Bloodline Cocktail

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1270.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Misogyny
Categories:	Hetero (F/M), Getting Together
Fandom:	One Piece (Manga)
Relationship:	Roronoa Zoro/Vinsmoke Reiju
Characters:	Roronoa Zoro, Vinsmoke Reiju, Sanji (One Piece), Vinsmoke Judge, Mugiwara Kaizoku | Strawhat Pirates, Monkey D. Luffy, Trafalgar Law, Vinsmoke Yonji, Vinsmoke Niji, Vinsmoke Ichiji, Caesar Clown (One Piece)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Modified Canon, Post-Canon, Pregnancy, Unplanned Pregnancy, Drama, Kidnapping, Slow Burn, Angst, Fluff, Humor, Developing Relationship, Touch-Starved, Roronoa Zoro is Bad at Feelings, Vinsmoke Reiju Needs a Hug, Blood and Violence, Kissing, Wrestling - Freeform, Non-Verbal Communication, Hurt/Comfort, Disguises, Harm to Animals, Panic Attacks
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-11-04 Updated: 2026-11-06 Words: 38,011 Chapters: 6/?

Bloodline Cocktail

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Summary

Zoro was (unfortunately) used enough to being kidnapped, but never for this long and never for situations this drastic. Now, not only has he been captured and imprisoned by his rival's former father, he now has a bun in the oven on its way and needs to get things straightened out fast, with Reiju and baby in tow. Hopefully the shitcook won't crucify him too much for this.

Reiju didn't think she had another chance to salvage her child's future, but the unfortunate situation with Zoro may actually be a boon as she breaks the both of them out of Germa and into a better future. Hopefully, Sanji won't hate her too much for this...

Chapter 1: So, You're Finally Awake

Three years had passed since Luffy's lifelong dream to be King of the Pirates had been achieved. Three years since his discovery of the One Piece had set off a chain reaction, toppling the World Government from the bottom up. Three years since that shockwave had shaken the Marines to the core and finally started its reformation. Those series of events three years ago resonated across the world...but for Zoro, it was just another Tuesday. And on this Tuesday evening, he had just woken up from one of his sporadic naps…in his bed? No, no, it couldn't be, he rarely ever actually slept there nowadays and even when he did, it never felt this uncomfortable and stiff. Opening his good eye, he could not see much around him, the room being darker than night. Then the smell hit him. The scent of dank still water, of the rot of dead rodents, and of other desiccated and forgotten things left in a cold and unfeeling area. Pushing his body up, he felt around him, the bed he was on simply being a slab of suspended metal and the walls being suspiciously moist stone.

He was in a *cell*.

Fuck, how the hell had he been captured. Were the rest of the crew also captured? A quick pat down told him that not only had his swords been confiscated but…he had even been stripped down to his fundoshi! He squeezed his thighs together, instinctively, feeling a cold breeze shooting up somewhere it did not belong. *Think, man, think*, he thought to himself. WHAT happened for him to end up like this? Zoro wracked his brain, putting together what pieces he could remember. He was…he was on the Sunny, doing the night watch with the kitchen gremlin. To avoid any fighting, they had taken to being on the opposite ends of the ship at all times. It was deep into the night, meaning they were the only souls awake under the cloudy sky and relatively calm sea. And then…and then…

Zoro groaned to himself when he could not remember anything after that. He had to have been drugged and brought here if that was the case, but by who?

"Lights on."

A set of bright, blinding lights switched on at the command of this deep voice and the swordsman had to squint hard for a few seconds for his eye to adjust to the change. When he could somewhat see again, he was able to realize that he was surrounded outside of his cell, with two figures in front of him who stuck out of the crowd. The larger figure was towering, with a shocking head of long and spiky hair and a mustache that looked like it could cut through flesh and frown that could cut through any lesser man's heart. Next to him was a pink haired woman who looked like she wanted to be anywhere else but here right now. It looks like they were seated and had been sitting there, waiting for his awakening, for a while.

Around them were identical soldiers, eyes hidden behind opaque glasses and a rifle in every one of their hands.

“So, you're finally awake.” The large man growled. He shifted in his chair and straightened his posture to make his already gargantuan self look taller. An obvious intimidation tactic. Like hell Zoro was going to allow his bastard captor to even feel the satisfaction of making him feel small.

“Yeah, and I'd like some damn answers.”

He shifted his weight to get up onto his feet, but this sudden movement made the already jumpy guards cock the hammers of their rifles. He was strong, sure, but without his swords…

Zoro settled down and instead glared at his captors with more contempt.

“Quite a demanding little thing you are, even knowing what position you are in. Do you even know why I brought you here today?”

The tall blond spoke through his teeth, biting back on some deeply held anger.

“How the hell should I know? All I remember is being captured by your cronies and plopped into this cell!”

The blond tsked. He got up from his chair, slowly walking towards Zoro with his hands behind his back.

“Mister Roronoa, while we may not have met before, your reputation has preceded you. A reputation I can acknowledge, as a combat expert myself. But even with that, what you have done to my *daughter*…it is just *unforgivable*.”

This statement confused Zoro for a second. Something he did to someone’s daughter? Sure, he had fought some women before, and their blood spilt, as with many of his foes, but none he could remember that were part of a kingdom like this.

As the older man got closer, though, Zoro could make out the details of his face more clearly. Much of his face was covered by an ornate helmet, but at this distance, the swordsman could

see his eyebrows…his curly eyebrows.

It all came together suddenly.

Zoro's eye widened and his knuckles turned white from how he gripped the bench.

"You're shit cook's sperm donor!"

The man, the king, *Vinsmoke Judge*, growled and bared his teeth as his shoulders tensed.

"It took you long enough to see that. I am guessing Sanji has been blabbing about Germa to anyone who will listen, dispensing his sob stories?"

"He told me enough to know how much of a short sighted, bigheaded, cowardly mad scientist you are."

The swordsman could not help his tone becoming more aggravated and edgy, making the already on edge soldiers poke their guns directly into his cell. Judge put a hand up to keep them from trying anything further. The pink haired woman, still in her chair, face partially covered by her hair with her head downturned, shrank into her seat further.

"So you do at least know about us Vinsmokes. To an extent. Hmph, only makes what you did far worse."

What the fuck was this man talking about? Judge kept yammering about what Zoro did to one of his kids but…he couldn't recall ever meeting one of them. He definitely would remember seeing someone else who isn't Curlybrow with those coiled brows.

"You sure you don't have the wrong guy? I've never even *seen* any of you people until now."

Judge's frown deepened and the room somehow felt even icier than before. He gripped one of the cell bars hard as he brought his face closer to the space between the metal.

"Oh you most definitely have, Mr.Roronoa. Or did you forget your little rendezvous on *Innsmouth*?"

Innsmouth…Innsmouth…

Zoro's eyes flicked over to the pink haired woman again, which had to be…Reiju. She shrunk away at Judge's mention of that island. And while her arms were covering her midsection, it was undeniable how…round it was. In a solid way that could only mean…

Oh God, Zoro was a fucking moron.

His mouth and throat felt dried up and incredibly parched.

"No way…no way, there is just…that woman didn't even have her eyebrows or tattoos!"

His floundering was obviously unfounded and desperate, the product of his mind trying not to believe what was right in front of him. Judge seemed to revel in breaking this news to the man, seeing him squirm a little.

"Reiju has been trained to be a little more covert than her brothers when it comes to assassinations, including the ability to disguise her most prominent features with makeup. Either way, though, it does not matter how you try to worm your way out of this, considering I finally got Reiju to give up the identity of the sire."

A shaky exhale came from the woman. Zoro clamped his lips together as he kept eye contact with Judge. Looking away at this point would just be giving the man what he wants.

"It took a few months, though, to get it out of her. Despite my best efforts to make sure she would not *keep secrets*," he turned away for a moment to shoot a look at Reiju, "she did keep

this child situation out of my sight until it could no longer be hidden. And then she kept *you* out of my knowledge until I managed to twist her arm enough."

God…fuck…

"And that leads us to now. You, here, in my dungeon, Roronoa. Do you know why I brought you here now that you know what has been done?"

"You…you want me to marry her?"

It was all Zoro could think of on why he was forcefully brought here, that usually was the byproduct of the father of the woman you knocked up dragging you to his home, but this made the king *laugh* at him mirthlessly.

"Not in your *life*, you little whelp. You may be part of that Straw Hat crew, but to me you're still just a commoner. No, I brought you to my home because I am beyond *livid* that this was done without my consent. Who are you to try and stake your claim in my kingdom, *in my daughter*, by sowing your seeds around so carelessly? You're just some uppity little pirate who does not know his place. So, in order to keep our image, and so you will not reap the rewards of your harvest, I decided it would be best to keep you here at Germa… *permanently*."

Zoro's heart was pounding in his chest, thrumming in his ears, as he kept his body still. A blood lust was coming over him at this revelation. He was being kept down here, kept from his *crew*, all because this big blond bastard was possessive over his daughter? At least from what he heard from Sanji about his former family that this was par for the course.

Sanji…oh shit, *Sanji*.

"Where is my crew, then," the swordsman snarled, "where are you keeping them?"

“Feh, I am keeping my promise I made to Sanji all those years ago. I left him and alone along with the rest of your crew. Though, I cannot say they might not have been roughed up by the extraction crew for resisting.”

Oh.

Oh he was going to KILL this man.

Composure lost, Zoro ran up and slammed against the bars of his cell. He heard a gun fire in his direction before Judge put a hand up for his soldiers to halt.

“What did you do to them!” The green haired man bared his teeth.

“As I said, I do at least know they are still alive…though, from the mission reports, they are not in the best shape. All because *you* could not keep it in your pants.”

The audacity of this statement, just the *thought* of his crewmates being hurt and him being unable to do anything about it…*fuck the guns around him*, he was ready to go for this man’s throat, swords be damned. One of his hands shot up from the bar it gripped, ready to choke this man out…

…until his eye locked with Reiju’s. The tiredness. The despair in them. The arm around her stomach.

None of this was easy for her too.

He…couldn’t be tough in the way he usually was, not now at least. The woman looked stressed enough as is. He started yapping from his cell and bringing Judge down from his humiliation high, and she might have to pay for that.

Zoro pulled both his hands back and stuck them to his sides. His movements were robotic as he contained all the emotions he had at the moment.

The blond king clucked his tongue condescendingly.

“Aww, nippy little thing, aren’t we? Well, don’t worry too much about that, I took the liberty of installing a little *extra security* on your person while you were out.”

Judge reached into his breastpocket and pressed something. In an instant, Zoro’s wrists and ankles slammed together and were stuck with great strength. He attempted to pull them apart but it was a fruitless effort. On further inspection, Zoro finally noticed what was keeping his limbs together: deep black tattoos, freshly inked, circled his ankles and wrists like cuffs.

Satisfied for now, Judge pressed a button again and his limbs were released.

“A new piece of technology,” he coolly informed the swordsman, “so you do not get any escape ideas. If you try to jump or swim off, all it takes is a push of a button to leave you retrievable…or to leave you to *drown*.”

“You…you…” Zoro felt like he was about to explode again with the mounting pressure, until he flicked his eye over at Reiju again and back at Judge. He could bark all he wanted, but even then he knew Judge *was* the one with all the cards in his favor. There was nothing sharp in his cell he could use as a weapon and slice through the bastard, he was outnumbered, outgunned, all of this was not to mention the king would most likely sic his super powered sons on him to pound him to mush.

Reluctantly, he deflated and took a few steps back. The king of Germa sneered at this, feeling a shot of satisfaction at Zoro’s silence.

“No more comments, then? Then we’re done here. I assign a handler to you tomorrow to wake you up and get you ready for work,” he waited a second to see if Zoro would react to this new phase of his life, “Do not think just because I have you imprisoned here that you will get any sort of special treatment from work. Being in Germa means being *useful*, and I am sure many of my citizens would have usage for *you*, especially when it comes to the jobs no one else wants to do.”

“So are we done here?” Zoro finally said in a bid for defiance. Judge’s expression simmered down a bit now, his face turning stony as he nodded.

“Yes, yes it is.” He shot a lighting bolt look to his daughter before gesturing to the entourage of soldiers to lower their weapons and leave. They left in single file, marching away

robotically, leaving Judge and Reiju alone with Zoro. The pair did not leave quite yet, Judge looking straight down at his daughter, his expression unreadable. Reiju herself could not even bear to glance at the captive man, her blue gaze averted and paying much closer attention to the floor.

“Reiju,” the blond king’s voice was crisp and devoid of empathy, “look at Mr.Roronoa Zoro.”

The woman’s head snapped up, as if possessed, and her hands gripped her nightgown skirt with a tremendous force. Her pair of eyes made firm contact with his remaining one.

Even though she did not say anything, the apologetic and strained look in her eyes made the message clear.

I am so, so sorry.

The few seconds where the two were forced to soak in each other’s states seemed to stretch on for infinity, his heart seemingly twisting in on itself as all the information dumped on him began to sink in. The discomfort between the pair was thick and palpable until Judge finally broke it with a snap of his fingers. He ordered Reiju to follow him upstairs and she obliged. As Zoro was left alone with just his thoughts and digesting all the information that had been shoved onto him, one thought kept repeating itself over and over throughout the night:

What was he supposed to do now?

“So,” her father shifted his hulking form around to face her as the door to the dungeon was closed and locked, “do we have an understanding now?”

Reiju forced her neck to crane her head up to look at Judge, even though the floor was a much more enticing sight at the moment.

"Yes, father," she forced her voice to be pillow soft and docile, "I cannot hide anything from you and…" she swallowed down the build up of saliva in her throat.

"And?" her father pushed on in anticipation.

"And anything that has to do with me or my body has to be approved by you first. Because I am not just your daughter, but your *soldier* too."

Something resembling a smile crossed his mustached lips and he gave her a pet on the head, a rough one.

"Good girl. And now you know what *happens* when you try to slink around me. Now, go to bed."

Once she was relieved from having to spend a second longer in the display of punitive shame her father just put her through, Reiju beelined back to her room and shut and locked the door behind her. She pressed her back against the wood and breathed slowly and deeply. It was like there was a heavy weight pulling down on her lungs.

She was expecting this, to an extent, but this did not mean that it hurt to see any less. Her father wanted her to regret her actions and it worked. He won. He got what he wanted, at least in this case, and she was left…having to take it. Having to see the father of her child confined, taken away from his true family, all because of her father's ego.

Most of Judge's anger seemed to stem from the fact that this was something he had no control over. He could not oversee the…*copulation*, and he could not oversee the first trimester of her pregnancy and make any modifications in the early stages. Maybe he would make changes to her child post birth, but…

Reiju grit her teeth together hard enough they felt that they would shatter from her head.

No…no, she could not let her mind be clouded by such horrid thoughts, not with this much more pressing matter in the present.

Today's outcome…had been expected. After all, she held out on her pregnancy until there was no way she could ever hide it. The excuses of stomach bugs and overindulgence only held up for so long until she was practically cornered by her father who told her that he would extract the truth out of her the easy way or the *hard way*.

Needless to say, she had a child now to look after, and as much as it pained her, she admitted what she had done…for the most part.

Using a loophole in the programming that controlled her, she had been able to skirt around the subject of the father of her child, Zoro, up until a few weeks ago when she was given an ultimatum.

Bile rose up and burned the back of her throat at the memory.

Needless to say, betraying the identity of her child's father was a far better option than *that*.

Reiju had hoped and hoped for weeks that her father would not be able to track down the Straw Hats, at least for long enough until his anger ran out. That would at least mean he could be safe from the man's wrath. Of course, it was a pipe dream, as she sat here in front of her door, the swordsman rotting in the dungeon.

A small limb hit her stomach with all the force the small being inside of her could muster. It was enough to put some of her thoughts on pause as she looked down at her stomach.

"So, you're awake," she stated rather matter of factly to the child inside of her, "right on time."

Yes, now was the time of evening when her child became active, moving and rolling around her abdomen without a care in the world. If only she were so lucky as to have that attitude. Reiju placed a hand on the crest of her stomach, the child giving a good kick just right next to her palm.

“So…that was your father back there, in the dungeon, if you did not know…though, not like you would know anything at this point. Except…maybe my voice…but you do not seem to always react to that, so perhaps I am assigning traits to you that are…” she pursed her lips and lowered her voice even further, “...nevermind, I am just rambling.”

The pink blonde’s nerves were still frayed, with seemingly every misstep she had made up until this point culminating into the present day.

She just wanted to see Sanji again, just one more time and never again due to extenuating circumstances, but then that swordsman…he just waltzed into her world, even if unintentionally, and it was like something had been wrenched out from the recesses of her chest and exposed to the sunlight for the first time ever. No man, woman, or person had ever been able to tickle her fancy and the princess had assumed love and pleasure just were not for her…but maybe it was more that her lock needed a very specific key, so to speak.

Now if only that key was protected…

Once she figured out she was pregnant, Reiju labored over what to do with this situation, with this life growing inside of her. A life that was innocent of the sins of Germa and the sins of their mother. A life that deserved nothing more than to be free, to be someone *good*.

The princess would put something good out in the world if it was the last thing she would do. She spent months feverishly scheming any and every way to give her child a better future than that of Germa. Just as she was about to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat…

Well, needless to say, she could still hear whispers from the staff and soldiers concerning the blowout her father had at the discovery months ago.

Another flutter rippled through her stomach and Reiju managed to pull her body away from the door. There were two beings who needed to escape Germa now, and only if one of them would even want to work with her or even talk to her now. The princess desperately wanted to talk to Zoro back there, give him anything, words of comfort, a heartfelt apology for dragging him into her world, anything at all, if only her father had not commanded her silence in his presence. For someone who was often called a “demon” or “king of hell”, he looked so vulnerable and tender, nearly naked in that cell, like a turtle that had lost its shell. It made her feel even lower than before and her chest seemed to tighten.

He probably hates her now, and for good reason, but hopefully he would cooperate enough to get him back to where he belongs so he would never have to see her again. Reiju only hoped

that none of his animosity towards her would affect how he saw his child.

Another kick hit her square in the ribs, causing a grunt to escape her lips as she sat down on her bed.

“I have never seen you be this excited before,” the princess commented, rubbing the kicked area. It did not hurt, of course, but feeling anything physical like that, and in such a rapid succession, was very unusual for someone of her body type. Reiju welcomed it in a way, though. Her family was not touchy feely, obviously, but even handshakes or a hand on the shoulder was nearly alien for her, so having this sort of…touch, it really was…

…No, no no no, she had to remind herself to stop getting so attached to the baby. Setting down roots would only make it troublesome for the tree to be planted somewhere else.

Well, as much as her head was swirling with emotional pain and guilt, it would have to subside for the evening so she could get some sleep. Her father had kept her up for the example of Zoro and she had already lost an hour and some minutes of precious sleep. She needed all the rest she could get if she was to start planning out the new escape route for the new prisoner now that the leash was tightened around her neck. If her resources were limited before, her father had strangled them to nearly being cut off now. Her life was already just work, training and sleep, with mercenary missions in between, now it was just work and sleep and now without any access to more sensitive areas such as the armory or treasury. Her already closed off world was even smaller and more cramped than ever and she was not how long this would keep up.

Either way, she *had* managed to pull off two miracles with her brother Sanji before…perhaps the third time would be the charm. Or at least it *had* to be the charm, nothing less.

Slipping under her covers, she gathered up her long pillow she had begun using and hugged it close to her body, belly supported by its cooling comfort. With the stress her body still had curled up, sleepiness began to unfurl it, leaving all behind until tomorrow…

…which was the *idea*, but was not working in practice as something small and still awake kicked her square in the kidneys. Reiju breathily groaned and wrapped an arm around her stomach.

“What has made you so riled up?”

Only the silence responded.

She had no idea what she was going to achieve by asking such a question, but for some godforsaken reason, it felt right. Reiju had become accustomed to talking to those who could say nothing back during her pregnancy, starting with the trips she made to her mother’s grave and evolving into relaying whatever feelings she had at the moment to her child. She felt foolish and a little bit like her sanity was slipping whenever she did so, but it provided some comfort, and that was enough for her.

“...Is it because of what happened today?”

Nothing once again, not even a stir.

“Look, I…” the words seemed to die on her lips as she tried to put together something comforting. Reiju was never good with being able to *say* comforting or soothing things, stumbling over the basics of language whenever she tried. If anything, she was a woman of action, though mainly because it was a role forced upon her. Words meant nothing if she could not back them up with anything. So, wetting her lips, she tried again.

“I know this situation has taken a turn for the worse, but…I can at least promise you that I will do everything in my abilities to solve this. Your father will be freed, you will be freed, and I will make sure of that even if it…”

Kills me were the last words she wanted to say, but some winding and tight part of her heart could not verbalize that. The princess was far from superstitious, but considering the fate of her mother…

Two more kicks poked her stomach and her baby seemed to calm down after that. Hopefully now she can get some sleep. She would begin her machinations in the morning along with the usual humdrum of work.

