The Tie that Binds

by Arcawolf

Summary

Xehanort had assumed that once Ventus and Vanitas merged, Vanitas would wake up in charge and ready for the next stage of their plan.

Maybe he should have doubled-checked that assumption was correct before the first stage went ahead.

(AU Where Ven-Vanitas turns out to be a darker and much more selfish Ven, and the universe still ends up needing Sora to save it.)

Notes

Please note that while this story will cover several events from canon, it's not going to be canon-compliant. There's just so many details in canon now that I can't keep track of them all.
Prologue

The first thing he’s aware of is pain. He lurches off his stomach and onto his feet, as if he can run away from it. But it follows, it follows from a place deep within and he keels over until he’s on his knees. There is a fire in his chest, hot and searing, cold and jagged. His heart quivers with each breath, like there’s too much inside and it’s about to explode.

A weapon comes to his hand. It’s a long, sword-like thing with two crossed keyblades as its – it vanishes again as he cries out in agony. Now he’s on his hands and knees. He wants it to stop. He just wants to go home and curl up until it stops . . .

Responding to his unspoken desires, a dark portal opens in front of him. He looks up and forces himself to trudge through the darkness. It spits him out in a room both strange and intimately familiar, and he crawls into the bed. He throws the covers over himself until he can’t see. (Can’t see the window and the land outside which was once so bright but is now shrouded in darkness.) He clenches his jaw and tries to sleep it off.

Back in the desert he just left, a blue-haired woman stirs.

Xehanort is down, but the heart is still corrupted.

The battered armour drags itself forward. Its rage is smouldering, but there is nothing to fight. Xehanort is down, and should it destroy the body, He cannot return. It wonders though, if the gain is worth the price. There will be no Xehanort. Aqua and Ven will be safe.

She is calling His name. The armour turns. It has no eyes with which to see, but it feels the pulse of her heart, and the soft hum of her keyblade. It extends a hand in acceptance, in loyalty. She is not yet here, but it knows the direction in which she lays.

The heart behind it stirs. It turns; the keyblade sharpens into a whip. But with the last of its strength, Xehanort’s heart calls upon the shadows to swallow him. The darkness fades, and Xehanort is gone.

She is here. She calls His name. Her hand rests on his chest plate and she is disturbed at the lack of heart.

“What happened to you?” she asks. “Who are you?”

“I am what remains. Radiant Garden,” it intones, because that is where He is. Because it was Him once, so it knows. “That is where you will find Him.”

She knocks on his chest and listens to the echo. “Are. . . Are you going to be okay?”

“A will like mine does not fade,” it tells her. “Find Him.”

She nods, and she is gone. It cannot follow; it lacks the body to endure through the perils of space. It must stay. It is here Xehanort’s plan will reach its climax, and here Xehanort will return.

“One day. . . I will set this right.”

“I’m with you,” she whispers. She smiles as she casts Terra off toward the light.
He wakes up, and he’s engulfed by urges he doesn’t fully understand. *(Find him. Find her. Claim Kingdom Hearts. Rip out the Master’s heart.)*

His feet take him to the Keyblade Graveyard, the place where he expects to satisfy his strongest cravings. Terra and Aqua do not respond to his shouts, so he shifts to Plan B. The X-Blade comes to him *(his soul sings because he knows this keyblade, because it means he is finally complete)*, ready to serve.

He should use it. He should summon Kingdom Hearts. It is his purpose.

His arms shake as he stands in the Keyblade Graveyard and points the X-Blade at the sky. He needs to do this. This is the reason he was created.

*(Yet something at him screams otherwise. He wants to summon Kingdom Hearts, and he wants to die to stop the summoning. He wants them to put an end to him so this never, ever comes to pass—)*

He pulls at his hair and screams. His knees hit the sand.

“What are you doing here?”

The voice echoes. He looks up at the gold and red armour. Terra?

“Ven. Why are you here?” Terra asks.

“I’m here to unlock Kingdom Hearts,” he says truthfully.

A strange noise comes from Terra, like his bones are rattling in a cage. He swipes Ends of the Earth through the air. “No! That is Xehanort’s plan. You cannot.”

“No?” he repeats.

He looks up at the armour towering over him. The image flickers, and then it is Terra he is looking up at, Terra telling him to leave.

“Okay,” Ven says. He wipes tears from his eyes. He laughs bitterly because he was the one complaining about being smothered before and now he’s just so glad to have Terra to guide him.

But something is wrong. He inhales and smells only metal. He knows the scent of Terra’s darkness *(from that time where he crawled in shadows, when he was a wretched soul chasing after the light.)* He knows the scent of Terra’s heart.

“Terra, what happened to you? Where’s your heart?”

“Radiant Garden,” the armour intones.

“Do you remember your name?” the blond man asks him.

It takes a while to come, like it’s wading its way to him through a thick sludge. “Xehanort.”

Behind Ansem, Braig smirks.

“My name is Xehanort,” he tells the boy that has suddenly appeared at his bedroom door.

There is a long silence. The boy is small, young, and yet Xehanort finds he cannot tear his eyes
“Is this some kind of joke?” the boy suddenly spits. And Xehanort steps back because he wasn’t prepared for the frantic fury in those gold eyes. “Your name isn’t Xehanort. You’re Terra!”
But Which Me Am I?

Yeah, this no longer looks like it’s going to be four chapters.

“Prove it,” he asks the boy. “If I truly am this Terra, present your proof.”

“Ask me anything.” The boy helps himself to his desk chair. It’s inconsiderate. Then again, considering the boy had simply walked in here without awaiting any sort of permission, he should have expected it.

There is no simple question to ask the boy. The boy could lie, and he remembers too little to separate truth from lies. The only thing he did remember was his name – a name the boy claims is the lie. There is nothing else to test. Nothing but . . .

He walks past the boy and pulls out the orange star-shaped charm from his desk drawer. (The charm he had lashed out at Dilan for when they tried to take it from him, the charm he had clutched tight to his breast without understanding why.) “Tell me what this is.”

“That’s your Wayfinder,” the boy says.

“What is . . .?”

He trails off. The boy has pulled out a charm of his own, the same as his, but green. Oblivious to his shock, the boy speaks. “We all have one. Yours is orange. Mine’s green, and Aqua’s is blue”

“Aqua?” he repeats. The name is familiar somehow.

The boy stares at him. “Do you really not remember anything? Do you know who I am?”

He shakes his head.

He sees grief in those golden eyes. The boy puts the charm away. On his lap, his hands curl into fist.

“Okay. That’s fine. I can handle this.” The boy hops to his feet and approaches him for a handshake. “My name is . . . it’s . . . Ventus. Yeah, Ventus. I’m Ventus! But just call me Ven.”

He shakes the offered hand. “I am . . .”

“You’re Terra. You’re my best friend. Aqua’s our other best friend. You two grew up together, I think. I came along a lot later so I’m not entirely sure.”

“Aqua,” he repeats again.

“Yeah. I don’t know where she is right now,” Ven says. “I’m sure she’ll get here eventually. She’s had plenty of practice following us from world to world.”

There guilt in Ven’s words that he doesn’t understand. He changes the subject. “If I am Terra, then why does the name Xehanort . . .”
“You’re Terra,” the boy snarls and for a moment, there’s something flickering in his hands. Something dark and wispy, like fire. “Xehanort was someone we knew. You were with him before. . . before whatever happened to make you end up here. That’s why you remember that name.”

“I already told them my name is Xehanort.” It’s a weak excuse, and he cringes to hear it come from him.

To his surprise, the boy nods. “Good. Let’s keep it that way.”

“Weren’t you the one insisting I am Terra?”

“That’s because it’s just us,” Ven says. “It’s not safe for everyone to know, though. I’ve seen the people who took you in. Not all of them are our friends.”

“I am Xehanort.” He doesn’t mean for it to come out uncertain.

Braig’s eye narrows. “You are. Why you asking?”

“I am not asking. I am stating.”

“Well, I’ll state something, too.” Braig steps in front of him, forcing him to stop. “You’re Xehanort. Anyone says differently, then they’re a liar. Anyone bothers you about it, you come get me. Got it?”

He nods.

They start walking again. There is something he must ask.

He holds out the orange charm. “Do you know what this is?”

Braig gives it a onceover. “Piece of junk, if you ask me. If I were you, I would toss it.”

The boy returns. He trots into Xehanort’s room like he owns the place. Xehanort is at his desk, studying the Wayfinder. Toss it, Braig had told him. A piece of junk, Braig had claimed. Yet the boy owned its twin. . .

“Are you planning to stay here? Don’t you want to go home?” Ven asks him.

“This is my home now,” Xehanort says.

Ven glances out the window. “Huh. I guess the Land of Departure isn’t a great place to stay anymore. I don’t know what happened but. . . It’s all dark and messy there.”

“Where will you go?” he asks the boy.

“I’ll stick around,” Ven says. “Hey, can you do me a favour? Don’t tell the others about me.”

He agrees. He keeps the vow. The promise thrums at the center of his being like a second heart.

He never finds out where Ven spends his time. Ven always comes to him. Ven comes to him after dinner when he has retired to his chambers, and Ven comes to him when he wanders the city by himself. Sometimes, when he’s walking through the streets with the others, he feels eyes upon him, waiting for him to be alone.
Ven is chatty. He talks about his day. He talks about Xehanort’s day as if he was there, just lurking in the shadows. He talks about things Xehanort doesn’t remember and doesn’t understand. He talks about things Xehanort doesn’t remember, but still feels a kinship towards.

Sometimes, Ven doesn’t talk at all. He simply basks in Xehanort’s company. Xehanort doesn’t mind. He finds he looks forward to Ven’s visits, no matter how chatty he is that day.

Ven insists on calling him Terra. Xehanort adapts and learns to respond to both names.

“You seem to trust Braig a lot,” Ven remarks.

“He’s made a point to look out for me,” Terra Xehanort says.

“You sure he has your best interests at heart?” Ven asks. He’s lying on his stomach on Xehanort’s bed, arms propped up by his elbow and cradling his chin.

“He’s given me no reasons to doubt him.”

“Maybe, but I’d be surprised if he isn’t holding a grudge,” Ven says sweetly. “You did take out his eye.”

“Who did that to him?” he asks Dilan.

“Braig says it was a man named Terra,” Dilan answer. “Don’t worry. I won’t let something like that happen again.”

“Who attacked Braig?” he asks Aeleus.

“His name was Terra,” Aeleus tells him.

“Who did that to you?” he asks Braig.

Braig gives him a long look. “Why? You worried about me, pops?”

“If there is a threat, we should know about it,” Xehanort says firmly.

Braig puts a hand on his shoulder. Squeezes. “There’s nothing to worry about. That kid isn’t coming back. Trust me. I know.”

“What’s taking her so long?” Ven mumbles as he studies his Wayfinder.

Terra Xehanort hasn’t thought much about her, this woman (Aqua) Ven claims as their friend. But Ven’s question, the pure heartache there strikes something deep within him. Ven’s question sinks in and grabs his heart in a vice. It rips open a scar Terra never knew was there. It opens a gaping hole deep within and he doesn’t know how to fill it.

“Even.” He taps the snoring man on the back of his skull. Even wakes with a yelp, limbs flailing. Terra acts quickly to keep Even from knocking his papers off his desk.

“What is it?” Even demands. “Has the experiment produced results?”

Xehanort smirks. “No. But I have stew for you.”
He put the bowl down and pushes it in front of the groggy-eyed man. Even pokes the spoon, as if unsure whether this is reality.

“Who told you I skipped dinner?” Even asks.

“No one,” he says smugly. “This isn’t the first time you’ve been so engrossed in a project that you’ve forgotten to eat.”

Even stares at him. “What? For you, it is.”

He blinks. “I . . . No, it’s not you. It’s . . . It reminds me of someone. That’s why I knew.”

“Of whom?” Even says, squinting at him.

“I don’t know.”

“I’m with you,” she whispers to him. He’s helpless as he’s tossed back into the light.

“You’re leaving?” Terra Xehanort says with nothing less but shock.

“Only for a few days,” Ven says. “I’ll be back.”

He says nothing. He understands Ven’s words, but he’s still barely able to understand what he’s saying. Ven isn’t supposed to leave him. Ven is supposed to stand with him always.

Ven reads his face. “I’m sorry, but . . . I’m worried about Aqua. She’s never taken this long to catch up before. What if she’s lost her memory, too, and is stranded on some other world?”

Is it possible? Perhaps. He is still unaware of what caused his own memory loss.

Something deep within him speaks. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” Ven says with a soft smile. “I’m going to track down which world she’s on, and then we’ll come home to you. Promise.”

He forces himself to nod, to trust. “Stay safe.”

Ven returns empty-handed. He leaves again. He again returns with nothing.

There’s a shift in his routine. Ven now spends most days away from Radiant Garden, and portals back at night to spend time with him. Terra Xehanort never asks how the search is going; Ven’s body language tells enough. Instead, he tells the boy about his day, tries to cheer him up with his own successes and breakthroughs. It works and Ven is happy for him, but then the stars come out and he sees Ven watching them, looking lost and younger than Terra has ever seen him before.

“What are you doing here?” Braig asks.

“I’m trying to understand.”

He has the armour’s metal glove spread out on a table. His left hand is laid out beside it. The glove is too small. It would never fit him.
Braig is looking over his shoulder, so Terra Xehanort feels inclined to speak. “This can’t possibly be mine.”

“Didn’t think so. Always seemed too small.” Braig claps him on the shoulder. “Say, where’s the giant key? It hasn’t disappeared, has it?”

Braig’s single gold eye is blazing when he asks that last question. It unnerves him, but he refuses to show it. Instead, he answers calmly. “I moved it. It is surprisingly sharp, and I don’t want to see anyone injured.”

“But it’s still in the castle?”

A strange question. “Where else could it be?”

Braig doesn’t answer that, but his lips cock into a smirk. “Heh, good question. Guess nobody’s coming for it.”

He doesn’t understand the hidden meaning, but he understands the tone. And Terra Xehanort Terra understands something else as well:

Braig can’t be trusted.

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“Take this.”

Ienzo takes the wooden sword Terra carved for him. He looks up questioningly.

“Now you can train with Aeleus,” Terra says with a smile.

“Should you be encouraging this?” Even hisses.

“Yes,” Terra says. Because it feels right.

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“I am Terra,” he tells Ven.

“Yes. I know,” Ven says, confused.

“You are Ven, my best friend. I trust you,” Terra says.

Ven says nothing, understanding this time that this is something Terra needs to say, needs to assimilate. Terra is ready to cast off all doubts, to embrace the identity of the life he has forgotten.

“There’s something I want to show you,” he tells Ven.

He takes Ven to an old storeroom and turns on the light. He directs Ven to one of the back corners, where they are waiting.

“I wasn’t found with just my Wayfinder,” he tells an extremely still and quiet Ven. “These items were with me as well.”

“Where did you get these?” Ven whispers.

“I don’t know. They were found with me.”

“No!” Ven bolts from his side. He collapses to his knees, and snatches up the metal helmet, turning it
over and over in his hands. “This is hers. What are they doing here?”

“Whose?” Terra asks, but he has a sinking feeling about the answer.

“Aqua’s!” Ven cries. “This is her armour, and that’s her keyblade. What are they doing here?”

“I don’t understand,” he says quietly. He can’t speak any louder because he can feel that this is wrong; he’s done something horribly wrong.

“She can’t travel between worlds without these,” Ven splutters. “She can’t fight without these. Why is Stormfall here? Why hasn’t she summoned it back?”

“Summon it? What do you. . .?”

Ven whips out his arm and something long and sharp appears. It resembles a sword, but the handle is strangely made from two giant, crisscrossed keys.

“It’s called a keyblade,” Ven explains. “They’re weapons manifested from our heart. We’re supposed to be able to call upon them no matter where we are.”

The ensuing silence is only broken by the clatter of metal as Ven drops the helmet in favour of Aqua’s keyblade.

“Ven, if she hasn’t summoned it back. . .”

“No!” Ven tugs at his neck. A chain appears, and so does the green Wayfinder attached to it. As Ven stares into the glass, he says, “She’s alive. I can feel it. Terra, how did you end up with these?”

“I don’t know,” he says helplessly.

“Then make yourself remember!” Ven stomps toward him. “This is the first lead I’ve gotten on her since she disappeared. I . . . If you have these, I think you have the answer to where she’s gone.”

“I want to remember, but I can’t. . .”

“You can.” Gently, Ven lays a hand on his chest, right above his heart. “Those memories are in there, somewhere. They’ve got to be.”

“Master Ansem, may I have a word?”

“Of course. Come in.”

The Master is browsing through a white binder when Terra enters. He doesn’t look up as Terra takes a seat and is only drawn away from his task when he realizes he needs a pen. He keeps working, filling in paperwork as he waits for Terra to speak.

“When you found me, I had no memories,” Terra begins. “I want to change that. There are things I need to remember. Things that I must remember.”

“Have the appointments with the therapist garnered no results?” It’s a question, but not really. They wouldn’t be talking about this unless they already knew the answer.

“None,” Terra says. “Maybe we’re going about this wrong. Maybe the memories aren’t stuck in my head, but my. . .”
He trails off, hand over his chest. The Master glances at him and understands.

“Master, I want to volunteer myself as a test subject,” he says.

“I heard your heart calling out to mine,” he tells her.

She releases a choking sob and the sound *hurts*. He wants to go to her, to hold her and shield her until the tears stop. But he cannot find her. He is lost in a realm of purple-black darkness and although he can hear her, he cannot see her.

“Where are you?” she asks.

“Radiant Garden,” he says immediately. *Come, find me. Come back to me.*

“You made it.” There is such joy, such relief in her voice that the sounds are barely recognizable as words. “And Ven? Do you know what happened to him?”

“He is with me.”

“... Thank you. That’s all I needed to know.”

His stomach drops at her words. There’s something lurking there: resignation.

“Aqua, where are you?” he demands. “Aqua? Answer me!”

He’s pulled away. There’s a hook in his core drawing him back. His fingers close on empty air, tear a phantom chain out and he runs forward. He cannot see her, but she must be here somewhere and if he keeps moving, he will find her.

Right before the dream ends, he sees a silhouette in the distance. He reaches out and calls her name.

_Again and again, he chases after her in a realm of purple-black darkness._

“Master Ansem, I...” He swallows and moistens his chapped lips. He is nervous for a reason he doesn’t fully understand. “I have a suggestion for our next step in our research.”

“And what is that, Xehanort?” the Master asks. Those wise eyes fix on him, ready to judge.

“All of our efforts have been focused on trying to understand the heart as a whole or only its light. However, there are two components to a heart: the light and darkness. I don’t believe ignoring one part completely is sound practice.”

“I understand, but darkness is a dangerous thing.” *(You haven’t changed, Master, Terra thinks suddenly.)* “There are great risks associated with delving into that subject.”

“Darkness is part of the heart’s true nature,” Terra says, voice deepening for a moment. “You may wish otherwise, but that is the truth. We will be careful.”

The Master sighs. He thinks for a long time.

“Very well. I’ll approve an exploratory project.”
“Are you sure about this?” Ven asks again.

“The brightest minds in Radiant Garden are assigned to this project,” Terra says. “It’s the best chance we have.”

Ven gnaws at his lower lip. “I know, it’s just . . . I want to make sure you recover the right memories. Promise you won’t do anything to yourself unless you’re sure it will work.”

“Ven, there can be no research without experiments.”

“Promise!” Ven snaps. “Promise that to me.”

He looks down at those fierce yellow eyes and finds he can’t deny him.

Later, he finds the apprentices in the library. He stands in the doorway, and the weight of his presence draws their attention.

“Testing on me is not enough,” Terra tells them calmly but firmly. “We will need more subjects.”

“Are you afraid?” Ven asks him.

Terra wonders. He turns his hand over and they watch the strange, purple flames that dance on his palm. It began happening shortly after their latest test, when they had delved into his heart and found something there.

“Should I be?” he asks Ven.

“No,” Ven says immediately. “The darkness is just another part of you.”

They find him sitting alone on the castle walls, moping as he watches the sunset. His fellow apprentices gather around in silent but steady support.

“We’ll find something that works, Xehanort,” Dilan tells him. “You’ll see your family again.”

“I’ve searched every world top to bottom,” Ven says hollowly. He hunches over a mug of cocoa. “Six years and not a single clue. What am I missing?”

“We’ll find her,” Terra vows. He squeezes Ven’s shoulder and remembers how a couple of years ago, squeezing this hard would have hurt him. “My research is making great strides. The answers we seek are within reach.”

“This is an outrage!” the Master shouts. “I told you to cease this project immediately.”

“Master, you don’t understand. We’re so close.” His hand slams down on the desk. Dimly, Terra is aware of an audience behind him. “I’m on the verge of a breakthrough. I can’t stop . . .”

“This data should have never seen the light of day. I was a fool to allow you to pursue it in the first place,” the Master says. “You will destroy it and forget everything to do with this abomination.”

His heart hardens. He says, “No. I won’t.”

The Master moves swiftly. Before Terra can react, he grabs a fistful of the papers he had been
holding against his chest. They tear. Terra cries out, reaching for the pieces in his Master’s hand.

“No more!” the Master declares, and he throws the papers into his burning fireplace.

“No!” Terra cries and he lunges at the fire. He doesn’t know what was on those. What if one of them had the information he needed? What if one was the answer?

The Master shoves him back and Terra can only watch as the papers curl into black ashes.

“It ends here, Xehanort.”

His grip slackens and the other papers tumble from his grasp. Terra breathes heavily, pants. It can’t end. He needs this and he’s so close to figuring it out. But the Master won’t listen to him because the Master never changes his mind because he’s always reviled the darkness. The Master has never understood, never wanted to understand the darkness inside him.

The Master kneels to grab the loose papers, to burn them too, and Terra grabs him by the throat.

It’s happening again. Once wasn’t enough. The Master raised his blade against Ven before, and now he’ll stand between them and Aqua. He can’t let that happen.

He growls, “You would keep me from my family?”

The Master coughs. Chokes.

“Xe. . . Xehanort!” the Master splutters.

That name stirs something dark within him. Terra says, “You will not stop me from finding her.”

Terra barely thinks. He raises his other arm, and the darkness rises also. The Master sees the dark portal and only has a moment for his eyes to widen before Terra throws him in that direction. He tries to save himself, to grab onto the edges and keep himself from falling through. But darkness is not solid to one like him; his hands pass through the mist and he disappears.

Terra turns to the other apprentices, all watching from the hallway.

“Our project continues,” he tells them.

Later, Braig finds him and compliments him on how he dealt with the ‘old coot.’

You’re next, something inside him whispers.

“You’re making Heartless. Is this necessary?” Ven asks him. They are standing outside the room with the Heartless Manufactory, watching the shadow that has just emerged from the machine. The beast has antennae that turn in their direction, as if it can sense their presence.

“To understand something, you must know all parts of its life,” Terra says. “Its birth. Its death. Only when you grasp the full existence can you begin to understand its soul.”

“You mean heart,” Ven deadpans. “Heartless don’t have a soul.”

Terra ignores the jab. “The darkness is the solution. That is where we will find our answer.”

Ven grunts. He leans against the glass. Terra studies him fondly. Ven is almost his height now, but he remembers when he didn’t even come up to his shoulders.
“If you’re sure,” Ven says after a while. “As long as you know what you’re doing. As long as this leads us to her.”

They misjudged. They cannot corral the darkness. The door he had found in the heart of the world did lead to darkness as he thought it would, but he was unable to wade through the tide.

Instead, he is back in the laboratory, watching as the other researchers attempt to bar the doors. He doesn’t tell them it is hopeless, that you can’t hold back shadows with physical barriers. There are screams out in the hallway where the Heartless reap their bounty and although something inside him wishes to fight and rush to their rescue, he doesn’t.

There is a window in the room, one too small for any of them to crawl though. The sky outside is dark and full of lightning, but he knows it is really day. He knows, with all the gratitude he can muster, that Ven is on a different world.

Braig walks up next to him, whispering, “Finally. Time for phase two.”

The treacherous swine shows no fear as the Heartless began to squeeze under the door. Terra waits. He waits until Dilan and Aeles are pulled under by the horde, until Braig steps forward to embrace the darkness. . .

Terra pulls out a knife and stabs Braig in the back.

Chapter End Notes

That's right! This is the story of how the Wayfinder Trio keep endangering the entire universe because they just love each other so damn much XD
When the dark corridor refuses to open into Radiant Garden, he knows something is horribly wrong. He portals to a world nearby instead, and flies through the Lanes Between to where Radiant Garden should be. Should be, because it isn’t. There is debris, remnants of the world expressed in house-sized rocks that float aimlessly through space. And there’s the acrid, overwhelming scent of pure darkness.

“Terra!” he shouts, although it is useless. Terra would not have stayed. Terra would have retreated to a safe world . . . Terra has yet to remember how to summon his keyblade. Ven hunts through the world’s graveyard, blasting aside boulders when they are too heavy to move, and picks through the rubble.

“He’s not dead,” Ven tells himself. “He’s not dead.”

He inhales. He holds his breath. Exhales. Moves to a new place and inhales again.

He keeps doing that until he finally picks up Terra’s scent.

“You remember everything now,” his Heartless asks – no, tells him.

“I do.”

The Heartless – Ansem as it has decided to call itself – sneers. “Then you know what we must do.”

“You’re not Terra.”

“I am what remains of his heart.”

“Heartless,” Ven growls. The X-Blade begins to take shape.

The Heartless chuckles. “Calm yourself, Ven. I am not a mindless beast like the others.”

“Then, you are Terra?” he asks. “Just different?”

He steps forward and reaches out. Terra (Heartless Terra?) glides out of his reach and suddenly, there’s a dark barrier shimmering between them.

“That is unwise,” Terra’s Heartless says. “I may retain my mind, but I still have the instinct to hunt and consume. I would rather you keep your distance.”

“O-okay, if you think I should. So, you’re a Heartless. Alright, fine. But you’re still . . . ?”

“I am no longer the only me. Go to him,” the Heartless orders. He raises his arm and a dark portal
appears on Ven’s side of the barrier. “My brother holds information that you will find very valuable.”

It is like the first time Ven found him in Radiant Garden, only it is not. Terra smiles at him. There’s no hesitation when he greets Ven, no . . . forgetting. For someone who apparently became a Heartless during their world’s destruction, Terra is not only remarkably unharmed, but unbothered. Somehow, he and the research group he had stayed with have made their way to a new world on the fringe of the universe, a world that Ven’s X-Blade-honed instincts tell him shouldn’t exist. And, somehow, on this world that shouldn’t exist, Terra managed to find a castle, too.

“So, you have found me again,” Terra says. He stands before a window, his back to Ven as he stares into the night sky.

“Yeah,” he says. He walks into Terra’s super-white room. “Terra, what happened?”

Terra tells him. Ven listens in horror as he emotionlessly explains the end he brought upon his own world, as he further explains why he feels so little about it.

"So, you're . . ." Ven staggers back into the wall. His legs wobble as he slides down it. "Terra, you're . . ."

"Perhaps it was meant to be," Terra says.

"How can you say that?" Ven demands. "I should have been there. I could have helped!"

"Perhaps you could have saved that world and me, but then we wouldn't be where we are."

"What does that mean?" When Terra doesn't answer right away, Ven shakes his head and returns to the subject that’s important. "It doesn't matter. How do I fix this?"

"Kingdom Hearts," Terra says, as if he has had decades, not a week to think about this without him. Ven's mouth goes dry. He stammers out the name twice.

“Terra, that’s . . . That’s insane! It’s Kingdom Hearts. We’re not supposed to. . . .”

“We are in a situation which the Master would have thought impossible,” Terra reminds him. "Ven, where else would you find a heart if not at the source of all hearts itself?"

Kingdom Hearts. They aren’t supposed to meddle with such godly things; they’re supposed to protect it. Terra does make sense though and it’s . . . it’s Terra. Even though he messes up sometimes, his intentions are always good. If Ven had to trust anyone with Kingdom Hearts, Terra would be at the top of the list.

On his third attempt to muster his nerve, the X-Blade comes to him. He takes hold of its handle. That familiar, dizzyingly desire to beg Terra to end him returns.

"Put it away," Terra says to his great relief, and surprise. "There are safer ways."

"Safer?" Ven repeats. "This is what the X-Blade was created for. How can there be something safer?"

Terra doesn't address that. "There are other ways we can summon Kingdom Hearts. Your X-Blade is not required."

He watches Terra closely, half expecting him to turn around and declare that was a joke. Yet Terra
"Terra, I can do this," he says quietly. "I don't know what you're worried about, but . . ."

"Are you certain?" Terra asks. "Can you promise that?"

Terra looks over his shoulder and straight into his eyes. The amber colour of his irises seems to bleed out beyond his face, engulfing the world. As it does, Ven is once again consumed by the need to be destroyed.

"As I thought," Terra says, turning back to the window. "We will use a safer means."

"Why do you even care if it's safe for me?" Ven mutters, boring a hole into the ground with his glower. "You can't feel anything."

He looks up, and jumps. Terra has half-turned towards him, and stares straight at him.

"No, I don't," Terra concedes. "But I remember what it was like to feel. I remember the person I used to be, and who I would become again. I know that if I were to regain my heart in exchange for you, I would spend every waking moment of my completed existence in agonizing regret."

Ven laughs. Something like a tear pokes at his eye. "You're even sappier without a heart."

But of course, Terra doesn't laugh. He returns to the window and continues as if that touching moment never happened. "The emblem Heartless I created hold hostage the hearts of their prey. If enough are released, Kingdom Hearts shall appear to us."

"Master Eraqus never said anything like that," Ven says. "How do you know this?"

"Xehanort spent many years on these plans."

At the sound of his old Master's name (the name he fantasizes about splattering all over the ground), the X-Blade makes itself known once more. Dark flames ripple down Ven's arms as he prepares to raise his blade against the one that haunted him for so long -

"I remember Xehanort’s life," Terra says suddenly, "as I remember all of mine. I know who I am. I know I am Terra."

Ven hesitates, unsure whether to believe him. But then he remembers another time in Radiant Garden, before things all went to hell, where all Terra wanted was trust from them and their Master, and they couldn't deliver.

"Okay," Ven says, forcing himself to dismiss his keyblade. "How did you remember?"

"We assumed incorrectly," Terra says. "My heart did not contain my memories. My heart was blocking them."

He doesn't understand, but he doesn't question it. "If that's true... Sorry. I... I'm going for a walk. I need to think."

He's halfway out the door when Terra calls his name.

"Were you not listening?" Terra asks.

Terra turns fully towards him for the first time and Ven freezes when he sees what Terra has been holding this entire conversation.
"I remember _everything_," Terra rumbles, as his long fingers curl over the side of Aqua's helmet.

“Can’t you sniff her out? She’s the only light here!”

From the shadows, Terra’s Heartless chuckles. He can’t see it – it’s keeping a safe distance from him – but its voice echoes in the desolate realm. “I could. I could let my mind meld with the darkness and join the hordes hunting her. I could mindlessly pursue her until I tear the beating light of her heart free of its cage.”

Ven cringes. “You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“I might,” the Heartless admits. “Are you willing to take that risk?”

“No. Forget it. I’m . . .” He rubs his forehead. “Sorry. I’m frustrated. I had no idea the Realm of Darkness was so big. There’s got to be some way to figure out where she is, or to signal her somehow!”

The Heartless is silent.

“She’s not dead,” Ven mutters to himself. “I can feel her. She’s _not_ dead.”

“Can’t I call you Terra?” he asks the weirdly renamed Xemnas.

“You can,” Xemnas – no, Terra agrees.

Ven nods, content. He’s content enough that he doesn’t ask his other questions, like how Terra came up with such a weird name to begin with.

Now that the mercenary that attacked Aqua and him is gone, Ven feels safe to introduce himself to the others. They make up some vague story about Terra running across him when he was testing out his portal-making ability. The others are skeptical – they are scientists – but nobody sees it fit to challenge them. He supposes it’s because they don’t care, or because they don’t want to chase him and his X-Blade off. Terra has already told them about his plan to restore their hearts.

Thankfully, none of them are aware of the X-Blade’s original purpose. He can only imagine how awkward it would be if someone realized the shortcut to their salvation was stealing food from the fridge.

Terra, with all the fondness his heartless self is capable of, dubs him number two of the Organization. (Terra, he decides, isn’t that great at inventing names.) That means Ven gets the second-highest throne next to him in the meeting room.

As for the others, he watches them with a mix of contempt and calm scrutiny. They’re decent fighters for what they are, though still raw with their new magical powers. Most importantly though, although it was Terra who led them into this abyss, they are still loyal to him.

Although Ven supposes that they don’t know exactly who it was that opened their world to the Heartless.

“If you can remember who you are, you should use your keyblade.”

“I am a Nobody,” Terra says. “I am not sure that it would come to me.”
“Give it a try,” Ven tells him.

Terra extends his hand. His fingers flex. There is nothing.

“Maybe you need some help. Like, something to kick-start it. Here, hold this.”

Ven summons not his X-Blade, but his regular keyblade. He’s a little surprised that it’s Void Gear that appears, but he shrugs it off. Terra takes the keyblade from him and immediately, almost drops it.

Ven laughs. “Wow, I guess it has been a while for you.”

“This keyblade. . .” Terra tests his grip on the weapon, as if unsure whether it will burn him. “I do not remember keyblades feeling this powerful.”

“What?”

Ven summons it back. It doesn’t feel that powerful to him. If anything, it kind of feels weak –

“Oh, maybe it’s because of the X-Blade,” Ven says happily. “That is the Ultimate keyblade, and it’s made directly from my heart. I guess since keyblades reflect the heart. . .”

“That some of the X-Blade’s power has been siphoned to this,” Terra concludes. “It seemed to like me. It is . . . It is as if I was holding a piece of you in my hands.”

“That’s kind of creepy,” Ven says casually. “I’m sure Void Gear wouldn’t mind fighting with you, but you should really try to use your own keyblade. Maybe your new form is just too new to summon Ends of the Earth right now.”

The powers of a Nobody are strange. It takes even Terra a while to master them. Ven tries to help, but this is something beyond light and darkness. So, he waits patiently until Terra is confident in himself, until Terra is ready to venture further and relearn the other powers he once had. Eventually, Terra does succeed in summoning his keyblade.

It’s then they hit their first major snag.

“Ends of the Earth is not content to be wielded by me.”

“The keyblade is supposed to reflect its wielder’s heart,” Ven says cautiously. “Maybe since you lost yours. . .”

“It still recognizes me,” Terra says with a shake of his head. “Observe.”

He opens his hand and Ends of the Earth takes shape. It materializes, even allows him to grab it. Then it vanishes with a flash after a few seconds.

“That’s weird,” Ven says. A thought strikes him. “Oh, maybe your armour is calling it back.”

“My armour?” Terra repeats, confused.

Ven can’t believe he forgot to tell Terra. “Back in the Keyblade Graveyard, your armour is walking around. It was using your keyblade last time I saw it.”

“The Keyblade Graveyard. . .? Ah, it must be a Lingering Sentiment. The Master taught Aqua and I about them,” Terra says in understanding.
“Should we go there and grab them?”

“No,” Terra says quickly. “I don’t believe that is a good idea.”

Ven doesn’t get it. It’s Terra’s keyblade and armour. But it’s Terra’s stuff and he knows it best, so he isn’t going to argue.

“Do you want to take mine instead?” Ven asks. When Terra stares at him, he continues. “Not the X-Blade – it wouldn’t answer to you. But my old one because, obviously, I don’t need it anymore.”

Ven summons his old keyblade – it’s Void Gear again, it’s always Void Gear – and starts to hand it to Terra.

“Wait, maybe not this one,” he amends. Terra might have bad memories associated with it and his darker side. He reaches for his connection to Wayward Wind.

Wayward Wind hears him and ignores him. He gropes for the connection again, and tugs at the chain connecting them. The painful backlash is immediate; Wayward Wind is more snarling beast than loyal pet.

What is this? His keyblade recognizes him, he can tell. But not only is it refusing to be summoned, it is vehemently refusing to be summoned. They say the keyblade is a reflection of its master’s heart, but Ven can’t think of any reason he’d be so angry at himself that it would shun him.

The echoes of Wayward Wind’s presence resonate through his head. They are angry and aggressive sensations, determined and possessive. They are defensive, like a dragon curled around its eggs, hissing at all that get too close. It is that last trait which guides him to the truth. Ven hasn’t summoned Wayward Wind for years. He has left the keyblade to make its own choices as if it had no master, and yet it is still bound to him; it still reflects his heart and wishes. He thinks about the ironclad belief that has prevented his hope from ever faltering; he thinks about the fact that he’s never doubted because he knew it was true.

This is why he knew. This is why he knows.

Aqua isn’t dead, because Wayward Wind found her a long time ago.

They meet on the dark beach that evening.

Xemnas hands Void Gear over to Ansem.

He stalks through the night street, Void Gear at his side. This Princess was difficult to track down. Yet, he has found her and here of all places, in this fated world where years ago, his complete self had added another player onto the board of fate. Heartless are drawn to attack those with the power of the keyblade, so he knows when he’s in the vicinity of a wielder. What surprise him is how strong that sensation is in this small town, as if there is more than the one he chose.

He phases through the house’s walls and into the bedroom. He approaches silently. He raises Void Gear above his head.

He holds the keyblade there as his eyes gleam. That power, the power of the keyblade, he senses it again. Here, in this room. It is almost unheard of for a Princess of Light to be a keyblade wielder, yet it is there.
Who was it? he demands of Void Gear. It is usually useless to ask questions of a keyblade you do not own, but Ven’s keyblade still recognizes him as Terra and never holds much back.

It answers eagerly, *Rainfell*.

He considers. He lowers Void Gear.

He needs to think about this.

Master Eraqu’s keyblade still lies in the courtyard in which he fell. Terra and Ven take a minute of silence.

“If it was required, I would make the same choice again,” Terra tells him.

“If our places were reversed, I would, too,” Ven says.

If Terra had a heart, Ven bet he would be blushing. As it was, Terra swept ahead and into the castle. No matter how dark the world had become, they still knew its layout. Terra pushes open the doors to the library and Ven rushes ahead. In his youth, he had never been one for reading – had despised his academic studies, actually – but now he can’t wait to get started. There are only so many books on keyblades, and one of them will have the answer.

It’s going to be a hell of a lot easier tracking down a keyblade bounded to his heart than tracking Aqua herself.

He opens the Door. The children rush to save their raft. He watches from the shadows. The Princess passes before him.

He stays his blade and urges the Heartless to be gentle. Let her meet them first, let her fight. They say the barrier between the realms is naturally thin here, that across the open sea, there is another beach where the sun never rises. Perhaps, in this world where the walls are so thin, the traumatic awakening of her successor will reach the lost Master. Perhaps it will lure her to that dark beach, where his brother patrols.

For now, Ansem will wait. And when the dark tide overwhelms the Princess, he will swoop in and claim her heart.

*(His plan was a mistake, it turns out. The same spell that brought the Princess to Destiny Islands activates again, and the three end up with the damn wizard.)*

“You should shave,” Terra tells him as he rubs a finger across Ven’s stubble. “Your appearance will be a shock to her. There’s no need to make it worse than necessary.”

Yen Sid’s apprentice is missing, having ventured into the Realm of Darkness a month ago to search for the key to close the Door to Darkness. The Realm of Light will have to be safe-guarded by the three children then, by the Princess he requires.

*Then I will force Yen Sid to send them out,* Ansem thinks as he observes the collapsing world around him. They are young, but there are only so many worlds Yen Sid can allow to fall before he will be compelled to act.
He wonders, as the Castle of Dreams descends into the abyss, if *she* will be drawn to such a familiar place.

He considers it and moves the worlds she’s visited to the top of his list.

She walks through the disintegrating remains of the Heartless. Wayward Wind tries to sear itself into her soul again. It’s a clingy, violent thing; has been ever since it appeared, where it cleaved through two Darksides on its way to her. She had feared the worst when she first saw it. But Ven is safe. Terra is safe. And she . . . she is . . .

Wayward Wind *bites* her.

She jumps. She wasn’t aware she had fallen to her knees. *The damn keyblade is more interested in keeping her alive than she is.*

She walks.

She hunts down the next fight.
Reunion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“All this time...” Her grip tightens on Wayward Wind as the whisper reaches her. “All the times I’ve passed through this realm while I searched the worlds, and it never occurred to me to look here. Your heart was filled with so much light that I was convinced I would find you in the light.”

“Show yourself!” Aqua barks. She points Wayward Wind at the voice. Only the strongest dare speak to her.

The figure steps forward. They look human. They have clothes; a black cloak with a hood that covers their face. As she watches, the figure reaches up and pulls down the hood.

“Ven?” For one shining moment, she believes it. She sees him smile at her and she yearns to go to him, she needs to touch him.

But then she snaps back to reality and raises her keyblade again. This isn’t Ven. That’s too deep to be his voice. It’s another phantom. She knows her Ven, and her Ven doesn’t have yellow eyes. Her Ven looks up at her; she doesn’t look up at him.

“Aqua? It’s me, Ven. Don’t you recognize me?” the phantom asks. “I don’t look that different, do I?”

She ignores it. Engaging with these types of illusions only brings heartache. Either it attacks her, or it doesn’t.

It doesn’t. She lowers Wayward Wind and continues walking, aware of it following.

“Aqua, wait! It doesn’t matter if you believe who I am. I can take you home. I can take you back to the Realm of Light.”

They’ve promised that before. She fell for it a few times at the beginning when she was desperate, only to find she had been pulled deeper into the darkness’s maw.

“Aqua, stop! Just listen to me. I’m here to rescue you!”

No one is coming. Not for her.

The phantom grabs her.

So, it does attack. That’s the only reason they’re ever solid. She swings Wayward Wind, and the phantom backs up just in time. She swings again. In a flash of light grey flames, a keyblade appears to block her blow. She thinks she recognizes it from a picture she saw long ago. Otherwise, she doesn’t know it and that’s how she knows this isn’t Ven.

“Aqua!” it cries out.

“You’re not real,” she drones. They never are. They are illusions meant to sap her will.

Her magic comes to her swift and strong. The phantom teleports – of course it does. The worst of them always know how to teleport – out of her reach. She waits for it to strike. It doesn’t, and she knows that means it will attack with words again.
“Aqua!” it cries out, and she can hear its imaginary heart breaking. “Please, just trust me!”

“You’re not real,” she drones.

She waits for it to attack.

Again, it does not. It is the first time a solid illusion has acted this way and she isn’t sure what to make of it. What does the darkness hope to achieve by using this phantom that claims Ven’s name but looks nothing like him?

She turns away. She continues walking.

Pillars burst through the ground in front of her. They are white, and they are bright and . . . she shields her eyes as they hurt. They . . . look like light, but they can’t be light because hers is the only one that exists in this realm.

“I’m not letting you spend another day in this place,” the phantom hisses behind her. “Aqua, I’m getting you out of here, one way or another.”

So, it does attack.

She fights hard.

He wasn’t sure if she could, considering it’s his own keyblade she’s turned against him. But Wayward Wind has been obsessively guarding her for so long that it turns on him the moment she asks. She’s wild and fierce, almost reckless in her attacks, but he’s got the X-Blade so he can keep up. He doesn’t want to hurt her. He hopes that by clashing with her, by mimicking their old exercises under Master Eraqus, she’ll come to the truth on her own. But it isn’t working. Her eyes remain feral.

His light frightens her. He isn’t sure whether it’s because she’s been in the dark so long that she’s forgotten what it is, or if it’s because Master Eraqus had drilled it into their heads that the light needed to be protected. It doesn’t matter. He takes full advantage and uses it to herd her, to narrow the battlefield and trap her. The last thing he wants is for her to slip away into the jaws of the heartless, not after he’s weakened her so much.

He closes the distance and squints. She’s barely visible between all the magic she’s casting. That’s good, he thinks with a heavy mind. He thinks it means she’s getting desperate.

Or it means she’s realized how to get past his guard.

He isn’t sure what hits him, but something does. It’s like an uppercut to the chin, making his teeth crack together and throwing him onto his back. And she’s already there, raising her keyblade to strike.

As the flaming blade descends, he holds his Wayfinder tight and closes his eye.

He doesn’t die.

Aqua has frozen. Her keyblade hovers above his chest, an inch away from the hand that holds the Wayfinder. She looks like a rabid animal.

“Where did you get that?” she rasps. She wants to strike him down, he can tell. But she’s frozen.

“You made it for me,” he says, moving so that his feet are under him. He knows what to do now. “You made one for me, and Terra.”
Her gaze is steady, but her keyblade wavers. Ven takes the opening to dart forward quick as a viper. He grabs the chain around her neck, the one he knows holds her Wayfinder. Before she can protest, he holds the blue charm against his Wayfinder. *(Against his heart.)*

“You. . .” As his warmth floods the charm, she staggers. “You’re . . .”

“Aqua, it’s me. It’s Ven.”

The keyblade drops. Her shoulders sag.

She falls.

Ven catches her.

Terra is waiting for them when he returns. He spies Ven’s burden and steps forward.

“How is she?” There is an authoritative tone in Terra’s voice, a *demand* for an answer.

Ven smiles. “She’ll be fine.”

She awakes with bitter, hostile confusion and Ven grimly realizes this is probably the first time she’s slept since she disappeared. She no longer knows what it’s like to not remember every second of the day, or to close her eyes and have the world be different when she opens them again. It stings when she doesn’t recognize them, even though Ven and her connected in the dark.

It stings both emotionally and physically when she attacks them.

Terra raises a wall of energy between them. Aqua, assuming it will hurt on touch, retreats. She prowls her side of the room, looking for another way out.

Once again, it’s the Wayfinders that calm her down. Still, she remains cagey until they finally get across to her how *long* it’s been. She doesn’t break down. She doesn’t seem to understand what to do. She touches his face and then turns her gaze downward, as if expecting to see a second Ven at the height she remembers.

“Welcome home,” he tells her.

He doesn’t get a happy look. He gets one that’s tentative and fearful. Aqua has yet to let go of Wayward Wind. She hugs it to her the way a little girl would a teddy bear.

“Welcome home,” Terra echoes.

Ven isn’t sure where Terra finds the courage to reach out and stroke her hair.

Naturally, Aqua attacks Dilan when they first meet. To be fair, Dilan was just coming out of a portal with his hood up, and she’s basically been programmed to attack anything that moves and looks like shadow. Terra calls a meeting afterwards and informs the others that hoods must be worn down when entering the castle though a portal.

It doesn’t help Even when he unintentionally steps out of a portal in front of her four days later.

Ven doesn’t think he’s imagining the amusement in Terra’s smile, even as Aqua sullenly apologizes.
“Xemnas?” Aqua repeats uncertainly, after she hears someone address him by that name for the first time.

“You may continue to address me by Terra,” he says.

“But . . . Why?” Now, she understands why Ven had been holding back laughter when he told her that Terra was the one who named everything around here. “Why that?”

“A new name for a new existence,” Terra says. “Until I reclaim what is lost, why should I have the same name as when I was whole?”

“I understand.” She doesn’t really. “But why that?”

“They used to call me Xehanort,” he remarks absently.

She blinks.

“When I first awoke in Radiant Garden, it was the first name I knew. By the time I realized otherwise, the name had already stuck. But when I lost my heart, I saw a chance to discard that albatross. And so I did.”

“I . . .” She almost wants to apologize. She can’t imagine having to live under that name for so many years.

He pats her shoulder before he walks away. “Don’t trouble yourself over it.”

She still doesn’t understand why he chose Xemnas.

Aqua is nostalgia.

It isn’t just her appearance that has been preserved. Her knowledge of the worlds has been as well, and it’s endearing how she needs everything to be explained. (“Terra, how can you say you don’t actually exist when I’m standing here talking to you?”) Her time in the darkness has eaten at her mind, but she remains unspoiled. It reminds him of easier days.

She’s a wild, beautiful thing. A tempest of gorgeous wrath trapped inside a fragile, human form. She is the reaper of the dark; he thinks it is less that the Heartless hunted her and more that she hunted them. He wonders if she has taught the Heartless fear.

Naturally, she clings to him and Ven, trying to stalk them from shadows, not understanding that it won’t work because her heart is the brightest here. (Bright not like a life-giving sun, but a raging inferno that that leaves only ashes in its famished wake.) The other members aren’t sure what to make of her, but any objections to her presence die when she summons her keyblade before them. Her keyblade, too, is nostalgia. But it is not hers, and so he guides her into the Chamber of Repose where her true weapon lays.

“I would advise that you continue to wear the cloak rather than the armour, but the keyblade is yours.”

“You kept these. I thought you lost your memories,” she says as she picks Stormfall up for the first time since she vanished. She swipes it through the air, and the keyblade pulses softly, delighting in her return.

Cleanup duty. Terra assigns them their mission with the faint baritone of humour. Ven nods and leads Aqua outside, to where too many Heartless have gathered at Memory’s Skyscraper. Although the lesser Nobodies have no hearts to give them, the two sides will still fight if given the chance, so it’s important to keep the numbers down.

Ven summons the X-Blade as the first wave appears. “Don’t worry, Aqua. I got your –”

The Heartless are dead. She’s already slain them.

It’s Ven who holds the Ultimate keyblade, yet it’s Aqua who does all the fighting. She’s simply too quick for him to do anything, too efficient. Too good. She doesn’t wait for him or the Heartless; she somehow already knows where they’ll appear, and she tears through the space before their limbs ever have a chance to solidify. Ven is left watching with horror, and ample admiration.

When Aqua’s keyblade finally drops, he approaches her with awe. “How?”

“That’s all there was to do in the darkness. Fight, and wander.”

It’s raining. He looks up and on Memory’s Skyscraper’s screen, there are flashes of a never-ending horde of yellow eyes, of pillars made of writhing darkness and a road leading into a void.

“Terra lost his memories,” he tells her. She blinks, unsure where he is going with this. “It took us years to figure out how to get them back, and then even more time until I realized you had my keyblade. That’s why . . . I came as soon as I knew.”

“It’s okay, Ven,” she says. “I knew the consequences of my actions.”

It’s not okay, he knows. He should have been there sooner. He should have figured it out earlier. But he won’t fight with her. Instead, he gathers her into his arms, and holds her as the storm breaks above them.

Xemnas watches from the rooftop. The air still glistens with Aqua’s magic, but there’s less of it than he would have expected. That, he supposes, is natural after she has fought with Ven’s less magic-capable keyblade for so long. Her style is somewhere between her old one and Ven’s now: still saturated with magic, but punctuated with sharp lunges and quick strikes.

He watches as her eyes rove over the scenery even as Ven holds her, as she searches for more prey.

She’s beautiful.

So many years have passed.

It’s surreal. There is no time in the Realm of Darkness. Just the endless night coupled with its endless wandering. She knew she had been there for a long time, but never would she have guessed how long. Without the physical proof, she doubts she would have believed them.

But there is plenty of proof. There’s the greying of Terra’s hair (How, she wonders. He isn’t that old), and creases in his forehead she hadn’t known before. Then there’s Ven. He’s still an inch shorter than Terra, but that means he towers over her. And though Ven’s lanky, his broad chest betrays a raw power.

They’ve changed so much. They’ve grown up without her while she was wandering through
countless shadows. Although she knows Ven was joking when he asked her if he was the big brother now, sometimes she can’t help but feel it’s true. Not just because they grown, but because she has become younger somehow.

(Because she’s the one who’s regressed into needing a nightlight. She’s the one who wakes up sweating and screaming, who needs to be reminded that eating and sleeping are things she’s supposed to do, and who needs to be with them when thunder rumbles and the sky goes pitch-black or she’ll attack everything in sight.)

If they think the same as her, they say nothing. If they resent it, they give no sign. Time has matured not just their bodies, but their minds. Terra was never cruel, but he could be prone to pigheadedness and cold anger. Now he’s infinitely patient. Nothing seems to annoy him, even when she asks for the third time to explain what he means when he says he has power over nothing. She wonders at first if it’s a mask he puts on for her, but as the days pass, she realizes it’s real. She realizes, as well, that it isn’t just Ven following him. These people (Nobodies) truly look up to him as a leader.

Ven’s changed, too. He’s mellowed with age, no longer zooming through the halls or erupting with excitement at every little thing. He’s jaded somehow, as well. She overhears him speak to the others sometimes, and it shakes her to hear how acrid his words can be.

He’s not like that with her though. Although he can’t always hold back his instinct to snark, it’s never mean spirited. Like Terra, he seems to draw from a well of infinite patience whenever he’s with her.

“Aqua, I waited eight years for you,” Ven says when she finally brings it up. “Do you think asking me to explain things is going to drive me away?”

Terra said something like that once.

“You are the bounty of eight years of sacrifice and labour,” he told her the day after he explained what being a Nobody meant; after he found her sitting alone on the front steps, grieving and confused. “Even without a heart, how could I not cherish you?”

They’ve changed. She wishes she could have been there with them, to grow alongside them.

"You . . . You lost your heart because . . ."

She wants to laugh and she wants to cry. Because she had sacrificed herself to the dark to save him from darkness and in the end, he'd turned around and done the same thing for her. She clutches at the fabric on his chest, hoping to feel his heart's warmth underneath, even though it is futile. Eight years in the dark, and she still ended up dooming him in the end.

"Aqua, this is not permanent." There's a finger on her chin, lifting it to see his face. "There is a way to regain what's been lost."

She listens to his explanation, and her gut clenches. "Kingdom Hearts? But Master said . . ."

"The universe has moved far beyond what the Master knew. We must rely on our own knowledge," he tells her. "And what better place to find a heart than at the source of hearts itself?"

Part of her resists. Part of her thinks of the Master and the disappointment he would feel. But Terra is right. The Master never knew of emblem Heartless or Nobodies. Nor did he warn her about what it would be like to spend a decade alone. This is their universe to protect now, and that means the decisions lie in their hands.
"So, we kill Heartless," she summarizes. It’s a rather handy plan, she thinks, and her toes curl in anticipation.

He watches her closely. "We do."

All he has told her is that he lost his heart to recover his memories, to recover her.

She doesn’t need to know anything else.

"Ven!"

Ven turns to see what Aqua is pointing out. It's a world, not one they had intended to stop at, but he understands immediately why it has drawn her attention. A great storm hangs over the world, its lightning visible even from the Lanes Between. Darkness is seeping out from the heart of the world itself, and there’s only a couple of hours, maybe even less than one, before it will be devoured.

He sniffs and tastes the storm’s scent. "It's mostly purebloods. We'll be more productive elsewhere."

He tips his glider forward to leave but Aqua suddenly cuts across him. "Ven, there’s Heartless!"

Mentally, he groans. He's forgotten how little she knows. This will be the first time Aqua has seen a world fall to the abyss. She doesn't have any idea how many Heartless are feeding on that world. Or maybe she does and doesn't mind. After the years she's had, maybe she thinks that walking into a choking miasma of Heartless is normal.

Maybe she knows exactly what awaits them, and that’s the reason she wants to go in the first place.

"We can't," he says.

But she is resolute. "We have to kill them."

As she begins to turn her glider into a dive, Ven shouts, “No!”

She pauses.

We worried for eight years about you, Ven doesn’t say. I only just pulled you out of the darkness, he doesn’t say. Because it won’t matter. Aqua only values herself somewhat more than she values her enemies.

Instead, he lies. “Aqua, this won’t be the first time I’ve tried. It’s already too late. Once the world is past that tipping point, it can’t be stopped. All we’d do is delay its descent and give the Heartless more time to cross over and endanger the rest of the universe.”

(In all honesty, he never expected that excuse to work.)

His fingers curl around the pulsing heart in his hand. He is in a sea of darkness, falling as it calls him home. With a surge of will, he dismisses Void Gear and sends it back to his brother. Maybe Xemnas will have more luck than him.

At least, Ansem thinks, I will take one with me.

Then, a light pierces through the everlasting darkness. It sears his hand and burns through his grip. He snarls and reaches out for the drifting heart.
But someone else’s hands close over it.

“You can’t have him,” the Princess says.

The light swells, breaking down the darkness keeping his form together. Before he fades, the Princess brings the heart close to her chest, and Ansem sees Sora begin to reform.

A dark tide sweeps over the worlds. It heaves, and then it falters. Light claws back what was lost, and Xemnas knows his brother has failed. But Xemnas is still here.

He stares down from the balcony, to where Aqua clears the city of Heartless with reckless abandon as she trains Isa. These Heartless are pureblooded and useless for their cause, but it won’t be long until they back in the worlds gathering hearts again. Each one they harvest brings him closer to his goal; each one they harvest bring them closer to danger. For it is only a matter of time before Yen Sid notices the abnormal collection of power in this desolate corner of the universe. The new keyblade wielders will come for them. That much is certain.

But they cannot stop now. The moon is half-full, and he can feel its power when he stands in its shadow. If they can hold off the assault until its done, then it will no longer matter how many keyblades they send his way. Ven may hold the X-Blade, but it will be Xemnas who lays claim to the power of Kingdom Hearts. His brother may have failed, but he was still here.

One way or another, the power of Kingdom Hearts would belong to him.

Chapter End Notes

That's right. In this universe, Isa's Berserker style is a result of him trying to pick up Aqua's KILL EVERYTHING mode. XD

At this point, we are around a year earlier than KHI. As the second-last section implied, Sora, Riku and Kairi have had their super climatic epic keyblade battle with Ansem, who managed to rip out Sora's heart before he died. Why does that matter? Well...

It matters because that means next chapter is when things are going to get interesting.
Snow blows across the charred ruins. It spreads out into the field beyond, where a mass of writhing shadows and shattered armour mark a recent gravesite. The Emperor had sent the Imperial Army to war. The army found battle, all right, but not with creatures of flesh.

“Soldiers are disciplined,” Ienzo says with approval. He leans on his sword, which is planted in the ground. “They will have produced some powerful Nobodies.”

“There are some strong Heartless mixed in, as well,” Dilan says. “Aqua will be pleased.”

She never understood why their thrones were so high off the ground. They were so high up that you needed either a portal or keyblade-enhanced jumping skills to reach them. She silently thanks her departed Master that she had the latter, because it would have been very embarrassing to constantly ask for help to sit in her own chair.

On the other side of the room, Ven watches her. Their thrones were at the same height, second only to Terra’s himself, which she didn’t begrudge him. Terra was directly across from her and Ven on his left. She thinks that if she had been there at the beginning, if she hadn’t come in after the rest of Terra’s friends had been given their seats, she would have been on his right. But fate would not have that, so she finds herself across from the two and within easy eyesight.

“You all know of Sora, I presume,” Terra says.

Aqua clenches her jaw. She remembers Sora as a bright-eyed kid on an island. Word is, however, that he has become a keyblade wielder. She hadn’t met this older Sora, and she doesn’t know what to feel about him. He had been the one to defeat Terra’s Heartless – to kill a part of him – but . . . well . . . It had been a Heartless.

“While he was fighting my brother at the End of the World, he tore out Sora’s heart. The Princess restored him, however, the deed was already done.” Terra smiles. “Allow me to introduce the newest member of our fold . . .”

Aqua leans forward to get a better look as Sora’s Nobody pulls down his hood.

He’s so young.

It’s the first thing she thought when she saw him, and it’s the first thing she thinks about now as she leads him to his room. From what she understands, Nobodies are supposed to look like their original selves, but Sora’s Nobody is an odd one. He’s got the eyes and rounded face that seem to be Sora’s, but for some reason, his hair looks like Ven’s.

Unlike the rest of the Nobodies, Roxas’s original person is still alive somehow. Because of that, Terra went ahead and changed the Nobody’s name, claiming it would help him avoid awkward questions in the future. She would have been mad at Terra for it, but apparently Roxas doesn’t remember anything and doesn’t know better.

“This is your room,” she tells him. “There’s already a bed and a desk, but do you need anything else?”

Roxas stares at her blankly. There’s no sense of comprehension in his face, but he seems to have
understood what she’s told him so far.

“It’s been a long day,” she says sympathetically. “Maybe you should rest, or we . . .”

Roxas is already walking into the room. He collapses onto the bed, seemingly unaware what the blankets are for. Biting back a giggle, she walks inside, too. She removes his shoes, then manoeuvres him under the covers so it looks like he knows what he is doing.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she whispers.

She leaves Roxas’s room and turns right into Terra.

“Oh! I didn’t see you there,” she says in apology. She closes Roxas’s door while informing Terra that their newest recruit is asleep.

“It’s instinctual for you, isn’t it?” Terra says. “Mothering.”

“I . . .” She squints, but Terra’s lack of heart makes him impossible to read.

“You mothered Ven, too, when he arrived at the castle,” Terra recalls. “As you once tried to mother me.”

Her cheeks heat up. Yes, she remembers that. She also remembers how much Terra had bristled when she had. “I’m sorry. I’m overstepping again, aren’t I? I . . .”

His finger touches her lip, silencing her. “It is not a problem. I am merely making an observation. However, if it is an inconvenience for you, do not feel obliged to guide Roxas.”

“It’s fine,” Aqua says. “It’s no trouble.”

“If you say so,” Terra says, not betraying whether he believes her. “Remember though: you spent many years taking care of Ven and I. Now, it is our turn to take care of you.”

It’s eerie how similar they are.

Like Ven at the beginning, Roxas doesn’t speak. He doesn’t emote. He keeps his hood up and barely shows his face. On the bright side, unlike Ven, he already knows how to summon his keyblade. On the brighter side, she’s been through this once before and knows how to handle it.

Patience. Understanding. Gentle words. That’s how she brought Ven out, and that’s how she’ll bring Roxas out. They take baby steps and while it isn’t a slow process, it isn’t fast either. Several times, Terra and Ven remind her that she doesn’t need to do this.

But Roxas is so much like Ven used to be, and she can’t help but want to be with him every step of the way.

“No memories, huh?”

Roxas stares at him.

“And you don’t talk.”

