Make Me Feel Like I Am Human

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Make Me Feel Like I Am Human

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Summary

Sanji has spent his whole life as Germa’s failure. Zoro has spent six months as his bodyguard and every one of them falling harder. When Judge decides to erase what makes Sanji human, Zoro will do anything to save him, even if Sanji never forgives him for it.

Chapter 1

Sanji let out a weary sigh as he stood in front of a familiar yet dreaded door.

Beyond it lay the family dining room, not that the people occupying the room were much of a family, and certainly not Sanji's. The only true family he had was lost when his mother died and when his old geezer was banished and/or killed by Judge. He was never sure which it was, all he knew was, like Sora, Zeff was gone. Sanji was left on his own. Well, almost on his own. Reiju showed glimmers of decency, playing a semi-competent role of big sister from time-to-time, but it was the recent addition to the Vinsmoke household that really made the difference.

Fingers brushed against his back beneath his red cloak. The warmth of the hand seeped past his gold vest and white silk shirt, into his skin and drew a small shiver from him. He glanced behind him at Zoro, his guard a now familiar shadow and comfort after months of being in his company.

It was only six months prior that King Vinsmoke Judge had hired guards to accompany his children everywhere, apparently due to suspicious threats and fears of assassination attempts. Germa was in a precarious position after Judge's genius plan of allying with the Big Mom Pirates fell through. It had resulted in Germa being ousted as a member nation by the World Government.

Sanji could honestly say he was surprised that his father bothered with procuring a guard for him. It was only a few years ago that he had seen fit to throw him into the dungeon with an iron mask on his face and pretend he was dead. He only "revived" him when he needed him for political gain. His plans fell through since Sanji couldn't marry Charlotte Pudding like his father wanted but it also meant Sanji couldn't just go back to the dungeon with all of Germa knowing that he was still alive. He had already been reintroduced to the public, it would be suspicious for him to disappear again. With recent events, his father was desperate to save face with the people of Germa, all of whom were none too pleased with suddenly losing the protection of the World Government and becoming enemies of an Emperor of the Sea on top of that. Sanji supposed discovering their leader was also so callous as to lock one of his children away in a dungeon with an iron mask on their face would send the message that the king didn't care about the people. Afterall, look at how he treated his own child. That would lead to greater civil unrest and cause the looming threat of an internal war to become even stronger. At least, that had been Reiju's reasoning. Sanji wasn't so sure. Why would the people care that much about what had happened to him? But his sister was more politically minded than him, so he didn't question it.

He was still treated as less than. His room was smaller than his siblings' and closer to the servants' quarters than it was the family wing. Not that Sanji minded that, it meant he could sneak to the kitchens a lot easier than he would've been able to if he was closer to the rest of his family. He wasn't allowed to leave the castle as much as his brothers were, which wasn't a hardship for him. He wasn't permitted guests or allowed to pursue his interests, not that he was deterred by receiving permission or not. By and large, his life had improved drastically

being out of the dungeons. He still had to endure his brothers and their cruelty, but less so now that they couldn't hide within the deep darkness of the dungeons. Now, they veiled their beatings as "training" and mutual combat. It still left Sanji bruised and bloody but at least he could limp away to his room with his soft bed and books he could read. Best of all, there was a kitchen he could access and cook in until he didn't feel as wretched unlike the dungeon.

Life drummed along at a sedate pace until one day their father called them to his room and introduced them to their guards. Sanji had been dubious at best, a former pirate hunter from the East Blue, half-blind and nearly cleaved in two if his chest was anything to go by, carrying three swords, one of which must've been ornamental. He figured either his guard had no way of protecting him (why would his father want to protect him in the first place) or he was secretly there to kill Sanji. That way, his father wouldn't be implicated and this time, Sanji would truly be dead. The failure finally removed once and for all, good riddance.

He hadn't been exactly welcoming to Zoro. The two butt heads and called each other names, Zoro not caring that Sanji was a prince. Zoro never talked down to him in front of others, only in the privacy of Sanji's chambers, but it still grated on his nerves.

By virtue of Zoro always being around, eventually he saw more than Sanji would've liked, especially between him and his brothers. Zoro's response was not what he expected. He didn't imagine the man would be furious on Sanji's behalf, enough to want to go and fight his brothers, pay them back for every wound they inflicted on the third prince. He didn't expect him to gently nurse and wrap his wounds, showing more tenderness than even Reiju did whenever she patched him up. He didn't expect him to care.

After that, things changed between them. They still argued but there was an undeniable undercurrent of affection and Sanji was not surprised when the man kissed him one day, only shocked at the gentleness of it. Six months later, Zoro's tenderness towards him was still a little mystifying, but it was sorely needed on days like this.

"It's only an hour, two at the most, Curly."

"That's more than enough. You sure you can't use one of those swords on me, put me out of commission for a while?"

"And miss seeing that pretty face every day? I don't think so."

Sanji felt a blush color his cheeks. Zoro said things like that from time to time, especially on days like this. Sanji didn't understand how the directionless, sweaty, idiot swordsman could be so sweet at times.

"Besides, who would I spar with if I killed you, Cook? I like our fights. Germa's weird, emotionless soldiers do fuck all for me. Plus, they creep me out."

Sanji rolled his eyes at that. That sounded more like the Zoro he knew. Zoro's hand splayed out across his back, the fingers digging in just a little deeper. He could feel the heat of Zoro's body, telling him the man had stepped closer to him even if there was still space between their bodies. A shiver went down his spine as he felt Zoro's hot breath brush against his ear.

“Just a couple of hours, Cook. You survive this dinner and then we can go back to your room and I’ll have you all to myself. I’ll make you forget whatever bullshit they put in your head this time.”

Sanji bit his lip, his mind flashing to all the ways Zoro made him forget, to how Zoro always effortlessly put him back together after dinners with his family tore him apart. He wished he could just have Zoro without having to deal with his family first, but if it was something he had to endure in order to get the prize of being in his arms, then he would endure every insult and degrading word his family had to offer.

Footsteps began echoing down the hall, coming towards them. Sanji recognized them immediately.

“Hands off, Mosshead,” he ordered.

Zoro’s fingers lingered a moment more before he took a step back, the distance between them now more appropriate even if it did make Sanji feel bereft. Reiju turned the corner then, her bodyguard walking behind her.

“Brother, what a surprise for you to beat me here.”

“I wanted to escort you inside, dear sister.”

“Oh Sanji, always such a gentleman.”

Sanji blinked at the unexpected compliment and felt his insides warm just a little.

“It’s a wonder Pudding didn’t want you.”

A stab shot through his chest at the careless words.

And so it begins.

Reiju likely wasn’t trying to inflict harm with her words. She didn’t even think about them before she said them and likely saw nothing wrong with them as they were the raw truth. They still hurt, even if Sanji didn’t love Pudding. Reiju hadn’t been trying to hurt him, but his father and brothers definitely would be. Sanji glanced over to Zoro briefly. His face was blank, but he could make out the way his shoulders were just that bit tighter. The swordsman briefly met his gaze. His eyes flashed with reassurance before they went back to their usual blankness.

Sanji steeled himself. A couple hours. Then he would have Zoro all to himself and he could forget this dinner ever happened.

He wordlessly held his elbow out to Reiju, who rested her hand in the crook of it and walked forward gracefully as Zoro and her guard opened the doors for them. Ichiji, Niji and Yonji were already there as they walked inside, their guards posted along the walls and largely ignoring the trio. Niji and Yonji were cackling about something, probably something stupid, while Ichiji watched on with an expressionless look on his face.

“Brothers,” Reiju greeted in a monotone voice. Sanji didn’t bother saying anything. He pulled out Reiju’s chair for her, drawing an absent smile, before taking his seat by her side across from their brothers.

Niji and Yonji didn’t acknowledge their presence, but Ichiji’s head turned to them slightly. Sanji couldn’t tell what his eyes might’ve been doing because of the glasses he always wore but there was no change in his face as he began speaking.

“Sister, Failure,” he said, using the word as if it were Sanji’s name. He was no longer shocked or surprised by this.

“I see you two managed to arrive before Father. That is a feat in and of itself.”

“Yeah, figured you’d be busy putting on your make-up, Reiju,” Yonji commented, snorting obnoxiously.

“Some of us choose to spend a little time on their appearance every once in a while,” she replied.

“That time you spend on yourself will be better served on Father. It is no excuse to be late,” Ichiji responded.

“A lady is never late. She arrives when she needs to,” Sanji declared, unable to stop himself from speaking up in a woman’s defense, even if his sister was perfectly capable of contending with the mannerless curs they called brothers.

Reiju gave him an impassive smile at that.

“See? You boys could stand to be as sensitive to a woman’s quirks as Sanji is.”

Despite himself, he felt another surge of warmth at the compliment. God, he was depressingly easy.

“The failure’s half a woman himself,” Niji snorted derisively.

A flash of fear, shame and embarrassment overtook the warmth Reiju’s comment had engendered in him. Niji didn’t know about him and Zoro, he was certain no one did. Sometimes, he thought Reiju suspected but if she did, she never spoke to him about it. The North Blue was notoriously more prejudiced against queer people than any other Blue. The East Blue and the West Blue were by far the most liberal seas with marriage between same-sex couples having been legal in most islands of the West Blue for years now and with a strong movement for its legalization across islands of the East Blue still ongoing. The South was a little more stringent. It wasn’t strictly illegal, but it was still seen as a moral ill with heavy regulations put in place regarding cohabitation, adoption, civil unions, etc.

The Grand Line had a much less unified stance, with each island having a different culture surrounding queer people. The North Blue, however, was the most restrictive of all the Blues.

Queer people were more likely to be killed, branded, harassed and shamed in the North and Germa was perhaps the worst of it. Germa outright banned homosexuality and had laws on

the books detailing punishments including jail time, public flogging or whippings and worse. People made sport of branding queer people, knowing they would be hunted and killed if they bore a mark that told the country of their sexuality. The perpetrators were rarely ever punished. Niji in particular had joined in on a few of those hunts.

Sanji was already persecuted for being the disgraced third prince, he could only imagine how much worse it would be if his family knew about his sexuality. It wouldn't matter that he liked women as well as men, he likely wouldn't survive it if the revelation of his bisexuality came to light. It would hardly be treated with a snippy barb at the dinner table, especially from Niji.

He used that knowledge to calm his rabbiting heart. Niji was just being his usual cruel self, nothing more.

"Be that as it may, you would all do well to get more in touch with your feminine side. It just might make you the least bit considerate," Reiju returned, her voice still flat as she delicately took a napkin and spread it across her lap to protect her dress from any spillage, not that there would be. His sister did everything with intention and precision, she'd never be so careless as to let a crumb stain her dress.

"We don't need to consider anything beyond what Father deems necessary for us to consider," Ichiji returned.

Reiju and Sanji shared a look from the corner of their eyes and even Niji and Yonji looked exasperated by Ichiji's stoic yet overzealous dedication to their Father's agenda.

Of course, Ichiji was programmed to feel that way, so it wasn't like he had much choice. The thought did make Sanji feel… something. Pity, maybe? Remorse? Guilt? Reiju had told him what Sora did in an attempt to save the quadruplets. Why did it only work on Sanji? What made him so special? Surely, if it was going to work on any of them, it should've been Ichiji, the eldest of the four, but he seemed to have the least emotion out of all the brothers. Niji and Yonji weren't winning any awards in empathy, but they seemed to feel something, even if it only was triggered by violence and cruelty, but Ichiji was never roused by anything. Should Sanji have done more to try and save his brothers? Try to change them? But what could he have logically done? He couldn't even save himself. Still, maybe there had been some way he could've helped them. So yes, pity, remorse, guilt. He felt all those things surface every now and again whenever he looked at them. He hated it because he also felt fear, disgust, hatred and anger for all they had done to him. It was a lot to reconcile.

"Of course, given that Sanji is utterly useless, I suppose it doesn't matter what he does and does not consider. It will do little to change his worth," Ichiji continued.

Sanji pursed his lip at the dig as Niji and Yonji started cackling like hyenas.

"True. Hey, you remember when he actually thought he could beat us in a sparring match," Niji recalled.

"Which time," Yonji prodded.

“You know, that time when we put him in the infirmary for two weeks. I think we broke half the bones in his body.”

Both Niji and Yonji started laughing again.

“Served him right, challenging us like that. If he wasn’t so weak, he would’ve been able to fight us.”

Sanji’s hand tightened into a fist then, anger and grief clutching his heart. He didn’t much care about his brothers’ words, not really. It was nothing new to him. In the beginning, he had been concerned that all their insults and degradation and indictments towards his existence would make a difference in how Zoro felt about him. However, he had learned not to doubt his swordsman’s conviction.

“Do I look like I’m going to take the word of a trio of bumbling idiots who wouldn’t survive outside of their Daddy’s walls for more than a day? What do you take me for, Cook?” Zoro had said, offended when Sanji had admitted as much to him.

He never brought it up again even though he still felt that way from time to time.

But no, his reaction was more born of what that incident had cost him. In a burst of bravado, Sanji had wanted to prove himself. He was able to beat all of Germa’s foot soldiers with no issue by the time he was 6 years old. He was by no means weak, he was just weaker than his siblings. However, when he was 8 years old, Germa’s former head chef had started teaching Sanji how to fight as well as how to cook. Through the old geezer’s tutelage, he discovered that he was much better at fighting with his legs than he was with his hands or weapons, like his brothers were. He had trained as hard as he could with this new form of fighting as well as in the kitchen, determined to beat his brothers and give his mother a dish she wouldn’t have to lie about enjoying.

When he challenged Niji, wanting to finally rub the smirk off his cruelest brother’s face, it had been a disaster. The blonde boy held out longer than usual, but Niji still beat him in two minutes flat. Then he and Yonji proceeded to beat him senseless while Ichiji stood nearby, watching the scene with a blank expression. The brothers only stopped when Reiju came along and made them. Sanji had been in a coma for two weeks. By the time he woke up, his mother was dead. He didn’t get to make that dish for her or even attend her funeral, he had missed it because he was unconscious. He never forgave himself or his brothers for that.

Sanji was spared from having to dignify any of that with a response by their father’s arrival along with one of his scientists. All five children stood up as the doors opened, the action automatic in deference of the king, and only sat down again once their father did at the head of the table, not bothering to greet any of his children as he continued his conversation with the man in the lab coat. Sanji didn’t bother learning his name, he hated every single one of them. They had helped to make his life a living hell, he didn’t give them the dignity of names.

All of the younger Vinsmokes stayed silent as the conversation went along, knowing better than to speak before their father addressed them. Sanji was set to tune the conversation out all together but his name (or at least his father’s approximation of it) caught his attention.

“And you’re certain this will make the failure of use?”

“Quite certain, your majesty. I doubt he will be as strong as his brothers, but I’m sure it will reverse some of the effects of the late Queen’s poison.”

“I’ve heard these platitudes before. I shall believe it when I see it. Even so, whether the runt finally lives up to his name in battle or not, he will still be useful for alliances all the same. Nevertheless, get your equipment ready and you can test your work on the morrow.”

Sanji felt himself stiffen in his seat at the implications.

More tests on him, more serums, more attempts to “fix” him. He was loathe to intimate that there were any benefits from being locked in that dungeon, trapped in that mask, forgotten in the bowels of the castle. However, he had been forgotten. That meant that all attempts to try and make him like his brothers had ceased. He didn’t have to be subjected to the tortures of his father’s laboratory because the king no longer cared enough to try and correct his greatest failure.

Now that he was out, the experiments had resumed. Sanji didn’t want to admit that they might’ve been on to something, but sometimes when he left the cold sterile rooms, he felt a little… less. Less like himself, less like there was a reason to give a damn about anything, less passionate about the things he usually cared for, less full of fear and desperation and self-loathing (which he didn’t hate) but also less full of love and passion and kindness (which he did hate).

It frightened him. What would happen if his father succeeded? Would Sanji end up like his brothers? Would he still have his passion for cooking? Would he still dream of the All Blue? Would he still miss his mother and Zeff? Would he still love Zoro? Would there be anything left of him at all?

His hands clenched into fists as he thought more and more, his thoughts spiraling and folding on one another. He impulsively opened his mouth to say something before he felt a sharp scratch on his arm. He glanced over at Reiju who gave him a warning look, prompting him to snap his mouth shut. His father and the scientist continued talking the logistics of their experiment, heedless of Sanji’s near slip up. It caused his stomach to coil into knots of anxiety. He felt small beads of sweat forming on his forehead and his palms and his breaths came just a bit harsher. He wished he could turn around and look at Zoro. The stoic man likely had a face of stone, unchanging despite how much he equally hated the days Sanji had to go to the lab. He had tried to talk him out of it in the beginning, tried to convince him they could run away. Zoro had friends in the East Blue, he said. They could go there and start over, he said. Sanji couldn’t make himself believe it. He had shot Zoro down and told him that it’d probably be better if he left, that Sanji wasn’t worth the hassle. The green-haired man had given him a flat look,

“Maybe those scientists fried your brain, but I already told you I’m not leaving you, so stop talking out of your ass, idiot cook. We go together or not at all.”

He didn’t get the Moss sometimes. He didn’t bathe enough, drank too much, trained too often, talking seemed to be like pulling teeth for him, most of Sanji’s subtle romantic gestures

went right over his head, he was concerningly devoted to his swords and had the most ridiculous dream of beating Dracule Mihawk to become the World's Greatest Swordsman. Yet, there were times when the man was oddly sweet, understanding, romantic even. Zoro turned devotion into an artform and for some reason, he had decided to turn that stringent sense of loyalty onto Sanji. He didn't know what he did to deserve it (even though Zoro had waxed poetic to him about all the reasons why during several hot and steamy nights locked away in Sanji's quarters), but he thanked every god and every ounce of luck that existed that he and Zoro had found each other.

Sanji felt his body relaxing slowly as thoughts of Zoro invaded his mind, shutting out the nightmarish images of all the crap that had been done to him in that lab.

The first time Zoro had dropped his mask of cordiality and insulted him.

Every time he and Zoro had sparred, Sanji using his unique kick-based fighting against Zoro's blades and finding that the two were evenly matched.

Midnight picnics they had gone on together in Sora's garden, Sanji cooking their favorites and nicking booze from the kitchen before spiriting his Moss away on impromptu dates.

The first time Zoro kissed him, a heated thing at first at the tail-end of a brutal sparring match. They had still been fighting each other, only with lips, but then Zoro slowed it down, made his touches softer, engulfed Sanji slowly in a wave of desire-soaked affection. The blonde had just about melted into the ground.

The first time Zoro made love to him. The amount of care he had put into making sure Sanji's body was ready, the way he had been only concerned with bringing Sanji to the peaks of pleasure, his own climax an afterthought, the way every word he said dripped with praise and affection and devotion and love, so different from their insult-laden spars.

Sanji had the promise of experiencing that again tonight. He just had to get through this dinner and then he could fall apart into anxiety and panic and once Zoro talked him down from that, they would fall into bed together and all would be right with the world again.

He wasn't sure how long it was before the scientist left, but it was long enough for Niji's eyes to have glazed over in boredom and Yonji to be playing with the tablecloth. Ichiji still sat up ramrod straight, not willing to relax until their father said so while Reiju stared off into space, occasionally sipping on champagne while her other hand remained on Sanji's arm, her sharp nails dancing up and down his skin. He was acutely aware of her ability to poison him right at that moment, yet he still felt no fear and actually welcomed the contact. It helped to keep him grounded in the moment, even as he continued to let his mind drift off to happier times with his lover.

Once the scientist was gone, Judge signaled to the servants lining the edges of the room to begin serving dinner. Sanji tuned back in then. He would never disrespect such a lovely lady like Cosette by not giving her food his undivided attention. Cosette kept Sanji's frequent visits to the kitchen hush-hush in gratitude after he defended her from Niji. She still got beaten later but they had became friendly to one another and made an arrangement that worked. She wasn't Zeff but it'd be unfair of Sanji to hold something like that against her.

