Lead Me Home

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Summary

The world ended and Zoro learned to survive it alone, with only the ghosts of his dead friends for company. Then a half-naked stranger with an absurd eyebrow starts screaming in the woods.

Sanji is lost and hunted and determined to get home. Zoro only agrees to take him there because he plans to leave the second they arrive.

Zoro was a loner, always had been. He had never really fit in amongst people, didn't play particularly well with others and enjoyed his independence too much to be anything but a loner. He had never liked anyone doing anything for him. Most of his life he didn't have anyone anyway, so he learned how to get along by himself. He didn't know it was going to become such a drastic part of his life without his say so.

In this case, some World Government experiment gone wrong had been let loose and ravaged the world. It kickstarted a pandemic, and soon 70% of the world's population was dead. That wasn't the end of it. Those who died came back as undead beasts to finish off the rest of the living.

With that being the state of the world, Zoro thought he was doing well for himself. He had zombie-killing down pat and could hold his own against the other threats. He was resourceful, and he only hallucinated four times a week now.

"That's progress," Yosaku said dryly beside him where before he hadn't existed.

"It's like saying I'm only 30% crazy where before I was 50," Johnny added.

"Don't listen to them. Any progress is progress," Kuina said from his left side.

She smiled encouragingly at him. It was so like the real Kuina, it scared him. Except the words out of her mouth were wrong. Kuina would've been more likely to tease him than encourage him. She probably would've laughed at what Johnny said, but that's not how Zoro's head worked these days.

He knew, objectively, that his friends were dead. He'd seen it happen and yet, here they were. It was probably pretty unhealthy to be hallucinating his dead friends but the world was fucked anyway. Who cared at the end of the day? Not like he could go to therapy and cry about his feelings.

"Like you would've even if the world hadn't ended," Yosaku grumbled in reply, rolling his eyes.

Zoro stared at him. It'd been so long for him that he couldn't consciously remember Kuina's smile or Johnny's voice or Yosaku's eyes, only the screams, flesh being ripped from bone and the laughing of their malicious captors. In these moments, the hallucinations presented themselves with perfect clarity. Every forgotten detail rushed back until the illusions left, and he forgot again. The cognitive dissonance would've killed him by now if he hadn't accepted it as quickly as he had and used these apparitions to his advantage.

Kuina was a supportive voice. She gave him the confidence he needed to follow through on his choices and didn't let him beat himself up for too long. It was similar to how she was in life but not quite. His hallucination of Kuina was softer than the real Kuina ever was. It was less ambitious, less competitive and yet, less warm. She was little more than a poor imitation of the woman he'd known.

Johnny and Yosaku were different as well. His approximations of them motivated him to survive by any means necessary. Sometimes, it was as simple as pointing out animals to hunt or zombies to put down. Other times, they gave him the resolve he needed to kill others before they killed him. Johnny and Yosaku were notoriously cowardly in life. He supposed it made sense that his natural survival instincts would take their form even if his mind made them more cutthroat and less compassionate than they were in life.

Logically, Zoro knew it was all him. They were just parts of himself projected into forms he was comfortable confronting, but without them, he wouldn't have survived. However, that didn't mean the apparitions always agreed. This situation perfectly exemplified that.

Someone was screaming.

Zoro froze on the spot and looked in the direction the screams were coming from. He chose this forest to roam because he knew it well. Zoro had been wandering a long time, he didn't even know what region of the world or country he was in anymore. However, he stuck close to this general area, having put up physical borders so he didn't stray too far. There was rarely anyone around here, which is why he chose this area to settle. Zombies could not be stealthy in the dense foliage of these woods and were usually caught in the booby traps he set up. That wasn't a zombie screaming though, that was a person.

"Poor sucker," Yosaku commented.

"Yup, bad luck," Johnny agreed.

"That guy's not dead. He could be a friend. We have to help him," Kuina protested.

The other two gave her dubious looks. She turned her heavy gaze to Zoro when they didn't budge. He sighed deeply in response.

"He's going to attract corpses. We should go," Johnny said, looking around critically.

"On second thought, maybe we should check it out. We're getting antsy," Yosaku said, bouncing with pent up energy.

Those two agreed on most things, but Johnny was certainly more fueled by self-preservation as opposed to Yosaku, who could be extremely gung-ho about killing zombies when the mood struck. He didn't like being idle or moving slow. The real Yosaku abhorred idleness but was averse to fighting as well, a fact that served to remind Zoro that these ghosts in his head were just that. They weren't real.

"If we help him, we can kill as many dead things as you want," Kuina negotiated, looking ready to run off any second.

"It's probably a trap," Johnny pointed out.

"You don't know that."

"I know we're with Zoro for a reason, and it's not because we all lived happily ever after."

“That was totally different, we were...”

The two’s arguing voices faded into the background as Zoro rubbed at his temples and then let his fingers run down his face, catching on his growing stubble ever-so-slightly before dropping down at his sides. Damn, he hated his fucking brain sometimes.

He glanced at Yosaku, who wasn’t adding to the argument. Instead, he was watching them all with a slight smirk and shrugged nonchalantly when Zoro looked at him.

“So, what’ll it be?”

Zoro shook his head again before taking a deep breath and running towards the screams. He kept low and hid behind the lush but overgrown greenery.

When he came upon the scene, he saw a man standing on a boulder. He was mostly naked save for a worn oversized white t-shirt that had dirt and blood splattered on it. Half his face was a bruise with his left eye looking like it was just coming off being swollen shut and dried blood around various parts of his face and stuck in his blonde hair. Three zombies were reaching up at him as he stood just out of their grasp with no weapons and a tree blocking his route of escape.

Zoro pulled Wado Ichimonji from its sheath before running at the zombies. He quickly dispatched the three undead and watched the man stare at them with confusion as they lay on the floor, decapitated, before he looked up at Zoro. The swordsman didn’t acknowledge him and contemplated just leaving, but resources were invaluable, and those corpses might have something useful on them.

“Um, hi,” the man said.

Zoro glanced up at him but didn’t speak.

Blue.

That’s the first thing he thought. The guy’s eyes were really fucking blue. It was certainly a change after seeing filmy gray courtesy of every walking corpse that managed to shamble Zoro’s way, but even among all the people Zoro had met, he’d never seen someone with eyes that damn blue before. He wondered briefly if they were contact lenses or something before dismissing the ridiculous thought. He stared at the blonde for a moment more before breaking eye contact and continuing to search the zombies’ bodies.

“I— I’m Sanji.”

Zoro didn’t offer his name. He focused on going through the zombie’s pockets. The first had nothing but he found some unopened Slim Jims and a lighter on the second one. As he moved on to the last one, the man carefully climbed down from the rock, avoiding contact with the decaying bodies on the ground. Zoro cataloged his movements but didn’t turn to him.

“I’m kind of lost. I was running away from... well, I was running. I wasn’t paying attention, and I lost my sense of direction, can’t find the way back to my camp.”

Zoro briefly noted the guy's accent. It sounded more suited to the North Blue than anything else. However, Zoro didn't even know where he was, so maybe everyone spoke that way around here.

He wordlessly stood up and began walking away.

"Hey!" Sanji called, running in front of him.

"I'm... look, I don't like asking a stranger for help. You could be anyone, but I'm desperate and lost, so can you help me?"

Zoro looked him up and down from his dirt-caked feet to his bruised legs to his scratched arms, which showed defensive wounds from a person. His face was half covered by his dirty blonde locks, but the visible half was littered with bruises, though Zoro could make out a weird curly eyebrow. He was clearly helpless. He didn't even have anything to defend himself with. Helping with those zombies was more than enough intervention from Zoro. He wanted nothing else to do with this man.

"No," he said hoarsely.

He didn't think about the effort it took just to speak that one word as he once again walked away. He didn't hear anything for a while before footsteps began following him. He glanced back at the man behind him. When Zoro rose an eyebrow at him, Sanji gave him a defiant look in return. Zoro would be impressed if he weren't annoyed. He chose to ignore him. Maybe if he did so long enough, he'd go away.

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Curly Brow wouldn't leave.

It had been hours since they first encountered each other. It was nearing nightfall, but Curly continued to follow him. He wasn't quiet in the beginning, chattering away about things Zoro ignored and calling out insults, which was frankly bold of him given Zoro could've been the type of man to kill him without a second thought as so many people were now that the civilized world had ended. Eventually, the blonde tapered off into silence. Zoro did his best to ignore him through it all, though he was hyper-aware of his footsteps scraping through the leaves behind him, so he perked up the second Curly's feet started to sound like they were dragging. It was only a couple more steps later when he heard his body hit the ground. Zoro stopped but didn't turn to look at his unwanted companion.

"We should just leave him. We didn't ask him to come with us," Yosaku said.

Zoro was startled at his presence. He'd manage to cut back on his hallucinations to just one a day, but he supposed it made sense. He hadn't encountered anyone living in some time. Encountering someone again threw him off-kilter.

"All the more reason to leave him. He could be anybody. We can't trust him. My stranger-danger senses are definitely tingling," Johnny added.

“We’ll stick him in a hollow tree for the night or something,” Yosaku concluded with a careless shrug.

“We can’t do that,” Kuina said softly, coming around to stare him in the face.

“Either the zombies will find him and turn him or whoever he was running from will.”

“Why should that be my problem?” Zoro asked her.

Who cared if he was talking to himself? There was no one to see.

“Because you need him.”

“He’s a stranger, Kuina.”

“He doesn’t have to be. He could be a friend.”

“I don’t *need* a friend.”

“You can’t drift alone forever.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Don’t you want something more than this? He said he had a camp.”

“I’m not—”

“Even if we don’t stay there, at least we’ll have a purpose. That’s more than we do now.”

Zoro stared at her with his good eye before his gaze drifted behind him. Curly Brow was passed out face first in the brush. He was breathing, but it didn’t seem like he was waking any time soon. Zoro sighed heavily and started walking towards him.

“What are we even here for?” Yosaku murmured to Johnny.

Zoro stared down at the man who had already disrupted his routine to the point of annoyance. He’d get rid of him as soon as he could, he decided. Once he woke up and wasn’t on the brink of keeling over, Zoro would leave no matter what Kuina said.

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Zoro had spent ample time around this area. Whether he knew the name or not, he knew it like the back of his hand by now, so it wasn’t hard to find someplace to set up camp for the night. He didn’t like going into the residential areas. He preferred sticking to the woods to avoid human contact and large crowds of zombies, so he carried Curly to a small cave in the woods. It was just big enough for Zoro to fit himself and Curly inside if they stayed crouched or laying down. He set up some empty cans on barbed wire around the cave so he would be alerted to anyone or anything’s presence should he doze off.

There was a small stream nearby, and he gathered some water there. He knew how to start a fire, but seeing as how Curly mentioned he was running from some people, he decided against it. He figured Curly must be dehydrated and exhausted, possibly malnourished. Zoro didn't have a monopoly on food, but he taught himself to catch small rodents, he could collect nuts and tell which berries were edible and which were poisonous. He wasn't much in the way of medical care beyond basic CPR and first aid, although he had patched himself up serviceably enough the past few years. Still, if Curly had any real injuries, he was shit-out-of-luck. If he died, it would hardly be Zoro's fault, just nature taking its course.

He pushed away that line of thought and spent the night plying Curly Brow with water and mashed up berries and nuts.

It took another two days for him to wake up. Zoro kept close to him the whole time. He cleaned his wounds, kept him hydrated, his temperature regulated, and made sure nothing ate him. It wasn't unlike caring for a plant.

When Curly finally woke up, Zoro was out hunting. He was surprised upon his return to see him up, staring at a zombie that was caught in the barbed wire perimeter of the cave. The zombie mindlessly reached out towards the blonde, its jaws snapping at him like it could taste his flesh in the air. Maybe it could. Curly stayed out of its reach. At least he wasn't completely clueless.

"Hey," Zoro called, his voice rough from disuse.

Curly looked over at him, surprise evident in his eyes.

"Thought you skipped out and left the trap just to be nice," he said, his voice heavy from his time unconscious.

"That'd be a waste of resources."

Curly drew back, offended, but didn't say anything.

"I caught a few rabbits. You can finally get some meat into yourself. If you're capable of that."

The man glared at Zoro then.

"I think I can manage it."

Zoro shrugged in response. He knew he was being prickly. He could blame it on the circumstances he found himself in, but he was an asshole by nature. There was no point in correcting himself. This guy would be gone in a week, two at most.

"You look like you're about to fall over. Sit. I didn't spend the last two days keeping you alive for you to literally fall into a zombie's arms."

"Wait, two days?"

"Guess whatever you're running from caught up to you, huh, Curly?"

Curly shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. The bruises on his legs looked slightly better. His eye seemed almost normal now besides the stupid eyebrow and some faint puffiness. The bruises on his face were yellowing. Soon there would be no evidence of whatever happened to him besides the bloody t-shirt he wore as his only source of clothing.

No physical evidence anyway.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask. It’s not my business and I don’t want to know.”

He could hazard a good guess anyway. Curly opened and closed his mouth before nodding.

“Thanks for not asking and for taking care of me.”

“Don’t thank me, Curly. I didn’t ask because I don’t want the trouble later, and I was getting bored before you showed up.”

“Well, don’t worry. I’ll be out of your hair soon. You can go back to your monotony then. And— wait, what the hell did you call me?”

“Curly.”

“My name is Sanji.”

“Curly fits better.”

“And how the hell do you figure that?”

Zoro approached the man steadily before raising a finger and pointing it in the middle of the spiral on his forehead.

“Curly,” he concluded.

The man’s face turned red then, whether in embarrassment or anger Zoro didn’t know.

“Oh, you’re one to point out weird features bloody Mosshead. Call me by my name.”

“Hmm, don’t think I will, Dartboard.”

“Dart— ugh, I’m going back inside and away from you before I hurt you.”

“Like you could.”

Curly huffed in reply before crawling back into the cave. Zoro glanced at the zombie stuck in the barbed wire. It had managed to gouge the cable into its stomach, revealing some of its guts to the world. Zoro rolled his eye in response. The damn things were as annoying now as they probably were when they were human.

“You’re cleaning zombie intestines off the barbed wire, by the way. Might as well make yourself useful,” Zoro called after him as he swiftly drew Wado and impaled the groaning corpse through the head.

“I liked you better when we didn’t talk. Let’s go back to that,” Curly replied.

Zoro was just fine with that.

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They don’t talk to each other for another three days.

Curly continued to heal. Zoro felt sweet freedom coming closer the more each cut scabbed over and each bruise yellowed. The ghosts in his head had been as quiet as his swirly-browed companion and Zoro couldn’t ask for more.

He and Curly couldn’t stay stationary forever. Zoro packed up to leave the day after Curly woke up and the other man wordlessly followed him. They walked on the roadside together. Zoro didn’t like the visibility it gave them, but there were markers he’d created on the road to help him tell where he was going. Yosaku, Johnny and Kuina used to get on him about getting lost all the time. Zoro would deny it then, but the apocalypse forced him to admit his sense of direction wasn’t the best, which is likely how he ended up wherever the hell he was nowadays rather than remaining near Shimotsuki as he had been at the start of this mess.

