

Black Cat

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I do not own the story. I just made some changes to it. Anyway, this is about Kuro's life; past, present, and future (sorry of my spelling). Please R&R. No criticism (again sorry for my spelling).

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1 - Kuro's Childhood

“Please, sir, you must stay!” cried the nurse, tears streaming down her blotched face. “Please!” “Not a chance,” grunted the pirate irritably. “I’ve more important and exciting things to do without dealing with a filthy, little kid.”

“But, this is your son!” the nurse said. “Please, sir, she would want you to be here.” Both of them could hear the loud, rushed voices behind the door.

“I can’t stay,” he grunted. “If I don’t leave now, I’ll never get another chance.”

“You choose booty over your own son,” moaned the nurse in disbelief. “Fine, leave, and woe betide you should you return!” The tears continued as she returned to the room from which the voices were issuing, and now leaving in a line, tired but happy. She stared upon the young woman, holding her newborn boy in her arms and resting on the bed.

“He...he...,” the nurse began, but she could not find the words to disrupt this woman’s hour of happiness.

“I already know,” the woman said. “It is to be expected. But, I do love him, and trust his judgment.” She shifted her arms a bit as the newborn fell asleep. “When he returns, he’ll be ready. But, right now, he can’t handle this.”

A silence swept across the two of them. They both understood. They both knew what would happen. But, aloud, they were not ready to confirm their shared fears.

Finally, the nurse broke the silence. “What are you going to name him?”

The woman thought about this for a moment, occasionally checking on the boy. Her eyes scanned the room and her memories, until it fell upon a black cat, resting upon the window. It seemed to almost be smiling, assuring her that all would be okay. She returned the cat’s smile and spoke, “Kuro. I shall name him Kuro.”

During Kuro’s younger years, he received such love and care from his mother such as no one else on that island had ever felt; and with good reason, as his father had not yet returned since his abrupt departure on Kuro’s birth.

Kuro proved to be quite adept, easily learning to walk before most toddlers his age and learning to speak just three months after his second birthday.

But still his father did not return. Kuro was oblivious to this; he was more interested in the world at his hands, particularly the animals that ran wild in the village. The cat that had been present on his birth made itself present regularly and permitted a few moments of love before placing itself well out of reach of the child. Kuro’s mother looked upon this cat as a sort of fill-in parent, someone that kept its eye over the young boy day and night.

But nothing really sunk in, formed a true memory, until he was five years old...

“Look!”

Kuro jumped slightly and dropped the small glass marble in his hand, letting it roll in the soft, dry dirt. He joined the other kids, who were gathered in a pack at the wooden-plank fence. It was a cinch for him to see over their heads; he was unusually tall for his age. Even from this huge distance the Southern Harbor was visible, as were a set of black flags. Within minutes, they could see a mass of people, marching solemnly and carrying a huge wooden box.

“Pirates!” some of the kids screamed as they spotted the flags. “What’re they doing here?”

“Dunno,” one of the shorter kids said. “I can’t see it.”

But at that moment, it didn’t matter whether or not anyone could see it, for the teachers had come out

and began to usher the anxious children back into the schoolhouse.

“Aw, come on, we wanna see the pirates!”

“No fair!”

“Yeah, come on, just one peek!” Even Kuro began to join in; he’d never before seen a pirate; he’d merely had to rely on his mother’s words, which described them as ‘dirty, ungrateful slobs that only think of themselves.’ But, he was quickly silenced as he noticed the teacher making her way towards him.

“I’m sorry, Kuro. You need to return home,” she said gravely. “Your mother...she needs to speak with you.”

Kuro was on the verge of asking why, but decided against it and began to make his way home. The procession of men and the wooden box had passed, leaving the street completely deserted. Something about the empty street unnerved Kuro, so he ran home, looking over his shoulder periodically.

The talk with his mother was soon driven out of his mind as he drew closer to home; the people had stopped in front of his house. The wooden box was missing. He hurried forward, not knowing what would await him inside that house. The taller men noticed him and started to push him away.

“Stay back, kid, dis ain’t none of your biz’ness,” one of the men said.

“No, you gotta let me in, I live here!” Kuro gasped, exhausted from the run. “My mom’s in there! You gotta let me in!” More men began to push him away while Kuro screamed hoarsely, beating at the raw hands and coughing against the stench of grog on each man’s breath. His brain numbly registered that these men were pirates, but somehow seeing a pirate didn’t matter to him anymore; all he wanted was to see his mom.

“Let ‘imp through, common move, you drunken idiots!” someone yelled. Kuro looked up to see a man shoving the pirates out of the way. He tried to say thanks, but he was still gasping and merely dashed into the house.

He had found the wooden box, but now, from up close he could see that there had been a lid on it. He moved his sight instead to his mother, who was sitting straight in her chair. Her eyes stared into nothingness, cold and gray, very different from her normally vibrant sea green eyes. Her face was paler than the moon, giving her an eerie look. Kuro merely looked at her, occasionally looking back at the box. It was a while before he spoke. “Mom?” He moved closer to her. She looked down and the eyes exploded into a mass of tears. She picked up Kuro and held him, still crying.

“What’s wrong, Mom? What’s in the big box?” he asked her softly. Still crying, albeit more softly, she looked down at him.

“Kuro,” she began, “do you remember what I told you about pirates?” This was the last thing he had been expecting, but he merely nodded.

“I ... I’m afraid that what I said ... what I said about the pirates ... is not always true. There are some good, decent pirates out there.” She set him down. “But... Kuro, your father left us a long time ago.” Somehow this sudden change of topic passed unnoticed; Kuro merely stared at her still, clearly afraid. “But, what’s in the box?” he repeated. His mother stopped crying; then, she stood up slowly and lifted the lid of the box.

“That...is your father.” Kuro stared at the cold, lifeless body of the man inside that box, the man that shared his hair color, his nose, even his hands. This man, this dead body...couldn’t be...

But, somehow, even as he knew that he’d never see his father alive, he wasn’t able to cry.

Somewhere, deep in his heart, he could find no sadness, no remorse for this man that he’d never known, and never would know.

All he did was stare and listen to the sounds of the cats outside his house as dusk, then night, settled on the island. But, still, no tears, no pity, ever came.

2 - Chapter 2

“Yeah, did you hear?”

“That parade, it showed up at the weird kid’s house! You know, that tall guy with glasses!”

“That box was a coffin! It had a pirate in it!”

“Kuro’s a pirate, too! He and his filthy mother!”

All around him, Kuro and his mother heard the accusing whispers as she walked the young boy to school, but feeling nervous all the same. Even now, after such a long time, the children of the island still held that one moment of darkness in their minds. It continued to be a topic of discussion when nothing else would suffice.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Kuro?” she asked him hesitantly. “I won’t make you go to school.”

“I’m sure, Mom,” Kuro said brightly. “They can’t say anything to upset me.” This was quite true; ever since that moment three years ago, when he had seen his father in that coffin, he had brooded on his feelings about it. Though the past years had been difficult, he’d decided that, on a level, they were all correct; his father was a good-for-nothing pirate.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be okay,” Kuro reassured his mother. “I’ll see you at home, okay?” He gave her a quick embrace and hurried into the white-washed building, closing the pine and glass door behind him.

“Settle down, everyone,” called the instructor from the front of the class room. Kuro took a seat in the back, not bothering to notice that the students near him had moved up a few seats and cast dark looks on him as they did so. All except one who sat next to him; a girl who had short, black hair with two long strains of her hair that was suspended down, covering parts of her face and brown eyes that glistened in the light and looked him as she hid one of the most faintest of all smiles. “It so happens that we have a guest with us today from a neighboring island.”

Whispers flooded the room that, for once, had nothing to do with Kuro. He grinned to himself as he pushed up his new glasses, which always seemed to fall down his nose, with the palm of his hand. Perhaps, this new person wouldn’t care who Kuro’s father was. Maybe this person would be different... but, as he saw the instructor open the door that stood behind his desk, he merely began to focus on the floor.

He wouldn’t get his hopes up...

“I’d like you to meet...well, um...” the instructor stuttered slightly as the boy stepped up to face the kids. He was of a normal height with short, spiky blonde hair. Over his eyes was a pair of heart-shaped glasses that sat upon his face.

The children laughed and pointed at the boy; or, more particularly, his face. Kuro and the girl looked up for a moment, wondering why everyone else was snickering; they finally noticed the new kid and frowned inwardly. The boy’s face seemed squashed inward, as if he’d run face first into a wall. The boy frowned at them and started looking for a place to sit.

“Well, tell them your name,” the instructor said. The boy was silent for a while, scratching his chin as if in a deep thought.

“I don’t need them to know my name,” he said after a while. His voice was slightly raspy and high-pitched, which made the class erupt into fresh laughs. The boy noticed Kuro in the back and quickly took a seat next to him. Kuro once again interested himself in the floor. The girl growled inwardly as she gritted her teeth with her elbows on the edge of her desk and her fists on her lips and she said aloud with rage in her voice which made everyone stop laughing and caught everyone’s attention as she closed her eyes, “You know, if you keep laughing at him, it will do you no good!”

A student turned to look at her and said, "What are you--?"

The student's sentence was cut short when she said after she looked at him and scowled, "Would you like it if everyone laughed at you?" As soon as the silence filled the room, she sneered, "Hmph, exactly."

"Alright, Nagasaki, that's enough!" the instructor shouted at her. "Now, let's begin on your multiplication..."

The new boy looked over at Kuro through his glasses almost angrily. "Why didn't you laugh at me? Don't you think I'm funny?" Kuro looked up again and turned, hiding the shock on his face.

"Was I supposed to think you're funny-looking?" Kuro asked cautiously. The boy shook his head.

"No. I meant, do you think I'm funny-acting? Like a performer?" Kuro just stared. He wasn't quite sure what to make of these questions.

"I'm sorry," Kuro said, turning to look at his desk. "I didn't know you were trying to be funny." This, however, must have been amusing to the boy, because he immediately covered his mouth to hide his wild laugh.

"Well, at least you don't hate me," he said after his laughter had subsided. "They," he said spitefully, "don't like me."

"Don't worry about what they think," Kuro said suddenly, a flicker of anger in his eyes. "And, they don't like me either." The boy seemed shocked at this.

"Why?"

Kuro pushed up his glasses again before he spoke. "My dad was a pirate." He said this very low, in case anyone was eavesdropping on them; no one seemed to notice, or care; they were too busy trying to study the problem on the board.

"Really?" the boy said, his eyes wide. "That's cool." Now it was Kuro's turn to be surprised.

"You...don't think it's bad?" Once again, the boy had to cover his mouth.

"Of course not!" He said it as if such a thing was nonexistent. Silently, Kuro wanted to agree, but his father...he pushed it out of his mind and instead pushed up his glasses. He could hear the instructor signaling for silence again, for the class had begun to discuss how to solve the problem.

"Homework tonight: solve this problem, show all your work!" the instructor said loudly. "Have a good day!" The mad rush to escape the room almost bulldozed Kuro, the girl, and the new boy. One girl plowed into Kuro, knocking him over and sending his glasses flying across the floor.

"No!" Kuro cried for no reason, groping around for his glasses. He didn't need them that badly, but everything appeared blurry enough that the desks looked like huge mountains. Large stampeding feet ran by, but no one stopped to try and help him.

"Here," someone said, though Kuro could not see who. He felt himself lifted slowly to his feet and felt a hand pushing his glasses into his own hands. He placed them back on his face and saw the new kid holding him by the shoulder and the girl who was in front of him.

"Thanks," Kuro said gratefully, standing all the way up.

"It was nothing, really," the boy said, waving his hand as if to dismiss the thought.

"Anything to help out a friend," the girl smiled.

For a brief moment, time seemed to stop as the three looked at each other and the girl's words hung over him. It took a moment for Kuro to register this.

"F-friend?" Kuro sputtered in disbelief, his glasses falling askew as his head jerked forward. "Did you just call me 'friend'?"

She blushed slightly and looked down. "Oh, I...I thought..." Kuro held up a hand to silence the girl.

"Yeah, why not?" he said, grinning from ear to ear. "You two could be my first friends."

They both nodded. "And, you can be our first friend." The three of them shook hands, almost like sealing a pact. They exited the building into the warming sun, watching the other kids play and,

occasionally, whisper. They walked for a while, not talking, merely enjoying the company of people they could call friends.

“Well, I should be getting home,” the boy said to Kuro as the sun’s last rays began to fall over the island.

“Yeah, me too,” Kuro agreed. “Hey, I never asked...”

“Hm?” the boy and the girl stopped in mid-walk.

“What’s your name?” The cats that roamed the nightly streets started to poke their heads out and the black cat began to sing on the rail of the house between them.

They thought for a moment about this.

“It’s Django.”

“And Nagasaki Masterson. Pleased to met you.” She said as she held out her hand.

“Pleased to met you, too.” Kuro said and shook her hand.

3 - Chapter 3

“A WHAT!”

Kuro, Nagasaki, and Django were relaxing in wicker chairs, listening to the sea crash into the high cliffs farther north and enjoying the medium breeze that negated the horrible heat wave. They had been discussing ideas for their future, until...

“I’m being serious,” Django said. “I want to be a hypnotist.” Kuro shook his head, but regretted it and had to push up his glasses again.

“But, Django, how would you even know how to become a hypnotist?” Kuro asked wildly. Django shrugged his shoulders.

“Through stubborn will, I suppose,” he said, then laughed at his own daring. “Still, if I can’t do that, I could always be a pirate.”

Kuro thought for a moment. “Even if I could be a pirate,” he said slowly, “I wouldn’t do that to my mom.” Django stopped laughing and looked at Kuro curiously.

“Why not? Your mom wouldn’t care if you were a pirate.” Kuro shook his head.

“No, I mean...I couldn’t leave her alone, like my dad did.” Again, anger filled him at the thought of his dad. “I won’t betray her.”

“Whatever you say,” Django said dismissively and stood up. He smiled at Kuro and Nagasaki then started walking backwards. Kuro and Nagasaki burst out laughing.

“You’re still not trying to do that, are you?” he snickered as Django fell over on his back. “You don’t have any sense of balance.”

“And YOU don’t have any sense at all,” Django shot back as Kuro and Nagasaki moved out of their seat and heaved him to his feet. Django tried again, this time tripping over his own feet and tumbling a few feet away. They both started laughing madly as Django continued to try over and over to walk backwards.

“Anyway, tomorrow’s your birthday, right?” Django said after an hour of failed walking. The three had relocated to the southern beach, where the breeze was stronger. The sun still beat down on them, but gray clouds were beginning to cover the orange-streaked sky.

“Yeah, my fifteenth birthday,” Kuro agreed and pushed up his glasses. “My mom’s so happy that I’ve made it this far.”

“Why’s that?” Django asked as he renewed his backward-walking attempt.

“I don’t know,” Kuro shrugged as he stood up. “Still, not every day that you’re fifteen, right?”

“Yeah, and you’ll be fifteen for an entire year,” Django snorted as he fell over. The three laughed and privately agreed to head home.

“Tomorrow, then?” Django said as he took the left fork that led to his home.

“Tomorrow,” Kuro agreed as he took the right fork. They waved and moved their separate ways.

“Kuro!” Even from this distance, Kuro could hear his mother calling him from their door, possibly with a spoon in her hands to beat him for being late. He cursed to himself as he sped up his pace until his house came into view.

“Finally!” Kuro’s mother breathed as he stepped into the house. She then proceeded to whack him over the head a few times with a wet towel. “I was worried you’d disappeared!”

“Aw, come on, Mom, I wouldn’t do that,” he said, brushing wet hair out of his eyes. “Where would I go?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Kuro laughed and fell into a chair. “So...what do you want for your birthday?”

Kuro looked at the ceiling and pushed up his glasses as he thought. "I don't know," he said after a while. "You could surprise me."

"With what, now?" she said. "How am I supposed to know what you like?" Kuro had to admit, she had a fair point; she really didn't know what he liked, for the simple fact that he himself wasn't interested in many things.

"Hm...how about a new pair of glasses?" she said, pulling off his glasses. "This pair is always slipping down your nose." Kuro made a reach for his glasses, but missed and swiped thin air.

"Give me back my glasses!" he said, reaching for them again, but laughing all the same. It took him a while before he snatched them and placed them promptly back on his face, where they slid forward a small bit.

"It's getting late," his mother said. "You should get to bed." He agreed with her and made his way upstairs, where he changed into his pajamas and climbed into bed. He took off his glasses and placed them on the table beside his bed and stared at the ceiling for a while before passing off to sleep.

"Wake up," someone said softly. Kuro moaned and pulled his sheets over his head. He felt someone grab the covers and yank them back to expose his head to the morning sunlight.

"Not now," he moaned and groped for the covers, his eyes still closed tight. When he couldn't reach them, he sat up, blinked, and put on his glasses.

"Surprise!" his mother shouted, holding a small cake in one hand and a wrapped package in the other. Behind her was Django, smiling with his own wrapped gift.

"Wow," Kuro gasped, rubbing his eyes. "This is...well, thanks, you guys." Suddenly, he noticed someone was missing. "Where's Nagasaki?" Kuro asked Django. Django sighed, "She...she couldn't make it."

"Huh? How come?"

Django sighed once again, "She's very sick."

"What do you mean?"

"She has leukemia; her fever is 104 degrees F."

Kuro was stunned; their friend had fallen sick and was now bedridden. "Oh..." Kuro said solemnly as he looked down at his hands.

"But," Django reassured him with a smile, "She's with us in spirit."

"Yeah." Kuro smiled as he nodded his head.

He gave his mother a quick embrace and reached for her present. He unwrapped it quickly to find an eyeglass carrier with a new pair of glasses inside. The rims were circular and stone gray; they encased a glimmering pair of lenses. A huge grin spread across his face as he whipped off his old pair and placed the new pair upon his face, sliding the ends behind his ears. But, they slid forward again, so he fell back onto the bed, laughing.

"I must be destined to have slippery glasses!" he chuckled, then, pushed himself back up. His mother was laughing, too. Django handed him the huge package in his hands; inside was a pair of striped shoes.

"That way, you'll trip as much as I do," Django said, and they both laughed wildly.

"Thanks, you two," Kuro said gratefully. "This has been one of my best birthdays."

Later that day, Kuro and Django were striding down the town's main street, examining the shops. Kuro had also received a large sum of Berries and was anxious to spend them. Django was trying once again to walk backwards, this time with more success. Suddenly, Django shouted out, gladly, "Hey, Kuro, look! It's Nagasaki!"

Kuro turned around and there stood Nagasaki. But...has she recovered from leukemia?

"Hi, Nagasaki, how're you felling?"

She didn't know what to say, but had to say something and fast. "Good!" she said ecstatically.

"That's great to hear!" Django smiled. But, Kuro knew she was still sick. He walked toward her, felt her forehead, and sighed, "Nagasaki, you're burning up."

"Kuro, I'll live, don't worry about it."

He sighed once again, "Your temperature is 104 degrees. That's not good for you, Nagasaki. You, really, should consider seeing a doctor."

"Kuro, I appreciate your concern. I really do, but I'll be fine. Really! Besides, the thermometer must've been broken. It's impossible to have a temperature of 104. It was probably a sun stroke. I don't need to see a doctor."

Kuro smiled, "Why do you have to be so headstrong?"

"Because it's your birthday and I don't want to miss out on it."