He looked down at the plate, pleased to see that the beef wellington he had prepared this morning and left in the kitchen had made its way to the plate. He had cooked it for the staff's lunch, but Cosette shared his and Zeff's philosophy on wasting food so she frequently served any leftovers from Sanji's cooking to the royal family, who were none the wiser.

Sanji was quite proud of his efforts. The puff pastry was flaky and showed beautiful lamination, his beef was perfectly seasoned and browned, the scoring on the pastry was complex and intricate, giving the meal a touch of elegance and he had paired it with a delicious red wine sauce. Zoro had done nothing but grunt and mumble a 's'good' when Sanji served it to him earlier, though he knew that was Zoro-speak for he liked it.

He silently watched now with a sense of glee and accomplishment as his family ate the food he had prepared. It was clear to him that they seemed to be enjoying it. Reiju, who was the only one who ever ate his cooking with full knowledge of who had prepared it, gave him a knowing look. The three idiots went for seconds with Niji even commenting that at least Cosette had made something decent for dinner. It rankled him that he judged the beautiful woman, who was a very talented cook, but it also made him feel a surge of happiness that they liked his food. He could never tell them it was his, they'd beat him black and blue for stepping foot in a kitchen, but it didn't make him feel any less proud of himself.

Then they had to open their mouths.

"So Father, is it true then? You're finally going to make the failure suitable of being a prince of Germa," Niji asked.

Judge didn't look up from his plate.

"Don't be ridiculous. He could never be suitable of bearing the title of prince, let alone the title of my son. He will never live up to the Vinsmoke name. I've simply found another way to make him useful, seeing as how he didn't have the decency to follow through with the last plan," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Who could blame the Emperor's daughter though? Who the hell would want the failure, let alone for life," Niji jeered.

"She would've saved us the trouble if she just took him and killed him when he wasn't our problem anymore," Yonji added, a vicious grin on his face.

"She would have. Even so, he can still be of some use, though his value will always be diminished by his constancy of failures. At least he can make his pathetic life worth something," Judge stated flatly.

Ichiji hummed in agreement. Sanji's hand tightened on his fork. He should be used to this, the way they talked about him like he wasn't there, not even looking in his direction or acknowledging his presence. It was like he had never left that cell at all. He itched to make himself known, to force them to look at him, but Reiju's fingers were still dancing along his arm and they dug in just a bit deeper as Sanji felt the need to speak. Sometimes, he wondered if his sister could read minds. Or perhaps he was just that easy to read.

“What shall you use him for, Father,” Reiju inquired, delicately spearing a carrot and popping it into her mouth.

“If the experiments go as planned, he should be nearly as durable as his brothers. The least he can do is clean up this mess he helped create with the Big Mom Pirates. He will do a few missions, off the books, on behalf of the World Government which will get us back in their good graces. Some light espionage, gathering rabbits for the Nobles’ Native Hunts, helping to raid some non-affiliated islands. Things of that sort.”

Sanji grit his teeth, hearing that Judge’s intention was to use him as a weapon and tool to wield against innocent people, force him to go against his morals, not that Judge cared about such things, much less Sanji’s.

“No.”

Sanji didn’t even realize he was the one that had spoken until he suddenly had four pairs of eyes on him.

Not Judge’s though, the king continued to explain as if Sanji hadn’t spoken at all.

“The scientists are calling this new drug of theirs Stealth Black, says it will give him significant modifications akin to your own…”

“No.”

“…Tougher skin, durability, accelerated healing and coupled with a raid suit, it will only make him more useful…”

“No.”

“I’m told the suit will even grant him a form of invisibility. That will make capturing participants for the hunt all the easier. Especially Fishmen, as that seems to be the hottest demand now that slavery has been abolished, officially at any rate. I will still have need of you boys for other missions but we will see if the failure can finally do something to give his worthless existence some purpose.”

Sanji felt a surge of anger and defiance hit him. He was ready to spring to his feet, to slam his hands on the table, to scream ‘no’ so his father would finally be forced to at least look at him. Before he could complete the action, the room suddenly went blurry. The shapes in front of him which had once been his brothers shifted into amorphous blobs of red, blue and green. The defiant ‘no’ that was building in his chest released from his lips as little more than a slurred whisper. His fisted hands went limp and he found himself sinking back into his chair, his body heavy.

What the hell, he thought to himself.

For a moment, he wondered if his food had been tampered with. Perhaps Judge wanted to send him to the lab tonight and had drugged him so he would be compliant. Then again, he never gave a damn if Sanji protested before. He would be dragged, kicking and screaming, if

it became necessary. Judge was never subtle, he was sure to make Sanji's humiliation as overt as possible. His brothers were the same and worse in some cases. The only person who exhibited even a bit of cunning was Reiju.

Reiju was sitting next to him.

Reiju was touching him.

Sanji's eyes flickered down to where his sister's fingers were still attached to his bare forearm. The veins there were discolored from her poison, a purplish unnatural hue that told Sanji all he needed to know. He felt a stab of betrayal at the action. So much for trusting her.

The rest of dinner passed in a drugged haze. He did his best to play off the poisoning he was enduring. He was certain whatever she had chosen wasn't lethal, but that didn't mean it was a pleasant feeling. He didn't feel like his body was his own. He watched with an air of detachment as he slowly and robotically ate all the food on his plate, not even poison would make him waste food. His father and brothers' voices were little more than garbled gibberish.

Time passed strangely and before he knew it, his father and brothers were leaving along with their guards. The room cleared until it was just Sanji, Zoro, Reiju and her guard. As soon as the rest of the royal family was gone, Sanji felt familiar hands grabbing his shoulder and chin. He glanced up at Zoro, his face a splash of shapes and colors. Sanji was sure he was probably scowling.

He said something in a snappish tone but Sanji couldn't decipher it. He thought Reiju might've answered but Sanji's head was swimming even more and he found himself leaning into Zoro and letting his eyes slip shut.

He briefly regained a bit of consciousness when he felt himself being lifted into strong arms, familiar arms, arms that had lifted him countless times. He let his head fall against Zoro's shoulder and drifted off again.

He resurfaced again when he felt a soft bed against his back. Voices became slightly clearer to him.

"…no right to do this to him… trusts you… sick kind of shit…" Zoro was saying, his voice tense and full of anger and recrimination.

"… mild poison at best… wear off… let him draw attention… watch him until…" Reiju was responding.

Sanji couldn't really make sense of it and he was too woozy to try. He finally let himself fall into black.

He didn't wake again until hours later, or at least he figured it was hours. As he opened his eyes, the world swam for a moment before settling into focus. He had a low-level headache pounding against his temples, his mouth felt dry and his limbs ached a bit but at least he felt like himself again.

He pinched his lips as he replayed what Reiju had done and the snippets of her conversation with Zoro. He could understand her logic. If Sanji had made a scene, there was no telling what Judge's reaction would be. Maybe he'd throw Sanji in the dungeon until morning, maybe he'd send him to the lab right away or maybe he'd just sic Ichiji, Niji and Yonji on him. Either way, it wouldn't have boded well for Sanji. Still, he couldn't help the betrayal he felt at her using her powers on him, stealing away his voice, his choice. Even if there had been dire consequences, at least it would've been the result of something Sanji had done, not just a consequence of his existence. And she couldn't have chosen a worst time to do something like that to him, just as Judge was talking about discovering the key that would take away Sanji's choice for the rest of his life, leave him as nothing more than a hollow shell, a tool for Germa's malicious intent, a weapon for Judge's aggrandizement. Sanji would essentially be dead.

He let out a shuddering breath at the thought. There had been many times he thought he would die, but every time the reality came around, he fought tooth and nail to survive, now what the hell was he meant to do?

"You awake there, Curls," Zoro asked, breaking Sanji from his sullen thoughts.

The blonde turned his head a bit to see Zoro sitting on the bed at his side, staring down at him with barely concealed concern.

"Wh…?" Sanji broke off, going into a coughing fit courtesy of his dry throat. Zoro helped him sit up and brought a glass of water to his lips. Sanji gratefully took a few long sips before clearing his throat.

"What time is it?"

Zoro glanced at the clock on the wall.

"11:30. You've been out for 3 hours. That's about how long your sister said it'd take for her poison to be absorbed into your system."

Sanji's lips pursed at that.

"That was a shitty thing she did to you, Cook."

"Yeah, it was. She was probably trying to save me from myself though."

"That's what she said, I don't give a fuck. I wish I could kill every single one of them. I'd take their heads in a second. The world wouldn't miss 'em," Zoro grumbled.

It was a familiar wish. Sanji had heard Zoro's murder fantasies dozens of times by now. He replied now the way he always did.

"I don't want that."

"I know, 'cause you're a dumbass. One with a big heart, but still a dumbass."

"Says the directionless shitty swordsman."

“Shit cook.”

“Mosshead.”

“Dartboard brows.”

“Neanderthal.”

“Swirly.”

“Algae-brain.”

By the time the two were done trading insults, their foreheads were pressed against one another, like two rams getting ready to butt heads, both growling in irritation at the other.

“You know, if you’re right about anything, and you rarely are, I do have to question my intelligence at times.”

“Hah, well at least you admit it,” Zoro replied, a smug grin on his face.

“Yeah, I’ve got to wonder how I thought it was a good idea to fall for the idiot who gets lost walking in a straight line.”

Zoro’s smugness fell away into a scowl momentarily before his face softened.

“Maybe, but you’d find me if I got lost, wouldn’t you, Prettybrows?”

Sanji felt his cheeks instantly warming up at the words and the nickname.

“Well, who else is gonna save your sorry ass, Mosshead,” Sanji returned, acutely aware of his softening tone and the way their foreheads were no longer butting like rams but instead were now resting gently against each other, their breaths mingling together.

Zoro raised a hand and caressed his cheek before slipping his fingers into his blonde hair. The green-haired man seemed to have an obsession with Sanji’s hair, his fingers unerringly found their way there whenever he could.

They stayed that way for a moment, absorbing the quiet affection between them.

“I’d do it, you know,” Zoro said after a long while.

“Hmm,” Sanji hummed inquiringly.

“I’d kill them all, for you. I wouldn’t hesitate. You just have to give me the word and I’d bring this castle crumbling down right at your feet.”

Sanji felt a shiver go down his spine. Sometimes he forgot who Zoro was before he knew him. Then there were moments like this, where Zoro spoke in a low tone, his eye flashing with dangerous and deadly intent, and Sanji was suddenly reminded that the man he loved was a fearsome killer. The man they called the Demon of the East Blue, relentless and

devoted to all things, including his hunts. It didn’t scare Sanji. Zoro had made him feel a lot of things but never fear.

He turned the offer over in his head. To see the castle crumble, to see all of his family dead. It wasn’t like he hadn’t considered it, a life where he was certain he would be free of the curse of the Vinsmoke family. No more dungeons, no more labs, no more having his voice stolen from him, no more being used and degraded and beaten and humiliated. It was a nice fantasy, but it was just that.

The reality was that he was a Vinsmoke, the disgraced and unwanted third son of Vinsmoke Judge, and he had to deal with all the shit that came with that. Including, apparently, whatever was planned for tomorrow.

He felt his earlier anxiety flooding his gut again. Judge had mentioned several different experiments before, but this time felt different. This time he was making plans for after. Plans that involved the World Government, plans that involved Sanji being in compliance, being a useful weapon which meant that they were sure about this Stealth Black serum. They had cracked it. They were going to render Sora’s sacrifice null and void, make her actions useless (not that Sanji didn’t already believe his mother had no business sacrificing herself for him). They were going to take away everything that made him who he was and turn him into a something, not a someone. They were already treating him like he wasn’t there, like he didn’t matter, he was already a means to an end to them and this serum would just catalyze all the feelings Judge already had about him into a single action that would see to Sanji’s essential death.

No.

Judge couldn’t win, he couldn’t be made to do what they wanted. He would never want to be responsible for causing the despair of innocent people the way Judge wanted him to. He would not spit in his mother’s face by becoming the thing she had worked so hard to prevent him from being.

He was jolted from his thoughts as slightly chapped lips were suddenly pressed against his. He barely had time to reciprocate the kiss before Zoro pulled back, his forehead still against Sanji’s.

“Come back to me, Cook. Don’t get lost in that stupid head of yours.”

Sanji raised a hand and pressed it against Zoro’s which had drifted back to his cheek.

“I’m still here.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Tomorrow.”

Zoro stiffened against him.

“We can go, tonight. We don’t have to stay here.”

“Where would we go? We’re a seafaring kingdom.”

“We’ll steal a boat.”

“The night guard would catch us. If they didn’t stop us from leaving, then they’d shoot our boat right out of the water.”

“At least we’d be free.”

“Freedom might not be in the cards for me, but you—”

“Don’t. Stop trying to get me to leave you. I already told you I don’t want to hear that shit. It’s not happening. Either we both leave or neither of us do.”

“But your dream—”

“People can have more than one dream. Being the World’s Greatest Swordsman has always been my lifelong goal, and it still is. But recently? Recently, I’ve been wondering if it would mean as much to me if you weren’t by my side.”

Sanji gasped at that, pulling back to stare at Zoro incredulously.

“But your dream is… and Kuina… What about Kuina?”

“Kuina would knock me upside the head for doing something as stupid as falling in love and she’d probably hate your guts, but she’d also understand why I’m doing this. It’s me and you, Cook. I can survive on my own. I’ve done that plenty in my life. I can be strong by myself and so can you. You’ve endured more than I can imagine. You’re one of the strongest men I’ve ever met.”

Sanji scoffed at that, a blush alighting his cheeks at the compliment.

“But I’d rather not be alone, not if I can be with you instead, and I’d rather not leave you alone to face any more of your family’s particular brand of bullshit.”

“But why?”

Zoro blinked at him.

“Don’t you know?”

Sanji blinked back at him.

“I love you, idiot.”

Sanji felt a blanket of warmth drift over him. Zoro had told him this plenty and still it seemed like a revelation every time he said it.

Sanji surged forward and pulled Zoro into a heated kiss. His chest was exploding with emotions, an endless stream of *I love yous* leaked out with each heartbeat while his every

thought was consumed with Zoro.

Zoro, who would put his dreams on hold for him.

Zoro, who refused to leave him.

Zoro, who thought he was strong and brave and worth something just because he was Sanji.

Zoro, who loved him.

And suddenly, what Sanji needed to do became clear to him. He would never want to hold Zoro back. He wanted Zoro to leave Germa. He wanted him to fulfill his dream. He wanted him to keep his promise to Kuina. He wanted, no, he *needed* Zoro to make it out of this unscathed because he loved him, more than he ever thought it was possible to love someone. He loved Zoro enough to let him go.

He pulled back after a moment, breathing heavily as they pressed their foreheads against one another's again.

"I need to ask you to do something. You're going to hate me for asking and you're going to want to say 'no', but I need you to agree anyway."

Zoro leaned back slightly to study his face, suspicion and concern lingering in his gaze.

"Tomorrow, if this Stealth Black serum works. If they… if they turn me into something I'm not, if I lose my mind, I need you to promise me that you'll kill me."

Zoro's face fell in shock before anger took over.

"No," he replied flatly, his jaw set stubbornly.

"Zoro—"

"No. I'm not doing that, Cook. Why would you even ask me something like that?"

"Because you know me. The real me. I can't become something to be used, something that hurts other people, something that can't even be classified as a someone. I don't want to be alive if everything that makes me who I am is stripped away. That person won't be me. I don't want to live like that, I can't. Could you?"

Zoro's jaw clenched at that.

"Please, you're the only one I can trust with this."

Zoro was silent for a long while.

"You're a selfish bastard for asking me this."

"I know."

Sanji waited silently as Zoro took another moment to think it over before he finally answered.

“Okay. If they change you tomorrow, and if there’s no way to bring you back to yourself, then I’ll kill you.”

Sanji decided not to comment on the added caveat.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, Curly. Because I’m making another promise to you too. If they take you away and I have to kill you because of them, then I don’t care how long it takes or how many times you’ve told me you don’t want it, I *will* kill them. Each and every one of them. I won’t stop until they’re all in the ground right beside you.”

Sanji heard that warning bell in his head again, the one that reminded him that this was his Zoro but also the Pirate Hunter, the Demon of the East. He didn’t bother responding to that with words. He knew nothing he said was going to sway the other man. He settled for pressing another kiss to his lips instead. Zoro reciprocated, a palpable air of desperation to the kiss. Sanji was briefly thrown before it suddenly hit him that this might be their last night together. If Stealth Black worked, then Sanji would be gone, spiritually if not physically.

“Zoro,” he whispered against his lips.

Zoro’s breath hitched slightly in reply. He used Zoro’s given name much more than the mosshead used Sanji’s, but it still gave the prince a sense of accomplishment to see how affected his swordsman could get by it.

“I need you,” he admitted.

Zoro gave him a smile in return. Not one of his challenging or teasing smirks, like he did during their spars. Nor one of his gloating grins when he thought he won one of their arguments. It was a genuine soft smile, one that made his eye fill with emotions that shook Sanji to his very core. Zoro leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to his lips before continuing to bestow a line of kisses onto his face, traveling towards his ear.

“I got you, Prettybrows. Told you I’d take care of you, I’m gonna keep my promise. Besides, you did so well tonight, you deserve whatever you need,” Zoro whispered.

Sanji shuddered at the praise as the man nipped at his ear, before sucking on the lobe lightly. He started kissing down Sanji’s neck, stopping to suck sections of his rapidly heating skin into his mouth and occasionally running his sharp teeth over the hot flesh. He felt Zoro’s hand rubbing up and down his sides before he started unbuttoning Sanji’s gold vest. The swordsman grumbled under his breath about the number of buttons, drawing an amused smirk from the prince. Sanji knew Zoro would tear the clothes separating them right off his body if Sanji allowed it. The moss had only succeeded in doing so once and Sanji’s ferocious kicks had ensured the brute never made that mistake again.

Eventually, he managed to undo the vest and then quickly tugged on the hem of Sanji’s white silk shirt beneath it, slipping it over his head and throwing it somewhere behind them, exposing Sanji’s bare chest to him.

Zoro’s eye raked over him hungrily, causing a blush to color the cook’s cheeks, traveling down his neck and upper chest.

“Gorgeous.”

Sanji went an even deeper shade of red then, Zoro’s compliments always having a visceral effect on him.

“You’re even prettier when you blush.”

Sanji’s heart thud in his chest and he felt a familiar tingling in his nose.

Damn it, Zoro usually had done more than just kiss him before he got a nosebleed. He looked down with embarrassment but Zoro’s hand on his chin made him look back up. Zoro stared him dead in his eye as his thumb swiped away the line of blood dripping from Sanji’s nose. He felt his jaw drop as he watched the other man bring his reddened finger to his lips and suck the blood off.

“God, you’re such an unhygienic brute,” Sanji insulted breathlessly, no heat or disgust managing to find its way to his words. Zoro smirked at him in reply.

“And you’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

Sanji actually had to clamp his mouth shut so a pathetic whimper didn’t escape his chest but that didn’t mean his body’s reaction wasn’t easy to read, not with the way Zoro’s eye flickered down to Sanji’s groin before his smirk grew wider.

Easy. Sanji was so easy.

“Looks like you got a problem there, Prettybrows. Want me to take care of that for you?”

Sanji wordlessly nodded.

“Uh-uh, I want to hear you. Come on, let that silly brain of yours rest and use that gorgeous mouth instead.”

Sanji’s cock twitched in response.

So depressingly easy.

Zoro leaned forward, not letting any part of his body touch Sanji’s besides his mouth. He started at Sanji’s nipples, a comment about how pretty and perfect they were falling from his lips before he rolled the bud around with his tongue, drawing a gasp from Sanji. He gave his other nipple the same treatment before he started kissing up his chest, stopping to suck the skin of his collarbone and his throat and his ears. He skipped his lips and pressed kisses to both cheeks, his nose, his visible eye, before he brushed Sanji’s hair out of his face, exposing the other side of it. He kissed that eye and then both eyebrows and his forehead before he pulled back and stared down at Sanji.