Once she was able to fall asleep, for once, Reiju’s slumber was dreamless.

With a makeshift respirator over his face, making each of his puffing breaths muted, Chopper was dashing back and forth between patients in the infirmary, checking vitals, observing their status and keeping Luffy and Robin breathing, getting fresh air into their lungs and ridding them more and more of the crystallized seastone powder out of their lungs. The ship’s captain started heaving, gagging as if to vomit, and the young reindeer caught it just in time to catch the now watery expulsion into a bucket. Sanji could no longer watch much more, limping through the hallway to the upper deck, where Franky was repairing the front mast. The cook turned his attention to their navigator, who was all bandaged up from the previous events of the evening, and giving commands to Jinbei on where to steer to get to the nearest populated island as soon as possible.

He took a huff of his cigarette, so much so, that he almost sucked the whole thing down in one breath. Sanji let the tobacco pool in his lungs for a minute, soothing his nerves to an extent before slowly letting it out.

Zoro is gone now. Snatched away, right in front of their eyes, and by Germa soldiers, no less. The operation seemed to be planned out far in advance since it seemed like every possibility had been accounted for. Some sort of seastone gas had been released, catching Robin and Luffy before they could act and rendering them too weak to fight. The rest of the crew mates had to fight packs of clone soldiers, all specific types that played into their weaknesses, that kept them busy while Zoro, looking like a pin cushion with all the tranquilizer darts, was gathered up and pulled into the clouds.

Sanji got close, so close, to rescuing Zoro before a soldier took a pot shot at his knees while he wasn't paying attention with a large and heavy weapon. The cook was sprawled across the galley, his knees burning with pain (he wouldn't be surprised if they were broken in that instant before his healing factor kicked in) and he was unable to pull himself up. All he could do in that time was watch, and listen, to a pair of guards holding Zoro by his arms and legs as they were hoisted up to the clouds. For a duo of soldiers who were still just pulling away from the ship they had just shanghaied someone from, they seemed calm enough to begin talking to one another.

“Hopefully this’ll fix the king’s mood.”

“I dunno about that. He's been in a real tizzy ever since what happened to the princess.”

Their short conversation was eating at him, Sanji's mind replaying the moment over and over along with what happened to Zoro, as if the 56th rewatch of it would reveal new information. If the soldiers didn't confirm his father had a hand in this, their direct mention of him did, but then hearing *Reiju* be brought up and it threw his mind into a tailspin. "*What happened to the princess*", what in the hell did that mean? What happened to his sister that required capturing one of his crew mates? WHY would it require Zoro? Was she still-

Sanji sucked down on the tobacco smoke even harder, letting it infest his body and his brain, smoking out the terrible thought.

She was fine when he last saw her, he was sure of that, but there still was the question of what connection those two had. The cook had told Zoro about some of his past after the failed wedding while they were in Wano, including about his sister, but that was the extent of it. There absolutely was no other connection between the two that he knew of. But…perhaps there being no connection was the point. Maybe he was looking into a crackpot theory, but what else was he supposed to work off of?

The cook took another gaseous swig of his cigarette, nearly done with it already. The burning end of it threatened to nip his fingers with heat, but that was nothing right now.

He knew that he and his crew would heal up soon enough. They always had freakish recovery rates that made most people not accustomed to them drop their jaws to the floor considering the damage they took. Luffy, Robin, Nami and the rest would get better by, at most, tomorrow, and they would begin to try and find Zoro again. That was all a fact.

They would find Zoro, and maybe, no, *would* find his sister, and they would kick some ass to get their swordsman back, this was also a fact.

What wasn't set in stone, though, was what the swordsman would go through while in that hell hole.

Sanji bit down on the butt of his cigarette, no usable tobacco left in the burnt out end.

He had escaped his former family once and had escaped them again, and now it looked like third time was going to be the charm from the way things were shaping up. The cook had every intention of leaving those people in the rearview mirror and now he was u-turning right back into that world. Every cell in his body was trying to implode on themselves so he wouldn't have to confront them again, but he couldn't do that…not to Zoro, not to *any* of his crewmates. Sanji would just have to suck it up, whether he liked it or not.

In the meantime, though, all he could do was hope that whatever was happening to Zoro, he could make it through for just long enough for them to pull through and rescue him…but since Germa 66 was the cause of this…there were no guarantees.

Chapter 2: Work for Works Sake

Chapter Summary

The morning after the reveal, Zoro and Reiju are put to work in their respective fields.

The whole night, Zoro could not think about anything else but his crew. Perhaps he was a terrible person for focusing solely on that when he just had something equally as important revealed to him, but the swordsman could not help himself. He trusted when Judge said they were not dead...but there were other, worse things than death, and with that psycho clown man with him, the two could cook up horrors beyond most people's imaginations. Zoro had to trust his crew in being able to hold their own (they HAD taken on the entire government and Imu themselves, after all), but some part of him could not help but think of the worst case scenarios. If a bunch of soldiers could take him, the world's strongest swordsman, down, then it meant Luffy, Sanji, and all the others were fair game too.

He could see rays of sunlight began to climb up and into his cell. Time had seemed to pass so slowly last night with his thoughts racing, yet he did not notice the passage of time in the slightest until now. Zoro thought back to Judge's words from the evening before, how his refusal to work with Germa was going to leave him as the lowest man on the totem pole. He had a gut feeling it would most likely involve some sort of hard labor or other hardships in order to "punish" him for dare impregnating the princess of Germa, but he would simply have to steel himself for the trials. Escape would have to wait, seeing as he was not only stripped of his swords, but now had restraints in his skin that could be turned on and off. Zoro thought about finding something sharp and just slicing off those pieces of skin, but he firstly did not want to bleed to death if he nicked the wrong vein, but also because he knew his captors would not let him get off that easily.

Speaking of the devil, the door to the dungeon groaned as it was opened in one swift movement. A tunnel of light poured down on the green haired man as he turned his head up to see who was entering. Muscular and stiff, the man wore a Germa soldier uniform, though it also had the addition of a red and black kepi hat, adorned in gold with the insignia of the Germa Kingdom, and a short black cape around his shoulders. Unlike many other soldiers, though, he had a long and black neatly groomed beard going down to this chest. In his left hand was a tray containing a serving of bread and eggs with a cup of water, all balanced with the precision of an experienced waiter. He looked directly at the swordsman as he glided down the stairs, sunglasses betraying no emotion.

“Good morning to you, Mister Zoro,” the soldier greeted with a perfectly flat affect.

“Mmm.” Zoro only offered a grunt back. The man took no heed of this, padding over to the cell and opening a slot on the floor to slide the tray through. He took a few steps back and leaned against the wall, arms crossed, gaze fixated on the prisoner. Zoro shot daggers at him back as he pulled the tray towards him. It was not much, definitely not as good as Sanji’s cooking, but it would at least fill his stomach, which was already growling.

“Please do eat as much as you can,” the soldier commented, “we have a long day ahead of us.”

“Like what?” Zoro could not help being curious on what was in store for him now. The Germa soldier reached into his cloak, pulling out a clipboard and pen that had been nestled under his arm the whole time.

“Firstly, the cooks got first dibs on you and require you to help reorganize all their stock and supplies, then you will work down near the snail breeding grounds to clean up the slime from yesterday’s breeding session, afterwards, the laundry for all four castles need to be done, and then finally, it is onto the blacksmith’s grounds, where you are needed in order to man the bellows and dump coal into the fire for the rest of the day, which at that point, should be about four hours,”

The man looked up from his board after the long spiel.

“Any questions?”

Zoro sniffed at the man.

“…No.” Even if they all, especially the last one, sounded like dirty work no one else wanted to do that were passed off onto him because of his predicament, the green blond felt that these were all something he could handle, at least until he found some sort of plan to escape from this place or when his nakama inevitably came to rescue him.

“Good, that’s great to hear,” the man replied, “by the way, the name is Rodrick, Colonel Rodrick, to be specific, but you can just call me Colonel. In fact, you should probably call me Colonel when we are out there. I would think you do not want to get into more trouble out there.”

“What are you, my handler?”

Rodrick nodded.

“Why in fact, I am. I have been assigned specifically to keep any eye on you, hence why not just any random soldier is taking charge of you while I get back to work,” he twirled some of his dark mustache on his index finger, “Mister Judge wants us to be very carefully when it comes to handling you, seeing as even without the swords you are one formidable opponent,” the man pushed his glasses up, “It’s hard not to take him seriously since I got to see your ferocity last night.”

And then it dawned on Zoro. Something in the back of his head had been nagging at him the entire time he was speaking to this man and he now remembered that this was the leader behind the team who kidnapped him. The memories were fuzzy, no doubt from the drugs they shot into him, but the details matched. That deadpan voice, the beard, the way he held himself with such nonchalance…

“Hmph, guess I wasn’t ferocious enough then if you’re still in one piece in front of me.”

The bearded man waved a hand, deflecting the aggression.

“No need for such harsh words, Mister Zoro. It was not like I wanted to do that to you in the first place…” his voice trailed off, but only for a second before he snapped back into place, “besides, it is not going to be beneficial to either party, me and you, if we spend this morning fighting. If you get all your tasks done quick enough, you might be able to squeeze in a few more hours of sleep for tomorrow’s task.”

“And what’s that going to be?”

Rodrick’s lips pulled down into a wry frown.

“Under direct orders from Vinsmoke Judge, I am not allowed to share that information with you.”

Zoro huffed but accepted this. Sanji did tell him that the soldiers of Germa were modified to never disobey orders, so squeezing any information from him would be a no go.

“Fine,” he finally replied, pushing back the now empty tray and glass, “let’s just get this over with as soon as possible.”

“Wonderful, let us get you dressed up, then.”

From the other side of his cape, he produced not only a long coil of rope, but also a metal collar, thick and solid with a locking mechanism and blue bulbs adorning the circumference.

“Figures they wouldn’t give me actual clothes to wear,” the swordsman commented bitterly, “what’s the collar for, another device to keep me trapped here?”

“Oh no, it’s not for that, your tattoo cuffs do the job well enough, it is more of an… incentivizer.”

Zoro could already feel that this “incentive device” was designed to cause him suffering, but he still mushed on to ask “What does it do?”

“It’s quite simple; if you resist or procrastinate during the job, and the people you are working under complain to me about it, I am to press this button,” he brings out a small remote, “and it will send an electric current through your body for as long as I hold it.”

“Huh…wow, I’m so glad I asked.”

“No problem. Now, I don’t want to do this next part, personally, but I am obliged to, so no hard feelings about this.”

The colonel pops his hand into his cape and presses something. In an instant, Zoro’s wrists and ankles snap together, the suddenness and force of it catching the swordsman off guard.

"There we go. Now, let's get this collar and rope on you, and it's off to the races."

Zoro made a mental note of popping this man third, after Judge and Caesar of course, once he was able to bust out and get his swords back.

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Many things people said about Reiju were things she could agree with. Cunning and manipulative? Why yes, she had to be those, in fact. Good at following orders? It was not like she had a choice. But to say that she was just a cog in her father's machine and all these traits were all that she was, all she could ever dream to be, was verifiably false.

She was good at crunching numbers, too.

One of the aspects of having a massive private army and being military for hire that was often overlooked by the layman was how much mundane paperwork and accounting was involved. Each soldier was a mouth to feed, a set of arms that needed weapons placed in them, a body that needed to be clothed and bedded, a head that needed to be accounted for when it came to training, housing and all the other amenities for living and fighting. This was not accounting for the non soldiers and their needs and pay too. Reiju had been the one to shoulder that job ever since her father deemed her old enough to take over the role.

Usually, now that her duty to Germa had been stripped to strictly clerical work due to extenuating circumstances, she would be in her office, toiling away in a climate controlled room with comfy seating. But this was more than a normal day, the snails were about to cross the Red Line from East Blue to West Blue for the upcoming mission on Havnor in about a week. This meant having to go some time without being able to resupply on essentials such as food (for both humans and the animals), medical equipment, medical supplies, the parts for certain vehicles and machinery, parts and supplies for just the lab, clothing, construction materials, and the list went on and on. If this were a more sane organization controlled by someone who is not a megalomaniac, she would receive a report from all the relevant parties and would go from there.

Since she did not live in such a world, she had to go from place to place to confirm what they said they needed was true and absolutely not asking for more than required.

This is why she was currently on her knees having to go through the protocol of inspecting the item reported as broken, one of the ovens in the royal kitchen, when it was obviously
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damaged at the glass from its shattered viewing area and the fact that the inside was covered in soot and broken metal. Using the end of her pen, she delicately tapped the handle of the door that was hanging off, and almost comedically, it immediately fell to the floor. Yep, definitely broken beyond repair.

“Hmm, alright then, I guess we can afford to send an order for another oven,” she reported to the head chef, Cosette, who had been shaking in her boots the entire time.

“Really, Lady Reiju, I have NO idea who did this, but we are definitely still lo-“

Reiju put a hand up before heaving herself onto her feet.

“Yes, I know, someone messed with the oven when they should not have, which caused… this,” she gestured to the stove, “the most important part is that we get a replacement for this as soon as possible.” The princess wrote down the condition of the oven and a note to put in an order for a new one. The freckled head chef swallowed and nodded.

"What shall we do in the me-meantime then?"

"We will just have to subside without baked goods for a while then."

"But-but, what if the princes need bread or something that's b-baked? I can't turn them down exactly."

"Yes you can," Reiju said, "if anyone gives you trouble then..." she had to fight the urge to say 'tell them I don't have one to pull out of my ass for them' and instead replied with "tell them that I already put in an order for a new oven."

Cosette nodded and gave a shaky half bow.

"Yes, my lady." she hastily affirmed before turning around and to order a chef to clean up the mess. When the head chef was out of view, Reiju let out a sigh and stretched out her arms and

back, hearing a crack as she did so. She was only about a third way through her list of the rounds she would have to make and it was almost noon already. She desperately needed to sit down for a few minutes, just a little break so she had enough energy to check on the tailors next.

One would have thought she would not have to do all this physical work as her pregnancy wore on and just standing too long made her dizzy, but seeing how her father treated her mother when she herself was expecting, Reiju was not surprised in the slightest. Though in this case, she wondered if this was also to intentionally hurt her for daring to obtain her condition. Though that thought was brushed away when she remembered that her father and brothers would not DEIGN to work this position, yet still wanted to reap the benefits of their conquests with reckless abandon and she was left tugging back their leashes.

Finding a nearby bench, she placed herself down and spent a minute just breathing. The kitchen would not look her way, mainly because he presence alone was uncomfortable, but that was fine, she was used to being feared to an extent.

With this moment of respite, she allowed her mind to wander from work for a bit. Of course, it never landed on anything pleasurable. It went straight for what had been residing in the back of her mind, Zoro.

She was truly worried about what her father had in store for him. Being the lowliest soldier in Germa had many consequences, not including death. The biggest one for those clones who failed to live up to their peers, but were not quite bad enough to be culled, was to be assigned as the sparring partner for her and her brothers. It was not too different from a death sentence, considering how many bodies they had piled up, but a greater majority lived, though in complete agony as their broken bodies were wheeled to the medical wing to fight another day. If Zoro were to go against one of her brothers…well, it was starting to make her sweat, and it wasn't because of all the activity that caused the perspiration.

Her father would not allow the man to die, he and that freak clown man wanted to see him pay for his "sins", but considering how her brothers were absolute monsters and the swordsman would definitely not be allowed to use any swords, her mind began to conjure up images of her child's father with broken bones, ripped tendons and muscles, and her just standing there on the sidelines.

'Aren't you already used to just standing around while the ones you care about suffer? Why so horrified now?' A thought twisted itself into her head. Reiju pursed her lips. Yes, she was a coward, but what power did she truly have? Sure, she was modified like most of her brothers, but they had been freakishly powerful since birth while she had to be worked on as a child. They were bigger than her, stronger than her, and even if she tried to fight them back, there was the large looming presence that was her father and the fact she could never ever fight him. He could thrash her around if he felt inclined and her mind would hold her back from

lifting a finger. Because of that, she had to focus on herself, to live another day so she could…well, she was not sure why she kept going after Sanji left. Perhaps out of pure animal instinct for survival. But now she had another reason to keep going, now two, considering yesterday's events.

The woman caught herself picking at her bandaged hand. Between the fabric, she could see a bit of the nearly black bruised skin. Finding out her father had kidnapped Zoro and brought him back to Germa all because she could not hold her ground for once…it lit something up inside of her. More than a fire, it was a burning heat, waves of rage, at her father, at herself, and it manifested in her absolutely destroying one of the walls in her bathroom. Yonji had got to her in time before she could punch anything else and actually break her hand, but she had done enough damage to leave her offending extremity in immense pain and totally bruised. Of course, it was healing quickly due to repairs to her exoskeleton and the fact her body could heal quicker than regular people if no skin was punctured, but it still needed to be wrapped up for another day or two. It was one of the few times since this pregnancy that her masked slipped off and her true emotions became revealed and she knew it would not be the last. But…she could NOT allow it to happen again. Her only line of defense against her family was crumbling like wet tissue paper, even more so since the reveal of her condition, and that meant she would be useless to them, useless like how Sanji was considered. She was not resilient like Sanji, though, because she had NOTHING, she had no dreams, no ambitions of her own, no-

No. This was not the time to spiral out. Too much was resting on her back for her to become undone. She had a little slip up, that was it.

Still, it was becoming very inconvenient when he emotions would torrent out like that. No longer could she keep them bottled up, as now she would be left with pieces of glass in her hands. Trying harder to keep them down would not work, she already figured, as they would just inevitably explode like a molotov. And now with Zoro around...

She would have to find a private release for them, but at a later date.

Right now, she had spent enough time resting and needed to get to the next stop for her rounds. Pulling herself up, Reiju left the kitchen for the tailors, putting her work first before any scheming could proceed.

Chapter 3: An Interlude

Chapter Summary

An intermission right before the action.

Caesar Clown had felt so much more giddy and actually happy the past few days than he had in the previous months. With all the doom and gloom that had been brought about the past two months from one of Judge's precious pups getting herself bred, having one of the Straw Hats be brought to the base of operations for all sorts of pain and humiliation was just the pick-me-up he needed. In fact, when he had some spare time earlier in the day, he would find a spot with the perfect view of the mossy swordsman being made to carry back breaking weight or accidentally slip on some snail slime and get covered in the foul smelling muck, and those viewings would make his cold, cold little heart get that just warmer.

Unfortunately, the good times never last, and the Straw Hat's right hand man was ushered back to the dungeon for the day. Pity, he would have savored seeing him get shocked one more time, but there was no time to complain. He had to give Judge a weekly report on all the findings and progress down in the labs. Going into his gaseous form, he crept down the rock walls, down the cobblestone paths, and finally, was in his lab. Judge was already waiting there, leaned against a wall in a rare display of casualness.

"So," the blond gruffly began, "what is it today?"

"First off, not even a hello?"

Judge rolled his eyes at Caesar's comment.

"Secondly," he pulled a clipboard out from his lab coat, "so far, the test run with the CloudScratchers went swimmingly. Only took them 2 hours to go from the West Blue to the North Blue and another 2 hours back. Though, we're going to need to work on their stamina as they've been lazing in their pens ever since you brought that Straw Hat here…or it could be they're just acting like cats."

Judge nodded along, twirling the end of his mustache with his pointer finger.

“And how are those…explosive rats you are working on?” He slightly grimaced when mentioning the rats. Caesar lit up at the mention, flicking through his pages to get to the relevent report.

“Oh! Oh yes, them! They’re incendiary organs are starting to grow in quite good now, and it’s not even noticeable to the naked eye! I think in about a month or two, we could start letting them out onto any targets and remotely detonate when needed.”

“That’s…good to hear.” Judge looked off distantly. Ok, now Caesar was getting a little peeved from this detached attitude from his lab partner. He had been putting up with his excessive brooding for long enough now and he was about sick of it, especially when he was not even listening when HE had something he was excited about to present. He pressed a bony finger into the blond's chest.

"Alright, that's it, what is bothering you NOW? I thought you’d feel better with that scrubber headed swordsman being put through the wringer, but nooooo.”

The gaseous man crossed his arms petulantly. A vein appeared to pop up on the side of Judge’s forehead, but he breathed slowly to compose himself before speaking.

“Even so, that does not change that Reiju blatantly offered herself up out there like a dog in heat. Do you know how much of my work would have gone down the drain if someone got their hands on that child and used them as their own weapon?! All my work, for nothing!”

Caesar resisted the urge to roll his eyes until they went to the back of his head.

