Wherever You Are

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Summary

Radiant Garden was your home, your best friends were Lea and Isa, and every day was an adventure of it's own. Then, the darkness came and tore you all apart.
Wait, who are you again?
What's your name?
You were looking for someone, right?
... What were their names...?
Or, in order to work within KH lore and not obliterate canon, you lost your memory when you lost your home. Now you traverse the worlds looking for people you're missing.

Notes

I'm gonna put this here - Do NOT read unless you've played KH3 or at least have read the secret reports! Earlier chapters don't touch on it much but later down the line there will be so so so much spoilers.
ALSO HEY, if you don't want to look at a bunch of Y/Ns you can get this chrome
extension and change them to your name or your oc's name.
https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/interactivefics/pcpjpdomcbnlkbghmchnjgeeipdlonli?hl=en

I'm basically writing this as I go along so we'll see how long this takes.
Flowers brushed against your shins in the breeze. The clouds above rolled endlessly onward, forever.

“Hey, Lea.”

He flinched in surprise, then turned to you. For a moment, he stared at you in confusion, then that familiar, bright smile split across his face. You felt your own reflect it.

“Y/N!” He laughed, stepping in closer. “Don’t scare me like that! What if I grabbed my frisbees thinking you were some kind of – “ His words stopped short, his smile fell. Yellow and purple and black crept into his mind. Monster.

You smiled, and he felt again at ease. “Sorry about that.”

A blush crept up his neck, but he looked away. “Don’t be, I guess I was just daydreaming again.”

You nodded, but otherwise didn’t respond. Over the horizon the sky began to bleed the first golds and reds of sunset. Your time was running short.

Watching the sunset, you felt a tear roll down your cheek. “Do you remember, Lea? The first time we met?”

His brows knit, then he scoffed. “Of course, I got it memorized!” He grinned at the flowers. “We met right here in the garden. I, uh,” He flushed, scratching the back of his head. “hit you with my frisbee.” When he caught your eyes, his easy smile returned. “How could I ever forget?”

Radiant Garden was in the full bloom of Spring. You were nine years old, scribbling away at your notebook in the flowers. You liked it here, in the sun, hidden in the petals where no one would care to look for you. It was nice to temporarily forget and be temporarily forgotten.

When you lifted your pencil, you were suddenly aware of shouts and happy laughter nearby. Looking up at the sky, alarm rang through you when you noticed the sun was already across the sky. Oh no! You scrambled for your notebook and pencils and got to your feet. Right in time for a flash of red to appear in your peripheral and knock you off your feet.

You shrieked as you hit the soft ground. Pain bloomed across the side of your head and tears were already rolling down your cheeks.

“Oh no!”

“Watch it, Lea!”

You opened your eyes and were met with two boys, both in different states of panic. “Are you okay?” One asked, with bright red hair and wearing an orange tank top.

Your head was throbbing, but you tried to snifflle back your tears. “I – I think so…”

The other boy, shorter than the first one and with blue hair pouted. “C’mon, help them up with me.”
“Oh, right.” He said, and they both took an arm and helped you back on your feet.

Before Red could say anything, Blue interrupted. “Sorry about my friend.” He said. “He can be
dumb, sometimes.”

Instead of answering, Red blew a raspberry at him, then turned back to you with concern. “I’m
sorry about hitting you, I swear I didn’t know you were there.” He took in your red eyes and little
hiccups and grimaced. “Here, let me… um,” He gestured you forward.

Hesitantly, you bent your neck and let him comb through your hair. His fingers pressed against the
spot and you hissed. He grimaced sympathetically. “You’ve got a bump, but you’re not bleeding.”

“That’s good.” Blue said. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

When Red drew back, you nodded again slowly, unable to meet their eyes. The two boys shared a
glance, then nodded.

“My name’s Lea,” Red said, catching your eye with a smile, “got it memorized?”

“And I’m Isa.” Blue added. “What’s yours?”

“Y/N…” You murmured shyly.

Both boys grinned. “It’s nice to meetcha, Y/N!” Lea grinned. “Do you go to the elementary school
here?”

You nodded, slowly relaxing, though your head still hurt a ton.

“I thought I recognized you.” He said.

Isa nodded. “You’re a fourth grader, right?” You nodded again. “Just a year behind us, then.”

Lea knelt down and picked up his frisbee and your notebook. “Here.”

You gently took the notebook back, and finally met his eyes with a smile of your own. “Thank
you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He said, though his proud posture said otherwise. “Hey, Isa and I were just
about to get some ice cream. Why don’t you come with us? Since we hit your head and all.”

“You hit their head.” Isa corrected him, then to you. “It’ll be our treat.”

Though the sun told you to hurry home, you couldn’t bring yourself to pay it any attention. Even
your head was only mildly irritating you. Surely, a little while longer wouldn’t be bad, especially
when ice cream was involved. “Yes, please!”

The two boys grinned, and you fell in step beside Lea. “What kind of ice cream are we getting?”
You asked.

“Ever had sea-salt before?” Lea asked, only to laugh at the face you made. “Aw, c’mon. I know it
sounds weird, but give it a try. You’ll like it!”

Doubtful, you glanced at Isa. He saw your eye and shrugged, then nodded with a small grin. Well,
it’s not like you could just pass up free ice cream. You were nine and had no money.

Soon enough you three were back at the garden, watching the sun drift closer to the horizon.
Despite your reservations, the color won you over and you took a nibble. Lea and Isa watched your face as you took your first taste.

“Sooolo?” Lea asked, “What do you think?”

You swallowed. “It’s salty, but sweet.” After a moment, you took another bite and smiled. “I like it! Thanks.”

Flowers brushed against your ankles in the breeze. The clouds above rolled endlessly onward, forever, towards the red horizon. A bitter wind picked up, blowing your hair in your face. The sky was dimming, growing dark.

“You’ve always been there for me.” You said, not meeting his eyes, afraid of what you might see. “Thank you.”

He glanced at you from the corner of his eye, “Yeah, that’s what friends are for, y’know?” He poked your shoulder. “And you’ve been there for me plenty of times, too. Thanks for that.”

You were eleven, and Lea was a boy, not a girl.

“Got it memorized?” He whispered in the dead of night. The two of you laid awake in his bed, facing each other. A sleep-over that wasn’t quite over yet. The starlight drifting in from the window illuminated his outline as he watched your face, his eyes wet.

You tucked the blankets closer to your chin as you thought. “Is that why your mom was okay with me staying in your room?”

His shoulder shook with a dry chuckle. “Yeah, she figures she’s got nothing to worry about.” He rolled his eyes. “But that’s okay, it means I don’t have to sneak into the living room and wake you up.”

You huffed, “Yeah, except you’re okay with keeping me up here.”

“Oh, like you haven’t been asking me if stars have names and feelings for the past hour!”

A giggle tripped over your lips, only to set him off too. Movement in the bedroom next to his made you both stop. For a while, there was silence, and you felt your eyes go heavy.

“You’re not bothered by it?”

“Hmm?” You opened your eyes. “About – no, not at all.” You lifted your head off the pillow. “You’re Lea, and you’re a boy.” You booped his nose. “I love you, you’re my best friend.”

His eyes went wide and he hid his face into his pillow, mumbling something back. He sighed, then peeked at you with a smile in his eyes. “Thanks, Y/N.” He whispered. “You’re my best friend, too.”

You put your head back on your pillow and felt the pull of sleep. “G’dnight.” You sighed.

He breathed. “Good night.”
“Lea?” You whispered.

He hummed, only to gasp when he saw the tears rolling steadily down your face. He closed the distance between you. “Hey, what’s wrong?” He asked, pushing your hair out of your face.

Your heart was fluttering weakly behind your ribs, stubbornly struggling onward. You wrapped your arms around yourself, “I’m scared.” You began to sob. “It’s cold, and it’s dark, and I don’t want to be alone.”

You were thirteen when the monsters started appearing. And still, you found yourself alone in the garden, scribbling among the flowers. Lea and Isa would probably be strolling through there at some point, but for the time being you needed some space.

No matter what you did, this picture just wouldn’t come out the way you wanted it to. You roughly pushed your notebook and pencils away, glowering unhappily. You didn’t like being a teenager, awkward and lumpy in weird places, stuck with weird thoughts at bad times.

*I look like a half-baked cookie.* You thought miserably, putting your chin on your hands. A half-baked oatmeal raisin cookie.

The light caught the petals of a flower in front of you. Pearly red, like a living sunburst. You sighed wistfully as you gently brushed your finger across the petals.

Your color’s green, always has been, but red was beginning to become a favorite.

“Excuse me?”

You jumped out of your thoughts and faced an old woman coming towards you. Her gnarled hands clutched at her shawl and her face was lined with worry. “Have you seen a little girl around here?”

“Huh?” You asked, bracing yourself on your arms. “No? What’s going on?”

The old woman trembled, swiveling her head this way and that. “It’s my granddaughter, I’ve lost her! And with these monsters appearing around the town – ”, she paled, “I have to find her.”

You got up so fast you almost fell down. “I’ll help.” You said. “Where haven’t you looked? What does she look like?”

She took a deep breath, a wobbly smile pressing against her cheeks. “She’s only four years old, with red hair and she was wearing a white and purple dress.” She hurriedly wiped her eyes, “I don’t believe I’ve checked near the castle yet.”

“Then that’s where I’ll look.” You said, “I’ll go on ahead. Be careful, ma’am.”

“And the same to you!” She sniffed. “Thank you.”

You nodded, then dashed out of the garden towards the castle. “Hellooo?” You shouted. “Little girl? Your gramma’s looking for you!” But the grounds were mostly empty. Figures, since most everyone was scared of the weird monsters. *Maybe she went into the castle?* You wondered, jogging up the steps. *Someone might’ve seen her and took her inside to keep her safe.* Then, a
shout pierced the afternoon.

“That was from – “ You gasped and leapt up the last steps.

A little girl was huddled against the wall, and it was obvious why. One of those things – sharp and rat faced – was bearing down on her.

“NO!” You screamed, then threw yourself forward. You skinned your knees on the brick as you slid in between the girl and the creature. You closed your eyes, waiting for the pain, only for a whistle of air to hit your ears and nothing else.

“Are you okay?”

You opened your eyes and slowly turned around. A strange woman was standing over your, holding an even stranger weapon. The monster was gone.

You nodded shakily, then checked on the girl. “You?” She nodded, just as shocked.

Then, you felt a rush of foul air on your face. You grabbed the girl around the middle and vaulted behind the woman. You felt a slash of pain on your back, but nothing more as more of those creatures squirm out of the bricks like daisies.

You let go of the girl and she touched the weapon in the stranger’s hand. You heard her mumble something, but you were too concerned about the monsters to pay much attention to it. Just as another one leapt to attack, someone crashed into it and it was gone in a cloud of dust.

With the immediate threat gone for the moment, she turned to you. “You both need to get someplace safe. Take her and run.”

You weren’t one to waste time on that. You tucked the girl against you and ran towards the flowers. Making sure the coast was clear, you put the girl between you and a tree. Your heart beat hard and fast against your ribs, the pound of adrenaline coursed through you.

Later, you ran into Isa and Lea, both looking very pleased.

“Hey!” Lea waved.

“We were just about to go looking for you.” Isa said when the three of you finally grouped up.

“And you are not going to believe what kind of weird guy we met.” Lea continued, then took in the dirt smudges and the slash on your back. “Woah, what happened?”

Isa pulled you around to get a better look at your back. It didn’t hurt anymore, the woman, Aqua had healed it, but your shirt was still ruined. “Are you okay?”

You nodded at them over your shoulder. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Lea ran around you to get a look at your face, eyeing you critically. “What happened? Did those monsters get you?”

You winked. “It’s a secret.”

He blinked, “What, you can’t tell us?”

“It’s a secret, Lea. That’s usually what that means.”
“But Y/N - !”

“Nope, not telling.”

“C’mon, you can tell us! We can keep a secret!”

“I promised, Lea. I can’t tell you.”

Finally, with a pout, he conceded. “Fine, alright.” But then he grinned. “Now c’mon. Race you guys to the garden!” and he took off.

You and Isa chuckled. He patted your arm with one last concerned stare. “Well, whatever happened, it’s good to see you’re okay.”

“Yeah, me too.” You grinned. “Thanks.”

“Last one there has to buy tomorrows ice cream!”

You and Isa glanced at each other one last time before racing after Lea. Your moment of melancholy was already long gone.

“Y/N…” He said, watching you crumple in on yourself. Then, he took your hands and held them close to his chest. “Then stay with me.”

You were fourteen, and there was a girl trapped in the castle.

The three of you stood panting behind a shrub, the moon high in the sky. The castle loomed behind you, making the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

“What in the hell?” Lea hissed, pressing close to you but never taking his eyes off the gate.

You shook your head. There was a girl in the castle, locked up and held in total darkness. There was no telling what they were doing to her in there. Your stomach flopped and you felt yourself heave as possibilities flooded your mind, terrible, awful possibilities.

Lea rubbed your back, though he didn’t look much better. His eyes were wide and his face was green. Isa, on the other hand, was on his hands and knees, trembling all over.

“What are we going to do?” Lea whispered, leaning over your and holding you, just as much for your sake as it was for his. “We can’t leave her in there.”

Before anyone could respond, someone opened the castle door. Everyone went stiff, eyes wide and breath caught. Then, you all dashed out of the bush and ran for your lives. No one stopped until you were in town.

You leaned against the brick wall of an alley, gasping for air. Lea and Isa were in similar states, sweaty and frightened. You couldn’t help but think that if you got caught, you’d all end up just like that sweet girl. Rotting, forgotten in a dungeon.

When you all began to breathe easier, Lea picked himself up and wiped his brow. “C’mon, let’s go
he said, patting Isa’s shoulder and nudging you forward. Neither of you hesitated as you followed him back to his house and snuck into his bedroom window.

Quickly, each of you went to your respective corners and changed into your pajamas in the dark, careful not to make much noise. Then, you and Isa quietly skedaddled back into the living room where you were supposed to be sleeping. Isa was just a bit faster than you, and you nearly jumped out of your skin when the other bedroom door opened.

“Y/N?” Lea’s father yawned. “What are you doing up?”

You shoved down your nervous laugh. “I’m sorry, sir, I was just going to the bathroom.”

You saw him reach up to scratch his chest as he nodded sleepily. “That’s what I thought.”

“Sorry again, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“S’okay, comes with the territory. Night, kid.”

“Good night, sir.”

To keep up with the lie, you hit the bathroom before returning to the couch. Isa was sleeping in the big fold out chair, but he was far from asleep. “Close call.” He murmured as you got underneath your blankets.

“Yeah.” You breathed, then sat back on the borrowed pillows. Yet, despite the exhaustion in your bones, your eyes wouldn’t stay closed. Every shadow loomed in the corners, a nightmare crept up on you with every blink. It felt like an eternity had passed, but when you checked the clock, only twenty minutes had gone by.

“I want to sleep in Lea’s room.” You whispered into the dark.

“Me too.” Isa whispered back.

Without a need for words, you both grabbed your pillows and extra blankets and quietly made your way to Lea’s room. Isa reached for the doorknob, only for it to swing open without him. Lea jumped a foot in the air when he saw the two of you shadowed in his doorway. The three of you stood there for a short second before he practically yanked you both inside and shut the door.

The three of you made quick work. Isa slept at the foot of the bed and you and Lea slept at the head on either side of him. Pillows and plushies were passed around and Lea opened the curtains to let in the moonlight. Finally, you were all tucked in and cozy.

“We should go back.” You whispered softly.

Isa piped up quietly from the foot of the bed. “Do you think we can save her?”

“We should try.” You answered, hands balling the blankets around you.

There was a moments silence, then you felt a warm hand slip into yours. “We’ll go back.” Lea said, his voice hard but his tone soft. “And we’ll figure out a way to save her.” His hand squeezed yours. “You’ll see.”

Only then did you finally breath easy. You fell asleep with his hand in yours.
You hiccupped in surprise, blinking away your tears to see his face. “What?”

You were going on fifteen and you were going to become an apprentice.

“I don’t know how I feel about this, guys.” You muttered, shivering in the shadow of the castle.

“It’s the only way to find out what happened to her.” Isa hissed back.

The two guards watched you walk up the last of the steps. They immediately recognized all of you and glowered. But before they could threaten to throw you all on your asses, Lea stepped in with his silver tongue at the ready.

“Hey, hey, we’re not here to break in.” He said with a disarming smile. “We’re actually looking to become apprentices to Ansem. Could you gentlemen perhaps show us the way?”

Aeleus and Dilan, you’ve been thrown out by them so much that you had to know their names by now, didn’t seem to buy it, but they did lower their weapons. That was more than you thought they would do, and thank god for that. Your back still shuddered in memory pains when you saw them.

They shared a look before Dilan squared you all up. “Fine, we’ll take you to Master Ansem, but you will be with us at all times. If not, then we’ll personally make sure you never step foot on these steps again.”

“Of course, thank you gentlemen.” He said, and waited for you and Isa before entering the doorway. The door swung shut behind you with a note of finality.

The next few weeks went by without much incident. But you still got knots in your stomach whenever you went to the castle. The only reason you could stomach it after what you saw of that poor girl was that Lea and Isa were with you, and that girl could be out there, lost. You had to find her and make sure she was safe.

You idly doodled on the margins of your notes as the teacher droned on. It was a mixed grade class, so you and the boys managed to get in together. Lea was watching you scribble, not even deigning to pay attention to the lesson. And hey, neither were you, but at least you were writing down what was on the board.

Knowing full well that what the teacher just erased was going to end up in the next test, you subtly tapped a bullet point. Lea flinched, then quickly turned to Isa’s desk to copy his immaculate notes instead of trying to decipher your chicken scratch. You giggled softly, that familiar warm ache blooming in your heart.

Movement at his desk caught your eye and you casually glanced in Lea’s direction. He was holding his pencil to the paper, but wasn’t writing anything down. Instead, he was staring at you, smiling in that soft, warm way that made you feel vulnerable and invincible all at once. He realized he was staring and quickly turned back to his notes, a blush creeping up his neck.

You followed suit and hurried to catch up before the teacher erased it all again. But, in the back of your mind, you hoped that smile was one he saved only for you.
With a gentle but persistent tug, he pulled you closer. “Stay with me, then. You won’t ever be alone, because I will always be with you.” He swallowed, but not once looked away. “I’ll keep you safe, until you’re not scared anymore, until everything’s okay again. Got it?”

Your throat tightened, your weakened heart began to slow, and slow, and slow. Your body was beginning to fade in the suns last rays. You fell forward into him with the force of your sob, and he held you close, letting you cry into his shoulder.

Lea glared at the stack of homework piled in between the three of you. “This blows.” He finally muttered.

“It’s homework.” You said, fiddling with your pencil as you tried to finish a particularly aggravating math problem. “I think that’s mandatory.”

Isa, despite being the most studious of the group, wasn’t fairing much better. His eyes kept trailing out the library window, despite the open book and paper in front of him.

Lea folded his arms and looked out the same window. It was truly a gorgeous day today, Spring was in full bloom and the sun was out for the first time in a week of rain. “This is one of our few days off from the castle, and we have to spend it indoors.” He gestured to the light coming in from the windows. “And it had to be the same day the suns out!”

You sighed, just as hungry to be out in the sunlight as he. “What stuff is due tomorrow?” You asked.

Lea thought, then picked out a few sheets. “I got a chapter review and half a sheet of math left.”

Isa returned to his book. “I have to finish a rough draft.”

“And I have ten math problems and a peer review.” You finished, hesitantly hopeful. “Let’s get this stuff done, then lets go out for ice cream.”

Lea and Isa both looked out the window, checking the position of the sun.

“How long do you think we have until sunset?” Lea asked.

Isa checked the clock on the far wall. “Um, if we get done at six-thirty we’ll have enough time to get the ice cream and get to the usual spot.”

“That’s two hours.” Lea nodded, then, full of ice cream fueled vigor, he began to scrawl across his homework. “Let’s get going!”

Lea’s mood was nothing if not infectious, and you quickly returned to your problem with a smile on your face.

Finally, after being kicked out of the library for disturbing the other patrons when you all finished your work, you ran to get your treat and make it to the garden.

Lea stretched out on his back, basking in the sun’s warmth. “Mm!” He laughed. “This is the best!”

“Your ice creams melting.” Isa pointed out.

Lea shouted and swung back on his backside to lick up the mess he was making. You laughed
around your ice cream and returned your eyes to the sky.

“I don’t want this to end.” You sighed.

“Hmm?” The boys cocked their heads, waiting for you to go on.


“What do you mean?” Isa asked.

Your eyes closed, and you felt the soft breeze blow against your face. “I don’t want this to change.” You tried to explain. “I dunno, it’s hard to put into words… I guess,” You opened your eyes to the lowering sun. “I mean that I don’t want us to be apart. It’d suck to live in a world without you guys.” You rubbed your cheek in embarrassment. “And if growing up means that we can’t do this anymore, then I’m not so sure I want that.”

They were quiet in thought, mulling over your words. Then, you felt Lea swing his arm around your shoulders. “Yeah, I get that.” He hummed. “With everyone at the castle, our parents, the teachers saying that we better enjoy this while we can, well, screw that.” He announced with a wave of his ice cream. “Let’s stay like this.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.” Isa smiled, but he nodded. “But even if we do grow up, let’s keep doing this together.” He winked at you both. “Just because other adults don’t like to have fun doesn’t mean we have to stop.”

You and Lea agreed, then returned you gaze to the setting sun.

“I love you guys.” You said. “Don’t ever forget that, okay?”

Lea squeezed your shoulder. “Don’t worry, we’ve got it memorized.”

Isa mumbled something under his breath and Lea choked.

“What?” You asked, looking around Lea’s back.

“Nothing!” He laughed, then shoved Isa’s shoulder and hissed, “Shuddup!”

Isa only laughed, but it was cut short when a foul breeze swept past you guys. Your every hair stood on end and you shot to your feet, your eyes sweeping the grounds.

“What is it?” Lea asked, getting on his feet, followed closely by Isa.

You shook your head. “Something’s not right.” You whispered. Alarm bells were ringing in your ears when the icy wind returned. Shadows swelled up around you.

“Where’d the sun go?!” Isa gasped, bringing your attention to the darkened sky. In a matter of seconds it had become the shade of a fresh bruise, black and purple and angry. Lightning struck the ground and thunder rocked the earth, sending your heart into your throat.

“Let’s go home.” You shivered, grabbing Lea’s hand. “Right now.”

The boys nodded and you three dashed back towards town, only to be stopped short when the shadows came alive. Yellow eyes blinked at you as a creature funneled from the growing darkness. With a shock, you realized it wasn’t just one, but many. Several, a hundred even, all squirming together in a great mass.
Isa grabbed Lea’s shoulder and pushed him to the side. “To the waterway, c’mon!” He shouted.

“What is that thing?!” Lea cried with you hot on his heels.

“I don’t know!” You gasped. You could hear them chasing you, whispering and wet, sending cold shivers up your spine. “It’s right behind us! Keep running!”

You took the winding paths in between the gardens to the stream. The whole while, you were aware of the monstrous, writhing thing behind you. Despite knowing all of Radiant Gardens twists and turns like the back of your hand, you couldn’t lose it. It stayed persistently at your heels, and it was catching up.

The three of you threw yourselves inside the water dome and raced up the stairs, and the monstrosity wasn’t far behind. It swelled and then shot up the middle, twisting and spirally and squishing one against the other. It came to eye level with you, and several twisted hands reached -

Lea grabbed your arm and pulled you away. The twister of darkness slammed against the wall and spilled over onto the steps. Gnarled creatures, like some twisted combination of child and insect, broke off from the group and began to take chase on the steps.

With the mass nearly beating you to the door and the ones on the stairs behind you, you could feel your hope being crushed with each step. Even while you knew you were going to die here, your only concern was getting your friends to safety.

In your memory, you saw Aqua, and heard the question she asked you.

“Y/N, why did you throw yourself in danger like that? Surely, there’s someone who would miss you if you were gone.”

Each breath burned in your lungs, your muscles screamed and ached, but you had to keep running. Eventually, Isa led you out of the waterway and back into the garden, into chaos.

People were screaming in the streets, more of those disgusting creatures chased after them. You watched helplessly as one knocked a man off his feet and ripped him apart. The man shattered into dust, and a pure, pink light floated towards the sky from where he once laid. Thunder and lightning shook the ground and the sky was heavy with those terrible dark clouds.

Behind you, you heard the writhing, squirming, hissing legion.

You ran in between them and grabbed their arms. “C’mon, we have to get somewhere safe!”

“Like where?!” Isa cried, running beside you.

You eyes searched, and eventually fell on the outline of the castle. “The castle! Master Ansem’s put defenses around there, right?” And even while you said it, your doubted it was true. “Maybe some people have already evacuated to there.”

Neither argued. Instead, you all focused on dodging the oncoming horde. Lightning struck the town and houses caught aflame. Your entire world was burning. Just a few hours before, you were worried about homework and what was going to be for dinner. It was all splitting apart at the very seams.

Struggling between alleys and disasters, the noise of the apocalypse just a backdrop, you came to the fence. There was no time to pause, to turn back, or to find the door. You could hear it coming closer.
You laced your fingers together. “C’mon, over the fence!”

Like a well-oiled machine, Isa grabbed the bars and braced himself on your hands. You pushed him upward as he jumped. He grabbed the top bar and pulled himself over it, but you didn’t wait to see if he got on the other side.

You nodded to Lea, “C’mon!” You tried not to look at the too many eyes and too many hands behind him.

He looked like he wanted to argue, but then he took a deep breath and did the same as Isa. When he pulled himself to the top, he turned around to you and held out his hand. You jumped up and scrambled for purchase on the bars. He grabbed your wrist, and for a moment you thought you’d make it.

Then pain erupted from your foot. You looked down to see yourself being slowly digested by the darkness. It seemed to grin up at you with its beady yellow eyes and hungry, clawing hands. More scorching pain bloomed up your leg and you desperately tried to kick them away, only for your other foot to be caught and eaten.

It was too late.

“Y/N!” Lea screamed, trying valiantly to pull you up. His beautiful eyes were wild with fear and panic.

Isa was on the other side of the fence. He grabbed a stick and tried to get the monsters off of you. He shrieked wildly, blood curdling and full of terror, but it only fazed through them.

And you were afraid. So afraid, so deeply terrified. But, then a cool calm flowed over you, forcing down you bile, but not your tears.

“Because she needed help! I wasn’t about to just watch her get hurt when I could’ve done something. Besides, what kind of person would I be if I couldn’t protect the people I care about? I’d do the same thing for them.”

“Run!”

You shoved Lea’s hand back and fell backwards. The darkness swallowed you, and for your last moments you were only aware of intense, terrible, clawing pain and your friends screams.

Lea and Isa watched helplessly as you disappeared into the legion. Lea’s hand was still outstretched, warm with the last of your life as you clutched onto him. There was only the sound of them tearing you apart and rushing water. He was brought back by a hand grabbing his shirt and pulling him backwards.

He fell on top of someone and heard a grunt in his ear.

“Y/N Y/N Y/N!” Lea gasped, scrambling back on his feet and reaching for the gate, but a sharp pain bloomed across his cheek. He stopped in his tracks, staring blankly at Isa’s red, tear stained face.

Isa grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet. “They’re gone!” He sobbed, and shook him. “We have to go!”

“No – No, they can’t be – “ Lea whispered. Everything was numb and pain. You couldn’t be gone. No – No, he - “I never told them.” He moaned, a feeling of emptiness clawing at him from the
inside. “I never told them…”

Isa shook with the power of his despair. “I know you didn’t, you idiot!” He took a deep breath and started dragging the both of them towards the castle. “But don’t let it be in vain!”

Isa’s foot touched the step, and the castle doors flew open. Too many yellow eyes and too many gnarled hands came down on them. Lea and Isa’s final screams were lost in the flood and they were torn apart from each other.

There was only pain, and then, there was nothing at all.

“And I’ll be with you.” You whispered softly as your sobs subsided.

He tucked his face into your shoulder. “Always.”

The sun glowed bright one last time, then there was only darkness.
We're Only Falling Apart

Chapter Summary

Even as Nobodies, Axel and Saix would search past the ends of the worlds to find you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They woke up on the edge of twilight. Though the land was unfamiliar, they did not panic, they did not fear. Lea and Isa stood apart under the shade of the oak trees, orange light drifting down upon them from between the leaves. A breeze brushed across them, unsettling their hair.

Slowly, they came to the realization that they were awake, that they were alive, and that they existed at all. None of these revelations fazed them, not a bit.

Lea looked up, catching peeks of the sky through the foliage, the same shade as his hair. He returned to earth to watch Isa look at his own hands, flexing his fingers and making fists.

“Hey, Isa.” He said, and felt like his voice had echoed from somewhere far away. Though he hadn’t the curiosity nor the care, he asked out of compulsion, “Feeling okay?”

Slowly, his friend nodded. “Yes, I’m not hurt.” He finally looked around them, no emotion passing his features. “Where are we?”

“Dunno.” Lea answered, and though he knew he should feel at least a little alarmed, he didn’t. “Not the Garden, that’s for sure.” The memories flashed across his eyes, yellow, black, purple, ravenous, “Where’s Y/N?”

And that’s when he stopped. With no sudden alarm, with no paling realization, with no confusion, or fear, or anger, or grief, or pain, he had said your name and felt nothing. He could remember it all in stunning clarity, watching you be eaten alive by the living darkness with squirming waves of fingers and eyes, your last scream cut short, your last word to him, the tears in your eyes, the terrible shaking of your fingers. And he felt nothing at all.

Isa said something, but he missed it while lost in thought. “What?” He asked.

What would usually be accompanied by an annoyed glare was said with only blank, keen eyes. “I said I don’t see them.”

Lea knew he should be afraid. He knew he should be panicking, he knew he should be thinking of finding you and nothing else, because you were the person he lo – “Something’s wrong.” He whispered, fingers coming to touch his chest. “This isn’t right.”

Isa paused, glancing at the ground. “You feel it too, then?” He asked.

“Nothing.”

“I feel nothing.”
Said in unison, with varying tones, but in mutual apathy.

“And despite that, you still linger.”

Wisps of black sprouted from the grass and a door of the void manifested before them. A man both familiar and strange stepped forward. In his eyes were the same hollowness that laid rest in themselves.

“Hello again, young apprentices. Allow me to give you empty vessels purpose.”

And all was silent in the wood. Not even a heartbeat was heard.

Nobodies. The final vestiges of people who have lost their hearts. A husk, the embodiment of their last wills. Unable to feel. Unable to want, or to wish, or experience joy or sadness or grief.

But they had a need. They needed their hearts back, so that they may be whole once again. Until that day came, Lea and Isa were no more.

“It is such a shame that your other friend has not manifested.” Said their leader, facing the window of a castle without a name. “They would have been a good addition to our fold.”

“Y/N is strong.” Axel replied, mimicking, or perhaps even mocking his old tone. Pretending to be offended by the very notion that you wouldn’t become a Nobody. “They’ll show up eventually.”

Saix, however, decided he was better off not wasting his time on pretending. His words were plain, his meaning simple. “If possible, could we search for their Nobody?”

Xemnas turned slightly to stare down at them with unfeeling eyes. “You already have your orders. Why should I allow you to disregard your missions for such a trifle?”

They wanted to be angry to hear you be considered so unimportant, and yet nothing came.

Saix paused, then turned to Axel. He was always the one to cut through defenses with nothing but his wit, and he did not fail.

Axel crossed his arms, leering at Xemnas for a moment before unfolding himself. “We’ll do it off the clock. Only after we’re done with the day work, and we’ll be back before curfew, no worries.”

He ended with a wave of his hand and a smile. But it was a far cry from the easy grin he had before.

Everything, right down to their own warm bodies, felt like a cruel hoax.

Xemnas said nothing as he returned his attention to the vast dark sky. After a long moment, he came to a conclusion. “So long as this search keeps from getting in the Organizations way, I will allow it.” And though there was no flux of emotion, no verbal cue, his next sentence was most definitely a threat. “Do make sure it doesn’t distract you from our goal.”

“Of course.” Saix nodded. “Let’s go, Axel.”

“Thanks, boss.” Axel said, following beside his friend.

Together, they left to find their missing number.
They swept across Twilight Town, into every nook and cranny, under every bridge and behind every bush. They continued until the perpetual sunset grew dim, yet never dark. This went on for many days.

Axel sighed, hands on his hips. They stood where they had first woken up, in the last vain hopes that they would show up there as well. “Just a bit behind us as always.” He muttered, trying to keep the mood light.

“They could have appeared in another world.” Saix said, “When Xemnas gives us permission to branch out, we should try again.”

He caught onto Saix’s meaning immediately. Unable to feel uneasy at his own lack of concern, he rubbed his chin. “So, you’re saying we should focus on getting on his good side before finding them?”

Saix said nothing for a moment, knowing that if he had a heart, what he would say next would appall him. “For the time being, yes.”

Axel didn’t feel his own eye twitch. “Are we supposed to just forget about them?”

“No at all.” He shot him a sharp glare. “Securing strong positions in the Organization will allow us more time and resources, so long as we’re careful.”

“Which means we’ll have a better chance of finding them.” Axel finished, then after a thought, he added, “And maybe we can find that girl who was locked in the castle, too.”

Saix had nothing else to say, and so opened up a dark corridor, but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

His friend grinned devilishly. “C’mon, what about the icing on the cake?” When he only frowned, Axel sighed overdramatically. “Ice cream, Saix, I mean ice cream. We haven’t sat down with some in a while and just talked.” He threw his thumb over his shoulder. “There’s a place in town and they sell sea-salt ice cream. And the view from the clocktower is pretty good, if I don’t say so myself.”

“And what will we do there, except pretend that everything’s just the way it was?” Saix scoffed, then looked away. “You and I both know it won’t be the same.”

The hand on his shoulder slowly fell away. “I figured we could at least talk.” Axel muttered, dropping his façade. “Stuff that doesn’t involve the Organization, or Xemnas, or being Nobodies.”

“Or Y/N?”

Axel flinched hard, his eyes dropped to the trampled grass below their feet. “I just want to talk.” He finally said again. “But if you don’t, then that’s fine. I’ll go alone.”

A hand caught his arm and he stopped. Saix stared at him with hard, unfeeling eyes. “You’re not going without me.” He said, letting him go.

Though Axel wanted to be relieved, he felt nothing at all. He lead them out of the forest and back into town, where the clocktower awaited them. Once they were sitting together, treat in hand, it was just as Saix had said; it was far from old times.
Days became weeks.

More had joined their fold, growing ever closer to that vague thirteen. Axel and Saix trusted none of them.

“Did you learn anything?”

Axel stopped on the stairs beside Saix. No one was around to overhear them, but that did not mean they wouldn’t be overheard. He casually leaned against the hand rails, hiding his mouth under the guise of rubbing his cheek. “No.” He said. “But that’s the strange part. It’s like Marluxia and Larxene just showed up one day out of thin air.” He pinned Saix out of the corner of his eyes. “You don’t think Xemnas has anything to do with that, do you?”

Saix said nothing. He was doing that more and more often lately.

Axel did as he’s always done when there was silence, and that was shrug it off and keep talking. “Well, in any case, I’m getting some devious vibes from them. I wouldn’t trust them as far as I could throw them.”

“Then we shall keep an eye on them.” Saix replied coolly, “So that we may be the first to alert our leader.”

The casual lean slipped off Axel and he crossed his arms. “And what about you? How’s your end going?”

His lips turned in the ghost of a smile. “All according to plan. Xemnas has chosen me as a confidante. If we keep going in this direction, I may even uproot Xigbar’s place as his right hand.”

“And then we’ll have all the information we need to find Y/N.” Axel grinned, and he saw you in his mind’s eye. “Thanks again for the marks.” He said, touching his cheeks.

Saix hummed. “I told you they would keep you from crying. And I’m sure they’ll catch Y/N’s eye.”

“Oh my god, stop. Don’t think I forgot you almost spilling it that one time.”

They shared a compulsive smile, then went their separate ways.

“I’ll catch you later, Saix.”

“Come back alive, Axel.”

Weeks became months.

There were many, many worlds out there, and many more orders. Saix and Axel dealt with them
“Did you take care of it?”

Blood stained Axel’s gloves and coat, across his cheeks and in his hair. It was dulling into the color of rust and flaking off onto the pristine white floor with every step. It was uncomfortably itchy, and he would have liked to have had a shower before being stopped.

“It’s taken care of.” He replied irritably. “And Xemnas didn’t have to lift a pinky finger.”

Saix glanced at the trail behind him. “Is that your blood?”

Axel did not smile. “No.”

“Then I suggest you get washed up. We have to report to our leader before the day’s over.” Then he continued past him down the hall.

Axel’s hands reflexively balled into fists. “Do you have any information on them at all?”

Saix came to a halt, and for a moment said nothing. Then, he looked over his shoulder at his old friend. “No. But there are more worlds out there. We’ll simply have to keep looking.”

Axel felt nothing, and so he said nothing. He moved on and went to his room and slammed the close button with his fist. With an impatient huff, he threw off his ruined clothes. He wanted to be annoyed, to be angry, to be furious and frustrated, but instead there was only emptiness. Slowly, he collapsed onto his bed.

He had grown taller, and so had Saix. His hair was longer, his body was lanky and toned. Years of hormone replacement therapy had done it’s job. He stared down at the binder on his chest. He should’ve taken it off and kept it off, but he couldn’t bring himself to care if it was starting to feel a little tight around his chest. It didn’t affect his performance during his duties, and so there was no reason to worry about it.

His eyes fell on his small bedside table. After a moment of consideration, he opened it with talented fingers. Inside was the last of his personal belongings; a homemade bracelet made of red string and strung with beads, the center one being a sun. Isa had one like it, except blue and with a moon. He hadn’t seen him wear it since they donned the coats.

He cradled it in the palm of his hand. That same hand had killed earlier that day. He was becoming very good at that, as of late.

He put the bracelet back and closed the drawer.

And months became years.

All their time searching, and you never showed up. Axel and Saix were fraying at the seams.

“Did you search everywhere?”

Axel had half a mind to keep on walking. “Yeah.” He muttered. “I couldn’t find them.”
Saix held a report in his hands, his scar wrinkled under the weight of his displeased frown. “Are you certain?”

He grit his teeth. Years of searching hadn’t gotten them anywhere. You were no where to be found. Every day that past by made the memories of you become hazier. Dreams of you had him wake up with a bitter taste in his mouth and his eyes wet. With every day that past, he pushed you further and further from his mind. He couldn’t let his every waking moment dwell on you, what you could possibly be doing at that moment, what you could possibly look like, what the years may have done to you, what they might not have.

He couldn’t think that you were dead. He had no heart, but he knew if he let that ever sink in, he would surely die of it breaking.

“Yes, I’m sure.” He seethed. “I looked everywhere, I snuck into every room, found every secret, got my fingers in every pot, and they weren’t there, Isa.”

Ignoring his threatening tone, Saix said, “Perhaps you could revisit one of the past worlds. There’s a mission over in Agrabah we still haven’t settled.” He decided, flipping through his reports. “I’ll assign you to it and send you out tomorrow.”

Axel’s fist hit the wall, and only then did Saix deign to look him in the eye.

“So, what about you?” Axel hissed. “When was the last time you went to look for them, huh?”

His old friend replied without hesitation, “I’ve been keeping our positions secured here, unless you’ve forgotten. And I’m closing in on putting myself at Xemnas’s side—”

“So we can keep looking for them, yeah yeah yeah.” Axel waved it aside, then his shoulders slumped. “You do that.” He muttered. “I’m going.”

Saix said nothing, and felt nothing.

The two walked their separate ways and not another word was shared.

“It would seem your search is going cold.”

Saix stopped around the corner. “Xemnas, I apologize. It is nothing to be concerned about, Axel and I are meeting our quota.”

“Oh, but it is something to be concerned about.” Said Xemnas, giving Saix a most sympathetic smile. “I have come across a most strange creature while fulfilling a mission of my own. I believe it will be of an interest to you, and possibly connected to your missing friend.”

Saix was never one to be hesitant, but he did then. “How do you mean?”

Xemnas opened a corridor, an unseen glint in his eyes. “It will be easier to show you.”

A creature indeed.

It sat against a tree in the corner of Twilight Town’s forest. It’s hands lay in it’s lap, legs sprawled out in front of them, limp as a puppet cut from it’s string.

It was you. It could have been no one else.
Saix stared down at you and could not fathom how it could be. It wore your clothes, it had your face, but your eyes were glassy and blank. Wisps of gray, black, and white drifted lazily but continuously from your form. Your body warped every few seconds into writhing white. His eyes traveled down to your wrist, where a green bracelet was still attached. The star bead winked at him knowingly.

“What is this?” He asked, making no motion to come any closer to you. “How did this happen?”

Xemnas stood to the side, watching over the scene. “At first it wasn’t clear, but after some debate I have come to the conclusion that something was cut off from them when they died.” He nodded to your fluxed state. “As you can see, they were in the process of becoming a fully fledged Nobody, but during this something must have happened, trapping them in this limbo.”

“Like what?” He snapped, or tried to. “And where could I find this missing piece?”

He did not see Xemnas’s satisfied smile. “As Nobodies are the embodiments of our wills and reason, it would mean that a significant portion of that would have been taken. And taken it must have been, for it’s simply not possible for such things to disappear on their own. It lies within another.”

Saix felt something come over him, twisted and snarling, and yet he fought to remain calm.

“Where?”

“Where do you think?”

The angry blister swelled inside him. He said nothing, he didn’t have to.

Xemnas nodded sagely. “You have always been quite deft, Saix. So, you must know what you need to do,” He came to stand beside him, staring down his nose at the unfinished and useless pawn. “to set your friend free from their suffering.”

Thoughts, memories connected to feelings, questions without answers flitted though his brain. He remembered the days he patiently helped you through mathematics, the poetry you shared, the books you swapped. He remembered the joy on your face the first time he and Lea sought you out on the school playground. He remembered how your combined dry humors would catch Lea so off guard he once burst into tears. He remembered how much he loved you like an older brother would, how he listened to you play the piano and heard you sing and draw in your sketchbook and play with your yoyos. He remembered how much he missed you, how much he had forgotten the space you had left empty, how alive you looked just before you died.

This thing before him wasn’t his friend. It was a sham, a shadow, a disgusting failure. And he would not allow it to bear your likeness any longer.

In a brief flash, the handle of his claymore weighed heavy in his hand.

Xemnas hid his victorious grin and patted his shoulder. “I understand this is an intimate act, so I shall take my leave.” Wisps of shadow formed a corridor behind him. “When you are done, come meet me in the throne room.” And with that, he left Saix alone with the shadow of you in the wood.

The door closed with a soft hiss, and only then did he raise his weapon. He could already feel it, the pommel of his claymore against your skull. It would be clean and decisive, just one blow, and this mockery with your eyes will be no more.

*Forgive your brother, Y/N.* His mind whispered, and he swung forward. But, the crunch of bone
and the gush of blood did not come. Instead, the bite of metal against metal echoed off the trees.

In it’s hands was a yellow star, bigger than it’s head, blocking the path of his swing. Then, it’s twin shot forward, narrowly missing his ear as he thrust himself backwards. The body before him morphed into some devastating hybrid of white hood and empty eyed puppet, and it still had the gall to share your resemblance. It stood on it’s feet, two stars hanging at both it’s sides, connected to it’s hands by wisps of thorny shades.

A low sigh pushed past his lips and he readied his weapon. He allowed the terrible growth to fester and broil. “So, even a creature such as you has enough power to resist death. Then so be it.” And with a roar, he threw himself at it with all his might, and the gnarled, ugly thing inside him burst.

It dodged him and striked back, catching his ribs with it’s weapon, and then stopped, waiting for his next move. Even through the haze of this untamed power, Saix was a cunning opponent. It would only react if actively attacked? Then he would simply give it no quarter until it’s defenses collapsed. And that was exactly what he did.

With toxic adrenaline pumping through his veins, he shrugged off each and every counter blow, and not once did he let up his constant barrage. It threw itself around trees, then he would just cut them down. It tried to flee, he summoned a barrier to keep it still. It blocked his attack, then he would come at a different angle. All the while, it stayed hauntingly silent, as if it’s voice box was gone. It gave no indication that it was truly alive.

Just an animal backed into a cage.

Finally, it did what he knew it would do. It ducked out of the way of a swing, crouched down in the grass, and paused just a moment too long. He switched the claymores direction mid swing and brought it down on them. They tried to get out of the way, but it was too late.

There was the crunch of ribs and the sharp crack of it’s spine being split. The spiked pommel pinned it to the ground. Already, it’s body began to disintegrate into the nothing it sprouted from. It’s weapons faded into the grass.

The pump of blood began to slow and eventually fade from his ears. Saix took hold of the hilt and pulled his weapon off it’s ruined body. He lifted it again to land the final blow and end it’s suffering.

He made the mistake of meeting your eyes. They were alive, and they pinned him just as he had mercilessly pinned you. Recognition, fear, acceptance.

“I… sa…”

He took a sharp breath and felt the crush of your skull between his claymore and the forest floor.

All was silent in the wood, not even a heartbeat was heard.

Axel stopped short on the stairs. Saix had just walked past him, his eyes must’ve been playing tricks, but still. “Hey, hold on.” He called, chasing him down the steps. When his old friend turned around, he realized he was not, in fact, seeing things.

He cleared his throat, trying to keep himself from stomping across these new, unfamiliar borders between them. “So, uh, do you look a bit different?”
Saix didn’t answer, but his amber eyes were unsettlingly similar to others he knew. Axel felt an involuntarily cold shiver run down his back.

“I have been promoted.” Saix said, though Axel had no idea how that had anything to do with these new changes. “I am now Second in Command. Xemnas granted me the honor yesterday evening.”

“Oh.” Axel paused, searching his face for any other indication, anything that could tip him off. “Congrats. It’s about time.”

Saix hummed in agreement. “There will be a congregation later today, do make sure you arrive on time. Also,” He added, “you no longer need to waste your time searching for Y/N.”

There was no way he heard what he thought he just heard. “What?”

Saix turned away, a step below him. “There is no longer a need to look for them. It’s fruitless.”

He began walking away, but Axel lunged forward and grabbed his arm. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean!?” He snarled, “What’s all this been for, then!?” He came to the same step as he to get a look at his face. What he saw made his stomach drop.

The new Second was staring straight ahead, refusing to meet his eyes. It was just like when they were kids and had hearts, whenever Isa did something he wasn’t proud of or expected a scolding from. It was the look he had when he wasn’t telling the truth.

“Isa,” Axel whispered, “what did you do?”

His question was rebuffed when Saix pulled his arm away. “Weren’t you the one griping about searching for them just yesterday?” He straightened his cloak and continued on his way. “They won’t be turning up. Now, make sure you arrive in time for the meeting.”

Axel watched him go. This was a betrayal, short and simple. A betrayal of you, a betrayal of their friendship, of trust, of everything they were, of everything they had built since they were children. So, why didn’t he feel betrayed? Angry, frustrated, sad?

He was getting exhausted of nothing. He turned around and continued up the steps.

And so, Saix and Axel went their own ways, giving up the search for their missing number.

Chapter End Notes

In this episode we see Xemnas be a sneaky, manipulative fuckwad and ruin a friendship from behind the scenes.
Working with canon is hard, but if Nomura can mess with the rules however he wants than I can too
ALSO I WENT IN TO FIX SOMETHING IN THIS CHAPTER YESTERDAY AND DIDNT REALIZE MY OWN EXTENSION WAS ON I FIXED IT AND IM V SORRY
Through Hardships

Chapter Summary

You woke up in an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar face, but what were you going to do now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You woke up under an endless night sky. Against cold brick, on cold stone, in an unfamiliar, empty alley. Your chin was lifted towards the sky, you watched a star burn brightly before blinking out entirely. Slowly, you turned your attention down to earth.

You sat on the ground, hands in your lap and legs sprawled out in front of you. The air was crisp and heavy. Would it rain soon? When you pulled yourself to your feet, a brief wave of dizziness rolled over you. Braced against the wall, you pressed your hand to your eyes.

Eventually, your fawn legs passed and you could stand on your own. Still, you cautiously stepped out of the dim alley, your fingers trailing across the rough wall. A courtyard spanned before you, a fountain to your far left and a grand building to your right. Neon lights strung above doors burned your eyes before they could adjust.

Where am I? You wondered. Nothing looked the least bit familiar. But, when you couldn’t think of something that fit that definition, it only brought up the question: What is familiar?

Before you could think of an answer, the shadows strewn across the cobblestones began to move. Literally. As in they were popping out of the ground and coming alive. Some warped out of balls of purple and black and twitched on the ground, like possessed suits of armor. When their yellow eyes turned on you, a shot of panic coursed through you.

You didn’t know how you knew, but if those things got to you, you would be killed.

One of the demon tinker toys reared up and you threw yourself to the side just before it’s feet could make contact with your head. Rolling to your feet, you bent your knees, desperately searching for a way out.

A sharp, blunt pain hit your back and you fell forward, straight into the mob of monsters. You braced yourself and hit the ground hard. For half a second, you floundered, and when you tried to flee you realized you were surrounded.

You were going to die here.

“Look out below!”

A whirlwind appeared beside you, knocking several of the creatures off their feet. A girl wielding a huge shuriken stood over you, one hand on her hip. “Prepare for Dues ex Yuffie!”

A hot push of air erupted at your back. Several of the monsters behind you were burnt to cinders, revealing a tall man wielding what looked like a giant knife taped to a gun. Also, he was wearing
too many belts, just way too many. It was a tiny bit distracting.

“You, get behind me!” He ordered, leveling his weapon.

A passing moment of déjà vu was ignored as you nearly tripped over yourself to get to gun-blade-belt man. The ninja wasn’t far behind, she somersaulted to his side.

“Yuffie, take care of them. I’ll be right behind you.” The stranger said, decimating a row of enemies with a swing of his blade.

“Right!” She gave you a crooked grin and pushed you forward, back towards the middle alley. “C’mon, we have a safe house nearby.”

You couldn’t help but pause, with a stranger taking you to a second location and all, “What is going on!?”

“We’ll get you sorted once we get somewhere safe.” She scolded. “Now come on, follow me!”

Despite sirens practically screaming Stranger Danger in your ears, you’d take that risk rather than the army of the black lagoon. When she took off, you kept close behind her. Good thing, too, since a giant bloated body just erupted from the ground. You screamed profanities, but Yuffie grabbed your wrist and twisted herself under it’s arm, forcing you with her.

The world was spinning when you hit the ground, but you weren’t given the time to recover. You were hauled to your feet and shoved forward towards a door at the end of the alley. With the sound of the brawl behind you, you threw the door open, Yuffie right behind you. And still, there was no time to breathe. In a matter of a few hair-raising moments, you found yourself in a snug room with two other people inside.

Yuffie closed the door behind you with a relieved sigh while you stood stiff in the doorway, no idea what to do or what to say or even what to think.

There was a tall young woman wearing a pink dress, her kind face made a little ‘o’ of surprise at your entry. The other, a curmudgeonly old fellow looked like he was caught in the middle of cooking on a tiny stove.

A hand on your back made you jump three feet in the air with a terrified squeal.

Yuffie threw her hands up, “Easy! Wow, sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.” Now with you once again aware of her presence, she gently patted your shoulder. “Good thing Leon and I were around, or you’d be a Heartless by now.”

“A what?” You gasped, clutching at your chest. Panicked shivers ran up and down your spine. “Who are you? And where am I?”

The woman came closer, her hands open. “You must be new.” She said, taking in your shaking frame and terrified eyes. “My name’s Aerith. Are you hurt?”

“No…” You murmured, unsure yourself. You certainly didn’t feel hurt, despite being attacked just a minute earlier.

Yuffie shook her head. “It’s the adrenaline. The Heartless got a few swipes in before we got there, they could use a Cure.”

You opened your mouth to say you were fine, but with a wave of Aerith’s hand, a bloom of green
light washed over you. Your heart calmed, your mind cleared, and aches and pains you weren’t even aware of disappeared. “Woah.” You whispered, “Thank you.”

She smiled. “Of course. Here, why don’t you take a seat?” She said, guiding you to a small sofa.

The man, now you could see he was wearing an apron, walked over to where you were sitting. He frowned at you for a moment, then offered his hand. “The name’s Cid. What's your name, kid?”

You took his hand, large, calloused, and warm, and shook it firmly. “I…”

Just then, the door opened, and in came gun-blade-belt man. Despite fighting his way through the mob to get there, he didn’t seem hurt or even tired. He balanced his weapon by the door and locked the door behind him. His eyes swept over the room before settling on you.

“It’s good to see you and Yuffie made it back safe.” He said, though there was no smile on his face. “I’m sure you have a few questions.”

You nodded with raised eyebrows. “Uh, yeah, a few.” You said with a bite, but then you softened. “I - Thank you for saving me.”

“That’s okay, we were on our way from the First District anyway.” Yuffie said with a wave of her hands. “As long as Leon didn’t bruise the veggies, we're cool.”

That’s when you finally noticed the two shopping bags draped over his shoulders. He made no reply whilst carefully putting them on the coffee table. The ninja girl threw herself on sofa beside you.

“I’m the Great Ninja Yuffie.” She grinned, “And that’s Leon.” With a nod to the last unnamed man. “I’m guessing you’re new to this place.”

You nodded hesitantly. You certainly had no memory of this town, that’s for sure.

“You’re in Traverse Town, kid.” Said Cid, returning to the stove where a big pot was steaming. He took a large ladle and stirred it. “This is where all those misplaced by the Heartless end up when their worlds fall to darkness.”

“Heartless?” You asked, “You mean those monsters outside?”

Yuffie nodded sagely. “Heartless are born from the darkness from people’s hearts, and if you lose your heart, you’ll become one, too.” She patted your shoulder. “So, better not let that happen, huh.”

Your fingers tightened around your knees, a cold sweat broke out across your forehead. Was it the prospect of falling to too many eyes hands legion of the dark monsters? The knot that formed in your stomach made you suspect something else had a hand in it, too.

Aerith took a seat on the recliner in front of you, her hands folded in her lap. “What’s your name?”

“Ah,” You began, then stopped, “ah… I…” Your eyes fell unseeingly at your lap. *I have a name. I have a name? Then, what is it? I. Have. A. Name. What is my name? But all you could draw was a blank. It was all smudged color and noise, but no substance, no words. Your mind began to spin like wheels treading ice, fast, frantic, I don’t know my name. I don’t know who I am. You went deeper, I must have a home. Where’s my home? They said that people end up here because of Purple Black Yellow Screaming Scared Legion Pain Pain Pain of the Heartless, but what was my home!? Wha –
A hand fell on your head, heavy and firm, cutting you out of your waking nightmare. Your heart was beating a mile a second, your fingers shook in your lap. Yuffie was holding your wrist, frowning, and Aerith was half off her seat, reaching out for you. Leon stood before you, it was his hand that sat upon your head.

You took trembling breath. “I’m sorry.”

He mussed your hair. “Don’t be.” He stood aside, revealing Cid putting a bowl of stew in front of you, along with a spoon.

“Here, kid.” He said gently, his eyes knowing. “You’ll feel better with something on your stomach.”

Carefully, you cradled the bowl in your lap, but you didn’t feel like eating. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He replied, going back to the stove. “You three better dish up, too, ‘fore it gets cold.”

There was a pause while the four new acquaintances got their meals. You tentatively took a few bites of the stew, hearty with mushrooms and potatoes and cubes of meat, and found it was quite tasty. Not five-star restaurant, but good in a homemade way. For some reason, that made your heart hurt. However, as good as it was, you only ate a few bites at a time with rests in between, unsure of where your stomach and day was headed.

After everyone got some stew in, they continued with the conversation before. Cid sat on the chair Aerith was on before, with Leon sitting on the arm rest. She took the wooden chair at the sofas left, which left you and Yuffie in your spots.

“Do you know your name?” Leon asked.

With a heavy heart, you shook your head.

You didn’t see them share a look of concern and caution. “We don’t usually ask this,” Yuffie began, Cid grunted warningly from his seat, “but do you know where you’re from?”

Again, you shook your head.

All was quiet. It was too much for you to bear. “… You croaked, “… know anything. I don’t know my name, or my home, or…” Your shoulders bent forward under the weight of your confusion and fear. “… You waved your free hand, searching for the word.

“Before waking up here?” Aerith asked, then winced in sympathy at your nod.

Cid sighed, balancing his bowl on his knee. “That happens sometimes.” He muttered. “Some people get their memory back, and some don’t. I’m very sorry.”

You stared at your half-eaten meal. The first of many tears rolled down your nose and into the stew. Trying to save face, you put the bowl on the table and hid your face in your arm, hiccupping and struggling for air.

The four of them were at a momentary loss, until Aerith came to stand at your right and gently rubbed your back. “These clothes look a bit too tight, how about we find you some new ones?” She whispered, gently leading you off the couch and towards the narrow hallway.
You tried to stifle your sobs while she brought you into a small room with a bunkbed, shared by the two girls. She let you curl up on the bottom bunk on top of a well-loved quilt that smelled of fresh flowers and cry your heart out. She sat by your feet, so you wouldn’t be alone.

“It’s good to get it out.” She reassured when you grew quiet. “Cry as much as you need.”

And you did. It was too hot and too cold, everything felt wrong from the inside out. You reached out across the bed, searching for someone’s hand, but no one was there.

Aerith laid out an outfit on the bed. “These should fit you.”

“Thanks.” You sniffled. “But, you don’t have to give me your clothes.”

She gave you a kind smile. “It’s alright. We have a closet full of extras, just for occasions like these.” She patted the stack. “If you don’t like them, or if they don’t fit right, just call and let me know.”

You thanked her again and she left the room, leaving you alone for the first time since you woke up. Part of you wanted to just dissolve again, but you had already cried all over her bedspread. You didn’t want to ruin it any further.

Carefully, you tried to peel off your shirt, only to get stuck with it halfway up your torso. “Oh shit.” You mumbled, fighting against the fabric.

These really are too small.

Hunching your back, you clawed at the neck until your face was free. Just as you were about to whoop in joy, your sleeve got caught on something on your wrist.

With a short huff, you picked at the sleeve until rolled off your hand, revealing a band around your wrist. It was made of sturdy green string and strung with a few beads. A star laid in the center. An unnamable ache grew outward from your lungs as you touched the round pieces of glass and metal.

You folded your shirt and put it on the bed, followed by your pants and underwear when you managed to wriggle out of them. Hopefully they could use them for another homeless vagabond that shows up on their doorstep. The bracelet staid on your wrist.

With that debacle over, you picked up the clothes Aerith got you. She obviously paid attention to the theme of your last outfit, as it was mostly green as well. Little planets and stars decorated the inside of the jacket, making you smile as you put it on over your new shirt. Once you buckled in your pants, you looked around for a mirror and spotted one on a small desk.

It was a handheld mirror, obviously nothing too fancy but the decorations around the edges were ornate little flowers. You turned it over to see yourself in, and paused when you saw… Well, it was your face, it had to be, but…

You were a goddamn wreck of a human being. Your hair was a long, tangled mess, your face was gaunt, and… you didn’t know, but something just didn’t look quite right. Nothing major, but like when you turn away and something on the table is at a different angle. You couldn’t put a word on it. But, god, something had to be done about your hair, at least.

You opened the door a bit and stuck your head out, calling for Aerith. She arrived just a few moments later, then clapped her hands when she saw you in your new duds. “They fit perfectly!” She laughed in relief.
You gave her a small smile. “Yeah, thank you. Um, but I wanted to ask, could you…?!” You picked at a strand of your hair. “Help me with this, please?”

You ran your hand over your hair, now at just the right length. Aerith sat behind you on the tub edge, giving your hair one last ruffle to shake the last of the loose hair out.

“Do you like it?” She asked, beginning to pick up the mess.

“Yeah!” You grinned. *It feels like me.* Then, you bounced to help her clean up. “Thank you, for being so kind to me…”

After a moment of quiet, you felt her put her hand on your shoulder. Her eyes were understanding, her smile was small. “You needed help, and we gave it to you. Don’t feel bad for that.”

Her words caught you off guard. Another wave of sobs shuddered through you, and try as you did to fight them back, you still winded up crying into her shoulder on their bathroom floor.

They offered the last, tiny bedroom where Cid slept, but you refused their offer and took the sofa. They had already done so much for you, it felt like you’d be taking advantage of them if you took their last bed.

The pillow under your head smelled of clean detergent and the blanket was worn but warm. Good, because it was stupid drafty in the living room. It still smelled like Cid’s stew, and the fridge tucked in the corner hummed laboriously. Rain fell outside, tapping on the window. Leon was snoozing on Cid’s recliner, snoring peacefully. It was all very…

*Familiar.* You thought, staring out the slit in the curtains on the large window. *If only I could remember why.*

Quietly, you tried to get comfortable, tucking the blanket to your chin.

Without a name, Cid stepped in and gave you one. “What about Astra?” He offered as he and Leon cleaned up dinner.

You tested the word in your mouth. It was unfamiliar, but not in a bad way.

*Per aspera ad astra.* Leon recited.

“Gesundheit.” You replied dryly.

He gave you a rare smile. “It means ‘through hardships to the stars’.” He returned to washing the dishes. “It’s something we picked up after our world fell.”

“Besides, we can’t keep calling you ‘kid’ or ‘guy’.” Yuffie elbowed you playfully. “But, hey, it’s up to you.”

“Do I even qualify as a kid?”

“No.” She laughed. “Cid just calls everyone that.”
Astra. You felt it around in your head. At least it was easy to remember. You were afraid they were going to make you take the whole Latin phrase as your new name for a second there.

The world outside the window didn’t seem to change. It stayed in perpetual night, the neon blinked through the gap on repeat. Your eyelids felt heavy, but you thought you’d never go to sleep. Until you actually did, anyway.

Colors – A Field – Sunlight on skin – Velour brushing your ankles – A hand around your shoulders – A hand in your hand –

Blue – Soft – The crinkle of paper / of pages – One word then another – Laughter – Holding you against the side – A gentle family – A gentle love

Red – Bright – Notes off the tongue / off the keys – Pure unbridled joy – Whispers – Holding your hand to the heart – A tender happiness – A tender love


You remembered nothing of your dreams, but every time you blinked you saw gold staring back at you. Thankfully, your new friends didn’t leave you to dwell on that. There was still so much you didn’t understand, after all.

Traverse Town would be your home, for the time being.

For the first day, they let you stay in their cramped home all day and just recover from yesterdays plight. Cid, Yuffie, and Aerith had places to be, but Leon kept you company. Apparently, they had a rotation set in place to dictate who would stay home and who did the errands. He wasn’t a big talker, but he caught on to where your borders were and respected them. He let you fiddle with the television and flip through the channels until you came to a program you were interested in without complaint. And when there was cleaning to be done, you insisted you help and he only gave token resistance.

Lunch was yesterdays leftovers with a side of buttered buns, which you ate ravenously. When the quiet grew heavy, you glanced at him from the corners of your eyes. He was staring at you intensely, frowning. Caught, he cleared his throat. “Sorry,” He apologized, “you just remind me of someone I used to know.”

You hummed inquiringly around your mouthful.

His shoulders dropped a little. “There was this kid that lived in my neighborhood. I used to babysit them sometimes, Aerith did too.” Though he didn’t sigh, you felt like he wanted to. “They were a bit shy, but they liked to draw. When they were still kind of little, they would draw us pictures while we watched over them. I haven’t thought about them in a while.” A fond little smile made his lips twitch. “I’m sorry for bringing it up. Our world fell nine years ago,” He shook his head. “so if they were going to show up, they would’ve done so a long time ago.”

You put your spoon in your bowl, a hollow ring echoed in your chest for him. “I wonder what
The next day, Yuffie took you around town.

“Is this safe?” You asked, looking out for any of the Heartless.

“We’ll be fine.” She said with a pat on your back. “You got me around, don’t you? Besides, it’s a short trip. Just stick close to me.”

“Okay…” You hummed, following her closely until she threw open a door on the plaza. It closed behind you with a thud, and you were surprised to see people walking around the street. “Where are we?”

“This is the First District.” Yuffie answered, walking towards the steps. “The only Heartless free place in Traverse Town, so breathe.”

If several question marks could pop out of your head, they would have. “Then why are you guys living back there?”

The sign above the door to the first store said, simply: Accessory Shop. She opened it for you, and found yourself in a cozy shop. A little Moogle was lounging above the fireplace next to a ladder, and a friendly man waved from behind the counter.

“Because it’s close to Merlin’s house.” She replied. “Have you got Cid’s order in?” She asked the cashier.

When she was done with the shop, you opened the door for her as you asked. “Who’s Merlin?”

“He’s a wizard.” She said, “Can you hold this for me?”

You hung the shopping bag around your arm. “So, he knows magic?”

“That’s what a wizard is, Astra.” She grinned.

“You wiseass.” You laughed, only for her to punch your arm lightly.

You entered the next shop, this one manned by three ducklings. “Isn’t this violating some kind of law?” You muttered to Yuffie, who winced knowingly.

“You gotta take what you can get here. Some people are volunteers, others are paid a salary if it’s an option. These guys are doing it to make money, so don’t worry. They’re doing it because they want to. Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Yuffie.” The duckling in red waved from the counter. “Who’s the new guy?”

You waved with a small smile, “I go by Astra.”

“Hey, Astra! I’m Huey, that’s Dewey, and over there’s Louie. Welcome to the shop!”

“Thanks.” You grinned, charmed by the trio of brothers.
Yuffie put her hands on her hips. “Alright, you three. We need to get my friend here a means to defend themself. Got anything new?”

The brother in green, Louie, perked up. “Yeah, yeah! Hey, Huey, we got that new shipment this weekend!”

“Woah, woah, wait!” You hissed in Yuffie ear. “I don’t even know if I can wield a weapon!”

She pushed your face away playfully, “Well, unless you’ve got one of your own, you’re gonna need to learn.”

Before you could think of an argument, the three brothers had pushed a crate out of a closet behind the counter. Huey opened it and started putting weapons of all sorts on the countertop. From staffs and shields to axes and lances and shuriken. You felt yourself pale.

“Take a look at our stock!” Dewey smiled. “Take your time!”

Despite their disarming smiles, you suddenly felt a little off-put by the feathered children. But, it wasn’t like you had much of a choice. Cautiously, you approached the array of instruments with growing interest.

You went one by one down the line, careful not to touch anything you weren’t sold on. It would just be your luck if you were to break something and make Yuffie pay for it. You didn’t know if you could handle that kind of guilt.

Near the end of the line, your eyes trailed to the box. Something inside winked at you. “Hey, what’s that in there?” You asked.

The brothers hesitated.

Huey picked it up and put on the counter. “It’s nothing really.” He said, “We think it’s broken. You won’t want this.”

They were twin stars, built up of six stars each, three on each side. They were polished yellow gold and bigger than your head, and the cuts on some of those edges looked knife-sharp. They weren’t shuriken, like Yuffie’s, you couldn’t really tell what they were supposed to be.

You absolutely wanted them.

“You can at least look at them?” You waited for their nod before carefully picking one up. That’s when you noticed the dip in between each side of the weapon. So, you did what you should never do with a strange weapon, and that was sticking your fingers in it. Thankfully, it wasn’t a trap of tiny barbed needles waiting to tear your fingers to ribbons, it was in fact,

“String?” Louie asked.

“Yarn?” Dewey wondered.

“Wire?” Huey questioned.

You tugged the strong thread hard and it didn’t break. The fluorescent lights caught it, colors jumped from the material like an opal.

Yuffie peered at it from your shoulder. “It’s a Yo-Yo?”

“I want them.” You said.
“You want the killer Yo-Yos.” She deadpanned.

“Would you rather I swing them around in here a bit and find out?”

“NO!” Screamed the triplets.

You patted your new deadly toys, hung on your hips. “Cute kids. It was nice of them to give us a discount.” You grinned devilishly.

“You know they did that just to make sure you didn’t destroy their shop, right?” Yuffie laughed.

You winked, and continued on with the shopping trip.

You patted your new deadly toys, hung on your hips. “Cute kids. It was nice of them to give us a discount.” You grinned devilishly.

“You know they did that just to make sure you didn’t destroy their shop, right?” Yuffie laughed.

You winked, and continued on with the shopping trip.

Merlin was kinda cooky.

“My my!” He cheered, “Hello Cid! How nice of you to visit. And who is this?”

Cid patted your shoulder. “This here’s Astra. They’re new around here.”

You waved shyly, unsure how to feel about the old man in the nightgown and slippers. “Hey.”

Cid decided to escort you to Merlin’s house, hidden behind a strange door and in the middle of an underground lake. You nearly bolted back outside, but when Cid started jumping across the stones, you ended up following him. Now you were in an incredibly messy hovel with an old man who looked like he just rolled out of bed. Not how you thought this day was gonna go.

“Ahh.” He nodded, sharing a look of sympathy with you. “I’m terribly sorry for your loss.”

“That’s kinda the problem.” You admitted awkwardly, “I don’t remember what I lost.”

His eyes went comically wide behind his glasses. “Pardon?”

“That’s why we’re here.” Cid said. “Was wonderin’ if you and the Fairy Godmother could help recover their memories, and maybe teach them a bit of magic while you’re at it. What with the Heartless coming outta the woodwork and all.”

Merlin put his hand over his heart, “I’ll be frank with you, recovering memories can be difficult, and sometimes dangerous.” His beard uncurled sadly. “If your amnesia is out of trauma, recovering them could do more harm than good. The brain will do what it must to protect itself, you understand?”

Nerves crawled under your skin, but, “Even if it’s a long shot, I would like to at least try.” You told him. “I know there’s something I’m missing, something important, if I could just get a hint of what it is…”

Slowly, Merlin smiled in understanding. “If you’re sure, then of course we can try. And, magic lessons!” He waved his wand, “Now that Sora’s back to his adventure, I’ll have plenty of time on my hands until he returns! We can even get started today, if you wish! But first,” A notepad and feather pen appeared in his hands, “what kind of tea and sweets do you like, my dear? And Cid, you’ll stay for tea time, won’t you?”
Colors – Colors – Colors –

Red – Blue – Green

Sun – Moon – Star

A field of flowers – The setting sun

You were beginning to remember your dreams.

Chapter End Notes

In case there's any confusion: Yes, your character has aged just like Lea and Isa since you were a Nobody. There is no time silliness like time travel, Castle Oblivion, or the Realm of Darkness.
And allow me to be bitter that neither Radiant Garden nor the FF crew showed up in KH3.
I did take some liberty with basing their dynamic closer to the manga. Found Family trope, baby!
Summer Song

Chapter Summary

Despite finding sanctuary and family in Traverse Town, something keeps calling you in your sleep. Not to mention, there's been these weird guys lurking around town, and Merlin's found the secret behind your amnesia.

Chapter Notes

I am in no way a song writer, but children are goofy and will do what they do. The song is based off of
You're My Best Friend by Queen
I'm Yours by Jason Mraz
Don't Forget by Laura Shigihara and Toby Fox
and First Love by Utada Hikaru
and it is in major key, so it's best you listen to the first two songs to get the right vibe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunlight caressed his arms, blown in by the gentle summer breeze. The light drapes whispered against each other, joining the lilting notes off the piano and your happy, beautiful laugh.

“Like I said, I’m not quite good at it yet.” You apologized, then played the five notes again, slower this time. “But I’ve been practicing.”

Lea smiled, it felt like the sun was in his very soul, filling up his every crevice. That was his love for you. “Y/N, you’re doing great.” He said, poking your forehead. “Got it memorized?”

You nudged his hand away with your head, laughing again. “You wanna play with me?”

Never one to say no to an excuse to hang out with you, but he still cocked his head as if you had sprouted three eyes. “I’d love to, but I can’t play.”

“That’s okay.” You scooched closer to the edge of your seat. “Sit behind me and put your hands over mine.”

For a second his heart stopped. The heat in his face was soon matched by your own terrible blush as you realized the implications behind your request. Quickly, before you could stutter a way out of it, he swung his legs around you and took a seat on the back of the stool. He already shot up so much since you both met, he could almost rest his chin on top your head.

His hands overlapped yours on the keys. “Okay.” He said, ignoring the frantic beat of his heart. “What now?”

“Well,” You recovered, hoping your hands weren’t sweaty. “I can start a few notes, and we can make a song. If you want.”
Already, his moment of shy, twitterpated embarrassment was gone. “Okay!” He straightened his back. “You’re good at the song stuff, I’ll follow your lead.”

“Alright, but I get to make it as silly and stupid as I want.” You strung a few notes together until you came to a chord you liked. “You ready?”

“Always.”

A chorus of notes joined the choir on the breeze in major key, bouncy and full of barely contained laughter. You began to sing.

“Remember those days, when we first met, and I knew I’d never be lonely again? I knew, from then on, that I’d love you, and love you, and love you again and again.” You leaned back and gave him his cue, “You’re my best friend!”

“Oh, it’s my turn?” He fumbled, then cleared his throat. “Uhm, oh. Here I go.

“When we run, when we go, I want it to be us, wherever we might go.” He flushed, “Was that alright?”

You laughed, “Yeah!”

Suddenly filled with confidence, he tried to continue, “Because I know, you’re the one…” He blushed again, knowing exactly what he wanted to say but unsure of how to say it, “you are the one…”

“You are the one who knows how to be kind to my heart!” You finished for him, hitting the keys with joy, “We laugh! We sing! And in every melody, I find” wiggled your shoulders, making him laugh, “myself in a warm embrace.”

“And I could never find it in any other place!” He glowed, finally finding his stride. “Wherever we goooo!” He crowed, “Wherever we goooo! Wherever we gooo-oooooh.”

“Even if we’re far apart!”

“I’ll always be with you!” You sang together, towards the open window. “I’ll always be with you!”

Lea tucked himself closer. “You’re my best friend.”

You nuzzled his cheek. “You’re my best friend.”

“And even if we fall apart,”

“Even if we’re torn apart,”

“Even if I can’t see you,”

“Even if I can’t find you, I’ll know…” You sang, “You’ll be with me.”

“You’ll be with me.” He echoed.

“I know,”

“And believe me, I’ll know that…”

Together in unison, you finished, “I’ll always be with you!”
The last notes rang out into the summer air, leaving you both alone with your giggles.

“Great job, Lea!” You laughed, “Bravo!”

