Sanji’s past was as haunted with demons as Zoro's own, demons that had finally caught up to him after years of living in the shadows. His very existence meant the hunt would never stop, but that hadn't stopped Zoro from falling for him and it wouldn't push him away now. Sanji was what was called a "negligible senescent porphyric humanoid." "Vampire" looked weird on medical records.
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

DISCLAIMER:

THIS STORY WILL CONTAIN MAJOR SPOILERS OF EVERY SORT (ALL THE WAY UP TO RECENT CHAPTERS), MATURE THEMES, EXPLICIT SEXUAL SCENES (FOR GAY AS WELL AS STRAIGHT PAIRS), HARSH LANGUAGE, ARTISTIC LICENSE, DARK HUMOR, ANGST, AND A PLETHORA OF THINGS CONTROVERSIAL! PLEASE DO NOT READ IF YOU ARE AFFECTED BY ANY OF THESE THINGS!

Other than that, this story will long, it will be crazy, it will not be left unfinished (unless I die in some unexpected manner), and it will be a wild ride! Hope you enjoy~

Killer

Zoro sat silently in the backseat of Kid’s old clunker, eyes locked on Kid’s flaming red hair for any sign of movement from the older man. The air was thick—thicker than it had been at Kuina’s wake, and it was making him sick to think of that. He couldn’t come up with reason for why the air here would be thicker than at a ceremony for the dead.

He wanted to ask where they were going. He wanted to ask why Kid wouldn’t say anything—especially when the older man normally cranked the loudest, raunchiest music when Law wasn’t in the car and sang along with Zoro at the top of his lungs. He wanted to ask why Kid had brought him if he wasn’t going to tell him anything. He wanted to ask why he hadn’t brought Luffy and Ace too, even though he’d picked them both up after school. He wanted to ask why the air was so thick that it was hard to breathe.

Zoro slunk lower in his seat, pulling his heels up onto the old, ripped leather so he could hold his knees close. He wasn’t scared. He wasn’t. But that didn’t mean he had to like the situation. Kid was always so much fun—crazy as fuck, as Ace would say—so what was going on?

Kid had picked him up from school that day—just as he did with Law every Thursday. He’d picked up Luffy and Ace at the school too and dropped them off at Shanks’ house. Law hadn’t been in the
car today, but that wasn’t strange; it just meant that Zoro got to listen to Kid’s music and pig out on whatever he wanted in the apartment before Law got back from his residency at the hospital and put an end to it. Law played angry that Kid let it happen, but Zoro knew he never was. Playing angry with Zoro just meant that Law would have time to stick his tongue down Kid’s throat—as Ace would say—after he chased Zoro out of the kitchen. Zoro always waited until they came to get him after that, because sometimes it would be a while before they were done doing… whatever. Ace hadn’t answered that question. Then Law would work on his homework with him, either he or Kid would lend him a metal pipe from Kid’s garage to use as a sword and kick him around the yard a little bit, and then they’d all pass out in front of the TV before Mihawk arrived to pick him up, or Shanks if they hadn’t dropped Luffy and Ace off that day. If Mihawk couldn’t come to get him, Law and Kid would just take him to school in the morning after they sparred a little. Thursdays were his favorite days.

Today the air was thick. Kid hadn’t said anything to him when he’d gotten in the car. He was still in his school uniform—tie and all—so that meant he hadn’t gone to their apartment before coming to get Zoro, which was odd because there was an hour between when Kid’s classes at the university got out and when the elementary school got out and Kid hated his tie. Zoro thought the black of the uniform looked better than the weird giraffe pattern and the fur or whatever, but Kid was a badass so Zoro supposed that meant he could wear whatever he wanted.

Zoro knew enough not to press for questions, but after Kid finally noticed how antsy he was getting—about halfway through the car ride—he’d finally sighed and grunted, “We have to go do an errand before we get home; we’ll make it back before your uncle comes to get you.”

“…What kind of errand?” Zoro had asked tentatively.

“…We have to go pick up Trafalgar, he’s not at the hospital though, and it’s kind of a long drive. You can go to sleep if you want, I’ll wake you up when we get there.”

“…Oh. Ok.”

And that had been it.

Zoro had tried to sleep; swore to everything he believed in he tried. He didn’t like situations like this, if there was a sleeping out, he’d take it. But he just couldn’t. The air was too thick. So he just held his knees close and kept checking to make sure the seatbelt was tight as he followed the whooshing blackness outside the window. It was late. They’d been driving for over an hour now—even if the sun did set early this time of year. He kind of wished he had Wado.
Zoro started as Kid yanked the wheel to the right suddenly and the car jolted, bouncing off of the pavement and onto gravel that crunched and dinged up under the car. Zoro gripped the door handle tightly, trying to find some purchase as he was shaken around like a loose paper in the wind.

“Kid…” he began, but the older man said nothing, so Zoro stopped and made himself take a breath. Mihawk trusted him with Kid, nineteen or not—and he trusted himself with Kid, screw his uncle—he wasn’t scared and he wouldn’t act like a baby and ask.

He really wanted to though.

The car drifted quietly to a stop. It had a subtle engine, despite how old it was. Franky’s father had helped Kid fix it up because Kid was learning to work with metals. Iceburg said he would go far, but Zoro wasn’t really sure what that meant; he just knew that Kid was good with cars, and he was pretty sure Kid made guns too but neither him nor Law had ever given him a straight answer on that.

Zoro took the moment of painful and awkward silence to take in his surroundings. They were beneath a tree, somewhere off the beaten road if the gravel was anything to go off of, but other than that everything was pitch black. Zoro wish he knew what time it was. Mihawk didn’t come to pick him up some nights until after midnight, but he didn’t want to be late either.

Kid unclicked his seatbelt and let it slide lazily back over his shoulder. Zoro took the hint and followed suit, but didn’t move aside from that. Kid sucked in a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair, mussing the disarray of spikes even more before he shifted the goggles on his forehead to a more comfortable position and hunkered down into his seat. Zoro watched as he pulled his phone from his pocket, and the little bright screen lit up the car before Kid almost instantly shut it off and set it in the cup holder next to him so he could see it. Just checking it. He did this three more times over the next fifteen minutes, flashing the light for just a moment to ensure that he hadn’t missed anything, even though nothing had come from the phone. It wasn’t until Kid let out a harsh grunt and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket that it suddenly hit Zoro across the face like a live cattle prod why the air was so thick.

If Kid was smoking, it only meant one thing:

He was scared.

Kid’s lighter ticked, sparking multiples times before it finally flared to life and he sucked in smoothly, unrolling the window just a crack and letting the smoke drift out of the side of his mouth.
Kid never smoked. Never. Law hated it when he smoked. A cigarette sighting usually ended in a multi-hour lecture on smoking that everyone in the house was “invited” to. Zoro wasn’t really creeped out by the black, shriveled lungs in a jar, but he didn’t necessarily keep it on his list of things to have sitting in his lap more than once either.

Zoro swallowed heavily and fought to keep his breathing steady. Maybe Kid would just let him walk home. It wasn’t that far; he could just find a phone and call Shanks or Mihawk or someone. It was a highway, a straight line, there was no way he’d get lost. And even if he did—

No. He wouldn’t be a baby. Wherever they were, Kid wouldn’t let anything happen. And Zoro could find a stick or a pipe too and help. Kid and Law were two of the weirdest, craziest people he’d ever known—and that was saying something—but he trusted them with everything. He told them everything. They were his family too. The brothers he’d never had, like Ace and Luffy. He’d trust them.

Kid chuckled suddenly and Zoro jolted, his eyes snapping to the front seat. Kid took another drag before he spoke.

“Don’t tell Traf, ‘k? He won’t be happy.”

Zoro wanted to tease him, call him stupid and ask him if he really thought he could hide it from Law, but the thoughts wouldn’t form words for some reason, and by the time they had, he’d forgotten that he could connect them to his tongue.

“You’re awfully quiet tonight. Didn’t think it was possible for you to shut up.”

Zoro could hear the grin in Kid’s voice, but his tongue was still glued to the bottom of his mouth, and there was cotton or something in his lungs. Maybe from the ripped seats.

Kid sighed again let his arm drop to the side, a thin wisp of smoke trickling up from the end of the glowing cherry. He shifted suddenly and ground the tip into a crushed soda can lying on the seat next to him before tossing the rest of the cigarette out the window.

“It’s out, ok?” Kid turned to face Zoro, and Zoro could do nothing but try not to grimace at Kid’s pathetic attempt to look unperturbed. Was something wrong with Law? Was that why they were picking him up? Why wasn’t he at the hospital? He never missed a day.
“Why don’t you come sit up front? We might be here a while.”

Zoro didn’t answer, but he clambered up over the cup holders after a minute and joined Kid up front, burrowing deep into the passenger seat. The heat in the front of the car was better anyways. Kid sat staring straight ahead, obviously preoccupied, and Zoro wished he’d just left him in the back seat. He was more hidden back there—Kid couldn’t scrutinize him at all.

Kid crossed his arms suddenly, laying his bright red fingernails across his grey sweatshirt where they stuck out like blood and sat back, closing his eyes. “I’m thinking of an animal.”

Zoro shot him a look, finally finding his voice at the insult. “I’m too old for that game.”

“Then you think of one.”

“It’s stupid no matter who thinks of one!”

“Whatsoever, you wouldn’t guess it anyways.”

Zoro huffed, looking sharply away and crossing his arms. Kid cracked one eye, watching the miffed little green head staring intently out the window. Kid grinned impishly and closed his eyes again. Three, two, one—

“Fine. Is it a mammal?”

“Nope.”

“Reptile.”

“Nope.”

“Amphibian.”
“Nope.”

“Bird.”

“You’re not doing so good, shrimp.”

“Shut up! Fish!”

“Nope.”

“Insect!”

“Wrong again.”

Zoro scowled. “You’re cheating, that’s all there is.”

“You didn’t guess monster.”

Zoro blinked, grinning suddenly and shifting to sit on his knees and face Kid, who was now grinning back at him.

“Monster.”

“There we go.”

“Does it have wings?”

“Sometimes.”
“Is it strong?”

“Yep.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Very.”

“How many more questions do I have?”

“Ten.”

Zoro crossed his arms and rethought his strategy. Kid had used up a lot of his questions with the monster category. He had to pick a couple of specific monster traits and hope it was one of them.

“Can it breathe underwater?”

“Nope.”

“…Does it shape shift?”

Kid cracked one eye to watch him. “Yes.”

“Does it have fur?”

“No.”

“Does it come out during the day?”
“No.”

Zoro grinned. “I know what it is.”

Kid blew a raspberry through his lips and closed his eyes again. “This one’s an easy one; you’ll never get the next one.”

“Vampire.” Zoro said smartly, and Kid opened his mouth to reply in what was sure to be a snarky and totally inappropriate retort when his phone lit up suddenly and Zoro yelped, jumping out of his skin and smacking his head on the window behind him. Kid lunged for the phone, scanned the screen, and threw it back down an instantly later, slamming his foot on the clutch as the engine roared to life.

“Put your seatbelt on,” he ordered quietly, and Zoro did just that, snapping his back to the seat and wrenching the buckle across his front. He’d completely forgotten he was in Law’s seat, and fumbled frantically to get himself unhooked when he realized it, his heart pounding against his lungs. Zoro threw the seatbelt away from himself and grabbed the headrest to leap into the back when something flashing by out his window caught his eye. He stopped, staring in shock at the form of a boy just about his age racing barefoot through the trees, blond hair glowing under the moon like starlight, blood dripping freely down his naked torso and skin discolored with bruises, and then he disappeared into the black.

“Kid—” Zoro started, pointing to the trees, when the backdoor was suddenly wrenched open and Zoro gasped and fell back as Law literally threw himself into the car headfirst. Law’s feet were pressed up against the ceiling and his hat was falling off of his head as he scrambled to yank the door closed behind him, all the while clutching a large brown burlap bag in his arms like his very soul was contained in the porous stitching.

“Drive!” Law roared to the front seat, the door barely shut and his hand still on the handle, and Kid took off, tires screaming against the dirt. Zoro yelped as he was thrown against the door, and then pitched forward onto the floor, the car tearing through the blackness. Zoro clutched at the glove box with everything he had, fingers raking the plastic for purchase as the car was thrown everywhere on the beaten down road. The car jumped, flying over a rock, and Zoro cracked his head on the dashboard, losing his grip momentarily and getting ricocheted back under the seat.

A hand grabbed his shoulder out of nowhere, and Zoro was heaved into the backseat the next time the car hit a rock hard enough for him to leave the floor. He crashed heavily down on top of Law, but Law only gripped him tighter, one foot jammed into the headrest of the front seat and one foot against the ceiling keeping them balanced. His other arm was still wrapped like iron around the burlap bag.
“Turn the lights on!” Law yelled, and Zoro looked up in horror to see that Kid was flying through the night without even the moon to guide him with all of the trees overhead. The only thing he could take in from outside was the sound of the road as pebbles and rocks shot up around them, pinging off of the car and cracking against the windows dangerously.

“I know where I’m going!”

“Eustass, turn the lights on!”

“I know where the road it, Traf!”

“Eustass! Turn the fucking—!”

The car leapt violently again, soaring through the air as the engine revved and Zoro’s breath stopped, Law’s arm locking around him and pulling him and the bag into his front in what was sure to be—if Zoro knew how Law’s brain worked at all—the place in the car that would take the least impact from the crash, and then the car crunched against pavement, metal grinding and sparks shooting up from the driver’s side, and the sound of whirring road against rubber filled the car. Kid flicked the lights on instantly, his foot slamming hard against gas pedal and Zoro flew backwards, cracking his forehead against Law’s chin as the car took off like a jet down the road, but Law hardly seemed to notice at all.

After Zoro’s momentum had caught up to the car’s and he’d stopped shaking enough to lift his head out of Law’s sweatshirt, Kid’s voice came from the front seat. “We’re ok.”

“…We’re not ok until we’re home,” Law answered after a moment. “We don’t know if they saw the car.”

“They didn’t.”

“Eustass, we have to make sure—”

“They didn’t see the goddamn car, all right?! I made sure! Why do you think I was parked so fucking far away?!’”
“…Don’t take the highway, I don’t want—”

“I know, Traf! Fuck! Just buckle Zoro in, I know how to drive the fucking car!”

Law closed his mouth, and Zoro sat there in his arms, letting himself be stunned for a moment. Everything today, and now Kid and Law actually fighting?

Law nodded to himself after he tired of staring at the back of Kid’s head and pulled his cow-print hat further down over his eyes. He untangled Zoro from his side and placed his feet back on the floor before sitting Zoro in one of the seats and pulling the seatbelt over his small torso. It was the only time Zoro would ever be ok with someone treating him like he was an invalid. He wasn’t sure he could do it on his own right now.

“Law,” he choked out suddenly, his voice high and weak. “What’s going on?”

“…It’s nothing, Zoro. I’m sorry there was no one else to watch you today; we’ll be home soon and you can sleep. Your uncle will be coming soon.”

Zoro sat silently as Law pulled his sweatshirt up over his head and draped it across Zoro’s front, tucking it in behind his shoulders. It was Law’s favorite, the one with the yellow smiling sun that Law had told him was supposed to look like a virus embroidered on the front and “Corazon” on the back, and the fact that he was giving it to Zoro meant that he was as shaken up as Kid was. Zoro shivered and dipped his face down behind the hood, suddenly very aware of how cold he was. He swallowed heavily, opening his mouth a few times and changing his mind before he finally asked.

“Are we ok?”

Zoro’s eyes shot open as Law unsnapped Zoro’s seatbelt and threw it way from him, yanking Zoro into his arms and holding him tighter than he ever had. Zoro couldn’t even remember the last time Law had held him. It might have even been Kuina’s funeral. Tears pricked at his eyes, taunting him, and he buried his head in Law’s shoulder, Law’s t-shirt crumpling in his fist as he yanked on the cloth to pull the older man closer.

“I’m so sorry, Zoro,” Law whispered. “I’m so, so sorry. We’re ok. I promise we’re ok, and no one is going anywhere, ok? I promise, everything is ok. We’re all ok.”
Zoro couldn’t stop the tears after that. He could only be grateful that no one—not even Kid—said anything and just let him sob into Law’s shirt.

The silence was painful, especially because the only sound that ever broke it was an occasional sniffle that Zoro couldn’t swallow. Zoro wished that Kid would put on some music or something, anything to break up the thick air, but something told him that any extra noise or light that could draw attention to them was dangerous.

“You smoked,” Law said suddenly. Zoro had never heard him so blasé. He was so passionate about the subject.

“…Sorry.”

Law didn’t answer, but from the lack of retaliation, Zoro knew that he wasn’t angry about the situation. This day needed to end. It was too weird.

Law didn’t make him sit in his own seat the whole way back, which almost made it worse considering how strongly Law also felt about seatbelts, but because of it, by the time Kid pulled the car into the parking spot for their apartment building, Zoro had been able to calm his body’s nervous wracking down to pitiful hiccups and wipe the last traces of his stupid tears off. Law pushed the car door open with his foot and climbed out awkwardly, keeping Zoro hidden in his arms the whole time. He draped his sweatshirt across Zoro’s back and head and kept Zoro’s face turned into his shoulder. Zoro gladly let him. He didn’t care how old he was; Law was strong enough to carry him, end of story.

“He’s still out?” Kid asked after a moment, closing the car door far too gently, and it took Zoro a moment to realize that Kid wasn’t talk about him, but the burlap sack in the back seat.

“They gave him a lot,” Law murmured. “We got him out just in time, another couple of days and his body would have given out. I’m going to draw some blood for him tonight.”

Zoro flinched as another pair of hands found his back—suddenly terrified that it was his uncle—that his uncle would see him crying—but Law stepped back and drew him away from them, even though he’d realized they were Kid’s.

“You take him? I’m going to try and get Zoro to sleep. And bring my medical bag into the kitchen.”
Zoro tipped his head up as Law’s boots clicked against the pavement, taking him into the building where Zoro’s skin greedily drank in the heat that rushed over him. The door swung shut behind them, but not before Zoro watched Kid take the sack out from the back of the car, holding it as tenderly as if it were another child. Zoro swallowed and hid his head back in Law’s shoulder, counting the steps to distract himself as they traveled soundlessly through the lobby, into the elevator, up fourteen flights and into Law and Kid’s apartment.

Law flicked the light on in the kitchen, but didn’t put Zoro down even when Zoro shifted and pulled away slightly from Law’s hold, carrying him instead straight into the guest bedroom where he lived on Thursdays. He placed Zoro carefully onto the bed and immediately went to pick out a pair of pajamas from the small suitcase of things he kept in their apartment.

“…Law?” Zoro tried after he’d pulled off his tie and jacket.

“Yes, Zoro?”

“Was there… a person in that bag?”

Law paused before resuming his selection, and then stood to bring Zoro his change of clothes, dropping them on the bed and peeling Zoro out of his shirt.

“Yes, there was.”

Zoro waited as Law busied himself with changing Zoro, but Law never continued.

“Is he ok?”

Law nodded. “He will be. He was in trouble, so I had to get him away from where he was living, and Kid was my only ride so we had to take you unfortunately. We tried to find somewhere else for you to be today, but we couldn’t tell anyone what we were doing and everyone else is always busy on Thursdays. That won’t happen again, Zoro.”

He stopped for a moment to put Zoro’s uniform out next to the bed. “Also, it’s pretty late, but if your uncle picks you up tonight, don’t say anything to him, ok? We’re not going to hide what we did
“Will they be worried because of me?”

“I should think so.”

“…Angry?”

“I think your uncle might want to remove a limb or two, but he’ll get over it. I could sew it back on anyways, so it’d just be a waste of time.” Law smirked at him.

Zoro couldn’t find the energy to return the gesture. He waited again as Law pulled the covers up over him, but the surgeon seemed to be done with talking. Zoro’s adrenaline, however, wasn’t ready to let him sleep yet; his mind was still buzzing with everything that had happened.

“What’s his name?”

Law blinked at him, confused at the question before he realized who Zoro was referring to and let out a tired chuckle. He sat down quietly on the bed and took a moment to look out the window.

“Would it be better if I told you tonight instead of in the morning?”

Zoro nodded eagerly. He was tired—**really** tired—but there was no way he was going to just sleep after all that happened this afternoon. He hadn’t even had a chance to tell Law that he’d gotten a 93 on the test that Law had helped him study for today.

“A while back,” Law started, running a hand tiredly over his eyes, “when I was just starting my job at the hospital, I came across some very interesting files on a couple of children. I was being moved up quickly in the ranks from part-time to actually helping in clinical trials and people were confused on what I was privy and not privy to, so I was given the wrong files for a clinical study.”

“You didn’t just give them back?” Zoro had always been taught that looking through other peoples’ things wasn’t polite, and that you could make people very angry if you didn’t respect their privacy. Mihawk was hell bent on that rule. The man held everything as a secret that he’d given his word not
to speak of again.

Law just shot him a devilish smile. “Now where’s the fun in that?” he asked innocently and Zoro smirked, finally starting to really relax.

“So I skimmed through the files, but I couldn’t find anything on the location of the children, so I forgot about it. It was interesting stuff—a blood deficiency gene problem I’ve never heard of—but I had my own study to work on so I put them back in the filing system and got the correct files. I didn’t bother mentioning it to anyone because file mix-ups happen all the time anyways and I’d figured out the code to the room and the filing cabinet the week before. Then, after two weeks or so, I found the same file out on the desk in one of the offices and decided to look through it again, to see if they’d made any progress, only to find that one of the children had died.”

Zoro’s mouth fell open with a small pop and the air left his lungs.

Law nodded. “Just like that. He’d been perfectly fine two weeks prior. There was no info in the file on why they had died, only the studies leading up to that and the time of death. I hadn’t even noticed the first time reading it that the file only said a child study and they hadn’t put the kid’s ages in there.”

Law pushed his hat back on his head to play with his bangs and closed his eyes, leaning sideways on the bed to get more comfortable. “I was nervous that they were doing studies on orphan kids again like some hospitals had a couple of years ago—ones that didn’t have parents to protect them, especially if the file had no ages taken down—so I started looking for more information, but there was nothing in the hospital. I didn’t find anything else until I overheard some of the doctors talking about the same case and I followed them after they left the hospital to an old, rundown warehouse-turned-haphazard-hospital with a makeshift”—Law waved his hand flippantly, obviously displeased—“operating room, I suppose, stocked to the brim with military equipment.”

Zoro took Law’s next pause—occupied with a yawn that he knew Law used to collect himself so as not to show any anger—to scooch himself deeper under the covers.

“So going to the police was out if the military were in on it,” Law sighed, “and there was one dead kid on their hands already. I stayed there that night to look through some things without anyone there to bother me.”

Zoro remember that night very clearly. Kid had nearly broken all of the dishes in the apartment with how nervous he was that Law hadn’t come home, hadn’t called, and hadn’t been seen since he’d left the hospital. He’d smoked that night too.
“I got everything I needed from the warehouse and left the next morning, working on how to get this to someone who could help the two kids left, but two days later I heard the same doctors talking about how the second one had died the night before.”

“Traf.”

Zoro and Law looked up to find Kid in the door, leaning tiredly against the doorframe.

Kid nodded towards the living room. “He’s starting to wake up.”

Law nodded before turning back to Zoro. “Clearly they weren’t doing anything beneficial to the children. So I told Eustass last night, and we couldn’t find a place for you so we brought you and got him out, the end.” Law stood to leave.

“What’s his name?”

Kid blinked, not sure exactly what the question was about, but Law gave Zoro a gentle smile.

“He doesn’t have one. He’s just about fifteen months and he can’t really walk or talk because no one ever taught him. But he’s going to be around for a while, so we’ll have to do something about that name, right?”

Zoro nodded, blinking as he remembered something just as Law reached his door.

“I saw someone there,” he called out and Law paused, turning back to look at him confusedly.

“I saw someone when we were waiting to pick you up,” he explained. “Out my window, it was a boy, running. He looked hurt.”

Law cocked his head slightly, thinking to himself, and then shrugged. “He might have just lived around there.”
Zoro shook his head. “He didn’t have a shirt or any shoes, and he was bleeding a lot.”

Law let out a slow breath, thinking again before he nodded and thanked Zoro for letting him know. Zoro nodded and watched as the door closed, Law and Kid murmuring their goodnights to him before the darkness swept the room. He turned over in his bed and pulled the covers over his head. Kuina wouldn’t be scared at all.

Law followed Kid into the kitchen after checking the pulse of the infant sleeping on the couch just for paranoia’s sake. The amount of sedatives he’d been receiving from the IV worried Law, but already he seemed to be making a recovery. Law pulled the infant’s file—nearly a ream of paper—from his medical bag where he’d stashed it and started combing through it for a third time. The infant was a fascinating creature; Law could hardly blame the military for wanting to experiment on them. It didn’t disgust him any less though that they had.

The baby was skinny and his muscles had atrophied from so much time spent sedated. His skin was pasty and greying, and bones were even starting to show through from the color difference. The only normal attribute he seemed to have was that fact that his hair was still coming in blond with seemingly no loss of color—though it was a little thin—and long enough already to cover his eyes. Even in the dull lighting, Law could see the “abnormal growth,” as it had been labeled, of the infant’s canine teeth, where they sharpened into points just behind his lips.

“Hey,” Kid laid his hand on Law’s forearm and Law closed the file, leaning back into Kid’s chest where the taller man held him like a vice. He reached up after a moment and rubbed Kid’s hands.

“I’m sorry I made you smoke.”

Law breathed in deeply as Kid leaned down against the top of his head, nibbling nervously on the cow print hat. He closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, finally accepting that if someone had suspected it was him, a swat team would have broken down their door hours before they’d even gotten home.

Kid was right; they were ok. He just needed to accept that there wasn’t much more they could do in this situation. The insane quota had already been filled tonight, even by their standards.

“…Mihawk called while you were in there with Zoro, asked if the runt could stay the night.”

Law nodded and looked into the living room where a tiny arm twitched a couple times before stilling
again. He pursed his lips. “Then what are we going to do with you…?” he muttered to himself before tipping his head up to look at Kid. “Is it too late to go out and buy a couple bottles and a crib?”

“Probably not. Whatever’s is always open. Not so sure about cribs though. I can run out and see.”

“We probably should have thought of this sooner.”

Kid snorted. “Ha. Who does that?”

Law smirked and stood up to kiss him deeply, wrapping his arms around Kid’s shoulders and letting himself be engulfed in his partner’s larger frame. “Grab diapers too? And some clothes, anything is fine, but the smallest size. We’ll make it work. I’m going to pull a pint of blood while you do that. We can get non-necessities tomorrow.”

“All right,” Kid kissed him again. “I’ll be back soon.”

Law nodded and let Kid kiss him a few more times before the flaming red hair disappeared through the front door. He dropped his hat on the table and ran his hands through his own hair before opening his medical bag and taking out an IV bag and a decent sized needle. Better to do it before he wakes up. Who knows how long it had been since the poor kid had eaten, and if he was too loud the neighbors might get curious.

Law sat back and tied the strip around his arm to find the vein, going over what Zoro had told him again as he poked at his inner elbow. Was it possible there was another child? One that hadn’t been on the file for whatever reason. Maybe a different case study.

Well, they’d never find him at this point. He was either miles into the woods or caught and under much stricter surveillance. Law looked up as a tiny cry alerted him to more movement coming from the infant and stuck the needle into his arm, trying to hurry. He’d have to keep an eye out for things coming through the hospital and watch closely for another kid.

Oops. He’d never asked Zoro if he was hungry. Damn.

-oOo-
The phrase “easy, killer,” became a staple in Kid and Law’s apartment. At least, after Mihawk allowed Zoro to grace them with his presence again. A ridiculous three months after the incident had happened.

Zoro was angry. He was angry that he’d lost his norm, that he’d lost the two people he could tell everything and trust with everything, that he wasn’t even allowed to see them, that he didn’t know what had happened to the baby they’d pulled from the claws of death, that there was nowhere else to go on Thursdays, which meant him being forced into the after school program unless Shanks could take him with Luffy and Ace.

Sometimes Ace would bring him along to friends’ houses, but Ace was too old for him and Luffy—and often told them so, even though he was actually only one year older than Zoro. Luffy could barely get Sabo to convince Ace to let him tag along, let alone Zoro. They liked Zoro well enough, but it was an older kid thing, as Ace said. Sabo just had a soft spot for Luffy, but they kicked Luffy out all the time too. Ace just liked his alone time with Sabo, and Zoro could understand that. Ace and Sabo had grown up together in a foster home before his grandfather Garp had located him again after years of searching and placed him in Shanks’ house with Luffy—who was suddenly his younger brother. Zoro wasn’t really sure on Sabo’s story, but he’d been brought back to his own home after that—his real home, if the way he talked about hating his parents said anything—but he still felt more at home with Ace and spent as much time as he could with him. Zoro got like that with Law and Kid sometimes, especially after having to stay over at Mihawk’s, so he was fine to let Ace and Sabo run off and just play with Luffy, but when Luffy ran off with them he was alone again and left at the school in the after school care program.

Zoro’s grades started to drop without Law’s tutoring, and his progression with his swords slowed to a disgusting standstill, making him more and more volatile. Mihawk tried to get him a new sensei to teach him, being that he was too busy with government work and his own swordfights, and even bought him two new swords, but Zoro would have absolutely none of it. The fact that Mihawk expected him to give up Kuina’s sword for some cheap practice sword Mihawk himself never would have used was insulting, and then he had actually insulted him by insinuating that if he didn’t move on from Kuina then he would never go anywhere. When Mihawk saw him practicing with all three one day—the one day he’d been home in close to a week—Kuina’s beautiful, white sword gripped between his teeth, he’d just given Zoro a look and said nothing. If that wasn’t enough, both Law and Kid were better than the moron Mihawk had sent to teach him, and only one of them had any real experience with sword fighting. Zoro was spiraling downwards. He was losing everything important. There was no way he could beat Mihawk when he was older if idiots were teaching him.

Zoro couldn’t sleep. He refused to eat Mihawk’s food because his cooking was terrible—even compared to Law’s—but he cooked because Zoro got so disgusted with take out every night that he had refused to eat that after a couple of weeks.

It wasn’t long before acting out in school became the norm for Zoro. It was the biggest stress reliever
of his life. He could piss off anyone, and prided himself on making his teachers fume, but they would never get physical with him. So he found the physical side in other kids his age—picking fights, chasing off anyone that tried to help him, yelling and screaming at everyone that looked at him wrong. His teachers all tried talking to him, and then quickly gave that up, following which he’d beaten up two kids so badly that he’d been suspended. Even Luffy and Ace hadn’t been able to get him to calm down, and Zoro had bitten Sabo’s head off when he tried to talk to him later.

That was when Shanks had finally gone to Mihawk. Zoro had pleaded for weeks to see Kid and Law, doing everything from throwing tantrums like he was three years old to refusing to speak for days on end, but Mihawk hadn’t budged, even though his schedule had recently become so crammed and sporadic that Zoro essentially lived at school with the morning and evening programs and then with a different babysitter every few nights. Mihawk told the babysitters that Zoro was a foster child and kind of “rough,” and they always promised they could handle him, but none had lasted more than a few nights.

Weeks, Zoro had tried to get Mihawk to let him go back, and one dinner with Shanks and suddenly Kid was waiting for him on Thursday, standing in front of the beat up old car with the stupidest grin on his face while Zoro stood frozen at the front of the school, gaping with the black eye and split lip from his most recent suspension.

“Come on, runt!” Kid bellowed suddenly, climbing back into the car and threatening with a loud roar from the engine to drive away if Zoro didn’t get his butt in gear, and Zoro took off like a rocket. He leapt over three kids while jumping down the stairs, ignoring the screams of all his teachers and nearly knocking down four different parents in his frantic scramble to get into Kid’s car. And before the door had even shut, Kid took off like a bat out of hell, tires screaming against the pavement as he cranked music Zoro knew for a fact that he wasn’t allowed to listen to and began screaming the lyrics at the top of his lungs. Zoro was so preoccupied with smiling that it didn’t even occur to him to join in.

Kid screeched the car to a halt in his parking space, and Zoro bounded into the building, tripping someone coming out with his backpack as he ducked between their legs. Zoro heard Kid bark something at him, but he had already shut himself in the elevator, repeatedly drilling the button for the fourteenth floor as if the machinery could understand his desperation and would fly him as fast as possible up to the apartment that he still considered more of his home than Mihawk’s house.

Zoro threw open the door to the apartment, cracking it sharply against the wall as he skidded into the kitchen, where he finally lost his momentum at the sight of the tiny, blond human sitting at the table, motionlessly staring at him from behind a curtain of thick hair that completely obscured his eyes. His mouth was hanging open, two bottom teeth poking out over slobbery lips, a spoon gleaming with spit clutched tightly in its tiny fist. Zoro blinked, suddenly entirely unsure of what to say or do.

“Hey, Zoro.”
Zoro’s eyes snapped up to the stove behind the table, and a huge grin split his face at the sight of Law’s devious smirk, like the sadistic surgeon was getting more enjoyment out of the fact that this was upsetting Mihawk than he was at seeing Zoro. And Zoro was totally ok with that. It just made being here all that much more wonderful.

“Jesus,” Kid snarled from behind him as he stepped into the apartment and kicked the door shut harshly. “Mrs. Arlen bitched me out for an hour, like everything you do is fucking my fault,” he cuffed Zoro upside the head as he said this and sent him stumbling a few steps to the side and out of Kid’s pathway.

“Oh, also,” Kid rounded on him again and smacked the other side of his head, sending him tumbling into the other wall, “thanks to your recent stunts we have several meetings with your teachers and I have to drag you along to the shop for two weeks because you’re suspended. So here’s the deal, you ever pull this kind of shit again and I will personally remove any limbs that you could potentially injure someone with!”

“You hungry?” Law asked, disregarding Kid’s small outburst, and Zoro dropped his backpack on the floor, pulling out one of the kitchen chairs and clambering up to the table. The baby screeched suddenly at the apparently very welcome company and laughed, banging the spoon with sharp clangs against the table. Zoro just stared. He’d never really interacted with a baby before.

“You’ll get used to it,” Law told him with a wink and set a plate of crackers and cheese down in front of Zoro, pulling back to ruffle the mop of blond hair and the baby squealed again, tiny arms flailing as it tried to grab onto Law’s hand and capture the offending assailant.

“Do you have homework for your suspension?” Law asked, oblivious to the burbling gnashing the baby was inflicting on its suddenly remembered spoon and Zoro nodded, cramming a few crackers into his mouth.

“Jus’ a ‘iddwe.”

Law yawned hugely and slouched back in his chair. “We’ll do that later,” he muttered flippantly. “Homework is so useless for kids your age.”

Zoro paused, and then grinned hugely again, stuffing some cheese in his mouth before he resumed his attack on the crackers.
It took Zoro a lot longer than he would have liked to settle back into himself after regaining Law and Kid in his life, even if Mihawk had agreed to let Zoro stay at their apartment whenever he wasn’t at his house, which was almost all the time. He still snapped easily, at what seemed like everything, and the fact that he didn’t have control over his anger upset him like nothing else and he was ashamed for the way he’d acted. It was so stupid and embarrassing. And he was suspended and stuck at the garage with Kid and the garage was cool but Kid couldn’t spend time with him because he had to work so Zoro had to sit for hours and try and keep everything inside of him from boiling over. He’d see Ace, Luffy, and Sabo as much as he could—and had apologized to all three the first moment he had been able—but they had school so the amount of energy he could expend on them was limited.

He’d tried to get Law to let him stay in the apartment instead of at the garage, offering to do chores and everything else, but Law had given him some very vague responses about the baby’s health and some tests and a bunch of other crap that Zoro didn’t understand. Basically, staying at the apartment had been out.

And so the phrase, “easy, killer,” became a staple in Kid and Law’s apartment. Kid would grab his wrist with frustratingly fast reflexes just as Zoro lashed out, before he could get the chance to break anything, murmuring, “easy, killer,” and not let go until Zoro was calm enough not to want to sink his teeth into Kid’s skin and could just storm off and slam his door instead of laying waste to some of the more expensive things in the apartment. Which would have been exponentially more wonderful in the stress-relief department. But they’d taken everything breakable out of his room except the bedframe, which was iron because they’d stolen it from one of the dorm rooms at Kid’s college. Zoro was fine to kick the thing and slam it into the wall as hard as he could, which had helped, but after he broke his finger the need for that physical release in the form of destruction started to slowly wear off. He couldn’t hold his swords correctly with his finger broken.

The baby was very different. The thing bit people like his life depended on it. Always. When he was happy, or laughing, or crying—even in his sleep he’d gnawed on Zoro’s hand once and made him bleed really badly. Law had to tell his teachers that they had two new cats at the house to help Zoro settle into the changes to keep them from setting up a meeting with Mihawk or calling child services. Both Law and Kid were covered in little curved rows of pinpricks that dotted everywhere from their hands and arms to their necks and cheeks from when they picked the baby up, and “easy, killer,” became the normal response for him too.

It took Zoro a while to settle into the crying and the biting and the fact that he was woken up every night he was over at three in the morning because the stupid thing couldn’t sleep through until morning. Memories from his time at the experimental facility, as Law explained, and Zoro understood that fear, so he just put up with it and did his best to fall back asleep when he was woken up. The baby smelled too, and Law and Kid still hadn’t picked a name, which Zoro thought was really stupid because he couldn’t even use good insults when the only thing he was directing them at
was “the baby.” Because he was nine and he was upset at a baby and it was a stupid baby and he couldn’t be upset at a baby for crying. So he just grumbled to himself when it woke him up and waited for Law or Kid to wake up and hold it or feed it or whatever so he could go back to sleep.

One night that Law hadn’t come home until 1 AM after work and Kid had dragged both Zoro and the baby around all afternoon buying groceries and scraps of metal and everything else for a new project of his, and trained with Zoro and done his homework, and then forced Zoro to help him give the baby a bath (in which they all took one too because the stupid thing kicked and loved splashing so much), that when the baby did wake Zoro up at 3 AM, screaming like there were demons in the crib with him, neither Law nor Kid woke up. Zoro laid in bed for ten minutes, trying to smother himself under the pillows to get away from the stupid screaming. It made him think of all the nights Law had comforted him after Kuina died, and he hated remembering those nights.

Zoro gritted his teeth, crunching himself further into a ball and trying desperately to become one with his bed as the baby’s screaming somehow got louder and more frantic, and Law and Kid somehow still didn’t wake up.

Zoro wrenched back the covers suddenly, glaring at the door to his room, closed but apparently not impervious to the stupid baby.

“Stop!” he screamed in its general direction, as if the wood could help. “Stop crying!”

Zoro growled again, tears pricking his own eyes as the darkness around him suddenly started to feel incredibly heavy and constricting, and Zoro threw the covers away, storming out of his room and down the hall into the makeshift nursery that had been thrown together with a crib and a shelf for baby supplies. Law and Kid didn’t have the money to spend on something nicer looking.

“Stop crying!” Zoro yelled, barging through the door and glaring at the mop of blond hair poking up over the top of the bars of the crib. The baby swallowed its next sob, hiccupping pitifully and shaking like a leaf as it clutched at the crib, tears and snot and spit and everything else soaking through his onesie as he stood there, shaking and staring at Zoro, and just as unsure of what to do next as Zoro was. Zoro wasn’t the one that normally got him in the middle of the night.

Zoro shifted uncomfortably and looked back over his shoulder. Should he get Kid? Law was so tired… Zoro had only been back in the apartment for three weeks, and he’d never even held the baby — any baby actually —

The baby hiccups violently, and then the screaming filled the room again, its tiny body jerking up and down, holding onto the crib for stability and shaking it with sharp squeaks that only made the noise worse. Zoro grimaced, knowing without a doubt that if he left, the screaming would get worse. He remembered how alone he’d felt. If Law or Kid had walked away from him when he was like
Zoro swallowed and steeled himself, marching up to the crib and popping open the latch that held the bars up. The baby fell back at the sudden loss of his support and landed heavily against the thin mattress. The wailing doubled and he sat there in anguish, shaking his tiny fists and scrubbing them futilely into his face in an attempt to get rid of what Zoro knew to be the irritation from the salty tears.

“Easy, killer,” he murmured, reaching in and hoisting the heavy lump out of the crib. Zoro dropped to the floor the second he had the baby in his arms, not even trying to hold up his weight with how tired he was. He pressed the shaking body as gently as he could into his own, rubbing gentle circles into its back. “Come on, you’re ok.”

The caterwauling slowed to the pathetic whimpers and body-wracking hiccups again as Zoro swayed slowly back and forth in an attempt to mimic what Law always did to calm him down.

“Easy, Killer,” Zoro whispered again, wiping some of the snot off of the baby’s face with his own sleeve, which he then scrubbed on the floor before the wetness soaked through to his skin. “It’s ok.”

It felt like forever that he sat there on the floor with Killer, rocking him gently and tussling his hair every once and a while as both Law and Kid did, and finally Killer’s erratic hyperventilating slowed to even breathing and he settled into Zoro’s shoulder, content—what it seemed—to sit there in the safety of the older boy’s arms. With the noise gone, Zoro felt himself drifting again, and his head started dropping to the side as the darkness welcomed him into sleep again.

He jolted awake at the remembrance that he was holding a very distraught baby that was likely to go off like a bomb at the slightest upset and grunted, hoisting both him and Killer off the floor. He cast one look at the crib before rolling his eyes and turning away from it, dragging the baby down the hallway, struggling under the extra weight only a tiny bit more than he would have liked to. He was still getting back into training with Kid and Law and Killer was almost a third of his size, but he made it back to his room and half threw, half shoved Killer up onto his bed, which he then climbed up into and set to work rearranging the covers he’d uprooted. Killer sat quietly and watched him through the whole thing.

Zoro sighed and pushed gently on Killer’s shoulder, laying him back on the pillow like he’d seen Law do—making sure to keep Killer between the wall and himself so he couldn’t fall off the bed—and pulled the covers over the both of them. Zoro snuggled down into the pillow and laid his hand over Killer’s middle in one last half-asleep-paranoid attempt to keep him safe in a bed with no bars on the side, and then just his snoring filled the room.
Law yawned hugely, frowning at the strange light filling the room before he suddenly realized what it was and shot up in bed. Ambulances. He yanked back the curtains to check what had happened outside that could possible explain the number of emergency vehicles and lights filling up the room like only the sun could do, when the blinding light of the actual sun caught him straight in the eyes and he dropped the curtain, snarling quietly at the jarring annoyance waking him up much faster than he was used to.

Law ground at his eyes with one hand, scrubbing sand from his eyelashes and looking around the room, unable to quite put together why…

Kid was asleep next to him, his flaming red hair splayed across the pillows with his back turned up to the ceiling, displaying the multitude of impressive scars, tattoos, and burns marring his skin, most of which Law had fixed of himself. That was normal.

The room was bright, way too bright for two in the morning when the baby usually woke up, and the clock glowing on the bedside table explained why. 7:02. That wasn’t normal.

_Huh_. Law let out a deep, curt sigh and looked over to the door. _I guess he slept through the night._

But still, the amount of hours the baby had slept through after waking up every single night since he’d been here (almost four months now) had Law pushing back the covers even though the slight chill in the room bit uncomfortably at his skin, and he pulled on a pair of pants and a t-shirt that had been discarded the previous night. He passed by his hat, as he normally did before showers, too asleep to ever care how muddled and cartoonish his hair looked in the morning, and pulled open the door to their room, padding quietly to the baby’s room. Law blinked at the open door and pushed it open cautiously with two fingers, leaning around to see into the tiny room.

Law’s tongue jumped down the back of his throat, and the door cracked sharply against the wall as he threw it open, leaving a hole in the thin plaster where the doorknob hit. Law couldn’t breathe for a second, couldn’t do anything but stand in the doorway with his jaw hanging open and his eyes popping out of his head.

Crib empty. Bars down. Door open.

“Traf?” he heard Kid grumble from down the hallway.
Law tore back out the door, his first instinct to find the goddamn lock on the fucking front door and make fucking sure that the piece of shit fucking worked—

He ground to a halt suddenly though just after passing Zoro’s open door. Zoro never left his door open. Something was either seriously wrong or…

Law backed up a few steps and pushed Zoro’s door open, standing immobile with his hand on the cheap wood as Zoro scowled up at him at the rude awakening of the other door slamming, blinking heavily and trying to remember how to see properly. The baby was asleep next to him, more calm than Law remembered seeing him since the fourth night of being away from the hospital, after it had really seemed to click that he wasn’t going back to that horrible place. Zoro yawned, leaning his head back like he was howling his good mornings to the sun before clambering out from under his covers.

“Killer woke me up last night and you slept through it, so I brought him here,” he said as he stretched, and was about to get off the bed before he suddenly seemed to remember said baby and turned around to cover him back up, even though the jostling had shaken the baby awake and he was now swiveling his head around the unfamiliar surroundings of the room.

“…Killer?” Law managed finally. Zoro had never seemed to show any interest in the baby…

Zoro just gave him a look before sliding down off of the bed and walking past him toward the kitchen. “Well if you aren’t gonna call him something, I will.”

Law watched him go before turning back to the baby and walking over to help it out of the bed before it fell. He set the small figure on his hip and shrugged after a moment, following the sleep-clogged voice asking where the milk was into the kitchen. It wasn’t like he had any better ideas, and this kept him and Kid from having to discuss which name to actually pick. Kid’s name choices were so arbitrary, ridiculous, and stupid that it almost made Law wonder why he was with him. And somehow he was sure Kid wouldn’t mind “Killer” at all, though it would make for some interesting paperwork come the time when Killer entered the school system. Well, they could always blame the name on the inept parents Killer had been taken from before they adopted him.

Inept indeed. Just the reminder made him scowl.

“The milk is in the fridge, Zoro, just like it has been for the past three years. Ever since we moved in, conveniently enough.”
“Well, it’s not there,” Zoro returned curtly.

Law sighed.

-oOo-

As always, review for us poor, emotionally starving artists! Hope you enjoyed and want to continue!

-As a side note, I swear I came up with the title Angel Down myself. I was thinking of Blackhawk Down and Angel Down popped into my head and I loved the sound of it so much that I googled it to make sure someone hadn’t already thought of it because it sounded that awesome to me so obviously it would sound awesome to someone else, and I thought I was in the clear but then I found that some band named their album Angel Down so damn! But this version of Angel Down I didn’t steal! Just incase anyone is wondering ;p
Zoro dug his fingernails deeper into his hair, the heel of his palm pressing into his eyeball so hard he was starting to see small pink bursts behind his eyelids, and the bottle in his hand was now crumpled and leaking all down his sleeve from the pressure. Beside him, Usopp swallowed heavily and shifted another inch away from him on the picnic table bench.

“I think it’s time for him to realize is all I’m saying,” she tugged on her cropped hair innocently, shrugging as if she’d been sucked into the conversation unwillingly and was only participating out of politeness. Zoro twitched again and the spots started flashing yellow and white. If she said one more fucking word…

“Ace,” Usopp said flatly.

“It’s long overdue, I’m really baffled as to why this hasn’t happened sooner.”

“Ace D. Portgas.”

“Is there something you’re implying, Usopp?”

“Wha’ amou’ my bwover?!” Luffy shouted over Nami’s shoulder, spewing food everywhere until she slapped him and sent him tumbling back harshly onto the ground where the food was launched back down his throat and he immediately grabbed his neck and started gasping for air.

“Nami!” Usopp shrieked.

“You got something else to say, long nose?” Nami turned, pinning him with one of her Nami stares and Usopp shrank back into the table.
Zoro blinked down with his one remaining good eye from his perch atop the picnic table at the ground where Luffy was still floundering frantically across the grass, slowly turning blue. He closed his eyes, counting down from five one last time before sliding his foot casually off of the table. He waited until Luffy flailed closer to him and then slammed his boot down on Luffy’s middle the next time the kid was in range. Bread, cheese, and meat erupted from Luffy’s throat, raining down on Zoro’s boot, and he grimaced as Luffy hacked on the ground.

“You know just as well as the rest of us that the only reason Ace would go for the redhead harpy in the school is because he’d use you for gambling tips,” Zoro snapped in Nami’s direction, settling himself on top of the table again. He placed his arms behind his head, getting as comfortable as he possibly could as Nami glared, smirking to himself triumphantly when she finally looked away in disgust. There were just some childish things it seemed he wouldn’t grow out of any time soon. Eh, he was only fifteen; he had time before he really had to. Zoro’s smirk fell. Three more years worth. Of high school. Ugh. He’d tried to get Law to let him drop out early. Kid really didn’t care either way, but Zoro had never seen Law laugh that hard before.

“Ace D. Portgas and I would be the power couple—”

“High school isn’t politics!” he snarled over her self-absorbed spiel.

“Teachers, friends, upperclassmen, lowerclassmen—the only person that would have a problem with it would be you, Zoro.” She was speaking quietly through her teeth, trying to be as intimidating as possible, and Zoro couldn’t stop another smirk at the fact that—still—only Usopp was shaking.

“And, you know, Ace,” he replied easily.

“Go to hell.”

“Fine, go ask him out,” Zoro closed his eyes and leaned back, shifting slightly to the left to even out the heat from the sunspot he was in. *Witch.* “He’s got his eye on that senior.”

“I have **way** more going for me then Laki—!”

Zoro groaned, tuning out and back into his sunspot as steam started pouring out of her ears. He blinked at the sudden vibration in his back pocket and leaned to the side to dig his phone out from under him. The little screen lit up and dimmed down on every vibration, illuminating the words “Surgeon of Death”—what Law had deemed a “charming nickname” from his coworkers. It was
based on his risk-taking on the patients’ behalf and how often he took on cases no other doctor would because of the possibility of patient death. The man was crazy; there was no other explanation.

Law never called him. Zoro flicked the phone open and held it to his ear. “Yeah?”

--I need you to go to Killer’s school.--

Zoro froze. “What happened?”

--I don’t really know, to be honest. The nurse called me instead of the ambulance this time though, which is good, but she sounded unnerved, which isn’t horribly reassuring. I’m still another town over; the hospital sent me for a consult last minute and I forgot to tell Eustass so he went to pick up some scrap metal from a junkyard about an hour away. I don’t want to tell her I can’t make it and have her actually call the hospital—I can’t be there to change the paperwork again.--

When Killer entered school, Law created him a diagnosis of “acute intermittent porphyria.” Law had explained it to Zoro once and didn’t bother explaining again because the disease was so complicated. It didn’t give them a perfect excuse not to have Killer sent to the hospital because of one of his “attacks”, but the diagnosis gave Law and Kid enough leg room to claim “family and therapist requests based on therapy treatments in order to lead a normal life” and work with the nurse. Killer wasn’t in therapy at all, but saying he was helped Law in convincing the nurse to contact him when dealing with an attack instead of the hospital. The first time he’d had an attack at school, the nurse had followed protocol and called an ambulance, forcing Law to break in and alter all of the paperwork and put a couple marks on his reputation with bribery in order to cover all of Killer’s tracks. It had also sparked a five-hour “discussion” about when the nurse felt an ambulance should be called as opposed to when Law felt an ambulance should be called. Law had won in the end, but not without what Zoro was sure were a few shady tactics. The man was too good at deception. Also, Kid had been standing threateningly outside the door, which Zoro was sure helped a great deal.

Law had also managed to convince her that because Killer was so young, being exposed to blood brought on anxiety, which meant that it might not always be an actual attack and she therefore couldn’t keep any treatments in her office and had to consult Law or Kid before anything was done. The reason she couldn’t keep any treatments in her office was because Killer—and probably Zoro—would be taken into custody the second she saw what they were giving him. What they hadn’t told her was that seeing blood only brought on the attacks half of the time because the other half he wasn’t hungry enough to be affected. When Zoro had reached high-school age he’d been added to the list of people able to handle Killer’s attacks.

“All right,” Zoro grabbed his backpack and slid off of the table. “I’m going over now.”
--Are you sure you know the way?--

“Shut up.”

--I’m being entirely serious.--

“Yes, I know the way! I’ve gone enough times now, it’s just a straight line!”

--The fact that the directions are the simplest set you’ll ever need to get anywhere hasn’t stopped you from getting lost before.--

“Did you need something else?”

--Do you want to take him home?--

“He probably won’t want to stay at school after everything. Especially with that damn nurse.”

--I’ll call you out for the rest of the day then. Call me if she gives you any more problems.--

“I can handle her,” Zoro growled before closing the phone and throwing it into his bag. The last time he’d tried to handle the nurse without Law, it had resulted in a screaming match with Zoro freaking out because the treatment was congealing in his bag and Killer was practically seizing in panic on the exam room table as his attack set in.

“Where are you going?” Usopp called after him. His eyes screamed “Don’t leave me alone with her!” but the long-nose didn’t dare say it out loud. He didn’t have as much faith as Zoro at his ability to handle an irate Nami.

“Killer’s sick,” Zoro called over his shoulder as he started jogging for the front gate. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Stupid long-nose had to learn to stand up for himself anyways.
He made himself take full steps the entire way out of the schoolyard; deliberate steps where one sole was always touching the ground. Nothing was wrong. The second he was around the fence though and out of sight, he took off as fast as he could, feet pounding against the pavement as he sprinted across the road to the shortcut through the apartment buildings separating their schools. They were lucky the buildings were only three blocks apart. He had to get there before the nurse gave up on them and called an ambulance.

Zoro bounded up the front stairs, leaning incessantly on the doorbell until the lock on the door clacked loudly and he yanked it open, dashing down the hallway to the nurse’s office. He heard someone in the main office yell for him to sign in but ignored it, making sure they saw him go into the nurse’s. He was pretty sure they would recognize his hair, but he didn’t need the police called on him on top of this.

Zoro skidded to a stop in front of the doorway, glaring at the nurse as she put the phone to her ear, stopping only when she saw him. She made a face, but hung the phone up anyways.

“Law told you he’s fine to wait,” Zoro snapped, marching into the room. “The attacks can manifest for a week.”

“Ki—hmm,” she closed her eyes and took a breath before continuing and Zoro’s lips pinched together tightly. She had never liked the name, even though Law had told her that it came from his abusive biological parents. “Killer is eight years old. He is not old enough to be handling this on his own and your father has been very specific about how I am not to treat him. When your parents are not here, he needs medical treatment, and if I have no options I am required to call emergency care.”

Still not my parents. Zoro felt his expression growing darker. She knew, and he knew that she said things like that deliberately. “Yeah, carting him off to a hospital filled with sick patients and people he doesn’t know poking him and prodding him and trying to force a useless treatment on him is a much better solution,” Zoro growled, fishing around in his backpack for the small cooler as he walked past her. “You’re right, Law must know fuck all about what he’s talking about. You know, what with being the youngest and best surgeon in the whole hospital that people fly across the country to see.”

That had done it. The nurse crossed her arms tightly but said nothing else. If she’d kept going, Zoro would have insulted her job next, but that could wait until next time.

When he had the pack in his hand, liquid sloshing around inside, he pushed open the door to the exam room. She made to follow him but he slipped inside without opening the door farther than he needed and slammed it in her face with a curt smile and a quick, “He doesn’t want to see you, thanks for all your help,” ignoring her indignant squawk as he did.
Zoro turned to the table behind him, looking up to the shaking little boy perched on top. Killer’s thick hair obscured his eyes, but Zoro knew they were pinched shut by the way he was gripping the table and how tightly his teeth were clenched. His breath was coming in uneven bursts, thrown off by the jarring shivers that were wracking his body. His head was tilted to the side and faced away from his right knee, where a band-aid was covering what was probably a skinned knee. Covered or not though, Zoro knew that Killer could still smell it, even through the overwhelming stench of rubbing alcohol in the room.

“You ok?” Zoro asked, laying a hand on Killer’s shoulder and bending down to try and get a response. Killer only clenched his teeth tighter.

Damn it. Zoro unzipped the cooler and pulled out a water bottle filled to the top with a thick, red liquid. He was supposed to eat after school today too.

“Chabo…” Killer choked out, breath wheezing in the back of his throat, “Chabo tripped… too.”

“Too much blood, huh?” Zoro muttered, shaking the bottle. Killer nodded, and then sucked in a sharp breath through his nose at the sound of the liquid, finally looking up but not relaxing in the slightest.

“Go slow,” Zoro said gently, waiting until Killer nodded to open the bottle, but the second the salty smell hit the air Killer lunged, hands snapping around the plastic and yanking it towards him. Zoro braced his feet, expecting the reaction, and held the bottle back long enough for Killer to drink enough of the liquid so it wouldn’t spill down his front. Or so he didn’t tear through the bottle again; clean up wouldn’t be easy here. The nurse, Zoro assumed, was pretty good at spotting an abnormal amount of blood for two people with no severe wounds.

Killer tipped the bottle back as the blood drained quickly from the bottle. He was gasping for breath but unwilling to stop drinking. Zoro moved to the chair at the side of the bed and got comfortable until Killer had drunk the whole thing. He made a mental note to talk to Law again about Killer eating in the morning on the days he was supposed to so this didn’t happen again. Or just eating more often. Normally Killer was nauseous after eating, which made eating in the morning bad and eating too often worse, but the nurse got more antsy and annoyed every time someone had to come to handle one of Killer’s attacks. Understandably, she didn’t like not being able to help with one of the student’s very debilitating diseases, but it didn’t make keeping Killer safe any easier.

Killer was four the first time Zoro had ever found himself in a situation like this. He was just starting preschool and Zoro was ready to enter his last year of elementary school. Killer had gotten hurt on the playground—just the same as today. As a four year old though, and a biter if the scars on Zoro’s
arm said anything, self-control was basically nonexistent.

Zoro watched Killer finally take the bottle away from his lips, gasping for air and clutching at the flimsy plastic for comfort as he started to relax, blood rushing through his system and fangs shrinking back so they were no longer visible poking out from his lips. Killer’s canines and bottom fangs (some number of tooth Law was always telling him and he never bothered to remember) would always be longer than normal, as Law had explained. Sharper and longer top fangs meant deeper puncture wounds in the vein: more blood. Longer bottom fangs meant a tighter hold on the victim: less struggling and chances of getting away. Law had explained this to Zoro after he and Killer had returned home that day.

-oOo-

Zoro watched four-year-old Killer and his playmate skid across the pavement during wrestling and shrugged off the injury. Killer had had worse. But before he could even turn back to his friends, a violent shrieking had him whipping around to find Killer on top of the other kid, ripping at his clothes and hair and making the child scream like his life were in danger. Zoro was up in seconds and sprinting across the playground to get there before the teachers could. Law and Kid were under enough scrutiny as it was, being gruff, overworked, unmarried, gay parents who were barely old enough to legally have Killer, let alone Zoro, and Zoro himself had a history of violence and suspensions from school. If Killer was a rough child and couldn’t play nice, it just provided more incentive to call a social worker.

Zoro reached their sides first and grabbed Killer’s hand like Kid used to in order to keep him from breaking things, pulling him off of the other kid. Instead of fighting back though, Killer turned his neck an impossible amount of degrees in the blink of an eye and sunk his teeth into Zoro’s arm. Deep into Zoro’s arm.

Zoro yelped, trying frantically to yank his arm out of Killer’s impossible hold, and then the kid started sucking. Zoro whirled to the sound of the closest teacher’s voice and heaved Killer into his chest—still attached to his arm—and dragged him toward the building entrance. He raced down the hallway and to the bathroom, threw the lock on the door and did a quick sweep of the floor to make sure no one was in any of the stalls before dropping Killer unceremoniously. Killer let go from the shock of gravity and landed heavily, letting out a soft wail before he seemed to realize what was happening and looked up to meet Zoro’s aghast expression. Neither moved for a full minute, and then tears began leaking out from under the thick bangs.

“I-I’m sorry…!” he said quickly in his tiny voice. “I… I was just… I didn’t want to eat this morning so Dad said I could eat when I got home, but I got so hungry…!”
Zoro blinked, swallowing heavily as he looked from the blood dripping down Killer’s chin to the gaping holes in his forearm steadily oozing blood.

“What. The fuck. Is going on.”

Killer sniffled heavily, bottom lip quivering and another drop of blood dripped down his chin. “It smelled so good,” he said pitifully, tears flowing freely now and Zoro caved in an instant, dropping to his knees and holding the top of Killer’s head to keep him still as he swiped his sleeve across the blood and the tears on Killer’s face.

“Easy, Killer,” he murmured as the smaller boy started to sob, scrubbing at his eyes with the backs of his wrists like he used to when he was a baby. Zoro pulled Killer into his lap and held him tightly, fear of getting bitten again drowned out by the little brother he’d grown so protective of that was easily more scared of himself than Zoro was of him. “Easy, Killer, I’m alright, you didn’t hurt me.”

Zoro sat quietly, running his fingers through Killer’s hair as the small boy’s sobs quieted down, connecting the dots slowly in his mind. No doubt Law had been called by now. And if Killer had hurt that other kid the administration wouldn’t be happy. Especially not if the bite marks looked like…

...Like **fangs**.

“We should go wait in the nurse’s office until Law or Kid get here,” he said finally and Killer nodded after a moment, moving to stand up and giving his eyes one final scrub to free his face of liquids. Zoro sat on the ground for a moment, looking up at the tiny downturned lips.

“Was… that kid bleeding before? Did he cut himself when you were playing?”

“…I don’t know,” Killer murmured, pulling his hands inside his sleeves and holding them into his chest.

“Did you bite him?”
A much longer pause this time before speaking. “I wanted to.”

“But you didn’t.”

“…I… I don’t think so. I don’t remember.”

“…Are you going to be ok if we go to the nurse’s and he’s there and he’s still bleeding?”

Killer’s lip started quivering again and he hugged himself tighter. Zoro swallowed again and moved to his knees in front of Killer.

“…Do… you want some of my blood before we go?”

What the hell was he doing?

“And then you can eat for real at home.”

He sounded insane. He sounded literally insane. This situation was insane. He was insane. What the hell was he doing?!

Killer looked up at him from behind a thick curtain of blond hair where Zoro knew his eyes were wide open in shock. He pulled his sleeve out of the way anyways and watched as Killer shuddered visibly, gaze now locked on the thick, red liquid pooling in the puncture wound.

“It’s ok,” he said gently. “You won’t hurt me.”

Killer managed to pull his eyes away for one second to verify that Zoro was telling the truth before he grabbed the older boy’s arm and stuck the bite mark back into his mouth. Zoro winced as Killer’s teeth—fangs?—found the same holes, cutting messily through the surrounding flesh, and then his tongue began moving rhythmically against Zoro’s skin, blood rushing with the weirdest sensation as it was pulled through his veins.

He let Killer drink for a couple of seconds until it really started to unnerve him, and then he pulled
back on his arm, pushing on Killer’s shoulder with his other arm when he didn’t let go right away. He wasn’t really sure how fast Killer was drinking or how much he could give him before it became a problem. Zoro packed the area with paper towel and tied it with one of his shoestrings before hiding it under his sleeve again while Killer waited, and then took the boy’s hand and led him out of the bathroom.

“Just wait until they get here,” he whispered and Killer nodded, sticking as close to Zoro’s side as he could without tripping as he tried to keep up with the older boy’s pace. Zoro knocked on the nurse’s open door and the scrawny, crow-like woman turned from where she was placing a bandage on the skinned knee of Chabo. Her eyes popped and she reassured him she would be right back before shuffling over to Killer and pulling him into her office. She hoisted him up onto the other examining table and began poking him and pulling at his clothes in various places.

“You were fighting?” she asked roughly and Killer shifted uncomfortably, looking over to Zoro for support and Zoro appeared at his side almost immediately, pulling Killer into a loose hug as the nurse looked him over. She looked like she was about to make Zoro leave but the expression he gave her and his tightened hold made her reconsider and she went back to her examination.

“We were just playing,” Killer said almost inaudibly before turning to Chabo. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

The other boy nodded and quietly returned, “It’s ok. You only pulled my hair a little bit.” Killer looked forlornly away anyways. A quick glance over to Chabo told Zoro that Killer didn’t seem to have actually done any harm, but he knew that wouldn’t help Killer feel better.

“Well,” the nurse concluded finally, “your father is on his way, so just hang tight here until he comes. You don’t look injured at all, so nothing wrong there.”

At that, Zoro glanced down to make sure blood wasn’t soaking through to his sleeve, tucking it behind his leg when he noticed a tiny spot that would soon bleed into a big and very noticeable one.

“You doing ok?” Zoro said under his breath after she had gone back to the first boy and Killer nodded, refusing to look up. Zoro jostled him playfully and poked his side, making him squirm and crack a small smile as he fought off Zoro’s finger. “Quite a first day, huh?” Killer nodded again.

A flaming head of red hair partially wrapped in an equally red bandana appeared suddenly in the doorway, and before Kid could even glare at the nurse or find a comfortable position in which to lean against the doorframe in a flippant manner, Killer had practically flown off of the table and wrapped himself around one of Kid’s legs, burying his face in the older man’s ripped and grease-
stained jeans. Zoro slid off the table and went to join them after a moment, wondering offhandedly if Killer’s quick reflexes had anything to do with…

“You coming home too?” Kid looked up at him, bent over in order to hold Killer close to him, rubbing a large hand over his tiny back. The nurse gave him a disapproving look over the glasses on her nose but it didn’t come close to deterring him. The only time Zoro had ever seen Kid scared was when Law was in danger—even he and Killer didn’t invoke that kind of reaction in the psycho.

“Yeah,” Zoro nodded blandly, still holding his arm out of the nurse’s view. Kid eyed the strange position for a moment before turning to face her, expression just as blasé as ever.

Oh yeah, he was going home. This was a conversation that should have happened years ago. Zoro clenched his fist, still astounded that neither Law nor Lid had ever bothered to mention this, when a sharp pain in his forearm reminded him why he was so angry and he relaxed his hand.

“Mr. Kid,” the nurse began. It was obvious by her expression that this particular twenty two year old was not someone she was a fan of dealing with, especially when his child with a severe disease was involved in a physical altercation with another child whose parents weren’t present. “I’m sure principal—”

“Trafalgar still has that meeting with you tomorrow, right?” Kid interrupted gruffly, picking Killer up and settling him on his hip. Killer looked so small and frail against Kid’s huge frame, and the fact that he had buried his face in Kid’s neck to hide didn’t help convince Zoro that Killer could keep a handle on himself. He was so close to Kid’s jugular… but he’d done that so many times before and never had a problem. Zoro let out a huff and stored the questions for the ride home and the yelling for the apartment so he wouldn’t scare Killer.

“I—what? Oh—uh, well yes, I believe so—”

“He’s better with explaining the acu-interrupting porphire or whatever—”

“Acute intermittent porphyria—”

“Yeah that, so I’m just going to leave the conversations for you and him tomorrow if that’s alright with you,” Kid gave her a clipped smile before turning on his heel and walking out, leaving her with no time to change her mind about the situation. Zoro wasted no time in dashing after him. They were ten feet down the hallway before Kid yelled over his shoulder, “Have the kid’s parents call me
if they’re all up in arms about their precious offspring!” and then Kid shoved open the front doors and marched toward the car without bothering to sign him or Killer out early.

They were silent as Zoro and waited for Kid to get Killer situated in his car seat, silent as they left the parking lot, silent for half of the ride home before Kid suddenly muttered, “Do you have homework?”

Zoro answered that he’d get it tomorrow and Kid grunted. They didn’t speak the rest of the ride home, up the stairs of the apartment building, or even as the two of them watched Killer dash into the apartment once the door was unlocked and pull open the fridge, unearthing a bottle of thick, red liquid from beneath some bags of kale and other greens in the fridge that only Law went near when it was dinner time. And Killer, apparently, when Zoro wasn’t around. Zoro waited until Killer had finished the entire bottle and placed it on the table, finding a seat heavily at the kitchen table and panting from drinking the whole thing in one breath, then he crossed his arms and faced Kid.

“So,” he snarled, anger bleeding out stronger than he had anticipated. He was twelve for Christ’s fucking sake, not an oblivious kid anymore. He’d had a right to know, especially if he had to be defending Killer in the future. What if the nurse or a teacher had gotten hold of Killer and he’d bitten them and started drinking their blood? What the fuck were they thinking not telling him about this?!

Kid took a deep breath and let it all out in a huff, shuffling a hand through his wild hair before he shrugged. “Traf’s really better explaining this stuff. I called him on the way to the school; he wants us to wait until he gets home—”

“Nope,” Zoro cut him off easily, yanking back his sleeve and tearing the makeshift and now blood-soaked bandage off of his arm to expose the bite mark. “Now. Or, you know, three years ago, but I guess that’s beside the point now.” Kid just made a face as he looked at the deep arc of puncture wounds, resigning himself to answer all of Zoro’s questions and crossed his arms, slouching back against the wall.

“…It’s acute intermittent porphyria,” he said finally. “Or, at least, that’s what all of the paperwork says. It’s the best thing to explain his symptoms—the irrationality, the mood swings, the aggression, the stomach pains when he’s hungry, the hysteria, the—”

“The drinking blood?” Zoro snapped, and Killer sunk lower in his chair.

Kid paused again before chuckling to himself, followed by a bored yawn. “Well,” he looked up to finally meet Zoro’s eyes, “‘vampire’ looks weird on medical records.”
All of the air rushed out of Zoro’s lungs. Even though he’d been expecting it—as much as one could expect an explanation as preposterous as that—it still sounded absurd to hear it in the real world. Go figure.

There was still a part of him waiting for Kid to burst out laughing at how easily he bought the ruse. There was still a part of him waiting for Killer to interject like he’d started to recently and tell Kid to stop lying because Law said so and he’d be mad. There was a part of him that really wanted to sit down before he fell down, but he couldn’t quite seem to get his body to move.

“Acute intermittent porphyria is much more realistic, and much less likely to get him taken away from us for insanity and believing our child is a mythical creature. Or blowing the whistles on him for escaping from the research facility. The porphyria crap actually does cover drinking blood and we can claim delusions if he ever attacks someone else again. People that had the actual disease centuries ago used to drink blood, like natural instinct or whatever, to get rid of their symptoms. If he seizes, it’s covered, if he “hallucinates”, Kid made air quotes with his fingers, “covered, temperature spikes or drops, covered. It’s really impressive that the disease covers it so well. And it’s not really well-known and symptoms vary anyways from person to person so no one will be nitpicking his symptoms.”

Zoro stood stupidly for another minute with his mouth hanging open before edging his way slowly into a seat next to Killer.

“…The hospital you found him at—”

“We don’t know how they discovered it. He may have bitten a parent or a nurse and started drinking, he may have had symptoms similar to another vampire, but there were no records on that or his parents. We don’t know how he got like this or if he was born like this or if his parents were too or if they’re dead or alive or being experimented on or what.”

“…So they could be… vampires… too…” Zoro mouthed dumbly, still unable to wrap his head around the concept. He was still waiting for Kid to start mocking him for believing it. One look at Killer’s ashamed face though told him that such a turn in the conversation wasn’t about to take place any time soon.

“Can we just wait until Traf comes home?” Kid asked after a minute, still uneasy discussing the subject. They’d been hiding it for so long after all, and really well too, considering that Zoro was twelve now and had been actually living with the three of them for three years. Blood in the fridge that had to come from someone, keeping Killer from drinking even as a baby, keeping him well fed enough that he wouldn’t drink even if he did bite someone, inventing paperwork and medical history
to cover their tracks, faking the entire adoption process, probably finding alibies in the adoption industry if it was ever called into question…

“What… about food?” Zoro made a face, looking up at Kid’s reluctant expression. Killer had been eating normal food (human food?) with them for years—

“He still eats food. He needs the energy. His blood just deteriorates and he needs to replace it in order to stay alive. Traf was thinking he might be half vampire and the food would come from the human side. From whatever tests Traf ran, the blood it only works half as well as it should so he still needs food.”

Kid waited another minute for Zoro to continue, but when he didn’t Kid tried again, “…But he understands this a hell of a lot more than I do… I just drive the getaway cars and occasionally show up to look intimidating.”

Zoro nodded finally, making Kid’s shoulders slump as he let out a relieved breath.

“I’m gonna go… take Killer…” Zoro stood up slowly, turning to look at the messy mop of blond hair half hiding under the table, “…play outside until Law comes home.”

“Good, I need to finish some things anyways,” Kid nodded and Zoro took Killer’s hand, helping him off of the chair he was just barely too short for and around Kid. They were almost out the door before Kid suddenly called Zoro from the kitchen.

“Just…” Kid looked away uneasily and ran a hand over the back of his neck as Zoro waited for him to finish. “What you did today was really helpful. Probably kept a full investigation from happening… I’m going to talk to Traf when he gets home about what other options we have… but it would be great if you were able to help like that again.”

Zoro blinked back at him with owl eyes, glanced down at the boy that barely reached his elbow, and nodded with an easy grin. He pulled Killer into a one-armed hug and Killer smiled for the first time that afternoon.

“Can we play tag?” Killer interjected suddenly, looking up at him with the happiest expression on his face.
“Hell yeah we can.”

-oOo-
“Have you seen this?”

Zoro looked up from the table where the homework he was scrambling to finish before school started was scattered around and littered with crumbs from the toast hanging out of his mouth. Law was holding a newspaper, head turned to look over his shoulder where Kid was standing at the counter, throwing together a sandwich that was drowning in meat and mayonnaise. Kid reached over and took the paper, laying it out next to his ingredients to skim through as he finished making his lunch.

Zoro looked over to the other side of the table where Killer, having lost interest long ago, was busy trying to cover every inch of his own toast equally with jam. Zoro rolled his eyes, turning back to his geometry. A quick glance at the clock told him that he would have to do three problems a minute in order to get it done before he had to drive Killer to school. He’d have to take another zero for this. Ugh. It was definitely worth last night’s bonfire though.

Every time Ace threw something like a house party, and especially when he organized a bonfire, doing homework was in no way worth missing seeing everyone. Ace drew people like moths to a flame, and last night everyone had miraculously been free. Chopper had had a light homework load, which meant that they had spent the whole night teaching him how to get drunk (“encouraging” him to keep drinking and assuring him he hadn’t reached his limit yet). Luffy ate his way through the first half of the night and slept the other half, but he had actually remembered to come this time. Sabo brought two cases of beer with him and was enveloped in a pig pile the second he arrived. Usopp brought Kaya and Nami had been there too, no doubt after Ace again, but the attention towards her had been drowned out by the arrival of Ace’s older friends: Marco, Thatch and Conis. Vivi had even come after Robin offered to pick her up on her way into town, and Zoro was always game to talk with Robin.

Robin made him uneasy, much more so than anyone ever had, and the adrenaline rush was nice when talking to her. It also meant that he could spend more time relaxing and drinking with Thatch, Marco, Sabo, and Ace while the younger kids experimented with the alcohol. Thatch, the oldest at nineteen, had had more than his quota of teenage drinking and was fine as long as he had two or three beers to get him through the night. He was also the one who was most inclined to keep an eye on those experimenting and everyone else was fine to let him do so.
Zoro had been surprised when Ace showed up with Saga, but not displeased. Saga and Zoro had run into each other a couple of times before when Mihawk had been forcing Zoro to take lessons from someone other than Law and Shanks, and they’d wrestled a little, practicing their attacks and blocks on each other. Saga was strong enough even with one arm missing and was a decent guy, and Zoro wasn’t really sure what to think about the looks Saga gave him, but beyond the thinking level, he knew they made something jump behind his navel and his face heat up.

Right off the bat Saga had grabbed two beers and plunked down next to Zoro, passing him one and cranking the top of the other off with his teeth, what with the lack of two hands and all. He held out his hand, offering to do the same with Zoro’s and Zoro had barked out a small laugh, choked slightly by the nervous lump in his throat, and handed his bottle back to the older boy. He’d been tense at first, but Saga had no problems launching right into a conversation and pulling Zoro into his light bantering, and as the night went on and the beer kept coming, the talk got easier and the two somehow kept moving closer and closer.

Marco, Sabo, and Ace spent the night swapping stories, occasionally pulling Robin in to tell her account—the brief few sentences she would tell when not giggling at their antics—and yelling at Zoro for not joining them more often. They didn’t know Saga all that well, being that he only knew them through Zoro and that Saga never saw Zoro anymore since Zoro had left the dojo and gone back to live with Kid and Law (Ace said he ran into him in the liquor store), but Saga seemed happy to sit and listen to their ridiculous escapades and laugh along with everyone. His laughter seemed to pull Zoro more into the humor of the conversation too, which was a plus in and of itself. Thatch gave the two of them a knowing look, but beyond that it seemed to go unnoticed.

It was nice finally not being too young to hang out with those who were mentally his age. Watching Luffy and Usopp trip over themselves with vodka coursing through their system and Chopper puke his brains out into the reeds made it so easy to remember why he didn’t miss that time period. Besides, Law and Kid had always let him drink with them, so his experimental phase had ended a couple years ago. Vivi had also attached herself to him by the middle of the night, and with Saga on his other side, jaunty as usual, he had nothing to complain about. Drinking time was bonding time, and being that nearly all of them lived in separate towns and went to different schools (excluding Thatch and Robin, who had already graduated, Thatch going off to culinary school and Robin doing god knows what), it was difficult to find time with everyone.

“Listen,” Ace slung an arm over Zoro’s shoulder a minute or two after Vivi had left, hair swishing wildly around her as she leapt onto Nami’s back and sent them both tumbling to the ground. Ace had interrupted the teasing Saga had picked right up with after Vivi left, but the older boy didn’t seem to mind, so Zoro grinned and offered Ace his beer. Ace took a second to blink at the bewildering object that was now far too close to his face for his eyes to focus on and then took a swig before handing it back to Zoro.

Saga laughed at the exchange and moved to stand, Zoro felt something jump in his throat, and moved to shove Ace off of him but Saga stopped him with a calm wave of his hand. “I’m getting another beer. You want one?”
Immediately the gnawing worry in his chest ceased and Zoro nodded, stupid half-grin back in place. Saga slipped him another smile and then turned to join Thatch and Marco by the cooler.

“Listen, listen,” Ace started again, scooching closer into Zoro’s personal space. “I really, you know, don’t care.”

Zoro snorted, alcohol clouding his own vision slightly, which gave him no right to judge. “About what?”

“You’re a good kid… I forget all the time that you’re only sixteen!”

Another snort. “Thanks.”

“So, like, if you like her, I really don’t care.”

“…Who?” Zoro wracked his brain for the person Ace could have meant. He obviously didn’t mean Saga. Not that Zoro was bringing up Saga for any particular reason. Damn the alcohol. “Conis? Didn’t you two break up? …Like, a couple months ago?”

Ace shook his head and waved his hand in a flippant manner. “Yea, bu’ we’re fine, she’s cool.”

Conis was cool. She was the teenager that did most of the insane things she did specifically to rile her parents up. They were very strict and very protective. Conis had been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, with the best education and everything money could buy. So naturally that meant she started hanging around with Ace and his friends, coercing them into teaching her how to fight with her fists and how to use a knife, stealing things and running from the police, the list went on and on. It took a long time to get her worked up, but when she was mad, Conis had the quickest tongue and the most painful bark. No bite, but the bark was enough.

She also had the most amazing angel wings tattooed across the entirety of her back—her most recent rebellion against her parents. Conis was cool, but she wasn’t exactly what Zoro was looking for. The whole rebelling for the hell of it thing was too much drama; he’d heard the screaming fights between her and her parents and it was not something he wanted to get involved in. He had enough of that with Kid and Law.
“…So who then?” he took another gulp from his beer.

“Vivi, like, hangs all over you, all the time, and so, you know, if you like her I really don’t care.”

“She jus’ does that because Robin trusts me,” Zoro said around the lip of his beer. His eyes drifted of their own accord up to the cooler where Saga had struck up a conversation with the two already there and was laughing along with them, alcohol bleeding happily through their veins. Zoro felt the smile creeping back onto his lips. His stomach flipped weirdly when Sabo bounded over out of nowhere and leapt onto Saga’s back—apparently they lived pretty close to each other and had hung out before—but he was too confused as to what the sensation meant to really pay attention after that, and Sabo jumped down to get another beer so it didn’t even matter.

Ace’s indignant cry snapped him back. “Robin trusts me!”

Zoro just grinned and stuck the bottle back in his mouth, ignoring Ace’s dejected look and how much he resembled a sad puppy. And then with incredible resiliency he shook it off with a literal shake of his head and was back to a boozed-up smile. Zoro laughed to himself at the snap change.

“What ever, she’s Robin.”

“Exactly.”

“You know she only trusts you because you didn’t trust her at first, right? She doesn’t get attached easily so she’s biased for other people that don’t.”

Is that why? He’d actually never been able to figure out just why Robin trusted him. There was no reason to, they hadn’t been close until very recently, which was her initiation, and when they first started hanging around each other Zoro hadn’t been very discreet about his distrust of the daughter of a military spy that showed very few emotions and a love for all things macabre and morbid. He’d heard rumors that Robin’s mother had actually defected before getting killed, but with Killer around he hadn’t liked the idea that Robin would be there too.

Zoro wasn’t about to mention that Robin’s level of trusting Zoro had reached her offering to help him lose his virginity. That would actually offend Ace.

Zoro waited for a minute, glancing to the right where Ace was slumped against him, but the older
boy never continued so Zoro turned back to his beer. He occupied himself with watching Vivi’s electric blue hair swish through the sand as she laughed with Nami as he drank.

“…What is it with you and defiant girls?” he asked finally, tipping the rest of his beer down his throat before grinding the bottle into the sand next to him so it would stand up. Ace gave him a look, obviously questioning his IQ level, before explaining.

“You know that whole “flame” in your heart, or the relationship?”

Ugh, what a romantic. Zoro took a breath and tried not to roll his eyes. “Yeah?”

“It’s a lot better if it’s a roaring fire…” he winked, “and that blue fire is the hottest there is.”

“She’s my age.” Actually, he was pretty sure she was younger.

“You act as old as my grandpa sometimes, get over yourself.”

Now it was Zoro’s turn to give him a look. “She doesn’t act like that.”

“Nah, but she’s not a kid either. She’s got enough spirit to keep her young, but the soul of someone who’s seen a lot of years.”

Zoro sat quietly, mulling over Ace’s words before he finally remembered the whole point of this conversation. “I don’t like her.”

“You don’t?”

Zoro shook his head and made another face. “That would mean I’d have to be nice to Nami. Completely kills the attraction.” Not that there was any really. She was hot but that was about it. She was way too bubbly and head-in-the-clouds for his personality.

Ace thought about that for a second before breaking into a signature “D” brother grin and clapping him heavily on the back. “Cool.”
Zoro just nodded, looking up with that stupid half smile as Saga returned and handed him a beer. The guy had even brought one over for Ace, though Zoro was pretty sure Thatch had cut the older boy off already. Ace poked Zoro’s side as Saga sat back down.

“Conis on the other hand—”

“No.”

“So, what then?” Ace sat up, pulling his knife out of his pocket to flip out the bottle opener. The cap flipped through the air and landed in the sand by Zoro’s feet, where Ace seemed to remember that Zoro had a new bottle too and popped his top with coordination that a drunken man really shouldn’t have at this point in the night. “You’re just going to float through life a virgin until the perfect person comes along and hope you don’t suck badly enough to scare them off the first night you’re together? Anyone stupid enough to go for you won’t have saved themselves for that.”

Zoro felt a nervous twitter in his chest as his cap hit the ground alongside Ace’s, for some reason worrying that Saga might have just that sort of reaction, especially now that he’d definitely overheard that, but he stomped on it just as quickly as it had risen up. What the fuck was wrong with him?

Maybe he should cut himself off. What number beer was this anyways? …Eight? Nine? It took him a lot to get drunk—closer to twelve or thirteen, but this was definitely enough to start feeling the effects. He hadn’t been expecting to go through this many; he’d have to give Thatch and Marco more money before the night was out.

Ace reached over to do Saga’s cap as well and the other boy gave him a warm smile, preserving his teeth and letting Ace pry his off. The fact that Saga hadn’t been chased off yet was helping Zoro relax, and took he another swig.

“I didn’t say that,” he answered Ace finally, giving the older boy a shove with his heel. “I just don’t wanna get some stupid girl in bed that I don’t like and then have to please too. Girls talk; I have a reputation at stake.”

Ace and Saga laughed, and Zoro felt himself grinning again in Saga’s direction before he quickly shoved his bottle in his mouth.
“Well,” Ace said suddenly, drawing both sets of eyes to him. “I’d better go accompany the young lady; seems she’s all alone tonight.” And he gave the two of them a smile and a wink and set off confidently down the beach to where Vivi and Nami were chatting excitedly with great hand flourishes. Zoro laughed again, realizing that Ace would be hitting on Vivi in front of Nami. That gave him way more pleasure than it should have.

“He’s a good guy,” Saga said suddenly, and Zoro turned back towards the water to sit side by side with the older boy, nodding his agreement as he nursed his beer. “Came right up to me in the liquor store. I don’t even think he’d been drinking at that point.”

Zoro snorted, shaking his head. “Yeah, he does that. He wasn’t drunk.”

“Bold.”

“I would say obnoxious, but that works too.”

Now it was Saga’s turn to laugh, and Zoro felt his eyes being drawn to the side to watch the older man’s profile. It was probably the drunken rose-tinted glasses, but the only word that Zoro could come up with that seemed to fit the situation was “wow”.

“So,” Saga started again after they’d been sitting there quietly for a while. “Who’s this certain girl you’ve got your eye on that you’re waiting for?”

Zoro nearly choked on his swallow, but managed to get it down without making any extra noise and calling attention to himself. He set the bottle slowly on his leg, grip tight on the neck, weighing his options for answering that question. There was no way he’d been interpreting things wrong all night, not with those smoldering looks; everything was in his court now.

He shrugged finally, taking another sip to stay calm. It gave his hands something to do at least. “No one. That’s the fourth time Ace has tried to get me with Conis, even though I’m pretty sure she’s dating someone now, but she just… doesn’t do it for me.”

“Wado the only girl in your life right now?”

That one merited a full smile. “Yeah, she’s good for me. You?”
Saga shook his head, twisting his bottle into the sand next to him so he could lean back on his arm and look at the stars. “Girls aren’t for me. Too soft.”

Zoro was kind of impressed. It took guts to just come out and say it like that, especially around guys from this area, where a good number of them were pretty homophobic. “…Yeah, I see that.”

Zoro swallowed, realizing that he hadn’t even admitted this to Law or Kid yet, and he was about to say it to some guy that gave him pathetic twitters just because he was drinking. “…They only do it for me some of the time.”

Zoro kept his face blank and facing straight ahead as Saga turned, watching him for a moment before he leaned forward to grab his beer and finish the last few gulps. Zoro took a silent breath, feeling the energy begin to crackle in between them in the air. He was sure Saga felt it too.

“We should spar again soon,” Saga said when he’d finished his drink and returned it to its place in the ground to free up his hand. “You’re not around enough; it sucks not seeing you at the dojo.”

“Oh, you miss me?” Zoro gave him a cocky grin and Saga returned it easily, shifting his body to face Zoro completely, still leaning forward with one elbow on his knee. An assertive aura was rolling off of him in waves, and a pleasant shiver skittered up Zoro’s spine at the intensity of his gaze.

“Maybe I do,” he said coolly.

The nervous twitter was back, but the alcohol seemed to be doing enough of its job. “Yeah? What’re you gonna do about it?”

Saga shrugged, seeming to think to himself about an appropriate retort, but the alcohol was hitting him too and Zoro saw him shrug again mentally before the older boy placed his hand on the ground and leaned in suddenly, laying his lips firmly against Zoro’s.

Zoro’s heart leapt up into his throat, and then back down into his stomach and back up again as Saga moved in closer, giving Zoro’s brain no time to even catch up with the kiss before he was splayed flat on his back with Saga balancing above him, forcefully dominating the kiss. Zoro’s back arched and the spot behind his navel took on a distinct heat that hadn’t been there before. He reached up slowly, hands hovering uncertainly in the air, an inch from Saga’s shoulders, when Luffy
whooped suddenly from where he and Usopp were playing and Zoro’s hands snapped to shove Saga back. His eyes flicked around nervously, looking for someone who may have seen them, but everyone else seemed preoccupied with their own night. Remembering the body above him, he looked up sheepishly to the man hovering above him, who was only grinning back at him. Saga sat back on his heels and, not once breaking eye contact with Zoro, reached down and gripped Zoro firmly through his jeans. Zoro’s head dropped back to the ground and a thick sound rolled off of his tongue.

Saga’s grin was confident as he rubbed his palm over Zoro’s increasingly sensitive cock, moving his hand in ways that told Zoro without a doubt that this wasn’t his first time. “Drive you home?” His voice just oozed coolness.

Zoro nodded, still slightly shaken from the first touch, and let Saga grab his hand and pull him to his feet, leading him back to where he had parked off in the woods.

“You weren’t actually reading it,” he retorted. Zoro and Killer exchanged a smirk before returning to their separate distractions.

“It was the way he was killed—did you read any of it?”

“You were totally drained.”

“And?”

“Of blood.”
That made Zoro stop. The pencil stopped scratching across the table as he paused to listen to the end of the conversation and Killer’s crunching went quiet as he followed suit.

Kid let out a slow breath and shoved his sandwich into a paper bag. “And?”

“…You don’t think this is something we need to keep an eye—”

“Killer’s not the only one in the world; this shouldn’t be that surprising.”

“What’s surprising is the lack of care to clean up after themselves. Just because deaths like this have never been covered doesn’t mean they haven’t happened. The tracks were just buried well enough to not call attention to it. This guy was found completely drained with two punctures in his brachial artery. They were messy too, which means the guy died struggling.”

“Alright, we’ll keep an eye on it,” Kid kissed Law lightly on the head before turning towards the door. “I have to go. Zoro, you got Killer?”

“Yeah,” Zoro drawled, turning back to his homework. Three minutes, twenty questions.

He leaned back with a groan and dropped his pencil on the table.

Law looked up at him out of the corner of his eye and then down at the homework before back up at him. “…Was the bonfire good?”

“Awesome,” Zoro returned easily before reaching forward to shove the paper into his backpack. “Everyone made it, even Robin and Vivi this time, and Ace brought Saga.” What had really happened last night danced across Zoro’s tongue, but he decided against saying anything at the last moment, instead covering his slip with, “You remember the kid I used to fight at the dojo, right?”

Law nodded absently with a bored “Mm-hmm,” leaning over to look at Zoro’s paper more closely.

“Zoro! You said you’d bring me next time!” Killer wailed suddenly and Zoro smirked.
“I said I’d bring you next time we weren’t doing things that were too old for you. Or when Law says you’re ok to drink.”

“Dad—!”

“No,” Law cut him off easily and leaned forward, snatching the paper out of Zoro’s hand like a hawk. “You’re eight.”

“When can I then?”

“I have to do some more tests before I decide. Alcohol gets into your blood stream and with your blood I don’t know how that would work. Your body might not be able to process it.”

“But it’s the liver that processes it, not the blood!”

Zoro grinned at the loud whine backed by information too advanced for Killer’s age. With all the testing Law had done on him over the years to make sure his body could handle everything from sugar to sunscreen, Killer had all of the medical terminology down.

“And the level of blood you have in your body might affect that, especially because we don’t know if your body destroys the blood cells or if they aren’t strong enough and just deteriorate. For whatever reason though, your blood disintegrates—especially under light—and your liver may be partially to blame. Alcohol could make the problem worse. Because you can’t filter it, the alcohol might stay in your blood stream indefinitely. You could be like a cat when given LSD and never get sober.”

“That isn’t true and you know it!”

“Well, let’s not test the theory.”

Killer groaned loudly and went back to munching on his toast. Zoro blinked as Law picked up his pencil and began furiously scribbling, sitting back in slight wonder and crossing his arms. Law glanced up at him for a second before back at the paper.
“It seems Kid and I taught you something right,” he said with a small smile.

*Family first.* Always family first. And with both Law and Kid’s backgrounds as orphans, as well as his own, he knew that him displaying family first held a certain point of pride for Law. Zoro was sure there was a time in his life when Law wondered if he’d ever get close to anyone like that.

Zoro got up from the table and grabbed his and Killer’s lunches off the counter. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Killer slipped his backpack on and ran to get his shoes just as Law handed him his now finished homework.

Zoro grinned. “Thanks, really.”

“Get it done early next time. Mihawk will kill me if you fail in any subjects. He thinks Kid is stupid, so therefor not to blame and Killer won’t be alone if I die, but I’d like to stick around and see how you two end up. How can I know if we failed as parents if I don’t see the end of the experiment?”

Zoro made a face and stuck his tongue out, provoking Law to pull his bottom eyelid down and stick his own tongue out.

“Thee you athter thcool,” the surgeon said around his tongue. Zoro just stuck his tongue out further, and Killer joined in with a loud “THHHPPPPBBBBTTTT” sound when he noticed the exchange between the two before following the older boy out the door.

“You still can’t drink!” Law called as the door slammed, smiling to himself and returning to the newspaper.

-oOo-

“The number of victims has continued to rise since Saturday, when a whopping thirty-two people were found dead and drained of blood in an alley just inside the city. Prior to that, the “vampire killers” as they’ve been nicknamed, had only been leaving a single body every two or three days. All of the victims have had their blood removed, and no correlation has been found between any of the victims. The ages range from seventeen to thirty-nine; both males and females from all races have
been found in all corners of the city. The victims did not appear to have known each other and came from different areas of the city and different socioeconomic statuses. The only thing they all had in common was that no one saw them being attacked and no one heard anyone call for help, even though there were people not far from the vicinity of the crime when forensic specialists estimate the deaths to have occurred. Including the tragic deaths from the last week, and the missing people that have yet to turn up and are thought to have been taken by the same group, the death toll has reached eighty-three.”

Vampire killers. It was far too ironic. The screen flashed with pictures of victims with their families and the owners of local stores that had been shut down, intermittently switching back to the reporter who—if her unease said anything—was used to reporting on high school sports teams and other highly uninteresting news. The fact that it was their home city made the news even harder to deliver.

“Police are reminding people to remain indoors at night and to avoid traveling alone until more information is found about the killers. Most of the bodies have been found after dark, but twelve of the victims—a father of three walking to work, a lawyer that had left the law firm building during her lunch break, and a recent graduate from the local high school—have all been found during the day. Police also say that due to the locations of the victims and the number of bodies found on Saturday, there are at least fifteen killers and probably more on the loose and all acting without selection of victims, and are asking people to take extreme care when going outside. Due to the fact that all of the blood has been drained from the bodies, police are speculating that only adults have been attacked so far because of the amount in their bodies. Police are monitoring known black market areas of trade and businesses like blood donation collectors, but no spike has been found in any of the places investigated. As of today and the recent decision of the courts, all most public places have been shut down to try and keep the number of people out on the streets down. All schools in the surrounding area, DMVs, parks, the zoo, and others have been ordered to close. Grocery stores and hospitals remain open under law, but officials want to remind everyone to take extra precautions when venturing outside. You may check online for a full list of establishments that have been temporarily closed. Government officials are now deciding on the severity of the situation, and if more police from surrounding areas need to be sent in or if the circumstances require military invention—”

“They’d better send the fucking military in. It’s their fucking fault,” Law snapped suddenly and slapped the power button, making the television wobble dangerously on the rickety table. Everyone watched him as he stormed out of the room, no doubt back to the files he had been able to sneak out of the hospital during the recent confusion of the swarm of pronounced-dead-at-the-scene people being flooded into the hospital and the following paranoia. Apparently, by “let’s keep an eye on the issue” he’d meant that he would hack into the military database in the hospital and download all of their information. It was only blind luck that the hack had been missed, smothered under the paperwork of all the dead people popping up around the city.

Law had been pouring over case after case of what they had come to find were military experiments being done on “negligible senescent porphyric humanoids,” or “NSPH’s” for short. The most recent one he’d read was of the first experiments done on an NSPH captured in 1583. There was no information on how old the man was or where he was living when he was captured, and there was nothing on how he’d died.
Law didn’t know where the sudden spike in NSPH’s had originated from, but he did know that the military (from many different countries over the centuries, according to the paperwork) was “balls deep in their own shit” as Kid described it. None of the subjects appeared to be venomous, so for whatever reason it was that the number of NSPH’s was rising, they themselves weren’t to blame. Any parents of the subjects that had been documented and were completely normal with no “superhuman” defects. NSPH’s had literally appeared out of nowhere.

“…Well…” Killer said after a moment, no doubt waiting to see if Law would cool down and return to the living room. “So many people are being attacked, sooner or later one is going to get caught… won’t they see something in an autopsy?” He looked around the room for any input. “I mean, my DNA looks different—”

“If the cover up is worth anything than nothing will be found and nothing will be released,” Law called from the other room, his voice clipped.

Kid took a deep breath and adjusted the bandana further down on his head. “So now what?”

“You mean now that everything has been shut down and no one is out on the streets even though the number of NSPH is still rising?” Law snarled from the kitchen. “Now they start actually hunting, instead of just happening upon any prey like they have been. And the government still refuses to do anything to help, because by helping this early on in a relatively small crisis, they’d be admitting some sort of fault, which is already being speculated so they want to stay removed. But by the time they do get their asses in gear, this will be too big to stop!”

Law stormed back into the room and gestured wildly to the mountain of papers burying the table. “There are one hundred and forty-two cases here. One hundred and eight have been killed during experimentation. Thirteen have been shipped out of the country and traded to other militaries. Four have escaped, including Killer, with one being found in another city and killed during recapture, and there are current records of fifteen still being held in other facilities around the country. That leaves seven NSPH rampaging the city, who are apparently very angry if they’ve killed eighty-three people—except that seven NSPH would die if they consumed that much blood. Eighty-three victims killed over the course of two weeks mean closer to fifty NSPH, unless they’re storing a lot of blood. Killer is a negligible senescent porphyric humanoid minor, and he doesn’t have the speed or the strength or any other traits that that make this situation really scary. Negligible senescent porphyric humanoid major on the other hand makes folklore vampires look like reality, and considering the lack of evidence found and how the victims literally just vanish before turning up as bodies, I’d say we have a sufficient lack of NSPH minor!” By now, he was inches away from Kid’s face.

“Traf, calm down—”
“So not only have they set a monster loose with no record of its existence, now they’re shutting down the only source of food around!”

“Jesus, Traf, Killer is right here!” Kid snarled, advancing on Law. What Law normally did then was take a step back to keep from riling Kid up any further, but the doctor held his ground and kept glaring. Zoro’s head flicked back and forth between the two, unsure if he should try and intervene or just get Killer out of the room so he wouldn’t see whatever followed. Shanks used to joke about the way Law and Kid fought when they first met, but he never elaborated, so Zoro could only assume that meant the fights were either really bland or really, really bad.

“I’m ok—” Killer interjected quietly before Law started again.

“When the military **does** get involved they’ll just neutralize any possible threat because the situation will have become that bad, which I would bet my license is why it’ll take them so long to respond —”

“**Traf—!**”

“And once they start, how long do you think it’ll take them to go through the paperwork and realize that Killer’s history is a dead end right around the exact age and time NSPH139 disappeared from a military facility?! A facility, by the way, that’s just two hours away from here and linked to a hospital I work at!”

Law finally stopped and the room went silent as the realization suddenly hit them. Law had both hands pressed over his eyes and his lips pinched tightly together, like he was holding himself back from screaming any more. Any other yelling would just be out of fear and Law was smart enough to realize that everyone else in the room would realize what he was feeling if he continued. He didn’t, however, seem to be calm enough though to relax the knots that had worked their way into his shoulders or to keep his breathing controlled.

Zoro’s eyes flicked over to Killer, where the younger boy was slumped down into his chair, eyes obscured by his thick bangs but bottom lip quivering as reality struck them all in the face.

They couldn’t just ride this one out.
Kid’s head dropped and he stilled. He crossed his arms and stood staring at the ground for a minute until Law finally let the hands fall from his eyes and jammed them into his pockets.

“So what do we do?”

Law breathed, defeated, shaking his head slowly. “…I don’t know.”

“Should we leave?”

“And go where?” Law snorted, pushing his hat back slightly to play with his bangs.

Kid’s expression darkened. “You don’t get to freak out like that and not have anything to follow it up with—”

“And where’s your brilliant plan?” Law returned vapidly, not breaking eye contact.

“We get the fuck out of here and wait until this has passed. We invent new paperwork for Killer, destroy the current stuff, change his age, and let them think NSPH139 died years ago like Killer would have if you hadn’t discovered his experiment file. No one would have guessed to give him blood without it and they don’t know that anyone outside the experiment saw it. He was a deteriorating infant, he wasn’t getting by on his own.”

Law didn’t answer.

“Or,” Kid growled, miffed at the lack of response, “we wait until the tanks roll in and annihilate all possible threats and they can think that NSPH139, if he did survive, was killed during the fight. And the only reason that wouldn’t happen is because they would think NSPH139 would have had to be stupid to stay in a city only two hours from the facility he was being held at.”

Law closed his eyes, thinking, and then opened his mouth before deciding against what he was going to say and closing it. When Kid looked up expectantly at him, a tick developing in his eye, Law just shook his head. “Let’s just call Mihawk, find out if he wants Zoro before they inevitably barricade the city and then—”
“I’m not leaving,” Zoro snarled suddenly, making Killer jump even from his seat across the room.

“…You don’t get a say in this—” Law started firmly without bothering to even look over his shoulder, patience wearing thin.

“I’m not fucking leaving Killer,” Zoro stood, hands clenched into fists and shoulders shaking. “You don’t get to send me away every time shit—”

“Your uncle might not want you around because he knows where Killer came from and isn’t stupid enough not to put the pieces together—”

“My uncle hasn’t been in my life for six years! He isn’t my uncle just as much as you aren’t my father!” Zoro roared, waiting with his teeth bared until Law finally turned around to face him with black eyes and lips shut tight. Behind him, Kid’s expression was dark and maniacal, framed by flaming red hair and a wild yellow and black zebra striped bandana. He honestly looked unhinged, and fully ready to physically enforce what he and Law decided would keep Zoro safe. Zoro had no doubt that Kid would beat him into submission if it looked like Zoro was going to fight back against them; he’d almost done so a couple times already.

“Your father,” Law said quietly, “left you with a man he barely knew to go gallivanting off with his newest wife two months after your mother died from birth complications that killed her and your younger sister, and then lost all of his money gambling and died mixing alcohol and cocaine.”

Zoro gritted his teeth. He knew the story. It didn’t change anything. He didn’t have a father, he didn’t have a mother, he didn’t have an uncle, and Law and Kid sure as hell weren’t his parents.

“A man,” Law continued through his teeth, voice clipped, “that hasn’t been in your life for ten out of sixteen years because he’s busy living the life of a government dog and reaping the benefits. So you may not have an uncle, you may not have a father, you may not have parents, and Eustass and I may not be those parents, but we are the only people you do have and right now we’re deciding what will keep you safe and alive, just as any guardian would do—”

“Yeah, this “family” is the greatest thing I could ever ask for!” Zoro screamed. “Guardians with no legal standing that can’t do shit even if I really need them that spend half the time deciding whether or not to send me away and take me from a brother that needs us all to keep him alive!”

“Sit the fuck down,” Kid growled dangerously, waves of anger rolling out of his voice. Kid didn’t
have rules. Zoro understood exactly how Kid worked: if you were going to dish it, expect it in return. If you got him too angry, it was wise to leave and let the situation cool down before Kid let you know exactly what he was feeling. On the other side of the room, Killer made to do just that and slid slowly out of his chair, smart enough to understand when to remove himself from the situation. Zoro wasn’t quite so smart. Or he chose to ignore it.

Zoro felt the beginnings of tears prick at the corner of his eyes as he realized they were scaring Killer off. It didn’t help the smothering realization that the two people he was still fighting to convince himself honestly cared and didn’t just pity him weren’t on his side. He bit deep into his lip, opening his mouth, retort ready like a weapon at the back of his throat and armed to draw blood when the sound of shattering glass and a sharp scream split the air. Killer jumped, having just made it to the kitchen, and whirled around as the other three in the room silenced, waiting for—

Another scream, much more shrill this time, echoing up through the floors. Almost immediately it was followed by another deeper scream, frantic and desperate.

In an instant Kid had lunged across the room, yanked the gun from the top drawer of the desk, and sprinted down the front hall to fling open the front door. The doorknob connected sharply with the wall, leaving a deep hole in the plaster and the door vibrated slightly as it bounced back, Kid disappearing down the hall and towards the sound of the scream.

Zoro raced after him, tearing through the living room and into the front hall when something clamped down hard around his collar and he was clotheslined, feet flying out from him as his shirt bit back against his neck and closed his windpipe. Zoro gasped, pulling at the cloth when it was yanked back again and he flew off of the floor. Law’s hand closed harshly around his upper arm and dragged him stumbling backwards into the living room.

Law was fast, and Zoro had no time to react before the doctor suddenly had Killer slung like a sack of flour under one arm and Zoro gripped in the other and had dragged them both through the apartment and thrown them into the closet in his and Kid’s bedroom. Flimsy boxes of shoes and coats exploded like water balloons around them as they landed, raining their contents down on them and covering them like a bunker.

Zoro sat gasping for air, still a little disoriented at the sudden change in location. His collar was sticking up to the side, and Killer was sprawled on top of him where they had landed. Because of how small Law was, it was easy to forget sometimes that both he and Kid had been very well renowned during their days of underground fighting, and for good reason.

Law’s hat had fallen off his head somewhere along the way through the apartment and his hair was sticking out wildly in all directions. He heaved himself up by his arms and gripped the top shelf of the closet, scrabbling with his feet against the door to stay in reach of the boxes above their heads.
Zoro made to get up and help him when Law pulled his sword, Kikoku, from behind the boxes, dropped to the ground, and kicked Zoro back into the closet all in one motion.

“Stay here,” he said quietly. “I’m locking the front door—don’t open it.”

And then he slammed the closet door and left them both sitting in the dark. Zoro followed Law’s rushed footsteps around the sound of his and Killer’s labored breathing, and then the front door slammed heavily and the key in the lock clacked.

Beside him, Killer whimpered and Zoro inched himself up, pulling the younger boy into his side and holding him tightly there.

“I’m scared,” Killer whispered.

“. . .Me too,” Zoro admitted quietly.

The silence was heavy. Way too heavy. And Zoro felt the instant that it hit both him and Killer—thoughts of Kuina’s funeral and god knows what was going through Killer’s head—hovering around them in the black. Killer shivered slightly and Zoro held him even closer, burying his head in the younger boy’s thick hair as Killer did the same in his shirt, hiding from the black in each other’s living, breathing, healthy, unharmed bodies.

“You ok?” Zoro managed finally, though it was stupid and hypocritical for him to be the one asking that. Killer nodded just the same and hugged him, grateful for the presence.

They both jumped as the sound of gunshots cut through the darkness. Four bullets, and quick, all one after the other, and then silence again. Killer clutched at Zoro’s shirt and Zoro pulled him in even closer, straining for any more sounds below them. It was a long and heavy few minutes before either of them dared to move again. Killer reached out finally, like he was going to push the closet door open and let in some of the light, but decided against it and curled back up in Zoro’s chest. Zoro wasn’t ready to reach out yet. The dark seemed all to eager to bite off his hand and swallow it whole.

Quietly, so quietly Zoro wasn’t even sure he was hearing it correctly at first, the front door rattled. Someone jiggling the doorknob. With no purchase. . . .Law had a key . . .

Zoro leaned down after a moment and whispered, “. . .Killer—”
The door banged against the frame suddenly, lock still holding tight, and Killer yelped. Zoro froze as the clatter against the door suddenly ceased at the sound of Killer’s yell, and neither breathed, and then something slammed hard against the door and Killer screamed, hiding his face in Zoro’s shirt.

Zoro’s foot snapped forward and the closet door flew open, cracking against the wall and knocking it off the top hinge. He grabbed Killer and flung him around to his back, holding the boy’s arms around his neck until Killer understood and squeezed him nearly tight enough to choke, but Zoro couldn’t even register the pain. He dove for the window and threw it open. The sharp smack of the sill against the frame startled Killer and he yelped again, burying his face in Zoro’s back and another slam echoed down the hall. He could hear muffled yells coming from the other side of the door that sounded just a little too edgy and curt, and he had no desire to find out who it was.

Zoro stuck his head out the window, looking around for anyone that might have also thought of using the fire escape but another slam against the door had him clambering out without a second thought and up the metal rungs, Killer dangling from his back and swinging blindly through the night air as Zoro scrambled to haul both of them up. Behind him, the sound of splintering wood echoed down the hall and into the bedroom.

Blood was roaring in his ears and Killer’s grip was starting to really cut off oxygen, but he didn’t even think to stop—the only thought in his head was how small and weak the little boy on his back was compared to—

Something snapped around his ankle, gripping him hard enough to hurt even through the fear, and yanked. Zoro gasped, nearly losing his grip on the metal ladder, and he kicked back viciously, his heel connecting with a crunch against skin and bone and the person below them snarled at the sudden pain.

Zoro froze, unable to breathe for a moment as he registered Kid’s voice and his eyes whipped down. The redhead was gripping his nose where Zoro’s foot had broken it, eyes squeezed shut as he tried not to let tears leak through. Blood was already starting to drip through his fingers and down his chin. His hand was still clamped like a vice around Zoro’s ankle.

There was a huge gash on Kid’s head from god knows what—not Zoro’s foot though—and blood was oozing steadily from a deep gouge in his right pectoral. Law’s head appeared suddenly through the window, looking up and them and making sure everyone was accounted for. His shirt was splattered through with blood, and there was some matted in his hair, but other than that he looked unharmed. Kid must have gotten to them first.

“Door was stuck, fuggin’ lock jammed again,” Kid said nasally through his fingers, blinking up at
Zoro with one eye. “Ad’ Killer was… id’ sounded like… I didn’ think you would hear us.”

Zoro was coursing with adrenaline and unable to make himself let go of the ladder, even when Killer hiccupped pathetically and started sobbing against his back. Killer reached down with one hand, but Zoro’s fingers were welded to the metal, and he just looked away leaned his head against the coolness of the rungs, away from Kid’s expectant eyes.

He had to calm down. *Breathe*, he told himself quietly.

Kid was scared.

How long had it been since he’d seen Kid scared?

Another shaky breath.

*Come on, breathe.*

Kid stepped out onto the stoop, his boots clanging against the grate and Zoro jolted. He’d forgotten he was holding Killer, or that the small boy was sobbing on his back and dangling off of the side of a building in the middle of the night. Kid helped Killer down into his arms and then climbed back into the apartment, making room for Law to climb out and hoist himself up next to Zoro.

“Come on,” he urged gently, pulling on one of Zoro’s wrists. “We’re all ok, let’s go back inside.”

Zoro let out a slow, shuddering breath, but his grip only seemed to tighten more.

He had to get Killer safe.

Zoro closed his eyes and shut his mouth, forcing himself to take deep breaths in through his nose. *Killer is safe. It’s over.*

“Come on, shrimp,” Law tried again. “You did good. You can let go now.”
Zoro looked over at the man that had practically raised him even while he was a child himself, now dripping with blood and looking at him with an expression that made Zoro feel as though he looked as pathetic as he felt. Which probably wasn’t far from the truth. He made himself relax though with a few more breaths, and stepped down carefully off of the ladder and onto the landing outside the window. His legs were shaking, and he felt unstable, enough so that he didn’t trust himself to let go of the ladder. Fourteen floors was a long way to fall to the street.

Law seemed to understand and gripped one of Zoro’s wrists and his shoulder on the opposite side. “Come on. We’re ok, we’re all ok.”

Zoro nodded and eased himself away from the fire escape and back into the apartment. He kept himself close to Law the entire time for support, all the way into the kitchen where Law sat him down at the table. Kid was on the phone, Killer still wrapped around him like a baby monkey. Zoro stared dumbly down the hall to where the front door was split down the middle and hanging slightly askew. Killer screaming must have made them just react.

He swallowed again and closed his eyes, counting his breathing.

Kid and Law were scared.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this vulnerable.

“We killed three,” Law told him quietly and handed him a glass of water. “Two got away, but there’s an apartment full of dead people downstairs. They’re really fast, much faster than Killer, and they jumped all the way from the thirteenth floor to the ground without getting hurt. The police are coming to clean everything up. I’m going to go down and collect some samples before they get here.”

Zoro nodded stiffly and sipped at his water. He still couldn’t see straight from the adrenaline, and the soreness in his neck from Killer’s grip was starting to sink in. He rubbed at it absently and followed Kid and Law around with his eyes as they milled about the kitchen, stripping out of the bloodied clothes and washing it off of their skin. All of the ruined clothes were crammed immediately into the trash, not worth the effort it would take to try and get the thick blood out.

Zoro’s eyes drifted to the hallway where he could see the door to his bedroom. A majestic, white sword was sitting on top of the dresser in there, left to him by someone with a powerful dream and an immense will to protect those close to her at all costs. And he’d been ready to run. It would have
been different if he’d had Wado in his hand.

“Law, Kid.” His voice was wobbly, but he made himself continue once the two of them had stopped what they were doing, Law’s medical bag in his hands as he prepared to run back downstairs, and looked over. “I want to learn to fight.”

He looked up to meet their blank stares. “Really fight, not bullshit that won’t…” he took another deep breath through his nose, heart rate starting to pick up again. “Like you guys, when you were fighting underground.”

Kid and Law blinked at each other before both turned suddenly away, but not fast enough for Zoro to miss the small smirks they were trying to hide from him.

“Traf’s better with all of that sword crap.” Kid said finally, adjusting Killer to a more comfortable position. “That was his weapon of choice. I mostly stuck with my hands, and you can’t make Kuina proud with a shitty sensei—and Mihawk isn’t helping, stingy bastard. I’ll teach you gun stuff when you want. Or fist fighting. Or cars. Or whatever weapon… not so much flame throwers though, homemade ones have a tendency to explode.”

Zoro nodded, mustering up a smirk and finished his water, slumping back in his chair as he wondered if he was too old to set up a mattress in their room for the night. Killer was probably going to sleep in their bed anyways so he doubted they’d say no.

“I guess that means you’ll have to stay here if we’re going to teach you.”

Zoro looked up at Kid, eyes wide, and then over to Law. When the surgeon didn’t object, Zoro grinned, sitting back heavily in his chair, breathing finally calm.

-oOo-
NSPH Minor

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

NSPH Minor

Zoro’s head snapped up at the same time that Killer’s suddenly did, automatically tuned into Killer’s ridiculous senses. Killer tilted his head slightly, staring at the table as he tried to pick up whatever he had thought he’d heard again. He didn’t seem to be having any luck; he kept swiveling from right to left like a satellite dish, trying to find the signal, but he did reach up to scratch absentmindedly at his shoulder blade—a spot that always tingled if something was wrong.

Across the table from where Zoro was doing his advanced algebra work (Law refused to let either of them fall behind on their school work even with the schools closed), Kid was too absorbed in the engine he was working on to notice anything and continued with his adjustments. The kitchen and living room were littered with pieces of his projects, the garage being too far away to get to and from safely, and even if he could somehow get there with all of his limbs, his co-owners refused to come in to work with him because of the recent small-scale apocalypse.

Kid was not deterred by the lack of current buyers and planned to have it finished before the problem was cleared up so celebratory customers could instantly buy it. He swore that the last time he sold a car with an engine like the one he was working on now, he hadn’t had to sell anything for months in order to live comfortably and was not about “to let some pussy-ass vampires keep him from doing what he loved just because they couldn’t keep their teeth in their heads”. Anything he sold after the car was just a bonus. Zoro still thought that selling anything right now would be a miracle. No one was buying anything but food.

The city was in ruins. The sky had been grey for weeks from airborne debris and when it rained it doused the ground in silt, dying the entire city a washed-out grey. Street lamps, signs, storefronts, and everything government had been ransacked by panicked people after the city had been closed off from the rest of the world—determined to keep whatever was killing people like the predator inside. The streets were barren, and littered with trash, pieces of cars, slashed tires, shattered glass and nearly every other kind of dangerous implement. Several buildings had gaping holes plugged in their sides from tank shells and were completely evacuated because they no longer provided any sort of coverage during prime attack times. Hundreds were dead, picked off by NSPH—still only referred to as terrorists (and human) by officials—or killed in the riots following the siege of the city.

The army had been marched at one point, but after more soldiers were found dead than helping to save the citizens, they were pulled out and people were left to fend for themselves. The only contact from the outside world was the food flown in by helicopters and dropped through holes punched in grocery store ceilings. Helicopters had stopped landing after one had been swarmed and its pilot
killed as people fought viciously to get themselves and their families flown out of the city. Law and Kid went every week to what had previously been a madhouse of frantic people fighting tooth and nail for food.

They had brought Zoro and Killer to the first few insane scrambles, but after many deaths had occurred—including the one where Killer had almost been kidnapped and Kid had literally beaten the guy who tried to grab him to death with his fists in the middle of the crowd as people stood screaming and sobbing around them, soldiers with guns had been sent to package and equally distribute the food to keep people from fighting over it. Law hadn’t let Killer come again, which meant that Zoro had to stay home to make sure he was safe.

Law had also started carrying Kikoku around over his shoulder, a sword that Zoro held in high respect, though the sword itself wasn’t all that special—all of its power came from Law’s own skill. Kid had taken to keeping a pair of leather gloves in his pocket for fighting and a gun stuck in his belt, but he was generally pretty confident with his hands.

The fact that Law had started keeping Kikoku on his person meant that Zoro had been able to take Wado with him nearly everywhere, and was always practicing with Kid, Law, Shanks, Luffy, Ace, and whoever else would take him up on bettering his skills. He’d even fought Mihawk once when he was snuck into the city to check up on them all and bring medical supplies for Law, but he hadn’t stayed long. Mihawk hadn’t seemed too impressed with how much Zoro had improved, and that was shoved under Zoro’s skin that ate at him constantly, driving him to train as though his life depended on it. Which, as the city was going, probably wasn’t far from the truth.

Killer’s head finally stopped swiveling and whipped around to the window behind him, regardless of the fact that the thick boards nailed over the glass made it impossible to see out into the city—still swimming in dust from the recent shelling done by the military. He twitched uncomfortably again as he did so, reaching back to scratch his shoulder blade again. Zoro looked too, but he didn’t hear or feel anything. Not even vibrations in the floors that would signal the tanks were rolling in again, looking out for a recent sighting of one of the “terrorists” that had taken over the city. The fact that Killer was still looking though meant that something was coming. Killer’s “instincts,” if you could call them that, were much more astute than anyone else Zoro had ever met because of the NSPH thing, and if Killer said the tanks were coming, Zoro believed him.

“What?” Kid asked gruffly, finally looking up, pliers still stuck deep in the metal contraption. Zoro looked over to meet his eyes, and then back to Killer, who was still trained on the window.

“…Tanks?” Zoro asked finally and Killer tilted his head to the side.

“I… no… I mean… it’s weird.”
Kid looking bored. He’d been tired of the tanks even before the first time they’d rolled through the city, just generally looking intimidating and not doing anything to help. He’d been angrier that they were tearing up the roads and that even if the NSPH situation was handled, no one would be able to drive anywhere until they redid every stretch of pavement in the entire city. “…Yeah?”

“It’s not like…” Killer cocked his head back to one side, trying to hone in on something, “the vibration isn’t coming from the ground. …I don’t feel it in the floor at least, so I don’t think it is.”

Zoro blinked and looked back at Kid, surprised to find the older man’s brown eyes wide and his hand frozen in the engine. His mouth dropped open with a slight popping sound and he floundered slightly as he seemed to try to find words.

Something had clicked.

“…Kid?” Zoro asked after a quiet moment.

After speaking wordlessly to himself for another moment, Kid drew in a deep breath through his nose and shut his eyes tight, massaging the corners of his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. After another minute he returned to fiddling with the pliers in the engine. His glare was tight—a forced calm keeping his shoulders steady. That in and of itself made Zoro uneasy and he exchanged a glance with Killer. Kid never felt the need to keep his emotions in check.

“…Should… we get under something?” Killer tried after a silent minute and Kid shrugged.

“…No point really.”

Zoro tried next. “…What do you mean?”

“We’re on the fourteenth floor. Hiding isn’t going to do shit if we’re falling out of the sky.”

“…The… tanks never make that much damage. Even with the exploding shells they’ve never taken a building down—”
“No, but if a bomber drops something on your head or launches a missile at anything in your vicinity it’s not going to matter if you’re under the bed or picking your nose, so you might as well finish that math or Traf will have a cow.”

Zoro’s mouth dropped open and Killer sucked in a quick breath, hiccupping slightly as it got caught in his throat.

“…They’re sending in the air force?”

It was such… a wide range attack…

Kid didn’t even bother to look up as he clipped the last wire and then placed the pliers on the side of the engine, laying the cover back over the machine. “Well, if it is the air force, the government has decided that tanks aren’t strong enough and they need to start removing all possible threats.”

Just like Law said. “…So what do we do?” Zoro asked angrily, infuriated by Kid’s apathy, but the redhead gave him a look and Zoro backed down slightly.

“Nothing,” Kid said firmly, heaving the engine off of the table and dragging it into the living room with the other finished ones. “You can’t outrun it, and if this building or the ones around us get hit, we’re fucked. So get comfortable and hope they don’t drop one too close.”

Zoro and Killer sat gaping, unable to completely understand what was happening. Especially with Kid milling about like there wasn’t anything happening. This was the man that Zoro had seen not two weeks ago drive someone’s eyes so deep into their skull his fist was literally dripping with brain matter; blood splattered down his front, framing his maniacal expression; eyes on fire with the desire to end the person that had threatened his son. It had taken Law two full minutes to tear Kid off of him and by then the man was long dead, blood pooling around his head like it was pouring from a hose.

“Also, don’t scream,” Kid added harshly as an after fact. “Either of you, I don’t want to go out hearing that.”

He didn’t want to die hearing the people he’d risked his life countless times for afraid and be unable to do anything. Zoro leaned forward heavily, setting his chin on the table and staring off at the wall. His muscles were tight, but his mind was impossibly quiet, and a strange electrical feeling was jolting uncomfortably up and down his spine with the need to scream or run or get angry or attack
something but unable to find the desire to in his lungs. Killer looked back and forth between the two of them, visibly growing more and more anxious by the second, and then Zoro felt the vibrations too. Unfamiliar ones that shook the walls instead of the floor and made the windows hum. All three heads turned to the window Killer had been looking at earlier as a drone started off in the distance, low and ominous.

…This could be it.

This could literally be the end of everything.

The heavy fear that oozed through his body was like sludge, choked by the inability to do anything to change the situation. If he’d had the opportunity, he wondered if he would have reacted differently—grabbed Killer and hid; gotten angry at Kid and screamed when he didn’t contribute enough; been terrified instead of suffocated by his own impending death.

“Is…” Killer said suddenly, and Zoro made his head turn to look at him, “is Dad going to be ok?”

Kid was silent. He’d just placed the engine carefully on the floor and away from feet bumbling around in the night—assuming that they’d all still be able to walk by nighttime—and remained crouching on the floor, one elbow on the chair next to him, keeping him propped up. His shoulders dropped slightly as he let out a slow breath and adjusted the neon blue bandana on his head.

“The military generally avoids hospitals,” he answered finally, but by his tone he very clearly didn’t believe what he was saying. “Like, out of principal. You know, don’t kick a man when he’s down and all that crap.”

Zoro felt the lead weight plummet further down his throat.

“The NSPH haven’t been attacking hospitals either, so hopefully no reason to target there. Maybe sick blood is thicker or weaker or something.”

This was too quick. Too soon. It was ridiculous. This couldn’t be it. They’d worked so hard to stay together and keep each other safe and now Law wasn’t even here and their own country was attacking them for something that wasn’t their fault—

Was Law afraid too? He didn’t have Killer’s instincts with him, did he even know what was coming? Zoro couldn’t even remember if he’d said goodbye this morning, or even if he’d been awake at all. Had he snapped at Law? He was never in a good mood when he woke up. Had Kid
kissed him or had the morning been rushed to get Law to work safely? What if they survived and Law died? Kid would snap. He would literally go insane. He would start hunting down the NSPH and get himself killed. Law was the only thing that kept him stable, no matter how much he cared for Zoro and Killer. What if they died and Law had to identify their bodies? Or they were just shipped off to keep disease from spreading and Law came home to an apartment building lying in ruins on the sidewalk and no one around?

“Kid—” he said, voice out of breath and obviously rushed even though he hadn’t been speaking or moving at all and whirled to face the man he really should have been calling father along with Law all of these years, sure that there was some way to convince him that they could run or get a couple floors downstairs to avoid the major attack or—

Kid laid a hand suddenly on his shoulder and Zoro jumped, head snapping up to where Kid’s eyes had taken on a strange calm, not really looking at either him or Killer. His tranquility wasn’t forced anymore, and Zoro couldn’t decide if that was better or worse.

“Let’s go sit on the bed or something,” he murmured, tugging on Zoro’s shoulder when he didn’t move. In the distance, a hollow explosion shattered the unearthly quiet and Killer was out of his chair in an instant, sprinting down the hall and into the bedroom with uncanny speed. Kid followed after him and Zoro scrambled out of his chair, thick fear keeping him from being left alone.

Killer was already buried under the covers, waiting for them, and upon closer inspection Zoro realized that he’d pulled on one of Law’s sweatshirts over his clothes. He glanced up at Kid, sure by the momentary pause in Kid’s step that he’d seen it too, but neither of them stopped and soon had Killer wedged between them on the mattress. Zoro pulled the covers up to his chin but Kid stayed on top, head resting laxly up against the wall and legs stretched out in front of him. A blank, emotionless stare clouded his face and Zoro looked away, focusing his attention back on Killer as another blast—much closer this time—broke the air.

Killer nestled into Kid’s side and Kid finally seemed to snap out of his funk, wrapping a long arm around both of the two of them and crushing them to his side. Zoro closed his eyes and found a comfortable position, lying still for a moment. The twinging anxiety quickly got the better of him though and he wrapped his arms around Killer and Kid as tightly as he could for some form of release.

Another explosion. The walls of the building jostled them and the lights flickered, but everything continued to hold. Zoro’s mind, tuned into counting his sit-ups and clocking his pushups, began counting down the seconds it had taken between the last one and the one before it. The droning of the planes was like a cloud of irate hornets, hovering outside the door and waiting for the walls to be blown open so they could swarm in for the unprotected bodies lying on the bed.
“…I wish Dad was here,” Killer whispered into Kid’s side and both he and Zoro squeezed the small boy tighter.

Kid took a huge breath and let it out in a rush, eyes still unsettlingly tranquil. “Yeah, me too.”

A dark voice in Zoro’s head, without any authorization or want from him, finished the sentence for Kid:

*But we’ll see him soon.*

And then, still without any consent:

*...I wonder if Kuina will be there.*

Stop, he ordered darkly, and then closed his eyes and buried his face in Killer’s shoulder. He felt the automatic reaction as the two others braced themselves, turning into each other for some sort of protection.

It was like the floor had incinerated beneath them. Zoro felt his head smash against the wall behind him, deafening noise obliterating his ears and sending his equilibrium reeling. The ceiling rained in on top of them, plaster and glass connecting violently with the exposed parts of his body and slicing through the blankets, and then in the same instant it had started, it was done. The only sound left in the room was Kid hacking profusely.
“Fucking goddamn piece of shit military! Why don’t they just tow in an atomic bomb and level the whole fucking city?!”

Zoro twitched experimentally, feeling Killer still held securely in his arms, and peeled open his eyes, trying to see around the blood dripping into his eyes to the rest of the room. Black and brown grit floated through the air as if they were submerged in water, and he couldn’t see more than ten feet in front of him. The bright light from the right side of the room made him guess that a pretty sizeable chunk had been blown out of the wall—if not the ceiling and the floor too. His ears were ringing, a high pitched whine that damn near drowned everything else out, but if he could still hear then the bomb must have exploded far enough away that the building wouldn’t collapse. And it didn’t seem like he would lose his hearing, which was always good. He tried to take a breath but dust swamped his lungs and he coughed harshly.

“Fucking Christ! It’s like we’re living in World War II and any cost is fine as long as the goddamn enemy has been annihilated! Next time shit like this goes down, as long as we’re descending into a forced-seceded city we might as well kidnap some of their fucking family and hold them hostage here! Then we’ll see if they send in the fucking air force!”

There was the anger Zoro had been looking for in Kid.

It had a strangely calming effect.

“**Missiles!** Fucking **short-range ballistic missiles!** FUCK!”

He strained to follow the sound of Kid as the older man crashed his way through the furniture and plaster toward the light, watching as the flaming red hair disappeared into the cloud of dust. Zoro tried breathing in slowly again and then coughed, lungs still burning with whatever had filled the air. The wind was whipping it into his face, only securing his idea that they were missing a good part of the wall, but it was helping in clearing the room so that he could see. Zoro found Kid’s outline at the hole in the wall that had also blown an opening into his room next door and his hand instinctively snapped to his side where Wado was hanging. He let out a slow breath—**safe**—and coughed again, pushing the covers away from their bodies.

Kid was hanging out of the hole, looking above and below, no doubt to check the sturdiness of the building and see if they needed to leave now or if they could collect themselves first. He didn’t seem too rushed, and finally fixed the ripped and bloodied neon blue bandana on his head before looking back over his shoulder to the two still on the bed.
“You ok?” he called. Zoro couldn’t tell if his voice was muffled because his vocal cords were caked in dust or because Zoro still couldn’t hear correctly.

Zoro nodded, coughing again heavily, before he suddenly remembered Killer in his arms and looked down to make sure he was fine too.

Zoro froze, eyes shooting open and he gasped—loudly—yanking back in shock from the blood drenching the blankets under him, soaking through to his clothes and staining his hands red. Zoro shook, fingers twitching as he tried to remember what they were supposed to be doing, what Law had taught him to do for emergency first aid treatment, and he scrambled to his knees, pulling Killer away from his awkward position on the wall. The blond head lolled heavily to the side, and when Zoro dropped him in shock from the odd movement and he sprawled out on the bed like a ragdoll, blood pouring out onto the bed.

“No,” Zoro choked out, yanking on Killer’s clothes and trying to find the source of the bleed. “No. No! Kid! Kid!”

Kid was at his side in a heartbeat, pushing Zoro’s hands away with one hand and tearing Killer’s shirt down the middle with another. A shard of glass bigger than Kid’s hand had shot through all of the debris and buried itself deep in Killer’s collarbone, slicing straight through Killer’s throat, which had been in its path. Zoro let out a sharp keening sound, a sound he’d never heard himself make before, and he scared himself with the amount of sheer desperation behind the tone. He reached desperately for Killer’s limp form.

His jugular…

“What do we do?” he wailed, terrified to touch the glass and make it worse. There was so much blood. There was so much blood. “What do we do?!”

Kid was frozen, one hand fist in Killer’s shirt, the other one locked painfully around Zoro’s wrist, holding him like a vice as he tried to come up with something—anything. Zoro could deal with broken bones, they were nothing new, and the pain might help get his mind locked on the problem. Nothing else seemed to be able to cut through the throttling feeling of hopelessness. He felt his own breathing start to go shallow.

Kid dropped his hand suddenly, and before Zoro could scream for him to stop—that he’d only make it worse, if such a thing was possible—the older man gripped the fragment tightly between two fingers and slid it out of Killer’s chest with a grotesque squelching sound. Blood spurted upwards, catching both of them in the face and Zoro flinched violently, lurching back and away from Killer’s
dying form. Zoro wasn’t sure he was breathing anymore.

Kid pressed his hands roughly over the wound, holding it together in a last desperate attempt, and Zoro paused, flabbergasted, before a deranged laugh leapt from his tongue, an unhinged look bleeding into his eyes.

This was Kid’s brilliant plan? He’d been with a doctor for twelve years and the best he could come up with was to hold the flesh together and try to stop the bleeding? The blood was probably gushing into his lungs too if the slice through his throat said anything.

“He’s dying!” Zoro screamed, his voice hysterical and unfamiliar. “That’s not going to do anything!”

Kid didn’t answer, but his glare darkened and he pressed harder on Killer’s chest, making the bedsprings groan under them. Zoro threw his hands over his eyes, gritting his teeth as he racked his brain for anything Law would have said about any injury like this.

“Weaklings can’t pick their way of death.”

That’s what he would have said. Maybe not exactly worded like that, especially if he was talking about Killer, but that’s what he would have said.

Zoro dug his fingers into his scalp, tucking his chin into his chest.

They were going to lose him.

Zoro’s diaphragm spasmed and he sucked in a choked breath, moving his hands to look down at the blood flooding over the tiny body. Zoro gripped the hilt at his side and held it as close to him as he could, holding his breath when he felt another spasm coming.

Zoro swallowed heavily, leaning forward to brush Killer’s hair away from his face—one last chance to say goodbye to him—and Killer’s vibrant copper eyes suddenly shot open. Zoro jerked back again as Killer coughed suddenly, blood spitting up from his lips like a tiny geyser and spattering his cheek. He rolled over onto his side, pulling away from Kid’s hands to hack into his hand, blood spraying across the sheets with every breath.

Zoro twitched slightly, reaching for him, but Kid grabbed his arm and held him back, shaking his
head. “He has to get the blood out of his lungs or he won’t be able to breathe.”

Zoro sat gaping as Killer gasped for air before finally calming down and rolling over onto his back with enough care to indicate exactly what kind of pain he was in. He whimpered, bottom lip quivering and tears leaking out from under where his thick bangs had fallen back into place. Zoro would normally have instantly been at his side—protectiveness kicking into hyper drive at the sound he rarely heard Killer make, but the shock of the sealed wound in his collarbone, now barely even oozing blood, held him motionless. The next pained cry Killer made however—so much more agonizing than the last—had Zoro dropping to the bed next to him and pulling him into a light hug.

“Easy, Killer,” he murmured, holding the shaking boy as tears poured down his face. “You’re going to be ok.”

Killer gritted his teeth, rocking his head from side to side as he tried to find a comfortable position. He pawed helplessly at the torn up skin where part of the collarbone was still poking through, not really seeming to be sure where the pain was coming from, but Kid took his hands to keep him from scratching the skin open and they just lay there and let Killer cry, twisting every once and a while in an attempt to get away from the pain.

“It itches!” he moaned, burrowing into Zoro’s front, and Zoro held him tighter. “And it really hurts!”

Zoro looked futilely at Kid for anything they could do, but Kid just shook his head and Zoro positioned himself to wrap his body more around the younger boy, cringing the next time Killer sobbed.

As much as he didn’t want to see the thing that had almost taken his brother from him, Zoro’s eyes kept drifting back to Killer’s front where the gaping hole had become an old slash. Even the bone peaking through was gone now. And even as Zoro and Kid sat watching, Killer’s skin continued to knit itself back together right in front of their eyes. Every once and a while the brand new pink skin would bubble and Killer would let out a half scream, squirming against the painful feeling, and then the bubble would drop back down into his skin and the new, stretched cells would crawl towards the other side of the lesion, as if the two sides were calling to each other.

Minutes ticked by, ten, fifteen, twenty, and with every passing moment the fatal laceration in his front looked less and less traumatic and more and more like he’d cut himself playing on the playground. The two sides of the cut had finally reached each other, and as the movement in his skin grew slower and slower, Killer’s crying faded to incoherent whimpers. The bubbling had stopped, and now only the pink skin and the fresh scar tissue remained as evidence. It was as if the skin had stopped panicking once the danger of infection or exposed bone was removed and was content to let Killer’s body heal naturally.
If naturally was the word.

Killer’s eyelids fluttered as he tried to keep himself awake, head flopping from side to side as he kept trying to look up at either one of them—being unable to keep his focus on either in particular. Every once and a while he would attempt to mutter something but it was never intelligible. His eyes rolled back into his head several times before he just couldn’t keep his head up anymore and it dropped heavily to the bed next to Zoro. His breathing was finally back to a normal pace.

Zoro ran his hand gently up and down Killer’s arm as his eyes quivered again, still trying to stay awake.

“Easy, Killer,” he whispered, suddenly tired himself as the adrenaline left his system. “You can sleep, we’ll all still be here.”

Killer tried one last time to look over at him, and then his head slumped back and his breath evened out to slow, deep inhaling and exhaling. In the distance, the sirens of the last two remaining ambulances and one fire truck could be heard wailing towards the wreckage.

-oOo-

Zoro slammed a backpack crammed full of cans and packages of food down on the kitchen table next to two more backpacks of supplies that he and Kid had filled. Barely anything except the main structure of the apartment had survived the blast; most of the furniture lay splintered or split in some irreparable way, the cabinets and fridge had been knocked open and most of the glassware and dishes were in fragments across the floor, the bathroom door had been taken off of it’s hinges and most of their clothes had too many holes and singed areas in them to wear anymore. What was viable had been stuffed into the blue backpack. For Zoro, two pairs of pants, three shirts, any boxers that had survived, whatever socks available, and a coat that he would wear on the way over to the hospital. For Kid, one shirt, three pairs of ratty jeans, and some of Law’s boxers and socks—his had caught on fire during the scramble to keep Killer from bleeding out. For Killer, four shirts, one extra pair of pants, and some of Zoro’s socks and underwear. Killer’s measly stock of sweatshirts and coats had been ripped apart like road kill in the blast, and Kid had been left with one coat that now had a gaping hole through the back. Most of Law’s things had been moved to the hospital for easy transportation and for donation to patients, meaning that the scant amount of clothing left would barely be enough for him. He and Kid would have to share.

Kid had started a separate bag for fighting gloves and assorted bandanas, goggles and other headwear. Zoro hadn’t bothered trying to keep him from this, especially when Kid took a moment to go around the ruins of the apartment—basically collapsing in on top of them—and collect some of
Law’s things, including a favorite hat and pair of boots, cow print jeans, and then whatever else could be salvaged. He also picked up scraps of Killer and Zoro’s favorite clothes, possibly to make something else out of, and Zoro rolled his eyes, returning to the more important job of making sure they wouldn’t be taking the hospital’s food if they had to stay there.

The food bag set up next to the clothing bags and a bag of medical supplies left in the bathroom and water bottles, Kid and Zoro shared a tired glance before both moving to put on their shoes. Zoro used a large strip of splintered wood from the ceiling to remove a chunk of plaster that had sliced through the toe of his right shoe and tested it to make sure it wouldn’t fall apart while they were walking. Satisfied that it would hold, he grabbed the most in-shape pair of shoes for Killer and trudged through the debris to the bedroom where Killer was still unconscious on the bed.

Zoro climbed up, ignoring Killer’s mouth hanging to the side in an unnervingly dead manner and threw the covers off of him, kneeling down to wrestle his shoes on. Killer didn’t even flinch, though Zoro was being far from careful, his movements growing harsher and more frantic as Killer continued not to react.

“Weaklings can’t pick their way of death.”

Zoro swallowed and took a deep breath, letting it out in a rush as he stilled his hand on Killer’s remaining shoe. Killer wasn’t weak. A wound like that would have killed anyone else in an instant. He wasn’t weak and he wasn’t going to die.

_Not if I have anything to say about it._

Zoro finished cramming the limp foot into the shoe and jerked the strings into a knot, not even bothering to keep the laces from hanging. It wasn’t like Killer was going to trip on them or anything.

“Ready?”