Roxas blinks.
Ven quickly checks the hall to make sure they’re alone. “You know, that’s already been done. I did that. All you’re doing is rehashing old ground.”

Roxas stares at him.

Ven glares back. “Just because she’s a Master doesn’t mean she’s looking for apprentices.”

“So, he’s mute because he doesn’t have memories?”

“That is correct,” Even says. He’s staring into a microscope, fiddling with the dials on the side. From what she understands, they’re researching something to do with replicate bodies, in hopes to use them as a placeholder for Nobodies in future experiments. She wants to ask how the research is going, but there’s no point. He won’t tell her; they never do. Instead, they’ll tell her to go to Terra for answers.

“And he doesn’t have memories because Sora is still alive.”

“That’s the hypothesis,” Even says. “It’s the only major difference between him and all of us. Of course, we can’t be sure without a proper experiment.”

“You’re not going to try to test that, right?” she asks slowly.

“I don’t see a need to. The process of memory retrieval in Nobodies isn’t relevant to our goal.” He stops and taps his chin. “Although…”

“Even!”

He jumps, as if just realizing she was there. “Of course, I won’t, Miss Aqua. Even if I wanted to, creating an environment where the Heartless would regenerate into its human form is beyond my current capabilities.”

Well, at least she has that assurance. As she tries to walk out of the room, the door opens in front of her and Aeleus is there.

“Pardon me, Miss Aqua,” he says, tilting his chin down slightly in an act of deference.

Though it grates on her, she doesn’t say anything about the formality. She’s asked them to drop it before, but they never do. They’ve been oddly formal and distant with her since the day she met them. Hopefully, it wasn’t because of that time she attacked them. It was only once. Twice… slightly less than a dozen…

Okay, so maybe they had a reason to be wary, but she had tried to make it up to them. Yet even though they always thanked her and applauded her efforts, she could never bridge the chasm. It was frustrating. Enough so that sometimes, she wondered if they maintained this distance on purpose.

“Aqua?”

She wants to burst out screaming and hug him, but she doesn’t because she might scare him and then he’ll probably never speak again. Instead she smiles broadly and says, “Yes. I’m Aqua.”

Roxas stares at her. She talked him into taking the hood down a week ago, so she can read his juvenile confusion about the world.

“I’m Aqua,” she says again. “I’m glad to meet you, Roxas.”
“I . . .” He speaks slowly, like a robot slowly coming to life. “I’m Roxas.”

Her face hurts from smiling so wide. “Yes, you are.”

“What is it?” Ven asks from his desk as she invites herself into his room. He’s grinning, so he must sense her excitement.

“Roxas spoke!”

The smile slips away. Ven waits for a few seconds before coughing. “And?”

“That’s it. He finally spoke!”

“So? I speak. Terra speaks.”

She rolls her eyes playfully. “Yes, but you two haven’t been going through a mute period for the last few weeks. Do you know what he said? My name!”

“Your name, huh?” Ven says.

“Yes! It’s funny because – you probably don’t remember – but your first word was Terra’s name.”

Ven laughs awkwardly. “Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

“Oh, I should probably go tell Terra,” she says. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to learn the latest keyblade wielder is talking.”

She runs off. Ven hunches over his desk and slowly counts to five.

“At least we have you. If that boy was our only hope, my nonexistent heart would be full of dismay.”

“Hush, Isa,” Aqua says without any venom. “Just because Roxas is young doesn’t mean he can’t help. Terra and I started our training when we were younger than Roxas.”

In a controlled area with structured lessons, goes unsaid. Likewise, Isa doesn’t mention how Roxas will be fighting real enemies that will not hesitate to kill him. It’s not ideal, but no one really has time to properly train Roxas with his keyblade. Technically, she’s the only qualified teacher, but it’s more crucial that she kills Heartless and grows their heart collection. Plus, apparently Terra and Ven were alarmed by how Isa’s fighting style turned out during her stint at mentoring.

She sniffs. So what if Isa gets a little aggressive when he fights? It gets results.

“He’s Sora’s Nobody,” she points out. “Let’s not forget that Sora and his equally young friends were able to kill Terra’s Heartless.”

“So, they did. It’s strange that one Heartless could present such a threat,” Isa remarks. “The ones I have seen are but mindless beasts.”

“Oh . . .” she says quietly. “Terra’s always been powerful.”

She keeps her mouth shut after that. She thinks about what happened before she fell into darkness and then wrenches her thoughts off that path. It’s Terra. He’s Terra.
(Isa is watching her closely. She’s not sure why.)

“I need to leave for my mission soon,” he tells her gently.

“Of course.”

She wishes the two of them were closer. That same distance between her and Terra’s Radiant Garden friends existed between her and Isa. She thought it would be different when she was tapped to train him. She thinks, at the beginning, it was. However, at some point, he started pulling away and given his introverted personality, she didn’t realize what was happening until it already did.

She glances at the scars on his forehead. She hopes it wasn’t due to fear of her keyblade and fighting ability. She would never hurt Isa, but shortly before she thinks he started pulling away, he had gotten those scars in a training accident with Ven.

She awakes covered in sweat and with a dry throat. From experience, she knows she had probably screamed in her sleep.

There’s a hand shaking her by the shoulder. “Aqua?”

“Roxas?” she says groggily. She expected someone had woken her, but not him.

“You were screaming,” he says with confusion, as if she were some sort of bizarre creature he had seen for the first time.

“It was just a nightmare,” she assures him. “I get really bad ones sometimes.”

She sits up and breathes, smoothing out the last wrinkles of terror in her psyche. She hears her bedroom door open and close. And suddenly, she hears Roxas being slammed against the wall.

“What did you do to her?” Ven snarls.

She scrambles out of bed and pulls Ven back by the shoulders. “Ven, it wasn’t him! I was having a nightmare. He woke me up.”

Ven still hesitates before releasing him. “My room’s next to hers. Yours isn’t. How did you get here before me?”

“I was passing outside.” Roxas gestures in the vague direction of the hallway. “I heard her.”

“Ven, I’m fine. It was just a bad dream.” She smiles, hoping to reassure him. “You can go.”

He’s slow to do so. He seems to want to stay for some reason. “Do you want me to turn the light on?”

“No, I think I’ll be okay.”

Just before he steps out of the room, he gives her one last look. Then, he’s gone. She thinks she hears him slam his door.

“He doesn’t like me,” Roxas says.

“Don’t say that,” Aqua says quickly. “Ven just gets a little overprotective sometimes.”
“Roxas has become awfully... expressive for a Nobody,” Ven remarks. Xemnas stills and watches his face, trying to discern how much he knows. “You’d think that without memories of his past emotions, he’d be even more stoic then the rest of us.”

“Perhaps he is mimicking Aqua,” Xemnas says. “Without memories, it’s natural he would imprint on those around him.”

Ven leaps on the suggestion. “That could be a problem. We let her train Isa and look how he turned out.”

He hears what Ven is really saying.

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“Lea.”

The red-haired Nobody turns slowly, a smirk playing at his lips.

“Taking care of Roxas is distracting Aqua from her duties. Take him off her hands,” Xemnas orders.

(But Aqua is stubborn. She simply ends up adopting them both.)

“Sea-salt ice-cream,” Lea declares with satisfaction. It’s a little awkward to hold three ice-cream bars in two hands, but Lea’s long fingers are up for the task. “Best you’re going to get in the worlds.”

“I don’t know,” Aqua says. “I’ve been to a festival in Disney Town. They had some pretty good flavours.”

“You just think that because you don’t know any better,” Lea says smugly as he hands them each one.

The clock tower chimes behind them. Lea digs right into his ice-cream, and nudges Roxas in the shoulder when he just stares at it. Startled, Roxas takes a big bite and emerges with a light blue mustache. Aqua giggles.

Lea watches closely as she takes her first bite. “Well? What do you think?”

She smirks. “It’s up there.”

They have ten minutes before they must head back. Technically, they have a couple of hours before they’re supposed to report in, but travelling through the Lanes Between takes time, and she’s not about to use one of those dark portals. She thinks this way is good for Roxas, too; it gives her a chance to tell him – and Lea – about the worlds they pass on the way.

“Lea,” she says casually, “can you cover for me this evening?”

“You sneaking out to kill Heartless again?” he asks with a cocked brow.

She doesn’t bother denying it.

“I don’t get it,” Roxas says. “Killing Heartless is our job. Why don’t they just let you?”

She sighs. “They worry about me. That’s why Terr... Xemnas always sends someone to scout before I’m sent in. They think I’ll run into a Heartless I can’t handle. Which I won’t.”
Lea kicks his feet. She knows what he’s thinking: Terra isn’t worried. Terra doesn’t have a heart. But they’ve had this fight enough times that he knows better than to say anything.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Lea says.

She can’t believe she’s finally had a chance to find them. True, that hadn’t been the first time she was on Destiny Islands, but last time she had been chasing Terra and Ven and hadn’t had the time to look.

When she returns home, she asks a Dusk to summon Ven to her room, where she waits with the fruit on her lap. She half-expects him to recognize what it is right away, but Ven only glances at it before addressing her,

“It’s a paopu fruit!” she tells him. “They say the people who share one create an unbreakable connection between them.”

“Well, I was just thinking about getting a snack,” Ven says eagerly. He sits cross-legged on her bed and waits for her to cut it.

She smiles sweetly. “Not until after dinner. You’ll spoil your appetite.”

“So, you called me here to taunt me?” He smirks. “That doesn’t sound like the Aqua I know.”

“I wanted to make sure you have something to look forward to.”

His gaze happens to wander at that moment and his eyes narrow. “I thought the three of us were sharing one?”

“We are,” she says.

“But you brought two back,” he says, staring at the bag on her desk. “You’re not thinking of sharing with someone else, are you?”

She laughs and ruffles his hair, avoiding the question.

“. . . and the people who share them have an unbreakable connection.”

“What does that mean?” Roxas asks as they sit at the Clock Tower. Lea doesn’t answer. He’s been oddly silent this entire time.

“It means we’ll be friends forever,” Aqua says. “So, hungry?”

She’s already broken the fruit into chunks. Roxas reaches out for his piece, but Lea stops him.

“Maybe we should reconsider,” Lea says. “This stuff is supposed to connect hearts, right? Well, Roxas and I don’t have one, so what exactly would you be bonding yourself to?”

She shrugs. “Maybe our souls? Nothing happened when Xemnas and I shared one.”

“Still, that’s an awfully big maybe,” Lea says. “I’m just saying that this doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

Roxas sees her crestfallen expression. He says, “What’s the worst that could happen? Here, I’ll share with you.”
He reaches out for his piece again. . .

Lea’s arm cuts across his and grabs the entire fruit. Within a moment, it’s been reduced to charcoal and Aqua is stupefied into silence.

“Lea, why would you do that?” Roxas demands.

Lea doesn’t look at them. “It’s a bad idea.”

Roxas speaks first. “That doesn’t mean . . .”

“Listen to me: sharing a paopu fruit is a really bad idea.”

She bristles. “I’m sorry for considering you my friend.”

Lea rubs his forehead. “Aqua, that’s not. . .”

“You made your point very clear.”

She storms off. Roxas follows. Lea sits there with his head in his hands.

“Hey, Lea.”

He freezes. Ventus’s tone is casual, but he still takes a moment to scope out his escape routes. Unfortunately, Ventus in standing in the doorway to the only exit, so Lea slowly turns around and faces his judgement.

“How’d your mission go?” Ventus asks, all calm and pleasant.

Lea shrugs. “You have nothing to complain about.”

Ventus tilts his head to one side. “That so?”

“I told her we didn’t like fruit,” he lies.

Ventus smiles. “I knew I could count on you.”

They sit on the railing of a balcony together under the moon’s glow. Isa’s pupils faintly glow, even though he isn’t calling upon his power.

“If I don’t have a heart, shouldn’t I not feel like garbage right now?”

Isa shrugs.

“They’re both pissed off as hell now,” Lea remarks.

“She’ll forgive you. She’ll be back,” Isa warns him.

Lea doesn’t hate the thought, but he still groans. “That woman is going to kill me.”

Isa says, “She’s not a bad person. She doesn’t know.”

“I know.”

He does, and that’s why it sucks. Aqua is a nice person and in normal times, they would be friends.
The problem is that she’s completely unaware that she hasn’t surrounded herself in good company. Xemnas surprisingly doesn’t seem to care about Lea hanging around; he seems to be entertained by Aqua’s very human behaviours. But Ventus? Ventus is the reason he’s going to die. The only reason he isn’t dead is because Ventus thinks he can use him as a buffer between Aqua and Roxas.

Not much he can do about it, though. As Ienzo kindly informed him when it was too late, Lea had made the fatal mistake of allowing Aqua to attach herself to him. As Ienzo also told him, he was in too far deep to pry himself away now. Because if he did, Aqua would start asking questions and if she started asking the wrong ones, he’d be dead.

And the worst part is she has no idea. Ventus seethes when she opens her heart to other people, but it’s not like the X-Blade wielder is ever planning to tell her that. Lea can’t warn her either, because he knows with a scary certainty that Ventus and Xemnas will kill him if he tries.

Wait. Take all that back. That wasn’t the worst part.

The worst part was that Roxas had no fucking idea either. And that someday, Roxas would grow up and then Ventus might not be so hands-off anymore.
The Heartless melt before Stormfall.

Aqua grins as she spins through a disintegrating Invisible and plunges her keyblade into the chest of a Large Body. For most people, those Heartless would take at least a few hits to defeat, but for her, only one is required. She lands on the balls of her feet, already sinking into a crouch in preparation for the next lunge.

“Come on,” she hisses. “That can’t be all of them!”

She’s running out of worlds that are close enough to sneak out to. You can’t actually exterminate Heartless, but she’s been doing a damn good job of it. The thought makes her grind her teeth together. If she runs out of Heartless, then what?

“Aqua?”

For a second, her heart skitters in excitement. She remembers the speaking phantoms in the Realm of Darkness. She turns.

Oh. Just Mickey. Her lips drop in disappointment.

Hold on, Mickey?

“Aqua, is that you?”

“Mickey,” she whispers to herself. If she’s honest, it’s difficult to remember him, and she only does because of his unique appearance.

“Aqua!”

Yen Sid’s apprentice rushes forward and grabs her hand in a way-too enthusiastic handshake.

“It’s almost been ten years since I saw you,” Mickey says. “Where were you?”

“The Realm of Darkness,” she says with a shrug. “But I’m with Terra and Ven, now.”

“So, they’re okay?”

“They’re alive,” she says. She’s a little surprised that Mickey doesn’t seem to know, but she reminds herself that Ven and Terra didn’t have a reason to seek him out like they had sought out her.

“Well, I’m glad to hear you’re all safe. All of you disappeared at the same time. Not just you, either. You three, Master Xehanort, even the Unversed vanished.”

Unversed. How long has it been since she heard that name? She’s almost sad to hear they were gone; she could have fought them and the Heartless. Though if her memories were correct, the Unversed wouldn’t be much of a challenge after the Realm of Darkness.

“Gosh, we sure could’ve used you earlier,” Mickey says. “Did you three hear about Ansem?”
Only years of wandering the dark while barely feeling anything prevent her from emoting and giving anything away now. She watches Mickey closely when she lies and says no.

“He was this really powerful Heartless who nearly threw the entire universe into darkness. Plus, he had a keyblade,” Mickey tells her. “He was trying to gather the seven Princesses of Heart and, well, he nearly got ‘em. One of them managed to get away when he went after them though and ended up with Master Yen Sid.”

“Oh,” she says. In all honesty, she knows little about what Ansem was doing. She’s never even met Terra’s Heartless. Although given that he was a Heartless, that might have been for the best.

“We managed to stop him, but it wasn’t easy,” Mickey says. “Sora lost his heart for a bit in the process. He’s one of the new keyblade wielders.”

She nods, pretending she didn’t know. “Who else is there?”

Mickey tells her easily. She repeats the names, recalling their faces and burns them into her brain so she can warn Terra and Ven later. She doesn’t know anything about what Mickey and his friends are up to, but what she does know is that they killed part of Terra.

“This Ansem, where did he come from?” she asks carefully.

“We don’t know,” Mickey says. “His name. . . It’s the same name as the ruler of Radiant Garden, which fell to darkness shortly before the other worlds began to fall. But they don’t look anything alike. Plus, Ansem the Wise is said to have disappeared a while before his world fell. Whomever that Heartless used to be, I don’t think it was *that* Ansem.”

She nods, finally beginning to understand. If it had instead been a keyblade-wielding Heartless going by Terra’s or even Xehanort’s name, then the next question would have been where she and Ven were. This way, they – and Terra – are separate from Ansem’s actions. She wonders if that’s why his Nobody is going by a different name, too.

Though she still doesn’t know where he came up with the name *Xemnas*.

“So, what have you three been doing?” Mickey asks.

“Recovering,” she says evasively. “Defeating Master Xehanort came with a heavy price.”

Mickey nods solemnly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there to help.”

She wonders what would have happened if he had been. Would she still have fallen into the Realm of Darkness? For a moment, her heart stirs, but she chases the thought away quickly. If she thinks too hard about what could have been, about what they could have been spared, Mickey might not be alive much longer.

“It sounds like a lot has happened since we last saw each other,” Aqua says. “Could you tell me what I’ve missed?”

“They’re not aware of us yet,” Aqua tells them. “However, Yen Sid suspects something is going on. I think it’s only a matter of time before they discover us.”

Ven nods with rapt attention. Terra listens, too. He speaks first.

“What did you tell them?”
“That we were recovering from our fight with Xehanort,” she says with a one-shoulder shrug.

“We?” Terra echoes. “You told him about me?”

“Of course,” she says. “I didn’t tell them about your new nickname. I used your real name.”

“What else did you tell him?” Terra demands, stepping forward until he’s right in front of her.

“Not much else. By the way, what happened to the Unversed? Mickey told me they disappeared when we did.”

Ven twitches oddly. Vaguely, he says, “We took care of them.”

“Aqua, what did you tell him?” Terra repeats.

“That’s about it. That we’re alive, we’re fine, and we had no idea who your Heartless was or what he was doing.” Suddenly, it dawns on her. She asks hesitantly, “Terra, why doesn’t anyone seem to know you and Ven are alive? Ven, didn’t you travel to all the worlds looking for me?”

“I did, but not as Ven,” he admits. “I didn’t know why you were missing, so I didn’t want anyone to know I was the one looking. Like, if Maleficent had been behind it, she wouldn’t have told me anything, so I had to be someone she would talk to.”

“Like whom?” Aqua asks, baffled. “If she had been responsible, she wouldn’t have admitted it to some stranger.”

Ven opens his mouth, but then closes it again. He looks off to the side. Although time has changed his body drastically, most of his tells remain the same. She can tell he’s nervous.

“Ven . . .?”

“You shouldn’t have told him,” Terra says suddenly. “You shouldn’t have revealed yourself to him.”

“It was just Mickey,” she protests. “You two didn’t know each other, but I knew him. He was a friend of mine, and he doesn’t seem to have changed much.”

“I am beyond light and darkness. I am unnatural; an abomination.” For all Terra claims to lack a heart, he sure seems upset. “The light will not suffer a thing like me to live.”

“But . . .”

She understands why they have been avoiding meeting Yen Sid and the others. What they’re doing with Kingdom Hearts is dubious to say the least, but it makes sense. She’s stayed away from her former allies out of respect for the Organization’s wishes, but now that the choice has been taken away, she sees no reason to keep avoiding them. Surely, if they explain, they might understand.

“Terra, they could help,” she pleads quietly. “Yen Sid’s the greatest wizard out there, and well-versed in the heart and soul. He could. . .”

“No,” Terra says sharply. “It will only bring them to our doorstep faster.”

“But Terra . . .”

“That’s an order, Aqua.”

Ven and her blink. Terra’s never ordered them around before. He’s offered suggestions, yes, and
personally assigns them their missions, but even though he’s the boss, he’s never tried to explicitly order them around.

“There will be no more of your nightly hunts,” Terra says. “Your recklessness brought this upon us. I will see no more of it.”

He walks out.

On the couch, Lea winces in sympathy. “Well, if it’s any consolation, you got off lightly. Personally, I’m not surprised they knew you were sneaking out.”

“I didn’t think it would be that important to him,” she says lamely, sulking at a table. “Terra never knew him, but Mickey was a friend to Ven and me.”

“Are they going to come after us?” Roxas asks from the couch.

Aqua bites her lip. “They don’t know that Terra is a Nobody, or that his Heartless was the one they fought. They don’t know where we are either. Although Yen Sid might be able to find. . .”

“Nope. He can’t,” Lea says. “Not as long as you’re wearing that cloak. Keeps all the light inside so the dark can’t get to it. And it prevents people from sensing your light, too.”

“Terra never mentioned that,” Aqua mutters, picking at the sleeve of said cloak.

“Probably saw no need to. But if you want to know, it’s the reason that the Heartless aren’t constantly trying to climb out of the city and into the castle to get at you and Ventus. Obviously, these clothes aren’t strong enough to block out your scents at close range, but long-distance? You’re pretty much set.”

“So, we’re safe,” Roxas concludes.

“For now,” she says. “Sooner or later, Yen Sid will know something is wrong. I. . . I only hope he listens when the time comes.”

“Or you two could hurry it up and complete Kingdom Hearts,” Lea says with a grin.

Roxas rolls his eyes. “Knock it off. We’re doing our best.”

*Swoosh.* A portal opens at one side of the room. Even though Aqua knows very well by now that its one of her allies using it, she still tenses and prepares to pounce.

Good thing she doesn’t, because it’s Ven. He spots her and makes a beeline, sullen expression brightening up.

“Yo, Ventus,” Lea says from the couch.

Ven jolts a bit and pauses upon noticing Lea’s presence. He looks around. He finds Roxas. His smile drops a little and he stuffs his hands into his pockets.

“Hey, Aqua,” he says, ignoring the other two.

“Hey, Ven.” Worriedly, she asks, “Is he still mad?”

Ven sighs and takes the seat next to her. “You did a really dumb thing, Aqua.”
“Aw, give her a break,” Lea says. “It was bound to happen eventually. Besides, we don’t know it’s a bad thing, yet. Maybe buttering them up early will make them go easier on us later.”

“You’re Nobodies. Terra says that means they’re going to destroy you.”

“Maybe. But Xemnas isn’t always right.”

Ven’s hands ball into fists. She doesn’t understand why Ven is so upset, but he looks like he wants to strangle Lea.

“Lea,” she says in a voice worn with years of ‘mothering’, “stop teasing Ven.”

Lea gives her a one-handed salute. Meanwhile, Roxas apparently takes pity on her and joins her at the table. She can’t help but notice Ven bristle.

“It can’t be that bad, can it?” Roxas says slowly. “They don’t know about the rest of us. All they know is that you three are still alive, and they had to have been wondering about that anyways.”

“You don’t even know any of these people,” Ven snaps. “What would you know?”

“Ven!” She’s honestly surprised. Sure, she’s come to realize that Ven isn’t the perfect sweetheart she knew before, but it usually takes at least a little provocation before he goes on the offense like that.

It’s alarming that he visibly has to get his temper under control, because she still has no idea what set him off. He says in the vague direction of Roxas, “I’m sure they haven’t been thinking of us all this time. Now it’s going to be at the top of their minds.”

“I’m sorry,” she says again. “I didn’t realize we were hiding from everyone.”

“Say, why are you? Why don’t you and Aqua go pay them a visit and ease everyone’s minds?” Lea suggests. “Tell them Terra has the flu or something.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” she states. Lea gives her an offended, ‘Why do you sound surprised?’ look. “It’s great. We could . . .”

“No,” Ven says flatly.

“But this would solve our problem!” Aqua protests. “You two are worried that they’re going to look for us, but if we go to them, we can . . .”

“No, Aqua.”

“But we can . . .”

“Aqua, there’s a reason Terra and I are in charge!”

Judging by his expression, he regrets that a moment later, but it’s already been said. She tries to shrug it off, but it hurts.

“She’s just trying to help,” Roxas says, glaring at Ven.

There’s clearly something nasty on the tip of Ven’s tongue, but he manages to hold it back. Still, Lea finally gets off the couch and starts to mosey over.

“Things seem to be getting a little heated,” Lea continues, lighting one finger on fire just because he can. “Everyone needs to cool down.”
Roxas perks up. “We could get ice-cream!”

Ven’s head snaps up. “What?”

“Do you two eat anything other than ice-cream? It’s very unhealthy.” Even as Aqua says that, she’s smiling.

“Guilty as charged,” Lea says.

In disbelief, Ven repeats, “You want to get ice-cream?”

“I’ll put my hood up, and Aqua can wait at the Clock Tower,” Roxas says eagerly. “Nobody goes there. We’ve done it plenty of times before. We won’t get caught.”

“Do. . .?” Ven looks from her to Roxas. “Do you do this often?”

“Yeah,” Roxas says. (Her and Roxas don’t notice Lea making shushing gestures at them.)

“. . . I see,” Ven says.

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Terra isn’t avoiding her, but he’s . . . Something’s changed.

He doesn’t review her missions anymore. He assigns her, is there when she reports back, but he doesn’t stay to listen to her talk about what happened. Part of her believes she’s overreacting; all she does is kill Heartless in remote locations, so it’s not like she has anything exciting to share. Still, he always listened patiently before. But now, all he wants to hear is that she’s uninjured and then he sends her away.

There’s no more random visits. Ven still pops in, but Terra stays away. She sees him only at meals, or during mission-related times.

She didn’t think he would be this upset. All she did was tell Mickey they were alive, and it shouldn’t be such a big deal, but it is. She wouldn’t have done it if she had known what it meant and she’s sorry, but that isn’t doing anything to soothe Terra’s ruffled feathers.

A couple of times, Lea tells her to stop worrying. That Terra can’t be angry because he doesn’t have a heart and she’s one of his favourites, anyways. But Lea’s wrong. He doesn’t know Terra. He didn’t see that disappointment when Terra heard what she had done.

Finally, she corners him in his room.

“Terra, I’m sorry!” she pleads. “I had no idea.”

He says nothing. His back is to her as he stares at Kingdom Hearts.

“I wish I could take it back,” she says, nearly sobbing. “Terra, please. Just look at me.”

He doesn’t. Her hand closes into a fist over her heart. Terra’s never been mad at her like this before.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers. “I swear it will never happen again.”

And finally, he looks at her.

“It won’t?” he questions, his deep voice rumbling.
She shakes her head passionately. “No, of course not! Never.”

He stares at her. Then, he turns slightly, and begins to lift his arm.

She snatches up the invitation and throws herself at him. His arms wrap around her. She turns her face into his chest and hides her face, hide her tears. She doesn’t want to admit how afraid she was that he wouldn’t forgive her, how much she feared what she had done was unforgivable. She doesn’t even want to think about how she had wondered if she had lost him.

Idly, Xemnas combs his fingers through her hair. He listens to her breathe as he watches Kingdom Hearts.

The Realm of Darkness had taken many things from Aqua. Some good, some bad. It had held her in time and spat her out into a universe she wasn’t ready to face. Past the iron-clad exterior and fearsome violence, she’s simply a scared little girl.

Simple to understand. Simple to control.

“I see you two have made up,” Lea remarks.

“We have,” she says with a smile. It’s not a secret. She’s sure most of the Organization saw her and Terra walking through the halls together.

“What happened?” Lea asks.

“I swallowed my pride and apologized,” she admits, unashamed.

“You apologized before and nothing changed.” He shifts and then stares at her, giving her his full, undivided attention. “What did he make you give up?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

Lea sighs. “Nothing.”

It’s a little surprising that this recon mission actually came back with something to report. Ven was pretty sure Terra had assigned it to the new guy not as an actual mission, but to help him get used to his powers and role. After all, what would you expect to see in the Keyblade Graveyard?

But not only did Myde see something there, but it’s important.

“Yeah, the guys with their keyblades were there, and the mouse, too.”

“Did they see you?” Ven asks quickly.

Myde strums that weird sitar. “Nah. I didn’t feel like having a conversation so . . .”

“Good job,” Ven says brusquely. “You never want to be seen.”

He makes a beeline for Terra and lets him know.

“They’re curious,” Ven says anxiously. “We had our battle with Xehanort there – Mickey’s got to be telling them about it.”
Terra is silent for a second. “Make sure Aqua isn’t sneaking out.”

“Tell me about Mickey,” he commands.

Aqua does. He listens to her words carefully, searching for something he can use. The mouse is Yen Sid’s ally, which means Yen Sid can reach her through him. That is very troubling.

“Ven said they’re looking for me,” she says carefully.

“That is our conclusion,” he lies, allowing her to invent her own theories about her recent lack of missions.

“If they found me, do you think I could . . .?”

“It is hard to say what would happen,” Xemnas says. “We should not forget that this was instigated by a thoughtless slip of the tongue.”

He feels her wince. “Right, that’s . . . I’m sorry. It was a dumb question. It would never work.”

He lets her believe it.

“We haven’t been on a lot of missions together lately,” Roxas says to her. “Killing Heartless takes a lot longer now.”

“Sora and the others are looking for me,” Aqua says. “They think it’s better I stick close to home.”

He tilts his head to one side. “Where is your real home? Lea says that no one was born on this world.”

“The Land of Departure,” she tells him. “That’s where Terra is from, too. I haven’t been there since I fell into the Realm of Darkness.”

“Do you think Xemnas would let you go back?” he asks.

“Maybe.” Even if they are still reeling under the consequences of her talk with Mickey, she knows Xemnas is sentimental. She thinks he will.

Naturally, she asks Ven to come with her first. He apologizes and tells her he has a mission in ten minutes. She tries Terra next, but finds him holding Void Gear because he’s going on a mission, too. Instead of him apologizing to her, she apologizes to him; she knows he’s picking up her slack.

She goes with Plan B and approaches Roxas and Lea. Part of her wanted this all along; she’s never had a chance to show off her home, let alone her world. Still, it was only proper that she invited Ven and Terra first. She would have held back and waited for them, but she knows they’ve visited their old home plenty of times before and . . . and maybe it’s better if she doesn't have the burden of their bittersweet memories for her first visit.

They fly to the Land of Departure, Lea sitting on the edge of her glider as usual.

She freezes at the sight of the world.

The Land of Departure is covered in darkness. It’s thick in the air with its smoky scent. The bright side is that this world must be much less appealing for a visit from Mickey and the others, but what
happened? She remembers what her Master told her about the world, about its need for a Master to be in residence, and grimly realizes this is why.

I could fix this, she thinks. I’m Master Eraqus’s successor.

But if she does, then she’s bound to stay. She can’t do that. Recovering Terra’s heart comes first.

She fits a smile onto her place and pretends this is the world as it’s meant to be. Lea and Roxas don’t notice anything wrong of course; they’re used to darkness. She shows them around the courtyard, kills the Heartless that show up, and tells them fun stories about Terra, Ven and her, until she works up the courage to open the castle’s doors.

“Hey, Aqua. We get a tour of the inside, right?” Lea asks after he and Roxas walk inside and notice she isn’t following.

“Take a few minutes for a break. I want . . .” She trails off and gestures at Master Keeper, still embedded in the ground.

“Got it,” Lea says. Roxas says something, too, looking confused, but Lea shushes him and hurries him into the castle.

The doors shut behind them and Aqua is alone in the courtyard. She walks up to Master Keeper, drops to one knee, and places her palm on the keyblade’s shaft. It’s cold as ice. She’s carefully avoided looking at it up to now, not wanting Lea and Roxas to see her pain. She wants to tear it out of the ground; it shouldn’t be left here like this, not like the keyblades in the graveyard. She doesn’t though because it feels too much like digging up a grave.

There’s a noise behind her. She turns to see Terra walking out of a dark portal.

“I thought you would be here,” he says.

“We should move this,” she whispers. “Give him a real memorial.”

“Of course. We should wait for Ven first, however.” His hand rests on her shoulder.

“Sometimes, I still can’t believe he’s gone,” she says. “He was the wisest man I knew.”

Terra’s grip on her tightens.

“You should be careful not to idolize him in death,” Terra says. “What would he have said if he saw what I had become?”

“Terra, being a Nobody isn’t your fault. You lost your heart.”

“But we must not forget it was Eraqus who drove us to this point,” Terra says. “His hated of the darkness gave Xehanort the opening he needed to deceive me, and by raising his hand against Ven, he forced mine.”

“I’m not saying everything he did was right, but . . .” She blinks. “Terra, do you blame Master Eraqus for what happened?”

“Why would I not?”

“Because it wasn’t his fault. It was Master Xehanort’s! It was all his plan.”

“They are both at fault.”
“Terra . . .” She slowly stood up to face him. “! I know the Master didn’t handle everything the way he should have, but he was trying his best. He . . . He was our Master. You shouldn’t lump him in with Xehanort.”

“What are Masters but shackles holding us down?” Terra demanded. “What are they but barricades on the path to destiny? We have outgrown such childish things.”

She couldn’t put into words how wrong that felt. Instead, as her mind raced a hundred miles a minute, the only sentence she could put to words was, “Terra, I’m a Master, too.”

He took a second, as if just remembering that for the first time. A gloved hand caressed her cheek.

“You are different. You listen,” Terra told her.

She touched his hand. A small part of her wanted to brush it away. “I try to. The Master always said . . .”

“Don’t,” Terra says sharply. “Forget his words. You have no further need to listen to his guidance.”

For a split second, something like anger had contorted his face. It was gone so quickly she was left wondering if it was a dream. That serenity she always associates with him returns. Something rings in the back of her mind, a warning of sorts. This time, she doesn’t completely toss it aside.

“Your support means a lot to me, but let’s be honest: I’m hardly a Master. I failed my first and only mission.” And look what I’ve done to you.

“It matters not,” Terra says. “I will always be here to guide you.”

One hand is on her cheek. The other holds her in place by her wrist. A day ago, Terra’s words would have been a cherished promise. But now it feels like . . .

“When Ven returns, we can discuss preparing a proper memorial.”

“Of course.”

He smiles at her, and then he departs. The darkness swallows him up. She touches her cheek.

Surely, she had imagined it. Terra wouldn’t get angry at something like that. Technically, Terra can’t even get angry.

(So why had that statement felt like a vague threat?)

Chapter End Notes

See? Ven isn't the only possessive person around. Xemnas is just possessive in a different way.
“So, this is where you, Ventus and Xemnas lived, right? He sure has a thing for giant castles.” Lea doesn’t say that in a bad way. He makes a show of looking around and whistling.

“If you like it now, imagine coming here for the first time when you were seven,” Aqua says.

Roxas follows them, looking around curiously. She’s a little disappointed. She had hoped for more excitement from him. She takes them on a tour of the place, avoiding the bedrooms and kitchen because after eight years of decay, she doesn’t want to think about what it smells like.

They get bogged down in the library when Roxas finds a book with pictures of different keyblades. He’s only seen the ones that they wield, so he’s overly interested. She and Lea leave him to it. They wander further into the library, looking for something to entertain themselves.

“Man, this reminds me of Radiant Garden,” Lea says. “The books. The castle. Even the whole dark and scary stuff going on outside.”

“The people in the Organization are from the same world, right?”

“Everyone but Roxas and that Myde kid. He seems like a nice guy,” Lea says offhandedly.

“Did you know Terra?”

“Hmm? You didn’t ask him?”

“I did,” she says with a shrug. “He says he didn’t know you or Isa.”

Lea is watching her very closely. “And now you’re asking me.”

The back of her neck prickles. She doesn’t like the way he says that, or how he’s looking at her. Like she’s . . . disloyal. She rubs her arm, hoping the friction will keep the goosebumps from showing up.

“I was just . . . I wanted to hear your side. You’re right. I already asked Terra. I don’t need to be asking . . .”

“Whoa!” He holds up his hands in surrender. “I was just commenting. It’s fine. Ask away.”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m being silly. Terra already told me.”

She can feel her face heating up, so she turns away and pretends to sift through the nearest bookcase. Lea leans on the one behind her, watching her.

“Say, Aqua, do they get on your case a lot about that? Like, about asking others about things they already told you about?”

She bites her lip. “I don’t mean to. It’s . . . It’s confusing when you’re gone and come back, and so much about the universe has changed. We didn’t have Nobodies in my time. We barely had Heartless. Unversed were the monsters of the day.”

Lea doesn’t say anything for a while, and she gets through an entire shelf before he suddenly speaks up. “We sort of knew each other. In that vague, ‘Those damn kids are on my lawn again’ way. Apparently, I had a reputation as a troublemaker.”
She laughs. “Did you?”

“I confess to multiple counts of assault with a frisbee.”

“Oh, that’s why you have chakrams!”

“I’m not sure whether that’s a compliment,” he says with a grin.

They laugh together. Whatever awkwardness she created before slips away. When she looks at the books this time, she’s actually able to read the titles.

Suddenly, Lea’s beside her. “You know, I wasn’t kidding about all the darkness reminding me of home. Radiant Garden was getting like that near the end.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine,” Aqua says softly. “When I visited, it was a city full of light.”

“A lot happened in those years you weren’t there,” Lea says. “Xemnas didn’t tell you about it?”

She shakes her head.

Lea shifts. He leans back against the bookcase. “Lot of bad stuff. People going missing. Blackouts. Weird things happening. Just a lot of general unease and fear. They say something happened to Ansem the Wise — the guy in charge. Now, I don’t know if it’s true because papers kept coming out of that castle with his name on it, but I do know that one day he went into that place and we never saw him in person again. There were lots of rumours about what was going on. All revolving around the castle and the people in it.”

“That’s . . .” She exhales. “I wish I had been there to help.”

Lea doesn’t acknowledge that. Instead he tells her, “Xemnas lived in that castle.”

She jumps. Her skin feels clammy.

“Aqua,” he asks quietly, “how much do you really know about the time you were gone?”

She’s saved from answering by the slam of a door.

“Aqua?”

“Ven,” she breathes. Like Terra, he must have come here to see her after his mission.

She pushes her way to the front of the library to meet him. Ven is frozen, only a few steps away from the door. He is staring at Roxas, who stares back at him, having paused his browsing of the book of keyblades.

She’s in the perfect place to see Ven summon the X-Blade.

“Roxas!”

There’s no time to get between them. Instead, she summons Stormfall and blasts Roxas across the room with Aeroga. The X-Blade passes through the spot he was in, and cleaves through another bookcase. That delay gives Aqua enough time to dart between them, to raise Stormfall in defense even as Ven swings around with another blow. The force of the block sends her backwards, right into Roxas where they both tumble to the ground against a wall.

“Aqua?” Ven says, breathing heavy.
“Ven, what are you doing?” she demands, scrambling to her feet. Stormfall hangs at her side, all fighting forgotten. “That was –”

“What is he doing here?” Ven hisses.

That warning bell from before returns. She forces herself to throw it off. “You were busy, so I…”

“You invited them?” Ven looks around and his face hardens when he sees Lea watching nearby. “Does Terra know?”

“Yes. I told him I was going to ask them when he couldn’t come either.”

He clenches his jaw. “Why?”

“I didn’t want to come alone,” she admits quietly.

“You could have waited for us!” Ven snaps. “There was no reason to bring them here.”

“Ven, it’s our home,” she says. “I can bring people here…”

“It’s my home, too!” he shoots back. “And I don’t want them here. Ever!”

“Okay, this is getting a little out of hand,” Lea says. He walks toward them with his hands showing, making sure Ven knows he isn’t armed. “Look, I’ve had my fill. Roxas and I will just…”

Ven points the X-Blade at him. “Shut up.”

“Ven!” she shouts.

“This is our home. They have no right to be here!” Ven is screaming, his face has twisted in rage and yet, she thinks she sees tears. “Especially not this… this fraud!”

He points the X-Blade straight at Roxas, who looks to her for an explanation. She doesn’t have one to give.

“Ven, calm down,” she says.

But as wiser people would have warned her, it’s the exact wrong thing to say. He takes her words as some sort of permission to light the X-Blade on fire. Roxas finally summons his own keyblade and that causes Lea to immediately summon his chakrams. Aqua swears in her head; this is quickly getting way out of control.

“I want them out,” Ven pants. His arm shakes. “I want them out, now.”

“Alright. We’re leaving,” Lea says. He gestures at Roxas to come to him. Warily, not taking his eyes off Ven, Roxas does. The two disappear through a portal.

Aqua bottles up her emotions. She doesn’t want to make things worse. “Ven, I…”

“Are you going to give him my room next?” Ven mutters.


But he’s already walked through a portal of his own. She’s left alone in the crumbling library.

“I don’t understand,” Roxas says.
Lea slowly counts to ten because how can he not? Ventus nearly \textit{killed} him.

\textit{(He should have said no to her. He knows he should have. But he didn’t, because... Hell, he’s not even sure why. Only that he saw her desperation, and Roxas had begged him to go, and then he saw the smile on her face when he started seriously considering it...)}

“Look, Roxas,” he says, “friendship is a really nice thing to have. Which means that sometimes, people get mad if they feel like it’s being taken away from them. It’s called jealousy. I explained what that is before, right?”

“But Aqua and Ven \textit{are} still friends,” Roxas says. “That’s what she tells me.”

“Yes, they are. The thing about emotions is that they’re not always rational,” Lea explains. “That’s kind of the point.”

“Okay. So, Ventus is angry because Aqua’s my friend, and he thinks that means they’re not friends anymore?”

Lea rubs the back of his neck. “Close enough.”

“Then to make Ventus unjealous, I should tell him that Aqua’s still his friend!!”

Roxas looks up at him earnestly, like a kid who just gave the right answer in a damn elementary class. It would be cute if Lea didn’t think that Roxas was about to march straight to his death.

“No. No, you \textit{definitely} shouldn’t,” he says. “You should stay as far away from him as you possibly can. Or did you not notice that he just tried to kill you?”

“But if he’s no longer jealous . . .”

Lea grabs Roxas’s shoulders. He pushes him into a closet where he can be sure no one is watching them.

“Roxas, listen closely. Ventus isn’t going to get unjealous. That guy, he’s . . . He’s not normal. He’s dangerous.”

“But Aqua. . .”

“Aqua doesn’t know!” he snaps because what is going to take to make them \textit{see}? “He and Xemnas are playing a game of chicken with her, and they’re not about to get off the track anytime soon.”

“What’s chicken?” Roxas asks.

Lea slaps his forehead. “What I’m trying to say is that they’re not really her friends. I have no idea what they’re supposed to be. So don’t bother trying to fix things between you and Ventus because it’s pointless.”

She flies home alone. It’s lonely, but it also gives her a chance to think. Not about Ven and what happened, because there isn’t much to think about that beyond what she witnessed; but about what Lea had asked her.

How much did she know about that time she was missing? Eight entire years. She knew Terra had wound up in Radiant Garden with his memories gone, and that that Ven had found him. She knew Ven spent those years looking for her while Terra tried to reclaim what he had lost. She knew, near the end, that Ven had discovered she was wielding Wayward Wind while Terra had his heart torn
out in his efforts to remember.

But she didn’t know how Radiant Garden had fallen to the shadows. She didn’t know exactly how Ansem and Xemnas had come into being.

Eight entire years, and she knew so much and so little about them.

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“Who the hell does he think he is? He thinks that just because he acted like me means he can take my place? And Lea. . . He’s not Terra!”

Ven snarls and hurls the X-Blade at the wall. It sinks in easily leaving a spiderweb of cracks around the impact site. Whatever. He’ll have the Dusks plaster it later. This isn’t the first time it has happened.

It is, however, the first time he’s turned around to see Terra in the doorway.

“Terra!” he chokes out. “I was. . . uh. . . Acting out a play I saw.”

Terra obviously doesn’t buy it. “Ven, what is this?”

“I. . . I’m. . . I’m sorry, okay? It’s just . . . They think they can replace us just because that idiot happens to look like me when I was younger and it’s stupid. She’s our best friend, not theirs! They need to leave her alone.”

He kicks at the wall underneath the X-Blade and then yanks it out. A small shower of dust falls onto the floor.

Ven rubs at his eyes where the tears are forming. “Isn’t it enough that he stole my past?”

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She finally docks at the Castle That Never Was. To her surprise, she finds Lea and Isa nearby speaking to each other. She sighs and shuffles towards them. She owes Lea an apology after what happened.

“Aqua.”

She jumps. She hadn’t seen Terra enter. Neither did Lea and Isa, if the way they go silent means anything.

“Come with me,” Terra tells her.

She obeys.

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At dinner, Roxas keeps an eyes out for Aqua. He still doesn't really get this jealousy thing, but apparently it's his fault and he wants to talk to her about it.

She never shows up.

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“Ven, you know I wasn’t trying to replace you, right?”

The lights in Ven’s room are off. His back is to her, but he’s looking over his shoulder and his golden eyes shine eerily in the gloom.
“I . . .” Her throat is clenching so hard that every breath is a conscious effort. “It wasn’t like that. He was just so young and lost and I wanted to help him.”

“Just like I was before, right?” he says bitterly.

“It’s not like that. I would have helped him no matter what he looked like! That’s . . . that’s what I like to do.”

She doubts the strength of her last argument and wants to bring up her responsibilities as a Master to empower it. She doesn’t though, because there’s no point. Her title doesn’t mean anything when she spent the last eight years lost in the dark and still struggles to understand the universe as it stands now.

“Do you still wish I was a little kid?” Ven asks.

“No. Of course not! I wish I could have watched you grow up, but . . .”

Ven stares into her eyes. “You do remember that Roxas and Lea are Nobodies, right? They don’t actually care about you.”

“Sounds like someone crossed a line yesterday.”

“Yeesh. Does everyone know?” Lea demands.

Dilan smirks. “It was hard not to overhear young Ventus’s tantrum.”

Lea pinches his nose. Stupid Somebodies and their drama . . .

“Lea? As someone who lived with Ventus while he and the Superior were still trying to retrieve their fair maiden from the darkness, allow me to give you a piece of advice.”

“What is it?” Lea asks warily.

Dilan says, “Plan for retirement.”

Roxas lounges on the couch, waiting for his mission partner. He’s not surprised that Xemnas walks in; since Aqua’s been mostly removed from the field, Roxas has been on more and more missions with the Organization’s Superior. Xemnas asks if he is ready to leave, then opens a portal when Roxas says yes.

They emerge somewhere in the mountains. Roxas zips his cloak up as far as he can as a cold wind buffets them.

“How are you, Roxas?” Xemnas asks.

“Fine,” he says. Xemnas asks him that sometimes. Roxas doesn’t think he actually cares, though.

“I heard you had an altercation with Ven recently.”

Roxas grimaces. “Lea says I make him jealous.”

Xemnas appraises him. “Lea would be correct.”

Xemnas walks forward. Roxas is quick to follow. There’s a battered stone path they’re following,
although Roxas has no idea where it will lead.

“What do you know about Ven’s history with Aqua?” Xemnas asks him.

“Uh, Aqua says that they’ve been friends for a long time. Then, she got lost in the darkness somehow, and Ventus rescued her.”

Xemnas chuckles. “A rather bland summary, but the premise is correct. They are extremely close.”

“You are too, right?” Roxas says, peering up at the hooded man he’s walking next to. “Aqua says all three of you lived together.”

“Yes. I have known her since childhood,” Terra says. “How the time has passed.”

They continue walking. There’s no sign of Heartless yet, but Roxas sees a shrine in the distance that he thinks is their destination.

“They’re both novelties,” Xemnas suddenly says. “Aqua is a Master in thrall to others. Ven holds so much power and yet demands so little. They’re both still very much the children I remember.”

“Did you know Ventus as a child, too?”

“No. He was in his teens when he came to us, but like you, he had lost all memory of his past and had no sense of self.”

“Like me,” Roxas repeats quietly. “Does that mean it’s normal?”

Xemnas smiles flatly. “No. Ven was quite perturbed by your condition.”

Xemnas suddenly touches his hair.

“Have you noticed the similarities in your appearances?” Xemnas asks. “You look very much as he did when he was younger.”

That’s weird. Sora’s his Somebody, so shouldn’t he look like – ?

The pain rips through his thoughts like a knife through paper. He’s barely able to understand what’s happening, other than that he hurts.

“. . . And unfortunately, Ven is no longer willing to overlook that,” Xemnas says softly. Void Gear is in his hand, smoking. “Who would I be to deny him, when he asks for so little from me?”

With a cough, Roxas summons his keyblade, but he’s too slow to get off the ground.

“You at least deserved to know why,” Xemnas mulls as he raises his blade.

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Such a shame that one of their keyblade wielders fell during a mission.

That’s what he’s going to tell them at least, Xemnas thinks idly as he dematerializes Void Gear. As far as the others know, Roxas was alone on this mission. He is concerned about Aqua’s reaction, however. It’s difficult to keep her corralled when she yearns to spend every day killing Heartless. Hearing that one of them killed her darling Roxas will make her more obsessed with fighting them.

Ah, he’ll just tell them Sora was the killer instead. That should also help prevent a repeat of the Mickey incident.
“Wake up, sleepyhead!”

Sora jolts awake. He wakes to big blue eyes and a wide smile.

“Come on, we’re supposed to go to the market,” Kairi says. “Riku and I have been waiting forever.”

“Oh, right! Sorry!”

“Told you,” Riku scoffs from the doorway. “He’s always sleeping.”

“Hey, that’s not true!”

“Well, maybe now that you’ve had a nap, you’ll be able to run faster than me!” Riku says, a challenge gleaming in his eyes.

“You’re on. . . Once I get dressed!”

Riku smirks and slips out of the room.

Kairi suddenly asks, “Hey, Sora, are you okay?”

He frowns. “Yeah. Why? Did something happen?”

“No, you just. . .” Kairi pauses. Her eyes flicker to his chest. “Something about you just feels different.”

He’s gone. He’s dead.

Aqua brings her knees in tight to her chest. Only the faint yellow glow of her nightlight illuminates the room. She’s drawn the curtains so she can’t see outside, so she can’t see the heart-shaped moon that Roxas gave his life for.

He was only a child.

She rests her forehead on her knees and sniffs. There are no tears left in her body for her emotions to find. She had started crying the moment Terra had walked into her room and delivered the news. He had stayed with her for a while, letting her crying into his shoulder. Eventually, though, he had disentangled himself, saying he had to inform the others.

_I should have been there. I should have been able to protect you._

Stormfall suddenly flashes into her hand. The shaft is hot enough that she must loosen her grip. Yellow light reflects off the keyblade’s teeth.

_So, this is how it is, _she thinks.

Someone knocks.

“Aqua?” Ven asks. “Terra wants to know if you’re up for a meeting.”
She takes a deep breath. Stormfall pulses.

“T’ll be there.”

It’s the first time she’s seen Lea since she found out about Roxas.

He’s choosing to keep his hood up, preventing her from seeing his face. She can guess, though. Or at least she thinks she can. Lea is a Nobody and so, shouldn’t be able to feel grief. Yet the lines between Nobodies and Somebodies are so blurred for her, because once he began talking, Roxas never seemed like an emotionless husk. Neither did Lea, if she’s honest. His humor always seemed real, as did his desire to watch over the younger boy.

Isa enters with him. Isa looks like a proper Nobody: emotionless. Before she gets too upset, she reminds herself that he didn’t know Roxas well. It’s okay for Isa not to feel as hurt as she does, just like it’s okay for Ven and Terra not to cry over Roxas.

She tunes out as Terra delivers the news. She already knows. She doesn’t want to hear him say it again. Terra’s low voice vibrates throughout the room and she lets it lull her into a stupor.

“Aqua?”

Everyone’s starting at her. She straightens up, wondering what she had missed.

Thankfully, it seems as though he was simply addressing her. Terra says, “I understand how your heart weeps for Roxas’s fate. However, I must ask you to promise that you will not go after Sora.”

An automatic protest bubbles up. “But Sora…”

“I understand,” Terra says. “But Sora has proven himself strong and merciless enough to take down another keyblade wielder. I do not want you to pursue him.”

“I can handle him!” she cries out, gripping the silver emblem on her chest that Master Eraqus had given her so long ago.

“That is not a risk we are willing to take,” Terra says. “Aqua, I want to hear you say it.”

They’re all staring at her. She grits her teeth. Lea’s hood is up so she can’t guess his opinion, but Ven is right across from her and gives her a steady, but demanding look.

“I… I promise,” she says weakly.

Terra nods. “Thank you. Now, let us discuss the upcoming missions…”

“Lea?”

Lea looks her way. The darkness of that hood feels like a black hole, sucking everything in. He pauses for a moment and she knows he’s thinking about saying something, but whatever it is, it goes unsaid in the end. Lea turns back around and keeps walking.

“Guess he’s upset,” Ven says from behind her.

“They were close,” Aqua whispers.

Ven squeezes her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go find Terra.”
“How much do you really know about the time you were gone?” Roxas asks in her head.

“Isa!”

Isa half-turns. For once, she’s glad for his stoic personality, because she’s not sure if she could handle it if he looked at her with pity.

“How’s Lea?”

Isa looks away.

She swallows. “I know he must be very upset. . .”

“Aqua, you should wait in Nothing’s Hall,” Isa says.

She doesn’t understand what Isa wants her to see, or how long she is supposed to wait. But she waits anyways, until she understands. Until Lea tromps into the room, hood down and a bag in his hand.

“Lea?”

His chakrams blaze into life. Wide-eyed, he makes to chuck them at her, only to stop mid-throw when he realizes who it is.

“Aqua? You waiting for someone?”

_You, I guess._ “Where are you going?”

Like Isa, he looks away.

“Are you _leaving_?” Her voice breaks.

“Aqua, I . . .” There’s something in his face she doesn’t understand. “Things have gotten too dangerous for me.”

“I can protect you!” she cries. “I’ll fight Sora. He won’t make it into the castle.”

He looks at her and it’s a sad look, like the last look a beloved dog gets before its elderly owner must sign it off to the pound.

“Sorry, Aqua.”

She can feel her composure cracking. She’s losing them both, one right after the other. Just like last time, where she lost everything in a single decision –

“Come with me.”

“Wh-what?” she says.

“Come with me,” Lea tells her. He holds his hand out, beseeching her. “We can escape together.”

She backs away. “Lea, are you crazy? I can’t just leave.”

That sad look returns. “No. I guess you can’t.”
She tries something else. “What about Isa? You’ll be leaving him behind.”

Lea stiffens. Then, he slumps and mutters, “Isa will be much safer if I’m not around.”

“But you won’t be.” She closes the distance between them. “We’re stronger as a group. If you meet Sora now, you’ll be all alone.”

Lea is silent for a long time.

“You know, Sora’s supposed to be one of those big hero types,” Lea finally says. “Not really the guy to go slicing up kids. Weird, isn’t it? What reason would he have to kill Roxas?”

“I . . . What are you implying? Why would Terra lie?”

Again, he gives her one of those long looks. “It’s just a question.”

She forces herself to think about other things. She won’t doubt Terra; she won’t. Lea sees the conflict on her face and sighs.

“Alright, let’s try a different question,” he says. “Why do you have the throne across from Xemnas while Ventus gets the one next to him?”

“I joined the Organization late. You should know that.”

He raises his eyebrows. “You seriously think Xemnas is too shy to ask someone to move? That someone would be willing to say no to him?”

“He’s more considerate than you think,” she snaps back, offended.

“. . . Maybe he is,” Lea says with a shrug.

He raises his arm and a dark portal appears behind him. They look at each other, silent. Lea turns and walks toward the portal. When his foot touches the threshold, he looks back, that same request for her to join him in his eyes.

She crosses her arms over her chest and looks away.

“Or maybe,” Lea says aloud suddenly as he walks alone into the darkness, “Xemnas has you sit there so he can keep an eye on you.”

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“How much do you really know?”

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“Terra, how did you lose your heart?”

He turns his head away from the window facing Kingdom Hearts and looks at her. “As all others do. The Heartless tore it beating from my chest.”

“Where did they even come from?” Aqua asked. “There weren’t very many of them in our time. How did they multiply so quickly? They devoured your entire world. . .”

Terra watches her as she thinks aloud. “Does it matter?”

“Of course, it does. What if it happens again?” she demands. “Something like this isn’t normal. Something terrible must have happened.”
Terra stares at her. Her words catch up with her, and she struggles to speak.

“I’m sorry! You don’t have to talk about it.” After all, she certainly hadn’t talked about her problems. Nowadays, Terra and Ven knew most of what she had seen in the Realm of Darkness, but she hadn’t come out of there spilling everything –

“It was me,” he says pleasantly.

She jerks back, stunned that he would just... admit it like that. That he would say that with a smile – even if he is a Nobody. “What do you mean?”

“I opened the door in Radiant Garden. I let the Heartless in.”

Her inhale shudders through her chest. “Why?”

“Although I lacked my memories, the experiments we performed on my heart allowed me to see glimpses of our last battle, and of your fate. When I peeked through the door and saw the world on the other side, I recognized it. And so, I threw it open in a foolish attempt to cross. Only too late did I realize what I had unleashed.”

That... That’s why? He’d let in the darkness looking for her? She covers her mouth, holding in the moan. Terra hadn’t just sacrificed himself to the dark for her; he’d... he had sacrificed...

“It was never my intention to plunge that world into darkness,” Terra says. “However, I accept responsibility for my actions.”

It’s her fault. It’s all her fault. Because she was weak and couldn’t find her way out of the darkness. Because in her arrogance, she’d allowed Terra to walk into Xehanort’s trap. She had failed. This was her fault.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “I’m sorry. I never wanted any of this to happen.”

“It’s alright, Aqua.” Terra’s lips curl into a shell of a smile. “I lack the ability to be upset over my current condition.”

But she doesn’t. She isn’t emotionless. And Terra’s words, meant to comfort, instead are a knife in the chest. She’d destroyed him. Terra, his home... She’d destroyed his entire life. She’d destroyed so many things...

“There’s no need to cry,” Terra murmurs. “We will make this right again. Together.”

She chokes. “Yes, we will.”

They’re standing in the glow of Kingdom Hearts together. The moon is a silent promise.

“Maybe you weren’t the first to find the door,” she wonders aloud, again. “Maybe that’s why Ansem the Wise disappeared, too.”

Terra whips around. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Terra, I’ve been to Radiant Garden,” she reminds him. “I heard he disappeared a few years before you lost your heart. You lived with him, didn’t you? Did you ever find out what happened?”

“Aqua, who told you this?”

In three quick strides, he’s in front of her and grabbing her upper arm. She yelps at the pressure,
which makes him loosen his grip, but he doesn’t let go.

“Mickey mentioned it to me,” she says. “He. . .”

“Mickey?” Terra repeats. “Why did you hide this from me?”

“Hide what?” she exclaims. “All he said was that Ansem the Wise disappeared before Radiant Garden fell.”

Again, he’s squeezing. “What else did he tell you? What haven’t you told me?”

“I – ”

“Uh, guys?”

They look. Ven’s in the doorway to Terra’s room. His hands are in his pockets as he looks at them in turn, confused.

“Is something wrong?” Ven asks.

“No,” Terra says calmly. “I believe the emotions in this conversation simply ran too high.”

Terra doesn’t have a heart, so Ven immediately assumes it’s her and stares at her questioningly. It’s not her, though. . . She doesn’t think it was her. But Terra’s a Nobody so he can’t . . .

(HOW MUCH DO YOU REALLY KNOW?)

He trudges onwards. As long as he keeps his distance, they’ll let him be. There are worlds between him and Aqua now, so Ventus should be happy and although it was tempting, he didn’t spill their secrets so Xemnas shouldn’t go after him either. He knows they’ve put Aqua on a leash, too. As long as he doesn’t go to any of the worlds near the World That Never Was, he’ll be safe. All he has to do is keep an ear out, wait for Kingdom Hearts to be completed and then return to beg Aqua to make Xemnas give him back his heart –

There are voices in the distance. Lea stills, waits, and swears when he sees their source.

He turns away –

He stops.

“. . . You know what?” Lea mutters to himself. “Ventus and Xemnas can fuck right off.”

He points his feet towards the voices and walks forward

Finally, her doubts have taken physical form.

They’ve taken the form of a hand-shaped bruise on her upper arm.

“Do you want me to sleep over?” Ven asks.

“What? No, you don’t need to –”

“Because I don’t mind. I didn’t mind before when you just got out of the Realm of Darkness,” Ven
says in a rush. He knows he shouldn’t be offering this because he needs to keep some distance. Because he’s too excited and needs to be careful with how he acts right now. Because if Aqua realizes what he really feels about Roxas being gone, then she’s going to be pissed.

“Ven, I’ll be fine . . .”

“Seriously, I don’t mind. If being alone is going to give you flashbacks again, I can drag my pillow into your room. I don’t want you to think I’m going to disappear, too.”

He watches her nails dig into her arm as she remembers. After he had retrieved her from the Realm of Darkness (before Roxas and Lea had come into their lives), Aqua hated to be alone for too long. She told them she had hallucinated finding them several times in the Realm of Darkness, only for them to suddenly disappear later and never return.

She looks away. “I . . .”

“It’s fine,” he says soothingly. She looks up at him, and it’s kind of funny how he’s tall enough now to rest his chin on her head. He wouldn’t, but she’s told him before that his chin’s sharp. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Aqua takes a deep breath. Shakily, she says, “Okay. Thank you.”

Ven anticipated this, so his stuff’s already by his door and ready to go. He’d invite Terra as well, except Terra’s in the middle of his Kingdom Hearts Time, and woe befall anyone who interrupts him.

Aqua falls asleep first. No surprise. He’s way too excited to sleep first because they’re finally gone. Roxas is gone, and Lea’s taken off never to return. He can finally breathe easy. The only thing left to do is return Terra’s heart, but it’s only a matter of time and in the meantime, Terra’s Nobody is a pretty cool guy.

He smiles contently and plays with the strands of Aqua’s hair.

(He plays with them the same way that a dragon sifts gold through its claws, counting its coins over and over again.)

Can you hear me? Are you even in there? Or am I just an idiot hoping to see a ghost?

Lea tenses his back and forces himself to grin. It’s tough though when he’s face-to-face with Roxas’s Somebody and damn, they look alike. They’re not identical though and that’s why he’s able to blur Sora’s face out, to stare at him without actually looking at him so he can get through this and play the suave character he needs to be.