But he said nothing. All words had abandoned him as he took in your beauty, like he had never seen you clearly before in his life.

“Lea?” You asked, then felt his fingers on your face, turning your gaze towards him. “Wha - ?”

He was a hairs breath away. All air escaped the room. Your eyes were all he could see as he leaned in closer, your lips so close –

Axel woke up with tears in his eyes and knots in his stomach. With the dream still fresh in his mind, he corrected the last action. It was a summer day, the window was open, you played the piano together, you made up a silly song he had all but forgotten, but he never kissed you. He never leaned in any closer, never touched your cheek, none of that.

And he still regretted it, though he had no heart to regret with.

“What are you humming?” Saix asked in the middle of their debriefing. Though his choice of words implied he wanted to know, at best he was just mildly annoyed that Axel wasn’t paying much attention.

“Mm? Oh,” He huffed, “Sorry, hadn’t realized I was doing anything. What was that last part, again?”

“Well done, Astra!”

You lowered your yo-yos, panting lightly. Merlin’s endless floating furniture lowered back to the floor. The wizard himself was clapping jubilantly by the window.

“Well done, well done! Why, you might be even quicker than Sora.” He waved his wand and a panel opened on the floor.

“I still haven’t gotten Fire and Blizzard down, though.” You pointed out, hopping down the hole.

“Yes, but I’m willing to let that slide. You’ve learned Thunder, Cura, Aerora, Stop, and Gravira!” He clapped his hands again, giggling like a schoolgirl. “You must’ve picked up the magical arts back on your home world, you’re such a quick study!”

You hummed noncommittally, putting away your weapons. “Maybe, I’m not sure.”

Seeing the look on your face, thinly veiled frustration and sadness pulling a weight on your shoulders, his own joy faded slightly. “Have you remembered anything?” He asked, reigning in his tone.

Your arms crossed over your chest, your eyes on the ground. “No.” You mumbled. “It’s still just color. It feels like I’m trapped underwater, and everything’s just…” You collapsed in your seat at the table with a defeated sigh. “Blurry. I can’t make out a thing.”
Merlin hummed softly, patting your hand while he waved his wand. A kettle on a rickety stove whistled and the china marched toward the tea table with pastries and chocolates. “I’m so sorry, dear.” He said, taking a seat. “I wish we could make things go faster, but…” He sighed again and poured you a cup of tea, you could already tell it was your favorite just by the smell.

Desperate to change the subject, you cut him off before he could continue, “I’ve been meaning to ask, who’s Sora?”

By his pause, you knew he was onto what you were doing, but he answered with grace. “He’s the boy who wields the keyblade.” He passed you your tea and saucer before serving himself some. “If anyone can stop the worlds from falling to the Heartless, it will have to be him.” He shook his head lowly. “It’s a terrible job to put on a boy so young, but there is no one else.”

You listened intently, blowing the steam off your tea before taking a small sip. “How old is he?”

“Only fourteen.” He replied warily, to your shock. “He’s come a long way, there is no doubt, and he’s grown quite powerful in such a short time. But, I wish the keyblade chose another, so that he may not go it alone.” He stirred his drink with a dainty spoon. “Please, don’t get the wrong idea. He’s a wonderful child, kind, strong-willed, it’s no surprise he’s a wielder.”

“But he’s only a kid.” You said, setting your tea on your saucer. “Is he out there alone?”

“No, no!” He choked, “No, two of the King’s advisors are with him. The magician Donald, and the knight Goofy. I have faith that they’ll stick with him and protect him when needed.”

Only slightly relieved, you took a bite out of a fruit filled pastry and thought. “What is a keyblade? Why is he the only one?”

Merlin sighed again, wistful. “It wasn’t always like this.” He began. “There used to be many keyblade wielders out there, I’ve heard, but they’re all gone. Now, there is only Sora and the King. The King’s master, Yen Sid was one as well, but he’s been retired for a while now. Far too old to go galivanting from world to world.” He chuckled to himself, reminiscing on some old memory. “The keyblade can be picky when it wants to be. Some are given the power by another, sometimes it will seek a person out on its own, when it’s power is called. But, those secrets do not lie with me.”

“That’s a shame.” You said, “I’m sure this boy could use all the help he can get.” Nonchalantly, you added, “I thought people can’t travel to other worlds. How’s that work?”

He chuckled lightly. “The King gave his friends a ship. Apparently, it’s quite the marvel. Though he doesn’t own it, Cid just adores the contraption.”


A calm quiet fell over the both of you, easy and familiar. You were getting comfortable within this new family, finding you place among the rag tag siblings. Younger than Leon and Aerith, and older than Yuffie, but they hardly made you feel like the weird middle sibling. They all came from the same world, Cid had been raising them for the past nine years on his own.

Polaroid pictures were kept in a scrapbook, carefully maintained by Cid and Aerith. They had let you browse through them on a quiet evening in.

“Who’s this?” You asked, pointing at a picture of a young man with blond hair. He was leaning against a wall with Aerith and Leon, smiling fondly.
A sad haze fell over the eldest two. “That’s Cloud.” Aerith answered when Leon looked away. “He used to live with us, too. But one day, he just disappeared.”

Cid sighed from his recliner, chewing on another toothpick. “He’d been acting strange before it happened. We knew something was botherin’ him, but he wouldn’t tell us what.” His eyes flicked to Leon, still silent, “All we can do right now is hope he’s okay out there.”

To dispel the heavy silence, Yuffie threw herself on you, camera in hand. “Let’s take a picture with you, Astra!”

Aerith and Cid immediately agreed, despite your surprised sputtering. Soon, Aerith was sitting beside you on the sofa, Leon sat on the armrest and Cid was leaning over the back of it. Yuffie prepared the camera then sprawled herself over your laps.

“Cheese!” She crowed.

“Cheese!” You all laughed.

Now, your picture was among them. You still smiled at the memory. You were grateful, happy, and you should’ve been content. But, something just out of your peripheral, something that continued to allude you, called out your name in the dark of your dreams.

“---!”

You blinked back to reality with a gasp. Merlin was watching you over his half-moon glasses, concerned.

“Astra, are you alright?” He asked, “I’ve been saying your name, but you weren’t responding.”

“Oh,” You breathed, “Yeah, yeah, I’m okay. Just…”

He waited for you to continue, but eventually nodded slowly. “We should pick this up at a later date.”

Your heart plummeted. “What? No, I’m okay! I want to do the memory therapy, please.”

But he only shook his head. “I think you’ve worked yourself hard enough today. Take the rest of the day to relax.” He finished his tea and stepped away from the table. “Would you like me to escort you home?”


“Goodbye, dear, get home safe!” He called, his bead uncurling as he watched you leave. “I did the right thing, didn’t I?” He murmured.

Light collected by the white carriage, and the Fairy Godmother appeared. She folded her hands together and gave him a coy smile. “They’re stronger than you realize, Merlin.” She told him. “You could’ve told them today.”

He sighed heavily, “I know, but they’ve been so distracted as of late.” He took a seat back at the table, and she appeared in your chair across from him. “I fear what they will do when I tell them. They have a support system here, but if they decide to leave in search for it?” He shook his head lowly, “We’d be devastated if something were to happen to them. Cid’s poor heart can’t handle another disappearance.”
“You think too poorly of Astra and Cid.” She scolded lightly. “I know you fear for them all, but Astra’s fate lies outside of Traverse Town.” She patted his hand. “If and when they decide to come back, they will. You’ll see.”

He snorted, “You’re right, of course. This old man just worries more than he ought.”

“Don’t we all?”

The night was still young as the door to the underground lake closed behind you. It didn’t take long for the Heartless to appear, and though the old man thought you needed rest, you vehemently disagreed. Your body practically went on auto-pilot as you began to dispatch them, an Aerora here, a well-timed Thunder there while you swung around the plaza like a chimpanzee that got it’s hands on some weaponized yo-yo’s and was going absolutely ape shit.

Finally, what was left of the horde dissolved, leaving you alone with energy to spare. Stuffing your hands into your pockets, you decided to take the long way around to the First District. Yuffie was stuck home today, but you hoped her attention was elsewhere when you dashed past the window into the alleys of the Second District.

Despite lined with shops and hotels, the place was dead as always. Cid told you that once the Heartless started appearing, almost everyone deserted to the F.D., which explained the many people left to wander the street. Everything there from motels to homes were crammed with refugees. Unless they could defend themselves, that’s where the people of Traverse Town had to stay.

Your friends and Merlin were the only people you saw living outside. You tried not to think about those who never got out.

An unfamiliar sound made you pause, the whispers that followed it made your hair stand on end. It was coming from the fountain. I hate weird coincidences. You thought bitterly, peeking around the corner of the alley.

Well, they were certainly people, though their sense of style was lacking. Full length black cloaks hung from their frames, both men. One with long, pink hair and the other with shorter gray hair. Behind them was a dark portal of swirling blacks and blues, like paint come alive.

“I don’t see why our leader would be so interested in such a small world.” The tall one said, though his tone didn’t seem all that bothered.

“It is the purpose of this world that interests him.” Shorty replied. “It appeared when the worlds started falling to the Heartless. All those who survive those calamities and keep their humanity inevitably wind up here, and yet, it managed to allude us for so long.”

Tall and Pretty thought on this, his eyes swept the District. “Then, where are the people?”

“That answer lies with the same reason we found this place.” Shorty stepped forward, and Shadows crept up to meet him. “The Heartless have found the last safe haven of it’s victims.”

Flower petals whipped around them and the Shadows were gone in a poof of mist. A long, dangerous scythe replaced them, pulled out of thin air. Tall and Pretty held onto the handle and casually leaned it against his shoulder.
“We should thank that witch.” He hummed.

Shorty scoffed. “Perhaps.” With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the portal. “You remember our leader’s orders, don’t you?”

“Of course.” He replied snidely. “Simple recon.”

“Then let us move on.” Shorty began walking, straight towards the Gizmo Shop. Movement caught his eye as he passed the alley, pausing his stride.

TnP stopped beside him. “What?”

Shorty stared into the shadows, but he eventually shrugged. “Probably the Heartless.” And they moved on.

Leaving you sweating against the brick, just out of sight. *Oh, thank god.* You breathed, listening to their fading footsteps.

Whatever they were doing, something about those two made your hackles rise. You couldn’t put your finger on why. They looked human enough, they talked human enough, they moved human enough, but your brain was telling you those two were *not* that. Something straight out of the Uncanny Valley.

Despite wanting nothing but to follow them and see what they were up to, that wicked scythe told you what would happen if you tried. One close call was enough.

With the sound of their swishing coats long gone, you peeked around the corner. Sure enough, they weren’t around. *For the time being, anyway.* You thought, and ran in the opposite direction, towards District One.

The gate shut behind you, only for you and Cid to nearly bowl each other over.

“Woah,” He huffed, steadying your shoulders. “Where’s the fire, kid?”

You gabbed his arms. “Cid, these guys in black coats jumped out of this dark weird portal thingy and they’re super strong and they look human but I don’t think they are and they almost saw me and I think they would’ve killed me if they did!” You took a long inhale, “And – And that’s it, I think.”

His sharp blue eyes were popping out of his skull. “Woah, back up. *What* just popped up and *where* are they going?”

“Weird not-people in black coats! They were going towards the Third District!”

He twisted to stare at the plaza, then whipped back around. He shook your shoulders gently. “You stay here – “

“No, I will not!” You shot back. “Not if you’re going over there by yourself!”

He was already stomping towards the Third District, and you followed in hot pursuit. “I’m not arguin’ with you, Astra!”

“It ain’t an argument!” You told him. “One of them’s got a scythe that took out a bunch of Heartless like it was nothing!”

Back and forth and back and bickering forth, until the doors swung open, and no one was there.
“The hell?” You whispered, walking further outside. “They were going here, I saw them.”

“Don’t act suspicious.” He scolded you quietly. “They could be hiding, or maybe they went back the way they came. C’mon, we’re gonna check on Yuffie.”

Yuffie was just fine.

She stared at the two of you barging in with a bowl of cheap ramen in her hands. “Wow, where’s the fire?”

“No fire,” You said, “just weirdos.”

“Astra said there’s a couple of strangers in black coats lurkin’ around here.” Cid added, finally relaxing, “Didja see them?”

She lowered her chopsticks, “Uh, yeah, actually.” She nodded to the closed curtains. “I saw them through the window. A guy with long, pink hair and a short one with the bad bangs?”

“Yes!” You shouted.

And just like that, all of Cid’s relief evaporated, “They didn’t see you, did they?”

“Don’t think so.” But she was sweating now, “What’s going on?”

“Don’t know yet. But those guys are up to something, and they’re dangerous, too.” You told them what you witnessed back in the Second District.

Cid was quiet while you and Yuffie began freaking out in tandem. (“They came out of a portal?! Like an evil portal?!”) (“I KNOW, I have no idea what it – “) Until he finally snapped. “I don’t want any of y’all near them.”

You both gasped, “What?”

“I said what I said.” He leveled you both with a hard stare. “I don’t want either of you, or Aerith, and yes, even Leon near them. Not until we know what the hell they’re doing here and just what they can do.” His head fell heavy in his hands with a great sigh. “We’ve gotta warn Merlin, too. And Sora, if we see him again.”

All was quiet for a long, tense moment. Wet tapping hit the window and the door, somewhere above you, something was leaking.

---

Despite the constant guilt that was eating away at your stomach, you did not stay away. To be fair, you weren’t interacting with them at all, you just happened to be where they were at the time. Where they couldn’t see you. Or hear you. Or otherwise know you were spying on them.

Sometimes it was the same two from the first round, sometimes there were different people, like a blonde lady with a sharp tongue and a big guy who looked like he was a Greek statue come to life. You were pretty sure you wouldn’t be able to take either of them, but there was this new guy walking around by himself who seemed like easy pickings.

That was, if you were ever going to pick.

For the time being, you were just interested in the spooky portals. A way off this world, a way to…
To what? You scoffed from the rooftops, watching the blonde and pink pair skulk about the Second District. *My world, whatever it was, is gone now. No going back there.*

And yet, the thought persisted. There was something out there, and it kept pulling you towards it. Whatever, whoever it might be.

Eventually, they came to stand before the fountain, talking quietly to one another. Whatever they were interested in, it was somewhere there, but they looked just about as stumped as you felt. You recognized this pattern and you leaned forward in anticipation.

With a wave of her hand, blondie summoned the portal. The two shared a few more words, then left together. It closed behind them.

You stood up, flexing your hands by your sides. This was a pattern too, one of your own design. They had come and gone seven times, and every time they left through that void, you would try to summon it yourself. But nothing yet, honestly it left you feeling constipated, today would be no different.

*It's not gonna happen.* That tinny, terrible voice told you. *But I still have to try.* You told it back.

You brought back their image, still fresh and new in your mind, and carefully, you mimicked her every move.

Nothing.

Biting back your disappointment, you tried again, smoother this time. You focused on nothing but the darkness behind your eyelids.

Still, nothing.

It was going to be just another day of no rewards. Still, one last try wouldn’t hurt anyone, hopefully. Your gaze fell on the shadows lying in the corners of alley below you. It grew and festered as you stared at it, though you knew it did nothing of the sort. And yet, it drew you deeper, and deeper, until all else faded. The sound of rushing water drowned all sounds of the night. You raised your hand.

“---!”

A sinister hiss rose from the roof tiles, shocking you straight to your core. An undignified yelp followed you as you nearly jumped straight off the roof. Nearly. Literally by your fingertips. You scrambled back up to witness the last of the doorway manifest.

*I did it.* You barely remembered to breathe as you stepped closer. All the times you studied it from afar, but the real thing right in front of you simply didn’t compare. Out from it came a bitter wind, the hairs on your arms stood on end.

*Cid would be so disappointed in me.* That tinny voice reminded you. *I’ll come back.* You replied. *I just need a peek.*

First, you poked it and ran to the side, as if expecting it to bite. It did not. Just had to make sure, was all. Next, you stuck your arm in up to the elbow. You waited. You waved it around. Then, and only then did you stick your head in.

Catacombs of the same undulating blues and purples snaked forward. Sneaks of branching paths caught on the murky shadows making up the corners. That same bitter wind pulled all breath from
your body, made your eyes water. In there was silence, and only silence.

At least it was better than finding all the black coats on the other side, ready to beat your face in. Which was what you expected. But, honestly, you weren’t sure if it was *that* much better.

You put in one foot, then the other. With the portal in your peripheral, you took your first steps into the Dark Corridor. For a moment, all was well.

Then, the Heartless came, as sudden as an avalanche and all at once. Forms you’ve never seen before morphed from the very walls and were on you in a second. All of a sudden it was *too many hands too many eyes too many mouths too many claws I’m going to die I’m going to die They’re tearing me apart Screaming —*

You shrieked in terror, casting Aerora after the first few got their licks in. The next wave bounced off, but they landed on their feet and more were already joining them. Your twin yo-yos flew at the cavalry, destroying some, but more and more and more just kept coming. Before the panic could kick in completely, you screamed, “STOP!”

The clock appeared over them, and then was gone. The seconds were ticking by, you didn’t have time. You twisted yourself around and threw yourself back through the gate.

You fell ungracefully on your knees, “Go away – Go away – Go away!” You waved your hand, but it stayed stubbornly in place. “*Go away!”* You bawled. “---!”

You grabbed the air with both fists and tore it apart. The door whistled back into shadows, leaving you alone in the night. Slowly, you pulled your shaking limbs close, felt the snot and tears roll down your face. In the silence and loneliness, you let you sobs loose, and listened to them echo off the rooftops of District Two.

---

You limply closed the front door behind you. You’d cry more in the shower and take a nap in Aerith’s bunk, that was the plan. But, the universe had a different idea.

“Astra, we were wonderin’ when you were gonna drop in.”

Cid sat at the small coffee table with a mug of coffee on the wood. Merlin sat across from him, cradling his own chipped mug in his hands.

You made a small noise, keeping your face lowered so he wouldn’t see your red eyes and tear stained cheeks. “Hey, sorry.” When you moved forward, heading for the hallway, you felt his hand on your shoulder.

“Kid, we need to talk.”

That got your heart racing. Already frayed nerves were further torn when you saw his face. It wasn’t anger, it wasn’t annoyance or fear, but it was a look that had no place on his face. The wrinkles seemed to multiply under his eyes and at the corners of his mouth. With a pit being dug behind your lungs, you glanced at Merlin, and wasn’t reassured.

“Please, come take a seat, Astra. Would you like some cocoa?”

“Um,” Slowly, you nodded, and took a seat on the wooden chair.
Merlin waved his wand, and another small mug danced from the cupboard towards the table. A pot on the stove began to steam and it rose up and poured the frothing hot chocolate into it without mess. You all waited until it marched into your waiting hands before getting on with whatever needed getting on with.

You nervously took a long sip, eyes skipping from Merlin to Cid and back. “So, what’s going on?”

Merlin sighed softly, “There’s been something I’ve been meaning to tell you.” He admitted, with no small note of sadness. “I should’ve told you weeks ago, but, I put it off. Kept going on with the treatment, hoping I was wrong.”

You lowered your warm mug to your lap, looking to Cid for comfort. All he had was a deep frown.

“I came earlier, thought you’d be in, but you weren’t so I’ve been speaking about it with Cid.” Merlin continued. “I was wondering if you had said anything to him that would prove me wrong, but,”

Cid shook his head. “You can’t keep putting it off.” He told him, then softened to you. “I don’t know what all this could mean myself, but I know it’s important. So, keep your ears open and your head on when you hear this, okay?”

“Oh okay?” You tried not to whimper. “You guys are scaring me a little. What’s wrong?”

Merlin’s hands tightened around his mug, but he looked you straight in the eye when he revealed his knowledge. “Your memories are no longer with you. They are not locked away in your mind, they are gone, completely. This part of you, the part that remembers your past, your home world, your name, it’s not with you, and what’s left of it is greatly fragmented. Try as we might, we can not recover what is not there.

I am so, greatly sorry, Astra.”

Your mug slipped between your fingers. It hardly registered that there was no crash, no hot pain on your legs, that it was stopped short by a wave of Merlin’s wand. His words were on repeat, like a broken recorder.

*Your memories are no longer with you… We can not recover what is not there.*

“No.” You whispered, unable to stop the overflow on your cheeks. A hole was eating you from the inside out, a gaping, weeping wound. It spread and spread, it was going to leave you hollow and empty, and you didn't know how to stop it.

“Astra…” Cid murmured. He opened his arms, not an order or a question, only an invitation, opened if needed.

Unable to hold yourself up any longer, you moved to the couch and fell into his side. Your chest was already tight as you began to hyperventilate. Everything was just too heavy with the grief and fear and sorrow you had tried so hard to hide. Cid’s arms held you close, rubbing your back is slow circles.

It was all becoming too much. Someone or something was out there, and you were missing them, so badly it hurt. And you were never going to know why.
The next few days passed in a grief laden haze. You dreamed of falling into the water, swirls of paint rolling on the surface above you, unintelligible, muffled words spoken to you. Every night, you tried to swim back, but every night you drowned. The water tasted salty, but sweet.

You tried to practice magic, but you didn’t have the strength. You tried to cook, but you couldn’t stay focused. You tried to eat, but your stomach was in knots. You tried to simply exist, but you couldn’t think of a reason to.

The question hung over you, glaring at you from every dark corner:

*What am I going to do now?*

From the moment you woke up, your memories, the lack thereof, haunted you. *How can they be gone?* You wondered in the dead of night, unable to sleep. *How can a person just wake up with no memories? And why did it have to be me?*

You sat in the alley of District One, bouncing an old ball you found off the wall in front of you. *Ba-Dump Ba-Dump.* The quiet street was brought to an inconstant drone in the background. *Ba-Dump Ba-Dump.* The others were doing their thing, leaving you to your own devices. *Ba-Dump Ba-Dump.* Or so you thought.

“Geeze, don’t look like you want to die or something.”

You flinched at the voice and turned to see Yuffie at the mouth of the alley. Her hands were on her hips, bags of metal clinking against metal were strung from her arms. A solid pout pulled her lips.

You sighed, and threw the ball. *Ba-Dump.* “Now’s not a good time, Yuffie.”

*Ba-Dump.* “It hasn’t been a good time since Merlin told you ‘the thing’.” She snipped back.

You laughed humorlessly. “Yeah, ain’t it the shit?” *Ba-Dump.*

*Ba-* She caught the ball out of the air and pinned you with a sad glare. Without warning, she put down the bags on the uneven bricks. “We’re gonna do something.”

*I don’t wanna do something.* You thought petulantly, like a six-year old who put themself in time out.

“It’s gonna be fun.” She added, throwing a smile over her shoulder at you. She got up and stepped back, revealing several cans of spray paint in a variety of colors.

“What?”

She picked up two cans and shook them. “This place could use some sprucing up. We’re gonna paint the town!”

“Not the whole town, I hope.” You blurted before thinking.

She laughed, “Duh. We’re just going to paint that wall, the one you’re sitting against.” She stepped by your feet. “Want the red, or the green?”

You stared.

“Red or green, Astra.” She repeated, daring you to try something.

She gave you the can with a smarmy smile.

The two of you got to work. It was slow at first, forcing the movements with apathetic carelessness, but you eventually began to notice things. A spot there that was bothering you, finding the right color to pair with another, fixing little mistakes with focused ease. It was like something had taken over you, pulled you into the here and now, and it was the best feeling in the world.

“Wow, Astra,” Yuffie whistled, standing back. “You’re good at this.”

You couldn’t stop the smile on your face, “You think?”

“Yeah! Come take a look.”

You carefully finished a line of purple and came to stand beside her. It was a team effort, you could see Yuffie’s bold colors framing your detailed mirage in the middle. She even added a little face in the corner.

“IT’s loud.” You stated, unsure of where to look. “Is that supposed to be you?”

She squatted, putting her face next to the purple spray painted one. “Yeah, and?”

“Nothing!” You laughed. “It’s adorable.”

She grinned and ran back over to your side, punching your arm lightly. The both of you stopped to admire your handiwork. Try as you might to appreciate Yuffie’s scribbling, your eyes kept getting drawn to your piece. You hadn’t seen it from far away before. You thought you were just putting color around willy-nilly, but, there was definitely something in there.

Yuffie narrowed her eyes at the middle too, humming quizzically. “That’s a sunset, right?”

“I…” You paused, “I’m not sure. I wasn’t really thinking about anything when I made it, but yeah. It looks like one, huh.”
She leaned forward, then pointed to the red blob. “That’s a person.” She said, then pointed at the blue one. “And so’s that one. And that’s the ground.” She puffed up her chest. “I’m an expert at those find the image puzzle books! I can tell.”

You wanted to roll your eyes and laugh it off, but when you got a second look, time froze. And you were back under the water, trying to reach the blurred image above you. It was so close, your fingers were bushing the surface, your stomach twisted against the lack of air –

“Those are flowers.” You whispered, pointing to the random splashes of color. “That’s grass, and those are – “ those are – “I – I – “

“---! C’mon, keep up, or we’re gonna leave you behind!”

… whatever’s left is greatly fragmented.

You snapped back to reality so hard you recoiled. Yuffie was at your shoulder, nervously tugging at your hood.

“Astra, you’re crying again.” She said, “What’s wrong?”

You shook your head, letting the tears collect under your chin. There were no words that could possibly express what you felt in your heart in that moment. But you had your answer now.

You were going to find your memories. And nothing was going to stop you.

Especially not Sitar-Loser-McGee.

You figured it out after talking with Leon about everything and nothing at all. Neither of you could sleep, it was one in the morning, and you had each other to keep company. It wasn’t the first, nor would it likely be the last time that happened.

Just talking about the creepy black coats that had been in and out lately, wondering if it was some sort of cult uniform or if there was actually a reason they wore those heavy looking things all the time. And that’s when it hit, you actually gasped aloud, startling Leon. They all used the portal full of Heartless spawn, but they never seemed all that bothered, and they also all wore those coats. Even if it was a longshot, even if you still weren’t sure you hadn’t just dreamt up that conversation, you were going to try.

I have someone out there I need to find.

So, there you were, pressed against the windowpane in the Second District. Bellow you was Sitar Guy, who often showed up alone and didn’t seem all that into fighting. Which suited you just fine.

You waited until he was almost right beneath you, and that’s when you jumped him. He shouted on his way down, now crumpled like a soda can. But, he wasn’t completely out. He twitched and groaned under you. Quickly, you grabbed his hair and smashed his face into the brick before you could think twice.

With dawning horror, you thought you had just killed a man. You threw yourself off of him and poked his neck. He didn’t move, and you were going to throw up, but then he snored.

You weren’t sure you liked this one. They were all bad, but this one in particular was out to give you a heart attack.

Making sure there weren’t any witnesses, you pulled him to the wall and started fishing him out of
the ridiculous coat. It was like handling a dead fish with human arms. Has anyone ever tried pulling a dead fish’s human arms out of a five-pound coat? Probably not, and good for them. It wasn’t fun, especially since this fish was absolutely not dead and might still whoop you if you didn’t get away before he woke up.

Finally, you slipped him out and had the coat at last. Before any misfortune could befall you, you took your spoils and ran. Hidden away in the Third District, on the bird’s perch overlooking the plaza, you got to work. There wasn’t time to dawdle, it was do or die.

You forced yourself in the coat, it fit wrong in weird places, but it was what it was. With the hood over your face, you pushed your fears to the back of your mind. With shaking fingers, you summoned the Dark Corridor. You patted your weapons one last time, took a deep breath, and stepped forth.

And you waited.

You walked further.

You waited.

You walked even further.

And you waited.

The walls moved and rippled, it felt like you were being slowly digested in the belly of some beast. The breeze was cold, but the floor was warm. A calamity in physical form. Each and every moment you lingered made your stomach turn.

But, there was no Heartless.

You wanted to cheer, to whoop and cry out your success into the dismal air. But, the reality was steadily crushing you.

The black coats knew someone was onto them. The black coats would go looking for you. The black coats would find what you stole. Every second you stayed in Traverse Town was a second they could be getting closer.

Getting closer to the people you’ve grown to care about so much, the thought of leaving them made you want to weep.

It would be your last dinner in Traverse Town. You tried to enjoy it, before you had to say goodbye. Tried to savor the familiarity of listening to the stories, of laughing, the ease and joy of simply being together. But it was tainted, no matter what you did to not think of what came next.

You took your time cleaning the dishes, Aerith and Leon were putting away the leftovers. Yuffie was bothering Cid, leaning over the back of his recliner and waving her hands in the air.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.” Aerith said, catching your attention. She finished zipping up a baggie. “It must feel like the end of the world, but I’m sure you’ll find them again, someday.” She put it away and turned to you with a fond smile. “I believe in you.”

Leon’s hand patted your head. “Time will do what time will do.” He said, smiling softly, then took
a seat on the wooden chair.

Aerith followed him, sitting on the sofa, and you were left to watch over them. This picture was worth a thousand memories, but they couldn’t replace the ones you’ve lost. With a heavy heart, you took a seat beside Aerith.

You waited patiently for a lull in conversation before calling for their attention. “Guys,” You began, “I wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.” You gave them a watery smile. “I can’t thank you enough.”

They opened their mouths, but you raised your hand, silently asking them to wait. “I wanted to let you know that I love you, so much.” Your voice cracked, the first of your sobs breaking through. “And I don’t want anything bad to happen to any of you, and that’s why…” You pinched your eyes shut, forcing back the waterworks. “That’s why I have to leave.”

“What?!” Cid and Yuffie cried.

Aerith, shocked into silence, could only say, “Astra…?”

It was Leon who asked, “What do you mean?”

Silently, you reached under the sofa, and pulled out the black coat. The room took a collective breath, watching the material unfold before them.

“I jumped one of them today.” You admitted, “They’ll be looking for me. But, I realized this is what keeps them safe when they’re in the portal. It’s full of Heartless, but when I put this on, it’s like I was invisible.” You lowered it onto your lap. “I can summon the portals, so I can go to other worlds. And, Cid, I’m sorry I didn’t do as you asked.

“But,” You looked him straight in the eye, “I know there’s someone out there, someone who knows me. I can feel it.” You touched your heart, “I can almost see them when I close my eyes. And I need to find them,” You told them, “not just so I can figure out who I am, but to know that they’re okay out there. That they’re safe.”

The sobs renewed again as you took in their expressions of shock and realization. “I didn’t want to leave without explaining myself. I wanted to say goodbye, and tell you that,” You took a deep breath, fighting to keep your voice steady, “that I’m going to miss you. And that I hope we’ll see each other again.”

When, one by one, they got up and held you close, the water overtook you and swept you away.

Later that night, the room of Merlin’s study was packed with your family. You had expected anger, even screaming, but there was only understanding and kindness behind every tearful goodbye.

“You’ve got everything?” Cid hovered, “Potions, Ethers, Cottages?”

You gave him a hug and pat the sack on your hip. “All that and more.”

He sighed, “Good.” Then gave you a last one-armed hug. “You travel safe now, y’hear?”

Aerith was next, she held you close. “I don’t like goodbyes.” She croaked. “So, let’s make this a ‘see you later’, okay?”
You hugged her back. “See you later, Aerith.”

“I’ll see you soon, Astra.”

Yuffie barely gave you a second to breathe before she gave you a bear-hug. “If you don’t come back, I’m gonna come hunt you down!” She told you, face buried in your shirt. “So promises the Great Ninja Yuffie.”

You laughed and kissed the crown of her head. “I’ll miss you too.”

Her next words were unintelligible, but her eyes were red and wet when she let you go.

“If anything happens, you know you can come back here.” Leon said, a bittersweet look in his eye. He mussed your hair, he never had been one for hugs. “And if you run into broody guy with blond hair, you tell him Leon’s waiting.”

“I will.” You said touching his hand. “I’ll make sure to tell you what he says.”

And finally, it was Merlin and the Fairy Godmother.

The Fairy Godmother smiled kindly and started fussing over your hair and dusting off your clothes. “I’m not sure we’ll meet again in this lifetime.” She said, “Change has a funny way with things such as hellos and goodbyes. But now that we’ve once met, I’ll remember you fondly. Allow this old woman one last gift.” She waved her wand, sparkles of magic dripping from the spell. “Bibbity – Bobbity – “ Her wand tapped your chest, “Boo!”

You touched the spot curiously, “Thank you, but what is it?”

“It’s so that you’ll always find your way back to them.” She nodded to the others. “No matter where any of you go, whatever troubles you may face, their home will always be in your reach.” Then, she held you. “Be good and true, my darling.”

“I will.” You whispered into her cape. “Thank you.”

Merlin was crying behind his glasses. “I do wish this could have gone differently,” He admitted softly, “but I have no hand in anyone’s fate but my own. People my age can only do what they can to make the lives of the young people easier than our own.”

“Merlin, you did.”

His old eyes shined and he sniffed into his handkerchief. “I – I hoped I had. Thank you for being such a good student, my dear.” He patted your hand. “Do stop by for tea some time again, would you?”

It was time. The shadows grew and the lights dimmed. You summoned the Dark Corridor.

You gave them one last teary smile. “Thank you all again.” You said, “I’m glad I got the chance to meet you.”

They waved farewell as you slipped on your coat and returned to the writhing bowels of the maze. You dismissed the portal with a wave of your hand. With a goal clear in mind, and no clear idea what was ahead, you began to walk your chosen path.

To fill the silence, you hummed a song.
I took too long trying to figure out how to put an image in ao3. I don't usually use airbrush tool, but I think I got the image across. If you want to see stuff that looks a lot better than that, you can check out my art tumblr at artoutforblood.tumblr.com
Also, I based Cloud and Leon's relationship on liverpops.tumblr.com which I came upon by accident a few years ago and can't imagine it any other way since. so, there will be tiniest hint of strifehart, yes. but anything that isn't reader/lea is not going to get a big spotlight
You've been to see many new faces and new places, but a close run-in with death has left you injured in the Dark Corridor.

The Dark Corridor was a cold and lonely place, but the pain coursing up and down your back set your skin ablaze. It was close run-in, death nearly had you in its jaws, but you were alive. Painfully, bitterly alive, despite everything.

You've been to new worlds, you've seen and met strange and amazing sights and people. The months had gone by fast, adventures twisting and turning you around and around until it left you dizzy. But it was all just white noise as you carried yourself through the labyrinth.

You practically leapt at the first portal you found. You didn't care what was on the other side, you were going to go insane if you had to stay another second in the Dark Corridor. Anything was better than the low groan echoing through the halls and the moving walls and ever looming danger of the Heartless and the Black Coats. Anything.

You stepped from the weird warm ground and onto lush green jungle floor. The buzzing of insects moaned in the afternoon heat. Trees rose high above your head, tangled in one another, soaking in the sun. The sound of rushing water could be heard a distance away.

The Incan Empire

Already feeling the leather stick to your skin, you hurriedly peeled it off and tucked it away, only to reveal your clothes had changed, however slightly. Instead of your jacket, a poncho hung off your shoulders, the hood still attached. Your pants were still mostly the same, but your shoes were replaced with sturdy sandals.

A light bulb went blinked on over your head. Oh, that's right, You thought, pinching the fabric, The Fairy Godmother enchanted my clothes a while back. Said something about a necessary change in wardrobe.

Just then, a shrill scream threw the birds into the air. Giving it no second thought, you grabbed your weapons and raced towards the sound. You dodged trees and jumped over rocks, reflexes built on way too many faceplants after tripping on Merlin's evil stepstool during training. All the while, more screams filled the air, now joined by another.

Finally, you burst out of the bush and came upon a peculiar sight. A large man, also wearing a poncho, was brandishing a large stick against a small mob of Heartless. Behind him, some kind of weird, extra hairy horse was cowerering and positively wailing.
Figuring you could unpack all of that later, you turned your attention to the Heartless. “Hold on!” You shouted, and leapt into the air. “Over here!” You called before spinning your yo-yos into a frenzy. The Powerwilds scattered around you and then rushed right back with their claws bared. Methodically, you struggled to crowd-control the maniac little monkeys. Then, the stranger barreled towards you, waving the stick like a club.

“No!” You shouted, watching a Powerwild switch targets and back up.

Before it could flail it’s talons and rip the poor man to shreds, you let one star fly, catching it in the back and sending it back to the dust it once came. You flipped over and stood with your back to the man.

“You need to get somewhere safe!” You hissed, catching a Sniperwild before it could get you with it’s pea shooter.

“I can’t just leave you here by yourself!” He replied, still holding his stick with shaking hands.

You chuckled humorlessly, “Trust me, I’ve got this. You just hang back.”

“But – “

“You heard them!” Came another voice from behind. “Get back over here and protect me!”

You didn’t stick around to hear the end of that conversation, and you spun back onto the fray. Though the monkey heartless were strong in number, you eventually got that number down to zero. With a sigh, you put away your weapons and turned around. A pair of fuzzy ears were sticking out from a rock.

“It’s safe now.” You called, approaching it.

The man’s hat, then his head popped into view. After a quick survey he hauled himself up and dusted off his clothes. The stick lied broken a few feet away. The weird animal wasn’t far behind, sticking close to his back.

With his head turned away from you, he laughed nervously. “Nice going, Pacha, you escorted me straight into a trap.”

What. “Did that horse just talk?”

The man flinched, but soon accepted the turn of events with a weary sigh. “Actually, he’s a llama.”

The llama in question was still hiding behind him. There was the clack of teeth and the man jumped with a shout. “I thought I told you not to say anything!” He hissed, then sing-songed, “Ha, there is no talking llama here! You must be mistaken!”

You crossed your arms, “Am I supposed to think the clouds shouted down from the sky?”

The man rubbed his eyes with a deep frown. “The cats out of the bag, your Highness.”

With a frustrated growl, the talking llama stomped around him. “I am not a llama!” He shouted indignantly, then turned his fiery attention to you. “And just what sort of peasant are you supposed to be?”

“Excuse me?” You deadpanned.
“Uh,” The stranger cut in, “pardon his Highness, he’s a…” He leaned in and whispered, “I’d say he’s cranky, but to be honest he’s just a brat.”

You narrowed your eyes at the less-than-majestic creature. “Uh huh.”

“In any case,” he continued with a warm smile, “we should thank you for saving us against those creatures. My name’s Pacha.” He offered his hand.

You gave him a firm handshake. “I go by Astra.”

He folded his hands together, “Thanks, Astra. Excuse me, but you don’t look like you’re from around these parts.”

Remembering Merlin’s warnings about the world order, you came up with a lie on the fly. “I’m a traveler. I’m going around the world, searching for someone.” You nodded to the remains of the battlefield. “How long have the Heartless been bothering you?”

The llama forced himself back into the conversation. “The whatz-less?”

“The Heartless.” You repeated. “They’re monsters born from the darkness in people’s hearts, and they’re very dangerous.”

“Pfft!” He snorted, “You’re telling us, they almost had me for a llama-lunch!” He shuddered in disgust and fear. “I’m not going to end up in some monster’s stomach! I’m too pretty to die.”

Pacha nodded, “I thought we were done for. I tried to fight back, but it was like,” he shook his head, eyes distant, “nothing could hurt them.”

You glanced at the broken stick on the ground. “I don’t know the whole answer myself, but most weapons won’t hurt them.” You undocked one of your yo-yo’s so they could see. “Mine work against them just fine, but that’s only because they were made to fight them.”

“Then you will come with us!” The llama decided, “Surely, you’ve got nothing better to do.”

Before you could burn the annoying horse’s ass, Pacha stepped in for you. “You said you were looking for someone, right?” He waited for your nod. “Then Emperor Kuzco here,” he said pointedly over his shoulder, “should help you find them.”

“Wait, you mean the llama?”

The llama’s ears went stiff straight. “You think you can order me around?” He barked, “I already have to save your precious hilltop, why should I do them any favors?”

“You certainly haven’t given me a reason to help you with that attitude.” You growled, crossing your arms again.

He marched right up to you. “I am Emperor Kuzco, and I have to get back to my palace and turn back into my beautiful self! You should be honored to help me.”

“You’re not my Emperor.” You laughed, “I’m not from here, your Llamaness.”

“But,” Pacha grinned by your elbow, “if you help them out, maybe they’ll accompany us and make sure we don’t die before we get you back.” He gave you a pleading side-eye. “Right?”

You mulled over it for a second. Stranger in a foreign land with no idea where anything is is given a chance to play bodyguard for a while for a fuzzy emperor. Except, that same fuzzy emperor was
obnoxious and smelled bad. But, you sighed, if you left them out here alone they could die to the Heartless.

“You promise,” You said to his Llamaness, “that you’ll help me?”

The two were in a glare-off.

(“We don’t need them-”) (“Need I remind you, your Highness, we would be dead if they hadn’t saved us.”) (“They’re suspicious and rude and they’re clothes are terrible!”) (“You are a llama, you have no thumbs, and I can’t protect us against these Heartless.”)

You watched their back and forth heated whispering with vague amusement. Finally, the argument petered out, and the two turned to you. Pacha, with a warm, if exhausted smile, and his Llamaness, with a sour pout.

He groaned dramatically. “Fiiiiiine. You join us as our bodyguard, and when I get my body back, I’ll help you find… whatever it is you’re looking for.”

“Deal.”

Pacha shook your hand, sealing it. “Thanks. The capitol is this way.”

The three of you began your long trek. You side eyed the supposed Emperor Llama. “I’m going to assume this doesn’t happen very often.”

Pacha chuckled. “It’s certainly a first for me.”

Kuzco put his chin haughtily in the air, pretending not to hear you.

“How did this even happen?” You asked curiously.

His Llamaness huffed, “That doesn’t matter! What matters is, is that I get to my palace, get my body back, and get back to being the Amazing Emperor Kuzco. And not sad, miserable llama Kuzco.”

“In other words, we don’t know.” Pacha said.

“How’d you get roped in all this?”

He shrugged, “I found him in a sack on my cart as I was going home. I’ve no idea how he got there, though.”

“Which is still suspicious!” His Llamaness barked.

The two began bickering again. It was going to be a long trip to the capitol.
Journey to

The Incan Empire
“No, no, you listen to me!” Kuzco snapped, “All you care about is your - your stupid hilltop!”

“What?”

“And you!” He growled at you, “all you care about is this missing friend you don’t even remember! Neither of you care about me!”

Your hackles rose, “What?”

Kuzco waved you off with his hooves, “Now just go.”

Pacha sputtered, “But – But – “

“They’re going to kill you!” You repeated, trying to get it through his thick skull. “Pacha and I heard the whole – “

He shouted over the both you, “Get on, get out of here!”

Pacha’s hands balled into fists. “Fine!” And stomped off without another word.

You glared at his Llamaness, in all his stupid, hardheaded glory. There were no words that could come through the broil of your anger and disappointment. You ran off after Pacha without a second glance. Kuzco was on his own.

After a few minutes on the path, you saw him further on. By the way his back was hunched, he was still steamed. You said nothing as you caught up to him, still seeing red yourself. The both of you walked in silence down the mountain, stewing in your thoughts.

Finally, Pacha sighed, running a hand down his tired face. “How are you feeling?” He asked.

You grunted, then answered quietly, “Really stupid.”
His lips twitched, a ghost of a grin. “And why’s that?”

You gave him a look. “Because I thought his Llamaness was actually a kinda okay guy? That he would at least have half a brain to figure out we’re trying to help him?” After a moment, you added in a sad, soft voice, “That he’d keep his stupid word. Obviously, I was wrong.”

A warm, heavy hand patted your shoulder kindly. Pacha’s smile was wane but still kind. “We’re not wrong.”

“What?”

He took his hand back and still continued down the road. “We’re not wrong about him. Not you, not me.”

You stopped, dirt settled over your sandals. Pacha rested just a little further down, giving you his full attention.

You took a moment to get your thoughts together. “You mean, he’s not a conceited, selfish, miserable llama-person?” You asked.

He gave you a coy look. “Astra, what did you think about him when we walked into that restaurant?”

“That he looked really stupid with those fake eyelashes on.”

That got a belly laugh out of him. He wiped his face, talking through his chuckles. “No, no, try again.”

You shrugged, feeling disagreeable and grouchy. But, under his knowing gaze, you finally broke. “I thought he was alright.” You muttered. “He could be kinda chill, when he wanted to be. And he was funny, though I’m still not sure if he ever actually means to be.” You shrugged again. “I don’t know. I guess I just thought he was becoming a good guy.”

Pacha nodded sadly, “Yeah. I thought so, too.” He approached you, until you both were overlooking the landscape. So much different than Traverse Town, sprawling and green and lush and beautiful as it was deadly. “But just because he’s a stubborn jackass doesn’t mean he’s still not all of those things, too.”

A surprised laugh burst out of you. “I don’t think I’ve heard you swear before. I didn’t think you were capable of it.”

He joined your laughter. “Hey, I’ve got little kids, it’s been awhile. But, you understand what I’m saying, right?”

You frowned, feeling your stomach bunch into knots. “Yeah, I guess.” You gave him a lopsided grin. “Friends don’t give up on friends.”

“Even when they fight.” He patted your shoulder again. “Trust me, I’ve had lots of friends and I’ve been in plenty fights. And I’m not even counting the recent ones.” He grinned, smoothing out his poncho. “And throwing a friendship away in the toilet is just never worth it. Sometimes, you’ve just got to apologize.”

You snorted, “I hear you, but I’m not apologizing.”

“Oh, we’re not.” He agreed. He nodded towards a valley below. “He will. We’ve just got to wait
for him.”

“But what about that pointy woman and the big guy?” You asked as he picked up his trek. “They’re gonna kill him, and he was going straight for them!”

“He’s fine.” He said, pointing down at the jungle below. Some brush was moving, you could see a flash of red and black. “Now, let’s go somewhere he’ll be able to find.”

The angry storm in your chest was beginning to fade. You hoped Kuzco would do the right thing, this time. He was capable of it, you were sure. “Okay.” You said, falling in line beside Pacha. “Lead the way, escort.”

“I’ll count on you to watch my back, bodyguard.” He chuckled.

Soon enough, the two of you were sitting in a field of, coincidentally, llamas. You sat beside Pacha as he began regaling the tales of your misadventures with his Llamaness to the herd. And, just as he said he would, Kuzco himself showed up, just in time.

“Now call us crazy for following this guy all the way out here, but as much as he’d try to deny it, I know there’s some good in him. Right, Astra?”

You shrugged with a laugh. “Right, Pacha.”

He then added with a conspiring wink, “Besides, we couldn’t just leave him out here all alone. He’s a lousy llama.”

“The lousiest llama ever.” You added, and looked up, finally acknowledging Kuzco’s presence. “He’d be lost without us.”

Kuzco wore an open-mouthed grin as you and Pacha got up from the ground. He approached hurriedly, but stopped, his ears falling against his head. “Hey, listen, guys…” He began, “About what I said – What I said to you back to the diner, I – I – I didn’t – I’m really - “

Pacha put his hand up. The meaning was heard, loud and clear.

“So,” Pacha said, “you tired of being a llama?”

“Yehehes!” He bawled with actual tears in his eyes.

“Then, we’d better get going.” You said, “If you want to come along.”

“I’m coming along! I’m coming!” He continued to cry as he galloped after you.
“Good afternoon, your Llamaness.” You said, walking into the throne room.

Kuzco, again Emperor, was speaking to his advisor, who was, blessedly, not Yzma. He perked up upon your arrival and gave a graceful wave. With a dismissal to his new advisor, her came strutting towards you with arms wide.

“Astra, good timing! I was just finishing up a report.” He wrapped his arms around your and gave you a quick squeeze.

“What happened to no-touchy?” You asked, patting his back.

“It’s still a thing.” He replied haughtily. “But I have given a select few the privilege to touch the royal body.”

You rolled your eyes. “I’m honored.”

“As you should be.” He hummed, leading you back towards his throne. “Can we get some snacks for my friend here?” He asked a nearby guard. “I know how much you love the spinach puffs.” He patted your hand before stopping at the throne. You watched him consider it, but instead of taking a seat, he turned to face you. “And how have you been?”

You made a face. Even back from his humbling time as a llama, Kuzco was not usually one to make small talk like that. “I’ve been fine.” You said, “Stayed at Chicha’s and Pacha’s for a bit, helped watch the kids while they’re busy with the baby.” That was an eventful weekend, You thought to yourself. Chicha went into labor not long after the curse was lifted, and it was all just a panic-fueled mess.

“Oh, good, good.” He replied distractedly, picking some lint off his tunic. “How long do you plan on staying here?” He asked out of the blue, peeking at you through his bangs.
You steadied him with a look. “I don’t know. Depends on if we find my friend here or not.” Your heart dropped, eyes falling on the floor. “I wish I could give you more information, but…”

He deflated slowly, finally facing you whilst twiddling his thumbs. “About the search, Astra, I…”

Your heart plummeted even further. “Oh.”

He bit his lower lip. “My search parties haven’t found any other travelers like you. I’m…” even now, it was still hard for him to say, but he said it, “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” You muttered, wrapping your arms around yourself. “That’s okay. Thank you for looking.”

Before the air could grow any heavier, he asked, “Do you have to go right away?”

The question made you pause, “Well, if they’re not here, then…”

He grabbed your arm, eyes huge and wet, “Just wait one more day!” He ordered, though it sounded more like a plea. “There’s a big party tomorrow, and everyone’s going to be there. I’m sure Pacha would be devastated if you left without saying goodbye, and you wouldn’t do that, right?”

Seeing through his words and into the meaning, you smiled with a sigh. With a pat on his hand, you said. “Okay, one more day.”

He threw his hands in the air with a “BOOYAH!” and almost scared the butler into dropping the spinach puffs.

You were glad you stayed for another day. The night sky reflected off the water of Kuzcotopia’s calm pool, clear and bright with more stars than you’d ever seen. Pacha’s family, you and Kuzco very much included, sat on the sand, slowly drying from a long, wet, fun day.

The children were fast asleep. Pacha held Chaca and TYPE in his lap while Chicha held their newborn. Kuzco sat beside Pacha, leaning back on his arms. They look peaceful, and happy. Even if it was only for a moment, you were content to be a part of that picture.

But, the night was growing long, and there were places you needed to be. You picked yourself up and dusted the sand off your legs.

“Going somewhere?” Pacha asked.

You nodded, giving them a wane smile. “It’s time for me to go.”

Chicha straightened, “Right now?”

“Yeah.” You sighed, watching the slow ripples on the water, the stars dancing on it’s surface. “I still have to find them, wherever they are.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay out there?” Pacha asked uncertainly. “You won’t rest a night?”

You shook your head. “I can’t. But, thank you, all of you.” You gave them a happy grin. “I had fun here.”

Kuzco had been strangely silent, but he finally sat up with his arms around his knees. “You’ll be back, right?”

You gave him a sad smile. “I don’t know. But, even if we don’t, I’ll make sure to remember you
fondly.”

“Of course you will!” Kuzco blurted, hiding his face from you. “I’m unforgettable!”

“Yes, your Llamaness.” You snorted, and found yourself in a bear hug. The entire family wrapped their arms around you, sending you off with one last gift.

“Thanks for all your help.” Pacha whispered. “Safe travels, Astra.”

Kuzco muttered something into your back. He still wasn’t used to not getting what he wanted.

When you parted, you said your last goodbyes and left for the jungle. You took one last breath of the fresh, clean air, and stepped back into the Dark Corridor.
You hadn’t actually meant to go through the portal. You were just going to rest for a moment, lean against the wall, stretch, grab a quick snack. But no, you put your shoulder against one of the gross walls only for a door to appear a half second later. You fell right through and ate it.

Splinters bit at your cheek. The ground slowly rocked to and fro. You quickly picked yourself up and peered through the dim, small room. Wood creaked softly under your feet. Well, wherever you were, you were there now. Besides, the portal had already closed behind you.
You quietly slipped out of your coat and opened the door, revealing an equally dim and narrow hallway. You closed the door and cautiously stepped down the hall, only for another door to swing open and a boy bodied you.

“Crap, sorry!” He hissed, rubbing his forehead where it cracked against your chin.

“It’s fine.” You muttered, picking yourself up.

The boy, a teenager, stiffened when his eyes finally adjusted to the dark. “You’re not on the crew.”

“I’m what?” You asked, caught off guard by the question.

The teenager suddenly was on the defense, eyes flicking from you to further down the hall where spots of light were coming through.

Before something very bad could happen, you stopped him. “Wait, where am I?”

That got him to pause. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, where am I?” You asked again. “What is this place?”

“First, who are you?” He leered, sizing you up.

“I go by Astra. Now could you please tell me where I am?”

Confusion and caution shifted on his face in equal measure. “You really don’t know?”

“Yes!” You groaned, “I don’t know how many times I have to repeat that. Please, can you tell me where I am?”

The boy blinked in perplexed bewilderment. “You’re on a ship, the RLS Legacy.” He said. “We’re in the middle of a voyage.”

You felt your eyebrows creep up your forehead. How were you going to explain yourself out of this one?

**RLS Legacy**

“You really had no idea.” He paled.

“No.” You admitted.

He glanced down the halls before pulling you through the door behind him. Plenty of sparkly clean pots and pans were piled on the shelves, reflecting the light coming through the windows – wait. You peered out the windows and saw not the sea, not an ocean, but billions of stars and swaths of beautiful galaxies. You tried very hard to keep that from spooking you.

The boy whirled around, hands spread like you were a wild animal. “How’d you get here?”

“Do I look like I know?” You lied shrilly.

He began to pace, hands scratching at his messy hair and pulling at his exhausted eyes. “We haven’t been boarded and we took off from Crescentia months ago! How’d this happen!?"

“I would like to know that as well.” You sweated, silently cursing the surprise portal.
“Okay, what do you know?” He hissed. “There’s got to be some explanation.”


The boy’s shoulders relaxed. “What?”

“I just woke up here.” You said, “All I remember is… is that name, and that I was looking for someone.”

The tears that welled in your eyes were very real as you recalled what brought you there in the first place.

The boy’s hackles finally subsided as he took in the misery plain on your face. “I’m…” He murmured, “I’m sorry.”

You shook your head. “I’m sure it’s not your fault.” You tried to joke. “Point is, I have no clue how I got here, or even where I’m from. I’m sorry, I wish I could tell you.”

He rubbed his arm, eyes somewhere else. “I guess we’ll just have to figure something out.” He finally said. “I’m not sure how the Captain will take a stowaway, even if you’re, y’know… But the crew,” His brow pinched and his eyes were hard. “If we don’t get you some support, some of them will try to eat you alive.”

You paled. “Not really, I hope.”

He chuckled wearily. “I don’t know, but something about Scroop screams man-eater.”

“Oh no.”

“Don’t worry.” He said, “We should go see the Captain. And, my name’s Jim, by the way.” He grinned tightly.

“Alright, Jim. I’m gonna trust you.”

Then, the door opened. “Jimbo, are ya still up and at it?” A voice croaked, “Are the dishes really that ha – “

In the doorway was the strangest person you had ever seen. He was a big man, he took up the doorway and more, with a round belly, and several pieces and parts of him were definitely not originals. You felt like screaming.

The stranger was stopped in the doorway, taking in the scene. He rubbed his eyes, then looked again, as if he thought he was seeing things. “Jimbo, what is this?”

“Uh,” He sputtered.

“I’m sorry!” You said, before any of the blame could be put on him. “I woke up in that room at the end of the hall.” You swallowed. “Jim was just trying to help me.”

Jim approached the man, “Mr. Silver, this is Astra.”

“A stowaway?” He muttered.

“No, I don’t think so.” Jim said. “They said they woke up on the ship, and they don’t remember
The man, Mr. Silver, hooked his thumbs in his pants, eyeing you critically from afar. He whispered something to Jim, who nodded. He grunted, then closed the door behind him and turned on a gas lamp. “C’mere, where I can get a look at ya.” He told you.

You stepped forward, pushing down your dinner and your nerves. Finally, the amber light fell on you, and Mr. Silver hummed slowly.

“Ya don’t look like a pirate.” He huffed, “Not with that getup.”

“I’m not.” You replied, “Or at least, I’m pretty sure I’m not.”

His yellow eye whizzed around you on it’s own. You tried to just stare at his nose where it was safe. “And you don’t look like you’ve been starving in the back of a boat either. Whatever you’ve been eating, it hadn’t been on my ship. Nothing’s been missing.” Finally, he put away his eye and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Now, this is curious indeed.”

“What about the longboats?” Jim asked.

Mr. Silver shook his head. “I’ve just been there. Nothing lost or new.” Finally, he crossed his arms and narrowed his mismatched eyes at you. “Jimbo said yer name’s Astra?”

“Yes… sir?”

His eyebrows shot up before he threw his head back and laughed. “Imagine that, someone callin’ ol’ John Silver ‘sir’!” His laughs rolled out until he cleared his throat. “I’m the cook, lad. No need for that.”

Jim shrugged at your curious glance.

Mr. Silver gave you one last sizing before huffing. “I suppose I’ll believe ya, for now anyway.” He nodded to Jim. “Jimbo here thinks we can trust ya. So, I guess I will, as well. But the Captain’s another book, entirely.” He thought hard for a moment. “Better get it done sooner, rather than later. C’mon,” He opened the door. “to the Captain’s quarters. Jimbo, get the lights, and” He gave him a wink, “I see we’ll have plenty of dishes for tomorrow.”

Jim was glowing, even after he turned off the lights.

“Where’s Morph?” He asked once you were all out on the main deck.

Your breath was stolen away, the conversation fell in the backwater. Space, in all it’s beauty, surrounded you, endless in it’s expanse. Nebulas and far off clusters like paint held suspended in the black, and yet, it was far from dark. Stars, suns, moons, all full of light, never once left you alone. Something moved a ways off, and you heart caught in your throat when they came into the glow. A pod of whales were swimming across the sky.

You slowly turned in a circle, only to shout in surprise. A tiny you was hovering in the air, maybe three inches from your face. You stumbled backwards, staring at the little marvel. “Am I hallucinating?” You asked, turning to Jim and Silver, who were both chuckling.

“That there’s Morph.” Silver said, “He’s introducing himself.”

The tiny you split apart into globes, then came back together as a little pink blob with two round eyes. It purred and licked your cheek. “Morph.” You whispered in awe, letting it settle in your
cupped hands. “He’s so cute!”

The lil’ thing preened and spoke something unintelligible before nuzzling your face. When Silver whistled, he obediently returned to him.

“Now, to introduce you to our dear Captain Amelia.” He said, guiding you to a gilded door. He knocked, and waited.

A voice replied, “Who is it at this hour?”

“It’s John Silver, ma’am.” He said, “I’s got a strange development to share with ya.”

There was silence, and then the door swung open, revealing a tall woman with a noble face. Her sharp eyes immediately fell on you. “Who is this?” She snapped.

Silver clapped you on the back. “This here’s Astra. Jim found them in a back room. They say they woke up there, and don’t recall how.” He nodded knowingly, “I know how it sounds ma’am, but it all checks out y’see – “

“The longboats?” She barked.

“Nothing gone and nothing new, ma’am.”

She stepped in closer, peering at you beadily. “Any rations gone missing?”

“None, ma’am.”

She stepped back, still suspicious but nevertheless curious. “Interesting. What is your name?”

“I go by Astra.” You said, clearing your throat. “I’m very sorry about all of…” you waved your hand. “this.” You ended lamely.

“And you truly have no recollection of how you came onto my ship?”

“It was a surprise for me, too.” You said with a shrug.

She folded her arms. “Do the words ‘Treasure Planet’ mean anything to you?”

You looked at Jim. You looked at Silver. Then, you shook your head.

When you opened your mouth, she unapologetically interrupted you. “Don’t hurt yourself, you obviously know nothing.” She hummed, tapping her manicured fingers on her arm. “I’ll report your arrival to Mr. Arrow first thing in the morning. Silver, you’re in charge of them.”

Though he didn’t seem thrilled with being saddled with you, he took his orders graciously. “Of course, ma’am.”

“As for you.” She said, making you straighten. “Now that you’ve found yourself here on my ship, you are going to have to wait until we return to Crescentia, after our mission is complete. You will be expected to earn your stay by helping Mr. Silver with whatever he tasks you with. Do not make me regret allowing you to stay here.” She ended gravely.

“Of course, Captain, ma’am.” You gulped.

“Good.” She nodded, “Good night, gentlemen, Astra.”
“Good night.” You chorused back.

Mr. Silver turned to you with folded arms. “I’m sure Jimbo here will appreciate the extra help.” He hummed. “You’ll both be waking up early, so best turn in now, before I find something for you to do.”

You made no complaint as you followed Jim to the hold, where several hammocks were already full of snoring crewmates. Jim guided you to the hammock below his, and with a quick ‘good night’ you both tucked in.

Of course, the prospect of leaving was heavy on your mind. This is not what you thought was going to happen. But, on a ship, going to some secret place? Even if it’s a small chance, it’s still a chance. If your friend is there, this was your only ticket.

Yo-ho-ho, a pirate’s life for me.

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Journey aboard the RLS Legacy
You were on deck, leaning against the wall, watching the sun silhouette a passing planet. It threw the Legacy in a beautiful golden orange haze. It was a rare moment of peace, without a chore needing done or the crew leering at you and your weapons slung on your hips.

Dr. Dilbert was hanging out on the top deck, looking through his spying glass and writing notes. Captain Amelia was in the captain’s quarters, doing captain-y duties, probably. The crew were off doing their own thing, making a ruckus in the galley over supper.

Jim was at your elbow, watching the stars go by with you.

“So, you still don’t remember anything?” He asked.

“Nope.” You sighed, rubbing the fabric of your jacket.

He grimaced, “Not even where you came from? Or your family?”

You shook your head, not bothering to hide your melancholy. “No.”

He deflated, his gaze far away. “I can’t imagine…” He whispered, “not remembering my Mom.”

You waited for him to continue, which he begrudgingly did. “She’s not on the ship.” He said, “She’s probably still at the Doc’s place. Our…” He cleared his throat. “Our place burnt to the ground. After I got the map. Pirates.” He explained. “That’s why we’re here. If I get the treasure, then we can rebuild the inn. And…” His voice caught, and the weight of the words buried him in his arms. “I just want to do something right, for once.” He sniffled.

“Jim…” You whispered, unsure of where to put your hands. You’d never seen him cry before, as emotional and moody as he was, especially after what happened to poor Mr. Arrow. Finally, you settled for placing your hand on his back.
He sniffed louder, trying in vain to hide his hiccupping sobs. “I gave her a hard time. All the time. And I don’t know how to fix it!” He coughed, “I don’t know how to fix it…”

You quietly mulled over his words, patting his back gently, until you knew what to say. “Jim, sometimes things aren’t meant to be fixed.” You began, a tug at your navel brought you to that underwater dream. “And sometimes it just can’t be. But you’re here so you can make it better, and that’s amazing.”

He peaked at you from his elbow, eyes red and puffy.

You gave him a gentle smile, giving him a little shake. “Our goal shouldn’t be to fix the past, but to… ensure that the future is better than yesterday.” Your glanced up at the stars. “I think I might’ve picked that up from somewhere.” Like a goofy old magician and a cranky old mechanic. “In any case,” You continued, “no matter what happened back at your home, I’m sure your Mom has already forgiven you. That’s what parents are supposed to do, right?”

He wiped his nose, a wobbly smile tugging at his lips. “Yeah…”

“So, don’t give yourself such a hard time, bud.” You patted his back. “I think Today-Jim is pretty cool. So don’t be mean to him, ‘kay?”

A weak laugh tripped over his lips. “Okay.”

“And why are my two helping hands standing here doing nothing?”

Silver stood behind you, holding his pipe. His smile was wide as he came to the other side of Jim. “Don’t get up now.” He said around his pipe. “Might as well keep doing what you’re doin’.”

The three of you watched space pass with quiet smiles for a time.

“Make sure to remember what Astra said, Mr. Hawkins.” Silver said, breathing out a cloud of smoke. “You’ve got what it takes. So, don’t you be letting yourself down, now.” He messed up his hair, to Jim’s indignation and delight.

“Right.” He laughed, fixing his bangs.

Then, Silver turned his attention to you. “Astra, what will you be doing once we get back to the spaceport?”

You shrugged. “Keep looking for my friend.”

He considered you while taking a long draw from his pipe. “But you don’t have your memories. How do you plan to find ‘em?”

That same question had been hounding you from the start. You still weren’t sure of the answer. “I’ve just got to believe that I’ll know.” You said, “Or, that they’ll recognize me.

“Forgive me for saying so, but that doesn’t sound like much of a plan.”

“Yeah, I know.” You agreed. “But if I must play the fool to get my winnings, then I shall play the fool.” You gave them a mock bow, pretending to tumble forwards, only to roll back on your feet. “It’s better than sitting around, doing nothing, waiting for them to show up.” You put your hands in your pockets. Off the starboard, a beautiful red and orange nebula passed you by. You could almost make out a face in it. “We’ll run into each other eventually.”
“Are you sure?” Jim asked.

“I’ve never been sure about a single thing in my life.” You quipped back. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t try anyway.”

“Them’s good words to live by.” Silver said, finishing his smoke. “For someone with no memory, you’ve got some good advice.”

Somewhere among those stars, a family was sitting down for supper. “Maybe I learned it somewhere.”

Jim perked up. “Maybe you can use your share to hire some search parties. Even commission a ship for yourself. There’s a lot of space to comb through for just one person.”

“Maybe.” You said.

Silver had become quiet again, eyes downcast as he fiddled with his pipe. Such melancholy didn’t look right on the man.

“What about you?” You asked him. “What are you going to do with your treasure?”

“Me?” He thought, “I think I’d like to retire.” He said, a wistful expression on his face. He offered no more.

A dim future misted your vision, finding a place to stay, with your memories, with that friend. “That sounds nice.” You whispered.
“Get. Back.”

Jim held the saber with both hands, fear, anger and betrayal clouding his young face in equal measure. Silver stood at the other end, the point barely cutting his shirt. His hat hid his face as he stared at it.

You held your yo-yos aloft, now free of the Heartless, for the moment. “It’s two against one.” You warned.

Slowly, Silver lifted his chin, pinning you both with a cold glare. “I like ya lads.” He said, defying your last defenses by stepping forward. “But I’ve not come this far for you to get between me and the treasure.”

Before any moves could be made, a geyser of pure energy shot between the growing cracks of the planets golden core. It blew off a piece of the ship in a hot blaze, throwing you and Jim off tumbling towards your deaths. Off you slid, towards the self-destructing ball of energy, and the Heartless were coming.

“Jim!” You screamed, swinging one star towards him, and the other towards a protrusion above you.

You watched helplessly as he scrambled for the string, then breathed when he caught fast. Now, you were both dangling off the sheer cliff. You glanced up, and saw the horde of yellow eyes consider you from above.

_We can’t die here. You began to weep. Someone’s waiting for me, Jim needs to get home, but – “Jim!” You shouted below. “Are you okay?”_

“No!” He shouted back, his voice shaking with terror.
On the other side of the chasm, Silver hauled both himself and hovering, half-destroyed ship closer. “Reach for me, now!” He ordered, holding his hand out to you.

“I can’t!” You screamed back. “I can’t let go!”

The Heartless were beginning to dribble towards you.

With no time to shout, you hoped Jim was holding on and began to swing the string like a pendulum. Finally, his momentum brought him into Silver’s arms. With a quick hug, Silver reached for you. But, he was too far.

“Astra!” Jim gasped, watching doom creep towards you from both ends.

“I can’t reach!” You cried, stretching your arm to the limit.

You watched the struggle of Silver’s conscience, from you and Jim to the ship and the one thing he had been searching for for years. “Oh,” He groaned, “Blast me for a fool!”

He shoved the ship away, just as the Heartless went for your face. A scream caught on your throat as you came to the decision: you’d rather die to the fire below than to the Heartless. You pulled the star above away from the cliff, and for a moment, just a moment, you were dead weight in the hot air.

A large hand swept you from death’s clutches. Silver held your trembling body close for a second until you could grab the ledge yourself. Jim yanked at each of your wrists, helping pull you up.

“You gave up the – “ Jim whispered in awe.

“It was only a lifetime obsession.” Silver sniffed, “It twas nothing.”

You gave him a teary smile. “Thank you.”

Then, the ship exploded.

The Heartless were coming.

“Go!” You barked, pulling Jim to his feet and pushing him forward, “I’ll cover you!”

For a moment, you thought you were all home free. But you, specifically, were not. When you tried to follow them through the portal, you bounced off of it and fell back.

“Astra!” You heard Jim shout past the ringing of your ears. And then he tried to go through the portal, but it was if a membrane of diamond had replaced it. He began pounding against it with his bare fists.

When you managed to get yourself to your feet, you saw Silver activate a tool on his arm and tried to blow a hole through it, but not even a scorch mark showed. You tried to throttle it with your stars, torch it with Thundaga, but there was no getting out. Behind them, Ben had arrived on top the Legacy. He prepared a cheery wave, only to see you stuck behind, and his hand fell limply to his chest.

“Astra, lad, what is going on!?” Silver roared.

“I don’t know!” You shouted back, “I don’t…”

“We were wondering where you’d turn up.”
Confusion, consternation, realization, fear, anger, horror. Lounging on the ledge above you sat a man in a black coat with the hood up. Twin guns hung from his relaxed hands. Behind you, the world was ending with a bang.

“Who’s that?” Jim growled.

The perfect stranger swung his legs and jumped from the ledge to land at the far end of the last piece of the room. “Who, me?” He said, cool as ever, as if he were unaware of the Armageddon at his back. “I’m nobody. But if you don’t jump ship, you’re going to be toast.”

You realized that though the new wall kept you from going, it didn’t mean that it would keep back the fire. Risking your back against the black coat, you ran to your friends.

“You need to go.”

“Not without you!” Jim said, eyes red.

Silver stared at you, expression slack and eyes wet. “You’ve been a good lad.” He said, taking Jim’s shoulder. “I’m grateful I’ve had the pleasure of meetin’ ya.”

Jim yanked himself back to you, “No!”

“Jim,” Silver said, taking him by both the shoulders.

“It’s okay, I’ll be okay.” You told him with a gentle smile, “Get back home safe, Jim. Tell your Mom I said hi, okay?”

“No!” He wailed, trying to break out of Silver’s hold, “No, Astra!”

Silver’s hat hid his face away from you, but you thought you saw a tear drip from his nose. You watched him hoist Jim aboard the ship, share a few words with Ben, and the Legacy took to the air.

A round of slow clapping cut through the explosions. You faced the black coat with pure loathing.

“Aw, how sweet.” He put a hand on his chest, “It just pulls at my heartstrings to see such a tearful goodbye.”

“How’d you find me?” You spat.

“Believe it or not, it was a happy coincidence.” He smoothly replied. “A matter of being at the right place at the right time.”

Your mind spun back to the accident of your arrival. “The portal.”

“Unplanned!” He said with a wave of his gun. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way,” He lowered it, leveling it with your chest, “it’s time we say goodbye. Y’see, we don’t take thieving lightly, and you added aggravated assault to the charges! So, how about you – “

One yo-yo nearly caught him in the chin, but he deftly dodged it. Before he could make some snide remark, the second one caught him in the stomach, bending him in half.

“Monologues are stupid, and I don’t care.” You snarled.

A string of dark chuckles rumbled from his chest as he straightened. “You’re gonna make this fun, aren’tcha?”
To be honest? With the apocalypse and the Heartless surrounding your temporary arena on all sides, your plan was to cut and run, but then a bullet nearly grazed your cheek. You twisted to dodge, then saw that the Legacy was losing time. One of the thrusters were out, and a dot was coming closer.

They’re not gonna make it. You realized before deflecting another diamond bullet and zooming to the other corner, keeping the portal in your peripheral. The black coat was hanging upside down in thin air, sending a barrage at you before vanishing and appearing somewhere else. When you tried to roll away, they only followed you and caught you in the back before you could recover.

You hissed, doing your best to ignore the flare of pain in your shoulders. What concerned you was on the other side. That dot was Jim on a slapped together board, and the Legacy wasn’t far behind. Your eyes fell on the green map, connecting the wires.

“Eyes on me!” He laughed, and you quickly blocked the next round of bullets. You quickly deflected them and watched them ricochet off and burn through the invisible wall. Attention back on your opponent, you tried to catch him with a Stopra, but he disappeared again, leaving the echo of his chilling laughter.

Jim screamed.

You turned in time to see him drop out of the air like a stone. The ignition went out on his board. Without a second thought, you twisted your hand to the portal. *I haven’t been able to do it yet, but please let me do it now!*

“Fire!”

A ball of weak flame shot from your hand at the same time black coat fired more bullets. You ducked them, and watched as they tore through the portal, sending ripples through it, and allowing your little spark to pull through. It sped after Jim, down the canyon, and then it was out of your hands.

Black coat surprised you, popping up right in front of your face. He raised his guns and you barely blocked in time, the force sending pain scorching through your arms.

“You clever kid.” He purred. “Looks like your pals are gonna make it after all.”

You dared to look behind you, and felt hope. Jim was back, and the Legacy took up the whole outside world. Your eyes met just before he reached the map.

You kicked black coat in crotch and bit the exposed bit of his arm. He made an unmanly squeal and you dipped out of the fight, pulling on your coat while rushing through the Corridor.

*Good luck, guys.* You thought with a vicious grin. *Maybe we can go sailing again, someday.*
You were bleeding into your clothes, the coat was glued to your shoulders. The jacket Aerith had given you was ruined. You were out of supplies, out of energy to cure yourself, and out of patience. You wanted to curl up on a familiar, old quilt and go straight to sleep while listening to

“Shhh! ---’s asleep.”

“Oh, crap, I’m – “

“You’re not making it any better.”

“Pff - I’m saying sorry!”

“I should tell your Mom you cursed.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“… Yeah, okay, I wouldn’t. But only if I get say a bad word, too.”

“Deal.”

“Okay… You need to be fucking quiet, ---’s asleep.”

“AHAHAHAHA”

them talk. Hopefully, soon.

The image rose from the fog of exhaustion and pain, a family taking a photo, the laughter, the scent of flowers and bread. A pull from your naval silently guided you down the winding roads. Sweat poured off your sooty, dirty face, soaking your clothes. Everything smelled like fire and chemicals,
it made your throat burn.

Eventually, you came to a lonely dead end where a portal sat open, waiting. You gave it only a cursory glance before stepping through. Then you came right back, wide eyed, wondering where you took a wrong turn.

