Too Late To Want Me

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Too Late To Want Me

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Summary

Sanji has spent years loving a man who doesn’t want him. When a future version of Zoro arrives carrying grief and regret, he finally gets to know what it feels like to be loved back. It just isn’t by the right Zoro.

Chapter 1

The sea was quiet as the Thousand Sunny sailed away from Wano, a newly minted Emperor's crew. The air of celebration was waning amongst the crew and more of the exhaustion of the fight was settling into their bones, yet it didn't overshadow the joy they felt. Luffy was still laughing. Usopp was still telling his stories. Brook was still playing music while the others danced on deck. Meanwhile, Sanji was cooking.

He cooked because it was what he could do. The rhythm of chopping and stirring kept his hands busy and his thoughts at bay. Feeding the crew was the closest he could come to reaching out without asking for a steadying hand in return. He didn't feel entitled to it, not after he had run off to Whole Cake. He still felt like the crew hadn't really processed what had happened. The only one acting normal was Luffy. Nami kept him at arm's length, her promise to never forgive him holding true. Usopp, Franky and Brook gave him strange looks sometimes. Chopper kept asking him if he was alright and looked sad whenever Sanji waved his concern off. Robin kept watching him like she expected him to break any second. And Zoro…

It wasn't like before. Before, there had been banter between them. It was sharp, stupid and strangely intimate. The tension between them had been like a dance, but now there was only silence. After their spat in Wano following Zoro waking up, he had gone back to ignoring Sanji, acting like he didn't exist for the most part. It was enough for Sanji to feel like his heart was breaking in two, even though he knew his heart wasn't something Zoro had ever wanted in the first place. He had no desire to reciprocate Sanji's feelings and that was fine, he had accepted that, but the resentment and vitriol he felt from him nowadays was infinitely worse than the indifference of before.

Sanji had confessed his feelings to Zoro once after Thriller Bark. It was a stupid impulse driven by fear and grief and the overwhelming terror he felt seeing Zoro standing in a pool of his own blood. He had been half-drunk, sitting at Zoro's bedside as the swordsman recovered and the words had come out before he had a chance to stop them.

"I think I love you," he had admitted after a hasty swig of wine.

"I've felt like this for a while now and I wanted to ignore it. I was going to take it to the grave. You are not what I thought I would ever want, but seeing you like that after Kuma… our lives are so dangerous and filled with uncertainty. We might die any second. I'm not okay with that happening without you knowing how I feel."

Zoro stared at him blearily in silence for a moment before shaking his head.

"No, you don't."

"What?"

"You don't love me. You just love the idea of love. You "love" me in the same way you love Nami and Robin. It's not real, it's just your overactive heart latching on to what you see as

weak and in need of saving. I'm not your damsel, Cook."

"It's not about—"

"Course it is. It's your need to play hero all the damn time. And even if it's not, I have a dream and a goal in mind that I won't compromise for something as tenuous as falling in love. I'm sworn to my captain and to my promise to reach the top. I won't let anything get in the way of that."

Sanji had blinked at him, stunned. He wanted to be angry, furious at Zoro for dismissing his feelings as if they were nothing, but he couldn't make himself say anything. He had walked out of the room instead and hadn't brought it up again.

He'd told himself it was fine, that Zoro didn't owe him anything, that he could live with indifference. Eventually, he'd get over Zoro and that conversation would be nothing but a bad memory. But his heart wasn't as capricious as Zoro had accused him of and he had never stopped feeling this way for the swordsman, hadn't stopped wanting him, longing for him, loving him. Part of him wondered if it was just his own self-loathing expressing itself in another way. He knew for sure Zoro didn't want him and so of course he would punish himself by falling for him as hard as he could, leading to nothing but pain and bitter longing. Still, he knew it was his own fault. He still had Zoro as a crewmate, a rival, a friend, an equal.

After Whole Cake, he couldn't even say that anymore. Not after the way Zoro looked at him: like he was something rotten, like he couldn't be trusted, like he should've stayed away. Zoro's indifference had curdled into something far worse: hatred.

He felt it in the way Zoro avoided him. In the way he spoke of him like he was a liability. In the way he never looked him in the eye unless it was to glare. Sanji had wanted to pretend like it wasn't real, but one night, as he and Luffy were having their usual spat in the galley over stolen food, it had been interrupted by a looming presence that had sent a shiver down Sanji's spine. A wave of malevolent energy had frozen him before he could kick Luffy away, almost bowing him down to the ground. He resisted the urge and glanced behind him only to see Zoro there, a hand on the hilt of his sword and a glare in his eye as he looked at Sanji. He had found himself stuck in that cold gray stare, trapped in the way Zoro looked at him like he was less than a worm.

"Zoro, you're being mean to Sanji. Stop it," Luffy ordered, cutting the tension.

Sanji released a gust of air as the energy let up, allowing him to breathe easier.

"Just making sure everything is alright."

"Why wouldn't it be okay? It was just Sanji. We were playing."

"The way Nami tells it, I have reason to worry about you and him nowadays."

Sanji felt a pit lodge in his stomach at Zoro's words.

“Oh, cause Sanji kicked me a bunch? That was nothing. Sanji was getting hurt way worse than me anyway. It’s alright now, cause Sanji’s back. And he’s never leaving again, cause he’s mine. Right, Sanji?”

He managed to tear himself away from Zoro’s glare to meet Luffy’s warmer gaze, full of love and light with no trace of anger, hatred or mistrust. He couldn’t stop the small smile that crossed his lips at Luffy’s unwavering faith in him.

“Right, Captain. I’m all yours.”

“Shishishi, see?”