“So, you’re Sora, huh?”

“You’re wearing a black cloak,” Sora thinks aloud. “Hey, does that mean you’re with those people who are going around hurting others?”

Come on, Roxas, you know me. Lea laughs hollowly. “Hard to be pals with the guys that are going to kill you.”

“But you know who we’re talking about?” the silver-haired kid - Riku, he thinks - demands.

No point in hiding it. “I do. I’m very familiar with them.”
“You are with them, aren’t you?” Riku accuses. His keyblade appears, causing the other two kids to summon theirs. It’s the first time Lea’s seen them and he has to say that Sora’s keyblade is rather plain-looking.

“What part of ‘They’re trying to kill me’, didn’t you understand?” Lea asks, exasperated. “Look, here’s the gist. I stepped on somebody’s toes, and certain people have decided that the only appropriate response is a hopefully quick murder.”

The kids look uncertain now. They even look uncomfortable at his flippant discussion of murder. He unblurs Sora’s face and looks directly into his eyes, searching for a sign, for a confirmation of any of his suspicions.

“So, what do you want from us?” Riku snaps.

“Actually, I’m looking for Mickey. Thought you guys could give me a hand.”

“The king? What do you want with him?”

And it’s time to drop the bomb. “I heard he was friends with Aqua.”

“Master Aqua? How do you know her?” Sora asks in astonishment. Lea’s smirk flickers because Roxas was so quick to respond to her – Wait. That’s the first time he’s heard anyone refer to Aqua by her title. Hell, even Aqua doesn’t do that.

“That’s not something I’m willing to share with you,” Lea says bluntly. “But Mickey has been looking for her, right? I think he’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

Riku starts. “That doesn’t mean we’re going to -“

Then, Kairi - the only one Lea knew before his world went to hell - grabs Riku’s arm. He jumps and looks at her, surprised but silent.

“We should let him speak to Mickey,” Kairi says, softly but firmly.


“It’s okay,” Kairi says. She smiles. “Mickey can beat him up if he’s lying.”

“Yeah, the king can take him!” Sora cheers. Lea rolls his eyes as the kids excitedly talk about watching the mouse king beat him into the ground.

“Okay, now that negotiations are over, are you going to introduce me to him?” Lea demands. Riku still looks like he wants a fight, but he sullenly raises his hand and opens a.

“You can portal?” Lea bursts out.

Riku smirks smugly. “Yep.”

Lea frowns. “Whatever.”

He’s about to walk into the portal when Kairi says, “Lea, can I ask you something?”

Lea keeps his face neutral as the other two gape at her. “Sure.”

Kairi glances at the center of his chest. “You… You are a Nobody, right?”
“I have a distinct memory of the Heartless ripping out my heart,” he says flatly.

“But you. . .” She glances at his chest again. “Never mind.”

Well, if she’s going to ask awkward questions, then he gets a freebee. “Hey, Sora?”

Sora blinks up at him. He has to take a moment because it reminds him of. . .

“Did you kill Roxas?” he forces out.

“Huh? Roxas? Who’s that? Wait, why do you think I killed . . .?”

“Forget it. That’s all I needed to hear.”

He walks into the waiting portal

_I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I couldn’t protect you, Roxas. But maybe. . ._

_Maybe I can at least save one of you._

Ven closes his eyes. For ten long minutes, his soft breathing is the only sound there is.

Suddenly, a very awake Aqua rolls over.

_“Sleep,”_ she whispers as she lays her hand on his brow, her hand glowing with magic.

Chapter End Notes

_I feel like this was the weakest chapter so far but I (finally) got to write a battle scene for the next chapter so I'm still happy_

_I'm sure you've noticed that Riku's still got a case of his khI pride. Because Ansem had Void Gear this time (and thus didn't need Riku to get Kingdom Hearts) and Kairi never fell into a coma, Riku never got possessed. Some of the things that happened during the trio's KHI equivalent did stamp out some of Riku's arrogance, but not not to the extent it did in canon._
“Good evening, Miss Aqua,” Aeleus says as she walks past him.

“Good evening,” she says back.

She passes Ienzo and Even, next, who are discussing some science thing she doesn’t understand. The doors to the outside are slightly open, allowing a cool breeze to enter.

“Going for a walk?” Dilan asks with a smirk. He’s right by the door, dipping his chin in greeting as she gets close.

“Someone’s got to keep the Heartless under control,” she says with a smirk of her own.

Suddenly, there’s an arm barring her way.

“I will presume Xemnas hasn’t informed you then,” Dilan says. “The other keyblade wielders are alarmingly close. That is why we four are standing guard. I cannot allow you to leave at this time.”

She’s speechless. She can’t believe this! Of all times, why now?

“Why wasn’t I informed about this?” she demands.

“I will not be so bold to guess our Superior’s thoughts,” Dilan says. “You will have to ask him.”

She can’t. . . She can’t be turned back now. She holds her chin up high and says, “Let me go to them. Mickey trusts me. I can direct him away from this place.”

“That is a generous offer, but you are one of our keyblade wielders. That is not a risk we are wiling to take.”

“Dilan, I can handle myself,” she says with a frown.

“My apologies, Miss Aqua, but I don’t believe you understand the severity of the situation. Even, fetch Xemnas. Let him explain.”

“There’s really no need for that,” she says quickly. “I believe you. However, I don’t think the sight of me killing Heartless is going to raise any suspicions among them.”

“It would be foolish to venture ahead without a view of the full picture,” Dilan says. He’s standing in the middle of the door now, so getting past him isn’t as simple as pushing his arm aside. “Xemnas will explain.”

Aqua’s no stranger to combat. Even ignoring her training, she spent eight straight years fighting. The fighter’s instinct is as much a part of her as her heart and soul are. So, when they move, she senses it without turning in their direction. She feels Aeleus and Ienzo closing in behind her.

They’re flanking her.

The thought hits her with certainty: they’re not protecting the castle from Sora. They know.

Stormfall comes to her in a blast of jagged ice. The first shard catches Dilan in the chest by surprise, and the rest freezes in a thorny crown around her to keep the other two back. She’s no fool. She knows they’ll fight to keep her. She, Ven and Terra are the only hopes they have and when she’s
unshackled, she’s by far the most productive

Aeleus recovers first. She feels his earth magic at work through her feet, and twirls to the side as the floor where she was buckles and collapses into a small crater. Her magic’s already on the tip of her tongue and her conjured fireball floats into the air and then burst into three smaller ones that dive at Aeleus in pursuit. The door to the outside slams behind her as Dilan’s wind shoves against it and Ienzo is splitting into copies - she doesn’t have time for that. Lightning rains down and fills the room with its glow, slashing through copies and real bodies alike.

Though he stumbles back when she lunges and bashes Stormfall into his stomach, Dilan’s wind doesn’t die. That doesn’t matter. He can’t keep the door closed if there is no door. She needs time for Megaflyre though, and so she skirts around a wincing Dilan, using him as a shield as Ienzo flashes-steps in with his sword raised. He can’t swing at her with his comrade in the way, but Ienzo has always been able to fight through other means. Light drains from the room as his illusionary world seeps in. That doesn’t matter; she already knows the direction to fire.

She lets Megaflyre escapes. Dilan’s wind only helps throw the white doors into the Dark City’s skyscape.

But it’s not done yet. A wall of rock bursts through the ground to the ceiling to seal her inside. Even that is an opening, because Aeleus raised the wall too fast, too high, and it’s cracked the ceiling above. She charges at him, and when he raises his axe-sword to block a strike that isn’t coming, she leaps atop his blade and uses that to propel herself upward. She channels magic through her keyblade, keeping it inside until the moment she slams Stormfall against the battered ceiling. It implodes; she scurries into the cavity like a Shadow before Aeleus can raise the wall higher, so that he’ll crush her if he does.

She breaks through on the other side. Ienzo’s illusionary world has claimed her sight. The world is inky black and purple; strange lights and things moving in the dark. The Realm of Darkness. It’s meant to cow her with the trauma of her past, but Ienzo is a fool. They’ve already ignited her warrior’s rage and that means the darkness does not weaken her; she feasts upon it.

A gale of lances come from the side. Barrier stops them. She casts Gravity, claims them as her own and Dilan dismisses them once she launches them at Ienzo. She absently freezes the ground below them, covering it in a thick plane of ice that stretches and binds to the unseen walls, so that even after Aeleus tries to collapse the floor, there’s still another floor to stand upon.

She can taste fresh air. Ienzo doesn’t know her nightmares well enough to shut that sense out. She opens her mouth slightly and homes in on the scent the same way the Heartless always found her light. She bounds forward, icy spikes spreading across the bottom of her shoes so she doesn’t slip.

Aeleus slides into place before her. She doesn’t falter. He braces, but his shoes slide along the ice while hers digs in. He’s too big for her to simply throw aside, but her shoulder crushes against his abdomen, and she feels his body collapse above her.

As if she had struck the illusionist instead of the guard, the mirage world flickers. Behind her, in the direction of the castle, there are flashes of blue light. She ignores them. She lets Aeleus fall to the ground, and then raises Stormfall and charges her shotlock as an unaware Dilan waits across from her and thinks about what to do next.

She fires.

Someone pants behind her.
She turns.

Isa’s eyes are a bright blue light. It seems to be coming from a place inside his head, because the blue light is pouring out through his scars, as well. Although Isa is breathing heavily and his lips had been pulled back to expose his teeth in a snarl, she isn’t frightened. Where others see blind fury, she sees purpose and will. His cultivated rage speaks to her in a way few others can; she understands enough to know it’s safe to take her eyes off him.

She checks on Dilan. After that full shotlock he took, he is down. Aeles isn’t moving, and she assumes Isa had already taken care of Ienzo.

“Even never made it to Xemnas,” Isa says. “He won’t remain unaware for long, however. If you wish to leave, now would be the time.”

It sounds so final when he says it aloud. She frowns and looks back at the castle’s gaping entrance. She. . . she isn’t leaving them. But she needs answers. Terra’s hiding things from her - Ven might be, too - and she needs to understand why.

“What about you?” she asks. “Why are you leaving?”

“I realized years ago that Lea would die without me to guide him,” Isa says casually. “Oh, Aqua? Take off the cloak.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll find we have a poor reputation in several of the worlds.”

“Mickey!”

The three run up to the Master, dismissing their keyblades as they do. Sora asks, “How’d the talk go? Did you have to beat him up?”

“Hey, fellas. Uh, yeah, Lea and I had a talk. . .”

Mickey trails off. He looks upset.

Kairi asks” What happened?”

Mickey stares at the ground. “Well, it sounds like Master Aqua’s gotten herself into a heap of trouble.”

“Master Aqua? We can help her!” Sora declares. He’s only ever heard about her from Mickey and Yen Sid, but apparently she’s a super cool Keyblade Master and he’s keen to meet her.

“But that guy’s a Nobody, right? What if he’s lying?” Riku demands.

Sora waves him off. “Lea isn’t lying.”

They all blink.

“The Lea I remember was pretty honest, but you sound awfully sure about this. Have you met Lea before?” Kairi asks Sora.

“I. . . No, I haven’t.”
Ven’s woken by the slam of Aqua’s bedroom door. He feels weird and groggy, like he’s spent the last couple of days awake.

“She’s gone,” Xemnas tells him.

Waves crash against the shore. This beach is one of the few places that appears to have a celestial body, so that it could easily be mistaken for a location in the Realm of Light. Only the root-like, rocky growths that arch through the air betray that something isn’t quite right.

Isa waits on the shoreline. He knows this moon isn’t true, or else he would feel its power in his blood. But the visual similarity satisfies him for now as he waits.

Nearby, a shadow rises from the ground. It blooms upward in a rolling cloud. A long limb suddenly emerges from the darkness, followed by the rest of Lea’s body. He whistles casually as he approaches the man staring at the moon.

“So, you got out without any trouble,” Lea says.

Isa shrugs. “Considering that Aqua appeared to have taken out half of the Organization on her own, there wasn’t much to stop me.”

“She did it? She ended up flying the coop, too?” Lea asks that in a tone that suggests he doesn’t care, but his gaze is sharp.

“She attempted to leave even before I did.”

“And I presume she’s out wandering the worlds now.”

“I would assume so. . .” Isa studies him. “What did you do?”

Lea grins. “Just the usual. I sowed the seeds of chaos.”

“. . . What happened?”

“The world’s fallen to darkness,” Mickey says sadly. “I never saw the Land of Departure before the darkness took over, but Master Yen Sid said it was a really nice place before.”

“Do you think this is because of those Nobodies?” Sora asks.

“No. This was because of Xehanort. It happened around he time he killed Aqua’s Master.”

“Do you think she’ll be here?” Kairi asks.

“Hard to say. This is her home. . . but if she realizes she’s in trouble, I can’t see her wanting to bring her enemies here. Although, considering who they might be, she might not have much of a choice.”

“What do you mean?” Riku asks, sensing more to the story.

“You remember I told you there were three of them, right? Aqua, Ventus and Terra.”

“The three lost wielders,” Riku says with a nod.
“Yeah. Except it turns out they might not have been as lost as we thought. I know Aqua spent a long
time lost in the Realm of Darkness, but I don’t know what Ventus and Terra were doing.
Apparently, I should have looked more into that.”

Something inside Sora clenches in anger. He agrees with the sentiment and grinds his teeth together.

“Did they do something bad?” Sora asks.

“I don’t know. If I did know though, maybe it would help explain. . .” Mickey sighs heavily. Star
Seeker taps against the ground as he thinks about his next words. “According to Lea, Aqua’s in
trouble because of them.”

“What does that mean?” It’s Kairi who asks the question, but Sora feel like it came out of his lips.
That thing inside him hasn’t stopped clenching and now it’s doing its best to twist into an angry little
ball.

“He. . . He says. . .” Mickey looks down. It’s obvious that he’s a lot more upset than he’s let them
known. “You three haven’t been there, but the Realm of Darkness is a really scary place. Aqua was
down there for years with no company, never knowing if she would ever get out. Things like that
can change a person.”

“It wounds them,” Kairi whispers and Sora knows that Kairi relates, that Kairi understands. He
doesn’t know what he can say to ease the memory of watching your entire world fall into the abyss,
but he lays his head on her shoulder and gives her his goofiest smile when she turns to look at him,
making her giggle.

Mickey allows them their moment before he continues talking. “It does. And apparently, Ventus and
Terra have been picking at those wounds.”

“Why would they do that?” Sora asks. “Aren’t they best friends?”

“That’s what I thought. That’s the impression Aqua and Ventus gave me, too, whenever I spoke to
them. That’s what Lea claims, though. I want to believe he’s lying, but if he isn’t. . .”

After a moment, Riku shrugs. “Well, we wanted to find them anyways.”

“We did. We’ll have to push it up our priority list.”

“Did Lea say anything about those Nobodies we’re supposed to stop?” Sora asks.

“Nope. Hardly spoke about them at all. He didn’t say a whole lot at all, actually. He didn’t even tell
me where Aqua is.”

“So, he came here to warn you that she was in trouble, but didn’t actually tell you anything that
would let us help her?” Riku points out.

“It is rather strange, but I don’t think it’s a trap,” Mickey says. “Why would he drag Ventus and
Terra into it like this if it was? Even if it is, Aqua’s my friend so I still gotta try to help her.”

“We’ll help, too,” Sora says. “If it is a trap, I know they won’t be able to handle all five of us!”

“Five?” Riku says with a scoff as Sora blinks. “Sora, do you need to go back to math class?”

Kairi hits him in the arm. “The fifth’s Master Aqua, silly.”
Radiant Garden.

No, Hollow Bastion, now.

Either Lea had vastly understated how much the darkness had damaged this place, or the world had been continued to be ravaged even after its fall. It smelt like darkness. There was a dark haze in the air, and so much of it stemmed from that twisted castle in the centre of the world.

Speaking of said castle, it bore the symbol of the Emblem Heartless in the middle of its front-facing side, as if in jubilation. That was . . . odd. Terra had implied the world’s first true encounter with the Heartless was when Radiant Garden fell. Who would have had the time and knowledge to carve this before it did?

*It could have been done after the restoration. As a reminder,* she tries to tell herself, but already, inky coils of doubt curl inside her veins.

Chunks of earth are missing from the world. Like someone had smashed them up after the world went to pieces so they couldn’t be restored. It made the trip to the castle interesting, though not as much as the spawning Heartless. She can sense that the world’s keyhole had been closed, yet they were still coming from somewhere.

She scales the last cliff and lands delicately in front of the castle’s doors. Her life seemed to be one long story of hopping from one giant castle to another. This one even looks like her first home. It has the same marble-like, white exterior. She thinks the castle in the Land of Departure looked brighter, but that could have been nostalgia speaking.

She’s not the first one who’s been here. Someone’s braved their way here to put up signs warning about the Heartless within. There are a few weapons waiting against the wall on the walkway, too, either for an emergency or convenience. Who placed them? Heartless hunters? It’s a fun thought, but also sobering because only a keyblade can silence the Heartless and she doesn’t like to think about the fates of desperate warriors who never knew that. It could be adventurers, too, hunting for hidden treasure.

Whatever they are, she can take them. The front door’s locked when she tests it, but since when has that stopped her?

She taps the door with her keyblade, then pushes it open and steps inside.

What is she doing this time?

Ven pulls his hood up as he walks through the Corridor of Darkness. Aqua obviously knows she’s doing something wrong. Otherwise, she would have given them a heads-up instead of a note on her pillow. (He hadn’t read it. He’d simply ask Terra if it said where she was going, and then turned away when he had said no.) He wants to believe she’s just on another Heartless hunt, but there’s a different prey she could be hunting now: Sora. He doesn’t want to think about it; she *promised* she wouldn’t. But Aqua’s allowed power to get to her head before.

He's on his own for now. Ven doesn’t know why she took off, but Terra believes it’s because of that fight he walked in on earlier. Terra doesn’t think she’ll react well if he comes along. He might be right. Aqua does tend to get snippy and avoidant when she’s mad. However, Ven still isn’t sure what would make her mad enough to ignore all their warnings about the other keybladers and run away –
Whatever. He'll make her explain once he finds her. And he will. He's kind of an expert in searching for her.

He hasn't come across her scent yet. He’ll start with the obvious places.

He passes through the other end of the Corridor and rolls his shoulders as he stares at the castle.

Their old home seems like a pretty good place to start.
“Whoa! Riku, don’t you wish we lived somewhere like this?”

“It’s just a castle, Sora,” Riku says, putting on his best Too Cool to Be Impressed face. “We’ve been to several castles already.”

“It’s pretty fun living in a castle,” Kairi says affectionately, “but it takes forever to find people.”

“Why did they need such a big place for four people anyways?” Riku asks.

Mickey answers, “It was only four then, but there used to be a whole lot more keyblade wielders than there are now. Master Yen Sid said that most of the others were lost in the Keyblade War.”

Sora, arms crossed behind his neck, cocks his head to one side. Mickey and Yen Sid have referenced this war a couple of times, but he still doesn’t know what it really is.

“Well, we saw the memorial outside, so she’s definitely been here since she escaped the Realm of Darkness,” Mickey says. “We should check her room and see if there’s any signs she’s been staying here.”

“Great idea! Where is her room?” Sora asks.

“I have no idea.”

At least they have an excuse to explore the castle. Sora runs right inside. There’s a grand staircase in the first chamber that leads up to an overhang that overlooks the entrance. At the back of the overhang is a set of open double doors, but behind them . . . It looks like it leads into a chasm.

“The darkness sure took a toll on this place,” Mickey says sadly as he follows Sora’s eyes. “The bedrooms are likely closer to the center of the castle.”

Kairi, their other resident castle expert, agrees. Thus, they walk through the double doors on the ground floor instead. It opens into a large room that has two rows of pillars for support. The floor is wooden, there are mats lined up against the wall and floating rings just hanging around. It’s a training area. Knowing this, Sora can’t resist whacking one of the rings.

Like Riku had said, the castle is bigger than it needs to be for the number of people that lived there. As they roam through corridors, they find more than one room that barely has anything in it. They find Heartless, too; nothing too powerful though. Mickey clears them out solemnly, as if doing so will bring his missing friend to them.

“Wait!” Sora suddenly cries out as Riku tries to open another door. They all stop and look at him.

“Did you want to go first?” Riku asks, stepping aside.

“No, it’s just . . .” He grabs his head, trying to shake off the sudden throbbing, “This room . . . Do we have to go in?”

The other three exchange looks. Mickey holds his arm out, and gestures for them to get back. Alone, the Keyblade Master approaches the door. He lays his ear against it. When he hears nothing, he turns the knob. Then he wrenches it open and charges inside.

They hold their breath. There’s no sound.
Finally, Mickey pokes his head out. “All clear.”

Mickey says that, but Sora can’t stop the cold shivers trembling down his spine. It feels like a ghost is grabbing the back of his neck. Still, Riku and Kairi are going ahead without any concerns, so he forces himself to follow them.

The four stand in the room. Riku starts laughing.

“Now I understand why this spooked you,” Riku says to him.

They’re in a library. Boy, he feels like a fool. And hey, he isn’t that afraid of homework.

“Oh, cheer up, Sora,” Kairi says. “If it makes you feel better, I thought that last book Master Yen Sid made us read was really boring, too.”

“Guys.”

Mickey says that sharply. He’s got his arm out ready to summon Star Seeker. Without thinking, without checking what has him on edge, they all prepare to summon their weapons. Mickey bounds ahead, and leaps atop a fallen bookcase that the rest of them have just realized has been severed in half. The trio go back-to-back, watching for enemies as Mickey checks the bookcase over.

Mickey says, “Whatever happened here, I don’t think it was that recent.”

With that, they all begin to fully relax. Although it’s a large room, nothing has shown up yet so it’s almost a given that there’s no Heartless in here. Heartless are attracted to strong lights, which means they flock to Kairi whenever she’s in the vicinity. It’s both super convenient and annoying.

Mickey and Riku go off to search for clues. Kairi sticks with Sora and they do a quick evaluation of the other bookcases and their subjects. One book has been pulled out and is resting on a table. They glance at each other, and then run over to it.

“Cool, it’s a bunch of keyblades!” Sora says. He flips through the pages rapidly, finally stopping on the one with his own.

“Mine’s prettier,” is what Kairi says.

They find no clues in the library, so they depart and wander through the halls again. At some point, they stumble into a large room with tall thrones that Mickey says was probably the site of Master Aqua’s exam.

“Just a sec!” Sora springs forward and then uses Aero to propel himself into the air. His landing on the central throne is hard and he falls onto his bottom, but he meant to sit down here anyways.

“How’s the view, King Sora?” Kairi calls up to him.

“Pretty sweet. There’s . . . Huh?”

He expected to see three loyal, admiring subjects. He sees four people.

“Who are you?” Sora asks the fourth. Everyone else turns around to look.

The newcomer stands in the doorway to the Throne Room. Whomever they are, they’re the tallest one here, although three of them are kids so that doesn’t mean much. Sora assumes this person is older than them, but he can’t tell because of the black hood covering their face. . .
Wait. Black hood? Black cloak?

Riku’s quicker to the understanding. “I think that’s a Nobody!”

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Mickey demands. His tone could be called aggressive, but he hasn’t summoned his keyblade yet.

For a few seconds, the cloaked figure is silent. Then they – he – says, “Couldn’t I be asking you the same question, Mickey? This doesn’t look like a place for little kids.”

Sora stands up on the throne. He doesn’t like this person’s voice. He senses something beneath, like a crocodile waiting in the water for its unlucky prey to come too close.

“We’re not kids. We’re keyblade wielders,” Riku protests.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Mickey says.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re here first?” the figure says. He has one hand raised, as if preparing to grab something.

Mickey considers it. “I’m looking for a friend.”

“. . . What a coincidence.”

As the figure says that, their hand balls into a fist. Something red and black spreads out from beneath his sleeve, sliding over the flesh until it covers it seamlessly like a second skin.

“But none of you belong here,” the figure continues. “You’re trespassing on sacred ground.”

“Hey, we’re her friends!” Sora shouts. “We’re more welcome than you are.”

“Friends? You don’t even know her!” the figure snaps, lurching forward, barely holding themselves back from pouncing.

“Her,” Mickey mutters to himself. He eyes the figure suspiciously.

“Aero!” Kairi cries. A small twister, not strong enough to lift anyone, forms around the stranger. The wind pushes his hood back and -

“You!” Star Seeker appears, glowing with the expectation of casting. “Vanitas!”

Sora stands straighter. Okay, this Vanitas guy is definitely evil. If the freaky black helmet and black cloak didn’t give it away, the hollow laugh certainly does. Sora leaps off the thrones to stand next to his friends.

“Mickey, you know this guy?” Riku asks.

“I do. He was with Master Xehanort eight years ago.”

“Him, too? Why are all these people reappearing now?”


“I retired,” Vanitas says shortly. “And if you stop pissing me off, maybe I’ll stay that way.”

“We’re pissing you off? You’re the one picking a fight!” Riku shouts.
“Plus, you’re invading Master Aqua’s home,” Mickey says. “I know for sure she wouldn’t like that.”

“Yeah, she wouldn’t. Technically, I did try to kill her a couple of times.” Vanitas says that with an almost nostalgic chuckle, as if embarrassed by the memory.

Sora doesn’t think. He summons Kingdom Key and throws it at Vanitas.

The slam of the keyblade against - no, into the wall, stops them all cold. Vanitas had moved out of the way, but if he hadn’t, he would have been struck in the head. Sora’s heart is pounding against his ribs so quickly that they’re vibrating, and he feels hazy not quite with rage, but with something closer to fear.

“Okay, who do you think you are?” Vanitas snarls. Sora’s face is reflected in his mask. “Wait, aren’t you Sora? Or are you Riku? No... No. You’ve got to be Sora.”

Vanitas reaches up and rubs his mask as he says that. It’s creepy, just like Vanitas.

“How do you know our names?” Riku demands.

Vanitas ignores him. “You’re lucky, Sora. If you were anyone else, I would consider gutting you. But I do owe you... And if she’s really slippery, you could be bait...”

“Leave him alone!” Kairi steps in front of him, as if Vanitas had been threatening to attack him.

“Put away the claws, Princess,” Vanitas says. “Because I’m willing to let Sora’s actions go. In fact, why don’t we all just leave this world and pretend this never happened?”

But Mickey eyes him shrewdly. “Why are you concerned that we’re here?”

“Maybe Master Aqua is here,” Riku mulls, “and that’s why he wants us out of the way. Maybe it’s not Terra and Ventus. He could be the real reason she’s in trouble.”

Vanitas’s head snaps around. “What does that mean?”

“Riku!” Kairi hisses, elbowing him.

“It slipped out,” Riku mumbles.

“Vanitas, I’m going to give you five seconds to leave,” Mickey says as he points his keyblade straight at him.

“Shut up!” Vanitas snaps. He takes a menacing step towards Riku. Riku stumbles back, apparently more intimidated by Vanitas than he’s admitted. “What does that mean?”

It hasn’t been five seconds yet, but they can all tell how this is going to end. Mickey takes the opening and strikes first.

And Vanitas is gone in a purple flash, leaving behind nothing but the floating embers of Mickey’s Firaga. The trio go back-to-back again, as they were taught. Mickey does not. Mickey looks up instead.

“Above you!”

The three of them are a tad too slow to respond, but Mickey’s there. He thrust his keyblade towards the sky and a blue barrier shimmers in the air above them; a red and black keyblade slams against the barrier, slipping, tilting so the blue eye carved into its hilt glares at them. Vanitas vanishes again and
reappears on the ground near them. He moves like a ghost; flickering in and out of corporealness, leaving glittering afterimages in his wake. It makes him difficult to center on unless he’s coming straight at you. And he is. Because the first thing he does is lunge and he’s fast. Sora is facing him, so he gets the block, and the force pushes him back against Kairi and Riku hard enough to make them all fall. Mickey leaps to their rescue and Vanitas turns and blocks the Keyblade Master so quickly it’s as if time had temporarily slowed down for him. Sora’s on top of the other two, so he gets to his feet first. Vanitas is focused on Mickey now, raining down heavy blow after blow. Sora casts Fire, but the shout draws their enemy’s attention. He swears Vanitas is laughing at him as he slices though Sora’s fireball with a single strike. Vanitas raises his arm, sweeps it out to one side, and a dark barrier rises, separating Sora and Riku from the other two.

“Kairi!” he shouts. He can see her shadow through the shimmering ripples of the barrier. She’s getting to her feet. Riku is, too. But before Sora can help him up, Vanitas appears between the two. He grabs Riku by the collar and hoists him into the air.

“What were you saying earlier?” Vanitas demands.

As Riku struggles, Sora swings at Vanitas from behind.

Vanitas drops Riku and whirls around just in time to catch Sora’s keyblade by the shaft. Even through that mask, Sora can feel his glower.

“Just because I owe you a couple of things doesn’t mean you’re safe. Stay out of my way.”

Sora swallows, but refuses to back down.

Suddenly, someone yanks him from behind. He sees Riku’s face for a second, and then he’s spat out in a world of emptiness and no stars. A few moments later, another portal appears and Kairi and Mickey rush through it, followed by Riku himself. Mickey casts some sort of Barrier spell, and Riku frantically closes the portal.

“Huh? We’re retreating?” Sora asks, confused.

“It might be better not to fight him. If he’s serious about being retired, then I’d rather we didn’t turn him into an enemy so quickly,” Mickey admits. “When we started fighting, I sensed a great power in him. That guy was tough eight years ago when I knew him, but he seems to have gotten a lot stronger.”

“Master Aqua…” Kairi begins.

“If she was there, I’m sure she would have shown up when Vanitas appeared.” Mickey sighs. “Plus, I think Vanitas is looking for her, too. It doesn’t seem like he’s found her.”

“Why does that guy care so much about what’s going on with Master Aqua?” Riku pants. He’s slumped forward, looking like he wishes he had something to lean against.

“I don’t know,” Mikey says. “He obviously doesn’t know what Lea claims about Terra and Ventus. That might be a point in their favour.”

“Okay,” Sora says. “So, what next?”
The castle looks like it’s built to impress. One step in, and she already sees a golden fountain. It’s in the center of the room, snuggled just below the point where two gold-trimmed, curved staircases that curl along the walls meet. There’s no water in the fountain, but there’s a golden lion statue with a gaping maw and a hole in its throat where she suspects water would pour out. On either side of the fountain, there’s a grim-faced, stone statue of something with fours legs, a large nose and sunken eyes. There’s a blue carpet patterned with light-blue curls under her feet that must have looked lovely once. But now it’s splattered with muddy footprints from whomever came before her.

She senses the portals appearing as she steps further into the room. She jumps, Stormfall leaping into her hand, and plunges the keyblade into a Darkball just as it begins to form. Keeping with the momentum, she spins in midair and brings the keyblade around in a full circle, exploiting its full reach to take out a group of Shadows that have just scurried out of the ground. She lazily flings her keyblade, and it impales a Neoshadow through the head before it even has a chance to blink.

That’s all? She’s disappointed. Considering the darkness seeping from this place, she had expected more, even if she is only in the mouth of the castle. Had she been younger, she could have predicted more accurately how much darkness awaited her within, but her years in the Realm of Darkness had saturated that sense to the point where it doesn’t work properly anymore; it’s been insisting there’s darkness around her ever since Ven carried her back into the light.

At the base of the left stairs, there’s a door. The room behind it is small and appears to be an office of some kind. That works. She spreads a layer of never-melting ice over the floor; the Heartless can phase through physical barriers, but not ones conjured by magic. She can’t freeze the walls or she risks sealing all the gaps and suffocating later, but for whatever reason, the Heartless greatly prefer coming up through floors than through walls. Still, she sets some Seeker Mines down, just in case.

The creation of safe areas is not something she learned about in the Realm of Darkness. There was no such thing as creating ‘safety’; a place was either safe, or it wasn’t. If you dared tried to take the time to create a shelter, then that only invited the strongest Heartless to tear it down, as if the Realm itself had summoned them out of spite. But here in the realm of Light, where the Heartless were so much weaker, it was possible. With her hard-earned knowledge of how the Heartless behaved, it was more than possible.

There’s nothing else to do for her shelter. When she’d left the Castle that Never Was, she hadn’t stopped to gather supplies first. Maybe she should have taken a couple of potions or elixirs with her, but she’s been without them for so long that the only time she thinks about them is long after she could have used them.

That’s okay. She’s not worried. Whatever’s buried within the castle, she knows she can handle it.

She wanders deeper into the castle’s interior. There’s more Heartless, of course. They come in group, but never more than three waves. She’s not the first to have fought them; the evidence is all around her in ripped wallpaper, ruined carpets and rubble. What’s missing is the information of how recent the fighting was. She suspects, however, it was after the world was retrieved from the darkness. For the doors she passes in the corridors have symbols painted upon them. While she doesn’t have anything to translate them, she can guess their meanings easily enough: Heartless within; needs further investigation; leave alone. It’s useful. It tells her what has already been explored and can be ignored. There are a few doors as well with barriers cast upon them. They’re strong spells, but she thinks she can break them. If she can’t, she can always break through the wall next to the doors instead.

*I’ll save that for later,* she thinks as she senses portals opening nearby.
“This is troubling,” Yen Sid says after hearing their report. “First, the fall of Radiant Garden, followed by the emergence of the Heartless Ansem and the capture of the Princesses. Now, this Organization has risen to threaten the universe. Alone, I would consider these a self-contained chain of events. However, with the re-emergence of not one, but several figures thought lost to history, I fear there is something greater afoot.”

“But what would Master Aqua have to do with any of this?” Mickey asks.

“Perhaps she had spent those lost years guarding an unknown evil. Or the encroaching darkness called her forth from her slumber. Whatever she was doing, it was more than resting. After all, Master Mickey, eight years have passed, and yet you say she looks exactly the same.”

Mickey’s ears droop. “Yeah, she does. But you said that time moves differently in the Realm of Darkness.”

“That it does. If she truly was there, then perhaps the question we should be asking is how she escaped.”

“Plus, that only accounts for one of them,” Sora says. “There’s still Terra, and Ventus, and now Vanitas.”

“Gosh, you don’t think Xehanort himself will come back, do you?” Mickey asks.

“We must consider all possibilities,” Yen Sid says.

Mickey stares down at his clenched first. “We’ve got to find her.”

“She’s not in the Land of Departure. I don’t think she’s been there recently, but...” Groaning, Ven sprawls across Xemnas’s bed on his back. “She’s not a Princess. She does have some darkness, but it’s always been a lot harder to pick up her scent than yours.”

“Even after her time in the dark, her light remains strong,” Xemnas says fondly. He absently wanders over to the bed where Ven is.

“I’m not complaining about that. It’s just a bit inconvenient.” Ven lifts his head off the mattress. “They’re really looking for her now. They’re saying she’s in trouble and... I think they’re blaming us.”

It is times like these where Xemnas appreciates his current state. A pulse of rage resonates through his hollow chest, but he is a Nobody. He is Nothing. He pushes it aside so he can think. After Aqua first encountered Mickey, he assigned Ven and Ienzo to sniff around Nothing’s Hall daily to make sure she wasn’t sneaking out. Unless she has discovered a way to mask a scent she didn’t know they were tracking, he is certain she kept her promise and hasn’t met the mouse since. Even if she hadn’t kept it, Aqua would not betray them like this.

“Did they say why?” Xemnas asks.

“Of course not. What are they going to say? ‘Gee, golly, it took them eight years to get her out of the Realm of Darkness.’ Well, excuse me, but where were they when I was looking for her? I didn’t see anyone else scouring the Realm of Darkness. I spent eight straights years hunting for just a hint of where she’d gone, and now they’re going to turn around and say I’m the problem?”

He reaches over to squeeze the boy’s shoulder. “You cannot expect them to understand. Aqua and Mickey were passing friends, at most.”
“Tell him that, because he’s harping on like he’s her best friend.”

“You must remain focused. Concentrate on finding her. I will pursue the root of these rumors.”

“Right. I’ll check out Disney Castle next,” Ven says. “We know they’re looking for her, but it’s possible she could be looking for them, too.”

Her gut cramps.

She reels back, a hand over her stomach. What is it? Is she injured? She doesn’t remember getting wounded, but adrenaline makes you ignore all sorts of things. She casts Cura on herself, but it doesn’t nothing to quell the gnawing pain in her abdomen. Her pulses quickens. She must be severely injured for it to –

Oh, wait. She’s just hungry.

She gradually loosens her hold on Stormfall and looks around. Where is she? She’s still in the castle, but she has no idea where. She remembers fighting Heartless. . . and then fighting more Heartless . . . and more Heartless . . . Huh. She doesn’t remember anything but fighting.

“You need to get control of yourself,” she mutters. She doesn’t have Ven and Terra to remind her to take care of herself anymore.

She doesn’t know where she is, but tries to navigate back to the entrance by following the paths that have little to no Heartless. Along the way, she happens to peer into a room whose door is open. It’s a large room, with a huge computer terminal and blinking screens. The lights draw her in like a moth to a flame.

She studies the screens. It’s all gibberish to her. She touches a keyboard, and suddenly, the central screen changes. There’s a face. It looks human, but the skin is light blue and the person is wearing a blue helmet with glowing lines.

“Greetings, User. Please identify yourself.”

There’s a blinking cursor in a black box. Intrigued, Aqua goes ahead and types in her name.

“Hello, User Aqua. I don’t have a match for you in my database. Can I ask what you are doing here?”

Trying to remember how to get back outside, she types truthfully.

“I can help with that!”

The face disappears and is replaced by a map with helpful yellow arrows. Aqua memorizes it and hits the keyboard when she’s done.

“User Aqua, after you have found your way out, please never come here again,” the computer says happily. “This building is under quarantine due to a severe infestation of Heartless.”

She understands why he’s saying this and his intent. But she’s angry. (Why doesn’t anyone believe in her?) Smouldering, she fiercely types, I have a keyblade. I’m fine.

“A keyblade?” the computer repeats. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had one of those weapons!”

She blinks. Although she had typed the words to begin with, she hadn’t expected to get a response
that sounded like it came from a real person.

“Are you a friend of User Sora?”

Her rage returns. But if there’s one benefit to typing her answers, it’s not as much a spur of the moment decision. Right before she hits the ‘Enter’ key, she reconsiders her answer.

She erases her previous answer and types in something different. Yes.

“Happy to hear it. Any friend of User Sora is a friend of mine.”

_Do you know where he is?_ she types quickly.

“No. He logged out sometime ago. But I know he’ll be back someday.”


“Is that why you came here?” the computer asks.

She thinks about it and decides there’s no harm in explaining. She tells the computer about the darkness she senses in the castle, and her pursuit of it.

“I wish I could assist you,” the computer says, “but I have strict instructions not to share relevant information with Users that haven’t been given clearance by the Restoration Committee.”

Who?

“They are a group of warriors native who wish to restore this world to its former glory. You may not be able to tell in its current state, but this city used to be beautiful.”

She thinks back to that city of light and smiles. As if reading her mind, the computer also plays a small video someone took long ago of the castle grounds. It looks exactly as she remembered. There’s the place where she met that little girl, and the place where she fought . . .

She pauses. She remembers what Terra and Lea told her.

_Did you know Xehanort?_ she types.
With Friends Like These

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder because I think some people might have forgotten: Aqua already knows the "Xehanort" that lived in the castle was actually Terra. He told her back in an earlier chapter. It's the reason she's asking Tron about Xehanort and not Terra in the first place.

Surprisingly, her sleep isn’t awful. She’s left the lights on and stolen blankets from around the castle so she wouldn’t freeze to death. She doesn’t sleep on the floor, either. She shapes the ice with her magic, creating what can only be described as a nest for her to rest in. Despite the Heartless lurking in the building, she feels oddly secure. When – if – she begins to doubt her safety, she can always reach out with her mind and feel the comforting buzz of her planted mines.

They’re what wake her up later. Her eyes snap open later as they explode and she thrashes with the blankets, confused. It’s one thing to wake up; it’s another to wake up and immediately need to act. Apparently, she still hasn’t re-adapted to the latter. Finally, she tosses the wool comforter off, leaps out of her bed and summons her keyblade.

That’s strange. She doesn’t sense Heartless.

“Good morning, Aqua.”

She turns.

Ven’s in the back of the room; it looked like he leapt there to avoid her mines. He was wearing his cloak, but also appeared to be wearing red and black gloves of some kind.

“Looks like Terra was right,” he mutters. He tilts his head as he stares at her.

As he stalks towards her, his shoes smack against the ice with a clack. He’s not holding his keyblade, so Aqua dismisses hers as a counter gesture, no matter how naked it makes her feel.

Once he’s in front of her, he says again, “Aqua.”

She swallows. “Ven. . .”

“What,” he pauses dramatically, “were you thinking?”

She cringes like a scolded dog. “I’m sorry! I needed some time to myself.”

“That’s what locks are for. Your bedroom has one, you know.”

“You know that isn’t the same,” she says. “You guys are still there and I . . . I can’t think when you’re. . .”

“Then what was the plan?” he asks. “Hole yourself up here for the rest of your life?”

“No! I’m not sure how long I was planning to stay, but it wouldn’t be forever. I need space. You two are wonderful and I owe you so much, but I feel like I still haven’t been able to process anything.
Please, just give me a few days!"

She needs that time. Tron’s restrictions had prevented him from telling her much about what Terra was up to on this world, but apparently Xehanort – Terra – had some top-secret research projects he worked on. She needs to find them. They have to be the secret he’s keeping from her. They must be.

“Do you have any idea how worried we’ve been?” Ven demands.

“I’m sorry!” she says again. “I told you I would be back in a few days.”

“When did you say that?”

“It was in the letter I left.”

“You think a letter’s enough? After how you disappeared for eight years?”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t mean to!”

Ven paces a few steps back and forth in front of her, like a caged lion that can see a meal just outside its reach. She hugs herself, feeling vulnerable and small.

“Why’d you leave?” he demands again.

“I told you: I needed some time alone to think.”

“. . . I don’t believe you,” Ven finally says. “I think there’s something more.”

“I . . .” She knows she’s giving it away.

“Aqua.”

Her face crumbles. “Ven, please. I just need some time on my own.”

Ven stares at her. It feels like he’s peeling her brain apart strip by strip so he can look inside.

“I have conditions,” he rasps. “One, you’re back home by Friday. Two, you stay in this world. Three: I get to check up on you. Whenever I want.”

“Alright,” she whispers. She can deal with this. It’s probably the best she’s going to get.

Ven nods. “When you come back home, you’re going to tell me the truth. You’re going to tell me why you left so I can fix it.”

He backs away into a portal. Then, he is gone.

“Did you find her?” Terra asks.

“No,” he lies.

“I can sense magic in this room,” Aerith says. She removes her hand from the closed door and steps back to give the others room.

Leon and Tifa exchange a nod. They take up positions on either side of the door, Lean taking the side with the doorknob. On the count of three, Leon turns the knob and forces his way inside.
He nearly slips on the unexpected ice under his feet. That’s all there seems to be: ice. It’s been spread over the ground in a thick plane and near the rear of the room, behind the desk, a platform of ice has been raised into a shape like a birdbath. Leon takes another step inside.

Something on the ground lights up. It zips towards him –

It explodes.

He’s thrown back and his tailbone clacks against the thankfully carpeted ground. He groans. Aerith hovers above him, asking if he’s okay. Yuffie is a little bit behind her and of course, she’s laughing. Tifa is still by the door, peering inside but careful not to enter after what happened to him.

“I’m fine,” he grunts. He ignores Aerith’s offered hand and finds his own way to his feet.

“What’s so important about that room?” Cid asks, walking over. “I ain’t seeing anything good in there.”

“There’s blankets in there,” Tifa says. Judging by the height of her pointing finger, she’s talking about the birdbath-like platform Leon noticed. “It looks like food’s stashed in that corner. Someone’s living here.”

Ignoring his throbbing backside, Leon approaches the doorway so he can get a better look. Tifa quietly points out all the evidence supporting her claim. It’s reasonable. The question is who it is. Freezing a room like this isn’t normal behaviour, but it isn’t Heartless behaviour either. The last time they would have seen something like this was in Transverse Town, where all sorts of refugees from different worlds had been crowded together.

“We may have another off-worlder here,” Leon says.

“I hope they’re alright,” Aerith mumbles. “Wherever the Heartless are coming from, it’s close.”

Leon glances at the maybe-still booby-trapped room. Whomever they are, they certainly seem capable of taking care of themselves.

They walk through the castle. There’s less Heartless than any of them expected, and it’s not a fluke because there’s significantly less. He catches Tifa’s eye and confirms they share the same theory. Either this outsider is fighting the Heartless, too, or is gathering them somewhere else for nefarious purposes.

Leon splits from the group once they reach the main terminal. Yuffie tags along, claiming boredom.

“We’ve gotten all the way here and what, there’s been a dozen Heartless? I could get used to this. It’s like a vacation,” Yuffie babbles as she walks ahead of him. “What do you say? Ready to hang up the sword and retire?”

Leon ignores her, as he does nearly half the time.

“Sheesh. Someone’s in a bad mood. I thought you’d be happy. Or are you worried that you’re going to be out of work. Poor Mr. Leonhart, forced into an early retirement before his time. . . Hello, what’s this?”

She stares behind him, grinning, but there’s something hard in that smile. Leon whirls around.

There’s someone there. An unknown woman with blue hair dressed in armour. It’s not drab armour, like those suits hurriedly pieced together by survivors. It’s professionally sculpted and clearly made
to fit her. This is a soldier. If the armour didn’t give it away, the steely gaze does. It draws his attention even before the weapon at her side does. He raises his own now, even though it could provoke her, just in case.

“State your business here,” Leon orders.

The woman doesn’t say a word. She looks from Yuffie to him, and her gaze sweeps them up and down. She’s sizing them up.

“Leon . . . Wait, is that a keyblade?” Aerith gasp, having just walked into the hallway.

The woman jerks. She blinks rapidly, as if throwing off a haze. Her gaze sweeps over them again and although it’s still wary, she doesn’t seem like she’s about to attack anymore.

“What are you doing here?” Leon repeats. Just because she has a keyblade doesn’t mean she’s an ally.

It takes some time before he finally hears the woman’s raspy voice. “I’m pursuing the darkness.”

“For what means?”

There’s another pause, but it seems more perplexed than anything. “To destroy it. What are you doing here?”

The woman steps forward and squares herself with them. She doesn’t seriously think she can fight them all, does she?

“We’re with the Restoration Committee,” Aerith says. Lean exhales; he hadn’t wanted to reveal that just yet.

“You’re the ones,” the woman murmurs. “Tron said he needed clearance from you before he could help me.”

There’s an almost childish eagerness in her voice. He’s not sure what to think of this woman. She seems honest in her assertion that she wants to destroy darkness, but there’s something wild about her. It feels like he’s tiptoeing around a lion.

“Help with what?” Aerith asks.

“To find where this darkness is coming from.”

“Aerith . . .” Leon warns.

She pulls him aside. “I can sense a strong light coming from her. Even if she wanted to, she can’t command the Heartless.”

He’s still not sure, but this woman is the only person here with a keyblade. She’s the only one who can actually destroy the Heartless.

The woman doesn’t seem keen to team up with them. She barely looks at them and doesn’t give her name – Aqua – until Yuffie insists. She follows quietly, so that he must strain to hear her footsteps. He doesn’t think she’s even trying to be quiet.

Cid raises his eyebrows when they reenter the room with their new companion. Tifa’s standing next to him and she takes one look at the woman, and then types something into the computer.
“Ah, yes. User Aqua did say that was what she looked like.”

“Tron says you’re looking for the source of the Heartless,” Tifa says warily.

Aqua stares at her and simply agrees. Cid types something.

“Unfortunately, I still haven’t figured out Xehanort’s password,” Tron says. “Until I do, there’s not much we can do.”

“Oh. That’s what you were looking for. I wish you could have told me earlier,” Aqua says, as if Tron has ears the way they do. “Here.”

She walks over to the computer and begins typing.

“What is that?” Tron asks.

“Try it,” she says.

There’s a second of peace, and then Tron’s face morphs into one of shock.

“It worked. That’s it. That’s the password!”

Tifa’s head snaps around. “Did she just . . .?”

Aerith says, “You knew the password?”

“He hasn’t changed,” Aqua says to herself with a small smile.

Now, even Aerith is beginning to look unsettled. Yuffie’s relaxed though, but that’s because she doesn’t have a functioning sense of danger.

Leon points his gunblade at her. “How did you know that?”

Aqua stares at him, not looking the least bit threatened.

“I’ve done a courtesy scan of the data hidden behind that password,” Tron suddenly interrupts. “There appears to be a secret passage in the castle right . . . here!”

With that warning, a wall to the side of the room suddenly slides up. Aqua approaches it, almost revenant.

Leon cocks the gun. “You still haven’t explained how you knew the password.”

She gives him an unimpressed stare. Then, with a one-shoulder shrug, she says, “I knew the man who set it.”

That isn’t a point in her favour. Far from it, actually.

Cid scratches his chin with the flat of his spear and says, “That’s interesting. They say that guy showed up out of nowhere without any memories.”

She winces. “I think that’s my fault.”

“Did you cast a spell on him?” Aerith asks.

“Several times. Usually, when I wasn’t hitting him with my keyblade,” Aqua answers flatly.
“You two fought,” Tifa says.

“I had to fight him,” Aqua murmurs. “He wasn’t himself. I fought defeating him would be enough to remove his influence. . . His secret research projects that Tron told me about, they’d be in this secret passage, wouldn’t they?”

Leon ignores her question. “How do we know you’re telling the truth? You could be one of Xehanort’s allies.”

“Master Xehanort and I were not allies,” she hisses. The hate that twists her face is too deep, too intense to be anything but real.

“So, we going in or what? I mean since we actually have someone with a keyblade here. . .” Yuffie says. She’s at the door –

“Don’t open that!” Leon commands.

“Shesne, no need to shout. We are going in, aren’t we? What’s it matter if I open it now or later?”

“We don’t know what could come out,” Tifa says. “We should set up a perimeter.”

They do as best as they can. Heartless were not your typical foes and most convention defenses didn’t work against them. But they set one up anyways with the door to the secret passage in the center. Aqua doesn’t assist. She prowls around the door impatiently instead, making Leon worry that she’ll go ahead and open it before they’re ready.

“We’re not going to be more prepared than this,” Tifa finally says when they’re all in position.

There’s still time to send Aqua away. She’s an unknown factor and he doesn’t want –

But Aqua’s already heard Tifa and she wrenches open the door . . .

“Oh my,” Aerith gasps.

They can feel the miasma of darkness that rolls out of the room. It tumbles across the floor and splashes against the walls like liquid. Past the door itself, the lights are off and they can’t see anything. Not at first. Then, one pair of yellow eyes appear. And another, and another . . .

This is going to be rough.

“Finally,” Aqua hisses. It’s hard to tell from this angle, but Leon swears her lips are curling into a smile.

Before anyone can stop her, Aqua hurtles forward into the darkness.

“We just escaped what’s basically a mafia run by a couple of super scary, super dangerous people who wanted our heads on a platter. I say the time is perfect for some self-indulgence.”

“And for that, you wish to go to an amusement part,” Isa scoffs as they stroll through the Realm of Darkness. “What is the point?”

“Nostalgia,” Lea says with emphasis.

“Nostalgia is meaningless. We lack hearts to enjoy it with.”
Lea rolls his eye. “Come on, you’re really buying that? Because last time I checked, Xemnas is the most sentimental guy I’ve ever known. If he can enjoy his childhood haunts, we can, too.”

“As you wish,” Isa says. Because he may lack a heart to be in favour of the motion, but that means he also lacks the emotions to truly be against it.

They continue walking along the shore of the dark beach. Every so often, Lea chuck a fireball at the water out of boredom, just so he can watch the ripples.

“Lea.”

Lea looks away from the water and sees it immediately. There’s something tall in the distance. It looks human, and it’s stumbling towards them. The two of them let it come. Even if it’s some weird Heartless, it’s not like it would be hunting them.

As it draws close, their eyes widened.

“Is that Ansem the Wise?”

The passage’s narrow corridors are their salvation. It limits the amount of Heartless that can crowd them and between the girls’ magic and their ranged arsenal, they’re able to hold their ground until the tide breaks. There’s only a few straggling Shadows now, easily taken care of by a keyblade that seems to hunger for them.

That isn’t to say the fight wasn’t hard. They’re down to their last hi-potions. At least those can be preserved for the next fight, because the break means that Aerith is free to heal to her heart’s content and not worry about her mana.

It’s a victory in more than one way. Not only have they broken the darkness’s charge and scattered it, but this time, they’ve truly slain a bunch thanks to the woman and her keyblade. He doesn’t want to be grateful to her, but they all know that the keyblade is the only thing that can truly put an end to those monstrosities.

“If there were that many, the source has gotta be down there,” Cid says.

“We should regroup,” Leon says. “We . . . Stop!”

Aqua pauses. It was only luck that he noticed her before she slipped away, before she wandered deeper into this secret area.

“Oi, kid. You’re not thinking of going for round two, are ya?” Cid demands.

“I can handle it,” she drones. She continues to walk into the darkness.

“Wait!”

Aerith rushes to her. Even though they aren’t sure whether they can trust Aqua, Aerith still worries for her because she’s Aerith.

“We know how powerful keyblade wielders are, but you should rest first,” Aerith tells her. “That was one of the longest battles we’ve had since we created the committee. We don’t know what it’s like further in.”

“I’m fine,” she drones.
“You should rest,” Aerith insists. “At least get something to eat so you can regain your strength.”

“Rest. . .” Aqua echoes. Like she had when she first decided not to fight them, Aqua seems to snap out of a trance. It’s alarming and once again, isn’t making Leon confident in her as an ally.

“No one else comes in here,” Aerith tells her. “Everything will still be here tomorrow.”

The problem with keyblade wielders is that they are inherently difficult to find.

Mickey sighs and lays out a route through the stars in his head. They’ve been to a couple of worlds now, and no luck. He has no idea where to go from here. After they realized Aqua wasn’t in the Land of Departure, everything became guesswork. Without knowledge of Aqua’s current circumstances, goals or anything, there was no way to predict where she would show up. They really needed a way to communicate that wasn’t reliant on Gummi ships.

Riku and the others are safely inside said ship, resting until their next adventure. Mickey takes the opportunity to slip outside, to get some fresh air and clear his head. He sighs and looks across the gentle sea.

His ears twitch. Why is it so silent?

The figure is waiting for him when he turns. It’s a tall, cloaked person and the height makes him think it’s Lea for a moment, but then he realizes Lea is skinner; Lea doesn’t have such a broad chest. The figure doesn’t say anything, nor does it radiate any danger. In fact, it doesn’t radiate anything, as if it isn’t there. As if it doesn’t truly exist.

He summons Star Seeker regardless. “Hello?”

The figure doesn’t move, but it speaks. “What is it you seek?”

“Huh?”

“You seek answers, do you not? Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

There’s something about the way the strange man speaks that lets Mickey know that his mission isn’t as private as he hoped. Mickey closes his eyes and concentrates.

“. . . I can’t sense darkness or light from you,” he observes aloud. “You’re a Nobody, aren’t you? What do you want?”

The man says. “A chance to be complete; to regain what once was lost.”

“I can’t help you with that,” Mickey says, firm but regretful. If there was a known way to restore these lost bodies, he would try.

“Do you distrust my kind so blindly? Our existence is an atrocity, but not one we asked for. All we seek is a way to rejoin the universe as we were meant to be.”

“You have no hearts,” Mickey says. “And the things you’ll do to regain one. . . It’s not acceptable. I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to help you.”

The man says, “Regardless, the keyblade is a weapon of the heart. If there is a solution, the answer lies with it. It is in my own interest to ensure the keyblade wielders remain safe.”

There’s no hint of anger or despair from the man. There’s nothing. His tone remains flat, as if Mikey
was commenting on the weather. He wishes he could see the man’s face. Because for this man to
stand here and suggest that they could be allies, that he wants to be allies, it flies in the face of what
Master Yen Sid told him. He holds to that, to his Master’s words. There’s no telling what the
Nobody really wants.

“We can take care of ourselves,” Mickey says.

“Very well. For your sake then, I can only hope that you distrust all Nobodies the way you distrust
me.”

Lea, he immediately thinks. He’s chosen to seriously consider the Nobody’s claims about Aqua and
her friends, but the man’s statement pokes at that. It stings, and he can’t help but remember how little
Lea actually told him.

As he struggles with his inner turmoil, the man concludes, “I am not the first Nobody you’ve had a
conversation with.”

“No. I spoke to one of your comrades. He also claimed he wanted to help,” Mickey accuses.

“The safety of the Keyblade Master is of great concern to us all,” the man says.

Mickey says. “If she’s in trouble, then why won’t you direct us to her?”

“Because we, too, lack that knowledge. She disappeared from our sights a few days ago.”

He can’t disprove that statement. It’s an awfully convenient one to make, he thinks. So, he changes
the subject, “You should at least be able to tell me what kind of trouble she’s in.”

“Tell me what you know, and I will expand from there.”

“No. I want to hear it from you first.”

There’s a long pause. Mickey’s almost written the Nobody off when he says, “Terra and Ventus.”

He does know. That doesn’t make him feel better, because now two people are claiming the same
thing which exponentially raises the chances that it’s true.

“Is it true?” Mickey whispers. He never met Terra, but he did meet Ventus and he desperately wants
to hear that Lea’s wrong.

“That depends on which part you’re referring to.”

“That they’ve . . . trapped her.” The statement is strange and foreign on his tongue.

“If that were so, then how is it that she could have vanished?”

“Not physically. Mentally. Emotionally.”

“Again, I must ask how she could leave if that were the case,” the man says.

Mickey hesitates. He knows it isn’t as simple as the man is suggesting, but he doesn’t know how to
explain – especially not to a Nobody. Not to a creature that only has memories of emotions to draw
upon.

“Then what is the problem?” Mickey demands.
“The same as it has always been. The Master takes on burdens not meant for her. She delves into a past best forgotten and carries its weight upon her shoulders. Some things are best left buried.”

“That doesn’t sound at all like what Lea said.”

“It is the truth,” the Nobody claims. “Whom you chose to believe is up to you. I have said my piece.”

With that, the Nobody turns away and walks through a gaping portal. Mikey stares after him.

Who was that, and what did he really want?

“She’s disturbingly eager to get down there. That isn’t normal behaviour for someone fighting the darkness. If Ansem’s apprentices were researching what we suspect they were, then that would be very dangerous knowledge in the wrong hands.”

His argument made, Leon leans back in his chair. Around the table, the other members of the committee consider his words. Barring Cid and Tifa, everyone else is there. Tifa is showing Aqua around upstairs where the room they’re letting her use is, while covertly keeping her out of earshot of their meeting. Cid is busy with something technical.

“She’s a great fighter, but you’re right. We don’t know what side she’s really on,” Aerith concedes. It’s true. The only thing they know for her is that she’s a very skilled fighter, and that’s something that could easily be turned against them.

Just then, Cid walks in. There’s a toothpick between his teeth as he looks them over and says, “Something important happening?”

“We’re discussing whether we can trust Aqua,” Leon says.

To everyone’s surprise, Cid just says, “Yep. We can.”

“What. . .?”

“Just got off the comm with the fellas on Sora’s ship. Apparently, she’s an old pal of the king. They’ve been looking for her.”

There’s an audible sigh of relief around the table. If King Mickey vouches for her, that’s enough. They don’t need to post a guard outside her door tonight.

“She’s got quite the story,” Cid continues. “Stopped some evil nine years ago and was trapped in hell because of it. Got bailed out only this year. But here’s the good part: the guy she fought was named Xehanort.”

They’re different today. Trusting. It unnerves her.

Aqua watches them closely as she follows behind the group. They’re all good fighters. Her instincts are telling her she can take them individually, but as a group? She’s uncertain.

“Aqua, what are you hoping to find down there?” Tifa asks.

She answers truthfully. “Nothing.”

Whatever they make of her answer, they don’t say. They approach the secret passageway again and open the door. Heartless have built up in the entrance again, but they’re not as intense as yesterday.
She finds herself mourning that.

There are several clusters of Heartless deeper within the passage’s corridor, but again, it’s nowhere near the density of that first fight. It’s enough to keep the others on their toes. Not her though, because even yesterday was a vacation compared to what she’s seen.

They round a corner, and the first doors appear. They’re on both sides of the corridor, positioned evenly against the walls. It’s the door that are interesting though, because they aren’t regular doors; they’re doors made of iron bars with a keypad on the side.

“Cells,” Leon growls.

She looks inside one. There’s no light inside; all illumination comes from the hallway. She can make out a blanket, and chains. It’s. . . It’s an awfully big cell for an animal, but Terra’s always been soft like that. She understands that sometimes it’s necessary to experiment on them, but it must have torn him up inside.

They pass through the corridor. It leads to a more typical research area, with desks and stations and equipment. There’s also a long table that’s been covered in a plastic tarp. Tifa uncovers it and immediately regrets it. The table is clean and polished, unnaturally so, which makes the leather restraints more obvious. On the counter nearby, Yuffie pokes at a collection of scalpels.

Aqua closes her eyes and shudders. Terra must have really hated that.

“It’s true. They really were experimenting on. . .” Cid mumbles.

“Aqua, is something wrong?” Aerith asks her.

She blinks. She hadn’t noticed she had summoned Stormfall, nor that she had pointed herself towards Cid.

“The darkness, it’s close,” she says, and it isn’t even a lie. It tears everyone’s attention away from the lab, away from the table.

They approach a door on the far side of the room. A door that ominously bears the symbol of the Emblem Heartless. It means nothing. Someone had probably placed it there as a warning.

