In the aftermath of kingdom hearts three, both Kairi and Riku cope slowly with the loss of Sora. Riku returns to destiny islands and tries to balance being a keyblade master with his homelife, while Kairi tries to catch up with the gap between them that only widened with Sora's disappearance. Looking for Sora, Riku and Kairi together visit several different worlds catching up with the other guardians of light dealing with the aftermath of being broken by battle, after battle, and trying to slowly put the pieces back together before the next mastermind shows up with the fate of all the different worlds in his palms. As they travel together Riku and Kairi realize their importance to each other that they almost forgot with years of separation.

At the same time, Yoshiya Kiryu otherwise known as the composer of the Reaper's Game in Shibuya travels to the final world to find some interesting souls for his reaper's game, and stumbles on Sora's soul by accident and decides to piece it together so Sora can keep his promise to Neku to see him again in Shibuya one day.

A fic to explore the Riku and Kairi relationship, as it was so underdeveloped in KH3, and revises the ending somewhat to be less neat. Canon divergent AU.
Those Two, Left Behind

There's something sweet and almost kind.
But he was mean, and he was course and unrefined.
And now he's dear, and so unsure.
I wonder why I didn't see it there before.

Side A: Destiny Islands
Track 1

Wake up, go to school, save the world, it always sounded so routine in the adventure stories that Riku read as a child. The reality of it was more tiring than he ever expected.

As he sat in the middle of science class trying to learn about the laws of physics as it pertained to one and only one world, suddenly the teacher’s voice faded away and the sound of rain on the window became much louder. His eyes drifted towards the window, to see falling water streaking along the pane.

For an Islander, Riku has almost no good memories associated with water. Riku was told again and again how beautiful it was to see blue surrounding him in every direction. The sea and the sky both seemed endless, but there was nothing to see.

Riku never liked water, but then again he never begrudged it either. Water had no choice but to fall. Condensation collected up in the clouds. Water vapor molecules bonded together. The more bonds that were formed, the harder it was to stay in a gaseous state it became more solid. It was too heavy, bonds made things too heavy, and then it fell from the clouds. Even after landing on the window pane gravity would drag the tiny droplets down and down.

It was almost as if falling was the natural state of things. Dragged down, down, falling further and further. Riku did not know when but at some point his eyes had closed. He saw no light at all but seeing nothing he was still familiar with the sensation of falling. He had fallen and stumbled along the way far more than most. When he tried to breathe the pressure on his body was so great, that he could only move his mouth slightly and only a few bubbles escaped from his lips like a murmur in a dream.

He suddenly realized he was not falling, but drowning. Riku moved his body and struggled to right himself. Kicking his legs he inverted his world just in time to land on a platform. He had been here once before he was sure of it, like having a faint memory of a dream from the distant past. He was standing on a stain glass platform in the middle of a dark sky.

Even though he had only the faintest of memories of the last time he had been here, he got the sense something was different. He opened his eyes to look down at his feet. He saw a much larger pair of shoes different from the boots he remembered putting on this morning. Underneath those, the stained glass platform he was standing on was cracked, to the very brink of shattering. Broken lines in the glass ran through the images of Kairi, Donald, Goofy, and himself. He remembered there used to be an image of a sleeping boy clutching a key on this platform, However, the half of the platform where the boy’s image had been was shattered, and Riku walked to the edge staring at the sheer fall from the missing piece. It looked like a large piece had been taken from what was once a whole circle. He could not shake the feeling that something was missing, and without that vital piece this glass platform could only crumble and crumble.
He took another step and another crack appeared in the dilapidated old platform. Was it him? Was he the one breaking it? Before he could figure out what had broken the stained glass window to this point, it gave way underneath his feet and finished shattering completely. He looked up and saw the broken pieces of glass reduced to the size of dust, shimmering against a pitch black background like they were a thousand little stars.

Riku fell again, further and further. That’s right what he hated was not the water itself, but looking at the same thing every day, the same sea, and the same sky. He was afraid there was only one sky and that was all he would see all his life. Yet, it was not all that bad. Yeah, he was just being ungrateful. An upstart brat. Familiar things weren’t bad. Familiar days weren’t bad either.

After all the sun rises every single day. There was a time every single day he could see the sun’s warmth. He never got tired of it. It was not like he wanted to choose the moon to spurn the sun. As long as the sun could keep smiling at him, somehow seeing that same face every time he never got tired of it. No, wait the sun can’t smile. He was not talking about the sun at all. To him, the sun rising in the morning just meant that he could see those two again, they were two stars in orbit around him who outshone the sun.

He wanted the same old days to end, but he would never want his days with them to end. His eyes opened again as he touched down on another platform. He could not see anything at first, like the whole circle he was standing on was obscured by darkness, then two lights shined from above so bright Riku needed to shield his eyes with his arm. The border of the circular platform was surrounded by the sigil of the dream eaters, a hollowed out heart silhouette with what looked to be a pair of jagged fangs eclipsing it. He saw a boy holding another keyblade, this one was made of two different wings, a sickly looking bat’s wing, and a divine looking angelic wing, two opposite extremes that were destined to clash. The boy did not look like he was sleeping, instead, he was kneeling down with his eyes closed as if he wished to be knighted as he carried his keyblade over his shoulder. The boy’s head was surrounded by seven circles six surrounding one in the middle. In this order, Sora, Kairi, Mickey, Namine, Terra, a hooded man who had abandoned his original name… and in the middle, there was the face of the man who had once taken over his heart but now his portrait was gone, replaced by broken glass.

Riku turned his head and saw himself in the mirror. His hair was longer and he wore a yellow vest and a pair of jeans. He looked down to see he was wearing those baggy pants he always wore as a kid, with an “x” on the chest of the shirt he was wearing. He stepped towards the mirror, but before he could his reflection stepped out of the mirror. This one wore a skin-tight purple suit, with the emblem of an empty heart emblazoned over his chest.

“What is it that you’re so afraid of?”

The replica made by the mirror asked.

“Losing something that’s important,” Riku answered, without even realizing he could talk. The words must have come straight from his heart.

Another Riku stepped out of the mirror. This time, he was wearing a pitch black coat. He let the hood down, showing his long white hair.

“What is the one thing you care about more than anything else?”

The second replica asked.

Once again, he was able to answer without speaking. “My close friends.”
“Riku, what do you wish?” They both asked at the same time. Their voices combining was especially grating on his ears, and he stopped to cover his ears with his hands for a moment.

“To recover something important.”

However, even when he tried to shut them out by covering his ears, those two other times appeared on either side of him. They both grabbed onto one shoulder and tried to pull him their way.

“Is that what you desire?”
“Is this the power you seek?”

“The power to protect what’s important?”

He wondered why they were asking such a stupid question. If they were him they should already know. They should know that what he wanted to protect was already gone. What he wanted to recover was unrecoverable.

“Why?”
“Why?”

They both asked. Then, with their choices combining and overlapping speaking with two voices at the same time. “If all you want is the power to protect, then why are you always the one who destroys that which you want to protect the most?”

“Shut up!”

Riku cried out, but those two other Rikus were no longer there. They had stepped over to him, over his shoes, exactly where he was standing, until they were overlapped, until they were indistinguishable from one another. The current you, what you call yourself, is just the accumulation of everything single mistake you’ve made in the past. All you can do is walk forward, becoming more broken, getting scratched, getting cut, acquiring more and more flaws, never able to return to the point of time before the first crack appeared.

He looked over his shoulder again but the mirror was already gone. It had been washed away by a wave. Riku saw the wave get closer and closer. He remembered this because this memory replayed itself over and over again in his mind. There was a time that he stood on the edge of the beach. It was raining that day too. He could hear the wave approaching from behind him but he was not afraid. He wanted to see what lied beyond the water, even if it that meant with no raft he would just have to swim his way there. If the water swallowed him up and devoured him all at once, that was still better than dying slowly on that island. There was another reason that he was not afraid. He was not alone, Sora was with him there on the beach.

He slowly held out his hand. He did not even look at the wave behind him, his eyes on Sora the whole time. His fingers uncurled slowly, ad his open palm reached out. His body flickered twice, between him and his normal clothes, him in that purple suit, and him wearing that black cloak. Yet, Sora should have been able to recognize it. It was the same hand, every time, he always reached out to Sora, again and again, no matter how much had changed about him that would stay the same.

Sora rushed towards him at first calling out his name, but at the last minute just as their hands were about to touch he hesitated and drew his back. Then the wave crashed over Riku. All alone. It was cold, and there was no light to guide him. He could not help but think over and over again, why didn’t you take my hand?

Riku felt water rushing all around him, falling on top of his head. Suddenly, he heard the sound of
dripping water, drip, drip, drip. His eyes cracked open and he saw in the real world someone had splashed an entire watering can’s worth of water all over his head.

He raised his head slowly to see Kairi holding an empty water can, pretending to water the flowers with it. “What are you looking at me like that for? It wasn’t me.” She said, already starting to get flustered.

She was a terrible liar as always.
Just like Sora.

He wanted to live a life different from other people.
He wanted to see a different sky, but he returned to the same island, the same sky, the same sea. He wondered why now that he had attained the rank of master and travel between worlds was so easy. Going back to school, living life day to day in the same world, it felt like pretending to him. Just a charade that he had never thrown open the door that day, and that he had never been given the key to seeing other worlds.

Kairi covered her mouth and smiled at him as he reached up to slick his wet hair back with his hands. He was embarrassed and trying not to show it on her face. That only made her laugh more.

It was probably her.
If he was here, he could see the same sky with her. He could share it with her.

She put the watering can down and walked in front of his desk, folding her hands behind her back as she always did. “You know it was always Sora who fell asleep during class, not you.”

Riku flinched hearing that name. In the past, he always thought he was the strongest on the island, but he had no idea what strength was. Ever since that person disappeared from that island, he had not said his name once. If the word escaped from his lips he felt like something might escape from him, he would lose it permanently.

Yet, Kairi continued to talk and joke around about him as nothing had ever happened. Like he had never disappeared.
He knew she was not merely pretending like he was either. She was trying to live their lives for both of them. Even if it meant dragging Riku along the way. She knew what she was missing, yet she could always go on smiling like that, that was why she was strong.

“...” The mention of Sora made him pause too long… Say something damnit!

Kairi spoke up again, “You know you have been missing from school for three years. I could help you catch up-”

“You’re a grade lower than me.”

“You weren’t even at school! You should be held back lower than me! You’re lucky they bought that excuse that you’d been studying abroad all throughout middle school. I could help you with your homework just fine, it doesn’t matter if I’m a grade lower than you, at least I actually show up at school! Gosh, why does everything have to be a competition with you Riku?”
You’re the one who’s making it a competition. Riku thought, but he did not speak it because Kairi seemed to be worked up about something today. He had no idea what it could be, there was no Xehanort anymore, and no Sora, so nothing for her to get excited over. “I’m just saying I don’t need your help with the material. I already caught up by the time summer ended and now I’m ahead.” He explained in an even voice. “I just fell asleep because it’s boring being lectured about things you already know.”

“So y-you don’t need any help at all? Jeez Riku, you don’t have to suddenly flex like that. I get it, you’re the smartest boy on the island.”

“...? Flex?” Riku looked down at his sleeves. It was true he had a habit of wearing sleeveless or short sleeves but he had no idea what that had to do with the current moment.

“I’m not talking about your arms. It’s just a thing people say on Kingsta. Do you know that site that’s on our gummi phones? It’s like another word for bragging, but like funny. Well, not so funny anymore now that you made me explain the joke.”

“Oh, you were making fun of me.”

“So, the boy prodigy finally realizes. I thought you were supposed to be smart. So smart you didn’t need my help studying.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.
Since they were kids, it had been her ultimate trump card.
He was sure no argument he could possibly give in his defense would beat that. Then again, he had been letting her talk circles around him the entire time.

Only now did he realize why. Kairi was just looking for an excuse to spend time with him, and he kept cutting her off. He knew he was neither smart nor a prodigy, smart people did not make as many mistakes as he had. Just as Kairi crossed her arms and moves to turn away from him, Riku reached out his fingers curling just in time to lock onto hers.

“Kairi, what do you want?”
He asked as directly as possible. It’s not like he wanted to refuse her.

Then, Riku realized he had really grabbed her hand. He should have just grabbed her sleeve or shirt, or something. Immediately, he pulls away feeling like he recklessly crossed a line. A line that had been drawn in the sand between them ever since Sora was gone. A line that marked they would always be walking side by side, but they would never get close to each other, lest they forget who was missing in the gap in between the two of them.

“I want to continue my training.”

“I don’t think that will help you on your math test.”

“I’m serious!” She threw her hands at her sides turning back to him suddenly.

But by that time, it was Riku who had already gotten up. He started to walk towards the door. This time Kairi grabbed onto the tail ends of the white button up shirt that he did not bother to tuck into his blue plaid pants. “Then you should go to Merlin or the Mysterious Tower, not me. As you said, I have three years I missed on this island. I need to make up for lost time.”

Riku is stronger than her, so even with her holding onto him, he can just drag across the floor. Kairi would probably give up once somebody saw them like this. Kairi continued to protest. “I know the reason you’ve been sleeping through class. It’s not because you’re bored, you’ve been sneaking
away at night.”

“I have a part-time job.”

“Really, how much does being a keyblade master on the side pay you?”

“Probably as much Munni as the heartless decide to drop for me.” Then, the boy genius realized. “Ssssshh, they’re not even supposed to know about the keyblade stuff. What if someone overhears us?”

“They’ll probably think we’re just talking about some video game.”

“I’m only going because I’m the only keyblade master left. Aqua’s busy taking care of Terra and Mickey has a kingdom to watch over. It’s not like I want to go alone.” He wanted this power so he could stay by both of their sides after all, only for one of them to disappear on his watch. “Just leave me alone, and go ask Yen Sid if you want more training.”

“I want you to be the one to train me! You’re a keyblade master aren’t you?”

“I’m not…”

Even if he won the rank of a master he did not think he was a teacher. I’m not someone who can guide others.

He thought, and Kairi must have read his thoughts somehow. As suddenly just as they were about to reach the door she got so frustrated with him she jumped up and landed on his back. “Whoa, whoa, whoa-what?” Riku stumbled forward a few steps, before bending his knees and balancing himself perfectly with her added weight. Still, she was so close, too close, she had just jumped over that line like she barely saw it, her weight was almost nothing at all to carry and yet he could feel himself sweating and his heart start to race. His literal heart, the one that pumped blood, no the metaphorical one. “What are you a kid?”

“So are you. Stop pretending like you’re too cool for this.”

He was not pretending. He knew how uncool he was because his cool had melted, the moment she had gotten this close to him. “Why are you doing this?” He asked once again.

She was acting strangely. When Sora was starting to fall apart he hid it from them. If he just told him, Riku would have done something, anything for him. He can’t go through that again. Kairi seemed to read his mood, as she stopped trying to crawl up his back. Instead, she leaned against him, her arms falling slowly over his shoulders and then wrapping together in front of his chest. Her neck found a perfect fit in the crevasse of his shoulder. “You keep sneaking away without telling me. Every time you do, I think ‘maybe this time he’ll disappear too without even saying goodbye’. I want to come with you. If I’m not strong enough to be by your side then train me more.”

“Kairi…”

“Don’t get the wrong idea.” Her stubborn side flares up as she lifts her head again and shouts way too close to his ear. “I just think you’re no good on your own. That’s why I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Kairi said that, but Riku could tell what she was thinking. That was right they were both grieving at the same time. Sora is a light so bright he’ll conquer any darkness. He’s the hero, so he’ll always win in the end with or without me. Kairi is strong.
She’s always able to smile, she can keep smiling all on her own. She’s used to being left alone, used to losing things, and she can still smile she was never troubled by darkness once, and therefore she can smile with or without him piling things on. Those were just the assumptions he had made. They were both mourning the same loss, but they had not grieved together not even once. He tried not to hate himself.

He had a high base stats, he had kind of good looks, a pessimistic but realistic perspective. None of those were bad things, but once again he felt like he was on the precipice of hating himself. The Kairi that he knew, always beautiful, unable to lie, honest, completely true to her heart, always standing on her own two feet even when her troublesome boys left her behind. He was sure he held that Kairi in admiration.

He chose to expect those things out of her. He chose to feel like he understood her. And he chose to leave her alone. As much as he told himself not to, he still does it. Even Kairi who made friends just as easily as Sora did, could feel alone. Even Kairi who was so much better than he could feel like she needed others.

He really did think he was the only one in the whole world who ever felt lonely.

And so.
He hated himself.
But he didn’t hate her. He didn’t ever want her to think he hated her, that he was avoiding her.

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go train together.” He said in a soft voice. In the end, he could never say no to her. He always ended up giving into her and giving in for her. “Now get down.”

“Why don’t you give me a ride? It’ll be muscle training.”

“You’re the one who’s supposed to be training, not me,” Riku said as he tried to shake her off. “What will somebody think if they see us?”

“What will they think?”

“That we’re a couple… of people being ridiculous!”

Kairi told him to use those arms of his to row the boat out from the mainland to the islands. He had no idea what she was talking about but pushed the rowboat out, and quietly obeyed her. A long time ago, he had to ride here with Sora’s dad. A few years ago, he was finally strong enough to push the boat himself.

The entire boat ride there, Kairi did not most the talking. He listened to every word but he did not have much to say. Funny, when he was younger he was the one who was always doing all the talking. He was so confident he talked circles around Kairi and Sora, so full of himself too. Nowadays, he was the one out of the group most likely to keep to himself probably because he did not have anything worthwhile to say.

When they made it to shore, Riku pushed the rowboat up and tied it off. Kairi led him forward on the beach, and he followed her like her loyal shadow. As she led him to the far part of the island, he
looked over her shoulder to see the ruins of what had once been the obstacle course they built, before it was destroyed by the storm. He always used to race Sora there. He wondered if Sora was still here... would he win?

Riku walked over to one of the palm trees with a wide trunk and lifted up a pile of leaves. There were two wooden swords there exactly where he had left them a few years ago. He said it was for security purposes when they left on the raft. He had no idea a key would fall into his hands.

He picked one up for himself and threw the other one to Kairi. The moment she caught it, she stared at it in disbelief. “You want to train with these toys? I knew you weren’t taking me seriously!” She kicked up the sand with her shoe. She must have been mad.

“You said you wanted me to teach you. If you want to play fight with keyblades go back to Merlin’s. This is exactly how I taught Sora to fight.”

There he just did it.
He said Sora’s name.
Probably because Kairi was here with him, he knew even if he let that name escape his lips between the two of them the memory would not be lost.

Kairi put her hands on her hips, incredulous. “Wait, are you claiming you taught Sora to fight?”

“This is Sora we’re talking about. Do you really think he would have learned it on his own if somebody else didn’t teach him?” He had no idea why he was boasting now. Maybe, because that’s what he thought the old Riku would do, the Riku that Kairi most wanted to see. The Riku who did not have three years of distance between Kairi. The one that belonged on these islands.

Kairi considered for a second, and then she held the sword pointing it at him decisively. “Fine, if you’re really taking this seriously then let’s make it interesting.”

“You said you didn’t want this to be a game.”

“No, I want you to fight seriously! Let’s make a bet like you always did with Sora before the two of you sparred.”

“I only made those bets because I was sure I was going to win.”

“Then that’s even more reason for me to knock you down!”

“Knock me down? Did you drag me all the way out here to bully me?”

“You bet I did! You’re going to regret making Kairi mad!” She was mad. Riku had no idea why. Kairi was always filled with such emotions he did not recognize. She was just like Sora though, they were both always filled to the brim with such wonderful, bright emotions, that was why they were so suited for each other. “If I win, you have to grant my wish. If you win... I dunno whatever.”

“Those aren’t specific terms at all. It sounds like we’re making a shady deal here.” Riku deadpanned.
Kairi, “What are you, scared?”

“Hm...” He was scared, more scared than anyone else but he never let that stop him before. Riku raised his hand above his head like a wave, and then with his other hand held below, he gestured for her to come at him. Kairi took a two-handed fighting stance, holding the wooden sword the same way she did her keyblade.
The island was filled with the sound of crashing wood. Their play swords smacking against each other was a nostalgic sound. Riku almost got lost in it, seeing in his shadow, his much younger self fighting against a much younger Sora again and again.

Riku was on the defensive the entire time, not because he was holding back against Kairi but because he wanted to observe her form. For strictly professional reasons of course. He didn’t want to stare at her or anything, shut up. He had not gotten the chance to see Kairi fight yet. What he saw was the same self-taught a style that he himself fought with three years ago.

Eventually, he saw an opening and decided to teach her a lesson for it. He let her sword swing past his and then swung forward with everything he had knocking her down to the ground. The moment she hit the sand, she kicked up quite a bit of it and rubbed at her head.

Riku’s eyes widened in worry for a moment. If he went too hard if he destroyed her like he destroyed everything else…

“Owie! Did you always go this hard on Sora?” Kairi whined. Oh, she was just being dramatic.

“I had to, it was the only way to get through that thick skull of his.” He said. He walked over to where Kairi had fallen and offered her a hand up.

“Oh, you’ve become such a graceful winner Riku. Just like a prince. The old you would have made fun of me for losing.”

“Yeah, yeah, and now I’m the one being made fun of.”

Not that he minded. His heart skipped a beat again when her fingers curl around his, just before he pulls her up. He wondered if all hearts were this weak or just his. The moment she’s standing on her two feet again he pulled his hand away not wanting her to make fun of how sweaty it must have been.

“Your form is good, but a lot of your training was really rushed. You lack the experience to improvise when someone knocks you off your feet.” Riku had no idea if he sounded like a proper key blade master or not.

“I wonder why that is,” She said with her hands on her hips, “Let’s go again, this time it’ll be double or nothing. If I win I get two things, and if you win you get nothing.”

“I’m not sure these odds are in my favor.”

“What does that matter? You should just beat the odds, hero boy!”

They sparred again, and Riku knew she was just teasing but he could not help but feel hero was an inappropriate thing to call him. Sora was a hero, he was not. He was the opposite of whatever a hero was.

He was a zero.
That probably meant without Sora around he was nothing.
He wondered why with him it was always all or nothing.
He was either together, or he was alone.
He was either a friend, or he was an enemy.
He was either light, or he was dark.
He wondered why he always divided himself along the middle between such opposite extremes.
Kairi and Sora felt so many different things, but if he felt something he did so with all of himself.
He put all of himself into everything he did.
That was just stupid though because that meant all of himself got hurt.

Riku could put off his homework until tomorrow, so every time Kairi demanded a rematch he kept sparring with her. It became triple or nothing, quadruple or nothing, quintuple or nothing, and then he lost count, all the way until the sunset.

Kairi flopped down exhausted on the ground next to him. Riku looked at the tree they always rested on in the distance, but there was no way he could go there. That was where Sora had last been with the two of them before he suddenly faded away.

“Riiiiiiiiiku, let me ride on your back.”

“Why do you want to ride on my back so much today?” Riku asked, standing over her.

“You always used to let me when we were younger. Nowadays whenever I get close to you, you just freeze in place. Do I have ice magic?”

“We can practice magic next time,” Riku said, trying to change the subject.

“Don’t you remember? Whenever something was too high for me to reach, you let me climb on your back. You were always the tallest one. It’s like you were trying to show off. Come ooooooon.”

She was right, he was trying to show off. It was not like he had changed since back then, or even his feelings had changed. He thought even if he got lost along the way, the feelings he had started out with were always the same. He just wanted to protect those two. To stay with those two. That was why he told them about his plan to leave the island on a raft, and then when they both grabbed onto him and begged him to let them come with he gave in. Now too, he gave in, he was always giving in, because he was weak to everything and especially to her. Riku knelt in front of her like a knight and offered up his back like she really was a princess.

Kairi gave an excited cry and climbed back on. The two of them together tried to get the extra height they needed to get Kairi in range of the top of the palm tree. She reached up and grabbed a coconut, and held it up like it was a trophy.

They set it down between them as they sat in the shadow of the great palm tree, just like they did when they were children. “How are we supposed to open this up?” Kairi asked, puzzled.

“It’s too bad Sora’s head isn’t here. We could have cracked it against another hard object.”

“Do you think we could use the keyblade to open a coconut?” Kairi asked, suddenly excited.

“I don’t see why not.”

Kairi summoned hers and whacked it hard enough to break it in half. Then, she lost interest. “Hey, remember when we were making our raft. Why did we ever think we could survive with just a few eggs, coconuts, and water?”

“You might not know this yet Kairi, but children are in fact very dumb. Especially me.” Riku had no idea why he was joking around like this. He did not want to play on this island or remember the good times now that Sora had disappeared. Neither of those things would bring him back. He wanted to go to every world and shout Sora’s name to see where that idiot had gone and disappeared on him this time, but he could not, probably because Kairi was here. That was why.

Kairi was his reason.

Suddenly, she looked up at him. “Riku, do you remember when you and Sora used to spar or race on
that obstacle course. I was always the referee?”

“And I always won.”

“I’m not talking about that part! I mean… it’s just… after a while, I thought it would be fun if I got to spar or race. I felt like I was on the sidelines, just watching you two fight.”

Riku’s shoulders sunk. That had been his fault too. After all, when Kairi needed their help the most the first time this island sank into darkness, Riku made Sora fight over the right of who got to save her. He did not think once of how lonely she must have been, her body was just a cold object they were fighting over.

“I thought maybe you didn’t want to include me, because… you and Sora were such great friends and I was just the girl who moved to the islands. You were already friends and I just got in the way.”

Riku looked over his shoulder. They had both sat down in the sand to rest, but he had lost track of where she was. Without realizing it, she had gotten close to him, close enough to lean her back against his back. Even though she was leaning on him, she did not look at him either. She had drawn her knees up to her chest, and her eyes were fixed down on herself. Riku almost felt like he was peaking and seeing something he was not meant to see. Maybe they were just supposed to lean on each other like this without looking at each other, that way they would not have to acknowledge who was not there. Riku fixed his eyes forward once more.

“That’s not it, Kairi. We just didn’t want you doing anything dangerous.”

“Yeah, well if you were that worried about me imagine how I must have felt watching you two always run off ahead of me straight into danger. When I couldn’t do anything but wait for you to come back.”

Riku got the feeling she was no longer talking about the games they used to play when they were children. Still, he knew he was wrong. Between the three of them, he was always the wrong one. Wrong for her especially.

“I’m sorry, I was wrong back then…” He always assumed he was the only one who was afraid of losing things, that he was the only one who got lonely. “So, from now on when I’m training you, I’ll be extra merciless. I’ll make it as dangerous as possible.” He was only joking. He had promised to continue her training, but he would shove that key into his own heart before he ever pointed it at her with harming intent.

“That’s what I like about you, Riku. You never hold anything back.”

His life would probably have gone a lot smoother if he learned to hold back a little more. “You liked something about me? I’m surprised.”

“I’m surprised too since you’re such a rude jerk all the time. When I’m with you, it's like you don’t treat me differently from anyone else.”

“Rude jerk… but I’m the one being bullied here.” Riku said in a soft voice. He noticed Kairi was leaning more against him, to the point that he felt some of her short hair brushing against his shoulder. “Kairi, were you trying to trick me into promising to take you on missions? If I lost the bet, I mean.”

“Maaaaaybe,” She says, pretending to be coy for reasons Riku doesn’t understand. “I didn’t need you to promise that though since I’m your apprentice now. You’d be a no good master if you left your apprentice behind.”
“Since when did I take you on as an apprentice?”

“Are you going to say no to me?”

“Um… no… I mean yes… I mean, okay you’re my apprentice.”

She played with her fingers. He felt her move behind him, her hair tickled him more and more. Then she turned around suddenly and he felt her breath tickle his ear. “What if I said, that if I won I was going to make you share the paopu fruit with me?”

Riku had no idea if she was teasing him or not, but he didn’t particularly care at that moment. He stood up and grabbed her by the wrist dragging her along. She was so surprised that only a small gasp fell out of her mouth, no words. He threw open the door on the far side of the island and walked her partway into the cave.

It was a private spot between Sora and Kairi. Riku had always known about it, even though Sora tried to draw it in a place where he never would find it. A chalk drawing, or both Kairi and Sora sharing the paopu fruit with each other.

Riku was nowhere near it, even though it had always been the three of them together. Once, all alone in the rising tides of Hollow Bastion, he thought. I should have tried that Paopu fruit thing. Now he knew better than that upstart brat, he knew it was not his place. “You’re not the only one who felt left out, you and Sora always got along better than you did with me. Just because he’s not here you can’t…”

Riku gnashed his teeth. He felt something overflowing in him like water, it was always like this. It was always everything at once. There was always a tidal wave waiting behind him to crash over him. He would get lost, he would lose himself, he had no idea where he would end up the moment he let these emotions swell and the water takes him.

“You can’t replace him! I’m nothing like Sora, I’m not the next best option after him!”

He was shouting. It took him a moment to realize that watery look in Kairi’s eyes. It was fear.

How hard was he gripping her wrist exactly?

“Riku, I… that’s not what I feel…”

Before she can ever finish her explanation, suddenly her shoulders collapse. She caves in on herself, reaching for her heart.

“I feel like something’s missing…” She says, her hand on her chest. There was something missing, but Riku did not think Kairi was collapsing because Sora was not here. He had no idea why she was suddenly fainting, but his brain jumped to one conclusion.


Kairi collapsed against him. Her head fell against his chest. He quickly let go of her wrist and threw arms around her to hold her up. Desperate to stop her from falling, he fumbled. Suddenly, in the pocket of his pants, he heard a beep.

He immediately hit the button and saw Zexion, no Ienzo’s familiar face on a screen. “Did something happen with Kairi? We were just running some tests on Namine and-”

“I’m bringing her to you,” Riku said, cutting him off and turning the phone off. He knew the scientist
would have a tendency to ramble otherwise if he left him on, and he had no time for that. Nor did he particularly like Lenzo monologuing considering what he tried to make him believe the last time he listened to him at length in Castle Oblivion.

Kairi had tried to get close to him all day, and Riku wanted to keep his distance for a hundred reasons that he kept listing in his own head. Suddenly, none of them mattered. He held a careful hand in the back of Kairi’s head, and then looped another around her legs and lifted her up like she was just a sleeping princess. Just like he had not let her ride on his back since they were kids, they had been kids to the last time he carried her like this. On Captain Hook’s Pirate Ship, her body had been so cold even when he held it next to his heart all of her usual warmth was gone. It was almost impossible to believe that the body belonged to Kairi, it was so unlike her.

This time as he held her close to his chest, he could hear her heartbeat faint as it was and sighed with relief. As he walked along he felt his heartbeat lining up to hers. Riku thought he was unreliable and always stumbled along, he always took three times as long to reach the same path as others because of his many difficulties. But he thought, as long as he had her to guide him, shimmering like pure light, no matter how far away he glimpsed that light as long as he kept following it he would be fine.

♛

Kairi regained consciousness briefly. Through the thin crescents of her barely open eyes, she saw Riku walking away from her. She was on a table in a room filled with all white. There were drawings on the wall, some of them she even recognized from her own memories.

There was a familiar scene playing in front of her like a memory, too. Riku was walking away from her again. She reached out with her hand to try to grab onto him. She had been trying to get close all day, just because she had the feeling if she looked away again he might disappear like a dream. Once you woke up and cried a little bit about you, it was so easy to forget dreams like that.

“Ri...Ku...”

He stopped for a moment as if hearing her, and then turned around. When he did, Kairi could not see what kind of face he was making. The light was too bright and it was obscuring him. “See you later.” He said, before turning around again.

The next time she woke up, her heart sped up for a moment when she saw silver hair waiting by her bedside. Then her eyes opened wider and she saw a scientist in a white lab coat, and her heart fell in her stomach with disappointment.

“Hello Kairi, you’re one of Sora’s friends, right? I don’t think we’ve met, I’m Lenzo. I work here at Radiant Gardens. I was part of the Namine, and Roxas restoration projects. Let me begin by saying-”

This guy did not seem to detect Kairi’s disappointment at all, he was all smiles. She sat up and put her hand on her chest. “Is something wrong with me?”

“No, no, not at all! That’s what I was about to explain, well I was going to get there with my explanation, but there were some background details first. Riku understood most of what I said, so I felt like I didn’t need to dumb it down for you as I did with Sora. Well, anyway, I wanted to say it’s nothing wrong with you, Namine had a problem, and you must have felt it in your heart because of your connection.”
So, that was the feeling, of being set adrift, like her heart wanted to leave her body like there was nothing to hold her there. She reached out for Riku a second time. “Riku’s still here?”

“He agreed to help us with Namine.”

“I want to help Namine too.”

“I knew you would, but Riku wouldn’t listen to me he ran off all on his own. It was rather rude of him. Even if it's understandable since he has no reason to be fond of me.”

“Stupid Riku…”

Kairi muttered under her breath.
She knew why he became a keyblade master. Not for power, even the time he was tempted by darkness he never once thought about himself, she realized that now. She understood him more than he would ever realize.

Probably because he assumed she thought nothing of her. Probably because he did not realize how others were feeling. She understood that too, he was afraid of himself, so he was always watching himself so closely more so than anybody else.

He wanted the power of the keyblade not to lose things.

“But I don’t want to lose you either… stupid.”
Darker than Black

Side A: Hollow Bastion
Track 2

“Riku, running off to the realm of darkness like this is worrisome behavior.”

Ienzo advised as he tried to stop him in the hallway before his departure. He even considered reaching out and grabbing him by the shoulder. However, Ienzo was not familiar with this whole touching thing when it came to human conversation. Another reason he liked staying in the lab so much was everything needed to be sterilized and no touchy was the rule by default. Perhaps he should have just called Riku to deliver him this warning after he had left, talking behind a screen, the barriers and distance that it implied suited him better.

Ienzo could not commit to the shoulder touch, so he simply stood there with his hand hovering awkwardly in the air by the time Riku turned around. He wished he had a clipboard to hold. He decided to suddenly hide it behind his back instead.

“Oh, you’re worried for me. You’ve gotten so sentimental since getting your heart back.” There was no hostility in his words, not really. Even Ienzo who preferred reading books to people could tell that. However, the way his words seethed like a slow burn you did not notice right away, that could easily fall under your notice if you weren’t looking for it. It reminded him of the way Axel sometimes spoke to him.

Axel may as well have been a snake with his tongue cut off. You could easily get the fangs inside of you without ever even hearing the hiss. There were slow working poisons like that too, compounds that were not toxic to the body right away but slowly built up in it because the body was unable to digest or get rid of it until the levels rose too high. It was an almost untraceable way of poisoning because the poison could be slipped in small doses at a time and the recipient would not even know until it was too late and they went into metabolic shock.

“Riku, whatever was between us is in the past. We’re cooperating right now, remember? I’m not hiding anything from you, in fact, I’m warning you this right now because I’m concerned about your behavior and the possible danger it might have to you. If I did have ill intentions I’d let you run off to the realm of darkness and disappear so-”

Ienzo tried to explain himself. He had no idea how to calm whatever had seized Riku, but if he explained it well enough he might be able to make him see reason. He was not sure how to explain it exactly though, as he kept talking, not emotions all that leaked out of his mouth were words, words, words, words.

“I want to help Namine just the same as you that’s why I called you, to do that we have to work together.” Ieno finished. Ever since he was a child and he was taken in as the brilliant, but odd for his age apprentice of Ansem the wise Ienzo knew how to placate others around him. To do this, he flexed 43 muscles on his face arranged to pull his cheeks and lips around, in other words, he forced a smile.

Riku’s blue eyes were frozen on him. Ienzo found it odd, only nobodies were this cold and this detailed in their thoughts when they should have been getting emotional, but that was because they had no emotions. “If you want to help, then open a corridor to the darkness, it will save me the trip we can go together.”
“That’s impossible. As somebodies that power escapes us, we had to give up the darkness to reclaim our humanity. Besides, I’m trying to convince you away from going to the realm of darkness. I want fewer people to go, not more.” Ienzo had quickly lost control of this conversation, just like the last time he had a conversation with Riku one on one.

“That’s not true,” Riku said right away. Ah, that was why Ienzo felt so uncomfortable talking around the boy. He saw through things most people did not, Ienzo was used to leading people on with illusions even though these days he only did it with the best of intentions. “I was able to use corridors of darkness as early back as castle oblivion, and Axel used them after regaining his heart.”

“Yes, but if I remember correctly you lost the ability to do so soon after defeating Xemnas.” Yes, do that, correct him Ienzo that will make him like you more. “Even if you’re an ally to the darkness, the darkness isn’t your ally. It’s not something that moves in rational ways or that can be controlled, it’s just something that eats away at you slowly. You’re not a special person whose an exemption to that rule, you should have learned after what happened to Sora there are no special people like that—”

“When did this happen, Ienzo? Now you’re the one who’s terrified of the dark.” Riku said, his tongue in the corner of his lips sharpening with his sardonic wit. It seemed that part of him from castle oblivion had not faded away.

“I’m not scared. I’m trying to avoid the same mistakes I made in the past when I studied the heart.”

“Me too, that’s why I have to face them over and over again. I thought you scientists were all about repeating trials.”

As Riku looked him dead in the eyes right then with a look cold enough to freeze him worse than Vexen, Ienzo realized why he kept his hair like this even though it always got in the way of the lab. Ever since he was a child, as long as he grew his bangs out like this, people never looked him directly in the eye.

When he escaped the eyes of others, Ienzo always felt like he had more control as he could keep doing as he liked. All he could do was sit there trying to use that supposedly big brain of his to come up with another excuse for Riku not to go off to the realm of darkness only for him to come up with a blank.

Other people could not be controlled, Ienzo should have learned this since he spent so much time pretending to be in control of himself, only to have it wrested away from him at last moment by someone with Riku’s face as Axel’s behest.

He had gone back to the lab to do something productive other than sulk, which was sulk while he waited for Kairi to wake back up. As she sat on her stretched, Ienzo finished summarizing the situation, as explaining things was one of the few things he was good for when it came to communication.

“I think I made him mad, well… it was difficult to tell but then my radar for detecting those sorts of things has always been off.” Ienzo said as he played with the buttons on his Gummiphone at the same time as talking to her to work out the excess energy that had built up by giving his hands something to do. Perhaps Riku would be able to call him in the realm of darkness, that would be a good way to test the network that he had set up.

“I don’t think that’s your fault, Riku’s always been like that. One time I vomited in his bike helmet and he held a grudge for two months over it. He kept asking me if I wanted to go biking with him, and then said it was too dangerous because he didn’t have a helmet. Sora’s different, every time he got mad like when bullies were picking on a kid he just jumped on the person immediately, and then
afterward he’d forget he was ever mad and try to become friends with the person he just fought.”

Ienzo smiled at her recollection. It must have been nice for her to have friends her own age as a child. He wondered if he ever made such memories before becoming an apprentice if he had they had faded away like it was two lifetimes ago. “You’re right, it is a bit easier dealing with Sora. Well… when you’re not a member of the organization anyway.”

“Sora’s like an orange fire, it’s obvious when he’s burning hot. Even when Riku’s burning up though he burns cool, like a blue flame. Still, they’re both fires, so when they touch they combust.” Kairi said, speaking with a warm familiarity. “They’re such dumb boys, but they’re mine.”

Ienzo bowed his head again, letting his silver hair droop even further down to cover his face. “Still, I feel like I must apologize. I’m the one who gave Riku the information that made him jump to that conclusion. I thought it was safe because when I explain things to Sora he doesn’t understand half of what I say but with Riku it’s different, not only does he understand he adds on and thinks of things I never thought of.” Ienzo was not used to it. Even among the apprentices, there was no-one who thought the way he did. He used to believe that such a person did not exist, so it was fine when he did not understand others.

“What did you tell him?” Kairi asked with a curious head tilt.

“He asked why Roxas was stable, but Namine’s heart was showing signs of instability. He was worried it was because Sora was not around anymore, but you were, which could mean it was impossible for a nobody and their somebody’s original heart to coexist. I explained there were different circumstances as there were a lot more traces that Namine existed in this world—”

“And then Riku figured it out and started to talk over you.”

“Yes, how did you know?” Ienzo said, peeking out from under his hair finally. “He said the difference is Roxas is surrounded by friends, he had the connections around him to make his heart real. Then he further went on to theorize that nobodies might have started to regrow their hearts because of the connections they made with other nobodies… if that’s the case that’s even more of a reason to regret. I was in that castle too and I left that girl all alone. None of us even bothered to show her how to speak, or move around when we first found her, she just sat there watching us all day like she was watching through a window and then one day she figured it out all on her own.”

“But, I remember Namine and there must be someone else.”

“That’s what Riku said, and he said he knew somebody who had a connection to her but the only place they could be in the realm of darkness, then he started ordering me around before storming out. It’s my lab you know…”

Kairi understood what Ienzo was saying, more or less. Sora was easier to deal with and he was unused to dealing with Riku. Everybody usually reacted to the two of them like that. “I’m sorry if he was rude, Riku’s always so difficult, but that’s what makes him Riku, I’m sure he’s not really mad at you.”

“I hope so.”

“Sounds funny for a scientist to say something so flimsy.”

“I may study the heart but people are an unsolvable equation.”

Kairi tapped a finger on her chest. “Then the reason her heart was aching like that, was she just feeling lonely? Loneliness can make the heart sicker than darkness.”
“...” Ienzo stayed quiet, feeling like he had nothing to add. He already talked so much and said so little.

“A connection, huh? I’m sure she’ll find one, someone who sees her as just Namine.”

It was easy to get lost when you lost sight of your friends. Perhaps that was why Riku was trying so hard to help Namine now because he understood those feelings.


dagger

The last time he went to the realm of darkness, Riku did not want to go alone he was thankful he had Mickey with him. Now that he thought about it though, he had done most of his fighting alone, he was more used to being alone than he was to be around other people. At least it felt this way in his memories. Memories were deceitful things, just like the heart was.

His heart was strong, and then it was weak. His heart was light and then it was dark. He knew Sora was somebody he needed to push in order to become strong, and then he thought Sora was so much stronger than himself he didn’t need to guide him because sora would find a way.

Riku left a trail of darkened footprints in the sand as he approached the water. The sand was so blackened it looked like ash, and when he stood at the water’s edge, he looked down and saw no reflection the water had been stained too much it looked like liquid ink.

Riku had walked on these shores many times before, they were somehow starting to get as familiar to him as the shores of that island where he spent his precious childhood days playing away and formed his dreams with both Sora and Kairi.

Truthfully, the minute Sora disappeared Riku had wanted to run to the realm of darkness to search for him. Perhaps it was just like the time that Sora gave up his own heart to free Kairi’s. He would be crawling around as a low level heartless, but still, keep his mind because he was sora. Just like the last time, Riku wanted to dive in to find him, he thought that it was his responsibility but Kairi grabbed his hand and held him back.

He was not here today to search for Sora, but he could not help but wonder if he ended up here. Even if he was in the realm of darkness, that would be better than going back to that place where the sea and the sky touched and became indistinguishable from each other. The final realm. If only Sora was just lost, then it would be his job to find him again. He could scold him for snoozing off and getting lost like always just like they were kids. He had no idea what to do if Sora were truly gone. It felt like he had become lost too, even though he was still here.

Even in his mind, he had no clue how he felt, whether he was sad because Sora had left, or angry at Sora for leaving him. Whether he was angry at himself for failing Sora, or sad because this was proof he was never going to be enough to walk by his side. His mind needed to make up its way how he felt, instead of replaying the events over and over again trying to analyze them.

He ended up thinking about these things far too much, staring at his palm he was still thinking three years after the fact why Sora did not take his hand on that day. He went over and over again in his head like an equation that refused to be solved. Even when he knew there was no solution, his brain never gave up that easily and kept thinking through it. Until the page became so marked with
This text is not visible or legible.
Riku's eyes widened when the water started to bubble at the mention of Sora’s name. He needed to remember he was not even heard to look for Sora, but he could not help it, his heart jumped to his throat.

He was on guard in case a sudden formation of heartless attacked like the last time, but all that crawled out of the waters was a strange blue creature with sharper features than the standard heartless shadow.

Riku was on his guard and had his keyblade already drawn. He had no idea what to do, so he tapped it on the head, immediately causing it to split. Rather than dispersing in a cloud of darkness like a heartless would the darkness that formed it suddenly flowed back into the water in a stream of negativity.

“Ow, I felt that.”

A voice that sounded familiar, and yet twisted beyond recognition bubbled up from the water. Suddenly the water’s surface broke and a hand broke through it. Riku raised his guard. Sora might have thought to just help whoever was stuck in the darkness and desperate to crawl their way out, but Riku’s immediate reaction was distrust.

The hand grabbed onto the shore, and something dragged its way out. A black silhouette, looking more like a shadow then a person, dripping with black liquid like ink ran through its veins rather than blood.

Riku would have raised his keyblade to defend himself until the thing raised his head to look at Riku. He saw a dark reflection of Sora’s face, dripping with black ink. Riku dropped his keyblade at his side, suddenly losing and feeling and all sensation of weight within his body.

“You should be nicer to the unversed. They’re cute, just like me. They’re made of me, after all.”

“Huh...you’re not... you’re not him.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed, otherwise I’ll take it personally.” He hacked violently, something bulged in his throat and then his mouth was forcefully opened from within as another one of those creatures crawled its way out of his mouth. This one had eight legs and was shaped like an octopus. It definitely looked like something that would evolve only where no light could reach. He hacked it up violently, and it fell back into the sea. “I am... I am... who am I again? Empty creature from Ventus riven...”

“The king told me about you, then those things you’re making those are unversed!” Riku summoned his keyblade to his side. “You look like that, is it because Ventus’ heart was inside Sora?”

He only coughed more. His yellow eyes leveled at the keyblade but he did not even flinch from the threat of the blade being placed between his two eyes. “You figured that out quick, but that’s going to take all the fun out of leading you around like a baby with a blindfold on just like me and master used to do to Venty-Wenty” He smiled. “What are you going to do? Tear me to pieces, can’t you tell I’m already in them?”

Riku saw the small unversed swimming around in the water. He figured it out. Vanitas was trying to piece himself back together. “What do you want?”

“How should I know? I don’t even remember my name yet. Besides master isn’t around anymore, he was the only one that gave me purpose. My name, my name, it was like Ventus but cooler. Ah, Vanitas.”
Nothing.
Vanity, or emptiness.
Or perhaps vanity in emptiness, in love with himself and his being even though it was nothing at all. As he struggled to be whole and pull himself up, he looked like an ink drawing trying to escape the paper and become real.

“Help a guy, would you? Won’t you be a friend to someone in need, oh hero?”

“You should have thought about that before making friends with Xehanort of all people.”

“It’s not like people were lining up to be friends with me. Who even wants to be friends with the asshole version of Ventus, when the baby faced cute one is still around.”

Riku finally gave up and decided to help Vanitas, grabbing him by the shoulders and dragging him the rest of the way onshore. He stabbed his keyblade into the ground to give Vanitas something to rest his back against, as he propped him up to sit. With his full body pulled out of the water, one of his arms and one of his legs was still missing. They did not leak blood like a severed limb might, but smoked wisped out of them and faded away.

Riku took a seat next to him. He wondered how many friendly chats he was going to have with strangers on the edges of incomprehensible darkness. “Ventus told me you chose darkness even when they gave you a choice to fight with them. Did you really want to go for a swim again in this place so badly?”

Vanitas coughed and pitch black smoke came out of his mouth. “I’m made out of darkness idiot. What was I supposed to do? Light’s incompatible with my being, I’d fade away.”

“You won’t fade. Not the light, not the dark.” Riku said, suddenly recalling something from the past.

Vanitas tilted his head from the side. Black liquid leaked out of his ears as he did. “What are you looking at me like that for? Did you really have it for my brother, that bad?”

“Your brother?”

“Isn’t that what you humans call people who look like you because you share a close relationship. My existence isn’t that odd or irrational. I have real boy feelings too, I know I do because they can bite people.”

“I guess you could see it that way, huh…” Riku looked at Vanitas’ stitched together body. “If you’re darkness, and your emotions become those unversed creatures does that mean darkness itself is just a physical manifestation of emotion?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know? Quit philosophizing at me, it’s like being stuck with the old man again in that dead ass world.”

Dead ass world. He must have been referring to the keyblade graveyard. Vanitas was born in darkness and raised surrounded by death, the emptiness left behind that was left behind when all those keyblade wielders left the world at once. “That’s not exactly a compliment, comparing me to Xehanort.”

“Why, because he’s bald? I’m sure your hair will last you all your life.”

Riku grabbed his short and spiky white hair and combed his fingers through it self consciously, “That’s not what I was talking about.”
“It’s not like I have experience with other people. You heard my two brothers. Nobody needs me. Nobody wants me. Nobody wants to face the darkness. Even the old man in the end… he just wanted to remake the world into a paradise with only light.”

Nobody wanted to deal with negative emotions true, and Vanitas was the embodiment of that. All he had known was gaining sentience and ego from all the dark thoughts that had been suppressed by Ventus until Xehanort ripped them away.

“Everyone can go on smiling in the light until they’re so sick with happiness they want to vomit, but it’s not really an option for me. No matter how much I wish for it, I’ll never become light in the end.”

If he reunited with Ventus, he could be a whole person again but he would sacrifice the ego he had built in all those years of isolation. If he stayed separate from Ventus and learned to live even while empty like this, he would still be darkness because darkness was what gave his being form in the first place.

“It’s the same for you, isn’t it? Once the darkness is there, you can’t go back to your previous state of being. You can’t stop looking away from the darkness no matter how much you try.”

It was all Vanitas knew.
Perhaps they could try ripping his heart out and putting his body in a doll-like with Roxas and ion, he had grown enough of an ego to grow a heart, but in that case, Ventus’ heart in a body not formed from darkness, he would just be a second less whole Ventus. He defined himself by darkness, he made himself distinct with darkness.

Those who were on the side of the light were trained by tradition to reject darkness though, even Sora believed unfalteringly in the light. Only non-traditional keyblade wielders like Riku were the exception. Perhaps that was why Vanitas was telling him this now.

But he could just be telling him so much in order to gain his trust. If this were sora, telling him such a story would instantly make him want to dive into the darkness and start swimming around to find the pieces of Vanitas.

“I think your heart is stronger than you give it credit for. I mean, your heart got shattered twice and you still can piece yourself back together like this. It seems like you can survive deep darkness most people can’t. And you’ve survived, getting burned away by bright lights. If you don’t want to help people with friends like Ventus and Sora, that’s fine. Sora’s got thousands of other friends.” Riku grimaced for a moment. “But you know, you could help other people who are like you.”

“Like… me?”

“Yeah, I think you’ve got a good attitude about this. Somebody I know told me that there didn’t need to be two of him in the world, so it was okay for him to disappear trying to save someone else. But, if he thought about things your way he would have stuck around because he was like a younger brother to me.”

“You have a brother too?”

“I do. He’s immature, rude, and competitive, so exactly like I was at that age. As an older brother, I’m a terrible role model. He faded away into darkness. The last time he did that, he ended up here but I don’t even know where to start looking.”

like that sounds unnecessary, just like me…”

Suddenly, dark clouds billowed from Vanitas’ form. The unversed born from it dove into the water. He even saw razor-sharp shark fins cutting through the surface of the water. More and more of Vanitas’ form disappeared as he gave birth to those extra unversed. Eventually one of the swimming unversed came to the surface. In between its teeth, it held a tiny spark of light, so fragile it looked like a small flame that would be snuffed out when the wind changed.

Another unversed appeared onshore and coughed up the broken piece of Way to the Dawn that Riku had left behind. Riku had no idea what to do with the spark of light, so he closed his fingers around it, while he lifted up the broken key.

“Vanitas, you should come with me. The lab might be able to do something about your body.”

“No thanks. I’ve got by on my own piecing myself together just fine until now. It took more than a decade last time, at this rate I’d be barely more than a shadow in the real world.”

“The real…”

“Besides, eating all of those emotions you leak out gave me more than a jumpstart than you could ever hope for. You have my thanks for being an even worse crybaby than Ventus, Riku.”

“I am not…” Riku said, pouting. He reached a hand towards Vanitas again offering to help him up or somewhere more comfortable but the other boy slapped his hand away. His form broke apart into darkness once more, and several more unversed was born. One of them looked at Riku with yellow eyes. He looked down and saw several of them nibbling at his shadow as if it were a physical form. Well, he knew that was the case for Peter Pan at least. Riku turned to walk back towards the Gummi ship. “Jeez, flaking out on me like that. Just like Sora. If only you really could eat my emotions.”

Riku commented bitterly. It was better than feeling everything and nothing at once.

“Replica…?”

Namine’s voice was foggy as if she was waking from a long and dreamless sleep. Riku softened around her because Namine was just a delicate little girl in a white dress. Yet, in the past, Riku and Diz had used her to push Roxas off a cliff so his heart would be broken in the fall.

She reminded him of Kairi when she was a little girl, just a younger sister so he could not help but be softer around her.

He had asked Ienzo to prepare another one of Even’s replica bodies now that Even no longer needed to sneak them away from the organization. When he arrived it was in the white room covered in a white sheet.

Riku uncurled his fingers and let the little light escape from his hands. It moved to the chest of the doll-like body right away. When he removed the white sheet, he saw his younger self looking back at him still covered in a cloak of darkness.

Yet something was wrong, the chest did not move, the body did not breathe, and his eyes were closed as if he was in the grips of a lifeless sleep. Riku tried waking him. He slapped his cheeks, flicked him on the forehead, and shook the whole body but nothing worked.
“Is this a heart thing?” He raised his keyblade above the body. “Ummm… heart! Heart! Go, heart!” This always looked so much easier when Sora did it.

Riku had made such a commotion that he woke Namine up. He hoped she did not see all of that, because it was a little embarrassing. Namine ignored Riku and walked past him, tugging lightly on the replica’s hand. “Replica… I wanted to see you again. You showed up to protect me even when I lied to you, but after castle oblivion, you disappeared.”

“Maybe he’s just asleep,” Riku said. He hoped he was not too asleep. There was no way Riku would use the power of waking again, not the power that Sora had broken his heart over and over again using to save them.

“Yeah. He fell asleep just like Sora did in castle oblivion. Then, just like you I should be here when he wakes up.” Namine said, nodding with a faint smile on her lips. “I’m sorry. Just because I got lonely again, I hurt somebody. I should apologize to Kairi too.”

“Namine, it wasn’t your fault. You always take responsibility when it is your fault, but sometimes I feel like you take too much responsibility.”

Namine broke out into light laughter. Riku wondered what it felt like, to finally be able to laugh with a heart of her own. “You’re the last one who should be saying that.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

She laughed into her hand, politely, as a princess might. She folded her hands back and smiled at Riku. “I wanted to see him again desperately… and then I made you go chasing after him.”

“It’s fine, I know the feeling of wanting to see somebody again so bad you don’t care if you get swallowed up by darkness.”

“Where did this lost one end up then?”

“He was in the realm of darkness. It’s no big deal, I’ve been there so many times before I was thinking of vacationing there sometime. See when you’re from the islands going to the beach for the weekend is nothing special so you’ve gotta mix it up.”

“Hmmmm. The realm of darkness, huh? Did that place reek of darkness?”

Riku looked absolutely betrayed. Namine was the last person he expected to make fun of him for something he did when he was younger. “I don’t smell stuff like that anymore.”

Suddenly, Kairi appeared in the doorway and Riku’s betrayal got worse. “Wait, what is this about Riku being smelly?”

“Kairi… You’re okay? Wait... don’t tell her.”

“Tell me, tell me!” Kairi immediately got in between the two of them, walking past Riku’s borders and invading his personal space as she belonged there getting in his face.

Namine tilted her head to watch the two of them. “Well, when Riku was in castle oblivion he kept talking about how people smelled. He even said I smelled like you.”

“That’s not what I meant! It was just an early way of sensing darkness which all keyblade wielders can do, I just didn’t know what it was called so I thought I was smelling it.”
Kairi looked at him with sympathy in her eyes. “You know Riku, for a cool guy you’re kind of lame.”

“What? I never claimed to be cool? You two can’t team up against me like this!”

Kairi joined in on the laughter and then froze for a moment. “Oh, yeah… I guess you’ve seen a Riku that I haven’t Namine.”

“Huh?”

“He would never show that to me.”

The light mood from a moment ago dissipated in an instant. Riku turned around suddenly and lightly started to tap her fists against his chest. It was just playing at boxing, but Riku played along acting like he was getting beaten up with every hit. “You. You. You. You. You. You.”