“Don’t know why you keep half your mug hidden, Cook. Not with a face like this. I’d burn kingdoms for your face.”

Sanji was certain there was a growing wet stain in his pants just from the swordsman’s words alone.

“Zoro, please. I need you,” Sanji begged, squirming in place but not moving closer, not until Zoro broke the invisible barrier between them.

“So, tell me what you want.”

“You have to do something, anything.”

“Way too vague, Cook. Try again.”

“I need you.”

“You said that already. Try again.”

Sanji growled in frustration then.

“Damn it, I want you to fuck me. Is that what you want to hear?”

A smirk spread across Zoro’s lips.

“There you go. Was that really so hard?”

Sanji glared at him in reply.

“Don’t worry. I’ll fuck you for as long as you need me to tonight. Fuck all those stupid silly thoughts right out of your head. Fuck you until you remember how perfect you are.”

Sanji’s heart practically sank to his stomach as both flared with desire and love.

“I hate you,” he hissed at the other man, trying to save some semblance of his dignity even though he knew it was a lost cause.

“Oh really? Well, I’d better fix that, huh?”

Before Sanji could blink, Zoro’s hands were on him. He pulled Sanji up and onto his lap, settling him over his groin and pulling him into a heated kiss.

Zoro had a habit of kissing like a man on a mission. His sole purpose seemed to be to consume every last drop of Sanji. Zoro practically inhaled him, biting and sucking and nibbling at his lips to the point where Sanji wondered if he was literally trying to devour him. He wondered if he would even mind if that were the case.

He shuddered feeling Zoro’s hardening cock under him as their lips continued to clash. He rocked his hips, grinding down against his hardness. Zoro’s hands went to his sides, his fingers tightening and clutching his waist.

“Tease,” he reprimanded, his voice slightly shaky.

Sanji smirked in return, feeling a bit of triumph at finally getting one over on the moss, though that didn’t last long as Zoro moved him so he was laying on the bed with the mosshead hovering over him. Sanji didn’t think he would’ve liked being manhandled so much if it were anyone besides Zoro.

Zoro went back to his nipples, not stopping until both were erect, wet and redder than they were pink. Sanji shivered as he blew on the sensitive skin before lavishing them with even more attention. He spread his thighs so that Zoro could fit between them, pressing their bodies flush against one another. Sanji felt a sense of safety at the reassuring weight on top of him. He knew Zoro had his back, would remain stalwart by his side for as long as Sanji wanted him there. That happened to be the rest of his life so it worked out just fine for them both.

His hands went to Zoro’s shoulders as the larger man started kissing down his chest, stopping to kiss his abs individually before he continued down to past his waist. He jumped slightly as he felt Zoro mouthing at his cock. A spike of frustration went through him at not having his mouth directly on him, his pants still acting as a barrier between them. That abruptly ceased to be a problem as Zoro pulled his pants down his legs, taking his underwear with it, before throwing it all behind him.

He found himself squirming in discomfort as Zoro sat back on his haunches and stared down at Sanji now that he was completely naked.

“Beautiful,” he said simply, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, like it was just a fact of life, like there was never any reason to doubt the veracity of that single word.

Sanji couldn’t hold back his whimper this time. He stopped his wriggling as Zoro placed his hands on Sanji’s knees, spreading his legs which had clamped up in his embarrassment, hiding him from Zoro’s gaze. He whimpered again as Zoro licked his lips, staring down at Sanji’s leaking cock with eyes hooded in desire.

“Gonna get you off first so you can last while I’m inside you.”

Sanji shuddered but nodded in agreement all the same. One of the few modifications that had stuck around thanks to all the experiments had been Sanji’s unnatural stamina and refractory period. It usually took a few climaxes before he was fully satisfied. It was something he had initially been embarrassed by but Zoro also had unnatural stamina and could keep up with him easily. They had gotten so attuned to each other by now that Zoro knew the best ways to make sure Sanji was thoroughly sated by the end of the night and not left wanting at all.

He found himself trembling as Zoro leaned down and pressed a kiss to his hips, moving horizontally until he was at his happy trail before he started making his way lower. His breath hitched in anticipation before he released it in a huff when Zoro completely skipped over his throbbing erection and began giving attention to his thighs.

“Tease,” Sanji reprimanded.

“Takes one to know one,” Zoro retorted before returning to his thighs.

“Mmm, so strong. Can’t wait to feel them squeezing around my waist when I’m inside you,” Zoro muttered between kisses and licks, massaging the thick corded muscles of Sanji’s powerful legs.

He blushed at the statement, feeling just as weak to compliments aimed at his strength as he was towards compliments aimed at his looks.

He jolted as Zoro’s hand finally went where he needed him, his fingers brushing against Sanji’s cock before the thick digits wrapped around him. He moaned in frustration after a moment as Zoro kept his touches light, a single finger running along a vein while his thumb languidly massaged the head. Sanji kicked him in the side admonishingly.

“Impatient bastard,” Zoro chuckled in reply.

“Shitty bastard,” Sanji snapped back.

“Pretty bastard,” the mosshead returned, causing another blush to color Sanji’s cheeks and for his annoyance to ebb.

Zoro smirked, clearly knowing the kind of effect he had on Sanji. God, he was a fool for letting this man have so much power over him. But then he thought of everything Zoro was willing to do for him, all he was willing to give up and shove aside for him and he wondered if it wasn’t the other way around. Zoro should know better than to let Sanji have so much say over his life. Zoro deserved so much better than him. Zoro deserved someone who was as strong as him, as brave as him, as kind and wonderful and loyal and beautiful as him. Zoro deserved someone who had no attachments that kept them from his side. He deserved someone who wasn’t worthless, useless, valueless.

He deserved more than a failure.

Sanji is utterly useless.

His value will always be diminished by his constancy of failures.

If he wasn’t so weak, he would’ve been able to fight us.

The failure’s half a woman himself.

He could never be suitable of bearing the title of prince, let alone the title of my son.

He will never live up to the Vinsmoke name.

Pudding didn’t want you.

She would’ve saved us the trouble if she just took him and killed him.

Who the hell would want the failure, let alone for life?

All the words his family had said around his brain, repeating themselves over and over again.

Zoro didn't see him, not the real him, not the him that his family saw. If Zoro truly knew what Sanji was, he'd never have fallen in love with him, he wouldn't want him, he wouldn't stay with him. Sanji was selfish for keeping him when he knew he'd never be enough. Zoro deserved—

"Oh shit," Sanji blurted out, his thoughts abruptly washed away by the hot wetness surrounding his cock.

He looked down at Zoro whose lips were wrapped around him, his eyes locked on Sanji, a look of admonishment clear in his eyes. He sucked the throbbing appendage, pulling his lips off with an obscene pop.

"You're getting lost in your stupid thoughts again. Whatever you're thinking, you're wrong."

"Zoro, you could do so much better than me. I'm not worth—"

"Don't you dare," the green-haired man snapped, narrowing his eye angrily at him.

"Don't finish that sentence. You're worth everything, you *are* everything to me. I love you. I love that you're kind, I love that you're strong, I love that you're an asshole sometimes and annoy the shit out of me, I love that you're brave, I love that you're passionate about cooking and I love that you dream of finding something no one's ever seen before. Meeting you made me feel more alive than I have in years, so don't you dare go telling me that you're not worthy of me. I'm the one who's not worthy of you."

Tears welled up in Sanji's eyes and he had to look away from the larger man, unable to withstand the steely conviction in Zoro's gaze.

"I should let you go. You shouldn't be in Germa. You belong out there, chasing your dream."

"As far as I'm concerned, I belong with you. Only let me go if you don't want me anymore, not because your family pumped your head full of bullshit that your dumb brain is making you think is true."

Tears slipped down the blonde's cheeks unbidden, his heart full of so many conflicting emotions.

"Look at me."

Sanji kept his eyes glued to the wall.

"Cook."

Sanji closed his eyes, biting his lips. He tasted the salty tears that had gathered there. He knew one look at Zoro would shatter him, it would shake his already rocky resistance to the other man's devotion. Sanji should be doing what's right and the right thing was to let Zoro go. He shouldn't have made him promise to kill him, he should've told him to leave tonight,

before Sanji was forced to take the Stealth Black serum. Zoro needed to be free, he deserved it and—

“Sanji.”

The blonde’s eyes flew open and he looked over at Zoro, wide-eyed at the use of his name, such a rare and sweet occurrence. Zoro’s face was a complicated mask of love, devotion, determination, defiance, anger and hurt. He still couldn’t wrap his head around being the source of so many passionate emotions in someone, let alone a man who Sanji was in love with.

“All I need to know is if you want me. Forget about what your mind is telling you or anything your family has said, do you still want me?”

“Yes,” he affirmed shakily.

“Then nothing else matters.”

“But what if—”

“*Sanji.*”

The blonde stopped again, a lance shot straight through his heart.

Once he figured out the origin of his name, he had developed complicated feelings around it, but with Zoro it was different. The way he said it, the emphasis he put into it, the emotion he imbued in the single word gave his name a totally different meaning. It made Sanji wonder if it was possible to say someone’s name and make it as if they didn’t even have one before that moment. Zoro would probably make fun of him if he told him that he felt that way sometimes when Zoro ever deigned to call him ‘Sanji’.

Sanji didn’t deserve him. Zoro could do so much better than him. Zoro was better than him in every conceivable way. However, for reasons Sanji couldn’t make himself believe, Zoro wanted *him*. Sanji would give him the world if it was in his power to do so, but all he asked for was Sanji. How could he deny him that much?

“Okay.”

Zoro held his gaze before he leaned up to press his lips to Sanji’s. The blonde wrapped his arms around the swordsman’s shoulders, pulling him close as they deepened the kiss. Sanji chased after him when Zoro pulled away, but the other man didn’t initiate another kiss.

“Gonna take you out of your head, make sure you stay in this room with me, not wherever your shitty thoughts are taking you,” Zoro promised before he began traveling down Sanji’s body again.

He watched Zoro kiss a path straight to his cock. This time, he didn’t hesitate to wrap his lips around the flagging erection, drawing a gasp from the blonde.

His mouth dropped open in a wordless moan as Zoro wasted no time lavishing attention on him, licking and sucking and swallowing around him. Sanji felt a thrill shoot through his veins as he watched the swordsman sucking him off. Watching Zoro do this always gave him an extra strain of pleasure. There was something different about the swordsman doing this, about his cock hitting the back of Zoro's throat, about Zoro of all people opening his mouth wider, inviting Sanji to use him.

He rocked his hips forward tentatively, not wanting to hurt him. That thought should be laughable after everything that had happened between them. He had seen Zoro do things that no ordinary man should be able to do, but as far as Sanji was concerned, there wasn't anything that existed beyond this room and Zoro's comfort mattered more to him than the other man's impenetrably reputation did.

Zoro moved Sanji's hand to rest upon his head, encouraging him to take what he wanted, and he stopped questioning it any further. He thrust his cock into the wetness of Zoro's mouth, moaning at the sensation. His fingers spasmed in his green hair, pushing him down on his length.

"Shit, fuck," he grunted when Zoro groaned around him.

He glanced down, unreasonably pleased and aroused at the image of Zoro, powerful, strong, stubborn Zoro, sucking his cock and enjoying it, letting Sanji use his mouth without hesitation. He had to put a hand over his own mouth to stifle the noises he was making, not wanting anyone who might be lurking nearby to hear him.

Zoro tapped his hand after a moment and Sanji reluctantly let him go, groaning when Zoro sucked hard as he pulled his mouth off him.

"Need lube," he explained, his voice raspy as he leaned over to Sanji's drawer and pulled out the small jar of oil he kept there for these purposes.

Zoro made quick work of the jar, coating his hand in the oil before his fingers went to Sanji's balls, massaging them in his grasp. Sanji smothered a groan in his palm before his hand was unceremoniously ripped from his face.

"Wanna hear you, Cook."

"Someone might hear us," Sanji returned.

"Let them. You moan so pretty for me."

Sanji's face was immediately overtaken by a blush at the unexpected comment.

"Mo— fuck!"

Sanji couldn't hold in the loud exclamation as Zoro bent down to lick a long, deliberate stroke over his asshole. The sensation hit him like lightning, wet heat and pressure in a place no one had ever touched before. He shuddered violently, his thighs trembling on either side of Zoro's head.

They'd never done that before. Sanji had never even thought that was something someone would *want* to do. The idea that Zoro would put his mouth *there*, would want to taste him in such an intimate way, it made something hot and uncomfortable twist in his chest.

“Moss,” he asked, his voice coming out higher than intended and reflecting his uncertainty.

Zoro pulled back just enough to meet his eyes, his expression serious despite the flush on his cheeks.

“Trust me. I’ve got you.”

Sanji breathed deeply, trying to identify where this sudden fear came from. He wasn't exactly modest when it came to the bedroom. Hell, he'd let Zoro fuck him six ways to Sunday without hesitation. Still, something about this particular act seemed more intimate than he'd thought it would be. More vulnerable and exposed.

It was one thing to let Zoro inside him, to feel him moving inside him, claiming him. But this? Having Zoro's face buried between his cheeks, his tongue on the most private part of him? That felt like surrendering something he hadn't known he was still holding back.

What if Zoro didn't actually like it? What if he was just doing this because he thought Sanji wanted it? What if—

"Can I?" Zoro asked, obviously sensing Sanji's internal battle. His voice was gentle, patient. One calloused hand stroked soothingly along Sanji's inner thigh.

Sanji thought it over, his heart hammering against his ribs. Zoro's eye was dark with want, his breathing heavy. He didn't look disgusted or reluctant. He looked... hungry. Like he genuinely wanted this, wanted to taste Sanji everywhere, wanted to claim every inch of him.

Sanji nodded slowly, not trusting his voice.

Zoro kept his gaze locked on him as he lowered his mouth between Sanji’s cheeks and licked a long stroke once more. He couldn’t help the shiver that left him as he watched Zoro close his eyes in clear pleasure. Zoro’s tongue eventually localized on his hole and Sanji could feel him pressing kisses and sucking at the ring of muscles between stripes of wet heat. He leaned back against the bed as the sensation of Zoro’s mouth started to cause his cock to pulsate almost painfully with need. He couldn’t stop the embarrassingly high-pitched whimper that left him when Zoro’s tongue pushed into him. Thankfully, Zoro couldn’t say anything about it with his mouth busy. He swirled his tongue around inside of him while simultaneously sucking at him.

Sanji’s legs started to tremble as he kept them as still as he could, not wanting to risk crushing Zoro’s head between his thighs. He bit his lips, trying to keep any noise from being released despite Zoro’s words about how pretty his moaning was. He felt precum leaking out of his cock just thinking about that. Zoro liked hearing him. Zoro thought his pathetic moaning and whimpering and whining was pretty.

Damn it, no. Sanji might be easy but he wasn't that damn easy. He could hold out. It would be the end of them both if anyone heard them, no matter how pretty Zoro thought he sounded.

Eventually, Sanji felt a slick finger stroking his hole alongside Zoro's tongue. He waited with anticipation to feel his finger enter him but instead he just circled the digit around Sanji's ass before he began ghosting it up and down his length. Sanji held back a whine at Zoro's teasing. He reached down himself, intent on jerking off but Zoro smacked his hand away without even looking. Sanji groaned loudly in frustration and felt Zoro grin against his ass.

"Shitty moss, would you just— shit!" Sanji exclaimed, unable to control his mouth momentarily as Zoro switched gears fast as lightning.

Suddenly, his mouth was on Sanji's cock again and the hand on his balls was massaging him with even more intent. He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood as he tried to ward off the sounds that wanted nothing more than to rip out of his chest. Zoro was relentless. He sucked Sanji's length hard, hollowing his cheeks as he unabashedly bobbed his head up and down. He pulled up so it was just the head of his cock still in his mouth and began to suck at the sensitive appendage.

Sanji slapped a hand over his mouth to lessen the volume of the noises coming out. Zoro dipped his head low on him, taking all of him into his mouth and began swallowing around him as his thumb rubbed circles into his balls. His other hand moved back to Sanji's entrance and started stroking over his hole. If Zoro let his fingers slip inside of him that would be it, Sanji wouldn't be able to stop screaming once he started.

Just as he thought that, one of Zoro's fingers pushed into him. Sanji quickly grabbed the pillow beside him and pressed it onto his face to muffle the noises he was sure to start making soon enough. Zoro grabbed the pillow and threw it across the room. Sanji growled and stuffed his fist into his mouth, trying to stay quiet. Zoro began circling his thumb with a firmer touch on his balls and sucked him off in earnest as his fingers, now two, went deep inside of him and began brushing against his prostate. Sanji moaned loudly around his fist. He couldn't hold it in anymore, couldn't hold back, not when Zoro was overwhelming him this way. He dropped his hand to the sheets and bunched them up tightly, letting all the moans and whimpers and screams and sighs Zoro longed to hear fall past his lips. Zoro hummed with satisfaction around him, the noise shooting through Sanji's cock into his belly.

He found himself thrusting as much as he could into the heat of Zoro's mouth while also trying his hardest to grind against the fingers inside of him, the dual sources of pleasure tearing him apart.

"Zoro, I can't— I'm close."

The swordsman hummed around his cock, sending another wave of pleasure coursing through him. He started thrusting his fingers hard and fast into his fluttering hole, a stream of groans leaving his lips and vibrating around Sanji's cock. He moved his hand off Sanji's balls and moved them to his nipples, rolling the erect buds between his hot, slick fingers. His whole body jerked as Zoro brushed against his prostate once more before he felt his stomach tighten. His orgasm hit him with the force of a tsunami, his breath getting trapped his lungs

and his body seizing up as his cock pulsed into Zoro's mouth. A filthy moan left his lips as Zoro started sucking the cum right out of him, swallowing down all of it until there was nothing left. He pulled off of Sanji's still semi-hard cock and kissed his way back up his body.

"You taste good, Cook."

Sanji whined in reply.

"You can't just say things like that to me, asshole."

"Why the hell not? It's true," Zoro responded absentmindedly as he contented himself with pressing kisses to Sanji's collarbone and neck. Sanji let his fingers sink into Zoro's deceptively soft green locks and dragged the man's face up to his own. He could taste himself on Zoro's lips, something he had long since stopped finding even a little bit gross. If the trade off was kissing Zoro, then he didn't give a damn where his lips had been.

He allowed his lips to fall open as he felt his tongue swiping across them, letting Zoro devour him completely. They lost themselves in the kiss for a few long minutes, Sanji's body coming down from his first climax of the night before he pulled back and looked up into Zoro's hooded eye. Arousal had made the silver orb appear completely black and they were laser-focused on Sanji and Sanji only. A shiver went down his spine at being the center of attention for a man who could exhibit focus so singular that it had earned him the pseudonym of Demon.

"I want to hear you too. I want to taste you too, please," Sanji requested.

Zoro gave him a sweet smile in return.

"Whatever you want."

Sanji felt his insides tremble at the truth-laden words. Zoro really would give him anything he wanted as long as it was in his power to do so. Hell, even if it wasn't, the idiot would still try. Sanji really didn't know what he did to deserve him.

The two of them switched positions, shuffling around until Zoro was finally divested of his clothes and was sitting on the edge of the bed with Sanji kneeling between his legs. He took a moment to admire his lover's physique. Zoro had more muscle than most men in Germa courtesy of his ridiculous workout routine. Though Sanji tended to make fun of all the nonsensical things he did in the name of training, it certainly hadn't hurt him in the looks department.

"Like what you see, Curly," Zoro asked, a smirk evident in his voice.

"S'alright, I guess. All that photosynthesizing has been good for something," Sanji replied, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a compliment.

Zoro barked a laugh in reply, a rare sound that warmed Sanji all the way down to his toes.