Zoro looked back to the remains of the doorframe where Kid was leaned stoically against what was left of the wood. The neon blue bandana he was wearing earlier had been replaced with a deep red one for better camouflage as darkness continued to fall, and the hood of his sweatshirt—awkwardly clinging to his shoulders with the massive hole in its back—had been pulled up to keep his bright red hair hidden from any lights or people that may know them. It was too dangerous to take any risks. He stalked forward and dropped the three backpacks on the bed, jostling them and making the mattress squeak. Not that Killer noticed.
Zoro nodded at him slowly, and then pulled his own hood up to hide his hair, which sometimes seemed to glow under the right lights. Zoro jerked back as something was thrust into his face, blinking at the strip of cloth that Kid was holding out for him until he realized that it was another bandana so that he wouldn’t have to worry about keeping his hood up as they ran. He reached out and took the cloth, pausing at the material, worn soft by with years of use. It had obviously been loved. He looked up at Kid, owl-eyed in question and Kid shrugged, refusing to meet his eyes.

“We, uh… we don’t know if the hospital got hit yet,” he said finally, shifting the backpack on his arm in an attempt to keep from feeling so uncomfortable under Zoro’s scrutiny. “…He won’t need this if it was. …And it was kind of mangled anyways, not much left to it.”

Zoro’s eyes dropped back to the bandana and flipped it over, scanning the black cloth for the mark even though he knew—

There.

On the bottom corner, tucked carefully into the stitching, was yellow embroidery thread in the shape of a two curved T’s and a section of a circle under them—the corner of an abstract sun that almost resembled a virus, adorned with a devilish smile and hand-stitched into the black fabric back when it had first been purchased. It was a symbol Law had taken on during his years underground, and continued to carry with him even nine years after getting out. Zoro’s fist closed unconsciously around the fabric and he pulled it into his chest, biting on his tongue to keep his lip from shaking before he tied it tightly over his head and almost completely over his eyes, making sure all of his hair was tucked away.

“Let’s go.”

Kid nodded and leaned over, grabbing Killer’s limp form by one arm and swinging him over his back. The heavy blanket followed, hiding Killer against his back and Kid tied it around his shoulders and waist to hold him like a sling. Killer didn’t stir once, and had it not been for the shallow but steady breathing, Zoro would have been convinced he hadn’t made it from the loss of blood.

“…Should we… feed Killer? Before we go? I-I can just make a little cut, all of the stuff in the fridge was contaminated but—”

Kid shook his head and slung the pack of water bottles over his shoulder, handing the other two to Zoro. “We need all of our strength to get to the hospital, and to be honest, I don’t know if he’ll be lucid enough to eat like this. And even if he ate, we’d be walking, bleeding targets for every predator with a decent sense of smell and we’d have a mile of open NSPH territory between this death trap
Zoro looked out the massive hole in the wall where the plaster and cement had been shattered, tracing the last rays of the sun as they licked like fire against the horizon and the still-standing buildings. The light was swirling through the dust saturating the air, flickering every once and a while to catch him in the eye before it disappeared again behind the thick, grey cloud. They were losing their light fast. Below them on the street, through the settling dust, he could see flashes of people as they darted from the destroyed buildings, scattering like bugs, all frantically hoping that they were each picking the direction the predator wasn’t in.

Zoro checked the bandana once more, yanked the hood up over his head, and pulled the zipper up tight to his chin. Each pack went on one shoulder, and then he looked over at Kid, still a full ten inches above him despite Zoro’s recent growth spurt, and nodded, turning abruptly and heading towards the remains of the front door.

“Zoro.”

“Yeah?”

“Wrong way. That’s the bathroom.”

“…Shut up.”

“I’m leading.”

-oOo-
My Soul May Set in Darkness

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

My Soul May Set in Darkness*

Zoro’s back slammed up against the wall and he dropped to the ground, pressing himself as close to the wall as possible as he tried to slow his breathing down. Kid landed next to him with a slam, both freezing when something crashed in the alley across from them. Zoro inched further into the shadows, pulling the toe of his mangled shoe out of the flickering light of one of the last remaining street lamps.

They were silent for a full minute with no sounds coming from the alley before Zoro moved again, shuffling over to Kid’s side to pull the blankets back from Killer’s face and make sure he was still breathing. He met Kid’s eye, who flicked his gaze across the street to their right where the hospital was leeching an eerie green light into the streets. Immediately behind the doors of the hospital—glass sliders with boards nailed in a crisscross pattern over the vulnerable spots—were people they could see drifting past the holes in the boards. The only reason they’d be posted there was if they had guns, which wasn’t a strange idea considering a shipment of medical supplies had been shipped in recently. Zoro nodded and swallowed again, heart rate still not down from their mile sprint across town through the shadows of the alleyways.

They shifted to their hands and knees, crawling towards the corner of the building and Zoro prepared to make a dash to the front door the second Kid moved. Falling behind even a single pace could mean enough space to give an NSPH the confidence needed to take down a kill. Together, they might stand a chance, especially with Wado at his side. But there were packs of NSPH lurking around the city and not that much food and not that much shelter left. Times were desperate for everyone.

Kid moved half an inch, a sudden jerk, and Zoro was instantly on his feet, flying forward when Kid dropped back to the shadows faster than Zoro could see and grabbed Zoro’s shoulders, yanking him back down where he connected hard with the wall. Zoro grunted at the impact and Kid clapped a hand over his mouth just as Zoro heard the telltale crunching and popping of rocks and glass fragments against the pavement, and tires squealed around the corner.

Two ambulances swung in front of the building, screeching to a halt violently and every door in both vehicles flew open before they had even come close to complete stops. Emergency personnel, dressed haphazardly in whatever red and yellow they could find, spilled out, rushing around to the back to pull patients out and racing over to bang on the wooden boards nailed across the hospital doors. It was a machine, poorly oiled, but well-run enough to function, and the doors slid open with sharp squeals as patients were carried and dragged towards the doors.
Kid got to his feet, ready to sprint into the crowd and slip in with the mayhem. Once they were inside they could find Law and no one would be able to kick them out, but until then no hospital staff was going to risk wasting resources on them—

“**Above!**” a voice screamed suddenly, and all eyes snapped to the roof, everything halting momentarily as a black shape dropped out of the sky. It landed on a gurney with a crash, taking the wheels out from under it and sending both bodies as well as the two people pushing it sprawling across the ground. The thing that had soared in like a hawk reared back, perched on top of the bleeding patient’s chest, and lunged down, sinking teeth into his neck as he shrieked in terror.

The crowd exploded, people screaming and scattering in every which direction, some towards the hospital where doors that had just been opened were suddenly flooded with guards. Every one of them was locked and loaded, and the second they had set foot outside the hospital bullets flew, bursts of light and short, deafening cracks split the night air, backed by the frantic wailing of abandoned patients and people running for their lives as more and more NSPH dropped out of the sky.

Zoro’s mind instantly began counting them—eight, nine, ten, eleven—when Kid grabbed his shirt sleeve and shot forward, snapping Zoro’s head back with the shock of the force behind the pull. The second his body caught up with his mind and he was keeping up, Kid let go, and they sprinted into the dead middle of the chaos, sidestepping and jumping over patients and NSPH writhing across the ground like a pit of snakes.

Zoro gasped as something snagged his pant leg and Wado was in his hand before he could even think. Quick twist, a flash of silver in the green light and blood flew, followed by a hand sailing through the air as someone howled. The entire movement happened before he’d taken his next step, or flying leap over someone bleeding to death on the ground from injuries from the bomb, and he didn’t bother to spare the energy to look behind him. He’d just have to trust that it was a NSPH and not the hand of some desperate, hurt person reaching out for him.

Something flashed overhead, black and moving as fast as a bolt of lighting right for Kid’s back and Zoro launched himself forward, too far away to use Wado. He hit the NSPH head-on, right above Kid’s head, sending both of them flying, clawing and lashing out at each other before they even hit the ground. Zoro’s shoulder hit first and the air was forced painfully out of his lungs as the NSPH landed on top of him, Wado spinning away across the ground from the blow. Zoro choked, momentarily stunned, and claws slashed deep through his cheek as he ducked barely in time to miss losing his eye.

His hands snapped out and grabbed both sets of claws flashing for his throat, holding them tight to his shoulders and away from his major arteries. Above him, slightly sunken but vibrant copper eyes narrowed in fury, lips peeling back to reveal fangs Zoro had come to know too well from all of his
Zoro struggled to his feet, still slightly out of breath, when a hand gripped the handle of one of the
backpacks he was wearing and he was yanked forward, knocking the air back out of his lungs. Zoro
coughed, reaching for Wado before he realized that it was Kid who had grabbed him and that Wado
was not in her sheath. Zoro gasped, whirling around in the impossibly tight grip and his hand shot
out, snagging the beautiful white sword from the blood and dirt before he was thrown like a javelin
through the open doors of the hospital and landed in a jumbled heap inside, cans spewing out of the
backpack and clattering across the floor and into the boots of the guards shooting from the door.

Zoro wrestled out of the tangled straps of the bags, gripping Wado in one hand and ready to race
back out into the frenzy now that he wasn’t held down with fifty pounds worth of canned food when
Kid clotheslined him with a giant arm and sent him flying, knocking the air out of him for the third
time in less than a minute. Zoro rolled over onto his back and pushed himself to his knees, hacking
profusely as his lungs tried to remember how to take in air. Kid’s bags landed with a thump next to
his head and he looked up as Kid pulled the gun from his belt, firing with the guards at the front door
out into the unnaturally green night, Killer still strapped to his back. Zoro clutched at his chest,
sucking a breath in with a loud gulp and leapt to his feet. Kid swiped for him as he ran past, but he
made sure to be far enough away so that he could duck around Kid’s hands.

“Zoro!”

Zoro dove forward, sliding across the pavement as bullets tore through the air above him, and came
to a stop next to the closest person on the ground outside the sliding doors. He placed a hand over
their mouth to feel for air, determined that they were dead and crawled to the next one. The woman
choked, a monstrous gash ripped open in her neck, and reached up slowly, calling for him. Her voice
was a thick gurgle, soaked through with blood draining into her lungs.

“P-Please…”

Zoro knew the wound was fatal, and he shouldn’t have wasted time rechecking it but there was a
dead NSPH next to her, face held in a grimace and fangs deadly sharp and white against the black
air. She was dying and had still managed to take one down with her, so he checked the wound again
before shaking his head grimly at her. Something deep, and uncomfortably private flashed behind her
eyes, fear, pain, realization, understanding, hatred, resentment, calm, and hundreds of other feelings
that Zoro had felt himself only an hour ago with Killer lying soaked in blood on the bed, dying under
his useless hand, and then something settled behind her eyes—resolve—and her hand drifted out
again to come to rest on top Zoro’s hand. Wado was gripped tightly in his grip, and he blinked before realizing what she wanted him to do.

“P…please…” she gurgled again, and Zoro nodded, reaching out with his free hand to cover her eyes and he plunged the blade into her side before he could change his mind, driving the tip through both lungs and her heart. She shivered, a rush of air escaping from her lips as more blood dribbled down her chin, and then she was still. An NSPH landed in a heap next to him, a bullet wound right above its ear and Zoro yanked Wado’s blade from the woman’s body, crawling over to the next one.

“Zoro! Leave them!”

Zoro faltered at the sound of Kid’s furious tone but pushed himself forward, crawling past three more dead bodies before he reached the snapped shin of a man. He placed a hand over his mouth to feel for breath and make sure he was still alive and then hauled the man up by his arms, dragging him back towards the hospital.

“ZORO!”

Zoro’s head snapped up and his mouth dropped open at the flicker of gleaming fangs above his face and then another crack from a gun and the NSPH smashed into him, dead weight forcing him roughly to the ground. Zoro grunted and heaved the body off of him, starting at the sight of four more pair of eyes glowing at him from the roof of the building next door. He let out a shaky breath and grabbed the man again, jolting as something groaned by him and he found an old woman crumpled against the ground, twisting uncomfortably. Zoro gritted his teeth and fisted the man’s jacket tightly in one hand so he could free up his other and dragged the two people over the next body they passed instead of around it to get to the safety of the hospital.

When he was in reach, two people raced out to help him bring the man and woman inside and two of the NSPH landed in front of them. The two people screamed and Zoro reacted, dropping the man and old woman and slashing with Wado so fast the two falling forms didn’t even have time to hit the ground. The head of the NSPH closest to him sailed backwards and the other one dropped to its knees, riddled with bullet holes. The people that had come to help him were frozen, clutching at themselves and screaming, fight or flight response overthrown by the sheer amount of adrenaline coursing through their systems.

“Come on!” Zoro roared, grabbing the man and woman again and the two snapped their mouths closed, shaking for another second before they grabbed the man’s feet and took his arms from Zoro so he could be carried inside, leaving Zoro to haul the old woman into his arms. The two dropped to the ground once inside, shaking in fear and curled into fetal positions, and Zoro set the old woman carefully down before turning back for the front doors. He had to make sure the other ones he’d seen
outside were actually dead, but a fist appeared out of nowhere in front of his face, smashing him backwards across the hospital entryway where he skidded across the bloodied floor and hit the wall on the other side of the room head-on. People yelped in shock as he went flying by, confused as to what was happening.

Zoro groaned, reaching up to finger his nose gingerly as pain erupted behind his eyes, blood gushing down the front of his face. In front of him, two of Kid were standing—swimming as his eyes filled with water—on the other side of the room, shaking from how livid he was, glaring at Zoro like he’d set out to murder small children.

“You stay there,” Kid ordered darkly, turning back for the glass doors as the guards started to slide them shut, still firing blindly into the night to deter the NSPH from trying to get in. Zoro made to get up, just to spite the motherfucker for thinking he could control him with barbarian tactics like that, but the sudden motion made his brain melt inside of his head and trickle out his ears, and movement suddenly became an extremely strange notion. He wasn’t sure why he’d tried to move in the first place. Zoro slid back to the ground, touching his nose, eyes, head, and neck like they were landmines, not sure exactly where the pain was coming from but understanding how much it hurt. He was going to look like a domestic abuse victim tomorrow. Though technically, it was true.

Asshole.

The doors boomed, echoing down the halls as they closed and the chains rattled as they were dragged across the boards, clicking into place. Zoro was content to just sit, but the bursting pain was getting worse by the second, and the sudden thickness of anger in the air from Kid crouching down next to him wasn’t helping in the slightest.

Zoro waited for Kid to say something, imagining all of the yelling and which choice names he would pick, but the redhead seemed so enraged that he couldn’t even form words and eventually just heaved Zoro over one shoulder. He ignored Zoro’s yelp of pain and grabbed the backpacks Zoro had been carrying and the food that had spilled out, marching them all down the hallway like a furious pack mule, steam pouring out of his ears and leaving a trail of blood as he stalked through the nurses, doctors, volunteers racing from room to room.

-oOo-

Out of the seven patients being brought to the hospital, only four had made it inside, and out of those, only two had lived past the first five minutes inside. Including those deaths and the people that were killed outside while trying to bring others in, there were several empty beds in the hospital, and Kid wasted no time in angering a lot of doctors to check the chart for an empty room and get Killer set up in an unoccupied one.
Kid growled like a rabid wolf at anyone that tried to check Killer for any wounds or bleeds and physically removed two others that tried to call his bluff, leaving Zoro to comfort the small boy when he woke up and instantly started sobbing, pain and hunger surging through him in waves.

It was like he was an infant again, screaming for some sort of reassurance in the night that things would get better, but his physical body had no reason to accept that everything would be fine, and he was left to the mercy of his demons. His skin was pale and flaky, turning grey in some areas and peeling in layer upon layer in others. His fangs fluctuated, extending and retracting as his mind tried to make sense of what his body was feeling and a few times he sunk them deep into his own lips by accident, blood dribbling down his chin and making the situation worse. He was soaked in sweat, and his breath was coming in choked bursts, like his lungs didn’t know how to take in oxygen anymore. Zoro was nearly frantic himself as he watched Killer thrash under the covers, so hungry and overwhelmed by the smell of blood covering nearly every inch of the hospital that he’d even tried to bite himself a couple times because he was the nearest source of food. He wasn’t even trying to bite Zoro, who was less than a foot from him. Zoro would have cut his wrist in a second and let him drink now that he was awake, but the doctors and nurses hadn’t left before and definitely weren’t now that Killer looked like he was having a seizure, a panic attack, and delusions all at once. Both Kid and Zoro were getting more and more agitated every second that Killer screamed, and Kid was about ready lunge at one of the doctors just to get some blood in Killer’s system.

“Get out!” Kid screamed, shoving the one closest to him harshly and making him stumble back on stick-thin legs, nearly falling over from his top-heavy frame. The doctor was tall but stumpy, like someone had stepped on his legs as a child and flattened them. Spine curved like the hunchback of Notre Dame, a curled flip of hair sticking our of his forehead, and dark glasses framing a nose as sharp as a wire coat hanger, the man looked more like a mad scientist from a children’s movie as opposed to a trusted doctor. It didn’t help that his voice broke like a twelve-year-old’s when he talked, and he didn’t seem to be able to stop smiling. Zoro wouldn’t have let the fucker near Killer even if Killer just needed a routine goddamn checkup.

“Go deal with other fucking patients! No one is touching him but Trafalgar Law! You want someone to see him? Find Law!”

“I’m very experienced with acute intermittent porphyria, Law and I have spoken about his condition and medical history! I can handle his—!”

“Get the fuck out of here before I actually hurt you!”

“Mr. Kid, you’re being paranoid! He needs medical attention! He might not be able to wait until Law—!”
“You’re not touching him! Brain-dead son of a whore!”

“Eustass. Kid.”

The whole wing went silent except for Killer’s hysterical moaning, Law’s deadly calm voice bleeding into everyone’s ears through all of the calamity and like a paralytic. Zoro looked over in exhausted relief to where he was standing, deep blue hair matted and sticking out in every direction from days of not washing it properly, clothes burned and torn, and eyes like black fire trying to burn a hole through Kid’s head.

“I hear,” he started slowly, “that you dragged a half dead child on your back a mile across a city crawling with vampires with absolutely nothing for protection but a gun not really within your reach and a very short-range sword being wielded by another child.” Any other time Zoro would have stood up for his range of attacks, but Law’s expression told him that doing that would be detrimental to his health.

Kid just gave him a tired look and shoved the doctor moving into his personal space again. “Just go see Killer. And you,” he rounded on the doctor as he started to move around Kid again to assist Law, “if I catch you in here, see you lurking about, so much as hear one of the volunteers mention that you wanted to come up here to do a follow up of any kind, I will hunt you down, dismember you and stick you in bags to catch the blood so I can offer you as a welcoming present to our unexpected guests outside. You think I’m fucking paranoid now? Try me, see if I’m kidding.”

“I’ll take care of it, Hogback. You go, he’s far too stubborn,” Law said flatly as he brushed past Kid, fixing the covers around Killer to keep him in the bed. Hogback, still smiling like a lunatic, stood watching Law’s back for a moment before he abruptly turned and stalked away, grumbling to himself as he went.

“Fucking creep,” Kid snarled as Law reached Killer’s side, checking his temperature with one hand and his pulse with the other. Zoro moved to hold Killer down so he wouldn’t thrash so much, but he sort of doubted that it was much help. Law seemed to mentally make a note of a few things before he moved onto the next tests. Kid yanked the curtain shut behind them just in case prying eyes got too close and saw something they weren’t supposed to, and he was glad someone remembered to. Zoro didn’t want to risk having to know if Law and Kid would actually commit murder for Killer, because something told him what the answer was and he still wasn’t sure if he liked it.

“He’s harmless,” Law murmured, pulling a plastic bag of blood out from under his coat and hanging it up beside Killer’s bed. The blonde made half a lunge for it, and then dropped back to the mattress almost instantly. He shook his head violently and screamed, throwing his head back so his fangs
flashed with his movements.

“I don’t like him,” Kid’s voice was dark, and he shot a burning glare over his shoulder to where Hogback had disappeared down the hall.

Law’s voice was flat and extremely blasé when he answered, just annoyed by Kid’s comments. “No one does.”

Zoro grimaced, partly from Killer’s movements but mostly from the flat look on Law’s face. Not even Killer writhing in pain could get him to lose his cool? Zoro felt a pang of jealousy prickle down his spine, remembering how Kid and Law spoke to each other, passionate and filled with every sort of emotion. No matter how close the four of them were, it seemed there was truly nothing he or Killer could do to evoke that same kind of reaction. Kid was loud and irrational, and even volatile, but that wasn’t new and certainly not exclusive to Killer. Even when Law or Kid got scared or angry, it was nothing compared to the way they got each other to feel and act. Zoro rested his chin down on Killer’s bedside, taking the twitching hand gently in his own. He eyed the black bandana he had tied around his upper arm and the little spot of yellow on the bottom corner.

Law flicked the end of the tube trailing down from the bag of blood, and a couple flecks of red jumped from the tip and landed on the white sheets. As soon as it had started dripping, he gripped Killer’s chin tightly and held the tube over his mouth, letting the liquid fall past his fangs. Killer gurgled and coughed as it hit the back of his throat, swallowing heavily and trying to twist away from Law’s grip. Law barely struggled with him for twenty seconds, just avoiding having his fingers bitten off more than a couple times before he pulled away.

He waited until Killer had calmed down again—as much as he was going to—and then attached the tube to a needle, slipping it into Killer’s forearm the next time he was still. Killer jolted at the sudden contact, but the injury wasn’t big and it was soon forgotten when it paled to the agony the rest of his body was in. Zoro squeezed his hand, unable to come up with anything else he could do.

“He won’t process it as well or quickly this way,” Law explained with a heavy breath, and reached into the drawer next to the bed to pull out a sedative and a syringe. Zoro watched as Law filled the needle and slid that into Killer’s arm, right above the IV. Almost instantly, Killer’s movements slowed to a standstill, and he went silent as his head flopped to the side. “But without it in his system he won’t be able to tell what’s going on; I guess technically he’s starving to death—no blood to carry oxygen or nutrients anywhere because he doesn’t produce any. And if I’m over here and he’s still screaming after too long, other doctors will start coming back. He can eat when he starts to really wake up.”

Zoro nodded after a moment, his chin still pressed into the mattress, not about to move even an inch from Killer’s side. Kid and Law could find somewhere else to sleep.
He was being petty, and he knew he was being petty. But still… they were only in their twenties.

Law was twenty-nine, Kid was twenty-seven, and he was seventeen. They were barely a decade apart in age, and neither of them had really signed up to take care of either him or Killer. They were still kids. They weren’t a family; they were a group of close friends thrown into life together.

He knew that Kid and Law loved them, he’d be stupid not to realize it, but that didn’t make them either of their parents. They were infinitely better than Mihawk or his real parents, but they had never really asked to be parents. They had just been stuck with some stupid kids that didn’t have anywhere better to go. Sometimes Zoro wondered what Kid and Law talked about with Shanks when he used to bring Luffy and Ace over when they were younger. Maybe Shanks had assured them that they were doing their best and that was good enough. Maybe they had taken the time away from watching small children to vent so they didn’t explode, angry that they had been forced to grow up so fast for him and Killer.

“Here.”

Zoro’s eyes opened from where they had drifted closed and he looked up at the glass of water and small bowl of food from the cans being held in front of his face. He stared up at Law’s calm expression, a tiny smile tugging at the edge of the doctor’s lips now that (hopefully) the most dangerous part of the night had passed. Zoro locked eyes with him for a moment before Law’s expression dropped into a deadpan and he placed the food on the table next to Zoro.

“You have that face you get when you’re thinking idiotic things about what family means.”

“I don’t have a face!” Zoro barked, too on edge to care that he might have woken Killer with the noise. “I’m not a kid!” also shot through Zoro’s mind, but he knew better than to start that argument. Law sighed and shifted the hat Kid had brought him higher on his head to play with his bangs.

“Listen, I know the guilt thing is heavy with you, but you don’t have a ton of people in your life that do things they don’t want to so I don’t understand why this is still so hard to comprehend. Your father didn’t stay, your mother didn’t bother taking care of herself before the birth of your sister so things went wrong, and Mihawk would have left you with a fulltime nanny if Eustass and I hadn’t gotten you back. Which, by the way, we had to fight pretty hard to do.”

Zoro just stared up at him unblinkingly, lips pinched, but Law held his gaze, strong and fearless as ever, fingers still twisted in his dark hair.
“You’re here because we want you here. You’re a pain in the ass, and we’ve had ample opportunity to walk away. Shanks even offered to take you a couple times when it looked like Mihawk would mutilate us if we asked to have you back again. But you’re still here, and have been for years, so you might as well get used to it.”

Zoro turned back to the bed, knowing the end of a Law Spiel when he heard one, but Law let out a slow sigh and then continued. “…Family is fucked up, god knows both Eustass and I understand that. And we understand that your idea of family is also fucked up, but you need to stop thinking that people care because they have to. It’s bullshit, and no one has the energy for it, especially during a war like this. Anyone who didn’t care would have walked out long ago. You think Eustass and I give a shit about guilt? I’ve killed people, Zoro, plural, and so has Eustass. If we didn’t want you, Eustass and I would be halfway across the world and you would have died with Killer long ago in that apartment, so get over yourself and eat your food before you start wasting away and lose it too.” And with that he turned and headed over to where Kid had rolled another empty bed he found behind their curtain and passed out not too long ago.

Zoro swallowed and placed his chin back on the bed. He fingered the edge of the bandana again, feeling the yellow embroidery floss and staring deeply at Killer before he groaned inwardly and picked up the food, shoving it into his mouth. He needed Killer to wake up; once he was awake and fine, almost all of their tension would drop away in a heartbeat.

-oOo-

Zoro had Wado on his side, a gun strapped to his back, and a new sweatshirt on. Both were an extra from the hospital. Zoro was pretty sure that meant the person before him wearing the sweatshirt had died, but it wasn’t as full of holes or drenched with blood as Zoro’s old one, so he’d taken it. He had yet to take off the bandana with Law’s mark on it. The surgeon hadn’t said anything and Zoro had gotten pretty used to wearing it. The gun was from a shipment flown in over the city and dropped on the hospital, which was the only place still receiving shipments from the outside—everything else was too far destroyed. And while the city’s supplies were quickly dwindling—along with the city’s inhabitants—the military was still trying to figure out their next attack. Apparently, according to some city officials at the hospital, the death toll of terrorists after the air strikes had not been high enough, so they had to figure out something else. Zoro had thought Kid would explode and Law would disintegrate in anger when they heard that, Killer still sleeping heavily on the other side of the room, a bag of blood dripping steadily into his arm.

Zoro glanced around the corner of the building and into the street, leaned back, took one more deep breath, and jogged out into the open. One hand held Wado’s hilt in her sheath, and the other gripped the gun, both at the ready. The streets were quiet after the last attack on the hospital—it had only been a couple of hours after all—but he knew from experience that that changed quickly.
Zoro slunk up to the severely dented front door of another apartment building that had survived thus far. He tried the knob, and pushed when he found it unlocked, trying to create as little noise as possible. It didn’t budge and he could hear near the top of the frame where the metal was jammed and grinding against itself. He glanced once more around the street, and then jerked forwards, slamming his whole body into the metal and it popped open. He dashed in and slammed the door behind him, wincing at the crash it made and the way it echoed down the building hallway, but he didn’t stop to worry before jogging up the stairs in front of him, one hand still on each weapon.

*I guess I should have checked to make sure they’re actually still here.*

Not that he’d have had any way of getting in touch with them.

He reached the third floor and trotted down the hallway, checking around corners before he continued and staying as close to the wall as he could. Every once and a while he’d double check a suspicious hole blown in one of the walls or have to step out into the middle of the hallway to sidestep a peeling piece of wallpaper, but it made him nervous—more so than he felt it should—and he always found himself pressed up against the wall again the second he was able.

Zoro slowed to a stop in front of the tag “3C” and surveyed the dim hallway, one light flickering at the end, before deciding he could spare a couple seconds away from keeping a look out and placed his ear to the door. Inside he could hear—barely, barely hear, they were doing an amazing job keeping their living status under wraps—the sound of people milling about. If he hadn’t put his ear right to the door, it could have easily been mistaken for an empty apartment.

He pulled back and looked once more up and down the hallway, forcing himself to calm down for one second so he could let go of the gun, and tapped a finger on the door three short times.

Instantly everything inside stopped. Nothing moved for minutes, and Zoro moved to knock again when he heard something shift inside. Someone hissed sharply at whoever had moved, and then the tiny sounds of feet padding to the door followed. Zoro moved to stand in front of the peephole so they could identify him, and waited for a moment, glancing up and down the length of the hallway over and over again. The door clicked behind him, and he shot forward just as the door creaked open, sliding into the room as Ace slapped the door shut behind him. No one moved for another full minute, Ace’s hand still on the doorknob, everyone straining for any sound on the outside that could have indicated a threat. It seemed that the only sound in the whole building was the breathing of everyone in the room, and eventually Ace let go of the doorknob and turned around to pad back to the couch were a beer was open and waiting for him.

Zoro stood, smiling at Marco and Thatch before he turned to Robin. The four of them had been sharing an apartment since moving to the city just months before it had been barricaded, when housing prices were so low that they could afford it. The crisis hadn’t improved, as they were
hoping, and they’d been locked in the city along with everyone else when the military had enacted a siege.

Robin smiled at him and instantly he felt himself relax. Not much riled her up, but she wasn’t stupid, and the fact that she was completely calm meant that they had time. He slipped the gun from his shoulder where it was strapped and laid it on the small table next to the couch, settling himself between her and Ace when they scooched to make room.

“Happy birthday, Zoro,” she looked slyly at him and he blinked. She’d known he would forget.

Ace snorted and passed Zoro his beer after taking a swig. “Lucky you.”

“How does it feel to finally be a man?” Thatch asked from the other side of the room, his voice barely a whisper. Zoro shrugged and took a good long gulp before handing the bottle back to Ace.

“Not different.” Huh. Eighteen.

“Well, it’s not like we have more pressing things on our mind than the fact that you can buy scratch tickets and cigarettes now,” Marco quirked a half smile and Zoro nodded, relaxing back into the couch as the alcohol hit him a tiny bit, faster than it normally did due to the fact that he hadn’t drank since before the “vampire killers” struck. Had it really been that many months since he’d seen them all?

“I’m amazed you’re still alive,” Ace admitted after a quiet pause. “I mean, you have Law and Kid and you fight really well but this place is such a shit show. Your place still ok?”

Zoro shook his head and closed his eyes, leaning back into the couch. Oh yeah, so much better than the hospital beds. “One of the buildings next to us got hit by a bomber, the whole north side of the apartment was blown open.”

“Jesus.”

“And everyone’s alright?” Robin’s voice drifted up, quieter even than the guys, even though she was sitting right next to him.
Zoro collected his thoughts before answering, preparing himself to recount and relive what he already wanted so desperately to forget.

He sighed, and then sucked in a slow breath. “Killer—”

Zoro’s throat closed. He sat staring ahead, mouth hanging open and voice locked, unable to find any words that would do it even a little bit of justice. The thick, red blood gushing out of Killer’s small body at such a horrifying rate, drenching through the bed, the sheets, their clothes, maybe even leeching through to leave a stain on the mangled floor. The loll of Killer’s head to the side when he was moved, the lack of breath lifting his lungs, the sallow, greenish color his skin had started to take on, making him so pale that he started to blend in with whatever white was left on the sheets. The way Zoro’s heart had sped up so fast that each beat was indistinguishable from the next, and yet so slow that Zoro could count every agonizing second he couldn’t come up with anything to keep Killer from dying. Zoro was pretty sure he still had red on his hands from ripping through Killer’s clothes, desperately trying to find the opening to a wound that would cause that much blood to spurt from his skin, and he didn’t dare look to see if that was true. Not that his neck would have allowed him to move at the moment.

“…Zoro?”

Zoro blinked, looking up from where Thatch had spoken his name. He met the concerned eyes of everyone in the room before clearing his throat quietly, mostly for his own sake.

“Killer got hit the worst from the blast, but it wasn’t bad. The apartment was unlivable though so we had to pack and carry everything across town to the hospital where Law was.”

Marco let out a low whistle and took a drink from his bottle. “You made it even after a bomb hit? When it was that dark outside?”

Zoro nodded and grabbed Ace’s drink from him, nursing it quietly as he waited for someone else to say something. He kept his eyes forward, avoiding Robin’s gaze. She’d know it was a lie. Ace, maybe, but he might just pull another D move and gloss over it for the next thing.

“And Kid and Law?” Ace asked, waiting until Zoro was done before he grabbed it back.

“Both at the hospital.”
“I mean they don’t know where you are, do they?”

“…I’ll get back before they wake up.”

“Uh huh.” Ace’s voice couldn’t have been more vapid or disbelieving. Zoro didn’t care to elaborate.

There was a pregnant silence before Thatch finally spoke up, moving to stand. “Well, I’m tired so you must be exhausted. We went out to find food today but that doesn’t compare to crossing the city like that. I’ll take the couch so you can have my bed?”

Zoro nodded slowly, thanking Thatch silently for his intuition. The older man had a gift; Zoro had never heard him say the wrong thing in a situation, and there wasn’t a situation he couldn’t defuse.

“Why doesn’t Zoro take the floor in my room?” Robin spoke up suddenly, placing her now empty glass on the table beside her. “That way you three can keep your beds, and my room is for two people so we’ll fit just fine. I have that blow up mattress we found anyways. If we have to do anything like run during the night, it might be dangerous to switch locations. You might not remember in the heat of the moment in the dark and that could be deadly.”

Zoro swallowed again, keeping his head ducked. If Thatch’s intuition was impeccable, it was second only to Robin’s. She might have even figured out why he was really there before he was even settled on the couch. Why else would he have braved the NSPH in the dead of night without telling anyone he was leaving? Thatch didn’t bat an eye and just nodded, plucking Robin’s glass off of the side table to bring it to the kitchen sink. Ace paused, giving them both a look before Marco stood and followed Thatch into the kitchen, giving no indication even if he did know. He shrugged with his eyes after a minute and murmured goodnight, scratching his chest as he shambled into the bedroom with a heavy yawn.

Zoro watched Robin as she uncrossed her legs almost painfully slowly and stood, drifting across the room and down the short hallway. She made no motion that he should follow, but he stood to follow after her when she disappeared into her room.

Zoro stepped around her through the door, refusing to make eye contact even though it didn’t seem like it would bother her, and she closed the door soundly behind them. He stood off to the side as she drifted around the room, sliding his hands into his pockets and keeping his arms tight at his side. He resisted the urge to shuffle his toes uncomfortably, keeping the soles of his feet locked tight against the floor as Robin started her bedtime routine.
“What happened to Killer?”

Zoro jolted at the sudden question, tightness in his chest and throat rushing back as his eyes began swimming again with the pictures of Killer drowning in blood. Unconsciously he pulled his hands from his pockets, inspecting the color of his palms under the dim light from Robin’s one small lamp—windows boarded over and keeping out any light from the one remaining street lamp outside—turning them over and over.

“Blood stains?”

His head flicked up to where her tranquil eyes were following his fingers, looking for the same thing he was. He dropped his hands and tucked them back into his pockets, feeling Wado brush against his wrist.

He shook his head, realizing that she probably wanted an answer. “No. …None.”

“Stains don’t have to be visible to the eye to mean they’re there.”

He didn’t answer, lips pinched tightly together as she continued to drift around the room, switching out of her day clothes and into a sleep shirt and shorts.

“You do the same thing with your lips that Law does when he’s upset.”

He pursed his lips tighter at the remark, and it took him a huge amount of effort to relax his muscles enough to keep them from pinching together again.

“Tell me what happened to Killer,” she tried again, her quiet voice compelling and almost more of a gentle order than a suggestion. She had a way. “You’re starting to worry me that he was blown to pieces.”

Zoro closed his eyes, hot anger pricking at his tear ducts and he let out a slow breath through his nose, counting backwards from ten until the constriction in his lungs had subsided. “H-He, uh…”

“Come sit.”
Zoro looked up to where she had perched herself on the corner of the bed. He weighed his options for a moment, thoughts and pros and cons and wants and desires and the anger and confusion bombarding his brain before he finally pushed away from the wall and went to join her. As an afterthought, he kicked off his boots before he settled himself and tossed them over to the door so the mud wouldn’t get everywhere, though she didn’t seem to care one way or another. Zoro draped his elbows across his knees and leaned his head forward, keeping his gaze away from Robin’s so he had some form of upper hand to keep her from reading him. She’d probably do it anyways but it made him feel more comfortable. Already, he was sure his unwillingness to speak was writing her novels.

“We all went into Kid’s room when the bombs started falling,” he started finally, trying to keep the words circulating through his head as opposed to the images. “To be in the same place just in case… you know. And when the bomb hit the building next to us it blew the entire wall off and shot a lot of debris back into the room. Kid and I were fine, but Ki—” he cut off again, waiting until the heat in his eyes was gone before continuing, “Killer got hit, really badly. He had a shard of glass jammed in his throat so big it looked like a meat cleaver, and he was bleeding everywhere. There was so much blood, just like… like… like a pool or… and we did get him to the hospital, and Law’s fixing him and he is going to be fine, but…” his swallowing was becoming more and more frequent and it was taking everything in him not to swipe at his eyes to make sure they weren’t wet.

“It’s alright to let go, Zoro,” Robin spoke up quietly, a gentle hand finding a resting place on his forearm. “You’re strong, but it isn’t necessary right now.”

Zoro shook his head sharply, letting out a huff to cool his body down. The prickling had stopped, and he could relax a little at the realization that he’d stopped the welling of emotions.

“…Robin—”

“My offer still stands, Zoro.”

He looked up slowly, meeting her dark, calm eyes and staring forlornly into them.

“You are a strong and powerful friend, and have been there ceaselessly for me and everyone close to me. I would like to be able to offer the same.”

So that was why. Neither moved, and then Robin, seeming to understand that he was floundering silently for anything to do, leaned forward and laid her lips against his. They were rough, not quite split, though the days since the city had been barricaded had taken their toll, but they were strong and
confident, guiding him and assuring him that things would be fine. Zoro closed his eyes and leaned into the kiss, beginning to move slowly along with her and he laid a hand on her upper arm, just resting it for a moment, still unsure if moving it would cross a line.

She seemed to feel his uncertainty just through touch, not that he was hiding it very well, and she moved her hands to his shoulders, pulling him lightly into her as she leaned back against the bed, taking him with her until they were pressed flush against each other.

Zoro broke the kiss, pulling back to meet her eyes, holding her gaze confidently for the first time that night. They couldn’t skip over this. “Are you sure about this? Don’t do this because you think—”

“My body is mine to do with it what I choose,” she cut him off, gaze firm at first, and then she gave him a light smile. “Neither of us have the emotional availability at the moment for this to become too complicated, while both of us are looking for something that has yet to present itself to us, and for that I find you a very safe partner to share certain vulnerabilities with, such as this one.”

Zoro nodded, letting her words sink in before he leaned back down and kissed her again, hard, rolling his body in a wave down hers as he gripped her hips tightly and she let out a content sigh, digging her fingers into his shoulder blades and holding him tightly.

-oOo-

Zoro sat perched on the edge of a fire escape that had survived the year since the first “vampire killer” attacks, looking out over the city that had just barely regained some electricity and was flickering with a dim glow, so different from how it used to look, vibrant and alive with energy and people.

Beside him, Ace sat hunched forward, his hands on his knees as he scanned the buildings in front of them. Somewhere off to their right, Thatch and Marco were watching over a different corner of the city, and to their left, Luffy and Sabo had taken another side. There were different couples scattered all across the city, most comprised of people he didn’t know, every single one of them armed. After it had become clear that the military was going to do little to regain control of the city, due to backlash and the huge number of dead soldiers that always followed attacks, the citizens had taken it upon themselves to form a militia and remove the terrorists attacking their city. Zoro wasn’t sure how many had figured it out, but after months of bodies turning up without blood, he knew that people were at least speculating. Reality, however, always turned to science for an explanation, so witch-hunts hadn’t begun yet—thank god.

Law hadn’t felt comfortable letting them out to defend the city—Luffy was only sixteen, after all—
but he had no jurisdiction over most of the boys (some of which were men now) and had decided that it was better to teach Zoro how to really fight instead of find out after he was dead that he’d joined even though they’d told him no. After he said that, Kid had mentioned that he’d had gotten into the underground world at fourteen and Law when he was even younger and Law had snapped, demanding what good it had ever done either of them. They’d both been pretty quiet after that.

Shanks was mostly in agreement with Law, and was always calm enough to let Luffy and Ace do what they wanted, though Ace wasn’t living with them anymore so Shanks didn’t even bother trying to tell him anything anymore. Thatch’s parents weren’t around and Marco’s were dead, and Zoro was pretty sure Sabo’s parents didn’t even know how old he was so they didn’t care, so that left the six of them to roam the city at night armed to kill vampire killers. Life was pretty good.

A couple of nights ago, Law had even sat them all down in their apartment and pulled out the NSPH files, ignoring Zoro’s aghast squawk, and explained everything to them about the truth behind the killers and why the government wasn’t really doing everything they could to intervene and why they had to be extremely careful when out looking for the “terrorists”. They’d all taken it pretty well, considering that Killer had to demonstrate drinking blood to convince them. Luffy had rolled with it the easiest, flooding Killer and Law with questions of food made with blood; Ace and Sabo, not ones to let their brother stand on his own, quickly shoved the new information to the back of their mind so as not to worry Killer and joined in. After Zoro finished hyperventilating, he’d relaxed enough to watch Luffy play with Killer without really being in his over-protective mode. Luffy was old enough, maybe not mentally, but he wouldn’t hurt Killer by accident anymore. Thatch had joined him on the sidelines, followed by Marco, who had both given him the easy smile reassuring him that he didn’t have to worry.

They were on Killer’s side now. Killer had that much more of a chance that he’d survive this hellhole.

“So you and Robin, huh?”

“Nopex.”

“…Uh, yeah. You’ve very obviously been fucking for three months —”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Zoro huffed, really done with thinking about it. It was a physical thing for god’s sake, and already he was spending way too much time on the subject. “We’re both stressed and it’s good, uncomplicated release without either of us having to worry about getting attached. Those are her words,” he added after noticing the look Ace was giving him. “We’re way too different to ever make it work.”
“…Is she good?” Ace waggled his eyebrows and Zoro shot him another withering look that Ace blatantly ignored before they both turned back to the city, sinking again into the silence alongside the flickering lights.

“…I always thought you didn’t swing that way. I mean, girls are always coming after you, but Robin was the first.”

Zoro sat quietly, thinking on how to answer the comment, before he finally shrugged, not looking over to meet Ace’s curious gaze.

“Robin’s nice. I don’t really care either which way.”

“…You one of those “beautiful personality” type of guys?”

Zoro made a face at Ace’s tone. “Shut up.”

“Hey, Ro’s hot. You couldn’t have picked a better match.”

“Just stop,” Zoro pleaded, shaking his head to himself as he finally cracked a smile. Beside him, Ace echoed with his own grin, which suddenly dropped off of his face and his eyes popped. Zoro raised his eyebrows, waiting for him to elaborate.

“…Holy shit. Saga.”

Zoro made another face.

“You were ogling him that whole night. I just thought he was a great fighter… and he drove you home!”

Zoro didn’t answer.

“You slick bastard! You never even told anyone that you two were leaving!”
Still nothing. Ace, seeing he’d have to use something else to get a reaction, decided to pull out the big guns and grinned devilishly.

“Does he fuck good even with one arm? You couldn’t have been on your back, he wouldn’t have been able to keep himself up.”

Zoro launched himself at the older man, swiping at him while Ace cackled, and they tumbled across the roof for a minute before pulling apart to turn back to the city and let the quiet wash over them again.

“Wait, were you two together?”

Zoro shrugged. “We hung around each other a bit. Never really went anywhere.” And by a bit he meant a lot. The only reason they’d never gotten more serious was that Saga had moved into his college dorm at the start of the school year and it was too far away for Zoro to commute. Ace didn’t have to know that though. Occasionally Saga would call—Kid and Law teased him nine ways to Sunday when he did—but the phone lines had all been knocked down or blown up, and phone companies weren’t really keeping up with the city anyways now so that had come to a quick halt. Ace didn’t need to know that either.

“…So the military is really that much at fault?”

Zoro blinked, looking over to where Ace was twirling a long stick he’d found in his fingers. He’d lit one end with his lighter and he was trying to keep the ember alive. “You mean with the city?”

Ace nodded. “This is why I never wanted to join my grandfather in the military,” he growled. “Their power makes them so much more corrupt than those that break the law.” Zoro just nodded and looked back to the city.

“…Do you think the military created them? I mean, no one ever really saw a vampire; they were always kept under wraps and hidden in facilities for experimenting. It’s like they were never in the outside world at all.”

Zoro shrugged. “The oldest one Law has in his records is an NSPH that appeared in paperwork in 1583. Law isn’t sure where he came from either.”
“Exactly. And Law said that Killer is basically human except for some minor DNA mutations. So, isn’t it possible that they were created as a weapon or something?”

Law had never mentioned something like that, and Zoro was so used to him coming up with these things that he’d just kind of assumed… but he guessed it was possible it hadn’t occurred to Law.

“Maybe. We should ask Law later, I don’t know if he’s already considered that.”

“Yeah.”

The city was still an unearthly quiet. Without the cars and other sounds of normal life, the only light coming from the few buildings and street lamps that had electricity, and most people staying holed up in their makeshift homes to keep from getting killed, the city had become a ghost town with nearly three-quarters of its inhabitants dead or missing. Well, still dead but also missing. Anyone missing was dead at this point; there was no coming back in a place like this.

“How’s Killer doing?”

“Alright. I think it still bothers him that so many people know about him. I didn’t even know until he was four, and after that it was just the three of us and him for years.”

“I knew.”

Zoro whipped around to stare wide-eyed at Ace’s blasé expression. Instantly he was racking his brains for a situation, something he might have said or something Ace might have seen to reveal what Killer was. If Ace had noticed and come to that farfetched a conclusion, who else had figured it out? Killer could be in so much more danger than they thought—

“Conis is a vampire too.”

Zoro stopped, his breath rushing out in realization, and the tension that had clenched his shoulders dissipated.
“Killer has the same, uh, symptoms that she gets. She can’t be around blood when she’s hungry, she’s attacked people before, that sort of thing, and also how over-protective her parents are and how often they keep her home for being “sick”. That’s why she’s so rebellious, because they’ve been shutting her down for so long. Kid and Law are doing a really good job at letting Killer run as free as possible while teaching him how to be safe, instead of keeping him holed up to ensure his safety. Conis never even went to school, they homeschooled her.”

Zoro crossed his arms, remembering Law mentioning three other NSPH that had escaped from experiment facilities. One was killed during recapture, but the other ones…

“When did they break her out?”

“Uh…” Ace blew a raspberry, vaguely gesturing with his arms. “Maybe like five or six? She was a lot older than Killer. Which is kind of why her parents are so protective. Military doctors could still potentially recognize her. But she and Killer could talk or spend some time together, you know, just because they’ll be able to understand each other so much better than any of us can.”

“…Law would be happy to have someone else whose blood he could test.”

“I bet he would.”

A sharp scream split the black air and both Zoro and Ace shot to their feet, looking out over the tops of the still-standing buildings when a second yell joined the first—garbled words leaping and echoing through the rubble and surviving walls. It was only seconds before snarls and shouts began filling the air too, peppered with screams of pain.

“Thatch and Marco,” Ace snarled and Zoro nodded, leaping off of the fire escape after the older man. He landed harshly on the ground four stories below and rolled until his feet were flat on the ground, and then took off after Ace’s disappearing frame.

They tore through the darkness, occasional street lamps doing little to aid their blind sprint through the destroyed city, honing in on Marco and Thatch’s voices. Zoro slipped Wado out of her sheath with a ringing sound and placed her hilt between his teeth, pulling the two swords Mihawk had given him from his side and gripping each tightly in one hand.

All at once they burst into the fight, NSPH seaming to float in slow motion over their heads towards Marco and Thatch, completely overtaking them—seventeen against two and four more dead ones.
lying at their feet. Both were already drenched in blood and losing energy fast. Zoro shifted his fingers slightly, following Ace’s movements out of the corner of his eye as the eldest D brother clenched his fist and drew it back behind him, and they launched themselves into the fray.

Blood exploded around them, Zoro’s swords slicing through body after body as he slashed, barely missing Ace as his fists danced around Zoro’s swords, tough skin complementing the gleaming metal. The NSPH caught their eyes and snarled viciously, turning in midair and leaping back towards them with alarming speed, claws and fangs flashing in the black night, glowing copper eyes catching the dim light and illuminating their black bodies against the black sky.

Zoro ducked and rolled as two flew over him, leaping up to run his blade through an unguarded chest and the creature screamed, slumping against him and tearing futilely at his back with its claws. Zoro growled, jerking and trying to shake it off as another one appeared above his head. He twisted, spinal cord bending far beyond where it should have and lifted his other sword, tilting Wado at the same time and it landed on both, skewering itself with a horrendous wail. The two fell on him, lifeless and heavy and Zoro grunted, heaving them off of himself before he rolled onto his knees and just missed the claws of another that would have come down on his head.

Zoro’s shins hit something soft and firm like leather and his body reacted before his mind could even process that he was feeling skin. He whirled, eyes snapping to the ground as he whipped his head to the side, intending to slice through it with Wado, but froze.

Thatch’s gelled hair was drenched in blood, his eyes glazed over and his hands splayed out to the side under him. His skin had turned a sickly grey from lack of blood and there was a deep hole in his throat. A monstrous hole was torn in his chest where Zoro could see clear through to the ground, and he choked, nearly swallowing his tongue.

He was dead.

Zoro was frozen for a moment, realization that he—anyone—couldn’t do anything else, when Ace barked his name and Zoro snapped back to reality, sword whipping up through the air to take the arm of the NSPH about to come in on his head and it screeched, tumbling to the side and writhing in pain. Zoro leapt off of Thatch and onto its side, holding it down as he stabbed his sword over and over again into anywhere on its abdomen he could reach.

Zoro’s head snapped up as something appeared in front of him, but he stopped at the sight of Marco, stumbling through the bodies and blood towards Thatch’s limp form. Marco got to his knees slowly, leaning forward and, with great care, shook Thatch’s shoulder as if trying to wake him. Glowing eyes flashed in the black behind him and Zoro growled, throwing himself over Marco’s head and colliding with the NSPH. It roared, claws sinking into Zoro’s arm his shoulders and Zoro yelped, whipping Wado to the side and severing its spinal cord at the base of its neck. A choked gurgle
rolled off of its tongue and it fell back, landing in a heap on the ground and rolling from side to side, as if trying to keep its brain from falling off center. By the time Zoro’s feet connected with the ground, it had stopped moving.

More eyes flashed in the darkness of an alleyway disappearing into the night and both Zoro and Ace whirled, looking up at the massively overweight form blocking the visible stars from view. It was so huge that if its eyes hadn’t been glowing like the others, Zoro would never have guessed it was an NSPH. Its shape reminded Zoro of Hogback’s bunched and deformed body, and he unconsciously gripped his swords tighter. The NSPH started to chuckle, whistling sounds slipping through its teeth and Ace and Zoro slid into fighting stances, ready to leap forward when six NSPH landed in front of them and lunged.

Zoro slashed and blood spurted up from the neck of the NSPH falling dead at his feet, and by the time the blood had fallen from his field of view the NSPH was gone from the alley—vanished into the blackness.

“Damnit!” he heard Ace snarl, winding back to physically punch his way through the NSPH and chase after the enormous one when the sound of Sabo’s battle cry, quickly followed by Luffy’s, echoed up through the buildings from behind them.

Ace whirled mid-punch, barely recovering in time to duck under the NSPH’s fangs diving for his head, and his fist snapped up, knocking its nose back into its skull with a thick crunch.

“Go!” Zoro yelled, pausing to remove the bandana with the yellow embroidery from his arm and tie it over his hair as the NSPH drifted together, eyeing him with snarling faces. Ace gave him a strange look, gaze flicking back and forth from him to where Marco and Thatch were still on the ground, and before he could change his mind grabbed a dislodged metal pipe from the ground and took off towards the sound of Sabo and Luffy’s fight.

Zoro smirked, feeling Wado’s stitching against his tongue, and slid into a more comfortable position. Marco appeared at his side, hands shanking in anger as he gripped a jagged wooden stake from one of the buildings.

“Come on,” he breathed, and the NSPH lunged.

-oOo-

-Sarah Williams
Sorry for the lack of lemon! Don’t worry about for the future though, this is a Zosan story, so that will come (haha pun intended), I just didn’t want this to take too sharp of a Zorobin detour!

Also sorry for the huge background story, but this is better than feeding it through the story every once and a while. Good news is that even I’m getting bored of not hearing about Sanji. Last chapter without him! (Spoiler alert)
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

It had taken three years for the city to really begin to thrive again. Energy and electricity was restored to the city, buildings were raised and establishments opened again, barricades separating the city from the outside world were breached, food was shipped in. The city was vibrant and alive, but not with the same energy that flowed through it before the vampires killers had caused a small-scale apocalypse. That energy could never be regained.

Kid and other engineers in the city had banded together, building their own generators to power the city after months of being cut off from the outside world; buildings were built to disguise the construction of inhabitants building a literal underground world under the military’s nose; people armed themselves and smashed through military defenses to bring their own food back; and created their own way of life after the abandonment of all outside help. Stores were reopened, but mostly as fronts for the sale of drugs and weapons, because no reputable trade could hope to get the city back to its prior wealth.

Crime skyrocketed, and the city became a hub of mafia hierarchies, building one on top of the other and relying on their own strength to keep them on top and alive despite the fact that vampires continued to roam the streets. People had given up years ago on an explanation of where they had come from and moved on with their lives, all effort focused first on survival, and then regaining what dignity and life they had left before the lack destroyed them.

Military were not welcome, and it had become an unspoken game for vampires and city people to see who could get to the military first and kill them or remove them from the city limits. After this became apparent, the government had tried to hit back and regain control, but the backlash from the rest of the country was staggering. News stations and every source of media flooded with stories of the city that had attempted to succeed from the rest of the country, and were brutal massacred and beaten into the ground. Bodies of children and families could be seen in every paper, and eventually the general outcry forced the military to step back and let the city work itself out.

Not long after Thatch’s death and Sabo’s disappearance—dragged off into the night, leaving just a pool of blood behind—the military had led one last airstrike before the rest of the country began to protest the treatment of their own citizens. It was the biggest attack yet, and easily most destructive, leaving less than half of what was still standing in the city intact, and then the soldiers had marched in and began picking off everyone they came across—even people coming out to celebrate their rescue.
Kid and Law had weighed their options, considered the fact that somewhere along the line someone might have come across Killer’s faked paperwork and packed up and vanished into the underground world with Killer, Zoro, Shanks, Ace, Luffy, and everyone else that was left and wanted to live. The two of them—already versed in the workings of the underground crime world—had moved up fairly quickly in the ranks and settled at a high enough position that Killer was feared enough to be left alone, and therefore safe.

Fighting vampires had become a way of life, dictated by fighting and how strong one was. If you weren’t strong enough, you didn’t survive to the next morning and a place in the hierarchy was cleared for someone stronger who would survive the next vampire attack. Everything had been transferred underground and out of prying eyes, and fight clubs and bars became the core of activity to prove strength and practice for going up against vampires. Because everything was hidden from the military, the barricade had come down just a few months ago, and instantly the city had been swarmed with crime, drugs, weapons, and people looking to prove their strength from other cities. The military had almost come back in before Shanks had stepped in and cracked down, placing himself on top of the hierarchy. Everything that came in and left the city was regulated, being that no one lived there anymore unless they had merged with the underground world, and Shanks’ city became the cleanest and well-run gang territory in the entire country.

Shanks had quickly become as powerful as Mihawk was on the outside world, and once Luffy had seen the inner workings of the hierarchy he’d set out to lead the chaos himself, begging Zoro to join him in his adventures, but Zoro would have backed him without him even asking. Years of having Luffy as adopted family had gotten him too close to the eccentric boy to say no. Besides, with Shanks already so powerful that challengers risked their livelihoods to get past the military’s watchful eye and into the city to join or fight in their underground, Luffy had a set goal and locked on a person to beat and make proud. Zoro was a little iffy when Nami was asked to join, but Usopp and Chopper were fine, and Franky was fun, so he couldn’t do too much griping. He’d just have to put up with the witch.

Ace, after convincing Luffy to stay, had been unable to remain bottled up in the city following Sabo and Thatch. He felt he’d let them down, and set out to find something to bring the feeling he was missing back. Zoro and Luffy had seen him off, waving to him before he got into his beat up truck and drove out of the city limits.

“You don’t want to go too?” Zoro turned to look at Luffy, who was grinning hugely despite the loss of a second brother.

“Nope!” Luffy smiled, turning to head back into the depths of the city. “I’m going to be the strongest, and I can’t do that if I leave. After I’ve done that, I’ll help Ace find Sabo’s killer. Sabo will understand. Revenge wasn’t his thing anyways. He’d get back at people, but it didn’t have to be an immediate thing.”
Zoro blinked before smiling to himself and shaking his head. There were some things about Luffy he would never understand, and some things that made so much sense it was hard to believe they came from the same person. Not that any of it made sense, but for Luffy, it made all the sense in the world.

“Hey Zoro, let’s go down to Shanks’ club and fight before the fight tonight!”

“Yeah, sure.”

-oOo-

Shanks had been the most secure thing to come out of the city’s destruction, and the protection he provided for his people was fantastic incentive for joining him. Most everyone from the city still alive had chosen to join him—abandoned by their government and country and with no faith in the rest of their future, Shanks was the only remotely positive and stable thing left in the wreckage, and the more people banded together, the stronger they were against the vampires. After the government had finally stepped back, it hadn’t taken long for Law’s information about NSPH’s to circulate, and with the right information in hand, people began systematically taking down the “terrorists”. There had been a lot of talk about scandals involving the heads of the military, but there was nothing to connect to them except a refusal to tell the general public, so it quickly blew over. In response, the military had come out in the open and organized teams that would sweep the country and exterminate the creatures they had “let” escape, though they were admitting no fault.

Zoro had joined the initiative instantly, grouping with Robin, Ace, Luffy, Usopp, Franky, a man named Brook, and Chopper for medical attention, trading off shifts during the night when small gangs of armed citizens went out and hunted down NSPH majors. They and the rest of the city had all refused to join the military due to recent history, and the battalions of soldiers hadn’t stepped in yet to stop them, so for the moment all was quiet between the two powers. Every one of them accelerated in fighting at an almost alarming rate as they fought monsters at least twice their own strength, trusting their bodies to be strong enough to handle the enemy. And when the city had gotten so used to fighting for all forms of stress-relief, Shanks, looking at the way other gangs were run across the country, had opened a fight club for everyone that wanted to join. It was an enormous betting establishment, and the fights and competitors became so well renowned that fighters from other territories began flocking in under the cover of night to bet and compete for titles. Zoro had basically been a shoe-in for Shanks’ fight club considering their history. Law and Kid had been asked to join and agreed, mostly for the stress relief but also to have some financial security. Brook and Franky were a ton of fun to watch in the arena, and Luffy had some of the most destructive fights around. Occasionally even Robin would fight, and watching her quick grace against an opponent was captivating.

The city was finally booming with people and money again. Completely self-run and self-sufficient,
the government had eventually sent in special marines to make sure the law was being enforced, but that only created a game for everyone, and more incentive to be stronger, better, faster, smarter so as not to get caught. Shanks’ city was a formidable enemy, but a calm and stable one under Shanks’ steady hand, so for the time being, Zoro was enjoying the life of a professional fighter. It all brought him closer to someday fighting Mihawk.

With Luffy at the head of the traveling fighting team now that Ace was off traversing the world, Zoro was second behind him as regular travelers. Law and Kid had both refused, preferring to stay close to home for weapons projects, the hospital, and Killer. Occasionally they or someone else would come along if there was a special request or challenge, but aside from that, Luffy had been allowed to choose the members of the team and had decided on the eight people who had started off with him during their days of hunting down vampires.

Robin, Nami, Chopper, and Usopp they’d known for years. Nami had tried to break out of the underground world years ago after her foster family had abused her talent for gambling, threatening her sister if she didn’t comply. She made it out, but it wasn’t long before the fact that gambling and using tricks to make money got her in so much trouble with the law she was forced back underground. Her desire to take her old boss for every penny she was worth drew her back in too, and if Shanks’ hadn’t invited her into his ranks, as opposed to her foster family’s, she would have been killed years ago. She was still getting used to the idea that she was stuck in the shadows for the time being.

Chopper was jumping levels faster than any medical prodigy seen in years. He’d been taught everything he knew by his aunt and had taken no formal classes, which mean he wasn’t able to do anything in the world of medicine outside the underground. As it was, Chopper’s skill was second only to Law’s in Shanks’ entire territory, but even Law admitted that Chopper was fast on the way to surpassing him. Chopper’s only fallback, Law said, was his nervousness to take risks, and once he got over that, he would be unstoppable.

Usopp was more of company for Luffy, but he was a great shot and paranoid, which meant that he made a great lookout for danger. He was also Chopper’s favorite storyteller and the one sent to sneak into places in disguise because of his paranoia.

Franky was a friend of a friend that had survived the city’s destruction and joined Shanks’ fight club. He was more company for Luffy, but also incredibly strong and great with gadgets. He’d nearly died as a kid and had his body rebuilt mostly with metal, which meant that he could build upon himself and upgrade his own body when it came time for fights.

Brook, a wandering man already, hadn’t thought for a second before agreeing to join Luffy, despite squawking from everyone else that he hadn’t consulted them. He was impossibly fast with a sword, like he didn’t make cuts at all, and great with music so Luffy wasn’t open to discussion about not bringing him along.
Zoro watched from his slouched position on the couch as Luffy launched himself across the lobby of the hotel they were staying at and Nami screamed at him from the front desk. She was rushing as fast as she could to get everything in order, knowing that the more time they spent in the lobby, the more charges for broken items they were likely to run up. Zoro sighed and placed a pillow over his head, oofing as Usopp and Chopper ran over him during their boisterous game of tag, and before he could yell at them, Luffy landed soundly on his face and sent them both sprawling across the floor.

“LUFFY!” Zoro swung out with the sheath of one of his swords, clocking Luffy upside the head and knocking him into a coffee table. Usopp and Chopper shrieked at the flying object coming straight for them and dashed behind a crowd of people who screamed and dispersed before anything happened to them.

“DOCTOR!” Chopper screamed as Luffy pulled his head from the table, bleeding from a small scratch in his hairline and slightly dazed. “WE NEED A DOCTOR!”

“YOU”RE THE DOCTOR!”

“YOU”RE PAYING FOR THAT!” Nami screamed from across the room, and Zoro growled as one of her smaller bags connected sharply with the side of his head. “THIS ISN’T IN THE BUDGET, WE STILL HAVE TO GET HOME!”

“YOHOHOHOHO!” Brook chortled and he and Franky whipped out their respective musical instruments, strumming them even over the ruckus they had created in the suddenly too-small lobby. The woman behind the counter looked like she was about to pop a blood vessel.

All was normal before a fight.

-oOo-

“Shishishishi!” Luffy chuckled, his hands tucked behind his head as they strolled out of the club. “That was easy! They were so weak!”

“He split your head open against the wall!” Nami snarled, a silver suitcase clutched tightly in her hand. “Those stitches are going to cost us a couple hundred dollars! It took so long to fix that, Franky and Brook had to leave early to make it back home before they were needed!”
“A COUPLE HUNDRED DOLLARS?!” Chopper shrieked, his mouth agape. “I don’t charge that much!”

“The materials cost that much. You should know this, you’re the doctor.”

“I remember a time when I was fighting so much that I spent a few thousand a day average on stitches,” Usopp drawled in a bored tone, puffing out his chest and thumping himself with one fist.

“REALLY?! THAT’S INCREDIBLE, USOPP!” Chopper whirled to him.

“It was back during the invasion of the vampires, when we had all been left by our own country and families to die!” Usopp struck a pose, jamming his pointer finger into the air. “The vampires all knew of my formidable strength and sought to take me down! Every night they would break down my door, and I would fight for hours to save the hundreds of women and children that had turned to me for safety!”

“That’s so cooooooool!” Chopper’s eyes were literally alight with excitement as he clung to Usopp’s words.

Zoro just smirked and rolled his shoulder, trying to work out a small kink he hadn’t noticed had set in after the fight. Both his and Luffy’s opponents had been easy, a couple of stitches was nothing compared to some fights.

“Are you hurt, Zoro?”

Zoro looked down to where Chopper was scrutinizing him with worry, eyeing the way Zoro was favoring his right side.

“It’s not bad, just a little stiff.”

“Are you sure? Just tell me if it starts to hurt more, you’ve broken things before and not felt it because of adrenaline. You can’t fight with an injury like that.”
“I won’t, Chopper, don’t worry.”

“You say that every time and you fight injured every time!”

Zoro blinked, something ahead of them catching his eye the same moment Luffy noticed it, and they slowed to a stop as something appeared in the shadows. It was enormous, huge and rotund, and Zoro blinked at the déjà vu that swept through him, but then a man stepped out into the light in front of them, grinning hugely with holes in his mouth where teeth were supposed to be, clothes bursting at the seams to stay on his body, fists hanging loosely by his side. Beside them, everyone else had noticed and slowed to a stop, Usopp and Chopper gaping unabashed at his huge form.

“Zehahahahahaha!” he bellowed suddenly, eyeing Luffy with a sick smile. “Impressive fight, Strawhat. I haven’t seen one that amusing in a long time!”

Luffy’s expression was heavy, strangely so compared to his normal relaxed mindset. Zoro felt his fingers drift to his sword’s side, Luffy’s dark look making the situation that much more uncomfortable.

Blackbeard didn’t seem to care.

Behind him, the door to a car with extremely tinted window swung open and another enormous man stepped out, purple hair draping down his back as he joined his boss in grinning at them.

_Burgess._

“Teach,” Nami said stiffly, arms crossed tightly in front of her. Zoro knew it was a tell, putting something between her and whoever she was facing, but it made her look that much more stable. Luffy had yet to move from his stance, and Zoro could feel the tense air around him as everyone waited for Luffy’s next word or move. They were in front of the largest terminal of the city, but Zoro could already tell by the atmosphere that it either Teach or Luffy even started to initiate something, there would be no telling how much destruction would follow.

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” he said finally, one eyebrow cocked and giving him an unhinged look. “But I wasn’t expecting you to be at this fight, and I’m in need of a favor that your part would make more convenient for both of us.”
Zoro clenched his teeth, fighting to keep his lips from pulling back. Teach and Luffy had never been on **good** terms, per se, but they had yet to get really bad either. It didn’t make encounters with the man any easier or lighter.

“Zehahaha… unless you’re headed to another fight before going home, in which case I’ll find someone else, but I thought the payment might interest you.”

Zoro felt Nami twitch beside him. *Shit.*

Teach nodded to Burgess, who pulled open the car door again and ducked inside, only to reappear with a silver suitcase in his hands. He stepped forward and past Luffy, offering the contents to Nami. Zoro could see the light flashing behind her eyes, and hoped that she wouldn’t get rough enough that Luffy could still convince her out of it.

“There’s ten thousand in there for each of you; you’re welcome to inspect the contents.”

Nami’s eyes flicked from the suitcase up to Burgess and back a couple times before she reached out and popped the latches. Zoro could see the wads of cash inside from the couple of inches she had opened the lid so as not to draw attention. She reached inside and dug around, drawing out a random stack to inspect. She pulled a couple of bills from the center and rubbed her fingers along the material, holding it up to the street lamp above them before she slipped it back into the suitcase and shut the lid.

*Come on, Luffy, make her leave it.*

“Alright, what’s this favor that’s going to cost you eighty thousand?”

“Uh—zehahaha! Maybe I’m talking to the wrong negotiator, I only see five people—”

“We charge as a team. We have three people not currently with us. When one of us accepts a job or challenge it affects the reputation and future of all of us. Eighty thousand for eight of us. What’s the job?” Her voice was ruthless.

Burgess scowled, looking back to Teach as if he expected him to back down and Zoro felt a little bit of relief wash through him. Maybe it would be easier than he thought to get them away from this. To his shock though, Teach’s bland expression dropped to annoyed and then flipped all in a second and
he was bellowing his laugh to the night sky again.

“I like you more and more!” he chortled before quieting down. Zoro’s eyes flicked around them, tracking the people watching them as they passed by. If they didn’t disperse soon there would be an even bigger scene.

“I’m running a shipment for a friend, but I’ve been called away for some important business and I can’t make the run.”

Nami looked ready to speak up, but he had anticipated the interruption.

“It’s an important shipment and an important friend. What’s more is that we’re running pretty close to your boss’s territory, which means that I would have to be there if we were stopped to diffuse the situation or negotiate. I was going to push the shipment, but it’s pretty necessary to happen tonight, but I saw you at the fight and thought you might be looking to earn some more easy money.”

Zoro felt a shiver run up his spine. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to Blackbeard’s sleazy smile, no matter how many times he saw it. His fingers twitched on his sword’s hilt, air so tense he was about to ask Luffy himself to give him the go-ahead.

But easy money was not something Nami was prone to turning down.

“What’s the shipment?”

Blackbeard shrugged, keeping his toothless smile wide. He knew he had her. “Drugs, weapons, pretty small scale stuff considering the rumors I’ve heard about what’s going on behind Shanks’ walls. A legitimate fight club, huh? The marines won’t be happy if they catch wind of it. Especially considering that he’s so new in his territory.”

Nami’s eyes grew dark, and beside her, Luffy twitched again. “Are you threatening us?”

“Zehahahahahaha! Before asking a favor of you? I’d be a very bad employer! It’s an hour drive, only twenty minutes out of the way of Shanks’ territory, at an abandoned warehouse. You don’t have to do nothing but drive it there and leave the whole truck. Once it’s at the warehouse, the cargo can be moved by other means and there’s no risk of having a run-in with some of Shanks’ guard dogs. No checkpoints and no questions, when you get there you can use the phone of the guy
meeting you to call me and get a... receipt of sorts so that we can’t make it seem like you made off with the truck.”

Nami’s lip was pulled back, like she smelled something particularly, nasty, but she had that look in her eye...

“I want to see the cargo. And I want the other thirty thousand upfront with the rest of it.”

“Nami~!” Luffy whined suddenly, and Zoro closed his eyes in relief. “I don’t want to drive it! I’m so hungry and Franky said there would be food waiting when we got back!”

“We’ll stop and get food on the way back.”

“Really??!”

Shit. The fight was over.

“Luffy! We can’t start doing shipments like this!” Usopp chimed in. “What if we get caught? Everyone gets arrested and you’d never be able to fight or, or, or eat good food again!”

“EH?!” Luffy whirled to face Usopp, but Nami was fast.

“We’ll have a lot of money left over from not hiring cabs to get home if we drive ourselves, which means you can get whatever you want when we stop to get food.”

“REALLY?!”

“Zehahahaha! I was worried for a minute that I was talking to the wrong person, but you’re quite good at your job!”

Zoro growled, watching as Luffy’s eyes sparkled with the possibilities of what he could eat, and it would be sooner than if they’d just gone straight home anyways.
“I want to see the cargo now; I haven’t said yes to anything yet.”

“It’s right in back of the building. Why don’t you hop in and we’ll drive you around?”

“We’ll walk, thanks.”

“Zehahahahaha!!”

Zoro sighed heavily and took his hand off his sword, moving to follow them as they started walking towards an alley leading to the back parking lot. Well, ten thousand would help to pay off what he owed her if nothing else.

-oOo-

“Congratulations on your wins, Zoro and Luffy!”

Oh yeah, now she was happy.

Zoro glared up at the front seat that Nami had claimed for herself long before the trip had started. She had delegated driving to Usopp and apparently giving the piss annoyed out of him to Zoro, which meant that he was stuck sharing the sleeper half of the cab, fending off Chopper and Luffy from doing more bodily harm to him in their inability to hide their excitement. Zoro grumbled to himself and slunk further into the corner, trying to tuck his head into a somewhat comfortable position.

Zoro watched from a safe distance, keeping the car, Burgess, Teach, and everyone else directly in his line of vision, arms crossed tightly but not so much that he would be slowed if he suddenly had to go for his swords.

Nami had pulled herself fearlessly up inside the trailer alongside Luffy, relying a little too much on their ability to block horrible things long enough to get out alive, in Zoro’s opinion, but saying that would get him hamstrung.
Teach pulled a crowbar from the side of the truck, and Zoro’s fingers found a hilt, his eyes flicking to the right as Burgess slid a hand behind him where, no doubt, an incredibly poorly concealed gun was stashed in his belt. Like that would help.

The dark iron was jammed into the side of one of the wooden crates with a sharp crack as the wood split, and the top popped off and went crashing to the metal bed of the trailer. Nami’s hand was inside the packing material instantly, coming up with a small box. She tore the top open on that without bothering to get an OK and held up a couple of vials filled with a thick, cloudy substance.

“Drugs,” Teach gestured to the crate, “weapons,” he motioned to some others at the back of the trailer, “there’s some jewelry in one of the crates, a couple vehicles have been broken down in those five… that sort of thing. Most of these are gifts, the drugs and weapons are for a little extra money.”

Nami dropped the vials back in the crate, ignoring the look Teach gave her at her treatment, but Zoro knew that she was testing his reactions and had no intent to damage the cargo. She yanked a second crowbar from the other side of the trailer where it was hanging and handed it to Usopp, pointing to a random crate stacked under two others. All of them had been labeled “this side up” with a large arrow on the side. “Open that one.”

Teach laughed hugely as Usopp went to pop open the crate, sending the top clattering to the ground like the other had. He paused a moment, looking into the box with a slight quiver, as if waiting for it to explode in his face. He blinked though and put the crowbar down, reaching in to shuffle around and pull at the black thing poking out of the packing. He grunted and came up with a large gun, inspecting it before brushing aside more of the packing material to verify that the rest were guns too.

Even from where Zoro was, he could see the heavy matte finish on the side of the gun and several nicks and scratches. From the way Usopp was holding it too, far more delicately than he held any other weapon, it looked fairly flimsy. Usopp turned it over and over again, aiming it to check the alignment before shrugging to Nami.

“Alright,” Nami turned to Teach, motioning for Usopp to put the gun back. “The rest of the eighty thousand.”

Zoro tuned out the grating sound of Teach’s laugh as Usopp hurried out of the truck and to his side, in enemy territory far too long for his liking.

“…They’re really cheaply made,” he said after a while, and Zoro just nodded. “I would have thought Blackbeard would put a little more effort in the quality of his goods before shipping them.”
“He isn’t making them, he’s just shipping them. As long as they get to where they’re supposed to be going, it doesn’t matter,” Chopper appeared beside Zoro’s side, whispering so as to keep under Burgess’ radar. Everyone else was still in the car, waiting for Teach to finish. “Although… that medicine he showed Nami… it’s completely the wrong color. It’s horrible quality, or they’ve been really contaminated. I’ve never seen anything that bad looking before.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” Zoro muttered, watching as Teach pulled more cash from his oversized coat’s pockets. Usopp nodded quickly in agreement, shuffling around to stand beside Chopper for extra protection.

“I hope they don’t administer those to any patients,” Chopper whimpered, clinging to Zoro’s pant leg like Killer used to. Zoro laid a hand on Chopper’s head and pulled him close. Nami was a witch, but she wouldn’t put any of them in danger.

“They might have just labeled them wrong on purpose,” he tried, hoping it was intelligent enough in the medical field to convince the young doctor out of his worry. “Just incase they were searched on the road, most police won’t know what color normal medical supplies are supposed to be.”

Chopper nodded after a moment, sniffing to himself and still clutching pathetically at Zoro’s hip, but he didn’t answer.

“THIS IS LIKE A SPACESHIP!”

Chopper shrieked in agreement, leaping over to Zoro and latching onto him. Zoro oofed, curling further into himself after he recovered and trying to shake Chopper off of his shoulder. Chopper was a seventeen year old kid and much tinier than others his age, but any weight launched at him wasn’t going to be comfortable. Especially when he was trying to sleep. If they were in two cabs like they’d planned this wouldn’t be a problem. Damn witch.

“NAMI! Lets get one of these for our next fight!”

“No!”

“But it’s so coooooool! Just think of all the meat we could store in the back!!”
“NO!”

“When are we stopping to get food?!”

“I already told you!” Nami shrieked, wrenching around in her seat to snarl at him with fangs practically sprouting out of her gums and steam pouring out of her ears. Zoro was about ready to do the same if they didn’t let him sleep. “After we drop the truck of at the right spot we’ll eat while we wait for our cabs to come! We can’t drive this home!”

“But that’s so looooooong! You said we’d get food before we get home!”

“WE ARE! We can’t drive this truck full of illegal cargo through a drive through though! Usopp, drive faster! I can’t listen to Luffy whine for too much longer!”

Usopp made a nervous sound, clenching the steering wheel tighter, for some reason refusing to look at Nami. Zoro was betting on annoyance for putting him in this situation.

“I… I really can’t, there aren’t that many streetlights here and the truck is so flimsy. The headlights barely go a hundred feet ahead of us, and every little bit of wind catches the trailer and I swear Luffy is going to tip us over one of these times jumping from one side to the other. Everything is making us rock like we’re on a ship.”

Zoro pursed his lips, eyebrows turning inward with confusion. *Cheap weapons, cheap drugs, cheap crates to pack them in, cheap truck, even the excuse was cheap… really the only money they’re spending is on us to ship it, and that might even be more than all of the cargo—including the truck—is worth… what the hell is going on?*

Zoro leaned forward and placed his hand on the shoulder of her seat to catch her attention. “Hey, Nami—”

Usopp screamed suddenly, silencing Zoro as something flew by his head and smacked against the windshield. The truck jolted to the right with Usopp’s dodge, and the second it was driving straight again Usopp whirled around to scream at Luffy, who was clapping in glee at the rollercoaster turn the ride had taken.

“Luffy, you idiot, you want to kill us?!”
Usopp whipped around again, realizing that he was driving blind, but the second he was focused on the road again something appeared out of the black, racing into the short-range headlights and blaring its horn as it sped towards them like a bullet.

The cab erupted in screams, and Usopp wrenched the wheel to the side, flinging the truck out of the way of the swerving car and swinging it dangerously onto the wrong side of the road where it began to lean up onto one side of wheels, rubber bouncing and grinding along the pavement. Usopp shrieked and spun the wheel frantically into the spin, limbs flailing as everyone tried to find purchase, flinging the trailer back onto both sets of tires and the rubber screamed against the ground as the truck spun. Usopp slammed his foot on the brakes, launching them all forward as he threw the truck into reverse and revved the engine in one last attempt to keep them from jackknifing, finally screeching to a halt on the opposite side of the road, facing the direction they’d come in.

The truck was silent except for the frantic gasps of five people desperately trying to convince themselves that they were all still alive and could breathe. Zoro’s eyes flicked up to where Chopper was damn near sitting on his head, behind him, Luffy had somehow attached himself to the ceiling and was gaping down at them. Zoro’s own fingers were white against Nami’s seat, while Nami had almost completely upturned herself and had her feet on the ceiling to keep her from flying all over the cab. She let out a furious shriek the moment she worked her fingers open enough to let go of the seat buckle strap and smashed her fist into Usopp’s head.

“You idiot! Are you trying to get us all killed?!”

“If I hit that stupid drunk driver we’d have to call the police and they’d take the truck and arrest us all!” Usopp wailed, scooting quickly away from her clenched hand. “You want a dead guy too?! This night is too weird for me! We never should have taken this stupid truck! We could be home right now and eating Franky’s food!”

Zoro reached up to pry Chopper from his neck, and once he had the younger boy in his lap, grabbed Luffy’s ankle and yanked him to the floor with a crunch, muffled by the things that had been thrown around the cab in the… excitement.

“You probably destroyed half of the cargo!”

“It’s all packed away and we didn’t flip over!” Usopp yelled back at her. “It’s not even our problem
anyways! Let’s just take the money, leave the truck, and go home!” Tears were spouting like geysers out of his eyes. Nami growled and flung her door open, jumping to the ground.

“You’re paying for anything broken!” she snarled, voice fading as he trudged to the door of the trailer. “Luffy! Zoro! Get out here and help me in case anything is heavy!”

Zoro groaned and heaved himself out of the mess that had rained down on their heads, sending Chopper and everything else tumbling to the floor. He should be sleeping. Luffy launched himself over Usopp’s head on the other side, ignoring the long-nose’s yelp as he dashed to the back of the truck.

Zoro’s tirade under his breath continued all to the back of the truck, drowned out only by the sharp grind of metal as Luffy threw the trailer door open. Usopp grimaced at the sound, no doubt worried about driving such a rickety vehicle anywhere else, especially if something like that would cause that much damage. There really wasn’t any pressure put on the truck, even when it had tipped partially off the ground. Anything else on the road would have survived it with no problem. To be honest, he didn’t want to drive it anywhere else either. But there was no number to get ahold of Teach and Zoro knew Nami wouldn’t back down from the job and put Shanks’ and his teams’ reputations at stake.

Luffy leapt up, not seeming to be fazed in the slightest by either the near-death situation or Nami’s demonic expression, and marched to the back of the truck where several crates had upset themselves and were scattered across the bed of the trailer. At least none of them had opened.

“Luffy! Wait for Zoro! I want you two picking them up together, we’re not risking breaking anything! We can argue to not lose pay because the drunk driver couldn’t be helped, but if we break anything now, we get severely docked! Zoro, why are you just standing there?!”

Zoro sighed heavily and scratched at the back of his head before pulling himself up after Luffy. His boots echoed heavily throughout the thin metal of the trailer, and as Zoro found more and more dents in the floor created by the fallen crates, he felt himself growing steadily more and more confused. Teach may not have given a shit about the contents of the crates, but he did take his shipping business very seriously, and here he was sending an important shipment with one of the weakest trucks Zoro had ever seen. They were lucky none of the crates ripped a hole in the bottom of the trailer. So either Teach actually didn’t care about his shipments, or he liked to play dangerous and cheaper trucks meant more money for him as long as the shipment got to its destination ok. Maybe that’s why he had so many huge guys with him all the time.

*Or, Zoro rolled his stiff shoulder again before bending down to grab the other side of the crate Luffy was already holding, he’s just not spending the money on a truck that might get seized. No point in wasting it.*
“Ready—”

“Yosh!” Luffy barked suddenly and Zoro grunted as the crate was thrust into his chest, Luffy snapping into a standing position and heaving the wood back on top of the other crates before Zoro could really even get his hands on it.

“Luffy!” Nami screamed, about ready to get into the trailer after them and beat them senseless. Her hair was sticking out in different places, and whether that was from their ride in the truck or her playing with it, when Nami wasn’t caring about her looks, Zoro stayed as far away as possible to avoid more interest and debt. “Together!! You’re going to break something!”

Her nerves seemed pretty fried at the moment, and they knew better than to push her when she was like this. Luffy turned back to the next crate with a newfound determination, face scrunched up in concentration as he nodded to Zoro. Zoro just reached for the crate, ignoring all of the idiocy in the air around him. He waited until Luffy decided that he had a good grip on the wood, and then the straw hat bobbed in a nod and he and Luffy stood.

Zoro winced at the sharp crack of splintering wood and nails being popped from their deep hold in the material and the bottom of the crate smashed to the ground, guns and packing peanuts raining out over their shoes and clattering like thunder against the metal under them. Another piece of wood, like a divider in the box, smashed to the ground and something heavy puddled like cloth on top of the guns. A case. Nami looked about ready to pass out.

Zoro’s eyes snapped down to the box in his and Luffy’s hands, where a stamp that read “this way up” with a very large arrow next to it was pointing at the ground. Zoro growled and shoved the box into Luffy’s arms, bending down to throw everything back into the crate as fast as he could. Fuck this night.

He grabbed the case first, intending to use it instead of the packing peanuts so they didn’t have to pick all of them up, but the thing his fingers closed around was much firmer and… warmer than what he’d been expecting and Zoro’s hand jolted back, breath freezing in his throat at the shock.

His first thought was that an animal had gotten into the box, but then he realized how smooth it had been and just how much it felt like leather. Soft, firm, warm leather, wrapped around bones and connected to an entire body. The unmistakable human form of the thing smashed into his brain like a wrecking ball and he was left floundering and spluttering for words, flabbergasted that he hadn’t recognized the shape at his feet sooner.
His eyes snapped up to meet Luffy’s the same time the younger man realized what was happening too, before they turned back to gape at the floor, brains trying to understand and take in the **person**—bruised, blood-soaked, emaciated, ghostly pale, covered in dirt, and nearly stripped naked—unconscious on the floor of the semi at their feet.

-oOo-
Thermal Shock

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

The air was thick, but that could have been just how tight Zoro’s throat was. With the lack of motion from Luffy though, it seemed more likely that the air was so thick that the only person capable of breathing in the trailer at the moment was the person at their feet. And Zoro wasn’t honestly too sure if he even was still breathing.

It took Luffy exactly seven seconds to fully process what he was seeing, and suddenly, with a tremendous roar of “NAMI!!” he heaved the entire crate out of the back of the truck where it smashed on the ground, exploding into splinters, nails, and strips of wood. Luffy dropped into a crouch to get a better look and Zoro finally regained some composure, realizing what was going on, and faltered slightly, nearly losing his balance and falling to the floor of the trailer.

When his vision finally evened out, he ripped a crowbar from its place on the side of the truck and jammed one end into the lid of another crate close to him. He snapped the top in two as he wrenched the crowbar down and lunged into the box, shuffling through the packing material and boxes whatever cargo was in this one. He shivered slightly as “cargo” ran through his head but forced himself to keep going.

He dug deeper and deeper, but his hands touched nothing out of the ordinary, and he was about to give up and pull back when his fingertips struck the bottom of the box. It was higher than the base should have been. Much higher. He pulled his hands out of the packing material and looked around at the crates stacked throughout the truck, unconsciously counting them as his mind fit together all of the pieces. Even in the dark of the trailer, he could see a row of nails around the middle of every one of the crates that could have only held the dividing piece of wood in place, otherwise the nails would have jutted straight through the contents of the boxes.

They had false bottoms. All of them.

There was a person in every single one of the twenty-four crates.

“WHY ARE YOU FLINGING THE CRATES AROUND?!” Nami screamed, grabbing ahold of the floor of the trailer and leaping over the debris littering the ground outside. “We have to pay for
that now, you idio—"

She ground to a halt, souls of her sandals slipping against the thin steel as she gaped down at the mishmash of things scattered across the trailer bed. Despite the fact that the whole crate of guns would have easily cost them easily as much as they were being paid to ship this stuff, her eyes were only trained on the body at her toes, and if Zoro weren’t so busy seething he would have commended her for her newfound sense of humanity. But as it was, he could feel the anger rolling off of him like toxic gas.

“…Nami,” he hissed slowly, words rolling off of his tongue and through his clenched teeth like an angry miasma. He poked a finger towards the limp, bedraggled body, still too unnerved to really look at it. “We. Are carting. A shipment,” he paused for a second, his voice hitching with anger, “of slaves.”

Her mouth dropped open and closed a couple times as she floundered pathetically for words, unable to move but desperately wanting to look away if the screaming behind her eyes said anything.

“Is everything alright?” Usopp called from outside, and his and Chopper’s noses appeared through the doors as they poked their heads in, pausing to take in the strange scene of frozen wax figures and guns and packing peanuts strewn across the floor. Chopper’s head turned from person to person, trying to decipher the thick air, and he grabbed the handle on the side of the truck, clambering up into the back.

Chopper’s reaction was the only one that wasn’t severely delayed.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAH!” he screamed, eyes practically popping out of his head, voice echoing like an atom bomb around the trailer, and everyone flinched to cover their ears, snapping out of the trance.

“CALL A DOCTOR!”

Usopp’s normal follow-up of “You’re the doctor!” went unsaid, the long-nose still standing, dumbfounded, outside the trailer, trying to understand what he was seeing.

“Chopper,” Nami whimpered meekly. “C-come… just come… come see—”
“What happened?!” Chopper shrieked, dropping to his knees beside the body and struggling to flip it over without jostling it too much. He gestured frantically in Zoro’s direction Zoro and Zoro crouched after trying to decipher the movements for a second, turning the torso of the person—man—over while Chopper held his head and made sure his neck didn’t twist. Not that that wouldn’t have already happened what with the crate being flung around during the drive and he and Luffy dumping everything onto the ground. If his neck were going to break, it would have done so already. Luffy reached over to poke the body’s limp arm and Zoro smacked his hand away sharply, not about to let his idiotic captain make the situation worse. Chopper already looked a little deranged with worry.

“Oh my god!” Usopp bawled suddenly, hands fisting in his hair as he fell back onto the pile of shattered crate outside the truck, creating another loud crash. “We took money for trafficking people! I WAS DRIVING THE TRUCK!”

Nami lurched backwards, stumbling in clipped spasms away from the guy as Chopper tipped the man’s face up to make sure he was still breathing. Zoro swallowed heavily, half of him pleading with his eyes to look away and the other half of him arguing that they’d already made the bed, so they were going to have to lie in it, and he could stomach just looking at the broken body on the floor.

Yep, they were lying in this bed now, whether or not there was a dead guy in it with them.

Usopp’s frantic caterwaul rang up through the trailer again. “WE’RE ALL GOING TO JAIL FOR THE REST OF OUR LIVES!”

Chopper’s hands flew over the man’s body, checking his pulse, skin, neck, shoulders, nose, and verifying over and over again that his breathing and pulse were still fine to make sure he wasn’t dying on them. Chopper fumbled around in his pocket, finally managing to pull out a small flashlight and he pushed back one limp eyelid, flicking the light in and out to watch the way his pupils reacted. Zoro ignored the deep purple bruise that could only come from an eye socket fracture, and his deep green eyes found the flat blue ones staring blankly out into space, but nevertheless reacting to the light the way Chopper seemed to want, because the small boy relaxed enough to sit back on his heels even though he was still shaking.

“I need my medical bag,” he choked out, and Zoro nodded at Luffy, who leapt out of the truck and over Usopp’s flailing body to run around to the front of the cab. Zoro wasn’t sure where Nami had disappeared to. Hopefully to collect her thoughts so she could figure them the fuck out of this situation.

Zoro found a seat next to Chopper, air still thick enough to keep him from breathing properly, and pulled the shaking boy into his side. Chopper clung gratefully to his shirt, hiding his nose in Zoro’s shoulder.
“…W-what if I can’t do anything?”

Zoro looked down to the man sprawled out in front of them, his mouth lolling slightly open, head cocked to the side, fingers limp and curled. Zoro began counting the bruises, measuring the color in his mind, calculating how old they were, and tallying the number of fractures and full-blown breaks visible. The socket fracture, sprained ankle, dislocated shoulder, broken shin, and several fractured ribs were the obvious ones. The rest of his body—the skin that wasn’t caked in dirt, at least—was littered with bruises of all stages of healing. He knew Chopper was doing the same and he was no doctor, but from the range of injuries, it was obvious this guy had suffered a lot of abuse over a significant period of time.

Spread out like that, the way Chopper had positioned him, the man almost looked like he could have been napping. If his chest hadn’t been rising and falling so shallowly, Zoro would have been able to convince himself that he would be fine. As it was, he didn’t feel confident enough to tell the little doctor that everything was going to be fine. Chopper took it harder if he felt more expectations were placed on him, and if this guy died, it was no fault of theirs.

“I’m calling Law,” Nami announced, appearing suddenly behind them with a phone in her hand, her fingers flashing across the buttons. “Shanks is god knows where and Ace never answers his phone unless it’s Luffy or Vivi and I can’t find Luffy’s phone, but Law will have an idea of what to do with him at least,” she nodded to the guy. “The next call is an ambulance so we can at least keep murder off our records—I don’t honestly think we’ll have enough time to get away without being seen. There’s nothing around for miles and no natural anything to hide in or on or under, and no way in hell we can bleach everything before they get here. It’s like the fucking plains out here.”

Chopper nodded sadly and returned to hiding in Zoro’s larger frame. His escape was short-lived though as Luffy joined them in the back of the truck with the medical bag and Chopper was instantly at the guy’s side again, shuffling through his equipment.

Nami finished dialing and placed to phone against her head, rocking back and forth nervously as she did, eyes gravitating to the man spread out on the floor. Zoro blinked, recognizing his own phone in her hand and began to ask when she cut him off.

“My phone was broken earlier in the truck.”

At the same time Law’s muffled --Yeah?-- came through the phone and she pulled it away from her ear, pressing the speakerphone button. Zoro winced, too late to stop her. Killer would be at the club with Shanks now, helping set up for the fight that night, leaving Law and Kid at least three hours alone while still coming to terms with the stress of being underground again.
Static-smothered sounds of squeaking bedsprings and heavy grunts and breathing flooded the trailer and Zoro took a deep breath, trying not to pay attention to Chopper’s eyes popping out of his head or Nami’s muscle spasms as they realized what they were hearing. Kid and Law didn’t care if Zoro heard, and honestly, he’d lived with them for too long in apartments with thin walls to really notice or care now. Poor Chopper though, the kid was too innocent for his own good sometimes.

--Yes? What, Zoro? I’m a little preoccupied.-- Law asked again, annoyed now no one was answering him. A breathy moan echoed from behind him and Zoro winced again as both Nami and Chopper twitched. Even from across the trailer Zoro could hear that Law’s voice was laden with sex, irritated or not. Nami swallowed, trying to get her tongue back in place before she spoke.

“L-Law… uh… it’s Nami.”

--Why do you have Zoro’s phone?-- Zoro followed the sounds of Law grabbing Kid to hold him still, voice tight as he waited for an answer. He was impressed Kid was actually waiting, though Zoro had just been away at a fight and could technically have been really hurt. In Shanks’ territory they were his parents, so they would be the first ones to hear—maybe after Luffy.

“Mine was… broken—it doesn’t matter,” she waved her hand suddenly, as if he could see. “Zoro isn’t hurt, but—”

--Oh good,-- Kid cut her off from the background and Law grunted suddenly, his breathing picking up, sheets shuffling against the phone as it was presumably dropped. --Who cares then? Drive safe.--

“This is important!” Nami barked, voice getting more and more out of control, and if Zoro knew her at all her stress level meant that she was about to cry. Ugh. He stood up and pulled the phone from her hand, not about to have to deal with her crying on top of everything else. Behind him, Chopper was wrestling with the crowbar to open up the other crates, and Luffy went over to help him. Once the top was off, Chopper climbed into the crate and felt around to pull the false bottom off, motioning for Luffy to do the same to the other crates.

--We can’t have two fucking minutes?-- Kid snarled as Zoro walked back over to Chopper, who was checking the pulse of the guy again and sat back with a low breath after a moment. Still alive, then.

“Nami took a job from Blackbeard,” he started, not bothering to wait, knowing that at least Law was listening. “He was supposed to drive a shipment twenty minutes outside of Shanks’ territory and couldn’t for whatever reason and offered her eighty thousand to do it. On the way back some of—”
“Yeah, but on the way—”

--Well that was… “stupid” I guess is the best word-----

“Shut up and listen for a second! A crate broke open on the way back—”

--You break it, you fucking pay for it,-- Kid cut in, patience wearing thin. --Didn’t we teach you anything?--

--Eustass, hold on a second, they actually sound a little distressed.--

Kid groaned and Zoro heard the sounds of more rustling as the larger man got up and padded away. He gritted his teeth and sucked in a large breath, done with this fucking situation.

“There are fucking people inside!”

That had done it. No sounds came from the other end of the phone.

“A false bottom fell out and there are people inside! We’re shipping slaves!”

Law’s voice was flat. --You took a job for Marshall D. Teach shipping slaves.-- He might as well have just called them fucking idiots and not wasted his breath.

“Not on purpose!” Nami called from the other side of the trailer, voice wrung out with guilt and fear. “I checked the cargo myself, it was fine!”

--Well apparently it wasn’t, now was it?--
Nami gritted her teeth and turned away sharply, wringing her hair in her hands.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Chopper gasped suddenly from the back of the trailer, and Zoro whirled, heart hammering in his chest, to watch the little doctor uncap a large syringe—with his teeth, he was in such a hurry—spider his fingers frantically up the side of the man’s neck until he seemed to find the right space he was looking for and plunge the needle into the vein. The man coughed harshly once, a thick and saturated sound, blood spurting up from his lips, and then was still, but Chopper seemed satisfied to continue without the extremely rushed pace after the procedure.

—He’s even shipping for Doflamingo now— Law sounded tired.

—The guy with the slave auction?”

—Yeah, that’s him.— He let out a long sigh before asking vapidly, —So why are you calling?— Zoro could very clearly picture the expression he was making. He used to make it all the time when Zoro was younger and got in trouble at school. Law was all about the school dishing out punishment; Kid was more inclined to deliver it himself. —What are we supposed to do from here?—

—Zoro…”

Zoro glanced down to where Chopper’s whimper had drifted from, blinking in confusion at the tears leaking from his eyes. He passed the phone to the small boy, who curled in on himself and clutched the phone to him like it was his lifeline.

—Law… the guy that fell out of the crate… h-he’s,” Chopper swallowed and swiped at his eyes, “he’s dying.”

Nami moaned and stalked out of the trailer, unable to handle the stress anymore. Luffy looked like he was about to follow, but decided at the last minute to stay and crouched down to hug Chopper tightly, who hiccupped in response.

—H-He just went into cardiac arrest, and I-I just gave him epinephrine to get his heart going again, but I only have five milligrams because normally there would be ambulances nearby during a fight and I wouldn’t need it and he’s going to go back into cardiac arrest soon and-and there are twenty-three more crates. If every one of these people gets like this then—!”
--Stop,-- Law ordered from the other end and Chopper swallowed the rest of his words. --What did you give him?--

“One milligram. He was really bad, I couldn’t hear anything listening at his chest.”

--…All right, keep an eye on him and give him more as needed. Let’s hope he can hold out long enough to get back. You’re not close enough to anything to leave the truck and get away free, and you can’t bring the truck here, so I want you to drive it to the pickup location.--

“What?!” Usopp squeaked. He had just joined the rest of them in the trailer, having composed himself enough to deal with the almost-dead body.

--Shanks cannot get tied into this, for any reason, at all. The marines are already breathing down our necks.--

--What the fuck is taking so long?-- Kid’s voice rose up again in the background.

--They took a job shipping slaves for Teach and one’s dying on their hands. Help me get them back without making connections between Shanks and the truck.--

--…Well that was stupid. Why the hell did they do that?--

Zoro felt the phone creak in his hands and he gritted his teeth, screaming into the speaker. “We have a money-grubbing hellcat with us, that’s why! What do we do?!”

--Look,-- Law turned his attention back to the phone, --Drive the truck there, and five minutes out make an anonymous phone call to the police to tip them off. It’ll take them at least ten minutes to get there. Drop it off, do whatever you were supposed to do to let Teach know you made it, and then get the fuck out of there before the police show. If you get seen, the marines will take this whole city down with no questions asked, and they’ll have probable cause so the rest of the country will have no say, whether or not civilians live here. Have you checked on the other cargo yet?--

Chopper nodded, and then seemed to remember that that wouldn’t suffice over the phone. “Everyone else seems fine. Battered, but fine. I don’t know why this one is doing so badly. It’s like he had an allergic reaction, but it’s really slow moving.”
“Or they overdosed him.”

“He would have had to have so much more anything the others got, there’s no way a little extra anything could get him in such bad condition. No one could have made that sort of mistake. And he’s about to go back into cardiac arrest now, I’m running out of epinephrine and the police will assume the truck has dangerous things in it so it might be locked down until they bring a special team in to do a sweep. There’s no way he’ll make it.”

Zoro looked down to where the guy’s breath had picked up again, even as shallow as it was, and a thin sheen of sweat had glossed across his head, making the dirt on his face run. Zoro felt his throat tighten again.

--Well fuck the rest of the shipment if they’re fine.-- That was Kid again, and the bed jostled through the phone as he sat down next to Law.

--Yes,-- Law agreed. --Let’s just assume they’ll stay that way through police investigation. There’s nothing else you can do for them anyways with what you have on you. This guy is an immediate concern, and the only way he’ll survive is if we bring him here and treat him. Call Franky and tell him to pick you up so you don’t have to worry about keeping a cab driver quiet. I’ll have the OR set up for when you get here.--

--The roster,-- Kid muttered from the background.

--Oh shit, you’re right. Um… Somewhere in the crates, probably with one of the slaves, will be a roster. It’s like an order slip, find his page and tear it out so the police don’t think he’s missing and won’t look for him.--

“How do we know it’s him?” Nami called from across the trailer. “It’s not like we can really ask him his name or anything.”

--Slave rosters always have pictures because the cargo will be unconscious upon arrival from the drugs for shipping.-- Zoro could hear Law losing his patience with every time she talked back. --You should be able to compare them, yes?--

Nami nodded to Luffy and he leapt up, grabbing the crowbar and tearing the top of another crate open. Chopper wailed at the wild movements, begging Luffy to be careful not to hurt the people any
more than they already were. Zoro crossed his arms and kept from asking how Law knew so much about this subject. It wasn’t worth it.

Luffy let out a triumphant “Aha!” and jumped back down to the floor from his perch atop a stack of crates, sandals slapping against the metal. He held out a packet of papers stapled together and Nami snatched it from him, flipping through the pictures.

--Don’t destroy his page, hopefully it will have medical information on it that we can use.--

“Hurry,” Usopp whined, looking to the doors of the trailer as a car rushed by. “Before someone pulls over to see if we need help.”

Nami glanced down to the beaten face and back to the packet again, eyebrows knitting in confusion as she turned back a couple pages, trying to match up the severely beaten face to its picture. Chopper stood and looked at the two profiles she was comparing, bending down after a moment to pull back the man’s eyelid, and the bright blue orb stared lifelessly off into space again, catching the dim light of the trailer.

“That’s him.”

Nami nodded and tore the page out carefully, handing it to Chopper before she began picking the scraps out of the binding. Zoro leaned over Chopper’s shoulder, taking in the strong, set face of the unconscious man in the picture. His blond hair—now brown from all of the dirt—was brushed out of the way to reveal two incredible and ridiculous curly eyebrows, both even facing in the same direction. Zoro looked down again, squinting through the dark lighting and the dirt until he found said eyebrows. In the shape of a swirl. He almost laughed at the absurdity, even though the guy—Black-leg, Sanji, he read off the paper—was in the midst of dying. He’d never been good at heavy moments.

Weird name too.

Nami slammed the stack of papers into Luffy’s chest when she was done and he “oofed” heavily, looking at her in bewilderment.

“Put that back where you found it and start putting everything back where it was,” she ordered, calmer now that there was a realistic and optimal end goal that didn’t involve jail or a dead person. “I’m calling Franky now, it will take him longer to get here than it will for us. He can wait outside
the warehouse for us. Luffy and Chopper will get dropped off outside with him so they can take this
guy, uh, Black-leg,” she waved vaguely at him, still preferring not to look at him. “And Usopp, Zoro, and I will drive the truck in. Don’t say anything, either of you. Usopp, open the back of the trailer to show them the cargo is there and fine—oh god damnit. Um, I guess shove the crate with the lid you broke in the back under the other ones so they can just see that it’s there. I’ll get on the phone with Teach and say we dropped it off. That’s it, then we leave, go get in Franky’s car, and get the hell out of there before the police show.”

Chopper thanked Law quietly and passed the phone back to Zoro, who took in his terrified expression and offered him the phone back. “You have anymore questions?”

Chopper bit his lip, looking unsurely to the limp body beneath them. “No.”

Oh yeah, he had a lot of questions. Zoro laid a hand on his shoulder, pulling him in close again and switched the phone off, sliding it back into his pocket.

Nami blew out a deep breath and jammed her hands in her hair. “All right… Ok… Luffy, Usopp, get this place organized enough so that they won’t be suspicious and search it. Zoro, Chopper, let’s get him moved to the cab. Gently,” she added, jabbing her finger at them.

Zoro nodded and waited until Chopper had closed his medical bag and backed nervously out of the way before he slid his hands under Sanji Black-leg’s body, lifting him off the ground like he was a set of sheets instead of a person. Zoro wondered grimly how long it had been since they fed him last. Zoro felt his fingers gripping any clothes he could—lest the man blow away in his hands from the sudden air movement.

Chopper guided him with a gentle hand on Sanji’s shoulder, pushing things out of Zoro’s way so he didn’t trip and scurrying like a frightened puppy alongside them. Zoro knew he didn’t feel like he wasn’t doing enough. He waited as Chopper pulled open the door to the cab and climbed in. Once Chopper had cleared the sleeper bunk in the back, Zoro found his footing on the side of the truck and hoisted them up, being careful not to hit any part of Sanji on the metal.

“Zoro!” Chopper gasped suddenly, lunging towards the older man over everything he had just pushed out of the way, sending it flying. His eyes were wide, hands flying in a frenzy at his sides. “Put him down! Put him down!”

Zoro damn near dropped him in shock anyways from Chopper’s gasp, managing to grab the emaciated body before it fell and place him carefully enough on the front seat. Chopper squeezed beside him even in the tight space and Zoro caught sight of the thick layer of sweat that had covered
Sanji’s visible skin. Instantly, his gaze found Sanji’s chest, but the shallow breathing had ceased and his chest was eerily still.

Chopper rooted through his pockets, checking them again when he didn’t come up with what he needed and let out a frustrated shriek. Zoro lunged forward, grabbing the medical bag Chopper had forgotten he’d thrown on the floor and shoved it into his arms. Chopper wrenched it open, spilling half of the contents onto the floor as he pulled a syringe from the bottom of the bag, jamming it into Sanji’s neck again, and a raspy breath jolted the grimy chest before the shallow breathing continued.

Three more doses.

Zoro didn’t wait for Chopper to move and heaved himself into the truck, lifting Sanji over the seat and dumping him on the sleeper before he jumped out of the truck, dashing around to the doors of the trailer where Nami was just getting off the phone and Usopp and Luffy were pushing the resealed crates back into their stacks.

“He’s dying, let’s go,” Zoro barked, grabbing Nami’s hand to help her out. She waited anxiously beside him until Luffy and Usopp had jumped down to slam the doors with him and latch them.

They crammed themselves into the cab in a mad scramble, everyone on top of each other in the rush to get moving. Usopp, tight-lipped and hunched over the wheel, barely waited for the door to be closed before he gunned the engine and sped out onto the road, tires squealing against the pavement. Everyone fought desperately to keep their gaze straight ahead, but after a while every set of eyes started flicking back to the unconscious man in their cab as Chopper tended to him. The care was all but useless, but Zoro was sure it made Chopper feel better.

Two doses in fifteen minutes, and another twenty-five before they were back at Shanks’ and could actually do something. And he was getting worse.

Zoro looked down at the almost-corpse next to him, trying to keep images of his broken body and the rest of the people in the crates splayed out on a stage, embellished with chains and drugged out of their minds, out of his mind. Even as Chopper filled another syringe with a clear, thick, liquid and slipped it slowly into Sanji's inner elbow and Zoro counted the number of needle marks lacing Sanji's arm, he felt his stomach turn. He didn't want to see how many were on Sanji’s other arm, and made a note not to look too deeply anywhere else while he was at it. The lighting was better in the cab than it had been in the trailer, and he didn’t want to know everything that had been done to Sanji. It wasn’t his business, and he didn’t want to know that private part of Sanji if he survived.

“Was that epinef… whatever?”
Chopper shook his head. “That’s specifically to make the heart beat again, it makes the muscles squeeze tightly and the blood gets pushed through, kick starting the heart. This will keep the beating from speeding up and hold it at a regular pace—hopefully—so he won’t go into cardiac arrest again as soon. I’m really not supposed to administer it at a time like this, he really needs a defibrillator and some more specific medications, but we don’t have them so I have to do something to get the other doses of epinephrine to last until we get back to Law.”

Zoro nodded uselessly, and without even thinking about it, gripped Sanji’s shoulder a little bit tighter, mostly to make sure that he wouldn’t fall off of the bed if Usopp had to stop short. He eyed the shallow shifts in Sanji’s chest, letting out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding when Sanji’s strained gasping suddenly evened out, and though it was still shallow, he seemed much less pained at the muscle use.

“It’s amazing,” Chopper murmured to himself, staring intently at Sanji’s roster page in his hands, and Zoro raised an eyebrow in question.

“It’s just…” Chopper shook his head. “They’ve pumped him full of so many drugs, it's a wonder the others aren't all in his condition too.”

Nami turned from her motionless position in the front seat to look over Chopper's shoulder, scrutinizing everything with her anxious gaze. “That wasn’t how much the others were given. …At least, not the ones I saw when I was looking for his page in the roster. Like that one,” she pointed to something on the list, “that's almost double what the others had.”

Chopper just blinked, his eyes more perplexed than Zoro had seen him in a while. “But why would they sedate him to this point?”

“Strong fighter?” Usopp offered, his voice tight. “Like Luffy or Zoro?”

Chopper shook his head again. “It doesn’t make any sense. Any doctor looking at this would see that it would kill him, especially with how skinny and light he is. He barely weighs as much as Luffy does. …Though that could be from how little they’ve fed him too.”

“Maybe it wasn't a doctor,” Zoro grunted. It wouldn't be the first time a slave had died from improper treatment. Chopper nodded after a moment, and then shifted nervously before pulling out his stethoscope and checking Sanji's heart again, looking for anything to do.
Nami took a deep breath suddenly and slipped Usopp’s phone out of her purse, having lost Zoro’s to him again. “Don’t go too slow,” she murmured to the long-nose as she pressed the phone to her ear. “We don’t want to call any attention to ourselves.” He just nodded in response.

The cab went silent, no one daring to speak so as not to further mess this up.

Zoro heard the click on the other end of the line, and before the person answering could even state where Nami was calling she had cut him off.

“The back of the old warehouse behind the strip mall closest to your station will receive a shipment of slaves and other illegal goods in twenty minutes.” And with that she hung up, not daring to breathe until she had completely closed the phone.

Zoro whipped around as Chopper lunged toward Sanji, sinking another syringe into his neck and quelling the beginnings of another attack. Chopper sat back with a slow breath after verifying Sanji’s vitals, double checking to make sure he still had the right amount of medicine on him and hadn’t counted wrong.

Two more doses.

“F-Franky’s coming?” Chopper asked nervously from the back, and Nami nodded before leaning over Usopp, ignoring his squawk that he couldn’t see with her in front of him, and rolled down the window just enough to toss the phone out before sitting up again. She ran her hands tiredly over her eyes and rested her head back against the seat. No one spoke.

The buildings grew taller and closer together as they pulled into the black of the city, Usopp drifting down the empty roads, street lights lighting up Sanji’s mangled form every other second. Zoro steeled himself and averted his eyes, not wanting to automatically start counting injuries again.

“Luffy,” Nami spoke up quietly, turning the equally (and strangely) quiet young man toward her. “You go with Chopper. I want Zoro with me so he can take everyone out if need be. No offence, but punches take more time to kill people.”

Luffy looked like he was about to protest, and Zoro wanted to join in, but Nami cut them off.
“We need someone really strong with Chopper. He’ll be all by himself and paying attention to making sure Black-leg doesn’t die. Franky will be focusing on getting away and he won’t be able to really help.” She turned to look him in the eye, a pained look crossing her face. “Please.”

Luffy was still, and then nodded, shifting his hat lower on his head as Usopp pulled the truck to the side of the road, brakes squealing slightly as the truck jolted to a stop just around the corner from where the headlights of Franky’s blue ’69 Charger was parked. It was his pride and joy, and the fact that he had brought it along to something so dangerous meant that Nami had sounded really scared on the phone and he hadn’t bothered going home to pick up his beater from the garage.

Zoro pushed the door open and Chopper jumped out, waiting until Luffy had jumped out and Zoro had passed the limp body to him. Chopper checked his breathing and pulse once more before dashing toward Franky’s car, Luffy trotting behind him.

“Go,” Nami ordered after watching Franky step out once they reached the car. Usopp nodded, already turning the wheel to pull away. Nami ran a hand roughly through her hair, trying to settle herself down with another rough exhale. It would never work as a relaxer if she did it that quickly.

Her next murmur was barely audible over the sound of the engine and their own hearts pounding in their ears. “Here’s the plan. Pull in fast, jump out, and immediately open the trailer doors so they can see that all of the boxes are there. Don’t talk to anyone, pretend like that was what Blackb—uh, Teach told us to do. I will get someone’s phone and call him, say that we dropped off, and then we get the hell out of there. Don’t go straight to Franky’s car. We’ll have somewhat of a walk anyways but just in case. We have to get out before the police show though. We have ten minutes, fifteen from what I told them on the phone but something tells me they won’t risk being right on time.”

Neither Zoro nor Usopp answered, but Zoro rested a hand on his swords, feeling their strength rooting him to the ground and keeping him calm, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Usopp shift so the weight of his gun would rub against his hip, making sure it was ready to go.

Around the next corner, the strip mall came into view, and Usopp pulled quietly through the parking lot around to the back where an old abandoned warehouse—paint peeling, shutters falling off their hinges, broken glass tinkling against the ground as it was pushed around by the wind—loomed in the shadows. Usopp shuddered and a terrified sound fell from his throat, making Nami jump beside him. Zoro’s brows furrowed, and he shifted himself so he could jump out of the truck quickly if need be.

Nine minutes.

Zoro felt the truck shift as Usopp applied the brakes, not sure where to park it, when a long string of
chains hanging near one of the loading docks suddenly clanked and with a metallic grunt the door jerked upwards, disappearing slowly into the ceiling of the loading bay. Zoro leaned forward, glaring into the darkness to count the people. Usopp pulled in and the truck squealed to a halt again, and then went silent as Usopp killed the engine.

Nami swallowed heavily, hands shaking as she nudged Zoro, urging him out of the truck. He flung the door open and jumped down, arms folded tightly and perfectly in reach of his swords. Usopp leapt down from the other side and marched toward the trailer, yanking the stiff doors open with a grunt as two men came forward to verify the contents. Looking as manly as possible, Usopp scuttled to Zoro’s side to stay out of their way.

Nami straightened her back, darkened her gaze, and strode forward, right up to the man that seemed to be overseeing everything. Most of his face was obscured by a black top hat, but it didn’t help to disguise his lanky height or dark blue overalls. He was also swinging a long red cane by his side that every once and a while he would tap against the ground. He gave her a leering smile framed with bright red lipstick at her forwardness—and probably the fact that she was a woman—but she ignored it with a sniff.

Eight minutes.

Nami held out her hand, and he paused for a second before reaching forward to take it. She yanked her hand back like he was diseased, reaching out again expectantly like she was waiting for more money.

“Teach,” she growled when he didn’t move.

The man grinned again, not moving for another moment and Zoro felt his shoulders stiffen. If they stalled at all—

But he suddenly reached into his back pocket and pulled out an old phone, passing it to Nami. Her fingers were a blur over the keys as she searched through the contacts even before she was even close enough to read the small screen.

“In no mood to hang around, eh?” the man asked, sauntering toward Nami’s side, shoes clicking loudly against the floor and echoing around the building.

*Tap shoes?*
Zoro took a warning step in his direction. The man eyed Zoro, weighing the situation before he stopped a safe distance from her. Usopp’s head flicked around to where two others had stepped forward at Zoro’s advance and shivered blatantly.

Seven minutes.

Nami held the phone up to her ear, standing there for nearly thirty seconds, growing antsier and antsier at every ring, and the man grinned wider.

“Maybe he’s not there. You might have to hang around until he is.”

Six minutes.

Usopp made a choked “eep” and stepped closer to Zoro and Nami shot him a dark glare just as something clicked on the other end.

“Yeah, we got here,” she answered after a moment. “…Well what do you want from me? There was traffic after the fight. That’s not something under my control and not something you can hold me accountable for. …Of course everything’s fine. …Your men have already—! Ugh, fine, here he is.”

Five minutes.

She thrust the phone back to the man and he took it nimbly, letting his fingers brush along hers for a lingering second. Zoro watched the tremor in her shoulders and took another step forward, leveling the asshole with a look that told him very clearly what would happen to him the next time he pulled that shit. The man seemed to get the message and took a step back, but he clearly wasn’t fazed at all by the show of protection.

“This is Laffitte… It seems to all be here, and they seem pretty eager to go.” He gave Nami another wide smile.

Four minutes.
“No, I shouldn’t think so…” Laffitte paused, looking between the three of them before he suddenly chortled loudly, and all three flinched at the sudden echo. “Only three, now that you mention it. I’m not sure where the others have been lost to.”

*Shit.*

They froze, Nami’s eyes snapping open as she realized what they were talking about, but recovered instantly and kept her gaze leveled with him. All was as it should have been.

“…No, I haven’t asked. I can if you wish.”

“We dropped them on the way here,” Nami jutted in, but Laffitte only grinned. Zoro growled. The display was only to make her nervous. Of course those bastards didn’t give two shits where their crew was as long as the shipment was there.

Three minutes.

“…Well, I suppose it’s none of our business… Yes, I will tell her.” He hung up suddenly before slipping the phone back into his pocket and dipping into a low bow, cane swung out in front of his pointed toes. “He asks that I thank you sincerely for your time and hopes that we may do business in the future. And he hopes your friends are fine as well.”

Nami nodded, a clipped spasm, and murmured a “Thank you” and something about them eating and how it would be a pleasure to work with them again. A pinched smile crossed her face before she turned on her heels, walking toward Zoro in the most normal way she could manage. He turned the second she was close enough, leading Usopp out the door behind him.

Two minutes.

“You couldn’t make that go any faster?” Usopp hissed once they were outside and the door had been shut behind them. Nami gave him a sharp whack on his head. Zoro shot them both a glare, not in any way in the mood for this.

“Here,” he ordered, turning sharply down an alley, but Nami grabbed his collar roughly and yanked, spinning him in the opposite direction.
“Here,” she corrected with a growl, and he glared back, but still followed behind her.

“Where are the police?” Usopp whispered after a silent minute, looking around. “What if they drive the truck out and leave with those people before they get here?”

“They should be here any minute. I told them twenty minutes ago about seventeen—”

Nami stopped and they strained, picking up the small echo of a wailing siren off in the distance, and getting closer fast.

They shared a glance, a panicked urgency leaching into the air, and took off sprinting down the street following Nami. She lead them through a maze of twists and turns before they suddenly rounded a corner and Nami ran straight into Franky’s chest, letting out a alarmed yelp at the sudden grip on her shoulders as he grabbed her. Zoro’s hand snapped to his swords at the sound, but Franky’s hand flashed forward and grabbed him before he could do anything.

“Where have you perverts—idiots been?” he growled under his breath, dragging them toward the car parked in the shadows behind them. “Chopper already gave the guy another dose, he only has one left and he’s not doing super at all!”

Franky practically tossed Zoro at the car, letting Usopp scramble towards it behind him. He placed Nami in front of the door and letting her climb in herself as he settled himself in the front seat. The engine roared to life and he gunned it, tires peeling out against the pavement.

“No…!” Chopper wailed not moments after the car had picked up speed, sliding another needle into Sanji’s neck, adding a fifth pinprick to the others. Chopper pulled back, looking miserably at the sweat-soaked and shivering body of the limp man splayed out on the back seat. He let out a weak cough, and then fell so still that Chopper had to lean forward to check his breath and make sure he was still breathing. Chopper turned to Franky, tears running down his face as he bit harshly into his lip. “That was my last milligram and it’s not taking because he’s had so much… he’s not going to make it!”

Franky gritted his teeth. “Not if I have anything to say about it!”

He slammed his foot down on the gas pedal, snapping it to the floor and everyone yelped as the car
shot forward, tearing through the streets.

“Franky!” Nami gasped, grabbing onto his shoulder, eye glued on the black surroundings in front of the windshield rushing by. “You’re going to get us killed!”

“Don’t you worry, sis, all we have to do is cut this drive back a little bit. We’ll be ok, I promise!”

“You have to stop at the check points outside the city too! If you’re going to fast, they’ll get suspicious—”

Franky turned to grin at her, too comfortable with the car and the directions to worry about looking at the road. Zoro gulped anyways, watching the trees shoot past them like flashes from a green strobe light. Nami’s muscled locked in the front seat and she grabbed ahold of the car’s door handle, Usopp whimpering behind her and clutching Chopper.

“Please,” Franky scoffed. “You’re insulting me. As if they wouldn’t recognize this super machine.”

-oOo-

Franky screeched to a halt in front of the fight club where Law, Kid, and Shanks were already waiting outside. Zoro flung open the door, trying to get out of the way so Law could see Chopper desperately doing compressions on Sanji’s chest and quickly losing energy. He’d been pushing nonstop for the last ten minutes of the drive and hadn’t let anyone take over for him. Zoro had one foot on the ground and was halfway out of the car before Law appeared like a phantom on top of him, draped across his lap, and jammed a huge syringe into Sanji’s neck. Before Zoro could even react to the invasion of space, Law had grabbed Sanji’s collar and yanked him over Zoro’s legs and out of the car where he spilled across the ground like a ragdoll.

“Eustass!” Law barked, but Kid was already there, grabbing the guy’s feet as Law lifted his shoulders and they rushed him inside. Chopper was blubbering Sanji’s medical history of the last half hour, running alongside them as they went, still panting from the compressions.

Zoro’s feet followed after them unconsciously, trailing all the way to the operating room that Law had haphazardly set up in the short time they had. Law passed Sanji to Kid, who dumped him unceremoniously on the table, ignoring Chopper’s wail at the treatment. Law threw on gloves, not even bothering to wash or change, and rounded on the table. He grabbed Sanji’s roster page from Chopper, scanning it quickly and Kid yawned, deciding he wasn’t needed anymore.
“I’m going to catch the rest of the fight,” he muttered to Zoro as he passed. “Might as well if I can’t get laid and I’m already here. I’m going to grab Killer from Shanks, so he’ll be home with Traf and I tonight.”

That was right, there was a fight going on tonight.

No part of Zoro wanted to go and watch.

Law chuckled to himself, muttering “idiots,” as Chopper crossed the room to close the door, already in his own pair of gloves.

“…What?” he asked timidly, trotting over to where Law was looking.

“No wonder this guy is so fucked up. This is more sedatives than we use on Luffy and Zoro combined when they won’t stay down.”

Zoro’s eyes popped and his lips fell open slightly; it hadn’t hit him before. Chopper had said they had given him a lot of drugs, but both he and Luffy went through an obscene amount of sedatives after a fight if they were injured—a fact that Nami loved to constantly remind him was extremely expensive. It was like their bodies thought the drugs were water; Luffy took enough for an elephant, and Zoro knew he wasn’t far behind.

Zoro’s eyes traced the blond form as Chopper rushed about him, more and more frantic the less troubled Law seemed. Zoro eyed the worst wounds across Sanji’s skin, turned calico with the blue, green, and yellow bruises and open wounds that were leaking blood onto the table. There was a lot of damage. Whoever had done this to him had really meant to do harm. And with that many sedatives… maybe they were hoping that he wouldn’t wake up.
Cold Seal

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

Cold Seal

“Left eye socket fracture, dislocated shoulder and a torn ligament, seven fractured ribs—two on the right, five on the left—internal bleeding, ruptured spleen, sprained right wrist, broken right thumb, dislocated left hip, twisted right ankle and two ruptured ligaments, broken left tibia, sprained left ankle, five broken toes—three on the left, two on the right—bruising everywhere, borderline malnutrition, hundreds of cuts and lacerations, and probably a concussion, if not worse, but we’ll only know that when he wakes up.”

“When will that be? Hours? Days?”

Zoro turned to Shanks, who was already calculating keeping the guy in their hospital until he was awake. Less space in the hospital meant more precautions at fights, even with two great doctors as well as traveling doctors and plenty of medical equipment on site. He had a business to run. Beside him, Luffy stuck his finger in his nose, already bored with the logistic portion of the matter.

Law shrugged flippantly, looking bored, but Chopper’s face tightened and his eyes began to water. They had been in the operating room with Sanji for hours. It was late afternoon already. The scrubs they were wearing had been soaked through with blood, and Zoro was kind of amazed that one person could contain that much blood, as well as lose that much blood without dying.

“W-Well… it’s hard to tell when he’s asleep. Especially with head injuries. He could be totally fine o-or… he could be…”

Zoro shifted, eyes flicking to the open door and the blond wrapped head to toe in bandages, half of them already soaked through with blood. That meant if he woke up. Behind him, Nami came down the steps to join them, trying to make as little noise as possible and still looking supremely guilty. Shanks had yet to talk to her, and Zoro didn’t blame her at all for being nervous. Shanks had a way about him that just commanded respect, and she’s disappointed him.

“The drugs?” he asked quietly and Chopper nodded, nibbling furiously on his lip.
“T-They gave him so much… that many sedatives normally…”

“Why would they give him enough drugs to turn him into a vegetable if they were going to try and sell him?” Nami spoke up suddenly, anger bleeding into her voice with her anxiety.

“They might have been trying for it if he was a fighter. People have weird fantasies and… sexual kinks,” Shanks returned. Nami didn’t have a response. Beside her, Luffy yawned and she scowled darkly at him.

“Honestly I’m surprised he’s breathing without a ventilator,” Law spoke up.

Luffy blinked. “We have a ventilator?” Zoro could almost see his mind churning out ideas of blowing giant bubbles with an unlimited source of airflow.

Law shook his head and Zoro scowled at him. “You could just say he shouldn’t be alive right now.” Asshole couldn’t help but not skip the cryptic part of his speech. Law shrugged and tipped his hat bag to play with his bangs.

More thumping on the stairs behind them alerted the group to two others joining, but Zoro had heard the way Kid and Killer walked on stairs enough to identify them without turning around.

Shanks and Kid nodded to each other before the redhead went to stand beside Law, keeping a protective distance from his right shoulder. Law rolled his eyes but Kid seemed to have no intention of moving.

“Well,” Shanks said finally, “I’m going to have to speak with Doflamingo about this, if nothing else. Something as big as this so close so our city without any verification with me is—”

He paused at the sound of someone else tapping quietly down the stairs and soon a pair of feet appeared on the top steps, followed by a face as the man crouched down to see them. Shanks nodded at him and he just shook his head in return.

“The police had a squad come in and secure it, but all of the slaves have been taken into custody and the truck is being held. So far, no one has died, as far as the reports say.”
"Any rumors?"

The man shook his head again. "Nothing, not to Blackbeard, not to Doflamingo, not here, not to the fight they were at. The city the drop off was in isn’t under anyone’s territory, so there’s nothing to tie it back to anyone. The truck is illegal too, which means there are zero traces, and they couldn’t get the driver to spill anything. He’s probably scared of what will happen to him if he does—no amount of military will keep him safe for long if he talks."

Shanks nodded again and Chopper blinked confusedly behind him, reaching up to tug on Shanks’ pant leg.

"He’s risking driving illegal trucks to not get traced back to? Won’t police be on more of a lookout for something like that, especially now that they know it’s being used?"

"It’s less expensive and damaging to lose a truck and a shipment of anything then to get found out, even if police are being vigilant about it. They can easily get more trucks, and even human cargo; keeping an organization under the radar once the military knows for sure that it exists is almost impossible."

"We can keep the guy here," Luffy said suddenly, finger in his nose again. Shanks turned to him, seemingly unaware of Luffy’s current distraction, though that could have been because he was so used to it from living with Luffy all these years. "We have the beds for other fighters, he won’t be in the way. We can’t send him away."

Shanks nodded. "We could use the subbasement apartments. I guess we really don’t have any other choice. Dropping him at any hospital is out; there’s no way we could sneak in—even to the one in our city, what with the marines stationing themselves there and looking for gang violence."

"No one will know to look for him here either."

"Yup. Investigators won’t be able to find this, let alone the apartments."

"Shanks?"

"Yeah?"
“I’m hungryyyyyy.”

Shanks gave Luffy a flat look and sighed heavily, rubbing his forehead with his one hand. “I could honestly use a drink. Or two. Or… eight. We’ll start with eight and see how it goes from there.”

Luffy cheered loudly and bounded towards the stairs, Shanks’ sandals clacking behind him. Zoro rolled his eyes and turned back to everyone else, snorting at Law’s unamused expression. Zoro was pretty sure there wasn’t a day that went by that Law didn’t thank the stars their chaotic family didn’t act like that. Zoro agreed, and he knew Kid did too. Kid would have shot Killer long ago if he acted like Luffy.

The air shifted suddenly and Zoro blinked, looking around to try and find the source. It was like… the breathing in the room had picked up. Zoro traced the faces of everyone around before something occurred to him and he turned to eye Sanji’s still form intently.

“…Law…” he began slowly and Law turned, Shanks pausing on the stairs and looking back at Zoro’s tone of voice.

Everyone followed Zoro’s gaze, Chopper looking back and forth between the green and the blond head before he trotted over to the hospital bed, clambering up on the stool beside the bed to look at Sanji.

Sanji was still for a long minute while everyone held their breath, and he suddenly sucked in a sharp breath, mouth falling open slightly as his head rolled to the side and Zoro’s eyes widened. He leaned in to get a better look, about to reach forward to pull Sanji’s upper lip back—sure that he had seen a flash of extra white where there shouldn’t have been any teeth. He leaned in closer, Chopper blinking up at him, not sure what Zoro had seen.

*It looked like… Killer’s fangs look like—*

Bright blue eyes shot open and Sanji snapped up in bed like a bear trap, his forehead colliding with Zoro’s and sending him crashing to the ground, taking Chopper and the stool down with him as Sanji let out a vicious scream, thrashing under the tightly-tucked covers.

“His injuries!!” Chopper wailed from underneath Zoro, and Zoro shot to his feet, lunging for Sanji at the same time Luffy and Law did to pin him to the bed, Kid joining them after he took the time to
sigh heavily at the interruption. Zoro’s hands clamped around Sanji’s ankles, and the instant they did—as if Zoro weren’t holding them at all—one foot lashed up and kicked Zoro so hard across the face his vision doubled. Zoro threw himself forward and gripped the writhing legs hard enough to break bone, tuning out the screams of the blond and the tiny doctor so he could listen and make sure he didn’t actually break anything else.

“Put him out!” Nami shrieked from behind them and Chopper rushed for a sedative.

“Don’t! This is good!” Law barked, stopping Chopper in his tracks. Zoro looked up to find the maniacal grin of his foster father and glared. Sick bastard was taking pleasure in this.

“If he knows there’s a problem then he’s coherent! If we can get him to calm down, we might be able to get some answers!”

“Or he could be going ballistic because he’s in pain and he’s not coherent!” Nami shouted.

“Not with the way he’s moving, and we don’t want more sedatives in his system either; it’s already amazing he hasn’t been fried.”

That made Chopper stop, and he covered his mouth sadly, watching Sanji fight against the bed like he was on fire. Shanks, seeming to have thought about what Law said, reached around them after a moment and grabbed Sanji’s chin, eyes hard as he met the one visible, vibrant, blue one that was rolling like a wild animal’s; the other eye was hidden under a thick bandage and no doubt the half vision wasn’t helping Sanji’s calm. Sanji’s movements halted suddenly as his eye locked on Shanks’ and he pushed back into the bed, trying to break eye contact with that stare—the same one Luffy had—but his body only continued to shake. Shanks let go of his chin after a minute, but the second he blinked and broke the stare Sanji roared again and they lunged forward, pinning him back down before he could launch himself off the bed.

Zoro gritted his teeth, pulling Sanji’s ankles into his chest to keep from having to hold them so tight with just his arms. Any tighter and he would do more damage to the breaks already there—or break more bones. He looked up at the thrashing figure fighting with everyone else to get off the bed, blood and fluids oozing thickly from every wound in his body and dying his bandages a thick red. Zoro was about to turn away again, not exactly sickened but definitely not wanting to continue watching for the hell of it, when he suddenly noticed that Sanji’s canine teeth were growing and shrinking at an incredibly fast rate—fluctuating like Killer’s did when he’d almost starved to death from lack of blood.

Zoro pinned Sanji’s ankles to him and stuck them under one arm, using his teeth to yank back his
sleeve. He thrust his bare arm in Sanji’s direction, trying to get him to eat so his body would calm
down, when Law suddenly realized what he was doing and why and slapped his hand away sharply
just as Sanji’s teeth snapped down where his wrist had been seconds ago. Sanji choked on a
desperate screeched, throwing his body back into the bed as his spine bent almost completely in the
wrong direction, and Zoro’s free hand flew back to keep his feet down.

“Nami and Chopper out!” Law ordered over Sanji’s caterwauling, making sure everyone else still
had him pinned before he dashed over to one of the counters. Nami made a face and started to
protest, but the next time Law screamed at her to leave she closed her mouth and marched out, no
doubt still feeling like she was on thin ice.

Law whirled around once he thought the room was cleared, a bag of blood in his hands, and stopped
at the sight of Chopper standing nervously in the middle of the floor, eyes flicking back and forth.

“I-I… he’s my patient too! …I should be able to help… I have to know how to treat him! I can help,
I won’t get in the way—!”

Law groaned loudly and stepped around Chopper. “Fine. But if you can’t handle this or if you tell
anyone, I’ll cut out your heart and keep it in a jar on display in my office.”

Chopper’s eyes popped at the threat and Zoro growled, snapping for Law to watch the way he talked
to Chopper, but Chopper just grabbed his arm to stop him and nodded up at Law, expression
determined.

“Just tell me what to do.”

“Good,” Law returned, and rounded on Zoro. “Now you, just because Killer happens not to be
venomous doesn’t mean the rest of them aren’t! You never heard me once mention that?! Do you
want to become one?!”

“Just give him the goddamn blood!” Zoro snarled. “His whole body is being starved of everything
right now!”

Chopper babbled something confusedly, trying to make sense of what was going on, but Law
ignored him and shook the tube at the end of the bag harshly until blood started dripping out. He
stuck the end of the tube in the corner of Sanji’s mouth when his head stilled for a moment and Sanji
coughed harshly as the liquid dripped down the back of his throat. He continued to struggle, trying to
shake and bite the tube to get it out of his mouth, but Law kept it far enough away from his teeth and far enough back in his throat to keep the blood dripping. Zoro knew that he would process it better and faster if he ingested it normally, but it was still hard to watch Law stick the tube down his throat as he choked and gagged around it.

More minutes went by and Sanji began to still, tongue flicking back in his mouth as he finally tasted what was in the back of his throat, and then—eyes still rolling—he started to turn his head into the tube to drink more of the thick liquid. Law yanked the cord from his mouth suddenly, plugging the drip at the end, and Sanji screamed frantically, making another uncontrolled jerk that almost sent him tumbling off of the table, but Law stuck the whole back of blood into his face and Sanji’s jaws clamped down faster than Zoro’s eyes could keep track of, puncturing the plastic and letting it gush out into his mouth. Sanji gulped greedily at every drop, slurping and gasping messily around the lack of air from drinking so fast, and in only a few seconds the whole bag had been drained.

“Let him go,” Law told them quietly before he dashed to the other side of the room and pulled out another pint of blood, placing it in Sanji’s hands just as everyone backed off and let his arms free. Sanji snapped into a sitting position and sank his fangs into the plastic, drinking the blood from the holes as if he hadn’t drunken in weeks—which might not have been far from the truth. Second bag empty, he let the plastic fall tiredly into his lap and sat panting, one eye closed and the other covered in bandages, head hanging limp. Nothing moved around him, his body previously so motionless and now so alive after just a couple of pints of blood. It was just like with Killer; an instantaneous cure to his pain.

Zoro looked over to where Law was, but the doctor was intently watched Sanji, waiting for the next thing he would do. A slight quirk in his lips revealed how excited he was to have another NSPH in the vicinity, and no doubt his mind was whirring with the testing possibilities. Behind him, Chopper’s eyes were still popping out of his head. He seemed unable to comprehend what he’d just seen, even though Zoro knew he’d understood it perfectly.

Law waited until Sanji’s head—still weak and wobbly—started rolling around to make eye contact with the people circling him before he began talking.

“Sanji, I’m Trafalgar Law. Can you hear me?”

Sanji’s head jerked up, eyeing Law from off to the side with his one good eye, waiting for him to continue.

“Do you remember what happened to you?”
The only sound in the room came from Sanji’s heavy panting as everyone waited, and then the blue eye flicked to every one of them in turn, taking in their placement around him and their stances—ready to pounce again if he lost it. His gaze rested on Killer the longest, staring flatly at him until Killer shifted uncomfortably and Kid moved to stand slightly in front of him and block Sanji’s line of vision. Sanji’s gaze drifted up to meet Kid’s hard glare, but he didn’t hold it long and turned back to his hands in his lap.

“We found you in the back of a truck in a shipment of slaves, you were dying from the drugs they gave you. Do you remember anything about that?”

Sanji’s stared blankly for a moment before shaking his head, looking back up to Law now that it seemed like he could focus on one thing at a time. The blood was circulating through his system faster now, but he still seemed a little off.

Sanji let out a deep breath, reaching up to rub one temple with the heel of his hand and scrunched his eye shut. Chopper made to get some headache medicine from the other side of the room but Law stopped him with a quick hand on his shoulder.

“What you remember might affect what medicine we can give you. And try not to move too much, you have a lot of injuries and the rate that your body heals will only help so much if you exacerbate them too much.”

“He can still have water,” Chopper insisted, pouring Sanji a glass from the plastic pitcher on the counter. Law sighed, relenting and letting Chopper dote over his patient before they continued; it wasn’t like they were in a hurry or anything. Chopper clambered back up onto the bed, trying but not really succeeding at keeping all of the water in the glass. He offered the glass to Sanji, who’s lip curled back uncomfortably and Chopper suddenly realized that he probably thought the water was spiked. He brought the glass to his lips, taking a long and obvious sip before offering the glass back to Sanji. Sanji eyed it again for a moment, but finally decided that it wasn’t worth the dehydration and reached out carefully, taking the glass without ever touching Chopper’s fingers, and drained it slowly.

Sanji looked back up after he was done, staring back at Law before he swallowed heavily and peeled his lips apart, tongue flicking over a small spot on his bottom lip. “…How bad?”

His voice was thick and saturated from the drugs. It scratched and seemed to catch in his throat, and even those two words made him grimace in pain and he cleared his throat, coughing to relieve whatever was making his vocal cords so heavy.
“After you start,” Law said coolly, unperturbed by the glare Sanji shot him in response, iridescent blue darkening with anger. He opened his mouth to protest, but decided against it and let out a slow growl instead. Zoro shifted at the sound, so much more feral and animalistic than anything Killer had ever made. Killer’s snarls sounded like a kitten’s attempts to learn to roar. The deep rumble Sanji had made reverberated around him, seeping through the air like mist and penetrating his skin. It was menacing. Zoro felt a smile tug at the corners of his lips, his muscles tingling just at the thought of fighting this man.

Sanji leaned back out of his hunched position and pulled his legs up on the table so he could rest his elbows on his knees, leaning his head back to take a slow breath, tongue flicking over that spot on his lip again.

“I got jumped in my city—”

“Where?”

Sanji deadpanned at the interruption but finally dipped his head to face Law. “Where are we?”

“Shanks’ territory. That’s him, there.” Law nodded to Shanks and Sanji looked over boredly at him before answering.

“North of here.”

“Where?”

“North.”

Law’s lips pinched together but he didn’t ask again. Shanks didn’t seem bothered.

“Seven guys attacked me, all in black with no signs or symbols or logos or uniforms, whatever, and I would have been fine but…” he rolled his shoulder uncomfortably, feeling for any lingering pain. “They hit me with something and I dropped. When I woke up I was strapped to a table with a shit ton of IV’s in my arm. They were interrogating me on my city and my boss, and when I didn’t answer they would pump me full of shit to try and get me to talk.”
“Describe it.”

