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.

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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.

Chapter 2

Zoro sat alone in the crow's nest, sharpening Wado Ichimonji with slow, deliberate strokes. The blade gleamed in the fading light, clean and quiet unlike his thoughts. The wind was soft tonight, the stars clear, the ship quiet in a way that made memories louder. He hated that, didn't want to think or remember or dwell on anything. Inevitably, his mind would drift back to Sanji in the silence and the cook was the last person he wanted to be thinking of.

Sanji, who had left.

Sanji, who had lied.

Sanji, who had come back.

He was different, more subdued, quieter, busier. But he was still Sanji. Sanji, who Zoro didn't trust, *couldn't* trust. Sanji leaving had carved something jagged between them. His partner, his rival, his other wing, had disappeared, run off to marry some girl and lied about coming back. If Luffy hadn't gone to get him, he'd still be gone. Zoro had known all along that Sanji's heart was fickle. He shouldn't have been surprised. He'd known it years ago when Sanji had confessed his "love" to him. Sanji, resident womanizer and flirt, in love with Zoro? Laughable. He was only in love with Zoro as much as he was in love with Nami or Robin or Vivi or Conis or any other woman they'd met on their journey that the cook got all noodly and poetic over.

Sanji had never gotten that way over a man though. Zoro had dismissed that thought. It was Sanji. Sanji fell in love with someone new every other second so Zoro didn't take this confession any more seriously than any other declaration Sanji had ever made. Then, when they had reunited, it was clear that whatever lapse in judgement that Sanji had had was over and done with. He'd gone pining after women even worse than before so Zoro dismissed his confession as a fluke.

Clearly, he was right to think so because Sanji had left. Left them with nothing more than a note and a wedding invitation.

Zoro had told himself it was proof. Proof that Sanji couldn't be trusted. Proof that the confession had meant nothing. Proof that Zoro had been right to dismiss him. Sanji had betrayed them worse than any of their other crewmates ever had or ever could.

But Sanji came back and Zoro didn't know what to do with the relief he felt over that.

He remembered the first time he saw him again — through a haze of fire and heat in Wano, fighting at his side again as if he had never left, as if he'd always been there to guard Zoro's back. Zoro had wanted to slice him in two, demand answers, ask him why. He'd wanted to say *don't do that again,* but he hadn't said anything because he didn't know how to say *I'm glad you're back* without sounding weak and he didn't know how to say *I missed you* without admitting that he'd been afraid.

Afraid that Sanji wouldn’t come back.

Afraid that he’d meant it when he left.

Afraid that maybe Sanji had mattered more to him than he’d realized.

He didn’t trust Sanji, but he didn’t want him to leave again. That contradiction sat in his chest like a blade he couldn’t unsheathe. He watched Sanji now from the crow’s nest moving towards the galley, his sleeves rolled up and a tray in his hand. The one he brought with him to visit Future Zoro.

Zoro didn’t know what to make of that. The Grand Line had thrown a lot of weird shit at them, future versions of themselves was probably par for the course. Zoro had challenged him to a duel as soon as he was healed and had roundly lost. At least he didn’t get weak in his older age. He hadn’t had much interactions with his future self beyond that, mainly because he kept himself confined away from the crew.

It reminded Zoro of his early days on the crew when he tried to keep to himself. However, this suited him fine since he didn’t trust Future Zoro as much as the others seemed to. He had come here for a reason. Zoro knew himself well enough to know that. He also wasn’t blind to the way Future Zoro had looked at Sanji when he’d first landed on the Sunny.

He’d seen glimpses of it ever since in the rare moments he ever saw Future Zoro. One time, he’d even caught them out on deck and Sanji had been laughing, actually laughing. Not loudly, just a quiet, tired chuckle as he stood next to Future Zoro by the stern of the ship. Zoro couldn’t hear the words passing between them, but he saw the way Future Zoro looked at him: steady, soft, like he was memorizing the shape of Sanji’s smile.

It made Zoro’s skin crawl. He’d seen that look before. In mirrors. In moments he didn’t name. In the way he used to glance at Sanji when the cook wasn’t looking. After a fight, after a meal, after one of those rare moments when Sanji let his guard down and Zoro saw something raw beneath the bravado. He’d never let it show because it didn’t matter. He had his dreams, which superseded anything else. Beyond that, he didn’t trust Sanji’s heart and he wasn’t going to jeopardize the crew on a man as erratic as the cook. They’d both left that in the past and moved on.

Future Zoro clearly hadn’t.

Zoro didn’t like it. He didn’t like the ease between them, the quiet, the attentive way Sanji would visit Future Zoro every day, sometimes for hours. Zoro didn’t trust it, didn’t trust him. Future Zoro had come from the future soaked in blood and reeking of loss. Now he was here watching Sanji like he was something sacred. It didn’t make sense, unless he wanted something from him.

Zoro had spoken to both of them separately about it on one occasion. He had gone to the first mate’s quarters, a room that was technically his though he’d never used it. Future Zoro hadn’t looked surprised when he saw Zoro standing on the other side of the door.

“You’re healing fast,” Zoro said.

“I’ve had practice,” Future Zoro answered, stepping aside so Zoro could enter.

The room smelled like sake and salt. The lantern cast soft shadows across the desk, the bed, the half-empty bottle. Zoro didn’t sit but Future Zoro poured two cups anyway. They drank in silence for a long while before Zoro broke it.

“What’s the deal with you and the cook?”

Future Zoro wordlessly rose an eyebrow in return.

“The way you look at him… it’s like you know something the rest of us don’t.”

“I know *him*.”

“Not this version,” Zoro replied, jaw tight.

“Close enough.”

“You’re always watching him, spending hours with him locked up in this room. I don’t know what you want from him or what you came back here for, but Luffy didn’t go running into an Emperor’s territory to bring him back here just for you to do… whatever it is that you’re doing.”

“Is that why you’re here? Because of Luffy? Really?”

Zoro’s fists curled in response.

“Everyone on this crew belongs to Luffy. I’m not about to sit by and let him lose his cook again.”

Future Zoro stared at him for a long while before he gave him a sad, knowing smile.

“He never stood a chance with you.”

Zoro’s brows furrowed at that.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

Future Zoro shook his head before replying.

“I’m not here to steal the cook away. If I’m stealing anything, it’s just some time.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Future Zoro looked down at his cup.

“You’re asking the wrong questions.”

Zoro paced the room, eyes scanning the desk, the bed, the tray of half-eaten food.

“You came back from a timeline we don’t understand. You won’t explain how. You won’t explain why. And now you’re here, watching Sanji all the time, and me asking why is the wrong question?”

“He’s the reason I came back.”

Zoro froze at that as Future Zoro continued.

“You think this is about strategy, about a mission, but it’s not. It’s about a choice. I had a choice to visit anywhere in time, just once, and I chose him, here and now, when he’s feeling at his lowest and most alone. I chose now so he knows that no matter how much anger and vitriol you throw at him, in the future, you’d still choose him. I bet you’d choose even now, wouldn’t you?”

Zoro didn’t answer, instead he turned to leave the room. Future Zoro’s voice followed him.

“You don’t trust him, I get that. But you don’t want to lose him either. Trust me, you won’t survive that.”

Zoro paused at the doorway.

“He’s still here,” Future Zoro pointed out.

“You should ask yourself why that matters so much to you.”

Zoro hadn’t slept after talking to Future Zoro. He’d trained instead until his shoulders burned, until his breath came ragged, until the ache in his chest felt more physical than emotional, but it didn’t help. He kept seeing it, the way Future Zoro looked at Sanji, the way Sanji softened in his presence, the way they moved around each other. Zoro didn’t understand it, didn’t trust it and he didn’t know why that mattered so much. He waited a day after before going to talk to Sanji. He found him on the deck, leaning against the railing, cigarette glowing in the dusk. The sky was bruised with color and the sea was quiet. Zoro approached like he was walking into battle.

“You look like hell,” Sanji commented with a glance.

Before, that would’ve sparked an argument or a spar but that’s not where they were with one another nowadays.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Future Zoro,” the swordsman said, cutting right to the chase.

“Is that a problem,” Sanji asked around a puff of smoke.

“He’s not me,” Zoro replied tightly.

“I know.”

“You shouldn’t trust him.”

Sanji raised an eyebrow at that.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t.”

“You don’t trust anyone nowadays,” Sanji replied bitterly.

“He’s hiding something.”

Sanji turned fully now, eyes sharp.

“What is this, Zoro? What do you want from me? You clearly don’t want me around you, you don’t trust me, so I’ve left you alone. Now you don’t want me around the future version of you? I don’t really think that’s your choice to make, is it?”

“It’s not about that. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m trying to warn you.”

