry Me Home
We The Kings - Check Yes Juliet
The Weepies - Can't Go Back Now
Within Temptation - Hand Of Sorrow
Within Temptation - The Heart of Everything
Within Temptation - It's The Fear
Within Temptation - See Who I Am
Within Temptation - Stand My Ground
Yellowcard - Light Up The Sky
YUI - Again

Again, songs of special importance have been denoted by ***
I heard Five For Fighting's "One More For Love" at work shortly after I started writing Impact, and my coworkers couldn't understand why I was grinning like an idiot. While Zoro was obviously doing it for love, the "one more" part turned out a bit differently than expected.

I literally lost count of how many times I listened to Brandon Flower's "Crossfire" while working on this fic; if anything, it's more relevant than ever.

P!nk and "Just Give Me A Reason" and UGH THIS DAMN SONG. This one's responsible for the fighting and angst in chapter 13 and Luffy's insistence that "we're not broken, just bent."

When my rp Luffy and I pestered one of our friends to give us a song appropriate for Luffy and Zoro, she recommended One Okay Rock's "The Beginning" and couldn't understand why we started freaking out so much after listening to it. Now that she's read Crossfire, I should probably tell Waifu to go listen to the song again, lol.

My husband heard Shinedown's "Unity" on the radio and insisted it reminded him of Crossfire, but the lyrics were actually responsible for the scene in chapter 19 of this fic, where Zoro's essentially forced to do the thing he fears most to save his family. "Hurricane" by 30 Seconds to Mars and Sam Tsui's cover of "Skyfall" also contributed greatly to chapters 18 and 19.

"Until You" by Dave Barnes doesn't have any particular significance other than making me screech and roll around on the floor hugging myself every fucking time I hear it.

Imagine Dragon's "Nothing Left To Say" : "Promise me that you won't hold back."

Yeah, I'm still listening to The Afters' "Runaway" and Sam Tsui's cover of "Safe And Sound"

Phillip Phillips' "Gone Gone Gone" just says everything that needs said.

News' "Sayaendo" is a One Piece movie song with some entertaining lyrics...

xxx

Fan Art, Thank Yous and Other Stuff

I've gotten quite a bit of Impact-related gift art and comics, and while it continues to blow my mind that anybody likes my writing enough to draw artwork based on certain scenes - or, in some cases, even develop NEW material based on ideas they got while reading - I LOVE ALL OF IT. Sketches, full-color pics, silly doodles, multi-page comics, omg, they're fantastic and I wish I could draw half as well.

I need to thank Unirizz and LexieSkye from deviantART and picmurasaki from tumblr for drawing A TON of great stuff. And everyone else who's either sent me or even just WANTED to send me some art (I'm looking at you, Robin and Nami). I keep everything you send me.

Thank you to the crew in general- both my actual "canon" crewmates and the others we picked up along the way, like Rayleigh and Shirahoshi. And that extremely confused Mihawk who was like "why the hell is Zoro popping out babies, what's going on here" but played along anyway.

Thank you to Robin and Lexie for reading beta, sometimes even before my husband, and providing feedback. Even if it was sometimes nothing but cursing and threats to wring my neck, lol.

Thanks to everybody who's not only taken the time to read, but also sent a message via review or ask, including those of you who did so anonymously. I swear, every time I posted a chapter - especially this last one - I'm left with this feeling of despair when the stats show people are reading
but I haven't gotten any messages, so every comment is greatly appreciated. What is self-confidence and where to find it...

And Luffy. Jfc. Where do I even start, you bastard? Thank you for roleplaying. Thank you for drawing everything from the peas to disgustingly cute preg-snuggling to- uh- things that were decidedly NOT snuggling, ehehe (nobody, I repeat, nobody else is ever gonna see THAT one though, omfg, even if it DID inspire a scene in the fic / ). Thank you for putting up with my dumb ass.