“…I was really fucking cold, and shaking and everything that touched me burned. It was weird as hell. It looked like I was looking through a strobe light and a huge fucking dose of LSD.”

Sanji paused, looking between Law and Shanks and waiting for them to say anything. He continued when they didn’t, an annoyed look crossing his face, tongue darting out again.

“The next time I woke up, they were pissed. They gave me something that made me say anything that came to mind, but I caught on pretty quick and just stopped talking, so they took me off of the table and beat the shit out of me,” Sanji ran a hand tiredly through his hair. “Something about old tactics being around because they worked. I was hungry too, and I hadn’t drank—” he paused suddenly, eye widening slightly as he realized what he was about to say and quickly corrected himself, “eaten in weeks so I was really out of—”

“You might not remember, but we gave you two pints of blood when you woke up to calm you down,” Law cut in and Sanji stopped, swallowing heavily and meeting Law’s gaze carefully. Zoro felt Sanji tense and his gaze flashed to the exit and back. Zoro shifted, ready to stop Sanji when he tried to fly off of the table.

“You’re not the only vampire in the city,” Law said vapidly, already uninterested in dealing with Sanji trying to escape. “And don’t run; did you not hear me say exacerbating your wounds will make them that much worse? If we wanted to do something, we would have done it when we realized why you were so low on blood and reacting like you did.”

Sanji closed his mouth, biting down on that spot on his lip, shoulders still tight, but his eye found Killer again and he seemed to relax a little bit, despite still being confused and wary. Zoro blinked, looking down at the pinched expression Killer was making. …Could Sanji… sense, or whatever, that he was a NSPH too? Had Killer been able to tell? Beside him, Chopper’s mouth was still hanging open, but other than that he seemed to be handling the situation pretty well. Zoro knew there would be an onslaught of questions after this though.

Sanji collected himself and looked back to Law. “…Well, uh, they started to… starve me.” A thick shiver shot up Sanji’s spine suddenly and everyone in the room flinched, but did nothing when Sanji didn’t move otherwise. Zoro blinked, unable to find a connection as to why that would be that horrible compared to everything else.

“They thought making me crazy would make me want to talk so I could eat. The drugs hit me harder after that because there was nothing but that in my system, but they hit me so fast that my brain
basically stopped working. I couldn’t even follow what they were saying. It was all just garbled
sounds.” Sanji rubbed a hand over his uninjured eye, carefully avoiding the other one.

“Your body metabolizes thing quickly anyways,” Law spoke up. “At least, Killer’s does; but without
blood in your system it metabolized that much quicker and you take all of the effects at once.
Depending on how much they were giving you, it was just continuous because even your system
couldn’t clear it out fast enough.”

Sanji nodded slowly before dropping his hand, not meeting anyone’s gaze, tongue licking his lip. He
seemed incredibly uncomfortable talking about it openly, like Killer had been the first time Law had
told someone outside their family what he was.

Go figure, after all the torturing. It was also very possible that he started off like Killer had in a
military experimental facility.

Sanji cleared his throat, tongue flicking out again. “They next time I woke up they’d put me in a
metal room, but I was still up on the other stuff so I couldn’t stop them when they came in and shot
me up with something hallucinogenic. Birds flying out of the ceiling and scratching me and breaking
like glass and the floor turning into tar and shit. I wasn’t awake long for that, or I don’t remember it.
Next time I was on the table again, and they gave me something that made everything hurt like a
motherfucker, and they kept poking my injuries to watch me scream—”

“Pain level from one to ten.”

Sanji gave him a dark look at the interruption and spat, “Forty-two,” waiting for Law to cut in again
but the doctor just gestured for him to continue. “Then I was here.”

Shanks turned slowly to Law, still processing what they’d heard. “Experimenting doesn’t sound like
Teach.”

“Or even really Doflamingo,” Kid agreed. “He can’t sell them if they’re damaged goods or
whatever.”

“Moriah?” Law asked quietly and the other two shrugged.

“Moriah does black market stuff,” Chopper mumbled, eyes still glazed over as he tried to put
everything in place in his mind, making sense of everything he’d seen with Killer but never had a real answer to. “Experimenting would risk the organs and risk his product and reputation.”

“Well,” Shanks sighed heavily, turning to Luffy. “You still hungry?”

Luffy let out a wild whoop and bounded from the room, Shanks trailing off behind him with a quick reminder over his shoulder that they could call him if they needed.

“…How bad are my injuries?” Sanji asked quietly, all eyes turning back to him as he looked over the yards and yards of bandages hiding his skin.

“You’re body is still taking in the blood you drank and is also still pumped full of adrenaline, so you probably can’t feel most of it now, but you will later. It’s worse than it looks.”

That made Sanji’s head pop up, and he looked quickly to Killer before back to Law. Zoro could almost hear his brain doing the calculations; if Law knew how fast he and Killer healed and was still calling it that bad, than it was bad.

“Dislocated shoulder, seven fractured ribs, internal bleeding, ruptured spleen, sprained right wrist, broken right thumb, dislocated left hip, broken left tibia, sprained left ankle, five broken toes… you shouldn’t be malnourished anymore now that you’ve fed, but you’ve got all sorts of cuts and lacerations, and it looks like your head doesn’t have any lasting damage, but Doctor Chopper and I will keep an eye on it for a couple of days. We fixed your spleen and stopped most of the bleeding of the rest of your organs, but you need to take it easy, especially after freaking out from lack of blood in your body.”

Sanji looked down to where Chopper was nodding excitedly, just starting to comprehend the possibilities of new medical information Sanji contained. Sanji seemed to realize this too and shifted uncomfortably, but Zoro wasn’t sure anyone other than Law and Killer noticed. This was all too new for Chopper to realize the effects that his enthusiasm for experimenting and testing would have on Sanji; it wasn’t like he knew Killer’s situation or how bad Sanji’s might have been.

“…How long until I can get out of here?”

“Maybe a month or so, depending on how fast you heal.” Law crossed the room and pulled an ophthalmoscope from one of the drawers before coming back, reaching for the bandages over Sanji’s left eye. The blond flinched back, but stilled after a moment when Law made no movements to pull
away and let Law unwrap the bandages.

“Your eye socket is fractured too,” Law said as he dropped the cloth in the trash and flipped on the light, holding it up to Sanji’s eye. The socket was purple and deformed, bubbling out unevenly and oozing something thick and yellow down Sanji’s cheek. Every once and a while Law would wipe it away with a rag so he could keep looking at it, but it never stopped flowing. Zoro watched for the stretching and reforming of new pink skin he’d seen Killer’s body do during the healing process, but the wound was still.

“There was a lot of damage done to the actual eyeball. You don’t remember anything about this or how it was done?” Law reached up carefully and with one gloved finger pushed back the disgustingly swollen lid, more blood and puss leaking from the tear duct. Zoro grimaced, looking at the cloudy blue eye pushed slightly off center, so much less alive and bright than Sanji’s other eye. He could only imagine how painful that was with Law poking and prodding at it, but Sanji didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest.

“No,” Sanji mouthed, barely finding the energy to speak. His viable eye closed as he tried to keep himself calm.

“Again, we won’t know the extent of the damage until we see how fast your body starts to heal now that you’re coming off of the drugs.”

“…Should I open my eye?” Sanji asked slowly. “Would it help if you saw the eyeball and not just the lid? It doesn’t hurt that badly.”

Law paused and everyone else in the room blinked. Law’s finger was still holding Sanji’s bad lid open. He turned the flashlight up to a brighter level and flashed it a couple times over Sanji’s pupil. No reaction.

“You can’t see this?” he asked carefully.

“Not through the lid, no.”

“I’m holding your eye open. You should be able to see this light. Can you feel me holding back your lid?”
Sanji’s good eye popped open and snapped to Law’s concentrative expression, but to his credit, he didn’t move his head once.

“Can you feel this?” Law asked again, letting Sanji’s lid fall and tapping on the outside of the socket. Zoro winced just at the thought of someone poking a fracture of his like that, especially around the eye, but Sanji didn’t even blink. He shook his head carefully, reaching up to finger the swollen edge and find where he stopped being able to feel. His fingers paused a good inch from his closed lid and a small shudder shook his shoulders, good eye staring off into the distance.

“It looks like experimenting was done on it. There’s a lot of chemical residue that shouldn’t be there and isn’t anywhere else on your body,” Law shut off the ophthalmoscope and laid it on the table. “It might take you longer to heal because of that. We won’t decide anything until we look at the progress in a couple of days.”

“Why would they experiment on his eye and not his... internal organs, or something?” Chopper asked, clambering up on the table to look for himself. Sanji didn’t even bother pulling away, still shell-shocked and staring off blankly.

Law shrugged. “Could be they were testing how much he could be damaged and still heal from. They could have chosen his eye because it’s an organ central to hunting, and therefore survival for vampires. It like the heart or lungs, it would take precedent over other things like broken limbs, but losing it won’t kill him; he’s also got two of them. We don’t have to remove it though, your body will keep it from rotting and hurting the rest of you, so there’s still a chance that the healing process might start.”

Sanji didn’t answer, arms hanging limply on the table and good eye now closed as he tried to keep himself calm. He was gnawing on that spot on his lip now.

“...Can... I get some cigarettes?” he ground out through clenched teeth, hands tightening into fists.

Law nodded. “Not in here with the oxygen, but we’re going to move you to one of the apartments downstairs that our fighters stay at. Doctor Chopper and I will keep checking in to make sure your healing is progressing, and while you rest, Zoro over here will find you some cigarettes and food,” he gestured vaguely in Zoro’s direction. Sanji didn’t even bother opening his eye to find out which one in the room he was referring to.

Law tapped Chopper on the shoulder after a silent moment and Chopper trotted off into the hallway, coming back after a moment with a wheelchair and rolling it over to the bed. Zoro turned pull the door open again, wondering if there would be anything left over in the kitchen now that Luffy had
no doubt ransacked the place or if he would have to order something out, and if so, what would Law consider nutritious enough to give Sanji—

“Hey, marimo. Try not to get too shitty a brand if at all possible. I’m having some serious fucking withdrawal here.”

Oh, he already knew he was going to hate this asshole. Zoro ground to a halt, turning back slowly to meet Sanji’s blank stare. The blond’s tongue flicked out over the spot on his lip again where, no doubt, a cigarette would have been normally. Behind him, Kid snorted loudly and Killer turned away, trying to hide his laughter.

*Marimo? That son of a—*

“Go, Zoro.” Law was smirking, not about to wait for Zoro to react to the nickname. Zoro ground his teeth, debating retorting, but he couldn’t come up with anything good on the spot and stalked out. The second he was out of the room Kid guffawed and Zoro slammed the door sharply behind him.

Shanks was waiting for him at the top of the stairs, beer in hand, somehow having known that Zoro would be the first one out of the room. Behind him, Zoro could hear the chefs in the kitchen crying and yelling for Luffy to stop, and periodically a tremendous crash blocked out the screaming, but it always picked up again. Zoro rolled his eyes, the kitchen now a lost cause, and headed for the door.

“Find out where he’s from,” Shanks murmured as Zoro passed. “Just in case this is a setup. It’s very possible with the marines around here. And I’d like you to stay here too to keep an eye on him. We’ll put you up in one of the bedrooms.”

Zoro nodded, leaving Shanks in the shadows behind him.

-oOo-
Zoro slammed open the door to one of the hospital’s spare rooms that Sanji had been given, uninterested in the visitor’s state of sleep or not. Judging from the way the blond was sitting up in bed and currently glaring at Zoro with a look dark enough to put a black spot on the sun, he’d been awake before Zoro had barged in. Not that Zoro cared.

Sanji’s hand was hovering in front of his face, and it made Zoro wonder if he’d been playing with his injured eye, unable to leave it alone, but that was pretty low on the priority list at the moment. What was bothering him was the fact that—regardless of how injured Law said he was—there was essentially a possible mole from the marines or another territory or god knows where living in their most safely guarded location in the entire city—left almost entirely on his own. Zoro wasn’t even sure there was a guard stationed in the hallway outside.

Zoro slapped the tray of food down on the bedside table and Sanji’s one angry, unblinking eye flicked over to the steaming soup and slices of bread before turning back to Zoro. They remained there, motionless, for close to two minutes, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

Zoro grunted finally, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. “You want to tell me how you really ended up in the back of that truck?”

Somehow, though it didn’t seem possible, Sanji’s gaze grew darker, pupils dilating much more so than Killer’s ever did when he was angry, and Zoro tensed as Sanji’s pale lip pulled back slightly to reveal his fangs glinting off of the blanched light overhead. Immediately Zoro’s mind jumped to his weapons. He only had Wado on him; the other two were still locked away in his case from the last fight, but it was a small room so his strength might give him the advantage. Zoro felt a grin starting to pull at his face, remembering the terrifying power he’d felt just holding Sanji down against the examining table earlier. He could only imagine the strength Sanji’s spine held, his hips, and if he had the upper body force too—

“Scullery maids shouldn’t ask questions,” Sanji jeered, cutting through Zoro’s train of thought. “Especially moldy-headed fuckers that use up half of their brain cells just trying to form the question.”
Zoro’s teeth clenched and the smirk he hadn’t noticed forming vanished. The guy had a hell of a tongue.

“I’m not sure you’d retain the answer even if I told you,” Sanji continued with a vapid tone, not even bothering to make eye contact with him anymore.

Every word out of the asshole’s mouth made Zoro’s muscles clench tighter and tighter, coiled like springs and ready to burst open at the slightest shift in pressure. He forced himself to reel his temper in; Law had messed him up before for fighting with a patient—even if it was Franky—and he wasn’t keen to go through that again.

“Meaning you weren’t kidnapped,” Zoro spat, fighting to keep his voice as even as possible.

Sanji looked about ready to snap himself, but somehow he forced the anger down and instead reached over to the bedside table where a box of cigarettes and a lighter were laying next to the tray of food. He pulled one from the package and slid it between his lips, and then fumbled with the lighter for a moment before he managed to get the flame going. Zoro blinked in confusion before he remembered the blond’s broken thumb, but Sanji had the tip of the cigarette lit even with his non-dominant hand and drew in a deep breath, and then tipped his head back to let the smoke out of his lungs and into the room. Zoro eyed the smoke detector off in the corner of the ceiling, but he was sure that had been taken into account when Sanji had been given the pack. When Sanji finally spoke, his voice was cool and collected.

“Every single one of my fractures have started to heal, which is why no one has put me in any casts. The doc thinks most will have put themselves back into place enough by tomorrow that I won’t need splints while they heal the rest of the way. The ligaments are whatever; I’ve fucked those up before. The ribs hurt like a bitch but they’re healing. Everything is fucking peachy, except that I fucked up my thumb and my wrist, which scared the fucking shit out of me even though they’re healing so I’m stressed as hell—” Zoro blinked again, trying to figure out why his thumb and wrist outweighed every other injury he’d racked up—“and I still can’t see out of my left eye.”

Sanji turned to glare at Zoro again with the one good lightning-blue iris. “The fucking shrimp doctor has been down here every. Single. Fucking. Hour. To see if there’s any improvement, and there hasn’t been a single. Fucking. Bit. To see if there’s any improvement, and there hasn’t been a single. Fucking. Bit. Don’t you fucking dare insinuate that I’d willingly give up my fucking eye just to… what? Waste your hospital materials? Get the fuck out of here, marimo. This situation is shitty enough without you fucking taking up the oxygen I need to heal. That and I’m still hungry as fuck so you standing there like a walking IV bag is making me want to attack you and that will fuck up my injuries more so now I’m really pissed off—”

“I don’t care about your stupid thumb, or wrist, or even your eye.”
Sanji flinched as Zoro said this, and Zoro noticed said injured hand twitch out of the corner of his eye.

“What I care about is the fact that, despite all of this, and how “shitty” this situation is, you won’t tell us anything about you that we don’t already know. So we can’t get anyone down here to get you the hell of here, we can’t figure out why you were “kidnapped,” or shipped off for breaking laws or codes, or whatever the fuck you did to end up on the way to a slave house, and we can’t be sure that you aren’t here to do some serious damage to us.”

Sanji eyed him darkly before turning away, bringing the cigarette back up to his lips. He turned deliberately back, dropping his hand to his waist before he blew the smoke in Zoro’s direction, making Zoro wrinkle his nose and huff uncomfortably to get the air out of his throat.

“Trust me, national treasure, if I’d wanted to bring down your shitty organization, you’d all have been ashes six feet underground long ago.”

Zoro growled, slamming a foot into the side of the bed where it jumped and clacked sharply against the wall. Sanji’s return snarl was instantaneous, and mangled body or not, he was lunging for Zoro’s throat almost faster than Zoro could keep track of, but Zoro had lived with Killer for years and could anticipate a lot of instinctual moves from NSPH’s. Sanji, on the other hand, couldn’t have anticipated Zoro’s reflexes.

Zoro’s hand snapped around Sanji’s throat and slammed him back into the bed. The blond’s legs flew up from the force of the blow and Sanji roared furiously and whipped his knee around, shin driving into Zoro’s diaphragm like a freight train and knocking him off of his feet. Zoro gagged, grip loosening on Sanji’s throat just enough to let the blond suck in a labored breath before his other foot snapped up. Zoro’s arm whipped to block its path, not about to take another one of those hits head on, and his entire body vibrated as the force of Sanji’s kick traveled up his arm. A wild grin split his face the exact same time Sanji gained the same feral expression and they leapt apart, staring each other down from across the room.

Zoro coughed again, lungs wailing in disapproval of the movement, though the pain from the blow was starting to lessen. “You don’t seem so broken to me.”

Sanji’s smile was malicious as his eyes found certain targets on Zoro’s body. Bruises on his neck where Zoro’s fingers had connected were forming and vanishing simultaneously so that there was no mark left on the pale skin almost as instantly as there had been a deep purple bruise. “Try me, shit head. You need brain as well as brawn to stand half a chance of beating—”
“WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MY PATIENT?!"

Zoro whipped around to find Chopper standing agape in the door, staring death at Zoro and debating with himself about whether or not to be angry at a patient and a stranger before his morals kicked in and he turned his glare on Sanji. Zoro cringed. Sanji was unimpressed.

“Chop—"

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?! WE SEND YOU DOWN HERE WITH FOOD AND STRICT ORDERS TO LEAVE HIM ALONE—LOOK! HIS KNEE IS ALREADY SWELLING MORE FROM THE TORN LIGAMENTS! GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I PUT YOU IN THE SAME STATE!"

Zoro grimaced but straightened up, taking his hand away from Wado where he had begun to slide her out of the sheath. He stepped around Chopper, about to say something else but the little doctor was already running over to the side of Sanji’s bed.

“Does rest not mean anything to you?! You almost died six times in the last day alone, and god knows what your body had to put up with when you were imprisoned! If you don’t let yourself recover, your eye might not be the only thing that doesn’t show improvement! You’re strung out, your body can only handle healing so much—and that’s without extra stress!”

Sanji stared blankly at Chopper’s irate expression before settling himself back on the bed, reaching down to pick up the still smoking cigarette off of the floor where it had been knocked from his hand. “…Were you coming down here to check on it?”

“I—! Huh?”

“My eye.”

“Oh… yeah, I was. We need to keep watching the rate everything else recovers compared to it. Law is comparing your fluids and tissues to some samples he took from Killer but we need to take some more from you. The samples we got when you were unconscious aren’t enough.”
Sanji’s shoulders tensed up violently, and Chopper was about to scream at him for not watching his injured shoulder when Sanji cut in darkly.

“Leave.”

Chopper stuttered, surprised at the sudden switch. “I—what?”

“**Leave,**” Sanji snarled, teeth clicking from being clenched so tightly.

*Oh shit.* “We’re not—” Zoro started, realizing what had made Sanji snap, but Sanji’s tongue was quicker.

“**Leave! You fucking psychopathic sadist!**”

Zoro could hear Chopper flinch from the name even without looking at him. No one ever talked to Chopper like that; he took it so personally.

“I didn’t make it out of one gulag just to get taken in by another Mengele! I’m leaving and I swear to fucking god if you try anything I will take you all down with me—!” Sanji got to his knees and drifted forward slowly, bared fangs and good eye trained on Chopper’s trembling form. Chopper yelped and stumbled behind Zoro’s leg.

Zoro slid one leg forward to brace himself, ready to take the force of Sanji’s hit if this didn’t work. At least Chopper wouldn’t get hit; he was still only seventeen, his body couldn’t handle that type of force.

“**Killer is my brother!**” he yelled at the same time Sanji’s muscles locked up to lunge.

The blond ground to a halt, eye popping open in shock as he stared at Zoro. Zoro could see the blond’s mind whirring as he tried to figure out the relation between the two. Zoro pinched his lips together, still uncomfortable with the idea of relaying Killer’s story so openly to someone that didn’t have their best interests in mind, but the situation needed it. He needed to say something to diffuse Sanji; the man was like a land mine.
“The doctor who treated you, his name is Law,” Zoro started off slowly, keeping his voice as even as possible and Chopper in the corner of his vision just in case the young doctor accidentally made any sudden moves. “The hulking asshole with red hair that isn’t Shanks is Kid. They’re my adoptive parents. When I was nine they broke Killer out of a research facility and hid him with us. We’ve spent years protecting him, hiding who he is, keeping him from doing anything that could wave a red flag on what he is to anyone that could hurt him and taking care of people that have found out. Yes, Law runs tests. They’re not brutal experiments, he does stupid shit like make sure that Killer can metabolize alcohol for when he starts drinking and cold medicine so he can take it. He tests his blood to find out if it’s started to deteriorate so Killer can eat before he gets too hungry and attacks someone. The only way Law would have samples of Killer’s whatever for tests is because Killer’s ok with it.”

Sanji was silent, staring blankly at Zoro but still standing and ready to lunge.

“Killer is one of the few people I would kill for in this world. Don’t you dare insinuate that we’re abusing him like a lab rat.”

Zoro stayed motionless for another moment while Sanji thought, and when the blond did nothing Zoro made a disgusted sound and straightened back up, turning for the door and ushering Chopper out with him. “Whatever. Just eat so you don’t go berserk again and hurt yourself more. Law is getting his hands on more blood; you’ll have to make due with that, they went through too much for your surgery. Someone will bring it down later.”

The door slammed behind them, leaving Sanji still crouching on the bed, staring vacantly off into the distance, processing Zoro’s words carefully in his mind.

Outside the door, Chopper brought his hands nervously to cover his mouth, looking back and forth from the door to Zoro’s back marching up the stairs before he trotted after the larger man.

Zoro looked down at Chopper’s trembling bottom lip and the tears forming in the corners of his eyes and winced inwardly. “…Are you ok?”

Chopper nodded with a jerky movement and swiped under his eyes.

“…He’s just scared,” Zoro added quietly.

Another nod. “I-I know… it’s just sad. …Do you think he’ll be ok? …He’s so angry… he was
abused for so much longer than Killer was… it looks like he has some mental scarring—maybe even PTSD.”

“…Well, I guess that’s why Law doesn’t really mind that he’s not saying where he’s from. We don’t have to kick him out that way.”

“…Law wants to help him?”

“…Something like that.”

-oOo-

Law’s diagnosis was two months. Sanji would have to put up with them for eight weeks before he could leave. Due to the amount of injuries his body had to deal with, the healing process had been significantly slowed down, which only meant that Sanji was even more infuriated that his body wasn’t cooperating with him. If the important things were healing first then he could leave much sooner. Law had put Zoro on fetch duty, pissing him off to no end, but in return he’d also designated him and Luffy as Sanji’s physical therapy sparring partners. Law wasn’t sure if, based on how slowly Sanji was healing anyways, his body would get lazy and not heal the injuries in the correct way if he was lying in a bed all day, and Zoro would be lying if he said that he wasn’t excited about the possibility of sparring with this guy.

“Hey marimo, who the fuck made this food? It tastes like a herd of buffalo shat all over the ingredients and some idiot failed to notice and still made something out of it.”

He was still a complete and total asshole though.

“I’m sorry that we haven’t gotten the finest to prepare your meal, your highness,” he replied dryly, now used to Sanji’s insults and not quite as quick to get annoyed. “But whose fault is it again that you’re laid up like a maiden in bed after her wedding night?”

Sanji growled, face scrunching up in a funny pinch that always made Zoro smirk. Sanji could be fun sometimes too, but those times were few and far between.

“Get me up to the fucking kitchen,” the blond ordered suddenly, flinging the covers back off of him and revealing the myriad of bandages littered across his body. “I’ll show these idiots how to fucking
cook. I’m injured for god’s sake! I need at least somewhat decent nourishment!”

Along with his wrapped eye, Law had decided that Sanji needed some braces and bandages, and then used Chopper’s adorable pouting face to wheedle Sanji into them. Most of his upper body injuries had put themselves back in place, so his shoulder, thumb, and ribs had been left untouched, and there was only a small brace on his wrist. His lower body was a different story. His right ankle only had another brace on it to keep the torn ligaments from stretching more, but his left leg had been seriously messed up. Sanji winced every time he turned slightly, leading Zoro to guess that his dislocated hip was still painful—back in the socket or not—and Chopper had insisted on a splint even though Law said it wasn’t necessary. Chopper had been thinking about Sanji’s quick temper. Law hadn’t cared if he hurt himself more. Sanji’s shin, even more out of place after his and Zoro’s little spat, had a cast from knee to ankle to hold the fracture in place, which also kept his ankle sprain still. And the broken toes didn’t help with his already impaired equilibrium.

“Hey!” Zoro lunged forward, grabbing Sanji’s unhurt arm to hold him steady as the idiot flailed for the crutches that were next to the bed but just out of his reach to keep him from jostling around too much. So much for that. Sanji was gritting his teeth through the pain of moving. Law had been right about the adrenaline and the blood though; once Sanji’s system acclimated, it was like a tidal wave of pain had slammed into the blond and completely wiped him out.

“I’m not eating this shit! And I’ve been making cuisine with blood for way too long to go back to drinking it out of a bag like some animal, so either help me up or get the fuck out of my way!”

“The crutches are going to hurt your shoulder—”

“The hell with them! I’m trying to use them to stand up so I can get to you!” And with that he grabbed ahold of the shirt on Zoro’s shoulder and yanked, pulling himself into as much of an upright position as he could while still favoring both the leg with the cast and the sprained ankle he was forced to stand on. Zoro choked slightly as his collar was yanked against his neck, grumbling as he assumed the position of the crutch with Sanji’s arm slung over his shoulder but not about to upset Chopper again by dumping the idiot on the ground. “Now get me to the kitchen. I’m not going to be a fucking invalid; if I have my hands I might as well be doing something useful.”

Zoro grumbled, mutterings of “asshole” and “useless cripple” drifting up, making Sanji grit his teeth, but Zoro took the first step, waiting for Sanji to follow, and Sanji finally took one gangly step after him. The blond sucked in a sharp hiss, doubling over and dropping all of his weight on Zoro’s shoulders—other hand snapping up to wrap around Zoro’s neck and halt his fall—a red hot bolt of pain shooting up through his ankle and toes tingling blindingly. “Fuck.”

“…Your ankle?”
“No, my fucking pride.”

Zoro rolled his eyes and grabbed Sanji’s arms—being careful of the injured wrist—and untangled himself from their grip while Sanji balanced helplessly on one leg and glared. Zoro was beginning to think the blond couldn’t make any other facial expressions except surprised and angry. Muscle paralysis or something. Maybe Law could give him a pill for it.

“Tell me if I hurt your hip,” he muttered, dipping down to wrap one arm around Sanji’s thighs and hoist him up slowly so that Sanji was half sitting in the crook of his arm, half leaning against his pectoral, clinging to his head and shoulders like a small monkey. Zoro grinned to himself at the pinched expression he imagined Sanji was making and started towards the door. Sanji was right about the food though, it couldn’t have been giving him very many nutrients; he was still too light, even with the casts.

“You give me a concussion, I kill you.”

“Shut up,” Zoro grunted, ducking down to get Sanji under the doorframe safely.

-oOo-

“I guess it counts as physical therapy… as long as he doesn’t stress his shoulder or wrist.”

Chopper was standing with Zoro outside the kitchen, watching Sanji’s hands moving like a blur across the stove, ingredients disappearing from where he’d prepped them and the wok sizzling loudly. Zoro had found him a stool when he’d been unable to stand on his injured legs for too long, and then two other stools for when he hadn’t been able to reach enough of the counter space for all of his ingredients and placed them on either side of him, one with knives and cutting boards, one with ingredients. Prepped ingredients went out of the way on one side of the stove to conserve space, and spices on the other side. All in all it was a pretty decent system, considering Sanji seemed to be used to having the run of the whole kitchen. Zoro had seen how territorial Shanks’ chef could get if people got in the way of his cooking, and the way Sanji had browbeaten him out of the room told him more and more about Sanji.

Namely, that he was an asshole.

But also that he seemed a competent chef with the wherewithal to take control of situations he
needed to be on top of in. God knows he’d been trying for three days now with Zoro. He’d lost the battle with Chopper, the kid was too cute, and Law didn’t take no for an answer, but Zoro was still fair game.

“…It smells really good,” Chopper murmured from Zoro’s side and the older man nodded. It did smell really good. Really good.

“Hey marimo, any word on that blood?”

Zoro grimaced at the name but didn’t comment on it. “It’s coming.”

He crossed his arms, moving to stand next to Sanji and watch the way the blond’s fingers danced over the wok, utensils flashing by every now and then to alter the food in what looked like the most infinitesimal ways.

“Don’t get in my way,” Sanji muttered after a moment of Zoro standing there quietly and Zoro just grunted in return.

Sanji was an asshole.

Zoro turned to the sound of footsteps, finding Nami in the doorway with Chopper, an IV bag full of red, sloshing liquid clutched tightly in her hands as she nervously nibbled on her lip. Zoro rolled his eyes and turned back to the stove. She’d refused to visit Sanji at all during the first two days, too guilt-ridden or something stupid to face him, even though it was technically her blunder that had saved his life. The whole vampire thing had come as a shock too and she’d been unable to come down for another day. Zoro was kind of surprised that she was coming at all today, and at “feeding time” no less. Zoro could hear her shuffling unsurely in the door for a minute before she finally crossed the threshold and the room to stand by Sanji’s side.

Sanji slammed the spoon down in an empty spot on one of the stools, struggling to turn and face her. “Well it’s about fucking time—”

Sanji froze, jolting so quickly to a stop with his breath caught in his throat that Zoro paused too, debating moving around to see Sanji’s expression. Had he hurt himself—?

“Oh what have I done? Speaking to such a lustrous princess in such an atrocious manner!”
Sanji’s hand snapped out, yanking a flower from the vase on the kitchen counter and presenting it to Nami, hearts practically popping out of his eyes. Nami blinked, taking a precautionary step backwards, holding the somewhat thin plastic of the IV bag closer to her for protection.

“My sweet Mellorine, allow me to prepare something for you as an apology,” he dipped into a deep bow. Or, as well as he could while fighting the brace on his hip and wincing from the straining motions.

“DON’T MOVE LIKE THAT! YOU’LL STRAIN YOUR INJURIES AND STITCHES!” Chopper screamed from the other side of the kitchen, racing over to try and push Sanji back into a normal position.

Oh yeah, this guy couldn’t be more of an asshole if he tried. Zoro huffed, turning and taking a seat heavily at the table.

“I… Uh…” Nami reached out slowly and took the flower from Sanji, passing him the bag of blood. “I don’t really…”

“Of fear not, my precious goddess. I would not think to contaminate your food with this vile substance!” Sanji flung the bag onto the counter, making Chopper screech again when it landed heavily and bubbled against the counter like a water balloon about to split open.

“You need that for the food, you idiot!” Zoro snapped from the table.

Sanji whirled on him, heart-filled gaze snapping back to a death glare. “Shitty marimo! Obviously I’m not going to make your food with blood! Did you think I was going to serve you that?!”

“I—” Zoro stopped, trying to understand.

Sanji rolled his eyes, letting out a loud groan before turning back to the stove. “And now he thinks I was going to keep him from eating… Please go sit at the table, Mellorine~ Your food will be ready shortly!”

Nami smiled uneasily, following Zoro to sit at his side. Chopper eventually joined them, though he
seemed uneasy to leave Sanji alone cooking with the new flourishes and dangerous movements he’d added.

“…He’s a strange one, isn’t he?” she asked, careful not to let her voice get above the crackling of the grease on the stove.

“We should have left him in the truck,” Zoro grunted.

“Shitty marimo,” Sanji snapped, appearing suddenly above his shoulder and twirling a plate down on the table in front of Nami with an elaborate bow. Zoro was about to protest about him standing when the blond slammed two plates down in front of him and Chopper and Zoro caught a whiff of the food.

“Is there anything else I can get you, my lovely?” Sanji held his arms out open to Nami, setting a glass of something fruity with a lemon and a flower sticking out of the top next to her plate. Where the hell had he pulled that from?

She gave him another strained smile, still not sure what to make of all this. “Would you join us, Sanji…? I… think you should be sitting and, you know, resting.”

Sanji dipped into a swoon, hands clasped by his head. “Ah, my sweet Mellorine’s care and compassion is more than one could ever ask for. I could never turn down such a request!” Sanji whirled to return to the stove where another plate was waiting, bag of blood rolled and clipped to keep from dripping next to it. Zoro took one look at Chopper’s mental breakdown in the process of exploding in full force at Sanji’s movements and grabbed Sanji’s uninjured shoulder, forcing him back into a chair as he stood to walk to the counter.

“Useless moss-head!” Sanji snarled, cringing and fingerling his hip tenderly. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

Zoro set the plate of food tinged slightly redder down in front of Sanji before sitting back in his own chair. “Those stupid ballet moves are going to give Chopper a heart attack. Sit.”

“Fuck you, I can take care of myself!”

Zoro’s retort died on his tongue as the food hit his mouth. It was an explosion of flavors and textures,
sweeping over his taste buds like an aphrodisiac and rendering his tongue useless for speaking. Zoro forgot for a second that he’d been talking at all, looking down at the plate in surprise.

“I’m so sorry for this brute’s appalling manner, my sweet~ Ah! I didn’t catch the young lady’s name!”

Nami gave him another smile, less forced now that he was picking fights with Zoro. Something they could relate on. “Nami. It’s very nice to meet you, Sanji, though I’m sorry we’ve had to in such bad circumstances.”

“Oh, Nami-swan! I assure you, if I were any more capable of showering you with the love and care you deserve I would do so without a moment’s hesitation! As it is, I’m afraid I shall have to apologize for my state and hope that the food is satisfactory without the presentation, though I am ashamed to call myself a chef with such pitiful delivery!”

“Sanji, this food is divine, and you’re really hurt. Don’t worry about it,” Nami was grinning down happily at the plate in front of her, Chopper sucking his own down like it was his last meal beside her.

Sanji’s eyes grew wide, and everyone paused at the expression, wondering what Nami had said wrong.

“…The lovely lady has praised my cooking with such wondrous words… IF I DIED RIGHT NOW I WOULD DIE HAPPY~!”

Zoro thought it best not to tell Sanji that Nami was the reason he was alive. They’d never hear the end of it.

“Hey, shit head. You don’t like my cooking or something?”

Zoro gritted his teeth, leaning in to stare back at Sanji. “Just trying to get used to the fact that Nami’s not the only princess in the room anymore.”

“Well I assume any idea bigger than “lift this heavy piece of shit” would be a little hard for your puny brain to take in, but go slow, you’ll get it.”
Zoro’s fist clenched, fork bending in his hand. “Dartboard brow.”

“Moss-head.”

“Idiot lovely.”

“Shitty marimo.”

“Shit cook.”

“Shitty swordsman.”

Nami turned quietly to Chopper, fork halfway to her mouth. “This is good, isn’t it?”

Chopper slurped his affirmative, nodding enthusiastically around the food.

-oOo-

Zoro followed the wonderful smells he knew were coming from the kitchen where Sanji had been every single meal since he’d first come up from the apartment. Every morning Zoro went down to help Sanji up out of bed before training and every morning, no matter how early Zoro got there, the cook was ready and waiting to be brought up to the kitchen with some comment about Zoro looking especially stupid that morning. Zoro generally walked him into at least one wall on the way up for the remark.

Once Luffy had tasted Sanji’s food, all hopes of the cook ever not cooking a meal were lost, although Shanks’ chef was still a little annoyed that he’d lost full reign of his kitchen and cooked while moping to himself in the rare moments when Sanji wasn’t working. Normally the kitchen was packed; everyone that knew of Sanji’s secretive presence looked for some sort of snack or a plate during mealtime, but this time of the morning Shanks’ territory was almost deserted. Occasionally someone would drift by on their way to some early work, but fights weren’t until night and no one bothered getting up early to start preparation, which meant that Sanji and Zoro essentially had the whole place to themselves.
Zoro swiped across his sweating brow with the cloth in his hand before draping it across his shoulders, wiping his hands on the ends that hung down to his chest. He’d lost the shirt a little while ago and didn’t honestly care (or remember) where it ended up, so he was just sticking with the pants for the moment.

He padded silently into the kitchen where Sanji had gotten rid of the stools just a day or two ago now that his ankle had healed enough to stand on. One week it had taken for the sprained joint to heal enough to stand on, which—if Sanji’s annoyed grumblings when Law told him this said anything—was a lot slower than he was anticipating, and also meant that his fractures would take that much longer to heal.

Zoro was still waiting to be taken up on as a sparring partner and see the power behind those legs; Sanji spent the whole day balanced on one injured ankle and didn’t even bat an eye. But he didn’t really seem to mind anything, whether it was Chopper coming to check up on him or Luffy coming to steal food, as long as he got to cook. The fact that Nami could flounce in at any time and request anything and Sanji would drop whatever he was doing and make it for her pissed Zoro off to no end, most of the time because Sanji insisted on twirling for her during the process and more often than not was cringing a lot more by the time she left than he had been before she came in. She also seemed to pick the times when he was so tired he was about to ask Zoro for help back to his room, and she would ask even though she could see how tired he was, and he would forgo sleep to make anything for her without hesitation. Manipulative bitch.

But even through the elaborate flourishes and stupid twirling when he served Nami, or the way he swooned slightly at a compliment from her, or somehow managed to beat Luffy out of the room even with how injured he was, Zoro could see the passion in Sanji’s one electric blue eye for his skill. Sanji may have been a fighter, but it was easy to see that he was a chef at heart, someone that was always looking to take care of others and make sure they were well to their full potential.

The fact that Sanji himself was at significantly less then full potential must have been eating him alive. Zoro had seen the cook smile with Nami, so he didn’t have muscle paralysis at least, but that was about the only time he wasn’t scowling to himself. Even cooking didn’t seem to put him in a consistent enough good mood. And Zoro was going to find a way to make him smile without that stupid witch having to be around if it killed him. There was no reason for Sanji to be pissed off the whole remaining seven weeks here. And Zoro had been assigned to Sanji so he was going to make the shit cook happy, because like hell he was going to spend seven weeks as the personal bitch of a pissed-off rattlesnake.

And also because Zoro was dying to fight with those legs. He could never get Luffy into a decent fight—the idiot always got too distracted—but with Sanji’s passion for everything he did… it would be one hell of a fight.
Sanji slowed for a second as Zoro found a place in one of the chairs by the table, soundless though the swordsman was, before he resumed his chopping. Something was bubbling methodically away on the stove beside him. Zoro sat patiently, panting to himself, not wanting to interrupt Sanji no matter how thirsty he was. Watching Sanji cook was almost as mesmerizing as watching Law or Chopper work with a new sample, watching Kid put together a new gun or engine, or even Kuina practicing with Wado, and he didn’t want to be the one to break that connection between the person and their trade. But the cook paused what he’d been doing and turned to a small spot on the counter where a plate and a cup of something hot and steaming had been set aside. He slid it across the counter more into Zoro’s line of view before returning to his work.

“Come get it yourself, I can’t walk all the way over there and back before this burns.”

Zoro blinked, wiping his hands once more on the towel on his shoulders before pulling himself out of the chair and crossing the room where a small plate of onigiri and a cup of tea were waiting.

Zoro took the two things, standing stupidly at the counter to stare at Sanji’s back. The cook seemed indifferent or unwilling to turn around and pointedly continued with whatever he was making.

“…Did you make these for me?”

Sanji shrugged, huffing out a stream of smoke in Zoro’s direction. “You’re in here every damn morning, you might as well do something besides stare at me like a fucking guard dog that actually merits you being in a kitchen.”

“…Thanks.”

“…Yeah, sure. …Just go sit, I can hear you wheezing from here.”

Zoro turned and did so, munching contentedly on the first onigiri before taking a sip of the tea. Perfect. Just like always. Zoro smiled to himself, still amazed that Sanji not only knew how to make rice balls, but that he could make them so well and he knew the traditional Japanese name. This made for a good morning.

Zoro sat silently eating the onigiri, gaze eventually drifting to Sanji’s marred skin where most of the bandages had been taken off the cuts, burns, and other skin wounds to let them breathe. Every once and a while Sanji would twitch, skin bubbling up before stretching farther over the wound, Sanji rolling whichever limb the cut was on uncomfortably to shake it out. Even the skin lesions were
healing much slower than they should have been. A lot slower actually, if the way Killer healed when he was hurt said anything. This way meant that Sanji was still open to infection; Killer’s body had stopped at nothing to remove that threat, even with how much it had hurt him or how tired it had made him. There had been several times that Killer slept for days straight after being really injured because his body expended all of its energy on healing him. Sanji’s body just… couldn’t.

Still too strung out? Zoro placed his cup back on the table, picking up the last onigiri. Law had said something about the drugs messing up the way Sanji functioned, but Chopper was pretty vehement about the fact that Sanji was just really overtired. “Hey cook, how do the breaks feel?”

Sanji shrugged again, wincing as a cut on his upper arm bubbled up. “The dislocations are all back in place, they don’t hurt so bad; Law only had to put my hip back in himself. The fractures are all back in place now too but they hurt like a motherfucker. I can’t put any weight on my left leg with how bad it’s fucked up. Useless body. If it weren’t for the drugs I would have been fine to leave days ago.”

“Still seven weeks to go?”

“It’d better fucking be that short. Any longer and I’ll go insane from lack of doing anything. I needed to kick the shit out of something a week ago.”

Zoro grinned, finally catching wind of some of the energy he knew was simmering under Sanji’s surface. “I’m good to fight whenever you feel up for it; don’t strain and all though, I’m not going anywhere.”

Sanji’s whirring hands ground to a halt, and the cook was still before he turned slowly to give Zoro a dark glare, but Zoro could see the amusement shining in his good eye before he turned back to what he was cooking.

“Watch it, marimo. You could barely deal with me fresh off the slave truck, I might kill you after I’m better.”

“Take your time,” Zoro said smugly, finishing off the tea as he sat back, admiring his handiwork and the way Sanji’s shoulders had relaxed slightly. Point for Zoro.

Zoro’s eyes found the door at the sound of footsteps, blinking in confusion when Killer appeared in the doorway. He was at the arena this early in the morning? How early did he have to leave Law and
Kid’s place to get here this early? Killer gave him a smirk before scuttling over to Sanji’s side, looking up expectantly.

Sanji ignored him for a good long minute before barely sparing him a glance. “I thought you weren’t coming.”

Killer shrugged, as unabashed as ever. “Kid asked me to help out at the garage really early.” He raised his shoulders innocently and rocking back and forth on his heels. “…I’m still hungry though.”

Sanji eyed him quietly for a moment while Killer rocked before cracking a small smile and turning back to what Zoro was pretty sure was soup on the stove. “Go get me some turmeric.”

Killer nodded eagerly and bounded over to the counter, just tall enough now at thirteen to reach the top shelf of the spice cabinet and pulled out the bottle of powder, dropping it like a puppy at Sanji’s side. Zoro watched as Killer fetched more ingredients at Sanji’s direction, a light smirk taking on an excited edge when Sanji told him to get the blood out of the freezer. He pulled a pint out, bounding back over to Sanji and resembling a puppy more and more with every order. Killer was hitting the angst-teenage years hard—he rarely wanted to be around Law and Kid for an entire day anymore and Zoro irked him more than anyone—and seeing him acting like this was kind of making Zoro stare.

“You can go sit now, I’ll finish,” Sanji said finally and Killer nodded again, finding a seat next to Zoro, toe tapping excitedly against the ground as he waited.

“How long have you been doing this?” Zoro asked casually, watching Sanji measure out a cup of the thick, red substance and add it to the frothy broth mixture.

“Every morning,” Killer answered happily. “Normally it’s when you’re working out but today Dad wanted me to help with the engine he’s been working on. He couldn’t reach some tiny wires inside so he let me wire it, you know, after he threatened me that he’d wire my fingers together if I messed it up. But Sanji’s food is so good; he makes it so we can eat gradually over the week instead of all at once, so it doesn’t make me feel sick. Oh! And me and Franky have been working on my scythes—they’re so cool! They’ve got these reinforced cuffs that go around my wrists so they won’t get knocked out of my hand so easily and I can block hits and Dad made the blade longer so I have better reach and they rotate—!”

Zoro grinned, tipping back in his chair. This was the little brother he remembered. “So when are we going to fight?”
Killer smirked in return, leaning forward edgily on the table to get into Zoro’s space. “The second they’re done I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You kick his ass and I make anything you want for a month,” Sanji interjected, setting a plate of food down in front of Killer before hobbling to his own chair with a bowl for himself. Zoro made a face up at him, too late to help but still annoyed that he would be the one to take Chopper’s wrath if the little doctor saw that he was allowing Sanji to move around like he was. And Sanji knew too, the asshole.

Killer’s grin widened before he grabbed a spoon and dove in, gulping down the contents as fast as he could. His fangs extended automatically and Zoro watched curiously as he took care to get the spoon in his mouth without hitting them. Law had never experimented with cooking blood; Killer had always just drank it once or twice a week depending on how much he went through, and drinking that much usually made him sick enough not to be able to move for a couple hours after eating. Sanji had spaced the blood out enough so that it didn’t overwhelm his system, and the fact that it was blended into the food seemed to help his system figure out how to process it. It was kind of fascinating, and Zoro wondered why Chopper wasn’t more interested. Unless he was and Zoro had missed that happening already.

Zoro looked over to Sanji, trying to figure out where Law got his hands on all of the blood. He knew that Shanks’ men donated all the time—he certainly did—but was that enough? Killer was easy, but how much did Sanji need? His portion seemed much redder than Killer’s.

Sanji shrugged, reading his mind. “It’s not as much as it looks, it’s just a dark color. I used to eat twice as much as Killer does and twice as often, but after the drugs they gave me… I’m still getting back to normal. I thought Killer needed more blood at first and was putting way too much in his food because I normally eat more. It was making him… twitchy. Law suggested that he might need less and has been taking…” he gestured vaguely, voice suddenly tighter, “blood samples for tests and stuff every couple of days. I don’t know. It might be an age thing; he might grow into eating more.”

“Bu’ this way I never haf’ to stop to eat and wai’ until my body processes it because i’s not a lot!” Killer’s mouth was half full of food and Sanji made a face and cuffed him upside the head, muttering not to talk with his mouth full of food.
“So you’re working on the scythes today?” Zoro asked and Killer nodded. “Well, I guess it’s fine. They’re close enough to swords.”

Sanji rolled his eyes and brought his cigarette back to his mouth to take a drag, blowing the smoke smoothly out of the corner of his mouth. “Shitty swordsman.”

“Shit cook.”

Killer snorted, wiping his chin where some broth had dripped before he grabbed his bowl and tipped it back, draining the last of the soup while Sanji carefully worked on his own bowl. Killer raced up to the sink when he was done and quickly rinsed the bowl and scrubbed it with a cloth, leaving it with a crash with the other dishes as he dashed for the door, no doubt excited to start working.

“Thanks!” Killer called, already halfway down the hall. Sanji just chuckled to himself and made to stand. Zoro stopped him with a hand on his shoulder and went to finish the dishes, Sanji rolling his eyes again but settling back into the chair to finish his soup and cigarette. His eye had a far off look, like he was processing something deeply. Zoro decided not to bring it up, guessing that it had something to do with Killer, fine to let Sanji think on it himself.

-oOo-
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

“We’re hosting, no one’s fighting tonight.”

“Zoro got the last one though! You said I’d be able to fight tonight!”

“No,” Shanks repeated slowly, eyes scrunching up in his head. “I said you could fight the next one we were in. We’re hosting tonight. Two other teams are bringing their fighters and medical teams in because they don’t have good enough arenas. No one from our team is fighting tonight except Kid for the opening.”

“AwwwwwWWW!” Luffy let out an impressive groan, throwing his hands up into the air. Zoro would have been grinning at the outburst except for the fact that he was desperately itching for a fight too. Shanks should have known better though, honestly. Both he and Luffy being not on the fighting roster? Of course Luffy was going to throw a fit. And he was pretty close to throwing one himself; a week and a half of being glued to Sanji’s side while the cook did nothing but cook was going to make him snap, no matter how good the food was.

“And you have to stay with Sanji.”

Now it was Zoro’s turn to groan. “He’s a cripple, what the hell can he do? All he does is read in bed and cook!”

“OOOH! Maybe Sanji will make be a lunch box for the fight tonight!”

“I think that would be a wonderful idea,” Shanks said coolly before turning back to Zoro, glad that Luffy’s mind was finally on something else. “Law wants him out and about because his leg isn’t healing as fast as they thought it would, walking around or whatever. They’re trying to liven him up and see if the energy and lessened stress will help. Try to bring him tonight. Kid’s fighting so I know you’ll want to come.”

Zoro crossed his arms, feeling slightly childish but doing it anyways. “He won’t want to come.”
Sanji had actually been offered walks and other trips outside to test the stress and energy theory, but he’d refused every time. Even for simple things like a run to the grocery store for some things they were low on. That was the last time Zoro ever went for him; doing laps through the stupid place with Sanji yelling at him from the other end of the phone was high up on his list of “things that made him lose it.” And every time he turned a corner they switched the food displays around so it took him four times as long to get ahold of anything Sanji needed. He’d almost been kicked out from screaming at the cook so much.

Zoro was beginning to wonder if Sanji hadn’t told them anything about where he was from because he really didn’t have anywhere to go back to other than the research facility. Law thought it was possible, which only solidified the thought. The cook certainly wasn’t doing anything to show that he really did want to get out of here as fast as possible, except squawk about it every possible second.

“I’ll talk to him.”

Zoro sighed heavily. Whatever, maybe it would help him find how to make Sanji smile. All the… good energy, or whatever, from the fight.

-oOo-

Sanji looked uncomfortable. No, that wasn’t a strong enough word. He was hunched down in the wheel chair he’d been cajoled into, hiding beneath the thick brim of the hat Law had lent him. He’d shoved all of his hair up inside it and yanked it down sideways to hide that his eye was bandaged so he couldn’t be recognized later even if someone did see him.

Zoro couldn’t quite decide if cow print was a good look on the blond.

He was pretty sure though that he was going to go with “no”.

But Sanji didn’t look happy at all. Maybe even queasy. Zoro rolled his eyes.

*I swear to god, if he throws up…*
“Stop looking at me like that, fucking marimo,” Sanji snarled, curling further in on himself and wrapping the large blue coat Franky had given him earlier tighter around himself. It was long enough to hide the cast on his leg, but not long enough to cover Sanji’s toes, due to the fact that he couldn’t put a shoe on with the cast on his ankle too. His toes were twitching, another tell when his hands were gripping the coat too tightly to wring his fingers together. He looked like a crotchety old man.

Zoro sighed to himself, moving around to the back of the wheelchair. It was to be expected, he guessed. The last time Sanji had been out in the open—it seemed, not that Sanji was telling them—he’d been kidnapped, drugged, beaten within an inch of his life, and nearly sold as a sex slave. Even just dealing with doctors gave him anxiety. So much for a no-stress situation. Why was this a good idea again?

“We’re sitting up in the top box with Shanks, Law, Luffy, Franky, Chopper, and plenty of others. No one will be able to see you over the railing, and even if they can, no eyes will be on you. Luffy’s way too animated during fights. And if someone comes up, every single one of us can fight.”

“I know that,” Sanji snapped, hunkering further down in the seat despite what he said.

Zoro waited a moment to see if he was going to change his mind. “…Ready?”

“Just fucking go.”

“Shit cook.”

Zoro looked down as he started pushing Sanji forward, not sure what to make of the fact that the cook hadn’t sniped a retort except that he wasn’t relaxed in any sense of the word. Hopefully he’d forget his nerves during the fight.

Zoro waited for the bouncer at the door to hold it open before he pushed the wheelchair through. The man gave Sanji an odd look at the fact that he couldn’t see any of his face, but didn’t protest because Zoro was the one guiding him along. Zoro grimaced as Sanji visibly shivered and pulled at the coat tighter, the sounds of the crowd around the arena echoing down the hall toward them.

For some reason, the phrase, “easy, killer,” was running through Zoro’s head and he had the urge to whisper it to Sanji before they joined the crowd. It wouldn’t have the same affect though. It had become such a big thing in his family that he could say it to any of the other three men and the calming effects were instantaneous, and most of their close friends knew the meaning too and it also
worked on them; Sanji didn’t have the right background.

Zoro pushed Sanji through the curtain of the top box where everyone was sitting, and almost instantly they were swallowed by the tremendous roar of the crowd. Echoes and screams reverberated through the walls as the arena seemed to shake from the floors up, packed to the brim with spectators not only from their city but from the two visiting territories as well. A deep pit lined with a guardrail was nestled in the center of the room, two enthusiastic men with sunglasses dancing around and inside and waving to the crowd as the last few people filed in and rushed to find seats.

Zoro stopped to let Sanji take in the scene and give him another chance to change his mind, but even with the clamor and commotion washing over them, Sanji’s shoulders held strong. He’d even let go of his hat in order to get a complete view of the impressive room.

“…I couldn’t…”

Zoro looked down, leaning around to Sanji’s front and grinning when he saw Sanji’s mouth hanging open as the blond tried to find the words he wanted.

Finally he seemed to figure out what he wanted to say. “…Is this really right under the building? You can’t hear anything.”

“Franky’s good,” Zoro agreed, pulling the wheelchair back into its space by Shanks and Luffy’s seats. He waited a moment to see if Sanji needed anything, but the cook just continued to gape, so Zoro took his own seat.

“It’s huge! This arena is amazing! We couldn’t even hear it from the hallway we just walked up! It’s not just me, right? My ears are still working fine?”

Luffy plunked heavily down from where he’d been standing on the railing, dinner Sanji had made for him clutched happy in his hands. “Shishishishi, Franky’s the best! When I make it here, he’s going to be my engineer!”

Sanji tore his eyes away from the pit in front of him where the two men were being handed microphones to look at Luffy. “You want to be a boss?”

“Yosh!” Luffy said confidently. “I’m going to be! I’ll be even stronger than Shanks!” Beside him,
Shanks grinned and shook his head to himself, cracking open another beer to add to the three empty ones already at his side.

“Zoro’s going to be my second in command!”

“Hey hey, I didn’t say—”

“And you’ll be my cook!” Luffy laughed, punching his fists into the air. Sanji cracked a half smile and eyed Luffy with his one good eye, blue shining through the dim lighting of the room as the lights were turned down. Blinding spotlights flashed to life, illuminating the arena and the crowd exploded with cheers.

“Oh, you think so?”

“I know so,” Luffy grinned hugely before turning back to the meal in his hands. “We have to have the best food to be the best!”

Sanji stared quietly at Luffy while he inhaled the food before turning back to the arena. “…Idiot, that’s not how it works.”

Zoro quirked an eyebrow at Sanji’s faraway look, but as Johnny’s voice rang out on the intercom from the pit, welcoming everyone and making the crowd scream, their attention was sucked back into the fight. Zoro leaned forward against the railing in front of them, muscles tingling under his skin at the contagious energy that saturated the air. Beside him, Sanji leaned forward in his chair to get a better view, expression still amazed. Zoro felt his grin stretch and his shoulders tighten with anticipation.

Time to show the shit cook what Shanks’ people were made of.

“Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, and determined competitors!” Johnny screamed into the microphone, somehow drowning out the roar of the crowd around him. Beside him, Yosaku whipped off his sunglasses so only the protective gear around his face remained.

“Tonight, fighting for you, all the way from the other side of the country, Bellamy and his talented and intimidating team! And our neighbors from the edge of the sea, the terrifying Macro and his crew! Macro and Bellamy will face off after two incredible fights, Sarkies verses Gyaro and Lily
verses Tansui! All bets will be taken during the opening fight!”

The crowd was a medley of hisses and cheers as the six jumped over the railing and down into the arena, loping around the pit to jeer at their opponents and wave to the crowd. One of the girls was elaborately blowing kisses and dancing on her tiptoes. It must have been a while since they’d fought if they were that excited. Zoro picked Bellamy and Macro out of the group, snorting to himself at the bandages still covering Bellamy’s face.

“…They’re a fucked up bunch,” Sanji murmured beside him, leaning in so Zoro could hear him. “Except, of course, the lovely Lily.”

Zoro rolled his eyes but nodded his agreement anyways.

“Which ones are the team captains?”

“The blond with the broken face and the under bite with the bad spray tan.”

Sanji shot him a look to see if he was joking before looking back to the two. He didn’t look the slightest bit impressed, and it made Zoro snort again.

“Yeah, the broken face is Luffy’s doing. They weren’t strong at all.”

“…Then why are we here? And why is Shanks letting them fight here if they’ve already been beaten? He should be more selective with an arena like this.”

Zoro ignored Sanji’s accusatory tone and turned to find Law, who was leaning forward slightly, a smirk just starting to pull at his lips, his eyes darkening hungrily. Beside him, Killer got up from his chair to jump up on the railing and dangle his feet over the heads of the people sitting below them. It was time.

“Because they said they’d bring someone that Kid’s been wanting to see for a while.”

“…Who?”
“He’s coming.” Zoro pointed to the pit where someone else had jumped down into the circle, Kid’s flaming red hair dancing like heat waves all the way back to where they were sitting. He broke into a maniacal grin and threw the heavy coat lined with fur to the side, sliding a pair of gloves out of his pockets. The jeering from the crowd ceased as the mass erupted with a deafening roar. Luffy let out a wild whoop and everyone else leaned forward, anticipation leeching into the air. Zoro felt the tingling start again in his muscles and for the umpteenth time that night wished he was the one down there in the sand lining the floor of the pit. There was nothing quite like feeling it crunch under his boots, the roaring of the crowd swallowing him like the sea.

Johnny and Yosaku shooed the two competing teams up the ladders and took a deep breath while Kid retied his bandana around his head, turning to face the empty ladders of the pit.

“And taking on our very own Eustass Kid, swooping in from the East side of the country, Haritsu Kendiyo!”

Kid’s smile grew dangerously as a stocky, portly man thumped his way out of the crowd and into the pit, having the gall to climb slowly down the ladder into the arena with his back to Kid, who’s smile only took on a more unhinged look in response. Zoro turned to find Law, who was already headed down the steps to help after the fight even though Chopper was already down there for Kid. The guy must have insulted Kid at some point for him to get that excited about a simple opening fight. Killer, having noticed that Law had left, leapt down from the railing and dashed to Zoro’s side, pulling himself back up onto the bar once he was closer to family.

Down in the pit, Kendiyo had stopped less than ten feet from Kid, which was almost an insult in and of itself, and was taking the time to stretch before he met with Kid in the middle before the fight. Zoro couldn’t quite see that far, but from how much he could see, there was a definite twitch in one of Kid’s shoulders, which meant his eye was twitching too. He only did that to physically keep himself from launching himself at an opponent before it was time.

“You’re got to be kidding me,” Sanji muttered at Zoro’s side, bringing a hand up to run the side of his forefinger along his bottom lip as he sized up Kid’s opponent. Zoro watched Sanji’s lips longer than he probably should have, but even as the thought crossed his mind he couldn’t find any reason to turn away.

“That guy’s going to die.”

Zoro shrugged.
“Kid will literally kill him.”

“Probably.”

“…God I miss fighting.”

Zoro looked back up to Sanji’s morose expression. The cook was quickly losing his interest in the fight as thoughts of his injured body swarmed back into his mind. Zoro felt something stick in his throat, mind whirring as he tried to come up with something to get his mood back up.

“Hey,” he cut in finally, trying to act as disinterested as possible, “we could always go a round later tonight. See if your ankle can hold up. No sense in sitting still if it’s only your shin that’s the problem.”

Sanji looked over to him, finger still blocking the view of his lips, his one good blue eye staring in disbelief at Zoro’s indifferent face. Zoro could see the question behind his gaze: *Did Law say it was ok? Chopper will get really mad if it’s not.*

Zoro shrugged again. “Might help kick start your body, get it healing faster if it knows it can’t laze around.”

Sanji turned back to the pit as Johnny and Yosaku scrambled up the ladders and out of the way, Kid and what’s-his-face sliding into fighting stances across from each other. Out of the corner of his eye, Zoro caught the beginnings of a smile starting to pull at Sanji’s cheeks.

“…Yeah. It’ll probably help me sleep tonight too.”

Zoro grinned in return and then turned back to the pit, his mind doing a victory whoop and kicking his already running adrenal gland into overdrive, screaming with the rest of the crowd for Kid to fucking get a move on—and Kid lunged.

Kid’s hands lashed like scythes for Kendiyo’s neck and the fatter man dropped to the ground, rolling out of the way as Kid snapped a fist toward the dirt, smashing it into the ground where his opponent’s head had been seconds ago. When he yanked his fist back, blood was already flowing freely from his knuckles, but his smile was maniacal and dangerous. Oh yeah, he’d been insulted.
Zoro leaned over to Killer. “What did that guy do?”

“Who knows,” Killer shrugged. “Must have really pissed him off though, Dad went down to help Chopper even before the fight started so he’s really expecting him to be beaten to a pulp.”

Kendiyo whirled up, kicking dirt toward Kid’s face as he did, using the time Kid took to splutter and get it out of his eyes to find his footing and attack. Kendiyo’s fist flew toward Kid’s face and Zoro stilled, waiting for Kid to move out of the way, but Kid wasn’t ready and the hit connected solidly with cheek, sending him stumbling back. Zoro jolted out of reflex at the hit and Killer shift in confusion next to him, the crowd exploding again at the sudden turn of events.

The redhead seemed to drift for a second, the whole pit moving in slow motion, and then out of nowhere he had both feet rammed firmly in the sand and sent a fist careening for Kendiyo’s face. Zoro and Killer threw their fists into the air at the same time, roaring along with the crowd as Kendiyo flew back like a kite in a tornado, drilling into the ground like a rogue Frisbee. He scrambled to get his footing, grabbing for fistfuls of the sand—no doubt slightly disoriented from the blow—and he finally managed to get his head off of the ground, face gushing blood when he came up spluttering.

Kendiyo rolled over onto his back, trying to push himself to his feet and fumbling desperately for his sword when Kid appeared like a phantom over him, grinning like a demon sent to take Kendiyo back with him to hell.

Kendiyo gasped, spluttering out his resign when Kid’s fist connected with his face again and smashed his head back into the ground. Beside Zoro, Sanji’s hand flew up to cover his mouth and Zoro could have sworn he heard the cook snort in amused shock. Kid reached down and grabbed the collar of Kendiyo’s shirt, dragging his head off of the ground and driving his fist into the fat face over and over again, cackling to himself with every hit. When it became apparent that Kendiyo could no longer physical check himself out, Johnny and Yosaku rushed out to grab at Kid’s shoulders and stop him, but Zoro was pretty sure they’d let the redhead get in a couple more hits to rile up the crowd before they stopped him. Poor idiot was going to need a face transplant after this fight. Behind them, Law and Chopper rushed out, Chopper dancing like a panicked animal, bucking his feet into the air and screaming for a doctor.

Zoro oofed as Killer leapt heavily onto him from the railing, clambering up to sit on Zoro’s shoulder like he used to when they were younger and he actually fit on Zoro’s shoulder, waving his fists in the air and high fiving Luffy when the black-haired man bounded over.

Zoro looked down, pausing in his laughter when he caught Sanji’s entertained smile, looking up at
him and Killer like this was the dumbest thing Sanji had seen since people believed that gravity didn’t exist because birds could fly.

“You people are weird,” the cook said finally, reaching up to pull the hat further down on his head and Zoro grinned in return, turning his attention back to Killer to make sure he didn’t fall.

-oOo-

Sanji still couldn’t fight. It was painfully obvious—to both of them. He could barely stay upright on one leg with his target moving around him, and from the way he grimaced from the quick turns to keep Zoro in his sight, it would be a while before he could fight. After ducking awkwardly past a couple hits and kicking in Zoro’s direction a couple times, he’d made Zoro wait so he could see if he could stay off of his legs all together and tried what looked like it could be an amazing move, flipping himself backwards onto his hands and whipping into a spin, but the pain or the weight of the cast or something had thrown him off and sent him crashing to the ground, screaming expletives the whole way.

And then Chopper had walked in.

“What are you thinking?!” he screeched from the doorway, eyes popping out of his head and making Sanji and Zoro wince. “Do you want to permanently damage your leg?! That cast is so heavy! What if you did damage to your spine with a move like that… and how did you even do that?! That was amazing!”

Sanji’s mouth popped open slightly, floundering with what to say next and Zoro laughed, motioning for Sanji to show him again.

Sanji sat stupidly on the ground for a second before he got his brain back in gear and rolled over onto his stomach, pulling himself up awkwardly to his one good leg and balancing there for a second. Zoro slid Kitetsu and Shusui back into their sheaths and went to stand next to Chopper’s agape face. Honestly, he really wanted to see it again too.

Sanji was still, shoulders relaxed, head tipped down, breathing slow. And then all at once, just like he’d done before, his spine whipped back, body contorting in ways it never should have been able to—especially injured like that—and his hands made contact with the ground. Zoro watched closely this time, knowing where to follow and when. He saw Sanji’s fingers twitch to grip the floor mostly with the pads of his fingers and just use his palms for grounding, and then both legs were off the floor, snapping into a split and Sanji rotated like a tornado, entire body swiveling to accommodate
the move as his feet whipped over his head.

Zoro’s tongue darted out to flick over his bottom lip, unable to mask his wildly thrilled smile.

He couldn’t wait until Sanji was ready to fight again.

Sanji’s feet arced, dipping towards the ground suddenly and he touched the toes of his good foot down, spinning up into a standing position with his hands out to balance him as he struggled to keep his bad leg off of the ground. He hopped awkwardly for a second, looking like he’d made the landing, when the heel of the cast caught the mortar between the tiles of the floor and the cook toppled over like a top, arms flailing as he tried to catch himself before he crashed to the ground.

“FUCK!”

“WOOOOOOOOOW!” Chopper squealed. “…But you can’t do that! You could really hurt yourself!”

Sanji’s expression dropped, and he rolled over again blankly to push himself to his feet.

Zoro made a guilty face, looking down carefully to Chopper before he said, “I mean, what’s the worst that could happen? All of his bones and stuff are back in place aside from his shin, and that’s got a cast on it. If anything this will be better physical therapy because he has to work with the weight of the cast.”

Sanji paused, staring perplexedly at Zoro from across the room. Zoro refused to make eye contact.

“And you said yourself,” he continued, “it’d be better for Sanji to move around. This is what he normally does anyways; his body should be able to handle it. You know, keeping his spirits and energy up and all that crap.”

“…Well,” Chopper’s eyes found the floor and he wrung his tiny hands together slowly. “I guess you’re right. But you really have to take it easy!” he turned back to Sanji, jabbing a finger at him. “If anything hurts more than usual, you have to stop. It’s not worth it to hurt yourself further! All of the drugs aren’t out of your system yet because of the way you metabolize them!”
Sanji looked back and forth between the two, mouth opening and closing a couple times before he found the words. “So… we don’t have to stop?”

Sanji was fascinating. Maybe it was because he had a history in a research facility, but he fluctuated between vehemently rebellious and extremely docile. He didn’t like doctors, and Chopper and Law were nice and all but he was still very uneasy around them, and yet he never really went against their orders—even when he might have known better himself what he could handle.

“Well—I—you—err… no… but seriously! Go easy!”

Sanji was still for another minute, and then a huge smile split his face and he barked out a quick laugh, reaching into his pockets for the pack of cigarettes and the lighter he always kept there.

“Thanks, Chopper. I promise, I’ll be fine. And you’re an amazing doctor so I know you wouldn’t let me do this if you didn’t really think I was progressing enough.” He winked, still grinning ear to ear. “I trust you.”

Chopper twisted happily around himself, hands flapping in Sanji’s direction. “Bastard! That’s not true! It doesn’t make me happy at all when you say that~!”

Zoro laughed and pulled Shusui from its place with a thick ringing of steel. “You ready, shit cook?”

Sanji leaned forward slightly on his one good leg, arms out to steady himself, smile still as big as it had been minutes ago. “Stop stalling, shitty marimo.”

Smile, check. Two points for Zoro.

-oOo-

An oversized hand banged rudely on the wooden doorframe and slammed the door in without waiting for a reply, opening it to a dimly lit room with two lamps off in the far corners of the darkness as the only light. The table dropped haphazardly in the center of the room was swathed in darkness, but it only seemed to highlight the blackened figures sitting around it—and one perched on it—all staring darkly up at the huge figure in the door.
The newcomer’s scruffy face stretched into a grin, revealing multiple holes where teeth had gone missing long ago. Heavy eyes seemed to suck up the darkness in the room, like the man himself was a cloud of black, smothering the air in the room with a thick smoke.

“Zehahaha… sorry I’m late,” he chortled unapologetically, dropping a large metal case on the floor by his feet. One of the figures at the table made a face, upper lip pulling back in disgust as he leaned back weightily in his chair. He waited until the larger man had joined them at the table to speak.

“Crocodile almost bailed because you botched it, Teach,” he hissed. “Again. Pull shit like that one more time and we’ll be down a lot of man power already inside Shanks’ organization and all the time it took getting them there.”

Blackbeard waved his hand, laughing again. “Zehahaha! Asshole never did anything anyways. His plans all take way too long to go anywhere, and I don’t know about the rest of you, but I heard one of his top executives that Miss Half-Wednesday or Thursday or whatever the fuck he called her vanished. His second in command, someone that’s been right under his nose for years and years, had another agenda it seems. Better not to have him along, Moriah, who cares if we lose him.”

Moriah huffed, turning his head sharply to look away and placing his hands on his hips. Beside him, the man perched on the table grinned hugely and adjusted the feathery coat on his shoulders.

“So about losing a pretty decent sized shipment of my cargo? And losing the kid, and not sinking any of Shanks’ credibility, and not getting any of his hounds locked up?”

Blackbeard reached under the table where the metal case had landed and grabbed the handle, flinging it across the table towards him. It skidded to the man’s knees and was about to connect with the joint when a long leg snapped up and a foot clapped it down against the table, stopping it short.

“That’s for the shipment,” Blackbeard explained as the man reached out slowly and popped the lid of the case open, shuffling through the stacks of money inside. “As for the kid, none of my guys in the police department saw him come through and one of the crates was empty. There are no rumors or sightings of him back home and he hasn’t made it to your auction house, Doflamingo, so unless he’s lying really low… zehahaha! I’d say it’s pretty safe that Shanks is holding tight to him. They’re too soft to do anything unless they really think he’s a spy, and not with the damage we already did to him.”

“Unless he’s already dead. You were told to use only the drugs and sedatives we gave you. My scientists have no idea how he could have reacted.”
“Nah, the first facility had him for too many years for something like that to kill him; his body’s too strong now.”

“I just hope you’re aware of what will happen to you if it did,” Doflamingo hissed, leaning forward and slamming the silver case shut. Blackbeard just grinned back, completely unfazed.

“How did they know what was in the crates?” Doflamingo pulled back suddenly, face blasé, like the previous exchange had never happened—or was a fairly often occurrence. “The police don’t just randomly walk in on something like that; they were tipped off.”

Blackbeard shrugged. “I’m more concerned with choosing our next step.”

“And what do you suggest we do?” Moriah’s hissing voice rose up again, finally done with pouting. “I have an investment in this and I’m not going to be happy if I lose it.”

“Zehahahaha! I’ve already called in a favor from an old friend. The kid will still be healing, and I’ve seen their doctor—little shit’s obsessed, so he won’t be going anywhere anytime soon. You just keep supplying me with the manpower, we’ll send a couple strong ones in to keep his guard dogs busy, and drag him out again. Just like last time. He wasn’t a problem then and he won’t be now.”

“Don’t forget our bargain.” Moriah growled, leaning forward to put his hands on the table and push himself out of his chair, turning for the door.

Blackbeard grinned, crazed expression following Moriah over his shoulder. “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you want the old man himself and every single one of his men down to the hookers on the streets. You can have them all after we’re done. But you touch him before and fuck up my chances, and I’ll end you.”

Moriah shifted uneasily, hand almost on the doorknob, and then quickly made to pull the door open when Doflamingo leapt off the table and landed next to him, case in hand, making him jolt to a stop nervously.

“While we’re on the subject,” he smiled, sunglasses flashing in the light of the now open door. “If either of you touch Blackleg, I will make sure you both end up right next to him in the next shipment to my establishment for some fun.”
Moriah made a face, shivering slightly and Blackbeard guffawed, turning around in his chair to grin back at the two. “He’s all yours.”

Doflamingo nodded his goodbyes and motioned for Moriah to walk ahead of him, bowing slightly. Moriah paused, rocking back and forth in front of the door a couple times, trying to go ahead of him and get out of the way before he registered Doflamingo’s movement and scrambled through the open door, tripping himself on the way out. Blackbeard burst out laughing and stood to follow them out.

-oOo-

-Sarah Williams
Sanji was sitting quietly at the table, arm draped over the back of his chair and cigarette held loosely in between his fore and middle finger, a thin wisp of smoke drifting up to the ceiling. Beside him, Chopper was waiting, eyes flicking anxiously between him and Law, who was taking a couple manila envelopes out of a black bag and laying them across the table in a certain order. Zoro sat across the table, as removed from the conversation for Sanji’s sake as he could be but still present enough to be able to keep a sufficient amount of surveillance on the blond. Off on the stovetop, a pot bubbled quietly, just hot enough to keep from losing heat as it waited for Sanji to finish and resume cooking dinner.

Only Zoro could see the slight tenseness he’d come to notice in Sanji’s shoulders when the cook was agitated. And even as he looked over to see if Sanji had reacted to Law setting the bag on the ground and preparing to start, the cook raised his cigarette to his lips to accommodate the extra jolt of tightness in his shoulders and hide it from the rest of the room.

Zoro wasn’t sure if Sanji knew that he knew this tell.

“So, from what I’ve gathered from your samples, Killer’s samples, and whatever data I had from the records of the research facilities, it looks like there are three types of NSPH, as opposed to the two I’d previously thought.”

Sanji blinked up at him with one eye in question, cigarette still held firmly between his lips.

Law leaned forward and pushed one document toward Sanji, who spared it a glance but other than that didn’t seem too interested. He would have had the quintessential calm down, were it not for the tension in his shoulders, and Zoro knew that Law was too meticulous not to notice it.

“Negligible senescent porphyric humanoids, or NSPH,” Law supplied, “as the military have named them, have been documented in three classes. The first is NSPH minor. Their body is left almost completely unchanged except for minor muscle growth acceleration and healing acceleration. There is a slight jump in speed, agility, senses, that sort of thing, but for the most part they look and behave like full-blooded humans. Their blood deteriorates the slowest, meaning they only have to ingest
blood once a week, or take in four pints over the course of one week as you’ve been doing with Killer. NSPH minor also isn’t venomous; Killer’s bitten us enough times to know, but you are venomous, aren’t you?” he looked up as he said this, but Sanji made no move to show that he’d heard.

“There’s a toxin I don’t recognize in your saliva,” Law continued. “It’s present in Killer’s blood but not his saliva.”

Sanji was silent. He let out a slow breath of smoke, not meeting anyone’s eyes as he waited for Law to continue. Law took that as a yes and moved on, making a small note as he did on the paperwork in front of him.

“The second class is NSPH major, which is what you are. Your speed and strength are, or should be, at a higher level than NSPH minor. For whatever reason, presently you seem to be at minor level, though your body has the capability to be major.”

Sanji remained mute and motionless, leaving Zoro to shift uncomfortably with the distinct feeling that he was intruding on something Sanji didn’t want to be a part of anyways, so he sure as hell didn’t want anyone else privy to it.

Law sighed quietly to himself. “Your blood deteriorates twice as fast, so eight pints a week, meaning that with the rate your body intakes blood, you could survive entirely on that if you chose to forgo human food. Your instincts and senses are heightened, and it seemed the first night you were here that you could sense that Killer was an NSPH, yes?”

Sanji finally brought the cigarette away from his lips and blew out another stream of smoke, barely nodding a yes.

“Killer can’t do that as a minor from what he’s told me, which means his instincts are probably not as keen either. Aside from that, NSPH major is venomous and seems to be able to inject the “vampire gene” into other hosts. Have you ever experienced this?”

Sanji was still for a long time before taking another drag, eyes closed to keep himself calm before he turned slowly to face Law for the first time since the doctor had walked in the room.

“Are you asking me,” Sanji said dangerously, “if I’ve ever bitten anyone with the intent to infect them and possibly subject them to what I’ve been through?” Zoro felt his muscles tense at Sanji’s
tone, ready to knock the cook back in his seat if his anxiety toward doctors got to be too much for the small room. There was sharp knives and flames and dangerous cutlery in here, and Chopper too. Law, Zoro had no doubt, could handle himself; Chopper and sharp knives and flames and an out of control Sanji was a bad combination.

Law was fearless, looking straight into Sanji’s one good, gleaming eye. “Purposefully or non-purposefully.”

“No,” Sanji spat. “When I drank straight from humans, before I could get blood from other places, I always drained them because I was near delirious with hunger. I didn’t eat often because killing people fucked with me, so I put it off until I went crazy. They weren’t alive enough to survive and turn.”

Law nodded and Chopper reached forward, scribbling something down in a notebook. The pen scritchting over the paper made Sanji twitch, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Zoro grimaced, trying for the umpteenth time not to imagine how much Sanji had to have been through just for a doctor taking notes to trigger something from his past.

“NSPH superior are what we dealt with when the city was being attacked.” Law continued without missing a beat, ignoring Sanji’s discomfort and the way he was puffing on the cigarette twice as much as he had been before. “The virus in their blood is so strong that not only does their blood deteriorate three times as fast as NSPH minor, but it overruns the brain as well. Any dose of the virus mutates the DNA slightly when the blood is being brought throughout the body, but this change is multiplied exponentially with the added dose. Their entire blood supply deteriorates on that triweekly basis, so drinking four pints three times a week is pushing it for survival and they will generally drink more—sometimes even up to twenty-four pints a week, or three people. They are faster, stronger, more instinctual, and generally more physically capable than minor or major, but the virus takes such a toll on their body that they have no thought capacity beyond finding their next meal to keep from drying up. NSPH superior are also venomous.”

A pregnant silence filled the space as Sanji smoked quietly to himself and Chopper and Zoro twitched, not really sure what to do in this situation. All of this information was very new to Zoro, he only knew what Law had found before the city had been destroyed.

“And?” Sanji asked finally, his voice heavy. “So what? I know how much I need to eat and I know I’m venomous. What’s the point of telling me this?”

Law leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, meeting Sanji’s glare head on with an almost uncanny calm demeanor. “NSPH superior is what most of the files from the research facilities consist of. There are a couple major, most of the ones left over are minor, which made me wonder where the jump came from. All vampires except minor are venomous, however without the venom there is no
way for a second or third class of vampire to develop, because the venom isn’t strong enough in NSPH minor to be transmitted. In order for a minor to become a major and a major to become a minor, a second and third dose of venom needs to be added to the system. So I compared yours and Killer’s blood down to the tiniest molecules, and I started to notice more and more how perfect the vampire gene that comes from the venom is. And then upon further inspection, I discovered that the venom is actually a virus. Despite the fact that it doesn’t replicate on its own, it still attaches, penetrates, synthesizes, and assembles the living cell for itself just as a virus does. It’s also strong, so it bypasses all forms of the immune system. It seemed to skip natural selection and evolution, because the samples taken from the first vampire found in the 1500’s and ones taken today are almost identical, meaning that it didn’t evolve with humans and there are no records of it being seen in animals, so it only targets humans and popped up literally out of nowhere as a perfect organism with no biological enemies. There isn’t a single pathogen in the history of existence that behaves like that. Viruses especially are constantly mutating and changing to accommodate immune systems evolving. This one seems to have no capability to evolve, but also no need to because it is completely impervious to the human immune system.”

Zoro blinked, looking back and forth between Chopper and Law for some kind of elaboration, which finally came from Chopper.

“…We… we think the virus, and via it the vampire gene… was manufactured. By humans.”

Zoro’s mouth dropped open and Sanji choked on a slight cough, recovering quickly to suck in another breath from his cigarette like he hadn’t heard anything. He pulled the filter back in disgust when no smoke came out, grinding it out on the heel of his shoe and reaching into his pocket for another one.

“When we were studying the venom in Sanji’s saliva…” Chopper continued slowly, looking down at the documents he was shuffling through, still nervously waiting for Sanji to do something rash. He’d noticed the cook’s uncomfortable reaction when he was taking notes, and the more information the doctors gave them, the tenser Sanji got. “It’s odd… it’s like the nor—well, “normal””—he made air quotes with his fingers—“toxin in Killer’s blood, but more strongly concentrated, so we kept looking at it until it just… hit us. The venom looks like a double dose of the virus in NSPH minor, but squished together so it will still fit inside the host without damaging itself.”

“Which, if you factor in the possibility that the virus may be manufactured,” Law finished for him, “would account for the fact that vampires without venom or the ability to pass the gene on—like NSPH minor—could suddenly contain twice the toxin and in a much concentrated form, even though the virus does not multiply on it’s own and had no way to transmit itself. The virus is like a steroid, and the more doses you take, the greater effect it has on your body. Because it doesn’t multiply on it’s own, it must come from an outside source. Taking into account the fact that one dose creates a minor, and two doses creates a major, we’d surmise that three doses would create a superior. And due to the fact that there are no files whatsoever on a fourth class, and considering how much damage to the human body and DNA three doses of the virus does, it’s our theory that four doses is simply too much for the body to handle. The blood would diminish almost instantly.
The brain would be entirely overrun by all of the incoming stimulation from heightened senses and would be unable to make or process outgoing information, so directions from the brain to the body would cease. Things like accelerated muscle growth and healing multiplied exponentially would expend so much energy that the body would simply shut down. The physical form can only handle so much alteration and at such a rapid rate before the quickly changing form stresses it too much to stay intact.”

Zoro blinked as Law shifted suddenly to watch Sanji closely, frame relaxed but controlled enough to react in an instant. Whatever he was about to say to Sanji, he wasn’t expecting a good reaction.

“When this city was first falling to NSPH superior, their numbers spiked hugely in a couple of months, and then suddenly took a nosedive for no explained reason. Nothing the military did was working, they hadn’t had a new idea to try in weeks; no one from this city had enough information to make a big enough impact; and yet they seemed to vanish. At first, we thought it was because the human population had dropped and there was nothing to feed on, but almost no NSPH bodies were found—none from the superiors, none from the fourth class that had been bitten and died, none. Not too long after that, their numbers rose again, and then dropped without explanation, also without leaving any corpses behind.”

He hadn’t looked away from Sanji a single second during the spiel, watching and waiting for Sanji to react badly. “This is why we’re telling you this: you were born, or perhaps created, in a world of studies and experimentation revolving solely around your mutated DNA and how it could be improved to be stronger. For whatever reason, NSPH superior was being created by the dozens, and considering that only bloodshed can come from them, the reason for that cannot be good. I would bet my life that that wasn’t the last time we see the numbers rise. If spikes in numbers keep happening—regardless of the fact of if it happens in this city again or somewhere else in the country—it’s only so long before the military declares NSPH superior a biohazard, a severe disturbance, and a threat to the foundation of the country—and us a consequence, because we are patient zero for NSPH superior. Their next step would be to nuke the entire city, and anywhere else NSPH superior had been seen. You have the inside view, and no one else as far as we know. We got Killer out too soon for him to remember anything and we have yet to come across another vampire aside from you. You had to suffer through years of their treatment, and for that you are the only one who may have inside awareness on what’s happening currently, what may happen in the future, and why.”

Sanji had been staring at the wall this entire time, hands slid loosely into his pockets as he traced patterns in the spots on the walls with his eyes. Finally, after what felt like years of silence, he pulled himself to his good foot, balancing on the cast, and hobbled over to the stove to continue with dinner.

“And?” he repeated finally, voice weak and tired. The sound barely traveled the space to where the other three were still sitting at the table.

“If they are weaponing humans,” Law replied easily, maybe expecting Sanji not to comply so easily,
“which it’s looking more and more like they’re doing, there is no reason to believe it could bode well for any of us. The virus takes a huge toll on the body, so I don’t see how this could be a medical breakthrough in the making. No one would agree with the side affects and it would never be approved outside of very specialized groups underground.”

Zoro was still sitting at the table, pathetically trying to keep up with the conversation while also watching the slight twitch Sanji’s shoulder had taken on. Voice calm or not, Sanji was going to snap if this conversation didn’t end soon. They waited patiently as Sanji picked up a knife and began to chop, the methodic chunk chunk chunk echoing across the room.

“…I wasn’t a tactician,” Sanji said finally. His voice was almost inaudible over the sounds of the kitchen buzzing around him. “Or a scientist, or a pet, or even really a prized possession. I was a test subject, and I was seen as such and treated as such. I never saw other children, and if I did, they were dead before I even knew their names. I was six before I could really talk—if it hadn’t been for my strong body I would have never learned to walk. They didn’t talk about anything like that around me, and…” his voice cut off suddenly, knife clacking down in an uneven schunk through the food and disrupting the beat. “…And even if they had… I don’t know how much of it I’d remember, or how much would be reliable information with… everything they were doing to me.”

Law nodded to himself and Sanji resumed his chopping, beat steady again. Zoro eyed the thick tension in his shoulders as it rolled off of his back in waves.

“In any event,” Law started again, and Zoro stood up at the visible jolt in Sanji’s neck. The cook’s nerves were stretched about as thin as they could get. He motioned for Law to stop, but the doctor waved him off and stood, Chopper scooping up the papers on the table.

“We found another agent in your blood. And from the looks of how it reacts to the vampire gene, this is the drug that is causing your decelerated healing. It seems to have been developed to hinder your body and basically put you back on NSPH minor level. Probably to keep you more manageable. Chopper and I have synthesized an antidote and we can administer it at any point, but keep in mind that the sudden jump in blood deterioration and physical improvement might be a lot to handle with your condition now. The amount of blood you’ve been drinking will probably return to normal overnight, if it doesn’t spike from the lack of blood in your system right when the antidote is administered. We can monitor you during administering, and it is your choice whether you want it or not, but it’s something to keep in mind.” With that, he strode calmly from the room, Chopper toddling after him with one last sad look at Sanji’s overwrought figure.

Zoro stood uselessly on the other side of the kitchen, weighing his options and trying to decide whether or not Sanji was so strung out that he’d attack Zoro at the slightest provocation. They weren’t on the best of terms at the greatest of times.
“You… uh, wanna cut out for a little bit and fight?”

“Thank fucking god,” Sanji snarled, wrenching the towel off of the wrack by his hip and drying his hands as he whirled to face Zoro, eye deathly black. “I thought you’d never ask. Get over here and help me get to the dojo, I can’t walk fast enough.”

-oOo-

Zoro sat heavily in the chair he’d flopped into after helping Sanji hobble back into the kitchen and hadn’t moved since Sanji had started cooking. He had a sneaking suspicion that he’d fallen asleep at some point from how much more amazing the food smelled now than it had just a second ago, but the cook didn’t seem to mind for once.

Zoro slid himself farther up in the chair and pulled the neck of his collar up to wipe his damp brow on the inside of his shirt. The cook made no motion to show that he knew Zoro had woken up and sprinkled something into the concoction in the pan in front of him, giving the contents a quick toss before he grabbed a knife and a couple of vegetables. Sanji used to be so jumpy when Zoro had first started sitting in here, no matter what time of day it was or even if he was here for food at all. It probably had something to do with the fact that Sanji couldn’t see what Zoro was doing while he faced the stove, but for whatever reason, he barely seemed to notice that Zoro was there anymore. It almost felt normal. Like they’d had this routine in place for three years instead of weeks. Not even, actually; Sanji had only been here seventeen days.

Zoro eyed the cast hindering Sanji’s every movement. On top of that was the awkwardly big shirt and shorts the cook had been borrowing just so he could have on some clothes at all. Nothing fit over the cast. Zoro didn’t honestly have enough clothes to give him, so some had come from Franky and some from Luffy and some from Usopp—maybe Sanji had one or two of Zoro’s shirts—but the rest of it Shanks had sent him out to pick up at a thrift store somewhere. Zoro had really thought Sanji was going to cry when he saw them, but they were really the only things that fit over the cast.

“How aren’t you letting Law give you the antidote?”

Not that he really expected the blond to answer. Three weeks Sanji had been there, and they hadn’t found out a single thing about him beyond his name. The cook wouldn’t even tell Chopper how old he was, though the young doctor had guessed early twenties. Sanji was like a lockbox, bound and determined to do its job correctly. So he was surprised when Sanji, instead of glossing over the question like he normally did, paused slightly before he continued to grate the cheese in front of him, and then suddenly spoke.
“…I don’t… know if I want to.”

Zoro was afraid to speak and disrupt the moment; him talking might have meant that Sanji would stop, but it seemed a question was necessary to spur the conversation forwards. And what was the harm? If he didn’t talk, it wouldn’t be any different than it normally was. “…Yet or at all?”

Sanji sighed heavily, thinking about the question much more intently than Zoro had expected, or even intended. Zoro sat up straighter in his chair, eyeing Sanji with a mixture of confusion and… excitement?

Ridiculous.

“I don’t know,” Sanji admitted finally, reaching into the cabinet over his head to pull out a mortar and pestle. Zoro had never met someone that insisted on grinding their own spices, but Sanji knew what he was doing when it came to food, so Zoro left it alone.

“…I mean,” the blond continued after a moment, “if they gave me the antidote I’d start drinking the normal amount of blood I had been before, which could draw more attention to the area. Especially because the truck was lost so close to Shanks’ territory and being driven by Shanks’ personnel.”

Zoro gave Sanji’s back a flat look and sank back down in his seat. Even he could tell how blatant of a lie that was. Sanji had been gunning to leave the second he could from the moment he woke up, and now that he had something to speed up his recovery he was hesitating? And he wasn’t talking anymore.

Got excited for nothing.

Except, you know, not excited.

“…And…”

Zoro looked up again, waiting for Sanji as the cook seemed to fight with himself, still debating talking at all.
“...I guess... I've just never had a moment where I hadn't felt dependent on my... “condition”, as
the doctors at the facility used to call it. It’s... nice,” Sanji shrugged, “not to have to worry about... killing someone every time I get hungry.”

“...We have enough blood here; we have direct access to the hospital and lots of fights, so there’s no
need to worry about an alibi or anything like that. An extra four pints a week is nothing.”

Sanji nodded, maybe to himself, maybe to Zoro, and then he was quiet for so long that Zoro had
given up on him continuing the conversation and settled back into his chair.

“...I know that Law and Chopper do it for Killer.”

Zoro cracked one eye from where he’d been about to fall asleep. Good thing the blond hadn’t waited
five seconds to say that or he’d have missed it.

“...I know Law is curious about me, as I’m sure all doctors would be, and I know they’re working
hard to keep Killer safe and healthy, but...” he paused in his preparations to take the pack of
cigarettes and a lighter out of his pocket, a telling tenseness rising again in his shoulders.

He lit it, inhaled deeply, held the breath in, and then let the smoke out in a slow stream over his head.
“I've never been in a situation like this. This is really fucked up to me, that I’m not in a cell
somewhere with an IV sewn into my arm, and Killer is running around and you all probably don’t
even know where he is. He goes out, and goes to school, and—” his voice hitched and he took
another drag. “And this is all really fucked up to me.”

Sanji leaned heavily against the counter, lifting his cast off the floor as much as he could to rotate his
stiff hip. Zoro wondered if it was actually healed all the way or if the blonde had just been done with
having on that many casts and braces at once. Thinking of Sanji’s temper had him guessing the latter,
though he wasn’t sure how the cook got Chopper to agree to that one.

“...I want to help. I want this to be a good thing, for whatever reason down the road. But any
changes made to my body are...” Sanji let out an annoyed huff, trying to find the right wording. “It
feels like experimenting. And I know it’s not—I fucking know—but—” he stopped again to take the
cigarette out of his mouth and raised his head. “It feels like it.”

Zoro couldn’t think of a single thing to say in return. What are you supposed to say to that? He had
nothing to compare or relate it to.

“The idea that testing could be a decent thing has never occurred to me before.” For some reason Sanji’s voice sounded stronger now, and he placed the cigarette back in between his lips to pick up the pestle again. “But you all really care about Killer, and it’s obvious, so I want to help. And my body is… fucked up, and taking a shit ton of time to heal, and healing the small potato shitty injuries first instead of the big ones, and for some god unknown reason I just… don’t… want to take the antidote.”

Zoro watched the smooth movements in Sanji’s frame, the slight undulations in his neck when he spoke, the ease in which he held his instruments in the most efficient manner; everything about Sanji was like a wave. A cool, blue, ocean wave lapping at the bayside in a mesmerizing rhythm, but still with the potential to turn dangerous if the conditions around him changed. Sanji was something else, and Zoro barely even realized that no part of him was thinking about the vampire gene.

He decided to try his luck again, as long as Sanji was in the mood. Had it been the sparring session earlier? Had it really helped to loosen Sanji’s tongue that much? There was no way half an hour of falling on his ass could put Sanji in this good a mood. The cook was still struggling pathetically to figure out how to do anything with the cast.

…But still…

“There’s no one wondering if you’re dead back home?”

There was the stillness again. But Zoro was patient. Meditation was something Sanji could seriously use. He was like a firecracker on the end of a flimsy stand, waving in the wind with a bunch of candles lit around him just waiting for him to blow in the right direction so they could set him off.

“…Maybe,” Sanji admitted, quiet and guilty. “…It’s not like they can’t figure out more or less what happened though. My old man is probably just about now starting to worry, old geezer.”

Sanji has parents?! Law had file after file after file of NSPH and not a single one had parents—

“But he only took me in a couple of years ago, and he’s not stupid, so he probably thinks I either wound up back where I started in the research facility and is keeping an ear out for rumors, or that I’m lying low because it’s too dangerous to come out yet. I don’t really know if he’d consider that I was dead until months after I disappeared. As far as I know, no one saw me get taken.”
Zoro sank back down in his chair, puzzling over Sanji’s words to himself.

“…How long were you in a facility?”

Sanji’s head twitched as he smiled to himself, watching what he was cooking with that far off expression no doubt, like he always did. “Um,” he reached up and rubbed his forehead uncomfortably with the back of his wrist, pestle still in hand, “…eleven years.”

Zoro’s mouth dropped open.

“…When I was about nine I broke out once, but other than that I was in there my whole life. … There was a huge commotion that night, all of the guards kept yelling about a security breach, and they were in the middle of transferring me back to my cell from the medical room, so I just attacked the bodyguards focused on me because the rest were so distracted and ran.”

Zoro blinked, the sound of tires peeling against the ground and Kid and Law screaming flashing through his head. He had the distinct feeling that it was dark, and that he was being thrown threw the air, but the thought halted there and he had nothing else, so he shook it off and tuned back into Sanji’s story.

“They kept sending guards out into the woods, screaming for whatever got out to be brought back at all costs, so I waiting until the next time they opened the doors and bolted. I ran for so many miles that it took my feet six hours to heal, even with how strong my body is. At the first town I hit, I was scared and drugged and disoriented and I’m pretty sure I was in clothes for testing so I looked bloody and pretty fucking messed up running down the street. Some guy tried to come up to me and ask me if I needed help, and I panicked and attacked him. I couldn’t even drink, I was so scared. But my old man—well, not my old man at the time—was across the street and saw everything. He took me to the police station. Stupid luck that they were the only two on the street. Anyone else around and I would have been found out a lot sooner; you can't keep something like that under the radar if there are a lot of spectators. A nine-year-old slaughtered a full-grown man in less than ten seconds; it’s definitely not something you see every day.”

Sanji talked about killing so easily. Whether it was because it’d become so normal over the years or he had forced himself to come to terms with it—being that he really couldn’t change who he was, and unless he wanted to kill himself, he couldn’t just stop eating. Zoro knew well enough how crazy and instinctual NSPH went when they were too hungry, Sanji could only hold out for so long before he attacked someone. He also didn’t seem like the type to bite someone and not kill them; he’d been through too much to put the vampire gene in another person and leave them to fend for themselves.
Sanji stopped for a moment to hobble over to the fridge and take out some more vegetables. Zoro debated helping him, but he was honestly so worried that any movement on his part would break the spell and Sanji would clam up again. But once the cook was back and had taken another deep breath off of the cigarette and let it out, he seemed fine to talk again.

“I was taken into custody because I couldn’t tell them anything about where I came from, and no one called for me and my description didn’t match any profiles of missing children so they put me with a foster family for the night. ……Huh,” he mused to himself with a small chuckle.

Zoro cocked his head slightly to the side. “…What?”

“I was just… I hadn’t really realized before, but that was the first time I’d slept in a real bed.”

Something cracked painfully inside Zoro’s chest as his eyes found Sanji’s sad smile, and then the blond started talking again.

“The next morning the old man who had brought me into the station called in some favors with a couple friends in the higher ranks of the police and had me brought over to his house. He used to be a foster parent years before and the paperwork was easier for him because of that. Shitty old man never really told me why he did it. Something about the look in my eye drawing him in or some bullshit. I stayed under the radar for two months there. He put up with me through my withdrawal period coming off of whatever drugs the scientists had been giving me; didn’t put up with my aggression or paranoia, so I got over most of it; started teaching me to cook at the shelter he worked at to give me something to work off my energy on… and the first time he caught me after I got unbearably hungry and attacked some woman in the street”—Sanji shivered thickly at this and Zoro rolled his eyes at the fact that that was the only time killing bothered him—“he kicked the shit out of me for touching a woman with anything less than respect and just called in more favors and started having blood shipped in. All he focused on was teaching me how beautiful women are and how you have to respect them simply because they’re easier pray.” Zoro felt his eye twitch again.

“He didn’t flinch once at what I was doing, even if I did kill someone, so I have to give him credit for that. I think he put together pretty quickly what I was and where I came from after that, especially with the military facility up the road.”

The far off look had returned to Sanji’s eye. “…He was really great. I went from having nothing to everything overnight; he even gave me a stupid nickname to really drive the point home.”
Zoro smiled to himself at this, only to realize that he’d been smiling the whole time and the last part had turned it into a full-blown grin. He scowled and shifted, crossing his arms tightly over his chest.

In an instant, the tightness had returned to Sanji’s shoulders and he was chopping with much more fervor than before. Zoro pushed himself into an easier position to jump to his feet, not sure where the change had come from but knowing that Sanji could do enough damage if he really wanted to not to be late on a response. Chopper wouldn’t be happy if he injured himself again, and he’d be even less happy with Zoro for letting him.

“And then one day two huge men showed up on our doorstep with a badge, the means to wipe me from the local record all together, and a sedative.” His voice was thick, like he just recently been pulled from a near-drowning experience and was still trying to convince himself he was alive. “Dragged me kicking and screaming from my old man’s house with a clamp over my mouth so I couldn’t bite them. I was so crazed that the sedative didn’t work at all. I’ve never wanted to kill anyone so badly in my life.”

Zoro’s chest had gotten progressively heavier and heavier as words tumbled out of Sanji’s mouth, guilty thoughts of the innocent and petty things he did at that age running through his head, which of course brought him to Killer, who had joined them right around that time; thoughts of what would have happened to them if they’d been found with Killer, who couldn’t have escaped by himself; thoughts of what would have happened to Killer if they’d never gotten him out. He looked up uncomfortably to the bandage still covering Sanji’s eye, thinking of how similar he and Killer looked with the blond hair and the hidden eyes. Sanji was Killer’s future, and they’d gotten Killer out, but no one had been there for Sanji and he’d still found the will to fight back, even after knowing nothing else his entire existence.

“The second I was back in the lab they strapped me down and did some of the most painful experiments I’ve ever been through.” Sanji had forgone the meal he was finishing at this point to lean his back up against the counter and let his leg rest. His arms were folded loosely and smoke danced up from the cigarette caught between his lips. Strangely enough though, the telltale tension in his shoulders wasn’t there. “I was just coming up on when puberty would hit, meaning I would be reaching the end of my rope and they wouldn’t have kept me around any longer anyways, so they figured they might as well do the experiments they wanted to but couldn’t for fear of hurting new subjects. …It was blind luck the old man found me before I died. At that point they weren’t even trying to keep me alive. They were just running test after test. If I lived, they’d do another one; if I didn’t, they’d get another kid. …And I just wouldn’t die.”

Sanji took the cigarette from his lips, one good eye still locked on the ground. Zoro couldn’t feel his body anymore. He felt like an entity, an audience watching Sanji, and any part of his physical form being in the room with Sanji could destroy what was happening. The horror of learning what had happened to Sanji was helping him disconnect from his body, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it really.
“I lived for two more years after that. …Not sure how much longer I could have made it.” Sanji kept talking, but the more he said, the weaker his voice got. Every few words, his voice would crack or he would have to clear his throat, and for some reason he kept continuing. “There wasn’t a single moment I wasn’t in pain… even with the constant healing. I hadn’t talked for months, and my eyesight… or maybe the way my brain processed light was failing… I wasn’t able to move nearly as easily as before, but I was always strapped down or in straight jackets so my muscles could have been atrophying, but I don’t know how long it would have taken to get to that point.”

Zoro waited, panicking slightly when Sanji turned back around and resumed putting the finishing ingredients out on the counter into the pan. Zoro was sure the delicious smell tasted even better, like it always did, but the idea of Sanji stopping was making his heart jump. This was the most Sanji had said in weeks, and Zoro was damned he was going to let it end now.

“How… how did your dad break you out?”

“How did you get Killer out?”

Zoro shrugged. “Law and Kid did. I never asked them. I was just along for the ride.” He could feel Sanji rolling his eyes from across the room, even turned to face away from him. He could just hear the blond screaming at him, That’s a huge part of Killer’s history!! Idiot marimo!

“…Uh, well,” Sanji started, still slightly uncomfortable at talking about this for what Zoro was almost sure was the first time ever. “So… I was back for two years and… I really, you know… thought I was finished… and then out of nowhere my old man showed up at my cell one day and broke me out. He didn’t have blood because he thought they’d be feeding me, but I was so starved and out of my mind that he had to carry me and was slowed down, so he was seen. They chased him into a storeroom, which the shitty old man thought was another room or hallway or something with an exit, and locked us in. Rather than fight us, especially with how strong and ravenous I was for blood, they figured they’d leave me in there with him, I’d drain him, and then starve to death and they’d be rid of both problems.”

“Starve to death?” Zoro repeated stupidly. How long had they left him in there?

“…Sixty days,” Sanji answered, voice barely over a whisper. His hands never stopped moving over the meat he was shredding as he tried to find something to ground himself, no doubt thousands of triggers battering at his mind, but he hadn’t stopped talking.

Zoro forgot that they spoke a language with words. There was nothing he could say anymore. He was almost at his limit of how much atrocities he could take in. While they were fighting with
Killer’s terrible twos, his incessant questioning as he learned to talk, and finding him a preschool, Sanji had been living in his very own personal hell with no way out. The entire world had turned against an eleven-year-old boy and deemed him a threat to their existence, and it was literally a miracle—and no small one at that—that Sanji was alive.

The fact that it wasn’t fair paled astronomically to Sanji’s story. It wasn’t fair that Sanji, and Killer, and every other NSPH out there—turned into a NSPH, if Law and Chopper were correct—faced the angry faces of the entire world just to survive. And it sounded like most of them didn’t make it to puberty.

“My old man could see how hungry I was, so he went to sit on the other side of the room near a vent in the ceiling to try and keep his smell away, but after five days I had completely lost it. Every single thought I had was how his blood would taste, how beautiful it would look dripping down his torn open throat, how much food he contained inside him, how hot and soothing it would be inside my icy veins, how it would make me better, how it would make my brain work… I needed it. I was withering away and I needed it so badly, and he must have been able to tell, because he started looking around for anything—an IV, a bottle, a box—something to hold blood so if he cut himself to feed me so I wouldn’t turn him. …Being venomous and all,” Sanji shrugged, stating the last part quieter than the rest of the story.

“I was about to attack him. I was standing next to him and I couldn’t remember getting there and I couldn’t believe my legs were working, but I was standing and he was less than ten feet away, and out of nowhere he tosses me a bag of blood he said he’d found in one of the boxes. I drained it in seconds. I was so hungry it didn’t even occur to me that if there had been a bag of blood in the room I would have smelled it right away the first day we’d been locked in.”

Zoro’s eyebrows furrowed. But… it was in the room…

“After that, we made it another fifty days. I was lying in a corner just convulsing and trying to keep down the horrendous thoughts of how many different ways I could kill him and not waste a single drop of his blood. He’d done everything for me and possibly lost everything for me and I couldn’t allow myself to hurt him. And then I started to rationalize that he’d already lost everything and we were dying anyways, it wouldn’t hurt if he died a few hours earlier and I could just not be a starving animal when I was killed; that he’d given up everything for me and would have offered me his blood if I wouldn’t have turned him into a vampire; that if he came after me in the first place he must not have been sure of the fact that he was going to make it out alive anyways, so it wasn’t like there was anything waiting for him. I was up and across the room in seconds, drooling even though I had no fluids left in my body, fangs extended even though my skin was tight and it was making my gums tear. I was standing over his shoulder, realizing that he wasn’t trying to defend himself but not caring why, and then as I went in to bite him, I finally noticed that one of his legs was missing.”

Zoro’s brows deepened, confused at the turn in the story.
Sanji’s voice was quiet again. “I’d been so delirious with the lack of blood… that I hadn’t even smelled the blood gushing from his leg when he cut it off and collected the blood for me. I was so wrapped up in my own pain that I’d entirely missed him eating his own leg to keep from starving.”

Every time Zoro was sure this story couldn’t get any worse, Sanji proved to him time and time again how cruel and heartless the world was. All he could do was imagine an eleven-year-old boy, turned to stone from years and years of no one caring for him, watching the last remaining shreds of his world be ripped apart as the one person that ever cared for him sacrificed himself to keep Sanji alive. “All desire to have any of his blood vanished in that instant. I was dying and deteriorating from the inside out and out of my mind with pain, but the old man was too and he’d still literally given a leg to keep us alive for just a little bit longer. I was starving, but the thought of eating any other part of him made me so sick I would have vomited if up I had drank anything from him. For some reason, after realizing I’d already eaten part of him, eating more of him… made me hate myself more than I ever had before.”

Sanji sighed quietly to himself, breath hitching in his throat as he swiped a wrist across his forehead to move a stray hair from his field of view. “So I just sat down next to him, twitching and choking like a mental patient… and he just held me. He was a little touchy at first, and I don’t blame him, I’m sure I looked as fucked up as anyone could and like I should have snapped years ago, but he ignored all of that and just held me. I kept instinctively leaning in towards him to eat, but no matter how close I got I couldn’t bite him. …We stayed like that for five days, just trying to sleep through the pain, and after sixty days the guards assumed I’d have died long ago and flung the door open. My teeth were in their jugulars before I even knew consciously that the door had been opened, and the ones I let go because I was so distracted by the blood of the two I’d killed, the old geezer somehow got to them and killed them. I was full but I was crazy with the smell of blood after not eating for so long, and when he grabbed me to get the hell out of there I almost bit him. Realized at the last moment who he was and stopped. He only had one leg, so I had to help him the whole way out, and I held my breath the entire time to make sure I wouldn’t do anything even though he kept telling me he knew I wouldn’t.”

Sanji took another deep breath and began moving his utensils into the sink. He was too tense to worry about keeping them from crashing against each other, so the racket nearly drowned out the next thing he said.

“And then we skipped town. Crossed the world, came here, and no one had found me until recently. I got a good ten years of the old man fixing me before anything happened, which I guess I really have to be thankful for.” He was puffing like a smoke stack, but still managed to calmly pick up the two plates he’d laid out on the counter and hobble over to Zoro with the cast. Inwardly, Zoro wondered if Sanji looked anything like the old man had when they’d broken out, what with his leg and all. Zoro didn’t even bother asking for the man’s name. If Sanji hadn’t said it up until now, he wasn’t going to.
Zoro realized something else with a start, going over the timeline again and what Sanji had been
telling him. Ten years with his father meant that Sanji was twenty-one years old. Same age as Zoro.

Sanji slapped a plate of food down in front of him and another at an empty chair for himself and gave
Zoro a tight smile, like he was just realizing how long he’d been talking for and what he’d divulged.
The butt of the cigarette in his lips had gotten crushed during the time he’d been talking and was
littered with nervous teeth marks, smoke still spewing from the end as Sanji kept puffing like a steam
engine, every word punctuated with a cloud of smoke.

“So.” His voice was clipped. “What’s your story?”

-oOo-

Sanji was amazing.

Zoro was staring.

Maybe gaping was a better word.

Zoro was sitting stupidly off on the side of the dojo as Sanji beamed, body twisting gracefully as he
showed off the myriad of moves he hadn’t been able to when he was laden down by the cast.

And Sanji was amazing.

Watching him was like watching a dancer who’s true passion was fighting, or maybe the other way
around. Sanji’s seamless unification of the two arts made it seem as though there was only one, and
that fighting and dancing had never existed as separate ideas. He was a tiger, impossibly fast and
nimble, overflowing with tremendous waves of power. The things Sanji was showing them now
made the flip and spin he’d been struggling with only days before look like child’s play.

Zoro’s fingers twitched, and he swore he could feel Shusui and Kitetsu humming excitedly at his
side, itching as desperately as he was for a fight. The pleasant humming was Wado, pleased with the
vitality in the room, always so calm—just like she’d been.
“Wow,” Nami breathed beside him. Chopper and Luffy had yet to put their tongues back in their mouths. Usopp had yet to find his eyes to put them back in his head. Law looked pleased at his handiwork, considering the fact that he had developed the antidote that Sanji had suddenly decided he wanted to kick his body back up to NSPH major level. And how much Sanji’s body had fought him originally on healing. Every once and a while he and Kid would look down proudly at Killer, who was standing between the two, looking on in awe at what Sanji could do. Zoro could feel the growing energy from Killer’s realization of the power he contained. Sanji was Killer’s future. After years of running and hiding, getting that strong had not been a top priority on Killer’s list, due to the fact that it may call more attention to him. But seeing what Sanji had been through and could still do with his body… Zoro wasn’t sure they’d ever be able to keep Killer from fighting after this.

“Wow,” Nami repeated as Sanji landed perfectly again before launching himself back into the air. She took a seat next to Zoro, her voice still breathless. Sanji shone from across the room and blew her a couple of dramatic and exaggerated kisses before resuming with his whirls and kicks and missing the roll of her eyes.

Zoro felt the exuberant grin stretch across his face, for once agreeing with the redheaded witch.

Wow.

-oOo-
Chasing the Strange Perhaps

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

Chasing the Strange Perhaps

After everyone had left the dojo, Zoro had remained behind, watching Sanji’s hypnotic movements like an addict finally getting a fix after days of withdrawal symptoms. Sanji was every bit as powerful as Zoro knew he would be, and he’d barely lasted ten minutes of Sanji stretching and trying to figure out how much he was healing before Zoro had stood up with a wild grin and pulled Kitetsu and Shusui from their sheaths.

The feral smirk Sanji had given him in return was enough to make his brain pop out of his head. It was like every nerve fiber in his body was going of at once, relaxing and tensing and driving him insane as he kicked off his boots and crossed the floor to stand across from the blond.

Fighting Sanji was like fighting the ocean. The cook threw kicks like the ocean threw tsunamis—hit after hit after hit of amazing, battering force, relentlessly coming at him with every intention of taking his feet out from under him and dragging him under. Blocking Sanji made his bones shake, and more often than not, he was pushed back across the floor just from the shock of the hit. It took every ounce of strength he had to keep his body in form and from crumpling.

And Zoro sucked in every second like he was an addict. He was drunk, imaging the ways in which he could build his body, his reflexes, his reaction time, his attacks, the ways in which he held his swords—

He had five weeks left with Sanji, and he swore that every second he possibly could, he would be fighting the cook. Sanji’s strength was the next step on his way to being the best.

Sanji twisted like he was a rubber band, impossibly resilient, and one leg whipped around, up over the cook’s shoulder to come down like a cannonball at Zoro’s head. Zoro barely managed to get his swords over his head and crossed in time to take the blow, and even with how fast Sanji had been moving, the cook had still been able to angle his leg just so to avoid the blades and knock them so the flat side was up, giving him free reign to deliver the full force of the blow. Zoro’s body shook and a smile split his face. He arced his swords to better take the weight of the attack with Kitetsu and slashed forward with Shusui, straight for Sanji’s throat.
In his drunken state, he almost didn’t see the grimace on Sanji’s face that had caused him to close his one good eye.

Zoro’s body snapped back, yanking the sword to the side and relieving pressure on Kitetsu just enough so that Sanji could drop, rolling away from the attack that flashed through the air right where his neck had been moments ago. Zoro sucked in an unsteady breath, stumbling and trying to keep himself upright as he was thrown off balance, and Sanji tumbled, crashing to the ground awkwardly on his bad shoulder.

“Fuck,” the cook snarled, using his other arm to lift himself gently off of his injured limb. Zoro was at his side in a second, hoisting Sanji into a sitting position even though the blond sent him a glare that might have made Shanks think twice about staying that close to him.

Zoro stayed awkwardly crouched next to Sanji as the blond rolled his arm tenderly, trying to decide for himself if he was just sore or if any more damage had been done. Satisfied that he wouldn’t have to tell Chopper that they’d been doing exactly what he’d threatened them not to do, he turned to his shin, where a deep bruise was forming right where Zoro knew a there used to be a clean break that split the bone right in half. Or, the “used to” was presumed, based on the rate that the bruise was growing. Sanji had been given the antidote knocking his body back up to NSPH major, but apparently he still had yet to entirely come back to major status.

“You were fighting with your bad leg?” Zoro asked, sort of in disbelief, especially with how much Sanji wanted to get out of here. Any more injuries would just push his time back and place him in line for the wrath of Chopper.

“Shut up,” Sanji snapped, flexing his ankle and knee carefully and wincing again. “It’s my dominant side.”

Zoro felt a little hiccup jump inside his lungs. With how good Sanji was on his toes, he was obviously ambidextrous, which meant that he’d chosen to rely on his stronger side. Or… maybe had to.

*He needed to use his dominant side to fight me?* Something about that fact made him want to gloat.

“Whatever.” Sanji moved to pull himself awkwardly to his feet, waving off Zoro’s hands when he tried to help again. “It’s not broken, and with my body coming back up to par because of the antidote, it should be fine by tomorrow. I’ll kick your ass then.”
“Sure, cook. If you can even stand up straight. I thought it was the cast throwing your balance off; guess I gave you too much credit.”

Sanji sent him a dark look over his shoulder from where he’d been stretching a kink out of his lower back. Zoro felt his muscles tingle even from such a simple gesture, and had to fight to keep his anticipatory smirk at bay. He could see the conflict behind Sanji’s eye as the blond argued with himself, struggling to keep the retorts and retaliations at bay after deciding that he’d almost reinjured himself enough for one night, and it was pretty cute.

Sanji turned back around to keep working on the tight spot in his back just as Zoro blanched at the thought that had gone through his head, missing the way the swordsman’s eyes popped and his mouth fell open like a fish out of water.

“Watch it, marimo. I might snap back when you least expect it thanks to that antidote.”

Zoro was still choking on his tongue; an answer was beyond him at the moment.

Cute?!

“You hungry?”

Cute ?!

“Hey, moss-brain, you in there?”

“What?!”

Sanji blinked, head snapping around as Zoro barked out the word. The green-haired man scowled and turned quickly away, hoping to god his cheeks weren’t flushed.

But really though, cute?!
“…Ok then. Well, I want a snack before I sleep. You can come if you want. …Dumbass marimo.”

-oOo-

Chopper really wanted Sanji out and about, especially now that the cast had been taken off.

And by that, Chopper meant out out, not buried under layers of clothes and snuck into one of the fights being held in their town in a wheelchair.

And the little doctor could be persuasive when he wanted.

Besides, Sanji needed clothes that actually fit him, not the sweatpants and shorts that had been cut to accommodate the cast. Zoro wasn’t complaining, but he had a sneaking suspicion that Sanji’s presentation meant a lot to him and it was part of the reason he didn’t want to venture into the big outdoors.

“We should stick him in drag,” Luffy had laughed to Zoro a couple of days ago as they tried to brainstorm ways in which to get Sanji out and about, making the older man crack a smile while Sanji nearly swallowed his cigarette. “People might not even really notice it’s him. Hammock passed out that night after seeing me in drag. …I still don’t get the nosebleed though.”

“Why were you in drag?” Zoro blinked at the blissfully unaware face of his younger friend. It didn’t really surprise him, the goddess in human form had certainly been trying for long enough to get with him, but Luffy was normally pretty oblivious about doing things with her.

Luffy shrugged. “Some costume party. Hammock didn’t tell me about it until I was already there and we spent too much time at dinner, so I just took some of her clothes. Her nursemaid was worried, said something about too much blood loss.”

Sanji gave Zoro an odd look, taking the cigarette from his mouth so he could mouth “hammock?”

“He means Hancock.”

“Ah.”
“I still don’t get why he doesn’t call her Boa,” Zoro looked over to where Luffy had stuck a finger up his nose and was fishing around absentmindedly. “It’d be so much easier.”

“BOA HANCOCK?!”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“LUFFY IS THE UNCULTURED CLOD THAT LOVELY GODDESS IS IN LOVE WITH?!”

“How the hell do you know her?”

“MY LOVELY SWAN! WHAT HAS CAUSED THIS ATROCITY?! WHAT HAVE I DONE WRONG?!”

It had taken Sanji a good twenty minutes of blubbering after that to come down from that realization. Zoro had spent the entire time sighing to himself while Luffy laughed and intermittently asked Sanji if there was any meat already made in the fridge. Apparently Sanji was high enough up from wherever he was from to know Boa Hancock. Zoro still had yet to find out anything about Sanji’s father—even the guy’s name, or Sanji’s hometown, or anything about the facility he had grown up in during the first eleven years of his life. Shanks had been intrigued when Zoro reported (more or less) what Sanji had told him, but hadn’t pressed further on the subject. And Zoro was glad. He had to tell Shanks the important things, but for some reason, telling Shanks the extensive recount of his peek into Sanji’s life felt like an intrusion. Or a breach of trust.

But Sanji needed clothes, in or out of drag, and so it was decided (by Chopper) that Sanji and Zoro would go out for some food, some groceries, some clothes, and some fresh air.

Sanji was grumbling to himself as he stood on the inside of the door, constantly reaching up to pull the hat Law had lent him further down over his eyes. The bandage over his left eye had yet to come off, even though Chopper checked it daily for any improvement. Zoro had yet to see for himself if there was any change from the purple, oozing, bulbous form it had been the first night Sanji was there. Chopper never checked it when Zoro was around and Sanji had never offered anything further on the subject so Zoro didn’t pry. That seemed to be how the cook worked.

Zoro was still going with a firm “no” for the cow print hat on Sanji. It really wasn’t his style. That didn’t stop Sanji, even though he probably shared Zoro’s opinion, from pulling the hat down tighter
on his head and over his face every second he got. What, did he think the wind inside the bank was
going to take it off his head? Even while he was standing in front of the teller, trying to write his
number down and recite information to the woman and somehow not look conspicuous, he was still
adamantly holding the hat over his left eye. The teller was starting to give him looks, and Zoro could
see Sanji scrambling to finish the transaction before she decided that he was too weird to go through
with this and got the manager. All the while, he was showering her with compliments and trying to
woo her into one of those shy smiles he seemed to like so much. With the brim down over his face
though, he really came off as more of a pervert.

“…Alright,” the woman said finally, seeming to find everything in order. “I just need to see a
driver’s license. We don’t have one on record and you’re not from around here so we need to verify
your identity.”

“T’m afraid I’ve lost it, miss,” Sanji returned smoothly. His voice was like shortening, slicking up the
process for his ease.

“Um…” the woman looked about ready to turn and get her boss and Zoro shifted in annoyance. So
much for inconspicuous. If the damn cook had just given up on the hat—because seriously, who did
he expect to waltz into at the bank and see him? Gangs didn’t deal with bank tellers.

“I can, however,” Sanji cut in again, finally letting go of the stupid hat to lean forward on the
counter, gesturing happily at the computer, “answer all of the security information you need.”

Zoro’s ear perked up and he shifted unconsciously to turn his head in the direction of Sanji’s voice.
Maybe he’d be able to pick up something useful about their strange visitor’s origins.

The woman looked unsure, but eventually moved her mouse to the correct tab on her computer. Her
eyes kept flicking unsurely to Sanji, but the guy was so slick it was almost impossible for her not to
see his point of view.

“Mother’s maiden name?”

“Abrams.”

“Father’s middle name?”
“Reginald.”

Ok, so it was a hidden account if the stupid fake information said anything. Zoro rolled his eyes again and tuned out, not bothering to expend any more energy on something that would take him down a long and winding dead-end path. No doubt it was completely untraceable, and if they did manage to find an end, they’d come up with the social security number of someone who had died or disappeared years ago. He closed his eyes and leaned back, comfortable enough to wait without getting more annoyed until the cook was done.

“Hey, marimo.”

Zoro’s eyes popped open at Sanji’s voice, looking up at the cook as he tucked a huge wad of cash into the borrowed sweatpants’ pocket. It was the first time in days Sanji could really wear pants, none of the pairs he’d borrowed could fit over the cast.

“You fall asleep?” Sanji seemed genuinely surprised, like he hadn’t seen all of the times Zoro passed out in his kitchen seconds after entering. “You’re standing up. And there are a shit ton of people. It’s loud as fuck.”

“Let’s go,” Zoro returned gruffly, bypassing the question and heading for the door. He paused when Sanji didn’t immediately move to follow him, mind zeroing in on the fact that it would be harder to catch the cook if he ran into the crowd, injured or not, especially because Zoro couldn’t carry his swords around in broad daylight. His eyes flashed to find the exits before—

“There? We walked in that door just, like, ten minutes ago. What’s that way?” Sanji stuck a thumb over his shoulder to a set of large double doors where the hoards of people in the bank were filing in and out of the bank. “Is that way a back door?”

Zoro made a face, turning on his heel to march past Sanji and towards the correct door. Now the cook was ok to follow him.

“Did you fall into a coma standing there? Your brain doesn’t seem to have turned back on yet.”

“Shut up, cook.”

The first stop had been a wallet, as Sanji seemed extremely put off by the idea of paying for his
things with a huge roll of cash jammed inside his ratty sweatpants. To be fair, it sort of looked like drug money, so Zoro didn’t tease him that he made the leather store their first stop. Sanji’s choice, though, did merit the mocking.

“You’ve just come back from practically the grave, and your priority right now is a four hundred dollar wallet?” He almost couldn’t believe he even had to ask the question in the first place. Sanji gave him a look that clearly said he didn’t agree, and was even offended at Zoro’s… impudence or whatever.

“First,” he said calmly, handing the cashier a couple of bills, “a gentleman’s class goes down to the tiniest details. You can buy the most expensive suit on the market, you’re still going to look like shit if your wallet has Velcro,” he spat the last word, taking the wallet with a pleasant smile and moving to the back of the store to transfer his cash into its stitched folds.

“What Second,” he continued, “just because I’m technically on the run doesn’t mean I have to pretend I’m in a thriller movie and delve into a world of dying my hair black and wearing trench coats with the collars up. That shit’s the first thing you look for if you’re trying to find someone who doesn’t want to be found. Third, I have the money and I have the time, seeing as I can’t go fucking anywhere or really do shit at all. So I’m going to get comfortable and sit this out without grimacing every time I remember that I’m wearing this,” he looked down at the sweatpants and long-sleeved t-shirt riddled with stains and pin holes, scrutinizing them like they had been in contact with toxic waste over the past few days. Suddenly remembering why he was wearing such items, he reached up and pulled his hat further down on his head. “I may have just come back from the grave, but I didn’t lose my style along the way, and the hell if you think I’m going to sink below my standards because my fucking shin hurts.”

“Whatever,” Zoro huffed, turning to stalk back to the door. Idiot-pretty could catch up after he was done huffing the smell of new leather.

“…Seriously?” Sanji called, still standing where he had been, and Zoro stopped grudgingly to look back at him. Sanji was pointing over his shoulder again to the front door. Zoro growled and marched by him, pointedly ignoring Sanji’s blatantly perplexed expression.

By the time they got to the middle of the city, Zoro had nearly gotten them lost a dozen times and Sanji, despite not being from the city, had gotten them to the shopping district alive and in a timely manner and had started to see a pattern.

“So wait,” he snorted, literally holding a hand up to Zoro as he paused. Zoro growled and kept walking. “You literally have no idea how to get anywhere, do you? You’re entirely serious right now.”
Zoro didn’t answer and Sanji burst out laughing at the top of his lungs, drawing the attention of the people around them. Most knew or recognized Zoro from the underground, and considering the mishmash of people they were used to seeing around Shanks’ territory, Sanji’s strange outfit seemed almost in place. What caused the nervous reactions was the fact that, ever since the marines had started stationing themselves inside the city walls, the activity on the streets had fallen to an all-time lull. Nearly every citizen living in the city had either survived the crumbling and rebirth of the city during the past five years or had moved in for Shanks’ protection. No one called any attention to themselves with the possibility that the marines might take notice. At this point, the marines knew anyone could be a possible tie to Shanks and his underground empire, and no one else wanted to be blacklisted.

Sanji apparently thought this too funny to care. He didn’t even really seem to mind that his hat was slipping back off of his head, and that fact would have intrigued Zoro were it not for the fact that Sanji was an asshole.

“I thought you grew up in this city!” Sanji chortled, finally reaching up to catch the hat as it threatened to really fall. “Do… do you even know where we are now?!”

“Come on!” Zoro snarled under his breath, grabbing Sanji’s wrist and dragging him down the road toward the first drug store he saw. He yanked Sanji through the doors and to the back corner where cards and birthday decorations had gone untouched since the city had reopened.

Zoro threw Sanji into the corner, where the cook stumbled but couldn’t stop laughing and was now doubled over on himself. Zoro clenched his teeth and his hand snapped out again, wrapping around Sanji’s injured wrist like a vise. That got Sanji’s attention, though he didn’t stop chuckling to himself.

“Are you a complete idiot or do you really not know how stupid it is to announce yourself like that around here?!”

“What’s the big deal?” Sanji snickered, trying to pull his wrist out of Zoro’s grasp. “It’s hilarious, I can’t believe how directionally challenged you are! How do you make it home at night?”

Zoro growled and squeezed, making Sanji suck in a sharp breath and jerk his hand in response, finally looking up to meet Zoro’s dark eyes.

“What do you know about this city?” Zoro growled.
Sanji’s face had been blank before, but now it dipped slightly and his eye flicked away, still unearthly vibrant even in the dark corner of the drug store. “…I know the rumors. Everyone outside the city does. A virus, a gas leak, a toxicity problem, a terrorist group, something horrible that forced the government to quarantine the city for two years and send in heavy fire power to try and shut it down. But not before enough rumors got out about inhumanly strong people out for blood to catch the attention of… you know, people like me and my old man.”

So people knew that the reasons behind the quarantine were bullshit, but it seemed that without prior knowledge of NSPH—or vampires to the outside—anyone outside the city walls couldn’t have put it together.

“The first NSPH started showing up when I was sixteen.” Zoro’s voice felt heavy, speaking about his strange history for the first time ever out loud. Something in him awed the strength it must have taken Sanji to tell him everything he did. “Small fry. Maybe NSPH superior but there weren’t enough to cause concern except for people like my family that knew what to look for in vampire victims.”

The word “victims” made Sanji twinge slightly but Zoro pressed on.

“Then they started multiplying. Within two years they had killed half of the city, rampaged through the streets and destroyed everything, made the government call for a siege to try and starve them out as they kept killing off humans, and forced the military to march on every living thing on the streets—including civilians—as well as roll in with tanks and eventually and drop ballistic missiles on our heads.”

Sanji was motionless, expression still pinched. He’d stopped trying to get his wrist out of Zoro’s grasp a while ago.

“After those two years things started getting better. The NSPH disappeared for some reason, and Shanks somehow came out on top of the underground city that had been forming beneath the government’s nose while we tried to figure out how to fight for ourselves. What you’re living in now is three years of Shanks’ devotion and the resilience of the people here. This entire city and every single person in it is under Shanks’ under his protection. We literally built it from scratch out of the ruins of what the country left for dead. This city doesn’t answer to anyone, and the government knows it. When they figured out just how strong and independent we were, they sent in marines, who have been camping out here and slowly putting together how… self-sustaining this city is. If anyone living here had been scared or just dragged along for the ride, someone would have talked by now and they’d know a hell of a lot more than they do now, but everyone here has survived the country turning its back on us and has no desire to return to it and no one is saying anything, so they’ve figured out just how deep the underground runs. No one calls attention to anything here, so
even you laughing is a huge red flag that—if nothing else, that you haven’t been here long and don’t belong.”

Zoro finally let go of Sanji’s wrist, and Sanji’s first movement following was to pull his hat tighter down over his eyes. He waited patiently for Sanji to speak. He was beginning to understand Sanji’s expressions and how to read him, and he knew the pinched face that meant Sanji was trying to work up the energy to speak his mind.

“I knew the city had been… hurt, but I didn’t know how extensive the damage was. It might be ancient history to you, but outside of the people here, not many know what really happened. Even people from the underground like us that travel and visit often don’t know. Just you telling me that a couple thousand people built this… kingdom in three years sounds like bullshit.”

Zoro was about to protest, snap at Sanji for not believing it with he himself being straight out of a fairy tale, but Sanji let out a slow breath and Zoro waited for the blond to finish his train of thought.

“Point them out to me,” Sanji said finally, reaching into his pocket for a long overdue cigarette. “So I know what to look for.”

Zoro took a step back, suddenly much calmer than he had been before. He wasn’t even sure why he’d been so angry. He’d been looking and there were no marines around. But with Killer around, he’d grown up understanding how important “better safe than sorry” was and it had just been a reflex.

“You’ll know ‘em. They’re the only thing that look like they have a tie to the government around here.”

Sanji nodded, waiting patiently with his cigarette between his lips and his hands in his pocket before Zoro finally took the hint and started back for the door.

“…Zoro. This way.”

Zoro grunted and turned, falling into pace next to Sanji as the cook led them out of the drug store.

Zoro let Sanji lead the rest of the way. He seemed to have a better sense of the way the roads switched and what he was looking for, which is how Zoro found himself in one of the most
expensive stores in the entirety of the city. The boutique owner had things shipped in especially from
the most high-end and well-made designers so that the store would hold up in the underground. Most
higher-ups underground had their own clothes shipped in, but the store was expensive enough to
survive in the city’s market just by selling a few outfits a year.

The second Sanji spied what was in the store windows, he lit up like the dawn sun breaking over the
horizon and, not wanting to lose Zoro, grabbed the other man’s wrist and dragged him into the store.
Zoro’s heart did a choked thump at the feeling of Sanji’s hand clenched around his wrist, but just as
soon as the cook had grabbed him, he let go and was flitting around the racks of clothes like an over
energetic puppy, picking out shirts and pants and feeling the material of every piece of clothing he
passed. Zoro couldn’t help but smile in amusement as he watched.

Sanji had dozens of shirts balanced in one arm, dozens of pants in another—even though every
single one of them was black and looked exactly the same—and was still picking out ties off of the
rack. The storekeeper at least looked happy as Sanji dragged them all into the dressing room. Zoro
sighed and found a comfortable chair to sit in outside the door, resting his head back against the wall
as he waited for Sanji to come back out—

“Hey, moss head, wake up.”

Zoro blinked heavily, looking up to find Sanji in front of the largest mirror in the store, pulling a tie
tightly around his collar. Zoro’s breath left him in a rush, and he was left sitting and staring at Sanji
as the cook put the final touches on the outfit.

The black pants were black and pants, but when the cook put them on they became so much more.
They swathed his impossibly long legs in ink, wrapping around him like the night and clinging to the
crispest edges of his hips. The shirt he had on at the moment had a similar effect. This particular one
was a deep teal, sucking the very light from the store and bathing Sanji in it to illuminate his hair and
one good eye. It sat on his shoulders like a cape made for royalty, exactly the right size to highlight
the strength in his back. Even the tie, which Zoro normally found redundant on a dressy outfit and
overly expensive, couldn’t do anything but compliment Sanji’s pristine stance. The cook knew
exactly how to hold himself to draw the attention of everyone around him. Gone were the sweatpants
and the t-shirt, and along with them, it seemed, Sanji’s nervous demeanor and obvious discomfort.
The only thing not perfectly in place with the rest of his outfit was the bandage around his eye,
keeping it hidden from the world.

“Where’s the hat?”

Sanji shrugged slightly, not meeting Zoro’s eyes. “Doesn’t go with the shirt,” he said quietly, before
barking, “And don’t fall asleep, asshole.”
He decided that he liked what he was wearing and ducked back into the dressing room to try on another set. “You’re supposed to be watching for marines so you can point them out. And looking out for anyone in case I have to run.”

Zoro didn’t think he even could sleep with the way his heart was hammering in his chest. He sat back dumbly in the chair and nodded even though in the back of his mind he knew Sanji couldn’t see him.

The next shirt Sanji stepped out wearing was a subtle pink with a deep navy tie around his shoulders to see if the color matched, followed by a mellow green shirt and brown tie. He repeated this way too many times, and the pile of “things to purchase” sitting next to Zoro grew so tall it nearly reached his head. When it finally did pass him in height, Zoro snorted loud enough to make Sanji shoot him a look.

“How much is all this gonna cost?” he folded his arms. “When you finally can get out of here you won’t be able to cover transportation costs from everything you’re buying here.”

“Shut it, you uncultured slob.” Sanji added another tie to the pile. “Someone with as few brain cells as you shouldn’t even try to understand.”

“Can you even fight with these things riding up your ass? Look at this,” Zoro reached over and plucked a pair of pants from the pile, sending everything on top of it tumbling as he dangled the cloth like a soggy towel away from his body. “The material’s so thick you can’t even——”

Something flashed in front of his eyes, and then all at once something with the force of a freight train plowed into the side of his head, sending him careening across the floor where he skidded to a halt in front of the cashier, making the poor girl shriek. Zoro grunted and pulled himself out of the floor, reaching up tenderly to see how much of his face was rug burn and how much was just bruises from Sanji’s foot. Zoro turned around with a snarl to glare at Sanji where the cook was calmly refolding everything. The blond was wearing one of the pairs Zoro had been accusing of being too debilitating, and he hadn’t lost an ounce of speed or strength.

“Don’t,” Sanji said coolly, taking the cigarette from his mouth and letting out a stream of smoke, “disrespect the clothes. I wouldn’t buy them if I couldn’t even defend myself in them. And don’t,” he picked the pile up, carrying it over to the cashier, “use such a vulgar tone in front of a lady.”

Zoro grinned viciously, pulling himself to his feet. “I’ll kill you.”
“Try me, marimo. I’m so sorry, dear lady, for the commotion this hulking brute and I have caused, and I’m going to wear this out today,” he gestured to the black pinstripe pants, ocean blue shirt and navy tie he was still wearing. Zoro didn’t see what he’d come into the store wearing anywhere, excepting the hat he’d pulled back over his eye. Zoro had a sneaking suspicion he hadn’t left it in the dressing room by accident. Sanji had even found socks, though they looked odd with the ratty sandals he’d been given this morning.

The girl behind the counter looked nervously between the two, but began ringing Sanji up anyways. Zoro scoffed at the pile in front of them. The store wouldn’t have to sell anything for years after this.

“You good?” he asked after the girl had handed Sanji his multiple bags of clothes and finally got away from his waterfall of compliments and other sweet nothings.

Sanji shook his head, grinning maniacally. “Not even close.”

Zoro hated shopping.

The next place they went into, Sanji spent an hour testing and retesting the durability of the store’s shoes. Shoes, he said, were much harder to find ones that could withstand the grief he gave them.

*I can see that,* Zoro thought absentmindedly as he found another chair to wait in. His cheek was still throbbing from the earlier kick. Sitting there for an hour though was still a bitch. And he was watching Sanji flex his toes and stretch and test jumping and kicking and the cook wouldn’t even let him fight. Sanji just had at the floor a couple times to test the sole. It was dumb. One second with any of his swords and Zoro would have been able to tell the cook if the shoes would hold up or not.

Which was how he found himself blinking himself wearily back awake, swiveling his head as he tried to locate the blond.

Nothing.

*Shit—!* Zoro leapt to his feet, only to grind to a halt as he found Sanji over in the corner of the store, new shoes on his feet and new clothes in the bags on his arms, ready to go. It looked like he’d been on his way over to wake Zoro (again) when something had caught his attention. Zoro watched as the blond slipped off Law’s cow print hat and tucked it carefully in with his other clothes, reaching up to pick one of the hats off the rack and pull it over his head. Something heavy fell over Zoro as he
watched Sanji tilt the hat this way and that before putting it back and trying another with a longer brim. No matter what he did, nothing seemed to fit him right, and it made something twinge in Zoro’s chest to watch the blond struggling with something he was so in upset about. Without even realizing it, he found himself drifting over to Sanji’s side.

Sanji glanced over when Zoro appeared next to him, but his gaze didn’t linger and turned he back to the mirror, now on his third style and still not pleased if his expression said anything.

“He granted,” he grunted, shoving the hat that had been on his head into Zoro’s hands. His hands snapped back up the second Zoro had a grip on it to comb frantically through his hair, pulling his bangs over to the left so they covered most of the bandage.

…His hair’s grown. Sanji hadn’t been able to do that the first night he was there. “…Did Chopper say anything?” His voice was strangely quiet and he couldn’t really find a good reason for that.

Sanji’s tugging slowed, but didn’t stop as he fought to get his hair to hang in the right manner. He was silent for a long time. So long that Zoro had given up on an answer before the blond suddenly spoke up.

…”It’s not going to heal.”

He spoke like a war veteran, weary and forced into acceptance from the realization that nothing he did would change it, whether he truly accepted the fact or not. Not accepting it would only make him miserable and eat him from the inside out, so he was making himself come to terms with it.

“Chopper said the bandage can come off, and it doesn’t look nearly as bad as it did, but…” he stopped there, but Zoro could finish the rest.

Taking off the bandage would be coming to terms with the facts that he won’t get his sight back.

Zoro nodded, at a loss for anything else to say, and just stood quietly holding the hats Sanji passed him as he tried on style after style, eventually settling on a newsboy cap that had a long enough brim to hide his eye and enough space that he could tuck all of his hair inside of it.

Zoro’s eyes widened as something occurred to him, standing behind Sanji in line. “…Hey.”
“Yeah?”