“Warn me or control me? What do you think I’m going to do to him anyway? Kill him in his sleep? I’m spending time with him because he doesn’t look at me like he wants to murder me, or like I’m going to slit the crew’s throats in their sleep, or like I’m going to fall apart any second, or like I need to be under constant surveillance, so I don’t run off again. He sees… me. I don’t know if any of you do anymore.”

“You think he cares about you? You think he’s here for you,” Zoro asked, his tone turning cold.

Sanji flinched at his words. Zoro saw it and hated himself for it but he couldn’t stop.

“You’re making the same mistake, trusting someone who’ll leave, who’ll lie, who’ll use you.”

“You mean someone like me? You mean what I did? You don’t have to forgive me and if you never trust me again, I won’t blame you. But stop pretending whatever issue you’re having with me has anything to do with him.”

Zoro opened his mouth trying to figure out how to fix this but ultimately turned to leave. Sanji wasn’t hearing concern, all he was hearing was contempt and Zoro wasn’t making it any better. He didn’t know how to say *I don’t want to lose you again* without sounding like he still hadn’t forgiven him for leaving the first time.

Zoro had kept his distance ever since, watching Sanji gravitate more and more to his future self while he remained unable to put his finger on just what about them bothered him so much. He knew he had a general distrust for both, but there was something more, something deeper burning in his chest that he couldn’t decipher for the life of him.

~*~*~

Zoro wasn’t looking for them. He’d been heading to the galley, half-distracted and half-starving, and had somehow ended up in the hall where the first mate’s quarters were. He had noticed that the door was ajar as he walked past. He didn’t mean to stop but he did. Inside, the lantern light was low, casting soft gold across the room. Sanji sat on the edge of the bed, one leg tucked beneath him, hair damp and shirt loose. Future Zoro knelt behind him, fingers combing gently through Sanji’s hair, slow and reverent. The silence between them was intimate and heavy.

Zoro’s breath caught, he didn’t move, didn’t speak, just watched. Future Zoro leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the back of Sanji’s neck. It was soft and careful, like he was afraid to break him. Sanji closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. Clearly, it wasn’t the first time. Zoro felt something twist in his chest. Not anger, not quite, something quieter, something colder.

Future Zoro’s hands moved slowly, one resting at the curve of Sanji’s shoulder and the other tracing the edge of a scar just beneath his collarbone. His touch was reverent, almost ritualistic, like he was memorizing the shape of it and offering something gentler in return. Sanji didn’t speak or flinch, just breathed and softened, melting into Future Zoro’s touch, his body leaning towards his. Zoro had never touched him like that, had never let himself want to, had never believed he could.

Sanji turned around in Future Zoro’s arms and met his lips, their bodies pressing together like they were used to it. Sanji moved to straddle the older man’s waist, his fingers gripping Zoro’s shoulders like he was holding on for dear life. Future Zoro pressed soft kisses all over Sanji’s face, down his neck, over his ear as Sanji ground his hips down against the older man’s, breathy moans brushing past his lips.

“Do you want me,” Future Zoro asked.

Sanji nodded against him, holding the man even tighter.

“Please, Zoro. I just need… please.”

Future Zoro kissed him even softer before laying Sanji down on the bed beneath him.
Zoro should leave. He knew he should leave. His feet wouldn’t move.

He stood frozen in the doorway, one hand gripping the doorframe hard enough that the wood creaked beneath his fingers. His other hand had found the hilt of Wado Ichimonji without conscious thought, knuckles white, palm slick with sweat. Leave. Walk away. This isn’t your business. The commands echoed in his head, but his body refused to obey.

Future Zoro’s hands moved to the hem of Sanji’s shirt, pushing it up slowly. Sanji lifted his arms to help and the fabric slid off to reveal pale skin marked with scars Zoro recognized. Some he’d seen in battle, some he’d glimpsed in passing, some he’d never let himself look at long enough to memorize. Future Zoro looked at them like they were sacred. His fingers traced each one with deliberate care, his lips following the path his hands made.

Sanji's breath hitched. His head fell back against the pillow, exposing the long line of his throat. Future Zoro kissed it, slow and reverent, and Sanji's hands came up to tangle in his hair.

Zoro's chest tightened. Something hot and sharp twisted beneath his ribs, spreading through his lungs until breathing felt like work. He didn't understand it. Didn't want to understand it. This was Sanji. Sanji, who he didn't trust. Sanji, who had left. Sanji, who—

Future Zoro's mouth moved lower, kissing down Sanji's sternum, over his ribs, pausing at the scar just below his navel. Sanji made a soft sound, something between a gasp and a whimper, and his hips shifted restlessly. Future Zoro's hand pressed against his hip, steadying him, grounding him.

"I've got you," Future Zoro murmured against his skin.

Zoro had heard himself say those words before. In battle. To the crew. Never like this. Never with that kind of tenderness, that kind of weight. Future Zoro's hands moved to Sanji's pants, undoing the button with practiced ease. He slid them down slowly, taking his underwear with them, and Sanji lifted his hips to help. When he was bare, Future Zoro sat back on his heels, just looking. His eye traced over Sanji's body with an intensity that made Zoro's stomach clench.

"Beautiful," Future Zoro said quietly.

Sanji's face flushed. He turned his head to the side, embarrassed, but Future Zoro caught his chin gently and turned him back.

"Don't hide from me."

Sanji's eyes were wet. He nodded, swallowing hard, and Future Zoro leaned down to kiss him again. This kiss was deeper, hungrier, but still achingly gentle. Sanji kissed back like he was drowning and Future Zoro was air.

Zoro's grip on his sword tightened. His jaw clenched so hard his teeth ached. He should leave. He needed to leave. Why couldn't he leave?

Future Zoro stripped off his own clothes, revealing the scarred, weathered body Zoro would one day inhabit. Sanji's hands reached for him immediately, pulling him back down, and they pressed together skin to skin. The sound Sanji made was raw and needy. Future Zoro swallowed it with another kiss.

"Tell me what you need," Future Zoro said.

"You," Sanji breathed.

Future Zoro reached for the nightstand, pulling out a small bottle of oil. He slicked his fingers methodically, his movements calm and sure. Sanji watched him with trust in his eyes. Trust. Sanji trusted him. Trusted this version of Zoro in a way he'd never trusted the present one.

The thought burned.

Future Zoro settled between Sanji's legs, one hand on his thigh, thumb rubbing soothing circles into the muscle. His other hand moved lower, and when his finger pressed against Sanji's entrance, Sanji's breath caught audibly.

"Relax. I'll take care of you," Future Zoro said softly.

Sanji nodded, his hands fisting in the sheets. Future Zoro worked the first finger in slowly, watching Sanji's face for any sign of discomfort. There was none. Just pleasure, just trust, just that soft, vulnerable expression that Zoro had never seen directed at him.

Zoro's breathing had gone shallow. His heart pounded against his ribs like it was trying to escape. The heat in his chest had spread lower, coiling in his gut, and he hated it. Hated that he couldn't look away. Hated that some part of him wanted to see this, needed to see this, even as it tore something open inside him.

Future Zoro added a second finger and Sanji's back arched off the bed. A moan spilled from his lips, unguarded and raw. Future Zoro's free hand came up to stroke his hip, his thigh, grounding him through the stretch.

"That's it. You're doing so well," Future Zoro murmured.

The praise made Sanji shudder. His eyes fluttered closed, his lips parting around another soft sound. Future Zoro's fingers moved with purpose, searching, and when they found that spot inside him, Sanji cried out.

"Zoro, please."

The name hit Zoro like a blade to the chest. His name. Sanji was saying his name, but not to him. It was to the version of him who'd learned how to be gentle, who'd learned how to touch without breaking, who'd learned how to love.

Future Zoro added a third finger, working Sanji open with infinite patience. Sanji was trembling now, his skin flushed, his breath coming in short gasps. He looked wrecked and beautiful and completely undone. Future Zoro looked at him like he was the only thing in the world that mattered.

"Please. I'm ready. *Please*," Sanji whispered.

Future Zoro withdrew his fingers slowly, pressing a kiss to Sanji's inner thigh. He slicked himself with oil, his movements steady despite the tension in his shoulders, and positioned himself between Sanji's legs. Their eyes met and something passed between them that Zoro couldn't name. Understanding. Forgiveness. Love.

"I love you," Future Zoro said.

Sanji's eyes filled with tears.

"I love you too."

The words punched the air from Zoro's lungs. His vision blurred at the edges. His hand on the doorframe was the only thing keeping him upright. Sanji loved him. Loved this version of him. Had maybe always loved him, and Zoro had been too stupid, too stubborn, too afraid to see it.