“We just talked about this. You said you weren’t going to leave me behind, and then you did the moment things were looking a little bit dangerous.”

“That’s because it was the realm of darkness, we don’t know what would happen to somebody whose heart was pure light if they went there.”

Sora disappeared because his heart was not toughened against the darkness, because he recklessly charged forward. Kairi knew this, but she was frustrated still. “I bet if it was Namine you would have taken her.”

“That’s because…”

*When we were working together Namine was just a nobody. Diz told me to treat her like she was expendable. I can’t say that, that’s terrible.*

He gave into her again.

“You’re right, I was wrong.”

“From now on I’ll never leave your side. I’ll be glued at the hip.”

“Just how close do you want to be exactly?”

“You’re my master, of course, I’m supposed to follow you!” Kairi finally let go of him and walked past him smiling at Namine and then looking who was lying on the table before them. A younger Riku, wearing a suit of darkness. “Oh, it’s like a little baby Riku how cute.”

“I wasn’t cute at that age, just annoying.”

Kairi did a double take looking back at the two of them. “Wait, why are there two Rikus? Is this another thing I missed?”

Both Namine and Riku looked at each other because the answer was yes but both of them were afraid of facing Kairi’s wrath once they answered.
What is Needed to Wake a Sleeping Princess

Side A: Hollow Bastion
Track 3

“Wake up sleepy head,” Kairi said as she tapped on the forehead of the unconscious replica.

“I don’t think that will work, Kairi,” Riku said using his height to look over her shoulder from behind.

Kairi folded her hands behind her back and leaned over him. She saw Riku’s same face looking back at her, his features much younger but there was something else that made him different. He was relaxed, it was strange to see him look so peaceful. “I don’t think I’ve seen your sleeping face for this long before, it’s cute.”

“I don’t usually have time to slack off.” Riku had been given an option to take a year-long nap once to seal off the darkness but he failed to take it.

All four of them were still in the lab. Five now that Ienzo had noticed they returned with a stunned gasp, which he quickly covered up by hiding his face behind his clipboard for a moment before reassessing the situation. Kairi who was currently pinching the cheeks of the sleeping Riku, Namine who quietly watched, Riku who hovered around Kairi fussing, Replica who was still asleep and Ienzo trying to look busy by writing things down on his clipboard.

“Hey, Riku I’ve figured out what it looks like when you smile,” Kairi said as she pulled on Replica's sleeping cheeks.

“Hey, I smile sometimes,” Riku said with a frown.

“Define sometimes.”

“When the mood strikes me.”

“What kind of moods? Describe them to me.”

“You know, um, friendship, following my heart, uh saving people with friendship and heart.”

“You were just repeating what Sora would say if he answered that question.”

“It was a Sora-esque answer I admit.” He wanted to say, Sora’s smile was what inspired him to smile, like the day Sora told him that since Kairi came from a different world from theirs he wanted to take her back there in case she had any family she was missing. Riku asked him what his plan was for getting off the island, let alone the world and Sora simply folded his arms behind his head and said I haven’t thought of that part yet, but if we’re doing it together then it should work out right? At the time Riku remembered how he was able to smile watching Sora smile with such bright confidence and optimism that things would work out their way if they were together. However, if he said that it would draw attention to the fact that Sora was not here. His reason to smile was gone, and Kairi was trying so hard to lighten the mood. He didn’t want to ruin it.

Ienzo had gone back and forth on it in his mind, but he decided right now was probably the appropriate time to interject. He hoped they would not think he was talking over them. “Since Riku
has been in contact with Replica Riku’s heart before and the body transformed on its own so that’s probably the right heart, then what else. Heart, memories, body, a connection… those were what brought Riku back the most successful model.”

“Model?” Riku’s eyes flashed a glare at Ienzo.

He looked like he had been flash frozen, and started to backpedal. “No, no, not like that. It’s just easier for me to think this through in scientific terms if we’re talking about the trials of heart restoration before this. Could his heart have been corrupted by the darkness?”

“Your heart was corrupted by the darkness once and you’re still breathing here, aren’t you?” Riku said, stopping his glare to look forward back at Replica.

Ienzo did not feel like he was breathing, not particularly. After all, on the table of his lab was the person who had killed him, and he was speaking with someone who held the exact same face. He still remembered fingers closing around his neck, tighter, and tighter, and all his struggle seemed to drain the life force out of him faster. It was getting hard to breathe, but somehow even out of breath lenzo just talked more. “Of course I willingly surrendered by heart to the darkness once, I’m not trying to hide that. However, there are differences between the two cases. I was a somebody before I became a nobody with a heart of my own. Replica never became a Nobody and started out as a replica before gaining a heart of his own. Namine and Roxas were nobodies too. Then the closest case is Xion, who gained existence and her own appearance by leeching off of Sora’s memories and heart.”

Kairi tilted her head to the side. “She did what?”

“Her existence on her own was unsustainable and was harming Sora, so Riku convinced her to return to Sora.”

Kairi tilted her head even further. “He did what?”

Riku had not gone out of his way to inform Kairi of everything that happened in the year after castle oblivion. Namine spoke up. “Then, maybe it’s a connection that he’s missing. All of his memories are fake, just a rewrite of Riku’s own memories with me replacing Kairi just like I did with Sora in castle oblivion. Maybe… his connection isn’t real enough to wake up.”

“You did what?” Kairi repeated a third time.

Namine realized Kairi was missing an explanation. She looked around the lab for a moment. As her condition was unstable, she had been living here for the past few weeks and nobody had decided where she would go yet. Namine had never really had much of a say in her own fate, so despite being uncomfortable in rooms of pure white, she did not speak up much. She also did not know where she could go.

It was like she had said to Sora as a star in the final world. The difference between her and Roxas. He’s the one they all miss. It’s…not me. Sora wanted to say thank you to her, but he had disappeared as well. She grabbed a chair and dragged it over to one of the shelves, making Ienzo a bit nervous. She stepped on top with her sandals and reached to the highest shelf where she had put her sketchbook the last time she was drawing.

She did not quite make the height and needed to lean forward causing the chair to stand on one leg. Just as she was about to grab the corner of the book the chair gave way and fell backward. Everyone
in the room looked on as Namine pulled her sketchbook out, causing several other papers and files to go flying, but the first one to move was Riku. Riku dashed forward holding both arms out and caught her softly like a princess.

“Oh, I’m sorry…” Namine said in a quiet voice as she covered the bottom half of her face with her fingers, embarrassed.

“You don’t have to keep apologizing, Namine.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I know you have complicated feelings about it but nobody here is sorry you were born.” Riku smiled at her without thinking. Sure, they had a lot of stuff to apologize for, Riku’s list was longer than most, but he would not be here now without Namine. She once said he could escape the deepest darkness, and see through the brightest light. She told him he could find his way to his friends again.

_Namie wanted you?_  
_Namie knows._

Namine reminded him he still had friends to return to, even when she had nothing like that, nowhere in this world, and nobody to go too. That was why Riku wanted to show her a small light if he could, even a smile. 

Behind him, Kairi crossed her arms and bumped him slightly with her hip. “Jeez, stop showing off prince charming.”

“Showing off?” Riku repeated, as he slowly let Namine onto the ground. “Please, I’m anything but charming.”

Namine had no idea what Kairi was feeling or why she was looking at them in such a way, so she gracefully stepped away and flipped to the pages she had drawn. “See, after you and Sora were separated he went to Castle Oblivion. The memories I rewrote into Sora and Replica’s heart were these. There was a little girl named Namine who moved to the islands, she was shy and spent all her time drawing while Sora and Riku were playing. One day a meteor storm fell and Namine grew scared, so Sora or Riku made a promise they would knock back all the meteors in the sky to protect her and then she gave them a charm in the shape of a star.”

“Namie…”

“Kairi… I… I knew I could never replace you, but some part of me must have wished for it to have connections to other people like you had to Riku and Sora, I was a jealous witch…”

“I can’t believe you were so lonely that you wrote self-insert fanfiction of our lives,” Kairi said, her eyes watering as she rushed to give Namine a hug. Namine simply kept staring forward, not quite processing that she was being hugged.

Namine was confused, by multiple things at once. “What’s fan fiction?”

Ienzo raised his hand. He did not need to raise his hand because this was his own lab, but he did it. “I know what that is. It’s when authors rewrite canon material that doesn’t belong to them, it’s started popping up on the internet that I designed. I have to monitor all the changes and content generated by people.”

Namine was still hesitant. “Oh, I see. You’re very emotional, just like Sora.” Her fingers flexed in
the air as she looked like she did not know what exactly to do. “So this is how this feels, I’ve only seen it in memories before.”

“Namine there’s no way I could be mad at you… but you.” Suddenly, Namine has pushed away and Kairi turned her attention on Riku again. Namine just looked a bit out of the moment, too many emotions for her to quietly process.

“What did I do wrong this time, I mean I do a lot of things wrong so you have to be specific,” Riku said, holding his hands up in surrender.

“You spent a year bringing Sora’s memories back all by yourself, you even dragged Namine along but not me? You didn’t even ask me for help once?”

“Kairi you… forgot sora.”

“But I still remembered you, and… even if I had forgotten Sora I still cared about him. Do you know what it was like, like having some missing piece of you, you don’t even remember being there?”

“I… I didn’t want you to see me.”

“But I wanted to see you.”

That time when he was wearing the face of someone else, Kairi grabbed him by the sleeve and made him show her his true self. Even if his body was different, even if his heart was lost to darkness, Kairi would have still accepted him.
He wanted to return home to his friends, he even told Namine so. Why then, why did he have a habit of continually cutting Kairi out? Did he want to atone alone? Did he not want Kairi to see what he did to Namine.

“I… DiZ treated Namine horribly, and I didn’t do much to stop it. All I thought about was returning Sora back to you.”

Namine interjected. “Don’t say that, when DiZ ordered you to terminate me you let me go.”

“That’s not enough, I should have done more. I’m sure if it were the other way around, Sora would have never let DiZ do what he did, and he would have woken me up without needing to hurt Roxas and Xion.”

Kairi realized, Riku was trying to keep her safe from the darkness. She might not have been able to stand the idea of forgetting Sora or watching Namine suffer all alone. She knew this, but what she could stand even worse was how Riku must have suffered all alone in that year too. She could have been there for him, but he always cut her off like this. He thought he deserved to be alone. Riku always took the long road around, it was his nature, but that did not mean he had to isolate himself.

That was what irked her earlier when she saw Namine and Riku so close. Namine had known Riku during that year he went missing, she got to see him grow into the Riku she knew now. There were parts of Riku she was never going to see because he refused to show it to her. Even though they were childhood friends, even though they were all dreaming of leaving that world together.

When she lost her original world she thought she had no place in the world, she could understand why Namine was so desperate to have friends because she had no place of belonging until she found
those two boys. But then those two boys always ran off ahead of her and left her behind.

Perhaps she really was just the girl that they had met on the island, she was not best friends with either of them like Riku and Sora were with each other. She had washed up on the shore one day and gotten in between them.

She did not want to think that way, but perhaps she deserved it. After all the first person to try to cut somebody out of their trio had not been Riku, it had been her. When they were younger than this, when Riku was around the age of Replica now even though they were all building that raft together one day she snuck out with sora in the middle of the night and asked him if he wanted to steal the raft and go off on his own with just the two of them - without Riku.

If Riku thought she was afraid of him, then she was the one who gave him that impression. She could feel nothing but regret now because she missed him, she missed the young Riku that Replica’s face showed her, and she missed getting to watch him grow up as Namine did.

Neither of them could say what each other needed to hear, and neither Riku nor Kairi knew what they wanted to hear either. Kairi leaned on him for a moment in indecision. Then suddenly, Ienzo popped up behind them.

“It seems like we haven’t come to a productive conclusion today, so how about we take a break. Perhaps an idea will come when we’re not thinking about it.” Inezo’s flashed three tickets in front of Riku, Namine and Kairi’s faces.

He felt bad for the animosity between him and Riku and wanted to smooth it over and give Namine more time in the outside world while he had more time to think. That was all. He definitely did not want to be alone, and to get the loud children out of his lab and stop them from making any further messes with his filing system. He would never think anything so rude. Zexion might, but Ienzo was all smiles.

Riku, Namine, and Kairi had tried to figure out how they should sit. Which meant Kairi and Namine discussed it while Riku stayed out of it because he had no idea what was going through Kiari’s head at the moment.

Emotions were amazing and unpredictable, they followed no rational logic, but that did not stop his mind from trying to analyze them over, and over. Eventually, it was decided that Riku would sit in the middle, and he was grabbed by both girls forward one on each arm. He had no idea what was going on and decided to surrender to it rather than make Kairi even madder.

The tickets they were given was to a play called LOVELESS written in big English letters across the paper. It was based on a book of poetry that survived since the time of fairy tales, and the play was a runaway hit in Hollow Bastion.

The story was focused around three men who were great friends on a quest to find the fabled gift of the goddess, one became a prisoner, one left his friends and became lost, and the last became a hero.

Seeing a trio about a play being torn apart by fate was probably the last thing that Riku needed. This, and being forced to see Sora’s face again and hear his voice coming from Vanitas, Riku wondered if the world had it out for him. Probably. If it did he deserved it though.
If it was Terra, Aqua, and Ventus, then Terra would be the prisoner in his own heart, Ventus would become lost, and Aqua would be the hero. He wondered how it applied to his two friends… there was no way he could ever become a hero, but he had been a prisoner, and he had been lost in the past.

Now Sora was the one who was lost. What he felt right now, it was probably what Kairi felt when she forgot about him. Then he was doing the same thing as the past, he was leaving her to grieve all on her own because he did not want to subject her to his own darkness.

Kairi was…

Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess. We seek it thus and take to the sky. Ripples form on the water's surface. The wandering soul knows no rest. There is no hate, only joy. For you are beloved by the goddess. Hero of the dawn, Healer of worlds"

Kairi was...

“My friend your desire, is the bringer of life, the gift of the goddess. Even if the morrow is barren of promises, nothing shall forestall my return.”

Riku looked up from his own pool of self-reflection remembering he was in the real world once more if he wanted to stare into dark waters trying to find himself he could have just kept sitting by the shore in the realm of Darkness.

In the play, the prisoner escaped and was critically wounded only to end up in the care of a woman who he fell in love with. The two of them alone together were living a peaceful life, but he was tortured by the promise he made with his friends.

“Of course… I’ll come back to you. Even if you don’t promise to wait. I’ll return knowing you’ll be here.”

Riku decided this was too much for him. “Popcorn? Does anybody need popcorn?” Riku said loudly, in the middle of the silent crowd overcome with emotion from the scene being enacted on stage.

“Sssshh, Riku read the room a little bit and go back to being broody quiet Riku,” Kairi said next to him.

Riku could not be stopped. He stood up giving Kairi a thumbs up. “I’ll get your popcorn, don’t worry. I won’t break my promise this time… I’ll come back no matter what, with popcorn.” He started to scoot away between the seats before anybody could see him.

Riku sometimes felt like he had been struggling his whole life, just for one moment of peace, just so one moment he could feel forgiven and like he was enough. That moment had yet to happen. Even when he ran away from the audience and the familiar feeling he was reminded about on stage, he found another familiar face waiting for him in the hallway outside the main room.

“Yo, if it isn’t my old enemy Riku.”

Demyx said with a wave of his hands. He was strumming his large sitar with an open case in front of him. The nobody pulled his fingers back through his slicked back hairstyle as if he was trying to look cool.

“We were enemies?” Riku was genuinely confused. “I think you have to actually antagonize
someone to count as an antagonist."

“The heroes aren’t supposed to be meanies. Gosh, if I was going to be treated like this with you guys I’d go back to her.” He pouted slightly, picking a flat note on his sitar on purpose to highlight the moment. “Even Zexy tried to get rid of me by giving me tickets to this play because I kept bothering him.”

“Demyx, what are you even doing? I mean, at this spot but also with your life in general. Why are you still wearing an organization cloak?”

“I’m making money obviously. I’ve decided to reform and share my talent with the world, for the small price of five thousand Munni per minute otherwise I’ll stop playing.”

“You know heartless drop Munni if you wanted you could just… kill them and get some.”

Demyx made a noise that sounded like a cat was dying at the back of his throat and then leaned back against the wall. “Listen, if I wanted too I could have been a super strong villain. Really, I’ve been spending all my effort holding myself back all this time. I’ve been repressing myself with all of my might because I love um… hearts and junk like that too much. I’m actually a pure-hearted good guy who pretends to be on the side of darkness to uh… deceive you into umm…”

“If you’re going to make up excuses at least think them up beforehand, don’t just half-ass them on the spot!”

“Ugh, but that requires thinking!” Demyx shouted as if too much of that might kill him. “Look, I’m actually a very complex and interesting kind of guy, but enough about me. You’ve clearly got a lot going on. What’s with you playboy, bringing two girls here like that?”

“Were you watching me? Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“Obviously I don’t.” Demyx replied immediately. He took pride in the fact that he had no pride at all. “Come on, I know I’m an unreliable guy but you can rely on me. The reason your face is all scrunched up and frowny like that-”

“I’m not frowny,” Riku said, kicking the air and pouting a little bit as he stared at his shoes. With Sora gone he was quickly becoming the clown that everyone made fun of. Taking yourself too seriously was a comedy all on its own.

“Is because you flipped a girl’s switch isn’t it? Don’t worry I can give you advice, I’ve got plenty of experience flipping girl’s switches.”

“Are you sure you have experience? You know experience requires doing things right?”

Demyx tilted his head back and forth as if he was wrestling with that concept for a moment, before holding his hand out. “Five Munni, and I’ll give you some girl advice.”

“No thanks,” Riku answered immediately. He looked at Demyx in his organization coat for a moment and wondered how exactly he had gotten to this place. Did he just sneak off after the final battle, and stay at Hollow Bastion because the only memories he had of those around him were the former organization members he recognized. “But…are you still a nobody Demyx? If you want I can re-complete you.”
“That’s a big no from me. Security, security! I’m about to get whacked with a giant blunt key! It’s more painful than it sounds!” Like a cowardly lion, he roared and then immediately tried to retreat.

“You.. want to stay a nobody?”

“I mean, nobodies have hearts don’t they? Namine and Roxas can exist without completing, and besides, there’s no guarantee that if my body destroys that my heart will come back, and the biggest reason is getting hit with a keyblade is big ouchie.”

“How do you know that you might not come back after re-completing?”

“If you want me to talk that’ll be five thousand Munni.”

“You’d make more Munni if you threatened to keep playing that sitar unless they paid you off” A female voice spoke up from behind them, heralded by peals of laughter cutting through the hallways.

Riku turned around to see a blonde girl, hands on her body whose curves were apparent even underneath the black robe. As she laughed she brought the back of her hand to her chin and curled her fingers, but then she stopped and added a groan at the mere sight of Demyx.

“Hey, Larxy why don’t you go bother tall dark and purple prose and leave me alone already,” Demyx said, glaring at her.

Riku felt like he was the third wheel to another situation he did not quite understand.

“If I knew where he was doing you really think I would be settling for you?”

“Hey, what do I have that that guy doesn’t have? I may not be able to summon sparkles and flower petals on command, but I’m plenty florid and dramatic. I can make my own theme music watch.” Demyx said as he plucked a few chords on his sitar.

“You know, motivation…”

“Oh, right I don’t have that.”

“Charisma, drive, likability, a spine, or really anything.”

“You didn’t have to keep going I already agreed with you!”

“Wait…Larxene did you re-complete? Is Marluxia here too?” Riku felt so behind. He regretted most things but he regretted stumbling into this situation especially.

“He, she’s actually going by-” Demyx volunteered before being suddenly cut off by Larxene.

“Who gave you permission to speak my name.”

“Quit acting like you’re superior to me. We’re both from the same organization, aren’t we? We’re coworkers.”

“I think being coworkers required you having done actual work at some point in your life,” Larxene said, staring at her nails not even looking up at him.

“Ugh, you’re so annoying. Why didn’t you just do me a favor and die for good the first time around
in castle oblivion? I forgot to give Axel a high five for that.”

“You’re right Demyx, I came back from hell just to piss you off,” Larxene said with a smile as she finally walked past Riku. “Get out of my way, white-haired pretty boy.”

“Prettyboy?” Riku repeated, utterly lost.

Demyx was grabbed by the hood and dragged him away. As he was pulled away Demyx shouted out his unneeded advice. “Don’t worry about flipping a girl’s switch Riku, some switches need to be flipped!”

“Hey, you snow topped emo mountains tell Axel not to cross my path again in this world.”

“What? Axel’s here too.” Riku said, wondering if this was like the world’s worst reunion. “How did you find him?”

“I dunno, maybe the fact that he’s two heads taller than everyone else and has giant spiky flame hair, makes him stick out in a crowd a little bit.”

“If we do see axel please let me stop and high five him for managing to get you killed once, Larxy.”

“Well, he may have killed half the organization but amazing how he never killed you. I guess you weren’t even worth killing, Demyx.”

“Hey… Now I feel left out. Why didn’t Axel try to backstab me? Are we not friends? Am I not special enough? Were he and Saix gossiping and calling me useless behind their backs?”

“That’s fine, but stay away from Namine you too… If that’s what you’re planning on doing, I have no idea what you guys are doing.” Riku watched the image of Demyx waving at him as he got dragged away. As he thought on Demyx’s last piece of advice for a moment, he felt encouraged. After all, as terrible as he was at least he was not Demyx. He hoped the nobody was proud of himself, he had helped Riku feel better about himself after all. Not too proud of himself though because he was still Demyx.

“\n\n\n“I remembered in this castle, Sora. The most important thing to me. My promise with Namine.”

A scene that could exist anywhere.
A boy and a girl holding hands as they watched the stars fall down from the sky.
The stars like teardrops falling.
The lights of the sky, all of the different colors, they were just metaphors for the mixed emotions that the girl felt in her heart. A mixture of fear, cold, remoteness as she was always on that island isolated from everybody else her whole body was cold except for her hand.
Her hand where he held her, she felt warm. A single point of contact.
Suddenly, her fear of the meteor shower did not matter.
She was glad the stars had decided to fall that day because they had granted her wish.
There was finally somebody to hold her hand.
A wooden sword in one hand, and her soft and delicate hand in the other.
The boy next to her looked ready to fight the whole world for her sake, but he did not need to. Her entire world was encapsulated at this moment. Her world began and ended where their hands overlapped. She had always felt so far apart from others, left behind while they played like she did not belong, but now she could finally be close to someone else.


However, that was just a lie. That scene that the boy held so closely in his heart, the charm he grasped between his fingertips, all of them never existed in the first place, they were mere fabrications.

The liar was quite the egotistical girl.

“We were never meant to exist in the first place.”

She told Roxas this once, and hurt his feelings. She knew this all along. She had no such happy memories in her heart, but two boys stumbled into her castle filled with memories of the past, connections, all the things she was lacking and pulled them apart and then wrapped them all around her finger.

Replica Riku was like a parody of the original Riku’s bravado as if the only thing he cared about in the world was protecting Kairi, and being the only one to protect her. She made the replica absolutely obsessed with her, willing to break his old childhood friend just so he would be the only one for her.

Even if she was coerced into doing it, she was sure that she could have never told those lies if such fantasies did not exist within her heart in the first place. There was no quiet girl growing up on an island, no forgotten about girl surrounded by friends. She had no memories at all. She was born with nothing, not even sentience.

All she could do was watch. She watched the others pass through the castle. They ignored her and regarded her like a doll. Her first ever feeling was how lonely it was, being looked away from everybody else, being treated like a mere object. There was a memory in Sora’s heart about a puppet that wanted to come to life, she felt like that.

Even after she came to life learning slowly all on her own to talk and move around by imitating the nobodies around her, she never stopped being a puppet. She had no memories of the past, and no people who remembered her, no connection even to the organization around her so all she had was fantasy.

She imagined herself, happy and smiling, like the girl in Sora's memories. She wanted to be like that, a perfectly innocent princess that needed to be saved, locked away in a castle, pure of heart, passive and not responsible for what had happened to her. She wanted to be a victim to be rescued, one of Sora’s precious friends he would fight for and show that smile too. In the end, though fate cast her as a villain instead. She was no princess waiting for her hero, she was a witch luring him into the trap.

By far the worst was what she had done to Replica. He was born a fake just like her, he was never supposed to exist in this world too, but she did nothing to save him. She only rewrote his memories to fill him with those lies that connected them. Even then, when all he wanted was to be a special person to her, she told Sora the exact same lie and gave him a counterfeit charm.
“Is there something troubling you? Are you feeling awful about tinkering with Sora's memory, or maybe you-”

“Cut it out, Larxene. Namine- she doesn’t want to remember Sora. Don’t worry. Whatever’s hurting you, I’ll make it go away.”

Even if they were all lies, he still comforted her when she was troubled. He was still the first person to look her in the eyes when no one else would.

“I swear it on this, the good luck charm you gave me.”

She knew she was not worthy of it, but she felt a small amount of happiness just being by him. She could not help what she felt. Watching the play with Riku and Kairi had just reminded her, she had watched everything unfold before her like they were just drawings on her wall, she was always the stranger, watching others memories play out with no precious memories of her own. Even when she did manage to talk with others, they quickly forgot about her. There was only one person who wanted to protect her for her.

But only because she had made him that way. That indecision stung her heart, she regretted desiring once again but she could not help but be filled with that feeling. I want to see him again. I want to see him again.

“Riku are you sure you were paying attention during the play? You looked like you were falling asleep.”

“I wasn’t falling asleep, I was thinking, that was my thinking face.”

Kairi and Riku chatted behind her. Namine tried to join in. “If your thinking face looks like you’re falling asleep, you might be becoming a little bit too much like Sora.”

Riku looked shocked again and Kairi laughed. That was right, she had been allowed to leave the lab and the three of them were just walking and talking on the way back like normal teenagers. This was the kind of memory that Hayner, Pence, and Ollete might experience, or that Roxas might have dreamed about in his last seven days of summer vacation.

Tears welled at the corners of Namine’s eyes. Huh, what was this? She had been alone all her life. She had been kicked around by others, forced around by Diz, treated like a marionette but never once had she cried before. Then why right now… she was going to ruin the good mood of all the others.

Kairi stopped noticing her face. She suddenly punched Riku in the side. “What did you do this time, Riku?”

“Hey, why do I always get the blame?”

“Well if you’re always going to act all boo hoo it’s all my fault, then that’s what you get.”

“You know I’m going to start crying too if this bullying keeps up.”

Kairi quickly looked to Namine’s side, pushing Riku away. “I’m sorry I just don’t know what to do… I tried to take your place in Sora’s memories, I tried to make Replica protect me like Riku
wanted to protect you and you’re being so nice to me.”

“Listen, Namine I would have loved if you grew up on the island with me. Do you know what it was like being the only girl with those two boys?” She said as she pointed at Riku’s face, her finger dig into his cheek. “It would have been awesome to have you as a childhood friend, who cares if you wished for that, I wish for that too.” Kairi stopped poking Riku and grabbed both of Namine’s hand. “We’re still children right now, there’s no rule saying we can’t become childhood friends. We can make new ones. I don’t care if it’s fake, I don’t mind playing along with the idea that you were a shy girl I knew when you were young who was always playing in her sketch pad. That’s such a cute story.”

In the background, once again Riku smiled without realizing. He had been thinking of what to say to Namine, turning it over in his head with the five other things he was actively worried about in any given moment, and Kairi just went ahead right there and did it.

Sometimes it felt like Kairi understood people better than they understood themselves. He wondered if she would ever understand him the same way - no, he probably didn’t deserve to be looked at her that much. It would be nice though if somebody could read him that way since he had such trouble reading himself.

Kairi talked with Namine the whole way home. Riku walked behind them in their shadow, feeling comfortable there. They returned to the lab again with the prince still sleeping.

Riku tried to reach out to Kairi, but hesitated and ended up staring at his own hand for a moment. Touching was, so awkward. How did Kairi do it so easily? He opened and closed his hand and then let it fall to his side.

Kairi noticed him being weird. “Whatcha staring at?”

“You.”

“Oh.”

“Kairi… I… should have told you about Sora. I don’t think you’re useless or anything, in fact, I think you might have understood the situation a lot better than I did. You… understand things, you know them so well… I wish I had that kind of intuition to guide me.”

He wanted to say the right thing like Sora would, the words that would make her smile. That was the amazing thing about Sora, he could inspire so much with a smile, he could pull off amazing miracles. Riku needed a miracle to talk about his feelings with words correctly.

He felt like he had to apologize again and again to her, most of all he felt like he needed to apologize for the fact that Sora was gone but he was still here. He was certain Kairi would have been happier if it was the other way around.

Maybe that was the real reason why he did not go find her when Sora was sleeping. He did not want to come home alone and face the disappointment on her face. “I… I’m lost without you. I do need you around.”

Riku confessed.
Kairi folded her hands behind her back and took a step closer to him.

“You know a lot more than me on some things.”

“Like talking to girls?” She teased, before getting even closer. It looked like Kairi had taken a step too close without realizing because her own face reddened when she noticed that she had gotten on her tiptoes just for the sake of teasing Riku and looking him directly in the face and now his face was centimeters from hers.

Riku’s mind raced at the closeness. There was no way Kairi did it intentionally. He would never let himself believe it. He would deny it over and over again. It was not him Kairi wanted to be close to.

There was no way Kairi knew what he was feeling. She would never know. Because he was awful for thinking this. Because there was no way she would want the same thing. Because he barely knew what was going on inside his own head, even though all he ever thought about was himself.

That was why there was no way Kairi could know, how much he wanted to close the few centimeters that were keeping them apart.

Then suddenly both of them heard a noise, and they turned their heads at the same time.

Namine had leaned over the table completely. Her blonde hair fell over his shoulders and tickled Replica Riku’s face. Her face was like a pale moon hanging over his. She had stood on her tiptoes and crawled onto the table just to be nearer to him. The moon fell down, and down until she eclipsed him. Her lips traveled to his, and the shapes of their faces somehow despite being such distinct and lonely pieces fit together.

Kairi’s hand traveled to her cheeks suddenly feeling even more embarrassed. “Riku, what is she doing?” She suddenly clutched onto his jacket.

Namine pulled back first. She looked to Riku and Kairi and blinked her eyes innocently at them. “What? I’m just trying what they did in the play to wake the sleeping princess up.”

“She doesn’t know… she’s just a baby. Riiiiiiiku. I’m failing to teach her.” Kairi’s voice crooned as she pulled on his jacket.

“Wait, since when have you adopted her?”

However, at that moment the Replica’s eyes peeled awake. He sat up on the table and stared at his empty hand. His fingers flexed and closed upon nothing.

“Your charm… Namine, sorry… I lost your charm.”

Namine moved her mouth but words refused to come out. She inhaled sharply, feeling tears form in the corner of her eyes once more. Why cry when she did not deserve to cry, those feelings were not real, she did not share any real memories with this boy. Yet, she still reached out and silently took his empty hand, hoping that holding his hand would be enough to replace the charm he had lost.
Replica Riku’s return to lucidity was a slow one. Days passed but Namine never left his side. She showed him pages of her sketchbook, and slowly recounted stories from each image as if she was telling him bedtime stories. That was all Namine knew, after all, she only gained sentience peering at the lives of others through a window. All of life outside of her room may as well have been a fairy tale.

Riku and Kairi kept checking in on them, afraid to leave the delicate situation alone. They both felt a responsibility towards their other counterparts as if they were watching younger siblings at work, though both of them had always been only children their entire lives with distant families. Kairi herself had lost her family when Hollow Bastion fell to darkness and was taken in by a foster family after washing up on the beach one day.

Perhaps that was why they took to this younger sibling idea so easily. The only family either of them had really ever experienced were the ones they found with each other, with Sora in the middle. Though, both of them were haunted by the same doubts. Without Sora here were they really together? Sora was the type of person who could befriend anybody on either side of any conflict, was he just the glue holding them together. If not for Sora would they have ever become friends?

Instead of being together and supporting one another without Sora, it felt like the two of them were just alone together, united in the fact they were both left behind. Neither of them could speak these doubts, so they simply watched their younger siblings interact hoping it would work out.

By this point, both of them had skipped several days of school, but Riku already told Kairi he was a month ahead in the coursework so it did not matter for him. He also offered to tutor her if she got subjected to summer school, which resulted in her offering to teach Riku how to talk to people without making them angry.

Kairi finally managed to pry Namine away from Repliku’s beside to convince her to get some sleep. The replica body was, in essence, a normal body and had the same limits. Riku wanted Namine to acknowledge she was a human too. He ignored how hypocritical it was on his part. He never paid any mind to his own limits. As he thought of this he heard a crack as he idly played with his wrist. Once Roxas had snapped it easily, but Riku never bothered to set the injury. He just kept fighting through it. That was all he knew how to do.

When it was just him and Ienzo alone in the lab, Riku finally felt emboldened to ask. “Hey, do you think your idea of putting hearts in replicas would work for someone whose heart- well everything is made of darkness?”

“There’s no way someone made of pure darkness would be able to sustain themselves. There’s a reason the heartless are mostly mindless. Even Xehanort’s heartless form couldn’t maintain a physical form…”

“That’s the problem his body is unstable because it’s assembled out of darkness. It breaks apart when he feels emotions. Maybe if we put his heart into a real body-”

“We’d make him stronger and take back the one drawback of him creating too many unversed? I
know who you’re referring to Riku, I was there thirteen years ago when the unversed were invading the worlds and radiant gardens. All of those monsters equivalent to an invasion of heartless spawned from one person.”

“Well… Maybe if he has a real body, he won’t.”

“Well maybe he didn’t want to cause terror, maybe he just wanted was to be a real boy all along.” Ienzo’s perpetual, painted on smile faded from his lips he showed his teeth biting back with sarcasm. “I’d expect Sora to come to me with such a poorly thought out proposition so he can play hero, but not you.”

“That’s not fair we gave you a second chance, even though you have such a pleasant personality.”

“I am pleasant…” Ienzo paused for a moment to collect himself. It felt like collecting jagged pieces in his hands. He was just as likely to be cut the more he tried to fit the pieces together. “I am trying at least. You’re not even trying to hide how you really feel. Besides, I demonstrated my worth and made use of myself as an ally, what you’re asking is for me to try to save someone who’s only going to be an uncontrolled danger.”

Ienzo had figured it out from passing information, more or less. As long as all of the data was in front of him, he could connect the dots together. That was how his brain worked. He went in assuming he would find the solution and he was almost never wrong. Confidence and a belief in your own abilities were what made a great thinker. You needed to believe you were capable of finding answers in order to seek them. That was why he could not stand when others looked down on him. When they thought of him as nothing more than a poor child set adrift in the world who could not take care of himself. He had always known what he was capable of, and he thought he knew what he could handle. He once thought he could handle the darkness and learn from it in a way no one else could, it was one of the few times he was wrong.

Ienzo put together that Riku was asking him about Vanitas. If only Vanitas had no rampaged on all the worlds thirteen years ago that was when it all started, that amnesiac boy might not have appeared in front of their castle, the master might not have disappeared. However, Ienzo was well aware of who he was. It was a defect of being so intellectualized he was eternally stuck in his own head. He did not understand how other people thought, not exactly, but he was self-aware at least.

That was why he knew even if Xehanort had not joined with the apprentices. If nobody told him to pull back the curtain of darkness to find the information hiding behind it. He would have made the exact same choice to open the door anyway because that was who he was. He wanted to learn those things. He wanted to prove he could learn more than anybody else could. There was a purpose to his existence. He was not brought to this lab out of compassion for a lost child. He was not a lost child. He was here to learn.

Either way, his feelings on Vanitas were complicated, much like his feelings on everything else. It was an incalculable risk. He did not want to see anything connected to Xehanort again, because it would just remind him of his own choices.

“How could you say that about Replica?” Riku said holding his hand out in front of the sleeping doll on the table.

Before their conversation could reach any kind of satisfactory conclusion, Riku Replica stood up all on his own. He grabbed Riku’s hand and redirected it until it was resting on the collarbone that showed through his skin-tight suit, composed of darkness and blue to purple veins. “You don’t have to get so upset, I agree with him. You never should have brought me back.”
“Huh…?” Riku tried to say something back, but when he opened it that noise was all that fell out of his mouth.

“I thought you knew what I wanted, that’s why you let me go. I was a failure, I didn’t make anything of my life, you and Sora moved on already. That’s why this time I just wanted to do one good thing with my life. I wanted to protect Namine.”

“You don’t protect people by making one heroic gesture and disappearing, you’re still alive, aren’t you? That’s the better result, that way you can use your life to keep protecting her.” Riku answered calmly, those were the words he was sure he wanted to hear. The power to protect what was most important.

“I don’t want a second chance! You should know why! I’m going to waste it just like I did the first time! I was okay with fading away, I wanted to do good one thing for her and disappear before I screwed anything up.”

“How do you know you’re going to screw up, you’re just being-”

“You. Because I’m you, that’s how I know.”

Replica said, throwing Riku’s hand away from him. His path was to struggle with the darkness. To fall off the path again and again and crawl his way back up. To take the long and winding road so many times it felt like he was going nowhere. To turn from darkness to light, to darkness, to light. He always doubted himself. He never knew peace. He wanted to save his friends. He was saved by them instead. He could not save them in return.

Riku had an uneasy peace with that. He knew he could keep on walking this path all on his own. However, what helped him make this peace, to call a truce with himself was that he had chosen this path for himself. He defined who he was. Even if it was a regrettable life, it was his. The cracks on his body like the one on his wrist that flared up right now were the ones he had earned.

Replica had no choice in the matter. His memories were rewritten. His personality was preconceived, he had never been able to develop these flaws or choose this path everything, including his deepest desires the one he wanted to protect was decided for him beforehand. He never got the chance to grow on his own. All of those cracks and flaws, they were given to him by somebody else.

Everything was decided for him, and all of Riku’s troubles, his regrets they were hefted on his shoulders. Replica’s only way of judging the world came from his rewritten memories. That was why he had judged himself. He did not want to continue on, because unlike Riku a living breathing person, he would never get the chance to grow up. Even if he lived forever in his replica body, he would not grow, he would commit the same mistakes over and over again, trapped in a Neverland that was more like a prison.

That metaphor was borrowed from another of Riku’s memories. It was almost an insult, Of all people, why did they have to make me into you? Perhaps he was wishing he had been made into a Sora replica instead, at least that way he would have a less troubled fake heart.

Riku could not make himself get angry at him. His fist untightened and he held out a hand to Replica. “I know that’s not what you want. Namine wanted to see you again, even if you’re afraid don’t you want to see her?”
He wanted to disappear. He had done his good deed, he was able to make something of his short existence doomed only to end in failure. He made the most of what little had been given to him. Wasn’t that enough?

He never asked to exist, but the moment he did exist he was violated, rewritten. Then when he was happy just protecting Namine, he was reminded that he would never be enough. Then when he tried to become something more, he learned the limits of his existence, what a broken failure he was. He tried to be happy fading away, he tried to find comfort in that but there was still none of it.

He was trying his best to work with the absolute nothing that had been given to him, and how could his other self the original still say he was wrong. He was human, there was an infinite amount of expanding possibilities across the horizon for him, his sky stretched on forever it could encompass anything. Riku could be anything he wanted to be. All replica could be was Riku.

That was why he wanted his limited sky to break apart, he wanted it to come crashing down on him. He thought if he did one good thing he would give his life meaning with the little time he had, but now being dragged back to life a second time he no longer cared about that. He wanted to destroy meaning. He wanted to destroy himself. Before he destroyed everything around him. Existing had been nothing but a painful emptiness for him, and even his own death which he thought he might be able to write his own story on his own terms finally and control how he went out had been seized away from him again.

“If I see Namine again, I’ll destroy her, because that’s what we do we destroy the things we want to protect.”

“That’s not true. You don’t really think that way.” Kairi said appearing in the doorway suddenly. “Riku protected Sora and tried to protect me. Even though Namine tricked you and used you, you still wanted to protect her. You’ve never wanted to harm anybody, you always just wanted to-”

“What do you know?” Replica grabbed his forehead with one of his darkness covered hands, his eyes swelled with so much emotion they bulged while it looked like he was keeping the cracks within his own head from falling apart. He was not just a doll, he was a broken one. He turned his attention back on Riku. “I’m so tired of people telling me they know about me better than I do, of telling me what I know, I’m so tired because they’re right.”

Replica finally flexed his fingers. To his hand, he summoned a broken keyblade, composed of a bat wing, and an angel wing in its guard. That was right, that keyblade was his whole life journey, he had to struggle to find the light that was there for everybody else, he would always be on a journey to the dawn.

“You think I care about Namine so much? Do you think Riku cares about you so much? Here’s the truth, it was never about Namine. We just wanted someone to save. It could have been anybody. You and she both were just princesses in castles to us to play hero with. If it was about anybody, it was probably about Sora. You didn’t want to save Kairi, you just wanted to prove that you could do it better than Sora could because he made you feel useless like you were unneeded.”

He put two hands around the broken keyblade and slowly raised it. Riku’s only response was a slight clenching of his fist but he still kept his hands at his side. “If your memories are borrowed then how do you know that?”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m only repeating your mistakes. I’m only doing what you would do in this situation. Do you know how I know that? Because I’m literally you, actively in the process of
being in that situation. That’s what I get for being the copy of you at your worst, nobody can know your mistakes better than me.”

Some heroes rise to have greatness and others have greatness thrust upon them, is that how the saying went? Then whatever the opposite of greatness was, Replica had it thrust upon him. He was drowning in the darkness that Riku at least had gotten to choose for himself.

“Riku… tell him he’s wrong.” Kairi’s voice whispered a soft plead behind him.

Riku opened his mouth again, but nothing came out. He thought of all people, he would be able to argue and disagree with himself, he had been fighting himself for so long but at that moment he did not know.

“Tell me that’s not true then… tell me what you really think.”

Riku did not even turn around to look at Kairi when he felt her weight on his back. He only kept staring at his own shadow. “I can’t…” The lights of the laboratory had caused his shadow to lengthen, and both him and Replica’s shadows had overlapped. The moment their shadows touched they became indistinguishable from one another, it was hard to tell where one began and the other ended.

Like a snake trying to swallow itself.
Riku thought it would be a better death if the snake just strangled itself in the attempt.

Replica picked up the keyblade further and leveled it at his throat. Riku only titled his chin back part way to accommodate him. In pieces like that, it would probably not function as a keyblade anymore, but he could still cut his throat on the broken edge.

“What are you going to do?” Riku asked.

“If you don’t choose to then I’ll force you, I’ll make you kill me just like you killed Xion and Roxas. Even if you won’t defend yourself then I’ll just target whoever is around.”

At the same time, Ienzo had slowly moved to the wall and was paging through a book. When he finally found what he wanted, Replica Riku’s entire body collapsed like there were strings holding him up. The keyblade that he was holding fell from his hand and spun against the floor.

“What did you do?”

“It’s just a sleeping spell I learned in castle oblivion,” Ienzo said as he closed the book shut.

“Then that’s dark magi-”

Ienzo suddenly held a finger to his lips, making a gentle ssh noise. As if the word itself might invite in darkness.

Riku heard Kairi storm out behind him and at the sounds of her leaving made no attempt to follow. He was too busy staring down himself. He looked at the sleeping body of his replica on the floor and saw how empty his eyes were, still peeled open while unconscious. An emptiness that could not be filled no matter how much darkness was inside of him.
It sinks into your heart how it hurts but this hurting is not loving.
If not then what exactly was she feeling, what was this pain she wanted to run away from. She tried to get herself lost among the crowds, maybe wishing she would be lost somewhere no one could find her.

That did not last her long forever, as soon she saw a familiar silhouette. “...Axel?”

A man with red hair spiking in every direction turned around. He had broad shoulders but a thin waist and towered over Kairi. Instead of his organization coat, he had gone back to wearing normal clothes, a plaid shirt, and a black jacket. His pointed eyebrows were raised in surprise. “Kairi, how did you find me? I was just planning to sneak here and sneak out but I keep running into all these unplanned reunions.”

“I’m pretty sure I could spot you with that haircut even if you were lost in darkness and I was blindfolded.”

Axel, used to being the wittiest one in conversation was taken aback for a moment. He put a hand on the top of his head, slicking his hair back until it flattened, only for it to spike up further.

“Besides you always wear the same thing, you were wearing that outfit the last time I saw you too.”

“If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.”

“In fact, I remember you saying that you dressed like this on purpose so I could pick you out of a crowd. In fact, how were you ever stealthy, it’s hard to imagine you sneaking around being... Well... you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you’re you.”

“Well, I guess that is a pretty fair criticism of me.”

Loud, begging for attention, and yet at the same time quiet, shifting through shadows, overdramatizing everything and yet feeling nothing. Axel was a contradiction, to have a heart was a contradiction.

Everything he did in the organization he did under the assumption that he had no heart, but it turned out Demyx was right all along and that simply was not true. Suddenly, Axel leaned in a step too close observing the features on Kairi’s face. His hand reached out to touch her cheek, she never noticed how large his hands were until this moment.

His thumb gently stroked tracing out the bottom of her eye, and then suddenly he changed and started to pull on her eyelid. “Hey... have you been crying?”

“Axel quit it!”

He was emotional, and somehow this emotionally dense at the same time. Another paradox. “Don’t think you can hide it from me, I know what people’s eyes look like when they’ve had teardrops
underneath ‘em.”

“That’s not it, I mean stop pulling on my face.”

“Oh, yeah.” Axel let go.

Kairi did not raise her eyes to look at him. Maybe she just did not want to hurt her neck craning it up at that angle.

Axel would not let go the moment he had noticed there was trouble. He was clingy like that. A little bit like Sora, who whenever Kairi cried would bother her all day until she was cheered up, but in a different way. Axel seemed a lot more desperate than Sora did. “Umm… do I need to buy you some ice cream?”

“Axel, I’m starting to feel like you shove ice cream in people’s faces when you don’t know what to say.”

“That’s not true. I’m a sensitive guy. I’m so sensitive I don’t think I’ll ever get over the wound of you implying that I’m not.”

Like Sora, but with an Ego. No matter how big it was it punctured easily though, so Kairi believed his claims of being a sensitive guy. “There are some things that can’t be solved with ice cream, you know.”

“I’m wounded that you would even imply that. No amount of ice cream is ever going to fill the hole you’ve left in me.”

“Wait… then aren’t you just agreeing with me if you say Ice Cream isn’t going to heal your wound?”

“What? No, don’t turn this around on me I’m supposed to be the smart talker. We’ve all got our roles to play you know, you can’t just go taking mine cuz’ you’re greedy.” He said. Apparently, Axel was going to leave her no choice but to be comforted by him. He was sweet, if a bit salty too. “Besides even if you’re empty, ice cream would still taste good.”

“I can’t believe we’re talking philosophically about ice cream… well, I guess it can’t all be about light and darkness.” Kairi sighed. Just like Sora, there was a time when you just had to kind of go with Axel’s unique flow because otherwise, he was going to drag you into it. “What you said about everyone having roles… I’m not sure what mine is anymore.”

“Kairi…?”

Axel was capable of talking about someone other than himself it seemed, as he quieted down. The sharp features of his face suddenly looked like one of those confused, sad kittens. He led Kari off somewhere to talk to her.

As he leaned against a tree, Kairi sat on the ground holding her knees. “Can you tell me what happened at castle oblivion? We’ve been dealing with Namine and Replica Riku, and I feel like I’m the only one being left behind.”

Axel scratched at the end of his hairline on his neck. He averted his eyes awkwardly away for a moment. “Okay, I’ll tell you everything but there’s going to be a lot of apologizing.”
“No more apologizing, don’t forget.”

Axel looked like he was about to say his signature line, but he decided Kairi needed to hear about oblivion first, so he told her everything. Saix’s plan, the infiltration, Vexen, letting Namine go, Larxene, and then Marluxia. Then he found the Replica all alone and used him to pick off the stragglers. Technically, he had not harmed Namine or Replica, not to the extent that everybody else did, but he pretended to help them, to sympathize with them just so he could use them more effectively. He probably could have accomplished his schemes without using them, but the moment he started to play, Axel wanted to control every piece on the board.

He remembered putting his hand on his empty chest and noticing he felt something for the first time in years. He had no idea what to think of it at the time. All that escaped from his mouth was a soft “Oh…”

If they were regrowing their hearts the entire time as nobodies, then what exactly were his first emotions felt as Axel? What colors did he dye his fledgling heart? He wanted to ask Kairi but… she was crying, and he had no idea how to fix that so he just kept answering her question to the best of his ability.

“That was all you. You seemed like an entirely different person from the one I know.”

“Well, I personally would rather have slept all day and made better use of my time that way, but I ended up doing all those anyway in the end… icky or not. I guess it’s all still Axel, after all this time.”

“That answer doesn’t really make a lot of sense.”

“What can I say, I’ve got a lot of faces, all of them are handsome but they don’t always gel well with each other.”

“I feel like you’re dramatizing.”

“Well, only a little. Just because when I see someone sad, my first instinct is to show off a little bit until they start to smile again.”

“I feel like your first instinct in most situations is to show off a lot of bits.” Axel had lived two different lives, and Kairi could not really understand him because she was not him but she did not want to make the mistake she made with Namine in the past in assuming she understood everything. Especially when she started out so far behind everyone else. “I feel the same way about Riku. He’s supposed to be my childhood friend, but it’s like Riku grew up when I wasn’t looking. He didn’t become a Nobody or a heartless, or anything but… did he become a completely different person when I wasn’t looking or… is it just always the same Riku and I never understood him to begin with only Sora.”

Feeling like you looked away for one second, and then suddenly somebody you had known for your entire life had changed. Axel understood that feeling at least. Even if he did not understand exactly the way Kairi was feeling it.

He leaned forward and poked her on the forehead. “You have all these memories of Riku right? Those aren’t going to waste. You’ll never forget them. Even if things change they won’t. So, trust in your memories a little more okay? If you’re friends then no matter how lost you get, you can follow those memories to find each other again.”
“I feel like you’re talking from personal experience.”

“Was that another dig at me?”

“Is it unearned?”

“Well, no… I mean dig away. You can laugh at me all you want, my life’s been a wild ride and I hope somebody besides me finds it funny. Besides, since we’re friends I don’t mind being your clown to make you smile.”

“Axel… you sweet weirdo.” She quieted down for a moment processing her thoughts before looking up again. “Why were you even in Hollow Bastion in the first place? I thought you were living in Twilight Town now?”

“Well yeah, but this place is my home. It’s the only place that has the fast food I like.” Axel said, holding up a paper bag.

“You… Did you travel between worlds just to order some food? Did you travel by a gummi ship at least? No more corridors of darkness?”

“Um… yeah, let’s just say I did that.” Axel suddenly uncrossed his arms and straightened up. “Well, whatever it is it’ll e solved if you talk it out with Riku, right? Then I’m going to get him and make sure his head is screwed on straight.”

“Wait, Axel no offense but you’ll probably just make it worse-”

“That may be true, but at least I’ll fail and make things worse with style.”

Riku had gone to find Namine to try to tell her the news. She was living in a room in a high tower of the castle. They were not permanent accommodations, just temporary while her body was monitored to be sure that the replication process had succeeded.

The room was white as always. No wondered Namine liked to color so much, she was probably trying to add just a little bit of color to her existence with those drawings. He stopped just short of the door, and could not bring himself to knock on it. Some hero he was, scared of a little girl in a white dress and sandals.

Riku leaned against the wall opposite to the door, and let his back drag on it until he was sitting on the floor. Eventually, the door cracked open and Namine’s voice floated to him from the other side. He was not looking up, staring into his own crossed arms instead.

“Riku, do you want to talk?”

“…”

“Riku, are you sulking?”
“No.”

“No, you don’t want to talk or no you’re not sulking.”

“No.”

“Oh, I see.” She said in her usual polite way and then sat next to him. Her toes flexed in her sandals and she kicked her feet slightly to fill up the empty air between them as she did not quite know what to do next. She reached forward and tapped on his cheek with a pale finger. “Riku, you’re not the worst, and it’s not all your fault.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, some of it is my fault as well I convinced Xion and Roxas to return to Sora, too.” She scooted closer to him and leaned against his shoulder even though he was much taller than her. “And… I’m the one who rewrote Replica Riku’s memories to make him believe he was you. He’ll blame himself, or even you before he blames me though.”

“…” Namine, do you like living in the same world with Ansem?”

“No…”

“What about with all the other nobodies in castle oblivion?”

“Well… they’re different people since regaining their hearts apparently, but if they are… my body still remembers how scared of them I was.”

“Then, why do you keep looking out for me? I don’t think I treated you any better than they did, in the end, I used you for Sora too… just like Kairi…”

“Well… we’re the same, aren’t we? We were both alone at the time and… you could have gone to sleep to fix the darkness in your heart but you chose to stay awake and it was like you were choosing to remember me.”

“That’s just because I like making things more difficult for myself.” Riku exhaled. He sat back raising his head once more. It was just the two of them together. In the great halls of the castle, they seemed so small. If only their problems would be that small. “Namine I… I keep telling you I haven’t done enough yet for you to-”

“Riku, you wanted to go back home but you atoned for a year trying to fix sora. Then, you helped try to fix what you did in that year by helping Sora bring everyone back. Now, you’re atoning for not being there for Sora. No matter what you do, you’ll keep making mistakes even if you only walk the path of light from now on. Are you going to spend the rest of your life atoning?”

“Tch… You haven’t even been alive that long. Since when did you get so wise?”

“I don’t have any happy memories of my own, but I’ve been watching yours for a long time Riku. I think yours are especially beautiful, so filled with emotion, so connected to people. Riku, do you remember Neverland?”

He looked out to the only window in the hallway. They must have lost track of time in the lab
because the moon had already risen outside. Perhaps he had lost track on time in his sulking.

With Maleficent’s help, he found Kairi’s body but it was nothing more than an unconscious shell.
Even so, he carried it around like it was the real thing. There was nothing left of Kairi in there, but he
knew she needed a place to return to.

All he wanted to do was see her smile again, and lecture him for fighting with Sora like she usually
did. If Kairi would just come back, everything between them would be right. He had opened the
door, but only because he wanted to walk through it and see the outside world with the two of them
by his side. It had all gone to darkness because of him, but if darkness was what did this then it could
undo this.

“I learned to control the heartless… So, I’ll find you soon. Don’t worry, after this, I won’t leave you
alone anymore.”

She said nothing in response. He almost hoped she would even though he knew it was impossible.
He wondered why he did something so pointless as talk to her when she could not hear or remember
this.

Outside he looked at the moon hanging over the sea. He reached out and tried to grab at it, squishing
it between his two fingers. If that was where he needed to go to find Kairi, he would reach it.

“The reason I appeared to you as Kairi when you were fighting Ienzo… If I really thought you didn’t
care about Kairi, do you think that would work?”

Riku hung his head. “You shouldn’t be comforting me. Ugh, I should have been over this by now, I
thought I was over myself.”

“Riku, I know you’re hard on yourself, but if you can’t be easier on yourself you could be easier on
other people around you. You’ve been picking fights with Ienzo…”

“Well, Sora can go on smiling with him and be a buddy but I just can’t do it like that.”

“That’s fine, but you know… I’m sure you can understand Ienzo in ways Sora can’t. Sora is
somebody who can save everybody but…there are people you can understand because you know
what it’s like to be alone in the darkness.”

That was what Namine wanted to say to him. She did not feel alone when she was around him. Riku
was too busy looking at himself the entire time. No matter how many times he stared at his reflection
in the water, it would not change. Even if the water rippled, even if he threw a rock in it, eventually it
would settle again and it would still be him looking back.

“Namine, you don’t even like Ienzo that much, or… staying in this castle. Why do you always stick
up for other people, rather than yourself?”

“I was always watching others, the first thing I thought for myself was… desire… I was born from
desire.” Even if she was threatened, even if she was coerced she could not say that those things were
not her fault. As those were the only things she had never done for herself. If she took those actions
away then she really would have just been Marluxia and Diz’s discarded puppet.

“You shouldn’t stay in this castle if you don’t want to. Namine, I can take you-”

“Where would I go? I want to see Roxas and Xion again, but if I’m around them all I’ll think about
is how I convinced them it was better if they didn’t exist even if they forgive me. I could go to the Destiny Islands, but all I’ll think about is how I almost destroyed your childhood memories of that place. Riku, do you remember the meteor storm?”