So. Tachi and Tanto. Those kids gotta have the most ridiculous names ever, but my rp Luffy and I had no idea what the hell else to name them. We brainstormed like mad, debating over whether to name them after memorable places the crew'd gone or something else. I stumbled across the samurai habit of carrying tachi and tanto while researching swords on Wiki and jokingly proposed that as a solution, which led to a ridiculous amount of bad TNT jokes - "lol, well there's no denying they're... DYNAMITE" - and those names somehow stuck. The entire thing was silly as hell, but Luffy liked the names, and when I ran them by Robin more recently because I was getting near the end and having serious doubts, she thought the idea was cute.

Some of you - notably picmurasaki and Luffy - asked if there were going to be any Impact-related drabbles. Well, to be honest, Luffy didn't so much ask as demand (because apparently a 140,000-word fic dedicated to your needy, pushy self wasn't e-fucking-nough, smh).

The short answer's yes. I'm currently 1300 words into one as I write this.

The longer answer's a bit more complicated, due to reasons explained below. Although I'd like to write more drabbles involving the twins, I won't be devoting the same amount of time and energy to the Impact universe that I applied to Crossfire and its myriad alternate endings and side stories. I have other things I'd like to write - namely some good old no-brainer smut fics - and I need a break from the universe in general.

That said, prompts are still welcome? I can't promise I'll answer them any time soon, but I did have a lot of fun writing those short Crossfire blurbs based on the requests you guys sent last time, so... we'll see.

xxx

Author's Closing Remarks

These are not the closing remarks I expected to write back when I posted Impact's first chapter back in November of last year. Nor are they the closing remarks I expected to write even a couple months ago.

A lot can happen in a year. Events that can test your strength. Events that can make or break you.

Since I started writing Impact, I've started a new job.

Since I started writing Impact, I've lost two grandparents- one after extended time in a nursing home and the other quite unexpectedly. I've watched my mother, who's spent the last eight years fighting a relatively unknown type of abdominal cancer, deal with the loss of her own mother while undergoing a series of experimental chemotherapies and be rushed to the hospital more than half a dozen times. I've watch my mother-in-law and husband struggle with their fear that my grandmother-in-law's sudden death might not have been due to natural causes.

Since I started writing Impact, I've watched my paternal grandmother admitted to a nursing home-
the same one where my maternal grandmother passed away. I've watched my father struggle with handling power-of-attorney for her while dealing with his emotional issues concerning my mother's illness and frequent trips to the emergency room. I've played mediator between him and my aunt, who isn't happy with how he's dealing with it.

Since I started writing Impact, I've watched my daughter celebrate her first birthday. I've watched her learning to walk and talk. I've gone from dreading getting pregnant again to wanting another child. I've gotten a positive pregnancy test and looked forward to my daughter having a younger sibling.

Since I started writing Impact, I've had a miscarriage.

Testing revealed it was a chromosomal defect. Such a little thing; a chromosome in the wrong place. Such a little- such a goddamn TINY thing, but enough to make a baby stop growing at six weeks and his or her heart either stop beating or possibly never even start, and I had no idea for about five weeks, until my body figured out there was something wrong and I finally started bleeding.

The hospital initially thought the lack of a visible heartbeat and the small size of the baby on ultrasound could've meant I miscalculated my due date, and I'd stopped spotting, so they sent me home with instructions to call my doctor's office first thing on Monday to schedule another scan. And to essentially just wait and see what would happen.

Monday, August 12th, 2013 is going to be one of those dates. The kind you never forget and can recall with crystal clarity. Probably the worst day of my life.

The contractions woke me up around one in the morning, and it only took me a few minutes to realize what was happening, because it happened fast. I don't know what I expected; I dreamed about miscarriages when I was pregnant with my daughter - you've read about THAT in "Smoke and Broken Mirrors" if you checked out the Crossfire drabbles - but the real thing was a million times worse than what I dreamed. There's something really horrible about having to go through labor already KNOWING the outcome.

I'm not sure if going through it at home was better or worse than being at the hospital would've been. True, I didn't have strangers climbing all over me, but I can't really say hemorrhaging in the bathroom at home, curled up in a ball and sobbing hysterically while repeatedly punching the bottom of the tub - and scaring the shit out of my husband - was really worth it. Maybe a bunch of nurses would've been a distraction.