Curly didn’t ask him where they were headed, he just followed him. They seldom stopped to rest. Zoro had been an orphaned loner a majority of his life, left to fend for himself, so he was fine with little rest and lots of movement. They had nuts, berries and dried pieces of rabbit to eat. And best of all: silence.

“Can we stop?” Curly asked.

Well, that was nice while it lasted.

“You can stop if you want to.”

“Are you going to leave me?”

“Yes.”

Curly sighed, but Zoro still heard his bare feet hitting the asphalt rhythmically. There was quiet for a minute more before Curly spoke again.

“I need to stop.”

“Then stop.”

“Will you please not be an ass for two minutes? I don’t have any shoes on, and my feet hurt.”

“So stop and rest. If you get eaten by zombies or those guys you’re running from find you, I’m sure your precious feet won’t hurt then.”

Curly didn’t reply to that. Zoro had his beloved silence for all of thirty seconds before he noticed a sound pick up.

No, he's not...

He glanced behind him and, yes, Curly was crying. His shoulders shook as his head stayed down, his eyes firmly turned to the ground, but he was definitely crying.

"I think we can all agree that at this point, we gotta drop the dead weight," Yosaku said, appearing before him, walking backward.

Zoro felt annoyance rise in him. If his peace was going to be broken might as well go all the way, he supposed.

"I mean, look at him. What use is he to us?"

"He's going to get us killed. I'm sure he'll be fine, let's just leave him," Johnny added, shrugging.

Zoro waited for Kuina to say something, but she didn't. She just walked beside him and glanced back at Curly. He wondered why Kuina wasn't speaking. He supposed the projection's silence said all it needed to.

Zoro sighed to himself. He should be happy about this, his better half was winning a lot more lately, but he just felt annoyed. This was more interaction than he wanted to have and more effort into talking to people than he wanted to exhaust. He turned around to face Curly and wracked his brain for something comforting to say but what came out was,

"What are you doing?"

Curly glanced up at him, his wet blue eyes shining with confusion.

"What?"

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Crying."

"I'm sorry if it bothers you so much, but between the facts that I'm lost from my camp, was attacked by a group of disgusting, perverted psychos and am now stuck walking down this bumpy fucking street with no shoes or pants on with the biggest dickhead on Earth, aforementioned psychos included, I think I have a right to feel however I want. If that means crying, then that's what I'm going to do. Ignore me if you don't want to listen to it, Mosshead. You're good at that anyway."

"I'm not saying you can't, I'm saying… you should just… you know, suck it up," Zoro said, stumbling over his words.

He finished it all off with a small punch to the other man's arm. Curly looked at him with confusion again.

“…the fuck was that?”

“I was… I was trying to make you feel better. My friend used to do that to me.”

“And did whatever that was usually make you feel better,” Curly asked, a mocking edge to his words.

“Not really,” Zoro mumbled to himself.

He took a few steps towards Curly but stopped as the blonde took a step back.

“Look, I’m trying to level with you. We can’t just stop out here. It’s dangerous, we might be seen. There’s a department store about ten minutes’ walk away. I got the barbed wire from the hardware section there. It’s clear of any food or conventional weapons, but we can stop and get some clothes and shoes for you. Maybe some camping gear too.”

“Won’t there be zombies inside?”

“I cleared it out when I started staying around here. Can you just hold out for ten minutes?”

Curly nodded after a moment and walked up to fall into step beside him rather than behind him. They were silent for another few minutes before the blonde spoke up.

“I know you think I’m weak and useless, but I’ve survived this long. I’ve faced things a lot worse than these zombies, and I can handle people better than you think I can. I’m not going to get you killed.”

Zoro didn’t reply to that. They’d just have to wait and see.

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The department store’s parking lot had a few zombies milling about, but it was nothing to bother themselves over. Zoro took Curly to the clothing section and left him to his own devices while he went to the camping section. He grabbed some more barbed wire as well as ropes for his traps. He turned around to leave before grabbing a pack hanging from the wall and wandering back over to the clothing section. He didn’t see Curly immediately, but he could hear him rummaging around in the dressing rooms. After a moment, he came out wearing a light blue hoodie along with a pair of dark jeans.

“Better?” Zoro asked nonchalantly.

Curly glanced at him with an indecipherable emotion on his face before answering.

“Wish I could take a shower, but at least I have clothes, though I would’ve liked a suit better.”

“Who you gonna impress with a suit? The zombies?”

“Would’ve just been familiar is all.”

“Regardless, maybe we’ll pass a stream again and you can bathe. Here, I figured you might want to put some extra clothes in this,” Zoro said, thrusting the pack at him.

Curly looked mildly surprised.

“Thanks.”

Zoro didn’t acknowledge the gratitude, instead he nodded for Curly to follow him to the shoe section, though the blonde ended up steering them in the right direction after Zoro got turned around.

He sat on a bench as Curly looked over the shoes and ultimately chose a pair of thick-heeled boots and some running sneakers.

“I should probably clean my feet before I put these on. You think they still have a first aid kit hanging out around here?”

“Maybe behind the counter.”

They walked over to the registers. Zoro found a kit just under the POS machine, along with some rubbing alcohol and hydrogen peroxide. He gestured for Curly to sit on the counter.

“You don’t have to. I can do it,” he protested.

“I know, Curly,” Zoro replied.

“Really? Because you seem to think I’m barely capable of remembering to breathe. And my name is Sanji.”

“Look, I get it. I’ve been an asshole to you. I’m not used to being around people again. Will you just sit up there so I can clean your feet?”

Curly still stared at him undecidedly.

“Please… Sanji,” Zoro tacked on.

Curly… *Sanji* sighed before hopping up onto the counter. Zoro kneeled and took his pack off his back, pulling out the flashlight he had inside. Sanji’s feet were dirty from walking around the forest all this time, so Zoro used the hydrogen peroxide along with a piece of cloth he had to clean his skin free of the dirt. It revealed a few superficial wounds, cuts from the gravel, sticks and glass. He applied the rubbing alcohol to sterilize the wounds.

After that, he went about administering some of the bacitracin from the kit to his cuts.

“You should let them breathe before you put on the shoes. We can stay here for the night. It’s big, but I’ll chain up the entrances and exits. We can sleep close to one of them just in case,” Zoro said.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll help you.”

“No, just stay there. Let the ointment sink in a little.”

Sanji looked like he was about to protest, but he held off.

Zoro stopped by the hardware section and picked up some chains before walking around the store and wrapping them on all the doors. He stopped by the camping section again and grabbed two sleeping bags before bringing them to the emergency exit. He got back to the registers and felt his heart sink when he saw that Sanji was no longer there. He looked around frantically and then relaxed as he caught sight of him close by in the kitchen section. Zoro strolled over and watched Sanji stare at the pots and pans with a sorrowful look on his face.

“Did you like to cook or something?” Zoro asked before he could stop himself.

“You don’t care,” Sanji mumbled back.

He shouldn’t care, but something about Sanji throwing him in the lot with the people who had attacked him, people like the ones who killed Kuina, Yosaku, and Johnny, rubbed him the wrong way.

“I asked, didn’t I?”

Sanji turned to face him.

“No, I didn’t like to cook. I loved it, it was my whole life. I grew up in my old man’s restaurant, the Baratie. I worked there since I was kid, helping Zeff build it from the ground up. We became rather successful. My old man wanted to expand, set up a second restaurant in Loguetown. We would’ve left a week later than we did to check out spaces, but I insisted we go early for a cooking competition that I wanted to participate in.”

Realization flooded Zoro. The first case of this zombie virus was documented in Loguetown.

“Loguetown was more populated than most places. More people meant more zombies and the location meant more travelers flooding in, potentially spreading the virus. There was an order from the World Government to quarantine and sterilize the city, which is just a very polite way of saying they decided to lock everyone in and blow the place up. I made it out, somehow, but my family, my father… he had lost his leg a while before that, couldn’t run and wouldn’t let me stay with him. I made a lot of promises to him about the kind of person I’d be at the end of the world. I promised I wouldn’t lose our shared passion for food, promised I’d still feed anyone who’s hungry, promised I’d keep dreaming about… anyway, I managed to find a place where I could be safe. I’m a cook at my camp, Laugh Tale. The camp leader’s stomach is a black hole, the bloody idiot. He’s probably starving without me there to feed him. They need me.”

There was a painfully fond tone in Blondie’s voice as he talked about this leader of his. Maybe he was more than just a leader to him.

“You want to get back to your camp for him?”

“Not just him. I have friends there. They’re my family now.”

Zoro looked down for a moment, his mind weighing pros and cons. He wondered if his mental companions would show up, but he was alone with this decision.

It wasn't his problem, he barely knew this man, but he almost felt like he had something to prove. He shouldn't, but he couldn't stop his old mulish behavior from rearing its head.

"I'll help you."

"What?"

"I'll help you find your camp. It's not safe out here by yourself. Other than the obvious, the men who attacked you are still around here somewhere. They might not be the only ones. I'll help you get home."

"I thought you didn't want anything to do with me once I got better."

"Changed my mind."

"Why are you being so civil all of a sudden," Sanji asked, his voice accusatory.

"I need a reason?"

"You've been a dick this whole time, and now you've done a complete 180. Yeah, I need you to give me a reason."

"It's… I… It's not… I'm not always like this. I can be… civil, when I need to be."

"Excuse me for doubting that, Mosshead," Sanji said in a deadpan voice.

"Mosshead?"

Sanji gazed pointedly at Zoro's green hair, prompting him to grit his teeth in annoyance.

"Watch it, Dartboard Brows."

"Dartboard— oi, don't test me, shitty swordsman."

"Right back at you, shitty cook."

"I'm a chef, not a cook!"

"Whatever. Look, point is I'm not like the people who attacked you. I'll help you, then I'll leave. You got a problem with that, feel free to walk all the way to this Laugh Tale place on your own, but good look watching your back by yourself. Sticking together makes more sense, Blondie. So, what will it be?"

Sanji was quiet for a moment, weighing his options, before he sighed.

"I guess it makes more sense to travel together."

Zoro nodded with finality, deeming the conversation over.

“Let’s get some sleep,” he said, turning to walk away.

“Wait.”

Zoro turned around to face him.

“You know, you haven’t told me your name yet.”

“Guess I haven’t.”

Sanji raised an eyebrow.

“Are you going to?”

“It’s Roronoa Zoro.”

“Roronoa, why does that seem familiar,” Sanji wondered to himself before his eyes lit with recognition.

“The kendo fighter?”

Zoro was surprised the blonde recognized him. He didn’t seem the type of guy to be into kendo.

“Once upon a time. What’s it to you?”

“Nothing, just surprised. You used to be something of a celebrity back before the world ended. I guess that explains the swords though.”

“I’m just a survivor, like everyone else.”

“Mmm. Although, I do have to say this is a bit anticlimactic for me. I’ve been calling you all sorts of things in my head, not all of them nice, and your name just turns out to be Zoro. It’s kind of a letdown.”

“What kind of name did you want me to have?”

“I don’t know. I was partial to Asshole McJerkface.”

“Really rolls off the tongue.”

“I thought so, Mosshead,” Sanji replied.

Zoro shook his head, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a shadow of a smile which he quickly hid behind a sneer.

“Let’s go to sleep.”

~*~*~

Zoro didn’t usually enjoy being wrong, but Kuina had been right about this (or was Zoro right all along since Kuina was just him?) He found that the days didn’t drag as much with Sanji there now that they talked. Before leaving the store, they managed to find some kitchen knives and Sanji had taken it as his weapon of choice with a grimace.

“Zeff would be disappointed in me. As chefs, we were never to use our hands to fight.”

“You fight?”

“Martial arts. Kick-based fighting. I still do against people, but the corpses stretch that resolve. Sometimes my kicks aren’t enough against them. The old me would kick the ass of the person who thought to defile knives by turning them into a weapon.”

“Well, we’re not in the old world anymore, Cook.”

Despite his clear reluctance to use the knives, Sanji had proven himself worthy against the zombies. His kicking actually was a sight to behold. Zoro had seen him crush skulls under his boot heels despite Zoro’s initial misgivings. Beyond that, he was not upset when it came to the cook’s skills at, well, cooking.

He had made fun when Sanji insisted on raiding the spice section of the department store as well as bringing a collection of pots with them. However, it was paying off now. This was the best food Zoro had ever eaten, both before and after the apocalypse.

He was on his second bowl of rabbit stew already with Sanji not so subtly watching him out of the corner of his eye.

“How does it taste,” the blonde asked as the two sat around a crackling fire in the woods.

It had been some time since they first met. Zoro figured whoever had attacked Sanji had moved on by now, so he decided to risk making the fire. Sanji took advantage of it to cook an actual dinner for them rather than the dried jerky and trail mix they’d been surviving off of.

“S’good,” he replied simply.

“Just good?”

“Yeah, what else do you want me to say,” he countered around a mouthful of stew.

“Ugh, swallow your food before you speak, neanderthal. Didn’t your parents teach you manners?”

“Nah. Died before they could. Did your parents teach you to be such a priss?”

Sanji paused for a moment before he chuckled humorlessly to himself.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking about how little I know about you. I mean, just getting your name took almost a week, and we’ve been together for two now.”

Zoro wasn't expecting the trip to Sanji's camp to take this long. They got turned around the first few days of walking which Sanji insisted on blaming Zoro for, saying he got them lost, which he vehemently protested. The blonde had commandeered the map at that point as they continued their journey on foot.

"Does it matter?" Zoro asked.

"It does to me. I tell you things about myself."

"I don't ask, you just tell me."

"Well, I'm asking."

Zoro shrugged in response.

"How about this? Let's play 20 questions. It's a good icebreaker."

Zoro gave him a dubious look.

"I'm serious. Ask me a question."

"Why are we playing this stupid game?"

"Because, even though you're nicer than you were when we first met, you're still an asshole. It's veered into the realm of vaguely charming by now, but I'd like to know the guy I'm going to be travelling with and, more importantly, bringing to my camp."

"I don't have to go to your camp."

"Let's be honest, Mosshead, the chances of you getting to my camp and getting back to your stomping grounds on your own are nil. You'll get lost immediately."

"I'm not attached to any one place anyway. Besides, I'm fine with you not knowing me."

"Well, I'm not. What's your favorite food?"

"You're not serious."

"I am."

Zoro rolled his eye. He took a slow sip of water just to bother Sanji, but he looked at him with the patience of a saint.

"Rice and meat," he said in a monotone voice.

"Okay… are you going to be more specific or tell me why?"

"No."

"Why not?"

“Because there’s no rule that says I have to answer your questions the way you want me to.”

“That’s not fair,” Sanji said petulantly.

Zoro was half expecting him to throw his arms across his chest and huff like a child throwing a tantrum.

“Shit happens. And that was three questions, which means the next three are mine.”

“Fine. Go ahead,” Sanji replied grudgingly.

“I think I’m going to save my questions for later.”

“Wh— you can’t do that!”

“Yes, I can. If I don’t ask all three of mine, you can’t ask yours.”

Zoro smirked to himself as Sanji crossed his arms over his chest and pouted.