Sanji smiled a little wider when Luffy’s rubbery body wrapped around him, nearly crushing him. It almost made up for the unwavering glare Zoro kept on him all throughout dinner. Still, the swordsman’s demeanor did take its toll and Sanji felt tense and jumpy by the time the crew swept out of the galley, leaving him alone to clean up alongside Robin.

The two set to clearing the table and washing dishes as Sanji tried to moderate the anxiety growing in his chest. Robin was quiet through most of the clean up, though Sanji could feel her gaze on him as he tried to keep himself busy and moving.

“You’re quite tense,” she commented softly after a half hour of silence.

“Oh?”

“You’re upset,” Robin deduced, stepping closer to him.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Is it Zoro?”

Sanji’s jaw clenched at that.

“It’s always Zoro,” he groused, equal parts longing and self-loathing in his words.

Robin tilted her head curiously at his tone. Sanji set down a knife he had been cleaning and let out a shaky breath.

“He hates me.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Robin answered calmly.

“You saw the way he looked at me tonight, the way he’s been looking at me every night, the way he talks to me. It’s like I’m a threat to him, like I’m lower than a worm in his eyes.”

“He’s angry.”

Sanji leaned against the counter tiredly.

“I get it. I left, I lied, I put the crew at risk when they ran after me. But I came back. I fought beside you guys in what has been our hardest fight yet. I bled for this crew. I would die for this crew. He still looks at me like I’m something this crew is going to live to regret. And the worst part is I can’t blame him because I feel that way too.”

Robin’s gaze was steady as she studied him for a moment.

“Do you regret loving him?”

Sanji froze at that. He had never spoken to anyone on the crew about how he felt and if they knew, they’d never said anything to him about it before.

“That’s what this is, isn’t it? Not just guilt or shame. You loved him and still do, I suspect.”

Sanji sat down heavily at the table, dropping his head in his hands.

“Does Zoro know,” Robin asked.

Sanji nodded into his hands before he looked back up at the archeologist.

“I told him after Thriller Bark. He dismissed it, said what I felt wasn’t real and even if it was, it didn’t matter in the face of his dreams. I accepted that, I dealt with it. At least I still had him in some way. And now… now he doesn’t even pretend to care about me. It’s worse than rejection, it’s contempt.”

Robin moved to place a hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“He cares, but he doesn’t know how to show it. I believe your departure affected him much more than he knows how to confront, not when that fear is so tangled up with his own sense of loyalty and pride. Neither of us can control how Zoro feels or what he does with those feelings. Perhaps it’s time for you to stop waiting for him to figure out how he feels or change the way he interacts with you. I think after what you’ve been through that its time that you start thinking more about what you need in order to heal.”

Sanji blinked at that, taken aback. Robin smiled sadly in return.

“You’re allowed to want more than just survival, Sanji. You can reach out for what will make you feel whole again.”

Sanji felt his eyes welling up at that and quickly tried to hide it, but Robin squeezed his shoulder.

“No. I’m honored that you trust me enough to be vulnerable with me.”

Sanji crumbled at that, allowing Robin to move in and hug him.

“What do you want, Sanji?” She asked, stroking his hair.

“I…”

I just want to know that I'm worthy of someone loving me back.

"This is enough for now."

Robin hummed but didn't question it. She held him tighter and let him cry into her shoulder.

~*~*~

Sanji didn't go to sleep after Robin had left him alone, his eyes stinging from the weight of the tears he had shed. He stood by the railing instead, cigarette dangling from his lips as he watched the moon carve silver light into the waves. The wind tugged at his jacket as the water lapped against the Sunny's hull. Sanji had a worrying impulse to jump into the sea. Not to die, just to feel something outside of the storm raging in his chest.

He stiffened as footsteps sounded behind him. Zoro stopped next to him, arms crossed, gaze fixed on the horizon. They stood there, side by side, like strangers who didn't know how to speak to one another. Sanji looked over at Zoro. His face was the same, but harder. His eye was tired. His mouth was set in a harsh line. He didn't smile much nowadays, mainly when he was drunk, amused or looking at Luffy.

Luffy, who Zoro had sworn himself to.

Luffy, who Zoro had heard Sanji fought against, kicking him into unconsciousness.

Luffy, who Zoro felt the need to protect from Sanji.

"You hate me," the blond commented, his voice low but sure.

Zoro didn't answer right away.

"I don't hate you."

Sanji waited, feeling like the swordsman had more to say.

"I don't trust you, not like I used to. I thought I had a partner, someone that could have my back, that could support our captain at my side. I was wrong."

Sanji swallowed down the urge to scream.

"I did what I thought I had to," he said instead.

"So will I."

Sanji didn't know what that meant and he didn't ask.

~*~*~

It was a quiet, cloudless day when it happened.

The storm rolled in so fast even Nami couldn't predict it. One moment, the Sunny was gliding through calm waters, sails full and laughter echoing from the deck. The next, the sky

split open. Thunder rolled low and mean as rain lashed the ship in sheets while the wind howled angrily. Sanji was in the galley, hands deep in flour, trying to distract himself. He barely registered the shift until the wood groaned beneath him and Nami's voice rang out, sharp and commanding.

"Franky, brace the sails! Devil Fruit users, get below deck! Jinbei, stabilize the rudder!"

Sanji washed his hands and ran out, knowing he'd be needed for whatever was threatening the Sunny. By the time he reached the deck, the crew was already in motion. Zoro stood at the bow, soaked and steady, eyes narrowed against the wind. Sanji's heart did that stupid thing it always did, even when he really wished it wouldn't anymore. He shoved it down as lightning cracked overhead and the sea surged. He moved to help Franky with the sails as Jinbei steered them through the angry sea.