I haven't told too many people the full story about what happened that day, during the actual miscarriage and after. Suffice to say it was a very long and emotional day, making phone calls and running back and forth between the hospital and my doctor's office and generally feeling like I was moving through fog. Nothing seemed quite real, I couldn't talk- I couldn't even TYPE about it without crying for days afterwards, and even though I needed to talk to someone and didn't go into super elaborate detail (I hope) to those few I DID confide in, I still feel awful for sharing what I did. My tumblr followers have been catching a few snippets here and there as I try to deal with the loss, although I think I deleted a lot of entries, and as grateful as I am for the condolences and supportive messages that were sent to my ask box, I still feel guilty for inflicting my grief on them.

My husband's devastated too. He's convinced the baby was a boy, even though we never found out for sure- you couldn't tell just looking and the lab that did the tissue analysis didn't include that with the results. Not that it mattered. But sometimes I find myself wondering and wishing I knew because it bothers me having to refer to the baby as "it" instead of "him" or "her" ... or maybe even a name, if I could bring myself to pick one.
Unfortunately, because I was showing very early in the pregnancy - something that was prompting a lot of speculation about twins, ironically enough - pretty much EVERYONE knew I was pregnant. Going back to work- hell, going pretty much ANYWHERE- after the miscarriage meant getting bombarded with well-meaning comments and people trying to hug me. And then there were the people who didn't know I'd lost the baby and either tried to ask how things were going or asked if I'd found out what I was having- or, in the case of a neighbor who hadn't seen me since she heard I was expecting, tried to congratulate me. Whereupon I had to tell them I miscarried. Yeah. There's no words to convey how awkward and awful that kind of thing is for both parties involved.

I also work in the baby department, where I'm surrounded by baby clothing and cribs and a ton of pregnant customers, and I currently have two pregnant coworkers as well, so things have been... difficult... to say the least. I cringe every time I hear someone ask someone else "when are you due?!" Which happens a lot.

And my husband's cousin just had a new baby in July, so family events and holidays and stuff have been rather emotionally taxing...

Essentially, I've gotten a firsthand look at how different every pregnancy can be; I had such an easy time with my daughter - at least up until her actual birth, although that's another story entirely - that I wasn't expecting any problems or complications. I should've known better, especially considering I'd been writing about Zoro having so much trouble carrying the twins after a relatively uncomplicated pregnancy with Sabo. You just never know.

Finishing this fic has been extremely difficult. If I hadn't already been so close to the end, there's a good possibility that I would've dropped it, potentially even deleted it, and everything from the twins' names to Zoro's difficulties with Asura, the surveillance footage and what he decided to do with Wado would've been left unresolved.

But although working on it again- after- has been painful as hell and stressful enough to cause more than one panic attack, not to mention a lot of tears, it's also helped bring me a bit of closure. I guess.

It hurts. It sucks. I miss someone I'll never get to meet, someone I'll never watch learn to walk and talk, and sometimes it hurts so badly, I want to scream and break things, and I know it's going to hurt for a long, long time. Pretty much as long as I live, because there's a hole inside my heart that's never going to be filled. And even though my husband and I have agreed that we want to try again, and we'll love whatever child comes along, I'm always going to feel that ache and that longing for the son or daughter we lost.

It fucking hurts. It hurts like hell, and it's not fair, and I can honestly say that I've had days where I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up. I've had days where I feel like my body's betrayed me, and even though I KNOW there's nothing I could've done differently, I hate myself anyway- I hate being in my own body so goddamn much that I feel like I'd rather die than keep feeling this way.

Now I'm not suicidal. I am, however, definitely depressed as shit, and whether or not the Zoloft my doctor prescribed is/was working... well, that's anybody's guess. I'm kinda leaning towards no.

But every day I keep reminding myself. Friends. Family. My husband and daughter. There's people who love me, there's people who mourn with me, there's people who make living with the pain worthwhile.

Sometimes you just gotta get the hell up and walk. And keeping walking, keep moving forward. Even when it hurts.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!