Kuro understood, but still concerned of his sick friend, and the three friends continued walking.

"I don't understand it," Django moaned. "Why aren't you tripping all over the place? Those shoes should have you tumbling all around town!"

Kuro and Nagasaki laughed. "I don't know, but everyone says I have the cat's grace." He didn't care if this was good or bad; he quite liked the way he walked. "Enough about walking; I want to get into those shops."

Django laughed. "I've never had any spending money." Kuro was about to say something when he heard the sound of a bugle being played.

"What's that?" Django asked. He stopped walking backwards and turned to look. Kuro also turned and noticed a new set of flags at the harbor.

"It's the Navy," Kuro muttered. "They always search the docks for filthy pirate workers." But this assumption vanished when he heard the sound of marching. Kuro's eyes widened.

"Django, Nagasaki, go home," Kuro said abruptly. His face had gone pale and his hands began to sweat. Django and Nagasaki, surprisingly, said nothing and sped off at a very fast run, not looking back. The Navy, coming to this town?

Kuro began running home, but still the sound of the marching continued. He had a bad feeling about this; since when did the Navy ever inspect a town? Still, he didn't look back once until he reached home.

"Kuro, what's wrong?" his mother asked as Kuro slammed the door behind him and bolted it.

"The Navy's coming," he gasped. "Coming to town...for something." His feeling of dread remained as he took a seat across from his mother. She, too, sensed danger and put away the book she had been reading.

Their fears were confirmed when they heard a loud rapping at the door.

"Open up, you scalawags! This is the Navy!" someone yelled from the other side of the door. Kuro and his mother remained still, partially from fear. After a few more slams on the door, a huge foot kicked it down, sending the hinges flying.

What happened next was nothing but a blur of bullets and screams; Kuro and his mother dived under their chairs to avoid the bullets. The crashing of glass and snapping of wood was earsplitting, combined with the yelling of the fifty or so men that had burst into the house. Kuro heard his mother scream as she was dragged out from under her spot. Kuro made to crawl out and grab her, but a swift kick in the head knocked him silly. He heard his mother's screams as she struggled against the men. After what seemed like an eternity, a sickening sound unlike anyone had ever heard silenced all other noises and was followed by the rough sounds of the men dragging a body out of the room.

When he felt it was safe to emerge, he crawled out, rubbing his head and repositioning his glasses.

What he saw was a nightmare; the remains of the door littered the room along with shards of glass and twine from the furniture; there was also a great deal of blood covering the floor.

"No," Kuro whispered. He dashed out of the house and saw his mother's mangled body splayed on the

dirt. Her clothing had been horribly shredded, but it didn't compare to what Kuro had first seen. Her head was gone.

He was lost for words; all he did was tumble to his knees and begin to cry silently, covering his face with his hands. He cried continuously, even as it began to get dark, but no one came to see the gruesome and sorrowful scene that was set there.

It was only after midnight that Kuro began to stop crying. He tried to stand up, but felt weak and simply fell to the ground again. Behind him, he heard a soft yowl.

It was a black cat. It approached Kuro, but kept a short distance and sat, staring at the broken boy before it.

Kuro wiped his eyes with the cuff of his shirt and glared at the cat feebly. "What do you want?"

The cat merely sat there, its lamp-like eyes staring at him.

"Don't you get it, you stupid cat?" Kuro yelled. "My mother's dead." The cat continued to stare, but moved closer to him.

Kuro stared at the cat and was hit with a new, painful thought; he was all alone. His father and mother were gone; there was no one left. He dropped his hands and returned the cat's stare.

"Do you know that, cat?" he asked the cat. "Do you know I'm alone?"

"That's not true." A voice said behind him.

Kuro turned and saw one of his two best friends, "Nagasaki..."

She was leaning against a house with her arms crossed. She continued while walking toward him, "You have Django and I, you're never alone, Kuro."

He nodded after he wiped the tears from his eyes. Suddenly, he started to cry again and trying to hold back the tears, but the attempt failed, apparently from the grief of his mother's death, and cried on Nagasaki. She wrapped one arm around him, one hand on his head, and reassured him, "Shh... I'm here, I'm here... It's alright, it's okay... Shh..."

She, later, hummed a lullaby (because she didn't know the words to the song. NOTE: it's the lullaby from 'Pan's Labyrinth') that her mother and brothers sung to her whenever she was upset.

Finally, Kuro calmed down a bit, but was still upset. Nagasaki hummed the lullaby again, but this time, cradling him gently from side to side.

"You want us to go with you?" Django asked,

Kuro had been completely ready to leave the island; but, he knew he couldn't leave Django and Nagasaki; they were his best friends.

"Yes," Kuro said. "I've had enough of this island; it carries too many horrible memories." He didn't tell Django what had happened to his mother, and in any case, it should be only his knowledge.

"But, where will we go?" Django asked. "And do you even have a boat?"

"They have a bunch of old boats at the harbor that no one uses, and there's an island not far from here," Kuro answered. Django shook his head.

"But, you said you'd never leave!" He stood up and started walking backwards again. "You said nothing could make you leave!"

"I..." Kuro stopped. He still didn't want to tell Django about his mother. "Never mind that. Are you coming?"

"Of course!" Django cried. "There's no work here for a traveling hypnotist!" All three of them laughed and started their way to the harbor.

4 - Chapter 4

“Finally!”

After what had been three long days at sea, Kuro, Nagasaki, and Django had, at last, reached the island that Kuro had seen with the cat. Though it had been an uneventful sail, the three had remained silent most of the voyage; Django lost in thoughts about hypnotism and Kuro brooding on his mother’s death and the strange black cat.

But, Kuro was having other thoughts, too; revenge on the pirates. It tugged at the back of his mind, but he argued with himself about what he could do.

“Kuro! Nagasaki!” Django called. “Watch this!” Django then started a dance of sorts on the sand, only to slip and land facedown. Kuro and Nagasaki laughed as Django rolled over and spit out sand.

“What were you trying to do?” Kuro asked, folding his arms. Django stood up and brushed himself off.

“Dancing!” he said excitedly. “I could try dancing instead!” He looked at Kuro for a response, but Kuro was deep in thought again. Django moved behind him and tapped him.

“What?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Django asked him. “You’ve been out of it since the morning we left.” Kuro shook his head and pushed up his glasses.

“It’s nothing,” he said and climbed out of the boat.

“Come on; let’s go find a town to rest in.” Django and Nagasaki followed him, still concerned about their friend.

“Move it!” someone shouted and shoved Kuro out of the way. The man was followed by a crowd of people, all wearing orange shirts and yellow bandannas on their heads. Far in front of them, there was a crowd of people in helmets running.

“Wonder what’s going on?” Django pondered out loud. Kuro pushed up his glasses and shrugged.

“Why don’t we try that place?” He pointed to a small house with a chicken on its roof.

“I suppose,” Kuro said, and followed Django inside. It turned to be a restaurant; most of the tables were empty, so they took a seat by the window. They saw the crowds of people run by again.

“Damn those clan members,” one of the waitresses said. She had appeared next to Kuro and Django’s table. “It’s bad enough that they even exist, but why must they run amuck in this town?”

“Clans?” Kuro inquired of the woman. She looked at him and nodded. “Yeah, just a bunch of people that think they know more about everything else than normal people. Trouble is, the different ones are always quarreling, but it usually doesn’t get very bad.” She shuddered slightly and walked away. Kuro moved his gaze to the window.

“Why do you care about clans?” Django asked. He dropped his feet up on the table.

“I don’t,” Kuro said unconvincingly. “I was just curious.”

“Yeah, well, curiosity killed the cat,” Django laughed and so did Nagasaki while shaking her head.

“What do you say we move out and try to find a place to sleep?” Kuro was about to answer when the door burst open. In the doorway stood two men unlike anything Kuro, Nagasaki, or Django had seen.

“Give us some grub,” the boy on the left said. He was short; or at least he appeared to be; he was slunk over and his back arched like an old man’s. His limbs were scrawny and his eyes were wide. Next to him was a giant of a kid, though it was mostly blubber. His head sat oddly on his neck and sported two small eyes and a tangled mass of hair.

“Why should we serve you?” the waitress that had spoken to Kuro said. “You two are the worst-mannered children in town.”

"Now, now, missy," the small boy hissed, "you wouldn't want my friend here to tear down this whole place, would you?" He nodded in the portly boy's direction. "He's in a bad mood today and could easily turn this old fleabag of a restaurant into a pile of timber and glass." The other boy said nothing. Nagasaki got infuriated of the two boys and made a low, threatening growl, sounding like a dog growling. The waitress backed away, showing a mixed look of fear and hatred on her face.

"That's a good girl," the small boy purred, "now if you'll just"-- His sentence was cut short by two hard fists thrown into his face; he went flying across the room and smashed into one of the other tables. He rubbed a spot on his head.

"Who dares to hit--?" he screeched but his sentence was cut short when Nagasaki unsheathed one of her swords and placed it at the side of his neck, ready to decapitate the boy's head. He looked up and saw a tall boy in glasses and a girl with swords at her side.

Django had fallen out of his chair and stood up; he hadn't even seen Kuro or Nagasaki move. How did they punch that rotten kid so quickly?

Meanwhile, after Nagasaki sheathed her sword back to her case, Kuro was throbbing with a strange source of anger. His hands were clenched in fists as they stared at the boy.

"Leave them alone," he said, taking a step toward the boy. The boy cowered back and shook wildly.

"Now, now, please, don't hurt me," he cried, beginning to sob. "We didn't mean no harm, did we?" He looked in the direction of the other boy, who backed out of the room. Then, what almost made both of the boys urinate their pants was the low, threatening growl, that Nagasaki made. "We'll just be on our way." He scrambled out of the mess and walked slowly by Kuro and Nagasaki.

"Be warned, new kids; if we catch you two anywhere else, you'll pay for what you did to me," the boy whispered as he passed Kuro and Nagasaki. Kuro responded by kicking him swiftly out the door. "Yeah, keep telling yourself that, it's never gonna happen. Oh, and let this be a warning to both of you vagabonds." The two stopped in mid-step as they flinched and turned to look at her and she continued, "If we see you roaming around these streets again, both of you will rue the day you were born!"

Nagasaki smirked with her arms crossed as her response. But, not only that, they also saw something that they found petrifying; a source of hatred and anger in her eyes and then a malevolent smile forming. And, soon, they ran off. As soon as the two were out of earshot, Kuro and Nagasaki turned to look at the waitress, who looked pleasantly surprised.

"Sorry about your table," Kuro said, blushing slightly. The waitress's jaw dropped and ran up to them, squeezing them tightly.

"Who cares about some table, you just chased out this town's biggest bullies!" she shouted, hugging them even tighter. Kuro blushed even harder and looked pleadingly at Django; he merely laughed with amusement and joined in on the applause from the staff that had appeared. Kuro and Nagasaki looked at them while trying to push the woman away.

"So, who are they?" Kuro asked; the woman had finally let them go, so Kuro readjusted his glasses.

"Butchie and Siam," the woman answered with a note of disgust in her voice. "They think they can do whatever they want in this town." A murmur of agreement came from the staff behind them.

"We should be leaving," Kuro said after a moment of silence. "Are you sure that we don't need to pay for the table?" The waitress laughed.

"No, no, it's a small price to pay for getting rid of those vagabonds," she said and waved to them.

Django exited after Kuro and Nagasaki and walked backwards a few paces ahead of Kuro.

"How'd you two do that?" he asked. Kuro and Nagasaki looked at him.

"Do what?"

"Whack that runt!" Django said, surprised, as he started dancing. "You two were at the table one moment, then you both were hitting that kid!"

Kuro simply stared; he couldn't explain it, much like the anger that he'd felt when those two guys had

harassed that woman.

"I don't know," he replied dully. "I...I wasn't really thinking." He started to contemplate this in silence as the three walked aimlessly, looking for an inn to rest.

After some time, the three stumbled across a small inn near the town's exit and took a room on the uppermost floor. Django continued to practice his dancing; Kuro, however, sat by the window and peered out of it, watching the sun's last rays climb over the houses and bathe the town in red. His grief had not yet passed; he wondered what his mother would say if she'd known he was on another island, another world. He missed her so much; but he still felt angry, both at the Navy and at the pirates. He had decided that they both should feel his pain.

"Kuro?"

Django had stopped dancing and both he and Nagasaki looked worried. Kuro snapped out of his thoughts as Nagasaki laid her hand on his shoulder.

"What?"

"You're...you're not thinking of starting a clan, are you?" Django asked.

This question hit Kuro by surprise; he hadn't considered creating a clan. He looked out the window again and pushed up his glasses.

"Now that you mention it, Django...it sounds like a good idea." Kuro stood up that made Nagasaki removed her hand from his shoulder and he smiled. "Why not? It'd be a great experience."

"But where are we going to get members?" Django said. "And, where would we meet?"

Kuro moved to one of the beds and sat upon it, thinking about all of this.

"I don't know," he replied. "We can discuss it tomorrow." And with that, the three climbed into the beds and dozed off, each with their own thoughts and worries weighing on their minds.

"So, you're serious about this?"

The next morning, the three had relocated to the restaurant and took seats outside, where the wind blew lightly around them. The crowds from yesterday were nowhere in sight, so many of the townsfolk were enjoying the silence.

"Completely," Kuro said.

Nagasaki was having second thoughts. "I don't know about this, you guys."

"Come on. What can possibly go wrong?" Django smiled.

She lifts an eyebrow as she turned her head to look at him. "You know, the people who asks that question can get jinxed, you know that, right?"

Django put his hands behind his head. "You're so superstitious, Nagasaki."

"I am not!" she protested as she smiled.

"Actually, Nagasaki, he's right." Kuro smiled at her as he adjusting his glasses.

"Who's side are you on!?" She laughed as she turned her gaze to Kuro.

"I want peace from this war." He joked.

"What kind of friends are you guys?" She said not looking at Django or Kuro as she smiled.

"Good, considerate friends." Both Kuro and Django answered simultaneously as they pat her shoulders.

"Thanks, guys, now I feel all warm and fuzzy inside." Nagasaki said sarcastically as she smiled and as she lifted a brow. All three of them laughed from her joke. After the laughter died down, Nagasaki continued, "Alright, I'm up for it."

And both Kuro and Django smiled.

Kuro, then, sipped his glass of water. He looked up from his glass to see the two boys from yesterday, Butchie and Siam, standing nearby.

"You have something to say?" he asked lightly and set the glass down. The smaller boy stepped

forward.

“Yes, well, we couldn’t help but overhear your conversation,” he began.

“I doubt that,” Django snorted. The boy looked menacingly at Django and turned back to Kuro, shaking slightly.

“Well, you see, Butchie and I could help you get members for your clan,” he finished.

“And, how would you do that?” Kuro said.

“We could always put in a good word for you,” Siam said. Django laughed again and ignored Siam’s glare.

“Only so you can protect your own back,” Django spat. He leaned back in his chair.

“Yeah, the only reason why you want to help us form a clan is so you can save your own asses!”

Nagasaki spat as she looked at the boy with her elbows on the edge of the table and her fists against her lips.

“Django, Nagasaki, enough,” Kuro said. Django sat up straight and both Django and Nagasaki looked at Kuro curiously. Kuro didn’t bother to turn their gaze. “If you want to prove yourself, bring twenty people to the inn at the edge of town.”

Siam nearly toppled over; whether out of fear or excitement, no one could tell. Butchie looked down at Kuro.

“We’ll bring the people; what time do you want them?” Butchie asked.

“As soon as the sun sets; we’ll meet you outside the inn,” Kuro replied. “Now be on your way.”

Butchie and Siam hurried away, Butchie dragging Siam slightly.

“What was that about?” Django said angrily as soon as the other two were out of earshot.

“How else are we supposed to get members?” Kuro replied just as angrily. A rough silence followed as they paid for their drinks.

“I’m going into town to find some better clothes,” Django said. “Maybe I’ll find some good dancing clothes.”

“You do that,” Kuro said absently. “We’ll meet you back at the inn before sundown.” Django made his way for one of the clothing shops; Kuro and Nagasaki began a trek to the ocean. All the while, Kuro thought about the prospect of the clan and whether or not Siam and Butchie would keep their promise. When they did reach the shore, they sat on the soft grass and stared out at the vast expanse of water and listened to the ocean crash into the rocks. His thoughts returned to that moment when he snapped at Django.

Suddenly, he noticed the expression that was on Nagasaki’s face and asked, “Nagasaki, what is it?” he sighed, “You’re afraid of me, aren’t you?”

“No.”-she looks at him- “I’m afraid of what you’ve become.”

He sighed once more, “It was an offer that we couldn’t refuse, it’s for the clan.”

“But maybe, it’s more for your peace of mind. Maybe, you really don’t care about this; all you want to do is kill those responsible for killing your mom!” she retorted.

“No,” he said calmly to Nagasaki, despite his anger. “It’s not about that.” But, somewhere, he wasn’t so sure of that. Yes, he wanted revenge, but he’d assumed that, even if he did find those men again, he wouldn’t be able to do anything to them. It was a fool’s dream to believe he could take on the Navy.

“Kuro, ever since you wanted to start a clan, you’ve changed. It’s not like you.”

“What are you implying?” he asked with irritation in his voice as he looked at her vexingly.

“It’s not like you to be dictatorial, Kuro.”

He mulled over what she said until the sun began to slowly creep its way down the sky. They stood up, brushed their selves off, and they started their way back to the inn.

“Where are they?” Kuro said impatiently. The sun had not completely set yet, but he was anxious to see if those two had kept their promise.

“Do you think they’ll show up at all?” Django said, pulling his new navy-blue hat over his eyes; he’d found a strange blue jacket and pair of pants in one of the stores; he’d also bought a matching hat, which now covered most of his yellowish hair.

“Don’t worry, they’ll show up,” Nagasaki retorted, mostly to reassure them.

“They better.” Kuro replied without looking at her. Nagasaki shook her head slightly.

After only a few minutes, they could see Butchie and Siam making their way toward the inn, followed by what appeared to be at least thirty people.

“There; we kept our promise,” Siam said, still shaking.

“How many are there?” Kuro said, folding his arms.

“Twenty-seven in all,” Butchie said. Django moved around the crowd of people to count them and gave a thumbs-up to Kuro. Kuro nodded to indicate that he’d seen him. “But, we want to be in the clan as well.”

Kuro looked up at him. “And, what makes you think I’d allow that?”

Siam stepped forward and looked at him forcefully, all fear gone from his face. “Because, we can simply tell all these people to leave and you’ll be without a clan.”

Once again, Kuro kicked Siam, this time in the gut, and sent him flying into Butchie. He moved over to him and placed his striped shoe on Siam’s chest, pinning him to the ground.

“I don’t believe you’ll be the one to threaten me,” Kuro hissed, pressing harder on Siam’s chest. Siam hacked and coughed for air, occasionally spitting up blood.

“Kuro, stop!!” Nagasaki cried, but he ignored her plea.

“I already knew you’d want to join.” Siam was still hacking; Butchie shifted as if to yank Siam from Kuro’s clutches, but thought better of it. Django moved closer to see what was going on and nearly collapsed. A few other people also moved to see what was taking place in front of Butchie.