Behind the door is a hub that connects to three medium-sized rooms. The walls connecting the hub to the rooms are made of glass, allowing them to peer inside and study the machinery within. It’s nothing like she’s ever seen before, but whatever these machines are, they still appear to be functioning.

“There’s Heartless in there,” Aerith says. It’s true, but they don’t seem to notice their presence, as if something in the walls blocks their senses.

Suddenly, Leon sharply says, “Look.”

They turn to look at the central room. The machine is humming; there’s coils of electricity bouncing along the antennas at its top. Slowly, in the glass container on the machine’s end, the air begins to turn black. It starts out small, just a purple-black orb. Then wisps of something escape from the orb, spreading through the air like roots through dirt, staining everything black.

And the roots take form. Four of them thicken and sharpen into claws. Thicker ones become thighs, which grow their own thinner branches to make feet. The orb splits in half, and the back half rises into arching wings. Then, with an audible crack, the creature bursts into existence. The jagged jaws
snap together, and then the Gargoyle Heartless phases through the glass to join the others in the room. For the first time since escaping the Realm of Darkness, the sight of the Heartless fills Aqua not with the need to fight, but with horror.

Cid mumbles, “It was true. Those bastards were the ones who made those Heartless!”

“No!” She turns on Cid, Stormfall in her head and ready. “It wasn’t him.”

“You kidding? Use your eyes!” Cid snaps, pushing away the tip of her keyblade with his spear. “What the hell would you call those things, then?”

“It wasn’t him! Terra would never do anything like this.”

“Terra?” Tifa repeats. “This was Xehanort.”

“That was just the alias he was using,” she snaps. “It was . . . He couldn’t have known. Terra never would have allowed this.”

“Girl, this place was guarded by Xehanort’s password,” Cid says.

“Shut up!”

She tries to swing Stormfall in his direction again, but the keyblade slips from her sweaty hands. The sound of it hitting the floor strikes like a punch in the face.

“He wouldn’t do this,” she whimpers and she can hear the pleading tone; she can hear herself begging.

They’re silent. Then Yuffie raises her hand.

“Okay, is someone going to explain who Terra is?”

“That’s his real name,” Aqua whispers. “Xehanort tricked him and possessed him, a-and . . . We beat him. Terra locked him away. But it was the first name he remembered when he woke up again, so he used that name while he lived I the castle. . . .”

Her ragged breathing fills the space.

Aerith puts a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

She barely keeps herself from shoving the mage. She hurtles out of the room, leaving Stormfall behind. Up the stairs she goes and through the twisting corridors until she bursts into the entrance hall. She throws herself into the office and curls up into the ice nest that still hasn’t melted.

Terra wouldn’t. He would never. Her nails claws into the ice. Even when he was struggling with the darkness, he would never go this far; he would never reap this kind of terror and destruction. What would be the point? Why could he possibly want to?

Her sobs echo. Even though it can’t be true, she can’t stop crying. She calls Stormfall back to her, plants it in the ground and starts to rise . . . Only to fall against it with more sobs shaking her body. The metal is cold against her burning forehead.

Swoosh.

“Aqua?” Ven steps out of the portal and freezes for half a second. Then he’s at her side. “What happened? Are you injured?”
“No,” she whispers. It’s all she’s able to say.

“What happened? Who did this? Give me their name!”

She shakes her head. “No one.”

He hovers by her side. In that moment, he’s every bit the anxious, well-meaning child she once knew. He puts his hands on the rim of the nest as if to climb in with her, and then thinks better of it. Her throat tightens and she rubs it until she’s strong enough to speak.

“I was in the research lab,” she says. “The secret one. Ven. . . they created Heartless down there. The Emblem Heartless, this is where they were born.”

“Aqua. . .”

She throws her arms around his neck and cries into his shoulder. He buckles a little at the sudden addition of her weight, but holds steady. His hand splays across the small of her back.

“Why?” she begs him.

Ven is quiet as he thinks about it. “Aqua, you know Terra. Whatever happened with these Heartless, he had a good reason for it.”

“A good reason?” she spits. “What kind of reason could he have to do this?”

Ven endures her shouting with nothing but patience. For once, it annoys her. He slowly frees himself from the hug, but his hand lingers on her wrist. His hand encircles it. It . . . reminds her of Terra.

“I’m sure he can explain,” Ven says. “Come on. We’ll ask him together.”

He tugs gently on her wrist, but still, she rips it away. Ven blinks, confused.

“Ven. . . I’m not going back,” she says softly, rubbing the wrist he had touched.

“What? Aqua - !”

“I can’t.”

Because this isn’t something that can be overlooked so easily. There is no good reason for this. There can’t be. She can’t forget this. She can’t forgive it, not until she understands what it means not just for them, but the universe.

“Aqua! Look, I know this is hard for you to accept, but. . .”

“That’s just it, Ven. I can’t accept this. He unleashed this upon the worlds.”

“Just let him explain,” Ven pleads. “I’m sure he has an explanation. You owe him that much.”

She shakes her head and looks away. She can’t. Because this can’t be forgiven yet, and she needs to remember that. But if she comes face-to-face with Terra, she’s not sure she will.

“No. I can’t face him right now.”

His pupils are so wide. It’s like she’s denouncing him instead of Terra.

“I’ll keep slaying Heartless, but for now, I’m finished with the Organization,” Aqua says.
“What about me?” Ven cries, voice cracking in a dozen places.

“I’m not going to make you choose between us,” she says. “If you want to stay with Terra, I understand.”

(She doesn’t really, but she’ll make herself. Ven’s always been closer to him than her, and she won’t take that away from him.)

Oh. He’s crying. They’re both crying. She already knows what choice he’s going to make. With a heavy heart, she pulls him into another hug. His grip on her is so tight, as if holding onto her hard enough will prevent what must happen next.

Suddenly, that sixth sense of hers picks up the stench of darkness –

*Knock, knock.* “Aqua?”

The darkness fades. Ven turns so quickly towards the door that he nearly throws her onto the ground.

“Who is that?” he demands. His eyes are like slits.

“Just some people I was fighting the Heartless with,” Aqua says. “Ven, are you. . .?”

“I’m fine,” he rasps. He certainly doesn’t sound like he is. “This won’t be the last time we see each other.”

She smiles at his promise. “I know.”

The knocking starts again. Eyes fixed on her, Ven backs away into a swirling portal. Those yellow eyes are the last thing she sees as he vanishes. She stares after him for a moment, and then hoarsely lets the others know they can come in.

Eight years in the darkness. Eight years living along monsters whose only goal is to tear out your heart. It takes strong survival instincts to survive that; it’s only natural to develop a strong sense of danger and what’s around you.

The thing is though that there was no sleep in the Realm of Darkness. And as Ven and Terra realized early on, while Aqua did have those innate senses, she only did while she was awake. Surprisingly, the Realm of Darkness had turned her into a heavy sleeper.

That’s exactly what he was relying on now.

Ven puts his foot down cautiously, watching the floor for any moving lights. As he learned the hard way, Seeker Mines hurt like hell. There’s nothing though. Aqua must have not felt the need to place them, or because she was that exhausted. He walks through the room quietly, keeping his eye on the door that would lead out of the room these people had lent her.

Once he’s next to the bed, he carefully drapes a thick cloth across her eyes. Her shoulder piece is easy to locate, and he clips it to where it belongs. Then, he holds his breath and activates it.

When the light fades, Aqua’s under the bedsheets in her armour. He backs up a step, X-Blade in hand, watching her. She doesn’t move; the cloth appeared to have blocked out enough light to leave her sleeping. This would be easier if he could just cast Sleep on her, but Aqua’s so attuned to magic that a spell might end up waking her rather than throwing her deeper into sleep.
He wriggles off the helmet and removes the cloth. It’s probably paranoia, but he’s afraid she’ll suffocate somehow if he leaves it there. He put the helmet back on her head. There. That should prevent her from feeling the darkness. Because otherwise, he doesn’t think Aqua would stay asleep during a trip through a dark corridor.

He works his arms under her body; one under her knees, the other under her shoulders. Once he’s sure he’s got a secure grip, he stands up. She’s lighter than he thought she would be; or maybe he still hasn’t fully accustomed to being the eldest in their relationship.

With Aqua sleeping in his arms, Ven turns around and heads back through the portal leading to Terra’s room.
“Gone?” Mickey echoes.

“We’re just as confused as you,” Cid says. “Nobody saw her leave. Course, the girl’s so quiet that doesn’t mean anything.”

The mouse king’s ears droop and Sora feels his own swell of disappointment. They had been so close, but there’s no denying that Aqua’s room is empty. Riku is picking around it, like this is a game of hide and seek and she’ll be under the bed.

Then, Riku speaks. “Vanitas was here.”

“Huh? You sure?” Sora asks.

Riku inhales deeply and nods. “I recognize his scent.”

“Oh no. . .” Mickey whispers. “He found her first.”

“What does that mean?” Leon asks.

“I’m not sure. Nothing good, though,” Mickey says. “Vanitas worked with Master Xehanort eight years ago; Aqua and him are bitter enemies.”

“Which group is Vanitas with again?” Sora asks, scratching his head.

“I think he’s on his own,” Mickey says.

“So, there’s the Nobodies, Vanitas, us, and probably Ventus and Terra. That’s a lot of people looking for her.”

“It’s a little weird,” Kairi agrees. “Why is everyone so interested in her?”

“That’s something else I don’t know. Gosh, there’s a ton of unresolved questions revolving around Master Aqua,” Mickey says.

“Well, maybe you can answer one of ours,” Leon says. “Aqua said she knew Xehanort.”

“Not this one. There was an old fella eight years ago also named Xehanort.”

“No, she knew our Xehanort, as well. She guessed his computer password on the first try.” Arms crossed over his chest, Leon lets the bomb fall. “Why did she keep saying his real name was Terra?”

“. . . What?” Mickey says.

“Terra? You mean that guy who’s supposed to be her best friend?” Sora asks.

Before anyone can answer, several voices call to them from the first floor. Leon and Cid immediately straighten up and head for the stairs, weapon drawn in Leon’s case.

Mickey chases after them. “Hold on! What was that about Terra?”

His question is lost in the commotion downstairs. Everyone’s crowded around the front door. Sora catches a glimpse of a black cloak and exchanges looks with Kairi and Riku; however, no one seems
to be shouting anymore, so thy don’t summon their keyblades. The others step back as Leon and Cid
draw near.

Leon lowers his gunblade. “Ansem the Wise?”

“Captain Leonhart.” Ansem blinks and looks around. “What happened?”

Lea coughs. “Before we get into this, I just wanted to let everyone I’m here, too. Also, this is my pal,
Isa.”

Cid swears. “Not these two brats!”

Aerith shushes him and approaches Lea. “No one’s seen you two for ages. We thought you were
dead.”

“We were. Are. It’s complicated. Anyways, you guys should pull some up chairs because there’s a
lot to talk about.”

“I should have known,” Ansem the Wise says, a rumble like thunder rolling under his words. “That
sob story of amnesia, chasing an imaginary woman in his mind. . . It was to make me let my guard
down. I took that boy under my wing when he had nothing. I gave all of them my trust, and they
repaid me with this?”

His fists thumps on the table they’re sitting around. They all wince.

“This woman Xehanort said he was looking for, was her name Aqua?” Mickey asks carefully.

Ansem’s frown deepens. “He told you about he. Bah, of course, he did. What an easy way to
manipulate those around him.”

“He didn’t tell me. I know her,” Mickey says simply. “She’s real. I bet he’s the reason she escaped
the Realm of Darkness. And she . . . she must still think he’s Terra.”

“You think he’s not?” Leon asks.

“What happened in that research lab, that doesn’t sound like something Terra would do. However, it
does sound like something Xehanort might do.”

“Mickey, you said Vanitas worked with Xehanort before, right?” Kairi says.

“Yes, he did. He could still be, which would mean that Aqua’s now. . .”

Mickey closes his eyes and trails off. They can’t blame him. The amount of revelations coming out is
staggering.

“Who’s Vanitas? Wait, answer that question second. What’s this about Aqua?” Lea demands. When
they hesitate, his voice rises. “Seriously? I’m the one who tipped you off about her in the first place!”

Kairi chooses to trust him first. “She was here. That’s why we came here. But now she’s disappeared
again, and Riku says Vanitas’s scent is in her room.”

“Fantastic,” Lea spits that out like a curse. “And who the hell is he?”

Mickey tells him. He further explains the encounter they had with him in the Land of Departure.
“Aqua hasn’t said a word about Vanitas. Neither has Terra for that matter. At least not to me. Say, Isa, have . . . ? Isa?”

Sometime during the conversation, Isa slipped away. Lea leans back in his chair. It gives him just the right angle to check out the staircase.

“Isa? What are you doing?” With surprising speed, those long limbs untangle themselves and Lea is running towards the stairs after his friend. Lean and Tifa, not trusting him, are out of the room a second later. Sora and his friends follow behind.

They find Lea standing in the doorway to Aqua’s room. Isa is inside, standing in the centre with his eyes closed. Sora tries to step inside, but Lea’s arm bars his way.

“Riku, was it?” Isa says, an unusual emphasis on the name. “What makes you think this is Vanitas?”

“We met him in the Land of Departure. I know his scent.”

“Yeah, they got really close. He grabbed Riku and lifted him into the air, so he’s got to know it!” Sora adds helpfully. (Riku glares at him.)

“It so happens that I know this scent as well,” Isa says. “This is Ventus’s scent.”

To half the people in the room, that means nothing. To the other half, it means a ton. They look back at Mickey, who is shaking his head.

“That’s not possible,” Mickey says. “Ventus has a heart of pure light. You can’t smell him.”

“. . . Are you kidding?” Lea’s voice is so low, they almost think it’s someone else speaking. “Ventus? You think that lunatic has a heart of light? He’s worse than your buddy, Terra!”

“He does,” Mickey insists. “I sensed it.”

“Well, he sure as hell doesn’t anymore,” Lea snarls. “That guy’s the reason we had to take off in the first place. He’s completely insane!”

“You are Nobodies,” Riku says. “Maybe you provoked him -”

“Shut up!”

Lea’s arms burst into flames so hot that everyone must scramble to get away from him. There’s something swirling around his hands in a disc-like shape, almost solid but not quite.

“Lea.” Isa’s stern voice cuts through the crackling flames. “Don’t do something you’ll regret.”

“I won’t regret this,” Lea says.

“You’re surrounded by Riku’s allies. You will.”

With a last snarl, the flames disappear. Lea stares down Riku, and then turns to look straight into Sora’s eyes.

Lea tells him. “I had a friend. His name was Roxas. Your age, your height. Had a keyblade, too. Ventus killed him.”

“No!” Mickey exclaims.
“Well, then who was it? Because it definitely wasn’t Sora like Terra claims.”


“That’s my point. If it wasn’t Ventus, then why bother lying about it?”

A kid like him. Sora touches his cheeks. He can feel Kairi and Riku watching him, imagining him in this Roxas’s place.


“Same reason he went after me and Isa. Because Aqua thought she was allowed to have other friends,” Lea spits.

Mickey staggers back a step, as if Lea’s verbal dagger to the heart had been physical. Sora doesn’t know what to think. He doesn’t know these people, but he’s heard about them from Mickey and Yen Sid and. . . He still feels like she’s his friend. And she’s in danger. Xemnas is going to hurt her, just like he hurt. . .

Micky swallows and braces himself. “So, Xehanort was Terra. Vanitas is Ventus. And Aqua’s . . .”

“Been getting jerked around and browbeaten by them since the moment they brought her home,” Lea says with disgust.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” Mickey says. “Why would Xehanort rescue her when she was the one who stopped him?”

“What was it Xehanort wanted in the first place?” Leon asks. “Maybe that will explain.”

They listen closely to Mickey’s story. Most of it is speculation, as neither Mickey nor Yen Sid had been there for the final battle and all its participants had disappeared afterwards. The only true information they were the random reports authored by Xehanort that had been scattered across the worlds. Not only did Xehanort apparently like to write down his thoughts, he did so in great detail.

“The Keyblade War. . .” Aerith shudders as she speaks. “If Xehanort initiates that, what happens next?”

“It would be the end of our universe,” Mickey says solemnly.

In the traumatized silence that follows, it makes perfect sense that an emotionless Nobody would break it.

“Lea. . .”

“Yeah, I know,” Lea says to Isa. “Alright, everyone. Listen up! There’s something we haven’t told you about yet.”

“There’s more?” Kairi gasps.

“There sure is. See, the group of Nobodies we hail from, they’re called the Organization. They’re led by a Nobody named Xemnas, who Aqua’s also been calling Terra for as long as we’ve known her. But it gets better. Because Xemnas is leading that group with the promise of getting their hearts back, and his proposed solution? Kingdom Hearts.”

“How?” Sora demands.
“By collecting hearts. Including Aqua, they’ve got three keyblades on their side, and every time they kill one of those Emblem Heartless, they fill our Kingdom Hearts up a little more.”

Kairi blinks. She seems to force herself to think about something other than how terrible this all is. “Okay, I think Ventus would have the second one, but who has the third keyblade?”

“Xemnas,” Isa says. “It’s a red and black one with two blue eyes.”

“. . . Ansem,” Mickey whispers.

“What?” Ansem the Wise says.

“Oh, not you. I was thinking about the Heartless we fought last year. It had that keyblade, too, and . . . I remember now. That was Vanitas’s keyblade!”

“You mean Ventus, right?” Sora asks. He’s still not completely sure who’s who anymore.

“I guess so. But that would mean even back then they were working together.”

“That would make sense,” Isa said. “According to Aqua, Ventus knew Terra while he was living in Radiant Garden.”

“Impossible. I would have known him as well, if that were the case,” Ansem the Wise says.

“Not unless he was hiding from you,” Mickey says. “Because it seems like he’s been hiding from everyone this entire time.”

This was not the room she fell asleep in.

She barely needed to open her eyes to figure that out. She had fallen asleep in a room with wooden floorboards, a carpet and a hanging light – a regular room. This was not one. This was a room carved out of white, sterile and bright to behold. The wall across from her was made of glass. It provided a perfect frame around the night sky, and the heart-shaped moon pouring its light upon her.

She knows only one room that had a glass wall facing Kingdom Hearts: Terra’s. She scrambles to a sitting position and –

“So, you have awoken.”

Terra is there. Right by the door. He’s not alone. Ven is sitting on the edge of a desk nearby, playing catch with . . . with her armour piece.

“How did I get here?” she demands. She pulls the covers up, as if to hide herself.

Terra ignores her question. “I was quite disturbed to find my comrades unconscious in Nothing’s Hall and you unspoken for. I feared we had come under attack.”

She winces. “Could you tell them I’m sorry? I didn’t want to hurt them, but they weren’t going to let me leave.”

Ven snorts and refuses to look at her.

“That is something you should tell them personally,” Terra says as he walks towards her. “I am sure that the relief at seeing you back home safe and sound will be stronger than any grudge.”
He’s close. Close enough to reach out and let her hair fall through his fingers, as he does now. As her hair falls against the back of her neck, a cold shiver works its way through her body.

“Terra, I’m not sure what I’m doing back here, but it wasn’t something I planned to do. I . . .”

Terra stops pacing. Hands clasped behind his back, he faces her and waits patiently. “Yes, Ven told me that you had something you wished to discuss.”

That wasn’t what she was about to say, but it’s not wrong. No, it is wrong! She wasn’t ready to have this confrontation yet. Delaying the talk, she buries her face in her hands, frazzled.

“Have you changed your mind? Perhaps we should talk later, after you rest further,” Terra says. “I’m sure these past few days have been trying.”

“No. . .” She must do this now. If she doesn’t, she might end up finding excuses to delay it over and over, until she forgets completely. “I was in Hollow Bastion.”

“Oh?” Terra glances at Ven, who shrugs. “That world is a shadow of itself. It must have been deeply unsettling.”

“I was in the labs,” Aqua says. She gathers her courage and looks Terra in the eyes. “I know what you were doing here.”

“Ah. I understand. The heart is a precious thing, but that man took me in when I had no one else. . . Easy, Ven,” Terra soothes, as Ven had started to stir angrily at the implication Terra didn’t have him. “Allowing them to experiment on my heart may be appalling in your eyes, but I believed it was the only way to repay him for his kindness.”

“They did what. . .?” Aqua jerks her head away sharply and scolds herself. Stay focused! “Not that. I’m talking about the Heartless!”

Terra sighs heavily. “Yes, those. It was inevitable, I suppose, that a research lab dedicated to the heart would stumble across that. If only I had retained my memories. I could have warned them of the dark path we walked upon.”

If. . . No, she had to stay focused. She had been forced to fight him. She had to take his memories away.

“Terra, you created Heartless!” she cries. “How could you ever think that was okay?”

“We thought we could control them,” Terra says. “Our Heartless were created by artificial means, so no one was hurt in the process. Of course, we never understood the true extent of what we were dealing with.”

“But why?”

“The darkness is as much a part of the heart as the light is. It was inevitable,” Terra says slowly. “With or without me, their fate would have been the same. Though I will confess I was inclined to study the darkness myself. My memories lay tattered in the dark, and I had hoped by mastering the darkness, I could recover them. I believed the darkness would let me follow my heart to those it yearned for.”

He’s touching her again, stroking her cheek with all the tenderness she remembers from her youth. She closes her eyes and leans into it. For an instant, she forgets. For an instant, she trusts him.
“All these people that are suffering, it’s because of this,” she says.

“I’m sorry. I did what I thought was necessary.”

“Necessary? Why would you think this is necessary. . .?” Then, it hits her what he’s been referring to all this time. “No! Terra, your memories weren’t worth this. No memories are.”

“It wasn’t the memories that mattered. It was what lay inside them.”

It takes her only a few moments to understand, because haven’t they talked about this before? Why he became a Nobody, why he opened the Door, it was all to . . .

She whispers, “This is my fault. I. . . I’m the reason the Heartless were unleashed.”

Because it is. If she had been stronger, better, if she had been a true Keyblade Master, she could have saved Terra without him throwing himself into the Realm of Darkness. All of this would have been avoided. If she had trusted him in Radiant Garden, then maybe Xehanort wouldn’t have gotten into his head; this wouldn’t have happened. But she had been stubborn, so sure she knew all the answers now that she was the Keyblade Master. So arrogant. So foolish. . .

“Aqua. . .”

“You should have left me down there,” Aqua weeps. “It wasn’t worth it.”

“What? No! Don’t ever say that!” Ven’s on his feet, furious. (Light, she can’t stop ruining her friends.) “You are worth it!”

“No. Not this. Not all this death and despair,” she says softly.

“Yes, you are!” Ven shouts. He storms towards them, only blocked from reaching her by Terra’s shoulder.

“So many people have suffered . . .”

“I don’t care about them! You’re worth a billion of them!”

She doesn’t answer him this time. That’s not true and . . . It doesn’t sound like something Ven would say, either. Not with that kind of tone or rage.

“Ven.” There’s a low warning note in Terra’s voice. “I understand you are upset, but please step back. I can handle this.”

“Then do it without making her talk like that!” Ven snaps. He snapped at Terra. She doesn’t think she’s ever heard Ven snap at him before. But despite that, as she looks at his body - tight like a bowstring that’s been drawn back - she realizes she recognizes it, that it’s not an uncommon posture of his. Since when did Ven become such an angry person? She knows he was obsessively worrying over her during the time she was gone. Was this her fault, too?

“Ven,” Terra warns again.

She curls up. When did everything become so wrong?

“You must be weary,” Terra tells her kindly. “I will escort you to your room.”

He’s holding his arms open for a hug, and she would. She wants to. But she can’t because he’s . . . they’re . . .
Toxic. The word comes to her abruptly with all the gentleness of a red-hot iron. They all are. She had eight years without them, and they eight years without her. But somehow, it’s only entangled them further. They’re all twisted up in each other, so that where one ends, the others begin. And it’s not the romantic, pure thing she once thought it would be. It’s dangerous and toxic and it’s not healthy for any of them. Because she’s driven Terra to such ends, and Ven’s a pile of barely controlled nerves, and she feels like nothing more than a dumb child around them sometimes.

“I can’t stay here,” she realizes aloud.

“Yes, there is only one bed. Allow me to take you to your room.” Terra says that calmly, but there’s a furrow in his brow.

“That’s not what I meant. I can’t stay here with you.”

He drops his arms. “You are still upset. Aqua, what use is there in mourning what was once done? You cannot change the past.”

“It shouldn’t have happened to begin with,” she counters. “Don’t you see? We’ve all lost sight of what matters.”

“We are here. The three of us are together. That is what matters.”

“But that shouldn’t be the only thing that does,” she says. She gets to her feet and stares him down. “What happen to protecting the worlds and maintaining the balance? It’s the reason we trained under Master Eraqus in the first place.”

“Master Eraqus is dead.”

“That doesn’t mean we give up. You... We’ve changed. I think that... the darkness has gotten to us all.”

It’s a terrifying thing to think about. But she was down there for eight years, and Terra was a couple of rooms away from Heartless, and she has no idea where Ven had been.

She says, “What happened to us? None of us would have been okay with this eight years ago. Terra wouldn’t have dreamed of using the darkness like this. And Ven... How are you even capable of using portals?”

“What do you mean?” Ven asks, defensive.

“That’s an ability that you need the darkness to use. But your heart was filled with light...”

“I needed to be able to portal,” Ven protests, nearly shouting again. “Or should I have left you down there forever?”

Yes, you should have. The bed frame bumps against her leg as she takes a step back. “Ven, how exactly did your eyes change colours?”

They both stare at her. It’s a question she breached once, near the beginning, and let Ven sidestep. Now, she understands that was a mistake.

“Aqua.” Terra’s using that warning tone with her now. “Whatever you may think of my actions, Ven’s were necessary.”

“Nobody got hurt by me learning how to portal, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Ven says.
“That’s not the point, Ven.”

Ven blinks slowly. He’s trying to understand her, but obviously is failing. “Well, Terra’s not making Heartless anymore. I can stop portalling. Will that make it better?”

“You’re missing the point.” She looks away, unable to look either in the face. “I thought I needed to be alone to think. That was only part of the answer. I think what’s really going on is that we need to be separated.”

“Well, we were,” Ven says with a sharp laugh. “For eight years.”

“And look what it’s done to us,” she says. “Whatever it was that corrupted us, we’re not helping each other face it. I think we’re making each other worse. We need to be apart, so we have time to remember who we were.”

“Right,” Ven says dryly, “because Terra’s magically going to get his heart back.”

“That research he did in Radiant Garden was with a heart!” she barks. “It wasn’t just one machine he made, either. I saw three of them and . . .”

It comes back in a haze: the symbol of the Heartless carved on Hollow Bastion’s castle. Mocking. Celebrating. Those machines had created Heartless, but how had they known it was possible unless . . . unless they had discovered them naturally first . . .

“It has been a trying week for you,” Terra says. “Have you eaten recently? Perhaps that is the cause of your agitation.”

Deep down, she had known the entire time that those cells weren’t for animals.

“I can’t. . .” Her throat tightens up and she can’t speak. She shakes her head, walks past Terra and ignores Ven. She needs to leave before she does something she regrets.

She reaches for the door, and her hand smacks into an energy barrier.

“Where are you going, Aqua?” Terra asks.

She fights to keep the tremble out of her voice. “I already told you.”

Terra just watches her. Ven fidgets next to him, not like a restless child, but like a hungry wolf only restrained by a leash.

“. . . Terra, take down the barrier,” she demands.

Terra says, “When emotions run high, it is common to make rash decisions. I do not want to see our bond damaged by a fit of irrationality. . .”

“I’m being irrational? You’re the one who thinks releasing those Heartless is nothing to be ashamed about!” Aqua shouts. She tries to force her hand through the barrier, but it pushes back. “Terra, let me go.”

“. . . Do you think that little of us?” Terra says.

He advances. Ven stays where he is, all coiled muscle.

“Everything we have sacrificed has been for your sake,” Terra says. “Every drop of sweat and tear has been in your name. You were not a witness to our turmoil during those years, but I thought you
would understand. You, who sacrificed everything for me. Although I suppose you have come to regret that choice.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” Aqua growls. “I never said anything like that!”

“Yet here you stand, condemning us. Condemning the very bond that ties us together. You say we have been led astray, but perhaps you were the one who lost her way in the dark.”

“No. What you did was wrong.” It is wrong. She knows it is. He’s trying to confuse her. She pushes against the barrier again and when it still refuses to crumble, summons Stormfall.

“You spent many years alone in the darkness with its illusions,” Terra drones. “You saw us down there, did you not? How do you know those mirages reflected the real us?”

“They were. I know you two.” Yet as she says it, she knows exactly what he’ll say next. She slams her keyblade against the barrier, both out of fierce frustration, and because she wants to get out of here now.

“Yet you claim now that you do not. If you knew us so well, then why were our actions a surprise? Shouldn’t you have predicted what Terra and Ven would do?”

“I don’t even know if you are Terra!” she screams. He had been in the process of reaching for her, but now he stops. His hand is still in mid-air as it curls into a fist.

“What does that mean?” Ven wonders aloud, befuddled.

“You were Xehanort when I fought you,” Aqua says to Terra. “I fell into the darkness immediately after. How do I know which one of you came -?”

“Don’t,” Terra says tersely. “Never accuse me of being him. I am Terra.”

“Then prove it!” She slams Stormfall in to the barrier again. It sends waves of tingly magic up her keyblade, making the hairs on her arms rise.

“Was raising you from darkness not enough?” he demands. “I didn’t need to tell Ven where you were. Nor did I need to return your armour and keyblade, and gift you the equipment you used to defy me. I would not have taken on this wretched form if you had not been in distress.”

“I didn’t tell you to throw your world into darkness! You were the one who decided to create the Heartless. Terra, let me out!”

Her shoulder slams into the barrier. It doesn’t yield. It’s on one side of her, Terra is on the other, and her heart pounds with the familiar sensation of being trapped. Magic swirls in her core, ready to pour out at the first request.

“I did it for –”

“Stop blaming me for this!” she shrieks. “This isn’t my fault.”

Terra looks at her with something like disgust. “The darkness has taken you.”

For some reason, that pushes her over the edge. After everything she’s endured down there, after all she’s survived. . . Because she did survive. He has no idea what that means.
“Aqua,” he says, and there is no softness anymore, “you are going to dismiss your keyblade. And then you will –”

He’s too close and it’s fight or flight now. Even without the barrier blocking her way, fighting’s so ingrained in her blood that it’s natural for magic to fly to her fingertips and push him back. Terra’s landing cracks the ground, but he stays standing. Blood rushes through her ears, drowning out Ven’s shouts.

“Let me go,” she hisses.

Terra stares back at her, defiant.

And she lunges. A haze seeps in at the edge of her vision. Terra flickers out of corporeality, letting her fly through him, but she’s fought opponents like this so many times. All she needs is one slipup, one good hit, and his spell will falter. The barrier will fall and she’ll finally be free –

Her swing is blocked. The rebound hits her with such force that she’s blasted back into the barrier. But Terra still hasn’t summoned a weapon . . .

“Aqua, quit it!” Ven commands. The X-Blade is within his hand, tip resting on the ground.

“Ven . . .!”

“Seriously, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I want out! You can’t keep me here.”

Ven grinds his teeth together. “Terra was right. I should have brought you back the moment I found you.”

“You did find her?” Terra says.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I thought if I gave her what she wanted, then everything would be okay. You were right.”

“Ven, how do even you know he is Terra?” she demands, desperate.

Of course, they can taste her desperation, and that only solidifies their opinion on her. Ven simply says, “He is Terra.”

“Terra would have let me go!”

Terra – whomever he really is – smiles. “You never understood me as well as you thought you did.”

“Aqua, put Stormfall away,” Ven pleads.

She holds Stormfall with both hands. Terra isn’t going to let the barrier fall; she’ll have make him. But Ven isn’t going to let her fight him.

She . . .

She’s going to have to fight them both.

She opens with Transcendence. With one hand, Ven clings to his X-Blade, planted in the ground, and doesn’t move. The anti-gravity spell catches Terra though and spits him out in the opposite direction of her. Springing to the side to put some distance between her and Ven, she unleashes a
Firaga at Terra.

Terra raises his hand. A smooth plane of energy forms and absorbs the blow. Red light builds up in his other hand, and then darts at her. She deflects the beam with Stormfall; the bolt flies off spinning and scorches the wall. Nearby, Ven leaps into a puddle of darkness and she was right about him, when had he allowed the darkness to seep in . . .?

Only her honed senses allow her to pick up the sound of his portal opening before he springs out behind her. She throws herself to the side as the Blizzard spell frosts over the area she had once been in.

Terra’s already taking advantage of her lost ground to fly at her. Void Gear comes to him as he draws his arm back. Their keyblades collide. He twists the shaft, trying to lock the teeth of their keyblades together, to trap Stormfall as well. She slides her blade down Void Gear’s shaft instead, and spins away with the momentum before he can overpower her.

Air tugs at her body. But Barrier is so instinctive to her, that she summons it before Ven’s Stopga steeps in. She lets magic flow through her; it bursts out of her body and entangles itself with the hexagonal plates of her Barrier in the form of flames. Now, she charges at Terra. He teleports out of her way. For a shining moment, through the red flames cloaking her barrier, there’s only the moon in her sights. Only the moon, and glass.

She hesitates too long, Ven leaps out of a puddle in front of her, and the point of the X-Blade slams into her ball-like shield as she tries to make a break for it. It is not a waterfall of sparks that fall as they grind together, but embers.

“Aqua, quit it!” he shouts.

Something crashes into her Barrier, making it shake. Then there’s another and another impact, and she can barely see what’s happening because the projectiles are the same colour as the flames.

The shield cracks. And then Terra is there and he swings –

The spell’s shattering resonates within her. It takes her a second to adjust.

A second is all they need.

She bounces against the floor. It smarts but she doesn’t think she’s hurt, because the twister gave her enough time to prepare for the landing. As she thrashes to her feet, an amber wall infused with chains rises in front of the glass. Eyes closed, Terra closes his upward-facing hand and the amber wall sharpens.

“Aqua, put the keyblade away,” Ven demands. He’s not even in a fighting stance.

“Is this really what you want?” she asks Ven in a low voice. “How far are we going to take this?”

Her question catches him blind. He blinks, looking lost and confused. Then, that expression hazes over. “You started it. You’re the one attacking us!”

“You can’t keep me here forever!” She knows it, and Terra knows it. He may be older than her, but his barriers have never been as powerful as hers. Sooner or later, she’ll break through.

“Terra!” Ven turns to the older man, pleading for assistance.

“Aqua, I am not sure what happened to you in Hollow Bastion, but it has clearly left you disturbed. I
cannot allow you to wander the worlds in your state.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me!” she shouts and she can’t help the wild wail there even though it isn’t helping her case. Animal panic is scratching at the back of her throat and its’ a miracle she’s able to speak at all.

“Aqua, just dismiss Stormfall,” Ven says in an exhausted voice. “We don’t have to fight each other. Let’s talk about this.”

“We did. You two won’t listen.” She tenses her biceps because Stormfall’s starting to shake in her hands and she can’t have that. “Let me go.”

Still, Ven doesn’t relent. There’s no question that Terra won’t, either.

A tear nips at her eyes. It’s like the whole world had fallen to pieces.

She bathes herself in fire once more.

The flame pillars rise around her, ignoring Ven’s attempts to blow them out. They spiral around her like planets around a sun, and the air contorts with the heat. She doesn’t feel it. She is aflame herself. Flames follow her arms, billowing off them like the feathers of a phoenix. Terra’s room is almost too small to contain Raging Storm and the firestorm forces Terra and Ven to the edges of the room.

Ven summons his armour and lunges at her. The armour’s enough to ward off the heat, but not protect him. She doesn’t understand. Ven slips between two of the swirling pillars and –

He explodes with light. Once again, she’s thrown backwards, lifted off her feet. The landing is softer than before and she’s still aflame, but when she looks up, there’s pillars of light chasing the ones of flame. They collide, and Ven’s pillars swell to engulf hers. Now, there’s still three pillars circling her, but they belong to him and she braces and waits for them to converge on her.

But they don’t. The pillars burn themselves out and sink into the ground as Ven tries to cast Blizzaga on her again. She rolls out of the way. All his attacks, she realizes, are designed to restrain or control. He’s not actually fighting her.

She rises and propels herself towards him, as if going for a Sonic Blade. It’s such a familiar technique to them all that Ven drops down into a defensive stance the second she moves. She pulls her keyblade back for a thrust, and then skews her path to the right at the last second, bypassing him and going for Terra, her true opponent. Flatfooted, Ven can’t stop her.

Void Gear shrieks against Stormfall, but Terra wasn’t quite fast enough. Her keyblade slips under his guard and with her momentum, drives itself into Terra’s stomach. He grunts; it’s the first sound of pain any of them have made. And the distance he gains by stumbling back is quickly reclaimed when Aqua falls into Sonic Blade for real and lunges.

On what would be the fourth hit, a wave of ice suddenly bursts out of the ground between them. Stormfall impales the ice instead, sending a kaleidoscope of cracks weaving through the wall, and making small pieces fall off everywhere.

“Terra!” Ven hops onto the ice wall, ignoring her for a second to check up on him. She sees his back.

The predator within awakens.

Keyblades aren’t meant to slice and tear. Ven’s that fortunate when Stormfall’s teeth rake down his
back. She strikes him again. The third time, Ven surrounds himself in a dark, bubble-like shield. She
hits it. She hits it again. Again. And again.

Her senses are flooded with darkness, but not from Ven. Perched atop the ice wall with him, she
looks down at Terra. His arms are open, and there’s some big, dark ball of energy shimmering in
front of him. It makes the air around it thin and wispy. Several of those wisps seem to be coming
from her.

Ven sinks into the darkness while she’s distracted. They’re so close that the portal swallows up the
ground by her toes and she teeters – she teeters at the edge of the hole into the abyss. She remembers
the first fall. She remembers the darkness closing in -

She gasps. She doesn’t remember throwing herself off the ice wall, or scrambling into a corner.
Shakily, she rises to her feet. Her knees buckle. Her body’s tired. The muscles in her limbs throb
quietly. Darkness lazily swirls around her in a dome and –

She bites back the cry. It’s not the Realm of Darkness, because the darkness surrounding her is
translucent. She doesn’t know where Ven is, but she can see Terra in the same place, watching her.
That ball of energy he was summoning before is gone – oh, that’s the thing encasing her. Like
before, wisps are peeling off her and feeding into it.

Her eyes widen as she realizes what’s happening.

She pushes herself to her feet. Raises Stormfall with a cry and charges. Terra teleports away and for
a moment, the weight crippling her body fades. But Terra reappears and the draining resumes once
more. She pivots to face him. He’s floating; watching her; taunting her.

She staggers towards him. A barrier rises to impede her path. It’s Ven’s, it’s got to be. Panting, she
swings at it. She howls with fury and rains down blow after blow on the spot right in front of Terra’s
face.

Her legs give in. With a sharp clack, her knees meet the ground. She rests against the barrier, then
raises her screaming arms and attacks it from her kneeling position, until something in her core gives
and she slumps over.

On Terra’s side of the barrier, Ven exhales in relief. “Alright, that’s good. She’s done.”

Terra holds his arms wide. His eyes are closed, face upturned as if in prayer. She can barely breathe.
Strange lights flicker in her vision as her fingers feebly twitch. Her mouth hangs open and she lacks
the strength to close it.

“I said that’s enough!”

The X-Blade suddenly flashes into sight and its flat end smacks into Terra’s cheek. The dark energy
surrounding her immediately disappears. Aqua pants. She tries to rise, but her arms won’t support her
weight.

She mouths a healing spell in rehearsal. She’s not done. She can fix this. She can keep fighting.

But before she can cast a spell for real, Ven’s armoured hand clamps over her mouth. She bites
down, but doesn’t have the strength to do real damage. Ven hooks his arms under her armpits and
drags her across the ground.

He throws her back onto Terra’s bed. Leaning his weight into her, he keeps her there as he fumbles
with something in his pocket and then reaches for her shoulder –
She blinks. The familiar, cool shell of her armour hugs her. Why would he . . .?

“Terra,” Ven gasps.

The amber wall protecting the glass falls. But only the energy part of it. The chains remain.

They slither across the floor at lightning speed. Ven’s only thrown himself back from her when the first chain wraps around her upper arm. It pulls down sharply, pinning it against the mattress, winding so tight that it would have sliced into her flesh without the armour. She struggles and yanks at the chain holding her one arm down, but it’s anchored itself to the bedframe and already, there’s a mass of them pouring up the bedside and attaching themselves to whatever they find. Each forces her body down and binds itself to the bedframe.

Finally, the rattling stops. Aqua pulls and pulls, but she’s been completely restrained. All she can do is howl.

She rages like an animal in a cage. But then, that’s what she has become now. His golden chains are entangled with her armour, as if apart of it. The thought contents him.

He approaches with perfect posture, unwilling to reveal any damage he has taken from her – or from Ven. Even through the shield of the armour, he can feel her glower. Calmly, he pulls off her helmet; it would get stuffy in there.

“Terra?” Ven looks to him for answers, as he always does.

“Let her rest,” he says. “She needs to calm before we can get anywhere.”

“Okay.” Ven pulls the blankets over her. She hisses.

“I’m not changing my mind,” she swears.

“You will,” Xemnas says. “Ven and I are patient.”

She is strong-willed, yes, but not invincible. Apply enough pressure at the weak points, and she will bend. He’s always liked that about her.

Ven hooks a finger in one of the chains and tugs on it. “These. . .”

“She cannot break them.” He knows it’s true. Although fierce and aggressive, Aqua’s first weakness is that she is physically the weakest of them three. “However, I will need to gag her.”

Ven recoils. “She can’t move. Isn’t that enough to stop her from casting spells?”

“Not with her.”

She resists, but it is only a matter of time and he is very patient. Ven refuses to watch. He cannot blame him. This, he reminds himself as Aqua turns her head away, is temporary. It must be until she bends or they prepare a more secure location. He brushes her bangs out of her eyes afterwards and tucks the covers in around her.

“You got a nightlight?” Ven asks.

“The moon will be her light,” he answers. He summons a Dusk to mind her, regardless.

Aqua lurches forward on the bed. Tries to, at least.
“We should talk outside,” Ven says uncertainly. He’s silently asking whether that’s only going to distress her further.

“We should,” he agrees. Aqua will be troubled if they leave and she can’t hear what they are saying; but she will be even more troubled if she could overhear.

Ven leaves. With a last smile in her direction, Xemnas flicks off the light and leaves her to sleep.

“Terra?” Ven says when they move away from the door. There’s a question in his eyes.

“I am Terra,” he assures Ven.

Ven cocks his head to one side. He changes the subject. “What was that last power you used?”

“That was the power of Nothingness,” Xemnas explains. “It saps away the very essence of existence and invites its prey into my realm.”

“Right. Want to explain what that means to the guy who doesn’t use fancy words?”

“It drains lifeforce.”

“That’s . . .” Ven shudders. “Well, you’re not using that on her again.”

“I, too, pray I will not have to,” Xemnas says. “It is. . .”

Ven grabs him by the throat.

“I don’t think you’re listening,” Ven murmurs. “You’re not using that on her again.”

It’s a one-handed grip. Yet it’s nearly tight enough to cut off his air.

Ven releases him and sighs. “You always tend to overdo things, Terra.”

Fighting with all his might not to choke, Xemnas just nods.

She will never admit it aloud, but Terra was right. This does calm her down. There’s only so long she can stew in her own helpless fury.

He’s right about something else, too: she needs to rest. Whatever that last attack of his was, it’s left her body drained and her muscles sagging in her skin. She doesn’t sleep. She waits, memorizing the sight of the moon as the time passes. The Dusk Terra assigned to watch her hangs out in a corner near her, motionless. She’s alone for now. That won’t last. They’re only letting her be because they think she might come around.

That means the time is now.

Once she’s ready, she closes her eyes and slips into the shadows.

She reappears with Stormfall embedded in the Dusk’s gut.

The force of the keyblade’s withdrawal tears the creature apart. It crumbles into dust as she fades out again and reappears in the center of the room and unties the gag. Ghost Drive’s teleportation range was small, but it was enough to get her out of those damn chains. It’s enough.

She teleports to the far end of the room, and then teleports onto the other side of the glass. Then, with
all the quietness and stealth of the creature that the command style was named after, she’s on her glider and heading for the stars.
His room is currently unavailable to him, so his next best access to Kingdom Hearts is on the roof. That’s where they come to him. With their hands over the spots where their hearts should be, the other former apprentices of Ansem the Wise bow. It’s a holdover from their Radiant Garden days.

“I have finished,” Aelesus tells him. “When you are ready to move her, it will hold her.”

“How deep underground is the chamber?” Xemnas asks.

Aeleus answers. “Half a mile. There will be no escape without a portal.”

He says nothing, but they know that is akin to acknowledgement.

“We are. . .” Dilan starts. Even shifts next to him.

“. . . We are sorry we didn’t stop her before,” Ienzo finishes.

They wait for his response. It takes Xemnas only a moment to laugh.

“Sorry?” he repeats. “She is a master of the keyblade. My friends, it astounds me that you still believe you were capable of stopping her.”

Ienzo says, “Regardless, I anticipated her actions and should have been able to counter them.”

He ignores the attempted admission of guilt. “You tried. You made the mistake of underestimating Aqua, as many do. You are simply another name on her lengthy list of victims.”

His will on this is firm. They accept the absolution and depart.

Xemnas stretches his limbs. It is time.

(And when he opens his bedroom door and finds the bed empty of naught but chains, he realizes she’s also added his name to her list.)

The Northern Lights dance in the sky. Aqua watches them from the mouth of her cave until the cold seeps in and forces her back to the fire.

She warms her hands over the small blaze. It’s chilly up here in the northern part of this world, but at least the ground was warmed by sunlight; the Realm of Darkness was colder. She brings her knees in close to preserve heat.

Where does she go from here? The numbered members gravitate toward worlds with lots of Heartless for their mission, but there’s no rhyme or reason for the destinations of the lesser members of the Organization. She grinds her teeth at the realization that she can’t freely chase down Heartless anymore, not unless she’s seeking out another encounter with Terra or Ven.

She wonders what they’ll do when they discover her missing. Will they be angry? Will they finally understand how serious she is about everything? Or has she just broken them further? It seems to be the only thing she’s done since becoming a Master.

See? This is exactly why you should have listened to me.
Her head shoots up. She’d scouted out the cave earlier; she had been sure she was alone.

“Who’s there?” she demands. She stands. The cave has only one entrance she knows of, but with portals in play, anything goes.

*Stupid girl. You should have done as I said.*

She lights up Stormfall and sweeps the light toward the back of the cave. There’s a glint where it reflects off light blue eyes –

*You should have let yourself fade into the darkness,* her mirror image snarls.

“You,” she mumbles, heart pounding. “I left you in the Realm of Darkness.”

_How would you have done that? You can’t leave your sins behind. It’s not that easy._

Aqua cries out and strikes.

Her keyblade passes through the clone, as does her body. The clone watches her, smirking. It doesn’t move as Stormfall swipes through it again.

*It doesn’t matter how many times you defeat me. It doesn’t change what you’ve done.*

“Be silent!” she commands. She points Stormfall at the clone. Her arm is shaking.

The clone stalks forward. They’re nose to nose, and Aqua swears she can feel its breath.

*See what you’ve done? This universe used to be full of light. It was beautiful once._

She bellows and swings again. Again, the keyblade passes through air.

_How many times did you beg for a rescue? Aqua jumps as the clone walks through her. You were willing to give up anything. Do you remember?_

No. Yes. She tries not to think of those times.

*Congratulations. The universe heard you. The clone looks over its shoulder at her. And it decided your friends were the price._

“No!”

Ice streams out of her keyblade and bleeds over the world. Half the cave is left frozen, but at least the clone is gone.

*Useless. No wonder they left you there for so long._

Where is it? She looks around and . . . there’s a half-dozen of them. Staring at her from the icy floor, from the icy planes upon the wall. Every time she looks deeper into the cave, there’s another reflection.

_Nothing but a failure. All you’ve done is drag them into the darkness with you._

“That wasn’t me! That was Xehanort’s doing.”

_And who opened the door for their corruption? Why was it that Terra decided to abandon his friends, his light in Radiant Garden? And what of Ven? I wonder why they bothered to find you._
She does, too.

_**Even out of the darkness, you can’t stop destroying what’s left of them. You should have never come back.**_

Her fist slams into the center of her reflection’s head. The ice there caves and cracks. Her distorted reflection sneers back at her, and Aqua screams. She’s not aware of casting the spell, but she does and the cave walls begin to glow a soft orange as heat scrubs it clean of all liquid. She must stumble out afterwards and even still, she isn’t fast enough to stop the bottom of her feet from getting burned. There’s a stream nearby, that’s why she chose this cave, so she hobbles over and lowers her feet into the water.

_You should have died down there._

She squeezes her eyes shut. “I know.”

The Organization’s avoided Hollow Bastion since its founding as the risk of being recognized was too great. This is the first time either of them has been back and, well... if they had a heart, it would be distressing. It’s nothing like the bright, vibrant city they once knew. The gardens and flowers have been replaced by scraggy grass poking through concrete. The only outside light are scattered streetlights, whose reach is just barely to the building next door. It’s like a set in a horror movie.

“Was this place this bad when we lost our hearts?” Lea asks as they stroll around the outskirts of what’s left of Radiant Garden.

“I don’t think so,” Isa says. “Not yet, at least. Much of this damage could have happened during the world’s final fall.”

Lea glances at a cliffside, where a fissure delves deep into its interior. “I don’t what to know what happened then.”

Isa grunts. The two of them had been near the castle when the Heartless were unleashed, and thus had been killed early into the invasion. They’d been slain fast enough that nobody had understood what the Heartless were yet, or what it meant to be caught by them. In some ways, he thinks it’s a blessing. Better to die quickly then in the prolonged cat-and-mouse game the rest of the city had been consumed by.

“Guess the amusement park’s not around anymore,” Lea remarks absently.

“I want to see the castle,” Isa suddenly says.

“Oh, why? You know the Restoration Committee probably won’t let us.”

It’s dumb because the Heartless wouldn’t attack them, but he understands. Explaining how he and Isa were back, along with their familiarity with the Organization, necessitated explaining what had happened to them. There’s an uncertain tension between them and the Committee now. They all knew each other once, but Lea and Isa had their hearts back then, and no one’s quite sure what that means for their past connections. Kairi’s the only one from his old world that seems to trust him, but she’s already left with her friends to tell Yen Sid about their recent conversation.

“We won’t tell them,” Isa says. “Wasn’t it your dream to sneak into the castle?”

“Sure, but that was when we were kids. What’s got you interested?”
“Xemnas lived there. Isn’t that enough?”

“Look at you taking an interest in ancient history. If that’s what you really want to do, then we can. But in exchange, we have to go to the beach later.” At Isa’s flat stare, Lea said, “What? It’s just sand and water. There’s no way the Heartless could have destroyed that.”

The walk to Ansem’s castle is uneventful, as is the process of entering it. Apparently, the Restoration Committee had destroyed the Heartless-creating machines within the castle’s dungeons, and Sora and co. had been by earlier to thin out the remaining herd. So, he’s not expecting much. They let their guard down and take time to scrutinize the castle they’ve finally been allowed to enter.

“Do you remember how many times we tried to sneak in here?” Lea asks in a low voice. “What do you think would have happened if we succeeded?”

“We would still be dead,” Isa says. “Victims of Xehanort’s experiments.”

Lea nods solemnly, for once, thankful for their complete inability to infiltrate the castle.

“Once the darkness began seeping in, we always thought this place was the source,” Isa continues. “How right we were. We only failed to recognize the magnitude of its corruption.”

“At least those kids were able to set everything right,” Lea says. “Give it time. I’m sure they’ll make this place like it used to be.”

“And what of us?” Isa asks.

Lea doesn’t have an answer for him. Nor does he have the time to deliver one, for at that moment, they hear a portal opening behind them. He summons his chakrams. Isa does not summon his claymore, but his eyes begin to glow in a vague threat.

And Isa should have summoned the claymore, before the figure that steps out before them is very familiar.

“Superior,” Isa says. Lea hopes it’s just habit and not because Isa has any lingering respect for this guy.

Xemnas completely ignores Isa. He stares straight at Lea, and Lea feels like a rabbit with a fox staring down its hall.

“You, too, fled to this castle,” Xemnas says. “I see. Now, it all makes sense.”

“We just got here,” Lea says, backing up. There’s a steady blare going off in the back of his mind, a siren even louder than any of the ones he heard while facing down Ventus.

“And you have done more than enough,” Xemnas says. For each step Lea takes back, he takes one forward. “You have meddled enough.”

Void Gear appears in a fizzle of black flames.

Isa roars. His claymore takes only a moment to appear and a trail of blue light follows him as he lunges toward Xemnas. Xemnas’s block seems so casual even as he uses two hands. He fades away and – fuck, Xemnas is right in front of –

It takes both chakrams to stop Xemnas’s swing. Xemnas smirks. And then he’s translucent, his keyblade disappearing, and through his half-solid form, Lea sees Isa coming straight at them with a
snarl.

Isa’s claymore slices through Xemnas’s image diagonally, scattering it. The blade smashes into the ground worryingly close to Lea’s feet.

“Isa!”

“Sorry,” Isa grunts. His scars glow.

Xemnas reappears on the other side of the room. He’s not alone. There’s a bunch of red laser-like beams floating in the air around him, like he’s planning to build a wall out of them. They pulse faintly, just strong enough to trace out Xemnas’s shadow on the carpet.

And the first one fires.

It’s quick. Quick enough that while Lea blocks it, he doesn’t realize what happened until a beat after. Then another comes. And another. They’re spread apart at first, as if warming up. By the seventh though, they’re noticeably coming closer together and he realizes there’s too many gaps in his chakrams to protect himself effectively.

Isa steps in front of him. He shouldn’t be able to swing that heavy claymore fast enough to deflect lasers, but somehow, he does. He swings with all the speed his berserker fury allows him, and it’s a lightshow of blue and red that Lea can only stand back and watch.

But not even Isa can keep up in the end. There’s a different kind of impact, one that ends in a small explosion and a hissing sound. Isa acts as though he can’t feel it, but as more slip past his guard, even he isn’t numb to the pain. He staggers back into Lea, who catches him. He can feel the impact of the lasers hitting his body.

And it’s over. The two of them wait for more, and then Lea is brave enough to look ahead. Xemnas is still there, but all the lasers around him are gone. They lock eyes. Xemnas strides forward.

Isa surges forward. He’s panting more than he’s growling, but he still pushes Lea off him and staggers forward to face Xemnas. His scars are glowing again. Lea can see it even standing behind him.

“Still, you rise,” Xemnas says. “Aqua taught you well.”

That name, the way Xemnas enunciates it, is all he needs to understand. Lea tries to shove Isa aside, but he’s refusing to be moved. So instead, he skirts around his friend and holds his arms open wide.

“Hey! Leave him alone. I’m the one you have a beef with,” Lea says.

“Yes, you are.” Like almost every time Xemnas speaks, its emotionless. Yet it’s charged with something that makes goosebumps erupt all over his skin. He once said that Aqua was going to be the reason he died.

Looks like the reckoning is today.

“Isa, go.” He tries to shove Isa aside again, but he’s never been able to effectively manhandle his best friend. “Get out of here!”

Isa looks offended at the very suggestion.

“He’s going to kill you!” Lea shouts as quietly as possible. “Just get out of here. I can take care of
myself.”

“My memories beg to differ.”

“Isa -!”

Isa suddenly tackles him at the waist. They hit the ground, and the entire world suddenly erupts. When the dust clears, there’s a trough torn through the floor where they once were standing, and a hole in the wall behind it.

“Your loss,” Xemnas said. “It would have been quick.”

Isa takes a little too long to get to his feet. This, Lea observes in his peripheral vision.

“Isa, run,” Lea gasps.

The idiot charges at Xemnas instead. Lea swears, lights his chakrams and flings them ahead. If anything, he can distract Xemnas. Give Isa an opening.

As the chakrams veer through the air and begin to converge, Xemnas suddenly rockets forward. He’s moving just as fast as Isa and –

Isa slams into a wall.

“Isa!”

Lea runs to him. There’s a crater in the wall where Isa hit it. He’s resting on his side and when he tries to push himself up, he slips.

“Hey. You okay?” Lea asks, kneeling by his side.

Isa only pants.

Lea looks up, and Xemnas is walking towards them. Not only that, but there’s more of those red lasers appearing around him.

He swallows. “Isa, listen to me and get out of here.”

Again, Isa growls and starts to stand.

“Just listen to me for once!” Lea steps on Isa’s shoulder, pushing him back into the ground. “Isa, you know we can’t win this.”

Isa looks up at him. “Lea . . .”

Xemnas is raising his arm, preparing to fire once again.

“No!”

Lea flings his chakrams. Xemnas catches them. Something rises within him at the sight, and his mouth opens in a soundless howl as the first sparks of magic fill his lungs.

His chakrams erupt into flames. Xemnas drops them, but that’s not going to be enough because he’s going to take this bastard down one way or another.

It feels like a part of his soul’s being ripped out. That’s how forcefully the magic escapes him. The
only warning Xemnas gets is a ripple around the edges of the dropped chakrams, and then they explode. Their flames combine, twist into a miniature sun that swirls like a whirlpool. Carpet, drapes, door, all of it is scorched black in an instant, consumed before their eyes can make sense of it.

“Go!” Lea shouts at Isa.

Isa is sweating profusely. “Lea...”

“I promise I’ll find you later. Just get out of here before you burn up, too.”

Isa looks at him a moment longer, and then summons a portal. He staggers through it, and Lea closes it for him to make sure he isn’t tempted into coming back.

The ceiling’s on fire now. Not that he can see it because smoke’s filled the upper half of the room. He can tell though it’s raining down thick globs. Just in time, he thinks, because he can’t hold out much longer. He lets the last of his magic escape him in a swoosh, like air being driven out of the lungs.

The majority of the flames die with his spell. Some remain, gnawing at the floor or the walls. Except for a particularly suspect circle of floor that still has its colour. A circle of floor that is also guarded by a smooth, red dome.

“Fuck,” Lea says as Xemnas drops the shield.

Xemnas flicks his wrist. It’s enough to conjure one of those lasers, which Lea blocks. He blocks the next one, and the next one. It’s easy, too easy. Xemnas isn’t even trying. He’s just flicking his wrist occasionally, as if it’s raining and some of the raindrops are getting on his sleeve.

“What do you want?” Lea shouts. “I left. Isn’t that enough?”

“It may have been, had you held your tongue,” Xemnas says. “I know Aqua was here. I know whatever occurred here caused a complete reversal in her opinion towards me. Would you like to fill in the blanks?”

He’d always known that would come back to bite him. But he’s not going to start regretting it now. If Aqua finally picked up the trail and realized who this guy really was, then that’s enough to make this worth it.

“So, you’re going to throw a tantrum because you can’t control her anymore?” he sneers. “Not much of a friend.”

“You know nothing of friendship,” Xemnas says. “You cannot begin to grasp the bond between our hearts. She will return to us.”

“And what if she doesn’t?” Lea demands.

Xemnas moves his arm in a circle, and a matching series of ethereal blades appear. “She has no choice.”

It’s not sequential this time. Every light comes at him at once, and they’re clustered too closely to block even with both chakrams. The blades slip through the gaps in the spokes. It’s like being hit with a bat made of ice; so cold it burns. He slams into the ground, tasting blood.

Xemnas slowly walks towards him. As Lea struggles to sit up, Xemnas raises his hand. Then, he clenches it.
Lea screams.

The pain is immediate. There’s a weird shudder in his shoulders, like his bones are wrenching themselves free of his muscles. His legs kick out, sending his chin right into the floor. But that sharp pain is lost in the maelstrom of nausea sweeping through him. It feels like someone is lifting him by the hair, and there’s a deep ache in his spine as he arches backwards too far.

He knows. He’s turning into a Dusk.

His body whips back; his forehead crashes into his knees. He can’t move his arms – does he even have arms? There’s something like claws swiping up his throat and back, peeling away the skin one strip at a time.

“You can be the first to search for her,” Xemnas says with satisfaction. “You will have the honour of testing her hostility towards us.”

Even now, Xemnas can’t stop thinking of ways to mess with her head. But as if Xemnas can read his mind, the moment Lea thinks about stabbing him, something stabs through his mind instead.

He’s . . . It’s over. His bones, they’re like cracking into liquid. His whole body’s folding in on itself. Becoming nothing.

And then, he feels it. Something warm in his core, so young and weak he’s not sure it’s really there. Yet it alone resists the pressure closing in from every side. Whereas the rest of him would fold and wither, it beats and maintains shape. It maintains him.

Xemnas’s jaw tightens. It feels like he’s trying to squash Lea into a ball, yet that thing in the center of his chest still fights. With an arm he barely feels, Lea brings it to his chest and clenches his fist.

He lashes out.

Xemnas is thrown back by the orb of fire that surrounds Lea. Lea slams his hand into the ground, fingers digging into the carpet. It gives way to his portal and he is falling through everlasting darkness.

I . . . I’m still dying, aren’t I?

He has no idea where he is anymore. All around him is shapeless shadows and there’s no sign of a landing anytime soon.

“After all that,” he whispers. “Hope I got his eyebrows, at least.”

The warm thing in his chest settles.

(In the dark room, blue eyes snap open.)

He tries to remember. He tries to picture Isa’s face and hear the promise he made to him. It’s there for a moment, and then it flickers out.

(Barefooted, still in his pyjamas, he stumbles outside.)

His eyes are open, but he can’t see anything. Except for one thing. Way off in the hazy distance, there’s something bright.

“You’re not leaving us, are you?”
He’s mouthing something but has no idea what it is. The light’s still so far away, yet it’s so clear. He’s looking into the eyes of someone familiar.

“C’mon, Lea. It’s not over yet.”