“And yet, both of them are right here with you, with no chance for no one to steal your work or any of that. Hell, didn’t you say you were going to find out what your grandchild’s gender is tomorrow? Shouldn’t you look forward to that a LITTLE?”

“Eh, not really. I couldn’t control this from the start like I could with Sora, so there’s no way that it could be a boy.”

Ugh, if there was one thing Caesar could go without concerning his partner, it was his propensity to value men over women. Not because the horned scientist himself was some bleeding heart, but because he felt like Judge was not utilizing his resources well enough. But he could not say that now…or ever to his face, really.

"Well," he began, "it's a 50/50 chance, so maybe-"

"I don't like 'maybes'. 'Maybes' are what led me to putting up with Sanji for so long."

"But this isn't LIKE Sanji, Judge," Caesar said through gritted teeth, "so maybe lighten up and listen to what I'VE been working on instead of brooding like-like-" the words failed to materialize, but his attitude said everything. Judge looked at Caesar like a detached husband looking at his wife as she asked for him to care for more about her besides what food and housework she provided for him.

"Ugggggghhh," Caesar groaned, "You know what? Here, take this." He shoved his clipboard of notes into Judge's chest. He stormed out of the lab, underling scientists practically leaping out of his way. The melancholic control freak could read about what he had been working on when he finally got his head out of his ass. He could not wait for it to get to the ninth month and he could finally actually work with him like a colleague again.

God, he needed a drink.

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Yonji could practically feel his blood pushing in and out of his veins as his excitement built for tomorrow. He only got to meet half of the Straw Hat crew at the time when reunited with his failure of a brother at Big Mom's archipelago. While he would have loved to see the lovely Nami once again, being able to spar with Greatest Swordsman Zoro had a great promise. The man had chewed through enough soldiers during his sparring sessions that it was becoming busy work now. Headlock a soldier, crunch them until something popped, and they would be out cold and carried off. Booooring. It was becoming mind numbingly dull.
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But with this new opponent in the ring, the promise of a half decent fight was enthralling. The green haired man could barely hide his desire at the dinner table, his behavior catching the attention of his two brothers.

“What’s got you all fired up?” Niji inquired while picking at the steak tartare he was no longer interested in. Yonji had already gulped down a plate of it and was currently mowing through the second while Ichiji nibbled at his and watched the conversation.

“Oh, you have no idea how awesome tomorrow is gonna be. Dad told me that I’m gonna fight that Zoro dude in a sparring match tomorrow!”

His blue haired brother scoffed.

“Oh please, what makes you think he’ll be any more interesting than the other cannon fodder?"

"Because he's the right hand man of the Pirate King! He's got to be worth his salt!”

Niji scoffed and leaned back in his chair. Even behind his dark glasses, Yonji could see him roll his eyes.

“And yet, he still got captured and trapped here. Can’t be that strong.”

“He will not be sedated tomorrow, though,” Ichiji calmed butted in, “that could make all the difference between then and now.”

The green haired man gestured to his red haired elder brother.

“See, even Ichiji sees his potential.”

"But at the same time, he *is* a swordsman, and since tomorrow will be a *sparring* match, he might be debilitated in a way."

Yonji deflated momentarily before hitting the table with his fist.

“Damn it, don’t kill my excitement, man!”

Ichiji shrugged without any emotion on his face.

“I am just stating the facts.”

“Mmm, well, I’ll check it out anyways,” Niji said as he spun his fork between his fingers, “ain’t got anything else I wanna do, so maybe seeing Reiju’s boytoy get thrashed will be something.”

“It may be, it may not be.” Ichiji pushed his now empty plate back, signaling for a servant to pick it up.

Well, whatever the case, Yonji looked forward to tomorrow.

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“Chopperrrrrr, let me go, we gotta get Zoro back…”

Luffy struggled in the arms of Chopper’s muscular Heavy Point, but even as he tried to get out of them, the effects of the gas still neutralized much of his strength and he flopped loosely like a fish in his raspy voice. The reindeer frowned sympathetically.

“Not yet, Luffy, you need to heal up more before he try to find Germa.”
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“But…but Zoro…”

It was breaking Chopper’s heart twofold, seeing his captain like this while also thinking about how Zoro was truly gone and they had no leads yet. No reports in the newspaper on their activity, no trail of destruction, nothing. It did not help that the havoc wrought by the soldiers meant the Straw Hats had to dock at a nearby island for the time being. The Sunny had been in worse situations in the past, but the crew was never this wiped out with it.

Putting Luffy back onto his cot in the medical room, Chopper let the rest of his residual strength fade before his captain finally gave his body a rest. Robin was much more amiable with needing to rest, but the doctor could tell the noxious gas equally left her sapped. He would have to check on the two in about half an hour.

In the meantime, he needed to get to the dining hall to join in the discussion with everyone else on what to do next. After everything and everyone recovered enough, they would go looking for the swordsman and Germa 66 in the process. How long it would take, though, he was not sure. Luffy and Robin mainly needed to heal from the gas, but Sanji had a dislocated knee, Nami was bruised and had cuts almost everywhere, Usopp’s right arm and hand were broken, and to add to that, the perpetrators had actually managed to break pieces of the ship, making Franky work round the clock to heal his creation.

“-and then he just went up with the rest of the soldiers."

Chopper made it to the dining hall, now in his brain point form. Everyone was gathered around the table, attention on Sanji as he finished telling them as much as he knew. Nami rubbed her chin, wincing a little from the sting of touching the bruise there. Chopper managed to get to his seat before the redhead spoke.

"So, do you think your sister is connected with this?"

Sanji was about to shake his head before pausing.

"Well, from what that bearded guy said, if she is, it's definitely not because she choose to."

"Even so, it doesn't explain why kidnap Zoro like that. If it is not something she wants, then, what do you think Judge wants out of him?"

Having already puffed through one cigarette in less than a minute, Sanji quickly pulled out and lit another. Ever since Zoro had been taken, by Germa no less, the blond had turned his smoking to chainsmoking, his whole being smelling like anxiety and cigarettes. Chopper resisted the urge to wrinkle his nose at the stench, not wanting to make the man feel even worse.

"That's where I'm at a dead end."

"Wait, guys, I may have a theory about this."

Usopp raised his good hand, turning everyone's attention to him.

"Go on," Nami pushed.

"Ok, so, hear me out, what if they took Zoro to your sister...because they're trying to pull off...a *breeding program*.

Crickets were all that replied to the long nosed man's conspiracy theory and his face turned red and blustering.

"L-look, there's not much to go off of, that's the best I've got."

Sanji sighed deeply and tapped the ash of his cigarette off into a nearby ash tray.

"Honestly, with how much we know, that very well could be true, even if we don't want it to be."

"This is so awful," Nami moaned, "we're never going to get him back at this rate."

"Hey, Nami-sis, don't say that," Franky tried to reassure, "we just got to find even a trace of where Germa and their snails are going and we can set sail there."

"And how are we going to do that? Even if they leave a trail of war in their wake, lots of rebellions and violence have been going down lately. How do we separate what is what?"

It was then that a light bulb flashed into Chopper's head. They DID know someone who could give them a lead after all...maybe. It was a big maybe, considering this person's fixation was on something at least Germa related, but it was best to at least try this connection than do nothing at all. He cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. When the melancholy was too strong even for that, he made the loudest fake cough he could to get all eyes on him.

"Umm, guys? I think I have an idea on a possible lead."

Everyone leaned in closer, hanging on to his every word.

"But first, we have to find a way to contact the Heart Pirates."

Chapter 4: Four On The Floor

Chapter Summary

Reiju finally has to bite the bullet on her child's gender and Zoro...just has to bite.

A morning for Reiju did not truly start until she could slip into a warm shower and after scrubbing herself clean, spend a few minutes just basking in the wet warmth. Being able to have that time of the day where she could relax her body and muscles to an extent before having to continue the rest of the day under tension was needed for her to keep going. She knew she would be admonished by her father for wasting water and time if he knew about her longer showers, but that was only if he knew. One of the good things about keeping her emotions under lock and key is that whenever she could find little things that she could derive even a sliver of joy from, it was hers and hers alone, with no one else knowing about it and being able to ruin it for any reason.

And considering what her father had in store for her today, she was going to need any morsel of goodness she could get her hands on.

As the warm water washed over her face, Reiju thought back to how the servant who had delivered her dinner (she had preferred to eat her meals away from her family now, not wanting to feel the gaze of their judgment while eating) had also delivered the news of her needing to go down to the labs tomorrow with the king for a medical appointment. They did not divulge details, as they had not been provided them, but Reiju knew exactly what this appointment was for. The woman was far along enough that the gender of the child in her could now be determined. Germa technology was advanced enough that they had the machinery to look inside of her and she dreaded to see which way the coin flipped.

Reiju should not have been partial to a gender as a mother to be, but this was not just about preferences, it was about the potential fate she could see for her baby just because of which sex they may have. While she herself was not considered a "failure" like Sanji was, there was always an underlying current of being lesser than her brothers in a way purely because she was a woman. One of the most useful things a woman could do was to produce more male heirs and Reiju knew her father was banking on having another boy in the family. She never understood, considering the type of man he is, why Judge never moved on to another woman to breed after her mother died, but perhaps it was a boon that some poor woman was swept into Germa.

Still, even if the pregnancy was unexpected for him, she knew her father would turn this around into something positive for himself. More children, more heirs, more test subjects, more men like her brothers…

But a girl would not be out of the woods. They would go through the same treatment she has endured, perhaps even worse as she would solely be surrounded by murderers and death. Reiju knew, too, that no matter how she tried, she would never live up to the positivity and humanity her mother practically radiated. She would never be able to fill her child up with the needed components to make her as good as Sanji and this fact gnawed at her.

She took a breath in, held it, and then slowly let it out.

Even if both options were not savory, they were only the options she had if her child stayed in Germa. If she could somehow get them away, let them free into the big blue world, then maybe...

Reiju turned off the water, grabbing a towel hanging near the shower before getting out. She dried herself off and was about to reach for her clothes when she remembered that she left them on her bed. Letting out an annoyed sigh, she wrapped the towel around herself before stepping into her room. She passed by the full length mirror nearby, glancing at herself at first before turning that glance into a full body turn and assessment. It had been a while since she had fully looked at her form. There was no real reason why she had not done so, none at all. She just did not feel like it and nothing else.

...Okay, maybe there was one reason.

It was something she would never admit (not like she had anyone she was willing to share anything to), but Reiju was almost afraid to see how she was looking now that she was starting to balloon. Her body did not look too different in the first trimester, but now in the second trimester and beyond, she was definitely looking much more fecund. This would not bother most people, but the last pregnancy Reiju had ever witnessed was very scarring. Her mother, her poor, poor mother, was made to carry four times the amount the average pregnant woman would usually carry, leaving her bed bound for the final months of her gestation. Reiju’s younger self witnessed all this and much more, the medical complications, the way her mother's body morphed and bloated into something unfamiliar and alien. The worst, part, undoubtedly, was when he father brought her to see the boys be extracted via c section, seeing her mother be cut open in the operating theater.

“Drink it in, Reiju,” he said as the doctor’s were pulling Niji out, “this is history in the making.”

He did not want her to forgot the moment, and she sure did remember. She remembered especially how angry that smile on her mother’s stomach looked while she was in recovery. It was like a mocking grin, as if knowing what effect its presence had on the three year old girl.

All these events painted a picture for Reiju, despite logic and statistics from the books she read on the topic saying otherwise, of pregnancy being something that should be feared. It changed you and not for the better, taking away more of more of your abilities until there was nothing left you could do but wait it out. Until the day they would finally be taken away from you.

But then again, this was not the same situation as then. For one, she was only carrying one child, which would put less strain on her body compared to quadruplets, but secondly, she was different from her mother Sora. Maybe…maybe things would not be so bad with her in particular. It could be a smooth pregnancy with no complications and the biggest concern should be how much she was filling her head with fear…

…Fat chance of that, but it was something that could be latched onto like a teddy bear for a scared child. It was at least enough to convince herself to give her body a once over, which was going to be necessary moving forward anyways.

Making sure he curtains were drawn so she did not accidentally flash the kingdom, Reiju unwrapped her towel and observed her nude form.

The first thing she took note of was how softer she had gotten. While not chiseled like her brothers despite her tremendous strength, she had always kept a sort of hourglass figure, one that was now filling out. Her muscles were less defined now and swelling was occurring on her ankles and wrists, only rounding her further.

Not only that, but along with the softening, and despite her efforts to use as much vitamin E cream as she could, the angry red lightning strikes of stretch marks were starting to form and creep up her stomach and down her thighs, resting above the 66 tattoos on her legs. They were small for now but would undoubtedly grow and stick out as the final months went on. Her breasts were growing too, losing their perkiness and sagging above her midsection, also not helping the stretch mark situation.

She was…normal. Her form was that of a textbook photo marking how things would look at the weeks she was at, down to her getting that “glow” she had always read about. Whether that glow was the kind of the sun setting over the horizon or the glow of radioactive material that was about to turn any living creature into goo was yet to be seen. It was a far cry from what had been imprinted on her mind and it gave her some slight relief. Just slight relief. She still had to see what her child's gender would be with her father and she damned with either path.

Speaking of the devil, a knock came to Reiju's door, slinging her back into the moment as she quickly wrapped her towel around herself again.

"Lady Reiju," a female servant's voice came from behind the wooden door, "your father requests your presence at the royal medical bay."

"I will be with you in a minute," she coolly replied, "thank you for informing me."

Pursing her lips, the pink haired princess finally got to dressing herself, steeling herself for the impending appointment.

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While the green haired swordsman had steeled himself to be thoroughly worked like a mule for his first day in Germa, he was not anticipating the humiliation wrought upon him by doing so in front of every day people evidently uncomfortable of his presence. It was definitely because he was a pissed off near naked prisoner being made to work around ordinary people, but Zoro could feel the eyes burrowing into him and it just soured his mood even more. The feeling was only bolstered by the work he was made to do, the worst of which being cleaning all the slime in the breeding caverns for the ship snails. He got some of it in his mouth accidentally after a slip and now that bitter and musky taste would not leave his tongue and throat. It even soured him being served his favorite, plain white rice, for his dinner last night. If anything, though, the soreness and tiredness of his muscles made it easy for him to just lay down and pass out for the entire night until Rodrick woke him up. He did
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not say anything at first, passing the food to Zoro and assuming a military rest position. The swordsman could see the slightest tug of the edges of his lips pulling downwards, giving the ghost of a frown.

Neither party said a word until Zoro finished his extremely plain yet adequately nutritional meal.

"So what humiliation am I being subjected to today?"

"Well...technically, it will not be humiliating if you're skilled enough, but the king and princes expect your failure."

The mention of the princes caught Zoro's attention. He had not met Sanji's brothers or even seen them yet, but from what little the blond had said about them, his image of them was already soured.

"Why are those three involved?"

"Because...you are going to have to spar with Prince Yonji today."

"...You're shitting me."

Rodrick shook his head. "Afraid I'm not. Judge just handed me the orders early this morning. I even picked up the clothes you have to wear for it, picked out by the King's science partner himself."

Oh, fucking great. He had a feeling that gasbag took enjoyment in some way of him working his ass off yesterday. Even if he did not see him, his slime ball presence was very much there, probably meshing with the snail slime.

“How bad is it?” He bluntly asked. Rodrick cleared his throat to give a sliver of time to delay the inevitable before reaching into his uniform’s pocket to and pulling out a lime green piece of clothing and pair of shoes. Oh God no.

Zoro took it and unfurled it and his face twisted into a disgusted grimace.

It was the unholy and bastard love child of a leotard and a mankini. It would cover up some of him, but expose much more of his body in...weirdly lewd ways. And now that he had a closer look of the thing, was that fucking glitter??? He was going to look a total pervert if he wore this thing!

He gave Rodrick a serious stare, glare hardening.

"What consequences would there be if I refused to wear this?"

"I've been ordered, in that case, to turn your tattoo shackles on and put it on you myself."

The only thing worse than wearing the…thing was if someone had to dress him up with it. Grumbling how he would stick his sword so far up where the sun does not shine in Caesar, the swordsman acquiesced and put on the garment. The material was breathable and light, but that was cold comfort.

“Well then,” his handler commented, “you look…nicely green now. Like a ripe lime.”

“Fuck off.”

“…I was trying find some way to compliment you to make you feel a bit better.”

Zoro breathed in, and slowly let it out while pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Ok, so this sparring thing, how does it work around here?”

Rodrick put his hands behind his back, prepping for his spiel.

“Well, the first thing you are going to want to know is that there are no weapons involved on either side. It is purely hand to hand combat, plus your abilities if you have them. No one is going to die, we are going to make sure of that, but it is meant mainly for the princes’ training…and entertainment, sometimes. Personally, if you ask me, I'd prepare myself for some wrestling since Prince Yonji IS a powerful grappler. The last few guys who went against him got thrown hundreds of feet out of the ring and into the sea."

Wrestling, huh…well, shit. Zoro was a swordsman, after all, and he flourished the most when with his weapons. Without them he was competent, but against someone who was more versed with hand to hand combat was when he started to crumble.

Well, there was no use in floundering about this. He was going to get dragged to the arena either way, so it was best to pony up and shut up.

“Ok,” the swordsman replied. That would have been the end of that, but in the moment, Zoro decided to tack on something he has been wanting to know about.

“So, like, is this gonna be a private thing or public?”

“Public. The usually involve most of the soldiers and the Vinsmoke family being in attendance. Citizens may watch, but most don’t because these can get…messy.”

“Is the whole family going to be there today?”

Rodrick picked up on what Zoro was getting at and shook his head.

"Judge and Lady Reiju will not be there today due to a health related appointment."

Damn. He did not know what he expected, seeing as her father seemed to have an iron grip over her, but Zoro at least wished to see her again, perhaps even talk to her, even if that

would require getting her away from Judge, because...hell, where did he even start? Even after digesting the fact that his pull out technique had failed so miserably this time that he knocked up a woman, that woman out of all people had to be *Sanji's sister*. Sure, he didn't know it was her at the time, his hormones swaying his decision making slightly and the fact she had on makeup so good that he didn't see her leg tattoos or the curly brow, but the fact still remained that it was HER. He still awaited for his crew's arrival, but had to figure out how he was going to handle the love cook once he found out this. This all was not bringing up the fact that he was still sort of the fence about the woman herself. All he knew about her before getting dragged here was what Sanji told him and...well, she definitely was better their brothers, but after that there was not much else he knew about her. She was still a part of Germa, still participating in it, and always putting on a mask. He did not know how much he should trust her, especially seeing how their situation occurred from her donning a false identity, but he also knew that he HAD to trust her to some extent as there were not many other options.

And none of that was bringing up the fact that Zoro was going to be a father soon.

He was not a bum, even if having a child was not in his near future plans, and had no intentions of leaving his child behind here. He still had to figure out what to do after that, all the parental and caretaker stuff, but one of his biggest priorities now besides getting out of this hell hole kingdom was bringing his kid along with him. The biggest snaggle, there, though, was that he absolutely needed Reiju to work with him on this and right now he could not even speak with her.

"Mister Zoro?"

Rodrick snapped his fingers to gain back the swordsman attention. The green haired man grunted from being perturbed, but knew he would have to be pulled away from his thoughts for a while. He had a fight to get to.

"Ok ok, let's just go now." He put his wrists together, his soldier handler clicking the button to close them together. Rodrick retrieved some rope from a pocket and began to tie the green haired captive's wrists together, which Zoro gave a quizzical look to.

"Is it really needed to keep tying me up when you already have my wrists stuck?"

"Eh, it's more like…a leash. So you don't get lost."

This brought out a pang of anger from Zoro.

“I can follow you very well.”

“So all the newspapers, eyewitnesses, and your crew themselves are liars?”

“Look,” Zoro raised his voice, “it just so happens in those instances that the areas were always confusing and-“

Rodrick gave a chuckle he tried to hide in his hand.

“Ok ok, I get it. Let me rephrase, then: this castle is very confusing and I would not want you, an outsider, to get easily lost here.”

“Hmph,” he shot his handler a short glance, as deadly as a bullet, and looked away.

Once his already bound wrists were wrapped up with rope, Rodrick led Zoro from the cell and brought him out of the dungeon. Zoro used the time to think about how he was going to deal with Yonji. The last time he had really done hand to hand wrestling was when he got pulled into fights with other boys at the dojo as a kid. Rusty was not enough to describe him. There was also the fact that this Yonji most likely had much more experience and from what he heard from Sanji, was a big bruiser. He probably had an advantage over Zoro from weight and height alone.

If he wanted to get out of this in one piece, he would have to find a way to get it over as possible and most likely need to deploy dirty tactics.