Future Zoro pressed forward slowly and Sanji's mouth fell open on a silent gasp. The stretch was clearly intense, but Sanji didn't flinch. He reached up, pulling Future Zoro down into a kiss, and they stayed like that as Future Zoro worked himself in inch by careful inch. When he was fully seated, they both stilled. Future Zoro's forehead pressed against Sanji's, their breath mingling in the small space between them.

"Okay?" Future Zoro asked.

"Yeah. Move. Please move," Sanji breathed.

Future Zoro did. He pulled out slowly before pressing back in, setting a rhythm. Each thrust was deep, angled perfectly to make Sanji gasp. Sanji's hands clutched at Future Zoro's back like he was afraid to let go.

"I love you," Future Zoro said again, the words falling from his lips like a prayer.

"I'm sorry it took me so long. I'm sorry I didn't see it. I'm sorry—"

"Stop. You're here now. That's enough," Sanji interrupted, his voice breaking.

Future Zoro kissed him, deep and desperate, and his rhythm faltered slightly. Sanji's legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him deeper, and they both moaned at the sensation.

Zoro's hand on his sword was shaking. His whole body was shaking. The heat in his chest had become unbearable, spreading through his limbs, making his skin feel too tight. He didn't understand it. Didn't understand why watching this felt like dying.

Future Zoro's hand slipped between their bodies, wrapping around Sanji with the same careful attention he'd shown the rest of him. Sanji's head fell back, exposing the long line of his throat, and Future Zoro leaned down to kiss it, to mark it, to claim it.

"Come for me. Let me see you," Future Zoro murmured against his skin.

Sanji shattered. His whole body tensed, his back arching off the bed, and he came with Zoro's name on his lips. Not present Zoro's name. Future Zoro's. The distinction didn't matter. It was still his name, still his voice, still the sound of Sanji falling apart for him.

Future Zoro followed moments later, burying himself deep and shuddering through his release. He collapsed onto Sanji carefully, mindful of his weight, and they lay there tangled together, breathing hard.

"I love you," Sanji whispered into the silence.

"I love you too," Future Zoro replied.

Zoro finally moved. His feet obeyed this time, carrying him away from the door, away from the room, away from the sight of Sanji being loved by someone who knew how. His legs felt unsteady. His chest felt hollow. His mind was a storm of thoughts he couldn't organize, feelings he couldn't name, realizations he didn't want to face.

He didn't understand why it hurt, didn't understand why jealousy burned so hot in his veins when he'd never wanted Sanji. Had he?

No. He couldn't have. Sanji was his crewmate. His rival. Someone he didn't trust. Someone who'd left.

Someone he'd missed.

Someone he'd been afraid wouldn't come back.

Someone who mattered more than Zoro had ever let himself admit.

He didn't remember walking to the crow's nest, didn't remember unsheathing his swords. Only remembered the way Sanji had leaned into Future Zoro like he trusted him, the way their bodies moved together in softness and pleasure, the way Sanji looked at his counterpart.

Zoro trained until his arms shook and his breath came heavy and his lungs screamed in protest, but it didn't help. He sat on the windowsill, staring at the sea, fists clenched, heart pounding. He didn't know what he felt. Jealousy was too simple. Anger was too easy. It was something else, something deeper, something that clawed at his ribs and made his breath catch.

He'd seen Sanji with other people before. Flirting. Dancing. Laughing. He'd never cared, but this? This was different. This was Sanji looking at someone like he meant it, like he'd found something worth breaking for and it was him. Zoro but not.

He didn't know what to do with that.

~*~*~

Zoro was already down on the deck when Nami found him.

It was just past dawn. The sky was pale and streaked with gold, the sea quiet beneath it. He stood at the railing, arms crossed, gaze fixed on the horizon like it might offer answers he hadn't earned. Nami didn't speak right away, she just stood beside him, close but not touching, her presence steady.

"You saw them," she said eventually.

Zoro didn't answer. Nami sighed as if his silence was answer enough.

"I did too."

Zoro's jaw clenched. Nami pulled a thermos from her bag, poured tea into two cups and handed him one. The silence between them was familiar, not comfortable, but familiar.

“I think Future Zoro’s grieving. So is Sanji in a way.”

Nami sipped her tea contemplatively before continuing.

“I was furious with him after Whole Cake, after the lies, after the fight with Luffy. I wanted to scream. I wanted to hit him. But now? I’ve watched him wilt, watched him bow and bend and carry every ounce of guilt like it’s a second skin.”

“He left. Maybe he deserves to feel guilty about it,” Zoro replied, his voice cracking.

“I know, but he came back. And he hasn’t stopped punishing himself since.”

Zoro looked away as Nami continued.

“I didn’t know how to reach him. I still don’t, but future you did. Somehow.”

“He’s reached for him alright,” Zoro answered bitterly.

“Sanji matters to him. I think he came here for him. I don’t know if what’s going on between them is a good thing or not. I don’t know if it’s safe. But I know Sanji needed someone to look at him and not see a mistake.”

“I don’t want to keep being angry at him. I want to forgive him,” Zoro admitted.

I want to be the one to look at him like that, to touch him like that.

Zoro’s breath hitched at the unbidden thought.

“You still can,” Nami reassured him.

Zoro didn’t answer. He didn’t know if he was too late. Nami didn’t push, she just stood beside him watching the sun rise over the sea and let him feel whatever he needed to.

~*~*~

Sanji didn’t seek him out. He moved through the ship like nothing had changed, but Zoro saw it now. The tension in his shoulders and the way he avoided eye contact when he was with him versus the way he lingered near the first mate’s quarters and the way he softened when Future Zoro was around. Zoro hated it. He hated the way it made him feel, like he’d lost something he didn’t know he wanted.

That night, Zoro stood outside the first mate’s quarters again.

He didn’t think of himself as a masochist or a voyeur, but he stood outside the door, not knocking, not going in, just listening.

He heard laughter, low and soft. He heard Sanji’s voice, warm and tired. He heard the clink of sake cups and soon silence before it was broken by breathy sighs and the creaking of the mattress. Zoro walked away then, his chest burning. He hated it.

Not because it was Sanji.

But because it wasn't him.

~*~*~

Zoro trained until his hands bled.

The sun rose and fell and rose again and he didn't stop. His muscles screamed. His breath came ragged. Sweat soaked his shirt, his bandana, the floor beneath him. He welcomed it, needed it. The pain was clean and the ache was honest.

He couldn't stop seeing it. Future Zoro's mouth on Sanji's neck. Sanji's hands on his shoulders, his hips and groin grinding into the older man. Sanji's voice — low, broken, reverent, moaning. Zoro's own face hovering above him. Not his face, not his body, but close enough to make him sick. It wasn't just jealousy or anger, it was something more. Sanji had said he loved him. He had found him when he had half his foot in the grave and had been at his bedside when he woke up from his closest brush with death to that point.

I think I'm in love with you.

And Zoro had rejected it. He'd seen too much of Sanji being in love to believe it. He had thought of his confession more times than he wanted to when he was stuck on Kuraigana and then seen him come back and was reminded just what love looked like when it came Sanji, so it was easy to dismiss any lingering thoughts of what-if.

Then Sanji had left to marry someone else. He didn't just leave the crew or Luffy, he left Zoro to marry some girl he'd never even met, to play the part of a prince in a cage, to bow and bend and break for a family that never wanted him.

Zoro didn't want to think rationally about it, didn't want to think that it was some sort of strategy, that Sanji was protecting them, that it wasn't personal. He didn't want to give him the benefit of a doubt, because Sanji hadn't stayed. He hadn't fought for Zoro, hadn't tried to make him see that his love was real or true, that it was something Zoro could trust, something he could make room for in his life. He'd just let it go, like it didn't matter, like Zoro didn't matter. And Zoro knew it wasn't fair to think of it that way, that he should be thinking in the here and now, that he should consider that Sanji had been bleeding inside every second since he got back, that he'd been trying to survive ever since and Zoro wasn't making it easier for him. But the betrayal still sat in his chest, nestled against his heart and cutting him with every beat.

Zoro pushed him away time and time again and now Future Zoro was touching him, holding him, kissing him, and Sanji was letting him. Sanji was leaning into him, trusting him, loving him back. Zoro hadn't earned that, hadn't even thought to ask for it, he hadn't ever believed in it. But now he wanted it.

He wanted Sanji's voice, low and reverent, for himself. He wanted Sanji's hands, desperate and trembling, on his shoulders. He wanted to be the one Sanji leaned into when the grief got too loud.

And he hated himself for it, he hated that he'd waited too long, hated that someone else had stepped in. He hated that it was him.