“Stupid mosshead.”

“Idiot cook.”

“I hate you.”

“That’s not what you said a second ago.”

Sanji looked at him with slight confusion.

“So, you think I’m charming, huh?”

“That is *not* what I said.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what you said.”

“What I meant was that there are some people, in general, who may find your overall shitty disposition appealing. Not that those people in any way reflect how I feel, but— oh my god, I hate you.”

“If I knew you had this huge crush on me, I would’ve been nicer to you sooner,” Zoro went on teasingly.

“Stupid fucking Moss. Dumbass, directionally challenged shitty-ass swordsman,” Sanji started cursing belligerently, much to Zoro’s amusement.

“Thought you were too much of a mannered priss to throw a tantrum, Cook.”

“I’m tempted to go back to not talking to you. And you only have two questions left,” Sanji declared before stomping towards the tent as he stuck his middle finger up at Zoro.

Zoro chuckled to himself. He was doing that a lot more with Sanji around.

“I like him,” Johnny said across from him.

“Me too. He should stick around. Could be useful,” Yosaku added.

“Two weeks ago, you two told a different story,” Kuina said, eyeing the two with disbelief.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Zoro sat back against a tree, content to let his phantoms fight amongst themselves while he listened to Sanji rummage around the tent.

Sanji being around made him quickly become okay with a lot of things.

~*~*~

That night Zoro dreamed memories and fantasies all wrapped up in one.

He dreamed about Kuina, Johnny, and Yosaku. He dreamed about life before the virus, of how they used to be. He had moved in with Kuina and her father as his fifth foster home. He and Kuina were rivals and best friends, practically siblings. Johnny and Yosaku attended Koshirou’s dojo and the four became friends eventually. It was particularly important to Zoro given making friends was a near impossible task for him. Then everything fell apart, and those spaces within Zoro held nothing but gnawing pain accentuated by their fading screams and the bloodshed before and during and after. Zoro limped away minus one eye and cleaved in half while his friends, his family, were dead.

Before his mind could snap under the weight of the dream/memory, he was brought back to a more jovial time. It was prom night and he had ended up going with Kuina since none of the guys asked her and Zoro couldn’t be bothered to ask anyone. Kuina had eventually came to him and told him they were going together and he was going to dance with her.

He resisted at first but eventually, she wore him down.

“You’re surprisingly not awful at this,” she commented as they danced in the gym.

“It’s just footwork at the end of the day, right? Your father’s drilled that skill in our heads enough for this to be a breeze,” he retorted.

“Hmm, I guess I can see that logic. Congratulations on your singular brain cell managing to scrap together a logical answer.”

Zoro rolled his eyes at that, long used to insults to his intelligence.

This was the part where she teased him some more. Zoro would pick back at her and the two would spend the rest of the dance sniping at one another.

However, Kuina didn’t tease him. Instead, she stared at him intensely.

“It’s okay, you know,” she said.

“What is?”

“Liking him, being content. Maybe almost happy.”

“What are you—”

“You don’t have to fight this war anymore. You could have a home if you tried.”

Kuina’s words confused and confounded him. He spun her out with the sole purpose of collecting himself, but when he pulled her back, it wasn’t her anymore, it was Sanji.

Sanji smiled brightly at him as he and Zoro swayed back and forth.

“Imagine it,” Sanji said, his voice so wistfully optimistic it didn’t even sound like the real Sanji.

Zoro stiffened as Dream Sanji suddenly leaned in close to him. The craziest thing was that Zoro wanted to kiss him back, if only in the privacy of his fantasies. Sanji opened his mouth as if to say something, but what came out was a growling moan. Zoro jumped back and his eye popped open.

He was disoriented by the blazing sunlight for a moment before the growling sounded again. His eye widened as a zombie came stalking at him. He fell asleep outside the trap, he realized. He kicked the zombie away to give him some time to pull Wado. Before he could unsheathed the sword, a flying figure blurred past him and then in the next moment a foot was crushing into the creature’s skull.

“I think that makes us even,” Sanji commented breathlessly, shaking black blood off his boot.

“I killed three zombies for you, the scale is still tipped,” Zoro commented back, standing up on slightly shaky legs as adrenaline coursed through him.

“What happened?” Sanji asked.

“Last night, I was... I don’t even remember what I was doing, but I went outside the trap. I must’ve dozed off. Woke up to that thing.”

Sanji glanced up at the sky and then at Zoro, looking him up and down.

“We’re staying here for the day.”

“What? No. Curly—”

“You’re exhausted. That’s what happens when you choose to keep watch three nights in a row. If someone weren’t so stubborn, he wouldn’t almost be a zombie’s lunch. You may be a dick, but I need to talk to someone. Go to sleep. The tent is all yours. We’ll get moving tomorrow.”

Zoro stared Sanji down, but he didn’t seem like he would budge. Zoro relented and made his way under the barbed wire towards the tent, tripping over a branch as he did. He glanced

back at Sanji to see him staring at him with a pensive expression rather than a mocking one.

“Maybe two days.”

“One.”

“Two days, and then we’re gone.”

“*One*.”

“We’ll see.”

~*~*~

They set off two days later.

He and Sanji took their time walking through the new area they found themselves in. They had to stop frequently. The zombies were more spread out here but favored the forest. From the various burned trees around, Zoro guessed someone set a large fire a while ago to attract them, and they ended up either getting stuck among the dense forestry or there was nothing to draw them away again. He didn’t want to deal with anyone living, so he and Sanji traipsed their way through a maze of the dead. They killed more zombies in the last two days than the two weeks spent in Zoro’s stomping grounds. The swordsman didn’t mind and Sanji didn’t either. They were even keeping track of their kills to see who could rack up more. He found that Sanji was as competitive as he was and there were times they abandoned forward progress in lieu of indulging their little competition, morbid though it was.

Still, it was getting late. The sun was nearly set, the sky a very deep blue. They needed somewhere to sleep and the woods wouldn’t cut it. They made it back to the road, Zoro hoping they’d come across a house, but all he saw for miles were trees.

“Moss,” Sanji said urgently.

Zoro looked at him before glancing back to see a herd of zombies ambling down the road. The numbers were dangerous, but if they kept ahead of them, Zoro wasn’t worried about them, at least not until nightfall. He motioned for Sanji to follow him down the road, but he shook his head.

“It’s not like they can run, we just have to keep our distance,” Zoro pointed out.

“It’s not that. It’s late. We need to hunker down and there’s no shelter in sight besides that thing,” Sanji said, pointing off to their left.

Zoro squinted before he was able to make out a blue semi crashed into a tree reading *Buggy’s Delivery Service* on the side of it. It was largely concealed by the overgrown, low hanging tree branches. Zoro wouldn’t have noticed it if Sanji hadn’t pointed it out.

“We could stay there for the night. I don’t want to be out here in the woods or on the road with those things around more than usual. The traps won’t do shit against that herd anyway.”

“The cabin is probably burned out,” Zoro commented.

“Yeah, but the trailer is fair game. We might even be able to open the tent in it. If not, we can just lay the bedrolls out. We can wait out the night until the herd passes. In the morning, we can make up ground.”

Zoro glanced back at the zombies. They hadn’t noticed them yet and still ambled at a leisure pace a safe distance away. He decided Sanji was right, the risk wasn’t worth it. Instead of pressing on, he followed him to the trailer and wrenched the door open cautiously. There were no zombies inside, and if there had been cargo in it before, it was gone now. Zoro chained the door up after closing it.

They set up in the trailer for the night, using the flashlight to illuminate the dark setting and rolling out their bedrolls next to one another when they determined the tent wouldn’t fit. They couldn’t start a fire in the trailer so he wouldn’t get to enjoy Sanji’s cooking, but the blonde had made some soup that was apparently meant to be served cold a couple days ago and they still had some containers of it left over along with some beef jerky. They ate dinner while listening to the zombies bump against the trailer before moving along. Sanji jumped with nearly every bang. Zoro looked at him as he gave a particularly violent shudder.

“What,” he snapped at him.

He noticed that the blonde tended to do that if he believed Zoro was doubting his strength. He figured it was a byproduct of the early days of their relationship. If Zoro was a better man, he’d reassure Sanji.

“You scared or something, Curly? You’re real jumpy.”

“I’m not jumpy, I’m vigilant.”

“What for?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it has something to do with the horde of rotting corpses currently shambling past our makeshift shelter, Mosshead. Come on, even your overworked brain cell should be able to figure out that much.”

Zoro gave a noncommittal grunt in reply, prompting Sanji to roll his eyes.

He enjoyed getting a rise out of the blonde. His exasperation provided endless entertainment.

(And if their bickering provided a distraction for the blonde, that was just a plus.)

“S’just a herd, don’t see the big deal. Happens from time to time, you just power through it.”

Sanji gave him a careful look at that.

“Do you do a lot of that out here, on your own? Powering through things?”

“How else do you expect to survive?”

“Don’t you want to do more than just survive? Don’t you want to live too?”

“Look around you, Curls. This *is* living nowadays.”

“It’s different in Laugh Tale. We don’t get this many of the corpses near the camp. Probably because of the smaller communities within the vicinity, not many people around to turn,” Sanji relayed.

“Where’s this place exactly anyway?”

He already knew but he wanted to distract Sanji. His questions were putting Zoro on edge, never mind the giant herd outside.

“Still farther south. And no, that doesn’t mean we’re underground. Contrary to your belief, south and down are *not* the same thing, Moss.”

Zoro looked away, refusing to admit embarrassment at that little misunderstanding. Zoro didn’t get why it was always pointing downwards on maps if it didn’t mean down.

“Anyway, Laugh Tale is…” Sanji trailed off before looking over at Zoro. He stared at him for a moment before he started chuckling lowly.

“Should I be insulted?” Zoro asked.

“I was just thinking of how you might react to a place like Laugh Tale. Now that I’m thinking of it, someone like you might be... slightly mystified.”

“What does that mean?” Zoro asked, leaning his elbows on his knees as he looked over at Sanji.

“It’s not a bad thing per se. Laugh Tale is just different than what you’re used to.”

Zoro still stared at him expectantly.

“We have a real society there. We’ve got power thanks to the solar panels, our own water supply, a well, animals, gardens, walls, a supply of weapons and food. We’re led by committee mostly. I mean, we’ve got a leader, I told you about Luffy, but we’ve got a council in charge of different aspects of the camp. Nami is second-in-command and honestly that woman makes sure we’re still in one piece given Luffy’s more hair-brained ideas. Jinbe is third-in-command. He’s our diplomat and represents us with the surrounding settlements. Usopp is the head of agriculture, Franky is our engineer, Chopper is our head doctor, Robin is our historian and librarian as well as head teacher, Brook handles music, Ace handles fire safety among other things, Sabo is our head of security and I, of course, head up the kitchens and oversee food stocks and storage.”

“You’re on this council thing?”

“Mmm. I ended up in Laugh Tale in the early days before we were fully established. We had to fight off the people in the area as well as the zombies to keep our camp safe. It’s partly due to those early days that Luffy ended up the leader. He made sure everyone was safe. Fought

the hardest for us, the fiercest. We had our losses, he did too, but he held us up. It's partly why I'm eager to return. Luffy will come for me. I don't want him to drag out our best fighters and take them away from protecting the camp."

Sanji's face brightened as he talked about Luffy. He was reminded that this leader guy was probably more than just a leader to the cook. Zoro didn't want to dwell on something like that even though it made a strange feeling curl in his gut.

"I know it must sound too good to be true but Laugh Tale has really worked out so far. Everyone has their job within the community, even if they're not on the council. Whatever we can't produce ourselves or scavenge on runs, we get through trade with the surrounding communities. Thanks to that, we have enough resources to lend to recreational activities like movie nights, soccer tournaments, book clubs, and a bunch of other things. So, yeah, I think there's more to life nowadays than *just* surviving," Sanji explained with a shrug.

Zoro didn't even know what to say to that. A place like that, which before would be par for the course, now sounded like something from a fantasy. Sanji looked over at him before chuckling again.

"The look on your face. I knew it. You think it's insane."

"I think it's... different. It's… something."

"Don't go pulling out any more complex adjectives or else you might lose me," Sanji quipped back.

Zoro rolled his eye at the sarcasm but didn't bother throwing it back.

"I'm counting this whole conversation towards your two questions by the way, which means it's my turn. You told me before you had a friend, and you said you weren't used to people anymore, so I'm guessing you weren't always alone out here."

"Get to the point," Zoro said as warning bells rang in his head.

"Like I said before, I want to know you. I look at you and I see this stranger. Granted it's a stranger who I can tolerate well enough. It didn't start out that way, but I do. I know you lost someone in all this. I know you like looking forward, but they're important to who you are. If I don't know them, I don't know you. So, who were they?"

Zoro stared over Sanji's shoulder. He hadn't seen his ghosts in a little while. Last time he did, Sanji almost caught him talking to himself so he tried to keep them out of his head now more than ever. Zoro jumped as Sanji's hand found its way to his cheek, brushing over the overgrown stubble that he gained during his time in the wilderness. The touch made his focus snap back towards the blonde as he wordlessly waited for an answer.

"Their names were Johnny, Kuina, and Yosaku. That's all I'm saying about it."

"Okay. Can I... I'm going to ask my second question."

"Fine, and then we're going to sleep."

“Why do you stay out here? I’m sure you could find some community to belong to.”

Zoro almost didn’t answer that question, but something about Sanji’s voice made him want to. Sanji didn’t sound judgmental, just genuinely curious.

“It’s easier out here. I know what to expect and I know better than to trust anyone or take anything at face value. It keeps me in tune with the world as it is. I don’t become soft or weak or immune to reality.”

Zoro paused before continuing.

“Plus, there’s not a lot of time to think about things other than how to survive. Can’t dwell on what happened if I’m too busy making sure I don’t die.”

“That makes sense, I guess. We get people like you a lot in Laugh Tale: nomads who live outside the community. Luffy encourages them to be as free as they want but to come behind the walls if they’re running low on supplies or anything else,” Sanji explained.

Zoro nodded before he suddenly realized Sanji still had his hand on his cheek, his fingers lightly stroking the scar over Zoro’s left eye. The realization flummoxed him for a moment, sending his heart into a tizzy. He clamped down on the fluttering in his chest before it could really begin. He wasn’t going to start this. He wouldn’t be with Sanji a week from now. Plus, Sanji had Luffy. Their presence in each other’s lives was temporary at best and that was all this would be.

“Good night,” Zoro said in a curt tone before laying down in his bedroll with his back towards the other man.

Sanji sighed audibly before turning off the flashlight.

“Good night,” he murmured in response.

Zoro squeezed his eye closed, hoping sleep would come swiftly.

It did happen eventually, but he found himself waking in what he thought was the middle of the night. He didn’t feel very rested. He had a moment of panic, wondering if it was the zombies or some other danger that woke him up. He tried to sit up but found he was unable to. That’s when Sanji’s closeness registered to him.