He turned his attention to Zoro's erect member then. He was dripping precum, just from his actions on Sanji. Zoro very rarely prioritized his pleasure over Sanji's. He seemed content with taking Sanji apart, giving him as many orgasms as he could stand and only worrying about himself once that task was done, even if it took hours for Sanji to finally be spent. He had to make it very clear to the idiot that he got pleasure from giving Zoro pleasure just as much as Zoro got pleasure from pleasuring Sanji. Even now, Zoro would still walk away after taking Sanji over the edge without having his own orgasm if Sanji didn't press him. With that in mind, he set on the man with a singular goal, knowing full well Zoro would be rearing to go again just as quickly as Sanji would be.

He leaned forward without a second thought, closing his mouth around Zoro's cock.

"Shit, Cook, warn a guy, would you," Zoro rebuked breathlessly.

Sanji would've smirked at his reaction if he could. He sunk his mouth down onto Zoro's hard length, soaking in the taste of him, the smell of him, the feel of him surrounding him, enveloping him and nearly overwhelming him completely. He began sucking exclusively on the head of his cock, revenge for earlier.

"Fuck, your mouth feels good. Like it was made just for me."

Sanji practically purred at the praise, feeling Zoro convulse slightly as the noise vibrated around his cock.

Sanji sunk back down and began bobbing his head and sucking intermittently, his hand stroking what his mouth couldn't reach. He established a rhythm, alternating between deep, slow movements and quicker, teasing flicks of his tongue along the sensitive underside. Zoro was squirming underneath him, gripping the sheets tightly in his fists, his knuckles turning white as praises poured out of his mouth in a breathless stream.

"So wet, so hot, so fucking perfect. Look at how good you're taking me. Such a good boy."

Sanji gave a full body shudder at that, his eyes fluttering closed as heat pooled in his belly. His body relaxed automatically at the praise, enough so that he found himself able to take all of Zoro's significant length, feeling it overwhelming his throat as he pushed himself further. The stretch was intense, almost too much, but he craved it. He stayed as relaxed as he could manage, controlling his breathing through his nose even when it got hard to breathe, taking all his length and swallowing around it deliberately to give him as much pleasure as he could. He could feel Zoro's thighs trembling on either side of him, could hear the way his breathing had become ragged and uneven.

"Fuck, Cook!"

He could tell the exact moment Zoro was going to come, reading the telltale signs with practiced precision. His compliments started getting raspier, the words becoming rougher and more fragmented as they left his lips. Zoro's body was starting to tense up beneath him, muscles coiling tight like springs ready to release. Every fiber seemed to be drawing inward, building toward that inevitable peak. He went completely rigid suddenly, his entire frame locking up in that perfect moment of release before Sanji felt his mouth starting to fill. The

warmth spread across his tongue as he swallowed thickly, working to take all that he could down his throat, determined not to waste a single drop.He could feel a few drops sliding down his chin, but he focused on licking Zoro clean before he pulled off and wiped a finger across his face. He considered the thick white substance for a moment before licking his fingers clean. He glanced up as Zoro made a choking sound. He was watching Sanji, his eye blown wide with arousal. He smiled at his dumbstruck expression before he stuck his tongue out and teasingly licked up the throbbing vein on Zoro's still half hard member and sucked at the head, knowing it would take the swordsman at least two more go arounds before it started to hurt but he would still be sensitive.

"Curly, you're going to kill me one of these days."

Sanji sucked harder, enjoying Zoro's prolonged groan before giving him a break and crawling into his lap instead to press a kiss to his lips.

"Stop whining. You've done a lot worse to me plenty of times."

Zoro flipped them and kissed him hard, pressing him into the mattress. Sanji pulled back and looked down where Zoro was... yup, he was hard again.

"Are you serious?"

"What? You can't keep up."

Sanji raised an eyebrow at that and reached down but Zoro grabbed both of his hands and pinned them above his head.

"I know all your tricks by now, Cook. Said I wanted to take care of you, not the other way around."

"I want you to feel good too. It's not fun if you don't."

"I feel good when I make you feel good."

"Well, so do I."

"Anyone ever tell you how stubborn you are?"

"Just some shitty swordsman but he can't find his way out of a paper bag so I wouldn't take him too seriously."

Zoro looked down at him, a challenge in his eyes, before he leaned down to press a slow kiss to his lips, one that was no less heated than any other kiss they'd shared that night. Still, it made an intense shiver go down his spine.

"Looks like that shitty swordsman is good for something, huh," Zoro murmured against his lips.

"I don't know about that. I seem to remember you saying something about fucking me, Moss, yet here we are," Sanji pointed out, his voice husky and lower than normal.

“You want me, Cook, you just have to ask.”

Sanji wrapped his arms around Zoro’s shoulders, his touch soft and loving, knowing full well that Zoro liked that just as much if not more than he liked to have Sanji’s strong legs wrapped around him or his nails digging into his biceps.

“I want you inside of me,” he said, looking Zoro dead in the eye. The man above him trembled a little at that but wordlessly nodded and pressed another kiss to his lips before retrieving the jar of oil from atop the bedside dresser.

He coated his fingers in the liquid before bringing them to Sanji’s entrance. He swirled his fingers around the tight muscles, spreading the oil all around his hole.

Sanji swatted at him for teasing him, but Zoro caught the fingers in his free hand, pulling the digits to his lips and pressing a kiss to each finger individually. Sanji’s breath hitched as his tongue laved between each one before he pressed kisses to the knuckles and his palm.

“Didn’t know hands could be pretty until I saw yours.”

Sanji blushed and felt a hint of pride. He took extreme care with his hands just like Zeff taught him, seeing them as his treasures since they allowed him to fulfill his passion. Zoro was always as careful with them.

Sanji was so focused on the way Zoro was lavishing his hand with attention—kissing each knuckle, dragging his tongue along the sensitive webbing between his fingers—that he was surprised when he slipped his finger into him, smoothly sliding into the already partly loose hole. The intrusion was gentle but deliberate, and Sanji’s breath hitched at the sudden fullness. Zoro drew it out slowly, teasingly, before thrusting back in with two fingers this time, stretching him more insistently. Sanji practically melted under him as he spread his legs wider, opening himself up completely, allowing Zoro’s fingers to slip in a little deeper into him. He started rolling his hips desperately, trying to fuck himself onto his fingers, chasing the friction and pressure he craved.

“Damn, you have no idea how fucking beautiful you look right now,” Zoro murmured, his voice rough with desire as he watched Sanji writhe beneath him.

Sanji whined as he felt his cock dribbling precum onto his stomach, the sticky fluid pooling in the hollow there, both at the feeling of Zoro’s fingers scissoring inside him and at the words. The praise sent heat flooding through his body, making him feel exposed and wanted all at once. A gust of air left his lungs as Zoro grabbed one of his legs firmly and bent it, pressing it to Sanji’s chest and folding him nearly in half. He wordlessly held onto his own knee, fingers digging into his skin, exposing himself completely to Zoro as the man added a third finger inside of him, the stretch bordering on overwhelming.

Sanji groaned at the delicious stretch, his rim burning slightly as it accommodated the additional digit, doing his best to move his hips even though the new position made it more difficult. His movements were restricted now, limited to small, desperate grinds. Zoro started thrusting his fingers deeper and harder then, curling them just right, drawing mewls and other appreciative sounds from Sanji’s lips—breathy gasps, broken moans, and needy whimpers

that he couldn’t suppress. A pathetic sound escaped him when Zoro pressed a soft kiss to his knee and anywhere else he could reach on the leg that Sanji was holding, the tender gesture contrasting beautifully with the aggressive pace of his fingers.

His whole body shook when Zoro’s fingers brushed up against his prostate, the bundle of nerves sending bolts of electricity running through him, lighting up every nerve ending. His back arched off the bed involuntarily, and his grip on his knee tightened as pleasure crashed over him in waves. Zoro’s lip quirked up at his reaction, clearly pleased with himself for reducing Sanji to such a trembling, desperate mess.

“There we go. Look at how ready you are for me, your body’s practically sucking me in.”

“Then fuck me already,” Sanji demanded, past the point of embarrassment and firmly in too-horny-to-give-a-damn territory.

“Haven’t gotten my fill of you yet, Cook.”

Sanji growled at that, a low, frustrated sound rumbling in his chest as he let go of his knee so he could kick Zoro. The bastard had that infuriating smirk on his face again. The man allowed the leg to meet his ribs with a solid thump, barely even flinching at the impact, before he wrapped his calloused hand firmly around Sanji’s foot and threw his leg over his shoulder in one smooth, practiced motion. He pushed the other leg further up on the bed, spreading him wider and pinning him more completely beneath his weight before he started thrusting his fingers into him in earnest, curling and scissoring them with deliberate precision that made Sanji’s breath catch in his throat.

Sanji’s mouth dropped open at the overwhelming sensation.

“Shit, fuck, Zoro! I can’t— fuck,” he babbled incoherently between harsh breaths and lustful moans.

“Love when you fall apart for me, Cook. Bet you could come on my fingers right now and still be ready to come on my cock again later, huh?”

Sanji could do nothing but whimper pathetically in reply, his voice catching in his throat. His body felt like a coiled spring wound impossibly tight, ready to snap at any moment. His cock was drooling steadily onto his stomach, leaving a sticky trail that only added to the overwhelming sensations coursing through him. Sweat was dripping down his flushed face, matting his blonde hair to his forehead. His heart was galloping wildly in his chest like a racehorse in the final stretch. His head was abuzz, completely foggy, filled with nothing beyond desperate, needy thoughts of Zoro and how badly he needed him—needed his touch, his weight, his everything.

All the while, Zoro’s thick fingers kept alternating their maddening rhythm between brushing teasingly against his sensitive walls and hitting his prostate dead on with devastating precision. Each direct hit sent sparks of white-hot pleasure shooting up his spine, making his toes curl and his breath hitch. Zoro was absolutely right—Sanji could come just from this, just from the relentless assault of those calloused fingers working him open. He felt tantalizingly, frustratingly close to it, teetering right on that knife’s edge. He almost wanted to

beg for it, to plead and whimper for release because he needed it so desperately it hurt. But there was also the intoxicating promise of Zoro's cock inside of him instead, stretching him full and complete, and god, he needed that just as badly—maybe even more. The war between immediate gratification and waiting for something even better was tearing him apart. Zoro's fingers curled purposefully then, pressing hard against that bundle of nerves, and Sanji's rapidly fraying patience finally snapped completely.

"Zoro, *please*. I need you inside of me. I want you to fuck me so hard, I still feel it tomorrow. I want to feel you in every part of me. I want to feel you filling me up. I want to come on your cock. I want you to come inside of me. I can't take it anymore. Please, please, just fuck me," Sanji begged, throwing a hand over his face as his eyes stung with tears from the stimulation.

Zoro pulled his hand away from his face before pressing a kiss just below Sanji's visible eye.

"You have no idea how hot it is when you tell me what you want. Don't worry, Prettybrows, I've got you."

Sanji felt bereft as Zoro briefly withdrew from him, dipping his fingers back in the oil jar so he could spread the liquid on his erect cock. Sanji watched Zoro's hand moving on himself intently, his mouth watering and his eyes dark with lust.

When Zoro was satisfied that he was slick enough, he pushed Sanji flat on his back again before he grabbed both his legs. Sanji wrapped them around his waist with no prompting and leaned up into the kiss Zoro pressed against his lips, tilting his head to deepen it and allow their tongues to brush against one another's. His stomach jumped as he felt Zoro's member brushing against his quivering hole, anticipation curling in his gut.

When Zoro finally pressed into him, Sanji was immediately overtaken by a heady, overwhelming feeling that consumed every inch of his being. Zoro was so thick and big and he was filling him up completely, stretching him in ways that made his breath catch in his throat. He was hot and heavy and all Sanji could feel was him, all he could taste, see, think, breathe was Zoro. His name echoed in Sanji's mind like a mantra, drowning out everything else. His walls clenched around him instinctively, greedily drawing him in deeper as he bottomed out. The fullness was intoxicating, bordering on too much but somehow exactly what he needed. Zoro shifted a bit, adjusting inside of him and searching for a more comfortable angle, but that tiny movement—that single roll of his hips—was all it took to finally send Sanji careening over the edge.

He tensed up, every muscle in his body going rigid as his second orgasm hit him like a sea train at full speed, completely unexpected and utterly devastating. His vision went white as pleasure crashed through him in relentless waves, splattering across his and Zoro's chest in hot streaks.

"Fuck… did you just…"

Sanji felt his cheeks redden in embarrassment, the heat spreading down his neck and across his shoulders. He couldn't even look Zoro in the eye. He really came just from Zoro pushing

into him. Just from that. Easy, he was fucking easy. Pathetic, even. What would Zoro think of him now?

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my whole life. Fuck, I love you,” Zoro growled, pulling him into a heated kiss. Sanji reciprocated, letting his body come down from the high.

They settled for kissing for a while, mouths moving together in a lazy, unhurried rhythm, allowing some time to pass and letting the intensity between them ease into something softer and more tender, before he nodded against Zoro’s forehead. Zoro arranged his legs again, hooking them more securely around his waist, before he started moving inside of him with careful, measured thrusts. Sanji hissed a little, still sensitive and oversensitive after his orgasm, every nerve ending feeling raw and exposed. Zoro pressed a placating kiss to his temple, then another to his cheekbone, and kept his movements slow and gentle but deliberate, each roll of his hips intentional and full of affection. It felt so nice and sweet, so different from their usual frantic coupling, that Sanji’s heart constricted painfully in his chest, tears burning hot and insistent behind his eyes again.

But no, he was not going to embarrass himself further by crying just because Zoro was making love to him—actually making love to him, treating him like he was something precious and worth cherishing. Sanji started rolling his hips up just as languidly, matching Zoro’s unhurried pace, enjoying the softness of it all, the overwhelming care and gentleness that Zoro was treating him with. He got lost in it completely, surrendering to the sensation, the room filled with nothing but satisfied moans, breathless huffs, whispered names and love-soaked murmurs that neither of them would probably remember clearly in the morning.

“Zoro, faster,” Sanji asked.

Zoro wordlessly sped up, rolling his hips into him at a more urgent pace. Sanji pressed his heels into the small of his back, wordlessly urging him on, feeling the flex of Zoro’s muscles beneath his legs with each powerful thrust. He groaned as Zoro started snapping his hips into him, thrusting harder, the change in tempo making his breath catch in his throat.

“Yes, like that. Feels so good,” he moaned, his voice breaking on the last word.

“You too, Cook. Like you were made for my cock, taking me so well.”

Sanji ate up the praise with a moan, shifting so Zoro slipped even deeper into him. The angle sent sparks of pleasure racing up his spine, and he could feel every ridge and vein of Zoro’s cock dragging against his sensitive walls.

“Ugh, Zoro. I can feel you in my stomach, it’s so fucking deep.”

The words tumbled out before Sanji could stop them, raw and honest and probably too revealing. He felt Zoro’s rhythm falter, felt the way his breath hitched, and then suddenly Zoro stopped thrusting into him entirely. Sanji whined at the loss of movement, his body clenching around Zoro’s cock in protest. He opened his eyes and looked up at the man who was staring down at him with a wide, wild eye, his pupil blown so dark there was barely any gray left visible.

The intensity of that gaze made Sanji's heart stutter in his chest. Then Zoro suddenly pulled out nearly completely—just the thick head of his cock still stretching Sanji's rim—and thrust back into him hard and deep, burying himself to the hilt in one brutal stroke. Sanji felt like all the air was punched out of him, his back arching off the bed as Zoro continued in that vein, fucking him as hard as Sanji had begged him for earlier.

"Shitty fucking Cook, saying things like that to me, don't know what you're doing to me, driving me crazy," Zoro was ranting mostly to himself as he continued the onslaught, each word punctuated by another devastating thrust.

Sanji could do nothing but lay back and take it, his fingers trembling on the bed by his side, clutching uselessly at the sheets. The force of Zoro's thrusts was making his whole body shift up the mattress, and he felt utterly wrecked, completely at Zoro's mercy. His cock was hard again—impossibly, painfully hard—slapping against his stomach with each impact of Zoro's hips against his ass.

Zoro captured the shaking hand in his own, intertwining their fingers and pinning it to the bed beside Sanji's head as he continued fucking him with long deep thrusts. The gesture was so tender, so at odds with the brutal pace, that Sanji felt his throat tighten with emotion. Their palms pressed together, fingers laced, and Sanji squeezed tight, needing that anchor, that connection.

Sanji could feel another orgasm building in his gut and whimpered at the feeling, so close to his previous one. It seemed impossible—he'd already come twice, his body was wrung out and oversensitive—but Zoro was relentless, hitting that spot inside him with devastating precision. Zoro was going to be the death of him, he was certain. He'd die here in this bed, fucked apart by his swordsman, and he couldn't think of a better way to go.

"*Zoro*," he pled desperately, not even sure what he was asking for anymore. More? Less? Everything?

"You close again, Curls?" Zoro's voice was rough, strained with his own pleasure, but there was something almost awed in it too.

Sanji nodded frantically, squeezing Zoro's fingers as he felt his walls fluttering around the hard cock spearing him in two. His rim was burning, stretched so wide around Zoro's girth, and every thrust sent shockwaves of pleasure-pain through his body. Sanji's free hand twitched towards his aching cock, desperate for friction, but Zoro was quick to order him otherwise.

"No touching. Want you to come on my cock again."

Sanji whined wordlessly in reply, his hand falling back to the bed. The denial made his cock throb, precome leaking steadily from the tip to pool on his stomach.

"I know you can do it, Cook. You're so hot and tight for me. Perfect. So fucking perfect."

Sanji couldn't even react to all the words of praise pouring from Zoro's lips anymore, he was lost to the sensations of his cock inside of him, his body pressed against him, his rumbling

voice flooding his mind so nothing existed outside of this room, nothing mattered but Zoro. The weight of him, the heat of him, the way he filled Sanji so completely—it was everything, it was too much, it wasn't enough.

Sanji's eyes started rolling to the back of his head when Zoro shifted to hit his sweet spot dead on, his orgasm enticingly imminent. His prostate was so sensitive now, swollen from the constant stimulation, and each thrust against it sent white-hot pleasure shooting through his veins.

"M'gonna come inside you after you've peaked. Then I'm gonna fuck you again until we both can't stand it anymore." Zoro's voice was a dark promise in his ear, sending shivers down Sanji's spine.

Sanji moaned breathlessly in reply, the sound high and desperate.

"You want that?" Zoro asked, his thrusts never faltering, his eye boring into Sanji's.

The blonde prince nodded in reply, unable to form words. Yes, he wanted that. He wanted everything Zoro would give him, wanted to be used and filled and claimed until there was no doubt who he belonged to.

"Then come for me, Sanji."

It was hearing his name from Zoro's lips again that finally sent him over the edge, his vision whiting out as he came hard, like he hadn't already two times before. His whole body shook and convulsed, trying to fold in on himself as pleasure shot through him almost painfully. His cock pulsed, painting his chest and stomach with streaks of white, and his ass clenched rhythmically around Zoro's cock, trying to pull him deeper. Zoro fucked him through it, not stopping even when Sanji tried to squirm away from the overstimulation, holding him in place with his weight and strength.

"I'm close, Cook," Zoro grunted, his rhythm becoming erratic.

He instinctively clenched his ass around Zoro's cock, wanting to keep him there, wanting to feel him come apart inside him, ignoring how his sensitive muscles spasmed at the action. The overstimulation was bordering on painful now, every nerve ending screaming, but Sanji didn't care. He wanted to give Zoro this, wanted to be good for him.

Sanji whined in protest when he felt Zoro pull out of him, the sudden emptiness making him feel bereft, but then gasped when he was abruptly flipped onto his stomach. His arms were too weak to hold himself up, so he just collapsed face-first into the pillow, his ass in the air. Zoro pressed himself against his back, blanketing him with his body, and lined his cock up to his entrance before pushing back inside of him. The blonde's mouth dropped open in a silent moan at yet another delicious angle, feeling Zoro somehow even deeper like this.