~*~*~

Future Zoro found him in the crow's nest, training. Zoro was there more times than not but it was rare to see his future self outside of the first mate's quarters or the galley occasionally. Zoro ignored him and continued his training as if he wasn't there until he'd finished all of his reps. Future Zoro stood and offered him a water bottle. Zoro reluctantly accepted it.

"You're angry," Future Zoro commented after a long while.

"You think," Zoro scoffed in reply, taking a long swig before he continued.

"You're using him," he accused sharply.

Future Zoro blinked at that.

"No," he replied simply.

Zoro stepped closer angrily.

"You're taking advantage of him."

"I'm loving him."

Zoro froze. The words hit like a blade to the ribs.

"You don't get to say that," Zoro said, his voice cracking.

"Why not?"

"Because he's not yours."

"He could've been if I hadn't killed him."

Zoro's breath caught. Silence fell, heavy and rushing.

"He was losing himself, piece by piece, emotion by emotion, until there was nothing left but malice and darkness and pain."

Zoro's hand went to his hilt.

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

He drew his blade, steel ringing in the air as he leveled his sword at his older self.

"I would never kill him," Zoro said.

“I said the same thing.”

“You’re not me.”

“No, but I remember being you. I remember the promise we made in Wano.”

Zoro’s grip faltered.

“He made us promise him that we’d kill him if he stopped being himself. Later, we told him we’d protect him, that we’d never let him fall.”

“Then why did you?”

Future Zoro’s eyes softened.

“Because I didn’t see it. Not until it was too late.”

Zoro’s blade trembled.

“He reached out, he told me again that he loved me. He was desperate, he was slipping, and I was too lost in denial to catch him. I didn’t know what I felt, not until he was already gone. I had to fight him. Wado shattered during the battle.”

Zoro lowered his blade slightly, his hand shaking. Future Zoro stepped closer, ignoring the sword to his neck.

“I came back here because I couldn’t live with that, because if there’s a version of me who can see it sooner, who can choose him before it’s too late, I want that.”

“You stole him,” Zoro quietly accused.

“I did. I don’t regret it, even if it’s selfish, even if it’s temporary, because he’s hurting and so am I. And this… this is the only time I get with him.”

Zoro didn’t speak or sheath his blade, he didn’t step back. He just stood there, trembling, staring at the man who wore his face and had already lived the ending he was trying not to write. He thought about Sanji, about the way he laughed, the way he fought, the way he cooked like it was a love language, the way he’d looked at Future Zoro like he was something rare and precious.

Zoro had never been looked at like that. Or maybe he had and he just hadn’t noticed it. He had never thought about whether he wanted that before and now he didn’t think he deserved it.

~*~*~

Sanji found him on the lower deck just after midnight. The ship was quiet and the moon hung low and heavy, casting silver across the wood. Zoro was alone, shirt damp with sweat, bandana still tied, hands still trembling from training. Sanji didn’t speak right away, just stood there watching him.

“I know you know about me and him, future you,” Sanji said finally.

“I saw you.”

“You *saw* us?”

“Wandered down the wrong hallway one night.”

Sanji’s face turned up in understanding before he shook his head.

“So, you saw us and now you’re angry.”

“I’m not angry,” Zoro denied.

Sanji gave him a dubious look at that.

“You’ve been training so hard lately, I’m surprised you haven’t broken the crow’s nest. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Zoro turned to face Sanji, his eyes wild.

“I don’t care who you sleep with.”

“…then why are you looking at me like I betrayed you?”

Zoro didn’t answer.

“You rejected me. You made it clear I wasn’t worth your time. So, what is this? Jealousy? Possessiveness? Or are you just pissed that he looks like you and I chose him anyway?”

“He’s not me.”

“No. He’s the version of you who loves me.”

Zoro flinched and Sanji saw it. His face cracked slightly before he visibly steeled himself.

“You don’t get to be angry. You don’t get to look at me like I’m doing something wrong when you never wanted me.”

Zoro looked at him then, really looked at the man who had once said *I love you* and then left. At the man who now leaned into someone else’s touch because Zoro hadn’t known how to offer his own.

“I didn’t know,” Zoro finally admitted.

“Didn’t know what,” Sanji frowned in reply.

“I didn’t know what I felt. I didn’t know how to name it. I didn’t know it mattered. And even now, everything is so messy in my head and tangled up and I can barely think, but I know I don’t like seeing you with him. I know I don’t like the way he touches you. I know I don’t like the way you look at him.”

“Why?” Sanji asked quietly.

“...Because it should’ve been me.”

Sanji’s eyes narrowed in reply.

“That’s not fair. It’s not fair of you to tell me this now.”

“I know it’s not.”

“You had months, years even, to come to this conclusion and you’ve only reached it now?”

“I didn’t understand it.”

“You understood enough to reject me.”

Zoro flinched at the reminder. Sanji didn’t soften.

“You let me walk away thinking you didn’t give a shit about me one way or another. I ran off to get married to someone else because I knew there was no one who wanted my heart anyway, so what did it matter if I tried to give it someone else? Although she didn’t want me any more than you did, probably even less than you actually. You watched me come back, broken and bleeding all over the place, and you never said a word beyond telling me how much you didn’t trust me. Now that I’m trying to heal with the support of someone else, now is when you choose to tell me how you feel? Not then, but now?”

“I was angry and hurt,” Zoro admitted.

“So was I. It didn’t matter to you,”

“You’ve always mattered to me. Even when I’m angry and hurt, you mattered.”

Sanji froze at his words.

“I see you with him, I see the way you lean in, the way you trust him, and I hate it. I hate that it’s not me,” Zoro continued, his words halting and awkward.

“I don’t know what this is. I don’t know how to be good at it, but I know I don’t want to lose you, Cook. I want you. I want to be the one you reach for. I want to be the one who catches you. I know I’m late and I know I don’t deserve you, but I need you to know that I… I think I love you.”

Silence, heavy and crushing. Sanji looked at him with wide wet eyes, breath shallow, heart visibly aching before he slowly shook his head.

“I can’t, Zoro. I still love you, I’ve never stopped, but I don’t trust you,” he said.

Zoro’s heart broke, not loudly, not violently, just quietly.

They stood in silence. The air between them was thick with everything unsaid. Sanji turned to leave and Zoro didn’t stop him.

Chapter 3

That night, Sanji didn't go to the first mate's quarters. He sat alone in the galley, nursing a cup of strong whiskey, staring at the flicker of the lantern. He thought about Zoro's face, not the older one, the one he'd loved first. The one who'd, for possibly the first time, looked at him like he was something worth fighting for and had said the words Sanji had been craving to hear from him for years.

I think I love you.

He had someone that wanted him, held him like he was special. He knew it was temporary with Future Zoro, it was a source of comfort for them both and never meant to last, but he still knew what it was to be held like he was something precious. Now here was Zoro telling him what he had wanted to hear from him two years ago.

Sanji hated how much it still mattered to him.

~*~*~

His head was pounding when he woke up in the morning, the alcohol doing him no favors at all. He dragged himself through morning prep before trudging out to the deck to lean against the railings with a cigarette between his lips, staring out at the sun rising. Future Zoro found him there and stood at his side, the sky turning more and more blue as they watched.

"I don't know what to do," Sanji admitted.

"I know."

"He said he loves me," Sanji replied, his voice cracking on the words.

Zoro didn't flinch or react. Sanji looked down with a sigh, taking a deep pull from his cigarette.

"I didn't think I'd ever hear it. Not from him, not like that."

"But you did."

"It's too late now."

"Is it," Future Zoro asked, turning to face him.

"I don't trust him."

"He doesn't trust you either."

"So what are we supposed to do with that," Sanji retorted bitterly.

Zoro reached out, slow and careful, to brush Sanji's hair back from his face.

“You fight. Fight for a future where you can trust your heart with him and he can trust his with you.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Sanji admitted, tears welling up in his eyes.

“You did once. You reached for him. You told him you loved him. You asked him to catch you.”

“And he didn’t.”

“Not then, but maybe now.”

“You really think he can be that person?”

“I think he wants to be,” Future Zoro reassured softly.

“And you? What do you want?”

Zoro smiled, faint and sad.

“I want you to live. I want you to be loved. I want you to be saved by someone who doesn’t wait until it’s too late, like I did.”

Sanji closed his eyes and let himself lean in, resting his forehead against Future Zoro’s, just for a moment, just until his heart settled. Zoro held him with reverence, like he understood the weight of Sanji. It wasn’t about Future Zoro claiming him, it was about allowing Sanji the space to make a choice. He still had time before he had to make a choice and so he took what comfort he could in a relationship that, ironically, was a lot less complicated than any other relationship he had nowadays.

~*~*~

Franky slammed the blueprint down on the galley table.