Nagasaki ran to Kuro and grabbed his arms back to have him release Siam, but Kuro’s strength was, surprisingly, too strong. “Kuro, stop! He’s not worth it!” she hollered. Kuro shift his gaze to Nagasaki, who was upset and she continued as she whispered, “What will this prove, Kuro? This will only prove that you’re nothing but a dark, cruel person. And how can I trust you if you’re that person? As long as you’re my friend, I need to trust you. Please, Kuro, this has gone too far.” He paused for a moment; she was right, how can she trust him if he was acting like this? “She saved your life. And, next time, keep your filthy mouth shut if you know what’s best for you,” Kuro said when he glared back at Siam, and removed his foot. Butchie helped Siam to his feet. Django and Nagasaki stared in horror at Kuro; Kuro’s eyes were full of a darkness that Django or Nagasaki had never seen before. Nagasaki, who was now seething with rage rather than afraid, whispered to him again, “What’s going on with you, Kuro? This isn’t like you at all.” He ignored her question.

“W-what are we g-going to c-call the clan?” Django stuttered slightly. Kuro looked at Django then heard a familiar yowl. He looked down to see the same black cat that he’d seen on that horrible night not long ago. Though the appearance of the cat was puzzling, he didn’t brood on it; the cat had given him an idea.

“We are the Black Cat Clan!” he declared. The people cheered behind Butchie. “We will become the greatest clan this town has ever seen!” They cheered again and moved closer, chanting his name. Django moved behind Kuro. “What’s happened to you?” he whispered in Kuro’s ear. Kuro ignored this; nothing could ruin this moment for him, this moment of triumph for him. For once, he felt something may go right.

“Now, my felines; meet at the beach tomorrow night at sundown,” Kuro commanded. The people bowed and dashed off. Now, only Kuro, Nagasaki, and Django, along with Butchie and Siam, remained.

“There’s an abandoned hut near the shore,” Butchie said, picking up Siam, who was still coughing. “It could be used as a base.”

“Good,” Kuro said. “Go, before someone spots you.” Butchie obeyed and hurried off, the choking Siam still in his arms.

The air whistled through the air as Kuro, Nagasaki, and Django stood alone in the dark. There was a long silence between them as they stood there; it continued as they returned to their room and climbed into their beds. As Django and Nagasaki passed off to sleep, Kuro laid awake, thinking about what had just occurred.

What’s happened to you? Django had said. What’s going on with you, Kuro? This isn’t like you.

Nagasaki had said. Kuro didn’t know, and he didn’t care. He’d never felt better in his life; he fell asleep after some time, smiling at the thought of all those people under his command.

It was hard to think about such horrible things when he felt so great. Especially the words of what Nagasaki said had him to have his second thoughts for a split second.

5 - Chapter 5

The next morning, Kuro woke up just before dawn; a rare occurrence for him. He put on his glasses and looked out the window at the rising sun. Suddenly, all the emotions from that night came rushing back: his excitement of being the clan leader, the bliss of acceptance...and Django's and Nagasaki's worries. As he continued to stare out the window, he began to wonder the same thing. What had happened to him? What he'd done to Siam...He gave himself a mental shake; he was being stupid. He would have to be tougher to be the clan leader. He dressed and left the inn, Django was still snoring in his bed, but as Nagasaki got out of bed, she looked out the window, watched as Kuro passed by the inn, and so many worries for him that she could not fathom in her mind; why was he acting like this? What has become of him? Was this Kuro? Both she and Django knew that their best friend had changed. Deciding not to dwell on the subject, she went back to bed and had quickly fell asleep.

Kuro decided to take a walk to the hut that Butchie had mentioned. As he passed people in the streets, many of them gave him a thumbs-up; he shooed them away and told them to keep quiet. All the while, he cycled through many different things for the clan; symbols, outfits, and other things.

What Butchie called a hut, Kuro called a manor; it was larger than any house he'd ever seen before. The exterior was a simple gray with a flat roof. When Kuro stepped inside, it was far from ordinary; there were rooms lining the wall's edges, while the center was reminiscent of a theater, complete with a large wooden stage at the far end. As Kuro walked through it, he had to climb over dusty, overturned chairs and boxes to reach the stage itself. The room felt dark and desolate, as if something wonderful and horrible had happened here.

When Kuro did reach the stage, he stood upon it and stared across the room. From this spot, he could see all of the room and most of the side rooms.

"This is perfect," he said to himself. "The perfect place to..." But, then he stopped. Yes, he'd become the clan leader; but why?

You still want revenge, he thought. He tried to shake that out of his head; how would being a clan leader give him revenge, he argued with himself.

Maybe, the voice whispered, you're just trying to hide from your pain. Maybe, you think that power will get you what you want. You think power will bring your mother back.

"NO!" he heard himself shout. He fell to the stage and started banging on it with his fist. "No, that's not right, I'm not hiding." Anger filled him again as he continued to beat the stage, furious with himself. He didn't stop until he heard a slow creaking noise. He stopped and looked up to see who'd opened the door.

It was Django, wearing the same strange clothing he'd bought yesterday, and Nagasaki right beside him. They had no idea what they'd just walked in upon, but Django merely nodded and closed the door, and Nagasaki was worried about Kuro.

"Kuro?" Nagasaki asked as she got near him.

"Mm?" He questioned as he shift his gaze to her.

"Can I speak to you for a minute?"

He sighed, "Alright."

"What's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?"

She sighed, "Do you remember when you hit Siam yesterday?"

"Yes." He answered in confusion and irritation.

"I saw you got so upset, that you weren't even you anymore. I'm not saying that you shouldn't have fought back, but you have to understand; for the people who love you, watching you being that much rage is really intimidating. You're a whole different person, and I'm scared for you, Kuro."

"Humph, he deserved what he'd gotten." Suddenly, he grabbed her neck as he banged her head on the stage, leaving Django to look at the fight. "If you ever defy me again, Nagasaki... I'll kill you! And, even though you're my best friend, I'll feel no pity for your doomed fate. I'll take more than a thousand lives and you'll be nothing but one more!" he said coldly as his grip got stronger. Django knew Kuro gotten too far, but he didn't know how to help Nagasaki. Kuro continued, "Consider that your warning." He let go of her neck and she went back to the inn, full of rage, sadness, and scarce of what Kuro had become.

"Butchie wasn't lying; this would be a great place," Django awed, as he past the subject aside. He moved closer to get a better look, an expression of great amazement on his face. "So...any ideas for the clan?"

Kuro grinned. "A few," he said.

That evening, Kuro and Django stood outside the building, slightly worn out; they had spent most of that day cleaning the inside of the building. Django was carrying a large box that was tightly sealed. Soon, they heard the soft stamping of feet as the crowd from the previous night, led by Siam and Butchie appeared. Kuro attempted to count how many people had shown up, but gave in as the crowd drew closer.

"We're all here and ready to serve you, leader," someone in the crowd said. A raucous cheer followed this.

"Silence!" Kuro shouted over them; the crowd instantly stopped cheering; a few people cowered. "You can't simply shout as if no one would care to hear." He motioned for Django to come forward. "You are my minions, yes, but can you be trusted?"

With one fell swoop, he pulled a knife from the sleeve of his sock and sliced open the box. Inside was a mess of black masks. "So," he continued, "you must wear these at every meeting." He and Django began tossing them to everyone, who swiftly placed them over their heads; the masks covered all but their mouths. "You will not know the identity of anyone else in this clan."

Kuro turned to the doors and pulled them open. A small burst of light fell on them all as they stepped inside and, noticing the chairs, took seats.

"Siam, Butchie," Kuro said to the two as they passed, "go to the side of the stage. I have something I need to discuss with you." They nodded and made their way along the wall to the side of the wooden stage. Django and Nagasaki waited as Kuro slammed the doors shut and the two made their way to the stage.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Django asked nervously.

"I'm sure," Kuro said, pushing up his glasses. "My plan can't fail."

They'd reached the stage; Kuro stepped onto it and moved to the center, where everyone could see him.

"My followers, so begins the clan of the Black Cat!" he said triumphantly. The crowd cheered again while some chanted his name. "You must all be made permanent members, however. So, let the initiation begin! Report to the last two rooms at the end of this chamber to be inducted into the clan." The crowd's cheering grew louder as people rushed to the rooms. Kuro stepped off the stage in Butchie and Siam's direction. Kuro instructed them on how to install the members.

"Each of them must lift their mask, speak their name, and cover their face again," Kuro said sharply. Butchie and Siam nodded and wandered off to the room on the left. Django was already making his way to the room on the right; Kuro had told him this beforehand. Kuro also started in that direction and placed a mask over his own face; this mask only covered the upper half of his face to allow him to wear his

glasses.

“Now, then,” Kuro said as he entered the room, “let’s begin.”

It was tedious work for both the members and the inductors, who were beginning to grow sleepy. It passed without much thought, until about half an hour into the induction...

“Lift your mask and speak your name,” Django said in monotone, preparing to scribble down the name. The person lifted the mask and a great deal of chestnut brown hair fell down her back. She looked up with sea-blue eyes at Kuro and Django. She stopped for a moment as she saw Kuro. She felt her heart skip a few beats before turning back to Django.

“Amelia,” she said, and lowered her mask. Django pointed her out of the room; Kuro, however, had frozen and stared at the girl as she left. He’d...he’d never before seen someone so beautiful.

The next afternoon, Kuro and Django were lounging on the grass on the top of the seaside cliff. They were idly watching clouds pass by and listening to the sea. Django had fallen asleep and was snoring; Kuro, however, still had his thoughts on that girl from last night.

It had only been a few seconds, but he’d never felt so odd. It was a new emotion for him. Every time he pictured her face, he was overcome with such a pleasure that he thought he could simply drown in it. She was so beautiful...and she’d looked at him. He took a quick glance at Django, who was still asleep; a mushroom was starting to grow on his chin. Kuro laughed inwardly and returned his gaze to the sky. Kuro turned his thoughts to other matters; sure, he had a clan, but what were they going to do? He scanned the clouds, as if they could give him some answer. He jumped slightly as he heard a yowl from behind him. He rolled over and sat up to see the black cat.

“How did you get here?” he asked the cat; the cat yowled again and ran off. Kuro stood up and chased after the cat, which was making its way toward the town. The cat weaved in and out of buildings, many of which Kuro couldn’t get around; he waited for the cat to reappear when it did that and resumed following it. He chased it for a while before running into a mob of people; Kuro stumbled and skidded on the dirt.

Kuro watched the mob run away and noticed that they were being chased by another mob; they must be two other clans, he said to himself. He got up and brushed himself off; the cat had disappeared.

“What did that cat want me to see?” Kuro asked himself. He thought about it, occasionally pushing up his glasses, until a thought occurred to him.

“The clans fight for a reason,” he said to himself. “But they always fail; if our clan succeeds...”

“Start a clan war?”

Kuro had raced back to where Django was sleeping; he proceeded to tell Django about his new plan.

“Yes, a clan war,” Kuro said. “If we attack the other clans, we could easily annihilate the smaller ones and recruit their members as warriors. Then we-”

“You’re insane!” Django shouted, interrupting Kuro. “We can’t start a clan war! This whole town will be destroyed!”

Kuro shook his head. “Not if we plan the attacks correctly. If we send spies, we can mark the other clans’ locations and strike when they’re most vulnerable.”

Django shook his head in disbelief. “Whatever you say, Kuro,” he muttered. “I’ve got my dancing class in ten minutes. You do what you think is best.” Django hurried off; he still hadn’t noticed the very small mushroom growing on his face.

That night, the clan gathered again, prepared to hear whatever their leader had to say. Butchie and Siam were now sitting in the seats closest to the stage; Django was sitting on the steps leading up to the stage. As Kuro passed him, he shook his head again; Kuro ignored this.

“We are a small clan, but we are far more powerful than any other clan,” Kuro began. The crowd shifted slightly, though they cheered harder than ever.

“Therefore,” Kuro continued, “we must take control of the other clans.” A long silence followed this.

"You will train in stealth and battle in secrecy. You all will learn the element of surprise as we take this island by storm!" Fresh cheers erupted as Kuro stepped down from the stage.

Kuro was true to his word. For the next six months, the clan met every night and trained, learning the different ways to spy on enemy clans, how to plot maps, and how to fight with lightweight knives and swords. Every meeting increased Kuro's passion as his minions grew stronger.

But soon, Kuro began to pick out his favorites from the heap and trained them more extensively in espionage; the others were restricted to battle. They became the scouts; while the others trained, they were sent to mark the other locations of clans and to note when they seemed most likely to fall to an attack. One of these few people was the girl that Kuro had seen the first night; she blushed deeply whenever he passed, as did he whenever she returned from a mission.

The members were not the only ones training; Siam and Butchie had crafted gloves with iron needles at the end and occasionally practiced against Kuro, who used two knives in each hand. They were no match for him; he easily outstripped them in speed. Django began using chakram as his personal weapon choice and used wooden blocks as target practice. Kuro's happiest moment of training came only two months into training.

"Kuro?" Django called from the entrance of Kuro's personal room.

"What is it, Django?" Kuro called back.

"Siam and Butchie are requesting to see you," Django said. "They say they have something for you." Kuro paused before answering. "Let them in." Butchie and Siam sidled into the room, carrying a long box.

"Your greatness, we have brought you something," Siam said feebly. "We thought that it would only be fitting for the mighty leader of the Black Cats." He pulled off the cover to reveal a matching pair of furry black gloves; what was truly extraordinary was that each finger of the gloves was tipped with a very long, sharp blade.

Kuro's eyes widened as he pulled the gloves delicately out of the box and slid them on. They were so light, so easy to move; within a fraction of a second, he'd sliced open one of the wooden boxes with one hand.

"They're..." Kuro was completely lost for words. He wanted to say that they were amazing; that they were perfect. "Siam, Butchie, I hereby issue you the status of clan guards."

This was too much for Siam and Butchie; they fell to the ground and broke down. This was far better than they had expected. Kuro even surprised himself. Still, these two had given him a most valuable gift.

"You are now the Meowban Brothers," Kuro declared. Siam and Butchie groveled at his feet and backed out of the room as Kuro continued to admire the gloves.

The training continued, this time even stronger than before. Kuro practiced almost obsessively with the gloves and developed his own techniques, blessing the striped shoes he'd received from Django that made his steps almost completely silent. After some time, he bought a pitch-black shirt and pants that truly gave him the look of a black cat.

The clan grew more ecstatic as the time of the first raid drew near; so did Kuro, Nagasaki, and Django. The mushroom on Django's chin had continued to grow, until about two weeks before the first raid, in which Django bit off the cap of the mushroom out of hunger; however, the mushroom was horribly flavored. He swallowed it anyway and sported a striped stalk on his chin the next time he appeared at the meeting, though no one seemed to notice. It did, however, reignite his dreams of hypnotism and gave him a new use for the chakram, as he learned that the chakram could be used to hypnotize people. The clan was fit to burst at the end of the six-month training as they prepared to leave for the first raid...

"Remember, you must be silent," Kuro said to the clan moments before they prepared to set off. "When I give the signal, you attack." No one made a single sound as the troupe of members, fourteen in all, left the headquarters along with Kuro.

“Django, keep the place under control while we’re gone,” Kuro whispered to Django as he passed. “I’ll do that,” Django whispered in response. Butchie, Siam, and Nagasaki were also going on this raid; Django was in a room of complete anonymity.

Kuro moved silently to the front of the group, where Siam and Butchie were leading. They made no noise, only nodded to indicate he was there. It was only a short walk to the first place; inside they could hear laughter from a bunch of people.

What happened next was a blur of blades and screams; there were less people in the room than expected; nonetheless, three of Kuro’s men led the captured people back to the hideout; the rest lay in pools of blood.

In all, they ransacked eight clans that night, taking about forty people prisoner and killing nearly fifty, mostly by Kuro’s claws. Still, nearly four hours later, only Kuro and one of his own members who hadn’t volunteered to capture prisoners, walked back to the clan’s hideout.

“That was amazing,” the member said joyfully.

“Yes, it was,” Kuro agreed. “Our number has more than doubled; we’ll be far more prepared to take on the larger clans.”

“I can’t wait,” the member said. “I’ve had faith in you ever since I saw you.” It took a moment for Kuro to register that it was a woman speaking from under the mask. “You seemed so powerful, so confident, that first night. And, you still are.”

Kuro remained silent. He may have just been guessing, but he was almost sure that this was the girl he’d seen that night.

“You’re so fast, though, that no one could even see you,” she continued. “And, your plans are so well-thought-out that nothing could ruin them.”

Kuro blushed slightly. There was a slight tension between them as they walked in silence. When they reached the building, they stopped and looked at each other, still silent.

“What’s your name?” the girl asked. This caught Kuro by surprise, but only for a moment.

“Kuro,” he said after a moment.

“I’m Amelia,” the girl said and shook his hand; a difficult feat, as she had to avoid the claws on his hand. Her sea-blue eyes smiled at him as they walked into the hideout and came face-to-face with a wild party.

“Let’s hear it for Kuro!” someone shouted and the noise grew louder. Kuro could see Django slowly making his way through the tangle of people toward Kuro.

“I’ll see you some other time,” Amelia said as she moved away while Django pushed the last few people out of his way.

“Incredible, Kuro!” Django laughed. “You’ve taken so many people prisoner! The clan’s now seventy strong!” He moon-walked away in someone else’s direction, leaving Kuro standing by the doorway. ‘He doesn’t know I killed some of those people,’ Kuro thought. He stared at his gloves and at the blades; they were completely clean. Not one drop of blood had seemed to touch them. Kuro stepped back out of the building and stared up at the crescent moon that was slowly sliding down the horizon, thinking about Amelia and what she’d said.

For the next month, the raids continued under Kuro’s carefully-designed plans. Hundreds of people were captured and forced to work, while the best became spare fighters.

But even more were killed.

Kuro’s speed seemed to increase with each night as more and more people fell by his claws. But, his thoughts of this success were punctured by another, stronger feeling.

He couldn’t stop thinking about Amelia.

True, he’d made her one of his top soldiers and they often fought back-to-back, he with his claws, she with her knives. She was also fast and able to slide her way through a large amount of people very

quickly.

But, after the battles, they'd walk together and talk about many different things as they drew closer to each other, almost to the point where they each felt they were falling in love...

"So, where do you come from, Amelia?" Kuro asked. It had been the eleventh raid in two months; now that word had gotten around about the acts of the Black Cats, the clans were beginning to arm themselves against attack, so more casualties were suffered during battle. Still, nothing seemed to come close to Kuro's claws.

"I used to live on an island a long way from here," she said, looking up at the stars. "My parents were always fighting about something. It drove my sister and me crazy."

"Where's your sister?" Kuro asked, turning his own gaze to the stars.

"Still on the island, I suppose," she said. "I left right after...after my parents killed each other." She stopped and looked at the ground, tears starting to fall down her face. Kuro stopped, too, and looked at her. He wanted to ask why, but she continued anyway.

"My father was into gambling," she continued. "He'd always disappear for days at a time then come home, asking for money. Finally, my mother got sick of it and refused to give him the money he needed. They pulled a gun on each other..." She looked up and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I knew I had to leave, but my sister was bedridden; she promised to stay and keep our home safe."

They started walking again. Kuro sighed and looked at the sky again.

"What about you?" Amelia asked. "How did you end up here?"

"I sailed here with Django and Nagasaki almost two years ago," Kuro said. "I didn't have a family anymore." He hoped she wouldn't inquire further; she didn't and merely moved closer to him.

"I guess we're both lost in this world," she said, returning her gaze to the sky. "But, I suppose we have each other."