There’s a hand stretching out for his. As his eyes close, Lea reaches out with the last of his strength.

(His mind still asleep, Sora Roxas reaches towards the stars.)
“Kairi! Riku! Wake up!”

Sora’s frantic hammering on the door rings throughout the Mysterious Tower. Riku is first to wake, and he does so in a fit: half-leaping out of bed so that his legs tangle with the blankets and he ends up on the floor. The loud thump is the last thing needed to rouse Kairi next door, who sits up and rubs her eyes with all the royal grace expected of her.

“How can you think about hurting it?” Kairi pleads. “Look at it! It’s a Dusk, but it’s an odd-looking one. It’s bigger, longer than the ones he’s used to with proportions that look normal. It’s got teardrop-shaped markings in the place that eyes would be, and it’s lacking the black bindings around its hands. In fact, it’s got fingers. That alone earns a doubletake. There’s something less floppy about it to, like it’s still got all its bones.

“Guys!” Mickey comes jogging up. “What’s going on?”

Mickey hesitates. “Is that...?”
“No!” Sora curls his body over the Dusk, shielding it from any aggressors.

“It’s not hurting anyone!” Kairi says.

Mickey looks at Riku. Riku shrugs. He doesn’t get why these two are so hellbent on protecting a Nobody, but what is he going to do: fight them over it? That would be stupid.

“Well, alright,” Mickey says awkwardly. “If that’s what you two really want.”

“Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you…” Sora babbles.

Mickey leans back a little and stretches his arm out, keeping as much distance from the Dusk as possible. Star Seeker finds the center of the Dusk’s chest, and a blue ripple emanates from the point of contact as Mickey casts a stronger healing spell. The Dusk’s chest stops moving. It lies still, mouth open. Sora cradles it to his chest like a kitten.

The Dusk’s mouth flaps. It’s either tilted its head, or Sora shifted it somehow and it doesn’t have the strength to move back. It reaches up suddenly, and – it’s touching Sora. Riku lurches forward, but Sora doesn’t seem alarmed. The Dusk moves its fingers across his cheeks, like it’s stroking him.

“Roxas?” Sora says suddenly. “I’m Sora.”

“Who are you talking to?” Kairi asks.

“Him. He’s talking to me. . . No, I’m not Roxas.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Riku says.

The Dusk lifts its head. Its weird, zipper-lined mouth is flapping again. Suddenly, it thrashes like a fish on land and ends up with its hips below its body but back still on the ground, bent in a way that nothing with bones can stand. Then, the back rises like a flower stem after it’s been trodden on. The Dusk is sitting up now and touching its own cheeks. It twists at the waist to stare at itself.

Now it’s up. Wait, false alarm. It’s fallen back down after its legs didn’t support it. It tries to flail to its feet again, and this time it seems to realize it can hover and stays up. It’s still super flaily though and waves its arms at them.

“I don’t understand you,” Sora says.

“Am I the only person who cares that this is a Nobody?” Riku asks.

The Dusk gives him the finger. The fact that it was able to understand that was an appropriate response strikes him dumb.

Kairi takes a few tentative steps closer. “What are you?”

The Nobody stares at her. Slowly, it begins to contort its body, and it takes them a bit to realize it’s making a letter. They say the letters aloud as the Dusk reshapes it body to spell it out.

“Lea?” Sora repeats. “Oh, Lea sent you!”

The Dusk stares at him. Then it slams its head against a wall.

“If it knew how to write, we could give it a pen,” Kairi says.

Surprisingly, the Dusk responds to that. It points at her and rapidly nods
“Okay, let’s get him a pen!” Sora says eagerly. “Come on. I know Master Yen Sid’s got some in his study.”

“Uh, I’m gonna get Yen Sid, you guys,” Mickey says.

By the time Mickey arrives in the study with Yen Sid, they’ve pieced together a chunk of the Dusk’s – Lea’s – story. Mickey arrives with Yen Sid to find the four of them in a silent circle, with Lea’s fingers and wrist twisted around a pen.

“So, Xemnas. . . Terra. . . Xehanort?” Sora glances at Kairi for confirmation. “He did this to you. Why?”

Lea scrawls a single word: jealous. Something lurches in Sora’s chest at the sight.

Mickey swallows. “This is about Master Aqua, isn’t it?”

Lea nods.

“Why do this, though?” Riku asks. “Isn’t this just going to piss her off?”

Yen Sid speaks up, “Only if she were to know. Lesser Nobodies are mindless beings with no individuality. They are the workers of the hive. That you, Lea, have maintained your sense of self is nearly unheard of.”

Kairi touches Lea’s arm and frowns. “Maybe. . .”

“Maybe what?” Sora encourages.

“Maybe it’s because of his heart,” Kairi says quietly.

“Huh?” Sora, Riku and Mickey say.

“That’s what makes us who we are, right?” Kairi says. “Maybe Lea’s still here because his heart survived.”

“But his heart would have turned into a Heartless,” Riku points out.

“But. . . It’s here,” Kairi repeats, touching Lea’s chest. “Can’t you feel it? I could before, too, before Xemnas got to him.”

Riku and Sora exchange a look. They shake their heads. But Yen Sid closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, there’s a thoughtful furrow in his brow.

“Kairi is correct,” Yen Sid says with what seems to be surprise. “It is immature at best, but there is something there.”

“But Nobodies are created when a heart and its body are separated,” Mickey says. “Did the Heartless accidentally leave some of it behind?”

“No, something different is at play,” Yen Sid says. “However, I am not sure what it means. It will require some research on my end.”

“Well, whatever the reason is, I’m glad you’re still with us,” Sora says with a bright smile at Lea.

Once again, Sora doesn’t wake up in his bedroom.
He's not afraid though. This place feels like he's meant to be here. It's warm and bright and comforting, like a cradle. The ground under his feet is slick glass and coloured with the remnants of the dozens of hearts he's connected with. Most are lost in the buzz of colours, but there are a few large faces distinguishable from the rest. The sky is mostly empty, but there's something floating in the void. A screen, almost like a television, surrounded by an ornate frame.

"Just keep out of my way! I can do this by myself," a voice yells on the screen. Sora blinks and watches the memory of his fight with Riku in Neverland. It's a weird thing for his heart to show him.

"So, that's jealousy."

"Huh?" Sora turns. There's someone standing on the other end of the glass platform. The person's around his height and is wearing one of those black cloaks with the hood up.

"That's jealousy, isn't it?" The voice is powerful and demanding, yet there's something unsure in it.

"Uh, yeah. Riku was a bit jealous before. But he's alright now."

"But isn't he your best friend?" the mysterious boy asks.

"Of course, he is! But that doesn't mean he can't get jealous."

There's a noise up on the screen. Sora looks up in time to see the tail end of a brief physical clash between Riku and him.

"I see." The hooded figure turns away from Sora and the screen. "Then even friendship doesn't protect you."

Sora chooses then to ask the question he should have led with. "Who are you?"

The hooded figure whips around. "We're wasting time. He already got to me and Lea, so if friendship really doesn't matter, she'll be his next target."

"Who? What are you even saying?" Sora cries out.

"We're wasting time in this tower. We need to get out and find her."

"Who?"

"Aqua!" the figure snaps.

"Master Aqua?" Another person looking for her? "Hold on, that cloak... You're with the Organization, aren't you?"

"Maybe. I don't know anymore. Why does it matter?"

"Because the Organization are the bad guys!"

The figure stands there. "If you don't want to to help, then I'll make us go find her."

With a flick of his arm, a keyblade – Abyssal Tide, his own warns – appears in the other boy's hand. Sora holds his hands up for peace.

"Hold on! I want to help her, but why do you want to?" Sora asks.

"She's my friend," the other boy says, with a cadence that suggests he thinks Sora is the dumbest
person alive.

“Your friend. Are... are you Roxas?”

The boy says nothing, but that is enough of an affirmative.

“But why are you here?”

“Don’t you know? When you lost your Heart to Ansem, you created a Nobody. That was me.”

Sora thinks. Riku would tell him that he was being lied to, that a Nobody can’t have friends. But Lea was Aqua’s friend, wasn’t he? Why else would he have done so much to try to help her? Kairi would agree with that. Kairi would tell him to listen to his heart. And he was already in his heart, wasn’t he?

“I’ll help her,” Sora says, “but how do I find her?”

“Let our heart guide you,” the boy says. “I don’t know why your heart is like this, but all these connections it’s made, even with people you knew for only a little while, they’re still so strong. Aqua’s the reason I have a heart, so I can use that power to find her. But we can’t waste any more time.”

“Alright. Let’s do it!” Sora says.

“. . . Thank you,” Roxas says as his form fades away.

“Okay, this is getting a little ridiculous. Did Master Eraqus give her some last commandant to make sure I always had something to do? Because if she’s trying to make sure my life isn’t boring, it’s working.”

Ven grinds his teeth together. He runs the edge of the X-Blade against the corner of the hallway, revelling in the pressure that fights against him. He looks back at Even and Ienzo, who watch him quietly.

“You’re supposed to be good at predicting people. Can’t you give me any hints?” he barks at Ienzo.

Ienzo slowly says, “You know her best. Any ideas you have would be more well-founded than ours.”

“But I don’t have any ideas! I can’t see why she’d go back to Hollow Bastion, and she didn’t go home either. Just give me something to work with.”

He’s left five notches in the wall by the time one of them decides to speak. Even asks, “Well, what’s her goal?”

“I have no idea what she’s thinking. She’s angry with Terra and she tried to attack him because he wasn’t letting her leave. That’s why she attacked you, isn’t it?”

“Yes...”

“And you just decided to fight her. None of you guys thought about getting us to handle it,” Ven remarks.

“I did!” Even protests. “I was on my way to Xemnas when . . .”
Ven didn’t mean to make him stop speaking, but apparently the sight of him turning around was enough to shut Even up. Even had always been kind of lame, so Ven would have brushed it off, except Ienzo had also moved back.

“Really?” he says.

“Ven?”

Oh, Terra. Finally! Ven stands at attention as Terra walks into the hall. Terra nods at Ienzo and Even, dismissing them.

“So?” Ven asks Terra aggressively. Terra’s the one who correctly predicted her location last time.

“There is only one world I can offer,” Terra says. “She may not be there now, but I believe she will eventually find her way there.”

“Where?”

“The Mysterious Tower.”

Ven blinks. “But that’s where Master Yen Sid lives. She wouldn’t do that. She’s angry, but she wouldn’t turn on us!”

“Rage can lead one to do many things they thought themselves incapable of. It is a conduit for the darkness,” Terra says softly, reminding Ven of his own fall. “Beyond that, she could gravitate there in seek of company.”

“Mickey,” Ven says in understanding. While he’s adventuring, Mickey’s more likely to return there than he is to his own castle, and now Aqua doesn’t have a reason to avoid him.

“Either way, it is a dangerous situation for us,” Terra says. “Aqua knows too much and I fear she doesn’t know how much of her knowledge is dangerous.”

“I’ll stake out the Mysterious Tower then,” Ven says. “I’ll see if I can intercept her.”

“I will watch the Land of Departure,” Terra says. “I doubt she would return there, but there is a slim possibility she’ll want to visit Eraqus’s memorial.”

“Sora!”

“Kairi! Riku!”

“What do you think you’re doing? You’re not leaving without us, are you?” Riku demands.

“I have to help Master Aqua,” Sora insists, halfway up the ladder to the Gummi Ship.

Riku tsks at him. “You don’t even know where she is.”

“Yes, I do! Well, I will. My heart will guide me,” Sora lays a hand over his chest.

“But you’re not going without us!” Kairi says. She joins Sora on the ladder.

“What about the King?” Riku cries, but the two are already inside. He groans and chases after them.

Sora’s sitting in the pilot seat, looking very confused as he examines the sky. Riku rolls his eyes and
takes the rear pilot seat next to Kairi.

“So, where are we going?” Kairi asks.

“I’m . . . not sure,” Sora admits. Riku gives him an unimpressed glance.

His heart would guide him, that was what Roxas had said. How did he do that, though? Maybe he needs to talk to Roxas again. Taking a deep breath as if about to plunge into the ocean, Sora places his hand on his chest and closes his eyes. Bit by bit, the outside world fades away, and the last echoing words that reach his ears was Riku demanding to know what was going on.

Sora opens his eyes. He’s back in that warm, comforting place. But the glass below is different this time. It isn’t a picture of him that occupies the bulk of it, but someone similar to him with blond hair. **Roxas.** Roxas stands a couple of feet away from him this time, with his hood down. There are two other portraits on this Station. Lea’s one of them. The other is a woman with blue hair.

“That’s Master Aqua, isn’t it?” Sora says, needing no confirmation.

Roxas walks into the center of her portrait, which lights up as he does. He extends a hand to Sora.

“With the strength of your heart backing the connections of mine, we can find her.”

“That’s Master Aqua, isn’t it?” Sora says, needing no confirmation.

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“With the strength of your heart backing the connections of mine, we can find her.”

“Right.” Sora takes his hand.

He gasps awake. Or something, because he wasn’t really asleep in the first place. Either way, the sound he makes is abrupt enough to catch the other two’s attention. Sora brushes off their questions, and then stands up on his seat and aims his keyblade. For a moment, it’s not the Kingdom Key he sees, but Roxas’s Abyssal Tide.

And space splits apart at his command, opening the route to a new world. Kairi and Riku watch, but don’t question as Sora plops back down in his chair and starts the ship.

It’s a new world to them all. Beautiful, though. Sora’s a little disappointed that he’s the one piloting the ship, because that means he can’t gather at the window like Kairi and Riku do to look at the ribbons of blue and green lights dancing in the sky. He settles instead for what’s in front of him: a wide expanse of pines broken only by a gently curving river that passes into the horizon. There are mountains to the left, and that’s where he aims the ship, because everywhere else has too many trees to land.

A light dusting of snow flees from the ship’s boosters as they land. The ship is naturally designed to cloak itself when it enters a world’s borders, so there’s no worry about being spotted. Sora leaps out of the ship first, bypassing the ladder, and stretches once he’s on the ground.

“Cool! So, where do you think we should go first?” Sora asks.

“Aren’t you supposed to lead us, Mr. ‘My Heart will Guide Us?’” Kairi teases.

“Hey! I got us to this world, didn’t I?”

“We still don’t know for sure that Master Aqua is here, though,” Riku says.

“Hm. Say, Kairi, think you can use those super Princess of Heart powers to track her down.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Kairi says with a laugh.
They spend a long time walking. Trees are everywhere, blocking out their view of the mountain before long, but they all have their High Jump ability, so it isn’t too hard to get to the top of a tree to check where they are in relation to it. They make a sport of it; leaping from tree to tree, knocking each other off and watching the other glide down. Sora never forgets why they’re here, though. He never forgets his promise to Roxas.

“Do you see that?”

It’s Kairi who says that. She’s pointing at the ground, where a rabbit stands on its hind legs and watches them. It’s a strange that are dancing in the sky. The rabbit stares at them. It doesn’t blink; Sora’s not sure if it has actual eyes.

He leaps down. “Hi, there.”

The rabbit tilts its head. It hops away from the tree, and then looks back at them. If that’s not a request to follow, then he doesn’t know what is.

They follow the glowing rabbit through the forest. Whatever it is, it’s not a real rabbit; he guesses that when it passes through a log instead of jumping over it. It leads them to a rushing stream, and then up the riverbed back towards the mountain.

Then it stops. It sits on its back legs again, looking deeper into the forest. The reason is evident.

“What happened here?” Riku asks.

It’s a good question. At first glance, everything seemed okay. Then Sora realizes that those fallen trees didn’t fall naturally. They’re pockmarked with the remnants of lighting, and Sora’s fought enough to recognize that it’s a spell’s doing. There’s trees and bushes that are strangely bent, too, all leaning away from a central area. Someone was fighting here.

There’s no hesitation as the three summon keyblades and rush forward. There’s a clear path of damage, and they’re going to follow it back to the source.

The trail ends at the gaping mouth of a cave. Kairi lights up her keyblade, and the three carefully walk inside. There was fighting in here, too; there’s thick marks scoured deep into the stone, and the ground underneath is uneven due to rubble and damage. There are lots of puddles, too. Kairi steps and casts her keyblade’s light into the void before them. Slowly, she sweeps it from one side of the cave to the other, until the glow happens upon a crumbled heap near the right wall.

Sora speaks. “Hey, is that . . .?”

“Master Aqua?” Riku says hesitantly.

She’s curled up on the ground, back to them. If they listen, they can hear her panting. She’s given no response, but Sora’s pretty sure they got the right woman if only because of the hair. Although it isn’t quite the ocean blue that Sora saw in Roxas’s heart. It is blue, but it’s noticeably whiter near the roots.

“Are you okay?” Sora doesn’t get near her yet, worried that he’ll hurt her somehow if he does.

When she moves, it’s like she’s discovering her limbs for the first time. It starts at her shoulders in sporadic jerks. Then they move more smoothly and she gets an arm under her, gets her head off the ground. She stays there, not quite laying down, but quite off the ground. Slowly, she begins to turn, until she can prop her upper off the ground with her forearms.
“Master Aqua?”

Her eyes are slow to focus. There’s a weird sheen to them; they shine like a cat’s eyes does when you shine a flashlight on them.

“Sora…” she whispers.

Huh? She knows him? That’s weird.

Aqua’s slow to rise and doesn’t seem steady on her feet. There’s a flash of light and a long, dark blue keyblade appears in her hand. They don’t react. Summoning keyblades is like the natural way for wielders to express strong emotions.

Kairi speaks up. “I’m Kairi. This is our best friend, Riku. Are you Master Aqua?”

“I am.” Her voice is gravelly, like it’s been days since she’s been able to drink something.

“I’m glad we finally found you. We’re friends of King Mickey,” Sora says.

“Yes. I’ve wanted to meet you, Sora.”

Riku suddenly summons his keyblade. Sora does pay more attention to that.

“Something’s wrong,” Riku whispers.

Like Kairi’s keyblade, Aqua’s keyblade lights up. Unlike Kairi’s though, there’s strange arcs rolling down it. Electricity.

“You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted to meet you,” Aqua hisses.
Battle Wounds

“We wanted to meet you, too.” Sora tries to say that earnestly, but doesn’t quite succeed. There’s something off about the way she’s watching them – watching him. He’s not sure how aware she is of the other two’s presence, because she doesn’t react when they move, only when he does.

“Master Aqua, we’re friends of King Mickey,” Kairi says. “We can take you somewhere safe.”

No response. They can hear her breathing. In, out. In, out. In, a pause. Sora senses the change in tension and raises his keyblade –

Clang.

Her keyblade is crossed over his. He feels like he’s being pressed into the ground. She’s right there. Close enough he can smell the sweat covering her body.

“Master Aqua!” Kairi cries.

“Master Aqua, we’re not here to fight you,” Sora says.

Something sparks deep within her pupils at the question. Something gold.

“I . . .” The first word is spoken uncertainly, but she gains strength as she starts again. “I will destroy you.”

She disentangles her keyblade from his and swings with a wild cry. A hand on his stomach pushes him back. Suddenly, Riku is there in his place, keyblade held above his head as he blocks. Aqua’s expression twists.

“Stop it!” Riku commands.

But the Keyblade Master isn’t keen to obey. Next thing they know, Riku’s crumbled against the cave wall. Aqua raises her keyblade and points the tip straight at Sora.

He only catches a glimpse of the rainbow-coloured light engulfing her keyblade before it’s slipping under his guard and into his midsection. It crushes the air out of his lungs like a punch, and the sharp pain slashing through him isn’t just from the rough landing afterwards on the forest floor afterwards.

Sora groans. The sharpness in his abdomen is suddenly smoothed away. Kairi is running towards him, keyblade glowing green.

Aqua bellows. She springs out of the cave with a high pounce, seeming to hang in the air straight above him before she plunges down. He throws himself out of the way. Dirt splashes his face as her keyblade impales the ground where he once was. She tears her keyblade free without any trouble and brings it up for an overhead strike at his head.

He rolls out away and whips his keyblade out with a Firaga. Did she block it? She must have, but she blocked so quickly it’s like she didn’t move. She’s grinning now. But it’s strained, as if she’ll break if she forgets to grin even for a moment.

Riku shouts from the cave’s mouth. Aqua doesn’t look at him, but she still springs out of the way of the dark energy coming her way. She lands in a squat, cat-like in her nimbleness.

“Master Aqua, please!” Kairi cries. “We want to help you.”
Aqua hesitates, as if she’s remembering Kairi from somewhere. But too soon, a grim mask overtakes the Keyblade Master, and she whips her keyblade around in a full circle. Sticks, stones and leaves rise in a sharp, swirling tornado around her that hides her from view, until the moment she sends it all shooting outward. Sora’s shield holds against the onslaught, but then something that’s clearly not a small piece of debris cracks against it. The shield crack down the center, giving him enough warning to move before it shatters.

On the ground, Sora grimaces and looks at his shredded sleeve. Scraps of fabric are mixed with the blood from his bleeding arm. He looks up. Aqua is there, so close to him, but she’s not looking at him. In her hand, she holds a strip of fabric that used to be attached to his clothes. It’s bloody, and leaves her fingers red when she rubs it between them.

“So, you bleed. How long has it been since I’ve fought something that can?” Aqua says. “Heartless don’t bleed. Nobodies don’t bleed. Terra . . . didn’t bleed.”

“You fought Terra?” Does she know, then? But wait, how can she if she’s still calling him Terra? She continues speaking. “He lied to me. They both lied. They were lying to me the entire time.”

He sees Riku and Kairi gathering together from the corner of his eye. Hastily, he throws up his hand to stop them. Whatever she’s talking about, it has her locked in a trance.

“And why wouldn’t they? After everything I put them through, why would they trust me? All of this is my fault,” Aqua says.

There’s a lack of inflection in her tone, like she’s reading out a speech that’s already put her half to sleep. It’s like she’s forgotten they’re here. While he appreciates that she’s no longer attacking him, that doesn’t mean he feels good about this or what she’s saying. It’s actually making him queasy.

“Lea was right. Now he’s gone, too. Because I exposed us. I let them find out about us and Roxas . . .” Her voice breaks. “It’s all my fault.”

A cloud passes over the sun. When it leaves, not all the darkness it brought does. Around Aqua’s feet, darkness leeches from her shoes like smoke.

“I didn’t deserve to be saved,” Aqua whispers.

His chest tightens. He springs to his feet, reaching out to her even as primal instinct warns him she’ll attack. “Master Aqua! I don’t know what you’ve been through, but I know you’re wrong. Everyone deserves a chance.”

His voice draws her out of whatever reverie she’s in. She looks at him and mumbles, “At least I can set one thing right.”

Oh. He prepares his guard.

A white dome shimmers between him and Aqua. Unlike most times of the times Kairi casts this spell, the dome’s not meant to shield him; it’s meant to seal the threat in. Aqua snarls and spins around to face Kairi, who continues to chant her protective magic. Aqua brings her sparking keyblade up and as she does, several large cracks appear in the dome. One slice from her is all it takes to make the dome burst. The draft pushes both him and Kairi back, but Riku rushes towards their opponent. There’s a bright blue light and then Aqua’s wielding a small, hexagonal barrier like a shield on her arm. She turns, swings that arm around, and bashes the barrier into Riku’s body like a ram. Yet even as his best friend falls to the ground with a bloody nose, Sora can’t be mad at her because Aqua’s hurting, too. It’s written all over her soul.
“We found Lea!” Sora cries. “He’s at the Mysterious Tower with King Mickey.”

“As if I would believe you,” she hisses. “Not after what you’ve done.”

“Me? I . . . That wasn’t me!” he says, finally realizing why she wants to fight him. “I didn’t hurt Roxas —”

“How dare you!”

The entire world goes black and white as it flashes with lightning. He blocks, but the electricity goes straight down the shaft and into his body. For a few moments, he’s looking at stained glass. When he regains consciousness, he’s on the ground, Aqua is screaming, and somewhere, keyblades are clanging together.

*Let me out.*

His ankle twists when he tries to put weight on it. The tip of a twig digs into his knee. Aqua’s spinning now, like she’s in the middle of a ballet. Her keyblade is pointed toward the sky and a large ice crystal grows at its tip. He feels weak looking at it, as if it’s draining his very life away.

*Move!*

He dives just as the crystal shatters. Shards litter the landscape; he can hear them embedding themselves in the dirt. At the end of his roll, even before he’s found his balance, he brings his keyblade around to block a flurry of icicles he just knows are homing in on him. He blocks them one after another without thinking, as if he’s seen this move of hers several times before. No one else notices his miracle though.

“It wasn’t me!” Sora cries. But his voice is lost among the din of clashing keyblades. Even still, he doesn’t remain unnoticed for long. Aqua’s eyes flash his way, and then the earth below him is erupting like a volcano.

*Let me out!*

The voice – Roxas’s, he finally realizes – throbs behind his skull like Roxas is pounding on it with his fists.

He snaps, “You could have just asked politely, you know.”

Riku gives him a weird look. Aqua’s looking at him too, and it’s not the least bit friendly. She freezes Kairi up against a tree, and then rockets through the air at him. Her body is straight like a dagger, and that keyblade looks as sharp as one.

It’s him and not him that wrenches his arms around for the parry. The teeth of her keyblade slides along the long curve in his keyblade with a plume of sparks. She tries to wind around him and as their keyblades stay joined, they twirl together in a full circle.

She breaks away first. At first, it seems like she’s dizzied because she stumbles away. But she stumbles too long, goes too far for it to be only that. She falls back against a charred tree, breathing heavily.

“Where did you get that keyblade?” she demands.

“Huh?” He expects to see Kingdom Key, but that’s not what greets him. He holds a long blue keyblade instead, whose blade looks more like one of those sabres from Agrabah than a key. It’s not
what he expected to see and yet he’s not surprised.

Aqua screams like a wild animal on its deathbed. She lunges at him so fast –

He didn’t do anything, but he explodes in light. Pillars of light, nine in total, erupt from him. Aqua’s caught in the blast and she skids across the forest floor, leaving indentations in the ground.

She gets up quickly. Dirt’s smeared across her cheeks, and there’s a muddy trail through part of it. She’s crying.

Sora says, “Master Aqua, listen to me, please. I didn’t kill him.”

“Shut up!” Lightning suddenly arcs between the trees around her. It doesn’t seem to be a conscious spell; it’s more like the world is reacting to her pain.

Roxas is rattling in his skull again. What does he want?

There’s a sharp pain between his eyes. It makes him flinch and when his eyes focus again, the woods are gone. Aqua is gone. Riku, Kairi, they’re all gone. He’s back in that starless place with glass under his feet and Roxas swinging a keyblade at his head.

Wait a sec –

Sora parries just in time. Roxas brings his keyblade around for another blow.

“What gives?” Sora demands as he jumps back.

“Just let me take control!” Roxas snaps his keyblade forward with a bolt of light that narrowly misses his shoulder. “I can end this.”

“What? Hey, that’s not fair. This is my body!”

“And it’s going to be just a streak on the ground soon if you keep getting her angry.”

Roxas charges. Sora raises his keyblade and Roxas swings at him again and again.

“I’m not letting Xemnas get to her, too!” Each pair of words is ended with a swing. “Let me out!”

_Tears? A Keyblade Master crying because she can’t defeat a child?_

The phantom’s hollow chuckle echoes in her mind. It’s right there in the corner of her vision, but every time she tries to turn her head to focus on it, it flits out of sight. It’s there though. It’s _always_ there, hiding in her shadow.

Sora twitches strangely. Even through the tears suddenly blurring her vision, she can tell he’s distracted. Lightning. Lightning’s quick enough to take advantage of this – _but fire hurts more_.

Which one is it that’s glowing at the tip of her keyblade. Maybe both? _It doesn’t matter as long as it hurts._

Fire wins out. Or a comet, apparently. That’s what her attack looks like. She doesn’t think she’s cast this spell before. Sora doesn’t seem like he’s going to dodge time. Maybe she can follow up with a stab.

He moves all at once. He draws his keyblade back, slashes outward in a swing that spins his entire body, and a whirlwind of _light_ revolves around him with the motion. His keyblade – _his trophy_ –
cuts through the comet-like fireball, scattering it to the winds. Stormfall’s handle is too warm against her clammy hand and why does she keep getting caught off-guard by this? She knew Roxas was his Nobody. Of course they have similar moves.

“Aqua. . .” Sora is still twitching oddly, like he’s put on a new suit and trying to get used to it.

No longer Master Aqua, huh? So, even he sees it. The inkiness crawls up her back again and she laughs bitterly. Why does the darkness even care? What prize would she be to it? She, who spoils all she touches? She, who can’t even find justice for a murdered child?

No, she still can. He’s right in front of her. She’s no Master, but she knows she’s stronger than him. She’ll avenge Roxas and everything will be right again.

*Defeat the boy and you can finally rest.*

She charges. Sora rolls out of the way. She twists half-stride, bringing her blade down on his new location, only for him to sidestep it. She scoops the blade up and swings with both hands but even before her grip settles, he’s ducking out of the way, as if he’s seen this before, as if he’s seen her fight before. His blue eyes are fixed on hers. They’ve lost their fear and against her will, it unnerves her. What bit of herself did she expose to cause this shift in attitude?

Her senses flare with the warning of darkness. She’s forgotten about the other two again. She flings her keyblade at the them, and it explodes in magic once it’s close enough. The grass underneath burns blue after it fades. This kind of attack is not a tactic she usually uses, but these constant interruption are clawing at her nerves.

“Aqua. . .” Sora says.

She summons Stormfall back to her. Sora backs away carefully, like he’s tiptoeing away from a sleeping beast. Good. He should be wary. He should be afraid. Again, it grates on her that he no longer is. That more than anything spurs her to forgo magic for a physical attack.

He’s around the same size that Ven used to be. He’s as swift, too – no, he’s reading her moves. She’s lapsed into a familiar flow and pattern that’s served her well against so many Heartless, and he reacts as if he knows it. Again and again, he ducks just out of reach.

“Aqua, it’s over. It’s alright,” Sora whispers. He’s not afraid of her, but as his gaze bores into her soul, she finds herself afraid of him.

“No!”

She shoves him back. *Really, scared of a child? What sort of warrior are you?* Her barrier surrounds her and she coats it in magic, but Sora doesn’t bother to fight. Irritatingly, he leaps high and lands on a tree branch where she can’t ram him.

“Come back and fight!” she snarls. *You made him bleed once. Make him bleed again.*

She fends off an assault from Riku and Kairi in the meantime. Then, just after her offensive half of the spell fades, he has the audacity to land on top of her now harmless barrier. He jumps off it before it fades away and she whirs around, teeth bared, ready to follow his trail. She only catches a glimpse of him in the air, of the sun gleaming off blond hair –

She knows that colour. It’s engraved in her heart. Her eyes burn hot and wet.

“Aqua.” Sora stands before her. “Sora didn’t do it.”
Her gut twists again at the unfairness of it all. Sora is here and Roxas is not. *Make him pay.*

Once again, when she gets near him, he explodes into light pillars. It’s not a shock this time so she protects herself, but when she’s pushed back and her knees hit the ground, she still screams. That was *his* signature move. Sora doesn’t deserve it. Sora doesn’t deserve to be here.

*Kill the boy.*

She startles, suddenly intimately aware of the inkiness licking at the edges of her mind. Of the phantom. In the past, it had told her to surrender. In the present, she knows she should have listened to it.

*Is this what I am now?* she wonders. *A rotting corpse?*

“I’m not letting you do this alone,” Sora says.

“What does that even mean?” she rasps. What is left of her to reach for? She’s nothing. Let the darkness have her; there’s nothing for it to claim.

She moves because she has to. She continues to fight him because there’s nothing else. All she’s ever been good at is fighting, and she can’t even win at that when it matters. She’s faintly aware of her keyblade scoring up Sora’s chest. He makes a sound as if he’s never been hit by a keyblade before.

Leaves crackle under her feet. Sora rests on his side, Abyssal Tide is impaled in the ground near him. She picks it up and polishes the shaft with her sleeve. Sora should have never been allowed to touch this weapon. She hears noises behind her and whips both keyblades out as she summons a great barrier to separate them from her. Finally, she can finish this.

“Master Aqua, please! Don’t hurt him!” the girl cries.

Aqua ignores her and stares down at Sora.

“Do you remember when you first took me to Twilight Town?” Sora asks. “You told me it was a place between the light and darkness, not quite either, just like Nobodies like me.”

“What are you talking about?” she demands, voice shaking. She never took Sora there.

“I liked to watch the sun,” Sora continues. “I know it doesn’t ever set in Twilight Town, but it’s still nice to look at. You said you’d take me to see a real sunset on your world someday.”

“You . . . What? Stop it!” she shouts. This is cruel. So much crueler than any kind of torture she could have thought up.

“Aqua, you need to stop. You can’t let Xemnas win,” Sora says. “Or . . . or Lea won’t have anyone left to eat ice-cream with!”

It’s such a stupid statement and why is it making her cry? She wipes at her eyes with her forearms and she doesn’t care if she’s obstructing her view of him and making herself vulnerable. What does it matter if she falls?

Now that she’s relatively still and her muscles aren’t clenched so tight, there’s enough room for the sob in her chest to swell. It pops like a bubble with a wheezy wail. He’s right there. Sora’s *right there.* But her body is shaking so hard that she can’t raise her keyblade; she needs to keep it upright in the ground to stay standing.
With time, even that isn’t enough, and she loses her grip. For some unexplainable reason, it’s Sora who catches her by the arm and keeps her from falling. She’s not sure if she laughs or cries when he does. His eyes are such a striking blue. Like Roxas. Like Terra and Ven.

*Like everyone you loved. Like everyone that’s been lost because of you.*

She bows her head in acceptance. She couldn’t even make this right in the end. She’s . . .

She’s so tired.

There’s something wrong with the ground under her. There’s something wrong with the world. It’s too dark, like she’s seeing it through a tinted window. Her feet suddenly slip into something beneath the ground. Ah. She understands. The Realm of Light has finally realized its folly. It’s preparing to return her to the void she was meant to meet her end in.

Aqua closes her eye as the portal begins to form under her feet –

Sora yanks on her arm and pulls her out of the shadows. Caught off-guard, she squeaks.

“Aqua! You’re not supposed to make portals directly underneath you. Lea says it’s dangerous because you can’t be sure where you’ll end up. And how come you never told me you can portal?”

Again, it’s such a dumb comment and of course she’s tearing up again. Anxiously, Sora hovers near her. Then he reaches out to wipe at her tears. As he does, it’s like he’s wiping at one painting to reveal another underneath. Brown becomes blond.

“. . . Roxas?”

He says, “Hey.”

“Roxas?” She touches his cheek.

“I’m fine,” he says, predicting thoughts she has yet to have. He touches his chest and winces. “I thought keyblades would be softer.”

“I . . . Roxas!”

“I’m fine,” he whines. He reflexively tries to pull away as she feels his chest for a wound, but it’s a token effort like that of a little kid.

“I hurt you,” she mumbles. “I hurt you.”

“It’s fine,” Roxas says. “That’s what happens when you spar.”

That wasn’t a spar. She shies away from the memory. She says, “I don’t understand. Why do you look like this? What happened to you?”

Roxas shrugs. “I guess when I . . . disappeared, I went back to where I was supposed to be. Aqua, Sora didn’t do it.”

She blinks rapidly, tears falling with each one. “Sora . . . didn’t?”

Roxas shakes his head.

Her body shakes. Roxas lets her rest her chin on his shoulder and cry.
The True You

Riku isn’t sure what to make of this whole Roxas thing. Yeah, it sucked that Roxas lost his body and got semi-murdered or whatever you would call this, but that didn’t mean he had to come back and hog Sora’s body. Sora isn’t just some random guy on the street. He is one of the few keyblade wielders safeguarding the universe and that meant he needed to stay Sora.

Not that anyone else agreed with him. He wasn’t going to say anything out loud either, because Master Aqua was right there. It’d been less than twenty minutes after she and Roxas had reunited, and she was already hovering over him in a manner that promised violence against anyone that would come between them. So, Riku had tried to have a conversation with Kairi with just their eyes, but she’d only chided him to be more compassionate.

“The ship’s right here,” Kairi says to Aqua and Roxas. The ship, of course, was invisible, but the suspicious indentations made its location obvious if you knew what to look for.

“Ship. . .” Aqua murmurs. She tugs at a couple of strands of her hair, as if nervous. Riku isn’t sure what was with her frosted roots earlier, but they’ve turned back into a radiant blue.

“Yeah, it’s a real spaceship!” Roxas exclaims. “I’ve never been inside one before.”

That’s the other thing he isn’t sure about. He’s seen two sides to Roxas’s personality so far. One is this naïve, childish persona. The other that peeks out from time to time is this angry kid who’s furious about being stuck in his body that isn’t his.

Kairi takes charge of showing the two around the ship as Riku starts it up. He wonders if she feels as weird as he does as he watches Sora’s body – who knows this ship like the back of his hand – walk around like a toddler set loose in a museum.

“Hold on,” Riku says, a thought coming to him. “How do you not know about Gummi ships? Mickey says you travelled the worlds, too.”

“We flew on her keyblade,” Roxas says, pointing over his shoulder at Aqua.

“That’s how we did in my days,” Aqua says. “But a ship seems more convenient.”

Flew on her . . . Huh?

By the time Kairi’s done with their tour, the ship’s out of the planet’s orbit and in space. Riku sets their course and kicks back. Except for the odd Heartless ship (and he has no idea where they learned how to fly), there’s not much to worry about on these voyages. Kairi takes the seat next to him and pushes off the ground, spinning herself and the revolving chair round and round. Roxas seems intimidated by this act of harmless fun and takes a spot close against the wall. As always, Aqua is a step behind him.

“Roxas. . .” When Roxas turns to her, Aqua fumbles over her words and looks down. “What happened to you?”

“. . . Xemnas said Ventus was angry at me because he was jealous,” Roxas says slowly. “So, he didn’t want me around anymore.”

“Xemnas?” Aqua says weakly.
“So, it was Ventus,” Riku says.

Roxas shakes his head. “It was Xemnas. Maybe Ventus, too. I don’t know how much they talked about it beforehand.”

“Why would he be jealous?” Aqua whispers. A look of horror overtakes her. “Is this because you two look so similar?”

“Lea says Ventus thought I was taking you away from him.”

Her mouth drops open. Her heel knocks against the wall as she tries to back up but finds no space to do so.

“He thought you were taking me from him. . . Oh no.” She covers her mouth. “This is my fault . . .”

Riku feels Kairi trying to catch his eye. Out of everyone, he has the most experience with jealousy. It had taken Sora losing his heart while protecting him to realize that Sora had never been trying to upstage him, for him to finally kick the last bit of that rotten part of him to the curb. So, he knew exactly what he was talking about when he says, “It’s not your fault. If Ventus was jealous, then he should have found a better way to deal with it.”

“You don’t understand,” Aqua says, “It’s because of me. He thought I was replacing him with Roxas because Roxas looks like a younger version of him and . . .”

“Doesn’t mean he had to kill a kid,” Riku says bluntly. “He could have just told you, because if you’re this surprised, you two obviously didn’t talk about it much.”

Aqua stops talking almost defiantly.

Roxas tugs on her sleeve. “Hey, it’s not your fault.”

And the waterworks begin again.

They’re quiet, the two of them, on the way back. Not that they’re silent; he can hear them buzzing away, but they speak to each other in whispers. He stops trying to eavesdrop after five minutes pass and he still has no idea what they’re talking about. He puts his feet on the control panel instead and waits for The Mysterious Tower to come into sight.

_Bang._

Thankfully, they’re all in sturdy positions so no one is knocked over when the ship lurches. Riku hurriedly puts his feet back on the ground and leans forward, squinting as he peers through the tinted windshield.

“Hello! This is the intergalactic police, here for a cargo inspection.”

That’s no cop. They’ve met the space police, and they have ships. What they don’t have are keyblades and a red and black bodysuit that completely conceals them. It’s obvious that Vanitas – Ventus – is making a joke, and he can’t tell whether that’s a good or bad thing.

“Vanitas?” Aqua hisses. Although the windows are tinted and Vanitas (Ventus, he reminds himself again) can’t see inside, she still pushes Roxas behind her.

“Don’t worry too much, Sora,” Ventus is saying. “I just need to take a quick look. I’ll be fast . . .”

“Which buttons were the missiles again?” Aqua suddenly asks.
“The big red ones over there.” Without thinking, Riku answers and points at the console. Then her question registers. “Wait, don’t -!”

He and Kairi turn just in time to see Aqua slam every single red button.

The consequences are quick. Aqua hits the wall, then the ceiling, then the ground again as the shockwave sends the ship somersaulting backwards. Roxas goes through a similar tumble and Riku and Kairi only avoid that fate because of their seatbelts. The ship is spinning like a top, and Riku wrenches the wheel hard in the opposite direction, hoping that would stabilize it somehow.

“. . . How long do they take to reload?” Aqua asks casually once the ship settles.

“That was more than enough time,” Riku says shakily, “but next time, can you make sure he’s not right in front of us when you use them –?”

A huge black pillar burst out of the center of the ship’s floor. It fades with a ring of fire that lights a few spots on the wall nearby, leaving behind a single figure.

“And now I’m pissed!” Ventus’s voice echoes like a god. In another time, the cracked helmet and missing patches in his rapidly re-growing bodysuit would have lessened the threat, but right now, they made it look like he had emerged from a battlefield with fresh carnage to his name. “So, which one of you thought that was a good . . .?”

“Ven?”

His mouth snaps shut. The last of his helmet seals up, but not before Aqua got a good look at his face.

“No.” Aqua’s hand curls into a fist over her heart. And then it’s curled around her keyblade. “What did you do to him!”

Ventus’s keyblade vanishes not with a flash, but with a soft pulse. “Aqua, it’s not what you think.”

“I’ll kill you!”

She lunges across the room. It’s not a large room so when Ventus teleports out of her way, she has to skid to a stop immediately. She whirls around to face Ventus as he reappears. Cracks appear in his mask, as if someone’s thrown a rock at it. When the pieces fall away, they vanish before they hit the ground. It takes only seconds. Then Ventus is there, his mask gone, and Aqua swings anyways.

“Give him back to me!”

“I’m not Vanitas!” Ventus says.

“Then why are you wearing that?”

It’s a very fair question in Riku’s opinion. Because seriously, who wears an outfit like that unless they’re evil? Ventus traces the sigil on his chest and it’s obvious he’s choosing his words carefully.

“I’m not Vanitas,” he says. “But I’m not Ventus, either. The Ventus you knew . . . He wasn’t real.”

“What?” Aqua says. Riku isn’t sure whether Ventus did that on purpose, but he’s confused her enough that she’s actually listening.

“When the three of us met at the Keyblade Graveyard before we fought Master Xehanort, I told you that he wanted me to forge the X-Blade. To do that, he needed an equal amount of light and darkness
to clash so he... he ripped my heart in half while I was his apprentice.”

“People can do that?” Kairi gasps, but Ventus ignores her.

“The ‘Ven’ you knew, that was the half of my heart that was light,” Ventus says. He takes a deep breath and braces himself. “And the half of me that was darkness took the name Vanitas.”

“No.” Aqua’s saying that even before Ventus finishes speaking. “That can’t be true. Vanitas was nothing like Ven! He tried to kill me!”

“I know, and I’m sorry!” Ventus says feverishly. “I did a lot of bad things as Vanitas. Xehanort did a lot of horrible things to us. But it’s true. That Ven and Vanitas you knew are gone. We’re complete. I’m who I’m meant to be.”

It’s hard to tell whether Aqua’s shaking from sympathy, or anger.

“Then what you’re saying is that we’re no better then strangers,” Aqua says.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying!” His hand swipes through the air. “You’ve been with the real me ever since I got you out of the Realm of Darkness. You know me.”

Huddled against the wall, Aqua looks like a scared kid. And her voice wobbles like one, too. “Was any of it real?”

“What do you mean?” Ventus asks warily.

“After the Realm of Darkness. You, Terra, was any of that real, or was it all a game of pretend?”

“It was real!” His face contorts, as if he’s about to call her an idiot. “Why are you asking that?”

“You’ve both changed.”

“Yeah, we have. That’s what growing up does.” The words should be sarcastic, but Ventus says them gently. “Let’s go home.”

“Go home?” she repeats. “Haven’t you been listening?”

There’s a quiet swoosh as Roxas summons his keyblade. If Ventus hears, he gives no sign.

Aqua says, “You just told me you’re not the person I thought you were. You’re not the Ven I knew.”

“That Ventus was an imposter,” Ventus says. “I’m the real one.”

“You are,” she agrees. “And I don’t know you. The Ven I knew would never have hurt Roxas.”

“What does he have to do with anything?” Ventus enunciates that pronoun like he’s spitting out trash. Maybe that’s exactly what he’s doing. They don’t know much about the history between Ventus and Roxas, but all the signs point to an epic disaster.

“You and Xemnas are the reason he was destroyed, not Sora,” Aqua says. Riku must admit that he’s impressed by the way she stands tall despite her wobbling lip and watery eyes.

“You’re awfully sure,” Ventus says.

“Just leave,” Aqua says. “I don’t want to speak to you or him.”
“I’m not going anywhere,” Ventus says. “What are you planning to do anyways? Shack up with these guys? They’re with Yen Sid.”

“Hey! She said she didn’t want to talk to you!” Roxas cuts in.

“Sora, the adults are talking,” Ventus says without looking at him. “Did you forget that conversation we had after you spilled everything to Mickey? You want to run off to Radiant Garden, fine. But you are not going to Yen Sid.”

“That’s not your choice.”

“Yes, it is. He’s the enemy. You can’t be our friend and be on his side.”

The implication in his declaration hits both sides at the same time. Aqua doesn’t seem too shocked. Riku suspects that she already knew this, that she already accepted it. Clearly, Ven hasn’t, however. He freezes in place and a chill sweeps over the area. Maybe it’s magic, maybe it’s nerves. Whatever it is, it makes Riku’s hackles rise. Next to him, Kairi quietly increases the ship’s speed.

“You are not going with them,” Ventus says again.

“You don’t get to decide that!” Roxas shouts. With his size and fury and the way Ventus keeps ignoring him, it’s like watching a kid trying to interrupt a fight between his parents.

“So, you’re going to turn on us after everything. I defended you against Terra, you know. I told him you would never betray us. And now you’re siding with them?”

“I’m not siding with anyone.” Aqua’s quiet voice somehow manages to carry. “I just . . . I just want to –”

“You don’t think they care, do you? They’re just interested in what you know,” Ventus snaps. “Once they get that, they won’t need you anymore.”

“Hey! That’s not true.” Kairi turns away from the controls to yell at him.

“Shut up!” Ventus snaps. He turns back to Aqua only to be confronted by an angry Roxas, who tries to push him back.

“Leave her alone!” Roxas says.

Ventus grabs him by the hair. “Really, kid? Get out of my. . . Huh?”

Ventus sniffs. His nostrils flare and he sniffs again.

“. . . You’re not Sora,” Ventus mutters. Fingers still locked in Roxas’s hair, he pulls Sora’s body towards him.

Aqua strikes before Riku can get to his feet.

They’re so close that Aqua’s Blizzard spell leaves a layer of ice on Roxas’s hair. She’s already moving, lunging forward to snag Roxas’s collar, at which point she hauls him behind her. A blue hexagonal barrier forms between her and Roxas, separating Roxas from her, but also separating him from the one who had heralded his death.

It also means that Aqua’s alone on her side of the barrier with Ventus.

“Kairi!” Riku warns.
She shakes her head, hand on the maxed-out throttle. “We need more time.”

“Who is that?” Ventus asks and each syllable drops like the tick of a clock, like a countdown until he figures it out. “That’s not Sora.”

“Stay away from him!” Aqua demands.

“You’re going to fight me for him?” Those golden eyes turn on Roxas with renewed curiosity. And hostility. “Who are you . . .?”

And he knows. Aqua blanches. Roxas struggles to hold Ventus’s glare, but keeps looking away nervously.

“You,” Ventus says. They can’t feel it on their side of the barrier, but some form of energy is emitting from him. It tests the barrier with a thousand tiny claws, making the view through it shimmer and distort strangely like that of a window during a rainstorm.

Ventus leans back out of the way of Aqua’s spell. Quick of a flash, those hawk-like eyes are fixated on her. A large keyblade that looks like a giant sword appears and its tip hits the floor with a resounding clunk.

This is bad. They’ve seen Aqua fight. If Ventus is anything close to her ferocity, then they’ll destroy the ship if they battle. He wonders if Aqua knows and doesn’t care, or if Aqua knows but sees no way out. Because he doesn’t either. They can continue to delay Ventus but sooner or later, it’s going to come down to a fight.

Ventus squares up with Aqua. “So, this is your choice? You want to be our enemy.”

Roxas paces on their side of the barrier, seeking a way through even though it might be the only thing keeping him alive. “Leave her alone!”

“I left, Ven, and I’m not going back,” Aqua tells him.

Ventus shifts his stance –

In the corner of his vision, Riku sees Kairi turn the wheel.

Everyone cries out but her as the ship suddenly flips on its side. Riku’s right next to his chair, so he falls into that and it’s okay. Roxas slides all the way across the ship and hits the same wall Aqua’s braced against. Ventus slides a little before jamming his keyblade into the ground.

“And this is why I like gliders better,” Ventus says.

That’s all he gets out before Kairi sends the ship into a spiral. Riku gets what she’s doing; Aqua and Ventus are going to have a hard time fighting if they can’t even stand. Still, he feels bad for the other guys. Aqua figures out quickly she can anchor herself with Gravity, but poor Sora – Roxas – is tumbling around the ship. On his second time passing Riku, Riku manages to grab Roxas’s arm and pull him against the back of the chair.

“I never thought all those silly competitions would pay off!” Kairi says, slightly panicked.

Riku nods. The three of them made the most of this ship. He and Sora made up contests for everything: racing, obstacles courses, seeing who would throw up first when they threw the ship into an endless barrel roll. It’s given them a surprisingly in-depth knowledge of their ship and how it ticks.
“That’s enough!”

Ventus tears his keyblade out of the tiles as its blade glows bright white. What looks like a laser rips through the floor and up the wall to the ceiling. To their surprise, Ventus brings the keyblade up and slams it into the floor again. It’s too much; it gives, crumbling away to space and they see Ventus leaping onto his keyblade before he disappears as well.

“Aqua!” Roxas cries.

She’s scrambling on all fours, rushing to get out of the radius of the crumbling floor. Roxas springs free of Riku’s grasp and reaches.

They lock hands. The ship bounces once more as Kairi rights it. It’s almost enough to send Aqua slipping into the gaping hole to space behind her.

“We still have two engines,” Kairi says shakily over the sound of blaring alarms. “We should be able to get to the Mysterious Tower.”

“How far away are we?”

“Not far.”

Riku rolls his shoulders, trying to work out the tension in them. Aqua and Roxas, having moved to safety, stare at the huge hole in their ship. Ventus accidentally kicking himself out wasn’t anything close to what they expected, but he’s not complaining.

And just when they began to relax, something came shooting back through the hole.

Aqua shifts, placing Roxas completely behind her and blocks with her keyblade. But the long sinuous thing crawls up her keyblade and wraps around her lower arm. It’s black with splotches of white. It looks like a chain.

Aqua suddenly lurches towards the hole.

She stabs her keyblade into the ground, but a second later she loses her grip. It’s only because Roxas skids forward and grabs her with one hand and her keyblade with the other, that she doesn’t go tumbling out of the ship. Riku charges forward and as he nears the hole, he can see the chain stretching out to a black and red figure waiting on his keyblade in the Lanes Between.

“Master Aqua!” he shouts. There’s not enough space for him to grab Aqua, too, so he springs forward to grab Roxas instead. She cries out suddenly and Roxas stiffens. Even though Riku’s the third person in the chain, he can still feel the pressure as Ventus tries to pull her out of the ship.

Her teeth are grinding together. He’s hearing that or the ship’s remaining frame straining. He can only imagine how strong the force is on her end.

“He’s going to rip off your arm at this rate!” he grunts. Aqua flashes him a look that says he isn’t helping.

The pressure slackens as the ship veers in a steep turn. Suddenly, he can’t see Ventus through the hole anymore. He looks over his shoulder, through the ship’s front windshield and sees Ventus there instead.

The ship begins to fire.
Through all the flashing lights, it’s impossible to tell what effect it’s having. However, it isn’t long before Aqua manages to free herself from the chain. He shouts at Kairi and she points the ship in a dive once again. Precious seconds tick pass. Seven seconds. Eight. Nine. Then a sharp blade tears itself through the remaining roof, its tip coming to a rest just a couple of feet above Kairi’s head –

And it’s gone.

Kairi slumps at the control console in relief. Riku closes his eyes, feels the familiar, comforting pulse of the world, and lets go of Roxas. Roxas, on the other hand, still has a white-knuckled grip on Aqua’s wrist, and Aqua herself has her keyblade out as she scans the ship.

“What happened?” she asks.

“We’ve passed the world’s border,” Riku says. “Master Yen Sid must have teleported him out.”

Clunk.

They all look back through the hole. Ventus is there, watching them, just behind a shimmering wall. He’s not riding on his keyblade like he was before; he’s floating all by himself. That large keyblade is in his hand and as they watch, he pushes the tip into the barrier separating them. Red rune-like symbols appear around the keyblade’s tip as Ventus pushes it further and the barrier flexes around it.

Riku summons his keyblade. Roxas does, too, and they stand on either side of Aqua as she rises to her feet. Kairi’s slower to join them, having to unbuckle her seatbelt first.

Ventus watches them. The runes continue to flicker their ominous colours.

Then he backs away. He glides silently into the emptiness of space and the darkness engulfs him.

“Come on,” Riku says. “The quicker we land, the better.”

Mickey runs out as the ship touches down. He and Master Yen Sid probably already knew about their Gummi ship’s damage, but he reacts in shock. The initial barrage of questions quickly ends when Aqua stumbles out of the gaping hole in the ship’s back.

“Master Aqua,” Mickey says.

She acknowledges him only with a slight turn of her head. Her tired gaze looks past them all. On her wrists, the last of the sores left from Ventus’s chain close as she heals herself.

“Lea. . . Lea’s here, isn’t he?” she asks.

“He’s . . .” Mickey fidgets and looks away. “Not right now, but he’ll be back.”

Is he lying? Riku isn’t sure. Mickey doesn’t lie often, but he doesn’t know where else Lea could go in his current state. Either way, when Roxas bumps against Aqua’s hip and she doesn’t respond, he can understand why Mickey might be lying.

“Is there anything I can do . . .?” Mickey starts.

“Please, I. . . I just want somewhere to rest,” she says.

“We got rooms in the Tower. You can get all the rest you need.”

Aqua nods, clearly distracted by something she isn’t talking about. Mickey takes her hand to guide her. They watch silently as she disappears into the Tower.
“Master Aqua?”

Aqua flinches ever so slightly. “Don’t call me that. Aqua is fine.”

“Well, if you say so.” Peeking through the half-open door into her borrowed room, Mickey speaks to her as she sat on the foot of the bed. “We have dinner ready downstairs, if you want any.”

“I’ll eat later,” she says, tone flat.

Mickey studies her. “Do you want me to bring some up for you?”

“Please.”

She was thankful he understood. She didn’t want to be around a group of people, even if they were the ones that knew about Ventus, that had already seen her at her weakest. Not even the allure of Roxas could drag her out of the room.

Once Mickey was gone, she reaches into her pocket and pulls out her Wayfinder. Even without a long-needed polish, it glimmers in the beam of sunlight entering through the window. It’s as if it had been made yesterday and everything was . . . As if she was back in the time when everything was okay. She knows Ven and Xemnas still had their Wayfinders, but she wonders what it means to them. Maybe it was just a pretty trinket they liked to keep around. Or a tool to make her stop asking questions.

With the Wayfinder clutched to her chest, she lays back on the mattress. She tries – oh, how she tries – not to think about them. But what else is there for her to think about? Everything in her life is tied to them in some way, even Roxas and Lea.

Her Ven is gone. She heard it from his own mouth. And in his place is this thing with his face and the cruelty of Vanitas. Terra is . . . Is that even Terra? Or is it Xehanort returned from the grave? The thought comforts her somehow even as it horrifies her. If he really was Xehanort, then she’s been gallivanting with that skin-stealer for months without a clue. She’d failed him yet again.

_Nothing but a failure_, her phantom hisses. She presses the pillow over her ears and tries not to listen.

Mickey delivers soup. It reminds her of sitting inside the castle on rainy days. Of sitting on a window alcove with Ven and watching the outside. Terra’s always shied away from thunder, but Ven was a storm-watcher like herself. There was something about the wild form of her Thunder spells that captivated her.

She suddenly becomes aware that she’s been staring at her bowl for an abnormally long time now. Mickey’s still there, watching. She eats a spoonful and waits for him to be satisfied.

“Hey, Aqua, is it alright if we talk?” Mickey asks.

_No_. A cold shudder goes down her spine. Yet she swallows the word down. She knew this was coming.

“What do you want to know?” she asks.
His ears twitch, as if he’s heard something unpleasant. “Are you okay?”

That’s not the question she expected him to lead with. She takes a moment because she can’t force words past her pounding heart.

“I . . .”

The lie dies on her lips. Her mouth is dry. She isn’t sure what she’s afraid of, but she is afraid.

“. . . No, I’m not,” she finally says.

Mickey frowns, but it’s a small one that says he was expecting this. “I’m sorry. I should have seen that something was wrong before, but I was too happy to see you alive.”

“It’s not your fault. I didn’t know anything was wrong back then, either.”

“Well, if you ever want to talk about it, I’m here.”

She nods. Mickey’s giving her a look that says there’s something on his mind.

“What is it?” she asks.

He hesitates. “Nothing. Just . . . If you want company, we’re on the lower floor.”

“Thank you,” she says. They both know she isn’t going.

It’s a full day before she allows herself to leave that room. She makes her way down the spiraling staircase carefully. Although she walked up these stairs the day before, she doesn’t remember it. Everything’s new to her. Somehow though, her feet remember where to go and lead her to the right place.

“Master Aqua!” Riku, the first to catch sight of her, exclaims loudly. Apparently, he’s startled enough to boot himself off the wall next to the stairs that he was leaning against. It’s suspicious and she has to consciously prevent herself from summoning Stormfall.

“Aqua!” Mickey immediately ends his conversation with Kairi to rush over. “I’m glad to see you’re up. Is everything okay?”

It’s a silly question because of course it isn’t. She knows he’s only referring to her immediate situation though and not the over-arcing one. So, she says yes. Though she does so without truly looking at him. She isn’t even aware she’s scanning the room until she catches sight of the brown-haired boy on the soda. He’s draped over the top of it and looking at her.

“Master Aqua!” He grins as she speed-walks over. “I’m glad that you’re okay.”

The inflections in his voice are all different. They’re too cheery. She doesn’t know whether to hide her disappointment and so, does it half-heartedly. It doesn’t bother Sora though; he seems to understand he isn’t the one she was hoping to see.

“Is Lea back yet?” she asks.

“He is.” Mickey sighs. “Aqua, there’s something we need to tell you about Lea. . .”

In the other room, there’s a crash. Everyone seems to be present though, and she can’t picture Yen Sid knocking anything over.
“What’s that?” she asks, waiting for permission to grab her keyblade and find out for herself.

Kairi huffs. “That would be Lea asking us not to tell you what’s going on.”

Lea. She steps toward the doorway, only stopping because Mickey gets in her way. Had it been one of the kids blocking her path instead, she probably would have thrown them aside.

“Aqua, we need to talk about Lea, first,” Mickey says.

“What is it?” she asks warily. Could it be that she was wrong about Lea, too? Is he also an enemy lurking in the wings?

“Something bad happened to him,” Mickey says evasively. “You’ll see when you go in there, but. . . Try to stay calm no matter what you see.”

If Mickey thought that was at all comforting, then he needs a new mentor. Still, in a way she’s grateful that he isn’t building up her hopes and instead is preparing her for the worst. She summons Stormfall and then simply tosses the keyblade aside. Technically, that gesture doesn’t mean anything because she can always summon it back, but she’s hoping her body will remember the action and make her subconscious less prone to violence.

The room’s empty when she enters, but she sees a closet door shut. Lea doesn’t strike her as one to hide in a closet, but it’s fitting in a way; he’s as skinny as a broom. She clings to that thought, uses it to soothe herself as she approaches the door and pulls. There’s a slight resistance from the other side; if Lea’s resisting, he isn’t putting much effort into it.

The door opens. There’s no one in the closet. She almost thinks she was mistaken about what she saw, but a shift of movement catches her attention and she sees it: a Dusk wrapped around the inside door handle.

She yelps and jumps back. If she didn’t have the memory of tossing away Stormfall just seconds ago, she surely would have slain the Nobody here and now. But she does have that memory, and so it stalls her long enough to also remember Mickey’s warning.

“Lea?”

The Dusk unravels itself from the handle. It collapses and slips to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut and then springs up again on unsteady legs.

“Lea, is that you?”

It’s way too still to be a normal Dusk. Unless ordered to perform a task, the Dusks are always bouncing or swaying from side to side. This one stands like a normal human, even stiller than one because it doesn’t need to breathe. She touches his face. It’s rough and thick-feeling like leather. It isn’t right for him to be so much shorter than her. It isn’t right that she looks at his face and sees teardrop tattoos instead of eyes.

“Oh, Lea.”

He’s almost child-sized, like Roxas in stature. The thought of Roxas makes panic coat the back of her throat. Is changing into a Dusk a normal thing for Nobodies? Does there come a point where their non-existence begins to break down and they become. . . this?

The back of her neck itches. Someone’s watching her. She already knows who. Sure enough, when she looks, Mickey’s trying to inconspicuously pull his head back into the other room.
“I see you,” she says. “It’s fine.”

Honestly, this was better than she had expected. Lea may be like this, but he’s alive and still her friend. It’s the most merciful fate so far that’s fallen upon those she loves.