But the feeling persisted, the Fairy Godmother’s gift was telling you to turn right back around, you lil’ idiot. You obliged, but only after a long moment of confusion. That also persisted as you stared up at the gates of waterfalls, rising backwards. Forward, there were floating platforms, heading up.

“How in the fuck?” You muttered, pushing yourself from one rock to the other.

Every movement hurt, but help wasn’t anywhere near. You were on your own. There, out on the horizon, was a dark and ominous castle. And yet, a dense sense of familiarity settled low in your gut. The platform you stood on held signs of tampering, perhaps even repair. Metal pillars and rope connected to other rocks below it. But, there was no way towards that distorted manor.

Or, so you thought. A few shambling steps forward and a slab of rock appeared and forced you aboard. You cried out, getting on your knees as the wind whipped your hair and threatened to throw you off. But just as soon as it came, it gradually slowed, then booted your right off.

You stood alone on the ground. More evidence of construction was evident, but it seemed to be just at it’s very beginning. Metal pillars, boards, walkways crisscrossed the side of the castle, near the big doors.

Nervously, you licked your dry, cracked lips and carried onward, only for the meanest Heartless you have ever seen pop into existence. You cursed under your breath and reached for your weapons, considering the odds stacked against you.

But, there was no one around. Just like in Traverse Town. Unfortunately, the aches had settled, knotting your muscles and leaving you stiff and sore. When you tried to get into Fight Mode, lightning lashed at your arms and shoulders, angrily forcing your hands down. What you wouldn’t do for a Curaga…

Fighting wasn’t an option, dying really wasn’t an option, leaving was out of the question. That left you with only one thing, and that was to run and pray.

So, you did your best. With the blood-stuck coat weighing you down, you ran for the front doors, using the very last dregs of your stamina. You got to the corner before you were wheezing for breath, it felt like your ribs were tightening around your lungs and your legs had turned to lead.

Their presence loomed at your back as you reached for the front door. Another burst of dark energy and another appeared, eyes on it’s snarling shield glowing red. With no energy to spare to even scream, you yanked the door open and fell inside.

The marble was cold under your cheek. The door closed behind you with a heavy thud. There were shouts, the slam of footsteps, but it took all of you to just breathe. Large hands moved you until the cold on your face was gone and you were staring up at the ceiling. The hood fell back, gasps rang off one after the other like dominos. More shouts, then a gentle green light surrounded you, easing the sting and carrying you off into slumber.

You woke up on a makeshift bed made of thick blankets. A worn-out pillow sat under your head,
yellow light drifted in from somewhere, it’s warmth on your cheek. Someone was humming nearby, a song you barely remember. You slowly lifted your head and opened your eyes blearily.

“You’re awake.”

A man was standing by a bookshelf, a wide, beautiful, familiar grin on his face. You wished you could make out the details, but it was all blurry, like sunlight on water. You rubbed at your eyes and looked again.

Leon was walking towards you. He took a seat beside you, underneath a grand staircase. Stained glass windows breathed golden colors into this tiny pocket of the world. Your eyes searched behind your friend, looking for the handsome stranger.

Leon peered at you curiously, “What is it?”

“Uh,” You sighed, rubbing at your sore shoulders. “Nothing, I guess it was a dream.” Wait. You gaped at him, the joyous reality settling in. “Leon!” You threw your arms around him, laughing. “You’re here! I’m so happy!”

Though he initially stiffened, he relaxed and messed your hair affectionately. “I’ve been here for a while, Astra. We all have.”

You pulled away, blinking dumbly, “Everyone’s here?”

He nodded with a smile. “They’re around here somewhere. We don’t usually wander far from the library, not until we get some control of the Heartless problem and the world starts repairing itself a little.”

Slowly, you took in your surroundings. The smell of old books, must and vanilla, flowers and detergent. Indeed, the place looked well-lived in. Someone had been going through the old tomes, there was a temporary makeshift oven in the corner, and laundry was strung between the bookcases.

“Where are we?”

Leon leaned against the wall, “This is home. Hallow Bastion.”

“Your world’s back?” You gasped, “Does that mean – “

“Sora did it.” Leon said with a rare grin. “He locked the door. The worlds are restoring themselves and everyone’s back where they belong.”

Despite your absolute glee that their home had returned, the question arose: why didn’t you go back to yours? But, this wasn’t the time nor the place. No need to rain on their parade.

You touched your shirt and realized it was an old one of Cid’s. Your yo-yos sat on a table nearby, and you could see your coat hanging off a clothesline. “Guess my clothes didn’t make it.”


You settled back into the nest with a groan. “One of the black coats cornered me, and at the worst possible time, too.”

He hummed for you to continue.

“Okay, so, I accidentally fell into a portal that was on a spaceship, but when I say that I mean like
“Pirate ship in space.” You began, he nodded, “So, I kinda played stowaway for a bit, and I met this kid named Jim, and this other guy named John Silver. Jim found a weird treasure map to this place called Treasure Planet, where this space pirate named Flint horded all of his treasure, which was a lot. But, as it turns out, Silver’s actually a pirate captain and he and his crew stage a coup when we got there.

“Following?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Jim, Captain Amelia, Dr. Dilbert and I managed to get off ship but we crash landed and the Captain got hurt. Also, there’s this little alien pet named Morph, he can morph, and he was being a little shit and disguised himself as the map. Cute joke. So, Jim and I have to go back to the ship to get the real map, and on the way we meet this robot named Ben who lost his mind, literally. Remember that, that’s important.

“When we got back, Silver and his crew found Captain Amelia and Dr. Dilbert. In exchange for their lives, they made Jim open a portal to the treasure, which was on the planets core. There we found Ben’s mind and plugged it back in, only to find out that Flint had rigged the place to blow up like a party balloon but with lots of fire and Heartless.

“The core’s collapsing and killing almost everyone, along with all the treasure. Flint’s an asshole, fuck that guy. Anyway, Jim sends Ben to go find the Captain and the Doctor while he fixes up an old longboat that’s there, and I’m fighting off all these Heartless so he can do his work. Then, Silver shows up, then the boat caught fire and Jim and I almost fell to our deaths.

“Still following?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. We thought Silver was going to kill us or something, but he actually threw away the boat and the gold to save us. The ship explodes, by the way. We’re running back to the portal, and they get through, but I bounce off of it. And why? Because this motherfucker in a black coat shows up and decides now’s a good time to fight. I’ll remind you, the planet is literally tearing itself apart in a fiery inferno and there’s Heartless everywhere and there’s maybe three minutes until we all die in a terrible explosion.”

“Yikes.”

“I know. So, of course, I don’t plan on sticking around, but then I guess the Legacy, that’s the ship – they managed to escape on it – got hit by a geyser of pure death and one of the thrusters went out. Jim slaps together a hoverboard, super smart kid, and is leading them back towards the portal. But then, his thruster goes out and he’s going to fall to his death.

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, but I did the Fire spell!”

“You did?”

“I did!”

“Awesome.”

“Thank you! Turns out the black coat, he has these two guns, his bullets could get through the
portal, as well as my clothes and my flesh. Next time he fired, I used Fire and ignited Jim’s hoverboard. They got to the portal, I kicked black coat in the balls and bit his arm.”

“Nice.”

“Then I hopped through a portal. Anyway, its’ that black coat’s fault for my back. I got here, was really confused, saw a bunch of Heartless, then passed out at your front door. Now I’m here. Tada.”

A round of hearty laughter filled the room. Cid took the last steps off the stairs and appeared with a grin on his face. “I forgot how much could come out if you were in the mood.”

“Cid!”

He walked in and crouched down. You threw your arms around his neck, never minding the tenderness of your back. He hugged you gently, as if he knew.

“Apparently you’ve been having some fun out there.”

“Yeah!”

With a final pat, he sat back on his haunches and just took a good look at you. His gaze was fatherly and affectionate. “It’s good to see you again. We’ve been missin’ you kid.”

“I’ve missed you guys, too. Is Aerith and Yuffie around?”

“They’re off on an errand. Should be back any minute.” He got back up, his joints popping loudly. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better. Much better.” You gave them both a tired smile. “Thank you for saving me.”

“Think nothin’ of it.” Cid said, rubbing the small of his back.

“We’re just glad you’re here and safe.” Leon said.

It didn’t take long for the ladies to come find you.

“Astra!” Yuffie crowed, and practically threw herself onto you.

“Yuffie!” You cried back, partially because ow.

Aerith came to sit where Cid was just a little bit before. When Yuffie was done strangling you with her love, she pulled you in for a long, warm hug. Aerith’s hugs were always the best, even better than Cid’s.

“Still sore?” She asked, noticing your wince.

“A bit.” You admitted. “But a lot better.”

“I bet!” Yuffie said, forcing you to share the nest. “There was blood everywhere! Cid wasn’t sure he could get it all out of the bad coat, but he managed.”

The feeling of the sticky leather and crunchy blood was still fresh in your mind. “Thanks.”

“It’s a shame about your jacket, though.” Aerith said, “I know how much you liked it.”
“It’s sacrifice will not be forgotten.” You sighed, wriggling back into the blankets, despite Yuffie’s intrusion. “I’m sorry I got it ruined.”

“Don’t be.” She said, almost scolded. “It was a spare that we were happy to give.”

Leon hummed in agreement. “Perhaps when you don’t look like you’re going to pass out, you can tell us more about your journey.”

Yuffie gasped, as if she only just remembered, “Did you find them?” She asked, grabbing your arm.

Your mournful silence was all the answer they needed.

“Oh…” She murmured, tucking herself against your arm.

Aerith and Leon shared a look of mutual understanding.

“I could use a nap.” Aerith said, grabbing a blanket from the pile.

Leon got himself comfortable against the wall. “Same here.”

Soon, the four of you were resting underneath the staircase in a makeshift, but nonetheless warm and cozy bed. Somewhere in your dreams, you heard someone humming a song.

Chapter End Notes

so, i know some of you guys are thinking: why am I making you guys look through the Disney Worlds? There's a good answer for that in the next chapter. Also, I'm not going to make you guys go through the whole movies word for word, so I doodled some pictures as visual reminders. I won't be putting story into Disney Worlds already in KH, unless I come up with something really good, so all the Disney content will be new. My plan is for about 3 to 4 Disney Worlds, with 2 of them being new worlds. I couldn't leave out my favorite world and the one that's showed up in every game. Sorry about the quality, due to formatting in ao3 the resolution had to be reduced to 500 pixels, and I had to find workarounds to keep from giving the reader, aka you, any traits besides clothes. anyway, sorry about the wait! I had a lot of pictures to draw. and no, this is slow burn, you and lea aren't gonna meet for a while
Axel sat on the ledge of the clocktower, the sun was bright backdrop to the sleepy city. It never was gone completely, but it was beginning to dim as the night dwelled closer. Just as it was everyday, since the day he awoke in the forest. Though then, he wasn’t alone.

As he did many times before, he slowly unzipped his coat and pressed his gloved hand over his chest. A silent question, with a silent answer. He zipped it back to his collar bone, his hand curling into a fist. Just as it had been since the day he awoke in the forest.

“Don’t be such a crybaby!”

“Stop calling me a baby!”

You and Lea stood in the garden, both red in the face and hot, angry tears ready to spill on your chubby cheeks. In your hands and in the dirt was the broken pieces of an old yo-yo.

Isa stood a ways away, watching the two of you hurl insults with eyes stunned wide. He didn’t know what to say, or what to do, or how to make either of you stop. This hadn’t happened before. He never thought it would. None of you did.

“I’m not a baby, Lea!” You said, hands shaking, palms cut by the shards of the plastic stars. “Stop it!”

“Then stop crying, it’s just a toy!” He snapped, but the look in his eye wasn’t that of anger, it was one of fear.

“I’ve had it for forever! It was my favorite!”

“I didn’t mean to break it!”

“I told you to stop, but you just kept – “ Frustrated to the point of sobs, you threw the last bits of
yellow shards to the dirt and ran off. “You stupid – you ruined it!”

Lea immediately shriveled in on himself, “Y/N, wait – “

“Leave me alone!”

They watched you run off, words dying in their throats. A miserable feeling ate at Lea from the inside, like an apple rotting from a tree, devoured by the worms. The broken bits blinked in the daylight, calling for his attention. Tears rolled off his nose and joined them on the ground.

“I didn’t – I didn’t mean to…”

Isa sighed. “You should’ve apologized.”

The anger that burned hot and fast returned, but sputtered out again when he saw you disappear around the bend. “I didn’t mean to break it.”

“But you did.” Isa pointed out, then crouched. “C’mon, help me pick this up.”

Still trying to snuffle back his meltdown, he started picking up the shards. Some of them were stained with blood, where they had cut into the meat of your palm. Your eyes were red and your fists were shaking and your voice was rough and…

He groaned, tucking his face into his knees. “They’re mad.”

Isa snorted, “You noticed, huh.”

He wanted to snap a reply, but all the fire was gone. With all the pieces between them, he stood up. He felt lost, like he’d never been to the garden before, like he couldn’t find his way back home. “…” He turned to his friend, his oldest friend, who always had an answer, “I don’t know how to fix it. Can I fix it?”

But, Isa was only eleven, too. He shrugged with a deep frown. “I don’t know, sorry.”

The two of them stood in silence, the weight in their hands felt like the world itself. He could still hear your shouts and hear your hiccups. The hot, rotten, gnarled wire twisted in his stomach again.

“Maybe… Maybe Mom and Dad will know.” He said, voice cracking. “C’mon.”

They walked in relative silence. Every time they passed a street, Lea both hoped for and was terrified by the thought that you’d be around the corner. He was crying the whole way there, with Isa a constant, comforting presence by his shoulder.

His Dad was in the kitchen making lemonade and Mom was folding laundry while the radio crooned by the open window. They both smiled when the front door opened, only to blink when they saw their son’s tear stained face. With the pieces of the toy on the table, they listened to Lea’s explanations.

“I didn’t mean to!” He sniffed, pushing the plastic cup of lemonade around with his fingers. “I was just playing around.”

“But they asked you to stop, didn’t they?” His Dad sternly reminded him. “What have we told you since you were three?”

With a pout, Lea said, “When someone say’s no, you’ve got to stop.”
Especially if it’s your friend.” His Mom said with a pointed look. “What would you do if Y/N was playing with one of your toys, like your frisbees, and you asked them to stop?”

“I’d be mad.”

“And if they broke it?”

“… I’d be really mad.”

Mom nodded, “So, you understand why Y/N’s mad now, right?”

“Yeah, but I still didn’t mean to break it!”

Dad frowned, “What were you even doing with it?”

“Just playing!”

The parents turned to Isa. “What was he doing with it?”

Lea folded his arms with a pout as Isa gave him a sheepish frown. “He was swinging it around in the metal dome thing. It hit one of the poles and it… yeah.”

His parents sighed. “Lea,” Mom said, “let me share something with you, okay? When you break something, you apologize for breaking it, right?”

“… Right.”

“And part of apologizing is admitting what you did.” She told him. “So, what did you do to it?”

He licked his chapped lips, still slouching in his chair. “I was playing keep away and swinging them around in the metal dome thing. It hit one of the poles and it broke.”

“And was that a good thing to do?”

“No.”

She leaned back with a there you have it stare. “Sometimes your intentions might be good, but it’s your actions that speak louder.” She tapped her forehead. “Do you have it memorized?”

Lea nodded solemnly. “But” he said, unfolding himself, “can we still fix it?”

His Dad considered the tiny pieces, “We can… try to glue it back together, but I don’t think it’ll work the same again.”

He deflated, “Oh.”

“But I think,” Dad continued, “Y/N would appreciate the thought, as long as it’s with an honest apology.”

Lea sunk lower in his chair, nose almost parallel to the table. “But... what if they don’t want to see me?”

Isa rolled his eyes with a fond smile, but let the parents do the talking.

They shared a look, a silent conversation, then turned back to their son. “They might not.” His Dad admitted to Lea’s horror, “Maybe not for some time. This toy obviously meant a lot to them. But,
it’s not them who has to take that first step. That is entirely up to you.”

“And a friendship like the one you three have is not one you should just toss out because of a fight.” His Mom said, “No matter what happens, and I’m saying this to you too, Isa, whatever happens, you should always make the attempt to set things right. Because, it will happen.”

“Oh, it will happen.” Dad nodded.

“There will be fights, there will be arguments, as far and as few between as they are, but that’s no reason to let something die.”

“Unless it happens all the time.”

“Yeah, if it’s making you miserable, let it die. But,” His Mom smiled, “I don’t think Y/N makes you miserable.”

A faint blush dusted Lea’s ears. “No.” He murmured.

“Then, what do you need to do?” His Dad asked.

His ears turned almost as red as his hair in shame. “I need to apologize.”

“That’s my son.” He ruffled his hair.

Lea glowed under the new turn of phrase and finally sat up. “Can we fix it now?”

“Sure.” She said, “Sweetheart, do you know where the super glue is?”

“In the junk drawer, love. How about, after we’re done, we make some brownies, boys?”

Isa’s gaze went intense, “Yes!” He whispered, “Please.”

Lea’s Dad ruffled Isa’s hair as he passed with a chuckle. “How about you help me get the ingredients together.”

He jumped out of his seat, “Okay!”

Lea watched them leave, then sat up when his Mom returned to the table with the glue and paper towels.

“It may not be the same.” She noted, appraising the bits of plastic. “But, we’ll do the best we can, alright?”

“Alright.” He smiled, then worked to piece together the star.

The next day, the boys waited for you on the sidewalk on the way to school. Lea paced and fidgeted, his hand kept creeping to his pocket. A lurking thought kept hissing that it was gone, but it’s weight was still there.

Isa rolled his eyes, “They’re gonna make it, Lea.”

“Yeah, sure.” He coughed. *What if they went in a different direction, though? We go this way ever day and take them to school. If they don’t want to see me then they’d go another way.*

They still hadn’t seen you coming the usual way, you didn’t appear in the distance, bookbag and uniform.
Isa eyed him, then gave him a one-armed hug. “You’re never this nervous.” He said, “Y/N’s probably feeling pretty bad, too, so what’s going on?”

Lea didn’t say anything for a moment, staring quietly at his feet. Then, he mumbled something under his breath.

“What?” Isa asked.

Lea sighed, “I said, that’s the point. I hurt Y/N and I…” Tears rolled off his chin, “I messed up.”

Isa stepped back, hand still on his friend’s shoulder. Lost for words.

He wiped his tears with his fist. “They might not wanna see me ever again. It’s my fault, I know it, but – but I…”

Isa wrapped his arms around him, and Lea hugged him back. He sniffled into his collar, struggling to breathe. When he was ready, Isa gave him some room.

“Then I guess you better make sure that that doesn’t happen.” He said, and nodded to something behind him. “Morning, Y/N.”

Lea spun, almost tripping on his feet. You stood by the corner, uncertain.

“Y/N!” He gasped, “Y/N, I – “

You backed up a step, bottom lip wobbling. His heart cracked under it’s pressure.

He took a shaky breath, “I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry.” He repeated, risking a step closer. “About what I said. And I should have listened when you said stop, and I’m really, really sorry I broke your yo-yo.”

Slowly, your edges softened, but your hands wound tightly around the straps of your backpack.

“Okay.”

“I – “ He dug into his pocket and held out the toy. The seams where it had been broken were clear on it’s face, but the pieces had been meticulously put back together. “I put it back, with Mom, and,” he dug in his other pocket to retrieve the brownie in the baggie. “we made these last night. I thought you might like one.”

You gaped at the toy in wonder, and came to stand before him. “You fixed it?”

“Sort of.” He said sheepishly, “It’s – It’s not the same. Mom and Dad said it might not work right again, but we glued it, see? Got all the pieces.”

Silently, you held out your hands and he gently placed it in your palm. The yellow plastic reflected your face back at you.

“And, the brownie,” Lea began to ramble, “Isa helped make them. They’re really good, Dad said he’s a good cook. Remember the last time I tried to bake and I burnt the cookies? Maybe we can all go and make something back at home – “

His train of thought was cut short by the tears in your eyes. “Y/N,” He whispered. “I – I don’t want to make you cry again.” He reached for you, but didn’t touch. “I want us to stay friends, and I’ll do
my best to make sure I – that I listen to you and not call you names or break anything else, because I…”

A shaky grin spread on your face. You opened your arms and he practically fell into them. He tucked his face into your hair. “Got it memorized?” He asked hoarsely.

You nodded into his shoulder. “Yeah.”

He sighed, relief flooding his system. “Thank you.”

“If the gushy stuff is over”, Isa said, getting both of your attention, “if we don’t get Y/N to school in two minutes we’re all going to be very late.”

Lea grinned, the morning sunlight setting his hair on fire, “Then let’s run! Race you guys!”

Isa and you laughed as you tried to keep up with him, joining the morning chorus.

But they were running in the jungle.

Towards a gentle valley.

The morning sun grew blistering and bright.

Isa warped into an unfamiliar shape.

You warped into an unfamiliar shape.

And you were going farther and farther and farther and

Axel woke up in a cold sweat.

The sound of footsteps broke him from the nightmare’s hold. Roxas rounded the corner, still wide eyed, bushy tailed, and still a bit like a zombie.

“Roxas.” He blinked. “Didn’t expect to see you here yet. I don’t even have any ice cream.”

But he only smiled and pulled some sea-salt ice cream out of his pocket, still in the wrapper (Thank god). “It’s okay. I have them.”

Axel took the one given to him with thanks. It was still a bit of a shock, sometimes, seeing Roxas’s face and see Ventus instead. But, and this was in all things a plus, their smiles were different. It soothed him, to notice the differences.

After a few moments of silence, Axel said, “I’m gonna miss this ice-cream thing we do.”

Roxas paused midbite, “Huh? Why?”

He sighed, let it melt on his tongue as he mulled over his answer. So much red tape for a gray space. “Starting tomorrow, I’m gonna be away.”

It was like watching a puppy get kicked. “Oh…”
And Axel was just sucker for the people he cared about, not that he could actually care. He ran a hand through his hair, and finally decided to fuck the rules. “Since you’re my buddy,” He grinned, “I guess I can fill you in. I’m gonna be at Castle Oblivion for a while.”

Roxas’s eyes lit up curiously. “What’s that?”

He leaned back, biting at what was left of his ice cream. “The Organization’s got a second Castle situated in the world between worlds. It’s called Castle Oblivion.” He waved his stick. “Got it memorized?”

The kid sat back, absolutely nothing clicking in that brain of his. “Yeah. I wish people told me these things.”

A moment of quiet fell on the clocktower, as it had done in their usual spot in garden. Maybe it was Roxas. Maybe it was the familiarity of it all that brought those dreams to him in the dead of sleep. It wasn’t a bad feeling, maybe it was a little bitter, but it wasn’t something he wanted to go away. All the while, he could never forgot his old friend, away in the Castle That Never Was.

Part of him wished he’d be there. Part of him wished he could talk to him as they did before. But, mostly, he was okay without him. Saix wasn’t Isa. Not anymore.

With the ice cream all gone and the glow getting dim, he forced himself up. Though less than thrilled with the prospect of more nightmares, he gave his goodbye. “Well, I gotta head back and get ready. Fun, fun, fun…” A Dark Corridor appeared behind him. “Anyway, you take your time.”

After the portal closed behind him, he just took a long moment to just… stand there and exist. No thought. No execution. No plots. No memories. No Lea. Just for a moment.

And just as it had been since the first day he awoke in the forest, he walked onward.

Lea laid beside you on the bed. The sun outside glowed bronze and gold, pushing through the window to paint the walls. You were laying side by side, naked, facing each other. He couldn’t remember what you had been talking about, and he couldn’t keep your gaze.

He sighed softly, ruffling the hair in his face. “What am I going to do…”

“With what?”

“With Isa.” He said, “We haven’t really talked to each other in months.” His computer leered at him from across the room. “It’s like he’s a completely different person…”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, haven’t you noticed?” He snorted, eyes going to the ceiling. “I… have a hard time connecting him to the kid we were friends with. Sometimes there’s moments” he gestured wildly with his hands, “where he’s so close to being him again that I almost get whiplash! But then,” His hands curled to his chest, “he’s gone right back to being Second. And I’m left there with so many thoughts in my damn head, I don’t know what to do!”

You giggled, “You mean you want to slap some sense into him.”

“He’s done it to me! On more than one occasion.” Though he knew it was true, he couldn’t picture
the scenario clearly. “Lately, it’s gotten a little worse.”

“Because of Roxas?”

“It’s not his fault.” He corrected gently, wanting so bad to take your hand and steady himself, but he didn’t. “It’s just the way he talks to him, the way he looks at him, like Roxas pissed on his favorite pen or something. I wish I knew why.”

“How is he, by the way?”

“He’s doing okay.” He smiled. “Still recovering from his memory loss, still acting like a zombie, but he’s getting there. And there’s the other kid too.”

“The other kid?”

He hummed, trying to recall their name. “Yeah… Xion. They haven’t done much, I don’t think I’ve even heard them talk, but maybe they’re like Roxas. No memory.”

“It’d be good for him to have other friends.”

He hummed again, “Yeah, I guess.”

“He should have someone with him while you’re gone on your business trip.”

He grinned up at the night sky above them. “Yeah, I guess. But, you’ll be here, too, right? As long as you’re watching out for him, he’ll be fine.”

For a long moment, you didn’t answer. “Beautiful stars out tonight.”

“Yeah.” He breathed. The grass was lush and soft under him. “I’m glad we went out.”

“Me too.”

He sighed again. “I’m glad you agreed to talk to me for a while. I can always clear my head when I’m with you. Even if this isn’t the conversation you’d expect after sex.”

You laughed. “Did you figure something out?”

“Mm? Nah.” He shook his head. “But, it’s not,” he made claws against his chest, “eating me up inside, for now at least. I guess I’m just going to have to wait for him to… fix it.”

“Some things can’t be fixed, Lea.”

He groaned, stretching out on the canopy of stars. A nebula lazily pulsed above you. “Don’t say that. When he turns it around, it’ll be just like old times again.”

“If he manages to come back, it won’t be the same as before.”

He made no answer, only waited for you to continue.

“He’s put you through a lot. And so have I.”

He scoffed, “You haven – “

“We have, Lea. And part of growing up is changing.”

“I thought you never wanted to grow up.”
“And we did anyway. But,”

He felt a ghost of a touch on his hand.

“if and when you and Isa feel that enough is enough, and you try to make things better, that would be amazing. And I can’t wait to see it.”

He tried to say your name, but no words moved past his lips. His hands reached for his throat, eyes wide as gold and reds swirled above. When he turned to you, there was no one there. The nebula burned brighter stronger, blotting out the stars until it was all there ever was.

Axel awoke in a cold sweat.

He glanced at the clock beside him and fell back against the bed with a groan. It was too-early o’clock. Already, the dream was fading from his memory. He could only remember skin on sheets, skin on grass, skin on skin; the type of lazy, languid sensuality you only read in good, mature romance novels or born from a relationship built on years of intimate knowledge and love.

God, he was going to be writing a smutty romance serial at this rate. Better just masturbate and go back to sleep before he waxes more poetic.

In nothing but boxer-briefs, Lea trailed his fingers through the snake of red hair and under the waistband. Wasting no time with foreplay, his massaged his clit and tried to think of a good fantasy. Of hands holding onto him, of holding on to someone, of legs entwined, of bedframes shaking, of moans and names and –

He stopped it as soon as the name was breathed into existence. No. No. Not that right now. Something else. Take it from the top. Action.

Long fingers pressed against his folds, twisting against the spot that sent pleasure rocking his hips. Further down, they circled and pressed against his entrance, enticing it. Slowly, he relaxed under his ministrations and opened for him. He was already wet enough for two fingers, which he slid inside with a low sigh, pumping and twisting to no beat.

Lips, hands, pumping into him from behind, hard and fast and deep deep deep. It switched, now underneath him as he pressed inside, smothering their moans with a kiss. Wrapped up in one another before he threw their legs over his shoulders, bending them just right. Hair a mess, mouth wet and open and eyes dark and he’d tease them, nice and slow at first, until they whined and moaned his name. At that point there would nothing else to do but grab their hips and Let me make you feel good I wanna make you feel good I wanna feel good –

He cursed. But it wasn’t the kind of curse he wanted. He pulled out and punched the mattress underneath him. No. No. No. He wanted to scream. Please, not them, not right now, just give me nothing. I just wanna cum and go back to sleep. Don’t do this to me now.

He pressed his palm against his crotch and hissed. The familiar slow burn spread from the contact. Still frustrated and horny, and still bringing up fantasies of things that make him want to throw a chair at the sky.

So, Axel laid there in dark silence, stewing over his options. Finally, he swung his long legs off the bed and hurriedly got dressed then opened the door to the hallway. If he needed another participant to replace the ghosts, then so be it. Like hell was he going to sit there like a miserable lump with a hard on for the next five hours before morning.

Through the halls that all looked the same, he stormed to Saix’s room and pounded on the door. He
impatiently waited for it to slide open, and was fully prepared to knock again when it did. Saix stood in the doorway, dressed, but his room was dark.

He did not look especially pleased to have been woken up. “What is it, Axel?”

“Fuck me.”

Seeing Saix’s eyes go big and round made him want to laugh. “Excuse me?”

“I said,” he repeated, stepping into his personal space, “fuck me.”

The Second stared, piecing together the events up until this point, trying to find where it all went wrong. “What?” He whispered, almost a growl. “Am I supposed to be some kind of replacement?”

“This isn’t that.” Axel snapped, “I just need a fuck. That’s it.”

“And what if I say no?” He sneered.

Axel huffed, leaning away from the doorway. “Then I’ll go find someone else to ride into the mattress.” He turned around, ready to go proposition someone else. “It doesn’t really matter to me.”

But a strong hand grabbed him by the arm. He glared at Saix from over his shoulder, waiting.

“I’m not letting you go alone.” He said.

Axel bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile, “Then take off your clothes and get on the bed.” He pushed him inside and closed the door behind them. The starless sky outside illuminated the room, but only a little. *It’s better this way.* He thought numbly, kicking off his boots.

They both made quick work of their clothes, neither of them looking at each other fully. Axel pushed Saix’s shoulder until he was lying on his back.

He made a small noise. “I don’t have any – “

“I do.” Axel said, pulling a condom and a small bottle of lube free from his pockets. He tossed the packet onto Saix’s chest while he straddled his legs.

“You still haven’t finished the transition.” Saix noted, eyeing the black binder around his chest while slipping the condom on his flaccid dick.

“Yeah, well,” he spat, “I’ll get it done when I’m human again.” Without another word, he put a generous dollop of lube in his palm and began working Saix until he was hard, hot, and heavy in his hands. Then, he leaned forward, braced himself on his chest and the bed, and lowered himself on his dick with a low hiss.

Saix grunted from below him, a flush beginning to spread across his cheeks, but there was nothing in his eyes.

Everything was nothing. Nothing had become everything.

They fucked in relative silence. There were grunts, moans, hisses, but no words. Neither of them wanted words. Axel rocked hard against Saix, both hands braced against his hard chest. There was no let up, no break in pace, and he didn’t give him the chance to do more than just lay there and
take it.

He didn’t want him to participate more than he already was. He didn’t want be bracing against his chest, he didn’t want his words, or his mouth, or his dick, or his moans. He didn’t want Saix.

He wanted it to be you.

*I want my best friend back.*

Saix’s hips jumped when he came, and they continued to twitch as Axel kept on furiously riding him. Ready for it to be over, Axel snaked his hand down and rubbed his swollen clit until it almost hurt. His thoughts kept coming back around to you, to ideas of what you looked like now.

*Your eyes. Your mouth. Your chest.*

*Your hands. Your body. Your moans.*


He squeezed his eyes shut.

*You. You. You.*

He came with a gasp, shuddering from his hips to his toes. He chased it, still grinding on Saix’s softening cock, until it was gone and left him lonely. The sound of breathing filled the empty space between them, and that was just fine by them.

... Axel sighed, and lifted his hips until he was empty. Spent, he let himself slide off the bed and onto the clean floor, where he sat and took a moment to just exist. No frustration. No fantasy. No angry sex. No cold floor. No Saix.

Saix lied awake on his bed. He rolled the used condom off and tossed it in the trash with neutral apathy. He watched Axel pick himself up and put on his clothes, crumpled and discarded on the floor. When his old friend opened the door, he took it upon himself to break the silence.

“You should move on.”

And Axel, the assassin with the silver tongue, said nothing. The door slid shut behind him.

He sighed into the empty room. “You’re only prolonging your suffering.”

Axel woke up feeling cold and empty. Today was the day. Off to Castle Oblivion to mess with the hero, off to Castle Oblivion to kill the traitors leaving with him. They took their orders from Saix first thing in the morning. They both pretended nothing had happened. Perhaps because nothing had.

How was he supposed to know the events that would come to pass after those long days? How was he to know the domino effect of every disaster that would pull them all apart someday soon?

Time moves quickly as you get older. It gets faster and faster and we have no feet on the gas, no access to the break. Days pass like the view out of the car window, the miles and the minutes
blurring together until it’s all just paint on water. We forget the things we wish we kept, what we always thought we’d remember.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror. The bathroom lights burned bright florescent above his head, shadowing his sunken eyes. His cheeks were red underneath the tape, the purple tattoos were still fresh. He gently brushed his fingers across the plastic, grimacing at the sting.

Saix stood in the doorway. “It’ll heal.”

“Yeah.” He croaked. He caught sight of his bony, thin wrist and shoved it out of sight. He felt too cold, too dizzy, too sick. His chin tucked heavy against his sharp collarbone.

When he lifted his head again, Saix was standing beside him. Where Axel had become pallid and thin, he had filled out, muscled and strong. But it was the scar on his face, the vacant chill in his eyes that made him look like a stranger.

He put a hand on Axel’s back, the bones pressed against his palm through the coat. “It’ll only be for a while longer.” He said, “When those markings are gone you can cry as much as you want. But for now, you have to fix this, fix yourself.”

Axel braced against the sink, felt the tremors through his long fingers. He felt nothing, and yet his eyes burned. “Can I fix this?” He wondered aloud.

“You don’t have that kind of choice.” Saix reminded him, watching their conversation through the mirror. “You either pull yourself together, or Xemnas will turn you into a Dusk.”

A shiver unrelated to the cold in his bones shuddered up and down his spine.

“I don’t want to kill people.” He murmured, unable to meet his own red-ringed eyes. “I never wanted to kill people.”

“That’s also not your choice, or even mine.” Saix hushed, giving his back a gentle rub, like he had done in the past. “We have to play along. You think I don’t want to hurt people, either?”

Axel’s back bowed under the weight of everything. Everything and nothing. Nothing had become everything.

Saix sighed and put his arm around his oldest friend’s shoulders. The one that was always ready for anything, the quickest to smile, to laugh, and to cry. The scarecrow in the mirror barely resembled that child.

“Whenever you think it’s all become too much, you look in the mirror and you see those reverse teardrops.” He said. “And keep those tears until you have your heart back, so when you cry they’re worth something.

“Tears from a Nobody are less than worthless. They’re nothing at all.”

Axel nodded silently, breathing hard. “I’m – I’m tired…” He whispered. “I want to sleep.”

“After you’ve eaten.” Saix said, guiding him back to his bed. A bowl of broth and a piece of bread sat on the bedside table. “Then, you can sleep.”

A humorless, dry, cracked laugh dribbled past Axel’s lips. “Then I have to do it all over again
“Yes.” Saix agreed quietly, watching him sit on the edge of the bed. A shell watching another shell break apart, just like their yo-yo did all those years ago. “Make sure to sleep well. Another early rise in the morning.”

Axel stood in the library, white and clean and vacant. There wasn’t the smell of old books, no quiet mutteredings of people, no friendly clutter. It was sterile, like a hospital. A deep sense of wrong permeated the very air in Castle Oblivion, but it was heavier here.

A waft of air pushed from above, the smell of detergent and vanilla and must breathed over him if only for a second. A glimmer of a smile touched his face as he pulled a book from a shelf. He hummed their song.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't think I'd get this chapter out this early, but it's also a little bit shorter. Thanks for reading!
You find yourself in the most beautiful city you've ever seen, but Twilight Town is more than it seems.

I meant to put these out the same time I posted this but forgot while I was at work. I made two playlists:

We Were Children Once: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUS2qy3rdeBKsjX_0xw-2kpWsDRlXLqln
Wherever You Are: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUS2qy3rdeBJ41gBjmNu0gUi6DyK6Wmc1

We Were Children Once is more happy and can be considered a Before and Wherever You Are is more romantic and can be considered an After.

You stomped out of the lift shop, sore, dirty, and real angry. Aerith peeked at you around the bookshelf, taking in your unkept figure with suppressed grin.

“Rough day?” She asked, watching you trudge towards the table.

“This place is a goddamn maze.” You growled, shucking off your shoes. “I got lost. Twice!”

Taking a seat on the chair, you inspected your boots with a miserable frown. The soles were peeling off the leather, and even if you were inclined to repair them, they were practically worn through anyway. “Leon said the world’s starting to repair itself?”

She nodded, leaning against the bookshelf. “More and more land is popping up all around. Soon, we can leave the castle.”

“Good.” You said, “Maybe there’s already people on them.”

“We can only hope.”

A comfortable quiet fell. The world outside the windows was falling asleep, the last purples and reds bleeding out of sight. But against that same horizon were splashes of color, new and old at the same time, a beautiful conundrum. Tiny pieces of the puzzle were finally coming together.

“What was this place like, before the Heartless?” You asked softly, watching dusk approach like a boat unfurling it’s sails.

Aerith said nothing for a long moment, then came to sit at the table with you. She twisted her hair around her fingers as she remembered. “Hallow Bastion wasn’t always it’s name.” She began, searching past the windows. “And Ansem wasn’t always the Seeker of Darkness.”
“Our world was a peaceful one. Leon and… Cloud and I were lucky to grow there long enough to still have good memories of it. Yuffie was only a kid, she says she barely remembers anything at all.” She shrugged, her lips a thin line, “But she doesn’t know how lucky she is… to have forgotten the day the Heartless came. They sky went dark, and they came all at once without warning. Some people tried to evacuate to the castle, here, but,” She pulled a strand of her hair, “it turned out this is where they had all came from. Ansem was making them below the castle… Everyone who was there died.”

A hot itch scratched at the base of your neck, pressure on your brain on both sides. You wondered silently if your world fell in a similar way.

“But, you didn’t ask about that.” She coughed, “Before that, the world was beautiful. There were endless fields of flowers everywhere, parks and forests, and so many fountains. Of course, I doubt it was perfect, but it was home. And we were happy there.

“The best thing about it was the people.” She hummed, smiling fondly, “Leon told you this already, but we used to babysit this kid on our street. They weren’t much younger than us, but two years makes a bigger difference when you’re children. They were so sweet and cute, and they never caused us trouble. Mostly. But their friends,”

She laughed, “that friend of theirs would come up with some of the most outrageous schemes. Always making mischief, dragging them and the other boy along by their pants. The other boy was a good baker, but one time they almost burnt down the kitchen while we were watching them. It wasn’t nearly as funny then as it is now. After we put out the fire, the three of them were just standing there, covered in that fire extinguisher stuff and soot, they’re eyes popping out of their heads. No one ever found out, of course, we all swore on our souls that not a word of what happened would leave the kitchen. We cleaned it all up until it was good as new and no one knew any better.”

She waited for your chuckles to fade before going on. “I wish I remembered their names, but I can see their faces clear as day.” A shadow fell on her face, “I’m hoping that they’re out there, somewhere. Maybe on those islands.”

You wished you could reassure her, but you knew better than anyone that nothing was for sure. Even if your wish was the same, you couldn't even convince yourself that you’d succeed. Instead, the two of you watched the moon glow softly down on the water, hiding the islands in the darkness.

“I hope so, too.”

Without any shops readily available, you had to wait about a month after you arrived before you left for other worlds again, after the castle was connected. The lot of you had been eagerly anticipating the day. Everything was packed away and ready to go an hour before the road arrived. Then, it was a mad dash passed the Heartless infested castle and towards civilization.

“LAND!” Yuffie screamed, putting her bags down before hugging the ground. “Oh, I’m so happy to be out of that stinking castle!”

You fell to your knees beside her, ready to start screaming like madman yourself. And, you did. It was very cathartic.
“If you two are done,” Leon said, walking on ahead. “Let’s keep moving. There might still be Heartless around.”

You both jumped to your feet and hurried after him with your luggage. Cid was groaning about his aching back when you ended up in the town square. It felt as if the first rays of sun had fallen on you all as you took in the sight. People were walking around, there were open stalls selling clothing and weapons, and one was even giving out blankets and food.

The place was in shambles. People were sleeping and eating in the streets, walking and talking in a daze. Your appearance didn’t go unnoticed for long. Several people tensed when they spotted you. Even when they saw you weren’t Heartless, their eyes still bore confusion and suspicion.

Leon was the first to take the steps down, his smile was falling. “I’m going to ask around.” He said. “Get a read on what’s going on.”

“Hold on, I’ll join ya.” Cid said, “But first lets put this shit down somewhere.”

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much space left. Aerith found a spot with some strangers who were willing to share; an aging women, a young man, and an old coot. You and Aerith hung back to watch your stuff while the other three went around asking questions.

Slowly, the hard eyes eased and whispers were traded. People began to glance curiously at the newcomers, some even with recognition. Cid was especially well received. What you could assume to be old friends shook his hand and clapped him on his back.

“Was Cid a popular guy?” You asked.

Aerith shrugged. “He said he was a mechanic, but not much else.”

“Is that Cid!?” The woman asked, then threw her head back and guffawed. “I thought I recognized him from somewhere. He was a regular at my bar all those years back.” She chuckled at old memories. “He sometimes stepped in when there was a fight. He’s a big guy, sure, and he can take a couple of hits, but the man would trip – oh, he would trip every single fight!” With a slap on her knee, she continued merrily, “I’ve lost so many bags of ice to that man. All because he’d smack his own face on the way down – on the table, on the floor, on someone’s boot, even with his own fist.”

You and Aerith were still laughing when they came back.

“What’s so funny?” Cid muttered when he caught you guys grinning at him. “Do I got somethin’ on my shirt?”

That got you rolling again, but Aerith winked. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

While he was left scratching his head, Leon said to you, “If you need new clothes, that stall over there’s got some good stuff. The couple who work there make them by hand, specially made to withstand wear and tear.”

You got up and stretched. “Thanks. No offense, Cid, but your clothes just aren’t right for me.”

He grunted, “Good, cuz I want ‘em back.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” You chuckled and left to get some new duds. When you returned, you handed Cid’s clothes back to him, then whispered. “Guys, check it out – “

They leaned in.
You opened your jacket and proudly showed the hidden zippers, “Inside pockets! No more fanny packs!”

Leon and Aerith high fived you.

“But you wore them on your hips.” Yuffie said, “So, they’re not fanny packs, they’re… hip packs?”

“I thought you liked them.” Cid muttered with a pout, packing his clothes away.

You didn’t wait long to leave after that, despite the yearning to stay. You helped them get situated, talked long and hard with Leon and Aerith about the future; the restoration of Hollow Bastion. But before dinner, Yuffie pulled you away with bags of spray paint and a big smile.

“This place is a little bland, huh?” She grinned, pushing you forward. “It needs some color!”

You belly laughed, pretending to drop all your weight on her. “Am I being kidnapped?”

She was a tough little thing and kept you moving. “Only temporarily. Now stop dragging your feet!”

“I thought you were gonna carry me.”

“If you let yourself fall, I’m not gonna catch you.”

Eventually she brought you to a lone gray wall, chipped and cracked here and there, but otherwise intact. She threw the red can to you. “One mural before you hit the road?”

You sighed with a smile, sarcastically rolling your eyes, “What am I going to do with this goblin?” Then laughed at her sour face. “Of course, Yuffie.”

You worked until the night began to creep. The sky was already so much clearer than it was the night before. Perhaps soon, it would resemble the night sky the people there missed so badly.

When you were done, the two of you stepped back to admire your work. Instead of a drab, gray slate, a field of flowers sprawled towards a dawn of silver, pink and gold. Colors meshed and struck the eye, an ache deep in your heart bloomed. Yuffie silently leaned against your shoulder, and you pretended, just for a moment, that you were home.

But all things end, as did that moment. Your home was in a heart far away from here. There wouldn’t be rest until you found them. Even so, you hoped there wouldn’t be too many last dinners.

Again, you all said your farewells. Still warmhearted and stinging, but this time was easier. All things get better with practice.

“Bring your friend back next time!” Cid shouted when you were halfway through the portal.

You gave him a mirthful grin and crossed your fingers. “Here’s hoping!”

“Be safe! Love you, kid!”

It almost felt like you hit the invisible wall again. You whirled around.

“Love you, Astra!” Yuffie joined, waving.
“We love you!” Aerith laughed.

“Love you.” Leon smiled.

Tears welled in your eyes. *Don’t be such a crybaby.* You wiped them away with your arm, and then beamed. “I love you, too! Love you a lot!”

But the worlds outside were beckoning. With one last lonely wave, you entered the Dark Corridor.

It wasn’t long before you found a portal. Now with the knowledge that the black coat association was very much after you, you cautiously peeked out and found yourself in a forest. Cicadas called and through the leaves you saw the world was bathed in orange and red and gold. The warm, fresh breeze was a welcome change from the stale air inside the library.

You stepped through and closed the portal behind you. Once your coat was away, you began to walk. Blessedly, it was less than sprawling and there weren’t many places to go. The first place was a dead end, a dilapidated mansion behind a locked gate.

You stood there for a long moment, just to look. Figuring there wasn’t anything to see at the moment, you went back the way you came, keeping the stone wall in your sight. Eventually, you came to a big hole and ducked through.

“Oh, wow.”

You’ve never seen such a beautiful, relaxed city. This was obviously the main square, people where everywhere. It wasn’t grand, or sprawling, or unbelievable but…

*I think this is the first functioning city I’ve been to. And I hesitate to include Halloween Town in that pile.***

People were living out their lives, walking the streets without fear. You began to explore, taking in the warmth and the life that breathed from the very bricks. You saw parents cradle their sleeping children against their chests. Friends walking around with cold drinks, talking about video games and homework. People in casual suits sitting at tables, talking on the phone while tapping away at their laptops. Baristas and clerks taking breaks in the front of shops, chatting with their lunch or cigarettes in hand.

You tried not to act as starstruck as you felt. This place was so peaceful, so – so –

It was indescribable. This feeling in your chest. Like how you got déjà vu when you looked closely at some faces, how you knew how to navigate the roads as if you’ve known them before. The thought crossed your mind, but you dismissed it. This world didn’t fall to the Heartless, you could see that plain as day.

This wasn’t your world.

You chewed the inside of your cheek as you took a break, leaning against a wall. The sunset was red, and it’s rays brushed against your face, like a lover’s touch. You closed your eyes and took a moment to simply breathe. The air was light and fresh, carrying the smell of food and grass.

When you opened your eyes, you felt your stomach drop.

A black coat was there. Alarm bells began ringing in your head as you prepared to flee, but then you got a second look.
The black coat had his back to you, the hood was down. Your jaw dropped. *He’s a kid.* You realized with horror. *He might be even younger than Yuffie.*

You took a long moment to consider the situation. Was this kid part of the Black Coat Baddie Society? And if he was, did he know about you? And would he be in a place to do anything about it with all these people around?

There was also the possibility that none of those things were true, and if they were, maybe he was being… manipulated? It’s easy to control kids with the right words and the right language. It could be possible that he had no idea…

But you weren’t going to get any of those answers standing by the wall like a creep. Swallowing hard, you casually approached.

“Two sea-salts, please.” He asked the cashier.

You waited out of sight for him to finish before catching his attention. “Um, excuse me?”

He blinked and turned to you with wide eyes. No recognition, no nothing, but his body language hinted that he was a little uncomfortable. Maybe he was shy, or just scared of strangers. Or black coats didn’t like being noticed.

“Uh, hi.” He said.

Good enough start. No threats. “Hey, I’m a traveler, and I was wondering if you knew what the name of this place is? I haven’t been able to find any signs or brochures.”

His brow furrowed slightly, “This is Twilight Town.” He said, then furtively glanced around. He moved in closer. “Where are you from?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what world are you from?”

“Oh,” You hummed. “So, you know about that.”

He nodded, waiting patiently for your answer. Something about him didn’t seem quite right, he was just a little dazed, like he was working on auto-pilot. But, the more you talked to him, the livelier he became, if only a little.

“Well, I’m not quite sure.” You admitted. “Part of this traveling thing is me figuring that part out.”

He gasped. “You don’t have any memory?”

You shook your head. “Yeah, woke up one day and had nothin’ in my noggin.” You pointed your finger at your temple with a dry chuckle. “I’m getting better at memorizing, though.”

He stared openly at you in wonder, then he turned and waved at someone by the wall. Your hackles shook, but then you saw it was only another kid, this one with their hood up. He gave them one of the ice creams. “Xion!” He said, “They don’t have any memory, either!”

They gasped and turned to you, their face hidden. “Really?”

“Wait.” You paused, “You guys have amnesia?”

They both nodded. Roxas opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it with a sheepish
frown.

“That’s okay,” You said, “you don’t have to share if you don’t want to.”

Their shoulders relaxed. You didn’t need to ask about the coats, you had your answer. But before you could excuse yourself, the boy asked, “Does it get better?”

It took you a second to digest the loaded question. “Well,” You hummed, “I mean, I have the memories I’ve made since then…” Your lip twitched, “and I’m grateful that I have them. The people I’ve met mean the world to me. If I chose too, I could probably go on without worrying about the memories I’ve lost, but.” You shook your head, “that isn’t the option I’ve chosen to take.

“Plus, I’m sure it’s different for everyone.” You pointed out. “I’m sure there’s tons of other people who go through it, too, but, I dunno…” You shrugged, “How you go about it is entirely up to you, it has to be the choice that’s right for you. That’s what defines it, I guess. I’m sorry,” You chuckled, “I sound like a loon.”

“No.” The other one said quietly. “That makes sense.”

The boy glanced at them in confusion. “You sure?”

They nodded. “Yeah.” And offered no elaboration.

You laughed softly. “I’m glad it made sense to somebody. I’m still not sure I made sense even to me.”

The boy giggled softly. “Can I ask, what’s your name?”

“Hm?” You blanched. Giving your nickname probably wasn’t the smartest move, but… something about these kids made you want to trust them. You hoped that wasn’t just some trickery hoodoo. “I go by Astra.” You said, putting your hands in your pockets.

“Is that your real name?” The hooded one asked.

You shrugged again. “No. Don’t remember that either.”

“Neither do we.” The boy said.

Your heart hurt for them. It was hard enough to go through that as an adult, but for a kid… “Can I ask for your names?” You asked gently.

They both stared at each other for a long moment.

Finally, the boy answered. “My name’s Roxas.”

The hooded one followed suit. “I’m Xion.”

“It’s nice to meet you both.” You smiled. “Say hey, if you guys ever need someone and you see me, don’t be afraid to come calling. Okay?”

They both nodded, little grins on their faces.

“You better eat that ice cream before it melts.” You added, eyeing the growing puddles in the wrappers.

Both shouted and waved goodbye before taking off.
Well, unexpected, a little weird. You thought with a sigh. But at least they didn’t try anything. I don’t want to hit a kid.

But this whole situation was screwy. Two kids who have no memories are a part of the BCBS. (Yes, it’s an acronym now, you were getting tired of saying black coat over and over.) Whatever was going on with that was more than a little suspicious. Besides, it’s one thing to steal a coat, it’s a whole other thing to kidnap two teenagers. Who might still kick your ass if you tried.

Well, fuck me I guess. You rubbed your eyes. All you could do was keep an eye out for them and help them if you can.

In the meantime, that ice cream looked really good. The color was too nice to pass up. He called it sea-salt, right? You went to the counter and bought one for yourself. Thinking of nothing, you took off the wrapper and threw it away and began nibbling away at it.

It’s salty, but sweet. I like it.

You didn’t notice the tears rolling silently down your cheeks.

The sunset never faded, but the sun rotated around the horizon. It was like the world was thrown off it’s axis. That was perhaps the oddest thing about it. There was no disaster, no curse or hidden treasure trove, you hadn’t even encountered any Heartless.

You walked around with no clear aim in mind. Soon, the twilight grew dim and lights flickered on in the streets. People were walking home. This must’ve been what qualified for night here.

“Hayner, Olette!” A chubby boy ran past you, towards two other teenagers about his age. You didn’t catch the rest of the conversation as he waved a camera around excitedly. The other two laughed at something he said and they all continued home together.

You could’ve sworn you’ve seen their faces before, but there was no way that could be.

The sign you passed said, “Sandlot”. An empty square lot, no one was there. You considered the bench, then took a seat, eventually lying on it, your legs hanging off the wood. A portal opened here, but there was no reason why. And the kids in the coats, that raised a few red flags. As much as you hated to admit it, something was up in Twilight Town.

Then, the noise you hated above all else warbled. You sat up with a groan, only to gape in wonder.

There were sinewy, white creatures, moving as if they were dancing. They glared at you with no eyes, a zipper opened their mouths and they made no noise, but it was obviously a scream. These weren’t Heartless.

You jumped behind the bench and readied yourself. They took to the air, twisting, swimming, swarming at you.

“Ohay,” You whispered, “Gross, weird. Okay.” Then you moved to dispatch them. They were a tricky bunch, their elegant yet repulsive movements made them hard to target, but when you did manage to get a hit in it turned out they were pretty easy to defeat. You’d compare them to a Soldier if you had to.

The bogeyman came out at night. After the last of them disappeared in thorny swirls of gray and black, Heartless came to take their place. The worst of them was a Large Body, and you had long past being threatened by those. When it was over and no others came, you picked up the fallen goods they dropped and decided to get a motel instead of sleeping in the open.
Thankfully, it was reasonably priced. You shed your clothes before taking a shower and collapsing on the bed. It wasn’t long before you fell asleep.

You dreamt you were talking with Yuffie and Aerith, watching the sunset at Hollow Bastion. You sat on a concrete wall, legs dangling off the ledge. You were snacking on strawberry ice cream, it didn’t bother you that you couldn’t taste it.

“Do you ever wonder why the sun sets red?” Yuffie wondered, chewing on the stick.

“It’s because light is made up of all kinds of colors.” You answered, “And red’s the one that travels the farthest.” It didn’t bother you that you didn’t know how you knew that.

Aerith gave you a curious glance. “How’d you know that?”

“Because,” You said, “red’s my favorite color.”

“I thought it was green.” Yuffie said. “How come you don’t wear it?”

You picked at your jacket. “I dunno. Just because it’s my favorite doesn’t mean it’s mine.”

“So, why do you wear green?” Aerith asked.

“I dunno.” You answered again. “It’s how I know myself.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I dunno.”

You took another bite of your treat and tasted salt and cream.

“I wonder what my favorite color is.”

The question made you frown. When you looked, Yuffie was Roxas, and that made total sense.

“It can be whatever you want it to be.” You said, then turned Aerith, who was now Xion. “You too.”

“We get to choose?” They wondered, looking over the hills and valleys of Twilight Town.

“Yeah.” You nodded, “My favorite color is red because it reminds me of someone important to me. Maybe yours will remind you of someone you care about, too.”

Roxas cocked his head. “Who’s the person that’s important to you?”

You grinned,

“I dunno.”

“---.”

“Is he your friend?” Xion asked.

“I dunno.”

“He’s my best friend.”

Roxas leaned in, “So, you guys eat ice cream together?”
“I dunno.”

“All the time.”

Xion watched their ice cream melt. “What’s it like, having a best friend?”

You patted her head, “It’s the best feeling in the whole world. You’ll know, someday soon.”

“But,” they whispered in unison, “---’s have no ---s to make friends with.”

“What?”

And you were falling off the clocktower, you so desperately wanted to scream but you had no mouth. A third figure sat where you had sat before, watching you fall. The ground was looming closer, and closer, but then it was gone, and so was the red sky and Twilight Town and everything.

You were falling and falling and falling in an endless sterile, white room.

You gasped awake in a cold sweat.

Slowly, you pulled the blankets up to your chin and shivered. Already, the dream was fading away, leaving you with nothing but the feeling of freefall, of a stone coming towards the ground, of skin on sharp air. Your hands tightened around the comforter, unable to close your eyes and seeing only white nothing.

You didn’t see the kids around the next day. There was a lot of Twilight Town to see, so you figured you’d take a train and go looking a little longer. Perhaps you’d stay here a few days, maybe a week so you could be thorough. If it weren’t for the shit you knew popped up at night, you’d say this was paradise. And even then, it was pretty close.

At this point, Heartless are probably everywhere. You grimaced, looking out from a hill, watching a train disappear into the mountain. At least it’s not an epidemic. People would be talking about it if it were.

The sun was at it’s highest point, the sky burned red above you. That’s because light’s made up of lots of colors. You thought, holding your hand out to the sky, watching the gold slip between your fingers like satin. Out of all those colors, red travels the farthest. I wonder if I watched the sunset a lot, back then.

The week felt like a vacation most days, just as long as you found somewhere to sleep in the night. It was the most relaxing search yet. A part of you felt a little guilty, like you weren’t looking hard enough, but that couldn’t be any farther from the truth. You spent every daylight hour looking for him them, just like before, this time you just ate lots of good food and had a few too many ice creams.

You were pretty sure you searched the place from top to bottom by the sixth day, which meant that you would be leaving by tomorrow once you were sure. That was also the day you bumped into Roxas again. And boy, did he look bummed out.

“Uh, hey,” You said.

He didn’t seem to recognize you for a second, then his eye lit up. “Hello.”
“It’s good to see you again, Roxas.” You bent to the side to get a better look at his down-turned face, hoping it would get a grin out of him. “What’s with the long face?”

He stared at you for a second, then mimicked your stance, now eye to eye. “Why are we doing this?”

You cackled, “Um, good question.”

“I feel silly.” He said.

“Good! Cuz I’m sure we both look pretty silly right now.” You straightened, as did he. “What’s up?”

It was like looking at a computer lagging, then he said, “Oh, I’ve been…” His face fell, “okay.”

You put your hands in your pockets. “You don’t look so sure about that.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s…”

“Complicated?” He nodded. “That’s okay… Do you wanna talk about it or something? What do you usually do around now, if it’s okay to ask?”

His eyes drifted to the ice cream stand. “I get ice cream and sit at the clocktower with Xion, or Axel, but…” Then he finally faced you fully, eyes flat. “Could you… go with me?”

“Yeah, sure.” You said, “The ice cream’ll be my treat. Just tell me what you want.”

“Sea-salt.”

You gave him a lopsided grin. “Alright, that’s what I wanted to.”

He brought you to the top of the clocktower, the view of the sunset took your breath away. He took a seat on the ledge and you did the same. A disturbing wave of déjà vu swept over you, but you didn’t let it bother you for long.

You took a small bite of your treat. “This is a beautiful view.” You said with a smile. “Thank you for showing it to me.”

Roxas gave you a subdued, but genuine smile. “You’re welcome.” Then sighed, as if the world were on his shoulders. “I keep coming here, but no one’s been showing up.”

“Xion and this other guy?”

He nodded quietly. “I haven’t seen Xion much lately. I wonder if she’s okay. But,” His shoulders sagged, his ice cream drooped in his fingers.

You leaned forward, “Are you okay?”

For a long moment, he didn’t answer. “Axel might be gone.”

Oh shit. I am not prepared for this. “I – I’m so sorry.” You said, “Do you know for sure?”

He shook his head. “Nobody will tell me. They only said someone got terminated, and it might’ve been him.”

You didn’t know what to do with your hands. Eventually, you could only say what you already
knew in your heart. “It’s terrible, not knowing.” You pressed your lips together, watching a drop of ice cream fall to the ground below. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Slowly, he faced you again. “I… don’t know what I’m feeling.” He whispered. “It’s like there’s something heavy on my chest. A lump in my throat I can’t swallow down. I don’t know how to make it go away.”

You knew that feeling all too well. It was the same feeling that crept on you when you delved too deep in the hole where your memories should be. “Maybe because it’s not supposed to.” You said. “You’re worried about them, you’re grieving.”

“Grieving?”

“Yeah, you’re grieving over your friends, because you don’t know if they’re safe, or alive, or if you’ll see them again. Trust me, I know it.”

He blinked at you, waiting for you to go on.

“It’s natural.” You said. “Even if it feels terrible, awful, like this is worst pain you’ve ever been in, it’s meant to be there, until it’s run it’s course. It’s important that you let yourself feel it, but it’s also important that you keep moving. Do you understand me?”

“I… think so.” He murmured, but the furrow on his brow spoke otherwise.

“It’s okay if you don’t. Some things we’re just not gonna understand. But, don’t lose hope.” You nudged his shoulder. “Your friends can be out there, thinking of you, too.”

“You think?”

You shrugged, “Nothing’s for sure, Roxas. But I hope.”

Slowly, he pressed a hand against his chest, lost in thought. Then, he turned and smiled at you. “At least I have a name for it now. Thank you.”

You patted his shoulder. “No problem. I did say you could ask for my help anytime. Besides, who am I to say no to puppy face like yours?”

He laughed, “I do not have a puppy face!”

“You have the biggest puppy dog face I have ever seen.” You corrected. “You look like a golden retriever.”

He pushed your arm playfully, “Do not!” Then he stopped, blinked, then the warmest smile spread across his face. “Are we friends now, Astra?”

It was your turn to blink. “I – Yeah, sure. We’re friends, Roxas.”

His smile grew wider. “Axel said,” He began, staring at his ice cream, “that friends are people who laugh and eat ice cream together.”

You bit down a chuckle. “Yeah, that’s part of it. Liking spending time with each other is pretty important.”

“I like spending time with them.” He said, “Axel, and Xion, and you.”

“Okay, kid.” You ate your ice cream to hide your proud flush. “Cool. I like spending time with
“you, too.”

You ate in comfortable silence, but as it was, you felt that you needed to break it. “Roxas, I’m going to be leaving tomorrow.”

“What?” He gasped. “Where?”

“I don’t know yet.” You said, worried by the look in his eyes. “I’ve looked all around this place, but my friend isn’t here. So, I have to go look somewhere else.”

His hands folded around the stick of his ice cream. “Axel went away, too, and he hasn’t come back yet.”

“Oh,” You hissed, “shit. That’s why – Okay, Roxas, I’m going to come back someday, okay?”

By the cowering puppy look, he was not okay.

You faced him fully. “I’ll make it a promise. I’ll come back after my next trip and check up on you, alright? It might not be for a while.” You admitted, “But I promise you that I will.”

He searched your eyes. “What’s a promise?”

That’s a hard question to answer. “It’s… something you keep.” You eventually decided. “Something you’ll follow through on, even when you… forget. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.” He breathed, “That makes sense.”

“Good.” You sighed in relief. “I was wondering if I was putting my foot in my mouth again.”

He gave you a curious look. “You say weird things.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah.” He gave you a small smile. “I think Axel would like you. He sometimes says weird things, too.”

You huffed. “Well, next time I come to visit, maybe we’ll run into each other.” But maybe not, for BCBS reasons.

The evening grew long, and the two of you had to say your goodbyes.

“Thanks for eating ice cream with me.” He said.

“Thank you.” You replied, giving his hair a friendly muss. “I’ll see you later, Roxas.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you, Astra.”

Axel sneezed.

“Bless you.”

Sitting by the window was the frail little witch in white. Naminé’s eyes were wide as she watched Axel from above her sketchbook, as if she wanted to take back her words. But you can’t just reload save files in real life, it doesn’t work that way.
He arched a brow at her, eyes roaming the otherwise empty room. “Why, thank you.” His grin held a sharp edge. He sauntered over to stand behind her. “Can I take a peek?”

She absolutely did not want him to take a peek, but she had no choice but to let him anyway. It wasn’t much more than a sketch, a mish-mash of blues and greens and reds.

Axel opened his mouth to make some stupid remark, only for it to die on his tongue. The longer he stared at the colors, the more he felt like he was drowning, heard the sound of water beat against his ears, saw the paint swirl on the surface.

He forced himself out of the spell. Naminé stared up at him, her big eyes full of confusion, even concern.

*I absolutely refuse to be saddled with another child.* He folded his arms. “Aw, what is it? You worried about poor Axel?”

That soured her. She turned her face away. “No.”

He nodded to himself, then went to stand by the window. Even if there wasn’t much to see, lots of ugly darkness, but anything was better than the white on white on white.

He sighed laboriously. *I could really use an ice cream right now.* Closing his eyes, he imagined he was sitting on the clocktower. Roxas was there, going on about something or another. *I wonder how he’s doing. Probably still a bit like a zombie.* His memory replayed something the kid did a while back that made him snort.

His mind screeched to a halt. There was someone on the other side of Roxas. His ice cream covered their face as they listened to him talk. Axel tried to lean around him, to get a better look at the stranger, *that shade of green—*

He banged his fist against his forehead with a low growl. *God, I --- you so much, but please stop stalking me in my daydreams.* He thought with absolutely no sense of irony. *Stupid brain. Stupid brain. Stop getting this shit mixed up.*


When he turned around, his face and mind were clear. “Hardly. The boredom is just getting to me.” Larxene snorted. “Relax. You’ll get your turn to pester the pipsqueak here soon.” She pinched Naminé’s cheeks. “Isn’t that right, girlie?”

The kid pulled her face away, forcing her words down her throat with a grimace. Larxene only bared her teeth in amusement and gave her a condescending pat on the head.

Axel and Naminé’s eyes met. If only she knew what he had in store for this whole operation. A little more time, not until all the pawns are where they need to be. The best assassin is one that’s patient above all else.

“*C’mon, keep up!***

*“Lea, this isn’t a race!”***

*“But I’m winning anyway!”***
“Not for long!”

He put his hands on his hips and stretched his chest towards the ceiling. *Guess I grew out of my impatience, huh, Y/N.*

Chapter End Notes

Watch reader causally adopt all the kids.
Another shorty, but the next one is probably going to be v long because its a mismatch of a Journey chapter and a plot chapter.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The last thing Axel wanted to do was go back to the Castle. What he wanted was to grab some ice cream and hang out on the clocktower with Roxas for a bit. Take a minute to sort out his head, it wasn’t like Castle Oblivion was a get-away vacation, far from it. He’d find the kid first, if he was around, just to check in.

Thankfully, it didn’t take long. Roxas ended up walking out of the Dark Corridor right in front of him. What happened next was a little odd. The kid was under the impression that everyone at Castle Oblivion died, looked like his eyes were about to pop right out of his head, then what’s more, he said he was worried about him.

“Where did you learn that, anyway?”

Roxas sat there for a moment. He had just said that he invited Xion to come hang out with them, which is fine, he guessed. “What?”

“Worry. Where’d you learn that word, and how do you know what it means?”

He sat back, then grinned. “I met this person a while back. They taught me what worry and grief is.”

Axel felt the beginnings of a protective surge twitch in his gut. “What do you mean? What person?”

“Just a normal person.” Roxas said, “I was feeling… wrong, and I asked them to eat ice cream with me here. We talked for a while, I told them what I felt, and they told me that I was grieving.”

Taking Axels’ stunned silence as confusion, he continued. “I said I felt like I was choking, that something heavy was on my chest, and that’s how they knew. They said it’s natural, that it’s important to feel it, but to not let it… get away from me or something.”

Axel thought long and hard for a moment. “Good advice, if it weren’t for a Nobody.” He said slowly, “But who is this person?”

“Their name is Astra, but they actually don’t remember their real name, like Xion and I.” He replied simply, “They don’t have any memories, either. They’re nice, and they make me laugh. They’re also a little goofy. They even like sea-salt ice cream, too.”

“How old are they?”

Roxas thought for a moment. “About your age? Maybe a little younger.”
Axel examined his expression closely, “Does anyone in the Organization know?”

He shook his head. “I know we’re not supposed to talk to people. I don’t want them to get into trouble.”

“So, you trust them?”

He nodded with a smile. “They said if I - or Xion - ever have a problem we can talk to them.” Then he threw the curveball. “I think you’d like them!”

A lot of things were going through Axels mind, but none of them said he’d like this new stranger. But if, he admitted begrudgingly, they helped Roxas out, I’ll let it slide. “Sure.” He said vaguely, finishing his ice cream.

“Do you want to meet them?”

And put yourself and I at risk? Fat chance. “Maybe. Let’s see how I feel when you see them again.”

You stepped back into the alleys of Twilight Town with the first embers of a smile. But you were quick to hide the coat away first, you hadn’t gotten caught again and you intended it to stay that way. Even so, you were excited to see the kids again, hopeful that things turned out alright.

With a furtive glance around, you meandered your way through Market Street. There was a chill in the air, the first touch of Autumn. With the world tipped on it’s axis the way it was, you had to wonder how that effected the weather. Maybe it was mild all year long.
First things first was to replenish your supplies, then you grabbed a warm drink you never tried. After a few minutes of quiet walking, you took a seat on an empty bench. You put your hood up and just closed your eyes, letting the last of the warm caramel and cinnamon melt on your tongue. The world was moving, and for the moment at least, you didn’t have to.

Little whispers soon dragged your attention back to the present. You opened your eyes and turned your head, only to startle the two familiar figures. Roxas and Xion stood by the corner, watching you. You waved with a smile and they came running.

“Astra, you’re back!” Roxas beamed, taking a seat on your right.

Xion took your left, “Roxas said you would.”

“And I’m here ain’t I?” You put your hands in your lap. “How’ve you guys been?”

They both answered with “good”s. Then Roxas said, “Axel’s okay! He came back a while ago!”

“Awesome!” You gasped, “I know how worried you were.”

“You told me to keep hoping, and you were right.” He beamed, “Xion and Axel came back.”

A smile split across your face like the first rays of dawn. “Friends always come back.” You said, patting their heads.

Xion straightened, then leaned towards you. “Are we friends?”

“Sure we are.” You said. “As long as you want to be, that is.”

They sat there for a long moment, deep in thought, then they pulled back their hood. To your surprise, Xion was a girl. You tried to remember if her voice ever gave you any clues, but when you tried to it all became white noise.

She gave you a shy sort of smile, trying to gauge your reaction. To ease her nerves, you gave her black hair a friendly muss. She laughed in delight and pushed your hand away playfully.

You put your hands in your lap again, feeling a warm glow spread from the inside out. “Thanks for trusting me.” You said.

“Why do you have your hood up?” Roxas asked, brushing his fingers through the faux fur.

You shrugged. “It’s a bit chilly. You guys are wearing heavy coats, I’ve only got this.” You waved your hand over your clothes. “What’s with those things, by the way? I’ve been wondering why you guys dress the same.”

They both got quiet, eyes falling on their laps.

“Uh,” You floundered, “is something wrong? Are you guys okay?”

Their body language practically shouted NO. Xion especially, her hands were balled into fists on her knees. Roxas had his eyes averted, hunched in on himself. Unlike her, he seemed to be more cautious than outright frustrated.

Just when you were about to say that they didn’t have to answer, Xion said, “It’s for our work.”

Roxas flinched, but now that his friend said something, he decided he could, too. “Yeah. It’s our uniform.”
“You don’t have any other clothes?”

They both shook their heads. “We can’t.” Xion whispered.

Cult Cult Cult Cult You gave the area a sweep, then lowered your voice gently, “Are you guys alright?”

They nodded, then didn’t seem so sure about that.

“They need us.” Roxas muttered. “We can’t leave.”

Xion hugged her elbows, “We’re not supposed to talk to you, either.”

It was like a whole alarm parade was going off in your head. “Am I putting you guys in danger by talking to you?”

Both gasped and grabbed your arms with wide eyes.

“It’s okay!” Roxas said, “They need us, so…”

“Please don’t go.” Xion pleaded. “We like talking to you.”

“We don’t care if it’s against the rules.”

Even so, it was hard to relax. Especially since the BCBS had a hit out for you. “Okay, okay, I’m not going anywhere.” You soothed them. Pulling your arms away, you opened them in question.

They both stared at you in confusion.

After the moment became awkward, you coughed. “Do you need a hug?”

They continued to stare.

Oh my god. “Have you never gotten a hug before?”

They both shook their head.

OH MY GOD. Anger, horror and sorrow boiled cold and hot in your gut, but you didn’t let it show on your face. “It’s something friends do.” You explained patiently. “You put your arms around each other and hold as gently or as tightly as you want. It makes people feel better, it’s a way to be close with one another.

“Would you like to try one?”

They both nodded and climbed into arms then wrapped themselves around your middle. Xion pressed her cheek against your collar bone. Her eyes went wide, then her whole body relaxed against you. Roxas had his face against your chest, listening to your breathing. Familiarity and wonder filled him up, then he closed his eyes. Xion did, too.

With stinging eyes, you wrapped your arms around their shoulders and held them close. I’ll protect you with my life. You silently vowed, feeling the tears well up. I’ll give you as many hugs as you need.

A peaceful moment in the twilight, two lives leaning on you, both precious and beautiful. A storm raged within you.
I’ve got to find a way to get them out of here.

But nothing happens overnight. You had to build on your relationship first, and it was this that you dwelled on for the next week that you stayed, for your sake as well as their own. This feeling just kept creeping up on you, that if you weren’t there to help them something terrible would happen.

They mostly got to you in the mornings, hitting you up before they had to get to work. They never did get into details, but they would sometimes mention things their ‘coworkers’ would say or something that they did. You tried not to sweat when the mentioned that one of them didn’t do any work and just played the sitar all day.

A recurring person they talked about most was definitely Axel. From what you could tell, he became something like a surrogate dad or brother to them. Some of the jokes they relayed to you had you rolling, and they seemed dead set that the two of you would like each other if you would only meet.

Nnnnnnnnnnno. “I wish I could, guys, seems that he’s pretty important to you.” You said with a tight grin. “But, I don’t think it’s a great idea.”

“Why not?” Roxas asked.

“Because, I really don’t want you guys to get in trouble, or him.” If he’s looking out for you, he’s the last guy I want, how did Roxas put it? Terminated. “Does he know about me?”

They both nodded. “We talk about you sometimes.” Xion said, “He said he thinks your funny!”

“From what you’ve said, I think he’s pretty funny, too.” You grinned. “But I think that’s where it needs stay, at least for now. Not that I don’t want to meet him.” You reassured when you saw their smiles become frowns, “it’s solely because I don’t want to become a liability to any of you. I don’t want you guys getting hurt because of me.”

A while ago, you would’ve expected that to go right over their heads, but they’ve matured since you met. The hard set in the lines of their mouths when they nodded said all.