The pair made it to a pair of large wooden doors, Rodrick knocking on it in a certain pattern in order to signal for the soldiers outside to open the doors. Slowly opening, Zoro could see the crowd outside, their hollering that was muffled earlier hitting him like a sea train. They were all clone soldiers of varying sizes, turning their attention and quieting down as the green haired swordsman marched out into the yard. Now being able to see many of the soldiers up close and all together, it was uncanny how they all looked like they came from one big family tumbleweed. Zoro also noticed how many of them were clean shaven and had minimal facial hair and short hair, making him question why Rodrick looked the way he did even more now. Up on one of the balconies in the castle, he caught sight of two flashes of brightly colored hair, red and blue respectively. Looks like Sanji’s other brothers turned up to watch the match too.

The crowd soon switched from silence to roaring jeers and sneering at the swordsman and his ridiculous outfit. Zoro chose not to listen to them, instead craning his head around the clone soldiers to get a look at his opponent as his handler led him to the middle.

Yonji was a spitting image of Sanji if he worked out like a maniac and grew a few inches. And was green. His hair slicked back, he wore his own wrestling singlet, a proper one, along with white wrestling shoes. What stuck out to him was what he could see of a tattoo on the man's chest. Square geometric designs wrapped around his pectorals and crept up his neck before stopping at his collarbone. The other thing that stuck out to Zoro too was how weird he looked without a fringe covering half his face. One look at Yonji and Zoro realized why the lovecook always kept one side of his face hidden. He'd also hide his face if his brows looked so stupid together like that.

That was the least of the issues he already had with this man. His stance, his sharp smirk and even the way he crossed his arms all made him come off as an overly confident bully, one who thought he was better than everyone else and could do whatever he wanted to others with no repercussions. It made Zoro want to lay him out on the ground as soon as possible.

Yonji bounced on his heels as he caught sight of Zoro. Rodrick untied and unbound the green haired man's wrists as he got into arena area.

"So, this is the famous Roronoa Zoro, huh?" He scanned Zoro up and down, giggling at his purposefully ridiculous outfit, "I never took you for the…glitz and glitter type."

Zoro scowled and unconsciously tugged on one of the straps of his leotard abomination.

"You know damn well this is not of my own volition.

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard that Caesar the Clown has a bone to pick with you and has been pulling some strings."

"HEY, it's just Caesar Clown, you little-"

Once the eyes were on him, Caesar choked on what he was about to say, ducking down into the crowd with his cameko snail. Zoro sent him a hellish glare. Watching AND recording this? Maybe Zoro would have to put him on the top of his hit list after all. Yonji seemed amused by this interaction.

“I guess EVERYONE really wants to see our little match. Why don’t we make sure this is an interesting one?”

Zoro kept his slightly pissed off face, not wanting to give the other green haired man any reaction to feed off of. He still wanted to punch him, of course, but he had a feeling that giving into those feelings would end up with him in traction. If only he had his swords…

He clenched his fists, veins in his arms popping up. No, this was no time to mourn his tools of trade, he just had to focus on the here and now.

The soldiers, ever loyal to the royal family, were all hyping up and cheering on Yonji before the match even started, only fueling the man’s ego more. Hmmm, maybe with all the ego inflating, it could be an advantage for the swordsman to overpower him.

“Alright, men!” A soldier, short but stout, stepped out of the crowd, hands outstretched and a yellow ascot in one hand, “we’re about to start this spar, so stay back!”

They all followed, moving into place until forming a perfect ring around the pair of green haired men and the lone soldier. The way they moved into perfect position in synchronicity with no missteps was a bit creepy.

Yonji hunched down into position, barely containing his excitement.

Zoro tried to copy his position as best as possible. The shorter soldier raised the yellow cloth up, everyone in the audience on the edge of their non existent seats.

He swung it down forcefully.

“Go!”

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Reiju was more than used to medical check ups and the invasive poking, prodding and collecting of data that entailed. She had been doing it ever since she received her enhancements and never complained once about them. At least not out loud. She had to accept that her body was no longer hers years ago, to expect at any moment to be called down and inspected like a show dog. The woman just wished that her child was not about to get that sort of judgment now.

Her father was there already, the large man finally wearing something non-combative, but not casual, for once. He instead wore a dark grey three piece suit, lab coat hanging in the crook of his right arm. He had probably just came out of the research lab for this. His eyes flicked down to his daughter, dark sclera piercing through her.

“So you have made it.”

Reiju nodded, bowing slightly.

“I came as soon as I was called, father.”

“Good. Now come, this is extremely important.”

She followed her father like a trained hound as he made his way into the medical bay. The obstetrician and nurses were already on standby, all heads flicking towards the king and his daughter. Reiju noticed that one of the scientists was there too, probably to gather information on her child for research into how to modify them once they were born.

“Ah, your majesties!” The obstetrician gave a curt bow, his spiky hair shaking with the movement of his head, “we already have all the equipment warmed up. Just allow us to do a few checks of the princess first and we can get to the ultrasound.”

“Hmph,” the tall blond sneered, “be as thorough as possible.”
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“As always, sir.”

The nurses led Reiju to the examination chair and sat her down, promptly beginning the usual routine of taking her vitals. She was used enough to being pulled around like a trained animal, though this time any sort of touch was making her skin itch. Not an itch on the skin itself, but an uncomfortable feeling that raised up at any hands that brushed against them. As the staff began to take her blood pressure, heart rate, and other vitals, Reiju glanced up to her father. His own gaze bared down on everyone like the powerful rays of the sun on a sweltering day. A lot of weight was being placed onto everyone by him at the moment, even if the results were ultimately out of their control. Some of the medical staff were even sweating a little from that hot pressure. She could already see how his brain was ticking off like an abacus, calculating what to do in either gender situation. Judge already saw her child as making the best out of a “bad” situation, now he was working out how…”bad” for him it was.

Seeing this made the uncomfortable itch Reiju had been experiencing worsen.

The nurses took down the results of their checks and gave them to the doctor. His eyes scanned the papers as he combed his free hand through his hair.

“Respiration normal, heart rate ok…the blood pressure is a little higher than I would like it to be-“

“What is the rate?” Judge interjected suddenly. The doctor, to which Reiju now remembered his name, Dr.Wu, flinched minutely at the booming voice before replying.

“I-it’s 128 over 83. I think we should keep an eye on that in case this could lead to preeclampsia.”

Judge nodded.

“Is that all?”

“Y-yes, sir,”

“Good, send a copy of that to the lab,” he motioned to the scientist on the sidelines, “Now, the ultrasound.”

Oh joy, here it comes. The moment of truth.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The ultrasound machine was one of the few useful pieces of Germa technology that Reiju could see having potential to revolutionize the medical field. It was too bad it was like her and would never see the outside of the castle walls. Using pre existing sonar technology, they were able to use the sound waves in order to see inside of someone in a 2d image. It had already seen much use being able to diagnose any tumors or pregnancies in the workers of Germa 66 and now the eldest Vinsmoke was going to be added to the list of recipients.

Too bad the piece of tech was producing more anxiety for her than anything.

Not even allowed to pull her shirt up on her own, the nurses pulled it up for her, exposing her stomach. Reiju’s now healed hand twitched but nothing else indicated what she felt. One thing that was going to follow her during the whole pregnancy was how self conscious she felt for the first time about her body when it came to her stomach. It was like she was baring a vulnerable part of herself for the first time ever and it made her skin crawl how much people *focused* on it.

Dr.Wu retrieved the wand from the machine, the black monitor screen behind him continuously giving an electrical hum. Next to him, a nurse brought out a small container of clear gel, lathering some of it on her fingers. She rubbed it on Reiju’s pronounced stomach, the pink haired woman’s skin now feeling like it would rip away from her body to get away from all the touching of that area. The doctor neared with the instrument.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Judge watched from the sidelines with bated breath, all the staff there twitching with anticipation.

Once some adjustments of placement on of the wand were made on her womb area, Reiju and Zoro's child came into view. And for once, one of the very few times she had ever done so, Reiju temporarily let her emotional shields down to marvel at this glance she got of her child.

She had seen ultrasound photos before, mainly when her mother was gravid with her brothers, but seeing HER child floating in there up on the snowy static screen, making small movements, moving their feet while she *felt* it at the same ti-*oh god, were they sucking their thumb?*

If her ability to let herself cry had not been sanded off years ago and if her father were not there, she felt that she would have fallen apart this very moment like wet paper at seeing her baby for the first time. Instead, she gasped gripped the seat as she kept herself in check. As much as her hormones threatened to blow up the dam, the most she

Reiju was so lost in the moment further connecting with her child that she almost forgot about the point of this procedure. Almost.

"Ahh, I can see what, um, the g-gender." Dr.Wu's expression turned morose at what he saw. Judge's brows knitted in impatience.

"What. Is. It?"

"It's…it's a girl."

The other shoe had finally dropped and the tension had finally released for her father. He shoulders slumped as his expression turned to one of disappointment accompanied by a sigh. When seeing that he did not blow up from news he did not want to hear, the rest of the medical staff and the scientist beside him could now breathe a sigh of relief.

Reiju could not do the same, though.

“Of all the…” Judge began, “Ok, this is not the end of the world, only a set back. This can be…salvaged.”

The way he spoke of Reiju’s child, her *daughter*, was a knife to the heart, though it would have to make room with all the other ones first.

The gravity gender reveal was laying its full weight on her now. A daughter…she was having a little girl. A little girl that was going to come into this world pure and innocent of the sins of her family, of the sins of her…mother.

The doors to the medical area burst open as a soldier, gasping from running all the way here, barreled in. Her father snapped around, his mood taking a nose dive now that he was interrupted.

“What’s going on?” He hissed. The clone soldier gulped down a few more lungfuls of air before answering.

“Yonji…prisoner…gone wrong…incident…”

Judge gritted his teeth and curled his hand into a fist.

“Beautiful, bloody beautiful, right after I get this news…”

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Ten minutes earlier…

Zoro was now beginning to wonder why Sanji decided to call him the “green gorilla” when his younger brother existed.
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Yonji's stance was seemingly impregnable, any attempt to sweep him down or get him to fall was useless. The swordsman gave up quickly trying to sweep or kick him down as his body felt like steel and hitting it like that hurt *himself*. He'd have to focus on keeping his own stance on the ground.

On the upper end, he was desperately defending himself from any other throws ensnaring him. He slipped up a minute ago and gave the Vinsmoke the opportunity to grab his waist, lift him up and slam him down on his side. The swordsman did not feel that any of his bones were broken, but everything on that side HURT.

At this moment, Yonji had gotten behind him and wrapped an arm around the swordsman's neck, starting to bend him backwards as if trying to fold him. This presented an opportunity though as his arms were still free. Reaching behind himself, he grabbed Yonji by the back of his head and using all his strength he had at the moment, wrenched his whole body forward, lifting and throwing the larger man in front of him with a surprisingly hard "thud". Any noises the crowd made were amplified at watching the "beloved" prince be thrown. The green haired prince did not immediately get up, though. He took a second to let out a joyous laugh and rolled over before popping up onto his feet.

"Woo, that actually stung a little!" And Yonji dove back into Zoro.

The best way to describe the rest of the battle was *crushing*. Even though he managed to defend himself from anymore throws, Yonji still had the advantage of experience over Zoro and quickly turned to keeping Zoro in his grasp at almost all times. While the swordsman was able to grab and sloppily throw Yonji a few more times, each one harder than the last and making the ground crack more, this emboldened the green haired prince, increasing his taunts per minutes and making him more aggressive with his moves.

He did not want to admit it, but Zoro was starting to lose steam, and fast. Struggling against the brawnier man was taking its toll on his body and even dirty tricks like throwing gravel in his face and elbowing him in the sternum did nothing to slow him down. Ending this fast was something easier said than done, now he just wanted it to end before the man could attempt to throw him again.

Luckily, if he could look at it like that, keeping the fight going this long with Sanji's younger brother was making the sparring last longer as he basked in lording over the right hand of the Pirate King. At this moment, when he had gotten Zoro to fall to the ground, he clamped down on his neck with his thighs in a vice grip, not giving him any room to breathe or wiggle out. His hands firmly grasped Zoro's calves and wrenched them backwards, inching the green haired man's feet closer to his back. At this rate, Zoro felt that his spine would break under all this tension.

Yonji turned to him, yelling over the audience who had now become loud background noise.

“How you holding up, mossy?”

Zoro’s eyes burned with a fire of rage at hearing this green haired curlybow call him by the name only HIS curlybrow could say.

“Can’t…breathe…you…big ape.”

Yonji squeezed his thighs tighter and bent Zoro more harshly.

“Damn, already? And here I thought we were just getting started. Laaaame.”

He accentuated the drawn out last word with a pull that made Zoro wince in pain.

“Ahh well, toys break sometimes. I’ll try not to mess you up *too* badly.”

Fuck, he was going to get his back broken if you did not do something quick. But what options were there? His hands could do nothing to against the brute’s muscular physique and his legs were crunched together by Yonji’s hands. There had to be some way he could, perhaps, use his teeth to get out of his hold before he either passed out or was snapped in half.

It was then that Zoro noticed how close his face was to…something between the prince’s legs. A part of his bulge that was moved around to not get crushed by his powerful thighs. If he craned his neck closer to it, the swordsman could…

Well, it would not be the first time he had a man’s nuts in his mouth and it probably would not be the last.

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Present
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Something…stirred within Ichiji at that moment. It was not something that happened often, or ever, if he correctly recalled, but seeing Yonji yowl at about three octaves higher than his normal voice, and medics setting up a little tent around his groin region as they attempted to treat his most likely swollen and sore family jewels, well…he felt some sort of sympathy. It was more in the way of imagining himself in that situation and cringing at how it would feel, but it was something new nevertheless.

Niji, who was leaning close to get a good look at the action going on, had now reeled back and contorted his face into that of pure horror and disgust.

“Dear God, there’s teeth marks here!” One of the medics exclaimed a little too loudly. Niji’s frown deepened.

“Fuck, I can’t believe that mossy swordsman took a bite out of Yonji!” He turned to his older brother, “Do you think he’s going to lose one of them?”

Ichiji cupped his chin in his hand and hummed in thought.

“Well, from the looks of it, he was mostly protected by his singlet, and I did not see any blood, so it is most likely a superficial wound. Hurts like hell, though.”

“I thought we had exoskeletons for situations like this, man.”

“We do, just not there.”

“Ugh, apparently,” Niji craned his neck to look at something else but Yonji’s pain, finding a distraction almost immediately. He snickered and pointed down.

“Hey, Ichiji, take a look at what’s happening to the boytoy.”

Looking over, next to their brother, Zoro's bearded handler was fighting off other enraged soldiers from taking a piece out of the man, his prowess in hand to hand combat showing as he tossed clones back like bags of flour. It was unsurprising that they would go after Roronoa. The clones were programmed to have total loyalty to the royal family, defending them in times of needs (or when they needed meat shields). Any attempt to injure a Vinsmoke and they would be swarmed like a defenseless caterpillar against an army of ants. Perhaps it was a good thing then that father assigned someone tough like that bearded clone to protect him from more serious injuries.

"Huh," the red haired prince mused at the pure chaos, "perhaps we should have had *him* do the sparring."

"Where's the fun in that, though?" Niji sneered.

In that moment, their father stomped onto the balcony, Reiju close behind him. His eyes bulged at the unfolding situation below him.

"What in the HELL is going on down here!?"

Everyone on the ground stopped what they were doing and looked up at the king of Germa. Scanning the crowd, Judge stopped and focused on his youngest son, who was now being laid out on a stretcher. Something looking like concern spread across his aged face.

"What happened to Yonji?" He looked at Ichiji. The red haired man shrugged.

"Zoro bit his testicles." He laid out plainly.

"He WHAT?" Judge and Reiju said in unison. Curious, he had not seen Reiju be that expressive ever.

"Yeah, he bit him like a dog." Niji chirped. Judge cradled his face in his hands, trying to hold himself back from screaming. Reiju was not looking too hot either, mouth slightly agape at

what she had just heard. Niji noticed this too and pounced on the opportunity to make a jab.

“Damn, it must hurt you Reiju to see your man in a-“

“Niji, please, shut up,” Judge sniped. He pointed accusingly at Zoro, his face turning red. The swordsman looked up, his one eyed gaze defiant and evidently feeling no guilt over what he had done. Even worse, he crossed his arms in front of their father.

Oh yes, this would not end well.

“You!” Judge snarled, “Youuuuuu…you little…you were supposed to SPAR, not actually hurt my son like that!”

“Well,” Zoro shouted back, “maybe he needs better training so he would not leave himself open like that.”

The remaining Vinsmoke siblings took a step back to avoid the upcoming storm of insults to be exchanged. Reiju bumped into him on accident and she jumped away from him as quick as a cat from water. It did not seem that there was going to be much gleaned from the interaction between his father and the prisoner at the moment, so he decided to see what he could get from Reiju on where her and father had been.

“So…where were you?”

Any sort of shock from the current events were ironed out of Reiju’s face now. She leaned against the stone door frame.

“He did not tell you?”

“You know father chooses not to fill us in on your ‘womanly affairs’.”

The pink haired woman sighed.

“Did an ultrasound. It’s a girl.”

Ahh, that made sense. Their father had been eager to know the gender of the child and now was the appropriate time to take a look. So they were having a niece, huh…He felt that Niji and Yonji would be disappointed by another girl coming into the fray, but Ichiji did not feel much of anything about that. Only wondering if this girl would be on par with everyone else or be a failure like her uncle.

Niji took immense pleasure watching their father threaten to come down and give the swordsman a piece of his mind and fume when Zoro yawned to his face.

“Hey,” Reiju wrapped an arm around her growing midsection to support it, “what is going on with that *hideous* outfit on Zoro?”

“A little gift from the goatman, I heard.”

Reiju groaned.

“God damn, not him.”

Ichiji solemnly nodded. If there was one thing his sister and him passionately agreed on, it was of their distaste for Caesar Clown.

“Yes, him. I even saw him bring a cameko snail to record the fi-“

“He RECORDED this!?” Judge sputtered. His grip on the railing was enough to break two chunks off of it. He looked either on the end of screaming or ripping out his hair.

“You know what? I am too damn stressed to think of a proper punishment for you right now, Roronoa,” he turned his head to Zoro’s handler, “no food for him for the rest of the week.”

The bearded soldier nodded, Ichiji noticing out of the corner of his eye how Reiju clenched her jaw shut at this.

“Fine, don’t give me any food, then,” Zoro retorted, “I’ll live.”.

And with that, his handler was ordered to turn all his tattoo cuffs and drag him away with his face to the ground. As the pirate threw in a few more expletives towards their father, Judge turned away and grumbled that he was going to find out the extent of Yonji’s injuries, and find Caesar, and stormed off. The remaining three siblings stood on the balcony awkwardly.

“Hey, I earjacked a little and heard you had an ultrasound,” Niji poked his head into their space, “what was the ge-“

“I need to get back to work. Need to get the inventory done before we land for a restock.”

Reiju hurried off in the opposite direction, not giving the brothers a second glance. Niji sucked on his teeth.

“Bitch.”

Chapter 5: 21 Questions

Chapter Summary

> The Straw Hats convene with Law on what to do next and Reiju and Zoro finally get to talk.

When it came to the "Sora, Warrior of the Sea" comics, the fans for it could be...obsessive, to say the least. They would dissect and analyze every frame, every line of drawing, every aspect of each issue and catalog it through newsletters passed around amongst each other. The difference though between them and other comic fans is that because Germa was real (albeit, very different from the fictionalized version) and the comics were based off of their real endeavors. Though, every aspect of this information was heavily edited and change as not to give the kingdom even more free advertising for their services. It would not be a good idea to tell people where exactly this guns for hire kingdom would be, especially when it came to people looking to acquire their “talent”. While the fans who could decipher this truth about Germa thankfully did not sell this information to the highest bidder, they did not do it for any gain of their own. In fact it, it seemed much more to be like a game, to see who could figure it out first and get as much details as possible, just for bragging rights. After that, the info would be sat upon.

This was all to explain why Sanji and the crew were calling upon the Surgeon of Death to let his fanboy out and tell them what he knew about Germa 66’s activities.

“…and this all relates back to the Obscure War spin off where Sora watches their partner, Suzume, be crushed in battle while they can do nothing but watch. This event was so damaging for him that it even resonated throughout the multiver-“

“So, Law, what about those latest issues of the mainline series?” Nami loudly steered the conversation back on track. Sanji silently thanked her as having to hear more than he had to about his biological family, even in comic book form and with entirely made up sections, made his stomach tie into knots. Law sighed on the other side.

“Ok, ok, fine, I got a little worked up in the moment.”

“You spent a whole two minutes talking about that non stop.”

“Anyways,” the surgeon brushed off, “me and the gentlemen from the newsletter poured over the previous arc and we think that the next place they’re headed is going to be in the West Blue. The islands they’ve been going to in the East Blue are all on a path west and from the looks of it, they're probably going to the major merchant port near the Red Line, Cinnabar Island."