“The meteor storm…?”

“I based one of Replica Riku’s memories off of it. The meteor storm just before Kairi arrived on the islands.”

“Ah…”

“The stars are scary. Not because they fall, but because each star is a different world in the sky and I know I don’t belong in any of them.”

“Yeah, that is scary.” Riku stood up once more. “But there is someone you do belong with, so I’m going to drag his butt back here.”

Riku walked down the spiraling stairs, no longer caring how far he was descending. That was right Namine was one of the first people to believe in him, she told him he could be darker than any darkness and brighter than any light. When he lost his darkness and the keyblade came back to him again after fighting Xemnas, he forgot about that.

Kairi took him by the hand when he was wearing Ansem’s face and recognized him anyway. Sora always believed in him even when they fought against each other. He had been saved by them countless times. He might not be able to save Kairi or Sora, but he could at least save himself.

He could not be friends with everybody like Sora had. There was a hole Sora had left that could not be filled. However, there were some people Sora could not reach but Riku could. If he could save those few people lost alone in the darkness, just like he had been once. They were not so lucky as to have such wonderful friends as he did, so perhaps he could be a friend to them.

Saving those people would be something. Even if they were a risk, even if they had fallen into the dark, even if they had to take the long way back to the dawn.

Riku returned to the lab.

At the exact same time, Axel barged in through the doors, throwing off Riku’s determination slightly as he was confused as to why the sudden Axel.

“Hey Riku, I gotta talk with you-” Axel said pushing past Ienzo.

Riku ignored him for a moment. Something that might have been a fatal mistake considering how much Axel hated being ignored. “Ienzo, can you wake up Replica?”

“Why, so we can have a repeat of what happened last time?” Ienzo eyed both Axel and the replica on the stretcher in front of them.

“Ienzo, if he’s not awake we won’t make any progress. Isn’t watching things that happen part of science?”
Ienzo looked at the boy on the table with one eye. Then he snapped his fingers. Replica’s eyes began to flutter open, and Ienzo immediately went to the bookshelf and pulled out a few like he was desperately looking for an excuse to leave.

Replica Riku rolled his head and then sat up once more. “Do you finally admit it? We want the same thing. Don’t you think it would have been better if you were the one to disappear in a heroic sacrifice and Sora and Kairi were left together?”

“No, I don’t think that. If Sora were here, he wouldn’t be able to understand you the way I could.”

“...You don’t know.”

“You’re right, I don’t know. Even if we have the exact same memories, and even if we look the same we’re always going to be separate.”

“Don’t act like you’re treating me like my own person now, you don’t even have a name for me.”

Ienzo glared from his one exposed eye as he went to the door. “That’s because Even didn’t take responsibility for you, I shouldn’t be the one to clean up his mess.”

“Hey, guys!” Axel raised his voice above all of them. “I’m sure you all have reasons to be silently seething at each other, but don’t forget about me. I’m just as guilty as all of you. Ienzo, just say it I manipulated Replica Riku into energy-draining you until you were strangled to death and faded into darkness. Replica, the reason you went mad at the end was that I pushed you. And Riku... well, I did kidnap Kairi that one time even though you let me live, that was pretty bad of me. Instead of getting pissed at each other and not talking about it but getting all complicated why not just be mad at me?”

It was like there were several trails of gunpowder in the room and they had all been carefully avoiding stepping on them, and because of that, it was almost impossible for any of them to reach each other. Axel’s solution was to just set fire to all of them at once and let them burn, hoping they’d burn away the complicated strings that were knotting between them too.

Ienzo finally slammed his hand against the wall. His demeanor of a friendly scientist all but burned away. “Lea, that has nothing to do with this! That death happened to Zexion, and anyway it was necessary for me to Re-complete.”

“It’s not Lea, it’s Axel now. Just like you’re still Zexion.”

“Lea, you got your toys back why are you bothering me?”

“What did you say?” Axel lost control of his anger for a moment and grabbed Zexion by the throat, throwing him against the wall.

Replica was the first to react, he summoned his keyblade and pointed it right at Axel’s back. “It’s your fault, you’re right. I was fine with being a fake, but then you told me that I could be real. If I hadn’t started to desire... I never should have desired to be real, to be my own person.”

Riku saw a three-way fight was about to break out and raised his voice as loud as he could. Which was still not that loud as Riku was not one to lash out in direct anger. “Axel, what are you even doing here?”
“That’s right I wasn’t bothering with either of you.” He threw Zexion to the side, and then pushed his way past the replica holding his broken blade like it was nothing more than a toy. “You’re the one I’ve got a bone to pick with—”

“I don’t care. You know what. Axel, Replica, go into the corner.”

“What?”

“What?” Axel repeated, “I’m not going to stop until I’ve said my piece--”

“Get in the corner, you oddly tall child!”

Both Axel and Riku suddenly dropped their heads and went to stare in the corners of the lab. Axel even muttered a quick, “Yes sir Riku, sorry Sir.”

Riku had only raised his voice to its maximum output, which to most people was just a growl because he saw the way Ienzo looked against the wall. Even though it was just a threat done in an emotional pique, Ienzo looked like he was reliving the moment of his death. His shoulders looked so weak they looked about to collapse in on themselves.

Once Ienzo had let his heart leave his body. He still had memories of that time, and the time he did not have a heart. Now, he wished more than anything not for his heart to leave, but rather his whole self to dissociate from this world.

He tried being whole again. He tried always smiling, acting like the kid he might have been if he was not born so smart. He had tons how a bright face to others because he had been living so selfishly all along and hurting others. He needed to make up for what he had done. He needed to prove he was not Zexion anymore, the one who read people like books, and thought that he could tear out the pages and rearrange them however he liked, that had no interest in the world so he became aloof searching for answers in darkness.

He wanted to go back to what that child should have grown up into. A cheerful boy who was happy to help others, who researched for the good of the whole kingdom. Not what he was, a silent boy far apart from others, always staring at them like they were nothing more than subjects in the experiments called life.

It was too much for him though, living with the memory that he was a terrible child, that chose to follow Xehanort and grew into a terrible adult. He deserved to be alone considering everyone who he harmed. In the end though when he needed to atone for what he had done, all he could think about was how terrified he was of dying at Replica Riku’s hands again. There was nothing too great about his own existence, there was nothing he could give others despite boasting about how much he knew, and yet he had clung to it anyway.

He had become so lost in darkness and forgotten why he even wanted to live in the first place, and yet he was terrified to die. There was that twisted self-value of his. He was afraid of others because he could not control them, afraid of the darkness because he could not control it. He was afraid of Replica Riku’s hands wrapping around his neck and squeezing because he could not control that either.

Yet he did not realize the person he could control the least was himself, as he was the one who had done all those things. No… perhaps being in control was far more terrifying, if those were the choices he made.
He wanted to surrender again, but he was afraid of that. He was afraid of himself but afraid of not being himself. A confusing paradox in his head that refused to resolve itself. All the while, Replica Riku’s hands grew tighter and tighter, he died smothered by darkness. There was no control at all, just the feeling of being choked, and everything slipping away from his fingertips.

He needed the world to make sense. He needed to make sense. But it didn’t and he didn’t. He needed an answer or some kind of meaning, but his brain refused to find one. There was only that memory replaying in his head again, his thoughts were becoming heavy too.

Fearing the darkness in everybody else believing they could not control it yet using it for himself. Claiming to be a scientist when all he could do was look at the world through his own self-centered viewpoint.

Suddenly, Ienzo was pulled by his own thoughts by Riku who wrapped his arms around him. Ienzo heaved against his chest. He looked to be drowning even though there was nothing around them. He was drowning in himself. The effort he was making to keep afloat just tired him out, he gulped water and it became impossible for him to breathe. He just wanted one thing to hold onto. He needed to know why, why his entire life had been uprooted like this again and again. First, his parents disappeared, then Ansem disappeared, and then Xehanort sent him away to that castle and he disappeared. He was a child. He was an adult. He was nobody. He was a person again. What had all of this been for? He understood the numbers and figures but his brain refused to derive any meaning from it. He just wanted something solid to hold onto, one piece of rock. He noticed in his panic, his head had slid against Riku’s chest. “Ienzo, you have to breathe.”

“I can’t…”

“If you can talk you can breathe.”

“You don’t understand. You’re right to hate me. I wanted to become a nobody, to rid myself of these troubling emotions. We were learning so much and they were getting in the way. Do you understand that? How sickening I am? I thought feelings were slowing down the inhumane experiments I was doing so I made myself become more of a monster.”

He remembered his heart being ripped out. He had no idea what faces the other apprentices were making but a smirk crawled on his lips. He thought the idea was novel. He never felt the warmth that a heart was supposed to give him. The only thing he had ever relied on was his mind. Emotions just interfered with the experience. He was so close to finding the mysteries too. Once he had a desirable result he could control the heart. He could make irrational equations like his own loneliness go away. A heart was an unreliable thing. Numbers, figures, they were tools to control an entirely irrational world.

He did not want to lose anyone to such a world again. There were answers lying in the heart. The more he could know the more he would be capable of doing. All of those useless numbers in data align into a beautiful meaning. There must have been some meaning behind the heart. He was born into this world after all. He was born with a heart and a head like any other. He wanted to justify that life. He wanted to make meaning out of it because his earliest memory was the senseless loss of the two people who had brought him into the world. If he survived and they did not it must have been for some greater purpose. If he was brought to be this lab, then it must have been because he was useful.

“See, you can talk a lot.” Riku's voice was as calm as ever. He was like the shore of an island, no
matter how many waves crashed against him he never broke. Ienzo never understood him from the first moment he met him, even though he was able to play around with his formative memories on destiny islands and turn them against him, Riku still did not break. He said nobody could control the darkness like Riku did. It should have been impossible. Perhaps the only reason he believed it was impossible was that he was unable to do it. He wondered what the difference between them was. How could Riku not break against a power that he lost his heart to?

Riku was like him.
Smart.
Alone.
He only had himself because nobody else thought like him.
Always trying to stand on his own.
More fragile than he appeared.
Ienzo crumbled, and Riku did not.

“That’s because you don’t get it. I haven’t explained it well enough. That’s why I have to explain more... why you should hate me. No... you already understand me, and that's why you hate me.”

“I don’t hate you. I just hated myself that I saw in you, pretending you fell to darkness once but everything’s okay now. It’s fine if you’re still hurt after re-completing.”

Then Ienzo was right, Riku did not want to stare at the weaker version of himself. The one who thought he could bury his nose in his books and hide his regrets behind a smile.

“No, it’s not. I should want my heart back, it's unnatural otherwise. I was unnatural, an aberration, even before I fell to darkness. I… I probably would have chosen it even if Xehanort was not here. I would have done those experiments consequences be damned and I don't know why anymore...”

He had lost himself. It was funny because re-completing literally meant he found his heart. Finding his heart only made him forget what it was all for. He wanted to say he had been swindled by Xehanort, tricked, to relieve some of the feelings of being so flooded with emotion that he was drowning it but if he threw those choices away he would lose himself even more. He had no idea who was standing in these two shoes. He knew he had done something wrong and needed to atone but that was it. Zexion was pretending to be Ienzo again. However, he no longer remembered what it was Ienzo would have wanted if his heart fell to darkness or if he never became a Nobody.

Answers, answers, answers, Xehanort told him they would be there. He needed them. He clung to them because knowledge was power. As long as he knew more than anybody else in the room he was in control. That was his worth. However, going through all of that, making all of those sacrifices he had gained nothing at all. It all felt pointless. Perhaps a philosopher could go on and on about how the world had no meaning but a scientist needed an observable result to draw conclusions. He lost his heart, he became nothing, he gained nothing that was it. He had even caused several other people to lose their hearts. All he could do was desperately atone to try to make something out of that nothing.

“You fell to the darkness once, but at least you learned from it right? That’s why I don’t want you pretending everything’s okay because otherwise, you’ll forget what you learned. You’re forgetting the reason why you fell to the darkness in the first place.”

“The reason…?”

“Ienzo, did you know once a storm of meteors fell from the outside world and Sora got upset so I promised him I’d protect him? Did you know after that we found a girl and Sora said he wanted to
bring her back home to her world, so I promised I’d take both of them? Even if I got lost along the way, that’s where I started out… Your intentions were good at one point weren’t they?”

Ienzo wondered why Riku was sharing such a memory with him at this moment. Especially when he had used such memories to torment Riku in castle oblivion. He used illusions to make him believe his most precious friendship was not what it appeared to be all along. He tried to drag out that vital component of him and break him. He could not break Riku though, Riku was solid as the earth. Not only that but he was sharing that precious memory with him willingly. That memory that had only been a toy in Ienzo's hand.

He could read people like a book but he could not read Riku, he did not understand what was special about him... Oh, he was refusing to look at himself. He was drowning in himself, he was self-aware, but somehow he was missing that critical detail. He thought about Riku's memory again. The falling stars. His more sensitive friend Sora got intimidated. Riku picked up a wooden sword and held them out in front of the sky. He said he would hit back every falling star that landed near Sora to protect him. Riku looked at the falling stars differently than Sora did. When he looked up, he saw every falling star as a different world. A different unexplored possibility that was what Ienzo had seen when he looked at the same sky.

Ienzo felt lost. Riku had a childhood friend to protect, he had a home to return to even if he ventured out. Ienzo never had those things. He was surrounded by adults. Almost all of his memories from the time he was a child before Ansem took him in were gone. He wondered if he had truly forgotten them or just repressed them. He did not want to be the lost boy. He dissociated that Ienzo from himself like it was a different life entirely. The same way he had wanted to separate Zexion. As far back as he could remember though, he never had any children his own age around him. His only friends were several other adults in the same lab. He was always out of place. He saw things differently than other people around him.

If he walked past his younger self, and that child told him it would have been better if he died with his parents what would he think?
It was life different from a lot of other people's.
It was his life though. He had kept walking forward past that.
If the child asked him he would give no answer he would just keep walking.
He had spent his entire life in pursuit of that information that was just out of reach, but he felt in his head it was there.
There was a time he just wanted to learn.
He wanted to learn everything.
It filled the heart of an otherwise empty child with joy, to think there were so many new things to discover.
It made him feel like there was a reason he had lived.

“I wanted to learn… because even though I'm just a powerless kid I can use my mind to help others. I wanted to show them there was a reason I was here. I wanted to help.”

“Mmm. We wanted good things, didn’t we? Even if we were led astray by our desires, it’s not a mistake to desire. Even if you fell to darkness, even if you lost control, you can still learn from it, you can still take control again.”

Learning from his experiences even if an experiment failed you could gain useful data from the results.
His life was just a set of trials. He failed most of them. Yet he was still here looking for answers. If he could just assess himself more honestly.
He was not Ienzo who smiled and energetically floated about the lab, he was not Zexion who skulked aloof and alone only caring for his books and his illusions. The real answer was likely somewhere in between. He needed an honest assessment of the data and to continue the experiment.

“I see. I failed as a scientist, and now I’m getting lectured by a brat that’s younger than me…” Ienzo finally wiped the tears from his eye. He made a mess of his hair, brushing it out of his face until two eyes were looking at Riku. Perhaps the tears had washed away something because his eyes looked clear for the first time in a long while. He met Riku's and it was the first time in a long while he felt comfortable looking into the eyes of another person. After all, he was sure that once Riku had looked up at the skies and seen the same limitless possibilities that he had. Riku had once wanted to chase the darkness because there was something good he wanted to gain from it. They saw the same darkness. They saw the same tiny points of light breaking through it. They saw the same stars. They shared the same sky, so they were not that far apart after all. He said it was impossible for someone to control the darkness like Riku did, but if Riku someone so similar to himself could learn then maybe one day he could learn as well. “When I was your age, I was always lecturing the adults too and thinking I knew better.”

When he was sure Ienzo would not collapse on his own, Riku let go of him. He moved to the other corner and watched as his shadow touched Replica’s once more. “I know you still care about Namine because you’re asking to disappear out of sight since you know if she saw it would hurt her.”

“Mn.”

“I know when I decided I wanted to protect my friends, but there was a time when you decided all on your own protect her didn’t you?”

Replica Riku remembered it, a memory of his own. His life had been short but he still was alive once. The scent of flower petals was thick enough in the air to choke him. He had been broken by Namine, his strings cut, all for the sake of Sora. He had been conscious that whole time, as Larxene tossed his limp body about like he was nothing more than a discarded toy and told him the truth. Part of him wanted to lie on the ground and remain utterly broken. He wanted to give into the cracks that were forming in his mind and let them overtake him.

Sora would save her. Sora was real. Even if his memories were real, he was sure Sora would have been the one to save her in the end. He could rest peacefully knowing that Sora would take care of it for him. Even so, he could not choose to let it end peacefully like that, he did not choose to be a broken tossed away doll. He slammed his fist into the ground and forced his way up. Namine was out there somewhere. His life was brief, but he had still spent all of it with her. The reason he felt things an empty doll was not supposed to feel was because of hers.

He rushed to her side. Even if his memories were just a stage play, he decided that the puppet should have to play his part until the end. He thought he would be satisfied with that once Marluxia was destroyed and Namine was saved. However, his end was delayed a little bit longer when Axel arrived. He had never thought about becoming real, he was content to believe in a fake promise but Axel whispered the idea into his head and made him believe it. His short life became a little bit longer. He felt prolonging it only made him hurt more. He fought against Riku wand was utterly broken. If he had ended it with just protecting Namine, he might not have failed to this extent, his mind would not have broken this much.

However, even broken like that and falling into the darkness some part of him still remained. When
Riku fell into the darkness again he woke up. His life was so short, he knew it would end the moment he discovered he was a fake so why did he keep delaying it over and over? Even when he planned his big heroic sacrifice, someone had dived into the darkness and dug him out once more. The more he continued the more broken he got. He only ever made bad choices. He wondered why then... why was he being given so many second chances?

“Sora said that even if his memories were fake, he’d keep his promise to Namine. Then he fought against Marluxia, and I... I should have stayed by her side after that.”

He knew Namine suffered alone afterward because of that. Now he was wondering what would have happened if he lived.... he did not want to think of that. He did not want to desire anymore.

“You’re not a mistake, Replica. You’re not my mistakes. You’re not my damage. You have to live, to make your own mistakes and learn from them, and grow to be different than me.” He held a hand out to the replica in front of him. “I’ll take you and Namine away from here, to another world. Even if all your memories are fake, you can make new ones but to do that you have to keep living. That’s the only way things are going to change for you.”

Replica stared at Riku’s offered hand. All he could do was hesitate. He wanted a connection of his own. He wanted a connection of his own. He wanted to be real. He wanted to have friends that were not fictional or forged memories, just like Namine wanted. He knew the moment he took that hand that connection would be forged. Riku wanted to see him as his own person. He wanted to give him a chance. Chance, after chance, after chance, Replica still had no idea why such a pointless existence like his was being prolonged. He could not think of a single reason to take that hand.

He tried to sum up his short existence but nothing at all came to his mind. He was trying to solve an equation where both ends were zero. He could not decide. If he chose he would continue to exist. He would stop being the puppet he thought he was.

He was afraid to take that hand.

“...”

Suddenly, Axel peaked out from his corner before Replica could make his choice.

“Wait, what about my speech?”

“You don’t get a speech, Axel!” Riku snapped back at him.
The Hero Dies. The End.

Side B - Shibuya
Track 1
Play 'Hey Kids!

Tonight we honor the hero!

Tonight we don their masks - the kids that tear it down.
Hate lies? Destruction? Then throw down the days.
And sweet honey of body warmth floated up.
Suck in the flavor, flavor, flavor!
Just want to hold your hand!
Bring all back to zero.

Go crazy hey kids.
The era changes in succession and never ending irritation.
Go crazy hey kids!
Along with you, who I never expected to see here! Oh! Oh! Oh!

In frenzied tears;
I want to keep connected searching out this love I can't forget.
Go crazy hey kids!
But nonetheless our future repeats, again and again.
Go crazy hey kids!
Let a senseless smile spill upon your lips - a pointless struggle.

It's okay to be crazy,
Just say my name again and again!
I swear I respect the hero.

It's all so ludicrous, a sinful distortion
You fall from heaven's gate into a villain's fate and say
"Hello? Temptation? Nice to meet you."
Now and foreverEVEREVER.

Be crazy hey kids! Shine on the closed yesterday with your impulse that's got nowhere to go.
Spitting your worthless ego, it's a meaningless battle.
Are you fine with being crazy?
You won't call my name?

I'm fading.
That was all he knew about his existence. He had once been a light shining brilliantly warning
everyone around him with his radiance but now he was fading out. The same way fireworks explode
bright colors in every direction, only to leave sparks and smoky burnt out trails. They say a candle that burns the brightest burns away the fastest. That was his existence now.

Except he had not gone out with a bang, he had not sacrificed himself brilliantly at the climax. He had gone quiet. He waited to the denouement to fade out with a whisper. His disappearance was so small, no more significant than a candle being snuffed by the breeze.

He was burnt out. Instead of breaking all at once he had been worn down gradually. He had not sacrificed himself in some final glorious blaze, he had simply become too tired to go on. He was not nobly holding on with determination, he was simply too stupid to realize his own limits.

He was not trying to be selfless. He just gave away all of himself, because he thought the parts inside of him were worthless. He gave them away to others hoping they would find some more worth than him. He could only find his worth in others. When he gave it all away there was nothing left of himself. He became even more worthless.

He thought he was only worthwhile while around others, but in the end, he fought alone. He was a hypocrite like that. His power was a borrowed one. He was not the chosen one, just the next in line. He was a fake like that. He thought he was only special because of the other people around him, so he wanted to keep on borrowing their power. He was afraid of losing them because he needed their strength, so he fought alone.

He was a hero but he never went on a hero’s journey. He wandered from place to place, making new friends easily, and always finding enemies there as well. He never thought of the next step ahead of him, only of the current one. Because of that, the only trail he could follow was the one left by the villains. He was the hero, but the maker of the story was the villain, the easter, the scripter, and the one responsible for the set design. He assumed as long as he defeated the villain in the end, everything would be alright. No matter what kind of darkness he fell into as long as he followed his heart he would escape.

His thinking was black and white like that. Light and darkness. He was a hero in a simple adventure story like the ones he read when he was a kid. The hero would face evil and then triumph in the end. That was the kind of simple good-natured heroics that he believed in.

He thought everything would be fine as long as he kept going. As long as he moved forward. He liked the concept of destiny. He thought as long as destiny was at play and he surrendered himself to it like a fool. Then as long as he kept moving forward every step forward was a step home.

But, he defeated the villain and the story did not end there. He saved everyone but himself. He had gone too far. He could not carry this body with him. It was too heavy. It was like an old abandoned shell. The kind left on beaches. The ones that broke easily when you stepped on them.

There was nothing, no light, and no darkness. He did not cry out. He fell as gently as a tree falls. There was not even any sound, because of the sand he fell on.

I’m fading. That was all. He looked up and the sunset he was watching from the beach had gone. He looked at his crystalline body. Cracks formed and branched out like tree roots growing at sped up time. Every attempt to put him back together had only scattered the pieces worse. Every time someone picked them up, they would break into smaller pieces. The sun was no longer in the sky, and that was
because the sky was no longer the sky.

The sea was the sky, and the sky was the sea. The sky was the sea, and the sea was the sky. He was laying on an outstretched glassy surface of blue. It was like a single line had been drawn between where two blue skies might converge, and everywhere else was a featureless expanse.

Then he started to sink. He was falling downwards, or perhaps he was falling upwards. It was difficult to tell because they both looked the same. It was like someone had hung two mirrors opposite to one another. He saw clouds roll in both the sky and the ocean. He was drowning, or he was suffocating due to being dragged into space. He had no idea but the result would be the same.

He was pulled down or up, and as he was pulled his pieces broke away even more. If glass could fall from the sky like snowflakes, and spin in every direction that would be him. There was nothing left of him, but this feeling of fading, of breaking apart.

He knew that whoever came to this world of endless blue and nothing afterward was a heart hanging on to their previous life. However, he could not remember his previous life. The body was made up of heart, body, soul and then memories. He had none of them left. He wondered then what this was. What was holding his last little pieces together?

There was a lingering will that once animated a suit of armor, even when the heart, soul, and body were conquered. Then, this must be a lingering regret. He was sorry, sorry, sorry. Not for himself as he could not even remember who he was. He was sorry to those he had left behind. He had friends. They must have thought he abandoned them. He wanted to go back home with them too.

If only he was stronger, he could have stayed with them.
All of the strength in his heart came from Ventus, Xion, and Roxas, with them gone there was nothing left. It was his fault he broke apart so easily. Now he left them alone.

The last thing he remembered, he saw Kairi and Riku crying begging him to hold it together. He thought he should have been able to, with the power of their hearts, with the power of friendship.

His love for them must not have been strong enough. The power of love was not enough this time.

He was falling, falling, and then he was caught suddenly. Just like that, he slammed up against a hand. What was left of him was so small it could be held in a palm. A reaper’s hand reached forward. For a moment, he thought two bony fingers might be plucking the wick of his candle to snuff out what was left for him. Instead, he landed in the soft palm of the reaper’s hand, and his fingers curled slowly around the park to protect it.

Kiryu Yoshiya stood on the watery surface of the final world. The moment he had stepped out on it, he giggled self indulgently about the idea of walking on water. His feet were so light they did not sink into the pools at all, and the water only rippled slightly at his feet.

He saw people’s souls spread out like stars around them. As he was in tune to the world, all at once he could hear their various thoughts and regrets. I kept telling everyone we were just friends. He crept into my head. When Shibuya briefly fell to darkness and became a sleeping world he figured out how to move between worlds. Into my heart. The world did not end with a single person, it did not end with Shibuya, there were many worlds he had never seen. Did I matter? Was I ever there at all? I thought I found my place, but look there. I’m gone but there they go on. There were as many worlds as there
were people, that was why Yoshiya never wanted to get bored again. He never wanted to hate his little world of Shibuya. *I GOT TO EXPERIENCE SO MUCH. I HAVE NO REGRETS.* If the scenery got stale he needed to change it up a little bit, that was where he got the idea of bringing people from other worlds into his game. Those who were strong enough to hold on at the final world would make excellent players. *CONSCIOUSNESS. FEELINGS THEY PASS THROUGH ME ONE THROUGH THE NEXT BUT NONE OF IT FEELS REAL. I RESIGNED MYSELF TO FORGET. TO LET IT ALL SLIP AWAY. BUT THERE WAS ONE PIECE I COULDN’T LET GO OF, ONE FRAGMENT OF MEMORY. MAYBE THAT SLIVER OF MEMORY IS WHAT’S KEPT ME HERE THE WHOLE TIME?* As he walked among the people whose remains were nothing more than glittering stars he went looking for interesting players to recruit.

Silence.

Okay, that was enough of that. If he got too attuned to the thoughts of others, it was like hearing every single radio station at the same time.

His name was Kiryu Yoshiya.
He was a reaper who collected souls. He was a god of death among gods of death. He was a god of Shibuya. He was a unique god of death because he could bring others back to life, but obviously, he was very choosy with this power.

He thought it was a wonderful life. There were infinite possibilities. He thought it was a boring life. Most people let those possibilities get closed off for them far too easily. Life could be beautiful, there were many times it was not.

His views were complicated and he was a complicated person, and most of all he was a brat. If it was possible for a god to obtain a god complex, then Kiryu Yoshiya had one. He had the power to restore to others to live, but only those who could prove to him life was worth living.

It had been proven to him once in a game with higher stakes than usual, but that was a story for another time. Yoshiya was more brilliant than anyone else around him, he was an angel composed of pure light, but as smart as he was also just as stubborn.

Sometimes when he already knew the answer he pretended like he did not. Sometimes he needed to learn the same lesson over and over again because he got bored of knowing all the answers.

That was enough of him though, if he was allowed to talk about himself he would go on forever. Not a single star caught Kiryu Yoshiya’s eye yet. Then he saw something strange. Rather than a star, there was a crack in the watery floor he was standing on. Rather than a soul, it seemed to be indicating the absence of a soul here, as if something was irregular, wrong with reality, missing.

He reached his hand into it and pulled out a star tinier than most.

“Sora?”

What was left of that fragment was not even able to be called noise? If he tried to convert it into a noise, one of the things damaged human souls became in his reaper’s game it would probably become a small whisper and fade away.
He could definitely tell the remaining piece was Sora though. Suddenly, Yoshiya’s body which was pure light took form again. He stood much taller than he usually was, he looked like the bright silhouette of an adult man. The shape of his back bulged, and two large wings reached grew to reach in both directions.

Not just one pair of wings, from them another bloomed, another, another, another, another, another, another, branching off like they were tree branches splitting and growing in every direction. When he finished there were twelve pairs of wings in all. From the frame and basic outline of each wings roots spread out, and on the roots bloomed into a plumage of feathers. It was beyond feathers though, in the dark spaces between feathers eyes peeled themselves open and began to look in every direction. The white feathers began to grow together until they fused into five-fingered shapes and began to move like hands. Countless eyes looked around while countless hands reached out.

Then suddenly, the seemingly limitless fountain of growth reversed itself and all of that retreated back into his bod. The pieces that his feathers were holding onto, and his eyes had searched out fell into his hands. He held a shattered heart, whose pieces were so fine most of them looked like dust.

“So Sora isn’t being saved by your friends how this is supposed to go? What are you going to do, being found by a person like me?”

He asked the pile of broken pieces in his fingers. However, the pile gave him no response. Still, whatever as there seemed cold to Yoshiya. He wondered if something so formless could shiver. He grew only four wings this time, two of them folded in front of his body and wrapped around what he was carrying close to his chest. The other two started to flex and beat hard against the air to give him flight.

“Really now, Sora. You don’t understand how stories work at all. That’s how you ended up like this. What kind of stories end with ‘the hero dies’ all in one sentence. There’s no drama at all in that.”

Life was dramatic. It was an opera, or a musical, or whatever you wanted the score to be. It was a beautifully and purposefully composed melody, at least when you were the composer you could arrange things to seem that way. That was how Kiryu Yoshiya liked it.

Things usually went as he liked it. That was why he had the confidence to keep talking to himself, even though he knew what was left of a person in his hands was not going to give him any reply.

Sakuraba Neku had an odd habit.

He was often solitary by nature. The kind of kid you would take one look at and write off as being in their own little world. He sometimes still had trouble following the crowd. He felt more comfortable doing his own thing.

Still, even for someone like that, his habits got a few stares. He was dressed as any other Shibuya
teen might, his spiky orange framed around his eyes casting shadows. His short sleeveless shirt had a high collar that he pulled up covering the lower half of his face. He wore his shorts sagging with his belt lose around it.

The crowds coming out of the station were restless, shuffling back and forth and making noise but Neku was quiet. He leaned against a statue of Hachiko. The reason he attracted stares was that he had been in the exact same spot for hours not saying a thing. The only noise he made passing the time was the slight scratching as he etched pencil sketches in the notepad he brought with him.

The Dog Statue of Hachiko was a popular meeting spot in front of the station. Anyone who passed by and realized that Neku was waiting and hung around enough to realize how long he was waiting for all through the same thing.

Whoever left that boy waiting for so long really was an inconsiderate person.

Sakuraba Neku was a player in what was called the reaper’s game. He died and came back to life. That was a story for another time. In the epilogue of that story, he made a promise to meet with all of his friends at the Hachiko statue. However, one friend did not show up.

Nobody else there seemed to miss him, they were all having a good time with their reunion. Neku could not help but notice he was gone. Even afterward he could not stop thinking about him. He made a habit of his to visit the Hachiko statue once a week on the same day they agreed to meet up, to wait for him.

He was not sure why he did it. He was different from before, he had friends now that were a part of his world. It was not like he particularly wanted to see that boy again either. He was still mad at him. He still had not forgiven him.

He did not even miss him, that would be like missing an annoying and particularly talkative tumor. Yet, no matter how hard he tried he could not stop thinking about it. Every time he tried to leave before sundown, he thought about what might happen if that boy came here to the Hachiko statue and there was nobody waiting for him.

He would feel all alone like there was nobody else for him in the world. The same way Neku had once felt.

So, Neku silently passed the time. His sketching had gotten better, if only because he had never done something over and over again with this much persistence in his life. Nothing ever happened. He felt like he was waiting for a sign from God. Literally.

Even when his noisy thoughts welled up inside of him and he wanted to scream at the sky, he could not bring himself to. That feeling was too empty to be fixed by screaming. It was like a part of him was missing, a part of his world was missing. If suddenly, one chunk of the city disappeared and you had to stare at the empty space every day you would be left with the same weird feeling he reasoned.

Nothing ever happened. Nothing probably ever would happen. All that time passed by like a dream. Then suddenly in the middle of the day, his phone buzzed just as he got at the statue.
He opened up his old flip phone (he needed a new one, he knew but his parents were still mad at him for tossing out a pair of expensive headphones to make a statement) and was about to text back to Bito and tell him not to text him at this time of the day when he saw it. The message came from an unknown sender.

Neku quickly clicked to open the message. “Mission: Report to Wildkat Cafe, you have fifteen minutes. Complete this or face erasure.”

His eyes widened slowly. He shoved the phone with a trembling hand in his pocket, and then took off running. He did not see the crowds, the streets, or the distance he covered in his desperate run. He just ran past it all, hoping to make it to the other side of the wall. If he ran hard enough, and jumped, perhaps he could clear the gaps between them, between his world and the boys.

He burst through the door of the WildKat Cafe. The Cafe was completely empty. The only other person inside had his back turned to the door, as he sat at the counter.

Kiryu Yoshiya, being of pure light, angel, god of Shibuya, at the moment he looked like none of those things a boy with curly gray hair slowly turned his head to look at Neku. he was baby faced, barely a day above fifteen, his shirt was untucked and he was so skinny his clothes practically hung off of him.

“Y-you? Where’s Mr. H this is his Cafe.”

“The owner is on a well-deserved vacation. He left the cafe in my hands.”

“Did I walk into some kind of special field? Why is the cafe empty?”

“It’s always this empty at this time of day. That’s what happens when there are almost no regular customers because the business is poorly managed.” The boy picked up a white coffee cup holding it pinched between two fingers and then carelessly spilled it onto the floor. “Hey you, that’s a rude thing to call someone when you don’t know their name.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I would never kid. I take my job very seriously you know. You can’t get much more serious than the world of cafe management.” He reached up a finger and flicked his hair with it, allowing Neku to see both of his lilac eyes. “The name’s Kiryu Yoshiya, but Mother and Father call me Joshua. I guess you can call me Joshua, too-”

“Why can I see you again? Why did I get a text from you? Why now? If you could talk to me all along why not-”

“Are you just skipping past the part where you tell me your name.”

“Sakuraba Neku, but you already know that Jerk.”

“Hellooo, Nekuuuu.” He spoke in his usual light-hearted manner, dragging out the sounds just to annoy Neku. “It’s nice to see you again, seeing as how you’re my dear, dear, partner. Hehehehehehe.’
He laughed to himself, apparently enjoying his own joke.

Neku had been waiting for this reunion for so long, and now ten seconds into the reunion his mood was already ruined. “I can’t say I feel the same.”

“Oh deary me, you’re still so mean. It’s like those three weeks of hell were for nothing.” Yoshiya immediately brought up the unseen tension in the room, because of course, he did. He loved forcing people to confront things if he thought it would make them better. That was a byproduct of always being able to see the unseen.

Neku once died.
He went through three weeks of hell trying to get his life back.
The reason he died was that Kiryu Yoshiya had shot him. The reason he was still alive was also because of Yoshiya. Just like all things involving Joshua it was complicated.

Neku crossed the floor and grabbed him by the collar of the shirt he left unbuttoned at the top, jerking him off of the counter he was sitting on cross-legged. “Why would you bring that up when you know I still haven’t forgiven you yet?”

“My, my, Neku what’s with that face you’re making. You look like you don’t know if you want to kiss me or kill me.” Yoshiya said the only visible change in his face is a wink.

Neku let go and staggered a few steps back, holding one of his hands in front of his face. “Would you cut that out! Quit messing with me, if you’re going to act like a know it all as usual then at least answer one of my questions. Why are you here now?”

“I’m helping you keep your promise.”

“Our… promise…” The words fell slowly out of Neku’s mouth, as he had no idea what to think if Yoshiya had remembered their promise to see each other again when they made it back to Shibuya to all this time.

“No, not that one silly. The promise you made to Sora that you’d see him in Shibuya again.”

Suddenly, Joshua snapped his fingers.

The body of Sora appeared from nowhere as if it had been invisible before. It stumbled forward a few steps and then fell towards Neku. Neku rushed forward and caught him in his arms. Catching him made no difference though because the moment before they touched Sora’s body began to break apart as if the light were trying to scatter in every direction.

The only reason it stopped was that Yoshiya snapped his fingers. Sora’s limp body floated up, a pure white heart escaped from his chest and spun above him in the air as his body hovered there limbs hanging uselessly.
“What are you doing to Sora? You can’t have him just floating there in the middle of the cafe.”

“It’s no matter, nobody comes in here all day long anyway.”

“No, that’s not what I meant I mean what are you doing to Sora! What did you do to him?” Neku said turning around to accuse Yoshiya. He remembered too, one day their world was smothered in darkness. Rather than disappear, it was like he went back to the past and relived his same three weeks of hell in the reaper’s game all over again. It was different this time because Sora and Riku suddenly appeared in the middle of it and changed up the events.

Not only that Yoshiya was on their side. That was right, that was the reason he kept showing up to the Hachiko statue because he really had seen Yoshiya again after the original game.

Joshua only smiled. “Neku, if you keep accusing me like this you’re going to hurt my feeling.”

“Your feeling?”

“Yeah, my one feeling. Smug self-satisfaction.” Kiryu Yoshiya shrugged. “I’m not doing anything to him. He was like this when I found him. That breaking act is what happens when I try to put his heart back inside him. It seems on his way to Shibuya, dear Sora got lost and ended up in the UG instead.”

The underground that was the world just below the real ground the one where the reaper’s game took place, only dead souls and shadows of living people inhabited that world.

“Sora’s… dead?”

“Neku, aren’t you a sweetheart? You only knew him for a few days, and now you look like the world’s ending just because you’ve lost him.”

“Don’t make fun of me for caring about other people when you LITERALLY designed a three week, life or death plan to teach me a lesson about caring about people.”

“Don’t I get to appreciate my hard work a little bit?”

“That’s not appreciation that’s just bragging.”

Yoshiya brought his hand to his chin and took back control of the subject. “Anyway, he might be something even worse than death. There’s a soul leaving a body, which allows someone to play in the UG that’s one death. There’s true death, destruction of the soul, heart, and body. There’s that silly heartless death where a heart devours someone and they leave an empty shell called a nobody behind. The Noise way cuter than the Heartless, just by the way.”

“I’m sure that was important to mention.”

“Supes important. Sora dearie didn’t experience any of them. It’s like he doesn’t exist anymore. There’s a hole in reality where he should be. I don’t even know what did this to him. I’m curious about what happened myself, so I thought if I can’t reassemble him then I could assemble his past memories to figure out what led him to this point. The same way that sleeping worlds relive the past
“There’s… there’s no part of Sora left? He’s gone as you know… gone gone.”

“Articulately put, Neku. I can’t wait for you to take the poetry world by storm.” Yoshiya dug into his pocket and pulled out a small pin, one that could easily appear hanging off a trendy bag. He threw it and Neku caught. “I was able to salvage a part of Sora by converting him into noise, the same we saved Rhyme after she was erased.”

“Really…? “ Neku shook the pin in his hands for a moment. “Sora, are you in there?”

“No, I’m just kidding. You’re just talking to a regular pin I bought for 100 yen like a crazy person.”

Neku immediately threw the pin back at Yoshiya. It bounced off his forehead but, Josh’s face did not change at all. “Stop screwing around! How do I know that you’re not the one who killed Sora so you can put him in another game of yours.”

Yoshiya held both of his hands up as if he was surrendering. He looked more like he was playing innocent though. Yoshiya only ever played, it was impossible to tell when he was being sincere. “There’s not even enough of Sora to put in the reaper’s game. He’s like this cup.” He picked the coffee cup up once more to show there was nothing left inside of it. Then, he threw it on the ground causing it to break into several jagged shards. “It’s not that he’s an empty vessel, he can’t hold anything either everything slips out through the cracks. I can’t fix this on my own that’s why I called you. Let’s be partners again, Neku!”

Yoshiya smiled as he said that. Not his usual smile that looked exactly like the cat that had swallowed the canary and was not even bothering to hide the feathers in his lips. It was a smile of someone who was really enjoying himself. He seemed to be able to smile that way because Neku was here. Whatever fun he was having was going to be at Neku’s expense.

Still, even then Neku felt like that smile was more of Joshua playing around. *I’m happy to see you again, but why is it every time we’re around each other we just fight like this.*

Yoshiya shrugged again as if he did not care that his offer was being met with a blank stare. As he did the coffee he had spilled lifted itself into the air and the coffee cup pieces mended themselves and floated telekinetically along. Yoshiya took a sip of the coffee in the fixed cup. Then immediately spat it out again. It tasted terrible. As he wiped his mouth with his sleeve he got bored of Neku’s silence. “What is it Neku? Just because I shot you in cold blood, twice, and then made you play three weeks of the game and never kept my promise to see you again in the real world until this point you don’t trust me?”

“I trust you.”

Neku said it so immediately and so naturally that it was disarming. Yoshiya did not know what to say, nor did he know what face he was showing Neku in response. He quickly put his five fingers over his face to reset himself, and flicking his hair back tried again.

“So, what do you say partner?”

“Howdy.”

“What?”
“I mean I’ll be your partner. I tried to say something cool there but it didn’t work.”

“How like you Neku,” Yoshiya said, snickering into his open hand.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Neku pulled his collar up further over his mouth to cover up his embarrassment. “Look, why am I the only one who can help you with this? I’m not your proxy anymore, and I heard chosen one narrative are out this season.”

“Oh, you’re paying attention to what’s in this season I’m so proud. It’s like this, I need someone to dive into his dreams and share their dreams with him but-”

“You don’t have any dreams?”

“Psh, I’ve got plenty of dreams,” Yoshiya said, looking away for a moment. He stared at his own finger as it got caught in one of his gray curls.

As Neku watched him his train of thought was like this. Is he pouting? Is he seriously pouting? Is the god of Shibuya getting pouty because he’s jealous? “Then, what I go to sleep and connect with him and replay his dreams and you guide me? What are you going to do to him after you’ve restored him?”

“You’ve become so softly for a hedgehog you know. How cute, I want to pet all your spines now that I know it won’t poke me.” He said as he reached out to rustle Neku’s spiky hair.

Neku slapped his hand away. Though he was not totally averse to the idea of Yoshiya touching him, he was annoyed about it right now. “Stop that. I’m just saying if you’re going to put Sora into the game after restoring his soul to bring him back to life, then kill me and put me in the reaper’s game too. I’ll be his partner and make him go back for sure.”

Yoshiya paused, disarmed a second time.
See this was why he made no effort to see Neku again in the real world.
See this was why he wanted to see Neku again more than anything else.

Then suddenly, Yoshiya’s face became deathly serious. The expression of serenity and calm focus he wore in his eyes like he was staring down death itself, Neku realized how this brat that constantly mouthed off to him could be called a god of death. Yet, there was something oddly beautiful about his expression too as he saw flickers of life flash across his mostly still face.

“Neku, then you should already know how I planned to put you into his dreams. We can’t do this on the RG, I’ll only be at full power in the UG. Neku… close your eyes please.”

“That’s fine. If it’s you, that’s fine.”

The boy who killed me.
The boy who deceived me.
The boy who saved me.

Sakuraba Neku closed his eyes. He wanted to see Joshua again when he opened them that was his only wish. He heard the other boy’s slow, quiet footsteps across the floor due to the sneakers he was wearing. A gun cocked at the back of his head. Even though he had been shot twice before, Neku’s
still braced himself.

Then suddenly, Yoshiya leaned over his shoulder and kissed him once on the cheek. Neku’s entire body went stiff as if poison had been injected into it, and his muscles seized as he collapsed.

“Just kidding. You don’t need to die at all, just go to sleep. The realms of sleep and death overlap by accident all the time.”

Neku craned his head back in his last moments of consciousness. “Then what the hell was that for?”

“You know in the garden of Gethsemane, Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss right? My parents named me Yoshiya and call me Joshua but it actually comes from the Jewish Yeshua, which in Greek translated to Iesu, to become Jesus in English.”

“I don’t care if you’re named Jesus mc Jesus, stop screwing around!”

Neku woke up sprawled in the middle of the street once more. He pushed himself off the ground getting to his feet. He was used to this by now, it was like his seventh time by this point. He quickly observed the area around him and saw he was not in scramble crossing, but the thrown together settlement known as traverse town.

He felt like his first goal was to look for Sora. He could figure that out all on his own, who knows when Yoshiya was going to give him instructions. Yoshiya enjoyed not telling people things, as much as he enjoyed lecturing them about things. That was what made him so unpredictable.

He started to walk through the streets of the city that looked like several different cities patched together, only to find he did not have to walk very far to find Sora. There was not just one Sora to find either.

Several soras were walking in several different directions. One of them spiraled around aimlessly. One of them ascended a staircase to nowhere. One of them fell off a building repeatedly. They were all wearing different outfits too, at different stages of his life. A few soras had different sets of friends following behind him.

He was in a red onesie with yellow shoes. He was in a black and red outfit taller and with spikier hair. He was in a back and red outfit with an x marking him. He was at his oldest with shortened hair, and He was a shark. Standing the tallest.

He was a lion. He was a shark. He was in a Halloween costume. He was in a black Santa suit. He was black and white like an old cartoon. He was covered in blue glowing lights like he was digital. He was a lion. He was a toy. He was a monster. He was a pirate.

There was too much Sora, Neku was completely overwhelmed. He did the same thing over and over again, he made the same mistakes, he always ended up in the same place. Neku had no idea how they were going to gather up all these pieces.

Then suddenly the voice of God spoke in his head.
See. People have more faces than you could ever possibly know. Understanding other people isn’t just hard Neku, it’s impossible.

God was really annoying.

“I can’t do all of this on my own.”

*By ourselves, we’re no one. It’s when other people look at us and see someone that’s the moment we start to list. Just reach out and touch one of them.*

Neku reached out and touched one of the older looking Sora’s on the shoulder. “Sora, I’m here. I’m waiting for you at Shibuya just like I promised.” He tried to talk to him, but the moment his fingers touched Sora the image broke apart into pieces of bright light. The scattering lights flashed before Neku’s eyes and the world disappeared for a moment.

Suddenly, he was standing somewhere else entirely. They were in the middle of a castle with towering ceilings. Sora… a dog man… some kind of duck, a girl with blue hair and a sleeping boy were in front of him. The girl with blue hair caressed the boy sleeping on his throne begging for forgiveness.

“Your heart never found it’s way home…?” The girl muttered, burying her face in the boy’s chest.

“Is this the past? Did I travel back in time?”

*Ugh, time travel really Neku? Nobody likes time travel. I’m literally god and time travel gives me a headache.*

“Sora? Hey, Sora? Why aren’t you answering me! You look alive now can’t you hear me?”

*Gosh, Neku not everything is about you. He’s clearly got other things to worry about right now, just watch.*

Suddenly, the sounds of footsteps echoed through the castle halls. A man dressed in black and red armor, with red veins pulsing through his chest and a featureless black mask covering his face, walked up with an oddly casual air. “That was a neat trick. No wonder no one could find him.”

“Vanitas!” Sora turned around taking a battle stance.

“Why are you here?” The girl with blue hair-

*Her name is Aqua don’t be rude, Neku. The sleepy cinnamon roll is Ventus.*

Aqua pushed Ventus back into his sleeping position and stepped in front of him holding a hand out protectively.

“Oh, I’m sorry to interrupt your touching reunion, but surely you won’t begrudge me a moment with my brother.”

Sora rushed at him summoning his keyblade to his hand. He slashed at nothing more than a shadow, as the sound of space tearing apart warped their ears, and Vanitas’ image reappeared several times before sitting atop the throne Ventus was resting on.
“What…?”

“So Venty-Wenty wants to keep sleeping. What am I ever going to do with you?”

The girl’s expression weakened from a moment with worry. Then her eyes tightened in resolve. It was like for the moment of weakness she showed, she needed to exert far more strength to crush it. “Shut up!” She waved her hand and a keyblade appeared in it, Aqua launched herself into the air and slammed it down with everything she had.

It dealt nothing more than a glancing blow. Vanitas raised a black keyblade in the air covered with chains to deflect it, it looked like he was barely making an effort. He kept chatting with his usual nonchalance. “You better settle down there, ‘Master’.”

“Aqua, I’ll handle him.” Sora cried out.

"No, I'm ending this." She shook her head.

“But, you haven’t recovered yet?”

"Wait why is she doing this? It makes no sense!” Neku cried out.

*Here, let me help you out Neku, it's called an omniscient narrator's view.*

As Neku said this, suddenly a feeling of calm washed over him just like when he was scanning. He could hear and understand Aqua's heart.

"I think it's called privacy invasion," Neku said, feeling slightly embarrassed peering into somebody's heart when he had not even had his first kiss yet.

“Sorry, but you’ve seen me too weak, too often.” She turned her head back, giving him one last parting look of regret before her eyes hardened again. Aqua was supposed to be a master, a guardian of light but she spent the last ten years floundering around in the dark. She was useless, weak. Everything was taken away from her. Her master. Her friends. Her memories of what the sun or the stars even looked like. Her keyblade. Her sanity. Even her pain was taken away from her and pried out of her heart by Xehanort pushing her head under the water. He turned her into his puppet-making her lash out in such an empty way, all to make a mockery of her pain.

Even her image of herself was taken away. She had fought so many mirror images in the world of darkness, only to become exactly like the dark side of herself she was fighting all along. She was journeying through that place to return to the world of light to save Ven. She had fallen down there to save Terra. She had given everything of her being in order to save them.

Everything was not enough. Her whole being was inferior, it fell just short. She needed to be saved. If that was the case then why was the title of the master even entrusted to her in the first place.

Just as she was about to finally save Ven, he appeared again one of the people who had taken everything from her. He appeared to laugh in her face. To gloat about his victory. That he had won the last time. That he had succeeded in taking because she failed to stop him. That he would take from her again.
She was going to prove she was not the heroine of some tragedy written by Xehanort, she was the hero who would save Terra and Ven. She would fight against anything to prove that, she had already fought against the darkness, and even herself. No, perhaps she had been fighting against herself for so long, mirror images, broken reflections, that was why she could do it so easily. She could risk this already fragile life of hers so recklessly because she had still not shaken the mindset that she was the enemy.

If she was weak she was not Aqua. She needed to prove herself. She had no regard for herself. She had no need for the weak Aqua. Not when her friends needed her strength. “Now it’s my turn to shine.”

She swept her hand, and a barrier appeared around her.

“What are you doing? It makes way more sense to fight him together! That’s a moving beat would pull!” Neku shouted at her.

* * *

“Mentally, physically, emotionally.”

“Show me some respect, jeez.”

“Do you- do you have any?”

“It’s like you don’t care about anybody but yourself!”

“I swear you do it to piss me off.”

*Tsk, what a shame. You’ve caught on.*

“You do, don’t you?”

When Neku stopped arguing with the voice in his head and looked up again he saw Aqua and Vanitas had fought to a standstill. Vanitas tilted his head back to the sleeping Ven, and summoned a black and smoky fire around his key, swinging the fire forward and cracking the wall in
Aqua realized and jumped in front holding her hands out. She did not even think to block. All that held her together for all those years in the darkness was the thought of seeing Ventus and Terra again. Even when she herself could not keep it together, the strings that attached her to the both of them stitched her up.

If she lost those last two connections everything would become undone. The seams that had been stretched to their limits would fall apart, and the stuffing would come out. All of that time she had been tormented in the darkness, it would all be for nothing. She would die and the darkness would suffocate and silence her screams.

They were her friends once, but now they were everything to her. They were how Aqua still knew she was Aqua. The only way she could return to being herself as if they were there with her.

A smile flickered on her lips. She did not even think about the damage to her body at all, she just felt faint happiness. Finally, she protected Ven.

She heard a distant sound of laughter, as Vanitas approached her.

“Aqua!”

A voice that was not Sora’s came out of his mouth.
Suddenly his heart seized up. It beat loudly once in his ears and then stopped.
Sora felt himself being torn from that world. Neku followed him because he was just an observer to the memory.

He saw a stain glass platform.
Sora’s sleeping body was depicted on it, surrounded by portraits of his friends and holding onto a key.

As he saw the images flash by his eyes, Neku heard two voices conversing.

“I… have to wake up.”

“Yes. Tell me what to do.”

“The power of waking.”

“I can’t. I still don’t have it yet.”

“You never lost it… It sleeps… Until someone needs it… Call to it.”

“I am calling… with all my heart.”

Sora had no idea what he had to give to make this situation right. He had been told over and over again to find the power of waking, but he still could not understand it. If only he had learned earlier then this situation would never have happened. This was why he was no good on his own. He always needed others to guide him. He never knew how to do things himself. If he was left alone, all he did was make friends and fool around on new worlds.

Riku had told him so, all those years ago when he had his first adventure. He was thoughtless. He forgot easily just like a fool. He was no good on his own. He was sure all by himself he had nothing
to give. He had failed to acquire the power of waking and failed to learn his lesson so many times. However, he would give everything of himself if that meant he could save the people in front of him.

He always won in the past. He never needed to learn a special power of waking to defeat Ansem and Xemnas. What did Yen Sid know anyway? Sora was always able to find the strength in his heart when he needed it, without any formal training, or fancy exams. He just needed to use his heart once more.

The only good thing about him was his heart because that was what allowed him to connect to other people so easily. In fact… he had probably been borrowing Ventus’ strength for too long. It was only because a keyblade wielder happened to share a heart with him, that was probably the only reason he was next in line for the keyblade in the first place.

He wanted to give it back. He wanted to give Ventus back. He reached inside himself, and when it started to hurt, he only pulled further until he could feel the seams tearing apart. He heard a loud rip, but when he saw the light he knew something good must have happened.

The light was usually warm a soft embrace, but this one burned him like fire. As the light faded away he saw himself standing in his own heart. He lifted up the key and made the hole appear as he always did.

The light glowed on the platform as Sora jumped back. The platform with himself on it disappeared, breaking apart into many pieces of colorful light that flew away in the shape of birds. He saw Ventus’ image sleeping underneath hidden there. Finally, a piece of light broke away from the platform. It left a hole where it had broken away from.

“Thank you for always keeping me safe, Sora…”

*It’s nothing, I just wanted to save you.* Sora thought.

Sora looked at the cracks in the broken magic in front of him as he returned to reality. He heard that noise in his own mind, the distinct sound of glass shattering. Young Master Xehanort had told him that his heart was a prison keeping the others locked up. If that was true then he would not mind breaking a little bit so they could break free.

Sora doubled over for a moment and suddenly began to cough. The ball of light that was Ventus’ heart fell out of his throat as he coughed horribly. For a moment his insides felt like such fire that they would fall apart if he was not holding them together. The light was burning him, but that must have meant it was working.

Once he coughed up that small orbit shot back and returned to Ventus’ heart. He woke up and rushed forward to protect Aqua from Vanitas, summoning his keyblade forth once more. Sora had been in such pain a moment ago, but he forgot about it and quickly smiled because he knew Aqua would be safe now.

“Sora, what are you doing?” Neku asked, from his spot in the background.

*It always seems like a good idea to wing it with a mysterious magical power that you have no idea how it works, right?*

“Shush you… What’s the power of waking? What did it do to you Sora to have another heart ripped out of you in an emergency like that?”
I imagine it’s about as good of an idea as doing an emergency removal on his biological heart with a scalpel. Especially when you’re Sora and not exactly a brain surgeon.

“How about I give you an emergency vocal cords removal?”

Neku I’m not even talking to you, that joke doesn’t work on so many levels. The most important being you love my clever banter and without it, you’d just be bored and talking to yourself.

“He thinks he’s so funny can you believe this guy?”

Who are you complaining too exactly?

As he continued to argue with the voice in his head. The scene suddenly shifted. The battle was over, and they had returned to the mysterious tower. Aqua was already tending to Ven alone, and Donald and Goofy went off to talk to the king.