When you ran into them again, it was the middle of the day, and they were both fidgety and uncomfortable when you approached.

“Work?” You asked.

They nodded apologetically.

“That’s okay, say no more.” You patted their heads. “I’m gonna be leaving here soon, but I’ll be sticking around until tomorrow morning. I shouldn’t be leaving town much, so if you want to hang out before I go, just come and find me.”

“Okay!” They both grinned, and you left them to do their bidding.

With… really nothing planned, you decided to go take a walk to the mansion. Might as well, right? The forest was one of the few well and truly quiet places in Twilight Town. Maybe in the entirety of your journey. Nothing but the sound of birds and squirrels, of your shoes on the grass.

The chained fence soon appeared in your line of sight, the abandoned building looming behind.

Why was this place left here? You wondered, pressing against the gate, hands around the metal. It’s so beautiful, with some fixing it might make for a good public entity. Like a shelter, or a library.
Then, the curtain moved.

Your eyes honed in on it, watching closely. *A draft?* But no… a shadow moved against the white.

Now that your interest was piqued, you stepped back to consider the gate. Moving to the stone wall, you stepped back and jumped. Using an Aeroga as a second launch pad, you more than doubled your height and cleared the wall. You tucked and rolled to a stop, getting a few new bruises but nothing major. You stood up and dusted yourself off.

The doors were heavy but weren’t locked. With just a little more encouragement one swung open for you. The light fell in on the dusty, dilapidated room. There wasn’t much to see besides some smashed up furniture. The stairs were in pretty good shape, only giving a measly groan with every step, but you did your best to be quiet. No need to spook the spook in the room.

When you came to the door, you first pressed your ear to hit and listened, but you heard nothing. You opened the door, only to be transported to a whole different place entirely. The room was white from top to bottom, even the curtains and the long table. Pictures, tons of them, were taped to the walls. Some in crayon, some in colored pencil, ranging from simple doodles to outlandish worlds.

A girl, maybe about the same age as Xion and Roxas, sat at the table with a sketchpad and a pencil in hand. She stared at you with wide, shocked eyes, barely even breathing.

You stared back, trying to think of something to say. “Hi.” You said, “You weren’t what I was expecting to find here.”

She took a deep breath, eyes jumping around the room and landing on a vase of flowers. Already seeing where this was going, you put your hands up.

“Woah, woah, woah! No need for that, I’m not here to hurt you. I didn’t even know you were in here.” When she did nothing, you nodded to the drawings. “Are those yours?”

After a pause, she asked, “Who are you?”

“I go by Astra.” You introduced yourself. “And I think we’re both very confused right now, right?”

She nodded.

“Cool, just thought I’d make sure it wasn’t just me.” With your hands still in the air, you pointed forward, “May I come in?”

She nodded slowly, never once taking her eyes off you. “Could you please close the door?”

“Sure.” You shut it quietly behind you. “So,” you began, “am I in a pocket dimension, or is this really the abandoned mansion?”

She tried to fight her grin, but she only barely succeeded. “This really is the abandoned mansion.”

“Cool.” You began to walk by the walls, taking in all the colors on the paper, as if you were in a fine art museum. “These are nice. You’re an amazing artist.”

She ducked her face, blushing under the praise. “Thank you.”

You turned your attention to her and waved a hand at an extra chair. “Can I take a seat?” She nodded and you sat down, taking in the genuine weirdness of the situation. “If I may ask, what is a
girl doing in a chained off abandoned mansion, alone?”

Her eyes fell to her lap, her fingers knotting together. “I… can’t tell you that.”

*Are all the teenagers here in some kind of bad situation?* “Alright. What about your name?”

She peeked under her bangs at you. “My name’s Naminé.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.”

You sat back and looked around the walls, “You drew all these?”

She nodded.

“Do you like to draw?”

“Yes.” She answered, her voice slowly becoming stronger. “It helps me take my mind off of things, when I’m not…” She became quiet again, then asked, “Why are you here?”

You shrugged. “Saw a shadow in the window and got curious. Jumped the fence.”

The face she gave you made you snort. “How’d you do that?”

“Magic.” You answered with a wiggle of your fingers.

Her grin finally broke free. “You say weird things.”

“Y’know, you’re the second kid to tell me that.”

“… It must be because it’s true.”

You put your hand over your heart, “Damn, tell me how you really feel.” Then you laughed, unable to take even yourself seriously. But her giggles joined yours, and it was worth it.

Then your eyes caught on a picture just a little further down the table. You brought it to you with your fingertips, careful not to tear or smudge. Three little figures, two very familiar, the third was not. A boy with spiky blond hair, a girl with black hair, and a taller one, a man, with long red hair. All wearing the black coats.

You turned to show it to her. “Is that Roxas and Xion?” You asked.

She flinched, “You know them?”

“Yeah, they’re friends of mine. Do you know them?”

She hugged her arm, “Sort of.” She said, “But not really. Why?”

You deflated, turning the picture back to you. “I think they’re in with some bad people. I’m trying to figure out a way to get them out of there.” You sighed heavily, “I’m worried about them.”

Naminé grew quiet, inward onto herself. “I wish I could help you.” She murmured.

You shook your head, “No, it’s okay.” You pointed at the red head. “My guess is that’s Axel?”

She nodded again.
“Good to know.” You hummed, mulling over your thoughts before your attention returned to Naminé. “What about you?”

“What?”

You relaxed your posture, making yourself less threatening, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She said, but something in her eyes was subdued, sad.

You considered her for a long moment. Naminé obviously wasn’t used to having visitors, and she was growing a bit uncomfortable with the current topic. You glanced back at the picture, “Can I give you a bit of shading advice, one artist to another?”

She straightened, then nodded in anticipation.

“Try shading red with purple.” You gave her an encouraging smile, “It makes the color pop more than a dark red would.”

It was like seeing a lightbulb turn on, her whole face lit up. “Of course.” She whispered, “That’s genius.”

You chuckled as you got up. “It’s been nice talking to you Naminé.”

Her face fell. “You’re leaving?”

You paused. “Would you like me to stay?”

Her hands were knotting in her lap again, but her gaze kept trailing to a clock. She said nothing, but the alarm in her eyes spoke volumes.

“Would you like me to come visit you again?”

It was as if the idea never even occurred to her. “Would you?”

You felt your smile become pained, “Of course. I’m leaving Twilight Town tomorrow, but I’ll drop by when I come back, okay?”

She nodded furiously, the liveliest you’ve seen her. “That would be nice, thank you!”

“Yes.” You came to stand by her and you gave her your hand.

Her hand was cold and thin in yours, bones like a bird’s. You gave her a firm but gentle handshake.

“I’ll see you later, Naminé.”

“Yeah.” She smiled sadly. “Please come back soon, Astra.”

Welp. You thought after you hopped the wall again. I think I’ve just adopted three adolescents. Cool.

You didn’t see Roxas or Xion until the next morning, they wanted to see you off before they had to get to work. Which was incredibly sweet and absolutely did not make you almost tear up.

The three of you sat on a bench, cups of hot cocoa warming your palms.

“You’ll come back soon, right?” Xion asked, whipped cream on her nose.
You gave them both a self-conscious shrug. “I’ll do my best. I honestly try not to stay in one place for too long, but then several hundred Heartless show up in a sandstorm and I have to help beat them back for a good three weeks until the storm wanes.” You swore you could still feel sand in creases where it shouldn’t be.

“In any case, I’ll try to come back as soon as my next journey is over. If I’m gone more than a month, I deeply apologize, but I doubt it’ll be my fault. And if it is, I’ll apologize again.”

You drank the rest of your cocoa, you hadn’t even realized it was almost all gone. When you put the cup down with a pout, both of the kids broke out into giggles.

“What’s so funny?” You asked, catching some of the laughter yourself.

Roxas pointed at your nose, “Your face!”

The dramatic frown you gave him made him peel into a new bout. When you turned to Xion, she did the same.

“You’ve got a beard!” She laughed.

“And I look good with it, too.” You replied haughtily, striking a pose, joining in their joy. Making the moment last.

When it was time to say goodbye, they hesitated on the edge of your personal space. You opened your arms and they leapt to give you a hug. You squeezed them tight, “I’ll see you guys later, okay?”

“ Bye, Astra.” Xion murmured into your jacket.

“Be safe.” Roxas said.

When Naminé woke up, there was a cup of cocoa on the table. It was still warm.
Axel sat awake in the dark of his bedroom. Thoughts swam around him, he could practically see water catch the light from the window. How did things become so complicated so fast?

Why did he have to catch feelings for those rugrats so fast?

Why did they have to be the ones to use the keyblade?

Why does it have to be one or the other, not both?

*Xion is a puppet* whispered through the water over and over again. *Xion is a puppet.*

She absolutely could not find out, but she did. “*Let’s go home.*” What more could he have done? Not hurt her, he couldn’t, but he has already been swiftly reminded that that’s what’s expected of him.

“He assassin stops liabilities at any means possible,” Saix said to him in the hall. “I hope I do not have to remind you of that again.”

Xion was draining Roxas, and she was beginning to realize it. What is she going to do with that knowledge? What means would she do to reach an end? And Roxas was struggling, too, with the stress of it all. He was getting weaker whilst still trying to go above and beyond what was expected of him.

*Because they know the cost of underperformance.*

Axel grabbed the pillow behind his head and screamed into it. He never had to do that before. Never even had the inkling to less than a year ago.

*I care about them but Nobodies don’t have hearts to care with!*

What kind of terrifying conundrum was this?
And why do they have to be caught in the middle of it all? They’re only kids! It doesn’t matter what they are, or who they came from, they were innocent. They had no business being tied up in Xemnas’s or the Organizations machinations.

His head hit the mattress, pressing the pillow against his eyes. Y/N... He thought into the river above his head, what’s the right thing to do? What would you do, if you were here? ‘Cause I have no idea anymore. I’m giving my everything just to keep giving them a moment of normalcy, even when we all know it’s not.

I don’t know what to say to them. I don’t know anything anymore.

I just, a terrible whine mulled from his throat, I can always talk to you. You clear my head, you listen, and even when neither of us have an answer, we always find a way to push through anyway.

I miss you so much.

What would you do, if it were you?

The pillow was wet.

You stepped out of the portal and onto the side street. By the lack of noise, it was a school day. You stretched towards the sky, dismissing the Dark Corridor with a wave of your hand. You doubted there was anyone around to care about your appearance anyway.

The one time that there was.

You heard a *whoosh* behind you and whistle of something being thrown. You threw yourself to the ground, watching a giant chakram fly over your head. If it had hit it’s mark, you would’ve been cleaved in two. It ricocheted off the narrow walls and disappeared in a burst of flame.

Knowing the owner was behind you, you swung to your feet and saw before you a proud member of the BCBS. This one was tall and thin, holding himself in an elegant, even smug posture. As if he’d already won.

A dark chuckle drifted under the hood. “Xigbar told me you were clever.”

“Was that his name? I didn’t care to remember.” You hissed, hoping your searching eyes went unnoticed under the black hood. “Not all that memorable, to be honest.”

There were three exits, two of them behind him, one of them behind you. The Sandlot would give you more area to move, but it would do the same to him. You had a bad feeling that giving him a true arena would be a bad time. Not only that, but the black coat was heavy, you’ve never fought in it before.

The alley was too narrow to make good use of the yoyos, they’d only slow you down, but his weapons were long range too and big, which meant he couldn’t use them either. Unless, of course, he managed to line you up again.

This left you with nothing but your magic and your fists. You realized this in the span of three seconds.

“Well, I’ll make sure you remember me.” He hissed, then vaulted at you. You saw it for what it
really was, he was trying to get you out in the open.

You ducked and rolled, kicking him in the back and casting Aeroga on yourself, a final defense in this close-quarters battle. You kind of hoped that he would try to bait you into running after him by going into the Sandlot, but no dice. You started hopping backwards, towards the final two exits, only for a blast of heat to scorch your back.

A wall of fire stopped you in your tracks. The black coat rose to his full height, cutting off your only other exit. You were trapped.

“Are you fucking kidding me!?” You hissed, and prepared yourself to get hurt.

He rushed you, and you tried to dodge under him again, but he had long reach. His fingers caught on the tail of your coat, throwing you off balance, but the wind forced him to let go. You stumbled back to your feet, heart beating fast.

But he gave you no quarter. He was fast and lithe and strong. You protected yourself with your arms when you couldn’t dodge his barrage of swift punches and kicks, your heels digging into the stone. Then, the wind dissipated, leaving you practically defenseless. Every single one brought pain licking up your arms, at this rate he was going to break both of them. But, you had to be patient, there had to be an opening, or you weren’t going to get out of this alive.

“Not gonna fight back?” He laughed, pulling his fist back, a circuit of flame sparking around it.

And there it was, the cocky motherfucker. With a deft clench of your hand, you cast Graviga. He grunted as the force hit his shoulders, then you stepped back and cast Thundaga for good measure. He shouted in surprise as he got fried. You gave him no time to react before grabbing his wrists in your hands and caging him against the wall. You knocked his knees out from under him, forcing him to be smaller.

With his wrists in one hand, you pulled back to punch his lights out.

“---!”

It was only for a dizzying second, the alley blurred and your muscles felt like jell-o, the sound of water beat against your ears. It was only for a second, but a second was all he needed.

Bands of fire pulsed around his wrists, burning your hand. You cried out, still unsteady, then your back hit the stone wall.

He held your wrists in one his hands easily, holding them high above your head. He was breathing hard, you’d obviously caught him off guard. “Nice try.” You could hear his grin. “But it looks like your –” Then his words drew to a fading halt. One of the sleeves on the coat had fallen a bit. An achingly familiar star bead winked at him, stealing his breath away. He leaned forward to get a better look –

You kicked him in the crotch.

He grunted, his eyes fell on your leg, still sitting between his thighs.

Oh, fuck. You realized. No junk.

“Y’know…” He said, “I thought that would happen sooner.”

But his hand had loosened around your wrists. With nothing left to lose, you kicked yourself off
the wall and headbutted him under the chin. Whatever he was going to be say next was cut off by
the clack of teeth on teeth.

He let you go, you casted Stopra, leaving him stuck in the middle of his fall with one foot off the
ground and his hands going to his face. You didn’t wait to get a better look, you didn’t have the
mind to call for a portal, so you ran.

When you were hidden in an alley in the Tram Commons, you hurriedly took off the coat and
hurried back into the open. Pretending you weren’t running for your life from a hooded
pyromaniac, you calmly rushed to the woods and towards the mansion.

The chase through Twilight Town, the mad rush from the woods to the mansion, jumping the
fence, getting through the doors: it was a blur. You had to keep up with the adrenaline before your
legs felt like lead and the pain in your arms became unbearable. There was only one place that no
one else knew about.

You stepped into Naminé’s room, and you knew you looked like a wreck. Your arms felt like
scorched rubber, the burns on your hand hurt even more so. Exhaustion pulled the rest of the
strings holding you up.

Naminé jumped out of her seat when she saw you, taking in your battered form. “Astra? What
happened?”

“Got jumped.” You hissed, “I just – I need to sit for second.”

Before you could ragdoll onto the floor, she took your arm gently and guided you to a chair. You
sat down heavily, closing your eyes, focusing on nothing but your breathing. Your arms were
wrapped around your middle, you were afraid to even flex a pinky.

A small noise brought your attention to the table. Naminé put a glass of water in front of you,
watching you as if unsure what to do with her hands. You gave her a grateful smile.

“Thank you.”

A tentative smile pressed against the corners of her mouth. “You’re welcome.”

You leaned forward, tried to move, only for sharp cracks of pain to shoot up your arms into your
shoulders. You cursed quietly, then softened your voice. “Naminé, I can’t move my arms. I have an
elixir in my right jacket pocket, can you please get it out for me?”

“Mhmm.” She unzipped the pocket and brought out the round vial glowing gold, and that’s where
she got stuck. “How do I…?”

“Crush it over my head.” You explained, “Don’t worry, the glass will disintegrate.”

She moved to stand behind you and rose the elixir over your head. With both hands, she crushed it,
and a swirl of gold and green light floated over you, bubbles of magic sinking into your skin.
Already, you were breathing easier, the pain was numbing. You bent your fingers experimentally
before slowly unwinding them.

Ugly purple bruises covered what skin you could see. They would fade quickly with the extra help,
but for the moment they were still stinging and sore. The burn on your hand was still red, some
skin had fried right off of it, leaving nasty patches of your palm oozing and red. The skin would
regrow, too, but you weren’t about to use that hand any time soon.
With the one that wasn’t sloughing off mucusy bits of skin, you took a long drink of water. “This isn’t how I thought we’d see each other again. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “What happened?”

“Got cornered by some one of the Black Coat Baddie Society.” You said, leaning back against the wood. “I call them the BCBS for short.”

“You mean…” She said, “the Organization?”

“Is that what they’re called?” You hummed, “That makes them sound too official for a bunch of lunatics wearing black leather snuggies. I think I’ll keep calling them the Black Coat Baddie Society.”

She hid her giggle behind her hand after taking a seat. “I think I like that one better, too.”

You sighed quietly, letting the tension bleed out from your wounds. “What’s their deal, anyway? You steal one coat and suddenly you’re enemy number one.”

“You stole a coat from them?”

You breathed through your teeth. “Yeah, a while ago. This is my second run-in with one that was trying to kill me. But don’t worry, I lost him.”

She fidgeted, staying too still. She knew more than she was letting on, but you weren’t about to press for answers.

“How’ve you been?” You asked quietly. “Did you like the cocoa?”

After a moment of surprise, she smiled bright and clear. “I knew it was you. I liked it a lot, especially the cinnamon on the whipped cream.” She flipped through her sketch book and showed you a picture of white hills and valleys, frothy with snow, patches of brown thrown here and there. “It gave me a little inspiration.”

You beamed, “That’s awesome. The way you use yellow and blue to shade the white is choice!”

She practically glowed, “I’m glad you like it!”

You both stiffened at the same moment. The door had been left open, and a man in a black coat stood in the doorway. No, not a man, a teenager with long hair and wearing a blindfold.

You jumped to your feet and put yourself between him and Naminé. “You guys are goddamned annoying.” You growled, but a hand on your arm made you pause.

Naminé wasn’t looking at you, she was looking at the stranger. “Riku, please don’t be mad.”

“What?”

“He’s not a part of the Organization.” She said, “He just wears the coat, like you do.” Then, to him, “Please, Riku, they’re my friend. Please don’t hurt them.”

He stood there silently, ominously. Even though his eyes were covered, you could feel his gaze upon you. “Fine.” He finally said in a calm voice. “But I can’t say that DiZ will do the same.”

Naminé curled in on herself at the name, the hand on your sleeve tightened. You didn’t think you liked this DiZ.
Riku was quiet for a little while longer. “Since your Naminé’s friend, I won’t tell him. But I can’t say I’ll help you if he catches you, either. It’s best you leave.”

*And leave her here, frightened?* You wanted to bare your teeth, show him your frustration and anger for her. “Why don’t you see me out?” You offered instead.

“Fine.” He nodded.

You turned your back on him and gave Naminé a small smile, which she tried to reflect. You brushed her hair out of her face gently. “You gonna be okay?”

She nodded, eyes downcast.

You held out your arm, and unlike Xion and Roxas, she understood. Yet, the way she lit up, the way she changed from afraid and confused to elated said many things, and none of them shed any good light on Riku or DiZ.

Naminé wrapped her arms around you, pressing her face into your jacket. You held her gently but closely, ignoring the way your arms stung. “I’ll see you later.” You said under your breath.

“Okay.” She whispered into your jacket.

She didn’t want to let you go, but when Riku cleared his throat, she did. You had to leave her behind as you followed Riku out of the mansion. You waited until you were both at the gate before asking your questions.

“Why do you have her isolated in there?” You asked, fighting to keep your tone level.

He sighed. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“I understand she’s a sweet kid locked away in a white room with little to no company, and that she’s really goddamn afraid.” You hissed, fingers twitching for your yoyos. “You understand what that looks like, right?”

Riku took a deep breath, then let it whistle out between his lips. “I know.” He admitted, “But she wants to be there. It’s the only way we can save someone that’s important to us, and it’s the only place where she’s safe. I won’t tell you any more than that.”

Your eyes trailed to the window, the curtains were moving again. “Is she being treated well?”

He didn’t answer.

“Maybe you should change that.” You said, *Or I’m going to bust her outta here.*

With nothing else to say, you left for Twilight Town. Of course, you didn’t openly strut yourself for everyone to see. You did what you could to keep a low profile without making yourself suspicious. The last thing you wanted was to get jumped again, and though the notion to leave for another world pulled at your tailcoat, you ignored it.

You made a promise that you’d come back.

Even though the morning had long passed, you still kept yourself outside, just incase you’d cross paths. Eventually, you made your way to the ice cream stand as the afternoon faded and evening began. You felt a little pep in your step return when you thought of treating yourself to a sea-salt. It had been a trying day indeed.
Through the crowd of families leaving and night-goers coming, you spotted black. With a grin, you pressed through the crowd, thinking it would Roxas or Xion, but when you made your way to the line you felt your eyes bug out of your head.

*It’s the motherfucker who burnt me and almost broke my arms.*

Sure enough, long, tall, and evil stood with his back turned to you, hood down, revealing long, beautiful red hair. He held up three fingers to the cashier, attention blessedly elsewhere. You quickly pulled your hood up and darted back into the crowd.

When you made some distance, you turned back, just to see if he noticed you. The crowd was thinning out, and the scene before you made your stomach drop.

Pyromaniac was talking to Xion and Roxas, he gave them both an ice cream. He waved his hand a bit, and they laughed at some joke you missed. You couldn’t get a good look at his face, but you already connected the clues.

You sank onto the motel bed with a groan, head in hands. “Why did HotMan have to be Axel?” You rubbed your tired eyes, whining. “Why him?”

The one BCBS member you wanted to hurt the least ended up being the same guy who tried to kill you that morning. Fucking figures. Did he even know? Did he even know that you, Astra, was the same guy who mugged Sitar Guy?

You did not sleep well that night. The next morning you woke up less than refreshed, but no less ready to see the kids. Their surrogate father be damned. The chill of defrosting Springtime cleared your lungs as you breathed.

“Astra!”

A grin split across your face when you saw them. Xion and Roxas ran towards you. “When’d you get here?” Xion asked.

You messed her hair, “Just got in yesterday.” Then did the same to Roxas. “I missed you guys. How’ve you been?”

It was immediate. Their smiles became tight, gaze unsure. You held one of each shoulder and leaned down to be eye to eye. “Hey, what’s going on?”

Xion hugged herself, folding in like paper, eyes on the ground. Roxas, however, just seemed… lost, even angry. His hands were clenched at his sides, his gaze kept trailing to Xion, but you had the feeling she wasn’t the source of the anger.

“Okay.” You said, “We can talk over breakfast. My treat.”

The three of you ate outside a café. You munched on you breakfast burrito, watching the two kids you loved dearly chew on their fruit crépes. Blueberry and banana for Xion, strawberry and hazelnut for Roxas, and they both had cups of cocoa, too. You didn’t know why you paid such attention to these little details, as if they would blow away like birds in flight.

You let them enjoy their breakfast in piece for a short while, appreciating what time you had with them. *I’d like them to meet the family.* You thought with a small smile. *Yuffie will get them into so many little schemes. And Naminé can paint the walls, we can do it all together if they want. God knows Cid has enough in his heart to dote on a few more strays.*
Your heart sank. *That's what we are, aren’t we? Just a bunch of strays the world forgot about.*

Before you could make yourself sad and cry, you took a drink from your cup and said, “What’s been going on, guys?” You didn’t make it sound like an interrogation, you didn’t press the issue, you only let the question hang. It was up to them what’d they answer with.

They were both quiet for a moment, eyeing each other, deep in thought.

“That things have gotten weird, lately.” Roxas muttered. “I don’t know what’s going on anymore, no one’s telling me anything.”

Xion nodded, “Me, too. And Saix,” She bit her tongue, fear blooming within.

“It’s okay.” You whispered.

She took a sharp breath through her nose, the set in her eyebrows hard and angry. “He looks at me like I’m dog shit.”

You felt a deep pit of rage smolder in your stomach, you fought to keep your face passive. But, you could feel the flames in your eyes. Roxas’s nod only stoked the embers.

“I don’t know what we did. He doesn’t like me either, but Xion’s got it worse.” He admitted this freely, and it was this that made Xion’s edges soften, if only a little.

You waited patiently for her to continue her part of the story. “He keeps calling me worthless…” She whispered, “Broken. He even called me a puppet to my face.”

*I’m gonna smack the shit outta that bitch*, the voice in your head snarled. *I hope he’s the one who tries to corner me next time, ’cause I’m gonna rip his throat out.*

“All of those aren’t true.” You told her, leaving no room for debate. When she looked up, her eyes were wet. “You are none of those things.” You said, opening your arms.

She scooched her chair over to you and she tucked herself against your side, hiding her face in your jacket. You put your burrito down to hold her close, rubbing small circles on her back.

“Xion, you are sweet and kind. You like the colors blue and black, and you get happy when you see stray dogs and kittens. You love spicy food, your favorite dish is coconut chicken curry, and you gag when you taste something too bitter. You’re compassionate, gentle-hearted, stubborn, and strong. I once saw you bench lift fifty pounds by yourself, and only because Roxas dared you to.

“Everything that I just said is the truth, right?”

The first of her sobs creaked from her throat, but it was joined by her soft laugh.

You gave her a little shake. “Am I right?”

She laughed harder. “Yes.” When she pulled her way, tears still rolled down her cheeks, but her smile more than made up for it.

“You aren’t broken.” You whispered, passing her a napkin for her face. “You’re you, and that’s all anyone can ask for.”

You looked up to see Roxas sitting on the edge of his seat, trying not to act too expectant, but remarkably failing. You waved for him to come join you and he did so with a smile. He leaned against your shoulder and sighed.
“And I don’t know why he wouldn’t like you, either.” You said to him. “I bet he wouldn’t if he knew you a little better, like, how your face turns red when you eat something too spicy. Or that your favorite colors are white and red. Or, that you have the biggest sweet tooth I’ve ever seen, and your favorite dish happens to be whatever dessert you have in your hands at the moment. You once sat beside a dog on the street at seven o’clock in the morning and pressed your face into its fur and didn’t move for five minutes. You’re also hardworking, caring, earnest, and honest, a sweet boy.

“I think if he knew some of these things, he might change his mind about both of you. I know I’m glad to know these things about you, at least.”

They both grinned into your jacket, eyes wet.

“Why do I feel so warm inside?” Xion asked. “I feel it whenever I’m with you guys and Axel. It’s like the feeling I get drinking cocoa, but better.”

You hummed, “From what I know when I feel that… I feel it whenever I’m with my family, or when I’m hanging out with you two, and my friends out there in the worlds. Does it make you feel safe?”

The nodded.

“Does it make you feel like you never want it to go away?”

They nodded.

“Does it make you feel like everything’s okay, even if for a moment?”

They nodded.

You gave them a soft squeeze. “Then I think that’s what we call love.”

“Love?” Roxas said, “But, Xaldin said it was a weakness.”

You harrumphed, “Then he must’ve never loved before. Though, I will admit,” you sighed, “that love can make people do some crazy things. Love is a weird sort of thing, it works differently for each person, but when you love someone it means that you want them to be safe and happy. You respect them as your equal, and you have to treat them as such. You give them your everything.”

“And… you love us?” Xion whispered.

“Yeah,” You smiled, “I love you both, very much.”

Was now a good time? You figured you might as well find out.

“Say, I have family out there. They took me in when I lost my memory. I even have a little sister just a year or so older than you guys.” You tried not to tense up or panic. “This isn’t me telling you what to do, this is just me giving you an option, okay? But, if you guys ever feel like you’re in danger, doesn’t matter who it’s from,” you lowered your voice, “you go to a world called Hollow Bastion. If I’m not there with you, ask around for Leon, Cid, or Aerith, okay?”

They both nodded, neither accepting or refusing the offer.

“You tell them you’re a friend of Astra’s, and if for some reason they don’t believe you” like because of the coats “mention that I think you’d get along with a girl named Yuffie.”

I really hope you don’t have to use that. Your mind whispered, I’d rather be there with you if
You’re in danger.

That creeping feeling hadn’t gone away.

You stepped out of the portal and straight into a swamp. You grit your teeth with a hiss and lifted your boot, watching the mud stick to it. “Ooohhh.” You shuddered. “Fantastic.”

From the look of it, you were smack dab in the middle of a bayou. Not exactly where you would hope to be dropped off, but you were there now. At least you were somewhere a little elevated, further out it looked like the murk would come up to your knees, your hips even. Which left you with one question:

*How in the hell am I supposed to get outta here?*

You figured you could open another portal and try again, but your attempts at that thus far had been unsuccessful. You once portalled your way straight into the nasty fountain in Halloween Town. Not your finest moment.

A horn faded into the air, blasting a bop. Voices joined it, a deep, happy song that made you want to dance. Then, you saw the musician come into view. You stood there, dumbstruck.

“Is that alligator playing a trumpet?”

**The Bayou**

You watched him swim on his back, carelessly tooting on the horn like a pro. Except, those were some pretty tight turns for a guy who didn’t seem to be doing much of anything but floating. You figured you’d might as well follow him. It’s not like you were going to see an alligator play the trumpet twice in your lifetime.

Using your yoyos, you swung from one tree to the next, using the trunks to vault through the swamp and skip over the mud. Then, he disappeared, leaving you scratching your head. You were ready to go back the way you came when he suddenly vaulted past you and plunged into the water, creating a huge wave that you only barely managed to avoid.

When he reemerged, trumpet in hand, you whistled for his attention. His jaw dropped when he saw you, very un-alligator like.

“Nice tunes!” You shouted. “Tell me, do all gators play the horn here, or is it just you?”

His gape became a toothy toothy toothy smile. He flapped his hands and started whispering to himself, or that’s what you thought until you saw the two moving lumps on his head. Finally, he turned his attention back to you and waved.

You waved back, “Can you understand me?”

He nodded, “I sure can!”

Remembering Kuzco, you felt the need to ask, “So, are you a cursed person turned into a gator?”

“No, why?”

“Cause you wouldn’t be the first guy I met who was. Except,” You pulled yourself to a closer tree.
“he was a llama.”

Another voice joined in, “Really?!”

“Yeah.” You called back, “Hey, can you move in a little closer? My voice is gonna go out at this rate.”

He eagerly swam towards you. “Wow, I’ve never spoken to a real human person before! I mean, I’ve tried,” He giggled, “but it never ends well.”

Someone cleared their throat and two frogs popped up on his head.

“Oh, I mean a real human person who is a real human person at the time.” He apologized, “My name’s Louis! What’s yours?”

You took a squat on a sturdy branch. “I go by Astra. And, you are?” You asked the frogs.

“We – “

“I am Prince Naveen of Maldonia!” Said the larger frog, cutting the other one off. “It is a pleasure to meet such a handsome devil as yourself.”

Before you could ask questions such as: frog prince? the other one piped in. “I’m Tiana. You mentioned you’ve seen a human become an animal before?”

You nodded, “Sounds crazy, I know, but it’s at least as crazy as an alligator playing the trumpet.”

“No, no, we’re human, too.” Tiana said, pointing to herself and Naveen. “Princey here got tricked by a witchdoctor and got turned into a frog.”

You wanted to groan, to laugh even. “Figures. His Llamaness was an Emperor. What is it with royalty and animal curses? I’m suspecting a trend here. But where do you fit in this equation, ma’am?”

She groaned, “It was his bright idea that a kiss would break it. Obviously,” she waved a hand at herself. “that didn’t work.”

“I thought you were a princess!” He folded his arms.

“It was a costume party!” She turned to you. “How did that Emperor change back?”

You grimaced, “It was actually an alchemical poisoning. We had to find the potion that would turn him back to human, which was a lot harder than it should’ve been.” You put your elbows on your knees. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m pretty sure that lab was one of a kind. Did you drink anything?” You asked Naveen.

He shook head, defeated. “He offered no food or drink.”

“Then I’m afraid this curse is new to me, too. Sorry.”

A familiar chill ran down your spine, the whistle of warping sounded close by. You got to your feet, braced against the bark to see several Heartless appear.

“What in the blue blazes is that!?” Louis yelped.

“Are they not from here?” Naveen asked.
Tiana shook her head, eyes wide. “I’ve never seen them before.”

“I got this.” You told them. “Don’t try to fight them, they’re dangerous.” You swung through the trees towards them. “Be right back!”

Throwing on an Aeroga, you quickly noticed that this was not an ideal arena. One wrong move and your yoyos could get tangled in the branches, or you’d fall into the swamp. The Heartless were unfortunately very mobile. Emerald Blues and Crimson Jazzes zipped around, joined by the ever obnoxious Shamans. The water below rippled, and out emerged Dire Plants, their hidden faces following you through the petals.

You quickly placed Stopra on the small group of Shamans before casting Thundaga. The Dire Plants collapsed easily when you shot the stars at them in the water. Then, one of the squeaky Blues flew in front of your face, distracting you from the spell wearing off the Shamans. When the Heartless was vaporized, it was replaced by several masks shooting at you, giving you no time to recover.

They slammed in you, knocking you off the tree and towards the murk below. You braced yourself, but a scaly back rose to meet you.

“I’ve got you, new pal!” Louis shouted, his voice trembling. “Let’s get ‘em!”

You quickly steadied yourself. Naveen and Tiana were still riding on his head, eyeing the monsters.

“On your left!” Taina shouted.

“Alright!” You clocked the monkey in the face, stalling it, then got it in with the second yoyo. “Louis, can I count on you?”

“Can you ever!”

He swam towards the fray, you surfing on his back. With their help, the rest of the Heartless were a cinch. When it was over, you sighed and carefully sat cross legged on Louis.

“Thanks guy.”

“It wasn’t a problem at all!” Naveen bowed.

Tiana still stood sentry, watching the water, “What were those creatures?”

“Heartless.” You swatted a bug on your neck. “They’re hard to kill, but I’m trained in fighting them. You don’t gotta worry as long as I’m around.”

Louis gasped, “Does that mean you’ll help us?”

“That… yeah, I am, but first, where are you going?”

“To Mama Odie’s.” He answered, “She’s a voodoo queen here, she can fix up Naveen and Tiana.”

“Alright.” You decided, an idea popping in your head, “But I’ve got to ask her something too, and of you guys when you’re human again.”

“What’s that?” Tiana asked.

You felt your smile become forced. “I’m looking for someone, but I’ve lost my memory, maybe
your witch queen might be able to find them for me.”

“If she can make us frogs back into humans, I would imagine so!” Naveen grinned. “And once I am human, it would be my pleasure to help you find your missing someone in exchange for your service.”

“He’s just gotta get married first.” Tiana rolled her eyes, “But I’m not about to let him forget his promise to me, either.”

“I will not forget!” He puffed his chest haughtily.

“Then it’s a deal.” You grinned. “Onward to Mama Odie’s.”
You watched Mama Odie tell Naveen and Tiana that they only had till midnight to get Charlotte to kiss the prince, leaving you all with almost no time at all. When the two of them grouped up with Ray, you tried to get to her, only for Louis to get there first, babbling about his wish to become human. But, she turned him down.

Despite feeling sorry for your new friends, you shouldered your way in. Mama Odie was again stirring her gumbo.
“Mama Odie?” You asked, “I know we don’t have much time, but, I’ve lost my memories and I – “

She held up her hand to you, sightlessly considering you through her glasses. “Now child, your predicament is a hard one, I can see it clear. No amount of kissing princesses is gonna cure ya.”

You hugged yourself. “Please.” You whispered. “If you could just tell me where they are, my friend or my memories, please…”

She patted your hand. “Wherever they are, they are past my sight, starshine. Outside this world.”

Your heart plummeted to your stomach. Another dead end. You wanted to cry, and you almost did if it weren’t for the witch. She patted your shoulder, “Now, I know, you’ve had a hard time of it, hadn’t ya? But, just remember this,” She pressed an arthritis wrought finger to your chest, above your heart. “The two of ya’ll are connected in a way that is unbreakable. I can see pieces of him through ya, like the sky on the water. He carries a part of you with him.”

“What?”

Mama Odie stepped back a bit, taking in the sight of you. “A piece of your soul is missin’. It’s the part of you that holds your childhood self, your memories of your past lies within it. It has stayed with him, though all these years.

“Though the memories mix and fade, the heart remembers always. The two of ya will find each other eventually, and then you will be whole once more. It will take some time yet, I’m afraid. Your man just isn’t ready, and your other friend even less so.”

You took a sharp inhale. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head slowly, gazing sadly into your face. “They are trapped in their own selves. Torturin’ their souls, though they don’t even know it. They’ve got a far bit of diggin’ ‘fore they’re ready. But, you keep on looking inside yourself, and you’ll know when they are.”

She laughed with a closed mouth, “I can tell that man a’ yours is a feisty one. He sho’ does miss ya something fierce. Ya’ll far from forgotten, li’l starshine.”

You felt your ears burn with your blush. “You keep saying, ‘your man’, what do you mean by that?”

She threw her head back and cackled. “Oh, you’ll know when the two of ya meet again. Now hop alon’ and give them a little light, starshine, to find their way. And come an’ visit Mama Odie when the journey’s done, y’hear?”

With words of thanks, the curious party took to the swamp.

“Y’all best get to swimmin’!” Mama Odie shouted from the boat in the tree.

“Not if we want to get to Mardi Gras in time.” You said.

Naveen pointed your attention to a nearby boat. “I’ve got a better idea.”

And that’s how you stowed away on your second ship, this time with two people frogs, one Cajun firefly, and an alligator that can the play the trumpet. Honestly, you couldn’t wait to tell the guys. Thankfully, you all went rather unnoticed, besides Louis, who was now playing in the band and getting plenty of attention.
The boat was an obvious leisure cruise, and most people were on the top deck enjoying the festivities. It wasn’t hard to find a quiet place on the lower decks, looking out onto the calm waters. Thoughts stormed and raged through your brain as you finally let Mama Odie’s talk wash over you.

*I have two people that I’m looking for. They’re out there.* You smiled weakly, watching the night sky reflect off the lake. *I now know that for sure.*

You pressed your fingers against your chest, where she had touched you. But they might be hurt, or worse. Mama Odie said that they were torturing themselves, but how? And why, what for? Was there anything you could do to help them if you tried?

As much as you tried not to focus on it, her other turn of phrase kept nagging at you. *“Your man.”* You felt your cheeks burn, your heart beat fast against your ribs. It was the best kind of panic, something that filled you up and swept you away, something that told you to hold his hand to keep yourself grounded. Something that told you to hold tight, because you didn’t want him to disappear, because you didn’t want to be alone.

Tears filled your eyes and rolled freely down your cheeks. This feeling is only the most beautiful kind of torture, the happiest sort of pain.

Ray drifted into your view, chuckling to himself until he saw you. *“Oh, starshine, what be makin’ you cry?”* Then he became furious, *“Someone hurt you? You jus’ point ol’ Ray at ‘em, I’ll give it to ‘em good!”*

A wet laugh bubbled out of you as you tried to wipe your face, *“No, Ray, no.”* You sniffed, unable to stop the tears.

He relaxed his shoulders, now only left with confusion and concern. He flew until he was in front of your face. *“Is it what you talked to Mama Odie ‘bout?”*

You nodded with a sob, hiding your face in your fists.

He tugged at your fingers, *“Now, now, don’ hide yo’self from me, starshine. I don’ think badly of ya for cryin’. We all do it.”* When you peeked from between your fingers, he gave you a small smile. *“You wanna talk ‘bout it?”*

You didn’t know the answer to that, but when you began, you didn’t know how to stop. *“She said that – I think she said that we’re in love with each other. Me and – and – “*

*“The person you’ve been missin’.”* He said, eyes wide.

*“I don’t know what this feeling is!”* You struggled to breathe. *“I don’t know what to think! I wish I knew why I was crying, but I can’t remember!”* You slid down the railing and sat with your back to the water, curled in on yourself. *“I just want to remember!”*

*“Oh, starshine,”* He whispered, petting your brow. Above him, Evangeline glowed softly. *“It’s hard, darlin’ I know. You let yo’self cry now.”*

The tears in your eyes mimicked the paint on the water, where you drowned in your dreams. *“You’re grieving.”* You told Roxas. The truth you left out was, *“I’m grieving, too.”*

*“What am I going to do?”* You said through your sobs. *“Mama Odie, she said they’re hurting, but I won’t be able to see them. But I miss them! I miss them so much it hurts so bad!”* You wailed, *“How am I missing someone I don’t even remember?! Why can’t I at least have my memories?"
Why was everything taken away from me?"

He began to shed tears, too, continuing to pet your brow. He began singing his song for Evangeline softly under his breath. You rode out the storm, him staying by your side the whole way through, singing his song to his star. When your sobs quieted into sniffles and hiccups, he gave your wet cheek a pat.

“You feelin’ alright there, starshine?”

You shook your head, careful not to hurt him.

He nodded slowly, then flew to rest on your hand. “You mind me sayin’ somethin’?”

You wiped your eyes and waited for him to continue.

He waved his hand to the wishing star, his Evangeline. “When Evangeline disappears come mornin’, I miss her mighty fierce, too.” He sighed shakily, wiping his face. “She is my everythin’, my guiding light in the night sky. I have a sure feelin’ that your man thinks of you the same.”

You hid your face again, mouth quivering, unable to decide on a smile or a frown.

“I know you’ve been missin’ him, I coul’ tell the moment we done met. He be missin’ you, too, and that’s fact.” He patted your knuckles. “But even when I be missin’ my Evangeline, I take care to remember that she be out there. Don’t matter that I can’ see her, ‘cause she be with me every moment I breathe.”

When you lifted your head, he pointed at your chest. “You an’ your man be the same. He is with you, here,” he pointed at your heart, “as you are with him. For you see, love is a promise your heart keeps.”

The tears started flowing again, a smile pressing against your lips. You pressed your arm over your eyes, choking on air.

“Wheneva’ you feel like the hurt from the missin’ gets too painful, you remember ol’ Ray, and you remember what I said to ya.” He gave your palm a squeeze, “Not everythin’ be lost. The promise in you still beatin’ strong.” He stayed with you, “You gonna be okay, starshine. You’ll see.”
The Shadow Man was gone, Tiana and Naveen were together and staying frogs. But Ray… You watched his light flicker with pained lungs as he laid on the leaf. The four of you stayed with him as his time came.

“Evangeline… she like that, too.”

Slowly, his glow dimmed and went out completely. You bent in half, holding yourself as you tried to bite back your sobs. Louis was crying freely, staring dumbstruck at his tiny body. Naveen and Tiana held each other, silent tears rolling down their faces.

Gray clouds hung heavy, blotting out the stars in the sky. Rain began to fall, no lightning, no thunder, only rain.

Evangeline was weeping with you.

The funeral was held the night after. His family, his many friends and the clear night sky arrived to see him off one last time. You watched him disappear into the unknown, holding Louis as you both wept.

Then, a light shined down upon you. A new star burned brightly above you, beside his belle, Evangeline. You gasped as cheers erupted through the fireflies.

“Whenva the hurt from the missin’ gets too painful, you remember ol’ Ray, and you remember what I said to ya. Not everythin’ be lost.

“The promise in your heart still beatin’ strong.”

You watched Tiana and Naveen change in a symphony of beauty and magic. They stood at the
altar in wedding clothes of white and green. You shouted in joy along with the forest, you and Louis jumping up and down in excitement.

“THEY DID IT! THEY DID IT! THEY DID IT!” You both cheered, happy tears rolling down both of your cheeks.

Soon, the newlyweds wrapped you in their arms.

“You guys are a beautiful couple!” You sniffed, “Now I can finally hug you without hurting you!”

Naveen picked you up and spun you around, laughing brightly before you and Tiana embraced again.

“You’re a princess now!” You gasped, eyes trailing to her tiara.

“I’m a princess now.” She giggled.

Then you said to Naveen, still shocked, “You’re married now!”

“I’m married now!” He agreed, beaming like you’ve never seen.

It was Tiana’s turn to gasp, “We have to go home.”

“And tell everyone we’re alright!” Naveen realized and cursed in Maldonian, “My parents will scorch my ears.”

“Mama’s probably worried sick, Lotte too.” Tiana rubbed her face. “I have to introduce you to my Mother.”

“I have to introduce you to my Mother!” Naveen echoed.

Mama Odie cackled, making her way towards you. “Then I suggest y’all hop alon’ now. Time will not wait fo’ ya.”

They both turned expectantly to you and Louis. The alligator was already begging to give them a lift back to New Orleans, gushing over them, but as much as you wanted to listen, it felt like water was plugging your ears. Mama Odie was arching her brow at you, you were reminded that she asked you to see her after the journey was done.

“What are you waiting for, Astra?” Naveen called, ready to ride the gator back home.

With a hurting heart, you shook your head. “I can’t go with you.”

The three of them froze.

“What do you mean you can’t go?” Louis asked.

Tiana approached you, taking your hands. “But what about your friend? I thought you were looking for them.”

You shrugged at the voodoo queen. “I already asked Mama Odie. She said they’re not here. And there’s a promise I made to a couple of kids a ways out there that I’d come by and see them again soon.” You watched Naveen and Louis come to either side of her. “I wish could stay, but I’ve already put it off to see Ray go on and come to your wedding.

“Speaking of Ray,” You sighed through your nose. You took Naveen’s hand and put it on Tiana’s.
“I don’t know if he ever said this to you, but he told me once that love is a promise your heart keeps. I wish you both the longest promise, and happiest days. I love you all, thank you for letting me be a part of this story.”

Louis moaned, already blubbering. He pulled all three of you into a hug that you gladly participated in.

“You speak as if we will never see each other again.” Naveen said softly.

“Because I don’t know if we will.” You replied quietly.

You watched them leave across the bayou atop their scaly carriage. They waved as they left, and you waved back, along with the many creatures of the bayou that were being left behind. Mama Odie came to stand beside you, leaning on her club.

“You’ve done seen lot of goodbyes now, haven’t ya?” She said.

You nodded, feeling cracks splintering through your chest. “Too many to count.”

“There’ll be mo’.” She sighed, “Life’s got a ways with that. I’m a hundred and ninety-seven, think y’all can guess how many ‘so longs’ I’ve had the pleasure of having?”

You chuckled, wiping your eyes. “Not a chance.”

“Good, cuz I done lost track!” She laughed her old, reedy laugh. “I’mma give you some advice, starshine, and though I knows you’ve done had a bit too much a’ that, I’mma still go ahead and say it.”

“I probably couldn’t stop you even if I tried.”

“Ya damn right!” She gave you a friendly smack with the club. “No goodbye replaces a hello, starshine. It be fine that you sad that it happens, but don’ let it smother all the good feelin’s already there! Rejoice!” She smiled toothlessly, “Rejoice that you have so much to miss in the first place, it means that those people meant dear to ya and happiness was shared among you. The more it happens, the more you know ya changed lives for the better, the more you’ve been changed for the better.”

“Did I, though?” You asked.

“For sho’.” She grinned. “Starshine, ya give a li’l light to everyone you meet.”

Your cheeks burned as you hid your face away from her, hurrying to wipe away the waterworks before they began again. “Thank you.”

She chuckled, “Now you jus’ hold still for a moment.”

Then she whacked you on the head.

“Ow!” You shouted, watching green dust swirl around you. “What was that for?”

“There still be worlds to explore!” She replied, “It’s better if ya can blend in, so to speak.”

“But you said – “

She put her hands on her hips. “Ne’er you mind what I said! Even if your man and your friend aren’t ready, it don’ mean you haveta sit there nice n’ pretty! Look yo’ Mama in the eye and say
you’d like that like ya mean it.”

You stared at her with wide eyes, head still smarting. “That’d be impossible.”

She nodded, “I know! So you keep on keepin’ on! Keep lookin’, for every step brings you a li’l closer to your sugar. Keep on sayin’ hello an’ goodbye! Keep on, for time waits for no one, and the moment may pass you by wi’out you even knowin’!”

You felt yourself curl in on yourself. “But, I’m tired.” You whispered. “I’m tired of dead ends, I’m tired of… hurting.”

“‘Yes, you’re tired, starshine.” She took your hands and held them tightly. “Don’ we all? So, you fin’ a place where ya don’ feel tired anymore, an’ you rest. Then ya get back on your fanny and get on back to it.”

Two places already came to mind. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sho’ as the day is long!” She folded your hands over your heart. “Don’ lose hope now, don’ stop wishin’, starshine.”

With shaking lips, you nodded, “Okay. I won’t.”

She opened her arms. “You come an’ give yo Mama a li’l sugar now.”

You had to crouch, but she wrapped her arms around you and gave you a kiss on your head. “You go on now.” She said, “You go on an’ be happy.”

“Y/N?”

Journey to

DIG A LITTLE DEEPER

THE BAYOU

“Y/N?”
You curled in on yourself, tucked away in a dark room within the castle. The look in Xehanort’s eyes still made your skin crawl when he caught you looking through the reports. His words were courteous, even apologetic when he asked you to put it down and leave, but there was something behind that was dangerous and dark. They left you picking them apart until there was only thread and you were hyperventilating and shaking and full of fear.

You covered your mouth to stifle your labored breathing. A panic attack had its hold on you and wasn’t letting go. This entire, stupid castle made you feel like your heart was going to beat of your chest. Ever since you found the girl in the dungeon, ever since she disappeared.

Footsteps echoed off the tile, “Y/N, are you in here?”

Lea turned on the lights, eyes roaming the room until he spotted your shoes under the desk. He glanced out into the hallway before closing the door behind him. “It’s me, it’s Lea.” He said, walking towards you. “I’m coming around, kay?”

You tried to dry your eyes before he saw you, but they wouldn’t stop. When he found you, his face fell, tears of sympathy prepared to fall, feeling your pain as if it were his own. He got on his knees, pushing back your bangs with warm hands.

“Hey, hey, hey…” He whispered softly. “It’s okay, it’s me. Breathe, breathe with me.”

You whined, unable to quell your sobs, unable to withstand the shake of your lungs. But he held your face in his hands, pressed your foreheads together. “Breathe.” He said, giving you a rhythm. His breath blew over your lips in a low whistle. “Breathe.”

The struggle slowly died, but the panic still burned like fire in your veins. When you could take deep breaths on your own, he sat back, his hands moving to hold your shoulders. His touch kept you grounded, kept you safe, kept you here.

“Are you okay?” He asked, searching your face. “What happened?”

You shook your head, sniffing back the snot. “Xe – Xehanort, he – he…”

His green eyes burned. “What did he do?”

“He – He just scared me.” You whispered, wiping your face. “I thought – I thought he was gonna hurt me, he scares me so bad.”

“Did he put his hands on you?” You shook your head, and he breathed. “Oh, thank god.”

You sat trembling on the cold linoleum, feeling foolish and anxious. Lea brought you into his arms, held you gently.

“He scares me.” You whimpered into his lab coat. “Something about him – it’s just not right.”

Lea rocked the both of you, tears rolling down his cheeks. “I know.”

“I’m sorry I ran – “

“Don’t be.” He cupped your cheek and pulled away to look in your eyes. “I mean, Isa and I were really worried about you, but, it’s alright. I’m glad you’re okay.”

You ducked your head, the last of your attack finally taking it’s leave. “Thank you for coming to find me.”
“Of course.” He finally smiled, wiping away the trail of tears. “I’ll always be there to bring you back. Got it memorized?”

You both fell back into each other, a moment of just you, no castle, no secrets in the basement, no Xehanort.

“I love you, Lea.”

I --- you, too. “I know, I’m pretty great.”

You snorted, holding him just a bit tighter. “Sure, nerd.”

“Go on, you just keep running. But I’ll always be there to bring you back!”

Axel limped out of the Dark Corridor, carrying his precious cargo. Xion lay unconscious in his arms, and he could tell he wasn’t that far behind. He didn’t know why it was those words that flew from his lips, he didn’t know why the tears just wouldn’t stop pouring down his face.

He took her from the fire only to bring her to the lions den. But what was I supposed to do? He wanted to scream. Just let her die?

But is what they’re going to do to her any better? Came the response.

Y/N… He sobbed. Roxas… Xion…

“Why you gotta cause me so much trouble…”

The room spun as his wounds overtook him. He fell to his knees, it felt like fire was running through his very marrow. Her weight tumbled out of his weak arms, and it was that thought that followed him into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

ya know, i made myself cry at least 10 times writing this chapter
also, unless you haven't noticed, this isn't beta'd and especially this is a longer chapter there might be some errors that i missed :I
Thank you as always for reading!
also, considering wonderland only ever showed up again in 358/2 days - here is what I have to say:
It's Free Real Estate
Hey guys, I know it's been a while since I last updated. I've actually been in the hospital for the last week after a crisis. But I'm back home and feeling so much better!
I drew a bit while I was there and I thought I'd share these Wherever You Are related doodles!
Love y'all, and expect an update real soon!
Unanswered Wishes

Chapter Summary

You'll be stuck in that moment for forever. There was no way you wouldn't be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four Days Earlier

- Day 352-

Summer once again reigned over Twilight Town. You stretched your hands over your head, basking in the evening glow, though by the position of the sun it was still closer to daytime.

Wonder what the kids are up to. You thought, strolling through the streets. I hope they’re okay.

An hour passed steadily onward, you passed the bench where you gave the kids their first hug. A small noise, unexpected and out of place tugged your ears. You stopped in your tracks, listening as the day waned. It came from a nearby alley, dark and small. With a tense heart, you peeked inside.

You felt yourself shrivel inside. “Xion?”

She sat there, head in her hands, sobbing. When she heard her name she gasped and jumped to her feet, ready to flee.

“Xion, wait, it’s me!” You cried, reaching out to her. “It’s Astra.”

She stopped, staring at you with red eyes and tear stained cheeks. You felt about ready to cry yourself as she stood on unsteady feet, unsure of which direction to choose.

You silently held out your hand and without another second of hesitation, she ran to you. You took her into your arms and held her close, hearing her panicked struggle for breath. You broke away only to kneel closer to her height, and she threw her arms around your shoulders and sobbed into your neck.

No words felt right, try as hard you did to think of what to say. So instead, you rocked her, the song you could never remember the words of whispered under your breath. Dearly beloved and sad. It was she who pulled back next, but still secure in your arms.

Tears still rolled down her cheeks, sniffing and hiccupping, “I don’t know what to do.” She whispered, “Astra, I don’t know what – “ And she dissolved again, and again, you held her.

Confused and panicked as you were, you weren’t about to fall apart on her. “What is it?” You asked softly.

She shook her head against your shoulder, “I can’t!”

You held her even tighter, already knowing this was something to do with the Organization. But
you couldn’t make her tell if she felt she couldn’t share. Quietly, you maneuvered yourself and her until you were sitting on the cobblestone, back against the wall, and Xion all but cradled in your lap.

After a few more long minutes, she finally quieted, cheek against your chest, all but limp in your arms. “Astra?” She murmured eventually.

“Yeah?”

She went quiet, then whispered, “When we first met, you said we have to make the choice that’s right for us.”

Unsure and wary of where this was going, you nodded.

“But what does that mean?”

You thought, tucking her head underneath your chin, feeling her lungs push in and out. “That’s a hard question to answer.” You admitted. “Really, only you can know the answer to that.”

“Then… what’s your right thing?”

“To make sure you that you’re safe and happy, for one.” You replied after a beat. “Roxas, too.”

When she said nothing, you sighed and let her be. Where was she going with this? What happened? Just like everything else in your life, it was like solving a puzzle without all the pieces, no picture to help you. But it wasn’t a puzzle, it was real life, it was Xion’s life.

*How do I solve this? and Can it be solved?*

Then, she asked a question that made your heart stop.

“If it were me or Roxas, who would you choose?”

“What on earth kinda question - ?” You sputtered, pulling away to look her in the eye. With the hand not supporting her back, you wiped her bangs out of her eyes. She wouldn’t look you in the face. “Both.” You said, trying to give your everything into that one word. “I would choose you both.”

She crumpled in on herself again, tears beading down her face, and she pressed herself back into you, as if she wanted to disappear. You didn’t know what to do with yourself, you just didn’t know what to do. So instead, you held her, held her dear, held her close.

“I love you so much.” You whispered into her hair. “I – I don’t what’s going on right now, but just, whatever is happening, don’t forget that. I love you, Xion.”

“I love you too.” She sobbed into your shirt. She sounded defeated, devoid of all hope.

Another however many minutes passed before she was ready to stand, and when she did, it all went by just too fast. You tried to slow her down,

“Xion, is there something I can do to help?” You pleaded, holding her shoulder.

She only smiled with tear stained cheeks. Her arms wrapped around your middle, and she held you. “I’ll be okay.” She whispered. When she pulled away, she said, “Thank you, for everything.”

“Thank you.” You told her, “I’m glad I – that I’ve met you, Xion.”
It looked like she was going to cry again, but there were no more tears. “I’m happy I got to meet you, too.” When she had her back to you and the alley, she said, “Goodbye, Astra.”

“I’ll see you later,” You replied, watching her leave, feeling lost and cold and empty, “Xion.”

“The there you are, Xion.”

Axel waited on the steps of the clocktower, ice cream in hand. He had been waiting for her, after what happened earlier that day, the staged battled, he only felt that he had too. He let her have her time alone to cry, he knew she’d come back.

He gave her the treat, pretending not to notice the obvious signs that she had been sobbing. “Are you ready? Roxas is waiting up top.”

The smile she gave him would’ve broken his heart if he had one. “Sure. Let’s go, Axel.”

The sunset really was beautiful that afternoon.

-Day 357-

You were beginning to panic.

It had been four days since you saw Xion, but you hadn’t seen neither her nor Roxas since. When you tried to get to the mansion, no one was there. Naminé’s room laid empty and quiet.

Where are they?!

Normally, you wouldn’t be feeling this way. Kids have lives of their own, they’re time is short with you always, but after Xion… Was it the anxiety, or was something terrible really about to happen?

You searched everywhere, at all of their hang out spots. The clocktower, the ice cream stand, even the café where you ate breakfast together. How are three kids, one in plain white dress and two in big ass black coats this hard to find? You couldn’t sleep, you could barely eat.

It was the first time you forgot about your memories, even your missing someone.

Finally, after another long day of searching, you sat heavily on a bench, head in your hands. If only you knew where their homebase was, then maybe you could risk a trip there. Or, and though you could hope, you doubted it, they went to Hollow Bastion.

With a grievous sigh, you picked your head up, only to gasp. “Roxas?”

He was walking out of an alley, flinched when he heard his name, then saw it was only you. You were already half out of your seat when he was beside you. You threw your arms around him and held him, and after a moment, he did the same.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” You said, putting your hands on his shoulders.
“Me?” He asked, “Why?”

“I ran into Xion a few – “

“Xion?!” He grabbed your wrists. “You’ve seen her?”

“Like, four days ago.” You said, “She was really upset about something. Why, is she okay?”

His shoulders sagged, his face fell, and fell back into your arms. “No.” His voice broke. “Nothing’s okay.”

With no one around, you sat him down on the bench beside you. You let him break down in your arms.

“What happened?” You asked, desperate for answers.

He sobbed into your shoulder, clutching your jacket. He tried so hard to speak through his tears, but it was all a hyperventilated mess.

“It’s okay, breathe first.” You whispered, rubbing circles into his back. “You can cry.”

But he pulled back and wiped his eyes, biting back the emotions ready to overspill. “There’s no time, I have to find her.”

You could feel your fingers shake, “What happened?”

Roxas opened his mouth, but no words came. The first signs of the imminent collapse caught the red light of the sunset. This lost, dear boy in your arms was being held together by sticks and thread.

“Xion ran away.” He finally whispered, fighting to keep his breath steady. His hands clung onto your jacket as if it were a lifeline. “She – You see, she’s…” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, practically mimicking your own mannerisms. “I don’t even care if Xion’s not a real person.”

It was like an out of body experience. You felt yourself whisper, “What?”

“They made her.” He explained with a shaking voice. “They made her to drain me of my powers, she’s a replica.”

The first pieces of the puzzle started to click into place. The crying, the questions. “If it were me or Roxas, who would you choose?” You felt like you swallowed lead. “Did she know?”

He nodded, and you felt something fracture inside. “That’s why she ran.” Then something dim sparked behind his eyes. “But I don’t care! Xion’s my friend, and right now, she’s my only lead to…” He drew quiet.

“To who?” You asked gently.

Finally, he sighed. “To Sora. But, that’s not important right now. I have to find her, first, make sure that she’s okay.”

“I’ll help you.” You said without hesitation. You didn’t know why Roxas and Xion were connected to him, but you added, “My family in Hollow Bastion are friends with a boy named Sora.”
He gasped, “Really?”

You nodded. “When we find Xion, let’s meet up there.” You pointed at the motel you’ve been staying in. “I’m using Room 23, here, I’ll even give you my spare key.” You let go with one hand to dig through your pockets. The bronze key was light and connected to a tag, you put it in his palm. “I’ll come in every midnight to see if you’re there with her, okay?”

His fingers curled over the piece of metal and he stared into your eyes. His were full of unshed tears, as it never even occurred to him that you would help. Choking once again, he wrapped his arms around you and sobbed into your shoulder.

You pet his hair, fighting tears yourself. “We’ll find her.” You swore. “Then, we’re getting out of here, together.”

He nodded, sniffing hard, and he held on even tighter. You did the same. As if, even then, you both knew that your wish would never come true.

You’d already searched most of Twilight Town that morning, but now there was a plan in place, you prayed that Naminé was in her room. Maybe, just maybe, you’d find Xion on the way.

_Please Please Please Please_ Your mind screeched into the heavens, _Please let them be okay!_

You’d done it so many times at this point that the vault was nothing in your way. Pushing open the front door and racing through the old mansion, you raced into her room. And she was there, _oh thank god she was there_. She flinched when the door opened, then blinked when saw it was you.

You felt a gush of wind whistle between your teeth. “You’re here – I’ve been worried – “

Naminé took in your frazzled and distressed figure, the mess of your hair, the bags under your eyes, your limbs shaking from panic. “Astra, what are you doing here?” She asked, going past you to close the door.

“I’ve been coming to check up on you for – for days now.” You explained, “You weren’t here and I was afraid that – that you were hurt or – or worse and I – “ You closed your eyes and took a deep, steadying breath.

Naminé touched your hand, and you opened your arms for her. She clung to you, eyes shut tightly. Even in the absence of words, you understood, and held her just as tightly.

“I’m sorry I scared you.” She whispered, “There was something… that I had to prepare for.”

“No,” You chuckled wetly, “No, don’t apologize. I’m just glad you’re here now, and that you’re okay.” You took her by the shoulders, so you could look in her eyes. “Naminé, listen, Roxas and I are looking for Xion, and when we do we’re leaving for Hollow Bastion. I wanted to ask you if you would like to come with us.”

It was as if the world had just been swept from under her feet. Now just floating in the dead of space.

“I’ll keep you guys safe.” You promised, “You can hide out where I’m staying if you want. You can be free.”

Tears spilled onto her cheeks, lips disappearing as she shook her head. You felt everything you were fall.

“I can’t.” She sniffed, managing to keep her voice though she wanted to bawl. “I wish I could but I
can’t.”

You crouched down to her level, feeling the cracks in your heart deepen. “Naminé…”

She tucked her face against her chest, hiding it from you. “I have to stay. I have to make sure my friend wakes up. And I can’t do that out there,” she waved her hands towards the endless drawings, “I’m stuck here. And then…” She finally faced you again, a wobbling smile pulling at her cheeks. “I’ll be done. And I won’t be needed here any longer.”

You felt tears mimic her own. “I can come back.” You said, “When you’re done, I can come pick you up and bring you…” home with me, where you’ll have real family, where you won’t be caged.

She took a shaking breath, waterfalls in her eyes. “You’ve been so kind to me.” She whispered between her breaths. “I know you only want to help, and I – I appreciate you so much, but no.” She sniffed, taking your hands off her shoulders and held them in her own, small, petite ones. “That won’t be possible.”

You tried to understand, you wanted to know why. But again, just again and again and again, you were missing the pieces. You were late to the game, and you were never going to understand anything fully, ever.

She wiped her eyes with her fist, staring at the wall beside you. “And… Roxas and Xion are the same.”

You stomach lurched. “What?”

She shook her head slowly. “Whatever happens, it’ll all turn out okay. And…” She began to cry again, laughing through the tears. “I’m glad you got curious that time.”

You were not going to break down crying, you absolutely were not. But, you did bring her in for one final hug. If you could’ve dissolved, it would’ve been right there – when you knew nothing of the uncertain futures your three children would face.

You left the baby bird in the cage. She waved at you from her window, a wisp against the white, you waved back. Though your stomach pulled and punched and made you green, you had to turn your back and continue on with the search.

The first midnight, you waited in your bedroom until dawn. You tried to wait for them, but exhaustion pulled you into sleep. You broke out of it at three in the morning in a cold sweat, unable to remember your dreams.

You sat ramrod straight, thought you heard a key in the lock, but no. With an impatient shove, you threw back the blinds, only to be greeted by red stained dim.

Where are they? You hissed, your heart leaping into your throat. Where is Roxas and – you almost couldn’t remember her name – Xion?

The sound of feet on carpet was the only sound you heard as you began to pace, unable to sit still. It was the dead of night, you thought he’d at least come to rest, right? He must be tired, too.

“Wait…” You whispered into the empty room. “Why is he out there again?”

Because of Xion

White noise filled your ears, the familiar sensation of forgetting to remember gnawing at your
already fragile heart. You pressed your palm to your forehead, “He was looking for someone, right?”

“She’s missing”

“What, was I waiting for two people?” You murmured, pacing even faster. You weren’t even aware of the pockets of precious memory fading out. But, you thought you remembered a face, a girl?

Xion

Soon, even the figure became hazy, the beginnings of a headache pushing pressure on your skull.

Xion

The memory of the breakfast, someone had blueberry and banana, right? But, no... no, it was strawberry and hazelnut.

Xion

Soon, you didn’t even know why you had such a headache at all. “I must be waiting for Naminé.” You grumbled, massaging your temples. “If she’ll come.” Roxas has some unfinished business. You thought, walking towards the bathroom where you kept the aspirin. Something to do with the BCBS, I think.

“That’s okay,” you sighed, staring at your red rimmed eyes in the mirror. “I’ll wait for them.”

don’t forget that

i love you
You waited for Roxas and Naminé.

You started looking for Roxas and Naminé.

You looked for Roxas and Naminé.

You couldn’t eat, you couldn’t sleep, not until you’d find Roxas and Naminé.

You passed out on the motel floor.
You met Riku again.

He caught you skulking around the mansion again, muttering to yourself, ready to tear your hair out. She wasn’t here, she wasn’t anywhere, and neither was Roxas. It’s been almost a week! Where could they be?!

When you tried to leave, he was waiting by the gate, but something was different about him. His hood covered his face, his voice was even deeper. You didn’t recognize him at first, until he said,

“I thought I told you to leave.”

You scoffed, twitchy and ready to thrash. “What did you do with her?”

He said nothing.

“I said what the \textit{fuck} did you with to her?” You hissed, cold, composed, but you felt ready to explode. The shell was already cracking, it had been for days.

“What does it matter to you?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” You growled, “Perhaps because she’s a little girl locked away in a room, obviously mistreated, and I know a place where she’d be safe from people like you.”

He sighed through his nose. “That’s not your problem.”

“As long as she’s in any danger, it is!”

For a long, tense moment, the two of you glared at each other, waiting for the other to make the first move. Finally, he groaned,

“I get it.” He said. “You want to protect her, but” he began to stalk towards you, every step heavy and deliberate, “that’s not your call.

“If you don’t back down, I’m afraid I’ll have to force you to.”

You drew your weapons with grim determination, “Fine then.”

He was just as ready as you were. Weapon drawn in a flash, he lunged towards you. You only barely dodged in time, but he pivoted on his heel and slashed you across your shoulder.

With a hiss, you thrust a star back at him. He, too, thought he dodged it, only to nearly be thrown off his feet on the return swing. To put some distance between the two of you, the stars spun around you like a whirlwind, a discord of a carousel, forcing him back before you put yourself between him and the gate. You were not going to leave this unfinished. You weren’t going to run, and you weren’t going to let him go either.

A surge from the well within you pulsed outward like a gust of wind. A half globe of energy cut you both off from the outside world, a wall of shifting force and energy, built of purple and black and blue. A Graviga cage.

Riku considered it, then shot a ball of dark energy at you. No flinch, no fear, you batted it away. It ricocheted back to him, but he merely stepped to the side and watched it hit the barrier. The effect was immediate, the ball collapsed in on itself between the flux of gravity and became only smoke before it vanished entirely.
He made no remark, only steadied his winged blade and prepared to meet you head on. No pleasantries, no fluff work, no words.

The battle began in earnest.

He had no intention to play pussy. His body vaporized into mist. Knowing this trick, oldest one in the book, you summoned an Aeroga so powerful it lifted you off the ground. The hand that reached for your neck was painfully rebuffed by the force of the wind.

Feeling only boiling cold bloodlust, you twisted around and took a shot for his skull with a star in hand. But his reflexes were sharp, your star grinded against his sword in a flurry of dazzling sparks. Of course, not one to ignore an opportunity when it presented itself, you pulled back the second yoyo like a whip. With enough power to plow down an oak, the star came back around and collided into his ribs.

His back scraped across the barrier, unable to do a thing except endure as the star finished it’s spin. Now he was right back on his side of the arena.

“Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong.” He warned, still pretending to be cold and calm despite his bared teeth.

Your gaze was like a blade the way it cut between the two of you, “No.”

The both of you circled the other, until he charged once more. He proved to be more agile and cunning than it previously seemed. He wanted this done, and he wanted it done fast.

It was slow going at the start, neither of you could do more than whittle away at each other. You holed up behind your defenses, waiting for his next move, but that was a mistake.

Riku feinted to your right, only to vanish when you prepared to retaliate. Several hisses pierced the warm air from behind you. Even when you couldn’t turn in time to block, your shield of storm absorbed most of them. But, to harm you with them was never his intention.

Pain erupted across your already damaged shoulder and sliced into your hip. He had put himself right beside you, shouldering the damage in order to ignore your defenses entirely. You roared and hurled him away with blast of cold wind, followed closely by a bolt of lightning that struck from the darkening sky.

It did not stop him for long.

Again, and again, and again he feinted and struck and feinted and struck. So fast, too fast, changing the formula slightly every time, defying your struggle with every blow. But your struggle was real. Your love was real.

She wanted to get out. Her tears still stung your eyes. She wanted to leave. Her fragile fingers still clung to your jacket. SHE WANTED TO LIVE.

Naminé. You felt every blow knock you further to the ground. Roxas.

*ion*

I wanted to help you!

You lashed back, feeling yourself grow more and more distant from your own body. I wanted to protect you! Something deep within you began to crack with every raindrop falling on your cheek.
I’m so sorry I took this long.

Riku slammed his foot against your back, throwing you to your knees. Your yoyos fell from your hands. The wind dissipated, leaving you defenseless.

You deserved better than me.

He swung back to his side of the arena. Something fell out of his coat, winking off the sunset’s light. It was a key. The key to your motel room. The key you gave to Roxas. Riku took a step towards you, his form once again fading out of existence.

Every emotion you had been holding back by a string; your sorrow, your loneliness, your fury, your loathing, your hope, your love, your fear, your heartbreak, it all came flooding forth. Before that moment, you didn’t know where your limits lay.

“Stay still.”

When he appeared yet again, weapon aloft, he was pulled back to the very middle of the courtyard. An orb of blinding silver and blue held him with his limbs out. His sword laid useless in the grass as he thrashed against his new prison.

Slowly, but with every ounce of your determination, you forced yourself to your feet. Your left hand, bleeding and a limp burden, hung at your side. Pain scorched through your very marrow with only a flex of your fingers. But, your right rose to level with your nose, palm held towards the sky, fingers clawed.

With that simple beckoning, the summer sky grew heavy and dark as it had never been in Twilight Town. The clouds swirled above you, creating a window to the cosmos. The sky became the color of an old bruise, sickly green and purple. The wind threatened to knock down what was left of the mansion’s pillars. Lightning surged and cackled above, arching between the approaching meteors, glowing red and yellow as they tore closer and closer. But, they waited, patiently hovering above his head, awaiting your order.

Your head was tucked against your collar bone, your whole body felt heavy with the weight of your promises, of the raindrops rolling off your chin. The key stared at you from the grass.

You don’t know what he saw when you lifted your face, lit by the fiery catastrophe above you, but it terrified him.

With one final breath, you waved your palm towards the ground. Omega Meteor obediently brought your wrath to the earth in a disaster of heat and color. You could only numbly notice that the world was still standing afterwards.

You won, but all of your strength had left you when it was done. Both you and Riku laid in the wake of the ruins of the courtyard, clinging to life.

Despite the pain tearing you apart, you dragged yourself to his body. Though the hate was still fresh and ran deep, you were relieved to see that he yet breathed. You don’t know how long it took to get there, everything was only a sad, miserable, painful haze. But, you eventually sat on your knees beside him.

You took him by the collar of his coat and lifted his limp body off the grass. He felt rain pouring on his face.

“Where…?” You sobbed, “Just tell me… where?”
Riku, wracked with pain, stared into the source of the rain. “Gone.”

You heard, yes, but you didn’t – couldn’t – wouldn’t – “What do you mean, gone?”

“I mean… what I said.” He groaned in agony, “Naminé… and Roxas… they’re both gone.”


He was quiet for a long, pensive moment.

“Because,” he whispered, “that’s where they belong.”

And the last of you shattered with the last of your hope. It was if you were torn in two, and the world kept turning but you could never move from this moment. The moment between them being alive, and them being dead.

Torn from the strings that held you up, you folded and screamed.

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry

“I wasn’t fast enough.”

Axel sat alone and cold. He didn’t know which world he hid in, he didn’t care. The last thing he cared to care about was gone. Just as it had been so many years ago, he slipped – no, he shoved his hand away and disappeared.

“He should’ve had you.”

The night sky was calm and clear above him. Two stars shined brightly down, a strange notion took him and he allowed it.

“It would’ve been different if you were here.” He said to the star. It flickered, as if it heard. “It all would’ve been different. And you have no idea” he felt his cheeks grow wet “how much I wish it was. How much I wish you were here, every day.”