Just then, something pinged at the edges of his Observation. He whipped around just in time to see a body fall from the sky. The man fell like a ragdoll, as if the storm had spit him out. The figure hit the deck hard, rolled and then laid eerily still.

Zoro crossed the deck in three strides, his swords drawn. Sanji followed behind him at a slower pace, his guard up as he warily eyed the newcomer. The crew circled around the man, tense and silent. He was bleeding. His black yukata was torn, soaked through and stained with something darker than just rain. His hair was a familiar green, longer, wilder and matted to his forehead. His face was older, scarred and hollowed. The crew froze as they looked down at him.

The man on the deck was Zoro but not. This Zoro was older, by 15 years at least. His jaw was sharper, his eyes sunken, his body leaner in a way that spoke of hunger, not training. He looked like he'd crawled out of hell. His left arm bore a jagged scar that ran from shoulder to wrist. His right hand clutched the hilt of Wado Ichimonji though the blade was broken, ending in a jagged edge. The sight of the broken sword shocked Sanji more than seeing an older doppelganger of Zoro did.

"Who the hell—" Nami started.

The man coughed abruptly, blood spattering across the deck as he did so. His gray eye popped open as he looked around the deck wildly before his sharp gaze fell on the blond.

"*Sanji*," he rasped.

His breath caught at hearing his name from the lips of Zoro, any Zoro. That was a rare occurrence. And beyond that, the way the man was looking at him was throwing him for a loop.

Zoro — the real Zoro — stepped forward menacingly.

"Who are you," he demanded.

The man glanced over at the younger swordsman.

“I’m you, from a dark future.”

Zoro’s eyes narrowed at that.

“You expect me to believe that?”

The man didn’t answer, he just looked back at Sanji.

“*Sanji*, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Future Zoro sounded sincere and distraught. It scared Sanji enough to take a step back. He glanced over as Robin, Luffy, Brook and Chopper returned to the deck. The ravenette woman gazed at the man curiously, obviously having overheard the conversation.

“Travel into the past is meant to be impossible and yet here you are. Fascinating,” she commented as Luffy stared at older Zoro with stars in his eyes.

“Two Zoros? So cool!”

“He’s injured. I need to get him to the infirmary,” Chopper declared.

Zoro stared at his counterpart with distrust, obviously not keen on Chopper’s idea. Robin used her Devil Fruit to help Chopper move the man towards the infirmary. Sanji watched them go, his hands trembling. He didn’t know what to make of this.

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The crew gathered in the galley, soaked and shaken. Zoro stood apart, arms crossed and eyes unreadable.

“So he’s really me,” he said finally.

“He’s from a future, a fractured timeline. Possibly a paradox,” Robin answered.

“Can we send him back?” Nami asked.

“Eventually, but it’ll take time and a *super* amount of power,” Franky answered.

“What do we do with him until then? One Zoro’s enough for me, no offense,” Usopp inquired.

“He’s healed enough to leave the infirmary,” Chopper replied.

“I don’t think I want to share quarters with Zoro’s broody future self. I’m not exactly eager to know what this “dark future” he mentioned is.”

“He could stay in the first mate’s quarters. It’s not being used and is far enough away from the shared crew quarters if you are so worried about him gruesomely killing everyone in their sleep,” Robin suggested.

“Why’d you have to say it like that,” Usopp whined.

Sanji didn’t speak. He was still thinking about the way Future Zoro had looked at him, like he was something lost or something to be mourned.

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That night, Sanji brought food to the first mate’s quarters. Their guest hadn’t joined them for dinner after Chopper said he needed rest for the night, but Sanji wasn’t about to let anyone go hungry on his ship, even if it was a future version of the man who hated his guts.

Future Zoro was awake and sitting up when Sanji entered. His shirt was off, revealing bandages wrapped around his torso. There were scars crisscrossed on his skin, more than Sanji remembered. His eyes were clearer now but sadder.

“*Sanji*,” he said upon seeing him in the same tone he had on the deck. It made a shiver crawl up his spine.

“I brought dinner since you missed it.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“It’s kind of my job as the ship’s cook actually. So, yeah, I did.”

He set the tray down along with the bottle of sake he’d decided to bring. He poured two glasses and set one down on the tray for Zoro before taking the other for himself.

They sat in silence, Sanji drinking and Zoro eating. Sanji couldn’t help but be drawn to Zoro’s face. His eye was closed and he chewed slowly, like he was savoring something he hadn’t eaten in a long while.

Sanji was startled as Zoro opened his eye to reveal it wet with unshed tears.

“You’re the best cook I’ve ever known. I didn’t tell you that enough. I never appreciated food until I met you. And after you… food never tasted good again. I never wasted it, I know you wouldn’t have wanted that, but I never enjoyed it. It wasn’t yours, so how could I?”

“Why couldn’t you eat my cooking and why are you looking at me like you’re mourning something,” Sanji asked, latching on to questions that felt safe rather than confronting the way Zoro’s words lit his heart on fire. Sanji’s breath caught as he watched what could only be called anguish cross Zoro’s face.

“Because I am. I… I had to keep my promise.”

“What promise?”

“I killed you,” Future Zoro admitted, looking away in shame.

Sanji’s breath hitched at that.

“In my timeline, you were compromised. You threatened the crew. I swore I’d stop you if it came to that.”

“And it did.”

Zoro nodded. Sanji downed a large gulp of sake before speaking again.

“Why are you here? To get the job done earlier?”

“No, no… I just needed to see you alive and as yourself at least one more time in my life.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t know what I felt until after I had to run you through, until after I saw the light in your eyes die. And I realized that I loved you too,” Zoro said.