“Come with us to our fight tomorrow.”

Sanji turned to give him a confused look. “I didn’t know you were fighting tomorrow.”

Zoro grinned, now way more excited than he probably should have been for the fight. He knew for a fact his opponent wasn’t very good. It was just that his boss had a lot of money and had wagered a lot on the fight. Nami wouldn’t have let them say no for anything in the world. He should have been dreading the drive with everyone and the stupid fight that wouldn’t last long enough to make the travel worth it, but now with the possibility that Sanji would come…

“Come on, shit cook. You have yet to see what the best fighters on Shanks’ team can do.”

Sanji looked like he was about to start jeering Zoro for his tiny unspoken confession, but something was pulling at the cook and finally he gave up fighting it and grinned back, turning away to hide his smile and pay for his items. “Fine, marimo. Just don’t shit yourself with excitement. We’re in a public place.”

Zoro couldn’t help it. He laughed, even at such a stupid insult.

-oOo-

Sanji stood at the side of the arena, mouth still hanging slightly open as he watched Luffy utterly demolish his opponent, crowd erupting all around them. Beside him, Zoro was leaning up against the railing with a huge grin on his face, cheering Luffy on. The marimo had the worst poker face in the history of all shitty poker players—no, scratch that, Luffy did. But Zoro was pretty damn close.

Still though, Sanji would be lying if he said it wasn’t even a little bit contagious. If he weren’t so busy staring like a fish at Luffy, he would have been smiling too from the sheer energy in the arena. Even as he tried to understand how Luffy could possibly be strong enough to pull off the last move he’d done, the younger man contorted like he was made of rubber and punched his opponent so hard the man was launched halfway across the arena, where he then rolled across the other half and connected with the opposite wall so hard he had to lie there and collect himself for a moment before struggling back up. Meanwhile Luffy laughed to himself and rolled his shoulder, winding up for another punch.
Zoro had fought just before Luffy, showing off every strong attack he had regardless of the fact that his opponent wasn’t even worth his time. The marimo had insisted on bragging and pummeling the poor man into pulp. And then the moss head had finished his fight and climbed out of the ring with Chopper flailing behind him about his injuries and come to join Sanji at the railing. The idiot didn’t stop moving so Chopper could bandage him up until he was in place next to Sanji.

*Jesus, I haven’t run away yet. What makes him think I’d do it the second he’s fighting?*

Sanji was way to absorbed watching Zoro fight to run now.

Zoro was strong. There was no doubt about it. Especially for a human, he was incredibly strong. Sanji was still pretty confident that he could take Zoro if it ever came down to it, but Luffy…

He paused in his train of thought as Luffy leapt into the air like a gangly gazelle and spun around, flinging his leg like a whip into the poor man’s face and smashing his head backwards into the ground where the rest of his body snapped up into the air upon the impact. Behind Sanji, the crowd jump to their feet as a unit, screaming their approval at the gore. Luffy had better stop soon or the poor sod would die.

Luffy… Sanji knew he wasn’t a vampire—err, NSPH, as Law had called them. Sanji couldn’t sense anything from him, and Luffy didn’t do any of the things that even NSPH in hiding couldn’t keep completely under wraps. No, Luffy was a human, but somehow still astronomically stronger than him. Maybe even him and Zoro combined. If he were to ever fight seriously with Luffy, the end might not fair so well for him. The thought was crazy; he’d never met anyone stronger than him until he got to this city. He could have even killed Zeff if he really needed to. People like Shanks though, or Law or Kid…

He used to wonder why Zoro emitted such a powerful air of respect around Luffy, and now he knew why. The muscle-brain was enough of an idiot to see brute strength as the most important trait. He looked at Kid and Law the same way. But Luffy was damn strong and Sanji couldn’t help his own level of respect for the effervescent idiot rising. And Luffy looked up to Shanks like Shanks carried the world on his shoulders without even breaking a sweat and smiled the whole time. Though after seeing the inner workings of their city, that might not have been too far from the truth.

This was an odd family indeed. Odd enough to still have him on edge for fear that some idiot would let something slip about his hiding here. He couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching over his shoulder, and hadn’t been able to since he’d woken up weeks ago in the hospital room. It was partly to be expected. Shanks’ men were constantly watching him, and for the first few days that had accounted for the feeling, but now that’d he’d acclimated to the way their eyes felt, he could still
feel something else lurking. Watching, but not close enough to put him directly in danger. There was a prickling on his shoulder blade when he was being watched, and he had yet to not really feel it at all since coming to Shanks’ territory.

Sanji took in a deep breath, grimacing at the way his body shuddered, and yanked the new hat further down on his head. Beside him, Zoro looked over to make sure Sanji was enjoying himself, and despite that itchy prickle still on his back, Zoro’s grin was contagious enough to have him smiling back after only a second, chuckling instead of being annoyed at how simply he was acting. The moss head was oblivious enough to actually think that he could convince Sanji that all was right in the world, which was maybe why it was working.

Something flashed behind Zoro’s deep green eyes at seeing Sanji’s expression, but before Sanji could lock onto it to decipher it, the swordsman had turned back to the fight and was yelling for Luffy to stop stalling and just finish him.

...Huh.

Maybe Zoro wasn’t oblivious as he acted.

And Zoro was easy. He was easy to be with, despite his doltish mannerisms and his abhorrent manners. If Sanji was feeling brave, he might even admit that Zoro was calming after everything that had happened. Zoro’s faith in what was to come was so unwavering and steadfast that, sometimes, he actually did convince Sanji that everything would be alright, and Sanji found himself breathing normally.

Sanji noticed the weight lifting from his lungs as he smiled alongside the brute and sighed, reaching up to push the brim of hit hat back slightly. Dud eye and protrusive bandage or not, he didn’t want to miss any of Luffy’s moves just because the stupid thing was in the way. Slowly and entirely not of his own accord, he found his gaze being drawn back to the overgrown marimo next to him, taking in the hard jawline and the way his cheeks stretched and the cords of muscle in his neck shifted when he smiled.

Zoro was something else, that was for sure.

With the lead off of his chest and his mind at ease enough to try and enjoy the fight, he didn’t notice the dark figure moving through the crowd behind him, staying just far enough away so that Sanji’s keen sense of smell couldn’t pick him up through the crowd. The prickling in Sanji’s shoulder hadn’t gone anywhere though.
Perfect Chaos

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

Perfect Chaos

Four weeks Sanji had been with them.

Twenty-eight long days.

Zoro couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so alive. He practically floated out of bed in the morning and dove into his exercises, counting his reps and all the while thinking about what Sanji was making for breakfast. Every morning Zoro was the second person in that kitchen, before most of the other people had even woken up. Every morning he fell asleep at the table with the wonderful aromas drifting about him. Every morning he woke up with a cup of tea and a small plate of something tasty and revitalizing placed on the table in front of him.

After he’d finished the plate, people started filing into the kitchen. Nami would generally join them first, waving off Sanji’s flourishes and exchanging snide remarks with Zoro. He still didn’t like the way she walked all over Sanji. Even if the cook was tired and clearly in pain from a rough night’s sleep—whether it was from physical pain or dreams, Zoro never asked—if she didn’t like what he was serving she would make a special request and he would leap to it.

Luffy and Chopper were usually the next ones to walk in, as a lot of nights they passed out cuddling each other like Luffy thought Chopper was an overgrown teddy bear. They would race into the kitchen, Luffy would get kicked upside the head (Chopper wised up before that could happen), and snarfed down their food. Usopp followed, having been woken up by the noise, and would entertain them all with his dreams and how they told the future and sometimes the past, pretending to read the food in their plates and the tea leaves in their mugs like a fortune teller. It was amusing, at least, but they were loud, and the louder they were, the more Sanji squawked at them. Sometimes Zoro missed the quiet mornings before people had figured out how good of a cook Sanji was, but Sanji lived to cook for others, so mornings now were a blessing and a curse, so to speak.

The noise had drawn Brook and Franky in after a couple weeks, who brought even more insanity to the table, and all at once if felt like they were a group of swashbuckling pirates stuck on a tiny ship together sailing through the ocean and singing songs the whole way. All they needed was more booze and they’d be set. Brook and Franky had their own apartments just a little ways down the road and really had no reason to be at the arena before fights, which meant that they either really liked Sanji’s cooking or really didn’t like their own sanity to get down here so early.
Zoro ducked as something went flying by his head, and off to his side he heard Sanji bark Luffy’s name and the idiot’s cry as Sanji launched a vicious kick in his direction. Franky laughed loudly at the exchange, slinging his arm over Chopper’s tiny shoulder.

“Gotta say, cook-bro, from bringing you back the night we found you, I really didn’t think you’d make this super a recovery!”

Chopper nodded wildly, bouncing up and down in his chair even with the extra weight on top of him. “I’m so glad, Sanji! We were all really scared for a while!”

Zoro looked over warily, taking in how Sanji’s good eye had found the floor, but the cook put on a happy face for the group anyways. “Well, I had the best doctor and the strongest crew on my team; it would be a crazy thought to think that I wouldn’t be ok.”

“Bastard!” Chopper warbled, flailing in Sanji’s direction. “I’m not the best! Don’t say that! It doesn’t make me happy at all!”

Franky bellowed out another laugh, joined by Brook’s chortle, and soon everyone around the table was laughing at Chopper’s antics and Zoro couldn’t help but chuckle along. Besides, the cook was laughing too, which meant that bringing up said untouchable topic hadn’t put him in too much of a funk. He was definitely doing better if they could talk about it that openly without him shutting down.

One by one the group thanked Sanji and chased each other out, crowing about what they were going to do that day.

“Swordsman-bro,” Franky said on his way out and Zoro looked up blearily from where he’d been about to fall asleep at the table. “I’m working with Kid today on an engine, you should stop by. The guy’s been talking about how he and Law haven’t seen you in a while. And Killer’s off who knows where doing super things; it looks like they’re having a little empty nest syndrome.”

Zoro nodded, shaking his head to himself at the thought of Law and Kid with empty nest syndrome and thanked Franky, who gave the remaining two in the kitchen a hardy wave before trudging out.

Zoro looked up to where Sanji was powering through the dishes and crossed the room to join him, taking a towel and drying the ones that Sanji finished. It was nice to have the quiet after such a crazy
breakfast, and they stood there comfortably for a long time, just washing and drying. The first footsteps they heard behind them still came too soon though. Zoro didn’t bother turning around. Anyone coming into the kitchen now was looking for Sanji.

Sanji turned, plate still in hand, to find Chopper walking back into the kitchen. Chopper smiled and Sanji managed a half smile before he dropped it and turned back around. Chopper’s expression dipped slightly, knowing how much Sanji dreaded this topic.

“Zoro?” He cantillated, trying to get the older man’s attention. He could still stay strong though for his patient, and that meant a happy tone of voice too.

Zoro blinked, finally turning around to find Chopper beaming up at him like a pint-sized bottle of sunbeam.

“…What’s got you so happy?”

“Would you give Sanji and I a couple of minutes?” Chopper was practically singing now.

Zoro caught the way Sanji’s shoulders sagged slightly and nodded, laying his last plate down on the drying rack as he went to get his swords off of the table.

Well, he thought with a yawn, scratching at the back of his head, *might as well rest while I have the chance*. Because Sanji would most likely be riled up enough to want to fight after he was done with Chopper. Any discussion relating to how his body was(n’t) healing always put the cook on edge.

Zoro yawned again, hand just resting on the doorknob to his bedroom in the arena when something prickled up his spine and he froze, eyes narrowing.

…*Inside*.

Zoro slid Kitetsu and Shusui out of their sheaths silently. He moved to find a comfortable standing spot, took a deep breath, and lunged forward, smashing through the door with a loud battle cry, swords brandished and ready for blood—only to grind to a halt at the person sitting innocuously on his bed, legs crossed and innocently waiting for him like he was the one who’d forgotten their plans and was late.
“…Robin!” Instantly a huge grin split his face and Robin smiled back, opening her arms as Zoro slid his swords away and walked over to hug her.

“How did you know I was staying here?” He had his own apartment up the road, but ever since he’d been charged with watching Sanji he’d been living with the rest of the crew here.

She shrugged, looking sheepish. “I didn’t, actually. I stopped there first but your place looked like it hadn’t been touched in days, so this was my next best guess, and I just tried doors until I found this room.” She gave him a chiding look. “Haven’t we talked about leaving your door unlocked?”

He glossed over the question unabashedly. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been…” she paused, choosing the right word, “immersed. I have many stories for you and everyone else.”

“All good?”

“Some yes, others no, but they’re only half of the story.”

“…I missed you,” he admitted quietly, and she smiled again, shifting closer to him to lean her head on his shoulder.

“Me too.” Her voice was firm and sure, just like it had always been. It was good to have her back. “And why the change in location?” She leaned back on her hands to get more comfortable, already reading him like she’d been here the whole time and it hadn’t been almost a year since she’d left.

The last time Robin was around, she’d been talking about these amazing ghost computer programs and the histories of the country they told about from their coding, gushing about how they were so complex that most of the government nowadays didn’t even know how to read them and missed all of their secrets because of it. At one point she’d hit a dead end because they weren’t available to the city any more, what with the… secession from the rest of the country and all. She couldn’t stay there if she wanted to pursue them. And then she’d left, just like Ace had, and they hadn’t heard from her since.
“…Well…” Oh boy.

“Hey, marimo, wake the fuck up so we can—”

Sanji froze in the door, Robin staring back at him with surprised eyes as he looked her up and down. Once. Twice.

Zoro grimaced and covered his eyes.

“…Marimo?” she repeated slowly, reaching up to cover her smirk with a hand. Her eyes popped back to Sanji in surprise as the cook suddenly sank to his knees in front of her, his head dipping dramatically as he gestured towards the heavens.

“My lovely goddess, I know not what glorious fates have brought us together here today, but let me assure you—” he pulled a flower that Zoro recognized from the vase in the kitchen out of his jacket and presented it to her. What the hell, did he carry one on him at all times? “—the pleasure is all mine.”

Robin clearly had no idea what to think of the situation, and Zoro would have teased her for this being one of the very few times she couldn’t find an appropriate response if he hadn’t been so annoyed that Robin was just another woman on Sanji’s list of things to cherish.

“Robin,” he started, forcing his tone to stay cool, “this is Sanji. Sanji, Robin is an old friend of mine. We’ve known each other for years.”

“A pleasure,” Robin smiled gracefully and Sanji swooned under her dark gaze, wobbling slightly on his one knee.

“Ah Robin, such elegance and poise to compliment such a spellbinding and beautiful flower. I can’t imagine how you survived so many years with this ape of a man, but even if it was him, I’m glad that you had reason to come here today and charm my eyes with such exquisiteness.”

Robin’s smile was getting more and more strained with every word. She’d never been one for useless drivel. It was kind of fun to see her out of her element for once.
“How long are you staying?” Zoro cut in, taking mercy on her.

She shook her head. “Not long. I have more work to do, but I was in the area and it suddenly struck me how long it’s been since I’ve seen everyone. I was excited to see how much Shanks has improved this place as well. The marines are a surprise though,” she turned back to Zoro.

He nodded. “Yeah, I’ll tell you about them after you’ve said hello to everyone. It’s kind of a long story, and they’ll be mad if you don’t go up soon. I’m gonna go see Kid at the garage later, wanna to come?”

She nodded again and stood, Sanji twirling to his feet beside her.

“Is the lovely lady weary from her travels? Might I be able to fix her something to eat?”

Robin gave Zoro a dumbfounded smirk over her shoulder and he grinned in return, mouthing “later” in response. He’d been around Sanji for four weeks now; she could deal with one day.

“That would be very kind, thank you.”

Sanji swooned again as she took his outstretched arm, and then they were through the door, leaving Zoro to yawn and get comfortable back on the bed.

Damn Robin, stealing his sparring partner.

-oOo-

“What is Mr. Kid working on today?” Robin asked as she and Zoro climbed onto Zoro’s bike. Kid had built the thing basically from scratch for him along with Franky and it was Zoro’s pride and joy aside from his swords. Robin had never commented on Zoro letting her ride it, but she knew that he’d only let Chopper and Killer on it—and once Luffy, but they’d both almost died because of the young man’s antics, so never again—and took great care to watch her heals for the paint job.

“Not sure.” Zoro handed her his extra helmet and pulled his own on. “Franky just mentioned that they’d been asking what I’ve been doing. I’ve been up here so much for Sanji, really haven’t seen
any of them.”

“And Mr. Law?”

Zoro shrugged. “Him either, I really haven’t seen either of them. Sometimes I’ll see Law when he comes to check up on Sanji, but he’s basically the head of the hospital because there weren’t any others left after the siege so he has a lot on his plate. Underground doctors aren’t easy to come by.”

Robin nodded and wrapped her arms around his waist as he gunned the engine and pulled out into the street. Right away she began giving him directions, tapping on either shoulder for turns and pulling back on his left shoulder if he was about to make a wrong turn so he didn’t swerve out into traffic. It was like she had never left. They pulled into the driveway and drifted into an open spot in the garage next to a car up on the lift. Robin swung her long legs over the bike and slid her helmet off, waiting for Zoro to stop the bike and knock out the kickstand before they went over to see everyone.

“Swordsman-bro!” Franky called, waving while one hand was busy stuck inside the engine of a car that was in desperate need of a new paint job. Beneath him, Kid’s legs were sticking out from under the car, the toe of one of his heavy boots twitching. He was annoyed about something.

“Zoro!” Kid barked, making Franky jump. “Get me a hemostat clamp! I need to hold a couple of pieces together and that idiot doesn’t know what the hell it is!”

Zoro grinned at the poor help who was shrugging uselessly over in the corner and left Robin to find Kid’s toolbox.

Zoro held out the clamp as Kid slid out from under the car on the creeper and scowled up at the poor skittish teenager that was supposed to be helping him.

“Law give this to you?” he asked as Kid took it. Kid just grinned impishly, the beginnings of laugh lines starting to appear around his eyes now that he had passed thirty, and wheeled back under the car without answering.

Franky found a stopping place and laid his tools down, wiping his greasy hands on a rag as he came over to join them. “Who’s your friend, bro?”
“You never met Robin?”

Franky shook his head. “She used to hang with you and your crazy friends back in the day?”

Robin chuckled to herself. “You could say that. I’m Robin Nico.”

“Charmed,” Franky gave her a wide grin. “I’d shake your hand, but I don’t know if you’d be able to get the black out for a couple of days. I use really super soap, takes everything but my bones off.”

Robin chuckled again, making Franky grin wider, and Zoro went back to helping Kid. Seems like he wasn’t needed there anymore.

“How’s your ward?” Kid’s voice drifted up from under the car and Zoro found a comfortable place resting up against the front door with his legs sticking out in front of him.

“Not bad, he’s still a little touchy. Law hasn’t told you this?”

“He has, but we haven’t seen you in weeks, and do you know how much of a bitch it is to get you to talk when you don’t have to?”

“I talk!” Zoro squawked indignantly.

“It’s a bitch, bro,” Franky cut in unapologetically and Robin laughed beside him, hiding behind her hand.

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing something?” Zoro snapped.

“Well you left the young lady all by herself, what was I supposed to do?”

“I’d love to help,” Robin spoke up, sliding her jacket off to reveal the dark lacy dress underneath. Franky’s eyes followed her long legs as she crossed the garage to hang it on one of the empty pegs, short heels clicking subtly against the floor. “What do you need me to do?”
“Uh, well, sure, I guess,” Franky shrugged, unsure at the turn of events but not about to be bothered by the extra hand, especially with their useless intern now making himself useful by tidying up. It seemed he’d caught on that staying clear of Kid after making him mad was a good idea for at least an hour. He could trade with Robin when she and Zoro left. “What do you know about car machinery?”

“Maybe more than you think,” she gave him another gentle smile and found a place next to him looking down at the engine. He stood dumbly for a moment, admiring the gentle curves in her shoulders before recollecting and picking up his wrench again.

“Want to find me a socket wrench? Three eighths?”

“Deep or regular?”

Franky grinned widely and stuck his head back under the hood. “Deep would be super.”

Robin nodded and headed for the tool bench, leaving Franky with another couple seconds to watch her graceful step.

Zoro watched the way they interacted, weighing them against each other as Franky cracked jokes and made wild gestures with his tools and Robin kept to her personal space and chuckled daintily behind her hand. It was like his charm pulled her out of her seriousness just enough, and her control grounded him just enough. Franky was very open and very friendly, and Robin might have just been being sociable, but Franky, on the other hand, looked very intrigued, and was certainly gaming to get her in bed if nothing else. Something protective inside him growled at the thought of Franky moving in on Robin, but he and Robin hadn’t been together for a long time and Franky was a good guy. Robin was very capable of making her own decisions, regardless of what those around her thought. She wouldn’t have survived in the underground outside the city on her own if she weren’t.

Zoro chuckled to himself, thinking of what Sanji’s reaction would be if he were here watching the exchange. He could picture the shit-cook leaping to the unwilling Robin’s defense, trying to protect her from the gentle giant of the family and adorning her with a flower crown he’d made himself. As it was, Chopper had stopped him again on their way out and assured Zoro that he and Luffy would watch the cook until Zoro got back.

“Franky said Killer hasn’t been around much.”
He watched Kid’s legs for any pause in activity, but nothing happened, so Kid was either used to the idea or it really didn’t bother him. Either was possible with the nut job.

“Yes, little shit’s been running off with his friends and now your blond Dracula feeds him whenever he needs his fix, so he’s been home less and less. Nice when Law’s off; we actually have the place to ourselves for the first time in way too goddamn long.”

“So you don’t mind that he’s not around?”

“Has it really been twelve years? Yeah, Killer’s thirteen. Jesus Christ it’s been twelve years since I’ve had really good sex. How in god’s fucking name did we make it that long? You two were not worth that many years.”

“Kid, you don’t care that he’s… you know?”

Now Kid paused. “Why? You grew up, we never had a problem with that.”

“No, but you guys have been watching Killer since he moved in with us. He’s never been away from you except for school. Never wanted to,” Zoro added offhandedly. “…I was the one always fighting you.”

“…Traf’s a little more bothered than I am. He was way too attentive for way too long. Fucking mother hen. Ever since Killer saw Sanji fight we can’t keep him home. He takes his scythes and leaves. Keeps coming back stronger though, which is good because he’ll be able to defend himself and Law won’t insist on calling him every night. Pass me the torque wrench.”

Zoro reached over and pulled the tool from the bench, sliding it under the car. So they were having empty nest syndrome. Or Law was at least.

It had never occurred to him. And Franky had been the one to notice.

He had to get back more often.
“Robin staying with you?”

Zoro shrugged before remembering that the older man couldn’t see him. “Didn’t ask. It’s fine if she wants to.”

“You two fucking again?”

“Nah,” Zoro glanced up to where Franky was very animatedly telling Robin a story from his hometown. She was immersed in the tale from her perch on the workbench, car long forgotten behind the two. “I think we’ve passed that.”

“Whatever.”

Zoro grinned, nudging Kid with the toe of his boot. “What, you don’t want grandkids?”

“No! Didn’t I just say how happy I was to be having decent sex again?! I’m fucking thirty-one, I’m not nearly old enough for grandkids—and you’re not nearly old enough to be having kids!”—Zoro grunted as Kid’s boot connected sharply with his side—“Do you know how much work a fucking baby is!? And like hell you’re going to give that yellow-eyed, pointy-mustached asshole a reason to show up here again! I don’t care if he and Shanks are friends!”

Zoro grinned, leaning back up against the car as Kid ranted.

-oOo-

“Curly-bro cooking again tonight?”

Zoro nodded at Franky as he climbed onto his bike and slid up the kickstand, leaning it to the side to make it easier for Robin to get on with her dress. Franky stepped up to the side of the bike, adjusting his sunglasses on his head as he grinned.

“I might join you then, cook-bro’s food is the best. You had any yet, Ro?”
Ro? Robin hated nicknames. With a passion. He waited to feel the claws in his shoulders when she climbed on, and when it never came he turned curiously to find her smiling and rolled his eyes.

“I had a light snack before we came earlier; by then it was already after breakfast. His cooking is quite delicious.”

Franky laughed, digging around in his coat pocket for his keys. “I haven’t missed a dinner since I first tried it. Let’s grab some booze on the way back so we’re not mooching off of everything.”

Robin nodded and made to climb on the back of Zoro’s bike, but he tipped it back away from her as she lifted her foot off the ground. She gave him a blank look and he nodded his head towards Franky’s car.

“Go with him. I’ll follow you guys.”

If possible, Robin’s look grew flatter, and a lesser man would have withered, but Zoro only grinned and gunned the bike, drowning out her dark aura. She rolled her eyes and turned for the car, giving Zoro time to put his helmet on and secure hers in the side bag.

Franky looked up in surprise as Robin walked around him, limber legs catching his eyes again. “You comin’ with me, sis?”

She nodded with a light smile. “If I’m not intruding at all.”

Franky couldn’t have looked happier. He slammed the door to the dingy Camaro, making the side mirror rattle dangerously as it threatened to fall off. The car was still in the process of being restored. It needed new paint; new mirrors and lights; the leather inside looked like the victim of a tiger attack; he had yet to replace the exhaust system and it belched everything from smoke to other pieces of the car as it drove down the road; and the undercarriage was so rusted Zoro was still commending Franky for his cojones driving the death trap down the street at all.

“Nope. But if I’m gonna have a lady in the car…” he gestured to the back of the garage, where the beautiful blue ’69 Charger he’d spent four years restoring sat quietly in the shadows, waiting to show the city what it had to offer. After the city had risen from the ashes, the Charger was the only decent thing on the road, which made it a sight to see driving down the street, and Franky loved showing it off.
Franky’s long strides easily out-stepped Robin, and he made it to the car to open the door for her long before she reached it. She nodded again with her light smile, an amused quirk playing with the corners of her lips, and slid gracefully like a cat into the hand-stitched leather seat. Franky closed the door behind her and grinned at Zoro as he walked around to the passenger seat. Zoro made a face and flipped his visor down, gunning the engine as loud as he could in the tiny garage to get Franky to stop showing off and hurry the fuck up.

-oOo-

Zoro poured himself another glass of sake and turned to see if Usopp, Luffy, or Chopper could use another beer to get them back in the conversation, only to find that they’d passed out in a heap on the table and were snoring with an assortment of limbs sticking into each other’s faces and out of the pile. He chuckled to himself, deciding that the situation deserved a double, and filled his glass to the top, passing the bottle to Robin after he was done. She thanked him quietly and turned back to Franky and Sanji, who were discussing old cars. Franky had been glued to Robin’s side the entire night, until Sanji mentioned the Charger Frank had parked outside. Apparently, Sanji’s father had done some work with old cars and ships. Still no name for the old man though.

“So,” Robin asked after a moment, voice quiet enough and hidden behind her glass so that the two across the table couldn’t hear—although they’d both had a considerable amount to drink and were discussing the topic quite loudly. “You and Sanji?”

Zoro choked on his drink, spluttering the sake back out across the table. His eyes snapped up to make sure that neither Franky nor Sanji had seen, but Franky was in the midst of one of his more humorous stories and was laughing so loud Zoro doubted either heard him at all.

“No!”

Robin chuckled and nodded, turning back to her drink. Zoro scowled and stuck his nose back in his own, a string of insults running through his mind as she grinned to herself.

“…I told him about Mihawk,” he said after a moment.

“…Everything?”

“Yeah. Showed him the scar, told him how berserk Law and Kid went, how scared Killer was. He didn’t really say anything.”
“Even when you told him your dream?”

Zoro shrugged. “He has one too. Wants to find this… place, with lots of fish.”

“Fish?”

“It’s like, where all the oceans meet so every kind of fish is there. You know, for cooking and all.”

“Yes, I could see how that could be his dream.”

“So mine didn’t seem so weird.”

She nodded.

He hadn’t told Sanji about Kuina. But then, he’d never told Robin either. He couldn’t even remember if he told Luffy or not. Kuina died before he got close to Luffy and Ace, and as far as he knew Kid and Law had never told Killer, making the two of them the only ones aside from Mihawk that knew. It also made the two of them the only ones that cared. Mihawk hadn’t even made the time to come to her funeral. But that didn’t really surprise him, coming from a blood relative he had that had nearly split him in two when Zoro challenged him, fueled by years of rage and a deadly drive to be the best, especially if it meant taking that man down.

He’d told Sanji everything: how long he was in the hospital afterwards; how much it hurt when Killer cried and wouldn’t speak to him for days for putting himself in a situation like that; how much effort it had taken Law to calm Kid down and keep him from attacking Mihawk; how little Law had said to him beyond the medical stuff; how the doctor had finally exploded, words reopening wound after wound as he told the younger man to just leave if he didn’t want to stay and not make it more painful for the rest of them; how much the wound hurt. The words just came, sort of like how Sanji’s stories had, just flowing out of him. And the cook had smoked quietly and let Zoro talk, taking in everything and handing him a really nice bottle of sake after he was done for them to split. He’d asked a couple of questions, about Zoro’s relationship with Mihawk and why the older man had joined the government, if he and Law had patched things up, but beyond that he’d just listened. And even taken notice when Zoro mentioned that Mihawk left him alive so Zoro could get better, because his uncle was impressed at what he could do.
Zoro knew Sanji would do the same if he brought up Kuina, but Kuina felt deeper. Like what he was sure Sanji felt about his past and his family beyond the facility. There was no need to bring it up, and he felt no desire to.

Robin finished her last sip and stood, bringing the glass over to the sink.

Sanji leapt up as he realized what she was doing, leaving his drink tottering dangerously on the table in his rush. “Let me do that, Robin-swan! There’s no need for you to ruin your post-drink relaxation with this menial work.”

Zoro poured himself another.

“You finished, Ro?”

“I think so, though I’ve had a lot of fun. I’m happy I decided to come this week and not have my brain implode from the coding. This is a nice break.”

Franky stood and stretched, yawning hugely before he finished his rum and coke in one enormous gulp. “You need me to drive you somewhere?”

“I’m actually staying in a room Shanks offered me, but you’re welcome to walk me down the stairs.”

“Sure thing,” Franky grinned, winking at Zoro, who turned away with a face and pretended not to have seen when Sanji caught it and shot flaming daggers from his eyes in Franky’s direction, soapy glass gripped dangerously in his hands.

“Good night, Sanji, thank you for everything.”

“Oh my sweet Robin, your praise is far more than I deserve for such a meal not fit for a peasant, but I am glad you enjoyed it~”

Robin giggled quietly, finally warming up to Sanji’s quirks and turned to Franky, who held the kitchen door open for her on her way out. He tried to catch Zoro’s eye again on as they left but Zoro turned away to watch the cook at the sink. That was imagery he didn’t need going through his mind.
Zoro waited as Sanji finished the dishes, pouring himself another glass when he’d finished his last. His eyes traced the sharp, strong curves of Sanji’s long legs, finding where the cook was leaning slightly off to one side to keep off his shin.

*Still hurts, huh?*

Finally Sanji finished and Zoro pushed the wine towards him before he could even turn to return to the table, knowing the tension in Sanji’s shoulders when he saw it but not quite understanding where it came from. Alcohol always fixed things in his mind.

Only problem was, he had no clue how to breach a problem even with alcohol.

*People should just have to deal with their own shit.*

“I feel like such a cripple,” Sanji spoke up suddenly and Zoro snorted, taking the cook’s lax tone as an OK to joke around. The fact that Sanji had offered that without Zoro asking meant that he wasn’t in as bad a mood as Zoro thought.

“Well you should, with the way you fight.”

Sanji shot him a look and flipped him the bird as he took another huge gulp.

Zoro waited, but when Sanji didn’t speak again, he asked, “Which part?”

“What?”

“Which crippled part?”

Another scathing look.

“…I thought everything was healing.”
“…My eye.”

Ah.

Sanji tipped his glass back up to his lips. “I hate the eye patch. Huge fucking reminder.”

Zoro grunted, taking a swig of his own drink. “Just take it off. It won’t make you any less of a pretty boy.”

Sanji slammed his glass down on the table and Zoro grumped, hand automatically on Shusui but Sanji just reached for the bottle and topped his glass off roughly, sloshing the liquid everywhere.

“It’s my eye and it’s not going to get better!” Sanji snapped. “It’s not like I broke a nail that will just grow back in a week and I can glue a fake one on until then! It’s my fucking eye!”

Sanji stopped and the silence filled the room again, everything motionless until Zoro poured himself another shot and downed it. Every nerve in his body was screaming for him not to—that his fingers were too important for holding his swords—but he set his glass down on the table anyways and reached slowly across the table to where Sanji was hunched over in his chair, cradling his wine.

His fingers touched the end of the bandage where the tape held it together and he paused, giving Sanji plenty of time to turn away or yell or kick him or something, but the cook did nothing but stare straight ahead with his one good eye, intently watching something on the opposite wall, far, far away from Zoro’s hand, and Zoro pulled back on the tape. It came off quickly, like the bandage hadn’t been changed in days and the tape had grown dirty and lost its adhesiveness. The cloth fell in a pile on the table as Zoro unwound it silently, sometimes using both hands to move Sanji’s hair out of the way so he could make sure he wasn’t touching Sanji’s eye.

And then the bandage was off and he set it off to the side, sitting back in his chair. Sanji took a deep breath, looking away uncomfortably before he finally turned to meet Zoro’s gaze. His good, iridescent blue eye stared strongly straight ahead, but the lid of his other eye was closed slightly, open just enough to reveal the murky white film that covered his iris and turned the vibrant blue a sky blue that was almost mundane next to the other.

“It doesn’t fuck with your depth perception,” Zoro spoke up, “—that I’ve seen. And you haven’t had
any other problems, so if your other eye hasn’t gotten stronger to deal with it, then they were damn strong in the first place and you never needed two. You can still see, so it doesn’t matter.”

Sanji didn’t answer, but didn’t look away either, still meeting Zoro’s gaze just as strongly as before. Finally he set his glass on the table and reached up, combing his long bangs over the eye until it was barely visible through the blond fringe.

“…Chopper will be happy,” he muttered, picking up his glass again. “He was always spouting this shit about how my eye might stay permanently blind if I didn’t let it get used to light. If it even can heal. Law hasn’t seen any change, but Chopper insists on telling me as often as he can that it still might someday.”

Zoro nodded. “That’s Chopper.”

“…How long have you known Robin?”

Zoro shrugged. “Years. I met her through Luffy.”

“You seem close.”

“We used to fuck, but it was really just stress relief—she was the one that initiated it!” he barked, cutting off Sanji’s tirade at the first signs of fire in the cook’s eyes. Sanji finally settled back into his chair, but for a while there it looked like he was going to launch himself at Zoro to defend Robin’s honor.

“You have a weird family.”

“…Yeah.”

“…Can I see the scar again?”

Now that had to have been the alcohol. But something in Zoro didn’t want to break the trance—the fairy circle that got Sanji to relax and talk when it was just the two of them. It still felt delicate, and he really didn’t mind, so he pushed away from the table and pulled back his shirt, revealing the gnarled
skin where marks from haphazard stitches just trying to keep him alive had been yanked through his skin, permanently marring it. Law had been angrier about the fact that another doctor had done such a useless job before he could get there than he had been at Zoro for nearly getting himself killed. He had been explicit about no one touching Zoro, and the ER doctor had decided that Zoro was losing too much blood. The other doctor nearly pissing himself in fear from Law’s reaction was the only thing that had made Zoro laugh in days.

Sanji’s eyes traced the mark, counting the stitches and leaning closer and closer on the table with every second. The fact that Zoro barely noticed or cared was also the fault of the alcohol.

Sanji’s fingers drifted up suddenly, and he was an inch away from touching it before he realized what he was doing and his eye popped open. Zoro couldn’t help but notice from this close distance that Sanji’s bad eye didn’t move at all in time with the other. Even through the curtain of hair he could see how motionless the lid was.

Sanji pulled back and grabbed his glass, muttering, “Sorry.”

Zoro mumbled something about it being ok, but he wasn’t sure exactly what he said and just pulled his shirt back down. The spot Sanji was about to touch felt numb.

-oOo-

Franky stayed in Robin’s room the entire week. And every morning she and Nami twittered together under their breaths, giggling when Franky walked into the kitchen looking refreshed and like a new man. The funniest part though was Sanji, who spent the whole morning twisting at the girls’ every word while simultaneously shooting daggers at Franky. It was still kind of annoying though after Zoro’s routine of working out and relaxing with Sanji and a cup of tea.

Robin helped Shanks with the coding and the security of the city, pouring everything she had learned into the safety of her friends and family at home, joking that she had to have a place to return to someday after she was done. It was no help to her if it’d been burned to the ground because the government had hacked their files. And somehow she still found time to shop with Nami, play with the three nut jobs, visit everyone she hadn’t seen for a year, and have so much sex with Franky that Law started calling them newlyweds (mostly to irk Sanji, which it did. Law had a sick sense of humor).

By the end of the week, neither Franky nor Robin were ever seen more than three feet from each other. It was like they’d been friends, or more than that for years. It was such a normal thing to see them walk into the kitchen together in the morning, both damp from a shared shower, that even
Usopp lost the desire to tease them about it. Chopper, as usual, had yet to catch on, commenting on how it was so cool that their body clocks seemed to function on the same schedule for whatever reason. Robin just smiled at that and Franky passed him by for the food.

At one point when Zoro found himself near Robin without Franky around, he’d taken the time to ask her how they’d gotten so close so fast, especially with her track record of taking years to get close to people. She’d given him a flat look and started to walk away but he’d grabbed her arm, snapping that she also had a track record of doing things like this to get something that she wanted. She at least had the courtesy to look embarrassed after that. Damned if he was going to let her use Franky. Good friend or not, she had some quirks. He might never forgive her for her first duplicity, and she was smart and aware of that.

The first time Zoro had ever seen her put herself in relationships for personal gain, she’d attempted to get close to Luffy, who was painfully oblivious and missed every one of her advances, whereupon she’d tried Ace. At the time, she was new to their area and still tied slightly to the espionage group her mother had been part of. Robin thought Shanks had something they needed and that his sons were the best way to get to him. What she hadn’t counted on was Luffy’s childlike personality or the fact that Ace would figure out what she was doing the second she showed interest in him. She also didn’t count on his sense of humor and the fact that he would play her until she was really in deep and he could call her out with hard evidence. What Ace hadn’t counted on was Shanks helping her, or the fact that Robin would leave her mother’s group after he offered her a way out and safety from the group. It had taken years for Ace and Robin to really warm up to each other after everything was out in the open—Luffy loved her right away with her uncanny ability for impressions—but when they finally did get close, there wasn’t anything they wouldn’t go to the other for. But Zoro hadn’t trusted her for a long time either. He already had very little family left, and no one was going to take what was left from him. Robin would have been very able to if she’d wanted. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Robin, but he was open to possibilities, and she had a track record.

Robin pulled him out of earshot of the rest of the group and leveled him with a stare that held him fast, which he quickly realized was from how uncomfortable she was but it was still cementing him to the ground. Her voice was honest though, so he let her talk.

“…Franky…” she stopped, sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, annoyed that she was being forced to talk about this. “…Franky called me on it. Before he came back to my room the first night.” That made her chuckle and she crossed her arms tightly, hip tilted slightly to the side in irritation. “A real gentleman. Wouldn’t do anything with me before we talked.”

“…About what?”

She blew out a short rush of air. “…How I… drift, apparently, around the room. Listening and not really talking or participating. He thought the same thing, that I was here for an ulterior motive that could be harmful to everyone.”
So that’s it. Franky had unknowingly hit upon her weak spot. Robin’s origins were swathed in darkness; everyone’s motives and actions clandestine and no one ever really able to trust a friend or family member as they all (hopefully) worked for a shared end goal. Aside from time and observation, the only thing that kick started Robin’s trust was people calling her on her secrets and being real with her, telling her honestly and forwardly that secrets like that weren’t welcome. Luffy had been the first one to accidentally stumble across it and Robin had yet to do anything against Luffy’s will. Zoro had been painfully blunt that he didn’t trust her, and all of a sudden it was her that was trying to convince him that she was a safe friend and ally to have around.

“What did you say?”

Robin snorted, a very un-Robin gesture and it made him blink.

“…I told him how we met, actually. What I was after initially with Shanks, how he trusted me for some unknown reason, and how I stayed.”

Zoro nodded, glad that he wasn’t going to have to try and convince her out of whatever she was manipulating Franky for. “You’re happy then?”

Robin was still, looking out over the group of people with her arms still tightly crossed, and then she relaxed, turning back to give him a light smile.

“I am. And I’m going to enjoy it while I can.”

“…What do you mean?”

There was the uncomfortable air again, and the relaxation in her form was replaced with a tight air that made him shift.

“…I didn’t come here because of work. I came home because I thought someone was following me. I contacted Shanks and asked him to send me someone to watch my back and maybe protect me if need be, but he thought I should come back. He assured me the city would be able to throw them off for at least a couple days so I could find some way to fix the situation—give me time without someone breathing down my neck to find options. And he was right; the city is so locked down that whoever was after me has yet to find a way in without being seen. I haven’t noticed anything strange in days.”
“…Who do you think?”

“…I’m not even entirely sure I’m being followed to be honest. But I have a hunch bad enough to worry me and I’d rather be safe, especially with my line of work. I’ve done some research and found an organization that can hide me. I’m going to meet with them tomorrow.”

“…You can’t stay longer? What about my apartment? No one will guess you’re there with everyone else here.”

Robin shook her head, reaching out to lay her hand on his arm. “I just wanted to let you know, just in case I disappear for a while.”

“And you can’t tell me where you’re going or the organization?”

She cocked her head to the side, giving him a mocking look. “That would defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it?”

-oOo-
Zoro sat perched on the table of the exam room in the arena’s hospital, back from the latest fight. The drive back had been five hours because Luffy was literally incapable of sitting on a plane quietly enough not to disturb other passengers and Shanks had yet to get his own plane, which meant that Zoro could only take so many feet accidently rammed up his nose before he lashed out. So he’d decked Luffy and ripped his stitches open in the process. It had been worth it.

Law was cutting the remainder of Chopper’s stitches from his bloodied skin, pulling the pieces of thread out with a pair of tweezers and leaving them in a bowl next to him on the table. Law was quiet, but he usually was when he worked and neither of them felt the need to talk if it was just to fill empty space. Kid and Killer were the blubberers of the family, always spewing crazy shit even when the quiet would be nice. So when Law did speak up, Zoro couldn’t help but be a little confused.

“Who has Sanji?”

Zoro shrugged. “Shanks said I don’t have to watch him every second anymore. Thinks five weeks is enough time to prove Sanji doesn’t have any other reasons for being here. He’s had no contact with the outside and hasn’t made any attempts either. The priss was way too concerned with matching his pants and his socks to talk to anyone when we went out.”

“…Well, he was pretty injured when he came in.”

Zoro twinged as Law poked the lesion and watched Zoro’s reaction, testing how much anesthesia he’d have to administer.

Zoro shot him a look. “Yes, it hurts.”

“Well you shouldn’t have pulled your stitches out. I’m not going to waste lidocaine on you because you can’t remember to punch with your uninjured arm.”
“…Kid said you guys have been enjoying the apartment to yourselves.”

Law didn’t answer or meet Zoro’s eyes, leaning around him to grab a packaged alcohol swab and peel open the package, wiping first his gloves and then Zoro’s injury again. He sighed when Zoro didn’t speak again, giving in to Zoro’s unasked question.

“…It’s odd.”

Zoro waited, watching as Law pulled the cap off the syringe and flicked it lightly to get the bubbles out.

“…I guess we—well, I got used to having you two around the house. Eustass seems fine, the impassive ape.”

Zoro smirked despite himself and ducked his head to hide it. His eyes flicked back up though as the tip of the needle found his skin, and he watched it slip in, too small an area for him to feel after what he was used to receiving from fights.

“Gives me shit for calling Killer to make sure he’s still alive. He acts like the second Killer hits double digits, everyone that previously would have made off with him if they had the chance suddenly lost interest.” Law picked up the needle, already threaded, and tested the knot once more. He jabbed Zoro’s skin a couple times, watching for another flinch, but when Zoro didn’t move he started stitching. Zoro followed Law’s fingers with his eyes, watching them pass back and forth methodically with the needle, and then the doctor stopped mid-suture and reached up, pulling lightly on the bandana with yellow embroidery thread tied securely around Zoro’s arm.

“You still carry this thing around? It must be a biohazard by now.”

“…I got used to fighting with it.”

“At least tell me you remember to wash it.”

“…Sometimes.”
“Zoro.”

“I forget, alright? I got used to having it there and it feels weird when I take it off.”

Law didn’t answer and just went back to his stitching, the low heels of his boots clicking against the tile floor as he shifted.

Zoro’s lips pinched together as he followed the slight crease in Law’s brow, the one he always got when he and Zoro talked “family.” Zoro had trust and family issues, but the older he got the more he could see how fucked up Law was on the same things, and all those times Law had been touchy when Zoro had pushed them away made so much more sense.

And somehow it didn’t help lessen Zoro’s guilt at all about taking their childhood from them—he and Killer forcing their way into the lives of two teenagers—one of them studying to be a surgeon—and throwing down roots before either of them could say no.

Every once and a while, he and Law would talk. Really talk. But it never got easier. There was something different about talking to Law as opposed to Kid. Kid never seemed disappointed in him or Killer, and he was always knocking Zoro around as a kid and showing some sort of affection in his physical way. Law was different. The way he showed he cared was like how a shy child would show that they had a crush, namely by avoiding the subject all together. But when he and Law talked, sometimes it would be years before those creeping doubts rose up again in the back of Zoro’s mind. And right now he really needed to talk to Law.

“…Kid cut it out of one of your sweatshirts.”

“I know.”

“…The night our building came down.”

“I know.” Law’s voice was infuriatingly calm.

“………I thought it was going to be the last thing I had of you.”
Law’s sewing hiccupped for a second, but picked up again so quickly it was like he’d never stopped.

“…Did you ever regret taking us in?”

Law dropped his hands to his side abruptly in annoyance, yanking on the thread in what Zoro was sure would have been a very painful manner were it not for the drugs. He couldn’t bring himself to look up to where he knew Law was glaring at him.

“How many goddamn times have we had this conversation?” the surgeon snapped. Zoro choked a little on his thoughts before answering.

“…I just… moved in. First it was once a while, then once a week, then all of a sudden it was every day. You and Kid could barely pay for the apartment with college, let alone more food for me—”

“You didn’t just move in,” Law said curtly as he resumed his sewing, much rougher now but still just as precise. Zoro thanked the sky quietly that Law had given him a painkiller at all. “It was months of staying with us on just Thursdays before it started being more frequent. And then we freaked Mihawk out by bringing Killer home and you couldn’t stay for months.”

“I was such… a brat. I was just throwing tantrums—”

“You’d lost what made you feel normal and happy and you were panicking because nine year olds don’t know how to adjust to situations they don’t want to be in. Jesus, we had no clue why you wouldn’t want to live with Mihawk, he was a perfect parent.” The sarcasm was practically dripping off of Law’s voice.

“…But you never got a choice, with Killer or me—”

“Killer was our choice. He would have been an easy one to skip. One more day and he would have been dead in that facility. And you were our choice too. We had to fight to get Mihawk to let you come live with us. I can’t tell you how often I came home to Eustass on the phone with someone who was offering to take you in just to get you out of the bastard’s house, screaming so loud that he’d woken Killer up, yelling that if you were going anywhere, it was back to our apartment. People stopped calling pretty quickly. Except Shanks, he never stopped offering, and towards the end we considered saying yes, but it took us months of arguing with Mihawk to get there.”
Zoro didn’t answer, his brain automatically counting the stitches Law had already put in place as he tried to fill the awkward silence.

Law sighed heavily, pausing again in his stitching in resignation before he continued. “…Do you remember the first night you stayed over?”

Zoro’s lips pinched tighter and Law paused as the tendons in his arm rippled as his muscles tightened, throwing off where he could do the sutures. Of course he remembered. He was up all night bawling his eyes out as his head split in two from the headache ripping through his brain, unable to sleep with Kuina’s funeral still only hours old in his mind. Law had stayed up with him the entire night, just holding him. Of course he fucking remembered—

Law shook his head, slapping Zoro’s arm to get him to loosen up.

“Not that one. You stayed with us two times before that.”

He took Zoro’s dumb silence as an ok to continue.

“The first time you stayed over, you were six. Mihawk had business, the nanny you usually had was busy, and no one else could take you that night. I was studying for finals and Eustass was working on a car that’d been commissioned, but Mihawk knows I have a weak spot for orphans, so the manipulative asshole brought you along when he asked us. We knew he had his brother’s kid, but we’d never had the chance to meet you. Mihawk just showed up at our door that night. No phone call or anything, asking if we could take you that night and he would get you in the morning for school. You’d only been living with him a little over a year at that point and he’d given you no reason to warm up to him, and I was going to say no because of my final but you looked so pathetic standing next to him. You had this permanent scowl that made it too easy to tell how shitty your first family had been, and then you got Hawk-eyes to top it off. He was making you carry your own bag, and it was too big so you kept tripping, but it had nothing in it except a toothbrush and a new pair of socks and underwear for the next day. You were trying to keep away from him but also knew that he was your safe point, so you were trying to find a good middle ground while hiding behind his leg to keep away from me. I just remember thinking that if we didn’t take you Mihawk was going to leave you alone in the house. You’d be asleep, so what was the difference? So I said yes.”

Law knotted the end of the stitches and clipped the thread, but took a seat in the chair next to the table instead of heading for the door so Zoro stayed seated and waited.

Law chuckled under his breath, remembering the night. “I was eighteen and Eustass was sixteen and we had no money and fulltime jobs and school and we’d barely been able to convince the landlady
to rent to us at all because we were so young and all of a sudden we had a kid with us. And you had nothing to do for the night because Mihawk didn’t bring anything along and we didn’t have much beyond beer and cereal in the kitchen, so Eustass and I got creative. Eustass took you down to the garage and let you climb all over the cars while I borrowed noodles from the neighbors and threw some cheese in it. Then when you got back I bandaged the cuts you’d gotten—which were a lot because Eustass doesn’t care if kids get hurt and you were tough—while Eustass found the extra sheets we had buried in the closet for the couch. The notes I hadn’t consolidated were still out on the table, so we made a game out of throwing the noodles on them and trying to hit certain words. When Eustass accidentally hit me with a noodle I threw my fork at him and he ducked and accidentally cracked his head on the table. That was the first time we’d gotten you to smile all night.”

Zoro cracked a smirk again, still unable to look up and meet Law’s eyes. Hearing the older man say all of this made him feel like a kid again, especially sitting up on the stupid table. He didn’t remember any of it; he must have been to young.

“The neighbor that gave me the noodles lent me some of her daughter’s picture books when I told her that my little cousin was having an impromptu visit, so when it was time for bed we tried to read them. At first you were confused at what we were doing because no one had ever read to you like that, and then when I explained it you got all offended and said that picture books were for babies.” Law laughed, pushing his hat up on his head to twist his bangs. “So I told you that we’d try one and if you didn’t like it we wouldn’t read anymore, and we ended up reading for two hours past when—you thought—you were supposed to sleep. Mihawk never told us what time he put you down so I just guessed. I had to go back to the neighbor and keep getting more books.”

There hadn’t been a bedtime. He didn’t remember much about living with Mihawk, but from what he did, there was no reinforcement, there just was. There was just structure and rules, and everything he needed he did for himself. Mihawk had made it clear from the moment he got custody of Zoro that it wasn’t that he didn’t want Zoro living with him, but he had chosen not to have kids for a reason and wasn’t about to become a father just because he’d been given one.

“After that we saw you all the time. When we picked Ace and Luffy up from school we’d sometimes get you, and then drive to Sabo’s school and get him if his mom wasn’t being a bitch that day. Eustass would take you all to the park if he didn’t have anything that afternoon before bringing you to Shanks’ place. Whenever Mihawk thought he could get laid at a function, he would bring you for the initial cuteness, but invariably you would be playing with us by the end of the evening, which was nice because it saved me from having to stop Eustass from barking at girls who hit on me. I don’t know if you remember, but I took you to all of your doctor appointments because I could make up believable things on the spot if Mihawk couldn’t pick up on them or forgot to tell me, otherwise you’d have been shipped off to a foster home for neglect. That went on for about a year and you got really comfortable with us, so the next time Mihawk was away and the nanny wasn’t free, we offered to take you before Mihawk had a chance to ask Shanks. Got registered with the school so we could pick you up and I switched one of my classes to keep from making you wait at the afterschool program. Eustass was putting the finishing touches on that car before the deadline and Mihawk was always late so I wanted to be on time. You came racing out of the school when the bell rang with the biggest grin on your face when you saw that I wasn’t late.” Law smiled to himself as he said this. “I
didn’t care at all when I had to switch that class to make time to pick you up every Thursday. And you didn’t stay over all the time at that point, but Mihawk didn’t care if we decided to pick you up from school and do something so we picked you up all the time. And he did pay us for things like gas and meals; he knew we were broke college students and we were a lot cheaper than real childcare.”

Law sighed, pulling his hat back down tighter over his eyes. “…I didn’t want a kid at that point in my life—god knows Eustass sure as hell didn’t, he wasn’t even legally an adult yet. And there were some days I did regret taking you in—if I missed something important at the hospital or Eustass had to put off what he was working on because we had a commitment to you. And for a while I told myself that it was because we didn’t want to let you down after your family and Mihawk, but you were so comfortable with us and Eustass took you in like it was always in the script that you’d come live with us at some point. You made the apartment so happy, even when I was drowning in schoolwork or fighting with Eustass, and you never had any qualms with anything. You were the easiest kid and sometimes I wonder if we would have adopted anyways if we hadn’t gotten you. Eustass would have taken some convincing; adoption is fucking expensive. You were free, win win.”

Zoro snorted, finally making some sort of noise, and it made Law look up at him from across the room with that impish smile.

“…I was so glad that day when Mihawk couldn’t make it to the funeral.”

Honestly, Zoro had been too, but it hadn’t made the day any easier.

“I don’t know how that would have affected you if you had to go home to that house, unable to cry because of Mihawk’s unspoken rules or whatever with no one to comfort you. Especially with your family issues and how long it took you to learn to trust people. I think Luffy was the fastest I’ve seen you get close to anyone. I was worried for a long time after Kuina died. …And then suddenly you had a baby brother and all we would have needed to make our home the perfect dream would have been a dog and a grill. So yes, I regretted taking you in, but would I have changed anything about the situation? No.” He stood, leaning back and stretching. “And now you’re both flying the nest. It comes with the territory. Eustass will just have to put up with me calling Killer at night.”

Zoro grinned, something suddenly occurring to him. “Does Kid get annoyed because it means he has to wait for sex?”

“You’d think he was fucking fifteen. Christ, we’re never on the phone for more than twenty minutes.”
“I’m really happy you took the bandage off!” Chopper squealed, holding Sanji’s bangs out of the way and flashing Sanji’s murky, unfocused eye with a flashlight. His pupil had no reaction, but Chopper was good with patients and didn’t once waver in his happy attitude. “This means that your retina and photoreceptors can adjust to incoming light and hopefully relearn to correctly send the signals to the brain.”

He didn’t mention that they were doing any healing, Zoro noted from the other side of the room where he was leaning up against the wall, arms folded in front of him. Sanji also didn’t ask, which meant that he’d noticed too and wasn’t expecting them to be better anyways.

“And your tibia looks great!” Chopper was like a kid in a candy store; it was actually pretty cute. “Any pain in your right ankle?”

Sanji shook his head, raising the cigarette in his fingers back to his lips. Zoro was surprised that Chopper was letting him smoke in here, but Chopper was usually trying to keep Sanji happy anyways.

“What about your ribs?” He poked a couple of places in Sanji’s side as he said this, but Sanji just shook his head again.

“And your shoulder?”

Again.

“Are you still having trouble fighting?”

Oh hell yeah he is. And it was a bitch; they had to keep cutting fights short when Sanji got hurt.

Sanji blew out a thin stream of smoke. “I feel tight.”

“Well, that’s to be expected. Your ligaments don’t heal by flexing, so they’re stiff for the time being until they’re healed, but then they’ll be flexible again. But other than that, no strange pains? Hurting
when you wake up or at the end of the day? Exhaustion beyond what you should be feeling? Energy enough to work in the kitchen as much as you do and not have to rest all the time?’”

Sanji nodded.

“This is wonderful!”

Zoro wouldn’t have been surprised at this point if Chopper started actually dancing. It was like he was winning big on a game show.

“All of your lacerations and burns are healed with extremely minimal scarring, your ligaments seem almost back to normal, and once your tibia is healed, you’ll be all set! You could even move out of the hospital if you want.”

That made Sanji perk up. His good eye popped open and Zoro could have sworn he saw the beginnings of a smile tugging at Sanji’s lips. Even the cigarette was forgotten in his fingers.

“Really? I’m ok enough to not stay in the hospital?”

Chopper nodded, fixing his hat on his head so it wouldn’t fall off when he leaned over to scribble something down in one of Sanji’s charts. Sanji was so elated that he didn’t even react to Chopper taking notes on his condition. Zoro smirked, chuckling to himself.

“I think you’re fine. If you don’t want to rush off, you could stay around so we could keep a little bit of a close eye on your, err, eye, and you’re not really fighting as well as you could be so discharging you completely would make me nervous with whoever kidnapped you in the first place still out there, but medically it’s your choice if you want to stay or not.”

Zoro felt something hiccup in his chest and his heart dropped into his stomach, eyes flicking over to Sanji as he watched the cook’s reaction. Sanji’s gaze had frozen as he took in Chopper’s information, cigarette letting off a thin stream of smoke halfway to Sanji’s open mouth. Chopper didn’t mean out of the hospital. He meant out of the city.

...*He can go...*
Sanji was ok to leave—more or less, but he was still fine. He could be gone by tonight.

He only had two weeks left to stay with them, but still… it felt like it had happened fast.

“I—” Sanji started quickly, and then stopped himself, planning out what he wanted to say and taking a deep drag before he continued. Chopper blinked up at him, a little confused at the frantic reaction.

“I don’t mind staying.” His voice was much more collected now. “I won’t know what to look for in my eye anyways. And I think you’re right, I wouldn’t be able to defend myself well enough if I left now.”

The clenching in Zoro’s chest released, and he let out an unconscious breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. What the hell was wrong with him?

“All right,” Chopper was beaming, not really ready to let Sanji go either. “I can talk to Shanks and get you set up in one of the apartments for the fight club. I know there are a couple free now, I just want to make sure they won’t be used for the next couple of weeks.”

Sanji’s drop was instantaneous. His smile fell and his head dropped, arm dropping back onto his lap where the cigarette lay next to his hip, and then he stuck it between his lips and starting puffing away heavily. The apartments for the fight club were right upstairs from the hospital rooms, and still very much so under Chopper and Law’s nose. Zoro’s eyes flicked back and forth between the two, watching Chopper try and figure out what had happened to Sanji’s good mood and fluttering his hands uselessly around Sanji as he spluttered. “Wh-What’s wrong?! What happened?!”

It… was almost like Sanji had never left the truck. Always being watched, always contained, always kept in certain rooms and never allowed outside on his own. It was like he’d made it from the research facility straight to the slave auction and now his last amount of freedom was being taken out from under him and he really had no option to say otherwise. What could he do? Change his mind and leave? He couldn’t find a place in the city on his own—

Oh. Uh… “He can stay at my place.”

Chopper turned to Zoro from where he’d been about to put his hands on Sanji’s shoulders and comfort him, eyes desperate. Sanji’s one good eye drifted up slowly and Zoro shrugged, turning away from the scrutiny and scowling.
"You know, only if he wants to. So he can get out of this damn building. I have enough space. And I'm gone all the time for fighting so... yeah."

Chopper whipped back to Sanji, obviously looking to see if it would cheer Sanji up again. And finally Sanji nodded, though he had yet to slow down the rate at which he was spewing smoke. Mentioning staying in the hospital had had put him in a funk.

"Sure."

"Really? Will that be good?" Chopper blubbered.

"Yeah, Chopper, don't worry about it."

"Ok, but you'll tell me if you need some place to yourself, right? I can always get you an apartment here—"

"Really, Chopper," Sanji managed a sad smile, looking up to meet Chopper's gaze and placing a hand on the top of his hat. "That's fine. I don't mind staying with the marimo-head if he doesn't mind having me."

Zoro grunted at the name. "Hey."

"Ok!" Chopper broke into another grin, taking out a pad of paper to scribble down some numbers. "I'm giving you the hospital phone, Shanks' hospital phone, Shanks' cell phone, his office phone, my cell phone, Law's cell phone, Kid's in case you can't get ahold of Law, Zoro's cell phone—"

Sanji finally grinned to himself, shaking his head as the little doctor rambled on. After a moment he looked back up to where Zoro was standing, a quiet moment passing between them as Zoro could see the thanks behind Sanji's eyes for giving him an out from the hospital.

It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing. And he really didn't use his apartment enough; it would basically be Sanji's anyways.

"Oh," Chopper stopped his rant, remembering something else. "And Shanks wanted me to tell you to
go see him after we’re done here. He wanted to talk to you about hiring you as the traveling chef for the upcoming fight. We were supposed to eat at this place out there, but they had a fire and are closed for renovations, and we can’t eat anywhere without reservations because they need to ship in extra food for Luffy’s appetite. So he wants us to bring food and rent a hotel room with a kitchen instead.”

Zoro could practically see Sanji’s eyes filling up with excitement.

“…Yeah, ok.”

“—And here’s the phone for Shanks’ right-hand men, I guess Robin’s number but you may not be able to get ahold of her—no one ever can—the agency Nami works through sometimes if she won’t pick up her phone, but she’s really good with that, Shanks’ chef if you need more supplies—”

-oOo-

Zoro grinned, twisting his feet to a comfortable position on the cement floor as his opponent jumped down into the arena. Ohm, Zoro was pretty sure was his name. Second to Enel, who’d challenged Shanks, and Shanks had sent Luffy in his stead. Enel had almost called off the fight, insulted that Shanks thought a kid was enough for him and Shanks hadn’t come himself to defend his honor, but Shanks had convinced him to just watch Zoro’s fight, and if he still wasn’t convinced that Luffy was strong enough to defend the city’s honor, they would postpone the fight and Shanks would come down himself. Zoro couldn’t help but laugh to himself when he heard this; Enel was getting off easy if Shanks wasn’t coming himself. He should be grateful.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the crew standing on the edge of the arena in front of the roaring crowd, opposite Enel’s crew on the other side of the railing surrounding the pit. Chopper had hopped up onto the top bar to cheer for Zoro between Luffy and Sanji, Luffy who was laughing happily and Sanji who was smoking calmly, waiting for the fight to start and sizing up both men in the arena. The cook’s sharp body was turned casually in on itself, his arms crossed and one leg crossed over the other. There was no tenseness in his shoulders, despite how out in the open he was, but he had insisted on a hat, which probably made him feel better. Zoro met Sanji’s iridescent blue eye and stuck his tongue out at the cook before turning back to Ohm, ignoring Sanji’s quick attempt at a rebuttal.

Zoro slid Shusui and Kitetsu from their sheaths and faced Ohm, grinning and waiting for the other man to move. He had yet to take the dark glasses off, which probably meant that he wasn’t going to. His skin was dark, and a deep purple tattoo roped up his arm where Zoro could see something on the tips of his shoulders where a design had been tattooed onto his back and stretched up over his neck. He was wearing baggy pants and a simple tank top with a sash around his waist where an odd sword with a large ball on the end was tucked. The sword was just as calm as it’s master, and Zoro’s own swords twittered happily in his hands in anticipation for the fight, making his grin stretch.
“Let’s get on with it,” he growled, unable to keep the adrenaline-filled shivers from running up and down his spine.

Ohm stared blankly at him, tranquil stance unaffected by the energy of the crowd, and reached up to push his glasses further up his nose. “Your desire to speed up the fight is unfortunate. Greed and your need to gain fortune is a weakness that will very soon be your undoing, especially in a power-driven world like this.”

Zoro gritted his teeth, stretching his toes in his boots.

Ohm pulled his sword from the sheath in his sash, pointing it towards Zoro. “I will free you tonight from such burdens.”

“Oh yeah?”

Ohm turned his sword to the side and grabbed the ball on the end of his sword, tugging gently until a strip of barbed wire started to unravel from inside the ball. Almost immediately, the crowd screamed with excitement of the blood to come. Ohm did this four more times until he had five long strips of barbed wire held loosely in one hand, his sword still in the other. “I will defeat you without ever touching you.”

Zoro growled, lunging forward for the cocky bastard, the blood rushing in his ear drowning out the cacophony of the audience around them. He slashed out with Kitetsu just as Ohm’s arm whipped up and a flash of rusty metal shot by his ear. Zoro tumbled to the right just barely out of reach of the wire Ohm had thrown, fighting to keep his eyes on his opponent as he turned. He rolled and leapt to his feet, something slicing through his shoulder the second he had his footing and he dropped back to the ground with a grunt, head snapping up to find a second wire Ohm had thrown. Both wires had been tangled in the bars of the railing around the pit, creating a cage over the part of the arena that he was standing on. Zoro gritted his teeth and turned back to Ohm, who was twirling a third wire in his hand, deciding where to place it.

Zoro waited, watching for the tenseness in Ohm’s muscles, and the second the cords on his arms popped, preparing to throw the wire, Zoro dove backwards, rolling to the other side of the arena and out of the way of the third wire, and he grunted as the fourth one shot past him and tore through his side, ripping through flesh as it shot with the force of a bullet. Zoro grunted, jumping away from the wire and pressing his back up against a wall of the arena, surveying what he had left to work with. The wires had created an obstacle course over much of the pit, making significantly less room where he could fight. He had to get in closer.
“You are not strong enough to defeat the shear will of a desire for freedom,” Ohm called, gripping the last wire tightly. “It is your destiny that I will free you. If you accept it, you will be much happier for the loss of material burdens.”

“Fucking Buddha,” Zoro snarled, sliding Wado out of her sheath and placed the woven hilt between his teeth. Dimly, he could hear the crowd screaming in approval, but it was lost in the calm that he’d forced through his mind. He leapt off of the ground and slammed his feet back into the wall, launching himself through the two wires blocking his escape as the fifth one smashed into the wall right where he’d been standing a moment ago and a chunk of the cement blew off in an explosion of dust.

Zoro rolled across the ground and pushed himself to his feet, charging through the wires toward Ohm.

*That was five, all he has left is his sword*—

Ohm swiped out suddenly, the flat end of his blade catching one of the wires above Zoro’s head and it snapped from it’s hold on the railing with a loud *twang*, whipping through the air like a snake and clawing its way deep into Zoro’s back. Zoro gasped, twisting out of its hold just as Ohm yanked it back toward him, just missing losing half of the skin on his back. Vaguely he heard someone scream his name, but the adrenaline in his ears was too loud.

…I have to use them.

And he had to make space. He couldn’t do anything this far away.

Zoro rolled over onto his side under one of the wires and slashed up just as Ohm was reaching out to catch the wire he’d yanked back towards him. The wire snapped back like the last one had, coiling through the air and Zoro ducked as it sliced through the ground around him and whipped back towards Ohm. The large man grunted and dove out of the way as the wire snapped into the ground where he’d been standing, taking out another chunk of cement where his feet had been not moments ago. The shards of cement flew up, barraging Ohm and making him stumble back.

Zoro lunged to his feet, leaping through the remaining wires and slashing out with Shusui and Kitetsu, steel ringing as they connected with Ohm’s sword. Both blades screamed with exhilaration at being so close to their pray, smelling the blood dripping from both men. There was a big drop on Ohm’s forehead that was about to drip into his eye, and Zoro watched it carefully out of the corner of
“You’re pretentious preaching is getting on my nerves,” Zoro growled, head whipping to the side and Ohm launched himself up and over Zoro’s head out of the way of the Wado. Zoro’s footing slipped as he turned to follow the movement, the blood he was losing starting to catch up with him and make his vision swim. Offhandedly, he wondered how deep the gash in his side was and if it’d hit any organs. Chopper would be mad. But even with the world starting to warp in front of him he could see that Ohm had landed right where the wires were lying like a pit of serpents woven together behind them.

Shit—!

Zoro whirled, shooting forward as Ohm grabbed two of the wires and launched them at Zoro’s head. Zoro grunted, twisting out of the way as much as he could, wincing as one ripped through his thigh and another knocked him slightly off balance when it caught his arm. He stumbled, foot slipping out from under him as Ohm wound back, raising his sword for another strike. Zoro wrenched his body to the side, forcing the wire deeper into his leg as he moved out of the way of the blade coming for his head, and his swords flashed forwards, bending the air around them, sweeping under Ohm’s feet and knocking him onto his back like a turtle, and Zoro brought Shusui down to rest on his throat, skidding to a halt and just barely keeping from losing his balance.

Ohm glared up at him, motionless, and then very slowly raised his hand to signal his defeat. Zoro nodded, respecting the decision, and slid his swords away, taking Wado out of his mouth last. He grunted in pain, a stabbing sensation running through his side and reached down, hand coming back with a lot of blood from the tear through his belly, and the arena twisted sideways as he fell.

Damn.

Zoro coughed, blood splattering his cheek as his sight and hearing started to come back to him, Chopper’s blurred outline zipping around him through the glaring white lights of the arena. The room was getting darker though, and he knew he was coming to, which must have meant that they were carrying him out of the pit. Almost instantly he grinned, though the movement hurt and made him hack up more blood. Chopper shrieked and quickly wiped it away, palpitating Zoro’s middle to find the source of the bleeding.

Zoro’s eyes drifted up to find Sanji standing above him, stance calm except for the slight telltale tenseness in his shoulders as he sucked on his cigarette. Zoro grinned again, picturing the last time Ohm had landed on his back and hadn’t gotten up. Egotistical asshole.
“Not bad, huh?” he gritted out. His voice sounded heavier than it should have been.

“Don’t talk!” Chopper barked. “Or I’ll sedate you! I think the blood you just coughed up came from your mouth, but I need to be sure it isn’t your lungs or stomach or any other organ, especially with that tear in your side! You need to be more careful!”

Sanji left the cigarette between his lips to stick his hands in his pockets and smirk down at Zoro. The tenseness hadn’t left his shoulders. “Idiot. I wouldn’t have taken nearly as much of a beating if I was the one fighting him.”

Zoro growled and would have swiped at him were it not for Chopper’s standing threat. He knew the doctor meant it and had the means right at his fingertips though, and forced a shit-eating grin back on his face. “Yeah? Why’re you so tense then, cook?”

Now it was Sanji’s turn to growl, and he took the cigarette out of his mouth to blow a stream of smoke in Zoro’s direction, making Zoro cough again. “Don’t flatter yourself, shitty-swordsman. And sit the fuck still so Chopper can fix you, if I miss Luffy’s fight because you’re a pussy I’ll be pissed. That Enel guy looked strong.”

Zoro’s brain was starting to twist what he was seeing again, and a funny weight was settling over his brain. Suddenly Sanji’s tenseness seemed a lot funnier than it had a moment ago.

...Must be the drugs.

“…You’re a really good cook.”

Sanji raised his eyebrow before grinning. “That sedative hitting you, marimo?”

Zoro nodded, a stupid smirk pulling at his face. “’S good stuff, whatever the ‘ell it ‘s.”

“You’re supposed to be asleep,” Chopper grumbled, cutting a couple strips of bandages and laying them out over Zoro’s chest so he could reach them easily for the laceration in his side. “Just hold still, or I’ll have to do another dose. Or a couple,” he added to himself under his breath.
Zoro nodded, settling back into the stretcher before turning again to look at Sanji, Chopper’s warning already forgotten. “Ser’ly though, Shanks’ cook was awful. And the guy Shanks had traveling was even worse… sucks going into a fight with shitty food in your stomach.”

Sanji barked out a laugh and crossed his feet to sit down near Zoro’s head. “You trying to butter me up, shithead? Think I’m going to be cooking for you at your apartment?”

Zoro shrugged. “I’d take whatever you’d serve. Even the stuff I don’ like is too good to turn down.”

“Really.”

“…I’m glad you decid’d t’ stay.”

“…Just sit still, marimo. Luffy’s fighting after they clean the blood up and you can’t come watch if you’re leaking like a popped water balloon.”

“I haven’t… really seen you fight yet. …You leave b’fore you’re healed an’ I’ll be pissed.”

Sanji snorted out another laugh, resting an elbow on his knee and leaning his head against his hand. “I want to try whatever Chopper gave you.”

Zoro slurred out a laugh, eyes pinching at the hilarity of the statement. Sanji was great.

“But you can stay at my apartm’nt for however long you want. Kill’r comes sometimes but i’s boring otherwise.”

“All right, marimo, I hear you, just sit still.”

“I am,” Zoro replied indignantly, fighting what he was sure was a pout starting to appear on his face. “Chopp’r hasn’t yelled or anything.”

“Don’t make me,” the little doctor growled, putting the last of the tape over the bandages on Zoro’s side. “No organs hit, thank goodness, but it’ll be a while before that heals.”
Zoro waved his hand flippantly. “I giv’ it four days.”

“STOP MOVING!”

Zoro dropped his hand to the ground, and was quiet for a while before he realized that Sanji had avoided his question. Or had it been a statement? “But you’re gonna stay until you’re healed?”

Sanji took a slow drag on his cigarette, trying to hide his smirk with the hand over his mouth. “Sure, marimo, whatever, I’ll stay.”

Zoro grinned to himself and leaned back into the stretcher, letting his eyes close. Just for a second. But just in case, “You better wake me when Luffy gets ready t’ fight. He’ll be upset if I miss it.”

“Yeah sure.”

Zoro furrowed his brow, a movement behind Sanji’s head catching his eye. His blurry eyes found a dark figure hovering above them a couple rows back in the crowd, completely still in the chaos of the screaming crowd, staring straight down at them. Zoro squinted, trying to see past the wide-brimmed hat obscuring the figure’s face. He wasn’t sure why that particular man had caught his attention, but he was unable to take his eyes off of him.

Something about the man screamed blackness, a dark, draining aura that closed him in like a cloud, keeping him away from everyone else around him.

“How…?” he slurred, trying to lean up and Sanji suddenly appeared in his line of vision, a hand on his shoulder to keep him down as he vaguely registered Chopper screaming for Sanji to hand him his medical bag so he could get another couple of sedatives out, not about to put up with Zoro fighting him with how much he was bleeding.

He felt a sharp prick in his arm, followed quickly by another, and was swept over almost instantly by the wave of cotton that threatened to smother his brain and felt his head drifting back down to the stretcher.

“How-n-no-o…” he tried, but it was impossible to speak anymore. His brain couldn’t remember that he
had once known words that others could understand him through, and he struggled pathetically against Sanji’s hold to lean around him to see if the man was still there. Sanji moved an inch to the side, and Zoro’s eyes narrowed as he watched the man take something from his pocket and tap it a couple times with one finger, and then he held it up to his ear, plugging his other ear with his free hand.

No… he’s there… he’s still there…! Can’t you see…?! Look…! He’s right there…!

“Stay down,” Sanji’s murmur broke through the noise, and then Sanji was the only thing Zoro could hear anymore as the sedative washed over him, static and waves of something that was keeping him from being able to concentrate making everything around him fuzzy and unfocused. “Everything’s fine.”

Something in the back of his mind urged him that it wasn’t fine, that his instincts had never steered him wrong, that he knew an ominous aura when he felt one, that he had to make Sanji listen!

...Listen to what?

He couldn’t remember what had been so pressing.

He thought it was… important…

“Everything’s fine, Zoro, just stay still.” Sanji sounded like he was on a ship three thousand leagues under the sea. Zoro was having trouble making out the words. “We’ll wake you for Luffy’s fight.”

…He supposed that was ok.

And with that acceptance, everything drifted into deep, inky black.

-oOo-

-T. S. Elliot
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

It had taken a couple of days for Zoro and Sanji to get used to living with each other, but once they had a system down, everything sort of straightened itself out. They’d found that if they had an argument over anything, from stupid things like which side of the room Zoro kept the bookshelf on to bigger things like where Zoro left his shoes around the house (God forbid he leave them in front of the door), the best way to settle the problem was for them to duke it out and then lay it to rest. Until Zoro left his shoes in front of the door again.

*What is he, the fucking wife of the house?* “Just step over them!”

“I can’t see them with my ONE EYE when I’m carrying groceries in, shitty marimo! I swear if I drop any food and waste it because of you, I’ll kill you!”

In the end, they always fought. It was a good thing Zoro didn’t keep much around his apartment.

Zoro had moved his bed out into the living-room-turned-dojo and set Sanji up in his old room so he didn’t have to tip toe around the cook when he wanted to train in the morning. Sanji was generally up by the time he was awake and ready to go, but for those odd times that Zoro couldn’t sleep or got woken up early, he didn’t want to wake the shit-cook up and mess up his concentration. Sanji was loud enough as it was without Zoro making him mad.

Sanji moving in also meant that his once bare apartment slowly but surely began taking in more strays from the outside. The once barren kitchen, really used only for Zoro to make tea and throw away his takeout containers and keep alcohol in the fridge, was now stocked like a restaurant kitchen. Pots and pans and woks and silverware of so many shapes and sizes, Zoro could never be sure how even half of them could ever be used or why in god’s name Sanji needed so many with so little variation. Sanji had bought beautiful knives and wooden cutting boards with intricate designs (except for the plastic one used for garlic and fruit); he’d filled the cabinets with glasses and plates and bowls and teacups and mugs; he’d crammed every spice imaginable into the pantry along with everything he could possibly need to garnish a meal; and every morning he made a fresh pot of coffee with the new French press for himself and a fresh pot of tea with the new kettle for Zoro. There were so many things in the kitchen now, Zoro would have been to intimidated to go in even if Sanji hadn’t made it explicitly clear that the kitchen was his territory and if Zoro broke anything, he’d have Sanji’s foot up his ass before he could take in a breath to apologize.
Like he’d apologize. It was his damn kitchen!

The shopping for the kitchen had taken days, and Zoro had only agreed because Sanji had offered him meals and fights in exchange for the time. Yesterday they went for furniture, though Zoro still couldn’t figure out why the cook wanted more things in the apartment that would get in the way of their fights and invariably break. And Sanji had stupidly expensive taste too.

Zoro had never felt the need for furniture. He was never in the apartment enough, always on the road for fights or practically living in Shanks’ fight club. Occasionally he’d stay at Law and Kid’s place when Killer had an insecure moment and needed his family. And he didn’t like lounging around in prissy-looking chairs with flowers out on the table anyways. He had a kitchen, a dojo, and a bedroom, and that was really all he needed. But Sanji was a girl, so he had needs, which meant the apartment had needs and Zoro wouldn’t be happy if those needs weren’t met. Zoro had actually suggested furniture first after Sanji made fun of him the first time he’d walked into the apartment from how little he had in it, but the cook had been unable to wait for the kitchen to be filled, so they did that first.

The only reason Zoro put up with it at all was Sanji’s stupid happy face. It gave him stupid little flutters in his chest and made his stupid brain decide that Sanji’s expression outweighed the annoyance of shopping.

Living with Sanji gave Zoro the chance to see the blond in every type of scenario, and in everything Sanji did and every day that passed, Zoro couldn’t help but notice how much easier Sanji walked, and how much easier he kicked Zoro if he was annoyed. Sanji was healing fast, exactly on time with Law’s diagnosis.

Sanji only had one week left in the two months, and after that, there would be no more excuses for him to stay.

Every time Zoro remembered that, the tightness in his chest returned and everything irritated him to no end. Generally he would piss Sanji off with his attitude and they would fight, which calmed both of them down and gave them another excuse to go shopping to replace whatever broke, but there was always the nagging reminder that if Sanji could fight normally, than he could leave, and the tightness in Zoro’s chest never fully went away.

But god could Sanji fight. He was like a weapon, whipping through the air, leaching power and strength and Zoro fought Sanji like it was his fix in life and he could never have enough. The blond never seemed to care though, which never helped the delicate items in the apartment.
Sanji was a pain in the ass, but Zoro really couldn’t find any reason to regret inviting him in. Even if everything the cook did pissed him off, the food was great, the fights were amazing, and Zoro could indulge himself in watching the way Sanji’s incredible body moved and dream of the day when he would be strong enough to really fight.

Recently, Killer had been over more and more for meals, even when Sanji wasn’t making anything with blood (for Killer at least, Sanji needed more blood than he did). Killer seemed more fascinated with Sanji than anyone else—which wasn’t a surprise, considering that Sanji was the first vampire Killer had ever met—and spent every moment he could with Sanji. Zoro was just kind of glad that Killer hadn’t asked to stay the night yet; the apartment was really running low on space and he was pretty sure Law would be jealous if he heard. They could put a sleeping bag on the floor in Sanji’s room though, Killer would definitely like that.

Zoro stepped out of the bathroom, steam rushing out into the living room as he draped a towel around his shoulders. The space where he could work out was slowly growing smaller and smaller as they added more and more things. The most recent additions were a coffee table and a couch, where Sanji was currently sitting with his legs crossed casually, reading a book through the stupidest pair of glasses Zoro had ever seen.

“You think that’s how oompa loompas see the world?”

Sanji shot Zoro a withering glare and pushed the orange glasses farther up on his nose, turning back to his book. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand, marimo, so don’t try. We’re not living in a hospital anymore, if you fry the last of your brain cells, we won’t reach a doctor in time to do anything. Though I suppose you’ll be fine as long as you can swing your swords around like an ape. Don’t need much brain to do that.”

“You think that color will fuck up your retina? You only have one good eye left, you’d better be careful with it.”

Sanji grinned up at him with a wicked smile, beckoning Zoro closer with one finger. “Come here, I want to show you something.”

Zoro’s own grin split his face, recognizing the shift in Sanji’s hips so he could kick easier. Sanji had been progressively more and more ok to joke about his injuries; whether that was an effect of leaving the hospital or that he was just coming to terms with it, Zoro couldn’t complain. “What is it?” he taunted, inching closer. “You can’t see me from there? That’s not good, cook.”
“Closer, come on,” Sanji called, his voice sweet and innocent, and when Zoro was in range his foot swept out playfully. Zoro danced out of the way of the kick and took a slow swipe at Sanji, letting the cook duck out of the way as he walked past him into the kitchen.

“Don’t snack,” Sanji called from the other room. Zoro could hear him getting settled again with his book. “I’m starting dinner after I finish this chapter.”

_I wouldn’t know what to do even if I wanted to,_ Zoro thought idly as he looked around the kitchen, taking in the odd assortment of tools, many of which he didn’t even know what they did. He filled the kettle with water and placed it on the stove, turning on the burner and leaning against the counter while he waited for it to boil. His eyes continued to trace the kitchen, and the more he looked, the more decorative and homey things he found tucked into small corners of the room. A couple of shells on the windowsill, a small vase of flowers in the middle of the table, a butterfly Sanji had found outside laid out above the stove. It was all superfluous, but whatever. He didn’t mind and Sanji seemed to like the additions.

And his stupid brain had decided that that was what mattered.

-oOo-

Sanji was… something. Even lying tousled on the couch with his book draped across his lap, hair brushed off to the side, a light snore reverberating up from his chest, he was a sight to behold, and that was putting it lightly.

And Zoro was staring, and totally fine with it.

Sanji was something.

And in one week he was going to lose that something.

The tightness was back in his chest, and Zoro felt the odd desire to cross the room and join Sanji on the couch, but with the way the cook’s legs were stretched out he’d have to either sit on Sanji or move the cook on top of him slightly—which he didn’t mind—but Sanji would have a cow when he woke up if Zoro didn’t wake him in the process and take a foot to the face.

He toyed with the idea of moving Sanji to the bed—mostly just to entertain his fantasies instead of
the actual idea—but that would disturb the trance and Sanji would undoubtedly wake up and flip to find himself in Zoro’s arms.

The idea of him carrying Sanji around had stupid imagery of Sanji naked and in his arms dancing through his head in seconds, Sanji’s powerful legs held tightly in Zoro’s arms, their opposing skin tones pressed so close together they looked like a single form with serious tan lines—

Zoro growled in disgust at his lack of willpower and crossed the room to the bathroom. He went to close the door, and on second thought slammed it roughly behind him, listening for the sound of Sanji jolting awake. Not a minute later, soft feet padded across the floor and the door to the bedroom shut. Zoro let out a heavy breath, leaning his head against the door.

Better to have the temptation removed.

…God damnit.

One more week and there wouldn’t be a problem. Sanji would be gone, and the blond sprite making his brain swim like a fifteen-year-old’s hormone-pickled mind would be gone. Sanji would disappear into the underground with no way of contacting him if he wanted to stay safe and hidden from the government. And considering the fact that Sanji had successfully hidden seven weeks from whoever and wherever he came from, Sanji was good at staying under the radar. When he was gone, he was gone.

God fucking damnit.

-oOo-

“What are you going to do when you get back?”

Sanji shrugged. “I guess I have to apologize to everyone for playing dead.”

“Will they be mad?”

“Probably, but they’ll understand, especially after they learn what happened. I just fucking hate
hiding out, I feel so pathetic. Back at home I could work at least and I was useful.”

“You work here.”

“Feeding you bottomless pits isn’t work, it’s my passion. I could do shit back home that seriously helped people and feed them along the way.”

Zoro considered asking or not. Most likely Sanji wouldn’t tell him, but every once and a while… “…What work?”

Sanji sighed, hands dropping slightly and the spoon in the bowl of batter slumped. Zoro’s lips pinched together, annoyed that he’d cut off that conversation so quickly, but instead of going silent, Sanji suddenly straightened up again.

“…Espionage, I guess. We worked really behind the scenes, even for the underground, helping people that were in trouble. Makes hiding now easy because I get the territory.”

Espionage? “Like what Robin does?”

Sanji shook his head, pouring the sticky mess out into a pan he’d greased prior. “More closely related to people. Pass me that spatula, will you?”

“…You don’t have to leave, you know. …We can protect you. We’ve had Killer for years—”

Sanji snorted loudly, chopping Zoro’s train of thought in half. “The government will swoop in with papers and guns and level the city if I don’t come quietly, and maybe then even if I do. They’ll do a full sweep because I’ve been missing for so long, and for all they know I could have been here since I was eleven, probably find Killer, and kill everyone else here for good measure. This city is already on bad terms with the government, don’t push it any further.”

Sanji was quiet after that, spreading the batter evenly through the pan with the spatula, and then he let out a slow breath, smoke decorating the air in front of him. “I got used to hiding out at home, I’ll get used to it here. …This is better than any facility. I’ll die before I go back.”
And with that the conversation had been over.

God knows why that was playing over again in Zoro’s mind. He was so tired he was amazed he had any brain functions at all left, especially hiking up these damn stairs to his apartment. Goddamn broken elevator. Goddamn Luffy keeping him awake. Goddamn Usopp teaching Luffy those stupid songs.

Sanji never talked about staying, so Zoro took that as he didn’t want to. And for the first day or two after this horrible realization, Zoro had felt the icy fingers of desperation clawing at his chest, begging him to do something rash and convince Sanji to stay—go all eighties cheesy romance movie on him with a boom box or a dance move or whatever was necessary just so long as he stayed please god. And then the ice had melted, time settling in, and Zoro had begun to accept the fact that Sanji would be leaving. He distanced himself from the blond whenever he could, working down at the shop with Kid, visiting Chopper and Law at the hospital, sparring with Luffy in practice for their upcoming tournament, anything as long as it got his mind used to the idea that his blond barnacle soon would be totally gone from his life. He had the willpower to quit Sanji slowly, so there was no point in going cold turkey and making it as painful as possible.

Still, the thought brought the now-familiar tightness back up into his chest as he rooted around in his pockets for his keys and he found himself planning out the quickest route to move through the apartment and get to his bed. Sanji might have already been asleep, though the thought was hopeful. It wasn’t much later than nine—no wait, that was when the fight started last night… then they’d driven home… what day was it anyways? Goddamn Usopp. Goddamn Luffy. He may well have been up for over twenty-four hours at this point.

The door swung open suddenly in front of him and Zoro jerked his hand back, keys stuck in the lock and flying away from him. Wide eyes found Sanji standing in the doorway, shoes and coat on and a gleam in his already iridescent eye like he’d been waiting to surprise Zoro on his birthday.

Was it his birthday?

No, Chopper and Luffy and everyone else would have been singing. He would have heard Brook and Franky’s songs and Nami screaming at Luffy as he snuck pieces of cake from the fridge all the way from the front of the building when he first walked in—

God he was tired.

“Come on!” Sanji grinned, pushing Zoro roughly out of the way as he stepped out of the apartment and locked the door, skipping down the stairs when he was done. Zoro looked at the lock on the
door, hoping to find his keys still there and offering him an escape to his bed.

“Come on!” Sanji repeated, stronger now but just as excited.

“Cooooook.” He ignored the obvious whine in his voice, telling himself that it was from exhaustion. “I just want to sleep! We were up all night for the fight and I couldn’t sleep at all on the way home with Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper screaming ninety-nine bottles of beer at the top of their lungs the entire way back.” Even Nami hadn’t been able to stop them, and Brook and Franky found it too funny to bother.

“Hear me out!” Sanji was apparently not offering hearing him out as an option, but as the option, and bounded back up the stairs to grab Zoro’s wrist and pull him stumbling back down the stairs. Zoro felt the irritation rise in the back of his throat, bed calling desperately for him from the closed apartment.

“Why didn’t you tell me before I got all the way up the damn stairs?”

“I said to text when you were coming back.”

“What am I, your husband?”

“Oh shut up, you're the one that's doing extra walking.”

“Sanjiiii.”

“Come on! It’s so awesome.”

Zoro was pretty sure he wouldn’t have been able to wipe the stupid smile off Sanji’s face even if he tripped the damn cook the rest of the way down the stairs. And his stupid brain was cutting in again, reminding him how nice it was to have Sanji’s electrifying touch on his wrist—Sanji was touching his skin holding his hand touching him holding him touching—even if the cook was dragging him down several flights of stairs to god only knew what.

_God damnit._
Sanji pulled him out through the front door, only letting go when they were completely outside and Zoro was at his side so he was sure the swordsman wouldn’t wander off. Zoro jammed his hands in his pockets after that, all incentive to keep walking lost, and grumbled quietly to himself, slowing down his pace as much as possible. Sanji, to his credit, didn’t lose the spring in his step, even though they were taking twice as long to get wherever the hell they were going now.

They went up two blocks and crossed the street to go down another, Sanji making sure that Zoro was with him at all times and hadn’t turned around or gotten lost or fallen asleep mid-step.

“Recognize where we are yet?”

“No” was ready at the back of Zoro’s tongue with a nice snarl to go along with it, but as he looked around, he realized that he did recognize this place. Wherever it was. He had no clue how to get back to his apartment now.

“…How far are we from the arena?”

“Just a block or so, it’s right on the way to town, we came down this street when we went clothes shopping a couple weeks ago.”

“…Oh yeah.”

Zoro was so busy looking at the buildings around him, trying to fix some to memory just in case he needed to find his way back here that he didn’t notice Sanji cutting in front of him and nearly walked straight into the cook as Sanji pulled open the door to a building halfway down the street and ushered him inside excitedly.

Zoro waited, a flat, bored look on his face as Sanji pranced over to the front desk—what the hell was he so happy about anyways?—and started speaking to the woman sitting behind it. Zoro’s deadpan flattened more with every flourishing gesture Sanji made and every word of useless drivel that drifted back over to him. When Sanji reached into his jacket, no doubt for the flower he always kept on hand, Zoro decided that that was enough.

“I’m going back,” Zoro grunted suddenly, not about to put up with Sanji’s bullshit when he was this tired, but the cook appeared at his side even before he’d said the last word and had a hand locked tightly around his arm.
"Goddamn NSPH speed."

“No! Sorry! I’m done, I promise, just come on!”

He dragged Zoro into the elevator on the other side of the room and hit the button for the seventh floor, smiling happily to himself and smoking away calmly as Zoro stood like a dark cloud in the corner of the elevator.

He hoped Sanji wasn’t expecting him to be cordial to whomever the fuck they were meeting.

The doors slid open and Sanji dashed out and across the hall, sliding the key he must have gotten from the lady at the front desk into the lock. He flung the door open and strode inside, leaving Zoro standing out in the hallway. Zoro sighed, scratched at a bothersome spot on his scalp, and followed the cook in. Might as well if they were already there.

Zoro stopped in the entryway, taking in the bare rooms of the apartment around him. It was a studio apartment—a big one.

“The space is so cool!” Sanji called from the kitchen, which Zoro could see right through to from the lack of walls separating the rooms. Beautiful grey and white marble countertops laced golden-stained wooden cabinets, drawers, and the island in the middle of the room with a grate overhead for hanging wine glasses. The warm colors of the wood accented the stainless steel stacked double oven, fridge, and dishwasher tucked into the cabinets, making them pop in a modern-old country home blend. The third counter, making up the only barrier in the entire downstairs, created a third wall for the kitchen and had two layers of marble with room on the other side for barstools, offering up ridiculous amounts of space to spread out. It was a chef’s dream, especially compared to the kitchen Zoro’s apartment had.

Beyond the kitchen, the entire floor was just one big open space, except for what must have been a bedroom jutting out from the back corner. But the rest of the floor created a giant “L” that Sanji was walking through, apparently trying to show Zoro vicariously what it was like to be in it.

“It has two floors, two bathrooms, two bedrooms—that closed room on this floor could be storage or a guest room. Although it doesn’t have a window, but that’s ok.”

Zoro followed Sanji’s brimming voice as the cook dashed upstairs and sighed to himself, resigning to
look around just to humor the cook.

“The kitchen is gorgeous!” Sanji called down the stairs. “And it connects right with the living room and I guess what’s suppose to be a sunroom or a dining room, but look!”

Zoro looked over to the “sunroom” area, where an section of the living room just a hair smaller than the kitchen had been raised with two steps leading up to it. Zoro eyed the giant panel windows that made up the entirety of both walls on both sides of the space, tracing the glass with his eyes to where another large paneled window had been put in the kitchen behind the far counter, opening up both of the rooms even more. Eight floors up meant that they had a pretty good view, and because the sunroom had windows on both walls, it meant that the apartment was on the corner of the building. No neighbors on both sides, then. Zoro crossed the space and stepped up the stairs unconsciously, feeling the way the wood held his weight and taking the time to look down to the street below them where the city was just starting to glow red with the sunset.

“It’s perfect for a dojo, and there’s still plenty of room for furniture and a table, though the kitchen has the barstool countertop and the island which can fit a couple chairs if you don’t hang pans underneath.”

Zoro looked up, confused at how he could hear Sanji’s voice so clearly from where he was, only to find Sanji looking back down at him from over the railing of a balcony. The ceiling had been opened above the sunroom—dojo?—leaving amazing amounts of room, and suddenly Zoro could feel himself grinning at the open air of the “dojo” and how perfect it would be for training and meditation. Sanji’s mood was finally catching up to him.

“There’s two bedrooms and a master bathroom up here,” Sanji gestured with his hand. “And there’s a pantry off of the kitchen with shelving for storage and a washer and dryer, so you don’t have to deal with other people in the laundry room, though you do meet some of the most lovely domestic ladies down there~”

Zoro rolled his eyes and turned back to the window, watching the red sun sinking down below the buildings.

“…It’s big,” he said finally. It's really fucking big.

“I know, I know,” Sanji stopped him quickly, padding down the stairs and trotting over to join him in the dojo. “It’s more than you’re used to, but we can split the cost, especially now that Shanks hired me—and you fight underground, so depending on what you make every fight, it really shouldn’t even cost that much. It’s much closer to the arena and to the town, you won’t have to sleep with your
weights anymore, and we can put Killer up for longer than a couple of hours when he wants to stay.”

Zoro opened his mouth, not exactly sure how to politely word such a blunt rejection, but Sanji held up his hand again, cutting him off.

“I talked to the landlady and she agreed to hold it for a couple of days because I said I had to talk to my roommate. You don’t have to decide now, but it’s a really cool space and it’d be much easier for both of us.”

That, Zoro could agree with.

It was still really fucking big though.

But Sanji’s happy expression was making his brain want to say stupid things like: “Of course we can get it, go tell the woman now!” or “Why are you even asking? You should know I’d say yes for you,” or “If you wanted it badly enough and it would make you happy, I’d find a way to live on the moon for you.”

_God damnit._

“…Listen,” he started as something occurred to him. “…This place is… well, it’s fine for two people, maybe even three or four”—he added under his breath—“but what about…?”

Zoro looked over and met Sanji’s vibrant blue eye silently, pleading for him to understand so he could avoid saying awkward things as much as possible. Sanji sighed, running a hand through his hair, picking up instantly on what Zoro meant.

“…Are you going to take all of your cooking stuff back with you? Like, what the hell am I supposed to do with a kitchen like this?”

“…Look…” Sanji ground out. “You—I—We—ugh… let’s just talk, marimo.”

Zoro nodded, tightness building up again in his chest, imagining all of the horrible things about to come out of Sanji’s mouth: For him to forget about the apartment, he’d buy boxes for the kitchen
stuff, Zoro could keep the things like the kettle and the mugs—

“…Dancing around it is stupid, we’re both thinking the same thing.”

But neither one of them seemed willing to say it.

…Wait, the same thing?

“…I… I don’t want to go. Things are just… I’m just… I don’t want to go.”

It was like someone had lifted a sandbag off of Zoro’s heart, and instantly he could breathe again, relief washing through him like new life.

“…And you have to tell me if you want me to leave, because I’m going to stay otherwise.”

Zoro chuckled, looking back over the city, agreeing that it was stupid to dance around it. Robin would have said the same thing but much more bluntly and weeks ago. She would have called Zoro dense for waiting this long to have this conversation, especially because Sanji was right, and she would have been right as always.

“What the fuck is so funny?”

Sanji’s defensive tone pulled Zoro back out of his thoughts and he looked back over to where the blond was scowling, wracking for a comeback to what had looked like a jeer from Zoro for him wanting to stay.

“No no!” Zoro covered quickly before Sanji’s brain could catch up with his quick tongue. “…I like what you’ve done with my place, and everyone likes having you around. Shanks and Luffy don’t seem to mind the idea of your joining the crew or whatever.”

“…So…”

“And this place is pretty cool.”
“…So I’m staying?”

“I’m not gonna ask you twice, shit cook, that’s the best you’re gonna get. Take it or leave it.”

An amused grin started to creep up on Sanji’s face and Zoro scowled, feeling the beginnings of a blush creeping up and looked sharply away, ignoring Sanji’s shit-eating expression.

But they’d done it. Sanji was staying.

The rush of breath in his lungs was like a drug, and Zoro felt himself straighten up and hurried to smother his own smirk so Sanji wouldn’t see it, but the cook caught it and leaned in, bringing his lips close to Zoro’s ear.

“What? Were you going to miss me, marimo?”

God damnit.

-oOo-

The next morning Zoro padded barefoot into the kitchen, swiping a towel across his forehead, and had the good grace to pause in the doorway and look around in almost shame for offering such a dingy kitchen to Sanji for his art. It was nothing like the other apartment, that was for sure.

He found a place leaning up against the crappy counter and picked up the cup of tea already waiting for him. He had finished quickly today, and Sanji must have noticed that he would and had forgone Zoro’s morning snack to finish breakfast. Zoro couldn’t help the possessive grin that touched his cheeks as he thought of everyone missing Sanji’s breakfasts, even though the cook still did most lunches and dinners at Shanks’ so everyone could gather.

“I want to see the apartment again,” he said around his tea, pausing curiously when Sanji didn’t jump at the idea and race to get his shoes on. The cook just shook his head, moving to transfer the crepe he’d been working on to a plate.
A pit dropped into Zoro’s stomach and his grip tightened on the thin mug. …Had Sanji changed his mind?

“The landlady called after you fell asleep,” Sanji explained, drizzling the plate with an assortment of colorful fruit decorations. “Someone made her a better offer after we left.”

The disappointment in Sanji’s face was painfully obvious, and painful to the part of Zoro’s brain that loved watching Sanji smile, and that stupid nagging feeling was back in Zoro’s chest, wheedling him to do whatever necessary to keep Sanji happy and here.

The cook looked so much cuter when he smiled.

Zoro grimaced to himself, not as big of a reaction as the first time he’d thought of Sanji as cute—though the word really didn’t do it justice—but still bothersome. The man was the King of Ladies, he’d be blind not to notice all of the doting on the women Sanji hung around. Sanji trusted him; that was what this was based on. And after what he’d been through, that was almost enough for Zoro, as long as it kept the cook here.

He wracked his brain, trying to come up with a scene in a book or a movie or something he’d read in the paper that would offer something… how could he fix this?—oh.

“How much better?”

Sanji blinked, pausing as he moved to slide the second crepe onto a plate, curious at Zoro’s unexpected interest.

“…Not much better… she said she’d give us until the end of the day to make a counter offer. The guy who made her the other one doesn’t want to wait to move in.”

Zoro thought, taking a slow sip of his tea as the numbers churned in his mind. He could pay for his half easily with what he made from just two fights. He had enough saved up from how little he spent on a regular basis. And Sanji didn’t seem to have trouble getting ahold of money—bills, if the lack of credit card and how easily the bank shelled him out hundreds meant anything. And his trade dealt entirely in paper money, nothing went through any system that could track numbers.

“…So… would she take our current offer if we made it cash?”
Sanji was still, and then the excited smirk split his face again and he reached over the sizzling pan for the phone. “I’ll ask.”

-oOo-

Sanji threw open the door to the apartment, hustling the large box he was carrying immediately into the kitchen where he began to unload and organize things to his liking in the ample storage space he suddenly had. He was like an excited puppy, mind leaping frantically from one thing to the next. He ground to a halt with his hands full of spoons, noticing the windows behind him, and tossed them haphazardly into one of the open drawers so he could fling open the huge panels and let the air rush in. After sticking his head out for a second and taking in the view, he bounded back to organize the spoons but noticed something else he wanted in the box on his way and raced to unload it. The cook was shining as brightly as the sunset bleeding in through the glass, and Zoro felt his chest swell as he witnessed one of Sanji’s happier moments in all seven weeks of being here.

Slowly but surely, the blond was opening up, coming back to himself—whoever that was. And Zoro was excited to meet this new Sanji.

The cook yanked open the fridge, box of tools forgotten on the counter for the moment, and beamed over in Zoro’s direction where he and their new landlady were having fun just watching the cook flit about the kitchen. She was a sweet little old lady that leaned heavily on a cane and hobbled with a light crick in her back. She had somehow survived the city when it was swarmed with NSPH and come out alright on the other side, and when she heard who she’d be selling to, she’d turned down the other offer immediately.

“How much food do you think we’ll have to offer everyone to help us move?” Sanji called excitedly. Zoro grinned, figuring out pretty easily that Sanji was using it as an excuse to cook in his glorious new kitchen. There would be way too much food; Sanji would want to use everything here twice and maybe more. They’d have to make sure Luffy came to finish it all off, but he would only be allowed to help with the large, durable furniture.

And the apartment was still big.

But it made Sanji happy, so that part in Zoro’s brain just kept saying, “Fuck it,” and as was well.

“How much food do you think we’d have to offer to get everyone to help us move today?”
The landlady laughed, handing Zoro the extra pair of keys because Sanji was far too preoccupied with his new space to take them. “I have another key if you need it for an emergency. I still manage the building, so I have to be able to get into the apartment for police or fire situations.”

Zoro nodded, slipping them into his pocket.

“And I collect for utilities and such on the first of every month, I’ll write you up a bill for the upcoming one because you’ve already paid for this one and you can pay that whenever.”

“Do you think people would want confit de canard? Is it too hot today for that?—No, the meat has to marinade for too long—what about Bouillabaisse? Ooh! I have to make Blanquette de Veau—and crab cakes with that saffron mayonnaise! What else do you have around here for food shopping? I couldn’t find cardamom the last time I went to the store—ooh! Spicy seafood pasta! I haven’t made that in so long!”

The landlady smiled, watching Sanji with a warm expression as he practically danced back to putting his utensils away. “He’s not from here, is he?”

“…No,” Zoro agreed after a moment. For anyone that had gone through the siege, it was pretty easy to pick out an unfamiliar personality. Sanji fluctuated too easily between watching the shadows for anything and being far too relaxed in his environment to blend in; everyone around here—save Luffy—had a very consistent demeanor. Maybe it was to keep themselves safe and hidden from the marines, maybe it was to keep the horrors of the past at bay, but it had never been difficult for Zoro to pick out a newcomer to the area.

The landlady shifted to hold her cane with both hands so she could turn to look at Zoro without throwing herself off balance. “I never thanked you by the way.”

“…For what?”

“…Four years ago, after my building was hit by a bomb, I was being brought by an ambulance to the hospital and we were attacked. A young man with green hair braved the vampires all around us and carried me into the hospital along with my eldest son.”

…She was there that day we brought Killer in. Even as he thought this, fangs and slashing metal and glowing eyes and haunting screams flashed behind his eyes, and he felt himself twitch
uncomfortably. He looked down to find the old woman calm and still smiling, even with the memories of that day running through her head. He still had a while to go before he reached that point apparently.

“I didn’t know who you were or if you’d survived until after the city had been rebuilt and I insisted on my son taking me to one of the…” she waved her hand vaguely, “matches being held in the old underground amphitheater where the town hall used to be. I wanted to see what the city’s new economy had been built on; I had to convince myself that even though it was illegal, it was what brought in the money to rebuild our lives and keep us from drowning because the government wasn’t helping anymore.”

Zoro stood quietly, watching the old woman reminisce happily, mostly to herself. She had gone through so much, come to terms with so much in her life, and still smiled so happily. Zoro assumed that when she said eldest son, she meant that at least one other son, if not more family, had died that night, and he was sure there had been a fight to bring her to the hospital at all because of how old she was.

She was still watching Sanji with that warm smile. The cook had moved onto the dessert plates in the box and was arranging them just so in one of the top cabinets.

“…What made him come?”

“…Why?”

“…I would just assume he’d think it was dangerous. …For his kind. Not many people around here would be comfortable with the idea of taking in a vampire after what had happened. And he’d be stupid not to know how his kind hunt and not figure out what had happened to this city.”

Zoro blanched, throat locking up as his eyes flicked to the old woman, measuring her at-peace smile and the relaxed manner in which she was leaning on her cane, just watching Sanji intently and taking in his mannerisms from afar.

“…U-uh—” Zoro started, trying to come up with something to reassure her but also wondering why she’d said yes to them renting so quickly if she knew—and how did she figure it out—?!?

“He has that way about him. You can just see it even when he walks,” she explained slowly, and Zoro turned to Sanji, watching his graceful movements and thinking over the way Sanji moved when
he fought, tracing all of his kicks and attacks in his mind.

Sanji was like a wave, powerful and unstoppable, carefree and certain, fluid and graceful beyond any human ability. If you looked closely enough, he moved like no human ever could.

But he wasn’t like what the old woman had known.

“…He’s not like those others—”

“I figured that out as well,” the woman chuckled. “I wasn’t sure why he was different, but it was obvious from the first time meeting him that he wasn’t what we had grown to know. I didn’t think someone like you, who’d been as close to barging right through death’s door without knocking as I was, would take in a monster that had nearly ended everything we held dear.”

Zoro wasn’t sure what to say. Part of him was so used to protecting Killer that all he wanted to do was convince her how not dangerous Sanji was, but the other part of that protectiveness was screaming for him to keep his mouth shut. He didn’t know this old woman, and she could very easily become a loose end. “…There are two different… breeds… of vampires. …One loses control of themselves like what happened here. …Sanji’s… stronger. He’s more human. More…”

He trailed off, watching as the blond hopped like a cat up onto the countertop to put something on one of the highest shelves. Sanji’s crisp limbs and bones were like a frame, keeping all of that power contained. The old woman was right: he did have a way about him. More…

*Something.*

*More everything.*

Zoro looked down as he heard her chuckle again, and she gave him a knowing look before shuffling towards the door. “Call me if you need me.”

He watched her close the door behind herself with that warm smile and then turned back to Sanji, tuning back into the cook’s wild gesticulations as he described all of the things he was imagining for the apartment, and something sunk in that hadn’t quite before.
Sanji was making his place in the city, a brand new start with everything he could ever need. Sanji was planning to stay for a long time, much longer than either of them had ever expected him to stay.

Zoro couldn’t come up with a single problem with that.

“Where’d the old woman go?”

“She left.”

“I was going to make her something in thanks! Go call her back!”

Zoro snorted to himself before turning for the door, hurrying to catch her before she got too far and had to hobble all the way back here with her gimpy walk. Inwardly, he wondered if she’d received the injury the night of the attack, but it wasn’t important.

-oOo-
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

“Oh look at these!”

Zoro sighed heavily, shifting the copious amounts of food in his arms so that he could see what the cook was looking at.

Sanji had stopped to peer in the window of the Pumpkin Café, nonchalantly looking through the pastries and tea sets on the shelves. He only had four bags of food, and none of the heavy stuff.

“Can you get those boxes?”

Zoro scoffed. “Carry your own damn boxes."

“Yeah, you probably can't anyways. I got them—”

“Gimme the damn boxes!”

He was an idiot. Such a kneejerk reaction to such a stupid challenge.

“Look,” Sanji laughed, “they’re all shaped like pumpkins!”

Zoro sighed again and turned so that he could lean his back against the open door frame and rest his arms a bit.

“…I wonder if the young lady selling them is just as cute~ I can’t see her, think she’s in the back~?”
Zoro grumbled under his breath, resigning to be there for a while, and set two of the boxes down on the ground at his feet so he had a free arm. He yawned and scratched the back of his neck, only half listening to Sanji’s plans about the pastries he could cook for everyone tomorrow, but how he’d have to make sure everyone liked sweet things like that.

Zoro’s head dropped back against the building and he closed his eyes for a moment, reopening them when Sanji suddenly stopped talking but made no move or insult to wake him up so they could continue back to the apartment. Sanji had stood up straight, looking around him in the street. He looked like he was trying to find someone who had just tapped him on the shoulder from behind and couldn’t see anyone.

“…What?”

Sanji reached up and scratched something on the back of his shoulder uncomfortably, now looking past Zoro to where they’d come from. “…I thought…”

...That’s… the same face Killer makes when—

When something was coming.

Zoro’s eyes narrowed and his head swiveled around, zeroing in on everything in the street for whatever was making Sanji’s instinct prickle. People were everywhere in the streets talking on phones, chatting with friends, carrying shopping bags, sitting outside of the teashops and restaurants of the street… He paused as his gaze flicked over Sanji’s shoulder, catching movement from what looked like a fairly large group of people coming toward them.

He leaned in slightly, trying to work out what he was seeing, when the flashy white uniforms caught the light and highlighted the stripes outlined with blue accents on the shoulder of the man in front. Zoro’s body reacted instantly and he grabbed Sanji’s arm, yanking him back into the shop behind them.

“Hey—!” Sanji barked, catching the boxes Zoro had left outside with his toe and dragging it back with them. “You can’t leave the food! What the hell are you doing, idio—”

Zoro clapped a hand over Sanji’s mouth, dropping the rest of the boxes roughly on the ground so he could pin Sanji’s back against his chest, keeping them flat against the wall next to the window. Sanji
went silent, an all too familiar shiver drifting up the center of his spine as the feeling of his arms being locked at his side and useless sank in. Zoro hadn’t felt him shake, too intensely trained on watching the group outside the window as they grew closer and closer. Sanji’s toes twitched, and he closed his eyes and swallowed hard, fighting down the urge to whip his shoe over his head and right through the eye of the person behind him.

_No. Not person. Zoro. Zoro’s behind me._

But the shiver was getting worse. Sanji felt his breath pick up and his heart start to pound against his ribs. He reached up and grabbed Zoro’s arms with his hands, pulling and digging his nails into the darker skin desperately. Zoro didn’t move and Sanji froze, every muscle he had in him turning to stone.

_Get off._

_It’s so cold._

_Please get off._

_Please… please…!_ 

_It’s so fucking cold._

_Get off get off get off get off–_ 

_Get it off._

_Get it off me._

Sanji felt his leg twitch again, good eye growing dark and fangs extending, his tongue flicking in anticipation around them. Sanji opened his mouth with a low hiss, fingers locking his nails into the flesh around him.
It’s bleeding already. Bleeding so easily. So easily. It smells so good. So goddamn good.

Zoro jolted as the sudden series of stabbing pains in his arm and his head snapped down. Sanji was curled in on himself, shoulders alight with a strong tremor, nails digging deep into Zoro’s arm where ten drops of blood were making their way down his skin and toward the floor. Zoro released him instantly and Sanji gasped, dipping his head even lower, breathing low and steady. His hands were still in the shape of talons, the tips of his nails dyed red with blood.

Zoro froze, panicking as he realized what he’d done. His head snapped towards the window, marines no more than one hundred feet outside the shop now. Most people in the street had scattered when they saw them coming—back into the shops or off down the road. Those that had stayed were either ignoring the marines’ presence or glaring blatantly in their direction. The marines were fazed by none of it.

If Sanji did something while the street was so quiet like this…

Zoro body reacted again, spinning Sanji harshly around to face him. The cook choked out another thick gasp, strangely dark blue eye locking onto Zoro like a predator in the black of night. Zoro could see brilliant white fangs poking out over his lips. Shit. He had to do something to throw him off.

The blood.

Zoro grabbed Sanji’s hands—lightly this time, keeping as far from forceful as he could—and stuck them in his mouth without a second thought, just hoping to god that this would work. Sanji jolted, head snapping back and away from Zoro as the swordsman sucked at the blood. He had to get the smell off of the cook.

Sanji’s eye had gone back to it’s vibrant blue, fangs receding as he got over the shock of finding himself held between the teeth of someone else instead of the other way around. It had kick started his thought process enough to get him to be aware of what was happening again and get ahold of himself. Someone was… biting him.

...Not someone. Zoro.

Sanji licked his lips, finally noticing the violent tremor in his shoulders and fought to still his body as Zoro finished with the last of his fingers. He jerked again as two hands suddenly landed on his
shoulders and Zoro pulled him abruptly into his chest. The swordsman was holding the back of his neck. Carefully this time. Tenderly. Déjà vu washed over him as he remembered how Zeff used to hold him after he’d first broken out of the facility. Even when he was screaming and lashing out in panic, Zeff would just hold the back of his neck like this to keep him from hurting himself or someone else and rub his back until he calmed down.

Sanji flexed his arms and Zoro moved with him so that the cook could be as mobile as he wanted. Sanji sucked in a shaking breath and closed his eyes, burrowing his face in Zoro’s shirt as Zoro rubbed his thumb carefully up and down one of the clenched tendons in Sanji’s neck.

It was so warm.

Zeff was warm like this.

“I’m sorry,” Zoro whispered into his hair. “I didn’t even think… there are marines coming. They have a good enough idea what I do for Shanks; it’ll be bad if they see me. They don’t have anything on me, but they’ve questioned other people before and they’ll see you if they do.”

Sanji nodded, keeping himself firmly pressed into the warmth, agreeing wholeheartedly that he didn’t want anyone with enough outside connections like marines to see him.

He had to see them though to know what to avoid, and forced himself to leave the warmth to look down the street. Fifty feet from the shop, a large man with a white coat flapping in the wind and two bars on his shoulder was leading a group of ten spritely looking men in white uniforms and caps. Each one of them was loaded up with guns at their hips, backs, and arms; overloaded even. Sanji couldn’t recall anyone here carrying guns with them—even the people that made weapons and worked with machines—and yet these marines acted like they were walking into what could be their final battle.

Zoro moved slowly farther away from the window, taking Sanji with him, but the windows were big, and Sanji could tell from his lingering claustrophobia that the shop was small. The marines would see them either way when they walked by. Sanji wasn’t sure when the last account of violence had been, or if there had ever been an attack on the marines, but things seemed pretty well contained and he was assuming that the marines didn’t really have a reason to carry all of those firearms.

A form appeared suddenly at their sides and both men jumped before they registered the young woman no more than Nami’s age next to them. She untied the strings on the edge of the shades and yanked the cloth closed, holding it together tightly with her hands just as the shadows of the marines
passed in front of the windows.

Zoro cocked his head to the side, recognizing her from somewhere, but—oh. She worked the betting booth some nights at the arena. What the hell was her name? If Sanji had met her, Zoro would have remembered her name from the disgusting and drippy way the cook had said it, but as of now he had no reason to.

“…They’re not welcome here,” she murmured under her breath, “but I can’t keep them out if they want to come in.”

Zoro nodded, keeping as flat against the wall as he could. He noticed with a start that the door was still open next to him, but it was too late to do anything about it.

“…Captain,” a woman’s voice spoke up. “Do you think we should go into a couple of the shops? Everyone’s acting so…”

The captain grunted, his voice dull and annoyed. “We’re here to protect the people, not to be home invaders. I don’t care what the other captains do, terrorizing people is not our job. If we see someone suspected of anything, we’ll engage, but until then there’s no reason to bother innocent people.”

“Y-yes, Captain.”

“Hey!” one of the marines laughed. “They look like pumpkins!”

All three in the shop froze, eyes flashing to each other before back to the window. Zoro wracked his brain, trying to remember how bright it was outside and if the girl would be backlit against the shades. The marines hadn’t passed the open door yet.

“That place is great, my wife brought me some yesterday morning. We should go in!”

“I know the girl that works there is hot too.”

“Ok, now we have to!”
The temperature in the room dropped another ten degrees and the girl looked apologetically at them, glancing at the door to the back of the shop where she’d been working when they came in. If they moved though, the marines would see the shadows through the curtains.

We might have to.

Zoro shifted his feet, Sanji following suit to stay with his motions and anticipate his next move. The girl held her hand up suddenly and waved for them to wait, shaking her head.

“Men!” the captain barked, and Zoro could see the marines straighten back up, falling into formation. “We are marines, and you will act strong and professional on rounds in the city! We are here for the good of the citizens and I won’t have my outfit distracted by food!”

“Yes sir!” the marines chorused, and followed their captain with renewed fervor in their tramping up the street. Zoro peered around, looking out through the doorframe, waiting until they left and the street started coming to life again with the people that had hidden as they passed through.

He felt Sanji shift against him and dropped his arms so the cook could move away. Sanji’s arms twitched like he was going to hug himself, and Zoro blinked at the look of longing that crossed his face. Sanji ducked his head and pulled his lighter and a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, flicking the cigarette to life with his head still down to hide the expression. Something in Zoro wanted to apologize again, especially as he saw the scabs forming on his arm. How could he not have guessed that would happen?!

Stupid!

“Are you ok?”

Zoro looked up to where the girl was pointing at his arm and nodded, reaching up to scrub the rest of the blood away.

“Just… caught myself on a corner coming in.”

She nodded, tugging the shades open again and flooding the shop with sunlight. “I’m always in a
hurry to get away from them.”

Sanji let out a slow breath, turning to her. “Young lady, my dear, thank you so much—”

“Think nothing of it.” She waved her hand in his direction with a light smile. “Anything to help one of Shanks’ best fighters. Can I get you something to calm you down?”

Sanji shook his head. “That’s incredibly kind of you, but I’d rather buy some of your magical looking pastries.”

“You don’t need to thank me, really—”

“Please, I’d like some pastries anyways. And what better time to celebrate such an act of bravery for us poor, undeserving souls?”

The girl sighed but moved to the back of the counter with a smile anyways. “What can I get you then?”

Zoro followed Sanji to the counter and stood at his side as the cook looked over the pumpkin-shaped things in the case. The woman kept smiling at him, and eventually his hand drifted up to the back of his neck to scratch at a nonexistent itch and he scowled uncomfortably.

“So… uh…” He hated small talk. “You been to one of the fights recently?”

She shook her head, grin widening. “Not lately. I was wondering if you’d recognize me. I’m Laki, by the way.” She held out her hand to him across the counter and he took it, shaking her tiny fingers gently before releasing her.

“Zoro. Roronoa.”

Laki. That’s her name.

“I remember you from when the city was being rebuilt too, when everyone was just starting to go to
fights. Your name was big along with a couple others for protecting the city.”

This was becoming a theme. Zoro sighed internally.

“My sister knows Ace D. Portgas and his brother, and I remember that you three were some of people that killed the most of those monsters.”

Zoro grimaced slightly and caught Sanji’s flinch out of the corner of his eye, but the cook was immediately back to picking out pastries like nothing had bothered him.

“Whatever… happened to the blond boy that used to hang around Ace?”

…Blond? Who—oh.

Zoro shook his head and Laki nodded, her smile growing sadder. It had been a while since someone had asked about Sabo.

“I used to hate this city,” Laki said quietly, looking out of the window to the tables outside the restaurant across the street where people were eating happily. “I hated the cards it had dealt me. I had just moved here two months before everything started happening. It was my first apartment, my first time away from my family. And then everything happened and there were so many times I thought I would die and I couldn’t even get a phone call through to my family to tell them what was happening.”

Zoro didn’t want to hear this. He didn’t want to hear everyone’s recount of the days before the city rose again. He had his own demonic memories; he didn’t need theirs too.

“But now that things are coming back together, and everyone is working together to make things happen, accepting help when they need it and offering it without hesitation when it’s needed… I was suddenly very proud to call this my home, and I can't imagine moving away and losing the connection I’ve made with everyone here.”

She turned to look at him. “It’s like, even the people you haven’t met, you understand each other so much more than anyone from the outside could. But this city is amazing. My parents are very protective of my younger sister. She’s… sick, I guess is the best word, but they’ve agreed to let her come visit me because they can tell how protected it is. This might even convince them that she can
start a life on her own. Have you picked out everything you wanted?” she turned back to Sanji and started ringing the pastries up when he nodded. “You’re not from here though, how did you end up here?”

Sanji blinked up at her, in the middle of getting out his wallet. He turned to give Zoro a questioning look, but the swordsman could only shrug in return. There was no way he’d be able to explain it.

“How could you tell I’m not from around here?”

Laki gave him a smile, placing the pastries in a bag with a smiling pumpkin with wings on the front. “It’s not a bad thing, if anything I’m glad you missed what happened. It’s not something I’d wish on anyone.”

“But how could you tell?”

Now it was her turn to pause. “…I’m not really sure, I guess. It’s something about the way you…” She placed the bag on the counter in front of her, thinking. “…Everyone here has such faith in this city. You still look over your shoulder, like you’re waiting for something to come up behind you. I didn’t even notice the marines until the street went silent because I trust the people around me so much. Even the ones I barely know.”

Sanji nodded after a moment and laid some bills on the counter. She plucked them up and handed Sanji the bag. “Will I see you two at the next fight? I’m working that night.”

Zoro grunted. “I think I’m fighting. I can’t remember who, though.”

Laki laughed and nodded. “I’ll bring you something. See you then!”

“Goodbye, my luscious goddess~! My eyes will weep for the loss of your beauty until we see each other again~!” Sanji gushed, blowing kiss after kiss, suddenly rejuvenated by the idea that he wouldn’t be seeing her shortly. Zoro rolled his eyes and went to pick up the boxes he’d dropped.

Once they were outside, the cook went silent, walking in a steady pace just in front of Zoro. Zoro grunted, shifting the boxes to make sure he didn’t lose the cook and get himself lost. There was no tenseness in Sanji’s shoulders, but Zoro didn’t like the drag in them either. He hadn’t even lit another cigarette, and the other had burned out a while ago.
“…What I don’t get is why people keep bringing up NSPH in front of you even though they know you’re not from here,” he tried, watching Sanji’s reaction. Almost none of the country knew exactly what had happened, and those that did didn’t advertise it.

“…Maybe they assume I know because I’m with you.”

No luck.

Zoro couldn’t help but find himself speeding up to walk in time with the cook. Sanji’s face was blank, staring straight ahead with the dead cigarette butt hanging out of his lips.

“…You know you’re not like that.”

Zoro could practically see the sigh in Sanji’s frame. “…What?”

“You’re not like them. A monster.”

Sanji took so long to answer that Zoro thought he wasn’t going to at first, but Sanji was surprising him more and more these days. Especially with how much he was letting Zoro see his soul.

“…I kinda am. I do everything that the monsters she remembers do, with very few differences.”

Zoro’s lips pinched together and his grip on the boxes tightened. “You’re nothing like them. You and Killer, nothing you do is—”

“You know, back in the shop—when you grabbed me—I was thinking over the trillions of ways I could kill you. All the ways in which I could keep your blood from dripping onto the floor so I wouldn’t waste it. You started bleeding so easily, even with the thick skin you have. It would have been so easy.”

“…But you didn’t.”
“I was pretty damn close.”

“But you didn’t.”

Sanji spat out his cigarette butt and turned to glare darkly at Zoro with his one eye. “Are you not hearing me—?!”

“I am. And the only thing I hear is that you didn’t go for me. Those things that attacked us years ago were mindless. They’d run right into my swords trying to get to my neck. Maybe you wanted to, fine, but you didn’t. You took the time to think before attacking. They didn’t do that. That’s what I hear.”

Sanji’s expression turned flat and he looked back at the road, fishing around in his pockets for his pack of cigarettes. Zoro huffed and turned back to watch where he was walking. He couldn’t see around the boxes enough to know he wouldn’t run into something.

“…The differences between you and them,” he said quietly, “may be few, but they’re big ones.”

Sanji slid his lighter away and tipped his head back, letting out a breath of smoke above him.

“…I’m going to stop looking over my shoulder, like Laki said I do.”

“Jeez, at least listen—”

“It doesn’t help, and I sense most things instinctually anyways. So I’m going to stop.”

Zoro growled. Fine, if the bastard didn’t want to talk, they wouldn’t.

“…I want to… keep as much of me human as possible. I can't do that if I’m always tuned into the part of me that isn’t.”

Zoro looked over carefully at him at that, but said nothing. Something like that didn’t merit an answer. He had heard, and Sanji knew he’d heard. That was that.
They walked in silent after that, Sanji smoking calmly, his spine straight and the confidence back in his walk, all of the lifelessness gone from his shoulders.

Sanji may not have had the same demons Zoro did, but without a doubt he had his own, and Zoro could feel the connection that had formed between them just from that as strong as the connection he had with anyone from the city. Laki was wrong. Sanji was from here. He may not have come from the city and he may not have been here when it fell, but he understood the pain and persecution that the people here had gone through like almost no one else could.

Sanji belonged here. He belonged with everyone else around them. He deserved to be like the people here: as happy as if nothing had happened three years ago, strong enough to look past their demons and move on with life. He deserved to look past the things that had happened, and he belonged with those that understood what he was facing and could help him through.

-oOo-

Zoro lazed into the kitchen, looking around for wherever Sanji had chosen to put the booze. The cook was way too organized; everything was so damn hard to find. He’d forgotten again where the sake was, though it was only their second day in the apartment and there was no way in hell he was going to remember everything’s new location that fast.

Behind him, everyone was piled into the new chairs and couches purchased just this morning for the living room-dining room area. Franky and Brook were animatedly telling a tale of their passionate solos one night playing at an art opening and how they had charmed the masses. Those that weren’t chortling at their antics (Nami) had found other ways to amuse themselves, touring the new apartment and taking in everything the space had to offer.

Usopp leapt up onto the table, brandishing his fork from dinner like a sword over his head and Chopper jumped up after him, head butting his hip playfully like a dog. Luffy laughed loudly and leaned back to clap his feet together before deciding that the table looked like more fun and launched himself at the two wrestling on the tabletop. Their resounding scream could have been heard down the block before Luffy crash-landed on top of them.

“Hey, hey,” Franky called lazily, a half-empty glass of rum and coke swinging between his fingertips. “You all need to be—”

“GET OFF THE FUCKING TABLE, SHIT HEADS!”
A stainless steal pan was launched across the room, and Luffy and Chopper ducked with a shriek, leaving Usopp to take the attack right in the middle of his forehead. He toppled off of the table with a loud crash, pan clattering on the wood beside his head. Zoro could almost see the little stars floating around his eyes. Sanji slammed his hands on the countertop, making the bowl of dessert batter he was mixing jump dangerously, glaring over at Luffy and Chopper as they scuttled to safety behind a bookshelf filled with Sanji’s favorite cookbooks.

“Nyeh nyeh!” Luffy stuck his tongue out from between the books, waving his arms out the side like flags. “Can’t get us here, Sanji!”

Sanji growled and Zoro chuckled at the veins popping out of the cook’s forehead. He bent down to check under the sink, pretty sure that—nope, not there either.

*Goddamn, where is it?*

“That’s macassar ebony wood! And brand new! You break it and you’ll be working probono for me washing dishes for the next decade! And don’t put your feet where we put food!”

“Hey cook.”

“What?”

“Where did you put the booze?”

“Jesus, for the fifth time, it’s up above the sink. The doors have glass panels! You can see right through them!”

“Whatever,” Zoro muttered, reaching up to pull down a large bottle of sake.

“Zoro~!” Brook called from the dojo where he and Franky had migrated to look out over the city. “Will you pass us a bottle of something nice? You’re out of coke, but I think Franky will manage.”
Zoro nodded and shuffled through the bottles until he found an open bottle of tequila and a half-finished bottle of gin, holding both up so the two could choose.

“Oh…” Brook put a finger to his lips, mulling over the options. “Choices.”

“Gin is pretty super, but I don’t think I could have it without tonic. You got any tonic, bro?”

“Then again the tequila would go nice with the view.”

“Oh!” Franky pulled back from Brook, looking impressed. “Super point! You really can see the romance in the view!”

“JUST PICK ONE!” Zoro barked, growling as he heard Sanji laugh quietly beside him.

Brook threw his hands into the air, his cane swinging around his wrist and narrowly missing Franky’s nose. “Send us the tequila, my good man!”

“Suuuuuuuper!”

Zoro tossed it through the living room past everyone else’s heads, ignoring Usopp’s scream as something shot past his ear. Brook caught it nimbly with one hand, sweeping down into a bow and unscrewing it at the same moment so that he could pour Franky a shot the second he’d spun to a stop. He snapped back up into a dramatic pose, filling his own cup effortlessly and clinked it with Franky’s before they both tipped their heads back and drained the alcohol.

“AMAZING!” Chopper gaped, his own bottle of beer clutched tightly in both hands. “SO FLUID!”

“Hey, Chopper!” Luffy called, leaping up to the top of the bookshelf and holding out his arms like a football goal post. “Try and get it through my hands! Throw it like Zoro did!”

“Yeah!”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!”
“But Sanjiiiiiii~”

“NO!”

“Will you idiots sit down?!” Nami screeched from the balcony. “We don’t want to piss off Sanji and Zoro’s new neighbors the first night they’re here!”

“There are more people here?!” Luffy’s eyes lit up. “Let’s go invite them in!!”

“NO!”

Zoro grinned at the cacophony of their new apartment, leaning back against the counter. He’d forgone the cup in favor of nursing the bottle itself. It made the sake taste stronger anyways. Luffy careened through the kitchen, grabbing at something Chopper was trying to keep out of his reach, and Nami appeared from the top of the stairs to punch him into silence.

“GYAH! Call a doctor!”

Yup, all was normal.

“Hey marimo, taste this.”

Zoro looked over to where Sanji was holding out the spatula he’d been using to spread the dough into a pan. Zoro made a face.

“I don’t like sweets.”

“Hey hey, don’t insult my cooking,” Sanji waved the spatula in his face and Zoro leaned away, swatting the offending tool. A splop of batter flung off of the end at the connection and flipped back, just missing Sanji’s apron and landing on what was visible of his shirt. Sanji blanched, his cheeks sucking in like a dehydrated fish, and Zoro barked out a laugh at his expression.
“Shitty marimo!” Sanji yelled, but a manic grin crossed his face, betraying his lack of anger. He lunged forward with the spatula brandished like a fencing sword and smeared the batter back across Zoro’s cheek with a loud smack.

“Hey!”

“This is a three hundred dollar shirt, asshole!”

“Why the hell do you need a three hundred dollar shirt?! You cook! They must get fucked up every day!”

“I have enough class to keep what I wear clean, you uncultured swine!”

Nami watched the two quietly from her seat in the incredibly comfortable and what must have been incredibly expensive chair in the living room. They fought like a cat and dog most days, and were it not for the stupid machismo grins they both got whenever they did this, she would have thought they actually hated each other. The first few times of watching them interact, Nami could practically see the sparks starting fires in the air between them.

As it was, even as they attacked each other, Sanji’s shoes and Zoro’s fists flying through the air, they couldn’t have looked more comfortable with each other.

Nami smirked, sipping at her glass of wine. *Sanji and Zoro bought an apartment together. Sanji and Zoro’s apartment… Sanji and Zoro…*

It had a nice enough ring to it.

But Sanji had bought an apartment with Zoro. And that meant that the cook was planning to stick around for a while. And with Zoro, no less.

That in and of itself was endlessly intriguing.

Across the floor in the kitchen, the two idiots had finally settled down enough for Sanji to finish putting the pan in the oven and then move on to washing the dishes and Zoro to clean the mess off of
his face and the spot on his arm where Sanji had caught him once more. Nami watched Zoro swipe a larger glob of the batter onto his finger and pause just before he was about to wipe it on a towel. He blinked down at it, brain ticking slowly as he wondered. He looked over at Sanji’s back once and then stuck his finger in his mouth.

“…It’s good. It’s not too sweet at all.”

“See?” Sanji snapped, a smile apparent in his playful tone. Nami could only guess that he wouldn’t turn around because he didn’t want to show Zoro. “I know you don’t like sweets, dumbass. I’d be a horrible cook if I couldn’t even figure that out.”

Nami’s smile stretched and she curled farther into the cushions. Zoro finished cleaning himself up and picked up his bottle of sake, moving over to lean back against the counter next to the sink, unconsciously putting himself as close as he could to the cook. Sanji’s eyes flicked up at the sudden invasion of his space and Zoro looked down, realizing suddenly how near to each other they were. They exchanged a look that bordered on embarrassed before both looked away sharply, Sanji scrubbing furiously while Zoro chugged the bottle in his hand like it was his last drink in life.

Nami giggled, hiding behind her wine glass. *It’s like a soap opera.*

-oOO-
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

“What’s to the north of Shanks’ territory?”

Zoro looked up at Sanji, trying to figure out at first if the cook was serious and then giving him a flat look when Sanji continued to look at him curiously.

Sanji made an annoyed face after a second of blank staring, rolling his eyes. “Can you find me a map, maybe?”

Zoro shook his head, turning back to the sandwich in front of him. Honestly, who knew sandwiches could be this good? Was there anything this guy couldn’t turn into a five-star meal?

Sanji crossed his arms dubiously. “You don’t have a single map here.”

“I don’t understand them. Don’t leave enough on my own to ever need them. Anytime we travel, Nami or Usopp drives.”

“I mean here as in the city here, dumbass.”

“Nope.”

“You’re kidding.”

Zoro shook his head again, mouth full of the amazing explosion of homemade cornichons, paper-thin roast beef, a mayonnaise sauce that was so good there was no way Sanji had bought it at the store, lettuce, and more things than Zoro’s taste buds could identify. But he didn’t give a shit; it tasted good and he was hungry.
“No need, we don’t get tourists here. No way to accommodate them, nothing to see, nowhere to put them, and too much to hide. And the people that leave here know where they’re going or they aren’t planning on coming back. All of our economy is based off of weapons, underground fighting, some stores in town, that sort of thing. Shanks didn’t want prostitutes at first, but now they register with him, make their own money, have to use protection and get testing, so they’re around too.”

Sanji let out a slow breath, shoving the last of the dishes into the dishwasher along with the plate from his now-empty sandwich plate. “This really is a dead city.”

Zoro didn’t feel the need to answer to that. The sandwich was too damn good.

“Fine,” Sanji shook off the monkey wrench in his plans, rounding on Zoro with his arms crossed. “I want to know where we are and where I can get to around here. This city only has so many food places and I can’t find a bunch of ingredients I need.”

Now it was Zoro’s turn to roll his eyes. “Who are you expecting to show up at our door? I highly doubt the queen would ever show her face here. Just the air in this city would mess up her prissy clothes; there’s still a ton of grit from all the bombing.”

“I take pride in my work,” Sanji returned easily, taking Zoro’s plate out from under him and sticking it in the dishwasher before he set it to run. “And I need some things. Like black truffles, saffron, daikon, and basil. Avocados would be nice too, and decent oranges.”

“Basil?”

“Exactly! How do you not have basil here?! It’s basil for Christ’s sake!”

“Whatever. Were you gonna go today?”

Sanji nodded, and Zoro noticed as he stepped around the counter that his shoes were already on. “What do you have here for transportation? And before you offer, I don’t want your death trap.”

“It’s just a bike—”
“It’s a poorly-balanced, weighed-down, racing machine of death that literally rockets you through the air toward your destination and turns everything around you into an obstacle that could kill you.”

Zoro stuck his fingers in his mouth one by one, sucking off the rest of the sauce. He watched from the counter as Sanji slid on his jacket and pulled a scarf off of the rack. Was it already that late in the year?

“I guess you could borrow a car.”

“Me? Oh no, marimo. We. We are going out to explore around the city. Put your shoes on.”

“Nope.”

“Yep.”

“Why do you need me? It’s not like I’m going to help anything.”

Sanji gave him an evil grin, tucking the end of the scarf into his coat before he fished for his pack of cigarettes to transfer them from his pants to his coat pocket. “Because you’re my ticket back if we run into trouble.”

Zoro raised an eyebrow, catching his jacket as Sanji tossed it to him. “I’m your what?”

“You’re my… call it a chaperone. If I leave now with no one watching me, how many red flags do you think that will raise? I’d have to be stupid to think Shanks’ people aren’t still watching me and waiting for me to make my move as a mole.”

“…Well, yeah, but—”

“I’m going now. Want to see how far I can get on my own before they drag me back underground in chains and put me away for the next gladiator fight?”
Zoro groaned, his head dropping back against his neck. He’d really been looking forward to pushing his workout to the limit today, especially after sleeping in from the fight last night and the celebration afterwards. “Can’t you call someone—”

“See ya later, marimo.”

“Wait!” Zoro barked as Sanji walked out the door with a carefree wave, smoking happily to himself. Zoro fumbled himself into his coat and slid to a stop next to the closed door, yanking his boots on and tripping himself on his untied shoelaces as he scrambled out the door. “Shit cook!”

Sanji pretended not to see him, looking for something in his pockets as the door to the elevator started to slide closed behind him. Zoro growled and jumped forward, catching his foot in the door just before it closed. He grunted as it clunked against his ankle, but drifted back open, letting him in to glare at the cook. Sanji looked back innocently, like he was genuinely surprised.

“Oh, you’re coming?”

Zoro grumbled to himself and bent down to lace up his boots, mutterings of “shitty cook” and “fucking curly brow” drifting up along with the other unintelligible words. Sanji smirked to himself and fixed his hair to make sure it was hanging correctly in front of his eye, something he’d been doing more and more compulsively as of late.

Every once and a while he would pull his bangs back in front of the mirror, generally after a shower so the water wouldn’t irritate his eye—especially because he still couldn’t feel most of it to tell if it was injured. The murky white that covered his eye had turned a dusky grey over the past few weeks, entirely obscuring his pupil from view. He looked like an alien from some planet that had never evolved to process light, and every time he saw his whole face his stomach churned. He’d spent the first two weeks here agonizing over the possibility of his sight never returning in that eye, and now that it had been eight weeks and there was absolutely no progress being made, his mind had decided that being disgusted by it was the better alternative and the next best stage in his… grieving process. Or whatever.