Zoro didn't build up this time, he fucked him rough and deep, drawing loud exclamations and choked off sobs from Sanji. The new position had Zoro's cock dragging against his prostate with every thrust, and Sanji's hands scrabbled uselessly at the sheets, trying to find purchase, trying to ground himself.

“Is it good,” he grunted into his ear, his breath hot against Sanji’s neck.

“It’s so good. Zoro, don’t stop. Please, please, please.” Sanji was babbling now, beyond shame, beyond pride. He was just a mess of sensation and need.

“I’ll give you as much as you want, Cook. Won’t stop until you want me to. Gonna give you what you deserve.”

Sanji turned his head, meeting Zoro’s gaze as he loomed behind him, his soft eye antithetical to his harsh thrusts. There was so much emotion there—desire, yes, but also something deeper, something that made Sanji’s chest ache. The green-haired man dropped a tender kiss to the top of his head and Sanji closed his eyes against the softness of it, feeling tears prick at his lashes again.

Zoro renewed his efforts, thrusting deep, one hand gripping Sanji’s hip hard enough to bruise while the other braced beside his head. Every part of Sanji was sensitive and overstimulated. Zoro’s actions verged on painful but he didn’t want it to stop. This was what he needed—to be overwhelmed, to be consumed, to forget everything but this moment.

“Sanji, I’m going to—” Zoro’s voice was strained, his control fraying.

“Inside me. Please, I need to feel you.” Sanji’s voice was wrecked, barely more than a rasp.

Zoro groaned in response and started murmuring in his native East dialect, words Sanji couldn’t understand but was sure were probably just as intelligent as anything his own pleasure-addled mind could think up. His accent curled through the words and hit Sanji’s ear pleasingly, the rough consonants and rolling vowels sending pleasant shivers down his spine. He’d probably come again just from that if he was physically able to.

He started thrusting back against Zoro, meeting him thrust for thrust despite his exhaustion, letting out a filth-laced litany of encouragements for him to come inside of him, to give him everything he had, to fill him up, to mark him, to make him his. Zoro stiffened above him before letting out a drawn-out groan, the sound reverberating through Sanji’s body.

Sanji moaned when he felt Zoro’s cock pulsing into him, the hot liquid filling him up, painting his insides. It felt obscene and perfect and right. It made an obscene squelching sound fill the room as Zoro fucked his cum deeper into him, each thrust pushing it further inside, before his thrusts gradually slowed down and his hips finally stuttered to a stop.

Sanji heaved out a breath as Zoro settled on top of him, his full weight pressing him into the mattress. He was entirely too damn heavy, but he made no effort to move. Their bodies were sticky with sweat and cum—Sanji’s release smeared between them, Zoro’s leaking out around his softening cock—and Zoro’s cock was softening inside of him and that wouldn’t be fun on his sensitive body when he pulled out, his weight was practically crushing his lungs, but Sanji didn’t care. He wanted all of Zoro. Wanted to feel him, to be surrounded by him, to be held by him.

“Your face is really hot when you come,” Zoro murmured unprompted into his ear.

Sanji jolted a little and then smacked the idiot upside the head.

“You can’t say things like that to me!”

“Why not? I’ve been saying them to you all night, you’ve liked it well enough. Don’t get shy on me now, not when my cock is still inside of your ass. I think we’re past embarrassment, shit cook.”

Sanji blushed at the words, shifting slightly and feeling said cock brushing against his sensitive insides.

“Gonna take a nap before we go again,” Zoro murmured sleepily.

“Oi! Don’t fall asleep on top of me, you’re going to suffocate me. And at least clean up first.”

“Why? We’re just going to get dirty again. I meant what I said about fucking you again tonight,” Zoro replied shamelessly, shifting them so they were laying on their sides.

“Incorrigible bastard,” Sanji muttered reproachfully, though he notably didn’t protest Zoro’s words.

“You like it,” the mosshead retorted.

“You planning to take that thing out of me any time soon,” he asked, noting that Zoro made sure his cock didn’t slip out as he moved them.

“Nah, gonna wake you up with it later.”

“Pervert,” Sanji hissed in reply, before kicking Zoro’s side and then promptly flinching as it caused Zoro’s cock to once against brush against his overstimulated sweet spot.

Zoro chuckled at that before carefully extracting himself from Sanji, pressing a kiss to his head as the blonde cringed at the action.

“Take a break, pillow princess. I’ll be right back.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one who just got their brains fucked out and came three times in a single hour, asshole,” Sanji snapped back acerbically, shifting around until he found a comfortable position.

His body felt like it had gone 10 rounds of grueling training but there was also a pleasant buzz still hanging over him and his thoughts were mercifully calm and hazy. None of the things he was worried about seemed able to penetrate the fog of pleasure and fatigue that he and Zoro’s lovemaking had created.

He closed his eyes, riding the high of his afterglow. He was so deep in his haze that he was startled when he felt a warm cloth running over his body. He wordlessly allowed Zoro to clean him up. Left to that brute, they’d both fall asleep covered in various bodily fluids, but Sanji would be damned before he let that happen.

Zoro went away briefly before slipping back into the bed beside him, pulling Sanji close so he was cuddled against his chest. He threw an arm around his waist, nuzzling into Zoro's neck.

The two laid pressed together, basking in the other's presence. Sanji wanted this moment to last forever.

Except it wouldn't, because the morning would inevitably come and his life was going to change as he knew it tomorrow.

He felt tears welling up in his eyes as he ruminated on the unfairness of it all. His life was a series of soul-crushing events designed to show him just how worthless he was in the grand scheme of the world. He had resigned himself to going to his grave being nothing more than what he had always been: Judge's greatest shame, Germa's unwanted prince, Reiju's useless burden, the idiot trio's punching bag, Sora's wasted sacrifice, Zeff's worst mistake. He didn't imagine that he would become anything more than that to anyone else. He couldn't account for Zoro showing up in his life. He still didn't know how he became the man that captured the heart of the Demon of the East Blue, but of all the things he had ever been, he wanted to go to his grave clinging to that.

"Sanji?" Zoro asked, pulling back slightly to look at his face.

Zoro's lips pursed unhappily when he saw the tears silently making their way down his cheeks. He opened his mouth to speak but Sanji shook his head before leaning in and pressing a kiss to his lips, pouring as much of himself as he could into it.

"I love you," he muttered against Zoro's slack mouth.

"I love you too," Zoro responded almost immediately.

The two were silent for a while before Zoro hesitantly began to speak.

"Sanji, we—"

"Can you just hold me tonight, please?"

Zoro sighed in reply before nodding.

"Anything you want."

The two maneuvered again until Zoro's chest was pressed up against Sanji's back, his muscular arm wrapped around Sanji's waist and holding him tightly.

"It's going to be okay. I'm going to figure this out for us," Zoro promised softly.

Sanji let out a wet sigh at that. Zoro wasn't the type to make empty promises or platitudes, so he knew the man believed his words but Sanji knew better that it was a useless vow to make.

He didn't bother telling Zoro as much. There was no use dwelling on it anymore. This night was for him and Zoro, they were the only ones that mattered, not Judge, not Reiju, not his

brothers, not the scientists, just the two of them. Sanji was going to hold on to that as long as he was able.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Zoro puts a plan in motion with some help.

Zoro had never belonged anywhere in his life. He had places where he existed or places where he needed to be. For the most part, he had simply existed in Shimotsuki. He had no family, no friends, no home. Most people didn't even know he was around before he made a splash fighting Kuina 2000 times and never beating her. He did a lot of existing in the East, not a lot of living, definitely no belonging.

He needed to be at Isshin Dojo for training (and for food) but he didn't belong. He needed to be on the road with Johnny and Yosaku because he needed to gain real-world experience before he could fight Mihawk, but he didn't really belong with them either. He needed money to travel to the Grand Line where Mihawk was and so he came to the North Blue and agreed to a bodyguard gig for a prince, but he didn't belong in Germa.

That wasn't a shock. What was a shock was that his charge didn't belong in Germa either.

Germa, Zoro had come to find, was a cesspool rotting of deceit, cruelty, duplicity and pain. King Judge treated his people like dirt, the ones who were actual people and the clones alike. Most of the princes were idiots with overinflated egos but they were dangerously strong idiots. The princess was cold and aloof and always seemed to have much more going on below the surface than Zoro wanted to parse through.

Then there was Sanji, the prince he was assigned to. The first impression he had upon meeting him was that he was a brat. It wasn't an assessment that had changed in the months since they met. Sanji was, undeniably, a brat and a jerk. He was a shameless flirt and a high-strung bastard. He overthought everything and had a superiority complex that he didn't want to acknowledge (which was strange in hindsight considering just how insecure the man actually was). Zoro had come to learn that he was also kind, selfless, caring and loving. He was always more concerned about others' wellbeing and happiness than his own. He only needed to see a single interaction between him and his family to figure out why.

Sanji was a prince. His life was the opposite of Zoro's. Where Zoro had nothing, Sanji had everything at his fingertips and yet it meant nothing at all. He didn't have his family's love, he didn't even have their respect. They saw him as less than a speck of dirt. Sanji didn't belong in Germa any more than Zoro did.

After that realization and all the days spent with the prince, it was painfully easy to fall in love with him. Zoro hadn't even known he was capable of feeling love or desire the way he felt it for Sanji. He had never experienced this before. Sure, he had felt lust and he had sated

it with willing partners when he felt the need to do so, but this was different. This was like a tidal wave swept over him and left him stupidly unable to do anything but strive for Sanji's happiness. He felt the world shift when the blonde's face brightened with a rare but treasured smile. He felt the sky tumbling when Sanji got the satisfaction of plating a meal he had cooked. He felt his heart trembling whenever he stared at Zoro, his eyes wide and bursting with love and tenderness. He equally felt every misaligned facet inside of him click into place when Sanji sneered and called him names. A sense of rightness settled in him whenever Sanji's heels met his blades during their spars. He got a thrill when he and the blonde challenged and pushed one another.

Sanji, somehow, impossibly, became something he couldn't live without. So, of course the world would conspire to take him away.

Zoro stood stock still in the dining room, his face blank as King Judge and nameless scientist #4 discussed the plans for the new Stealth Black serum. He played the part of perfect emotionless guardsman as the two talked about stripping away Sanji's agency and humanity as if they were discussing something as mundane as the weather. Outwardly, he gave no reaction to their callous words. Inside, he was fuming.

Zoro had always considered himself lucky and luck had driven him this far, brought him to Germa to continue striving to be the best after his failed attempts at beating Mihawk. Luck had brought him to Sanji, but sometimes Zoro wondered if Sanji had the opposite relationship with luck. His life seemed to be a never-ending parade of shit and tonight was promising that the future would be no exception.

He switched his gaze to the blonde man in question. Sanji's shoulders were hiked up defensively, his back rigid, tension emanating off of him so much it was nearly visible in the air. Zoro wanted nothing more than to be able to take his prince away from here, to leave this room with nothing but the broken bodies of the Vinsmokes behind them. Or, at the least, he wanted Sanji to look at him so he could give him some kind of reassurance, let him know that Zoro was still with him, but it wouldn't be appropriate for them to do so.

Normally, Zoro wouldn't give a fuck about something as trivial as propriety but Germa was different. If it was just himself on the line, he would say fuck it, but there was Sanji to consider. Flying under the radar of Sanji's family meant that they had to do what was expected of them, so Zoro had to play stoic guard and Sanji had to pretend there was nothing more between them than a professional relationship. Zoro was certain that together they could overcome the Vinsmokes, they could leave this kingdom behind them for greener pastures, but Sanji still wasn't sure of it. He had spent too long living in fear, so he was too afraid to strive for something different, something more.

Zoro would usually scorn a man like that. He would call them a coward, unworthy of his time. However, Sanji *was* striving for more. He did so every time he snuck into the kitchen to fulfill his passion. He did it every time he threw a kick, refusing to train in Germa's style of combat and sticking close to what his old chef taught him. He did every time he sought Zoro out, when he kissed him, when he chose to love him. All of that was acts of rebellion in their own ways, even if Sanji didn't see it that way.

With that in mind, Zoro thought he had time to convince Sanji that they had the strength to leave Germa behind, to make sure he knew that he deserved so much more and that it would satiate the deep yearning in Zoro's chest if he just let him give him the life he deserved. Now, his time had run out.

He felt nothing but the deepest, darkest hatred as he listened to the Vinsmokes talk about using Sanji like he was a tool, a means to an end, a thing. His hatred only deepened as he noticed Reiju use her poison on Sanji, snatching his voice away. Despite clearly feeling the effects of whatever she had poisoned him with, he still cleared his plate of all food. Zoro felt a stab of total affection at that. God, he was such an idiot.

He held himself firmly in place until the only people in the room were him, the cook, the princess and her guard, Drake. Only then did he go to Sanji's side and tilt his face up to meet his eyes. The blonde's gaze was unfocused, like he was seeing right through Zoro. The swordsman scowled at that before turning back to the princess.

"What the hell is your problem," he snapped at her.

The pink-haired woman raised an eyebrow at that.

"Excuse me?"

"Where the fuck do you get off doing this to him?"

"I did what was best for him."

"Poisoning him is what's best for him? Snatching his voice away is what's best? Making him this compliant shell is best?"

"I did what was necessary to save him from getting himself into trouble."

"Oh please, I'm know about how little you do to help him when he's in trouble. You bandage the wounds after but you're nowhere to be found when your dickhead brothers are inflicting the pain or when those bastard scientists are fucking him over."

Zoro thought he might've seen Reiju falter just a bit at that, but he had never known this woman to wear her emotions plainly for anyone to see and if she did, she was likely putting on a show for a specific purpose.

"She's the princess of this kingdom. You mind how you speak to her," Drake warned.

"She's your princess, not mine. My loyalty is to my prince, not this kingdom," Zoro asserted before turning back to Sanji who had leaned against Zoro during the spat, his eyes already shut. Zoro would've panicked if he couldn't feel the way the cook's breath rose and fell with his breathing. Sanji's eyes blinked open sluggishly when Zoro moved in and lifted him into his arms but he soon let his head fall on his shoulder and drifted off again.

Zoro turned to bring Sanji back to his room and paused as footsteps followed him.

“It’s best if my brother takes some time to rest. If his complaints about your abysmal sense of direction is any indication, then you’ll probably need a guide.”

Zoro didn’t like admitting weakness but now wasn’t the time for him to deny this particular shortcoming, so though he wasn’t happy about it, he followed behind the princess and her guard towards Sanji’s room. His attention was solely on the prince, making sure his breathing stayed consistent, taking note of any tenseness in his muscles or signs of discomfort.

He immediately brought Sanji to his bed when they reached his room. He took the time to remove his red cape, boots and socks before covering his body with a blanket and his feet with an extra one as they had a tendency of getting cold at night. He brushed his blonde locks back a little and felt his forehead briefly. His skin was clammy and pale with unnatural purple veins standing out starkly on the skin of his forearm. He clenched his jaw at that before he turned back around to the princess who was still standing in the room silently observing him, a strange glint in her eye.

“You have no right to do this to him. He trusts you. Do you have any idea how hard it is for him to actually trust someone with himself? I never thought you deserved it. God only knows why he feels even an ounce of pity for anyone in your fucked up family, but he does. Even more than that, he loves you. Then you go and pull this. What sick kind of shit are you into, lady?”

“Roronoa—” Drake started only to be cut off by Reiju waving a dismissive hand.

“You’re upset.”

“No shit.”

“You care deeply about my brother.”

“No shit.”

“Not many people do.”

“Not many people have gotten the chance to. Your father made sure of that.”

“I suppose you have a point there. At any rate, it’s a mild poison at best. It will wear off in three hours. I couldn’t let him draw attention to himself. You are free to watch him until he wakes up in order to see that I’m telling the truth.”

“Trust me, I have no intentions of leaving him.”

“You don’t, do you?”

Reiju paused there, her eyes narrowing as her gaze flickered between him and Sanji.

“If I ask you a question, swordsman, will you answer truthfully?”

Zoro narrowed his eye at that.

“Depends on your question.”

“That’s fair. It is a simple one which requires a simple answer. Do you love my brother?”

Hell, wasn’t that a loaded question. Yet it was also the simplest one in the world.

“Of course I do. He’s my prince.”

“Are you *in love* with my brother?”

“Yes.”

Reiju stared a moment longer before she looked at Drake. There was something that passed between them before the red-haired man sighed and stepped out of the room. Reiju’s eyes didn’t leave Zoro, an intensity to her that he rarely saw.

“My four brothers’ lives were bargained for with the life of our mother. She drank a deadly poison to try to counteract our father’s modifications. Her efforts worked only on Sanji, but she was happy for it. He brought her joy through his kind heart. Now my father wishes to undo her sacrifice and Sanji, in his ridiculous penchant for martyrdom, will let him. So, I would like for you to decide now whether saving Sanji’s life isn’t worth going against his wishes.”

“Why?”

“I have a plan to get him out of here tonight. Initially, I was going to have Drake take him away but I suspect Sanji would prefer to leave with you.”

Zoro’s breath caught at that.

“What kind of plan?”

“In truth, my use of poison tonight was two-fold. I wanted to be sure how the dosage and my choice of poison would work. I will knock him out and you will bring him to the western gate. There, a ship will be waiting. It is a stealth submarine, a prototype but has shown great promise. It has automated functions, defenses against sea life, built-in navigation and already has a destination input along with any provisions two able-bodied men would need for a few months. It will take you somewhere he will be safe. All you have to do is get him on the ship and not touch any buttons until he wakes. Sanji can do the rest. Of course, it’s best to keep this plan from my brother. I suspect he will make some grand sacrifice play if he were made abreast of it.”

Zoro’s lips went tight at that.

“Let me get this straight. You want me to lie to Curly, drug him, kidnap him and take on a ship that isn’t even officially deemed seaworthy towards a destination I don’t know but should trust simply on your word?”

“Yes.”

“You’re out of your fucking mind.”

“Perhaps. I’m also quite invested in seeing my brother remain himself. There is only a small window to do that. Understand the plan will go forward whether it is you as Sanji’s travel companion or Drake. He has gone to fetch the poison as well the bag I packed with a few of Sanji’s things and a map of the Grand Line and East Blue.”

East Blue?

“The ship has built-in maps, but Sanji may prefer a traditional view as well. So, Mr. Swordsman, will you be staying behind or will you be joining my brother?”

“You’re the devil, woman.”

“I’m simply an older sister doing what’s necessary. Whether you believe me or not, I do love my brother, as much as I’m able to do so. On that, we share a common ground. Knowing my brother as I do and his dreadful sense of self-worth, I dare say Sanji will be more hurt if you don’t join than he will be by the actions you take to save him.”

Zoro wished he could say her words were bullshit, but he knew full well that Sanji would take it as a rejection if Zoro didn’t leave with him, not that that was ever an option. He wasn’t about to let the love of his life run off to parts unknown with a fallen marine officer instead of him.

As if summoned by thought, Drake re-entered the room carrying a small bag as well as a tube with the map. He dropped the bag and maps at the foot of the bed and took out a purple vial from his pocket, handing it to Zoro.

“It’s a distilled version of my poison. You should administer it to him around 3 AM and be ready to leave around that time. Guard shift changes then and the guard on duty will avoid the western gate for a short time, giving you an opening. Don’t miss it.”

Zoro clenched his teeth but nodded. Reiju nodded in reply before approaching the bed. Zoro tensed slightly, watching her vigilantly as she kneeled down and pressed a kiss on Sanji’s forehead, brushing her fingers through his hair.

“You take care of my brother, Roronoa. If I find you’ve harmed him in any way, there will be no place on this planet where you can hide from me.”

“And if this poison is some ruse and all of this hurts Sanji, then I won’t hesitate to kill you myself.”

“Another source of common ground then. I leave my brother in your hands.”

With that, the princess and former marine left the room, leaving Zoro to his task and his choice.