Kuro looked at her and smiled, though it was invisible in the darkness. She was right; they had each other.

"Alright, warriors, tonight is the night!" Django shouted from the stage; Kuro had decided not to give this particular speech. "We are going to attack the second-largest clan on this island, so you all must be ready!" Nearly a thousand cheers echoed across the room.

"You must be warned; every member of that clan is...a pirate!" Django proclaimed; amidst the wild cheers, he didn't see Kuro shake slightly on the steps of the stage.

Kuro had planned long and hard for this; the clan they were about to face was composed entirely of pirates. They had been steadily taking in the smaller clans through bribery and blackmail, but there were a few clans that were excited to see the Black Cats fall from grace as the greatest and largest clan on the island.

"Only the best of you will get to follow your great leader into battle against these sea dogs into triumph!" Django yelled over the crowd. "Let's go!" About eight hundred members started to march out of the building, leaving only a hundred or so waiting in their midst.

"Are you ready, Kuro?" Django asked. Kuro smiled up at him evilly and pushed up his glasses.

"Of course," Kuro said. Django still didn't know about Kuro's hatred of pirates, nor did he know about all the deaths Kuro had caused. "Let's bring those pirates to their knees."

It was a short march to the newly-built warehouse where the pirate clan was waiting. When Kuro's men did get inside, all hell and mayhem broke loose. All around, the clang of steel erupted beneath the iron bars that covered the ceiling.

Somehow, Kuro and Amelia found themselves back-to-back again, hacking away at the oncoming pirates.

"Doing okay, Kuro?" Amelia yelled over the ruckus.

"Never felt better," Kuro replied loudly. He sped away from her into a dark corner where the madness

had not yet made its presence.

“Okay,” Kuro said to himself as he pushed up his glasses. “Time to try out this new technique.” He signaled for his men to move out of the way as he slouched and began to sway. The pirates and even some of Kuro’s own men had stopped to watch this, laughing wildly.

‘Heh...you won’t be laughing soon,’ Kuro said to himself. “Out-Of-The-Bag!”

The next few moments were pure horror. Kuro moved at lightning speed around the room, unable to see who or what he was slashing. He heard the screams of the men as they fell in bloody heaps all over the room. A huge, dark smile filled his face as he slashed everything around him to ribbons; but, amidst the carnage he was causing, he didn’t see one of the pirates set off the bomb that was hidden behind one of the steel supports.

A loud blast and the whole place began to tumble. Kuro stopped abruptly and started scanning the room; almost all of the people, including his own men, lay dead on the floor in a horrible, bloody carnage. He noticed Django running to safety; Kuro didn’t care. All he wanted to do was find Amelia.

‘There!’ he screamed in his mind and rushed forward to her, trying to snatch her out of the way of the falling wreckage.

He saw everything in slow-motion; the horror of the huge iron bar that toppled down and landed on Amelia, crushing her flat.

The building completely collapsed around him and he stood there in the dark at the mess of metal and wood. He couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe...

“AMELIA!” he cried, finally gaining his voice, and rushed over to her. The bar had fallen completely on top of her, crushing her torso and leg. She had died on impact.

Kuro fell to his knees, ripped off his gloves, and grabbed her hand; it was stone-cold. He held her hand for what seemed like an eternity, crying silently at the loss of his only love, the only girl that had ever loved him, the only girl he’d ever loved.

“It’s not fair,” he said to himself. “She shouldn’t have died.”

Life isn’t supposed to be fair, the voice in the back of his head said. She was going to die, anyway. He tried to get the thought out of his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘She shouldn’t have died; it wasn’t her fault.’

That’s right, the voice said. It was the pirates’ fault. They set off the bomb that made the building collapse.

The voice hit Kuro full force as if he’d been punched in the gut. It was true; it was all true. He’d had enough; the pirates had taken everything from him. And, he knew there was only one way to take his revenge...even if he had to give up all he’d dreamed of.

He let go of the girl’s hand and picked up the gloves; this time, the blades were stained with blood, both that of the pirates and of his own clan members. He put them back on and made his way over the rubble to where Django was standing. He wouldn’t be able to hide this from Django; he’d have to tell him.

“Kuro, what happened?” Django asked, worried. “What was it?” He noticed as Kuro passed that Kuro’s gloves were covered in blood and gasped softly.

“You...you killed all those people,” Django whispered. Kuro stopped and looked back at him.

“I did,” Kuro said coldly. “They were worthless.”

“Worthless!?” Django sputtered in disbelief. “Kuro, you massacred every person in that building!”

“I did,” Kuro repeated with no remorse in his voice. “And, I’ve had it with this clan.”

“What?” Django said. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” Kuro said. “I never told you...my parents died because of the pirates. I want those pirates to feel as much pain as I did.”

Django and Nagasaki just stared at Kuro as if they’d never met him before; they didn’t seem to hear Kuro properly. “H-how are you g-going to do that?”

Kuro grinned evilly. "I'm going to become a pirate. It's the only way I'll get close enough to kill them." He started to walk away.

"You're insane!" Django screeched. "You can't blame this on the pirates!" Kuro stopped again and looked back at him. "You can't blame what happened to those nobodies on pirates!"

Django felt a blade poke into the side of his neck; Kuro had suddenly appeared behind him, one of the gloves pointed at Django's neck.

"Are you defying me, Django?" Kuro hissed. "If you don't follow me, I'll kill you with my own hands." He pushed the point of the claw farther into Django's neck and drew blood. Django shivered horribly, but didn't dare move away.

"Alright, I'll follow you," Django said nervously and felt the blade move away.

"Good," Kuro said. "Get rid of those clothes and gather up whoever is remaining at the hideout; bring them all to the ship docked closest to the cliff wall." He pointed the blades of his left glove at Django.

"Those who refuse...kill them."

"O-okay," Django stuttered and ran off, dropping the jacket and hat behind him. Kuro pushed up his glasses with his hand and started his walk to the ship. When he arrived there, Django was waiting with close to thirty people.

"The clan is hereby disbanded," Kuro barked. "You are hereby the Black Cat Pirates." No applause followed this; people merely shook with fear as he pointed them onto the boat. Django, however, stayed behind.

"You have something to say?" Kuro asked. Django shook his head.

"You'll be my first mate and Nagasaki will be my second," Kuro said.

"Nagasaki can't come."

"Are you defying me!?"

"No, I mean, she really can't come; she's still ill. If she comes on this voyage, she'll just be a liability and slow us down."

Kuro looked back at the little house that Nagasaki rented and stayed, looked back at Django, and he said, "Fine, she'll be stayed behind. Now, get on the ship."

"Okay, Kuro," Django sputtered. He took a step and felt a blade point into his back.

"It's Captain Kuro," Kuro hissed and pushed him forward. Kuro stepped onto the ship after Django resigned himself to the captain's quarters to think over what had happened while the others set sail, and Nagasaki stayed behind. The black cat stood at the edge of the beach and yowled as the ship disappeared in the darkness.

6 - Chapter 6

Who we are...

What we will become...

Even we do not know. We are fickle in our choices and in ourselves. We do things often for ourselves only.

There is so much we do that affects everyone, whether we want it to or not. It alters everyone around us. For better or worse...

"Sunrise!" called Django from the bow of the ship. It had been only a few hours ago that the great catastrophe had occurred and Kuro had forced everyone onto the ship. Against Kuro's orders, he had kept the outfit; it was now stored in one of the crates on the ship's deck.

The men on the ship were sitting around, waiting for something to happen; Butchie and Siam were closest to Kuro's quarters.

"Wonder what happened to him?" Butchie said to Siam.

"I don't know," Siam replied. "But, that was a cool bit of hypnotism that Django used, wasn't it?" He was referring to last night, when Django hypnotized the other members, those that refused to come, into believing that they were supposed to run away and that the clan never existed.

"I suppose," Butchie said, but quickly fell silent as the door near them creaked open. They moved quickly to another part of the ship as Kuro emerged from the room.

Kuro looked slightly haunted; his hair was a wild mess and he was slightly pale. Upon his shoulders rested a ruby-red coat with tasseled shoulder plates. He was still wearing his blood-stained cat claws. He stared around at the men on the ship and pushed up his glasses.

"Thirty of you," Kuro said. The men cowered slightly. "All of you, now pirates, under Captain Kuro." They stared at him, afraid to do anything.

Kuro pushed up his glasses again. "Butchie, Siam!" he called. They slinked up to Kuro, positively shaking in fear. "You two are the ship's guards. The rest of you, keep a sharp lookout for other pirate ships."

"Aye-aye!" sounded the pirates. Kuro returned to his room and locked the door tight then collapsed onto the small bed.

"It's over," he said to thin air. "Everything I'd ever hoped for, shattered. Everyone I've cared about has been taken from me." He slid farther down in the bed and dozed off for a while.

"Captain!"

Kuro awoke from his slumber to find that it was dusk; the sun was sliding slowly into the horizon. He pulled himself out of bed and put on the red coat.

"What is it?" Kuro said as he opened the door and stepped out of the room.

"A Navy ship, off port!" one of the men said. Even in the poor light, Kuro could see the ship; its cannons were drawn.

"Lower a boat," Kuro said. A few of the men stared at this order. "You heard me!"

After a few minutes, Kuro was rowing over to the Navy ship while his crew gawked at him.

"What does he think he's doing?" one of the men asked.

"I don't know," Django said. "Pull the ship in closer!" A few of the men moved away to do as Django ordered and the others felt themselves get closer to the Navy's light-blue vessel. When they were close enough to see the deck of the Navy ship, most of them gasped loudly.

Every single person aboard the ship was dead; a few were lying in puddles of blood; others had swords and sabers sticking out of their chests. Near the bow they could see Kuro, standing there as if nothing had happened.

“What the...he...he killed them all!” Siam sputtered as he pushed his way to the front of the group.

“They’re all dead!”

Kuro looked over at them. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he growled. “Search the ship for loot.” About six or seven men jumped over to the Navy ship and made their way through its passages, while Kuro leaped back onto his own ship amidst the stares of his crew. “When the others return, set sail. We’re finished here.” He started to make his way back to his quarters when Django moved in front of his path.

“You have something to say?” he asked Django, who was shaking.

“W-what happened to you?” Django stuttered, speaking almost in a whisper. “You’re not the Kuro Nagasaki and I knew nine years ago. You’re bloodthirsty and cruel now.”

“Give me an example.”

“You left red hand prints on Nagasaki’s throat. Like I explained before, you’re not the Kuro Nagasaki and I knew nine years ago. You’re bloodthirsty and cruel now.”

Kuro simply laughed mirthlessly, as if it was some sort of joke.

“Is that all, Django?” Kuro asked after he’d stopped laughing. Django was lost for words; this was the exact opposite of what he’d expected.

“N-no,” Django said. “The Navy’s going to be after you now. What are you going to do?”

Kuro looked at him through his glasses. Surely Django didn’t think he’d know that.

“Listen closely, you insolent wretch,” Kuro hissed, staring coldly at Django. “I’ll kill anyone that interferes with my plans...including you and Nagasaki.” He walked away, leaving Django there in a broken heap.

After what had been nine long years, Django had lost one of his friends to the very thing he’d despised.

For the next twenty years, Captain Kuro and the Black Cat Pirates became one of the most feared pirate crews ever to sail the seas. Under Kuro’s intricately designed plans, thousands of pirate and Navy ships, along with towns, were plundered and destroyed by his orders. In no time a bounty of fourteen million Berries was placed on Captain Kuro’s head as he swiftly became known as Captain Kuro of the Thousand Plans.

He was easily the most intelligent pirate on the seas, but he was also the fastest; they said that he could kill fifty assassins without detection with his Creeping Cat and Out-Of-The-Bag maneuvers. His death toll ranked almost near the millions. His crew both feared and respected him.

But he soon became frustrated with the life of a pirate. He was growing tired of directing these idiotic sea dogs around, wasting his beautiful plans on them, only to be pursued by the Navy and various bounty hunters. He wanted riches and revenge, that was true; but he also wanted to enjoy these without the constant annoyance of his single-minded crew and hiding like a fugitive.

And, a miniscule twinge of guilt stabbed him, reminding him of his promise.

So, one fateful night, when the crescent moon shone down upon Kuro’s ship, Captain Kuro made a final decision...

“Django!” one of the men called. “Captain Kuro wants to see you!”

“Me?” Django said stiffly. He pulled the stocking out of the cloth around his waist and slammed it over his yellow hair to make his way to the captain’s quarters.

“You...you wanted to see me?” Django asked as he opened the door. Kuro was lounging on the bed, reading a book. Django closed the door behind him. “Captain?” “Django, I’m leaving the ship,” Kuro

said, not lifting his eyes from the book.

"What?" Django said in disbelief. "But, but, you can't leave this ship! You're the captain!"

"Captain?" Kuro echoed as he closed the book and sat up. "You take the title of captain. I've had it with being a pirate; there's nothing worth being a pirate for." Outside the room, Kuro and Django heard the men shouting.

"A ship of Marines, heading this way!"

"Not again, that's the third time this week!"

Kuro looked over at Django. "You see? This is what being a pirate earns me."

"We have to expect it," Django said, pulling the stocking farther down his head, almost so that it touched his heart-shaped glasses. "We plunder and they pursue. We've earned ourselves a reputation."

Kuro stood up and growled. "It's this reputation that forces us to run at every given moment! 'Captain Kuro' has outlived his usefulness."

"But, Captain," Django said lightly, "even if you did leave, they'd hunt you down until you're dead."

Kuro paused for a moment as he considered this; Django let out a sigh of relief.

Kuro looked up and grinned darkly at Django. "Then," he said, "I'll have to die...and the whole world must know." He exited the room, Django following at a distance.

"Aye, Captain! Should we fire upon them Marines?" one of the crew members asked as Kuro passed him. "No," Kuro said. "Lower a boat."

In a few minutes, Kuro was rowing over to the Marines boat.

"What does he think he's doing?" one of the pirates said. "He's mad!" Silence followed this as the small boat stopped, but it was too dark to see anything.

"Maybe we should fire," another pirate said after a few minutes, but they soon caught sight of the ship's deck and their captain on the far side.

Every Marine aboard the ship had been massacred. They lay in heaps, bloody and broken, some hanging off the sides of the ship.

"Well, then," Kuro said as he pushed up his glasses. "Time to try my plan." He started to make his way through the carnage, not bothering to step around the dead men, when he heard a groan from beneath his shoe.

"So," he said, stopping to stare down at the man under his shoe. "You're still alive." He grinned horribly at the man. "You can claim the reward for Captain Kuro of the Thousand Plans."

Kuro rowed back to the ship, ignoring the stares from his crew. When he climbed aboard, he threw off his coat. "Django, get your chakram." Django didn't dare ask why; he dashed off to find one. Kuro began to search through his men until he found one that looked similar to him.

"Dress him up like me," Kuro instructed to his men, "and row him and Django over to the Marines boat." They scattered to follow his orders while Django returned with his chakram.

"Listen, Django," Kuro ordered. "You are to hypnotize him," here he paused to point at the member they were dressing like Kuro, "into believing that he is Captain Kuro. There is one man aboard the Marines ship; hypnotize him so that he believes he captured Captain Kuro and will have him executed."

"Aye-aye," was all that Django could say as he climbed aboard the boat along with the Kuro look-alike and one other crew member that would take the ship to the Marines headquarters.

After only a few minutes, Django was back; however, he'd hypnotized himself accidentally and was parading about, saying he'd captured Kuro.

"That takes care of that," Kuro muttered to himself. "When the impostor dies, I'll be free to gain my riches." He ordered one man to strip down the black flag that he'd flown for so long, the flag that sported the symbol of the Black Cats, while the others set a course for the nearest island. Even now, as the ship sailed through the darkness and some of the crew tried to snap Django out of his hypnosis,

Kuro knew what he was going to do.

'All of these men know who I am,' Kuro thought to himself. 'I won't allow them to live.' He grinned darkly as the ship made its way across the sea to the dark horizon.

"Land!" called one of the men. Kuro looked up and saw a small strip of land far ahead; over his clothes he wore a torn brown coat.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Django asked. He stood near Kuro, who was slouching against the side of the cabin. Kuro remained silent for a moment.

"Leave me here," Kuro said; Django jumped a bit.

"What? Leave you here?" Django couldn't believe his ears.

"That's right," Kuro said. "I may not be your captain, but I'm hiring you for this job. There's a wealthy family that lives here; I remember hearing about it a long time ago. I'll keep in contact with you. When three years have passed, you'll all get your fair share."

Django shook his head in disbelief. "We can't just abandon you."

Kuro snatched the collar of Django's shirt and held him a hair's breadth away from his glasses. "You'll do as you're ordered," he hissed, "or I'll kill you." He dropped Django as the crew anchored the ship.

Kuro picked up the small black bag at his feet and stepped up to the bow of the ship.

"Django is your captain now!" Kuro called to the men. "You must learn to listen to him, to follow him. I'm no longer your captain." He paused for a moment before making his last statement.

"Captain Kuro is no more!"

With that, he reached for one of the ropes and leaped out of the boat and landed softly on the wet sand. He waited for the ship to sail away before making his way up the path.

"So begins my plan," he said to himself as he walked up the slope and toward the village.

"PIRATES ARE COMING!"

Kuro stopped as he heard a loud voice echo. He stiffened as he heard it; could someone have seen the ship? He moved faster up the road and soon saw a crowd of people coming his way. But, they weren't coming after him; he saw one person in front of them, laughing wildly as the others chased him.

"You good-for-nothing liar!" the people shouted. "Get back here!" They chased the boy into the forest and disappeared from view. Kuro heaved a sigh; it was nothing to worry about. He slowed his walk as he approached the town.

"Sir!" someone called. Kuro looked up and saw a man and woman coming his way; from the state of their clothes, he guessed that they were the wealthy couple that lived on this island. Kuro collapsed to his knees as they drew closer.

"Oh, my goodness!" the woman shrieked. "Are you all right?"

"No," Kuro said weakly. "I was abandoned here; I had been forced to work on a ship until they kicked me off."

"You poor man," the gentleman said. "Come with me; we'll help you." The woman moaned slightly and tugged on his shoulder.

"I don't know," she whispered. "He could be dangerous."

"Nonsense," the man whispered back to his wife, then turned back to Kuro and extended his hand.

"Tell me, what is your name?"

Kuro took his hand and smiled. "Klahadore," he said.

"You were forced onto a pirate ship?"

The wealthy man and woman had taken Kuro/Klahadore back to their mansion; it wasn't hard to miss. They'd given him a new suit and asked him to join them and their daughter, Kaya, for lunch.

"That's right, your lady," Kuro said between bites. "They thought I was spying on their ship, so they

forced me to clean the ship every night and day.”

“How horrible!” the young girl, Kaya, gasped. “How did you happen to end up here?”

“I made a mistake,” Kuro muttered darkly. “It wasn’t clean enough, so they threw me from the ship onto the shore.” The woman shrieked and dropped part of her biscuit.

“You’ve been through a horrible ordeal,” the man said after his wife retrieved the biscuit. “Say, how would you like to stay here?”

“Stay here?” Kuro echoed. He grinned inwardly; his plan was working.

“Yes, you could stay here and work as a butler,” the man continued. “Of course, you’ll have your own accommodations and Merry will instruct you on protocol.” He nodded in the direction of a man with very curly hair.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Klahadore, you’ll feel right at home in no time,” Merry said cheerfully. Kuro smiled and finished his meal.