“It’s possible. Barely. It’s dangerous as hell, but possible.”

Robin leaned over the schematic, fingers tracing the lines.

“Temporal compression. If we can stabilize the rift long enough, he might survive the return.”

“Might,” Sanji repeated.

“Sorry, bro. No guarantees with this.”

The crew was silent for a long while.

“Will he remember us,” Luffy asked.

“It’s unlikely he’d remember this version of us or this timeline,” Robin replied.

Sanji stood at the edge of the room, arms crossed, heart sinking. He wasn’t ready to lose this.

~*~*~

The first mate's quarters were dim. Future Zoro sat on the edge of the bed, shirt off, bandages fresh. He looked tired. Not just physically, but like he'd been carrying something too heavy for too long. Sanji closed the door behind him.

"Franky and Robin found a way to send you back to your time," he said.

"It was bound to happen eventually."

"You might not survive," Sanji informed him as he sat beside him.

"That's a risk I chose to take when I came here."

"You won't remember me, you won't remember us, *this*."

That fact did seem to trouble Future Zoro before he shook it loose.

"I'm happy that I got to have you at all."

Sanji sighed, rubbing his hands over his face.

"I don't want you to forget me," Sanji admitted brokenly.

Zoro touched his face, fingers gentle.

"I won't, not really. I love you, in every timeline. I just didn't know how to say it until it was too late."

"Say it now. Show me before you go."

Zoro kissed him. It was slow, tender, final. They undressed without words. Their bodies met soft, aching and full of everything they couldn't keep. Sanji traced every scar like a map. Zoro held him like he was something holy. They didn't rush, they held each other, breath mingling, hearts breaking, bodies meeting for the last time. After, they lay tangled in silence, Sanji's head on Zoro's chest and Zoro's fingers in his hair.

"I wish you were mine," Sanji whispered.

"I am yours. I'll always be yours. He can be yours too, if you let him," Future Zoro advised, pressing a kiss to his temple.

Sanji snuggled deeply into his embrace, resolving to enjoy Zoro's arms for the rest of the night before he had to go.

At dawn, the crew gathered on the deck.

Franky's machine hummed and a rift in space and time appeared, shimmering and translucent. The air was thick with tension as Zoro — older, weary, ready — stood beside Sanji. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. Sanji gave him a long look before handing him a

letter, folded and unmarked. Zoro took it and tucked it into his belt. Sanji leaned up and pressed a final kiss to Future Zoro's cheek before he let him go. Future Zoro glanced behind him at the Strawhats, his eyes lingering on his younger self, before he nodded and stepped into the rift.

The wind howled as the rift bent and twisted before blinking out of existence. The entire process took maybe 10 seconds total, and just like that, Zoro was gone.

Sanji didn't cry, though he felt the urge burning behind his eyes. Instead, he went to the galley and started cooking breakfast, prepping for lunch and dinner, deep cleaning the kitchen. Grief was always a strange thing and it was even stranger to be grieving the loss of a man he was never meant to have, a man who was technically still there. Sanji decided to do what he did with most turbulent emotions and work himself ragged until the thoughts stopped plaguing him.

~*~*~

The letter was folded in thirds. There was no name or seal, just a paper worn soft at the edges, tucked under Zoro's pillow in the crow's nest. He found it two days after the rift closed, after the older version of himself vanished. He stared at it for a long time, debating with himself, before he opened it.

You won't remember the way he looked at you, not yet, but I do. You won't know what it feels like to lose him, not until it's too late. So, I'm writing this now because you still have time.

He loves you. Even when you don't deserve it, even when you don't see it. He loves you when you're cruel, when you're silent, when you walk away. And I didn't know I loved him until I killed him. But you're already a step ahead of me. You've realized how you felt and told Sanji. Don't give up now. Don't bury this or try to train it away until your hands bleed. Don't tell yourself it doesn't matter because it does.

He matters.

Zoro closed his eyes. He saw Sanji: laughing, cooking, fighting. He saw the way Sanji looked at Future Zoro, the way he touched him, the way he didn't flinch when that Zoro walked into a room. He saw the way Sanji had looked at him, the real him, once. Before Zoro's rejection, before their silence, before their mutual mistrust of one another, before Thriller Bark and Whole Cake. He had noticed it and dismissed it. With the benefit of hindsight, he realized now that it was the only way he wanted to be looked at by Sanji for the rest of his life.

You don't have to love him the way I did, but I know you do. The trust between you is broken, but if there's a chance to fix it, don't wait.

Don't let your pride be the thing that kills him.

~*~*~

Sanji was in the galley, slicing ginger with surgical precision. The air smelled like broth and citrus. His movements were calm and controlled. Zoro watched him from the doorway. He

used to do this before Whole Cake had fractured them. He used to watch the way Sanji's hands moved with grace and confidence. He used to wonder what he'd look like wielding a blade and then banish the thoughts when he felt heat rising to his cheeks. He was such an idiot for not seeing how he felt sooner.

"Booze is in the last cabinet on the right. Take it and go," Sanji said, breaking through Zoro's thoughts.

"Didn't come for that," Zoro replied, stepping into the room.

"Then what do you want?"

"He left a letter for me."

Sanji's hands stilled momentarily before he kept working with his back turned to him.

"Oh?"

"He said you still love me. Do you?" Zoro asked, stepping closer.

Sanji finally looked up at him. The cook's eyes were conflicted, tremulous and red-rimmed. He looked tired, weary and unsure of himself. Or maybe he was just unsure of Zoro. He studied the swordsman for a long moment before he let out a weary sigh.

"I did. I do."

Zoro's breath caught in his throat at the admission.

"But like I said, I don't trust you."

"I don't blame you for that."

Sanji stared at him with narrowed eyes before he put the knife down and turned to face Zoro completely.

"I need to ask you something and you need to be honest," he said.

"I'm always honest with you, Cook."

Sanji's lips twisted into a humorless smile but he didn't comment on Zoro's words.

"Do you really love me or do you just hate that he got there first? Because I won't be a prize. I won't be a regret you're trying to rewrite."

"It's not that."

"Then what is it? What do you want?"

"To try."

"You don't get to rewrite history."

“I’m not trying to.”

“Then what are you trying to do?”

“I’m choosing you. Not because he did, not because I lost you once, but because I want to. I don’t know how to be good at this. I don’t know how to say the right things, but I know I want to learn.”

“And if I say no,” Sanji asked quietly.

“Then I’ll have to accept it, but it won’t change how I feel.”

Sanji looked away at that, his fingers tapping the counter anxiously.

“You hurt me. You made me feel like I was nothing. Now you want me to believe you care?”

Zoro reached out and almost touched Sanji before he stopped himself, letting his hand hover near Sanji’s tapping fingers.

“I don’t want you to just believe me, I want to earn it. I want to earn you. I didn’t know how to say it. I didn’t know how to value something like the love you were offering me, not when it was something that I didn’t have to sweat and bleed over like I do my dream. I realize how stupid that was now and that I just made everything more complicated for both of us.”

“You don’t think love is something you have to fight for? Something that you need to work for?”

“I didn’t back then. Now I know better and I want to earn it from you, I want to deserve it. Because it’s you, it’s always been you.”

Sanji stared at him for a long time, his gaze contemplative before he came to a decision.

“Then earn it now.”

“How?”

“Start by listening. I’m still angry and hurt. I still don’t trust you… but I want to. So, here’s what I need. No more silence, no more pride. If you feel something, say it. I’m just going to spiral down a rabbit hole if I don’t know how you’re feeling and make up the most hurtful thing I can in my head. I’d rather not, so I need you to speak to me.”

“Okay.”

“If you want something, ask for it. I know you’re not the best with words, but I need you to try. If you’re scared, admit it instead of lashing out or getting angry at me.”

Zoro nodded firmly to himself. He could do that. It wouldn’t be easy, but for Sanji, he would.

“And if you ever *ever* make me feel like I’m a mistake again, I walk. No second chances, no do-overs,” Sanji’s voice trembled.

Zoro’s heart ached.

“I won’t. If I make you feel that way again, then I’ve failed and I deserve to lose you.”

Sanji seemed to take his words to heart before he continued.

“Trust isn’t just mine to give.”

Zoro tilted his head in confusion at that.

“It’s a two-way street. You don’t trust me either,” Sanji continued.

“I want to,” Zoro admitted.

“Then tell me what you need from me.”

Zoro blinked at him in surprise. Sanji stepped closer, his tone softening.

“Set your boundaries. Ask for what helps. Tell me what makes you feel safe.”

Zoro’s breath hitched. He wasn’t expecting that. Sanji didn’t push, just waited. Zoro looked down, fiddling with his swords before he spoke.