For all his reservations, it wasn’t a hard one to make. Sanji deserved the world and his own insecurities and lack of self-worth would keep him from even taking the chance to save himself. Although, it wasn’t just that. The prince had a legitimate reason to be afraid of his

family. These were the same people who had locked him up in a dungeon for years, stuck an iron mask on his face, held a fake public funeral after pronouncing him dead only to drag him out of said dungeon when they had wanted to use him as a sacrifice. Zoro didn't even want to think of what kind of fucked up things King Judge's shitty parenting had done to Sanji's psyche. If it wasn't for his old chef visiting him or Reiju coming to patch him up after his brothers' beatings, the prince would have been completely isolated with only torture to break up the loneliness.

Zoro did see some lingering signs of his trauma. His terror around bugs because they used to crawl under his helmet and he was unable to get them out or sometimes they died underneath and he could do nothing to dislodge their carcasses. He would grip and tug on his hair, sometimes to remind himself the mask was gone but other times Zoro wondered if it was some kind of self-harm given how hard he pulled on it, ripping hair out of the roots. He clearly had an affinity towards women over men, because men had been his abusers all his life and women were usually kinder to him. Zoro had proven to be an exception, something he prided himself on. But now, if he chose to follow Reiju's plan, was he just like the others? He'd be going behind Sanji's back, making a choice for him, taking away his agency.

But damn it, Zoro wanted to be selfish too. He wanted to be with Sanji without worrying about Judge or his dickhead brothers. He wanted Sanji to be free to cook when and where he wanted. He wanted him to be by his side when he became the World's Greatest Swordsman. He wanted to be standing next to Sanji when he found the All Blue. He wanted to live a life with him outside of these gray, lifeless walls. He knew Sanji wanted it too. His own fear, both at taking a chance on himself and at the consequences if he and Zoro were caught, were stopping him from making the choice he really wanted to make. Sanji didn't belong here, he belonged in the world, he belonged where he was free to do as he pleased. If he hated Zoro at the end of the day for making the choice to ensure Sanji's freedom, then he would take his hatred. He would rather Sanji be alive, himself and free without Zoro than to remain at his side here and let Judge snatch away the man he loved, leaving only a hollow shell. He loved Sanji enough to make the choice that would save him, even if Sanji might not see it that way.

With the decision made, he settled on the bed next to his prince, waiting for him to wake up. When he finally did, their conversation only solidified Zoro's choice. Sanji couldn't find it in himself to hope. He had gone so far as to ask Zoro to kill him if Judge's plan worked. It tore something inside the swordsman's heart to see the man he loved so defeated and resigned to his fate. He knew Sanji had big dreams and passion that, at times, burst out of him like a rocket. But this place, it sucked out the essence of the prince, leaving only embers of that passion. Zoro always delighted in reigniting the flame in Sanji whenever possible. Sanji did the same for him. He pushed him to be better, he challenged him, he forced him to see the world that existed beyond his promise and his goal. Sanji had forced him to live and not just survive. How could Zoro do anything but return that favor? So he made his promise to Sanji, a promise he did intend to keep. Should he and his prince be caught tonight and Sanji be forced to undergo the Stealth Black procedure, Zoro would kill him as he asked and then he would destroy the Vinsmoke family and every bit of Germa with them.

He used his words and his body and his love to piece Sanji back together until his broken pieces were at least reassembled to match the man he loved. He held him close as he drifted off, satisfied but grieving all the same. He reminded himself that he was doing what was

necessary to protect them both, to save their lives, to give them a chance to chase their dreams. He would do whatever it took to make that happen, even if it meant following Reiju's plan.

~*~*~

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Sanji scrunched his brows at the annoying persistent noise repeating in his ears. The dull beeping continued on a loop and as awareness returned to him, he noticed several other beeping and whirring noises. There was nothing in his bedroom that should be making that noise.

As the thought crossed his mind, he realized that his mattress felt wrong. It wasn't as soft as usual or as warm. He didn't feel the familiar silk sheets or the feather pillow beneath his head or the familiar weight of Zoro's arms around him.

A sharp spike of panic settled in his chest. Did his father come for him already? Was he in the lab? It didn't smell like the lab, all antiseptic and chemicals and burnt wood and sulfur. He didn't hear the buzz of clinical voices talking about him like he wasn't there, like he was an object, just a thing to carry out their scientific whims on. He didn't taste the rubber of the mouth guard they would put in his mouth to keep him from biting his tongue or the weight of restraints on his wrists and ankles to keep him bound to the gurney they used to experiment on him.

No, instead wherever he was smelled like metal and ammonia and fish and Zoro.

Zoro was close by. The thought made Sanji relaxed as his eyes fluttered open, taking in his surroundings. He was in a dimly lit enclosed space laid out on a narrow bunk which was embedded into the wall. The walls were all gray metal with the 66 insignia painted onto it. A few feet to his right, pushed up against the back wall, was a small metal table with a black duffle bag and a metal tube on top of it. Above the table was a small round window beyond which Sanji could see nothing but pitch black. Still, he recognized where he was as one of Germa's submarines. Why the hell was he in one though?

He looked towards the controls and saw Zoro sitting at the captain's seat, murmuring to himself as he stared at the radar which showed their path.

"This damn thing better be taking us somewhere safe. Damn witch better not have tricked us. How the hell does this thing work anyway? How am I supposed to know where we're going? Can't see shit outside. Fucking Cook better wake up soon. His Observation is better than mine. Last thing I need is to get eaten by a damn sea king in this metal can. Fucking crazy witch, making me ride around in this thing."

Sanji wasn't sure who Zoro was cursing or why they were on this ship in this first place, but as the buffoon raised his finger to press a button, Sanji figured he'd better announce himself.

"Please don't, Mossy. It would be a pity for you to cause a depressurization in here below sea level and kill us both through your stupidity."

Zoro whipped around quickly as Sanji sat up, pushing the sheet off himself.

The greenhead immediately shot up and approached Sanji in the small space, though he kept a few feet of distance between. Sanji raised an eyebrow at that. That wasn't like the clingy moss. There were more pressing matters though.

"Why the hell are we on one of Germa's scouting subs, Moss? Don't tell me you managed to get lost and drag me along with you."

"We're exactly where we're supposed to be."

Sanji narrowed his eyes at that.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I saw a chance for us to get out and I took it."

Sanji stood up as he felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"What did you do?"

"Technically, all I did was follow Reiju's plan."

"Reiju?"

"She's the one who thought of how to save you. She's the one who got this ship ready and your things. She's the one who put our destination into the ship's computer. She's the one who made sure the guards wouldn't be looking. But… but I was the one who used her poison to keep you asleep so I could carry you onto the ship and get you out of Germa."

Sanji's jaw dropped at that.

"You did what?!"

"You wouldn't have come any other way. You would've been too worried over what Judge might do."

"And for good fucking reason! Do you know what that man is capable of, how far his influence can reach?"

"Germa isn't protected by the World Government anymore. They can't just go conquering any place they like without consequences and he's already got Big Mom on his ass, why would he waste his time coming for us?"

"Because he can and because he's a cruel bastard! He's never needed a reason beyond that. We need to go back before he realizes we're gone."

"Are you insane? No. Besides, like I said, Reiju programmed the ship to navigate us to wherever the fuck she's sent us and the ship won't deviate too far off course without her

changing it. It was a failsafe she made in case of emergency or in case of exactly this. You, freaking out. We couldn't risk it."

"We? All of a sudden, you and Reiju are a 'we'? You're such great friends that you would conspire against me and go behind my back to—"

"To save you? Yeah, we would. Because we love you and we're not about to let Judge take away everything that makes you you. And we're not about to sit by and let you play the martyr to let him do it either."

"Playing the martyr? That's what you think I'm doing?"

"That or you just have a death wish. You asked me to kill you before you ever thought to ask me to save you."

"Because there's nothing to save!"

"You aren't nothing. Sanji, you're *everything.*"

The blonde shook his head in denial.

"I was lost a long time ago, Zoro. But you aren't. You have a dream, you have a goal, you have a purpose. You are going to be the greatest swordsman in the world."

"And you're the man who's going to find the All Blue. That's your goal, your dream. It's not dead. Don't tell you've stopped believing in it."

"I never could. Not even sitting in the bug-infested dungeon could kill that dream. But it's just like you said before. You're my dream now too. You have the ability to go out there and meet new people who deserve you. People who will cherish you. Friends, lovers, a family. You can make that because you're a good man with a good heart and more love to spare than you'd ever admit. My dream is for you to find those people, for them to be your home in a way that I can't."

"Damn it, you idiot cook," Zoro cursed as he closed the distance between them, clasping his hands on Sanji's shoulder before he gave him a shake.

"When are you going to get it through your thick skull that I already have a home with you? You are my people. You are the person who cherishes me and who I cherish back. You're the person I call my friend, my lover, my family. I don't care about sparing love for anyone else if I can't give my life to you first."

"I'm a failed lab experiment. My life is not my own. Judge won't just let me go. He'll come for me and now because you're with me, he'll come for you too. That's why I've never wanted to leave before, that's why I've never taken this chance. I refuse to put your life in danger. It's too important. *You're* too important to me."

"And you're too important to me to not take the chance I saw to save your life."

"Even if it kills you?"

“I’d die a thousand times if it meant that I at least could say I tried.”

Sanji stared at Zoro, seeing nothing but conviction and devotion shining in his eyes. This was the man who was nicknamed the demon. A man of singular vision and resolve. Sanji knew he would not be swayed. He shook his head with annoyance as he breathed out a deep sigh.

“God, you’re so stubborn.”

“Takes one to know one, Prettybrows.”

“Don’t call me that when I’m mad at you. You plotted with my sister to drug and kidnap me when you knew I’d never agree to it and put yourself in danger in the process.”

“I got you away from that place and we’re on our way to safer waters. I’ll take your anger as a trade-off any day of the week, Curls.”

Sanji deflated, most of the fight leaving his body.

“I do not agree with this or condone it. If we weren’t standing in a tin can smaller than my bedroom, I’d be kicking your ass for this.”

Zoro pursed his lips at that, his brow furrowing in annoyance but a grim sort of acceptance settling in his gaze.

“However, in the grand scheme of things, what you did was also hopelessly romantic.”

Zoro blinked at that, surprise flashing in his eyes, before a grin settled on his lips.

“Yeah? This doing it for you?”

“It’s doing something to me. Mostly annoying me, worrying me, making me freak the fuck out. I’m certain you’re going to have to talk me down from a panic attack at some point. But also, yeah, it’s doing it for me.”

Zoro grinned wider as he pulled Sanji flush to his body before he pressed a firm kiss to his lips, leaving the blonde’s lips tingling.

“This doesn’t mean I forgive you yet, Moss.”

“Guess I’m just going to have to earn that, aren’t I?” Zoro declared before he leaned down to kiss Sanji again.

He wrapped his arms around Zoro shoulders, returning the kiss.

The sub gave a loud beep, forcing Sanji to pull away and look at the monitor.

“Keeps doing that. We’re not about to die, are we? Reiju said this model was a prototype.”

“Nah, Moss. Just the sonar getting a ping from some fish in the area,” Sanji explained, approaching the console.

He took quick stock of everything. The sub was a prototype, but knowing his sister, she stocked it with all the necessities they would need to survive for… however long they were going to be down here.

“Wait, do you even know where we’re going?”

“Reiju said she set the course for the East Blue.”

“East Blue? Why on earth would she do that?”

“Dunno.”

“But… but Mihawk’s in the Grand Line. If you go to East Blue with me, you’re going back to the drawing board. It’s like you never made any progress towards your goal at all.”

“Grand Line isn’t going anywhere and neither is Mihawk. I can always come back.”

Sanji stared at the green-haired man as he dug into his ear like he hadn’t just said something monumental.

“You’d do that for me? You love me that much?”

Zoro paused then.

“One of these days, I’m going to say I love you and you’re going to believe me without question.”

Zoro said it like it was a fact, something he was speaking into existence. Sanji hoped he was right.

“Although, are we going to have to climb that damn mountain?”

Sanji smirked as Zoro flipped from being unbearably romantic to casually annoyed.

“It’s that or the Calm Belt. I know which one I prefer.”

Zoro grumbled to himself as Sanji pulled up the navigation screen so he could get more details on where Reiju was sending them. The screen indicated that there was a vivre card embedded in the navigation panel that they were following.

Whose card would Reiju have? And why would it be pointing to East Blue?

Sanji scrolled down the navigation screen so he could see the coordinates for their destination and hopefully get some more information.

Destination

Ocean: East Blue

Locale: Sambas Region

Coordinates: 27.7567667, -81.4639835

“Sambas Region,” he muttered to himself before leaning over and grabbing the navigation log that was kept on all Germa submarines. It featured details of every region of every sea, intel necessary for Germa’s military coups. He grabbed the book on East Blue and flipped through the pages until he got to the Sambas Region.

“Sambas Region is a portion of East Blue which lies between the Oykot Kingdom and Sixis Island. The region is characterized by a dense fog which settles over the waters for a majority of the year. While the Sambas Region is not known to have any islands, it recently has had a boost in popularity due to the anchoring of a “restaurant at sea”. It is a port for both Marines and pirates alike. Called the Baratie, it…”

Sanji paused as the name of the sea restaurant registered in his mind.

“The sea is a young man’s game, Eggplant. I’m too old to follow our dream. Besides, I don’t have my crew anymore. I planned for us to find my dream together. But a man can have more than one dream. A restaurant at sea, a beacon for weary, hungry sailors. No one will starve at sea so long as it’s around. I’ll call it Baratie.”

Zeff’s words, whispered to Sanji as they both languished in hunger and despair in the dungeons of Germa, rang in his ears.

But it wasn’t possible, was it? He was so sure that Judge had killed Zeff. He had never directly said so, only intimated or insinuated things but Judge’s cruelty stretched as far as his imagination and Sanji could attest that it was vast. He had had nightmares for years after, dreaming of what had become of the man who he had come to see as a kindred spirit, mentor and a father figure, the only true one he had.

Judge had been livid when he realized Zeff was indulging Sanji in his affinity for cooking. He had been sneaking him recipes, cooking with him and refining his techniques during visits to the dungeons (he had also been teaching him to fight as well but Judge didn’t know about that and if he did, he didn’t care.) Zeff had indulged Sanji for years, making his life bearable until Zeff had tried to get Sanji out permanently. Judge had discovered his plans and his indulgences, and he had locked Zeff up too, punishing them by withholding food from them and leaving them to starve for weeks. Reiju came down periodically in the first days and brought a bag of food for them which Zeff had forced Sanji to take and make stretch for however long Judge wanted to play this game with them. He hadn’t known what Zeff had been eating until much later when Judge came back and sneered in disgust.

“I see you’ve chosen to live up to your name in the most macabre sense, Red Leg.”

“I’ve done what I must to keep that boy alive, no more and no less.”

“Is this supposed to move me? That boy’s life is only continuing by my mercy and even then it’s of little value.”

“To you maybe. The world’s better off with Sanji in it and would be a sight better if you left it. You’re a poor excuse for a king and a father. You don’t deserve that boy and never did.”

“Is that what you’re fashioning yourself as? His father? Any trapped animal would gnaw its own leg off, you are apparently no different. That doesn’t make you a father.”

“A father sacrifices for their own. That’s something you’ve never done. Sanji’s my responsibility and so I made sure he lived.”

“I hope it was worth it.”

With that, Judge had opened the cell and dragged Zeff out. Only then did Sanji see the severed stump where his leg had been. The sacrifice Zeff had made for him had rendered him speechless, so much so he didn’t even get to say goodbye. When he was finally permitted to leave the dungeons, Reiju had been silent on Zeff’s whereabouts and Judge had been content with hanging Zeff’s fate over his head. Sanji had resigned himself to the reality that he was dead. But now…

He didn’t realize he was hyperventilating until warm hands cupped his cheeks and forced him to meet a steady silver gaze through his own tears.

“You need to breath, Curly. You keep going like this, you’re going to pass out.”

“I… I can’t… I… mmm,” Sanji trailed off with a whimper, his chest tight as tears fell down his face.

“Look at me, Prettybrows. Just focus on me and breath with me.”

Zoro took Sanji’s hand in his and pressed it against his warm chest, right over his scar. He felt the rhythm of Zoro’s breathing beneath his palm and though it took a while, he eventually began to follow the pattern until some semblance of sanity returned to him. Zoro pulled him close once Sanji was breathing better, brushing his tears away with the pads of his thumbs.

“Talk to me. What’s going on?”

“I… it… Zeff,” Sanji mumbled out through hiccups.

“Your old chef?”

“The Baratie… it’s his. It has to be. But I thought he was… Judge killed him… but now…” Sanji dissolved into sobs, unable to continue talking.

Zoro pulled him close and moved them to sit on the bunk, rubbing his hands up and down Sanji’s back to sooth him. He didn’t know exactly what it was he was feeling. It was a strange mixture of grief, sadness, longing, relief, gratitude, love. Zeff was alive. He was in the East Blue and Sanji was going to him.

~*~*~

The first few hours on the submarine were disorienting.

Sanji stood in the center of the small living quarters, his arms wrapped around himself as the reality of what had happened slowly sank in. The sub hummed quietly around them, the

automated systems guiding them away from Germa. Away from his family. Away from everything he'd ever known.

He was free.

The thought should have filled him with joy, with relief, but instead it made his chest tight and his breathing shallow. His hands started trembling and he pressed them against his thighs, trying to still them.

"Sanji." Zoro's voice cut through the rising panic. Strong hands gripped his shoulders, grounding him. "Breathe."

"I can't— I don't—" Sanji gasped, his vision blurring at the edges. "What if they come after us? What if Reiju gets caught? What if Judge finds us? What if—"

"Hey, look at me." Zoro turned him around, his gray eye steady and calm. "We're in the Calm Belt. No ships can follow us here without getting torn apart by sea kings, and this sub has systems to keep them away. We're safe."

"Safe," Sanji repeated, the word foreign on his tongue. When had he ever been safe?

"Yeah. Safe." Zoro pulled him close, wrapping his arms around him. "I've got you, Cook. I'm not letting anything happen to you."

Sanji buried his face in Zoro's chest, breathing in his familiar scent—steel and sweat and something uniquely Zoro. Slowly, his heartbeat began to settle, matching the steady rhythm of Zoro's.

They stood like that for a long time, until Sanji's legs started to ache and his breathing had fully returned to normal. When he finally pulled back, Zoro was watching him with that soft expression he only ever showed when they were alone.

"Better?"

"Yeah." Sanji wiped at his eyes, embarrassed. "Sorry. I don't know what—"

"Don't apologize." Zoro's thumb brushed across his cheekbone. "You just escaped from a lifetime of hell. You're allowed to feel whatever you're feeling."

Sanji nodded, not trusting his voice. Zoro pressed a kiss to his forehead before stepping back and surveying their surroundings.

"So. This is home for the next few weeks."

The submarine was small but well-equipped. There was a compact galley kitchen, a tiny bathroom with a shower, a living area with a small table and bench seating, and a single bedroom with a double bunk. Storage compartments lined the walls, and large circular windows offered views of the dark water outside.

"It's not much," Sanji said quietly.

“It’s enough.” Zoro caught his hand, threading their fingers together. “We’ve got food, water, a bed. And we’ve got each other. That’s all we need.”

Something warm unfurled in Sanji’s chest at those words. “Yeah. I guess it is.”

~*~*~

The days began to blur together in a strange, timeless way. Without the sun to mark the passage of time, without the rigid schedule that had governed every moment of his life in Germa, Sanji found himself unmoored. Sometimes he’d wake up and not know if it was morning or evening, if they’d been traveling for three days or ten.

But slowly, they found their rhythm.

Sanji cooked. It was the one thing that made sense, the one thing that felt familiar and right. The galley was tiny compared to Germa’s kitchens, but it had everything he needed. He made elaborate meals from the supplies Reiju had stocked—fresh pasta with cream sauce, perfectly seared fish, delicate pastries that filled the sub with the scent of butter and sugar.