They had moved in their sleep. Zoro was on his back rather than his side, and Sanji had his arm thrown over his waist, his head resting on Zoro’s shoulder. He was a warm presence in the otherwise cold atmosphere of the truck’s trailer. He was soft where the ground was hard under his back. The trailer was dark. The only sliver of light that came in was through the bottom of the shutter, but Zoro’s eye used that minuscule illumination, and his eye adjusted, allowing Sanji’s features to come into focus.

He hadn’t ever been this close to him or anything that wasn’t dead for some time. He found himself studying him. His bruises and scars had faded. He slept peacefully curled against Zoro, his face relaxed and worry-free. He looked soft and unbothered by the shitstorm

outside. Zoro almost let himself hope he was part of the reason for that. Sanji's lips were fuller than he'd noticed before, his goatee around it grew into some sort of tamed pattern, but he could probably do with a shave if not trim if they managed to find a pharmacy or a store somewhere around.

One of Zoro's hands came up to Sanji's cheek. He had a scar there that looked old. Zoro wondered where it came from, it didn't look like it came from the men who attacked him. It wasn't fresh enough. He quickly cut off that line of thinking. Wallowing in the past did no one any good. He couldn't stop his finger from coming up to trace over the raised skin. Sanji shuddered lightly in his sleep before his arm latched on tighter to Zoro's waist and he cuddled deeper into his shoulder. Zoro rested his head gently on top of Sanji's and let himself indulge by pressing a light kiss to the top of his head, drawing another shiver from the sleeping man.

Sanji would never know he had done it. Zoro wouldn't know what to do if Sanji felt anything other than tolerance or, at best, mild fondness towards him. It was easier this way. They worked together because they had to. Once Sanji reached Laugh Tale, Zoro was gone. Besides, Sanji had that Luffy guy. Sure, he never actually said they were together or anything but the way he spoke of him told Zoro all he needed to know. Zoro and Sanji were friends, if that. More accurately, they were traveling companions. That was all they ever needed to be to one another. If there was some part of Zoro that wanted there to be more, that wanted to be able to stay with Sanji, maybe even in that impossible camp of his, that was a part of himself that was easily ignored.

~*~*~

Zoro did his best to keep the twos' journey confined to backwoods and dense forestry, but residential areas couldn't be avoided forever. Besides, there might be some food or weapons locked away in one of the houses they would typically avoid. When they reached farther south, he decided to make a detour. Per the map they had, they were close enough to their destination that he felt comfortable deviating.

"You keep watch while I look around. If anything, come around the back and get me."

Sanji nodded, tapping his feet on the ground in that characteristic way Zoro had come to associate with his kicks as they stood in front of the fifth house they decided to rummage through.

Zoro knocked on the door to draw any zombies that may be inside, but when none came, he eased his way inside. It was in pristine condition if dusty from neglect. The house was decorated in pink, black and beige. He walked further into the living room, Wado at the ready. The place looked untouched, frozen in time. There were pictures on the mantle, mostly of large groups of people. There was also a wedding photo of two heavy-set people. The man had a cigar hanging out the side of his mouth while the woman had bubblegum pink hair and cherry red lipstick. There was a wedding book set on a stand right next to it commemorating the marriage of Capone Bege and Charlotte Chiffon. Next to it was a picture of a baby that must've been their son.

He left the mantle and continued to look around the living room. There was a layer of dust over everything, suggesting no one had been to the house in some time. This could bode well

or ill for the duo.

He moved past the living room to the kitchen, searching the cabinets with the aid of his flashlight. They were all cleared of anything edible or useful. He shined his flashlight into the cupboard under the sink and only saw rusted pipes. He was about to move on when he noticed his flashlight shining on something that wasn't rusted. He ducked down further and saw a gun taped to the underside of the pipe. He shook his head, wondering why they felt the need to hide it around the house in the first place, but he wasn't about to investigate the former owners' lives.

It wasn't important anymore.

He pulled the pistol off the pipe and checked the clip to see it full. He made sure the safety was on before stuffing it into his pocket. He hoped that wasn't the only one there. It'd be better if both he and Sanji had guns. Sanji was weird about weapons that required his hands, he clearly didn't like it and thought it was a betrayal towards his father, but the world forced his hand whether he liked it or not. He still relied on his legs more but if it came down to it, Zoro would just give the gun to Sanji. It would give the swordsman some piece of mind. His legs weren't worth shit when it came to long-distance defense anyway.

"That's cute," Johnny said behind him.

Zoro jumped ever so slightly, not expecting the man to show up. There was no reason, Zoro was just checking the place out.

"What the hell?" He growled at him.

"It's cute that you feel the need to justify why you're giving the new guy the gun. I mean, we all know it's because of the moon eyes you've been giving each other, but if you want to keep lying to yourself, far be it from us to stop you. Actually, that's not true. Thanks to the longevity of your relationship with Johnny, I'm stuck talking to you about this."

"Poor you. How about you just leave then? I don't need you here, I can get by on my own."

"Really? There's a padlock on the pantry, by the way."

Zoro glanced across the kitchen at the plywood door before making his way towards it.

"Look, I'm just saying while it's not essential to your survival, maybe it's not the worst thing in the world."

"What isn't," Zoro asked, kicking at the heavy plywood.

"Don't make me say it. I'll be physically ill, which means you will be too."

Zoro spared Johnny a look at that.

"An intimate relationship, a deep connection… new love for lack of better, less disgustingly sappy words."

“Johnny was a hopeless romantic. You’re not good at replicating that,” Zoro commented.

“Hey, I’m a byproduct of your fucked-up mind. Blame yourself for that, not me.”

“I don’t know what you mean about Sanji and I don’t care. You can go back to whatever corner of my fucked-up mind Kuina and Yosaku are hiding in and stay there. I need to—”

“Mossy,” Sanji asked, coming around the corner of the kitchen.

Zoro turned to him quickly.

“I told you to keep watch.”

“I heard a bunch of banging in here. I got worried, thought you were in trouble.”

“It’s fine. I’m trying to kick through this thing.”

Sanji glanced at the pantry before stepping past Zoro. He ran his fingers over the wood and then stepped back.

“It’s plywood, you’re not kicking through that. It’s what they use for horse stables. I’ll break it. My legs are stronger than yours.”

Zoro nodded, moving out of the way as Sanji took a running start and then flew feet first towards the door, cracking the wood and ripping it off its hinges. Zoro would never admit how much he enjoyed seeing Sanji move, his strength was the kind that Zoro would’ve been instantly drawn to in his former life.

He pulled the door out of the way, removing it the rest of the way off its hinges and setting it aside. Sanji let out a sharp breath once the inside was revealed and Zoro’s jaw must’ve dropped right along with him. The pantry was fully stocked with canned goods and dry food on all four shelves.

“This can’t be real,” Sanji muttered.

Zoro shook out of his stupor before pulling his pack off his back. He promptly began stuffing it with food, starting from the top.

“Do you have any idea how much I can make with all of this,” Sanji muttered, clear delight in his voice.

“You’d know better than me, Cook,” Zoro retorted as he continued filling his bag.

He pulled down the cereal boxes. There were probably insects in them already, but maybe there was something behind the boxes. He grabbed two boxes and placed them to the side. He grabbed a third and made to put it to the side as well but stopped as it felt more cumbersome than the others. He shook it a little and felt something loose in it. He opened the box. Just as he suspected, there was a gun sitting innocuously inside. He pulled it out and glanced at Sanji, who raised an eyebrow. Zoro wordlessly shrugged and checked the clip to find it full before checking the safety and handing the gun to Sanji.

The blonde looked a bit disgusted as he held the weapon in his hand.

“I know, I know. But humor me, I’ll feel better if you take it.”

Sanji looked like he wanted to protest but he tucked the gun away unhappily.

“What about—”

“Found another one under the sink.”

“Who were these people?” Sanji asked incredulously.

“Apparently, the kind of people who had to hide guns around their house, which is helpful for us. Whatever else they were doesn’t matter now.”

“We can’t fit all this food into our packs. We can’t even fit half with all the other stuff we have,” Sanji commented.

“Maybe not, but we can still take enough to get us to Laugh Tale and then some. You can bring it back to your people. Least you won’t show up empty handed, right?”

“… right.”

Zoro’s eyebrow ticked up at Sanji’s weird tone.

“What is it, Curly?”

The blonde didn’t meet his gaze.

“Nothing. It’s… nothing at all. Let’s just keep sorting through all of this, Zoro.”

Zoro stopped stuffing the cans in the bag and turned his attention towards Sanji, who was biting his lip apprehensively.

“You haven’t called me by my name since we’ve known each other. What’s going on?”

Sanji stared at him indecisively as Zoro waited patiently for him to speak.

“I— it’s just— this crazy thought just popped in my head and it surprised me is all.”

“What kind of thought?” Zoro pressed.

“I wondered… I was thinking… this place, this house, its… the door has a million locks. There are weapons all over the place. I’d be willing to bet we could find more than the two you already did. I bet this place has secret rooms or something and look at all this food. There’s a warm bed, maybe water if we’re lucky and...”

“Curls, spit it out.”

“This stupid, stray thought popped in my head and I found myself wondering, what if we just stay here?”

Zoro blinked at that, staring at the blonde incredulously.

“Huh? But Laugh Tale… you’re so eager to go back and you’ve got Luffy there waiting for you—”

“I know that. I *know.* Like I said, it’s just a stray, crazy thought. I’m not really considering it. And it’s selfish anyway, right? I’m being selfish,” Sanji said, turning around and walking away from him.

Zoro grabbed his hand to stop him.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to, your face said it.”

“I’m not… I’m just confused, I guess. Why would you want to stay out here? You told me about that place, it doesn’t sound like a raw deal.”

“It isn’t. It’s great. Laugh Tale has been a dream. Walls are not something to take for granted, and neither is a steady food supply, protection, community. Out here, it’s running and constantly staying alert, fighting dead assholes and living ones too.”

“I’m not hearing a lot of pluses for you to stay out here.”

Sanji stared at him for a long moment, an intensity to his gaze that momentarily froze Zoro in place.

“…you’re out here.”

Zoro jolted in shock at the words. What did Sanji mean by that? Zoro was afraid of the answer.

“Would you stay in a place like Laugh Tale? Would you want to?” Sanji asked.

“I… I don’t know. I don’t know if I could,” Zoro answered honestly.

“I heard you talking to yourself earlier, or to Johnny rather.”

Zoro looked away, shifting uncomfortably.

“I’ve heard you talking to him before. Kuina and Yosaku too. More than once.”

Zoro opened his mouth to say something, but there was nothing he could say.

“It’s okay. I used to talk to my dead mother when I was a kid. It happens. We cope how we can.”

“Do you have a point?”

“You mentioned their names before, but you don’t talk about them.”

“They’re dead.”

“But they’re important to you.”

“A lot of people were once important to me. Now they’re dead. I don’t talk about it. We can stay here for the night and figure out what to do in the morning. I’m going to check downstairs. You finish here and then check upstairs,” Zoro said, effectively ending the conversation.

~*~*~

Night fell and Zoro settled down in the living room. The people who had lived here had their own water supply. While there was no hot water, at least there was water at all. Both Sanji and Zoro took short showers with actual soap, brushed their teeth and shaved. It was more than they had in a while, so neither complained about the temperature.

They pulled the blinds over the windows, pushed a couch in front of the door and made sure there were no visible signs that they were in the house. Sanji prepared dinner, pasta mixed with the canned vegetables and some rabbit meat they had left over from the road. It was more delicious than it had any right to be.

After that, Zoro retreated to the living room, sat on the floor with his back against the couch and relaxed for the first time in months. After a few minutes of sitting in peaceful silence, Sanji made his way into the room and dropped down beside him. He bumped his shoulder against Zoro’s and waved a liquor bottle at him when he turned to look at him.

“I found this earlier when I was checking out upstairs. Clement rum. I would’ve preferred wine, but this will have to do I suppose,” Sanji explained, handing Zoro a wine glass.

He used a corkscrew to crack open the bottle and then poured a generous amount of the clear liquid into the glasses. They clinked them together before sipping. Zoro snorted in amusement as Sanji immediately began coughing on the strong beverage. Zoro savored the drink. It’d been a while since he got to indulge in a good glass of booze. The two silently drank through their glasses, their bodies building up a pleasant buzz, before Sanji said something.

“What if they were spies?”

“Huh?” Zoro asked as he cracked his eye open and lazily looked over at him.

“The people who lived here, what if they were spies? Or assassins? Or mobsters? I mean, who needs to hide guns in cereal boxes and under sinks? Who needs to padlock their pantry? Obviously, they were into some shady business. What did their basement look like?”

“Like a conspiracy theorist’s wet dream. It’s basically a bomb shelter down there. So?”

“So? Who were they? What did they do? Why did they do it?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re probably dead.”

“Just because they might be dead doesn’t mean they suddenly stop mattering.”

Zoro knew he wasn’t just talking about the owners of this place. He felt frustration growing in him.

“Why are you suddenly so gung-ho about speaking for dead people?”

“I just think… I mean I don’t want you to… I want you to talk to me. I want you to trust me. I don’t have all the answers, but I can still listen to you. That’s all I want. You listen to me all the time, even if you say you don’t want to or that you don’t care. I want to even the score.”

“You didn’t tell me anything about those guys who attacked you when I first found you. How’s that evening the score?”

Zoro knew it was unfair to throw that in Sanji’s face. He was as invested in avoiding that conversation as Sanji was, but he hoped mentioning it would get the blonde off his back.

“You said you didn’t want to know.”

“What if I want to know now,” Zoro challenged.

“I’ll tell you.”

That stopped Zoro short.

“What? Just like that?”

“Yes. Because I trust you, and I hope you trust me, at least enough to know that whatever happened to you matters to me. Will you tell me what happened?”

Zoro sighed and shook his head. He didn’t want to talk about this, but Sanji was looking at him with an imploring gaze, his eyes slightly shiny. Zoro didn’t know if that was the alcohol or something else, but he didn’t want to keep having to deflect and field Sanji’s questions, he just wanted it over with.

So he opened his mouth and he spoke.

He told Sanji about losing his parents at a young age.

He told him about bouncing from foster home to foster home.

He told him about being placed with Koshirou and meeting Kuina.

He told him about meeting Johnny and Yosaku, who lived in the same apartment building as Zoro and Kuina.

He told him about the four sticking together when the world fell apart.

“When everything went down, we stuck by each others’ sides. Figured that was enough to get us out of things alive. We got out of Shimotsuki when leaving was still possible and traveled across the East Blue for a long while before we ran into a group of guys like the ones who attacked you. Johnny, Yosaku, and Kuina didn’t survive. I found my way to the area where you and I met eventually. I stopped there and decided to stay,” Zoro said.

Sanji didn’t look at him judgmentally about any of it. He just looked like he was, well, listening to him.

“Why’d you choose there?”

“It was as good a place as any to survive. What happened with those guys?”

Sanji shrugged lightly.