“Thank you for lunch,” Kuro said, and bowed. He followed Merry out of the room.

“It’s so nice that you’ve come here to work for such a lovely family,” Merry commented as he led Kuro through the hallway. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy it here.”

“I’m sure that I will, too,” Kuro agreed.

“That’s the spirit!” Merry said jovially as he reached around for a key in his pocket. “Miss Kaya will be glad to get to know you as well.” He withdrew a long key and unlocked the door in front of him. “This will be your room.” Merry opened the door and handed Kuro the key.

“Thank you,” Kuro said and closed the door. He fell onto the bed and placed the black bag next to him. He grinned darkly at the ceiling; nothing could ruin his plan now.

From this point on, Kuro will be referred to as Klahadore.

Over the next two years, Klahadore the Butler became known throughout the town as one of the kindest and most honest men anyone had ever had their fortune to meet.

Or, at least that’s what Klahadore wanted them to think. The family he worked for adored him, the other servants looked up to him.

And, Kaya saw him as a second father, someone who was always there for her, cheering her up and making her laugh.

In between moments, Klahadore took time to write short letters to his crew and sent them off with messenger birds. Each letter drew him closer to that moment when his plan would be fulfilled and he could live peacefully, despite his grief.

But, things don’t always go as planned...

“This food gets better every time I eat here,” Kaya said softly. She, along with her parents, Merry, and Klahadore were eating dinner at one of the small restaurants in town. Many of the people also eating there were being almost over-gracious to them, while the waiters and waitresses stumbled over themselves to serve the lovely Miss Kaya and the wonderful Mr. Klahadore. “I agree,” Merry said as he snapped a bite of chicken into his mouth.

“Me too,” Klahadore agreed. They all laughed as two of the waiters started to fight over who would serve the lobster dish they were holding. Kaya’s father looked down at his watch.

“Kaya, you’d best be getting home,” he said. “Merry, would you escort Kaya home?”

“Of course, sir,” Merry said as he jumped to his feet to lead Kaya out of the restaurant. Klahadore was now alone with Kaya’s parents.

“Mr. Klahadore,” Kaya’s father said, “would you accompany my wife and me on a nighttime stroll?”

Klahadore looked surprised; nonetheless, he agreed. The man left a check on the table and escorted his

wife out of the restaurant with Klahadore behind them. It was a short trek to the slope; however, they continued up the hill to the rocky cliff overlooking the ocean.

"Klahadore," the man said, "I have something I want to discuss with you."

"Sir?" Klahadore asked. "What is it?"

The man and his wife turned to face Klahadore. "You see, my wife and I are getting on in years," he began. "We want to be sure that our wealth and status can be maintained should we ever pass on." Klahadore nodded, hiding both the confusion and glee from his face; this was what he'd been hoping for.

"That's why," he continued, "I'm leaving my daughter in your care should we meet our end." This wasn't what Klahadore had expected; nonetheless, he gave a deep bow, while his mind raced to the plan. How was he going to carry out his plan now?

"I am honored that you would put so much trust in me," Klahadore said.

"It's already in our will," Kaya's mother added, "so it's permanent." She smiled at him. "You've given us so much joy these past two years, Klahadore."

Klahadore bowed again; but, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a bird carrying a letter making its way toward him and the two wealthy people. It dropped the letter; Kaya's father caught it, a look of astonishment on his face.

"Now, what could this be?" he inquired as he opened the letter; Klahadore was powerless to stop it from happening. He hadn't planned this; he couldn't let his hard work end in failure. In one swift movement, he pulled on his gloves and slashed Kaya's parents, killing them instantly. The man dropped the letter in his bloody hand, a look of shock upon his face.

Klahadore bent over and picked up the letter; he scanned the contents then crumpled it up and tossed it into the sea.

"You had to die," he told the lifeless bodies. "I can't let anyone interfere with my plans." He shoved the bodies into the ocean and rinsed off the claws of his gloves at the bottom of the slope before hiding them away and making the long trek back to the mansion.

"Mom? Dad? Klahadore?" Kaya called from the front door of the mansion. "You don't think something bad has happened to them, do you?" she said as she turned to Merry.

"Don't worry, I'm sure they're all right," Merry reassured her. "I suppose they just wanted to take a stroll." He peered into the darkness as Kaya started calling for them again.

"I'm here, Miss Kaya," Klahadore called. Kaya hurried out to him.

"But...", she breathed, "where are my mother and father?" Klahadore looked at the ground and forced tears. "I'm...", he looked up, "I'm sorry, Miss Kaya. Your parents...are gone."

Kaya fell over in a heap, completely flabbergasted.

"They...they wanted to take a walk on the cliff by the ocean," Klahadore stuttered. "Your mother...she tripped over a rock...and pulled your father down with her...they both slammed into the rocks at the bottom..." He didn't finish the tale; Kaya knew what had happened.

"Oh, Klahadore," she sighed, leaping up and hugging Klahadore tight. "It's not fair." As they stood there in an embrace, Kaya crying loudly, Klahadore felt a twinge of sadness as well. He'd killed this girl's parents. She was alone.

Just like him.

The next morning, Kaya fell terribly ill and remained in bed while Klahadore and Merry stood outside her room.

"Do you think she's grieving?" Merry asked Klahadore.

"I...don't know," Klahadore responded truthfully.

"You should go in there and cheer her up," Merry suggested. "I'll go and tell the cooks to make something healthier for her." He dashed off, leaving Klahadore alone. He knocked lightly on the door.

"Miss Kaya?" he called through the door.

"Come in," she said softly; he opened the door and saw her sitting up, clutching a pillow. Her face was horribly pale. He closed the door and moved toward her. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Klahadore said in surprise. "For...for getting sick and worrying all of you," she replied. "Now, now, Miss Kaya, it's not your fault," Klahadore said as he pushed up his glasses. "Merry and I and the rest of the people here will take good care of you. You'll be feeling better in no time." He placed a finger under her chin and lifted her head to smile at her.

"Don't worry; you'll be better soon," he repeated.

But Kaya didn't get better. Over the next few weeks, Merry and Klahadore rushed about, trying to help Kaya, but nothing seemed to work; but, Klahadore had another thing on his mind. The weight of killing Kaya's parents was heavy on his heart; indeed, much heavier than any death he'd ever caused. He tried to shove it out of his mind as he helped Merry with all manner of things.

Also, a new presence was found at the estate as time went on; a boy named Usopp was breaking into the estate regularly and, according to Kaya, was telling great lies to cheer her up.

In the following months, things remained the same; the constant worrying about Miss Kaya's state of being and the threat of Usopp, a liar and, Klahadore discovered, the son of a pirate.

But, Klahadore was still keeping contact with his crew; he changed his plan to incorporate Kaya's parents' deaths and now had a fixed date for their return to the island.

"One month," he wrote in the last letter. "In one month, return to the island; don't pull up to the shore; anchor yourselves out of sight. When I give you the signal, you'll attack the village."

The morning before Klahadore's plan was to take effect, Kaya called Klahadore into her room.

"Klahadore?" she said.

"Yes, Miss Kaya?" Klahadore asked as he closed the door behind him.

"I want to see Usopp," she said.

"Impossible!" Klahadore proclaimed, hiding the surprise from his face.

"Why?" Kaya asked. "I just want to talk with him."

Klahadore sighed and pushed up his glasses. "Must I explain again? That boy is a bad influence."

Kaya shook her head. "Phooey!"

Klahadore sighed again. "Think what you will, but I must protect you. Usopp's stories cause your body too much stress.

"But I like Usopp's stories," Kaya protested. Klahadore pushed up his glasses again. "Please understand, Miss Kaya. Your late parents instructed me to watch over you when they passed on. It's all for your best interest."

Now it was Kaya's turn to sigh. "You're right"

Klahadore nodded. "I'm glad you understand." He left the room and proceeded down the hallway, only to run into Merry. They toppled over in a heap and, standing up, laughed for a moment.

"What's the rush, Merry?" Klahadore asked after the small bout of laughter.

"There's an intruder and the guards are all on their lunch break!" Merry exclaimed. Klahadore nodded and started toward the garden that faced Kaya's bedroom. When he stepped outside, he came face-to-face with a small group of people standing on the grounds.

"What is the meaning of this!" he shouted, causing everyone's heads to turn. "Do you realize you're trespassing!" He started making his way toward them.

Kaya leaned further out the window. "Klahadore, these people want a-" Klahadore held up a hand to silence her and turned his gaze to the boy wearing a straw hat.

"Do you have some business here?" he asked the straw-hat boy.

"Yes," the boy replied, "I want a big, sturdy ship!"

"I can't help you," Klahadore said shortly and turned his gaze upon the long-nosed boy. "You're Usopp, aren't you?" Kaya and Usopp both shivered slightly.

Klahadore pushed up his glasses. "The guards have reported seeing you around the estate. What is your business here?"

"Well, you see, sir," Usopp began, "I'm trying to catch a legendary mole that's entered the estate.

"Humph," Klahadore grunted. "You've a gift for deceit." Usopp stared, flummoxed.

"But...I've heard tales about your father," Klahadore continued. "You're the son of a filthy pirate. So, stay away from Miss Kaya."

A quick tension passed through everyone at these last few words.

"Unless," Klahadore said shrewdly, "it's money you're after. How much do you want?"

This last statement infuriated Kaya. "Klahadore! That's enough!" she shouted from the window.

"Apologize to him!"

"Miss Kaya, why should I apologize to him?" Klahadore said, spreading his arms. "I'm merely speaking the truth. But, I do feel sorry for you; your treasure-crazy father abandoned you, right?"

"Klahadore!" Kaya shrilled again. Usopp was glaring at Klahadore, completely infuriated.

"Don't badmouth my father!" he said in an undertone.

"Why are you so upset?" Klahadore said, pushing up his glasses. "Just fabricate some outrageous lie about him."

This was too much for Usopp; he punched Klahadore in the side of his face, knocking him to the ground.

Gasps followed this stunning moment; Klahadore merely pushed up his glasses again.

"You see?" he said wildly. "He's an animal—just like his father!"

"SHUT UP!" Usopp shouted. "I'm proud my dad's a pirate! I'm proud to be the son of a pirate! My dad's a brave warrior of the sea!"

Klahadore smirked and pushed up his glasses again, ignoring the pain on his face. "That's a deceitful way to twist the truth. You can lie all you wish; but when faced with adversity, your reaction is violence."

Klahadore paused as he stood up. "And, I'm aware that you're after Miss Kaya."

"What!?" Usopp sputtered.

"I'm onto your scheme!" Klahadore shouted. "You're trash, just like your father!" Usopp grabbed the collar of Klahadore's shirt, prepared to punch him again.

"No, Usopp!" Kaya called. "Please, no more violence." She buried her face in her hand. "Klahadore's not a bad person...he just went too far."

Klahadore whacked Usopp's hand away. "Leave the grounds. Never come to this estate again!"

"Fine!" Usopp retorted. "I'll never come back!" The smaller children and the straw-hat boy started to run toward Klahadore, prepared to attack him as well.

"Get off this property!" he shouted at them and returned to the building.

As he shut the door behind him, Klahadore thought about what he'd said to Usopp. 'A filthy son of a pirate,' he'd said.

It was just like what the children had said to him so long ago. He was no different than Usopp...but he couldn't let some long-nosed brat get in the way of his plans. He retrieved Kaya's lunch from the kitchens and took it to her room.

"Come in," she said through her pillow after Klahadore had knocked. He could see her bury her head in the pillow again and sighed.

"May I sit?" he requested; she merely nodded. "I came to this estate three years ago...I'll never forget that day. Your father found me and took pity on me. I...I owe my life to your late parents." He paused to push up his glasses. "They trusted me to take care of you. I realize I went too far...but Usopp has a

dangerous reputation, no matter how he tries to hide it.”

He paused again. “If he ever hurt you...I’ll have failed you and your father.” He sighed and looked down. “No doubt you hate me.”

Kaya looked up. “I don’t hate you,” she said. “I’m grateful, but Usopp is a good person.”

Klahadore stood up and pushed up his glasses. “Humph! Indeed!”

“You just don’t understand!” Kaya shouted.

“You’re right, I don’t!” Klahadore shouted back.

After that morning’s incident, Klahadore left for the town, insisting there was someone he needed to meet. He greeted the people he met along the way and only stopped when he ran into a man sleeping on the dirt.

“Wake up, Django,” Klahadore said, kicking Django in the side. Django jolted upward.

“Who kicked me?” he said dumbly and looked at the pair of shoes. His eyes traveled upward to see Klahadore, who was glaring and pushing up his glasses.

“Ku-“ he started to say, but Klahadore kicked him in the side again.

“Enough,” Klahadore hissed. “Come with me; we’ll talk at the beach.”

From this point on, Kuro will be referred to as Kuro again.

“What were you doing, sleeping in the middle of the village?” Kuro asked in disbelief.

“Nothing at all,” Django said.

Kuro pushed up his glasses. “Is everything prepared?”

“Yes,” Django replied. “Operation ‘Murder Miss Kaya’ is ready to go.”

Kuro shook his head. “Don’t say ‘murder’, Django.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Django said as he took a seat on a rock. “It’s supposed to be an accident, right, Captain Kuro?”

Kuro pushed up his glasses and glared at Django. “I’ve told you, I’m not Captain Kuro anymore. You’re the captain.”

Django looked over at Kuro. “You know I wasn’t too sure about this plan in the beginning. You just completely quit pirating and told us to work without you. We’ve followed your orders, but it had better be worth it.”

Kuro nodded. “Don’t worry; you’ll get your fair share. Remember, you have to make it appear to be an accident.”

“Right,” Django said. “You give the signal, we attack the village, we accident the girl to death, and you inherit her fortune.”

Kuro shook his head and pushed up his glasses. “Idiot, how am I supposed to inherit her fortune? Listen closely. Before you kill her, hypnotize her to write a will that says she leaves everything to me, her butler Klahadore. I’ve worked hard to earn the trust of everyone around her; no one would question it if she left everything to me.”

“So, that’s why you worked as a butler for three years,” Django said in comprehension. “But wouldn’t it have been easier to take it all at gunpoint?”

“See, that’s the crude thinking of a pirate,” Kuro said. “I’ve gone legitimate; I’m a pacifist now.”

Django forced out a laugh. “Yeah, and after you slaughtered the girl’s parents!”

“I never slaughtered anyone!” Kuro said defensively. “That wasn’t part of my plan.” It was very true; he’d never intended to kill her parents.

“Well, you might want to hurry and give us the signal,” Django said, shaking a bit. “Those pirates are going mad over there.”

Suddenly, overhead, Kuro and Django heard a loud voice yell, "Hey! Don't kill Miss Kaya!" Kuro and Django looked up to see the straw-hat boy standing there, with Usopp cowering behind him. He glared up at them through his glasses.

"Well, well...it's Usopp," Kuro growled. "Hear anything...interesting?" He watched Usopp shake horribly.

"I'll take care of them," Django said as he pulled out his chakram. "When I say 'one-two-Django', you'll fall into a deep sleep." He cast the hypnosis and both he and the straw-hat kid fell asleep.

"Curse you Django," Kuro said, holding him upright. He looked up at the straw-hat kid, who swayed on the spot and tumbled off the edge, landing headfirst into the sand. The loud smack from the straw-hat kid hitting the ground awoke Django.

"He's dead for sure," Django said, "falling from that height." He looked up at Usopp. "Should I kill him?"

"No," Kuro said. "No one will believe that buffoon anyway. Tomorrow, attack the village and kill Miss Kaya." He smiled evilly back up at Usopp. "Like I said," he said darkly to Usopp, "no one will believe you." He watched as Usopp ran off, still shaking.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Django asked Kuro after Usopp had disappeared.

"Of course," Kuro said. "My plan can't fail."

7 - Chapter 7

Our beliefs are something we fight for, and occasionally die for, every day. We would give up everything if only to have our beliefs fulfilled.

But if no one believes us, we lose our heart. We find no solace in our beliefs and, slowly, fall apart... We'll give our lives to see the world change, in our eyes, for the better. But, sometimes, precious lives are wasted in the name of our beliefs...

That evening, Kuro/Klahadore returned to the estate to find Kaya asleep in her room.

"Today's excitement has worn her out," Merry said sadly. "That boy, Usopp, breaking in here again and trying to take her away!"

Kuro pushed up his glasses. "And to think all this occurred while I was in the next town."

Merry gave a deep sigh, as if trying to conceal a laugh. "That boy even accused you of being a pirate!"

Kuro turned away and pushed up his glasses; he'd been right; Usopp's gift for deception gave him a protection. His thoughts were interrupted when he noticed a small wrapped package on the table.

"What's this?"

"Oh!" Merry exclaimed. "That's a present for you from Miss Kaya. After all, tomorrow it will be three years since you came to this estate." Kuro unwrapped the gift to find a new pair of glasses. "Your glasses are always slipping, so she had that pair custom-made." Merry began to cry with joy as he thought about the gift. Kuro, meanwhile, stared out the window at the crescent moon. "Nights like these," Kuro muttered as he dropped Kaya's present, "bring out the beast in me." He crushed the gift with his foot while Merry shrieked behind him.

"Klahadore!" Merry cried. "Why did you-!"

"Oh, I'll receive a gift from her," Kuro sneered. "But I'd prefer her entire estate!"

"What are you-!" Merry was completely lost for words.

"There's no need to continue this charade," Kuro said lightly. "In a few hours, the accident will happen." He drew his gloves. "Three years is a long time to wait." He didn't hear Merry scream as he slashed him, letting him fall in a bloody heap. He left the mansion and sat upon the steps, waiting and pushing his glasses as the sun began to rise over the dark seas and hills.

After a few hours, Kuro's patience was beginning to run thin.

"They're late," he said to air. "They know the penalty for ruining my plans." He stood up with the black bag and started his trek to the beach. "But," he sneered, "if they need a reminder...I'll put them all to death."

Kuro couldn't have imagined the scene that was taking place as he arrived at the beach. His ship had been scuttled; his men were still at the bottom of the slope; the Meowban Brothers were fighting the man with the swords he'd seen in the grounds.

"C-captain!" Django stuttered. "We, uh, hit a few snags!" Kuro ignored his bumbling and the fear that had washed over the rest of the pirates. "Kuro..." Both Nagasaki and Nagase, her 15-year-old daughter who was at her mother's side, murmured in unison.

"It's long past dawn," Kuro began, "but you seem to be having trouble following my plan. What is going on here?!" He paused for a moment to take in the scene. "Are you trying to tell me that these children have been holding you up?"

"B-but, sir," Django shivered, "you said it didn't matter if we let the kid go."

Kuro nodded. "Yes, I said that...and I was right! Anyone would have expected that he would try to stop us; I didn't expect your defenses to be so feeble!"

"Feeble?" Siam hissed. "Maybe you were strong once." He flexed his hands. "But three years is a long time to wait!"

"While you were living the fancy life," Butchie spat, "we were plundering villages and sinking ships!" He and Siam began to rush Kuro.

"You've grown soft!" Siam screeched.

"Do you really think you can beat us?" Butchie hissed. They made a slash at him...only to find that he was gone. Behind them, they heard a sinister voice. "Who," Kuro said in an undertone, his cat claws drawn, "are you going to kill?" The Meowban Brothers tried to follow his movement; but, all of a sudden, they found him hanging on his shoulders. "You're right; I have gotten soft." He lifted his claws to point them at Siam and Butchie's throats. "I'm not your captain anymore...but I hired you to do a job; and the penalty for failure is death!"