There were so many other things he wanted to say. He regretted so much, for so long. Everything had been numb for so many years, and now it was all loud and confusing and painful. He didn’t know what else to do, but at that moment, underneath the wishing star, he felt closer to you than he had for the last ten years.

He took a deep, shaky breath. A daydream, hazy and warm, where the people he cared to care about surrounded him. Where he was never alone.

Axel began to sing to his star.

“Do you remember…” he sang under his breath, “the day when we first met… and we thought we’d never be lonely again?”

Caught between a laugh and a sob, “I’m still not so good with lyrics but…”
“Here I am. And I guess that wish didn’t come true.”

A new rainfall ran down his cheeks. “I don’t know what to do, Y/N, I just don’t know…

“But, I wish that I could be with you. Wherever you are…”

The wishing star winked down at him while he wasn’t looking, curled in on himself. And for the first time in an uncountable many years, he ignored the tattoos under his eyes. As less than worthless as his tears were, the fact there were so many had to mean something.

All of this had to mean something. But, in all truth, nothing happens for a reason.

Chapter End Notes

we all knew this was coming, right?
Still, I'm sorry that it took a while to get back. I was, again, at the hospital getting better. Thank you as always for reading!!
*goes back to fix a small typo
Forgets I have an extension on
Runs back five hours later screaming to fix the thing
On the Flood and Waves

Chapter Summary

What do you do when you've lost the people precious to you?

Chapter Notes

I want to thank one of my reader's and friend for beta-ing this chapter! Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You don’t remember much of what happened after. Getting to the motel, coming back to health. The only things that surfaced from the numb empty nothing nothing nothing were the faces of the children. The faces you would never see again.

Time meant nothing, Riku meant nothing, not even the person you missed so badly meant nothing. The world was nothing, everything had become nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

It screamed at you soundlessly from the empty. It surrounded you and drowned you until it was all there ever was and all there ever would be. Little pieces peaked through, lying awake in bed in the first hours of the morning, eating cheap Chinese that tasted like sand in your mouth, staring into your own dead eyes in the bathroom mirror.

Until, finally, you stood before a Dark Corridor in the dreaded black coat with only the feeling that you had to be anywhere but there. You left Twilight Town and walked alone into the dark.

You wandered aimlessly, let your feet take you without thought. Eventually, you stopped at a dead end, facing a portal. You stood there, staring into the swirling dark empty for uncounted minutes. With a breath of foul air, you stepped out into a new unknown.

Your feet echoed on metal. People in uniforms were walking around, speaking quietly to one another. None spared a glance at you, all too focused on their work. You slipped off the cloak, noticing your clothes no longer resembled anything you owned. You couldn’t bring yourself to care much.

Following the strangers from a healthy distance, you walked into a large dome of a room. Windows took up much of the wall. That’s when you realized you had stowed away on your third ship.

Outside, the water became glass. A world of blue and beautiful, an alien planet under the waves. It truly wasn’t that much different than the view from the Legacy, both were strange and magnificent.

Outside, the water became glass. A world of blue and beautiful, an alien planet under the waves. It truly wasn’t that much different than the view from the Legacy, both were strange and magnificent.
in their own ethereal way. Even you were able to give it a small moment of appreciation.

Then, someone collided with your back.

“I’m sorry!”

A twiggy guy stumbled back, fixing his round glasses. “Didn’t see you there.”

By the look of him, you were surprised he didn’t end up on his butt. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah!” He grinned, certainly excited about something or another. “Are you going to the presentation, too?”

Figuring saying nothing was the safe thing, you simply nodded.

“Great – I mean,” he stepped around you and pointed to a raised platform in the center of the room. “that’s where I’m going too. I’ll see you there!”

He turned, then spun back around, “My name’s Milo, by the way.” He offered his hand.

You gave it a firm shake. “I go by Astra.”

“Nice to meet you, I have to – “ He stumbled towards the stairs, “I’m gonna be late!”

You watched him go with something like amusement and curiosity. Giving it only meager thought, you walked up the metal steps and stepped into a small crowd. Milo was by a projector, looking over slides, and everyone either seemed to be disinterested or only hardly paying attention. There was enough space for you to step behind a teenage girl and a pointy man with a bowl cut.

“The first slide is a depiction of a creature.” Milo began, a slide at the ready, “A creature so frightening that sailors were said to be driven mad by the mere sight of it.”

The picture that showed up was certainly frightening, laughter echoed through the gathering. The poor guy fumbled to correct it, it was hard not to feel bad for him.

While the girl said something to the man, you noticed another newcomer drift in. Unlike the others, such as the crew cut man and the gorgeous woman overseeing the presentation who discreetly wore their guns on their hips, this guy stuck out like a sore thumb with the huge ass sword strapped to his back. And, honestly, how many worlds have you been to that openly cart around enormous over the top weapons like that?

His clothes resembled what the others wore well enough, but he gave off a very peculiar energy. One that gave you déjà vu. Something about spiky blond hair nagged at you from the back of your mind.

The sound of shattering glass brought your attention back to the moment. Milo had dropped a slide in his haste to get it back on track.

“This is an illustration of the Leviathan,” He explained. A picture of a lobster like monster tearing a ship apart loomed against the wall. “the creature guarding the entrance to Atlantis.”

You felt your eyebrows shoot up to your hairline. Did he just say what I think he said?

Atlantis

You listened in stunned silence as he continued on with his speech, explaining how to enter the lost
city. After the initial surprise, really, it wasn’t the weirdest place you ever visited. Wonderland and Halloween Town continued to fight one another for that position.

There certainly were some strange characters around here, but it figures that a hunt for Atlantis would attract that sort of people. This… Mole was very weird. Blond and broody didn’t make any comment, however.

Class was interrupted by a one of the pilots saying, “Captain, you’d better come look at this, sir.”

The graying man, his name you now knew to be Rourke, dismissed everyone and asked for lights. What was illuminated sent a chill throughout the crew. The sea bed was littered with the wreckage of ships, it was like a garbage dump how deep and vast it spanned the sea floor.

Blonde and broody came to stand to the side of you, joining in the gapes of horror.

“Look at that.” Helga whispered.

Milo fixed his glasses in wide eyed amazement. “There are ships here from every era.”

Blond and broody remained silent, but the way his eyes scanned the silt and his tense shoulders didn’t make you feel any better. But, as all things go, people began to drift their attention away from the outside, returning to their duties. You, with nothing to do, stayed, watching the water.

“Don’t get too comfortable.”

So, he could speak. The stranger stood there, glaring outside the windows just as intensely. “Ships don’t just fall apart in this number for no reason.”

You nodded, folding your arms across your chest tightly.

He eyed you from the side. “When did you show up?”

“Right before the dive.” You lied easily.

He hummed lowly, never letting on whether or not he believed you.

“What’s your name?” You asked.

He waited a moment before answering, “Cloud.”

You couldn’t help your flinch. “Cloud!” You whispered.

He wasn’t exactly keen on your reaction. He leaned away, “Yeah?”

With a furtive glance around, you said, “I know Leon and Aerith.”

His eyes went wide with recognition, but yet another announcement cut the conversation off. A whooshing roar rolled off the speakers. The room went quiet as everyone listened to the eerie echo. It was unlike anything you had ever heard before, it warbled endlessly, almost metallic in pitch.

Rourke and Helga hurried to Mrs. Packard’s station and Milo followed soon after.

“I know he said that it was probably just a statue,” You murmured, listening to the deep whine, “but do you think it could be the Leviathan?”

Cloud’s fingers itched for his sword. “If what he said about the Book of Job is true, let’s hope it
isn’t.”

It went on for not much longer. Many of the crew breathed a sigh of relief when it finally faded out of the speakers. You and Cloud were not one of those people.

“Helmsman!” Rourke called, “Bring us about. Tighten our search pattern and slow us to – “

He didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence. The ship rocked violently, sending everyone flying off their feet. If you hadn’t covered your head, you would have smashed the back of your skull against the metal. Another roar surged out of the speakers before another crash wrecked through the submarine.

You and Cloud helped each other to your feet. The lights went out and red lights flashed as alarms blared. There was no time to get your sea legs back before Helga ordered subpod crews to their battle stations.

“That’s us.” Cloud said and ran out off deck. You had no choice but to follow him as the ship ceded under the attack, fighting to keep your footing as you dashed through the halls.

Cloud pushed you towards a small pod and climbed in after you. You threw on the headphones and stared at the buttons and levers, at a complete loss. But, he was fast to give you a crash course.

“I drive, you shoot.” He pointed at the binoculars lowered from the low roof and two levers with buttons. “Bend to aim, push to shoot. React fast, don’t get tunnel vision, and don’t get too trigger happy – we don’t have unlimited torpedoes.”

“Got it.” You gasped, strapping yourself in.

The captain’s voice pierced from the headphones. “Launch subpods!”

“Subpods away!” another voice echoed.

Your tiny ship catapulted from the submarine along with the others. Your back hit the seat with the force of your evacuation, fingers wound tight around the joysticks. Cloud pulled your ship up and around, heading straight for the behemoth.

“It does look like lobster.” You said in a panicked whisper.

It was a ginormous machine, it held the submarine in its claws like it was a toy. How were a dozen tinker toys supposed to take down that thing?

“Fire!” Rourke ordered.

Swallowing down the bile and excitement in your throat, you pressed against the specs and aimed at it’s belly. Your torpedoes joined the storm of others, but even if the firework show was impressive, it didn’t do more than annoy the beast, but it did let go of the ship. That was the good news.

The bad news was that it was now very much focused on you and all the other subpods. You were like a chicken egg compared to it, and it was fast and agile and wanted you dead.

Cloud steered you into formation with the others, all racing back to the freed ship. One of your number was not so lucky as it was crushed between the Leviathan’s claws and an ocean stalagmite. It would’ve killed more, but several torpedoes shot from the sub, stalling it for just a moment.
You managed to make distance, but when Cloud turned you towards the sub once more, a blast of white and blue energy struck the ship. A huge chunk was ripped off the side, it was now incapacitated and sinking fast. There was no saving it.

Both of you took in the horror of it in silence. Then, Mrs. Packard’s voice echoed in your ears.

“All hands, abandon ship.”

He was fast on the uptake and steered your pod. “There’s evacuation pods on this side.” He said breathlessly.

You twisted in your seat to keep an eye on the monster. It was already preparing another attack.

“Keep your distance. I think it’s going to fire again!”

It wasn’t another moment before your prediction came true. It spit another bolt of energy from it’s mouth that pierced the sub down the middle. Whatever time everyone onboard had left, it had just been cut terribly short.

“There they are.” Cloud hissed, yanking the subpod away and following a small pod of larger subs that had just spat out into the water. And not a moment too soon, for your short stay on the magnificent ship had just ended indefinitely.

The lights went out and several explosions sent shrapnel spiraling through the water. All that was left of it were metal intestines and oily blood creating a cloud of smoke under the water. The Leviathan crashed through it, screeching it’s terrible battle cry.

“All crafts,” Helga said through the radio, “make your mark twenty degrees down angle.”

“Twenty degrees down angle.” He replied, and twisted towards a crevice in the bottom of the ocean.

He kept his eyes on the destination. You pressed your face on the binoculars, turning it so it faced behind you. You kept your eyes on the beast fast approaching.

It quickly destroyed an evac pod that had been lagging behind, sending a strong ripple that shook your pod. You cursed, he cursed, there was a lot of cursing.

“Keep going!” You shook, wishing you could fire the torpedoes backwards. “Whatever you do, don’t stop.”

“Yeah.” He hissed between his gritted teeth, feeling just as anxious as you were.

The last of the pack slipped between the giant crack and it tried to follow. You wanted to laugh when it’s giant shell got stuck, but the danger was far from gone. It continued to swipe and scream, another bolt of lightning destroyed yet another pod and the people inside it.

It spat more of the deadly energy, it nearly hit you and a pod just a bit behind. You were helpless as you watched it dodge right into the other evac pod. The pod hit the tight walls of the cavern and blew up, and by doing so it caused the evac to do the same.

A moment of peace, you spun the binoculars. To your numb horror, there were only three ships let, including yours.

The moment didn’t last for long. Arcs and cracks of lightning stubbornly followed you in your escape. It was a genuine miracle that it failed to hit the last of you. Then, it was unable to do even
that any longer as Cloud pulled hard on the steering wheel and you shot up. Everyone emerged into a dark cavern.

Still shaking, you pushed the looking glass away and unbuckled your seatbelt. You opened the latch and took a deep breath of moist air. Cloud was right behind you, sharing the window to freedom. The others did the same, Helga shined a spotlight around, giving your first glance to the road to Atlantis.

Despite being free of the Leviathan, you still felt caged.

Cloud sighed, hands balled into fists. He may have put up a good front, but of course he had been scared, too.

“It’s not every day you fight a robot sea monster and manage to escape.” You whispered numbly.

The corners of his mouth twitched, but a smile did not appear. “You must be Astra.”

“Yeah.” You sighed, looking down at the dark water. “Wish we could’ve met under better circumstances.”

“Yeah.” He muttered, staring out into the dim. “Same here.”
The few weeks that followed were hard going. More than once you considered just up and leaving, but something inside was blistered and bleeding. Whatever it was just kept growing, eating away at your strength. There were days when you had to fight just to roll out of your cot.

Some of the last survivors were kind. You learned some of their names, Audrey and Vinny, Mrs. Packard, Cookie (who you honestly doubted knew how to bake one of those without smothering it in grease), Mole, who by all accounts was still smelly and strange, and Dr. Sweet. Dr. Sweet became rather notorious about your health, always giving you a look that made you want to stare at the floor, always one of the first to make sure you ate and slept decently. He was a kind man, and though you could appreciate the thought, you didn’t want his help.

Milo, though as awkward and stuck in his book as he was, was a pleasant presence at your side. Maybe it was because the others didn’t much care for him after some of his unintentional fiascos, maybe it was because you had been labeled, as Cloud was, a guard. But when there was a moment of quiet where nothing needed or could be done, he often came to find you. You listened to him ramble about Atlantis, or you simply stood in silence. Something he, Cloud, and you had in common was the understanding that quiet wasn’t bad. Not every moment had to be filled with noise.

Cloud was much the same. The two of you knew the situation as it was, both outsiders inserted for a time, only to leave when it was over. He had been signed in to the expedition last minute by the man who funded it, Mr. Whitmore, after an impressive ‘interview’ as he called it. When you asked for details, he nodded to Rourke, who had just been caught glaring at the back of Cloud’s head.

“You beat the shit out of him?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”
When the two of you did talk, it was mostly about Hollow Bastion and the family. Cloud had dropped in shortly before you had arrived, but was quick to leave. He never said why, but you recognized the empty pain in his eyes whenever you caught your own reflection.

One night, which would prove to be more eventful than you first thought, the crew found themselves in a large cave with some sort of lamp hanging high above them. You had just finished putting up your tent when you heard stories being traded. It was good to see Milo finally being included.

Cloud laid down in the tent next to you, you both listened with small smiles as they shared pieces of their lives. Just as he was closing his eyes, Sweet spoke up.

“What about you, Cloud?” He asked, laying on his stomach.

Of course, the guy didn’t talk much and wasn’t prepared to answer.

Audrey gave him a smug smile, “It’s not like you just popped out of the sky before you showed up here.”

And yes, even you were interested in blonde and broody’s backstory. It’s not like Leon and Aerith spewed all his secrets to you. So, when he looked to you for support, he was disappointed to only get a supportive shrug.

He sighed slowly, sitting up on his cot. “Well, I’m not sure you’ll like it. It’s not exactly happy.”

No one made any comment, they only waited patiently.

Though he seemed less than happy to share, he admitted, “I’ve been told I need to talk about my feelings more…” His fist fell against his mat. “Fine.”

He thought for a moment, sorting the memories into Okay to Share and Never to Share, until he had a reasonable timeline set up. “I… lost my home when I was kid.” He said, managing to remain stoic, “I ended up being taken in by my friends and the guy who was taking care of them. It was… good, for a while.”

Milo leaned forward, eyes wet with sympathy, he had lost his parents, too. “But… what happened?”

His throat moved, his arms crossed tight over his chest. “Something came up… something personal, and I had to leave.”

“Are you ever going to go back?” Audrey asked.

“Yeah, they’ve got to be missing you.” Sweet said. “I know I miss my folks every day.”

He shrugged, “Yeah, I will. Eventually.” And he offered no more.

Of course, it was your turn next.

“We’ve shared ours, now what’s yours?” Vinny waved at you, still wearing his gloves in bed.

“Is this payback for us making you share yours?” You scoffed lightly, but you didn’t give it as much of a fight as Cloud. You nodded to him. “I’m actually in a similar boat. I got taken in by the same guys Cloud was with.”

“No shit.” Audrey said. Sweet was not amused.
“For shit.” Sweet was even less amused. “They took me in after I lost my memory. I - - “

*Hot chocolate in the early morning. Cinnamon on whipped cream hills.*

Your voice broke, but everyone was watching you expectantly. You pushed the intrusive memories away and tried again, “I’ve just been going around, trying to figure out where - - “

*Blue eyes, his were bright, and her’s were gray. Shy smiles, but warm hugs.*

“- - I just got back from,” You cleared your throat, trying blink away the tears, “somewhere, I was taking a small break. I actually haven’t been home - - “

*Children – They were children – Just kids – Teenagers – And you*

“in some time.” Your fingers grew numb, your heart thundered against your ribs.

Everyone was watching you.

“Um, hey,” You coughed, “I think I’m tired, I’m gonna turn in.”

A quiet chorus of goodnights followed you as you pushed your way into the tent. You wiped your eyes and tried to breathe. But every time you closed your eyes, they were there, watching you.

*You weren’t fast enough – You couldn’t save them – You weren’t good enough – Not strong enough – And now they’re –*

The fabric walls pulsed and closed in around you, the air was being sucked from your lungs. It was all too much at one time and you couldn’t breathe you couldn’t think goddammit you couldn’t even feel it was all too much too much too much at once they were there every time you closed your eyes they were yours you gave them everything you were theirs and now they were

You threw yourself out of the tent, gasping for air. Time had spun forward, all lanterns were dark and snores hung heavy in the air. Good, you didn’t want to be disturbed.

You threw on your shoes and walked out of camp, arms tight around your middle. Aimless, you collapsed on a flat spot of ground overlooking the endless drop below. Slowly, you curled in on yourself, bottom on the hard ground, listening to the quiet moans of the underground. Anything but the screams echoing in-between your ears.

Someone took a seat beside you, appearing in your peripheral. You flinched hard, ready to run, but Cloud asked quietly,

“Wait.”

Though you didn’t want to, you hadn’t the strength to even stand. You fell back to the ground, and you sat in silence.

Cloud cleared his throat. “Are you… okay?”

You felt nothing, like you were just a hollow shell. Just… empty. “I don’t know…” You whispered.

He stared at you for a long moment until he nodded, mostly to himself. “There…” He sighed, “It’s still hard to talk about… But… back when Hollow Bastion was still Hollow Bastion…” His throat clicked, “I had this friend. He was close to Aerith, too. He was older, and he had a lot going for him… Then, he found a way to go to another world.”
You listened in silence as he picked at his gloves, his lips disappearing into a thin line before he could find the way to continue. “He wanted to become a hero. And, because of him, I did too. But, then he left. Just disappeared off the face of the earth. We never saw him again.

“We sent letters. Put them in bottles and threw them in the ocean. And we kept waiting for him to come back, but, he never did.” His eyes shut tight, wincing at some unseen pain, “And then, the Darkness came. And I…”

His stoic shell was collapsing with every sentence. “I fell to it. I wanted power, to protect my friends, to find Zach, but it ended up taking over me.

“What would he think…” His voice broke, “if he could see me? If he saw all the miserable bullshit I did, all I put them through?”

There was a long moment of tense silence as he struggled for words. “What’s worse…” He finally whispered, “is that I might never find out.”

And that was the nail between the cracks of your armor. “They already forgive you, y’know…” You sniffed, trying to keep the topic off of you.

“I know.” He sighed, “The problem is, I haven’t forgiven myself.”

A wheeze broke through your lungs despite your efforts to keep it in.

Cloud turned to you and whispered gently, “It’s your turn.”

The tears hadn’t yet began to roll, but they would. All the flood, just as it was the day you summoned your full strength, threatened to split open the dam in your heart. “I – “ You gasped, “I’ve been – “

Where could you even begin?

He waited beside you, patient and quiet as you fought for a chart, a map, a something that you so desperately needed. Everything was a battle of overfull and empty, scorching hot and freezing cold, terrible and awful and horrible and frightening and loud and loud and loud and loud and loud.

“I met some kids. They were gentle and kind.”

The overflow. The memories. The words flowed forth, spoken with every ounce of your love. You tried to breathe.

“I loved them so much. I couldn’t – I couldn’t help them and I – they’re – “ Your lungs burned for air, but you couldn’t breathe because you were drowning. “They were mine.” You cried, staring out into the dark empty, “And I was theirs, I gave them my everything, but -

“They needed help, and I tried to give it to them. God, I tried, I tried – “ They still sat against the sunset in your minds eye. “But I wasn’t fast enough! I wasn’t there when they needed me!”

A terrible moan between a cry and a croak split the air as salt dripped into your open mouth. “They’re gone!” You sobbed, “Oh, god, they’re gone and it’s my fault. It’s all my fault! I should’ve been there sooner – I should’ve – but I couldn’t –

“They’re gone…” You collapsed, “Oh my god, they’re gone.”

A strong hand came to rest against your back. Cloud held you up as you fell deeper and deeper. “I
couldn’t save them!” You bawled quietly, “They’re gone – They’re gone – They’re gone and I miss them so much! What am I going to do!? What am I going to do…!?"

Cloud shifted closer and gave you a lifeline. “First, breathe.” He whispered, “Just breathe.”

It hurt, but you did. It hurt… but you did.

The taste of smoke felt heavy on your tongue. The air itself was ash.

“FIRE!”

Milo screeched at the top of his lungs from the camp. You both spun in your seats, only to see the tents up in flames. A cloud of huge fireflies swarmed the cave like a storm cloud.

The smoke wasn’t a machination of your mind.

“FIIEEE!”

“We should probably help with that.”

“Yeah.”
Atlantis was beautiful, alive and dying. And Rourke was going to deal the finishing blow.

You and Cloud heard of the treason through the grapevines and ran through the city to catch the crew throwing a glowing, crystalized…

“Is that the Princess?” You hissed. “Rourke, what is this?!”

“Ah,” He grinned. He opened his arms to the two of you, proudly showing his holstered gun. “We were wondering were the two of you had been. Dealing with family issues, I presume?”

“Don’t avoid the question.” Cloud warned, hand going for the hilt of his sword. “Answer them.”

Rourke was a cunning man, his eyes bounced from your weapons to his. “We’re only taking what we came to get in the first place.” He replied easily, “Forgive us for not letting you in on it sooner, but it was on a strictly need to know basis. And, now you know, so…” He pointed his thumb to the statue of glass and sound. “This will make us all very rich. Are you in?”

Milo, who had been struggling against the line of firearms, turned to you with fury you hadn’t thought he was capable of. “Don’t!” He seethed. “That crystal is what’s keeping Atlantis alive!” He pointed to them locking it, her? in a sort of transportable prison, “Without it, everyone here will die, and Kida’s trapped inside it!”

Cloud grimaced, fingers tightening around the hilt. It wasn’t hard to see who was on the wrong side here, what hurt was that so many of the good people you knew were with them.

You undocked your weapons and prepared for battle. “Let her go.”

Helga rolled her eyes from the background and waved for the others to continue what they were doing. The ones with the guns, of course, came to stand beside their commander.
He sighed heavily, “Now this really is disappointing. Thatch here, I expected, but you two?” He unholstered his gun with a steady, cold eyes. “Don’t be stupid, you’re outgunned and outmanned.”

“I’ve gone against worse odds.” You growled.

“Ready?” Cloud asked.

“Always.”

Together, you and Cloud charged the cavalry. It wasn’t the first time you worked together, there were Heartless and monsters crawling the labyrinth towards Atlantis, but this would be your first time fighting against humans with guns.

You were like two well oiled cogs the way you worked together. You both had long reach, but Cloud was much slower than you as you played crowd control and he brought the heavy artillery. Your yo-yos swept feet while he sprayed them with magic. They fell easily against your combined force, but a decisive cock of a gun brought it all to a standstill.

Rourke held the barrel of his gun to Milo’s head. He tried to get away, but Rourke grabbed him by the arm and kept him in place.

“Now I don’t like getting my hands dirty, but lower your weapons or our linguist here will lose more than just his glasses.” He barked.

You and Cloud swapped startled stares. Your hesitation caused him to wave his gun at the last of his men. Together, they turned their guns at the civilians of Atlantis.

The others gaped in wide eyed horror as their commander once again threatened, “Put your weapons down, or their blood is on your hands.”

There was nothing else you could do. Your hands were tied. Silently, you and Cloud put your weapons away and held your hands in the air.

Rourke’s smug smile made you see red. “I’m a man of my word. Step away, boys.”

The firing team backed off, but did not lower their weapons.

“Now, what am I missing…” Rourke wondered with his back towards you, holding Milo by the collar of his shirt, “I’ve got the cargo, the crew… Oh, yeah.” With a brutal swing of his fist, he punched Milo to the ground.

“Milo!” You moved to help him, but several of the firearms moved on you. You were pinned.

Rourke advanced on him, something shattered under his foot. “Look at it this way, son. You’re the man who discovered Atlantis,” he threw his glasses at him, “and now you’re part of the exhibit.”

You were left to watch in defeat as the crew regrouped and prepared to leave with their prize. You and Cloud slowly advanced as they retreated, now standing on either side of Milo. When you tried to help him up, all guns once again focused on you, giving you no room to maneuver.

Thankfully, others came to fill in. Audrey shoved herself out of the car and came to stand with you, helping Milo stand with a glare at the others. Vinny joined soon after, holding his other arm steady. One by one, Mole, Cookie, and even Mrs. Packard came to your ranks, to the boiling disappointment of Helga and Rourke.
“Oh, you can’t be serious.” He groaned.

“This is wrong and you know it!” Audrey shouted back.

He climbed out of his car and walked towards your group. “We’re this close to our biggest payday ever and you pick now of all times to grow a conscience?”

“We’ve done a lot of things we’re not proud of.” Vinny replied evenly, counting off his fingers, “Robbing graves, plundering tomes, double parking. But, nobody got hurt. Well,” He shrugged, “maybe somebody got hurt, but nobody we knew.”

He scoffed, “If that’s the way you want it, fine. More for me.”

Milo tried to chase after them as they drove across the bridge, but Vinny held him back. The bridge exploded in clouds of red smoke. You were all stranded on a dying world.

Well, not you. You could leave anytime you want, bring Cloud with you, but no one else had a coat. And retreat wouldn’t save Atlantis.

You stared out into the dried up waterfalls, no water to reflect but you felt the same. Maybe dying here wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

You were tired.

You were hurting.

Your children were dead. Your missing person is being tortured, and you could do nothing about it.

What use were you?

What good were you alive?

What was even the use of fighting?

You followed Milo and Sweet in a daze, watched the king die with them. You had your magic, but you couldn’t heal him. Some things just couldn’t be fixed.

The king took Milo’s hands in his with the last of his dying strength.

“Return the crystal. Save Atlantis.

“Save my daughter.”

The dam opened up and the rain poured over your cheeks.

“My name’s Roxas.” “Who are you?” “Could you... go with me?” “My name’s Naminé.” “Are we friends now, Astra?” “Would you?” “Axel said that friends are people who laugh and eat ice cream together.” “Please come back soon, Astra.” “What’s a promise?” “I think I like that one better, too.” “We don’t care if it’s against the rules.” “Please, Riku, they’re my friend.” “Be safe.” “You’ve been so kind to me.” “Love?” “I’m glad you got curious that time.”

“I’ll keep you guys safe.”

Milo stormed past you. With fists at your sides, you turned to follow. You passed Cloud and thought nothing of it, until he grabbed your arm.
“Astra, wait, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to help Milo get Kida back.”

He glanced down the steps towards the crowd that was forming. “Are you sure?” He asked quietly. “This has a small chance of working. This isn’t some sort of suicide attempt is it?”

You were shocked, not at the accusation, but the way he saw through you. Of course, Cloud would know the look in your eyes. Cloud knew the pain of losing people dear to you, and letting it kill you.

You took a deep breath. “I wasn’t able to save my kids.” You whispered, tears beading at the corners of your eyes. “I wasn’t able to save my daughter. But I’m going to give it my all so that someone’s daughter is.”

He was quiet for a long, contemplative moment. “Alright.” He said, “But I’m going with you, I’m not leaving your side for a moment. You’ve got to promise me that you’ll be coming out of this alive.”

You didn’t want to. But a smile twitched at the corners of your lips. “Before I forget again, Leon asked me to tell a broody guy with blond hair something if I were to ever run into him.”

He blinked.

“He said, ‘Leon’s waiting’.”

Slowly, a bloom of fondness warmed him. He let go of your arm. “Then I guess we better get home when this is done.”

You nodded, melancholy still alive in your veins. “Yeah.”

Honestly? Fighting barebacked on a stone fish with an angry guy throwing a sword around while a volcano was ready to explode was probably worse than the lobster monster.

The last of the squadron sped away, Kida and the crystal flying in the wind behind you.

“Talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire.” You gasped, watching the magma burst from the cave and gaining fast. “Can you make this thing go any faster?!”

“Do you wanna drive?” Cloud shouted.

A slab of red hot rock nearly missed your ear. “No!”

“Then no backseat driving.”

The rock fish landed with the others and you were quick to roll off of it.

“The fissure!” Mole screamed, “It is about to eject it’s pyroclastic fury!”

Indeed, the lava was bursting from the natural seems of the rock. It wouldn’t take long for it to be on you all, and all of this would be for nothing.

“Milo! Mole says the walls gonna blow!” Sweet translated.

Cloud rushed over to help him with the crystal, shoving his sword in between the door and putting his whole weight into it. In less than a moment, the casing burst open, revealing the crystal and
Kida inside of it.

A whoosh of cold air pushed your hair out of your face as the slabs of metal floated off the ground, Crystal/Kida stood at it’s center, orchestrating the power. Bright blue light filled the rivulets carved into the ground, quickly spreading outward as she summoned something from the deep. It all went dark just as suddenly as several floating monoliths purged from the ground, and together they rose into the heavens.

They spun around and around, marvelously, like the spin of your stars. Bolts of energy, much like the Leviathan’s, erupted from the spiraling planet. Following the trajectory, a titan of rock rose from the water, so large it cast a shadow on the city. More bolts shot off one by one, and soon there was a small army of giants surrounding Atlantis.

You stood with last of the good ones, Cloud at your back. Whatever happened next, it was out of your hands.

They came to stand at the very edges of the small piece of earth, then clapped their hands and brought forth a shield. A half globe of pure blue and white, spreading out from between their fingers and swallowing Atlantis, bathing it in light. Blink, and you would’ve missed it.

Then, hot on it’s tail, the magma swept over. You flinched at the first wave of bleeding hot red, listened to it’s warped scream as it beat against the fortress. Where once was blue, now was red, all encompassing, and then, darkness and silence.

There was no light, it was suffocating and paralyzing. But it never lasts, and light erupted from Atlantis, broke apart the darkness and sent it away.

Life returned, the sun, the song of animals and rushing water. In a ray of sunlight, Kida returned home.

You watched her look over her empire, reborn and made new, and felt water roll down your cheeks. A smile pressed against the corners of your mouth, for in her shadow, you saw a boy and a girl.

Cloud’s hand pressed against your back.

“She’s home now.” You sighed happily. “I think I’m ready to go home, too.”

Cloud breathed a long sigh of relief. “Funny, that’s what I was thinking, too. Mind if I go with you?”

“Not at all.” You sobbed, wiping your eyes with your fist. “Not at all.”

You two had meant to disappear when no one was looking, but Kida found you while you finished packing. Needless to say, she thoroughly startled you both.

She took in the piles and the packed supplies with sad eyes, “You are leaving so soon?” She asked quietly.

“Uh,” You coughed.

“We…” Cloud bit his tongue.

She gave you a coy smile. “Do not be alarmed. It is well known in Atlantis the existence of other worlds past our own.”

“Neither of you are very good at hiding it.” She laughed. “I do not understand how the ones you travelled with did not catch on.”

“Huh.” You hummed, glancing at Cloud. “And here I thought we were doing pretty good being on the down-low.”

She laughed again, and you heard another’s echo within it.

“I understand.” She said, “The World Order is also common knowledge. Your secret is safe with me.”

Cloud scoffed, having resumed packing the last of his belongings. “I’m sure it won’t take Milo long to figure it out.”

You rolled your eyes, “Once he dusts off your library, yeah. He’s snoopy like that.”

“You will not say goodbye to them?”

Your shoulders fell. “No, it’s not…”

“World Order.” Cloud explained simply.

She nodded once again. “I see. If you insist on leaving now, then allow me to present you both with these gifts of gratitude.”

Out from her pocket, she held two crystals hung on leather rope. Both glowing and beautiful.

You held your breath as she hung it around your neck. “Atlantis will not forget the brave travelers who stood with us against the invaders.” Cloud bowed to receive his. “Yourselves included.”

“I will make sure of it.” She gave a bitter smile, “I now hold the burden of Empress, and I will bear it with pride as my father and mother did before me.”

“We wish you the best of luck.” You whispered, cradling the jewel in your hands.

“You’ll do good.” Cloud nodded.

“To you as well.” She held each of your hands. “I know not what ails you, what sickness you hold in your hearts, but I know that you are strong.” She squeezed your palms. “You will prevail, friends.”

You gave her your thanks and said your goodbyes. You didn’t summon the Dark Corridor until she had left, and even then, you hesitated.

“… It’s weird…” You sighed, “I’ve always been able to at least say goodbye, before.”

*Not always.* Your mind corrected you.

“But,” You said, giving your brother a small smile, “I’ve always left alone before, too.”

Cloud said nothing, only gave you a small nod of encouragement.

You entered the portal. This time, you weren’t alone.
It was amazing how much a year could change a place. Cloud stepped out of the portal first, taking in the view of Hollow Bastion with quiet awe. The healing of the world was out in the open, cranes and reconstruction hung proudly everywhere. The sound of drills and the whirs of machinery, the chatter of people, orders and shouts. So different.

So different than the world you had left so long ago.

You came to stand beside him. The castle of Hollow Bastion loomed far in the horizon, but it was small and far away from the recovery. Just a sad reminder in the distance, never out of sight, never out of mind, but it was no longer the haunted ground it once was.

A tear trailed down your smiling cheeks. “They’ve been working hard.”

Cloud grinned silently beside you, basking in the warm sunlight. He led the way down to the square, no longer spilling over with refugees. There were honest to god shops, grocery stands and clothe shops. A long breath rolled from between your lips as you took it in.

“HEY, YOU!”

You jumped three feet in the air, only managing to spot the sprite of black before she collided with you. You nearly fell over on your ass, Cloud certainly wasn’t going to stop you, but you managed to find your footing after an alarming amount of parody dancing with a lanky teenager dangling from your neck.

Yuffie clung to you like a koala, hiding her big grin in your shoulder. “Where’ve you been?” She suddenly scolded, grabbing you by the shoulders while still wrapped around your waist.

“Oh, y’know…” You whispered, holding her back steady. “stuff.”
She pouted, unimpressed, but that was okay. She was here, you didn’t even realize how much you had missed her.

You felt the numbing sting behind your eyes and quickly brought her back for a hug.

“Astra?” She said, “Hey, why are you crying?”

You couldn’t find the words to answer. There was no answer.

She unhooked her legs and stepped to the ground, still holding you, letting you silently sob into her shoulder. She held you close, eyes wide with confusion and fear.

“What happened?” She asked softly.

Cloud put his hand on your back. “Let’s… get them home, first.”

She said nothing for a second, then gently pulled you away from the square and it’s prying eyes.

The house was cozy, but not nearly as tiny as the one in Traverse Town. For a moment, just a moment, everything felt right within the world. Aerith barely said a word before she hugged you, smiling from ear to ear seeing both of her friends back safe and sound. Merlin was next, patting your shoulders with tears in his eyes, proud to see how far you’d come.

Yuffie hung by your elbow, trying to feel the entirety of the joy, but unable to keep her eyes off of you for long. Your little sister knew nothing was alright, but it wasn’t until Cid appeared in the commotion that everyone else knew it, too.

“Hey, kid!” He grinned, pulling you in for a one-armed hug. “It’s good to see you back.” He smiled at Cloud, “Since you brought him back home… I’ll ignore the part where you fucked off for a year.”

Your face was pressed against his chest, you could hear the distant thud of his heart. The gentle but firm way he held you close. It shattered you apart like glass.

A numbing sting spread from your fingertips, your lungs could no longer hold air. Everything else faded away, there was only his arms and your pain. And it burned.

“Woah, hey, Astra…” He whispered once he felt your tears soak through his shirt, “What - ?”

But you couldn’t answer him, no words could split through the fog. You were choking on nothing and everything all at once.

Silence befell the living room in the wake of your break down. Cid especially looked lost, holding your back with both hands. Cloud grimaced, then whispered into his ear something you couldn’t hear.

Cid sighed softly, then quietly led you to the hallway and into the guest room – no, it was your room. There were things you had left behind on the bedside table, a green bedspread, a mixmash of roses and stars. He sat you both on the bed, and simply waited.

You fell apart into his chest, feeling small and swallowed up and crumbling down. He held you quietly, rubbing small circles into your back, nearly cradling you in his lap. He was warm and smelled of cigarette smoke and motor oil.

“It’s gonna be okay.” He whispered into your hair. “You just cry now.”
You wailed, pressing your face further into his chest. “I – I wasn’t - !”

He hushed you softly. “Breathe. Just breathe.”

You don’t remember how long you sat there, pressed into his chest like a child, secure and safe. Where, for the moment, there was nothing you had to do but just be. Knowing that this person would protect and love you from anything and everything. Loved, unconditionally and wholly.

Did they feel like this in your arms?

The overflow began anew, you squeezed your eyes to try and stop it then hid your face into his shirt. His large hand came up to your shoulder, guiding you closer, safer.

“They were kids.”

His chin dipped, listening closely.

“They were my kids.”

A long sigh ruffled the hairs on your head. “Oh, Astra…”

You sniffed, revealing your face back to the world. The sunlight drifted in from the open window, there was a wisp against the curtains, then she was gone. “Their names…” Your lungs kicked and seized. No, not today. “They needed someone, and I tried to be that someone, but… but I couldn’t do a single thing.”

Cid closed his eyes, feeling the shared pain, but remained silent.

“Now they’re…” Your voice broke and your body shuddered.

There are no words. There never will be words.

A pain so terrible and soul crushing, the pain of losing someone you held dearly to your heart. The pain of losing the ones who depended on you.

The days merged at first. You slept a lot, well, slept is a generous word for it. You rested, unable to sleep most days, but you managed to stay still and silent with a blank mind.

After a nap one long afternoon, you found a sketchpad and a pack of cheap colored pencils on your bedside table. A gift without a name, quiet and appreciated. Soon, when you weren’t alone in your room, you were in the living room, drawing in the quiet.

Merlin and Cid were often in the house, working on something or another, though they were vague on the details at first. You found yourself with mugs of hot chocolate by your elbow while you doodled, and more than once Merlin would sneak in his sweets.

The rest of them tended to stay outside, taking an active part on the restoration of Hollow Bastion. You felt useless as you drifted through the halls, but there was an understanding among them all. You were hurting, and though they didn’t know exactly why or how deep it ran, they gave you time and space to heal.

But as the days went on and you slowly returned to yourself, it became clear that something dire was on its way.
“Leon,” You called, stepping out the door after him one early morning.

He paused, watching you over his shoulder. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

“Something’s going on, isn’t there?” You came to stand by his shoulder. “What is it?”

He grimaced, crossing his arms, unwilling to share. His silence said as much.

You fought the roll of your eyes. “I’m not a porcelain doll.” You said, “I want to know what’s going on, please.”

He sighed, “You don’t have to worry about it, you need to focus on yourself right now.”

“I appreciate that, I really do.” You put yourself in front of him, “But, if you don’t tell me, I’m just going to keep getting anxious about it. So, please.”

He considered you for a long moment. “Can you make a promise that you won’t do anything stupid?”

“I promise I won’t do anything stupid.”

“Good.” He walked past you, “Then follow me.”

He led you up the stairs and even further upward. Until you got so high you could see for yourself what the coming calamity was.

“Oh no.”

Heartless, hundreds of them flooded the valley between the town and the castle. They were barely held back, kept from the borders by natural and manmade barriers. The beams of light they created to keep the population in check sputtered in and out through the crowd, only for more to take their places.

“They’re going to get through at some point.” Leon admitted quietly. “We’re managing to keep them back so far, but it won’t be too long now. I give us a few months at most.”

“Oh no.” You repeated, feeling your knees grow weak. Already, images of your found family falling to the onslaught took over your thoughts.

*I’m not going to be able to protect them.* The voice sobbed. *They’re going to die, just like –*

His arm wrapped around your shoulders, grounding you back to reality. Leon gave you a small squeeze, eyes soft and sympathetic. “It’s going to be alright.” He said, “Trust me, Astra. When they come, we’ll be ready, and we’ll defeat them.”

With numb fingers, you nodded, believing your brother. “Okay.”

Even so, if you could lighten the load, even just a little, you were going to. Heartless still roamed the streets, they were a welcome distraction from the ones grown deep outside.

You walked past a fork in the road and recoiled. You thought, maybe, but no. A boy was fighting a pack of Heartless with two others. Now, it should’ve been the duck and the dog that made you double back, but no, it was the boy.

“… Is that a giant key?”
That’s when it clicked. *The keyblade.*

He was really good with it, though there was some room for improvement. Like paying attention.

One of those weird white phantoms curdled off the ground and reeled back to slam into his blind spot. Too bad your star struck through it’s torso. He whirled around in time to watch it poof into dust.

“Woah.” He grinned, “Thanks!”

“No problem.” You walked towards him with your hands in your pockets. “Are you Sora, by any chance?”

“You know me?” He asked, pointing at his face.

Something about that expression nearly gave you whiplash. “Yeah.” You blinked, shaking off the spell.

The duck crossed his arms and leaned forward aggressively, “And who are you?”

“I’m Astra.”

Sora gasped, then, “Astra!” He cheered, taking your hands and shaking them eagerly. “Leon and the gang have told us all about you!”

“Uh,” You recovered quickly, his attitude infectious. “You too.”

The dog stepped forward with a happy wave. “My name’s Goofy, and this is Donald.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“And it’s nice ta meetcha, too!”

The three of you began to take a walk through the neighborhood. The trio weren’t staying long, only stopping in for something to do with Merlin’s book and supplies.

Sora was walking along the low stone wall, hands spread out to keep steady. “So,” He watched his feet, “can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” You shrugged.

“There’s this guy,” He nearly tripped, but saved himself fast. “I’ve been looking for him everywhere. He has gray hair and blueish green eyes. Have you seen someone like that?”

While the eyes sparked nothing, the gray hair certainly reminded you of a certain character. You hummed sourly, “Maybe. What’s his name?”

“His name’s Riku.”

“What?!“

Okay, you felt bad for making him tumble off the wall, but not bad enough to keep the steam from spouting from your ears. “You’re looking for Riku?” You bared your teeth.

Sora’s shoulders hunched in towards his ears. “Yeah, why? What he do?”
Before you could scream, you took a long deep breath and tried to talk like a rational person. And, now that you had to explain it, well… Riku’s a teenager, too.

Oh, god, you almost killed a kid.

“Let’s just say,” You hissed, “he’s working with someone, and the two of us didn’t leave on the best of terms.” I hurt him really really bad, actually, but he also aided in the death of two kids. “I don’t know the details of his arrangement, but I don’t trust him.”

Goofy and Donald both crossed their arms and shared a familiar look while Sora hung his head. So, this wasn’t a one-time occurrence.

Sora sighed, “I’m sorry, but I promise he’s a good guy.” He apologized, “Whatever he did, he probably did it because he thought it was the right thing to do.”

Your expression spoke for you, if their awkward body language was anything to go by. But, and you could barely hold back your groan as you admitted this to yourself; but if Sora trusted this guy meant well, then maybe. But there was absolutely no forgiveness. Not until you got some reputable answers out of him yourself.

The conversation took a sharp turn, returning to milder topics. The day was beginning to grow long, and listening to him childishly argue with Donald made something twist and break inside you.

“You talk too much!” Donald quaked.

“Yeah, and?” Sora snarked back, holding his hands behind his head. “At least people can understand me!”

“WHY I OUGHTTA!”

Goofy casually placed himself between the two before any bloodshed could occur. They all dissolved into little chuckles, no harm meant or done.

Sora and you began to match pace. Despite the pain, you couldn’t stop looking at him, noticing the resemblances, so uncanny yet distinct. They could be brothers, twins even, but that wasn’t possible.

He did notice eventually. “What?” He picked at his chin, “Do I have something on my face?”

“What? No, no,” You laughed awkwardly, unable to look away for more than a moment. “You just…” The breeze sighed, “you remind me of a boy I knew once.”

Despite his carefree and fun attitude, he understood the meaning behind your words immediately. His face fell, replaced by a sympathetic and concerned frown. “Oh… What was his name?”

The sun was setting over the horizon. Gold and red, just as it had been the day you met. “His name was…” You tried to say it, but you couldn’t. It stuck in your throat like a stone. Your feet slowed to a stop, sand filling in the gaps.

What you’re feeling is grief.

And Sora understood grief better than anyone might imagine. He stopped too and said something, but the water in your ears drowned it out. But he was quick to repeat it when you asked.

“I said, I’m sorry for your loss.” He gave you a pained grin, “Aerith mentioned you’re missing
someone, too. Is he the one you’re looking for?"

You shook your head, “No, I – “ When was the last time I thought about you? “No, he’s not the one I’m looking for.” A puff of hot air pushed past your lips as you pressed your palm to your forehead. The ever vibrant picture of paint on water resurfaced, “I… I can’t believe I haven’t thought about him in… after all of that…”

“I’m sure he forgive you.” He smiled, and it was like looking at the sun reflecting off the ocean. “Circumstances and all that.”

*This kid is something else.* You realized, feeling your smile appear like his. “I hope so.”

“And I hope you find him soon.” He nodded.

Even though you still weren’t sure you liked him, you replied, “And I hope you find Riku.”

A little crack formed in his shell, a little fatigue, a little sorrow, but he’s only human. “We’re gonna see our missing people.” He said, “Someday.”

“Let’s hope that someday’s soon.” You patted him on the shoulder, “If you need help, ever, and you see me out there, don’t hesitate to call for me. Okay?”

He nodded again, “Yeah, thank you.”

The sun reflected off something else for a second in that red sunset. “Hey,” You whispered, watching the tear roll down his cheek. “You alright?”

“Hmm?” He touched his face, startled to find it wet. “Yeah.” He coughed, wiping them with his fist. “I guess I just… I don’t know, I feel like I’m afraid that…” He lifted his head, tears gone, “that I’m not going to see you ever again.”

Your hand lifted off his shoulder, fingers curling towards your palm in surprise and confusion, but also in empathy. You couldn’t tell how many times you felt like that. And, in truth, as you watched the sun fall behind his back, you felt the same way.

Before you could say something, he shrugged away the moment with a small laugh. “Sorry, that’s the second time that’s happened. I wish I knew why.”

“Don’t be sorry.” You said, giving him a small smile. “I’m afraid of the same thing. Weird, right?”

“Guess we’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen.” Goofy stepped in with a soothing presence. “Right, Donald?”

The duck folded his arms, but his eyes kept trailing to Sora. “Yeah.” He finally sighed, “So don’t worry.”

You looked back, the sun fanning his outline, and saw him, even if just for a second. You chose to believe them.

“Yeah, we’ll see each other again.” You said, patting his head, fighting the tears in your own eyes.

He chose to believe it, too. “Count on it.”
You weren’t going to give them a last dinner, not this time. But you couldn’t stay in Hollow Bastion, not when you saw them in the beams of sunlight and heard their names in the whisper of curtains. Not when you forgot about the one you had forgotten too much already.

You’d be back, yes, but you couldn’t stay. There couldn’t be another sleepless night for you here.

You opened the Dark Corridor, one last glance at the note you left on the bed. You bade goodbye and goodnight before you left into the dark.

You entered a new world to the sound of war drums. And coconuts. Lots of weaponized, angry, killer coconuts.

Polynesia

Their attentions was intensely elsewhere. For like, two seconds. Then, you stepped on a creaky floorboard. Suddenly, all of them in the immediate vicinity turned on you.

“Oh no.”

They swarmed you before you could blink. You shrieked and ran for your life. That’s about the time you noticed there weren’t many places to run too, unless you were willing to swim.

Unwilling to fall to a watery demise, you tried to put distance between you and the horde so you could call a portal. That was before you ran into the girl. After nearly barreling into each other, you both stood there like a couple of idiots.

“Ohuh?”
“Wha –“

Her eyes slid to the left of you and went wide. Behind her, the coconut trolls were nearly upon her.

“Duck!” She yelled.

“Behind you!”

With a swift undocking of your weapons, after a little fumble with your new clothes, you slid down to waist height with one foot shot forward and the other bent. You swept a star out from the deck and into the open sea, sending several of the little heathens shrieking before they plopped into the water.

Her oar swept over your head, beaming the leaping little termites into the air, following their brethren to a watery grave. You didn’t even have enough time to say thanks before you were taken away by the flood and split up.

You fought like hell, but they just kept coming. At this rate, you were considering opening a portal in the air and making a dive for it (literally). There sure wasn’t any room on the coconut ship for one.

You were pushed towards an open part of the ship, only to watch with the girl bounce off one of their giant drums and zip line herself to a raft drifting in the middle of the closing circle of ships. It was awe inspiring.

After a moment, you still struggling against the monsters coming on you from all sides, she scanned the ships and spotted you. She shouted something and waved, which hopefully meant to come aboard, ‘cause that’s exactly what you were about to do.

The harpoon she threw was no longer connected, but you still shot for the drum. It gave you a good boost, but you were still going to be a far cry from safety. Thankfully, you were not stranger to jumping tricks.

With a blast of tropical wind you sailed through the air rolled onto the ship, to the occupants surprise. But, there was no time for questions, you had to get out of there before you were all crushed or captured.

Two smaller ships closed in from both sides, attempting to block you in or kill you trying, but the big guy was too fast and too skilled. You braced for impact, only to hear the crash shatter from behind you.

Breathing a string of curses, you watched the giant boats crumble into the water. You felt the rock of the waves with every passing second. Guess it was a good thing you learned how to swim in the last world.

“Uh,” The big guy said, waving a hand at you while glaring at the girl, “what is this?”

“They were on the kakamora’s boat.” She explained.

“We don’t need another mortal slowing me down!”

“Lay off her.” You groaned, finding your sea legs, “I didn’t see you beating those coconut demons within an inch of their lives with an oar.”

“Thank you.” She folded her arms and grinned smugly at the big guy.
He growled, then turned his glare on you. “And how, exactly, does a human get into a kakamora pirate ship in the first place?”

Ain’t that the big question, huh. You blanched, “Uhh. Well, I’m not entirely sure.”

“How are you not sure?”

The girl shot a look at him and put herself between the two of you. “What happened to your boat?”

_Uh, destroyed?_

“Probably destroyed.”

Now they were looking you in the way that meant you had to form some sort of elaborate lie.

“I was,” You thought, “in the middle of looking someone important to me when the kakawhatzas”

“Kakamora.” He interrupted.

“and I crossed paths. Woke up on their ship right before she” you pointed at the girl “showed up.”

Now that you could stand and not feel like you were going to collapse the moment a wave rocked the canoe, you could see there was a distinct lack of land… everywhere. “So, I suppose it’ll be too much to ask to be dropped off somewhere?”

Big guy opened his mouth, but the girl beat him to it. “No,” She said apologetically, “we’re on a very important mission. No stops, unless, uh, there’s something on the way.”

_That figures._ You sighed through your nose. _I always have the worst timing._ “What kind of mission?”

With a proud smile, she opened the locket around her neck and presented a green rock, glowing softly. “We’re returning the heart of Te Fiti and stopping the world from being poisoned.”

“No, we’re not.”

“Huh.” You admired the stone, eyes trailing the spiral, “A save the world mission. Cool.”

Big guy stepped up with an appeasing grin, “Look, we don’t need another mortal, maybe we should just – “

“Could you help us?”

“WHAT?”

“Me?” You pointed at your face.

She nodded, “Yeah!”

“No!” He said. “No. No. No. I’m not taking that thing back.”

She gasped, and he stepped past her. “You wanna get to Te Fiti, you have to get through a whole ocean of bad.” He pointed at a tattoo on his back, “Not to mention Te Ka. Lava monster?” He turned to the two of you, “Ever defeat a lava monster?”

“No,” She huffed, then shot back with a smooth delivery, “Have you?”
You scratched your head, thinking back to your first few journeys. “I think I have. Or maybe it was an earth monster…? Definitely done in an ice titan once.”

Your every sentence only angered him more. “Whatever.” He stooped and starting digging through supplies, “I’m not going on some suicide mission with two mortals. You can’t restore the heart without me, and me says no.”

With a banana in hand, he shoved past you and started steering. “End of discussion.”

You scoffed, then whispered, “Who does this guy think he is anyway?”

That was enough to get her thinking. She gave you a devious grin before quietly sneaking to his side.

“You’d be a hero.”

That made him pause. He leaned back, staring at her with a peeled banana dwarfed in his fist.

“That’s what you’re all about, right?”

“Little girl.” He took a bite and waved it at her, “I am a hero.”

“Maybe you were.” She admitted, taking his snack, “But now you’re just the guy who stole the heart of Te Fiti, the guy who cursed the world!” She ate with a smug smile, “You’re no one’s hero.”

He scoffed, “No one.”

When she folded her arms and shook her head, he turned to you.

You shrugged.

He looked at the chicken. Then to the side, where a mound of water shook it’s head. Which should’ve startled you more than it did.

The realization was crushing him.

“But,” She opened her locket, “put this back, save the world, you’d be everyone’s hero.”

That’s about the same time you realized his tattoos moved. Which you found so, so much weirder than sentient water for some reason.

They argued a little about some hook, and even then he almost refused. To like, save the world. Which he lived in. Which was just strange.

Finally, it looked like he was finally swayed. Then he threw her overboard.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” You screamed, rushing to find her in the ocean.

But, in a swarm of water, she was put was put back on deck.

“Worth a shot.” He shrugged.

And this was, somehow, still less weird than Wonderland.

“So, what’s your face?” The big guy asked.
“People call me Astra.” You said, “And you?”

His shoulders stiffened and he was one second away from jumping down your throat, until he saw the blank look in your eyes and knew you were serious. “I’m… Maui?” He stepped forward, “Demigod of the wind and sea, hero to all?”

“Oh,” You nodded to the girl, “Okay, so you weren’t making fun of him.”

He. Was. Crushed.

“I’m Moana of Montunui.” The girl was quick to say. “So, are you in?”

With one last long look over the blue horizons, you said, “It’s not like I got anywhere else to go.”

“Great!” She whooped, giddy as a schoolgirl. “It’s time to set sail!”

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**Journey to**

**POLYNESIA**
You watched the water reflect the sky, almost like a mirror of stars. Heihei lounged in your lap, sleeping and, for once, not trying to drown himself. Moana sat nearby, drowsily navigating the boat. Maui was snacking on something, hook in his lap.

In an attempt to keep herself from falling asleep, she blinked her eyes slowly and yawned. “So… who’s this person you’re looking for?”

You took your eyes off the ocean for a second, then grew quiet. There were shadows in the stars
tonight. “I wish I knew.”

That spurred her attention. She sat up, “What do you mean?”

You rolled your shoulders in a slow shrug. “I don’t remember him. No memory.” You pointed at your temple.

It was her turn to become quiet. “Oh…” She whispered, “I’m… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” You sighed, curling your arms around yourself. “I’ll be saying enough of those when we meet again.”

Maui grunted. “How are you so sure you’ll find this guy?”

You didn’t answer.

There was the sound of wood echoing against a skull. He yelped.

Moana returned to her station, watching you in silence. For that, you were grateful. You closed your eyes and listened to the sound of the wind and the waves of the sea. Calm and beautiful. Except, the more you listened, the more you heard.

Though you knew there was no one else for miles upon miles, you swore you could hear someone. Against the dark of your eyelids, you could almost see someone. It was black on black.

You opened your eyes with a gasp and searched the horizon.

“What is it?” Moana asked.

But there was nothing. Nothing except… “I swore I heard someone, in the waves.” You murmured, watching the slow ripples of water break the mirror. Or a name. You swallowed, “Probably nothing. Sorry.”

But now that you heard it, it was hard to stop. Something just out of reach, on the tip of your tongue. You don’t know why you remembered the taste of sea salt ice cream, hot cocoa, and blueberries.

“Do you have any family?” You heard Moana ask.

“Mm? Yeah.” You leaned back to gaze at the vibrant night sky. “Some people that took me in. You?”

“I have my island, my parents, and…” She drifted into silence.

Now interested yourself, you turned your head to watch her face. Moana was staring into the water, sad, quiet. Very un-Moana like.

“My grandma.” She finally finished to your unvoiced question. “She’s… She died just before I left.”

A hiss pulled from between your teeth. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s okay.” She said, “She’s not gone. Not really.”

You suddenly couldn’t find the strength to sit back up. “How do you know?”
Many emotions passed across her face, grief being paramount among them. Like a pattern: anguish, grief, fear, grief, hope, grief.

“Because,” She whispered, “she told me that there’s no place I can go where she wouldn’t be with me.”

You felt rain, though there were no clouds in the sky.

Her fingers brushed against your shoulder. “Are… you okay, Astra?”

You made no motion to wipe the tears away. “I… I lost some people close to me, recently.” Your hands balled into fists against the wood. “And I don’t really want to talk about it, sorry.”

“That’s okay.” She said, feeling her eyes grow heavy. “But you’re not alone.” She whispered under her breath.

The wind brought the last sentence to your ears, but your stomach only soured. You closed your eyes once more and hoped for sleep, no longer listening to the waves say the name you couldn’t hear.

Maui watched the scene silently, then gently took the reins from Moana.

“You should get some sleep.”

She shook her head, “No,” then she yawned, “I’m fine.”

He grinned, “It’ll be some time until we get to Te Fiti. Sleep.”

“Moana says no.”

“Maui says yes.” He carefully took her loose fingers off the helm. “You’re not going to get us anywhere if you fall asleep while driving.”

She grumbled some more, but put up no fight when he put her down on the opposite side of the ship as you. Soon enough, she had fallen asleep. Her deep, easy breaths joined the night air. For a time, that was the only sound aboard the tiny raft.

“I thought I was supposed to be the surly one.”

You snickered, “I don’t believe it, he is self-aware!”

“Shut up!” He laughed, then let the quiet linger, “So, how long have been looking?”

You opened your eyes slowly. “Year and a half, maybe.”

He held one hand steady on the oar. “That long?”

“I didn’t wake up long before then.”

“What do you mean?”

You shrugged, feeling your skin against the weathered wood. “Woke up one day and had no memories. I was told my home was destroyed. Wasn’t hard to believe, since I was in a refugee camp.”

A flutter of guilt flew over his face, believing that the poisoning of the world was what happened.
You let him, if just to keep up the lie.

He cleared his throat. “I would think the memories are a more pressing matter.”

“Eh.” You shrugged. “Turns out they’re sort of one and the same. Some crazy old witch queen I ran into told me that he, essentially, has them.”

You leaned off the boards just to get a look at his face. “ Weird coincidence, huh?”

He shook his head, “And you actually believe her?”

“She was right about everything else.” You laid down again with a flippant wave of your hand. “Besides, that’s my only lead. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

After a moment of deep thought, he just couldn’t wrap his head around it. “How does that even happen? How does your memories wind up in someone else?”

“I’m hazy on the details.” You said, staring up at the stars without seeing them. “She told me that part of my soul somehow winded up in him. My childhood self, she called it.”

“That’s nuts.”

“It’s coconuts.”

After some deliberation, he said, “We could always ask Te Fiti for her wisdom. She could know.”

“Maybe.” You replied vaguely. “I’m not getting my hopes up.”

In all honesty? It was hard to dwell on him, your man, Mama Odie called him. That guilt ate you up, but so did many other guilts.

“I’m tired.” You said. “I wish this part of my life was over with already.”

Maui sat in silence, waiting for you to keep going.

“It’s got to end at some point, right?” You wondered aloud. “I just want it to be over.”

He never was good at comforting, but his fingers touched your arm. “It will.” He said. “But if you give up, I’m losing faith in all mortals.”

You chuckled, bat ting his hand away. “Shut up.”

When sleep finally did take you, you dreamt of the sky against the ocean, and the red line that hung between them.
You watched Maui take off with the stone in hand towards the unfurling dark clouds.

“My guess is that’s Te Ka.” You said, yoyos hanging by your sides, at the ready.

Sure enough, several orbs of scorching hot lava shot from it. Despite Maui’s attempts to keep the trajectory off the raft, you had to bat a few away, just to keep the waves from overturning the ship.

He tried to rise over the smoke, but in cackles of lightning, the lava demon surged in his way with a scream. There was no time to react before it smacked Maui out of the very air.

“MAUI!” Moana unfurled the sail and sped towards them.

You stood helplessly as you watched him recover, only to be slammed out of the air once again. He plunged into the stormy waters. Te Ka didn’t give you much room to worry about him as it hurled more of it’s lava into the ocean.

Moana continued forward while you kept the attacks off the raft. Only then, now that Maui was temporarily out of the picture, did it’s attention find its way to you. It leaned forward, putting pressure on an unstable rock that fell out under it’s weight. It’s hand dipped into the ocean and it howled in pain.

A tiny fish flopped aboard and was soon replaced with Maui, heaving for breath. Moana went to his side immediately, leaving you to watch Te Ka recover from it’s moment of weakness.

The boat lurched forward, Moana again at the helm.

“Wha – “ Maui coughed, “What are you doing?”

“Finding you a better way in!”

But Te Ka was on the prowl once more, growling at the border shores.
“We won’t make it!” He shouted.

“Yes, we will!”

“Moana – “ You gasped, eyes on the enemy that was swiftly coming closer.

“Turn around!”

“No!”

“GUYS – “

“No!”

“WATCH OUT!”

Te Ka roared, pulling it’s fist high into the air. You only barely managed to throw a defensive Aeroga around the raft in time before it collided with Maui’s hook.

And then, all was darkness.

“---!”

You opened your eyes to a flower bed. Laughter echoed off the sky. A figure stood against the blue and gold, too bright, like the sun itself.

“Should’ve known I’d find you here, sleepyhead.”

“Who – “ You sighed. Your head felt heavy against the grass, you couldn’t help but think you just had the strangest dream.

Then, the figure was against the moon, gentle, but still too bright. You still couldn’t see.

“You shouldn’t sleep out in the open, y’know.”

You could barely breathe, let alone think.

Then, it was sunset, and though you couldn’t see him in the dim of oranges and purples, you knew who it was.

“Mind if we join you?”

Then, another figure stood against the oncoming dawn. She laid down on your left, curled towards your body.

“We’ve missed you.”

He came to lay down on your right, hand on his stomach. Then, someone else appeared, standing against the dark sky, black against black.

She opened her mouth, but all you heard was the sound of waves.

It was all the sound of waves. Beating against your ears, flooding down your throat. It was all blue against the water. The ocean gently pushed you up and you surfaced quietly and found you could once again breathe.
The boat wasn’t far, but the waters were unfamiliar. Aboard the canoe was Moana and an elderly woman shrouded in blue. There was a conversation you had missed, but what you witnessed next you wouldn’t soon forget.

The woman stood and began to sing. “I know a girl from an island, she stands apart from the crowd.” Slowly, she made her way to Moana. “She loves the sea, and her people. She makes her whole family proud.

“Sometimes the world seems against you,” she opened a tear in the sail, “the journey may leave a scar, but scars can heal and reveal just where you are.”

You knew the words were for Moana, but the pain in your heart was personal.

“The people you love will change you, the things you have learned will guide you, and nothing on earth can silence the quiet voice still inside you. And when the voice starts to whisper, ‘Moana, you’ve come so far.’ Moana, listen, do you know who you are?”

“Who am I?”

With tears in your eyes, you pictured the journey you had taken. The faces of friends, of people who you loved dearly, even if you couldn’t see them again. While silently supporting one of those many people from your place on the sidelines.

As she sang, more apparitions appeared in the horizon. “I’ve delivered us to where we are. I have journeyed farther! I am everything I’ve learned and more, still it calls me.”

Boats of her ancestors sailed past, silently cheering her onward.

“And the call isn’t out there at all, it’s inside me!” She stood on the mast against the stars, “It’s like the tide, always falling and rising!”

And then, she returned to her grandmother, for who else could she be? They held each other, foreheads pressed against the other. “I will carry you here in my heart. You’ll remind me that come what may, I know the way!”

She stood at the helm and declared to the sea and sky, “I am Moana!”

She disappeared from view. With a single blink, the spirits passed on, as if they were never there in the first place. But that wasn’t true, not in the tears joining the ocean, not in Moana’s victorious return.

You pulled yourself aboard, dripping water.

“Astra!” She gasped, helping you. “I thought – “

“It’ll take a little more than that to get rid of me.” You laughed, then took her by the shoulder. “So, are we finishing this?”

A smile slowly spread across her cheeks. “You’re coming with me?”

“I’m not about to give up.” You nodded to the heart in the palm of her hand. “I may not be a demigod, but I can try to keep Te Ka off the ship long enough for you put that back.”

You took a deep breath. There’s no place you can go where I won’t be with you. “I won’t let you down.”
She threw her arms around your neck. “Thank you.”

“Yeah.” You squeezed her. “Let’s set sail.”

After repairing the canoe, the two of you set off, back towards last obstacle between you and Te Fiti.

“We’re here.” You announced, watching ash blow in the wind and the sky turn gray.

Moana pulled her hair up. “Te Ka can’t follow us into the water. We make it past the barrier islands, we make it to Te Fiti.” Then, she made sure Heihei was secured in the hold. “None of which you understand, because you are a chicken.”

You ready?” She asked, tightening her hold on the rope.

“Ready.” You replied, stars in hand.

Te Ka erupted from the ground, right where you had been sailing towards. It pulled back to strike a blow, but you both rolled into action. Moana pulled a spectacular turn as you tried to summon wind, only for a barrier of glass to reflect off the side of the ship.

*Oh, shit! You took in the panels of clear force. I’ve never done that before!*  

Te Ka’s hand slid down it and plunged into the water, to it’s horror.

Moana got the boat coasting beside the islands, towards a different gap in the rock. But Te Ka was already upon you again. It threw a gob of lava that you smacked away from the raft with the full power of your yoyos.

It was only a distraction. The monster crawled across the jagged rocks until it passed the raft and blocked your entrance. With it came a cloud of smoke, which blinded you only for a moment.

You summoned an Aeroga that Moana used to make a sharp turn back the way you came. You left Te Ka in the dust.

With your added windpower, Moana unfurled the sail and you sped to the crevice. A familiar shriek pierced the ashen air and a crash made your stomach drop. Lava splashed across the gap, sending hot rocks falling towards you.

You threw your arms out, “SHIELD!” and the new power domed over the ship, protecting you from above, but it killed the wind form the outside. With a grunt of effort, you called for the wind to propel you forward and you crashed through a frothing wave and into the open.

“Te Fiti!” Moana gasped, eyes on the mound of earth laying just ahead.

Then, Te Ka burst from the islands with a shrill scream, sending a tidal wave you had no time to prepare for. The canoe flipped over through the air, sending you and Moana flying.

Goddamn, you were getting tired of the sound of water against your ears. You swam to the surface, coughing for air. Moana was already at the overturned boat, trying to turn it back over and you hurried to join her.

Then, a hand of glowing red death reached for you. Thinking fast, you felt something new stir within you. You leapt off the boat, swinging your stars across it’s palm, and sprays of ocean water flew from them, turning the hand into stony rock.
I’ve never done that before either!

A cry of a hawk followed soon after, and Maui cut Te Ka’s hand off from the wrist, then turned back into a bird just as fast.

You landed back on the boat and he joined you.

Moana’s voice broke, “You came back!” But, then she brought your attention to a new development. “But, your hook… One more hit, and…”

It was a scorched mess, purple lightning cracked from the wound, but he scoffed. “Te Ka’s gotta catch me first.”

Te Ka growled from the border islands. You could already see this going wrong. “I’ll help.” You volunteered.

He nodded and overturned the ship with his hook. “We’ve got your back, chosen one. Go save the world!”

“Maui,” She smiled, “Thank you.”

A swell of pride brightened his eyes. “You’re welcome.” Then he jumped and cried, turning into a beetle and taking off towards Te Ka.

You summoned your own personal hurricane and rode in after him. You laughed as he turned into a whale and splashed the beast, hopping off only long enough for the wave to pass before resuming your new ride.

Just when it sloughed off the hardened lava, you came in and sent a blast of water straight into it’s eyes. It shrieked and flailed, only to yelp when Maui started snacking on it’s finger as a shark. Before it could crush him, he transformed again into something small enough you couldn’t see it, but something Te Ka certainly felt.

To keep it off of him, you shot another volley of water barraging into it’s chest, giving him enough time to fly off as a hawk and cut off on it’s hands again. It went like this for a few more moments, though it felt much longer. He cut off another of it’s hands, thoroughly pissing it off. And he paid the price for it.

With one of it’s stumpy arms, it smacked Maui out of the air and straight into you. You both flew off course and into a small reef. While the two of you tried to shake off the pain, Te Ka threw another ball of lava over your heads.

“MOANA!” You both screamed.

The ocean rose up to meet the attack, but only slowed it down. Moana was thrown off her ship, your heart stopped, but she quickly reemerged with the ocean’s help.

“Get the heart to the spiral!” Maui yelled.

Now, it was just you, him, and Te Ka. You watched him shift his hold on his damaged hook, sparking and one mistake from breaking entirely.

“Are you gonna be okay?” You asked.

“I’ll be fine.” He huffed, readying himself.
You did the same. “I’ve got your back.”

“You stay here.” He replied with a wave of his hook. “Nothing else can stop a direct attack.”

You sighed through gritted teeth. “Then I guess I’ll make sure your landing’s soft.”

He gave you a tight grin. “I know.” With the monster seconds from another strike, he took flight. As soon as he reverted, you cast Aeroga on him, then a flash of purple light made you blind.

“MAUI?” You cried, blinking against the imprints on your eyes. He sailed right over your head, the wind still wrapping around him. The landing was rough, but he was still awake and alive.

And so was Te Ka. It picked itself up slowly and immediately pinned it’s gaze on Moana, out in the open and defenseless. As a last attempt to keep it preoccupied, Maui screamed a Haka, stirring it’s anger until it prepared to finish him in one mighty blow.

Then, a light spread over the barren sky. It was Moana. The ocean parted for her, and you watched in horror as Te Ka raced towards her.

“No!” You lunged, but Maui held you back.

“Look.” He whispered.

Te Ka loomed over her, but instead of killing her, the fires stoked inside dimmed, it’s arms fell to it’s sides. It lowered it’s head to her, and they breathed the same air.

Moana restored the heart of Te Fiti.

Green bloomed across her body, cracking open her hardened shell. She rose, graceful and beautiful above the ocean, then practically floated back to her place of rest.

Then, the ocean grabbed both you and Maui before you could even realize what was happening. It dumped you on the mother island. Heihei was thrown in right after.

Maui chuckled. “The chicken lives.”

Moana turned, beaming, but it soon fell. “I’m sorry about your hook.”

He shrugged. “Well, hook, no hook. I’m Maui.”

The ground shook underneath you and you were lifted into the air on the palm of Te Fiti. Moana bowed, then pointedly nodded at you two to do the same.

You and Moana chuckled to yourselves when Te Fiti gave Maui a new hook in return for his heart felt apology. Then, she turned to you.

You hesitated to speak, but she only shook her head sadly at your unasked question. Then, she lifted her head towards the sky.

“I understand.” You sighed.

She opened her other hand, and in it was a conch shell. Wordlessly, you picked it up, and held it to your ear. In it was the sound of waves. A reminder? you wondered, or a memory?

“Thank you.” You bowed, “Now, I think it’s time for me to get home.”
She smiled warmly and let you on her other hand. Moana stopped you.

“Where are you going?” She held onto your hand.

You tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Home. And it’s because of you that I’m ready.”

She took a long breath. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” You touched your heart. “Roxas and Naminé wouldn’t want me to keep running away.”
You felt a tear roll down your cheek. “It’s time I lived up to be the person I wanted to be for them.”

“Thank you, Moana.” You said. “Get home safe.”

She sniffed and gave you a hug. “You too.”

It was time you went home. There were still people who counted on you, and you were finally ready to help them. You stepped into the darkness, ready to receive the light.

Chapter End Notes

oh my god it's finally posted. It took me forever to draw the doodles this time around, and I'm sorry it's a little late.
Also, I've meant to ask this a few chapters ago, but I'm curious - what do you think the reader's theme would be? (in context of most characters in kh have their own theme) if you want, put in a comment down below!
As always, thank you for reading!
Echoes

Chapter Summary

It's the battle for Hollow Bastion, and answers are so close and yet so far away.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lea crouched by the fountains in the oncoming night. In his hands was a flower, the petals torn out in clumps. Footsteps approached him from behind, but he could tell it was only you.

You stood at his side, “Mind if I sit with you?”

He tore up the rest of the flower and threw it in the water. “Sure.”

You quietly took a seat beside him, watching the dusk reflect off the pond and waterfalls. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” He muttered, crossing his arms over his knees.

“Okay.”

So, you both sat in silence, listening to the sounds of the night. The days were getting short and cold, a brisk wind made you shiver. Clouds were sweeping across the sky, blotting out the stars.

Lea sighed heavily, glaring at the rippling water. “Do you ever just wake up feeling angry and sad? For no reason at all?”

“Yeah.” You brought your knees to your chest, feebly attempting to stay warm.

His lips twitched, wishing to bare his teeth. “I hate looking at myself.” His foot shot out and kicked the water, anything to keep his reflection scattered and broken.