“I was on a run with a couple other people from my camp. We were farther from Laugh Tale than usual, trying to widen the net of resources we were taking from. We ended up running into this group of thugs led by this asshole named Teach. They’d attacked runners a time or two, but we always fought them off before. They tried to take Nami while Vivi and I were checking out a store. I came outside in time to stop them, but they grabbed me instead and took off, said I was going to be their entertainment. They spent the whole journey going on and on about how they were going to… rape me, who was going to go first, everything they wanted to do to me. I didn’t…”

Sanji paused to take a deep breath, his fingers knotting roughly in his blonde hair. Zoro reached up and captured the hand, gently untangling the harsh grip. He went to pull back, but Sanji’s fingers tightened around his own. Zoro relented and allowed their hands to remain intertwined while Sanji recounted the nightmare he had endured.

“We got to a house, they stripped me down, chained me up in the bathroom and left some drunken oaf to watch me. Vasco, I think they called him. He didn’t want to wait. He wanted to have me first, so he attacked me. We fought. He got some good licks in, hence the injuries when you found me, but I won. I strangled him with my legs. I didn’t feel bad about killing him, I just did it. I jumped out the window, we were just on the second floor, and I ran. I got the shirt I was wearing off a dead zombie I found in the woods when I was running. I don’t know how long I was running for. I didn’t know where I was running to, I just ran. Eventually, I ran into you,” Sanji said, downing the rest of the rum in his half-empty glass right after.

He looked visibly shaken, which made sense. They weren’t so far removed from it, just a month or so. Zoro didn’t even know how Sanji chose to cope with it.

“Are you… okay now?” He asked, not sure what else to say.

Sanji gave him a soft smile and nodded after a moment.

“Yeah, I am now. I don’t want to say some cliché bullshit about how I wouldn’t change anything because at least I met you. Obviously, I would like to not have been kidnapped and almost raped, but I *am* glad I met you.”

Zoro scoffed slightly and looked away.

“It’s true. I’d take being out here with you these past few weeks over anything else that’s happened since the world went to shit.”

Zoro looked at him disbelievingly.

“Maybe I just like your company,” Sanji said, answering Zoro’s silent question.

Zoro didn’t have a response to that. Sanji put his empty glass on the floor out of the way before gently taking Zoro’s away and doing the same. Zoro watched him move his legs under him and sit back on his haunches, putting them at eye level. Zoro stared at the man questioningly.

Sanji reached out and ran his fingers down Zoro’s cheek in a caress.

Oh.

“Cook…”

“It’s okay,” Sanji replied reassuringly, leaning in closer to him.

Zoro could feel his hot breath brushing against his lips.

“We— we’ve been drinking, and you’re… emotional.”

“It was one glass. One and a half at best. I feel perfectly fine.”

“What about Luffy? You two… you’re…”

Sanji pulled back slightly at that, his eyes searching Zoro’s face before he let out a chuckle.

“Me and Luffy? God, no. That’d be like getting with my little brother. We’re just friends. I don’t have anyone else that makes me feel this way, Mosshead. You’re infuriating, so goddamned annoying that I want to put my head through a brick wall sometimes and kick your ass the rest of the time, but still, there’s more than that. You make me feel… *more.* I can’t explain it, I just know that I don’t want to wait. I know what I want. I want this, I want you.”

“You’re just saying that because it’s just us here.”

“I certainly have options in Laugh Tale. It’s not like I’ve been living celibate and am so starved for touch that I’d throw myself at the first halfway decent prospect. None of them have made me feel like this though.”

“We can’t—”

“We can,” Sanji interrupted once more, leaning his forehead against Zoro’s.

It was taking all his restraint not to just lean in and kiss Sanji.

“Tell me you don’t want this, and I’ll stop,” he whispered, his lips brushing ever so slightly against Zoro’s.

“I… I want this.”

No sooner had the words come out than Sanji’s lips were pressed against his. Zoro grabbed onto the collar of Sanji’s shirt, not wasting time tiptoeing. He pulled Sanji until he settled in his lap and deepened the kiss. Sanji made an appreciative noise in the back of his throat, wrapping his arms around Zoro’s neck and tilting his head into the kiss. They could’ve stayed like that forever and Zoro wouldn’t have complained. Eventually, air became a necessity. He detached his lips from Sanji’s and nosed his way down the other man’s neck.

“Zoro,” Sanji moaned, grinding his hips down on his as Zoro began trailing wet kisses along his neck. The sound of Sanji saying his name like that had his pants feeling tight around his groin.

Sanji pulled away so he could pull his shirt off. Zoro took the opportunity to do the same before pulling Sanji close, their chests pressed flush against one another. They began kissing again as Zoro wrapped his arms around Sanji’s lithe waist and stood up, holding him in his arms effortlessly. He pulled away with reluctance so he could make it up the stairs without falling while Sanji focused his attentions on sucking and biting the skin on Zoro’s neck and chest, his long fingers paying special attention to Zoro’s pecs and abs. He lingered at the top of Zoro’s jeans, his touch ghosting over his abdomen.

“Teasing me on a staircase isn’t the brightest idea,” Zoro warned as steadily as he could.

He was surprised his voice didn’t betray how turned on he was. He didn’t think he had the control to form a sentence, let alone scold Sanji.

“That’d be something. A zombie apocalypse and we die falling down the stairs during sex,” Sanji quipped back as Zoro pushed the bedroom door open.

He laid Sanji down on the bed, standing at the edge of it. Sanji smiled softly up at him with hooded eyes. Zoro couldn’t help but lean down for another kiss, this one softer than the ones they shared downstairs.

Sanji pulled him along by his belt loops as he made his way to the middle of the bed before Zoro settled himself between the blonde’s legs. He breathed out a harsh breath as Sanji began pushing his hips against his. Zoro ground down against him, biting his lip at the friction it was causing. It wasn’t nearly enough. Sanji must’ve felt the same because a second later, he was tugging insistently at Zoro’s jeans. Zoro sat back on his knees and made quick work of his sword belt, placing it on the nightstand in case he needed Wado at any point, before unbuttoning his jeans and tugging it off. Sanji sat up, running his hands over Zoro’s chest once more, pressing kisses up his abdomen, lingering over his nipples to flick his tongue at the bud. He pushed insistently at Zoro’s shoulder until they switched positions and Sanji was on top. He pushed Zoro down onto the mattress, pressing their lips together briefly before he began kissing his way down Zoro’s body.

He watched Sanji make his way lower and lower. Sanji's fingers hooked into Zoro's boxers, and he pulled them off frustratingly slow. He threw them somewhere and ghosted his lips up Zoro's leg from his toes. By the time he made it to his thigh, Zoro wanted to throw something across the room.

"Curls," he groaned, desperation seeping into his voice.

Sanji chuckled lowly and it was probably the sexiest thing Zoro ever heard.

"Yeah, I got you."

Sanji pressed two kisses on the inside of Zoro's thigh before his tongue brushed ever so slightly against his balls.

"Sa...." he trailed off breathlessly as Sanji's lips were suddenly wrapped around his cock. It was all heat and too much and exactly right.

Zoro dropped his head back against the bed, his eye fighting to stay open as Sanji bobbed his head up and down his length.

"Ooh, that feels so good," he muttered barely above a whisper.

The air felt punched out of him, too much to speak in anything but hushed tones. Sanji hummed around him, dipping his head low before coming back up. His hand wrapped around his length, stroking him up and down as he licked the head of his cock. His thumb smeared some pre-cum down the sides of him before he flicked his tongue over him again and then let his lips stretch open and cover Zoro. Zoro made an unintelligible sound as red-hot pleasure shot up his spine. Sanji chuckled around him but otherwise was content to continue his movements like Zoro wasn't falling apart.

After some time riding the wave of pleasure, he grabbed Sanji by the shoulder as he began to feel a tingling sensation creeping around his spine and pulled him back up so he could kiss him.

"I wish we had something so we could..." Zoro mumbled.

Sanji moved around slightly and reached into his jeans pocket before pulling out a small tube of lube. Zoro stared at it.

"Where did you...?"

"It was sitting on the nightstand when I checked the bedroom out."

"Did you plan this?"

"No, but I hoped eventually this would happen. And if I did plan it, would you mind?"

"Not really," Zoro responded, taking the lube from him.

He pushed Sanji off him so he could get his pants and boxers off before settling on top of him. He opened the half-empty tube, squeezing some of its contents onto his finger. He made eye contact with Sanji and could see the barely restrained anticipation plain on his face. He lowered his fingers, brushing them against Sanji's entrance. Sanji's breath hitched at the contact before stuttering as Zoro eased one finger into him. It had been a while for them both, so Zoro took his time and went slow, preparing Sanji with tentative, gentle fingers, inserting another only when he was sure Sanji was ready.

"Zoro, just get inside me already."

"I already am inside of you. I don't really know what you mean," Zoro teased with a smirk.

"Mosshead, if your cock isn't inside me in the next minute, I will make you regret it," Sanji threatened through clenched teeth.

Zoro's chest rumbled with laughter at Sanji's behavior before he pulled his fingers free. He coated his length with more lubricant, chucking the tube on the nightstand before lining himself up between Sanji's legs. He slowly pushed into him, relishing Sanji's open groans while Zoro bit his lip to stave off the noises that wanted to claw out of him. Sanji wrapped his arms around him, clutching Zoro's back as he became fully seated inside of him. Zoro panted, trying to fill his lungs with an adequate amount of air but was unable to. He stayed still, letting Sanji adjust to his girth. In all honesty, he needed the moment to collect himself so he didn't cum on the spot. After a moment of the two merely breathing, Sanji moved one hand from Zoro's back to tangle into his green hair, pulling their faces together and pressing light kisses along his cheek towards his ear.

"I'm ready," he whispered, his hot breath tickling his skin.

Zoro nodded against him before pulling out ever so slightly and thrusting back in. He kept his thrusts light and shallow for a moment, letting himself get reacquainted with this activity.

"Please," Sanji moaned, his legs wrapped high around Zoro's waist to pull him in deeper.

"Please, I need you to— oh," Sanji exclaimed as Zoro pulled nearly all the way out and slammed back into him.

He didn't stop even as Sanji begged him to keep going, thrusting into him harder and faster. The room was filled only with the sounds of skin slapping against skin and breathless moans and whimpers.

One of Sanji's hands were tugging at Zoro's hair again to pull him in for a kiss that lacked anything close to finesse while his other was wrapped around his shoulders. He hitched his legs higher, past Zoro's waist so his feet were pressed into the small of his back, pushing him in deeper. It was like he was doing all he could to meld them into a single body, join them as one. Zoro didn't think he would mind. His doubts were a million miles away.

He supposed he missed sex on the whole, the satisfaction and pleasure of it, but more than that, it was the closeness to Sanji that was ripping him apart. It was how receptive he was to Zoro's slightest touch, how he said his name reverently, how alive he was, and how alive

Zoro felt with him. His heart hammered in his chest with every thrust, filling with emotions he dared not give name to for more than one reason. It was too early, he was mentally unstable, and Sanji was...

Fuck, he couldn't even bother to think of reasons. Not when Sanji was clenching around him and licking the shell of his ear like that.

Sanji pushed at him and Zoro pulled out of him. Sanji turned over onto his hands and knees, unashamedly giving himself over to Zoro. He grabbed his waist and pushed back in, resuming a bruising pace to Sanji's delight. He could do this all night. He could be with Sanji like this in this house and let the world fall away without a care if only he could have him like this. Sanji's arms trembled under him as his nerves shot off pulse after pulse of electric pleasure before they eventually gave out. Zoro pressed the rest of him down, so he was flat on his stomach on the mattress. He leaned down, pressing kisses to his back and neck as he continued thrusting into him. As he leaned back, Sanji let out a guttural groan.

"There. Right there, Fuck me there."

Zoro redoubled his efforts, thrusting harder and faster than before, repeatedly hitting his prostate. Sanji's whimpers kept getting higher and higher whenever contact was made. Zoro couldn't last much longer, but he wanted Sanji to come first.

"That feels good, doesn't it?" Zoro whispered into his ear.

"Mmm, yes, so good."

"Are you close?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Bet I don't even need to touch you. I bet you could come just from this."

"Please..." Sanji whimpered.

"Come for me, Sanji," Zoro demanded, kissing his face gently.

He only had to thrust into him a few more times before Sanji cried out, clenching around him and clutching the bedsheets as he hit his release.

He was so warm. No, he was almost unbearably hot, and he transferred that heat to Zoro wherever they were touching. He felt the heat everywhere, it crept down from his chest, through his stomach and settled in his groin until he was shaking with his own release. It pulsed hot out of him and into Sanji. He collapsed on top of him, resting his head in the crook of his neck as they both caught their breath.

Eventually, Zoro regained enough sense to pull out of him and roll off the bed. He went to the bathroom and wet a rag he found. Sanji had moved off the wet patch in the sheets and was practically passed out in the bed, his eyes drooping. Zoro cleaned him up and left him to rest before cleaning himself up as well. He threw a towel over where Sanji came into the sheets and laid down next to him. Sanji curled up into his side, resting his head on Zoro's chest as

his breath started evening out. Zoro didn't mind. He had nothing he wanted to say, he just wanted to be here with Sanji.

However, despite the afterglow falling over them, Zoro's mind started racing with thoughts of what would happen after this, what needed to happen. Sanji suggested staying here. Zoro kicked that idea around in his head. There was an ample amount of food, they had shelter, they could probably find more guns and other weapons if they looked hard enough. They could survive here, that much was true. It would just be the two of them. It could always be like this: the intimacy, the heat between them, they could share it every night if they wanted to. They could smile together, laugh together, fight together like they have been. They could do that forever.

At the same time, it'd just be them. Just the two of them against the world. Would that be enough for Sanji in the long run? Could Zoro be enough? He didn't think so. He was a mess, barely able to allow himself enough hindsight to acknowledge the reflection Sanji wanted to indulge in. He couldn't look back because all he would see was a trail of his own mistakes, mistakes that got the people he loved killed. He didn't want that to be Sanji, he didn't want him to depend on Zoro only to, at best, be disappointed in the end, at worst, end up another ghost that only existed in Zoro's head.

That settled it. They couldn't stay here. Zoro would get Sanji back to his camp and after that…

~*~*~

Zoro woke up to the sun streaming in through the windows of the bedroom. For a moment he was disoriented, unsure of where he was. He looked up as Sanji came from the bathroom dressed in sweats and a t-shirt. He smiled at him when he saw Zoro was awake.

"Hey, I was wondering when you were going to wake up," he said, walking over to the bed.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Zoro's lips while simultaneously climbing into Zoro's lap. They kissed for a long moment, Zoro's arms lazily coming around Sanji's waist as he sat up and pulled Sanji closer. Even though he couldn't stay with Sanji, he wanted every ounce he could get from him. It was selfish, Sanji would only end up hating him down the road, but that didn't stop him. Sanji pulled away after a moment, leaning his forehead against Zoro's.

"I made some breakfast. I was thinking we eat, then we can have round two."

Zoro pulled his forehead back so he could look Sanji in the eye.

"That'd be good, then we can pack up to leave."

That gave Sanji pause.

"Leave? I thought we—"

"Last night doesn't change the fact that we shouldn't stay here. It's not safe."

"There's food, four walls and a roof, weapons—"

“It’s not enough.”

“But—”

“Cook, it’s not enough.”

He looked down. Zoro lifted his head with a gentle hand on his chin.