Only when he was completely alone did Sora check to make sure. He found a mirror. This was a magic tower it was full of mirrors. Some of them were probably even magical. He made a funny face in the mirror for a moment, and then took his jacket off and pulled his shirt over his head. He was stuck because of the spikiness of his hair and struggled with it for a moment.

I don’t get what Riku sees in him.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Neku asked.

When Sora finally finished tugging it off of his head he looked at the boy looking back at him, and almost did not recognize it for a moment. He saw Roxas looking back. He saw Xion looking back. Then he saw nobody. He blinked and looked back to his own reflection. However, there was one startling difference.

At first, Sora had thought he was looking into a broken mirror. Then he realized the crack in his reflection, was running down his own body instead. He held his hand out to inspect it and then ran his hand down the crack. It began from his heart and reached all the way down to his waste. When he pressed his fingers against it, he felt nothing at all. He wondered if it was a scar from a recent fight.

Then he realized…
The power of waking he still had no idea what it was, he had just wished for Ventus to be free with all of his heart. He had forced the door open. This was the crack Ventus escaped from. This was what he left behind.

As he looked he saw small traces of light escaping from the crack. It felt like his existence was leaking out. Sora had no idea what to do, other than keeping poking at it.

“So...ra?”

Riku’s voice sounded from behind him. Sora quickly grabbed his shirt and forced it over his head again, before turning around to face the other boy.

“Riku, can we talk about something?” Sora asked.

Before Neku could see any more, suddenly his eyes peeled open. He was no longer watching Sora’s memories in a dream, he had returned to the world of the living.
“Wait, no I was just getting to the good part.”

“I know, I could really feel the suspense building on the mystery.”

“Would you quit treating this like some show you’re watching!”

“But I’m such a fan of yours Neku.”

“I don’t care! Send me back.” Neku said, picking himself off the floor once more.

He stopped when Yoshiya’s eyes became serious again. He was almost scared of the sharp look on Yoshiya’s face. That sharpness had cut through him more than once. He had a look that could cut through anything. He saw through everything, that was why everything in front of his eyes seemed to have such little importance.

“Neku, you can only do so much in a day or you really will die and go back to the reaper’s game again. Not that that wouldn’t be fun too.”

“You could at least pretend to be concerned at the thought of me dying.”

Yoshiya’s voice was completely dry. “Oh, no… don’t. Whatever will I do? Dearie, me.”

Neku wondered how this was even possible. He had not seen Yoshiya for months. His entire world had been empty of Yoshiya for so long. He waited to have no idea what he wanted to say, or even if he wanted to see him again.

Then suddenly, Yoshiya was in front of him and the two of them were arguing like normal.

“Rest up and come back tomorrow.”

“Will… Will you be here tomorrow?”

Yoshiya was not a real boy. He was not a ghost. He was not an urban legend. He was not quite a god and not quite an angel. Neku had no idea what he really was. He was not even sure if he had ever been human, to begin with.

He was the type of person who even when you were next to him, it felt like there was nobody there at all. He was like a dream. If Neku looked away, he felt like Yoshiya would disappear again. Then Neku would wipe his eyes and forget he had ever seen Josh in the first place.

“Trust me.”

Was all Yoshiya said, those two words.

“I don’t buy that you’re trying to help Sora out of the goodness of your heart. You’re treating it like a pet project, or just trying to prove that you can… and… if we do fix Sora and he comes back to life are you just going to disappear again?”

Yoshiya tilted his head to the side.

“If I did disappear, what would you do?”
“I’d wait for you still because you promised to meet me again back in our world.”

“What if the promise was a lie?”

Sakuraba Neku smiled. He folded his hands back behind his head and gave such a carefree expression. Despite the serious air he carried around him, he looked like a normal boy for once. “It wasn’t a lie to me. That’s all that matters right?”

All Yoshiya could do was avert his eyes. It would be impossible for someone like him to stare at something so bright. “You always say such funny things, Neku.”
Replica Riku stared at the hand offered to him. Salvation or damnation, it was always extremes with him. Well, it was that way for the real Riku, and he was nothing if not a faithful replication. When he wanted to save Namine, that had given him enough reason to live on a little longer.

Could he find the same reason for himself? Himself, who was that? Riku? The replica who went mad and died? The little boy in the fake memories? What could he save when there was nothing there.

“No, the world already has you.”

“You're you.”

“You're you... he says.”

Replica struck out against Riku’s hand, gathering dark magic that smoked like fire between his fingertips. He wanted to burn any bridge that might lead him forward. He wanted to sever any hand that was offered to him. Replica brought his hand above his head while Riku recoiled clutching, and peeling the burnt glove off his hand. A broken blade came to Replica’s hand and he used the darkness to speed him up moving faster than the blink of an eye for one moment and slashing forward.

The slash caught Riku in the wrist, he heard the sound of something snapping. His wrist bent back past its limits as he blocked the blow at the last minute. His own large silver key shook in his hand for a moment as he forced his wrist back into place.

“Don’t fight in my lab! Do you know how many experiments in a trial you’re going to ruin!” Ienzo shouted out, making it clear where his priorities were. He looked back and saw Axel, and decided to hold him back before he even tried to get involved and inevitably made things worse.

Riku tried to think of something, but before he could Replica acted again. He jumped into the air and swung his broken blade in a wide arc when Riku held his keyblade up above his head to block Replica twisted his body around.

The blow was nothing more than a feint, Replica reached out past his block with his other hand and grabbed Riku on the face. If he wanted to use Dark Firaga he could end it right now, but Riku saw darkness erupting behind them from the ground. It became a dark hole space that Replica pushed Riku into, he opened a corridor of darkness to relocate the fight.

Riku felt himself being dragged, the darkness was heavy on his sensations, his sight, his touch… okay, even his smell. The only awareness of where he was were the pinpricks of pain shooting through him as Replica pushed him into the darkness and forced him through. He felt like his head was being grabbed and forced underwater, the loss of control was the worst part he barely could move enough to thrash about.
Then suddenly he was in the light once more, as if he was spitting out by the darkness. The sudden contrast from seeing even the pale light of the moon above him once more was enough to burn at his eyes. He bounced once, twice, and rolled before he could grab onto whatever surface he was tumbling on and stop his fall. He punched his hand into the ground and forced himself to stand up, only to see Replica standing above him holding his keyblade over his head for another large swing.

Replica was his own person, Riku wanted to prove that. But… that was so like him. He would keep fighting even with a broken sword like that. It was not heroic determination like Sora had, it was just stubbornness. Riku summoned the keyblade to his hand and blocked it horizontally, using his opposite hand to hold the other end to increase the strength of his block. As their keyblades met, Riku dug in his heels and slowly began to stand up.

“What are you going to do about Namine? She doesn’t have anybody just like you, she’s lost too.”

He heard the sound of grinding metal as the edges of their blades were forced against each other and they battled for strength.

“That’s why I left Namine with you! So you would protect her!”

Replica finally broke through Riku’s guard, forcing Riku to throw his chest back wildly in an attempt to dodge. The broken edge tore through his shirt, just as he twisted his ankle just enough to force himself to jump back.

“There’s already somebody I want to protect. I’m sorry, I’m not Sora, I can’t fight for everybody as he can, I can’t protect everybody that he can… I have to do what only I can do.”

Riku looked around where they were, assessing the situation. He could tell from how he almost fell off a moment ago they were somewhere high. As he looked around he saw a pointed tower in the distance. Replica had only teleported them a short range to the roof of the castle.

Replica looked at his own sword. Blood dripped off the jagged edges. That was the stuff that flowed inside a real person, that was what a real heart pumped. Replica pushed darkness through his body as if he was forcing it through his veins. The blood dripping off the sword started a bright crimson, and slowly turned into an inky black and began to ooze. His face cracked into a smile. That was what it looked like, as the physical features of his doll-like face had cracked leaving that broken smile.

“Protect who? Sora’s not there anymore. Oh, you weren’t thinking of protecting Kairi, were you? That’s Sora’s job… not yours.”

Digs like that would never work on Riku. He was far too rational to give into sudden anger most of the time. However, that did not mean it did not hurt. Replica knew all he needed to do was hand Riku the knife. Later on, the next time that Riku believed that he was not capable of protecting Kairi, he would hear Replica’s words in his head. If he was handed the knife Riku would twist it in his wound, all on his own.

Replica rushed forward swinging his broke sword once more. He chained the blows as fast as he could, using darkness to strip every ounce of effort from his muscles for speed. He noticed something strange.

No matter how many times he hit him, Riku who had the superior strength between the two did not even attack back once. All he did was block. When Replica stepped away in a corridor of darkness
and reappeared launching forth three large fireballs billowing with black and purple smoke Riku did not even retaliate he brought up his guard to block.

After that, his stance was shaky when Replica slashed another wide arc turning his body as he did Riku stumbled back taking the blow. He was the original. He was more experienced. He was stronger. He was better. That was the same reason Riku had won against Dark Riku, no matter how much a past version of himself called against the darkness Riku would not lose to a fight he had already won.

He had been through this before. He battled Xehanort and regained control of his body. He battled Replica Riku and did not lose to an original who feared darkness. He had fought this over and over again so why not fight seriously now?

“Why aren’t you fighting? Fight with everything you have here, or you’ll lose and it’ll be all your fault again.”

“I know everything you’re going to say to me, it’s all my fault, I’m the worst, but…” Riku’s fingers loosened around the handle of his keyblade, as it fell out of his hands he heard a metallic clang. “I’m tired of fighting myself. If you want to use me as a punching bag fine, but no matter what you do I won’t fight you anymore.”

“Shut up! I know, that you know that fighting’s all your good for.” Brash. Young. Trying to prove his worth. He cared so much about the people around him but he had no idea how to show it. Those feelings were trapped inside of himself all he could do was watch as they got deeper and deeper. A pool of water that seemed still on the surface but once you stepped into it, you sank and sank with no end to its depths in sight. Replica Riku picked up his blade again making it begin to spark and billow with black smoke. He knew his own flaws all he needed to do was push Riku’s head under the water once more.

He seemed unemotional but his emotions ran deeper than the ocean. Replica knew he would sink anybody into those depths, he would even dive in himself if it meant protecting his friends. Replica just needed to remind him of who he was.

Then suddenly as he swung forward he saw a flash of white appear in front of Riku. Namine stood there, her arms held wide to protect Riku. Replica already regretted it, but the magic had already been loosed and escaped from his hands.

He saw her pure white dress get covered in black ash. He could not even scream, his mouth just fell open and nothing came out. He tossed his broken blade aside and rushed to her. He turned her around and wiped the ash that was stuck to her face. He could immediately tell she had been burned, as he ran his thumb along her otherwise perfect skin. “Why did you protect him…?”

He definitely was some part of Riku. Replica just like him, always picked the absolute worst times to get insecure.

“Watching you want to hurt yourself so badly… it made me so sad. I wanted to protect you.”
Replica’s hands trembled as he held her, even though he was the one who had hurt her. His heart was overwhelmed with a heaviness, more than a fake heart could bear. These feelings were shaking him to his core. He felt like he wanted to cry, but he could not shed a single tear. After all, if he were crying he would be using Riku’s feelings to cry and not his own. Even those feelings did not belong to him. He had no idea if what he felt was even real anymore.

Why did he feel this way? Was it because Riku regretted what he did to Namine? Was it because Namine’s memories were still inside of his heart? The more his thoughts pooled around him the harder it became to see, it became blurrier and blurrier as he asked the same questions over again. He repeated them so many times that the words that made up those questions lost their meaning.

He gritted his teeth and snapped them, like an attack hound who had turned on his own master. He no longer had any idea what he was supposed to do with those teeth. He was lost, confused. He wanted to turn those teeth on him and sink them into himself. He spoke through those teeth and bared them at Riku. “This is what I told you would happen... I hurt her.”

Namine spoke up first. “No, I’m the one who hurt you.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the screw-up, you… you’re…”

“Riku…” She said looking at the Replica not adding ‘replica’ to his name. “I’m the one who hurt you first. If you can’t live on with borrowed memories if they’re just a chain on your heart then I’ll free you. You won’t remember me, and you don’t think you’re Riku anymore.”

He could start again as Xion did with nothing, make new friends, form a new self with them. Namine was a lonely girl. She had never known a time when she had not been alone. Perhaps that was why she had accepted returning to Kairi’s heart so easily because it meant in a way she would always be with someone.

She had watched the world through other people’s memories. She had viewed friendship through other people's eyes. Just as nobodies could no longer feel, but remembered what having a heart was like, she had never once had friends but she knew what it was like. She knew what she did not have and all the ways in which she was deficient.

She drew those scenes. She hung the scenes from people’s memories on her wall. Axel and Roxas. Roxas with his three new friends in Twilight Town. Riku, Sora, Kairi. She had stopped drawing herself into those scenes a long time ago. After castle oblivion, she thought it was wrong to want because she had desired she had almost ruined Sora’s heart.

So she wondered why she kept drawing the happy memories of other people like this. She wanted to remind herself. She was not a part of those scenes. She did not belong there.

I’m not really there.
I don’t exist in anyone’s heart.
I never have existed anywhere.

There was one person who remembered only her. There was one person whose heart she existed inside of. Not because of the fake memories she sewed within him, but because he chose to protect her regardless in Castle Oblivion.
There was one person she belonged with because he was a fake just like her. But, Namine was willing to give that up. She could let one person who remembered her forget her again. If that was what he needed to continue living, she would do that.

She was afraid of being alone. All she was, was a lonely girl. A girl left all alone in her pure white room with her drawings. The only reason she could be pure white was that she had never interacted with anybody, never been touched by anybody, nobody was there to dye her heart a different color.

Yet, she was willing to go back to being alone for his sake. Replica stared at her eyes wide but empty. The light shined in the darkness, but the darkness did not comprehend it at all.

_I could have it. I could have the end I wanted. I wouldn’t have to live on with Riku’s flaws anymore._

He looked up at the stars above him. The stars were a map leading him somewhere else, to a different world he had never seen before where nobody even knew the name Riku. He was lost, but he could find his way back. He could find a place for himself and forget these unresolvable feelings that would plague his heart forever. Then suddenly as Namine’s frail body leaned against his, he felt her heart beating. It was so quiet and soft it could only belong to hers. _That’s right, you’re lost here in the darkness too. If... If I left then I’d be leaving you behind._

He wanted to remind Riku, but Replica was the one who was reminded at the end of his origin point.

“You’re a shell - a shell who has had everything taken! Everything!” Marluxia’s voice hissed in his ear.

His strings had been cut, he realized his own tie to Namine was fake. There was no reason for him to move at all, and if he did come to protect her he would just be acting as a puppet again.

“What you possibly think I ever had?”

Yet, he picked up his sword and fought.

“Both my body and my heart are fake, but…. There is one memory I’ll keep even if it’s just a lie. Whether it was a phantom promise or not, I will protect Namine.”

“You would knowingly shackle your heart to a chain of memories born of lies. You would be one who has a heart, but cast aside your heart’s freedom?”

Marluxia did not understand. That chain was all he had to hold onto. That chain was all that held him together. He would be lost without it. Marluxia saw those ties as something that could only restrict your freedom. These connections did not tie him down or hold him back. They guided him. If he had those connections, then he knew who he was. Those connections had made him feel like a real person if only for a moment.
“Riku, protect Namine.”

“You don’t… mind?”

“Should I?”

“Alright.”

“There’s no way I could forget about you that easily, then it’d be like our promise didn’t even matter. If it’s real to you then don’t ask me to forget like that.” He reached forward and intertwined his fingers with Namine’s slowly. He had no idea how to hold someone’s hands. All he had to inform him were a set of fake memories belonging to Riku.

The reason she painted a scene of a boy and a girl holding hands in front of a meteor shower in his mind was probably just because she wanted somebody to hold her hand.

All of the complicated questions of his existence would never be resolved as simple as that. Perhaps he would ask the same questions again and again never finding a reason, but still.

*If you’re lost, then I’ll stay lost with you.*

Replica did not trust his own hands to carry her. It would probably be a while before he could trust his own hands not to break whatever they touched. Riku volunteered and carried Namine down the stairs like a princess.

When Kairi finally made it back to the castle she barged into the lab, yelling. “I’m sorry guys I lost Axel in the crowd, for a guy who looks like a palm tree that’s on fire he’s really sneaky.”

She walked in on Riku carrying Namine in his arms once more. The much shorter Replica Riku standing next to them, and in the corner Axel and Zexion arguing over a clipboard for unseen (and probably immature) reasons.

“I was gone for like an hour top can everything stop happening while I’m not here!” Kairi shouted.

皇冠

Determined to do something, Kairi grabbed the still lost looking Replica Riku and dragged him away. As she ran back to the castle she had already come up with the perfect solution for getting rid of Axel. She told him a small little white lie that Isa had called her on her gummi phone worrying about him.

Axel skedaddled so fast he may as well have burned an axel shaped hole in the wall when he left, but not before delivering a warning to Ienzo, Riku and herself that he saw Demyx and Larxene together and had no idea what they were up to. Ienzo asked if he meant Larxene and Marluxia and
Axel shook his head. He did not see Marluxia near them anywhere.

Kairi walked ahead of Replica Riku, dragging him along by the wrist. She felt like she was walking with a Riku who had stepped right out of her memories. She knew the one from the past the one who had not spent two years apart from her almost more than she knew the new grown-up Riku, who had grown apart… and so much taller than her frustratingly enough.

She knew that for instance whenever Riku made a terrible mistake, he did not cry and beg for forgiveness like Sora would. Kairi had seen it so many times and Riku’s biggest response was to always go quiet and distance himself from others until he felt like he had made up for the mistake in some way. She called it the pouty Riku mode. It looked like he was feeling nothing, and nothing showed on his face, but inside he was feeling everything at once.

“K...Kairi…?”

Replica Riku stuttered out her name, feeling confused. He had no memories of her. He only remembered Namine. The only reason he knew about her at all was the other Riku. The Dark Riku he had fought against and pulled out of the replica body in his last planned heroic act. The two of them fell into the darkness together and became all mixed up in one another.

If Replica was the tiny spark of light that had survived after his mind broke and fell into darkness, then Dark Riku was the shadow that he cast. That one did not remember Namine and only tried to outperform the original using darkness as his power. He did not even question himself, until the end, he mistakenly thought he was real.

He wondered why he, the failure that could only question himself over and over had been the one to survive. He was questioning a lot of things, like why this girl had suddenly grabbed him and dragged him away and everybody else looked too afraid to stop her. She must have been an incredibly powerful, or imposing person, to scare a keyblade master and two former organization members like this.

“What are we doing?”

“We’re going clothes shopping.”

“How? Is that really important right now-”

“Are you going to walk around in public all the time from now on wearing a skin-tight leather suit!” Kairi said, pointing at the blackened heart emblem of the heartless on his chest.

He had been wearing this suit for so long he just got used to it. Replica looked down at his own clothing, and then at the other people walking around the kingdom and realized how much he stuck out. “I can take this off. I just… didn’t…”

“Why?”

“I thought it looked cool.”

“That was your first mistake.”
Replica took a breath and then let the darkness that he had wrapped in so many layers around himself leave his body. It floated away like black smoke being dispersed by the breeze. Underneath that suit of darkness, he was wearing a yellow shirt and blue jeans. The same clothes Riku always wore around the island.

“Oh my gosh, you’re wearing the poofy pants! Riku hasn’t worn them in so long.” Kairi walked over to him and grabbed his shoulders, and then put her hand on the top of his head and smothered his hair. “You’re so short too! I never thought I’d be taller than Riku. You’re so tiny I could just pick you up and carry you around with me wherever.”

Replica was starting to understand why Riku bowed to Kairi so easily. This was her fearsome power. She was overflowing with so much enthusiasm and emotions, and she showed them so easily. The light which Riku buried deep inside of his chest, Kairi was constantly giving off, radiant with it. It was almost too bright, bright enough to burn. Then Replica realized that without the platform shoes he had been wearing he had lost a few centimeters of height. He really was short.

Kairi grabbed his cheeks and pulled on them hard. “You’re so short and cute. You’re like if Riku had a baby brother following him around.”

“Short? Cute? Baby?” He had just tried to burn Riku with everything he had. He wanted to throw himself away and break his body into pieces a moment ago. Yet that girl was able to smile at him in such a carefree way. It really was like dealing with Sora. It only made Replica think about how much wide the gulf must be between the real Riku and Kairi. “I’m not following around that guy at all.”

“Sure you are. You’re acting all cool like you’re trying to impress someone. Riku was like that at that age too. For a guy who’s so self-involved, you think he’d be better at guiding himself but… he’s still trying to learn you know.”

“I can see why he’d think he was a terrible role model.”

“Riku thinks that everything he did in the past was a mistake, he’s got nothing but bad memories of his younger self but you know… I was there too. It wasn’t like that for me.” She let her delicate fingers rest upon her chest. “When I lost my heart, it was like a long dreamless sleep I couldn’t wake up from. More than I was scared, I felt alone… until I heard a voice telling me he would save me. It was Riku’s voice. I don’t know how it reached me because I was nothing more than an empty shell but I felt less alone knowing there was someone in this world who would stop at nothing to find me.”

Even if her heart and mind forgot about it, her body still remembered the way he held her in Neverland. Even though it was nothing more than an empty shell left behind devoid of any warmth of its own, Riku had held it in his arms and shared his warmth with her.

If Riku forgot the kind of person he was, then she would remind him. She wanted to search for him and find him now after he had gone so far to find her in the past. “You don’t have to be a copy. You’re three years younger than him now. You’re his younger brother. You can grow up differently, learn different lessons from his mistakes. Your connection to him doesn’t have to be a chain that always reminds you-you’re a fake.”

“Then… how should I think of him?”
Kairi turned at him and smiled. “He’s your foolish older brother who can warn you not to make the same mistakes that he did.”

“If I’m next to her I can’t protect Namine.”

He knew he would hurt her again. He was too wrapped up in himself. He had no idea if these feelings were real. He had never been next to Namine for along in anywhere except his fake memories. He might hate her. He might keep hating himself.

For all the weight he had given his words and the mixed feelings lace within them, Kairi replied by messing up his hair once more. “How are you going to protect her from far away? That doesn’t make any sense. I thought you were supposed to be smart. Maybe Riku’s the smart one and you’re the muscle head.”

It seemed there was no escape, his hair was just going to get messier and messier. She grabbed him by the hand once more and dragged him forward. “Come on, let’s go find some clothes for Namine too. She can’t just keep wearing that same dress and sandals every single day.”

“What do you need me here for then?”

“Don’t you want to pick something that would look cute on her?”

“Why would that matter?”

“Gosh, you’re just as oblivious too. We should get some swimsuits too.”

“Wait, wait, what? Don’t go deciding all this on your own.”

“Why? You boys always run off and fight on your own.”

“...”

“Besides, you’ll need a swimsuit if you want to visit the beach right? Let’s go to the Destiny Islands let’s see if the real thing is anything like you remember.”

The sand between his toes. Swinging on the obstacle course he and Sora built. Playing with the wooden swords that Riku built for the two of them. Eating a Paopu fruit that grew on the island. All of those memories were inside his head but he had never experienced them. He wondered what that would be like.

“I can’t go there. What will people think if they see two Rikus?”

“Your right it would get confusing. What if we just make up a new name for you?”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Of course not. Nothing’s easy with you. That’s your inner Riku-ness shining.”

He had no idea what to call himself. What does one call a puppet who came to life? Perhaps he should ask Jiminy Cricket.
“You should take her away from this place.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, Riku’s always acting like such a knight in shining armor. If you don’t do it, then he just might sweep her off her feet before you get the chance,”

“Do you really think Riku is a knight?”

“Omigod no, it was just a joke.”

When Replica Riku returned to the castle he was carrying Kairi’s bags for her. Apparently, if he was going to act like he was all muscle than he should put those muscles to work. He was too timid to disagree with her by that point.

He went back to wearing his suit of darkness, for now, it was what felt the most comfortable to him. Perhaps he was just hiding behind it because Kairi had subjected him to hours of trying out clothes to calm him down. He had no idea why he got dragged along into that, he just did not have it in him to say no to her.

When they returned the sun had already started to rise. The nighttime ended and it was dawn again. He heard Riku and Ieno discussing together ideas of how to let Namine permanently leave the castle and live on her own without the need for monitoring. It sounded like they were bouncing ideas off of each other.

Even though Replica had Riku’s mind he did not understand exactly what they were saying. He guessed that was just one more difference between them.

“You’re definitely more of a jock goth than a jock nerd like Riku.”

Kairi had said, to which he replied. “What?”

“Gosh, you both are so behind. Just because you’ve been running off to have keyblade adventures for three years is not an excuse to not know about the latest internet humor.”

He had no idea what she was going on about. She seemed very enthusiastic though.

He ignored the rest of the world as he searched the castle because there was only one person he wanted to see. All along he had wanted to see her again, but he denied himself that right. He did not think he had the right to even desire.

He had just one thing - a desire of his own.

Even the real Riku had met him but they had interacted completely differently. Riku had never wanted to protect her the same way he had. Even Sora had other friends to return to besides Namine,
he had forgotten about her and still had not thanked her.

For one person in the whole of the sky, he was an individual. He was sure it was the same for her. Even if it started out as fake for both of them. When he was alone fading away there was only one thought in his broken mind that kept him together.

If he threw himself into the darkness once more to try to end himself he might forget about her. That thought gave him an unprecedented attack of fear and loneliness.

It was a feeling of loss from forgetting Namine.

It was a feeling worse than slowly sinking into that darkness, as heartless nibbled away at the edge of his consciousness, it was worse than being broken into pieces and mixed together with the other dark Riku and feeling himself melt away.

He wanted to see Namine’s face. He wanted to hear Namine’s voice. He wanted to smell Namine’s scent. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to meet her. He wanted to meet her, he wanted to meet her.

That was right, they could finally see each other for the first time since Castle Oblivion. They had been apart for so long.

He didn’t even have a home, but he felt like this feeling was that of returning home. When he finally threw open the door Namine was waiting in the pure white room as always, her dress was covered in black stains and her arm was bandaged up.

Before Replica could take a single step in, his shadow cast into her room ahead of him. His black silhouette on the pure white floor looked like a stain. He took one shaky step and then the next.

He was sure he was incapable of crying. People only cried when they were overwhelmed by their real emotions. None of his emotions belonged to him. When he felt them he had no idea if he was really feeling them, or he was just feeling what Riku was supposed to feel. He was not sure what a fake heart was supposed to feel when it was not imitating Riku.

He was a convincing enough fake. That was probably why when she turned her head and smiled at him, just for returning to her, his eyes started to water. He was so convincing that he had fooled himself into thinking he had a real heart.

A tear fell down his cheek. He took a few wayward and lost footsteps until he collapsed into her lap like a wave crashing against an island’s rocky shore. From both of his eyes, tears leaked out uncontrollably. He had no idea why he was crying like this, but he could not stop himself.

He was even a failure at being a fake it seemed, as he no longer knew which emotion he was imitating. He was lost in a sudden storm of them, just like the one that appeared that day and swept Sora, Riku, and Kairi away.

“I wanted to see you again… I wanted to see you again so badly.”

“Me too.”

“I thought it was enough. I thought just being able to remember you were enough. That as long as I carried those memories in my heart it would be enough for me. But I couldn’t stop wanting to see
“You were the only person who ever wanted to protect only me. I thought it was enough, that for a moment I was real to one person… I thought that one happy memory could be enough for me.”

She put her hands in his hair and gently patted him. It felt different from when Kairi messed with his long hair. He was making a mess of things as usual. He was going to ruin the pure white dress she wore every day.

He was made in darkness, she was made in light. He a brutish boy always looking for a fight, she a gentle girl shying away from others. They were different enough to be opposites, black and white.

Yet they were both fakes clinging to the fake memories they had of each other because they had nobody else. They were trying to find something real within each other.

She wrapped her arms around his head and leaned over him. Namine was afraid of stars. If she wished on one she was sure it would fall out of the sky. Something bad would happen again just from her wishing.

She knew it was selfish, to still believe in her fantasy that one day a hero would come to save her from this castle. Especially when she was the witch who had cursed that hero’s heart. Yet, she whispered to him.

“Would you take me away from this castle, please…? I never want to sit in a white room like this again.”

“I… I don’t know if I can control the darkness I might hurt you again. It’s dangerous with me so…”

“I don’t mind if I get stained by your darkness. Getting stained by other people is what it means to have a heart.”
He Burned His Fingers Catching a Falling Star

Side A: Destiny Islands
Track 6

Replica Riku was finally convinced to take off his skin-tight leather suit of darkness when they made it to the destiny islands by Kairi.

“Nobody but Riku would think it was a good idea to walk around in public like that. You have to learn from big brother’s mistakes, including his fashion mistakes.”

“Hey!” Riku said defensively from the front of the Gummi Ship. He let his head drop and started to pout.

“Wait, don’t these things run on smiles? Is it really a good idea to have two of the broody boys on this at the same time?” Kairi wondered aloud.

Which prompted Riku to force a smile and keep driving them. Kairi was probably the only reason they did not run out of fuel on the way back to the destiny islands. When he stepped out of the Gummi Ship, Replica wore a leather jacket, over a grey hoodie and leather pants. Technically, he was still dressing in all dark colors but Kairi was at least glad she convinced him to no longer be perpetually cloaked in darkness and leaking it out into the air.

Replica Riku walked all the way to the sandy shores alone. Even Namine had been to these islands once during the party the guardians of light threw after the final battle in Sora’s absence. Replica was the only one who had never stood on a beach before. He bent over and removed his boots (black leather, of course) and socks letting his toes dip into the water.

He was overwhelmed with sensation. The last time he had been on this beach he was nothing more than a phantom following around in Riku’s shadow, not even able to feel the sand he sat in for himself. He had memories of the island but none of them were genuine. A fake like him could finally experience the real thing this was so - and then at that exact moment, he got bored of watching the waves hit the shore over, and over, and over again.

He turned back to Kairi, Riku, and Namine who had run to catch up with him. Even Namine’s outfit had been changed a little bit, she now wore a long coat that reached to about her knees over her white dress. She was changing, slowly but surely. At least Kairi knew a little bit of mercy and did not tease Namine for wearing the same thing every day.

“What did you guys do for fun on these islands?” Replica asked, he had implanted memories of the past but that was it, even when those memories were in broad strokes. He was meant to be somebody who had forgotten everything else but remembered the person most important to him, Namine.

Kairi gestured to the obstacle course in ruins behind them. “Well, Riku and Sora used to race around the island and I would be the referee!”

Riku picked up a wooden sword from the ground. “We sparred with these for who got to be the king of the island, and the captain of the ship and stuff. Also sometimes to practice our dodge rolls we rolled into a tree to make the coconuts fall out, actually mostly Sora did that. Wait, why didn’t I stop him from doing that?”
“Sounds boring. No wonder you made a deal with the devil to get away from this place.”

“Not the devil really that’s Hades, I made a deal with Maleficent and Xehanort…” Riku said, lowering his head and pouting again.

Replica ignored him and turned to Namine instead. “What did you always want to do here?”

“Well, mostly I just dreamed of watching other people play while I drew. Oh… the last time I was here, Xion and I looked for shells and then I drew them.” Namine did not have the widest range of hobbies but to be fair she had spent the entire three years of her existence locked in a room.

“That’s amazing Namine. You’re way more fun than Snore-Riku and Not-Namine.” Replica said running over to her and fawning her with attention once more. “Show me all the best shells you can find.”

“Huh?”
“Huh?”

Snore-Riku and the other girl who was not Namine said at the same time, after having their entire childhoods be dismissed as boring.
Kairi decided to take control, grabbing Riku by the arm to make him carry the bags she had packed into the back of the Gummi Ship out. “There’s one more thing we did together on the islands, we went swimming!”

“Did you swim out as far as you can and try to get into a fight with the sharks?” Replica said, turning looking back from one of the shells that Namine had placed in his hand.

“No, we just umm… swam… sometimes we splashed each other.” Kairi said racking her brain for something more interesting. There were the times that they played pirates but Sora always took that so seriously. One time he did not talk to Riku for a week after he lost a game of pirates. It was the longest she had seen Sora ever remember he was mad at someone, he usually forgot after a day.

“I can’t believe the real version of me has the privilege of having a real heart and real existence, and he wastes it with such childish games.” Replica Riku said, his haughty voice rising.

Until Namine brushed her hair over her shoulder and stood up with him. “I think swimming would be fun.”

“You heard her, it’s time to go swimming. I can’t think of anything more fun. Namine deserves to make her own precious childhood memories too” Replica said his haughtiness immediately crashing back into the earth, as he threw off his jacket and tried to pull his sweater over his head only to get stuck because he was in a hurry.

First, the boys disappeared in the Gummi ship to change. Replica appeared wearing the same long baggy swim trunks that Riku wore around that age. Riku was a lot more hesitant to come out of the Gumi ship. When he finally showed himself, he had his hands on his hips and a single bead of sweat running down his face as he tried not to move too much.

“Kairi about this swimsuit…”

“Yes?” She said tilting her head innocently.
Riku was wearing a pair of tight swim briefs that hugged his thighs very closely. He bent his back around to show the backside of the briefs on which a large emblem of the dream eaters appeared. “Did you have to get them with a symbol of the back?”

“Would you rather that symbol be on the front?”

“N-no, it’s fine.” Riku crossed his arms in front of his chest feeling a little bit exposed. “You didn’t do this on purpose did you?”

“No way…” Kairi said, covering her mouth to stop the giggles from pouring out. “I just didn’t know your size… really… it’s just been so long since we went swimming together.” That last part made it harder for Riku to suspect her anymore even though she was doing a terrible job of playing innocent.

Replica Riku scoffed at Riku when they were both left behind as the girls went to go change. “How much darkness do I have to use to get a body like that?”

Riku just tightened his grip around himself. “Is there something wrong with my body? Why does everybody keep staring like that.” He had barely been in his own body for most of his teenage years due to Ansem’s possession, so Riku was a bit oblivious to the fact that puberty had hit him like a truck. Now that he thought about it he had caught Sora staring at his arms a few too many times too. Was there something wrong with his elbows?

When Kairi and Namine emerged, Replica Riku ignored Kairi and ran over Namine and immediately began fussing over her. She was wearing a simple white swimsuit and shawl. “You look beautiful, but your beauty is dangerous. What if you get sunburned? Is this your first time swimming? What if you drown?”

“Umm…” Introverted Namine found herself overshadowed by Replica’s excess energy. A minute later he was dragging her away. A few minutes later Namine returned in a large sun hat, a pair of sunglasses, water wings on her arm, and a ducky inflatable tube around her waist.

“There, all safe.” Replica smiled, feeling proud of himself for fulfilling his promise to protect Namine.

Kairi just looked at Riku. “You could stare at me a little more you know.”

“Why should I stare at you? I already know what you look like in a swimsuit. We’ve gone swimming hundreds of times.”

“I’ve grown up!”

“Oh, I guess you did get a little bit taller.’

“In other areas… you know don’t I look like a teenage girl now instead of your childhood best friend.”

“Ummm… Can you just tell me what I’m not noticing? Did you get a zit or something?”

“Nevermind, the effect of you standing there and looking pretty becomes ruined the moment you open your mouth.”

“W-what? P-pretty? What are you talking about, Kairi wait!” Riku went chasing after her. The
moment they got into the water Kairi ended up dunking him. Only to almost lose her breath when
Riku emerged from the water like a beautiful mermaid and flipped his white hair allowing water
droplets to fly from it in slow motion.

Namine eventually convinced Replica to let her take off the layers he had put on her, leaving it in a
pile by the beach. When she ran into the water however, she immediately discovered the water was
cold and fled back to the beach. Namine thought it would be very fun from that point onward to just
draw everybody else having fun. Replica Riku hovered around her until she nudged him to go back
into the water.

The day passed away so quickly, time was as smooth of a transition as turning to another page in her
sketchbook. Namine smiled thinking to herself no wonder people clung to happy memories so
tightly, happy times together always seemed to go by so quickly.

The four of them got along just like four normal children would. There was no special incident for
the rest of the day. Except for the splash fight between Replica Riku and Riku which Replica took so
seriously it resulted in Riku getting hit by a wave and his swimming briefs getting knocked off of
him. Kairi almost fainted from laughter as he desperately searched the water for them.

Namine was amazed by how many drawings she had finished by the time the sun dropped out of the
sky and the shadows lengthened. For the first time ever, she was in the middle of her drawings. Well,
not in the middle but she was off in the corner which still counted. For the first time, she was able to
draw herself into the scene without it feeling forced. It was a strange and unbelievably complex story
but she belonged somewhere in these pages.

When the sun was finally setting they went to sit by the Paopu trees to watch it. Riku kept his
distance, as it was hard for him to sit in the same spot he had once sat with Sora. Kairi came to
interrupt him mid brood, tugging on his sleeve. (He had taken off that swimsuit as quickly as he
possibly could, prompting a disappointed sigh from Kairi).

“Pssssst.”

“Why are we whispering?”

“Well one of us has to be able to read the mood,” Kairi said, gesturing to Namine and Replica sitting
shoulder to shoulder. “If only we could make a meteor shower happen tonight.”

“Why a meteor shower?”

“Then Namine could get scared and Replica could promise to protect her again, it’d be just like their
fake childhood memory.”

“What are you trying to set them up?”

“What no…” She suddenly hid behind his back, as if he would not be able to find her there. Riku
kept looking forward, however, as he did not want to know what kind of face Kairi wore at the
moment. “Why would I want to set up somebody who looks like a baby faced you and a baby faced me. That would be um…”

“Awkweird.”

“Yeah, I mean maybe somebody else would think about it just because those two get along so well but not us…”

“Yeah, definitely not us. This isn't about us at all. Not everything is about me, I gotta learn that.”

“Besides they still don’t even know what that kind of thing is. Roxas and Xion still think being a couple is like being super best friends.”

“Were you gossiping with Axel again?”

“Of course I was. Who else am I going to gossip with? You’re too oblivious and behind on everything.”

“I’m sorry, Ienzo tried to teach me what memes are. He has a database. I’ll study more.”

“Anyway…” Feeling the awkwardness reaches its height, Kairi immediately began pushing on Riku’s back urging him forward. “Go climb up on that cliff and cast meteor so we can scare Namine and give Replica Riku the chance to look cool.”

“What? I can’t even cast meteor, and that cliff is way too sheer.”

“Are you kidding me? Then what are those arms supposed to be for? To look at?” Kairi said as he stopped pushing him for a moment and then tilted her head again with a girlish bob. “What kind of keyblade master are you if you can’t cast meteor?”

“I’m not a magic specialist like Aqua or Mickey is. You can’t cast meteor either.”

“I’m just an apprentice and you’re the mast, they say blame the teacher for the failings of the student.”

“If we want them to have a special moment why don’t we just have them talk without any scheme involved?”

“Yeah, because that’s what the Broody Brothers are so good at. Talking.”

Riku knew there was no way he could win against Kairi. Even when they were younger the one who had always broken up his and Sora’s arguments was her. He was always thinking that he was far too complicated for others to understand him, but it was probably the other way around. He did not understand Kairi. He did not grasp what made her so amazing. He just watched her from afar basking in that light without understanding it. He always gave in to her.

Riku took off his jacket prompting another gasp from Kairi, as he started to climb the rock face with his bare hands. When he reached the top he hung off with one hand and pointed his keyblade at the sky. Just before he could try to cast Dark Firaga, the clouds opened up and another sudden rainstorm fell on the island.

Their scheme utterly foiled, a few minutes later they were standing in front of Riku’s house. Replica
Riku had gone out of his way to drape his jacket on Namine’s shoulders even though Namine was already wearing a coat. Kairi assured them it would be fine to stay at Riku’s house as Riku’s parents were almost never at home, just like their son.

After some time passed through the storm, Kairi grabbed Riku by the arm once more. Before Riku could stop to wonder why Kairi had become so handsy lately, she spoke up getting all of his attention. “Did you see where Replica went off to?”

“I gave him a book to look through to try to find new names and he walked off,” Riku said.

“So, he’s all by himself? Well, he is you so how much trouble can he get into if he’s alone for a little while.”

Immediately, Riku stood up and started to walk dragging Kairi behind him. “We’ve got to find him fast.”

Namine was the first to notice he was gone and the first to go looking for him. Her white dress glowed in the dim light as if Namine was a light source all on her own. The book he had borrowed from Riku was on the floor in front of Replica, all the pages were torn out. Namine walked over and picked up a few of the crumpled up pages.

“I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“That’s okay, names are a hard thing to choose. Even mine just means born from the sea. You know, like born from Kairi.”

“No, it’s not that.’

“Oh…” She quieted for a moment. “Is it me?” Namine turned away, crossing her arms in front of herself. “I’m sure you’re tired. I’ll leave you alone. I won’t look into your dreams or anything.”

It was a fragile thing for both of them. This feeling that neither of them could put a name to. They did not have the ties everybody else had, all they had were falsehoods to bind them. Lies were fragile things, they fell apart easily. Perhaps if both of them grew up from what they were right now, they were growing apart. They would have nothing in common. If they no longer needed each other as each other’s sole connection like they did now, then they would have no reason to be around each other.

Namine was happy, but thoughts like these swirled in her head. When you were never supposed to exist in the first place, you became sort of a pessimist. She had lived for so long thinking the only future awaiting ahead of her was one where she faded away. She had tried to accept the smallest feelings, a small amount of happiness, a thank you, she tried to settle for that. Happy days like this were especially worried because she knew better than anybody else how quickly that happiness became just a memory, and how quickly memories fade.

Then there was the awkward air between Riku and Kairi, both of their originals. No matter how close they were they still remained at a distance, no matter how hard one tried to close the gap they could not. Perhaps it was impossible, to begin with. All friends fell apart, Namine had witnessed as much in the memories she paged through in her books. The same was true for Kairi and Riku they were no longer a trio in absence of Sora.

However as she turned to leave carrying all of those pessimistic thoughts with her swirling in her
head like the dark clouds in the sky, suddenly the room lit up and she heard a terrible crash outside.

The next few moments flashed by so slowly illuminated by the lightning, it was like they were individual frames of a film or drawings on the pages of her book. Replica reached out for her, balling his hand in the back of her dress.

“Ah…?”

As Namine turned her head, slowly Replica let go and then tried to take a step back. The next moment another lightning strike flashed and thunder sounded immediately afterward and his white hair fluffed up like a porcupine before he hid his face in his hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I just remembered I have to go do some squats, excuse me.” Replica said as he walked away and shut himself inside of a wardrobe.

“Wait, you can’t do squats in there. Is that a door to somewhere else?” When you had this many keyblade wielder concentrated in one place doors could pop up anywhere. It was technically possible that a door to another world could be hidden in a wardrobe though it sounded a bit like a fantasy story to Namine.

She struggled with the door for a moment, it barely budging behind her weak hands. “This isn’t fair, I’m like the only person here who doesn’t have a giant key…” When she finally pried it open she saw in the darkness through a tiny sliver of light, Replica holds himself as his body looked like it threatened to shake itself to pieces.

“You’re trembling… are you scared of the-”

“No way, I’m not scared of anything not even of the darkness. That’s why I can protect you from anything.”

Namine saw the lightning crack behind her. She suddenly remembered a familiar scene. A woman in a black cloak, grabbing Replica by the hair and dragging him forward forcing him at her feet and ordering her to rewrite his memories. That same boy was easily tossed aside like a doll by that woman with lightning magic.

Replica thought his purpose was only to protect Namine. He never thought of his own fears. He never thought that he might have been a victim too, that he might need to be saved. “I understand now. There was nobody to protect you either, but not anymore.”

“I can’t… I can’t be scared. I can’t be…”

“You can be human. All those painful feelings, it just means you have a heart of your own.”

“I have to keep my promise…otherwise, we’ll-”

Namine shook her head. For a shy girl when she needed to be she was oddly confident. “We don’t need promises, or charms or anything to stay together. We just need each other.” She paused for a moment tapping the side of her face, “In fact every time one of our friends’ exchanges charms they always get separated… maybe it's a jinx-”
In the middle of her musing, suddenly lightning struck again. Replica Riku hiding away in the darkness suddenly sprung forward and buried himself in her chest. Namine fell backward a step, and then another trying to accommodate for his weight. She easily crossed her hands behind his head again as she held him.

“I’m not that good in a fight but… since the rest of you is so strong your emotions have always been weak, so I’ll protect those.”

“I’m not much of a knight, huh?”

“That’s alright I was never a princess, to begin with, only a witch.”

Even with the sound of thunder crashing against his ears, Replica Riku raised his head looking directly at her. Namine looked like a sole point of light in the dark. She herself was like a fallen star, so brilliant and so short a light. He’d do anything to catch her. “I was never a knight either. I’m just someone living with stolen memories. If you’re a witch then I’ll be a thief, that way we can be friends.”

“Friends…?”

Namine’s voice cracked. She suddenly felt so light like she was floating on air. The two who were destined never to exist in the first place met and became friends. What a wonderful story, she could hang that colored sketch on her wall along with all the others.

“I never thought I would have a friend in this world or any.”

Accepting her fate, being happy with what she was given it sounded like a gracious thing to do in stories, it was what a kind princess pure of heart might do but Namine could not think that way anymore.

This little amount of happiness they had stolen from themselves, even if it was defying whatever destiny they were supposed to share under the same sky, she liked much better. She would remain a witch never able to become a princess. As long as she could walk hand in hand with her thief though, she was fine with that.

Their happy little epilogue was ruined the next morning however when Tidus came to the door to deliver Riku’s homework and caught sight of Replica and Riku at the same time.

“Dude, why are there two of you?” Tidus asked.

“Why do you never wear a shirt with matching sleeve lengths?” Riku snapped back, not sure of what else to say. He was a brilliant thinker but no portion of his mind was devoted to witty comebacks. He then suddenly noticed Replica getting mad about being mistaken for Riku and grabbed him, holding him back like he was an angry dog.

After that, they all decided it was a bad idea for Replica Riku and Namine to live on the destiny islands.
When they were about to board the Gummi ship again, Namine stood on her toes and whispered into Riku’s ears two places she wanted to see.

Which was why the four of them were now standing in the dark sands Riku had stepped in enough times to become familiar with. The dark shores he was constantly visiting and revisiting. He was sure if his footprints had lasted in the sand there would be trails of only him all over the place wandering in the dark.

The only person who had wandered here more than him was Aqua, but thinking of that sent a chill up Riku’s spine.

Kairi next to him poked at Riku’s back causing another jolt of nerves. “I didn’t know the realm of darkness was literally just our beach with an emo makeover. Why did you drag me here again?”

Riku swiveled his head around to look back at her. “You were the one who got so mad the last time I went here on my own.”

Namine had lifted her dress and wandered to the edge of the inky waters, that oozed on the shore more than they did splash when the waves rolled in. Behind her, Replica Riku was hovering again like a faithful shadow.

“Umm… Vanitas? Are you there?”

Replica looked down at his own shadow and saw two-dimensional creatures moving on the fringes of it, biting its silhouette like they were feasting. He lifted up his leg and kicked, and one of the unversed shot from the ground and skipped across the water.

The water bubbled up once more and a face appeared inside of it. “Yo…” Sora’s blackened image greeted both of them. As he raised his head black ink leaked out from his nose and when he opened his mouth the same dribbled from both sides of his lips. He tried to form a hand to lift himself out of the water, but when he reached it up just at its highest point it broke apart into black particles that faded away like dust. “Who do I have to thank for bringing me such a feast of emotions… oh, two Rikus that would explain it.”

Namine folded her hands behind her back looking down at him. “I wanted to thank you. You helped rescue him from the darkness didn’t you?”

“I don’t know why anybody would want to be rescued from darkness. Come on in. The water’s just fine.”

Namine tilted her head to the side in the same manner Kairi did. “Doesn’t it get lonely inside there?”

At that, Vanitas laughed causing the water to bubble up even more. “Why would I ever get lonely? I’m surrounded by myself. There’s enough for me to go around.” As he said that his shadow in the water extended. Several unversed were born at once surrounding him. “The only person more self-absorbed then me, is Riku.”

Riku put a hand in front of Kairi protectively, but Replica Riku did not move. He walked to the water’s edge along with Namine and took another step in. He reached forward and put his half keyblade into the water. “Grab onto this, I’ll drag you out.”

“No thanks. I’m not into the whole being a whole person thing. Apparently, I tried it once in Ventus’
“You don’t want to be saved?”

“I’m not really fit for the princess role. I’d rather be the monster that devours everybody. I guess I do get a pure heart, but mine’s pure evil.”

“You can stay here stitching up your own wounds if you want.” The white-haired boy stood up once more withdrawing the hand he offered. He knew what it was like to want to sink to the depths of a dark ocean because you were unwilling to let go of the pride weighing you down. After all, if you gave up pride then there would be nothing left in your hands to hold. “You still won’t be alone though because from now on… my name is Rei. It means nothing, empty, zero, just like you Vanitas. I decided to take the name from the person who saved me.”

Vanitas mouth fell open, but nothing came out or crawled out of it this time. Instead, suddenly, a helmet emerged from the back of his head and grew over his face covering it in a black shield to hide it.

*I didn’t ask for this.
To be sifted apart.*

He remembered his brother saying that. Nobody would choose for him to exist if, given the choice, his existence was already such a fragile thing already.

Namine picked up one of the unversed in her hands. Before it squirms away she kissed it on the top of its head. “Thank you Vanitas. Even if nobody else thinks so, we’re glad we met you.”

Rei behind her immediately got flustered. “What are you doing? That kind of thing you only do to special people?”

“But Vanitas is pretty special. He has a heart of darkness and he breaks apart into cute little monsters.”

“I guess he’s a pretty unique guy but not special in that sense,” Rei said, grabbing Namine by the hand possessively.

Watching from afar Riku felt an oncoming sense of dread. “Oh no, not this again.” He looked to Kairi and finally noticed it. The moment that Vanitas had revealed his face she had clutched onto his arm and had not let go since. It was like her body and her heart were both frozen. He felt the same way when he saw Sora’s face again.

He had been dreaming of seeing Sora again so badly, and yet a reminder of him was the last thing he wanted to see. He had no idea what to say, so he simply stood there letting her cling onto him.

Rei tried one more time. “You could try coming with us. I’d give you the energy you need to reform.” He held out his hand, summoning the darkness to it.

“No way. We can’t show up somewhere wearing the exact same outfit. What would other people think?” Just like in Riku’s memories, the boy wearing Sora’s face refused to take it.

“Besides my heart just wouldn’t be in it. It got smashed into pieces by all your friends, you know.”

heart, and then I was just dying to get out.”
Vanitas chose darkness again. He would choose to remain a shadow, over and over, because that was all he knew.

Riku and the rest finally arrived at their destination after their detour into darkness, the Land of Departure. Riku looked at the aisle which used to be Castle Oblivion, now Rubix Cubed back into its original shape. There were large spires of earth chained to the castle’s towers. The entire area around them was green and overgrowing with life once more.

The emptiness that plagued the hallowed halls of castle oblivion were gone. Still, much like Hollow Bastion even with the world’s residents returned there was still a heavy atmosphere hanging over the place.

Riku had called Aqua to inform her, but only Ventus came out to greet them with a friendly wave. When he no longer had Eraqus’ heart to support him from the effects of thirteen years of possession, Terra collapsed almost immediately after their party in the destiny islands. Aqua had barely left his side since trying all sorts of magical remedies to ease his ailment.

Even if it meant that the majority of keyblade masterwork was now getting shifted onto him, Riku could not bring himself to blame her. After all, he was sure if he was in her position if there was some chance of bringing Sora back he would have devoted all of himself to that. Still, he found it a little sad, Aqua had just gotten her friends back but after thirteen years of isolation, she could not be happy about it. All she could think about was how she might lose them again.

Aqua was keeping a similar eye on Ventus, not allowing him to leave the island alone even though he was eager to help out with the duties of a keyblade wielder. Which was why he was so happy to greet Namine and Rei. Finally after all that time alone in castle oblivion, a thirteen-year nap he would have a little bit of company.

Rei ran his fingers through his white hair. “Of all places is this really where you wanted to go? I’d take you anywhere you know…”

“It’s our home, isn’t it? It’s where we were born. It looks a little different but I like it that way.”

“Come on guys this place can be fun when it’s not dreary old Castle Oblivion. I’ve explored almost all of it by now so I can show you the best parts.” Ventus said as he grabbed both of them and started to drag them along. “Finally I’m not the youngest one on the island anymore. Actually, you guys can call me big brother Ven from now on. If you want me to teach you all the moves of using a keyblade I can totally do it, Rei.”

Namine let her fingers slip out of Ventus’ for a moment to run back to Riku. She stood on her toes and whispered in his ear again. “Now that we’re somewhere safe there’s something I have to tell you. I didn’t faint and fall into a deep sleep just because of I as lonely. I had a dream and saw a dark figure.”

“Another cloak… come on its been two months can we have a break from mysterious guys in cloaks.”
“No, he wasn’t in a cloak he was just wearing all black. I couldn’t see his face because of the hat he was wearing and he kept talking in these strange numbers, like 01001 repeating like that.”

“I understand. Stay near Rei then.”

Namine finally drew back, giving him a sweet smile as she held her hands at her hips. “Of course I will. I’ll protect him and he’ll protect me. That’s why we’re together.”

Ventus looked back at Rei who he had been trying to show off to. “Hey, what do you guys mean you’re together? I thought you were supposed to be less mature than me.”

“It’s not like that we’re friends.” Rei immediately defended.

“Hmmmmmm…”

Riku took a step back from her pushing Namine towards the other two boys. “Since when did you become so bold?”

Namine shyly touched her fingers together. “I’ve always been bold… in my own way.”

She was a quiet kind of bold.
A witch masquerading as a princess.
A puppet like her needed to seize what few small changes and choices she was given in order to become herself.

Riku turned back to Kairi who had been oddly silent the entire time. He took a step to close the distance between them until his toes were touching hers. He looked right into her eyes. “What’s with you? You’ve been acting strange lately, first, you were all pushy and now you’re being quiet.”

Kairi’s lips pulled into a tight line and her brows knitted. She pushed her forehead against his. “I need to be pushy with you, otherwise you’ll go off somewhere and nobody can stop you.”

“Huh?”

“Riku you’re so hard to reach sometimes, you’re always in some distant place.” Even though she was looking right at him, she could still feel the distance in between them. It was a frustrating thing being so close to someone but unable to grasp them or feel their warmth. Especially since both of them felt so cold with Sora gone. There was only one sky for all of them to share, but the blue skies which Riku and Kairi were used to gazing at had broken into pieces and fallen apart. There was only an empty space where the sky should have been now. There was no warmth for them without the sun in their lives. “You’re like an island. Always all by yourself, it’s like you don’t even need anybody.”

He understood now, Kairi was trying so hard to push those two together because she could not reach the person right in front of her. She wanted to distract herself from that fact. Even though Sora was gone and the two of them lived every day with that fact, they had not talked about it once.

“Kairi I… I didn’t tell you something about Sora.”

“Hm?”

“The day before we went to the keyblade graveyard he came to talk to me because something was wrong, and I… this entire time I’ve been thinking about how I should have helped him then. He was alone and he was scared.”
Everybody else’s trios had finally been reunited and theirs fell apart. No wonder Riku thought, no wonder it all fell apart for them they might not have even been a trio in the first place. One of them was always being left alone.

Namine spent the rest of the day being led around by Ventus with Rei by her side. Ventus gave Rei a wooden keyblade to practice with so he could one day learn to summon his own keyblade and Rei’s wounded pride immediately caused him to challenge the other boy to a sparring match.

Namine found Ventus’ small catlike creature apparently called a ‘Chirithy’ the same one that Sora had encountered in the final world where she had been set adrift as a star. She had thought of letting go there since there was no place for her to return to, but she was glad she did not. Now sitting there with a cat in her lap she gently pets its head. There had been no place for her from the beginning, or for the longest time, but it was only by continuing forward that she had found this place.

That night she went to sleep after the boys painted the walls of her room many different colors by her request. She never wanted to see white again. Rei and Ventus had both made messes of themselves doing it, and the three of them were exhausted from the whole day. After the paint dried and she hung up her own drawings on the wall again she practically collapsed into bed.

Sleep met her so quickly that she did not even bother to grab a blanket. She might be cold in the morning, but that was the future Namine’s problem. Hmm, when did she start thinking like that, like she had a future?