He pushed the points of the blades in deeper and drew blood, ignoring their screams. "You have five minutes," he hissed. "If this isn't sorted out by then..."

"I'll kill you all with my own hands." He released the brothers and waited. But, in only a few moments, the sword boy had slashed down the brothers.

"Don't worry," he said through the sword held in his mouth. "It won't take me five minutes to trash you all!"

Kuro pushed up his glasses and stared down at him "Try it." He watched as Butchie rose to his wobbly feet. "But, it looks like your claws need sharpening." He waited and watched again as the sword boy and Butchie faced off again, until he heard a familiar yell at the end of the beach. It was the straw-hat boy."

'I thought that lad died when he fell off the cliff,' Kuro thought to himself. He looked down at his watch.

"Three minutes before I massacre everyone." From behind him, despite the noise, he heard footsteps.

"Klahadore!" Kaya yelled. "Stop!"

"What a lovely surprise, Miss Kaya," Kuro said as he pushed up his glasses. "What brings you here?"

"Merry told me everything," Kaya said angrily. Kuro hid the surprise from his face.

"I thought," he said slowly, "I'd killed him." Kaya turned away from him, horrified, and spoke to Usopp; it was irrelevant to Kuro.

"Klahadore," Kaya shouted, "I'll give you my fortune, but leave the village alone!"

"That's not good enough, Miss Kaya," Kuro said, pushing up his glasses. "You see, I also want peace of mind. I've been able to relax here. Only when I have that peace of mind and your wealth will my plan be fulfilled." He paused for a moment. "So, the attack on the village and your accidental demise are both quite essential." Kaya didn't move for a moment; then, from the coat she was wearing, drew a gun and pointed it at Kuro.

"Hm," Kuro said thoughtfully. "You've really grown up these past three years. And, I've been at your side for all of it, haven't I? Even before your parents passed on and you fell ill, you and I spent a lot of time together." He paused as he saw Kaya, slowly thinking about what he was saying. "I suffered with you; I laughed with you. I humored you, Miss Kaya, in all your silly dreams...and I endured it...all for today, that day that I could kill you!" He could see Kaya beginning to cry. "I, who was once the dread Captain Kuro, bowed and scraped to a spoiled little girl." He watched as the gun toppled from her hands. "Can you fathom my humiliation?"

"KURO!!!!" Nagase shouted as she charged toward him and unsheathed one of her two katana. She continued, "YOU COLD-HEARTED, RUTHLESS BASTARD!!!!!" But, as she reached the spot, Kuro vanished and reappeared behind her. "Nagase!" Nagasaki, Kaya, Nami, Zoro, Luffy, and Usopp

warned, but it was too late; as soon as his blades impaled through her chest, her sword slipped out from her hands and clanged on the ground as blood seeped out of her mouth, letting the blood drip on the blade of her katana. Kuro chuckled inwardly as a smile formed on his face and said coldly, "To insult a former pirate..., is a fool's mistake, you pathetic, worthless girl." He detached the blades from her corps, letting it fall on the ground.

"Kuro!" Usopp shouted as he lunged forward, pulling back a punch. But, as he reached the spot, Kuro had vanished and reappeared behind him.

"That reminds me," he said coldly. "I owe you for hitting me." But, out of nowhere, a fist launched at Kuro and knocked him to the ground, cracking his glasses. Behind him, he heard a holler from the children as they raced forward and began to beat him on the face with various objects.

Kuro stood up and pushed up his glasses, watching the lenses fall in tiny pieces; but, he couldn't think about that now. He walked past the children and kicked Usopp, who was lying on the ground in front of him.

"An unusual ability, boy," Kuro said to the straw-hat kid. "You must have the power of the Devil Fruit!"

"That's right!" the kid said, flexing his arm. "I'm a Gum-Gum man!"

Kuro stepped forward a few more paces. "Django!"

"Y-yes?" Django shivered.

"I'll kill the Gum-Gum man!" Kuro said, arching his claws. "You deal with Miss Kaya. Force her to write the will...then kill her!" He watched as they began to quarrel again and saw the children run off into the forest with Miss Kaya. "Follow them!" He waited until they were gone before speaking to the rubber man and the sword boy.

"It's useless," Kuro said coldly. "They won't outrun Django. Run for help if you wish..., " he paused to push up his glasses, "but you'll have to get up this slope."

Usopp looked incredulously at Kuro. "Don't you have an ounce of feeling for her!"

"No," Kuro replied. "She was merely a pawn." He watched as Usopp tried to get up, only fall again on his face. Kuro laughed mirthlessly at him. "You're safer on the ground that way...Django would only kill you."

He turned his attention to the sword boy, who was carrying Usopp up the hill. "Who gave you permission to climb this slope?"

"I did!" the straw-hat kid said and threw another punch at Kuro; he dodged it and disappeared then slashed at the boy; who threw a kick at him; Kuro vanished again.

"Before we fight seriously," Kuro said as he reappeared behind the straw-hat, "I have one question...why are you sticking your neck out for this village?"

"There's someone here I don't want you to kill!" the straw-hat said. Kuro laughed.

"Ah, that simple..., " Kuro mused as he stretched his arms, prepared to dash at the boy. "Die."

After a few moments of fighting, Kuro could hear the crew cheering him on: "Captain Kuro!"

Kuro stopped and looked at them. "Never call me by that name!" he shouted at the men. "My plan was to do away with Captain Kuro! I was tired of crafting plans for men with only plunder on their minds...and what did it earn me? The entire Navy on my heels!" The men shook horribly as they listened to him.

"So, I decided, three years ago, that Captain Kuro had to die!" A few of the men murmured amongst themselves; most remained stiff with fear.

"And," he continued, "with the success of this plan, I'm free to pursue my two goals; wealth and peace of mind." He turned his gaze to the straw-hat boy. "Can you understand? There's no room for error in my plan!" He lunged after the boy again. "My plans never go off course!"

But, his claws did not tear into skin; the boy had pulled up a rock to block the attack.

"So...stretching isn't your only talent," Kuro said amusingly.

"Nope! I've been training!" the straw-hat kid said as he whipped the rock around, breaking the five

claws on Kuro's right glove, and knocked Kuro over the head with the rock. "Now you only have five claws!"

Kuro stood up again, ignoring the blood falling down his face and the cheers from the men behind him. "I'll deal with you dogs later," Kuro hissed, "and Django as well." The men started to scream in protest.

"What about your plan?" one of them yelled.

"Don't worry about my plan," Kuro said as he turned to them. "I never intended to let any of you live. Even three years ago, when I was still Captain Kuro, I planned to kill every last one of you!"

The straw-hat kid turned to Kuro. "Are you stupid? What a dumb bunch of pirates!"

"Of course they're dumb," Kuro sneered, returning his gaze to the boy. "Pirates are the outcasts of society. Without a leader, they're helpless. They should have shut up and followed my plan, no matter what awaited them! They should have died following my plan!" His rage grew as he said these words.

"That's the way of the pirate! You should keep your large mouth shut!"

"Still," the boy said, "you could never beat Usopp."

This took Kuro by surprise; nonetheless, he laughed mirthlessly. "How amusing, boy! But don't get cocky just because you broke my claws!" He vanished again "But tell me why I'd lose to him!"

"It's your style!" the boy said, swinging an arm behind him and whacking Kuro on the shoulder. "You don't even look like a real pirate!" Kuro slammed into the cliff and fell to the ground. But, after only a moment, he stood up again, pushing up his glasses and ignoring the blood flowing more freely down the side of his head. "Hm...if you want to talk real pirates," Kuro said softly, "I'll show you the ferocity..." he slouched over and began to sway, "of a pirate that has faced a thousand deaths!" The men at the bottom of the slope began to beg for their lives, but Kuro had enough; even if he wasn't their captain, he was still tied to them. He knew that they all had to die.

"Out-of-the-Bag!"

As it had been those many years ago, complete carnage ensued as Kuro raced around at lightning speed, slashing everything that came in contact with his claws. He ignored the screeches and groans from his men; he slashed over and over until he felt a hand grab his jacket and fling him to the ground.

"Curse you, boy," Kuro said as he got up again, pushing up his glasses. "But, look at what you've done. Thanks to you, my pawns will suffer agonizing deaths."

"Heh," the straw-hat kid laughed, "I'll never become a pirate like you!"

Kuro laughed again. "Don't worry...you'll never become a pirate like...because I'm about to kill you."

He slouched over again, but felt a heavy weight as the boy flung himself on top of Kuro and wrapped his rubbery arms and legs around Kuro.

"Let go of me, boy!" Kuro shouted. "My plan cannot fail!" But, he was silenced as the rubber boy stretched his head back and whacked Kuro unconscious, where he fell to the ground, covered in blood.

When Kuro awoke, he found himself strewn amongst the bodies of his dead men at the bottom of the slope. He pulled himself up, aching all over.

"No," he whispered, looking around at the dead bodies. "I...I've failed." Far away, he noticed a flash of moonlight on an object farther up the slope. He made his way up there to find his glasses, his mother's last gift to him so many years ago, bent and broken horribly. He fell to his knees and cried silently, staring at the glasses.

"Everything...everything I've ever loved, ever wanted, has been taken from me," he said through his tears. His mother and father...his only love...his plans...everything had been destroyed.

He climbed aboard the abandoned ship and salvaged what he could from it. Once he did, he stumbled into town to find an unused boat; he didn't have to look far, though it was hard work to drag it down to the water in his condition. He loaded the boat with his items and set sail into the night, determined to get

away from this island, no matter where he ended up.

By the next afternoon, Kuro had spotted a large island off to the left. It didn't look familiar to him; he hadn't explored this area much as a pirate.

"You're not a pirate anymore," Kuro said to himself. "Your crew is dead. Your ship is gone."

But, are you the same man you were before becoming a pirate? the voice in the back of his head said. Or, have the deaths you've caused left a scar on your heart?

He ignored the voice and docked the small ship. This shore was only a short walk to the town; he stumbled up there until he collapsed in the street, exhausted from blood loss.

"I think he's coming around," someone said. Kuro groaned and felt a wet cloth over his head. "He must have had a run-in with pirates; he's covered in blood." He winced from the pain on the side of his head; the cloth disappeared from his forehead.

"Please don't die," the voice said softly. Something about the voice seemed familiar to Kuro, but he wasn't sure what. Still, there was no point in trying to feign sleep; he opened his eyes to see a woman with long, blonde hair standing over him.

"Ah, thank goodness, you're alive," the woman said. "You must've been through quite an ordeal."

Kuro sat up in the bed, touching the spot where his head ached horribly. He winced again and looked at the girl.

"How...how did I get here?" Kuro asked.

"My servant and I found you in the middle of the street," the girl replied. "What happened to you?"

Kuro paused for a moment, trying to think of something to say. "I was attacked by pirates," he said after a moment. "I escaped just in time in a small boat."

The girl smiled and placed the cloth over his head again. "Well, we can take care of you until you're better," she said promptly.

"Thanks, miss, but I really couldn't," Kuro said, trying to get out of bed.

"Nonsense!" she replied, pushing him back into the bed. "You're in no condition to go anywhere. But, tell me, what's your name?"

Kuro paused for a long time; he knew that the name Klahadore was no longer safe; but, perhaps...perhaps that, now, his old name carried no danger.

"Kuro," he said.

"Captain Kuro!" one of the servants gasped. Kuro shook his head, though it made him dizzy.

"No, just Kuro," he reassured the servant. His hand moved as if to push up his glasses; but, they weren't there. Somehow, without those glasses, he felt terribly vulnerable.

Over the next few days, the lady of the manor and her servants tended to Kuro, though they tried endlessly to keep him in bed. But, all Kuro wanted was to get his glasses; he felt alone without them. On the fifth day after Kuro's arrival at the mansion, the woman allowed Kuro to leave and have his glasses repaired; Kuro had taken the broken pair with him, unable to part with the treasure that his mother had given him.

But, he also wanted his cat claws repaired.

So, he returned to the ship and retrieved the glasses and the broken glove; he left the other one there, in case it gave him away. He took the glasses to a repair shop first; then, after locating a metal shop, prepared to confront whatever would happen.

"Excuse me, sir," Kuro said as he walked into the shop, "do you repair blades?"

"Aye, that I do," said the man behind the counter. "What do you need repaired?" Kuro pulled the glove out and set it on the counter.

"It belongs to a friend of mine," Kuro explained as the man looked it over. "He uses it for sword practice against multiple targets."

The man behind the counter looked up at Kuro. "Well, whatever took these blades off must have been powerful," he commented, "but it's easy to fix." Kuro heaved a sigh; he was out of danger. "It'll be ready in a day or two; come back then." Kuro obliged and left to retrieve his glasses.

"Are you sure you can't stay?" begged the woman. Kuro had returned to the manor, his glasses repaired and sitting on his face again.

"I'm sure, miss," he replied, pushing up his glasses. "I'm only staying to have one other thing fixed; then I'm leaving." He grinned sadly at her. "I don't want to become a burden."

"But you're not!" she lied, tackling him in an embrace. "Please, don't leave!" Kuro looked down at her; then, he did something he hadn't done in a long time; he returned the hug until she let go.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "But, maybe I'll come back one day. This island is beautiful." From their spot outside, they had a good glimpse of the ocean.

"Well," the woman said, "if you're sure...but, at least let me provide you with a better boat!"

She was true to her word. The next day, Kuro claimed his fixed cat glove and hid it on the small boat; it appeared that no one had touched it. The woman decided to give Kuro one of her smaller boats, but it was still rather large; he loaded everything from the smaller boat onto the new one and stood on the deck as he waved farewell to the woman.

"Don't forget, you promised to come back!" she called from the beach.

"I won't forget!" he called back, waving. When the woman and her servants were out of sight, Kuro retired to the cabin inside the ship.

'Well, that's that,' he thought to himself as fell onto the bed. He quickly dozed off as his boat sailed north with the wind to guide it.

For two months, Kuro sailed aimlessly, lost in his thoughts about the past...and that last battle. What he'd said to Usopp...he realized, angrily, that Usopp and he were similar. Usopp's father had left him; so had Kuro's. But, he knew that there was one difference.

Kuro's father had never loved him; his mother had told him that. But, as he thought more about his mother, the darker and more alone he felt. He'd promised never to become a pirate, never to become the thing that had broken his mother's heart...and killed her. But, he'd broken that promise for revenge. He'd gone against everything he'd ever said, just so he could see those men scream in agony as he slashed them to ribbons with his own hands.

But, something else entered his mind almost a month after he'd set sail. One night, while the wind howled outside the cabin, a piece of old paper fluttered in through the small gap at the bottom of the door.

He looked over at it and reached down to pick it up.

"Hm...Monkey D. Luffy, 30 million Berries," he read aloud to himself from the wanted poster. "So...that straw-hat kid's got the Navy after him now." He grinned darkly and tossed the paper to the ground.

Perhaps Luffy would understand what his life had been like, now that the Navy was chasing him. With that, he gazed out the window and pushed up his glasses, smiling to himself as he did.

But, after two months at sea, something occurred that changed everything.

Kuro stood on the deck of the ship, appreciating the breeze that blew across the water and his ship. In his mind, it was a perfect day. But, as he looked out over the ocean, a small...something was flying towards him.

As it got closer, Kuro could see that it was a bird; one of the messenger birds that inhabited the Grand

Line. The small bird fell to the deck of Kuro's ship, completely exhausted.

"You must've had a long flight," Kuro said to the bird as he bent down to scoop it up. He pulled the letter from its grasp. "But...who'd be writing to me?"

He set the bird down on a box to open the letter and pulled out the piece of paper inside; as his eyes scanned the text, his mind raced.

The letter was from the woman that had given him the ship; or, at least it was about her. Of all the writing on the letter, only one part of it stood out.

"She says that she wants to see you; that you know what to do. You see, she is slightly addled in the brain; she lost her parents at the same time as her sibling and believes she sees them returning to her.

But, now she's also seeing you. She's been saying that you have to save her.

You have to save her from Captain Kuro."

Kuro sailed as quickly as he could back to the island, those last few words filling his mind at every given moment.

Save her from Captain Kuro.

8 - Chapter 8

Loss...

The grief imposed by the loss of those we love is so great, we feel we may burst with the sorrow that chains our heart to the earth. We try to break free of the shackles, but it keeps a tight hold upon us and haunts our every moment, whether waking or sleeping.

We can go mad with anguish...and nothing will break us away from the horrible past.

We are forever haunted by our pain, as long as time exists...

"Move faster!" Kuro urged on the ship, though he knew that shouting at it wouldn't make the wind or the boat speed up; it certainly hadn't during the past few days. The bird that had delivered the message had recovered quickly and was now flying a few feet ahead of Kuro's boat, directing him back to the island.

Back to the woman that had asked for him. Or, more precisely, who he had been...Captain Kuro.

He went over the contents of the letter again in his mind, still slightly confused. How did she know who Captain Kuro was, or even what he looked like? And, why did she think that he could stop him?

"She must've known," he sighed, pushing up his glasses. "She must've seen a wanted poster a long time ago of...him." He felt his throat dry as he spoke those last words and shook his head. It was silly of him to think of Captain Kuro as a separate person; no matter how he wanted it differently, he still was Captain Kuro. No amount of planning or deaths could change it.

He heaved a sigh of relief as the island came into view and felt his thoughts about the woman fill his mind again. He watched the messenger bird fly off into the distance then quickly anchored his boat on the shoreline. He jumped out of the boat and dashed up the shore to the mansion.

He forgot that he was still carrying his cat claws.

"Miss, please, you must get up!" said the servant pleadingly. "I'm telling you, there's no one there!"

"You're wrong," the woman said, staring hungrily out the window at the sea. "I see my sister...and a black-haired man. I won't move until they come."

"They're not coming!" the servant cried angrily. He tried to heave the woman to her feet, but she slipped out of his grasp and tumbled to the floor again. "That captain and your sister aren't coming back!"

The woman turned to the servant and glared at him. "You don't know them." Suddenly, they heard a rapid knock at the door.

"Let them in!" the servant called, not budging from his spot and staring into the woman's eyes. "Miss, you can't allow anyone to see you like this!" They only had to wait for a moment before the door of the room burst open; in the doorway stood Kuro, completely exhausted. The servant jumped slightly and looked at Kuro.

"Kuro, the mistress...she says...that there's a black-haired man coming," the servant stumbled over his words. The woman also turned her gaze to Kuro, though her eyes changed rapidly.

"Oh, Kuro!" she gasped and leaped to her feet immediately. "Such a pleasure to see you again!" She raced to him and wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace, while the servant stared sadly at Kuro and the woman.

"It's...it's good to see you again, miss," Kuro said softly, returning the hug and looking over at the servant.

"Oh, enough with all this 'miss' nonsense," she said as she released him. "Call me Sara." Kuro smiled and nodded. "Now, would you like some lunch?"

"I...," Kuro began to say, looking over at the servant; he nodded his head slightly. "I'd love to." As he began to follow Sara out of the room, the servant stopped him and closed the door.

"We need to talk," he said, looking at Kuro. "About the letter."

"You said she was hallucinating," Kuro stated flatly. "You said she saw...Captain Kuro...and her sister." Again, Kuro separated himself from who he'd been, even if it wasn't possible.