Sanji froze at that.

“I didn’t know, not until you were gone. You told me again when you were turning into Stealth Black, you told me again how you felt and instead of saving your heart from turning cold and emotionless, I let you fall. And then I killed you. It wasn’t until I saw your blood on my hands and felt something in my heart tear that I knew what I had felt all along. By then, it was too late.”

Sanji sighed heavily, dropping his face into his hands with a bitter laugh.

“Of course. Of course that’s what happened.”

He rubbed his hands roughly over his face before he stood up, intending to leave the room. Zoro’s hand stopped him before he could.

“Wait, please. Just give me a minute, a chance. I don’t care if you stay just to yell at me or tell me how much you hate me. I don’t need you to forgive me. I just want you to be here. I just want to be here with you.”

Sanji turned back to Zoro, Future Zoro, who was older and broken and apparently in love with him, something he only realized after killing him. And wasn’t that rich? Honestly, Sanji didn’t know why he would expect anything less from the universe.

He wanted to gnash his teeth and rage and kick the shit out of this man because how dare he come now, when Sanji was halfway to breaking apart, only to lay all this shit at his feet. How dare he show up now when Sanji was dealing with a Zoro that hated him, only to dangle a Zoro that loved him in front of his face like a carrot on a stick.

But damn it, he looked so broken and Sanji got unpleasant flashes of seeing Zoro laid up in a bed in a similar fashion after Thriller Bark. His traitorous heart wouldn’t let him walk away, no matter how much he wanted to. He sat back down on the edge of the bed, taking another long sip of his sake.

“You’re not him. You’re not Zoro,” he declared.

“I am Zoro.”

“You’re not *my* Zoro.”

“No, but I wish I had been.”

Sanji let out a shaky sigh in response to that and drained the rest of his glass wordlessly.

He sat beside Future Zoro for the rest of the night, neither talking or sleeping. It wasn’t until early morning before Sanji had to leave to do prep that he finally spoke.

“I don’t forgive you,” Sanji said.

“I don’t expect you to.”

Sanji moved to clean up the sake and plates that he had brought in last night. Zoro moved to hand over the tray to him, their fingers brushing as he did so. Sanji pulled away from the brief contact and retreated from the room as fast as he could without running away.

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In the three days that had passed since Future Zoro’s arrival, Sanji had done his best to avoid him. The man made it easy since he was perfectly fine staying confined in the first mate’s quarters, rarely leaving them. Franky and Robin were working on how to send him back home but beyond that, his presence didn’t seem to be overly affecting the crew. Luffy went to visit him and so did Robin and Chopper, Brook brought him food at Sanji’s request since he didn’t take his meals with the crew. Sanji also saw him meditating with Jinbei a couple of times, but beyond that, it was like he wasn’t even there.

Sanji reasoned that his avoidance was a matter of survival. He needed space and time. He couldn’t spend that time dwelling on the way Future Zoro looked at him, the way he said his name, the way he had admitted that he loved Sanji almost in the same breath as he admitted to killing him, not because he loved him enough to save Sanji from what he became but because he was a threat. It wasn’t that Sanji was upset by that in particular. It was what he wanted when he had Zoro make that promise in the first place. Maybe it was just the fact that he was being confronted with the reality that he’d never get to actually feel what it was like to be loved by Zoro and the swordsman himself would only realize he felt that way when it was too late to mean anything.

Sanji didn’t want to be Zoro’s regret, his greatest what-if, his ghost. So instead, he cooked, he cleaned, he sparred with Luffy in the form of protecting his fridge. He retreated to the library to spend quiet moments with Robin, sipping tea and letting himself feel a measure of peace despite the storm raging in his chest and roiling in his gut. He stayed busy and he didn’t go near the first mate’s quarters.

That didn’t mean he didn’t feel a pull there.

Beyond his indignation of what it took for Zoro to actually love him, he couldn’t help but think of how he looked at him like he was something precious, something to cherish, something that was worth it. It was everything Sanji wanted. He hated himself for wanting to go back to Future Zoro just to get a taste of what he’d never get from his own Zoro. He set

himself to work so he wouldn’t be tempted to do something stupid, doing his utmost to make sure the crew was fed and the kitchen was spotless.

He was doing inventory when Zoro walked in, his Zoro, present-day Zoro.

The swordsman didn’t speak as he grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter and then turned to leave. Sanji didn’t look up but he was hyper-aware of him pausing in his retreat.

“You’ve been hovering.”

Sanji blinked at that.

“Excuse me?”

“Around the crew, around the galley, around me. You’re just always… around.”

Sanji’s jaw clenched at that.

“I live here. Sorry to inconvenience you by existing.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?”

“You’re avoiding him, you’re using us to hide.”

“You think I’m afraid of him?”

“I don’t know, are you?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Moss. I’m not afraid of you. I never have been and I never will be, trust me.”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t what?

“Trust you.”

Sanji flinched at that, taken aback.

“You lied to us. You left. You let yourself be used. I bet that version of me is just as disappointed with you as I am.”

“I loved you… I just want to be here with you.”

That’s what Future Zoro had said. He wasn’t disappointed with Sanji. He wanted him. Sanji shook himself back to present, looking to his Zoro, the Zoro he fell in love with, the Zoro who hated him.

“I did what I had to,” he said weakly, his voice cracking.

“You always say that,” Zoro replied coldly.

“You think I wanted any of it? You think I didn’t bleed for this crew? Cry for it? Fight for it? I came back because I love this crew. I want to be here.”

“You bled and fought and cried and yet you still haven’t let us in.”