Zoro ate everything he made with enthusiasm, never failing to compliment him, never taking a single bite for granted. It made Sanji’s chest ache in the best way.

“You don’t have to make such fancy stuff every time,” Zoro said one evening, watching as Sanji plated a perfectly cooked steak with roasted vegetables. “I’d be happy with rice and whatever.”

“I know.” Sanji set the plate in front of him. “But I want to. Cooking for you... it makes me happy.”

Zoro’s expression softened. “Then cook whatever you want, Curls. I’ll eat it all.”

And he did. Every single time.

~*~*~

They trained together in the small living area, pushing the table aside to make room. Zoro went through his kata with his swords, the movements precise and deadly even in the confined space. Sanji practiced his kicks, his legs cutting through the air with controlled power.

Sometimes they sparred, careful not to damage the sub but still pushing each other, testing limits. Sanji loved these moments—the familiar dance of their bodies, the way they moved around each other with practiced ease, the competitive fire that burned between them.

“You’re getting sloppy, Cook,” Zoro taunted, blocking a kick aimed at his ribs.

“Says the moss-head who nearly took out a window with that last swing.”

They grinned at each other, breathless and sweating, and then Zoro was pulling him close and kissing him hard. Sanji melted into it, his hands fisting in Zoro’s shirt.

These kisses were different from the ones they'd stolen in Germa. There was no urgency, no fear of being caught. They could take their time, could savor each other.

It was intoxicating.

~*~*~

At night—or what they decided was night—they'd sit by the windows and watch the ocean. The Calm Belt was eerily beautiful, the water dark and still, occasionally illuminated by bioluminescent creatures that drifted past like living stars.

"Look at that one," Sanji breathed, pressing his hand against the glass as a massive jellyfish floated by, its tentacles trailing behind it in ribbons of blue-green light.

Zoro sat beside him, their shoulders touching. "Never seen anything like this before."

"Me neither." Sanji watched the jellyfish disappear into the darkness. "I've spent my whole life on the sea and I've never really *seen* it."

Zoro's hand found his, squeezing gently. "You'll see a lot more of it now. The East Blue, the Grand Line if we ever go back. All of it."

"The Grand Line," Sanji murmured. "I've read about it. The Reverse Mountain, the different islands, the weather patterns. But reading about it isn't the same as seeing it."

"No, it's not." Zoro leaned his head against Sanji's shoulder. "But you'll get to see it all now. Whatever you want."

The promise of it—of freedom, of choice, of a future that was his to decide—still felt surreal. But with Zoro beside him, it was starting to feel possible.

But the freedom was terrifying too.

One afternoon, Sanji found himself frozen in the galley, staring at the ingredients laid out before him. He'd been about to start preparing lunch when suddenly his mind went blank. What should he make? What did he want to make?

In Germa, his meals had always been dictated by Judge's preferences, by what would be served at formal dinners, by what his brothers demanded. He'd never had to think about what *he* wanted to cook.

His hands started shaking. The trembling spread up his arms, into his chest, until his whole body was quaking. His breath came in short, sharp gasps.

"Sanji?" Zoro appeared in the doorway, concern etched across his face. "What's wrong?"

"I don't— I can't—" Sanji gestured helplessly at the ingredients. "I don't know what to make."

"Okay." Zoro stepped closer, his movements slow and careful. "That's okay."

“It’s not okay! I’m a chef, I should be able to—”

“Hey.” Zoro caught his wrists gently, stilling the shaking. “You’ve spent your whole life cooking what other people told you to cook. It’s okay if it takes time to figure out what you want.”

Sanji’s eyes burned with unshed tears. “What if I never figure it out? What if I’m so broken that I can’t even make a simple decision without—”

“You’re not broken.” Zoro’s voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. “You’re healing. There’s a difference.”

“I don’t feel like I’m healing. I feel like I’m falling apart.”

“Sometimes that’s part of it.” Zoro pulled him close, wrapping his arms around him. “You’ve been holding yourself together for so long, keeping everything locked down just to survive. Now you’re safe enough to fall apart. So fall apart. I’ll be here to catch you.”

Sanji clung to him, his face pressed against Zoro’s neck, and let himself cry. When the tears finally subsided, Zoro was still there, solid and steady.

“How about we make something together?” Zoro suggested quietly. “You can teach me, and we’ll figure out what sounds good as we go.”

“You want to cook with me?”

“Why not? I can follow instructions. Probably.”

Despite everything, Sanji found himself laughing. “You’re going to be terrible at this.”

“Probably,” Zoro agreed with a grin. “But at least we’ll have fun.”

They did have fun. Zoro was, as predicted, terrible at cooking—he nearly burned the rice and cut the vegetables into uneven chunks—but he tried, and he made Sanji laugh, and by the end they had a simple but satisfying meal of fried rice and vegetables.

“See?” Zoro said, taking a bite. “Not so bad.”

“It’s a disaster,” Sanji said, but he was smiling.

“It’s our disaster.”

~*~*~

The nightmares came frequently. Sanji would wake gasping, his heart racing, the phantom sensation of his brothers’ fists still echoing through his body. Or he’d dream of Judge’s cold eyes, of being dragged back to Germa, of Zoro being killed in front of him.

Every time, Zoro was there. He’d pull Sanji close, murmuring reassurances, running his hands through his hair until the panic subsided.

“I’m sorry,” Sanji whispered one night after a particularly bad dream. “I keep waking you up.”

“Don’t care.” Zoro pressed a kiss to his temple. “I’d rather be woken up than have you deal with this alone.”

“I should be better by now. We’ve been gone for over a week.”

“Sanji.” Zoro tilted his chin up, making him meet his eye. “Healing isn’t linear. Some days will be better than others. That’s normal.”

“How are you so patient with me?”

“Because I love you.” Zoro said it simply, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And because you’re worth it.”

Sanji’s throat tightened. “I don’t know if I believe that.”

“I know. But I believe it enough for both of us. And one day, you’ll believe it too.”

~*~*~

They read together, sprawled on the bunk with books from the small library Reiju had included. Zoro preferred adventure stories and historical accounts of famous swordsmen. Sanji gravitated toward cookbooks and novels, losing himself in stories of people living ordinary, peaceful lives.

Sometimes Sanji would read aloud, his voice filling the quiet space. Zoro would listen with his eye closed, his hand resting on Sanji’s thigh, his thumb tracing idle patterns.

“You have a nice voice,” Zoro said one evening.

Sanji paused mid-sentence. “What?”

“Your voice. It’s nice. I like listening to you.”

Warmth bloomed in Sanji’s chest. “That’s... thank you.”

“Keep reading, Cook.”

So he did, and Zoro’s hand stayed on his thigh, grounding and comforting.

~*~*~

Two weeks into their journey, something shifted.

They were in the bedroom, Sanji sitting on the edge of the bunk while Zoro stood between his legs, kissing him slowly. It was late—or what they’d decided was late—and they were both tired, but neither wanted to stop touching each other.

Sanji’s hands slid under Zoro’s shirt, mapping the familiar planes of muscle and scar tissue. Zoro’s fingers threaded through his hair, tilting his head back to deepen the kiss.

“Zoro,” Sanji breathed against his lips.

“Yeah?”

“I want...” He trailed off, suddenly uncertain.

“What do you want, Cook?” Zoro’s voice was low, rough with desire but patient.

“I want you. But...” Sanji bit his lip. “In Germa, we always had to be so quiet. So careful. I want... I want to not have to hold back.”

Understanding dawned in Zoro’s eye. “We don’t have to hold back here. There’s no one to hear us. No one to hide from.”

“I know. But I don’t know if I can... if I remember how to not hold back.”

Zoro cupped his face gently. “Then let me help you remember.”

He kissed Sanji again, slower this time, more deliberate. His hands moved to Sanji’s shirt, unbuttoning it with careful precision. When he pushed it off Sanji’s shoulders, his fingers traced over the scars there—some from training, some from his brothers’ cruelty.

“You’re beautiful,” Zoro murmured.

Sanji’s breath hitched. “I’m not—”

“You are.” Zoro kissed his collarbone, his shoulder, the hollow of his throat. “Every part of you.”

Sanji’s hands fisted in Zoro’s shirt, pulling him closer. “I need you.”

“You have me.” Zoro pulled back just long enough to strip off his own shirt before guiding Sanji to lie back on the bunk. “You’ve always had me.”

He settled between Sanji’s legs, his weight familiar and comforting. They kissed until Sanji was breathless, until his hips were rocking up against Zoro’s, seeking friction.

“Tell me what you want,” Zoro said, his lips brushing against Sanji’s ear.

“Everything.” Sanji’s voice came out shaky, desperate. “I want everything.”

Zoro’s hands moved to Sanji’s pants, unbuttoning them and sliding them down his legs along with his underwear. The cool air of the sub made Sanji shiver, but then Zoro’s warm hands were on his thighs, spreading them wider.

“So fucking beautiful,” Zoro breathed, his eye dark with want.

Sanji felt exposed, vulnerable, but not in the way he had in Germa. This was different. This was safe. This was Zoro, who loved him, who would never hurt him.

“Touch me,” he whispered. “Please.”

Zoro’s hand wrapped around his cock, stroking slowly. Sanji gasped, his back arching off the bed. In Germa, he would have bitten his lip, would have swallowed the sound. But here, there was no need.

“That’s it,” Zoro encouraged. “Let me hear you.”

He stroked faster, his grip firm and perfect, and Sanji moaned, the sound echoing in the small space. It felt strange, being loud, but also liberating.

“Zoro, please, I need—”

“I know what you need.” Zoro released his cock and reached for the oil they kept in the bedside drawer. “Gonna take care of you.”

He slicked his fingers and pressed one against Sanji’s entrance, circling gently before pushing inside. Sanji’s breath caught, his body tensing for a moment before he forced himself to relax.

“That’s it, Cook. Just relax for me.” Zoro worked his finger deeper, his other hand stroking Sanji’s thigh soothingly.

It had been a few days since they’d last done this, and Sanji’s body needed time to adjust. But Zoro was patient, working him open slowly, adding a second finger when he was ready, then a third.

“Fuck,” Sanji gasped when Zoro’s fingers brushed against his prostate. “Right there, please —”

Zoro obliged, rubbing against that spot until Sanji was writhing, his hands clutching at the sheets. The pleasure was intense, overwhelming, and he didn’t have to hide it. He could moan as loud as he wanted, could beg and plead and fall apart.

“You’re so responsive,” Zoro murmured, his voice full of awe. “So perfect.”

“Not perfect,” Sanji managed. “Just— ah!— just yours.”

“Yeah. Mine.” Zoro’s fingers pressed deeper, stretching him wider. “And I’m yours.”

“Yours,” Sanji repeated, the word feeling like a promise. “Zoro, I’m ready. Please.”

Zoro withdrew his fingers and slicked his cock, positioning himself at Sanji’s entrance. “Look at me.”

Sanji met his eye, and Zoro pushed inside slowly, carefully, watching his face for any sign of discomfort. Sanji gasped at the stretch, at the fullness, but it was good, so good.

“Okay?” Zoro asked, his voice strained with the effort of holding still.

“More than okay.” Sanji wrapped his legs around Zoro’s waist, pulling him deeper. “Move. Please move.”

Zoro started with slow, deep thrusts, letting Sanji adjust to the feeling. But as Sanji’s moans grew louder, more desperate, he picked up the pace.

“That’s it,” Zoro groaned. “Let me hear you. Don’t hold back.”

Sanji didn’t. He moaned and gasped and cried out with every thrust, his voice echoing off the metal walls of the sub. It felt incredible, being able to express his pleasure without fear, without shame.

“Feels so good,” he gasped. “Zoro, you feel so good inside me.”

“Fuck, Sanji.” Zoro’s hips snapped forward harder. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

“Tell me.” Sanji’s hands clutched at Zoro’s shoulders, his nails digging into skin. “Tell me what I do to you.”

“You drive me crazy.” Zoro’s voice was rough, breathless. “Every sound you make, every time you say my name. I can’t get enough of you.”

“Then take more.” Sanji pulled him down into a kiss, messy and desperate. “Take everything.”

Zoro groaned into his mouth and shifted the angle, hitting Sanji’s prostate dead-on with every thrust. Sanji broke the kiss with a cry, his head falling back against the pillow.

“Yes! Right there, don’t stop!”

“Not stopping.” Zoro’s hand wrapped around Sanji’s cock, stroking in time with his thrusts. “Want to feel you come around me.”

The dual stimulation was too much. Sanji’s whole body tensed, pleasure coiling tight in his belly. “Close, I’m so close—”

“Come for me, Sanji. Let go.”

Sanji shattered, his orgasm crashing over him in waves. He cried out Zoro’s name, loud and unrestrained, his body clenching around Zoro’s cock. Distantly, he heard Zoro curse, felt him thrust harder, faster, chasing his own release.

“Sanji, I’m—”

“Inside me,” Sanji gasped. “Want to feel you.”

Zoro groaned, his hips stuttering as he came, filling Sanji with warmth. He collapsed on top of him, both of them breathing hard, their bodies slick with sweat.

For a long moment, they just lay there, tangled together, hearts racing in sync. Then Zoro pressed a soft kiss to Sanji's temple.

"You okay?"

"More than okay." Sanji's voice was hoarse from crying out, but he was smiling. "That was... we've never been able to do that before."

"No." Zoro shifted to look at him, his expression tender. "We've never been free before."

Free. The word settled over Sanji like a blanket, warm and comforting. He was free. Free to be loud, free to express his pleasure, free to love Zoro without fear.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too, Cook." Zoro kissed him softly. "And we have the rest of our lives to be this free."

The rest of their lives. It was a promise and a gift, and for the first time, Sanji let himself believe in it.

~*~*~

As they neared the end of their journey, Sanji found himself growing anxious again, but for different reasons. Soon they'd reach the East Blue. Soon he'd see Zeff again—if Zeff even remembered him, if he even wanted to see him.

"What if he doesn't want me there?" Sanji asked one evening as they sat by the window, watching a school of glowing fish swim past.

"Then we'll figure something else out," Zoro said simply. "But I don't think that's going to happen."

"You don't know that."

"No, but I know you. And anyone who spent time with you and didn't want you around would have to be an idiot."

Sanji leaned his head on Zoro's shoulder. "You're biased."

"Maybe. But I'm also right."

Despite his anxiety, Sanji found himself smiling. Whatever happened when they reached the Baratie, he wouldn't be facing it alone. He had Zoro. And that made all the difference.

The sub's navigation system chimed, indicating they were approaching their destination. Sanji's heart leapt into his throat.

"We're almost there," he whispered.

Zoro squeezed his hand. “Ready?”

Was he ready? Ready to face Zeff, to start a new life, to step into a world he’d only ever dreamed of?

No. But he was going to do it anyway.

“Yeah,” Sanji said, squeezing back. “I’m ready.”

When the sub finally began to show Baratie in their vicinity, Sanji pressed a button to have the sub surface before he opened the hatch and stared out into the sea. He took a moment to breath in the fresh air before taking in his surroundings. It was foggy, a thick layer of it hanging low over the sea, making it hard to see anything.

“See any land yet? I’m ready to get out of this thing.”

“Not yet,” Sanji muttered back, narrowing his eyes as he glanced around. He could barely see a few feet in front of him but on his next pass he noticed something through the fog.

A lighthouse, a beacon shining across the water. He kept his eyes peeled as they got closer and soon saw the anchored ship shaped like a fish with a sign reading Baratie posted on the front.

“It’s real. It’s really here,” he muttered to himself, pressing a hand to his chest as they got closer until the sub stopped right outside the restaurant alongside several other ships.

“What if he doesn’t recognize me? I mean, most of our time together, I was wearing a helmet. He won’t know my face.”

“You’ll have two very obvious defining features for him to know you by even if he never saw your face, Curls,” Zoro pointed out, running his finger over Sanji’s eyebrows and through his blonde locks.

“Besides, that North Blue accent of yours gives you away too.”

“What if he doesn’t want me?”

“No man would sacrifice what he did for someone he didn’t want. He called you his son of his own free will. He isn’t Judge. If all you’ve told me about him is true, he’ll know you and he’ll want you. Besides, there isn’t any sane person on this earth who could truly know you and not want to keep you.”

Sanji blushed at that.

“You can’t just say things like that to me.”

“Yeah I can. I just did, Prettybrows.”

Sanji turned even redder then.

“Don’t call me that.”

Zoro leaned over and kissed his hot cheek before he climbed out of the submarine and hopped onto the deck. He stretched his back and twisted his hips before resting one hand on his swords and reaching the other out to him.

“C’mon, Love Cook. Let’s go see your old man.”

Sanji hesitated momentarily before accepting Zoro’s hand and stepping onto the deck. Once he did, the submarine gave a beep before the hatch closed on its own and the ship submerged back into the water.

“Well, there goes our ride. Guess we’re stuck here. No backing out now, Cook.”

Sanji took a deep breath before nodding to himself and walking towards the entrance, Zoro’s hand clasped his own in a death grip.

The dining room was packed given it was around lunchtime. Sanji smiled to see Zeff’s business doing so well as they approached the front desk.

“Welcome to the Baratie. Do you have a reservation,” a man with a blue buzzcut asked.

“Um, no. Actually, I’m here to speak with the owner. It’s Zeff, isn’t it?”

“It is. Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

“I’m afraid the head chef is very busy at the moment.”

“Oh, um, then I guess—”

“He’ll make an exception for this,” Zoro interrupted him just as Sanji was about to accept the maître d’s words.

Sanji shot him an annoyed look.

“No backing out, Cook.”

Sanji’s lips pursed before he turned back to the man behind the desk.

“Tell him it’s about the eggplants from the North. He’ll know what it means,” Sanji told him.

The man seemed to hesitate before ultimately turning to walk to the kitchen.

“If this turns out to be a disaster, I’m blaming you,” Sanji muttered.

“Does that mean if it turns out well that I get credit for it,” Zoro asked back.

“I hardly think—”

Sanji was cut off as the door to the kitchen suddenly banged open with enough force to rattle the frames on the walls, cutting short all the conversations in the room.

Every head turned toward the sound. Sanji's breath caught in his throat.

Zeff stood in the doorway, one hand still gripping the door handle, his chest heaving like he'd run the entire length of the kitchen. He was older—so much older than Sanji remembered. Deep lines creased his weathered face, his braided mustache more gray than blond now. He wore a pristine white chef's coat and that ridiculously tall toque he'd always favored, and his peg leg gleamed under the dining room lights. But it was his eyes that made Sanji's heart clench—wild, desperate, disbelieving as they swept across the crowded room.

Then they landed on Sanji.

The world seemed to stop. Sanji couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't do anything but stare back at the man who had saved his life, who had shared his dream, who had been the closest thing to a real father he'd ever known. Part of him still couldn't believe this was real, that Zeff was actually standing there, that he wasn't going to wake up in his cell in Germa to find this had all been a cruel dream.

Zeff's face went through a dozen emotions in the span of a heartbeat—shock, disbelief, recognition, and then something that looked almost like pain before settling into fierce, overwhelming joy.

"Sanji?" His voice cracked on the name, rough and uncertain, like he was afraid saying it too loud would shatter the illusion.

Sanji's legs moved without his permission, carrying him forward through the maze of tables. Diners pressed back to give him room, their conversations dying to whispers. He was vaguely aware of Zoro following a few steps behind, a solid presence at his back, but all his focus was on Zeff.

He stopped a few feet away, suddenly uncertain. What if Zeff was angry he'd never tried to contact him? What if he blamed him for what Judge had done? What if—

"Eggplant?" Zeff's voice was softer now, wondering. "That really you?"

The old nickname—the one Sanji had always protested, always complained about—hit him like a physical blow. His vision blurred with tears.

"Yeah," he managed, his voice breaking. "Yeah, it's me. Hi, old geezer."

For a long moment, Zeff just stared at him, his single visible eye roving over Sanji's face like he was trying to memorize every detail. Sanji watched his throat work, saw his hands clench and unclench at his sides.