"That's right, I did," the servant scowled.

"But, why did you think I could help you?" Kuro asked as he pushed up his glasses. But, as soon as he did, he noticed the servant shudder and felt as if he'd been slapped in the face; the servant had known all along, ever since that first day.

The shock must've shown on his face, because the servant stared at him even deeper. "She's seeing you, and you have to tell her that you're gone."

Kuro turned away as he tried to force the subject away from himself. "Why did she act the way she did as soon as she saw me?" he inquired without turning around.

"These visions happen at any given moment and are varied in length," the servant replied. "Perhaps the surprise of seeing you again snapped her out of it." Kuro still kept his back to the servant and started to stare out the window.

"Does this window have any importance?" he asked suddenly. "What about the room?"

"Oh...," the servant sighed slightly. "This was the room...where she last saw her parents."

Kuro turned around, pushing up his glasses. "What happened to them?"

The servant bowed, holding back small tears. "Killed, sir. They were killed in this very room." As soon as Kuro heard this, his heart jumped; somewhere, some memory long buried, began to creep up...it couldn't be...

"And her sister; what about her?" Kuro pressed on. "Did...did her sister die as well?"

"No," the servant answered. "She left not long after her parents passed on. She used to send us letters, but...they stopped."

Kuro's heart skipped a few beats. "How...how long ago?"

The servant stared at Kuro, trying to read his expression. "More than twenty years ago, I believe."

'It is,' Kuro thought to himself. 'It's really her.' Kuro moved past the servant and exited the room, leaving the servant baffled. He remembered where the dining room was and, when he stepped into it, found Sara waiting for him.

"Well, sit down, silly!" she laughed. "There's plenty here!" Kuro smiled gratefully and took a seat, still thinking about what he'd discovered. "And, there's something that I wanted to ask you."

Kuro looked over at her as he reached for the food spread on the table. "Hm?"

"I was wondering...well, if you'd like to stay here," she said, blushing.

"I..." Kuro sat in silence for a while, going over his thoughts. He couldn't stay here; not with the servant knowing who he was...but...he had to know more about Sara and her sister. He had to confirm his doubts.

"Of course," Kuro said, grinning. "But, only if you allow me to work here."

Sara looked stunned for a moment, but she agreed, despite her protests of him staying as a guest. Out of the corner of his eye, Kuro could see the servant, looking at Kuro and Sara apprehensively.

And so, for the next seven years, Kuro worked as a servant for Sara, much as he had done for Kaya; but, this time, he wanted something else. All he wanted now were answers. Though it was little more than speculation, he felt as if he'd met Sara long before this. But, somehow, he could never find the words to ask her. So, for those long years, he was haunted by that one simple thought, one simple

memory.

However, another dark surprise awaited him one afternoon...

"Let's see..." Kuro said to himself as he scanned the list that Sara had given him. He'd volunteered to do the shopping in town after having nothing to do. "Hm...fresh fruit." He started his way to the fruit cart when he heard a familiar voice.

"Why can't we get the meat now?" Kuro turned around and saw Monkey D. Luffy, standing there with the sword boy and a person he'd never seen before.

"I told you; you need more than meat to cook a meal," said the blonde-haired man through his cigarette.

"Besides, it'll spoil in this heat."

"Sanji's right, Luffy," the sword boy said. "We can get the meat last." He turned to move on and saw Kuro, standing there idly, and stopped.

"Luffy?" the man said urgently without moving.

"What, Zoro?" Luffy asked and turned his gaze. He jumped suddenly and moved closer. "Hey, it's Cap-" His sentence was cut short by Kuro's hand; he'd reappeared behind Luffy and covered his mouth.

"Be quiet," Kuro hissed in his ear. "You can't go around saying things like that!" He released Luffy and moved back as Luffy spun around.

"What're you doing here, Kuro?" Zoro said, his hand moving to his swords.

"I'm working as a servant," Kuro said, pushing up his glasses. "What're you doing here?"

"We need to restock on supplies," Luffy said cheerfully. "Why are you working as a servant?"

Kuro paused for a moment as he thought about this; truthfully, it sounded similar to what had occurred those few years ago.

"It's a service to her," he said, looking down. "I was asked to stay as a guest, but..." Kuro stopped and, collecting a large amount of fruit from the cart and leaving a sack of money, started to walk away.

"If you don't believe me...visit the manor on that cliff up there."

As Kuro walked away, Luffy and Zoro exchanged looks.

"Do you trust him?" Zoro asked Luffy as soon as Kuro was out of earshot.

"No," Luffy said, stretching his arms. "Let's follow him." Luffy lead the way while Zoro hung back to explain the situation to Sanji.

Kuro stopped in the middle of the path and looked back; he noticed Luffy and the other two following him; he ignored them and continued.

"Whatever they're doing, they must be stopped," he said to himself. He returned to the mansion well ahead of Luffy and the others.

"Miss Sara," Kuro called from the kitchen, "we have visitors coming up the path." He stepped out of the kitchen into the dining room, but the mistress was not there; from far away, he thought he heard something like sniffing. Somehow, though he wasn't aware of it, he found himself automatically dashing to the same room he'd found Sara in the day he'd returned.

Sure enough, she was in the room, but this time she was sitting in one of the chairs, facing the window. Kuro walked in softly and stood behind her, determined to try and see what she was looking at.

"Miss, there are visitors waiting for you," Kuro said without moving his gaze from the window.

"They can wait," Sara said in monotone. "I see them again." She looked up at Kuro, who looked down at her. "That captain that has your name...he's coming again." Something jolted in Kuro's mind; she didn't think he was Captain Kuro. She merely thought that they shared names. He shook it out of his mind.

"And your sister?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said. "So you can see her, too." Kuro's eyes stared deeper into hers, sadness slowly filling

them.

"I can't," he said and looked up again. "I...I don't know what she looks like." They heard a loud knock at the door that snapped Sara out of her hallucination. She leaped out of the chair.

"Oh my! Guests!" she cried and dashed out of the room, leaving Kuro standing there, small tears rolling down his face. He swabbed them away before leaving the room to chase off Luffy and the others. But, he arrived a bit too late...

"Wow!" Luffy cried as he entered the mansion. "This place is huge!"

"You'll have to excuse him," Zoro said as he whacked Luffy on the head with his fist. "Thank you for inviting us into your home."

"Oh, no trouble at all!" Sara said joyfully. "You can join us for lunch!"

"You're too kind, miss," Sanji said, kneeling and taking her hand. Kuro appeared from the hallway, arms folded.

"Oh, Kuro!" Sara said, pulling her hand away. "These three are going to join us for lunch!" Though she didn't notice it, a ripple of confusion passed through Luffy and Zoro. Kuro didn't argue with her; so, ten minutes later, the five of them were sitting at the table, enjoying lunch while Luffy and Sanji were retelling their tales to Sara. Kuro sat there stiffly, barely listening to Luffy and Sanji; oddly enough, so was Zoro.

"I'll be back in a moment," Zoro said suddenly, standing up. He walked past Kuro and whispered, "Follow me." Kuro excused himself and followed Zoro into one of the empty rooms. When he closed the door, Zoro drew one of his swords and pointed it at Kuro.

"What do you think you're doing?" Zoro said wildly.

"I'm taking care of her," Kuro said angrily, pushing the blade away. "Nothing more."

"I don't believe you," Zoro spat, pointing the sword back at him. "And, why does she call you Kuro?"

Kuro sighed and pushed up his glasses. "There was no point in trying to hide my name."

Zoro sheathed his sword after a moment and crossed his arms. "Does she know?"

Kuro looked at Zoro, pure hatred in his eyes. "She doesn't know...she thinks that he's a completely different person." Zoro couldn't hide the confusion on his face.

"What do you mean?"

Kuro sighed and opened the door slightly, peering out at Sara, who was laughing at whatever Sanji and Luffy had said. He closed the door again and pushed up his glasses. "She's lost her mind...she sees her sister...and Captain Kuro...coming home to her." He flinched slightly; he'd separated it again; but, he so desperately wanted to be free of that horrible name.

"You ARE Captain Kuro," Zoro said darkly. "No matter what you do." He moved closer to the door and opened it. "You'll have to tell her." He left Kuro alone in the room.

That evening, Kuro and Sara sat alone on one of the upper floor's balconies, staring out at the ocean. The sun was still setting, slowly, into the water, casting a golden glow over everything. A soft wind was blowing, rustling the leaves in the tree branches along the estate.

"It's a beautiful evening," Sara said, standing up and leaning on the balcony's edge. Kuro remained silent; he was still thinking about what Zoro had said.

'I should have killed him,' Kuro thought to himself. 'I shouldn't have allowed him to leave...none of them, knowing what they know.'

"Don't you think so?" Sara asked, turning around to look at Kuro and pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Yes," Kuro answered automatically. She smiled, pleased with his answer, and turned around again.

"Moments like these remind me of so many things," she reminisced, her eyes glazing over. Kuro looked at her sadly.

"What things?" he asked, almost in a whisper. Sara turned around, tears rolling down her aged face.

"My sister," she said, and fell over; Kuro moved to catch her and held her for a moment, pushing her back up, but it was no good; she fell to her knees. "She told me...she said she'd come back...but she never did."

Kuro fell to his own knees, trying to meet her gaze. "Did she say where she was going to go?"

Sara shook her head. "She said she had to get away...she couldn't live with her parents anymore...but, she said she'd come back for me." She looked up at Kuro, still crying. "But, she would write...she always wrote to me, no matter what happened...but...one day, almost thirty years ago...they stopped."

"Do you have any of the letters?" Kuro asked, his heart beating impossibly fast; it just had to be her.

"I do," Sara replied; she stood up and entered the room behind them; she moved to the bookcase that lined the wall and pulled out a box from one of the lower shelves; inside were a number of letters, yellow and decaying, each with Sara's name on them. She dug her hand into the pile and unearthed one of them. She returned to Kuro and handed him the letter; he lifted the already-opened flap and pulled out the parchment inside.

"Dear Sara,

It's been only about a month here on the island, but already I'm happier than I've ever been. I miss you greatly, but, even with our parents gone, I couldn't stand their constant quarreling. I promise I'll come back for you soon, but at the current moment, I'm afraid I can't. I hope the house isn't getting too lonely.

Apparently, this island's main attractions are these large clubs scattered all over the place; I believe they are called clans. Anyway, one of the townsfolk recommended me to come to a brand-new one at the edge of the island. The leader is tall and dark; I think I've fallen for him, but I haven't even seen his face! I wish I could get close enough to even talk to him.

Hope everything's okay there, say hello to our cousin if you see her.

Amelia."

Kuro dropped the parchment, a mix of sorrow and understanding on his face. It was her...that's why Sara was so familiar...

"She's not coming back," Kuro said from his spot on the ground. He stood up and faced Sara, who wore a look of shock.

"How...how do you know?" she whispered. Kuro turned away; somehow, he couldn't seem to say it; he wouldn't be able to stand the look in her eyes.

"She's dead." He could hear Sara crying behind him, but he couldn't turn around. He couldn't bear to look at her; he knew that, from now on, all he'd see was his beloved Amelia.

"No," Sara said suddenly. "No, she can't be dead! I was told...I was told that she'd left on a boat with Captain Kuro! That man is with her and they're going to come back here!"

"They aren't," Kuro whispered. "You were wrong; I don't know Captain Kuro...I can't save you from him." He slid on his gloves and turned around to face her, sadness in his eyes.

"I am him."

Sara didn't scream or gasp, or even explode in anger; she merely continued to cry and fell into Kuro, gripping his shirt tightly. Kuro wrapped his arms around her carefully, making sure not to hurt her with his claws, and cried with her.

"You're not him," she said suddenly without looking up. "You're not him anymore."

"I can't change who I was," Kuro said, though not directly to her. "My past is set in stone."

"But your future isn't," she answered and looked up at him. "You're not Captain Kuro anymore; you're no longer that horrible villain." Kuro looked down at her; somehow, despite everything he'd thought...

This one person had freed him. He was no longer tied to the darkness that was Captain Kuro. He hugged her tighter, letting his hands slide out of the cat claws, which fell to the floor with a small clang.

They clung to each other as night settled across the room, the moonlight streaming in upon them softly.

The next morning before dawn, Kuro had packed his things, including the gloves. He couldn't stay; the place would only bring misery. He'd almost made it to the front entrance and reached for the doorknob; but, something stopped him.

'I can't stay,' he told himself again. 'She'll only bring back horrible memories.'

They're not horrible, are they? the voice in his head said. They're painful; they link you to darker things. He ignored the voice and reached for the doorknob again.

"Going somewhere?"

Kuro turned around to see Sara, standing in the doorway in her nightdress. Her arms were folded tightly.

"You can't run away, Kuro," she said darkly. "You can't run away from everything."

"I'm not running away," he lied. She came closer and he noticed that she had something in her hands.

"I won't stop you," she said and uncrossed her arms to reveal a very old piece of parchment in her hand. "But, I don't want you to live in regret." She handed him the paper.

"What's this?" Kuro asked, looking at the paper curiously.

"It's the deed to my grandparent's house," she replied. "It's only about a day's worth of sailing from here...directly south." She gave him a hug, dodging the items in his hands. "Take care of yourself."

Kuro smiled sadly at her. "Thank you...take care of yourself, too." He placed the deed in the bag he was carrying and left the mansion, holding back the tears of joy and grief in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Miss Sara?" the servant asked Sara; she was sitting on the wooden porch on the front of the house.

"I forgot...to give him the letters," she said slowly, staring at the road.

"That reminds me," the servant said suddenly, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a letter. "This arrived last night from your cousin."

"Oh?" Sara took the letter and read through it carefully; she gasped and dropped the letter. "I need to write her a reply quickly, before it's too late!" She dashed into the house, the letter clutched in her hand, leaving her servant on the porch, quite perplexed.

Kuro sighed from the bow of the ship; he hadn't caught sight of the mansion yet. The sea air wrapped around him thickly, even though it was late in the afternoon.

"She didn't have to do that for me," Kuro said to himself, remembering the deed in the bag. "But, I'll finally be able to live in peace." He grinned, shoving out any sad thoughts he had, and continued his way south.

9 - Chapter 9

No life lives forever.

So, we each strive to leave our own mark on the people and places around us, whether positively or negatively.

But, without even knowing it, we have already left a piece of ourselves behind. People will remember us long after we're dead...

Even after those we know forget us themselves.

"Ah, there it is!"

Kuro grinned as the small island, graced with but one large manor surrounded by a forest of large trees, appeared on the sun-stricken horizon; he'd slept through a large part of the night sailing. Now, as the sun rose and flashed off his glasses, he finally felt as if everything would turn out all right.

And, for almost twenty long, peaceful years, it certainly felt that way. Thankful for the nonperishable food that was stored so meticulously within the mansion, he had no reason to ever set sail again; the place was close to self-sustaining. The library within the manor became one of his favorite spots, both because of the books and the soothing fireplace surrounded by soft, warm chairs. He could spend all his evenings in that room, whiling away the hours completely entranced within these fabulous books.

And yet, a dark sort of worry hung in the back of his head. Though he had this newfound, but limited, wealth, still, he did not feel as if he had complete peace of mind. There was still three people that knew where he was; three people that could easily destroy this calm world in which he now found himself.

He tried hard not to dwell on such worries.

Also, something else had lingered in his mind; not long after he'd settled in, a piece of driftwood carrying a black cat washed up on the shore. It was the same black cat that Kuro had known as a child; how it had come across him again was a mystery, though one he wasn't anxious to explore.

Still, his life on the tiny island was comfortable; he could finally relax...until one evening...

Outside, the rain continued to pour down upon the island, creating a soothing sort of sound while Kuro sat in one of the red velvet chairs around the roaring fireplace. In his hands was an old, seemingly unused book; he'd been reading it every night for the past few days. The black cat was curled up on the armrest of the chair, breathing heavily and looking at Kuro intently.

"It's a gloomy night, isn't it?" Kuro said to the cat, setting down the book. The cat mewed very softly and its eyelids drooped slowly. Kuro gave a very small smile to the cat and picked the book up again; the cat moved to the back of the chair to look over Kuro's shoulder at the print. As the two began to envelop themselves within the book, a loud creak echoed through the room.

'The front door,' Kuro thought to himself; the chair he was sitting in was facing away from the door of the library; however, he didn't get up to investigate. Though the front door did creak when opened, the wind that had been joining the rain was probably causing the sound. He once again attempted to bury himself in the book.

He didn't hear the library door open or see the aging figures step in, carrying small pistols; but, the cat did. It looked around and hissed at one of the two figures.

"Kuro," a man said loudly. "we found you."

Kuro set down the book and stood, not turning to look at them. "What do you two want?"

They stood silent and raised their pistols, aiming at Kuro's head. "We want to kill you."

"Now, why would you two want to do that?" Kuro asked lightly, as if it was all just a joke. "We're friends, remember?"

"We're not anymore!" the man shouted, preparing to fire. "You abandoned me! You left me for dead!"

"And I won't forgive you for what you did to Nagase!" the woman yelled furiously, was preparing to fire.

Kuro shift his gaze to the woman from the reflection of the window, who lowered her pistol at her side as she lowered her head as well. Kuro smirked as he adjusted his glasses, "You don't want to die, but you don't know how to take a life. Am I right, Nagasaki?"

"No," she looks up at him with tear-stained eyes, "I can't take a life of a friend."

Both Kuro and the man were in shock and a tear trickled down Nagasaki's cheek. She wailed, "I can't afford to lose someone else that is precious me."

"Else...?" the man thought as he looked at her.

"Why?" Kuro asked.

Nagasaki smiled at him, "Because if something is precious to me, I'll protect it with all the strength I've got. Even at the risk of my own life." Then she set the pistol at the table next to her and continued, "I'm not going to kill you, Kuro."-turns her head to the man-"I'm sorry."

Kuro understood. "You were going to die anyway, old friend," Kuro hissed and turned around. "You were going to die anyway, Django."

Django stumbled a bit, the gun sliding slightly in his hand. "What...what are you saying!?"

Kuro grimaced and felt sorrow cover his face. "It was as I said...none who knew my true identity could live. I killed all of those men." He looked up, trying to hide the sadness on his face and in the eyes that rested behind his glasses but knew Nagasaki saw it. "But, I'm sure that some escaped; some of them lived."

"We lived," Django spat, raising the pistol again. "Nagase and I suffered because of you!"

"I, myself, had as well." Nagasaki added, with sorrow no longer had control but anger instead, "I understand you're upset about losing your mother and Amelia. However, you can't take it out on the innocent lives."

A silence fell across the three, the years of pain seeming to show more prominently on them. Kuro broke the silence. "How did you two find me, anyway?"

"We interrogated people," Django replied quickly. "They told us of a cursed island and how an aging servant had taken up residence on the island."

"I see," Kuro mused, closing his eyes and bringing his hand to his face. Django and Nagasaki had no clue what was going on in Kuro's head...the sinister feeling of betrayal that was slowly creeping its way into Kuro's mind. "So, perhaps she did not keep her vow."

Django ignored this. "But, that doesn't matter." His finger was barely a thread's width from the trigger.

"All that matters is that you suffer the way I suffered."

Suddenly, the gun was missing from Django's hand and he was flat on his back, five long blades pointed at his throat. Kuro stood over him, malice flickering in his eyes.