Looking at his eye made his muscles lock up and his fingers twitch. It made his toes curl and his spine beg to twist—to fly through the air and severely injure something—to make something hurt as much as he had hurt that unbearable month in captivity. If he’d been at home, Zeff probably would have been the recipient of his rage. Zeff was always too good about taking his lumps with Sanji and then dishing them back tenfold after he’d calmed down. Here…

Zoro didn’t deserve it. Zoro, and Luffy, and Chopper, and Franky, and Brook, and Nami-swan, and
Usopp… they’d all taken him in in a heartbeat. There had been no question about saving his life. Questions about where his loyalty was had followed, but he could tell from the way the tiny doctor had cried over his injuries even from the first time Sanji had woken up that there was never a single consideration to leave him or let him die.

He owed them too much. They were good, genuine people and they didn’t deserve his anger for something they had no control over and still worked so hard to accommodate. Sanji wasn’t their problem, but they’d taken him in as their own and made him their problem.

So when he looked in the mirror and saw a monster comparable to the Hunchback of Notre Dame, his fangs extended just from anger and he thanked every god he didn’t believe in that Zoro was a warrior and would never turn down a fight.

Sanji looked down to where Zoro was finishing his laces, still grumbling to himself. The elevator dinged as they reached the first floor and the marimo stood, scowling heartily and refusing to look at Sanji. Sanji smirked again as the brute stalked out of the elevator first like an alpha leading the pack, even though he knew he had to listen to the intellectuals (Sanji) before he could actually do something.

Zoro would never know just how many times he’d saved Sanji’s sanity by just being there for him. He was the light to Sanji’s fuse. Not exactly a perfect relationship, but Sanji was a regenerating powder keg, and sometimes it seemed like there was no way to keep his explosive residue from leaking over—if it didn’t burn off every once and a while, one of these days he would explode. And the results, especially in a city fresh from a war that knew exactly how vampires behaved and what to look for, would have been devastating—for him, for Shanks for taking him in, for everyone under Shanks, for those under Shanks’ protection, for the city, and everyone tied to this weird-ass family. Killer flashed through his mind, and how insanely protective Zoro was of his little brother. No, he could never lose control. He would never let it happen. He may be a vampire, but—

Not vampire. NSPH. Negligible senescent porphyric humanoid. He had to get used to thinking of himself as such. The people of this city, ironically enough, got twitchier about calling him a monster than he did. …And he wasn’t a monster, not in the traditional sense of the word at least. He wasn’t allergic to garlic and crawling around in the shadows of night looking for pretty young women to prey upon (he shivered at the though), but he was definitely a threat to the humans around him.

Sanji smirked to himself as Zoro—still grumbling to himself—used his body sort of like a battering ram to push open the incredibly heavy front door. He raised a hand to grab his cigarette and hide the smile, lest the idiot turn around for whatever reason.

Sanji wasn’t exactly sure why he’d cajoled the idiot into coming along. That was something he hadn’t yet found the courage to tackle. That was a big box in his mind, filed under “Fuck This Shit,”
and he had no desire to open it up quite yet. Zoro just… calmed him. If Sanji was a raging tide, Zoro was a jetty, strong and immovable and able to take whatever Sanji dished and still stand up to him and fight back.

Zoro was something, that was for sure. In a way, he almost reminded Sanji of—

“What are you doing?”

Sanji stopped outside the front door of the building as Zoro picked his helmet up off of his bike. He’d called the swordsman stupid at first for leaving the motorcycle out here so unprotected, but it had occurred to him after a while that probably everyone in the city knew who it belonged to and would never dare take it, because those that would take it wouldn’t get half a block away before people that felt indebted to Shanks and his crew would find it odd that someone else was riding the great Zoro Roronoa’s bike.

Zoro turned to give him a look, clearly asking how stupid he was. Sanji felt his shoulders tighten at the expression; a kneejerk reaction to being around the dickhead for so long.

“I’m putting on my helmet,” Zoro said slowly.

“I know that, fucker! Why are you putting on your helmet?!”

“…Because it’s stupid to ride without it.”

“That’s not—!”

“Look,” Zoro cut him off, climbing onto the bike and knocking the kickstand back, “Law was crazy about this stuff when I was younger. Always wear a seatbelt, always wear a helmet, never drink and drive, don’t take candy from strangers; I got in the habit. Just shut up and get over here.”

“I’m not going over there! Why the hell are you—”

Sanji growled as Zoro gunned the engine to life and drowned out his yells, beckoning Sanji over like he fucking owned him or something.
“I’m not getting on that fucking thing!” he screamed around Zoro’s loud revving. Zoro gestured to his ears and shook his head. He flipped the visor down over his face, but not before Sanji caught the shit-eating smirk on his face.

“I SAID I’M NOT—”

Zoro shrugged, gesturing to his head again and sat back, patiently waiting for Sanji to come over. The cook planted his feet and stuck his hands in his pocket, puffing heavily on his cigarette now. He was not pouting. But he was going to need a new cigarette soon. Zoro sagged a little and quieted the engine.

“What, shit cook. What is the problem.”

“I’m not getting on that fucking thing!”

“I know it’s scary the first few times, but I’m not a bad—”

“I’M NOT SCARED, ASSHOLE!”

“Really? You look pretty nervous to me.”

“FUCK YOU, THAT THING IS LIKE ONE OF THE HORSES OF THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE! I’D HAVE TO BE AN IDIOT NOT TO HAVE RESERVATIONS!”

Zoro sighed to himself and turned the key, silencing the engine again. He leaned back on his seat and pushed the visor open again, leveling Sanji with a hard glare.

“Do you want to try and convince Franky to let us take one of his cars? This is a city, and a dead one, not a lot of people have vehicles. And we can’t take Shanks’ in case he needs them.”

Sanji shifted, recalling the blue-haired whacko’s obsession with his giant toys. Maybe if he threatened not to make a favorite meal of his for a while they could just have the clunker piece of
shit… which honestly might have been more dangerous than this motorized execution chair. Ugh.

“I’ll drive slow, alright? Just come on. I don’t know how far you’re planning on going outside the city, but you don’t know where we’re going and I sure as hell don’t so we’d better save out enough daylight hours to make it back.” And with that he snapped the visor back down and cranked the key, filling the streets with the echoing roars of the bike.

Sanji growled to himself and sucked in a huge breath. Not to calm himself down, it was to use up the rest of the cigarette. So he could have another one. Also not to calm himself down.

Damn. It’ll blow out in the wind anyways.

“Come on, shit cook,” Zoro held out his extra helmet, waving it at him impatiently. Sanji ran a hand over his eyes and quietly said his goodbyes to the world before he stepped forward and took the helmet from Zoro, sliding it over his eyes. He swung his foot over the back seat, determined not to falter and give the moss-head more to tease him about, but as soon as he was firmly seated on the bike, he found his arms locked tightly around Zoro’s middle and his face pressed into the impossibly strong back.

This was happening way too often. The fact that the idiot calmed him at all was a problem in the first place; that he was willingly giving into it was another kettle of fish. Stinking,rotting, fly-infested, toxic, week-old fish. Maybe Zeff was right; he did have an addictive personality. That was the only sane explanation he could find right now for why he was currently wrapped around the brute like a fucking new bride.

Fucking Christ.

Zoro’s voice was muffled considerably through both helmets and the way Sanji’s ears were jammed up against the padding in his from how he’d crammed himself into the grooves in Zoro’s back, but he managed to make out Zoro’s, “Ready?” and nod his head in response.

Zoro shifted, kicking the bike to life and Sanji jolted as it roared, and then Zoro shot off down the street like a missile, swinging so low around the first corner that Sanji was sure he’d lose paint on the side of the helmet. The bastard was doing it on purpose.

Sanji growled as he felt the chuckle in Zoro’s ribs and dug his nails into the idiot’s front, making him jump at the sudden stabbing sensation. Zoro took mercy on him after that and only skidded to a halt
at the first intersection, leveling out and letting Sanji get his heart rate back under control. Even whizzing as fast as they were down through the other cars on the road, Zoro kept the bike steady enough that Sanji felt himself pulling back—while still keeping a firm grip on Zoro’s coat—to look around and watch the city pass by.

Traveling at four-hundred-million miles an hour or not, the city was an impressive sight for something that had been raised in only a couple of years and was still largely under construction, and soon Sanji was even taking his eyes off of the road to gape at the buildings above him and how tall they were after only three years. Idly, he wondered what the population was here; there were almost no newcomers—it was such a protective cult here, he doubted they’d just let anyone in—and the population had been decimated during the bombing and the vam—NSPH invasion. Maybe ten thousand or so people. It was a small city, only like six miles, so walking from one end to the other shouldn’t have taken him more than an hour. The city used to be much bigger, but without help from the government, their budget had forced them to rebuild up instead of out. If nothing else, it would make air raids more difficult in the future from how close together and tall the buildings were.

Zoro blinked as he felt Sanji’s front lean back into him, the cook’s arms shifting to find a comfortable position around his middle. Zoro let himself have the grin because it was hidden by his helmet and no one would ever see.

And the idiot put up such a fuss.

-oOo-

Zoro looked back confusedly when Sanji tapped his shoulder excitedly, gesturing towards something on the street up ahead of him. Unable to see anything of interest and knowing that he wouldn’t be able to hear Sanji over the wind, he pulled off to the side of the road, coasting to a stop so he could look back over his shoulder properly. Sanji had already yanked his helmet off of his head and was grinning hugely up at one of the buildings in front of them.

“Is that an aquarium?”

Zoro looked back to the sign above them where Sanji’s one good eye was trained. That’s what the sign said. “Yeah, I guess. So what?”

Sanji bounded off of the back of the bike, long legs flinging over the seat and onto the ground before Zoro had even noticed he’d moved and had the option to protest. “Let’s go in!”
“Seriously, cook? Aren’t we trying to get food?”

“We’re trying,” Sanji corrected, combing his fingers through his bangs to make sure that the fringe hid his eyes after being stuck under the helmet, “to learn the area outside the city. If I happen to cross some more things off of my list in the process, awesome, but I’ve never been in an aquarium before and I haven’t been this close to the ocean since my old man and I got off the boat here.”

Sanji took off for the front doors of the aquarium, so in a hurry that he forgot he was still holding the helmet and did a double take when he realized it was still in his hands, tripping over himself as he ground to a stop. Zoro chuckled and shifted to lean the bike straight up, balancing the weight better. Sanji turned back for the bike to put the helmet on the seat and paused again, noticing that Zoro hadn’t moved an inch and didn’t seem to be planning on it any time soon.

Sanji dropped his head back in annoyance before leveling Zoro with what the swordsman was expecting to be a glare, a show of authority and a threat to not make him onigiri for a month unless he came, but was instead closer to… a plea. That made Zoro stop.

Sanji gestured uselessly towards the building behind him, an antsy spring in his movements. He didn’t seem to know how to convey that this was really important to him. Or even if he wanted to convey it to Zoro. Maybe he’d been hoping the swordsman would just do it so he wouldn’t have to divulge this about himself.

Sanji made a sound at the back of his throat, exasperated and imploring, and Zoro found himself straightening unconsciously at the request. “Please, marimo? Come on, we won’t take long—I haven’t seen anything remotely close to the ocean in ten years!”

Zoro groaned and pulled the key from the ignition, sliding his helmet off his head and moving to clip it to the seat. He wasn’t really annoyed, but Sanji was… cute like this. And it gave Zoro a funny twitter in his chest to know that he was able to make the idiot happy, even for something stupid like this.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Just not too long, ok? We’ll never get back if we have to find our way home in the dark. I really don’t want to have to owe Franky for coming to get me again.”

“We won’t!” Sanji assured him quickly, dashing over to add his own helmet to the seat. “I promise, we won’t, I just want to see the fish. And the water will be nice—do you think they have one of those giant open tanks?!”
Zoro ducked his head, pretending to fiddle with the bike so he could hide the smirk that was pulling at his cheeks. Damn cook.

-oOo-

The main room of the aquarium was filled with columns that stretched ten feet above their heads to the ceiling. Each column was filled with plant life and fish from different corners of every ocean that reflected the dim blue lighting off in wisps that danced across the tiled floor. The floor itself was made to look like the ocean floor with fake shadows of turtles, sharks, and other creatures swimming about. The room looked like something out of an underwater futuristic society with hollow columns that acted as windows into the outside world, and Sanji had never looked so at home.

Zoro watched him drift from column to column, looking the insides up and down, taking in every fish, every plant, every life form, every change in lighting, all of the facts listed outside the columns, like he was a little kid and had just entered a marine life phase.

Sanji’s hair had taken on an odd blue tinge along with everything else in the room, and his dark suit shone iridescent navy as the black reflected the blue. The only thing of him that hadn’t changed was his eye, and Zoro’s breath still caught slightly in his throat every time the cook turned around and Zoro could see clearly just how closely the color mimicked the blue of the ocean water.

Zoro stepped quietly up to Sanji’s side, his hands firmly in his pockets, lips pinched tightly together. Even with everyone else drifting around them, the aquarium was so quiet that it felt like much more of an intimate moment than it was supposed to be. Sanji looked up from where he was crouched and face to face with a vibrantly striped fish, and the fish darted off at the sudden additional person. The cook didn’t seem bothered by the loss and watched it go, turning to give Zoro a small smile before he realized what he was doing and ducked his head to look at another fish. Zoro scowled and turned his head sharply away, jamming his hands deeper into his pockets. But the way Sanji moved was too spellbinding, and soon his gaze was trained on the cook again, watching Sanji’s cold exterior melt as he followed the fish around the column with his eyes.

“…What are you looking for?” he murmured. Speaking too loud felt like a sacrilegious act in here for some reason, but Zoro wasn’t sure if that was because of Sanji or the place itself.

Sanji shrugged, patting himself down for a cigarette before he remembered where they were and ran his tongue over his lip where a cigarette normally sat instead. Zoro’s mouth went dry at the sight and he chewed lightly on the end of his tongue, fighting the urge to mimic the movement.

“…It’s stupid.”
“…What?”

“…Just… looking for fish that aren’t supposed to be in this tank. All of the columns are separated out by areas in the world; I thought if I could see a fish here that wasn’t supposed to be here it might give me a clue to where All Blue is.”

All Blue. Sanji had mentioned it once before—to reassure Zoro that his dream wasn’t stupid when Zoro was explaining Mihawk and felt a particularly strong blush radiating up in his cheeks. He’d said that if achieving Zoro’s dream was like winning the lottery, than achieving his was like finding water on Mercury. An ocean where all the life of the marine world congregated in a place that created a chef’s heaven; Sanji had been set on finding it ever since he’d broken out of the facility the first time.

“…Has it really been ten years since you’ve seen the ocean?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Nothing, I guess. Just seems like you’d want to get back there sooner; when you’re in here you don’t look like you’d want to live on land at all.”

Sanji chuckled to himself at that and straightened back up, leaning away from the tank. Zoro watched his tongue flick out again over his lip—this subject always made him touchy and whenever it was brought up, it came hand in hand with a dose of nicotine, so the fact that he was still talking about it even without a cigarette had Zoro reverting to how he acted when Sanji first started talking: silent until Sanji needed a small, probing question, and then just hopeful that the cook would continue.

“…The first time I got out, Ze—err, my old man”—Zoro blinked, locking in on Sanji’s slip, but the cook carried on like nothing had happened, though the tenseness in his shoulders gave away his uneasiness. He’d almost given away a substantial key to his origins.—“always talked about the ocean. He told me story after story of the huge blue waters that stretched so far you could sail for days and days and never hope to see either side of it, filled to the brim with every kind of nutrient and flavor to cook with. …For a kid that had just seen the light of day for the first time in years and had never really used his hands, the idea of something so… liberating and with so many opportunities to advance skill sets…”

Sanji’s voice was strong even without the cigarette, and Zoro was in something of a trance, drifting
closer and closer with every word out of Sanji’s mouth.

“And then after I was taken back and my old man rescued me again, we got on his boat and left. It was too dangerous to stay on land anywhere close to the facility, so we left and we sailed for a year, feeding ships we passed, picking up cooking techniques wherever we docked, learning the life of sailors and sometimes pirates—who occasionally we had to fight to get off of our boat again but most just left after we fed them.”

“Pirates?” Zoro snorted. He didn’t realize how close he was to Sanji. Something about the lighting in the room, messing up his vision. Sanji rolled his eye.

“Yes, pirates. Not swash-buckling, plank-walking, beard-burning, arr-ye-matey pirates, but pirates in the sense of the technical definition. They just take hostages and hold up ships and cruise liners, with guns these days instead of scabbards. You’re the only weirdo I know that still uses swords.”

Zoro snorted again, a totally different tone in his voice. He put out an arm above his head, resting it against the glass and leaned his head on his forearm, turning slightly to keep watching Sanji, who had gotten close to the tank again to watch the fish. In the back of his mind, he registered that they were pretty close, but nothing in the foreground of his brain was signaling that it was a problem and the thought went unchecked. And from this closeness he could see everything of Sanji, something that felt so deep and primal—considering how protective the curly-cue was of his personal space—that moving away would have felt like chickening out right as you were about to put your hand on the head of a king cobra. Everything in him screamed “unforgivable” at the idea.

“He started telling me about the legends of All Blue then, and then laughed at me when I swore that I would find it. I knew the bastard wanted to find it too, but he’s always been a little more realistic then me when it comes to what you can and can’t do.” Sanji chuckled sheepishly and scratched the back of his head. “Apparently… I don’t have a very good track record for doing what I’m supposed to.”

“I’ll say.” Zoro’s voice sounded heavy, and he tracked the flinch in the sharp shoulders as the cook registered Zoro’s breath on his cheek. All in the span of half a second, Sanji’s eyes widened slightly and then closed back down again; his shoulder’s tensed further and then relaxed completely, unintentionally straightening him out; his toes shifted like his first reaction to the invasion of space was to lash out, but stilled after that; and his head drifted forward and came to rest against the glass of the tank next to Zoro’s. Zoro’s breath left him in a rush—the cook was completely, utterly, entirely relaxed for the first time since he’d woken up in the hospital here.

Sanji was still and Zoro waited patiently, pattering heart rate taking off like maraca when after a good, solid minute, Sanji’s head started drifting to the side, the vibrant blue eye raising slowly to meet Zoro’s deep green ones. The cook was turning towards him—!
“Excuse me, sirs.”

Sanji was gone so fast that neither Zoro nor the guard standing behind them saw him move. Zoro did see the guard jump at the sudden appearance of Sanji’s head level with his own as the cook snapped up straighter than a ruler, but he recovered pretty quickly despite the scare. Sanji’s good eye was as wide and bright as the tanks, his mouth closed tightly, and Zoro could see every fase of comprehension wash over him all too clearly. Reality was kicking in again, and the shockwave was knocking Sanji off of his feet.

“You can’t lean against the glass.”

“Sorry,” Sanji rasped, already gone and halfway across the room toward the glowing “Exit” sign over the gift shop doors. Zoro’s lips pinched tighter together, and his dark glower found the guard before he could remember to keep from making a scene. He’d be fucked if he got arrested here, more so because Law and Kid would kill him than anything else, but it would still create a pool of shit to wade through. The guard, a poor kid who was probably just trying to pay for school, jumped for a second time at the glare but held his ground.

“Sir—”

“I heard you,” Zoro growled, pulling away from the tank to follow after Sanji. He just hoped the cook got over himself and slowed down before Zoro lost him and any chance of using daylight to find their way back to the city was shot.

-oOo-

The air back on the bike was thick, despite how fast Zoro was going in his annoyance. It was so awkward between the two that Sanji didn’t even seem perturbed by the speed as they careened through the streets. The cook had had a bare minimum hold on his waist since leaving the aquarium and didn’t seem to be game to grab ahold any time soon. Zoro was grinding his teeth, listening to the grating noises in his mouth and trying to concentrate on that to keep from getting more annoyed.

_Stupid fucking idiot and his stupid fucking job and his stupid fucking timing and fuck the stupid fucking aquarium and—even though the aquarium had been what opened Sanji up so much in the first place—fuck the stupid fucking_—
Blue and white lights flashed suddenly out of the corner of Zoro’s eye and he sucked in an annoyed breath, bike wobbling as the cook whipped back around to see the police car trailing them. Zoro’s eyes flicked down to the speedometer and he swore loudly, though it was drowned out by the wind.

Zoro closed his eyes for a second and counted backwards from ten, trying to keep from grinding a hole right through one of his teeth, blowing out the breath he’d been holding when he reached one.

Fine. Whatever.

_This license better hold up in their system or I will fucking kill Usopp_—

Zoro blinked as he felt the pressure tighten around his middle and something warm lean into his back, looking back over his shoulder to see that Sanji hand anchored himself to him. A quick glance down told him that the cook had locked his impossibly strong legs around the bike too.

…Well, the cook must have been pretty used to running too.

“Driver, pull over and turn your engine off.”

Zoro felt a grin split his face and leaned down into the bike, Sanji moving with him to meld to the bike’s form, and Zoro yanked his fingers off of the handbrake and gunned the engine.

He tore off down the street, siren wailing to life behind them as the cruiser began its pursuit. Sanji’s grip tightening around him only made Zoro’s heart rate race in his chest and he revved again, whipping around a corner into a residential area so fast they came close to touching the ground.

Zoro felt Sanji shift behind him, moving to look back at the cruiser as it fishtailed down the street after them. Sanji moved again, looking around them and squeezed Zoro’s left shoulder hard just before the next intersection, just like Robin did. Zoro was grinning like a hyena now and turned, tires squealing against the pavement as they raced around the corner. Zoro swung the bike like a pendulum, barely straight up and down from the last corner before Sanji squeezed one of his shoulders and he tore around another, the sounds of the police cruiser getting farther and farther away the faster they turned.

A car rolled around a blind corner and through a stop sign suddenly in front of him and Zoro sucked in a breath, yanking the bike to the left. His heart jumped into his throat as the grip on his shoulders
was suddenly gone and one horrible image of Sanji’s head smashing open against the ground flashed through his head. He tightened his grip on the handle bars, whipping back around to see what he’d done when the cook’s body slammed back into him from behind, gripping him so tight that Zoro was having trouble breathing, and Zoro whirled back around barely in time to see that the car was still coming and swerved sharply, the car’s horn blaring as they slammed on their brakes, and Zoro took off down another street.

His heart was like a jackhammer in his chest, and he could feel Sanji’s hand shaking slightly against him, the cook’s helmet pressed painfully into his shoulder blades. Sanji wasn’t directing him anymore. Zoro gritted his teeth and turned off onto another side street and around an orange fence marked “construction”, drifting slowly to a stop. He had to pull over.

The bike rumbled gently as he rolled it down past where the pavement ended and dirt surrounded where the house going up. He pulled it into a nook in the foundation where the owners must have been saving room for an addition later and killed the engine and turned his lights off, even though it was still evening and no one would have seen them driving by. He pulled his helmet off, letting Sanji keep his anaconda grip around his ribs as they listened, waiting, and a minute later the siren came into range, growing closer and closer before the cruiser sped past the house and off down the road. Zoro relaxed after that and rested his helmet on the handlebars, sliding the keys into his jacket pocket before he craned around to look down at Sanji. The cook had stopped shaking, if nothing else, and Zoro was going to take that as a plus.

“That,” Sanji breathed, letting go of Zoro to lean back and yank his helmet off, “is why I don’t ride these fucking things.”

Zoro said nothing, heart still thudding heavily now that he didn’t have to concentrate on driving and that image of Sanji’s blood splattering across the road could play in a torturous loop in his mind. Sanji swung his long legs over the back of the bike and walked away slowly, patting himself down for his pack of cigarettes and lighter. The cook found a comfortable place to stand next to the foundation and lit up, breathing in deeply as he looked over the open frame of the two-story house.

Zoro shifted uncomfortably, trying to find some un-assholish way to breach the fact that they had to get back on the bike to go home. Maybe he should just let Sanji finish the cigarette. Or a couple. Or —

“Hey!” he called as Sanji walked up the steps suddenly and disappeared through the frame where the front door would have been in the half-finished house. Zoro scrambled off of the bike and dashed up the stairs after the cook, groaning when Sanji was nowhere in sight even in such an open building.

“Cook!” Zoro crossed the threshold, leaning around what would have been corners to find the cook until he came to a larger room lined with metal piping and wires that splayed across the walls and
ceiling. Sanji was standing in the middle of the wood shavings, surveying the layout with the cigarette held casually in his fingers.

“I’m thinking granite counter tops,” he gestured vaguely and Zoro blinked, glancing around and trying to find where he was looking. “Grey would work best with the cherry cabinets. But we’d have to do tile flooring, anything else would look tacky against the dark wood.”

“…Huh?”

“And then over there,” the cook waved his hand toward the far wall where a hole was cut out for glass double sliding doors, “some really nice dark golden curtains. Floor length.”

“You high, cook?”

Zoro watched the cook as he meandered across the room, taking in the walls, the floors, the doorways to other rooms—everything he was imagining there to be around them. Zoro looked around again, just incase he was the one who’d almost died on the bike and was just hallucinating now.

“I want ceiling-high shelves here,” Sanji stuck the cigarette in his mouth so he could use both hands now. “The same color as the cabinets, and with enough space for big pots and my cookbooks.”

Zoro sighed to himself, scratching at his scalp uneasily before he said, “…Only… if the colors work with the tile behind the sink. You know, on the wall.”

Sanji looked back over his shoulder, hands still out to gesture to where the shelves would have been, to blink at Zoro curiously and Zoro shrugged, scratching the back of his head. He wasn’t good at this sort of thing. “You know… it’ll look really weird otherwise.”

Sanji was still for another moment, and then slowly cracked a smile before he turned back to the far wall and nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. But I think the grey countertops will match the blue tile, so we don’t have to worry about that. We’ll have to be careful about the color for the floor though, it’s easy to pick clashing colors if you don’t want to use the same colors.”

“Grey might be nice for tiles.”
“It’s not too much with the counters?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think so. I’m not really good with colors; you’re better with that.”

Sanji wasn’t looking at him, but Zoro could see from how relaxed his shoulders were that this was calming him down and guessed that from the way the cook had suddenly moved to grab his cigarette that he was hiding a smile. Zoro let himself have the victorious smirk, especially after such an awkward start to their ride home. The sky was growing darker outside, but Zoro had no desire to leave yet. Maybe getting lost with Sanji would be fun; they’d make it home sooner or later.

Zoro found his way to Sanji’s side and they drifted into the next room, Sanji pointing out a spot on the wall between two large windows.

“Great-Grandfather Banban’s portrait could go there; it’d go nicely with a suede couch.”

Zoro shook his head. “We better get a leather couch, or Odama will get fur all over it. I’m not getting rid of that cat; he’s too old, no one will take him so we’d have to put him down.”

That made Sanji laugh. “Why is that thing still alive anyways? It’s the crotchetiest fifteen-year-old cat in existence. All it does it eat and scratch the furniture and shit in the tub when we go away for a couple of days. But I don’t know about the leather. Zenny, Moore, and Minchey always chase it everywhere, and dog claws are much bigger than cats’. If they jump up on the leather it’ll tear really easily.”

“I don’t want wool.”

“Gross. No. That would be the worst for the summers around here; all that heat. I guess we could do textured cotton, something that we could vacuum so Odama could sit his touchy ass wherever he wanted and it wouldn’t matter.”

Zoro grinned at that, nodding. “You think we could get a surround sound system in here?”

Sanji thought for a moment, reaching up to take his cigarette from his lips. “I guess I could put in some overtime at the office. The pharmaceutical companies have been sending in more samples
anyways and they want me to advertise to patients that come in for their prescriptions.”

“Odama will be pissed that you’re not here.”

“Maybe he’ll choke from anger.”

Zoro faked a gasp and leaned over to knock into Sanji with his shoulder, making the cook stumble slightly. “I’ve had that cat since college!”

Sanji grinned evilly and blew smoke in Zoro’s direction. “Whatever. I’m not paying for the damn thing’s meds.”

“You always liked dogs better.”

“Hell yeah I do, why do you think we have three colossal Irish Wolfhounds? We’re going to have no room to live here ourselves with them.”

“And you’re expecting me to take care of them while you’re at work, I guess.”

“Well yeah, you run a small gallery with some artists no one knows about yet and openings are only at night. You have enough time for them.”

Zoro snorted. “A gallery, huh? What type of art?”

“Whoever isn’t selling enough to be desperate enough to ask you.”

“So you’re the breadwinner of the house.”

“Well I know stress gets to you, so you just relax at home.” He gave Zoro a shit-eating grin. “I’ll take care of the rest.”
“Whatever, cook. Let’s just see how your colossal Irish Wolfhounds get by without me taking care of them when I leave because I’m not appreciated.”

“You always do this. You’re such a diva.”

-oOo-

After getting home, Sanji had gone up for a desperately needed shower following such a long day of being whipped through the air like a bullet. He was pretty sure for a while there that his hair would never be affected by gravity again; the wind had done too much damage.

He padded down the stairs of the apartment, rubbing a towel over his dripping hair and heading for the kitchen. The clock that was visible through a peephole in the towel around his head said 11:26. Sanji groaned. They hadn’t even had dinner yet. Next time they went out, he was investing in enough maps to make up an atlas. The idiot swordsman couldn’t have found his way home if kidnappers called and told him he had three days to get to his apartment before they killed one of his friends.

Sanji chuckled to himself, imagining the brute pleading with them to let him say goodbye over the phone because he might not make it and did a double take after his gaze passed over the kitchen. Sitting on the far counter was a small fishbowl with deep blue sand and a couple of plants. Four fish swam lazily through the water, one white with green splotches like a cow, one yellow with flowing fins that resembled tentacles, one grey with a white underbelly and needle-like teeth, and one that looked something like a tiny whale. Upon further inspection, Sanji could see that none of the fish should have been in the same bowl at all, as they were all found in different corners of the ocean.

Sanji pulled back and ran his finger over the top of the glass, where the mini-cow swam over and nibbled at the top of the water like he’d put food in. Sanji, spying the container of fish food next to the bowl and telling himself he’d start a feeding schedule tomorrow—Zoro wasn’t stupid enough not to feed them—dropped a couple of flakes in the water and watched contentedly as the four fish darted around, swallowing flecks of food as they floated about.

…Maybe he’d make Zoro’s favorite tonight, even though it was so late.

A smirk found its way onto Sanji’s face and he pushed the towel on his head back to his shoulders, leaving the fish for the moment and heading towards the fridge.
And he even went out and got back before I got out of the shower. Maybe he hired someone to help him find his way. Where is he anyways? Is he sleeping? He better not be, he hasn’t had dinner.

Sanji ignored the tiny part of him that hoped Zoro wasn’t asleep. Evenings were always the best time to talk to the swordsman, he was most relaxed after a good workout at the end of the day and would say a lot more unprovoked.

And the moment today at the aquarium was filed under “Fuck This Shit” and shoved into a dark corner of Sanji’s mind. He cooked better when he wasn’t focused on stupid shit like that.

-oOo-
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

He adjusted the black hat on his head and reached into his pocket to pull out the phone resting quietly there, never once taking his eyes off of the two of them from down the street. He punched in the number with his thumb, a number he knew by heart and didn’t have to look at the keypad to get right. A waitress walked up to him, holding out a pot of coffee and he nodded, gesturing to his cup while he waited for the answer on the other end. As it was, he wasn’t sure which direction the two of them were going to continue in—they’d only just come out of the supermarket and could either come towards him or walk away—and he probably wouldn’t be able to finish the coffee before he had to move, whether it was to follow them or keep out of sight.

“Yes?”

“I found the apartment,” he murmured, pausing to take a sip of the steaming liquid. They were stopped in front of a window that he was pretty sure was a kitchenware store, nothing out of the ordinary there. “It’s a two-floored place in a building that was converted from a warehouse. Some old woman owns it now and rents out the spaces as studio apartments. They might have some sort of history with her, she normally doesn’t rent to anyone she doesn’t know, but I can’t find any past relations.”

“That doesn’t matter; Roronoa has a reputation in the city so the relations may just stem from that. But you have the address?”

“Yes, I’ll text it to you.”

“And the apartment?”

“It’s got good locks, but that isn’t surprising. I couldn’t get in, I tried while they were at the grocery store and now I’m watching from down the street. But the place itself is pretty open, a good chunk of the two outside walls are entirely windows. I don’t think it’ll be hard to get into. The problem is getting them apart, I have yet to see him without Roronoa.”
“If we must, we can all go in together. The two of them won’t be able to handle all of us. Any sign of Nico?”

“Nothing, and I’ve been here for weeks. She may have been working under Shanks for a while there, but whether she left or is just gone, there haven’t been any whisperings of her for over a year now.”

“Very well, that’s for Teach and Doflamingo to handle anyways. We’ll set up a time to go in and retrieve him.”

“About that.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been watching them for weeks, and it doesn’t seem… like Blackleg’s noticed me at all.”

“And?”

“Well, isn’t he supposed to have all those innate abilities and sixth senses? I was pretty sure Roronoa saw me once by accident at a fight, but nothing’s come of it—not even a raise in guards around the city—so I think the sedatives they gave him made him forget.”

“Any ideas?”

“None, I have no fucking clue how the virus works and they won’t tell me. …In any event, part of the plan—and the boss okayed this—was that I would stay far enough away that Blackleg would get comfortable, and then move in closer little by little so he would start to sense me being there. Hopefully by that point he’d be close enough to the people here not to want them hurt and would start distancing himself when he felt the impending danger, which would make it easier for us to take him. He’s been here for at least five weeks—I couldn’t find how long he was here before Fukuro found him—and has clearly formed an attachment to them, but no matter how close I get, he shows no signs of sensing me. I can’t get any closer now or someone else like Monkey or Flam or Roronoa will sense me and throw everything off. As it is, short of starting ding-dong ditching and calling in the middle of the night and hanging up, I don’t think he’s going to sense me any time soon, which means he’ll have no reason to leave Roronoa’s side.”
“…Perhaps he’s gotten too comfortable. Being around that many people at that level of strength may have given him a false sense of security. Shanks is much stronger than Redleg ever was.”

“Yeah, and there’s been no contact to Redleg either from what I can tell, which I can only figure is to keep himself safe. Blueno and I have regular contact and he says the atmosphere there is still as if Blackleg died; Redleg is the only one that is keeping positive about that, but the old man is just stubborn. But I found something interesting that would send a pretty damn obvious message, and it’s perfect because the rest of them expect that something like this might happen anyways. He’s the only one that would think of himself and take it as a double-meaning.”

“What’s that?”

“Roronoa’s little brother? He’s one of them too.”

“…………No.”

“On my life. I never looked into him because Law and Kid are so damn protective and I could never get close, but for whatever reason—maybe even just that he’s getting older now—they’re letting him out more on his own. Should I let Spandam know?”

“…No. We were not ordered to. And you’re sure?”

“Positive. I did as much digging as I could, but what with the destruction and rebuilding of the city and the shit show of paper work that comes along with something like that, the kid’s history cuts off somewhere around ten years back. But I’m positive. There are a couple kids his age with the virus that went missing right about then; some were thought to be dead but no one knows for sure. The kid’s good leverage regardless of his NSPH status because of his family, but Blackleg would take it for sure as that, and then all we have to do is get Blackleg alone for a minute. I’m going to call in other people so it won’t be tied back to us just in case something goes wrong.”

“Do it.”

-oOo-

“Hey, little bro, wanna take this to your dad? I borrowed it to fix the speaker system but I think he’s gonna to need it to build the feed tray he’s working on today.”
Killer nodded and took the tool from Franky, tucking it into the sheath where his scythes were on his belt. He had started wearing the hand guards all the time now—which made Law happier when he went out with friends—but the blades were detachable and had to be kept out of sight just in case he ran into marines, hence the sheath.

Franky stuck his head back up into the ceiling through the missing panel, fiddling with the wires hanging down. “I think both of your dads are down at the shop today, Law had the day off and I haven’t seen him around here. No one hurt to fix up. Why don’t you stop over with cook-bro and get something to eat too? You’re looking a little tired.”

“I will,” Killer nodded again even though Franky couldn’t see him anymore. “Be back soon.”

“Sure thing, little bro.”

Killer started up the stairs from the arena, yawning as he jogged. He really should have gone to Sanji this morning—he was getting too used to eating regularly every few days now, but he’d gone for much longer and been fine. And Franky had been working on a really intricately wired part of the system; he didn’t want to miss that.

The hallways were strangely quiet, even straining he couldn’t hear people off in other parts of the building. Now that Sanji wasn’t living in the hospital rooms, both he and Zoro had less reason to be here what with their new apartment, which he still had yet to visit. And Sanji constantly being in his own kitchen instead of here meant that Luffy was usually off too, wandering the city until dinnertime when Sanji and Zoro came back to feed everyone. Chopper probably had extra work at the hospital with Law not being there, Usopp was probably at home working in his garage, Nami was most likely finding extra work or betting in one of the establishments just outside the city, Brook was probably off having tea somewhere… A lot of when the group came together seemed to revolve around Sanji’s food. But Sanji’s food was great, so that was ok.

Killer grinned. *Maybe Zoro will let me stay over, then I can have as much of Sanji’s food as I…*

Killer bristled suddenly, grinding to a halt in the middle of the street. Just now, a cactus had scuttled up his spine and left a trail of stinging pricks in his skin. He reached up and scratched lightly at his shoulder blade, glancing around the evening street behind him, lit only by the scattered streetlights that were just coming on as the sun set. Only a few lights had survived the demolition of the city and they had yet to put new ones up—and might not at all—but his eyes were strong enough without them to see.
A shiver ran up the back of his neck again and Killer stuck his hands into the sheaths on either side of his hips, where both blades clipping automatically to the hand guards on his wrists. He was a couple blocks from Shanks’ now, too far to run back, which meant finding someone else to help or somewhere to hide. The prickling hurt, which never meant anything good. Normally it was just annoying, and that meant something like Luffy was about to jump on him or Usopp was about to detonate something accidentally. The last time it hurt, he’d nearly died in their apartment, and he fought the burning sensation rising in the scar on his neck to keep from scratching it and ready for whatever was coming. He whirred the blades back close to his forearm, in waiting position like he’d been learning, and crept slowly out of the street and towards the sidewalk where the shadows were darkest.

A twig popped behind him and Killer spun with a gasp, slashing out with his scythes, but he knew even before he’d fully turned that he’d missed from the way his neck was still twittering and whirlled again, trying to find whoever was there when something whipped into his field of vision from the side and slammed into his cheek, launching him into the air and sending him crashing to the ground in the middle of the street.

-oOo-

“I’m not getting a fucking cat! We didn’t get rid of two kids to get something else to feed! Get a plant if you need something that badly for your empty nest syndrome!”

“I’m just saying that the mother is out in the streets with two brand new kittens and we should at least feed them if nothing else.”

“It can be a cactus if you want it to scratch you!”

“I’m sure Sanji would agree with me that we should feed them.”

“Don’t use him! He’s not your trump card! I don’t give a flying fuck what he thinks!”

“You know, you yelling with your head is stuck under the car is toning down the severity of your threats.”

“We’re not getting a cat!”
Zoro snorted, covering his mouth and turning slightly so that Kid wouldn’t see him, even though the redhead was currently beneath the underbelly of a car and was just a pair of irate legs thrashing about. Sanji, perched next to him on the table Zoro was leaning against, reached up, pretending to grab his cigarette while he covered his own smirk. Law looked amused, leaning against the car Kid was working on and grinning to himself while Kid ranted.

“Kittens,” Law corrected unabashedly. “Two kittens, and you’ll barely notice they’re there. We’ll be able to find homes for them—some nurses at the hospital have already expressed interest. It’s temporary.”

“Temporary shredding of our apartment and shitting all over our floors!”

“You’re the one who complains if they’re noisy when we have sex.”

That made Sanji snort, and he covered it quickly with a cough as Kid rolled out from under the car and sat up to glare at Law.

“Just make Killer come home for dinner every once and a while.”

Law rolled his eyes. “It’s not about my supposed empty next syndrome, Eustass. It’s about three hungry cats that live outside our apartment door and the fact that we will be feeding them.”

“Don’t say “fact” like it’s already been decided!”

“I’m not about to step over kitten corpses every time I want to walk through my front door.”

“I’ll feed them if you don’t want to,” Sanji chimed in quietly and Law gestured to him.

“See? Wanting innocent kittens to starve to death is not a normal thing.”

“They’re not starving to death!”

Zoro recognized the tapping of Luffy’s sandals outside the door but decided he’d let the younger
man let himself in instead of walking away from the table. He didn’t feel quite like moving from this spot, especially since Sanji had hopped up on the table right next to him and basically had the length of his leg draped up against Zoro’s side. It was odd for the cook to be so bold like that, but he wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth and he wasn’t about to move until Sanji did. His arm was still burning where they were touching, just like it had been ten minutes ago when the cook joined him.

“You guys in there?” Luffy called from outside the door, followed immediately by the sound of something crashing against the cement floors. Kid gritted his teeth and Law smirked down at him, watching the annoyance roll over his body before Kid gave up and leaned back on the creeper heavily so he could roll back under the car.

“Yes, Luffy, we’re in here,” Law called in much of a sing-song voice, no doubt to continue bothering Kid.

Zoro, from his position leaning on the table that was next to the door, couldn’t see Luffy at first, but he could see Law’s expression drop as Luffy came into Law’s view. The doctor’s lips pinched together so tight they lost their color, and horror and dead seriousness snapped over Law’s face like a bolt of lightning as the doctor yanked away from the car, making a beeline for Luffy with long strides. Zoro followed him with his eyes, confused as to what could make Law act like that, only to almost swallow his tongue when he saw Luffy, his breath locking in his throat painfully.

The younger D brother was grinning happily, dripping blood from three different places on his face and several others on his body where his clothes had been ripped, but Luffy fighting and coming back injured was nothing out of the ordinary. The small person on his back, on the other hand, was very out of the ordinary.

Killer was clutching at Luffy’s shoulders and hiding his face in the back of Luffy’s neck, but even from far away, Zoro could see the enormous bruise on his brother’s face and the numerous skid marks and cuts marring his body. Law was at Luffy’s side in a heartbeat, faster than Zoro could even get his body to move, helping Killer off of Luffy’s back and up onto the table on the other side of the door so he could look at Killer’s wounds.

“What happened?” Law asked quietly, running his fingers gently over the bruise on Killer’s cheek. It was already yellowing, the edges of it starting to turn back to Killer’s normal skin color, but it was the size of a grapefruit and the fact that it was taking this long to heal at all meant that whatever had hit Killer had hit him hard. The bone looked broken underneath the skin. Zoro registered inwardly that Kid had joined them, the older man’s stance tight, but he didn’t even really remember getting to Law’s side and he couldn’t take in anything other than Killer’s quivering bottom lip through the white-hot rage that was boiling up through his blood. His fingers drifted unconsciously to his side where his swords were hanging, waiting for Luffy’s answer.
Luffy shifted the hat on his head. “I was on my way to Sanji and Zoro’s apartment because I was really hungry and I hadn’t eaten since my snack after lunch, and I saw some people attacking Killer in the street about two blocks from here.”

“And where are they?”

Luffy shrugged. “Probably still in the street. There was no one else around and I didn’t want to stay there with Killer, so I called Shanks with a payphone. He said he would send some people to clean them up.”

“I want you to describe to me everyone you saw there,” Kid snarled, fingers twitching as he tried to stay calm.

“No,” Law snapped. “No one is going out there. You either, Zoro, calm down.”

Zoro let out a slow breath, forcing his grip on Shusui and Kitetsu to loosen. He’d already begun to slide them from their sheaths.

Two blocks wasn’t far from here and Shanks might not have gotten people there yet. He and Kid could go—

He jumped at the sudden weight on his shoulder, finding Sanji’s hand firmly holding him as the cook shook his head. Zoro grunted, snapping the swords back into their places. He took another slow breath, counting Killer’s breaths as he calmed himself. Zoro traced the bubbling cuts with his eyes, watching them knit themselves back together. Killer was all right. The way he flinched though every time an oozing bubble deflated so the skin could stretch back over the bleeding cut made something burn in the back of his throat, but he made himself stay calm, feeling the weight of Sanji’s hand on his shoulder.

Law’s voice was firm, but more relaxed now that he was sure Killer was healing normally. “Was there anyone you recognized? Anyone from the city?”

Luffy didn’t move at first. “…I saw a couple of people, and I think I know who they are, but I want to make sure. I thought I remembered Franky telling me this morning that you’d both be at the shop so I told Shanks to meet me here after he gets them. He’s bringing the ID book of all the people he’s logged that live in the city.”
Law nodded and stepped slightly to the side so Kid could move in and the larger man laid a hand on
Killer’s head. Killer only quivered for a long time, a fang digging deep into his bottom lip where a
trickle of blood was dripping down his chin, and then he leaned over into Kid’s grimy shirt, turning
to hide his face as Kid held him close. Law stepped closer at that and Killer reached out, letting Law
rest a hand on his back soothingly while he clutched at both shirts. Zoro swallowed heavily, rolling
his neck, feeling Luffy and Sanji’s energies on either side of him to keep him anchored.

He didn’t notice how tightly Sanji was gripping his shoulder, or how stiff the cook had gone when
Luffy said that he’d recognized some of the people.

-oOo-

Zoro was leaning against a pillar in the front hall of the had-been-town-hall-turned-Shanks’-home-
base-and-arena, eyes closed and breathing deeply and counting until he was calm enough to open his
eyes and get his bearings. It didn’t look like that was going to be any time soon, he’d already reached
2,045.

Sturdy shoes tapped down the stairs next to him, and he followed the sounds of someone sitting next
to him. The smell of a cigarette washed over him, and even though he wasn’t particularly fond of the
smell he felt some of the tension leaving his back and neck.

Sanji.

“You ok?” the cook asked and Zoro managed a nod.

*Killer bleeding* Killer crying Killer hurt Killer scared Killer bruised Killer in danger—

“Shanks’ guys brought in some people through the back door. I didn’t see anyone, but one of the
guys that went with him said he brought back three. Two of them are still out, but Law is looking at
the awake one.”

Zoro blinked, finally losing his count and opening his eyes to look down at Sanji in shock. “…Law
is fixing… the people that hurt Killer?”

Sanji shrugged. “Guess so. I told him we’d come down soon.”
“…He can’t be fixing them.”

“Take it up with him, marimo, maybe his humanity has won over.”

“No,” Zoro shook his head firmly. “Law can’t be fixing them. He’s insane. He’d never go near someone that hurt someone close to him, unless he could make the process as painful as possible. There’s no way he’d agree to it, even if Shanks ordered him to.”

“He’s a doctor, maybe this is just because of the oath.”

Zoro knew that Law wouldn’t, but even the thought brought the anger he’d just forced down to a simmer back to a broil in his chest.

“…Are you really ok though?”

Sanji’s tone of voice made Zoro pause, and he looked down slowly to meet the cook’s good iridescent eye, glowing morosely up at him.

…Was **Sanji** ok?

“This doesn’t mean anything,” he answered, though it was for a slightly different question. Sanji turned away after a moment, sucking deeply on the cigarette. The tenseness was back in his shoulders.

“Killer has a lot of standing with Law and Kid,” Zoro continued. “It’s not weird that someone would try and use him to get to Shanks, who backs Law and Kid on everything.”

“…I know. And Killer’s already healed, so it’s fine.”

Zoro didn’t like Sanji’s weak tone though, and waited silently until Sanji finally turned back to look at him, leveling him with a look so serious it was almost a glare. Sanji returned it easily, and that made Zoro relax.
“Really, dumbass, I’m fine. I’m not going to vanish into the night because I’m scared. I’ve been running all my life. This isn’t new.”

“Good. Because you’re a pussy.”

“Fuck you, shitty swordsman.”

“Dart-board brow.”

“Idiot marimo.”

“Curly-cue.”

“Dumbass.”

Zoro joined the cook on the stairs quietly after that, Sanji smoking while Zoro went back to counting in his head. It was amazing that with all the stress that they could have such normal coping mechanisms and still stay sane. Just cigarettes, alcohol, and banter.

“Hey, mush-for-brains.”

Zoro actually managed a smirk at that name. Sanji was never at a loss for smartass things to say.

“Law and Kid will want to have Killer at their place for a while, but after that let’s set up the guest room for him. Give him a place to stay when he doesn’t want to go home.”

“Yeah.”

Sanji smoked for a while more before he stood suddenly and beckoned for Zoro to follow. “Come on. Let’s go down. We should hear what the person they got has to say.”
Zoro nodded and stood to follow him. He hadn’t notice that Sanji hadn’t started walking yet, which meant that when Zoro stood up he was an inch from sticking his nose right in Sanji’s ear.

Zoro felt his breathing pick up, anger entirely forgotten as the cook’s subtle, spicy smell filled his nose. The tension was still tight in Sanji’s shoulders, but it was… strange. Not like the tension Zoro had grown accustomed to. This tension traveled down Sanji’s shoulders and into his spine, creating a weird S-curve in his back like he was leaning backwards and forwards at the same time. The cook reached up slowly and took the cigarette from his lips, head ducked down to the floor so he didn’t have to meet Zoro’s surprised look at finding himself with a face full of cook.

…They were actually really close to the same height.

_I have… like, a quarter of an inch on him._

Zoro’s heartbeat hitched when the cook rotated the corner turn back to face him, his head still tipped towards the ground, but reached up with his free hand to fix an inside-out zipper pocket on Zoro’s leather jacket. The place Sanji had touched burned and something in Zoro’s eardrums shifted, throwing off his equilibrium and making his vision twist. His eyes flicked down as the cook finally looked back at him, blue eye staring unblinkingly into his own. Inwardly, Zoro could feel the quick shifting in the air from the cook’s own accelerated breathing.

“…Sanji—”

A muffled scream split the air and both men snapped toward the direction that it came from, racing down the hallway without a moment’s hesitation. They dashed down the stairs, Zoro’s hands finding their way to Shusui and Kitetsu’s hilts as Sanji tucked his cigarette back into his mouth. The screaming was picking up the closer they got to the arena’s hospital, punctuated by the muffled voices of others talking around it. Zoro blinked in confusion, looking over to Sanji for something, but the cook was dead-set on their destination. Zoro’s mind was whirling, wondering how something could have happened right under Shanks’ nose in Shanks’ central location with so many of Shanks’ top people still in the building—

Room 34.

...The operating room?

Zoro stopped outside the door, trying to make sense of what was happening as he slid his swords
from their hilts with a low ringing sound, but Sanji wasn’t waiting. It only took Zoro a second to figure out why, growling in annoyance afterwards.

The screams were coming from a woman.

Sanji threw open the door like the front runner in a drug raid and the hard metal cracked sharply against the cement wall behind it, sending little bits of shrapnel raining down to the floor, and then the cook ground to a halt, bristling as he took in the scene in front of them.

A woman had been strapped down to the operating table, tears streaming down her face and blood dripping from a couple minor cuts in her arms and legs. Her dress was messy and torn from what must have been the fight to get her inside—or maybe Luffy did that. Law was standing over her like the guardian of death himself. The dark gleam in his eyes matched the chilling reflection of the blood on the knife against the blinding light above the table, and Zoro felt a shiver run down his spine as Law’s dark eyes flicked up, meeting first him and then Sanji with that delicately insane look. And then the cook launched himself.

Sanji flew over the table like a missile, foot trained for Law’s head, and all in the span of a half-second Law whipped to the side, smacking Sanji’s ankle out of the way where he connected with the wall on the other side, Law sliding out of the way of the attack, his scalpel spinning off across the floor. The woman shrieked pitifully at the attack, turning to hide her head in her shoulders. Zoro grimaced, catching the malignant smile stretching across Law’s face, watching the doctor calculate the distance between him and the scalpel and the cook. Zoro dove forward as Sanji whirled on Law, lip pulled back to reveal his fangs as the cook snarled viciously at him.

Zoro was too far away.

“No!” he barked, Luffy appearing at his side as they lunged for Sanji and the cook shot forward, leg out and ready to take Law’s head off when Kid appeared in front of the blond and clamped a hand around his neck, smashing him back into the floor so hard Zoro swore he saw Sanji’s eyes pop out of his head.

The cook choked loudly, hands snapping up and tearing at Kid’s arms, leaving angry red gouges that turned his nails red. Kid laughed, eyes flashing with instability and he raised a fist over his head.

Zoro and Luffy reached Kid at the same time, Luffy locking onto Kid’s fist and using his whole body to keep him from attacking, Zoro prying at his grip on Sanji’s throat as the cook’s face started to turn red from the lack of oxygen.
“Law!” Zoro barked desperately, looking back over his shoulder, but the doctor just straightened back up and dusted himself off, returning to the woman on the table. Her eyes locked on him and she started to shake violently, throwing back her head and screaming at the top of her lungs as she thrashed. Sanji’s foot connected harshly with Zoro’s middle and he grunted, losing his grip and Kid clamped back down on Sanji’s neck. Zoro looked over to Shanks for help, but the older man hadn’t moved from his position leaning against the far wall.

“Sanji!” Luffy called, shoving back hard on Kid and finally getting him to lower his arm. “She’s one of the people that attacked Killer!”

Sanji faltered, his struggling slowing for a second before the lack of air hit him again and he choked out a strangled sound, kicking Kid square in the chest. Kid grunted and stumbled back, giving Zoro the leverage he needed to pull him off and let Sanji scramble away. Once they were apart Luffy moved to Kid’s front, hands out to keep him back while Zoro slid to Sanji’s side, reaching out but not touching the cook. He had a feeling he would lose a finger if he touched Sanji right now.

“Sanji,” Shanks said coolly from the corner. Sanji halted at the intensity of his voice, holding his neck tenderly and wheezing as the color returned to his face. Zoro glanced back to Kid, hoping to god Luffy could see that every single one of Kid’s muscles were locked and ready to kill Sanji if he went at Law like that again. He wouldn’t be able to hold the both of them off by himself.

“She calls herself Miss Valentine. The other two with her are just underlings; they know nothing about what was going on, but they told us her name. She might be able to give us some insight into why Killer was attacked. If it’s because of Law and Kid, that’s nothing strange. If it’s because of… well, who he is, we’ll have to find some way to handle that problem, and fast.”

“Sometimes,” Law snarled, leaning down to pick up the scalpel. Miss Valentine screamed again, trying to yank away from him, “people need to be broken. Men and women. The weak ones die; there’s nothing I can do about that. Weaklings can’t pick their way of death. She might be able to save her demise for another day if she answers our questions.”

“Help! Help me, please!”

Sanji gritted his teeth and ducked his head, toes twitching as he fought the urge to throw himself at Law again. Zoro was like a spring, ready to lunge at either Sanji or Kid, eyes flicking back and forth between them, waiting for some sort of movement.
“What’s going on?!” Chopper shrieked, rushing into the room, still in scrubs from the hospital across the city. “The door is open, I can hear you all the way—WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING?”

“Chopper,” Law snapped, scowling at the dirt on the scalpel. He chucked it into the container labeled “sharps” and picked up another, bigger knife, making Miss Valentine shriek and yank against her bonds.

Chopper yelped at the screams, his horrified expression locking on Law. Zoro swallowed, a memory of Law lashing out and taking an ear clean off of someone else in this position flashing through his mind, the man’s agonizing screams echoing around the barren room while Law grinned. Chopper had never seen Law like this before, the poor kid.

“Take,” Law hissed, grinning maniacally, “that half-brained, unrestrained, military lab rat the hell out of my operating room and stitch him up. Make clear, if you will, that if he ever tries to interfere with me like that again, he will be the next one under my knife and I will graft his fingers together to keep him from ever cooking again.”

Chopper nodded nervously, fumbling with his backpack as he raced to fill it with gloves, thread, needles, a sedative, and whatever else he would need. He tripped several times in the process, but finally managed to get it back onto his back and shuffle past Kid to Sanji, tugging on his arm to get him to stand up.

Zoro watched, scared for one awful moment that Sanji would decide in favor of the woman on the table, but the cook stood, stance tight, and stalked out after Chopper. Miss Valentine’s wails filled the room again and Sanji twitched violently, making Kid growl in return but Luffy held their stance, and finally Sanji was gone. Kid scoffed after a minute when the cook didn’t return, yanking out of Luffy’s hold and he stepped back to let him go.

Zoro waited a moment, gaze flicking from Law to Kid to Luffy to the door and back before he finally landed on Shanks, who nodded calmly at the door and Zoro raced out without a second thought. Remembering what Chopper had said, he slammed the door behind him, and a viciously terrified scream from Miss Valentine echoed down the hallway as all help was taken out from under her. Zoro gritted his teeth and stomped up the stairs, counting again. Counting his steps, his breaths, the spots on the wall, anything to get Law and Kid’s demonic expressions out of his mind. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen them, but they never stopped making his heart beat erratically in his chest. It was easy to forget how fucked up the pair of them were sometimes.

He found Sanji on the steps outside in front of the building, head in his hands while he breathed deeply, Chopper behind him stitching away quietly at a gash Kid had torn in his shoulder from slamming him into the ground. Sanji had both hands pressed tightly over his eyes, fangs poking out from his lips as he shook. Zoro sat down carefully next to him, mind still overloaded with what had
happened. He shot Chopper an apologetic look, but the boy’s traumatized expression was focused too intently on his patient to notice.

“…I was taught…” Sanji snarled through gritted teeth, moving his hands away from his face so he could clench them into fists, “to never disrespect a woman. For any reason. This world is overrun with assholes that try and “put women in their place” or force themselves on them because they can. Just because you may be stronger doesn’t mean that you should use it on a whim to force women into submission.”

Zoro’s eyes found the ground. Useless idiot. He didn’t get it. And Zoro didn’t know how to explain it to make him understand.

“…Law and Kid…” Chopper spoke up quietly after it became clear that no one else was going to talk, and thank god he was the one taking the initiative to explain, “won’t see it that way. Especially when Killer is in danger. And from what you told me, he really was for a minute there. Thank goodness Luffy got there in time, but what if he hadn’t?”

Both Sanji and Zoro shifted uncomfortably at the thought.

“Maybe they weren’t sent in,” Chopper continued with a shrug. “Maybe they saw something and wanted to bring him back, and capturing them will keep Killer safe for a couple more years until he can fight for himself. They didn’t see that it was a woman they were questioning; they just saw a threat and moved to eliminate it.”

Sanji groaned hugely and Zoro growled, actually angry now that Sanji refused to listen.

“Kid could have crushed your skull there,” he snapped, “and if you’d pissed Law off any more than you did, he’d have slit your throat open before Kid could even move to attack you. You got lucky; you ever pull that bullshit again and one of them will kill you. Both of them are easily just as strong as Luffy is and they’re way too overprotective of each other. They’re the only things that ground each other—even Killer and I don’t have that effect on them. If you threaten that, they lose their fucking minds.”

“…You have to be careful, Sanji,” Chopper agreed. “We all like you—we really do—but Shanks… isn’t going to take your side against someone like Law or Kid, who are two of his top men, especially when it’s practically Shanks’ nephew that they’re protecting. And they’re definitely not going to take your side when you’re defending the enemy. Shanks is really kind, but honestly, you’re the rookie around here and we still don’t know if we can trust you. You walked in on a family that survived an apocalypse together; we don’t trust outsiders easily and you need to understand that and
stay out of the limelight.”

Sanji said nothing, and it looked like he wanted to get up and walk away, but Chopper still had a needle in his back so he was forcing himself to stay still. Zoro sucked in a huge breath he’d been about to huff out and turned away, chewing on his tongue to keep from saying anything else. The idiot wouldn’t listen; it didn’t matter even if he did say something worthwhile.

Chopper and Zoro looked up at the sound of sandals tapping against the steps to find Luffy trotting down to where they were, an oddly serious expression on his face, and it made Zoro uncomfortable. Just knowing how seriously Luffy took the situation made it that much more nerve-wracking.

“Chopper… uh, Law says for you to fix her up now. …I don’t think he really wants to.”

Chopper nodded and tied the last knot in Sanji’s shoulder, clipping the thread and tucking the materials back in his bag.

Zoro stood to be level with Luffy. “Did she say anything?”

Luffy made a face something like he didn’t want to answer, but gave in to Zoro’s stare after a moment. “Crocodile.”

Zoro grimaced, fists clenching.

“Shanks says not to let it get out. He says it’ll be better if Crocodile thinks we don’t know. Even if his people don’t get back to him, he won’t know that we saw them attack Killer.”

Zoro nodded, sighing to himself as he remembered Sanji sitting like a gargoyle by his feet. It had turned into an awful day really fast.

Did that mean that Crocodile knew about Killer? Or was it really just because he was Law and Kid’s son?

“Hey, Sanji, I’m hungry. Can we go back to your place?”
Zoro watched nervously as Sanji’s shoulders clenched and unclenched three times as the cook fought with himself, imagining him screaming at Luffy for being able to eat after seeing that poor woman—!

But the cook stood suddenly and nodded, flicking his spent cigarette down the steps in front of him.

“Sure, Luffy.”

“WOO-HOO! Thanks Sanji!!”

Zoro sighed again to himself, following the two as they slumped/bounded down the stairs of the building. Maybe the day wasn’t shot after all. It was only six thirty, after all.

*Jesus Christ it’s only 6:30. That whole fucking thing only took three hours.*

-oOo-

“We’re going out,” Luffy announced happily as a plate of food was set down in front of him. Zoro and Sanji fixed him with blank stares. “Because you two need to lighten up. You both have had too many bad adventures recently, so we need to have a good adventure.”

Sanji and Zoro shared a glance, both opening their mouths to decline when Luffy said (around a mouth full of food), “I called Franky and Brook and told them what happened. They said they’re coming over now and forcing you two to come.”

And that had been that.

Zoro scrubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes, whether it was for the sand in his tear ducts or the lingering annoyances of the day settling in he wasn’t sure, but the bright spots of light bursting in his eyes were giving him something to focus on that wasn’t all the shit that had happened. He’d called Law and Kid’s apartment earlier and talked with Killer a little bit before the younger boy grew too exhausted to stay awake any longer. The expedited healing always took a lot out of him. But Killer had seemed pretty excited to come stay with him and Sanji regardless of his lack of energy, so that was a good thing, and he’d seemed ok overall, which was the only thing that was keeping Zoro from storming out of the apartment and demanding that Shanks let him take at least a couple good swings at the bastards that attacked Killer before he went to hunt Crocodile down.
Crocodile had risen to power just as quickly as Shanks had, but not nearly in as honest ways. The man was feared almost everywhere, running shady organizations under the pretense of working for the government, which came with the protection of the marines, giving him almost complete power in whatever he did as long as he didn’t screw things up and get caught infiltrating and taking over some of the most top secret organizations in the government. For years now, he’d been untouchable and unstoppable; only a select few bosses and people in the underground had enough manpower backing them to stand up to him and get away with it.

Just thinking about the smug, drawl bastard’s cigar-smoking, fucked up face made Zoro’s upper lip curl back into a snarl. If he ever caught up to the fucker—

“I never thanked you for these.”

Zoro blinked at the sudden sound that wasn’t Luffy snarfing down his food like he was a dog with nasal problems. He looked over to where Sanji had joined him against the counter, smoking idly on a cigarette. The blond gestured to the fishbowl on the counter, where the four fish he’d just fed where darting around at the surface of the water, gobbling up the flakes of food. Sanji brought the cigarette back up to his lips, eyes on the floor and avoiding Zoro’s gaze.

“They’re…” the cook paused, looking for the right word, “sweet. Thank you. Especially because, you know, the four corners and everything.”

Zoro crossed his arms casually, anger finally starting to dissipate. Sanji’s cool demeanor was contagious, especially because he was normally such a hothead. Zoro had been nervous for a while there that the blond would take Killer’s attack just as badly as they did, but for entirely the wrong reasons. Sanji hadn’t felt safe for so long in this city, and he couldn’t shake the eerie feeling that if he let the cook out of his sight, he might not be around for much longer.

“You could tell?” he asked finally, and Sanji nodded.

“Surume is the one that got me thinking, he’s the most distinctive, and then when I looked closer I saw the markings on Mohmoo’s back. Only fish from the more southern parts of the ocean have them.”

“…Surume…?”

“Luffy named them.”
Ah.

Sanji leaned in towards the bowl, waving a finger over the water so the fish would swim up to the surface, looking for food. “The yellow one with the fins that look like squid tentacles is Surume, the green cow-like one is Mohmoo, the one that looks like a tiny shark is Megalo, and then the tiny whale is Laboon. Did Laboon get in a fight or something on the way home from the store, by the way? His face is all torn up. Yeah, what happened, Laboon?” Sanji cooed, leaning in to the largest fish and waggling the tip of his finger over it.

Zoro snorted. He’d kind of hoped that Sanji wouldn’t notice, but the reason was still funny anyways. “It’s a fighting fish apparently, and some new worker didn’t know and put two males together in a tank. He was on sale because of it.”

“Classy, marimo.”

“Shut up.”

“…Are we really doing this tonight?”

Zoro blinked, looking over to finally meet Sanji’s eyes. The blond looked uncomfortable.

“What do you mean? The club? It’s not that far out of Shanks’ territory.”

Sanji shrugged, scuffing out his cigarette in the sink. “I know. It’s just… depending on where we go. I don’t know who I’ll know there.”

Oh.

“…Most of the attention will probably be on Luffy all night. He’s actually pretty charming and a lot of fun, so he attracts a bunch of people and then gets them to buy him drinks and food all night. We brought Usopp and Chopper once, but they can’t do the whole drink and dance and socialize and not end up with bad company at the end of the night. Luffy can handle himself, so he’s ok to go with. Usopp and Chopper just… kind of turn into a babysitting job. It’s better to do less intense things with them. And it’ll be dark and loud, and it’s been months since you’ve been seen. It’s not like everyone
there is looking for you.”

Sanji rolled his eyes. “I know what a club is like, moron. That’s not what I’m… whatever.”

“…Do you really not want to go?”

“No, I just…” Sanji reached up and scratched absentmindedly at a spot on his shoulder blade. “I just can’t shake this bad feeling. But it’s probably because of what happened with Killer.”

“There will be a lot of us there too. And drunk or not, we can still handle ourselves. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve fought at the club with more than I should have had in my system.” He chuckled. “It makes Chopper really mad because you bleed more, but people buy me drinks all the time.”

Sanji gave him a dark smile and Zoro cocked his head slightly to the side, not sure where the sudden change in the mood was coming from, but his blood was suddenly jumping in his veins.

“So popular, marimo.” Sanji’s voice was heavier than normal too, and it made Zoro’s breath hitch in his throat. “Is this going to be one of these things where you promise me all this shit and then ditch me once we’re there?”

A returning grin stretched across his face, challenging. “You sound like you’re threatening me not to leave you if you’re pregnant.”

“Fuck off.”

“Make me.”

Sparks crackled dangerously in the air between them, both grinning viciously and waiting for the other to make a move. Zoro’s breath was like fire in his lung, spurring him forwards, screaming for him to lunge—run—yell—to get his hands on the fiery blond in front of him—!

“Uh, guys?”
Franky’s interruption was like a bucket of water dousing their conversation. Sanji pulled out of his hunched stance first, reaching into his pocket for another cigarette as he turned to the blue-haired intrusion. Zoro closed his mouth and swallowed heavily, counting his breathing as he forced the energy down in his heart.

“Yeah?” Sanji asked coolly, flicking his lighter to life and sucking in a deep breath.

“Uh,” Franky looked around the room once, from Zoro to Brook and Luffy, and when they shrugged, he followed suit and turned back to Sanji like nothing had happened. “Well, we’re looking at a couple places. Luffy, can we get into Hancock’s tonight?”

“I can call her, but I don’t think she’ll say no. Hammock never does for me, and she has really awesome food too!”

Zoro snorted to himself, waiting for the onslaught of praise for the amazon and the fact that Sanji would be able to see her again in person, but the cook was strangely quiet and turned in on himself, just smoking the cigarette. He looked pained, like he was making an incredibly difficult decision, and it made Zoro’s mind jump back to what the cook had said earlier. He shook his head silently at Franky, nodding over to Sanji and the mechanic nodded.

“We can go somewhere quieter, there’s a place half an hour from here to the west. It’s a little farther but it’s not bad, I know the man that runs it so we should be able to get in, I helped him build the sound system at his club. But we should get going soon. It got late fast.”

Sanji nodded and murmured something about changing before he sulked up the stairs, a sad wisp of smoke trailing behind his slumped form. Zoro rolled his eyes.

“What’s with Sanji?” Brook asked, helping himself to a drink from their cabinet. So Brook wasn’t driving tonight. Zoro debated joining him to take himself out of the running, but that would just be a dick move and Franky was probably going to offer anyways considering the circumstances of the night.

“He’s just pissy because he can’t see Hancock.”

Franky burst out laughing, finding a seat at the table. “Cook-bro is great.”
“If that’s the word for it.”

Great was not the word.

Zoro threw back the drink that had just been set in front of him, adding the empty glass to his line of nine empty glasses in front of him. The alcohol was helping to keep him from focusing in on Sanji’s annoying trilling and the cackling of the banshees he’d latched himself onto basically the moment they walked through the door, offering drinks all around and handing the bartender a huge stack of bills. Zoro had just let him go. God knows he was fucking stressed from earlier, so Sanji was probably worse at this point. He needed this.

One woman deposited herself in Sanji’s lap and he grabbed her happily, making her shriek with excitement and Zoro waved the bartender back over, downing another shot. Good, now he could feel the buzz setting in. About damn time. Zoro finished off another two and shoved away from the bar, stalking off into the crowd, anywhere to get away from the cook and his fucking caterwauling hoard of females. Why wasn’t Robin here? What was wrong with her? Up and leaving for years!

Jesus, it was like she’d never grown up with them and didn’t give a shit about any of them. Knowing her she probably kept a very close eye on all of them even from a far, but for all he knew, she could have been dead for weeks and he’d just think she was hiding out from some organization trying to kill her.

The beat of the music reverberating through his body was starting to have a calming affect, probably because of the alcohol, but Zoro felt his steps slowing down to a more casual walk as he wove his way through the crowd of dripping skin meshing together around him. Hands started to find their way into his shirt and tracing up and down his bare arms, and he started to get why Franky and Brook had made him put on a t-shirt before they came. The skin on skin contact was creating pulses of tightness that ran between his groin and his stomach, generally centered right behind his naval where he felt like gravity kept dropping out from under him. A pair of strong hands found his shoulders, yanking him to a halt and Zoro stumbled slightly, finding himself face to face with someone just a hair shorter than him with blond hair draping across his eyes. Zoro grinned stupidly, swaying along with the other man’s lead.

Sanji threw back his head and laughed, maybe too strongly for the joke Ever had told, but she seemed to be enjoying the attention. She was a beauty to behold, grace and poise practically spilling out of her glowing skin, but she was fun too and could hold her drink pretty well. He was pretty sure
that she was still keeping up with him, but those last three shots had really done a number on him. The world was starting to twist sideways, and speaking of twisting, if she didn’t sit still it was going to create an awkward moment for the both of them, especially because he didn’t know anything about this place Zoro had taken him.

Zoro.

Sanji looked around curiously, swiveling his head to keep Ever from blocking his view, but even in his drunken haze it was easy to see that the vibrant head of green hair was no longer sitting next to him. The guy was such a stick in the mud.

But maybe… Sanji’s eyes slowly found the mob of people gyrating against each other, half-naked bodies and bare skin dripping sweat from the heat of the dance floor dancing together like a hoard of choreographed snakes twisting together for heat and warmth. And probably company.

*Do snakes care about company? Zoro’s hair is green like a snake. But I guess not all snakes. Or wait—no, not all snakes are green. Where the hell did he go? Little snake went off to find himself a mate... heh... that rhymes. No it doesn’t, not really.*

*Did he go off to find someone?*

Something unpleasant curled in Sanji’s stomach and suddenly the writhing, gorgeous woman that had willingly plunked herself into his lap was encroaching on his breathing space. Her smell was too sweet and her limbs were too fragile and her blood didn’t even smell good—

What the fuck was he thinking?!

Sanji jolted uncomfortably and wrapped one arm around Ever’s waist so that he wouldn’t send her sprawling when he shot out of his seat. She shrieked at the sudden movement and clutched at his neck, making his spine shiver and he pulled as far away from her as he could while still holding her off of the ground.

The floor twisted again and Sanji stumbled slightly, catching himself on the counter as several pairs of hands flew to his shoulders to steady him. How many women had joined him? Four-thousand?

Sanji set Ever on the ground and stepped backwards, flinching as his hip hit the counter sharply and
he hissed, more because he inwardly knew that it should have hurt more than it actually did. Which wasn’t a good sign. Or maybe it was good, because… you know, he couldn’t feel it.

“I’m-m sorry, my sweet… flower,” he slurred, dipping into a sloppy bow. Close enough. “I’m afraid I must be going, but your stellar charm has provided me with charms of memories that I will carry in my persona forever.”

I don’t even understand what I’m saying right now. The thought made him snort.

“What’s wrong, Sanji?” a twittering voice asked him, a delicate hand finding his shoulder.

I could probably break it pretty easily by accident right now. I never really got drunk with Zeff… dunno how much I won’t know my own strength. Or whatever.

“My Amazonian princess of far of lands and all the pretty in between,” Holy fuck I sound so stupid, “I’m displeased to say that I must take my leave now, something from afar calls to me.”

“…Calls to you? Who’s calling to you?”

Sanji smiled to himself and raised a finger to his lips. He could really go for a cigarette right now.

That might be dangerous though… some old person might have an oxygen tank lying around or something...

Do old people go to clubs?—stopping that thought right there.

Sanji leaned in to the girl that (he hoped) had been talking and lowered his voice. “Don’t tell anyone, it’s kind of a secret, but a prince has caught my eye and I’m shocked to say that for some reason your exquisite beauty just isn’t doing it for me tonight.”

And with that he strode off into the crowd with all the confidence of a drunken cow. Sanji snorted again. Drunken cow. Now that’d be funny to see.
A hand landed roughly on his shoulder and Sanji’s face lit up as he was pulled around, but his smile dropped to find that the brute strength had not been, in fact, coming from the hoped source.

Where the fuck is that fucker?

“Hey, I’m Kaku.”

Sanji rolled his eyeballs (no small feat) back to the man standing in front of him and unabashedly sized him up with a couple once-overs. He was tall, four inches or so over Sanji’s head, with a nose that bore striking resemblance to Usopp’s in the manner in which it jutted way out into Sanji’s personal space. He really wanted to laugh, but something told him that would be rude. The tight grip on his shoulder though was making something deep inside of him ebb in anticipation. That same brute strength…

“You want to dance?”

The man—Kaku pulled him into the heart of the dance floor where most of the people had ended up, pressing Sanji right up against the man’s chest where he could let his head loll against the man’s cut shoulders and just twist his body along with the music.

…This is nice.

Kaku wrapped his hands around Sanji’s waist, running his fingers up and down the cook’s rib cage and making Sanji’s body undulate against his control. Sanji’s mouth dropped open and his breath picked up, something hot and suddenly very alive inside of him twisting and whining impatiently. The grip was tight, and when he suddenly started walking backwards Sanji was pulled along with him, stumbling around the steady feet leading him. His hands snapped up to grab the man’s shoulders, just fighting to keep his feet at a point where he could take actual steps instead of being dragged along like some fainted maiden. It suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea where they were going and forced his head up to look around.

They’d made it out of the crowd of people and were drifting towards a darkened hallway lit with what Sanji guessed were black lights but gave him an odd feeling of being dragged into a cave with a monster waiting at the end for him. The hands, tight on his back, should have been reassuring, but the unpleasant chill was settling back into his stomach and a wave of cold smashed into him despite the pulsing heat of the dance floor. In the back of his mind he could feel something like a cactus prickling incessantly at his shoulder blades, but he couldn’t put together at the moment what that meant.
Those strong hands were normally so reassuring, guiding him along and promising without the use of superfluous words that he was going to be safe. That no matter what happened, he wouldn’t leave Sanji’s side no matter how much danger he was in. Zoro was like a stone wall, standing up to the battering storms going for Sanji’s throat and—

“Let’s go into the backrooms.”

Sanji blinked at the sudden voice in his ear. It was strong, and confident, but definitely, **definitely** not Zoro’s.

Sanji yanked back, hands still on the man’s shoulders to stare blankly at him and figure out what was wrong with the picture.

...

*Not Zoro.*

Sanji whirled suddenly and yanked himself out of the man’s—err, Kaku’s grip, ignoring the indignant squawk as he stalked into the… backrooms, as Kaku had called them.

Kaku looked around in confusion before following and Sanji grimaced, realizing that he thought Sanji was initiating now. It would be much easier to find Zoro if he did a process of elimination, and these “backrooms” as they were called were probably much easier to navigate than that writhing orgy of human snakes out there. Kaku fell into step behind him, a hand invasively resting on his lower back, occasionally asking where Sanji was going and what had him in such a hurry, but Sanji was too set on his task now.

*Where the hell did that fucker go?*
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

Somehow he’d ended up in the sleaziest part of the backrooms. His shirt was gone and he could feel (sort of) distinctly (not at all, actually) that he was pressed up against another sweaty, writhing body. He reached up to slide his hand around the gyrating grab hips to grab the ass that was connected and winced as he cracked his hand against the wall behind them, shaking out his fingers unconsciously more for the motion than the pain. How did he get here? But the wall he could definitely use, and wedged his hands between the lithe hips and the now hot plaster, yanking the smaller body into him and grinding them up against the wall.

Zoro grinned as the man groaned throatily and repeated the moment, twisting his own hips as he flattened the man up against the wall, sliding his tongue through the abused lips. Oh god, he smoked too. Zoro had the sudden urge to wind his fingers into the wispy blond hair and took one hand from the cut hips to do so, gripping the back of the man’s neck as he rocked against him. He was pretty sure the guy had already come in his pants, but the fact that he was still willing to continue with him made the room even hotter.

This was too much; it was incredible how similar they were. The hips; the defined shoulders; the muscles he could feel in the sharp neck; the blond hair; the ashy, smoky smell—it was actually pretty impressive that his drunken mind was still even remembering that this guy wasn’t Sanji.

What the hell was his name anyways? Whatever, didn’t really matter. Sanji’s face kept flickering in and out of his mind, slowly but surely replacing the doppelgänger in front of him until the cook was squirming up against him, groaning into his mouth, pressing closer and closer into his body, pleading silently for more. Zoro groaned heavily, swallowing Sanji’s name before he said it out loud and grabbed the hips again, thrusting hard into them and making the man grunt.

Oh yeah, he could definitely go for this right now.

The door slammed open with a crack that echoed throughout the room even around the sound of the reverberating bass and Zoro jumped damn near through the roof, slamming the guy dancing with him into the wall so hard that he hacked and doubled over on Zoro’s shoulder. Zoro whipped around, dragging the guy along with him to growl at the asshole—
“ZORO! You fucking marimo asshole motherfucking douchebag piece of shit!”

Zoro ducked as the heel of a well-known and expensive shoe came flying at his face, yanking the man he was holding around again and making him shriek as he flailed to grab onto Zoro’s shoulders for something to ground himself.

“What the fuck, cook?!"

“You went running off like an asshole and left me at the bar with those fucking women—what if something—you selfish, unconcerned jerk—what if I’d gone home with someone?!”

Zoro snarled through his teeth, dumping the man unceremoniously on the floor. He clenched his fists, not stupid enough to miss the tightness in Sanji’s hips and the way he looked pretty ready bury Zoro six feet under. How fucking drunk was he?!

“What the fuck?!” the man he’d dropped screamed from under him, looking up indignantly. Zoro barely cared enough to hear him.

“Cook—!”

“You fucking—what the fuck was this night supposed to be, huh?! Oh yeah me not being able to do shit here while everyone else went home with someone is so relaxing after a day like today!”

“Who the fuck are you anyways?!” the man screamed from the floor in Sanji’s general direction, scrambling to find his footing and still keep his dignity.

“Who the fuck are you anyways?!” Sanji screamed in return, lifting his foot and slamming it down not inches away from the man’s nose, making him shriek again. “You and your fucking hands all over… get the fuck out!”

The man scrambled up, racing around Sanji and to the door where he ran into someone with a nose so long he was almost skewered in the eye in his haste. The man he’d run into grunted, shoving the other one off of him, and then he turned back to eye Zoro and Sanji. He seemed to be thinking,
weighing something, and Zoro wondered if he’d been hoping to get Sanji into one of these rooms.

Sanji snarled violently, yanking Zoro’s attention back to him and Zoro bared his own teeth when he could see Sanji’s fangs poking out over his lips. What the fuck was he so angry about? He’d been the one running off with all those women, and Zoro had been gone for ages for Christ’s sake. Now the idiot cared?

“Marimo…” Sanji hissed dangerously, and out of the corner of his eye Zoro could see the man in the door turn and leave, apparently deciding the situation not worth getting involved in. Distractions gone, Zoro raised his fists, ready to take Sanji on. Already his muscles were tingling from the energy he could feel in the room, Sanji’s anger leaching out into the air and making Zoro grin in anticipation. Sex would have been nice, but this could be just as good—

Sanji lunged, shooting towards Zoro like a bullet and Zoro barely moved his hands in time to clamp onto the cook’s shoulders, holding him back and keeping the cook from being able to use all of his weight. He grounded his feet roughly, using the wall behind him to keep himself upright as he watched for those powerful feet—and Sanji lips slammed into his own, knocking his head back where he cracked his shoulder against the wall.

Zoro’s eyes popped, a barrage of Sanji slamming into every single one of his senses and rendering his body useless. The cook’s defined shoulders were caught in a death grip where Zoro had yanked the him against his chest in shock, Sanji’s hands suddenly finding the back of his neck and holding them tightly together as a slipped his lips against Zoro’s.

The man from before had paled in comparison. Sanji didn’t taste like spices and smoke, he was like the most incredibly-made mixed drink—smoky in so many senses of the word that Zoro was scared to even try and place them all; spiced with countless herbs that made his taste buds tingle—sesame oil and peanuts and rice and wine and mint and cinnamon and chile pepper and everything else that Zoro suddenly loved caressing his every cell and submerging him in everything he’d hoped Sanji would taste exactly like. His hands were like the wings of a phoenix, sliding majestically like lava up against Zoro’s skin and scratching his nails down every place that made Zoro die a little inside from overstimulation and glee. That stunning body was flush against him, melding into every contour and defined bone, creating a wave between them that made Zoro’s body undulate uncontrollably against the cook—

“Goddamnit,” Sanji growled suddenly around his lips, and Zoro found himself pulling off of the wall to chase Sanji’s mouth, tongue lolling uselessly from his mouth. “God damn marimo and your fucking sexy sparring and yelling and pinning me to the ground when Kid is trying to kill me—”

Zoro grunted, some sort of sound falling out of his mouth that probably meant some sort of affirmation, but then his lips were on Sanji’s again and the thought was gone, gone, gone.
“I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” Sanji groaned, and Zoro felt something jump almost painfully behind his navel. Good god, when was the last time he’d been this hard?

“I’ve just got this girl back home, ya know?”

Zoro froze, lips going still and eyes popping back open as Sanji continued to move against him, playing unconsciously with the three earrings dangling from his lobe. Normally, that got him going more than anything else, even getting head, but—

“She’s…” Sanji slurred, “beautiful. Nymph-like. An angel, or a seraph, or a goddess… she’s like a siren or a selkie or a mermaid or something so gorgeous that she could only be taken straight out of mythology or a storybook—”

There was a cold, gnawing feeling growing in Zoro’s stomach, and his grip lessened on Sanji’s shoulders with the increasingly less comfortable temperature against the heat of his drunkenness and the room. He pulled back slightly and Sanji latched instantly onto his jawbone, sucking carefully and working an extremely talented tongue over his nerves. Zoro closed his eyes, befuddled brain trying to convince himself that it didn’t matter, of course Sanji had someone—he’d had an entire life before—

“She’s just so boring.”

Zoro blinked at that, such a strange word cutting through his haze and cuing him that he should probably listen to the thing making his cock jump pleasantly. The biting cold was still worming itself deeper and deeper into his core though, and it was making him physically wince against the oblivious cook’s body. This isn’t what he’d wanted this to feel like.

“She’s, like… bland. Not like everyone here at all. She never makes me mad, crazy, or anything other than happy, and I love fighting so much—when I first woke up here I thought I was right back where I started on an exam table but this fucking city has been the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me. I want you so bad—”

Zoro shoved hard, sending Sanji stumbling back off of him where he slammed into the far wall and slid to the ground, staring up at Zoro in shock. Zoro growled, barely remembering to grab his shirt off of the ground before he stalked towards the door.
“Tell me when you’re not smashed,” he snarled and left Sanji gaping on the floor behind him.

Zoro shoved his way out into the crowd undulating with the bass of the music, a red glaze falling over his eyes and blurring his vision.

He had to get out.

“Sword-bro! Where you going?”

Zoro turned to find Franky and Brook wailing away on two microphones on the stage and shoved his way towards them. Franky crouched to hear him, rocking the microphone dangerously to the side where he almost hit a couple people dancing.

“Take Sanji home!” Zoro screamed over the music.

“Why? Where is he?”

Zoro gestured vaguely, growling, the conversation already overstepping its time limit. “I don’t fucking know—somewhere in the back! I’m walking now!”

“…You ok? You seem a little—”

Zoro turned and trudged away, yanking his shirt over his head as he swam through the crowd to the front door, stumbling out into the chilled air of the night. Inwardly he could hear whoever’s friend it was—the bouncer, he couldn’t remember his damn name and wasn’t about to try—yelling goodbye, but that barely took up enough of his thought process to even remember that it had happened. The world was still tipping around him—how much did he have anyways?—but the cold was helping to straighten out his mind, so he just checked his pockets for phone and money and stumbled off down the steps. The door clacked behind him as it opened, the quiet night split open by the cacophony from back inside the club, and then the door slammed again, swathing him in silence except for the telltale sound of sandals clapping against the pavement as someone jogged after him.

“You done already?” Luffy asked, bounding up to his side, a huge grin splitting his face. “Wanna come back with me? I found these awesome girls that have been buying me drinks and food all night—they said they won a huge bet on me once and wanted to thank me! This one girl even asked if you were here—you should come back!”
Zoro swallowed heavily, the cold lowering the temperature of that uncomfortable lump sitting in his stomach even more—that was now kind of moving up to his throat and making it hard for him to take even breaths.

“Nah,” he rasped, wincing at how unconvincing he sounded. He was going to continue the rejection in a less jack-ass-ish way so it didn’t sound like he was mad at Luffy, but his vocal cords didn’t seem up for the task.

“…You ok? You sound like you’re going to cry.”

“I’m fine, Luffy.”

“You’re walking?”

“Yes.” Go. Away.

Luffy shook his head, making a noncommittal noise. “Let’s find a cab. I’m not ready to go and you’ll never make it. You’re silly, Zoro, even drunk you always remember you can’t do directions; what’s up with you tonight?”

Zoro swallowed again, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and fighting with the heat growing in his throat, making his breath speed up.

Luffy was silent for a moment, and then grabbed Zoro’s arm and dragged him to the curb where he stuck his hand into the air despite how silent and deserted the street was, like it would just hail a cab from fucking heaven or something.

“…Did something happen?”

Zoro shook his head, coughing and finally dislodging some of the anger building up. He looked straight back at Luffy and nodded heartily to prove that he was ok, but the younger man didn’t seem convinced.

“…It’ll be better in the morning. Alcohol always makes things worse.”
Zoro nodded, looking up as a pair of lights pulled up next to them and Luffy stepped back, giving him space to get in the cab. Only Luffy would have that kind of luck. And thank god too, the kid was so simple-minded that he might have stood there for hours waiting for a cab if one hadn’t come. Luffy grabbed his shoulder right as he opened the door, making him stop.

"Do you want to stay at my place tonight? Will it be easier if you don’t see him for a little bit?"

Zoro sighed, shaking his head and forcing a smile. For some reason, it was easier than he thought it would be. “Nah, thanks, Luffy. I’m just… being silly, I guess.”

Luffy grinned and let him go. “Zoro is silly a lot of the time. Especially when it comes to Sanji. It’s like you just forget that it’s not always “maybe” with him.”

Zoro blinked, trying to decipher that one. “…What?”

Luffy shook his head, readjusting his hat. “Text me when you’re home?”

Zoro chuckled to himself and nodded, climbing into the cab. “Sure.”

Not always a maybe?

He exchanged addresses and pleasantries with the cab driver and then hunkered back down into the backseat, fighting not to fall asleep so the guy didn’t rob him blind and dump him on the side of the road somewhere in enemy territory. Who knew who the guy worked for or if he was being protected by a boss somewhere.

…Not always a maybe?

Zoro didn’t fucking get him. How something like that made sense in Luffy’s mind, one could only guess.

Zoro tilted his head so as to watch the passing street lights, mostly to know when they were getting
close to the city but also so he could jump from the cab if it looked like he was ending up in some undesired place.

What the fuck was with him tonight? Why was he being so paranoid?

Zoro closed his eyes, wrestling with the sleep already forming in his eyes and shifting uncomfortably around the cold nodule still sitting in his gut. Thank god he wasn’t fucking crying though.

-oOo-

Zoro let out a deep breath and stood calmly, his head finally cleared after hours of repetitions right from the moment he’d woken up this morning until—what time was it? He leaned back to glance across the dojo and the living room and into the kitchen where a large clock hung ticking above the sink. 7:30. It had only taken him three hours to get his mind back under control, which was actually pretty good, considering he’d woken up at 4:15 wrought with dreams of an incredibly… um, exuberant Sanji sharing a bed with him, and then immediately remembered that said NSPH major was only the next room over and could have been sharing his real bed very easily.

And so had started the work out at 4:30. You know, after, ahem. Gave him plenty of time to take in the sunrise though, and meditate, and contemplate on last night, and think about what Luffy had said. He still had nothing, no clue whatsoever on what the loon had meant, but he was sure it had sounded sincere in Luffy’s head and it was the thought that counted.

Zoro padded over to the small bench he’d set up on the side of the dojo, barely lifting his head when the sound of feet tramping over his head echoed across the apartment, picking up fervor and noise level as Sanji stomped down the stairs. The cook was pissed.

Zoro closed his eyes for a moment as he draped the towel across his shoulders and breathed in deeply. Perfect. Three hours of working out had brought him the exact calm frame of mind he needed to deal with this conversation. Sanji would rant about not being gay and bitch and moan about Zoro letting him first go off with some other guy before he let Sanji dribble himself like honey all down Zoro’s front, and, you know, suck on his tongue while they were at it.

The footsteps halted abruptly on the last step and Zoro waited a moment for the screaming to start, but only dead silence filled the air. Which was fine, because he was literally as calm as a sloth. If he were moving any slower right now, he would start to grow moss. Har-har, yes, jokes about his hair, always as funny as the first time he heard them.
Zoro debated taking in another calming breath, but then decided that he was so calm that the extra effort it would take really wasn’t worth it right now. He was riding such a calm wave that his heart rate must have been damn near hypotension. And so he just turned. Turned to face the irate cook and whatever was about to be thrown his way.

They stood at opposite sides of the dojo, both men’s bodies unconsciously taking fighting stances with feet spread and arms tight at their sides, just in case. Or it was from the forming tension Zoro could feel sparking in the air between them. His calm was beautiful though, and he held his ground without a single ounce of tension and stared straight back into Sanji’s one iridescent, captivating eye.

Sanji looked like he’d had the worst night’s sleep possible. His hair was dripping like he’d doused himself in the sink before coming down the stairs and his eye looked blood shot and slightly swollen. If it hadn’t been for his strong foothold, Zoro would have wondered if the idiot had slept at all. He had no idea what time the rest of the group had gotten in last night; he’d been so dead asleep that nothing could have woken him.

The cook’s arms were crossed tightly, and if Zoro looked close enough he could see the whiteness in Sanji’s knuckles from gripping his skin so tightly. The fact that his anger was leaching out into his hands meant that the cook was really pissed, and that this would be a really good fight.

Sanji growled to himself, unconsciously taking another step forward and Zoro turned automatically to accommodate the closer range if Sanji decided to lunge.

Sanji gritted his teeth, fighting with himself, and then spat, “Is this sober enough for you? You goddamn, thick-skulled, mother-fucking, brainless, oblivious, blundering, fucking marimo?”

Zoro blinked, grip slipping from the cloth on his shoulders as he fumbled for… anything. Any response to that. There were no words in the English language that… what was the cook… what did…

“…Wha…?”

Sanji groaned, jamming his fingers into his hair and gripping the blond fringe tightly, pulling it out of the way of his useless eye for the first time in what Zoro was pretty sure was months now. …Wow, the cook was more off than he thought.

“No one,” Sanji snarled suddenly, “has ever turned me down. Ever. Drunk or not. I’ve known I’m
bi for fucking years now, but she was beautiful and kind and there and she loved me and it was so much easier than trying to keep a tough-guy persona in a fucking world like this! Especially with my fucked up background!"

And Zoro just continued to flounder. What was air? It could have possibly given him the ability to say words, if he had any.

“I hated how easily you held your reputation while—blatantly—not having a single girl around you—not even Robin! She came home and could have been the long lost love but she and Franky spent the whole week fucking and you just sat idly by! You’re so obviously fucking gay and you hold the utmost respect from so many people in the highest ranks!”

The small thought that he wasn’t really…gay—entirely, at least…his track record was starting to make it look more and more so—popped into his head, but his tongue had yet to reattach itself.

…Wait, was Sanji really…?

_Holy shit, he’s really—_

“But now I’m here! I’m here, I’m sober, and I’m fucking smoldering just looking at you sweating, so are you going to stand there gaping, or—?!"

Zoro was across the room so fast that Sanji actually jumped, reflexes kicking in before he could remind his brain that this was what he wanted.

Oh god Zoro hoped it was what he wanted.

And then his lips were on Sanji’s and his brain exploded in his head.

Sanji when he was sober was exponentially better. Zoro could smell everything, taste everything, see everything, hear everything, feel everything. His hands were running up and down the tight muscles of the cook’s back, arms, neck, shoulders, hips, grabbing him and grinding and pulling and pushing as Sanji’s own hands found his body, working those long and talented fingers into every contour in his body, up every muscle, down every tendon, making sure that none of his skin was left untouched. The cook’s fingers found the back of his head where the short, sensitive hairs were and
pulled and Zoro lost it.

He had Sanji on the floor in a second, pinning the cook’s lithe body to the floor with his own as he undulated, grinding hard between the cook’s legs and the cook groaned into his mouth, making an electric shiver shoot up Zoro’s spine.

Sanji scrabbled at Zoro’s back at the hem of his pants and Zoro pulled back, yanking the cook’s shirt up over his head as he went and dropping it on the floor next to them. He wrestled out of his pants and then dropped back to the ground, running his tongue in a long line up Sanji’s middle from his naval to the first nipple and took it between his top teeth and bottom lip. Sanji sucked in a harsh breath as Zoro worked his tongue, head dropping back from where he’d been watching the swordsman to loll on the ground, but he only waited a minute before reaching down to push his pants off. Zoro followed suit before moving back up to be parallel to the cook, slipping his tongue between Sanji’s willing lips as he ground them together again.

Spots of light burst behind his eyes and a distinct tightness in his toes was rising up, along with a telling buzzing behind his ears. The sensations were drowning out his senses as they were overwhelmed with everything Sanji, and Zoro opened his eyes to take in the cook’s beautiful eyes—cloudy, marred eye and all—and sex-laden expression and Sanji reached up to rake his nails over Zoro’s scalp.

Zoro pulled back slightly, panting, his lips still brushing along Sanji’s. “You done this before?”

Sanji nodded and Zoro pushed their lips back together, closing his eyes again and grinding down harder between the cook’s legs. Sanji grunted and raised his legs, locked them around Zoro’s hips, and squeezed. Hard.

Zoro groaned, his head dropping down to Sanji’s chest as his nether regions were pulled hard into Sanji’s, making his sensory receptors hiccup in his brain. Zoro slowed for a moment, taking in the feeling of just moving against Sanji. He slid one arm up from where he was leaning on both elbows to lock his forearm behind the cook’s shoulders, and then all at once he pulled forward and thrust.

Sanji let out a feral sound, nails digging deep into Zoro’s shoulders and the swordsman shivered and spit into his hand. He reached down and fumbling to slick himself and get himself in place, lining up his cock between Sanji’s legs, and then leaned forward, sliding in.

Sanji grunted again and shifted his hips so that Zoro could slip in easier, and the swordsman’s mind went blank as he was completely engulfed in the cook’s incredible body. He drew back and pushed in again, Sanji letting out a rough breath under him, and he groaned into the cook’s mouth, picking
He was gasping into Sanji’s neck, nothing but Sanji’s smell, Sanji’s feel, Sanji’s taste. Sanji barreling through his head like a freight train. His muscles felt uncontrolled and wild and he could feel Sanji’s blazing hot breath against his shoulder as the cook, squirmed under him, nails gouging deep lines into his shoulders. His knees and toes were slipping against the wood and he was scrabbling at the floor with his hands for any purchase, anything to move harder, faster—

He pulled back slightly, ignoring Sanji’s feral snarl of protest—a territorial sound that made his insides churn with heat—and worked a hand in between their bodies to grab Sanji’s cock. Sanji’s body jumped and he tightened around Zoro and Zoro jerked, pushing harder into the cook’s body, the tightness in his toes and the buzzing in his ears growing. Sanji’s legs locked impossibly tightly around his waist, cutting off his ability to move, and then the cook groaned and an explosion shot through Zoro’s every muscle—electricity and freezing cold and searing hot and intense pain and numbing pleasure, and then he was laying on top of the cook, panting in time with Sanji, waiting for his mind to come down off of the high.

The cook shifted, unwrapping his legs from Zoro’s waist and Zoro rolled, pulling out of Sanji but taking the cook with him so he ended up on top of Zoro’s chest. He could feel Sanji rolling his eyes at the possessiveness, but the cook did move to settle himself more comfortably on top of him. Zoro was more than content to stay there on the floor, which was much less uncomfortable than it should have been with Sanji sprawled out on top of him, breathing heavily in time with him.

The nagging thought wouldn’t leave though. Damn it.

“…That girl you have back home…”

Zoro tracked Sanji’s movements as the cook flinched slightly, and then tensed as if preparing to run, and then sighed and relaxed again all in the span of a second. Sanji’s reflexes always impressed him, whether they were due to the NSPH part of him or not. The cook moved slowly, resigning himself to his fate, and pushed his chest off of Zoro’s to reach for his pants. He dug out the pack of cigarettes and the lighter from his pocket and slipped one between his lips, flicking it to life before he tossed all three away. He laid back down, placing his chin on the back of his hands as he smoked quietly. Zoro grimaced slightly, watching the cherry of the cigarette glowing right over his damn chest but Sanji seemed to know what he was doing enough not to care.

“…I met her about five years back. She had a boyfriend at the time so we just got close as friends, but then after they broke up… she was gorgeous. Beautiful, blonde, hotter than a supermodel, the works, but I could have never gone anywhere with her.”
Zoro reached up idly to run a couple fingers over the arm lying across his chest. It was crazy how soft Sanji’s skin was, and Zoro wondered if it had something to do with his healing ability. “Too dangerous?”

Sanji shook his head. “Nah, not even that. It wasn’t like she came from a less dangerous world or anything. It was just… my background plus the situation I’d put myself into, something like you have here with how high in the ranks you are, I didn’t think she would have been able to handle it. She seemed a little… I don’t know, crazy, I guess. But not in the cool “I can actually handle myself, I just don’t take life very seriously” way. More like “I’m angry and I might react poorly because of it.” …I don’t know. She didn’t seem to be able to handle pain, and that could have made it a lot more dangerous for everyone, including her.”

Zoro nodded, sort of understanding what the cook was saying. The more Sanji talked about his home, the more it seemed like he was in a very high rank, maybe even higher than Zoro, though he always skirted around the fact. Whatever he did.

Sanji chuckled to himself. “And then one day she came home with these angel wings tattooed on her back. Big ones too. They were badass, totally not something an irrational or weak person would have put themself through willingly. I decided to give it a try, because she’d expressed interest in me and every other girl around me was honest-to-god frail. …It’s so weird being here. Shanks’ women hold their own so self-assuredly. I think they actually get offended when I try to be chivalrous. It was just normal back home; that was the way Zeff taught me and that was the way it was.”

Zoro snorted. “Yeah, that’s because they’re not weak, and they don’t want to be treated like that. Robin doesn’t mind asking for help, but Nami doesn’t like it, especially from a love-idiot.”

He waited for the snippy response, but Sanji just thought quietly to himself for a moment before continuing.

“We’re been—er, were together for three years. …Not anymore, I guess.”

“…Do you think she’s worried?”

Sanji shrugged, lifting the cigarette to his lips to tap the growing ash off of the end onto the top of his cigarette box so as not to burn Zoro. “Probably. She’ll be fine. She’s tough, and it’s not like I’m actually dead.”
Now this was a side of Sanji Zoro had never seen. Turning down a woman? He almost reached up to feel Sanji’s forehead—only half in jest—but it didn’t seem the time.

Sanji shoved off of his chest suddenly and ground out the rest of the cigarette on the box, leaving the stub on top of it as he stood.

“I need a shower,” he sniffed, tipping his head away from himself in mock disgust, and then beckoned for Zoro to follow him as he started up the stairs. Zoro grinned and moved to follow.

-oOo-

“And then you did that thing where you, like, sashayed over his head like you had wings and were like—FWACHYAH—and he was just—ARRGHHHHHH—”

Zoro snorted to himself around the bottle of water Sanji had passed him, listening to Usopp’s relaying of his fight as Chopper worked on a small nick on his shoulder blade. It had been an easy fight honestly, he was barely even sweating, and Sanji looked as relaxed as a fifteen-year-old cat lying in a patch of sun so he hadn’t been worried at all about Zoro’s opponent. That fact kind of made Zoro’s chest puff out unconsciously, which he hoped was catching Sanji’s eye—that the cook was pretending he was keeping intent on Usopp but would occasionally glance over—because his shirt was off so Chopper could stitch up his shoulder.

Zoro grinned around the lip of the bottle, taking another sip. The image of Sanji on top of him, dripping sweat and grinding into him with those incredible muscles so hard it was almost painful popped into his head. His grin stretched further and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand to hide it before he decided to test the waters a bit and leaned back slightly, slowly so Chopper wouldn’t freak and just enough so that he could stretch and flex his shoulders. Casual and cool. Sanji’s eye flicked back over momentarily, tracing up and down Zoro’s front once before looking back as Usopp started relaying how he used to use moves just like Zoro’s in his own days of underground fighting before he got so good that they begged him to retire and give others a chance. Zoro grinned again and scratched his sternum inconspicuously, knowing that Sanji was watching out of the corner of that iridescent eye.

“Whatever,” Nami huffed, crossing her arms, though a small smile graced her lips. Zoro knew she’d won a lot off the fight so she had nothing to be upset about. “As long as the medical stuff doesn’t cost too much. You’re lucky you ducked during his last swing, you would have lost your ear otherwise. Do you know how much it costs to just call an ambulance? Let alone sew your ear back on!”

“Nami-swan~! You are so smart, remembering all of those numbers off the top of your head like you have a photographic memory!”
Zoro rolled his eyes and brought the bottle back to his lips, looking around arena where most of the spectators had dispersed now that everyone had fought. He’d barely been able to convince Chopper to wait until after Luffy had fought to fix him up and because it was such a small wound, but now the tiny doctor had threatened him at sedation point to—

Zoro choked slightly on his drink as something caught his eye across the room and shot to his feet, yanking out of Chopper’s grip and pushing his way through the remaining people drifting around them.

“ZORO!” Chopper shrieked. Sanji and Usopp jumped at the sudden spike in volume, Nami gasping as she stumbled out of Chopper’s way. The three whirled to watch the young doctor swipe at Zoro before the green head disappeared into the crowd and Chopper scrambled off of the table he’d been sitting on, racing after him.

“THE FUCKING NEEDLE IS STILL IN YOUR BACK! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”

Sanji blinked, trying to find some sort of danger that Zoro had seen, looking confusedly back at Usopp and Nami before they moved to follow the two. After excusing himself around a couple of people, Sanji finally caught sight of Shanks on the other side of the arena’s seating, a gorgeous, majestic woman with green-tinged hair on his arm, but that couldn’t have been—

Sanji eyes popped when Zoro walked straight past Shanks to wrap the tiny woman up in his huge arms and she laughed, throwing her own arms around him and patting him on the back… like she was an aunt or something.

“…Uh—” Sanji started stupidly, not exactly sure how to continue. There was a strange something bubbling up in his chest, or down in his stomach—it felt more primal than discomfort—and he was disgusted at himself that he was feeling this towards a woman—and a beautiful, goddess-like, magnificent angel too—

“Makino!” Nami called happily, trotting over to Shanks and the woman, Makino, who gave her the biggest grin Sanji had ever seen.

“That’s Makino,” Usopp supplied, no doubt at his stupid face, and Sanji closed his mouth with a sharp click of his teeth.
“Oh yeah?” he finally managed to make his tongue say. Usopp nodded. Chopper had finally managed to get a good enough grip on Zoro’s shoulder to yank him down to his height and cut the stitching, but then he immediately jumped to see Makino too and she swept him up happily, spinning him like he was a small child while Zoro and Shanks grinned. Nami was already babbling away, asking Makino about her time away from the city and what she’d been doing and what she’d seen.

Usopp scratched his head. “She can disappear for months at a time, kind of like Robin used to do before she moved out of the city for good, but then she’ll turn up with Shanks like nothing ever happened. I don’t even know… she may have moved in with Shanks when the city was in the first stages of being rebuilt, but I don’t really know. She was kind of Ace and Luffy’s mother when they were younger and lived with Shanks and I think she watched them when he was away, but these are all rumors and Ace and Luffy never say anything about it. I do know that Ace lived with Whitebeard for a while, but I honestly have no idea where he is now and I don’t even know if Luffy knows.”

Sanji had heard plenty about Luffy’s illusive older brother and his nomadic tendencies after the city was destroyed. Zoro seemed very fond of him, and at first that bubbling thing in Sanji’s chest had grown like a particularly bad case of heartburn, but the more he heard about Ace, the more he’d been able to understand that their closeness really came from friendship. Ace seemed pretty damn straight too, if the long list of girls Zoro had mentioned meant anything.

Sanji watched the five of them interact, just like Usopp had said, everyone grinning ear to ear and Makino placing her hand on Chopper and Zoro’s shoulders every time she talked to them. If it weren’t for the fact that she seemed so close to them and Sanji knew nothing about her existence, he would have thought she’d been here the entire time.

“…So Makino is…”


Sanji grimaced when he mentioned sister. “That’s gross.”

“They’re just rumors. I’d put my money on lover but she hasn’t been here in close to three months now. I’ve known her for years and I really can’t say for sure.”

Sanji blinked, taking in how close she and Shanks were standing, how their bodies turned in on each other automatically, like they had a homing beacon for each other. She left him constantly? It didn’t make sense.
“Why does she leave?”

“…Maybe Shanks is protecting her, maybe she doesn’t feel safe, I really don’t know. Shanks isn’t big on sharing his secrets. If you find out, he won’t care, but he won’t tell you willingly.”

Makino rounded on them, finally at a break in the conversation, and gave Usopp the biggest, most contagious grin that Sanji had ever seen. Instantly he was ashamed that he’d ever felt anything less than entirely welcoming to this saint of a woman.

“Usopp!” she walked over to the long-nose, now alit with his own grin, and pulled him into a hug, launching into a series of questions about his life and his work at his shop. Usopp thumped on his chest once she’d let him go, off on another story with Makino listening just as intently as Chopper and Luffy did, though Sanji was sure she was smart enough not to fall for them.

She was just… the epitome of a kind human being. Every part of her bled happiness and generosity, and again Sanji found himself jealous of the family Zoro had grown up with, even if he’d had no family of his own. It was impossible to miss how happy and comfortable Zoro looked with her. Sanji remembered rumors of Mihawk’s prizefighter nephew jumping homes before he finally settled down in Shanks’ territory, but he had no idea how long it had taken, and asking Zoro would be dangerous. If he let something slip that Zoro hadn’t told him, it could give away where he was from and the moss-head hadn’t really offered much about his past here. Only someone from the underground would know as much as he did about something from another territory, but he couldn’t remember Zeff talking about Makino.

Her bright eyes turned to find him and Sanji felt himself grinning before she’d even spoken. “And who are you?”

Sanji swept into a deep bow, taking her hand tenderly, and she giggled. “Sanji Blackleg, lovely lady. And may I say what an honor it is to be here today to witness such a reunion, it is clear that you command a lot of respect and admiration simply through your kindness.”

Makino giggled again, hiding behind her free hand, and Sanji swooned slightly, his vision twisting at her sheer grace. If she got any brighter, he wouldn’t be able to look straight at her.

“A pleasure to meet you, Sanji. What did you say your name was, again?”

“Blackleg, and I assure you, the pleasure is entirely mine.”
“Ah, I see."

Sanji’s eye popped open and his heart dropped into his stomach, a cold pain shooting up through his spine. That tone of voice… she couldn’t have… did she recognize…? There no way she could have

Sanji started again, realizing finally that she’d just finished asking him a question. He floundered up, fumbling over his own feet and trying to ignore the weird look Zoro was giving him. There’s no way she could…

“What—I-I’m sorry, lovely lady, w-what?” he choked out.

“MAKINO!”

Luffy came flying in over Sanji’s head and landed painfully on his arm, making Sanji yelp before the younger man leapt up again and latched himself onto Makino, making her stumble and spin as she laughed through his arms.

“How are you?! Did you have a nice trip?! Are you happy to be back?! How long are you staying?! Did you bring me any meat?! Did you—” Luffy pulled back suddenly, holding Makino out at arms length and inspecting her intently from head to toe. She blinked back at him curiously, holding both of his hands on her shoulders like a doting mother. Luffy did this a couple of time, trying to formulate a question in his head before he finally said, completely unabashedly, “Makino, you got fat. When did that happen?”

Zoro’s eyes popped out of his skull, along with everyone else there, all collectively shrieking and racing to hit Luffy on the head. Shanks got there first.

“Luffy! You idiot! What is wrong with you?!"
“Whaaaaaat?” Luffy whined, holding his head sadly. “I just asked—”

“It’s ok, Luffy,” Makino cut in suddenly, chuckling to herself. She pulled Luffy out of Shanks’ reach and ruffled his hair slightly, and then looked around like she was trying to make sure someone wasn’t there before placing a finger over her lips and winking. “It’s a secret.”

Shanks mouth hit the ground and Zoro’s eyes snapped to Makino’s stomach, where there was indeed a slight bump protruding from her middle.

…Holy shit.

“Makino!” Luffy threw his hands into the air and laughed happily. “I haven’t lost a single fight since you left! Can I tell you about the best ones?!”

“Yes!” Makino clapped happily, following Luffy’s lead as he bounced happily away from the group. Shanks choked slightly, finally managing to get his mouth closed.

“Wait a second! Damnit, Makino! Tell me what’s going on!”

Sanji blew out a sharp breath of air, slightly exhausted after the exchange, and turned to see if the marimo-head wanted to maybe get something to eat when a beautiful pixie with vibrant blue hair caught his vision, popping out of the crowd like a ray of sunshine. Sanji was across the room in seconds, sliding to his knees in front of her and presenting her with a flower that he pulled from one of the vases he passed along the way. The girl jumped slightly, Sanji appearing almost out of nowhere in front of her.

“My lovely goddess, it was a cold and dreary day here in this place until my eye caught sight of your glorious hair, such a radiant color to grace such a radiant girl—might I have the pleasure of knowing your name?”

“Uh…” the girl looked around carefully, measuring the amount of people around them and how safe the situation was before she straightened back up, giving him a strained smile.

“Vi…vi—”
“Vivi!” Sanji sang, plucking her fingers up to place the flower in her hand. “And such a radiant—”

A hand clamped down suddenly on his, grip tight enough to almost break his wrist. If he were human.

Sanji’s dark eye snapped up to where a dark-haired man was standing over him, an orange cowboy hat or some other stupid shit on his head, eyes like death and leveling Sanji with a glare hot enough to set fire to his hair. Sanji kept a steady grip on the flower without crushing it, shifting slightly to whip his feet over his head at a moment’s notice when two more hands grabbed his wrist and the wrist of the hand holding him, Zoro’s voice breaking through the tension.

“Sanji.” Zoro said slowly, as if he thought being too loud might set either or them off. “This is Ace. …Ace, this is Sanji. Sanji, this is Vivi, Ace’s girlfriend.”

Sanji’s eyes flicked between the three of them, measuring the static in the air with a deep breath in before he finally drew his hand back, pulling Ace with him and Zoro while he was still holding onto Ace. It was partially a show; Sanji could feel Ace’s power dripping off of the strong body above him, but Ace had better know that Sanji was no pushover and could easily overpower him if they were going on strength alone. The way Ace’s eyes popped slightly meant that he wasn’t expecting Sanji to be that strong in such an awkward position, but Sanji wasn’t stupid enough to think strength was all the man had going for him. You didn’t gain the nickname “Firefist Ace” by swinging your biceps around like a chimpanzee. The tension spiked suddenly now that Ace knew what Sanji was capable of while just kneeling, waiting to see what he’d do next. Sanji could see Zoro’s eyes flicking around him, trying to find how close his swords were. He had Wado on his hip, but against the two of them, he might need more.

Sanji coughed suddenly, making all three of them start, and reached his free hand up to push his bangs back into place. “I apologize for my bluntness, dear lady, as well as the way in which I composed myself. But how ever did you find such an ape of a man?”

Everyone was quiet, and then Ace threw his head back and guffawed loudly, letting go of Sanji’s hand and clapping him hard on the back before Sanji could even register that it was coming. Sanji oofed, leaning off slightly to the side with his weight still awkwardly placed on one knee.

“He seems ok,” Ace said to Zoro before leaving Vivi with the two of them and walking off to throw an arm around Makino and Luffy’s necks, making Luffy scream happily and cling to his brother in a hug that almost knocked all three of them to the ground. Shanks screamed at Luffy again, but Sanji was too busy being confused by the bizarre dynamics of their ridiculous family to care at this point.
“Vivi!” Nami screamed, running to the blue-haired girl and throwing her arms around her, making the two of them spin around. Almost instantly the two were off, babbling about their current clothes and hairstyles and how things had been here in the city and traveling with Ace. Sanji watched quietly, taking in the interactions and how these people were so easily able to be open with each other after so long not seeing them. It was… impressive, almost. Sanji didn’t like to think about going home, or how he would react the next time he saw someone from home. It was only so long before he couldn’t hide the fact that he was alive anymore, especially with living in the underground. Someone under Zeff was bound to come across him sooner or later, but for the moment, Sanji was fine to let it be later.

Sanji meandered his way over to Zoro’s side, watching the way Ace and Luffy beat on each other like a couple of twelve-year-olds while Makino tried to keep them from doing too much harm to each other. Zoro couldn’t take his eyes off of Makino’s middle, where a slight protrusion was making her dress fall slightly off center. It was crazy to think about it. Everything in this city was crazy to think about, especially after it had been rebuilt literally from ashes. Now… it had a legacy, of sorts, which was about to be passed on to future generations. Idly he wondered if Makino and Shanks would pick either Luffy or Ace to be the godfather, but watching the way Luffy flailed around Ace and how quick Ace was to knock him back to the ground with a punch, he wasn’t really sure. Makino was the nicest person he’d ever met though, so it was possible.

Ace found his way back to their side, throwing his arm around Zoro’s shoulder while Sanji it up a cigarette casually. Zoro furrowed his brows at the tightness in Sanji’s shoulders, trying to find some reason for the cook’s tenseness. Unless it was Ace, but he’d made it very clear how straight Ace was and that they hadn’t and weren’t going to go beyond friendship. So what…?

“So where’d you come from?” Ace asked, grinning over at Sanji. The cook returned the smile, it seemed, mostly out of habit, but he didn’t look like he was about to say anything and a moment passed before the awkward silence started to grow uncomfortable.

“He’s a poor little foundling we found on the side of the street,” Zoro supplied, and Ace blinked in confusion both at the statement and the face Sanji made in response.

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“What?” Luffy interjected, leaning over Zoro’s other shoulder to join in the conversation. “But that’s not what happened! Zoro, did you forget how Sanji—”

“Later,” Zoro cut in, leaning into Ace’s ear as he clapped a hand over Luffy’s mouth. Ace looked slowly between the three of them, taking in the way Sanji’s eyes had found the floor uncomfortably and nodded, withdrawing from Zoro before his face lit up again.
“I brought some people!” he cheered happily, turning with his arm outstretched to introduce them to someone and faltering when he realized that there was no one behind him, not that anyone would have been standing there anymore after how long he’d been talking with so many people. “Wait! Where’d they go?” Zoro rolled his eyes and waited for the dimly lit bulb to find his friends in the crowd.

“Oh there!” Ace pointed suddenly to two girls standing off to the side, waiting to be invited back into the group. For how calm they looked, it seemed that this wasn’t the first time Ace had done something like this. Vivi and Nami had joined them at some point, and Zoro blinked at the strange assortment of hair colors before realizing that it was Conis, one of Ace’s exes and good friends, and the girl Laki from the Pumpkin Café.

“You remember Conis right? And that’s Laki, her sister.”

Sanji choked suddenly on his cigarette, hacking uncontrollably into his hand and turning away in an attempt to hide it. His eyes were wide and watering and he spluttered uselessly, trying to force out words around his hand. The tenseness in his shoulders had tripled and Zoro found himself unconsciously stiffening and looking around to find whatever danger Sanji had seen. Ace stared down at him blankly before his eyes flicked back up to Zoro, mouthing a question about what had caused such a—

The sound of shattering glass split the air and Sanji’s coughing immediately ceased. The cook froze, eyes wide and trained on the group of girls in front of him where Conis had dropped her drink. It had exploded, drenching the shoes of all four girls in liquor and fragments of the ice cubes, but she didn’t seem to notice, eyes wide and locked on Sanji.

“…S…Sanji?”

Nothing moved, everyone too confused by what had happened to say anything, and then Conis clapped a hand over her mouth, tears beginning to pour down her face, her knees wobbling slightly. Laki held out her hands, unsure if she should try to stabilize her sister. Ace looked uselessly between her and Sanji before turning to Vivi, who only shrugged in response.

Zoro blinked, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Did Sanji know—oh.

Something cold and hard settled in his stomach, Zoro’s eyes going wide as he made the connection.
“And then one day she came home with these angel wings tattooed on her back. Big ones too. They were badass, totally not something an irrational or weak person would have put themself through willingly.”

Conis had angel wings tattooed on her back. Big ones. Badass ones.

He was so fucking stupid.

Instantly Zoro’s brain snapped to the timeline of what he knew about Conis—when she’d dated Ace, when they’d broken up, when Ace had told him that she’d started seeing someone else… and she lived in another city. She’d only visited them from time to time, meaning she had another entire life. There was plenty of time to get over Ace. Sanji had been dating his girlfriend for three years. The timing worked out perfectly.

Sanji swallowed heavily, making sure that he wouldn’t start coughing again, and then straightened up slowly, his eyes wide and wrought with… guilt. Cold, heavy guilt that was weighing down the vibrant colors of his eye. He looked pained, and sorry, and uncomfortable, and like he wanted to be anywhere else but here in this room with Conis.

“…Conis.” He said her name slowly, deliberately, weighing the situation to gage what she would do.

Her name was the trigger, and she shot across the room with incredible speed that could only come from the mutations of the NSPH venom and flung herself into Sanji’s arms, bawling into his shoulder and clinging to him as tightly as she could. He’d caught her out of reflex when she’d launched herself at him and was holding her carefully now, just letting her cry as the guilt sunk deeper into his eye.

“Where have you been?!” she screamed around his shoulder. “Why the hell didn’t you bother telling anyone that you’re alive?! We thought…! We thought…!”

Sanji didn’t say anything, he just stood quietly with his arms around her, forgotten cigarette still smoking where he’d dropped it on the floor.

“We were all heartbroken! You’re father didn’t accept it for weeks, you jerk! You couldn’t have called?! Even once?! Just to say that, oh, by the way, you actually weren’t taken back to the facility—he almost went in again to find you! We had to stop him from storming the place to try and break you back out!”
Zoro couldn’t make himself move. Luffy was still on his shoulder and it had been uncomfortable previously, but now he barely even noticed the younger man’s presence. The cold thing was still sitting like a rock in his gut, pulling at him and growing colder and colder the longer he watched the two of them standing together.

It was to be expected. Sanji had disappeared suddenly and never contacted anyone from home. Of course she’d be freaking out. Of course she’d be upset. Of course she’d want to hold him and make sure he was ok.

But that thing in Zoro’s stomach wasn’t moving, and watching the two of them together wasn’t helping.

Zoro swallowed heavily as Conis pulled away suddenly to kiss Sanji frantically, pecking him on both cheeks and his jaw bone and nose—she kissed him hard on the lips and Sanji returned it out of reflex before turning away and moving his arms to hold her slightly out of range. The thing in Zoro’s stomach was growing colder, and had taken on a painful heaviness.

“We’ll talk,” Sanji murmured finally, his eyes drifting to the floor. “I promise, I’ll explain everything. Later.”

Conis nodded, a spastic movement of her neck before she buried herself back in Sanji’s shoulder, holding him as tightly as she possibly could.

Zoro couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe, or move, or look away, and then the cook’s eyes flicked up to meet his and the thing in Zoro’s stomach burst into flame. Painful, gut wrenching, spurring, screaming flame, and Zoro wrenched out of Luffy’s hold and headed for the door as fast as he could without actually running. If it wouldn’t have looked so weird, he would have been sprinting. Anything to get him away from this.

Ace followed him with his eyes, measuring Luffy’s confusion and Sanji’s expression as he held Conis, and then reached up and readjusted the hat on his head. Vivi drifted over to his side, giving him a confused look, but he shook his head, nodding towards the door. She nodded again and stepped back to go stand with Laki and ease her and Nami’s confusion as Ace followed Zoro back up the stairs and out of the arena.

-oOo-
Ace meandered his way out through the door Zoro had disappeared through, finding him leaning up against the railing of the stairs leading down to the alley out of the arena. He was lucky Zoro was so directionally challenged, if the idiot hadn’t gone straight the whole way out and taken a different route to lose him, because he was going so fast, Ace might not have seen him for a good couple days. He was staying at Luffy’s place for the night, and Vivi had opted to stay with Nami in order to catch up, but he had work to do with Shanks and things to do before he decided whether or not he wanted to move back into the city. And now he had to hunt down his friends on the first day he was back in this long? Ain’t nobody got time for that.

He stepped up to Zoro’s side, pushing the hat back further on his head so he could see the stars and pulling his coat tighter around him. He sighed to himself. He’d gotten way too used to not wearing a shirt during his time exploring the islands off the coast of the country.

“Hey,” he said finally, smirking at the green-haired moron beside him, “I thought you weren’t interested in Conis.”

“…Hey, Ace.”

Well. So it’s bad then. Ace made a face.

After some prying, Zoro filled him in on what had happened in the last two months. From the night Nami had taken the job shipping for Blackbeard to what had happened between him and Sanji last night. Everything about Sanji spilled out, along with everything about Crocodile, the attack on Killer, Law and Kid, Shanks, Luffy, the new apartment… it almost seemed like half a lifetime had passed while he’d been gone.

Ace pulled his hat back down firmly on his head. Jesus, for three years while he’d been here the city had been… well, thriving wasn’t really the best word but it worked, and he’s gone for not even six months and that’s when everything happens. What beautiful timing he had.
“Sanji looks so…” Zoro paused, trying to find the way he wanted to word what he wanted to say. Ace took the moment to readjust his hat as the wind picked up, “guilty when he talks about her.”

“He never mentioned her name?”

Zoro shook his head. “The only things I know from his past are that he has an adoptive father somewhere and that he was higher than my level in the hierarchy in his territory.”

“And no word of any territories looking for missing people?”

“Not with his history. He has to stay too well hidden, advertising it would be dangerous.”

Ace nodded and moved to lean against the railing alongside Zoro. “…I still can’t believe… I mean, because they’re both vampires—or, NHTP or… whatever they’re called—it makes sense that they’d try out a relationship. They have a lot in common because of it.”

Zoro was quiet for a moment, just staring blankly up at the night sky littered with tiny lights. They shouldn’t have been that visible in a city, but no one had ever had the budget since the city had been rebuilt to flood it with as many lights as it had before the NSPH invasion. “…And now she’s here, and he obviously still has feelings for her, so he’s going to go home.”

Ace eyed Zoro’s expression quietly for a moment, picking up on the way Zoro was turned in on himself and the fact that he had yet to look Ace in the eye.

…”So he’s that important, huh?”

Ace shot him a shit-eating grin. “Well now we know a ton about his past because of what we know about Conis.”

Zoro turned slowly, finally meeting his gaze, leveling him with a blank stare.

“Sanji Black-leg… that name doesn’t ring a bell?”
Zoro shook his head.

Ace’s grin stretched. “What the name of the boss in Conis’s territory?”

Zoro deadpanned. There was no way he’d ever remember something as stupid as that—

“Come on, dumbass. Black-leg. **Black-leg.**”

“I heard you, Ace! It still doesn’t—the only thing that sounds even a little… oh fuck.”

Ace stood up and crossed his arms. “Yeah.”

“…It…” Zoro’s heart did a little hiccup, “like Red-leg.”

“Yeah.”

“You think… Zeff Red-leg is Sanji’s adoptive father?”

Zeff Red-leg ran one of the most shrouded territories of the entire country, which was why Zoro had always suspected that Conis’s parents chose to live under him instead of Shanks. Zoro himself knew next to nothing about the man—along with nearly everyone else in the world, let alone the city, even Law and Kid. Shanks had always called him an old softie and respected Red-leg’s attempts to keep his cities quiet by not saying anything further than that. Zoro had picked up over the years—through Conis and Shanks and other people that had drifted through his territory—that Zeff Red-leg ran a haven for everyone pursued, offering food and shelter to those in danger and homes for those looking to begin new lives. Conis had always said her family could never repay Red-leg for what he’d given them and given back to them, the biggest one being their lives.

The only thing Zoro knew for sure about Red-leg was that he commanded an extremely high amount of respect, and that Shanks was lucky to be on good terms with him. Not that Red-leg wasn’t lucky to be on good terms with Shanks, but Red-leg had so many networking options and had helped so many powerful people over the years that would all take bullets for him… a war between Red-leg and anyone would be a sight to behold. The man literally had an empire to his name.
If Sanji was his son… it was perfect. Sanji had said he worked in espionage, and he needed a home that could hide him above all else. It was literally perfect.

Zoro’s heart suddenly did another little jump as something else occurred to him: Red-leg had one leg. The leg he’d cut off and bled to save Sanji.

It was him.

“Makes sense. Conis lives in Red-leg’s territory too, so that’s how they would have met. Conis’s parents don’t let her do anything; they’re so paranoid about her being a N… NS… that.”

“It’s a negligible senescent porphyric humanoid.”

“Yeah, what does that mean anyways?”

Zoro paused, suddenly realizing that he had no idea and had never even asked Law. “…I don’t know. Never asked, we just always called Killer that. It was just… medical bullshit.”

“How…” Zoro’s brain was still trying to come to terms with his recent discovery. “…Does Shanks not… he has to know…!”

Ace gave him an odd look. “Shanks said that he didn’t know where Sanji was from?”

“He—” Zoro started, and then suddenly realized that Shanks had actually said nothing on the matter. Sly bastard must have known all along. Which actually made incredible amounts of sense, seeing as how Shanks had never distrusted Sanji, even with supposedly knowing absolutely nothing about him.

“Yeah,” Ace chuckled to himself, playing with his hat again, “he does that. Trust me, after all those years living with him, I know.”
The two went quiet, blending silently into the darkness around them, watching the stars. They used to do this so often, after Luffy passed out and they could actually enjoy the quiet.

“…You gonna stick around for a while?”

“I think so. Vivi was really the one that wanted to come home so soon. I could have gone another year. …Not sure what we’re going to do next, but we’ll hang around for a bit. Probably just long enough to get a place, a couple ratty pieces of furniture, a TV, and a six-pack in the fridge.”

Zoro snorted. “Vivi won't put up with that.”

“Yeah, but a man can dream.”

-oOo-

Sanji had found a quiet place on the roof of the arena, cigarette resting casually in his fingers as he leaned against the railing of the building and gazed up at the stars. Every once and while he’d take a slow drag and release the smoke up into the sky, watching the way it obscured the stars for a moment before dissipating into the night air. The night was silent. He’d gotten used to the sirens and normal bustle of the cities back home, not to mention the rush of the kitchen, but he was finally starting to feel settled in the absolute lack of sound.

The sudden slapping of sandal soles against the cement broke through the quiet, and Luffy joined him on the roof, leaping up onto the railing and chuckling happily at his new companion. Sanji sighed, taking another deep breath off of the cigarette. So much for the quiet.

“Sanji? Will you make me some meat? I’m starving…!”

Sanji grumbled under his breath, fighting to keep himself calm before he said, “Later, Luffy. You just ate dinner.”

Maybe that would get him to shut up.

Hah, yeah right.
Luffy cocked his head to the side, staring off blankly into the night as he tried to make sense of something. Sanji sighed quietly, preparing himself for the conversation to come.

“…Why didn’t you try to kick me?”

“What?”

“I asked you for food. Like, not that long after eating. And you didn’t try to kick me.”

Sanji grunted.

“Is something bothering you?”

“No.”

“But you didn’t get mad at all. Something’s bothering you. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Luffy. I’ll make you something later, that’s all.”

“What happened?”

“Jesus Christ, nothing happened—”

“You looked like you were having so much fun early with Zoro—”

Sanji couldn’t help his reaction. Zoro’s name triggered the most recent happenings to play through his mind again and Sanji’s shoulders locked up, the cigarette crunching in his fingers as his muscles spasmed. Zoro had looked so… betrayed, broken, hurt, abandoned… pick one. His expression though…
Sanji dropped his head into his free hand, scrubbing at his eyes and pulling slightly at his hair as he tried to get Zoro’s face out of his mind. He had yet to notice that Luffy had gone quiet at his side, surprised at Sanji’s violent reaction to such a simple statement.

Luffy cocked his head further to the side. “…Did you fight with Zoro?”

“…No, I didn’t fight with the idiot marimo. …No more than we ever do.” Sanji added the last part mostly for himself. His head was still in his hands, but he was too tired of hiding everything to bother trying to hide every little physical tell in front of the straw-hat idiot. Luffy would most likely miss most of it anyways.

“…Then if it’s not Zoro… are you afraid because he saw you with Conis?”

Sanji’s reaction was instantaneous. “WHY WOULD I BE AFRAID OF THE STUPID MOSS HEAD?”

Ugh, such an immature, kneejerk response. Luffy, to his credit, didn’t seem perturbed at all by the outburst.

“Because you care for Zoro.” Luffy said this like it was the most obvious thing. “And Zoro cares for you, so you don’t want him to be hurt because you care for her too.”

Sanji slipped his cigarette between his lips. Maybe this would be one of Luffy’s rare moments of clarity.

Luffy didn’t take Sanji’s silence as a sign to stop, which was good and bad, based on the situation. “Does Conis want you to go back home?”

“…Probably.”

“Then you’re leaving?”

Sanji said nothing.
Sanji was content for the moment to ride this out until the younger man got bored and left with smoke in his lungs. Conveniently, that also meant that he didn’t have to talk. Luffy, unfortunately, seemed fine to hold the conversation all by himself. He loved the wild idiot with everything in him, but right now he just really didn’t—

“Do you want to leave?”

Sanji thought for a moment, mind quiet enough that he could seriously entertain the thought without provoking himself.

…He didn’t honestly know.

“Why would you leave if you don’t want to?”

“…I have a duty back home, to all my friends and family—”

“Well why can’t you do that from here?”

“It’s complicated, Luffy.”

“What’s so complicated about it? If you want to stay, stay, if you want to go, go.” He grinned. “We’ll still be your friends. You have to come visit and cook for us though!”

Sanji didn’t answer and Luffy’s grin dropped as he tried to figure out what was such a huge problem to be causing his cook so much grief. He cocked his head to the side, scrunching up his nose as he thought over all of the possibilities of what could have upset Sanji so much.

Maybe it was that Zoro had beaten him in a fight. Or maybe he hadn’t cooked something the way he’d wanted to. Maybe Zoro was upset and that was upsetting him. What would he have been cooking that he’d messed it up? What could Zoro have been upset about? Maybe he was cooking
meat. Luffy would have been very upset if meat had been ruined. Would Sanji make him meat later? Maybe Zoro had said something. Zoro always said silly things. Sanji had said he’d make him something; he really hoped it was meat.

Oof, he could feel a headache coming on. Luffy pushed on his temple with the heel of his palm, trying to relieve some of the pressure building up. Sanji was standing patiently beside him, just smoking quietly to himself and watching the stars.

…Maybe it wasn’t Zoro.

“If it’s not Zoro… is it that you’re worried Conis will be hurt? Because you care for her, and she cares for you, so you don’t want her to be hurt because you care for Zoro?”

Sanji was quiet for so long, hand holding his cigarette in place in his mouth, that Luffy thought he wasn’t going to answer and started wracking his brains again for another possibility. He was definitely going to need some meat later for this headache. And then all of a sudden the cook pulled his hand away from his mouth and his head dropped down slightly.

“…I’m such an asshole.”

“Huh?”

“…I disappear for weeks without even telling her I’m alive, and now that we’re together for the first time in a couple months, I don’t even want to talk to her. We were together three years and I can’t even give her that.”

“…You don’t love her anymore?”

Sanji placed the cigarette back in his mouth, and Luffy took that as an affirmative. Also an ok to continue. “What made you stop being in love with her?”

“It doesn’t work like that, Luffy.”

“Yes it does. Sometimes you just stop being in love with someone.”
Sanji huffed to himself, his voice starting to take on an annoyed tone. “It’s not that simple, idiot.”

“Yes it is,” Luffy insisted firmly. “If something changes, you can fall out of love. Even if you change, you can fall out of love. Shanks and Makino fell out of love for a little while after everything with the city happened. Shanks wanted to have an adventure here and Makino thought it was too dangerous. They changed, first differently and they had their own adventures, and then they realized that they were changing together again and missed each other.”

Luffy waited for Sanji to say something, watching the almost weird calm in the cook’s muscles and waiting for him to snap. Sanji was normally so easy to fire up; he must have been really upset. But Luffy would do anything to help his cook. He hoped that Sanji knew that. Maybe Sanji would want some of the meat later, eating meat made everyone feel better.

“You had a huge change, Sanji. You started from scratch, had huge injuries, people hunting you down, new friends, new nakama—”

“New what?”

“It’s your family. The family that you pick because they’re important to you. Ace and Sabo used to tell me about it.”

*Ace and who?* Sanji recognized that name from somewhere, but he couldn’t place it. Maybe Zoro had mentioned it at some point.

“Those are big changes,” Luffy continued, not the slightest bit bothered by the interruption. “You didn’t think you were going to stay the same the whole way through, did you? When things around you change, you change too.”

Sanji took another drag, mulling over that last one. He had been planning on going back the whole way through this shitty ordeal. He’d been so convicted, held so strongly to the idea, and then…

And then Zoro had happened.

Luffy was right. He’d changed.
“And if you fell out of love along the way, that’s ok. If Conis really cares about you, she’ll understand, even if it hurts, because she wants you to be happy.”

Luffy gave Sanji a wide grin and hopped down from the railing, throwing his arms over his head and grunting as he stretched. “If Zoro makes you happy, I think you should stay.”

Sanji followed Luffy’s movements, watching the way he moved so unabashedly through the world, like nothing around him could hurt him simply because he chose not to let it. Life would be so much simpler if he could do that.

“Can you make food now? I’m really starving. They wouldn’t let me eat after the fight because they’re saving it for Ace and everyone to eat all together and he and Zoro are talking.”

“You can wait, you idiot, they’ll be done soon. You know Zoro’s not much of a talker.”

“Shishishishi,” Luffy chuckled, heading for the door. “That’s why you’re so good for him. Because you understand him even without the words. Tra-guy does that too, and Killer and Kid.”

And Sanji was left to smoke under the stars, thinking quietly to himself until he was called upon to whip up as much protein as he possibly could.

Well, he’d enjoy the quiet while he could.

-oOo-

She was beautiful.

Conis had silky, long, platinum hair that she normally wore in loose braids. Her skin was unnaturally pale and her skin always looked delicate, but especially so under the white lights of the examination room. Conis had always said that her skin and hair were those colors because of medication she’d taken when she was younger, but after Ace had revealed her NSPH status, Zoro had always wondered if her appearance was actually due to the experimentations she’d been through during her time in the facility.
She was beautiful. And she looked delicate, but Zoro knew how tough she could be. Ace didn’t date damsels in distress, he was too rough and tumble, and the impression her tattoo had given Sanji…

Zoro felt something twist unpleasantly in his stomach and he shifted despite himself, though it was getting easier to be around the two of them. Maybe his talk with Ace had helped.

But whatever the reason was, he’d found himself standing off in the corner of the examination room, Conis up on the table while Law laid out his tools next to her. Both Conis and Sanji had yet to even look in the direction of the tools, and probably weren’t planning on it any time soon. Sanji was sitting off to the side on one of the empty chairs, smoking quietly to himself with his eyes glued on the floor. Conis, to her credit, seemed to be doing better and was smiling and chatting with the people in the room. Beside Sanji, Ace was leaned casually up against the wall with Shanks and Luffy, there more as representatives to gain any helpful information in keeping dangerous visitors outside, especially now with so many NSPH in the city. The only one slightly out of place in the room was Laki, who had refused to leave her sister in the hands of a doctor, even Shanks’ doctor and one of the most respected surgeons of the underground.

Law had explained negligible senescent porphyric humanoids to Conis in extreme detail. Everything of their history, everything that he didn’t know, what he thought the three levels of NSPH and a lack of a fourth meant, Killer’s lack of venom, his and Chopper’s hypothesis on the government’s involvement—Law was hiding nothing from his… well, test subjects. Whether that was to gain their trust by showing them that he would always be as upfront as possible with them, or that he thought they deserved to know after all these years—especially so they could protect themselves—Law seemed vehement about telling every NSPH he encountered everything he knew about their condition.

Conis, instead of shying away like Sanji had, engrossed herself in the topic and was rattling off questions like she only had ten minutes with Law to learn as much as she possibly could before he’d leave forever. She’d finally reached the end of her questions and was closing the circle with the question every one of them had asked at some point.

“But… but why…?”

Law shrugged, snapping on two gloves and walking back over to the tools next to her hip. “Perhaps as weapons, perhaps as genetic experiments to improve the human race… who knows. It’s very difficult to guess, and there are a lot of plausible explanations, but as you’ve probably figured out, most of them aren’t very nice.”

Conis nodded, mostly to herself, before continuing. “Well… I want to help as much as possible.
Zoro, I still can't believe your little brother is a vam—err, NSPH too. I can't believe how many are ending up in this city—especially after what happened. Ace talked about you two almost as much as he did Luffy and Sabo. How old is he again?"

“…Thirteen.” Zoro was surprised at how firm his voice was, but nevertheless happy that his tenseness wasn’t showing.