“I need you to look at me and understand what I’m telling you. This isn’t about last night or who’s running from the past or any of that. It’s about safety. Yeah, there’s four walls and a roof but it isn’t enough. All we have keeping anyone out is a couch. That’s nothing. We need more than four walls. We need a concrete security system and Laugh Tale has that. They have —”

“We?”

“What?”

“You said ‘we’. Are you staying with me in Laugh Tale? You think that’s something you can do?”

Zoro paused.

He didn’t want to lie to Sanji. They had managed to keep things honest between them up to this point, but if he told the truth, Sanji wouldn’t go along with this.

“I’ll try.”

Sanji smiled brightly at him. Zoro’s heart ached at the sight for more than one reason. He was going to end up breaking that smile. But it was for the best, he had to believe that.

Sanji leaned forward and kissed him again, this kiss heavy and filled with passion. Zoro returned just as good as he got. He wanted to take his mind off his upcoming departure and keep it on Sanji. He kissed the other man’s shoulders as Sanji pushed and kicked away the sheets separating them. Sanji pushed at his shoulders, pinning him to the headboard as he reattached their lips. Zoro closed his eye, losing himself to the kiss as Sanji moved around, taking his sweatpants off. Zoro was already naked, and feeling Sanji’s naked body against his was doing more than enough to get him hard. Sanji’s hand slid down to his shaft, jerking him off in slow but firm strokes.

“Mmm, Sanji. I... unh,” Zoro murmured, clutching at Sanji’s shoulders.

Sanji leaned forward for one more kiss before lining himself up with Zoro’s cock.

“Wait, we didn’t—”

Zoro cut himself off as he sunk down on him in one swift motion. He was warm and wet inside.

“I did already, in the shower,” Sanji said breathlessly, hanging onto Zoro as his muscles, sensitive from their activities the previous night, adjusted to his girth.

“I swear you’re planning this.”

“Again, do you care?”

“Uh-uh,” Zoro replied, trying to thrust up into him but not having the purchase he wanted.

He went to move his legs so he could properly fuck him, but Sanji stopped him.

“I wanna do it.”

Zoro nodded and let himself be at Sanji’s mercy. He owed it to him even if he didn’t know it yet. Sanji set a pace that shifted continuously from languid and sensual to bruising and downright maddening. Zoro probably got to the edge three times, but Sanji would switch up his rhythm, and the feeling would recede.

“Curly, damn it, come on,” Zoro hissed after the third time, his body a shuddering mess as he clutched the headboard so tightly, he thought he would get splinters. It already had cracks thanks to him.

“You need something, Mosshead?” Sanji asked with amusement in his voice, his heat enveloping Zoro’s cock again and again.

“I need to cum, you asshole. So speed up or go harder but do *something*.”

“Why should I?”

Zoro growled in response, bucking under Sanji in an attempt to dislodge him. The blonde’s knees locked against his waist, preventing the action. The swordsman huffed in annoyance much to Sanji’s delight. Zoro shifted as much as he could with Sanji’s grip still restricting his movements until Zoro managed to move enough so that his hard length brushed against Sanji’s prostate, drawing a shiver from the man.

“Okay, that’s no fair,” Sanji groused, but he picked up the pace, rising and falling over Zoro’s dick, clenching around him periodically. Somehow, it was when Sanji leaned forward and bestowed a soft kiss to his lips that Zoro finally fell over the edge. Sanji continued riding him through his orgasm. Zoro eventually regained his strength and brought his hand up around Sanji’s cock, stroking him until he reached his climax to a resounding moan.

After they had spent themselves, they fell back on the bed, panting heavily.

“Damn it,” Sanji cursed.

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to have to take another shower. That thing is cold.”

Zoro smiled a little at his bitching, but inside he was something of a wreck. He was lying to Sanji, and now it felt like he was using him too. Sanji glanced at him and furrowed his eyebrows.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Sanji looked at him doubtfully.

“Really, it’s nothing,” Zoro reiterated, putting on a small smile for him.

Sanji studied him for a moment before speaking.

“If you say so,” he responded, leaning over to kiss Zoro before pulling away with a slight chuckle.

“I can’t wait until we get to Laugh Tale. I think you’ll fit in better than you think. You can join the cynical brigade, party of Robin, Wyper and Law. You guys can glare murderously and creep people out on my front porch if it means so much to you. Of course, that would mean making friends with people.”

“I made friends with you.”

“We’re not just friends, unless you have sex with all your friends.”

There was a question in Sanji’s eyes, something deeper he was asking beneath the words he actually said, a confirmation he was seeking.

“No. We’re not just friends,” Zoro confirmed because that’s not how he felt about Sanji.

He knew what the name of the emotion growing in him was and it was in its name that he now betrayed the cook. But it was to protect him. He’d do it ten times over if only to protect him, even if it meant protecting him from Zoro.

~*~*~

Zoro didn’t know if it was the lie or the fact that they were getting closer to Laugh Tale, but something had been reinvigorated in Sanji. He didn’t want to stop until they made it to the camp. They had let this journey drag out over a month and a half and now Sanji wanted to push harder than before.

“We just passed by one of our ally camps, Wano, a couple miles back. Laugh Tale is only one county over. If we push hard enough, we can get there before nightfall tonight. Early tomorrow, if nothing else,” Sanji declared, marching a few feet ahead of Zoro on the side of the road.

“That’s nice and all but slow down,” Zoro said as he gripped his sword hilt in one hand and his gun with the other, keeping his eye peeled for any threats while Sanji walked in front of him almost carelessly.

“What’s wrong, Mosshead? Can’t keep up? You want to stop and rest your precious feet?” Sanji teased, glancing back at him with a wry smile but slowing down nevertheless to walk beside Zoro.

“I thought you said you forgive me for all of that, Curls.”

“I didn’t actually say that, but then again, you didn’t actually apologize.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Zeff always said saying sorry and apologizing isn’t the same.”

Zoro rolled his eye at that.

“I apologize. Happy?”

“That didn’t sound very sincere.”

Zoro stopped and looked over at Sanji. Zoro had so many things to apologize for. He wouldn’t lack sincerity if he were trying, but if he did that, Sanji would know the score. The blonde rose an expectant eyebrow at him before shaking his head.

“I don’t actually need you to make some grandiose speech and apologize, I was just teasing. I forgave you already even if you are still an asshole,” Sanji told him, reaching over to pull Zoro in for a kiss.

Sanji made to walk away, but Zoro pulled him back, dragging him into another kiss.

Sanji chuckled against his lips but wrapped his arms around Zoro’s neck, indulging him. Zoro let the kiss linger as long as his paranoia allowed him (which wasn’t long with the alarms blaring in his head, telling him that they were making out on the open road.)

“You’re touchier than I thought you’d be. I like it,” Sanji commented, grabbing Zoro’s hand away from Wado.

Sanji was about to pull him along behind him down the road when a loud bang followed by a whizzing sound tore through the air, stopping them in their tracks.

A bullet came flying out of nowhere past their heads, embedding itself in a tree. Zoro tensed up as a voice came from the collection of trees to their left.

“Zehahaha. Well, well. What do we have here?”

A tall, brown-skinned man came out of the trees with three other men behind him. One of them was broad shouldered with purple hair and a large dagger in hand, one was extremely pale-skinned with a top hat on and a cane in hand and the last one was a lanky man with a droll expression on his face, staring them down from the barrel of a shotgun.

Still, it was the leaser that caught most of Zoro’s attention. The man was a sight. He had a massive build as his body is round with relatively thin limbs. He lecherous smile revealed

several broken or missing teeth. He had a pronounced crooked nose and his shirt was left open to reveal a large and hairy chest. More importantly, it revealed the three pistols tucked into his waistband. The man didn't reach from any of the weapons, seemingly unworried even when Zoro drew his sword in one hand and the gun he'd found in the other, pushing Sanji behind him.

The cook seemed frozen, unable to react. It didn't take a genius to figure out that he must know these guys, that they were the ones who attacked him.

"Hello there," the leader, Teach, greeted, his gaze solely on Sanji.

"Here I was lamenting the fact that you'd managed to get away. I would've lost my cook and my guide to Laugh Tale if that were the case."

"Boss, don't go easy on him just because he has a pretty face," purple-haired guy complained loudly.

"Oi, oi, Burgess. All in good time. My men were highly upset about you leaving, if you couldn't tell. Firstly, you killed Vasco. I understand the emotion you might have felt at that moment, but that can't be easily forgiven. Two: we've been following tracks all over kingdom come that we weren't even sure were yours. You can run into some nasty things out here and you bet we did. All of which culminates into number three: you left my men unsatisfied and unhappy to have to chase you around, being chased by zombies along the way. I promised them a good time, and you made a liar out of me," Teach explained, an unhinged, slimy grin on his face.

"You're not getting anything from him," Zoro told them firmly, cocking his gun.

Teach finally looked at him.

"Oh, you got yourself a new friend. We haven't met before. I'm Marshall D. Teach and you have my property. I'm going to need you to hand him back over and you can make it out of here alive."

Zoro glared at the man. He didn't seem threatened by him in the slightest as he smiled confidently at the two. Sanji snapped out of it then, taking a step out from behind Zoro despite his protests.

"I'm not your property. You guys are just a bunch of jumped up thugs who think you can take whatever you want. Fuck you," Sanji spat venomously at them.

"We were certainly hoping for as much, yes, hohohoho," pale guy tittered.

"Let's get real, you two aren't going anywhere," Burgess added, laughing as well.

"You thought that before. Vasco sure did, we see where he is," Sanji pointed out viciously, cutting off the two men's laughter. He turned his glare towards the Teach.

"I'm not leaving with you."

Teach's smile dropped from his face.

"Don't play games, chef. This could go easy or rough, whichever way is up to you, but if you think you're getting out of here, you better think again."

"Boss," sniper guy called, jerking his head to the left.

Zoro looked out the corner of his eye and saw a group of zombies ambling towards them, probably drawn by the sound of the gunshot.

"Right on time. You gonna stay out here and get eaten or what?"

Zoro flicked his eye over the men, wondering how he was going to get Sanji out of this. There was too much distance for his sword to be effective. He could shoot a couple of them from afar, but sniper guy already had the drop on them. If he shot the sniper, would Teach draw his pistols in time to shoot him? Did they have more people in the trees?

"I can see you still need some convincing here. Bring 'em out!"

Sanji's breath hitched slightly as a sickly-looking man and a woman came dragging two younger women out from behind a few trees, dropping them down to their knees. Teach walked over to the orange haired one whose tresses were knotted with leaves and dirt. She sported a black eye, and there was blood on her shirt from where her lip had been busted. Teach pointed his gun to her head.

"Now dear chef, if you didn't get involved, it'd be this little beauty dealing with us, but you did. You wanted your friend Nami here safe. Well, now is your chance to save her again along with Vivi over there. You see, it may not look or feel like it, but there are rules to this world. An eye for an eye. You killed one of my men. Either you pay for that or your friends do. Time's a ticking. The dead guys are getting closer, you better figure it out quick."

"Sanji, don't listen to this shithead," the blue-haired woman, Vivi, said before yelping as the older woman pulled her hair roughly.

The orange haired woman lunged at the woman who had done so as Sanji took a threatening step forward.

"Hey! Don't you touch her," Sanji snapped.

"We won't have to as long as we have you," Teach pressed.

Zoro felt Sanji squeeze his hand slightly before he let it go and moved away from him.

"Sanji, no," Zoro said through grit teeth.

"I can't let him kill them. They're my friends."

Zoro shook his head at him.

"*Sanji*," he said imploringly, not knowing how to convince Sanji to reconsider this.

The other man looked at him tearfully before pressing a kiss to Zoro's lips. The finality of it was palpable. Sanji rested his head against Zoro's for a second before he pulled away. He turned and walked over to Teach, who smiled triumphantly at him.

"I knew you'd see it my way," he crowed victoriously to Sanji as he stood in front of him.

"Thanks for bringing him back, whoever you are. I'll even be nice and let you leave with Sanji's buddies. Whether the zombies will let you, well, that's up to you."

Zoro wanted to kill every one of them, but Teach backed into the woods with Sanji in front of him as a shield. Zoro shook his head and pointed the gun at the zombies who were almost right on them, shooting the closest ones in the head and then beheading the ones who came within range of his sword.

He jumped as someone grabbed his shoulder, ready to strike them too, but was met by the orange-haired woman.

"Hey, follow us," the one who must be Nami said, pulling him down the road.

He followed her and the other woman as they ran away from the zombies.

"Sanji," Zoro protested.

"I know, we'll get him back. We need to regroup with our people. They're close by. We can circle around and find him."

Zoro followed them into the woods until the sound of zombies groaning began to fade into the background. Every step they took felt like one more death sentence on Sanji's head. Eventually, they slowed down and began trudging through the forest at a pace slower than running but faster than strolling.

"They're just up here," Vivi said, leading them through the woods. Zoro kept a critical eye on their surroundings. Even so, he didn't notice someone else's presence until it was too late. He was snatched from behind. Someone kicked at his leg and he found himself on his knees, his arm twisted behind him back.

"Who are you?" A gruff voice demanded.

Zoro resisted the iron hold, gritting his teeth angrily. More hands started restraining him until the orange haired woman's voice broke through the scuffle.

"Wait, wait! He's with us!" Nami said.

Zoro felt the presences on him abate and he immediately stood up to face his aggressors. There were three people who strangely donned varying levels of ridiculous hats. One in a top hat with blue goggles, one in an orange cowboy hat and the last in an old looking strawhat. Zoro didn't know what to make of them, but there were more pressing matters.

"Nami, your face," the man in the strawhat pointed out with concern.

“It doesn’t matter. We just ran into those jackasses who attacked us. They took Sanji again.”

The new people gave a look then.

“Sanji was here? You saw him?” the man in the top hat asked urgently.

“Yes. This man here was with Sanji when Teach’s group caught up with him. They’d been following his tracks for a while apparently. They’re still close by. They drew zombies on us, but we could probably catch up to them if we hurry,” Vivi explained.

“No, *we* could catch up to them, as in the people whose job it is to actually do this sort of thing. You two are going back to the camp,” the man in the orange cowboy hat said firmly.

Nami shot him a glare in response.

“That’s not your choice to make, Ace.”

“Maybe not, but as head of security, it *is* my choice to make. You and Vivi head back, the rest of us should coordinate to get Sanji back.”

“Seriously, Sabo?”

“Yeah, seriously. We’re all worried about Sanji, but spearheading some ill-conceived suicide mission with your girlfriend out of a guilty conscience and putting the whole camp in danger in the process was in no way the answer.”

Nami shot him a venomous glare before turning her attention to the man in the straw hat.

“Luffy?”

“Do what Sabo says.”

Nami scoffed and looked like she was gearing up for an argument but Zoro had reached the limits of his patience.

“Look, I don’t know who the hell you people are and I don’t give a fuck. While you stand here dicking around, Sanji is getting farther away. I did not listen to him talk you people up and spend weeks eager to get back to you just to watch you fumble the opportunity to save him with your petty bullshit! If you’re too busy arguing, I’m gonna go save the cook myself.”