As she fell asleep suddenly Namine’s shadow split in two. The tiny shadow of the girl’s image shook, distorted and then grew crooked. Her shadow no longer resembled her shape but rather the shape of a boy with spiky hair imposed over her. The shadow smiled and in the place where its mouth was, an empty crescent opened in the floor below.

The shadow keeping its connection to her feet walked along the floor and then to the wall. Even though it looked like it was just a painting on the wall, the shadow reached forward and picked the blanket up pulling it over her shoulders.

Namine smiled cracking one of her eyes open as she stared at her shadow shaped like a boy. “Thank you Vanitas.”

“...”

“Good night to you too. If you want to hide there that’s fine, I know what it’s like to be shy.”
I Want to Line the Pieces up, Yours and Mine

Side B: Shibuya
Track 2

“Neku, did you know in good character writing a character’s greatest strength should double as their greatest weakness. For example, my greatest strength is how much better I am than everybody else, and my greatest weakness is how it makes them all jealous so they don’t want to play with me.”

“I think they don’t want to play games with you because you cheat and have a habit of killing the losers.”

“Naku I was attempting to be humble and share my greatest insecurity with you and you had to go and rain on my parade. Maybe I was wrong and you haven’t learned to be a good friend after all.”

“I think a good friend cuts down another friend’s arrogance before their ego gets so high and mighty it causes them to float off into space.”

“Please, Neku you should know by now I’m only arrogant in a joking way. Wink, wink.”

“Nobody says wink out loud.”

“Wink. I do, I’m a trendsetter. Wink.”

“Yeah, it’s a big joke when you act all arrogant. The kind of joke where everybody laughs at you behind your back.”

“Do you feel good about yourself, Neku? Saying something like that to somebody with no friends.”

“Y-you… you have friends. Even if there’s nobody else who knows you exist you have me at least.”

“….Hehehehehehe.”

“Quit acting like that just to mess with me!”

“You mean acting cute?”

“I mean acting like an ass!”

“I’m a cute ass at least.”

“Maybe a little bit, I MEAN HEY!”

Kiryuu Joshua and Sakuraba Neku had been uselessly chatting like this while Neku dove into Sora’s dreams once more. Neku felt his world view invert, and then reassert itself as his feet touched down to the streets of traverse town once more. Yoshiya’s insistence on making everything more difficult only made him more determined to dive deeper into Sora’s memories.

Neku genuinely had no idea if Josh was trying to motivate him in his usual indirect and trickster way, or if he was just bored and doing this for his own amusement. The worst thing about Josh was that he was smart enough to figure out a way to get his kicks from a situation and motivate someone to
move towards the end he desired without making it seem like he lifted a finger. It all seemed so
effortless.

Except Neku knew it took a lot of effort. It took an effort to deal with someone as insufferable as
Josh. As he wandered the empty looking streets he caught sight of himself in a glass window and
paused. He held his arms out looking down. “What is this?”

“It’s called fashion, Neku.”

Neku looked down and saw that he was wearing a jacket with a black and white checker pattern on
the shoulders and the hood. Underneath he wore a red and white shirt that loosely hung off of him,
plaid shorts, and black and white stockings that ran all the way up his legs leading to his black and
white shoes.

It might be self-indulgent to describe his outfit in such great detail, but those were two words that
described Kiryuu Joshua perfectly. Self-indulgent. He had a hard time believing that other people
existed besides himself.

Neku looked at the cross necklace that was hanging around his neck as a fashion accessory. He held
it in his hand for a moment before letting go and crossing his arms over his chest to cover himself. He
felt exposed. “You redesigned my outfit?”

“I did you a favor so you’ll get a bonus to your stats.”

“There’s not even anything to fight down here! Besides your attitude… every step of the way.”

“Isn’t learning to be a better person to save your friends like fighting a battle against yourself?”

“You just can’t help yourself can you?”

“Look, if I don’t give in to temptation every now and then, then what did our dear Lord Jesus even
die on the cross for?”

He considered ripping off the cross from his neck the obvious symbol of Joshua and just throwing it
away to vent his frustration. However, when he held it in his hand he could not bring himself to do it.
He wondered if he could bring this into the real world and hold onto it if Yoshiya decided to pull his
disappearing act again]

He took another step to push past Joshua’s pushy attitude and walked straight into another ghost Sora
zombie walking around. The Sora exploded and Neku’s eyes peeled open as he found himself in the
middle of another memory.

“Sora, what’s wrong?”

When Sora turned around to face Riku, he quickly pulled his shirt back down to conceal himself. He
held himself together gripping both sides of his stomach as if he were assembled from lass and about
to fall to pieces.

Riku did not notice at all, how fragile his friend looked. Riku believed himself more fragile than
anybody else, and in comparison, Sora who had always believed in him without faltering was
stronger than anyone else. One wonders if he was seeing the real Sora though, or simply using Sora
as a measuring stick. The higher he built Sora up into the heavens, falling at his feet in worship the
lower and lower Riku could push himself until he was standing in hell.
“Dude can you stop narrating in my head I’m trying to pay attention,” Neku said, touching at the side of his ear as if he was in some kind of two-way relay with Yoshiya.

When actually it was more like Yoshiya was a very snippy fairy whispering into his ear whenever he chose to. “I’m setting the scene darling, it’s important for establishing the mood.”

“Says the guy who can’t even read the mood at all. You’re just Statler and Waldorf it dragging me along as your bantering partner.”

“Well if you didn’t want to banter you could just ignore me, so you must be enjoying this on some level.”

“…”

“…Hm?”

“You just get more annoying if I ignore you.”

“Sure, sure, dear, keep telling yourself that.”

“Whatever, continue on with the pretentious narration then.”

“Neku, it’s not pretentious if you are genuinely that important of a person I think one of the perks of being a literal -God is you can make all of the religious metaphors you want.”

“Please tell me that’s not the reason why you became Composer.”

Sora looked like he was about to collapse against Riku but Riku did not see. More than that, Sora saw right away the admiration that was in Riku’s eyes for him. He knew he was at the center of Riku’s eyes. Even if Sora was not smart enough to understand the emotions, he felt what other people felt even when they were not aware they were feeling it and sometimes he even felt it stronger than they did.

In the past he had no idea why Riku felt so alone to the point of wanting to fight him to get his attention, nor did he understand the cold burning anger that slowly boiled over to him. Even when Riku explained it he did not grasp it. However, he could feel those emotions more distinctly that Riku could, he felt every thorn on the vine as he wandered through Maleficent’s maze trying to reach the heart of his lost friend again. He felt it so much that he was dragged into fighting over and over again with the person he wanted to fight with the least.

Riku’s braggadocio, his resentment, his loneliness, his feelings of attachment to their days in the past more than anyone else, his want to protect others Sora felt all of those things as if they were his own emotions. That was why he would fight Riku as many times as he needed. He had no idea what words to say to reach his friend’s heart. He was stupid like that. Riku was always telling him what to do but he could never once be a light to reach out to Riku, only a punching bag to work out his frustrations on.

That was fine though even if Riku went ahead of him and left him alone they would be connected. When he was stupid, Riku was smart. When he was lost, Riku found him. For all of his weaknesses, Riku was so much stronger than him. Even if he was weak on his own his friends would always be strong.
That’s why he didn’t mind if all he could do in the end was believe in Riku and wait for Riku to come back to him. Even if it meant he was lonely when Riku wandered off and kept him at an arm’s length apart for his own good.

That was why, this time when Riku was net to him. It was the first time they had been together in such a long while. Every adventure before this Riku disappeared to some far off place. He was like an island Sora was never going to reach. Sharing the sky was a small comfort but sometimes Sora wondered if his words were just small empty comforts like that. Even if the sky was above you always, you could not reach out and touch it. Even if you saw the sun out in the sky, or the stars, the warmth of those lights were so far away that all you could do was gaze longingly at them. Even seeing them you couldn’t feel their warmth.

“Nothing's wrong! It’s just…” Sora’s fingers squeezed on his chest, as he tried to feel that warmth between his fingertips. One day he and Riku made a promise in front of some falling stars, but Sora was too empty-headed and forgot that memory already. All he knew was that Riku was like that same fallen star to him. A light that had fallen out of the sky. One he could hold between his fingers and feel the warmth escape between the gaps of his interlocking fingers. Light all of his own. For him who got so lost, so easily. Riku thought that he fell to the darkness too easily, but for Sora, Riku was a light so strong and so intense no matter how deeply he fell, or how much darkness he was surrounded by Sora would be able to find him again. Something that would warm him no matter how much Sora felt like he was drowning, and losing sensation to the ice-cold waters that numbed him. That feeling of being lost, he hated it, but he wasn’t smart enough to find himself.

Perhaps he was just afraid of himself. He did not want to look at himself or his own reflection in the mirror and see how cracked it had become. He was always looking to others instead, hoping they would see him.

Some part of him wished he could just hold that little star in his hands. He did not need to be the hero who saved everyone like he was always bragging in front of Yen Sid. If he could keep holding onto that star, like that star-shaped fruit he wanted to sink his teeth into that would be enough.

Sora finally broke out of his thoughts, because he was not good at thinking he tended to get lost in them just like everything else. “Before we go… do you really think I should be the one fighting? I…”

“Sora…” Riku swallowed his own words. Sora had no idea what he was going to say. Sometimes he grew anxious about this. They had known each other for so long and yet Sora had no idea what was going on in his closest friend’s heart. Riku’s hands grasped at the empty air around him feeling like he could hold nothing between his fingers. Sora had no idea why Riku felt that way either. Riku always had such large hands, the warmest ones of them all. It was Riku who had been holding his hand for so long guiding him forward. “You don’t… Think I’ll disappear again, do you?”

“Of course not!” Riku had assumed Sora was worrying about him. That was so like Riku. Sora did not understand this either, no matter how many times they were separated in the past Sora never stopped believing in him. There were even times where Riku tried to get Sora to stop believing in him, but Sora would never lose that belief, that star could not be pried out of his fingers no matter how much it burned him. So he wondered why Riku felt that way. Did his feelings not reach him? Riku was such… an island… so strong like earth and always able to keep his form on his own no matter what waves hit him. “But… Just in case something happens I want to make sure we’ll always find each other again. We’ve… just managed to gather everybody together what if they all get lost again?”
Riku let out a puff of air. Sora paid attention to the way his shirt tightly gripped his chest and the way his chest and shoulder muscles moved as he took in such a deep breath. “Sora. They’re not going to get lost again because you’re here, they’ve all gathered around you.” He put his hand on his heart. Sora looked at Riku’s fingernails despite how well muscled his body was his fingernails were so precise and clean almost girlish. Sora thought about how such fingers would feel if they brushed against his own. The hadn’t even been close enough to touch fingers, not since they were kids, and the feelings of three years of that distance were pooling up in Sora. “Our hearts are already connected as you said.”

Even if their hearts were connected, even if he already knew the feelings were there it would be nice to put them into words. He was such a fool he could not do it himself. He wanted to tell him about the crack that had appeared in his chest. He wanted to tell Riku about this strange anxiety he was feeling. “Do you remember in the past, when you said I my heart was weak. Do you remember how I failed the mark of mastery exam and how I would have lost if it weren’t for you? Do you remember how you felt when you thought you were the only one trying to save Kairi, and all I did was goof around with Donald and Goofy on the worlds.”

“Sora... What is this about? You know I was wrong back then. The one who’s always been right is you. Don’t you know how amazing you are? Every time we’re in trouble, you’re the one who saves everybody with a smile. This time too, if you believe in it with all of your heart you can make those connections to Roxas and Namine real again.”

Riku said, as he stepped forward and got close enough to Sora that the tips of their shoes were touching. He put his hand over Sora’s heart, but at this close of a range, he could hear how loudly Riku’s was beating as well. “Your heart has never led you wrong in the past. You can give all of your heart in a way I can’t.”

Sora felt that with every beating of his heart, the crack in his chest he was concealing was getting worse. His feelings were going to turn to dark water and leak out through those cracks. Riku saw so much in him. Even though Sora did not see anything at all, he was transparent, empty, like air. He could not bring himself to tell Riku he was wrong. He could tell Riku that he was not nearly as good as the Sora that Riku believed in.

So, he did what he always did. When he could not believe in himself, he relied on Riku’s belief in him. If it was strong enough it would keep them together. There was no need for Sora to worry. Even if he fell apart as long as his friends were there they would be able to pick up the pieces.

Sora tried to reassure himself of this but at the same time as he clung onto Riku’s warmth silently for a bit longer, he was scared. He was scared one day the would all find out that he fell short of the Sora that everyone believed in. When they did they would leave. They would take everything with them and he would have nothing left of him, not even broken pieces. That was why he had to fight so hard not to lose a single person.

Sora held onto the embrace as long as he could. Then, he immediately pushed the other boy away and put on the face of a clown. His eye went crooked and he forced a smile. “Jeez Riku, talking about following your heart what are you doing an imitation of me? If you keep using my lines like that you won’t even need me around anymore.”

Riku still looked as serious as ever. “I’ll always need you around.”

*I’m the one who needs you. You and everybody else. You’ve always done just fine alone, Riku. You’ve always been an island. Sora wanted to say, but he just crossed his arms behind and smiled. “Where else would I have to go? I’m not some big important keyblade master hotshot like you.”*
I still don’t get what Riku sees in him. He’s so intelligent and perceptive otherwise, but when it comes to Sora it’s like walking around with a blindfold.

“I don’t know how to explain this to you. Most people have a wider range of emotions when it comes to other people that make them-”

Stupid. People show different aspects of themselves depending on who they’re with, Riku’s always so smart but when he’s around Sora he wants to become more like him. Heaven only knows why. Actually, I’m a part of heaven and I still don’t know.

“They’re dealing with serious feelings of loss don’t make fun of them. Don’t you feel any remorse at all? Oh, wait you probably don’t know what that is. Remorse is an emotion people feel when they- Oh, I’m getting ahead of myself. Most people have these things called feelings.”

I know what feelings are, they’re what guide people to their ends in tragedies right? Instead of listening to the voices of logic in their head.

Neku watched as Sora walked away from Riku, smiling so brightly as to obfuscate the darkness he was looking away from. He tried to ignore the hiss of a snake that had coiled around his spine and whispered into his ear. It was impossible to ignore because somehow the long and twisted body of the snake had somehow twisted himself around his heart.

“Yes, because for someone as logical as you, you’re never fickle at aaaallllllllll.” Neku dragged the last part to mock Yoshiya’s own hypocrisy.

You should be more grateful to my whims. I killed you on a whim, and I saved your life on a whim too.

Joshua was probably just jealous is all, he would never have that close of a relationship with somebody else. He had no childhood friends as far as Neku knew. Well, who knew if he even had a childhood. It was easy to turn your nose up and declare sour grapes at something you could never have for yourself. He watched people lie to themselves, delude themselves, play the fool all for the fear of losing those close friendships that Joshua never had in the first place.

It all must seem so logical from the distance that Joshua was looking down from. Neku could not bring himself to blame Joshua too much either, because watching Sora and Riku fail to talk to each other or even properly say goodbye just reminded him. That once too he had an irreplaceable friend like that. One he never got the chance to say goodbye too, or tell him how important he was until he lost him and it felt like losing a part of himself.

Joshua’s feelings were like a bitter poison, dripping from his fangs into Neku’s ear and Neku did not even want to think about how he felt. He wanted to shut it all out as he did in the past, but he had thrown his headphones away already.

If he saved Sora it would go away. He needed to save Sora because he knew exactly how Riku felt right now. Losing somebody that important was like losing part of your world. It hurt Neku so much he had wanted to run away from the whole world.

“I am grateful to you.” He finally said to Joshua, his true feelings as he broke the memory around him like glass and watched the world shatter apart as he stepped onto the next one. “No matter how hard you try to fight me on this, I won’t stop being grateful I met you.”
Only when your hopes have been broken by battle upon battle… can the key to Kingdom Hearts be claimed?

That was what the new organization said as they came to meet them on the keyblade graveyard. Sora did not feel ready, but part of him knew he would never be. This was how it had always been for him; he did not get to choose how to fight or when; he just had to keep fighting what was in front of him and keep moving forward.

As Neku watched the empty graveyard each grave marked with a rusted and broken key stuck into the cracked earth he heard another whisper in his ear.

Don’t you think these guys talk theme far too much? Especially Sora. All this heart, heart, heart, light darkness nonsense, it’s like he doesn’t understand what he’s saying.

“You’re the last one who should complain about talking in theme. You’re the one who kills people to teach them life lessons.”

What better way to learn about life than death, Neku? Besides, I’m not the one who constantly spouts life advice that’s my dear Sanae.

“You know as much as it pains me to agree with you I think you’re right about that. One time in the first week he stopped me and said ‘He who enjoys life, wins and life’ and then walked off. Like he was going to explode if he didn’t give advice every five minutes.” Neku stared at Sora, holding onto his keyblade with shaking hands, trying to smile to hide the fear in his eyes. “What’s your deal with that guy anyway? Are you really that jealous over Riku you only knew him for a few days.”

You only knew me for one week during the first game, Neku.

“Yeah, and I still don’t like you!”

Because usually in romantic comedies when people get all worked up and deny having feelings for someone you’re supposed to take that as one hundred percent true.

“Quit acting so genre was aware! This isn’t a comedy romantic or otherwise, you clown.”

Well, we are watching somebody’s memories play out in front of us much like piecing frames together for a film reel, and we’re both giving commentary at the same time.

“Yeah, but this is a real person we’re talking about. And you’re the one who keeps interrupting because he can’t take anything seriously! I’m just telling you to shut up.”

What even is real Neku? How can you be so sure what’s right in front of you is the real thing, you can only see the world from one perspective, and somebody close to you can see an entirely different world.

“See! You’re talking in theme too so shut up and don’t bitch when other people do it. Actually, don’t open your mouth at all because bitching is all that comes out.”

Their argument over the memory resumed. Neku swore to himself that when he got out of this endless labyrinth of memories again he was going to wrestle the remote out of Joshua’s hands even if
it meant facing him in a life or death battle. That would be what, their third round?

So the cast gathered on stage this time. Neku got the sense that Joshua was using the theatre metaphors specifically because Neku pointed out how much they annoyed him. *Aqua and Ventus are here to face Terra, their old friend. Lea or uh is it Axel, has to face Isa his best friend from the past. Xehanort no doubt has something lined up for those three as well. Riku and Sora you've seen. The girl with red hair with Kairi.*

“She reminds me of Shiki… I’m just getting the same vibe it’s scary.”

“Today you will lose. Before you even face the thirteen, everyone the last one of you will be torn the heart from the body but fear not—”

Terra said, speaking in a voice that did not sound like it belonged to him. As a contrast to his pure white hair, a black aura was leaking from him like ink on paper spreading around him and corrupting his image.

*Don’t you think this Xehanort fellow is cruel? Making them fight battles that he arranges while he watches over them like a god. What kind of person would force anybody through such life or death circumstances? Even if it’s for a good goal like remodeling a better world.*

“I know what you’re joking about and it’s not funny. Quit rubbing it in my face what a villain you are damn mastermind!”

*Mastermind is such a harsh word Neku, if other people could master their minds themselves then I wouldn’t need to do it for them.*

“Take a little bit of responsibility for my three weeks of hell!”

*I think my problem is that I take too much responsibility, really. It’s because I care that I make things so difficult.*

“Jesus, do I know that more than anybody else.”

*Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain dear. God is actually petty. I’m not projecting or anything.*

“We’re not going to lose to you.”

“Hmm.” Terra put on a bemused smile and disappeared. The next moment he reappeared in front of Ventus, the pitch black keyblade he was carrying already swung in a wicked arc behind him.

Sora watched in slow motion as Terra swung without any hesitation at all towards his close friend, with enough force to separate him in two. Ventus flew backward hitting against the dry rock face. Sora heard the sound of something shattering. He had no idea what had broken first, Ventus, the rocks he collided into, or Ventus fragile heart just now pieced together.

“That’s it!”

Sora needed to act. If he did not act he would lose everything. He was the one they were all counting on. They were all standing here because of him. The distant and tangled threads that connected them all, we’re all tied to him and he could feel them pulling on him in every direction, burning his skin, suffocating him, pulling tight around his neck. Even if they were just puppet strings pulling him forward he had no choice but to act.
He swung his hand behind him as he rushed forward and slammed everything he had, all his anger, all of his heart’s feelings, his desires to protect everyone around him into the swing of his keyblade.

Terra blocked it with one hand, emitting some kind of dark spell from his fingers. Sora never even reached him. All of those feelings amounted to nothing. “What did you think you were going to accomplish?” His bemused smile never even left his face. Terra’s eyes narrowed on Sora like he was a speck of dust. “Impudent brat. You’re not the one I came here to fight.” He threw Sora aside like he was dusting himself off.

He did not even look to see where Sora fell as he skipped across the ground. His attention turned to Aqua. The next moment their keyblades were connecting as Aqua brought up a guard, their faces mere centimeters away from each other as both of them locked their keyblades Terra’s intent to kill meeting Aqua’s attempt to protect.

“I’ve always wanted to fight like this to prove which one of us was the stronger, keyblade master.”

“Shut up I don’t care about you, give me Terra back.”

“Those were Terra’s words, not mine. Our hearts are overlapped, his memories are mine. Don’t you remember when we fought like this the first time in front of Eraqus and Xehanort to see which one was worthy of the title of Master? That’s where it all started.”

Terra’s body pitch black looked like Aqua’s exact opposite as he started to glow with light. The two of them were halves broken apart trying to be together again like each was missing some vital component that could only be found in the other but neither of them could get close every time they did they clashed like this.

It did not matter that this was the keyblade graveyard, a recreation of the keyblade war or the final battle, they had fought countless times like this. Aqua’s bones ached with familiarity as she felt Terra strike against her.

He swung his blade in a long sloppy arc. Unlike Aqua who was precise with every swing, there was no art to his at all, but he was stronger. He broke their stalemate and forced her to jump back. He chased after her, continuing with his long swings and every single time Aqua just barely danced out of the way. Theirs looked like a long and violent dance between ex-lovers, every time they drew close enough to embrace they tried to jab knives in each other’s backs.

“You’re running away from your precious friend! What are you doing keyblade master the darkness is right in front of you?.” Suddenly Terra changed directions and swung his blade around in the side catching her and hitting her in the gut. He smiled, even more, when Aqua gritted her teeth to hide the pain in her face. “If you don’t fight you’ll fall to darkness like last time.”

The moment she was forced to recall the memory of falling into darkness, all to save Terra’s body in front of her, which was now mocking her for it made Aqua’s emotions burst. The damn that had been holding them back crack, and once a crack appeared everything would flow out eventually. She spun her keyblade in a full arc around her and summoned explosive magic, orbs of light striking at Terra forcing him back.

She did not let up immediately swinging her keyblade against his one more. As their keys became locked together and they stared into each other’s eyes, Xehanort only continued to taunt her using Terra’s voice. “Fight the darkness right in front of you. Do it. Do it. Kill me..”
“I would never!”

“Come on. What are you fighting for then, master?”

“All I’ve wanted all this time is to Save Terra. He’s the reason I’ve been holding on all this time.”

She jumped into the air raising her keyblade high into the air over her head to maximize the power of her swing. Before she could even touch him, suddenly Terra’s hand grabbed her by the neck. The large hands she had once held were now closing around her neck cutting off her air.

"Your heart is weak. It contradicts itself. You hung on for thirteen years in the realm of darkness all because of Terra, but he’s the reason you feel there in the first place. The one who dragged you down, the one who suffocated you in darkness it was all him wasn’t it? His hands are doing this to you.”

As Aqua struggled against him, his hands only grew tighter and tighter around her neck.

“The world’s all fell into darkness without a keyblade master, and it’s all because you chose saving Terra above the whole world! It was Terra’s heart that became Ansem the seeker of darkness, it was Terra’s heart that became Xemnas the nobody, you’re responsible for saving that person for choosing them over everybody else.”

Suddenly his fingers let go. He dropped her limp body on the ground and threw his keyblade away. “But you know what, even if you’d choose Terra every time, even if you never would stop believing in him can you say the same for him? Did he listen to you once? Did he trust you? If he had would he end up like this? You poor girl, suffering so much for someone who thinks nothing of you at all.”

He held his arms open once more and left his chest bare as if offering it to her.

“Come on, kill me. Kill me, kill me, kill me, kill me, kill me. Defeat the darkness and save everyone, keyblade master!”

Every repetition of those two words smashed Aqua apart more than being beaten by his keyblade had. She simply stared at him unsure of what to do, every part of her down to her pupils themselves shaking.

Neku could not even see how that scene concluded because that was not even the only scene that was going on, the only person that was being broken to pieces. Suddenly everything had gone wrong at once, the seven lights were being bombarded like a sudden tidal wave had appeared from every angle to smother them.

A storm of darkness was brewing around them as if called there by Terra’s presence alone. Heartless in the thousands were whipped into the air and began cycling. The guardians of light had barely been able to fight back against Terra when they saw something worse appearing in his shadow.

Terra ignored Aqua who would not fight and rushed towards Kairi. Just as Sora had tried to, Axel jumped into the way to play the hero for his new friend. He was batted away just as uselessly. "Axel!" Kairi cried out, looking in a panic to both Axel and Sora on the ground. When she saw a dark shadow appearing behind Sora, she rushed to Sora's side instead of deciding in an instant.
Terra raised his keyblade and Kairi raised hers to meet him ready to protect Sora.

"Zetta flare!"

Just then, the highest level magic Donald had plunged itself into Terra's side, launching him away into the horizon. Donald collapsed with the force of the magic, Mickey and Goofy rushing to his side. Sora could only watch. He was at the center of it all, but everybody else was moving around him. Everybody was throwing themselves into danger to protect him. He had not been able to do a single thing of substance. He pulled himself to his feet Kairi standing in front of him.

Even with Terra gone, the shadow that he was making did not disappear. Darkness welled up from the very earth. It joined with the darkness cycling in the sky, twisting, and becoming more twisted into a terrible cyclone rushing towards them.

While all eyes were on the storm of heartless a shifting shadow snuck from behind sifting from place to place.

*Oh, he's a sneaky one. I didn't even notice him and I know it all, or at least I act like it.*

"Who?"

*The one trying to sneak on Sora from behind. I think he goes by Braig, for now at least.*

"What do you mean for now?"

*People have many different faces that they show to other people, you can never really tell who someone is on the inside underneath their skin-*

"Ugh whatever save me this lecture I've heard it before. You don't even need to put people's lives on the line in the reaper's game why don't you just lecture them all to death."

Sora tried to grab his keyblade at his side to meet the oncoming storm. Suddenly he felt something teleport behind him. He turned to see Braig's scarred face, centimeters away from him. Before Braig could reach him, Kairi swung her keyblade hard where he was. Braig teleported away like a coward and took shots from afar. Riku had already rushed to the king's side, and with Aqua, trying to rally them to leave the injured Ventus, Donald, alone for now and use their keyblades to protect the others.

Kairi danced around Sora, deflecting bullets as Braig sniped at him from afar. Her speedy and quick style knocked them out of the air.

She seemed so happy, able to protect Sora for once. However, that was also her downfall. All she could think of was protecting Sora, just like all Aqua could think of was protecting Terra and Ventus. It made Neku a little bit sad, watching all of these people so desperate to protect one another that they kept tripping over each other.

Braig, or Xigbar as he was currently being called aimed his gun right at Sora. Kairi saw the shot he was going to take just as he pulled the trigger and recklessly threw herself in front of it. She was hit right in the chest.

The next moment Terra batted Aqua aside and picked up his keyblade to charge at Sora. He aimed a wild slash, but again Kairi threw herself in the way, making it clear across her chest in a diagonal strike all the way down to her hip. She still held onto her keyblade even after that but fell to her
knees in the middle of the melee.

Xigbar appeared behind Sora just as he desperately reached out to Kairi, and grabbed him by his hood as if he was a helpless little kitten. “Shot through the heart, and you’re to blame.”

“Shut up!” He struggled against Xigbar, kicking his feet and trying to thrash about.

“I see you’re the same idiot you always were! You plod your way through world after world learning nothing, and try to play the hero yet again! Trying to get your way with force yet again! Didn't I tell you at the start this was exactly how it was going to end up? And what did you change at all? Do you think destiny would lose to the likes of you, you blithering idiot?”

“I’m not trying to control destiny! You guys are always the ones trying to control destiny, I just want to follow it what I’m meant to do. I can accept it.”

Suddenly, Xigbar’s face which already had a significant crack running down the middle of it cracked again. A grin spread on his lips like his face was slowly breaking into pieces or maybe just the mask he was wearing over his face as he disappeared, dragging Sora with him. He reappeared on a high cliff over which the entire melee could be seen.

Xigbar let him hang there like he was hanging from a noose. “Here’s a little secret, I’ve seen… so many like you who think they’re special so they can throw everything to fate. Look at them down there, breaking, suffering, the one they’re all suffering for is you. Get it? Because you tricked them into believing you are some hot shit, the magical chosen one.”

He leaned forward and whispered into Sora’s ears. “You saw what happened to Roxas, Xion and Namine didn’t you? They were all broken for your sake. One by one, they were smashed to pieces to rebuild you. Because you’re special. Because you’re the chosen one. Because you’re the hero? How does it feel? How does it feel having your heart assembled from their broken pieces?”

“I wanted them to be their own people! I never wanted them to sacrifice themselves for me.”

“In the end, you couldn’t even bring yourself to be the one to do it. You couldn’t destroy them. You pushed all the hard work on Riku. He had to do those horrible things for your sake. You always talk about fighting for your friends, but really they’re the ones who fight for you when you go off and take a nap and then wake up when it’s time to play hero.”

“I… I…”

“So tell me this time what are you going to do? Are you going to play the hero? Are you going to play the martyr? What’s your role? What do you want to protect? Everybody? Yourself?”

Sora could find no answer. The smile finally fell off of Xigbar’s lips, along with the last pieces of what he was using to hide. He could not bear to look at Sora anymore.

“I hate types like you the most. Who just assume everything’s going to work out for them because they’re special and destiny’s on their side then push the hard work of cleaning up their messes onto someone else. If you just want to be fate’s puppet then go dance on your strings, fool.”

Before Sora could eve find the willpower to face the brewing storm threatening to swallow all of them when he needed to stand at the lead of the pack he had been cut off like this. Xigbar's words cut through him so easily.
He threw Sora back as if he was bored as if he was done with him. As Xigbar stood there he disappeared into a cloud of darkness. He threw Sora back to the mouth of the storm after reminding him how helpless he really was. He looked to Aqua, Riku and the King standing in front of him all of them trying to meet the storm.

“It can’t be… no….”

As Aqua saw the storm of heartless coming towards her, she remembered how many times she had fought against similar waves of darkness in the past. They beat against her again and again. She thought she could endure all of them. She thought she could be an island.

She could not… She realized as she watched the heartless swirl towards her. She could not fight again, not on her own, she did not want to be dragged back to the world of darkness. She was weak. Weak. Weak. The stronger she pretended to be the weaker she became. The more she fought back, all she did was damage herself. As if she was fighting herself in the mirror. Every time she hit, cracks appeared in herself.

She was nothing without Terra or Ventus. The reason she had held on for so long was nothing if she could not be strong enough to save them. She failed just like she did thirteen years ago. Her fingers loosened and the keyblade fell out of her hands.

“Aqua!” Riku cried out after her as the darkness took her away. One by one, the darkness dragged them all away Lea, Donald, Goofy, Ventus, the king, until only Sora, Riku and Kairi were left. Sora had not been heroically watching and fighting with determination until the bitter end, all he did was watch like a scared helpless child.

Sora fell to his knees. He had nothing inside of him for a heroic last stand. Everything that made up himself, had been taken away from him. He was hollowed out. He had no strength of his own left to stand with.

He clutched at the side of his face and cried out. A twisted hollow echo of a scream. His own agony echoing again and again in his emptied out self. Then he collapsed forward clutching his head too. He could not bear to look at it, without them around it was too painful.

“Aaaaaaaaaugggggggggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

He could not look. He could not look because if he did he would see he was all alone. He would see that they had disappeared, and he had disappeared as well. He turned his eyes away and shut them. In doing so his body collapsed, caving in on itself. There was no reason for him to stay strong if they were not there. They were all relying on him as Riku said and he failed all of them.

“Sora?” Riku turned to him. Riku’s voice was like a light in the darkness calling out his name.

“They’re gone. Donald, Goofy, the King, Axel, Aqua, Ventus, Gone forever. What do we do? Without them I… All my strength came from them, they gave me all of it. Alone, I’m worthless. We’ve lost. It’s over.”

Riku reached out to comfort him for a moment. Then he decided all on his own that Sora did not need it. The sora he knew was stronger than that. The sora he knew had beaten him and reclaimed the keyblade all on his own even when Donald and Goofy left him and he had nothing but a wooden
sword. The Sora he knew was the person whose heart was strong enough to pull off miracles with a smile.

“Sora, you don’t believe that. I know you don’t.”

He tightened his hand and turned away from Sora going to face the tempest all on his own. It looked like the worst case scenario right now, but really it could be far worse. As long as Sora remained there was still hope. He could leave everything to Sora.

Just like Ansem told him in the middle of Sora’s heart, that Sora had the power to believe in people so strongly he could even bring the nobodies that never existed back and make them real. He could bring a reality where they won into existence.

It was much better if Riku disappeared and Sora was the one who was left behind. Riku knew if he left it all to Sora, that Sora would find a way that he never could. He just needed to show Sora that he believed in him.

That to Riku there was nobody in the world more worth fighting for than Sora. Riku looked back to Kairi, who after taking two terrible wounds had still gotten back up on her feet. She wanted to keep fighting that badly like she was making up for lost time.

Riku smiled at her awkwardly. “Protect Sora, okay? I’m leaving it to you.”

It was the same thing he had said to Sora long ago, protect Kairi. If Riku was the one to disappear than everything would be fine. Sora and Kairi fit so naturally together. They were the heroes of this story.

As the spiraling storm of heartless converged on him, Riku had never felt calmer. He took it all on himself, bringing his single key against the converging heartless to protect Sora. As the darkness began to eat away at the edge of his being he felt himself disappear.

Then suddenly, he saw a light behind him. Rather than stay with Sora as Riku had asked him, Kairi suddenly appeared right next to Riku crossing her keyblade against his.

“Kairi, what are you...?”

“There’s no way I’d let you disappear alone. I want to protect him too! You’re not the only one who’d die for him!”

“Kairi...”

Even with the two of them pushing all their strength against the storm it was not enough. Sora could only reach for them at the edges of their beings were eaten away by darkness and their forms shattered into pieces of light. Both of their hearts rushed forward slamming into his chest. He heard their voices like faint goodbyes.

“Sora, you’re protected us so many times.” Riku began.

“This time, let us protect you.” Kairi finished.

The deepest wish of his two closest friends was that he survive even if everything else was extinguished, even at the cost of themselves. Sora could not grant their wish. In the next moment, the
darkness took him as helpless as Xigbar had called him. A helpless fool who could only be puppeteered by others, convincing himself he was the hero all along. Darkness ate away at the corner of his vision and the world disappeared.

And so, as foretold, darkness prevailed, and light expired.

Neku regained his consciousness in the real world, sitting straight up as if thrown back into the waking world by the sheer force of the memory he had witnessed. The world was a dizzy whirl around him for a moment as he regained his bearings. It was easy to forget that what he was witnessing was just a memory, that had already happened and there was nothing he could do to change it. Just watching it unfold made him feel completely helpless just as Sora had.

He looked down and saw a blanket had been pulled over his sleeping form. In the corner, Sora’s body was lying there, empty, like a discarded puppet. They were in the back room of the Cafe now. Yoshiya had been watching him the whole time. He sat on the desk just to get a little bit more height over Neku. Neku’s eyes trailed down, from Yoshiya’s catlike lilac eyes always on him, to the collar that he left flauntingly open. This time rather than immediately make some smart remark, Yoshiya jumped down and closed the distance between them. He reached forward and Neku flinched, but Yoshiya’s touch did not hurt at all. His thumbs softly wiped past Neku’s delicate eyelashes, brushing the tears away.

Neku had not even realized he was crying. Joshua helped him so silently, without rubbing it in his face. He was such a strange boy. The worst part was not how consistently annoying he was, but rather how inconsistent. He seemed like a person existing in his own little world who did not even see other people at one moment, and then the next saw deep into your own soul and understood you better than you did, he spoke to you with words that you desperately wanted to hear.

“So Sensitive Neku. You really are a lot like Sora. You care so deeply. No, even deeper. It always hurts you like this. It hurts you too much.”

He spoke like he knew everything as usual, but Neku did not feel like he was being mocked. He wondered if this was the bratty god’s twisted version of sympathy. It must have been. Joshua acted like he was above humanity, but he was always desperately trying to see himself in them, trying to raise them up to his level.

In that way, he was just like everybody else. He did not want to be alone. He was like everybody else in the most pathetic and desperate way possible, so no wonder he suppressed it.

Neku realized why he had suppressed this side of himself, the sora-like aspect because he too had felt the agony Sora did when he saw someone ripped away from him and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Utterly powerless. A car slammed into them and dragged their flesh against the ground. He went there to meet them that day and he saw their body. No trace of his friend was left in this. It was hard to believe a soul could have ever occupied something so ugly.

He let Yoshiya wipe his tears away, standing still doing nothing to push him away. Joshua did not comfort him either, he went quiet looking like he had gotten bored and then let go of Neku turning
“A claw machine… I want to play on a claw machine.” He announced suddenly to himself.

“What are you talking about?”

“Neku you need a break. You’ll be overwhelmed if you keep going. I’ve decided you’re going to take me to an arcade.”

“Oh, lucky me,” Neku said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

Joshua pretended not to notice his sarcasm. He smiled in a charming way, which to Neku was all the more infuriating. Joshua had a perfectly innocent, beautiful smile, he could wear at a moment’s notice like it was painted on. The bastard. “After all that misfortune, your luck is finally turning around. Good for you, Neku. You might not regret meeting me after all.”

As they walked, Joshua walked a few steps behind him the whole time. He looked like he did not know how to walk side by side with someone. Neku cut straight through the crowds of people.

“Don’t be in such a rush. I might get lost, Neku.”

“Please do.”

“So mean to me! And I was looking forward to this, some normal time at the arcade. Just like any other two boys might spend their day. I’ve never experienced that before.”

“Well of course, if you’re there it’s pretty much guaranteed not to be normal.”

“Oh…” Joshua said softly and added nothing else.

When they finally reached an arcade he was familiar with, Neku went to the counter and exchanged for some tokens. He slid one into the machine, as Joshua leaned against it. The entire time as he tried to get an animal from the claw machine, Joshua nitpicked his technique.

“Shut up already!”

Neku said when he was almost out of tokens with no stuffed animals to show.

“I bet I can get this without your help! I don’t need you.”

“Oh, but everything turns out so much better when I’m involved.”

“You’re the only one who thinks that! Here let me show you! Zip a lip for five minutes.”

“Oh, are you going to show me something? Do you want to make this interesting then.”

“Oh god, not another game and wager. I’m not risking my life over a damn claw machine.”

“Boo. Games are no fun with nothing on the line. How about this then, let’s wager information. If you win me a stuffed animal I’ll answer your questions honestly. For every one, you win.”

Neku turned away for a moment. He ran a hand through his orange hair, which was combed back away from him.
into several spikes. “Please. You lie so much you probably can’t even tell the truth anymore.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

Joshua kept taunting him with that. He was trying his hardest to make Neku regret trusting him. It was like he was trying purposefully to destroy that trust. Who even knew with him. He liked to push things, that was his nature. He pushed people too, sometimes it made them better, sometimes it made them worse, but Joshua assumed he had to be the one to push people’s fates around like that. He had to be involved.

Neku went quiet and focused on the machine. A moment later, a cat plushie fell into the prize hatch. He picked it up and shoved it into Joshua’s face.

“Why are you being so hard on Sora?”

“Asking about him first. Look at you, you really do want to protect him. I hope one day you’ll want that badly to save me too-” Joshua stopped taunting when Neku hissed at him like an angered cat, “It’s because he didn’t change. All of Sora’s friends around him are so in love with the image of him that they wanted him to stay exactly the same, but what good did that do him in the end?”

Neku could not disagree. Yet, it still bothered him how little Joshua seemed to feel. Especially when the scene of everybody being torn away from Sora had affected him so much. “That’s how he got broken then. He lost everybody and the darkness ate him.”

“That can’t be. He would have just become heartless if that happened or lost his heart. He tampered with something much worse and fell much further than losing his heart. I still don’t know what exactly he meddled with to somehow face a fate worse than when the reaper’s get erased.”

“So you think he’s cocky? That’s why you’re being so harsh on him.”

“All of his precious friends didn’t challenge him to change at all. In my opinion, his antagonists were being much kinder to him, at least they bothered to point out his flaws and gave him a chance to fight back.”

“Of course you’d end up sympathizing with the villains.”

“It’s the antagonist’s job to challenge the protagonist and then be defeated when the protagonist grows to overcome them. It’s the ideal place to push people into their best selves and watch.”

“Yeah, if you’re a messed up control freak with a complex,” Neku said, causing Joshua to frown slightly in a pout as he put another token into the machine. This time he brought out a hedgehog, shoving it in Joshua’s face once more.

“You say you hate people that can’t change. Does that mean you hate yourself as well?”

“…” Joshua simply looked down, holding the two stuffed animals in his arms.

“That’s too bad. No matter how much you try, you can’t make me hate you. Maybe it’s because… I see a better person you can be and I can’t hate that person.”

If Neku could change, Neku who rejected the whole world who ran away from it because it had hurt him too much then anybody could. Perhaps that was why he wanted to be by Joshua’s side again.
He wanted to show the other boy the lesson that he had taught him.

“Do you trust me?”

Neku suddenly asked.

“That’s two questions.” Joshua raised his head.

“You didn’t answer the first one.”

Joshua’s lilac eyes traced around his being as if he was memorizing the way Neku looked in this moment to lock the scene away in his heart forever. “You should already know the answer to that one, you’re my dear partner after all.”

Even though Joshua looked more open than usual, of course, he would never answer a question like that straightforwardly. It was too bad, Neku wanted to do it. He wanted to show Joshua parts of himself that even Joshua did not know. He wanted to show Joshua that he could be better.

Because it hurt.
It hurt watching the person you care about being hated.
Even if they were just hating themselves.

Neku put everything he had into the final token and got a sheep plushie that he shoved in Joshua’s face as well.

“What happened to Mr. H?”

Neku finally asked. Of course, he did not trust Joshua’s earlier explanation. He wanted to be friends with Joshua, and he wanted to trust him, but trusting him blindly would destroy all chances at the first two desires.

“He was banished. Sanae was a dear and opened the door to darkness in this world causing us all to get swallowed up and you and your friends to stop existing after all.”

Neku’s mouth fell open. He could not believe that Mr. H would do such a thing, but he did not get the sense Joshua was lying either. After all, for what he thought was the greater good, Mr. H was willing to become a fallen angel and had even revived somebody as unstable as Minaminoto Sho and let him run loose like a wild card.

“So… that’s why you’re dragging me into your games. Without Mr. H you-”

He would disappear.
He would not be able to hold himself back.
He would lose sight of himself again.

“You’re overthinking things. I just wanted to play games with you again.” Joshua said, with an innocent childish smile. “Life’s so lonely otherwise.”
Riku and Kairi had yet to leave the land of departure. Just as they were about to in order to give Namine and Rei time to develop on their own, Kairi spotted a sparring arena in the distance. Riku had agreed to mentor her, even though they had gotten sidetracked by helping Namine.

Riku remembered the first day he had agreed to this, the two of them spent almost the entire day sparring. It was the first time they had been together in so long since Sora disappeared. The entire time with Namine as well they had been next to each other. He wondered when it became so easy.

He always thought he had to fight the whole world to earn his place next to Sora and Kairi. That was why he desired the strength to protect so much. Now, something had changed. The two of them had gone from avoiding each other and dealing with their pain on their own, even though what they needed was to be with somebody the most, to always being around each other without even noticing it.

Of course, there was still something unsaid between them. Even when they were next to each other they could not hear it. It was there even if they were not aware of it. It would not go away by ignoring it.

That unseen thing. Perhaps they were afraid if they looked it might disappear.

Kairi dragged Riku to the outdoor sparring area, and then picked up one of the wooden keyblades that was left lying around. Apparently, they were toys made by Terra to spar with when he was younger and then given to Ventus when he was brought to the island.

Riku shook his head however and summoned forth his real keyblade Braveheart. Kairi smiled at him. There was definitely something different, perhaps meeting Rei and Namine had made Riku want to grow up a little and treat her more seriously. Either way, she was happy, she did not want him to hold back against her. Sora was always overprotective, it was cute how hard he tried to impress her but she always felt like Riku saw her as is. She was the one who saw him when he was wearing Ansem’s face, and he was the one who trusted her to come with them in the World that Never Was when Sora wanted to leave her behind.

They could understand one another, they could close the gap of one year she knew they could. She wanted to show it to him even if it meant proving her strength because Riku was a dumb boy who sometimes forgot about his own big brain and thought in terms of strength alone. Perhaps by crossing keyblades, they would be able to understand each other’s hearts more, or something cheesy like that.

That was how the boys had done it originally when Riku became lost Sora fought against him again and again not once ever giving up on their friendship. If Riku were to become lost to her… Kairi wanted to know she had the resolve to do that too. If Riku were to become lost what a terrible thing to think about. She would have nothing left.

That wasn’t the reason why she was spending so much time with Riku now though… No, that terrible thought never even entered her mind. She wanted to shut it out, forget about it.

She threw herself into the fight, aggressively, like she had something to prove. She wondered who
she was proving it to with just the two of them there. She wanted to prove Sora wrong, perhaps. She wanted to prove him wrong because he had disappeared. He disappeared because he wanted to save everybody else but he did not want to be saved. He wanted to save her, but she could not save him.

Sora was not here, she was fighting against Riku and also herself. Their keyblades clashed in an inelegant dance. Riku looked terrified the whole time. It amused her a little bit how he was always so dashing and confident with everybody else, but around her, he became just like any other clumsy boy. They were not fighting with keyblades, they were a boy and a girl holding onto each other dressed in their finest clothes circling around one another. In that situation, Riku would be the sweaty boy who had never even danced with a girl before, terrified to step on her feet.

There was another reason he always looked so scared around her that Kairi could not find as funny. He was scared to hurt her. Kairi wondered when Riku had decided in his mind, that she was Beauty and he was the beast. Especially when it could easily be the other way around. Kairi knew this because she had seen his face when he transformed. Iku was a beauty, dashing, Prince-like, always looking to fight for others, but when it came to his friends he was willing to become a beast for their sake.

That was why he was holding back so much of himself when he was around her. He was like a prisoner shackling himself. Even when she thought he was taking her seriously now in their spars, he only blocked her and never attacked. He was not even using magic. The two of them had both fallen silent during the fight not even exchanging words between blows. Kairi was always the one who started conversations, otherwise, Riku would stay silent in his own head forever. Now that she was trying to think things through though Riku simply watched her with those ice cold eyes as always.

She felt agitated. She wanted to show him. She wanted him to see. She wanted him to look at him. The sounding of metal from their spar echoing in her ears Kairi raised her keyblade into the air and brought it down hard with a two-handed blow, Riku blocked with one hand. She twisted the blow away at the last minute and heard a terrible noise from his wrist.

Riku’s keyblade twisted out of his hand and spun across the empty training field. “Riku…?” Kairi forgot her confused adolescent feelings at once. There was one thing she knew about Riku, no matter what he would always hide how he was hurting. He was so good at it he even hid it from himself, once he finished a relay race with a twisted ankle and did not even notice until after the race was over. He finished in first of course because it was Riku. He was always like that, when part of him was broken he never stopped to rest, he just pushed himself further. Even now she had heard his body make such a terrible noise but Riku did not show it on his face at all.

He merely put his hands up in the air and kept the same calm and collected expression as usual. “Looks like you win this one. Don’t surpass me too quickly otherwise you won’t need me as master anymore.”

As Riku turned around to get the keyblade Kairi grabbed him by the hand. Riku paused for a moment his mouth hung open. Before he could get any words out, Kairi wrenched his whole arm back and bit at the fingers of the long leather gloves he was wearing. “Kairi, this is cheating-”

Riku must have thought she was still trying to spar. “You’re not getting away from me that easily pretty boy,” Kairi said in a rush, as she slowly peeled the glove away from his hand. Riku struggled against her for a moment until his opposite hand rushed the soft part of her chest on accident. Then Riku’s whole body froze and Kairi had her way with him. She finished peeling the leather glove away from the last digit and exposed his naked hand underneath.
His wrist was twisted, purple, and swollen something awful by this point. It looked like he had broken it almost two days ago, and just kept using the wrist. Riku only looked guilty for the fact that he had been caught, and Kairi was upset about it. *Jeez, that guy.* Kairi thought as she grabbed his non-broken wrist and tugged him down to it on the ground next to her. *He’s barely concerned about himself at all.*

He should know better. Sora was gone. If he disappeared she would have no one left. No that wasn’t the reason. He wasn’t all she had left after Sora. That made him seem like a consolation prize. “Take your shirt off.”

“K...Kairi.” He sputtered.

Kairi did not listen, she immediately reached forward and grabbed at the end of his shirt around his waist. She would rip it off like she had the gloves if she had to. Riku eventually pushed her away, and willingly removed the jacket and pulled the shirt over his head himself.

He wondered when Kairi had lost all sense of personal space. Maybe it was just for him. No, there was no way. He was not special to her in any way. They were not so close that they had forgotten they were separate bodies with boundaries between them. They were not mistaking these days for their youth when the whole world consisted of just the three of them.

This closeness was an entirely new feeling, but Riku would deny every feeling it. All he could do was deny himself, it was the only way to keep himself in check.

Kairi was not even paying attention to Riku, or the awkward faces his usually cool expression twisted into as she poked at him. The moment she saw his bare chest, her eyes had become fixated on the scars that were crudely painted across it. “Riku, I was so distracted by your muscles last time I didn’t notice…”

“Distracted by my what…?”

“Why do you do this to yourself?”

His wrist was twisted to the point that it had turned purple. There was a large number of burn scars collected at the side of his waist, from the time that Xemnas had hit him with a close-range attack hard enough that Sora needed to drag him around and support him by the shoulder for him to even walk for a while. There were several darkened areas of skin from where flames had licked him in the past, especially when he called upon darkness for himself over and over again. The most recent wounds were from the battle at the keyblade graveyard, one of his ribs did not feel quite right underneath his skin as Kairi traced the contour as his chest dipped to become his stomach, and he had several scars from blows he took in the fight.

Riku took all of this and he kept going. He did not even complain once. Not to Rei who had lashed out against him and made him fight once more. Not to Kairi who was following him around and making Riku risk himself to protect her. Not to Aqua who was not performing her duties as master and making Riku work twice as hard when he was just as broken as everybody else. Not even to having to take his shirt off and show his scars like this, he simply pretended like he did not see them.
Her eyes could not make sense of what she saw before her. Riku always acted so distantly, like he was carrying a pain with him nobody could understand, and yet when he was so obviously in pain it was like it was nothing to him.

Kairi wanted to cry, but she had cried out all her tears for broken boys when Sora disappeared from her. Alone. Because Riku ran away from her that day. She got angry instead, curling up her soft and small hands into fists and hitting them against his chest. It felt like she was hitting them against a rock.


Riku still had not answered her. That was what he did when he was really upset. He got silent. He retreated to his own little island. She had no idea what to do with that. No matter how many waves broke against his shore they never reached him. She would prefer it if he screamed in her face, or broke down crying, but it was rare for Riku to ever feel something so straightforward.

“Kairi… I don’t get why you’re upset, but I’m not trying to make you upset this time really.” He finally answered, fumbling with his words.

“Why do you keep punishing yourself like this? When is it going to be enough for you?”

She saw his eyes widened. In he always stone-like the expression, it was like the earth had cracked open. He finally averted his eyes as if he could not look at her. She felt like she had won against the earth.

“I tried to set the wound properly.”

“Hmm, how did you set it, exactly?”

“I jammed it back into place in a hurry.”

Kairi hummed, in a, *I Told you so kind* of way. She used that hum a lot around a boy who was supposed to be smart like Riku. Kairi picked herself up because this was an area for training they had medical supplies as well. It was not always as simple as casting Cura when more complicated injuries set in they needed to be corrected.

This time Riku offered Kairi his hand. It was not as gallant or knight like when Riku usually gave his hand to a lady. Of course, he never realized what he was doing when he acted like that. It was different somehow like he was offering his hand because he needed it to be held.

That hand that was so strong for everybody else, looked fragile when she was turning it over in her hands and holding onto it. She inspected the wound once more and set it. There was nothing to do about the older scars for now, but Kairi went over a fresher one at the upper part of his arm bandaging that one as well.

Riku looked embarrassed about the whole thing. Kairi thought he would be less red if she had accidentally seen him naked… not that she ever thought about such a thing. “You’re saving me once again…” Riku said, looking down still as she tied off the last bandage.
“Okay, well next time I’ll throw you to the sharks and they can eat that pride of yours.”

“I hope they find more use for it than I do.”

“You could laugh you know, that was a good line.

“Kairi, you’ve been so rough on me lately.”

“Maybe you like it rough.”

“What?”

“Actually, I don’t know what I just said either. Weird.”

“No, I mean is there something bothering you? I’m not Sora, I’m sorry I can’t feel the same way you do about things but… I’ll still try to understand.”

Kairi hated when he apologize like that. It sounded like he was saying he was sorry he was not Sora.

“Don’t you think this is too much for you to be handling all alone? Aqua’s a master too, and she has both of her friends back so-”

“Terra’s still sick.”

“Yeah, but tending to his bedside every day. What are they exactly?”

“I’m sure she’d do the exact same thing to Ven.”

“I’m not talking about that, I’m just saying, you heard their story. Aqua was always chasing after Terra, she was always trying to make sure he stayed on the right path, she worries for him more than anyone else, she even sacrificed herself for Terra’s body when there was no trace left of him there. She’s the most logical and rule-bound of all of us, but it’s like all logic flies out the window for Terra.”

All logic flies out the window. Kairi wondered if Riku could ever do that. Throw away that internal logic that was so precious to him to act for the sake of somebody else. What feelings could drive a person like that to do something?

“Do you… think Aqua’s flawed as a keyblade master? Is that what you’re saying?”

Riku was still not getting it though.

“I was just wondering what kind of special feelings would motivate Aqua to do that. I don’t think she’s wrong. No… I’m jealous. Even if I were to feel that way about someone… Aqua would move the sky and the earth to protect Ven and Terra but I’ve never been able to protect a single person.”
Riku understood a little bit now. He had no idea what this talk meant about special feelings but, Kairi and Aqua were both the girls of their groups. However, Aqua was the strongest and most experienced in the group. She was the one who saved both boys in the end, even if she had to take the long journey there. Kairi was the least experienced in the group, she was the one being saved.

“You’re not weak. You’re just inexperienced like Ven. You’ll get there I know you will.” Riku said finally bringing his eyes up to look directly at her. He could list all the ways Kairi had already surpassed him. She understood people more than he did, she was kinder than he was, but he felt if he put himself down in front of her he might provoke her anger again.

“You know, I think most people would assume that you’re a big dumb tough guy like Terra, but to me, you’re more like Aqua. No matter how lost you get in the darkness you always come to save us in the end.”

“I see.”

“Plus, you’re all graceful like she is.”

“Graceful? Me? Can you tell me when I do it next time because I feel like I only ever screw up.”

“You’re always so smooth in front of everybody else, Riku without even realizing it. When are you going to be my knight?”

“Um… I don’t need to be your knight. I’d rather fight alongside you.”

Riku did not know what else to say. He let his wounded self lean on Kairi for a while, the two of them talking like that. It was a meaningless chatter between friends. They still had not talked about what they were both purposefully keeping silent on. Yet, being able to talk at all was still a relief. Riku could not remember the last time he had let himself lean against somebody like that, it was probably the time that Sora let him lean on his shoulder when he was unable to walk on his own.

♛

A scattered dream that’s like a far off memory.
A far off memory that’s like a scattered dream.

The sun hung over the sky as always. That was what the town was named for after all. They were all so happy and smiling, sunny skies above, but it was like the light of the sun and the light of other people’s smiles just wanted to get in her way.