“That’s right,” she mused, shaking her head slightly. “Things happen so quickly nowadays. …Or maybe that’s just me getting older.” She gave him a smile, slightly pained and no doubt wrought with memories that were being dredged up about a lot of horrible things as she was sitting on an exam table, and Zoro could help but quirk her a smile in return.

Conis was great. He’d never hated her; she was a wonderful girlfriend to Ace and a great person to be around. Nami and Vivi loved her, and the fact that Ace wanted to keep contact with her after they broke up (most of his relationships ended in threats from his girlfriends and warnings not to contact them again) said a lot about how wonderful she was.

But his stomach was still churning with Sanji visible out of the corner of his eye, even as she smiled at him.

“Law…” Conis turned back to him, pointedly ignoring the needle he was preparing. “Am I… NSPH major? You said Killer was minor, but I don’t know… how to distinguish… it sounds like I drink more blood than him…”

“Killer is minor,” Law nodded, “and I’m assuming you are too, based off of how much blood you normally consume, as well as healing time from what you’ve told me. You do eat more than Killer, but not nearly as much as Sanji, so that could just be an age thing. But I’ll be able to tell you after we look at the concentration of the virus in your blood. That’s the real determinant.” Law picked up the tourniquet and wrapped it securely around her upper arm. “Anyone that doesn’t want to see this should leave now.”

Sanji sucked in another breath from his cigarette, eyes still locked on the tiles, but he made no move to leave. Conis, finally eyeing the needle and the rubber wrapped around her arm, shifted uncomfortably and her face tightened like she’d eaten something sour, but she nodded for Law to continue when he asked her silently with his eyes if she was ok. How many years had she been in the facility again? Four? Five? Long enough to leave some scars.

Law slipped the needle into her arm and began filling the first of four vials he’d laid out, trying to finish as quickly as possible. Conis’s eyes were trained on the needle, watching Law’s every
movement with her fist clenched tightly. Beside her, Laki had grown stiff too and her muscles were
tensed, like she was prepared to run to Conis’s side the moment she showed any signs of real
distress. And then Law was done, and he slid the needle out of her skin and tossed it into the
container marked “sharps,” and most of the tenseness left the room in a rush, like someone had
opened a window and physically let it all out.

“I’m going to leave the bandage off if that’s alright with you, so that we can get a visual of your
healing. Sanji is the only major I’ve ever come across, and regardless of the viral count, your body
may behave in different ways than his. May I take a cheek swab?”

Conis nodded and opened her mouth for Law’s q-tip, which Law swept quickly over both cheeks
without looking, focused more on his watch while he eyed the puncture in her arm. Already it was
almost completely healed over, and resembled more of a tiny blood blister than an actual injury.

Zoro looked up as the door to the exam room clicked and Chopper trotted in with some files in his
arms, which he placed on the table next to Conis and immediately moved to take the swab from Law
and place it in a sterile container without even making eye contact with the surgeon. They worked so
well together at this point that it wasn’t really necessary. When Conis opened the top file curiously,
Chopper climbed up onto the table next to her and started pointing some things on the first page out.

“This is the file of the first NSPH we know about, Neculai Sergiu Pescariu. There may have been
ones before him, but there’s no paperwork that exists. Or if there is, the military doesn’t have it. This
stuff may not be up to date either, Law was able to get these before the city collapsed, but it’s too
dangerous to try and hack in again now, so it’s a couple years old.”

“1583?” Conis asked, reading from the file.

Chopper half shrugged, nodding and shaking his head at the same time. “Well, he was captured in
1583; they don’t know when he was born. It also doesn’t say anything about if he was born with the
virus or if it was administered to him, like we think it was. It’s too bad he didn’t make it just a little
longer, we could have asked him ourselves.”

Zoro blinked, looking over to where Conis had also looked up at Chopper in confusion and Sanji
had actually stirred in the corner for the first time since sitting down. He hadn’t moved in so long that
his cigarette was about to burn his hand.

“I doubt his mind would be salvageable enough to ask him questions after all those years of
experimenting,” Law interjected.
“That’s true,” Chopper shrugged again.

“Whoa, wait, asked him ourselves?” Laki spoke up, voicing everyone’s question.

Chopper looked up to all of the eyes on him, expression blank, like he couldn’t figure out what the problem was. “…Have we never mentioned this? Pescariu died during World War II after the Nazi scientists got ahold of him. He was in captivity for 357 years being passed from government to government, but we have no way of knowing how long before that he was born.”

“357?” Conis gasped, covering her hand with her mouth. Chopper nodded apologetically. Aside from Shanks and Law, who apparently knew, the eyes of everyone in the room had gone as round as dinner plates. Zoro’s heart had done another little hiccup, and he was having trouble figuring out how to breathe again. His eyes, almost as though they were magnetized, had locked on Sanji and seemed unable to look away from the cook’s aghast expression.

357.

“If the virus was administered to him when he was captured, than he shouldn’t have been much older than 390,” Law interrupted. “He looks about thirty in all of the pictures they have—don’t look,” he added as Conis reached for the file, and she yanked her hand back like it had been burned, her face starting to take on a green tinge. Beside her, Sanji twitched and immediately reached into his pocket for another cigarette, even though the one in his mouth wasn’t completely out. “But any paperwork before that could have been hidden or lost, or it wasn’t a military experiment before and they started a paperwork trail when they took it over… for all we know, he could have been around when some of the first homo sapiens were.”

“That’s what negligible senescent means…” Chopper trailed off, looking around the room incredulously. “Did know one know? And no one bothered to ask or look it up?”

All eyes found the floor almost guiltily, avoiding meeting Chopper’s eye.

“Seriously? No one? Ugh! You all…! …Fine! Senescence means that organisms, like…” he waved his hands around him, no doubt trying to dumb down the medical terminology so they could all keep up, “deteriorate as they grow older. So their muscles start to lack function, their reproductive systems start to fail, their senses are less astute, that sort of thing. Negligible senescent means that age and time have no affect on the physical form of certain organisms. Death rate doesn’t increase, they can reproduce… they basically function exactly the same way whether they’re ten or a hundred years
old. It’s not actually as uncommon as you’d think. Some types of fish are negligible senescent, some
turtles, lobsters, certain bacteria, naked mole rats, clams… it’s hard to tell for sure because there are
environmental factors that affect death rate, like you wouldn’t be able to tell how long a clam could
live if it got eaten, or if a disease kills something off, but from what we have seen, there are some
species that are basically immortal.”

“Because of the NSPH virus’s effect of speeding up the healing process,” Law finished for him,
ignoring Chopper’s miffed expression as the smaller doctor glared at his audience, “which is
basically just healing the body constantly and always giving it new cells, along with evidence like
Neculai Sergiu Pescariu, it seems that NSPH are negligible senescent.”

357.

Zoro couldn’t wrap his head around the concept.

Sanji… could live forever. Theoretically.

No wonder the military wanted control of the virus so badly.

Zoro found Sanji again, brow furrowing as he took in Sanji’s wide eyes and the ash that had
collected on his forgotten cigarette. He knew exactly what was going through the cook’s mind: Sanji
and Conis and Killer and every other NSPH maybe could live forever, but that didn’t specify how or
where.

If the three of them had never been broken out, they could have very easily ended up in the military
facilities forever.

~

Sanji found himself back outside with a much-needed cigarette in between his fingers, his lungs filled
with smoke as he tried to get as much nicotine out of the breath as possible. Zeff had tried to get him
to quit a couple of times, and in all honesty he could if he wanted to, but they were so helpful in
calming him down. His body healed and rid itself of toxins fast enough that the addictive part of the
nicotine as well as the withdrawal was almost nonexistent. And he didn’t have to worry about cancer
because his body healed too fast for anything like that to even begin. He didn’t even really have a
smoker’s cough, and he’d been smoking for close to ten years.
He’d quit once just to prove to Zeff that he could, and the withdrawal had only lasted a week or so before he’d felt fine, but the stress of everything around him caught up to him so quickly. Everything set him off now; he was just quick-tempered and hotheaded and he had too much psychological scarring to really care or for anyone to really fault him. But the nicotine helped to calm him, and it was easy to get to and simple to administer without pills or needles or anything else fucking with his body. He’d never been gassed in the facility so the cigarettes didn’t trigger anything, and he’d spent eleven years in that hellhole and come out relatively sane so if he wanted a fucking cigarette he would have a fucking cigarette.

Sanji snorted to himself and knocked the accumulating ash off over the railing of the roof.

...I guess that riled me up a lot more than I thought it would. Ranting to himself about how he could have a cigarette if he wanted? Seeing Conis in the position of the patient with Law must have really bothered him. Not that he was sure why he thought he wouldn’t be bothered. Just knowing that Chopper was a doctor put him on edge sometimes when he came to visit the apartment, like showing his home to any doctor would put him in serious danger. It was ridiculous, but he couldn’t keep himself from flinching every time Chopper walked in the door. Thank god the kid was so bubbly and had no such thing as a poker face, and that he’d never realized that Sanji’s discomfort was a direct result of his presence, or he’d have a real problem.

Needles were a huge trigger for him. He had scars on his arms from how many times he’d been injected with things and had samples taken from him, and scarring was not easy to do, considering how fast he healed. Idly, he wondered how many times he’d have to have been stuck for his skin to break down and stop healing correctly in those spots. His eye was one thing, it was delicate and he was pretty sure he’d been able to smell acid when they were experimenting on it. The point of that was to see how much his body would be able to withstand and still heal, especially on a part of his body so important for hunting. His arms were a different story. Needles left almost no marks, so getting a scar from just that meant hundreds of thousands (of maybe tens of thousands) of injections. Just the thought made a pretty significant shiver shoot up his spine, and he had to change positions just to get comfortable again, crossing his arms so his inner elbows were tucked away.

But if he were being honest with himself, what was bothering him was more than that.

357.

357 years as a prisoner. 357 years living just by the scientific definition of living. Law’s comment about the man’s mind not being coherent enough to answer questions had really thrown him too.

The older Conis and Killer got, the less likely they were to be found again unless they did something stupid like attack someone in front of onlookers. He just looked like an older, albeit healthier version of himself. He was so easily identifiable, especially to someone that was looking.
Sanji growled to himself as he noticed the distinct tremor his hands had taken on and he quickly sucked in another breath, relishing in the nicotine washing over him. He needed to find a brand with a higher dose; his body filtered it out of his system too quickly. The good thing about healing that fast was that he didn’t build up a tolerance to the nicotine, so when he had a cigarette, that was fine and generally all he needed. You know, if whatever was throwing him went away. Otherwise he could go through a whole pack in less than half an hour.

The calm was short-lived though as his sharp ears picked up the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs and a cactus-like feeling prickled up the back of his shoulders.


It was Conis.

The thoughts 'shit' and 'well, now’s as good a time as ever' invaded his head simultaneously, and he took another deep breath on his cigarette as the door to the roof was pushed open and Conis stepped quietly out onto the roof. She could probably hear him puffing away nervously all the way from the door—if her momentary pause said anything. Sanji closed his eyes and sucked in another breath.

Her arms found his middle as she joined him, and his heart rate leveled out as she laid her head against his back even with what he had to say next sitting on his tongue. It was… nostalgic, sort of. She was a reminder of better times, back when he still had two fucking eyes and all of his hard work getting over triggers hadn’t been obliterated by him being kidnapped again and beaten within an inch of his life, again.

She felt good. Warm. And without him even realizing it, she had made him calmer than any cigarette ever could. The only person that could have calmed him faster was—

A rush of heat swept over his body and Sanji ducked his head, biting down hard on his tongue and clamping down on his breathing. A lump had clogged his throat, leeching anger and hate into the rest of his body.

I want to go back—do not fucking cry—I want Zeff—don’t you fucking cry—I need Zeff—don’t you fucking dare—I want Zeff—
“What’s wrong?”

Sanji forced himself to suck in a slow and even breath, looking back out over the city as he blinked to make sure his eyes weren’t wet. And then he turned to face her, really look her in the eye for the first time since she’d gotten here.

And she was smiling at him. Despite everything, everything he’d put her through, everything they’d been through together, everything he owed her, she was still smiling that breath-taking, altruistic, angelic smile at him.

He was the worst.

“Are you going to call Zeff?” she murmured. The lump jumped violently in Sanji’s throat again, but he was pretty sure that he hadn’t flinched in any physical way that she would have picked up. “Because you should, selfish jerk.”

He wished her joking tone were doing more to cheer him up.

He wished that he didn’t have to be the one to make her stop smiling.

He wished she hadn’t come yet.

He wished that he was home with Zo—Zeff—

Sanji blinked, realizing suddenly that his mind had started associating home with Zoro, even after such a short period of time. He even realized that he’d wanted to go back to Zeff, not home.

What was happening to him?

“You didn’t think you were going to stay the same the whole way through, did you? When things around you change, you change too.”

The corners of Sanji’s lips quirked upwards and he chuckled to himself. Leave it to the idiot to make
him laugh at a time like this. Conis cocked her head in his direction, her smile still gentle, but he shook his head and snuffed out his cigarette on the railing.

The change in her expression was instantaneous. He used to always put out his cigarettes in front of her, not wanting to disgust the lady, but then they’d gotten too close and always getting away from her to smoke had become a pain. More recently, he didn’t bother not smoking around her unless there was something serious they had to talk about. She knew that.

She pulled back slightly, hands still on his arms but clearly giving him the space he needed, her expression tight now as she tried to stay strong for whatever he was going to say. He despised making her feel like this.

“…I want to tell you what happened,” he whispered.

The words didn’t feel real on his tongue. So much had happened in such a short amount of time. He even told her about the night he’d been kidnapped, how they’d had some woman scream off in an alley and lured him away from anyone that would help or even see when they kidnapped him—things that no one else knew. Everything came out.

Everything but Zoro.

For some reason, he couldn’t get himself to say anything to her about Zoro. He hadn’t even told her that his new apartment here was specifically so that he could live with the moss head.

Conis was openly crying by the time he was finished, and when she reached up slowly he stilled, feeling that, if nothing else, he owed her as much trust as he’d placed in her before, and let her sweep the hair out of the way of his eye. She brushed over his lid carefully with her thumb, her expression never faltering from the warm, open, loving gaze she was giving him as she took in the newest and biggest physical scar. She looked like she wanted to hug him, or cover him with a blanket and shield him from the world, or grab him and run far enough away that nothing would ever stand a chance of finding them again. The lump in his throat refused to move.

“You…” her voice was heavy and waterlogged, and she combed his bangs back in place and allowed him his privacy again, “you… Sanji, I’m so sorry… you went through that all on your own…”

Sanji shook his head, a slight smile forcing his way onto his lips. He leaned back heavily against the
railing with his head tipped towards the ground so he wouldn’t have to look her in the eye. He was such a coward.

“I wasn’t alone,” he said firmly, watching the first few snowflakes staring to fall around his feet. “I had my… nakama here.”

“…Your what?”

“…Conis, I…” he had absolutely no idea how to say this. “…These past few weeks, they’ve really changed me. And I didn’t realize how much until I saw you today.”

“…You weren’t planning on coming back at all, were you—”

He shook his head quickly. “No, I was. But there are people chasing me and I was really hurt and I had to be safe. I wasn’t healed enough because of the drugs they gave me to stand a chance of getting back on my own until really recently.”

He took a deep breath before continuing, running his tongue over the spot on his lip where a cigarette normally would have sat. “While I was here, I… I joined this crew. This crew of psycho lunatics who would support my every decision just because I thought it was important, not even that they agreed with it.”

She seemed at a loss for anything to say, so he just kept talking.

“I found something really incredible here. And I don’t want to leave.”

“…I don’t understand.”

Sanji winced at the wobble in her voice. He couldn’t look at her; he couldn’t see that broken expression and the tears in her eyes that were there because of him.

“…I think… the way I feel about you has changed too.”
“…I’m so sorry, Conis. You’re so beautiful, and strong, and wonderful, and so, so perfect, I’m so angry at myself that I feel this way… but I won’t lead you on. That disgrace would be even worse than the one I’m putting you through now.”

“…Sanji, I… I can wait.” Her grip on his arm tightened. “We can work through this. I know you’ve been hurt and god knows after how many years you were in that facility that this wasn’t easy, but—”

“I don’t want you to wait for me.”

“…There’s someone else, isn’t there.” It wasn’t a question. “Here, in the city.”

Sanji nodded after a moment, eyes still locked on the ground. “I’m so sorry, Conis.”

She pulled her hand back slowly, and part of his heart broke as her warmth left his skin. He couldn’t look at her. He couldn’t face her as she turned and walked back to the door, not even as he heard her choke on a small sob behind her hand and another piece of his heart broke for her. The door clacked open loudly, her jerky and unstable movements making it much louder than when she’d joined him, and Sanji waited for the following slam as she closed it. It never came, and he blinked, looking back over his shoulder just enough to see that she was still there without actually looking at her.

“…Please call your father,” she whispered, knowing that he would hear her even from that distance. “He’s really scared.”

And with that she stepped through the door and it clicked shut behind her, leaving him alone out in the black with the snow falling silently around him.

-oOo-

Zoro was pretty sure that Sanji would have ended up on the roof. The cook liked open spaces with lots of escape options. But he wasn’t honestly sure the best way to get to the roof from where he was and he was passing the back door anyways (how did he get here again?) so he pushed it open anyways. Might as well check while he was there.
The night was cold and silent with snow just starting to fall, though it wasn’t cold enough to stick on the black pavement, which gave the scene a strange, surreal feel, like he was flying through space.

Someone was outside, but it wasn’t Sanji. Zoro tried to duck back out the door quickly, not really in the mood for chit-chat, but Laki turned quickly and saw him, giving him a warm smile and he sighed to himself, resigning to join her for a little bit.

He trudged down the steps and moved to stand next to her, pulling his jacket tighter around him. They were quiet for a long time, watching the stars and the snow and breathing in the crisp, pure air. Zoro had gotten so used to the smell of debris in the air that smelling actual air was kind of odd, though definitely not unappreciated.

“Long night,” Laki said finally, and Zoro nodded. “…I never realized that you had so much involvement with… you know, people like Conis.”

Zoro just nodded again. He’d been having way too many of these types of conversations in the past few weeks.

“I can’t believe I didn’t realize that Sanji was one too.”

Zoro found himself rolling his eyes before he even realized what he was doing and quietly thanked the stars that it was dark out. He didn’t need to be making enemies with Conis’s sister with everything going on. But seriously, did she think all NSPH had a stamp or something on the backs of their necks? NSPH actually weren’t that easy to pick out unless you were looking for them. The woman who’d rented them out their apartment had been a fluke because she’d been able to see Sanji excited and unreserved, Laki would have had no way of telling. And good thing too, they would have all been in hiding years ago for Killer if it was that easy to pick an NSPH out of the crowd.

On that note though… “Why…” he started and Laki looked over to him, waiting patiently. “When we were in your shop that day… you called NSPH’s “monsters—”

Laki blew a raspberry, cutting him off, and he blinked over at her.

“The ones that destroyed the city were monsters. My sister is not a monster, and neither if Sanji, and from what I’ve heard, neither is your brother, but I guess I can only take your word for him.”
She winked in his direction and Zoro found himself smirking.

She’d known there was a difference all along. Duh.

They were quiet again after that, Zoro suddenly content to stay for a while before going to find Sanji as they watched the snow falling from the stars.

~

The man leaned around the corner of the building he was watching from, keeping one eye to where Black-leg was standing on the roof smoking quietly and one eye on the rest of the street to make sure no one surprised him. He raised the phone to his ear at the sound of someone picking up on the other end, ducking away so he wouldn’t be seen while he was distracted. He was really close to the heart of their territory anyways; he should start working his way back before someone saw him. He was still surprised at the fact that Black-leg had yet to notice him; maybe he was more frazzled than he was letting on, but he was definitely unnerved so it was possible that he did sense something. Something was definitely throwing him off though, perhaps something to do with the fight tonight, or that blonde girl that had come to talk with him earlier.

--Yes?--

“It’s Kaku. I found how we can do it.”

--Yes?--

“Black-leg has been hired as the traveling chef for Shanks’ fighting team.”

--…When’s their next fight?--

“I’m pretty sure it’s in a couple weeks. Moriah only has them on the weekend because a lot of his fighters have ties outside the underground. I was going to leave the city tonight and head straight there, just to be sure. Also maybe to get Black-leg to relax more so his guard is down, so he won’t feel me over his shoulder. I doubt anything will happen while I’m gone, but we can have Fukuro or someone come to watch while I’m gone.”
--Good. Take whoever you need, you have jurisdiction to pull people from wherever they’re stationed now. No one should be more than 100 miles away from your current location.--

Kaku smiled to himself, able to hear Lucci’s pleased tone even through the phone. *Finally. “Done. I’ll keep you updated.”*

He flipped the phone closed and slid it into his pocket, looking up once more at Sanji to see if he’d moved before he jogged off down the black alley.

Up on the roof, Sanji’s shoulder blade prickled uncomfortably and he reached up to scratch it, looking around in the night, but there was no one there.

-oOo-
Zoro grunted, peeling open his eyes at the sound of something crashing around… around him. Somewhere. It was way too goddamn early. What the hell time was it? Swear to god if the fucking neighbors didn’t shut the fuck up—

The door to his bedroom smashed in suddenly, colliding with the wall behind it and creating a crash that echoed around the open apartment. Zoro was awake in a heartbeat, and inwardly he heard someone bellow, “Fuck!” near him but he was too intent on the intruder to care. Zoro wrenched back the covers and lunged for Wado, when suddenly a stray foot caught him across the face and knocked his head back violently. His arms flew up, flailing for something to hold onto as he felt the bed vanish out from under him, and the back of his hand connected with something soft and leathery with a watery crunch.

The last thought through his sleep-ridden brain before he hit the floor was: Oh. Sanji.

“FUCK!” the blond roared, covering his nose tenderly as blood began dripping down his face. Zoro whirled for the door (no small feat with how tangled he was in the blankets he’d taken down with him) only to grind to a standstill.

Killer was standing in the doorway innocently, watching the whole thing unfold in front of him with a little shit-eating grin hidden behind a lollipop in his mouth.

“You gave me a key, remember?” he asked calmly, watching Zoro try to unhook himself from the sheets and Sanji scrabble for something to cover himself, realizing that Killer had no intention of leaving just because they were naked. “I just let myself in. When’s breakfast? I’ve been a little woozy since yesterday.”

“Get out!” Zoro yelled, heaving a pillow in his direction, but Killer just ducked casually. Goddamn NSPH reflexes.

Killer pulled the lollipop out of his mouth to gesture between the two of them, smirk growing. “This,
“Out!” Zoro shot forward, having finally pulled himself out of the covers. Killer let out a whoop before racing back through the door and slamming it behind him, giving himself just enough time as Zoro stopped to yank it back open to launch himself over the balcony and land gracefully in the dojo below, cackling to himself as he disappeared into the kitchen.

Zoro stood in the doorway for a moment as Sanji guffawed to himself behind him, growling to the empty hallway before he slammed the door with a satisfying smash and stalked back over to the bed.

“Little shit,” he snarled, tossing the covers back onto the bed.

The cook’s nose had stopped bleeding and he was touching it gingerly, snickering at Zoro’s tizzy. “We’re going to regret giving him that key, aren’t we?”

“Already do,” Zoro assured him, eyeing Sanji’s nose with a weird look as the cartilage put itself back in place with another watery crunch. “…Umm, sorry.” He felt compelled to say it even though he wasn’t even sure if it was necessary.

Sanji waved his hand and disregarded the apology. “If you’re going to have a guard dog, sometimes you might get bitten.” He threw back the covers and crossed the room to the closet. “I’m going to get started on breakfast, I’m actually really thirsty too. Want anything in particular?”

Zoro’s eyes found the hickeys dotting Sanji’s back and chest that were quickly fading and would probably be entirely gone by lunchtime. He sighed inwardly to himself. The marks had always been… a little source of pride for him. He’d have to find something else to put on Sanji, something that wouldn’t fade so easily.

“Nah, Killer can pick. Extra blood in mine.”

“Oh ha ha, marimo. That gets funnier every time you say it.”

-oOo-
“So you guys are like actually a thing now?”

He’d let Sanji answer that one.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the glower that Sanji sent him from across the kitchen and all the way into the dojo where he remained silent. The cook finally turned back to the stove and Zoro smirked slightly, curling the weights back up into his chest.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Is that why you got the apartment? How long have you been sleeping together?”

“None of your business,” Sanji said casually around his cigarette, sliding the finished eggs—died red for Killer and himself—out of the pan and onto a plate, which he then placed on the upper counter for Killer to eat. Killer pulled his barstool in and grabbed the fork laid out for him, digging in.

They’d only been sharing a room for three days, actually. Conis had decided to stay with Laki instead of Sanji the first night she was here, like everyone thought she would have after their tearful reunion, so that night after getting home from the arena, Sanji had shoved Zoro to the floor and fucked him like no one ever had before. Zoro hadn’t been able to walk straight the next day, which hadn’t happened since Saga, and Zoro couldn’t have been a happier clam.

No one had been dumb enough to ask why Sanji and Conis hadn’t stayed together, but Zoro knew
everyone was buzzing with questions and they would soon come.

488.

“’Oes ’at mean you’re gonna ‘fay for a while?”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. And yeah, I was getting used to being here. Speaking of, we were going to go out and buy a bed for your room here. Do you want to come so you can pick it out?”

Killer gave him an impish grin around a mouth full of eggs. “Why don’t I just take your room? Not like you’re using the bed anymore.”

Sanji flushed a deep red and whipped around to finish Zoro’s eggs so Killer wouldn’t see, the little shit. He was enjoying this way too much.

493.

“Hey moss head, grub’s done.”

“Coming,” Zoro grunted.

495.

A sharp rap at the door turned everyone’s eyes toward the front of the apartment and Zoro groaned silently to himself as Nami pushed the door open with a wide smile.

“Hello? Anyone home?”

“Nami-swan~! What brings you—”

“FOOOOOOOD!”
Luffy leapt out from behind Nami and she ducked violently, nearly dropping the bags in her hands and she took a swing as Luffy as he passed for that, screeching at him to be more careful, but he was much too intent on the food. Sanji was already opening the fridge to take out more eggs before he’d had the chance to leap onto one of the stools next to Killer. Luffy’s hand shot out for Killer’s plate before he was completely seated, and Killer’s arm flashed like a bullet and he stabbed the fork into the countertop exactly between Luffy’s fingers, halting his advances.

“It’s got blood in it, dope,” Killer made a face at him and Luffy giggled back sheepishly, sticking out his tongue playfully as Nami joined them with an exhausted sigh. Like it was such a problem dealing with Luffy. Witch.

“You chip that counter, you die,” Sanji grunted, spreading out a menagerie of ingredients across the counter. “Nami-swannnnn~! What would you like for breakfast?”

“Anything, Sanji.” She took a seat on Luffy’s other side. “It smells delicious in here, you can smell if all the way from the elevator.”

Zoro set his weights back on the rack with a heavy clank and went to join the rest of the crew at the counter. If Luffy went through all the food, he’d be pissed.

“You hair’s getting long,” he commented offhandedly, swiping at Killer’s hair. It had always been in his eyes, but recently it seemed like he was growing it out like Willie Nelson. “You need a haircut.”

“I like it like this,” Killer gave him a quick smirk before returning to his eggs.

“You’re going to start tripping over it soon.”

“Dad thinks it’s cool,” he shrugged.

“Kid wears more fucked up things than anyone I’ve ever seen. Don’t take fashion advice from him.”

Killer snorted. “He said the same thing about you.”
“What do I wear that’s weird?! He wears fake fur on a daily basis!”

“That haramaki thing you wear when you fight is pretty weird—”

“IT’S USEFUL! IT’S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE A FASHION THING!”

Sanji set a plate of eggs down in front of them all and all of a sudden Zoro had to be alert to finish his food before Luffy did. And the breakfast war began. All they needed was—

“We heard that fooooooood was being offered~!”

“Cook-bro, it smells so good!”

“I remember when I used to be the chef for the King and Queen of Denmark! The kitchens always smelled this amazing with me around!”

“Really, Usopp? That’s incredible!”

And there they were. Killer pushed over so that Chopper could hop up and share his barstool, giving Usopp the last one, and Franky and Brook moved to stand around the crew. Sanji, as if he’d known that this was going to happen, handed them all eggs and then moved to finish with the ham slices he’d started. Beside him, a pile of potatoes was sitting, waiting to be peeled—maybe for hash browns—and Zoro removed himself from the insanity to place his empty plate off to the side and start peeling. The cook managed to send him a grateful look before he had to turn all of his attention to the stove so that he could fend Luffy off from the ham. All they needed was—

“Oh Jesus, no way in hell we’re staying,” Kid’s gruff voice echoed across the room, stating his obvious displeasure.

And there they were.

“You can leave,” Law answered easily, crossing the room with a couple bags of groceries in his
hands and leaving Kid’s almost disgusted expression at the door. “I’m hungry.”

“Hey, Dad,” Killer nodded and Law nodded back, setting the bags on the counter and placing his hat next to them so he could play with his mussed bangs.

“What’s that?” Sanji asked, leaning over just far enough to see into them without leaving the stove unattended. Luffy reached for the ham and Sanji swiped out with his spatula without even looking, snapping him across the back of the hand and he yelped, leaping back onto his stool.

“Killer said you gave him a key. We had to go out anyways and figured we could drop some things off since most likely all he’ll be doing here is eating.”

“We don’t mind feeding him.” Sanji pushed open the bags to inspect the food inside, not displeased if his expression said anything. Law had good taste, though he couldn’t cook for shit. Kid joined Law at the counter, entirely displeased with the loud atmosphere if his expression said anything. Beside them, Brook was animatedly telling a crowd of engaged onlookers about how he’d saved a damsel in distress once during a song without missing a single beat. Chopper, Usopp, and Luffy’s jaws were hanging on the floor. Kid rolled his eyes, but didn’t refuse the plate of food Sanji offered him.

“Also, we can bring an old mattress over or something,” Law added. “We don’t have an extra frame lying around, they take up too much space.”

Sanji was about to answer that when Killer cut him off, shaking his head. “I’m going to sleep in Sanji’s bed. He and Zoro are fucking.”

Zoro blanched and Sanji choked on his cigarette, both whirling to see how much damage control they had to do, but everyone seemed to be too entrapped in Brook’s story and hadn’t heard him say anything. Zoro grabbed a potato off of the counter and whipped at his head. Killer just barely ducked out of the way so it bounced off Usopp’s head, knocking him off of his stool with a loud squawk.

“Killer, shut up!” Zoro yelled.

“What?!” Killer straightened back up, holding up his hands to fend off whatever else came flying at his head. “They don’t need to bring a bed over!”
“How exciting,” Law said drawly, pulling his plate out of Sanji’s frozen hands as the cook tried to calm himself and not make a scene about the amount of smoke he’d inhaled, eye watering slightly. “Saves us that time, at least.”

“Good,” Kid grumbled, “I hate shopping.”

“Knock knock! Hello~?! Can we come in?! We’ve been knocking for five minutes, I don’t think anyone can hear us!”

Good god even with how big enough this apartment was, it still wasn’t big enough for—

Zoro ground to a halt as his eyes caught the two new figures at the door. He didn’t even have to look to his side to see that the cook had frozen in the kitchen too. Standing in the doorway were Laki—waving happily to everyone with a paper bag adorned with pumpkin with wings—and Conis—who looked like she was fighting with herself not to hide behind Laki or run from the apartment. And then Laki closed the door behind them and trapped her before crossing the room and forcing her to follow.

“Conis!” Nami called happily, leaning over from her barstool to wrap her arm around Conis’s neck and pull her close, offering her what was left on her plate. Sanji had resumed his cooking now, and both seemed keen to wait a moment before acknowledging each other. It was three days now since they’d seen each other at the fight. Zoro’s stomach still took on that cold knot he’d been forming in situations like this. What a pain in the ass. He grabbed the kettle off the stove and poured himself a cup of hot water before going to search for the tea.

Conis looked up again after a moment of awkward silence between them and slipped away from Nami to steal around the counter, standing next to Sanji’s arm while he cut up some cheese slices to go with crackers. She slid her hands into her pockets, back slouching slightly as she waited for him to see her. He did after a moment and they exchanged an uneasy couple of smiles broken up intermittently by glances at the floor or to other sides of the kitchen. Zoro, having just found the tea and witnessed this exchange, turned back to find the honey, deciding suddenly that his tea needed it if he were going to get over this stupid lump in his stomach. What a pain in the ass.

“How are you doing?” Sanji said as he offered her the board of cheese and she took a slice with a grateful and shy smile, nibbling on one of the corners. Sanji turned back to the counter to cut some more slices, hating himself for the expressions she was making. She hadn’t been this shy with him for close to two and a half years now. Part of him hated the fact that they had to date at all because now he might lose his friendship with her too.
“Good.” She was nodding incessantly, like the movement was the only tick that would get rid of her anxiety.

“That’s good.”

She nodded again.

Another moment passed between the two of them before she spoke, shuffling awkwardly between her feet. “I just… wanted to make sure you knew that there were no hard feelings between us.”

Sanji’s hand froze on his food so that he could turn and give her his full attention. She deserved it. He flashed her a smile and reached over to smear some olive tapenade on the top of another slice of cheese, and then garnished it with some mint leaves. He placed the mini smorgasbord in the perfect center of a cracker and handed it to her. “Of course not.” His voice was radiating happiness.

Meanwhile, Zoro—having finally found the honey, even though he didn’t really want it—sighed to himself and prepared to turn around. Sanji and Conis were too kind. They’d be smiling at each other and touching and offering each other whatever food they had in front of themselves. He knew them both well enough to understand that they could never really hate each other—and he’d never want them to—it was all just very new. And if he were being honest with himself, Sanji telling him the honest truth was very new too, and it made him twitch slightly when he saw them together. God knows what else the cook wasn’t telling him, even though he knew that was absurd.

Absurd or not though, it distracted him enough to walk right into Laki when he turned back around.

“Oh!” she laughed, grabbing his arms to steady herself. “Sorry, I guess I assumed you heard me coming.”

Zoro grinned sheepishly. “Yeah… guess I’m not so impressive out of the arena.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Laki stepped away from him to lift herself up onto the counter and sit facing him. She had a plate of the leftover food in her hand while she waited for Sanji to make more—none had escaped Luffy’s stomach—and was nibbling on it idly. “So this is the apartment of the famed Vampire Hunter.”

Zoro cringed despite himself. He’d never liked the name, even before meeting Sanji. It had always
made Killer twitch.

Laki seemed to realize her mistake and quickly backtracked. “Sorry, I—I guess… I got so used to not thinking of Conis and Sanji like that, I forget that some people actually do think of them as such. …I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“…You’re place is much more… decorated than I pictured.”

Zoro barked out a short laugh before he could catch himself, moving to lean against the counter next to her. “Yeah, that’s the cook.”

“Ah,” she nodded to herself in mock surprise, surveying the kitchen. “That would explain the plethora of things that aren’t knives in this kitchen.”

Sanji paused in his conversation with Conis, his eye catching Zoro and Laki chatting off in the quiet corner of the kitchen. That normally wouldn’t have bothered him, except that whatever Laki had just said seemed to hit the marimo’s sense of humor right on the head. They were currently staring at each other silently in joking glares, waiting for the other to crack. Laki finally did and she said something else that made Zoro smirk. Then gesture towards the cabinet, offering her tea. She nodded and he set about making it. Sanji blanched.

Zoro was making someone else food?!

Laki wasn’t even…! She was too…! She wasn’t—well, she was gorgeous, and perfect of course—but definitely not for Zoro! He was such a hulking ape! Sexy as hell of course, and devoted, and kind, and passionate, and strong, and…

Sanji’s eyes followed as Zoro passed her a steaming mug and she thanked him with a smile before continuing the conversation. He wasn’t talking, like normal, the uncouth monkey, but whatever she was saying was interesting enough to keep him in the conversation at all. Hadn’t Luffy said that? That he was good with Zoro because he understood him without the words? Or whatever.

Sanji huffed to himself and turned back to the pan in front of him, reaching for a plate and nodding to Conis like he’d been listening the whole time. There was nothing to worry about and he knew it.
Still, it made his insides bubble uncomfortably.

-oOo-

“Let’s go on a date.”

“…What?”

“Technically, a respectable amount of time hasn’t passed since I broke up with Conis, but I’m counting the time that I’ve been here as time not being together with her—”

“No, wait, what?”

Sanji gave him an exasperated look and took the cigarette out of his mouth, so he could talk more clearly. “I’m asking you out.”

Zoro stood frozen in the dojo, weights half raised over his head mid-rep, staring owl-eyed at Sanji like he’d asked to move to a faraway island somewhere completely off the grid.

Sanji sighed and moved to lean against the closest support beam, tucking one of his legs casually behind the other. “Generally,” his tone was of a teacher talking to someone with a severely lowered IQ. Or a brain injury. “When you like someone, it’s customary to go out on dates with them. You know,” he waved his hand flippantly through the air and slipped the cigarette back into his lips in one smooth motion. “Get to know the other person. Make small talk. Ask stupid icebreaker questions. Find out what their favorite color is and what pets they had as a kid and stuff about their families—”

“…But you know all that stuff—”

“Maybe see some red flags that can help you decide if you see you two together for longer than a summer fling. All that shit. Spending every night fucking until the sun comes up is nice—”

“Speaking of—” Zoro waggled his eyebrows but Sanji plowed right by, completely ignoring his interjection.
“—but you can't get to know someone only between the sheets. The other stuff is important too. Dating is fun if you do it right, and to do it right you have to go the whole nine yards with exactly what the other person would want.”

Oh dear god, what had he signed himself up for?

Zoro thought to himself for a moment, taking the time to lower the weights back to a resting position. He fought off a shiver, thinking of flowers and limos and quiet music and fancy tablecloths and—ugh—having to actually pay attention to table manners—

Sanji blew out a heavy breath, shooting Zoro a look. “Are you really turning me down, marimo?”

Zoro’s eyes snapped back to the cook, impossibly graceful even in his casual stance, majestic even when he was glaring at Zoro. Even months after meeting him, witnessing Sanji’s… beauty never got mundane.

“…I’m not getting dressed up.”

“HA! Like I could take you anywhere that fancy. I’d embarrass myself horrifically.”

Zoro shot him a glare. “And I’m leaving if you start fawning over any girls.”

“Yes, yes, I will be a perfect gentleman. Anything else?”

Zoro said nothing and Sanji looked back to the moss head from where his eyes had drifted to the floor, smirking to himself at Zoro’s pinched expression. The fucker was cute when he did that. He’d definitely picked up the pinched lip thing from Law, which was very endearing indeed.

Sanji’s eyes fell back to the floor for a moment and he drew in a thick breath from the cigarette. More and more… affectionate words were working into his vocabulary as of late with regards to the marimo. He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about it. He’d found many men attractive over the years, but the adjectives he used to describe them were always more… manly. Handsome, built, strong, dark, dominant, brave, resolute… Zoro was all of the above, but words like pretty, sensual, alluring (even when the dope was being an ape), and loving were starting to pick up in frequency when Zoro
crossed his mind. “Cute” was becoming a favorite of his brain.

Sanji couldn’t keep the happiness out of his expression when Zoro pouted, and pretty soon he gave in, chuckling to himself as a full-blown smile split his face. Damn. “Come on, Zoro. I’m actually pretty good at planning dates. Give me some credit. Really easy and simple, no anticipation, we can do it tonight just so I can prove to you how good I am at this shit.”

Zoro thought for another moment, his lips still pinched together—just like daddy—before he finally grunted and resumed his reps. “Fine.”

Sanji nodded, smile still way too prominent on his face, and turned to head up the stairs. “Pick you up at three.”

What was he thinking? Three hours to prepare for a date? Minus the time he needed to get himself ready… he had to start now.

Zoro watched him dash up the stairs, knowing full well that nothing about that night would be simple… but whatever. It was worth it to see smiles like that on Sanji’s face as often as possible. He could deal with a couple nights of stiff clothing and uppity waiters that knew way too much about wines because it made Sanji happy.

Because it made Sanji happy. Zoro grunted, a little miffed at himself, and picked up the pace of his curls. He still wasn’t used to how easily he thought that.

-oOo-

Zoro blinked as Sanji thunked two backpacks down on the countertop (that were decently heavy, if the way they shook the things on the counter said anything). The cook took the cigarette butt out of his mouth and tossed it into the sink with a small hiss, looking proudly and expectantly over in Zoro’s direction.

His eyes grew slightly as he took in the swordsman’s appearance. “Did you change?”

Zoro huffed, crossing his arms as he felt himself flushing slightly. “Are we going or what?”
Sanji didn’t seem to quite have the correct answer, being that he hadn’t gotten over the changing thing. “You… I thought you said you weren’t going to dress up—”

“I’m going to take a nap,” Zoro snapped and abruptly turned for the stairs.

“No!” Sanji barked, trailing off as Zoro stopped on the first step, pouting back at him. “I just…!” The word “cute” popped back into his head, but he was too flabbergasted with what Zoro was wearing to really care, or even notice.

Zoro had not only showered, and had maybe even cared how his hair dried, but also had put on a pair of black jeans that were so crisp the marimo couldn’t have worn them more than once or twice, a white t-shirt that was in very similar condition, his best black boots, and a heavy, dark-green, military-style jacket. Sanji couldn’t help but admire how well the gold from his three earrings went with the green of the jacket.

“…Well,” Sanji managed finally, “can… can you hike in that?”

Zoro blinked. “…Hike?”

“…Yeah, you said you weren’t dressing up. Also taking you to an expensive restaurant would be the worst date for your personality ever. I told you I’m good at this, why would we go somewhere like that? You’d hate it.”

Zoro looked down at himself. He didn’t particularly care about what he was wearing, but it was technically the only nice thing he had. The only reason he had them at all was because Nami had dragged him out a couple years back when they needed to make an appearance with Shanks in Whitebeard’s territory. Ace was there training under Whitebeard and Luffy and Shanks had been dying to visit him.

Zoro sighed heavily. “Hang on,” he turned for the stairs, “Nami will murder me if she finds out I ruined these.”

“…Ok,” Sanji replied, mostly to himself, watching Zoro thud up the stairs. The moss head… had dressed up for him. Sort of.

But he still looked damn good.
Sanji smirked to himself, unzipping his backpack once more to make sure he had everything.

-oOo-

Sanji had borrowed one of Franky’s clunkers, picked up a map from a neighboring city’s grocery store, plunked Zoro into the passenger seat, put the bags in the back, and then told Zoro he could sleep until they got there. Which Zoro did wholeheartedly. It was a decent start to any date in Zoro’s mind.

So when the swordsman was finally jostled awake as the car jolted across the craggily roads of some back trail, the fact that it was starting to get dark kind of threw him. He blinked blearily out the window, trying to find some sort of landmark that he recognized, but nothing looked familiar. He glanced at the clock and shot Sanji a look.

“You know it gets dark at like six this time of year, right?”

Sanji gave him an incurious smirk in return, holding up his hand dramatically as if to stop Zoro at a crosswalk. “Please, marimo, I got this.”

Zoro rolled his eyes and leaned back in his seat again, about to get comfortable and drift back off to sleep when Sanji slammed on the breaks suddenly and he jolted forward, hacking unceremoniously when the seatbelt caught him.

“The fuck, cook?!”

“We’re here!” Sanji warbled, throwing his own door open and practically prancing out of the driver’s side and around to the backseat. Zoro sighed to himself and released himself from the locked buckle that was now constricting his breathing. Once he was out of the car, Sanji tossed him one of the backpacks and Zoro threw it on and got comfortable to wait until the cook had situated himself in his own. He took the quiet moment to look up in front of the car, tracing the mountain in front of him with his eyes. It was just about four o’clock; the drive had taken about an hour. The sky would be mostly dark at around five and then pitch black at six.

It was a big mountain.
“And I’m assuming that you can figure out that this mountain looks like a four hour hike just to get to the top?”

Sanji flashed him another goofy smirk and slammed the car door, tucking the keys into his pocket. “Don’t worry.” Zoro felt himself deadpan at the cook’s tone. If Sanji faked being any more suave, he would slide back down the mountain like butter. “I got this.”

So Zoro sighed to himself again, resigned himself to another night of sleeping in the open if they never made it back, hoped Sanji had enough sense to bring enough water for the both of them, and set off after the cook up the trail.

The mountain itself wasn’t very difficult; it wasn’t an easy hike, but it definitely wasn’t making him sweat either. Zoro still wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. In the meantime, however, the sky was getting blacker and blacker, and Sanji had even resorted to pulling out a flashlight to lead them up the rest of the trail so they didn’t trip and crack their heads open on something. They also weren’t more than a quarter of the way up the mountain. And he was getting hungry.

“I’m not impressed with your date so far,” he called, and Sanji spared him a flat look over his shoulder—just enough to make Zoro grin impishly—before he turned back to the trail. The next branch the cook pushed out of the way, he ducked suddenly so it snapped back at Zoro’s head, and the swordsman ducked with a yelp. He lunged forward, swiping at Sanji’s ankles and the cook leapt over his hands, dashing up the trail with a short bark of laughter. Zoro smirked. Now this he could get into.

They were tearing through the dark, Zoro leaping over rocks and fallen trees in his way to catch up. He’d be lying if he said it wasn’t a strain, both Killer and Sanji were uncannily fast, but with being unable to see most things because of the darkness, it gave him an extra burst of adrenaline.

Zoro jumped up onto a rock that the cook had forgone in order to run around it, launching himself forward to get a couple steps ahead and Sanji skidded to a halt so suddenly that Zoro barely had time to readjust his fall before he crash landed on top of the cook, sending them both toppling forward. He rotated his body so Sanji wouldn’t hit the ground, using the inertia to keep him moving as he gripped Sanji’s backpack and flew over the cook’s shoulder. Sanji yelped as he was yanked forward and came down with a grunt on Zoro’s chest, something clattering like pots and pans in his backpack as they landed in a heap.

Zoro blinked at the sound, leaning around to see if the tin man had fallen out of Sanji’s bag. “What the hell did you pack?” He wasn’t so distracted though that he couldn’t enjoy Sanji lying on top of him, and took a moment to marvel at the way Sanji’s stunning blue eye was catching the moonlight and making it glow like some phosphorescent sea life. With the hazy blue light from the moon
drifting around them, reflecting off of Sanji’s pale hair and skin as well as his eye, he looked pretty magical. Zoro leaned up, bringing himself in closer to the cook—

“There is it!” Sanji popped up suddenly and scrambled off of Zoro’s chest, ignoring him even as Zoro tugged gently at his pant leg, unconsciously trying to get him not to go. Zoro dropped his head back to the ground, rolling his eyes back in his head in annoyance before he pushed himself off of the ground to find what the cook had gotten so excited over.

“…Cook?”

Sanji was scaling a wall of rocks close to twenty feet high with the flashlight stuck between his teeth, throwing light every which way as he tried to find the easiest way up.

“Come om!” he slurred around the flashlight and Zoro stepped up to the rocks below him, finding the first place for his foot and pulling himself up onto the first ledge. He doubted they were very close to the path at this point.

Zoro continued to clamber up as Sanji disappeared over the top of the rocks, and then another clatter of metal echoed back down. Not Sanji dropping anything by accident—Zoro guessed—from the lack of expletives that followed, but it had made a hell of a racket.

Zoro pulled himself up over the top of the rock and was immediately blinded by the flashlight that Sanji had left there once he reached the top. Zoro grunted in annoyance and heaved himself up, dropping his backpack next to the cook as Sanji spread out a blanket over a mossy area to their right.

The view in front of them wasn’t anything special, just a bunch of trees and what Zoro was pretty sure was a river off in the distance, but that was it. They were pretty removed from civilization at this point. It was… peaceful, he supposed.

“What is this?” he turned down to where Sanji had pulled out a rolled-up newspaper and a box of matches and set them to the side.

“This?” Sanji looked out over the view before turning back to his materials. “Nothing.”

“…Nothing.”
“Yeah, this isn’t anything.”

“…Then why are we—”

“Hang on, hang on, I’m almost done!”

Sanji’s exuberance was just pouring out from his bubbly tone, so Zoro found a seat on the blanket the cook had laid out and nestled himself into a comfy position against the rocks behind him. The light from the flashlight was really bright, illuminating the whole area around them and sending all sorts of interesting shadows across the rocks. Zoro closed his eyes after a moment.

“Don’t you fall asleep on me,” Sanji warned and Zoro grunted something like an affirmative. The rustling continued as Sanji balled up the newspaper and found a couple of sticks, setting up for a fire. Occasionally he’d nudge Zoro with his foot to make sure he didn’t fall asleep, but other than that they were quiet.

Zoro cracked an eye as the rustling came to a stop, looking up to find Sanji coming to join him, settling himself into the blanket as he lit a cigarette, the tiny spark flaring brightly against the light from the flashlight.

“Ready?” Sanji asked, so excited it was almost like he was a child, and Zoro nodded just to humor him. The hike had been nice, and he wasn’t too keen on staying out here the whole night, but maybe if he got some sex out of it—

Sanji reached across him, and Zoro’s first instinct was to reach up and touch him, but the cook had grabbed the flashlight and pulled back before he had the chance. Zoro dropped his hands and huffed to himself.

“Ready?” Sanji asked again, and Zoro was about to snap at him when the cook flicked the flashlight off and they were engulfed in the black.

Zoro’s eyes adjusted to the dark, and he couldn’t keep his mouth from dropping open as the sky was consumed in stars. Trillions of twinkling lights that lit up the whole valley, giving the trees and the river an unearthly glow and the rocks they were sitting on an opalescent radiance. It was so bright that he could see the light dancing off of the water from miles away, and when the trees shifted in the wind the remaining leaves caught the light like stained glass hanging in a window.
“…This…” Zoro finally managed, but he didn’t seem to have words for the rest of it.

“This was my favorite place to come after breaking out of the facility.”

Zoro looked over to Sanji’s reflective expression, swallowing heavily at the angelic aura the cook seemed to have taken on under the stars. His eye was still glowing like a cat’s, and Zoro was trapped staring at this magnificent creature in front of him.

“My old man used to take me here if things got too stressful back home. There was no one around, and I think he was trying to… recondition me, or whatever, to be ok with the darkness. …When I was in the facility, unless I was on an exam table I was basically in total darkness. This place, which is so dark at night and so not dark at all with all the stars… it really helped me.”

The cook seemed to be tracing something in the sky with his eye, and idly Zoro wondered if he was looking for constellations.

…He was so beautiful.

Zoro leaned forward and closed the distance between the two of them, leaning around so that he could press his lips to Sanji’s, moving gingerly against him, tracing gentle lines on his cheek and jawbone. Sanji’s hands drifted up and worked their way into his hair, returning some of his enthusiasm and Zoro pushed forward, leaning Sanji back, but the cook turned away sharply and Zoro stopped. So him avoiding Zoro earlier hadn’t been a coincidence.

“…Listen…” Sanji started, his voice thicker now. “I… damn it.”

Zoro tried to sit back but Sanji’s grip tightened on his scalp and Zoro was left hovering awkwardly in the air in front of him, waiting for the cook. “…Yeah?”

Sanji didn’t answer, and Zoro shifted again, trying not to fall. “…Can I lay down?”

Sanji released him at that, and Zoro thought about moving back over to his own spot, but the sight of Sanji sitting so anxiously held him fast, and after a moment he rolled over onto his back to rest his head on Sanji’s thigh. The cook didn’t react for a moment, and then his long fingers found Zoro’s
head again and he scratched slow lines into Zoro’s hair. Dear god if Zoro was a cat he’d be purring like a motorcycle.

“About… about my old man—”

“I know,” Zoro murmured, turning his head slightly so it was resting up against Sanji’s hip and he wouldn’t have to use his muscles to keep it straight.

“…You know?”

Zoro knew from Sanji’s panicked tone and his own past experience what was going through the cook’s head. The frantic thoughts about what he’d done to give himself away, how many people had figured it out because of that, how much danger he was in, who would have figured it out that would be a danger to him or would have said something to someone that was a danger. He shook his head before Sanji’s imagination could run totally wild with that thought process.

“I think Shanks figured it out pretty early on. He never asked me to try and find out where you were from specifically, I was just supposed to keep an eye out for anything in general, but he never really distrusted you, so that’s the only reason I can come up with. More have probably figured it out since Conis came to visit.”

“…Conis?”

“We grew up with her. She spent a lot of weekends out here when she was dating Ace, and then less after they broke up but we knew when she’d started dating someone else, and we knew she lived in Red-leg’s territory.”

Sanji’s hand had stilled on Zoro’s head. Zoro wasn’t really sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

“Ace really clued me in when he came. You know, Red-leg, Black-leg. And it sounded like you had a lot of influence from where you’re from, so you’d have to be pretty high up. Makes sense that he’s your dad.”

Sanji hadn’t said anything, but he’d resumed his stroking of Zoro’s head, so that couldn’t have been a bad sign. Zoro closed his eyes and gave Sanji a moment to process that as he surveyed the stars. He could understand because of Killer how unnerving it was to have a ton of people know a lot of
intimate details about you.

“…Zeff…”

That was the first time Sanji had ever said his name out loud, and Zoro could hear the incredible gratitude and pride and debt and love and admiration and thousands of other emotions saturating Sanji’s voice without any difficulty. Sanji held the man in incredibly high regard.

“…I owe him everything. He saved my life, stuck with me, taught me how to trust people, how to run and fight and protect myself. He fixed my mistakes when I fucked up, called in hundreds of hundreds of favors to keep me hidden when it looked like I’d been found out… for years and years he was the only thing I had. And the only thing I wanted. I went from having no one to having him. …I couldn’t have ended up in a better situation, especially with how old I was and the fact that I’d already broken out once so they were fine to kill me off.”

Zoro looked up to find Sanji’s glowing eye, watching the way it flicked silently back and forth, following shapes and patterns in the sky. Maybe Sanji knew some of the more obscure stories behind the constellations.

“Kids like me, and Conis, and Killer… children with the NSPH virus in the facilities die. We don’t get happiness—I can’t tell you how many kids I saw come and go before they even reached twelve. They killed us off before puberty because our bodies went through changes that would mess up their experiments and it was easier just to start over with another kid. You don’t lose as many years that way if an experiment kills them. Kids are also more resilient and can handle more drugs and altercations to their bodies. We don’t get families and parents and friends and homes… and I got Zeff. I owe that man literally everything.”

“…Did Conis tell him…?”

Sanji was silent for another long moment before he reached into his bag and pulled out his cigarettes and a lighter, finally giving in to the stress. To his credit though, he hadn’t stopped talking. The cook was doing so much better than he had been when he’d first gotten to their city.

“Did she tell him I’m alive?” Sanji’s tone had taken a sharp and angry dip, like he felt so guilty that he didn’t know what to do with it at this point. “Doubt it. Shanks hasn’t said he tried to contact me. And I don’t have my cellphone anymore, that would have been the only way.”
“Why hasn’t she said anything?” It sounded like Conis would feel more or less the same way, especially if she was being hidden and protected by Zeff. Going behind his back like this…

“Who knows. Maybe she thinks I want to do it. Maybe she thinks I won’t and she’s testing me. She asked me if I’d been planning to come back at all.”

“…You don’t want to?”

“………No. I want to. Some days I miss him so fucking much it takes everything I have in me not to boost a car and just drive home. But rationally I know that would cause a whole lot more shit than it would solve, and it’s pretty damn likely I’d never make it there anyways.”

“Why?”

“…I’ve probably been found out already.”

Zoro’s breath caught in his throat, and Sanji must have noticed because the pace of his caressing had picked up, which would have been more soothing if Sanji hadn’t just fucking said that the people that were trying to take him back to the facility probably knew—

“They found me in Zeff’s territory and got me out without anyone seeing. I didn’t even see them. They lured me away and jammed a sedative in my back before I could even turn to look at them. And in all honesty I still can’t shake the feeling that I’m being followed. The only reason they haven’t made a move yet is probably because I’m around so many of Shanks’ strongest fighters.”

“…So all we have to do is not let you out of our sight?”

Sanji snorted, letting out another deep breath of smoke that glowed eerily in the starry sky. “Sure. Until they get bored of waiting, then they start on other tactics. Or they just wait until we mess up.”

“Wouldn’t Zeff be more help in protecting you? You know, just having that extra set of eyes or hands or whatever?”

Sanji closed his mouth slowly, turning to look away before he shook his head.
Zoro wanted to reach up and touch him, or hug him, or kiss him, or something docile that would calm the cook, but he knew nothing would at this point. This topic was just difficult. “…You can't contact him at all?”

“…I probably can, I’m just so fucking paranoid. What if they actually haven’t found me here and he wants to come visit? That’ll start talk about why Shanks and him are suddenly so buddy-buddy. People might put together that I disappeared not too long ago while under the care of Shanks’ fighters and Conis came here not too long before Zeff did, and she very rarely visits. They might start looking around, come up with where Zeff came from originally and how close it was to my facility and how he disappeared exactly the same time I did and after already having been seen breaking me out and housing me the first time I broke out and—”

Sanji cut off sharply, leaning his head into his free hand. “…It’s stupid. Zeff and I are already as deep as we can be in the danger zone. If people were going to put together who I am and who he is and where we came from they would have done so years ago. And actually clearly already did, if my recent kidnapping says anything. …The only thing keeping him safe is how easily they made off with me and the fact that they haven’t decided that he himself is a direct threat to the government. If they ever decide to send in someone to take him down though…”

“Red-leg has a lot of friends in the underground. I know from Shanks that his… search and rescue program or whatever has helped a lot of people from a lot of territories.”

Sanji chuckled to himself. “Search and rescue… It’s more like a witness protection program.”

“Yeah, same thing. My point is that so many people owe him so much… the government would have to be stupid to try and take him down without planning on taking down the whole underground. They’re not strong enough to do that. They also really don’t have the evidence to do anything legally.”

Sanji nodded, rubbing Zoro’s head with more fervor now and making Zoro meld into his leg like a wad of clay.

“…Also, whenever you get cold we can light that fire, and your backpack has burgers and onigiri and a couple other things we can cook.”

“…I lied. This is a good date.”
“I told you. I’m good at what I do. Moss head. Also…”

Zoro blinked up as Sanji reached over him and into the backpack Zoro had been carrying, rooting around inside with one hand awkwardly as he mashed Zoro’s head into his leg with his chest.

Zoro reached up and tapped him after a moment, nose starting to feel significantly crushed. “‘Ey, I don’t heal as fast as you do.”

“I can’t…” Sanji grunted, trying to lean farther and pull away from him at the same time and just ended up squishing his face more. “Ah!”

He sat back suddenly and Zoro reached up to finger his nose tenderly when something large and heavy and soft was dropped on his face. He pulled it back to stare stupidly at the extra blanket.

“What’s this for?” They were already laying on one.

Sanji was quiet for another moment and then curled his spine down and leaned in to press his lips against Zoro’s.

“Extra padding,” he hissed into Zoro’s ear when he pulled back, sliding his thigh out from under Zoro’s head to roll over on top of the swordsman. Zoro grinned and shifted his legs, letting Sanji settle in between them with a pleasant roll of his body that ground them together. He grunted heavily at the contact and reached up, pulling Sanji down into a kiss.

Sanji sighed contently into his mouth, talented hands moving to run up and down every contour of Zoro’s body and explore all the lines his muscles made in his skin. Sanji found the two ribs on his side that always made him shiver and ran a hand firmly across them. Zoro jolted, rolling into the touch and pushing up for better access to Sanji’s lips.

Sanji pulled back and grabbed the blanket from where it had been discarded off to the side, flipping it open once Zoro had rolled off of the one already there. Zoro waited while the cook spread it evenly, tucking corners under big rocks so it wouldn’t move, and then took the cook’s cheeks in his hands once Sanji had turned back to him, kissing him slowly.
Sanji grabbed his shoulders and shimmied over to the blanket, pulling on Zoro’s back and trying to get him to lie down on top of him, but Zoro kept pushing back against the cook’s confused resistance until Sanji’s back was up against the rocks behind them, and then clambered up so his legs were on either side of the cook’s hips. Sanji grinned, finally catching on, and grabbed Zoro’s hips with uncanny speed, grinding him down the second he thrust up so hard that little black spots burst behind Zoro’s eyes.

Zoro groaned hugely, not bothering to care how loud he was with how far off they were into the mountains. And being this high up, they’d hear people coming for miles. And so he was left to moan and fall over onto one of Sanji’s shoulders, bracing himself against the rocks behind him with his hands, though he wasn’t really sure when he’d grabbed them.

“‘S kinda cold,” Sanji murmured, not stopping once with his movements. Zoro was inclined to agree. Not that he much fucking cared, especially when the cook worked open his zipper and grabbed him, jerking roughly.

“Don’t care,” he groaned and tried to roll his hips, only for the cook to grab him in a hold so harsh he really couldn’t move, and thrust up hard again. Oh dear god.

“Your ass is going to freeze.”

“Sanjiiiii.”

“Alright, alright,” Sanji chuckled, reaching into the bag next to him for the lube. Zoro didn’t heal quite as easily as him, AKA, didn’t adjust as quickly to being fucked. And the cook was impatient. Zoro had been wicked sore the last time and Sanji had immediately picked up some lube the next time he was out.

Said cook was also grinning stupidly to himself in a prideful sort of manner, and Zoro gritted his teeth, not so much in favor of being the only one here that was acting like a whore. He pushed forward again, jerking his way our of Sanji’s distracted hold, and Sanji’s breath hiccupped as Zoro’s naked manhood ground against his pants. Zoro’s pride vanished as he did this and he closed his eyes, pushing forward again experimentally.

Sanji paused, slowly taking the bottle out from where he’d found it, and turned back to meet Zoro’s eyes. Zoro swallowed and shifted forward, solidifying his grip on the rocks to hoist himself up a little more onto his knees and less on Sanji’s legs. Once he had the mobility he wanted he leaned forward, pressing his lips to Sanji’s forehead and running his cock slowly across Sanji’s lower belly. The cook had gone quiet, eye glued to the junction between their bodies as Zoro slid himself up and down
Sanji’s stomach in micro-thrusts, breathing quietly and deeply to himself.

Zoro kissed Sanji’s hairline and sparked a tiny movement from the cook, who seemed at first like he was debating not breaking this small fairy circle, and then changed his mind and reached up slowly to wrap his hand around Zoro’s manhood. Zoro grunted and picked up his pace, thrusting into Sanji’s hand.

Sanji let out a low growl and leaned forward, grip still tight on Zoro’s cock, to wrap his other arm around Zoro’s back and pull him in close. Zoro leaned his head back, gasping into the cold, night air as his muscles tightened and the cold and hot sensation swept through his body that had nothing to do with the temperature around them.

“…Goddamn…” Sanji breathed into his neck and Zoro groaned loudly, pace picking up again and he shifted his hands from the rocks to Sanji’s back for more leverage, curling in around the cook.

“Fuck…” Zoro hissed, and Sanji let go of him suddenly to shove him back where he landed with a grunt, pants suddenly gone from his body in a harsh yank and Sanji was between his legs, grinding so hard it was almost painful. Zoro grabbed onto the cook’s shoulders and held on for dear life, mind reeling as his nerves were overloaded.

Zoro felt Sanji’s core muscles tighten and the cook used the leverage of his knees against the ground to lift himself off of Zoro’s front, fumbling with both hands to get his pants off as fast as possible. Sanji caught Zoro’s eye, the swordsman watching him contently, admiring the glow in Sanji’s eye from the stars and the slight sheen on his skin from sweat despite the chill in the air around them, and paused. His pants were already down around his knees, and when he leaned forward slowly to meet Zoro’s lips, his manhood came to rest comfortably between Zoro’s legs and Zoro sighed, although it might have been a hiccup, or a spasm. Whatever.

Sanji’s arms found a place next to Zoro’s head as the cook situated himself above Zoro and leaned forward, mimicking Zoro’s micro-thrusts from earlier, drawing himself up and down Zoro’s body. Zoro hiccupped again and shifted, subtly rocking himself—maybe undulate would be a good word—trying to entice Sanji forward. One of Sanji’s arms left the side of his head and reached down between them, positioning himself as he slid forward and pushed into Zoro with a grunt.

Zoro’s head dropped back against the ground and he held his back still as he adjusted, Sanji continuing his micro-thrusts and breathing heavily into his neck, both arms now back alongside his head. It would only be so long before Sanji gripped his shoulders and used him for leverage to fuck his brains out, but this was nice too. Although, the extra heat wouldn’t be—oh.
Sanji twisted his hips suddenly, swirling around inside Zoro, and Zoro let out a sound so foreign that Sanji halted abruptly and lifted his head with his one glowing eye to find Zoro’s face.

“…Did that hurt—”

“God no.”

He hadn’t intended to say it so forcefully, and almost immediately the flush in his cheeks began, but it did the trick. Sanji grinned devilishly to himself and shifted, repeating his motion suddenly.

Oh yeah.

Zoro’s blunt nails found the skin on Sanji’s back and anchored himself there as the cook picked up speed, twirling and rotating with those incredibly powerful hips, dragging him along like undertow pulling him into the waves. Sanji’s arms locked behind his back and around his shoulder blades, sucking him further and further into the depths, and Zoro felt the telltale cold, numbness rising up from his toes, through his limbs, painfully slowly until it smashed into his groin like a volcano with painfully cold heat and Zoro groaned into Sanji’s shoulder, feeling the hot splatter mixing with their meshed bodies. The feeling made Sanji’s back spasm unevenly and the cook grunted, lurching into Zoro one last time before he stilled, his lips finding Zoro’s neck harshly.

Zoro laid back, breathing heavily, looking up at the stars and about to detangle himself from Sanji’s body when the cook’s tongue snaked out over his skin, followed almost immediately by the scrape of razor-sharp fangs dancing across the tender and pathetically thin barrier between Sanji’s venom and his jugular vein.

Zoro froze, unable to help himself, grip still lax on Sanji’s back, ankles still wrapped around the cook’s hips as Sanji played—amused himself by tracing patterns up and down his tendons with both his fangs and his tongue. Zoro’s brain was jumping uncomfortably between working frantically to find a way out of this situation, figure out what had happened, and come down off of his orgasm all at the same time. It wasn’t working so well.

And then all at once Sanji pulled back and hot lips met with his own. Just lips. Gentle skin, with no fangs. Zoro let himself close his eyes and sink into the kiss as Sanji moved slowly against him.

What was that? He wasn’t even sure if the question was necessary to say outloud.
“You hungry?” Sanji murmured around his mouth, dipping back in between every word for another kiss, and Zoro nodded, the cook moving to peel their sweaty bodies apart and find some sort of clothes for them in the chilly night air.

-oOo-

-Augie March
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

Zoro turned towards the door as someone rapped sharply, looking over to Sanji as the cook looked back at him, raising one eyebrow. They’d gotten pretty good at identifying knocks over the first month living in the apartment. Killer didn’t knock anymore—or never had actually; Chopper, Usopp, Franky, and Luffy all screamed something about food when they came and could be heard all the way from the front lobby; Brook could be heard singing all the way from the elevator; Nami’s knock about as dainty as a butterfly’s and Sanji always pranced to the door whenever he heard it; and no one else came to their apartment.

“…Who…?” Sanji asked, mostly to himself, tossing the towel he was using over his shoulder and placing his utensils back in order on the counter. Sanji never let Zoro answer the door when he was working out, he said it gave the apartment a grimy feel. Zoro made a point of beating him to the door for the next week whenever someone knocked.

Now though… Zoro was pretty sure he knew who it was. Sanji could get the door.

The person knocked again, more insistent and louder this time and Sanji growled to himself, slamming the last spoon into place next to the marinade he was working on so he could stomp over to the door. Zoro smirked to himself and resumed his barbell lunges.

“Coming!” Sanji barked as the person knocked again right as he reached the door, turning back to Zoro as he opened the door so he could snarl, “Jesus, who the fuck—”

A stake of wood shot through the crack in the open door, catching Sanji straight in the chest and ricocheting him back across the room where he did four backward summersaults before smashing so hard into the wall on the far side of the room so hard he crumpled in a little ball like a newspaper blown against the side of a building in a tornado.

Zoro’s weights echoed like a bomb around the apartment as he dropped them and lunged for his swords, unsheathing them with a loud ring. He whirled to the door just as it swung the rest of the way open and ground to a halt.
“Easy, Zoro,” Shanks smirked at him and crossed the threshold, cape swinging casually around him. Standing behind him in the doorway was an old man with greying blond hair, a thick mustache twisted into even thicker braids that hung down almost to his shoulders, a sour (and what looked like a permanent) scowl on his face, and a peg leg that thunked steadily against the floor as he followed Shanks into the apartment.

“Stupid little eggplant,” Zeff Redleg growled as Sanji fought to find his bearings, arms and legs flailing as he tried to locate the floor. It was weird to see Sanji caught in such an awkward position, being that the cook’s reflexes were normally impeccable. “You couldn’t call?”

Zoro had spent a lot of time around a lot of really powerful people. Shanks, Mihawk, Law, Kid, Ace—hell, even Luffy—but his heart still did a little jump every time someone with an incredible amount of strength walked into his apartment for the first time. And Zoro could just feel the power bleeding off of the man standing in front of him. No wonder Sanji held him in such high regards—

“SHITTY OLD GEEZER!”

“What are you cooking here?”

“GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY KITCHEN—I’M COOKING—I DON’T NEED YOUR—IT’S A CHEESE—WHO THE HELL EVEN—HOW DID YOU FIND ME?! You called him, didn’t you?!” Sanji whirled on Zoro with one of the darkest glares he’d had seen since Zoro had nearly dropped Sanji’s favorite mixing bowl, but Shanks cut in before Zoro had to defend himself.

“I called him.” Shanks was smirking to himself, enjoying the crazy energy of the situation.

Zoro breathed a silent sigh of relief. Later he’d tell Sanji that it was his idea to get in contact with Zeff, but after Sanji had cooled down a bit. Or maybe he wouldn’t tell him.

Zeff leaned over the bowl Sanji had been working on, both he and Shanks having made it to the kitchen without once being perturbed by Sanji’s state of crumpledness on the floor or Zoro’s frozen half-attack over in the dojo to sniff the marinade once. Because apparently sniffing it once was enough for the old man to get exactly what he needed to know. Zeff grunted to himself before pulling away to meet Sanji’s furious expression and Sanji gritted his teeth tighter. Zoro could just hear him screaming, “What?! Not good enough for you?! Don’t fucking touch it then! I’ll give you a can of beans later so you won’t starve and you can open the damn thing yourself, asshole!”
Zeff and Sanji faced off for a good two minutes like that, glaring at each other like their lives depended on it. It gave Zoro enough time to recover from the intrusion and return his swords to their sheaths and Shanks to swipe his finger innocently across the lip of the bowl and pop the mixture in his mouth. Zeff grunted harshly all of a sudden and the two turned back from their distractions to the sparks flying in the middle of the room.

“You’re so crippled now that you can’t hold a phone or something?”

“Or I almost died and I was a little paranoid to give away my location.”

“To who? The phone pixies? Who the fuck do you think is listening in that intently to every single phone in the area?”

“Maybe the people whose truck I ended up in the back of!” Sanji snarled, shoving himself to his feet, hands clenched so tightly they were shaking. “How long was it before you even noticed that I’d been gone for a little too long?!”

Despite the situation, Zoro felt himself wanting to cross the room and tap Sanji’s wrist or something to snap the cook out of his funk and tell him to watch his hands, because goddamn if he hurt himself that would just send the situation to hell in a hand basket. …Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea.

Shanks shook his head off in the background, ignoring Sanji’s tirade, as if he were reading Zoro’s mind. “Give it a second,” the look said.

Zeff grunted again. “…How long have you been here?”

Sanji winced, finally lessening his grip and flicking his eyes away guiltily.

Zeff’s expression deadpanned more. “…Are you going to make me guess? Are you twelve again?”

“Two and a half months, alright?!”

“…What’s wrong with your hair?”
Again, despite himself, the feral snarl that reverberated up from Sanji’s throat made something jump behind Zoro’s navel, and he realized happily that Sanji would probably be very worked up after this, which as of late had been leading to amazing sparring followed by even more amazing sex. Zeff didn’t ask for elaboration on Sanji’s eye after that, but he didn’t back down from his glare either.

“You’ve been here twelve weeks.”

“Yes.”

“……You saw Conis.”

“Yes.”

“………You’ve been keeping up with your cooking.”

“Yes.”

“………Are you alright?”

The dissipation of the tenseness in the room was instantaneous. Sanji’s clenched fists dropped to his sides as if the muscles in them had disconnected suddenly, his snarl relaxing into something much more… pained. The cook straightened slowly and slid the normal pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, ducking his head so his hair fell in front of his face while he lit it with wobbly hands.

Zoro and Shanks stood quietly off to the side, Zoro entirely at a loss for what to do at this point, especially when Sanji’s shoulders shuddered suddenly and he reached up to swipe across his eyes before jamming his hands into his pockets.

Zeff huffed again, scrunching up his face as his eyes flicked around the room to anything but Shanks or Zoro and finally settled on the bowl Sanji had been working on again.

“Come show me what you’re making.” His gruff voice sounded odd when he was trying to be so
gentle. But Sanji sniffed and swiped under his eyes once more before crossing the room to join him. Shanks smiled to himself and joined Zoro in the dojo, giving the two some space.

They stood like two macho men in the kitchen, Sanji’s hands tightly in his pockets and Zeff’s arms crossed like a vice, nitpicking everything Sanji had been doing. The situation wouldn’t have looked like it could have been any more awkward to an outsider, but Zoro could see the lack of tension in Sanji’s shoulders, and he couldn’t detect any stress in Zeff’s stance either.

“Told you,” Shanks grinned and slid down against one of the windows in the dojo, closing his eyes to drift off, no doubt until one of the chefs said that food was ready. Zoro watched Sanji’s shoulders for another moment, looking for any shift in his ease, but when none came he joined Shanks against the window and closed his eyes.

-oOo-

“Just step over them!”

“I can’t SEE them, asshole! I have ONE EYE! ONE FUCKING EYE! Didn’t I tell you I would kill you if I dropped any food?!”

“You didn’t drop anything!”

“MOVE YOUR FUCKING SHOES!”

Zeff and Shanks shared a glance before turning back to their own respective sections of the newspaper. Zoro and Sanji had just gone out for ingredients to make sure that they’d have enough food for when the whole crew showed up, which they undoubtedly would once they heard that Zeff had come and why he was in their apartment. Not much left the city as far as information went, but not much stayed a secret within its walls either.

“They always like this?” Zeff grunted, turning the page. Shanks just nodded absently and turned his own page. “Hey, eggplant, come sit. We need to—”

“DON’T LEAVE THAT THERE, YOU APE!” Sanji launched a kick at Zoro where he’d been about to place the groceries on the ground by the door and he ducked sharply to avoid Sanji’s shoe, nearly spilling the bag in the process. Sanji shrieked as the eggs flew from the bag but Zoro lunged and snatched them up, cradling them awkwardly into his chest just before they smashed. Sanji let out
a feral half-growl, foot twitching as he fought not to kick Zoro again.

“…Loud,” Zeff commented after a minute and Shanks nodded again.

“I’ll kill you!”

“Try me, shit cook!”

“**Come sit!**” Zeff screamed above the noise and whipped the napkin at his place at Sanji’s head where it hit him across the face with a definite smack, making the two halt just before they launched themselves at each other. “We have to talk about you staying here or not! …Useless little eggplant.”

Shanks nodded again, still reading the newspaper. “And from the groceries it seems like we don’t know how much time we’ll have before we get a certain group of visitors for dinner. Unless you don’t mind talking about it when everyone’s here.”

Sanji cringed and gave up on their glaring contest, standing to light a cigarette before the trudged across the room and kicked back one of the chairs at the dining table. Zoro growled, debating leaving his boots where they were, but he kicked them out of the way and toward the shoe tray before going to join everyone at the table.

They sat in an incredibly uncomfortable silence for way too long. So long that Zoro almost fell asleep. And then Zeff grunted harshly, as Zoro was starting to notice he did before speaking, and he jolted back awake.

“What do you want to do?”

Sanji took his time answering, blowing out a deep breath of smoke before he said anything.

“………………….Dunno.”

Zeff gave him an impressively flat look.
“What do you want me to say, old geezer?! You know what happened, that shit’s gonna happen no matter where I am. Nothing’s changed since I broke out the first time.”

“Always such an extrapolator,” Zeff said dryly. His expression looked like he was trying not to roll his eyes and Sanji growled loudly. Wow, Zeff was the first person Zoro had met that could rile the cook up faster than he could, or get him to show the more feral side of the NSPH virus. Sanji was sounding like a wild animal more today than he had for almost the entire time he’d been in the city.

“I mean,” Zeff continued, ignoring Sanji’s black look—holy shit, the cook’s pupils had actually grown like he was a predator zeroing in on his prey—“do you feel safe here?”

Sanji quieted at that question, his eyes slowly returning to normal as he leaned back in his chair, puffing more steadily now. “……I don’t know how safe I’m going to feel back home anymore either, to be honest.”

“So you don’t feel safe here.” Zeff reiterated and waited for Sanji to nod before he continued. “Someone following you?”

“…I… I felt someone for a long time. It was fine for a while, but then I kept getting these prickles,” he reached up to rub the back of his shoulder. “It’s been about a month now.”

Shanks leaned forward onto the table, finally interjecting. “How bad?” He knew about Killer’s instincts and how the younger boy could just tell that things were going to happen. He also knew that this “ESP” of sorts could determine how immediate the threat was by how badly it “prickled.” And he had a job to do to make sure that no one was infiltrating his city.

Sanji shook his head. “Not too bad. Just there. Pretty consistently. I actually haven’t felt it since the fight, when Ace brought Conis and Laki up, but it was always there until then.”

“But you had that at home too,” Zeff said and Sanji nodded again.

*And look where it got you,* Zoro thought scathingly, not pleased at how blasé everyone seemed to be about Sanji’s, you know, *life.*

Shanks leaned back in his chair, resting his arm across his lap as he thought. “…This might just be something that comes with the territory. No pun intended. You got out of the facility much later than
either Conis or Killer, and I check in with both of them pretty regularly, neither have said that they’ve noticed someone following them.”

Jesus, so Shanks new about Conis too? Well, it made sense actually that Ace would have told him, but really, what didn’t the guy know?

“You’re much more easily identifiable. Our objective here might be less about hiding you and more just about keeping you safe.”

Sanji nodded slowly, like he’d already, and sadly so, come to the same conclusion.

“The stronger you are,” Shanks continued, “and the more people you have behind you, the better your chances are of being left alone. You have both Zeff and I, as well as our territories and our strongest fighters. Whitebeard is a loose cannon and really operates on his own agenda, but I think Ace might be able to convince him into this if a situation arose where the government was actually challenging us, though I think that would take a lot of catalysts to change this that drastically.”

“I don’t want to hide,” Sanji grumbled quietly. Zoro knew the cook was admitting something personal and intimate and clearly he wasn’t comfortable doing so. But he also couldn’t stay locked up behind the walls of the city.

Zeff shifted uncomfortable but Shanks shrugged. “I get that. I don’t see why we can't keep you on as the traveling cook for the fighting team, especially since you’ll be with a good number of the stronger fighters of the city.”

Zoro waited for Zeff to interject with something about Sanji’s safety, but he must have known that that would just be clipping Sanji’s wings, because he said nothing.

He finally grunted though before saying, “So it sounds like you’ll be wanting to stay here.”

Sanji waited another moment before nodding and Shanks shrugged. “If they see you coming and going, Red-leg, it might help to defer potential attackers. Knowing that we’re backing this together.”

Zeff nodded at that, taking it as the best offer available, and then turned back to Sanji, gesturing flippantly at Zoro. “So you broke up with Conis for this?”
Sanji coughed sharply, spewing smoke everywhere before he recovered. Zoro just turned his eyes to the table, glaring heartily. He didn’t mind talking about it, it was just the fucking way that everyone kept saying it, like he and Sanji were their personal soap opera and everyone had hoped for them to end up with someone else.

“What about it?” Sanji hissed under his breath. “You got a problem?”

Zoro blinked up at the cook. Now that was new. What was with that… possessive tone? It made something in Zoro’s heart splutter unevenly.

“No,” Zeff said coolly. “He going to grow ovaries any time soon?”

Now it was Zoro’s turn to choke.

“Unlikely,” Sanji spat, eyes black again. “Not that I really want to pass on my fucked up genes.”

“You’re genes are fine.”

“My genes are a death sentence,” Sanji crossed his arms tightly. He’d started flicking his cigarette up and down in between his lips, and every once and a while the light flashed off of his now-elongated fangs when his upper lip stretched slightly.

“What about his?” Zeff waved back in Zoro’s direction.

“Ask him yourself.” Sanji’s lip had pulled back in a definite snarl, fangs long enough now to leave some deep wounds if he lost his cool. “His sitting right there.”

Zeff turned to stare intimidatingly at Zoro and Zoro crossed his arms, used to glaring at Sanji and not at all worried about what this old geezer could throw at him. Zeff looked him up and down three times before Zoro finally snapped, “What?”

“Am I going to get grandkids?”
“I don’t fucking know!” How senile was this asshole?! “Ask me in ten years or so!” Jesus, he was barely old enough to legally drink in the US!

Having kids now would be like…!

...Like Kid and Law.

…Not that he even knew if he and Sanji would be together long enough to think about kids.

Kids in general were an obscure thought though. There was a good chance he’d die fighting to be the best, and the road getting there—even if he did make it—was not something that he wanted to drag a child down.

The yodels of several people echoing up from the main lobby through the elevator shaft interrupted them suddenly and Sanji stood, pushing the chair back with a groan across the floor to start on dinner. Shanks was the first to recover and quickly said his goodbyes to duck out before the chaos started. If Zoro knew the man at all, he’d take the stairs to avoid getting sucked into all the mayhem. They weren’t so lucky, what with living in the apartment and all. He sighed and braced himself for the rest of the crew.

-oOo-

Zoro had watched Sanji the entire night. The outward appearance from the cook had been no different than usual. He’d been energetic and fine to yell at the trio of chaos and welcome everyone else the second they bounded in the door and happy to cook and even happier to cook with Zeff and watch and laugh as everyone introduced themselves to the famed Red-leg and finally get Sanji’s background story. Zeff had even spent a portion of the informal stand-up dinner entertaining everyone with semi-embarrassing stories from Sanji’s teenage years.

Outwardly, everything had been the same. But when Zoro looked closely at the cook’s shoulders he could see the lack of tenseness, but he could also see a slight… drag in the way Sanji mixed and stirred and threw things at Luffy and Usopp and handed Nami her drinks and served his meal. It was a lack of energy that Zoro hadn’t seen before in the cook, and that made it more unsettling than it probably should have been, especially after such a heavy conversation earlier. Zoro hadn’t been able to place the lack of energy for the longest time. Sanji still moved with fervor and seemed to be enjoying what he was doing… and then it had hit him.
Sanji’s shoulders weren’t carrying his passion.

Zoro’s mood had taken a sharp dip at the sudden thought that Sanji’s passion for what he did wasn’t helping him through this. Sanji’s love for cooking had gotten him out of bed the first week in the hospital after it looked like he’d be crippled for months. Sanji’s cooking had grounded him, had given him and Zoro something to bond over, had given the people joining them a reason to give the cook a chance, had breathed life into him again when he’d been broken nearly beyond repair.

Why wasn’t his art… working?

And so Zoro found himself at a complete loss for anything to do once everyone had left and he was leaning quietly against the counter watching Sanji finish up with the last of the dishes. Even Zeff had followed after the crew with plans on sleeping somewhere that Shanks had set up for him, even though Zoro and Sanji offered their spare bed. Zoro had helped Sanji load the dishwasher, but there were certain pans that the cook liked to clean in a special way. Like the cast iron pans. Zoro had no clue why you wouldn’t use soap to clean something you cooked in, but the cook knew what he was doing, so he let Sanji clean them the way he wanted.

Sanji’s shoulders were still hanging, like his muscles had atrophied or he’d never worked them hard enough to get them to the point where they’d be able to hold themselves up. It made Zoro hurt to see it. He knew what to do if the cook’s shoulders held a tenseness: provoke the cook into a fight that would quickly become fucking and one of them would drill the other into oblivion, and then they would shower and wash all of the lingering negativity down the drain with the dirty water.

This Sanji was different. Zoro wasn’t even sure if he could be provoked into a fight right now. Aside from outward appearances, he really hadn’t put up a fight on Luffy and Usopp being too crazy around the expensive furniture or Zeff telling stories at his expense.

This Sanji was hurting, and Zoro really didn’t know what to do.

He wasn’t sure what made him cross the kitchen, be he had almost before he even realized what he was doing. His arms found their way around the cook’s lithe middle and Zoro pressed his front flush against Sanji’s powerful back, breathing in time with Sanji’s own rise and fall. Sanji had stopped his scrubbing and turned slightly to look over his shoulder at the swordsman. Zoro didn’t look up to meet his gaze. His hips fell into line with Sanji’s and he reveled in their power and steadiness for a moment before his body unconsciously squeezed to pull Sanji tighter into him and he laid his head in the crook where Sanji’s shoulder met his neck.
Zoro could feel the slight shift in Sanji’s muscles as the cook’s body moved in time with his train of thought, following along as Sanji debated leaning back into him, and then started to resume his scrubbing, still for a moment, and ultimately decided against finishing the pan and let it slide back into the soapy water. Sanji’s long fingers plucked the towel from the counter and dried his hands, slowly and deliberately, and then he reached up slowly and worked his fingers into Zoro’s hair, turning to lean his head against Zoro’s.

Zoro let out a slow and empowered breath and squeezed Sanji’s middle tighter. He hadn’t been expecting the cook to welcome his touch so openly. Sanji normally fought him a bit with a snarky comment or a joking insult, if not something physical like a smack on the head with the towel, though he never really backed away. Zoro shifted slightly to lay his lips on Sanji’s neck without taking away the support for the cook’s head and Sanji’s torso shuddered as he let out a shaky breath. Zoro sucked in a quick breath through his nose and slid his tongue across Sanji’s warm skin, pulling the cook in tighter still when Sanji shuddered again, leaning his head back to give Zoro more access.

Zoro made a small sound in the back of his throat, hips rocking unconsciously into Sanji’s back. Submissive Sanji was something very new too. The cook always made it very clear that he was in charge, regardless of the situation. Zoro knew that he hated being caught off guard, and completely understood with his background. But Sanji was…

Zoro decided to test his luck and opened his mouth more to take a larger portion of Sanji’s skin in between his teeth and tongue, adjusting his grip on Sanji’s middle to slide his hands up under the cook’s shirt. Sanji let out a slow breath and dropped his head back to lean against Zoro’s shoulder as the swordsman found his nipples and began playing with them idly. Zoro made another sound and thrust again, harder this time and more deliberate, sucking harder when Sanji returned it with his own small whine. The cook’s hand on his head had found the back of his neck and was pulling gently at the short and delicate hairs there, shifting intermittently to massage Zoro’s tendons leading down into his shoulders. Zoro gritted his teeth and pushed one hand down into Sanji’s pants while his other hand kept playing with the cook’s nipples, grunting and twisting his hips forward when the cook let out a sharp breath and jolted as Zoro’s hand found his cock.

“…Tell me what to do,” he mouthed against Sanji’s neck.

“…Wha…?” the cook breathed back, twisting his own hips back into Zoro’s, one hand tight in Zoro’s hair and the other resting on Zoro’s hand over his shirt.

Zoro wasn’t sure what had made him say it. And he knew for a fact that there was no way he’d be able to find the words for what he wanted to say. **Tell me what to do to make this easier, to make this better, to make you happier, to make this hurt less, to make—**

*To make you love me.*
Zoro’s heart spluttered as the thought shot like a lightning bolt through his mind and he latched on to Sanji’s neck with renewed enthusiasm, pushing his cock into Sanji’s ass as he wrapped his hand around the cook’s manhood and started working his hand up and down. Sanji spasmed, letting out a small cry and his hand dropped from Zoro’s head and hand to grip the counter and give him something to hold him up.

*I love him.*

Zoro slid the hand under Sanji’s shirt back to wrestle first the cook’s pants down and then his own so they caught around their thighs and Zoro could press his cock into the cleft of Sanji’s ass.

*I love him.*

Sanji gasped as Zoro worked two fingers inside of him. Zoro buried his face in the back on Sanji’s neck as the cook pooled forward against the counter like a ragdoll. He was giving in entirely to Zoro’s strength, completely relying on the swordsman to keep him upright, and Sanji leaning on him both literally and figuratively was giving Zoro the most raging hard-on he’d had in years. Zoro groaned into Sanji’s back, pulling out his fingers so he could position himself, and he leaned forward and slid into the cook’s impossible heat.

*I love him.*

Sanji’s breathing had picked up significantly as he gripped the counter like a vice, leaning forward so that Zoro could thrust as deep as possible, Zoro’s hand still working rapidly over Sanji’s cock.

*I love him.*

Zoro’s pulled back slightly to rotate himself to hit that place inside Sanji and the cook nearly flopped into the full sink as Zoro thrust forward with an unrestrained groan, catching the nerves hard. Little black spots started to burst behind Zoro’s eyes at the sounds Sanji was making, picking up his pace and driving deep and hard into Sanji’s body.

*I love him.*
Zoro pulled himself up close to Sanji’s back, holding the cook to him with one hand on his chest and one hand wrapped around his cock, trying to get so deep into Sanji that the cook would never feel anything but him.

He wanted to hide the cook away from anything that would ever hurt him, take him from whoever was threatening him and making him hurt and making him lose the passion for his cooking. Deep down he knew that tomorrow Sanji would be fine and he’d make the most elaborate dishes that he could as an apology to his utensils for not worshiping them like he always did tonight, but he also knew that he wanted to find whoever made Sanji lose sight of that passion in the first place and end them. He wanted to remove every threat that could possibly come after Sanji, take away everything to make the cook scared to go home, scared to see his father, scared to be himself in the open, scared to make a name for himself lest people find out who and what he was.

*I love him so much.*

His mind was screaming for his tongue to form the words that were scorching his mind and he bit into the side of Sanji’s neck, grinning to himself when the cook shuddered harshly at the stimulation and curled in on himself suddenly, hot and thick liquid dribbling down through Zoro’s fingers.

He wanted nothing more than for Sanji to understand, for Sanji to never question how important he was, for Sanji to want to find his attackers and end them too. He wanted to take the cook’s mending body and mind into his heart and hid them in his ribcage and offer himself in whatever way he could to help Sanji heal. He wanted to know Sanji, be with Sanji, stay with Sanji always.

And he wanted nothing more than for the cook to return what he was feeling.

*I love you.*

Zoro groaned deeply, muscles locking with a wave of extreme heat and cold that tore its way up from his toes all the way to his shoulders, clawing through his body as he came hard into the cook, his body commanding him to hold Sanji tight and never let him go.

Zoro let go of Sanji’s cock to wrap his arms tightly around Sanji’s middle and nuzzle his face into the back of his neck, kissing him again and again on the sensitive skin at the top of his spine as they panted together.

*I love you.*
Zoro’s lips almost formed the words, but at the last minute he tipped his head forward and kissed Sanji again tenderly, hoping with everything in him that somehow Sanji would understand.

-oOo-

“Do we really have to do this?”

“Yup,” Sanji nodded unapologetically, holding up a deep forest green dress shirt to Zoro’s front. “When you said Nami-swan would murder you if you ruined those clothes, I didn’t realize that by that you meant those were the only dress things you owned. You need some dressy things for certain occasions.”

Zoro huffed and looked away, letting Sanji select a couple more shirts off of the rack. They’d ended up back in the most expensive store in the entire city where Sanji had stocked up on his own clothes. “Just make sure I can move in them,” he grumbled.

Sanji nodded, not really paying attention and picked up a grey shirt with asymmetrical cubes next. “How are you on patterns?”

The cook looked over when Zoro didn’t answer, staring blankly at the swordsman’s flat expression for a second before he seemed to rethink his question and put the shirt back on the rack. Zoro sighed again, looking over to the chair where Sanji had picked out a dark grey and a black suit. Now he just had to match the shirts and ties. Zoro still didn’t think this was necessary. He never wore this sort of thing anyways.

“Try these on,” Sanji stuffed a pile of shirts into his arms and spun him, pushing him towards the dressing room. “And put the ties on. Those are just as important.”

Zoro grumbled and closed the door behind him. He moved to just take off his shirt and jacket, but Sanji tossed the black suit over the door and Zoro caught it, huffing again, loud enough so that Sanji could hear him, and started stripping. Goddamn shit cook.

They’d been doing much more… couple-y things together as of late. Zeff had hung around for three days before going back to his own territory and they’d had him over every night. Law and Kid had even joined one night to meet the infamous Red-leg and it had felt incredibly and uncomfortably like their parents were meeting each other for the first time. Which was kind of what it was, not that Kid...
or Law or Zeff acted like it was, but neither Sanji nor Zoro had been able to enjoy the night until everyone had left and Sanji had fucked Zoro’s brains out, still snarling about Zeff riling him up while Law and Kid looked on in amusement.

But aside from that, Zoro joined Sanji for shopping now at the grocery store, he never went to Kid’s garage anymore without the cook accompanying him, everything held at the arena they went to together, Sanji had even suggested that they go for a ride on Zoro’s bike so he could get used to the stupid thing and nuzzled himself comfortably into Zoro’s back for the entire ride. Not to mention the fact that Sanji had yet to go back to his own bed to the point that the sheets were starting to smell like both of them, which meant fantastic naps for Zoro, all wrapped up in the cook’s essence. Zoro had yet to find a reason to complain.

*Until today.* He gritted his teeth and pulled at the tie around his neck, fiddling with the too-tight collar and unbuttoning the top of the shirt so he could actually breathe.

“Jesus, marimo, what’s taking you so long?”

Zoro banged the door open, revealing Sanji’s unimpressed face until the cook actually turned to look at him and his expression dropped slightly, eye popping as he stared.

“…What?” Zoro snapped, already done with waiting for the cook to say something. He remembered how long Sanji took shopping for himself, and he wasn’t about to agree to taking that long just because the cook was in the store with him.

“…Uh…” Sanji seemed to be trying to find the best way to word something. “I… I don’t like the color, but…”

“Good, me either,” Zoro grunted and disappeared back into the dressing room with another bang of the door.

Sanji reached up slowly and ran a hand down his face slowly, trying to get his heart rate back to normal by slowing his breathing. He’d almost choked on his tongue when Zoro had stepped out, and now it was all he could do to keep his… nether regions from expressing their approval of the suit.

Blue was definitely not the marimo’s color though. Which in a way was almost good, with Sanji’s blond hair and pale skin and Zoro’s green hair and deep olive skin, they would never clash with outfits because they wore such different colors.
Zoro tromped out of the dressing room again, this time in the sage shirt with an emerald tie with light green diagonal stripes draped around his neck. Apparently he’d thought that doing the tie every time was a pain.

Sanji swallowed inconspicuously behind his hand, standing to half-tie the tie so he could get a better feel. Zoro huffed again but didn’t stop him from doing so. Zoro’s incredibly powerful shoulders were almost too big for the jacket, but they couldn’t really do anything about that, and honestly the fact that the swordsman’s muscles were visible through the material really wasn’t a bad thing. The rest of the suit was perfect, it clung to the marimo in exactly the right ways to make Sanji drool, and he filed away in his head a reminder to coerce Zoro into one of the suits the next time they were home alone. He was sure the moss head wouldn’t object if he said it got him hard. Which it was doing quite nicely.

“This is a good color,” he commented offhandedly and Zoro shrugged, as if to say, “Sure.” The marimo was usually pretty good once he realized… once he realized that…

Sanji ducked to hide him smile and pushed Zoro back towards the dressing room before the moss head saw it, turning to sit back down and covering his smile with his hand.

…I can't believe I didn’t realize that before.

Zoro was good once he seemed to realize that it would make Sanji happy.

Sanji OK’d the sage green and emerald combo, and after that the hunter green shirt and black tie with gold designs and the white pinstripe shirt and black tie, but all of the blues and greys were basically a fail. If he let Zoro go out in any of them he’d be humiliated for allowing the marimo to even buy them in the first place; his reputation with style was on the line.

“…You need some more colors,” Sanji said unhappily, looking around the store after Zoro had stepped out in another wash up of a pinstripe grey shirt and black tie. “Green is great but you have so damn much of it.”

“Whatever,” Zoro grumbled, scratching the back of his head. He was losing his patience fast. Sanji had maybe three more tries before the ape just stalked out of the store altogether—oh!

Sanji’s hand whipped out and he snatched a maroon shirt off of the rack. He was so stupid!
Zoro grunted as Sanji threw the shirt at his head and he pulled it off just to be hit in the face with… a purple one?

“What the hell color even is this?” he held it up. It looked girly as fuck!

“Lavender pinstripe,” Sanji called from behind another rack. “And you need a patriarch purple tie with that, maybe with polka dots or checkers, I just can’t find—got it!”

The tie came flying at Zoro’s hand and he dropped the shirt to catch it, staring down in almost disgust at the colors. It was like the most abhorrent version of magenta possible.

“The maroon goes with the black tie, so that’s fine, but I really want to find a good green for this,” he held up another shirt that was almost screaming with how vibrant it was. Zoro was pretty sure that if he stood under a black light in that he’d blind some people.

“What the hell color is that?”

“Eminence, and stop griping, this will really look good with your skin tone.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Go put that one on while I look!”

Zoro groaned loudly and bent to pick up the other shirt, disappearing back into the dressing room with the… stupidly complex colors. Really? Purple?

He stood for a moment looking between the two shirts. The maroon was fine, he liked that color, but the purple… Zoro eyed it with his lip curled like he’d smelled something nasty. There was no way that’d look good on him.

“Come on, marimo!”
Zoro sighed and moved to unbutton the one he was wearing.

Sanji took his place in the chair outside the dressing room, waiting patiently while the swordsman came to terms with the colors he’d been given. The door clicked after a moment and Sanji reached up as something came flying at his head. The maroon shirt?

“That one’s fine.”

“…Alright.” Sanji gave up with getting him to put it on, adding it to the pile of accepted shirts and ties before he turned back to Zoro and stopped short.

…Purple was definitely his color. The lavender was perfect for his skin and his hair, and the patriarch couldn’t have fit the shirt better. Lucky bastard, Sanji couldn’t wear those colors no matter how much he wanted to.

“Well?” he asked, unable to keep the excitement out of his tone.

Zoro gave him an unsure look, crossing his arms uncomfortably. “…What’s with that voice?”

“You look good. Sue me.”

Zoro’s lips pinched together and he huffed again, his cheeks taking on a slight tinge. He turned to the mirror, face scrunched up in embarrassment.

Sanji huffed to himself. If the marimo didn’t like it, there was no point in forcing him into it. …No matter how good it looked. “…Do you really not like it?”

Zoro grumbled again under his breath, reaching up to scratch at the back of his head. “…No,” he admitted finally. “It’s just… purple.”

“There’s nothing wrong with purple. And you happen to look damn good in it, so I say we get it.”

“Fine, whatever,” Zoro turned back to him. “Any others?”
“Just this.” Sanji handed him the eminence shirt and dark green tie, not bothering to hide his smile. Zoro’s face darkened and he snatched the two, ducking back into the dressing room with another bang.

Sanji had gotten a little bold with the last one. That color purple was definitely out of Zoro’s range of colors that he would ever chose, and the tie had subtle green paisley embroidered into it, but—

Zoro stepped out again, definitely louder in color than he would ever pick for himself… but goddamn if he didn’t look fucking amazing.

“Yeah,” Sanji said finally with a huge grin, leaning back and crossing his arms to survey his handiwork as Zoro flushed again. Ok, he was out of time now. Marimo had hit his quota. Time to clock out. “…You hungry?”

“Thank god,” Zoro breathed, looking up at the ceiling like he was actually singing his praises to the heavens before he turned back and closed the door behind him. Sanji stood to gather the other clothes, trying to decide what he should make for lunch. The moss head definitely deserved a reward after this.

And maybe he’d model a full suit for Sanji if the cook blew him.

Now they just needed an occasion for Zoro to wear it so Sanji could show him off.

-oOo-
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

An occasion couldn’t have come faster.

Ever since the city had reinstated itself as a worthy power in the country, the underground had become a booming industry—albeit not an industry, because in all legal senses, it didn’t exist.

That didn’t mean, however, that other more legal things couldn’t also pick up recognition throughout the country. One of them being a small private practice that Law had set up, mostly to take in wayward people from the underground, but also people that knew nothing of the city. They couldn’t turn away patients if they didn’t want to draw any eyes, and Law was good at what he did, so he attracted a lot of patients looking for a phenomenal surgeon that would take risks that they needed. Chopper said all the time that the amount of paperwork involved with getting a go-ahead to do such risky surgeries almost made the process not worth it, but it was always so easy to tell that he was lying. Chopper would have done it even if he had to do the paperwork three times over for every patient. Law, not so much, but Chopper was devoted like that.

About a year and a half ago, Law had suddenly said the hell with teaching Chopper everything on his own (sometimes he just wanted to cut things) and sent him off to work at an actual hospital for a year. Law was good enough to realize that no matter how helpful or good Chopper was with surgery, he needed the actual legitimate foundation as a doctor. Also, he liked slicing people up. Sometimes Zoro wondered where he would have ended up with a personality like that if he wasn’t smart enough to become a doctor. So Law had forged the paperwork for Chopper’s undergraduate and medical degree and the first three years of his residency and sent him off to finish the “last” year at an actual hospital. He wanted Chopper to have the networking to get himself settled outside the underground should the need ever arise. Chopper was adamant that he’d never leave the underground but Law didn’t lose arguments.

Chopper, being Chopper and brilliant, and dedicated, and caring, and far better than any aspiring surgeon there, and with Law’s instruction, had flown through the year with almost uncanny ease. Towards the last few months, after the surgeons recognized that he was much farther along as a surgeon than his peers, despite them having nearly ten years on him, had allowed him to focus on actual medicine and clinical trials for pharmaceutical development. Medicines were a passion of Chopper’s that he didn’t really get to spend much time on when he was with Law. He’d recently published an article about the medications he’d been developing while working with injured fighters from the underground, studying Killer’s blood and working to accelerate natural healing in the body. No one knew that his work was based off of an already existing virus that caused this, and none of it
was actually in any of the paperwork, so the work the article was centered around was extremely advanced and well-developed to the outside eye. So much so that he’d been selected as a recipient for the AVCS Outstand Surgical Resident Award.

This particular function that they had all been invited to was just the after party. Chopper had taken pity on them and not asked them to come to the actual award ceremony, and tried to tell them that they didn’t have to attend the party, but like hell they weren’t going to be there to support him for this. Also, Luffy had heard the work “buffet,” so all hopes of not traveling for hours by car with the monkey’s insanity were lost.

And the event was in formal attire.

Sanji had spent way too much time gleefully holding the shirts and ties up to Zoro’s naked torso, trying to select the one that best fit both his skin tone and the sky blue-azure shirt and tie combination he’d chosen while Zoro sighed heavily the whole way through at Sanji’s rejections of his attempts to get the cook out of his clothes too.

Sanji had finally gone with the lavender-patriarch shirt and tie. Whereupon Zoro had finally gotten Sanji out of his clothes, and all was well.

Until the five-hour car ride in formal attire happened. Though Sanji was good to have on those rides; he was much quicker to kick Luffy in the head for any stupid antics, which meant fewer injuries for everyone else (namely Usopp and Zoro) before arrival. But any car was cramped with Luffy, let alone for five hours, so when they’d finally reached the hospital’s reception hall, no one had cared how stiff and ridiculous they felt in the clothes and launched themselves out of the doors before the car had even stopped to get the hell out of Luffy’s way as he barreled for the buffet, screaming for meat. Zoro had joked about them giving the valet a story to tell at the dinner table and Sanji had growled for him to shut up, still pissed about the wrinkles in his shirt from kicking Luffy so many times. Zoro had called him a priss and offered to see if they could borrow an iron from one of the penguin-suits walking around with h’orderves and Sanji had told him to shut up again and grabbed two champagne glasses from one said penguin-suit and downed them both.

Once Luffy had food, it was much easier to settle into the party. There were too many people in Zoro’s opinion, but Sanji didn’t seem too bothered, especially when he spotted a group of women in tight, revealing—but still sophisticated—dresses and spiraled over to them to offer his services bringing them any h’orderves from the buffet table. Zoro sighed to himself and went to mill with people (find a quiet place to sleep).

But first, sake. The food here looked expensive, after all, which meant that the booze would be good.
He found himself by the drink table, browsing through the options there when a firm tap on his shoulder turned him around, his face splitting into a huge grin.

Saga was as handsome as he ever was, tall and strong, hair sleek and framing his defined cheekbones, feet planted like he owned the whole place, sleeve of his right arm hanging limply by his side. He had a glass of cognac in his one hand, and was smiling confidently back at Zoro’s grin. Seeing him brought back a rush of weird feelings. Nothing because he was the first guy Zoro had ever been with, but more just a reminder of when the city had been demolished, and before that too. They’d never really intended to lose touch—the guy was a damn good sparring partner if nothing else—but they didn’t have much time or ability to once the NSPH superior had started turning up more and more frequently in the city. Saga lived two towns over, so when the city had been shut down and everyone outside sealed out and phone lines and electricity cut, they’d just stopped. Zoro had more on his mind to think about than if Saga ever knew what happened.

“Did you forget how your phone worked or did you just regret that night?” Saga asked smoothly around his smile and Zoro snorted, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. He never knew where to start, how much people knew, what they thought about everything… he didn’t know if Saga even anything outside what the government was telling everyone about the city during that time.

“Um…” he started, but Saga shook his head and took a sip from his drink.

“I’m joking.”

So he did know then.

“…How… how much do you…?”

Saga shrugged with his one good shoulder. “I’ve been fighting freelance underground for a while, just keeping up with it outside work. I’ve been moving around a lot, so you hear different versions of what happened from every place, but I’ve been able to piece together a lot of it. I don’t think anyone really knows what happened; seems like it’s a secret that you guys have kept pretty securely.”

Zoro nodded and selected a bottle from the table behind him, pouring himself a large drink as he started from the beginning, right from the first killings that left bodies drained entirely of blood. Saga was a good guy, and trustworthy. Zoro wouldn’t have minded having him around to fight sometimes, or even just to hang. Zoro didn’t tell him about Sanji or Killer. They’d never been that close, Zoro was pretty sure that Saga had never seen anyone from his makeshift family and there seemed no need to check that off the list.
Saga listened quietly the whole time, only slight changes in his expression indicating that he had an opinion about everything that he was hearing. By the time Zoro was done, he’d finished his drink and went to pour himself another one.

“…Shit,” he said finally. Zoro just nodded. He was almost done with his own drink. Telling his history got easier every time, but the alcohol always helped to neutralize the lingering uncomfortable twinges he got telling it.

“…But you all got out ok?”

Zoro winced inwardly. He’d kind of been hoping that Saga wouldn’t ask that. “…Do you remember Sabo?”

“…I’m sorry.”

Zoro just nodded.

“…How’s the quest to be the best swordsman going?”

“I’m fighting for Shanks’ traveling team, Luffy is the captain and I’m… first mate, or whatever. Never had the desire to be captain.”

“Who needs to lead when you can just sit back and be the best?”

Zoro shot him a look that slowly turned into a smirk. It was nice to see him again. And he knew Saga was thinking the same, so neither had any desire to voice it out loud. This was fine.

“Hey, marimo, Chopper’s looking for you. You haven’t even said hello to him yet?”

Zoro shook his head, passing Sanji a champagne glass from the table behind him as the cook stepped up to his side. Sanji nodded his thanks and sipped on it, still eyeing him like he should feel guilty or something about not hunting Chopper down the second he got there.
“Chopper knows I’m proud of him, and I’ll see him at some point.”

Sanji rolled his eyes and turned to Saga, exchanging nods.

“Saga, this is Sanji, the newest addition to Shanks’ team.”

Saga put down his glass to offer his hand to Sanji, who had to switch his glass to his other hand in order to shake it but did it so smoothly it was like that was something he did every time.

“You fight?” Saga asked and Sanji shook his head.

“Cook,” he corrected. “I’m not from the city.”

“So then you do fight?”

“Err, yeah, technically. Savate. I cook so I don’t use my hands fighting.”

“You any good?”

Sanji refrained from giving this guy a look. Why the hell was he being so forward and comfortable? He was acting like he’d known Sanji for years and it wasn’t freaking rude to ask that.

“Why?” he returned easily. “The marimo boring you with all of his baton-swinging?”

Zoro’s look darkened and Saga snorted around his drink, the first break from all his suaveness.

Saga grinned devilishly in Zoro’s direction, head cocked slightly to the side. “Marimo?”

“Shut up,” Zoro huffed, refilling his drink as Saga barked out a short laugh.
Oh. He and the shitty-swordsman had history.

No wonder Sanji had bile collecting at the back of his throat.

No! Wait, what the fuck?! So what if they had history?! Zoro knew Conis and didn’t have any problems!

But Sanji couldn’t keep his eyes from running up and down Saga’s form, taking in his powerful stance and wide shoulders, even with only one arm; the way he seemed to always stand in a fighting position; his confident grin that was making Sanji’s upper lip curl back in a territorial haze. The guy looked like a powerhouse; of course the ape would be into something that he could throw weights around with. And Saga had asked him if he fought too, so obviously he did. And they talked so easily. Sanji had never heard anything about this guy, how long had it been since he and Zoro had seen each other?

And why did he even care?

_Fuck this_, he decided abruptly and excused himself on the grounds of finding Chopper to tell him that Zoro was taking his sweet time getting around to seeing him. He ignored the odd look Zoro gave him, stalking away with as little contempt in his step as he could. He was not about to cause a scene, especially since Luffy and Usopp had already almost toppled a whole table of food with their antics. This was important to Chopper. When Sanji had talked with him earlier, the little doctor had gushed about how many incredible doctors and surgeons were here and how he was way too nervous to talk to any of them but he wanted to so badly. Even Law had come up for this, dressed up and everything, and he did not do that. Sanji wasn’t about to ruin any part of this.

But when he did a lap of the room, talked to a few dozen assholes that were all way too pretentious for their own shoes, and had finally gotten fed up with doctors and surgeons trying to impress each other by using the biggest words and most complicated descriptions of surgeries that they could—honestly, all of these fucking asshats had PhD’s, who the fuck were they trying to impress?—he’d finally said fuck it again and gone to find Zoro. His jealousy be damned. He could chat Saga up without getting jealous, damn it.

Zoro however, before Sanji could get to him and grace him with his charming mood, had been found by Laki. So when Sanji found him, Saga was drifting off in the distance and Laki was taking her turn joking around with Zoro and trying to get him to smile as much as she could. When she offered him food from the buffet table behind him that had been Sanji’s last straw.
The food was fucking **his** territory.

Sanji wasn’t even sure what was going through his head when he marched over. “Fuck it” circled a couple times. “How dare that bitch offer him food” was another key phrase, along with a couple others with colorful phrases. In the back of his mind, the more cynical side of him whispered, *If I’m going to get kidnapped and experimented on for hundreds of years to come, I might as well enjoy this as much as I can right now. So I can at least remember it when I’m starved and delusional and emotionally and physically broken.*”

But oddly enough, when Sanji stuck himself physically in between them, cutting off their conversation abruptly, and grabbed Zoro’s lapels, the thing he could most clearly comprehend was: *He really does look good in these colors.*

And then he yanked the marimo in and laid his lips firmly against Zoro’s, closing his eyes so he wouldn’t have to stare back awkwardly into the idiot’s slack-jawed, wide-eyed, dumbass gaze.

In Zoro’s defense, however, when Sanji finally pulled back, he didn’t look all that disappointed. Sanji wasn’t sure the red of his rising blush really went with the purple or the green—too many strong colors all together—but it was so cute that he didn’t really care.

He rolled his eyes mentally. There he went with the “cute” again.

Sanji smoothed out Zoro’s jacket, ignoring the way the marimo’s mouth had dropped open, before turning back around to face Laki and her pleased, albeit somewhat scorned, smirk.

*Good,* he couldn’t help but think.

“Excuse me,” he smiled politely, nodding to her, before muttering something about finding the head chef for the catering and marching off again, leaving Zoro spluttering and trying not to smile and Laki to try and pick up their conversation again, grinning inwardly to herself at how hot under the collar Zoro was getting.

If Conis was more upset, then she could be the protective older sister that she always had been, but she knew that Conis wanted Sanji happy more than anything. She truly did love him, even if he had someone else, and she knew that Conis wouldn’t want that ruined for anything.
She sighed. Her sister was too nice. Sanji was damn lucky.

-oOo-

“I can’t believe he just called a fight like that.”

“I can’t believe you just kissed me like that.”

“And Shanks just said yes! Just like that! Doesn’t he have a reputation to uphold?!”

“You just… kissed me. In front of everyone.”

“Does he know how hard it is for me to pack food for Luffy? Or call ahead to places and order it?! He’s lucky we’re not going to be there for more than two days; I’d have to clean out every damn grocery store in the area just to feed you idiots.”

“…You just… kissed—”

“How many damn times are you going to say that?!”

Zoro hadn’t stopped grinning the entire time back in the car, all through Nami and Usopp and Chopper teasing Sanji and Luffy asking all of his oblivious questions, even when Luffy had inquired if they were going to start holding hands everywhere like Ace did with his girlfriends and Sanji had bitten his head off, asking (screaming) if he looked like that Don Juan idiot of a lady killer that had no clue how to treat a lady properly.

“…It’s just… you kissed me, in front of everyone.”

“And? You got a problem with it?” Sanji snapped, leveling him with an impressive glare, pausing in his process of completing the monstrous grocery list that they would cart up to Thriller Bark for Luffy’s fight with Gekko Moriah’s best fighter. Sanji and Zoro would have to take their own small, rented ice truck up while everyone else drove separately, then they’d drive back together with no more use for the truck, although Sanji was debating paying for it for another day with their own money so he didn’t have to deal with Luffy, Chopper, and Usopp’s antics the whole way back. And
Nami’s voice was glorious, but even that got to be a bit much if she screamed at them the whole way back. And generally fists started flying if Luffy annoyed Zoro enough, and he was not about to get his nose broken again, no matter how fast he healed. That shit hurt.

Zoro shrugged, shit-eating grin still full-blown. “No. I didn’t say it was a problem.”

“Good,” Sanji snarled, turning back to his list. He was forgetting something. “…Then I’m going to keep doing it.”

“That’s fine.”

Zoro had replied to the comment so easily, no hesitation at all. Sanji couldn’t help the smirk that tugged at his lips, and quickly dug into his pockets to pull out a cigarette and muffle it a bit. Zoro snorted, recognizing the cover, and Sanji’s face dropped back to a glare. Shitty marimo.

Oh, mayonnaise, just in case Luffy was lacking on carbs and he had to cram some bread down the idiot’s throat in a sandwich.

“Are we going to start singing to each other and doing stupid, cheesy shit now? Lovin’ you is easy ‘cause you’re beautiful—*”

“Ugh,” Sanji rolled his eyes. “I hate when people say that.”

“I—what?”

“Lovin’. It’s such a bullshit term.”

 “…I’m pretty sure she uses it as a noun there—”

“I know that! I just hate how overused it’s gotten!”

“Never thought I’d hear you say there was something about romance you didn’t like, shitty cook.”
“That’s not romance, that’s bullshit. That’s why I hate it. It’s not… I don’t know. It’s like you’re taking the other person’s love for granted, not holding it to mean as much as it does. “Lovin’”—Sanji shuddered—“It’s belittling, attributing it to love but making it obvious that you’re not referring to the same thing. You say “lovin’” when you’re in the midst of a one night stand and you don’t want to tell them you don’t love them and ruin your chances of getting in their pants.”

“…You put way too much thought into that.”

“Shut up, it’s important. It’s cruel manipulation, leading the person on by deliberately twisting words.”

“…Lovin’ you—”

“Oh god,” Sanji snorted, finally looking back up at Zoro’s attempt at reaching those notes. “Please don’t.”

“I seeee your soul come shining through—!?”

“Please, have mercy.”

“Dood’n dood’n doo doo—”

“Please,” Sanji attempted again, snorting too hard now behind his hand to even get the words out. “It’s sacrilegious to her voice.”

“Aaaaaaaah—!”

Sanji launched himself over the counter and into Zoro’s chest, knocking him back onto the ground with a sharp grunt from the swordsman, and then the marimo’s powerful arms locked around him and threw him to the side, Zoro’s weight coming down on top of him to pin him.

As if.
Sanji’s one of Sanji’s legs snapped around Zoro’s hips and the other slammed into the floor, flipping them back over as Sanji’s muscles clenched and Zoro choked as the cook’s leg locked around his middle, constricting his air as Sanji used his arms to keep Zoro under him, the marimo struggling under him.

Until the marimo twisted like a fucking alligator, spine contorting like Sanji had never seen it, surprising him so much that he suddenly found his shoulders back against the ground when Zoro rolled against the ground while Sanji replayed sparring with Zoro over again in his mind, trying to figure out if he’d just missed Zoro doing that or if he always could and never had. Zoro’s arms snapped against his wrists and slammed them back into the ground, Sanji’s leg around his middle the only hold the cook had on him.

But Sanji was stubborn, and he tightened his hold around Zoro’s middle again, Zoro huffing heavily as he lost more air and Sanji grinned casually, good to sit this out for a second until the marimo gave up—

“Hey!” he barked suddenly, jerking and unconsciously losing his grip on Zoro’s waist as the marimo fucking gyrated between his open legs. Zoro grinned, suddenly in the upper hand, and twisted again like a python and forced himself more between Sanji’s legs so that Sanji’s knee was almost back against the ground and he couldn’t get his knee to bend the right way around Zoro, arms still up by his head.

He scowled, rotating both ankles experimentally. Not much liberty. But he could still—

Zoro leaned down before Sanji could get too riled up by his need to win, rocking again between the cook’s legs and laying his lips against Sanji’s, oddly gently for how tight his grip was on Sanji’s wrists. Sanji sighed, relenting to the hold, and let the marimo kiss him, returning it after a moment. Though he wasn’t too keen on being pinned. That was Zoro’s kink.

…It wasn’t as physically nerve-wracking though anymore. Maybe it was Zoro’s body heat against him, or how bright the room was, but even with his back flat against the floor and his arms pinned to his side… it wasn’t triggering anything.

So Sanji took the time to enjoy the moment, even if it wasn’t his kink.

-oOo-
Gekko Moriah’ arena was the type of place that reminded Zoro’s of any and all dungeons, caves, and subterranean lairs that comic book villains had. The lights were so dim you could barely see and hung from the wall like ramshackle spotlights hung up in mining caves. Cracks ran deep through the ceiling, walls, and floor, and on more than one occasion the crew had tripped and nearly fallen from the neglectful disarray of the building. Zoro was on edge before they were even halfway down the stairs to the arena, and that wasn’t even including the extra two floors down they had to go to get to the lockers underneath. Sanji found his side, which normally would have helped assure him—even if not calm him—but nothing was helping now. This place was wrong.

“I don’t like this,” Sanji murmured, the only one to talk since they’d approached the front door to the disgusting warehouse hiding their location. No one felt good about this fight. Sanji had a hand on his shoulder where there was no doubt the cactus crawling up and down his spine, signaling just how wrong their surrounding were. Zoro just nodded his agreement.

Zoro looked forward at their captain, the determination in Luffy’s walk, the sureness in his clenched fists, swinging at his sides and leading them all onward and downward. His captain would never listen, but more than that, Luffy would never disappoint Shanks, and that meant taking on this battle. Zoro was sure Luffy felt at least something off in the building’s air, but the tak-tak-tak of his sandals never slowed or wavered.

So Zoro sucked in a deep breath through his nose and squared his shoulders. Beside him, he felt Sanji realize the same thing he had and reach into his pocket for a cigarette—maybe the last one before the fight, and the crew strode out into the pitiful roar of the pitifully small crowed. What was this place? Wasn’t Moriah really big in the underground? Why were the stands so empty?

But he shut down his thoughts and let his fingers wander subconsciously over the hilts by his side.

The captain had decided. They were going to win this.

-oOo-

Zoro hated Dr. Hogback before the man had even set foot in the arena. It was his smile, or his cackle, or his glasses, or his stupidly small legs that somehow held up his massive body. There was something familiar about him that Zoro couldn’t place, but that was probably because Moriah’s stadium had so many knots tied in his stomach that he couldn’t concentrate on much else. This guy wasn’t weak, but he wouldn’t win against Luffy, Zoro knew just by looking at him.
But even so he couldn’t stop his racing heart. His lips pinched tighter, and Sanji slid in closer on the decrepit bench beside him so their arms were connected. Again, the touch should have calmed him, but did nothing.

Giant footsteps started to ring around the dome, and the crowd that Moriah had maybe even swept up off the streets began the same hyena whooping and calling they had done when Luffy’s team walked down the entryway steps and Zoro swallowed unconsciously.

Wrong.

Gekko Moriah stepped out of the drowning shadows leading to his private sitting box and up beside his throne where he grabbed the microphone hanging from the ceiling. The button was grungy, and made a snapping sound when he pushed it in, and almost immediately the sound system screamed with feedback, making Zoro’s hackles stand up on end.

Wrong.

“Let the match begin!” Moriah screeched, and the crowd erupted in feral sounds of joy and anticipation.

Wrong.

“We have to get out of here,” Sanji blurted out suddenly at his side and Zoro nodded, on his feet immediately, but Hogback hadn’t wasted time after getting the go-ahead and was already pulling a blade from his side. Zoro could tell just from the way he held it that the man had almost no experience whatsoever holding a knife like that, let alone fighting with it.

“He’s never used that thing in his life,” Sanji said next to him, his voice harsh with confusion.

“I know,” Zoro grunted, his hands on his swords. What the fuck is happening? Why the fuck does this feel so goddamn wrong?

“Is he using poison? Drugs?” Sanji’s anxiety was high if his tone said anything. Somehow, it was setting Zoro even more on edge. He wanted to snap, to tell Sanji to shut the fuck up so he could think.
“D-Does anyone else feel like the Grim Reaper has been in here the whole time?” Usopp asked shakily, and the rest of the crew nodded around him. Zoro could feel that everyone was ready to attack at a moment’s notice.

Luffy raised his fists, and it took everything Zoro had not to scream at him to get out of the arena.

This was wrong.

-oOo-

It happened so fast—Hogback was using poisons, and in almost no time Luffy began to swoon and attack the air around the enormous man like he could see three of him. The team was out of their seats and sprinting for the ground floor before even the crowd realized what was happening and could really start to cheer, leaping over everyone’s heads, stepping on limbs, slashing at people that tried to reach for them and stop them.

Luffy figured out what was happening to him just before he lost all control over his body, and as he dropped to the ground he spun, his foot connecting with Hogback’s face and sending the man into the metal rungs of the arena behind him where his spine cracked sharply against the unforgiving surface and he slumped motionlessly to the ground.

Moriah let out an earsplitting shriek, and with a loud clack and a giant explosion of sparks from the ceiling, the lights began to shut down from the outside of the arena in until only the dim emergency lights lined the room, a siren blaring through the room and metal doors slamming down across all of the exits and echoing around the stadium, locking them all inside as the whooping from the crowd somehow grew even louder than before.

Zoro had an uncanny feeling that most mice felt like this after being dropped into a snake pit.

-oOo-

Zoro slashed down to knock his opponent’s swords away, a freak of nature that unnerved him unlike any NSPH had managed to, hacking at him with sewn-on arms.
Zoro couldn’t find anything in his brain that could actually use logic to explain how dead-eyed the man looked. It was like he was a dead man walking, he never spoke, paused, or even seemed to breathe in between slicing at every part of Zoro he could reach. Zoro swallowed a yelp as the blade tore through his upper thigh and whipped his right hand back, slicing the man’s hand clean off and sending it flying through the air.

Zoro waited for the fountain of blood, the cry of pain, the reaction that anything would have made, but the man simply stopped next to his hand and bent slowly, reaching for his sword. Zoro’s breath picked up to what he would never admit was a terrified—but also a bit impressed—level. The man hadn’t even blinked. He was a zombie, or he was so drugged out of his mind that the idea of his very existence wasn’t even registering.

“I am Ryuma,” the man said matter-of-factly, flicking his sword in his remaining hand as if to test it out. “You will die.”

Zoro grinned a tight, uncomfortable grin at the fight response rising in his blood.

A quick glance around found his teammates fighting with other members of the crowd, and he winced as Sanji took a hit straight to the chest from another zombie-looking motherfucker who was roaring like a lion, but he forced himself to face his opponent again when the cook landed on his feet, skidding to a halt, and charged back at his opponent. Sanji was bleeding. This guys were not to be trifled with.

Luffy was still in the arena, missing nearly every swing he took at Hogback, who had thankfully stayed down long enough to let some of the poison wear off, but not nearly enough. All Luffy could do at this point was dodge and keep from getting more poison in his system. Zoro had to get down there.

“Fucking try,” Zoro hissed, and lunged.

-Zoro’s elbow were slogged in blood as he rested on the ground, heaving and trying to keep his vision straight after losing so much blood. On the other side of the arena, Chopper was trying to help Luffy with his injuries while keeping his own blood from dripping on everything. Nami and Usopp were closer to him, both on the ground surrounded by the dismembered body parts of the creatures that didn’t bleed, all of which had to be entirely in pieces to stop fighting them. Sanji lit up another cigarette, refusing to look at any of them, but Zoro didn’t care. As long as the fucker was safe he could brood as much as he wanted, although it wouldn’t help them until they actually got out of here. -
Brook walked slowly up to Franky as the larger man gave one of the bigger pieces of torso a sharp kick, testing it’s resolve to stay dead or taking some frustrations out on it.

“Is Luffy ok?” Franky called out, and Luffy called out a pained, “Yes!” from the under Chopper’s hand, ignoring Chopper squawk for him not to talk.

Good, Zoro sighed heavily, heavier than he had meant to, but the calm felt forced. This wasn’t done.

And almost immediately after the thought had crossed his mind, the floor started to shake with looming, ominous, booming footsteps that just kept getting louder and louder and louder and louder, until the whole crew was on their feet again, not ready for the monster they knew was about to walk into the room.

“Fuck,” Sanji snarled, puffing a huge cloud of smoke from his cigarette before tossing it away, sliding into a fighting stance to mimic everyone else. Luffy pushed Chopper away from him grimly and stood to face whatever was coming for them, stitches pulling in what looked like an incredibly painful manner even from across the room.

Zoro’s eyes unconsciously found the body parts of the ripped-open zombies under his feet, vibrations in the floor starting to feel like they were leading his heartbeat and making him feel even uneasier. His eyes found Luffy, where the captain still wasn’t standing up straight, remnants of Hogback’s poison still circulating in his system. He wasn’t doing so good.

Fuck.

Zoro sucked in one last deep breath, and then the wall exploded inward like a bomb had been set off behind it, raining chunks of rock and piping down around them where they pummeled the zombie remains even more. Water was spraying out from the ruined plumbing system and layering the room with a thick mist, blinding everyone momentarily enough just to set their nerves on edge one last time, and a creature the size of a fifteen-story building thundered into the room, overtaking the gaping whole in the wall like he was the ground caving in to swallow the room whole.

Zoro took in his mangled, red, patchwork skin, the enormous fists swinging over the entire room, the gargoyle teeth gnashing in his jaws, the bones visible through the missing portions of flesh on his body, and the devil horns sticking out of his head, and couldn’t even get his brain together enough to breath, “Fuck.”
Zoro dug his painfully tired feet into the ground, forcing himself up the steps, his arm slung over Sanji’s shoulder as the cook helped him along, the latter having lost only half of his blood and not most of it. Zoro coughed heavily and spat up blood and chunks of something else and Sanji gripped him tighter, pulling him faster even though Zoro grunted in pain.

Behind them were the decimated remains of the thing that had introduced itself as “Oars.” Zoro knew that, had they had more time, Chopper would give a foot to look over the medical aspect of whatever the fuck kind of black magic had made the zombies move—let alone on the size of a skyscraper, but as it was, not many of them had the strength to stand for long period of time. Luffy had passed out the second he’d managed to tear Oar’s head from his body, leaving the rest of the crew to hack the rest of it to pieces now that it was a bumbling, debilitated, battle ship-sized chicken with it’s head cut off, and Moriah had fled the stadium, forcing him to open the metal door, and they had to get out before the option for Moriah to close the doors again from the outside became a really scary possibility.

Oars had taken hours to defeat, with Moriah watching from behind barred windows and cackling the whole time. The creature had been a literal brick house of reinforced skin, metal bones, and the most goddamn annoying, scratchy, whiny voice that wouldn’t shut up even when it was losing chunks of it’s body. Zoro had stopped keeping track of how many times the thing had smashed him clear across the room with a hand or a foot when his vision had started to tilt from the impacts and counting started to be a real headache.

Zoro wasn’t sure how much blood was his and how much was Sanji’s. Sanji, to his credit, was much faster and had taken fewer hits than the rest of them over the course of the fight, but he’d taken the hardest hit to bring Oars down. He’d scaled the creature with his claws and teeth, ripping and tearing at its eyes and ears to keep it from attacking them so quickly—because the thing was fast too—managing to get Oars to smash itself in the face once when he jumped out of the way and knock it onto its back, but when Sanji landed on the thing’s neck and prepared to kick its throat in, a giant hand had swept up and grabbed Sanji in it’s gargantuan hold. Oars then rolled to the side and pitched Sanji into the ground, where Zoro had been able to see Sanji’s neck snap back and blood spurt from his mouth from all the way across the room as his tiny body bounced against the cement floors. Zoro’s brain had shut down, and he was on his feet and running as straight as he could with his sideways vision to the blond, maybe screaming his name in his half-conscious state, and Oars raised a fist, bringing it down like a wrecking ball on Sanji’s entire body.

The rest of the crew had screamed Sanji’s name but Zoro hadn’t heard them. His vision went black except for the fist crushing Sanji and lunged, flinging himself farther than he ever had and driving Wado to the hilt into Oar’s wrist before wrenching his body back and slicing the giant’s hand off with a shower of blood, chunks of flesh, sparks, and oil.
Oars had screamed and fallen back, Franky taking the opportunity to land a perfect uppercut and knock the monster back onto it’s back as the rest of the crew raced to heave the clenched fist off Sanji’s body.

*Please, please, please, please,* Zoro remembered thinking blindly, scrambling under the hand the second it was high enough off of the ground and crawling to Sanji’s side. He’d braced himself on the ground and shoved back with a scream, maybe in pain, maybe in determination, maybe in fear, and sent the hand flying.

Sanji coughed a harsh and wheezing breath as the bones in his ribcage snapped themselves back into place, reforming his crushed torso and allowing him to breathe. Zoro dropped to his side as everyone else turned back to Oars, the thing finding its footing again, death in their eyes.

Zoro touched Sanji’s battered face carefully as his nose fixed itself with a painful crunch and the blond winced heartily, moving to push himself to a sitting position. Zoro put a hand on his shoulder to stop him but Sanji brushed him away, groaning that it was just his ribs and pelvis, nothing bad. Zoro pinched his lips together, but couldn’t find the energy to stop Sanji, not with his head throbbing the way it was. Somewhere in the back of his mind he wanted to kiss Sanji, but his brain couldn’t focus enough, and then the blond was on his feet again and Zoro was racing after him.

Luffy had taken the worst of the attacks though, partially because Oars was so focused on him as the strongest fighter and partially because his body was a bit akin to a rubber band after Hogback’s poisons. He couldn’t dodge nearly as well as he normally would have.

Luffy needed help now, and the rest of them weren’t much better. Franky and Brook were carrying him, but they themselves barely had the strength to. Nami, Usopp, and Chopper had run ahead to get the truck, making sure that some of them were outside at least just incase they did get closed in again, but damned if Zoro was going to be the rat in this trap for any longer.

Something was humming in his ear, and it took a while for his brain to zero in, but he finally realized the rhythmic thrumming as Sanji’s voice—a long string of curses and promises of pain and never ending death on anyone that was even associated with this place. Even laced with a need to maim and kill, Sanji’s voice still managed to calm him—now that they were on the way out of Moriah’s rat’s nest. Disgusting, fucking, bastard son of a bitch. Sanji’s words were giving Zoro a new fire to get up the stairs and home as fast as possible so they could come back and burn this place to the ground, blinding the pain and forcing him on.

Rays from the sunset screamed across the horizon and into everyone’s eyes as they hit the surface of the grungy city, Sanji letting out another fowl string of curses—not hindered at all with Nami gone for the moment—and clawed at the air like he could put up a barrier to shield himself. Zoro grunted and ducked his head, letting Sanji be his eyes until they got to the truck. His vision was pretty blurry
anyways.

They turned the corner to start the maze of alley ways back to the street so Nami, Usopp, and Chopper could get to them, when Sanji’s body jolted to a harsh stop, making the rest of them snap up.

Zoro could practically feel the prickling running up and down Sanji’s spine and the way it made the cook shiver. Sanji’s iridescent eye was locked on the next turn in the allies, his neck uncomfortable straight and his fingers clenched tight around Zoro’s shirt, like a feral cat waiting for the predator it knew was coming.

“You’re got to be fucking kidding me,” he keened, mostly to himself, before a giant teddy bear—No, just a man in a bear hat, Zoro realized, blinking a couple of times to straighten his sight—thumped slowly into view.

The man’s stance was calm, and almost laughably huggable, but the tension in Sanji’s back told Zoro without any question that it was very bad that they’d run into this man.

“Bartholomew Kuma,” Sanji whispered, almost with humor, as if he just couldn’t believe that this day could get any more ridiculous.

This was too many freak shows for one day. It had to be a glitch in the matrix. There was no other explanation why the universe seemed to be throwing another “fuck you” right into their faces.

“I’m here for Luffy D. Monkey. Give him to me, and I will let you all live.”

A snarl rolled off of Sanji’s tongue, Zoro imagining clear as day his eye going black as he stared this “Bartholomew Kuma” down.

“You can’t have him,” Zoro snapped, beyond fed up with all the fucking attitudes of the people around here and too fucking tired to care anyways.

“You are not strong enough to fight me,” Kuma said in his solemn, clear voice, and slipped a gun from the holster at his side. Zoro grimaced. He’d only seen laser guns in the hands of marines.

“Get Luffy out of here,” Zoro ordered. There were no footsteps behind them, and for one horrible
moment Zoro thought that Franky and Brook were going to insist on fighting with Luffy “safe” nearby, but they suddenly turned and dashed in the other direction.

Kuma’s blank eyes met Zoro’s, time freezing solid for what felt like years, Kuma maybe waiting for them to change their minds, and then faster than Zoro could see and with barely enough time for Sanji’s lightning reflexes to throw them out of the way, Kuma’s hand snapped up and fired the gun.

Sanji had gotten them out of the direct shot, but the following explosion was what really did the damage. Sanji and Zoro were ripped apart, Zoro colliding with the wall beside him as asphalt and glass tore through his skin. He threw his arms up over his face, his wrists and forearms taking the brunt of the hit as he fell to the ground, the dust from the blast whipping up in the wind tunnel in the alley.

Zoro’s body reacted, Wado yanked from his side with an echoing ring that sang through the commotion the gun had left, and Zoro shot for Kuma. He grunted against the pain screaming through his every motion and twisted, landing a deep cut in Kuma’s shoulder, but a recoil that shouldn’t have happened had he hit a normal body rocked Wado like a sledgehammer and Zoro was thrown back, skidding against the coarse ground until he hit the crumbling wall of what had once been a building and came to an abrupt stop, choking as he tried to force air back into his lungs.

Zoro’s eyes found sparks, the only thing he could see clearly as the dust finally started to part, fighting to find Kuma’s body before the larger man attacked again. He struggled to his feet, using the wall as balance, letting the wind clear the air before he did anything.

Zoro squinted, gasping for breath and shaking his head to try and clear his vision. The sparks could not be coming from Kuma’s shoulder. Zombies were one thing, but Zoro was not about to believe that a fucking robot had wandered down after the fight to meet them. But the more he concentrated, the more sure he was that his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. Below Kuma’s sliced shirt and skin was gleaming titanium, spitting playful sparks out into the air where wires had come loose.

The man was a robot.

The man was a fucking robot.

“I’m surprised you’re even still awake,” Kuma said thoughtfully before he turned away from Zoro, no longer interested, “but it doesn’t matter. I am only here for Straw Hat.” And with that his giant lumbering feet started to where Franky and Brook had fallen unconscious from the explosion, Luffy’s broken form sprawled between them.
Arrogant bastard. Zoro snarled, throwing Wado into his teeth and yanking Shusui and Sandai Kitetsu from his side. He lunged at Kuma, trying desperately from below, not really sure how this was going to help but just knowing that it had to. His swords were inches from Kuma’s legs when the giant teddy bear hand snapped down, slapping Zoro like a fly into the ground. Zoro screamed, blood spewing from his lips, his eyes swimming, and Kuma kept walking.

Zoro’s ears were ringing. He couldn’t hear anything but the sound of those giant footsteps advancing on Luffy. Rage welled up inside of him like water overflowing a well, and there was nothing to stop him from getting back on his feet and swinging futilely again at Kuma, who slapped him effortlessly back into one of the alley walls where he slid slowly to the ground.

“You’re drive is impressive, but you will not win. Stop now, before you die.”

Zoro sat gasping, mind whirling, body reeling, desperate for some way to end the forward progression of the horrifying figure in front of him. Inwardly he was glad he was the only one awake, none of them could have won against Bartholomew Kuma.

Maybe it could just be Zoro that had to go.

“Kuma,” he growled as the lumbering giant stepped up to Luffy’s side. Kuma paused, turning slightly so that he could look at Zoro while he spoke. A respectful man, then.

Zoro’s lips pinched together and he forced a grim half-smile. This idea might work if the man was honorable.

“I offer you my life for his.”

Kuma was still for longer than Zoro had anticipated. A good sign. Not for him though.

“Please,” he said forcefully, using any energy he had left. “Luffy means more to so many people than you will ever know. He’s going to be the man to control the underground. He’s going to be the one to make the world right. He’s going to put the world back together.”

Kuma was silent, so Zoro continued. He supposed it couldn’t hurt at this point. “I must get him to his
dream, he’s the only reason that I ever had a shot at reaching my own. I owe him everything.”

“Hold up, you fucktard.”

Zoro sucked in an involuntary panicked breath, his eyes snapping to Sanji, who was stumbling towards them, leaking blood from all corners of his body—too exhausted for even his NSPH genes to heal him—a cigarette hanging from his lips and his hands in his pockets like he was out for a goddamn stroll.

No no no no! What was the fucker doing?!

“Why are you in such a goddamn hurry to die?” Sanji’s voice was more animal than it was human, but his eye had lost most of the feral black it had at the beginning of the hunt. Sanji was loosing steam faster than his NSPH side could replace it. “What about your own goddamn dream, huh? Did you forget about that?”

Sanji stood strong and looked Kuma right in the eye, growl on his face like he was in charge of the situation.

“Hey gargantua,” Sanji spat, no waver in his stance, “take me instead. I promise you the government wants me much more than they want this guy,” he jerked his head in Luffy’s direction.