"You don't know how I've suffered, Django!" Kuro hissed, moving the blades closer to Django's throat so that the cold steel rested on his flesh. "You can't fathom the pain and sorrow I've felt."

Django whimpered slightly and tried to move; his body seemed frozen on that spot with those evil blades ready to slice him to ribbons. "You...you wouldn't kill me, would you?" he stuttered.

Kuro looked at him, and then moved his other blades to Django's heart. "I have no reason to kill you...except...you threatened my life."

Django suddenly felt a swelling of anger. "You want us to die! You're no better than those Navy officials that killed your mother! You're as bad as them! You're as awful as those pirates!"

"Django..." Nagasaki said in awe as tears still trickled down her cheeks and looking at him.

If Django was going to say anything else, he never got the chance; in that very small instant, Kuro had thrust both sets of blades into their targets and withdrawn them quickly. Blood oozed out of the cuts and covered Django in red. Nagasaki covered her mouth as tears flowed down onto her hands and trembled uncontrollably as she saw one of her best friends lying dead.

That old man, who had once been one of Kuro's best friends and his first mate, lay dead on the carpet, bleeding profusely as Kuro stood limply over him. But, what Django had said had filled Kuro with such fury that, for a moment, everything else seemed to disappear.

The cat yowled from its spot on the chair; Kuro turned to look at it.

"He compared me to those men that slaughtered my parents," Kuro said dumbly to the cat. Nagasaki uncovered her mouth as she looked at him and said, "Kuro?" The cat yowled again then jumped to the floor and wrapped itself around Kuro's leg.

But, a disturbing thought entered Kuro's thoughts...

Was it true? "I--...", Kuro stuttered to Nagasaki, "I'd killed thousands of men in cold blood; all for revenge." He looked at her with a sad expression and asked her, "Was it as horrible as what those men had done to my mother?"

"What's done, is done. There's no point in regretting something that already happened and cannot be changed." He looked away as he sighed and she continued, "Okay, so... you made a mistake over the past twenty years. Beating yourself up isn't going to fix anything, Kuro."

She, soon, looked at the remains of Django and said, "What would we do with his body?"

"Bury it. I'll be right back."

She noded her head once again and he left outside.

The previous thought consumed every moment of Kuro's life as he buried Django's body in the vast sea, a great distance from the island.

But, now he knew; there was nothing left. There was no one that cared for him anymore; he had no reason to live.

No reason to live any longer...

Soon he got back inside and back into the library where Nagasaki was.

Nagasaki saw the sadness in his eyes. As Kuro walked past her, she grabbed his shoulder and he said solemnly, "Now I know, that there's nothing left."

"What are you--?"

"There's no one that cares for me anymore, I have no reason to live. No reason to live any longer..."

"KURO, DON'T YOU DARE TALK ABOUT DYING!!!!!"

"There's--" His sentence was cut short when he turned his head and saw the expression on Nagasaki's face.

"Please, Kuro, don't talk about dying..." Suddenly, she wrapped her arms around his stomach, her head on his shoulder, and wailed, "Please, Kuro, don't go... don't go...don't go..."

Before he had the chance to speak, he noticed that she was clutching on to his jacket as she sobbed, "You're not alone, Kuro. I care about you." He noticed the sorrow that she was going through from the incident; she lost her brothers (Daddy Masterson & Smoker), her three best friends (Django, Moru, & Tashigi), her niece (Carol Masterson), her husband (Alba Samaru), and her daughter (Alba Nagase). She was alone just like him, and she couldn't afford to lose any one else that was precious to her, especially him. They, both, had two things in common; they fight to stay alive, and they were both alive. Soon, she wailed as she clutched his jacket tighter, "I'm not going to lose you. Not again, Kuro. You're the only person I have left in my life." He took his gloves off, hugged Nagasaki, and hummed the same lullaby that she hummed to him when he lost his mother. When Nagasaki calmed down, he stood her up. "Nagasaki..." She looked at him, and took two steps back to give him space. He looked at her with sorrow in his eyes, yet a smile appeared on his face and continued, "Your daughter was just like you;

the first time I met her, I noticed that she pushes herself and struggles in battles, no matter what condition she was in. So, one day, I asked her, 'Why are you so headstrong and persistent?' She answered, 'Because my mom told me never give up, never surrender. That became my motto.' I was appalled by her words. Your daughter was truly a remarkable child...and so were you."

"She told me that you spared and saved her life several times." She hesitated before she asked, "Why?"

"Because she reminded me of you; strong-wielded, willful. Also, she saved my life as well. She's just like you, each and every step of the way. You taught her well during those past twenty years." Kuro said as his smile was still on his face. Nagasaki was appalled of what he said and tears trickled down her cheeks. "I have another question, Nagasaki; during those years of our friendship, why were you over protective?"

Nagasaki smiled, "I care too much about you, Kuro. You were like the family I never had. I'd always looked up to you. And I'm still incredibly mad for what you did to Nagase."

"I don't blame you, Nagasaki."

"But it doesn't mean I won't forgive you. Because if I don't, I might lose you again."

Kuro was shocked by her words. "Listen, about what happen the first time we went to the Kazakori Village, I'm sorry for what I did to you. I never wanted any of that to happen."

Nagasaki smiled, "You're forgiven, Kuro."

"I can take you to her. I can take you to Nagase," he said solemnly while tears came down her cheeks, "However... the cost is your life. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything, for what I did you, your family, our friend," He paused for a moment and continued, "and even Nagase."

"Speaking of her," She peered through her bag until she found what she was looking for; a poem.

"When I told her about you, she wrote this about you. I asked her why she wrote it to you. She said, 'Because, despite of everything, I still believe that people are really good from heart.' Anyway, she wanted me to deliver it to you, but I didn't get the chance to do it." She handed the poem to him. Soon, she took two steps back and put her arms out.

"Do what you need to do, Kuro," She smiled as tears trickled down her cheeks, "my... my best friend."

He looked at her puzzled and appalled. He hesitated then said, "Why do you want me to end your life?" She looked down, "Leukemia..."

"What? Why--"

"There's no cure; there couldn't be a treatment that could get rid of this wretched leukemia for good."

She looked up at him, despite the sadness, she smiled, and said, "We're just alike, Kuro."

He looked at her, appalled once again, he looked down, mulled over the concept, looked up at her, and smiled, "Alright."

Before he did what he needed to, Nagasaki said, "Kuro, wait!" Unexpectedly, she hugged him, as her last request. "Thank-you, Kuro, for everything." She smiled as tears trickled down on to his jacket. He returned the hug and the tears came down his cheeks. After they hugged, Nagasaki removed one of his gloves, removed her favorite necklace, placed it in his hands, and then she said as they hugged one last time, "Kuro, promise me you'll take good care of it."

"I promise."

Kuro put her necklace in his pocket and put his glove back on as Nagasaki moved two steps back. Tears went down his cheeks when she smiled as tears trickled down her cheeks and said her last words to him, "You were an unlucky black cat lost in the world...and was lucky enough to find those who cared for you. Because of this, you were, soon, born away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance..." And then, with one swift movement, Kuro gashed Nagasaki's torso, leaving him to tears as the corps fell.

He, now, knew that he was alone once again...

He wiped the tears from his eyes and then buried Nagasaki's body in the vast sea, a great distance from the island, along with Django's body. "Nagase, I hope you can forgive me." Suddenly, Nagase's spirit appeared, held his hand as she smiled, and then he heard her say, "I already have." But when he looked down next to him, Nagase's spirit was gone. "May they all rest in peace..." Kuro said solemnly. Suddenly, he noticed the poem that Nagasaki gave to him. He took his gloves off, reached in his pocket, found the poem, unfold it, and read,

Guardian Angel
By: Alba Nagase

You're not alone, I'm always there,
Don't worry you're in my prayer.
I will help you find your Angel Wings,
I will help you find the Angels when they sing.

You can undo the sinful things you did, it's not too late.
Take your time, the world can wait.
No matter what road you choose, I'll be there by your side,
I'm your Guardian Angel, your conscience, your friend, your guide.

Soon, Kuro let out a smile and went back inside the manor.

"Hey, what's that?" Luffy called from the bow of the ship. He pointed at a tiny island directly in their sailing path.

"I don't know," Nami answered from the kitchen. "It's not marked on the map...it must be a private island."

"Who would have a private island this far out in the ocean?" Sanji asked as he drew himself away from his cooking to peer over Nami's shoulder. "Where would you get food?"

"It's probably full of food that won't spoil," Nami said thoughtfully. "We should probably stop there." She yelled the new directions to the person steering the ship while Luffy grinned widely at the prospect of a new island.

"What could they want?" Kuro wondered as he stood by the window, the sunlight streaming into the room. In the distance, he could see a large ship sailing toward his island.

Kuro walked away from the window and sighed. He still could not purge himself of that night...though it had only been a few weeks ago. It stuck with him as nothing ever had. Every night...those last words... You're the same as them!

You were an unlucky black cat lost in the world...and lucky enough to find those who cared for you. Because of this, you was, soon, born away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance...

"Wow!"

Luffy had finally hit land and fell onto the warm sand, laughing to himself.

"Get up, you lazy bum!" Nami laughed as she and Zoro jumped off the ship. "Let's see if anyone lives here!" She held out a hand to pull Luffy to his feet.

Kuro returned to the window; the black cat followed him and stood by the window. The sight of the three people at the shore made him stumble back in shock.

"No..." Kuro said softly to himself and pushed up his glasses. "It...it can't be them." For a moment, Kuro considered hiding; perhaps even gathering his things and leaving the island...but, then, a small, dark thought entered his head.

This could be your escape, the voice said. This could be your chance to leave this wretched planet... And return to those who love you...

"This place looks abandoned," Zoro said, folding his arms.

"Come on, we have to at least look around!" Luffy called far ahead. "Besides, I found the entrance to the house!" Zoro and Nami caught up with Luffy, who had stopped. "It looks like someone does live here!"

"But, who would live in a place like this?" Nami wondered darkly. However, her question was quickly answered by the slam of a door.

Kuro stepped down from the porch and stood in the path of Luffy and the others.

"How...how did you get here?" Luffy asked, stunned. "You used to live with that old woman!"

"I couldn't stay," Kuro said. "Besides, it's none of your business."

"Fine," Nami said, stepping forward, "but could you at least give us some food?"

"No," Kuro said, folding his arms. "I won't just give it to you. You have to do something for me."

"What do we have to do?" Zoro asked angrily.

Kuro uncrossed his arms and slowly turned his gaze to the sky. "You...you have to kill me." The others looked shocked for a moment; Luffy recovered first.

"We won't do that," he said forcefully.

"Then," Kuro sighed and turning his gaze to Luffy, "you will not receive any food."

A long silence followed this as Luffy and Kuro looked at each other; Kuro continued to push the awful thoughts out of his head...if he succeeded, he could heal himself of all the evil that surrounded him. The wind began to blow through the trees, echoing around them.

"Fight me," Luffy finally said. "Fight me to the death." He began to stretch his arms and grinned. "If I win, we get all the food."

Kuro, for a moment, looked stunned; it vanished as he looked down and smiled. "Alright, then." He drew his claws as if no time had passed and pushed up his glasses. "But, we must battle on the wooden deck."

Luffy agreed and followed Kuro up the path. No one spoke as they stepped onto the deck, Nami and Zoro taking seats near the edges. Kuro and Luffy remained standing.

"Tell me something, Kuro," Luffy said as he raced at Kuro.

"What?" It was amazing; even in his age, Kuro could still move incredibly fast; but, he knew that Luffy was younger; stronger...he wouldn't last long.

"Why do you want me to kill you?" They continued to fight even as they talked; but Kuro was slowly tiring; he knew that it wouldn't last long...

"I don't have anything else to live for," Kuro said shakily.

"What do you mean?" Luffy asked incredulously. "What about your dreams?"

"They died," Kuro stated flatly. He couldn't block one of Luffy's swings and felt the blood pour from the cut on his head. "Everything did."

"What about your family!?" Luffy was fighting like a madman; something had infuriated him. "Don't you care about them at all!?" He landed another hit on Kuro, who fell to the ground.

Kuro pushed himself up with his knee; part of his face was covered in blood. A sort of dark joy glittered in his eyes as he pushed up his glasses. "They're all dead, Luffy. Every last one of them...they've been dead for almost fifty years." A cold moment swept through all of them; Nami shrieked softly and Zoro almost toppled over in shock.

“How will your death do any good?” Luffy asked as Kuro stood up. He threw another punch and Kuro was on his knees again. “How would that help your family? How would it help you!?” Luffy threw punches wildly, determined to attack him, to hurt him for giving up...again.

Kuro felt as if he couldn't breathe; he was covered in blood and his glasses were askew. He pushed them up and smiled sadly at Luffy, who was huffing angrily.

“I'll be able to see Amelia again...”

One final attack to his face...and Kuro fell, bloody and broken, to the deck. He closed his eyes and...and it was almost as if he could hear her calling his name...calling to him...

“Klahadore!”

Calling him to her...

“Klahadore!” Kaya called as she ran up the dark path to the house. “Kuro!” Behind her, Merry was dashing at top speed just to keep up with her. But, she was stopped in the path by Zoro.

“You...you can't go up there,” Zoro said, shaking slightly.

“Why not?” Kaya said defiantly. “Out of my way; I have to see Klahadore!”

“Kuro...can't be seen,” Zoro said sadly. But, Kaya pushed past him and didn't hear him say the next few words.

“He's dead.”

But, she didn't need to; before she even reached the top of the deck, she saw Luffy standing over someone lying on the wooden deck. Even from there, she could tell that it was Kuro.

“No...Klahadore!” Kaya cried, beginning to burst into tears. Luffy and Nami turned to look at her, shocked. Kaya dashed up to the deck and stared upon the blood-soaked man lying spread-eagled on the wood.

“How did you get here?” Nami asked wildly.

“A letter...but that doesn't matter!” Kaya cried dismissively. She fell to her knees; not even medical help could save him. “Klahadore...Kuro...you can't be dead!” She rested her head on his and began to sob...he just couldn't be gone...not now...“You just can't be dead...Kuro...”

That evening, Luffy and his crew buried Kuro at sea, just beyond the shore...but, at Kaya's request, they had removed the cat claws first.

“How did you find him?” Nami asked again from the side of the ship, listening to the breeze.

“I received a letter...from a long-lost cousin...” Kaya said softly; she was visiting Luffy's ship for the moment. “She wrote back to me and told me that Kuro had moved here...but, I couldn't get off the island...I couldn't leave my patients to search for him...until about two weeks ago.”

“But why now?” Usopp had joined them on the side of the ship. “Why now, when he'd died?”

“I don't know,” Kaya said, staring at the sun. “Maybe it was fate.” She heard Luffy and Zoro move behind them.

“Maybe,” Zoro mused. “Or, perhaps it was something else...something that we can't understand.”

“Maybe,” Luffy agreed. “Kaya, why did you want us to take his gloves off?”

Kaya continued to stare at the sun. “My cousin told me that he didn't want to belong to the title of Captain anymore...but he felt that he couldn't escape...this way, he will pass on as Kuro...not as a pirate captain.”

“Still,” Zoro said, crossing his arms, “I think we should keep this quiet.”

“Yes,” Usopp agreed. “We can't tell anyone about this.”

Soon, they all felt the rush of the cool breeze, but not only that; they heard a voice from behind them say, “Kaya, Straw-Hat Pirates!” All five of them (Usopp, Zoro, Nami, Kaya, and Luffy) recognized that voice. When they turned around, they saw Nagase's spirit smiling at them. “Nagase!” Kaya shouted

gladly as she carefully ran down from the ship to rejoice of her best friend. They hugged each other and she sobbed. Then Kaya was terribly upset when Nagase said, "I have to cross over." As soon as Kaya pulled away she said in sadness, "What?"

"I'm so, so sorry, Kaya. I really am, but I have to cross over."

As much as it pained Kaya, she understood. Before, Nagase said her good-byes to everyone, she, incidentally, said a moving speech as a smile appeared,

"I'm grateful to have met all of you. No one could have ask better friends like all of you, I'll never forget what you all have done for me. I'm truly grateful to be called your best friend. We may be gone, but we shall not be forgotten. If you have dreams or people that are precious to you, protect them with all the strength you've got. Even at the risk of your own life, or else they'll be nothing but bitter ashes."

Everyone cried from Nagase's speech. She continued starting with Kaya, "Kaya," she looks at her, "promise me you'll stay strong?"

"Y-yes, I promise." Kaya wailed as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Sanji, Zoro, try not to kill each other." Nagase laughed. Everyone chuckled. Next, she shift her gaze to Zoro, "Zoro, I hope you get the title of the world's greatest swordsman."

"Thank-you, Nagase." Zoro smiled.

Next, she shift her gaze to Luffy, "Luffy, I'm looking forward to be seeing you as King of the Pirates."

Luffy nodded his head. Next, she shift her gaze at Nami. "Keep an eye on those four. Especially Usopp."

"Always do." Nami laughed. So did Nagase. Next, to Tricia. "Tricia, this is for you." Nagase tossed up a bottle that had a letter in it and Tricia caught it. She shift her gaze from the bottle to Nagase who said, "It's from Mazuharo." After she said that, a tear trickled down Tricia's face and, unexpectedly, she ran to Nagase and hugged her with the bottle in her hand as she cried, "Thank-you, Nagase." Tricia let go of her and then, before she got back on the ship, Nagase said, "Hey, Tricia!" –she turned to Nagase- "I hope you find Mazuharo. I promise you that." "Thank you." Tricia smiled. Finally, Nagase shifted her gaze at Usopp. "Usopp, come here." And he did so. As soon as Usopp was near her, she hugged him and said with a choked up voice as tears fell down, "Good-bye, Usopp. I hope you'll become the brave warrior of the sea. I'm looking forward to it." Then it was time for her to cross over, but before she did, she turned and asked, "Will you keep it a secret? About Kuro?" As Kuro appeared, Luffy smiled and said, "Yes, we'll keep it as a secret."

Kuro smiled. 'Thank-you, Straw-Hat Pirates and Miss Kaya.'

Then Nagase glowed and said without moving her lips, "Thanks, everyone, for everything. Remember, Never give up, never surrender and if something is precious you, protect it with all the strength you've got, even at the risk of your own life." Soon, she disappeared and Luffy thought as he smiled, 'We won't tell anyone, Kuro. We promise.'

And, no one did. They all kept their vow of silence to each other and left the memory of this man in their minds; but, no one would ever hear of it...and, eventually, the memory faded and was forgotten. They continued on their way; Sara was later informed of Kuro's death, and though she pined for him, she felt that, in death, he had been freed...and so had she. The home was left empty for ages; the curses of legend grew...

Kuro's black cat continued to live in the house, living off whatever it could; but, eventually, it too passed on; no one knows what has happened to it.

So was the tale of Kuro, so alone, so young in life; guided by darkness and saved by it as well. The five ladies; Kaya, Sara, Nagasaki, Nagase, and Amelia; they all affected Kuro through their love. Though many would remember Kuro as a great terror and an intelligent, silent killer, there would be the few that would hold him dear to their hearts as a lone, little boy, lost in a world that cared nothing for him.

An unlucky black cat, lost in the world...and lucky enough to find those who cared for him.
[Nagase, Nagasaki, Amelia, Kaya, and Sara voice over]: “He was, soon, born away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance...”