“I… I need you to stop hiding things. It makes me feel like I don’t know you and I… I don’t like that.”

“Okay.”

“I need to know you won’t leave again without telling me why or without intending to come back.”

“I won’t,” Sanji promised, stepping closer.

“Even if it’s hard?”

“Especially then.”

Zoro exhaled a breath of relief.

“I need you to tell me when you’re hurting. Not just when it’s convenient. I won’t have all the words and I probably won’t be the best at helping you, but it makes me feel powerless when I know something’s wrong with you and I can’t help.”

“You won’t be able to fix me. I’ve got shit I need to work through on my own.”

“Maybe it’s yours to work through, but you don’t have to do it alone. You’re my crew, my friend, you always have been. I should’ve been there to support you through whatever you’re going through, not making it worse. I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you.”

Sanji’s eyes welled up at that.

“I… it’s alright.”

“No, it’s not.”

Sanji shook his head.

“It’s not. I’m not.”

Zoro reached out slowly and carefully, brushing Sanji’s hair back from his face.

“What do you need from me,” Zoro asked.

Sanji glanced up at him, his eyes wet and trembling.

“I… I need… can you just hold me?”

Zoro stepped forward with slow deliberate movements, giving Sanji the chance to move away before he pulled him in his arms. Sanji was stiff for a moment before he melted into the embrace, allowing Zoro to wrap an arm around his waist and rest his other hand behind his neck, his lips pressed against Sanji’s head.

Sanji let it happen, melted into it. It might not be forgiveness, but it was an understanding at least.

~*~*~

They didn’t talk much at first, not about their feelings or the past. When they did, it was mostly about the ship, the weather, the next island, Luffy’s latest disaster. Usopp’s newest invention. Safe things. Surface things. They began walking together in the evenings as the sun was setting, quiet laps around the deck side by side. Sometimes they talked, sometimes they didn’t. Sometimes Zoro would ask about a recipe or Sanji would ask about sword forms. Sometimes they’d talk about their dreams and Sanji would go on long rants about what he imagined the All Blue to be. Zoro never interrupted him. Sometimes he worried that he was supposed to be saying something back, but Sanji always seemed to know that he was listening. Sometimes they just stood side by side and watched the sun dip below the waves.

Zoro started showing up in the galley, not for food or booze, but to be near. He’d sit at the counter while Sanji cooked, silent but steady, and Sanji would slide him a plate without comment. Sometimes Zoro would stumble in from morning watch and fall asleep on the couch or the table, lulled by the sound of Sanji’s humming as he moved around the kitchen. One morning, Zoro even offered to help prep ingredients. Sanji had raised a dubious eyebrow.

“You know what to use that knife for?”

“I’ve watched you enough times to have a vague idea.”

Sanji wordlessly handed him the cutting board. Their hands brushed, but neither of them pulled away. It wasn’t easy trying to navigate this new place in their relationship. They did

have their missteps. Sometimes it felt like they were navigating a minefield and they'd stumble over words that triggered emotions they didn't expect.

Sanji had been teasing Zoro in the galley one morning. It was much lighter than the verbal jabbing they used to get up to. They were still trying to find their feet with one another. Sparring still felt too raw. Too close to something that could break. Zoro had rolled his eyes at Sanji's joke and muttered something about eyebrow symmetry and Sanji's face.

"Careful, mosshead. I might start thinking you actually like me," Sanji jabbed back.

Zoro froze. The words hit harder than they should have. His shoulders went rigid and his gaze dropped. He couldn't look at him. Sanji's smile faltered. Zoro didn't respond or joke back and he wouldn't meet his eyes as he turned and walked out of the galley.

He trained for hours, let the sun burn his skin, let his knuckles split, let the ache drown out the panic. Sanji found him on the upper deck. He watched Zoro for a moment before speaking.

"You left," Sanji said eventually.

"I needed space," Zoro replied, blade still moving. Sanji was quiet for another long moment before speaking again.

"Did I cross a line?"

Zoro's blade stilled. He exhaled audibly before turning to face Sanji.

"I don't know," he said.

Sanji stepped closer and leaned against the railing, raising an inquiring eyebrow at Zoro.

"I wanted to laugh, I wanted to say something back, but I couldn't."

"Why," Sanji asked with a frown.

"Because… because I… I got… scared."

Sanji blinked.

"I was scared that I was going to say the wrong thing, that I'd ruin everything and you were going to leave," Zoro continued, halting.

"It was just a joke. If we spend all our time walking on eggshells around one another, this isn't going to work."

"I know, I know. I just… I know I screwed this up before and I don't want to do that again."

Sanji looked at him contemplatively before speaking.

"You wanna know why I fell for you in the first place, Moss?"

Zoro looked up sharply at that before nodding, his eye intent on Sanji's face.

"I used to think you didn't feel anything," Sanji said.

"I didn't know how to show it."

"I know that now," Sanji affirmed before continuing.

"I fell in love with you because you never asked me to be anything but myself. You didn't flinch when I was mean, you gave me back as good as you got. You didn't pity me when I was broken, you believed that I could pick myself back up again and keep fighting. You didn't try to fix me, you just stood there, steady and sure, like I could fall apart and you'd still be there. I loved you because you were strong. Not just with swords, but with loyalty and presence. You didn't bend or break. I wanted to be near that. I wanted to believe I could *be* that."

"You are."

Sanji smiled, faint and sad.

"Not always, but I loved you because you made me feel like I could be more than what they made me."

"And now," Zoro asked quietly.

Sanji looked at him, his eyes soft, guarded and aching.

"I still love you, even though I'm still working on trusting you. And I'm telling you this not because I want something from you, but because of all those reasons I fell for you? Being good with words wasn't one of them."

Zoro scoffed at that and shook his head.

"All that just to make fun of me, cook?"

"Teasing is what we do. We insult each other and push each other and we're not always kind to one another. I still fell in love with you even with all that. So, you can joke with me, idiot. You can call me names because seas know I won't stop calling you names, shitty moss. And we can spar when we both feel comfortable enough for that too. Being an *us*, if that's what we end up being, doesn't mean we have to change everything about us that came before. Alright?"

Zoro took a moment before nodding.

"Yeah, sounds good."

"And maybe don't run off next time without letting me know you need some space. I get scared too you know. Running without a word won't fix anything. We talk, give each other space if that's what we need, we try to figure out what's wrong."

Zoro nodded in agreement.

~*~*~

Sanji was used to being one of the first people up every morning, it came with the territory of being the cook, so he was a little confused when he went into the galley and saw Zoro already there, awkwardly chopping vegetables with a blade far too large for the task, sleeves rolled up, brow furrowed in concentration.

“What are you doing?”

“Helping.”

“You’re butchering my carrots,” Sanji pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest.

“They’ll still taste like carrots,” Zoro shrugged.

Sanji sighed and rolled his eyes at that.

“You’re lucky I’m too tired to fight you.”

Later, Zoro started showing up during prep. Not just to sleep or hover, but to help and learn. He asked questions, listened and tried. He burned things, which earned him a kick to the head, but he also ate whatever he burned so he wouldn’t waste food, which earned him a slight blush.

Sanji didn’t tease him much. He saw the effort and patience Zoro was putting into the task of learning to cook. He didn’t know why he was doing it, but Sanji liked teaching Zoro more than he thought he would. He liked Zoro being there with him in the space that was his own, indulging in this task that was so vital to Sanji’s being.

Spending their time cooking also seemed to melt away the tension between them and they started speaking to one another as they usually would, trading insults and physical blows and banter. Sanji had been unreasonably delighted when they’d had their first spar in weeks, even if it had destroyed more of the Sunny than he cared to remember. Franky still hadn’t forgiven them for that, but it had eased something in his chest.

One evening while Sanji was sitting in the library, sipping tea with Robin, Zoro showed up, lingering awkwardly by the door. Sanji raised an eyebrow at him.

“Um, can you come with me please?”

Sanji’s other eyebrow went up.

“Please? Are you marching me to my execution or something?”

Zoro rolled his eyes in response.

“Are you coming or not?”

Sanji turned back to Robin who waved him off.

“Please, don’t let me stop you. Enjoy your evening, Sanji.”

Sanji bid her farewell before following Zoro.

“Where exactly are we going, moss? I want to get there some time tonight.”

Zoro rolled his eyes but relented and informed him they were going to the upper deck. Sanji took the lead as they climbed up. It was late. The stars were scattered across the sky like spilled sugar, the sea whispering below. He paused when he reached the upper deck.

There was a blanket spread across the deck. Fairy lights were strung along the railing, flickering soft gold. There were two bento boxes set on the blanket with two cups and a bottle of wine chilling in ice. Zoro moved to stand beside the blanket, looking like he wasn’t sure if he should be proud or terrified.