Glare. That was the word for too much light in your eyes. It was giving her a headache. She glared back at everyone like she was trying to burn a hole in the area right in front of her. She was a dandelion. A flower meant to blow away to another garden and take root there. She was someone who could bloom anywhere, that was how strong she was.

Strength was supposed to come from friendship and all that icky stuff but for some reason, this beautiful city she was fighting to protect had become an eyesore to her. People passed by her eyes and she stopped caring about them, and sooner or later she ended up alone. People knew to avoid
eyes that glared daggers like hers.

She had started to wonder why she was still even putting up with this. It was no fun… for some reason. The sights that passed her eyes it was like they were not even real. That was why they were such an eyesore.

She just wanted a break from the light, so she found the furthest removed alleyway she could. In the shadows, she finally stretched herself out. She felt the cold stone staircase she was sitting n. A dandelion that floated away and got lost, would never bloom into a proper flower. If it could not take root somewhere it would just choke and die. But if that meant avoiding more annoying people than that might have been worth it.

She finally let her eyes close, but the moment she did she felt something strange. It was like a new refreshing breeze had blown her way. She heard soft footsteps behind her. Before he even spoke up she noticed one thing about the man right away.

He smelled like flowers. The breeze carried his scent to her. It was an odd feeling for the first meeting like a vine had grown from where he was standing and slowly wrapped around her wrist, gently guiding her attention to him.

“Are you Elrena?”

A boy dressed in fine clothes, whose collar hung open like he was trying to show off. He wore a tight vest that made a sharp silhouette of his body. His pink hair was tousled and reached to just about his neck, he was just standing there in front of her like his bed head was the style.

In storybooks that she read.
A prince would appear from nowhere and be the first person to take the time to slowly look, A girl in the eyes.
The would fall in love from that sight alone.
But, those kinds of stories made her want to vomit. She wasn’t into that at all.
There was nothing special about the first meetings.

Even if the boy smelled like flowers and dressed like he was in a stage play, she still looked at the world with no romanticism at all.

“Um, yes…”

She stood up swinging he head around. She tried to look him in the eyes anyway, glancing up the stairway that separated them. The moment she stared at where his eyes were supposed to be, all she could see were empty holes.

His face was missing as if it had failed to load. The moment her mind noticed the discrepancy, the world around her failed to continue loading. Buildings disappeared, fuzzy effects scratched out the images in front of her, the world glitched out before her eyes.

As she heard white noise replacing the sounds of that city, his voice rose just about it. “I want to ask you something about my little sister ____”

No matter how hard she tried she could not make out the last part. Her memories broke apart like
somebody had cut the film and let the reel keep spinning. As everything whitened out, she suddenly awoke with a start sitting up with a sudden jolt as she did.

Larxene felt like she had just taken juiced up volts via a lightning storm straight to the neck just to wake her up from the dead. In other words, regaining her heart felt like something similar to a bad hangover.

They were supposed to gain their old selves among Re-completing, but all she had was the same memories she had as a nobody with a bunch of glitched out broken memories added on top. Great. Fantastic. Super.

She was already so over this whole having a heart thing, and it had been about five seconds.

Ancient keyblade legacy? Light? Darkness? Whatever. Snooze. She was tired of hearing about old men blather on and on about it in monotone voices. She could care less about reclaiming any of those things.

Yet there was still something heavy on the tip of her tongue. “Laur… Laur…I…” Her head turned around slowly as she looked at her hand. She was wearing clothes that were far too small for her and that she did not recognize, and she was in a place she did not recognize either, but most of all in her hand there was something she did not recognize there.

She held onto one of the thousands of rusted up keyblades that made up the graveyard. She tried to lift it into the air but the moment she did, it broke into pieces in her hand, that scattered like dispersing light. When it was gone her hand felt particularly empty, like some part of her had gone missing.

“I… am….”

Recompleted.
If she had, then he might have as well.
She was never too stoked about having or losing a heart after all. To her, it felt like she had lost nothing. She had never lived for anybody but herself in the first place.

She had thrown away pain and all those weak little human feelings. Good riddance, really. Falling to darkness and turning the full villain might have been the best decision she had ever made. Not that she understood the details of how it had happened but who cares if she was happy enough with the end result.

However, he seemed to be bothered by it. He hated when people misused their hearts when they had hearts but chained them to the wrong things when they would willingly throw themselves away and become puppets for the sake of attachment.

Even though they were always together as eleven and twelve it always seemed like he was missing someone even when with her.

If he could gain his heart back.
If she could see him again.
If gaining their hearts back was a prerequisite to meeting him.
Two people who were not even all that close as human beings met as horrible monsters and became good friends, and then that friendship became more important than any human connection they had. Meeting someone and then falling in love in the next life was a barf-worthy story to Larxene, but… maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.

She looked around for him. She would never describe it as frantic, it was just natural for her movements to be like that, every twitch sizzled with energy, she jolted from place to place. Even when it was something as simple as looking around she was animated.

Perhaps somewhere in this empty battlefield, she would find him again. As she thought that, her heart that she did not even want to swell all the way up to her throat. She felt like she might swallow it. She suddenly heard the heart that had not beaten for years, drumming loud in her ears.

Suddenly, a face appeared in front of her. It took up her whole world.

“Hey, Larxy! I’ve been looking around this place all day but you’re the only one I found. Scouting was supposed to be my strong suit too, oh well! Hey, now that you’ve regained your heart, do you see the error of your ways for always being so mean to little old DemDem? If you show me an apology and some heartfelt tears I’ll grace you with my forgiveness.”

Larxene’s heart which had been in her throat sunk all the way to her stomach and boiled in its acid.

That was how someone who had once been part of a ride or die-duo was now part of the most unlikely duo possible with Demyx.

They had nothing else better to do. Especially Demyx who did nothing in general. So they decided to leave together and search for the other two legacies of the keyblade war, Luxord, and Marluxia.

Which was why they were currently even searching the land of departure as well. Larxene came here on some thin hope that he might have completed here, because of a connection to the former Castle Oblivion.

As she watched from the shadows, all she saw was the blonde haired boy who looked like Roxas but wasn’t Roxas for some reason (note: she didn’t care about the explanation) playing with what looked to be a walking, talking stuffed cat toy.

“That cat…”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re one of those girls whose horrible to everybody but secretly has a soft spot for cats.”

Larxene turned her head back and glared at him. Glaring daggers was not enough for Demyx she looked at him like she was using her mind to erase his image from the scenery in front of her. “You know you think for someone who's good for nothing and has zero charisma who everybody ignores you’d at least be good at being sneaky.”
“I’m very sneaky when I want to be. How do you think I avoided all that work?”

“Then, why don’t you use that now?”

“You see in this situation I would have to work to be sneaky, therefore it’s doing work. As opposed to usually where I act sneaky to avoid doing work, therefore the net cost of work that it takes to be sneaky is lower than the sum total of work I have to do.”

“That’s pretty complicated math for someone who can’t even count his three brain cells. It’s amazing how much you waste.”

“Hey, hey, wasted time is the time I don’t have to spend working.”


“Hey, don’t gesture to all of me vaguely like that, double hey!” Demyx let out a loud gasp. “Not the hair gel. That’s the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Sssssh, already. I’m trying to watch that cat.”

“See, you’re getting angry at me for putting off work but you’re looking at a cute cat picture that’s like procrastination 101. Or at least it has been since Zexy invented the internet.”

“I’m trying to recover my memories here.”

“I’m trying to do that too.”

“Well, if you did recover a memory wouldn’t you remember something? Because all I see you doing is running your mouth.”

“Running…” Demyx said, leaning against the back wall they were hiding behind. He sunk all the way to the floor. “You even made talking sound exhausting. Just the worst.”

Demyx had been doing some very intensive training to try to recover his legacy as a lost keyblade warrior. He flicked his wrist in the air and went. “Keyblade.” And then flicked his wrist again and went again. “Keyblade.”

He did this every time his mind was centered and all zen and stuff. Also, when he got bored. It was hard work, trying to call the weapon of pure light forth from his heart. His wrist was totally starting to get sore. “C’mon, keyblade…”

Somehow despite the combining of their two amazing talents, water and lightning the two of them had managed to get nothing done at all. Larxene finally stopped staring at the cat not wanting to think about why looking at it made her feel such strange loneliness and snapped back at Demyx. “Would you just shut up already!”

This time she was the one raising her voice and blowing their cover, right as Riku and Kairi walked by on the way to return home. Kairi immediately took a battle stance stepping in front of Riku
because his wrist was broken.

“Larxene,” Riku said.

“Umm… the other guy.” Kairi said looking at Demyx.

Demyx immediately sat up to complain. He even stopped slouching. Complaining was one of the few things that were worth the effort. “Oh come on, you never even fought her how come you remember her name but I’m just the other guy!”

“Of course I remember her. I nearly killed her.” Larxene retorted.

“Larxene,” Riku said, already turning into a knight without even realizing it. He might as well put his armor on. There was a way to do that with keyblades after all even if they had not quite learned that yet.

“Keep your sword in your pants, pretty boy, we’re not here for that. That was soooo like two schemes ago.”

Larxene said brushing her hair back in annoyance, which flattened her two blonde antennae for a moment before the spiked back up all on their own.


“But that was the official scheme. You know, the one where we’re both going to die and the other one is going to win.”

“Exactly. But hey, I’m not talking to you.” Larxene dismissed.

“Says you! Oh who am I kidding, you don’t even have a plan.”

Larxene barely tolerated people in the first place. Now suddenly, there were three more around her plus one Demyx who did not count as human in her eyes but still was rather loud and obnoxious.

“As if I’ll believe that. What kind of scheme are you running this time?”

She heard the familiar whir of a metal disc cutting through the air. Larxene quickly threw her head down, grabbing Demyx by the collar and forcing him to dodge as well.

Axel caught the spinning chakram reforming it into the grip of his keyblade. Rather than looking like they had both been saved by him, Riku just looked confused at his sudden appearance at the exact same time.

Seriously, how did everybody know they were here?

“Axel, what are you even doing here?” He asked.

“Didn’t I tattle on you to Isa?” Kairi said, with a tilt of her head.

“Hey, just as I was heading back I noticed these two sneaking around. So, are you here to settle the score for all the way back when in the organization? What scheme are you running with Marluxia…?”

Axel assumed this was about him, as he was so natural to do.

Larxene barely tolerated people in the first place. Now suddenly, there were three more around her plus one Demyx who did not count as human in her eyes but still was rather loud and obnoxious.

“Please, I’m so over that Axel. Trust me not everybody is as hung up on you as…” She pointed. It
was rude. “Well, you.”

Larxene’s attitude was the only thing that was keeping her afloat. She never wanted a heart to begin with after all. She did not care for reclaiming her old memories, repenting for what she had done in the past, and she especially didn’t want to feel whole again.

She did not want to feel anything at all. She preferred it as a nobody, cackling, playing the role of the two-dimensional villain, that was much easier for her than navigating whatever confusing mess this was.

When she faded away the first time, she desperately clung onto herself refusing to believe that she had lost. She tried to scare others but at that moment she was more scared than anybody else, grabbing at the tattered, fading away pieces as they left her body that broke apart into darkness. She had been so desperate to keep it together then, and at the moment she had no idea why she had even felt that.

What exactly was worth enduring all of this annoyance for? She had no need for philosophy, having a heart was not meaningful, or meaningless, it was just annoying, an endless list of things that pissed her off. An endless list of reasons to cut people off, push them away, and generally act unpleasant.

Yet there was a reason she had come back.
There was a reason she was putting up with all this.
There was someone she wanted to see again.
To make all the terrible things slightly more bearable.
Life was livable with him around.

All she could do though was a grasp at her own shoulders and try not to fall apart like the time she had faded. That emotion of breaking apart was still there and it flowed through her as she was overwhelmed. Stupid heart. Useless to the end.

“I don’t even know where Marluxia is. We can’t find him. He’s nowhere.”

“We tried very hard. Watch. Keyblade.” Demyx said as he struck the exact same dramatic pose that Axel used to summon his keyblade, before giving up when nothing happened. “Eh, must be in the flick of the wrist.”

Axel paused for a moment, putting himself between Larxene and the kids. “What do you mean you don’t know where he is? Didn’t he complete like you and Isa?”

Larxene shook her head. She gripped at the black robe she was wearing. “There’s no guarantee if someone fades that they’ll Re-complete.”

Demyx did not seem capable of reading her mood at all. “Yeah, that’s why she’s got me looking out at every world. If his heartless hasn’t been destroyed yet maybe that’s what’s stopping him from coming back. Scouting is all I’m good for anyway.”

Axel brought a finger to his forehead as he thought. “Do you even know what his heartless looks like?”

“Ummm…” Demyx shrugged. “I’m assuming it would be plant-based?”
“It doesn’t matter though because even if we find it we can’t kill it. Only a heartless killed by a keyblade will return. That’s why we’re not here to antagonize, we’re here to… ugh… ick… I just can’t say it.”

Larxene looked like she had a serious case of indigestion, she even hiccuped as the words got caught in her throat. Suddenly, she kicked Demyx over causing him to topple and fall to the ground.

“You do it, you’re much more suited for begging.”

“I mean you’re right but it’s still not very nice to say,” Demyx said, before clasping his hands together and addressing Riku, Axel, and Kairi. “Will you help us, pretty pretty please, keyblade wielders?”
Maze of Thorns

Side A: Land of Departure
Track 8

So, the story resumes in the middle of a three-way standoff.

Kairi and Riku the left behind the duo, Larxene and Demyx the ‘not if you were the last person in the multiverse’ duo and Axel. Axel was on his own side by default because he hated sharing the attention.

“You guys were ancient keyblade wielders?” Riku dropped his guard for a moment in shock. “You’re asking us for help?” He had no idea which statement was the most shocking one, but Demyx at any point in his life being worthy of a keyblade (or worthy of anything really) was a stretch to him.

Larxene immediately felt defensive. Being pitied was one of the worst things for a villain. This devil did not need any sympathy. She threw one of her hands out in frustration. “If I had a keyblade it’d be different.”

Kairi stared down the face of the woman who had tormented Namine so much, now coming to ask them a favor. Even after regaining her heart it seemed little had changed about her. Perhaps she was just always unpleasant towards other people and losing her heart just made it worse. Even if she had once been a keyblade wielder like she claimed to be she doubted the twist to this story was that Larxene had a hidden heart of gold all along.

“Like you’re actually worthy to use one.”

“It’d be wasted on you,” Riku said, backing Kairi up. Even if Namine was with Rei now, he still felt protective of her for all the times he had failed her in the past. He could not care less what had happened to him at Castle Oblivion, but he could never forgive the terrible memories that were now chained to Rei and Namine’s heart.

Larxene’s lip twisted. She flippanently waved her hand in the air, before pointing straight at Axel. “The keyblade can’t be that picky if it chose him of all people.”

“Hey, don’t look at me like I’m an icky pick,” Axel said, twisting his hands around his keyblade defensively and holding it close to his chest.

“I’m just saying if you somehow managed to get one they must be giving them away like free candy.” Even she had been dubbed worthy of a keyblade at some point in the past, and Larxene knew she made a much better villain than a chosen hero.

Kairi did not understand, why someone would have a heart and still choose to act this way. She wondered if that was what made her a princess of pure light, she did not comprehend darkness at all especially in other people. “Apologize to Namine. If you do that we’ll help you.”

Larxene kicked Demyx from behind, once more driving her heel straight into his back. “You heard the girl, go get on your knees in front of Namine too.”

Kairi felt a little bit of pity for Demyx. “No, you’re the one who has to apologize. He didn’t even do
anything.”

Demyx stood back up, holding his hand in front of his empty chest as if he was the picture of innocence. “See, I’ve never done anything before, so therefore I’ve done nothing wrong. I’ve figured out how to win at life.”

“More like how to lose at life. Every single time.” Larxene flicked her tongue back and forth letting sarcasm drip off of it. She seemed to consider it for a moment, but whatever sincerity or thoughtfulness was in her eyes was erased the moment she shrugged her shoulders and turned away. “Guess you’re useless then. I’ll do it myself without relying on the brats.”

“You can’t even swallow your pride for one apology?”

“Who am I without my pride? I’d be a nobody. For real this time.” Larxene said without looking back. She clicked her tongue as if she expected Demyx to follow on her heels like a dog.

Riku had been thinking for a while but he finally spoke up. “Are you serious about chasing down some lost keyblade legacy? Do you just want another keyblade to use as a puppet like the time in oblivion?”

“Look, I’ve only ever done what I liked. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t want to.” She was terrible, but she was terrible with principles. Those principles only applied to how she treated herself, however, not other people. “I don’t care about keyblades this time, that was way too much trouble last time.”

“Then, why? I don’t get it…”

“He was the only one I liked.”

That simple, familiar sentiment. She guessed villains could have friends too.

Kairi and Riku would always care about Namine more, but Axel only heard his own feelings at the moment. Those familiar words reached him. He lowered his keyblade. “You kids scream. I’ll help these guys out.”

“But Namine…” Kairi spoke up.

“I’ll apologize to Namine later, but if you think about it I did kill both Marluxia and Larxene. That’s what it’s like to be a popular guy like me, I owe apologies everywhere.”

Kairi sighed. “Ugh, Axel enough with the apologies already.”

Riku put a hand on Kairi’s shoulder. “If he wants to help them it’s not our business. Besides, if it’s Axel helping them he’ll probably hurt just as much as he helps.”

“How can you say that? Everybody is rooting for the Axel redemption arc.”

“Because you’re you, that’s how. I’m sure just as many people are booing.”

Axel let the remark slide off of him with nonchalance. “Well, as long as they’re watching even if it’s to watch me crash and burn I don’t mind.”

Kairi grabbed Riku by the arm. “Hey, go easy on him. He’s like you, he means well.” Riku gave up
again to Kairi and waved both of them off. The two groups split up, Riku and Kairi heading back to
the Gummi Ship and the newfound trio heading elsewhere.

As Kairi and Riku walked back, Riku noticed that Kairi had yet to let go of him. He did not dare
mention this fact though. Instead, he looked at Axel’s pointy silhouette in the distance. “How much
do you bet we’re going to have to lean up whatever mess those three make later?”

“Sssssh you’re always so gloomy.”

“I’m gloomy?” Riku repeated back, with a scowl.

“Come on we need to rest your hand anyway instead of running off to do more keyblade work let’s
take a day off.”

“Shouldn’t we go back to school?”

“Let’s call it senior skip day.”

“I’m a third year, you’re a second year, and we haven’t gone to school in a week.”

“See this is why nobody thinks your fun.”

“I can be fun. Ha. Ha. Exclamation point.” The two continued to chat uselessly like that having no
idea what awaited them.

♛

As Axel’s keyblade glider came to a sudden stop, both Larxene and Demyx who were hitching a
ride were suddenly thrown off of it. He pulled the armored helmet off of his head, causing his
flattened red hair to spike up once more immediately.

As Larxene and Demyx picked themselves up, Axel smiled like he was waiting to be praised. “Pretty
impressive, right? I told you guys this is a way better way to travel than corridors of darkness. My
old friend Ventus taught me how to do it.”

“How many friends do you have exactly? You’re spreading everywhere, like a disease.” Larxene
said dusting herself off.

“Hey, friendship isn’t a disease. Maybe you’d have friends too if you had any likable qualities.”

“Why do I need that? You seem to be making a lot of friends just fine without them.” Larxene said
as she finished fixing her hair and slicking it back into its usual shape. Electricity magic was useful
for that making it all stick into place, she had no idea how porcupine Axel managed his gravity-
defying locks without it. She thought about it for a moment. “How did you even fit all that hair in
that helmet anyway?”

Before they could figure out the long-running mysteries of Axel’s hair, they were interrupted by
Demyx standing up between them. Surprisingly, Demyx was the only one on topic for once. “This is
the world Maruxia went too, right? On my recon, I spotted a strange heartless appearing around that
tower.”
The world they had traveled to was the kingdom of Corona. When Axel’s speeder touched down, they had landed in a field of grass and flowers. Green stretched into the horizon all around them, and the grass had broken both Demyx and Larxene’s fall. They were surrounded by a lush natural beauty that seemed to extend off into the horizon forever, the sight of it all overwhelmed Larxene, with nausea mostly. The beauty of the world most often made her want to gag.

She was over it already, like she was over most things. She took a step forward and saw her heel was about to land on a flower and crush it. She saw nothing in it at all, but... she wondered if Marluxia had thought anything special about his time in his world. She stepped aside avoiding stepping on the flower.

In the center of the green that seemed to stretch forever, in a clearing that dropped away from the forest around them, there was a single stone tower built up to reach for the sky. It reminded her of the spires of castle oblivion. “Another girl in a castle? Is that seriously what he came to this world for? Isn’t that a little BTDT.”

“BTDT?” Demyx asked.

“Been there done that. I know your haircut is from twenty years ago but try to keep current, abbreviations are popular now because of Zexion’s internet.”

“Hey, my hair is totally hip! Besides, don’t act like you’re all that young. If you’re from the ancient keyblade war doesn’t that mean you’re chronologically an old lady?”

Larxene responded to that reason. She threw a knife in his face, which Demyx dodged in time so that it only scraped across his shoulder. She did not feel particularly agitated by his remark though, just his loud existence, and the fact that he kept insisting on existing even though he was clearly really bad at it.

He was a distraction as she was trying to focus in on her thoughts. Most of the nobodies were desperate to reclaim their hearts from the time they were alive. They were guided only by the memories of their previous lives, so much so they put on acts and pretended to still have emotions. Their time when they had a heart was all they had to guide them. So then she must have gotten it all backward.

As she looked at the shape of the tower, all she could think about was Castle Oblivion. Even if it all ended in ruin, even if it was ruined by that spiky guy who was helping her out right now, it was the only time she could remember having any fun. She had no interest in chasing her memories as a somebody, it was her time as a nobody that was guiding her right now.

She wondered why he was hanging around castles too. Did their shared memories mean the same thing to him as they did to her? She doubted it. To Marluxia, memories were just chains that restricted the heart. She never learned what made him think that way, she never asked to begin with. What was between them was good enough to go unspoken. Or so she thought. Now that he wasn’t around she was only left with questions, and the empty space he once occupied. They were no longer in Castle Oblivion though, she could not make his memories appear around them in a card, she could not sift through them as Namine did, it was a pointless thing to wonder.

She gave up on the past a long time ago. She thought she gave up on all of it. She lived freely and broke all of the chains. She wondered why she kept coming back to this small piece of it then. If she threw the rest of it away why couldn’t she let go? Even though she knew it was pointless no matter
how hard she tried she knew she could not stop thinking about it. It was a prickly feeling like vines were slowly wrapping tighter and tighter around her heart.

Suddenly, she saw a figure appear in a black cloak at the base of the tower. Larxene forgot about the two tall boys behind her and rushed forward, grabbing the figure by the shoulder. “What do you think you’re doing making me wait so long? It’s been so boring without you.”

The figure turned around slowly and removed his hood. There was absolutely nothing underneath the hood, not even a nobody. Axel suddenly pushed her onto the ground away from the figure as the cloak collapsed.

“What are you thinking? Getting somebody to follow the mysterious hooded figure was like Organization trick number one. Did Sora hit you too hard when he whacked you over the head with a giant key to re-complete you.”

“Um, what do you think you’re doing touching me,” Larxene said as she kicked Axel off of her. The two rolled back to their feet as they saw the cloak in front of them begin to contort itself. The black cloak turned white in every area except for the sleeves. Even with nothing underneath it, it took shape and began to float around. The heartless in front of them looked like the very image of a phantom, the emptiness left behind when a person disappeared from the world. From its sleeves, two pitch black hands with long fingers grew.

Axel held a hand out. “Stand behind me, I’ll take the lead and you two be my backup dancers. Metaphorically speaking of course. If we were really dancing I wouldn’t need any backup, I’d steal the show.”

“Yeah, like I’m listening to you attention hedgehog.”

“I’m the one with the keyblade. I don’t mean to get all power of friendship on you, but things will go way smoother if all the actors involved cooperate.”

“Cooperation? From me? Please?” She moved to swivel her hips as she did to give him even more of the brush off.

“You’re not even listening-”

“Because listening to you went so well for me last time. Oh wait no it didn’t, I died.”

“I think we should listen to Axel, especially if he wants to do all the work. The main character is too tiresome and demanding a role anyway, let somebody else have the spotlight.” Demyx joined in finally catching up to them.

“Ugh, both of you. I thought men without hearts were boring but maybe it’s just men.” Larxene said as she jumped up into the air, she used Demyx’s shoulders as a point to kick off from and give additional height to her jump. This had the added bonus of pushing Demyx face first into the dirt.

She ran up the tower to gain height as she summoned four knives to each hand, holding them expertly in between her knuckles. She threw the barrage down at the Phantom from above and punctuated the blow with a lightning strike. The knives punctured straight through the cloak of the phantom, but his body was already so tattered and covered with holes he barely seemed bothered.

As she fell down she aimed one last kick hard into the center of the thing, but the moment she
thought she made contact the Phantom’s body became flat as a cloak and moved around her reappearing behind her and spreading its arms wide to grab her.

The only reason she was not hit in the opening was that Axel jumped in front of her right more, blocking with his keyblade. The phantom’s hands glowed with a pale fire, and Axel enchanted his keyblade with hot burning orange fire to match. A moment later he was blown back by the force of the white fire.

Larxene watched him fly past her. “Hey, I thought flames were supposed to be your thing.”

“I didn’t ask for constructive criticism here,” Axel said as he got back to his feet.

The two of them rushed forward once more, even if they were on the same side technically they were not fighting together at all. Larxene threw a fresh set of knives at the exact same time Axel broke his keyblade into two pieces and threw his chakrams once more. They both cut through the sky until they collided with each other uselessly and fell on the ground.

When Larxene got in close range again to try to make another hit, she ended up getting accidentally blasted back by one of Axel’s flame bursts. Then she completely on purpose zapped Axel instead of the Phantom when he went in for close range.

They both had the same battle style, to dance gracefully along the battlefield and rely on light hits and magic rather than brute strength. However while both of them were dancing at the same time, it was like they wanted to compete to see who could step on the other’s toes more. They were both doing it on purpose while pretending to cooperate.

Even the heartless that they were both fighting against looked a little bored from the fact that it was being ignored as those two fought each other. He threw both of his arms to the side and his cape separated.

From within the shadows underneath his cloak, pitch black vines appeared. They shot forward wrapping their way around both Larxene and Axel as they attacked. The two both lost control of themselves as the vines twisted around them and swung them hard, into each other.

The winds around the heartless increased, slicing both of them. In those winds, Larxene saw a single flower petal falling. She writhed within the vines tied around her, and let her arm slip free to reach out for it.

She wondered why she was doing something so pointless. Reaching for a single flower petal dancing on the wind. Flowers were just as pointless as everything else, the color faded from the petals, their life wilted, their beauty waned, if they were going to fade away then they might as well not be alive in the first place. Hearts were the same way, the always faded, one day they would all eventually fall. In that case why even bother having one? Seemed like it wasn’t worth the trouble.

She reached forward her fingers clenching around the petal. “Mar…”

The heartless laughed.

Heartless were not supposed to show emotions. They were not sentient or even aware like nobodies.

“You would knowingly shackle your heart with a chain of memories born of lies? You would be one who has a heart, yet cast aside your heart’s freedom?”
No wonder Marluxia hated chains so much. These chains that tied them were so heavy. They would never break because they were the bonds between them. She stopped struggling against the thorny vines that wrapped around her.

It was not that Marluxia disappeared, he was not taken away somewhere, he was just lost. His heart was lost behind a maze of thorns. Whatever far off place he had gone off to, there was probably no reaching him there.

She gave up.
More trouble than it’s worth.
But still.
*You up for another coup?*
When she said that, Marluxia who was always the most emotionless of nobodies, monotone and serene at all times like a stretch of water so still and silent it never even rippled, smiled at her.
Where-ever he wanted to go, where-ever he had gotten lost, wouldn’t it be more fun if they were together?

Suddenly, something cut through both of the vines growing from his heartless form. Larxene fell back to discover that the Phantom had influenced the whole area to overgrow with thorned rose vines, so landing wasn’t all that comfortable.

She looked up to see what had interrupted their fight. Of course, it was not Demyx finally deciding to do something, there was no way that would happen. In fact the only way Demyx had been useful as that Larxene landed on top of him, cushioning her fall somewhat from the thorns.

Instead, a figure in all black appeared. He disappeared behind the heartless, moving so fast reality seemed to glitch out with a black and white particle effect when he did. He grabbed the heartless from the back of the head, and let a pitch black magic that moved through the air indistinct pattern that looked somewhat like tattoo designs to lace around the heartless.

He stopped just once to look at both Axel and Larxene who had fallen. Larxene did not hear all of his taunts, there was thunder echoing in her eardrums. “So ____ Slow!”

With that both he and the heartless disappeared, not in a portal of darkness more like their images were glitching out of reality.

Larxene was incensed, not only had they stolen away from their best suspect for Marluxia’s heartless, but they also stole the villainous taunt away from her. That was her favorite part of the job. What was this guy’s deal anyway? Heroes were supposed to come and foil villains, villains were not supposed to go fight other villains.

The moment she got back to her feet and blasted a few vines away from her, she immediately turned her anger on Axel. “Why did you keep getting in my way, burnout?”

“I’m the one with the keyblade, I’m the one who's here to help you, you think maybe you were getting in my way.”

“Funny, how your help always ends up killing people.”

Larxene and Axel met each other halfway as they both glared each other down. Larxene was much shorter even in heels, but if looks could kill she would have already sliced Axel into a much more manageable size with the daggers she was staring alone.
“I don’t get what your deal is. I’m helping you aren’t I? What’s with the attitude?”

“Oh, you’re right Axel we got along much better when you were pretending to get along with us so you could betray and kill us more effectively.”

“People just keep doing what they want, but you don’t even seem like you know what you want.”

“What I want…?” She threw her arms in her side, finally losing her temper. To think Larxene had been holding back her anger until this point, it did not seem like it at all. “I’m not you, Axel! I’m not addicted to having a heart! I didn’t even want my heart back!”

Axel quieted down, even his fiery personality was not much in the face of Larxene’s tempest. He even took a step back unconsciously as Larxene got closer and closer, jabbing a finger in his chest like she wanted to sink a knife there instead. Her outburst though quickly faded away, even Larxene’s hand went limp trailing down his chest instead.

She spoke in a much quieter voice this time, so quiet it didn’t sound like it came from her. “I just thought… if he was here even having a heart would be manageable.”

“Hearts are nothing but trouble for you, huh?” Axel spoke oddly emphatically.

“Yeah… but you know if you’re getting in trouble you need your partner in crime with you.”

Before Axel and Larxene could say any more, Demyx suddenly sprung up between the two of them, wrapping an arm around each other their respective shoulders bringing them in for a huddle.

“Looks like we all fought hard-”

“You didn’t even help!”

“You’ve never done anything hard in your life.”

“I know, isn’t my life amazing? Anyway, I think it’s best we take a break. Come on, I know the perfect place to relax.”

“…”

“…”

“Hey, sometimes you need to do nothing and let the answers come to you.”

“How many answers have come to you, exactly?” Larxene asked.

“Well, none yet but if they do come I’ll be open to them.”

Demyx dragged the other two through the dark portal that the stranger had left behind. On the way, Axel texted Riku where he was going in case the other needed to follow and clean up his mess.

♛

Prowling the streets of Shibuya, there was a pair trying to appreciate the concrete Roses.
One of them had short cropped pink hair and wore a blue jacket unbuttoned to expose her belly in a way she thought was cute. She walked as standoffish as possible as if posturing with her arms crossed in contempt at the whole city.

The other wore a skull and bones hoodie that was a bit on the nose considering his occupation. His orange hair was combed back and kept in place with several hairpins. His glasses hung on the end of his nose casually, and he seemed nonchalant about his entire existence. He rolled a toothpick around in his mouth as he looked at the city around him.

The two could not have more different auras if they tried, the laid back slacker, and the overachiever. Yet, they seemed oddly comfortable around one another.

Uzuki, the pink one finally spoke up interrupting Kariya, the orange one’s mellow as he people watched. “Ugh, it’s like a sick joke. They expect us to take off work this week, too?”

“Hey, getting this much off is like we’re getting paid vacation. Learn to enjoy it a little, it’s better than that crazy time we had to work back to back weeks.”

“Is that why it was crazy? Because we had to work three weeks in a row, not because the city was almost destroyed?”

“Yeah definitely. The first thing you said. If the world really was going to end the last thing I’d want to do was spend my last moments working.”

“Can you sound any more like an old man?”

“Can’t all be spring chickens like you.”

She wrinkled slightly at being called a spring chicken. She looked like she was trying to hide it, but every time she got the littlest bit upset she made it obvious what she was feeling. Kariya who loved watching other people’s expressions couldn’t help but find it cute. “Nevermind. Just tell me this how exactly is this supposed to be a vacation if we’re stuck in the same city all the time?”

“Hey, you can learn to see a city from so many different angles. That’s why you need to learn to slow down and appreciate the concrete roses more like I keep saying.”

“No thanks. I don’t have time to waste on philosophy as you have apparently.”

They had this argument about once a week. It was familiar ground for them. However, even if Uzuki was stubborn Kariya liked the familiar too. There were a lot of new ways to see, even the same old people, and the same old city if you learned to look the right way. He was sure as long as he kept living like this he would never get bored.

However, it was a little worrying if Uzuki did get bored. She tended to think outside the box when she did, and her version of thinking outside the box was recklessly breaking the box. He was content to waste time but she never was. That’s because, for them, time was a finite resource that they had to earn to keep existing.

The two who could have looked like any other pair of adult Shibuya natives were not even human, to begin with. On their backs long wings spread out, black, they looked more like the bones of wings that the feathers had been stripped off of with a stylized design that resembled a tattoo brought to life
somewhat.

“You know I hear there are other worlds. One of the higher ups threw the door open and that’s why this whole place went black for a while.”

“Are you kidding? That’s just a rumor.”

“Who knows, maybe if we asked very nicely they’d give us a vacation to one of those other worlds.”

“There’s no way they’d let us do that. We aren’t even Officers yet, I doubt they’d let us wander out of Shibuya.”

“Awe man, why can’t everybody else be chill about things like I am? The world would be a better place.”

“Only an idiot thinks the world would be better if everybody thought the exact same way,” Uzuki said, crossing her arms tighter. She had no idea why, but for some reason trying to get everybody to think the same way elicited a lot of unpleasant emotions from her.

As the two of them casually continued to chat, getting along even when it seemed like they weren’t getting

“If you’re really that bored without work, then how ‘bout we play a little a game?”

“A gaaaaame?”

“Yeah, to pass the time. C’mon, you love it.”

*Oh, yeah. He knows me too well. What a problem.* She sighed. “Fine, what’s the game?”

“How ‘bout we play the Uzuki buys Kariya ramen game.”

“That’s not a game!”

“Well whatever game we play you’re going to lose and treat me to ramen in the end, so let’s just skip the middle-man this time.”

“I’m going to rush you so hard you won’t even have anything left to eat ramen with.”

“Oooh, that one’s a zinger.” Kariya laughed.

At the same time walking across the same street, Larxene, Axel and Demyx tried to make their way through the crowds. Despite the fact that they were a colorful bunch that clearly stood out, not a single person seemed to notice them no matter how many people Larxene pushed out of her way.

Demyx walked with his hands crossed behind his head. He sighed. “I can’t believe we went clothes shopping and all you bought was more plaid.”

Axel looked back holding a shopping bag over his shoulder. “Hey, plaid is in this season, even Riku is wearing it. Do you know what’s out? Creepy and mysterious black trench coats.”
Both Demyx and Marluxia had changed out of their black cloaks, finally having enough money to buy new clothes. Demyx had not helped at all on that front, and Axel had been the one to foot the bill (with Isa’s Munni).

Demyx looked at Larxene walking ahead of them as if she did not want to be associated with either him or Axel. She wore a blue jacket and a blue skirt, though longer than the ones she had woke up in. “Are you trying to dress in a way he’ll recognize you?” He asked in a sing-song voice.

“Are you trying to test my patience and see how long I’ll let your gross sticky eyes look at me before clawing your eyes out?” Larxene sang back to him in the same voice.

“Now that you mention it. It’s a little weird how popular plaid is getting, it keeps showing up in a bunch of different worlds. Do you think somebody is controlling the fashion trend?” Axel was in his own little world, as usual, talking to himself as the other two kept arguing.

“I don’t see how any of this helps us find Marluxia.”

“You know what poor Luxord, we said we were tracking down all the lost keyblade legacies but it’s like we totally forgot about him.”

“What, do you need somebody to lose even more of your money too?”

“Hey, Luxord did more things than gamble. He uh… he had a winning smile.”

“Pointless. Next.”

“I am helping! You guys were at each other’s throats a moment ago, I’m helping you learn how to chill. I may be very terrible at everything, but I’m very good at slacking.”

“We still have to fight that Heartless, and now there’s some other guy that’s after it. How many mysterious figures dressed in all black are there going to be? Isn’t that a little cliche by now?”

“Well, we can worry about that later. That way we don’t have to get all worked up now. See. Problem solved.”

“You’re just procrastinating.”

“Hey, procrastination is one of the few skills I’ve managed to hone in my life I won’t have you insulting it.”

Just before Larxene and Demyx’s argument heated up and boiled over into something worse, Larxene suddenly stopped and gripped her stomach. Before she could say anything her stomach spoke for her making a loud growling noise.

Larxene groaned, her face looking entirely unpleasant. “Ugh, I forgot being alive and being human sucks. I don’t want this.”

Axel looked to Demyx. “Nobody’s needed to eat too, right?”

Demyx shrugged. “I dunno, did any of us try starving ourselves? Man, if I don’t need to cook for myself I’d save so much time.”
The three of them decided to take a break at a ramen stand. Just as they were about to grab a few of the last remaining seats, Larxene saw a flash of pink. She reached forward again without thinking.

Uzuki looked back, her annoyance sharpened her eyes to a glare. “Umm… what do you think you’re doing touching me. How is that even possible?”

As she said that, a man with orange hair walked from behind. He kept both hands in his pockets as he walked. “Hey, Uzuki I thought I told you to save our seats.”

Axel had already sat down, so really they were just arguing over the last two seats.

Demyx poked his head into the scene. “Hey, Larxy maybe we can ask these guys about Mar Mar. They’re the first people outside of shops who could see us. You two, did you happen to see a really dramatic man with a scythe? He uh… kind of has that whole grim reaper look going on right now?”

“Reapers, huh?”

Kariya smiled.
His wings stretched behind him a little bit as he removed the toothpick from his mouth. On the other end what looked to be a lollipop was actually just a small amount of bean paste.

“I dunno Uzuki, you think there are any reapers walking these streets? Sounds like an urban legend.”

Riku looked at the cityscape unfolding before him. He had never seen so many buildings in one place, there were more people here than even Hollow Bastion or Twilight Town. That was exactly the kind of world he had imagined stuck on those dreary little islands all day as a small islander boy.

Kairi behind him looked around with just as much amazement, it clearly showing on her face. “Is this the place Sora sent you pictures from?”

“No, that was San Fransokyo.” Sora had sent him dozens of texts and pictures. They were all left unopened as Riku could not bring himself to look at them. “This place is called Tokyo, I think… or actually, it’s a smaller part of Tokyo. Shibuya.”

Riku felt a little bit lost, even though seeing such an amazing city was something he had always dreamed of when he thought of leaving his world. Kairi as if reading him before he could even say anything, slowly reached down to his side and entwined his hand with hers. So neither of them would get lost in this place. She did it without saying anything, and once it was done neither of them looked at their connected hands.

Riku led the way. He was quickly overwhelmed by the crowds and the noise and started to look for a familiar sight in the sea of people. He finally found it in the distance, a familiar head of red hair. The two of them walked down the back alley together as Riku tried to catch up with that familiar person.

Finally, in a less crowded street, he approached her from behind. He reached out a hand and gently touched her shoulder. “Shiki… Is that you? It’s me, Riku… remember…”

“…?” The girl in the fashionable hat with long red hair turned her head around slowly. Riku could already see an annoyed look on her face. “Ugh, what kind of creep thinks they can walk up to some stranger and just grab them… omigod it’s a total hottie! “
Eri pushed away from him and called out to further down the street. “Hey, Shiki a total prince showed up out of nowhere!”

Unlike the fashionable and loudly dressed girl that Riku remembered, a different girl named Shiki walked to meet them, clutching a cartoon cat plushie between her arms. “Eri, I told you not to wander away while I was waiting in line this is the part of the city all the creeps show up. R-r-Riku!” She stopped for a moment. She was wearing a green baggy sweater, a pair of glasses and her hair was done in a messy bob. From behind her glasses, her eyes looked over Riku’s entire body once. “Wow, you um… you got taller.”

“Shiki is that you… wow, you um.. Your entire body changed.”

The quiet and mousy looking girl suddenly gained a lot of energy as she quickly jabbed Riku in the stomach with her elbow.

Eri tilted her head. “Shiki, you know this guy?”

“Yeah, we met one time during a thing that we’re not talking about now.” She said as she twisted her elbow, before picking up Mr. Mew Mew and shoving him in his face. She tilted her head to look at Kairi behind him. “Riku. I didn’t know you had friends.”

“I have friends…” Riku repeated, feeling a little embarrassed.

“Really, because you totally don’t act like it,” Shiki said in a quiet voice as she locked back behind Riku even further to finally catch sight of Kairi. “Oh, who is this? She umm… kind of looks like you Eri. Not that I’m saying you stole her look or anything.”

Eri tilted her head the opposite way to catch sight of Kairi. “You’re right. She’d be cute to dress up.”

“Ummm… Hi.” Kairi said, giving a friendly wave. The entire scene kind of felt awkward, like Riku and Shiki were keeping a secret from both her and Eri. In that case, she sympathized with Eri, she knew what it was like to feel left behind.

The entire moment was heavy with a weird tension. Shiki suddenly, clumsily decided to shatter through the tension speaking up finally. “What are you doing in Shibuya, anyway?” Her eyes trailed down as she saw Riku’s hand still holding onto Kairi’s their fingers intertwined. “Omigosh I’m so sorry, no wonder it seems so awkward are we interrupting you?”

“Interrupting us?” Riku repeated again, really not getting it.

“Are you two on a date?”

Shiki asked.
The question that shattered the moment.
That smashed it into pieces.

Neither Kairi nor Riku had an answer, they could not even look at each other.
“If it’s the hero’s job to save everyone, then who saves the hero?”

“Dude, who the hell are you talking to?”

“Nobody but you, of course, my dear partner.”

“Really, because it sounds like you’re addressing an audience.”

“I just have a very important and bombastic way of speaking.

“Do you even need me to dive into these dreams for you?”

“…”

“Am I just here so you can have someone to gloat to?”

“Gloating is a harsh word, but an accurate word.”

Neku knocked on the side of his head, knowing it would do nothing. The annoying voice in his head, much like the sidekick fairy character to the main character in most video games was not going to go away. As he traversed the streets of traverse town-

“Hehehehe, Neku, that’s called wordplay.”

“Dude stop narrating in my head.”

Joshua did not, in fact, stop narrating in his head, because otherwise, the story would be unable to continue. His empty footsteps echoed through the streets of traverse town. The city was filled to the brim with Soras running back and forth, but none of them had any weight. They were all hollow shells. They could not withstand any weight either. The moment he touched them they shattered into colorful particles of light.

He was not alone, technically. Joshua was there in his head. Neku was surrounded by hollow reminders of his friend, too. Neither of those really helped to abate the loneliness. He wondered if the emotion he was feeling was not his, but rather Sora’s. This entire city was a construct of Sora’s mind. In other words, it was just a projection, not even the real traverse town. Then maybe Sora’s feelings had infected his heart too. Sora was not aware if he was dead, missing, or lost, he just knew he left alone.

That made Neku want to finish this search more. Even if Joshua refused to take things seriously, he would. Of course one never knew with Joshua. His version of taking things seriously look like most people’s unserious. Which made the idea of Joshua really taking things seriously, an unknowable
and dangerous horror.

Neku shook his head to dismiss that thought. As he did he saw his reflection in a shop window again. This time instead of shorts he was wearing long white jeans that got longer and rounder at the cuffs. His top had been transformed into a simple tight t-shirt, and he wore a sleeveless jacket on top with plaid inseams. “Are you serious? Plaid?”

“Plaid is in these days, Neku. Some might say it’s out of this world, hehehehe.”

“There’s no way bell bottoms are still in.”

“They’re in if I say they’re in. I am a god of fashion, after all.”

“I’m sure it has nothing to do with the fact that you’re always wearing them, you god of vanity.”

“You can’t control fashion trends, Neku. They’re like the whims of a god. You know what they say: Fashion is fashion, is fashion.”

“You know what they say: Joshua, is annoying, is annoying.” Neku felt like he had been on the defense the entire time on this particular round of banter. An idea quickly popped into his head. “The 1970s called, they want their pants back.”

“The early 2000s called, they want their tired and overused joke back,” Joshua replied in an instant. He had completely lost. There really was no winning with Joshua. Even when Neku did win, it felt like Joshua let him win. It must be boring, winning like that all the time. No wonder he had never developed a personality trait besides ‘smug bitch’. Neku wanted to move on quickly from his defeat this round. “Hey, let’s get this straight.

“Oh, I don’t do anything straight, Neku.”

“Ugh, you know what I mean. If getting swallowed by darkness isn’t how sora died, then what gives? Do we have to start from the beginning?”

“Hmmm, let’s see, from the very beginning: The world was nothing, and then God took six days to create the world. After he created fashion he realized his creation was so great, he needed to rest to appreciate it.”

“That’s way too far back!”

“You always give such spirited responses, Neku. I couldn’t ask for a better partner.”

“A better partner to taunt, you mean.”

“No, I’m really envious. You’re filled with such powerful emotions, with your friend’s hopes, your dreams. You’re so full you might overflow.” Perhaps that was why Joshua had picked him then. Joshua did not believe he could relate to Sora. There was no Joshua if he was not the smartest, prickliest, most isolated person in the room. Yet, as intelligent as he was, as lonely as he was, he knew what he was lacking. He was all alone and he believed in the power of human connection most of all.

It was almost sad. Joshua was trying to save a boy who had everything he lacked. Sora was probably
not even aware of what he had. That was why Joshua wanted to save him. That was why Joshua hated the person he wanted to save. This last part, the narrator kept to himself. It was locked so deep in his heart even a keyblade could not unlock it.

Neku had enough of aimless wandering and wondering. No matter how many times he tried to think of it, he could not make sense of how Sora died. If Joshua knew the answer, he was not telling Neku. Neku did not understand his passive-aggressive hints, either. He finally balled his fist up and shoved it through the window he was staring at. The broken pieces of glass fell at his feet. He was not truly there so he did not bleed from the blow. He looked down and saw his own reflection looking back, piece by piece in the shattered glass.

“Did he put himself back together?”

Neku asked. Then suddenly the ground broke apart at his feet. Just as he felt like he was falling the world inverted again. He opened his eyes to find himself touching down in another memory.

"Huh? Did I hit the fast forward or something?"

_That can't be, Neku._
_I control the horizontal, and I control the vertical._
_This is exactly where we left off last time._

"But he died last time!"

_Don't you believe in life after death?_

"Would the literal angel stop preaching to me about religion already."

Sora was in the memory, but for the first time, he was not the main character. Neku saw Sora’s body lying in the middle of a blue expanse. He saw Sora’s body lying on the ground because when Neku woke up, he was lying right next to it. It was like they had fallen asleep in the same bed. Awkward. His eyes peeled open slowly, and as he turned his head around without getting up he saw Sora’s silhouette. A smile ghosted on his lips. Then the sleepiness cleared out of his eyes and he saw Sora was nothing more than a clear shell. He was entirely translucent like there was nothing inside of him. Neku’s smile quickly soured into a frown.

As he got up on his feet he saw two other people awaken exactly the same way they did. Their bodies were sleeping on the surface of blue. Then suddenly the silhouettes of their forms stirred. As they tried to stand up they realized they had yet to take a definite shape. Their hands formed first, and as they reached up towards the sky that looked exactly like the sea the rest of their bodies took shape.

Riku stood up first. It was Riku’s shape at least, but he was even more transparent than Sora. The only part of his body that was filled in was his heart. The rest of his body seemed to be made out of the water. His body rippled as if waves were going through it.

He stuck his hand into the water and then pulled up Kairi’s body. She formed suddenly like she was born from the sea foam. Unlike Riku rather than being made of water, her outline shimmered like pure light. Neku wondered for a moment if the reason a doppelganger Riku appeared was because
Kairi was the one holding him together and allowing him to take form.

The two stood next to each other perfectly comfortable. In Neku’s terms, it was like they were on the exact same wavelength, tuned into the same radio station. They did not even need to speak. They both desired the same thing with all of their hearts. They believed in the same person. The person where their beliefs overlapped was Sora, still sitting motionless and empty in the water. As long as they had him they were together.

They were three people, with Sora in the middle.

Kairi stopped leaning against Riku and stood up all on her own. She brushed her hand through her red hair and gave the horizon a sidelong gaze, just as the wind began to roll through. The horizon looked like a single vertical line where the sky met the sea, but both the sky and the sea were impossible to tell the difference from one another. Clouds rolled above and reflected perfectly in the sea.

Sometimes when Neku stared into the mirror he thought about how alike he and Joshua were. One day, without notice, it could be Joshua’s reflection looking back rather than his. Sometimes when he waited for Joshua at the Hachiko statue he rested his head against a glass window and wondered if Joshua was watching from the other side of it. That was what the UG was, after all, a reflection of the living world. It was like there was another world entirely hidden behind the mirror.

That was what Neku thought as he observed the final world, the mirrored blue expanses that made you forget which one was the real one and which was the reflection. Of the boy watching him from behind the mirror. Riku and Kairi were on one side of the mirror, and Sora was on another side. The thick sheet of glass was keeping them apart. Yet all they could do was rest their head on the side of it, and feel the coolness of the glass. They could only look longingly into the mirror, trying to find the other person and only seeing their own reflection.

*I told you we see our reflections by looking at others.*

“No that lecture again,” Neku muttered.

*You’re the one who started it.*

The sky of the final world cracked open and started to fall into pieces. Those falling pieces were just Soras. They fell to the ground and then began to walk around like they were empty manikins on auto-pilot.

Riku picked up Sora’s body. He held Sora’s limp and translucent body in his arms princess style. He held onto him as if he was carrying his most precious thing. Sora looked as comfortable as a sleeping child in Riku’s arms.

Kairi walked away from the two boys towards the Sora’s who had fallen everywhere. She started to collect them, piece by piece. Every time she made contact with one a little color restored itself to Sora’s transparent body. It was like he was a puzzle whose pieces were scattered to the winds, and the only ones who could reassemble him were the two who knew him most in the world. It was like the two of them were trying to catch stars together.

Eventually, Sora’s whole body was assembled back together. Kairi’s heart who was always with him holding him together, Riku’s belief in him and words urging him to believe in himself propping him up. The two of them started to walk together with no destination in mind.
As he walked Riku began to break apart. Starting at the shoulders, something ate away at his body as if he was dissolving. The small parts of Riku that broke away from him looked like shining fragments of glass, fracturing more and more until only shimmering dust was left. He held himself together long enough to lay Sora back on the surface’s surface once more. His hand reached forward and gently caressed Sora’s cheek, running his rough thumb over Sora’s soft eyelashes to wake him. Then, his hand broke apart into glass shards of many different colors Riku turned into a soft, light that caressed Sora with his warmth and kissed his cheeks with his rays. Then that light too, dissolved away.

Just as Sora started to wake up, Kairi sank beneath the surface of the water again. Sora’s body restored he pushed his hands into the ground, and tried to find his bearings on the uneven surface of the water as waves rolled through it. He noticed the water rippling where Kairi had been standing a moment ago. Sora crawled his way over to her and pressed his hands against the surface of the water. He pressed his face against the water's glassy surface and tried to push his way underneath.

Kairi was already gone, but with the omniscient third person view that Joshua gave him, he could see that Kairi was sitting on the opposite side of the water trying to do the exact same thing. As she sunk into the water she reached towards the surface. She pressed her face on the mirror’s edge for a moment, trying to feel Sora on the other side.

That would have to pass for her goodbye, as she drifted away. On the other side of the mirror, Kairi’s waters were so dark they smothered all light.

As she sank, Riku’s voice spoke to her finally.

“Will, that be enough? Did we do enough? Are there enough pieces there?”

“Don’t worry. If it’s Sora, he’ll find a way.” Kairi replied.

That was the absolute faith his friends had in him. They knew Sora would do the right thing. That was why they had made the decision to leave everything to him.

They had only pieced him together enough to make sure he could maintain a form in this world. It was Sora who would have to piece himself back together the rest of the way.

Nothing good comes from passing the buck.

“It’s a beautiful moment about the power of friendship, shut up Joshua.”

Sora wandered around for as long as he could. On his own, he had no idea what to do. The world before him was featureless and formless he could take off running in one direction and run forever.

“Riiiiikuuuuuuuu?”

“Kaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii?”

He wandered until he found a few stars to talk to, but not a single one of them knew about his
friends. A nameless star told him about a person who she was waiting for who lost his original body and memories and became unrecognizable. He found Namine's star who told him that the ones keeping him together were Riku and Kairi’s hearts overlapped and in sync with his.

*Jeez, talk about needy.*

“You know for somebody who doesn’t have any friends you’re just as needy.”

*Why must you attack my self-esteem so much, Neku? I might cry and show everybody a tearful scene.*

“You have too much of it. Leave a little for someone else.”

Sora kept screaming for the names of the others. He did not even realize how long he had been screaming until he noticed how dry his throat was and his voice cracked and broke. He rasped a few times catching his breath.

Then suddenly he looked up and from the sky, a falling star fell towards him in a zig-zag pattern. When it landed the surface rippled and from the glowing light, a small cat that looked more stuffed animal than a cat with a pouch around his neck appeared.

"Does that guy look like Mr. Mew to you?” Neku asked when he saw the stuffed cat.

*Sanoe would literally die if he saw this cat.*

"Shiki would never get over how cute it was either." Neku nodded along.

“The name’s Chirithy, and this is the final world.”

“I’m Sora. What’s the ‘final world’?”

“There’s nothing else beyond this. You’ve wandered here more than once before on your visits to the Station of Awakening, but... I let that slide. The edges of sleep and death touch and one can’t help the occasional crossover.”

“Wait, death?”

“Yes. The natural end for those whose hearts and bodies perish together. But some persist, and arrive here.”

“My heart and body perished? Umm, does that mean?”

“Something is holding you here - refusing to let you go. You’re hanging by two threads”

“What about my friends?”

“I’m afraid that no one else arrived with you, and if they’re not here they’re either gone forever or they’re clinging to the world you came from.”

“I’m going back!” Sora immediately forgot everything else, turning around and summoning a key to his hands. He was ready to charge off blindly, still lost, until the cat called after him.

“Whoa, whoa, how exactly? You can’t just wander out like your other visits.”
“What?”

“I told you. The other times you came here by your own choice. This time is very different. A one-time exception.”

Really, just rushing off like that when he has no idea what’s going on. He wouldn’t last a day in the reaper’s game.

“Quit sizing him up for your damn game!” Neku shouted ignoring the memory to bicker with his head once more. “Hey, is this really the Final World? Like there’s nothing after this?”

No there’s one more after this that’s why it’s called the penultimate world, oh wait it’s called the final world.”

“Somebody is mad.”

Aren’t you going to ask any more obvious questions to your exposition fairy?

“Not if you’re going to get all snippy with me.”

Joshua handed out second chances like this, but in Shibuya, there was always a price to pay. It was cruel to the players of the game, but most of them had already lost their lives, to begin with. They made every single choice up until that moment how to live. Most of the people in the reaper’s game were not murder victims or innocents (except yours truly Neku the victim of Joshua). They were suicides, or like BIto somebody who made a foolish choice and threw their life away due to their own recklessness. There were strings attached to the reaper’s game because the people who were getting a second chance at life had thrown their lives away carelessly in the first place.

That was Joshua’s philosophy anyway, Neku was not sure how much he agreed. Those three weeks of hell would never go away for him even if he had a happy ending. Still, he felt a prickling sensation of wariness at how easily Sora had thrown away his life and how easily he was getting it back.

The game had rough consequences because of Joshua was like life itself, a harsh teacher. He was the worst because he wanted people to be their best. He wanted them to learn. He wondered if Sora was learning the right lesson here.