“What happened?” she asks Lea.

“He can’t speak,” Mickey tells her. “But he told us. . . Xemnas . . .”

Her heart clenches. Not Terra. Xehanort, she reminds herself. She repeats that refrain until her chest loosens.

“I’m sorry,” she says to Lea. He pats her cheek and she can imagine his sigh. She can picture his signature smirk that borders on fondness as he shakes his head at her.

She’s less upset than she’d thought she’d be. Maybe it hasn’t sunk in yet, or there’s simply not enough sorrow in her left to give. At least he’s alive. At least he isn’t locked in his Somebody’s body like Roxas is. This is just a hiccup. Once Lea gets his heart back, he’ll go back to normal.

“Where’s Isa?” she asks Lea.

Lea goes still again.

“Is he okay?” she demands.

Lea nods, but it takes him too long.

“I’ll find him,” she promises. “I can . . .”

“Aqua, before you go making those kind of promises. . .” Mickey leans sideways and glances out a window. “You’re going to have to be very careful. We saw Vanitas . . . Ventus flying out there earlier.”

Of course. They knew exactly where she was.

“From one prison to another,” she murmurs.

Mickey winces. “It doesn’t have to be like that. You don’t have to go through the Lanes to get to other worlds. Riku can open portals and he —”

“No portals!” she snaps. She remembers teetering on the brink of the abyss while fighting Ven, and has no desire to relive that.

“I don’t want you to feel like you’re stuck here,” Mickey says softly.

“I’m already used to that feeling,” she says bluntly.

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Kingdom Hearts is hungry.

Aqua is gone. Roxas no more. The king and his allies are more cautious about the fights they choose. Ven is distracted and it gets harder to redirect him to his primary responsibility every day. Xemnas himself is the only reliable source of hearts now; he doubts his ability to complete Kingdom Hearts before the wolves knock at the door.

If that happens, he will handle it. He can siphon enough energy from the moon to present a viable
threat and should it come down to it, Ven will stand at his side. He will lose subordinates, however, perhaps even all of them. He is no fool. Unlike Aqua, he catches the little flickers of emotions Ven tries to hide around them. Ven merely tolerates his fellow apprentices because he understands they need their brains. Ven will not take up his keyblade to protect them.

But there is also the problem of Aqua. She has made it to Yen Sid, and the circumstances of her last encounter with Ven are likely to have turned her against him. The ties binding them fray at the seams. He remembers their last conversation where she had labeled him Xehanort and implored Ven to do the same. Such dangerous convictions shall only fester with the distance.

Would she storm the gates with their foes? Would she carry the torch that would set his castle aflame? Aqua is devoted to those she loves, but he remembers how easily she brandished in her keyblade in Radiant Garden when she realized Xehanort was behind his eyes. She hadn’t hesitated when it was her best friend’s body she was scarring. Would she falter now?

The stars twinkle throughout the sky. Yen Sid’s tower moves every day, but he knows exactly which star it is. He is drawn to it; it pulls at him the same way Kingdom Hearts does. He feels it at the back of his hollow chest: an itch. The same one that propelled him into the dark. The same one that led him to open the Door. He has no way of soothing it, no way of reaching her. She has squirreled away in the tower, and he lacks the required power to extract her.

But soon, he mulls as he bathes in the moonlight. Soon.

She knew this was coming. She had spent nearly a year inside the home of those Yen Sid would see fall. Ven had warned her they would seek information, but that was the price to pay for shelter.

Mickey brought her to his master’s study where the old wizard was already seated. There were no chairs on their side of the desk, but that didn’t bother her. Master Eraqus didn’t offer chairs; unlike Yen Sid, he wouldn’t use one himself either. She waits in front of Yen Sid, stiff as a soldier.

“Master Aqua,” he rumbles. “How are you settling in?”

“Everything is fine.” She swallows. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

They all knew exactly what – whom – she was referring to. Not a day went by without a sighting of Ven at the world’s borders. Sora and the others seemed confident that he would give up eventually. However, they didn’t know him; they didn’t know that a few days was nothing to the years he had devoted to her. She didn’t know if Ven knew how to give up.

“It is better that he is within our sight,” Yen Sid says. “Master Aqua, are you aware of the Organization’s plans?”

“They want to restore their hearts,” she says vaguely.

“That may be what he has claimed, but we believe Xemnas may be after Kingdom Hearts for more nefarious purposes. Do you remember Xehanort’s motivations from your original time?”

“Oh course,” she says. She remembers Ven approaching them with his head bowed, pleading with them to end his life. She remembers the sound of Mickey’s keyblade clashing against his as the king blocked a thrust directed at her heart. “But something’s changed between then and now, because he’s not interested in the X-Blade anymore. He can’t be, because Ven already has it.”

“Err, what?” Mickey asks.
“Ven had the X-Blade when he found me in the Realm of Darkness,” she says.

“That is news,” Yen Sid says.

“So, is he not trying to start the Keyblade War again?” Mickey asks.

“I don’t know why he isn’t leveraging Ventus’s access to the X-Blade,” Yen Sid says, “however, it is still far too dangerous to allow Kingdom Hearts to fall into their hands. Without hearts, they have no morals. There is no telling what Xemnas would do with that power.”

Something in her gut twists. “That’s. . . Roxas and Lea aren’t like that.”

Yen Sid sit there, as unemotive as always. She thinks of Xemnas, of his placid calmness, and flinches.

“Lea is interesting. Master Aqua, surely you are aware that Kairi is a Princess of Heart.” When she nods, he continues, “As one of the Seven, young Kairi is deeply connected to the power of the heart. In Lea, she has found something. Not a full heart such as mine or yours, but a fledgling heart.”

“What does that mean?”

“The how is unknown to us, but I believe that Lea has somehow begun to develop his own heart.”

Every bit of her snaps to attention, perking up like a dog’s ear. “Is that possible?”

“Perhaps. There is much we do not know about these beings,” Yen Sid says. “Prior to the creation of the Emblem Heartless, Nobodies were so few and scattered in number, that it was rare for them to survive long past their birth. The evolution of intelligent Nobodies such as the ones that make up Organization Thirteen are unprecedented.”

“If this is true, then they don’t need Kingdom Hearts,” Aqua says. “They. . . Everything can go back to normal. They don’t need Kingdom Hearts.”

She’s smiling. It’s foreign and her face aches with it. Yet she’s not happy. The firecrackers going off in her stomach feel more like anxiety. And when Yen Sid addresses her, her bones shudder in their sockets.

“Master Aqua, are Xemnas and Ventus aware of this?”

She blinks. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard anything like this, but I doubt they would have told me if they knew.”

They wouldn’t have. She knows that as surely as she knows her own name. She had stayed with the Organization for the men she thought were her friends, but she had cooperated with their plans because of the hope they dangled in front of her nose. Xemnas’s grand plan had been little more like a fancy, baited hook shethat had snapped up mindlessly. No wonder that sometimes, they had spoken to her like a child.

“We should investigate Lea’s situation further,” Mickey says. “If we can figure out how he regained a heart, then maybe we can talk the Organization into standing down.”

“If Xemnas truly shares Xehanort’s aims, this won’t dissuade him. However, it may pry his allies from his side,” Yen Sid says.

“Xemnas. . . he did that to Lea. Do you know why?” Her heart pounds. Somewhere within, she
already knows the answer. But her mind’s hidden it behind thick steel walls and no matter how hard she scratches, she cannot reach the other side.

“Lea found us awhile ago and told us a bunch of things Xemnas wouldn’t have wanted us to know,” Mickey says.

She nods. That makes sense.

“We cannot allow them to have Kingdom Hearts,” Yen Sid says with finality. “If we cannot dissuade them from their path, then more forceful methods must be used.”

Did they think her stupid? Did they think by speaking vaguely she wouldn’t be able to parse their true meaning?

“Master Aqua, you know them best. Do you have any advice on how to defeat them?”

Yes. She knew them all. She had seen them all fight at some point. She’d even helped them become stronger.

She could see them all in her mind, laid out before her like a book. Dilan in the air, dreadlocks flapping in a fell wind as his lances swirled around him. (Need to close the distance. Has trouble penetrating armour at close range.) There was Even, not a man she would call a fighter, but trained, nonetheless. (Intelligent, but lacks a quick reaction time. Keep the pressure on and do not allow him time to think.) Aeleus, tall and strong, grim and determined. (His body announces every swing before it comes; even his magic is broadcasted. Keep moving, keep away. Just like sparring with Terra, just like fighting Terra . . .) Last, there is Ienzo, the youngest but possibly the proudest. (His illusionary powers make him dangerous, and cocky. Plays with his opponents rather than finishing them. Be patient. Wait for the opening.) She sees them all.

And then she sees Xemnas swinging Void Gear at her and her mind freezes in place. The image overlaps with that of the real world. Xemnas is there before her, intent, fixated at her, his ghostly leg jutting into Yen Sid’s desk. She cringes and wrenches her eyes away, and the stuttering gears in her mind come back to life.

Xehanort. Not Terra. Yet it’s Terra she sees. Even when Xemnas’s ghostly afterimage was there before her, it was the possessed Terra in Radiant Garden that she thinks of. She knows what Mickey will do with any information she gives them, and she thinks of Ven thrashing in Xehanort’s grip before he’s frozen solid. It isn’t them. It isn’t her friend. But what if it is? What if there’s the tiniest chance it is?

Mickey and Yen Sid exchange a look. Mickey says, “It’s alright, Aqua. You don’t have to tell us anything. We understand.”

Useless. That’s all she is. Humiliated, she walks out of there without waiting to be dismissed. She races up the stairs, throws open the door to her room and falls upon the bed, where she presses her face into the pillow and fights tooth and nail not to cry.

When she finally regains control, Lea’s peering in the doorway. He slinks in once he notices him, his body surging up and down in the air like he’s swimming. He’s taken a liking to the weird contortions his body is capable of, and winds around her bedpost like a snake.

“They’re going to have to fight Organization Thirteen.” And only one side can triumph – can survive – and I don’t know how to root for. “They want me to help.”

Lea watches her. She thinks. It’s impossible to tell when he doesn’t have eyes.
“They told me Kairi sensed a heart in you. Is it true?”

He shrugs.

She smiles. A couple of tears gather in her eyes but for once, they don’t burn on the way out. “Oh, Lea. I’m so happy for you.”

He lets her pull him off the bedpost. She clutches him to her like a beloved pet. She hopes the hug means as much to him as it does to her.

“I’ll fix this,” she promises. “I’ll find a way to help you. I’ll make everything right again –”

He thrashes in her grip. Surprised, she lets him slip away. He doesn’t go far. He pools on the mattress before her like a spool of thread, and then sits up. His mouth is moving; his hands are moving rapidly as he mouths a speech he cannot voice. It takes him a bit to realize that he’s mute and when he does, he goes still suddenly.

“I’m sorry,” she chokes. “I promise I’ll fix this.”

She grabs his hand but barely a second passes before Lea pries it off. She doesn’t understand. Is he angry? Does he hate her? She agonizes over that until Lea put his hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t understand. His nonexistent stare bores into her as he tries to tell her something without words.

She wishes she knew what it was.
A House Divided

He paces in a small circle, tossing his head like an angry bull. It’s not safe to be in prolonged contact with barrier magic, Aqua would tell him, even if there is a layer of clothing separating them. It’s especially not safe, she would say, when it’s Yen Sid’s magic. But if Yen Sid designed the world’s shield to burn anyone who walked on it, then it was doing a terrible job.

The magic barrier is smooth under his feet, almost frictionless. He drags his heel and it’s like sliding across ice. He has a good view of the tower below, enough so that sometimes, he can see figures walking past the windows.

For eight years, he looked for her. For eight years, he wallowed in ignorance and despair. He remembers curling up in his bed, arms wrapped around his pillow, worrying, mourning. He remembers what it was like to be sapped of hope bit by bit, until all that remained was someone that some people would consider delusional.

Yet this is worse. He knows exactly where she is. He’s sure he even knows what room she’s staying in. And yet she remains out of reach. He itches to reach out to her but loitering on this barrier is the closest he’s going to get. Not knowing was easier than this.

Scowling, Ven opens a portal back to the Castle That Never Was. His stomach is telling him it’s time for lunch.

He’s gnawing on a sandwich when Terra finds him. Ven takes a slice of bread out of the bag and offers it.

Terra waves it away. “Have you gathered any hearts today?”

“Sure,” Ven lies.

Terra glances to the side. The window in this room opens to the Dark City; the moon isn’t anywhere in sight. But Terra’s eyes continue to slide upwards, aiming at an upward angle. Ven doesn’t doubt that he has some kind of x-ray vision that lets him find his precious moon.

“Our pace has slowed,” Terra says. “It will take years to finish Kingdom Hearts, at this rate.”

“Good thing we’re young,” Ven quips.

Of course, Terra doesn’t laugh. As if Ven hadn’t said anything, he stays serious. “I know recent events have been troubling, but we must turn our gaze back towards our primary goal...”

Ven feels his forehead crinkle. Terra can be an idiot with his words, sometimes. At least Terra realizes it though, if the way he trails off means anything. Still, Ven takes a particularly vicious bite of his sandwich.

“She’ll need time until we can try again to reason with her,” Terra says. “There is little you can do.”

“And how do you know that?” Ven demands. His nails scrap across the tabletop. “Do you know how many people told me my search for her was hopeless?”

“Sometimes, the only thing you can do is be patient.”

“I am patient. I’ve been patient for years,” Ven snarls. “I waited for her. I waited for you and your
memories. Now you’re telling me I need to wait more?”

“You may not be able to aid her at this time, but you can aid me.” Terra says. He sweeps his arm in the direction of the unseen moon. “Once Kingdom Hearts is filled, I will be complete once more.”

“And then what?” Ven asks warily. “Are you going to lose your memories, again?”

“No.” Terra studies him. “Then we can turn our full attention to the missing piece of the puzzle.”

Ven tears at his sandwich. The bread is thick and dry as it slides down his throat. “You’re so calm about this. You were the one who kept telling me how important it was to make sure she didn’t join Yen Sid.”

“I am calm, yes. It is the benefit of lacking a heart,” Terra says dryly. “The past cannot be undone. We must accept that the future has not gone as planned.”

“Do you think portals could get past that barrier?” Ven asks.

“Yen Sid would be a fool not to consider that.” Terra’s eyes narrow. “Do not try it.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Ven says. “I walk into an invisible wall. It’s not a big deal.”

“We will deal with Aqua when the time comes,” Terra says with an edge to his words.

“And when’s that? We’ve been working on this stupid moon for months.” He slams both fists down.

“And she’s going to spend that time with them and . . . we don’t know what they’ll tell her . . . Hey, did you know Roxas is still alive?”

“Impossible,” Terra says. “He was destroyed.”

“Maybe he was destroyed, but all it did was send him straight to Sora.” The thought of it makes Ven want to crack a bone between his teeth. Stupid Roxas is ruins everything. “It’s like Sora has a split personality now.”

“Is Roxas with Aqua?” Terra asks slowly.

“Of course, he is. What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Terra blinks. He turns away. “Did Roxas say anything to you?”

“Nothing important. He tried to hit me with his keyblade,” Ven says. He smirks at the memory of Roxas tumbling helplessly around the ship.

“I see. I will leave you now. I must consider this new information.”

Ven waves him off. Terra should consider this. Because the sooner they can make Roxas go away, the better. The brat’s nothing but a parasite; first he fed off Aqua, now he’s feeding off Sora.

Ven picks up his mug and drinks deeply. At least Lea and Isa didn’t seem to be sniffing around anymore.

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They stand outside. The air tastes faintly of rain, the same rain that left little crystals on the blades of grass within the glade. There’s but a few heavy clouds lazily drifting toward the horizon. Aqua remembers scenes like this, where she sat with her friends in the castle’s shadow as they pointed out constellations. But it’s not a castle that watches over her now, but a crooked tower, and the small
figure to her right is Mickey instead of Ven.

“It feels different.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean?” Mickey asks.

“The stars. I feel like the sky was brighter in my time.”

Mickey sighs and picks at his glove. “It was. Ever since the Emblem Heartless appeared, they’ve been rampaging through the worlds. We weren’t able to restore all of them yet.”

Something is rotting in the back of her throat. “Did you know that Terra . . . Xehanort created them while he was in Radiant Garden?”

“He did? Gosh, I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing to me?” she croaks. “The Heartless are my fault.”

“How?” Mickey asks. “Didn’t you spend all that time in the Realm of Darkness?”

“I did, and that’s why . . .” She wets her lips anxiously. “Their memory of me haunted them and lured them down the path into darkness. That’s why Xehanort threw open the Door; he thought I would be on the other side. They were always looking for me.”


“None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for me,” she argues. There’s a burning in the lower part of her eyes, but no tears. She’s already given too much.

“You know,” Mickey says after a pause, “I met Xehanort once while he was working for Ansem the Wise. Even though they shared a name, I didn’t think anything of it. If I had realized something was wrong though, I could have stopped all of this before it started.”

“You couldn’t be expected to know,” Aqua says. “The age difference alone made it unlikely.”

“But Aqua, you couldn’t have known either,” Mickey says gently. “They did this all without you present. Just because they did it for you doesn’t mean they were justified in doing it; they should have known better. They should have known you wouldn’t have wanted this.”

She’s silent. She feels the phantom leaning over her shoulder, although she isn’t sure what it wants to say.

“Sometimes, the people you care about decide to go down a dark path,” Mickey says. “And no matter how hard you try to stop them, you can’t. It’s not your fault that you couldn’t pull them back into the light; in the end, it’s their decision and no one else’s.”

“I should have been there,” Aqua says.

Mickey ears droop. “I should have been there, too.”

His hand brushes against her. She takes it and squeezes back.

“Aren’t you guys supposed to be geniuses?”

“We were researchers,” Even clucks. “While my intelligence far surpasses most of the people you
“But you use magic now,” Ven points out. “So, why don’t you know anything about it?”

“Yes, I do have magic. And it makes no sense! How does losing my heart grant me the power of ice?” Even drops his clipboard onto the lab counter in his rage, rattling the beakers nearby. Ven eyes them warily; there’s a lot of strange, colourful liquids in here and he doesn’t know what they’ll do if they spill.

“You have magic. Can’t you run a few experiments and figure something out?” Ven says.

“You’re asking me to create a counterspell that will work against the universe’s leading authority in magic; a man who has been studying this subject for longer than you or I have been born. It’s a fool’s endeavor! I have more important tasks than pursuing this pet project of yours . . .”

Ven isn’t sure what he looks like to Even right now, but he’s sure it isn’t friendly. He can feel the darkness rising on his arms, sliding over it in a cold film. Even coughs and adverts his eye. The researcher turns on a Bunsen burner and sets a flask on it, pretending to be busy.

“What you’re asking for is impossible,” Even says at long last. “A wizard like him doesn’t publish his spells in a research paper. We don’t have the background, the resources or manpower to reverse-engineer his wards.”

“How do you know that if you haven’t tried?”

There are slight footsteps behind him. They hear them once Ven has stopped talking. Terra approaches them, brow furrowed, hands clasped behind his back. Even straightens up, like a soldier undergoing inspection.

“Ven,” Terra says, “what brings you here?”

“I’m trying to get these researchers to research something useful,” Ven says, frustrated. He glares at Even and dares him to argue.

“I know you are not privy to the work of my comrades, but I can assure you that the work they are doing is in the Organization’s best interests,” Terra says. “What is it you wish them to study?”

“The wards around the Mysterious Tower,” Ven says promptly. Terra will understand.

“It’s not possible!” Even says. Although it’s the same conclusion he gave to Ven, he more’s meek when he delivers it to Terra. He neither looks Terra in the eye, nor raises his voice above a normal speaking volume. “It would take decades, perhaps even centuries even with the proper resources.”

Terra nods. “I understand, Even.”

“What?” Ven exclaims.

“I know you are deeply concerned for Aqua’s wellbeing, Ven, but Even is correct,” Terra says. “One cannot hope to match a Master if they only have a few weeks of practice behind them.”

“What if they have a breakthrough?” Ven demands shrilly. “They don’t need to become as good as Yen Sid. They just need to deal with one spell.”

Terra lays a hand on his shoulder and guides him out of the laboratory and away from Even. “We both know magic does not work like that. Even and Ienzo are already occupied with projects that
will aid our goal of obtaining Kingdom Hearts.”

“How do Replicas help anything?” Ven mutters. “Can’t you go talk to her?”

“If what you say about Roxas is true, then my presence will only worsen the situation,” Terra says. “It is best that she does not see me again.”

Ven demands, “Why would Roxas have anything to do with you?”

Terra’s lips twitch. He turns to the side. “Roxas was not slain by Sora.”

Ven blinks. He’s surprised, but only mildly so. He knew from the beginning that Sora wasn’t that kind of person, but hadn’t been eager to ask too many questions.

“You did it,” Ven says.

“Yes, but it appears that it went drastically wrong.”

“No kidding. Did you ever think maybe it wasn’t a good idea to try to murder Aqua’s favourite tagalong?”

“He was a disturbance,” Terra says almost defensively. “You came to me with your concerns about that several times.”

Ven blanches. “That didn’t mean I was telling you to kill him! Geez, there are ways other than violence to solve a problem!”

Terra says nothing. Ven takes a breath.

“It’s not your fault. You’re a Nobody. You don’t have a heart. You can’t really tell right from wrong anymore,” Ven says.

Terra shakes his head. “I still am a Nobody. Until I cease to be, Aqua will not listen to such reasoning.”

At least there’s hope for the future. Ven paces down the hall, trying to figure out how to turn this to their advantage.

“Come,” Terra says, taking him by the shoulder once more. “We will have time to deal with this later.”

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“Master Aqua, you’re still awake?”

“Hello, Sora,” Aqua says as an answer. The three children insist on using that title, and she’s starting to give up insisting they do otherwise. “Would you like some hot chocolate? I just boiled the water.”

As she says that, she leans across the table and fills up a mug in front of Lea. He delicately stirs the drink before wrapping his fingers around the handle and taking a gulp. The liquid flows back onto the counter a second later. Aqua and him freeze, just realizing that although Lea’s new form has a mouth, it doesn’t have a throat.

“No wonder you’re so skinny,” Sora teases, trying to break up the simmering tension. He grabs Lea’s mug and claims it for himself without asking.

“Sorry. I should have known better,” Aqua mumbles to Lea. She grabs a cloth and begins wiping up
“Hey, that means more for you and me,” Sora says.

Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. Meanwhile, Lea’s sticking his arm into the puddle, checking whether he can soak it up like a sponge.

Aqua speaks. “You know Sora, I was on your world once when you were just a child. Do you remember?”

He shakes his head.

“You were young,” she says with a sigh. “I met all three of you, although I’m sure Kairi was in Radiant Garden. How did you meet?”

“She washed up on the beach after her world fell to darkness,” Sora says casually, as if they weren’t discussing an event that led to the uproot of thousands. “We didn’t realize she was from another world, though. The mayor thought that a ship had sunk. She started coming to school after a few weeks and me and Riku became friends with her.”

“Just like that?”

“Sure! Not a lot changes on Destiny Islands, so she was the most interesting thing that had happened in years. Plus…”

“Yes?” she urges.

Sora hides his head under his arms, cheeks bright red. “…She was really pretty.”

Lea makes a choking sound that might have been a laugh. Yes, it’s just like someone of his age to giggle at young love. At least Sora’s story has that silver lining. Not many do.

“Are you okay?” Sora asks her as her expression falls.

“Yes,” she says shortly. “I should apologize to Kairi when I see her.”

Sora frowns. “Why?”

Carefully, she explains. She outlines Xehanort’s seizure of Terra’s body, and the wicked experiments he performed in secret. She tells Sora how he found the passage to the darkness and brought the end upon Radiant Garden.

“Riku did the same thing,” Sora remarks suddenly. “Ansem – the Heartless one – talked him into opening the Door on our world. That’s how Destiny Islands fell to darkness.”

“I’m sorry.” She exhales. “I’ll apologize to him, too.”

“Huh? Why would you do that?” Sora says. “I doubt whatever you said to him when he was a little kid talked him into anything.”

Laboriously, she began to explain to him exactly how this was her fault, but it seemed like she had barely begun before he was shaking his head and interrupting.

“Come on, that’s ridiculous,” Sora says. “I’d like to see you try to tell Riku it’s your fault.”

“I allowed Xehanort to escape,” she says. Something’s bubbling in her stomach and she needs to
speak quickly before she vomits. “Without me, none of this…”

“But if you hadn’t done anything, then worse stuff would have happened nine years ago,” Sora says. “That’s what Mickey and Yen Sid say.”

“You don’t understand!” she cries out. “I could have prevented all of this!”

She fears that she woke the others with her shout. They all go still, listening. There are the unsteady clicks of a puddle she hasn’t quite clean up dripping off the table, but otherwise it’s quiet inside.

“Master Aqua, you’re taking way too much responsibility for this,” Sora says. “Mickey and Yen Sid could have prevented this, too, but they didn’t. And . . . your friends could have, too. They could have stopped at any time and realized what they were doing was wrong.”

Lea’s slumped against the tabletop, his back making a ninety degree turn at the waist. One of his spindly arms reach over so that his hand rests on her forearm.

“Sora, look at him,” she whispers. “And Roxas. Xehanort only hurt them because –”

Lea’s hand over her mouth muffles her rant. He removes it, only to cover her mouth once again when she attempts to speak.

“Well, you said it yourself: Xehanort hurt them,” Sora says. “You didn’t. I know you didn’t ask him to, either.”

She clenches her fists. Her body’s tight like a piano string, liable of snapping and injuring anyone who’s near.

“Master Aqua,” Sora says and she looks up at him. “You need to forgive yourself.”

“. . . I don’t know if I can.”

“Well, we’re here when you’re ready to try,” Sora says with a big grin. Lea peers at him, and then tries to imitate him; it’s a weird look where the teeth of his zipper mouth stick out like a rabbit’s teeth. “And I know everyone else is, too!”

Everyone except the ones she misses the most, the phantom reminds her. The thought threatens to consume her. She fights it back. She pats Lea’s head and focuses on the friends she still has.

It’s been three full minutes and Cid still hasn’t finished his tirade. Sora hadn’t thought Cid would be attached to their Gummi Ship, considering it was their ship. Yet when they had led Cid into the garage and presented the ship’s mauled carcass, Cid’s face had gone purple. A moment later, the toothpick the man had been chewing on had fallen right out of his mouth, too.

“. . . did you take a damn can opener and pry it apart? What did you do to her?”

“It wasn’t our fault,” Riku bites back. “Vanitas . . . Ventus . . . that guy destroyed it!”

“With what? A goddamn laser cannon?”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Sora says. “He made one from his keyblade.”

Spluttering, Cid picks up a wrench and tries to wring it like it’s one of their necks.

“Cid, can you fix it?” Kairi asks meekly.
Cid takes a moment to calm himself. It’s an accommodation he’ll offers to Kairi, but never him or Riku. “Fixing this would be the same as building a new ship entirely.”

“Can you do that? Please!” Sora says.

“Guess I have to seeing that you brats are the one fighting the Heartless,” Cid grumbles. “By the way, you kids seen Lea around? Isa’s been asking for him.”

Sora can’t help but exchange a look with Kairi. Very carefully, she says, “He’s off-world with us. Do you know where Isa is?”

“Beach,” Cid grunts.

Seeing that Isa is Lea’s best friend, they owe it to the Nobody to let him know what’s happened. As Cid promised, they find Isa at the beach, seated on a boulder in the shade as he watches families frolic in the water. Even now, he’s wearing that heavy, black cloak. It’s as if his limbs will catch on fire if they encounter sunlight.

“Hi, Isa,” Kairi says. “This never struck me as your kind of place.”

“It isn’t,” Isa agrees. “But Lea said. . . I suppose it’s nostalgia.”

Sora slips off a shoe so he can dip his toes in the warm sand. It reminds him of home. It isn’t the same because Radiant Garden’s beach resides along a lake and he can see the other side, but if he closes his eyes, he can pretend.

“We know where Lea is,” Kairi tells Isa. “But he’s different now. He’s turned into one of those small Nobodies that look like someone dressed up in a sack.”


“I’m sure he can still portal,” Sora says. “I’ve seen tons of the other Dusks do it. So, at least he can visit you.”

Isa says, “What use would that be? He is nothing but one of Xemnas’s drones now.”

Sora can’t tell if Isa’s playing at pretending he’s not upset, or if this is the Nobody coming out out. On the outside, Isa is unruffled and it seems like it would be the latter. But Sora believes in Lea, and he’s sure Lea believes in Isa.

“Lea has a heart,” Kairi says. “It’s small, but it’s there.”

“What does that mean?”

Kairi explains as best as they can, which honestly, isn’t much. Isa watches them intensely; there’s a hunger of sorts in his eyes that he would associate with a werewolf on the full moon.

“I don’t understand,” Isa says when it’s over.

“Neither do we, but I know it’s true!” Sora vows.

Isa turns his head back towards the lake. “I see. Thank you for telling me.”

He still can’t tell if this coolness is fake or Isa’s nature. He doesn’t know Isa, but Isa’s a bit like Riku and he knows very well that trying to drag an answer to that question out of Riku would lead to disaster.
Riku suddenly pipes up. “Master Aqua got away from them.”

“Has she? I didn’t think she would.” Isa nods, still staring at the beach. “I am glad to hear it.”

The bedroom door slowly creaks open. Light spills into the room. It cuts across the floor in a sharp blade, licking at the rumbled covers on the bed. Ven groans and half-conscious, rolls away from the door.

“You’re still asleep?” Terra’s voice echoes with surprise.

“I’m tired,” Ven mutters. “I’ll get up when I’m ready.”

Terra doesn’t take the hint and enters. “Everyone else has already left for their missions.”

“I’ll get it to later!” Ven says. He rolls onto his back again. “I need more sleep.”

“And what is it that has disturbed your usual routine?” Terra asks and he sounds exactly like a grumpy dad. “This is not typical behaviour for you.”

Ven makes a random noise and hopes Terra accepts it as an answer.

“You cannot continue to haunt that world,” Terra says. “Your presence only encourages her to remain in their protection. No animal would wander away from its den while a predator is sniffing about.”

Ven ignores him. He’s getting a little annoyed at how much Terra’s been scolding him since Aqua ran away.

“Ven.”

“I’m not a kid, Terra!” he snaps. “I’ll get up when I want to.”

“You have responsibilities.”

“And I’ll get to them later. You can’t always tell me what to do.”

It’s true and he doesn’t care what Terra thinks about it. He hasn’t been a kid for years. He’s older than Terra was when Aqua disappeared. He’s older than Aqua, which means Terra doesn’t get to go around setting bedtimes for him.

“Ven –”

“Terra, get out of my room or I’m going to throw you out.”

There’s a moment where Ven thinks Terra’s going to take him on, and he’s not sure what he’ll do if that happens. But the tension fizzles away and Terra backs out, closing the door behind him.

Ven pulls the covers over his head and closes his eyes.
To Come Into One's Own

“I’m not cold. You don’t need to be my scarf.”

When Lea doesn’t listen, Isa scowls and plucks the Nobody from his neck. He holds Lea away from him, and the Dusk hangs from the three-fingered grip on his skull like a kitten hanging by its scruff. Isa lets Lea fall.

“They say you have a heart.”

Lea pats his chest proudly. Isa touches his own chest, yearning to feel a warmth that isn’t there.

“It’s quite the price to pay,” Isa says to himself. He cannot say whether it would be worth it; Nobodies can’t feel, but want isn’t quite an emotion. And he does want.

It’s nearly sunset. Orange light paints the lake’s surface. Within the sky’s pink-blue haze, a few bright stars have made themselves known. He wonders whether one of them is The World That Never Was. He wonders which of them is the Organization’s Kingdom Hearts.

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Ven yawns as he heads into the castle, the X-Blade hoisted over his shoulder. He shakes himself like a dog, and wipes rain off his face with his forearm. His clothes cling to him and between the dampness and the heat of his exertion, he feels like he was in a sauna.

“If you had left when I had suggested, you would have missed the storm,” Terra says as Ven ascends the stairs after the castle’s entrance. Void Gear hangs loosely at Terra’s side and Ven thinks he can detect an energy rising off it, as if the keyblade is celebrating its recent feast of Heartless.

Ven shrugs. “It’s fine. I needed to do laundry anyways.”

He walks up the stairs. At the top, he’s surprised to see the other members of the Organization clustered nearby. He nods at them, and then points his feet on the path that will take him to his room.

“Ven, wait. There is something we need to discuss.”

Terra said that within earshot of the others, despite the fact that Ven was heading somewhere where they could speak alone. That isn’t good. The coincidental presence of the others by the entrance suddenly seems like anything but chance.

“Is this about Kingdom Hearts?” Ven demands, irritated. “Why is it always about that?”

“Because Kingdom Hearts is the only hope I, and they, have,” Terra says. The other Nobodies move closer, more confident now that their leader has broken the ice. “What else do they have to dream about?”

Ven wrinkles his nose. “It doesn’t matter. I could spend all tomorrow slaying Heartless, and Kingdom Hearts isn’t going to be completed. I could spend the next week on nothing else and it still won’t be done. It’s not like it’s dangling in front of your nose; we’re months, if not years away from completion.”

“The time adds up,” Terra says. “A delay is still a delay, no matter the scale. Each day that passes without the benefit of your full effort is another our comrades spend in the agony of nonexistence.”
“Good thing they’re Nobodies and can’t feel agony,” Ven deadpans. Even mutters something he can’t hear. “Look, I might be taking a bit of a break, but it’s temporary. Not everyone can be a workaholic.”

“Kingdom Hearts cannot wait for your break,” Terra says.

“Kingdom Hearts will wait until I’m ready,” Ven shoots back. As he stomps past Terra, he says, “What are you going to do? Try to ground me?”

“You know I would rather not do anything of the sort,” Terra says. Ven checks quickly; good, the others are a healthy distance back. “But I also must uphold the rules. Each of us has a role to play in the Organization.”

“Oh, yeah?” He turns slowly. “And what if I don’t like those roles?”

He hears the swoosh of a weapon being summoned. Does he sound that scary? Well, he does have an intimidating build; swinging the X-Blade does wonders for the arms and shoulders. He thinks back to being Vanitas and fits one of those wild grins on his face. He flashes it at the others, making sure they’ll think twice before doing something dumb.

“Who said you had the right to dictate what I do with my life anyways?” he asks Terra. “I’m not a kid anymore. I took care of myself before you got your memories back.”

“Ven.” For a moment, Terra sounds old and tired. “Do not escalate this further.”

Ven leans back slightly, arms crossed behind his head. He can see Terra and the others like this. It’s a little odd to him that Terra invited them as spectators, and he begins to wonder what Terra really expected to happen here.

“I’m not planning to escalate anything,” Ven says. “Are you?”

“Don’t insult me.”

That almost seems like that’s it, but then Ienzo shoulders his way past the other Nobodies. The man says, “Kingdom Hearts must be completed, regardless of whatever petty squabbles you have with each other.”

“Well, it’s not like you guys have been helping me with what I want,” Ven snaps. “Thanks for the reciprocation.”

“What do you need help with?” Myde wonders allowed. “Is this about the lady with the blue hair?”

“Aqua was a marvellous fighter,” Dilan says with something like admiration. “It is a pity she is no longer with us. But it doesn’t matter whose side she fights on so long as she continues to fight.”

“Of course, it matters! Because if she fights with them, she’s fighting against us.”

“All freed hearts will find their way here,” Dilan says with a smirk. “The end result is the same.”

Ven stalks towards him, unheeding of the many lances at Dilan’s side. “Keep talking about her like she’s a tool, and we’ll see how many times you can be used as a hammer before you break. You don’t want to be on my bad side.”

He thinks Terra tries to say something, but Dilan is faster. “Or what?”

“Or you never get a chance at seeing Kingdom Hearts.”
“Ven.” Terra’s eyes are narrowed. He’s moved forward in the time that Ven has spent arguing with Dilan, so that he’s almost directly behind Ven. “While I agree that Dilan should not speak thusly, such promises are not yours to make.”

“Sure, they are.” Ven reaches with his free arm out to the side and opens his hand.

“They –”

In his defense, he hadn’t noticed Terra was leaning some of his weight on Void Gear. It was a complete accident that when the keyblade disappeared, Terra stumbled. Still, it achieves his goal: it gets their attention and shuts them up. With the X-Blade still balanced on his shoulder, Ven grabs Void Gear in his free hand and spins it around by its handle.

“So, how are you planning to complete Kingdom Hearts?” he asks calmly. He already knows the answer, as do they, and if the descending silence means anything, they’ve just understood what he’s really telling them. “The Organization needs me.”

*I’m the only one that really matters,* he doesn’t need to say.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Ven says. “If any of you want to continue this conversation later. . . Hope I’m in a good mood.”

Pluto pants as he lays his head in her lap. With a smile, Aqua scratches behind his ears and pretends she doesn’t know that his owner is discussing the Organization with the other keybladers. She doesn’t need more on her plate.

By the time they’re finished talking, Pluto’s sprawled out on the couch so she can rub his belly. He nearly catches her hand when he rolls over and barks at Mickey with his tail high.

“Pluto, what did we say about the couch?” The scolding is light. Pluto jumps off the couch and sits in front of his owner. “Gosh, don’t make this a habit.”

“I’m sorry, I encouraged him,” Aqua says.

“It’s not your fault. He knows better.” Pluto’s smile is so innocent at that statement that Aqua is left wondering just how well the dog understands the spoken word.

“Master Aqua.” Kairi rounds the corner of the couch’s armrest, almost like she’s sneaking up on her. “Before Gummi ships, you said you used your keyblade to get to other worlds.”

“We all did. I’m not surprised you didn’t know about it. It’s not a skill you accidentally figure out, and there were so few Masters even in my day.” She shakes her head and distracts her emotions by rubbing Pluto’s neck. “It’s . . . odd to think that all the people I once knew are completely different now.”

“Well, they grew up a bit, but that doesn’t mean everything’s changed,” Mickey says. “I’m sure the people in Disney Town still remember you. We could always go for a visit.”

“We could, but. . .” She looks out the tower’s window. There’s no sign of her jailer, but Ven could always be lurking out of sight.

“Actually, there is a way we could sneak out of here without portals,” Micky says. He wrings his hands together, as if about to suggest something illegal. “There’s a magical train that sometimes passes between here and Twilight Town. We can bypass Ventus with that, and then fly to where we
need to go from Twilight Town.”

It could work. Ven and Xemnas clearly don’t have a way to track her, or else they would have found her before Sora and his friends had. Even with that promise however, the idea makes her queasy. Not because she’s worried about whether they can fool Ventus, but because of what leaving would mean. More old faces to see. More people that have changed; more people whose lives she has uprooted.

“So, whaddya say? Should we head to Disney Town? I’ll be able to show you around this time.”

He’s King Mickey now, isn’t he? She really shouldn’t be keeping him away from his people like this. More than anything, that twists her wrist into saying yes. But if Mickey senses the lack of enthusiasm, he doesn’t say. He cheerfully announces that he’ll arrange everything with Yen Sid, and then departs.

“Cool. It’s been a while since we’ve been there.” Sora says. He stretches his arms and crosses them behind his head. “It’d be great to see Donald and Goofy again.”

She’s silent as Sora chats about people he knows. She knows so few of the names. It makes her itchy somehow. The more Sora talks about the world, the more it feels like a place she’s never been to before.

“What are you going to do when we get there?” Sora suddenly asks her.

“Get that tour from Mickey,” she says with a shrug.

“Hm? Oh, sure! Have you ever been inside the castle?” When she shakes her head, Sora adds, “It’s really cool, and Mickey gives great tours!”

Shortly after, Sora and Kairi leave, too, to pack up supplies. That leaves her and Riku in the room together. Riku’s brooding in the corner closest to her, but she feels alone.

“It’s like I’ll be lying to them,” she says.

“Who?” Riku says after a start.

“Mickey’s people. I know he’s not going to tell them what I’ve done. If they do remember me, they’ll still think I’m a hero. They don’t know I unleashed the Heartless –”

“And if you say that, you’re also lying to them,” Riku cuts in. “If you need to spill your heart to them, at least limit it to things you actually did. Just tell them that you saved your best friend from getting trapped in the Realm of Darkness, but he turned out to be possessed by Xehanort and then Xehanort created the Emblem Heartless.”

“But that’s not fair!” she cries. “That sounds so . . .”

“. . . Like it’s not really your fault?” Riku scoffs. “But it’s the truth. The actual truth.”

There are different arguments buzzing on her tongue. Similar refrains she’s repeated to Mickey, to Lea, to Sora. Riku doesn’t give her time to get her thoughts together. His joints crack as he pushes himself off the wall and he walks towards her with a swagger she’s seen before on a younger Terra.

“I’m sure you know that I opened the Door on my world,” Riku says. “That’s the fact about me that everyone seems to know. Xehanort’s Heartless talked me into doing it, but I’m still the one who opened the Door. I didn’t know the consequences, but that’s because I didn’t care. I had a dream,
and I wanted it so badly that I didn’t bother to think about consequences. Ansem might have tricked me, but it’s still my fault. It’s exactly like how this whole mess with the Heartless is Xehanort’s fault.”

He suddenly looks awkward, like he’s blurted out his feelings in front of a girl he liked.

“Just think about it,” Riku tells her before he leave her alone, too.

In the end, visiting is nice. Mickey’s people are kind and goodhearted. It must be something about the world, because she had noticed that the first time she visited – well, except for that loose cannon named Pete. It feels good to be around people with only a token understanding of the keyblade and what it means, and the Cornerstone of Light keeps the Heartless away, so she doesn’t even have to face that reminder.

“Say, Aqua, could you come with me?”

“Sure.” She detaches from the group and follows Mickey. Odd that he wants to talk to her alone.

He leads her into the basement. As it gets darker and the wide halls give way to the narrow staircase, she bristles. Perfect for an ambush. Once she’s in deep enough, they come from both sides and . . . No! There’s no Heartless here. She’s with Mickey. She’s safe.

Still, she can’t stop Stormfall’s materialization. The keyblade’s almost overprotective of her sometimes, as if it’s trying to make up for the horrors she had to face without it. Not until they reach their destination, does the keyblade deign to be dismissed. Aqua wipes her sweaty palms on her pants, and then looks up at the massive stone before them. It’s a pearly white, tall with a tapered point.

“The Cornerstone of Light,” Mickey says with satisfaction. “Here, lay your hand on it like this.”

Mickey demonstrates. The second his hand makes contact with the Cornerstone’s surface, something twists inside her. It feels like a Heartless has grabbed her intestines and is trying to tie it into a bow.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she says, backing away. “That’s pure light. I don’t know how it would react to me.”

She’s tainting this room with her presence. She needs to leave. Yet when she turns to do so, Mickey grabs her wrist.

“Aqua, it’s okay.”

She has no answer for him. He pulls her forward, each tug like a nudge, and lays her palm flat on the Cornerstone’s surface.

The stone is firm and smooth, like a marble countertop. Unlike marble though, there’s heat under the surface. It brushes against her skin, as if tasting her, before leeching its way inside. With it comes the light, and her body tries to pull away from a hand that seems glued to the Cornerstone. She’s no stranger to light and its feel. Master Eraqus was a master of light himself, and she wasn’t always able to use healing magic; she has memories of his healing magic knitting through her flesh, of the gentle light that followed it like a father’s kiss on a wound. But she’s changed since then, and the Cornerstone is no friend of hers.

The light trickles into her. It branches, following the path of her veins and arteries. It meets with her own (tainted) heart, and her chest clenches with a pain so fierce she briefly thinks she’s having a
heart attack.

She and the Cornerstone remain there, locked in place by that silent hold on her heart. Her body is so stiff that her muscles ache and complain from being held tense for so long. There’s only so long she can keep it up, and only when she has to relax her muscles does she realize the pain is all her own. The Cornerstone’s light has already retreated into itself, minding its own business once more. Aqua lifts her hand off the stone. She hadn’t been struck down where she stood. The light hadn’t even burned her.

“Aqua,” Mickey says, “you’re not a bad person.”

Her fingers curl. Without warning, her legs give way. She falls against the Cornerstone. It’s okay, it seems to tell her, the light seems to tell her, as if Kingdom Hearts itself is speaking through it.

She isn’t a monster. The light hasn’t rejected her.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and she isn’t sure to whom (what) she’s addressing.

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“Master Aqua?”

She shakes herself out of her stupor. “Sorry. That clocktower up there, Roxas, Lea and I used to go there all the time.”

Sora nods, understanding. He squares himself up with the clocktower and checks it over. “It does feel familiar. I guess Roxas recognizes it, too.”

“Right,” she says quietly. It’s not Sora’s fault, but she hates the reminder of how Roxas is trapped within him.

“If you want to go there for closure, we get it,” Sora says. “The train will come whenever Mickey calls for it.”

“Thank you.”

For once in her life, she makes her way up the clocktower alone. They always sat on the ledge above the face, unafraid of the fall. Now, she stands instead of sits, but the ghosts of Roxas and Lea still sit beside her, laughing and squabbling over their ice-cream bars. She smiles, wishing to lose herself in the fantasy and join them, but she knows if she tries, her body will pass right through them.

“So, you did come back here.”

She turns. The ledge isn’t that big, and she hadn’t thought it wide enough for him to stand there. Not Xemnas. . . Terra? Ten minutes ago, she had been sure that during her next meeting with him, Stormfall would do all the talking. But all that certainty disappears from her grasp. He’s there, in front of her, and he’s different. His chin is sharper, cheekbones less pronounced. He’s younger. And for the first time since she’s left the Realm of Darkness, the cloak’s gone. In exchange, he’s returned to a black, collared shirt with red straps.

He looks. . . like he did before she fell into the darkness.

“Aqua, it’s me. The real me. Ven. . . We didn’t need Kingdom Hearts. He found a shortcut,” Terra says softly.

“That’s not possible,” she says, even as he’s there in front of her with that body.
She should call Stormfall. She should summon her armour. Both those thoughts run through her head as Terra gets closer.

“Feel it,” he says. His hand is softer than she expects, grip looser than she remembers as he guides her hand to his chest. She gasps. She does feel it: the heat shimmering underneath.

“Terra!”

She throws her arms around him, not noticing how he stumbles and throws himself against the side of the clock tower so they don’t fall. He’s here in front of her. Terra with his heart restored.

. . . But what of Xehanort?

“I’m so sorry for everything,” Terra murmurs. “Come on, let’s go home.”

Her smile wavers. “To the Castle That Never Was? Terra, that’s . . .”

“We don’t need the Organization anymore. We can go back to the Land of Departure.”

She tightens her grip on him. Home. They can go home.

“Okay. I think I can fix it, too. I’ve never tried the spell, but Master Eraqus taught me the theory . . .”

“That can wait,” Terra says. “We’ll start the repairs when you’re ready.”

“I’m not sure it can wait,” Aqua says. “The entire world’s a mess, and I’m not sure it’s safe to spend too much time in that much darkness.”

His brow crinkles in confusion. Just for a moment. He hides it, and he does it too fast. It’s suspicious. Someone else seizes her vocal cords, someone grim and aggressive who learned in the darkness to trust nothing.

“What about Ven? We can’t go back without him. We’ve known him since he was a baby.”

“We’re not leaving him,” Terra says, cupping her cheek with too-small hands. “He’s already there waiting for us.”

“. . . That’s all. You’re not going to correct me?”

He’s confused again. She pushes him away.

“Who are you really?” she snarls, because Terra would know what was wrong with what she had said; Xehanort would know. This person before her is neither of them.

“Aqua. . .”

The wind whistles. Something glints in the corner of her eye. Stormfall forces itself into her hands and her body moves and swings the keyblade sideways. Something hits the keyblade; something that reflects the setting sun’s light as it tumbles toward the distant ground.

And she’s slammed back into the clock tower as something whizzes past her. The next thing she knows, there’s a lance impaled in the tower and through one of the sashes on her waist.

Dilan.

He floats before the clock tower, using his wind magic to stay aloft. His dreadlocks move like living
things, twisting and fencing in the air. Four lances float behind him, sticking out beyond his shoulders like wings.

“Firaga!”

In the air, Dilan is quick when he wants to be. Her fire spell amounts to nothing, although she didn’t expect much else. Already, the Thundaga spell – the spell she intends to cause damage – is already at her fingertips; only for her to pull it back at the last moment as Terra rips a sword out of nothing and swings at her. She tries to jump away, but the lance has her pinned. She blocks the sword, but her block comes from an unbalanced stance.

The real Terra would have capitalized on that immediately. This one doesn’t; the blow is weaker than it should be. She shouldn’t be able to hold her ground like this, but she does. For a while. Then another lance catches her by the sleeve and nails that arm to the clock tower as Stormfall falls and clatters off the ledge.

But even one-handed, Aqua isn’t defenseless. She uses the lances to support herself as she brings both feet up and kicks the fake Terra in the stomach; that’ll leave bruises. It’s then that an absurdly powerful gale pins the rest of her against the clock tower.

She can barely turn her head against the wind to look at Dilan. Panting, she meets his eyes. It was a cleverly planned ambush, she’ll give them that.

“Did Xemnas send you after me?” she asks.

“It doesn’t matter who led us here,” Terra – no, a disguised Ienzo – says. It’s as good as a confession.

“You’re not afraid of getting in trouble for attacking me like this?” It’s a long shot, but maybe, just maybe Xemnas hasn’t told them the truth of their falling out.

“. . . Xemnas’s desires are no longer a priority for us,” Ienzo says at length.

Is he saying that Dilan and he have gone rogue? She can’t think of what else he can mean. Even if they wanted to, Xemnas has power over nothingness, over Nobodies themselves. They can’t overthrow him.

“Do you think I’m going to come back quietly?” Aqua says. “I’m not. I’m done. I’m not helping you complete Kingdom Hearts. There’s no point in bringing me back.”

“Surrender,” Dilan says. “We have no desire to harm you beyond what is necessary.”

She answers, “You know I won’t. I can’t.”

The third lance makes its move, pinning her other sleeve and arm to the clock tower. She forces herself to remain something close to calm and goes over her options. There are still spells she can use even pinned down like this, but they’re limited and more importantly, they’re not going to free her. Ghost Drive? No, too dangerous. The ledge is thin and unlike Ven, she never developed the ability to glide.

“I’m not going to help you!” she spits, lurching against the lances keeping her trapped. “I don’t care what Xemnas and Ven have to say. I won’t help you get Kingdom Hearts!”

“You do not need to collect hearts for us,” Dilan says. “You simply need to come back.”

It’s a lie. The Organization wants her for her keyblade; it’s the only reason they tolerated her in the
first place.

“If that’s true, then what the point of coming after me?” she demands. “If you’re trying to stop Master Yen Sid from getting information, you’re too late. I already told him everything.”

Another lie. There’s so much she hasn’t said to them, that she can’t. Even if that’s truly Xehanort slinking around in Terra’s body, there’s still Ven. While the Vanitas-Ven thing is difficult to wrap her head around, what she understands is that at some point, he was the person that was her best friend. That’s enough to make her fear for his life, to guard it.

“The Organization requires your presence,” Ienzo answers vaguely.

“Why?”

“Because the Organization cannot exist without you,” Dilan answers, and it looks like every word is being pried out of him with a crowbar.

What does that mean? The Organization was founded before she returned to the worlds. She spent the entire time with them not even understanding what they were really doing. She’s not a vital cog; they have two other keyblade wielders, for crying out loud!

A cloud passes over the sun. Only, it’s not just a cloud; it’s a storm cloud.

Thick forks of lightning illuminate the air around Dilan. Like they produce a gale of their own, the lancer sways violently from side to side. His own wind dies, and Aqua surges forward, sleeve tearing on the side that doesn’t have the pinned sash. Arm now free, she calls Stormfall back to her and directs a cushion of light at Ienzo that hits like a punch. He falls back. As he does, the light mixes with his outline in golden-black sparks. Brown hair goes grey. Black shirt lengthens to a cloak. Ienzo, returned to his true form, doesn’t get a word in before someone that isn’t her aims a spell at him.

“Aqua!”

Of course. They knew she was here. They were waiting for her; no doubt they had looked up here from time to time and eventually, had seen what was happening.

She, alone, was a match for Dilan and Ienzo when she wasn’t being tricked or ambushed. So, once the reinforcements came, they were quick to portal away. The lances disappeared with their owner and Aqua fell to her knees, rubbing her aching shoulder.

“That was Dilan and Ienzo: a wind mage and an illusionist,” she told them, answering their unspoken questions. “They were trying to bring me back to the Organization.”

“Still haven’t given up, huh?” Riku says.

“I don’t understand why,” she says. “Bringing me back there isn’t going to make me their servant again. Unless Xemnas believes I’m that easy to manipulate. . .”

“You’re not,” Mickey says firmly. “Last time, you were all by yourself, but you still saw through him. This time, you got us.”

There’s no easy way to describe how that feels, how it ignites a match within her and burns bright. Yes. She isn’t alone. She has true allies beside her this time. Some crack within her broken heart heals at the realization and when she smiles, it felt like the first time she had truly smiled in years.
“Let’s go back,” she says firmly. Confidently. “We need to tell Yen Sid about this.”

The two men trudge through the open door, both knowing they’re lucky not to be injured. They walk up the stairs. There is someone standing at the top of them, hood up as he observes the entrance. It’s a usual sight for them. Xemnas takes his duty as overseer seriously.

Only it’s not Xemnas’s face they end up seeing under the hood.

“How was your mission?” Ven asks.
“I just don’t see the point of this,” Ven finally says. He shifts on his throne. He and Dilan are alone in the Round Room, with the older man far down below on the floor. Ven won’t say it aloud, but he gets a sadistic kick out of looming over the other like this.

“It is a creature of rage,” Dilan says, “with a will mighty enough to carry him through the darkness between the worlds. A will like that produces only one outcome.”

“Yeah, I get it. But why do we need more Nobodies?” Ven demands. “Maybe we get a strong Heartless out of it, but there doesn’t seem to be a correlation between the strength of the Heartless we kill and how much they fill up Kingdom Hearts. You’re wasting so much time with this experiment. You could be using that time to do something way more helpful to us.”

“If you would come with me to see him, you would understand,” Dilan says. “The Beast is powerful. With that power in our grasp –”

“Who cares?” Ven says, enunciating each word. “He doesn’t have a keyblade. He won’t help us with Kingdom Hearts.”

“But –”

“Just drop this,” Ven commands. “It’s a waste of time.”

Ven rolls his eyes and leans back over the armrest after Dilan departs. These people are so annoying. They complain again and again about not getting their hearts back, yet it seems like half of them have little hobbies that don’t help them achieve that. He had half a mind to pull the plug on the Replica project, too, because artificially created people? Seriously? That reached inside and throttled something inside him. The only reason he allowed the project was because he understood the desire to have test subjects for alternative methods of regaining hearts.

His knees crack as he stands. He stretches one arm at a time. Should he go kill Heartless? Nah, his head hurts after that pointless discussion.

Something itches in that stitched-together thing he called a heart. He rubs his chest absently-mindedly. Terra should be resting in his room. Aqua. . . he pushes that thought out of his mind.

He leans back in his throne. There’s glass in the center of the ceiling, just enough to let some of the moon’s light in.

Ven closes his eyes. He feels the moon’s power thrum quietly above him.

“So, what’s got you down?” Riku asks.

“I’m worried about Roxas,” Sora says. He kicks his feet, and his heels knock against the boulder he’s seated upon. “He’s so much quieter than he used to be. I can barely feel him in my head.”

“He’s your Nobody. He was never supposed to exist.” Riku takes a seat next to him. “Maybe the universe is correcting its mistakes.”
“But I heard him before. I could feel him!”

“That was when Master Aqua needed him to help her,” Riku points out. “She’s safe now so maybe . . . maybe he’s returning to being a part of you again.”

Sora scowls. He shakes his head. “I can’t accept that. Roxas wasn’t supposed to exist, but he did, and I don’t have the right to take that from him.”

“What are you going to do?” Riku says.

“I don’t know yet. But I’ll figure out something,” Sora vows as he stares at the stars.

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It’s raining in the once-beautiful city. Ven remembers what it used to look like. If he focuses, he can see the old layered atop the new. Even if he doesn’t concentrate, he sees lights that are no longer there. Radiant Garden is carved into his brain, and for all the wrong reasons. For it is here that everything fell apart: the fight with his friends; Aqua’s fight with Xehanort and losing her; Terra opening the Door to Darkness. Even now, this echo of what the world used to be found a way to wrench Aqua from them again.

*I should raze this place to the ground*, a dark voice inside him whispers.

He brushes the suggestion aside. He trudges through the streets, flitting in and out of the shadows of flickering streetlights. His cloak weighs heavily on his shoulders, like Terra is breathing on the back of his neck, reminding him of duty.

Oh. He sneers. Look where he is. At that square where he, Terra and Aqua had their fight. Where everything fell apart. He’s on the fringes, just beyond the reach of the nearest streetlight. There are fireflies buzzing around the square in small, luminous clouds. He watches them bitterly, hating how they lend even a semblance of beauty to this place.

He’s not alone. There’s another person hanging out on the opposite side of the square, leaning against a streetlight. Something slithers through the air nearby and orbits the person. It’s long and sinuous –

A Nobody? Ven doesn’t see a black cloak on the man. Weird that one of his Dusks is interacting with him.

And then the man turns his head. Light bounces off blue hair and Ven narrows his eyes.

Terra's voice echoes in his mind:

"Aqua’s weakness is her friends."

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Lea gasps for breath. Water spills out of his gaping mouth, flecked with spittle and foam. Waves continue to pound at his back without mercy, threatening to rip him off his bed of sand and pull him back into the water’s depths.

He pulls himself forward by his arms until the water is merely licking at his bare feet. Fuck. He lets his chin sink into the sand. Fuck this all. It feels like someone ripped all his bones and broke them into pieces just to stuff them back in.

A higher-than-average wave has him choking again. He rolls onto his back, flinching as the sun scalds his eyes. That . . . that isn’t right. As a Dusk, he’s supposed to have a hazy, greyscale view of
the world, like everything’s being seen through a thick fog. But when he adjusts to the lights and
opens his eyes, he sees the cerulean-blue sky.

He lifts his hand in front of his face, and spreads fingers made of real flesh. What happened?

It takes a while for the answers to come. The revival of his senses have claimed the entirety of his
processing power. It’s too hard to rewind back to the past when in the present, there’s a cushion of
cool, brackish-smelling water cradling his sides. It’s hard to view memories through a Dusk’s
nonexistent eyes when his vision explodes with colour every where he looks. His heart beats against
his ribs like a caged bird, desperate to be free to soar among the clouds. Even sitting up enthralls him
as he can feel the steady support of bones as his body settles into place.

What happened?

He remembers in that hazy dreamscape. He remembers the monochrome setting of Hollow Bastion,
and the white-hot glow of Ventus’s keyblade. They’d been ambushed. Ventus had been after Isa.
Lea was pretty sure Isa had gotten away, and he remembered fighting Ventus himself. He’d tried to
wrap himself around Ventus’s head to blind him and he’d –

Died. Not the half-death he’d been subjected to before. A true death. Ventus had stabbed him right
through the chest, and then literally torn him in half. Would have hurt like a bitch if he hadn’t been a
Dusk. Except he’s. . . not a Dusk. . . Not anymore.

What happened?

Lea comes to them dripping wet and lost-looking like a kitten abandoned on the side of the road.
They hesitate because it wasn’t that long ago that Ienzo had come to Aqua disguised as Terra.
Finally, Kairi and Sora sweep forward as one, grabbing Lea by the wrists and dragging him inside
the tower. Lea blinks rapidly, pupils wide and dazed.

“I don’t understand,” Aqua whispers. She follows them from room to room, but never gets too close
to Lea.

“I died,” Lea mutters. His hand is balled around the fabric on his chest and Sora doesn’t know if the
wrinkles will ever come out.

“That Dusk from before was Lea, right?” Mickey asks.

“It was. I was,” Lea says after a beat. He seems to be having trouble accepting that he’s had two
completely different forms.

Whatever happened to Lea, it’s left him weak. He collapses onto the couch the moment his legs
brush against it. Aqua perches on the armrest and stares at him, wide-eyed.

Sora’s head spins. Everything that happens around Aqua and Lea seems to be overly complicated.
This, too, is complicated, and it takes nearly an hour before they can figure out a working scenario of
what’s going on. Lea got his heart taken by Heartless. Okay, that’s easy. Then he was a Nobody
with no heart, then he was a Nobody with a tiny heart, and now he’s. . . normal? There’s definitely
something beating under that chest; his keyblade senses it when he waves it over the spot.

“I’ll be back in a second,” a pale-faced Aqua says. She’s only taken a step out of the room when Lea
staggers to his feet to follow.

“Lea –” Kairi says.
“I’ll talk to her,” Lea says. There’s a moment where he must use a wall as support, but he manages to follow her on his own.

“So, what is going on?” Sora asks, turning to Master Yen Sid.

Technically, Yen Sid doesn’t have a definite answer for them. But with the evidence having stood in this very room, there’s a couple of theories that seem to be all but confirmed. Yen Sid tells them about recompletion, about the heart and body finding each other in the dark.

Sora says, “But that means Lea. . .”

“Died,” Riku finishes. “That’s what he said, remember?”

“Yeah.” Sora put his hands over his heart, expecting – hoping – to hear Roxas respond. But there’s silence from the Nobody hidden within.

“I feel bad for Master Aqua,” Kairi sighs. “I know she’s happy that Lea’s himself again, but. . .”

“Ventus,” Sora says. Because once again, it was one of Aqua’s once-best friends that destroyed the lives of her new ones.

There’s not much to say after that. Lea and Aqua return, but ten minutes later, Lea falls asleep on the couch and no one wants to wake him. Sora and his friends leave to give him the peace and quiet he deserves and hang out on the Tower’s front steps.