"And are you absolutely sure about this?" Nami leaned closer to the snail, it's imitation of Law not changing in expression. "The newsletter guys and I have never been wrong before."

Noticing his current cigarette had burned down to a nub, Sanji brought out another one and lit it with the still burning end of the one currently in his mouth. He exhaled a plume of smoke as he replaced the old cigarette with the new one, harshly snuffing out the unusable nub in a nearby ashtray.

"The East Blue, huh? We could probably cut through the Grand Line and catch up to them."

"In less than a week? That might be a bit of a tall ord-"

"We gotta do it, Traffy!"Luffy leapt up, his shaky hand grasping the transponder snails receiver. He had recovered scarily fast from being bed ridden from the sea stone gas and was completely gung-ho about raiding Germa to get Zoro, no questions asked, but the captain was not one hundred percent back to his bouncy self.

"They took Zoro for whatever reason and I'm not having that, especially since they promised not to bother Sanji anymore!"

His legs began to wobble and Usopp rushed to steady Luffy with his good arm.

"Yare yare, I know they did, Luffy," Law drawled, "but they ARE the evil army, after all. Besides, they technically are not bothering Sanji directly."

The rubbery captain's brow furrowed.

"Even so, they took Zoro and are doing whatever they want with him! We have to raid them with full force!"

"What did I tell you earlier about how long it would take?"

"Actually, Law-bro," Franky butted in, leaning over Luffy's shoulder, "the ship does have the Rabbit Screw, meaning we could put the pedal to the metal, though it'll definitely burn up our fuel and we can't use it all the way. At least it'll give us a SUPER headstart."

"Mmmmm," Law hummed, "that sounds good, but you guys still gotta cut through the Grand Line in time before those snails start climbing. One minute too late and you're stonewalled for the time being until they get to the West Blue. It might be safest to get to the West Blue first and wait for them there."

"But that would mean leaving Zoro with them for longer..." Usopp's voice trembled. His mind was no doubtably conjuring up a movie serial worth of horrible ideas of what could be going on. The snail transponder lowered its eye stalks in a gloomy manner.

"I know, it's not ideal, but it might be the best overall."

"Well, do we at least know which island they're going to make their way to after they cross the Red Line?"

Law paused for a second, the snail rubbing its lips together in an attempt to impersonate what the caller was doing.

"That is where things get fuzzy. We don't have direct communication with Germa, of course, so we cannot know EXACTLY which island they have made a deal with at this moment, though there is a cluster of islands we think they are going to."

"And how many islands does that archipelago have?" Nami squinted at the snail.

"Over fifty. Many of which are of larger size and have their own kingdoms."

The mood between the Strawhats fell even lower now. Sanji snuffed out his now nub of a cigarette and started on another one. He didn't kill his brothers and his biological father when he had the chance to because it was just wrong for him to do that, but a darker and angrier part of him now wished he could have let them perish when he had the chance. Now...now Zoro was gone and it was all their God damn fault!

Screw Judge, screw Ichiji, screw Niji, screw Yonji and screw Reij-

No. No, that was not fair to include her with the rest of them. Sure, maybe she wasn't a saint, but she wasn't quite horrible to him either. He wondered if she was treating Zoro the way she did to him when he was in that dungeon himself for six months; from a distance, but better than nothing.

"Hold on," Robin's calm voice broke onto the scene, "Law, may I suggest something?"

"Ok, shoot."

"Your submarine is faster than our Thousand Sunny, correct?"

Franky looked a little hurt at that question but masked it as Law replied.

"Yes."

"And it can make long trips across the Grand Line, also correct?"

"Also yes."

"And you are near our ship?"

"Yes we ar-oh," realization hit the pirate captain before he snapped back, "wait wait wait, before we get ahead of-"

"An alliance, yes!" Luffy's eyes sparkled with renewed energy at the idea.

There was a moment of silence on Law's end, followed by a long, long sigh.

"Ok, yep, let's do the alliance thing. Again."

“Hooray!” Luffy did a little jump in the air at this. Sanji could hear Law mumble something unintelligible under his breath.

“One condition, though,” Law managed to steady himself back into his monotone self, “We unfortunately cannot bring everyone onto the sub. Space is limited here already and adding nine more people might overdo it.”

Luffy’s mood shifted downwards a little at this but not totally. Even without seeing it, Law could pick up on the pirate king’s disappointment.

“But, I can take, at most, five of you, so discuss amongst yourselves who’s coming.”

“We can definitely do that, Traffy!” Luffy turned to face the whole remaining crew. The light and hope in his eyes was returning once again.

“We got this in the bag, guys! We’re gonna get Zoro back!”

While everyone else was having tempered excitement at the development, himself included, Sanji couldn’t help but bring the idea gnawing at the back of his mind to the front while Law

was still on the line. Amidst the celebration, the blond slid over near where Luffy was and picked up the receiver.

“Hey Law, it's Sanji.”

“Oh, hey, man. Uhh, sorry for gushing about all the comic stuff earlier. I know it makes you uncomfortable but-”

“I'm not here about that, it's…look, I need your Germa comic nerd expertise for something that's eating away at me. It has to do with…’Poison Pink’.”

“What do you need to know about her?”

“What has she been doing there recently?”

The cook refused to ever in his life read the Sora comics, but they were an undoubtedly useful resource for seeing what his family had been up to, even on a surface level. With Reiju being connected to Zoro’s kidnapping in some nebulous way, any lead would be a good one. It might also allay some theories that had been sprouting around in his mind about their connection that were…crackpot to say the least. He had to laugh at himself for even thinking that there had been a long and secret love affair between the two that had only now culminated in a wedding at Germa or else he'd cry at how far his mind had gone during this whole debacle. Sleep was becoming harder and harder to get and it was showing.

“She hasn't been in any of the issues for a few months now, actually.”

Sanji’s heart skipped a beat.

“Are…are you sure?”

“Sanji, I have read all the comics and am completely caught up. Got an encyclopedia of everyone's appearances in my head and I know for certain that she seemingly dropped off the

maps in the latest issues. Which kinda sucks, she's one of my favorites…outside of Sora, of course, because fawning over such a villain over the hero would be-”

Sanji had tuned Law out, letting him ramble, as the weight of what he said sunk onto him. If she wasn't in the comics…where was she then? Where was she that no one could see her even as his father and brothers went into battle? A stinging and awful thought struck him. Had they finally found out about what she did during the wedding? How she knew about the double cross and let it happen so they could all be destroyed? It would count as high treason for Judge and he would not take that from even his own children. Perhaps she was imprisoned, or maybe even…

“Whatcha doin’, Sanji?”

Feeling Luffy hop onto his back finally broke the cook from his train of thoughts. His captain was staring back at him with curiosity while Law still kept going on his end.

“Luffy, can I make a request to add a secondary goal to this mission?”

In all fairness, Yonji should have planned ahead when he chose to spar with the world's greatest swordsman. He did assume that because weapons would not be given to him, the match would at least be more in his favor. He probably should have factored in that a pirate of all people would go for low blows. Now, he was in his room, legs wide open as he sat on his bed and his gonads resting on a packet of ice. The doctors said that his family jewels would be intact, but they would be bruised and sore for the next few days. His father also came into the medical area to chide him for letting himself get humiliated like that in front of everyone and told him to do better. And of course, Niji was giving him shit about it all day. If Yonji had to hear a ball related pun one more time, someone was going to get their neck snapped.

God damn that Zoro...it was real fun to fight with him, but...he had LOST in the end. Vinsmoke Yonji did not LOSE, he was the pinnacle of raw strength, he had years of grappling and throwing under his belt, he was called WINCH GREEN, for fuck’s sake! Even if he had a worthy opponent, the match should have always been in his favor because he was his father’s success, not a failure.

But right now, he could not prove that worthiness and success to everyone while he recovered from his injury, which would be a little before they got to the next hit. The best he could do for nursing his ego at the moment was to indulge in some good old fashioned punching someone in the face. And he knew who exactly to enact that upon.

Shoving the pack of ice into his underwear, hissing as the cold made contact with his injured area, and marched out of his room, servants diving away out of his war path. It would be a bit of a trek to get to the dungeon, but it would all be worth it in the end. Yonji finally began to plan what exactly he would do to the green haired swordsman. He was not going to kill him, obviously, but he had to do something that would not grievously wound him. The prince already got enough of a tongue lashing from this father and did not want more of that if he broke Germa's new workhorse/toy. So that meant no broken bones (this time at least) and hurting him so much that he would not move the next day (again, at least this time). Hmm, perhaps just messing up his face would be enough. Hell, maybe he could return the favor and get a few ball shots in too. A grin creeped on his face from that thought.

By the time he got to the dungeon entrance, he kicked the door open, not caring if he broke it or not. He just wanted to catch the attention of the prisoner inside. When he went down the stairs, though, he saw that his act had not perturbed Zoro in the slightest. The man was in what looked like a position for meditation, eyes closed and posture stiff. The aloofness he displayed was pissing the bigger green haired man off. Hands in his pockets, he walked up to the bars and kicked them, ringing out a loud clang as his exoskeleton made contact with the metal.

“What’s up, fuckface?” He snarled. No reaction from Zoro.

“Hey, answer me, mossman.” Still no response. Yonji’s lips curled downward into a frown. So, he was going to play the silent game, huh? He would have to escalate things a little to get the response he desired, then.

Rolling up his sleeves, he gripped two of the bars and with some effort (the bars had been reinforced after Sanji had escaped initially) managed to bend them enough to fit his broad shoulders through. This was not enough to stir the swordsman, even as Yonji walked up to him, looking directly down at his mossy looking hair.

“You know, you really embarrassed me back there during our sparring match.”

“Good.” So, he was finally able to yank an answer from Zoro, though it was not one he wanted. He decided to escalate things by giving him a relatively soft kick in the stomach. The swordsman twitched for a second but returned back to his meditative mode.

Oh, he was not having this.

Yonji grabbed Zoro by the shoulders and shoved him against the wall. Zoro finally opened his eyes, staring back with a deathly glare, but not because of the show of strength. He seemed more annoyed than anything from being interrupted, like he was looking down on the bright green haired man.

"Do you even know what your little toothy attack has done to me? Not only do my balls hurt like a bitch, but I've lost face!" he snarled, baring his teeth at Zoro.

"Oh yeah, and who's fault is that?" Zoro spat back, "I'm not the one who decided to keep someone's teeth in biting distance to their groin."

Truly pissed now, Yonji pulled the man back and slammed him into the wall hard enough to crack some of the stones behind the swordsman. Zoro grimaced but held steadfast.

"You think you're hot shit, don't you? You got one little nip in and you think you're better than me? Pfft, don't make me laugh."

"At least I actually worked for my strength instead of cheating my way through."

Oh. Oh no he did NOT. This was a level of disrespect that needed immediate correction. Yonji wound up a fist and aimed it directly at the swordsman's nose.

"You take that God damn back."

Zoro spat at him, a wad of spit hitting the prince's cheek.

Hmph. He gave him a chance at least.

His fist shot forward, intending to smash Zoro's nose to bits. But in the very last second, the prisoner moved his head out of the path, Yonji's fist going straight into the thick wall. With this momentary mistake, Zoro seized the prince's other arm, the one pinning down his shoulder, and, with the flexibility and skill of a very muscular monkey, wrapped his arms and legs around the appendage in order to get the prince off kilter and pull him down with his body weight. It worked and Yonji yelped as Zoro fell on his back and the green haired prince flat on his face. Fuck, he was majorly off his game!

When he felt the swordsman’s teeth graze his knuckles, ready to bite, Yonji pulled his arm back, jumping back onto his two feet and using his body to block the entrance he made out of the bars.

"You little fucker!"

"Back off, big man," Zoro coolly responded, "I'm gonna get out of this cell one way or another, and it can end with either you stepping aside or me forcing you there. I've got someone I gotta see."

The bigger man backed himself up until his shoulders nearly touched the bent bars. Like hell he was going to let this asshole out. His father may be distracted at the moment as he argued with Caesar on some footage the goat dude took, but he would hear about any attempted escapes and trace it back to him quickly. Things were already bad enough today.

"Like hell I am! Who the hell are you trying to get to, anyways? Assassination attempts are not gonna work around here, pal."

Yonji put up his fists in expectation of any future blows. His balls were starting to hurt again from moving around so much but he ignored the pain as he watched Zoro's face harden into a look of determination.

“Your sister.”

Huh?

“You wanna assassinate my sister? The one bearing your kid? That’s fucked up, bro.”

The blush never left Zoro's face even as his expression rapidly twisted into one of disgust and confusion.

"What the fu-Of course I'm not going to kill her, you dumbass! I have…other reasons…" he tapered off, shutting his mouth so fast his teeth clicked, like he remembered that he should be sharing this to one of his captors. Yonji pressed his lips together and raised a swirled brow.

"Then what's your angle?"

"I just want to…I just…I wanna…" it almost seemed like his brain was clicking and clacking like a mechanical calculator on what to say next, "I just wanna…*see her,* if you catch my drift."

The drift would not be caught by Yonji until a few seconds later. In doing so, his face scrunched up.

"Oh my God, don't talk about banging my sister in this dirty ass cell!"

"Wha-You asked!"

"Well I didn't know it would be THAT!"

The vein on the man's temple throbbed again but he vented some of that mounting frustration by clucking his tongue.

"Will that be enough for you to let me by? I know you fellas can be horny bastards yourselves, so you should understand."

Another thing Yonji did not appreciate was being talked like this by someone who was not his family. While Zoro was right that he understood the urgency of one wanting to get their

dick wet, he still did not want a dressing down from his father for this, and most importantly, would not be ordered around by some…*commoner*, right hand man of the Pirate King or not.

“Understood or not, you’re still not getting through these bars without getting through *me*.”

Zoro chuffed, cracking his neck and knuckles.

“Fine by me.”

Yonji braced for impact as Zoro rushed up on the man, slamming his body at full force into his, clanging his back and shoulders fully against the cell bars as the sound of his exoskeleton hitting metal rang in the prince’s ears. Then the pushing began. Zoro was using all his might to try and push Yonji through the hole, grunting in the struggle. The youngest Vinsmoke stood his ground and grinded his heels into the floor, but he could feel himself sliding against the stone. He tried to counteract this by pressing his weight down onto Zoro to stop him. It didn't work and Zoro thrusted his body forward, suddenly pushing Yonji’s butt and legs out of the bent bars.

Shit shit shit! He was not about to take two humiliating blows in one day! He grabbed at the swordsman’s arms, attempting to push him away, which was a fruitless effort. Zoro reeled back for a second only to shove himself into Yonji again, this time his elbow hitting the larger man’s sternum. It probably hurt the swordsman more than it did the warrior prince himself, but it brought him off kilter long enough for the pressure applied by Zoro to sweep him off his feet and push both men out of the cell.

Shiiiiiit, no no no! Once out of the cell, Zoro quickly regained his bearings and rolled off of Yonji, making a beeline for the stairs. Pure animal instinct took over Yonji and he reached out and managed to grab Zoro by his ankle, making the man fall over flat on his face. Finally! An advantage!

Pulling the swordsman over, he immediately got on top of him, pinning him down with his weight. He sat on top of his stomach , ready to start whaling on him at any second. But, since he had some power over the man, he might as well treat his bruised and battered ego to some lording over.

“What are you gonna do now, sword boy? I'm gonna beat your face in so bad Reiju wouldn't want you unless you put a sack over your head.”

“Fat chance, greenbrow.”

“Heh,” Yonji closed the distance between his face and Zoro’s, grinning cruelly, “and just what are you gonna do about that?”

The next events happened so fast, as if in one smeary blur.

Zoro, his eyes showing a glimmer of an awful idea returned his smile with one more evil and demonic. The swordsman brought his head closer to Yonji’s, the prince expecting a headbutt, and was blown away when Zoro made contact with his slightly open mouth with his own.

He was…kissing him! And he obviously had experience with it, with the way he sucked and nibbled on his lips and had his tongue enter and maneuver in his mouth. Yonji should have been pulling away, walloping the swordsman for daring to do that, but…how could he even describe the feeling? It was so alien he couldn't put it in words.

Soon enough, though, his hands found their bearings and pushed the ground hard enough that he popped back up onto his two feet, stumbling back a few steps as if the ground was shaking. It at least felt like it. The world was spinning too. Another man just kissed him and he had no idea how to feel about it. Well…he didn't hate it at leas-

Out of the corner of his eye, Yonji caught a human shaped blob of pink at the top of the stairs and refocused his vision to the point of interest. It was…Reiju, wide eyed and baffled, like she had…seen…everything…

Fuck.

Well...that was unexpected. She did not know what she expected when she could hear Yonji's voice from the hallway leading to the dungeon, but Reiju definitely did not predict that her brother would be mashing lips with the father of her child. And he seemed to not expect it too, considering the blank deer in the headlights stare he was giving her. She was in the beginning of formulating how to respond to this when in the blink of an eye, Yonji kicked away the swordsman and dashed up to her, screeching to a stop when his face was only inches away from hers. He grasped her arms with desperation as he brought his head closer to her until their noses almost touched. His blue eyes were wild with bubbling anxiety.

"HowmuchofthatdidyouseeReijuhowmuchhowmuch???" The question came out as a long string of rushed syllables. His grip was starting to hurt now.

"I, uh, saw the kiss and strange position you were in?"

This seemed to not be the proper response as Yonji slumped back, releasing his hold on her as he buried his face into his hands and moaned.

"Nooo, NOOOOO!" his wails echoed throughout the stone walls. Good thing she closed the door on her way in. His self pity only lasted a few seconds as he sprung back into an upright stance.

"Hold on, just what the hell are you doing here?" He tried to shoot her a scrutinizing look despite being obviously shaken.

"I could ask you the same, especially considering the scene."

Yonji blushed, stuttering up an answer.

"I just, uhhh, wanted to see the prisoner and rough him up a little. I'm mad at him and that's all I feel about him, ok?"

"Oh, you were roughing him up, alright."

Yonji groaned and facepalmed for walking right into her punchline.

“Ok, just, don’t tell anyone about this, ok? This is just something you, me, and…him know about.” He side eyed Zoro, who was getting back up and finding slight amusement in the chaos he had caused, but was mainly focused on the princess in the room.

Oh…oh wow, she had no words for this. What could Reiju possibly say about the greatest opportunity just plopping in her lap like this so casually? After spending the last few days wracking her brain on what to do with Zoro now that many of her resources and privileges were restricted or revoked, this little incident just now suddenly showed up and practically handed her some good blackmail.

It was not something she used on her brothers, mainly because shame was something they rarely felt, no matter what they did, but there were things that did push their buttons in specific ways. One of the ways was their manly pride. Like her father, their sense of masculinity did not simply tiptoe near the line of chauvinistic male pride, but stomped all over the line and then walked past it. Why else would the second son be called the “first”? In this situation, something like being caught kissing another man and being in such an intimate situation with him would cause a bomb drop to their egos if spread around…

“Oh, so this is something we have to keep under wraps, huh?” She pondered with a false innocence, “Better not let Ichiji, Niji or Father get this information to their ears, right?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Well, dear brother, you can rest assured that *I* would never spill such sensitive information to them, I promise you that…however…”

Yonji’s body tensed up, his posture straightening as he took in what she was insinuating. Even Zoro leaned in to listen better.

“However?” Her green haired younger brother echoed back, as if to prompt her to continue.

“However, I cannot guarantee that such juicy gossip would not reach the ears of the servants. You know how they love to talk amongst each other about what happens with the royal

family they serve. I'm sure such a 'rumor' would spread like a wildfire amongst them ,too. And you know how those whispers eventually get to *everyone's* ears."

Reiju prepared herself for a blow up at this obvious flexing of blackmail material. She had built surface level rapport with Yonji over the years, but this would definitely smash it like a sledgehammer to glass. She could sacrifice that, take in his anger at her for holding such a thing over his head.

What she had not expected was for his reaction to be much quieter and not angry at all.

It was one…of betrayal. Of *feeling* betrayed. The shock of *her* doing this, followed by the look of a sad dog who had just been kicked by its owner, even if just for the briefest seconds. If the reaction had taken her aback, she shoved it down before it could show. She had to focus on her goal after all.

"Alright, what do you want?" Yonji asked her robotically. At least when he knew the cards were not in his favor, he would jump straight to business.

"One white and one horned transponder snail. I will also need access to the treasury after I have made my calls."

Despite Reiju having the upper hand here, Yonji still furrowed his brow and exhaled in exasperation.

"That's a tall order, considering that everyone will KNOW when that vault is opened."

"I know that," Reiju limply waved her hand, "which is why I will tell you after my call when you will do it."

Her brother's gaze hardened like steel, as if trying to see through her like an X-ray. He'd find nothing though, as she had been living under such a gaze for years.