The reason his friends had so carefully pieced his body back together was because of how much they valued Sora. Yet Sora was not able to see any of that value in himself. The moment he regained consciousness he was willing to throw that self away once more. No matter how much his friends cared about him, no matter how much it would hurt them if he disappeared. He still refused to see himself as anything but worthless except when he saved others.

As Neku and Joshua argued, Sor had already done the work of piecing himself back together.

“Umm… could I get a hint on how to save the others?” Sora said, turning around awkwardly just as he was about to run off from Chirithy. He scratched at his head cluelessly.

“Seriously?” The kitty’s ears drooped. “Are you a keyblade wielder, or aren’t you? Haven’t you already learned how to restore someone’s heart after it has been lost?”

“Is that the same thing as… ‘The Power of Waking’?”
“I’m not sure, but, give it a shot?”

“No…”

Sora slowly curled his fingers around his chest. In his reflection on the surface of the water just at his chest, there were three large cracks, meeting in the middle of his body. He already looked fragile as if he was being held together by some miracle alone on the fringe of breaking apart again just after reassembly. “This’ll take all my heart.” Yet he was willing to risk all of himself.

Neku watched the scene of Sora being consumed by darkness again, only this time he kept himself together and reached for the light.

“Is this a rewind? Are we still in the same memory?” Neku questioned.

_Ugh, time travel._

“Wait, is time travel a thing? Explain this fairy! What even is ‘The Power of Waking’?”

_Sora himself doesn’t even seem to understand it, but look at him using it._
_I guess he’s just following his heart. Aren’t heart’s great? Steer us wrong every time._

“Because following the snarky voice in your ear is much better.”

_Yes, I agree. I’m a wonderful person to follow. At least that way I’ll steer your wrong on purpose, not on accident. Oh, look Neku it’s Riku! Riku is on Mount Olympus! Among the gods where he belongs! I think that’s the torch of Apollo, God of the Sun, how appropriate._

“What is with you and Riku?”

As Joshua and Neku were talking, Neku floated in the background of Sora’s memory watching him travel to different worlds and fight a lich heartless over and over again to reclaim the hearts of his friends.

_Hmmm, so the power of waking, literally the power fo restore sleeping hearts. Do you remember what Chirithy said earlier? They said sleep and death sometimes overlap._
_To start with, what is sleep?_

“You always go way too far back on these explanations. I don’t need you to start questioning the basic principles of life on me.”

_No, I mean what is sleep a symbol of._
_Sleeping, dreaming, and in the final realm water._
_All of those are symbols of darkness._
_Darkness isn’t just the dark side of the force, however._

“A star wars reference, really? The 70s is still on the phone why aren’t you picking up?”

_Do you know the Jungian concept of the shadow? All of those symbols repeat. Sleep, dreams, illusion, misdirection, obfuscation, water, drowning in the depths of water, in terms of darkness and the Jungian shadow. Darkness is literally, dark, what our consciousness is not aware of. If Light is our consciousness, what we are aware of, what we can see, the dark is the opposite. However, they cannot exist without the other._
“The moment you shine a light on something it casts a shadow, right?”

The reason people use dreams as symbols for a Jungian shadow is that they’re fluid, senseless, not exactly under our control, and yet we’re aware of them. It’s the exact opposite of waking conscience. The reason that the darkness exists is that unlike me, no human beings are perfect.

“Gag.”

Even if the darkness represents the more flawed, repressed parts of human consciousness, the stuff you would naturally want to look away from I would not say it’s always bad. What are human beings but their flaws? You find yourselves unique in the cracks on your being. Humans cling to light more than anybody else, but the darkness is what makes them grow.

“Yeah, can you explain all this without sounding like a villain there at the end?”

There are those who become aware of the repressed parts of their personality, they learn to live aware of their flaws. They can live with their darkness. I believe people should always be striving to improve themselves with what they have, but I’m not so idealistic as to think that people can be perfect. I’m not like the rest of the upper dimensions.

“The world’s above the RG?”

Yeah, the paradise where everybody’s on the same wavelength. How dull. Darkness is inevitable for humans. All hearts will inevitably become weighed down by their own issues. They’ll all fall eventually. Humans are born in darkness and then they return. Dust to dust.

“Wow, don’t get so optimistic in my head. That’s really off character for you, buddy.”

I was being an optimist. Faced with this inevitable loss, humans still always try to improve themselves. They move forward even though there’s no destination awaiting them. Isn’t life wonderful like that? But you know, is Sora doing that at the moment? Is he moving forward, or is he clinging and trying to avoid loss?

As Joshua posed the question Neku’s attention was taken as Sora’s fight against the Lich was interrupted by a boy in a black coat with spiky white hair. Joshua’s narration informed him that this was the Young Master Xehanort brought to the future through ‘Time Travel Shenanigans’.

“You!”

“All that gallivanting through the Sleeping Worlds and yet you learned nothing.”

“What?”

“Dream by dream, you nearly buried yourself in the dark of sleep. And now you’re at it again? The Lich you’ve been fighting, it’s not like other heartless. It exists to usher hearts down to the depths of darkness. If you chase it, you will condemn your heart to that same abyss.”

He pointed straight at Sora’s chest, his words like knives cutting straight through him. Sora resisted
putting a hand over his chest. Whether he was defending it, or just concealing the cracks that appeared on his body, Sora stared defiantly.

“You’re wrong, my heart is strong.”

“What do you think the power of waking is? It’s for traversing hearts to reach worlds. Not for traversing world’s to reach hearts. There’s a high price to pay for wielding such power foolishly.”

“What?” Neku remarked, confused by Xehanort’s babble.

*Think about it this way Neku, as I told you in the past in every person there’s a hidden world. Every single person is like their own world. When they disappear that world disappears as well. When you, Beat, Shiki and Rhyme started to disappear when this world fell to darkness the world disappeared as well. You all fell into a sleep and you needed each other to wake up again.*

*But Sora’s doing this all on his own, so it’s much different than the power I used to wake you all up.*

Xehanort turned away as if disinterested.

Feeling brave, or perhaps cocky Sora called after him to mock him. “So, what? You’re worried about me now?”

“No. There’s no saving you.”

“Hah!”

*Gosh, Sora not listening to the villains. Don’t you know they have your best interests at heart?*

“Quit sympathizing with the villains!” Neku snapped at the voice in his head.

Xehanort held his arms out wide as he turned on his heel to fall back into the darkness. “You’ve paid the price. And it lies at the bottom of the abyss.”

“Wait!”

Sora rushed after him but by the time he reached Xehanort his image was nothing more than a shadow that Sora reached through, and then he was gone entirely.

As the scene continued to play, Neku’s sense of foreboding only increased. No matter how hard he tried he could not shake Joshua’s words from his head. It was difficult for him to watch Sora be warned twice he would not be able to repeat this last saving throw again, only to ignore both of them.

*You never answered my question, Neku.*

“Huh?”

*Who is it that saves the hero?*

Neku always thought that his relationship with Joshua was just like Riku’s to Sora. Despite how different they were, one entirely intellectual and one entirely emotional the two of them understood each other better than anybody else could in the world. They were closer than anybody else, even though they were the last two people who should get along. It was like one was the light, and the
other was the shadow, and because they complimented each other they were inseparable. One
would not exist without the other. That was how close they were.

However, he realized a key difference now. Joshua was antagonistic to him at all times, he was not
nearly s kind, or encouraging, or willing to sacrifice himself as Riku was towards Sora. (Joshua had
sacrificed himself once, but Joshua was so selfish he somehow turned a move to sacrifice his life for
Neku’s sake into something entirely about Joshua). Neku was starting to realize maybe that
antagonism was a good thing. It always kept Neku on his toes. He was always being challenged to
be better.

Riku at some point along the line stopped challenging Sora. He fell so in love with the current Sora,
all he could think about was how Sora was better than him. He only wanted to protect that person,
but wasn’t that like keeping a person in a box so they would stay exactly the same?

As Neku tried to work out the answer in his head no words came to his lips. Finally, his head
hanging down orange locks falling over his eyes he answered.

“I don’t know.”

It hurt. Even if it was because of Sora’s own recklessness, even if Sora was warned and charged into
tragedy anyway. It still hurt to watch somebody who others loved so much throw himself away.

Neku wanted to save him. He wanted to save Sora because there was a point when Neku listened to
nobody else and shut everyone off recklessly too. He was also someone who could not be saved.

His eyes peeled open and he returned to the waking world once more. He found that his head was
not resting against the floor or a couch in the break room. Instead, Joshua had let Neku rest his head
on his lap. His head hurt too much to protest. He did not even have the energy to open his mouth to
complain.

He simply rolled over and let Joshua keep running his fingers through Neku’s orange hair. He was
oddly silent for once, tracing the contours of Neku’s face and head as if he were a work of art. Even
heroes needed rest. He closed his eyes and let the moment last a little longer because he knew he
could trust the person he was resting his head against.

♛

While he slept for real Neku witnessed another memory. This one did not belong to him or Sora, so it
passed by him like a dream. He could not even hear Joshua’s voice in his ear or feel the tickle of his
breath as the boy whispered into the crevasse of his neck.

Unlike the last time when he was able to view the memory as an outsider from a third person
perspective, he was locked into someone’s head and saw the world through their eyes. It was
because of that he had no idea whose memories he was watching at the moment.

All he knew was that there was messy pink hair framing the edges of his vision and that he smelled
strongly of flowers. He smelled so strong that he could choke on the smell. He stared at his own
trembling hands as they started to fade away. His scythe fell to the ground next to him and broke
apart into flower petals.

“I’m starting to… remember… the person I was.”
Next, to him, he felt somebody holding onto him. It was a phantom pain he had been carrying around for a long time. Even when he was not able to feel things he was able to feel its absence. He laughed at others for chaining their hearts to things, but his heart was chained to someone he could not even recall. Finally, he recalled their face. They had been following him as closely as a shadow. They had been holding onto him all along. Even now as he was falling apart, he fell back into their embrace.

He was no longer in the barren battlefield, he was no longer empty. He was a full person, in a town filled with light, and plant life. His eyes looked to the side as he snuck a glance next to the girl he was sitting next to. There were rumors she had a harsh glare. That she always worked by herself and scared off others when they tried to get close to her. He saw the sharp edges of that expression when she caught him glancing at her, but for a reason, he did not understand her features softened.

“____ is missing?”

“My little sister wasn’t one to say much even to me. It seems the two of you were in the same part of a few times. I had heard her mention your name before, I thought you might know something.”

“I don’t really know anything either. ______ spent a lot of time alone. It wasn't like we were friends we only talked about missions.”

“Really?” My little sister was hesitating over joining the dandelions and I was trying to persuade her, but I haven’t met her since then, or even seen her around.”

“Your sister is dear to you, isn’t she?”

“Sure?”

“I wish I could help you… Oh… maybe I can! Chirithy!”

The conversation continued on, but the details were blurry to Neku. Occasionally words were replaced with white noise. When he looked in the background, it seemed to be computer generated for some reason, made up of numbers and code that created images. It felt like more of a game than the reaper’s world did. Occasionally those glitches affected the memories of people passing by, their faces disappeared like they were not even thee, and he could not make out the face of the girl in front of him.

“Until we meet again.”

Those words seemed more like a promise than a standard goodbye.

As he walked away he turned back just once to look at the blonde haired girl.

“Where are you going?” The Chirithy asked her.

“To go into that building to look for clues, isn’t it obvious?”

“You don’t normally care much about other people, is all.”

“Oh, shut up.”

He could not see the details of his own face or remember what he looked like, but he knew he was
smiling. Just sneaking a peek at that scene and seeing how that girl acted when he was not round had brought a smile to his lips without him even realizing it.

Suddenly, Neku felt a second awakening. His eyes opened and he lifted his head suddenly sitting up. The place he woke up was an endless stretch of blue sky, that reflected like a mirror into the surface of the water below.

Neku knew he was in the final world, but the person whose perspective he was sharing had no idea at all. He felt like he had been in a deep dream, but the moment he woke up he forgot what he had been dreaming about. The moment you wake up and cry it’s all over, even if you’re still gripped by sadness. He wiped at his eyes and looked around. He was sure he had been resting his head on something a moment ago.

When he turned his head he saw a man with combed back black hair, a permanent five o’clock shadow, wearing a vest. He lowered his glasses for a moment as he looked at the other man trying to make eye contact before he pushed them back up on the bridge of his nose.

“Oh, you’re awake. Well, that’s fine I prefer to have cats resting on my lap anyway.”

As he said this the man wrapped his arms around what looked to be a stuffed cat he held in his lap. He noticed the man was looking at him and smiled back.

“Oh, this little guy’s a Chirithy. They’re all named Chirithy, apparently. Kind of uncreative don’t you think? Like naming a cat, cat.”

Neku felt the world bob up and down as the person whose perspective he was sharing nodded his head.

The stranger combed his hand through his greasy hair for a moment and then gave a carefree wave. “The name’s Hanekoma Sanae. Pisces, blood type A. What’s your star sign?”

Neku just felt his head shake in confusion.

“You don’t know? Then how am I supposed to know if we’re going to get along? I guess this meeting isn’t in the stars after all.” As usual, Hanekoma was overly chatty and completely casual. He did not seem to care or notice at all that his other conversation partner had no idea what was going on. “This is the final world, looks like your heartless got destroyed in some way and it’s all gone out of whack and you ended up here. Sorry about that. My bad, really. I think it’s my apprentice who did this to you.”

Even though Neku heard no words coming out from the other side of the conversation, Sanae just kept on chatting. Either he was incredibly rude, or understood people that intuitively. It was probably both.

“The truth is I ended up in the same place as you. I got kicked from the cycle of death and rebirth in my world and exiled so my soul ended up here when I got erased. Well, I’m a little different than everybody else so I fine tune those lingering desires until they produce a clearer image.”

He looked down and saw that he was more than just a pair of eyes, he also had a body. He only remembered what he looked like after he saw it again. He was wearing a vest, there were flowers stuffed in his pockets, along with tight slacks.
“Hey, we’re vest buddies! If we have the same fashion sense we’ll either get along or hate each other, that’s what my friend would always say.”

“...”

“The truth is there was one other person I’m waiting with, but it looks like she’s shy. The moment you arrived she ran off somewhere. She was pretty lively for conversation too, weird girl.”

“...”

“Weird is good when you’re an artist though.”

“...”

“Well, I certainly don’t have anything better to do. I kind of got stuck babysitting her cat too. How about you, do you got anywhere to be?”

“I’m not sure.” The words came out of his lips even though Neku did not speak them. Neku heard the voice, it was a distant, yet serene kind of voice.

“Let’s wait here for a while then. Ah, but this is awkward…” Hanekoma suddenly began to scratch at his neck, he bent his head at an awkward angle. He looked not at the person Neku was sharing senses with, but directly past them.

“You’re not supposed to be here.”

*Mr. H?*

“I wonder how you’re even doing this. Did Joshua search you out? If you’re sharing senses with him right now… well, he’ll never admit it but we have a connection. Some part of him probably sensed that I was here. That’s why he keeps visiting this place. Even if he tells himself he just wants interesting souls for his game.”

*Mr. H? What are you doing?*

“Hey, don’t worry about me. If you’re with Joshua you have your hands full already. You’re doing this unconsciously, but I’m going to warn you anyway don’t snoop around too much in the link you’re sharing with Joshua right now.”

*Why?*

“Empathy is one hell of a drug man. If you care too much about somebody it might tear you apart.”

*Is that what happened to Sora.*

Hanekoma did not answer. He simply held two fingers up in the air. “Peace out!”

Neku’s eyes peeled open once more. He had a headache the likes of which he had never felt before. Thinking hurt, but he could only think about one thing.  

*Mr. H is such a louse.*
After several games of janken which ended in ties, and even an arm wrestling match between Uzuki and Larxene that ended with no victor it was undecided. Kariya finally volunteered to eat his ramen on the curb. He thought Uzuki was going to follow him, but when he patted the seat next to him and looked up at her with puppy dog eyes she turned her nose up at him for assuming she would always follow him.

“Fine, you go sit with the losers.”

Demyx who was also already sitting on the curb tilted his head. “Am I a part of the losers?”

“…”

“Hey, Larxy this is the point where you’re supposed to insult me.”

“It was just so easy that time it wasn’t even worth the effort.”

“Hey, saying something’s not worth the effort is my thing! You can’t take that from me.”

Larxene stared into her broth with disinterest. Even insulting Demyx was losing its charm. She had preferred when her chest was empty, but now that it was full she had no idea what was wrong with the thing ticking in there. She thought this feeling, life passing by her eyes with nothing but dull colors, a pervasive hollowness that would not go away, feeling like a part of you was missing and slowly going numb over it, was supposed to go away when she got the heart back. The one advantage of having a heart should be these tedious emotions.

Did humans feel empty too? In that case, she did not see the point of having a heart in the first place. She had not been human in so long, and when she had been the only memories that returned to her on Re-Completing were scattered and few. She only ever remembered being alone. That was the link which formed the connecting chain of all of those memories.

Then, is this feeling loneliness?

Larxene choked on her ramen. No way, she would not allow it. There was no way she had anything in common with those hand holding friendship monkeys. No thank you. She was not secretly some crybaby with a sob story that justified her pushing everyone away when she desired friends all along, she was not some misunderstood girl hiding a hidden soft side.

She thought it was a good thing when she lost her heart. When she was nothing but an empty person who could have acted any way she wanted, she chose to act this way, to push everybody aside because they were getting in her way. If she had a choice she would choose to be alone, and choose to lose her heart all over again.

But she had a heart.
She was not alone. Even if he was gone right now she could feel a connection to him.
Uzuki had been awkwardly stirring her ramen with one chopstick as well. She refused to sit by Kariya mostly to make a point, but now she was bored without him. Her stubbornness and her need for attention were at war with one another. Finally, she moved to break the stalemate. “So, where do you work? Lazybones over there, and I work for uh… a company.”

Larxene could already tell something was up with the pair from the floating wings they had behind their back, you did not overthrow an organization by being stupid, but she decided to just go along with it for now. “I worked for an organization, but then I got fired and the whole place went belly up.”

“Did you have a bad manager?”

“Yeah, it was some cranky old geezer. He had no idea how to run things. I would have done a much better job, but I was just one of the lower ranks. I was basically just a disposable body to him”

“The working environment in Japan is so hostile these days. Well, my group is like that too. If you’re one of the lower ranks you’re expendable and if you don’t work too hard you disappear easy.”

“So you get fired?” When Larxene said ‘get fired’ she pictured the time Axel snapped his fingers and roasted Even alive. A faint smile finally returned to her lips replacing her bored and dispassionate look.

“Yeah, something like that. So I’m always telling too cool for skull over there that we need to work harder and improve our ranks, and he says I’m wrong. I’m right, right? I’m totally right. Tell me I’m right.”

When Uzuki jerked her thumb back at Kariya to use him as a negative example, Kariya simply looked up from a distance and waved at her. “Hey, Uzuki! Are you talking about me? Enjoy your ramen.”

While Uuki was constantly boiling over with negative emotions, to the point that even Larxene who was quite the spiteful existence herself noticed it, every ounce of her negativity seemed to roll off of Kariya like water off of a duck’s back.

“I think you’re wrong,” Larxene said her eyes still dull.

“Huh?”

“If you want to get anywhere where are you going to get working your way to the top? If you really had the ambition, you’d just topple everything down and then sit on the top.”

“B-but the rules… Promotion.”

“If you were in charge you would be making the rules. You don’t need to wait for someone to give you anything, you can just take it.” Despite the menacing-sounding quality of her words, Larxene yawned in disinterest.

“You do have a point, I thought I was being serious with my ambitions until this point but I never thought about risking them on that level.” Uzuki had taken large risks in the past when she was pushed by desperation. There was a time she had lost to Beat and Neku that she did not care about throwing her own life away if it meant her fingers scraping the mere chance of getting a promotion,
but she had not gone as far as Pi Face or Miss Konishi. She never even considered the possibility of risking breaking the entire game or staging a coup against the composer to get what she wanted. She wondered why, because this game was her life perhaps. Her life was her days spent playing games with Kariya. Even if she always lost it was still so much fun. There was too much holding her back to risk those things. She grabbed her hair in frustration. “Urrrrggg, what have I been doing all this time? Was I not even trying?”

Larxene watched her breakdown with the same disinterested eyes, thinking *this one gets worked up really easily. She definitely has some kind of heart.* Larxene shrugged. “I mean, I wasn’t that serious either. If I got to the top I have no idea what I was going to do next. I just didn’t want to lose to any losers.” Larxene thought about it seriously, if her plan to seize the organization had worked what did Marluxia want to do next? Complete Kingdom Hearts, pass she did not even want a heart. They would have a super powerful puppet under their control. They could plunge all the worlds into darkness but uh, then what? Now that she thought about it she was not super invested in the end result. “I guess I was just along for the ride.”

Uzuki’s eyebrow twitched for a moment, so did the wings behind her back. She thought she had read a similar vibe from herself in the girl in front of her, but now that she thought about it this blonde sounded more like Kariya. The ambition was there but she had no wish to follow a system of rules like Uzuki did or climb the ranks of command, it was wild overflowing energy that seemed to burn uncontrollably in every direction. “So, is that how you got fired?”

“Oh, yeah. We tried to stage a coup. It was great. Until we get foiled that sucked.”

Failing meant erasure for Uzuki, she would never be able to eat ramen again. Funny, in her real life she had been a nobody, the kind of person nobody would miss and yet in her afterlife she was just a nobody to a low ranking harrier and she felt that there were too many important things to disappear now. “Well, I like my job. I don’t want to destroy it or anything, I just want it to be you know…”

“Fun?”

“Well, fulfilling but that too.”

“Be honest with me, you like playing games more than you do doing whatever work you take so seriously.”

“Are you trying to mess with me?”

For once, she wasn’t. Larxene smirked. “I just don’t know why you put up with this. You deserve way better. Especially for him. You deserve someone who will follow you to the top.”

As he heard they were talking Kariya waved to Uzuki once more in a friendly way.

“Are you sure you should be talking because your partner isn’t really-”

“That thing is not my partner!” Larxene said as she pointed back at Demyx.

Demyx yelled after her. “Hey, we had that talk about pointing, and hurting with our words.”

“How about I hurt you with my knives instead?”
“Words are fine! Words are good, even!”

Larxene paid more attention to her ramen to get herself to calm down. Demyx always got her worked up in the worst ways. When she was finished slurping her ramen she turned her attention back to Uzuki. “I’m just saying you shouldn’t be rotting on the lower ranks just for his sake. You got a crush on him or something?”

“Um, no way. If anything he’s totally head over heels for me, not that I can blame him. Tragically, he’s not in my league.”

“Yep.”

“You’re right, I do deserve better.”

“So you’re gonna make a mad grab for power and destroy everything?”

“Wait, wait, hold on.” Now Uzuki thought that Larxene was the one who got worked up too easily. Reapers were inhumane by nature, it came with the job. You had to eat human lives to continue living to the next week. However, the way the girl in front of her talked without holding anything back it was like she did not have a heart. “It’s like what you said about having fun. I like my job, it’s fun, but the reason it’s fun is because he’s there with me.”

Larxene did not want to look at her so she stared down at her ramen instead.

“If it weren’t for him I would have worked myself to death by now a few times over, he’s the one who always holds me back and makes sure I enjoy myself.”

They completed each other, she got it. Uzuki lacked restraint so she chained herself to Kariya. Larxene lacked purpose and at one point when she felt empty finding Marluxia filled that up. He was poetic, dramatic, driven by some deep-seated wound that Larxene never understood. She was all about the surface, the thrills, chills, and sparks of inspiration that hit at the moment. Without him, she was free to do whatever she liked again, but she was unchained.

This friendship thing was really over her head, how exactly did an idiot like Sora understand this?

♛

Koki seemed to do just fine on his own people watching. Demyx poked at his ramen. He was an expert at ramen because it was one of the easiest food to make. He rarely ever ate out. That cost money and to get the money he had to take his job seriously. He was an inefficient worker, but he was an incredibly efficient slacker.

Demyx also got bored easily though, that was the double-edged sword of his laziness. Once Zexion had theorized that the reason Demyx was so lazy was that without a heart he was infected with apathy and therefore lacked the will to do anything, and Demyx wished that it was so clear cut. If he could sleep in bed all day without worrying that would be the best.
However, when he did nothing he was still infected with this boredom. He was not apathetic towards life, he was exhausted. Existing was a pain but he preferred to continue existing rather than to just be nothing. If he had it his way he would always do the minimum, just enough so that he could not get bored but not enough that he exhausted himself. He wanted an easy life. He wanted an enjoyable life where he was always smiling. See, he was secretly a good guy after all. As long as being a good guy did not take that much work he was fine with being a good guy, but if it meant putting his neck on the line he would rather be a coward.

See, he looked like a one-note slacker but there were all kinds of depths to the way he saw the world. He always tried to explain this to others but they never listened.

Demyx eventually pulled out his Sitar from his shadow and started to pluck at it.

Koki seeing the weapon appear from nowhere, tilted his head. “You always carry that thing around with you?”

“Well, yeah it’s my weapon.”

Koki plucked the bean paste out of his mouth for a moment, thinking. “So, you uh… hit people over the head with it?”

“No, obviously I beat them with my beats! Well, this is a string instrument so, I beat them with my melodies!”

“Oh, so you play? To be honest I care more about music than I do fighting. Why don’t you tickle the strings a little for me?”

“You… you want to hear me play?” Demyx felt like his jaw was going to drop in disbelief. This was the first time in (He could not remember a time somebody actually cared more about his music playing than his fighting prowess), well anyway finally he found someone with the right set of priorities. Demyx began to pluck the strings, in a more purposeful way than the usual lazy playing he did to pass the time. All of those stray notes came together to form a melody.

Koki nodded is head along with the music. “Amazing, you’re even better than 777 and the boys. They must really appreciate you where you come from.”

“They don’t.” Demyx immediately answered. His daily traded barbs with Larxene, Queen of Mean should have been proof enough for that.

“I get it, I get it man so you’re one of those misunderstood geniuses then?”

“Oh… Um, yeah totally I am. I’m really troubled about it and it comes out in my music, right?”

“The truth is you’re a lot stronger than anybody, you just choose to hide it.”

“Oh, yeah I could totally be imposing when I want to be which is admittedly almost never. I just don’t see the point. Philosophically I mean, because I’m a really deep guy you know. Everything I do it’s got lots of nuance and meaning you got to read my actions carefully to deduce my hidden side.”

“Cool.”
“Y-yeah, so cool. Cool like water. That’s me. I never ripple I just always stay still.”

“Yeah, I get you.”

Demyx suddenly got the vibe that the man in front of him was an entirely effortless kind of cool. Nothing at all got him worked up. He was the highest ascended form of all slackers, he had reached laziness Nirvana. Demyx wanted to throw himself at Kariya’s feet and beg him to show him the way to enlightenment, but he felt that might make him look a little needy which was very uncool.

“So what do you do most days?” Demyx asked.

“Nothing. I let other people do things while I observe from a front row seat.”

“Marry me.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Is she your work partner? She seems high maintenance like Larxy.”

“Yeah, so what. Life is about the highs and lows you know. It’s all gotta balance out.”

“Oh, y-yeah totally you’re right.” Demyx had no idea what Kariya just said, or what he was agreeing to.

“Well I’m not the type to share but you bared your soul for me with that song.” Kariya began. Demyx had just been playing a melody that randomly popped into his head, but sure he was bearing his soul he would take the compliment. “See at one point I was in the music biz too. I was what you called a teen prodigy. Everyone praised me, I was the shit. But the more I played, the less and less I felt about any of it. I realized I was just a machine, they put notes in me and music came out. Everyone around me saw me as a machine too, if I put the right input in I got the perfect output, it was all so perfect but there was nothing fun about it. I just strut around looking important all day, and I was definitely somebody, but I felt like a nobody y’know like I wasn’t even living. So I quit.”

“You quit your job and got a new one?”

“Yeah, sure let’s say that.” Kariya readjusted his oranged sunglasses pushing the up the bridge of his nose as he stuck his bean paste in his mouth once more and chewed on the toothpick. “Then I get this new job and it turns out I’m amazing at that too. I really should stop being so good at everything I try it drains the fun out of life.”

“Oh yeah, I have the exact same problem,” Demyx said, blatantly lying at this point.

“Everybody I met sang my praises too, said I was going to be snatched up and promoted quickly. They all tried to suck up to me so they could ride on my tailcoats. I was just being treated like a machine again. Week to week went by, and suddenly the city streets all looked the same, and the people at my job might as well have all been faceless. They could all disappear and I could care less. Then one day two years ago this girl showed up out of nowhere, she said she was going to be something great and I was going to be her back up. She started to make demands out of me.”
“She sounds bossy,” Demyx complained.

“Mm, by that point I was hiding who I really was and everybody lost interest in me. The only person who ever liked me as a slacker was her. No matter how many times I try to peace out she drags me back in. It might look like I tamed her but it’s the other way around, she’s the one who tamed me.”

Everybody was replaceable to him. Nobody was worth the investment of getting to know because they all faded away. His job was a pain, and he only did it because not existing was even more of a pain. Then suddenly this pink haired girl appeared out of nowhere, so full of the life he had turned his back on so long ago.

Demyx felt empty for a moment. He liked everybody, except for the people he disliked like Larxene, but he had never gotten deeply invested in anybody, not even once. Friendships took work too. He remembered all the trouble Axel got pulled into because of his friendship with Roxas and Xion and thought it was not worth all the extra heartbreak.

He had a heart but it was small and weak and he really only ever looked out for himself, his world was unbelievably small. Kariya unlike him definitely had a heart. He mattered to somebody. Demyx was a nobody because nobody, in particular, cared about his existence.

Demyx suddenly stopped playing. Before he could think on this any further he looked to see some kind of strange symbol moving through the sky above him. It was pitch black and looked like the fangs of a beast.

A scythe emerged from that symbol and swung down hard where Demyx was sitting. He quickly raised his sitar in the air to block, before realizing that Scythes were sharp. “No, wait don’t break my Sitar!” He made the Sitar disappear and ducked his head low just as the scythe completed his arc flying over it. “Wait, no don’t break my hair either! It’s my best feature!”

“More like your worst.” Larxene flawlessly followed up as she took her bowl of ramen and chucked it straight at the monster. She jumped off of her seat and landed a perfect kick on the strange creature, throwing it back as she landed on the ground like a gymnast.

Axel who had been watching the entire time sighed. “Finally, something happened. I was wondering why nobody was paying attention to me.” He flicked his wrist effortlessly and a key returned to his hand.

Koki and Uzuki stood up at the same time, both of them feeling equally confused. They knew something was up with the non-players who suddenly showed up in the UG able to see and talk with them. However they had no idea why they could summon weapons, and even a key on command, those did not look like psyches at least.

Koki and Uzuki’s phones went off at the exact same time. Uzuki pulled hers out while Kariya read over her shoulder.

There have been three intruders spotted in the UG who have been declared illegal. They’ve brought a forbidden taboo noise with them. Destroy them.
Signed ______
The reaper in management who gave out the text forgot to sign their name, but when Kariya looked it was more like the name was glitching out and refusing to display on Uzuki’s phone.

“Sounds fishy,” Kariya muttered.

“Then let’s go fishing!” Uzuki said slamming the two sides of her phone together. “Those two look like the easiest marks, we take them and then double team tall, red and spiky?”

“That’s my girl. So vicious as usual.”

Suddenly the strange noise in front of them began to bubble with darkness. It mutated, two hands shooting out from its side made up of the same patterns as the noise, but suddenly it grew a phantom cloak around it. Rather than an animal, it looked like a grim reaper with a scythe, and in the center of its chest as its cloak billowed there was a hole in the shape of a heart.

“Is that really a taboo noise? It looks like a Heartless.” Kariya observed.

Uzuki blinked and looked back at Kariya. “What’s a Heartless? Hey wait, I told you to stop knowing more than me!” She hit one of her hands against his chest, but it was a useless blow with no force behind it. She was just venting empty frustration with nowhere to go.

“Hey come on, I’ve seen a lot in my days but nothing quite like you.”

“You can’t smooth over everything with charm, you know!”

“Oh, can’t I?” He joked before he saw that Uzuki was about to explode and decided to back off. “You guys bring that thing in here?”

Larxene’s priorities immediately turned to the heartless she had been chasing. “You guys can’t kill him, he’s way out of your league—”

“No thanks, this is our turf you know. I don’t feel like taking orders from a bunch of nobodies.” Uzuki said brimming with confidence once more. She leaned her head on Kariya’s chest. Kariya adjusted his body so it was more comfortable for Uzuki. At the same time one of his wings rose up, and one of hers as well. If they both only had one wing, they looked like they might be able to fly together just fine.

“Wait, seriously? Come on Kariya, aren’t we slacker bros? It’d be way easier to resolve this if we didn’t fight right?”

“Um, villain? Giving you a hard time is my job.” Kariya said, plucking the toothpick from his mouth once more. He beckoned them forward with a wave of his hand.

Axel rushed in to make the first strike, only to suddenly slam face first into an invisible wall. Larxene watched reality fade out like television that was on the fritz, only to find herself the next moment nowhere near the ramen stand.
Larxene raised her head. Axel disappeared completely, the crowds of the street were gone. She could see Demyx but he was not standing next to her, instead, he was on the other side of what looked to be a mirror version of the small world she was standing in.

When she looked closer at Demyx, he was being mobbed by more of those animal monsters that looked like street graffiti. They were called ‘noise’ apparently. Larxene’s eyes sharpened and she called out in a high pitched voice. “Summon your nobodies!”

“I don’t know how to make them appear here! Or where they are! Or where we are!” Demyx said floundering.

Larxene sighed to herself. “Moron.” She did not even have the patience left to come up with a clever enough insult. Then immediately Uzuki was on her. The pink girl spread her wings and raced forward as if she was skating on the ground in her heels. She looked like she was using some kind of psychic power. “Well, I have no idea what’s going on but I know that I’m stronger than you.”

Larxene did not, in fact, know that, but it was an assumption she often made. She was usually correct more often than she was not unless some idiot with a keyblade showed up. Uzuki held out a hand, spamming some kind of short repeating blasts of psychic energy.

Larxene easily dodged back and forth, weaving between the blasts. When she got close enough she slid on the ground and kicked Uzuki into the air. Once she was in the air she threw the four knives she was holding two in each hand to follow up on the blow.

Suddenly, Uzuki disappeared before the attack could hit, replaced by a shadowed silhouette. In the next moment, Kariya was standing where she was, summoning a massive wave of energy with a beating of his reaper wings to throw the knives off course. Then he disappeared again, only to have his silhouette reappear behind her.

“What does it matter how strong you are on your own? You’re fighting Shibuya style, that means you do it with partners. You don’t seem like the type that gets along well with others.” Before Larxene could react, he kicked her with everything he had.

Larxene went flying, but before she could recover Uzuki appeared waving her hand and making another barrier appear. Larxene slammed straight into it. She fell to the ground just as Uzuki disappeared again and Kariya reappeared.

“Let me guess, you were empty inside so you tried to fill yourself up with pleasures. You really enjoyed screwing with people, it was the only thing that made you feel something. As long as you could live from moment to moment, thrill to thrill you didn’t care. You acted like someone who was born to be a villain, and because no part of you was vulnerable, soft or nice you would never feel weak, never feel like you were missing something. I know the type.”

The lecture only served to piss off Larxene more, which made her more reckless. She let electricity course through her and radiate around her and increased the size of her knives to make them better conductors. When they were about the size of short swords she charged forward again. She slashed wildly at him, but Kariya managed to weave through all of her blows.

“It’s not like I disapprove of that kind of life, I’m not a goody two shoes myself or anything but if
you push everybody away like that then who are you enjoying life with?"

If it was Axel maybe she could have managed some kind of teamwork, but Demyx was the worst person on earth to pair her up with. While Demyx floundered and did nothing, Uzuki and Kariya were basically fighting her two on one.

Even then she thought she should be able to take them, but this way of fighting was too strange. If it relied entirely on partnership than Demyx must have been making her weaker somehow. Ick, she could not believe his loser germs had infected her.

She thought the finally got a blow on Kariya, only for him to disappear again. His hand was glowing with some kind of energy and he threw it behind Larxene like a baseball. Larxene whipped her head around to see Uzuki standing behind her once more. She caught whatever Kariya had thrown her and glowed with his energy.

"Ugh, Kariya you lazy bum who said you could play around. Now, look sharp before I put on my angry face."

"Aight, Uzuki. I'll finish this fight if I have to."

"You have to. I'll pick up the tab for Ramen after this."

"I told you, you were going to."

As they casually chatted suddenly for the first time they both appeared in the same field of play with her. Uzuki crossing her arms on one side, and Kariya casually holding his hands open on the other side. They both rushed her at the same time. Then, suddenly they were standing opposite sides to where they were a moment ago.

Uzuki slashed the air with her claws, and Kariya casually kicked the air, but what was stronger was the shared psychic energy radiating from both of them. As she desperately tried to block her knives were knocked out of her hand and a cross-slash appeared behind her back.

She felt slashed from every angle and fell to her knees while Kariya and Uzuki finished off their blow by landing on opposite sides of her. Uzuki landed with her hands on her hips, and Kariya finished a backflip before standing again with his hands in his pockets.

Demyx watched Larxene getting beaten up. If they lost here, not only would Larxene possibly die and most certainly be humiliated, she would also lose Marluxia as those two moved to destroy him. She would lose the only thing she really seemed to care about.

Well, she deserved it. Demyx hated her, Larxene was only ever mean to him. He had been happy the first time around when she died at Castle Oblivion. This entire time he had been wishing Larxene never Re-completed and that he found Luxord at that graveyard instead. There was no need for him to lift a finger for her sake. He could just open a portal of darkness and escape this world, and then run like he always did. Effortlessly, one of his biggest problems and biggest pains was going to be removed for him.

Yet, Demyx could not bring himself to do it. He was a proud coward, one of his favorite activities was running away and yet he stood here just watching and doing nothing.

“I get it, it’s not the strength of heart that matters when fighting in this world it’s the strength of
creativity.”

Kariya was the former musician, he was by far the stronger of the two. Noise, that was like music with no melody so it was unpleasant to hear. It was just wild guess, but Demyx for all of his lack of smarts had a sharp intuition.

If that was the case this could be the one world where he was actually useful. He almost did not want to be, just because being useful was so much effort and being useless was effort free. He felt like he was breaking character.

It would be much easier to let Larxene die but…

As Larxene was kicked to the side again she pridefully tried to stand back up. She grabbed onto her shoulders as she did, just in case she started to fall apart again like the two times she faded. She remembered the last time well.

It was humiliating, looking at Sora’s stupid face as he won against her. It was even worse that she was going first and leaving Marluxia behind. After Luxord disappeared the two of them started to fight together for the first time since Castle Oblivion and she had really been enjoying it.

Then suddenly all the fun was coming to an end again. Just like Castle Oblivion, everything was thrown off the rails by one stubborn hero. There was a chance she might not even see him again. As nobodies, they were born with nothing, and their only future ahead of them was to fade away into the darkness. With those amazing prospects ahead of her, it was no wonder she just wanted to enjoy the moment. Everybody else just sat around and moaned all day about not having a heart and how their existences would always be incomplete.

God, get over it already. If they did not have hearts then why were they all such crybabies? There was only one person who thought like her, one person who she got along with. Everybody else had precious memories from their past but her precious memories are from the time she was a nobody. Her heart was walking right next to her.

Oh, she just thought a corny line like that. Now she really did want to die. Sora’s clueless face was looking at her the same as always. “Become that geezers heart tank? No thanks.”

“Then why help him?”

“Hmph!” She closed her eyes and looked away stubbornly turning her head to the side. There was no need for her to share what was inside her heart, not when she thought hearts were unnecessary in the first place. “I was really just along for the ride.”

“… With?”

Larxene’s eyes opened slightly as if she was sneaking a peak. She saw through her blurry vision, the silhouette of Marluxia watching her fade away. He stood there actually looking sad to see her go. It was the first time she had ever seen an emotion on that always calm face. Even her view of the world was starting to fade away along with pieces of her body.

As she did, she saw a different image flooding into her vision. It was Marluxia standing there, genuinely smiling. He looked younger, and there was someone with similar pink hair standing by his side. She had always enjoyed being with him, but she had never seen Marluxia give her such a smile
as if he was just happy to exist. She wondered what would have made him show her such a face in the past.

She had no idea, memories, emotions, they did not come flooding back to her because she did not want them too. Instead, she looked back to Sora and decided to play it coy with both him and Marluxia. There was no reason he needed to know. He might disappear after this, they both might, or it might be that she was the only one having fun. These feelings were a treasure she could keep all to herself. It was like solitaire, a game that could only be played alone. These feelings were only for herself, after all, she only cared about what she felt, what filled her up, the fun she was having.

She brought her fingers to her lips. “My secret.” Then her vision and the rest of her faded away.

In the present, the reality dawned on Larxene that she might fade away again. Not to Re-complete, but to die. She never really did understand Marluxia in the end, she just understood her own feelings and saw things her own way the selfish girl that she was. Perhaps he never wanted to come back.

“I lost, huh? Guess I’m the real loser here, I lost everything.”

She felt something wet leak out from the corner of her eyes. Larxene covered her face, not wanting the enemies to see her crying. “Lame, lame, lame, lame, lame, lame, lame, lame.”

Demyx watched the whole thing from behind the glass. Even someone like Larxene was fighting with all of her heart for just one friend. She had found someone. He wanted friends like that too. He did not want to fight for them, and he would prefer if they were low effort but…

He could not let Larxene’s efforts go to waste. He was good for nothing but she was not. He picked up his sitar and suddenly started to play it with everything he had. “Silence Larxene!”

He said in a voice loud and commanding enough to draw the attention of everyone. It was so unlike him, that he suddenly cracked a smile as he pointed at them. “I’m supposed to be the lame one, not you.”

Then suddenly from everywhere, Demyx clones rose up from the ground. They mobbed the noise easily destroying them, breaking apart into exploding water and then reforming. The next moment they turned their attention on Uzuki and Kariya.

They all converged on the pair at once. Teamwork hardly mattered when it was one hundred versus two. Kariya suddenly jumped in front of Uzuki to protect her, throwing his back in front of her.

The dimension they were standing in faded away. Uzuki and Kariya both fell to the ground like they were drowned in the water looking completely stunned. Their clothes were both completely soaked through and ruined.

Larxene stood up again and suddenly saw herself face to face with the phantom they had been chasing.

“Axel!” She cried out, to the redhead who was still recovering. “Give me your keyblade!”

“Hey, no touchy it’s my keyblade!” Axel looked at the scene in confusion. From his perspective it was like no time had passed at all, he had just seen the four suddenly disappear into some other dimension and then reappear like they had a random encounter in an RPG.
Suddenly vines shot from the Phantom's cloak once more. Just like last time, they wrapped themselves around Larxene and Axel. Larxene tried to supercharge her body with electricity in order to escape, only to be slammed straight into Axel.

Perhaps that reaper was right, her teamwork was terrible. Even if that was the case all she could do was mutter. “You are the worst keyblade wielder ever,” In indignation at Axel as she was slammed face to face with him.

♛

Kairi, Eri, Shiki, and Riku had decided to spend the day together going through Shibuya’s shopping district due to their impromptu meeting. Riku the tallest and strongest of the group was elected their bag boy, who carried everything while the girls had fun. Kairi was careful about his sprained wrist however and made him carry it in one hand.

Kairi had kept up the chatter with Shiki and Eri the whole way. She noticed Eri was a little bit like the center stage type, and Shiki seemed like her shadow but when Shiki spoke up she always had something amazing to say. With the boys, Kairi was used to bridging conversation between Sora and Riku who sometimes were like two polar opposites to talk to, quiet and broody, loud and energetic. Now the flow of conversation felt more natural, especially to Kairi who had always been the most talkative of her trio of friends.

When they were wandering the food district looking for a place they could all sit down and have lunch, suddenly Kairi found herself alone with Shiki. Just by chance with how the groups happened to break up. Kairi smiled at the glasses-wearing girl with what she thought was a friendly look.

Suddenly, there was a cat being shoved in her face. “Mr. Mew-Mew told me you weren’t having a good time.”

“Huh? That cat can talk!” Kairi had just been shown Ventus’ Chirithy, a talking stuffed cat so that was not that strange to her. She realized a moment later. “Oh wait, Mr. Mew Mew is a stuffed animal and now I look like an eccentric weirdo.”

Shiki touched her index finger and thumb together making a tiny circle. “Just a little bit.”

“I didn’t mean to make things awkward. I just thought even though you were smiling and laughing, it didn’t look like you were having fun with us like you’re distracted or something.”

“Mr. Mew Mew told you this?”

“Yes, he has highly attuned senses,” Shiki said raising up the cat once more. It was rare that people ever played along with her Mr. Mew Mew gimmick. Most of them gave her looks for bringing a stuffed animal around in public, even though hugging him gave her help with her social anxiety. Even Neku never played along, and he had the word cat in his name. “You don’t have to tell Eri or Riku, but you can tell me. I’m quiet, so I’m good at keeping secrets.”

“You don’t seem quite to me.”

“That’s just because Eri’s around. I feel more like myself when I’m around her, probably because she has so much confidence she shares some with me.”
“...It’s nothing really.”

“You’re not mad at us for interrupting your date?”

“It wasn’t a date!”

Shiki suddenly waved her hands in the air and backed away on one foot in reaction. “Okay, okay I get it it’s not a date. You know you can get kind of scary…” For a meek-looking girl, she definitely had a lot of energy.

“It’s just when Riku first met you he already knew who you were.”

“Were you jealous?”

“I so wasn’t!” Kairi snapped again and then realized that the other girl was just poking at her to get her to be more honest. It was weird dealing with somebody with actual emotional intelligence. She was used to her two dumb boys. “It just reminded me again that Riku’s been to so many places I haven’t. It just… you know… it feels like Riku is the one starring in all these adventures and I’m just the supporting character. I don’t matter except for backup, that’s why I always get left out.”

“There’s no way Riku could take on the starring role, have you seen that guy’s personality?” She said looking at the quiet guy who was currently across the street being weighed down by shopping bags.

“I’m not as good as he is. That’s why I always get left behind.”

“Listen,” Shiki finally raised her voice. “You know the first time we met that guy barely knew how to talk. He was super flustered, and I’m starting to realize why. It’s because I had red hair. He was probably thinking of you.”

“... You had red hair? Did you dye your hair or something?”

Shiki hugged onto the cat in her arms. Her green sweater fell off her thin body. The same way that...
Kairi wished she was strong in the way Riku was, always running off on her own and plunging into the greatest darknesses to save Sora. Shiki must have wished that plain body of hers was extraordinary in the way Eri’s was.

Kairi hated it, always being left behind. The way she felt right now. The way Sora made her feel when he disappeared. The way Riku made her feel when he always protected her but cared nothing about himself. That was how Shiki made Eri feel.

“I didn’t understand how Eri felt, and Riku didn’t understand how you felt. There’s this boy I know too, he’s named Sakuraba Neku. He’s alone cat always strutting around in his own cherry garden. When he met other people though, he got a little bit better…”

Suddenly, Kairi had a cat being shoved in her face. “See, that’s why you shouldn’t give up either. If the two of you are together, you can make him understand those feelings.”

Riku’s mind was like that lone cat. His was a forbidden garden he would never let anybody else in. He was probably scared to do so, because he thought he was dangerous, or perhaps because he thought Kairi would fear him.

“By the way, you really need to teach that boy to talk to people.”

“I know I’ve been working on it.”

Before Kairi could continue, suddenly the world in front of her started to glitch out. Just like it was a holographic projection, Larxene, Axel and Demyx appeared all of them in the claws of what looked to be heartless with some kind of graffiti designs spraypainted on his body.

Shiki immediately stepped in front of Kairi. “Noise aren’t supposed to appear in the RG. What’s happening?”

Riku dropped his shopping bags finally looking up. “Then, this world is separated into two different worlds like the dream world? The RG is where we landed, and Axel landed in the UG. I told you we were going to have to clean up his mess.”

Kairi saw the heartless in front of her glitching in and out of reality. If she remembered correctly, that heartless belonged to Marluxia, another member of the organization that Larxene wanted to save.

Kairi thought it was impossible, somebody who acted like they did not even have a heart like Larxene was fighting with everything they had at the moment to bring back her friend. She still felt no sympathy for Larxene. She wanted to beat her over the head and make her get on her knees to apologize to Namine.

However, she remembered what Shiki said about making Eri feel the pain of losing her friend. She remembered her own pain about Sora. There was no way she could reach Sora right now, but right in front of her Larxene was going to lose someone as precious to her Sora was to Kairi.

It was true that Larxene was just a petty villain. There was nothing good about her. Heroes were supposed to be better than villains. Larxene would not get any better if she was all on her own. She’d remain alone in her secret garden forever.

Kairi summoned Destiny's Embrace, the flower-covered Keylbade to her side. She held it in the air
and wished with all of her heart to open up the door between this world and the other that was so close to this tone.

She jumped straight through it, and from the air fell down slashing downwards with her keyblade. In two strokes, the vines that were holding Larxene and Axel in the air were torn to pieces. So, that was what Sora felt when he always saved everyone by showing up at the last minute.

Kairi picked up her keyblade and suddenly threw it in the air to Larxene. “Catch, loser!”

“Hey, you’re the-” Larxene decided to shut up and just take it, watching the keyblade spin through the air as it rushed at her. She had no idea if she was even worthy for this thing anymore, or if this would even work. All she knew was what she longed for in her heart. She wanted to see him again. She wanted to see him again. She wanted to see him again. Her empty self was filled to the brim with that longing.

When she caught it, the Key Blade in her hand suddenly glowed with a violent light. She felt like it was burning her, that she needed to throw it away from her hands. From behind she felt someone’s embrace.

Just before she turned her head someone whispered in her ear. 
*Don’t look back, I’m shy.*

*I guess I can let you borrow this.*
*A thank you for watching over my big brother when I was gone.*

The voice was familiar to her even if she did not remember like she was recalling a far-off dream. Destiny’s Embrace was no longer in her hand, instead, there was keyblade shaped like a star on its hilt, and blade.

She raised it in the air. As she did, a field of flowers bloomed all around her, making the shape of a keyhole at her feet. She had no idea how all of this was happening. Keyblade bullshit, she supposed. She had run out of patience and no longer cared.

As long as she could see him again. She would even throw away the one thing she had left without him, her pride. A beam of pure light extended from the keyblade straight through the creature’s empty heart.

The black patterns that surrounded the heartless like ink tattoos writhed, and then dispersed leaving nothing more than splashes of ink on the ground. The heartless’ body was blown away, the shadow erased and when the light was gone all that was left was a sleeping man in a black coat.

Larxene had no idea what else to do. She threw the keyblade aside and crawled over to his side. Gently, she took his head and lifted it into her lap. The keyblade to the side of her turned into Destiny’s Embrace once more and returned to Kairi’s hand. She was no longer paying attention to it.

The weight of the world was resting on her lap. Her world was resting on her lap. His face was serene as always, but he looked peaceful for once in his sleep. She had no idea what he was dreaming about at all, but she would like it if he shared those dreams with her. Whatever they were, whatever twisted plans his dreams cooked up next she would follow. She picked up a flower from the field that had sprouted around her, literal concrete roses, and dangled it under his nose.
“Wake up, sleepyhead.”

She giggled softly.

“You’re not getting a kiss from me no matter how long you sleep. So come on.”
A Flower of My Own

Chapter Summary

A short cameo from the back of my Khux main character's head. His name is Sigurd.

Side A: The Final World
Track 10

The sky was always the same color in Daybreak town, the color just before dawn somewhere between the colors of blue and purple. They were beautiful colors he thought, but if you stared at them for too long you started to get the sense that time never passed.

Lauriham made his way down the cobblestone streets. Their entire city could seem like a maze of winding pathways and staircases if you got lost in it, but most guided themselves by the fountain in the central square. Besides being the sight of the six unions, the fountain was one of the town’s major landmarks.

Keyblade wielders in parties often met up at the fountain before embarking on other worlds for missions. It was the age of fairy tales where such adventuring was commonplace, and everyone seemed to be the hero of their own story.

There was one girl scared to approach the fountain where friends met up. Instead, she had gone out of her way to climb all the way on top of a house. She sat on the rooftop with huddled knees, resting her chin on the space between her knees and muttering to herself.

“Today, you’re alone again.”

She said as she stared from afar at the back of a brown-haired boy's head. Despite the fact that he was also alone, he looked perfectly content. People had seen him around Daybreak Town recently, all that she overheard about him was that he was silent, and his only friend was his companion Chirithy.

“I wish I could have a friend who’s like you…” The girl whispered into her knees. She exhaled with a soft "fuuuuh. Her pink hair framed her face but was slightly uneven, the longer end was kept back with three hairpins, two of them crisscrossing in an x. The rest of her hair was tied back in ribbons that she kept in pigtails. Her brother was the one who taught her how to style her hair like this. He told her it looked just like the petals of the Strelitzia flower she was named after.

“I knew I’d find you here.”

A calm voice spoke up behind her.

Strelitzia suddenly whipped her head around. Her mouth fell open, she gave a soft “Ah” in surprise.

“Big brother!”
“I see you’re still stalking that friend for yours-”

Lauriam called from a staircase far away. He stood there hand in his pocket. Her brother was gentle and well liked, he even dressed like a prince. He was the exact opposite of her. Of the two of them, Strelitzia always thought he was the only one who deserved to be named after a flower.

“S-stalking? You got it wrong!”

Her brother laughed at her reaction. Even though it seemed like he was teasing her, he went out of his way to find her again. Strelitzia had a habit of wandering away from their home, she got lost in this city easily but it was Lauriam who always found her. Big brother could make friends with others easily, but he always went out of his way to spend most of his time with her who had no friends at all. He never once complained about having to be dragged by his little sister place to place.

She always called him a prince, but he would just laugh and say. “If I’m a prince, then that makes you a princess too.”

That was why her home was not that flower covered house in Daybreak Town. Her home was not anywhere, except for right by her brother’s side. He was the reason that even though she was alone, she was never lonely. If she was lost no matter where she would always be found by him. That was what she believed with all her heart.

*Let your heart be your guiding key.*

That was what everybody in the unions said. However, it seemed sometimes the heart was not enough.

One day she wandered into a pitch black place. She was still looking for that person. Somewhere far away, where her brother could not see her, where he could not protect her, Strelitzia was struck down from behind.

She picked herself and her Chirithy up off the ground and crawled in the darkness trying to make it back to him. Just as she was about to reach the light, she collapsed. It had taken all of her to reach that far, and she could only manage to crawl a few mealy steps.

Her Chirithy fading, the only small comfort she could give was to wrap her arms around it. “I’m sorry, this is all my fault. If only…”

She took one more step, and the image of her body broke apart into particles of light. Nothing left of Sterlitzia remained. Her heart and her lingering regret came to this place.

“I’d had the courage.”

A while later her brother returned to that pitch-black house. There was nothing left of her there, not even a phantom for her to see. He still called out her name to the empty place.
“Strelitziaaaaaaa!”

In the present day, Sanae lowered his glasses as listened to the pink haired man in front of him recounting his story. Despite how open the man’s body gestured looked, his face was a cleverly placed mask, he had the expression of a smirking kitten at the moment. “Lauriam is it… are you getting confused? Are you really sure you’re the hero of that story?”

In the final world, Lauriam looked down at his own body. He was no longer a well-dressed youth in a vest before he knew it he was suddenly in an adult body, dressed in a pitch black cloak. His hair had grown longer falling beyond his shoulders, his body had grown taller, but on the inside, he did not feel like he had grown up at all. He was hollowed out.

Sanae dug into his pocket and picked out a coin, casually flipping it in the air. When he caught it he did not look at the result. “Heroes and villains are two sides of the same coin you know if you’re not watching yourself before you know it you can become someone you don’t even recognize.”

Lauriam stared at his black gloved hands. They moved in front of his face without him controlling them. He was a witness to another memory. In front of his eyes, he saw a piece of paper being torn in half.

After being assigned to this castle, the organization fund a girl sleeping inside of it. She was pure in the dullest ways, she only wore a simple white dress, she had pale skin and blonde hair, and she never spoke to anyone only looking around with her glassy eyes. She was no better than a doll on a shelf.