Zoro huffed and made to walk away but was stopped when the the guy in the cowboy hat, Ace, stood in front of him, a light smirk on his face.

“*Move,*” Zoro demanded, seething.

“’Fraid I can’t do that, pal. You’re a liability to our camp.”

“He’s Sanji’s friend,” Vivi defended.

“He’s a stranger, we don’t know anything about him,” Sabo reasoned.

“Enough. New guy is right. We need to get Sanji back,” Luffy declared.

“Our car is close. Nami, Vivi, take this man back to Laugh Tale. Me, Ace and Sabo are going to go after Sanji.”

Nami seemed put out by this request but accepted it more than she had the words of the other men.

“I know you don’t like this, Nami, but Vivi is hurt. She needs someone watching out for her and we don’t know this guy.”

She held his gaze before relenting.

“Fine. Just get Sanji back.”

Zoro held his ground, eyeing Luffy down. Part of him was curious about the guy Sanji had such faith in, the guy Zoro had believed he was in love with, the guy who looked closer to a boy than a man.

Luffy, in turn, stared back at Zoro with wide eyes. It felt like he was being taken apart and dissected by that gaze until suddenly the man smiled a great big grin. Zoro found himself blinking at the brilliance of it. It felt out of place in the shitty world they lived in, but it clearly was a well-worn expression on the young man’s face.

“I don’t know who you are, but Sanji is my friend and my cook, so I’m going to save him no matter what. I think you’re a good person, sword guy.”

Zoro couldn’t quite hold in the scoff at that statement.

“Do you really think there’s anybody good in this world?”

“Sanji’s good,” he retorted, his voice leaving no room for argument and it wasn’t like Zoro was about to argue that point.

Sanji was a prissy asshole with the temperament of a hibernating bear disturbed from its slumber, but he was also kind and caring. Zoro had watched him kill zombies and then apologize for the person they had once been. He watched him wonder and hope for the wellbeing of the owners of abandoned homes and cars they’d come across. He watched him offer food to wild animals. He knew Sanji was still somehow, impossibly, improbably, good.

Luffy seemed to take his silence as agreement and his smile turned softer.

“Sanji wouldn’t like you if you weren’t a good person, which is why I’m allowing you back to my home with my friends and family. If you’re not a good guy, my friends will stop you before you hurt anyone.”

Zoro held the guy’s eyes for longer until the blonde in the top hat heaved a sigh and stepped up to them.

“Look, my brothers and I are going to save Sanji and we can’t afford anyone getting in our way, not even you, new guy. We don’t know you and my brothers and I work best together, we can coordinate easily. Anyone else getting involved will throw off the dynamic and it won’t serve Sanji. You should go with Nami and Vivi,” Sabo explained.

“Every second we’re wasting here debating this is another second Sanji is with Teach and his band of ass-kissing lunatics,” Ace pointed out impatiently.

Zoro shook his head and sighed.

“Bring him back,” he demanded.

Ace smirked wickedly in return.

“We don’t intend to return without him. Luffy would eat us out of house and home if we did. Now go.”

Zoro followed Vivi and Nami as they all reluctantly made their way to where there was a car parked close by. He got in the passenger seat while Nami got into the driver’s seat and Vivi slipped into the back.

There was an elastic band tethered to him on one end and Sanji on the other. Every foot of distance put between them pulled the band tighter and tighter. It was going to snap eventually, and the fear of whether it would snap back or simply break was more nerve-wracking than sitting in a car with strangers on his way to a community he never planned to see the inside of in the first place.

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Driving cut the time it took to get to Laugh Tale in half, so they reached the settlement before nightfall. The drive had been a silent one, only broken by the exchange of names and the occasional hiss of pain. He didn’t miss the .380 Glock Vivi had in her lap, but he kept one hand wrapped around Wado’s hilt, neither woman bothering to take it from him.

He felt a pit of apprehension settle in his gut as they drove up to the gates. There were armed guards manning the top of the walls and Zoro could see traps for zombies near the base of the gates. They were several rotters caught on the spikes, slumped over with wounds to their heads. It seemed like this place had security figured out at least.

The gates opened without preamble and Zoro found himself looking out the window as they drove through the streets of Laugh Tale. It was unnaturally clean. The houses closer to the gates were likely older ones given they were built of bricks and sheetrock but the further into the settlement they drove, he saw evidence of houses that were recently built, resembling log cabins rather than the modern homes closer to the gate. People milled about the community leisurely, stopping to greet each other and have idle conversation. They passed lush gardens with various vegetables growing as well as a stable for horses, a pig pen and a chicken coop. He was sure he heard a cow at one point though he didn’t see it. They drove past a garage with several cars parked out front being worked on by a man with electric blue hair in a floral print shirt and a speedo of all things. Zoro blinked at the sat as they passed by a library with

people sitting on a bench outside, reading books. There were training grounds where he could see a group of children being drilled on how to shoot slingshots by a man with an unnaturally long nose. They even passed by a basketball court where two teams were happily playing together. Zoro almost wanted to rub his eye to make sure this was real. He was known to hallucinate, so that wasn't a stretch. He noticed Nami glancing at him and he fixed his features to hide the wonder and disbelief he felt.

They stopped outside a house with the sign of a red cross outside. Nami went to open the car, but Vivi stopped her.

"No, I can get myself to a doctor. You deal with Sanji's friend," Vivi assured.

"Are you sure? It'll be quick."

"I'm sure. Just make sure you swing by when you're done. Chopper will have a fit if you don't and nothing Law or Kaya say will calm him down."

"Yeah, yeah. Just stick some cotton candy in his face, he'll get over it. I've gotta deal with Sanji's loverboy anyway."

Zoro bristled at the nickname but said nothing.

Vivi leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Nami's cheek.

"Don't give our head doctor a hard time," she advised in her ear before pulling back.

She shot Zoro a polite smile before exiting the backseat and walking up to the house. They idled while they watched the blue-haired woman walk inside, Nami's eyes never straying until she was out of sight. Only then did they keep driving.

"Where'd Sanji pick you up anyway," Nami asked suddenly as if they'd been carrying on a conversation while they continued down the road.

"Further north." he replied curtly.

"That's vague."

Zoro grunted noncommittally.

"Not talkative? Don't know how he stood you."

"Me either."

They pulled up to a smaller house in comparison to the others. There was a sign with a blue cross stuck in the grass out front. He followed Nami inside. A woman sat behind a desk wearing a crimson newsboy cap with gold goggles. Beyond her was a room with a ceiling-to-floor length gate welded into the entryway, effectively making the room a cage or prison cell.

"Hey Koala. I got a ward for you."

The woman looked up from a magazine and glanced Zoro up and down before sighing.

“Fine. You know where to set him up.”

Nami nodded before glancing over at Zoro and motioning to his sword. He shot her an affronted look in reply.

“Look, Luffy has decided to give you a chance and Sanji clearly cares about you, but I’m not going to risk my people and our community on feelings. This is just until we know for sure we can all trust you. If that’s the case, it would be in your best interest to just follow the path of least resistance. Entertain us for now and when Sanji and Luffy are back, we can go from there.”

Zoro stared her down hard before his grip on Wado loosened. He unbuckled his sword belt and hesitantly placed it her outstretched arm.

“Thank you,” she said before making to pull away, however Zoro didn’t relinquish his grip just yet.

“Sanji was willing to give himself to men he spent over a month running from for you. I’m trusting that you’re worth that choice. Don’t make me regret it.”

Something flashed in the orange-haired woman’s eyes at his words, a mixture of defiance and guilt before it all vanished.

“I don’t need you to tell me about the depths of Sanji’s loyalty. I’ve known him a hell of lot longer than you. I’m aware of his worth and so are the others. Luffy won’t stop until Sanji is back where he belongs. Even if it is with a plus one. We’re not keen on just opening our community to strangers we haven’t gotten the chance to vet but given that Sanji’s the one who brought you here, we’re giving you some leeway. Don’t make *us* regret it.”

Nami held his gaze in a measured fashion, unflinching under Zoro’s glare. He could respect that at least.

She nodded at the doorway. Zoro stepped inside, letting the gate be closed and locked behind him.

“Don’t think of it as a prison. Think of it as a bed and breakfast you can’t leave until we have more of a handle on who you are.”

Zoro didn’t know how he was supposed to look at this as anything other than a prison.

“You’ll tell me if you find Sanji?”

“*When* he’s back, I’ll tell you. Until then, sit tight.”

Nami made to walk away but Zoro stopped her again. She turned to him with an annoyed look in her eye.

“Take care of my sword. It’s not just a weapon to me.”

She gave him a curious squint but Zoro didn't expound further. She gave him a short nod before finally walking out of the building.

Koala didn't bother looking at him so Zoro explored his surroundings. He was in a living room, except the entrances to the other parts of the house were blocked by bars and the windows were barred as well. The room itself was mostly bare besides a television with a DVD player attached and rows of movies next to it as well as a shelf with about 20 books. The couch looked comfortable enough, so he sat down.

He expected Kuina, Johnny or Yosaku to show up, but they were nowhere to be found. He was alone.

He stared ahead, hoping for the first time in a long time for something good to happen.

~*~*~

He sat in his expansive jail cell for three days before he got any news. His days were spent trying to meditate or staring blankly at a wall, his mind running wild with possibilities. He dreamed about Kuina, Yosaku and Johnny's deaths. He dreamed of what could happen to Sanji. The nightmares shook him awake, leaving him unable to fall back asleep.

Koala brought him two meals a day, which Zoro only finished because Sanji's diatribes about food waste were ringing in his head. Beyond that, he chose to spend his time pacing and worrying despite Koala's suggestions to find another activity to occupy his time. The warden kept a constant eye on him, even when it seemed she did nothing besides read magazines and drink coffee.

Zoro spent the time he didn't sleep thinking. If they brought Sanji back, *when* they brought Sanji back, he would be hurt. Zoro was supposed to protect him. He was supposed to make sure this never happened again, yet he stood powerless as Sanji walked right back into those monsters' arms. He hadn't protected him while he was with him, so what was the point of being there at all? Sanji had better protection with Luffy and his friends than he did with Zoro.

At the same time, if he was with Sanji, he could keep a better watch over him. He couldn't foresee Teach, but anyone else who tried to come up against him, Zoro would be there to protect him.

Then again, he hadn't done a damn thing to protect Johnny, Yosaku or Kuina.

"That wasn't your fault," Kuina said, appearing beside him.

"I thought you were gone for good," Zoro mumbled back, ignoring the way Koala glanced over at him talking to himself.

"Almost. We wanted to see what you would decide on your own, but I guess I'm too impatient."

Zoro scoffed lightly. At least this apparition got the trait right.

“You need to stay here.”

“Oh, is that what I need,” he shot back sarcastically.

“I’m serious, Zoro. This is the point, this is the entire point. This is why we existed at all: so you could get to a place like this. You need to be here. Being out there isn’t cutting it anymore, running isn’t cutting it, keep company with the ghosts in your head isn’t cutting it. You need Sanji,” she said, giving him an intense look.

“For what? So, I can watch him die like I watched all of you and know I can’t do anything to stop that?”

“Everyone is going to die at some point, that’s how it works. Trying to stop that is a waste of time, all you can do is push it off. If this new world has taught you nothing else, it’s that. But there’s a big difference between living and surviving. My purpose was to help you survive, but how you are with Sanji: that’s living. It’s not the most horrible thing in the world. You don’t have to forget Kuina or Johnny and Yosaku, but you don’t have to be afraid to move on either.”

“I’m not afraid,” he protested.

Kuina gave him an indulgent smile at that.

“You’re still a shit liar, little bro.”

Zoro felt a catch in his throat at those words. They were painfully close to something the real Kuina would’ve said that it knocked him off kilter, so much so that he jumped when Koala spoke to him.

“You alright?” She asked, approaching the cell gate.

Zoro nodded after a moment.

“Just arguing with myself.”

“Need help?”

“No.”

“You sure? Because I’ve kept a careful watch over you and behind the worry in your eye is a man who wants to run. Are you going to stick around here or are you going to leave the first chance you get?”

Zoro didn’t have an answer for that, he hadn’t thought about it enough to answer that question.

“Sanji’s coming back, you know. Luffy is not going to leave him out there. Seems like you two are close. What’s he going to say if you’re not here when he gets back?”

Zoro shook his head.

“You don’t get it.”

“You met a man named Sabo out there, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

“He’s my husband. I met him when I got to Laugh Tale. I ended up with people like the ones who have Sanji now. I was saved by an amazing man from the Ryugu settlement a few miles away and ended up here. I’d lost all hope and Sabo managed to restore it. All the bullshit going on and I find something good in all of it. It felt wrong in the beginning. I wondered how it was even possible. I lost everyone that I knew my whole life and my world crashed down around me yet I gained him. That didn’t replace what I lose, but I don’t look gift horses in the mouth. You shouldn’t either,” she said before returning to her spot by the front door.

Finally, on the third evening, Nami came. She walked into the house with her hair a wild mess, huffing like she had been running. That wasn’t what stuck out to him the most. Her shirt was covered in blood. Zoro’s mind immediately began racing.

Sanji was dead. He was gone. Zoro didn’t do shit to protect him, not a damn thing. He was dead and it was all his fault.

Nami noticed Zoro’s eye glued to her shirt and immediately reassured him.

“It’s not Sanji’s. Zombies piled up at the gate and we had to deal with it. Sanji is okay. They brought him back late yesterday. He was hurt. Our doctors worked on him all night, but he’ll be okay,” she said, coming towards the gate and unlocking it.

“Where is he?” Zoro asked, leaving his cell and strutting out the door with her.

They both got looks from the townspeople as they passed, Nami for the blood and Zoro because they didn’t recognize him. He stood out like a sore thumb among them. His clothing ranged from dark green and black so he could better blend into the forests he frequented. Everyone here seemed to have some affinity to pastels and bright colors. He shook his head free of this assessment and concentrated on the road ahead.

“He’s in the infirmary.”

He was overcome with an urge to run ahead of her but he wasn’t interesting in getting lost on the way to find Sanji. He followed for a few tense minutes until they turned a corner and Zoro caught sight of a familiar building, the same one he’d seen Vivi walk into a few days ago. He began running towards the building then, not taking his eyes off of it as he willed his body not to deviate from the path laid out before him.

There was a small group of people collected in front of it. Zoro ignored them and ran towards the infirmary doors. He burst into the house, startling the three people in the room.

“Where is he?”

The doctors stared at him with confusion and slight fear.

“Sanji? Where is he?”

The two younger doctors, a blonde woman and a teen with shaggy brown hair turned to look at the eldest man, a brown-skinned man with tattoos painting his skin and a spotted hat atop his head. He narrowed his shadowed eyes sharply at Zoro.

“Chopper, Kaya,” the tattooed man called, nodding behind himself, indicating he wanted the others hidden away. The man stepped up in front of them and treated Zoro with a glare before speaking.

“Who might you be and why are you in my medical wing?”

It didn’t escape Zoro’s notice that he was twirling a scalpel between his fingers. It was clear he’d weaponize it if he felt the need.