“You don’t want me to let you in. You don’t want *me.*”

Zoro’s jaw clenched harder at that. Sanji looked away, not wanting to see whatever expression was on his face. He let out a harsh breath as Zoro left the room. He stood in the galley and let the words settle like ash.

Someone I can’t trust… disappointed with you.

I loved you… I just want to be here with you.

Sanji leaned against the counter as words from the two different Zoros swirled in his head maddeningly, creating a cacophony of noise he could barely think past.

Sanji didn’t let himself think as he walked through the ship, a bottle of sake and two glasses in hand. He paused briefly when he reached the first mate’s quarters but took a fortifying breath and made himself knock on the door.

Future Zoro opened it. He didn’t speak but he did look surprised. Sanji wordlessly stepped past him into the room and sat on the edge of the bed, pouring out the two drinks. Future Zoro watched him doing so, not like he was a threat but like every action Sanji took was precious and worth savoring, even in its mundanity. And seas, Sanji just wanted to be looked at like he was worth saving by the man he loved.

Zoro didn’t ask as he took the glass from him, their fingers brushing against one another.

Sanji didn’t pull away.

~*~*~

It became a habit.

Sanji started bringing all meals to Future Zoro and when he did, he’d bring a bottle of sake and linger in the room with the older swordsman. Sometimes they talked and sometimes they didn’t. They always ended up sharing a drink together, sitting side by side. Future Zoro always looked at him the same way, like Sanji was something fragile and damn near mythic. He didn’t know if he was just feeding his own ego by growing more and more addicted to that look on Zoro’s face or if he was just that desperate. Either way, he kept coming back.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he admitted one night as he stared out the porthole into the sea, sucking on a cigarette like it held any answers.

“You don’t have to.”

“My Zoro hates me. He doesn’t trust me. I broke something between us and I don’t know if it can ever be healed. And then there’s you. And you… you…”

Zoro stood and slowly approached him, stopping just behind him.

“I love you.”

Sanji’s breath hitched at the declaration. He coughed a little around the smoke in his lungs, telling himself it was just a bad pull and not Zoro’s words that caused the reaction.

“You’re allowed to feel guilty if that’s what you’re feeling, Sanji. But you’re also allowed to be loved.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” he reluctantly admitted.

Zoro reached out. His hand hovered near Sanji’s close enough to feel the warmth, far enough not to intrude. Sanji looked at the man who wore Zoro’s face but not his contempt, who didn’t flinch when Sanji was vulnerable.

“I’m not ready,” he said.

Zoro nodded.

“I’ll wait. It’s the least I can do after how long I kept you waiting.”

They sat like that for a long time. Eventually, Sanji leaned over, just enough for their shoulders to touch.

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The galley was quiet. Late afternoon light spilled through the windows, warm and golden. Sanji stood at the counter, sleeves rolled up, hands deep in prep work. He set his attention to chopping scallions, humming faintly along with the tone dial playing softly as he tried not to think too hard about the stranger who wore Zoro’s face.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Future Zoro stepped inside. He walked wordlessly to the table and sat down, watching Sanji as he chopped vegetables.

“You hungry,” Sanji asked, not looking up from his work.

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Just to be here with you.”

Sanji faltered a little at the confession before he chose to ignore it and continue working. They co-existed in silence for a long moment, Sanji working on dinner while feeling the

weight of Future Zoro's stare on his back.

"We found it, you know," Zoro said suddenly.

"Found what?"

"The All Blue."

Sanji froze, the knife in his hand clattering to the cutting board as he whipped around to stare at Future Zoro, wide-eyed.

"It was real, *is* real. A stretch of sea where every fish from every ocean swims together. Warm currents, coral reefs, schools of fish so dense you could walk across them. Small islands, lush with vegetables and fruits from all over the world. Some of the islands are even populated with people who learned how to cultivate all kinds of food."

Sanji's breath hitched.

"Luffy and Chopper cried when they saw it, Nami teared up too. Usopp nearly passed out. Robin said it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen."

"And you," Sanji asked, his voice cracking.

Zoro met his gaze, his eyes heavy.

"I didn't feel anything. I couldn't, because you weren't there."

Silence fell over the galley, heavy and crushing. Sanji took a deep breath before wiping his hands clean and approaching the table to sit across from Zoro.

"Describe it to me."

"You sure you want to know?"

"Maybe hearing about it will help fight off whatever Germa bullshit rears its head in the future."

Zoro was quiet for a moment before he nodded in acquiescence.

"There were flying fish from the East Blue, bright as sapphires. Giant squid from the North. Tiny silver eels from the South. Dolphins and whales from the West. And from the Grand Line —creatures I don't even have names for in colors I've never seen before."

Sanji closed his eyes.

"The water was clear, so clear you could see the ocean floor. There were herbs growing in the sand. Closer to the inhabited islands, there were spices drifting in the currents from some of the trading ships. It smelled like every dish you've ever dreamed of."

Sanji's breath trembled as he imagined it, the ocean of his dreams.

“I wanted to bring you there. I wanted to see your face when you saw it, wanted to hear you name every fish and plan a hundred recipes before we even docked. But you were already gone.”

Sanji opened his eyes again and met Zoro’s aching gaze.

“I came back because I couldn’t live with that, because if there’s a version of me who can bring you there, I want that.”

“You think I’ll live long enough to see it?”

“If I have anything to say about it.”

~*~*~

The tea was jasmine, delicate and floral, steaming gently in porcelain cups. Robin had brewed it herself, hands steady and movements graceful. Sanji sat across from her at the small table tucked into the corner of the library, fingers curled around his steaming cup.