“What is this,” Sanji asked.

“A late dinner I made.”

“You cooked?”

“I just used what you’ve been teaching me.”

Sanji approached and crouched down to inspect the food. There was grilled fish that smelled like it had actually been seasoned, sautéed greens and onigiri shaped into neat little triangles. It wasn’t perfect but it didn’t look like a disaster.

“I wanted to do something for you,” Zoro explained.

Sanji stood back up and glanced over at the swordsman.

“Is this a date?”

Sanji watched him curiously, cautiously, hopefully. Zoro opened his mouth and then closed it with a frown.

“I didn’t ask. I should’ve asked. I didn’t want to assume—”

Sanji leaned forward and kissed his cheek softly. Zoro immediately stopped talking and stiffened. Sanji pulled back, ignoring the way Zoro leaned in before catching himself.

“Thank you for the surprise. I love it,” he said gently.

“You’re welcome.”

They sat together on the blanket, the stars above them, the sea below, the food between them. It wasn’t perfect, but it was theirs and for the first time in a long time, it felt right.

Conversation between them felt easy, their banter felt comfortable. It didn't feel awkward when they finished their food and Sanji leaned over to rest his shoulder against Zoro's. Zoro kept glancing up at the sky every now and again and Sanji didn't realize why until the first streak of light cut across it.

"Was that—?"

"Nami mentioned there'd be a meteor shower in the area tonight. I thought you'd want to see it."

Sanji looked up.

Another streak. Then another. Then dozens of silver and gold and pale blue streaks trailed across the night sky. Sanji's breath caught at the sight.

"You've never seen one," Zoro asked, glancing over at him.

"Not like this."

Zoro shifted, sat up, reached for the blanket and tugged it so Sanji was closer. Sanji didn't resist, he let his head fall on Zoro's shoulder and kept taking in the sight, gaze still fixed on the sky.

"It used to happen a lot more when we were in Paradise. I would watch them from the crow's nest, back when I couldn't sleep."

"Why couldn't you sleep," Sanji asked, glancing over briefly.

"Too much noise in my head."

"I know the feeling."

Another meteor streaked overhead, bright and fast.

"They're beautiful," Sanji whispered.

"So are you."

Sanji turned and met his gaze.

"Too much?" the swordsman asked.

"No, it's… it's alright," Sanji replied with a soft exhale before dropping his head back down to Zoro's shoulder. Zoro tilted his head gently against Sanji's and they watched the sky together.

~*~*~

Sanji woke with a gasp. Sweat clung to his skin, the sheets were twisted, his breath came fast and shallow, like he'd been running through fire. He sat up and ran a hand through his hair,

trying to breathe. The dream lingered behind his eyes: Zeff bleeding, Luffy falling, the wedding cake towering like a guillotine.

Sanji didn't think, he just moved. He needed to get out of this room. He needed time to think, to breathe. He found himself walking purposefully onto the deck towards the ladder leading to the crow's nest. It wasn't until he was halfway there that the thought struck him.

I'm going to Zoro.

Not Robin, not Luffy, not the quiet of the galley or the distraction of the kitchen but Zoro. That realization hit harder than the dream. Somewhere between the silence and the walks and the shared meals and the awkward gestures, something had shifted. He trusted Zoro. Not completely, not without fear, but enough that his first instinct was to seek him out. He hadn't known that trust had rebuilt itself to that point, not until now.

Zoro was sitting cross-legged in the crow's nest, swords beside him, eye half-closed like he'd been meditating. He looked up when Sanji entered. He didn't speak, just shifted slightly, making space. Sanji sat beside him, their shoulders brushing one another's. They were silent for a long while, the only sounds in the crow's nest being their quiet breaths, before Sanji finally spoke.

"I had a nightmare. I keep seeing it, the altar, the chains, the way they looked at me like I was property. I didn't want to go. The wedding, leaving the crew, I didn't want any of it. I left because they threatened to kill Zeff if I didn't obey them."

Sanji looked down in shame.

"So I did. I left. I lied. I fought Luffy. I broke everything I loved because I thought it was the only way to keep Zeff alive. I thought I could handle it, that I could protect everyone by disappearing."

"You didn't trust us," Zoro commented quietly.

"I didn't trust that you guys would still choose me once you knew about the real me and I hated myself for that. I'm still trying to work through all of that."

"You haven't talked to any of us about it."

"I didn't think you'd care."

Zoro flinched.

"And I didn't trust you to stay if you knew how broken I was," Sanji continued.

"I'll stay now."

"I know," Sanji replied, a small sad smile on his lips.

Zoro reached out slowly and carefully, resting his hand on Sanji's wrist.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Sanji looked up at him as Zoro continued.

“For not asking earlier how you’ve felt, for not listening and for not seeing.”

Sanji’s breath trembled.

“I’m here now and I’m not leaving.”

Sanji didn’t speak, just leaned in and let himself be held and heard.

~*~*~

They sat on the deck just after sunrise. The sky was soft with color — peach and lavender bleeding into pale blue. The sea was calm as the ship slept. Sanji had brought coffee and he and Zoro sat side by side on the deck, legs stretched out, shoulders brushing as they enjoyed the silence of early morning.

“We never really talked about it,” Sanji said softly.

“About what,” Zoro asked, glancing over.

“Us. What we want, what this is, what it could be. I don’t want something perfect.”

“Good, because I’m not,” Zoro replied, sipping his coffee.

Sanji smiled faintly, deciding to save the automatic jab on his lips in favor of keeping the conversation on track.

“I want something honest, something steady, something I don’t have to second-guess.”

“I want that too,” Zoro replied quietly.

Sanji turned to face him as he continued.

“I want to be able to fight with you and still know you’ll be there after.”

“I will be.”

“I want to be able to fall apart and not feel ashamed.”

“I want to be someone you can lean on, someone who’ll listen. I want you to be someone who’ll stay and I want to have someone who’ll stay with me.”

“I will.”

“I want to build something with you. Not just moments, a future,” Zoro affirmed.

“What does that look like,” Sanji wondered.

Zoro shrugged in reply.

“Shared space, shared fights, shared mornings like this.”

“Shared kitchen,” Sanji smiled.

“Yeah cook, even that if you want.”

Sanji smiled wider and then reached out and intertwined his hand with Zoro’s.

“I want to try,” he said.

Zoro nodded in response.

“Me too.”

They sat together as the sun rose, fingers intertwined, hearts still aching but open. It wasn’t a promise or even a plan, but it was a beginning and for now, that was enough.

Chapter 4

The first thing Zoro noticed was the sunlight.

It was warm and gentle as it spilled across his face. The second thing was the bright, unrestrained laughter that carried on the wind. He opened his eye slowly, expecting the quiet of Baratie's worn deck, the creak of old wood, the rasp of Zeff's voice. Instead, he saw the Thousand Sunny.

For a moment he thought he was dreaming. He had left this ship a couple of years ago, left the crew so he could stay with Zeff when the old man's health began to fail, not that the chef had been thrilled about that. Some days he and Zeff had managed fine, other days they sat in heavy silence, the animosity Zeff held for him unsaid but apparent. Sometimes Zeff gave into the urge to kick his ass and Zoro had let him. Sometimes Zeff spit venom at the man who had killed his son, regardless of circumstance, and Zoro took it because he deserved it for not trying to save Sanji, for stomping on his heart over and over again only to ultimately drive his sword through it and take his life. But this wasn't Baratie, this was home.

He lay there on the deck, the planks warm beneath his back, the sky impossibly blue above him. The laughter grew closer until shadows fell across his face. He blinked up to see Luffy grinning down at him with Usopp beside him, both of them looking older than the versions he had just left behind but still unmistakably themselves.

"Zoro fell out of the sky!" Luffy announced, as if it were the funniest thing in the world.

"Should we get Chopper or Kaya? Maybe one of them should check him out," Usopp suggested.

Zoro frowned, pushing himself up on his elbows. Kaya? Usopp had left the crew years ago after Luffy became Pirate King to settle in Syrup Village with her. Yet here Usopp was, standing beside Luffy, looking like he hadn't missed a single adventure. Zoro sat up fully, his swords beside him. He glanced down, three swords. He reached down for Wado and hesitantly unsheathed it. His breath caught as he saw his most prized sword was not broken as he knew it to be but perfectly polished and maintained.

More laughter echoed across the ship. He turned his head and saw two long-nosed children running across the deck, their voices high and joyous as they called out.

"Is Uncle Zoro okay, Daddy?" The girl asked.

"Yeah Merry, don't worry. You know how your uncles are," Usopp assured.

"Uncle Zoro fell from the sky like a bird," the boy piped up.