“It sounds to me like you wanna elope with Greeny over there.”

“Why would you care if I do? You're not in any place right now to try and bargain with me.”

Yonji shrugged his shoulders, not meeting Reiju with eye contact.

“I mean, this is gonna throw away a *lot* of stuff for you, stuff you've done for us, stuff you've worked for, all down the drain when father sees you conspiring with the prisoner. I'm not totally concerned with what you wanna do with your life, hell if I care, but it'd suck to see father be more pissed than ever.”

Yonji could be stupid sometimes, but he was not dumb and quite observant, in fact (when his mind was not being ruled by his ego or his other head). The plan she had come up with would have pre-pregnancy her pulling her aside and making sure she was mentally fit enough to even be thinking. And truth be told, she was having reservations about the current escape plan she was cobbling together. The reward (freeing Zoro) was about equal to the risk (losing any and all privileges she had at Germa, maybe even some rights, too), but still had the sticky question of getting their daughter out of here too. This was time sensitive and she couldn't have both getting Zoro back with his crew and getting her daughter out of here without involving herself at one point.

“Well, that's tough. If you don't like what I'm doing, then I'm not going to force you. But I will let the staff have a juicy morsel of gossip that they can chew on for *years* to come.”

This had the intended effect of making Yonji bristle. He closed his eyes, real tight, and made a strained humming noise considering his options. She’ll let him weigh the pros and cons of giving in. While that happened, Reiju took a momentary peek at Zoro, who was now sitting on the floor. She could see some bruises mainly around his shoulders and back from the sparring earlier, but nothing much worse, which was a good sign. His singular eye, the iris as black as coal, stared her down during her observation, wanting to say so many things to her but holding back so Reiju could finish her dealings with Yonji.

“Augh, fine,” Yonji spat, “I’ll see what I can do to get what you need!” He threw his hands in the air for dramatic effect.

“It’ll take a minute to do because your boy toy used my nuts as a chew toy, so I’m officially off the clock, but I’ll get it done as long as *you* keep quiet about this on your end about this… incident, alright?”

Reiju flashed him a smile that dripped with sweet insincerity.

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

The younger brother simply huffed in response and shoved his hands into his pockets. He turned to waddle back upstairs but he turned back around to face the pair.

“Reiju…” The green haired prince seemed hesitant and embarrassed to force the next few words out of his mouth, “when you’re…*satisfied* with him, and all that, clean yourself extra well. The stink of the dungeon can get into your clothes pretty deep.”

With that, he left without another word, leaving Reiju confused on what the hell he was referring to.

Ahh, to hell with it. If she had the privilege of having emotions for herself right now, she would have felt giddy about how things were finally looking up for her plans, but again, not the time. Right now, she had a soon to be father to talk to.

“So…” Zoro started after waiting a bit for Yonji to truly storm off, “it…sure is something to see you again.”

The princess turned to directly face Zoro, promptly sitting down in a seiza position.

So. This was it. A face to face meeting between her and Zoro. For a moment, they said nothing and drank in each other's presence, as if to make sure they were really here. It was only when Zoro's eye migrated from her face to her midsection did the interaction truly start.

His eye was focused on the swell of her belly, mainly on how big it was. It was twice the size of when he last saw her. The swordsman looked up with true fear in his eyes.

“Is it…is it multiple?”

Oh, right. It had completely slipped her mind that she had hidden a satchel with food and supplies under her dress. She quickly went to untie the knot on the back and let the leather bag flop to the floor. Zoro breathed a sigh of relief at seeing that her stomach was the size it should be for one baby.

“Ok, phew, I thought for a second the whole quadruplets thing was hereditary. I…honestly have no idea how I'd handle that.”

No, it couldn't be genetic since the boys were made invitro-

And then Reiju remembered that she could not speak to the man. All the words drove right into a pile up in front of her closed lips and teeth. At least she had figured out a workaround that could possibly work. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a medium sized notebook, still with that new book smell, and a ballpoint pen. Zoro gave her pen a quizzical look but let her write. She tried to jot it down fast but still make it legible. Once finished, she handed the open book to Zoro.

My apologies that I could not speak to you earlier when you got here. Judge has ordered me to not speak to you and I quite literally cannot disobey what he says.

“Ahh, I get it then,” Zoro flopped the book down on his lap before handing it back to Reiju, “So this is the only way you can communicate with me for now.”

Reiju nodded.

“Well…if it works, it works. So…if I may be forthcoming, do you know where they are keeping my swords?”

Reiju frowned slightly at this. She did know their location, but unfortunately, once the swordsman’s swords were taken to the treasury, her rights to enter it had been revoked and the passcode and locks were changed. She wrote in the notebook again and handed it back.

I do know where it is, but I unfortunately have no access to it.

“Well, if you tell me where it’s located, maybe I can find them myself.”

Reiju shot Zoro a withering look, as if to say “Really?”.

”God, not you too!” Zoro groaned, “Why does everyone keep thinking I’m bad with directions, I follow them to the-oh come on, don’t roll your eyes!”

The princess could not help herself.

Would you like the short or long list of every way that plan could go wrong?

”…No list, please.”

Despite his objections to even the insinuation of being chronically unconsciously wanderlust, he knew this was not a war he was going to win. Besides, this was not the time to squabble.

This is precisely why I am having Yonji get us access to the treasury when the time is right.

The swordsman snapped his fingers at the realization.

“Ahhh, so that's why you asked Yonji to getcha access there. Hold on, you already have an escape plan cooked up, with the snails and everything?”

Reiju nodded again, though with less enthusiasm.

Sort of.

Zoro looked up from the notebook semi confused.

“Sort of?”

Finding the words to explain what problems she had was hard. Everything else she was on board with and if done right, could get Zoro and her daughter off of Germa and back with the Straw Hats. The only issue was that since her child still needed time in the oven, Reiju herself would have to go with them. She would have to free herself and be *out there* for once in her life and the prospect…the prospect should have elicited excitement in her but all it did was *terrify*.

There was no mincing words about it, she was a monster. A monster who was self aware of her nature and had no choice about it, but still a killer beast no less. Nevermind how that would affect the Strawhats to have her galavanting around with them while Judge would be hot on their tails, imagine how it would affect her daughter if she had to bear the weight of her being her mother in more than just blood. She didn’t deserve to be released from her prison but her innocent child did.

…Of course, she could not tell Zoro any of that. Instead, she wrote down an alternative answer for him. One that was truthful but not the entire truth.

I need to work out any back up plans in case something gets in our way. For example, Caesar and his incessant obsession about out.

“Ugh, yeah, that fucker’s had his eyes on me since day one. Probably still mad cause we stopped his experimenting on kids…*oh fuck*.” He exclaimed as his eyes migrated down to her belly. Yet another reason Reiju needed to get out of Germa, at least until the baby was born. With her father and Caesar combined, she did not want to think about what terrors for experiments and training they would unleash onto the baby girl.

“Yeah, we need to get the hell out of here as soon as possible. Though…fuck, it’s not like I don’t wanna see my crew again…but…I’m not sure how to feel about seeing erocook again.”

Reiju cocked her head, questioning his trepidation.

”It’s like…he always gets on me when it comes to how I interact with any women, even the most normal of things I do. Just because I don’t get stupid when I see a pair of boobs and a pretty face, well-“ he flicked his eyes down to the swell of her belly again, “not all the time, it doesn’t mean I’m some hater of women. But he’ll never hear that. And you're the only family

he has left that he still likes, so I just know he's gonna nail me onto a cross when I get back on the Sunny."

Despite his tone, something flickered in his eye that was along the lines a deep fondness even if his words did not match that.

I'm sure Sanji would be very understanding of the situation. You're still part of his family despite it all.

"Hmph, yeah, he'll be understanding that he's going to put his foot up my ass. But I shouldn't be thinking about that," he sighs, "dare I say, I miss him trying to burn me with those 'flames of passion'. I'll take being burned everyday by them if it means getting out of here."

And I can promise you that I am going to make that happen. Now, I want to get down to some brass tacks on the plan while we are together right now.

"Right, right, gimme the low down."

It was getting a bit harder to write everything down so quickly the longer sprints Reiju had to do. But she had no idea if anyone else was coming if Yonji sauntered down here before she did so it had to be done with haste. She gave him back the book, hoping her more manic scribbles were still legible.

Firstly, we're going to make a call to your crew since they are a sea separated from us right now. That's what the extra snails are for, as all lines on Germa are monitored out of the gate. We will make our location known to them and the circumstances surrounding your capture. We keep in contact to be constantly updated on their location. If they can make it to our next major stop before hitting the Red Line, Cinnabar Island, the next phase of the plan can start immediately.

Yonji will let us into the treasury, we will get your swords back, reconvene with your crew who will be nearby, and get out of here.

Zoro hummed after reading the plan over.

“I see, I see then. Sounds like a pretty solid plan AND I get to kick some ass. I hope Caesar just so happens to get himself caught in the crossfire, but knowing the fucker, he'll hole himself up in hi-huh?”

His train of thought was stopped as Reiju put up one hand and frantically wrote down with the other.

Please try not to kill anyone. I mean it.

She tapped the page with her pen for extra emphasis

“Well, hey, if things are going to get violent, I can't guarantee that my blades won't want to get a taste of blood.”

I know, but minimization is the key if we do not want more problems for your crew. If even Caesar is lost, Judge will follow you to the ends of the Earth to crush you, not accounting for the already apparent reason he would chase you all once this plan goes through.

“Hey, don't doubt us, we’ve handled big bullshit like him before.”

I understand that, but there is someone else we have to think about now, too.

Her hand slid down the curvature of her stomach, her daughter kicking in response. Zoro's expression hardened along with his spine stiffening.

“...Alright, then I solemnly promise to not rough your family and Caesar up too much, at least not enough to kill.”

Reiju breathed a sigh of relief. She already had a gut feeling that Zoro was the type to not break a promise when made.

“I do have one question for the plan, though,” Zoro raised a finger, “how are you going to juggle opening the treasury to cause chaos and getting me to my swords? I feel like shit is gonna go down once that place is opened and I'll be stuck here until you get me.”

Ahh, yes, she did need him to be right with her when the final part of the plan was enacted. Though that would be tricky since Judge pulled out all the stops for them to be close… unless…unless…

Ah. She had an idea on how to get Zoro and her together, *but it was going to hurt*.

She started writing again and took a few minutes (thank goodness for Zoro being patient), but her idea was finally hastily inscribed onto the paper as she pushed the notebook back into the swordsman’s arms.

I have an idea for that middle part: I have a lot of paperwork in my office/storage space that needs to be moved to the main paperwork storage building. It is about a year’s worth of documentation of costs, casualties, tax forms, etcetera. This is along with all the other responsibilities I have with tracking expenses around here. Usually I would do the main task, the storage transfer myself, but am unable to do so because of extenuating circumstances. So I need someone to assist me with that. I cannot nominate you for that now, but father does not trust other people either for this job, slimming it down to just me and my brothers.

Essentially, I will choose the one I know is the worst out of the three when it comes to manual, “boring” labor and have them be my assistant for a day and only day so they can make things FUBAR enough that I'll be “forced” to ask father for a replacement of my own choosing, which will be you. Due to the nature of the work too, he will also be forced to lift my talking restriction, which is great because I think my hand is cramping up “talking” to you right now.

On that note, Reiju tried shaking the feeling back into her hand. She could write fast, but she was more of a long distance writer rather than a sprinter.

After finishing the text, Zoro gave her a look of genuine concern.

“I'm not trying to poke holes in your plan, Reiju, I do trust your intuition, but…can you really handle being around one of those jackasses for a whole day while also doing hard work? You've been handling them for years, I'm sure of that, but the circumstances are different and

I'm just…I'm…" he was trying to force out the right words for this, "I'm just worried they might hurt you and the kid in some way and I won't be there to do anything about it. I'll probably be cleaning up the snail breeding caverns again tomorrow while you're dealing with one of the shitty evilbrows. I'd never be able to live with myself if I let my own kid get hurt like that…"

His tone was solemn and deadly serious with the slightest tinge of worry he was trying to smoosh down that emotion. Reiju herself was frozen in place. It was not quite shock that she felt, as she already knew Zoro was a protective man and was the type who actually cared about his offspring no matter what, but still…hearing some sort of care even tangentially thrown her way would always surprise her.

I have handled my brothers for over 24 years. What's one more day?

Zoro analyzed her face and body language for any trace of hesitation or doubt of her words. Reiju knew he would not find anything, though.

"If you say so…just don't choose greenbrow for that, it'll make things awkward.

Ahh, Yonji. She had already struck him from the very short list because of his groin injury, but now that they were on the topic of him…

So what was that scene I walked into earlier?

This seemed to catch the man off guard, raising his hackles.

"Well, the dumbass wanted to go for round two again and I was not having that so we… tussled."

So was the kiss a new fighting style? One Tongue Style?

Zoro groaned loudly and long. Again, Reiju was grateful that the door to the dungeon was closed or she would not have gotten this funny reaction out of the swordsman.

“Look, it was a bit of an underhanded tactic I had to use because the tub of fuck was on top of me. What the hell do you guys feed that dude anyways, bricks? Anywho, I did that to leave him dazed so I could suplex him and run out of this dank place. I have to say, though, he's not a good kisser at all. It was like tonguing a dead fish.”

Reiju elected to ignore that last comment.

You had a plan for after knocking him down?

“Ummm, kinda. I just knew I wanted to see you again, but not much else.”

Well, I appreciate the thought at least. Even though you would have been caught immediately.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, not the best idea, but it's all I had.”

And while we are on the subject, I also would like to know what Yonji was talking about earlier *satisfaction* when he left us be.

“Oh, that, well…I may have made a little fib when I accidentally revealed too much to greenbrow so I tried to say I was actually looking for you for…for…” It was surprising to see the swordsman actually look hesitant on finishing his answer, “augh, look, I tried to insinuate that I wanted you for sex and he bought it. Just to throw him off my trail.”

Oh. Huh. Reiju filed that tidbit of information away in her mind robotically, not really knowing what to do with it.

“I didn’t mean it of course, sorry if that somehow got your hopes up, but…ugh, again, not my best plan.”

It’s okay. And my hopes were not brought up by that.

Things were quiet for a few seconds after that. What WAS she supposed to say to that? It’s not like…well Zoro was quite a looker, yes, but…it was just…god damn, she couldn’t even get her thoughts to be coherent for herself.

She could not feel things for him again, not in that way, not ever since…

“Hey, while we are here, can I ask a stupid question?”

Reiju pursed her lips and thought about it for a second.

Go ahead.

"Well, don't be offended when I ask this," Reiju braced herself for what Zoro was going to say, "but why did you even go to bed with me in the first place? You seem like someone who is usually pretty cautious, so why take such a chance with me?"

Ah. Well, that was most likely the worst question he could have asked her. It was the one thing she absolutely did not want to answer even if a gun was pointed to her head. But Zoro’s want for an answer was worse than any firearm, so she would have to answer. God, where should she even start without sounding so…dumb? Ridiculous? Preposterous considering what she was usually like? Reiju thought back to the night that started it all…

Despite being a practiced actress due to her living situation, one act Reiju struggled with was playing the drunk. It required being able to be loose and unpredictable, two traits that were the polar opposite of her very core. There also was the fact that her body considered any and all alcohol “poison” and filtered any and all of its effects. It was like she was drinking flavored water.

It was why when at the celebration party for the Straw Hats, Reiju simply took hummingbird sips of the hard apple cider in her hands. The apples on this island had to be some breed that had been cut off from the others in cultivation as it had a pleasant aromatic scent to it and the taste was like that of the scent of apple blossoms in taste form mixed with very sweet but with hints of tartness, along with the alcohol content, to bring you back down from the sugar high.

All in all, she would give Innsmouth Island's cider an eight out of ten.

But the cider was not why she was here. Going between the crowd of bodies, Reiju was finally able to catch sight of the reason why she was here: Sanji…who was unfortunately making a fool of himself in front of women again, but that was a part of his charm, was it not?

Sitting at a wooden table and bench, she watched as the festivities were going on for the pirate crew saving the island from the old god that had been terrorizing it. She had tested her disguise out before on another island to see if she would be recognized and thankfully, her makeup and outfit coordination skills were good enough that no one had ever thought she was the Poison Princess. A reputation like that barred her from as many opportunities as it opened up.

So here she was, being another face in the crowd watching her brother from a distance. It has been three years since she last saw him in person, three years since the wedding disaster. The only times she had been able to get a look at her baby brother were in news articles and some of the newfangled film serials. And it should have stayed that way. She would keep her distance and he would live his own life. A fair (at least for Sanji) arrangement that made everyone happy.

And then she almost died. Slowly. Painfully. Her nearly last moments swarmed with visions of the last person who actually cared about her turning his back and finally calling her what she already knew she was and never wanted to hear him say.

Needless to say, breaking an arrangement to bring herself out of the post recovery tar pits of despair was an understandable breach on her end. Seeing her brother flourish in an environment that actually wanted him and his talents was the only medicine she had for this.

Her second to last youngest brother was a light shining in the darkness, figuratively and literally so with the way the lights bounced off his golden hair. He was offering to feed the cat burglar, Nami, some of the soft and light colored pudding from the feast, overhearing his reasoning being "So your sweet hands do not have to do anymore work ". The redhead relished in this attention flagrantly and it was no secret on the Grand Line that she basically

used Sanji as a servant. But he never minded this, or hell, maybe he knew already and just kept on doing it because he was such a kind man. The kindest in the world, even.

*Laying her head on the table, the world going sideways, she reminisced on the days she spent with her mother when she was bedridden, how the woman enjoyed anything Sanji made for her and did. He really was the greatest boy in the world. The greatest man in the world. A far better person than she could ever b-**HOLY MOLY!***

*Her self-deprecating thoughts were tied up and shoved into a closet faster than the eye could see as her brother turned to yell at the captain's right hand man, bringing him into the princess' focus. She had seen the rest of the Strawhats she could not meet in the papers and bounty posters, including the swordsman, but this was her first time seeing all of them in person in one spot. And Zoro's poster…**did not do the man justice.***

The pair was loud enough that she could hear their conversation from her spot.

"What the hell would you understand about treating a woman, shitty marimo!?"

"Not to act like a brainless servant monkey when one is around you."

"At least I'm not a heartless gorilla who-"

*Their squabbling was interrupted by Nami conking both of them on the head and yelling at them for trying to start a physical fight with each other. Reiju almost wished they would start fighting so **she could see his muscles ripple and move under his skin like-***

*All her muscles tensed as she tried her damndest to push away the thought. Where the hell did that come from? In all her life, she had not had any attraction to any person, but this pirate was making her feel all…warm and tingly inside. These feelings were for people who did not have their entire lives tied to a military mercenary empire. Besides, she should not harbor such feelings for one of her brother's shipmates. That was his real family there and she needed to keep hersel-**Oh Lord, look at those lips work that mug of cider!***

It took all her energy to not slam her head right into the table for that one, prompting instead to simply laying her face down on the wood as the crowd around her went on with their merriment.

*This was ridiculous, she shouldn't be acting like a dog in heat just because she had seen a well built man. She had seen plenty of them on Germa with the soldiers and it's not like the Straw Hats were barren of any other good looking men (sans Sanji, because **eww** to think of her brother in the proximity of sexiness). But there was something different about the swordsman…*

Observing him, she could see how sweaty he was, undoubtedly from the recent battle and heat of mid spring on the Grand Line, how his clothes stuck to his body, which had every muscle defined like they were from an anatomy textbook-

Maybe she should stop looking at him. And stop looking at Sanji too because he was so close to the swordsman and her treacherous eyes would migrate away. She should focus on taking a peek at some of the other crew members she did not get a chance to see during the Big Mom incident. The cyborg, Franky, was quite a looker, both in an aesthetic and a showman sense, and was quite good with kids with the way he showed off the abilities of his implants to the children. The long nosed one too, Usopp, was easy on the eyes, albeit, the effect of that was dampened as he fought off Luffy from stealing off his plate like the pirate king was a naughty dog.

*And then there was Jinbei…**Jinbei~~~**-alright, time to redirect her attention away from him too.*

*Finally, there was the enigmatic Nico Robin. The Demon Child, who had been a key player in finding Laught-**God damn she was sitting next to Zoro!***

It was at that point that Reiju felt something warm and thick down her top lip down to her chin. Wiping it away, she found that it was blood.

Oh God.

*She was acting **just** like Sanji when he was around women.*

Slugging down the rest of her cider, she tried to fill her mind with unsexy thoughts to flush out all the feelings she had for the gruff swordsman that were beginning to make her panties wet.