They had begun doing this after he’d fallen apart in the galley and cried on her shoulder. He couldn’t open himself up fully to the crew, but Robin was diligent about pulling him into these moments of solace, offering space for him to talk to her if that was what he wanted or simply be if he’d rather stay quiet. Tonight, he hadn’t spoken since he’d stepped foot in the library and Robin didn’t press him. He supposed that was why he felt the need to speak.

“Future Zoro told me he loved me.”

Robin glanced up at him, her gaze unwavering.

“He said he loved me, that he always had. He said he killed me in his timeline after my Germa enhancements took my emotions away. He said he never forgave himself.”

“And how did that feel to hear?”

Sanji laughed softly, bitterly.

“Like a punch to the gut. Like a dream I didn’t know I still had.”

Robin sipped her tea quietly as he continued.

“I keep looking at him and seeing everything I ever wanted from Zoro. The steadiness, the softness, the care, the way he looks at me like I matter.”

“And you feel guilty for wanting that,” Robin asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Sanji breathed out.

“Why?”

“Because it’s not him, not really. It’s a version of him who lost me, who had to lose me to realize what I meant to him.”

“And you’re afraid that clinging to him means giving up on the Zoro who’s still here.”

Sanji nodded in reply. Robin set her cup down and turned her attention to him completely.

“Are you telling me this because you want me to talk you out of it or are you asking me for permission?”

“… I don’t know.”

Robin reached across the table and rested her hand over his.

“I’m not here to judge you. My only concern is that you have what you need to heal.”

Sanji looked up at her from beneath his eyelashes.

“If this version of Zoro helps with that, however temporarily, I don’t see why guilt should stand in your way. You deserve to be loved. In every timeline.”

~*~*~

The first mate’s quarters were quiet. Sanji stood in the doorway, tray in hand, watching the man who wore Zoro’s face sip slowly from a chipped sake bowl before he stepped into the room and set the tray down. Rice, grilled mackerel, pickled daikon. Sanji sat across from him, arms crossed, gaze sharp as he watched Future Zoro eating. It almost felt indecent to watch. The older swordsman ate Sanji’s food like it was a religious experience. The cook glanced down at him. He was still a broad man and taller than present-day Zoro as well, but he was slimmer and had lost some of his muscle mass.

“What are you eating in the future?”

Future Zoro swallowed his mouthful before answering.

“The crew cooks on a rotation. You left all your recipes and journals for us so we could be prepared when we lost you.”

“Lost me,” Sanji repeated, the words sounding wrong on his tongue.

“What exactly happened? Whatever it is might happen in my timeline too and I want to avoid it if I can.”

Zoro looked at him then. His eye was older, darker, rimmed with something that wasn’t just exhaustion. It was regret, grief, sorrow.

“It was after our fight with the Blackbeard Pirates. Something was triggered in you by Blackbeard’s darkness powers. Your modifications activated but they started to change your personality too. You were cold, mean. You didn’t cook anymore. You suggested that we leave Usopp behind because he was dead weight. You left Chopper and Nami behind once and they

got badly hurt. You threatened Robin. You were betraying everything that made you who you were: wasting food, fighting with your hands, hitting women. Luffy believed in you though, said you were still Sanji, said we could find a cure to get you back to yourself. The rest of the crew believed it too."

"But you didn't."

"I thought you were a liability and I made a promise to you anyway. I thought I was doing the right thing by fulfilling it. I thought I was protecting the crew."

"So what? You came back to say sorry?"

"I came back because I couldn't live with it."

"You're living."

"Barely," Zoro answered quietly.

Sanji stared at him. At the man who looked like the one he'd loved for years. The man who'd rejected him. The man who'd killed him.

"I don't know what you want from me," he said.

Zoro set his cup down.

"I want you to know I love you."

Sanji laughed bitterly.

"You didn't. You don't."

"I did and I do. *He* does. Just didn't realize until after."

"That's not love," Sanji replied tremulously.

"It's all I have. You deserve more. You deserve a love that makes you feel seen, held, safe. A love that lets you know just how precious and rare you really are."

They faced each other across the room. Two men shaped by battle and silence and choices they couldn't take back.

"I'm late and I know I'm stealing moments I have no right to, but let me give you the love I should've for years. I promise you won't regret it."

Sanji's hand trembled as he reached out and touched Zoro's chest, just above the scar.

"I hate you," he whispered.

"I deserve that."

Sanji looked up.

“Say it again. Tell me that you love me.”

“I love you, Sanji.”

Sanji was only a man.

He kissed him.

It wasn’t gentle. It wasn’t sweet. It was desperate and angry and full of everything Sanji hadn’t let himself feel. Zoro kissed back like he was drowning.

Everything inside Sanji was a storm. He didn’t know what he was doing or what he wanted. He knew that the man he was kissing wasn’t his Zoro, but he was the only one who’d ever said those words to him. He didn’t know how to walk away from that.

~*~*~

They didn’t talk about it.

The next morning, Sanji brought breakfast. Zoro ate in silence. Their fingers brushed when Sanji took the tray away. Neither of them flinched.

That night, Sanji brought sake again. They drank slowly. No jokes. No flirting. Just the quiet rhythm of shared cups and shared breath. Zoro watched him like he was memorizing something he’d already lost and Sanji let him.

After they had finished their drink and Zoro finished his food, Sanji turned towards him and let the older man pull him into a secure embrace. He was not a small man, but he felt small tucked beneath Zoro’s chin, pressed against his warm, broad chest. He found himself melting in his strong arms. They were just as he had always imagined and he couldn’t stop himself from leaning up to press a kiss to the older man’s lips.

Zoro let him.

~*~*~

The crew didn’t know. Or if they did, they didn’t say.