You flinched, watching him turn his face away from the water and on the hard ground. You’ve seen him frustrated, but not like this. Not the inward look in his eyes, not the folds between his brow. “Why?”

His shoulders rolled without finesse, every motion angry and hard. There are some things we just don’t know, sometimes we feel things for no reason.

“I think you’re handsome.”

Just a second ago he had his whole body turned away from you, and now he couldn’t tear his eyes off of you. “Huh?”

You felt your cheeks grow warm and hoped the darkness would hide it. “I think you’re handsome. You’re beautiful.”

His eyes had gone wide. “Why?” He blurted, with no small amount of vindictiveness.
For a long second, you took the time to just see him as he was. He was a gangly teenager, still filling out in weird places and acne for miles, but you knew pieces of him he hardly knew himself. “Your hair’s really nice.” You said, tucking a thick lock of it behind his ear. “It’s soft, and you style it really cool.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat, but didn’t look away.

“And, your eyes are…” You swallowed. “They’re always so bright; I can still see them right now. They look like the grass and stems in the gardens when it’s springtime. And…” You grinned, playfully poking his cheek. “when you’re not breaking out, your skin’s always looked the best.”

That got a little chuckle out of him when he pushed your hand away; success.

“Your hands…” You hummed, overlapping one of yours onto the back of his. “Are big, and your fingers are long. I like the way your callouses feel.”

“You like my hands?”

“Is that weird?”

His face said, **good question**, but he otherwise didn’t comment.

You turned to face him with a grin, thinking of all the other things you liked about him. “Your nose…” You booped it, “is cute. And your legs are long, it’s fun watching you run during track and leave everyone in the dust.”

“Is it because you won twenty dollars in bets or is that part irrelevant?”

You beamed, pushing him gently. “It maaay have a small part in it.”

There were so many other things you adored about him, but many of them were locked tight behind your lips. You tucked yourself against his shoulder, watching your reflections. “But I love your hugs best, because you’re so warm all the time.”

Lea huffed and wrapped his arm around you. He gazed at his reflection, slowly taking in the things you saw about him. “You really think all of those things?”

“Yeah.” You hung an arm around his back. “I think you’re the most handsome-est person I’ve ever met.”

He snorted, “You’re not just saying that are you?”


He opened his mouth to reciprocate, but quickly shut it. He still hadn’t said those words back to you, but that was okay, he let you know through other ways. You still had to pretend it didn’t bother you, though. You still tried not to wonder why he wouldn’t say it back.

“You know you can count on me, right?” You felt yourself whisper.

His eyes shifted over to your watery mirror, a fondness that he still hadn’t a name for softened his edges.

“Of course I do.” His hand sought out yours, his callouses brushing over the back of your fingers. “You’re my best friend. And I, uh,” His face burned, “I think you’re really pretty, too.”
“Thanks.” You laughed, then reflexively gave him a kiss on the cheek.

You both went shock still. It’s not the first time you kissed each other on the cheek, but neither of you had done it since you were kids and touches started meaning more than before. You leaned back and grinned it off, pretending your heart hadn’t just leapt into your throat.

“Let’s go home.” You stood up. “The ground is too damn cold.” Then, before he could open his mouth and ask about the kiss, because of course he was gonna, you took off. “Race ya!”

That got him going. “Not fair!” He cackled, chasing after you in the night.

Your combined laughter echoed off the high walls, and eventually faded.

You stepped into Hollow Bastion and felt the hairs on your arms raise. There was a certain type of tension in the air. In the town square, almost all surplus was sold out or they were closed entirely. Those who were outside had arms full of goods and never stayed in one place too long. Always, their eyes searched the far horizon, towards the castle, towards the field before it.

You ran through the barren streets until you arrived at your family’s house. You opened the door, unsurprised to see everyone there. The living room was organized chaos as they calmly hurried from one thing to another, looking over items, rations, clothes. They’d obviously just arrived, despite being prepared for the attack, they’d apparently been taken by surprise. One last check before running into the fray.

Cid was at the computer, hurriedly typing away into the Restoration grid, toothpick held tight between his teeth. Leon and Yuffie were at work looking over a map while Cloud and Aerith were going through the piles, ticking off lists. Merlin was at his table, magic dancing around him. You couldn’t tell what he was doing, but you could only assume it was important.

Cid caught your reflection off the computer screen and grinned grimly. “So, made it to the party, did you?”

Everyone turned to stare at you in the doorway. They weren’t jumping for joy to see you again, you know you disappointed them when you left without even saying goodbye, but you could only be there for them now.

“I know I left in a bad way,” You hugged yourself, the weight of your yoyos heavy in your pockets, “I’m sorry. But I’m here, if you want me.”

Cid stood up with a sigh. “If you think we wouldn’t want you around after that, you obviously don’t know us.” He walked towards you and pulled you in for a tight hug. “It’s good to have you back.”

You wrapped your arms around him and pressed your face in the junction between his shoulder and neck. “I’m glad I’m here.”

“And so are we.” Aerith said, rubbing your back.

Leon grinned at you fondly, “Don’t know how much you’ll be able to handle,” he teased, messing your hair, “but some help would be appreciated.”

You felt yourself glow, “Just point me where.”
Merlin tapped his wand in his palm, beaming underneath his beard. “Then let us get this under way! The Heartless certainly won’t wait for us.”

“Us old coots will hold the fort from here.” Cid said, “You young people do what you need to do, just make sure you come home when it’s over.”

With a collective breath, his kids surrounded him, wrapping their arms around him. All the words they couldn’t get past lips were spoken in that simple moment. When you parted, he muttered about something in his eye and waved you all impatiently on.

Together, with the people you cared for by your side, you went to defend your home in their hearts.

“We’ll stick with each other at the tunnel.” Leon said as you jogged towards the mouth of the border lands. “But, we’re gonna have to split up in pairs of three and two at the fork, then we’re on our own.”

“We can’t contact each other once we’re out there.” Aerith nodded to you, “But when we’ve cleared an area and are still able to fight, we’ll send a ball of fire into the air. Can you handle that?”

“As long as you’re not asking for a fireworks show, I think I can manage.” You sweated, still not the best with that particular branch of magic. “What else?”

“If you can’t fight anymore, retreat to the wall here.” Cloud pointed at a manmade wall, crates were piled against it. “There’s supplies there. Merlin’s going to be providing support by replenishing that and keeping an eye on the town’s walls. But if you can’t manage that, make a single bolt of lightning and we’ll try to back you up.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“Yeah!” Yuffie smirked, “Destroy them!”

Her smug confidence made you grin. “Alright then. Let’s get them!”

“Yeah!” They cheered back, and towards the battle of a thousand Heartless you ran.

The Heartless you ran into as a group were thin and couldn’t lift a finger to the combined might of the five of you. When you came to the aforementioned fork, you split off with Yuffie and Aerith to add a bit more fire power.

“Aerie, you hang back.” Yuffie ran ahead. “I’ve got this!”

You gave her the side eye and cleared your throat.

“We’ve got this!”

“Thank you.” You said while Aerith giggled from behind.

Several Heartless showed up just ahead. Yuffie leapt up and you slid across the dirt, knocking several of the lighter creatures off their feet. You found yourself right at the feet of a large body and grinned at it with a wave. It drummed it’s stomach and prepared to mow you over, but little did it know that a cunning ninja was right over it’s head.

You rolled away just in time for Yuffie to swing her shuriken with a blast of white force, sending a shockwaves throughout the crowd.

You felt a gust of wind behind you and found a pane of glass reflecting off your shoulder. A lance
soldier was reeling backwards, having bounced off the barrier. Aerith followed up with a beam of light erupting from the earth, clearing both the Heartless and the ones near it.

To finish off the rest of the pack, you spun around the small arena, pulling the last of them with the force of your swing. Once they were all bundled up, you summoned Thundaga and they turned to dust under the weight of your voltage.

Many of the fights you witnessed together went the same, all downed under the force of your might and magic. Yuffie and Aerith more than held their own, and you hoped – no, they let you know you were doing amazing too. Getting a pat on your back from your sisters made you flush with pride.

But, eventually, there came another fork.

“I’ll go.” You volunteered, “You two be safe.”

Aerith kissed your forehead and Yuffie patted your back, their hesitation evident, but you gave them a confident grin.

“I’ll see you guys later.”

Yuffie puffed up, “You better!”

A flicker of warmth shifted the embers in your heart and you dived head first into danger. You’ve been up against hordes of Heatless before, even had your back up against the wall at times, but this was different. There was no end to them in sight.

You stayed near the town, overlooking it’s safety. Moving from one spot to the other made your stomach twist in a way you hadn’t felt before. The idea that you would leave a spot, believing the danger to be gone, only for them to crash through the moment you had your back turned had your eyes returning over your shoulder over and over again.

Sweat beaded at your brow, and your limbs grew heavy on and off. There were bruises all over your body, but you tried to keep up with potions and elixers, always keeping your magic reserves in mind before casting curaga on yourself. If it weren’t for the balls of fire sporadically shooting into the air, you would’ve given in a long time ago.

Everyone was fighting, giving it their everything to protect the home they nearly lost forever. There wasn’t any room for running and hiding. You promised that they could count on you, and this time, you weren’t going to let them down.

After a particularly grueling battle, you caved and casted curaga and it was the best feeling in the world. It was like fighting with weights on your shoes and finally being able to cast them off. It was when you quickly used a mega-ether that you spotted three figures on the ledge below you, vigilantly fighting off a pack of Heartless. Now ready for anything, you pounced off the cliffside, towards their sides.

“You okay there, boys?” You called, spinning yourself like a top before you hit the ground, whipping many of the monsters into dust or off the platform altogether.

“Astra!” Sora grinned tightly, landing a killing blow against a lance soldier. “Good timing!”

That’s when several morning stars fell from the sky and shook the rocky cliff under your feet. They circled around you, bolstering the last of the mob’s defenses. You and Sora found yourselves back to back.
“Thinking what I’m thinking?” He asked, keyblade in hand. “Together!”

You nodded, “They won’t know what hit ‘em!”

You both kicked up a whirlwind and you summoned Magnet, pulling several of the smaller Heartless to the center, even the morning stars jerked forward. A ball of wind kept you both off the ground as you worked together. You spinning your stars in fierce downward slashes as he began to mimic your moves, tossing his keyblade at the crowds, only for it to return into his hands. A brief image of shooting stars was brought to your mind as you barreled through the crowd.

Finally, you both summoned a deep well of power, and from the sky came several hurdling asteroids pulled in by your combined gravity.

“It’s the finale!”

“Wishing can’t save you now!”

Final Wish decimated what was left of the small army surrounding you. Goofy and Donald finished the last of the weak-kneed creatures and high fived the both of you.

Sora threw his arm around your shoulder and you gently noogied him, a familiar and friendly peace amidst the chaos.

“We’ll see you later!” Sora beamed, already moving further into the gorge.

You waved goodbye, despite the crushing sensation on your ribs, you had to put your faith in this boy. “I know you will. Be careful out there!”

With one final wave, they disappeared around the bend. You sent a ball of flame into the air to alert the others and raced onward.

The entire ordeal lasted way too long, but of course it did. That didn’t mean you had to be happy about it, especially since your meticulously well stocked item reserve was all but completely depleted.

With a trembling arm, you sent another fireball into the air, letting the others know you were alright. Fortunately, you were able to overlook the valley from your perch and saw that the majority of the Heartless were gone. Flashes of light sparked from the mob, someone was in there, taking out huge swaths of them.

You sighed in relief, the battle was nearly over.

A slice of pain like lightning erupted from your shoulder. You yelped in the familiar hot flash of pain and spun around to see none other than the black coat.

The familiar figure rested his purple gun against his shoulder, you could feel him smirking. “Hello, starshine. Remember me?”

You pressed a hand to your shoulder, relieved to see it wasn’t bloody. “Yeah, you’re the guy I kicked in the balls.”

That was not the answer he wanted. Another bullet shot from his gun, and when you dodged it, it curved through the air and aimed for your back. With a deft smack, you blocked it with a star.

“Listen, asshole.” You growled, sneaking a hand into your pocket and crushing your last hi-potion
inside it. “As you can probably see, we’ve got more pressing issues than a little property dispute.”

“Oh, that?” He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, towards the gorge. “The keyblade’s chosen one has that covered. You’re dismissed from duty! Which means we have all the time in the world to settle this.”

You searched for an exit, “Don’t tell me a widdle playground smack hurt your feelings.”

A cold, humorless laugh filled the round strip of rock. “Don’t tell me you still have no idea what we are after all this time.” He mocked.

In spirals of dark and light, several of those spindly creatures appeared, these ones almost resembling humans holding crossbows.

“We Nobodies don’t have any feelings for you to hurt!” He said with deadly grin, “Maybe you should worry about yourself right now, kiddo."

Something nagged at the back of you mind as you stared up at him, and he slowly lifted back his hood, revealing the fiend himself. “I know you’re smart enough to figure out what’s happening right now.”

Your eyes traced the scar on his cheek, a deep unease dug in your guts. “Sure.” You replied vaguely, slowly backing up inch by inch. “And I’m sure you remember what happened last time.”

“Why do you think I brought some friends this time?” He laughed, “It’ll just be like old times in that castle back there, starshine.”

If multiple question marks could pop over your head, they would.

His smile fell. “Oh boy, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten?”

You felt your eyes pulled towards Hollow Bastion looming past your shoulder.

“Now, this is a pickle.” He sighed, “First Roxas, and now you?”

“Roxas?!” Your fingers tightened over your yoyos.

He paused. “Oh?” He hummed, “You knew him, did you?” Then, he started chuckling, “That’s such a sweet look on your face. It’s too bad, you should save it for someone who might actually appreciate it.”

A terrible chill ran down your spine. That familiar hot and cold anger washed over you, the rage that split across your spine like lightning.

“I wonder what those old friends of yours would think”, he leered, “if they knew you’d forgotten all about them.”

The clouds above you darkened, a crack of lightning burst from their heavy burden in tandem with your shock. That was the spark against the short wick, and all the monsters, the Nobodies, vanished. They reappeared soon after, all honing in on your position.

You had no time for this.

With a silent fury, you boomeranged around the cliffside and began dispatching the creatures. All other noise was drowned out by the thunder in your veins, not when answers could be a sentence away. The enemies fell under your powerful and precise strikes, but they were merely obstacles for
you. Pebbles to be tossed over the ledge.

Xigbar watched you slaughter his Nobodies, noting the strength now thinly held back by a string. Maybe it was a mistake to rile you up as he did, he needed to preserve his strength for the hero. As much as he would’ve liked to alleviate his invisible boredom, there was no need to waste time on such a small hinderance such as yourself.

Before he could summon a Dark Corridor, a bolt of lightning struck between his feet. He leapt backwards, blinking away the imprint with a grunt.

The strings of your stars circled around him and then pulled taught. He shouted on his way down, his chin hit the ground with a sharp crack, but you didn’t give him time to react.

You grabbed a fistful of his hair close to the scalp, putting your entire weight on your knee against his spine. “What do you know?” You growled with a steely hiss. When he didn’t reply, too busy spitting his hair out of his face, you yanked his head back to a painful degree. “Tell me!”

He grunted, “What use is teaching a blind person how to see?”

His forehead split against the rocky ground. “What use is a mouth that never shuts up but never has anything to say?” You spit back, digging you knee into the small of his spine.

He bared his teeth against the jabbing pain. “Touché. Then I guess I have to give you some parting wisdom to prove you wrong.” Then, he vanished from his bindings. His voice appeared from behind you. “May your heart be your guiding key, starshine.”

You roared, swinging your stars around, only to hiss harmlessly through the disappearing portal. The momentum brought you to your knees, scraping them against the ground in the fall. Tears rolled silently down your cheeks as you stared at the spot hanging in the air where your hopes and answers vanished into darkness.

You returned home sore and spent. You all managed to find each other on your way back at the mouth of the gorge, all except Cloud. For a moment, you feared the worst, but Leon, haggard and torn, shook his head at your terror, lips a thin smile.

“He’ll be back.”

Yuffie dragged her feet, leaning heavily on an exhausted Aerith. Her feet tripped on a rock and you were quick to keep her from falling. Despite her half-hearted struggling, you carefully maneuvered her until she was pressed against your back and her legs dangled from your hands and hips. Her arms limply crossed over your shoulders and a deep sigh rustled the hair behind your ears.

Leon leaned against his sword, a bandage wrapped around his middle. Both he and Aerith leaned against each other, catching a moment’s breath. Was it surprising to find that the sun still hung over your heads? Was it surprising that the day was not yet over?

“Where’s Sora?” You asked quietly when you entered town. “And Donald and Goofy?”

“Off to find their friends.” Leon sighed, holding his bleeding ribs. “They went after the Organization when they showed up.”

You felt yourself tense. “The – You knew about them?”
Leon went silent in a rare moment of shock.

“We didn’t tell you?” Aerith realized.

“Yeah, no, you didn’t.” But in this state you didn’t have the energy to be sad, let alone angry. “Got jumped again. Do you know what a Nobody is?”

“They’re the shells of people who become Heartless.” Leon answered, leading you through the bailey. “They’ve been showing up a lot recently. The Organization are the most powerful of all of them.”

And Roxas was one of them? The thought echoed.

“They’re beings without a heart, so they can’t feel emotions like we do.” Aerith hissed, taking a moment to lean against a wall. She lifted her dress slightly to reveal deep bruises running up and down her leg.

Leon wordlessly moved her to lean against him, using his blade as a makeshift cane.

She went quiet for a long time. “It has to be a sad life, wouldn’t you think?”

But that wouldn’t make sense. Your mind reeled on despite the exhaustion and ache deep in your bones. Roxas did feel. He laughed and cried and grieved and got angry and frustrated and happy. He had emotions, just like you and me.

When you all finally collapsed into Merlin’s and Cid’s arms in the small home, you had to wonder why your search for answers only brought on more questions.

You woke up at some god forsaken time. The lack of light outside threw you for a loop, you were sure it had to be morning by now, but the clock proved you wrong with a bright 1:45 A.M. glaring off its face.

Sure, you wanted to go back to sleep, but something stirred within you that kept you from staying still. Everything hurt, and no position was comfortable. Though you tried to reason it away, you felt panic pang through your gut every time a thought whispered: The Heartless – The Heartless – The Nobodies – At the gates – At the gorge –

Of course there were going to be those monsters, they were like cockroaches, but not at that number again. Not anytime soon. But still…

You quietly changed into some clean clothes and snuck out of your window. The last thing you wanted was to wake someone else up or get caught at the door. That would get you a burnt ear for sure.

Hollow Bastion was quiet and calm that night, or early morning if you wanted to be tedious and technical. There were some stray creatures that fell swiftly under your yoyos, despite every movement rocketing aches you didn’t know could exist through your whole body. As long as you weren’t made to go swinging around like a monkey, you could handle it.

Your feet brought you to the border lands just outside the gates. They were stark empty, much different then just some hours earlier, but the remnants of the long battle remained. Craters in the ground, scorch marks against the walls. Reminders that wouldn’t soon be forgotten.
Then, you came upon a figure sitting on a rock, his silhouette illuminated by the moon hanging in the sky. Though the black hood made you hesitate, the red hair and the sad frame of his shoulders let your feet move towards him. You climbed the sheer slate until you stood at his back.

Either he didn’t hear you or didn’t care, but just in case it was the former, you said, “I’m Astra.”

His head lifted, but he didn’t turn. The fact he didn’t immediately attack spoke for itself.

“Can I sit with you?”

He said nothing for a long moment, then rolled his shoulders listlessly. “Sure.”

You sat with your back to his, overlooking the gorge between the town and the castle. Though what the man said before still murmured in your ears, you shoved it away. You tried not to sound hopeful when you asked, “Is Roxas…?”

“No.”

Of course. You didn’t think he was, but, if anyone would know, it would’ve been Axel.

He stiffened from behind you. “Is that it?” He growled. “What? Are you not taking this seriously?”

“You don’t think I have?” You sighed, staring up at the pale moon peaking through the murky clouds. “You don’t think I lost my mind when he went missing?”

He went silent, head cocked towards his shoulder, waiting.

You brought your knees to your chest, shivering against the cold wind. “I was going to bring him here, where he’d be safe. But there was something he had to do first, and…” You pinched your eyes closed, the wound stinging as if it were fresh, “that was the last time I saw him. So, don’t you dare think you’re alone here.”

A noise murmured at the back of his throat as he turned away, glaring at the ground below.

“How’re you so calm about it?”

You wanted to laugh. “I wasn’t. I’m not.” The smell of trees and food still lingered in the air in this barren wasteland. “There isn’t a day that I don’t think about him.”

The sound of leather shifted from behind you; Axel’s fists clenched over his knees. “Must be nice.”

He scoffed, “Not feeling like you want to set the world on fire because of it.”

This time you really did almost laugh. “Not the world, just myself.”

“Then why haven’t you?”

The question caught you off guard, but also made you hyper aware of the man sitting behind you. The sounds of the night faded and his every movement amplified in your ears. “I don’t think Roxas would appreciate that.”

His entire body went tense. “And how do you know what he would want?!”

“Because I knew him and loved him like he was my own kid.” You snapped without any malice, then, something melted inside. “I don’t know about you…” You breathed slowly, “but I want to be someone he’d be proud of.” Someone they’d all be proud of.

He went silent, staring at the ground as if seeing something new he hadn’t noticed before.
“If he loved you, and I have reason to believe he did, then he must’ve seen something in you worth being proud of.” You whispered, letting the tears roll down your cheeks. “Maybe it’s time you saw it, too.”

Neither of you continued, only sitting in the lonely quiet. Eventually, the shift of leather and hair announced his departure. A portal whirred to life at your back, and then you were alone in the night.

With a deep sigh, you dusted off your pants, and returned to your family and warm bed. Suddenly, you weren’t that restless anymore. Your head hit the pillow and you fell into a deep sleep.

“Be someone he’d be proud of? Is that it?”

He stared at the winning stick in his hands, so light, but it felt like the world weighed in his palm. He caught his reflection in the glass of a vacant shop. There was something he hadn’t seen before in there, something he may have forgotten.

Is that what you saw in me?

The answer came swift and guilt ate at his lungs: He wouldn’t be proud of what you’ve done to them. What would he do to make it right?

His fingers slowly curled over the stick in his hand.

Axel knew what he had to do. It was time he stopped being selfish for once and set things right. Damn the consequences.

Lea stood among the flowers, they brushed against his ankles in the soft breeze. The sky above went on forever, and the sun was beginning to set. The endless blue blushed with reds, pinks, and golds. But that wasn’t what caught his eye.

You were sitting in the usual spot, your back turned to him, watching the colors turn.

“---!” He gasped.

You picked up your head and looked behind you. Your smile reflected his. “---!”

Thinking of little else but to be beside you, he ran across the field until you were close enough to touch. “Why does it feel like I haven’t seen you in forever?” He asked, taking a seat at your right.

Your brow knit, then you said with a shrug, “I dunno. You still look the same to me.”

He laughed dryly, looking down at his bandana. “Yeah, but I sure feel a little different.” He touched his chest as his smile faded, “Maybe more than a little…”

Silence filled the air, familiar but tight. You kept each other in your peripheral as the sun came ever closer to the edge of the world.

Lea felt like he was suffocating. Bricks on his chest, fingers around his throat. His clothes crumpled in his fist as the first of his sobs tore through him.
“I’m scared, ---.” He choked, feeling his tears roll down his cheeks and onto his lap. “I don’t know anything anymore. They’re gone, all of them. I wasn’t able to keep even one promise!” He curled in on himself, his knees at his ears as he desperately tried to stifle his wails. “I don’t know what comes next! I’m tired, but I – I” a low, pained moan pulled from his lungs. “I don’t want to be alone…”

You watched him break apart. Heartfelt tears welled in your eyes, but you blinked them away and scooched closer. “---,” You said softly, “don’t you remember?”

He sniffed miserably and said nothing. Gently, you pulled his hand away from his clothes and you put your hand over his heart. He was always warm, even here, even now. He stared at your hand before meeting your determined gaze.

“I am always with you.” You said. “You will never be alone. Whatever you and I face, we’ll do it together.” He blinked in surprise, another tear rolled down his cheek. “Got it memorized?”

His hand covered yours, and soon his sobs renewed. “But that’s selfish.” He coughed. “I’m supposed to keep you safe until you’re ready to go. It’s already gotten so late – “

“No, ---.” You said, closing the rest of the space between you. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going to leave you alone.” You tried for a smile. “I’ll stay here with you, until you’re not afraid anymore, for as long as you want me.”

Unable to keep you apart for another second, Lea threw his arms around you and sobbed into your shoulder. You wrapped your arms around him, holding him close. “I will always be with you.” You whispered into his hair.

“And I’ll be with you?”

You smiled softly. “Until we meet again. Always.”

The sun flashed bright as the last rays hit the horizon. And then, there was only light.

---

You dreamt of fire, suffocating on smoke, wisps of gray and black bleeding from your veins. When you woke up, there were tears in your eyes and your lungs couldn't hold air. The clock said it was past noon, daylight spilled over your crumpled bedsheets, but it couldn’t touch the pits of dark in the corners of the room.

A panicked fight of Where did he go? and He’s gone – He’s gone – wared behind your weeping eyes.

Who’s where? Who’s gone?!

And what was this anguish in your heart? What was this empty loneliness? It was like you had fallen asleep in someone’s arms, only to wake up to find they weren’t there come morning.

---’s gone! ---’s gone! Where did he go?!

Who’s ---? WHO’S ---?!

It felt like your skull was going to split at the seam. You grabbed your head and bit back a scream of agony. There was something missing. Something terrible had happened. But what? And to who?
With a sudden cry, you were put out of your misery by a flash of fiery light. You felt someone hold you close as you lost consciousness in the haze of confusion and hysteria. A song drifted in from the open window, familiar and warm.

“It’s okay, ---. Go to sleep. I’ll be there when you wake up, got it memorized?

“Thank you for letting me stay here. I won’t forget it.”

Chapter End Notes

Its so CLOSE!
Thank you all for reading!!! See you next chapter!
You woke up with tear stained cheeks, the taste of ash heavy on your tongue. Was it a dream? you wondered. It was too bad you couldn’t remember, some of it must’ve been good, or you wouldn’t have felt like you had been in someone’s arms.

Your body resisted your every movement, creaking and crunching all the way from your room to the bathroom. Hot water rained against your sore back in the shower, slowly releasing the knots caused from yesterday’s (you had to double check to make sure that was accurate) drawn out battle. After your back felt just a little better, you backed further against the water until it was on your neck.

There was a hurried knock on the door. “I NEED TO GO PEE!” Yuffie cried from behind the door. “I have the curtain drawn!” You shouted back, already very used to sharing one bathroom with four other people.

She whined, “But Astaaaaa!”

“I’m not done!”

“Fine!”

You heard the door open and tried not to listen to her do her business. “Just don’t flush the toilet.”

It was early evening, but you hoped your remaining exhaustion wouldn’t let you ruin your rhythm. There was a casserole and a large chocolate cake awaiting everyone for dinner, courtesy of you fathers.

The others had been fairing a little better than you, though they hadn’t slept for over twenty-four hours either. There were still dark circles under their eyes as you all drowsily chewed the moist, delicious cake. It was the best post-battle meal ever, you only wished Cloud and Sora were around to share it.
“Now, I want every single one of you to go to bed at a decent time tonight.” Cid warned, pointing his chocolate smudged spoon at Leon in particular. “The defense grid can handle what’s out there for another day. Y’all just sit back and recover.”

“We’re fiine.” Yuffie groaned around a mouthful of cake and frosting.

“You’re gonna drop your spoon on the floor.”

She dragged her utensil back to her bowl, just a few blinks away from sleep. “No, I’m not.”

He sighed grievously and Merlin chuckled from behind his napkin.

You couldn’t fall asleep. Exhaustion pulled at your muscles, dragged at your eyelids, but no matter what you did you just couldn’t fall asleep. There was no pinpointing it, no explanation for this sensation of something terribly and inherently missing.

With a sluggish lack of grace, you pulled back the covers and crawled out of your bed and into the hall, towards Aerith’s room. The door was always partially open, she never did like closed doors when she slept, and you quietly snuck in.

“Aerith?”

She made a small noise in the back of her throat.

“Can I sleep with you?”

Without even opening her eyes, she pulled back her quilt and allowed you to sidle up against her back. Her bed was much larger than the one back in Traverse Town, and it came to your surprise it was able to hold three people.

Yuffie slept curled up on Aerith’s other side, snoring peacefully. Her big sister had her hand draped over her body, gently holding her in place.

You gingerly got yourself comfortable, careful not to rock the bed much or wake them. When you were curled up in warm blankets, the familiar scent of flowers and honey heavy in the quilt, you pressed your forehead between her shoulder blades and finally fell asleep.

You were running a small errand, grab some medicine, get some veggies for dinner. With one small parcel of pain medicine and potions in one hand, you held some cucumbers and carrots in the other. An errand like any other, but for some odd reason the people in line in front of you didn’t fade from your memory.

A spindly woman with wild red hair streaked with gray, so wiry and thick it was like a perm. The man next to her practically dwarfed her, but what you heard of it, his voice was gentle and sweet. She hung off his arm, their free hands full of groceries.

You don’t know why you kept thinking about them as you began your walk home. There was nothing out of the ordinary about them, just an aging couple doing some grocery shopping, talking about dinner and baking.
Why had standing behind them, listening to that quiet conversation, give you such strong déjà vu? Well, there could be a reason, but not likely. You doubted you fit anywhere in their equation.

You noticed movement on the roofs above you and came to stop. “Sora?”

He was sitting on patched up roof, staring off into the clouds. After spotting you below, he waved slowly.

After a moment’s hesitation, you asked, “Mind some company?”

“You on an errand?”

You got yourself comfortable on the rooftop beside him, your bags between your legs. “Nothing urgent.” You replied. “Missed you after the battle. What happened?”

He turned his face away, towards the ground. “Organization Thirteen.” He explained simply. “They took my friend; they stole Kairi, and…” His shoulders shook, “Axel died, and I met Roxas…” His chin lifted just a bit towards you. “He was the one you… the one who vanished, isn’t he?”

Your hands balled into fists on your thighs, though it wasn’t anger that overtook you. “How?”

The answer did not come immediately. Sora’s fingers touched his chest, slowly, as if he were afraid. “He’s here.” He whispered, “He’s a part of me. It still hasn’t sunk in, it’s confusing, and it’s…” scary. “But he loved you.”

White noise joined his voice as you stared at the ground below.

“He misses you, and he… he’s sorry. I’m sorry.”

“No,” You cut him off, finally looking at him. He slowly lifted his head to meet your eyes. “You obviously had no part in that – no willing part.” You touched his shoulder, “I don’t blame you, and I don’t think Roxas is one to blame you either.”

He gave you a weak smile and your hand fell back to the space between the two of you. “I don’t know how I know these things, but I feel them whenever I look at you for too long. I just – “ He fell into pensive silence, “Thank you, for Roxas, and me.”

“Well always be here to listen if you need me.”

A speaking of whispered in the gentle wind that tugged on your sleeves and hair. Sora stared ahead, the angle hiding his expression. “I have to beat the Organization. I have to beat Xemnas, but just for a moment I was… we were…

“I was so close.” He held himself, fingers digging into his sleeves.

You leaned forward, trying to get a look at his face. “To what?”

“To Kairi.” He whispered. “To Riku. All I want is for us to be together on the islands again.” His chin slowly tucked against his collarbone. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Sora was a silent crier. For a boy so free and open with his emotions, you expected it to be loud, to be explosive even, but no. This boy was a quiet crier, his hair hiding his face, his breath caught in his throat. The only reason you knew for sure were the drops of water blinking off the noontime sun.
With no words spoken, you put your hand on his back, and he promptly fell into your side. Your arm circled his shoulder as he silently wept on your chest, burying this moment away from the sky.

When do the people ever want a hero that cries? Rarely, never.

When to the people need a hero that cries? Always.

The boy was a hero, and the hero was a boy. He had already given so much laughter and smiles to the worlds, and he would give more until there wasn’t anything left of him. At that moment, he needed someone to give his misery to, and you accepted it with gentle kindness.

We all need to cry sometimes. No one is above fear, not even heroes, and especially not boys.

The portal opened into a crowded graveyard. Though it was nighttime, the graves were well lit with candlelight. Food and drink were laid out in baskets, families sat around them as if picnicking with the undead.

You doubled back. They *were* picnicking with the undead. Rubbing your eyes, you looked once more.

Skeletons stood at graves, walking along the graves towards the town, following a tail of orange petals, marigolds. They sidestepped the living reflexively, though the humans didn’t look at them twice. Then, you saw children run straight through a tall skeleton, who only laughed as he watched them go.

Cautiously, you peaked down at your body, and saw that there was an orange aura hovering around you, just like the walking dead without the bones.

Just when it couldn’t get any weirder, you saw another human like you, a boy. He was being gently guided towards a – you recoiled – it was a bridge of marigolds. They walked through, meeting some resistance before stepping through.

Carefully, you decided to follow. Considering the yelps and stares from the skeletons, it wasn’t everyday a living kid walks around with them, which was reason enough to investigate. You flipped your hood up but hesitated when you arrived at the invisible gate.

Taking a deep breath, tasting candle smoke, cinnamon, and baked bread, you pressed yourself forward. It felt like walking through a thin membrane, like a bubble, then your foot hit the petals. The rest of your body soon followed.

You walked like you had a purpose, trying not to gawk at the many other bridges and the decorated dead. Then, you crested the bridge, and saw a city built upon layers and layers of colors. It took your breath away in its dazzling wake.

You ran a hand through your hair, as if afraid you’d been dreaming, then choked on a scream. There was no flesh on your hand, only starch white bone.

Now at a complete stop, you studied your fingers, noticing hairlines where they had been broken in the past, then up your arm. Finally, you pushed back your hood and touched your face, only to feel the strangely pliant but still rock hard jawbone and eye sockets.

You still breathed, you could still feel the fabric of your jacket with your fingers, you could even
taste the spiced air.

Then you realized you lost the kid and his entourage.

And now you were in the land of the dead with no clear objective or way out in sight.

La Tierra de los Muertos

“Ohhkay.”

Well, it wasn’t everyday you got to sightsee skeleton town as a skeleton. And this was waaaay better than Halloween Town, no offense Jack.

You passed through the claims station without a problem, but you definitely heard whispers of someone claiming a living kid from the workers. Apparently it was a jaw dropping story, literally, but if only they would say where they went.

But hey, that’s okay, you were there now. Might as well enjoy it while you could. Which meant food, for there were plenty of sweet smelling bakeries lining the streets. You piled yourself with chocolate cake with flan, churros, spicy and savory tamales and happily munched while admiring the festivities.

“C’mon, mija, we can’t miss Día de Muertos!” A father said to his elderly daughter, who laughed before grabbing his hand.

“Papá, my son isn’t going to take us off the ofrenda any time soon.” She admonished him. “The night is still young.”

Día de Muertos? You wondered, finishing your churro and picking up your cake. Interesting.

You were halfway through it when someone smashed into you. You felt yourself scatter across the ground, a profoundly unsettling sensation, only dimmed by the realization your flan cake was smeared across a gutter grate.

“I’m sorry!” You hear a boy’s voice say, but you couldn’t see him.

Then, your bones began to pull towards each other, an equally terrible feeling, and your limbs began to slot back together like magnets. Soon, you were standing once more, your food rolling in your nonexistent stomach.

You groaned miserably, holding your midsection. If they could, your cheeks would be green.

Then, you realized something was missing. Looking down, you saw only one hand was pressed against your jacket. The other one was gone.

“Esperame, chamaco!” Someone cried further down the street. Dangling out a red jacket hood were the fingers of your missing hand.

“Hey – HEY, HOLD UP!” You hollered, dashing after them. “HEY! KID!”

But they only sped up through the twisting alleys, until you couldn’t hear their footsteps anymore, but that didn’t mean they were gone. Quietly, you crept over the cobblestone streets, following the murmurs that were slowly growing. Until, you turned a corner and came face to face with the living boy from before. He was joined by a tall skeleton, and both were shocked to see you.

You panted, waving your stump at the kid’s hood. “You have something of mine.”
He cocked his head, then screamed when his hood moved and your hand crawled out from between his hair and the red fabric. It reattached itself, and you stretched the wrist and wiggled your fingers just to make sure.

“Pardon me, but I feel like you should be a little more concerned about who had your hand.” The skeleton coughed.

You glanced from him to the boy. “Yeah, that’s a little weird.” Then, something shifted from in the darkness, and you felt yourself groan. “But I think there’s more pressing concerns.”

A hairless dog by the boy’s leg growled. A neoshadow leapt from the stones, straight for the two strangers. Instead, it crashed against a yoyo and fell back into the alley. “Get behind me!”

“What are those things?!” The kid gasped, hiding behind both you and the skeleton.

“They’re not like any alabrijes I’ve ever seen.” The man shivered, sliding behind you with the kid right behind.

More of them sprouted from the ground like tumorous growths. Neoshadows were never something to sneeze at, but you handled it as well as you could in the tight alley. It’s not like you could get bruised or bloodied as a skeleton. The worst you got was a femur that got knocked out.

After a little searching, you guided it back into place and it did the rest. “Those were Heartless.”

“Heartless?”

“What are those?” The boy asked.

“They’re monsters that are born from the darkness in people’s hearts. They’ll kill you and make you into one of them if given the chance.”

The skeleton man shook his head, “Wait – Wait – Wait, what are they doing here?”

You shrugged. “They’re everywhere. Really; there’s no getting rid of them.”

“I have been here for – “ He paused, “I don’t know, many, many years, and have never seen a creature like that.”

“Yup, well, they’re here now.” You nodded to the end of the alley.

A commotion muttered at a nearby street, multiple voices and the sound of footsteps. The boy stiffened and grabbed your hand, “C’mon!” But didn’t give you much say before dragging you away.

“Right, we have a schedule!” Skeleton man chased after you until he was in the lead, “Follow me!”

He brought you to an empty underpass and quickly began painting the kid’s face. “Tada!” He announced when he was done, “Dead as a doorknob.”

“So, listen, Miguel, this place runs on memories.” He began to explain his end of the deal, unable to cross the bridge into the land of the living. You listened, hands crossed over your ribs as they began to suss out the details.

“Hold on,” You held up your hand. “I’m still not sure what you’re doing here, Miguel. Why do you need to get to your great-great grandpa?”
He sighed, putting Héctor’s photo in his pocket and showed you his hands. The skin was fading, revealing white bone. “I’m cursed, and in order to get back home I need my great-great grandpa’s blessing. de la Cruz is my only family here.”

You remembered the group of people he was with and hummed quietly. That was something to bring up with him privately, just to skip any awkwardness.

“And you, amigo.” Héctor stood up and pointed at you with a grin, “Are you willing to help us? Apparently this Día de Muertos is going to be a biiiiit more dangerous than usual, much too dangerous for a boy and a man who can’t even walk straight.” He waved at his bum leg.

“Hmm.” You rubbed your bony cheek. Running around helping people was certainly more than walking around and stuffing your face for a night. “Sure, I will.”

“Perfecto!” Héctor crowed, “Now, we only need to find a way to…” He groaned, “get to the guy.”

“How hard can it be?” You asked.

“Harder than you might think.” He grumbled, now leading you back towards the city. “de la Cruz is a popular man.”

After a minute or so, you let yourself lag behind to match Miguel’s and Dante’s pace. “Hey, Miguel.”

“Yeah?” He asked.

“I saw you enter the bridge with a bunch of people.” You said, trying to get your concern across. “I thought they were your family.”

“Oh, no!” He laughed tightly, nudging the dog, Dante, along, “No, no, no, they were just…” He rubbed his arm, “just some people who were trying to help me out.”

You didn’t necessarily believe him, but you also didn’t have any proof he was lying. “Alright.” You murmured, and decided to let it go.
You watched the stranger glow brightly, a beautiful orange hue, then he blew away in the breeze, like dust on the wind.

"I’m fading."

Héctor stood slowly with the guitar in hand. He raised a glass to his departed friend and drank, then set it down beside the untouched share.
“Wait.” Miguel whispered as he walked past. “What happened?”

He paused with his back to you. “He’s been forgotten.” He answered solemnly. “When there’s no one left in the living world who remembers you, you disappear from this world.”

An immeasurable pain began to fill up and bubble over you glass, frothing and sticky. Forgotten? The imprint still burned your eyes. *Is this what happens when you’re forgotten?*

“We call it the final death.”

Miguel was still staring at the sky, as if the stranger would appear in the wind. “Where did he go?”

“No one knows.”

Flashes of red and blue joined the orange light. Though you had no lungs, it felt as if they’d been punched. You trailed behind them in a quiet daze, smelling warm flowers and hearing echoes of bird songs.

You listened to them talk on the trolley without really hearing any of it. Then, someone snapped their fingers in your face.

Héctor was watching you out of the corners of his eyes. “You alright there, *amigo*? You’ve been quiet.”

“Oh,” You sighed, “I’m fine. Just…” You waved your hand, “I – watching that was – “

He nodded, eyes down at the lights below. “I know.” He thumbed the strings of the guitar, listening to the fading vibrations. Too many old friends, living out the last of their days in the squalor that the ones forgotten are left in. “I know.”

Then, he sat up on the handrails. “Welcome to the Plaza de la Cruz!” He announced, but the skeletal smile did not match the sorrow in his eyes. “Showtime, *amigos*!”

You hopped over the rails easily and raced after them through the chaotic crowd of dancers, stalls, *alabrijes*, and even fireworks. All the color and noise proved to be a better distraction from the too many thoughts wracking your mind.

You watched the woman with towering blue hair pop out of the cut out eye socket and thought, *These people know how to party.*

“That’s our ticket, *muchacho.*” Héctor said into Miguel’s ear.

You followed the announcer’s finger towards a white pillar in the distance decorated with spotlights. “We’re trying to get into *that*?”

“Sí, Astra.” He nodded, ushering the both of you backstage. “Now, to get you signed up,” He said, looking around the crowd.

You eyed the guitar in Miguel’s hands. “You know how to play?”

He nodded, picking at the strings with a self-conscious grin. “I’ve mostly only played for myself, though. What about you?” He asked, “Are you a musician?”

You hated how you answered with a, “Good question.” You crossed your arms and leaned back, only for a crash of notes to come from your back end.
You yelped as Miguel laughed. Thankfully, it didn’t seem that you broke the –

It was a piano.

Nothing fancy, not a grand piano, but a quality keyboard. Something about the keys, white and black, reminded you of sunlight through curtains. With a quick glance around, there was nobody there to claim it, you pressed your fingers against the keys, testing out the sound.

Then, your hands strung together a chord. *That’s in major key.* Your dim memory supplied. Then, you moved down the keys and strung together another. *And that’s minor.*

Miguel came to stand beside you, watching your fingers strum the notes. “You can play the piano?”

You shrugged, “Guess we’ll find out.”

You nudged a box towards you and took a seat, stretching out your wrists and wiggling your fingers before placing them on the instrument. At first, they were simple cords, lullabies that eased from your fingertips like magic. Then, they evolved into a soft, slow, sad melody. It flowed and ebbed, like waves on the sand, like flowers in the breeze.

It was so familiar, so achingly so, and again that song that drifted at the edge of your conscious returned. Still, no words, no meaning, not yet. This song was different than that, this song was yours.

Héctor returned with someone with a clipboard and had to keep his jaw in place when he heard you. “Astra, *amigo*, I have an idea!” He pulled you and Miguel into a huddle, away from the worker’s ears. “You both need to get signed up for the show.”

“What?” You gasped.

“Ay, ay, ay, listen.” He whispered. “Two contestants mean’s double the chances of getting in. Astra, if you win, you give your ticket to Miguel. *Sí*?”

“I don’t – “ You flubbed, “I’ve never – I don’t even – “

“Please, Astra?” Miguel asked, “You’re really good, and I really need to get to de la Cruz. Please.”

A sharp groan rattled at the back of your throat. “Fine.” You bit.

“*Perfecto!* Senor, these two would like to enter separately.” Héctor told the guy with the clipboard before any other arguments could be made.

Clipboard guy turned to you, “Of course, and what name would you like to go under?”

“Uh.” You blanked, “I guess, I mean my nickname is Starshine.”

“That’ll do.” He said, and you were left with your fate.

You sweated at the keyboard, fingers drumming out chords as you desperately tried to figure something out. It didn’t help that every single one of them were doing covers. “Does it have to be a de la Cruz song?” You asked, hitting a bad note.

“No, it just has to be good.” Héctor replied while dogs barked from onstage. “It’s going to be okay. Have you ever preformed before?”
“NO!” You nearly shouted.

That got him to pause, “Eh, alright, it’s gonna be okay. Here, shake out those nerves.” He shook himself until his head popped off. “Now you.”

With a deep breath, you rattled your bones until they were practically making music on their own.

“Good.” He said, “Now, what kind of song are you going to play?”

You stared at the piece of paper in your hands. It was covered in lyrics, most of them had been scribbled out, but there was something kinda cohesive on there. “I – I think I’ve got something.”

“Alright, then let’s hear – “

“Starshine, you’re up!” A voice called from the stairs.

You were going to be sick. Could skeletons get sick? Because those tamales and churros were threatening a comeback.

Héctor packed up the keyboard and handed it to you with a sheepish grin. “You’re going to do fine. Chin up, amigo.” He turned your around and nudged you towards the stage.

“Good luck!” Miguel said.

And then, you were onstage, all the lights right on you. Oh no Oh no Oh no Oh no. Your brain screamed as you robotically unfolded the keyboard and took a seat on a folding chair. Just play, dammit! Play! You cleared your throat, gently pulled the mic closer and dropped it to your height. Just do not puke on the mic. Do not puke on the mic.

But there were so many people staring at you, a sea of unfamiliar faces. You took a deep breath and closed your eyes, and imagined them being replaced by flowers.

You struck a few chords, and began to play. Something slow, something sad, something gentle, something kind.

“There’s a question I yearn to ask,” You sang softly into the mic and heard your voice echo across the plaza, “A wonder that whispers in the dark of my dreams, ‘Would you stay with me?’ You breathed, “‘Would you still stay with me?’ If only you were around to hear it…”

It was a spell, how the words came forth. The piece of paper was crumpled in your pocket. A grueling process, to find the right words, to find the right song.

The song picked up, just a little as you tried to get the meaning of the words through, “I keep seeking answers though I’m way out of time, I still ask questions though there’s no room for lines, and I still feel like I’m just standing still…” The beat slowed once more, sorrow and exhaustion dripping from your voice, “No progress made, but I’ve paid with my pain. I’m lost…” The piano paused, “I’m still so lost.”

Could skeletons cry, you wondered, finally opening your eyes to look over the crowd. They were staring at you, many holding onto someone close to them, some holding their hands to their hearts.

You sighed, and the chorus began again, “I still have a question I need to ask, it lingers in whispers with you at my back,” Your eyes burned, “‘Would you love me?’ Just off stage, Miguel and Héctor watched from the stairs. “‘Would you still love me?’” Héctor turned his face away, but had to stare once again when you powered into a crescendo, “Wherever you are, can you hear me?”
It pulled your forward, your piano and voice a heady mix as you all but sobbed into the mic, “I remember notes of a song I can no longer sing! I remember sunlight and flowers and echoes of Spring, and I’d give away most everything,” the emotions came down from near anger, back to your quiet sorrow, “if I only could remember you.”

The crowd watched, enraptured by your performance, some now openly weeping at your powerful song and beautiful, soft devotion.

“Are you seeking answers when you’ve run out of time?” You sang, almost wondered, “Are you asking questions when there’s no room for lines? Are you standing still?” You took a shaky breath, “If you can hear me, tell me, are you standing still?”

Finally, the last chorus lilted off the piano, nearly whispers into the night. “Do you love me?” You asked in song, “Do you still love me? Because I know the answer to my own.” For a long moment, you only played the piano, the words hung heavy on your tongue, so ready to be said. Always so ready to be said. “I love you.

“I still love you.”

The crowd erupted in cheers and you bowed. But, this song wasn’t for them. Your eyes turned towards the sky, though there were no stars to be seen. It for was them. For him.

You didn’t get the chance to check in on the guys before Miguel was ushered on stage, but that didn’t stop you cheering for them on the sidelines.

“Ay!” You hollered, then crowed with Dante and clapped along with the crowd, until the dog got distracted by something.

He sniffed along the stairs, then barked and raced off. “Dante!” You hissed, giving chase. “Come back!”

You winded around the leftover instruments and pieces of the crowd and spotted his naked heinie scrambling into an alley. You followed, whistling for him, but he was long gone. But, he tended to do that, disappear then reappear sometime later out of the blue.

Figuring he’d turn up eventually, you headed back to the plaza. Héctor was standing at the edge of the crowd when he spotted you and came running.

“Astra, have you seen Miguel?” He panted.

“What? No, why?”

“His family is here!” He said, his photo held between his fingers. “I tried to make him go to them but then he ran away! I can’t find him.”

After the realization dawned on you, you cursed, “I knew it!” Then, you got on your tiptoes and looked over the crowd, trying to find the people who were with him when he crossed the bridge.

“I’m going to go find him.” He said, “You go try to find his family. We need to get him back to the Land of the Living.”

You nodded and patted his bony shoulder. “Good luck, and be careful.”

“And the same to you, now, esperame!”
You watched Ernesto back up with Miguel in his fist, but you were too busy keeping the security at bay to do anything.

“Stay back!” He shouted, shaking like the coward he was, “Stay back!”

Dante howled and grabbed Miguel by the leg, desperately trying to shake him out of his grasp.
Meanwhile, your star knocked a man’s head clean off his shoulders as you fought with the same desperation. Another one charged for you, holding a club, and you kicked him in the ribs. Several cracks filled the air and he cried shrilly before rolling onto his back.

Panting, you turned just in time to see de la Cruz dropping Miguel off the side of the building.

“MIGUEL!” You screamed before you leapt over Héctor’s prone body. You shoved Ernesto out of your way before diving after the boy.

“ASTRA!” He begged, gangly arms grasping for you.

Dante beat you to him, his little wings flapping hard to slow his deadly descent, but he slipped out of the dog’s teeth. But, he slowed just enough for you to wrap your arms around him. With one hand, you swung a yoyo back towards the building, praying that it would find a foothold, but even if it did, the ground was coming too fast, too soon.

You could already feel your bones grinding on the concrete, the shatter of your skull and the breaking of your spine, like a memory. You hoped you could at least soften the blow for him. Could at least keep him salvageable.

“Close your eyes.” You whispered, holding him close. “It’s gonna be okay.”

A roar startled you before coarse fur hit your back. Miguel bounced off of you and grabbed onto Pepita and your jacket. He was sobbing, his cheek buried into your chest.

“I lost his picture!” He wailed, “I lost his picture!”

Speechless, you pet his hair and tried to soothe him the best you could before Pepita brought you both back to the top of the building. You both slid off her back and Miguel was rushed by his family

All except for Héctor.

He shuddered on all fours, the orange light blinking through him like cancer. Miguel was the one to run to him.

You watched helplessly as Héctor began to fade in earnest. It was like a punch to the gut, to not watch a simple stranger but someone you now knew to be forgotten.

With a struggling breath, you got on your knees beside Imelda and a familiar, gentle green glow flowed from your fingertips.

“It’s almost sunrise.”

A pink light began to spread like watercolors on a purple backdrop behind you, but none of you had the time to appreciate it.

“No no no no no, I can’t leave you!” Miguel sobbed as his great great grandfather gently cupped his cheek. In the light, you could see the last of his living flesh fade. “I promised you’d see Coco.”

Taking your mind off of Héctor, you whispered, “Miguel, you have to go home.”

“We’re both out of time, mijo.” Then, another wave crashed through him.

Tears welled in your eyes as you returned to the task at hand. Anything to slow it, anything to stop it, to save Héctor to save –
To save –

To save –

A pained whimper pulled from the back of your throat as you renewed your efforts, the glow becoming golden as whispers of a flower blossomed above his chest.

“I just wanted her to know,” he revealed the orange petal, “that I loved her.”

Miguel pleaded his name again, as if his love alone could reverse this curse.

Héctor and Imelda put their hands over the petal. “You have our blessing.”

Imelda pushed it towards her great great grandson, “No conditions.”

You watched the boy move to Héctor, not his way home, begging, please, that he wouldn’t go. Then, he vanished with a spiral of blossoms. All was silent for one moment, then another wrack of agony ran though Héctor’s body.

“Hold on.” You prayed, pushing more and more of your magic into him.

Imelda took you by the shoulders, eyes wide and wet. “What can you do?”

“I can’t – I don’t know!” You cried with effort. Your reserves were quickly running dry. “This is all I have – I don’t know – “

Héctor quietly slipped his hand into Imelda’s. “It’s alright, amigo.” He breathed. “It’s alright.”

“It’s not alright!” You cursed, “If I can’t save you then – then I can’t – I can’t save – “ Your cure sputtered in tune with the clack of his bones. “Just try to hold on, please.”

Imelda’s fingers squeezed your shoulder gently. “It’s alright, my friend.” She sighed with pain laced in every syllable. “There’s nothing we can do.”

A sobbed beat into your gut, forcing the tears out one by one until you sat back on your legs and covered your eyes. “I’m sorry.” You hiccupped, “I’m so sorry.”

You waited for the final goodbye with the Rivera family. You waited. And you waited. And you waited.

Then, Héctor sat up with a look of pure amazement. He looked at his hands, then at his feet, then, to everyone’s shock, he stood up with a crow.

“Héctor?” Imelda gasped, immediately standing up. “What – How - ?”

He took her by the shoulders with a disbelieving grin. “He did it.” He whispered, “Coco, she – “

“She remembers you!” She beamed and found herself swept into her husband’s embrace. “Miguel, bless you mijo.”

You were still sitting where you were, your eyes bugging out of your skull at the true miracle you held before you. Héctor wasn’t forgotten. Miguel did it, somehow.

It could only bring up the question, “Can you remember someone you’ve already forgotten?”

You don’t know how long you were just sitting there, back against the sunrise, until a familiar
bony hand clapped you on the shoulder. You jumped, only to see your friend giving you a melancholy smile and a hand.

You accepted his help up and you both stood overlooking the city as the rest of the family celebrated behind you.

“Now, I know all those tears weren’t just for your cousin Héctor.”

“What?”

He was watching you with crossed arms but soft eyes. “You weren’t just crying for me, were you?”

You found yourself unable to meet his eyes. No, those tears weren’t just for him. If only you truly knew why. “I forgot them.” The words tripped over your tongue. “I was…” You took a deep breath, “My home was destroyed. I could be the only one left.” Your voice cracked against the strain of your emotions, “And I forgot them.”

Your shoulders hunched to your ears as you tried to sniff back your tears. Héctor stood at your side with pain in his every bone before he rubbed your back.

“What if they’re gone?” You struggled, “What if they’re gone forever?”

“Oh, Astra…” He sighed, “I wish I knew.”

A warm breeze carrying the smell of flowers washed over you. Your eyes, shut tight against your tears, opened to the sky.

“C’mon ---, y’know that isn’t true. The three of us are inseparable.”

“Insufferably so.”

Two silhouettes stood against the blooming colors of the rising sun.

“Still, you forgot about us? Ouch.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

Though you couldn’t see any features, you had the distinct feeling they were smiling.

“Astra? Amigo?”

You blinked, and the two figures were gone. Héctor was waving his hand in front of your eyes. “Are you alright?”

The bright spots faded from your sight. Already, whatever had just transpired faded with them too. All you had left was the vague sensation you had just seen someone you hadn’t seen in a long time. “Yeah,” you choked, “yeah.”

He breathed softly and gave your shoulder a final pat. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” You wiped your eyes. Maybe it’s too early for sorries.
The last pitstop on your never ending journey was unlike anything you had seen before. You stepped out onto a sandy beach, overlooking a blue horizon. A pirate ship sat in the water far out, till it was the size of your thumb. Behind you, some sort of hybrid of jungle and forest sprawled. Mountains and other, smaller islands curved just out of sight.

The sound of children’s laughter hollered somewhere overhead. Against the bright blue sky, a boy and a girl were flying towards inland.

**Neverland**

With one side walled off by water, you headed into the jungle, tucking your coat away as you did. Thankfully, it didn’t take very long for something interesting to happen. In fact, it landed right on your head.

A shower of dust made your eyes water before the object writhed in your hair.

“Ow!” You moved to grab whatever it was, but it bit you, “Hey!”

Finally, it got loose and got right in your face. It was a tiny woman with a scowl to end all scowls and hands on her hips. She waved her fists at your, bells chiming shrilly in your ear. She was throwing a downright tantrum.

“Hey! Hey! Easy!” You backed away, “I didn’t make you fall! You landed one me! AND you bit me!”

She stomped her feet and crossed her arms, but at least she wasn’t trying to kick you anymore.

“Jeez.” You sighed, then saw one of her wings was bent. Her whole body was at a tilt. You groaned inwardly and said, “You want some help with that?”
She turned her face away, but she was about to be horizontal at this rate. With a dark *chingaling*, she reached behind her and tried to fix it herself, but if anything, it was only getting worse.

You held your hand out below her, “Here, before you fall again.”

This little twerpy pixie really didn’t want to, but then she was hanging like a Christmas ornament in the air. With a grievous sigh, she took a dainty landing on your palm.

With patience you were just holding by a thread, you gently smoothed out the crinkled wing. She snapped at you when you pulled to hard, but eventually calmed. Emphasis on eventually.

When you were done she twirled around, trying to get a better look at her fixed wings.

“Better?” You asked.

She gave you a vain once over before nodding. With a patronizing pat on the hand, she took off without another word.

“You’re welcome.” You huffed, moving on.

After that, there was only more trouble. Storm clouds rolled overheard and blanketed the entire sky in two minutes flat. And a torrential rain came pouring down only a minute later. With several curses and grumblings, you searched for shelter.

Until, another noise joined the storm. Somewhere in the rain, someone was crying. The little sobs led you towards a pile of rocks, and under an overhand was a small child curled up and alone.

You knelt just outside of the dry dirt, “Hello?”

She flinched, peaking out from her arms. “Who’re you?” She sniffed.

“My friend’s call me Astra.” You said gently. “Who’re you?”

After a moment, she wiped her nose and uncurled herself a little. “I’m Jane.” She leaned forward, trying to get a good look at you. “You’re not dressed like a pirate.”

You had to check your garb, just to make sure. “Yeah, I would hope so, since that would mean I got someone else’s clothes.”

She didn’t seem amused by this, “Then, how did you get here?”

“Uhh, not sure.” You hummed, “How’d you get here?”

Her chubby face folded angrily, “Those blasted pirates stuffed me in a sack like I’m potatoes and kidnapped me!” More angry tears hiccupped out of her, which she wiped with the heels of her palms, “And now I – I’m stuck here and – “

She dissolved right in front of you, her knees tucked up to her eyes as she tried to force herself to be quiet.

Taking this as a signal you could come closer, you carefully crept under the rock and sat beside her. “Jane?”

“I’m sorry.” She fuzzed frustratedly, “This is stupid, this is no time for crying.”

“It’s okay to cry.” You corrected her, but she wasn’t listening. “What happened?”
She wiped her nose with her sleeve and glared at the dirt. “It was those horrid boys!” She growled, “They were jumping all over me, they were filthy, and loud, and they ate my notebook! I need that!”

Okay, you were a little lost. “What boys?”

“The Lost Boys.” She scowled and picked up a rock. After a moment’s consideration, she chucked it outside. “And that stupid, cocky, show off Peter Pan.”

You both sat in silence, watching the rain and the forest floor.

Jane wrapped her arms around her knees and whispered, “I just want to go home.”

“Well,” You hummed, “I can try to help with that.”

She shook her head miserably. “You can only fly out of here, and to fly, you need pixie dust, and that doesn’t even work!”

“Maybe there’s another way.” You tried to keep positive. There had to be some way to get this girl home. “When this clears up, why don’t we go looking for one?”

That got her thinking. She crawled to the edge of the alcove and peered up past the trees. “There’s some mountains. And large animals. We’d have to split up to cover more ground.”

You did not like that last part, “Woah, maybe splitting up isn’t the best – “

“I have to get home, and soon!” She shot you a look, “The train’s coming in the morning, and my brother, he – “ Her everything folded, her mind somewhere far away. “We can’t waste any more time. Once this rain lets up, I’m going out.”

You relented with a low hiss, “Okay, okay,” You sighed, encouraging back under the rock. “But you look like you’ve had a hard day.” She made a face at that, but you didn’t let her retort. “Let’s get some rest. Until the rain stops.”

The exhaustion began to creep up on her, and she laid down next to you, curled up into a ball. Eventually, her eyes closed and her breaths slowed.

Did you know what was going on? No. Did this have anything to do with what you were trying to accomplish in the long run? Also no, but that stopped mattering a long time ago. Did this girl need to get home? Yes.

But, for right now, it was just you, the sleeping child, and the rain. Nothing else.
You had been calling for Jane for hours. You tried not to panic as you frantically searched through the island, tried not think too hard on your stomach cramping with knots. Tried not to think too hard on a similar situation you had been in not long ago at all.

A twig snapped somewhere and you stiffened for a moment before heading in that direction. “Jane?”

A blur sped past you; Jane either hadn’t heard or had ignored your call. She was running as fast as
her legs could carry her, her breaths coming hard and fast.

“Jane!” You shouted again, then took off after her.

After a few moments of battling the foliage, you saw her dive for a dead tree. Was something chasing her? Were there enemies after her? You couldn’t hear any other bodies through the trees, but you needed to know if she was okay.

You followed her into the tree, having to duck in order to fit and more than once nearly slipped on your ass. After squeezing your way into it, you found yourself in a sort of tree house, but within a tree. It was dirty, kind of smelly, and there were toys and clothes everywhere, but none of those mattered.

Jane was kneeling beside the bed, sobbing into her arms.

“Jane?” You stepped forward. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head, “Tinkerbell, she’s – “ her words choked in her throat, but it didn’t take you long to find out for yourself. The little fairy you ran into before was lying on the pillow, her light was gone, she wasn’t breathing.

A gust of air fled your lungs, “Oh.”

She whined in anguish, “I – I – “


With tears and snot running down her face, she finally lifted her face to you. “Its – It’s,” More spilled down her face, “It’s all my fault!” She bawled, falling into your chest.

You cradled her, at a complete and utter loss. With a pained grimace, you bowed your head and petted her hair with gentle strokes. Anything to calm and soothe her. Anything.

A wave of dizziness crept on you and you closed your eyes with a grimace. When you opened them, the girl crying in your arms was a stranger with dark hair. A pain unimaginable and familiar brought tears to your own eyes.

“---?”

When you blinked again, she was Jane once more. A light flickered on the pillow, pulsing softly. Your breath caught in your throat as the tiny fairy began to glow once again, slowly opening her bleary eyes.

“Jane.” You whispered, watching Tinkerbell flutter into the air and yawn, a flurry of sparkling dust falling from her.

She blinked her eyes again, then saw you with Jane in your arms. She gave you a warm smile before turning to the girl.

“Jane.” You said again, giving her a little shake.

She pulled away in confusion, then gasped when the fairy pulled on her hair. “Tinkerbell?”

Tink twirled with a victorious grin before swooping down to rub their noses. Jane fell back against your chest with delighted laughter. “This is wonderful!”
Then, the fairy flew to you and rubbed your cheek with hers. “What happened?” You beamed.

Tinkerbell returned to Jane knowingly, and she said, “I…” She wiped the last of her tears, “I believe.”

She nodded fervently and twirled again, obviously happy to be back in the land of the living.

“Wait until Peter – “ Jane’s face fell, “Oh my gosh – Peter!”

“What?” You asked when she jumped to her feet. “Isn’t that the kid who made you cry before?”

She sighed, “Yes, but, he apologized. And he meant it.” She turned to you with fists at her side, “But now he and the Lost Boys are in danger, all because of me.”

Both you and Tink glanced at each other, lost.

“Captain Hook has them.” She admitted.

Tinkerbell hopped several feet in the air in fright, then got into her face, moving her hands as if demanding answers.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen!” Jane explained, “Hook wanted me to blow a whistle when I found his treasure, but I threw it into the water. I don’t know how Tootles got it! But if we don’t get to them fast, Hook will –“ She took a sharp breath, “He’ll kill them.”

You were on your feet in less than a second. “Then let’s go save them.”

“They’re out on the water!” Jane said, pushing her bangs back with wide eyes, “And there’s this terrible octopus – unless,” She turned to Tink, “unless we can fly!”

“Fly?”

Tink was already nodding and gathering her golden dust, throwing it on Jane in a panic. Jane pinched her brow, then you squeaked as her feet lifted off the ground.

“Oh my god.” You whispered as Tink turned to you, but your moment of fear quickly became excitement. “Alright, just a dusting then we’re off?”

“Not quite.” Jane said as Tinkerbell began giving you a dust shower. “It’s takes a little more than that.”

You sneezed, “Like what?”

She twisted through the air like a torpedo, “All you need is a little faith, trust, and of course,” Tinkerbell gave her a high five, “pixie dust!”

“Is that all?” You looked down at your now glitter covered clothes. With a deep breath, you tried to concentrate on flying, and for a moment, nothing, not even an inch.

Then, there was a sensation of free fall, you opened your eyes and only saw paint on water, vivid and beautiful and terrifying, until a pair of arms wrapped around your waist.

“C’mon, ---. You can trust me, I promise. I won’t let you fall.”

“Never?”
“Never ever.”

You opened your eyes, and you were hovering a foot off the ground.

“See?” The voice laughed, “Never ever.”

A burst of laughter bubbled over as you carefully turned through the air. Tinkerbell cheered at your side, bells chiming from her.

After the spell was over, Jane rushed to the exit, “C’mon! We have to save Peter!”

“I’m right behind you.” You said, with Tink by her ear.

You both dived above the trees and the pirate ship was in plain sight. The sky had turned heavy and dark while you had been in the tree house, and a sour wind blew through the island. Keeping low towards the leaves, your small band sped like a bullet towards it.

Jane drifted to your side, “I say we take them by surprise!”

You scanned the nearing horizon. “Then we better get close to the water.”

The three of you took a wide turn towards starboard, getting cozy with the salt water as it sprayed onto your clothes. You guided them towards the ship, almost hugging the wood as the pirates above cackled and hollered.

Carefully, you all peeked over the edge at the scene. A group of children in animal skins were tied tight to the mast. A redhead boy was strapped to an anchor, kept at the very edge of the plank by swords’ edge.

“Peter!” Jane gasped, then flew towards the sails, ignoring your hissing. She swung onto the ropes, scowling at the villains below, “Not so fast, you old codfish! Or you’ll have to answer to me.”

It went about as well as you would expect. The boys were cheering for their savior with surprise and delirious delight, the pirates however…

“Good heavens!” The man you could only guess was Captain Hook cried theatrically, “Run! Run for your lives, it’s…” Then he grinned with a bat of his eyelashes, “a little girl.”

And they all laughed in her face. You hadn’t even realized Tink had joined her until a round guy added, “Oh, and look Cap’n, a fairy too!”

Then, it was your turn to appear at Janes side, stars in hand and a cold snarl on your face. “And me.”

They all quickly grew silent, the bloodlust you managed to call on at will thick in the air. They all took a collective gulp.

Then, all merry hell broke loose.
You watched Jane say goodbye to her friends from above. The Lost Boys hugged her, and told her how much they’d miss her.

“And I’ll miss you.” She admitted with a smile, “All of you.” She picked up the smallest one, “But they’re someone back home who needs me. And besides, now I’ve got great stories to tell him. And they’ll all be about Peter Pan, and the Lost Boys!”

You chuckled along with their cheers.

Peter swooped to her with a bow, “In that case, Mademoiselle, it would be my pleasure to escort you back to London.”

“The pleasure will be all mine, good sir!” Then she bodied him towards the ocean, he only managed to save himself by a hair.

Tink circled around her, and Jane said, “Well, it’s a long way home, give me your best shot, Tink!”

And she gladly did so, spiraling over them with her pixie dust raining down, and Jane and the Lost Boys had lift off. After them, it was your turn, and when she was done, Tinkerbell nuzzled your nose.

“Astra!” Jane laughed, “We have room for one more!”

“Oh, I guess,” You rolled your eyes, then gave them a wink, “I suppose I can watch over you rowdy kids on the way home.”

“As if!” Peter snuck behind you and flipped your hood over your head.

But your reflexes were faster, and you grabbed him by the arm before pinning him against you for a noogie. “Last one there’s a rotten egg!” You hollered, letting the kids get a head start before
flying after them.

When Jane was safely home, you and Peter flew to the bell tower.

“This is where I said goodbye to some friends of mine a while back.” He said, playing tightrope on thin air. Melancholy was a strange look on him, but it was genuine, “I wonder how much he’s grown since I last saw him. Maybe he’s like Wendy now.”

“Everyone grows up.” You replied, standing on the platform, looking out over the city.

“No me.” He scoffed, “I’m never gonna grow up. Not me. Never.”

You chuckled slightly, “And why’s that?”

And… that somehow caught him off guard. This thought must’ve gone through his head before. By the math, he would be older than Wendy, older than you. He must’ve been so very old, but how come he chose to never grow up?

“It’s fun.” He finally said, “I don’t need school, or jobs, or responsibilities, or any of that stuff.”

And he said this with such certainty, it almost convinced you. “Why should I grow up when I can stay a kid and play all day? Why should I grow up if it means I have to give up everything I have? I never want to change.”

A sense of déjà vu so strong nearly made you stumble straight off the tower. For a moment, all you saw was paint on water, “Everything changes.” You eventually said.

“I’m not!”

“But you did.” You said, “You and Jane weren’t friends at first, right? And that changed.”

He blinked several times, dropping a few inches in the night air.

You took a deep breath, staring up at the stars in the clear sky. “Growing up doesn’t mean you stop having fun, or playing, or having friends, or a laugh, y’know? It just means you have more than that. Yeah, parts of it aren’t fun.” You had to admit, “But parts of being a kid aren’t fun, either.”

He sniffed haughtily, turning over until he was upside down. “And what are you trying to say?”

You shrugged, “I guess what I’m trying to say is…” Along with the smell of gunfire and smoke, you could smell flowers and taste ice cream. “To live is an awfully big adventure.” You turned to him with a firm stare, “It’s gonna keep on going, whether you like it or not. It’s up to you whether you’ll go with it.”

He had slowly right sided himself as you spoke, his eyes drifting back the way you came. Back at Jane.

“She’s gonna grow up.” You said, following his line of sight. “She’s gonna be the hero of her own story. It’s up to you whether or not you want to have a bigger part in it.”

He turned his face away, something shifting in his eyes, a something a little heavier, a something a little older. He made no answer, and he wouldn’t tonight. But maybe he would, and maybe it’ll be on time.

You let the silence settle, your gaze turning to the stars above you once more. The two largest stars were bright that night, the second star to the right was Neverland. But she had a name to you. And
the one beside her did, too.

Your arms wrapped around yourself as you thought back on your friend. This wasn’t the first time you’d seen him past his home, and it wouldn’t be the last. No matter where you went, every world had the same sky. Every world had it’s wishing star.

“Whenva’ you feel like the hurt from the missin’ get’s too painful, you remember ol’ Ray.”

_I have a wish, if you’d make it true. You thought, your eyes falling back to the city. Please._

Then, the star grew brighter. And brighter. It asked, no, demanded your attention, and you gave it to her in awe.

“Evangeline?”

She burned so bright she was all there was, then you felt something rise within, warm and familiar, and powerful. Paint on water, so crisp, you were so close to the waters’ surface. You heard laughter, and saw people, figures, standing against Evangeline’s light.

“Okaaay, ---!” That voice shouted, so distant but so real. “Hide and seeks’ over! We’re ready! Come out now!”

“---!”

You took a sharp breath, and you were back on the clocktower, openly weeping and smiling so hard your cheeks hurt. You were at the towers’ edge, and you threw your hands into the air before letting yourself fall with a whoop.

Laughter flew from your lips as you shot back up, higher than the clocktower, high above the ground. Maybe it was the pixie dust, maybe it was the beautiful and scary elation flooding through you. The knowing. The wonderful feeling of something exciting beginning just a few minutes from now, something you had waited for forever for.

Peter and Tink watched your spiral with slow grins before you came to stop before them. “Astra?” Peter asked, a little uncomfortable, “Are you okay? You’re crying.”

You couldn’t stop if you tried. “I’m going home.” You finally said, “I have someone I need to see.”

He drooped slightly, “Oh. You too?”

“Don’t be sad.” You told him, taking his shoulders, “This is a good thing.”

Tinkerbell circled above you before peering at your face curiously. Then, she blinked, like that was all she needed for her to understand. She beamed and swirled above you once more, peeling in giddy laughter for you.

Peter stared, at a complete loss. “What is it?”

You shook your head. “I don’t know yet. It’s going to be a surprise for me, too.”

Then, you floated away, giving them one last farewell, before flying towards Evangeline and summoning a portal.

Mama Odie was right. You knew. It was finally, finally time.
GUESS THE PICS ON THIS CHAPTER TOOK SO DAMN LONG I ENDED UP WRITING THE ENTIRE NEXT CHAPTER BEFORE THIS WAS EVEN PUBLISHED

in any case, im sorry there's only four pics for neverland, I might publish the missing one later. I just wanted this chapter out so bad. And, as an apology for the wait, I'm publishing the next chapter real soon.

Thank you all for your patience!! Love yall
Chapter Summary

Wherever you may go, he would find you. He promised.
Wherever he may be, you would find him. You promised.

Chapter Notes

Thank you my awesome beta for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lea walked ahead of you in a secret grove behind the fountains, overgrown with flowers and vines. Broken bits of concrete made stepping stones through the shallow, moving stream. It had long been made your own; yours, Lea’s, and Isa’s. There were old books and blankets kept safe in bags on the mossy, craggy shore. Old lamps, ranging from electric to oil, hung anywhere you could reach; from low ceilings to sturdy vines.

He stepped from stone to stone, hands held out beside him with you just behind. Fireflies blinked in and out, emerging from a giant hole in the wall where the night sky bloomed.

“- and then he said,” He rumbled low in his throat, “‘Yeah? And how are you gonna do that?’” He threw you a grin over his shoulder, “Remember, he’s got his foot stuck in the toilet and there’s three other guys plus me just standing outside the stall.”