“We got company,” Riku says. He beckons with his keyblade to the sky. “Let’s go in.”

“. . . You guys go ahead,” Sora says. “Give me a minute.”

“Sora, what are you . . .?” Kairi asks.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine,” he says with a grin.

They don’t look like they believe him, but there is a giant magical barrier between him and Ventus, so they obey and leave him alone. Sora does a little jog in place to warm up, and then high jumps onto the tower’s nearest ledge. It takes some more high jumps and other keyblade-enabled, acrobatic shenanigans, but he climbs his way onto the spire of the tallest tower and settles at its base.

“Hey, Ventus!”

It doesn’t take Ventus long to drift over. Thankfully, Ventus doesn’t hang around their world as much as he did in the first few days after they found Aqua, but he still drops by often enough in what seems to be a calculated ploy to keep them unsettled.

“Sora,” Ventus greets with an upward tip of the chin that almost seems respectful.

“Did you see Lea come in?” Sora asks. “It must have been a shock considering you killed him.”

Ventus frowns. “What are you talking about?”

Sora isn’t sure which statement he’s referring to until he remembers that Lea would have been a Dusk at the time. Ventus sincerely might not have known it was Lea. That makes it a little better, he thinks.

“Never mind,” he says. “Ventus, I want to ask you stop whatever you’re planning with Kingdom Hearts.”
“Not an option,” Ventus says flatly. “We need Kingdom Hearts. It’s the only way . . .”

“No, it’s not!” Sora shouts. “There’s another way.”

Ventus is very still as Sora explains recompletion, or at least what they think it is. It’s impossible to guess what the older man is thinking; his expression remains flat, like a mannikin. It’s not just him. Everything seems to have gone quiet. The universe itself had gone quiet so it can listen.

“Are you saying Terra has been lying to me?” Ventus asks. Sora can sense the hostility lurking underneath that question, like a coiled snake peeking out from under a rock.

“I don’t know. I guess it’s possible he didn’t know either,” Sora says. “We only found out because Lea’s Nobody was destroyed. Plus, there might even be a third way. Master Yen Sid thinks that Nobodies can grow their own hearts, especially if they are around people who already have one. We know Lea was definitely growing one.”

There a long, pregnant pause where Ventus simply watches him. Then, with a heavy heave, he says, “You’re a cool guy, Sora. Thanks for telling me this.”

“So, does that the Organization will stop?” Sora asks. “Because if you do, then we don’t have to fight anymore.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ventus says. “I got to go.”

With that, Ventus is gone. Sora smiles to himself and glides back to the ground. He has a good feeling about this.

“You want me to hold your hair back? Hate to see it get in the way.”

“I’m fine,” Aqua says, waving Lea’s reaching hand away.

“You sure? In my experience, the only reason people sit next to toilets is because they’re about to be sick. And you started looking pretty pale after hearing about . . . you know.”

“There was a moment I thought I might puke, but I’m okay now.”

Lea nods and then takes a seat right next to her.

Aqua says, “Oh, are you sick now? I can hold your hair back.”

“This hair? No need.” Lea happily pats his spikes. “They stay in place all on their own.”

Aqua says, “I’ve noticed. I’m surprised it’s still so spikey even though it looks like you had been dunked in the ocean.”

She reaches out to ruffle his hair. But on the way to their desination, her knuckle brushes his cheek and he jerks violently. She pulls back at once, an apology on her lips.

“No, no. I’m sorry. That was me,” Lea says before she has a chance to say anything. “It’s just overwhelming. Everything’s so sharp and real now, and those things floating around in my heart aren’t phantom feelings. It’s . . . Am I crying?”

“A little.”

Lea drags a finger under his eye and flicks away the tear there. “Whoa. I’m crying. Never thought
I’d be so happy to say that.”

“They’re happy tears.” She takes a tissue from the counter and fusses over his face.

“They sure are.” He throws his head back with a barking laugh. “Guess I should thank Ventus if I ever see him again.”

She looks away. “It shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“I know.” He stares at her.

“What?”

“Nothing! I just expected to have another hour-long argument about how this isn’t your fault. I haven’t had a chance to tell you yet,” Lea says, “but I’m proud of you for getting out of there.”

“Thanks, dad,” she deadpans.

He smirks. “Not so fun being on the receiving end, huh?”

The plucky sound of Myde’s guitar echoes through the castle. He’s alone today, everyone else being on missions. He’s supposed to be on a mission, too, but it’s reconnaissance and he’s got a few days set aside for it. So why not take the day off and relax?

Of course, Myde hadn’t gotten any permission for his impromptu holiday, which was why he choked when a portal suddenly appeared in front of him and Ventus walked out. Myde scrambled for his notes. Maybe he could pretend he knew what he was talking about and –

“Hey, Myde. You busy?”

Right. This isn’t Xemnas with his intimidating seriousness. This is Ventus, who’s relatively more laidback as long as you don’t talk about her.

“So, I got some interesting news earlier this morning,” Ventus says before Myde answers his previous question. “Well, it’s not news so much as it’s a theory. But if it’s right, it’s one that’s going to help us.”

“What is it?” Myde asks, not really caring.

The tip of the X-blade scratches the floor. “There is a possibility that we don’t need Kingdom Hearts to restore your hearts. Apparently, we might already have what we need.”

“Seriously?” Myde exclaims. “That’s awesome! And you’re saying we don’t need to do any work to set it up?”

“Maybe not,” Ventus says. “But first, I need to ask you a question. In your unbiased opinion, is Dilan or Aeleus more dependable?”

“Independence might not be a good thing,” Ven says to himself. “Means he can go against me.”

“Why are you asking anyways?”
“I want to know which one is expendable,” Ventus says easily. “I should use at least two test subjects.”

Myde’s fingers stop in the middle of plucking a string. “Huh?”

And suddenly, Ventus is flying at him, X-Blade extended and already tearing through his sitar. Myde scrambles to the side, but he still feels the burn as the X-Blade slices through his side.

“Hey, relax,” Ventus says. He walks toward his prey slowly. “If that theory Sora has is right, you’re about to be recompleted.”

“But what if it isn’t?” Myde gasps. He crawls away backwards from the encroaching shadow.

Ventus pauses. He shrugs. “Then that sucks.”

“... Weren’t you a Dusk?”

“I was. But I got better,” Lea says as he leans against the doorway to the Mysterious Tower. “Also, you’re welcome for saving your butt. Again.”

Isa blinks. For once, his usually snarky friend is speechless.

“It’s complicated,” Lea says. “Point is that I’m not a Dusk anymore, and I might have gotten my heart back.”

“What? How?” Isa demands. His gaze bores into Lea’s chest, like he’s imagining tearing part his ribcage to get to the light there.

“I told you, it’s complicated. Some mumbo-jumbo happened when I was supposed to die and... Tada! Honestly, you should go ask one of the keybladers about it. They understand this heart stuff better than I do.”

“Lea? Who are you talking to?” Aqua asks as she comes into sight. She stops. “Isa? Isa, you’re here!”

“Yep. He finally decided that being on his own wasn’t as cool as hanging out with his friends,” Lea says as Aqua rushes over. “You aren’t going to hug him?”

Of course, Aqua jumps on the permission, even if it came from Lea instead of Isa himself. Lea winces, swearing he can hear Isa’s bones being crushed.

“Are you okay?” Aqua says, already fussing over him looking for injuries. “I haven’t seen you since we left the Organization. Lea had a rough time...”

“I’m fine,” Isa says. “Thanks to him.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. I’m... Ugh.” Aqua rubs at tears that are starting to gather under her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m just so glad to have my... two of my friends back.”

Lea’s smile drops. He knows exactly who she’s thinking about. Roxas’s situation had been unique from the start, unique enough that apparently, dying like Lea had wasn’t enough to bring him back.

“Hey, this is supposed to be a happy time.” He sticks his finger in the corner of her lips and pulls it up into a goofy smile. “I have an idea: let’s sneak into Twilight Town and get some ice cream.”
Aqua laughs. “You haven’t change.”

“You can’t blame me. I haven’t been able to eat ice cream for... for a long time.”

“You consider two days a long time,” Isa sneers.

“Yep. And it’s been way longer than that, so let’s get moving!”

Aqua wakes early with the sun. She lingers inside her cocoon of warmth; it’s a treat she’s indulged in ever since escaping the Realm of Darkness, where the only sleep she got were brief moments of unconsciousness after exerting herself in a tough fight.

The sun rises early on this world, so it’s difficult to judge what time it is. She hears noises out in the hall though. The boys like to sleep in, so if they’re up, it’s probably nearing breakfast. Which means she better get up now! No one in the Tower is a bad cook, but she’s definitely the most experienced.

But when she wakes into the dining room, it appears that breakfast has come and gone. Enchanted brooms are sweeping away crumbs or else bouncing dirty dishes on their handles on the way to the sink. Mickey and the keybladers from Destiny Islands are packing knapsacks and freeze when they see her.

“What’s going on?” Aqua asks, already made suspicious by their hesitation.

Mickey puts his bag down. He approaches her with drooping ears. “Morning, Master Aqua. Sorry for waking you.”

“What are you guys up to?” she pushes.

“We... Isa and Lea gave us directions to the World That Never Was. We’re going to confront the Organization.”

A heavy weight drops into her stomach. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry, Aqua.”

“It’s okay,” she whispers. “It has to be done.”

She can’t look at them any longer. Terra and Ven are – were – her best friends. But she doesn’t want any of these four to get hurt either. However, she knows how fixated Xemnas is on Kingdom Hearts; they aren’t going to persuade him to give it up. Somebody’s going to get hurt.

(No matter what happens, she’s going to lose someone.)

She returns to bed, pulls the covers over her head and pretends she never woke up.

The Castle that Never Was may be the biggest castle Sora’s seen yet. The most magical, too. It has a disc as its base that doesn’t really touch the ground, that feeds into a central tower that’s way too skinny to support the massive structure opening from its top. The castle almost looks alive on its own, with hollow Nobody emblems carved into its turrets that look like screaming faces. Behind the castle, a half-heart, mottled Kingdom Hearts awaits. Its light is absorbed by the castle before it, giving the white paint an unearthly glow.

“You guys ready?” Mickey asks.
They nod. At the very end of the group, Ansem the Wise snorts.

“Come on. The sooner we encode that moon, the sooner it’s over.” Ansem’s eyes gleam with a vindictive light that makes Sora uncomfortable; however, he’s the only one that has a plan to deal with the physical Kingdom Hearts, so there’s no choice but to put up with it.

They walk up the path to the Castle That Never Was and enter through its open doors. Given how Isa and Lea described Xemnas and Ventus, Sora expects to be greeted – or ambushed – there. There’s nothing, however. Not a sound. The achingly lonely room remains that.

“We should stick around the edges,” Mickey says after a minute passes and they realize no one is coming to meet them. “Maybe we can find a window that will give us a good path to Kingdom Hearts.”

They let the Keyblade Master lead the way. The rest of them take up positions near Ansem, boxing him in within their protection. He’s the key, after all. Without him, there’s no containing Kingdom Hearts.

It’s twenty minutes of wandering before they hear something. They turn as one; Mickey’s keyblade begins to glow. And soon his isn’t the only one glowing when the source of the footsteps come into view and they see Ventus. He thinks that it is Ventus, at least. Sora’s only seen him in a black cloak or that red-and-black armour from when he was calling himself Vanitas. He’s never seen Ventus in that silver armour before.

“Huh? What are you guys doing here?” Ven asks, befuddled. He rubs the back of his neck.

“The creatures that live here do not deserve to lay their hands on Kingdom Hearts,” Ansem says. Sora desperately tries to quiet him because Ventus is someone Ansem really doesn’t want to fight, but the man won’t be perturbed. “We are here to right that wrong.”

Ventus shrug. “Sure. Whatever. If that’s what makes you happy.”

“You’re okay with this?” Sora asks. Maybe that conversation he had with Ventus earlier got to him.

“Go ahead. Knock yourselves out,” Ventus says. “It doesn’t matter to me; you guys are a little too late anyways.”

“What?” Sora spins around and looks out the window: Yep, Kingdom Hearts is still there, and it isn’t complete. “What do you mean we’re too late?”

“I’m just saying that there isn’t anyone to stop,” Ventus says. “The Organization’s disbanded and I don’t care about Kingdom Hearts.”

“You’re just going to let us take Kingdom Hearts from you?” Riku asks skeptically.

“Sure. I was on my way out anyways,” Ventus says. He starts walking towards them. Sora takes a step back, but Ventus hasn’t summoned his keyblade yet, so they reluctantly lower their own. When Ventus gets close enough, Sora’s able to see that there’s a tear in his armour. It’s by his hip; the edges of the tear are black like it’s been burnt, and he can see some blood underneath.

“You’re bleeding,” Sora says, pointing at the spot.

“Hm? Oh, I must have missed that.” Ventus lays his glowing hand over the tear. When he removes it, the armour has been repaired. “Thanks. Now if you excuse me, I’m going home.”
Ventus walks past them. They exchange looks behind his back, still stunned that they’re not going to fight him.

“Don’t let your guard down,” Riku says. “There’s still Xemnas and . . . Why are you laughing?”

“Sorry, sorry.” Ventus takes a moment to calm himself. “You don’t get it, do you? I already told you that there’s no one here for you to stop.”

They walk through the castle. They find a bedroom with a window directly facing Kingdom Hearts. Ansem sets up his equipment and sets to work.

No one comes to stop them.

Chapter End Notes

We're in the endgame now.
She and her boys are waiting when the away party returns. Lea slides off the sofa’s armrest and places a hand on her shoulder as if to hold her back. There’s something solemn in the faces of those who have returned and she knows – her heart clenches in sympathy – that her prayers for peace were in vain.

“It is done?” Lea asks brusquely.

“Ansem encoded Kingdom Hearts and... Yeah, it’s done,” Sora says awkwardly. He stretches and crosses his arms behind his head.

It’s not his fault. They had to be stopped, she tells herself. It’s for little gain though. She can’t hold down the thought that should have been another way; she should have been able to negotiate something. She should have done anything but hide in this tower like a coward.

“I can’t imagine they took that well,” Isa says, fishing for a story that they already know the outcome to.

“Actually, Ventus didn’t care,” Mickey says.

Ven didn’t care? What does that mean? Xemnas – Xehanort, it must be him – would defend Kingdom Hearts to his last breath. She had thought that Ven would protect Xemnas, but what if he hadn’t?

“Is he... alive?” she asks hoarsely.

“Ven? Yeah, we saw him when he was on his way out,” Sora says.

She covers her mouth, holding back a cry. He’s okay. Ven’s alive – But he isn’t your Ven, she must remind herself. He is a man wearing Ven’s face and name, a shadow of what once was.


“We don’t know. We never saw him.”

“You never saw Xemnas?” Aqua repeats. “That’s not possible. You took Kingdom Hearts from him. He would have tried to stop you the moment you harmed it.”

“He never appeared. None of them did,” Mickey says. “The castle was abandoned.”

Her mind is buzzing. She reminds herself that Xehanort is probably lurking behind Xemnas’s eyes. She reminds herself that the jury’s still up on whether the abandoned castle is a good thing. But her heart doesn’t care. Her heart jumps and does a backflip, overjoyed. It’s done. The danger has passed without any casualties and her boys –Ven knowingly – have stepped aside.

“They stopped. They surrendered!” she babbles excitedly.

“Wait a second! Something’s not right,” Lea says. “This doesn’t sound like Xemnas at all.”

“Don’t you see? They must have found another way!” Aqua tells him. “They realized they don’t need something as dangerous as Kingdom Hearts, so they let it go. This is great news!”
It is. Ven and Xemnas let Kingdom Hearts go. They’re not who everyone thought they were. Instead, they’re a Nobody and a devoted friend trying to restore what was lost.

“Like what?” Lea counters. “What other way do you think they would have found? How would they have known?”

Sora raises his hand. “Uh, actually, I might have mentioned a couple of things to Ventus about your recompletion.”

The others look at Sora in dismay, realizing he revealed sensitive information to the enemy, but Aqua hops over and crushes him in a hug. She should be gentler because she can feel him squirming in discomfort, but she’s just too happy. Only hours ago, she had tried to resign herself to the fact that both of her best friends lives were forfeit. Now, there’s a second chance.

“Thank you, thank you!” she says to him.

Sora smiles. “Always happy to help.”

He looks at himself in the mirror. The body he wore then as Xemnas and now as himself is the same, yet it is different. Nobodies don’t bleed, but this body does. His heart pounds strong in his chest and he can feel blood passing through his arteries.

Carefully, he pries an eye open. Those have changed. They have sharpened in colour, abandoning the amber to return to the golden hue they had donned during his days in Radiant Garden.

He reels back as the bathroom door slams shut. Ven strolls in, looking amused at his brief spurt of panic.

“Ven.” He straightens up.

“Hi. Was I interrupting your beauty time?” Ven teases.

He looks away. “No. I am merely . . . accepting my new situation.”

“Cool. Hey, I got a present for you.”

Without further ado, Ven tosses a small cylinder.

“I was shopping, and I happened to be passing past a salon,” Ven says with a wicked grin. “I thought ‘Geez, isn’t it ridiculous that Terra’s only in his thirties and has grey hair?’ So, tada! I tried to get a dye that was close to your original colour, but it’s hard to tell how close it matches when it’s in a can.”

“That was very thoughtful. Thank you, Ven.” He sets the hair dye down.

Ven peers at him. “Are you going to use it?”

“Of course,” he says quickly.

“And maybe after that you can. . . you know. Finally put all this to rest.”

“I will.”

“Great!” Ven bounces on his toes. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”
As the younger man leaves him, he exhales heavily and loosens his fists. He stares at his palm and frowns at the crescent-shaped cuts left by his nails.

Lea swears. He throws his cup at the opposite wall. The cup is made of plastic though, not glass, so there’s no satisfying shatter.

“What wrong?” Isa asks.

Lea strains his neck, making sure they are alone. “Aqua. She was getting over them. She had just started to be happy again. Now they’re sucking her right back into their orbit. It’s like she’s forgotten everything they’ve done to her.”

“Such is the cycle. What do you think really happened with the Organization?” Isa asks.

“I don’t know. Aqua’s right: Xemnas wouldn’t give up Kingdom Hearts like that,” Lea says. “Something’s rotten, that’s for sure.”

Isa takes a seat at the table across from Lea. Very seriously, he asks, “Can you kill me?”

If Lea had still been drinking from that cup, he would have spat his mouthful out. Even with only his spit to choke on, he coughs violently enough that he needs to thump his chest.

“I’m sorry?” Lea says.

“Kill me. That is how your heart was restored. As my best friend, it is your duty to murder me,” Isa says. He sits there straight-backed with his elbows on the table and hands steepled. It’s a very solemn pose. It would have been funny if Isa had been asking anyone else.

“Right. Not happening. What happened with me was an accident. We don’t know whether it’s something that can be triggered at will, so you’re going to have to earn your heart the long, safe way.” Lea bops him in the forehead. “Hey, look at the good side: without a heart, you can’t get upset at having to wait.”

As if summoned by the glorious gods themselves to save him from this awkward conversation, Aqua frolics in. Really. There’s a little hop to her step and everything.

“Someone’s in a good mood this morning,” Lea remarks.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Aqua replies and Lea tries to pretend that she’s only saying that because it is a nice day outside, and not because yesterday she decided that maybe her old best friends hadn’t really betrayed her and everything she stood for.

“Hey, guys. Bye, guys!” Sora calls as he and Riku rush past them for the exit to outside. Lea leans forward without his conscious input, scanning Sora’s movements for any trace of another mind fighting his. He’s left disappointed.

“So, Aqua,” Isa says, “what are your plans now that the Organization has disbanded?”

She frowns thoughtfully. “I haven’t thought about it. Everything happened so suddenly. I guess I’ll have to return to the Land of Departure soon.”

“You don’t have to do that soon,” Lea says. “Our summer vacation just started.”

“Actually, I think I do,” she says. “The Land of Departure is a world that hovers on the edge of darkness and light. Without a Keyblade Master to protect it, it’s too easy for someone to turn it to
Lea is silent. He doesn’t point out that he’s visited the Land of Departure with her, and so he knows that Aqua is a little too late to stop the whole tilting into darkness thing.

But she reads his mind. “I can restore the world to how it was. But to keep it that way, I need to be there. You two can always visit... Oh, you don’t have keyblades.”

“I’m sure Sora can give us a ride here and there. It’s not like he needs to protect the World Order from us,” Lea scoffs.

She gives him a bright smile that almost makes him go hot behind the ears.

The door opens again. Sora hurries in, looking stressed. He disappears into the stairwell.

“What was that about?” Aqua asks. In response, Isa rises and exits the Tower.

They find Riku on the lowest step to the entrance. He turns when he hears him, jogs up and says, “You guys might want to go inside.”

Although Riku’s speaking to all of them, he’s looking directly at Aqua so that narrows the possible situations down drastically. Aqua’s face hardens. She sets her shoulders and reminds him, “I’ve dealt with Ventus before.”

“It’s... It’s not Ventus,” Riku admits reluctantly.

She’s quiet. Then, just as Lea’s mental voice erupts into a string of expletives, Aqua steps past Riku and walks into the courtyard. She looks up. A moment later, her keyblade is shining and warping as it tumbles in somersaults through the air. The familiar glider appears and she’s off towards the sky.

“Where’s your glider?” Lea demands of Riku. “If that’s who I think it, I really don’t want her going up there alone.”

“I don’t have one,” Riku grumbles. “Aqua’s the only one I know who does.”

“Okay. Do you have flying magic or anything? Something to get me up there?”

Riku looks around. He shrugs with one shoulder. “There’s trees.”

“Fine! Portal me to the top of a freaking tree.”

Thankfully, Riku’s smart enough not to take him literally. He opens the portal not at the top of the tree, but far enough towards the base that the area Lea must take a short leap onto is strong enough to support his weight. It’s a cramped fit; his body is long and branches tend to come in clusters.

“Do you need help?” Riku asks as his upper body hangs out of the leaking portal.

“It’s fine,” Lea says. As much as Aqua is indebted to Riku for his help, Lea doubts the younger boy has enough clout to persuade her of anything. “Just be on guard in case things get messy.”

He begins to climb. It’s nothing new. As rebellious teens, Isa and he had their fair share of impromptu climbing into places they shouldn’t be. A tree is nothing. He gets as high as he dares, stopping when the branches begin to splinter and bend ominously. He snaps off a leafy one in front of his face and throws it aside. The world opens as he does, and he can see her. She’s higher than him; he’s not nearly close enough to touch. But if he picks up a pinecone, he might be able to hit her.
She isn’t all he sees. The worst has happened. It isn’t Ventus she’s facing; it’s him. But he looks different. Way different. Xemnas has ditched their trademarked black cloak for something more. . . medieval-like? Is that the word? He has no idea what fashion Xemnas is trying to emulate because he swears his former Superior is wearing a long skirt, but then Xemnas shifts and the damn thing is revealed to be super baggy pants instead. He’s got a black shirt, too, with crisscrossed suspenders on the front and his hair is brown. . .

Lea’s newborn heart seizes in panic. He knows exactly what kind of mind game they’re playing with her.

“Aqua!” he calls out.

“Lea? Lea, what are you doing? You could fall!” Aqua scolds, wrenching her attention away from Terra. Hell, if enduring a lecture is the price of getting her away from him, he’ll take it.

“Never mind me. Who is that?”

She looks over her shoulder as if genuinely confused about what he’s talking about. When she turns back, he swears her eyes are glossy. “Lea, it’s him. It’s Terra.”

*You fucker.* He prays Xemnas can read his mind.

“Is that what he’s saying?” Lea says in a low voice, not that Aqua seems to notice his tone.

Xemnas nods at him in greeting. “Hello, Lea. I understand you, too, have regained your heart. I am happy to hear it.”

Lea ignores him. He shifts for an a better look. Like glass, Yen Sid’s barrier around the world is transparent. But also like glass, if you look at it from the right angle, it becomes faintly visible. He sees the barrier shimmering between Aqua and Xemnas. That’s good. But she’s close to the border; less than a foot away. It makes his palms sweat and threatens his hold on the tree. He just wants Xemnas to attack or for someone to start yelling, or for anything to shatter this absurdly unsettling peace they’ve found.

“Aqua, I’ve missed you. It feels like it’s been decades since I’ve been able to see you as myself,” Xemnas says and Lea cringes because although his appearance might have changed, it’s the same voice.

“I’ve missed you, too.” There’s so much to unpack in her voice: sadness, longing, all things that would be heartwarming in another time. But not now.

“Aqua!” Lea’s shout slices into their happy reunion as smoothly as a hot knife through butter. “Just hear me out. I know this is a huge moment, but don’t forget what he did to you.”

“I know I did awful things as Xemnas, but I’m not that person anymore,” Xemnas insists. “Ven restored my heart. I’m different, now.”

“See, Lea?” She’s almost begging him. Like a young child asking her father for a puppy. Wouldn’t it be something if she was right and all this Xemnas-Aqua nastiness could blow over? But he can’t squash the intrusive thought that there’s a beartrap hidden in this conversation and it hasn’t gone off yet.

“I just think we need to be careful,” Lea says.

“Lea,” Xemnas says again. “I know some of the actions I took towards you were reprehensible. I am
“Sorry. Without a heart, I lost perspective. I went astray.”

He aims the last word at Aqua. Lea can tell it means something to her, but he doesn’t know what. It only pours fuel on the smouldering suspicion within him.

“If you’re still the guy who let the Heartless ravage our world,” Lea snaps.

Aqua’s eyes widen. She’s either surprised he brought it up or just remembering that – he doesn’t know which. Xemnas is eerily silent.

“Maybe. But you’re still the guy who let the Heartless ravage our world,” Lea snaps.

Aqua takes a step back on her glider and softly says to Xemnas, “Maybe we should keep our distance for now.”

Lea keeps eagle-eyes locked on Terra, hands itching to grab chakrams he no longer has. If a fight’s going to happen, it’s going to be now.

Xemnas nods. “I understand.”

Is that it? He hopes so because he needs to breathe and he hasn’t been able to for the last exchange. It wouldn’t be a surprise if his face was turning blue.

“Aqua? I didn’t want to overwhelm you, so I talked Ven out of accompanying me, but he insisted I bring this instead.” Xemnas reaches into his pocket and pulls out an envelope. “It’s a letter for you.”

“Oh. Thank you.” And like any normal person would, Aqua automatically reaches to take it from Xemnas –

She reaches past Yen Sid’s barrier.

The beartrap shuts.

There’s nothing for her to hold onto. Hardly any ground for her to dig her heels in. Xemnas’s free hand snaps over her wrist and there’s only a moment of resistance before he wrenches her off the glider and pulls her fully outside the world’s barrier. Her glider warps again, twisting in midair so that it’s handle lands right in Aqua’s waiting palm. She swings. Xemnas takes the blow, letting her keyblade clash against the piece of armour glued to his shoulder.

“Aqua!” Lea flings his arm out automatically, expecting a fireball. But he’s not a fire-controlling Nobody anymore, and he hasn’t learned how to use normal magic like the regular folks. Riku is shouting up at him but fuck, the kid doesn’t know how to fly!

In the end, it simply happens too fast. Lea looks up from shouting at Riku just in time to see Aqua and Xemnas disappear into a portal.

“Let go of me!”

At this distance, he doesn’t have a chance to block her spell. The beam of light slams into his jaw
like a punch, cracking his teeth together. She twists and tears herself free, leaping off his glider. The landing is hard because she can’t accurately judge where the ground is. It’s all black and purple and foggy.

It’s made of shadows.

It’s not like the Realm of Darkness. The Realm is solid. This is more like being trapped within a smog; it’s almost dream-like, and that comforts her in a way. She spins in a circle but doesn’t see a way out. The man before her has sealed his portal already, and he’s the only one who can make more.

“Aqua.” He stands there calmly like he hadn’t brought them here. Like he hadn’t attempted to abduct her.

“You’re not really Terra, are you, Xehanort?” Aqua says.

Still, he hardly reacts. “I know why you would think that, but I am not him. It’s time to come home.”

“Not with you.” She holds her keyblade in a guard position, ready.

“There is no more room for delays. Ven... demands you come home.” Finally, there’s a flicker of emotion; but the emotion she reads doesn’t make sense, so she doesn’t know what to make of it.

“He’s not our Ven. He’s someone else.”

“Tell him that,” Xehanort says in a low voice. He scoops up his keyblade and even now, it’s not Ends of the Earth, but Void Gear.

She’s lost before against Ven and Xemnas. She can’t let Xehanort get Ven involved in the fight again. She needs to end this here or get away.

Xehanort had always been a creature of darkness. With his heart restored, that becomes apparent. She sees it when he moves: the smoky aura that dogs his footsteps. It curls off him like a mane, or like a banner declaring his allegiance. There isn’t time to be disgusted. There isn’t time to feel anything. The darkness lends him a speed and agility unlike any that Terra ever had. He’s in front of her and then he’s twirling into the darkness and he’s behind. Just like before. Just like the last time she tried to purge his influence from Terra’s body.

She spins with her keyblade out, bringing it across to intercept Terra’s strike. The block sends him reeling back, but he takes advantage of the momentum to leap away from her. He brings his palm up, closes his hand, and there’s a second of coldness under her feet before dark spikes rupture through the ground. They graze her leg as she dodges aside. She releases projectiles from her keyblade like bullets.

Xehanort’s blocks are as violent as him. Rather than deflecting or absorbing them, he slashes through the projectiles in a show of strength with a speed that would give anyone pause. He gets closer with each swing, too, and on the last one he suddenly propels himself forward in a sideways flip that throws his entire weight behind his keyblade. It’s too much. Void Gear plows through her block and slams into her like a freight train. She hits the ground elbow first and skids across it.

“You cannot hide from us forever,” Xehanort tells her. “We are bound.”

“My heart is bound to Terra’s, not yours,” she says as the healing glow fades from her arm. “And I won’t rest until I’ve freed him.”
His lip twitches in what’s almost a small smirk. “Even now, you are blind. Like Master, like student.”

She grits her teeth. “Terra would never speak of our Master like that!”

“Terra watched his Master try to kill Ven. Terra saw his Master trust the traitor over him.” Xehanort huffs. “Terra has outgrown such childish idolization.”

“Has he outgrown decency, too? Or did attacking your friends fall into favour while I was gone?”

He looks away for a moment. “If not me, it would be Ven. My coming for you, even with this turn of events, is a kindness.”

He flicks his arm in her direction. The smoggy floor bubbles and swells dangerously. She flips into the air a beat before the floor pops and flailing, whip-like appendages burst out of the ground. Midair, she freezes a bundle that get too close. Her boots find purchase in the ice as she lands atop them. She brings her keyblade around with another freezing aura as the remaining appendages attempt to converge on her.

“Stop resisting.” There are blue-black orbs hovering near Xehanort, like Xemnas’s ethereal beams, that fly at her with the signal of his lazy swing.

“You can’t have me!” She dodges the first few orbs and swings a small shield at the last ones with enough force to deflect them his way. Xehanort ducks.

“We don’t have a choice in the matter,” Xehanort says.

He flies at her with unnatural speed. He’s not Ven though; his speed only comes in bursts and he slows as he closes in on her. She casts a shield this time, having learned, and his keyblade bounces off it with a blast of darkness. She cartwheels away. Terra is dangerous up close; Xehanort, even more so.

“Where will you go?” Xehanort asks, his voice rumbling. “Where can you hide? Even the Realm of Darkness isn’t safe for you anymore.”

Motes of light orbit her head before launching themselves at him. He takes the blow with clenched teeth, before springing off his heels. It’s three strikes that follow in quick succession. She blocks the first two, but the strength of the second yanks her keyblade out of place and Void Gear’s teeth rake against her chest on the third.

“You are the final piece of a puzzle a decade old. Do you think you can dissuade Ven from his hunt with words?” Xehanort scoffs. “Even your Ven disobeyed the Master and chased me across the universe because a stranger said our bond may be at risk.”

He brings his keyblade over his shoulder and swings at her again. This time, with both hands behind it, her block holds.

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He brings his keyblade over his shoulder and swings at her again. This time, with both hands behind it, her block holds.

“Yen Sid’s barrier can’t protect you forever. Ven will find a way to draw you out, no matter how many suffer in the process. This is a kindness.”

And he’s gone. She stumbles forward as he teleports. She raises a full barrier instantly and looks behind her.

He comes from above. But even with his full weight and the momentum of his fall, her dome holds. She aims upward and hears him grunt as electricity travels through his system.
When she drops the barrier, she casts Gravity, expecting to see Xehanort slam into the ground. He does, but before he does, she watches him twist in midair, bringing the tip of Void Gear down so that it slams into the ground first. As it does, stones punch out of the ground around him. And under her.

She lands on her back, ears ringing. Her spine creaks as she sits up. Terra rises and tries to shake off his own crash-landing like a dog.

She waits. As she expected, he charges her again. She releases her magic and time nearly freezes; he’s so slow compared to her that she can trace the bead of sweat rolling down his temple. She zips to his side, strikes twice before moving again. He turns and slashes Void Gear through her midsection.

Only it’s not her he swung at, but one of her afterimages. She reads his shock in the jerk of his muscles as they fail to hit anything solid. She’s behind him now; she slashes in an X. And when he turns to try and counter her again, he’s facing another afterimage and she’s to his left. She goes for the leg, driving her keyblade into the back of his knee and forcing him to the ground. She teleports once more and delivers the last blow as a vicious strike to the side of his jaw.

For others, it would be a knockout blow, but Xehanort is strong enough to tough it out. He spits and stands again on slightly unsteady legs.

“If you do win this fight, then what?” Xehanort asks. “You cannot summon the darkness. Time is my friend here.”

As if to taunt her, he raises a portal. She recoils at the very sight of it, picturing yellow eyes waiting on the other side.

“When you are ready, destiny awaits,” Xehanort says. It almost sounds like he’s going to leave her there, but then he swings his keyblade in a clear prelude to another clash.

As their magic batters each other’s shields, she wonders what his game is. He can’t be expecting her to simply grow bored and walk through that portal. She was in the Realm of Darkness for eight years; she’s patient. Lea saw Xehanort pull her into the portal. The others will come for her. Maybe it’s for his own retreat. So that if he truly feels that she’s getting to close to tearing his mind out of Terra, he can flee. After all, she can’t follow him. Because if she does, she’ll run straight into Ven and –

Ven. That’s his game. If the portal is open here, then it’s open on the other side. It’s visible to anyone who wanders into the same room.

She whips her keyblade around in a spin that creates a shockwave of wind magic. It throws off the paths of the dark bolts Xehanort has shot at her and forces the man himself back a few paces. She mouths sorry, not to him, but to the friend he has possessed before casting the same magic under her feet and springing away.

“Where are you going?” Xehanort says. “The darkness is endless.”

Is that so? Then maybe she can hide.

The good thing about the smoky, not-quite-solid-ground is that it offers little friction. If she lands with the right angle and enough momentum, she slides across it and covers distance at a pace she wouldn’t get with pure running. A couple of dark-energy bolts flash past as Xehanort tries to hit her from behind.

“Where are you going?” Xehanort demands again, voice harsher. “Only the abyss awaits beyond
Then that’s where she’ll go. She can’t allow herself to play into Xehanort’s plans, not after the atrocities his others have caused. The smog gets thicker the further she pushes into the darkness.

“Aqua, stop! You don’t know where you’re going.”

She can’t see below her own hips. Xehanort is yelling louder than ever, but his voice is fainter than it was before. When the darkness chokes her vision, she closes her eyes and pushes forward.

Then the ground is gone. Her eyes snap open, but there’s nothing for them to focus on. She falls and yet, she’s not falling. There’s no sensation of rushing air, just weightlessness –

She spoke too soon.

The world erupts into light and the impact with the ground knocks the air out of her lungs. Something warm and grainy finds it way into her mouth. She hacks it up as some gets into her lungs.

When she raises her head, she’s temporarily blinded by the bright light. She shields her eyes, stares at the ground. Slowly, the golden ground becomes bearable to look at. She lets her gaze stretch outward and finds more of the same. Although she isn’t certain yet, she has an inkling of where she is. She stands and takes in the crags and rocky plateaus around her.

Just as she thought: this is the Keyblade Graveyard. That, or the wilderness of Agrabah.

She staggers to the side of a cliff and rests in its shadow. She needs a plan. The Graveyard is a shelter for the dead, not the living. Xehanort implied the Mysterious Tower wouldn’t be safe for her, but he could have been lying. Getting there poses a problem, however. They’ll expect her to return. Maybe if she goes through Twilight Town again . . .

Hm? What’s that? There’s a beam of light in the distance. It rises from a plateau like someone is signalling her. However, the beam never changes its angle; whatever the sun is reflecting off from is still. It’s odd.

There’s little chance it’s Xehanort or Ven; they wouldn’t stand still like that. Yet they should be the only three that had spent any significant amount of time in this place. Part of her wants to ignore the light, but it’s on such a sensitive world – such a potentially dangerous world – that she feels duty calling.

She soars up to the plateau and dismounts, her keyblade swishing through the air and back into her hand. The source of the reflected light lies clear in her sights.

And it’s moving. The helmet of Terra’s lost armour turns slowly, focusing on her with nonexistent eyes.
End of the Line

The armour seems worn in places; it’s dull in other sections from years of caking sand. Little grains of sand fall as the helmet turns. There is a sand-drift against the armour’s back, burying the hem of its red cape. It is still obviously Terra’s armour though, and apparently still sentient as well.

“Terra?”

“Xe. . . Xehanort. . .?” The armour croaks.

Her stomach curls in on itself. “No. I’m sorry. I thought I stopped him, that I drove him out, but I didn’t. It wasn’t you.”

The armour takes in her words. The helmet rotates to its original position and falls still.

“Have you been here this whole time?” When the armour doesn’t respond, she pushes. “Are you waiting for Xehanort to come back? I’m not sure if he will; he’s already got Ven and the X-Blade.”

The armour is silent. She bites her lip and tries not to be hurt.

It’s hot in the midday sun. She should get moving. The Lingering Will doesn’t stir as her footsteps take her away.

Then, she stops. She turns. The armour is where she left it, alone and dusty on the forsaken world.

“How long are you planning to stay here?” she asks it, a desperation she doesn’t understand filling her tone.

It is silent.

She wasn’t sure when her legs decided to carry her back to the armour. She studies it and breathes out through her nose. On an impulse, she spits on one of her sleeves and polishes the armour’s helm. Slowly, grainy metal brightens. It is better. It makes the armour look less lonely, somehow.

She polishes the rest of the helm. It gleams afterwards like its been enchanted. She lets her gaze fall to the rest of the armour. Before she can seriously think about touching the rest of it up, an invasive drip of sweat slithers down her sternum and reminds her that it would be too much.

She leans back. Cleaning Terra’s helm had monopolised all her attention and now that it was done, the feelings she had been blocking out hit her at once. It was hot. Her hair was matted with sweat and limbs itchy from all the sand that had stuck to her damp skin. And she was tired, too. Thinking came slowly, like the words in her inner monologue had to wade through a thick sludge.

She leans against the armour’s side. It should have burnt at the touch, but the Lingering Will wasn’t that hot. It wasn’t cold either, though. It was warm. Comfortable. Body temperature. There’s still the sun however and shutting her eyes and pressing into the Will’s side doesn’t shake the unrelenting pressure of heat. She grabs its cape and tears it out of the sand-drift. She tosses it over herself, and the difference the shade makes is immediately apparent.

Somehow, she fits her head onto the ridge marking the armour’s hip. She doesn’t notice that sleep has already begun to take her.
Sand makes a much better pillow than Terra’s armour, and that’s what she finds herself laying on when she wakes. The heat is still omnipresent, but the coolness of the shade makes it bearable. She pushes her upper body off the ground, blinks away the stickiness in her eyes, and lets her gaze rise to the sloping ceiling above——

This isn’t where she fell asleep.

Stormfall comes to her while she’s in the middle of leaping to her feet, and she ends up planting it in the ground to push herself up. She twists and turns her head, never settling on one place too long, only getting flashes of the environment around her; dark and shaded; rough and rocky; a great expanse of sand spreading away from her through an opening that channeled light. She stumbles back and——

Smacks right into the upright shaft of Ends of the Earth. Gasping, she whirls around and faces the armour that had been on its knees behind her the entire time.

“Terra?” she asks shakily.

The proximity of the Lingering Will brings comfort, like it would to a baby bird watching its mother swoop down to the nest. She looks around again. She, they, are in a cave. Footsteps, deep ones left by a heavy, metal boot, led into the cave from the great desert beyond.

“Did you bring me here?” she asks.

She waits an absurdly long time for an answer. Just when she’s about to give up, the Lingering Will slowly moans, “Aqua.”

“Yes, it’s me.” She sits, crossing her legs as she eagerly awaits more. But nothing comes. The Will is dormant once more.

She has no idea why the Lingering Will brought her here. Was there something she was supposed to see? The cave did lead deeper in, but not by much, and when she ventured into its depths, there was nothing to be found. She peers outside. In the near distance rises the great plateau she had found the Will upon. It hadn’t taken her far. But the question of why it had moved her remained.

She sits in front of the Lingering Will again and twiddles her thumbs. Can it feel pain, she wonders? No one could hold the position it does for hours, let alone years, without their knees screaming. She traces the edge of its keyblade’s shaft with a couple of fingers, a chill running down her spine when feels how so alive the keyblade still is.

“This reminds me of our secret cave back home. The one in the mountains,” she adds quickly. While the Master did tell Terra and her about Lingering Wills, it hadn’t been a topic of much study, and she was unsure how many memories of its original life Terra’s armour carried. “Do you remember? Ven didn’t know about it, so you used to sneak out there when you were working on that wooden keyblade.”

“Ven,” the Will groans.

“Yes, Ven! He...” She had instinctively smiled at the sound of his name, but now she remembers and... Terra didn’t know, did he? How could he?

Her legs tuck in against her chest. Ends of the Earth towers above her, like a guillotine awaiting the judge’s command.

“Terra, Ven didn’t make it,” she tells him. “He’s... different. Vanitas merged with him and he’s
dangerous. He’s on Xehanort’s side.”

“Xehanort,” the armour says.

“Yes, him. Like I said, I never drove him out. I failed.”

“Xehanort.”

“Yes, Xehanort.”

“Xehanort!”

She smiles a little. “Not much of a conversationalist, are you?”

The statement is true, but she cherishes his attempt anyways. Because this is the first time she knows she’s been speaking to her Terra since escaping the Realm of Darkness.

She leans back against Ends of the Earth and stares at the ceiling as time ticks by.

“And then what happened?”

“She fled into the darkness and . . . It’s impossible to say exactly what happened.”

Ven nods. His X-Blade taps against the ground rapidly, like a nervous tick. “So, where would she be now?”

“She could be anywhere.”

Ven nods against. It’s a jerky, twitchy thing. He begins to walk away, and then tosses his arms into the air and roars in frustration.

“Why are you two so annoying?” Ven groans. He flops onto a nearby couch, rolling onto his back. “Do I have to snap your keyblades in half?”

Terra takes a step back and glances down at his hand where Void Gear still sits. “You can do that?”

“Um, no idea. I don’t think so.” Ven says thoughtfully. “Keyblades are a reflection of the heart. . . Well, hearts can be broken, but then apparently you just get two keyblades instead. So, now what do we do?”

“She won’t return to the Mysterious Tower by any standards routes,” Terra says. “If she does attempt to find her way there, then it means she knows a way to reach that world undetected.”

“If she doesn’t want to go back there, then there’s nowhere in particular she would want to go,” Ven finishes. “She can be literally anywhere.”

These two are going to kill him with stress. When he was younger, he used to dream about what his life would be like as a Keyblade Master. He had imagined constant adventures and enemies, like the characters in the comics Terra brought him from other worlds. But when he had pictured adventures, they hadn’t been like this. His friends were supposed to be the constant, the party members. Not the quarry he was chasing.

“I want to see it,” Ven declares.

“It will not help,” Terra tells him. “There is no way to track her through the darkness.”
“I’m still going to see it. Maybe it will give me inspiration.” True to his word, Ven raises a portal.
“Come along if you want.”

Terra does. They trudge into the darkness together, and Ven lets the shadows fall behind him. He’s no stranger to Corridors of Darkness and in his past life as Vanitas, they were a second home. That said, the flickering shapes of the darkness around him are always different; never familiar. Darkness, by definition, is formless and indistinct. This place is no different.

“And she ran out into the darkness,” Ven says. He tries to pierce the shadows’ veil, but either he fails of there’s nothing to be found beyond.

“The Corridors connect to the hearts of all worlds,” Terra says. “But there are no landmarks or mapped routes to determine which you are approaching.”

Ven sniffs. If Aqua’s scent still lingers in this place, it’s completely drowned out by the overwhelming reek of pure darkness.

“Shit,” he says. There really is no way to track her, then. Out of habit, he takes out the Wayfinder in his pocket. It seems dull in the dim light, but it’s still warm when he holds it in his palm. He knows there’s connective magic inside the glass, but it’s not enough; he knows from experience. It’s not that type of connection –

And as he stands there, brooding over that eight-year long search, it’s only natural his mind strays to the end of it. He has an idea.

Terra squints at the sudden light that engulfs the Corridor. “Ven? What are you doing?”

Ven doesn’t answer. His tongue sticks out of the corner of his mouth as he hauls Wayward Wind above his shoulder and aims at nothing. He sets his hip, takes a purposeful stride forward, just as Terra taught him during their strength-training exercises, and then flings the keyblade like a shotput. The invisible cord connecting his heart to his keyblade lengths, grows taut. Until something snaps and its presence fades from the Corridor.

“Ven?”

Ven catches Terra’s eye. “Let’s see where it ended up.”

The Lingering Will doesn’t talk much and when it does, it be would generous to describe what it says as a sentence. She doesn’t mind. When she rests her palm on its chest, there’s a hum underneath that reminds her of a heartbeat. The Lingering Will’s . . . will is so powerful that it exudes a tangible aura like an electric field. It’s like a little tap on her shoulder to remind her that it’s there and listening.

“Do you remember the first time you summoned your armour? Neither of us were expecting it – I think we both thought I would, first, since it was magic – and you were so startled you fell down the hill. He tried to hide it, but I know the Master wanted to laugh.”

The Lingering Will rarely reacts to her stories, but this time, it does. The helm turns with the grating sound of rubbing metal. It intones, “Master . . . Eraquus.”

“I’m certainly not talking about You Know Who,” she says with a bit of a bite. She’s learned quickly that using Xehanort’s actual name irritates it.

“Master is dead,” it says suddenly.
“I know. Terra, you know it wasn’t your fault, right?”

But the Will is dormant once more.

She curls up next to the Will and uses its cape as a blanket. Some part of her mind whispers that she should be searching for food, that the icicles she sucks on to quench her thirst aren’t enough. She doesn’t feel hungry though.

She lays there for some time. The only reason she gets up at all is because the Lingering Will suddenly moves. It isn’t like the times before, either. Whenever she had seen the armour move before, it had moved with the slowness you would expect of an aged suit of armour. But now when the armour shifts away from her and stands, it’s as smooth as a living person.

She quickly stands, too. “Terra?”

The armour looks straight at her. “Xehanort.”

“Um. . .” She struggles to remember what they had talked about last.

“Xehanort!” the armour insists, walking towards her.

“I’m not . . . Terra, it’s me!” Stormfall flashes into her hand. It feels heavy.

“Xehanort!”

With that, the armour turns away from her. It plants itself in the mouth of the cave, cape flapping, shoulders flared as if to declare a territorial claim. It doesn’t move when Aqua squeezes past it.

There’s something in the desert. Stormfall shudders in her hand. The shadow of what she’s looking at is familiar somehow. Enough to draw her in until she can see what it is.

“What are you doing here?” she asks aloud. She grabs the handle of Wayward Wind, impaled upright in the sand. The keyblade sparks with energy, almost overjoyed at their reunion.

And she feels the touch of darkness in the air.

She stumbles away from the keyblade and back towards the cave, but it’s too late. She is the only moving thing in the desert; it’s impossible that Xehanort hasn’t seen her.

Ven steps out behind Xehanort. He seems to flash into place next to Xehanort, like Vanitas had done those many years ago.

Her elbow smashes into the midsection of the Lingering Will, who had somehow snuck up on her. She can feel its concentration on the man possessing its body; it inflates the aura around him until the hairs on her arm stand on end.

“Xehanort,” it growls.

Ven’s laughing. Wayward Wind returns to him, and he slings it across his shoulders and behind his neck.

“See? Remember when I told you about your armour,” Ven says cheerfully to Xehanort. “And there’s Ends of the Earth. Finally! Won’t it be nice to have your own keyblade back?”

The Lingering Will suddenly switches to a two-handed grasp, as if wary that they’ll try to take the keyblade from it right now.
“Hey, Aqua.” While Ven’s still smiling, his pitch drops; there’s something considerably more cautious in it. “I guess I should have known that you’d end up here.”

“What do you want?” she demands.

Ven fidgets like a kid with a crush. “I got Terra back. He’s not a Nobody anymore.”

“No. He’s worse,” she says with disgust. Something shifts on Xehanort’s face that almost resembles hurt.

Ven frowns. “That’s all you have to say?”

She glares at Xehanort. “I think we’ve discussed all we needed to.”

Terra and she used to argue a lot when they were little, usually about petty things. That look Ven wears now is eerily similar to the one Master Eraqus would wear when he overheard them.

“Aqua, don’t be like this,” Ven says. He reaches –

“Xehanort!”

Aqua suddenly finds metal digging into her abdomen; it takes a fair bit of pressure for her to realize that it’s the Lingering Will arm and it’s pushing her behind it.

“Uh, sure. He sucks,” Ven says, confused.

The Lingering Will stares at him. “Ven.”

“Hey, Terra.”

“. . . You are different.”

“I hope so. Can’t stay a little kid forever.” Ven leans to the side to get a better look at her, she who is half-hidden behind the Lingering Will. “Anyways . . .”

The Lingering Will shifts into Ven’s path.

“. . . Terra?” Ven questions.

“This is why I wanted to avoid this place,” Xehanort says. “A Lingering Sentiment is a mind trapped in time. Aqua, too, was frozen in time in the Realm of Darkness, so the difference between its memories and the reality of her is slim.”

“And what’s the point you want to make?” Ven asks him.

“It’s hostile toward you and me,” Xehanort says.

Ven glances between Xehanort and the Lingering Will, and then staggers back towards Xehanort. The Lingering Will takes that opening to raise Ends of the Earth to a more battle-ready position. But it doesn’t strike. It looks sideways at her instead, and she swears Terra’s voice in her mind is real:

You ready for this?

She adopts her own stance. I am.

The Will slams its keyblade into the ground.
The earth shakes. It explodes in a great cloud of sand that nearly blinds her along with Ven and Xehanort. But it’s not lethal; there’s no sharp particles in the cloud or anything that appears to cause damage. She doesn’t understand until she must dive out of the way of the Lingering Will’s suddenly-charging Ultima Cannon. It lets loose the beam and strafes the cloud; somewhere within, Ven starts cussing out the Will and complaining that it hurt.

Xehanort reappears first, shadows leeching off his outline. Void Gear aimed at her throat. She blocks, catching the keyblade’s teeth with Stormfall’s shaft. Metal against metal rings through the air, and the back of her neck erupts in goosebumps as she feels the Lingering Will reach another level of rage. Xehanort is quick though, retreating the moment his attack against her failed.

Xehanort’s fingers curl. She recognizes the gesture. Eyes wide, she turns to the Will and shouts, “He’s trying to separate us.”

She latches onto the Will’s side just as the earth begins to rise. They’re dangerously close to the edge of the rising platform; she nearly slips but the Will grabs her and locks her into place under its shoulder. They hunker down as the sky rushes towards them at a dizzying pace.

It takes a couple of moments to reorient themselves when the ground starts rising, enough time for Ven to seemingly appear out of nowhere. He leaps high into the air and brings his keyblade down on the ground like the Lingering Will had. Instead of a cloud of dust, however, a spiderweb of cracks claw their way towards them. Aqua leaps ahead, leaps clear of the cracking earth, but the Will doesn’t react at all.

“Terra!”

She’s only begun to reach for the armour when the section of earth it’s standing on sloughs off. She’s left with her fingers groping towards empty air and turns just in time to see Xehanort charging his shotlock.

They’re less numerous than the ethereal beams Xemnas once subjected her to, and her barrier holds against the onslaught. Ven’s ignoring them, peering over the edge where the Lingering Will fell. He looks up suddenly in her direction and swings the X-Blade –

Aqua coughs. There’s blood on her chin thanks to her teeth slicing into her lower lip. The shattered remnants of her barrier fade around her.

“Come on. Let’s get this done,” Ven commands.

Xehanort on one side, this man wearing Ven’s face on the other. She doesn’t think she’s been in a worse situation.

Then something arcs high over the plateau. It’s long and thin with a faint red glow. It dives to ground suddenly, wrapping itself around Xehanort’s keyblade. Xehanort is yanked harshly towards the edge. He plants his feet, muscles heaving as he fights whatever’s on the other side.

Then the Lingering Will is hurtling over the edge, propelled by Xehanort’s own strength as he fights the whip wrapped around his weapon. The Lingering Will slams directly into Xehanort, using its own metal casing as its weapon. It sends Xehanort tumbling halfway across the plateau.

“Terra!” she gasps.

The Lingering Will straightens up, unbothered by the recent impact. It vibrates like a stricken gong.

“You know that’s your body, right?” Ven says to the armour. “Is this one of those ‘Prove you’re
“Worthy’ tests?”

“Xehanort,” the Lingering Will growls.

“Come on, Aqua,” Ven says. He trots towards her like he hadn’t just attacked her, like they hadn’t just hunted her down like a rat.

The lash of the whip is sudden. Ven isn’t expecting it. It gets him across the cheek, not sharp enough to draw blood, but with a harsh enough sound that she expects bruises. Ven scowls and looks back at Xehanort as if to scold the man for the armour’s rampage.

“It’s just one thing after another,” Ven mutters, wiping imaginary blood from his cheek. “Though I guess standing out here in the heat for years would drive anyone nuts. Alright. Let’s end this.”

He slides back into a fighting stance, and it isn’t Ven’s backwards grip, but the aloft grip of Vanitas.

“Let’s end this,” she echoes, staring down Xehanort.

“I have detected a sudden surge of energy in the Keyblade Graveyard,” Yen Sid tells them solemnly. The wizard stares out a window, gaze locked on a twinkling star.

“Nobody lives there though, which means it’s got to be them!” Mickey says.

“I agree,” Yen Sid says. “That they would be gathered there is troubling, as Xehanort’s last plans centered on that world.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll stop ’em,” Mickey vows. He turns to the others, “You guys with me?”

“Yeah!” they say together.

Mickey turns to Isa and Lea next. “I know you two are worried about Master Aqua, but I think you should stay here. There’s probably going to be a lot of fighting.”

“I understand,” Isa says. He puts a hand on Lea’s shoulder; Lea appears ready to protest.

Lea sulks. “Fine. Make sure to give Xehanort a good whack to the face for me.”
Yesterday and Today

The Lingering Will goes straight for its possessed body, gauntlet outstretched as if to throttle the life from Xehanort. Aqua’s been choked before; she can imagine how painful it would be when metal’s doing the job.

However, unluckily for them, Xehanort has a guardian angel on his side and without the weight of a body, the Lingering Will is more vulnerable to being tossed around than Terra was. Ven’s Aeroga sends the Will teetering to the side like a glider banking into a turn. The Lingering Will hooks Ends of the Earth into the ground to steady itself, digging its heels in once its feet make contact. Xehanort, quick to take notice, speeds towards the Will with the same dark powers he had against her.

Aqua summons a barrier, not for herself but for the struggling armour. The momentum of the spell’s motion carries her into the next blow: spark-like flares in Ven’s direction. It isn’t much, not very powerful, but it looks flashy enough that Ven’s compelled to dodge and split his attention. Her attack hadn’t been very powerful, but his glares spells out that he didn’t know that. It gives the Lingering Will the chance to catch its footing, to stand tall as Xehanort’s keyblade slides off the barrier before him. But Xehanort is not intimidated easily. Neither is Ven.

Xehanort’s exchanging blows with the Lingering Will. They’re both sturdy fighters that attack with heavy blows that flow into each other and are noticeably affected by gravity. That means Aqua has breathing room, and uses that to funnel magic into her keyblade, to make it strong. She twirls her keyblade and channels the movement into a spell; the bolt trails an icy cloud behind it like a comet.

And Ven comes out of nowhere. It’s a blur. He cuts in front of her, X-Blade slicing through her spell. But that deflection is almost an afterthought as he charges the Lingering Will and plants a boot right into the center of its chest. Ven’s big enough now that the impact drives the Lingering Will back, and Ven follows up with a toss of his keyblade. The ringing that follows has her preparing a healing spell, only to hold back at the last minute when realizes she it might not work on the armour.

“Gravity!”

The Lingering Will is yanked to the side, where it joins a rapidly growing ball of dirt at the epicenter of Ven’s spell. The Will, of course, doesn’t complain, but she has no such qualms. Her own Gravity spell, tuned to Ven and Xehanort instead, doesn’t do much to harm her opponents, but does swallow the influence of Ven’s spell and free her ally.

The Will moves fast, as fast as Xehanort himself had. It swings that heavy keyblade as easily as a twig; Ends of the Earth whistles through the air with a large, sweeping blow meant to catch the two men standing side by side. They leap back, but the distance means nothing to a keyblade that has suddenly stretched into a whip. Ven slides in front of Xehanort, defends him, and the whip hardens back into a keyblade as the Lingering Will surges forward.

And she leaps from behind. The Will is the more distracting of the two of them and gives her a clear path to Xehanort, but he tastes something amiss at the last moment and looks over his shoulder. His overhead block is hasty, but enough to stop her keyblade as it grazes his nose. Next to them, Ven jumps, having forgotten she was also involved in the fight.

There’s no room for a follow-up from any of them. The Lingering Will is coming, and no one wants to get in the way. It splits them down the center – Ven on one side, Xehanort and her on the other – and then banks around in a glide. She’s never seen Terra fly without a glider before, but his armour soars a few feet above the ground as if it was born flying. Never mind that, though. She lights her
keyblade up with crackling electricity, and then scraps it up Xehanort’s front. His body locks up, making him a sitting duck for the Lingering Will.

Xehanort and the Will tumble across the plateau. Aqua prepares her next spell –

A heavy weight besets her from behind. She thrashes instinctively, and that’s the only reason she slips free before Ven’s headlock sets in place. She lands on the sand. Ven blots out the sun before her.

He can’t swing the X-Blade at this close range, but he can do other things. She isn’t sure what those black-and-white thorns that burst out of the ground do, but they make her elbow numb when they touch. She teleports; time slows to a crawl. She reappears behind Ven and takes advantage of this frozen moment in time to swing –

Ven whirls around and deflects her keyblade.

Her Timersplicer spells breaks with a pop as her concentration wavers. They stare at each other.

“What are you hoping to accomplish here?” Ven demands, exasperated. “Believe it or not, but hitting people with keyblades doesn’t always solve your problems.”

“Xehanort,” she says, “he . . .”

“He’s not Xehanort,” Ven bites out.

“Ven, look at them!” she cries. “That’s Terra’s own armour fighting him.”

“It’s a Sentiment!” Ven says. “It’s a will trapped in a moment of time. Terra was possessed when that thing was created, so of course it’s still going to think he’s possessed!”

“Who told you that?” Her eyes narrow. “Was it him? Was it Xehanort?”

“Will you let go of that? I don’t know what Yen Sid and the others told you, but that’s not Xehanort.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’ve been with him for the last nine years!” Ven cries. “He’s been the only person who stood by me, and that couldn’t have been Xehanort. I know Xehanort. Xehanort wouldn’t do that. It had to be Terra!”

“Maybe it was once,” she says, “but Xemnas. . .”

“He saved you! Without him, I never would have found you. Xehanort would never have done that.”

“He would if he wanted my keyblade,” Aqua says sourly.

“No!” Ven pulls at his hair with one hand. “Xehanort doesn’t care. He wouldn’t be so nice to us. Only Terra would. Terra’s the one who cares. I did not spend the last nine years of my life with Xehanort.”

“You think this is nice?” she growls. “He’s –”

“You don’t know him. You never knew Xehanort! This isn’t him. It’s NOT XEHANORT!”
There’s a roar in the distance as Xehanort charges up an attack against the Lingering Will. Ven breathes heavily before her, cheeks tinged red.

“Let’s say I believe that. What happens next?” she asks.


“I already told you I don’t want to go home.” Her jaw aches from all the clenching. “You can’t just ignore what he did to Radiant Garden, Ven.”

“It’s not his fault. He didn’t know any better,” Ven says. The tip of the X-Blade has fallen to the ground as he pleads his case.

“But you did.”

Something in Ven withdraws, retreats behind a moat and fortress with stone walls. He shakes his head, muttering to himself. The X-Blade creaks ominously, shaft bending as Ven rocks back and forth while keeping it planted in the ground.

“If you would just stop and listen,” he says. “Terra can explain everything.”

“How?” she demands. “How can you possibly explain away letting the Heartless loose into the worlds?”

“He . . . h-he . . . he promised!” Ven cries. “He can explain. He promised. He promised he could fix this. I just need you to stop . . .”

She grimaces. She thinks not of the Xehanort fighting nearby, but Xemnas and his honeyed words; Xemnas who would have put her every movement under chains, and then later choke her with them. How long had Ven been with him, listening to him speak? After all that, what did the inside of his mind even look like?

“Ven, it’s done,” she says as gently as she can, which honestly, is limited. “Everything you’ve done, everything you’re doing . . . it’s too much. I can’t look away and pretend to be okay with it.”