Robin watched with eyes too sharp to miss anything. Brook looked between them with knowing curiosity. Present-day Zoro kept his distance. He trained hard, slept less, ate in silence. His gaze continued to be heavy as he looked at Sanji, though his mistrust seemed to be shifting more and more to his counterpart than on Sanji.

He didn’t know what to make of that.

~*~*~

One night, Future Zoro joined them for dinner.

It was rare to see him outside the first mate's quarters and Sanji had been struck silent seeing the two Zoros together in one room. He'd been uncharacteristically silent throughout dinner as a result. Future Zoro volunteered to help clean up after dinner and the crew accepted this. Present Zoro lingered a little longer than necessary before he left the room. Sanji noticed but didn't comment.

The galley was quiet as they cleaned up together, washing dishes and wiping down the counter. He poured two cups of plum wine when they were finished and sat at the dining room table across from Zoro.

Sanji handed him a cup. Their fingers brushed. Zoro's hand was rough, calloused, familiar in a way that made Sanji's chest ache. The wine was sweet and sharp.

"Your Zoro doesn't like me. I don't think he likes the time we spend together," Future Zoro informed him.

"Maybe he thinks I'm a threat to you or something. He doesn't trust me after all."

"I don't think that's it."

"It doesn't really matter. It's not up to him if I want to see you. Robin said I should be thinking about what I need to heal, not just survive."

"What do you need?"

"I… I need to feel like I'm worth loving to someone. I need to feel like my heart isn't going to always be wasted on the people I choose to fall in love with. He can't do that for me, but you can, can't you?"

Zoro set his cup down.

"I don't know how to be gentle with you."

"You already are."

Zoro's mouth twisted.

"Not enough."

"It's not about enough. It's about being here, now."

Zoro kissed him. This time, it was slow. Careful, like he was afraid of breaking something. Sanji reciprocated, feeling like his chest was cracked open from the softness of it all.

"Zoro, bring me back to your room. I need you to show me how much you love me."

Zoro pulled back slightly, his eyes searching.

"Are you sure?"

Sanji nodded wordlessly. Zoro stood and wrapped an arm around Sanji's waist, leading him towards the first mate's quarters. His heart pounded in his chest as he let himself be steered to the room.

He didn't feel even a whisper of regret.

~*~*~

The door closed behind them with a soft click that felt louder than it should have. Sanji's pulse hammered in his throat as Zoro turned to face him, backlit by the moonlight streaming through the porthole. The older swordsman looked at him like he was something holy. Sanji didn't know what to do with that kind of attention.

"Come here," Zoro said quietly, extending a hand.

Zoro's palm was rough and warm, calloused from years of gripping sword hilts, but his touch was impossibly gentle as he drew Sanji closer. Their bodies came together slowly, chest to chest. He could feel the steady thrum of Zoro's heartbeat against his own racing one.

Zoro kissed him again, deeper this time but still achingly tender. His hand came up to cup Sanji's jaw, thumb brushing over his cheekbone like he was something fragile. Sanji's breath hitched. He'd been kissed before. They were usually quick, hungry, desperate things, but never like this. Never like he was being savored.

"Let me see you," Zoro murmured against his lips.

Sanji's hands trembled as he reached for the buttons of his shirt. Zoro's hand covered his, stilling the motion.

"Let me."

Sanji dropped his hands to his sides, feeling exposed even though he was still fully clothed. Zoro worked each button free with deliberate slowness, his knuckles brushing against Sanji's chest with every movement. When the shirt finally fell open, Zoro pushed it off his shoulders and let it pool on the floor. The cool air hit Sanji's skin, raising goosebumps. Zoro's eye tracked over him, taking in every scar, every mark, every imperfection. He fought the urge to cover himself, to hide the evidence of battles fought and lost.

"You're perfect," Zoro said, his hands settling on his waist, warm and grounding.

Sanji's throat tightened in response.

"I'm not—"

"You are. To me, you always have been."

Sanji didn't know what to say to that so he kissed him instead. Zoro responded immediately, one hand sliding up Sanji's bare back while the other worked at his belt. The leather slipped free and his fingers moved to the button of his slacks, popping it open with practiced ease.

The zipper followed and then Zoro was easing the fabric down over his hips, kneeling as he did so.

The sight of Zoro on his knees before him made something crack open in Sanji's chest. He'd imagined this but never like this. Never with this kind of reverence. Zoro pressed a kiss to his hip bone, then another to the scar just above it where a blade had once cut deep. His lips were warm against Sanji's skin.

"Zoro," Sanji breathed, his hand coming up to thread through the older man's hair.

Zoro looked up at him, his eye dark and intense.

"I've got you."

He helped Sanji step out of his slacks and underwear, leaving him completely bare. Sanji felt vulnerable in a way that had nothing to do with nakedness and everything to do with being seen. Zoro stood slowly, his hands trailing up Sanji's thighs, over his hips, across his ribs.

"Lie down," Zoro said, nodding toward the bed.

Sanji obeyed, his legs unsteady as he moved to the narrow bunk. The sheets were cool against his heated skin as he settled onto his back, watching as Zoro stripped off his own clothes with far less ceremony. The moonlight painted silver across the planes of his body. He was broader than present-day Zoro, scarred and weathered, but still undeniably him.

He joined Sanji on the bed, settling beside him rather than over him. His hand came up to cup Sanji's face, thumb brushing over his lower lip.

"I'm going to take care of you. Tell me if anything doesn't feel right."

Sanji nodded, not trusting his voice. Zoro leaned in and kissed him again, slow and deep, while his hand began to explore. He traced the line of Sanji's collarbone, the dip of his sternum, the ridges of his ribs. Every touch was feather-light, like Sanji \ might shatter under too much pressure.