Ok, ok, the snail breeding caverns, that was a good start, uh, uhhh, ***wheat biscuits****, yes, very effective, very unsexy. The idea of the swordsman's abs were still popping up in her head, though, so she needed a true bomb to salt the earth of her lavicious mind.*

And then her brain popped in the idea of her father naked. And that seemed to be the key as she physically cringed at the idea and dried up any feelings of lewdness along with her nosebleed. Reiju felt that it was enough to stymie those feelings from resurfacing again since the imagery her mind forced onto her was…something she wished never to see in real life.

Now was probably the time for her to take her leave. She wanted to stay longer to refill her will to live by watching Sanji, but she knew if she stayed any longer, she might do something unwise because of the-

OH

MY

GOD.

Out of the corner of her eye, Reiju had caught the swordsman flagrantly pulling his shirt off, the sweaty cloth being too much for him and he tossed it behind him. Sanji was yelling at him again but her own brother got pushed to the wayside as she locked into Zoro's ***delicious*** *muscles.* ***His abs were so defined as a classical statue's, and as chiseled as the stone they were made from, and his pecs were like a pair of dirigibles!***

Reiju's eye twitched as more blood gushed from her nose. Her grip on the table tightened so much This was not simply a horny bomb on her psyche, it was the fourth Ancient Weapon! She could feel her sense and logic being locked up and the key thrown away as lust took the reins.

And then it happened. Her system overloaded with smut and newly awakened sexual passion, her gaze turned into a heart bulging out of her eye socket, her body soft and wiggly and her voice raising a few octaves in an over the top display reminiscent of the mating ritual of tropical male birds.

Her now limber waved side to side, arms in the air, as she shouted:

"Zoro-kyuuuun~!"

All the villagers in the vicinity turned to face the seemingly crazy woman and even Zoro himself glanced in her direction, but she was gone before anyone could find who just screamed to the captain's right hand man in that cutesy way.

Reiju had managed to fight the horny urges in time and dove under a table to catch her breath and manage herself. What in the hell did she just do? Why was she feeling this way at the worst possible moment? God, maybe she should bang her head against a rock until she stops being so stupid. But at the same time, doing that would ruin her makeup and she had no time to reapply it so she would just have to internalize the need to scream. While wrestling back for control, she still had the indelible carnal need for the green haired swordsman. Her insides felt so hot, she needed some release or else she would have her organs twist into knots. Stupid sexy Zoro!

Now she could not leave, at least not immediately. She could not go back to Germa all horned up like this as she already knew self pleasurement would not be enough. She did not simply want the man now, she NEEDED him.

Making her way out from under the table, she brought her raid suit canister nearer to the opening of her jacket so she could easily pull it out when she got to the point where she could take off back to the nearby Germa ships. Looks like things would have to prematurely end.

She wanted to stay longer, to soak up a little more of the sunshine so she could keep on living and surviving, but she would have to take what she could get. Reiju only was able to keep going the way she had done all these years because she had control over herself and losing that control for the briefest of moments back there was disconcerting. Without it, she would have been…well, probably locked away in a dungeon like Sanji had all those years ago. Having her body take the reins even if just for a second, it was quite terrifying.

*…But…maybe, just maybe…**a little taste of that was not so bad.***

Reiju stopped dead in her tracks at that thought. Of course it was bad! It would have meant that her over twenty years of "good behavior" was all for nothing! All those years of masking and all the years she would continue to mask would be all for naught!

*…Then again, **was that not all the more reason for her to give herself a little treat?***

Reiju could feel her heart beating so hard it thrummed in her chest and the core of her body was so hot now it felt like a furnace, hot enough to melt steel.

No, she did not deserve a "little treat", she deserved to suffer the way she had for years. She was not a good person, or even just a person, so why should she-

Why should…

Why…

Why not?

How long had she gone without any pleasure in her life? It had been so long that she could not remember any start point for it. She always had Sanji's wellbeing and thriving life to take pleasure in the knowledge of, but when had she done something for ***herself?*** *Never, that was for sure. A little nibble was not something she should worry about. After all, she would go back to the sterile Germa for either option she chose, so why not go with the fun one?*

Reiju was not sure at this point if it was her or her hormones doing the talking, but either way, the argument was sounding more convincing. She had lived spartan enough and would continue to do so. Not much else in life gave her any sort of stimulation that was not the sort of flight or fight response for survival, and drugs and alcohol couldn't be a distraction considering how her system filtered all their effects out. And it was not like her father would know this happened, considering he is asleep and quite a bit away now. And this was her first time, too! The first time she's ever felt this passionately for someone that was not familial. A temporary passion maybe, but the swordsman's presence was enough to override all her cautiousness and drive up her hormones where no one else was able to. He was special, that was for sure.

Reiju made a U-turn away from her destination (though it turned into a W-turn when she debated on going back), but did not go back directly to the banquet. She still had her lower face covered in blood from the nosebleed and went to find a water source to wash it off. The closest thing she could find was a water fountain and thought it might be her best bet as no one would be drinking from it anyways. As Reiju wiped her face, not caring about ruining some of the makeup now since it was better than trying to woo someone while looking like one got out of a pub brawl. As she flecked the residual drops off of her hands, she looked at her reflection once again in the water, the moon being the only source of light now.

She really did not look like herself when in the disguise. The makeup did some heavy lifting, covering up her tattoos and curly eyebrows, but the way she parted her hair, the way she had dressed and the accessories she wore like her sunglasses all combined together to form an entirely different yet somewhat similar person.

He would not recognize her, which was good (though, it was not like the swordsman had actually seen her before in the first place), as she need not to entangle herself anymore with

the Strawhats' lives than she already has. Well, has and will do soon. But that would be temporary. The warmth inside of her had spread, making her entire torso feel hot to the touch and ready for ***action****.*

All that was left now was finding the swordsman, which…could be hard considering his infamous ability to go in the opposite of even clearly explained and laid out directions, but since he was with his crew they probably would at least keep him reined in for a certain area.

As soon as Reiju went to look for him, though, she quickly stumbled upon him leaving the celebration and going to the outskirts of it and into the village with an evident pep in his step. Reiju watched, wondering what he was doing until he went into an alleyway. Ahh, he had to take a piss…well, better now than never.

Reiju stopped once more before making her move. Every muscle in her body ached to be taken by the man's strong self and her mind was awash with perfumed ardor, yet the one part of her mind, the one that was always aware, always vigilant, always afraid, clung on the idea of "Don't do this" like a piece of driftwood. Perhaps she could get away with this moment of passion if the swordsman wanted to do it too, but it was still uncharted territory for the woman. She knew how to be flirtatious and bend and mold others emotions, yes, but physical acts were something else entirely. Reiju had no idea how to be in control of such a thing or even if it was something to be in control of.

But these arguments were swept away by one thought: feeling this way, towards another person, was it not very human? Was it not human to ***want*** *and not to need? To do something not for survival, not for fitting into the fold, but out of pure desire and feeling comfortable enough to express that?*

Reiju may have been a monster, and always would be, but maybe with this newly started passion, she could play pretend, ***just for one night…***

Reiju still could not believe that he agreed to such an act then and there, but she also had to consider all the factors such as adrenaline and the good times going on that would contribute to such acts of passion. God knows it was not her skills at seduction that got her that far. Or maybe he was also horned up like her at the time and she just could not see it, making it a happy coincidence for them both.

Well.

Not quite happy *now*, but still…

In the end, she decided to put down the much shortened but also true answer.

You are an interesting specimen.

“That’s, uhhh, certainly a way to put it.”

Well, she was not expecting an enthusiastic reaction to her response, but it was better than saying she went full Sanji Mode at the sight of him.

“Huh, now that I think back to that day, I feel a little bad that we screwed in that alleyway.”

Huh?

Huh?

Zoro shrugged nonchalantly.

“I mean, if they ask one day about how we met or something, what do we even say? I’d personally wanna give them the truth, but I know the witch would never let me hear the end of it so I gotta think of something else.”

Reiju could not tell if the swordsman was joking or not, but she leaned towards not once observing how contemplative his expression was.

But the other thing that put her off kilter was the implication of “we”. Both of them, together in their daughter’s life. Reiju needed to make sure that did not happen, but she would have to keep that to herself from now seeing as Zoro was implying otherwise.

I guess we will just have to wait until she is old enough to learn the truth.

Zoro quirked his brow right as Reiju registered what she had written down.

“‘She’? It's a girl?”

The woman slowly nodded.

“Oh…oh wow,” Zoro combed his fingers through his hair, soaking in the gender reveal, “wow.”

Reiju meant to tell him the child’s gender soon, though she wished to tell him when she got her voice back. It was something she felt would be better revealed through words than the much colder form of writing.

“How long did you know?”

Only since yesterday.

“Ahh,” Zoro crossed his arms, staring contemplatively at Reiju’s stomach. She wished more than any other moment now that she could crack open his head and see what the man was thinking. While not quite enigmatic, he still was not the type who wore his heart on his sleeve like Luffy or Sanji. Was he mad at her for all this but just pushing those emotions into a corner for their daughter? Was he more interested in having a son instead of a daughter? The questions started to swirl in her mind.

“Hey,” Zoro’s voice penetrated through the clouds, “can I…feel her?”

Reiju looked back at him, analyzing his face. While his expression was steely as usual, she could sense a tinge of uncertainty. Despite that she nodded and scooted closer to the man. Zoro inched an open hand closer to the swell of her stomach until his palm and fingers fully touched her midsection. It was at that moment that their daughter decided to give a hearty kick, right on the part of Reiju's stomach Zoro was touching. He pulled his hand back fast, as if he touched a hot iron, eye widening a little. The baby girl kept up her movements until Zoro worked himself up enough to feel her again. This time when he felt the kicks again, he inhaled and held it in his chest.

Reiju could relate. Feeling their daughter moving for the first time almost didn't seem like it was actually happening, like she had mistaken some other bodily process for it. Knowing that someone else's life depended on you was something she was familiar with before, only now with a different context.

"Huh, strong kicks," Zoro mused, "just like her uncle…"

The pair stayed silent for a moment, the only sound now being a "drip-drip" noise coming from somewhere.

Zoro brought his legs into a criss-cross position and brought his hands back to plant them on his knees. He corrected his expression to lose some of the emotion he was showing.

"So…Reiju…I trust you know what you're doing with your plan and if you have faith in it, so do I. Even so, though, I have one thing to ask…well, there are more things I want to say, but one that relates to the plan: please do not bite off more than you can chew."

The swordsman did not have anything else to say in that respect, only tilting his head forward slightly to emphasize his grave look. Reiju made a mental note to keep her distance (but not too much) for the first part of her plan tomorrow.

Okay then, I can do that.

“Are you sure?”

Affirmative.

With the way his head was positioned, a shadow covered Zoro’s good eye.

“Ok…” he took in a deep inhale and let out an equally deep exhale, “ok…just make sure you’re both safe and I will do my part.”

Reiju hummed and nodded. She could understand his fears, especially when he could not be there, but the princess still had enough confidence in handling her brothers. For the most part.

“Oh right, my other question,” Zoro’s gaze softened a little, “did you think of any names for her yet?”

Reiju was about to write again when she realized she never actually thought of any yet. She's been so focused on worrying about what she was to do with her child and her well-being that it never occurred to her that she should be thinking about things such as a name for her girl. Reiju was batting zero so far at being a good mother.

She shook her head.

“Well, if you don't have any in mind, I can suggest some. I mean, you can veto any of them if you want, but I think the kid should have a name if she's got a gender now, you know?”

The princess nodded in agreement. She was about to transcribe them until she thought that it might be better if Zoro wrote them down himself. He could write it down the way he wanted it spelled and all that.

“Oh, me? Wouldn't your handwriting look better?”

Reiju was practically shoving the book and pen into his chest.

“AUGH, fine, fine, I'll do it,” he did not seem displeased despite what he said and took the items from her hands. The princess could practically see the gears turning in his head as he looked at the page, tapping his chin with the pen.

Inspiration struck him and he started to write, though part way through the process Reiju could see him crossing out one of his options. After a minute he gave her both the pen and book back.

“There we go. Sorry if they're not…*the best* names out there, but I never thought I was going to have a daughter that I'd need a name already thought out for. But I think these ones would be nice.”

Reiju poured over the list.

Tsumi

Hato

Tsubame

Tachi

Kuina

Suzume

The Germa princess’ first thought was how Zoro was not slick for trying to stick what was obviously a sword name onto the list of regular names, so she immediately crossed that out. The second thing she noticed was how he seemed to backtrack immediately on the “Kuina” with a great fervor, the scribbles he crossed it out with almost covering the entire thing. She made note of the detail but decided not to press the issue.

The other names, though, she really liked the sound of them, especially “Suzume”. Something about it just rolled off the tongue and felt right. Reiju would still consider the other two, but her heart was set on that one.

I like these quite a bit.

Zoro smiled.

“You can add some of your own if you want, but I thought these ones were just…nice. Something I feel like a kid wouldn't hate being named.”

He did not think a kid would not want to be named after an ancient sword? Well, swords *were* his things after all so maybe Reiju could not fault his logic too much.

Since she was going to throw the book in the fireplace once she got back to her room to destroy any evidence of this conversation, she ripped out the page of names and folded it up, placing it in her bosom.

Her gut told that she should probably make her leave about now, since the guards being distracted by her father and Caesar fighting would not last forever, but she still had to give Zoro one more thing, one of the things she came for before getting off track with the other subjects. She cleared her throat and got up, Zoro jumping up to attempt to assist her with rising. Reiju frowned slightly, as she was not a *total* blimp who would need that help yet.

“You’re leaving already?”

Have to. I’m still expected to do my job around her despite everything.

Zoro hummed in understanding. He looked back at his cell, the two bars still bent. He sighed.

“And I guess I should go back in there for the plan to work.”

He walked over and back into the cell and turned around in front of the bent bars.

Reiju knew what he wanted her to do and went over to bend the metal back into place. She attempted to put them back at the same time, but found difficulty doing it one handed each. Zoro looked down at her with concern.

“Do you need he-” a glare from Reiju quieted him. She could still do this, she just needed to work smarter about it since the metal bars were probably reinforced since the last escape sixteen years ago. Steeling herself, she pushed each bar back into place with greater effort than before, putting both hands on each piece. Once back together, she took a second to breathe and reached down for the almost forgotten satchel she brought. Zoro looked on curiously until he saw what she had brought. Covered tightly by a steel lid was an ornate meal tray, to which when Reiju pulled off the lid, revealed a meal tray with a balanced but rich (in the monetary sense and food sense) meal. Lots of brown rice next to ratatouille and a cut of filet steak. She could see the green haired man’s eye brighten for a second before it was snuffed out.

“Hold on, that looks like a full and well balanced meal.”

Reiju nodded hesitantly. Shit, did he figure her out already? Zoro crossed his arms and shook his head.

“I appreciate the effort, but I’m not taking the food out of a pregnant woman’s mouth.”

The warrior princess groaned as she set the tray near the entrance of the meal slot. Figures he was sharp enough to know she would definitely be unable to request any more food than what was allotted to her. She attempted to push it through the food slot, inching it forward while keeping eye contact, but Zoro just blocked it with his hand.

“Look, I can survive going without food for while. You, no way.”

There was a finality in his words that made any ways to argue back die on her fingertips. For the most part at least.

I’d rather not see you go hungry and let said hunger get in the way of the plan.

Not the exact truth, as in reality she could not stand the thought of letting starvation be added to Zoro’s list of troubles because of her, but it could work. Surprisingly, Zoro dryly laughed it off.

“If you try to force it on me, I won’t eat it, even if I know Sanji would kill me if he found out.”

And that was the true bookend for that. Zoro was not the King of Hell, he was the King of Stonewalling.

Reiju took the defeat as gracefully as she could and put away the food back with its cover and into her bag. Packing everything up and ready to eat and go to bed, she turned to Zoro and waved him goodnight instead of writing it seeing as her hand was starting to cramp from her frantic scribbles. He waved back and got back into his meditating position as she left. Once out of his sight and earshot, Reiju let out any remaining tension in a long sigh while leaning up against a wall. This plan…was a bit of a slapped together job. But she reminded herself that the escape she orchestrated for Sanji as a child was also on the seat of her pants but it still went well.

She also had to remind herself, though, that these circumstances were different. She did not have the strength or stamina that she used to, and if all went well, she would be forced to leave Germa, forced to leave everything behind, including never seeing her mother’s gravestone again, all for the sake of others.

Gathering her bearings and walking back to her room, making sure she was not seen, she thought about the afterwards, how she would find it hard to detach herself from her daughter so she could have a better life, but it would need to be done, it was inevitable, it was for the better.

It was something she could absolutely never tell a soul about. This heritage was *her* cross to bear, after all. Not Suzume, not Sanji, not anyone else.

All Reiju could hope was that Zoro would not pick up on her end game.

Yonji was having trouble sleeping and it was all stupid Reiju and stupid Zoro’s fault!

He tossed and turned in his extravagant bed, unable to find a sleeping position that just worked for him. Granted, his injury played a part in that, but the events that had just transpired were eating at him too. He had just been kissed by the captive and Reiju was now holding it over his head to get her way. It would be a cold day in hell before he let Niji and Ichiji get more material to jab him with so his hands were tied. It was either get the stuff she wanted or have his moment of weakness revealed.

The prince grit his teeth in anger. He hated feeling stuck because he was strong, he was one of Judge's *beloved* sons. There shouldn't have been any problems he couldn't bash a hole through and yet, here he was. Stuck between a rock and a hard place and now would be the fall guy for his sister’s machinations. He knew he'd be implicated for getting her the snails and opening the vault and the fallout from that…unless…

He could just lie later down the line, saying Reiju forcefully got the code for the treasury out of him, but that wouldn't be too believable since father ordered him and his brothers to not tell her that piece of information…

Yonji punched his pillow and swore under his breath. What did Reiju even find so captivating in that swordsmoss anyways, enough that she'd betray her own country over him? Sure he was strong and muscular and handsome and had soft, plush lips, but-

The green haired man stopped his train of thoughts and backed up. What the hell did he just think? Soft, plush lips? Like hell he did! That fucker smelled like sweat and dirt from all the work they put him under and was an animal compared to the Vinsmokes! He would never be attracted to someone as magical and delightful as hi-

Yonji buried his face into his pillow, screaming his mixed emotions out before putting it back and flopping onto it. What the hell was this feeling? It was…warm and fuzzy and directed at Roronoa Zoro. It wasn't hate but it wasn't amusement, it was something deeper, something he couldn't put his finger on. What he could say is that it felt nice. Feeling his lips with his fingertips, he traced around them, wondering why he did not feel so bad about that kiss…

…Bah, he was starting to sound like Sanji! All soft and mushy. He forcefully shut his eyes to try and get some sleep as the days ahead of him were going to be hard.

Chapter 6: Panic Button

Chapter Summary

Things go sideways.

Reiju really could not say that she took “pride”, per se, in her clerical work, but she did take it seriously. VERY seriously. With not much else in her life to actually do besides warmonger and train, and not wanting to let her mind dwell too much on the things she had done and seen, Reiju had thrown herself into her job and had perfected what she had done down to a science. Countless days she had spent just organizing files and papers, making the routine trips back and forth to the document warehouse, both retrieving and depositing paperwork there, being a one woman conveyor belt when it came to processing all sorts of forms, and so on.

…No, it was not fulfilling work in the slightest, but being good at it was good for killing time. She had been killing time for 27 years.

But most importantly, it was usually something she could do all on her own. It started as her having to do it alone and she quickly adapted and needed no one else to do her job. Not until she got pregnant. The princess did her best to keep up with it all even when she felt her worst in the first trimester, morning sickness being her mortal enemy, yet a backlog still piled up slowly and steadily. It was especially apparent and staring down at her in her office now that it was becoming much more difficult to transport large amounts of papers back and forth as she treaded into the end of the second trimester. That, and even outside of physical labor, her factory line tactics were jammed up by fatigue that grinded everything to a halt and would not let up until she rested for a bit or had a small nap. Every minute she was not working was a minute wasted and Reiju could feel her father's specter-like presence lurking in the back of her mind with all the time wasted.

So, unfortunately for her, assistance was going to be inevitable at some point. While being behind the operations of everything was her domain (a domain she treasured since she was all by herself in it), she would have to share it for a while with one of her brothers. Which was good when it came to the wider plan with Zoro, but bad for her at the moment since *she would have to deal with her brothers.*

But who would she saddle with the task of essentially being her fall guy? She spent last night thinking about it and came a terrible conclusion:

Niji. God damn *Niji*.

While true that she had no affection for her other brothers, Niji was something else entirely. Yonji was a meat head but good at following her like a little puppy dog with only occasional complaints. Ichiji was silent and brooding, but also father's favorite as he embodied much of what he wanted his perfect soldier to be. Niji, on the other hand, embodied everything wrong with those who got their hands on power, and doubly so for a royal family member.