Then Zeff moved.

He was fast—faster than a man his age with a peg leg had any right to be—and suddenly Sanji was being pulled into a crushing embrace. Strong arms wrapped around him, one hand

coming up to cradle the back of his head, and Sanji found himself pressed against Zeff's broad chest.

The smell hit him first—garlic, oregano and herbs, the lingering scent of the kitchen, and underneath it all something that was purely Zeff. Clean cotton and sea salt. The chef's coat was soft against Sanji's cheek, worn from countless washings, and he could feel the steady thump of Zeff's heartbeat against his ear.

It was real. This was real.

Sanji's hands fisted in the back of Zeff's coat as a sob tore from his throat. All the years of separation, all the loneliness and fear and desperate hope came crashing down on him at once. He buried his face in Zeff's shoulder and let himself cry, great heaving sobs that shook his whole body.

Zeff held him through it all, one hand stroking his hair, the other arm locked around him like he was afraid Sanji might disappear if he let go.

"How?" Zeff whispered against his ear, his voice thick with emotion. "How are you here?"

"Reiju," Sanji gasped out between sobs. "And Zoro. They—they got me out. We took a submarine through the Calm Belt and I—I thought—maybe you'd—you'd want to see me—"

"Want to see you?" Zeff's arms tightened almost painfully. "You're damn right I would. I've spent *years* worrying about you, wondering if I'd ever see you again, if you were even still —" His voice broke and he didn't finish the sentence.

"I'm sorry," Sanji choked out. "I'm so sorry, I should have—"

"Don't." Zeff's voice was fierce. "Don't you dare apologize to me, you little brat. That was Judge's doing, not yours. You hear me? None of this was your fault."

"But he hurt you because of me. All because you tried to—"

"That man never needed an excuse to hurt anyone," Zeff cut him off. "And I don't regret what I did. Not for a second. A man's got to take responsibility for his own, and you were mine the moment I decided to teach you. That's all I did."

Sanji let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob, something breaking open in his chest. He pressed his face harder into Zeff's shoulder, breathing in his scent, letting the solid warmth of him chase away the lingering cold of Germa's halls.

The world around them faded—the watching diners, the clatter of dishes, even Zoro's presence behind him. There was only this: Zeff's arms around him, the proof that someone had missed him, had worried about him, had kept hoping he'd come back.

Something that had been broken and askew inside him for so long finally clicked into place.

They stood like that for a long time, neither willing to let go. Sanji felt Zeff's chest hitch once, twice, and realized the old man was crying too. That made him cry harder.

Finally, after what felt like both an eternity and no time at all, Zeff pulled back. He kept his hands on Sanji's shoulders, his grip firm and grounding, and studied his face with an intensity that made Sanji want to squirm.

"Look at you," Zeff said, his voice rough. "All grown up." His eye traced over Sanji's features—the sharper angles of his face, the faint shadows under his eyes, the way he held himself. "Still a string bean though. How the hell have you been eating?"

Despite everything, Sanji found himself laughing wetly. "Well, I've only had MREs to work with for the last couple months, and I needed to prioritize Zoro's dietary needs anyway."

"No, you didn't," came the immediate grumble from behind him.

Sanji turned his head to glare at the swordsman. "We're not having that argument again right now, Moss. Especially not in front of my dad."

The word slipped out before he could stop it. *Dad.* He'd never called Zeff that before, had always stuck to "old man" or "geezer" or his name. But it felt right. It felt true.

Zeff's eye widened slightly, something soft and vulnerable crossing his face before he cleared his throat roughly. His gaze shifted past Sanji to the green-haired man standing a few feet back.

Sanji watched as Zeff assessed Zoro with the same critical eye he'd once used to judge Sanji's knife work. He took in the three swords, the hard muscle, the way Zoro stood with his weight balanced and ready despite his relaxed posture. The protective way he hovered near Sanji without crowding him.

Zoro met Zeff's gaze steadily, his jaw set, his single eye unwavering. There was a challenge in his stance—not aggressive, but firm. A clear message: *I'm not going anywhere.*

Zeff's eyebrow rose slowly. He looked back at Sanji with an expression that was equal parts knowing and amused.

"So," he said slowly. "This is the one who got you out?"

"One of them, yeah." Sanji stepped back and gestured for Zoro to come closer. The swordsman moved forward immediately, and Sanji found himself reaching for him, his hand finding Zoro's arm and holding on. "This is Zoro. He's... he's my..."

The words stuck in his throat. What were they? Lovers? Partners? Boyfriends seemed too casual for what they had, too small to encompass everything Zoro meant to him. They'd never put a label on it, had never needed to when it was just the two of them.

But now, standing in front of Zeff, Sanji realized he needed to find the words. Needed Zeff to understand.

"He's my Moss," he finally said, the nickname feeling inadequate but somehow right. "My... my person."

Zoro's hand came up to cover his where it gripped his arm, squeezing gently. When Sanji glanced at him, he found Zoro looking at him with that soft expression that was reserved only for him, the one that made his chest feel too full.

Even if Zeff rejected him for this—for being with a man, for choosing a pirate, for any of a dozen reasons—he'd still have Zoro. It would hurt, would tear something vital inside him, but he wouldn't be alone.

Zeff was quiet for a long moment, his gaze moving between them. Sanji held his breath.

"*Your* moss, eh?" Zeff's mouth twitched. "Can't say I'm surprised."

"What?" Sanji blinked.

"You always did have a type." Zeff crossed his arms, his expression turning thoughtful. "Remember that doctor lad who broke into Germa to raid the labs? The one with the spotted hat?"

Sanji's face immediately heated. "That was—Trafalgar Law was just—"

"You two got along a little too well for it to be 'just' anything," Zeff continued, clearly enjoying himself now. "I watched you sneak him extra food, saw the way you'd light up when he came to visit. The boy was half in love with you by the time Judge ran him off."

"We were friends!" Sanji protested, his face burning. "He was interesting and he didn't treat me like—like I was nothing. That's all."

"Uh-huh." Zeff's grin widened. "And what about that other pirate lad? The one from Whitebeard's crew with the fire powers?"

Sanji wanted to sink through the floor. "Oh my god."

"Firefist Ace," Zeff said, his tone almost fond. "Now that boy was ready to sweep you off your feet and carry you away as his bride if Judge hadn't caught wind of it. I've never seen someone so determined to flirt their way through reinforced steel bars."

"He was keeping me company during my captivity," Sanji said weakly. "That was all. We talked about cooking and the sea and—"

"And he brought you flowers," Zeff added. "And wrote you poetry. Terrible poetry, mind you, but poetry nonetheless."

"It wasn't that bad," Sanji muttered, then realized what he'd admitted. "I mean—"

"I'm old, Eggplant, not blind. I know what flirting looks like." Zeff's expression softened slightly. "I also know what it looks like when someone's trying to bring a little light into a dark place. Those boys cared about you. I was grateful for that, even if it made Judge's security team lose their minds."

Sanji couldn’t look at Zeff anymore. His gaze slid sideways and landed on Zoro—whose jaw was clenched tight, whose eye had gone dark and stormy, whose entire body had gone rigid with tension.

Oh no.

Zoro’s lip was jutted out more than normal, his brows drawn together in a scowl that would have been comical if Sanji didn’t recognize it for what it was. The swordsman was staring at a point somewhere past Zeff’s shoulder, his expression thunderous.

He was pouting. Actually, genuinely pouting.

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re jealous, Moss,” Sanji said, exasperated and fond in equal measure. “I knew them each for the span of a month, maybe two. I’m here with *you*, not them. I’m introducing you to my dad, for heaven’s sake.”

Zoro’s scowl deepened. “Didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. Your face is doing all the talking.” Sanji squeezed his arm. “Law was a friend who understood what it was like to be trapped. Ace was... Ace was kind to me when kindness was rare. But neither of them are you.”

“They wanted you,” Zoro muttered, still not looking at him.

“Maybe. But I didn’t want them. Not like—” Sanji cut himself off, suddenly aware of their audience. The entire dining room had gone silent, every eye fixed on them. He could feel the weight of their stares, the curiosity and speculation.

A low, dangerous sound rumbled from Zoro’s chest—not quite a growl, but close. Several nearby diners actually leaned back in their seats, their eyes widening. Sanji had to admit, Zoro did look rather homicidal at the moment, all sharp edges and barely contained violence.

“Zoro,” Sanji said quietly, turning to face him fully. He reached up to cup the swordsman’s face, forcing him to meet his eyes. “Hey. Look at me.”

Zoro’s gaze snapped to his, still stormy but focused now.

“You’re the one I chose,” Sanji said, low enough that only Zoro and maybe Zeff could hear. “You’re the one who came for me. You’re the one I’m standing here with. That means something, doesn’t it?”

Some of the tension bled out of Zoro’s shoulders. His hand came up to cover Sanji’s where it rested against his cheek. “Yeah. It does.”

“Then stop pouting like a child who had his toy taken away.”

“I don’t pout.”

“You’re literally pouting right now.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

Zeff cleared his throat loudly, and Sanji suddenly remembered where they were. He dropped his hand from Zoro’s face, his own face heating again as he turned back to find Zeff watching them with barely concealed amusement.

“You two done?” the old chef asked.

“Sorry,” Sanji muttered.

“Don’t be. It’s good to see you happy.” Zeff’s expression turned serious. “Even if your taste in men is questionable.”

“Hey,” Zoro protested.

“Three swords?” Zeff continued, ignoring him. “What kind of ridiculous fighting style is that? And that hair—did you lose a bet, son?”

“It’s natural,” Zoro growled.

“Even worse.” But there was no real heat in Zeff’s words. He was still studying Zoro with that assessing gaze, and Sanji could practically see him cataloging everything—the calluses on Zoro’s hands, the way he stood, the quality of his swords, the protective way he angled himself toward Sanji.

Finally, Zeff gave a small nod, like Zoro had passed some invisible test.

“Well,” he said, his voice gruff. “At least he looks like he can handle himself in a fight. You’re going to need that, the trouble you attract.”

“I don’t attract trouble,” Sanji protested.

“Eggplant, you were born into trouble and you’ve been swimming in it ever since.” Zeff’s expression softened. “But maybe now you’ve got someone to help you swim.”

Zoro’s hand found Sanji’s, their fingers threading together. “Yeah. He does.”

The simple certainty in those words made Sanji’s throat tight. He squeezed Zoro’s hand, grateful beyond words.

A throat cleared nearby, and Sanji looked over to see the maître d—Patty, he remembered—standing a few feet away. The man’s eyes were suspiciously bright, and he was dabbing at them with a handkerchief.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Patty said, his voice thick. “But the kitchen’s starting to back up, and—” He broke off, looking at Sanji with wonder. “You’re really him. You’re really Sanji.”

“I—yes?” Sanji said, uncertain. He’d never met this man before.

“The old man’s talked about you for years,” Patty continued, his voice thick with emotion. “Told us all about his son. About your dreams of finding All Blue, about how talented you were in the kitchen, about...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “We all hoped someday you’d make it here. That he’d get to see you again.”

Around the dining room, Sanji noticed other staff members had paused in their work.

“It’s good to finally meet you,” Patty said, his eyes glistening. “Really good.”

Sanji looked around the dining room and realized that several of the staff were watching him with similar expressions—recognition, joy, welcome. These people had never met him, but they knew him through Zeff’s words, through years of stories and hope. And now, finally, he was here.

The realization made his eyes sting again.

“Alright, alright,” Zeff said, waving a hand. “Show’s over. Everyone back to work or back to your meals before I start charging a spectator fee.”

There was a ripple of laughter, and slowly the dining room returned to its normal buzz of conversation. But Sanji could still feel eyes on him, could sense the curiosity and speculation.

Zeff must have noticed his discomfort because he jerked his head toward the kitchen. “Come on, you two. You look like you need a proper meal, and I’m not having this conversation in the middle of the dining room. I’ll make you something and you can tell me everything—how you got out, where you’ve been, what your plans are.”

He started toward the kitchen, then paused and looked back at Patty. “Make up a room for them. The big one on the third floor.”

“The big one?” Patty’s eyebrows rose. “But that’s—”

“I know what it is. Move Sanji’s things there and make sure there’s space for his... Moss.” Zeff’s mouth twitched on the word.

“Wait.” Sanji’s brain finally caught up. “My things? What things?”

Zeff turned back to him, his expression unreadable. “Your room, Eggplant. Did you think I wouldn’t keep one ready for you?”

“I—” Sanji’s voice failed him. “You kept a room for me?”

“Of course I did.” Zeff’s voice was gruff, almost defensive. “I wasn’t going to build this place without making sure there was space for you. Been waiting for you to come home since the day I opened the doors.”

The words hit Sanji like a physical blow. All these years, Zeff had been waiting. Had kept a room ready, had hoped, had believed Sanji would come back someday.

“I didn’t know if you’d want me here,” Sanji whispered. “After everything that happened, after what Judge did to you—”

“What Judge did to me was his choice, not yours.” Zeff stepped closer, his hand coming up to grip Sanji’s shoulder. “You’re my son in every way that matters. This is your home. It always has been.”

Sanji couldn’t speak past the lump in his throat. He nodded, not trusting his voice.

“Didn’t expect the plus one though,” Zeff added, glancing at Zoro. “But we’ll make it work. The room’s big enough for two.”

“Thank you,” Zoro said quietly. It was the first time he’d spoken directly to Zeff, and there was a weight to the words—gratitude, but also a promise. *I’ll take care of him. I’ll keep him safe.*

Zeff seemed to hear it too because he nodded slowly. “Just don’t break anything. And keep the noise down—we’ve got paying customers.”

Sanji’s face flamed. “Oh my god.”

“What? I’m just saying—”

“We’re not having this conversation.” Sanji grabbed Zoro’s hand and started pulling him toward the kitchen. “Come on, Moss. Let’s go before he gets worse.”

Behind them, he heard Zeff’s rough laughter and Patty’s amused chuckle. Despite his embarrassment, Sanji found himself smiling.

He was home. He was really, truly home.

~*~*~

The kitchen was exactly as Sanji remembered and nothing like it at the same time.

It was bigger, for one thing—a sprawling space with multiple stations, industrial stoves, and gleaming prep counters. The air was thick with heat and the smell of cooking food—searing meat, simmering sauces, fresh bread. Chefs moved through the space with practiced efficiency, calling out orders and plating dishes with swift precision.

But the bones of it were the same. The layout, the flow, the way everything was organized—it was all familiar, like coming home to a place he’d only ever visited in dreams.

Zeff led them to a small table in the corner, away from the main cooking area but still within sight of everything. “Sit,” he ordered. “I’ll make you something.”

“You don’t have to—” Sanji started.

“I’m making you something,” Zeff repeated firmly. “You’re skin and bones, and I’m not having you waste away on my watch. Now sit.”

Sanji sat. Zoro settled beside him, close enough that their thighs pressed together, his presence warm and grounding.

They watched as Zeff moved through the kitchen, barking orders at his staff, checking dishes, adjusting seasonings. He moved with the same confidence and grace Sanji remembered, peg leg and all, completely in his element.

“He’s good,” Zoro observed quietly.

“He’s the best,” Sanji said, unable to keep the pride from his voice. “He taught me everything I know about cooking.”

“That why you’re so good at it?”

“Part of it. The rest is just... it’s the only thing that’s ever been mine, you know? The only thing they couldn’t take from me.”

Zoro’s hand found his under the table, squeezing gently. “You’ve got more than that now.”

“Yeah.” Sanji squeezed back. “I do.”

Zeff returned a short while later with two plates piled high with food—perfectly seared fish, roasted vegetables, creamy risotto, and fresh bread still warm from the oven. The smell alone made Sanji’s mouth water.

“Eat,” Zeff commanded, setting the plates in front of them. “And while you eat, you talk. I want to know everything.”

So Sanji talked. He told Zeff about the years in Germa, about the isolation and the training and the slow erosion of hope. He told him about Zoro appearing, about their stolen moments, about falling in love in the spaces between surveillance. He told him about Reiju’s plan, about the escape, about the submarine journey through the Calm Belt.

Zeff listened to all of it, his expression growing darker with each detail. When Sanji mentioned his brothers’ abuse, Zeff’s hands clenched into fists. When he talked about Judge’s cruelty, the old chef’s jaw tightened until Sanji could see the muscle jumping.

But he didn’t interrupt. He let Sanji talk, let him get it all out, and when Sanji finally fell silent, Zeff was quiet for a long moment.

“I should have done more,” he finally said, his voice rough. “Should have fought harder to get you out.”

“You did everything you could,” Sanji said firmly. “Judge had an army. You had a restaurant. There was nothing more you could have done.”

“Still should have tried.”

“And you would have died.” Sanji met his eyes. “I’m glad you didn’t. I’m glad you’re here now.”

Zeff's throat worked. He looked away, blinking rapidly. "Yeah. Well. You're here now too. That's what matters."

They finished their meal in comfortable silence, the food as incredible as Sanji remembered. When they were done, Zeff stood and gestured for them to follow.

"Come on. I'll show you to your room."

He led them through the restaurant, up a set of stairs to the third floor. The hallway was quiet, lined with doors that Sanji assumed led to other rooms. Zeff stopped in front of one near the end and pulled out a key.

"This one's yours," he said, unlocking the door and pushing it open.

The room was spacious—larger than Sanji's cell in Germa by a factor of ten. There was a big bed with a thick comforter, a dresser, a desk, and a window that looked out over the ocean. The walls were painted a warm cream color, and there were small touches everywhere that made it feel lived-in—a bookshelf with cooking texts, a small plant on the windowsill, a framed photo of the ocean at sunset.

But what caught Sanji's attention was the small pile of belongings on the dresser. A few books, a worn apron, a set of kitchen knives in a leather roll.

"Are those..." He stepped closer, his hand hovering over the knives. "These are mine. From before."

"Kept them safe for you," Zeff said gruffly. "Figured you'd want them back someday."

Sanji picked up the knife roll with shaking hands. He unrolled it slowly, revealing the blades inside—perfectly maintained, sharp and gleaming. These were the knives Zeff had given him when he'd first started teaching him, the ones he'd used before Germa.

"You kept them," he whispered.

"Of course I kept them. They're yours." Zeff cleared his throat. "There's more in the closet—some clothes, other things. Patty will bring up anything else you need."

Sanji couldn't speak. He clutched the knife roll to his chest, overwhelmed by the evidence of Zeff's faith, his hope, his love.

Zeff stepped forward and pulled him into another hug, this one briefer but no less meaningful. "Welcome home, Eggplant," he murmured. "Welcome home."

When he pulled back, his eye was suspiciously bright. He cleared his throat roughly and turned to Zoro. "You take care of him, you hear me? Or you'll answer to me."

"I will," Zoro said simply.

Zeff nodded, satisfied. "Good. Now get some rest. You both look like you need it." He headed for the door, then paused and looked back. "Sanji?"

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re home.”

Then he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him.

Sanji stood in the middle of the room, still holding his knives, and felt something inside him finally, fully settle. He was home. He was safe. He was loved.

Zoro’s arms came around him from behind, pulling him back against his chest. “You okay, Cook?”

“Yeah.” Sanji leaned into him, letting Zoro’s warmth seep into him. “Yeah, I think I am.”

They stood like that for a long moment, just breathing together, letting the reality of their new life sink in. Then Zoro pressed a kiss to the top of Sanji’s head.

“Come on. Let’s get some rest. We’ve got time now. All the time in the world.”

Time. Freedom. Home. Sanji had all of it now, and he had Zoro beside him.

It was more than he’d ever dared to dream of.

He set the knives down carefully on the dresser and turned in Zoro’s arms, reaching up to cup his face. “I love you,” he said softly.

“I love you too, Curls.” Zoro kissed him, slow and sweet and full of promise.

When they finally pulled apart, Sanji smiled—a real, genuine smile that felt like it came from somewhere deep inside him.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said.

“Yeah. Let’s go home.”

And they did.

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