"Yeah, it was real funny. How'd you get way up there, Zoro," Luffy added, laughing boisterously.

Zoro's breath caught. He didn't move or speak. He found himself caught in the impossible sight of Wado unbroken, Usopp and his children on the Sunny and the ship alive in ways he hadn't seen in years.

Franky's laugh rumbled from the garden as Robin leaned into him, her fingers tracing idle patterns across his arm. Zoro blinked at the sight. In his timeline, Robin was always a shadow at the edges, her smile tinged with melancholy and her companionship quiet but solitary. Here, she was radiant and her laughter was unguarded. Zoro's chest tightened. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed seeing her happy.

Brook's violin carried across the air, but the tune was jaunty and playful, a melody that called people to dance rather than to mourn. Zoro remembered the years after Sanji's death when Brook's music had been nothing but elegies. Now the sound was light and buoyant as if the grief had been replaced by joy. There was a deep rumbling off the side of the ship and Luffy gave a loud cheer.

"Hey Laboon! You're back! Let's dance, keep playing Brook!"

He could hear Brook's distinctive laughter as a response before he continued playing. Zoro closed his eye, letting the music wash over him. For a moment, he felt the weight of grief lifting away from him.

Jinbei stood at the helm, steady as ever, but even he was changed. Merry perched happily on his shoulder, giggling as Jinbei pointed out the horizon. Zoro's lips twitched into an almost smile. Everywhere Zoro looked, there was laughter, sunlight and life. It was surreal and yet it felt like home.

Robin had told him that when he returned to his own timeline, if he survived the trip, the memories of the past would fade leaving him with nothing but the ache of Sanji's death. But he remembered everything. He remembered the Devil Fruit user's bargain, the chance to step back into the past. He remembered finding Sanji younger, sadder but alive. He remembered telling him he loved him. He remembered the meals, the quiet moments, the tenderness. He remembered their last night together, the way Sanji had touched him like he was something sacred, the way they had said goodbye with tears and kisses and promises they couldn't keep.

He hadn't expected to remember, but he did. If Robin had bent the truth, if she had hidden something from him, then maybe it was for this. Maybe it was for this gift.

Zoro's steps slowed as he neared the galley. His hand hovered over the doorframe, trembling. He could hear the faint clatter of pans, the hiss of oil, the scent of garlic and ginger curling through the air. His throat tightened. He didn't know if he could take the heartbreak if Sanji wasn't there, but he needed to know, he needed to see. He pushed the door open.

The door creaked as Zoro pushed it open, the familiar scent of garlic and ginger rushing out to meet him. For a heartbeat he couldn't move or breathe. The galley was warm, lantern light spilling across polished counters, the hiss of oil in a pan filling the silence. It was ordinary, achingly ordinary, and yet it felt like the most extraordinary thing he had ever seen because Sanji was there.

He was older than Zoro had ever seen him, older than he had ever even imagined him. His blond hair had grown long, wavy and brushed his shoulders. A beard framed his jaw, short and neat but fuller than the goatee Zoro remembered. He wore a burgundy button-up with the sleeves rolled to his forearms, no tie, no jacket, chest open to the air. When he turned, the light caught on something that made Zoro's breath stutter. Sanji was wearing one of Zoro's earrings in his left ear. Zoro absently tugged on his own ear, only now realizing he only had two.

Sanji scowled when he saw him.

"You just gonna stand there letting all the good air out, dumbass?"

Zoro stared at him for a moment longer before he moved. He didn't think or hesitate. His hands found Sanji's face and pulled him in, pressing his lips to the cook's and kissing him breathless. Sanji froze for a moment before he returned the kiss. Zoro shuddered and leaned into the other man's smaller body, absently noticing he wasn't as small as the past Sanji was. The blond was taller now, broader. Zoro hadn't expected that, hadn't expected the way it felt to hold him in his arms like this. He pulled Sanji closer, wrapping his arms around him so their bodies were flush against one another. Sanji made a small noise of pleasure as he gave as good as he got, his fingers clutching Zoro's hair. Zoro felt something burning in his chest and he didn't realize he had tears streamed down his face until Sanji pulled back, staring at him with concern.

"What happened, Moss? Is everything alright?" Sanji asked, glancing toward the deck as if expecting trouble.

"Yes, I just… I missed you," Zoro rasped, voice breaking.

Sanji raised a dubious eyebrow.

"I've been in here the whole time. You hit your head or something?"

Zoro didn't answer. He pulled Sanji into his arms, holding him tight, burying his face against his shoulder.

"Oi, mosshead, you're shaking. What the hell happened," Sanji murmured, voice low, almost cautious.

Zoro swallowed hard, forcing himself to loosen his grip just enough to look at him through his teary eye.

"I thought I lost you. I thought… I thought I'd never get this again," he explained, his voice raspy with emotion.

Sanji blinked, taken aback. He tilted his head, studying Zoro's face as if trying to read the truth in the lines etched there.

"You're talking like I've been gone. I've been here, idiot. Cooking, same as always."

Zoro shook his head, the words catching in his throat.

“Not always. Not in my time. You were—”

He stopped himself, biting down on the memory of his grief, days without Sanji, years of silence, loneliness and regret. He had had to travel back in time to have this, even just for a short time, but now Sanji was standing here, alive, older, warm and scowling at him like nothing had changed.

Sanji’s scowl softened, his eyes narrowing with something closer to worry.

“You hit your head, didn’t you? Fell asleep in the sun too long? You’re crying, for god’s sake. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Zoro huffed, half a laugh, half a sob.

“Doesn’t matter. What matters is you’re here with me and I’m not letting go.”

For a long moment, Sanji didn’t reply. He stood there, letting Zoro hold him, the pots simmering behind them as Brook’s violin drifted in from the deck along with Laboon’s happy noises and Luffy and the kids’ laughter. Sanji sighed after a while and held Zoro back, one arm wrapped around his back and the other tangled in his hair.

“You’re a mess,” he muttered against the other man’s neck, reaching up to press a kiss just beneath his ear where he knew Zoro was sensitive. The swordsman shivered at the touch and held Sanji tighter in response.

“I don’t care. I’ve been given something I didn’t think I’d ever have again. I’m not wasting it.”

Sanji raised an eyebrow, skeptical but curious.

“And what exactly do you think you’ve been given?”

Zoro’s lips pressed into a thin line before he answered, steady and certain.

“You. Us. A second chance to show you how much I love you for as long as I live.”

The words hung between them. Sanji’s breath caught as he pulled away, staring at Zoro with assessing eyes.

“What the hell happened in the hour I’ve been away from you,” Sanji said quietly, almost disbelieving.

Zoro didn’t answer. He just stared at Sanji, his eyes filled with hope and longing. Sanji exhaled, a shaky laugh escaping him as he shook his head.

“You’re insane. But… maybe that’s what I’ve always liked about you.”

“*Liked* about me?”

“You fishing for something, Moss?”

“Maybe.”

“Couldn’t imagine what.”

Zoro’s lips twisted and Sanji let out a chuckle that made his heart ache.

“Alright, alright, stop pouting already.”

“M’not pouting.”

“Uh-huh,” Sanji replied dubiously, leaning up to press his lips to Zoro’s. It was similar to past Sanji and not at the same time. With past Sanji, there was always a mutual air of desperation to their kisses, both of them yearning for something only the other could give. This Sanji kissed like the action was a familiar one, something that they did all the time, something that he was settled into, secure in but still passionate about.

“I love you,” Sanji whispered against his mouth.

Zoro’s lips twitched, the ghost of a smile breaking through the tears. He leaned in again, pressing his forehead against Sanji’s.

“I love you too. And I’ll prove it to you, every day. I’ll earn this.”

Sanji didn’t answer right away. He closed his eyes, letting the silence stretch, letting the weight of Zoro’s words settle. Outside, the crew’s laughter carried across the deck, the sound of the children playing and the violin’s jaunty tune. Sanji’s hand slid up to cup the back of Zoro’s neck, his thumb brushing against damp skin.

“Alright, mosshead,” he whispered.

Zoro held Sanji closer, his forehead pressed against the cook’s, his breath steadying as the tremors in his chest began to ease. For the first time in years, he felt whole. He’d thought that was what he felt when he went to the past, and it was undoubtedly a feeling of closure he’d always cherish, but this was different. Not because the past had been erased, but because he had been given something he never thought possible: a chance to begin again and live his life with the man he loved.

Zoro closed his eye, letting that thought settle deep in his chest. He didn’t know how he had ended up with this gift, this impossible second chance, but he knew one thing with absolute certainty: he wasn’t about to waste it. He wasn’t going to let Sanji slip away again. Not now, not ever.

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