Zoro breath stopped dead in his throat. Behind his eyes he could see Sanji dropping dead, just like that, after all the fighting he did to stay alive. Zoro’s mind flashed with images of Killer dying in his hands, far too close to death to ever forget.

No wait, Zoro’s eyes snapped open in realization.

Sanji wasn’t offering to die. He was offering himself back.

Alive.

Zoro scrabbled to his feet, grabbing for any purchase as he fought to get to Sanji’s side.
“Your bosses will give you a promotion like you never believed you could get,” Sanji gritted his teeth, rolling his cigarette stiffly to the other side of his mouth. “I’m what they call a—”

Sanji gasped heavily, dull pain washing over his body as his mind fought to stay awake, his eyes dropping down to find Wado’s hilt rammed into his broken ribs, electric pain shooting in pulses throughout his entire body.

Sanji let out a what was supposed to be a roar but was closer to a mewl, reaching with furious claws for Zoro’s arms and shoulders to hold onto consciousness, digging them deep into Zoro’s skin as his mind flooded with fury, fear, and a need greater than he’d ever felt to kick the marino’s face in for overstepping his bounds. But his vision was going black and his limbs wouldn’t work.

No. No no no! What are you doing, you fucker?!

“You bastard,” Sanji hissed, daring Zoro not to look him in the eyes before he blacked out, but Zoro refused to meet his gaze, and Sanji couldn’t stop fear from overtaking him.

“No… plea…”

Zoro kept his mind cold and blank as Sanji’s grasp lost all strength. It seemed to take hours for Sanji to hit the ground, landing partially on Zoro’s feet, but he refused to let himself look down. He wasn’t sure he wouldn’t falter if he saw Sanji’s gorgeous blond hair, Sanji’s powerful back, Sanji’s lean hips, Sanji’s glorious lips and stunning iridescent blue eye—

Zoro steeled himself and took one slow breath before stepping over Sanji’s still form. He wobbled, and almost had to catch himself on the wall but managed to steady himself. He took one last slow breath, counting back slowly from ten, before he walked right up to Kuma’s side.

Zoro couldn’t feel the pain anymore. He wasn’t sure what had passed to make that happen—maybe the blood loss—but it was a good thing, he supposed. Better to enjoy his last moments not in pain.

Kuma was still for a long time, and Zoro was beginning to worry that the larger man had changed his mind when Kuma suddenly let out a low sigh and turned to face Zoro.
“I would bear shame if I were to touch Straw Hat Luffy after your words.”

“…I am in your debt.”

“…You are devoted.”

Zoro blinked at the hesitation in Kuma’s voice, but he was too tired to really be curious until the man spoke again.

“I will give you a chance to show your devotion to your crew.”

Kuma knelt beside Luffy, Zoro’s instincts screaming at him not to let Kuma any closer, but his reflexes couldn’t react quickly enough, and Kuma slipped a device from his pocket, pulling a needle attached by a wire to what looked like a monitor and stuck it in Luffy’s arm.

“This piece of equipment will measure Straw Hat’s heart rate, brain waves, electrical waves, hormone levels, and many other components of his physical and mental state. This will show the state of pain and fatigue that Luffy is in, and I will inflict the same amount of pain on you. If you wish to take his place, you must take all of his ailments.” The monitor beeped, and Kuma said assuredly, “With your injuries, it will kill you.”

Zoro nodded, looking over Luffy’s small, shredded form, amazed that the younger man still had the determination to cling to life after everything he’d been put through.

Something tight inside Zoro’s chest cried for one last look at Sanji, one last reminder of the beautiful creature he had shared so much wonderful time with. Zoro traced Wado’s wrappings with his fingers. He was a man of discipline, and he deserved nothing from Sanji, not after what he was going to do to him.

I’m sorry Sanji.

“Just take me to another place, farther from here.”

-oOo-
Tires screamed as they peeled around the corner, Nami throwing open the passenger door so early that she was almost thrown clear from the van when Usopp slammed on the brakes and swung the vehicle around so that the back doors were as close to Luffy as possible. Everyone was just starting to come to from Kuma’s blast, some looking around in confusion, others just struggling to get themselves off of the ground. Chopper was the first to realize what his duties were and was at Luffy’s side in a second, checking everything that he could—heartbeat, breath pace, every visible wound and then some.

The usually incredibly rowdy crew was painfully silent as Nami dropped down to her knees at Luffy’s side, sliding her hands under their leader’s back as Chopper held his neck straight. They struggled under Luffy’s weight for a moment before Franky came to their aid, Brook right behind him, both of them easily taking the brunt of his weight and allowing Chopper to free his hands to put pressure on some of the graver lacerations. No one said anything about Kuma. No one asked if he’d done anything to Luffy. Nothing was outwardly apparent, and no one wanted to make it true by saying anything out loud, as if it would jinx the situation.

Nami backed off slightly as they reached the van, Usopp already there with the doors open, and turned to survey the scene. The windows in the alley had all been blown in from the force of the shockwave, loose bricks knocked free and scattered in bits and pieces along the pavement. Sanji pulled himself shakily from the debris and hissed loudly, moving to hold his side tenderly.

Nami swallowed and staggered over to him, kneeling down slowly and placing her hand on his shoulder. With the other one she pulled back his shirt where the buttons had all been popped off and grimaced. A thick bruise, almost darker than the dried blood on his shirt and pants, swaddled his bottom couple of ribs on his left side. She could see easily through his skin—his impossibly strong NSPH-protected skin—that they were shattered. Her fingers drifted unconsciously toward the bruise, but she immediately realized what she was doing and pulled back, pulling herself to her feet to help him up.

Sanji didn’t move for a minute, and then his feet found the ground, legs wobbling so much that he almost couldn’t stand, but he grabbed her forearm suddenly—surprising her with how much force he had unconsciously behind the grip—and let her help him up. Nami grimaced again, wishing so much that she could tease him for accepting help from a woman.

Sanji’s head swiveled around, free hand massaging his side as he slowly forced his back up straight. He was tracing the ground, looking for something, movements become more and more frantic as he couldn’t seem to locate—

_Zoro_, Nami realized with a start, whirling around, suddenly very aware that she hadn’t seen him on the ground amongst the others. Her eyes found the van where Luffy had been placed carefully in the
back and Franky and Brook had both seemed to realize that they were missing one of their people and had started doing the same swiveling, scanning the whole area and trying to put together where the hell—

The hand on her arm vanished suddenly and Nami whipped back around, Sanji’s name unconsciously bursting from her lips and shattering the silence uncomfortably, but he was already vanishing into the shadows down one of the allies. Nami whirled back to Franky and Brook, teeth gritted tight, met with their unsure gazes and raced after Sanji into the blackness illuminated only by the occasional choking and spluttering streetlights.

-oOo-

Sanji’s insides—outsides—brain—muscles—bones—were exploding in pain. Every movement he made was sending bursts and triggering flashes of pain through his head. Every flickering streetlight he raced through was making his vision swim as his mind regressed to when he’d first broken out of the facility and had been unable to process the light, like his brain had literally forgotten what it was. Every time the soles of his feet hit the ground it sent a convulsion up through every nerve in his body, and he could feel the blood dripping from his skin, his fangs extending and retracting and slicing into his tongue and his lips, his clothes snapping against the spot on his rib cage where it felt like his side had been caved in by a meteor.

Sanji gritted his teeth, tasting thick blood that was lacking far too much on liquid substance, and forced himself to go faster, eyes searching as well as they could through the alternating dark and light, through the confusion, through the anger, through the paranoia—

Through the dead look in Zoro’s eyes as he let Sanji fall to the ground, gripping the place on his side where Zoro had struck him with the hilt of his sword, playing on repeat through Sanji’s mind like some twisted form of Chinese water torture.

Something flashed by out of the corner of his eye—not black and not the sickly warm light of the lamps—and his feet found the ground as he ground to a halt just past the alley, slowing down just quickly enough for his brain to register green before he slid past it.

Sanji choked on the breath in his throat and fell back, palms connecting harshly with the ground and he scrambled towards the green, ignoring the stabbing sensations in his hands as he tore into the alley he’d passed, skidding to his knees next to Zoro’s limp body laying face down in the street.

His hands hovered in a blind panic over Zoro’s back as his mind took in the green and red through the darkness. Blood oozed from it seemed Zoro’s every pore, thick bruises and slices and stab
wounds and brunt traumas and every single injury that wouldn’t reach deep enough to hit the swordsman’s bones marred his skin and flesh. Sanji’s eye was so wide it might have been falling out of his head and he wouldn’t have even noticed. A strangled sound fell from his lips and his fingertips found Zoro’s shoulders, jerking back as he registered just how wet Zoro was from just the sheer amount of blood dripping to the ground. Sanji’s knees were sinking in a lake of blood that was leaching up his pants and staining them redder and redder, and Sanji shook as he eyed his fingers, as red as a blood moon splitting the night sky.

He screamed slightly, at first unaware that it was even him that had made the sound, his brain still only half able to comprehend what it was seeing in front of him. His fingers found the swordsman’s neck unconsciously and he felt tenderly for his pulse. Low, but still there.

Immediately Sanji’s brain was in overdrive, estimating the amount of blood on the ground and in Zoro’s clothes and how much blood the human body contained. Zoro was ok, but not for long. And that wasn’t even accounting for other wounds, that was just if he was bleeding out. Sanji’s fingers on his neck twitched, tuned into the steady thumping of the artery.

He could bite him.

He could bite him now. It would only take minutes to turn. Minutes to start the healing process. Minutes to stop bleeding. Zoro had minutes before he bled out—

Sanji gasped, realizing suddenly what he’d been considering, tasting the blood in his mouth from where his fangs had cut clear through his tongue and it had yet to heal. Black, black thoughts tore through his mind, leaching out without authorization—a sterile smell that overwhelmed even the blood, stabbing pain in his arms and wrists from thousands and thousands of needles poking and prodding him and taking his blood and injecting him with every sort of serum, liquid, poison—

Sanji scrambled to get to his feet. Chopper. He had to get Chopper—

A black shape dropped in front of his eyes, a long, limber, impossibly fast limb whipping towards Sanji’s head and somehow his leg snapped up, taking the brunt of the blow even though it knocked him back a couple wobbly steps so he was standing just over Zoro’s body and the man halted like a statue in front of him, staring Sanji down.

Sanji gritted his teeth, eyes bleeding black and fangs now long enough to be used as weapons. Below him, he could feel Zoro’s presence. Zoro’s weak, vulnerable presence, and it was making his insides boil. He couldn’t have cared less that the force from the hit hat shattered another two ribs that were screaming in protest and panic now at the adrenaline surging through his system.
“You’ve been letting your guard down too much,” the form drawled, straightening out from his fighting stance and pulling a sword from his back, voice slow and clear. “Trusting the people around you to pick up the slack.”

A thick, feral sound rolled off of Sanji’s tongue and he felt his fingers twitch unconsciously, begging to find their way deep into the skin of the man standing before him. His right foot slid, out finding better ground ne he leaned forward slightly, far to aware of Zoro’s blood he could smell—feel—see—touch—taste—pooling under his soles. His ribs wailed at the forward movement, but he either didn’t care enough to feel it or didn’t feel it enough to care and the pain went unheard.

The man shot forward like a bullet and Sanji whipped to the side, a sword slicing through the air where his shoulder had been moments ago. His leg whipped up and caught the edge of something—maybe the man’s elbow—but it wasn’t nearly enough to do any damage, and the sword came down again, forcing him to contort his spine so far out of the way that he heard another rib crack under his skin and spots of black started exploding behind his eyes. But he still couldn’t feel it.

Sanji dropped to the ground and rolled out of the way of the next few swings, pushing up with his hands and launching himself over it again as he kicked out. His toe caught his offender’s cheek and the cold steel tore into his other side. Sanji snarled and twisted, spiraling out of the blow and dropping back to the ground, knees hugging the pavement while he fingered his side gently. The man straightened to wipe at his check with the back of his hand.

A stab of uncomfortable prickly shot up his spine and Sanji sucked in a harsh breath at the feeling, vaulting up and flipping backwards as a pair of heels smashed into the ground, intending for his middle. He hadn’t been prepared for that one, and stumbled as he landed, falling back on his elbows.

The woman moved to stand, and Sanji could see all too clearly under the warm glow of the streetlamps that her heels had made actual divots in the asphalt where she’d landed. That one would have done him in, especially with his broken ribs.

But not enough to kill him.

These were the people that had found him in Zeff’s territory.

Sanji pushed himself to his feet, snarling again, and both lunged at him. Sanji was a whirlwind, twisting and flipping and kicking and blocking and clawing, but there were two of them, and they were fast.
These were the people that had kidnapped him and forced him into the truck.

A heel and a sword slashed for his neck and Sanji’s legs split open, dropping him to the ground and he arched his back, pulling his legs back up into a spin, both heels connecting with either target and the man and the woman jumped back slightly.

These were the people that had drugged and beaten him, tried to break him again, destroyed all of his hard work trying to just live again after escaping from the facility.

The two lunged again.

Sanji’s lips pulled back into a grin, eyes blacker than the night air around them.

These people were going to die.

Sanji leg snapped up, heel catching the blade where it sunk into the rubber and stuck, Sanji slamming his foot to the ground and taking its owner with it and his hand shot out, claws digging deep into the neck of the woman. He pushed back, hard, her back connecting with a ground and she cried out in pain as Sanji rotated his hips and slammed his other heel so hard into the shoulder of the man that he flipped back, letting go of his sword and smashing into one of the buildings lining the alley.

Sanji growled, rearing back, fangs bared and black eyes locked on her beautiful neck, so pale and delicate. He could see it dripping, crimson liquid trickling down her skin, seeping into her clothes and the blackness of the pavement under them, his fingers relishing in the hot substance—

Sanji’s head snapped up as something dropped down from the rooftop of the building next to them, his breath locking in his throat and eyes snapping back to iridescent blue as the large man slammed into the ground, missing Zoro’s head by no more than two inches. His toe nudged at Zoro’s ear and Sanji sanity became nonexistent, heart simultaneously popping and shriveling in his chest as he lunged forward with a snarl, just as something flashed out of the corner of his eye—a third man—and a foot caught him across the face hard enough to smash him into the wall where he’d sent the other man.

Sanji coughed harshly as he hit the ground, blood spurting from his lips and dripping down his chin. Something smashed down into his back and he cried out, a hand suddenly grabbing the back of his collar and yanking him up. Sanji choked as his esophagus was forced closed, and then a fist
connected with his cheek, cracking his head back into the wall behind him. His head was ringing and light was bursting behind his eyes, so he couldn’t see the next hit coming before a freight train collided with his broken ribs and he screamed, feeling another two snap under the force.

He lashed out desperately, stumbling as the two around him jumped back, and the woman appeared in front of him, throwing something in his face that made his eyes burn like he’d stumbled into a miasma and his throat close in a pathetic attempt to protect his lungs. He choked, falling back, but before he could hit the wall, something was thrown over his head—burlap, his realized inwardly and with a growing sense of horror, as he clawed at it, scrambling to get it off of him, mind going black, fear eroding his senses, and the sack was yanked tight around his waist, pinning his arms to his side. His foot snapped up of its own accord, trying to do something, but he hit nothing, and then something smashed into his right temple, his head cracking back into the wall behind him for the third time, and he dropped.

-oOo-

Jabra jumped back as the immobile form hit the ground, waiting for Blackleg to start moving again, but he didn’t. He took the second to wipe at the slash on his collarbone where the NSPH had caught him earlier in a blind panic, grumbling angrily to himself about the nick in one of his favorite shirts, and readjusted the glasses on his head.

“Kumadori,” Kaku murmured, sliding his sword back into his sheath and moving to pick up his hat from where Blackleg had kicked it off earlier. Kumadori’s long hair swished against the ground as he pulled tighter on the rope around the mouth of the sack, testing to make sure that Blackleg was indeed unconscious before he got his own face kicked in—Kaku looked in pain—and drifted forward to tie it tightly, locking Blackleg’s claws and fangs away for the moment. He grunted, hoisting the limp frame up onto his shoulder.

“Someone’s coming!” Fukuro announced suddenly from the rooftop, and the five on the ground scattered into the alleys around them.

Nami raced around the corner, gasping for breath, eyes trained for the blond hair that she knew she wouldn’t be able to see through the black air and gold lighting from the lamps unless she really looked. Green, though, that she could see, and she skidded to a halt, gasping loudly, hands clapping over her mouth, Zoro’s broken body, swimming out in blood, laid out in front of her.

“CHOPPER!!!!”
'I had this horrible, **horrible** thought when I wrote this that at the end of the story I could have Sanji wake up a hundred years in the future strapped to a metal table. Doctors would be hovering over him, murmuring numbers and measurements, and he’d be swaddled in pain that had become the norm long ago. Just as the doctors go to draw more blood, Sanji hears Zoro ask him what he’s looking at and looks over into the shadows of the plain white room to see Zoro, and suddenly he’s back in their dojo sparring with Zoro as dinner simmers away and just goes back to fighting, wondering idly what the sterilized smell is. But I immediately realized just how horrible it was and decided to only make it a tidbit here ;p You’re welcome. If you want, I could make a short one-shot for the darker of you all portraying that, but you can rest easy that that isn’t how the story will end~
Crepuscular

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

Crepuscular

Zoro’s head felt like someone had deliberately placed it under the front tires of a semi and proceeded to then run it over with every set of tires. And then lead a team of horses to trample over his insides, and monkeys to tear and claw at his skin and ants to eat at his muscles and snakes to slither up inside his bone marrow. His eyeballs were screaming to burst out of his skull and relieve some of the pressure—his sight be damned. He couldn’t even work up the effort to groan in pain, and honestly the thought of moving even that much scared him. He didn’t know it was possible to be in so much pain.

He fought the dark shiver in the back of his throat, hilariously and pathetically unaccustomed to being so debilitated. Sanji had probably survived a thousand times worse than this and come out only as an asshole; he would be fine.

But still, he could feel pain in muscles hidden under bones that he was pretty sure were atrophied because they were never used. He felt pain in places he didn’t know existed. There was a little spot in his brain behind the top of his ear that he had never considered having nerve ending there, and yet that little spot was wailing for some sort of relief. Any sort of relief.

The notion of putting a hammer through that little spot in his skull didn’t sound so horrible. Maybe it would relieve the pressure.

Idly he wondered how many times Sanji had contemplated death like this.

Almost as a joke his eyes drifted open so he could find something to bludgeon himself with. Almost a joke. That little spot was in hysterics. With his eyes open, however, his other senses started to kick in now that his brain wasn’t being marinated in more pain than he’d ever known.

“No, he—no, I already said, he ran off so I followed him but I only found—yeah, I only found him… No, he had to be going after Zoro… He had to be, he looked so worried.”

That was Nami.
“Tell him how injured Sanji looked,” Brook murmured into her ear. “There’s no way he could have thought he could run off like that and get far.”

“I mean, I guess he could have been running, but I found Zoro in the same direction. He would have stopped, there’s no way he would have been able to run by… Two minutes! He couldn’t have been longer than that, and I know he runs fast, but I didn’t see blood on the ground, footprints, scuffs in the dirt, nothing.”

The whir of the wheels against the road was unmistakable, he could tell they were in some sort of vehicle heading home; it was the lack of other sound that threw him off. If it weren’t for Chopper’s tiny form—that he could now see—hovering over his body, he would have thought Kuma lied and he was hallucinating and they weren’t driving home at all—

Kuma.

“WHERE’S LUFFY?!” Zoro roared, a pathetic attempt at launching himself up off of the cot foiled when a herd of stinging nettles traversed up his spine the second he moved, and then tangoed their way out all of his limbs and he screamed, head dropping back. It felt like hours later when the exploding light bulbs in his head died down enough that he could hear Chopper’s frantic screaming, trying to keep him from moving again.

No worries, Chopper, definitely not doing that again any time soon.

“Luffy’s ok! He’s fine, he’s ok! Kuma didn’t touch him—I don’t even know why, but Luffy’s fine, I promise! You have to stop moving!”

“Better do as the doc says, Bro,” Franky spoke up from the front, not taking his eyes off the road to say this. “Luffy’s been out since we got him in the truck, he’s going to be in a lot of pain and we’d rather not wake him before we get home to Law; Chopper only has so much morphine and you’re going to need some of that.”

Zoro’s head rolled over as Franky said this, Zoro gritting his teeth through the wrenching of every muscle, tendon, skin fiber—everything in his neck—and his eyes settled on Luffy. Luffy’s young, innocent, wounded face. But his expression was calm. Luffy’s expression was never hurt, no matter how hurt the rest of his body was. It made Zoro’s heart rate slow enough that he would have even been able to go back to sleep.
—No, wait.

Zoro rolled his head back over carefully, eyes surveying the truck and everyone in it. Immediately his mind started counting. Seven. Minus Robin. They were missing one.

“Where’s Sanji?”

And there was the silence in the cab again.

He didn’t realize how much he’d gotten used to not having the silence.

He hated it.

-oOo-

Sanji’s consciousness snapped back like someone had thrown a light switch. He didn’t even have to open his eyes for everything he needed to know about his environment to register in his brain.


But before he could continue, his fingers twitched involuntarily and feeling shot back up his arm and through the rest of his body, and he was suddenly very aware of something else.

There was an IV in his arm.

Sanji’s body spasmed with a shiver so violent that it threw him up off the bed like he’d been raised with demonic possession. He barely registered the startled screams around him as he let out his own howl, scrambling back away from the IV and tearing frantically at the needle in his arm, ripping deep
gouges into his skin. Sanji screamed frantically, finally hooking his nails under the tape holding the needle into his arm. Every millimeter of steel as cold as liquid nitrogen was like an eel sliding out of his body, and his hand wailed to throw the IV as far away as he could while his muscles stayed paralyzed, unable to let go of the needle, and Sanji was left staring in horror at the clear liquid dripping from the tip—God knows what had been going into his system.

The flap of a white coat out of the corner of his eye ripped another scream from his throat and his ears came back online, registering the screams of the doctors, calling for different doses of all different medications, what seemed like dozens of people running at him, all holding needles in their hands. Sanji’s body reacted instantly. He threw the IV as hard as he could at the doctors, and the cord caught the IV bag and took the whole stand with it, flying over his shoulder and crashing into the three closest to him and knocking them back harshly to the floor. Sanji’s one good eye, glowing a blinding iridescent blue under the fluorescent lights, followed the syringes as they spun out of the doctors’ hands and across the floor, spurting liquid as they went.

Sanji’s leg shot up, snapping the head of the doctor that had gotten close back and sending him flying, and then ten sets of hands landed on him, trying to pin him back to the bed. Sanji’s eye bled black, his fangs extending in a fraction of a section as he lunged for the arm closest to his face, making the doctor scream and yank her hand back, just barely out of the way.

Sanji’s eye snapped open, going from black back to blue in an instant as he felt the stiff steel invading his body again as someone jabbed a needle into his upper arm, and then the sickeningly warm liquid as it flooded into his muscles and up into his chest, fogging up his lungs.

He couldn’t remember what happened next. His body didn’t need any commands from his brain to know to protect him. When he came to again, maybe seconds, maybe minutes later, he was face down in a desolated room as his arms and legs fought to get him back into an upright position against the sedation. Broken glass sliced into his palms and knees from the smashed hospital equipment, the bed was overturned, all of the stands and drawers had been thrown clear of their original location and punched holes in the walls so deep he’d reached cement several inches of plaster under. All of the doctors that were still conscious, many of them bleeding profusely, many holding broken limbs to their sides, were cowering up against the walls, as far away from Sanji as they could be in the tiny room.

Sanji shivered again, falling over onto his side and scrabbling pathetically at the cold tiles to get himself back up. He could feel the sedative wearing off as his body metabolized it. But it wasn’t wearing off fast enough.

One of the doctors took a step towards him and Sanji let out a sound somewhere between a snarl and a shriek, fighting to get him as far away from them as he could. He only needed another minute and then he’d be fine—just another minute—
“Sanji. Sanji Blackleg,” the doctor said, so gingerly that Sanji stopped, confused by the lack of aggression or hurry in his voice.

“Sanji, stop, we’re not going to hurt you. I’m sorry we sedated you; you wouldn’t have listened otherwise. Stop, please, no one here wants to hurt you.”

His forehead was still pressed against the floor, a fifth point of stability along with his hands and knees, and as he lifted it to try and look more clearly at the doctor he lost his balance, hands slipping out from under him and his head cracked back against the floor. A couple doctor’s looked like they wanted to reach out and help him, but ultimately thought better of it and stayed where they were. Only the doctor that had spoken to Sanji was brave enough to keep coming forward. Sanji fought the rising bile and the violent shivers in his spine as the white coat advanced, forcing himself to hear him out.

“We don’t want to hurt you. You’re not hungry, right? You’ve been out for a long time and you were bleeding a lot when they brought you in, but we gave you an IV, so you should be fine. Tell us if you want more, we have plenty in store.”

Hungry? He wasn’t hungry. But he should have been, after Absalom and Kuma.

And Zoro.

Sanji reached under him where his knees were still holding his hips off of the ground, fingering his side tenderly where his shattered ribs were putting themselves back into place. They still hurt. Damn, the fucker hit hard when he wanted to.

Sanji swallowed heavily, not even fighting the liquid collecting in his eyes as it overflowed and dripped onto the floor under him.

“Sanji, do you remember anything?”

He didn’t think his voice would have worked to answer even if he wanted to.

“Some of Doflamingo’s men saw you get kidnapped and followed the truck. We traced the license
plate back to a government official, so they broke you out and brought you here. Do you remember the people that attacked you?”

_Blood oozed from it seemed Zoro’s every pore, thick bruises and slices and stab wounds and brunt traumas and every single injury that wouldn’t reach deep enough to hit the swordsman’s bones marred his skin and flesh._

“We figured you were an NSPH because they sent CP9 after you—please,” he cut in as Sanji flinched again, fingers curling into fists at the mention of his NSPH status, “We’re not here to hurt you. Doflamingo has been working with rescued NSPH for years, trying to develop a cure for the virus. Three months ago you were kidnapped by the same team of mercenaries and Marshall Teach intercepted the truck. He was bringing you to Doflamingo’s research facility, which masquerades as a slave house so any investigations won’t be looking for medical facilities, for safe keeping until the drugs in your system wore off and you healed. Shanks’ team got ahold of you at some point, and after we tracked down your location and saw that you were in no danger, so we stayed back because the less attention we drew to you, the more likely it was that you wouldn’t be found. Unfortunately, CP9 is very good at their jobs. Doflamingo has been working on proposing a collaboration with Shanks, we just recently discovered that Law and Kid’s son is an NSPH as well, and with the hospital here, we think they could do a lot of good together.”

...Marshall Teach? Sanji couldn’t remember if that name had ever been mentioned before. Zeff had talked about Doflamingo before, a little, the two had never liked each other but Sanji didn’t remember any real issues, but Teach wasn’t a name he recognized. CP9 was new too.

“CP9 is a group of hired hands to track down just such people as you,” another doctor spoke up, finally getting her nerve to stand back up, even though she was still holding her arm tenderly at her side. Inwardly, Sanji winced that he’d been the one to cause that damage, but he didn’t allow himself to dwell on it. “We weren’t fast enough to stop them from attacking you, but we did manage to stop the truck before—as far as we can tell—they got a message out that they had you again, so no one governmental should be looking for you at this point. And then you were brought straight here.”

“Doflamingo is on his way now, but...” That was the first doctor again, “we’ve been instructed to tell you that you are under no obligation to stay.”

Sanji sucked in a shaky breath, unaware that he’d been holding it for the past minute, more tears falling from his eyes as he curled in on himself slowly, bringing his shins to the ground so that he could push himself into a kneeling position, still holding his twinging side gently. The doctors were silent around him, waiting for him to speak.

“...Where am I?” he murmured finally.
“Yup,” Nami nodded, placing her pen back in her pocket and lifting up the piece of paper so the passing car headlights illuminated the phone number intermittently. Shank’s direct number was almost always a no-no, sort of for respect, sort of to keep from bothering him with lackey bullshit, mostly because he hated his phone, but no one had stopped Nami from dialing him the second they were out of range of any satellite dishes Moriah might have set up. “Who is it?”

“Goes by?” Brook spoke up, leaning into the phone. Name put her hand on his forehead and shoved to try and push him away.

<Yes, and you can only call her that. For safety concerns. But you’ll recognize her voice, I promise.>

They were pulled off to the side of the highway in order to get Shanks’ opinion on their current missing person. Shanks had given them a number to call, which belonged to some brilliant hacker friend of his that was the most likely person to be able to help them find Sanji. God knows how, though.

Shanks didn’t think Sanji had run (and even though Zoro knew he wouldn’t, it was still a huge relief to hear him actually say it. One word from Shanks and if Zoro didn’t want to have to follow orders and hunt him down, he’d have to defect and get the fuck away to even have a hope of staying alive for longer than a couple of days), especially after Zoro had to tell him that Sanji tried to reveal his NSPH status to Kuma to keep the rest of them safe. And for whatever reason, Shanks believed that Kuma kept his promises, which meant he wouldn’t have touched anyone else from the crew. Apparently he’d known Kuma pretty well before he’d become a government dog.

Zoro hadn’t told any of them what Kuma had done to him. He was going to tell Shanks later, but he didn’t want to have that conversation right now with him incapacitated in bed and Nami holding out
the phone for him. Chopper had asked, but Zoro had told him that he fought Kuma so Luffy wouldn’t have to and that was a good enough response to not merit any other questions, so it hadn’t been brought up again.

<Are you all set?>

“Yeah,” Nami said dejectedly. “I’ll call you if this… Miss All Sunday doesn’t pick up.”

<She will. That’s the phone I use to contact her, she always has it on her.>

“Thanks,” Nami murmured before hanging up and flipping the phone shut. She held the device up to her lips for a moment, her eyes closed and her breathing still. Zoro’s insides twitched, and he was about to scream at her to hurry the fuck up because for all they knew Sanji’s brains were stewing in sedatives while he was being trucked to some slave house or research facility miles out of the area, but she flipped the phone back open and dialed, her fingers a blur, before holding the receiver up to her ear. A tiny ring echoed out from the phone and Nami pulled it away from her ear and pressed the speakerphone button so the static-y sound rang out into the truck.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

And then a small click on the end of the line.

Nami blinked, looking up around at everyone in confusion as no one answered. Had they hung up?

“…Hello?” she tried unsurely.

Nothing.

Zoro’s teeth clenched. Shanks had no other ideas aside from this woman. If she couldn’t help them…
“…Miss All Sunday?” Nami tried again.

<…Yes?>

Zoro’s heart rate took off like a rocket, Chopper and Brook clapping their hands over their mouths to keep from squealing in happiness. Nami’s head dropped into her hands in relief and Franky let out a bark of laughter, followed by Usopp clapping him happily on his shoulder. Zoro’s head dropped back onto the bed and he took a second to breath to himself, smiling into the darkness of the cab.

It was so good to hear Robin’s voice.

“R—Miss All Sunday,” Nami breathed into the phone, a grin splitting her face. “It’s—”

<I know who it is,> Robin cut her off, keeping her from saying any names out loud. <How… How did you get this number?>

“Um,” Nami paused, not exactly sure how to answer the question. “Uh… Riding hood gave it to me.”

Red riding hood. For Shanks.

<I see. It must be bad then.>

“Don’t worry, I’m going to destroy the phone after.”

<I know. I’m not worried.>

Zoro could hear the sad smile in her voice and it made his heart twist. All he wanted was one of her uncomfortable hugs. They both sucked so much at it.

It had been months since anyone aside from Shanks had talked to Robin, ever since she’d gone into
hiding. None of them knew anything about her situation except for the fact that the number they had for her before had been disconnected and she'd left no forwarding address. Most of the relief, Zoro suspected, came from the proof of knowing she was alive. None of them had been very sure of that for a long time. Even when Robin was running for a year outside Shanks’ territory to learn more about computer software and programming, she’d always had a cellphone that she changed every couple of weeks. They’d always been able to call her in an emergency. Now, even that was too dangerous. And it seemed only she and Shanks knew why, and it seemed like only Shanks would know if she ended up dead.

<Why did he give you this number?>

Nami relayed what had happened, all the way from the start of the fight to where they were at that moment sitting on the side of the road, the only light coming from the cars speeding by. Robin listened silently, not asking any questions, not needing clarification on anything, even when Nami missed some small details that would have thrown off the timeline in Zoro’s mind. He guessed that the exact timeline wasn’t one of Robin’s main concerns. Sanji was missing. Only those moments were important; that was how Robin’s brain worked.

<Did you see any security cameras around?>

“…Uh…” Nami looked up blankly to everyone else, who all shrugged in turn. That had been the last thing on their mind.

“I mean… I would assume so, right?” Franky said idly, running a hand through his hair. “It’s Moriah. He’s all sorts of paranoid. If he didn’t have security cameras outside it would have probably meant he had guards stationed everywhere so he would know every step that everyone made in his area.”

Tapping echoed up from over the phone and they all waited silently.

<…I think I may have found something,> Robin said quietly, like she’d leaned away from the phone. <I see Marimo—>

A sharp intake of breath crackled through the speaker and Zoro froze, realizing with a start that Robin was watching him with Kuma. She was watching Kuma give him every ounce of pain that Luffy had felt, and was watching him fall—nearly dead—afterwards. Chopper hadn’t said anything about his state when he’d been found, so that meant that it was bad.
“What?!” Nami barked when Robin stayed silent, her fingers twitching with a painful need to do something, but there was nothing they could do. At this point, every single thing had been taken out of their hands. They could literally do nothing but sit in their bubble of anticipation and anxiety.

<I…> Robin said finally, her voice strained. Zoro swallowed heavily, closing his eyes and praying for her not to say anything. <I, uh, I found it… I’m sending you the video portion. There’s no audio.>

Zoro’s head snapped up and he winced at the painful crack in his neck, just glad that Chopper was staring too intently at Nami’s phone where its pathetically tiny screen was trying to load the video. He froze, waiting for the white circle to stop spinning, but when the video finally started, he was already lying on the ground soaked in blood. Kuma was nowhere to be seen. His heart relaxed unconsciously and he dropped back to the seat, breathing heavily, surprised and angry at how much energy the reaction had taken out of him.

“What… why are you so far from where we were?” Usopp asked timidly, looking back at him, but Zoro just shook his head and nodded back at the video, waiting until Usopp turned back to the phone.

They could see a little moving blur at the bottom of the screen counting the time, but the pixels were too unfocused to read what it actually was. It was playing faster than real time though, because when Sanji came racing into the picture—even with his speed—he was moving entirely too fast.

They watched him all drop to his knees over Zoro’s body, frantically searching for something he could do before he suddenly stood up and tried to run back the way he came, only to have someone drop down from the roof in front of him and attack him. And then another, and another. One dropped landed on the ground inches from Zoro’s head and tried to nudge him with his foot, making the hair on the back of Zoro’s neck stand up. He’d been in such a vulnerable situation.

Sanji was like a viper, lunging forward so fast the camera almost couldn’t keep up with him. He’d been inches from the man’s throat when another had appeared out of nowhere and kicked him so hard he’d smashed back into the wall of the building behind him, fragments of the wall raining down around him.

They were relentless, barely giving Sanji enough time to hit the ground before they were at his side. The man’s foot smashed down into Sanji’s spine and Zoro’s insides curdled as he watched the man, as Sanji was still spitting up blood from the last hit, heave him up by his collar and kick him straight across the face so his head smashed back into the wall, and then again into Sanji’s side, exactly where Zoro had hit him. Zoro’s lips pinched together and he bit down on his tongue.
He’d done that. That man had just exacerbated what he’d done.

Sanji lashed out in a desperate attempt, his form far from his normal caliber and the man jumped back easily as Sanji stumbled. Sanji was so exhausted from everything that had happened before. Zoro hadn’t even seen Sanji wincing in pain from his body healing him, which probably had meant that he wasn’t healing at all. Without consuming blood, his body had no fuel to run off of.

The woman landed in front of him again and threw some sort of powder in his eyes, making him fall back against the wall behind him in an attempt to get away as he scrubbed at his face, and the one with stupidly long hair landed next to him and yanked a burlap sack over him in the same moment. Sanji kicked out again, missing horribly, and the one with long hair grabbed the stick on his back and cracked Sanji across the head and he dropped, Zoro laying no more than three feet away from him.

The whole thing had taken less than two minutes.

They milled about for a couple seconds, almost as if waiting for Sanji to change his mind and pop back up to attack them, before the woman suddenly looked up at the roof and they all scattered, the long-haired one throwing Sanji over his shoulder before the took off into the shadows, and Nami raced on screen, hovering frantically over Zoro just like Sanji had done before she sprinted back off screen, no doubt for Chopper.

“Can… can you follow them on more cameras?” Nami asked stiffly, her hand still tight over her mouth.

<‘I’m trying, you should be getting the next few clips now.’>

These ones were shorter because they were running. Zoro had lost track long ago of where they were in the location sense, but he was sure it made sense to someone in the truck with them. Robin sent them four videos of them running before they finally reached a car and a truck parked off in a tiny alley. Some jumped into the car while the one carrying Sanji jammed a huge needle into his neck before tossing him in the back of their truck, and then both vehicles took off.

<‘I’m tracking the license plate,’> Robin said before any of them could ask. <‘I couldn’t find it in any records, so they’ve never been pulled over or investigated, but both vehicles are registered to someone named Spandam, who works in the government if the firewalls and other security fighting me say anything.’>
A chill ran through the truck, Chopper and Usopp swallowing heavily and moving to hold each other. Zoro clenched his eyes shut, images of Sanji’s broken expression as he told Zoro about Zeff’s leg and how they’d both almost starved to death in that room, not to mention the experimenting they’d done on Sanji before Zeff had gotten there. They’d had to uproot their lives entirely after breaking out, and had been on the run and in hiding for years after leaving, and after all that it still meant nothing. They had Sanji again.

“I got used to hiding out at home, I’ll get used to it here. ...This is better than any facility. I’ll die before I go back.”

They’d failed him.

Zoro’s eyes burned and tears soaked up into his vision, making the world blur over before the searing liquid spilled over. He was so glad everyone was looking at the phone.

And on the phone the video clip of the car and the truck speeding off was playing on repeat, taunting them with their uselessness as they waited for Robin to find something else.

Zoro could feel the anger boiling up inside of him. The poisonous hate. His fists clenched under the bandages and he could feel the dangerous pull on his stitches. If he’d just been stronger. If he’d just kept from passing out. If he’d just realized what Moriah was planning. If he’d just been stronger—!

<I’m really sorry, their security system is quite good,> Robin broke the silence. <The newer programs always take longer to get through, but his files are all under top security. They must be working with a lot of NSPH in order to get this much security clearance. I’m going to try looking up some more casual things. I saw a cabin in the woods registered to his name when I was searching the license plates.>

“Ok,” Nami whispered, her voice sad and weak. It made the painful anger boil more ferociously in Zoro’s chest. He’d never actually blame her, but the logical part of his brain wouldn’t stop screaming that if she and Usopp hadn’t run off for the trucks they would have had two more people to fight Kuma—

No. It wasn’t their fault. He knew that. And Sanji was already gone, there was no changing that. Now there was only fixing it.

<I found a couple of things,> Robin said suddenly, and everyone’s heads popped back up from
where they’d all been swept up in their own thoughts. Zoro had a feeling much of it was along the same lines of what was going through his head.

<There isn’t much, only a couple articles in newspapers from five years ago until now, all recounting various promotions, so he’s in a pretty high position now. More articles on his achievements, “protecting” the citizens of certain cities, although they don’t really list the names of the security threats that he neutralized.>

No one had to ask what that meant. NSPH accidents or escapes.

<There’s also an old factory under his care that used to be used for weapons manufacturing but was shut down when production got to be too big for the facility and they moved manufacturing. He still owns the factory. I’m sending you the picture now.>

Nami placed the phone on the front seat and everyone craned in to get a good look at it once it loaded, but no one looked for more than a second once it had come in, all pulling back to share a nervous look, preparing themselves for what they knew was coming.

The photo was an old black and white picture with water stains and tears around the edges where someone had cut it sloppily out of a newspaper. Someone must have uploaded it at some point. The factory in the picture was situated on the side of a river, a large waterwheel connected to its closest wall. The foundation was crumbling away against the ground, ruined by the onslaught of water over the years. The rest of the building wasn’t faring much better. Only a few windows survived, the rest were smashed in or boarded over. Panels of the walls and roof shingles had come loose, leaving gaping holes in the structure where stray vines had wormed their way into the building and back out of the roof when they stretched back up for the sun. The fence surrounding the premises had given way long ago, some parts of it rotten, some torn in by various trespassers over the years.

It couldn’t have looked more like an old abandoned hospital or mental ward unless there was a sign littered with vines and peeling paint that read “keep away.”

Zoro had an eel as cold as an ice pick working its way further and further up from his stomach and into his heart. He pushed himself up into a sitting position, shrugging away Chopper’s nervous hand that came to rest on his shoulder. The fact that Chopper didn’t press him meant that he wasn’t doing a good job at all of hiding how nauseous he felt and goose bumps prickled across his skin at the thought. He leaned forward and breathed evenly for a moment, counting his breaths and willing his nerves to stop sending signals to his brain. He couldn’t be in pain right now.

Franky was the first to regain some composure, and ran a hand slowly over his eyes before saying,
“So what do we do? We can’t just rush into this.”

Zoro’s response was like a snake, lashing out before he could even think about what he was saying. “Well we can’t just sit here with our heads up our asses.” It made Chopper jump slightly next to him, but he couldn’t give less of a shit at the moment if he tried. “We have to hurry before they ship him off somewhere else, because they’re not going to wait for us to come find him.”

Franky eyed him carefully, not exactly sure how to answer. Zoro must have looked like a demon to get the older man to keep from saying anything. Normally he was fine to quell anyone.

“We have no idea if they’ve actually taken him there,” Zoro continued, his voice thick and venomous. His grip tightened on the seat under him, making the springs creak. “And we can’t waste the time waiting before we go. If we don’t find him then we have to keep looking and we’ll need all the time we have for that.”

Nami’s face looked queasy, and her fingers were twitching every couple of seconds as she fought to keep from wringing them. “…We really need Miss All Sunday,” she murmured after a moment towards the phone, and a sigh rose up from the speaker after another second.

<Someone come and get me.> Her voice was tired, like she’d been up for the last couple of days with a colicky baby.

“Give me an address,” Franky said immediately, cranking the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life.

“No!” Chopper jumped, like he’d suddenly remembered what his job was. “Luf—err, Rubberman has to be brought back! He needed serious medical attention, like, four hours ago! I can’t do anything else for him here but keep him asleep, and I can’t even do that for much longer! When he wakes up he’s going to be in more pain than he’s ever been in!”

“…Alright, we’ll have to split up,” Franky said decidedly, his expression set in one of someone who was about to go to war. “We’ll drive back to that car rental place we passed a couple miles back. Skeleton can rent another car and take Rubberman and, uh, Raccoon back. I’ll do the same and go get Miss All Sunday.”

“Am I “raccoon”?!?” Chopper shrieked, horrified. “Why?!”
“Understood,” Brook nodded, his voice resolute.

“What about me?!” Usopp shrieked, realizing with a start that that meant he would be the one driving the truck to the hospital. “I—I just remembered that I have severe carpal tunnel in my wrist—or I didn’t just remember, it’s acting up now from the fight back there! I—I—I can’t turn the wheel enough, we could get into—”

“Longnose!” Nami screamed, making him yelp and cower back in his seat. She sighed, her voice suddenly much calmer when she spoke again. “…San… Cook really needs us right now. All of us. Um, Robot has to go get Miss All Sunday because he can get there the fastest, and, uh, Skeleton knows the back roads around here because he originally came from Moriah’s territory and can get Rubberman home the fastest, but that means that we need the most courageous one of us to drive the truck. …I have to go inside with Marimo and help him find Cook—because like hell we’re letting him get lost in that place, so we need you to take the wheel and stay with the truck. Please?”

Usopp was quiet for a moment, and then suddenly stood (with a slight crick in his neck in order to accommodate the low ceiling of the truck) and puffed out his chest. “Alright,” he breathed, “You can count on me.”

<I will call Riding Hood.> Robin cut in suddenly. <So he knows what’s going on and isn’t surprised when we all turn up dead. You all need to concentrate on this. He can tell the legal system to get the hospital set up.>

“I…” Chopper spoke up and everyone looked back to him. He shifted between his feet nervously. “I… I think, Skeleton, you should take Rubberman back by yourself. He’s stable now and… I need to be there if we find Cook. And for Marimo—I’m still not ok with you charging into this in your state, but we can’t really do anything about that. But you have to be aware that you’re really injured!” he barked suddenly, rounding on Zoro. “You can’t charge into a fight and hurt yourself more, because most likely any more injuries will just knock you unconscious! Your body is already running on adrenaline, and once that wears off, you are going to be in serious pain!”

Oh good. The pain was going to get worse.

Swell. He nodded anyways.

“Ok,” Nami nodded, collecting all of the information in her head. “Franky, let’s go,”—he nodded as she said this and revved the engine, pulling the truck back onto the road—“Skeleton will rent a car
and take Rubberman home. Robot will go get Miss All Sunday in another rental. Longnose is
driving the rest of us to the factory, and once Robot has… his cargo, you both will come meet us
there.”

Everyone nodded and Nami said her goodbyes to Robin, slipping the phone into her pocket after she
was done. She turned after a moment and gave Zoro an unsure look, but he turned away, refusing to
meet her eyes, and she eventually faced the road again, the muscles in her back tight and nervous.

-oOo-

“…This is a hospital not far outside Moriah’s territory,” the first doctor spoke up again, “that’s why
we could get to you so quickly, and thank god, or you’d be in the hands of the government right
now.”

A wash of nauseating cold swept over Sanji like a slap across the face from a Rhino’s horn and he
tipped forward, emptying the already depleted contents of his stomach onto the ground in front of
him.

He was in captivity for 357 years being passed from government to government, but we have no way
of knowing how long before that he was born.

The doctors around him waited patiently, not saying anything while he coughed, his stomach
lurching violently long past when he had nothing left to throw up.

“…Sanji,” the first doctor started again once he’d finished, “Doflamingo’s scientist have been
working with, not on, NSPH for decades, keeping them hidden and safe, trying to find cures,
inventing synthetic blood so you don’t have to attack anyone to eat… ultimately we’re working
towards a cure, but honestly, that looks like it is still far off in the future. At this point we’re focusing
on the healing properties of the virus, trying to isolate it for the general population. Imagine a world
with no worries about freak accidents because your body will heal, a world with no major illnesses,
no lasting or crippling pain… And the people infected with this version of the virus wouldn’t have to
drink blood because it doesn’t attack the red blood cells.”

It didn’t… not make sense. And they weren’t attacking him, or trying to sedate him again. And he
wasn’t already locked up or tied down or chained. The sedation was entirely out of his system at this
point. If he wanted, he could have killed them all and bolted on the spot. But something, maybe the
tone of the doctor’s voice, was holding him there in the center of the room. His stomach lurches
again involuntarily and a third doctor stood, picking up a plastic cup and a closed pitcher of water
that hadn’t been destroyed in Sanji’s blind panic. He stayed there unsurely for a minute before
pouring a glass of water and stepping slowly over to Sanji’s side.

Sanji’s eye flicked up as the doctor kneeled, offering the glass out to him, but Sanji had known too many manipulative doctors to trust that there wasn’t anything in the water—until the doctor seemed to realize this and took a large and obvious gulp of the water himself before offering it back to Sanji.

“He can still have water,” Chopper insisted, pouring Sanji a glass from the plastic pitcher on the counter. Law sighed, relenting and letting Chopper dote over his patient before they continued; it wasn’t like they were in a hurry or anything. Chopper clambered back up onto the bed, trying but not really succeeding at keeping all of the water in the glass. He offered the glass to Sanji, who’s lip curled back uncomfortably and Chopper suddenly realized that he probably thought the water was spiked. He brought the glass to his lips, taking a long and obvious sip before offering the glass back to Sanji. Sanji eyed in again for a moment, but finally decided that it wasn’t worth the dehydration and reached out carefully, taking the glass without ever touching Chopper’s fingers, and drained it slowly.

Sanji’s bottom lip quivered, eyes filling up again and spilling over as he reached out and took the glass, sipping at the cold liquid slowly and shivering as it rushed into his overheating body and still-lurching stomach. His lungs spasmed and he hiccupped pathetically, offering the glass back as he reached up with his free hand and swiped across his eyes. He doctor poured him another glass and Sanji finished that one faster, setting the glass at his side when he was done. He could see the doctor’s fascination in his eyes, looking Sanji up and down over and over like an obsessive fan, eternally grateful to be as close as he was to such a dangerous creature. Offering Sanji water and having him accept it must have felt like touching the back of a cobra’s head.

“…I want to leave.”

The doctors passed a look around the room again, obviously disappointed but not about to go against their orders.

“…We’d really suggest that you stay. We’re not going to force you, but you’re still injured and it would be much better if you gave yourself even a couple of days to heal—”

“I want to leave,” Sanji said again, no change in tone in his voice.

Zoro was out there. Sanji gritted his teeth behind his lips. If the motherfucker had let Bartholomew Kuma kill him Sanji was going to dig him up and grind his bones up like a crazy person.
“…We can arrange transport for you,” the first doctor spoke up again, his voice quieter now, relenting. “Back to Shanks’ territory or to a common meeting point if you’d like. We can get you a telephone so you can get in contact with people. …Will you eat at least before you go? So you’re not starving as well as injured. Any extra blood in your system will help you heal faster.”

Sanji nodded slowly and moved to stand, allowing the doctor that poured him the glass of water to lead him back over to the bed so he could sit. The doctors began milling around, some collecting dropped papers before they left the room, some leaving right away, others lingering around for as long as they could to watch the specimen in action.

“You have free reign of the hospital,” the second doctor said on her way out, her hand on the door. “We’ll leave the door open so you can leave whenever you’d like, but please don’t feel like you have to be out as fast as you can be.” And then she vanished through the doorway.

The doctor that had given him a glass of water was searching through the overturned drawers spread across the room and finally came up with a bag of blood, crossing the room to join the other remaining doctor. He held the bag out and Sanji reached up slowly, feeling the thick, cold liquid sifting around in the bag and across his fingers as it moved. His arms lowered and the plastic came to rest on his legs, where his eyes zeroed in on blood that had stained his pants and dyed the knee caps almost solid red, even through the blue of the cloth.

Zoro’s blood.

He had to go.

“Thank you,” he murmured, and then brought the bag up to his lips, resting his fangs carefully against the thin bubble before pressing down slightly, and he cut through the plastic, blood rushing out into his mouth. He waited for a second before swallowing as his taste buds sifted through the cells floating around in his mouth, and then, not tasting or smelling anything out of the ordinary, he began to drink. The two doctors nodded, one of them turning for the door, but the other still looked like he had something he wanted to say.

“…Doflamingo can really help you,” the doctor said finally. “You don’t have to stay, but we would like to contact you in the future for our research.”

Sanji said nothing. The only sound after that was the quiet slurping as the blood drained slowly from the bag like depleting water levels out of a sponge. Sanji’s eye hadn’t left the red on his knees. The doctor nodded finally before following the other one out of the room. Sanji’s gaze snapped up as they reached the door, his muscles tightening, ready to lunge if it started to close, but they left it open
just like they said they would, so he turned back to his meal.

*Marshall Teach, huh? Had* he heard the name before?

The blood was washing throughout his system already, cleansing out the cold from the needles that was still prickling up and down his arms, dulling the chilled water sitting stagnantly in his stomach and weighing him down. He pulled back from the plastic with a deep intake of air after he’d finished and placed it on the bedside next to him, resting his hands on the bed for a moment as he waited for the blood to circulate all the way out through the tiniest capillaries in his fingers and toes. He tipped his head back, breathing in and out slowly, listening for sounds outside the room but getting nothing, so he allowed himself to relax. It would be better if his heart wasn’t accelerated with fresh blood in his system, before his veins and arteries stretched a bit to accommodate the new volume.

He stomach lurched again and Sanji grunted, leaning in on himself, brows furrowing in confusion at the sudden and strong tightness all throughout his gut. He reached up with one hand and massaged his middle gently, trying to get his stomach to settle. He shouldn’t have drunk so fast, but the tightness was subsiding already; he would be able to go in a minute.

His eyes kept drifting back to the blood stains on his knees, and no matter how many times he looked away he was unable to keep his mind on anything other than the sight of Zoro lying there in the street, face down in a pool of blood that couldn’t have been anyone else’s but his own. The thought pushed him to his feet even though his stomach clenched painfully again, and he gritted his teeth, holding onto the bedframe for a second until his muscles relaxed.

He took a slow breath, straightening up and pushing away from the bed and stumbled slightly, blinking in confusion as his peripheral vision swam. He held his arms out to steady himself but his stomach locked again and he lurched forward, falling into the bed before he crashed awkwardly on the floor.

“*Shit,*” he snarled, reaching up for the bed to pull himself back up. “Son of—”

Something sliced through his bottom lip and Sanji yelped, hand snapping down to his mouth where he instantly punctured his index finger on an extended fang. His extended fang.

“…Wha…?” Sanji started, eyeing the thick drop of blood running down his finger as the cut healed in lightning fast speed in front of him, his entire field of vision blurring dangerously to the point of blackness before it came back again. Sanji reached in carefully, running his fingers over the piercing sharpness of all four of his fangs, for some reason extended, his gums twinging as the tender skin stretched.
Sanji grunted again, grabbing onto his middle as wrenching hunger tore through him, a feral growl rolling off of his tongue without his authorization.

What the fuck was happening?

“H-Hey…” Sanji called out, turning back to the open door. Someone would hear him down the hall; they were all too fascinated, they couldn’t have gone far. “Hey—ahh!”

He doubled over, a strained groan drowned out by the ferocious rumbling in his stomach. Ravenous hunger was working its way through his body and Sanji’s chest heaved, tongue lolling out as his mouth went dry, lips cracking and only making them more susceptible to being cut by his fangs.

His head felt like lead, and the next time his vision swam, his equilibrium was so off that he dropped like a stone, his right cheek connecting with the ground first. Sanji snarled, shoving himself back up as his eyes continued to blur over, entirely unaware that his nails had grown into claws that were digging scratches into the tiles under him, bruise fading like it could be washed from his body with water.

“Hey!” he screamed at the door, everything in front of him flashing between black and blurry and making his head explode in searing pain. His lungs were heavy and the fire in his stomach was eating him alive. It was the closest thing he’d felt to starvation since Zeff had rescued him, and the thought was making him panic. He’d just had a pint of blood!

“Help!” he yelled, his voice overcome with snarls that he didn’t understand why he was making. There was nothing wrong! “Hey! Help!”

The world tipped in front of him, and Sanji found himself back on the ground before he felt his muscles give up on him, his hand reaching for the door even though he didn’t remember telling it to do so. Flames raced up and down his limbs, soaking through his veins and he gasped for breath, smothered under the heat his skin was giving off. His vision was steadily getting darker and darker.

“H-help… he… help…”

Outside the door, the first doctor poked his head around the doorframe, notating what he was seeing quietly on the clipboard against his hip. He nodded to the second doctor and she pulled a small phone from her pocket, flipping it open and pressing the “1” button before she held it up to her ear.
“Yes,” she whispered. The serum was probably affecting him enough that he wouldn’t hear her at this point, but it was better to be quiet than sorry. If Sanji Blackleg thought that the doctors did this to him, the second part of this plan would never work. “It’s repressing his immune system just as tested. He is NSPH major, so it’s taking longer than with the minor subjects, but the virus should overtake his body in just another minute or so. With the elevated viral levels, his superior status should last about twenty minutes before he begins to heal and his body metabolizes the serum. After that, it’ll be another five to ten minutes before his immune system kicks back in completely and the virus returns to major levels.”

<Good. They’ve just hacked into the system now, so with driving time, you should expect them in about ten minutes.>

The second doctor looked back into the hospital room before ducking back out into the hallway. “He’s unconscious now. When he wakes up, his viral levels will be superior level.”

<All the doors are set and locked?>

“Yes, it’ll lead him straight to the lab. Same for them.”

<All right, why don’t you get yourself out of harm’s way? Make sure none of them will see you, I don’t want to have to come down there early and fix this myself.>

“Yes sir,” she nodded and flipped the phone shut, nodding to the other doctors, who put away their pens and notepads and trotted off after her down the hall. At the sound of all the footsteps echoing off of the long walls, Sanji twitched, a low growl rising up from his throat as he stirred.

The smell of their blood was as clear as if they had slashed their own throats in front of him.

He was so hungry.
And over there in the corner, there hangs a strange bird/Sings a strange song but it won't be heard

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

And over there in the corner, there hangs a strange bird /

Sings a strange song but it won't be heard*

“…Well, yeah he’s here, but why didn’t you just call him?”

Zoro looked up from where he’d been staring off blankly into space. The only thing keeping his blood from boiling over at the moment was counting the street lights at they flashed by the car windshield in time—542—and he’d barely noticed when Nami had gotten the call at all. The statement had made both Chopper and Usopp glance over at her, though Usopp immediately looked back towards the road. Zoro could see that he was losing his nerve fast. A thick sheen of sweat was collecting on the back of his neck and his upper lip and his eyebrows looked like they’d been sewn together above his nose to create a permanent scowl for him. Whether that was because of how fast they were driving or where they were going, one would never know. Although, knowing Usopp, it was probably both, as well as a mixture of other things that would make him sweat.

“Well, yeah, I guess… I don’t know. Maybe he lost it after the fight. The one I broke after talking with Robin was Usopp’s. I couldn’t find mine then. …Yeah, here.”

She turned around in the passenger seat to offer the phone to Zoro. He took it after a moment—ignoring the momentarily blinding pain in his shoulder as he reached—giving her a confused look, and she mouthed “Law.”

“Yeah?”

--I’ve been calling you for twenty minutes.--

Zoro’s already pinched lips threatened to pull back into a snarl. He was pretty sure Law was doing the same thing at the moment based on his malicious tone and it only served to make him angrier.

“I’m so sorry that me and Luffy almost dying threw off your schedule,” he spat into the phone,
which he was damn near ready to throw out—through the window. Who did the bastard think he was?

--Where is your phone?--

“Well apparently not here, but I thought that was obvious.”

--You have a phone so that people can contact you. You cannot just go charging blindly headfirst like a bumbling, enraged bull into situations like-----

--Traf.--

That was Kid. He was on speaker. Better keep his language in check until he knew if Killer was around. Some key words that would make even Killer’s eyes pop were tumbling around in his head.

--Zoro… are you ok?--

Killer’s pained voice made the anger drop from him like water off of an oiled pan. He sighed heavily, leaning back into the seat from where his spine had straightened like an iron rod and had him nearly in a fighting stance.

“I’m fine,” he murmured. “…I’m sorry. I don’t know where my phone is. I’m still not even sure I know what happened. The whole damn thing took only took a couple hours.”

--Robin told us what you told her,-- Kid spoke up. Apparently Law was still too pissy to bother with telling Zoro that he was glad everyone was alive.

Well, that everyone that they had with them was still alive. The thought made something clench painfully in Zoro’s chest and he shifted uncomfortably, the corners of his eyes pricking.

--She found something else too.--
“…Yeah?”

--Spam-damn, or whatever the fuck his name is, he’s working with Doflamingo. Doflamingo is working with the government now, like Mihawk and Kuma.--

Well wasn’t that just dandy. As if they weren’t already balls deep in government dogs. Now the government was deliberately backing a drug lord with a slave house and a human trade system. Any attack Zoro made on him was that much more dangerous.

Zoro ground his free hand into one eye. “…And? I’m still going in there. I’m getting him out.”

--I wasn’t telling you not to.-- Kid’s voice was gruff and unfamiliar. Like he wasn’t exactly sure how to phrase what he wanted to say. Normally he left the long speeches to Law, who was still being a fucking infant and skulking in the back corner of the conversation. In the back of his mind Zoro knew that Law didn’t skulk and the fact that he wasn’t saying anything was strange, but he was too angry to care. Sanji’s broken and… betrayed expression—there was no better word for it—when Zoro had hit him and knocked him unconscious was playing like a broken record through his mind, and every time he thought about it, the simmering temperature in his veins roared to life and his stomach tried to get rid of everything it had in it.

He didn’t have time to feel guilty.

He didn’t have the right to feel guilty.

--…Look…-- Kid tried again, but trailed off uncomfortably. Zoro was losing patience fast and about to scream at Law for being so immature at such an inopportune time. --When Robin found Doflamingo’s name attached to Spam, she got ahold of Shanks again—after the first time she called—and Shanks did some more digging. …Uh, have you ever heard of Caesar?--

“…Who?” Zoro asked blandly, the phone creaking in his hand at the next pause as Kid stuttered, again trying to come up with the words.

--He’s, uh… fuck. Traf, just talk to him.--

Zoro felt the growl rising up in the back of his throat, half a second away from screaming his agreement into the phone when Kid spoke up again.
--It’s just Zoro.--

That made him stop, and he pulled the phone back from his ear to stare stupidly at it for a moment before listening in again. Why did Kid sound so… reserved? Reserved wasn’t a setting that Kid had in his brain.

A rustle came from the other end of the line as the phone exchanged hands, and Zoro’s lips pinched together tighter as he caught the tiny conversation whispered between the two of them.

--Do you want Killer out?--

--…No, he can stay.-- Law answered after a good, long moment.

Zoro had never heard Law sound so withdrawn before. He wasn’t angry at all. What the fuck was going on?

--You sure?--

--…Yeah. If one kid knows, they both might as well.--

“…Law?” Zoro asked carefully. He hadn’t seen Law scared in… years now.

He was almost positive he heard Law swallow from the other end of the line. --…Yes Zoro?--

“…Who is Caesar?”

Law was quiet for a long time before he suddenly sucked in a huge breath, and then let it out very slowly. Zoro shifted uncomfortably in his seat, imagining Law playing with his bangs as they all sat in the living room, twisting them as he did when he was uncomfortable, lips pinched together tightly. Killer was probably in his normal chair, the one closest to the doorway, ready to leave if anything escalated. Maybe Law was sitting down too. He sounded so… tired.
Zoro swallowed heavily, closing his eyes as thick fear settled deep into his stomach. Something was really very wrong, and he knew that whatever Law was about to tell him was going to make it that much worse.

“How much longer until we get there?” he whispered to the front seat, covering the receiver with his other hand.

Usopp shrugged. “Maybe… another ten minutes? It's not far, but we can’t go much faster than this on the highway. We can’t get pulled over now. If we do we’ll basically have to shoot the cop and burn his car HAHA not funny,” he blurted out awkwardly. Usopp was trying so hard to alleviate the system.

Zoro nodded and then turned his attention back to the phone. He wasn’t sure what to do. He’d never been in a position of having to… comfort Law. He didn’t know such a thing was even possible in the real world for anyone other than Kid. Law snapped, not nearly as often as Kid, but anger was the only emotion he had for acting out. Even when he got scared it was an annoyed-scared. This was…

Frankly this was terrifying.

Law chuckled to himself, probably from all the nerves. --I… um, I have to tell you a little more of my history for the answer to that question to really make sense. …I didn’t think Caesar and Doflamingo were working together anymore, but I was wrong.--

“…Ok.”

--…It makes this situation a lot worse.--

“…Ok.”

--…And you have to know this before you go streaking into one of Spandam’s facilities. Especially if Doflamingo is running it.--
Zoro didn’t bother answering again, just waiting this time. He could hear the unspoken follow-up comment in his head, “Especially if Caesar is working with him.”

Law was quiet for another long and painful moment before he started.

--…I lived in a top-secret research facility until I was seven years old. Both my sister and I were born there, just like my parents and their parents. It was a drug-testing lab, though I’m not really sure on what overall. My parents were scientists there, working on developing biological warfare weapons and antidotes to weaponized gasses. They and many other scientists—along with their families—were all fulltime, live-in personnel and had been for three generations, because the facility was top-secret and we weren’t allowed to come and go as we pleased. Most of the substances they worked with were safe, or handled in safe manners, but at some point over the years of them working there, the government decided that the scientists would be a better service if the testing they did was a little more… direct. They started giving the scientists more dangerous substances to work with without telling them of the dangers involved. They needed the research done and this was the only way to do so without putting themselves at risk, and legally they wouldn’t be allowed to do the research at all. It wasn’t very long before everyone started to get sick.--

Zoro’s mind had gone blank, imagining a seven year old Law living in a hospital setting all of his life, never allowed to go outside, never allowed to leave, told that this was his life and that was that. Images of Law and other kids running around, playing, just being children, were flashing across his eyes, and he couldn’t help but try and find the mindset of whoever had first given the families these substances, damning everyone in the facility…how fucked up you would have to be to hand someone their own death certificate and those of all of their friends and family.

--…I have something called Amber Lead Syndrome. Or, had at least. There is no cure, but… well, I’ll get to that in a minute.--

*Amber Lead?*

--Amber lead is an ore that was used to make bullets because of its density. It holds up much stronger than most metals without having the excess weight, but it isn’t the easiest to synthesize and normal factories can’t process it, which is why they could convince the scientists to work with it. They weren’t informed of how toxic it was. The intent of using the ore was to ensure that—even if the fight was lost—the toxicity would keep fighting the battle against their enemies and eventually wipe out the entire population.--

*The entire population?! “…How?”*
Law sighed heavily. ——Amber Lead Syndrome occurs at a high point of build up of the ore in the blood, before that you only have Amber Lead Toxicity. It develops slowly, with very few syndromes at first, so no one suspected anything. When the levels of Amber Lead reach a high enough level, the hair loses all of its color first, and then white patches start appearing on the skin as it also loses its pigment. It causes extreme chronic pain, spreading until it eventually causes death. What happens generationally is that any children born receive their parents’ levels of toxicity, so each generation has a shorter and shorter lifespan because it takes less and less time to reach that critical point. …I was about three when my parents started exhibiting symptoms along with the rest of the scientists. They all started to work on a cure immediately, because it wasn’t contagious—outside workers still came to visit with no observed issues, the only difference was that they were never in contact with the ore—but after a couple of years the chronic pain became so bad that none of the scientists could continue their work and none of the other parents could take care of any of the children. …Everyone was basically dead anyways. Even the other children my age were starting to lose color sparsely in their hair. My generation had until about ten years to live, so we would be the last generation of scientists working in the facility. That wasn’t nearly enough time to be worth it to any government.—

Zoro swallowed, knowing what was coming but still not wanting to hear it.

—–They came in and exterminated everyone, removed the ore, carried out the bodies, and the issue was resolved and they could start on another substance with a new round of scientists.—

“How did you get out?”

Law cut off, like he’d been hoping Zoro wouldn’t ask that question. But Law had never lied to him. Omitted information, yes, but never lied.

—–I snuck out. …Hiding under a couple of cadavers on one of the carts they used to wheel the bodies out. …They just happened not to hit me in the shooting, and then didn’t recheck the bodies once they were in the cart, so I climbed in when no one was looking.—

Zoro closed his eyes, leaning forward until his head was resting against the back of the seat. The nausea was rolling over him in waves again, and the longer he was awake, the more his adrenaline wore off and the pain was hitting him triple fold.

—–I stayed hidden with the other bodies until the government left. …That’s when I first met Doflamingo.—

“The corpses aren’t contagious.”
Trafalgar Law jolted, not having heard the small crowd walking towards him until they were basically standing on top of him. He was still shaking from the escape, buried under bodies that he refused to try and identify. He’d know them. He knew all of them.

“You can only get Amber lead poisoning by being in contact with the ore itself. Grab some of the bodies—three should be enough to synthesize the blood, but don’t touch any that are bleeding, the blood can transfer the toxin to you. After that, we’re going home.”

The man’s voice was silky and slick. He sounded like a buttered snake, a deep anger in his voice that Traf recognized. An anger driven by power, and a need for death.

He shoved the dead body off of his back, too close to death to care if this didn’t work. It was his only way out. His only chance to avenge his family.

“Let me join you!” he ordered to the group of people, standing up in their immediate midst. Several yelped and jumped away from the sudden and dead-looking small child that had appeared like a ghost, but the man in the pink boa and sunglasses hadn’t flinched. Good. Traf didn’t have time to mess around with people that weren’t serious about what they were doing. This man was a killer.

“I have a lot of people to kill,” Traf continued without hesitation, his fists clenched, trying to keep his bottom lip from shaking as he realized that he was standing on someone else’s arm. He wouldn’t show weakness to this man. He wasn’t weak. “And only a little bit of time before I die to do it.”

The pink man’s posse burst into laughter, cackling at the resolve in this tiny, promised-to-death child. Traf grit his teeth. They wouldn’t laugh at him for long.

The man stared at him long and hard, sizing him up, before a maniacal grin split his face. “You can try. Let’s see if you’re worthy enough to join our family. My name is Doflamingo… keep up or you’ll stay behind.”

He had barely finished speaking when a collapsing wall tipped over beside the group, exploding in rubble and making everyone but Doflamingo—who flashed the remains an unimpressed look—stumbled back and out of the way. A man with Doflamingo’s lanky height and eye-catchingly bright hair stepped through the dust, kicking chunks of cement as he went. He had on a black feather boa cape very similar to the one Doflamingo had on and a hat pulled down low over his eyes, but that didn’t hide the star he’d drawn in eyeliner around his eye or the way he seemed to be completely incapable of applying lipstick correctly. He was almost to Doflamingo’s side when he suddenly
tripped and tipped forward, driving his face straight into the dirt underneath him. Doflamingo’s expression remained indifferent.

Traf sat staring from where he’d jumped out of the way of the wall—not scared by the sudden movement—hating the man with his face in the earth for making him show weakness and for the fact that his flailing leg had landed right across Traf’s lap. What an idiot.

“Watch it!” Traf yelled, shoving the leg off of him and scrambling to his feet, fists up like he was about to fight the giant man on the ground.

A low murmur of “ooh” echoed from Doflamingo’s “family” as the lanky man stood, still a little wobbly from the impact, and slowly turned to face Traf. Good, let them know that he wasn’t scared —

The man’s foot snapped out suddenly like a viper and caught Traf square in the stomach. Traf oofed, air rushing out of his lungs, and then he was flying like a ragdoll, clear across the room, sailing over debris and dead bodies before finally coming to a crashing stop against the wall on the other side of the room. He sat gasping, trying to get the air back into his lungs.

“Corazon doesn’t like kids!” the small girl with Doflamingo called from across the room, a useless and late warning.

Thanks, Traf thought nastily, still trying to breathe right. From where he was sitting, he could watch as this Corazon pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, lit up, crossed his arms as he let out a cloud of smoke, and proceeded to catch his feather cape on fire with the cherry of his cigarette.

Traf hated him. With everything in him, he hated this idiot of a man.

-oOo-

Corazon was dumb and useless, Trafalgar had decided, but only with good and due consideration. The conclusion was still pretty easy to reach though. Aside from their first encounter, Traf had witnessed the moron scald himself with boiling hot tea, fall over backwards in chairs, trip others and himself, and walk into so many walls and doors that Traf hadn’t even bothered keeping count of how many times it happened. He hadn’t set himself on fire since the first time, but Traf was sure that it was only a matter of time before it happened again.
He’d been warned by others in Doflamingo’s family—Baby5 and Buffalo—not to mess with Corazon. Corazon was strange, they’d said, but he was still blood, and Doflamingo took family very seriously. He was still Doflamingo’s brother and Doflamingo would make his end long and messy if Traf tried anything. But Traf didn’t care. The man had kicked him clean across a room—he’d been humiliated and insulted and he was going to teach the daft man not to mess with him.

Corazon was going to die.

--I hated everything. I didn’t believe in anything. I wanted to destroy the world.--

Zoro had no idea how to take in all of this. He knew Law was a psycho but… Law could very well have been legitimately crazy. Just a really intelligent insane person who could use his talents to still do the crazy things he wanted to do. Law was traumatized maybe irreparably. And it didn’t sound like the story was going to get better. No wonder he had a soft spot for kids.

--I ran Corazon through with a sword I stole from one of Doflamingo’s men the second I saw an opportunity, but I was mad and lashing out and I missed his lung and Corazon lived. I discovered this after I’d left him to die, and then arrived back at Doflamingo’s place to find the two of them there, Corazon with his shirt off, bandaging the wound, and Doflamingo asking about it.

“What happened? That looks nasty.”

Corazon looked up over his shoulder at his brother, scribbling down “enemy” on a piece of paper and passing it over.

“He got you pretty good. But you took care of him?”

Corazon nodded, slipping his shirt back on. Traf gritted his teeth. The man didn’t even look like he was in pain. But he hadn’t turned Traf in. …Why?

“What. Well alright, be careful next time.”

--I learned to fight in the underground world. I spent almost two years with them, training, fighting, using weapons, stealing, killing, studying to be a doctor, traveling, helping Doflamingo plan every death we wanted in the world… having a family again. It was around that time that Doflamingo started working with Caesar. Caesar was cruel, he would use his subordinates as bait and
experimental tools but I never cared because I had an end goal and an end date and I didn’t care how
many people died as long as I killed as many of the people I wanted to as possible. When I was good
enough to actually compete for Doflamingo, to try and win him money and his team better ranks, I
met Eustass. I don’t even remember how. We didn’t fight each other, we might have been in the
same prefight room, but it doesn’t matter. Eventually we started sparring during our free time—all
you do is practice when you’re young in the underground. We ran into each other enough times to
decide to meet up purposefully outside the arena, and then consistently… we got pretty close, but
Corazon ended that all one day.—

Zoro blinked, confused why there wasn’t any anger in Law’s voice, especially after how he’d been
seething earlier.

—The Amber lead syndrome got really bad. My skin and hair started turning white, and I was in so
much pain some times that I would just drop to the ground practically seizing. Once was during a
fight, and Eustass—who was on the sidelines—realized that I hadn’t fallen in pain from an injury
from my opponent and leapt into the ring and beat him back. Eustass was better than me then and at
a higher level at the time, so it didn’t take long, but long enough for both Doflamingo’s men to jump
in and grab me, and for Eustass’s team to pull him off of my opponent and back to the sidelines.—
Law paused, a weird tightness in his voice that Zoro recognized—oddly—as embarrassment. It was
strange in Law’s voice.

—Eustass, uh, was screaming for me, fighting against his own crew. It was causing quite an uproar,
mostly with his team, but Corazon was there and took notice. He must have seen how we’d been
spending time together. When I finally woke up from the fit, I was three hundred miles from
Doflamingo’s home and family and in a makeshift camping bed with Corazon cooking dinner over a
fire next to me. The man had played mute for years, everyone thought he was too traumatized by
whatever caused Doflamingo to want so much death in the world to ever speak again, but it was a
ruse. He told me that he’d seen something in Eustass and I—and me specifically—that I didn’t have
when I asked to join Doflamingo’s family. A… dedication to someone, a want to fight for another
reason than to cause pain. …Heart, I guess. He said that he’d left a note for Doflamingo that he was
going to find a cure for my Amber Lead Syndrome and he’d be back with me alive. I thought he was
crazy. I’d been kidnapped and told that I might live when I knew there was no cure. I wanted to be
back with the new family I’d joined, I wanted…— Law huffed heavily, skipping to the next topic
noticeably. —Corazon told me that his brother was a monster.—

You wanted Kid, Zoro filled in what Law had been unable to say. Kid was just as crazy as Law,
they’d probably been the only two to really understand each other ever.

—Doflamingo killed his father when he was ten for giving up their family status as lords who owned
slaves, stole food and resources from thousands of people, and killed just because they could.
Doflamingo swore to kill every civilian, one by one, until they all belong to him again, and Corazon
believed that his brother would do it and had promised to stop him. At first I threatened to tell
Doflamingo. I tried to get away, I attacked Corazon, I used every moment I had to insult him, and
still he kept taking me to doctor after doctor after doctor, defending me against the ones who were
scared of me, insulting their dedication to the profession and their promise to help people, bribing people to run tests, seeking out names of people who might be able to help, even killing people when they tried to go to the police. He wouldn’t let me think of myself as a lost cause when doctors ran from me in fear. He didn’t let me consider myself inhuman for being rejected by so many. He never once gave up on me. I stopped trying to run, and even though this man was the clumsiest, most ridiculous man I’d ever met, I started believing in something again—in him. And in the possibility of having my own life beyond the toxicity. We traveled for six months looking for a cure, and one night Corazon was drinking and broke down and admitted to me that he was sorry for putting me through everything that had happened, that when I stabbed him all he felt was my pain and not his own, and that he was going to save me if it was the last thing he did. He couldn’t go back to Doflamingo, we’d been gone for too long and everyone would think he was a traitor. I was his one cause.--

--Cora-san got a call at some point during that sixth month, saying that he’d heard from someone of a government-run program that was synthesizing a virus known to have incredible healing qualities, and thought it might be able to supplement a cure.--

Oh my god. Zoro’s mouth dropped open. It couldn’t be. He’s not—no—he’s not—no—he’s not—no—he’s not—is he—?

--Corazon swung me around like a little kid he was so happy and then sent me out of the room to go buy me a soda and him a beer in celebration before we set out to raid this government lab. I sprinted the whole way I was so excited. I trusted this man, and he was sure that this could save me, so I believed his every word he said like a message from God. When I got back, he was on the phone, so I waited outside so he could finish his conversation, but I could hear everything from where I was. It took me a second to understand why he was using such official jargon, but he was calling in a favor with the marines to find out if there was an exchange of the synthesized virus anywhere. I was horrified when I realized.--

The breath was stuck in the back of Trafalgar’s throat, bottles shaking in his hand and threatening to clink together and reveal his location.

Wait! Traf didn’t care a damn bit if Cora-san knew he was listening!

Traf stormed into the room, hurling the bottles at the ground where they shattered, soda and beer exploding everywhere. Corazon shrieked, slipping on the fresh spill and crashing to the ground, his eyes nearly popping out of his head. The phone cord had been yanked from the wall in his fall, and Traf kicked it as hard as he could, splitting it down the middle with a sharp and choked ringing sound, quivering like a time bomb in fury.

“Are you a marine?!” he screamed. Red-hot liquid was washing into his eyes and down his cheeks and he didn’t understand why.
“No no!” Corazon said quickly, trying to scramble to his feet and tripping on his feathers, knocking him back into the floor in his haste, face first.

“Did you lie to me?!” It couldn’t be true.

“I’m not a marine!” Corazon yelled, his voice damn near a plea. Traf felt like a volcano. He wanted to lunge at Corazon and bite his head off.

“I know what I heard!” he wailed. The bastard! The bastard had tricked him! “You were talking to a marine! You called a marine! You’re working with them! I never should have trusted you!”

“Traf, no, come on!” Corazon grabbed his shoulders, holding him tight when he tried to shove away, but not close enough so that Traf could actually sink his teeth into Corazon’s body like he wanted to.

“Listen to me! I’m not working with them! I’m working for Doflamingo, but not with him, right?”

Traf slowed, bottom lip jutting out, tears still flowing freely, but he let Corazon speak. He didn’t want it to be true. It couldn’t be true. Cora-san wouldn’t do that to him.

“Come on,” Corazon pulled him in close, tucking Traf into his lanky body. “We’re going to intercept the serum when the marines transport it from one lab to another. I know Doflamingo is going to try and beat us there. If Caesar gets ahold of it, he could replicate it, and Doflamingo could give it to all his men. If they get the serum into the lab we’ll never be able to get in and out without being found, we have to get it before. I had to call in a favor from a friend I have on the inside.”

Traf sucked in a watery sob, grabbing onto Corazon’s shirt, letting himself be held. It had been a long, long time since he’d felt this safe. He should have killed Corazon when he had the chance. This man was screwing him up in the head.

A lightning bolt of pain shot up his spine, bleeding into every bleached-white spot on his body. His vocal chords locked, rendering him unable to make any indication that he was about to pass out.

“We’re going to heal you and go into hiding,” Corazon continued, unaware of the unbearable pain
Traf was in. “Just you and me. …Traf? …Hey?”

Corazon shifted to move him out of the hug and Traf found his voice, letting out an ear-splitting wail and curling in on himself as his body screamed against the movement. He didn’t have much longer to live now.

“Traf! Come on, kiddo, you’re gonna make it! U-uh, uh, here! We’re going now! Just hold tight, we’re gonna fix you up!”

Traf was too far gone in the searing agony to hear anything. Unconsciousness was a welcome gift.

--Corazon snuck me into the facility where the exchange was taking place and made me wait as he dressed as a marine, helping to move crates, one of them with the vial of the serum. He managed to find which crate was hiding it and steal it, but he must have been seen, because when he came back with the vial and a needle and injected me with it, he was barely conscious from blood loss from bullet wounds.--

Oh my fucking god he is.

--I’m sure you have a pretty good idea of what that serum was.--

“…L-Law… are you…”

Law sighed heavily. --The serum was synthesized from the negligible senescent porphyric humanoid virus, and it was the miracle drug of the century. I started healing immediately, white spots disappearing, color returning to my hair, pain gone in an instant. I felt better and stronger than I ever had. But Corazon was dying and he’d used the whole vial on me, maybe scared that if I didn’t get enough, it wouldn’t work. In all honesty, he was probably scared that it might not work at all. …I watched the man who had never given up on me for a single second dying on the floor, and I had to do something. I knew that he’d been lying, that he was a marine, and I knew the best shot he had was to get someone to help him. He’d be able to explain himself before they even put him on trial for being a criminal, explain that everything he did was undercover. He had to be fine if he had medical help. They would even get him his own vial of the serum, so I ran and brought back the first marine I could find, only to have Corazon lunge at him like an enemy, attacking him before he was barely in the room. Suddenly they were shooting at each other, and I couldn’t understand. I knew that Corazon was a marine, you don’t pretend to be undercover marines unless you’re actually doing the job, it’s impossible to fake. Corazon grabbed me and ran, leaving a trail of blood as we went. He told me that I’d found Vergo, Doflamingo’s best spy in the marines, and if we wanted to live, we had to leave right then, because Vergo was going to call Doflamingo immediately, and he was almost
certain that Vergo being here meant Doflamingo was also here to intercept the serum.--

Zoro was starting to realize why Law had never mentioned this man before, and his heart ached for the poor little boy with the deadly toxicity and just one person there for him.

--Vergo pulled the alarm and shut off all of our escape options. We had no way out. Eventually Corazon couldn’t run anymore from lack of blood, and he hid me in a shipping crate that had been emptied of the serum and he knew was going back to the other government lab, which meant outside. I begged him to hide with me, but he all he would say was that I was going to live. He told me he’d be fine, that he was Doflamingo’s family, and locked me in the crate--

“I want you to always remember me smiling!”

“But Cora-san—!”

“I’ll be ok, Doflamingo might be mad at me, but he won’t do anything to his brother,” Corazon cut him off with a huge smile. “Keep quiet, although this crate should keep in most of the sound, it’s pretty thick. We’ll meet up at the town to the north, find a café and stay there until I can come find you,”

He moved to shut the top of the crate before he paused and then pushed it back open.

“Hey Traf.”

“…Yeah?”

“…I love you!” and he slammed the lid.

*Traf sat staring at the inside of the dark crate, too many emotions whirling around inside of him to process any of what he was feeling, but he couldn’t stop the stupid grin from taking over his face. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt really, honestly happy.

…Stupid Cora-san.
Long, lanky steps tapped deliberately into the room, and Traf felt his body tighten—in fear this time, though he was so used to that happening in pain. He’d recognize Doflamingo’s footsteps anywhere.

“…It’s been six months, Corazon.”

Law swallowed heavily, realizing how loud it sounded and covering his mouth. He wouldn’t be the one to give Corazon away.

A lighter clicked once, twice, three times. Traf could imagine Corazon lighting his cigarette and setting his shoulder on fire in the process.

A gun clicked as it was cocked, too close to the crate to be anyone but Corazon.

“Code 01746. Marine Base Commander Rocinante. Doflamingo, Captain of the Don Quixote pirates, I have infiltrated your ranks to stop you and the atrocities you were going to commit.”

Even low on breath, blood, and options, Corazon’s voice was strong and unwavering. He was in charge of the situation. It still made Traf’s heart lurch to hear him admit it out loud. Corazon was a marine spy.

Traf jumped at the sudden thunk against the crate, Corazon knocking on it. “I’m sorry I lied. I didn’t want you to hate me.”

“…What?” Doflamingo asked blandly, not really interested. With how injured Corazon was, he could have been saying anything in delirium. “Nevermind, enough. I just have two questions for you. Where is Law, and where is the serum?”

“…He’s safe… I healed him with the NSPH serum… you’ll be happy to know that his body is taking care of the toxicity. Hopefully he’ll live a long, healthy life.”

“Where is he?”
“I sent him to escape before you pulled the alarm. He got out with the marine ship. He’s probably already in protective custody. You’ll have to attack a navy base now to get him. They know how valuable he is.”

There was a thick silence, and Traf felt his breathing get tighter and tighter. He leaned up against the inside of the crate, willing Corazon to run and escape while he could, that he’d be ok and he’d escape when he had the chance.

Doflamingo chuckled quietly. “Looks like we’ll be sneaking into that navy base. I guess I’ll have to educate Law on the importance of dying for me! He’s healed, but we have the NSPH virus now, I’ll inject him with it and turn him into the greatest weapon we have, with an endless supply of blood to synthesize and make more compounds from!”

Another gun cocked, and Law choked on his tongue. He could almost see it pointed at Corazon with his own eyes. Corazon said he’d be all right, he had to be all right!

“Why are you getting in my way, Corazon? Why are you making me do this do another blood relative?”

“You can’t have Law,” Traf heard Corazon stand. “He won’t listen to you anymore, he’s not the lost boy that you took on those years ago. He’s beaten his curse. He’s going to live, and you’re no family of his. He’s free from everything, from your hold, from his short lifespan, from the fear others have of him. Nothing is holding him back. He’ll get far away and he’ll never stop.”

Doflamingo’s growl was clear even through the walls of the crate, but maybe that was just because Traf could imagine it so well.

“You lost, Doffy.”

BANG.

Law was an NSPH.

Law was a fucking NSPH.
--I escaped after Doflamingo left and continued studying as a doctor. Eventually I got an internship with an underground doctor and met Eustass again. But that’s unimportant. Zoro——

“You’re an NSPH!” Zoro barked. He couldn’t help himself. How had that never become apparent to him?! “Why don’t you drink blood?! Why don’t you have fangs?!” At this point, everyone in the truck was staring at him like he was crazy. Maybe he was.

--Well, no not technically. But it doesn’t matter——

“It does matter! It fucking matters! Why haven’t you said anything?! Does Kid know?!”

--Zoro! Doflamingo is going to create an army of NSPH and Sanji is their key!–

Zoro swallowed his voice, going cold again at the mention of his beautiful blond on a lab table somewhere.

--Before Sanji,— Law continued,—NSPH superior and minor were easy to create, but as far as I could find out, Sanji was the first NSPH major they got right. If Killer were ever to get bitten, he’d most likely become a superior because the level of the virus is so hard to get right based on one’s individual physical body. Sanji had the right physical components, the right metabolism, the right mindset, the right level of the NSPH virus, all by accident, and now that they have him they have him they have a formula for more NSPH major. The first time Sanji broke out, they did more testing on him then they did on any other NSPH subject, but Sanji survived it all, far beyond what anyone else had survived. It didn’t take them long to realize how strong he was and how different he was from every other test subject in the fact that along with his strength he also retained his humanity, but just when they realized his potential, Zeff broke him out again and the key to their army was lost. Doflamingo has the manpower, now he just needs the virus, and if he gets it he’ll be damn near unstoppable. I’m a lost cause, I only have the NSPH healing component—so no, technically I’m no NSPH—and they can synthesize parts of Sanji’s virus much easier than they can mine, so no one has come after me, but everyone and their mothers and the fucking pope wants Sanji—dead or alive. Shanks thinks Moriah wants Sanji for the healing properties in the virus because he’s closely tied with so many hospitals and he deals organs on the black market. If he could get useless organs and heal them, and sell the serum to hospital patients on the side, he could die rich. Shanks also thinks Moriah had something to do with the first rise of NSPH years ago. All they had to do was collect the organs of the people that had been slaughtered, and then when there were no more, they could hunt down the NSPH and take their organs. We don’t know about Blackbeard yet, but he might have stumbled across Sanji when the government was transporting him and intercepted the shipment, offering him to Doflamingo in exchange for something. Zeff runs a sort of “search and rescue program,” hiding people on the run and hunting down people with huge bounties on their heads. We know of a couple under his care, and he’s watching over some high-profile people. Blackbeard might want something from him.—
“Ok,” Zoro said weakly, trying to take everything in, but nothing was really sticking in his head. It didn’t sound important at the moment, or like it would help him rescue Sanji.

--Doflamingo’s territory is miles from the factory where you’re thinking Sanji is, so even if he’s on his way, you have some time. You need to get in there and get him out. And you have to intercept them before they try to transport him anywhere. All they need is a strong sedative and Sanji isn’t a threat. Get there fast, get him, and get out. Do nothing else. Do you understand?--

Zoro nodded before remembering that he had to speak, muttering “yes,” but he couldn’t get any more words out and he couldn’t move the phone away from his ear. Sanji was the only thing gracing his mind.

--…Zoro.--

“…Yeah?”

--Be careful.--

“…Thanks.”

-000-

They’d parked the truck far enough away from the old factory so that even Usopp felt comfortable (enough) that it wasn’t going to be seen. They’d decided that Chopper would stay with Usopp (without Chopper’s consent) because they couldn’t risk the only person that could save Sanji’s life if he was really in bad shape. Doflamingo only really needed Sanji’s blood if Sanji got to be too much to handle, so transporting him dead might be easier, and they couldn’t risk not having their doctor. So they’d left Chopper sobbing in Usopp’s arms and clutching at his cellphone, just incase they called him in. They weren’t going to call him in.

Nami and Zoro each had phones and had dialed each other, keeping the call going while they snuck up to the only door that wasn’t boarded over. Nami had her staff clutched tightly in her hands, Zoro already with Wado in his teeth, his phone taped to Wado’s hilt. He and Nami shared a glance, took a deep breath, and then shoved quietly against the door, ducking through it when it was open wide enough.
The plan was to get in, get Sanji, and get out. Whoever found Sanji first would call for the other and direct them to where they were (Nami was pretty sure they were fucked and had insisted on activating the GPS locations on their phones, even though that meant if they were caught it would lead their captors right to the other) and then they’d remove any adversaries and get the fuck out, even if that meant jumping out a freaking window. Nami wanted to wait until Robin and Franky got there, but they couldn’t. They didn’t have any time to waste.

This was their only shot to save Sanji.

Zoro threw up at the thought the moment he was out of Nami’s sight, wiped his mouth, swallowed the pain rocketing through his body, and continued running as silently as he could through the dead, grey walls.

-0O0- 

The place had been abandoned for a long time. Most of the doors were open, making checking every room almost stupidly easy, and any that were locked were so weakened by the elements and rust that they broke open just as easily, but there was only wrecked furniture, ancient equipment, and cobwebs. Most of the rooms had been cleaned out long ago.

Zoro’s every footstep echoed for what felt like miles down the dead hallways, no matter how quiet he tried to be. But honestly, his best bet wasn’t sneaking in if there were in fact people here, it was to cut now and ask later. Sanji was his only priority, and this place was definitely abandoned, so anyone here wasn’t supposed to be here.

He took a undistinguished flight of stairs up to the next undistinguished floor, repeating the same routine, door after door after door after door. No change.

“Anything?” he hissed into the phone.

--Nothing.-- Nami said back. --Not a goddamn thing.--

Neither of them said what they were thinking. Maybe Sanji wasn’t here.
He had to be here. Zoro wasn’t going to accept the alternative.

But just the thought made him pick up his stride even though it made his steps louder.

Zoro rounded a corner and slowed. The walls here had been painted with a thick white paint that Zoro recognized from visits with Law to the hospital, which was waxy and easy to wash any fluids from. He pushed doors open slower now, checking around corners before he continued, tapping his toe occasionally to see how far the sound would echo and how far away he’d be able to detect something.

And then he heard it.

It sounded like a machine rumbling at first, but Zoro had lived with too many NSPH not to know what the growl of an angry NSPH sounded like. This wasn’t like the noise Killer made though, and it didn’t even sound like Sanji at his worst. There was no human voice in this, no intonation, no deliberate thought process driving the sound. This was just a low, predatory sound. The creator probably wasn’t even cognizant that it was making it.

*NSPH superior?* Zoro thought idly, not stopping. Maybe there were others nearby, and that would be the place to find Sanji. Either way, he knew he was in the right place.

“Nami,” he whispered, “I might have something.”

--What? Sanji?--

“No, but… growling. Like NSPH but worse.”

--Super?--

“Superior, but yeah. I’ll let you know, but quiet for a bit until I know they won’t hear you.”

--Ok.--
The sound grew the closer he got, going from animal to killer to monstrous in volume. Zoro felt the hairs on the back of his neck standing up, memories of running through the destroyed city with Killer strapped to Kid’s back when the NSPH took over invading his mind. He was close.

There was a metal door at the end of the hallway lined with three enormous bolts, but the door had been cracked and Zoro could tell beyond a shadow of a doubt that the growling was coming from inside. The fact that the NSPH hadn’t attacked him yet meant that it was either starving and wasn’t conscious enough to smell his blood, or it was tied down. Either way, whatever was inside was not in good shape. Zoro hoped to god that they weren’t doing the same with Sanji. He knew that with Sanji’s past, they’d be starving him to try and weaken his resolve.

*I’m coming, Sanji.* He leaned his shoulder up against the door and pushed, amazed when it gave way to him silently despite the rust covering the rest of the factory, albeit stupidly slowly because of how heavy it was. It seemed that this place wasn’t so abandoned. His shoulder protested loudly against the pain as he pushed and made spots appear over his vision, but he ignored it.

The door opened to a large, gaping room, ceiling high enough to make the windowless walls dwarf the bland hospital cots lining the exterior, each one paired with a metal tank and tubes running to the bed where a face mask had been attached to the headrest, but Zoro was only focused on the body in the center of the room.

The person looked so small from where Zoro was, hunched over themself, arms wrapped over their head as they rocked back and forth in shuddering jerks, emitting the horrible starved growl that Zoro had heard hundreds of yards ago. Their clothes were shredded, shirt maybe white at one point but now dyed so red with blood that the color was soaking over into their pants. No wonder it was so crazed. Being able to smell blood and be that hungry would have had Killer screaming against the ache. Despite himself, Zoro grimaced in pain for the NSPH. If he had something to carry the blood in, he would have stepped back outside the room and taken a bit from his own arm to try and bring it back to sanity, damned Chopper’s warning against not injuring himself any further. They might be able to help him find Sanji, or would know if there were any other NSPH in the… “hospital.”

…Hell, he might as well see how much sanity they had left.

“Hey,” Zoro called out, and the body froze, curling in more on itself at the shock of Zoro’s voice. His one word bounced back and forth between the enormous walls and Zoro winced. He hadn’t meant to make that much noise; hopefully it hadn’t upset them too much, especially with how sensitive they was right now.

He had no idea what to say now that he had their attention. “…Do… do you need… I can help you.” He could practically hear Nami rolling her eyes over the phone. “What’s your name?”
The body turned slowly, still hunched like a gargoyle, to stare at him through its arms with one cloudy, scarred eye. Zoro’s lips pinched together, and he prepared himself for the NSPH to attack him.

The NSPH’s—man’s hands found the ground for stability, revealing grey-blond hair crusted with dried blood, and turned to look at him with one iridescent blue-black eye.

*Sanji!*  

But… no, it wasn’t. The man’s eyes were sunken deep in sallow skin stretched so tight that it pulled his nose back against his face, cheekbones jutting out under hair that really was more grey than it was blond, claws longer than Sanji’s had ever gotten gouging marks deep into the painted cement floors.

--Zoro! Who’s there?--

“…Uh, I…”

The man… creature cocked its head at Zoro, sniffing deeply at the air, finally zeroing on the smell of Zoro’s blood and its eye bled solid black, fangs ripping open the man’s own gums as they grew in anticipation, where a thick, dark sludge instead of blood leaked from the tears.

--Is it Sanji?!-- Nami demanded.

“I—uh—no—I mean—”

--Is it?!--

“I don’t know!—I-I don’t think so!”

The creature lunged, just a flash of grey-blond, and Zoro dove to the side as it smashed into the door behind him, the bang echoing around the room. Zoro landed and rolled on the floor, sweeping up
with the blunt side of Shusui to knock the NSPH back where it landed harshly on the floor. He grunted at the flash of pain from the movement, but didn’t give himself time to process it.

It couldn’t be Sanji. There was no way. NSPH major didn’t get like this when they were starved, and either way there hadn’t been enough time for Sanji to get this hungry. He’d only been missing a couple of hours.

“It’s not him!” Zoro called into the phone, and then almost changed his mind immediately. “I mean… I don’t know! Nami, it’s like Sanji but NSPH superior. Law said they wanted to create an army off of Sanji’s physical… form or virus or whatever!” He slashed again, knocking the creature back, wincing at the next flash of pain. The thing was out for blood, and Zoro was too scared to really go for its hands, whether out of habit or that he was still scared that it was Sanji. He couldn’t do this for long though, the only reason he was able to hold it off now was because of how starved it was. He could feel the power in the NSPH’s body through every connection his sword made. Pretty soon the smell of him would make it forget how tired it was. That or Zoro would run out of energy and adrenaline to keep him from feeling how injured he was.

--Just hold him off, I’m in this weird hallway, the doors are the same but the rooms inside have bars so whatever’s inside can’t escape. I’m running, just don’t hurt him, I might find Sanji!--

Please do, Zoro thought, diving out of the way as the creature came back at him, shrieking like a banshee in the night as it dove.

-oOo-

“Fuck,” Nami hissed to herself as she ran, kicking in the doors on her right and jabbing them open with her staff on her left, revealing empty barred room after empty barred room. Nothing. Fucking nothing. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck! fuck!” she could hear Zoro’s swords and the NSPH’s screaming through the phone, and it was only making her more frantic.

That couldn’t be Sanji, it sounded like a real vampire from old folklore!

But they couldn’t risk it.

She had to find Sanji.
She dashed up the flight of stairs at the end of the hall and started her same procedure, kicking in one side and bashing in the other. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

She kicked in the next door as hard as she could, shaking physically, and ground to a halt.

There was someone in there!

“Hey!” she yelled, running up to the bars and grabbing onto them to try and get a better look at the lanky man slumped over the bench against the back wall, blood dripping steadily to the floor where a large pool had formed underneath him.

The man stirred slowly, raising his head just enough for the light from the hallway to illuminate the numerous bruises decorating his face and the oddly signature curly-q eyebrow tucked beneath golden-blond hair.

“…Nami?” Sanji’s weak voice called out, barely able to talk.

“Zoro, I found him!” Nami screamed into the phone, looking for something to pick the lock on the bars, giving it one sharp kick just to see how strong the door was. These rooms weren’t rusty. Not so abandoned after all.

--You’re sure?!--

“Nami, what’s going on? Is that Zoro?” Sanji pushed himself slowly into a sitting position, moving to stand with a pained groan.

“I’m sure! He’s here and curly-browed and standing and talking to me!” she yelled. “Don’t worry, Sanji, we’re getting you out of here.”

-oOo-

Zoro let out a relieved sigh through the phone and turned on the monster lunging for him. He was breathing hard, oozing blood steadily from several good slashes that it had landed on him.
“Come on, I can't dance with you anymore,” he breathed, cracking his neck, ripping the phone from Wado’s hilt so he could get a better grip on it with his teeth and dropping the device to the ground.

The NSPH snarled at him, death in its one good eye, and shot toward him. It was tired and panting hard, and definitely not as strong as Sanji. Almost immediately Sandai tore through it’s shoulder, and it let out an ear-splitting scream. Zoro almost felt bad for the person this monster had once been, but it was so far gone that it was only slowing down. Even in the old city when most of the people had been killed off and the NSPH were running out of food he’d never seen one slow at the prospect of eating. This one had a horrible past in the lab it seemed. They might have even abandoned it here when they left because it was in such terrible shape.

-oOo-

Sanji pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tucked one between his lips, his back suddenly straighter. Nami blinked. They let him keep his cigarettes?

“How are you, Nami?”

...What? “Sanji...?”

Sanji stood, moving towards her, a slight swagger in his step that she... didn’t recognize...

And then someone stepped out into the light of the hallway, same blond hair, same roll of the cigarette between his lips, same lean, lanky body, same curled eyebrow, but definitely not Sanji.

Nami gasped, a hand snapping over her mouth.

The man put an arm up above his head slowly and leaned against the bars, sucking in a deep breath of smoke before he pulled the cigarette from his lips and blew coolly to Nami’s side, exactly how Sanji did.

“Nice to meet you, young lady... Nami. I am Duval. I’m sorry to say, well, sorry for you at least, that I was offered a small price because of my resemblance to your young... friend,” —he said the word with a disgusted grimace— “to play his part to whoever found me.”
He grinned. “It looks like their plan worked better than even they thought it would. I have to say I’m happy that such a lovely young lady didn’t find the monster. I was quite convincing, no? Being that you didn’t realize at all that I wasn’t the freak.”

Nami couldn’t speak. What the absolute fuck had just happened?

“Your green-haired friend can at least defend himself. Maybe he’ll even kill the monster if we’re lucky.”

Zoro!!

“Zoro!” Nami screamed into the phone, bolting from the room. “Zoro, don’t hurt him! Zoro, that’s Sanji! ZORO!!”

Nothing. No answer. Just horrible, vicious, pained screaming from the NSPH—from Sanji.

“No no no!” Nami wailed, sprinting down the hallway to the other side of the building where Zoro had been looking. She had to find him before he killed Sanji! Behind her, Duval’s echoing laugh faded in the featurelessness of the disgustingly grey hallway.

“ZORO!”

Nami ran until her lungs were heaving from the strain, but she didn’t allow herself to slow, and in the back of her mind she knew that screaming for Zoro was dangerous for anyone that was still in this place, but there was no other way.

“ZORO!”

All of a sudden she could hear them, a floor above her, swords clanging and Sanji shrieking like a rabid animal straight through the cement walls. Part of her hoped to everything that one might believe in that it wasn’t really Sanji, that this was all some huge mistake, a sick joke, that the man behind bars was just crazy, but even so she pushed herself faster down the nearest flight of stairs. Ahead of her was a metal door that looked like it was built for a submarine, ready to hold back the blast of a bomb, the sounds of the fight echoing through crack in the door, guiding her.
“ZORO!” she screamed, slamming into door and shoving forward with all her might. It was heavy, and not moving nearly fast enough. Sanji let out a pained wail from inside.

“COME ON!” Nami screamed, turning and jamming her feet into the open part of the doorframe, throwing all of her body weight against it, slowly forcing it open.

Finally it was open enough to get her body through, and Nami wriggled through to a white room covered nearly floor to wall in fresh, thick blood, just as Zoro and what she guessed was a deranged and starved Sanji, both layered with gashes and soaked through with blood, lunged at each other. Sanji’s eyes were crazed from the smell of blood everywhere, and Nami honestly didn’t know how he was still standing with how much damage Zoro had done, but he was out to kill and Zoro was defending himself with just as much violence. Zoro didn’t look good either, though it was clear he had the upper hand.

“Zoro, stop! That’s Sanji! That’s really Sanji!” Nami cried.

Zoro’s eyes went wide and he leaned back, sliding in the blood on the floor and losing his balance, arms flailing out to the side to steady himself.

What?

Zoro’s brain locked, taking in the creature’s—Sanji’s—mangled body, gaping wounds, gushing blood, slices on every limb, immediately checking to make sure Sanji had all ten fingers.

No, that couldn’t be Sanji.

His body wouldn’t move. Sanji, seeing a falter in his food’s stance and an opportunity, grabbed both of Zoro’s arms and threw his head back, snapped forward, and sank his fangs deep into Zoro’s throat with a victorious snarl as they toppled to the floor, a mass of limbs and weapons spewing blood as they rolled.

-oOo-

*Augie March*
In Which Zoro is Entirely Surrounded by Darkness

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

In Which Zoro is Entirely Surrounded by Darkness

Thick, rhythmic panting was slowly becoming the only thing that Sanji could comprehend in the stewy blackness. It was loud, and pained, like the creature had just burst through the surface of the water after swimming from the bottom of the ocean, tasting air after it thought it never would again.

It took an unnervingly long time for him to realize that the one panting was him. And it took an even longer time for his mind to come around to the fact that him breathing like he thought he never would again was not in any way a good thing.

The blackness in front of—or maybe in—his eyes was starting to recede. Large blobs were becoming shapes, than objects, then things with names that his brain could connect. Ceiling. Table. Bed. Tank. Cord. The objects started to categorize themselves in the back of his mind—medical—and his blood ran cold, but he swallowed and forced himself to wait a moment before he panicked. This could be Law’s… something. Exam room. Home. Something. He couldn’t react yet. He might hurt someone if he did.

The next thing to come back online were his NSPH senses, which wasted no time in informing him that there was someone behind him even though he couldn’t smell them or hear them yet.

Sanji nearly swallowed his tongue in shock, knowing that no one from home would sneak up on him in a place as sterile as this, knowing how he’d reacted on previous occasions, knowing what had happened to him, and whipped around to lock eyes on his target.

Nami shrieked, leaping back and pressing herself up against the large, metal door behind her.

Her eyes were wide, skin pale, body quivering, toes turned in, tears staining her face, hands pressed over her mouth to keep from making another sound, all in fear.

Something was terrifying her.
Sanji spun again, not trusting his senses enough yet to tell him if there was another threat in the room, but there was nothing behind him. Just cold, solid walls.

No, wait.

Sanji blinked again, giving his head a slight shake, forcing his brain to see color even though it wasn’t necessary for survival. He blinked a third time, now in confusion, unable to process the thick red thrown haphazardly against the white walls.

He turned back to Nami, who was looking straight into his eyes, and not at any threat around him in the room.

“…N-Nami-swan…”

His sense of touch came next, and he was suddenly vividly aware of the cold air, the crisp, dry draft leaking in through the moldy vent, and the starkly hot, wetness soaking into the knees of his pants where he was kneeling on the floor.

Sanji’s eyes dropped down as he tried to make sense of everything that was being thrown at him, his entire being—mind, breath, heart—stopping short as he caught sight of a head of green hair, its owner face down in a lake of blood, and the jagged hole torn deep into the side of his throat.

Sanji choked, bile rising like magma from a volcano in his throat, his body rejecting everything that his eyes were screaming not to be looking at. His body was jerking with ragged confusion, reaching for Zoro’s still form and fighting to get as far as it could anywhere but next to this body, his tongue leaping in his mouth, needing words but not having any that could change what was beneath him, and finally his fingers clenched shakily into Zoro’s blood-soaked shirt and shook hard, as if the movement would wake Zoro and they’d all have a hearty laugh.

Something inappropriately dark and sarcastic in him knew that now was the time for him to laugh, to start the joke and beat them all—whoever they were—to their fucking hilarious punch. Fucking hilarious. Motherfucking goddamn fucking hilarious. But Zoro wasn’t moving. There was no rise and fall in his chest—from either breath or heartbeat, and as Sanji blankly rolled him over to the glaring light above their heads, shuddering with another gag at the blood running off of Zoro’s face, there was no reaction in the deep green eyes to the change in light.

The air in his lungs burned like acid, his chest spasming over and over with pathetic hiccups to rid
himself of the awful, numbing, searing heat.

Oh god... oh god...!

There was no way. It wasn’t him. There was no way he did this...!

But he knew in his heart that he did. He reached up before he could stop himself and his fingertips found his lips, coming away wet and bloody.

Oh god.

Sanji’s head snapped up as something—Nami—appeared at his side and she gasped at the sudden, jerky movement. Her body unconsciously jumped back half a step, but he could see the resolve in her eyes not to move—her body language trained on Zoro—and Sanji scrambled back pitifully against the floor to give her the space that she needed.

She was afraid of him.

Nami watched him for a moment, eyes flicking back to Zoro multiple times before her body finally accepted that Sanji was going to stay there, and she lowered herself gingerly to her knees, uncaring of the pool of blood that she settled in. Her hands hovered uselessly over Zoro’s body for a minute and she bit into her lip so hard that it bled, but there was nothing that her hands could find to do that would change the scene in front of her.

After a pregnant wait her body seemed to give out and she slumped slowly forward, laying her torso across Zoro’s chest, wracking, choking sobs echoing throughout the room, bouncing off of the blood-soaked walls. Sanji pressed a hand over his mouth and bit down on his palm to keep from making any noise. His mind was going quiet, closing him off from any unnecessary thought, keeping the sight of Zoro’s dead body from burning into his mind like an iron brand fresh from the coals.

Strange voices echoing down the hallway, coming towards them, made them both snap up, eyes trained on the looming, metal door. Nami let out a frantic keen and forced herself to her feet, grabbing Zoro’s shirt and heaving, dragging him toward the door on the opposite side of the room. Her eyes were set in determination, but Zoro’s body was heavy, and she would never make it to the stairs before the voices—growing quickly closer and more intelligible—found them. They must have heard the sounds of the fight. Sanji could tell from the wounds—now old scars—in his skin, that Zoro had not gone down without a fight, and something inside him died knowing that this miracle in
his life had died fully aware that the person—*thing, monster, demon, vampire* his mind screamed at him—he loved most had wanted him dead.

Nami slipped in the blood at her feet, stumbling as she gave Zoro’s body another yank, slipping again.

Sanji was at her side in an instant, not remembering that he moved, to catch her, but she jerked in alarm at his touch and he dropped her, letting her crash to the floor.

Nami couldn’t explain how guilty her reaction made her feel, understanding the broken look in Sanji’s iridescent blue eye. It wasn’t his fault, and she knew that, but something had made him absolutely and utterly crazy beyond words and there was no way of knowing what that was. For all she knew he could snap again, and she could be in his arms at the time. Not that she’d be able to escape him even if she were already halfway out the door, not with his speed and strength.

She gripped Zoro’s shirt tighter and stood again, yanking him towards the door. There was no time for this. She had to get him out. Chopper could fix this. Law could fix this. Shanks could fix this! In the back of her mind though, nothing would make her forget the feeling of Zoro’s skin, already growing cold, no blood left in his body to keep him warm. The thought made her nauseous, but she swallowed the bile rising in her throat and yanked again. The voices were growing louder. There was no time.

“You can’t take him.” Sanji’s voice rose up quietly, confused and drained. “You’ll never make it out before you’re found.”

Nami ignored him, throwing her whole body into the next pull, vicious anger rising in her spine and making every nerve in her body stand on end.

“…He’s dead. It won’t matter where his body is.”

“Shut up.” she hissed, turning to glare into his downturned eye. She wanted to spit insults at him, she wanted to hit him, she wanted to hurt him for daring to give up on Zoro because Zoro never gave up on Sanji and Zoro didn’t deserve this *bullshit*—!

Without realizing it, hot tears had started running down her face again, and she hated them with everything in her so that she wouldn’t have to hate Sanji.
How could she hate Sanji?

Zoro had never hated Sanji. He’d never feared Sanji. Even in his last moments Nami had watched him fear only one thing—hurting Sanji, and he’d given his life for it.

A shuddering sob forced its way out of her throat and she yanked on Zoro again, shrieking in frustration.

“The marimo would be furious if someone died for him for such a silly reason.”

He was right.

Nami shook her head. “You have to come with me. Carry him. This isn’t over, you can’t give up yet!”

Footsteps were suddenly audible, sprinting towards them through the echoing halls and Sanji reacted before she could really be aware of the change. He grabbed her arms, dragging her away—Zoro pulled harshly from her grip, his body lying there on the floor as Sanji rushed her to the door.

She screamed in protest, unable to form any words for her argument as Sanji tossed her as gently as he could into the hallway where she tumbled like a broken ragdoll, coming down on the floor hard as she fought against everything he was doing.

“Sanji, don’t!” Nami wailed, trying desperately to find her footing.

“Run,” Sanji told her simply, his one iridescent, beautiful eye never leaving the floor as he slammed the door behind her.

Nami threw herself against the cold, cruel metal as the lock echoed from the other side, beating against it with her fists and knees and boots and screaming for Sanji to open the door, to come with her. Her movements grew still as she leaned helplessly against the metal, sobbing and listening to it echo down the cold hallway behind her. She gasped as she was suddenly able to hear voices again, farther away but still growing closer, and she cursed the stupidly heavy door one more time before she sprinted away.
Sanji stared blankly down at Zoro’s body. There were no tears on his face, no shaking in his form, no show of pain, and he hated himself for it. How could he not feel pain? After what he did? To Nami, Usopp, Chopper, Brook, Franky, Luffy, Law, Kid—oh god, Killer—

And the pain hit him. Waves of rage and anguish beating against him like the fury of an ocean storm, slapping him down before he had the chance to collect himself, battering his body and mind. Sanji dropped to his knees beside Zoro, feeling the sobs start to wrack his body, and pulled the swordsman into his arms, holding him as close into the warmth of his chest as he could.

He wouldn’t apologize. There was no way being sorry could make up for this.

Dozens of footsteps thundered through the door, heavy boots thumping in formation to wrap around Sanji in a circle, a pitiful attempt to keep him closed in, but Sanji wasn’t going anywhere.

The foot soldiers waited for what felt like days to them. They’d been told the NSPH would be hostile, and what’s more, volatile, dangerous, malicious. This sobbing… creature on the floor wasn’t what they’d been expecting. More than one shared looks between them, wondering what to do next. Their guns were cocked and ready, but this thing looked beaten down and broken already. From the sheer amount of blood on the walls, whatever happened had happened to more than one person in here.

But they had their orders, and after another stagnant pause, a few of them stepped forward to apprehend it and remove the dead body.

The NSPH was unresponsive, and the foot soldiers were staring to feel confident in the outcome of their mission until one reached down to pull the body out of the NSPH’s arms.

“If you touch him,” Sanji snarled suddenly, making the men start, “I’ll remove every tendon in your necks, individually, until you can’t move, and the eyelids from your eyes, and I’ll make you watch as I suck you dry.”

Nothing moved for a long moment, and then one man readjusted his gun, toying with the idea of aiming it at the adversary’s head—just to warn it, remembering what Doflamingo told them about needing to put the NSPH in it’s place and remind it who has the power—and Sanji erupted in a feral roar, one black eye locking on the soldier as the rest of them went for their guns, and Sanji lunged.
Sanji didn’t understand what was happening to his body. He was like a wild animal. Tearing through pathetic body after pathetic body. They were all so weak, firing at him blindly where the bullets ricocheted off of the walls and hit their comrades, making their weak bodies that much easier to rip open. There was no hunger in Sanji’s desire. He didn’t care for the scent of any of them, he just wanted them all spilled open across the floor, a medley of blood unlike his nose had ever smelled before. But even through the wild instincts that had taken over him—the weird, gross enjoyment he was getting from hearing them scream as he dove from one body to the next, his fangs finding every exposed piece of their skin—he could still find the smell of Zoro’s blood through it all. It was taking everything in him not to throw up.

Sanji skidded to a halt, suddenly very aware of the new body in the room as a tall man adorned in a pink, feather coat stepped up beside Zoro’s body, and Sanji flashed to his side, laying his body across Zoro’s like a shield.

The man was still for a moment, and then very deliberately and with no fear crouched down next to the two smaller forms, laying a hand on Sanji’s back without hesitation even when Sanji flinched violently and the rest of the men in the room took a step back.

“Sanji, my name is Doflamingo. I oversee this hospital.”

Sanji’s mind went black, memories of the facility—the pain, the dark, the cold, the blood, the screaming, the bodies of the other children, the screaming, the laughs of the doctors, the men that forced him back after he got out, the chains that dug into his body, the endless screaming that lasted for days echoing through the halls as he listened to the children in the experimentation rooms die around him screaming for the pain to end—

“We brought you here after you were kidnapped, do you remember?”

Sanji couldn’t find words. The only thing in his mind was the screaming. His arms were starting to hurt where the needles—thousands of needles for hours upon hours of injections—chains on his wrists and ankles so tight his bones were strained not to break with the pressure—

“Sanji, can you hear me? Can you tell me what happened?”

Sanji shuddered, thickly, unknowingly, like an animal, and Doflamingo grinned.
“…We have to keep everyone safe. You’re strong, Sanji, but the disease inside you is stronger. It’s not your fault, but no matter how strong you are, there will always be a chance of this happening.”

A sob found it’s way from Sanji’s lips, words starting to poor from his tongue, but it didn’t seem like he knew he was speaking. “I didn’t mean… I didn’t know… I… what was… happening… I just woke up… and…”

Good. Caesar was right. The hospital setting had triggered him.

“I know. I understand how you feel. My own little brother was killed in a situation like this.” The grin splitting his face hadn’t wavered for a moment.

“We want to help you. We want to keep things like this from happening, for all afflicted with this disease. With the research we’re doing, we think we can. …We know what you went through as a child, Sanji, and we’re very sorry.”

Sanji was still, blank eye never leaving the floor, lips still moving slightly as if he were uttering useless nothings, but he was making no sound.

“This isn’t your fault, Sanji. It isn’t anyone’s fault but the monsters that did this to you. But we must keep it from happening again. You need to let us help you. We can keep the darker side of you hidden, make you stronger so that you can stop it.”

Sanji was still. Doflamingo’s grin wavered, but the strength in his voice didn’t. It was time to try suggestion. If Sanji was triggered enough, he’d be back in the facility as a child, and he’d do what he was told.

“Come with me,” Doflamingo said firmly, standing, waiting to see if Caesar’s theories were right.

Sanji was still, and then slowly he moved to stand, hands slipping from Zoro’s back and letting the body slide to the floor, the only warmth left in him gone with the loss of Sanji’s touch.

Doflamingo put his arm around Sanji’s shoulders and pulled him in close, Sanji’s blank stare never leaving the floor. Wherever his mind was, it wasn’t here.
“Everything’s going to be all right, you can trust us,” and Doflamingo waved the remaining men forward with a gentle flick of his hand. They were slow to move toward the monster that had attacked them, but one by one started shakily forward. “Show Sanji to Caesar, he’ll be able to help best now.”

The soldiers moved for their guns but Doflamingo waved them down. “Sanji won’t hurt anyone, will you?” he asked, looking down at the slumped, blond head. Sanji said nothing. Doflamingo took his arm from Sanji’s shoulders and gave him a light push toward the stairs and the open door, the men moving to circle him nervously and guide him down the hallway.

Doflamingo turned to survey the destroyed room, his eyes resting last on Zoro’s dead form, the last piece of Sanji’s conditioning. He flicked his hand, waving at it vapidly and turning for the door. “Toss it out with the trash.” The last few men nodded to his back and grabbed the body, lifting it into the air and carrying it towards the window, the sound of the river rushing below flooding into the room as they pushed the glass open.

-oOo-

Nami stumbled blindly from the hospital doors she’d entered from, scrubbing at her eyes and sobbing as she tried to catch her breath—tried to make sense of what had just happened—tried to—

Arms grabbed her shoulders and she screamed, lashing out again and again until her wrists were caught and someone was screaming in her face.

“Nami! Nami, stop! It’s just us!”

Usopp.

Nami’s knees gave out and she dropped like a stone, coming down hard in Usopp’s arms and Chopper gasped next to her, diving to her side and holding her head up, checking her pulse

“What happened?!” he demanded, looking her over frantically. “Are you hurt? Where’s Zoro?!”

“Tell us what happened!” Usopp begged, shaking her roughly even when Chopper shrieked and slapped his hands away from her.
Nami grabbed Usopp’s shirt, choking on feeble breath after feeble breath, her head whirling like a tornado and throbbing in pain.

“H-He’s… he’s… S-Sanji… Sanji ki-ki… Z-Zoro’s…”

“What happened?!” Usopp wailed, looking back to the hospital, working up the nerve to stand and run inside after Zoro. He might have to be the hero here—even if the thought made his very bones shake—

“Zoro’s dead.”

Usopp and Chopper froze, staring blankly back at Nami as she sobbed into the ground. Chopper shook his head, slowly at first, picking up speed until he was almost knocking himself over.

“S-Sanji… Sanji attacked h-him… he-he didn’t know what he was doing… he-he’s… he’s dead…”

Nami buried her face in her hands, pulling away from Usopp. “I-I t-ried… to ge-get S-S-Sanji… but h-he locked me out…he-he wouldn’t come with me…”

“Nami, are you sure? Are you… are you sure?! Sanji…”

Nami just nodded, “S-Sanji didn’t know who he was… he just… went right for Zoro’s… I distracted him—it’s my fault!”

Usopp grabbed her again, letting her sob into his shirt, staring in horror up at the hospital looking over them as it seemed to grow bigger and bigger in the night, staring back at him.

“It’s my fault! They hired someone that looks like Sanji to pretend to be him, and Sanji didn’t know who we were, he was like an NSPH superior… and when I found out I tried to stop Zoro, but—”

“You couldn’t have stopped it,” Usopp cut her off. “Zoro’s distraction wasn’t your fault.”
Chopper had joined Nami in sobbing, still shaking his head and wailing as quietly as he could into his hands. “No!” he shrieked suddenly. “This isn’t happening!”

Usopp gulped, turning to stone as the hospital opened an eye and stared back at him from above the river. **It was coming for them**—!

And then people appeared in the window. Two of them, which suddenly became three, and Usopp gasped, hissing, “Look!!” as the first two tipped the third out the window and the distinctly human form plummeted toward the rushing water.

Nami yanked away from Usopp like he was on fire and raced for the river, diving into the frozen, blackness the second the body hit the water as Chopper and Usopp hissed for her, trying not to be seen by the people in the window tossing large hunks of demolished furniture into the water.

“Nami!” Usopp screamed under his voice and scrambled for her, watching her swim the best she could against the rushing water to the body racing downstream. She wasn’t going to make it. Usopp swallowed and dove in after her before he could think twice about the water opening its mouth to swallow him whole.

Chopper clapped his hands over his mouth to keep from screaming, “I can’t swim!!” and ran along the bank after them after a moment of floundering. He grabbed a stick along the way, nearly tripping numerous times trying to get the biggest one he could. They were all nerve-wrackingly tiny. Even if he caught up with them he might not be able to pull them out.

Usopp had almost reached Nami when she seemed to realize that she was going to miss Zoro and dove under the water, kicking her legs as hard as she could as she strained into the black, feeling frantically for anything she could grab onto.

She screamed into the thick silence, lungs about to explode and bogged down with inky fear that she had missed him, when her fingers suddenly caught in a thin strip of cloth and her arm was yanked downstream with the sudden weight.

**His bandana!** Nami nearly inhaled water in relief, gasping for air as she surfaced just as Usopp grabbed onto her. She pulled Zoro in close to her, kicking desperately with Usopp to drag them to shore.
“Nami!! Usopp!!”

The two looked up the best they could, water splashing in their eyes and down their throats, their bodies going numb with the cold, to where Chopper had dashed out onto a log across the river and was waving a long stick down at them. Both with a hand on Zoro’s person, they reached for the stick.

Chopper yelped as the sudden jerk of weight as they grabbed it nearly pulled him off the log. He grabbed onto the closest knot he could before he fell, straining against the water, ignoring the bark slicing deep into his hands as Nami and Usopp spluttered, water rushing over them and keeping their heads under.

Chopper gasped as his hand slipped, the world going silent as he plunged toward the water after them, knowing that they were all going to die, when Franky’s enormous hand snatched his wrist and hauled, dragging him back up onto the log and grabbing the stick Usopp and Nami were clinging to, grunting against the weight. Chopper sobbed in relief as Robin raced down next to them, sliding to her knees and skinnning them deep to grab Zoro’s body and pull him as hard as she could out of the water. The woman was strong enough to be an octopus with eight arms. Nami and Usopp let go and Chopper rushed to help Robin, dragging Zoro’s limp, ice-cold form from the water as Nami and Usopp flopped down on the log next to them, coughing the remaining water from their lungs. But Chopper wasn’t giving them any time to rest.

“Franky, pick up Zoro! Robin, hold his head! Keep him warm! Get him back to the car! We need to get him home now!! I want to see movement, people!! Nami, how long has it been without him breathing?!”

“I don’t know,” Nami gasped around her waterlogged lungs, running next to them as best as she could, Usopp gasping and stumbling behind her.

“I need a better answer than that!” Chopper demanded.

“Ten minutes!” Nami blurted out. “Maybe less! I don’t know! It took me maybe four minutes to get outside!”

Franky threw Zoro like a rag doll into the back seat and rushed for the front, everyone else cramming into the car and as out of Chopper’s way as possible so he could start compressions, beating hard on Zoro’s chest.
“Robin, breathe for him! Every two compressions! Franky, get us home!”

Tires screamed as they tore against the gravel, the car vanishing into the night. Zoro was getting colder and greyer by the minute, if that was even possible, Chopper gasping with exhaustion from the river and the compressions but he wouldn’t let anyone touch Zoro. Every couple of compressions he could swear he saw Zoro’s chest rise on its own, and that was enough to keep him going.

“Nami, call Shanks! Get Law ready to take Zoro the second we get home! Usopp, get me the blankets from the back and pack Zoro as tight as you can! Get him warm! I don’t care if you have to spoon him! Get him warm!!”

-oOo-

Law tapped his foot as he waited, his arms crossed tightly in front of him, every once and a while his fingers jerking towards his bangs to twist them anxiously before they gave up their mission and wedged themselves back under the security of his arm. Kid and Killer were waiting anxiously behind him, Shanks at their side, maybe to see Zoro himself, maybe for the support he’d have to show with what he knew was coming. Nami hadn’t said anything promising… or, uplifting, over the phone—from what he could understand through her tears. Shanks hadn’t relayed everything to Law, upsetting him now would only be unproductive. Law knew that Zoro had been injured further since they’d gotten off the phone, that he’d been attacked by Sanji, and that he hadn’t been breathing when Nami had called. Everything else could be left up to Chopper when they arrived.

The approaching engine could be heard from what felt like miles off, and Law continued to dance in front of the door to the arena, mentally spitting vicious insults at the sky and ground and everywhere else that someone important might hear him. He’d only been religious at the research facility when he was a child. Now, he was strictly anti. Religion was just a piss-poor distraction for the shit-show called earth as far as he was concerned.

Franky screeched to a halt in front of the fight club where Law, Kid, and Shanks were already waiting outside. Zoro flung open the door, trying to get out of the way so Law could see Chopper desperately doing compressions on Sanji’s chest and quickly losing energy. He’d been pushing nonstop for the last ten minutes of the drive and hadn’t let anyone take over for him. Zoro had one foot on the ground and was halfway out of the car before Law appeared like a phantom on top of him, draped across his lap, and jammed a huge syringe into Sanji’s neck. Before Zoro could even react to the invasion of space, Law had grabbed Sanji’s collar and yanked him over Zoro’s legs and out of the car where he spilled across the ground like a ragdoll.

“Eustass!” Law barked, but Kid was already there, grabbing the guy’s feet as Law lifted his shoulders and they rushed him inside. Chopper was blabbering Sanji’s medical history of the last half hour, running alongside them as they went, still panting from the compressions.
It was so fucking like when they’d brought Sanji home Law wanted to throw up. Disgusting. Fucking universe and its fucking déjà vu.

Law was ready for the door before Franky’s car had even ground to a screeching halt, his face uncomfortable and pinched, like he was prepared to take the door clean off if it got him to Zoro faster. Shanks was sure that, had Law had any sort of superhuman strength, the car would have been relieved of the offending barrier.

As it was, Law moved with almost inhuman speed—Shanks was sure he was seeing things from the nerves—and was on the door in half a second, only half as long as it took Killer to appear in front of him with his actual inhuman speed and whip the door back where it snapped off of its holdings and came to rest firmly wedged into the driver’s side front door with a gnarled crunch and glass raining down across their feet, locking Franky in on his side.

Neither moved, both sets of eyes locked on Chopper, who was sobbing pitifully and wholeheartedly into his hands, sitting next to Zoro’s limp form. Zoro’s head had been thrown to the side during the nasty car ride, exposing the blood-soaked face and hair for the world to see, and his arms dangled limply off of the seat, where his nearly blood-drained wounds were leaking the last of his life onto the floor of the car.

Law’s mind was blank. An odd—and inappropriately fascinating—difference to his usual mental chatter. But Law had always found a fascination in the inappropriate.

Zoro’s heavy-lidded eyes stared with an unsettling emptiness at the back of the front seat, as if his mind were searching for the reboot code and would be up momentarily.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

This isn’t supposed to happen, his mind told him again, as if he had the power to change anything.

I know, he replied vacantly. He searched for more words, but there were none that would change this.

Why is this happening?
He had no answer for that.

Killer’s breathing started to pick up, and he pressed his hands over his mouth as his body started to shake, stumbling back where he hit Kid’s unmoving body, leaning up against his father like it was the only thing keeping him on planet earth. His eyes flicked up to Law, waiting for him to do something, back to Zoro’s body, back to Law, back to Zoro, slowly realizing that Law wasn’t reacting because there wasn’t anything to be done.

“How long?” Law demanded after a weighty moment of silence, and when Chopper said nothing between his choked sobs, Law yelled, “How long?” and dove for the body. *We can change this,* his mind insisted. His body was keen to agree.

“An hour,” Chopper supplied suddenly, stopping Law in his tracks, his face still in his hands, voice waterlogged—a sad acceptance in the back of his voice. Law didn’t understand that acceptance.

*There is nothing to accept,* his mind insisted, quiet at first and then louder when he didn’t listen.

“Zoro wasn’t breathing before the car ride,” Chopper continued quietly, like he was reminding himself instead of informing Law. “I got Zoro’s heart going twice on the way home and kept it going for a while, but it’s been twenty minutes since it stopped last and… and there’s no sign…”

*There is nothing to accept.*

*Shut up.*

“Zoro’s lost so much blood.”

*There is nothing to accept.*

*Shut. Up.*

“He’s covered in wounds that have been flooded with bacteria.”
There is nothing to accept.

I’ll kill you.

“And he was thrown in the river by Doflamingo’s men. We’ve had the heat cranked but without his blood to warm him, it’s pointless.”

There is nothing to accept.

I will murder you where you stand. I will filet you and hang you in shop windows for everyone to see. I will show your friends and family and everyone you knew how sordid and dark your insides are. I will find every nerve in your body and play them with needles like a bow over a violin until you beg me for death.

Law’s eyes found Nami first, her tear-streaked face and horrified expression locked on him. Usopp next, more frightened and tear-streaked then Nami was. Robin wasn’t giving him a promising look either. It occurred to him that he might have death in his eyes, but he didn’t care if he was scaring them.

There is nothing to accept.

His mind was so quiet, gentle. Asking him.

Behind him, he could hear Killer screaming in Kid’s arms, fighting to get to Zoro’s side. He could only imagine Killer’s state right now. Part of him wanted to test his hormone levels. Another part of him imagined the injuries Killer would inflict on Kid as he held him back that Law would get to fix. Another part of him imagined Kid stripped and dotted with those new wounds, embellished with stitches and gauze. Another part asked him to help Zoro, because Zoro needed him.

A bolt of raw nerves shot through him, the sudden realization of how boring life would be without his first child dawning on him.

Zoro was dead.
There is nothing to accept.

He’s gone.

There is nothing to accept.

He’s dead. I can’t fix that.

There is nothing to accept.

…Why do you keep saying that?

Because you’re better than this.

Law blinked, confused, and looked down slowly to scan over Zoro. Scores of claw marks had found skin, flesh, muscle, joint, and bone. Blood had drained and dried, leaving the marred flesh looking old. His eyes had drifted open and his skin was sallow and stiff. But it wasn’t tinged, and the bones didn’t glisten through his flesh.

Medical training told him that not enough time had passed for any of these changes to occur, but his eyes kept looking.

Law leaned in, finally catching Chopper’s eye as he examined up and down, looking for any sort of indication that Sanji had done something more than claw him.

And then he saw it.

Law smirked, tipping Zoro’s head to the side to look deeply into the gaping tear in the side of Zoro’s throat. It easily could have been a claw wound, or even a wound caused by debris, but buried deep in the torn flesh were a distinct and full set of fangs.

Law’s smirk grew and he brushed his fingers over the arc of punctures, marveling even after all these years how quickly the skin healed. Of course it looked old. To Zoro’s flesh, the wound was old.
The venom was setting in.

“Sanji bit him,” he said casually, making Chopper’s head pop up. No doubt, the younger man had already done a sweep for bite marks—knowing Sanji’s venomous status—but in his rush it was not strange that he would have missed something buried so deeply. It was a nasty wound. Zoro had fought hard, swinging his head back and forth and pushing on Sanji as hard as he could, knowing even as Sanji was draining him that he could stop death if his blood was given enough time to flush through Sanji’s system and stop him from drinking. Given the opportunity, an NSPH would drain their victim in an instant, but fight back while their sanity starts to return… hopefully, before the victim has no blood left to circulate the venom.

Zoro had just enough.

“Oh my god,” Chopper whispered, leaning in to watch the little spot Law had zeroed in on. Sure enough, even in the first couple of still moments, the skin was stretching slowly but visibly back over the open laceration.

“Killer,” Law barked out of the vehicle to where Killer was calm enough to hear him, clutching desperately at Kid’s torn forearms. Kid, in the meantime, was gripping Killer so hard that if he were human, Kid would have broken his shoulders. Kid only had so much more control in himself as it was. They needed a distraction.

“Bring me my stethoscope,” Law ordered, and when Killer didn’t react fast enough, he turned to glare to let his second child know that he was serious.

Killer vanished from Kid’s arms, slipping out from under them like smoke, and had Law’s bag open and the stethoscope in his hand before Law could think to ask again. He clambered up onto Law’s shoulder, leaning heavily on him as Law turned around to place the metal end against Zoro’s chest, listening in multiple places. Killer was silent, holding his breath, waiting for the verdict. All Chopper could do for the moment was sit in silence, relief flooding through him to the point where he would have collapsed on the ground had he not been sitting.

It was faint, and weak, but there was definitely a heartbeat. Chopper wouldn’t have been able to find it without equipment. But as it was, Chopper frantically keeping his heart going all this time was probably the reason that the venom was able to circulate enough to start the transition.

Law was grinning. He hadn’t realized it, but Killer had, and leapt from the car with a whoop, diving
into Kid’s arms, jolting the older man from the killing spree he was planning to himself. All he needed was a gun, a backpack of bullets, a small sword, and a car…

“Oh my god,” Chopper breathed again, leaning back heavily against the car. Nami and Usopp were staring in dumb shock, Franky and Robin waiting anxiously for their next job in the process of saving Zoro. Law was super calm and it was surprisingly unfitting. This was supposed to be a really happy moment.

“Is… is he going to be ok?” Usopp asked after a moment.

Law, satisfied that Zoro’s heartbeat wasn’t losing strength or speed, hung the stethoscope around his neck and waved Kid forward.

“Eustass,” he called, but Kid was already there, grabbing Zoro’s shoulders and pulling him swiftly from the pool of blood that had collected under him. He’d need another couple of pints. Law took Zoro’s feet and lifted as Killer raced to hold the door for them.

Law looked up at the sky, and then at the ground, musing to himself how he’d been insulting a nonexistent entity—or entities.

But despite himself, before he was all the way inside, he gave the sky a hearty smile, a: Suck my mortal penis, and flipped a mental bird into the clouds.

-oOo-
Sanji should have been able to feel how cold the examination table was.

He should have been able to smell how many chemicals were saturating the air.

He should have been terrified at the row of injections lined up on the table next to him.

He should have looked around the room and known that very few of the instruments hung up on the walls would have benefitted a patient, or even cause them as little pain as possible.

He should have asked why a doctor had so many multi-colored tanks filled with what could only have been an alarming range of inhalants.

He should have questioned why the doctor had an apothecary at the back of the room instead of a cabinet of medically approved prescription drugs.

The Sanji who had grown to understand that the childhood he knew was imprisonment would have questioned.

The Sanji who had found strength in a city of vampire lovers would have fought.

The Sanji who had found the strength to escape would have known not to trust anyone even if he believed he couldn’t trust himself.

It was arguable that that Sanji was gone.

He should have been able to hear the obvious excitement in the doctor’s voice when the man talked so flippantly about everything that had transpired with Sanji—what had been done to him and what he’d done. The high voice from the doctor that flitted about the room like he’d been the biologist to find a real live mermaid should have been the biggest warning sign, but it barely drifted into Sanji’s
ears.

Sanji wasn’t on the examination table.

Just one stale image of Zoro, dead under him, by his hands—bloody, broken, gone—sat in his mind like a cement weight on the feet of a sinking corpse.

“It’s going to be all right, Sanji.”

Sanji sniffed, trying to smother how much pain he was in. Marks on his body bubbled and seared like acid before the newly stretched skin pulled together over the deeper gouges, saving the less pressing openings in his body for last. But those ones hurt too.

The doctor sat beside him on the bed where Sanji had pulled his knees into his chest and was trying to convince himself out of feeling. They told him he was special. They told him he was strong. They told him he was like no other person. He had started wondering if he had superpowers a couple years ago when he saw one of the doctors wearing a bandage and asked why he had it on so long. He must have superpowers. So he could use them to not feel when they had to do tests or give him medicine.

The doctor slid his arm around Sanji’s shoulder and pulled him into his chest, rubbing his shoulder gently. Sanji didn’t want to say anything, but the spot where the doctor was pressing on still hurt from the shots yesterday. They told him that he was sick and he needed medicine to get better. But the shots hurt too. And they made his belly feel worse.

The doctor smelled like asphyxiation. Sanji knew what that was because one time when he was sick, he’d needed medicine and it made his lungs burn and his throat fill so he couldn’t breathe. He’d woken up a while later feeling like his throat was coated in gauze. They told him he was allergic to the medicine. But they told him he was strong and he didn’t let the medicine beat him. He was strong, and he could use his superpowers not to feel this pain.

He shifted and the metal cuff around his ankle clanked, pulling on the line of metal links connecting him to the bedframe. He was used to the sound, but he still didn’t like it. It was heavy and cold, and it cut into his skin sometimes when he slept and made his sheets bloody. They were stiff already, and with blood dried and crusted on them it felt like he had dirt in his bed.

“Can I take this off?” Sanji asked quietly, his voice choked and barely loud enough to reach the ears.
doctor’s ears. He’d asked before and the answer was always no, but he really didn’t like it.

Sanji wiped his nose, smearing the residue onto his white pants. The doctor eyed the wet spot for a long time, as if he was thinking, and then shook his head. “No. Remember you started sleepwalking? We don’t want you to get lost. You could end up outside the hospital.”

Sanji lowered his head into his knees and took a deep breath. He asked his superpowers to hurry.

The doctor squeezed his shoulder—by accident where it hurt again—and gave him a little shake that Sanji thought was supposed to be encouraging. But he leaned to the side and tucked his head under the doctor’s arm. He liked this doctor. This was the black-haired doctor. They were all “doctor,” but this one hugged him after he had to have shots or swallow medicine. Some of it tasted so awful he threw up while trying to swallow and they made his belly hurt so much he cried.

“Why am I so sick?” he sucked in another shaky breathe. “I hate it. I want to be better.”

The doctor gave him another light jostle. “Hey now, we’re going to get you healthy. But you have to be strong, ok?”

Sanji nodded after a moment. Doctors took care of people. Doctors fixed people. This was a hospital and people came here to get better.

“You’re special, Sanji. You’re too strong for this sickness to beat you.”