Spoiled, entitled, and would never lift a finger to do the type of work she does without being forced to, the blue haired man lived only for the sword and the luxuries being a Vinsmoke offered. In his mind, if he was already better than most other people, why try so hard? How nice that he had all the resources to think that way…

But, it was this ineptitude and attitude that would prove useful, even if it meant gritting her teeth the entire time. While her father had the ultimate authority around the kingdom, his hand could be forced, and if her brothers just HAPPENED to be useless when she needed immense help with maintaining literally everything, she could finally get some time alone and be able to speak to Zoro. And if gaining that meant spending time with her least favorite brother out of the three, then…

…Well, she would not die, that was for sure. But it sure was appealing right now…

“Ugh, Reiju!” the blue haired man yelled from a floor below, “Where the hell do these *striped* top boxes go?”

Her eye twitched as her grip tightened on the papers in her hands. Controlled breathing, Reiju, controlled breathing…feh, easier said than done. For some reason, Suzume was feeling quite lively today, and while she usually would welcome all the kicks and movements, with her soured mood, every jab to her side or organs made her wince.

“Can you specify *what* color they are?”

“It’s like, black and yellow.”

“...I already told you, those are *our* medical records, not the ones for everyone else in the kingdom, *only* the Vinsmokes, so do not mix them in-”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time.”

Her eye twitched again and she neatly put the stack of papers in her hands away before she could crumble them in her vice grip. Something that was becoming dangerously apparent as the day went on was how the hold she had on her emotions and displaying them was slipping as her pregnancy continued. It seemed cliche to blame it on the hormones, but that seemed to be the only explanation for why she either really wanted to cry so badly over the littlest of things or be ready to fly off the handle where there would have been cold and calculated responses. Is that one of the things Zoro had considered when he asked her yesterday if she was sure she could do this? Because if that was the case, maybe she really could not…

No. No backing down now. Reiju had gotten far enough into the weeds of things that there was no option for her to back out into safety. She had already roped Yonji into her plan, meaning she really could not stay at Germa anymore. Revealing her scheming here would show how duplicitous she was, and after that, events such as the wedding incident would probably click together for her father and brothers…

And yet somehow, thinking about leaving the place she had lived her entire life gave her pangs of melancholy in her heart…or maybe that was just pangs of pain from Suzume treating her kidneys like a pair of soccer balls.

“Woa-WOAH!” Reiju did not flinch when she heard Niji fall forward and splat right on the ground, metal clanking, the box of papers exploding everywhere, but she did allow a sigh to escape her chest.

Niji had been playing his role perfectly, first getting all huffy when father ordered him to be her helper, then loudly complaining all the way to the warehouse, and then being the absolute worst at listening to simple instructions and being as slow as possible about everything he did, dragging his feet. She really would just need one day of him on the job and she could perfectly prove to her father that she needed someone of her own choosing to work with. And yet…seeing her brother be so incompetent was stabbing into her like a knife.

Reiju peered at the scene as she made her way downstairs and slightly cringed at it.

Niji was pushing himself back up to his feet, a crushed flat box under him and papers surrounding him on the ground.

“Fucking hell…” he looked down at the mess he made and then at his sister, “uhhh, whoops.”

Reiju clucked her tongue.

“I guess we will have to clean that up.”

Niji groaned and put his hands on his hips.

“I still don't get why *we* gotta do this in the first place. This is…this is servant work!”

“Well, you know how father is with documentation and how protective he is of it.”

She got down on one knee and began to scoop up as many papers as she could.

“But, like, it's kind of stupid, don't you think?”

Yes, Reiju thought.

“If you have a problem, take it up with father.”

Niji said nothing else but grumbled as he helped her gather up the mess. Some of them had become crinkled and crumpled when Niji fell on them, but they were at least still legible. She could iron them later, as there still was the matter of the boxes she left behind on the upper floors that she had abandoned to fix this mistake.

Reiju and her brother spent about a minute cleaning up until they had stacked all the papers into a tall but neat stack.

“Alright, now that we fixed that, somewhat, come with me.” She could see Niji’s face just peek around the pile he was carrying before she about-faced.

“Wait a minute, I thought you had your own stuff to sort on the second level.” The blue haired prince rebutted.

“I do, but I obviously need to guide your own work since you cannot be left alone.”

Another bout of grumbles emanated from Niji, but he still went on to trail her as Reiju brought the pair to the family medical records section.

The layout of the document warehouse was intentionally confusing to the average layman, with everything looking the same and the matte filing cabinets towering to almost twice her height. Fortunately, her father had programmed a map of the place and all its areas into her when she first started her secretarial job, so navigating it was second nature to her. Hmm, the confusing nature of it was probably a reason Niji had problems doing simple tasks.

Good.

Suzume rumbled around inside of her again, giving a mean kick upwards. It was nothing that could knock the wind from her lungs, but it was yet another flicker of movement showing that the baby was going to be energetic out of the womb. Instinctively, Reiju wrapped a protective arm around her midsection. What had gotten her so excited? The princess could understand her thrums yesterday when getting to hear her father again, but today was much, much less pleasant (as if there was a pleasant day on Germa)...unless being around Niji was just so enthralling for her baby girl. If that was the case, poor thing, getting all kicky for not even one of her good uncles. Well, the singular good uncle, in this case.

A tiny foot jabbed her again, this time shifting slightly near her back. The princess frowned and hoped Suzume would either stay in that position or move somewhere else but there. Getting hit in the spine, even when it happened rarely, had to be her least favorite movements and negated all cuteness of her child for a moment when her already suffering lower back twitched in pain. She could not imagine how bad it would be in the later months.

…Speaking of her back, Reiju could feel a pair of eyes boring into hers. Flicking herself around quickly, she caught her younger brother duck his head back behind the papers he was holding. Reiju’s first thought was how he was holding the stack haphazardly, quickly adjusting his arms so they straightened out, but her second thought seemed to be observing her when she reacted to her rambunctious child. *That* made her a bit uneasy.

Her brothers had not taken her condition too seriously, unlike their father, and their interest in her child was of casual curiosity, like they were not about to have a new family member coming into the picture. Reiju indulged them to the extent that they looked and never touched, but even then was never fully comfortable with the setup, especially when it came to someone like Niji who, for lack of a better term, just saw “womanly matters” as entirely not his problem and did not deign to care much about them. So to see him looking at her like that…it was quite out of character. She'd have to keep a better eye on Niji from now on.

Once making it to the section for family medical records, which was in a deep corner of the warehouse, Reiju signaled for Niji to stop.

“Now, I REALLY hope sorting this area should not be too hard for you.” She said, motioning to the main cabinets. All of them were color coded around the rims of each drawer according to each member of the family: black for father, red for Ichiji, blue for Niji, etc. The only one evidently missing was Sanji’s, but she heard that all of his files post leaving Germa were destroyed. Niji rolled his eyes under his sunglasses.

“Oh come on, even I could see which is which.”

“Really?”

“*Really*.” He forced the words out through gritted teeth. Placing the stack down on the floor, Niji ripped a document off the top. Before he could quickly scan it to see who it belonged to, Reiju snatched it out of his hands.

“That is your first problem: you need to sort by name first.”

Niji sucked on his teeth, frustration growing.

“Then why didn't we do that when I dropped all those papers in the first place?”

“Because, Niji, that was just to make sure we had all the documentation that I had so carefully categorized in the helpless box you body slammed. Besides…you know I cannot be on my knees for long.”

Her blue haired brother let out an extremely loud, drawn out sigh before resigning himself to his fate. Some expletives were muttered under his breath but Reiju paid no mind to it as she joined him. She immediately established all the piles for each family and began delegating the appropriate documentation to their places. Suzume, who had been quiet for a few minutes, decided to get back to work and jutted her foot out, causing Reiju to make a small

“oof” sound. The princess still was wondering why she was more active than usual. Was it really excitement like she thought, or was something wrong? The movements and kicks themselves felt the same as always, but in more rapid succession. What if that was some sort of distress signal? Her child was trying to call for help and here she was *sorting papers like a god damn monke-*

“Hey, Earth to Reiju.”

The snapping of Niji’s fingers snapped Reiju out of her trance and she turned to him.

“*What?*” She said more harshly than she wanted to.

Niji put his hands up.

“Yo, don't bite my head off. I'm just trying to get your attention since you've been staring at your stomach for an entire minute.”

Reiju realized that she had been cradling the swell of her belly with both arms and quickly brought them back to her sides.

“I, uhh,” she fake cleared her throat, “my apologies about that.”

The princess went back to work, leaving no room for questions. And yet…Niji was still looking at her. From the glances she gave, she could tell he still had something he wanted to say about the baby. Well, he could keep staring, because Reiju had no intention of-

“You know, I've been thinking, but how does it feel to be fat for once?”

…

What.

Reiju creaked her neck around to *glare* at her brother, a vein beginning to show on her temple as her temper was being tested.

“Choose your next words very carefully.” She stated, holding back any emotion in her voice. Steady and calm, she needed to stay steady and calm.

Her brother carefully placed another sheet onto Ichiji’s pile as he considered this. At least Niji, with all his vocal knives he liked to sink into weak spots, knew better than to test his usually cool and collected sister.

“Look, maybe instead of ‘fat’, it's more like you're…softer, now.”

This managed to put some cool water on Reiju’s temper…a little bit.

“Do elaborate.”

“Well it's like…we're all pretty solid, right? All muscles and the bare minimum of fat? Add on the exoskeleton stuff and you realize that none of us have any curves, just sharp edges. But now that you've got baby stuff going on, all these edges on you are starting to fill out.”

Reiju raised a curly brow.

“And?”

“And…I dunno, it's just so new and alien to me to see one of my own family members like this. It's like you're a hen gravid with eg-”

“**Okay**, back to work,” Reiju snapped her gaze back to the paperwork at hand while Niji silently turned back towards his stacks. It stayed silent for most of the time after that, Reiju preferring this to her brother running his mouth.

Her frustration rising, eyeing Niji as he sloppily organized the papers, leaving the pile uneven and haphazard, Reiju felt Suzume roll around in her again. She took in a deep breath and let it out. She had no idea if babies could feel their mother’s emotions, but it seemed like Suzume was getting riled up every time her temper flared up. Perhaps it was just a bunch of coincidences that should not be taken seriously, but something felt off, she just could not put her finger on it…

“Hey, Reiju.”

The aforementioned princess, with all the paper organization done, turned to her brother.

“Yes?”

“Why do you gotta, like…fawn over the baby?”

Reiju was taken aback by this for only a second before composing herself again.

“Why do you ask?”

“Hey, don't answer a question with a que-”

“*Why do you ask?*” Eugh, once again, it came out harsher than she intended. Niji made a show of covering his ears like she was just screaming at him instead of raising her voice.

“Alright, alright, I guess it's because I've been watching you for a bit now and you keep… rubbing and holding your stomach like it's a damn genie lamp.”

Oh hell, so he *had* been observing her. Tightening her expression, she forgot about the papers for a minute and got up.

“It is natural for a mother to fawn over their child.” She answered matter-of-factly.

“Okay, but *why*,” Niji asked, genuinely puzzled.

“You are quite inquisitive today,” Reiju slightly widened the gap between them, “what caused this?”

“Again with the que-ok, fine, fine. I'll…humor you,” Niji shoved his hands in his pockets, “This whole situation…it's just been *weird*. And seeing how you act now because of the kid is *weird*.”

Reiju's blood turned cold in her veins at this statement. What Niji said could go into many different directions, but she hoped it was just him seeing the facade she put up and not him actually noticing her change in behavior to help out the swordsman.

“Like, when the hell did you become so *caring*? I guess it's natural so the kid doesn't get neglected or anything, but it just isn't you, you know?”

Reiju gritted her teeth hard so she would not make any incendiary comments.

“And you're so *flighty*, too! Like, what the hell was that where you told Ichiji all the stuff about the baby and completely ignored me! What the hell was that about?”

“I had no idea you cared about my…child, Niji.”

“Oh no, it's not really about the kid at this point,” he waved his hand flippantly, “it's more of the fact that you're acting like you aren't really part of our lives,” getting more and more passionate in his ranting, the prince began to pace, “like you're receding away from us, from the *family*, Reiju!”

Reiju’s daughter’s movements were really picking up, but another unusual feeling was alongside them now. It was like some phantom force was making her stomach muscles twitch and contract, albeit in minute amounts. Perhaps that itself was a side effect of how Niji was getting under skin at the moment. A part of this family? He should not make her laugh with such ridiculous statements. Blood was their only tie.

“Would things really change if I was gone?”

Reiju was shocked that the thought came out of her mouth instead of staying in her head. She clamped her jaws shut as Niji stopped in his tracks.

“...I guess…realistically, I would have to take your job in that scenario, which if I had to work like this everyday, I'd probably kill myself, but besides that…” there was a flicker, just a momentary one, of *sorrow* across her brother's face as he figured out what would happen. That alone would have knocked Reiju right on her back if she was not trying so hard right now to keep it together.

And then Niji blew up. Literally and figuratively. Reiju had a feeling he would release a burst of electricity from the way she felt the static on her skin and the air smelled like ozone, so she took several steps back as blue lightning coming from her brother’s body rushed out and surrounded him like a cage, the man roaring, exasperated. The twitching in her stomach picked up and she clutched the swell of her belly. It was starting to hurt a bit.

“Look, you’re not like that *failure*, Reiju, you have a home here, a purpose here! And even if life would go on with just the three of us, it’s not a change *I* would want ‘cause I like things the way they are!” His pacing turned back into walking and he made a beeline to Reiju as he went on and on. As much as she hated to think it, Reiju was starting to feel a little fearful with her brother barreling towards her and her daughter right after his electric outburst, and the fact that her stomach felt tingly and twitchy during this did nothing to assuage her nerves.

“But things are quite literally about to change, Niji,” Reiju’s voice had a slight waver, “*I* am quite literally changing as we speak.”

“Yeah, changing for the *worse*. Now all you do is obsess over that kid inside of you and act like I’m such an insect that you can’t even tell me the damn *gender* of the thing you’re changing yourself for! *It’s like I don’t even know who you are anymore!*”

Niji began huffing and his face slightly reddened, and a bit of sweat lining the collar of his shirt. Reiju…had not planned for this in the slightest, but how could she? Niji was an *asshole*, but a very emotionally detached and short sighted one. He had been playing that part beautifully up until now with the revelation of his true feelings, feelings her father had *surgically removed*. The princess had no idea how to handle her prince brother because, ironically, it was like *she* was dealing with an entirely new person.

But while grappling with that, what bothered her equally if not even more was what he was saying, that she…that she belongs here, that she has a place here. Every statement he made was like an arrow to the chest because part of her agreed with that. A large chunk of her mind accepted that she was and always would be a Vinsmoke and she was right where she belonged. A family of monsters, cozy in their cave.

And yet…deep, deep down, a much smaller but still breathing part of her said “No”.

Perhaps it was a fledgeling form of hope or denial, but it made it all the more unbearable to hear her brother talk about her and her remaining family members like they had any real connections.

“I just…I just want my goddamn sister back, okay!?”

Niji threw his hands in the air, voice gaining airiness as he ran out of breath. Reiju only blinked back in response initially.

“You do not know me,” Reiju breathed, “you do not know a thing about me.”

Niji gave a rough and dry laugh, tangling his fingers in his hair as he combed them through the electric blue strands.

“Don't know you? I've lived with you *my entire goddamn life*!”

“You have only known what I have chosen to give to you,” Reiju hissed. She immediately regretted saying it, of course, but her emotions seemed to force themselves out now.

“...I'm gonna overlook that statement you just made as just your hormones flaring up,” Niji’s voice was dangerously calm, “but my point still stands that I cannot WAIT for that kid to get cut or pushed or whatever out of you so we can finally be *normal* again, have a goddamn conversation again!”

“Normal!?” Reiju winced in pain from Suzume’s rapid movements and her muscles tightening and relaxing, “NONE OF THIS is normal in the slightest, you-you-”

The blue haired prince put his hand up in front of her to get her to stop talking, which only aggravated Reiju more.

“Fucking hell, you’re acting all hormonal and shit now. Why don’t you sit down for a minute and-”

The pink princess tried to slap her brother’s hand away, ready to punt him if the spasming and kicks in her stomach were not making it hard to move without worry and pain ripping through her abdomen, but having quick reaction times, Niji caught her hand in his, gripping hard enough to keep her from hitting him, but not enough to cause serious damage. Her daughter was beginning to still now, but her muscles in her stomach tingled and contracted so tightly like an electric current coursed through them that tears threatened to sting Reiju’s eyes from the agony of it.

“Do not DARE talk to me like I’m a child!”

Niji, reverting back to his douchebag self, scoffed.

“And what are you going to do about i-”

Neither of them could have predicted or anticipated the nearby filing cabinet flying right into Niji’s head and throwing him off his feet. As the echoes of metal hitting metal receded, Reiju snapped herself out of her frozen position, instinctively protecting her abdomen and backing away, quickly hitting a wall.

Her brother, slightly dazed, got back on his feet speedily and began to scan the perimeter for whoever threw that. He locked eyes with Reiju.

“What the hell did you do?”

“Me? I-I was right in front of you, how could I have-”Another sting of muscular pain shot through Reiju and almost on cue, another filing cabinet ripped forward at an inhuman speed and hit Niji in the back. He yelped as he was bowled over, but the cabinet seemed to follow him downwards and press against him, trying to pin him down. Though, being a modified human with inhuman strength, he growled and punched the storage unit away, leaving a gaping hole in it and having it crash into other cabinets.

“Come out, you fucker, and fight me!”

That might have been his biggest mistake.

In an event that Reiju would not have believed to have happened if it did not occur in front of her own eyes, all the nearby filing cabinets leapt forward, spewing papers everywhere out as they began to pile onto her brother with reckless abandon. Sparks of electricity boomed from Niji as he tried to fend off the assaulting objects, but even when he smashed one, more followed in its wake and crunched together into him, trapping him as more and more of the things flew into each other. The crumpling of metal and Niji's yells, which soon turned to screams, was deafening.

The filing cabinets, pushed by an invisible force, were packed on so tightly, so violently forcing themselves into each other, that they began to bend and deform, forming a ball on top of Niji, who was now trapped by the metal and pressure. Whatever or whoever was doing this wanted her brother totally immobilized and unable to fight back.

And yet, during all of this, Reiju was not even paying full attention to the attack. She focused enough to keep track of what was going on, but she was not directly looking at her brother in peril. Instead, she focused on her stomach, the pain pulsing through her system at an inordinate rate. It almost felt like she was having contractions, but it was only in her abdominal area, and the push and pull of her muscles contracting and relaxing was far too fast. Reiju's thoughts were only on Suzume at this moment, if she was okay, if she was having a premature birth or what-*what was going on*? Hugging her stomach tightly, the Germa princess never felt any more vulnerable and…helpless.

As soon as the battering of office supplies started, it ended soon after Niji was silent, the only noises left were of fluttering papers and paper pieces. Many of the cabinets were now ruined, resembling pieces of abstract art instead of receptacles for important documents. But…*screw the documents.* Screw everything right now, all that mattered now was her daughter, her still very fragile and precious daughter. The pain, the spasms, it all stopped coincidentally when the barrage stopped, but Suzume was not moving. No…nononononononononononono.

With bloodshot eyes and trembling hands, Reiju felt for any signs of life, any movements in her belly. Nothing after a second. Nothing after five seconds. Nothing after ten seconds. Her heart was beginning to drop at the twenty second mark. Her daughter's life…her potential as a *human being* could not end just like thi-

A kick. Right against her left palm. And then some stirring, like the baby was readjusting positions, like she was not about to make her mother's mask crumble into pieces at the thought of her not existing just like that. Tears stung the edges of Reiju's eyes, but she did not

cry nor did she breathe a sigh of relief. She was alive, ALIVE. The princess never felt more grateful for her child to still be here after what happened with the womb that held her, but there still was the issue of the recent attack at hand. Just what had happened, and why did it only target Niji? None of the cabinets went near her as the invisible force maneuvered them around and even with their clumsy movements, they knew how much pressure to apply and to keep going until Niji passed out-

And then Reiju had a gut feeling she wish never happened.

The spasms, the fact that she felt them worsen every time a cabinet was picked up and used, how they stopped only when there was no need for the intimidating presence to be tranquilized any further. Maybe there were not enough pieces to put together a more definitive theory, but with those facts alone, Reiju could feel the truth bearing down on her.

Suzume had powers, just like the rest of the modified humans. Powers that her father could exploit and train his granddaughter in strengthening so he could finally conquer the North Blue. Powers that, if the girl were to get out of the kingdom, she would be hounded for because she would not be considered a *failure*, but a success that needed to be kept in the family.

She really would be…a Vinsmoke.

Never more did Reiju wish for her mama, if only so she could lay her head on her lap and cry.

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