You snickered, hopping closer, “I remember. I also remember the teachers scrambling towards the boy’s bathroom and the second floor flooding so bad the seniors were trying to throw a pool party during third period.”

“What can I say?” He spun on one foot, just to give you a wink, then finished his circuit and continued, “I make things interesting!”

“You attract trouble, you mean.” You jabbed.

He held his heart as if to swoon, then blindsided you with, “What does that make you then?”

Pretending your cheeks weren’t hot, you shot back, “A very special kind of trouble.”

He chuckled, and said so quietly you almost missed it, “You got that right.”

You both walked along in silence for a moment, listening to the cicadas creak outside. Lea, as it often is, broke it.

“Hey, Y/N.”

“Yeah?”
“Run away with me.”

You paused, giving his back a look, “Why?”

“Why not?” He waited for you to catch up, now watching you from the side. “Let’s do it. Grab our bags, and go somewhere.”

You sighed with a smile, “And where would we go?”

“Anywhere.” He grinned, “ Doesn’t matter where, so long as…” He swallowed, “ so long as you’re there.”

Ignoring the thumping of your heart, you rolled your eyes dramatically, “We’re not going to leave Isa behind, are we?”

“Course not!” He scoffed, “Duh. Even if we have to drag him by his sweatpants.”

Always the topic of debate, Isa’s terrible, terrible taste in fashion. Laughter rolled out of you like thunder on a summer storm, “Okay.”

He glanced at you with wide eyes, “Okay?”

“Yeah.” You took another step, with him right behind, “I’ll run away with you. Besides, it doesn’t really matter,” You danced a few steps forward, taking the lead, “I’m home, as long as I’m with you.”

He fell a step short, and you turned to smile at him in the dim orange light of those old lamps with the sky at your back.

“Got it memorized?”

Lea’s heart stilled, it hurt, even, but in the best way possible.

When you offered your hand, he took it without hesitation. He let you lead him onward, almost dancing atop the water, painted and beautiful. Everything felt more vibrant, more alive, the moment he realized he had long been so in love with you.

You walked the Dark Corridors, following the sound of childlike laughter that echoed off the walls. The race of your heart did not let up, not for a second. You ran the entire way there, you couldn’t wait another second, you had waited far too long already.

The laughter grew louder, and louder, until it was bubbling right in front of you, out of the swirling corridor. You were here. He was here. It was here, this world right in front of you, where you’d find him. Finally.

You jumped through it and stumbled to a stop. Your face fell slightly as you took in your surroundings. You were in Radiant Garden – Wait, you were where?

Radiant Garden, you breathed, staring at the wall covered in flowers, the one you and Yuffie painted almost a year ago. It had chipped in places and was worn away in others. Your fingers brushed against a red petal as you blinked in wonder.

This place wasn’t Hollow Bastion, it never was, but how did you know that? Where had this
memory come from?

“Hollow Bastion wasn’t always it’s name...” Aerith’s voice echoed, “Before that, the world was beautiful. There were endless fields of flowers everywhere, parks and forests, and so many fountains.” You walked along the wall, feeling the concrete under your hand, “Of course, I doubt it was perfect,” Slowly, you came to a stop, staring at the painted dawn, “but it was home.”

Home?

That same song eased back into your mind. Had it been there the whole time? Filling in the silence between the wonder and the laughter?

You stepped back far enough that only the tips of your fingers touched the memory of the past. You took a deep breath and sang in harmony with the notes in your mind. No words, those were still out of reach, but it tasted so familiar on your tongue. An aria of something warm, something very, very close.

Lea was Lea again.

Everything he had been told about Kingdom Hearts had been a lie, hadn’t it? Of course it was. It was all for nothing. Roxas died for nothing. Isa lost for nothing.

He tried not to dwell on the bitterness. He had felt it near the end of his rotten stint as a Nobody, but now it was full and fresh and god awful. Overwhelming, even. It was all overwhelming, though he took care to keep it from showing. No one needed to doubt him more than they already were. Not if he was going to prove himself as a keyblade wielder and break that gross, awful, veiny old man’s ribs in for killing his friends, destroying his home, and ruining his life.

He stood outside Merlin’s house with folded arms and sighed. Figures. He finally get’s his heart back and he’s just bitter. Bitter and angry. So goddamn angry. And... sad. Really, really sad. And lonely. And afraid. And –

His eyes shut tight against the onslaught. A shaky breath stumbled over his lips. It was getting easier, he was getting used to having emotions again, but for the moment, it took him several moments to keep himself in check. He’d already had two panic attacks in the past week alone, he didn’t need another one.

Not when Kairi was around. Not when he needed to make up for what he’d done. He couldn’t count how many times he had quietly apologized to her in the past two days since they’d been paired for training. She was still uncomfortable, he could tell, and he didn’t blame her one bit. He had terrorized her, and now that he could, he felt real terrible for that.

He felt real terrible for a lot of things, now. A lot, a lot of things. But it’s not like he can just go back to the past and try to fix things, even though that evil, greasy fuck apparently can.

Lea really, really hated Xehanort.

Lea also really, really needed to stop ruminating.

His back hit the brick wall behind him as he stared at the cobblestone street. It was looking more and more like it did, once. Leon and the squad had done a good job. Speaking of scarface, he hadn’t thought he’d run into him again, or Aerith. Needless to say, they were both quite surprised
by his return, but when they asked about you, that quickly turned into sour disappointment.

_Aw, fuck._ He shut his eyes and threw an arm over his face. Feelings towards you were the heaviest. It was a close tie between you and Roxas; which death did he regret more?

Footsteps approached him quietly, and he immediately knew who it was.

“Lea?”

Opening his eyes and lowering his arm, he saw Kairi standing at the corner, watching him with cautious eyes. They weren’t steely cold, like they were before. That made him feel a little better. “Yeah?”

A small fold fit between her brows as she considered the situation, “Are you… feeling okay?”

“Sure, I’m fine.” He lied easily, leaning off the wall. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.” She said, folding her arms behind her back, still eyeing him. “I just wanted some fresh air.”

He nodded, looking away, “Yeah, same here. Get’s crowded in there fast.” He chuckled, “Especially when Merlin starts making the chairs dance.”

That got a small giggle out of her, “He knocked Cid on the head with a teapot before I stepped out.”

He grinned against his laughter, “Did the teapot survive Cid’s hard head?”

“Only barely.”

Then, it settled into silence. It wasn’t comfortable, not yet, but maybe it’d get there. But for now, they just tried to enjoy the sunshine while it lasted.

After a few minutes, Kairi perked up.

“What?” Lea asked, watching her look down the road.

“I hear singing.” She replied, then smiled gently. “It’s beautiful.”

Now that he was aware of it, he heard it, too. He hummed in agreement, then as the tune continued on, his entire body went numb.

Kairi’s wonder, “I wonder where it’s coming from.” was nearly drowned out by the familiar song. There weren’t any words, but he would know it anywhere. Those notes – It was their part –

He stepped into the middle of the road, listening intently as his heart began to race. No one else would know that song, Isa didn’t even know. It was their song, only theirs’!

A hand touched his elbow, startling him out of the spell. “Lea, what is it?” Kairi asked, eyes flicking around them as if expecting an attack.

“I know that song.” He breathed impatiently, “Quiet.”

And she did, though not obediently. The song was rising in tone, as if calling out for someone, and finally pinpointed the direction it was coming from. Without another moment wasted, he ran as fast as he could.
Heart in his throat, he knew it was foolish to get his hopes up, but despite all of his reservations his feet kept running. There was no stopping him now, not until he knew for sure.

The song took him into an alley, and on that alley wall were painted flowers against the dawn. In that alley was someone he knew. You had your back turned to him, but he said your name. For a moment, it was like you hadn’t heard, but when he said it again, you turned. And his breath was gone, water rushed in his ears.

“Y/N.”

The song was coming to an end, the melody softly closing along with your lips. You ignored the sound of racing footsteps as you smiled at the mural. At the reflection of the paint on the water.

Someone called for someone nearby, they must’ve been in the alleyway. Something about that name made something itch at the base of your skull, borderline uncomfortable. Nobody answered them, and they said it again, and now that you heard the voice again you swore it was – but it couldn’t be –

You turned around and saw a tall man at the mouth of the alley. He was lithe and strong in a familiar way, but not as familiar as his thick red hair and green eyes. You had never met Axel face to face like this before, but seeing him now made your heart thump in your chest in a way that made you blush.

A disbelieving smile slowly lit up his entire person, “Y/N.” He whispered again.

Well, now you were just confused. He was saying someone else’s name and looking at you.

“Axel?” You asked, eyeing him again, “You’re Axel, right?”

Well, now he was confused, too. He nodded slowly, his smile slipping off his face in shame. “You – How do you know that?”

“Red hair.” You pointed at his head, then at his body, “Black coat. You’re a part of Organization Thirteen.”

His cheeks flushed, his head bowed, “Not anymore. I’m back!” He straightened again and stepped towards you with a hopeful smile, “It’s me, I’m a person again. I don’t – “ He shook his head, “I have no idea how you know about that, but – “

You stepped back, now just a little weirded out. “What do you mean? You’re not a Nobody anymore?”

His face fell again. Footsteps announced the arrival of a redheaded girl as she appeared behind Axel. She blinked at you, then back at him. “Lea?” She whispered.

He shook his head, fighting against the deep need to run into your arms, “Y/N, I don’t know what you heard, but I won’t hurt you. I would never hurt you, ever.” He pleaded. “Please, believe me.”

“I don’t – “ Then you paused, staring at him a little harder. For a moment, his person rippled, like paint on water, “Who are you?”

Pure shock and disbelief flooded him, heartbreak free on his face. “I’m – It’s me, Lea!” He said,
his hands clutching his chest, “Y/N, don’t you…?” A tear rolled down his cheek, “Don’t you remember me?”

A sharp breath stole into your lungs, “Oh my god.” Your hands pressed against your mouth. _It’s him? It’s him? It’s him?_ Your mind reeled, and you scrambled to find a foothold, “Axel – I don’t – no!” You sputtered, apologies in every syllable spoken, “My memory – it’s gone, but I – I think…” You stared into his eyes, like green stems, “I think you’re the one I’ve been looking for.

“I mean,” You tried to explain. Now that he was here, what could you say? How were you going to explain to him everything that’s happened? “I’m so sorry.” You fought the tears in your eyes, “I’m so sorry, I don’t remember anything.”

Lea was crushed. You were here, you were finally here, but it was his worst nightmare. You didn’t remember him. First Roxas, and now you. He never wanted to be forgotten, but he never thought he’d be forgotten by you.

His knees felt weak under his weight as he stared at you, tears slipping down his face. How could this happen? Why did this have to happen? And why did it have to be you? Why did it have to be him? Why did this keep happening?

Why was it never ending?

He thought nothing as Kairi stepped past him, towards you. She stared into your face, your hands still pressed against your mouth. Then, she smiled slightly.

“Give me your hand.” She requested, “I think I can help.”

Staring at her outstretched hand, you found you had no other options. You put your hand palm up in hers and let yourself be guided towards Axel.

“Now, you.” She said, or perhaps politely demanded.

He stared emptily at her palm, then slowly put his hand in hers. She immediately placed his hand in yours and said, “Close your eyes. Trust me.”

You stared at him. He stared at you. You closed your eyes. After a moment, so did he.

When you opened your eyes, you were in total darkness, and Axel stood with you. Then, something strange and miraculous happened. You both faded, and found yourselves replaced.

Lea, sixteen years old, gaped at you. There he was, the puzzle piece you had been searching for. Something deep within you clicked back into place, the smell of flowers and the taste of ice cream so sweet and strong to your senses washed over you both.

Memories returned like waves on the sand, calm and powerful, filling up the gaps you had been carrying for so long. So much you had lost, but bit by bit, they happily returned to you. _He_ had returned to you.

The memories of him were bright and precious. You remembered now why you had missed him so badly. You remembered now why you had loved him for so long. You remembered now why he was your best friend and love of your life.

You glanced down at yourself and found familiar clothes. You pressed your nose to your shoulder and smelled the detergent you had used when you were a child. This jacket was something you wore on windy days sailing kites, what you wore when you were struggling over homework in the
library with your two best friends, what you wore when you sat at your usual spot watching the sun set and eating ice cream.

Your childhood memories were back. Your childhood self was back.

Tears overflowed onto your cheeks and you wept, “Lea.”

“Y/N.” He sobbed with a smile before you both pulled each other into a desperate hug. Your knees hit the ground with the force of it, but it didn’t matter as you buried yourself into his shoulder and breathed him in.

“You were here all along.” You hiccupped, arms tight around his neck.

He cried, pressing his face into your hair, “I would never leave you alone.”

You opened your eyes and found yourself in the alley, on your knees, with Lea in your arms. “Thank you.” You whispered against his neck. “Thank you.”

“Thank you.” He breathed back, pressing you as close to him as possible.

Kairi backed away with a bright smile, “I’ll see you guys later.” Then, she went back the way she came, giving you both the privacy you needed.

For a long time, neither of you moved, rocking back and forth. There was only the elation and bittersweet joy that you had been reunited, finally. Finally. Finally.

You pulled away and cupped his cheeks, pushed his hair out of his face and took a deep breath. He aged beautifully, you had never seen a man so gorgeous. Maybe it was the love talking, but probably not. You couldn’t get enough. “I missed you so much.” You took his shoulders, “Even when I forgot, I never stopped missing you.”

“I missed you, too.” He chuckled wetly, this whole scene catching him by surprise. “God, I missed you so much.”

“I looked for you everywhere.”

“I looked for you for so long.”

The absurdity of it made you laugh, “You would think we would’ve run into each other a few times – “ Then your mouth fell open, “We did.”

His eyes went wide, then realization hit him like a freight train, “It was you! You were the one who talked to me on the – “ His hand hit his forehead, “I’m a goddamn idiot.”

“I didn’t recognize you either!” You laughed.

“You had amnesia!” He groaned, biting back his smile, “I’ve got no excuse.” Then he went bug eyed again and this time he hid his face in both of his hands. “You’re Astra.”

“I’m Astra.” You agreed, then it was your turn to groan, “Oh, no, Roxas – He wanted us to – “ You pinched your brow, “This could’ve been solved so long ago.”

“I know!” He cried, then bubbled into manic laughter.

You were helpless to follow suit, and you leaned into each other’s shoulders. Holding onto one another, rocking slowly. “I love you so much.” You sighed.
He held onto you a little tighter, “I know.”

But the happiness couldn’t last on it’s own for long. Now that you knew, you had to ask. “Lea?”

“Yeah?” He hummed against your jacket.

“Where’s Isa?”

This was not a question he wanted asked. He went still for several moments before pulling away, eyes on his lap. “He’s…” He bit his lip, unable to look you in the eyes. “he’s gone.”

Your heart hit your stomach, “What?”

“It’s a long story.” He took your hands and finally met your gaze, “And I’ll explain it; I’ll tell you everything, but just…” His chin dipped against his collarbone, “I can’t. Not right now. I’m sorry.”

You rubbed your thumb across the back of his hand, feeling several new, unfamiliar scars marred across his skin. It was a reminder that while you had been missing for several years, he had been living them. Time is not always kind.

“Alright.” You whispered, despite the concern for the person who you’d once called your brother, you agreed. With a sigh, you tucked a displaced lock of hair behind his ear, “C’mon, let’s go.”

“So, where am I dropping you off?” Lea asked, walking beside you on the street. He tried not to stare at you, but he couldn’t look at you enough. Had to make up for lost time.

You noticed, of course, but you were doing the same thing so you let it slide. “It’s a little house, you probably won’t know where it is. How about I lead, and you pretend you dropped me off.”

He harrumphed dramatically, “If that’s the way it is, you should be the one walking me home.”

Okay,” You agreed quickly, and it threw him off just as it always did. “Where to?”

He gulped and coughed into his fist. “Guess it’s gonna be a surprise. I’ll lead.”

It took you about two streets to realize that you were heading towards Merlin’s house. At least you wouldn’t get lost on the way back. You didn’t think much of it, focusing on your conversation with Lea, until he brought you right to the doorstep.

“Welp, this is my stop.” He sighed, then brightened, “You know your old babysitters? They live here, and they’d love to see you!”

“I know.” You deadpanned, “I live here.”

Awesome, then let’s – “ He chocked on air, “You what?”

You pointed at the door, still staring at him. “I live here. I’m adopted now.” Then, the weight of your words finally hit you, “Oh my god, they’re gonna flip their lids.”


“Ever since I became a keyblade wielder.” He said, his thumb jutted towards the window with a smirk, “Now Kairi and I are getting taught by Merlin.”
“You’re a what? How?”
“I asked nicely.”
“Show me.”
“Hmm?”
You rolled your eyes, “Show me, please.”

With a charming grin, he flipped his hand out and licks of flame bloomed around his hand, but what appeared was not a keyblade. Lea cursed quietly, glaring at the very, very, very familiar chakram in his hand. You made a noise at the back of your throat and he turned his frowning face at you.

“What?”

“It was you!” You shouted, then immediately cackled with your hand pressed to your forehead, “You’re the motherfucker who burnt me and almost broke my arms! You’re No Crotch!”

He cocked his head at you, then his jaw dropped, “That was you?” Then he gasped, his chakram fell out of his hand and dissolved into flame. He was on you in a second, holding your arms, frantically looking them over, even going so far to pull off your glove and check your palms for burns. “I’m so sorry,” He whispered, “I’m so sorry, if I knew it was you – I would’ve never –”

“What in the goddamn is goin’ on out here?”

The door swung open, revealing Cid standing in the doorway. His eyes went to you, then to Lea, then to Lea ripping your gloves off your hands and pushing up your sleeves. His nostrils flared and his eyes could burn a hole right into Lea’s forehead.

You grinned, waving with Lea’s hand still hanging on your wrist. “Hi, Dad.”

And he always melted when you called him that. He glared at the two of you, “I don’t know what’s goin’ on, but if you two don’t get your asses in here, Red’s sleeping outside.”

“Okay.” You made to follow, but Lea was standing with your wrist in his hand and wasn’t moving.

He held you gently, his eyes on the bracelet around your wrist. Tracing the stitching and the beads with a soft, breath-taken expression. Without a word, he lifted his head and smiled.

When he let you go, he swept his hands towards the door, “After you.”

“What a gentleman.” You stepped into the home and he followed behind. Under your breath, you sang your song,

“I knew, from then on, that I’d love you, and love you, and love you again and again.” His body was warm by you elbow, he smelled like home, “You’re my best friend.”

Everyone beamed when they saw you home. Cid soon swooped an arm around your shoulders and hugged you, kissing the crown of your head. “Love you, kid.”

You hugged him back, happily pressing your cheek into his chest. “I love you, too.”

Merlin was next, ho-hoing and dusting off your clothes, “It’s good to see you again, my dear. How have you been doing?”
You grinned at Lea, “Really, really great actually.”

Then, Aerith and Leon walked from the kitchen and saw you. Seeing them now, your heart swooped. They had been like your siblings for far longer than you thought.

“Guys!” You ran to them and hugged them both around the waist.

Leon stared at you, then rolled his eyes while patting your head, “It’s good to see you, too.”

Aerith smacked a kiss on your forehead, “Welcome back!”

You practically bounced when you let them go, “Guys!” You cheered, “Guys! Guess what!”

Lea chuckled, then cleared his throat. With a sweep of his arms, he revealed, “Ta-da!” Then, to Aerith and Leon, “I brought someone back home.”

“It’s me!” You laughed, grabbing their hands, “It’s me! It’s Y/N!”


“It’s been me all this time!” You turned to the entire room, “I got my memories back!” You grabbed Lea’s hand and raised it in the air, “It’s Lea! And – “

That’s when you saw the redheaded girl again, but you recoiled. For a second, you thought she was Naminé. It was like when you saw Sora for the first time, and you had to wonder, but not right now. “Uh, what’s your name?” You asked her.

She stepped forward with a smile, “I’m Kairi. I’m glad I could help.”


Then, Leon grabbed your shoulders and turned you back to him, despite your hand still in Lea’s. He studied your face, with Aerith right over his shoulder. “Y/N?”

You nodded, “I’m still really sorry about the kitchen. I think I still owe you those five bucks for not telling anyone.”

Aerith gasped, “Y/N!” then threw her arms around your neck, “I’ve missed you!”

“I missed you, too!” You laughed, hugging her back. A familiar hand mussed your hair, you had to peek through your bangs to see a wet-eyed Leon.

“It’s good to have you back.”

Then, the door opened, and in came Yuffie, carrying bags of sweets. She paused at the doorframe, “What did I miss?”

You laughed first, then grabbed her around the middle and held in the air.

“HEY!” She yelled, still holding the bags, “No fair, Astra!”

“It’s Y/N.” You laughed.

She went blank, “Huh?”

“My name.” You explained, “It’s Y/N.”
“Since when – “ Then she stared, “NO WAY!”

“Yes way!”

“Your memories?”

“Yeah!”

She whooped, wiggling out of your hands and landing on you for a monkey hug. “YEAH! ABOUT TIME!”

You spun her around, “I know!”

Again, she writhed out of your arms, “How? When?”


“That’s him?”

Lea put his hands on his hips, “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

She stuck her tongue out with an exaggerated look of disgust, “Did it have to be him?”

“Be nice.” You rolled your eyes.

They both put their hands on their hips and frowned at you, “I am nice!”

Cid could only stare, then clapped you on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

Instead of having a final dinner, you had a first dinner. Lea sat at your elbow, and the ones who took you in all around you. For the first time, everything felt right. For the first time, you felt at peace.

A warm hand slipped into yours, Lea’s voice whispered, “Everything okay?”

You squeezed his fingers, letting the tears roll freely down your face. “Everything is wonderful.”

That night, you went to bed, tucked in to your chin. It was the first time you were away from Lea since you met him, and you didn’t like it one bit. With a groan, you slipped out of bed and threw open the door and nearly jumped out of your skin.

Lea stood there with one hand ready to knock, in a slim fitting shirt and sweatpants. He blinked, you blinked, then you took his hand and pulled him inside.

The door shut softly behind you as you both made yourselves comfortable. Perhaps you both were a little too old for sleep overs, but that didn’t stop you, not even the small bed. You were nearly on top of each other when you both stilled, turned to one another with barely an inch between your bodies.

You took a deep breath and sighed in content, grabbing a fistful of his shirt to ground you, to ground him. To remind you this was not a dream.

He chuckled, hand covering your own. “Comfy?”
“Very.” You hummed, nestling further into your pillow. The night time breeze flew against the curtains, revealing the clear sky and all it’s stars. “I’m so happy.”

His thumb rubbed against your knuckles, “Me too.” He whispered. “I can’t begin to tell you how much I…” He sighed, curling further around you, almost burying his face in your hair. “I’ve missed you. And I’m sorry.”

You lifted your face, felt his chin against your hair, “What do you mean?”

“For a lot of things.” He replied, his palm pressed against the back of your hand. “For letting you go, for one.”

It took you a moment to remember, and you shuddered when you did. “That wasn’t your fault.”

He scoffed, “That wasn’t the only time I did.” He went quiet for a few minutes, though it felt much longer. “I gave up.” He shifted again, almost creating a crescent around you. His voice dripped heavy remorse. “I gave up on ever seeing you again. I stopped looking.”

“It was eleven years.” You reminded him.

“And I should’ve been ready to look for you for a hundred.” His lips were pressed against your hair, not quite kissing, “You obviously were.”

You sighed, kneading the fabric of his shirt. “I already forgive you, Lea.”

He huffed again, softer than before. “Thanks, but let me make it up to you anyway, okay?”

You grinned, “How?”

His chest vibrated with his short laughter. He let go of your hand and wrapped it around your back, letting the last of the space between you disappear. “By letting me stay with you.” Then, with gravitas, “I’ll be your personal bodyguard!”

“Like I need one.” You pinched him, making him giggle with your cheek against his chest. It took you a little too long to realize something obvious. “Lea?”

“Hm?”

“Where’d your chest go?”

He barked a laugh, leaning back enough to guide your hand to breast-less chest. “The wonders of modern medicine.” Then, he inched his shirt up, and you swore he was doing it slow on purpose, the minx. The scars under his nipples were pink, still healing. “I got this done just a few days ago, actually.”

“And you’re up and walking?” You blurted, trying to ignore how much he had… matured. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

“Still stings a bit.” He rolled his shirt back down, “But I ain’t got time to be sitting around. Mega-Potions and Aerith are godsend.” Then, he curled back around you like a cat, “I’m just happy it’s done. No more binders.”

You tucked yourself against his chest and listened to his heartbeat, “Why’d you wait?”

His shoulders rolled, you could feel it through his shirt, and again he didn’t answer for a time. “I wanted to be human.”
That had almost slipped your mind in the wake of… everything else that happened. “When did it happen?”

“About a week ago? Just… woke up in the castle lab with everyone else; Ienzo, Dilan, Aeleus. All of us were human again.”

“Woah,” You reeled, “They were Nobodies, too?”

“Oh yeah.” He said, “Me, Ienzo, Dilan, Aeleus, Even, Briag…” His tone soured, “Xehanort, and Isa.”

“Oh, god,” You grimaced, “I hadn’t thought of that guy since…”

“He was our boss.” He muttered, “Leader of the Nobodies, blah, blah, blah. Fuckhead.”

“Grayscalp.”

“Manager FatHead.”

“Hurr durr durr,” you mocked, “I have a deep voice and woke up five minutes ago but I know more than Master Ansem learned in the fifty years he’s been a scientist so fuck you and your rules, I’m gonna make a torture dungeon.”

He huffed a laugh against your hair, squeezing you around the middle, “I missed you.”

You felt your grin fall, “Lea… What about Isa?”

He went stiff, just like before. “I don’t know.” He muttered, “We – We had a falling out, and now he’s possessed or something, but it was his choice and – “ His hands balled into fists against your back, “Fuck.”

You leaned away, fear and confusion bubbling in your gut, “What do you mean? What happened to Isa?”

He sighed deeply, pulling away from you, his head dipping in shame.

“Lea?”

He shook his head, “I’m afraid… I’m afraid you won’t like me if I told you. It’s not – We did fucked up things, Y/N. We hurt people, I – I killed people. And I – “ He curled into himself, creeping further and further away from you, “I don’t want you to hate me.”

You took his hand, now on your shoulder instead of your back, and pressed it to your cheek, “Lea, I could never hate you.” You told him firmly, “You obviously feel terrible about whatever it is you did, so that has to count for something, right?”

He could barely look you in the eye, “Y/N…”

With loving care, you took both of his hands in yours and held them between the two of you. “Whatever it is you need to tell me, don’t be afraid. I’m going to listen.”

Green eyes reflected the moon out the window as he stared at you with open wonder. A blush crept up his neck and ears and he swiftly turned his face away. You’ve gotta stop looking at me like that, or I’m gonna get my hopes up. “Alright.” He whispered, “I’ll tell you.”

The night sky turned as you talked the night away. Very little was happy, much of it was sad, more
of it was horrifying. Organization Thirteen, the deeds they had done, the blood and dirt Lea had on
his hands. There was a war on the brink, one that could destroy everything as you knew it, and the
love of your life was on the frontlines, and your brother was on the other side. He told you
everything.

Despite having strange and terrible dreams, when you woke up with Lea wrapped around you with
his head on your chest, right above your heart, you couldn’t bring yourself to care. You brushed his
bedhead out of his face, felt the rise and fall of his chest, listened to his deep breaths. If your time
together was going to be limited, you weren’t going to waste it.

You snuggled further into the blankets and held him close, then went back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

IT FINALLY HAPPENED
HOWEVER this is not the end, still more to come guys!
Thank you so much for reading!
Xemnas stood before something he had not expected. The form was familiar, but somehow not. Like a crack through a mirror’s reflection.

*How strange.* He thought, staring down his nose at this… Nobody. *Something has gone wrong. This cannot be.*

The child’s eyes stared blankly ahead, either unable to see or unable to recognize his presence. Then, the figure pulsed, wisps of black and white curling above them like smoke. For a moment, they were replaced with writhing white, before they returned to themself.

“Can you hear me?” He asked.

No response.

“Can you see me?”

Again, no response.

A low noise murmured in the back of his throat. If he was capable of such, this would displease him greatly. This child was key in his plot, and yet this pawn had been taken off the board before the game had even started.

*How did this happen?*

He lurked towards them silently, inspecting them closer, but the answer did not lay on the surface. This demanded further investigation. However, when he reached for them, their hand whipped out in a flash and grabbed him around the wrist, stilling his hand.

He hummed, “So, there is something there.” Then, he drew back his other hand and punched them in the ribs.

A sickening *crack* echoed off the trees as their ribs crumpled under the force. Their eyes rolled into the back of their head as they went limp. Xemnas caught them around the middle and lifted them like a sack of potatoes. A portal whirred to life, and with a dark look in his eyes, the master of all the Nobodies exited into the corridors of darkness.
Lea woke up in a warm pair of arms, a strong heartbeat pumping under his ear. It was the song he fell asleep to, the lullaby he already adored so. A feeling he barely recognized churned in his heart; contentment, happiness even.

If he could bury himself in you until the lines blurred, he would’ve, but he was okay with simply wrapping his arms around you with a gratified sigh.

Fingers carded through his hair, causing him to blink.

“Comfy?”

He smiled into your chest, “Very.”

With your fingers slowly petting him, he found his eyes slipping shut again. God, what he wouldn’t do to stay right there for the rest of the day. But, there were things to do. Very important things to do; as in the worlds hang in the balance.

Plus, the smell of sausage and waffles were drifting through the house. His stomach rumbled hungrily, soon echoed by your own’s.

“Ugh.” He grunted, pushing himself up on his elbows, taking a second just to look at you. The morning sunlight drifted lazily through the open curtains, followed by the fresh scent of a new day. If he had to compare, you were more beautiful. Yes, even with your bedhead and eye crust.

I am so fucked. He beamed, “Morning, sunshine.”

“G’morning.” You grinned back, wiping your eyes with the back of your hand. “You got some drool.”

He felt himself flush in embarrassment before wiping his mouth and chin, but you obviously hadn’t been bothered by it, so…

“Alright,” He sat up on his knees and stretched languidly, totally not on purpose. He had to make up for the drool somehow. “I’m starving.”

His stomach growled again, and you poked it playfully, “I can tell.”

He rolled off the bed with a sigh, then realized all his clothes were in his bag. “I gotta change. See you at breakfast.”

“Mhmm.” He heard you say as he opened the door.

At first, it seemed he was alone in the hallway, but then he turned towards the kitchen and saw none other than Cid. Cid, who was looming at the end of the unlit hall. Cid, who happened to be holding a kitchen knife. Cid, who did not seem pleased with seeing a man who was a borderline stranger just walk out of his kid’s room in his pajamas.

“Oh,” Lea tried not to sweat, “Good morning… sir.”

“Breakfast is ready.” He rumbled, his knife winking in backlit living room. “Better not let it go cold.”

“Yes, sir.” He edged towards the bathroom. “Right away, sir, just a – one – “
Then, thankfully, you stepped out of your room with a big yawn. With a crack of your sleepy eyes, you saw the tense stand-off between the two men.

“Good morning, Dad.” You grinned, flowers practically appearing behind your head. “Breakfast smells great.”

He was still glaring at Lea. “Thanks.”

Easily, you gave Lea a one-armed hug, then went towards Cid. “I think I smell something burning?”

That snapped him out of it. “Shit, the eggs.”

He watched you follow him, giving him a wink before disappearing around the corner.

*Yep. He turned on his heel, straight towards the bathroom. I’m fucked.*

Despite the murder scene that nearly transpired, breakfast was full of cozy laughter. Again, with the taste of syrup on your tongue, your everything felt so full. You were practically overflowing with happiness, if that was possible.

Even with the uncertain future on the horizon, nothing could tarnish this morning. This beautiful, wonderful morning.

You and Lea were practically joined to the hip now; wherever one went, the other wasn’t far behind. Maybe he felt the same; that he would vanish if you looked away for too long. And so, when Leon and Merlin stole them for their training, you weren’t far behind.

Merlin sat beside you on a low stone bench in a quiet courtyard with the other three warming up a ways away. He was inspecting a strange, ornate tea kettle closely. You couldn’t tell if it was actually a terrarium holding several, tiny plants, or if it was just painted with magic hoodoo voodoo. That was something you’ve long accepted that you’d have to question whenever Merlin was involved.

“What’re you doing?” You asked, keeping the others in your peripheral.

He pulled his wand out of thin air and began tapping it, “I am creating a place for our guests to train.”

You glanced at them then back, “Uh,”

“I know, I know.” He waved his wand, never looking away from his task, “But the battle comes closer with each passing day. Both Kairi and Lea are novice keyblade wielders, they need more time.” He let go of it to scratch his beard, and it floated patiently in the air, “Once I create this ‘pocket world’, they’ll be given the chance to train. I just need to make sure that the time inside moves at the precise momentum we need. Faster than our own, but not too fast.”

His every word grabbed more and more of your attention. “You mean,” you tried to keep your disappointment in check, “they’ll be in there until the battle?”

He glanced at you with a knowing twinkle in his eye, “Not entirely. They’ll need help inside, and it’s imperative that I check on them regularly to make sure this Secret Forest is stable.” He
chuckled, “It’s not like you can ask two green ears to make themselves masters without help.”

Your attention returned to them. Kairi and Lea were making repeated motions, using different stances and hand waves. “Why don’t we have someone who can wield the keyblade help them?”

“I’m afraid all of our guardians are busy.” He replied with a sigh, “Master Yen Sid has told me everything; Sora is searching for a way to wield the power of Waking so that he can awake their missing number, and the King and Riku are searching for Aqua.”

There were many things in that sentence that demanded your attention, but you decided to go down the list. “Riku?” You scoffed, “Riku is a guardian?”

“Of course!” He nodded, “Why wouldn’t he be?”

Despite feeling just a little sour, you moved on, “They’re missing guardians?”

“Precisely, the poor souls that disappeared after Xehanort’s first attempt at Kingdom Hearts. Master Aqua and the boy, Ventus. Once they join them, then we will have our Seven Guardians of Light.”

Aqua… You stewed silently, That name sounds familiar.

A flourish of light and dancing petals caught your attentions’ as Kairi’s keyblade appeared in her hands. She cheered, leaving Lea scratching his head and congratulating her.

Merlin sighed beside you, “Lea is having the most trouble. It is not easy summoning a keyblade without it being passed onto you.”

“Passed on?”

“Keyblades are often passed on from someone. It is why there are Masters and Apprentices. Sora is an outlier,” He returned to the teapot, “his keyblade was originally Riku’s, but when the boy fell to Darkness, it found its’ way to Sora’s light. A marvelous weapon.”

“And Lea…?”

He harrumphed with a rueful grin, “Stubborn determination.”

“Yup,” you nodded, “that sounds like him.”

The poor guy was starting to look constipated trying to summon the thing. Despite Kairi’s tentative encouragement, there was a vein making an appearance on his forehead.

You edged off the seat, “I’m gonna…”

“Yes,” He nodded, “please do.”

You approached the small group with a wave, “What’s up?”

Lea glanced at you, then back at his hands, muttering something under his breath. Leon’s arms were folded and his lips a thin line.

“Keyblade magic weirdness.” Leon said simply.

“It’s being stupid.” Lea translated.
You and Kairi glanced at each other with mutual frowns. “What’s the hang up?” You asked.

Kairi thought for a second, unsure of herself, “I… have an idea.” But by the way she was eyeing Lea, she obviously didn’t trust in his response.

Of course, Lea had told you what happened. “Please, share.” You coaxed, marking yourself as safe.

She glanced between the two of you before holding her keyblade aloft, “When I first got my keyblade, I was protecting Sora and Riku.” She held a hand to her heart, seeing something far away, “I was tired of being the one left behind, and all I wanted was to help them. When I summon my keyblade, I remember that feeling.” She turned to him, “Maybe that’s the trick.”

Lea stared at her for a second before staring at his hand for a long, pensive moment. “Worth a shot.” He finally admitted, then moved his arm out with his hand open. Nothing. Then he lifted his disappointed face and saw you standing right there before him. Your eyes met, unblinkingly.

He took a breath, and in a flurry of dancing flame, his fingers tightened around his keyblade.

“Hey!” You gasped, touching the spirals of glowing flame. It was warm to the touch, “You did it!”

“Yeah,” He smiled, a little subdued as he could stare at nothing but you, “Yeah.”

You didn’t see Leon and Merlin share some raised eyebrows.

Lea stepped back to appreciate his weapon. He whistled, “Thanks Kairi. That helped a lot.”

She grinned, “No problem.”

Even you had to stop and stare, your smile slowly falling off your face. Why did she look so much like Naminé? And why… you wondered, watching their training continue, did you feel like you were forgetting something very important?

The day continued on, as did their training. It was laborious, intensive work as they switched from Leon to Merlin off and on again. They practiced and practiced until they were pouring sweat and out of breath.

Yuffie had arrived a while ago with lunch and was now hanging back with you, munching on a sandwich. “Man, I’m getting tired just watching them.”

You nodded solemnly, watching them take turns fighting Leon. Kari was the first to finish and came to join you.

“My arms feel like jelly…” She sighed, wiping her forehead with her arm.

Yuffie tossed her an elixir and a bottle of water, “You hanging in there okay?”

She nodded, her eyebrows pinched, “Yeah. Once I take a breather I’ll be ready to go back.” First she took the elixir then gulped down her water. “Thanks.”

You watched her out of the corners of your eyes, hoping you weren’t being obvious. “Just take it easy, okay?”

“No time.” Her fingers tightened around the bottle, “I’ve got to get stronger.”

“Right…” You hummed, peeling your attention back to the guys.
Lea lost; he was clumsy and awkward with his weapon. But, you remembered, _he hasn’t fought like this before, has he?_

He and Leon joined the group next, both spent and sore. It was time for a break.

You watched Lea for a long moment, looking refreshed after an elixir and some water. “You don’t usually fight close-quarters, do you?”

He hummed curiously, then nodded, “Yeah. My magic and chakrams aren’t very good in a fight like that.”

“That figures.” You nodded, “No wonder you’re having trouble.”

He narrowed his eyes at you, “It’s not like I’m bad at close-quarters.” He corrected, “I can handle my own without a weapon, or don’t you remember? I’d say we were pretty much tied in that fight.”

“Uh, excuse me?” You laughed, “I remember having you pinned against the bricks.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” He smirked bashfully, “But I got out of that pretty easily.”

“Sure, and who was the one frozen with one foot in the air and a bloody chin?”

He leaned forward, closing the height difference between the two of you, “I wasn’t using my full potential.” He grinned playfully.

“Oh, sweetheart.” You smirked, closing the distance just a little more in this game of chicken, “You wouldn’t be able to handle me at mine.”

After a moment, the two of you backed off, neither looking at the other. Part of you was still reeling you had the balls to flirt like that, and that you got away with it.

Then, you heard, “Okay.”

You turned, eyeing him up and down. “Okay?”

“Okay.” He grinned slyly, as if he thought you wouldn’t do it.

“Okay.” You shrugged out of your jacket, putting it on the bench. “Let’s go.”

He gaped, watching you sashay towards the courtyard with wide eyes. Kairi giggled behind her hand while Yuffie smirked crookedly.

“What, hothead? Getting cold feet?”

“No.” He flushed, following you and ignoring the little sisters’ laughter.

Leon rolled his eyes, “Fine. It’ll be good to get some more practice in.”

Lea ignored him too, then caught your eye and paused, a slow smile creeping on his face. Without breaking eye contact, he tugged on his coat zipper and let it fall off his shoulders.

You felt yourself heat up as he threw it behind him in a pile, “You really don’t wear anything under that thing?”

“Yep.” He drawled, coming to stand on the other side of the arena, “Why? Distracted?”
A growl rumbled low in your throat as you held your yoyos aloft, “Alright, you tease…”

“What was that?” He held his gloved hand by his ear, “I didn’t quite catch that.”

You huffed, pushing your hair out of your face, “I said, as if.”

With deep chuckle, he summoned his keyblade, “Challenge accepted.”

“On one!” Yuffie shouted as the two of you began to circle, “Two! Three… Brawl!”

He rushed first, swift as a dagger, ducking low to sweep your defenses and force you off your feet. But before he could swing, you flipped over and landed back on your feet.

He whistled, “Nice recovery.”

“Thanks.” Then you nodded to the loop of string around his ankle, “Careful.”

“Huh?” He looked down and you yanked his foot out from under him, “Oh – “

You pulled the string and he fell backwards, but this wasn’t his first rodeo either. His keyblade shot into the air, grabbing your attention while he twisted onto his hands then swung his leg, taking your star with him.

You yelped, forced to stumble towards him, directly under the falling blade. You prepared to deflect it with your other yoyo when a familiar arm shot out above you and grabbed it by the hilt.

Lea grinned down at you and you swallowed.

His knee shot out, followed closely by your leg. The two limbs collided painfully, but it allowed you to fall back and create distance between the two of you. The loop came undone around his foot at some point during the brief struggle and he was free.

“Hey, Y/N,” He said, “I know I asked for this in the first place, but I really don’t want to hurt you, okay?”

You paused, allowing the battle to clear, “You wanna stop?”

“And get teased relentlessly by the ninja gremlin? No thanks.” He let his keyblade rest against his back, “Let’s just try not to get too carried away.”

You nodded with a small smile, “Sure, I don’t want to hurt you either, Lea.”

He grinned warmly back, “Deal.” Then his smile turned a shade darker, “Then let’s get back to it, shall we?”

“We shall.” Then, you spun towards him in a ballistic of twirling stars, laughing.

The fight was brimming with fire and sparks, fast and smooth. To keep yourselves from actually causing any damage, all attacks were mostly for show; meant to throw off and dizzy instead of harm. It was more of a, dare you say, seductive show-off match. Yuffie would later call it ‘glorified, aggressive flirting’.

Many times, he would press in too close for comfort. It was obvious there was no reason to do this in any real combat situation, but you hesitated to call it flirting. Was he trying to impress you with his muscles and his long legs? Your mind at the time couldn’t think past of what was going on at that moment, but later in the day you would find yourself unwilling to jump to conclusions.
Lea had always been a massive show-off and a flirt, even when you were kids. That hadn’t changed a bit, if anything, he was bolder than ever. When you found yourselves on either side of the arena again, panting lightly, you had to admit to yourself he had every right to be, looking the way he did.

But, you weren’t about to be distracted by abs and nice hips. With huff of effort, you whipped your yoyos back, letting the string fly out behind them, then back. They came spiraling right at Lea, but he dodged them easily, jumping high into the sky, his velocity coming straight at you.

As good as he may be, he wasn’t as disciplined as you. Or, he was just letting himself get lazy. While he sinuously twisted and turned, you did the same. It wasn’t hard to notice that he was paying more attention to you then your weapons, and with a wicked smile, you used it to your advantage.

The scuffle looked more like a gratuitous dance as you turned his tactics right back on him. With every move, you made sure to give him angles of all your assets. Pressing against his legs and back, getting close enough to kiss if you tried.

He obviously wasn’t used to such treatment. Every accidental brush had him sweating, and the time you spun around him, letting your chest press against his bare back made him stumble, face red and heart racing.

When the flurry was over, the two of your found yourselves standing just a meter apart. The strings of your stars held suspended, slowly coming to a fall. He noticed too late.

“Uh.”

With a glint in your eye, you pulled the strings taught. They wrapped around him with a snap and he grunted, his keyblade forced out of his tied hands. It disappeared before it hit the ground, and Lea was going to soon follow it.

But, he found his descent stopped by a hand holding the strings wrapped around his chest. You stood toe to toe, close enough that your breath ghosted over his neck, making his hair stand on end in excitement.

“See?” You purred, making him heat up low in his stomach, “Nice try, but you can’t handle me, Red.”

He growled low in his throat, his green eyes blown and burning. “Is that so?” He mused, quiet enough for only the two of you to hear, “Maybe this demands a re – “

“NOW KISS!”

A noise burst from the back of your throat when you twisted your head so fast your neck cracked, “Wha – Yuffie – “

You hadn’t noticed your hold on the strings had slipped. Lea hit the ground with an, “ow...”

Your cheeks were ablaze and you knew it, but you quickly apologized and helped him out of the trap and stand. However, the moment was thoroughly ruined.

“Oh, oops,” Yuffie rubbed the back of her head, grinning sheepishly at Kairi, “My bad.”
You stepped out of the shower to find Yuffie passing you by in the hall. You didn’t even have to say anything.

“Sorry! I ruined the mood, didn’t I?”

Your head fell into your hands, “What were you thinking saying something like that?”

She glanced out the side of her eyes stiffly, “Completely… valid thoughts?”

“What? You wanted to make things awkward?”

“Oh, like you guys don’t already kiss!” She stared at you for a second, then blinked, “Don’t you?”

You tried to give her a flat glare despite the heat in your cheeks.

Her jaw dropped, “You don’t?!”

“Shh – Wargh!”

Your stumbled on the bathroom tile as Yuffie spun to shut the door behind you. Then, she was on you, “What do you mean you don’t kiss?!”

“Why do you think we do?!”

“Because you guys – You guys – ugh!” She hissed, “He walked out of your bedroom last night!”

“Oh my god, you too?” You groaned, “We talked! And slept! That was it!”

“Don’t lie to me! Your bed is tiny, there was absolutely cuddling!”

“Yes, yes there was, but nothing more.”

She leered with her hands on her hips, “You’re totally into him, though.”

“I – We – I – “

“Yeah, you’re into him! And he’s into you! So, what’s the hold up?!”

You sputtered, “What gives you that idea?!”

“Puh – lease,” She rolled her eyes, “It’s totally obvious! He barely takes his eyes off of you, and he was laying on the flirty hotheaded pretty boy seduction pretty heavy during that sparring match.”

“He does get awfully soft around you.”

Both you and Yuffie yelped when the door opened a crack, but it was only Aerith. “Are we using the bathroom as the gossip closet now?”

“And could you not?” Leon appeared in the doorway with a small grimace, “This is the only bathroom, and we have eight people living here now.”

Aerith got a look in her eye before saying sweetly, “Returning to the topic, it’s like watching how Cloud and Leon get around each other.”

His face got a bit red as he glared at the top of her head, “Really?”

“But it’s true!” She teased, “Lea get’s so cute and playful when he’s around you. Just like you get
with Cloud, Leon.”

Now you and Leon were like red faced twins as your sisters laughed at your plights in romance.

“So, you’re really not dating?” Aerith asked.

“No!” You blushed, “Never.”

Then, she clapped her hands, “That must mean you two were pining childhood sweethearts.”

Yuffie sighed, “It’s like one of Merlin’s romance novels.”

“Can you please not name it like that?!”

“Did you make a promise to marry when you were grown up?” Aerith continued. You honestly couldn’t tell if she was wrapped up in the idea of a fairytale romance or was just making your life hard.

“I – shit, man – “

“You know…” Leon, no, not you too! “I’m sure this will resolve itself if you just told him how you felt.”

You were painfully pulled back through time to relive the multiple instances when you tried to admit your feelings, only for nothing to come of it. Except nausea, that one time.

“I don’t – “

“We can help!”

“If we get Merlin, he could probably – “

“Just as long as Cid doesn’t – “

It was then that you realized you were trapped in a tiny bathroom, the doorway blocked by your three nosy siblings, and there was a window behind you. You edged closer and closer to it, letting them bounce ideas off each other with rising volume.

With some effort, you managed to open the window without looking and slowly lifted –

Of course, it was Yuffie, “Hey!”

You screamed, throwing it open and scrambling to get away.

“Don’t run away from this!”

“Too late!” You yelled back, slipping through and rolling to your feet on the cobblestone. You could already hear Yuffie trying to follow and booked it through the quiet evening streets of Radiant Garden.

Twisting and turning through the narrow streets, you finally managed to either bore her or lose her. It was often hard to tell which.

Your back hit an alley wall with a sigh. A familiar, fresh wind blew across your face, calling for your attention. It came in the direction of the setting sun. A soft, fond smile spread across your face as you followed it.
The sprawling gardens of your childhood home were slowly growing. The people had put much time and care into these precious flowers. Some of the older plots of land were already in bloom while others were still budding. It was different, but…

You took a deep breath, tasting roses on your tongue. It was like coming home all over again.

A body of black stuck out like a sore thumb in this land of color. Lea was laying down in a patch of moss and grass, hands under his head. You quietly snuck up on him and leaned over him.

He bolted up in his seat with a gasp, giving you a rueful glare as you laughed.

“Should’ve known I’d find you here.” You smiled.

He chuckled, already losing his frown. “Should’ve known you’d find me.”

He patted the spot beside him and you took a seat. The sunset was red and purple today, the swimming clouds pink and gold. It gave you such a warmth of nostalgia, sitting amongst the flowers and watching the day say goodnight.

“Hey…” Lea cleared his throat, “I want you to know, even if I was making fun earlier, I really am sorry about that fight.”

You hugged your knees, “I know you are. You don’t have to apologize.”

“Still…” He murmured.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m sorry about kicking you in the crotch.”

That got a laugh out of him, “You don’t need to apologize for that, that was funny as hell.”

You joined him, “It was surprise, that’s for sure.”

Your laughter peeled out, joining the sounds of the world going home for the night. Soon, you were both laying on your back, watching the stars arrive one by one. Talking about everything and nothing, different but familiar.

Your hands were folded on your stomach, your fingers tracing small circles around your knuckles as a thought kept nagging at you. “Hey…”

“Mm?”

“Did… you know a girl named Naminé?”

He went unnaturally quiet. When you turned your head, he was staring at you with a strange look in his eyes. “Yeah…” He finally admitted, “How did you know her?”

“By complete accident. I went looking in that old mansion in Twilight Town and found her there.”

After a moment of searching your expression, he asked, “What about her?”

You shrugged against the grass uncomfortably. “It’s just… Doesn’t she look like Kairi?”

His eyebrows furrowed, “Yeah. But, don’t you know that she’s…?”

The truth you had been considering weighed heavy in your gut. “She’s like Sora and Roxas, isn’t she?”
He turned away from you, staring up at the sky once more. “Yeah…” He muttered, “She was Kairi’s Nobody, and she went back to her.”

Your hands fell off your middle and twisted into fists, pulling out pieces of grass in the process.

“When I look at her…” He whispered, “I feel like I’m… forgetting something.” He grunted, “Normally, I’d be laughing it off, but it’s been really bugging me.”

It was your turn to go still, “Really? ‘Cause, I feel the same way, too.”

He lifted his head, “You shitting me?”

“No shit involved.” You replied, “I couldn’t put my finger on what it was, but I just couldn’t get it out of my head.”

“Damn…” His head hit the ground again, “That’s weird.”

You couldn’t stop your bittersweet chuckle, “Lea, our entire lives are weird. I think that’s something we’re just gonna have to accept.”

“Yeah, well it still pisses me off a bit.” He smiled sourly, “Life doesn’t make sense.”

“And it never will.” You agreed solemnly.

The last of the sun dipped below the horizon, leaving the moon and stars to shine brightly down. It was a clear and beautiful night.

“But, Lea?”

“Yeah?”

You turned your head, “I love you. I’m happy I met you, and that you’re a part of my life again.”

His cheek brushed against the grass, the same shade as his eyes in the dark. “Yeah,” he breathed, a warm smile slowly painted on his face, “Me too.” A hand pulled out from his blanket of hair and brushed against your bangs, “Let’s not get separated like that again.”

“I’ll stay with you.” You promised.

“And I’ll stay with you.” He vowed. “Always.”

You watched the night sky turn above you. Little did you know, destiny would try to pull you apart one last time.

Chapter End Notes

just setting things up for later chapters ;)
(i like to sprinkle in that im a sorikai shipper when i write)
thank you as always for reading!!
Xemnas sat on his throne within the Chamber of Repose, now home to two old ‘friends’. The child was sitting, chained beside the old, dusty armor. Bandages were wrapped around their middle to keep their back straight and their ribs within alignment. Despite their condition, there might still be hope for them yet.

He watched patiently as their eyes fluttered, then slowly opened.

“Hello again.” He mused, “Do you know who I am?”

Just as it was before, they gave him no response. But, their head slowly turned. Towards the broken, useless suit of armor and it’s keyblade.

After a moment, he realized, “Ah,” Then, with a cold smile, “Do you recognize these? Or,” he hummed, “do you recognize to who they once belonged?”

They made no response, but their hands, limp at their sides, twitched in its’ direction.

He rested his cheek against his fist, “Was it she who saw something worthy within you? Something worth trusting with that power?

“Can you summon it?” He demanded.

Their hand went limp once more, they no longer moved.

_How do I fix this?_ He thought impatiently, _How long must I wait to create Kingdom Hearts?_

Lea carefully brushed Kairi’s hair as they chatted aimlessly.

“I honestly had no idea!” She said, sewing a rip in his coat closed, “You like styling hair?”
He chuckled in his throat, “My mom and dad taught me. They would style my hair since before I could remember.” He smiled wistfully, remembering times long past, “Dad used to braid flowers in my hair. He stopped when I came out. I skip the flowers, but I still braid it from time to time.”

“It is a lot of hair.” She said, letting him tug hers’ into place. “What style do you usually do?”

“Fishtail.” He hummed, “When I want to look nice. Dutch and pull-through when I need it out of my face. Though, it does that pretty well on its’ own.”

“Wait,” She paused, “You don’t style it that way? Your hair defies gravity on it’s own?”

“Yep.” Despite the smile on his face, there was a creeping pain in his heart, “Thank you, mom.”

Now that the combing was over, he began twisting and pulling, working from bottom to top.

“I wish I could remember my parents.”

He paused, “What do you mean?”

She sighed quietly, “I don’t remember anything before arriving on the islands.” She set the needle down sadly, “Something about Radiant Garden feels so familiar. I wonder if…”

Continuing with the braid, he did the math, “If you lived here then… you would’ve been little when the Heartless attacked. Really little.”

“I was four – maybe five when they found me.”

He found his mind slowing to a halt, “The math adds up.” Then, to lighten the mood, he pressed the back of his hand to his forehead, “Honestly, what is with this place and amnesiacs?”

A comfortable silence filled the air. Lea silently rejoiced; Kairi wasn’t scared of him anymore. One blessing at a time.

She picked up the task again, tugging the string tight with every stitch. “So, what’s going on outside?” She asked slyly, “What did Y/N say?”

He sighed softly through his nose, “Same old same old. They’ll come visit longer later. I can’t tell if it’s tomorrow for us or tomorrow for them.”

“That’s two very different tomorrows.”

“Tell me about it.”

After a moment of quiet, she said, “You miss them, don’t you?”

Two mornings after you found each other, the Secret Garden was ready. Which meant you had to say goodbye again, for the time being.

It still stung. More than it should’ve, since you weren’t that far at all, but for him, he would go longer than a day without seeing you. It was just how it had to work, he could accept that, but that didn’t mean he had to be happy about it.

Before he and Kairi were taken away for training, you held each other and did nothing but hold each other. Everyone let them be, casually avoiding it getting awkward, and for that he was grateful.
“I don’t want to let go.” He murmured into your hair, arms tightening around you. On the verge of tears.

You said nothing, only clung more, burying into his chest. That was more than words could ever say.

“Yeah.” He whispered, “I do.”

With a small flourish, he finished the reverse braid and snapped a band around the bun on top. “Voila.” He moved to get up, “Now, let’s get to practice –"

But a small hand took him by the wrist. Kairi’s expression was sad and soft, and an utter reflection of his own.

“It’ll be okay.” She said, “There’s always tomorrow.”

After a second, he cleared his throat, “Yeah.” Then he pinched her ear, “Thanks, Kairi.”

She batted his hand away and jumped up, “Race you!”

“Hey!” He got up, “That’s cheating!”

But she was already far ahead him, laughing all the way to the arena. Even if he was missing someone now, he was still grateful to have this.

You watched flowers and drapes being hung from the streetlamps with curiosity, “What’s going on?”

Aerith looked up from her purse, “Oh, I forgot to tell you. The reparations are finally complete!”

You gasped, “That’s a pretty big thing to forget!”

“It was a few days before you arrived.” She finally found her wallet and thumbed through her munny, “Almost all of Radiant Garden have been preparing a festival to celebrate. Everyone’s going.”

“A festival…?” You wondered, and didn’t even notice when she had walked towards the accessory shop. You were quick to catch up to her, “What kinda festival?”

She gave you a fond smile, “The loud and happy kind.” As she eyed the items on the counter, she continued, “There’ll be lots of food and music, dancing, and games for the kids. Then, once it’s dark, there’ll be a fireworks show.” She finished her purchase and took your arm, “Leon’s not very good with parties, so Merlin and I took the ropes.”

You allowed her to guide you to the open farmers market with stars in your eyes, “I’m gonna go. I can go, right?”

“You can go.” She laughed, “We can go together. Lea and Kairi are going to be invited, too.” She added with a wink.

You pretended to have no idea what she was insinuating, “When is it?”

“Two nights from now. Go ahead and pick anything you like.” She inspected the rhubarb and mint.
“We’re going to have a short picnic beforehand. What do you think of a rhubarb cobbler? Maybe with some iced chai…”

You were practically bouncing, and not just at the idea of some sweet dessert. “I can tell them about it when we visit tonight!”

She giggled, ruffling your hair, “It’s nice to see you so excited about something. I’m glad.”

You were grinning from ear to ear, “Can we get some strawberries? And make lemonade, too?”

Aerith beamed. There were no words to explain her joy to see you like this; to act like the child she had once known. “Of course, Y/N.” She hugged you around the hips. “Let’s make it pink lemonade.”

When you arrived with Merlin into the Secret Garden, you practically pounced on Lea.

He hugged you tightly, happy under your attention, “Where’s the fire?” He laughed.

You backed off with a bright smile, “There’s gonna be a festival! You guys are gonna come, right?”

Lea blinked, as if lost with the very concept, “A festival?”

“A festival!” Kairi grinned excitedly, “Yes!”

“Aerith and Cid are making a big picnic to eat before it starts! You’ve gotta come.”

Unlike the bubbling Kairi, Lea went into a pensive silence, still hanging onto you. He could barely remember the last time he went to a party, though he knew Radiant Garden had it’s fair share. In all honesty, he found it hard to justify something like that… wrong timing, wrong…

But, he was shaken out of his thoughts by your hands on his arms, looking up at him with such happy eyes. Choking down a blush, he covered your eyes with his hand, “Okay, okay, just stop with the puppy eyes.”

You snorted, blindly reaching up to do the same to him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He bent his neck away, laughter rolling out of him so naturally, “Fine!” He relented, your palm covering one of his eyes, “I’ll go. But only because Aerith and Cid are cooking.”

You pinched his nose and he coughed, moving his hand to push back your bangs to reveal your beautiful face. His nose was released, only to be lightly booped.

“I’m glad.” You smiled, “Thank you.”

His cheeks burned and he immediately covered your eyes again, unable to look at you, “Yeah, you’re welcome.”

“Can you dance, Lea?” Kairi asked with a clap of her hands, “There’ll be dancing, right?”

“That’s what Aerith said – “ You huffed, whipping your head back and forth, “Please let go of my face before I lick your hand.”

That got results, he took his hand back like it was burned, “Sorry.”

“Anyway, yeah, there’s gonna be dancing. You used to dance all the time, right, Lea?”
He folded his arms, his small grin tight, “Uh, yeah, but I haven’t in a while so I wouldn’t expect anything fancy.”

Already, you could tell something was up, but you figured you could ask him about it later, or he’d tell you if he wanted to.

“That’s alright.” You took Kairi’s hands and posed as if ready to ballroom dance, “I’ll be your prince for the night, Kairi.”

She giggled then swooned playfully, “Oh, Y/N! But we couldn’t possibly…!”

“No princess left behind!” You declared, then swept her into a bridal carry, dipping her so that she was nearly upside down.

She peeled into giddy laughter until she was red in the face, “Y/N!”

Chuckling yourself, you put her safely on her feet.

Merlin cleared his throat from behind you. The three of you gave him sheepish grins.

“If we may continue with your training…” He said with a twinkle in his old eyes, “So that you can actually join the party.”

They both saluted, “Right away!” making you laugh behind your hand.

Lea looked at you from the side, smiling warmly. The same smile you always wished he reserved for you when you were young.

It was the night before the festival, and you found yourself up far into the night. Thoughts scorched paths through your mind endlessly, most of them made no sense, but they still kept on coming. You tried to debunk them as they came, but it was fruitless.

Eventually, you kicked off your bedsheets and went to the window, staring into the night sky. Clouds rolled on, with or without you, but unable to hide the castle not far off at all. The lights were on in some of the towers.

Your room was beginning to feel claustrophobic.

Carefully, you got dressed and rolled out of your window. You may not have Lea or Isa with you, but a trip to the castle was long overdue.

When the uneventful walk was over, you hesitated. The gates were gone, but this was still the same castle that haunted you as a child, the same that hosted Heartless and Xehanort’s torture dungeon. But, he wasn’t here. He was off somewhere plotting the end of the worlds.

Despite that somewhat comforting thought, your stomach still turned when you opened the doors. It wasn’t exactly the same as it was before, it sort of felt like something out of the Uncanny Valley. Close, but not quite right. But, you still managed to find your way to the labs and the basement.

These had signs of being used recently, but not in the same ways they had been during it’s final moments. Whoever was using it was definitely not Xehanort, nor seemed to share his twisted view in science. And thank god for that.
You stepped into a room full of computers with a machine taking up an entire wall. It took you a moment to realize this was the one room you had never been allowed in, Isa and Lea either.

Cautiously, you stepped up to the computer and started analyzing what was left open. Replica…? You wondered, and is that…?

“Who are you?”

You turned on your heel, one hand immediately going to your weapons. A familiar, short young man stood in the doorway holding a clipboard and some papers. His gray hair hung in his face, but he still seemed to stare at you just fine.

He paused and blinked, “Hold on… Don’t I know you?”

You squinted. The last time you’d seen someone like this was one of the Organization – and part of the Organization was –

“Ienzo?”

That’s when he smiled, “It’s you! Y/N,” He set his papers and aside and strode towards you, taking your hands in his, “It’s so good to see you again.”


He laughed brightly, “I know, the last time we saw each other I was only a boy.”

Ehh, “Sure.” You grinned tightly, “Excuse me for peeping, but I was just looking over what was on the monitor.”

“Oh!” He picked his stuff up and moved it to the console, “Yes, you see we’re trying to revive one of the hearts that lives within Sora. Do you know Sora?”

“I know a Sora.” You replied evenly. “What’s a replica?” And why do I feel like I’ve heard of it before?

“It’s a vessel of a sort, once possessed with a heart it will be nearly identical to a human.” He tapped a command into it, “It’s necessary for his revival. To fix the Organizations mistakes.”

“Who’s?”

He sighed wearily, his movements slowing, “A boy named Roxas.”

You nearly screamed, “Roxas?! You turned him around, “You mean – Roxas is gonna come back?!”

He blinked several times, “You know Roxas?”

“I know Roxas!” You gasped, “I have to tell Lea!”

That’s when a sharp noise rang from Ienzo’s pocket. He fished it out and pressed a button, “Hello, Sora.”

“Oh, hey Ienzo.” Came a familiar voice.

Curious, you walked around his back and looked over his shoulder at the device. “Sora?”
He made a small ‘o’ of surprise, “Astra, it’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too.”

“Hey, Ienzo, I wanna talk to Astra.”

“Oh,” He hummed, handing you the phone, “Alright. Be careful with that, please.”

“Okay.”

“Can you go somewhere private?” Sora asked you, his voice tight, “I really…” His expression drooped, “I need someone to talk to.”

You were already out the door, headed for one of the balconies. “Of course, one sec…” You sat against the wall, resting your hand on your knees. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

Behind him was the dark backdrop of night, it looked like he was alone. Finally, the smiling façade fell away, revealing a lonely boy. “Yeah, I just…” He sat down, wrapping his arms around himself, “I just miss home.”

The wind blew gently past as you waited patiently for him to continue.

“We were together, finally.” He muttered, “All on the islands. I got to see my family again, all my friends. I even went to school for a little bit. I…” His entire face tightened, “I – All that time, I tried not to think too hard about my home, but it all hit me how much I missed it.

“I know it’s not King Mickey’s fault, I’m trying not to be bitter,” But by the dark look that passed over his eyes, it wasn’t working, “but I wish I never had to leave again.

“And now – And now I’m just trying to set things right – even though they’re not my mistakes to fix.” His voice broke, angry, stressed tears welling up in his eyes, “I still haven’t gotten any clues to Xehanort’s plan, I still haven’t learned the power of Waking, and I still haven’t seen Riku or Kairi since – “

Finally, the weight of it all tucked his head between his knees. His hand came to rest on his hair, as if boxing him in, shielding him from the outside.

“I just – “ He choked, “Sometimes I wish I had my mom. D – Donald and Goofy are great, they’re like dads, but – but I want my mom.”

You felt tears roll down your cheeks as well, “Sora…” If you could push your way through the screen in your hands and wrap your arms around him, you would.

“I didn’t talk about her much, ‘cause it hurt to think about it.” He admitted with a sob, “I was fine as long as I focused on Riku and Kairi, but when I really thought about what was going on that first time around, it all became too much. Thinking about it all was too much, and then I was there, and now there might not even be a ‘there’ anymore if we don’t win.

“I know I don’t have time to cry, but – but – “

“You have every right to cry.” You snapped.

He lifted his eyes with a wet sniff.

More tears fell off your chin, “You have every right to be upset. To be angry, and sad, and scared.”
“But – But there’s so much we need to do – that I need to do…”

“And you’ll get it done,” You promised softly, “but not when you’re burnt out… It’s okay to cry and be sad. It’s healthy and it’s normal.”

His eyes fell to the ground, tears and snot dripping off his nose. “Can we talk a little longer?”

“Of course,” You got comfortable, “Take all the time you need. I’ll be here.”

Meanwhile, in the Secret Forest, someone else was still awake.

Lea stood up late, summoning his keyblade over and over again. Vaulting around the arena with a ferocity he let few see. Sweat dripped down his face, stinging his red eyes with not even the moon nor stars to keep him company.

He swung the blade over and over and over again, trying to gain some form of confidence in it.

_I don’t have time to relax._

Tatters of cotton and felt flew past his eyes as he ran to the next.

_I don’t have time to party._

Fire scorched under his feet, fingers tight around this weapon he was forced to put his trust in.

_Not when Isa’s on the line._

Old memories burned behind his eyes as he continued his barrage, more and more of those faceless dolls sprouting up to replace those that fell.

_Not when my future with you is on the line._

He forced his eyes closed and swung his blade with a roar.

_Not when our lives are on the line._

His lungs heaved with heavy breaths as he slowly opened his eyes.

_Not when_

Roxas stood in front of him, bleeding and broken. Angry, and betrayed, with his blade through his gut. His form wavered into someone strange and familiar, black coat – black hair –

Lea gasped as his keyblade shattered in his hands, blowing him away with the force of it. He fell to his knees, hands in white hot pain, but it wasn’t the reason for the tears hitting the ground. Slowly, he broke down one piece at a time, curling over the ground, leaning on his bleeding fists.

His quiet, lonely sobs echoed against the trees, unheard.

_________________________________________________

“Can you braid my hair for the festival today?”

Kairi stood beaming expectantly with a small bouquet of flowers in her hands.

Lea put his hands on his hips and thought, “Well, I sure have a lot of napping to catch up on…”
She batted her teary eyes at him.

“But I suppose I can make some time, princess.”

Soon they were sitting on Kairi’s floor once more. Lea’s fingers twisted her hair flawlessly, except for the flinches of pain. When he was finished braiding in a baby’s breath, he wordlessly waved for another.

Kairi handed him a daisy, “What style are you going to do?”

He hummed distractedly, “Milkmaid.”

She scoffed, “Milkmaid?”

“It’s cute, I promise. Goes around your head like a tiara.”

“Oh,” She relaxed, “I thought you were talking about twin braids or something like that.”

“I resent that.” He smirked through the licks of pain shooting through his fingers. “My mom would make me the cutest farmboy ever.”

They laughed until his fingers spasmed and he dropped the braid.

Lea hissed, holding his hand close to his chest as the sharp sting throbbed through his knuckles.

Kairi twisted in her spot, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, m’fine.” He muttered, sweating through it with his eyes squeezed shut.

Then, a hand pressed against the back of his own, a gentle green light blooming from the point of contact. After a moment of sweltering rancid pain, it finally began to die down.

Kairi slowly retracted her hand, staring up at him with understanding eyes.

“Thanks…” He gave he a small smile, “Now, let’s finish your hair.”

But she stopped him, catching his hand before it reached her. “Lea, are you sure you’re okay?”

His expression soured slightly, but it was swiftly shrugged away with an easy grin, “Yeah. Now c’mon, you’ve got a festival to enjoy. Or am I just gonna leave you looking like your rolled around in Aerith’s garden?”

Finally, she relented with a sigh and let him continue doing as he pleased. He really was stubborn, sometimes. Like some other boys she knew.

But, she thought, tilting her chin to give him an innocent upside-down grin, good thing I am, too.

He gave her an affectionate grin back. He had no idea what she and Yuffie had in store for him and a certain somebody that evening.

Yuffie watched you have a post-picnic nap with a deep frown and an impatient tap of her foot. Both you and Lea had something up your collective butts. Did neither of you get any sleep last night? And no, not in the fun way, because you would need Merlin to let you into the Secret Forest and
she knew for certain that he was snoozing away on his bed at eight on the dot last night.

Of course, the picnic was great. The food was great, the company was great, but she and Kairi had been waiting for something to happen. Like spilling something on his clothes and he would need a change. Or one of you feeding the other like in the manga she read. That was typical romance stuff, right?

But noo, you two just talked and ate. Boring.

Now, you both were here snoozing on the picnic blanket while the others were packing up and getting ready to go. Admittedly, it was kinda cute, watching the way you both ended up sorta falling asleep on one another. But there was a party in need of some romance.

Kairi stood beside her with a nervous smile, “Are you sure this is gonna work? They’re both out of it today.”

Yuffie harrumphed with her fists on her hips, “It’ll work whether they like it or not, so says the Great Ninja Yuffie!”

She bent over and knocked on your forehead like it was a door, “Wakey wakey, it’s time to go.”

You groaned, blinking blearily up at her before turning and shoveling yourself into Lea’s side. “Stop.”

“No.” She replied, walking around you to nudge Lea’s cheek with her foot. “C’mon! Let’s go.”

He grunted, shoving her foot away sleepily before cocooning around you.

“Aw,” Kairi cooed.

Yuffie wasn’t nearly as pleased. She grabbed you both by the hoods of your jackets and began to drag you away from the gardens.

Lea was the first to recover, rolling out of her grip before pouncing onto his feet, glaring daggers at her. “Can’t you wake us up like a normal person?”

You groaned again, sitting up with a blearily but nonetheless irritated blink, “Honestly.”

“Oh, sorry.” She huffed, letting go. “But they’re leaving without us. Seriously, let’s go.”

You still felt groggy from staying up late talking to Sora, but you allowed yourself to be pulled to your feet by Yuffie. Lea followed suit, muttering under his breath. He didn’t look much better to be honest.

The girls didn’t give either of you a lot of time to breathe, unfortunately. You played games and ate food, but something about them seemed determined to toe the line between keeping you all preoccupied and not tiring you out.

“Is it me, or is Kairi and Yuffie acting strange?” You asked around a loaded hotdog.

Lea looked up from is takoyaki which he was greedily stuffing his face with, “Well,” He murmured, “Yeah.” He swallowed his bite, “But they’re probably just excited. It’s probably been a while since they got to have fun like this.”

“Point.” You admitted, wiping your hands on a napkin.
As if sensing that you were getting suspicious, the two of them returned, begging that you guys win them a plush. Which you did, to the stall owners complete and utter shock.

Lea handed Kairi a cute cat plush while you handed Yuffie a soft puppy. They thanked you happily before pointing out another stall. You both shared a shrug before following.

As the day was coming to a close, the girls dragged you to a loose crowd. A band was playing at the plaza. Aerith and Leon were near the front, watching a few people dance.

You quickly greeted one another before turning your attention on the dancing. Little did you and Lea know, the four of them were sharing a conspiratorial wink.

“Think you’re gonna dance?” You nudged him with your elbow.

He sighed and gave a weak, “Maybe.”

However, neither of you were given a choice in the matter. The second the beat picked up, Yuffie grabbed your arm.

“Let’s dance!” She laughed, dragging you into the circle.

“Yuffie -!” But she was already skipping in time with the beat, and you were forced to recover or make an absolute buffoon out of yourself.

Lea whistled from the sidelines, but then felt dread when Kairi took his hand.

“Dance with me!”

“I – uh – “ But, just as it was with you, she pulled him in and he quickly found himself in a game of dance or die.

Thankfully, many others were joining in on the fun, clapping along and dancing with partners. All around having an absolute blast. The energy was infectious and you found yourself laughing as you were passed onto Aerith.

Her footing was a bit awkward, but it didn’t matter as you twirled her by the waist and she giggled like a schoolgirl before you were passed onto Leon, and she took Kairi’s place as the two girls began dancing with each other.

Though he wasn’t much for dancing, he led with grace and lifted you into the air for a moment before setting you down with a victorious grin. Soundly keeping your attention off the Yuffie and Kairi’s mischievous shenanigans.

Soon, it was your turn with Kairi. She danced with playful beauty, letting you lead with a happy smile as Yuffie and Lea laughed nearby. You gave her a ballerina twirl before she danced closer and closer to the other pair.

You found yourself in Lea’s arms just as the song came to an end. You both stood there, breathless and giddy.

Yuffie gave the band a thumbs up, one of which was a close friend of hers’. On her signal, a slow dance began, though still upbeat. Soon, you two were silently sweating.

“Okay,” You whispered breathlessly, “Your hand on my hip, right?”

“Yeah,” He cleared his throat, threading his fingers with yours, his other hand a warm weight on
your hip. “Your hand on my shoulder.”

You held onto him, feeling your heart race in your chest. And then, you began to dance. At first it was simple swaying from side to side, like the other couples in the middle.

Yuffie held out her fist and Kairi bumped it with a grin.

As the beat picked up, he led you into something like a ballroom dance. Sweeping you across the cobblestone plaza as you listened to the lyrics, lost within the song and each others arms.

As Lea danced with you, creating poetry in motion, you sang under your breath. And it was wonderful and beautiful, this moment. Drawing closer and closer to one another, intoxicated in one another’s presence. By the comfort of being with you, by the heat of being with him.