“Law, it’s alright. Loverboy here is just overexcited and worried.”

Zoro looked over as Sabo and Ace walked in from a door to the left.

“You guys did great work. Sanji just needs to rest now. We’ll keep an eye on his stats. You guys head out and get some rest,” Sabo advised.

“I hardly see why I should leave my patient,” Law protested.

“You’ve got bags under your eyes the size of Luffy’s stomach after friendship feasts, babe. Kaya looks paler than normal and Chopper’s ready to fall over. Go, rest. If it makes you feel better, I’ll make sure Marco checks on him after he’s finished his rounds. He’ll be able to confirm we didn’t do anything to fuck with Sanji’s recovery,” Ace said.

The three doctors looked at Zoro with distrust and Law gripped his scalpel tighter.

“And leave this man with my patient?”

Ace approached him and knocked his hip into the shorter man’s.

“You know, it’s very attractive when you’re full of doctorly rage and protectiveness like this, but seriously get out of here and take a break.”

Law turned a dead-eyed glare on Ace who shot him a winning grin in reply.

The doctors spared Zoro one more glance before turning and leaving, though not without a few more looks thrown back at the room.

“I thought you were locked up,” Sabo stated.

“I told Nami to let him out,” Luffy said, entering the room.

“Luffy. You should’ve asked me first. I’m head of security for a reason, you know,” Sabo groused.

“Sanji said we could trust him, so I trust him.”

Zoro was getting antsy not having information about Sanji’s condition. He looked between the three men expectantly.

“Our guest seems impatient,” Ace observed.

“Oh, I’ll just—”

“Actually, I have questions,” Sabo said, cutting Luffy off.

Zoro realized in that second that though Luffy was the leader, Sabo was the one who he needed to convince here. He sighed, wondering if anyone was going to tell him anything.

“If I answer your questions, can I see him?”

“We won’t keep you away.”

“Fine.”

“Teach and his crew escaped us, but we won’t leave any stone unturned in our pursuit of him. We previously alerted the surrounding communities of the danger his presence presented, but they chose to ignore us. We knew better and now we see what damage he can cause. However, we don’t know everything,” Sabo explained before stepping closer.

“But you? You know a lot about the road, don’t you?”

“How do you figure that,” Zoro asked.

Ace snorted and gave Zoro a knowing look.

“It’s pretty obvious you haven’t spent much time behind walls during this shitstorm, buddy.”

“So what if I haven’t?”

“Teach’s gang knows a lot about the road too. They prefer it actually,” Sabo threw in.

“It has its upsides.”

“You never encountered these men on your travels?”

“I stayed much further north of here. Unless they were based there, I wouldn’t have. Besides, I tried to keep away from people.”

“Yet you found Sanji?” Ace pointed out.

“He found me,” Zoro corrected.

It felt like ages now since they first met, but realistically, it hadn’t even been two months.

“He was being attacked by zombies. I saved him, told him I’d help him get back to his camp.”

“Why? You said you had an aversion to people and you couldn’t know what kind of man he was,” Sabo asked.

“I wasn’t my most hospitable to him in the beginning. I wanted to make it up to him so I said I’d bring him here. Can I ask you a question?”

“I don’t see why not,” Sabo said, an indecipherable smile on his face.

“What are these questions for?”

Luffy stepped forward then.

“Like I said, Sanji’s our friend. That means we’re going to defend him, no matter what. We’re not just going to let those guys go free after what they did to him and what they tried to do to Nami and Vivi. I’m going to find them.”

Zoro narrowed his eyes at that. There was an unshakeable sort of conviction in the camp leader’s voice that invited no argument, yet Zoro felt the need to speak up anyway.

“The open road is an easy place to lose yourself, especially if you don’t want to be found. Seems like these guys know this area better than you guys do.”

“We’re going to find them,” Luffy reiterated.

He sounded so sure, like it was an inevitability. Zoro found himself staring into the man’s dark eyes. They were brimming with determination, fire and belief. It was strange to see someone still have such a strong sense of belief in the world they lived in today. This Luffy was either incredibly foolish or incredibly strong, possibly both.

“As you can see, our little brother doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. However, you were right in so much as Teach and his crew do have the advantage of knowing the outside world far better than even our best runners. A man with your experience would be a huge advantage in our mission to locate his gang,” Sabo said.

Ah, there was the point of this whole thing.

“What makes you think I’d want to join this place?”

“We didn’t say anything about you joining us, think of it more as a mutually beneficial arrangement,” Ace threw in.

“*Mutually* beneficial?”

“We’re friendly with several travelers who choose a nomadic lifestyle, much like yourself. They come back to Laugh Tale frequently when they need supplies or friendly human contact. You help us with Teach and I don’t see why we can’t make a similar arrangement with you.”

“Who says I want something like that?”

“You care about Sanji,” Luffy proclaimed.

He used that same tone of voice, like he was speaking an immutable fact into existence. Zoro was slightly annoyed that his feelings were on the receiving end of that tone but he couldn’t exactly deny the words.

“We want to make sure his attackers are brought to justice.”

“Is there such a thing anymore?”

“Here there is. We have a charter drawn up between Laugh Tale and our allies to the south, north, west and east. It outlines laws and punishments within our jurisdiction,” Sabo explained.

“That’s… civil,” Zoro commented dubiously.

Ace and Sabo smirked at that.

“It works for us, holds people accountable for their actions just like we intend to hold Teach accountable for his. We can’t have men like him attacking any more of our runners or terrorizing those of you who choose a life on the road. We’re asking for your assistance in this problem in any way you can give it.”

Zoro paused before he answered.

He had spent long and hard thinking after Koala’s words to him. Whether he stayed or went, Sanji should have some say in it, but Zoro knew for sure he couldn’t just let Teach go scot-free, not after all he’d done to the cook.

“I’ll help however I can,” Zoro responded.

“Good. Luffy will show you to Sanji. We can hammer out details later,” Sabo said before strutting out of the room alongside Ace.

Luffy beamed a large grin at Zoro that momentarily knocked all thought from his brain. He didn’t think he’d ever seen anyone smile that big before.

“Follow me, Sanji’s friend.”

“My name is Roronoa Zoro.”

“Zoro. Cool name. I’m Monkey D. Luffy and I have a feeling we’re going to be great friends,” Luffy declared brightly. Zoro couldn’t even find it in himself to tell the guy differently.

As they walked into a room off to the left where there were three beds with people he didn’t recognize. They must’ve been injured in some way, shape, or form. They walked past the three people to the fourth bed at the end where Sanji was.

Zoro shook his head as he took in Sanji's appearance. His right leg was in a cast. He was shirtless, showing the bandages around his abdomen and the myriad of bruises coloring his skin dark purple. He had a cut over the top of his blackened left eye and a gash across his left cheek.

"They took him away, stopped at a house, and started beating him up to punish him. They knew he fought with his legs, so they shot him in it to stop him from fighting them, but they didn't know he had a gun. He shot a couple of them. My brothers and I were able to find them thanks to the gunfire," Luffy explained grimly, looking over Sanji with a flare of anger before his face cleared and he gave Zoro a reassuring smile.

"Sanji will be okay. The doctors say his leg needs time to heal, he's got a few broken ribs and a lot of bruises, but he'll heal. He's Sanji. He's one of the strongest people I know. No way he'll let some guy beat him. He'll be back to cooking delicious food in no time."

Zoro nodded, his eye not leaving Sanji's form for a second. Luffy stared at them for a moment before turning to leave, although he paused before he walked away fully.

"Sanji can be pretty dumb sometimes. He doesn't like to talk to people about how he feels because he thinks it makes him weak or that people won't want him anymore, which is dumb because Sanji is the best. He cares about people a lot though, he's a good person, a kind person. He gives people a lot of chances. Still, he doesn't trust people a whole lot, not with himself, not really. He trusts you. He likes you. He cares about you a lot. He kept asking if you were okay when he was awake."

Zoro stiffened and turned to the face the leader who was staring back at him with guileless eyes.

"Is there a point to all that?"

Luffy continued to stare, his eyes bottomless pits of black that seemed like falling into an abyss before he suddenly smiled at Zoro.

"I like you, Zoro. Just don't break Sanji's heart. If you do, I won't be happy. And don't try to take him away, he still has to cook me lots of yummy meat," he warned him.

He didn't bother waiting for a response from him before walking off.

Weird.

Zoro shook his head and turned back to Sanji. He cautiously approached the blonde and sat on the stool by his bed. He hesitantly reached out and held his right hand, examining the scratches over his skin. He pressed a kiss to his fingers before leaning his forehead over the appendage.

Zoro sat there for an indeterminate amount of time before he felt Sanji's fingers twitching in his grasp. He looked up to see him blinking awake, his left hand going up to pull off his nasal cannula.

“No, no. You need it,” Zoro told him, gently pulling his hand away from his face.

Sanji lazily rolled his head over to look at him.

“Moss? Wha—? I... Where…?”

“You’re in the infirmary in Laugh Tale. You got hurt when you decided to play action hero. The doctors here got you all patched up.”

Sanji leaned back, shaking his head slightly.

“Did they give me sedatives? I feel loopy. Room’s all spinny,” he mumbled.

Zoro chuckled slightly.

“They might’ve. I scared all the doctors away but I’ll go see if that tattoo guy is around, get him to lower the dosage.”

He got up to leave, but Sanji gripped his hand.

“No, don’t leave. Stay.”

Zoro nodded and sat back down, leaning his head on the bed beside Sanji. After a moment, Sanji’s free hand sluggishly began petting Zoro’s hair. For some reason, it was that simple gesture that sent Zoro over the edge and he felt pure raw emotion swelling up in him. He could feel his throat growing tight and a pit swelled in his stomach as he felt tremors begin running down his frame, despite his best efforts to hide this from Sanji.

“Mossy? What is it?” Sanji muttered, his voice cracking on the words.

Zoro took a deep breath before looking up at Sanji, trying to compose himself.

“M’fine,” Zoro said, trying to project his usual stoicism.

Sanji frowned and tapped Zoro’s lips lightly.

“Lying to me.”

Zoro shook his head, running his fingers through his green locks with a sigh.

“I was just thinking about everything. About how you could’ve died. I think it’s time to level with you. Kuina, Yosaku and Johnny died because of me.”

“Moss—”

“No, it was my fault. You don’t know what I— I was leading them. I said we could make our way to the Center for Disease Control. We had opportunities to get behind walls, but I pushed us to go on to the CDC because that had to be where the answers were. We ran into this group on the road. They didn’t want to trust this group of guys, but I did. They helped us against the zombies, and I thought… I don’t know what I thought. They turned out to be monsters. They

held us and tortured us. They made me watch them kill my friends, my family, one by one. When it was my turn to die, I fought and, somehow, I won. I got away and I ran. I didn't stop running. I ran and made it to the CDC, but there was nothing there. The scientists had blown their own brains out."

Zoro paused in his recollection, his emotions getting the better of him momentarily. The images still haunted him. Sanji rubbed his thumb comfortingly against Zoro's hand and just listened.

"Even just staying on the road was another way for me to run. I could focus on staying alive, I didn't have to think about how I let my family die. I don't want to be responsible for anyone else dying. Least of all you."

Zoro paused to chuckle incredulously.

"I don't know how I let you get to me like this."

Sanji smiled ever so slightly at him.

"That's what scared me the most. That's why I was going to leave. I never planned to stay with you in Laugh Tale. I was going to get you here and then go. That was always the plan, it never changed even when we did."

"Wait, what?"

"I didn't want to be responsible for you getting hurt, but that happened anyway."

"Zoro…"

"But somebody told me that leaving for your sake should be up to you, not me. So, if you say to go, I'll go, but if you want me to stay, I'll stay."

"I want you to stay, but… I want you to stay 'cause you want to not because I want you to," Sanji said, his voice cracking throughout the sentence.

"I want to be with you, Sanji. I just— I don't know how to."

"You were doing a good job before at the spies' house."

"When it was just us and walls that I knew were temporary. I don't know how to do *this* anymore," Zoro answered, waving at the general area and the normalcy of it all.

"I don't want to mess this up for you, Cook."

Sanji struggled to sit up then, ignoring Zoro's protests as he made himself be sitting at eye level with Zoro rather than have the swordsman looming over him.

"I haven't been in a relationship in a long time either, you know? I don't remember enough about the world before to know if we're doing this the right way or not, but I don't care. I'm

afraid too, but I want you in my life. The way I feel about you is stronger than the fear. I think we can do this together so don't go, please Zoro."

Zoro reached over to gently caress Sanji's cheek, avoiding the gash and minor cuts as best he could.

"I'll stay with you as long as you'll want me," Zoro promised, sealing it with a kiss to Sanji's forehead.

He had failed before, but he wasn't going to fail again.

~*~*~

Epilogue:

Something was blaring in his ears.

Zoro groaned as the alarm clock continued blaring away before he gathered the energy to smack the snooze button and flip the damn thing off. He groaned again as he sat up in the bed, rubbing his sleep weary eye.

"I don't know why you brought that back with you from your last run anyway," Sanji muttered in the bed beside him, his face pressed into the pillow.

"I didn't get it from a run. Jinbei gave it to me as a gift or something for helping with those rogues poaching on Neptune's territory."

"Some gift."

"Uh-huh. I gotta go get ready. Sabo and I are going to meet up with some people from northern and eastern settlements for a run to the mall in the city. We need to get an early start, been planning it for weeks."

"You don't sound enthused. Maybe you should just come back to bed. I'm sure we can find something more entertaining to do," Sanji suggested, smiling up at him sleepily.

"You're a bad influence. If I'm late, Sabo will kill me," Zoro replied but he slipped back under the covers and shifted closer to Sanji's warm body.

"Sabo will be late too on account of Koala, so you and I have time for a proper goodbye."

"I thought all of last night was a proper goodbye. Thanks to your goodbye, I can barely stay awake right now. Did you plan that?"

"One year into married life, I feel like you shouldn't have to ask anymore whether I plan these things. It's not my fault you can't resist my wily charms and good looks."

Zoro rolled his eye as he leaned down and pressed a kiss to Sanji's lips.

The years had passed in quick fashion for them. They got married only a year after being together and a year after that neither could find a reason to regret the decision. Living in the post-apocalyptical world made a person extra conscious of the passage of time and so they didn’t waste theirs. They knew they wanted to be together forever and so they made it happen.

Zoro had found his niche in the community by not always being in the community. He helped Luffy and the other settlements in the area to deal with nefarious travelers on the road, as well as passing along messages between the dominions and going on supply runs. He got along well enough with the locals and even had some fond acquaintanceships with residents from the other camps in the area, but he largely kept to Sanji and his group of friends.

Zoro’s friends didn’t haunt him anymore and he was never sure if he was happy about it or sad most days. Sometimes he couldn’t decide whether they were ever real or not. Sometimes life still felt like a dream. He would walk past the schoolhouse or sit with Sanji on movie or trivia night and wonder how something like this could exist with the world being as it was beyond the walls that protected them, but then he would look at Sanji and somehow, impossibly, Zoro wouldn’t care anymore.

As long as he had Sanji, he was alright.

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