Zoro's mouth followed the path of his hands. He kissed the scar on Sanji's collarbone, the one beneath his ribs, the one on his shoulder from a bullet. He lingered on each one, his tongue tracing the raised tissue like he was trying to memorize every mark Sanji had ever earned.

"You're so strong, so brave. You've survived so much," Zoro murmured against his skin.

Sanji's breath came in short gasps. His hands clutched at the sheets, not knowing what else to do with them. He'd never been touched like his scars were something to be honored rather than hidden. Like his body was a map worth studying.

Zoro's hand drifted lower, ghosting over Sanji's hip, his thigh, everywhere except where Sanji was starting to ache for him. The teasing was exquisite torture, building a heat in his belly that had nothing to do with lust and everything to do with being wanted.

“Zoro, please,” he whispered.

He wordlessly reached for a small bottle of oil on the nightstand and coated his fingers. The scent of it was clean and faintly herbal. Zoro settled between his legs, one hand on his thigh, thumb rubbing soothing circles into the muscle.

“Relax for me,” Zoro said softly.

Sanji tried. He focused on breathing, on the warmth of Zoro’s hand, on the way the older man was looking at him like he was the only thing in the world that mattered. When Zoro’s finger pressed against him, slick and careful, Sanji’s breath caught.

“That’s it. You’re doing so well,” Zoro encouraged, working the digit in slowly.

The stretch was unfamiliar but not unwelcome. Zoro took his time, moving with infinite patience, watching Sanji’s face for any sign of discomfort. When he added a second finger, he leaned down to kiss Sanji’s knee, his thigh, his hip, distracting him with gentle affection while his hand worked steadily.

Sanji felt himself opening up, his body yielding to Zoro’s careful ministrations. It was overwhelming in the best way, the physical sensation tangling with the emotional weight of being cared for like this. Zoro’s fingers moved inside him with purpose, searching, and when they found that spot that made stars burst behind Sanji’s eyelids, he couldn’t stop the broken moan that escaped him.

“There you are. So beautiful like this. So perfect,” Zoro complimented, satisfaction in his voice.

He worked that spot with gentle persistence, drawing more sounds from Sanji’s throat, more trembling from his limbs. Tears pricked at the corners of Sanji’s eyes. Between the pleasure, the tenderness, the way Zoro was looking at him like he hung the moon, it was all too much. He’d never felt so seen, so cherished, so utterly wanted for exactly who he was.

“I’m ready. Please, Zoro. I need you,” Sanji managed, his voice cracking.

“Are you sure?”

Sanji reached for him, pulling him up into a kiss that tasted of desperation and need.

“Yes. I’m sure,” he murmured against his lips.

Zoro withdrew his fingers slowly. He positioned himself carefully, one hand braced beside Sanji’s head, the other guiding himself into place. When he pressed forward, it was with the same aching slowness he’d shown throughout, giving Sanji time to adjust, to breathe, to accept him.

The stretch was intense, bordering on too much, but Zoro paused whenever Sanji tensed, murmuring reassurances against his temple, his cheek, his lips. He focused on the warmth of Zoro’s body above him, the solid weight of him, the way his hand came up to cradle Sanji’s

face with such impossible gentleness. When Zoro was fully seated inside him, they both stilled, breathing hard, foreheads pressed together.

“Okay?” Zoro asked, his voice strained.

Sanji’s hands came up to grip Zoro’s shoulders, feeling the tension in the muscles there.

“Yeah. Move. Please.”

Zoro pulled out slowly before pressing back in with the same careful movement. The rhythm he set was unhurried, almost lazy, like they had all the time in the world. Each thrust was angled to make Sanji gasp, deep enough to make him feel full and wanted and whole.

“I love you,” Zoro said, the words falling from his lips like a confession.

“I love you so much. I’m sorry it took me so long to say it.”

The tears Sanji had been holding back finally spilled over. They tracked hot down his temples as Zoro continued to move inside him, steady and sure and achingly tender. No one had ever made love to him like this.

“I love you,” Zoro said again, kissing away Sanji’s tears.

“I love the way you cook, the way you fight, the way you care for everyone even when it hurts you. I love your strength and your kindness and your stubborn heart.”

Sanji sobbed, the sound breaking free from his chest. It wasn’t from pain or even from pleasure, though that was building steadily in his core. It was from the overwhelming feeling of being loved.

Zoro’s hand slipped between them, wrapping around Sanji with the same careful attention he’d shown the rest of him. Sanji felt like he was coming apart at the seams, his ribs cracking open to expose his heart, raw and beating and finally, *finally* held by someone who wanted it.

“Let go. I’ve got you. I’ll always have you,” Zoro murmured, his thrusts becoming slightly less controlled, his breath coming harder.

Sanji shattered. The orgasm rolled through him in waves, stealing his breath, making his vision white out at the edges. He felt Zoro follow moments later, felt the warmth of him, the way his body shuddered and his grip tightened like he never wanted to let go.

They stayed like that for a long moment, tangled together, breathing hard. Zoro’s weight was grounding, his presence a comfort Sanji hadn’t known he needed. When he finally pulled out, it was with the same care he’d shown entering, and he immediately gathered Sanji into his arms, holding him close.

Sanji buried his face in Zoro’s chest and let himself cry. Not from sadness, but from relief. Zoro’s hand stroked through his hair, his lips pressing kisses to his crown, his temple, anywhere he could reach.

“I’m here. I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered.

Sanji closed his eyes and let himself fall completely into Zoro’s embrace, let himself be held and cherished, just until the ache went away.

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