Sanji nodded. He knew it was true. He had superpowers. Nothing was going to get him.

“It’s going to be all right.”

A high-pitched voice made Sanji blink, and he wavered a bit, raising his head to see where the voice had come from. The white walls around him were strange, and the green… table?… underneath him was even stranger.

Zoro’s deep green eyes stared vacantly back into his, asking him silently why he’d done it, why he hadn’t been strong enough.
Zoro’s eyes asked him if he loved him.

Sanji thought he must not if he could have killed him so easily.

“Good morning, Sanji.”

Sanji turned his head into the pillow to scrub his eyes, and then pushed himself up in bed, flinching when the swelling in his arms where he’d needed to have all of those shots yesterday ached, but he felt good.

He felt really good.

“I feel better!” he crowed happily, turning to look at the doctor that had come to wake him. It was a new doctor, with long brown hair. “I feel better today!”

She smiled warmly at him and went over to the bedside table to hand him his glass of water. “That’s great! I’m so glad Sanji. We’re going to have you better in no time.”

She sat on the end of the bed while Sanji drank the water, wincing against the protesting soreness in his arms, but he had superpowers. He knew he did. This pain was nothing.

“I’m the new doctor that was called in. They need help figuring out what’s making you feel so bad all of the time. Would it be ok if I helped them to try and make you better?”

Sanji nodded, a smile pulling at his cheeks. Maybe this would be the doctor to fix him!

“Sanji,” the doctor said. “Because you’re feeling so good today, I’d like to run a couple of tests. Some are blood tests, so we can try to see if there is a virus or a bacterium in your body making you sick. The other tests look at your skin to see if we can see anything strange.”

Sanji lowered the glass of water slowly, a slight shake in his hands starting to rise. He swallowed, begging his eyes not to start crying.
“More shots?” he asked meekly, pleading for it not to be true.

She gave him a nod, smiling sadly for him. “Just a couple, I promise.”

Tears filled his eyes and spilled over down his cheeks. “My arms hurt,” he whispered.

She pulled him in close and hugged him tight. This doctor hugged him too. He thought he would like this doctor.

“I’m sorry, buddy. But we have to. We’re going to get you better.”

“…But I always don’t feel good after shots. Shots make me throw up. One time they made lights hurt my eyes—and one time they made my insides burn!” he cried.

“That’s the sickness, buddy,” she told him. “I know it’s not easy. But you’re doing great. And I’m going to stay right by your side the whole time. Ok?”

Sanji nodded after a moment and hugged her back. He was going to need extra hugs today.

“Your scarring is amaz—well, just the amount of abuse you had to handle for you skin—with such a high healing rate—is… is terrifying. We’re so sorry for everything you’ve been put through. It’s horrible when people who call themselves doctors don’t have the patient’s best interests in mind.”

Sanji blinked. …Scarring? Sorry?

“This is cruel beyond anything I’ve ever seen, and frankly unprofessional and grandiose. Any true medical personnel would be ashamed to put their name on this work—err, would be ashamed to be associated with these types of practices.”

One powerful, iridescent blue eye drifted up from the tile floor to find the tall man in front of him with long black hair and dressed in light pink scrubs.
...Cruel?

It was cruel.

He knew it was cruel.

Where was he?

Who was this man standing in front of him?

Where was Zoro—

Zoro’s mesmerizing, hunter green eyes were like glass marbles fixed permanently straight ahead, matching the heavy limpness of his limbs draped across Sanji’s lap.

*The doctor held his arm as he limped back to his room, his other hand pressed against the wall to help him keep his balance. She had gloves on to keep the numerous gashes where they’d taken his skin samples from staining her skin or clothes, but he was leaving a trail of blood behind him on the floor. They always told him that it was ok, that someone else was going to clean it up. His head hurt, and the spots on his temples where he’d been shocked were burned so badly he could smell his hair smoking. They’d never done anything like that to him.*

Was the sickness in his brain?

But that didn’t make any sense.

*They’d never looked at his brain before, and he had been in the hospital as long as he could remember.*

*The doctor pulled on his arm suddenly, trying to take him in another direction, but it was away from his room and he wanted to lie down so badly. He pressed the bare soles of his feet into the cold floor and held his ground, stopping her short. He was only eleven years old, but he knew he was stronger than her. He had superpowers. He’d realized over many years of seeing the doctors act and perform so differently from him that he and they were nothing alike aside from their human appearances. He*
was stronger, and faster, and he knew he could hear and see more than they could. He could hear them whisper about him even if he was too far away for them to know he was there. Sometimes they did it after tests or giving him his medication when they thought he was asleep. Sometimes he heard them say weird things... weird, cruel things.

The prickling skitter he always felt up the back of his shoulder when something was coming startled him, enough to let the doctor pull him another couple of steps, but he held fast when he realized she was trying to get him away from the squeaking wheels of one of the tables from the doctor’s office. Sanji strained to see it. He so rarely saw other children here, though he knew the doctors took care of a lot of sick children. They told him this was a special hospital that worked on very special children who needed help. When he crossed paths with other kids they would usually smile to each other, maybe ask if the other one was feeling better, or tell each other that they were strong and special and going to get better.

He looked for the table, barely noticing the doctor yanking on his arm and trying to drag him down the hallway. She was calling for him, but he didn’t care. He never got to see other kids and he wanted to and his head hurt so he didn’t want to listen to her—

The table was wheeled around the corner and pushed slowly past him, a thin, white cloth draped over its contents, but the sheet was backlit, and Sanji was able to see the face of a little girl, maybe about four years old. She was the little girl who threw up blood a couple doors down from him, the only little girl that age currently in the hospital; he'd loved seeing her in the hallways, which was more often than the other kids because their rooms were so close.

“...Is she dead?” he asked quietly as the table rolled by, squeaking rhythmically as it disappeared from sight, but he could hear the squeaking long after it had left. Probably long after the doctor could hear it.

“...Yes,” the doctor holding onto him admitted, loosening her grip on his arm. “She died just a little while ago.”

“What happened?”

“...There... was something wrong with her stomach.”

Bullshit.
The thought surprised him. He’d only heard the doctors whisper words like that when they thought he wasn’t there, it was a bad word and not allowed, and he wasn’t sure why it had crossed his mind.

But that little girl had been fine yesterday evening. He’d heard her out in the hall as they brought her back to her room, saying that she felt so much better and that she was going to go home soon.

Something—a smell—was distracting him. It was hanging in the back of his nose, rusty and salty. It smelted like the IV he was given every day to help replenish his blood because his body didn’t produce enough.

“What was her name?”

“...What?”

Sanji turned to the doctor, his feet firm on the ground. “What was her name?”

The doctor looked at him, caught off guard, blank.

She didn’t know.

“I—I wasn’t on her case. I wasn’t her doctor. I can find out for you.”

Sanji wasn’t listening.

His head hurt.

The cuts and removed skin pinched and stabbed and burned as his body healed them. They’d never needed to cut pieces of skin off before, why did they have to now? Why didn’t they care how much it hurt?

The salty heat burned in his nostrils. It was... demanding him.
And he couldn’t understand why they’d hurt his head when his head had never been the problem. They’d always looked at his body for the cause of his sickness.

Even as he thought that he looked down to the pool of blood collecting under his feet, taking in the numerous injuries that would only take time to heal. Hadn’t they already taken more than enough skin and blood samples? Over the past years?

They had. He knew in his heart that they had more than enough of his body.

“What did you do to her?”

“…What—?”

“What did you do to her?” Sanji turned to stare at her, unblinking, daring her not to answer.

They had no reason to hurt his head.

They had no reason to cut up his body.

There was no reason for that little girl to be dead.

The doctor looked scared.

Sanji sniffed the air around him, trying to zero in on where the mouth-watering, salty, rusty smell was coming from, swiveling back and forth until his eyes finally came to rest on the doctor and her eyes widened in horror. She took a shaky step back from him.

It was her. She was the delicious smell.

A smile started to pull at the corners of his lips but he squashed the feeling, staring straight into her muddy, bland eyes, filled with fear.
She was scared of him.

She didn’t smell like the other children here.

She smelled like asphyxiation.

But buried deep under that smell was the smell of blood.

Only it smelled implausibly delicious.

Was this what was in his IV? Normally they gave him the IV on a schedule, but... Sanji glanced down again at the blood pooling under his feet, taking over the floor slowly, inch by inch, encroaching on her toes and making her back away.

He didn’t have enough blood.

That was it.

His eyes found the terrified doctor’s again.

He could smell her blood.

He wanted it.

“Sanji.”

He took a step forward.

“Sanji, we’re going back to your room.”
He took another step.

“Sanji.”

He needed it.

A scream exploded from her mouth as Sanji lunged for her—he could see the blood pulsing under the weak veins at her neck—he needed it—he was so hungry—“Code red—!” when an alarm sounded over their heads, red light downing the hallway in the color of blood.

“Break in!” a doctor yelled over the intercom, and the doctor with Sanji looked up to the ceiling in shock. Someone had broken in? Oh god, they’d been found out.

She looked back to Sanji, but the little boy was gone, a bloody line of footprints leading past her down the hall. She hadn’t even seen him run past her.

Sanji saw the emergency exit door in front of him. He’d never even seen the outside of the hospital, but he didn’t care. His body ached and stung and his lungs could barely handle the strain of running from yesterday’s inhaler that they’d given him that had nearly suffocated him. He could still smell the woman’s blood behind him and his body screamed for him to go back—he was so hungry!!—but he knew that if he turned around he might be caught. And he wasn’t coming back.

They wouldn’t take any more of him.

He didn’t belong to them anymore.

Sanji felt fearless now.

Sanji blinked as something was handed to him and took it automatically, raising what he realized was a glass of water to his lips and drinking slowly.

Where was he?
The man in front of him had long black hair and pink scrubs. He was grinning, and Sanji couldn’t figure out why.

“Sometimes when people like you get close to others—intimately speaking, that is—it makes their instincts long for the person in ways only their primal instincts can understand.”

Sanji furrowed his brows, finishing the water and lowering the glass slowly.

“You have to have them, and for you, that means their blood.”

*Have who?*

Zoro’s dead eyes met Sanji’s and Sanji felt his blood turn to stone in his veins, ceasing his every movement, his breath halting in his throat as he sank back out of the room and into his younger body.

Caesar watched the young man’s eyes go blank again. He was almost the most suggestive patient Caesar had ever seen. He grinned and took the glass from Sanji’s limp hand, setting it on the table. That particular serum would sink in over the next couple hours, taking much longer than the last one they gave to Sanji, which was much better for long term mental adjustment and made communicating with the subject much easier.

Caesar leaned over and waved a hand in front of Sanji’s face, trying to catch some form of attention. He doubted Blackleg could even hear him now, but the serum should be starting to help with suggestion, so he gave it a shot.

“We’re going to make you stronger, Sanji, so others like you won’t have to suffer. So they won’t have to do to their loved ones what you did to Roronoa.”

Caesar leaned in again, as close as he could be to Sanji’s ear and still watch his expression for any micro-shifts.

“Do you want to do that? Will you be willing to work with me? Be my partner in research? Help provide what we need to keep your viral status in check?”
Sanji was still for so long that Caesar started to scowl, annoyed that he’d have to wait longer to talk to the NSPH, and then Sanji nodded, slowly and stiffly. Caesar grinned and slipped his arm around Sanji’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Sanji. You’re very brave. You will be the hero for others like you, the reason they can sleep calmly at night, without having to fear that they will hurt the ones they care about ever again.”

Sanji didn’t move.

“It’s going to be all right, Sanji.”

“It’s going to be all right, Sanji.”

Sanji sniffed, trying to smother how much pain he was in. Marks on his body bubbled and seared like acid before the newly stretched skin pulled together over the deeper gouges, saving the less pressing cavities in his body for last. But those ones hurt too.

The doctor sat beside him on the bed where Sanji had pulled his knees into his chest and was trying to convince himself out of feeling. They told him he was special. They told him he was strong. They told him he was like no other person. He had started wondering if he had superpowers a couple years ago when he saw one of the doctors wearing a bandage and asked why he had it on so long. He must have superpowers. So he could use them to not feel when they had to do tests or give him medicine.

The doctor slid his arm around Sanji’s shoulder and pulled him into his chest, rubbing his shoulder gently. Sanji didn’t want to say anything, but the spot where the doctor was pressing on still hurt from the shots yesterday. They told him that he was sick and he needed medicine to get better. But the shots hurt too. And they made his belly feel worse.

The doctor smelled like asphyxiation. Sanji knew what that was because one time when he was sick, he’d needed medicine and it made his lungs burn and his throat fill so he couldn’t breathe. He’d woken up a while later feeling like his throat was coated in gauze. They told him he was allergic to the medicine. But they told him he was strong and he didn’t let the medicine beat him. He was strong, and he could use his superpowers not to feel this pain.

“Can he hear you?”
Caesar turned to acknowledge Doflamingo before looking back at Sanji. He snapped his fingers in front of Sanji’s nose, eliciting no reaction, and then turned back to the man in the pink feather coat.

“Enough to take suggestions.” He seemed pleased with himself. “He’s deep in his own mind. Our setup worked quite nicely. The trigger seems to be Roronoa at the moment—even just a mention of him. Easy to understand when Blackleg was the one who slaughtered the poor bastard. But in this constant aroused state of fight or flight, he’s zeroed in on anything having to do with Roronoa or the reason he’s dead—being the NSPH virus. His mind can hear us.” He gave Doflamingo a shrewd look. “Just ask him nicely.”

Doflamingo grinned. “Good. Because we have an agreement to fulfill with Teach before we begin with the real testing.”

-oOo-

Zoro shifted in the stiff sheets of what he was slowly realizing was one of Law’s outpatient rooms in the hospital. He was waking up slower than he liked—coming to slowly was always a good way to end up dead in a fight—and the room was blurry, but he was with it enough to know that there wasn’t much to see in the room anyways and he closed his eyes, taking the extra moment out of danger to let his brain put all of the pieces together slowly.

He was expecting pain—searing headache, throbbing wounds healing, pain medications in his body that would make him brain swim… but there was nothing.

And all the same, there was strangely so much more.

Zoro opened his eyes, letting them come into focus slowly on their own, taking in everything that the world was feeding him.

And it was feeding him everything.

Zoro’s head was moving on its own accord as his eyes begged to drink in everything. The heat from the blaring white light above him was sending off delicate waves, letting him track the temperature as it ghosted its way around the room. Colors he’d never seen before clung in spattered patterns on things that weren’t supposed to have more than one color. Machines that were heated by their processing gave off splotches of warm or cold light that mixed in with the machine’s actual color. His own skin and clothes were a patchwork of colors and the patterns in his skin refracted light like
He could hear entire conversations taking place from through the closed door and all the way down the hallway, but beyond that, the room was alive with the buzz of electronic workings and electromagnetic particles tinkling like bells as they bounced to and from objects, creating little pixie echoes as they danced.

Zoro pulled back from the suddenly overwhelming sensory overload and focused on the mostly-white bed sheet over his legs, which only had a couple new colors added to them. He took in a slow breath, trying to keep his heart rate—which he could now hear and feel with alarming clarity; he wouldn’t be able to use ignorance as an excuse anymore when Chopper was grilling him on why he was so injured if he could feel how hard his heart was working—to a slow patter.

He looked down at himself, surprised to find his body almost entirely void of bandages. Sanji tore into him like a tiger into its prey, there should have been some mark left—his brain told him, even though he knew that wouldn’t be how his body worked anymore. If he looked close enough, he could see nearly healed scars that looked years old. It was like the fight had never happened.

Zoro closed his eyes for a moment to suck in another, slower breath, cringing when he could hear his lungs whoosh with the new windstorm inside them. He couldn’t get his brain to believe what was happening, even though his logic was supplying him with everything he needed as proof.

It worked. He’d fought back enough. Sanji didn’t kill him.

Zoro reached out and snatched the glass of water off the side table near his arm—with too much speed and precision—and poured the water out into the bucket by the bed. The bucket probably left there by Chopper just in case the shock of everything made him lose whatever wasn’t in his stomach. As it was, Zoro thanked Chopper idly and chucked the glass at the bottom of the bucket where it shattered in the water, filling the room with the sound of crystals ringing together in a symphony instead of the cacophony he normally would have heard. Even the sound of the shards against the bucket added a reverberating beat. Jesus, this was how NSPH lived? How did they keep from going crazy? How did they keep from pitying humans for their obliviousness?

Zoro reached down into the bucket—amazed at how new and rejuvenated and rested his muscles, joints, skin… really everything felt—and selected a large shard from the pool of glass. He sat up and looked at the inside of his arm for a minute, taking in the strange light refraction before he slipped the glass into his arm.

The pain was still there, but he could feel the difference in the fingers holding the shard when he was
cutting through skin, and then vein, and then flesh, and then tendon. He stopped before he could feel what resistance bone would give him. Zoro pulled the glass out of his arm and stared blankly at the fingers holding it, marveling at the incredible range of touch he felt.

A cactus suddenly bolted across his shoulders and Zoro shivered heartily, tracking the footsteps getting closer—six foot three inches, firm and controlled step, click of small heels—Law. He watched the blood flow from the puncture in his arm and drip onto the bed, wondering if he cut too deep, and then realizing what a silly question that was.

The door clacked open—Zoro followed the sound range all the way from Law’s hand finding the door knob to the swish of wind against the wall as the door came close to touching it to the tiny echo of Law’s boot heels against the far wall and machinery—and Law strolled in, not at all concerned if he was drawn by the sound of glass breaking.

“How are you feeling?” Law asked, plucking the glass from Zoro’s hand and tossing it into the trash as he reached down to empty the bucket and remove the temptation for Zoro. Zoro watched silently, tracking the pain of his skin bubbling and stretching as it stitched his arm back together—first tendon, then flesh, then vein, then skin. To say the sensation was uncomfortable would be a boldfaced lie, and he could actually see the color changes in his skin as it heated and cooled at amazingly rapid rates to heal itself.

“You’ve been out for two days,” Law said, finding a seat lazily on the edge of the bed. “Just enough time for everything to heal. Sanji did a number on you.”

Law waited, patient as Zoro lost interest in his arm and slowly turned to make eye contact. Law didn’t look surprised at all by his current state of… inhumaness. Zoro was concentrating on the sound of Law’s voice in awe as his ears registered so many more sounds than normal. Every minute change in Law’s voice was no longer a cryptic secret to be deciphered, just a clear indication to what he was feeling. It was like Zoro’s brain was a translator, sent to make him understand the world.

“…Did you do it on purpose?”

Zoro’s eyes dropped back to the sheets. No, he didn’t do it on purpose. He wasn’t even sure it would work, really. Sanji was so hungry—Zoro had never seen an NSPH like that beyond superior. He could have just as easily been killed.

“…Given the alternative to dying…” he started, and then trailed off. Law seemed to understand his expression and didn’t press him further. “Did they bring Sanji back?”
Law gave him a grim look and Zoro paused in confusion, freezing when he realized why Law would have been looking at him like that. Zoro could feel his body heat up, feel the senses he was marveling over before fade away into nothingness so he could zero in on Law like a predator. He could feel his fangs grow and stab into his lips as roiling fury filled his blood, swallowing the terror he'd felt moments ago whole.

“Where is he?” His voice was so obviously a growl. He sounds like an animal.

“…He wouldn’t leave with Nami after he thought he’d killed you.” Law was so blunt, enjoying watching the new changes in Zoro so much it was painfully obvious that Sanji was not a cause for any concern to him. Zoro wondered idly if his eyes were solid black, like Sanji’s or Killer’s when they were livid.

“We think Doflamingo has him to create him army,” Law continued. “They have to rebuild their research from scratch, so it’s going to take them some time.”

Zoro flung the covers off, ignoring the vibrant rush of air he could track across his body, and thought to test his newfound strength and speed by bolting for the door when Law’s hand clamped down on a pressure point in his shoulder and stopped him dead in his tracks like an off switch.

“Sit,” Law commanded without much of an argument in his voice. “You are now the lucky winner of a full-blown NSPH, or negligible senescent porphyric humanoid, viral infection, which as of yet has no cure. As your doctor, and your father, we are going to discuss the changes that will take place in your body and in your daily life and what this means for charging in and rescuing Sanji. Understand?”

Zoro nodded, the only movement he could really manage, and sat once Law had lessened his grip a little. Zoro swallowed, feeling that spot in his shoulder flare and try to heal the injury that hadn’t occurred but had still made his body stop, finally quelling once the cell accepted there was no damage.

“Also, and I can’t believe you haven’t noticed it yet. Although… with improved vision everything is probably so different anyways,” Law reached out to point at something on Zoro’s face, only for the finger that was much too far away to make contact suddenly struck Zoro right in the cheek. Zoro flinched back violently, faster than he’d ever moved before, blinking in confusion. Law made a bored face and reached into the the pocket on his jacket, tossing Zoro his pen. Zoro’s hand flashed up to catch it and missed horribly, the pen flying past his fingers by inches and clattering loudly to the floor.
...What the fuck? “Did… I hit my head?” Why wouldn’t it have healed?

Law shook his head, looking into the compact mirror he’d taken from another pocket before he
passed it to Zoro, holding it this time until Zoro took it.

It dawned on him half a moment before he looked into the mirror what he was going to see.

“It looks like experimenting was done on it. There’s a lot of chemical residue that shouldn’t be there
and isn’t anywhere else on your body,” Law shut off the ophthalmoscope and laid it on the table. “It
might take you longer to heal because of that. We won’t decide anything until we look at the
progress in a couple of days.”

“Why would they experiment on his eye and not his… internal organs, or something?” Chopper
asked, clambering up on the table to look for himself. Sanji didn’t even bother pulling away, still
shell-shocked and staring off blankly.

Law shrugged. “Could be they were testing how much he could be damaged and still heal from.
They could have chosen his eye because it’s an organ central to hunting, and therefore survival for
vampires. It like the heart or lungs, it would take precedent over other things like broken limbs, but
losing it won’t kill him; he’s also got two of them. We don’t have to remove it though, your body will
keep it from rotting and hurting the rest of you, so there’s still a chance that the healing process
might start.”

Sanji didn’t answer, arms hanging limply on the table and good eye now closed as he tried to keep
himself calm. He was gnawing on that spot on his lip now.

“…Can… I get some cigarettes?” he ground out through clenched teeth, hands tightening into fists.

The déjà vu in this universe was disgusting.

Zoro’s left eye was shut tight, a thick scar running through both eyelids and straight down his face,
from his forehead almost to his lips. Ugh, now he had to learn how to fight with only half of his line
of sight. Although…
Law leaned down, quirking his head to look up into Zoro’s expression of concentration. “What’s on your mind?”

“……It looks cool.”

Law blinked, and then—realizing that Zoro was in fact enjoying his partial-loss of vision—rolled his eyes. “You’re a dumbass.”

“…So… how does half of the training sound?”

“Nope,” Law said easily, standing and moving to the door. “Luckily for you, there are a lot of people who’d like to throw shit at you.”

Zoro’s pursed his lips, not liking what Law was implying. And then he realized what Law was actually implying, and a look of terror crossed his face as Law pulled the door open.

*Maybe now’s a good time to try out my speed—!*

Zoro had the covers back and was halfway out of the bed, not at all ready to deal with everyone charging into the room and congratulating him on not dying—

He could feel Killer coming from a mile away. He had no idea how he knew it—sensed it—*knew it*—but something deep in his blood hummed happily at the feeling of another—how could his body know that it was another?—NSPH, rapidly closing the distance between them.

Killer appeared like a bullet in front of him, colliding with his chest with an exuberant shriek and sending them sprawling off of the bed as he clamped onto Zoro’s torso. All of the air in Zoro’s lungs stayed behind him on the bed as he fell—flung—flew backwards. Killer’s head connected with his chin, snapping his head back and Zoro swore he bit off a chunk of his tongue from the impact.

“What the fuck—!” he bellowed once his lungs worked again, Killer gripping him tighter and squeezing the remaining air from his body with a harsh choking sound, and then everyone else was on top of him.
Nami and Usopp each clamped themselves onto the sides of his head, effectively pinning him to the ground as Franky clapped him on the back strong enough to break bones had he still been human—ooh, what a weird thought that was. Brook was twirling in the corner with Chopper in his arms, who was fighting desperately as he sobbed to get in on the mass Zoro hug, but where was—?

And speak of the devil, Zoro watched—literally in slow motion with his new vision and processing speed, unable to do anything but grimace—as Luffy launched himself over the bed, hung there in the air above all of them right as Chopper broke free of Brook’s hold and joined Killer in the death clamp of Zoro’s internal organs, and then dropped like a stone, coming down with the force of a bowling ball on all of them. In the back of his mind, Zoro cursed Law to hell and back for letting them treat a patient like this.

The mass Zoro hug erupted with limbs as Luffy capped it, shouting how happy he was that Zoro was alive and reiterating all the meals he’d eaten over the last two days and how he’d missed Zoro at them and how it was so nice to be home and how they were so worried he would die and how they had to go get Sanji now that he was better and was he done with his training?!

The last note made everyone—but Luffy, who was clearly very excited to finally get a move on to rescuing Sanji—still, and slowly untangle themselves to climb back and let Zoro breathe, although just about everyone managed to put a foot or hand into a painful place on his body as they stood.

When it was just Killer left holding him, and not looking like he was about to move, Zoro rolled his eyes and heaved them both up onto the bed, placing his thirteen year old brother on the bed beside him so Killer could curl up against him like a mutated, vicious, fanged cat. With hair that needed a damn cut.

“Your hair’s too long,” Zoro remarked, yanking on the shortest fringe. It was touching Killer’s shoulders. Killer just hugged him tighter.

“It’s going to touch the floor soon,” Zoro tried again.

“Good,” Killer goaded happily.

Zoro looked up to everyone grinning around him, unsure what to say or do—and then his eyes fell on Robin.

Robin was back.
Zoro’s face split into a full-blown grin and Robin stepped forward with a chuckle, sitting on the end of his bed.

“Hey, Ro.”

“Hi, Zoro.”

Her smile was so good to see.

“Sorry I was a little late.”

Zoro shrugged, too happy to see her to give a shit. He looked around the room again, thrilled, and strangely proud of the people before him—the ones he’d known as children, as babies, who had become the warriors they were today. Every one of them was ready to go get Sanji back.

“Your eye looks like it hurts.”

Zoro shook his head. “…I was sloppy.”

“EYE WAS SLOPPY! Get it?!” Usopp cackled, falling back against the wall behind him until Nami took a swing at him.

“It’s not permanent,” Law spoke up. “Most of the damage is superficial, but we’ve already seen that eyes seem to be particularly hard for the NSPH virus to heal, because it’s delicate equipment or because it really isn’t as crucial to heal—at least according to your new NSPH genes—as long as you have another eye. Part of why you can’t go right away is that you need bit of rehab before you go gallivanting off. No sense in fighting people you can’t hit.”

Zoro gritted his teeth, feeling his fangs pull against his gums as they lengthened every so slightly. “…How long will it take?”

Law shrugged.
“…Do we have the time?”

Law shrugged again. “We’re going to have to.”

“We’re here to help you with rehab!” Killer crowed suddenly, popping up and grabbing a bag that he had dropped by Zoro’s bed, pulling out his scythes. Behind him, Kid hoisted his own backpack—no doubt filled with a whole slough of projectiles—over his shoulder with a maniacal grin, eyes dark and scary. And then, like he’d set off a chain reaction, everyone in the room armed themselves with their respective choice of weaponry—be that object or fists. Zoro looked around with a nervous deadpan, finally settling on Robin’s dangerously happy smile last.

“We figured since you’re all vampire-y now, we could do an expedited rehab training!” Luffy whooped, leaping up onto the bed and jostling everyone on it harshly. Robin didn’t stop smiling for a single moment. Yikes.

“You know, what with your increased healing speed,” Killer slipped his scythes on, knocking them into place with a sharp, mechanical clack, whirling them right under Zoro’s nose to prove a point.

…Uh oh.

“Everyone out, I need to talk to my kid for a minute,” Law said suddenly, looking down at his watch. “Five minutes before you have to be in the arena. No holds barred on Zoro.”

Various feet stampeded or walked from the room, everyone cackling with excitement as they left Zoro alone with his family. Zoro still hadn’t lost the look of dread on his face.

“…You looked like you wanted to ask something,” Law said once the room had been quiet for a solid moment.

Zoro looked down at the sheets uncomfortably, not really sure how to breech this subject. “Why didn’t anyone try to break Sanji out while I was unconscious?” He’d been lying here for two days, two days that Sanji could have gone through horrible experiments, pain, medical procedures, transportation… Sanji had been with them for so long now, and that meant even more with his cockamamie crew… they’d all been so ready to rescue him before—
“No one wanted to.”

Zoro blinked, not understanding. “No one…” he couldn’t even get the words to fall off of his tongue. That didn’t make any sense.

Kid gave him a flat look. “He killed you, you dumbfuck.”

That made Zoro flinch.

“If he hadn’t been venomous you’d be six feet under right now, and it’s damn lucky you are alive even though he is venomous. And like hell I’m risking my ass for that pain in the ass,” Kid scoffs. “I thought breaking Killer out was a responsibility and a half. Blondie’s more trouble than he’s worth.”

“Eustass, he may very well be our son-in-law soon.”

“Doesn’t make him not a pain in the ass. And since when do we do marriage bullshit?”

Law chose to ignore Kid’s last remark. “Shanks wouldn’t let them,” he told Zoro. “If you couldn’t handle Sanji, it’s not likely that anyone else would have made any real progress. Luffy offered, but Shanks told him no too. He can’t stop them though now that you’re up. The only reason they agreed to wait is because you were going to wake up soon, and Shanks feels better with them having another NSPH on their side. That being said, I think you’re an idiot for walking into what’s most definitely going to be a worse and harder situation to rescue Sanji. That being said, I don’t expect you to not try and rescue him. That being said, as this is now a multiple-attempt operation”—Law sounded seriously annoyed when he said that—“if they capture you too and Kid and I have to come get you, I will remove your limbs and you will be our invalid child due to sad, unfortunate events of you being a dumbfuck and getting yourself into more shit than you can handle and we’ll just be forced to take care of you for the rest of your immobile life.”

Zoro nodded after a moment, knowing the threat was mostly empty but understanding that if he got caught, he’d be the next NSPH in experimentation for three hundred years, probably right next to Sanji’s side.

His moment of fear was short-lived though as Killer suddenly took a jab at his good eye—his one eye, he’d have to get used to that—and Zoro’s hand snapped up with surprising speed—pleasingly surprising speed—to snag the blade out of the air. A demonic grin spread across his face as he looked at Killer, suddenly realizing what his reflexes meant, and he reached for his brother.
Normally, Killer would have been vanished without him even seeing it, but now, even with Killer moving at his fastest speed, Zoro’s hand had no trouble clotheslining him and yanking him in close as Killer yelped. Zoro leaned in, grinning like the devil, digging his fingers into every ticklish spot on Killer’s body. The younger boy flailed, barking like a caught animal and trying to land any hit he could on Zoro’s person, but Zoro had his arms pinned down.

“You know this means you can never pull shit and escape again from me again, right?”

The realization dawned on Killer and he gave another playful shriek, trying to yank away and finally lunging for Zoro with his fangs. Zoro yelped, pulling back out of habit and kicking himself for doing so automatically as Killer danced away, facing Zoro with his scythes up once he was off the bed.

“I have to teach you how to use your new weapons,” he said slyly.

Zoro sighed, resigning himself to an arena full of hurt for the next… ugh, at least a day—he shuddered. “Where are my swords?”

Killer shook his head, a shit-eating grin plastered to his face. “You already know how to swing a sword.”

Zoro’s expression went flat. *No shit.* “What do you expect me to use? I need my swords. I’m not walking in to fight everyone without swords.”

“Yes you are.”

“**Brat—**”

“Don’t need ‘em,” Killer said happily, his voice singsongy, like he knew a secret Zoro didn’t. “You’ve got new weapons.”

Zoro’s eyes widened as he realized what Killer was talking about.

No. Hell no. Oh hell. Fucking. No. He was **not** going to go fight **everyone** with **no weapons**—
“You’ll learn depth perception just the same,” Law cut in. “You can use your new sense of sight to see without an eye using reflections, dust particles, air movement, heat changes; smell to tell who’s closer to and farther from you; obviously your ears… There’s a chance you’ll learn faster if you don’t have your swords.”

“TO KEEP FROM GETTING KILLED?! GEE, YA THINK?!”

Kid chuckled from the other side of the room and Zoro blanched. “WHO’S BULLSHIT IDEA WAS THIS?!?”

Killer flashed Zoro a grin, fangs extended almost to his lips, and he ran a tongue across all four of them, beckoning Zoro forward with one claw.

“Whip ‘em out,” Killer whispered, his eyes black, owning his name more and more every day. Zoro swallowed, unable to help but notice the similarity in smiles and stance between his brother and his crazy-ass fathers.

He was going to die.

Zoro groaned, rubbing his face with his hands vigorously before he calmed his mind and stood abruptly. Killer bounded from the room with a victorious battle cry.

This was for Sanji.

*I’m coming for you, you stupid, shit-cook.*

He would do this for Sanji.

Zoro looked down at his hands, drawing on the vicious need to hurt anyone who touched the cook, letting the anger and power leach into his body, and his claws started to pull away from the tips of his fingers, thickening and sharpening as they stretched. He let his mouth drop open slightly to keep from cutting himself on his fangs.
He would gladly do this for Sanji.

Zoro sucked in one more slow breath before stalking towards the door, reaching it much faster than he was used to, Law and Kid trailing behind him as he marched toward the chaos sounding from the arena. Every single person—or NSPH—was in there ready and willing to kill to set Sanji free.

Wait for me, curly-brow.

Zoro felt fearless now.

-oOo-

“He isn’t ready! He’s been here barely two days and has only been agreeable to a couple of things I’ve suggested to him. The serum is still taking hold in his mind because it’s made for long-term use and can’t bombard the brain or his body will learn how to reject it and filter it. He has so much potential for everything you’re doing here and this could set him back—possibly for good!”

“I made a deal with Teach and our time to act is up,” Doflamingo replied coolly, not at all perturbed or troubled by Caesar’s sudden spike in concern. He needs access to the mainframe database to find the hacker he’s looking for, and I have agreed to provide that access. Teach is the reason Blackleg is sitting in this office at all. Without his contact with CP9 and his manpower, we would not have this opportunity at all.”

“So you’re going to risk it all? For an underground hack who pretends like he’s gotten to where he is by being good at what he does? He’s a manipulator. He gets what he wants and then stabs people in the back. He’s using you for this and you’re letting him.”

“I made a deal. I gave him my word in exchange for his. Regardless of his business ethics, I will continue to compose myself with good dealings—honest and fair to those who are good partners. He has delivered, and I, at least, am glad to have the product I ordered.”

Caesar gritted his teeth, his eyes flicking to where the NSPH wealth of information was sitting on the other side of the room, eyes glazed over, lost somewhere in his own tormented mind. Sanji had not been cheap, and he understood that.

“We will complete our deal,” Doflamingo continued, “and then he is yours. Does that sound
“...Blackleg won’t want to do this. He might not understand what he’s doing, but his brain will still recognize Redleg’s face.”

“Might we be able to entice him at all?”

Caesar growled to himself, understanding the lack of question. “Maybe,” he agreed after a moment. “But I want to take more samples before you send him off to this... sacrifice—”

“I’d actually like it if you were there.”

“ME?! I don’t do any physical altercations, that was clear when we first began working together—”

“Not to fight, just for Sanji. You would be there to manage his suggestions—I’d think only his doctor could manage him correctly—and to see anything that might aggregate to any sort of setback, possibly even working with him in the moment to keep him...” Doflamingo paused to look over at Sanji’s blank form, “with us.”

It was impossible to miss the twinge of pride bubbling up in Caesar’s face as Doflamingo talked.

“...Fine, but I want extra guards for protection.”

“That sounds reasonable. And Sanji?"

“...I’ll see what I can do.”

Caesar turned, striding over to his patient with an air of confidence in his step as if he had already coerced his victim into signing their own death wish. Doflamingo’s devilish grin split his face, and he strode back out of the laboratory, set to allow his scientist to work.

“Sanji.”
Nothing. Not even a flicker of recognition. Caesar debated raising the levels of the serum he was being fed for additional speed and a more aggressive alteration in his brain.

He leaned in to Sanji’s ear. “I found something interesting about your condition, but I want to warn you before I tell you that this may be hard to hear.”

He didn’t pause long to wait to see if Sanji’s catatonic appearance shifted at all.

“It seems that the NSPH virus has been manufactured. Governmental programs—which is what held you as a child—have been splicing together this monstrous virus to create weapons out of human subjects. We have found someone who can break into the computer system to remove the formula—delete it forever in using their linked computer network system—locate everywhere that is using the virus in the country and destroy every lab that ever did, is, or has held humans to use them for the NSPH virus. After that only Doflamingo would have access to the virus through you, and we would use that to develop a cure and remove the virus from every NSPH in existence. If we do that, there will be no more NSPH victims created ever again.”

The only sound in the room came from the whirring of the machines. Sanji was so far gone that even the possibility of helping other escape his fate wasn’t going to rouse him. So far so good; now for the next suggestion. If he reacted poorly, Caesar would administer more serum and try again in the next couple of hours.

“We need access to one person. One woman who is the key and can hack into the system and make this a reality. But we need to find her, and she’s very good at not being found. There’s an organization in the area that specializes in hiding people and we believe they’ve taken her into their… witness protection program, shall we say. If we get to her and make her help us, we could end all suffering for NSPH victims—no one would ever hurt like you do again. Think of all that the NSPH have been through—being used as tools, weapons, things, and it will continue if we don’t stop it. …It’s likely that we won’t get the location of this person easily. We might have to cause a little damage, but it won’t amount to the death of anyone. We need to make the boss tell us the location of Robin Nico. We need to extract the information from Zeff Redleg.”

Sanji hadn’t moved once. Caesar wasn’t even sure his brain was registering what he was saying.

Caesar needed something more personal. A gift. Something returned to him, especially after his recent… loss.
“…Sanji… what if I gave you your sight back?”

Sanji’s blue eye, void of its usual vibrancy and iridescence, widened infinitesimally. Caesar let out a happy cackle, unable to contain himself. He’d found another trigger for Sanji!

“The… state you were in when the… incident with Roronoa happened, it accelerated your healing already; we just have to… trigger healing in your eye specifically and you’ll be able to see again. But I’m going to need your help in return.”

It was a long and smothering minute of stillness, but sure enough, Sanji’s head tipped in an uncomfortable nod.

“Are you sure? We don’t want you hurt more.”

Sanji’s second nod came after a shorter pause, but his eye hadn’t reacted again and it hadn’t lost the stagnant, blue thickness of a muddy pond.

“Have you forgotten how to speak? You can't say anything?”

Caesar sighed. It was like talking to a ghost who didn’t quite understand what language was anymore.

“We leave for Baratie territory tomorrow; I’ll fix your eye up for you and you’ll be a ready warrior. It might hurt a little bit, but I assure you, you’ll be grateful for the sight. With how strong you are with currently, imagine all that you could accomplish with better depth perception, better coordination, better locating… I’ll try and make it hurt as little as possible.”

“More shots?” he asked meekly, pleading for it not to be true.

She gave him a nod, smiling sadly for him. “Just a couple, I promise.”
Tears filled his eyes and spilled over down his cheeks. “My arms hurt,” he whispered.

She pulled him in close and hugged him tight. This doctor hugged him too. He thought he would like this doctor.

“I’m sorry, buddy. But we have to. We’re going to get you better.”

“But I always don’t feel good after shots. Shots make me throw up. One time they made lights hurt my eyes—and one time they made my insides burn!” he cried.

“That’s the sickness, buddy,” she told him. “I know it’s not easy. But you’re doing great. And I’m going to stay right by your side the whole time. Ok?”

“Are you ready to begin, Sanji?”

Sanji nodded, stronger this time, and with less hesitation, and Caesar let the smirk leak into his calculated expression. Sanji couldn’t see him anyways. He turned and pulled a tool roll from the table behind him and set it on the bench next to Sanji’s leg, spreading it across the table to reveal an alarming and grotesque assortment of sharp instruments. Had Sanji been aware of what had just been placed in front of him, he might not have stayed so still.

But Sanji wasn’t sitting in the laboratory.

Sanji saw the emergency exit door in front of him. He’d never even seen the outside of the hospital, but he didn’t care. His body ached and stung and his lungs could barely handle the strain of running from yesterday’s inhaler that they’d given him that had nearly suffocated him. He could still smell the woman’s blood behind him and his body screamed for him to go back—he was so hungry!!—but he knew that if he turned around he might be caught. And he wasn’t coming back.

They wouldn’t take any more of him.

He didn’t belong to them anymore.

Sanji was fearless now.
“That was faster than I expected.” Law sounded disappointed.

“Fuck you,” Zoro spat, panting on the ground like he’d just run a marathon. Everyone around him was grinning and stretching having worked up a nice sweat all attacking him at once. He gritted his teeth, trying not to gasp in pain as his skin bubbled and stretched, crawling slowly over the plethora of open wounds lacing his body. Fuck them all. This shit hurt.

Killer sat down heavily next to him, holding out a bottle of water filled with thick, red liquid. The bottle was already forming condensation, chilled from being in the cooler. Zoro reached up and took it from him, thinking of all the times he’d gone to Killer’s school—or wherever he was—to get him the blood he needed. Killer was probably the only one who really understood the pain of his body healing itself.

Idly Zoro wondered if Killer had brought this all on his own, knowing Zoro would hurt after the fight. “My turn?”

Killer nodded happily and Zoro grinned back, draining the bottle. He stood, rolling his tight muscles and joints as they did most of the work of relieving the stress for him.

Zoro looked around to each set of eyes in his crew, falling on Luffy’s excited grin last, unable to keep from smiling back. He was ready to go. And the rest of them looked it too.

Zoro turned to Law, who gave him a nod of approval, clearly amazed medically that Zoro had been able to catch on to fighting with one eye but also disappointed that it had happened so fast and he hadn’t been able to observe more.

Zoro turned to Luffy, giving his captain the lead and Luffy jammed both fists in the air, hooting happily.

“Our cook needs us! Let’s go get him back!”

The crew erupted with approval, war cries and shrieks echoing around the arena and Zoro looked
down to find Chopper holding out his swords for him.

-00-“Yosh,” Luffy said firmly, swathed in uncharacteristic black, wedging his hat firmly down on his head. In front of the van, the enormous restaurant—a cover for black market trade, covert operations, personnel disappearance, and the backbone of the operation that had eventually become synonymous with the name of the territory as it offered free food to those who could not afford it—loomed like a dark phantom as the sun began to illuminate the world around it. The van had been haphazardly spray painted black to match the surroundings of the night; no one was expecting it to survive enough for a return trip. Franky had parked it so as to join several other large vehicles placed cleverly out of sight in the shadows of the nearby buildings, quickly silencing the two men that stood on guard—one with the hood of the van, the other with his hands. They were a bit late, but everything still seemed quiet, so it looked like they hadn’t missed the whole show. Robin had done some digging in one of Doflamingo’s internet networks and found that rather than take the cook as far away as humanly possible, they had brought him home. For nothing good, everyone knew, and had scrambled to get to the northern territory as fast as they were able to. Shanks, concerned that it could possibly be a trap to draw them from home and leave the “Red Hair” territory unguarded, had asked Law and Kid to stay, but assuming it wasn’t a trap and assuming that Doflamingo’s men still didn’t know that Robin had returned to them, their ambush should hold enough surprise to strike hard and fast.

Now all they had to do was get the cook out. Before he was made to hurt someone else he loved.

Zoro looked up at the shadowy sign—“The Baratie”—recognizing in the back of his mind that this was the first time he had seen Sanji’s home—the place where the cook had learned his trade, where he’d learned to fight, where he’d found his humanity, where he’d found a family… All around him, various sensory information was flooding Zoro’s brain—smells, sounds, lights, all of which were available to him and only him, but he was zeroed in on the cool, blue, ocean-like beacon.

Sanji was in there. He could feel it—sense it. His blood hummed at the thought of coming in contact with one of its own, just as it had with Killer. Less than one thousand feet, and he would take the cook in his arms and obliterate anyone who dared try to take the cook from him again.

Luffy looked each one of his crewmates in the eyes, gifting each one of them a knowing smile—a faith in them, a belief that they were anything and everything they needed to be to triumph in whatever the world threw at them—and then grabbed the door handle. They were all ready, dressed black as the night, weapons in hand, gaze set on the target in front of them.

Zoro breathed in the clear smell of steel and polish that his NSPH senses had given him the ability to nearly feel—letting it wash through his mouth, nose, body, and mind. He reached out for an
infinitesimal moment to Kuina before he placed the brilliant white sword between his teeth, gripping the other two as they trilled excitedly in his hand and letting the energy skitter like electricity up his arms and into his core.

Luffy pushed the door open carefully, and like one coordinated entity the crew sprinted for the double doors below the Baratie sign.

*Wait for me, Sanji.*

Zoro was fearless now.

-oOo-

Hey everyone! Guess what!! Look at this amazing art by ZoSanLaw of Sanji! Guys!! This wonderful person drew me some art for my work!! How incredible is that?? Go find her on Tumblr and make "oohing" and "awing" sounds to her wonderfulness! Thanks ZoSanLaw!!
I don’t own anything but my ideas.

The Baratie was stunning. Ceilings that towered over their heads and dwarfed them like fairies in a magical kingdom were speckled with glistening chandeliers. Tall, narrow windows stretched from about Zoro-height to the top of the room, giving the early morning light that had started to stream in an ethereal, almost religious feel as the room was illuminated. The art lining the walls had been selected with care, abstract and provoking and blue like the walls and the ocean theme that swallowed the building. There was a spiral staircase in the center of the ballroom-sized dining hall leading up to a balcony of tables, each adorned with candles and flowers that looked no more than a day old. White table clothes ghosted down like mist over thick, mahogany tables and gave the intricate, carved ocean designs of the backs of the chairs a solid background with which one could fully appreciate the majesty of the hand-carved chairs.

The Baratie was stunning, but it hadn’t fared so well since the arrival of its earlier unwelcome visitors.

Bodies of what must have been trusted right-hand men and women littered the floor, strewn like branches torn from trees in a violent storm. Blood speckled the pristine white tablecloths, and both the elegant tables and breath-taking chairs had upset in what was clearly a very violent struggle—perhaps even used as weapons and projectiles in the fight.

Zoro could taste the blood in the air even before they walked into the restaurant. There was so much of it everywhere. He held his breath and closed his eyes, willing his body to ignore the smell that made his body moan with hunger. He’d had some blood in the car before they’d arrived, but the sheer amount of it and the delicious composite of smells from so many different people would be too much for him to handle if he kept breathing regularly. He took an unconscious step forward and felt something soft under the sole of his boot. He swallowed, bracing himself for a limb or a digit of a person, but when he looked down the brilliant red of the roses that had once decorated the tables made his breath come to a slow and smothered stop in his throat. Roses were Sanji’s preferred flower to gift to women.

A deadly calm sank into Zoro’s mind and body and he strode into the demolished restaurant, everyone behind him quickly following in tow—not one to miss the excitement whenever it decided to show its face.
“Do you think we missed them?” Usopp asked quietly, face buried behind his mask, hands, and slingshot loaded with pepper spray pellets, but he was still shaking.

Franky shook his head, nudging one of the bodies with his foot disappointedly. “Their rides are outside—wouldn’t be able to go very far without those, bro. They’re in here.”

Chopper knelt between two people and laid his hands over their mouths, withdrawing them sadly after a moment. “How many people did he bring, do you think?” he whispered, looking to Luffy. Luffy didn’t answer, his eyes steeled as he scanned the shadows surrounding the room. There was a lot of damage, but honestly, it wouldn’t have been very hard for just Sanji to take care of this on his own.

“Upstairs?” Nami murmured.

“The upstairs seems to be an extension of the restaurant,” Robin spoke up, her voice calm and quiet. Her fingers were raised, ready with her kyusho-jitsu—her ninja-fast pressure point fighting that almost gave her the appearance of having multiple arms and legs when she moved fast enough. “Perhaps in the back, or downstairs. It’s quiet, so whatever is happening has started already.”

“This way,” Zoro spoke up suddenly, striding towards the double doors layered with oceanic paintings tucked behind the spiral staircase. “I can feel him.”

His reasoning needed no convincing. No one even thought to distrust his new skillset.

-oOo-

Zeff Redleg wasn’t stupid.

Initially the plan had been to threaten him with injury to Sanji, but Caesar hadn’t been too keen on the idea of triggering their subject in the negative manner and possibly turning the volatile creature he’d created against him. It wasn’t even a guarantee that Zeff would tell them anything even if Sanji were in danger. He wasn’t stupid enough to tell Sanji anything if he showed up unannounced with no word from Shanks, semi-catatonic and asking about a hacker that had gone into hiding after he’d already been kidnapped. He wasn’t stupid enough to answer any questions Sanji would ask over the phone.
Which left, in Caesar’s opinion, really only one option.

Caesar would ask Zeff the questions, and every time Zeff didn’t answer or lied to him, Caesar would tell Sanji to leave another mark on Zeff. A big mark. And progressing to bigger and bigger the longer they were there with no answers.

But first, he had to prime the subject.

“Your son killed Zoro Roronoa four days ago.”

Zeff’s eyes went dark, a dread and understanding sinking into his expression, splattered with blood from the first hit—a broken nose, child’s play in this type of profession. He didn’t bother looking up at Sanji again. Seeing the robotic, dead expression on his son’s face wouldn’t make this any easier. It hadn’t taken very long once he started hearing the slaughter Sanji had committed to figure out what was about to happen. It wasn’t worth the time trying to run; he’d never make it very far. He’d had time to down one drink before they had found him.

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?” Caesar was grinning. Sanji was standing by his side, his back strong but his head slightly off kilt, and his eyes wouldn’t focus on anything in particular. Behind them, eight men in thick, black, bullet-proof padding and helmets stood with guns almost half the length of a full grown man. They seemed unsure of their place now that Zeff’s people had been eliminated. Caesar had yet to acknowledge them again since they’d entered the room. So they stood at the back of the room with their assault rifles at their sides, waiting for the entertainment to start. All had at least some experience with Caesar’s methods, and it was never anything less than thrilling.

“How could such a strong boy, who had worked so hard to retain his humanity, possibly have been able to be influenced like this, right Sanji?”

Sanji made no indication that he’d heard anything, but Caesar didn’t stop smiling.

“His lover, dead by his hands—his own monstrous, uncontrollable, lethal hands. What do you think killing his father would do to him?”

“…He doesn’t know me,” Zeff growled, wiping the blood from his swelling lip. The little eggplant hit hard. Only a couple more of those to the head before he wouldn’t be able to see straight.
“Not right now,” Caesar agreed. “Not until I want him to. Sanji, again.”

Sanji strode forward with the immediate reaction of a programed machine, eyes locked on the older man’s, and then his foot found Zeff’s face again and Zeff was launched, sprawling over backwards and choking on the blood that dripped down his throat. He rolled to his side the moment his vision was centered enough to find the ground and spit fragments of shattered teeth onto the floor.

“I think Sanji would benefit much more from seeing you already dead—cold and stiff. Maybe I’ll have him hold you. I’m told it was quite endearing when he cradled Roronoa and shielded him with his own body, as if protecting the brute would do anything to help him or keep him alive. So sweet.”

It wasn’t a foolproof plan, but Sanji really was the old man’s only weakness, and it was possible that with the threat of Sanji coming back into consciousness and realizing that he was the one to kill his father, Zeff might actually talk.

“All we want is her name. Give us the name of the hacker you helped get into hiding, and this will all be over,”

Zeff steeled himself, letting his gaze drift down to the floor.

Zeff wasn’t stupid.

Caesar had come with Sanji and just a couple of men, who—if the fact that only Sanji was standing here—had died in the process of getting to him. It was actually possible that Sanji had killed everyone, including Doflamingo’s men. If his orders were to do anything to get to Zeff, with his reflexes, he wouldn’t have wasted time finding out who was who before he dropped them. It was just Caesar and Sanji here, no Doflamingo, no backup.

“There isn’t a single possibility of Sanji and I getting out of this alive.”

“How’s that?” Caesar asked coolly.

“Even if you let me live, which I really doubt, you will take him, and everything that he is from him. And I won’t live and know the I allowed that to happen.”
Caesar just stared at him flatly, not in the least bit amused by the stalling.

“I will not condone your torturing, but it’s obvious that even if I comply, it won’t stop, and I won’t be part of it.”

“But you already are. Just hearing Roronoa’s name triggers your son now. Imagine when I have two names to work off of. Maybe I’ll condition him to perform different tasks based on whether I use you or Roronoa to trigger him. That could be fun.” Caesar’s grin had returned. “And come now, you think we’d let such a glorious resource go to waste on such a little project? We’re nowhere near through the first couple of steps. We need the name of the hacker. Her location would be helpful as well, but that won’t be hard for us to find once we know who she is. After that, Sanji’s blood—and the perfection of the viral cocktail in him—will allow us to create the most powerful army in the universe. People will cower to us from every corner of the globe, all power having been returned to Doflamingo, as it rightfully should be.”

Ah. So that was it.

“You’re crazy to think I’d help you.”

“Sanji, harder.”

Zeff braced himself, steeling his shoulders and keeping his eyes on the floor as he heard the solid steps finding their way back to his side.

“With your hands, if you please.”

Zeff’s eyes popped, nearly dropping out of his head, and his gaze met Sanji’s dead expression as Sanji raised his hand, and in an invisible moment his fist had snapped down, driving into Zeff’s head like a train and cracking his forehead solidly against the ground. Zeff gasped, spitting blood from the spaces now missing teeth in his mouth and looked up at Sanji in horror to find his hand dripping with red.

_Is that my blood or his?_

Zeff couldn’t tell if Sanji had done any damage to himself, and honestly any injuries wouldn’t last long with Sanji’s healing rate, but Zeff couldn’t keep himself from shaking at the idea of Sanji
hurting his hands.

Zeff gritted his teeth. Caesar would make Sanji kill him with his hands, with the tools for his art. Sanji would never cook again after this even if he did manage to escape.

“Oh good, a reaction from you. I was starting to think this was going to be much more difficult than I’d originally thought.”

Zeff looked up into Sanji’s brilliant, iridescent eyes, looking back at him with such stagnant vacancy. A sad smile found its way onto his face despite himself.

“Your eye looks better,” he said quietly. Maybe luck would be on his side and Sanji would hear him. Or Caesar wouldn’t.

“A gift to our new friend,” Caesar supplied, clearly pleased with himself. Sanji had some minor new scarring around the eye, but the lid was supple and secure, blinking exactly in time with his other eye. Its stunning color had returned, echoed and intensified by the blue of the Baratie walls. “In exchange for helping us.”

“…Little Eggplant,” Zeff tried again, filtering out everything from Caesar. “You don’t have to—”

“No, he doesn’t,” Caesar agreed. “He wants to. All research we do on him will of course help him to be more in control of himself, to be calmer and steadier.”

Zeff’s eyes narrowed sharply. “He’s lying, Eggplant—”

“Remember why we’re here, Sanji. Think of all the other NSPH who won’t suffer because of everything you’re doing here.”

Sanji hadn’t moved aside from blinking. Zeff wasn’t even sure that his eyes were really on him. Maybe Sanji was seeing right through him to the bloodied tiles below.

“We have a job to do, Sanji, and I’m afraid Redleg isn’t cooperating as we hoped him to. It seems that we must take the steps I prepared you for, the ones I warned you we may have to.”
Sanji raised his hands slowly until they were in front of his face, but his eyes weren’t tracking anything he was doing. He wasn’t seeing anything in front of him.

Zeff watched in mounting horror as Sanji stretched out his fingers, and then gripped his right forefinger in his left hand and pulled.

“No!” he yelped as the skin pulled taught, the joint and bones straining to hold together.

“Her name, Redleg.”

“Eggplant, you don’t want to do this!”

“We need her name.”

Zeff heaved himself up, slipping on the pooling blood beneath him and crashing back to the ground. His peg leg struck Sanji’s shin sharply, but Sanji hadn’t even felt it.

Snap.

A feral sound erupted from Zeff’s mouth as Sanji’s finger broke, a small wince finally making its way into his eyes. He was on his feet in an instant, almost unsure of how he got there, his hands set for Caesar’s throat.

“Sanji!”

Sanji’s foot found Zeff’s chest, and Zeff lifted into the air, his lungs forced empty from the blow. He let out a sharp, hacking sound and hit the floor hard, sliding backwards on the slick kitchen tiles and smashing into the counters behind him, cutting boards of all shapes and sizes raining down on him from above. His eyes, filled with water and his vision rocking back and forth, found Sanji, where he was still holding the broken finger in his grip.

“I can have him take it off,” Caesar offered.
“Eggplant, please…” Zeff barely heard the whisper leave his tongue.

“Last chance. And then I have him start on the other fingers. The name of the hacker you helped into hiding three months ago.”

“I guess that would be you, wouldn’t it, Ro?”

“It does sound like me they want, Franky.”

Caesar shrieked, all eyes whirling to the double doors where a mass of uncharacteristic black stood, bodies taught and ready for the volatile situation that was very likely to occur.

The eight men—shocked at their sudden inclusion in the moment—whirled with their guns. Luffy snapped forward like a rubber band, grabbing the heads of the two men closest to him and cracking them together. Their heads burst with blood like melons, skulls dented, and fell heavily to the floor in a spray of blood. He whirled to Caesar, glare as dark as the young man could make it, which—granted—wasn’t much, but the look was so foreign on his face that it fostered its own sense of terror and forebodingness.

Franky and Brook lunged. Brook’s sword whipped like a snake, slicing one men open from neck to stomach as Franky threw the other clear across the room where he landed hard on the restaurant’s enormous spread of burners, the grates and tools laid across it exploding from under him and clattering across the floor in an echoing dissonance. Robin’s fingers found nerve points in the neck of the man closest to her and he dropped to his knees before he’d even had the chance to lift his gun, his eyes rolling back into his head as he sagged heavily into the tiles, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. Once he was on the floor she jabbed him like a rattlesnake three times in three different spots in his chest and neck and he started to shake, his throat gurgling as it filled with liquid.

The man behind the one who Robin had brought to the floor screamed suddenly, scrubbing at his eyes and nose as something thick and pungent spread its way across his face. Usopp—slingshot held tightly in his other hand—drove his fist into the man’s throat harshly and he crashed backwards into the wall behind him.

Nami’s staff cracked across one of the last standing men’s face and he tumbled into the man standing next to him, his gun going off and littering the ceiling with a spray of wild bullets. Nami dropped to the floor to avoid the shower of shrapnel and Chopper dove over her, rolling over the unconscious man’s body to wrap his legs around the last man’s arms to keep him from raising his gun again. The
man kicked wildly for a moment before Chopper tore his helmet off and grabbed his hair, smashing his face into the ground repeatedly until he lay still, and then he shoved the body off of him, scrambling back to the safety of the crew.

Caesar stood gaping, his eyes wide and stuck on Zoro, his black bandana pulled down tight over his eyes—eye, thick scar mostly obscured by the black cloth, a smattering of tattered yellow embroidery that used to form the shape of something akin to a sun, or a virus, ornamenting the back of the cloth—the only color on his body aside from his loud green hair.

“You.” Caesar’s voice bled through the air like a thick miasma, his face pulling in tight in fury as his fists started to shake by his side. Zoro’s eyes bled black, his fangs ripping through his gums and creeping towards his lips around Wado as they extended, screaming to find their way into Caesar’s throat, wailing for his blood to decorate the floor. His grip tightened around Shusui and Sandai Kitetsu and he took a step forward.

“Sanji!!”

For a moment, Zoro forgot that Sanji wouldn’t appear in front of him faster than the eye could hope to see. Sanji’s astounding grace and fluidity never wavered, as it never had before, and Zoro’s eyes followed every exquisite movement Sanji made as if he were strolling instead of rocketing towards him. Zoro couldn’t help the gentle sigh that found its way into his throat, the swell in his chest, the calm that somehow worked its way into his every nerve even with Sanji’s fangs and teeth coming at him like bullets.

Sanji was here in front of him.

Sanji was ok.

Zoro rolled his blades away from Sanji’s hands, and Sanji collided with him like a asteroid hurtling in from space. Zoro felt his bones shake—and maybe even the building around them shake—but his feet held strong against the floor, Sanji’s grip rattling against his as the cook snarled at him like a feral creature.

The sigh in Zoro’s throat had turned into a smirk tugging at the edges of his lips. “Your eye’s better,” he said quietly, knowing Sanji would hear him.

Sanji’s striking blue eyes popped at the sound of his voice and he threw himself back, landing on the
other side of the room in a tight crouch, baring his fangs in threat. Sanji’s eyes weren’t black. He wasn’t angry. He might not have even known what he was doing.

Zoro’s eyes quickly found Zeff where Robin and Chopper had run to his side, helping him into a sitting position so they could pull him out of the way of the fight. Zeff’s clothes were soaked through with blood, several bones in his face broken and teeth missing visible through black eyes and swollen lips. Zoro’s gaze snapped back to Sanji and found the blood on the cook’s hands and shoes. Zoro’s eyebrows pulled together, his lips pinching tight. If he had time he might have felt sadness for Sanji when the cook came to and realized what had happened, but right now his focus was bringing Sanji back to him.

“Sanji!!” Caesar screamed and Sanji’s head whipped to him like a guard dog, ready for his next command. Zoro’s blood roiled like magma in his veins, a low snarl rising in his throat at the man who dared to think that Sanji was his. Caesar looked scared, his eyes wide with the possibility of Sanji recognizing Zoro. “Remember why we’re here! Remember that we have to delete the NSPH from the network—we have to stop atrocities like the ones that happened to you from happening to others! These people, like the old man, will get in the way of that!”

Sanji whirled back to him instantly, his iridescent blue eyes fading to a deep grey as his fears and traumas started to sink back into the orders. Zoro readied himself with churning rage held just at bay, resigning himself to fight if he couldn’t get through to Sanji.

“Sanji, stop. You don’t want to do this,” he said firmly as Sanji straightened, still hunched and ready to spring, claws off of the floor and trained on Zoro’s body. Zoro watched Sanji’s every twitch, every breath, every blink and lack thereof, waiting for the cook to come at him.

Behind him, Zoro felt everyone ready themselves for the fight and he waved them back harshly with Shusui, ignoring the angry trill the sword gave him for taking it away from the heat of the fight. He took a deliberate step toward Sanji, watching the unsure waver in the cook’s eyes at the sudden advance, but Sanji didn’t stop coming forward. Zoro latched onto that hesitation, praying to everything that he didn’t believe in that Sanji still knew who he was in his heart—that Sanji knew who both he and Zoro were.

Sanji’s claws slashed out and Zoro knocked them away with the flat side of Shusui to quiet its annoyed vibrations, reminding it what was in front of them. The closer he got the more Sanji’s grey eyes flickered—flickered away from him, to Caesar and back—from grey to blue and back. Sanji was in there. He could feel Zoro’s strength. He could probably sense the virus in Zoro’s body, and it was keeping him from lunging for Zoro’s throat. Sanji finally took one stumbling step back, lashing out again with his claws—shaky and indirect this time—and Zoro knocked him away again.

“What are you doing?!” Caesar bellowed, making Sanji’s face pinch in fear and he lashed at Zoro
again, taking another wobbly step backwards, his fangs still bared but with no bite behind the threat. His eyes were almost completely blue now, and he was looking for an out, his eyes finding openings around Zoro to try to dart through. Zoro held a sword in each spot, following the movement of Sanji’s eyes.

“You don’t have to run, cook.”

“Attack him!!” Caesar screamed, slamming a fist onto the counter nearest to him. Sanji jumped sharply and Zoro sucked in a surprised breath, not expecting the sudden movement, missing the next time Sanji’s claws snapped forward and they sliced through his shoulder before he could block.

Zoro’s blood hit Sanji’s fingers and Sanji’s eyes went wide. He fell backwards a couple of steps, staring at the thick, red substance on his fingers in utter confusion.

*He can smell the virus.* Zoro grimaced, hoping that Sanji wouldn’t convince himself out of not attacking him.

“Come on, Sanji, wake up. This is the experiments.”

“You are our strongest! The strongest of any NSPH ever created!!”

“They gave you something that’s messing with your head. This isn’t you.”

“You are the only NSPH Major to make it past puberty! You are the alpha of all NSPH! A perfect machine for killing! **Kill him!!**”

Sanji was frozen, both in mind and body, staring at the blood on his fingers, the beginnings of realization starting to come back into his eyes.

“Do you really want Zeff dead? The man who saved you?”

Sanji flinched violently, his eyes snapping to where Zeff was still on the floor with Robin and Chopper and now Nami and Usopp at his side, all ready to defend him should Sanji lose himself again.
“You told me once that you owed you life to Zeff. That you could never repay him. Do you really want him dead?”

Sanji shut his eyes, shaking his head, trying to rid himself of whatever fog was flooding his mind.

“You cannot back off! You are the most superior of all NSPH! We gave you your strength for this! Kill Roronoa!”

“This isn’t you. The monster behind you turned you into this.”

Sanji’s eyes flicked back to where Caesar was standing and Caesar shrieked, pulling back from the counter, but Sanji only took another shaky step backwards. His back hit the wall on his next step and he sank to the ground, curling in on himself as Zoro kept coming.

Somewhere in the back of Zoro’s mind, Zoro saw Law sitting in front of him—a small, broken child on the floor of Doflamingo’s research facilities, convinced into giving his life to these monsters.

“We were so worried, Sanji.”

“GET UP!!”

“They hurt Law too. They got him into underground fighting by promising things they would never give him. They tried to kill him—to teach him to die for Doflamingo. Caesar’s the reason you were kidnapped from Zeff’s territory in the first place. He’s the reason we found you dying in a crate in the back of a truck.”

Sanji’s eyes snapped open, bleeding a thick inky black as his gaze found Caesar and Caesar gaped, stumbling back silently as if that would keep him from being seen.

“Caesar broke into the military network and stole the NSPH virus formula. He infected hundreds of infants, raising them and killing them for his research. His information was destroyed by Law and Kid when Law escaped from them and he’s been trying to rebuild it again ever since. You were the key to rebuilding that research.”
“It’s a lie! Don’t listen to him! I will hurt you like you’ve never felt pain before, you miserable animal!”

Sanji clapped his hands over his ears, shutting his eyes tight and tucking his face into his knees. Zoro watched a slow rocking start in Sanji’s shoulders and got on his knees, reaching for Sanji’s slumped form. He looked so small and frail, so unlike the person Zoro had met just a few short months ago. That Sanji was strong and fearless, years after being taken out of the research facility. This Sanji… Zoro was meeting the Sanji from moments after being broken out.

Zoro’s fingers touched Sanji’s arm—barely laid his skin on Sanji’s sleeve—and Sanji snapped forward, sinking his teeth into Zoro’s arm and yanking back just as quickly. Zoro heard Chopper shriek behind him and then go silent in confusion.

“What aren’t you feeding?!”

A soft smile touched Zoro’s face as it dawned on him why Sanji had been so unwilling to attack him, looking gently into Sanji’s terrified, beautiful eyes.

Sanji remembered.

“You already got me, shit-cook. NSPH don’t drink other NSPH.”

Sanji swallowed heavily, his gaze finding the floor before he looked back into Zoro’s eyes, the fear behind his eyes starting to fade.

“Do you remember my name?” Zoro asked carefully, scared that he was asking too early. What if Sanji didn’t? No, he was too strong. “Please don’t have forgotten me.” Sanji was too strong. Zoro knew in his heart that Sanji was too strong—no matter what was done to him, no matter how much he had been hurt—to forget the people he loved.

Sanji blinked heavily, his brows knitting with understanding and sadness. He looked over at Caesar once more, swallowed the remaining fear in his expression, and murmured, “…Z-Zoro.”

Caesar bolted for the door, Luffy, Franky, and Brook bolting after him, Luffy screaming excitedly
that he wanted Flamingo, Nami screaming for them not to let Blackbeard get away if they saw him.

Zoro sank forward and grabbed Sanji, pulling him into a tight hug, feeling Sanji tense in his arms and not caring if he was attacked or bitten. He needed to hold Sanji, to feel him in his arms, to feel his heartbeat against his own. Sanji’s hands found Zoro’s chest and shoved hard, trying to wriggle out of his grip, and Zoro held him tighter.

“You won’t bite me. You didn’t bite Zeff after two months of starving to death with his blood across the room. You’re stronger than this, stronger than the virus, stronger than Caesar.”

Sanji stopped pushing, a calm settling into his body as Zoro gripped him. Zoro held him tighter, burying his head in Sanji’s neck and hair, breathing in Sanji’s smell like it was the only oxygen left on the planet.

“Come back to me, Sanji. I love you. You know that. I know you know that. You haven’t forgotten, you’ve hidden it away. But it’s there. I’m there. We’re there. Come back.”

Sanji didn’t move and Zoro paused, stagnant fear sinking back into him that—despite the cook remembering him, he wouldn’t want to come back, and then Sanji’s nervous arms wrapped around his torso and the cook tucked his face into Zoro’s chest, sucking in a shaky breath.

Sanji’s breath picked up suddenly, melding into shaking hyperventilating as words began pouring from his mouth, too muffled in Zoro’s shirt for anyone but Zoro’s NSPH senses to pick up.

“I-I… I-I couldn’t… stop—I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t make i-it stop—it just kept coming—it was all so black, just—just like back then. It wouldn’t stop. It wouldn’t stop. I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry I’m sorry—”

“Stop, love cook, goddamnit you’re here and you know who I am and I don’t fucking care.”

“I love you. I love you. I love you so fucking much.”

“Me too, cook.”
“…Don’t let them take me again. I don’t want to lose you again.”

“You never lost me cook. I was always here, I was always coming for you—”

“N-No… he took me. I lost you. I… I almost killed you. H-He took me and everything was so black and I lost how important you were and-and how important—fuck, Zeff—!” Sanji’s back went rigid in a heartbeat as he strained to see the old man. Zoro shifted, unwilling to let Sanji go but angling himself so that Sanji could see Chopper bandaging the old man.

“He’s fine, he’s fine, just a lot of blood. He’s completely fine and he’s worried about you so we should go see him.”

Sanji sank back again at the thought of getting close to his father. Zoro winced, understanding Sanji’s realization that he had almost killed his father. “…I lost you all. I… I knew who you were, but… I lost you. You were just there. You weren’t… mine. You weren’t my memories, my experiences, my thoughts, my… I don’t know what happened… I don’t want—”

Sanji was blubbering and he might not have stopped any time soon, and Zoro ducked in without a second thought, pressing his lips to Sanji’s. Sanji melted, Zoro’s touch finally getting to him, and let himself be held.

“I will never leave you, and they can’t have you. I’m yours and at your mercy. Always. I wont ever leave.”

Sanji just held him, sighing into his shirt.

Robin appeared above the two and Zoro looked up to find her with a sad determination in her eyes.

“…What you said about Caesar trying to recreate his research… how far along in the process do you think he is?”

Zoro blinked, not even sure where to begin answering that. Law had said Sanji was the key, but who knew what else that meant towards what they had done. And he didn’t want to give her that type of vague response with Sanji here.
She continued without waiting for him.

“I’m going to do what Caesar said, whether or not he was lying to get Sanji to follow along with him”—Zoro felt Sanji flinch in his arms and gripped him tighter. Robin saw the exchange and winced but didn’t stop—“I’m going to hack into the server and delete all remnants of the NSPH virus and formula. If I can get into the governmental network with my equipment, I can find everywhere the virus is on any computer with the linked connections, and I’m going to delete it all. And then I’m going to locate all of the facilities acting with NSPH and we’re going to go to them and get every NSPH out and eviscerate everything and everyone who had contact with the facilities. I’m going to talk to Shanks and Zeff to get money and weapons and we’re going to leave it all in ashes and end this horrendous cycle. And I want you two to come with me because you are NSPH and the other NSPH—no matter how traumatized they are—will be able to sense that you are… kin. You’ll be the easiest way for us to enact this plan and I want to do it once and I want to do it correctly. And then I want to find everyone that Doflamingo promised Sanji to and I want to eviscerate them too. You don’t have to come along for that, but I need your help for the first part.”

Zoro loosened his grip as Sanji raised his head, looking up at Robin with steady and watery eyes, nodding to her with a deep breath. She smiled gently back at him, welcoming him home with her eyes.

**The End (Part 1)**

Hey everyone! I want to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for sticking with me through such a crazy journey. This story has been something I’ve working on for over six years now and it feels like not long ago that I thought I might not be able to finish it at all, so I want to thank everyone for being a part of this exploration for me and for pouring so much love into this story to fuel me to the end. I know this chapter is much shorter than most of the others; I was grappling with how long to make it, and ultimately what I decided was to split the end into an “actual” end and an epilogue instead of one enormous chapter that felt disjointed and rushed. I’ve left some things unexplained at this point and I don’t want you to worry that I will leave them indefinitely; they just need their own space and their own time. Writing the whole thing at once also would have taken me twice the time it already has and you’ve all been waiting for so long, so here is The End Part 1. Part 2 to come soon!

:)
The Victor

Chapter Summary

Epilogue

I don’t own anything but my ideas.

The Victor

The eradication of the NSPH virus from the world took less than six months to complete. Due to the classified nature of the studies with the virus, its placement across the globe was sparse, and Robin had a list of the seven establishments that had ever worked with the NSPH virus in less than an hour from when they arrived home. Her plan had all of its finishing details several days later, but Robin was never one to take less than the utmost amount of time on important things.

There were five NSPH laboratories all within driving distance and two outside the country. Robin brought what information she had to Shanks, who gave her unlimited access to whatever funds needed to rent or buy whatever was required to enact her master plan. Robin assured him that she would only put together the barest of necessities; most of their strength would come from the anger shared between the nakama. Everything else would be an added bonus.

Robin took one month to put together everything that was needed—guns, incendiaries, smoke grenades, flash bombs, cars, and a plane. Everything else most of Shanks’ friends and allies already had in their possession.

She took one month to deconstruct the layout and learn every detail of every facility: the exits, windows, emergency escapes, emergency systems, plumbing, electrical work… anything that could be used against the occupants of the building. In that month she created viruses for the buildings’ control panels and computer systems and placed them in devices that could be easily plugged into the technical systems, regardless of their level of connection with other systems. The virus was built to act as a person: finding permission instead of bludgeoning through barriers. Robin foresaw no issues.

She took one month teaching her insatiably detailed maps and plans to selected groups of two or three who were each assigned to one of the facilities—Law and Kid; Robin and Franky; Brook, Chopper, and Usopp; Luffy and Nami; and Zoro and Sanji. The plan was relatively simple: Go in, kill everyone, destroy everything. It was a bit overkill, but it was efficient and effective, and no one had any qualms with her proposal. They would go out in waves, Zoro and Sanji to the closest
facility, as they would be the fastest to destroy an establishment, so they could leave to fly to the farthest after they were finished; Law and Kid to the next closest and then to the next farthest, and so on. The idea was to have everything happen so quickly that no facility would be able to get any advanced warning before it was burned to the ground.

The next month was intensive training. Every day Zoro stood in the center of the arena with his bandana tied low over his eyes and his three swords gripped tight. He’d arrive an hour early to sit there in the pits and meditate, and then the rest of the participants of Robin’s plan filed in in groups. Sanji had been with the rest of the groups in the arena for the first day of training, assuring everyone that he was fine and more than capable of controlling himself for a cause this important. But not one hour in his eyes suddenly bled black and he started lunging for people with a real intent to hurt. The arena was evacuated and Zoro of course offered himself as a partner until Sanji wore off some of his frantic energy. He was able to force an uneasy calm on Sanji long enough to remind him where he was, and then he brought Sanji home and made voracious love to him until Sanji was himself enough again to lay in Zoro’s arms quietly and admit that he might not be ready to fight yet. Zoro had held him quietly and nodded, absentmindedly laying kisses on his forehead and running his fingers through Sanji’s hair. The cook had been through some real shit recently, and Caesar was dead by Luffy’s hands but Doflamingo and Blackbeard still roamed free. Zoro could tell by the intense beating in Sanji’s chest that the cook, even months later, still held a clear deep-seeded fear of the possibility of being taken again. It was no secret now where he was. Zoro had gritted his teeth and squeezed Sanji tight and swore to himself that it would be him that went anywhere with the bastards before Sanji ever did. He told Sanji that he would work the rest of them hard, be absolutely sure that they were ready, and then they’d handle the issue. It was clear Sanji wasn’t too pleased having to back out, but he had more important considerations than his pride.

Zoro trained everyone for that month, pushing them all to their limits as he fought all-out with his new NSPH senses and agility. There was a good chance, after all, that they’d run into NSPH starving or under the influence of something that made them forget who they were. They all had to be ready to defend themselves.

Zoro took the month to discover what his body could do and what his very few limitations were; mostly the month was needed to fully adjust to the onslaught of incoming information from the world around him—sound, vibration, color, touch, air current, breath, light wave… even at the end of the month his brain still reeled as it worked to process everything he was aware of. Sanji told him he’d never had that sort of issue, possibly because he didn’t remember when he was turned. Zoro’s heart ached for baby Sanji, screaming in a hospital laboratory, alone and battered by tests and sensory information.

Zoro’s inexorable power stunned him every day, and for a time he was strangely jealous of Sanji for having so much practice with his NSPH status. He felt like a baby giraffe: wobbly and sloppy and as if he had no true direction for anything he did. His brain worked too fast in one direction and his body too fast in the other—leaving him sore and strained and angry at the end of every day. He’d put several cracks in the building that threatened the foundation, and had tweaked nearly every muscle and joint in his body rotating like a goddamn rubber band as his body and mind registered every single attack coming at him almost before his attacker had begun their approach, his body screaming
at him with inarguable force to counter every single iota of danger.

It was the end of the month and looking like neither Sanji nor Zoro would be on their game enough to be the quintessential part of the plan. With their NSPH status, they were one of the groups that would be destroying two facilities—Law and Kid would be the other. No other groups were strong enough or fast enough to accomplish the same task in the same time frame. Rearrangement would have to be done, throwing a monkey wrench and stress and fear into everything.

Zoro could feel his animal nature roiling more and more every day. He was weak, and useless, and not anything like a warrior—let alone a swordsman. His fangs cut into his gums and lips as they extended and shrank rapidly in his frustration, everyone bore more marks from his claws than his swords, and it took an hour of weights at the end of every day to calm his seething self before he went home to Sanji.

Robin had pulled him aside and told him that they weren’t ready. They would take another month to train, with more emphasis now on his skills. They would train as usual every other day, and on the opposite day Zoro would train with Law, Kid, Luffy, and Shanks, who had offered to step in after observing Zoro blast a hole through the ceiling, his eyes black and deadly as he eyed his nakama like prey. The training helped, but every day Zoro failed again just a little bit more. His body wanted to go faster and faster and faster and no one could keep up with him to wear out his animalistic side. He wanted to hurt them. His muscles screamed in frustration for an actual fight, for an actual challenge beyond his own mind being unable to process everything it needed to, and at one point he stormed out of the arena before he broke it entirely, leaving everyone grimacing behind him.

Sanji had found him as he was leaving, a grocery bag in his arm filled with ingredients he was bringing to prepare training dinner. He’d looked Zoro up and down once—Zoro’s wide, frantic eyes shifting like everything around him was a threat, his hands curled back into talons, his chest heaving, his body shaking with a need for his energy to go somewhere. Sanji sighed, set down the groceries, took a deep drag on his cigarette, and lunged for Zoro’s throat.

They’d destroyed the stairwell in their fight, and lay panting and bleeding, sprawled out on the rubble when it was safe enough for everyone else to come see the extent of the damage. Nami was the only one to say anything, glaring heartily at them both before informing them that this would be coming out of their winnings until it was paid off. It didn’t matter. The magic combination had been found. Every day before training Sanji and Zoro fought like apex predators on endless cocaine, finishing just as everyone else arrived, just tired enough not to be a threat to themselves, their friends, or the building.

Robin okayed them for action. The date was set. Sanji made everyone one last feast before they left, and everyone promised to return safely under threat of tears a la Chopper.
At dusk, they all stood out front of the arena, Shanks and Killer standing on the steps like kings ready to send their soldiers off into battle. Everyone had nodded their good lucks to their nakama and climbed into their respective cars.

Sanji and Zoro waited a moment and watched the other cars drive away into the not-so-obscuring black, able to watch them almost until they were miles away. The distance between them and the disappearing cars nudged Sanji, who was in the driver’s seat, into starting the engine but he leaned back against the seat again once it had started and closed his eyes. Zoro looked over forlornly, understanding that there was nothing he could say until all was done, and reached out to take Sanji’s hand. The sun was gone over the horizon, but Zoro didn’t struggle to see every stunningly beautiful shred of Sanji. His incredible Sanji. Zoro squeezed his hand and Sanji returned the gesture in kind before his eyes popped open, dark now, serious and laced with purpose. He took the wheel in his free hand and pulled away from the arena slowly. Zoro looked out again at Killer and waved, an odd motion that he regretted the moment he’d begun, but Killer flung his arms into the air and flapped like a downed bird, hopping up and down the front steps in exuberance for their mission. Zoro’s face broke into an unauthorized grin and he leaned back against his headrest, looking over again at Sanji idly. Sanji gripped his hand tighter, silent still, but absolutely sure in his body language that he’d be with Zoro every step of the way.

“Read it again,” Sanji mouthed. His words would have been inaudible to anyone else’s ears. As it was, Zoro hear read just the wind coming from his lips and nodded, reaching into the backpack beneath his feet to pull out the binder Robin had made for them. They were one of only two groups that had two binders—one for each facility. Zoro passed the map and flipped over to their “itinerary,” a simple list of jobs for them to execute:

At dawn, hide the car and find position. Wait until midday when all staff have returned from lunch (see attached staff lunch schedule)

Execute virus from cell phone – all electricity will stop, all emergency functions will cease, all windows and doors will lock. Use virus-tailored code 321111 to access locked areas

Clear all staff by any means necessary

Find all living NSPH and ensure their safety (all exits and escapes are marked on Map #2)

Once all NSPH have been evacuated, use code 111123 at the front entrance code box to destroy all NSPH-related material

Zoro let the binder fall into his lap and looked back over at Sanji, who had taken the time to light up a cigarette.

“Ready?” The calm in his voice felt unnatural, but he wasn’t going to complain.
Sanji pulled the cigarette from his lips, the same unnatural calm in his voice.

“Fuck yeah.”

-oOo-

Zoro sheathed his swords silently, looking down over the bodies strewn across the floor, their white coats eerily red even in the black of the electricity-stripped building. Zoro wasn’t even sure they’d realized what was happening. He and Sanji were too fast.

He’d never considered himself a killer before. Before, it was work. People attacked him, and he defended himself.

He looked up to where Sanji was shoving a body off of its chair to tap on the keyboard in front of it. The computer lit up, the only light in the whole compound, illuminating Sanji’s perfection as the cook leaned into the screen, flicking his smoldering cigarette up and down between his lips. Sanji had never wanted to be a killer.

Zoro pursed his lips, looking down again at the bodies. It had to be done. No more of this. They were going to end it today. He sniffed heavily, running the back of his hand across his nose and trying to clear his head of the indescribably rich and exquisite smell flooding the air.

“Anything?” he asked silently, pulling the roll of selected papers from the binder and sifting through them to find the map. Not that it would help him at all. He rolled them up again, twisting them tightly in his hands and telling himself that it wasn’t because of the nerves.

Sanji typed “321111” into the keyboard and the computer screen blinked to life, allowing Sanji access to the home page. Sanji took the mouse and swiveled it gently, clicking through various things.

“I see three… uh… I guess possible spots. Give me the map, let me see if they line up with anything Robin marked down.”

Zoro crossed the room, stepping over bodies like he was stepping over streams. He ignored the churning in his stomach—part disgust, part hunger—and handed Sanji the roll of papers. Sanji leaned back from the computer, beautiful and lithe, and took the roll with his alabaster fingers. Zoro
almost grabbed his hand to pull him close, but they had things to do.

Sanji leaned over the provided maps, his eyes flicking back and forth between the computer and the material in his hands. Zoro turned away as he did, his eyes drawn back to the bodies on the floor.

Four of them. Three women, one man. They’d killed countless others on their journey to the main office. Security guards. Custodial personnel. Laboratory workers. Surveyors. All of them had families, homes—

Zoro closed his eyes, forcing himself to stop. His eyes found Sanji again, the only reason he’d ever need to convince himself that this had to be done. No more of this. They were going to end it today.

And somewhere in this building was even more incentive. They just needed to find—

“I think this might be it,” Sanji said quietly, droll and vapid, unwilling to allow any sort of gratitude or hope or closure into his voice. He looked up from the map to nod back at the computer screen, where he’d activated emergency security cameras across the building. “It’s the only place left with any people. And they’re the only ones with guns in the whole building.”

Zoro walked over to Sanji’s shoulder, looking at the hazy little men in the screen, clutching nervously at their guns and trying their radios desperately. One of them tried his access code at the door, yanking on the handle when nothing responded. It probably wasn’t the first time he’d tried. Zoro nodded his readiness and stepped towards the door Sanji was pointing to, punching the code into the box by the door. The bolts in the blast-proof metal clacked open sharply with a rush of air and Zoro pulled the door open, allowing Sanji past him to lead the way, an agitated trail of smoke following the cook like bread crumbs.

Sanji had the roll of papers hanging at his side, and every once and a while he’d check the map again before inputting the virus code at a door and leading Zoro through. He held the door every time, like a perfect gentleman, but he didn’t seem to be able to look Zoro in the eye. Zoro didn’t blame him. He just followed behind stoically, letting Sanji direct, available were the cook to decide he wanted to blow off some steam. Sanji just puffed away.

All at once Sanji held up his hand, stopping the both of them just behind a doorframe. Sanji nodded his head around the corner as he rolled the papers tight and crammed them into one of his pockets. Zoro nodded and unsheathed his swords, placing Wado between his teeth calmly. He blinked when Sanji laid a hand on his arm, shaking his head, stream of smoke now quicker.
“Kids,” Sanji mouthed, sliding around the doorframe and inching his way up against the wall to the code box. Beyond the doorframe, Zoro could see the security guard craning to see through the window into the dark. He looked like he was shouting, trying to get someone’s attention, but the facility had been built too securely. No person, gun, sound, or poltergeist was getting through the door without a functional code. After a moment of pause Zoro put his swords away, a scowl on his face. Sanji had a point. No need to add to the trauma of whoever was being held there. That did put him at a disadvantage though.

Well, disadvantage was relative.

Sanji had his back against the wall, the code box right above his shoulder. He nodded towards the door and Zoro nodded his agreement of readiness, not keen to go in without his weapons, and less keen when the guard was standing at the window with all the clear shots he wanted, but understanding its necessity. Sanji laid his head back against the cold steel, waiting for Zoro’s indication.

The guard was clearly frantic, looking through the window and waving frenetically. Zoro didn’t think the man had seen either of them; he was just hoping to catch someone’s eye as they walked by.

Zoro sighed to himself, exasperated, wishing the man away from the door. They had a schedule to keep.

The guard spun suddenly, his hands still waving as he and his partner conversed desperately. Zoro gestured at Sanji and strode towards the door, fists raised. Sanji punched the code in with invisible speed and flung the door open with his foot just as Zoro past by him like smoke.

The guard turned at the sound of the door clacking open, his eyes wide—a perfect target. Zoro drove his fist into the first guard’s face, following the punch through as the guard crumpled backwards, keeping his knuckles in the man’s forehead until the back of his skull hit the cement floor with a definite crack and Zoro’s fingers split through skin. Sanji flashed by Zoro’s side, diving past the first bullet as the second guard fired, his eyes terrified and confused. Sanji grabbed his vest, wrenching him to the side and smashing him up against the wall. The guard’s eyes nearly popped out of his head at the impact, the gun flying from his hand. Sanji braced, spinning himself around as he lifted his foot, and slammed his heel into the guard’s head directly between his eyes. The hit made a solid divot in the man’s face, fluids bursting from the man’s eyes as his feet wobbled under him, the last of his consciousness probably aware that his best chance was not the low ground. Not that it mattered anymore. The man dropped, joining the first guard on the ground where his feet were twitching and he was staring back up at Zoro with dead eyes.

Zoro sat back slowly, taking his hand away even slower, strangely afraid of seeing the damage he’d caused. In the back of his mind, he was aware of how little effort that had taken, even without his
swords. In the forefront of his mind, even stranger, was the undeniable want rushing through his body as his senses were flooded with the guard’s freed blood, dripping down his face and pooling on the floor under his head. Zoro’s tongue lolled out of his mouth without his ok, his fangs pulling against his gums as he stared back into the far-gone gaze.

Behind him, he almost heard the sound of the door snapping open with a rush of air.

“Zoro?” Sanji’s voice floated over gently. Zoro didn’t care.

He needed more blood than Sanji. Not gradually, not over time as the virus set into his body. From the moment he’d been turned, Zoro’s NSPH Major venom had demanded far more blood than anyone had been expecting. Law surmised that it might have had something to do with his metabolism. He’d needed a lot of food when he was human anyways and still ate a lot now, but what he lost in food necessity he seemed to make up in double the blood. Sanji had struggled to concoct him recipes that weren’t basically entirely blood. Zoro had taken to having some in a bottle with him at all times, but he’d downed one before they’d set the facility virus in motion and hadn’t carried it in.

He shouldn’t have been hungry. Maybe it was just the sheer amount of blood finally starting to get to him. Idly, he was aware that he was drooling on the man’s chest, but it was so far from important that he almost couldn’t really even process that it was happening. He should have been embarrassed, but the NSPH side of him gave two shits and a flying fuck about his embarrassment when so much blood was gracing the body in front of him.

A hand found its way to his shoulder, but Zoro didn’t register this until Sanji was shaking him gently, calling for him in a soft croon, like he was an animal. Zoro’s eyes snapped up to Sanji’s cool, iridescent blue eyes. He was sure his own eyes were black, but Sanji, to his credit, didn’t falter once.

“Go ahead,” he said instead, kindly. Zoro blinked, finally realizing how much his breath was heaving now that his NSPH side thought it wasn’t going to get any resistance.

*Go ahead?*

He looked back down at the guard’s mangled face, finding the holes where his knuckles had caved through flesh and bone like weapons. His eyes glazed over, and he was unable to see the man’s face anymore.

*Go ahead,* something inside him agreed gleefully, and Zoro dipped forward without a moment’s
hesitation.

The fuzziness in his brain started to dissipate, blood rushing down his throat and breathing fresh life into him. Zoro sighed despite himself, clutching the man’s shoulders tightly and pressing his lips deeper into the gash he’d made in the man’s neck. He could tell he’d been sloppy. Blood spurted out of the space between his lips and the man’s skin and down all three of their chests as he drank, but he was getting most of it in his mouth and that was all he truly cared about at the moment.

The flow of blood started to slow and Zoro could feel a real calm setting into his body, which had been gone since before they’d crossed the building’s threshold. He pulled his mouth back and let the man drop back to the floor like a burlap sack folding up on itself. He sat there for a moment on his knees and toes, breathing deeply and staring down at the horribly bloodied guard. At his side, Sanji was still rubbing his shoulder, waiting for Zoro to come back to him.

Zoro blinked down at the man, unable to see his face anymore now that’d he’d been bent over backwards awkwardly with his arms draped out beside him. A wave of sickness hit him like a hammer, across his head, stomach, and heart. He lurches suddenly, forwards and backwards at the same time, unable to put into clear thoughts the deep-seeded horror in his body that transcended tangible words. He’d passed by the man’s face—his humanness—without a moment’s hesitation. This man hadn’t been a man to Zoro. He’d been food.

Zoro pressed a bloodied hand to his bloodied face, covering his bloodied mouth where he could feel his bloodied fangs sitting innocently against his bloodied palms. Zoro choked, a pained, feral sound exploding from his mouth that rocked him to his core. Sanji was around him in an instant, holding him tightly into his chest, rubbing his hair and kissing his head as Zoro shook. The desperate sobs wracking Zoro’s chest were far too strong to try to ignore or fight, so they just sat, wrapped up together while Zoro’s mind roiled.

*I’m a monster I ate that man I didn’t see him I’m a monster I drank his blood I’m a monster—*

And Sanji held him tenderly, understanding everything going through his head—the crippling shame, the distinct repulsion, the clear horror, the cruel resignation.

This was who he was. This was who they were.

Neither knew how long they sat there, but slowly Zoro’s body-shaking bawling slowed to the occasional sharp intake of breath and the tears either stopped or ran themselves dry. Darkly, Zoro wondered if he was crying blood too, even though logically he knew that would never be the case.
Sanji didn’t move until he did, and then he sat back on his heels and licked his jacket sleeve until it was wet, scrubbing at Zoro’s face gently to remove the evidence. Zoro closed his eyes, letting Sanji clean him tenderly.

Sanji may have finished or he may have not. Zoro could have been far too soaked in blood—both the guard and Sanji certainly were—but eventually he stopped and stood, tying the jacket around his waist and offering a hand to Zoro. Zoro swiped across his eyes once more before taking Sanji’s hand and letting the cook pull him to his feet.

“Ready?” Sanji asked, his voice a strange blend of apologetic and loving. But there was no fear in his voice and Zoro was endlessly grateful for that. He wondered if he’d ever showed fear of Sanji, and he was so thankful that Sanji had never held it against him. Zoro reached out carefully, laying the tips of his fingers against Sanji’s cheeks, and leaned in to press their lips together. The salted iron in Zoro’s mouth melded with Sanji’s tongue and they swayed together for a moment, holding each other as if the world around them didn’t exist—Zoro allowed himself to pretend that it didn’t for just the moment.

Zoro pulled away slowly, letting Sanji dip in quickly and peck him one last time on the lips before the cook turned back to the opened door behind them.

“Come on,” he took Zoro’s hand, a grim smile adorning his expression. “It’s going to get worse.”

Zoro nodded, his eyes cast down at the dark cement, and let Sanji lead him into the black hall.

There were four rooms in the short hallway, each thick, steel door set about four feet apart. Zoro’s eyebrows furrowed. Unless the rooms were really deep, which he doubted, each room was no more than six feet by six feet. He looked over to Sanji, who had dropped the butt of his spent cigarette on the floor and was lighting up another. His hand wasn’t shaking, but Zoro could tell that it was taking him longer to light the end than it normally did. He almost offered to do it for Sanji, but the end suddenly came alight. Sanji sucked in so deep he leaned backwards to accommodate the extra air in his lungs before letting an industrial pillar of smoke waft towards the ceiling.

“Whoo,” he coughed low, curling in on himself, and then straightened back up. “All right, let’s do this and get the fuck out of here.”

He marched over to the first door and started putting the code in. Zoro nodded, to Sanji and to himself, and approached the second door, following suit.
Both doors clacked open with the same jarring, abrupt metal clanking and woosh of air. Zoro apologized in his head for the noise, although he was sure the room’s inhabitant was likely used to the sound by now.

He pulled the door open slowly, his body taking the time that his eyes used to need to adjust to the dark to stand in the door while his more-than-capable eyes drank in the horrible blandness of the room. Nothing but a bed graced the grey walls, with a tiny curled up form hunched into the mattress by the wall’s corner.

The metal bed frame sat pinned up against one of the cement walls, its mattress so shriveled and ruined that it hung down between the slats and springs, almost touching the floor in three places. Zoro swallowed as silently as he could, knowing almost beyond a doubt that the little boy on the bed—no more than four years old—could hear him do it, but he needed to be strong for this boy and did his best to silence the sound. Behind him, he could hear that Sanji had started gently talking to the child in the other room, his voice floating in like a soft breeze, calming Zoro. On the bed, the little boy hadn’t moved, but his bright eyes bore into Zoro with curiosity that only a child would be able to maintain in such an awful situation. Zoro eyed the chains on the boy’s ankle linking him to the bed and allowing him no more than two feet of movement around the room, and then moved towards the bed, watching the little boy for the slightest movement. There was none.

He reached the side of the bed and crouched, laying his elbows on the mattress, which had been left without a sheet. Out of the corner of his eye he could see bloodstains dotting the fabric. If they’d been from this boy, he’d long since healed. If not… Zoro closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, collecting himself, and then opened them again to find that the little boy was still staring back into him, waiting.

Zoro had no idea what to say. “Are you ok?” he started carefully. The boy didn’t say anything.

“...I’m here to take you somewhere safe,” he tried again, probably more for himself than the boy. “Away from here.”

The boy’s bright eyes found the door and then Zoro again with speed only capable of an NSPH. He laid his head against his knees, unblinking brown eyes digging through Zoro’s brain. Zoro wouldn’t have been surprised to discover the boy could read his mind. Behind him, he could hear Sanji’s shoes knocking softly against the floor as he moved to the next room. His steps were heavier by about 37 pounds. He must have been carrying the child.

Zoro rested his chin on his arms, meeting the boy’s eyes firmly. “...My name’s Zoro.”
The boy looked at the door again, watching Sanji pass by and holding the look until the third door clacked open. His eyes flashed back to Zoro. “...Where are we going?”

Zoro smiled despite himself, the little boy’s strong voice washing over his shoulders like amber crystals that made his ears sing in delight. There was no fear in the boy’s voice. Zoro thought about Sanji like this, no doubt just as fearless, just as faith-filled, just as steadfast. Sanji had never been anything less.

“Home.”

The boy’s brow knit. Confusion. Zoro found his face mimicking the look before it hit him. The boy had no concept of home.

“To people who will love you,” he started again, “who will care for you and take care of you, who will never hurt you like the people here do.”

Behind them, tiny scared cries started up suddenly, echoing through the room. Zoro held his smile firm, unwilling to let the little boy feel fear he didn’t need to. The cries sounded young, less than a year old. The boy watched the door for a moment and then looked back to Zoro.

Well… here goes nothing.

“May I carry you?” he asked gently. The boy was still, and then nodded, straightening up and lifting his head from where it was resting on his knees. Zoro stood, pausing for a moment as the boy held out his chained ankle, looking up expectantly at Zoro. Zoro faltered, looking back over his shoulder to where he could feel Sanji standing.

“Break it,” Sanji said firmly. On one hip was a sniffling little boy with tear tracks mussing his dirt-clad face, leaning against Sanji’s shoulder with his thumb in his mouth and his chest shaking slightly as lingering hiccups jumped him up and down in Sanji’s arm. On Sanji’s other hip was a girl with short brown hair, just as thin and dirty as the other two, watching Zoro with brilliant black eyes. The color was strange, as Zoro couldn’t feel any predatory intent from her, but he ignored them to turn back to the boy.

He crouched and wrapped his fingers around the joint of the cuff, squeezing. He followed the sounds of the metal bending in his fingers, creaking quietly, and made sure he was keeping as far from the
boy’s skin as possible. He gritted his teeth and pulled sharply, popping the cuff open with a clank as nasty as the sound the doors made. The cuff fell away from the boy’s ankle and slid off the bed, clattering to the floor and echoing down the hall behind them.

Zoro reached down and lifted the boy, who pushed off the bed almost eagerly, and held him to his hip with his arm under the boy’s thin, neglected frame. The boy stared at Sanji, his head down slightly, the endless curiosity in his eyes still glowing through the black of the room. Sanji smiled, resolute calmness in his iridescent blue eyes as he met the boy’s gaze.

“Let’s go get your friend,” he nodded towards the last door as Zoro stepped out of the cell. The boy looked at the girl and then the baby, at Sanji and then at Zoro, and nodded his agreement. Zoro smiled and turned for the last door.

-oOo-

They hadn’t thought about car seats.

“Stupid,” Zoro muttered to himself, surveying the backseat. Thank god there was only the four of them. Otherwise they’d be walking.

“I’m going to go set it off,” Sanji said, looking just as displeased with their riding situation as Zoro felt. “And then we go straight to the nearest Whatever’s and get a couple of booster seats. ...You’ll have to hold him, I guess,” he added, shrugging and gesturing towards the baby, who was currently sitting in the little girl’s lap. She’d volunteered to hold him when their lack of seats had become apparent, her intent black eyes strangely calm and kind. Zoro and Sanji had shared a look and passed the one-year-old over to her. He was big against her tiny frame and she’d had to scooch down in her seat in order to lean back far enough to accommodate him, but to her credit, she’d helped him settle in relatively quickly, and he was laying against her chest now with his thumb in his mouth, looking around to everyone in turn.

Zoro nodded, looking back at the facility, eerily dark and quiet for the middle of the day. He watched Sanji trot over to the front entrance, and then climbed into the passenger side seat, starting the engine.

In the back seat, all four looked relatively comfortable for all of the strangeness the world had thrown them that day. Zoro tried not to scowl too much, knowing that their calm probably had a lot to do with the fact that neither he nor Sanji were freaking out.
The driver’s side door swung open suddenly and Sanji climbed in, throwing his seatbelt on. Zoro reached back between the front seats and held his hand out to the little girl. She nodded and tried to hand the baby to him, struggling slightly under his weight. Zoro leaned further to save her the energy, not knowing how long it had been since any of them had eaten. They had blood in the car, but they had to go get carseats in case they were pulled over and then drive the car to a meeting point where Law and Kid would be waiting with a plane. There, they’d trade the car in and take the plane to the next facility. He set the baby on his lap, very unsure of what to do with him, but the boy seemed to be more self-entertained than not, and was still looking in turn between everyone in the car. When he looked at Sanji, Sanji gave him as much of a smile as he could and bopped the baby on the nose with this forefinger. The baby didn’t blink.

“Let’s go,” Sanji said suddenly, pulling the car around and back onto the main road from where they’d hidden it in the brush. They’d have to get back off into the woods surrounding the facility to drive through the hole in the fence they’d made, but for now the lack of bumping was better for everyone involved.

Zoro said nothing, watching out his window with the baby as the car swung in a circle. Down the hill he could see smoke starting to billow up from the vents at the center of the facility, and flames starting to claw their way up against the windows, trying to find a way out.

-oOo-

“What do we do with the rest of them?”

“…Orphanages are out?”

“No fucking shit.”

“And—”

“Don’t even say foster care, you dumbfuck.”

“…”

“That’s what I thought.”
Zoro leaned forward against the table, ignoring the square-off between Luffy and Kid. Dumb asses.

“So what do we do with the rest of them?” Shanks asked again, absolutely unbothered by the testosterone flying like sparks in front of him. This was a small gathering, just Law, Kid, Shanks, Zeff, Luffy, Zoro, and Sanji sat around the table. Zeff had flown in immediately after hearing that they were bringing people back from the facilities, knowing that they’d need places to go. Killer had expressed his displeasure at not being included, but Shanks had pulled him aside and said something to him to coax him into spending time with the new young ones at the arena, and Killer had happily bounded off. Most of their nakama had eagerly offered to join Killer, knowing that they would not be privy to the discussion about what to do with them, but all eager to meet the new additions.

There were twenty-one children newly boarded at the arena. One was fifteen, eleven were between the ages of eight and ten, seven four- or five-year olds, and two infants. Law, doctor in all his ways, had insisted on seeing each of them individually in the rooms they’d been put in and not in the hospital. He’d fed them all, given them all a clean bill of health, and clocked their virus count for reference. Only two were Major, but it did introduce some extra roadblocks when trying to find them permanent placement.

This wasn’t part of Robin’s plan. She was the tactician, not the Mother Teresa 2.0. She’d gotten them out, now everyone else had to figure out where they would go.

“I spoke with Benn, he’d like to stay with me,” Shanks spoke up. “I promised him that I’d teach him how to fight and work towards getting him involved in the arena. He’s anxious to get started on making something of himself outside the facility. I guess he was about 11 when he was turned by an escaped NSPH. He was kidnapped not long after that. He hasn’t said anything about trying to reunite with his family yet, but I’m going to give him some time here before I bring that up. That means that I’d take the other three that were in the facility with him. They’ve all grown attached to each other from what I’ve picked up. None of them were born in the facility.”

“Good. With his major status, he’ll need people around him who have a solid understanding of NSPH functionings,” Law said.

“I’ll also be taking some,” Zeff agreed gruffly. “They’re a little young but NSPH learn damn fast. They won’t be held back by their age for long. Until then they’ll be fine in the kitchen. I can handle about five of them. We have some people in the area who have expressed interest in helping; I’m not sure that they meant they would take in an infected child, but there’s no harm in asking. That would probably be three families if all goes well, and the other two would stay with me.”

“The younger ones will be tough,” Law added as he tugged on the ends of his bangs, the heels of his
boots resting on the table. “We may have to look into more families within the city… host a vetting process and a training period perhaps.”

Kid snorted. “When do we break it to them that their new kids are humanity hazards for the rest of their family?”

“We’d have to have a prior, uh,” Law paused, “assumption that they’d be comfortable with at least the knowledge that NSPH exist and in multiples and in very close proximity to them.”

“Conis would probably take one,” Sanji said suddenly. “We, eh, I think she’d feel like she could handle a child just fine. We could ask Laki or their parents too.”

Zoro said nothing, surmising that at some point Sanji and Conis had talked about children. Maybe even about adopting; neither of them had probably liked the risk of their child also being NSPH.

“Our landlady knows about NSPH,” Zoro suggested, shrugging slightly.

Sanji blew a stream of smoke into his face. “She’s probably as old as Neculai Pescariu, marimo.”

Zoro scowled back at him heartily. “She has a son in the area, shit-cook. Maybe already with kids.”

Sanji puffed away with endless cool. “Whatever. …Shitty swordsman.”

“CURLY-BROW—”

“Keep your rutting to the bedroom,” Law interrupted suddenly. “I know you haven’t had time alone since getting back but please, lord, bottle it until you’re out of here. And I don’t think we should give the infants to unprepared families. The risk that they’ll be infected or overwhelmed is too high.”

Shanks sucked in a slow sigh, leaning his head back so it draped over his shoulders and he had a perfect view of the wall behind them. “So what’s our tally now?”

“We have three eight- to ten-year-olds, seven four- and five-year-olds, and two infants left to find
“Ok!” Shanks said happily. “We’ll do a search, call some people, make some moves, and reconvene in two days? In the mean time... uhhhhhhhh... We'll hire all of you to watch the kids,” he grinned, cycling around the table.

“NOPE.”

“They have to go somewhere, Sanji.”

“Fuck. No.”

“You have somewhere to be?”

“I have a goddamn date tonight. I believe that was already broadcasted to the table.” Sanji’s arms were tightly folded. Zoro fought the smirk rising on his face.

“Everyone is going to take some. No one gets out of this,” Shanks stood up abruptly from his seat, ridiculously cape billowing out behind him dramatically. Zoro wondered if he practiced that. “Except you,” Shanks added suddenly, pointing at Luffy. Luffy’s mouth dropped open in shock but Shanks continued before he could protest. “The children are not to be left alone under any circumstances for their own safety and for our best chances of ensuring their safety, which means that there’s going to be a reasonable ratio of kids to adults, which means that everyone takes some children.”

“...Fuck.”

“Anyone who has agreed to take kids already—myself, Zeff,—will take their kids starting tonight. Everyone at this table has the job of calling two trustworthy people and seeing about their fit for being a possible guardian. I’ve already had someone go out and pick up cribs for infants for whoever takes them.”

“Eustass,” Law took Kid’s hand suddenly, “maybe we should just agree to adopting another.” The edges of his lips quirked upwards slightly.
“Nope.” Kid’s glower could have burnt a hole through cement, but he didn’t take his hand away from Law’s.

“We’re only in our thirties. Now is the perfect time to restart our family. Let’s not call anyone and just take them all in.”

“Abso-fuckin-lutely not. …You fucking psycho.”

-oOo-

Zoro stared blankly with his hand on his forehead, rubbing gently, surveying the two rooms of brats from his standpoint between the doors as all six of them slept peacefully, their bellies full from all of the Sanji’s cooking they could eat. Brats.

Sanji came up behind him silently and wrapped his arms around Zoro’s waist, leaning his chin into Zoro’s shoulder and breathing in deeply. “It’s crowded,” he mused.

Zoro nodded his agreement, head still swiveling back and forth between the two rooms.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6—

“They’re all there, Zoro.”

Zoro nodded his agreement but didn’t stop counting. How was this a reasonable goddamn ratio? He hadn’t seemed to be able to move from his position in front of the doors since everyone had settled down. It was probably just the shock of their first night being outside the facility, but every kid had been asleep within a minute of lying down. There were two sharing the beds in Sanji’s old room and the guest room, and each room had a crib for the infants. Two babies. They had been trusted with two babies.

One of the babies had to be with them. His Major status made him very dangerous for anyone not already infected. The other had been sent their way because of similar reasons, but mostly because no one else wanted to care for an infant.
“Come on, marimo,” Sanji spun him and began pushing him up the stairs. “The light is on; they all know where the bathroom is; the little ones have diapers; they’ve all been fed and watered; and they know where to find us if they wake up. They’ll be fine.”

Zoro looked at the front door as they passed, suddenly unbelieving of its lock functionality for some strange reason.

*The one with the dark eyes—Rika—I didn’t see if she got her glass of water—*

“Zoro.”

They were in the bedroom.

“Come on,” Sanji was in front of him, smiling playfully, nose to nose with him.

“Did Rika get that—”

“I brought her a glass of water,” Sanji nodded.

Zoro nodded again. There had to have been something they’d forgotten. There were six of them.

“They’re fine,” Sanji repeated, kissing him lightly on his lips and around his jaw. “Come to bed. It’s late.”

Zoro nodded in agreement and didn’t move. “Both of the babies’ diapers—”

“Done. They’re ready for bed.”

Zoro nodded, his gaze drifting up to Sanji’s stunning blue eyes. He held them for a moment,
everything churning inside him like a tornado filled with sunshine.

“…That sucked.”

It was out of his mouth so suddenly. He hadn’t really even felt it coming.

Sanji’s expression darkened and he nodded, losing Zoro’s gaze and finding a spot on Zoro’s chin.

“…I hope that I’ve never been outwardly afraid of you.”

That was also out of his mouth so suddenly. He hadn’t really even wanted to say it.

Sanji pursed his lips, shaking his head. “No I don’t think so. And of course I wouldn’t care if you had. Come on,” he took Zoro’s hands pulled him back towards the bed. Zoro moved, grateful for the reason.

“Did the brown-haired kid get his—”

“They’re all asleep,” Sanji sat, kissing along the hem of Zoro’s pants and tugging the edge of his shirt upwards. “You can’t bring them anything anymore.”

“...Promise?”

“Promise,” Sanji agreed, sliding Zoro’s pants down and nuzzling Zoro gently with his nose.

Zoro closed his eyes and sighed now that there was good incentive to be distracted.

-oOo-

Zoro peeked through his fingers, watching the three oldest ones careen around the apartment with dizzying speed as they chased each other, screaming “Tag!” “Tag!” “Tag!” without any real
semblance of who was It and who wasn’t. Goddamn NSPH speed. Teaching them how to play had been a stupid idea. This was the first moment Zoro had been allowed to sit down since starting the game as an attempt to corral some of their amaranthine energy. Zoro wasn’t sure if it was a kid thing or an NSPH thing.

The oldest one, Yoko, kept vaulting herself off of walls and furniture and railings and windowsills and over the heads of the younger two, Momosuke and Tamanegi, as she avoided being caught. Her braid—tied with some hair ties and pins, a gift from Nami—flew out behind her so straight it was almost as though it just stood on end and gravity didn’t affect it. Momosuke and Tamanegi, trying to copy her with their lessened motor control, inevitably ended up crumpled on the floor and flailing as they tried to right themselves and chase after her again.

The five-year-old not chasing the others was Rika, who preferred to be in the kitchen with Sanji. Sanji had set her up with one of the bar stools to get her high enough to reach the counter. Presently she was stirring something with break-neck speed as Sanji chuckled over her, avoiding the splops that flew like projectiles from the bowl.

“Slower,” he smiled, reaching up and snagging a glop out of the air before it hit his shirt. She looked up at him with wide eyes and a wide mouth for a second before grinning heartily and returning to her task with less fervor.

On the other side of the counter were two high chairs with two infants each gnawing on or banging their respective silverware on the countertops. Neither had names to the best of their knowledge, so the girl had been named Tama and the boy Doran. The older kids had weaseled their way into choosing the names with shouting and jumping and endless pleas to be able to name them. Zoro was sitting beside them in the last available bar stool so he had the best view of the rest of the kids and the majority of the apartment. Not that anything he did was going to help to—

“YA!” Yoko screamed suddenly, landing in the middle of the dojo from where she’d leapt from the balcony. She was flying back into the dining room without a moment’s hesitation from the landing.

Zoro’s eyes widened—“Oh shit.”—and he dove forward from the stool.

Too late.

All at once both Momosuke and Tamanegi hit the floor face first, landing in terrifyingly bent little piles of downed child.
“CHRIST!” Zoro screamed, at their side the same moment they hit the floor and lifting them to their feet where they stood for a moment, dazed from the impact.

“Are you ok—?” Zoro barked, but both boys had already ducked under his arms and were racing after Yoko again, screaming “Tag!” “Tag!” “Tag!”

Zoro took a very large deep breath and put his face back into his hands, counting down slowly from ten.

“Was that the door?” Sanji called from the kitchen.

Fuck if he knew. You couldn’t hear a damn fire alarm over this noise.

“I’ll get it!” Yoko was at the door instantly and working on the locks. Zoro flashed to her side and put his hand over the lock, more than aware that there were a lot of people that shouldn’t know she was here, and even more that would have been very, very happy to happen upon her. He couldn’t really explain the serious protective need he had for the kids. It was strange. Strange and strong.

Zoro cracked the door slightly as Yoko tried to shove herself into the open space to force it further open. Zoro looked down at her blandly, not even phased by her attempts. Thank god he was still much stronger than them. Behind him, Momonosuke and Tamanegi appeared, leaping up and down in time with their chants of “Visitors! Visitors! Visitors!”

“...Hello?” Conis called tentatively from the other side of the door, smiling in at Zoro. Zoro yanked the door open, sending Yoko sprawling back against the floor.

“Oh!” Conis gasped as Yoko’s feet flew up over her head, but she was up again the next moment, cackling with glee and sprinting towards the dojo. The boys shrieked their answer and followed suit, Momonosuke tripping up the dojo stairs as he went.

“They don’t feel pain,” Zoro grumbled, moving out of her way and allowing her in before he closed the door and locked it, turning it harder than he normally would have to make sure it was indeed locked. Conis stepped in almost nervously, her arms around her waist but her smile wide as she watched the kids race around the apartment.

“I see that,” she giggled. “How’s it going? They certainly have a lot of energy.”
Zoro rubbed his forehead. “They’ve been like this since day two. Maybe…” he shrugged, “excitement from being, you know, out.”

Conis nodded, watching as Yoko leapt from the top of the stairs and the boys imitated her, Tamanegi tripping at the top and tumbling down the flight. The interruption stopped none of the three.

“CONIS!” Sanji warbled from the kitchen.

Rika threw her hands up in the air beside him, taking the mixing spoon with her and lacing the ceiling and the window behind her with sauce. “Conis!” she screamed.

Conis laughed, sitting down in Zoro’s seat. Zoro sighed and moved to stand between the babies. Doran dropped his fork, watching it clatter against the floor before he stared up at Zoro and pointed. Zoro grumbled and bent, dropping the fork back onto the counter in front of him. Doran stared at it for a second, picked it up, and dropped it off the side of the high chair before looking back up at Zoro. Zoro blinked and bent, setting the fork in front of him again with a sterner look. Doran looked at it for a moment and then picked it up and flung it into the air where it clanked off the high chair and back onto the floor. Zoro’s eyebrow twitched.

“You got a problem?” he glowered. Doran laughed up at him and pointed down at the fork, waving his hand insistently when Zoro didn’t move right away.

“I’m Rika,” Rika supplied happily. “I’m helping make lunch. Are you hungry? Sanji says we always feed hungry people.”

“That’s right,” Sanji agreed, flicking his cigarette up and down between his lips as he stirred the pot on the stove with one hand and tore a hole in a bag of blood with the other, emptying the bag into the pot.

“I want some!” Rika shouted, crossing her arms tightly. Sanji smirked at the grand scowl on her face and pulled open the fridge next to him, fishing out another bag. He tore the top open and poured a quarter into her bowl. Rika grinned and went back to stirring as Sanji eyed the mostly full bag in his hands. He seemed to consider trying to but it back in the fridge for a moment, looking back and forth between the stove and the fridge, before rolling his eyes and dumping the rest into his pot.

“Leftovers are good,” he muttered to himself. Conis giggled again, her head snapping to the side at
the loud crash from up the stairs.

“You break anything and I’ll kick your little speedy-Gonzales butts!” Sanji roared up the stairs, grumbling at the cackling that followed from the kids.

“Thanks for calling me,” Conis said happily, leaning her chin against the counter so she could look over and watch the babies. Beside her, Tama stared unabashedly at her, sucking on the handle-end of a fork. “Hi! What’s your name?”

“That’s Tama!” Rika chimed in, pointing. She pointed to Doran next. “And that’s Doran. And that’s Yoko,” her words sped up as the racing trio sped by, more than able to accommodate their speed and still name them in time before they disappeared. “And that’s Tamanegi and that’s Momonosuke!”

“Hi Tama,” Conis turned on the stool to face Tama, who kept staring. Tama’s bright eyes looked quickly to Zoro behind her and then back to Conis, unsure of the newcomer.

Sanji handed Conis a bowl of stew from the pot. “Here, she should be hungry. HEY KNEE-SKINNERS! FOOD!”

The three were at the table instantly, hopping up and down on their chairs and laughing and trying to touch the ceiling.

“SIT DOWN!”

Rika pushed her bowl towards Sanji and jumped down from her stool, skipping over to the quiet side of the table where she sat patiently and bounced her legs up and down. Sanji added her bowl to the stew (having given her part of his mixture to occupy her while he cooked), then grabbed the pot and followed her. Zoro picked up Doran’s fork from where he’d dropped it again and then Doran’s high chair, carting it over to the table as Doran tried to wrestle the fork from Zoro’s fist with gleeful cries.

Conis stood and wrapped her arm around Tama’s high chair, standing and lifting it from the floor. She picked up the bowl next and carried both to the table.

“You’re so strong,” Yoko said, her mouth hanging open slightly as she stared. “I’m gonna be like you when I grow up.”
“Not if you don’t eat,” Sanji slapped a bowl down in front of her and then Momonosuke and Tamanegi in turn. They dropped to their seats and leaned in, gulping the stew down. “Slow down!” Sanji barked.

“How long have you had everyone?” Conis asked around the spoonful she was blowing on. Tama watched her intently, the handle of her fork still in her mouth.

“Five days,” Zoro answered slowly while Sanji leaned over Tamanegi intimidatingly as he tried to get out of his chair. Tamanegi yiped and clambered back up, snorting and giggling with Momonosuke once he was sitting and Sanji had flopped back into his own chair. Zoro couldn’t tell if the drawl in his voice was from the exhaustion or from the surprise that they had made it five days. He took the bowl Sanji handed him automatically and set it down in front of him, taking a smaller one next for Doran.

“Wow,” Conis mused, offering the spoonful to Tama, who just stared at her. “Have any of them been… claimed?”

Sanji shook his head, blowing on his own spoon. “We’re not on the rush list.”

“Rush list?”

“Because we’re both NSPH everyone thinks we’re perfectly fine to handle six kids all at once,” Sanji muttered, ladling out another bowlful for Yoko when she finished. She tipped her head back and belched hugely, starting a round of laughing from the kids. Momonosuke and Tamanegi started burping their own tiny mimic-attempts in return.

“Stop it, that’s rude. They’re trying to get the kids out of everyone else’s place first. Biting hazard or some bullshit.”

“Are you hungry?” Conis asked Tama gently, who just continued to watch her. “It’s good,” she ate the spoonful herself in show and then filled it again, blowing on it and offering it to Tama again. Tama looked to Sanji and Zoro again and then back to Conis.

Zoro rolled his eyes and leaned forward, popping the fork out of her mouth and taking it back with him. She shrieked a little in protest and flapped her arms up and down, lips quivering as she stared at Zoro.
Zoro shook his head, knowing by now that she was being dramatic. “No. It’s time to eat.” He turned back to Doran and offered him a spoonful, which he happily (and messily) crammed into his mouth, simultaneously trying to battle the spoon from Zoro.

Tama shrieked again and then, when she didn’t get a response, turned back to Conis, watching her with more seriousness now, a little scowl on her face.

“…You don’t want it?” Conis leaned back, looking down at the bowl. “Well… all right then, I guess I’ll have to eat it myself.”

She brought the spoon up to her mouth and Tama shrieked again, leaning forward with her mouth open.

Conis smiled, feeding her the mouthful. “Good choice.”

“Are you here to take Tama to her new home?” Rika spoke up around a mouthful of stew.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Sanji said. Zoro didn’t know how he had the energy. They had to get some of these kids to other places.

Conis nodded, feeding Tama another spoon. “If she and I get along, yes.”

“Yay!” the kids screamed, all leaping up onto their chairs and jumping up and down. “Tama gets a new home! Tama gets a new home!”

“Sit down!”

Yoko stopped abruptly, realizing both the pros and cons of Tama’s new home. She crossed her arms. “No! I don’t want her to go! I’m going to miss her!”

Conis grinned over at her. “What if we visited all the time? Tama can’t not have friends just because she comes home with me. And she has to have friends like her. Like you! And me!”
“Sit down.”

Yoko considered that for a moment before nodding. “I guess. …But you have to promise to take care of her! You have to take the best care of her!” She jerked her finger accusingly at Conis. “She’s just a baby! So she needs people to protect her—!”

“Sit. **Down.**” Sanji snarled, leaning across the table and reaching for her. Yoko dropped into her chair and dug into her bowl innocently. When Sanji returned to his chair after a moment of glaring she stuck her tongue out at him, inciting another round of cackling from the rest of the kids. Sanji and Zoro sighed.

“**You’re an… enespaitch?**” Rika asked Conis, wide-eyed, her dark eyes glowing brilliantly.

“**NSPH,**” Sanji corrected her, filling her bowl again.

Conis nodded. “I am. I think that would make me a good person to take care of Tama. She and I could understand each other in ways other people wouldn’t understand. What do you think?”

Rika shrugged after a moment’s consideration. “Zoro says he doesn’t understand us, but we’re both enespaitch.”

“I said I didn’t understand how you were all so damn loud,” Zoro told her flatly. Rika stared at him blankly for a moment before grinning widely and turning back to her bowl. Zoro smirked despite himself.

Conis gave Tama another spoonful and then leaned over to Zoro, lowering her voice so the kids couldn’t hear. “**Are… are you two considering…?**”

Zoro shook his head. “That’s not important. Finding them damn homes is the most important thing. We’re not going to… okay one for here if someone else wants to take them.”

“**WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?**” Momonosuke appeared between the two, making them both leap back.
“Go sit in your chair and finish your food!” Zoro’s patience was wearing really thin today.

“I’m all done! I want to go play!”

“Fine, go play. You get one hour and then it’s quiet time.”

“AAWWWMMMMM!”

“Not an option!” Zoro growled. “One hour of play and then everyone needs to find a book or some markers or something else quiet and find a spot and NOT MAKE ANY NOISE. It’s my time in the dojo.” Getting up early enough to beat the kids to the dojo was impossible. He felt like he hadn’t trained in days. Time did not fly with six screaming maniacs in his apartment.

“BUT WE DON’T WANT TO HAVE QUIET TIME!” Tamanegi stood up in his chair. “Quiet time is boring!”

“One hour of play and then quiet time.”

“BUT WE—”

“It sounds like no one wants any play time before quiet time!”

The three oldest kids gasped, shared and look, and then dashed away from the table to hide upstairs.

“I don’t want to play,” Rika moped. “They’re too loud.”

Sanji leaned over and hoisted her from her chair, dragging her into his lap and tickling her. She screamed in protest, trying to wiggle away.

“Life’s hard, isn’t it? Isn’t it?” He tickled her relentlessly for a heartbeat and then let go, she dropped from his lap and land on her feet. “You can go start the dishes then,” he waved a hand towards the
kitchen, “I’ll be over in a minute.”

Rika stared wide-eyed up at him before shaking her head slowly. “No thanks. I’m going to go play. Will you read me a book for quiet time?”

“Quiet time is time for me and Zoro to have a minute to ourselves,” Sanji told her, leaning back into his chair and puffing on his cigarette. Rika’s expression sank and she curled in on herself. Sanji was still for a moment before conceding. “…Maybe if you can get the others to play a quiet game I’ll read you something.”

Rika grinned, flopping back to ease and happiness with no issue, and then skipped off towards the stairs. Sanji watched her go and then leaned forward onto the table on his elbows. “She wanted me to read her the damn dictionary last night.”

“Smart!” Conis laughed, setting Tama’s mostly-empty bowl aside.

Sanji shook his head. “I’m going to try and see if she’ll let me read some recipe books to her instead. At least I’ll be able to stay awake then.”

Conis stood, undoing Tama’s securements and lifting her from the chair. “Come here, sweetheart.” She sat back with Tama on her lap, who watched her attentively from nuder her tuft of purple hair for a moment before reaching for her necklace. Conis held it up and let Tama shove the beads into her mouth.

“…What do you think?” Sanji asked, smiling at the pair.

Conis beamed back at him, turning to Tama after. “I think you’re perfect,” she nuzzled her nose into Tama’s neck, making her squeal.

“Thank god,” Zoro sighed, slumping forward on the table and joining Sanji. “Take her today. Have the crib.”

“She has been having some nightmares,” Sanji leaned forward even further into the table. “But that’s to be expected. I’ll write down some things we’ve had luck with before you go. We’ll collect her things but don’t feel like we’re pushing you out. Stay until you’re both really comfortable. I’m making a casserole for dinner, you’re of course welcome to join.”
“Thanks,” Conis smiled.

“Are you sure you don’t want two?” Zoro spoke up from the wood, wincing as something crashed upstairs. “Any one of them.”

Conis giggled and shook her head, turning back to Tama, who had reached for her earrings next. “I think I’ll be all set with you, little Miss.” Tama grinned and resumed her gnashing on Conis’s jewelry. “But I’m sure the other ones will find homes soon!”

Another crash from upstairs. Zoro closed his eyes tightly. “Uh-huh.”

-oOo-

Zoro sat at the counter glowering playful at Doran, who placed his hands over his mouth in giddy excitement and squealed behind his palms. Zoro cracked a smirk and leaned his head to the right slightly. Doran’s eyes grew with anticipation and he pressed his little fists tighter into his face.

Zoro held still for a second, and then spat the cherry seed in his mouth into the sink.

PANG.

Doran burst out laughing, tossing his head back so he could do so more fully. Zoro smirked again and popped another cherry in his mouth, chewing slowly and waiting for Doran to come back. Over on the other side of the kitchen Sanji chuckled to himself and continued stirring the bowl in his arms. Outside, snow drifted by the window and frosted the glass over. Yoko and Rika were drawing shapes into the fog. They were the only kids remaining in the house.

Thank god, because Zoro needed his damn sleep.

A sharp wrap called everyone’s attention to the door.

“I got it!” Yoko screamed, racing for the door, Rika hot on her tail. It was nice to see the two of them
getting along, they tended to do a lot of bickering. Yoko was so high energy and Rika wanted nothing more than to cook with Sanji and read.

“I want to get the door!” Rika wailed, jumping up and down. Yoko paused with her hands on the door knob and turned to eye Rika devilishly. She started to turn the lock slowly.

“YOKO!!”

“Will someone please open the door?” Sanji called. Zoro rolled his eyes and spat the pit into the sink.

PANG.

Doran erupted in gleeful laughter, rolling over in his high chair.

“I want toooooooooo!” Rika whined, crouching down to stare up at Yoko. Yoko watched her intently, feigned turning the lock so Rika shrieked again, and then backed away from the door. Rika grinned and jumped for the lock, hanging from the door handle to reach it.

Zoro blinked. Well, that was new. Yoko didn’t usually concede.

“Tell her thank you!” Sanji called.

“Thankssssss,” Rika flipped the lock and turned the knob as Yoko wrapped her arms around Rika’s waist and pulled her back to open the door. The girls cackled.

“Hello!” Chopper called, poking his head through the door. Yoko’s face turned devious again and she ran forward suddenly with Rika still in her arms, pretending to slam the door in his face. Chopper screamed and darted through the door, slipping and flopping onto his face. The girls cackled again.

“Excuse me,” Law shoved his way through the door. Rika let go of the knob and the two joined Chopper on the floor, leaping on him and tickling him.

“AAH! HAHA STOP IT! HAHA I DON’T LIKE THAT! HAHA NO!”
Law passed by the pile as if it didn’t exist and joined Zoro at the counter.

“Welcome,” Zoro said drawly. “Come on in.”

“Mmhmm,” Law nodded, unperturbed.

“Are you hungry?” Sanji asked, indicating to the stove. “Should be ten minutes.”

“Sure, but we didn’t come for lunch. I need to talk with you both for a moment.”

Zoro and Sanji paused, shared a look, and then turned back to Law. Chopper continued to scream against the tickle barrage. “…In private?”

Law shrugged.

Sanji made a face. “I mean is it going to fuck up the kids. Should we send the kids from the room so as not to fuck them up. Does this conversation need to be in private to not fuck up the kids.”

“The only thing “fucking them up” is your language, Sanji,” Law said politely. He poked Doran who squealed happily and tried to bat the offending hand away. “Nothing I have to say is bad for them to hear. Chopper, would you join us please?”

“Let the doctor go!” Sanji called into the kitchen. “Or no dessert tonight!”

The girls gasped and scrambled away from Chopper, who laid on the floor catching his breath for a moment before clambering up, exhausted, and joining the group at the counter.

Law and Chopper were quiet for a moment before Law spoke up. “…We have some big news…”

“…Yeah?” Sanji demanded. Zoro could see that he was fully considering ignoring them to turn back to his cooking. As it was, he wasn’t looking at Law anymore and was stirring the bowl more
vigorously.

“...We developed a virucide.”

“...A what?” Zoro blinked.

“...An antidote.”

“For what?”

Chopper leapt out of his chair, throwing his arms into the air. “The Negligible Senescent Porphyric Humanoid virus!”

Sanji’s arms dropped to his side. The bowl hit the ground, shattering and drenching the floor in pasta sauce and porcelain. Sanji stood stalk still, staring blankly at the two doctors. Doran, who’d jumped violently at the bowl breaking, tucked himself behind his hands and started crying. Zoro just stared, his mouth hanging open slightly.

“What happened?!” Yoko burst into the kitchen, sliding to a stop on the floor with her fists up, ready to defend whoever needed defending. Rika trotted over behind her, looking between Sanji and Zoro with fierce worry. Law sighed and stood. He lifted Doran from his chair and set him on his hip, bouncing him slowly and rubbing his back.

“...Excuse me?” Zoro choked out.

“I treated myself,” Law held out his arm where a bandage was covering a nasty wound, if the amount of blood leaking through the cotton said anything. Law wasn’t healing at an NSPH rate. “It takes a couple of hours for the virucide to process the whole viral load.”

Law’s arm wasn’t healing.

“...You…” Zoro was dumbfounded. He slumped into the counter.
“It’s your choice, for you two and the kids—if you’re intending to keep them, otherwise I will make the decision for them—but it will eradicate the virus from the planet. Technically the people infected are the last remnants of the virus now that all of the related material has been destroyed. I’m going to offer it to all of the other NSPH and to the parents of the kids. I don’t expect many people will turn me down.”

Law turned to Zoro, nodding to the patch covering his eye. “That won’t ever heal if you take the virucide.”

Zoro nodded automatically, an unprompted laugh starting to tumble out of his mouth.

Law passed Doran to Zoro, who was quieter now and sucking on his thumb. “We’ll come back in a couple of hours. Take your time, I don’t expect this to be an easy decision.”

Law nodded to Chopper and both started for the door, letting themselves out.

Zoro looked back to Sanji, who had started shaking. Yoko and Rika watched the doctors go and turned to stare at Sanji and Zoro in turn.

“What happened?” Yoko demanded. “Did they hurt you? I’ll hurt them back!”

Sanji was still, and then all at once he slid to the floor and placed his head in his hands, trembling with sobs. Zoro couldn’t stop laughing. He staggered to Sanji’s side and sat down with Doran still on his hip, wrapping his arms around Sanji and laughing fully for the first time in what felt like years. Yoko and Rika shared a look and nodded to each other, deciding that the two men were weird.

-oOo-

“You’ll have to stop smoking. Smoking without the healing properties of the NSPH virus will damage your arteries, lungs, eyes, taste buds, make it harder for you to fight… essentially you’d be starting as a new smoker the second you aren’t infected anymore.”

Sanji eyed Chopper with demonic anger as he said this, but Chopper pretended not to see. Zoro swallowed inwardly, aware that he’d likely take the brunt of Sanji’s withdrawal, no matter how small it was.
He leaned forward and placed his hand on Sanji’s thigh. “We’ll get through it.”

Sanji didn’t acknowledge him. He was too busy spewing smoke like a train and chewing on the tip of the cigarette in his mouth like it was a hefty cigar and could handle the abuse.

“I suggest you quit before taking the virucide,” Chopper continued, “otherwise you’ll go through withdrawal in your “new” body and we don’t want the experience to be any stranger than it already will be. The less shock your body has to deal with as it adjusts to being without… uh… superhuman powers the better.”

Sanji closed his eyes tightly, breathing slowly to himself through flared nostrils, and then fished into his pocket and dug out the pack of cigarettes. He shoved them across the counter towards Chopper, who beamed and tucked them out of sight in his own pocket.

-oOo-

Sanji was lying back on the table in the operating room, lifting his head to look over at Law with wide eyes, dropping his head back onto the table and breathing heavily for a moment before lifting his head again to watch Law. Beside him, Zoro pursed his lips and took Sanji’s hand. Sanji’s head snapped to where Zoro was, almost as if he’d forgotten Zoro was there. The fear was obvious in his eyes.

In another room, Chopper was monitoring Doran, Rika, and Yoko as they slept and the virucide seeped into their bodies.

“I know Law’s not very good at what he does, but I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Zoro smiled, trying to alleviate the stress in the room. Sanji glared at him and dropped his head back onto the table to breathe.

“You can be calm, Sanji,” Law strode idly to the side of the bed, tapping on the syringe in his hand to remove the bubbles. “You’re one of the last NSPH to take the virucide. No one has had any ill effects.” Law reached for Sanji’s arm and Sanji suddenly sat up like a bullet, pulling his arm away. Zoro stood and wrapped his arms around Sanji’s shoulders.

Law watched the two of them idly before stating, “…I’ll give you a moment,” and starting for the door. “Give me a call when you’re ready.”
Zoro waited until the door had closed and then laid his lips on Sanji’s forehead, feeling him hyperventilate into his chest.

“…I’ve… I’ve never been anything but NSPH,” Sanji said finally. “How do I… how can I… know this person I’ve never been? That’s never existed?”

“…That person has always existed. That’s the side of you that you keep insisting isn’t there—the cook, the caretaker, the one who refused to hurt people who were important to him even through everything the NSPH instincts were forcing on him. ...Maybe it’s time that side of you gets to enjoy some freedom.”

Sanji was still.

“And I’ll be here,” Zoro continued, running his hands through Sanji’s hair. “And I’m sure as hell taking the thing. I mean, you don’t have to—absolutely, but… change is ok, and change is good. I don’t think you have to be worried about this change.”

Sanji sat for a moment, thinking back on Luffy’s wisdom on change when they talked on the roof of the arena. That day seemed so long ago.

Sanji nodded and leaned into Zoro. “Go get Law.”

Zoro nodded and reached back to knock on the door without letting go of Sanji. Law came in a moment after, surveying the room before taking his place beside the bed again.

Zoro leaned down and kissed Sanji gently.

“This is a sedative,” Law repeated the bubble-removing procedure and then swabbed the inside of Sanji’s arm, ignoring Sanji’s automatic tensing. Sanji might never feel comfortable around doctors, but maybe that would change too. “I don’t know if the virucide is painful, and I have no intention of finding out. You’ll wake up a couple of hours after everything has worked through your system. We’ll run some tests to make sure your blood is clean afterwards, but this should take care of everything.”
Sanji and Zoro watched the clear liquid slip down the needle and into Sanji’s arm.

Sanji’s vision grew heavy and his body turned to cotton. He slumped into Zoro heavily and happily.

“Hey,” Zoro said gently through the water flooding Sanji’s ears. Sanji could feel himself being laid down onto the table. “See you soon.”

“……Marimo,” Sanji agreed.

-oOo-

The thing Sanji loved most about being entirely human was getting too hot and needing to take off his tie and undo the top two buttons on his shirt in the middle of a fight. It was a strange discovery, but he loved it nonetheless.

It had taken him some time getting used to being non-NSPH. He tripped constantly, banged every extremity he had on everything that protruded into walkways even slightly, struggled endlessly trying to relearn his taste pallet, wore out his hands and arms cooking too much, got winded and tired, couldn’t carry all of his grocery bags in one go, might need to consider real glasses, and even had limits on how long sex could go because of his human stamina. It was not all perfect. It was not all great. There were days that he really, truly regretted taking the virucide.

Sanji looked up onto the arena balcony where Zoro stood. He had Doran in his arms and was pointing at Sanji and teaching Doran to wave. Beside them, Rika and Yoko jumped up and down and shrieked their encouragement to Sanji. He couldn’t hear them over the crowd anymore, but he didn’t care.

He missed some things, but even with his dulled senses, Zoro had never once stopped stunning him, and when all was said and done, Sanji was more grateful than he could ever hope to explain to be human with that dope and their dopey kids.

Sanji took off his jacket and tossed it out of the arena. He’d wait on the tie until he got too hot; he did really enjoy it after all. His opponent joined him in the arena and the crowd erupted in excitement. Sanji grinned, feeling his weight in the packed sand under their feet. He blew Doran, Rika, and Yoko three kisses and then flipped Zoro off, eliciting a round of laughter from the crowd. Sanji turned back to his opponent and leaned forward, settling himself into a fighting stance.
He should take Zoro out. …Maybe to an oceanside cottage. …With a grill and a nice sunset.

“Um……. you’re… the greatest.” Sanji barked out a laugh, stunned by Zoro’s little mini-speech. “And… I love you. So much. And I would like you to spend the rest of your life with me. …………. Please.”

The bell rang and Sanji’s opponent raced forward. Sanji steeled himself and waited.

Maybe they’d buy an oceanside cottage for trips. It’d be nice to have a place to bring the kids away from the city. Or they could get a babysitter for the weekend.

“Marimo,” Sanji agreed quietly, feeling the cool metal of the band around his finger as he leaned in to kiss Zoro.

Sanji’s opponent leapt into the air, raising his weapon high.

They’d definitely need a babysitter.

Sanji leaned back, ducking under the blade with endless grace and whipping his foot into the air. His heel cracked into the man’s chin with deft accuracy. The crowd swelled in approval.

Sanji grinned to himself, making a note to ask Killer if he’d babysit.

While he was at it, he made a note to kiss Zoro first thing when he was done. It had been almost ten minutes since they’d last kissed. Unacceptable. And while he was at that, he made a note to find an oceanside cottage for sale.

He’d start a list of places he needed to kiss Zoro later.

They had time.
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