“That’s not true. It’s only like that because you’re choosing –”

“Yes, I am. I’ve chosen, Ven.”

He’s about to say something, but whatever words he has are cut off when Ends of the Earth comes out of nowhere and socks him in the jaw; his teeth clack against each other with a bone-crushing sound. Ven spits out a glob of saliva and wobbles.

“Just go away!” Ven screams at the weaponless Will. Storm clouds crackle above as Ven raises the X-Blade. The Lingering Will doesn’t care; that or trying to break Xehanort’s arm with its bare hands is too distracting. She cares, though. So when Ven’s arms begin to fall and the lightning arcing between the clouds glows white, she zaps him first.

Ven hunches over, gasping like a dying animal. She rushes past him and slides across the sand, swerving out of the way of a bolt of darkness. She drops her weight once she’s close, slides into Xehanort so that her heels slam into his ankle. It’s enough for him to stagger, for him to hit the ground as she’s in the process of standing. The Lingering Will looms above Xehanort, and impale thes ground with a strike that barely misses his shoulder.

“That’s enough!”
A gleaming X-Blade flies through the air, spinning like a pinwheel. There seems to be little resistance as it cleaves into the Lingering Will’s shoulder, in the exact spot that it had just tried to stab Xehanort. The keyblade sticks, and it’s heavy. Even the Will buckles under the weight as it gropes at the blade embedded in its shoulder. It doesn’t bleed, of course, nor does it cry out. Yet Aqua’s heart still reacts as if it had –

Ven’s hand closes around her throat.

It’s tight. Not so tight that she’s suffocating, but tight enough that most of her energy goes to the simple task of keeping her body supplied with oxygen. It only gets worse when her feet dangle in midair. Stormfall, where is Stormfall? On the ground, but Ven shakes her when she tries to summon it.

“I’ve had enough of being patient,” Ven growls. “At least Terra lost his heart by accident, but you... You’re like a child, Aqua.”

His other hand is flexing. She isn’t sure what he plans to do, but whatever it is, it’s brought to an abrupt halt when the Lingering Will lurches forward and seizes Ven’s free wrist. Ven scowls and tries to pull free, but the Will clings with both hands. A chain wraps around the Will from behind. Xehanort pulls, but the Will leans its weight in and holds its ground.

“Get lost!”

Ven drops her. Palm glowing black, he slams it into the Will’s chest. The impact explodes; a cloud of smoky darkness chokes her as the Will is propelled back. Ven leaps forward, covering a least an acre in a single bound. There’s a horrible shriek as he extracts the X-Blade from the Lingering Will’s shoulder.

Xehanort’s already closing in on her. He speaks her name with a lilt at the end, almost sounding concerned. Her lungs are still convulsing, refusing to settle and let her utter a spell. But she can swing her keyblade.

Not that such a simple tactic is enough. Xehanort teleports a bit to the right. Normally, she could adapt. But her body is still choked of air, jumpy and slow to respond. She misses and can’t quite bring Stormfall around fast enough to cover that moment of vulnerability.

Void Gear is tinged with darkness. Her body rejects it; as the teeth pierce her skin, the muscles beneath convulse like they’ve been dropped in hot water. It feels like he tore them out and tied them into a knot. As she yelps in pain, Xehanort pulls back suddenly. Not that it stops her from collapsing to one knee.

Ven seizes her left arm. There’s an energy about him. Magic. Suddenly, her arm erupts into a white-hot pain before going numb and –

The sensation fades abruptly. Even Ven seems taken aback. He shakes his head a little, blinking rapidly, before looking over his shoulder and exclaiming, “Did it just seal my magic?”

Aqua doesn’t feel any different, but Xehanort is looking down at his own hands, evidently affected. She kicks Ven with both feet and rips free. The roll backwards is clumsy and off-balance somehow, and it isn’t until she stumbles on the way to her feet that she realizes her left arm is a solid block of ice.

“Careful!” Ven shouts before he ducks out of the way of the Lingering Will’s Ultima cannon. The blast impacts near her, creating a cloud that offers a temporary reprieve, a chance to place some
distance between her and her once-friends. Armed with dispelling magic, she tries to peel Ven’s magic away, but the ice is as stubborn as he.

Xehanort is the first to make his way through the cloud. He skirts around her, and then charges in with those swift strikes he used in their last encounter. She deflects; ducks to the side; deflects again. It feels wrong. She’s right-handed and doesn’t need both hands to use magic but still, something’s lacking. Aqua takes pride in her athleticism. She’s incorporated that into her moves with pirouettes, cartwheels and dance-like footwork – moves that made a younger Terra uncertain and hesitant to fight. But those same moves that made her light on her feet now act as weights. Her fighting style is one that demands minuscular control and synchronization from every part of her body, but her left arm is frozen in a v-shape, throwing off her balance with every move. As she fumbles a twist and hastily defends herself with a Barrier spell, she finally understands why Master Eraqus had so aggressively pursued that family of defensive spells with her.

She finally forces him to back off by lighting the air around her on fire. Xehanort stalks outside her keyblade’s range, circling slowly. Meanwhile, Ven is beating against a barrier surrounding the Lingering Will, no doubt looking to end the spell that has their magic on lockdown. Ven might be distracted, but Aqua still rushes to attack Xehanort before he circles behind her, before she’s caught in the middle of him and Ven.

She keeps her distance, shooting at Xehanort with ice and fire. Even when she slows time, he still finds enough room to defend himself. He vanishes suddenly; she counts to two and casts a full Barrier as he reappears. Xehanort pounces upon the barrier like a wolf. The gold eyes appear almost green though the haze of her spell.

“Let’s end this!” Ven says, having teleported much closer to them. There’s magic sparking along his X-Blade, making it clear that the advantage is back on their side.

“Now, together!” Xehanort barks.

“As one!” As Ven speaks, a new energy arises from him and Xehanort.

Are... are they kidding? They’re going to use a D-Link against her? That’s not fair! She wants to scream it at them. She wants to shout until her throat bleeds that they’re not bonded; they’re just a manipulative liar and his prey. They’re not Terra and Ven. They shouldn’t be allowed to use that technique.

But fate doesn’t listen and when Xehanort moves next, it’s much faster than he should be. That she can handle; she’s sparred with Ven before. But never two Vens. Never two coordinating Vens coming from different sides. She doesn’t see the blow but feels it connect with her gut. She doesn’t know which one of them it was, but it’s Terra’s strength that hits her, nonetheless. Something in her core folds in on itself painfully. Between that and her frozen arm, she can’t get up. Not in time for when they come at her again.

Black coats the edge of her vision. Everything is dim and hazy, swaying back and forth. She thinks she bit her tongue but she can’t tell. She feels everything and nothing at the same time.

Get... up...!

Somehow, she moves a body she doesn’t feel connected to. Somehow, she draws breath through a mouthful of blood coming from her broken nose. She raises her eyes to find Ven right in front of her. He grabs her head, fingers clenching tight in her hair. Cool air streams into her nose as his healing magic repairs the cartilage.
Then he swings.

Aqua goes limp. She would have dropped like a stone if Ven hadn’t been holding her head. Face neutral, he lowers her until she’s resting peacefully on the sand. The peace is only an illusion, however. There are splatters of red near her that they must look away from.

“So... who wants to carry her?” Ven asks quietly. There’s still a couple of drops of blood on his cheek from when his X-Blade had crushed her nose.

“I will.” Terra kneels and scoops her up.

Usually, winning a battle calls for celebration and praise. There’s none of that. It’s impossible to feel good about this. Even the lingering promise of finally coming together isn’t enough to soothe Ven’s unsettled nerves.

Terra grunts suddenly, face twisting.

“Are you okay?” Ven asks. Terra took some tough hits in that battle. Honestly, they both did.

“I am. I just... It itches.”

Terra shifts Aqua to one arm, and then scratches deep into his chest. By the look on his face, it’s less an itch and more a pulled muscle.

“I’ll take her if you can’t,” Ven says. “I’ve carried her before –”

The earth roars.

Ven drops to his knees, hands on the ground. What in Hades? Are they having an earthquake? Was there a freaking volcano here that no one had told him about? Something terrible is happening, that’s for sure.

Wait, it’s no volcano. It’s Terra’s goddamn armour. The thing is howling with a hollow, echoing sound like a lion roaring inside a long tunnel. Ends of the Earth hums as it glows orange, and the Sentiment raises its keyblade as if to swing even though it’s a hundred metres away.

Then Terra’s golden chains burst out of the ground. They wrap around the Lingering Will’s legs and upper body. It fights, as does Terra; his face is red and cheeks are pinched like they’re physically playing tug-of-war. The Lingering Will’s demonic cry shakes as it’s forced to one knee.

Before Ven’s eyes, the armour begins to cave. A crack works its ways down the center of its front from helm to groin, and then splits the limbs horizontally. The metal around the cracks’ edges peel like paint. Although he knows the Will isn’t truly alive and can’t feel pain, Ven’s heart still drops into his stomach.

“Terra, I know it’s your armour, but are you really going to destroy it?” Ven demands.

But Terra is wide-eyed himself, Helplessly, he says, “It’s not me.”

The Will shrieks again. It reaches down suddenly with its frayed hand, and grabs the chains by the common point where they emerge from the ground. It shouldn’t be possible for the armour to exert such stretch when it’s damaged so badly, and yet it yanks the chains out of the ground as easily as weeds. Then, the whole damn thing is glowing orange.

It comes at them in a twister. One filled with rocks and the silver gleam of its keyblade’s teeth. Ven
and Terra scatter; Aqua slips from Terra’s grasp. Or the Lingering Will grabs her. Either way, she
ends up alone on the ground –

The Lingering Will’s body slams down on hers.

For as long as Ven can remember, Terra was bulkier and taller than Aqua. His armour reflects that as
it smothers her from sight. Ven swears and runs towards them. The Lingering Will wouldn’t want to
hurt her, he knows that. But it could accidentally, especially with all the sharp pieces created by its

"Get off of her!" he snaps. He grabs the armour by one of the prongs on its head and pulls it up . . .

Aqua isn’t there.

He blinks. He could have sworn . . . Yes, she had been there. On the ground right there before the
armour had dove on top on her. How in the worlds . . .?

He finally notices that the cracks in the armour are repairing themselves. The peeled-back strips are
folding back into place. And right before the helmet closes, Ven catches a glimpse of blue.

"What -?"

The Will swings Ends of the Earth with a speed that catches even him by surprise. He flies back,
hastily caught by Terra, who is still wide-eyed as he observes the Will. The armour is on one knee,
glowing keyblade planted in the ground. As Ven pushes off Terra and gets his feet back under him,
the armour finishes repairing itself, sealing Aqua’s body inside.

"That thing . . ." Terra begins.

The Will watches them. It feels like it’s glaring at them. It reaches out with its free hand.

It picks up Stormfall.

Aqua’s keyblade sparks, but settles quickly and adopts a ghostly blue glow. The Lingering Will does
not stand but merely straightens its body as it levitates above the ground. It holds its arms out to the
side on a small angle, giving the keyblades just enough room so that their tips remain in midair.

"Two?" Terra exclaims and Ven isn’t sure, but his voice may have cracked.

The Lingering Will brandishes its keyblades and roars.
All Falls Down

Shouldn’t she be in a lot more pain?

For once, Aqua doesn’t wake up confused, but instead with a crystal-clear vision of what had just occurred. Her body responded quickly, and she was on her feet in an instant with Stormfall . . . Not in her hand? The keyblade’s presence was heavy in the air around her, but it refused to appear.

When she finally got over that twist, it occurred to her that she might not need Stormfall. For some reason, Ven and Xehanort had chosen not to be present when she awoke. That would be a cause for celebration, except she had no idea where she was. The world around her was blank. There was no other way to describe it. There were no sources of light, yet it didn’t feel dark. She could see miles into the distance and yet, there was nothing to see.

Nothing, except one lonely figure with a bowed head.

“Xehanort?” she says because although she can’t tell for sure, the profile looks around his size.

The head creaks as it lifts, and her whole body relaxes. For there’s two points on the top of the figure’s head that rules it out as Xehanort, and instead labels it as something else.

“Terra!”

There’s something off about the Lingering Will that has her screeching to a halt before she reaches it. It’s glowing faintly; not orange, but white. Most alarming though, was that it didn’t seem solid but slightly transparent.

The Lingering Will turns around. It takes a step, and she gasps when the ground underneath its foot lights up. The light arcs off far into the distance in a narrow path just wide enough for one of them to fit. By the Will’s second step, the light has softened, but in its place is something solid that looks like glass.

The Lingering Will continues to walk away from her. There’s nothing else to do, nowhere else to go, so she follows it down the glass road.

It’s the weirdest thing. The world around them is an unrelentless black, so although she’s walking, it feels like she’s walking in place. She tries to speak to the Will a couple of times, but it never responds. Where was it going? Was she meant to follow?

Something appears on the horizon: a purple-black fog that stretches as far as the eye can see. The Lingering Will walks right up to the edge of the haze and stops. It raises its hand, tries to push through, but the fog appears to be solid.

“Terra, what is this? Where are we?” she asks. “What happened to Xehanort and Ven?”

“Xehanort,” the armour groans. It turns aside suddenly. It steps aside.

There’s only one reason she can see for it to act that way, and she balks. The fog is uninviting, to say the least, and she can’t tell what lays within.

“Terra?” she whines.

The Lingering Will stares at her, and then looks into the fog.
“I don’t want to leave you,” she says.

As usual, the Will makes no sound. But it offers a hand to her, pulls her forward gently when she accepts, and then urges her onward. Its hand, when it contacts the fog, stops short. But her passes through with only a slight sensation of coolness.

“Terra?” she asks once more.

The Will watches her, waiting.

She shudders. She doesn’t want to, but she trusts the Lingering Will. She can’t imagine that it would let her pass if it thought she’d come to harm. Thus, she steps forward. The coolness spreads over her body like a light dew.

Only a metre in, and the Lingering Will can no longer be seen. There’s fog all around her, and a muffled glow from ahead that marks the pathway she’s walking on. She continues to follow it, her anxious thoughts reminding her of the Realm of Darkness, and a small part of her wonders if she’s found her way into it again.

(But they wouldn’t do that. Ven wouldn’t allow it. They wouldn’t send her back there.)

Finally, she steps into the light.

Like before, the world around her is black, but there’s something else. Ahead of her, the glass path reaches the end of its arc and touches down at the edge of a large, glass disc. It’s the brightest thing – the only bright thing – in this realm, and she hastens toward it. As she approaches and the angle of her sight changes, she’s able to see things that lay upon the glass: orange and yellow; a border around the disc’s edge that’s patterned with the symbol of the Mark of Mastery; A large picture draped over the glass of a man with brown hair and closed eyes.

Aqua breaks into a sprint.

The Station of Awakening is warm, not cold under her feet. If a few tears leak from her eyes when she bursts with a gleeful shout, she’s not ashamed. Warm means breathing. Warm means alive. Warm means all is not lost.

“Aqua?”

She freezes. Her fingers try to curl around a keyblade that doesn’t come. Anyone could be under that cloak’s hood, and she already knows at least one other person with that voice.

“Who are you? Take it off!” she demands more aggressively than she means to.

And they comply. The hood slides off brown hair and pools upon broad shoulders. The man smacks his lips and they remain slightly open afterwards as if tasting the air for the first time.

“Aqua,” he says again and there’s a touch of incredibility in his voice. His blue eyes are wide, like she’s spun a spell that opened this dark realm to the sight of the stars. “What are you doing here?”

“What now?” Terra asks.

“Get her out of there,” Ven says tightly as he observes the levitating suit of armour. The keyblades are glowing – one orange, one blue – and its cape is rustling as if there’s a wind.

He bounds forward, and the Lingering Will glides back. It’s much nimbler now that it doesn’t have
to worry about terrain. The light at Stormfall’s tip swells, and then bolts are shooting from it as quickly as a shotlock. They pepper the ground all around Ven as he twists and dodges in midair.

“Terra, quit it!” Ven barks at the armour. “It’s me.”

The Lingering Will crosses the keyblades above its head at the hilt, and the sky above darkens and growls. Pebbles begin to float, wobbling dangerously as they rise.

“Terra, stop. It’s me!”

But that hadn’t been enough to stop the Lingering Will before and it isn’t enough now. The sky splits open. There’s white, a blinding white that burns Ven’s shadow into the sand and leaves him crouched with spots in his vision. The snap of the lightning bolts hitting the ground drowns out all else. He can’t see. He summons a shield all around him and hunkers down.

There’s an orb around the Will, one made of hexagonal plates and spitting sparks. The Will moves, and the orb rolls with it; each time a plate hits the ground, it throws out purple sparks. It rolls toward Terra, the armour always in the orb’s centre. Although Stormfall remains at its side, Ends of the Earth is long enough to extend outside the orb’s reach. The Lingering Will swings at Terra through its own barrier, which melts before the keyblade and reforms afterwards. Terra can defend himself against the keyblade, but being within range of Ends of the Earth means he’s so dangerously close to the orb that his hair starts standing on end.

“Magnera!”

A shower of sparks falls from the orb in protest. Unlike before, the Lingering Will fights the spell. It jerks in place like a fly caught in a spider’s web. Terra teleports safety out of range, reappearing next to Ven. Ven pats his back, quickly checking he’s okay, before closing in on the Will.

“Come on, you know me,” Ven pleads as the Will frees itself from the spell. “It’s me: it’s Ventus! If you remember Aqua, then you have to remember me.”

He’s sure that somewhere, the Lingering Will does. But it remembers him as he used to be, as a half-person instead of a whole. For all he knows, the Lingering Will can sense the part of his heart that used to be Vanitas, and thinks he’s been possessed as well.

It swings. Ven skids backwards, avoiding the craters left by the lightning strikes. With each swing, Ends of the Earth leaves an orange banner behind it that lingers momentarily. It comes at him again, but the X-Blade’s reach is further than Ends of the Earth. Ven plunges the tip of the X-Blade into the orb, stopping it cold in its tracks. The pressure is immense; his boots sinks into the ground.

And Terra is there. He leaps with a cry and tosses his darkness-infused keyblade at the top of the orb. The powerful strikes from two directions are enough to cause the orb to dissolve and the Will quickly floats backwards out of reach.

“Terra, I’m here to help,” Ven says. “Just give her to me. I can help her.”

The Lingering Will comes at him. One keyblade is raised to strike, the other trails behind it. As it twists its body with the first swing, it uses the movement to bring up the other keyblade to strike right after. Thankfully, the X-Blade is long enough to block both.

The Will twists again as Terra attacks from behind. Stormfall meets Void Gear in a flash of black and blue. Ven naturally takes advantage of the distraction, but the Lingering Will isn’t stupid. It expects the blow and defends with Ends of the Earth. For a few moments, it seems like Ven will overpower it. But the angle, with the Lingering Will floating above him, is too awkward. With both attacks
deflected, the Will sees it fit to hold both keyblades out and start spinning.

As they had before, the two keyblades leave streaks of orange and blue behind them. However, it becomes apparent that this is more than a fancy light-show when the colours mix together and expand, like the armour’s wrapped an aurora around itself. The gale, combined with the hungry teeth of the keyblades, drive Terra and Ven back. Above the armour, a brown crystal begins to take shape and Ven feels the spell tugging at his strength.

“Ven!” Terra throws his arms out. A dark ball appears in front of him, swirling like a black hole.

“Keep it steady!” Ven orders. He gets some room, and then runs toward the ball. At the last moment, he plants his feet and swings the X-Blade like a baseball bat. The swing is true; the ball whistles through the air.

The collision is too much for the growing crystal above the Will’s head. It ruptures with the clink of broken glass, shards disappearing before they hit the ground. The Lingering Will twitches oddly, as if hurt.

“Now!”

Chains rise from the earth again. But as before, the Lingering Will gets a hand on them and rips them out. It whips them straight at Ven, who dodges left. The Lingering Will slams Ends of the Earth into the ground, creating a fissure in Ven’s direction that simultaneously sprouts claw-like growths. Ven dodges again and then wedges the X-Blade into a gap between the growths. He uses that to vault himself into the air, where he has the better angle.

The Lingering Will takes his shotlock with little more than a few jolts. More damaging is Terra, who tackles the Will while cloaked in darkness. It makes the Will touch down for a moment, and that’s enough for Ven’s adrenaline to pump.

He dives. Terra has followed-up on his attack, but with two keyblades, the Will doesn’t seem to have much difficulty defending itself. Ven swoops in from the side and - Wait, he can’t strike it with the X-Blade. Aqua’s in there and if he cuts through the metal. . .

He ends up slamming the armour with the X-blade’s guard. The two tumble to the ground, Ven atop the other. Ven scrambles forward, knees dropping on either side of the Will’s hips.

“Just give her to me,” Ven pants. The X-Blade comes to her and - yes - he wedges it into the groove connecting two of the armour’s chest plates. “I can protect her. I’ll keep her safe.”

The X-Blade slides under the metal. Ven pushes down on the shaft, leveraging the plate, prying it free. So close, so close. . . That bitterness coating his tongue is the taste of excitement.

The Lingering Will grabs his wrist, resisting his effort to pry it open. Ven suppresses the urge to pound his fists against its chest and scream. He grabs the X-Blade with both hands and adds more of his weight.

“No. . . to you,” the armour rasps. **“Never to Xehanort.”**

The Lingering Will grabs him by the hair and slams their heads together.

“Terra, is that really you?”

Aqua reaches for him without thinking. But when coherent thought does strike her again, she pulls
back immediately. Xehanort’s came to her with brown hair before. But the eyes... he was never able to imitate those eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Terra repeats. Here, being the Station of Awakening; his own heart. The gravity of that hits him a moment later, and he asks, “Did something happen? Are you okay?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve been knocked out,” she says. Her voice hiccups, as if it’s a humorous event that happens every day.

Terra says. “So, you lost, huh?”

“You know?”

“I see pieces sometimes,” Terra says hesitantly. “I hear him.”

“And you’ve been here this whole time,” she says slowly. “All along, it was really him...”

“Aqua...” He speaks with a downturned face and haunted eyes. As if he is personally responsible for all that’s happened.

She doesn’t ask for permission first. She’s tired of being selfless. She grabs him, holds him, tries to press his face into her shoulder like she can shield him from all that’s happened.

“I miss you.” Her fingers tighten in his cloak. “I miss you so much.”

His hand finds the back of her skull. He lifts his head, shifting so that hers fits into the curve of his chin and neck. He’s warm, like a young sun. Or has it just been that long since she’s felt safe enough to be embraced like this?

“It’s not too late,” she says. “Ven is fighting us because he thinks Xehanort is you. If you can get your body back, he’ll listen to you.”

Terra’s grip on her tightens. “Aqua, I... I can’t help you. I can’t draw Xehanort’s attention.”

“What are you saying? It’s your body. You can’t give up. You wouldn’t give up!” She pounds on his chest, but with how close they are, it’s little more than a tap. “I saw your armour!”

“That’s different,” he says. “My armour’s on the outside, so it’s fine. But I can’t fight Xehanort in here. It’s too dangerous.”

“Too dangerous?” she repeats tightly. Something like panic coats her mouth. This isn’t right. Terra doesn’t bend like this. “Terra, Ven... Vanitas... whomever he is, he has the X-Blade, and he’s following Xehanort. This is exactly what Xehanort tried to do nine years ago. He has everything he needs for his plan!”

“But he doesn’t care about that plan,” Terra says.

“Terra, he’s one step away from getting Kingdom Hearts!”

He grabs her shoulders and bends his knees just enough to be eye-level with her. “Aqua, he doesn’t care about that plan.”

He’s staring at her so intensely that she listens. That she tries to listen. She doesn’t understand though.

And it's obvious that she doesn’t because Terra takes one look at her, sighs and steps back. His
hands slide off her shoulders, leaving them oddly naked.

“When we woke in Radiant Garden, after you . . . went away, the only thing he had was a name. Then Ven found us, and he was already convinced who we were.”

“You.”

He nods. “Ven was so confident, so aggressively insistent that Xehanort believed him. Ven won.”

She searches his face. “What do you mean he ‘won?’”

“When we lost our heart and regained our memories, Xehanort rejected his own past in favour of mine.”

Now she’s stepping back. “Then you’re saying that Xehanort. . . He thinks. . .”

“It’s not Terra he thinks he has trapped down here. Honestly, the only reason I didn’t start to believe I was Xehanort is because there’s a giant picture of me on the ground,” he says with a small smile.

But the humour can’t last. There’s still the stark reality outside this dream, and the haunting knowledge that only one of them can wake up.

“They, Xemnas and that me out there, they do care about you.” Terra sounds like he’s in physical pain when he admits that.

“I don’t want them to,” she spits. “I want you.”

“I can’t help you,” he says again. “If Xehanort focuses on me and figures out the truth, then everything is going to be so much worse.”

She tries one last thing. “You can’t let him have Kingdom Hearts!”

“I don’t want him to have it,” Terra says. “But if he thinks he’s me, then at least if he does get it, there will still be a universe to protect afterwards.”

“Do you. . . Do you know what’s he planning to do with Kingdom Hearts?”

“Yes.” Terra closes his eyes. “He’s going to do exactly what Master trained us to do.”

Ven rolls onto his stomach, clutching his head. His ears ring, but it’s a distant sound, drowned out by the echoing chorus in his head:

_Not to you._

“Why did your armour have to inherit your stubbornness?” Ven hisses.

As if it heard him and was offended, the armour is suddenly there before Ven. But before either can attack, Terra charges in with his body aflame. The ferocity of the attack drives the armour back and gives Ven some breathing room.

_Not to you. What did that even mean? Not to a friend? Not to family? Not to what?_”

_Never to Xehanort._

Stupid undead armour. Stupid Terra getting possessed. Stupid Xehanort. _Stupid Xehanort!_ He hated
Xehanort! How was this fair? How did Xehanort keep ruining his life without being here?

“Ven, watch out!”

He twists, but Terra’s already got his back. He has a foot on either side of Ven’s legs as he grunts and pushes back against an overhead swing from the Lingering Will. Terra growls, digs his heels in and shoves hard. While the keyblade is pushes away, the Will itself remains where it stands, meaning Terra’s well within range for a swipe from Stormfall.

Ven winces as Stormfall crashes into Terra’s gut. The keyblade sparks as it makes contact, and there’s similar arcs of energy running down its shaft, as if Aqua’s magic is too much to be fully contained. Ven, flat on his back, slams his palms into the ground and calls the earth to him. He’s not as good with earth magic as Terra, but he knows enough that he can rupture the earth underneath the Lingering Will’s feet.

“Here.” And Terra is offering him a hand. Though the dust cloud, Ven can see the sweaty, dirty face of his best friend. To him, it seems even younger than it should be: a face clean of wrinkles, blue eyes as calm as the sea. He reaches for it –

They’re so close that Ven can see the ripples in Terra’s shirt as he jumps away from the Lingering Will’s spell. Whatever the spell is, it hits the ground past them with a ‘pop’ and Ven feels something inside him break at the sound. Maybe it’s his last strand of patience. He leaps to his feet and sees the Lingering Will’s silhouette in the dust.

“Leave us alone!” he shrieks. “You’re Terra. You’re supposed to be on my side!”

But the Will does not care for his words. It points Ends of the Earth at them and –

“That’s not even yours. That’s his. Give it back to my Terra!”

He springs forward and grabs End of the Earth by the shaft. The keyblade jolts in his hand; the tendrils of energy it sends into his body are hesitant and confused.

Yes! Ven’s heart sings. Recognize me.

He pulls with both hands, the Will with one. He plants one foot on the Will’s thigh and pulls.

And the keyblade comes loose. Ven falls onto his back, but quickly rolls onto all fours. He’s got it! He scrambles in Terra’s direction, still on all fours. He’s got it!

His chin hits the sand when the keyblade suddenly vanishes. By the time he reorients himself, the Lingering Will has the keyblade again and is marching towards them.

“You…” Ven gasps. “Just leave!”

The spell that blasts out of the X-Blade sounds like a train hurtling through a tunnel. It engulf the Will completely and when the spell’s light fades five seconds later, the Will is still tumbling through the air. Ven plants the X-Blade in the ground, staggers to his feet, and just screams.

“Ven!” If it weren’t for Terra’s familiar voice, Ven would have snapped his arm in half when Terra grabbed his shoulder. “Calm down.”

“I am calm!” he snaps.

Terra swallows and pulls back. “I know you’re upset, but you must hold yourself back. She’s still in
there . . .”

“Maybe she deserves it!” Ven spits. “Maybe she should get hurt after putting us through all this!”

The look on Terra’s face is one of horror, and that snaps Ven out of it. He pulls at his hair, needing the pain. He didn’t mean it. Not her. He never meant it.

“I’m sorry!” he cries and his face is wet with hot tears.

“Ven. . .” Terra’s hand hovers right above his shoulder.

There’s a deep thrum from the armour as it rises to its feet. Unlike the previous times, it doesn’t charge them. Instead, it remains where it is, watching, waiting.

“How do we kill it?” Ven asks.

“Other than tearing apart its physical form, I am not sure,” Terra says.

Ven is about to respond when a twinkle in the sky catches his attention. His pupils narrow to slits.

Great. Just what they need right now:

More people.
Sora could never get used to the Keyblade Graveyard. He’d been to planets with deserts before, yes, but deserts usually harboured a rich array of life. Yet the Graveyard remained as dead as its name suggested. There were no oases; no camels or caravans making their way across the dunes; no shrubs or cacti or little mice huddled between the rocks. Nothing grew here. Nothing lived. It was as if the very heart of the world itself had perished in the great war.

Scattered over the landscape lay hundreds of rusted, upright shafts, each marking the spot of a fallen warrior. From their Gummi ship, they looked like no more than stones. It was a grim reminder of what had happened here, and what may happen again if Xehanort got his way.

Sand swirls through the air as the ship’s door opens and Sora steps out. He swallows as his throat protests the first gulp of parched air.

“Man, this place gives me the creeps,” he says as Kairi fits herself into the doorway next to him. Riku, the tallest of the three, peers over their heads.

“Do you see that?” Riku asks. He points to a plateau in the distance, where blue, orange and purple light flash like lightning.

“That doesn’t look good!” Sora summons Kingdom Key immediately and rushes out of the ship.

Under the thin layer of sand, the ground is cracked but firm. It offers solid purchase as the three charge towards the plateau. Once he’s close enough, Sora high-jumps, trusting that Kairi’s hexagonal platform will be waiting under his feet at the apex of his leap. He uses the rest of the platforms she creates to reach the top of the plateau while below, Kairi and Riku, more resistant to the darkness than he is, pass through a Corridor.

Sora lands with knees bent in a crouch – and is almost immediately blown off the plateau when two blurs collide in front of him. The shock-wave of the clashing keyblades sends a tumbleweed of sand rolling across the plateau and off the edge. He thinks one of the two is Xehanort, but he’s not entirely sure because he’s used to Xehanort having silver hair. He has no idea who the other guy in armour is.

Strangely, there’s no sign of Master Aqua. There are the two sparring blurs and someone further off that he can’t get a clear handle on, but all of them are too tall to be her.

Suddenly, that far-off figure takes into the air. Then it’s not so far-off, and lands right in front of him. Now, it’s obvious who it is. Ventus straightens up, cutting an imposing figure that blocks out the fight behind him.

“Sora.” Ventus looks him up and down, like he’s expecting Sora to have a knife hidden under his clothes. “What are you doing here?”

“I…” He trails off. Telling the truth isn’t a good idea here “What’s going on?”

Ventus doesn’t say anything immediately. He pauses, thinks. It’s for too long.

Then he speaks. “Actually, you came at a good time. Aqua needs help.”

“Master Aqua?” he says skeptically. “Where is she?”
Ventus points at the golden armour.

“What? That can’t be her. It’s too . . .”

“I know,” Ven says tightly. “It’s an animated suit of armour. It’s . . . consumed her. She’s trapped inside.”

This is getting weirder and weirder. Before Sora can say anything, the armour suddenly tosses Xehanort aside and rings with a hollow, metallic cry.

“Shit, Terra!” Ventus scampers off, leaving Sora with his confusion.

Space tears next to him. Riku and Kairi rush through the portal, keyblades drawn and similar looks of bewilderment quickly overtaking them.

“What’s going on? Where’s Master Aqua?” Kairi asks.

“In there, apparently.” Sora points at the armour and quickly fills them in.

“What would a walking suit of armour want with her?” Riku says after a pause. “What’s it doing here, anyways? Nothing’s supposed to be here.”

“Something’s not right,” Kairi agrees. With two of the three decided, Kairi and Riku look at him for his say.

“Even if we do get Master Aqua out, she’ll just be in danger from those two,” Sora says with a sigh. “Let’s take care of them first, and then deal with this armour.”

“Right!” The two nod and take their positions.

Riku’s the first to charge in. He takes a large step, almost a bound, and disappears. When he reappears, he’d behind Xehanort, and the benefit of being an unannounced enemy means there’s no resistance rake Way to the Dawn across his back. It’s the only clear shot they’ll get; Xehanort’s sharp intake of breath is enough to catch the attention of Ventus, whose eyes narrow in response.

“Traitors!” Ventus spits at them.

“We never were on your side,” Riku reminds him. Having placed a healthy distance between himself and them, Riku now settles into that familiar keyblade-above-the-shoulder fighting stance.

The armour isn’t one to be ignored. Sensing that its opponents are distracted, the armour plants its keyblades into the ground – wait, two? Sora blinks. He hadn’t noticed before, the fighting being so fast and aggressive. . . And Stormfall? That’s Master Aqua’s own keyblade the armour is wielding, and it only increases Sora’s conviction that he’s chosen the right side. If the armour was holding her hostage, then why would her keyblade choose to fight alongside it?

The armour steams. The metal glows a hot red, although the grooves and seams shine blue. It scoops up the longer, sandy-coloured keyblade, then rips out Stormfall with such strength that it almost tosses the keyblade behind it. The armour brings both keyblades over a single shoulder, and then rockets forward and swings in a double-strike –

The ground explodes with the force of the impact. They have a second’s warning before a wave of sand rises above them. There’s nothing to do but shield their eyes, nothing to do but listen to clanging metal and wait until the storm has passed. When it does begin to clear, they see the X-Blade first; its long reach means it claws its way outside the remaining cloud. The dust cleared away by the
swinging keyblade means that the armour’s keyblade are what they see next. The two continue to
dance and around each other, armour and flesh popping in and out of the clouds, until the air is
clered and both can be seen plain.

The red haze is fading from the armour. It warps away from Ventus and appears eerily close to
where Sora and Kairi stands. Riku starts in their direction, but stops, wary of provoking it into
attacking.

“Xehanort...” the armour groans at them.

“We’ll help you,” Kairi says, sounding more confident than Sora feels.

The long keyblade suddenly shifts. The armour tosses it into the air, and it swells in size; at the same
time, it spreads outwards. A large, central base appears with two rail-like structures jutting out from
either... Oh, he knows what this is. There’s no time to awe over the glider though, because the
armour’s already mounted it like a bike and started accelerating. It uses Stormfall to shoot fireballs
ahead as it closes in on Xehanort and Ventus.

Ventus charges and cuts in between the armour and Xehanort to intercept. The armour responds with
a strike that comes not from Stormfall, but by tilting the bike-like glider onto its side and letting its
sharp bottom slide into the X-Blade. Ventus is forced back but somehow keeps his balance. He
needs that too, because the armour’s upper body flops over the glider’s side with a loaded Shotlock.

The armour continues to pursue Ventus, leaving Xehanort. Maybe, when the armour had said his
name to them, that hadn’t been a question of whose side they were on, but a command on whom to
focus. He’s happy to leave Ventus to the armour, because those two are fighting fierce and fast and
unlike Kairi and Riku, Sora’s not familiar enough with the armour to be sure he won’t get in its way.

“Follow me,” he tells Kairi. He leads the way, Kingdom Key held high like a flag. Riku sees them
going and heads in himself.

Sora flings his keyblade. Somehow, Xehanort detects it. He spins around, and the eyes on Void Gear
seem to stare straight at Sora as Xehanort deflects his keyblade. It goes spinning, higher and higher,
and is caught by Riku at the height of its arc. Riku throws it at Xehanort a second time. He blocks
that, too, and barely conjures a shield in time to defend against the beams of light that erupt from
Kairi’s keyblade. Riku quickly warps away but Sora keeps running; the pure light doesn’t bother him
as much as it does his Xehanort and best friend. He calls Kingdom Key home and slides forward
with a solid thrust.

Xehanort teleports away. Sora grunts and sinks into a stance. Xehanort’s a Keyblade Master. He’ll
be he first to admit that’s intimidating. But there’s three of them and one of him, and that means
something.

Kairi’s fingers brush over his hand, squeeze. A spark flies through their fingers as they connect. Sora
squeezes. Their practiced feet carry them around each other - two dancers in a spin. Magic builds up,
and then the combo is complete: a stream of comet-like lights burst like a geyser and home in on
Xehanort. These Riku isn’t wary of and in fact, he uses the disorienting flashes of light to mask his
own approach.

Xehanort shouts and some dark pulse radiates from him. The light motes vanish with a pop. Sora and
Kairi are far enough away to have time to shield themselves but Riku does not and so, bears it. Still,
Riku nails the landing, still springs forward and attacks. But, with a straight-on attack, he’s bitten off
more than he can chew. Riku is strong, but Xehanort stronger, and they all realize that when the
Keyblades clash and Riku alone jolts from the blow.
“Fira!” Sora calls. Kairi casts next. The two continue to cast, each covering the time where the other breaks between spells. The flurry of fireballs gives Xehanort no choice than to give Riku some breathing room.

“Dark Firaga!” Riku, never to be outdone, cries.

Xehanort thrusts his arm out. Riku’s Firaga hisses as it contacts the cushion of water on Xehanort’s palm. For a moment, it’s unsure who will win. Then, there’s a flash and a block of ice is in the place where the fireball was.

“Enough!” Xehanort cries. His curled hand raises skyward, and six equally spaced fissures rip through from the ground around him. One cuts close to Sora, who stumbles into Kairi.

Stones rise through the fissures; the ground between them shakes and churns. The earth itself rebuilds at Xehanort’s command.

“In here!” Riku shouts from a portal behind them. Kairi goes first, then Riku and Sora lock hands. Riku hesitates.

“I’ll be fine,” Sora says. Riku nods grimly then pulls him inside.

He feels the darkness immediately. It’s ambient and smothering, like it’s the Realm of Darkness’s version of temperature. Sora ignores it and focuses on running at the portal before him, the same one Riku and Kairi are headed towards. He passes through and then he’s airborne, wind whistling through his hair. Xehanort is far below, still manipulating the earth. Its reach has spread to Ventus and the armour, who cope by gliding and hovering instead of making contact with the ground.

Like a bird, Sora spreads his arms. Then, once he thinks his aim is true, he tucks them in and descends.

He’s not silent. His clothes rustle and flap and his zippers rattle. Xehanort hears, but is almost too late to stop him. The collision sends the Keyblade Master stumbling back, but it is a successful defence.

But they are three, not one. Sora’s collision hits hard, hard enough that when Kairi dive-bombs him next, Xehanort isn’t nearly as successful. The impact brings Xehanort to one knee. Then Riku, the largest and therefore last in the order, takes the clean shot. He barrels over Xehanort like a train and the Keyblade Master goes flying back into the jagged, churning whirlpool of stone and earth that he, himself, created.

When the sky darkens, they assume it’s Xehanort. But it’s Ventus who rises, not him. That spiky blond hair whips about as a swirling cone surrounds him. Although Sora is not close, he feels the wind regardless.

Xehanort warps in front of them. His keyblade seems to tear through space itself as he swings. The slash created across his chest is muffled by clothes and doesn’t quite break skin, but still burns and feels raised like a scar. Suddenly, Kairi’s tossed aside and Xehanort is reaching out with those curled, claw-like fingers. They fasten around Riku’s throat in a deadlock, and Sora’s best friend cries out in pain.

Kairi casts Magnera just in time. It catches Xehanort halfway inside his portal, still clutching Riku’s throat. Riku is pale, clawing at the fingers and Sora acts. He tries to dig his fingers between the impossibly tight grasp and Riku’s throat. As his flesh brushes against Xehanort’s fingers, a weird prickling spreads through out his arm and . . . Ah! It’s like someone’s hitting his knees with a hammer, trying to trigger their reflex while he’s wrestling with Xehanort.
Xehanort closes his eyes and digs in. He’s not fighting Sora, really, but Kairi’s spell. Sora’s knee buckles again, but he can’t let go. He hangs from Xehanort’s wrist like a rag.

**Void Gear rises** –

The fireball hits all of them. Something lands on top of him, a sharp edge digging into his stomach and only getting worse as it thrashes. . . It’s Riku: coughing and shaking and pinning him down. The angle gives Sora a view of the sky, where the glider-mounted armour is turning back towards Ventus.

“Guys!” As Kairi runs towards them, she casts Curaga. Sora didn’t think he was injured, but as the spell washes over him, the prickling along his arm disappears.

However, Riku’s still shaking. He does roll off Sora, but remains on his side afterwards, panting.

He waves them off. “I’ll be fine. Whatever that was. . . Just get Xehanort!”

Like a switch’s been toggled, Sora remembers that Xehanort is present. He whips around, but there’s no golden-eyed man stalking him. Xehanort is standing a fair distance back, arms out to either side, eyes closed. He’s definitely using magic.

“Uh. . .” Riku’s eyes are wide. “Guys?”

They look up. There’s a ton of smalls shapes in the sky, like a swarm of bees. As they get closer though, it’s apparent they are not insects; they’re *keyblades*.

“That’s such a cheap spell,” Ventus says. He stands atop of one of the mounds Xehanort inadvertently made. “Why didn’t you use it earlier?”

“I hate it,” Xehanort grunts. That doesn’t make sense to Sora, but Ventus seems to understand.

The keyblade cloud creates blotchy shadows on the plateau. That’s sure a lot of them. More than he’s ready to handle. He glances at Kairi, who looks equally overwhelmed.

But the armour isn’t one to be intimidated. The glider launches off a hill and lands before them. It continues onward, approaching the coming storm alone. Then, the armor dismounts, hits the ground running. The bike-like glider twists back into its original shape. The armour picks it up, and then stabs the keyblade into the ground.

From the armour, grows an orb. It’s orange, lined with chains, and swells until it envelops the plateau. One of the keyblades flies ahead of the others, meets the orange field, then spins off into space with a clang. The others follow; the sound of them hitting the barrier reminds him of drumming.

“Terra!” Ventus shouts. Sora doesn’t turn fast enough to see what passes between him and Xehanort, but he does spy Xehanort take off running.

“They’re going to attack it while it’s distracted!” he warns his friends. That’s *dirty*.

Riku still can’t stand, but he can roll onto his stomach and open a portal. Kairi runs through and drops in front of the armour. Miraculously, her barrier holds against Xehanort’s assault. Each slam of the keyblade against the barrier makes his heart jolt, but Sora forces himself to look away. He wants to help her – *needs* to help her, but there’s an even greater danger to her than Xehanort.

He locks in on Ventus. Magic infuses with his body. He takes off like a cannonball, flying straight at
his foe, who is charging up a ranged attack meant to overwhelm Kairi.

He strikes first with an uppercut slash. Ventus, surprised, defends with the guard of the X-Blade. Sora flips off him and positions himself between Ventus and Kairi.

“Why...?” Ventus mutters. “Why are you doing this? I told you that thing captured her!”

“That might be true,” he admits. “But I’m not sure I can trust you either. You’re the reason Master Aqua is here in the first place.”

“No one was trying to bring her here,” Ventus stresses.

“I believe you. But she’s afraid of you and...”

“Afraid?” As Ventus says that, Sora can almost see the hairs on his body rising like a pissed-off cat.

“Ventus, that’s why she left.”

For a moment, he breaks. The harsh lines across his forehead disappear. Then he shoves Sora aside with a shout of Terra’s – Xehanort’s name. Sora looks, too; it’s Xehanort’s turn to be choked. The armour has one hand around his neck, and the other hand is positioned so threateningly on his chin that Sora honestly wonders if Xehanort’s about to get his lower jaw ripped off. Even Kairi’s grabbing the armour’s elbow.

The X-Blade lights up with fire. Then, Ventus twitches and the fire is replaced by electricity. Finally, he settles on water and aims. It’s not enough. The armour staggers but keep his hold on Xehanort. Ventus growls and teleports.

The armour knows Ventus is coming. The hand on the lower jaw changes to a hand on the face. It lifts Xehanort up high by his head, and then slams him into the ground before abandoning its quarry and retreating safely out of range. Ventus appears, and there’s nothing to attack.

“Terra!” He kneels by Xehanort’s side.

And the armour slowly advances. “Xehanort.”

Xehanort’s jaw locks. “Listen to me. I know you sense him, but it’s not what you believe. I’ve contained him. I...”

The armour cuts him off. “Xehanort!”

Ventus, sensing the danger, places himself between Xehanort and the armour. But that means he isn’t between Xehanort, Sora and Kairi anymore, and he knows. He keeps frantically looking behind them while trying to also keep the armour in sight.

“Terra, get up!” Ventus demands.

Propped up by his elbows, Xehanort tries.


“No,” Ventus says.

Kairi tries. “I know you think he’s your friend, but he’s not who...”

“Shut up!” Ventus swings in her direction. The armour sees an opening and tries to charge, only to
be warded away. “Stay away from him!”

Ventus stands right over Xehanort, foot on either side of his hips. There’s a hunched, feral quality to his stance, and his teeth grind together so much Sora can almost hear it as a growl.

Wait, that’s not Ventus. It’s the armour growling. It steps forward and says one last time, “Xehanort.”

Xehanort has stopped trying to stand. Ventus notices.

“No,” he mumbles.

The armour advances.

“No!”

A dark pulse emanates from Ventus, pushing them all back. The force is irresistible, but it doesn’t hurt. Sora’s back on his feet in no time, and Ventus . . .

What is he doing?

He’s holding the X-Blade up high and the sight of him is muffled somehow, like they’re viewing him through the haze created on a hot day. Sora doesn’t get it, and then something inside tells him to look up. So he does, straight up at the heart-shaped moon beginning to peek its way between the clouds.

Frightened, Kairi asks, “Is that Kingdom Hearts?”

“I’m not losing here,” Ventus snarls. He holds the X-Blade aloft with one hand. The blade itself is glowing not one, but two colours; white and black, split evenly down the center.

Ventus stumbles forward. The X-Blade falls from his hand. Ventus, too, falls straight onto his knees. He’s pulls at his hair, and his next words are half-muttered, half-screamed:

“No, I need to do this. I have to. Shut up, just . . . We need to finish this!”

Ventus fights his way back to his feet. He grabs one side of the X-Blade’s handle –

Just as Xehanort grabs the other.

“Huh?” Ventus stares at Xehanort, confused.

Xehanort says, “Ven, give the X-Blade.”
“This isn’t the time, Terra,” Ventus says, confused. He stares at the man on his belly that’s clinging
to his X-Blade. It’s a very undignified position but Xehanort doesn’t seem to care.

“There may not be another time,” Xehanort says.

“We’ll talk about this later. I need to finish this.” Ventus yanks on the X-Blade, tearing it free of
Xehanort. He faces Sora and his friends again, holding his weapon waist-height with both hands.

Sora and his friends drop into a stance. The armour, on the other hand, does not, instead choosing to
look skyward. Moonlight reflects off its form, shimmering with every little movement it makes.

“Kingdom... Hearts...” it groans.

Hearing the name seems to hurt Ventus. He presses a hand into his forehead like he has a headache.
One of his feet drags itself through the ground.

“What’s going on?” Riku mutters. Seeing that Sora and Kairi are frozen, he takes a step toward
Ventus.

Ventus snarls. He swings. None of them are close enough to be hit by the X-Blade directly, but a
black shockwave emits from the weapon. The armour is merely forced onto one knee, but the rest of
them are thrown back. Sora lands on his side, hissing in pain. Kingdom Key impales the sand
nearby.

Black-and-white thorns erupt around the armour. They curve inward, curling around its limbs when
it tries to escape. The armour is stopped two-thirds of the way through the process of standing. They
can see its legs trembling. It jolts, legs bending, nearly caving and falling to its knees again. There’s a
white flash as the armour twists in its struggle and moonlight hits it at just the right angle... 

Ventus staggers, eyes screwed shut. The thorns stop growing and with a mighty crack, the armour
tears an arm free.

“Come on. Get a grip,” Ventus growls at himself. His steps are hurried and unbalanced as he
struggles to find his battle stance.

“Ven!” Xehanort has fought his way to his knees. “Give it to me.”

“I... I... Let me finish this!”

Xehanort clenches his jaw in frustration. “You can’t handle it!”

“Yes, I can. This is what I was made for. I am the X-Blade!” Ventus shouts, but they aren’t sure why
he’s shouting, nor whom he’s shouting at.

“Look at yourself: your heart is in conflict,” Xehanort says, having finished standing. He extends one
hand to Ventus, imploring. “Give it to me. We can finally end this!”

Xehanort’s shout echoes through the land. It seems to carry further, spreading through the vast
enclaves of space.

“Xehanort,” the armour rumbles, but its warning goes ignored by the X-Blade wielder.
“Wait!” Sora cries, rushing forward. “Ventus, you can’t let him have Kingdom Hearts. He’ll destroy everything!”

“Terra wouldn’t do that,” Ventus says reflexively. “Is that what Yen Sid’s claiming? I can’t believe she was stupid enough to fall for it.”

Ventus’s gaze sharpens at he speaks. If it were aimed at him, Sora would be shivering. Alas, Ventus’s focus is solely on the armour allegedly housing his friend, which was ignoring him in favour of clawing its way free of the thorns.

“Maybe not on purpose,” Sora says, “but that’s what the Keyblade War led to last time and –”

“What?” Ventus suddenly staggers back, expression twisted in something like. . . is that fear?

“Where did you hear about that?”

“That’s Xehanort’s plan,” Sora says. “That was his plan nine years ago, and it hasn’t changed.”

“That’s not true,” Xehanort grunts.

“Terra?” Ventus isn’t backing away from Xehanort or speaking in a way that signifies doubt, but he isn’t handing over the X-Blade either.

“That was his plan,” Xehanort says. “Ven, trust me. It’s not mine.”

“Then what is your plan?” Sora asks slowly.

“To deliver an end to this universe’s tragedy,” Xehanort says. “To absolve its inhabitants of their sins.”

“And for the people who don’t use fancy words?” Ventus says in a way that suggest this isn’t an uncommon comeback for him.

Xehanort’s toothy grin is more of a snarl. “To destroy the darkness.”

Even the armour cocks its head at the answer. Ventus glances at his X-Blade like he feared it had turned into a snake in his hand.

“Kingdom Hearts: the source of all hearts; and the X-Blade, the key to it all. With it, I can open the hearts of the worlds themselves and cleanse them.” Sand crunches under Xehanort’s feet as he approaches Ventus. “I can raise the Realm of Darkness from the depths and scour it. Without darkness, what is left but peace?”

Ventus speaks slowly. “You want to . . .?”

“Ven. Give it to me. So long as darkness exists, she will be haunted by it. So long as Kingdom Hearts remains unclaimed, you will be hunted for your heart. Give me the X-Blade.”

There’s a minute jerk of Ventus’s arm in Xehanort’s direction. It’s small, barely noticeable, but enough to tell them all which way he’s leaning. And so, Sora, desperate, says the only thing that can be said about this proposal.

“That’s . . . stupid!”

Xehanort, insulted, snaps to attention. “What is that?”

“You can’t get rid of darkness like that. You’ll upset the balance.”
“Balance?” Xehanort scoffs. “What does it matter? The darkness is naught but selfishness and greed – what balance is to be found in that? Master Eraqus made many mistakes in his life, but this was a subject he judged correctly. The darkness is our sins personified, and I will see it vanquished.”

“Even if all that stuff you’re saying is true, you can’t do it. You can’t only rip darkness out of the worlds and think everything will be fine because darkness is a part of everyone, too.”

“Tell her that.” Xehanort points straight at Kairi. “There are multiple beings who live without darkness in their hearts, while the only being I knew without any light was an unnatural monster. We don’t have to live with darkness. We can end all the universe’s suffering together. With Kingdom Hearts, all is possible.”

“Xehanort,” the armour growls. By this point, everything knows that it’s barely capable of saying anything else. Thus, they disregard it. Or all but Sora do, because he can’t help but wonder. . .

“If that’s all you want Kingdom Hearts for, then why didn’t you tell Aqua or Ventus?” Sora asks. “If I wanted to save the world, I would tell Riku and Kairi everything about it. So, why didn’t you say anything? Especially since Ventus had the X-Blade this entire time. . .”

“Independence,” Riku says. “He went his own way as Xemnas because he doesn’t want his power to be dependent on Ventus.”

“But why?” Sora stresses. “We know Ventus trusts him.”

Kairi, silent until now, meets Xehanort’s eyes. “You said nobody has to live with darkness inside them. What does that mean? Almost everyone already has. . .”

Her question trails off because just by voicing it, the answer becomes clear.

“It’s not just the worlds. You’re going to target hearts themselves,” Riku says.

“You’re crazy,” Sora squeaks. “You can’t rip darkness out of people.”

There’s a distinct gleam in Xehanort’s golden eyes: one of triumph. Slowly, he holds himself high on wobbly legs and they’re all transfixed by the sight.

“But you can,” Xehanort says. “You are children; you know nothing of the nature of darkness. But I spent eight years studying it in Radiant Garden. I’ve seen it happen. I made it happen.”

“Yeah, you turned people into heartless!” Sora shoots back. “Master Aqua told us all about it.”

“I did,” Xehanort admits easily. “But I was also able to extract darkness from hearts, and not all of them collapsed. I have enough experience to judge who is strong enough to survive.”

“You. . . did turn people into Heartless?” Ventus repeats. The X-Blade is carried close to himself, balanced on the hip furthest from Xehanort like Ventus is protecting it.

“There were some accidents,” Xehanort says, “before we understood and created the manufactories as an alternative. Ven, trust me. I pried open and studied the abyss itself; there has never been anyone who understands the darkness as well as I. I can set this right.”

Even as Xehanort speaks to Ventus, even as he affectionally positions a finger under Ventus’s chin and raises it, Xehanort is eyeing up the X-Blade like a piece of meat.

“Sora!” Kairi hisses. He meets her eyes and understands. He has to say something. He doesn’t know
what to say, but he *has* to speak because Aqua’s apparently turned into a weird hyper-aggressive suit of armour and that means he’s the person Ventus is most likely to listen to.

“Ventus, don’t listen to him. You know it’s wrong. That’s. . . that why he’s been trying to work around you,” Sora says in a stoke of genius. Finally, he feels like he’s grasping the piece they’ve all been neglecting. “He was afraid you won’t cooperate, so he wanted to get Kingdom Hearts without your X-Blade.”

Yet, something’s still missing because Ventus doesn’t look like he agrees. Instead, Ventus has a deer-in-the-headlights expression that isn’t leaning toward either side.

“Ven. . .” Xehanort murmurs.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sora sees Kairi puff herself up. Her trembling fists lie tight against her side as she says, “Someone with good intentions wouldn’t plan to hurt their friends like this.” Xehanort frowns. He turns away from Ventus to face Kairi as his brow furrows. “I did not want to fight her, but Aqua was the one who insisted. We gave her the opportunity to stop, but she refused. . .”

“But you would still be planning to tear apart her heart even if she had stayed with you.”

Sora, Riku and Ventus startle. Sora had assumed, given Ventus and Xehanort’s manic obsession with each other and Aqua, that there had been an implied exception when Xehanort had talked about ripping the darkness out of people. But the way Xehanort looks at Kairi steady and strong makes it clear that he had no exceptions in mind.

“Aqua will hardly notice a difference,” Xehanort says dismissively. “She may feel a weight lifted off her shoulders, but nothing more.”

“What about Ventus? His heart is half darkness.”

Xehanort rests a hand over his heart. “His light is strong now. This time, he will be able to bear it.”

How could you respond to such an answer? How did you argue with someone that was so fundamentally wrong? Sora wouldn’t call Ventus his friend, but in this situation, he feels for the guy; he hadn’t missed Xehanort’s implication that something like this had happened to Ventus before. Obviously, whatever happened to his heart has been patched over now, but the way Ventus has gone slack-jawed and glassy-eyed tells them that whatever the past held, it was awful.

“You’re disgusting,” Riku says. “You’ve been planning to betray them this whole time. That’s the real reason you wanted to get Kingdom Hearts by yourself, isn’t it: so they couldn’t stop you when you turned on them.”

“Mind your choice of words,” Xehanort warns.

“You’re going to rip apart their hearts. There’s nothing you can call that but betrayal!” As Sora shouts, he steps back and braces himself. Xehanort is still slumping from their earlier fight, but this is the calmest they’ve seen him since their arrival and there’s something inherently dangerous about that.

“It is no more a betrayal than forcing an unwilling child to attend school,” Xehanort says. “They will thank me for it later. You all will.”

“No way.” Sora says.
“Terra?” Ventus says quietly. There’s something young and vulnerable about the way he speaks.

Xehanort frowns again. “I know you’re scared. I promise this time will be different. Think of what how your life will be when it is over. It truly will be like the old days again.”

Ventus screws his eyes shut. He’s shaking. “But my darkness. . . It’s a part of me.”

“Ven, you’ve seen your darkness. You’ve met it. You’ve fought it.” Xehanort has a hand on Ventus’s shoulder. “Remember how much happy your life was without it? The animosity you held towards it wasn’t unearned. Your darkness is an abomination unworthy of life.”

Suddenly, Xehanort and Ventus aren’t facing each other anymore. Instead, Xehanort is back-pedalling away from Ventus, or maybe his feet are moving that fast because he’s trying to keep his balance. If that’s true, he fails in the end; he splashes into the sand. Xehanort rolls onto his side and props up his chest with one arm. There’s a strange rattling sound that takes Sora a moment to connect to Xehanort’s breathing.

“Ven?” Gone are the rich, honeyed tones of before. Gone is the cold confidence. Xehanort’s voice is cracking.

Ventus doesn’t respond. In fact, there’s no transition from the moment he’s simply standing there to the moment he has the X-Blade impaled in Xehanort’s chest.

Strangely, there’s no blood when Ventus rips the X-Blade out, as if it had cauterized the wounds on the way. He doesn’t have far to go, but they hear the thump as Xehanort’s body falls and stops moving.

Sora’s heart drops into his stomach. Sure, Xehanort was a bad guy and needed to be stopped, but there’s something deeply wrong about the way it happened. It shouldn’t have been Ventus. Not like this. Speaking of the man, Ventus has fallen to his knees. His pallor is pale like he’s about to vomit.

Ventus can barely speak. “Why. . .?”

Sora can’t move as Ventus weeps. Even now, Ventus still thinks it was Terra. They should say something; they should tell him the truth. But Sora finds his tongue just as paralyzed as the rest of him.

Then, he catches sight of a strange light coming from Xehanort’s body, centered at his chest. Something white and wispy detaches from his body and –

“XEHANORT!”

The armour throws Riku out of its way. It’s already swinging before anyone can register –

A flash of black and white blinds them.

Then it’s over and nobody understands what happened. Xehanort’s body is still in the same place it was before and the light is gone. The armour towers above him and then shockingly, walks past his mortal foe. It takes less a dozen steps away before it stops, head turned towards the overhanging light of Kingdom Hearts.

Then, like a puppet with cut strings, it collapses.

Sora’s first instinct is to run over, but he stops himself short. Ventus is between them and the armour. Although Ventus is crying and doesn’t appear to be paying attention, the X-Blade is still within
arm’s reach. Thus, Sora tiptoes; each crackle of sand sounds like a bomb going off.

Nevertheless, he reaches the armour safely. Wary, he pokes it with his keyblade; it doesn’t respond.

His last poke is rougher than he means to be. It catches the armour by its chin, jostling it enough so that it no longer lies flush with the torso. In the crack, there’s a pale soft-looking thing that has to be a neck. Curious, Sora wedge the tip of his keyblade into the gap and then carefully pulls the helmet up and over the head that is clearly too small for it. Oh. It is Master Aqua. She’s grimy and unconscious; blood speckles the lower half of her face.

The sight of the abducted Master gives Kairi and Riku the motivation they need to sneak past Ventus. They crouch around her. Nobody speaks; they’re afraid Ventus will hear.

But there’s only so long mice can hide from a cat. Ventus looks up straight at them. Yet he doesn’t strike. He stares at them for a few long moments. Then his gaze falls upon the ground again.

Sora nearly screams when an armoured arm knocks against his shin. Although the armour doesn’t fit her, Aqua doesn’t seem to realize anything’s wrong until she tries to rub her eyes and ends up hitting herself in the face with a giant metal hand. Despite that, her odd outfit doesn’t seem to surprise her.

“Are you okay?” Kairi asks her.

“I’ll be fine,” Aqua says. “I . . .”

Aqua’s lying on the ground, so it’s only natural she looks up to see them. And she freezes. There’s a faint white light reflected in her eyes: moonlight.

“Kingdom Hearts,” she whispered. “He . . . Did Xehanort . . .?”

Sora struggles not to look back at the body. “It’s over.”

“It’s not over as long as Kingdom Hearts is still here. We have to –”

She had tried to look directly at him that time, which meant she saw Ventus on his knees behind them. She freezes again.

“I got it,” Sora tells her. He stands and carefully walks over to Ventus, who has thankfully stopped crying. “Ventus? You. . . you can send Kingdom Hearts away now.”

“. . . Why should I?” Ventus says.

“What do you mean?” Sora steps back. Despite everything, Ventus doesn’t seem to be threatening them. But why then would he refuse?

“Leave Kingdom Hearts hanging around and everyone will come for it,” Ventus mutters. “Fine. If the universe wants to fight over it so badly, let it. I don’t care.”

“But if the Keyblade War happens then –”

Ventus speaks again, his tone steel:

“I don’t care.”
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