*I love you* was written in every step. *I want to be with you* whispered in every breath. *Please, won’t you love me, too* asked every time you eyes met.

As the song drew to a close, you both stood hand in hand, nearly hugging one another. Lea was panting slowly, you could almost feel the rise and fall of his chest against yours. Then, a mischievous smile lit up his face before he pulled you away from the crowd.

He was quick and smooth as he guided you through the gaps. Finally, you were both free, but he didn’t let go of your hand. Instead, he brought you right to the edge of the gardens.

He brought your hand to his lips, almost shyly, and kissed the back of your hand with a wink. “Race ya.”

“Hey!” But he was already booking it towards the dark horizon. Laughing, you followed him, hopping over the flowers and swerving through the trees.

“Can you catch me?” He shouted behind himself happily.

That was enough to give you a boost of speed, “How about we find out?”

He stopped short for some reason, turning around, only for you to barrel into him. He shouted as he went down, and you saw why he had stopped.

You spun around on your back as you hit the grass, both of you hanging onto each other as you rolled down the hill, still laughing. When you came to a stop, Lea was on you.

He sniffed back his giggles, raising himself on his elbows, only to come face to face with you. Your laughter died as he stared at you, just a hairs breath away.

“Y/N,” He whispered, a comforting, warm weight on you. His hips lined up just below yours, unintentionally pressing against your groin. “There’s something I…” and he came closer, his eyes fluttering in a daze as he watched you part your lips.

Instead of continuing with his sentence, he pressed closer, and closer, and you leaned up to meet him until you could taste his breath –

*crack – Ka BOOM*

He jumped and rolled to his feet, then realized it was only the fireworks show. You sighed deeply, the back of your head hitting the ground. You just couldn’t catch a break.
Lea cleared his throat awkwardly, taking a seat beside you to watch the show. You decided to sit up, too. For a while, neither of you spoke, just taking in the sound and colors in silence.

But, now that you had a moment to think, you eyed him from the side. Something Sora mentioned had you wondering…

“Lea?”

He hummed, lowering his chin slightly.

“Have you… thought about your parents at all?”

He straightened, now almost glaring at you from the corners of his eyes. “What brought this on?”

You shrugged, “Sora called last night and needed someone to talk to. It just got me thinking…”

For a few minutes, he said nothing, only stared at the grass. “At first… yeah. I… secretly wanted to find them, too. But I eventually gave up.” He went silent again, processing his thoughts.

“At first it didn’t matter. No, it slowly stopped mattering, but that was because I was a Nobody. I –” He sighed slowly, “I tried not to think about them.

“Then Roxas got thrown into my life.” That’s when he turned to you, sad with a smile. “And I found myself… mimicking them in some ways. I wasn’t perfect, but… it reminded me,” he slowly turned his bitter smile to the ground, “that I had them once.”

You reached out and rubbed his arm, and he tucked himself in closer. He breathed out his nose, thigh to thigh with you. “Now I’ve been thinking about them almost every day.”

“Then…” You spoke up, “why don’t you go look for them?”

“I don’t have the time.” He answered, “Especially when we don’t even know if they’re around.” Though his tone was sharp, his pain was obvious in every line etched on his face.

“We don’t have anymore time.” He said softly, “I don’t have anymore time. If I don’t master the keyblade by the time the war starts, then we’re screwed.”

“Lea? What are you talking about?”

After a moment, he slowly peeled off his gloves. Fresh, pink scars littered his fingers and palm, somewhere between burn marks and knife wounds.

You gasped quietly, silently held out your hands and he placed his palm up in yours. “How did this happen?”

“My keyblade…” He admitted quietly, “it broke.”

You recoiled, your fingers flinching around his wounded hand. “It did what?”

“It came back.” He added quickly, “But, if that happens in battle,” that’s the moment he revealed the depth of his sorrow and worry, plain as day on his face, “then it could ruin everything.”

All was silent except for the crashes of color in the night sky, reflected on your persons. Silently, you held your hands out, your fingers intertwined, your palm pressed against the back of his hand.

“Try again.”
He stared at your joined hands before turning his gaze to you.

“Whatever we go through, we’ll go through it together.” You reminded him gently. “Summon it.”

Flashes of pink and red caught him in the light. Just as it was before, he was unable to tear his eyes off of you when a bloom of warm heat spread from his fingertips and together, your fingers clasped around the weight of his keyblade.

The smile you wore would be one he would not soon forget. “See?” You said.

Lea reflected it with deep affection, “Yeah,” then, he let it go, letting it dissolve in licks of flame, “I’ve got it memorized.”

You leaned into each other, warmth spreading from your heart out. You silently expressed your love and devotion, pressing his scarred hand to your lips. And he did the same, pressing a kiss to your temple.

Chapter End Notes

yes, i know im teasing the hell out of all y'all, but i promise that scene will come very soon ;)
thank you as always for reading!
"I Love You"

Chapter Summary

A culmination is a slow thing, but the pay off for facing regrets is more than worth it.

Chapter Notes

Thank you wonderful beta!!

Time was a lamentable cost of life. Especially when nothing comes from it’s passing.

It had been years since Xemnas found the broken Nobody in the woods. Despite everything he had done, there was barely any sign of life within them. Much less, the ability to draw the power he had desperately been seeking.

If only he could harness it himself again, but no. Which left only one other option…

He silently stiffened as he heard voices carry to his sanctum. It was the assassin, talking shortly with the young man that he was considering promoting.

The body, aging appropriately despite the lack of anything within, slowly lifted their head towards the exit. Something between a pant and a whistle hissed between their teeth, “hhhh…” They mutely begged, “hhhhh…”

A cruel smile twisted his lips, “That’s right…” He hummed, “they used to be your friends. If only they knew that you are being kept safe here in the castle, it would ease them greatly.”

Their hand shifted off their thigh, curling towards the door. Desperately trying to say something, maybe even to cry for help, they whined, “Hhhhh… hhhhhh…”

But, their voices faded away and their plea was unheard. In their wake, what little awareness has surfaced soon dimmed and they went limp once more.

Thinking of another child with the power, of another member of the Thirteen, a truly evil, terrible idea came to mind.

“They’re gonna bring Roxas back.”

Lea recoiled as if slapped, “Huh?”

You blurted it out without thinking when you remembered what happened the night before. “They’re bringing him back.” You repeated with awe, “They’re making something called a Replica
to put his heart in.”

“Who - ?” Then realization washed over his face, “Ienzo.”

You nodded fervently, holding his hands between yours with a wobbly smile, “He’s coming back.”

A delirious laugh bubbled out of him, “I – I always keep forgetting to ask how you guys got along.”

“I told you before, didn’t I?” You answered sadly, “He was like my son. I loved him, and I tried to…” You wilted, “I tried to take care of them.”

He hummed, rubbing the back of his head with a blush, “I think we’re a little too young to be parents to kids their age, but…” He drifted off, frowning thoughtfully, “I keep doing that.”

“Doing what?”

He slipped his hands out of yours to rub his thumbs over your knuckles. “Saying ‘them’ when I mean ‘he’.” He drew back, pensive and quiet once again. “When my keyblade broke last night…” he groaned in his throat, “I saw… someone. I couldn’t really make anything out, but, the silhouette reminds me of…” he finally lifted his chin, “the one I see when I look at Kairi for too long.”

It took you a moment to connect the pieces, “I do the same thing. Do you think they could be the same person? The thing we can’t remember?”

He considered that, “It wouldn’t surprise me at this point.” He chuckled bitterly, “Who do you think it is?”

You shrugged slowly, watching the last of the fireworks blast off, “I wish I knew.”

When the show drew to a close, Lea helped you up and the two of you walked arm in arm back to Merlin’s. Tomorrow was already close, and with it, the dwindling bridge between you and the final battle.

Neither of you knew just how close it was.

Radiant Garden was in the middle of a sleepy Sunday. It was a quiet morning, perfect for a walk with no destination. However, that doesn’t mean you didn’t find anything.

Down one road, like any other, you spotted a familiar couple eating on their porch. You came to a slow stop across the street, trying to place where you had seen them before. While their attention was on each other, you began to cross the street.

“ – I was looking for the scrapbook earlier and I couldn’t find it.” Said the wild haired woman.

The large man thought quietly for a moment, “I left it in the box with their things…”

At the sound of their voices, you went still, memories flooding over you. Evenings around a crowded dinner table, cookies and cakes, stories and laughter, talking into the wee hours of the morning -

“Hey!”
“What?”

You pressed yourself against a tree, hidden from view.

The familiar woman’s voice eventually mumbled, “Sware I saw someone…”

“I don’t see anyone.” And you could just imagine the concerned but relaxed shrug that accompanied it.

When the excitement died down, you carefully peeked around the trunk to stare at the miracle before you. Lea’s parents leaned back in their chairs, eating BLT’s and drinking iced tea, something you’d seen so often before. But they were older now, just as you and the boys were older. Their hair was streaked with gray, his mother wore large round glasses, and lines were etched into their faces.

Softly, she spoke up, “Why would you do that to yourself, babe?”

He sighed lowly, “I’m just… I’m trying to move on and… it feels good to cry about it sometimes.”

The realization struck you like lightning, They think we’re dead.

Part of you wanted to step out that second and show yourself to them, but… You felt your expression darken, that role was for Lea and Lea alone. He was their boy, their little rascal, and they deserved to see him first.

Hitting your palm with your fist, you ran back down the way you came. You rounded a corner contentedly before coming to a sudden and abrupt halt. Resting against the wall in front of you was none other a teenager with silver hair. He was holding a similar device to Ienzo’s and studying something on it closely.

Perhaps hearing your footsteps, he glanced up, went back down, then his eyes widened and returned to you. They were greenish blue.

Your hands balled into fists at your sides without thought, “Riku.”

He was off the wall as if it burned him, “Astra!”

Honestly, if Sora hadn’t asked you to give him a second chance, you’d be in a street brawl. You were practically seeing red.

Seeing as you weren’t leaping at him while foaming at the mouth, he held his hands up and said, “I’m not going to fight you!”

You didn’t respond.

He swallowed, shame smeared across his face, “I’m sorry – about what happened before. You were right, and I should’ve…” He sighed, “I should’ve helped you. Even if the end was gonna be the same, she would’ve at least had…” His chin dropped, “she would’ve had some time to be happy.”

Some tension eased from your shoulders, but not a lot, “The sentiment is a little late.” You replied bitterly.

He nodded grimly, “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Keep your apologies.” But, the anger had burned out quickly. Now, you were just tired. “You
should’ve given them to her, and him.”

“Yeah…” After a long dark, awkward moment, he sighed, “Sora told me about you. Told me how you felt. And told me what you meant to Roxas.” He lifted his eyes to yours, “I caused you a lot of pain. Me, and DiZ. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, tell me,” You crossed your arms, “Who is this DiZ motherfucker?”

He grinned tightly, “He might be someone you know. DiZ was an alias, his real name was Ansem the Wise.”

A cold wash ran down your spine before the wall cracked under the force of your fist. Him, too?

Your mind reeled, Him, too?

Then, a short mouse walked up with a smile, “Riku, things are looking good. Now that Aqua is – Oh!” He noticed you with a flick of his tail, “Hello, are you a friend of Riku’s?”

“I’m a friend of Sora’s.” You corrected him, “Who’re you?”

Sensing the tension in the air, he leered at you, “I’m King Mickey, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Y/N.” You said, to Riku’s confusion, “I used to go by Astra.”

“Oh!” He blinked, “Sora told me about you some. Said you were a real kind and strong fellah.”

A small smile tilted your lips, “Thanks.”

He nodded, “In any case, could you point us to Merlin’s House?”

“Sure, I live there.” With one last cold glare at a nervous Riku, you waved for them to follow you. “What’s going on?”

“We need to speak with Lea and Kairi. It’s almost time.” He ended darkly, which was weird to hear with his voice, but that wasn’t what you were worried about.

You tripped over your feet, “The war?” You asked in fear.

Riku glanced at you, “Yeah. Aqua’s been saved, and now she’s gone to save Ventus with Sora.”

As good as this news was, as much as those names tugged at the dregs of your memory, there was a deep ache in your heart. The completion of the seven lights meant that… meant that Lea was going to have to go.

With a sharp breath, you held back your tears and stoically escorted them to your home. You watched them speak with Merlin, knowing your name was brought up a few times but unable to spare any feelings to that. It was taking everything you had to just keep calm and not think about this war to end all worlds.

To not think about Isa and Lea.

To not think about Lea and Isa getting hurt.

To not think about them dying.

The droplets started rolling the second the two guardians were summoned out of the Secret Forest. They listened to Riku and the King’s spiel with wide eyes. Of course this was coming – Of course
they were training for a reason, but –

It was Lea who noticed you crying. He didn’t even bother excusing himself before taking you into his arms.

“I – I’m sorry, I – “

He hushed you and quietly escorted you to your room without a backwards glance. “No apologies.” He whispered, sitting you on the bed. “I know.”

When you saw his face, he was crying too.

With a hiccup, all of it came rushing out, “Lea - !”

You collapsed into him, holding him as close as you could while he wept on your shoulder.

“I don’t want to lose you!” You sobbed, “Please, I don’t – “

“You won’t lose me.” He swore, “Ever. I’ll come back. I promise.”

“I just got you back.” You wailed, muffled by his coat, “And now I might never – “

“You won’t lose me!” He repeated, holding you tightly, “And I won’t lose you, either. Never.”

“Please…” You coughed, cheeks wet, unaware of what you were pleading for, “Please…”

He sniffed heavily, hiding his terror into your shoulder. All the words he kept within still wouldn’t push past his lips.

After some time, the two of you found yourselves holding one another on top your bedspread. He ran his fingers through your hair, gently preening you in quiet, sad silence.

You closed your eyes, listening to his heartbeat below your ear. “I saw your parents today.”

He went still, fingers paused between strands. “… What?” He whispered disbelievingly.

“They’re alive, Lea.” You breathed, “I didn’t… I couldn’t show myself to them.” Your hand drifted up to caress his cheek, “I thought that should be you.”

He moved his face so that his lips touched your fingers. His eyes couldn’t focus and his fingers shifted until they rested against your scalp.

“They miss you.”

He closed his eyes. “I miss them, too.”

“Are you going to talk to them?”

He couldn’t answer. Instead, he pressed a kiss to the pads of your fingers and tried not to dwell on yet another thing he may lose.

Later, as the day wore on, there was a knock on the door. Neither of you responded, but in stepped Kairi and Yuffie, both wary and wet eyed.

They softly came to sit on the bed beside you. “It’s time to go.” Kairi said.

You closed your eyes and held on tighter.
Yuffie pressed her hand against your back, “It’ll be okay. Kairi convinced them to let you come along.”

They promptly opened, “Huh?”

Kairi leaned closer, “I know it really isn’t my place, but I explained the situation a little. I also mentioned that you and Sora would probably like to see each other again.”

Lea stared at the young girl as a smile slowly spread against his cheeks. His hand clapped onto her head as he messed her hair affectionately, “Thanks.” He whispered.

“Thank you.” You sighed, finally relaxing, “It’ll help to at least know…”

“I know.” He closed his eyes, “No more worrying, got it memorized?”

“D’aww.”

You reached over and pinched Yuffie with a rueful grin, “Alright, c’mere you!”

The girls shrieked as your hands reached to grab and tickle and they quickly absconded the room with laughter high in their voices.

You and Lea both sighed, taking in each other one last time before they had to go back to the Secret Forest.

“I gotta wash up.” Lea murmured, slowly sitting up with you in his lap.

“Okay.”

When he got to the bathroom he quietly closed the door behind him before putting his head in his hands.

_Goddammit._

He leaned over the sink, keeping himself up by his shaking arms.

_Goddammit! Goddammit Goddammit!_

“I’m not going to die.” He whispered alone. “I’m not going to die.”

Not when there were so many regrets he still held within his heart. So many words he hadn’t said, so many things he hadn’t done. He already knew better than to think this couldn’t possibly go wrong. He had already gone through life thinking there was always later. He had already died with regrets heavy on his tongue.

Lea stared into the mirror, water dripping off his nose. With a pained, but peaceful grimace, he made his decision.

_Not this time._

Tomorrow, they’d be going to the Mysterious Tower. Tomorrow… tomorrow, he wouldn’t be free of his regrets, but they’ll be free from him.
The Mysterious Tower loomed over the three of you. It was far from haunting, but a chill ran down your collective spines nonetheless. This was the last benchmark, then, it was time.

You sighed slowly, listening to your heart beat against your ribs. Casting a sideways glance, it looked like neither of them wanted to talk about their feelings. Which was fine, you didn’t either.

Together, you, Lea, and Kairi entered the twisted halls, towards the top of the spire. Lea was the one who opened the door, catching the attention of those inside. By count of heads, you were only missing two.

“Kairi!” Sora cheered, rushing to give her a hug. “I missed you! How was training?”

She laughed, squeezing him tight, “It was great. You and Riku should see what I can do now.”

Riku smiled warmly, “We’ll see soon enough. I’ll be expecting to see at least a few things explode in flower petals.”

Now that Sora let her go, she grinned and flexed her arms, showing off her toned muscles, “Be ready with a camera.”

Finally, the boy noticed you and Lea. “Astra!”

He gave you a big hug, and yes, this boy gave the absolute best hugs. “Hey, it’s good to see you. And it’s Y/N, now.”

He paused, then held you back with his hands on your shoulders, “Huh?”

“Gawrsh.” Goofy tapped his chin, “Does that mean you got your memories back?”

Donald recoiled, “Wack? Since when has it been gone?”

“Gee, Donald,” Sora put his fists on his hips, “Pay more attention, wouldja?”

“Hey!”

You chuckled softly, “Yep. I’ve got it memorized.” You pointed at your temple while grinning at a pleased Lea. “Speaking of, may I introduce you,” You waved your hands at said redhead, “my person.”

Lea jabbed his thumb at his chest, “Got it? Property of Y/N. Copyright Y/N. No touchy the body.”

“That is not what I meant and you know it.”

That’s when someone cleared their throat, splitting the red sea of faces to reveal an old man with a comically large hat. On cue, everyone filed into the room.

“Master Yen Sid, this is Astra – I mean, Y/N.” Sora introduced you, “They’re a good friend of mine. They’re really strong, and it’ll be good to have them around in case something goes south.”

Yen Sid considered you with beady eyes, “I would rather not bring civilians into this if I can help it, but I can sense a deep strength within you…”

“At least let me work as emotional support.” You joked with sharp, hard eyes.

However, you conversation did not continue any further as two newcomers entered the room. You nearly hurt your neck in the whiplash.
“Ro - ?!”

“No,” Lea’s hand clapped down on your shoulder as he whispered in your ear, “That’s Ventus. He looks like Roxas, I know, but they’re different people.”

Now that he said it… there were subtle but noticeable differences between the two of them. Ventus’ eyes were greener than his, and his skin was lighter, his face a little kinder. It relieved and confused you. What did this boy have to do with Roxas?

Then, you felt another pair of eyes on you. The woman was watching you closely, and though it was neither friendly or unfriendly, it still made you uncomfortable. Especially since you felt like you had seen her before, too. But where, and when?

But, like everything else that day, no answers could be passed along before the sermon started. You stood behind Lea, laughing quietly at his theatrics, but you couldn’t keep your eyes from crawling back to the woman. You knew her, you could swear you did, but from where?

“- Lea, Kairi, you’ve made tremendous strides.”

“Hey there. And that’s ‘future keyblade Master – ‘”

“Kairi!”

Lea was cut off by the stranger who was now approaching Kairi. She leaned down to get a better look at her before saying, “Incredible! It is you.”

King Mickey butted in, “You know her?”

“When you and I first met in Radiant Garden,” She said, “the Unversed tried to attack a little girl. Do you remember?”

Again, you recoiled as the memory of that strange, incredible day rushed over you. The day you met a kind and powerful stranger and saved a lost little girl. The rest of the conversation was nearly lost on you, but now that you could remember, that little girl was Kairi! And that stranger, it was her! It was Aqua!

Lea coughed into his hand again, only to stop when he noticed you pressing your hands to your head in absolute shock. “Uh, Y/N?”

Aqua’s attention snapped to you, “Y/N?”

You pointed from Kairi to Aqua and back again, “Aqua!”

Lea stood there, absolutely bamboozled by this turn of events, but stepped aside to let you and Aqua meet in the middle.

“It is you!” She smiled, taking your hands in hers’, “I was wondering if it was so.”

“Uh, Y/N?” Lea asked again, “You know these people?”

“Yeah – Yeah!” You almost couldn’t believe it yourself, “Remember that day my jacket was all torn up when we were kids? The same day you told me about the strange kid you met – Ventus? That’s when I met Aqua, and Kairi, too apparently.” You added with a scoff, seeing the girl in a new light, “Even with my memories back, it still took me until now to recognize you.”

“Y/N helped me protect you, Kairi.” Aqua explained, letting go of your hands, “They put their life...
at risk to do so.” Then, with a warm smile, “They were incredibly brave.”

You chuckled bashfully, rubbing your neck, “I mean, I was just doing what was right…”

Sora and Riku shared a glance before turning back to you and Aqua.

“Thank you for saving her.” Sora said with a bright grin.

“Yeah,” Riku said with a note of shame when he looked at you, “If it weren’t for you two, we probably never would’ve met.”

Then, Kairi bowed to you, too, “Thank you.”

“Woah, woah, no need for that.” You patted her back.

Aqua silently took a count of the group with a growing, thoughtful frown, “Are you a part of the Seven Lights?” She asked.

“Hmm?” You straightened, “Talking to me?”

“Yes,” she nodded, “That would offset our number.”

You raised a brow, “No? I don’t think so. Don’t believe I’ve been invited.”

“Oh,” She deflated slightly, “Since you’re able to wield the keyblade, I thought – “

You and Lea flinched hard.

“I can WHAT?”

“They can WHAT?”

Even Kairi gaped, “They can’t wield the keyblade.” She turned to you, “Can you?”

“Can I?” You echoed, then back at Aqua, “I can?”

She nodded slowly, confused now, too, “Yes. I passed on the power to you that day.”

“But why?” You gasped, “And how? I – “ Then, the rest of that day flowed back to you.

“Y/N, where do you find meaning?”

You thought quietly, looking away from the woman for a moment, “Like… in life?” When she nodded, you continued, “I guess… by making others happy, and keep them from getting hurt, like that little girl.” You sighed, “I want to protect them, no matter what.”

“And how would you do that?” She asked, holding your gaze.

At first you shrugged, then considered the question further, “I’ll put myself between them. I’ll give everything I got, I’ll fight and kick and scream…” Your head hung, as if some part of you knew what would transpire not long from now, “Or I’ll go quietly. Whatever way.”

Slowly, she smiled, then handed the handle of her blade to you, “Y/N, what I hold is a weapon that protects the light. What is the light within your life?”

And the answer was immediate, “My friends. They’re like my family, really.”
“Will you be the guardian between the light and the darkness? Even if you must do it silently? Even if no one else can know?”

This question hung heavy on your mind as you turned your eyes to the hilt of the blade. Your answer would affect the rest of your life, whatever it may be.

“I will.”

She nodded, her expression becoming just a tad sharper, but nonetheless warm. “Then place your hand upon this blade, so that when that time comes, you’ll be able to protect your light.”

With a long exhale, you slowly lifted your hand and firmly gripped the hilt. You couldn’t feel anything especially magical coursing through you, but something felt almost… heavy when you let go. Like the weapon was still in your hand.

“Y/N,” She said to you, “promise me that you’ll keep this piece of you. This piece of you that wants to help people. Please.”

With your hands held to your heart, that heavy weight still hanging on, in truth it would never really go away, “I promise, Aqua.”

Just as you did back then, your hands folded above your heart, “Oh.”

Knowing what you had just remembered, she gave you another fond smile, “Exactly, Y/N.”

“What are you waiting for?” Sora chimed in, stars in his eyes, “Let’s see it!”

Slowly, your eyes travelled the room, over friends old and new, until they finally landed on Lea, standing just behind your elbow. His entire expression was serious, but he nodded, I’m with you.

Swallowing hard, you held out your hand and tried to call upon that heaviness. After a moment of dead silence, swirls of greens and stars threaded over your fingers. For a second, just a second, it had a form, but it dissolved before it came to be.

The entire room deflated. You wanted to apologize, but what was there to apologize for?

“That’s okay.”

Sora held his fist up high, “You’ll be able to do it eventually. Even I lost my ability to use the keyblade, so it’s sure to come to you.”

Kairi joined in, taking the hand that nearly held your blade, “Lea and I couldn’t summon ours very well at first either. So, don’t give up!”

A thin smile wobbled on your face before an arm draped around your shoulders. Lea sighed dramatically, “I suppose we’ll have to go on without you,” Then he gave you a wink, “too bad you’ll miss all the fun while we tear Xehanort a new one.”

But, you thought, despite the smiles and encouragements, I want to be there with you, too.

Lea stared at the front door of the small bungalow, “Is this really the place?”

You stood just behind him with hands in your pockets, “Yeah.”
After a second, he approached and lifted his hand, but when it made to collide with the door, he hesitated.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

He had thought long and hard about that, but, “Nah,” He shook his head, “I… I wanna talk to them alone.”

“Okay.” You stepped back, “I’ll drop by in an hour?”

“Yeah.” He said without looking at you, “And… thank you. For finding them.”

“If you can call it that.” You smiled, giving his back a pat, “I love you. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah.”

He waited until you disappeared down the street before returning to the painted blue door once again. He took a deep breath, then knocked.

After a few moments, a woman said behind the door, “Who is it?”

Suddenly his throat went dry like it had never done before. After a second of clearing it, he said, “It’s…” He took a sharp breath, “It’s Lea. Is this…?”

But the door was already thrown open, and a woman who was both familiar and not stood in the doorway. They had the same color hair, the same color eyes, the same sharp features, but now she was older; wizened and gray.

She gaped at her son before turning back into the house, “HONEY, COME OVER HERE, RIGHT NOW!” Then, tearfully looking over her shoulder, “It’s our son!”

“We failed finding her, but guess what? I found Y/N! Me!”

Isa was not as surprised as he thought he would be. He only nodded slowly, tapping his knee.

“What?” Lea hissed aggressively, “Don’t you care?”

“No, of course I care.” He replied sharply, “That’s why I already know.”

Lea leaned back, thrown momentarily off his feet, “Then what the hell are you doing, then? I don’t care what you think of me at this point, but are you really ready to kill yourself for a stupid cause without even talking to them?”

Isa sighed wearily and said in complete silence, And what would I do when they see me? See my eyes? See what I’ve become?

Lea growled, “Tch, fine. Do whatever you want, but if you so much as touch a hair on Y/N’s head, I’m going to beat the shit out of you. Don’t think I won’t.”

Isa lowered his chin with a bitter smile, It’s too late for that, Lea.

“And then I’m bringing back her, and especially Roxas.” He shouted, waving his ice cream around with a snarl, “I’m even dragging you home!”
“The marks under your eyes,” Isa said, “they’re gone.”

“Yeah, don’t need ‘em.”

Now done with his ice cream and saying goodbye, Isa stood up, “Always said they’d stop you from crying. The upside-down tears.”

“Would you get lost? I’ll clobber you tomorrow.”

“I expect no less.”

Hearing another voice, you raced around the corner to find familiar blue hair quietly vanishing into the shades. Familiar—Unfamiliar golden eyes pierced you in their shock before he was gone altogether.

You stared at the place where your friend once sat with arms outstretched, “Was that…?”

“Isa.” Lea muttered, “Ice cream?”

Taking his deflection with a frown, you sat down beside him and took the sea-salt. “What did he want?”

“Beats the hell outta me.” He grouched, “To make me feel bad.”

It hurt you to see them like this, to know Isa was on the wrong side and that the two of them would seek each other out tomorrow. They had their childhood squabbles, of course they did, but this was something different entirely. This was a change you were not ready or willing to accept.

Lea, on the other hand, was ready to forget about it for a little while. He had enough confrontations with Isa that he could practically roll them off his shoulders at this point. And there was something he desperately needed to do, to say.

“Hey, you remember the last time we ate ice cream and watched the sunset together?”

You thought around your bite, “Wasn’t it…?”

“The last time.” He nodded, “And do you remember that Isa said something, but you didn’t hear it?”

Despite the fog, you managed to dredge it back up. Isa had said something, and Lea had practically bitten him. “Yeah?”

He didn’t answer right away, and for a while, the two of you ate in silence. Despite trying to forget about tomorrow, it managed to creep its way into every thought.

I don’t want to lose you.

Lea stared at the last of his ice cream, now melting off the stick. “Y’know…” He murmured, “I’ve decided I’m not going to die with regrets.”

After a moment, you pulled your bare ice cream stick out of your mouth, “What do you mean?”

He took a deep breath, then turned to you with soft determination, a vulnerability you hadn’t seen in him for a very, very long time. “Can I kiss you?”

If you hadn’t caught it, your stick would’ve tumbled from your loose grip. Heat washed over your
face, both surprised and expected, how could that be? “Uh,” You finally mumbled, “Yeah.”

Lea hadn’t felt nervous in a long time, but he was now. Butterflies swarmed his stomach and his ears burned as he slowly leaned forward with open eyes, watching you mirror him with sweet panic. Then, your lips connected.

It was chaste and brief, maybe just a little awkward as first kisses often are, but just like that, the panic was gone. When you both pulled away, only to stare breathlessly at one another, there was only the ghost of pressure on your lips. And everything felt too full and too warm and too sweet and just right.

He was the one to push forward again, moving closer to you, kissing you with increasing need. He smelled good, his lips were chapped, his eyes were closed, to let himself drown in the sensation of you and only you.

You moved your lips against his with a gentle hunger, like you had only now found your favorite food, something you’d always be hungry for. The first few moments were rough as you both searched for a rhythm, an angle that fit just right. You found it eventually, and the kiss slowed.

You sighed through your nose as the kiss continued on, languid and soft, until you both needed to breathe. For a moment, you shared the air between the two of you.

“I love you.”

You blinked dumbly at the love of your life, your breath caught in your lungs.

A fervent, unburdened happiness spilled from Lea as he cupped your face and peppered you with kisses. “I love you.” He confessed between them, over and over again. Every single one he kept inside, every single one he wished he said, they were there now, free as the tears running down your cheeks.

He pressed his lips to your forehead, “I love you.” to your nose, “I love you.” to your chin, “I love you.” and finally once again to your lips, “I love you.”

His thumb brushed away the thin trail of tears, his forehead pressed against yours. Your hands cupped his hand and hung onto his wrist. Smiles pressed against your cheeks. Never before had either of you felt so free.

Lea took a deep breath, and released it slowly. “Stay the night with me.”

Your cheeks grew hot, “Huh?”

“Doesn’t have to be sex!” He corrected with a blush, “I – We just…” He huffed, looking away bashfully, “Let’s not be alone tonight.”

You stared at the beautiful man before you, and the answer was clear, “Okay.”

It was like he thought you’d say no. “Okay.” He said, staring right back at you. “I have a place I’m staying at. You want to go now?”

You nodded without care. “Sure.”

“Okay.” He said again, the last few minutes catching up with him. With the both of you.

With a soft touch, you trailed your fingers down his cheek to his chin, guiding him back towards
your lips for another kiss.

“After you.”

Chapter End Notes

BIRCHES IT FINALLY HAPPENED
also, i hope its cool i did that thing with the reader, itll come into play later
Also, if you want to see more of lea's parents, I'll be making another part of the series
sometime later with interactions with them. Including the sneak we see in this chapter.
Thank you as always for reading!
No More Goodbyes

Chapter Summary

The war has come.

Chapter Notes

NSFW Warning for the beginning ;) you know what be going down

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What a miserable end for a husk,” Xemnas mused, “who’s light once burned so bright. For one I thought would be my Thirteenth.”

There was no reply from the corpse, now sitting like a marionette without it’s strings. Chin against chest, staring straight ahead.

He crouched slowly, “As pitiful as your existence has been, you are now less than necessary in this or any other life. Your replacement will be arriving soon.

“But do not be afraid,” he mocked, “your friend will undoubtedly give you a swift and dignified end.”

Not for the first nor the last time, a flicker of recognition blinked a bit of life into your eyes. “Hhhh…” You breathed, almost groaned. A muted voice struggling for words.

That familiar, terrifying smile leered down at you, “Yes, that’s right. Your ‘brother’ will be coming for you soon. It is too bad…” His amber eyes glowed bright under his hood, “that seeing you will break his heart, if not his mind.”

Your fingers twitched, trying in vain to summon a power that you no longer could call. But, the moment of lucidity, however brief and vague, drained out of you and into the forest floor. Again, there was nothing, and only nothing inside.

He stood and summoned a portal, “A hero of the keyblade is among us once more. And so, it is time we discarded the old, broken, and useless.”

All was silent in the wood, not even a heartbeat was heard.

Lea led you, hand in hand, to the apartment he was staying at for the night. It was pretty good, the open curtains boasted a beautiful view of Twilight Town. The cluttered, strange, confusing, wonderful day was coming to a close as the sun sunk low in the sky, but never quite gone.

“Make yourself at home.” He said, squeezing your hand before letting go, turning to his luggage.
You watched him for a long moment, slowly shrugging off your jacket as you considered the situation. The love of your entire life just confessed his love for you and asked you to stay with him for the night, though with the comment that it didn’t have to be sex. However…

With your jacket off your shoulders, you asked, “Do you want to have sex with me?”

A noise choked out his throat before he whipped his head around to stare at you with wide eyes. After a moment, he nodded, “Yeah, ‘course.”

“Cool, ‘cause I want to have sex with you.” You let it finally fall off you and you tossed it onto a nearby chair, “Right now?”

A blush was slowly creeping up his neck and over his ears, you watched his throat bob, “Yeah, right now.” He breathed, then, “Are you sure?”

“Lea,” You laughed, “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes,” He nodded enthusiastically, “If I have to be honest,” He stood up and started pulling at the zipper of his coat with a lecherous grin, “I’ve been ready for it ever since you tied me up during practice.”

“Oh really?” You smiled, walking towards him before helping him peel off his coat, your chest nearly pressed against his, “Is that what you like?”

“One of many,” He purred, letting the coat slide off under it’s own weight before pressing a hungry kiss to your lips. His long arms wrapped around you, sliding under your shirt, letting you shiver under the leather of his gloves.

He pressed his tongue against the seam of your lips and you opened for him with a quiet moan, which he echoed as soon as he backed you up against the bed. You took a seat and began taking off your clothes as he stood between your open legs, fighting with his belt and tearing off his gloves with his teeth.

Wiggling out of your underwear, you gave him a coy chuckle, “Excited?”

He looked up from his (finally open) buckle and stared at you. You were nearly naked except for the garment hanging down your thighs. His pupils were immediately blown and a hiss seared between his teeth.

“Oh, I’m fucked.” He groaned, aggressively shoving off his pants.

“That’s the plan, love.”

That got a soft laugh out of him as he finally discarded his boots and climbed ontop of you, pressing more searing kisses onto your lips. He slowly mapped to your neck, “You know this has been my dream since I was a teenager, right?” He said after sucking a large hicky to the junction of your neck and shoulder.

You writhed under him until you could get a piece of his neck and bit down gently, “I had a feeling.”

He moaned under the pressure of your teeth and lips, “Fuck.”

“Another one of the many?”
“Darling, if you keep teasing me…”

That made you pause, replaying the term again, “I like that.” You mumbled against his skin, then gave the bite mark a kiss, “Now – “ You made to push him over, but he quickly leaned his weight back onto you and stopped you fast. Granted, you didn’t give it much strength in the first place, but, “Hey!”

“Nuh-uh-uh.” He wagged his finger, leaning up onto his knees slightly.

You pouted, letting him pin your arms by your head, “Lea, I want to treat you first.”

His smile turned softer and he pressed a sweet kiss to your cheek, “Allow me to be the gentleman here, darling.” He rolled the pet name under his tongue, just for you. “Trust me, this is treating me.” Then he winked, which probably had it’s intended affect of getting you anticipated for what was coming next.

“Oh okay,” You finally relented, leaning back, “Go on.”

He kissed your nose, “You won’t regret it.”

Then, he kissed your pulse, then your collarbone, then between you breasts, and under your ribcage, then above your belly button. His fingers found your wrist and he guided it to his lips, then the other hand. It was so soft, so tender, it was as if he was saying “I love you” all over again, and again, and again.

He put your hands on his head, coaxing you to thread your fingers into his thick hair. Your thighs trembled as he lowered his head between them, pressing two quick kisses to the inside of your thighs before coming still.

You could feel his breath against your groin, your fingers tightened against his scalp. He looked up, taking in the sight of you sprawled before him, like he had dreamt of in secret for so long. With you tugging on his hair, he sighed, relishing in that passionate burn below his gut.

With a cheeky, “Bottoms up.” he blissfully pressed his mouth against you and sucked.

Your thighs jumped, and he was quick to wrap his arms around them, securing them on either side of his head with his impressive strength.

“Lea!”

He hummed, lapping at you with greedy hunger, only for you to pull at his hair from the vibrations. He popped off, moaning at the pressure and the taste of you on his tongue. Still, he kept himself from digging back in,

“Yeah?”

Already you were missing the feeling of his skillful tongue against you, “Shit, keep going! Please.”

He smirked, “Since you asked so nicely.” But he was all too enthusiastic to return to devouring you. He hummed and moaned around you, working you up with his tongue until a mix of drool and you dripped off his chin.

You groaned with tight lips, letting the sensation drown out everything else. It was a lot, too much in fact.
“I’m close.” You shivered as he twisted tongue around you, “Lea, *fuck*, you’re so good.”

He laughed, still sucking on you, “I know, thanks.” Then, he pressed as far as he could against you and made to drink you dry.

A sharp cry tore through you as came into his mouth. He sighed through his nose as he tasted you, you were just as delicious as he knew you would be.

After a few quick kisses pressed against you, he lifted his head and wiped off the sheen from his mouth and chin with a wink, “See? That was a good treat.”

“You okay?” You sighed, then grabbed his arm and tugged him towards you, “C’mere, my love.”

“My love…” He echoed, lowering himself back onto you and snuggling down, “I like that.”

You kissed his nose, “I hoped you would.” Then, before he knew what was going on, you flipped positions and winked at his surprised, blushing face. “It’s my turn.”

He huffed with a grin, cupping your cheek to guide you back for a slow kiss. “I eagerly await.”

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You woke up the next morning with Lea snoozing on your bare chest, curled up like a cat, long limbs wrapped around you like a warm cocoon. You said nothing, only wrapped your arms around him and laid there, listening and feeling his deep breaths.

Of course, he did eventually wake up. You could feel it in the way his breathing shifted.

Your fingers tightened around him, “It’s today…”

He turned his face further into you, “Yeah.”

Again, nothing was said, only the relish of being with each other for the time being. Even if it were to be cut short. If it were up to the two of you, neither of you would leave the hotel room, wouldn’t leave the bed if possible.

You tucked your chin against his head and breathed him in. “Can we switch?”

He cocked his head, obviously this was his favorite place and he had no intention of moving, “Why?”

Softly, you admitted, “I want to hear your heartbeat.” *I don’t want it to be the last time.*

He gave no further struggle as you clumsily switched positions, now with him below you. As soon as you were settled, he carded his fingers through your hair, slowly massaging and petting you with a slow smile on his face.

You closed your eyes and listened to the gentle thunder under your ear. The solid evidence of him being there, alive, no longer suffering as a Nobody, of being there with you.

“There were times I thought I’d never find you.”

He paused, hand coming to rest at the base of your skull.

You buried further into his chest, pretending you weren’t shaking and that the sting of tears
weren’t budding in your closed eyes, “I was so afraid that I’d never meet you again. That I wouldn’t find all the reasons I’ve been in love with you.”

His hand came to cup your head, securing you against his breast, “But you did.” He whispered.

“I did!” You began to weep, feeling the hiccup of his own tears under your cheek, “And I fell in love with you all over again. And I want to do it again, and again, and again until the day I die.”

Wet trails of tears were sliding off of Lea’s cheeks as he listened to your confession and plea. He knew better than anyone that promises fell through, but what else was he to do? But to give everything he had into those three words, that promise within his heart?

“I love you.”

“Please don’t leave me behind.”

“I won’t, ever.”

You cried together for a while, an act just as intimate as night before.

As you stood before the gummi ship, you couldn’t feel anything but despair and hope for an uncertain future. Your family stood around, saying goodbye to Lea and Kairi and offering what supplies they could. You hung back, arms folded as you watched the scene unfold before you.

Before Lea, Kairi came to say goodbye.

“Thank you for looking after me all this time.” She said with a smile. “I’m happy I got the chance to meet you,” She looked behind her, “and Lea, and everybody.”

You gave her a kind smile, “You know me, I’ll always be your prince if those two schmucks decide to do you wrong.”

She laughed, pressed her hand to her forehead and swooned, “Oh, but Y/N, it simply can’t be… But,” She took your hands, “Promise you’ll be thinking of me while we’re out there.”

“I promise.” You said, then opened your arms and she gave you a great bear hug. “You’ll do great out there, be careful.”

“I will.” She loosened her hold, “Let’s go to another festival together again.”

You nodded with a grin, “Yeah.” Then, you pressed a kiss to her forehead, “And, just so you know, I’m glad I got the chance to meet you back then.”

The sun graced her cheek, reflecting her warm smile, “I am, too.”

After her, naturally, was Lea. He came marching towards you like a man on a mission, and gently took your hands from your stomach.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” You murmured back, “… I don’t want to say goodbye.”

“Then, we won’t.” He tugged you closer, “No more goodbyes, ever. Okay?”
You took the extra step and pressed yourself against his chest, “Okay.” You shut your eyes, trying to hear his heartbeat through his coat, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He whispered, tilting your cheek up to meet your eyes, “I always have. I always will. No matter where I am.”

As he leaned down, you stood up to meet his lips. “I know.” You whispered between kisses, “I’ll love you forever.”

He pressed another slow kiss to your lips, “I know.”

Your eyelashes fluttered until they opened fully. A wonderful, beautiful idea of a future took your heart and refused to let go. With determined, certain eyes, you told him, “I’m going to ask you to stay with me as my partner when you get back. For as long as you’ll have me.”

An emotion there was no name for in words overwhelmed him the second those words left your lips. Already holding you close, Lea held your back as he dipped you, pushing all his feelings, all the romance he knew that could be cut short into it. In that moment, there were no onlookers, no gummi ship, nothing but you and the looming, uncertain future.

When the kiss ended he pressed his forehead to yours.

“Please, come back to me.” You whispered against his lips.

“I promise I will.” He said, closing his eyes, “I promise.”

You held each other longer as you felt your heart crack under the pressure of his departure, “I don’t want to let go…”

He squeezed you even harder, and that said more than words ever could.

Eventually, they boarded the gummi ship, waving goodbye as they did. You hoped to see his green eyes once more before the door closed, but it wasn’t possible.

Despite the questions your family no doubt had, they held their tongues upon seeing your despondent frame. For that you were grateful as you made your way to the castle, the only place empty enough for you to be alone with your thoughts.

You passed the gates without disruption and wandered the castle for a time, moving from room to room, unable to stand still. Finally your feet brought you to a familiar place; the grand ballroom.

It was dusty, vacant, unused. But, in the most meager of attempts to give it purpose, there was a grand piano sitting beside the open windows.

There was suddenly an itch in your fingers. A long to play and sing, you needed this, to give voice to the feelings trapped in your heart.

You briskly made your way over to the piano, wiped away a layer of dust off the keys and took a seat. For a minute, you just let your fingers play, find their rhythm, find their equilibrium and melody. The words that came were awkward, but the feeling behind them was real as you sang a tune you had no words for before.

“Do you remember, when we first met?” You sang softly, feeling the spring sun caress your cheeks, “And we thought we’d never be lonely again?”
The empty space behind you called out to you as you continued, “Well, the world had a different plan, and I soon forgot the touch of your hand…” You drew it out, crooning to the sun in a melancholy you knew all too well.

The notes drifted off the piano in a somber loveliness, “But, we made a promise that final twilight, and we kept it near and dear to our hearts.” Your eyes burned, “I knew I’d love you, and love you, and love you again… and again.

“Even when we were torn apart,” You wanted to scream, “Even when I forgot, even when the worlds kept us lost…” Slowly, you bent over the piano, wet tears hitting the keys as your hands became still, “I knew… you’d be with me… “ It hurt to breath, “You’d be with me… You were with me, you are with me.” A sharp hiccup hurt your chest, “Please know…”

“Please know…”

…

No.

The piano crashed under your hands when you pushed yourself up, eyes ablaze.

No.

You vaulted out of the ballroom, down towards the labs.

No, no.

The stairs disappeared two at a time under you.

I won’t just sit here. I can’t just sit here!

Your shoes squealed against the tile.

Not when Isa’s on the line! Not when you are on the line!

The far room beeped and whirred with life, the console of the master computer peaking around the doorframe.

Not when all our futures are on the line!

Not when my future with you is on the line!

You skidded into the room, and saw a faceless boy sitting on a cot, surrounded by people you once knew. But none of that mattered, because right before your eyes, the boy’s face began to emerge. Blond hair peaked under the hood, thick eyelashes fluttered against his brown cheeks.

“Roxas!” You gasped and ran to his side.

“Who - ?” An older gentleman said, then blinked upon seeing your face, “Y/N?”

You only gave him a baleful glance, knowing the fact he had to be here on this bed was all his fault. You took the boys hand in both of yours, begging to feel just a little warmth underneath the gloves.

“Roxas, it’s me, it’s Astra. I’m going to go help them, I just – I” You petted his hood off his face and cupped his cheek, “I wanted to say goodbye before – “
A sharp pain split your skull, you cried out, along with all the others in the lab. Ansem even fell to knee under the agony, while you kept yourself up on the cot.

I'll see you later,

Your eyes flew open as the memories rushed over you, all the tears, all the joy, all the everything you couldn’t believe you forgot about that one beautiful girl you cherished so.

“Xion.”

Blinking away the daze, Why now? Why do I remember now? Then, Something’s happening. Something’s wrong, Something’s -

“Roxas, wake up!” You begged, “Please, Xion – “

Then, something glowing and pink descended into the Replica’s chest and Roxas opened his eyes. There was no grogginess, no curiosity or confusion, just wild awareness.

He grabbed you by the shoulders, “Astra!”

“Roxas!” You gasped, feeling tears bead in your eyes.

“We have to go.” He said, leaping off the table, “Come with me!”

You didn’t have time to hesitate. Hesitation was your downfall before, you couldn’t let it be your downfall now.

“Okay.”

He took your hands and you were engulfed by a bright light.

Where are we going?

To Axel and Xion. And Sora.

What’s going on?! How’d you come back?

Their hearts called out to me, so Sora released me. I’ve seen everything through his eyes… Y/N.

You opened your eyes and found yourself in the Keyblade Graveyard you were told about. Lea was crippled on the ground, Sora and Xion sprawled on the ground. Standing over them was Isa, and the man you knew to be the leader of the Nobodies.

With your yoyos aloft, you put yourself beside Roxas, a barrier between them and the ones that were fallen. You tried to listen to Roxas, but your entire attention was on the one you once called your brother.

Isa was no longer Isa. His eyes glowed yellow, his hair was wild and unkept, so different from the poised if awkward boy you once knew. He was animalistic, and though you didn’t know if he truly saw you, he was glaring at you with blank rage.

“Isa…?” You whispered, feeling your heart knot. The first time you’ve seen him since all those years ago and he was this. A monster wearing his skin. “What happened to you?”
Then, Xemnas vanished and reappeared behind a stunned Kairi.

“Kairi!” You, Sora, and Lea shouted.

She fought back, hissing and scratching as the man spouted off some cryptic nonsense about numbers you didn’t care to understand. You only wanted Kairi back.

You shouted, summoning a heavy glob of gravity to slow him down, along with a barrage of light from the three kids and a chakram of flame from Lea. But, with a menacing laugh, he disappeared with Kairi held hostage.

Now, it was only Isa.

“Astra – Y/N,” Roxas said, “Hang back and take care of Axel.”

Despite the need to help, you figured it was best you sit this one out. Could you go against him, even if you tried? But, watching those three line up, your son and daughter among them, you wanted to scream.

But, you retreated back and picked up the battered Lea.

“You… came.” He panted, gazing at you with adoring eyes.

“I’ve never been one to sit still and look pretty.” You said, taking him closer to the wall and summoning a barrier. “How bad is it?”

“Bad…” He groaned as you laid him on the ground, his head in your lap, “Took a direct hit from Xemnas himself. Before…” Then, a breathless, disbelieving laugh broke out of him, “Xion.”

“Xion.” You echoed, casting a slow working Curaga to conserve your mana. Tears beaded in your eyes, joined by a pained smile, “I can’t believe how much I’ve missed her.”

“Me too.” He began to cry himself, “God, I’ve missed her.”

Now that he was stabilizing, you turned your attention to the battle. Isa was an abomination on the battlefield, a brute of strength and strategy, sweeping them off their feet despite their skill.

More tears rolled down your cheeks as you watched the children get pummeled once again. A hand closed around your wrist and Lea stared with clear understanding.

“Go to them.”

You blinked, “But, what about you - ?”

“I’m already better.” He picked open a hole in his coat, revealing a scabbed over wound. “I’ll be okay, as long as you keep the barrier over us.”

“But how can I help them?”

He stared into your eyes, then took your hand, threading his fingers between yours and held it out.

“Remember what Kairi said?”

“… all I wanted was to help them. When I summon my keyblade, I remember that feeling.”

He shook your entwined hands, “You have to protect them.”
“I made a promise.” You realized, then put your other hand over his and pressed a fierce kiss to his knuckles, “I’ll come back.” You vowed, “I still have a promise to keep with you, too.”

He smiled softly, sliding his other hand up to stroke your cheek, “I know you will.”

With a silent farewell, you ran out of the barrier, only to see a weak Roxas and Xion standing before a towering Isa, his claymore held aloft and a snarl on his face.

“NO!” You screamed, then called upon the wind to throw you between them. *I have a promise!* You cried, *I HAVE A PROMISE!*

The clang of metal against metal cleared the dust of battle as you stood against Isa. That sound echoed in your head, and for a moment the arena was paint on water. Between you and your certain death was none other than a keyblade, *your* keyblade.

Two diamonds of stars winked at the end of the blade, and you knew who they represented. The hilt held a similar shape to the main body of your yoyos, familiar and easy in your hands. In that moment, you gave it a name. The same name that had held you up and kept you strong when you were left with nothing.

Astra.

Isa’s claymore pressed against your new weapon, and you bent your knees before shooting your strength forward, throwing him off before sweeping his feet. He jumped backwards, but made no more move to come after you, simply watching for you next move.

Again, a severe sense of déjà vu made you wince.

“Astra!” Xion gasped, “Why…?”

“I made a promise.” You said, standing between them and the danger ahead. “I couldn’t keep it last time, I’m sorry, but I will keep it now.” You took your battle stance and declared to both the world and fate, “It doesn’t matter who I have to face, I will protect you all!”

“Y/N…” Roxas breathed.

Sora ran to join you, “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” You nodded, “Besides, this one is personal.” Then, you shouted, “Isa! If you’re in there, stop this madness! Please!” Your words beat against the onrush of water against his ears. “I don’t want to fight you! I love you! But,” Despite the pain in your heart, you said with steadfast commitment, “I will not back down, and I will not lose if you continue.”

But, he did not move, did not surrender, did not return to himself. Your hands tightened over your keyblade as you summoned all your strength to even move against him. But, once you did, there would be no stopping you.

One of you had to fall for this to be over. It would not be you.

“If this is how it has to be…”

You charged him, spinning your blade from hand to hand to blindside him, but he dodged it easily and summersaulted away, crouching low to the ground.

Roxas took a stance, now at Isa’s blindside, and decided to take his shot. With Isa’s attention on
you, he landed a blow to his hip, but the retaliation was swift and severe. The claymore caught him in the chest and sent him sailing with a sharp cry.

“ISA!” You roared, dashing to put yourself between the two of them and swiping him across his ribs. He grunted with an animalistic growl and turned his yellow eyes to you.

With the single moment before the storm, you called behind you, “Stay out of this!” But, before they could respond, Isa bent his knees, hand tight around the hilt of his weapon and glaring at you balefully. You steadied your blade with a grimace, “Okay.” You whispered, “I love you, Isa.”

He charged you, sending dust sailing behind him. You dodged him with a cartwheel before kicking at his heel. He stumbled, then blocked your second move before pushing you off and sending you tumbling back.

You landed on your feet and swung your blade up, “Graviga!”

A globe of purple energy came to hang on his shoulders, but other than a flinch as he was dragged to the ground, he shrugged it off and came for you again.

“Shit!” You tried to dodge, but then his fist collided with your back. Pain lanced through your spine, but it wouldn’t leave anything behind but a nasty bruise. However, you landed on your stomach. When you twisted around, ignoring the pain in your back, another wave of déjà vu coursed through you as Isa stood above you, his claymore held high.

With a raised hand, you shouted in desperation, “STORM!”

The sky darkened at your call and thick bolts of lightning fell down upon you, many of them catching Isa and he was blown back by the force of them. You hopped back up and threw your blade across the arena, watched it spin just like your yoyos and catch him in the chest. He went limp for a moment as your weapon reappeared in your hands.

“STOP THIS, ISA!” You charged him, “Space!”

Again, another Graviga came down on him, halting him further, but that wasn’t all. You saw what he was doing earlier, he was holding back his attacks. So, there was someone in there, somewhere. If only he’d respond.

If you thought it would help, you would lay your weapon down and hope he’d come to his senses, but then he turned his head towards the children, waiting on the wings with their keyblades ready. If you backed down, if you didn’t give him something to focus on, he would only turn on them.

Seeing Xion and Roxas again, you knew in your heart you would kill him first, not without hesitation, but you would stop him by any means necessary. You had already lost them all once.

He lifted his claymore, just in time for you to swing you blade down, “Stop this, please!” Then, you spun and kicked his weapon down before swiping in a downwards arc. Though he was dazed for only a second, it still wasn’t enough.

That’s when it clicked, *this form’s done something with his defenses*. And, obviously, it wasn’t something you could take down oneself.

“Guys!” You shouted, dodging backwards before chasing him down, sparks flinging off the clash of your weapons, “Do your best magic on Isa! Give it your best shot!”

“But, you said – “
“No matter what I said!” You hollered, sending Isa skidding towards the middle of the arena, arms protecting his face, “Just do it!”

After a breath, arcs of light came at him from all angles. Slashes rolling across the ground, beams sprouting from the thin air, and barrages of it colliding with him all at once. You could see the change immediately as he went limp and dazed under the assault.

With Xion, Roxas, and Sora holding him down, the swell of déjà vu finally burst into sad, faded memories. “Isa…” You whispered with tears rolling down your cheeks. You gripped your blade and aimed straight for his heart. “I’m so sorry, please forgive me, brother.”

There was the squelch and crunch of flesh and bone before the blade came out from the other side. You stood toe to toe with him as his eyes twitched and that bestial yellow faded and unfamiliar – all too familiar gold stared into your eyes. With it, a blast of cold, foul air rushed up and around you both, dark waves of black and purple. Shock, pure and simple, was all that he wore as his claymore slipped from his hands.

The three children stepped back and his legs collapsed underneath him, but you were quick to catch him, gently lowering him to the ground.

“Isa!” You gasped, wiping his hair out of his face, “Talk to me, please!”

He groaned, “Y/N…”

Lea raced over to you, standing over the scene with tears in his eyes.

“Why… so sad?” Isa asked you both as you wept.

Lea shut his eyes, then shouted with anger laced in every word, “You let them reduce you to this?”

Isa said nothing, leaning against your chest, then said, almost laughed, “I thought you outgrew the marks under your eyes.”

He wiped his tears, “So?”

The air shifted around Isa, as if he were a window pane on a rainy day. His figure was becoming evermore hazy with each passing second, “You look like…” He smiled sadly, “you need them.”

“Stop it.” Lea begged, “The whole act. I thought,” he looked at you, “this was all for them.”

You blinked as Isa sighed, “At first.” He admitted, look at the ground instead of you, “I sacrificed everything to try and track them down.” You caught his eye out of his peripheral, it was pained.

“You’re the one who went off and made other friends.” He shuddered in agony, you could feel it under his coat, “Left all of us in the dust.” But, he managed to straighten himself just a little, “It infuriated me how you just exited our lives.” But it could not last for long, and pain like a hot wire coursed through him.

He fell into you ungracefully, now he had no choice but to look you in the eye. “I lost… all sense of purpose.” He said, looking straight at you. “Y/N… When I found you…”

“I know.” You said, cradling him, “I remember now.”

“What I did…” He blinked slowly in his suffering, “it was unforgivable. As is what I just made you do. You should have had nothing to do with this.”
“It’s my fight as long as you two are involved.” You scolded him, sniffling, “I’ve been looking for you for far too long to just sit back and wait. And…” You gave him a teary smile, “I already forgive you.”

A smile finally graced his face, “Thank you. As…” He grunted, “do I.”

Lea was already kneeling beside the two of you, watching with pained eyes, helping holding him up “I didn’t forget you.”

“Yes…” He sighed, “I know. You wouldn’t do that. But,” he hissed, “I was jealous.”

“You admit it.”

“Well, if I make it back, you won’t get it out of me a second time.” Isa tried to stand, only for another wave of darkness to spill out of him. Weak, he toppled over and into Lea’s arms. You leaned over them, holding Isa’s hands.

“See you, Isa.” The two of you said.

He smiled serenely, as he did before, once, “See you, Lea, Y/N.”

And in both of your arms, your friend vanished in wisps of black.

Chapter End Notes

We’re at the final stretch y’all!!!!
Thank you so much for reading everyone!
Isa was gone. By your hands. It was long, and no doubt painful, but then it was over in a blink of an eye. Would he come back?

Well… You wondered, meeting Lea’s eyes, you’ve had a good track record so far.

Lea helped you up and Sora ran over, but before he could open his mouth, he said in a soft, quiet voice, “You go help Kairi.”

“Go get her back.” You nodded with an equally sad voice.

With fire in his eyes, he turned towards the exit, “Right. Good luck.” And ran on ahead.

Lea mumbled something under his breath with crossed arms, but your attention was on Roxas. The boy jogged towards you, beaming with a tired but warm smile.

Smiles of your own spread across your faces, until the sound of sobbing brought your eyes to Xion. She held her hands clasped over her stomach, eyes downcast with tears pouring over her cheeks.

After a moments silence, Lea said, “I guess,” he rubbed the back of his head, “I should’ve brought some ice cream.”

Again, they smiled those familiar, fond smiles, and tears spilled down your faces.

Lea was the one to hug them first, holding them close to his chest as they sobbed together. You watched and waited patiently, unable to stop crying. They moved, wordlessly inviting you, and you ran to them. You threw your arms around their shoulders and held them closer than you’ve ever held them before. Lea wrapped his arm around your shoulder, the other around Xion.

“I missed you…” You wept, pressing wet kisses to their cheeks.

“We missed you, too.” Roxas hiccuped into your shoulder.

“I – “ Xion cried, “I’m so happy!” She clung to you both, ”I’m sorry, I can’t stop crying.”

Lea cupped the back of her head, pressing her against his collarbone, “Don’t be sorry!” He gasped, “Don’t ever be sorry.”

Still crying, you created some space between the three of you and gently touched their faces. The faces you missed so much, even if you forgot, “I didn’t say it enough, I love you two so much.” A new waved crashed over you and you pulled them in tightly, “I love you so so much!”

“I love you, too.” Lea whispered, petting their hair out of their wet faces, “And I don’t care if it embarrasses you, I’m gonna make up for every ‘I love you’ I missed before.”

Roxas laughed, leaning into his hand with a wobbly smile, “Okay.”

Xion snuggled further into your chest, unwilling to ever let go, “We love you, too. So, please,” She hid her face into you, “don’t leave us.”
“Never.” You kissed her head.

“Never ever.” Lea promised, and this time, he knew he would keep it.

And you would, forever.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this and just,, it felt like it needed to be a chapter by itself. I cried writing this moment the whole way through.

Last chapter will be up next. It's been a long and crazy ride, and thank you all for joining it with me!
Flowers brushed against your ankles in the breeze. The clouds rolled endlessly onward, forever.

“Hey, Lea.”

He flinched in surprise, then turned to you. That familiar, bright smile split across his face. You felt your own reflect it.

“Y/N!” He said, holding his hand out. Your fingers slipped between his like they were meant for each other. “Whatcha doing?”

“Nothing.” You replied, leaning into his shoulder. All was quiet for a moment as you watched the sun set closer to the horizon, “Hey, do you remember the first time we met?”

He chuckled quietly, scratching the back of his head, “I’ve got it memorized; how could I forget?”

His ears flushed, “I hit you in the head with my frisbee, right here in the garden.”

You laughed, “I think I can still feel the bump.”

It was morning already. And again, you woke up in a pair of warm arms.

You were still exhausted in your bones, but you remembered waking up in the middle of your long sleep and finding the will to slowly make love to the man currently curled around you.

He was snoring peacefully on your bare chest, totally entwined with you, like he wished you were one and not separate. How deep was his love for you? As deep as your love for him, at least. A love that surrounded, encompassed, and kept you warm and safe. A beautiful love that should never run dry, even in the hottest droughts, nor wash away in torrential rain.

“I love you.” You whispered into the space between you.

A low hum responded, “I love you, too.”

A smile spread across your face, “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long.” He mumbled back, taking a moment to stretch out before wrapping around you once again.

Sunlight hit the curtains of your bedroom in Radiant Garden in midday glory. How long had you been asleep? Probably too long. Cid and the others might be getting worried.
Your heart skipped a beat when you remembered two others that may be waiting for you.

“We should check on Roxas and Xion.”

Lea went still, as if he forgot as well. With a sleepy groan, he got on he elbows and blinked away the last dregs of sleep. Then, he took a moment to just drink in the sight of you with a soft smile, “You’re beautiful, you know that right?”

You cupped his face, rubbed his cheekbone with your thumb, “And you’re devilishly handsome. I’m sure you know that.”

He laughed, then leaned down to kiss your chin, then your lips, “We should get dressed.”

You sighed, but the anticipation of seeing your family again had your heart pumping, “Alright.”

However, it was really stuffy in there, and you first opened up the windows to let in the fresh air.

Despite having shed your clothes in an exhausted haze, you managed to spot most of them on the ground. You made to grab your underwear when you noticed Lea standing over his black coat.

He picked it off the ground, then paused. He stood there with the coat held out in front of him, put between the two of you. Then, fire stemmed from his fingers, and in a matter of seconds it was reduced to ash so fine you couldn’t even see any of it. But what you wanted to see was already standing there, with a smile on his face.

“Don’t need it.” He stepped forward, cupping your bare shoulders in his palms. His hands trailed down to your elbows, there was barely any room between the two of you. “It’s about time I tried on something new.”

Without a word, the two of you moved to press your foreheads together, breathing in the same air.

The smell of smoke drifted through the breeze, reminding you of something you had no use for, too.

He let you pull away with a small hum, watching you dig through your belongings until you returned.

Your coat unraveled and hung between the two of you. The leather shoulders bunched up in your hands, so familiar, even comforting. But, there was no reason to keep it, no reason to want it. Not when it’s time in your life was finally at it’s end.

With significant concentration, embers smoked from your fingers, laced through the fabric, festering and smoldering until it all blew away in a flash of fire. You beamed. “I don’t need it, either.”

Lea stood naked before you, and you stood naked before him. There would be nothing between you now, not ever. You both pushed forward and wrapped yourselves within the other. His long arms supported your back, his face in your shoulder. You pushed your hand through his hair and breathed him in. Both pressing against the other as if you could will the lines that made you separate disappear.

“I love you.” He kissed your shoulder.

You pressed a kiss to his temple, “I love you.”
The flowers swam in an ocean of wind while the clouds rolled endlessly onward, forever towards a red horizon.

He stepped closer to you, his fingers squeezing yours. “I sometimes can’t believe we’ve gotten this far.”

“I know, right?” You pressed your face into his arm and breathed him in, “In a way, we’ve been with each other the entire time.”

It took him a second to remember, but of course he did. “Of course we were. I’d never leave you alone.”

“I know.” You leaned away with a smile, “Speaking of, there’s something I’d like to ask, love.”

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

You looked him right in the eye, backlit by the beautiful sunset, “Would you stay with me?”

You both showered before anything. It wasn’t more than just washing up, you both were still sore and groggy. You helped scrub him when the pain was too much, his wounds from Xemnas’ blows still fresh. In the middle of washing his chest, you leaned forward and kissed his scars, catching him off guard. But, he was quick to smile and kiss your head in gratitude.

Both clean and in the softest clothes you had, you stepped out of the bathroom and towards the smell of food like a trance.

Cid and Aerith were at the stove, cooking a light vegetable stew. Merlin was nearby, merrily waving his wand to set the table. Leon was pulling buttered buns out of the oven, only for Yuffie to sneak up on him and snatch one out from under his nose.

Sitting at the table were Roxas and Xion, now in Aerith’s and Leon’s hand me downs. It seems they, too, let go of their coats.

They were the first to catch sight of the two of you and they beamed. Xion shot out of her seat and barreled into the two of you, followed closely by Roxas.

“And good morning to you, too.” Lea laughed, though you could see his eyes were wet. He gave them a squeeze, then whispered in their ears, “Guess what?”

“What?” Roxas whispered back.

He held them closer, “I love you.”

Their arms held on tighter, “Love you, too.” Roxas mumbled, his ears hot.

“I love you!” Xion admitted happily.

“Love you, love you, love you!” You teased, kissing their hair.

“Okay, okay!” Roxas groaned, pushing your faces away, “I love you, now let me go.”
Xion giggled and gleefully took all the attention for herself, humming a happy tune.

“So,” Cid said from the stove with a soft, knowing smile, “We’ve been meaning to ask who’re these kids you brought home.”

With a mischievous wink at Lea, you tossed Xion into the air and held her high. She shrieked, but quickly dissolved into laughter.

“This is Xion.”

With a smirk, Lea grabbed Roxas and held him out below the armpits like a cat, and he grumbled appropriately, “And this is Roxas.”

“They’re our kids now. We’re adopting them.”

All grouching and laughing stopped immediately. Though neither of you could see it, the rest of your family saw the wonder and surprise in their eyes before they welled up in tears. Xion hid her face behind her hands and Roxas tried to wipe them away on his arm before you noticed, but it was in vain.

“Woah, hey, hey,” Lea set Roxas down and turned him around to face him, “Sorry, we didn’t mean to make you cry.”

With a shocked, breathy laugh, you turned Xion’s face into your shoulder and grinned apologetically at the entire situation, “Maybe we should’ve kept it a surprise.”

Roxas leaned forward until his forehead was pressed against Lea’s chest, neither of them looked like they were going to stop crying any time soon.

You and Lea shared an embarrassed, happy smile, and waited for your kids to stop crying before leading them back to the table.

You watched Yuffie sit beside Roxas and wave her spoon around, retailing tales of her exploits with the proud air of the youngest finally bumping up to young er. It seems they were getting along just as well as you thought they would.

Cid was already doting on them like a proud grandfather, never letting their bowls run dry and pushing more and more rolls to them. “Y’all are skinny, especially you.” He nodded to Xion, “You’re just like Y/N when we found them. Eat up.”

Leon chuckled beside you, “If you don’t make it official soon, he’s going to take your place.”

“As if I’d – we’d let them.” Lea scoffed, but by the look in his eyes, he was obviously relieved on how well they’d been received.

Aerith, who was sitting opposite Lea, leaned forward and put her chin on her hands, “So, what’s the parenting situation going to look like?”

“Oh,” You gasped, then narrowed your eyes at her, “Hey, you saw them off too, you should already know.”

Now, the conversation grabbed Yuffie’s attention. She leaned around Roxas and grinned at you from down the table, “Yeeaahh!” She fluttered her eyes, but before she could say another word, Cid pinned her with The Look ™ and stopped her in her tracks.
Lea glanced nervously around the room, until you put your hand in his.

“So, yeah,” You told the table, “We’re a couple now.” Then, you straightened, remember something important that you promised him. How was it only yesterday.

But, before you could say a thing, the majority of the room erupted in cheers.

In any case, you thought, staring at Xion and Roxas happily joined to your family, it looks like you were parents now.

“Huh?” He leered at you, “I’m pretty sure we’re connected at the hip now, I don’t think there’s any closer we can be.”

You huffed, “Yeah, but I mean,” You took his other hands and held them close to your chest, “Stay with me. You won’t ever be alone, because I will always be with you. No matter what happens, who or what we face, whatever the future holds, we’ll face it together, even when we’re scared.”

He stared at you in a mix of confusion and affection, until you reached into your pocket and pulled out a ring. His eyes went wide and his jaw dropped. He made no comment, perhaps he was unable to, as he took the ring and slipped it onto his finger. Wordlessly, he held it out to the setting sun, admiring it with a slow smile.

You had only moved everything to your new apartment in Twilight Town when he reappeared.

After finishing another box, you stood up and stretched your back, “Ugh, love, let’s take a break.”

Lea wiped sweat off his brow, taking in the state of the kitchen. Almost everything had been taken care of, but there was still a mess of pots, pans, and boxes everywhere.

He rolled his shoulders with a frown, “The kids are hanging out with Hayner and that crew, right? So, we’ve got some time before they can come give us a hand.”

“Mhmm.” You sighed with your hands on your hips, then you patted his shoulder and kissed his cheek as you passed by, “Let’s go get some ice cream and go to the clocktower.”

He turned his head to kiss you full on the lips, “Yeah, sounds good.”

“Great, let’s get changed – “

There was a knock on the door. You both paused. Roxas and Xion both had keys, they were living there after all, so they wouldn’t knock. Unless it was some neighbor complaining about noise, you had no idea who it could be.

“I got it.” Lea sighed before peaking through the peephole. He went still, then turned to you with shock written in every line.

“What?” You asked, coming closer, “Who is it?”

As an answer, he opened the door.
“Isa.”

The man stood in the doorway, looking small. “Hello.” He said, “It’s good to see you again.”

In response, you both brought him in for a close, warm hug. After a moment of silence, Isa wrapped his arms around your shoulders. None of you acknowledged the tears rolling down his nose.

“Okay,” He whispered, “So, we gonna ask Isa to officiate our wedding?”

“C’mon, Isa.” Lea called, “Are you done yet?”

A moment passed, then he stepped out of the dressing room in shapeless gray sweats. He wiped imaginary dust off his chest before noticing your expressions.

“What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Lea snorted, hiding his smile behind his hand.

You grinned, your hands in your pockets, “It’s just good to have you back.”

And again, the three of you ate ice cream at sunset. Not for the first, and not for the last time.

For a moment there, you were afraid he was going to turn you down, but your fears were for nothing. “Okay.” You felt tears roll down your cheeks. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.”

When he finally turned to you, he was crying, too. The two of you fell into each other, holding and loving one another like neither of you would love another.

The sound of laughter rolled down to you, coming closer to the town. Your smile grew even wider when you thought about telling them. The people you held just as close to your heart.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

You watched the gummi ship touch down on the island’s shore before turning your attention back to Aqua, then did a double take.

Down the ramp came a slight young woman with blond hair, wearing a pale white dress.

Your breath caught in your throat as you stared at her taking her first step on sand before you began running towards her, picking up speed.

“NAMINÉ!”
She turned at the call of her name, her gray blue eyes fell on you and she beamed. “Astra!”

She moved to meet you, but she didn’t get far before you swept her off her feet in a bear hug. Her arms instinctively wrapped around your neck and her face pressed against your shoulder.

“Astra…!” You felt your shirt grow wet, “You’re really here.”

“I’m here.” You promised, falling to your knees. You kissed her hair, “I’ll always be here.”

She leaned away to look you in the face with a teary smile, “I missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” You kissed her forehead, “I didn’t say it before, I think, but I love you so much, sweetheart.”

Her eyes went wide as those words hit her ears, then the sobs ran anew as she fell back into you, “I love you, too.”

Xion and Roxas ran towards you with happy surprise.

“Naminé!” Xion gasped, falling to her knees and wrapping her arms around her neck, “You’re back!”

“I’m back!” She sniffed, “I’m so happy to be back.”

Roxas circled to the other side and knelt, holding her shoulder, “Welcome back.”

A soft giggle gently burst from Naminé, “Thank you. All of you.”

You didn’t notice Lea join you until he knelt beside you, gazing apologetically at the girl in your arms. In your ear, he whispered, “I guess we’ve got another one, huh?”

“You bet your sweet ass we do.” You murmured back, holding her tighter.

After a pregnant pause, he nodded and said to her, “Hey,”

She turned her face from the other children and her eyebrows shot into her hair, then she leaned away, unsure of herself and the man beside you.

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry,” He bowed his head, “Even if I was just playing my roll, the way I treated you…” He finally made eye contact with her, “That was no way to treat you, I’m really sorry.”

“Axel…”

He gave her a small, hesitant smile, “If you’d let me, I’d like to make it up to you. The four of us,” he nodded around, “have a place in Twilight Town.”

“Would you join us?” You asked hopefully, “We’ll take care of you. Please,” you all but begged, “let me make it up to you, too. When I wasn’t able to help you.”

For a long moment, there was no answer, then, silent tears began running down her face, “Really?”

“Really.” Lea echoed with a brightening smile.

Xion and Roxas beamed at each other. Xion took Naminé’s hands and held them close to her chest, “We’ll be here for you, too.”
“Like you were there for us.” Roxas grinned.

“We won’t let you down.”

“Yep. Never.”

Slowly, her arms fell from your shoulders and she held them to her face, trying to wipe away her weeping tears even as more took their place. She nodded again, and again, “Yes,” she cried quietly, “Yes, please.”

A beautiful grin bloomed across your face before your wrapped her into a hug anew, followed by Xion, Roxas, and finally Lea.

“Thank you, Naminé.”

“I’ll be with you.” Lea whispered into your shoulder.

You kissed his temple, “Always.”

The sun glowed one last time before setting below the horizon, and it would do so again tomorrow. Again, and again, and again.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god. It's over. I can't believe it's over. Thank you all so much for your love and support, you guys kept me going! I'm happy I lived to see this to the end Have beautiful days, everyone. And thank you again :)

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