One day for the first time that doll moved. She walked up to him with a piece of paper in her hands. She had drawn it all on her own. She offered it to him as a present. He saw on the paper a boy with pink hair, holding the hands of a girl with pink pigtails.

Marluxia knew this nobody with no memories must have been lonely. She spent all her time locked away in this castle, like a perfect little princess. She could speak to no one, she could not leave to look at the sky, and even if she did see the sky she would have no one to share it with, no one to stand under the same sky with.

For the first time, Marluxia thought that being a princess was a cruel fate. He no longer cared though, because he considered having the heart to be a cruel fate as well.

She probably just wanted a friend, so she gave him that drawing. To remind her of her place, that she was just a doll in his plans he tore it in half in front of her. The girl had never so much as spoke before and she rarely moved, but he saw her shoulders look like they were going to collapse, and her hair falls over her face as her head bobbed up and down. She probably wanted to cry but she did not know how to, she knew so little that she did not even remember being a nobody.

Namine’s eyes trailed to the piece of paper that touched the ground. Her ice blue eyes stared at the memory she had gone out of her way to painstakingly draw. The boy in the drawing had been completely torn up from the pieces that Marluxia tore away, and only half the page with the twin-tailed girl remained.

That princess did not need to know anything about the outside world, as long as the lord of the castle
remained in power.

“Isn’t that right, Marluxia?” Sanae’s voice spoke clearly in his ears.

“Show some decorum. Let them be.”

“Why is that?”

“Because Rapunzel is far too important. Atop her tower, she must remain out of sight and live out her days with Mother Gothel.”

“But that’s like locking her in some prison.”

“That is exactly what it’s like. Rapunzel’s hair holds the powerful magic of healing. And yes, Mother Gothel wants to use her, as do others. And, if Mother Gothel’s actions will protect Rapunzel, preserve her… then she is doing the Organization a favor.”

That was right he remembered now. His princess was missing, and then he became the kind of person who locked away princesses in towers and kept them there. If Strelitzia had never wondered off where she could not see him, she would not have disappeared.

No, that was not true. The reason she disappeared was that there were people in the world, just like him, with hearts filled with darkness who snatched her way.

“It’s no good pretending that just because you’ve regained your heart, you changed Marluxia. People don’t exist until they see someone else, we’re formed by our interactions with others. There’s no true you lying deep within your chest, here you are the sum result of all the faces shown to others.”

As Hanekoma said that, Marluxia struggled to grip at his face. His form shifted wildly between Lauriam and Marluxia. Half of his face was his younger self, and the half was his smirking older self. It looked like the two halves would fall apart if Marluxia’s hands were not holding them together. However, he loathes the self that he was trying to keep together. He stopped gripping his face between shaking fingers and instead started to claw at it wildly. He wanted to tear the face off. That face was only good for wearing masks after all. He had lost whatever was underneath the mask a long time ago.

He clawed, and clawed until his face became bloody. His hands were entirely stained red with his own blood as he tried to scrape off the details but it was no good. He could still see, he could still hear, so that was not enough. He started to claw more fiercely until he heard a voice like soft bells.

“Mr. H that’s enough! You promised you wouldn’t bully my big brother.”

Hanekoma reclined, relaxing with his elbow on his knee. “Oh, you’re back. Did you have fun seeing Elrena again?”

“Thank you, Mr. H. We didn’t get to talk much, I was too shy.” The voice said.

Marluxia looked around but there was nobody but the two of them sitting there. Whoever was speaking, they were only a voice. He looked down and saw that what he saw in his own hand and
thought was blood, was just pink flower petals. The wind changed direction, causing the clouds underneath the surface they were sitting on to roll, and the flower petals to blow out of his hand. Marluxia tried to reach for them desperately, but he could not grab onto a single one.

“Who are you?” Marluxia asked.

“No one anymore. They took away my name - everything about me.” The voice replied.

“There was nothing that remained, not even your heart?” Marluxia, kept questioning.

“Only because it pines for another.”

“Really. All alone and you choose to chain yourself to this person. Where even is he?” He kept trying to remember.

“I cannot be certain. He’s been changed beyond recognition- his heart replaced with another’s. But, were he to regain his old self again he would be distressed by my absence. So I choose to wait here, where he can find me.”

Hanekoma picked a cigarette pack out from the pocket of his vest. He hit the bottom against his flat hand and drew out a single cigarette. He lit it with a snap of his fingers and then exhaled smoke. The smoke swirled around them, becoming a mist. Through it, Marluxia could see the vague outline of a girl.

“Are you sure you don’t want him to see you?” Sanae asked, speaking to the voice. “You’ve been waiting all this time.”

“If he knew I was here, he wouldn’t want to return.” The voice responded to Sanae.

The mist was too heavy. It filled Marluxia’s lungs. He felt like he had stumbled into a flower field, and now was being cursed into a deep sleep by a faerie. He fell backward, only to be caught in someone’s lap. His eyes were so heavy, but Marluxia resisted sleep with all of his beings.

“No… I want to choose.”

Hanekoma paused for a moment, snuffing out the cigarette in his hands by placing it in the water’s surface. The wind blew again, whipping Strelitzia’s twin tails behind her. Marluxia tilted his head back, but she ducked her head away from his field of vision. Still, he could feel her hands gently holding the sides of his cheeks.

“If this is who I am then let me choose to be the villain that breaks his sister’s heart by abandoning her here.”

He did remember. The alone was enough to bring her to tears. While she still had a body, while she could cry, while she remembered what sadness felt like, the corners of her eyes watered and fat tears rolled off the sides of his cheeks. Marluxia felt her tears land on him, it was like a small rain shower falling on a lone flower.

“No, please. If you know it’s me… I don't want you to go.”

She said, knowing that if he stayed here her big brother would disappear. She wanted to see him again, but not in this way, not if it meant he would become like her. Yet, she had been waiting for so
long she could not stop herself from wishing. Even when she was just the stardust left behind after her original body had perished, she wanted to wish on a star even if it meant wishing on herself.

“Be still…” He was no longer a prince. Perhaps he had never been one. Still, he reached up and brushed away her tears with a touch of his thumb. “If the only way I can save you is through betrayal, then so be it.”

Sanae in the background watched with his chin in his hands. “Wow, he’s from the age of fairy tales alright. He even talks like he’s from one.”

“When we were younger, you always ran away like this without telling me where you were going.”

“And you always waited for me.”

“Mm, my only dream was to find you again, and then I lost everything but after losing it all I gained something. I made a friend. When I return here I’ll introduce you two, she doesn’t mingle well with others, but you’re also weird so the two of you should get along.”

“D-don’t call me weird.”

“Then, all three of us are going to escape to the land of fairy tales together.”

“I’m only going to forget about you when you disappear from here. The only reason I even have the form right now is that that nice man is helping me, and he can’t stay here forever.”

“It’s alright. Even if you forget, I’ll remember.”

“Do you promise?”

Marluxia paused. He remembered when he laughed in the face of somebody whose only reason for existence was a promise that he made to a fake girl.

You would knowingly shackle your heart with a chain of memories born of lies?

“A promise means nothing from me, not anymore-”

“Even if you make a new friend, even if I get mad at you, even if I run away, even if your face changes, even if I start to hate you, and even if I die, I’ll always be your sister. So, do you promise?”

“Fine, I promise… with all of the heart that I don’t have.”

His heart was no longer free. It was bound to a promise now. It was bound to memories that he did not even feel like belonged to him, from a past life, or from another person, from some distant fairy tale version of him. The chains that people attached to their hearts did not break that easily, he had learned that a long time ago with the keyblade master.

His body felt heavy, empty, an improper vessel but if he wanted to save her all he could do was continue on living as this person, with everything he had done chaining his heart down until he found a way.
The wind blew again and Marluxia’s body scattered like flower petals. As she was left behind Strelitzia realized, this was what her brother must have always felt like when he was waiting for her to come home.

“So this is what it feels like.”

Hanekoma tilted his head towards her, letting his shades fall down again. “S’okay, I got nowhere to be just yet so I can wait with you a little while longer, little missy.”

In the real world, he woke up to the scent of flowers. As he turned his head he noticed he was still resting in someone’s lap.

“True love’s kiss, huh? Were you going to find some way to kiss yourself? A mirror, perhaps.” He said, as he reached up and stopped the downward tilt of her head by pressing his thumb to her flips.

Larxene’s face twisted into an emotion he recognized as anger. He could tell, this was not Larxene puppeteering around pretending to be, but rather her genuine emotion. He had just wanted to see it.

“Hmmph! Next time I’m smacking you awake then!”

“That line is more you.” He said, a fond smirk on his face. “Elrena.”

“Lauriam.”

Elrena said those words with all of her heart.

How fun, Lauriam thought.

His old friend Larxene with a heart. She was going to show him, so many new faces.

♛

Kariya’s wings bristled, rising slightly behind him as a sign of emotion even as his face stayed the same as always. Just as they had recovered and Kariya was wringing out his hoodie, trying not to look like he had been washed out and was now dripping wet (he was a burnout, not a washout, there was a difference), he finally got a look at the frequency of the two stranger’s souls.

He put a hand on Uzuki’s shoulder, pulling her back. Usually, he let Uzuki be the one to initiate contact because she was very touchy and liked to manhandle him while not letting him lay a finger on her. Kariya preferred going with the flow and seeing where it would take him, then striking out on his own rhythm. This one time was an exception because he noticed something Uzuki would never notice.

“Hey, Johnny Storm over there is basically just a grown-up child, and I dunno about David Bowie, but sleeping beauty and his GF have got really weird souls in comparison to the rest. They’re older than I am, I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Hey, since when have we used having no idea what we were doing as an excuse to slack?” Uzuki said, elbowing him away as she turned away from the scene to glare back at him.
“You're right, fake it until we make it is basically the reaper motto. If you think about it though, the world is fake and-”

“Enough with the fake deep shit. Let’s get down to business.”

“To defeat the Huns?” Kariya said tilting his head. Then he put a finger on his cheek for a moment. “Wait, am I allowed to make that joke if Mulan is an actual world we can visit?”

“Stop knowing more than me! The cool mysterious guy looks totally isn’t working on you!”

As they were talking, Elrena stood up and held a hand to help Lauriam to his feet. She let him rest with his arm over her shoulder. She noticed that the two reapers had recovered from their first fight.

She looked over for Demyx only to find that he was laying down on the ground in front of her, all of his limbs spread out. She kicked him in the side. “Demyx, do something!”

“I already did something!” Demyx whined as he laid on the ground unmoving.

“You did one whole thing!”

“I did one thing and it was exhausting! If I do something else, that will be two whole things! That’s double the exhaustion!”

“Since when did you learn math, idiot!” Elrena bit her lip and looked back to Axel. “Yo, it’s your time to shine finally. You love the spotlight don’t you?”

Axel hit his hands against the invisible wall cutting them off from the others. He looked around for Kairi, but she had already disappeared back into the RG from her last-minute save. “I can’t, there’s some kind of doorway in my way.”

Kariya casually bit on the toothpick on his lips. “That’s a reaper wall, you need a key pin to take it down.”

“Oh man if only you had some kind of giant key with you,” Elrena said, rolling her eyes and muttering under her breath. “Worst. Keyblader. Ever.”

Lauriam removed his hand from Elena's shoulder and stood up to support his own weight. When he stepped away from her Elrena looked like there was something missing, and grabbed at the area where his hand had been a moment ago.

“Lauriam, wait… you just woke-”

“Since when were you the type to be concerned for others? I know you, if I cannot keep up, you will get bored.” As he said that he held a hand at his side, the wind began to spin around him. Suddenly a scythe took form spinning before he caught it, and spun it around a few more times deftly
maneuvering with his hands. When he finished spinning he rested it behind his shoulder the pink blade cutting cleanly space behind his back.

Elrena nodded. This was what she wanted, after all, just to fight by his side again. Then suddenly, just as before the world inverted. It disappeared away in white noise, and she found herself standing in an empty street.

This time she was ready. She toyed with Uzuki while Marluxia kept Kariya busy. They were not able to pull the switching act this time around as easily. As Uzuki danced around the battlefield, Elrena made the knives dance on her fingertips and threw them up in the air. They became columns of lightning that spread out from around her.

Uzuki needed to psychically push herself back just to avoid turning into what happened when you stuck a fork into a toaster. Elrena was just getting started, she wanted to make the other girl dance a little more.

But she heard Lauriam's voice loud and clear ringing in her ears, even though he was behind the mirror wall. Funny, even separated they felt like they were right next to each other.

“Stop playing.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Elrena threw her hands behind her back and coated her entire body in lightning magic. She saw Lauriam next to her spinning his scythe around him with the wind to whip up a storm before his aura turned pink and he caught his scythe again. Both of them released the energy they were charging at the same time. Larxene darted back and forth, zig-zagging in sharp angles leaving a trail of lightning in her wake. Lauriam spun his entire body around, cutting through the air in a cyclone. The two of them moved together in perfect sync, lightning and the wind together created a storm.

“What’s the matter?”

Elrena cried out in a taunt as she slammed hard into Uzuki’s body. She jolted around her, before coming to finish her off.

“See ya!”

In that exact moment, Kariya appeared and threw himself in front of Uzuki. He took both attacks head-on at once. The dimension that they were fighting in shattered, and Elrena saw white noise again, and glass pieces fall from the sky before she blinked and they were standing in the UG again.

“Round three, I can totally take around three!” Uzuki said.

Elrena smiled. “Are you sure about that, pinky?”

“Hey, you should be talking, you look like you can pick up radio signals with that hair.”

She shadow boxed at the air before Kariya grabbed her from behind, using his superior height to lift her up. “Down girl.” His wings drooped, the sweater he had put back on before the fight was now torn to pieces, on top of being drenched. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll hold her back and look the other way
while you four make a tactical retreat.”

“Oh, you will won’t you? How nice.” Elrena said.

“I know, I’m a really good guy underneath it all. Don’t tell anybody it’s embarrassing.” Kariya said as he held back the struggling Uzuki. “Come on, we don’t even know if that message was legit. We should talk with headquarters first. And… if we keep fighting in the middle of the street it’ll look like we skipped out on paying the bill for our ramen.”

“Oh, no they might ban up from Ramen Don!” Uzuki quickly remembered as she rushed back to the ramen booth to pay. Kariya gave a cool wave with his hand before following after her.

The wall in front of Axel collapsed and he fell face first to rejoin the group. Lauriam smirked. He totally did not hold a grudge. No, he was above such petty matters.

“Well, they were nice,” Demyx said, finally sitting up from where he had been laying on the ground.

“Yes. I liked them.”

“Wait, what is Larxy agreeing with me? What bizarre parallel world have I woken up in? This isn’t my beautiful wife, these aren’t my beautiful children?”

“Shut it, I wouldn’t be your wife in any parallel world. I was just saying, it’d be fun to fight them to the death another time.”

Apparently, that was Elena’s working definition of friendship. She was still learning about that whole power of friendship thing.

“Oh, that sounds more like the Larxy I know. I’m glad I was afraid you’d go all gaga eyes on me the moment MarMar woke up.”

At that point, Demyx fell back down to the ground again because Elrena kicked him there.

After they finished clothes shopping for Marluxia they left from Shibuya and returned to the Kingdom of Corona to find somewhere to talk. They did not have anywhere else to go, as the world which Elrena and Lauriam remembered had long ago sunken into darkness.

They watched the sunset, all sitting atop Rapunzel’s now abandoned tower. Axel stood on the edge of the roof and handed out ice cream from a plastic baggy he was carrying. As he sat down he exhaled in relief. “See, I told you guys Ice Cream solves everything.”

“Quit pretending like you did anything useful, Attention-Hedgehog.” Elrena snapped at him. It looked like the only thing preventing her from starting a fight was the fact that Lauriam was sitting in between them.
Even though they had finally been returned to each other’s side, neither of them said anything for the longest time. Lauriam waited until his ice cream was completely devoured. Salty, and sweet, like Elrena. No wonder Axel enjoyed eating this ice cream so much and tried to solve all conflicts with it. He looked to Elrena sitting at his side at the far end of the group. She was distant as usual.

Elrena wore a shirt and tie, the tie loosened and the collar open to flaunt more of her body. Lauriam himself was wearing a vest again, though a much longer one than the one he did as a child. They were both wearing older versions of the outfits they wore in daybreak town. At one moment they were kids fighting as heroes in the keyblade war, and then the next they had grown up without even realizing it. The evolution and the stars which had led them to this point was far beyond him.

“You changed your hair.”

Lauriam finally spoke up.

Elrena self consciously ran her fingers through her slicked-back bangs for a moment. “Oh, yeah I used to have bangs. Our past selves are embarrassing huh? Losing our hearts to the darkness, thinking bangs worked with this haircut, totes embarrassing.”

“How much do you remember?” Lauriam finally asked it. He looked like he had been silently composing himself all this while before finally asking that question, Elrena had no idea what he always seemed so composed. He was basically a symphony, and she was just a pair of symbols.

Loud, thunderous, crashing, just noise lacking in purpose. She had no idea about the purpose he remembered. She did not even know if she was a part of it. She was a partner in crime, not a hero to fight by his side. “Bits and pieces. Whatever the main story was with DayBreak Town I was just one of the side characters, weren’t you the main event, one of the big five?”

Lauriam only nodded. She had no idea what he was thinking, his face remained still as always. There were many things that she wanted to say to him, she kept thinking about them over and over. The first time she faded, the second time as well, she thought it would be alright as long as she enjoyed the ride. She never considered she would get the chance to see him again when it was all over, side by side, as whole people.

It was some sort of impossibility that they existed in this age, to begin with, and it was another impossibility that they had found each other, how much were they going to mess with what the stars had planned for them. No, that was just her nerves. Even if they shared common memories now, she barely remembered Lauriam. She had no idea if he would feel the same things that she did, or want the same things.

She held her hand up trying to catch the fleeting sunrays. “Ahh, so warm. I feel so alive… It felt like this back then too. Remember when we were plotting to overthrow the organization? ‘I think we can get Axel to kill Vexen’ and ‘What if Axel won’t do it and turns us in’, you know? Every day back then was so exciting.”

“Hmm.”

“Say, do you remember the time when we first met?”

“Yeah, you said you didn’t want a heart.”
“You were the only person in the organization who understood me. The rest of them were all boring, a bunch of emos and crybabies.”

“Hey!” Axel said, still biting onto his lollipop.

“When we didn’t have hearts, no matter who we broke, it didn’t matter to us. Today, was the most fun I’ve ever had, going on a crazy adventure to find you but…it’s over now, huh?”

Elrena tried to reach out to catch the light, but the sun’s rays slipped between her fingertips. No wonder she had fallen to the darkness at some point before this. The light was so hard to hold onto, and so was warmth.

“I couldn’t stand waking up without you. I… For me, getting to play with you again was reason enough to join the old man’s organization, and reason enough to Re-complete but it’s different for you isn’t it? I can never read what you want, it’s like you’re always so far away.”

She stopped grabbing towards the light and let her hand fall. Her fingers touched her lips again. She had no idea why she was saying all of this. She must have looked idiotic, babbling about feelings and what not. After she beat up the good guys for doing it so many times. She wanted to sew her mouth shut, but she just kept going.

“Lauriam, it was on a tower like this wasn’t it? After our first investigation failed, and our leads dried up. Do you remember what I said about your sister? I told you I’d help you find her. And we tried so hard to get her back. But in the end, we just couldn’t. I guess none of that matters anymore either.”

“…”

“The truth is I’ve always been like this. Even when I had a heart I didn’t have any friends, so no wonder I turned out like this as a nobody. And now, everyone’s gone. Skuld, Brain, Sigurd, everyone from the dandelions. Gone, all of them. We lost our hearts. Not only that, but we lost that time we tried to take over the organization, and in the new organization we lost as well. Maybe it’s time to call it quits and admit we’re losers. So, it doesn’t matter anymore if we remember each other from the past. Just go on ahead of me.”

When he heard the name Skuld, Axel pressed his hand to his chest. He had no idea why, but he felt particularly empty like something was missing when he heard that name, even though he had no memory of it. He had touched his chest to see if it was still beating.

“Go on?” Lauriam listened, with no change in his expression.

“If you want to play the hero and rescue your sister, that’s fine by me. You might be more suited to that kind of role, but me, not so much. You don’t have to chain yourself down to me.”

“No,” Lauriam said, speaking clearly. “I have you and you have me. We haven’t lost anything.”

“What? Don’t give me that-”

“I am going to give you that. What do you think a heart is, Elrena?”

“Uhh, the thing in your heart that goes tick tock that people like to make a bunch of flowery
Lauriam loved flowery metaphors, so she would just have to deal with it. “Who needs a heart you can’t see? My heart is right next to me…”

Larxene turned her head away. “Sounds like a pain.”

“I have a person to share all my pain, and all my loss with. There’s only one person who understands me that way.”

“Yeah, get over yourself, Romeo. Stop reciting poetry.”

“Besides, I have no intention of playing the hero. You and I are thieves, aren’t we? We’re going to steal back everything we lost.”

Elrena’s anger bubbled. It boiled over until it escaped her voice in a yell as she whipped her head back around at him. “And what if we just lose again? What then?”

“Well, in that case, we will have died. Lost our hearts. Become nobodies. Become nobodies again. Re-completed. Only to lose our hearts again. After somehow time traveling from the age of fairy tales and surviving to this time. So, as you would say, we’ll have had a long and fun ride at least.”

“Is that your next scheme?” She asked, biting down hard on the popsicle stick. She finally removed it from her teeth and held it up at him, pointing at him with it. Lauriam was quite a polite person, but he did not mind the rudeness. “Fine, you’ve got me. As long as you need me.”

“That’ll be a long time, considering how long it’s been so far,” Lauriam said as he crossed his popsicle stick to hers.

Demyx appeared from behind them, pulling both of their shoulders closer to each other for a three-way group hug. “You have me, too!”

“Apparently, we also have a Demyx,” Lauriam said.

“Ugh!” Larxene groaned.

“S-s-s-s-s-…”

Elrena had been trying to pronounce the word for a while, but it was stuck on her tongue. She sounded more like a hissing snake as she hesitated.

Behind her, Demyx was losing his patience. “It’s been fifteen minutes, Larxy! Just say I’m sorry already! It’s not that hard I do it all the time.”

“That’s because you have to apologize just for existing.” Elrena snapped her head back to yell at Demyx.
They had all returned to the Land of Departure. Riku and Kairi from their day off, and Demyx, Axel from their search to reunite Elrena and Lauriam. Now Kairi was standing behind Namine defensively, waiting to hear the apology that Elrena owed her.

“Is it that hard to apologize?” Kairi asked.

“I’m sorry, jeez! Okay, I’m sorry. There I said it. Are you happy now?”

“Not really,” Namine said with a blank face. Behind her, Kairi and Rei were both standing. Riku had gone to talk to Ventus because he wanted to trust Kairi to resolve the scene by herself. Kairi was the best with dealing with people out of all of them. Namine crossed her arms over the sketchbook she had been holding, hugging it tighter to her chest. “I don’t care about what you did to me, but apologize to Rei. You kept calling him a fake.”

“I’m sorry to him too. I’m outta here before you make me apologize to everybody because that’s gonna be a long list.”

Rei bristled behind Namine. He could tell that Elrena was a few moments away from losing her temper. Rather than causing a scene, she just stormed off. Thank goodness for Rei, she did not literally storm off and no lightning was summoned.

Lauriam bowed his head. Unlike Elrena his remorse seemed more genuine. He was definitely not putting on the act of a nobody anymore. His green eyes looked heavier than before, the spark of wicked insight that Namine remembered from the past was almost completely smothered. “The lord of your castle was a terrible man. I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that young princess.”

“You’re right, I didn’t…” Namine held strong, “I have so many regrets about Castle Oblivion more than the stars in the sky but, I think if you had treated me like a person I would not have been so lonely as to try to write myself in Sora’s memories. I can’t believe I’m saying this but you’re worse than Axel, at least he tried to treat Roxas and Xion as people even when he did not have a heart.”

“Haha, you’re worse than me.” Axel was petty, pointing fingers in the background. “I’m sorry too, by the way, Namine.”

“I said no more apologizing, Axel!” Kairi snapped at him.

“But I have so many people I need to apologize to. I kind of screw up a lot.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

Namine continued. “So, I’ll accept your apology but I won’t forgive you, and I don’t want to see you again either. I don’t want you making things up to me either, just leave me alone, let me be my own person far away from you.”

Lauriam put his hand on his chest and bowed his head. “I thought nobodies were only meant to fade away, but it turns out the bonds between people cannot fade that easily. My apologies for becoming such a heavy chain on your heart and forcing you to live with it.” He turned around swiftly as he was about to go looking for Elrena when he hesitated for a moment. “I have a sister. She’s a missing girl who forgot about herself, just like you. When I find her again, I hope the two of you can be friends.
Please don’t blame my sister, for the fact that big brother grew up into such a terrible man.”

He had no right to ask it of her.
However, at that moment Namine could see the sincerity in Lauriam’s eyes. They were all missing things, and they chose to hurt each other over it. At the end that was not a good enough reason and more was lost because of it. Lauriam was left with only his actions, and he could only try to reassemble with the broken pieces, knowing that he was the one who helped shatter them, to begin with.

Namine did not hate him for asking such a thing, though. She was a younger sister now too, so she thought she understood a little bit of what Lauriam’s younger sister might feel.

As Lauriam walked away to go join Elrena she saw their tall silhouettes standing next to each other. She had no idea what they were talking about from so far away, but it was a lively conversation.

She blinked and saw a light so bright it blurred her vision. In the next moment, it was no longer Larxene and Marluxia, but rather a pink haired boy and a blonde haired girl talking to each other, each of them in their mid-teens around Kairi’s age. Around them, there were a few other children, a black haired girl with star earrings, a boy with white curly hair and a scarf, another boy wearing a hat and staring into the pages of a book. The strangest of all, she saw a young blonde boy approach them, one that looked exactly like Roxas, or Ventus.

When she blinked again the image disappeared. Rei next to her leaned over her shoulder. “Did they say something to make you upset? Do I need to fight them?”

Namine shook her head. She was just confused, is all. They had been so close once, she wondered why people ever grew apart, to begin with. That was just the musings of a lonely girl who never had friends though, she could not imagine the pain of losing them.

Elrena leaned against a tree as she spoke to Lauriam in private. “So, what are you going to do about Ventus? Is he like us? You were making funny faces when you saw him.”

“Funny faces?”

“Well, your version of funny faces. It’s kind of like this.”

She imitated the face he made. It looked like the same calm face he was always making.

“I don’t see a difference. Are you mocking me?”

“Not the issue here. He doesn’t remember, does he? Even less than I do, and way less than Demyx does and that guy’s head emptied out instead of his heart when he became a nobody.”

“It’s no matter. He already found friends in this day and age, right? There’s no need for me to disturb him.”

“But if you know him.”

“I already have you, don’t I?” Lauriam asked her suddenly.

He was so annoying, being able to say embarrassing stuff like that without losing his cool at all.
“Well, I am pretty great, like the whole package who else would you need…” She said, rambling to avoid getting flustered. “Still I wonder if you and I are here. Then, did Skuld and Brain make it here as well? Isn’t this too many random instances of time travel to be a coincidence?”

“Perhaps it’s fate.”

“Haha, as if! Fate is just what losers say when they don’t want to admit they lost. Oh well, there was no avoiding it, it was always gonna happen, whatever. Fate is what the old geezer used to pull the rug over so many people’s eyes.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Axel had been listening from afar. Spying was an old, bad habit of his that was hard to break. He paused when he heard the name Skuld again. He had no idea why that name resonated with him. He reached up and touched a familiar spot on his forehead with a finger as he tried to think.

Kairi who was standing next to him noticed. “What’s up? Are you having trouble keeping something memorized?”

“No way, I’d never. My entire reputation would be ruined if I forgot something.”

Riku rejoined them, a fresh set of bandages on his hand all the way up to the wrist. “Ventus got Aqua to take a break from Terra and use her healing magic on me, she said there’s some permanent damage that’ll make it a little slower than the other hand but it’ll heal soon.”

“Oh, Riku.”

“What? It’s not like I dual wield like Roxas.”

“You could be a little more concerned about getting permanent injuries to your body!”

“I already have regrets I’m going to carry for the rest of my life, no need to pile them on.”

“Ugh, so serious,” Kairi said, crossing her arms. She looked back to Axel searching for someone to agree with her. Now that she thought about it though, it was a little weird he was still standing there in the middle of their argument.

“Well, now that we’re done saving those two let’s go our next adventure. I’m sure there’s still plenty of work to be done for those of us chosen by the keyblade.” Axel said, as he turned around and started to walk off expecting them to follow.

“Axel…” Kairi started out.

“Why have you been following us?” Riku finished her sentence for her.

“Are you avoiding something?”

Just like they had been skipping school this entire time.
Axel suddenly turned around, nervously he covered his hand with his mouth and spoke through his fingers. “Okay, so this is kind of awkward so I’m just going to say it really fast and hope I don’t become less cool by admitting it. I don’t know what my relationship with Isa is any more or if we’re friends or boyfriends and I’m too scared to ask so I’ve just been following you guys around.”

“…”

“Axel, omigosh,” Kairi said, sounding a little bit like Shiki the other girl rubbing off on her. “Just talk to him. You know how to talk right? You’re always running your mouth.”

Axel hung his head. “You don’t get it, avoiding each other and not talking about important things for years is the only way Isa and I know how to communicate.”

Kairi looked to Riku for support, but she suddenly saw that Riku was making the exact same embarrassed face and then covering it up his hand. He immediately averted his eyes. She should have known, Axel was talking about a childhood friend that he had feelings deeper than friendship with but had no idea how to put those feelings into words. Riku’s face had turned almost entirely red.

“Axel’s right…”

The moment Riku admitted to that she knew something was wrong.

“I don’t know how you’re supposed to talk about that. I don’t know how to talk. Silence good.”
Any Tree Can Drop an Apple, I'll Drop the Moon

Side B: Shibuya
Track 4

When Neku’s eyes peeled open once more he was in the middle of a battlefield. The last thing he remembered he was having a coffee break with Joshua. Neku was not particularly fond of the idea of waking up somewhere with missing memories. He had had bad experiences with it in the past.

As he pushed himself off the ground he looked up to see a barren wasteland extending all around him. The only things planted in the ground were rusted and broken keyblades left them from millennia ago.

He was back in the keyblade graveyard, then… how had he gotten here? Before he could answer that question suddenly a man that looked like a frenzied blue demon jumped into the sky in front of him. He picked a giant claymore off the ground and slammed it right at the spot of earth that Neku was standing in. Neku crossed his hands in front of his face, not knowing what else to do to guard.

He had no psyches.
He was going to be broken into pieces.
Then suddenly the man passed straight through him as if he was a hologram.

“Hehehehehe, Neku self-absorbed much? Why would you assume you’re a part of this memory?”

Hand stuffed into the pockets of his jeans, wearing a coy expression as always Joshua was standing right next to him in the middle of the battlefield.

“What’s going on here?”

It was a stupid question to ask Joshua because Joshua was almost guaranteed never to give a straightforward explanation. In fact upon hearing that question Joshua only smirked. “Haven’t you heard of In Medias Res, Neku? I thought we’d jump right into things this time.”

“Why can I see you?”

“Don’t act so bothered. Isn’t it nice to see my handsome face?”

“You’re only handsome until the exact moment you open your mouth.”

“Oh, so you’re admitting I’m handsome.” Joshua said putting a finger to his lips. Neku was starting to wonder if he had selective hearing or he was just acting that way. “When memories connect to each other they form a chain, after we found it we didn’t need to keep fishing through random memories in traverse town as for me.” Joshua looked down as if he did not expect his bod to be there. “The reason you can see me is likely because we’re becoming more harmonized. We’re on the same wavelength Neku, how dangerous.”

“You’re telling me like I wanna be on the same wavelength as a guy like you.” Neku made a sour face, sticking out his tongue. While the two of them stood as mere holograms on the battlefield the blue demon rushed through them once more and smashed the earth where Axel had been standing a
moment ago.

“Oh…” Joshua said, reaching up to twirl a stray curl of his silver hair around his finger, “It looks like Axel and Saix are communicating.”

“Is this what you call communication?”

“Yes, by my standards this is very positive communication.”

Neku turned his head to give Joshua a flat look. At which point he noticed that Joshua was wearing the same loose-fitting high collared button up shirt and disc jeans as always. “Hey, how come my outfit always changes when I go down here but you get to wear the same thing as ever.”

Joshua put a hand on his heart. If he was speaking about fashion, those words came from the heart at least. “Pardon me, Neku? This look is a classic.”

Axel jumped back, only for Saix to appear behind him and swing his Luna Diviner with everything he had slamming it into Axel’s side. Axel only raised his keyblade to block at last minute. He watched the sword swing past him, grinding along the edge of his keyblade.

He swung his body around using his momentum to throw Saix off of him. Saix flew back through the air. Saix moved around the oversized sword like it was nothing landing and turning to face Axel. A bloodthirsty, maddened smile on his face, his fangs sharpened and his eyes animalistic he looked like he was desperate to take a bite out of Axel.

“How about this? Is this more like the old me? Are you remembering me now, Axel? Is this the only way to jog your memory to get your attention?”

“Shaddup! You’re the one forcing me to fight! Quit acting like this is what I wanted, I’d never want to-”

“What do you want?” Saix slammed his claymore down hard again knocking it away from Axel and knocking him to the ground. “Lea. I wanted so long for this. I’m going to crack your ribs open and reach your heart. Are you feeling things again? Am I finally able to make you feel things again? It’s like nothing has changed between us after all. Just like you wanted.”

“That’s not what I wanted. This shit… None of it. You’re my friend. I didn’t want to forget you or grow apart, you’re the one who ran off-”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! You’re such an idiot without me, Lea. You’ve even forgotten yourself. Let me remind you.”

He put down his great sword, cracking the earth with its weight. He no longer needed it because brought down to his knees Saix’s next words were heavier than any blow that Axel could use to finish him off.
“The one who got bored of me and ran away is you.”

Smash.

“The one who started to get bored of his new toys, Roxas and Xion when they gained minds of their own was you as well. When they started to want things besides you.”

Smash.

“The one who wanted to break their legs so they couldn’t run away from you was you. You didn’t want to protect them, what you wanted to protect was yourself, your own feelings for them. Your friendship always comes first, even before what anybody else wants and that’s why it’s so poisonous. It chokes the life out of everything it touches.”

Smash.

“Because if they’re lifeless toys they can’t leave you. Now that you have a heart why are you going on pretending just like you were when you were a nobody that this was about them? It was about you, it’s always about you.”


“That’s why this time I’m going to break everyone around you. Not a single memory of you will remain. Nobody will be left to care about you. You’ll disappear. I’ve wanted this for so long. Let’s disappear together, Lea, just like that girl did so long ago without leaving a trace behind.”

He had felt Axel slowly pull away from him. It was impossible for the moon and the sun to exist in the same sky. No matter what, the moon had to fall so the sun could rise, and the sun ran away when the moon appeared. They played that game over and over again, on and off like flipping a light switch.

It became too much for him. Isa had watched too many times the light slowly escape from his fingertips, when all he could do was reach out for it so far away. The sun could be bright all on its own. It would always burn bright. Everyone would always look at the sun. The moon could not survive without the sun’s light though. All it could do was reflect the light that had been given to it.

Without the sun it was nothing but darkness, a numbness that ate away at every sensation. He could not even mourn his loss because he could not even feel what he was losing. As the sun slowly pulled away from him. He had to watch the sun turn away. If it was going to be like that, if it was slowly going to all fall apart and there was nothing he could do but watch then this time he wanted to break it himself. He wanted to rampage around enough to shatter the sky and cause it all to come collapsing down on them. It was better to break it then to watch it all fade away slowly powerless to do anything.

Neku could feel it was just the madness of all his repressed emotions dragged up to the surface at once talking in Saix. Before this, he had been given insight into their thoughts like he was scanning them in the reaper’s game, but he had never had their emotions fill his own heart up. He wondered if
this was a result of what Joshua called their sync rate going up.

“I don’t get it. He only wants to go home, so why is he trying to destroy it?” Neku said, stumbling backward clutching his chest. The multitude of emotions Saix felt was simply too much for him. He must have been repressing them for so long, because he knew he could not face them, they would destroy him if they did. Yet, no matter how much water he pushed them under those emotions never went away. It was like there was nothing he could do, people were just meant to break.

The home that Neku mentioned, it was not Hollow Bastion that he was trying to sink into darkness. The home was Lea, the light he was trying to extinguish in front of him.

“Perhaps he’s been lost for so long he forgot he has a home to return to, or perhaps he doesn’t see himself as worthy of returning” Neku had meant the question as a rhetorical one, but to Joshua there was no such thing as a question he could not answer. He loved to give his input on everything. “Do you know the word lunacy derives from the moon. It refers to a particular kind of madness that appears when the moon is in the sky.”

“Like being a werewolf?”

“Don’t ruin my metaphors, Neku, honey, sweetie, darling.” Joshua waved him off dismissively as his eyes returned to the fight. “It’s different from insanity which is caused by mental unhealth, and therefore is a curable sickness. The moon is always going to be present in the sky you can’t ignore it, just as shadows will always appear at your feet as long as there is light.”

“Yeah, yeah, can we skip to the part where you summarize. I’m getting kind of nervous being in the middle of this fight.”

“You have no sense for Razzle Dazzle at all. What a dull and unexciting life you must lead. Period.”

“I have a great sense for excitement, you’re just an adrenaline junky. Exclamation point.”

“Why don’t you just admit you hate fun, question mark?”

“I don’t hate fun. I just hate your version of fun. Period. New paragraph. Anyway, what do you mean- wait, what the hell are we doing?”

“It’s banter, relax. We’ve been talking over these memories the entire time but that just makes us an engaged audience. As I was saying, there are some feelings that simply won’t go away no matter how much you resist. In fact, the resistance makes them stronger.” Joshua said as he curled his fingers just as he was about to touch his face and dragged them along his cheeks. When he posed like that, it drew attention to just how pale he was, he was beautiful but in exactly the same way a doll was. When Neku first met him and found him in the middle of the street he just assumed Joshua was a kid who had been kept indoors all of his life.

Lunacy. An incurable sickness. The moon would always appear waxing and waning it was outside of humans control. Humans had no choice but to stare up at its pale light. Just as a shadow would always be there at your feet no matter how much you tried to outrun it. Emotions that would not go away. All he could do was smash what was right in front of him to distract himself, but even then the emotions would return.

The moon envied the sun because the sun was bright and shined its light on everyone, but the moon was covetous, he wanted the sun’s light all to himself. Otherwise, he would have no light of his own.
They were of different levels of importance. To the moon, the sun was his one and only. However, the sun still had everyone else. Then it had to be that the sun cared less because the moon was just one of many.

It was painful knowing that no matter how deeply you loved someone, they always might love you slightly less. Because two people’s emotions could never be the same, because they could never understand each other fully, then perhaps fully requited love was just a fairy tale. That was what Joshua would say, or narrate rather.

“Quit narrating in my head.”

“No.”

Joshua and Neku’s argument was interrupted by Kairi running right through them. She was fighting, just as Axel was against a shadow. Even Neku with his foresight could not see what was underneath the hood of the organization member wielding a kingdom key who was chasing her.

When he tried to scan, all he got back was white noise.

Joshua put his elbow on Neku’s shoulder to lean on him. (Rude!) “A blank slate then.”

“So she’s nobody in particular?”

“No, she’s much greater than that. She’s like a white piece of paper, you could draw a wonderful masterpiece on it or you could crumple it up and throw it away. Isn’t it dismissive of the potential of such a person just to call them a nobody because they started out with nothing?”

“That’s Sora’s keyblade,” Kairi said as she saw the weapon materialize in the organization member’s hand.

She had been only casting magic before that point, terribly powerful light magic that Kairi needed to run and jump around the entire battlefield to dodge. When she heard that the keyblade in her hand did not belong to her, the girl in the coat made no sound at all, and her face was too concealed by a pulled up hood to show any emotion but suddenly she rushed forward swinging the key over her head and striking down.

Kairi blocked holding her hilt in both hands. They were of about equal strength, but suddenly Kairi’s hands were shaking. She was not scared, but rather there was something leaking out of the person she was fighting. Emotions that were not supposed to be there, and not supposed to belong to her.

The girl in the coat jumped into the air suddenly and spun head over the toe, landing spinning strikes again and again. Kairi dodged to the side and started to run again. As soon as the girl landed she struck the spinning Kairi from behind, again, and again.

Kairi turned around to face her ignoring the pain in her back from the consecutive blows. She turned her body on her heel, elegant like a dancer and knocked her keyblade into the side of the girl’s guard.
The strength behind the blow knocked the girl in the cloak off her toes for a moment and forced her to jump back.

When she jumped in the air, she summoned six columns of light in a circle around her sending them all after Kairi. Riku had the most strength and could use darkness, Sora was a magic expert, she wondered what her specialty was supposed to be of the trio. In that moment she needed to be faster than the light chasing her, she decided to make it speed. She turned her hand around and gripped her keyblade backwards exactly the same way Ventus did and then ducked and weaved just before spinning as she leaped in the air to knock down the floating cloaked girl.

When they both landed they looked at each other and charged once more from opposite sides of the wasteland. As their keyblades locked, destiny’s embrace crossing against the simple kingdom key she saw Sora always using, Kairi tried to get a look at the fae underneath the cloak. “Wh-who are you?”

“No one.”

“You can’t be? Namine?”

“Namine? I don’t… sounds familiar.”

“What?”

“Tell me, tell me why it’s you. Just because you were born, you get to be you.” The girl dragged her keyblade along the earth making a grinding noise as she went after Kairi. She swung again a large scythe-like blow, which Kairi sidestepped.

Kairi blocked her next blow and tried to pin her keyblade to the ground, only for the girl in the cloak to jump over her and land on the other side in a feat of acrobatics. Kairi tried a similar jump only to be knocked away.

When the other girl leaped into the air to come after her, Kairi turned her body around to swing up. They met in the air one of them jumping up and the other falling down, it was like they were mirror images fighting one another. When Kairi landed, the other girl looked to the opposite side of the battlefield.

There was a red-haired man, and a spiky-haired boy who came here with Kairi who were fighting by her side. Suddenly, an image flashed in her mind. There was a time when two figures were standing next to her two, one of them a boy, the other a man. Then suddenly the images of both of them disappeared from her mind as if they had been erased, and she was standing there all alone.

“N-no… I’m not angry, I’m just sad.”

Her voice cracked. She did not even know she could speak with such emotion as to overwhelm her voice. When she landed she ran over and slammed her keyblade down so many times, that it Kairi’s keyblade she was guarding with flew out of her hand.

Still she hesitated, holding the keyblade between Kairi’s eyes as a threat but she did not bring it any further. She remembered now, she did not hate the girl in front of her, or the boy. She was not angry at them. She was just sad. What a wonderful thing it was to exist. What a sad thing it was to not exist.
Kairi summoned her keyblade back to her hand and swung in an upward arc, tearing part of her cloak. However, underneath the missing pieces of the cloak, Kairi saw only blackness like there was nothing underneath.

“You’re useless unless someone is pulling your strings. Come on.”

Suddenly, the girl turned her attention away from Kairi and joined the fight against Sora with Xemnas. Sora seemed to be fighting with everything he had, but in a way that made Kairi more worried for him than encouraged. She wondered if she had ever seen him fight so recklessly in the past.

Suddenly, Sora was knocked back and at the same time, Saix changed targets from Axel to her. She saw him raise his Claymore, then suddenly her entire world became surrounded by blue flames for a moment and she bounced back against the ground and landed near Sora.

Axel who had been desperately trying to recover found his second wind when he saw Kairi harmed, and rushed in front of them. He swung his keyblade in the air, “Stop it, Isa!”

He tried to attack, but his swing was met with Saix’s claymore halfway through. Axel collapsed to the ground whatever determination that was holding him up when his body had already been thoroughly broken, quickly fading away. He turned his head up with the last effort he had to look at Isa whose face was entirely lost to rage, the shadows lengthening on Axel’s face only served to make his features sharper.

If your face was the last thing I saw, that wouldn’t be too bad.

“Gay,” Joshua remarked.

“Shut up. We don’t need you commenting on the subtext.” Neku snapped back at him.

“I think all works of fiction would be greatly improved if my commentary was added pointing out all homoerotic subtext.”

“This isn’t a work of fiction stop treating it like one, you’re ruining the moment!”

But I…
I don’t want those two to disappear behind me because of my dumb mistakes.

He would have been content if the last thing he saw was Saix’s face, but then suddenly he saw a face that displeased him causing his sharp features to grow hostile enough to cut.

“Xemnas…”
Xemnas stepped out in front of him, walking past both Saix and the cloaked girl both just standing there as if they had no reason to move when their strings were not being pulled. “There was a time I trusted you to deal with traitors and now, your betrayal outstrips them all. What final words do you have for your superior?”

“Well, let me think about it. How about you were never my superior.”

“Ah, ever the rogue pawn. Knocked from the board early in the game. Utterly useless and forgotten.”

“You kidding? Do you know how popular I am? I got loads of people rootin’ for me. Sorry, boss, no one axes, Axel.” He brought his finger to his forehead a confident smile causing his lips to twist. “Got it memorized?”

“I wonder how long he was waiting to say his catchphrase.” Joshua crossed his arms, unimpressed.

“Dude, he’s trying to look cool stop interrupting,” Neku said waving his hand in front of Joshua’s face.

“Trying and failing.”

Axel threw his keyblade behind him as he started to run, and then with all the momentum he could muster swung it back and then forward again leaping into the air and swinging the red hot blade at Xemnas blocked by catching it in his bare hand.

“You see,” Joshua said, sounding bored.

“Is this supposed to be a Keyblade? Or is it some sort of joke?” As he closed his eyes, darkness spiraled around Xemnas’ fingertips. He broke apart the flame that Axel was holding in his hand into mere cinders. Then he closed his hand to summon beams of light concentrated into lasers blasting him from all around.

As Axel collapsed to his knees Xemnas casually strolled forward another concentrated beam appearing from his right hand in the form of a red beam sword.

“Oh, how very Star Wars of him,” Joshua said as he watched.

“Wait, are we allowed to reference Star Wars? Have you even seen it?”

“Oh of course I did it came out in the seventies. Besides, Disney bought the rights to star wars a long time ago, you’re behind the times, how 2007 of you Neku.”

“This conversation is starting to make my head hurt.”

“Our plans have been dashed by you… for more times than I care to count.” Xemnas continued in his emotionless growl. “Now it ends I will purge that light in you, with darkness-”

Axel could only close his eyes, but the end that he was expecting never came. A single hand reached
out grabbing onto the sword with her gloves. It was nothing more than a weak link that was saving him.

“Changing sides again?” Xemnas asked.

“We need him alive.” The girls’ voice spoke. She had no idea why she was doing this, or why those words left her lips. It felt like somebody else was moving her body for her. Reasons she did not remember, feeling she did not recall belonging to her, perhaps she truly was a puppet because she had no idea what strings were controlling her anymore. “You know that.”

“We only need his heart to forge the key. We do not need his soul. Oh, but that's right. You were ‘friends’. Then… you take his life.”

Friends?
She had friends?
There was a time when she was not alone like this?
There had been people who once saw what was underneath her hood, and saw a face. She looked at them and they looked at her in return. Until she met them she was absolutely nothing. She did not even have an appearance. She was invisible until they looked at her.

They had forgotten her and now she disappeared again. So, that was why she was sad. What a sad, sad, story. Even though she had never been born just like Kairi, there was a time where she was alive like her. She had lived, even without being born, even just as something that was never meant to exist she had lived.

Now that was over. She could not return to those days. She was the one who had decided to bring them to an end, she thought. She could not remember entirely, because that person was not her. That person had disappeared and the one remaining was just a shell. She was alive once but she was not alive now.

She had lived, and she died. Story over. A story that was never meant to be told in the first place. A story that nobody remembered because of how unimportant she was. Those precious memories must not have mattered to her too much if she had forgotten about them.

“Who... are you...?”

Axel asked her.

She wished with all of her heart she could answer him, but she did not have one so there was nothing to wish with. There were no stars in the sky for her. She only leveled a keyblade at his face.

She had no eyes. She had no face. There was nothing under her hood. The only reason she could still move was because people were pulling her strings. Yet, she could not bear to look at him. She hesitated, turning her hood away.

Kairi looked at Sora next to her. Suddenly, Sora who had been in too much pain to move got up and walked on his own. He looked like somebody else was possessing his body and moving it for him. He grabbed at the cloaked girl's key recklessly, and pushed it out of the way.
“Sora, no! You’re still hurt!” Kairi called after him. She was desperate to prove she would be more than a bystander in situations like this, and even she felt moving was too hard right now.

“Don’t do this.”

The sight of Sora’s face made her lash out. She was terrified. She felt terror looking at that face for some reason. She was scared that if she stood in front of a mirror, she would see that face looking back at her.

She swung her keyblade wildly, trying to make it go away. The face that was not hers, the memories that were not hers, she wished they would all go away. She was feeling too much. She was feeling feelings she could not bear to feel. The reason that people were afraid of feeling, was because sometimes there was no proper way to feel things, no proper way to react, the feelings would just be destructive, they would just hurt.

Pain with no comfort. The desire of wanting to exist, the pain of not being able to exist, the remorse for hurting others just by existing, she had no way to reconcile any of it. She had wanted to shut it all out and just remain a puppet, because even if she felt her sadness, even if she cried and mourned for her tiny and unimportant existence it would not change a thing. Her story had already ended.

Then…
Then if nothing she felt mattered if it would change nothing, why was she so sad?
Her own emotions were pointless. They did not belong to her. So why did the hurt her so much?
She raised her keyblade above her head with both hands and then slammed it into his keyblade.

“It’s alright. You can stop now.”

“Huh?”

“It’s alright, Xion,” Sora spoke in a voice that was not his.

She did not want to live, because she knew her living would hurt Sora.
So she returned to the place where she belonged.
She chose oblivion.
Because she had already hurt so many people, and there was nothing she could do to make up for it. Only Sora could. She was not the main character of a story. She was not even a character in a story.

She thought she would be okay with disappearing, but then they snatched her away from oblivion.
They took away everything from her until she forgot what her face was supposed to look like, and she forgot those two boys who looked at her face like she was her own person. The boys that always smiled at her when she took down her hood.

Yet, after forgetting all of that she still could not stop wanting. Even though she no longer remembered his name or his face, she could not forget how desperately she wanted to hear his voice again. All this time she had never stopped wishing for it, even though her selfish wish to exist had harmed Sora so much.

She cried. She wailed. She cried out in agony. She had no idea what to do anymore, she was reduced to blubbering underneath her hood, even though she did not have a face to cry with. Then suddenly, Sora took her keyblade in his hand and moved it towards his own chest.
“It will be okay.”

Sora’s voice spoke again. As he said that a beam of light went through his chest.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Xemnas said, standing behind them with his hands folded behind his back. “Useless puppet.” He kicked Xion as if she was a toy he had gotten bored with. She fell back, knocking Sora down with her.

Light escaped from his heart, and as her hood fell off she remembered what her face looked like. Underneath the hood was a girl with black hair, in the short bob that Kairi had worn when she was younger with messier bangs.

Axel gripped his forehead, memories heavy with impossible emotions surged through his skull, he barely had time to comprehend all of them it made him feel like his forehead was going to crack but that did not matter. “Xion!” He called out.

Before Xemnas could take another step forward, Axel reached forward desperately grabbing his foot to stop him from taking another step. Xemnas merely stepped on his hand, crushing it. He easily shrugged him off. “Your Keyblade is no more. And still you think you can play at being a guardian of light? You can wait your turn… also-ran.”

The door that Sora had opened in his heart was left still open. As he lay on the ground another spark of light escaped him. Nearby in a battlefield an empty replica that had been stolen away and left there by Rei’s last sacrifice suddenly began to glow. He moved and flexed his newfound fingers, before punching them into the ground. Roxas lifted his body up on that determined push. He removed his hood and looked around with his newfound eyes, instead of a blank white face now there was blonde hair hanging in front of his eyes, bangs that framed a face that looked exactly like Sora’s. As his blue eyes looked around spotting where he needed to go, his entire body disappeared in the darkness.

“Hands off my friends.”

Roxas spoke in his own voice, through his own lips and not Sora’s for the first time, as he finally landed in front of Xemnas before he could finish his strike.

“Roxas…” Axel called out. He thought he was seeing something he could only see in a memory, or perhaps a dream.

“My turn,” Roxas said, as his two friends struggled to his feet behind him.

“Roxas.” Xion repeated the name. She remembered the name. The name of her precious person. That name was finally able to leave her lips. She wanted to say his name over and over again, Roxas, Roxas, Roxas.

“This is impossible. Where did you get a vessel?” Xemnas stared on, his emotionless voice wavering slightly in disbelief.

“Same as you. Most of the Organization’s members - they traveled here from the past as hearts. And you had replicas ready and waiting. One for each of them.” Roxas began.

“Who told you?” Xemnas interrupted.
“I owe my return to many. Some of them people you knew.”

“Ansem the wise, Zexion.”

“And others too. It seems you’re not as good at winning over people’s hearts as you think.”

As he said that Roxas looked just over Xemnas’ shoulder to the enraged demon standing perfectly still behind him like a puppet dangling on his strings.

“Ah, I see.”

“There was one last thing I needed in order to be whole again, a connection. Sora helped me find my way back here. To my friends.”

Roxas raised his hands, finally, he had hands of his own. He no longer needed to rely on Sora to be the main character, to fight in his place. He had given up and thought Sora was the better one when he saw how many hearts Sora was connected to, but he too had connections of his own. He would protect them with his own hands this time. He summoned a keyblade in each of them, the pitch black oath keeper and the pure white oblivion.

Xemnas took this sudden development with his usual calm. He looked at the people in front of him like they barely made a difference. “I don’t need hearts I will scatter them all to the winds.”

As he jumped forward, Kairi jumped in the way to intercept his blow. His beam sword crossed against her keyblade.

“Kairi!” Sora called her name, but with three pieces of his heart missing, he only had the strength to reach out after her.

“It’s fine, Sora. I can handle some guy you beat up a year ago. You two, protect Sora.” Kairi said as she jumped back, planning to act as the distraction for Xemnas so he could not harm Axel or Sora while the others figured out their plan of attack.

Xion wiped the tears from her face. She had had enough, of being sad, of acting out the main character of her tragedy. Surely there must have been some other roll for her to play than a puppet. She who was supposed to have disappeared was standing in front of the others right now, after all. She summoned her keyblade to her hand and stepped in front of Axel. “Rest, Axel. Roxas will fight in your place and I’ll… I will…” Even in her determination, she hesitated. Xion could not bring herself to say she would fight in Sora’s place. She was afraid just like last time her face would turn to Sora’s, she would forget herself again. She was just an extra after all, an understudy to play Sora on the stage.

Axel noticed her hesitation, and had no idea what to say. He always acted so smooth, but when he wanted them the most the right words never came to him. All he could do was smile and try to tell a joke to lighten the mood. “Yeah. When it comes to keyblades, you’re the old hands.” Perhaps Isa
was right and there was nothing he could give to these children. He had only taken away from them in the past. He knew he was no good. Even his attempt at playing at keyblade warrior had ended in such a comical way. Still, he wanted to do something, to give them something because they were his friends even if he had been a terrible friend to them. He at least wanted to be able to give them a smile if nothing else.

Kairi held off Xemnas while Isa roared and rejoined the fight. He threw his claymore up into the air and six more claymores circled around him. When Xion was still trembling, Roxas made one of his keyblades disappear and reached out to close the gap in between them by holding her hand.

That was enough, this connection was enough to remind Xion who she was. Even if she was a fake in everybody else’s eyes, as long as those two looked at her she would always be real to them. What was between them was the real thing, they were each other’s best friends.

The two of them together Roxas and Xion decided to take on Isa to protect Axel. Axel could only watch from behind them, as the children he wanted to protect were protecting him, and the guy he wanted to pound some sense into and drag back home was not even fighting him anymore.

He should have been the one to settle things with Isa. They were best friends after all.

“Why are you even fighting like this? What is there left to fight for? If you can switch sides just like Xion did, then do it already!”

Axel cried out at him, as he watched Roxas and Xion separate so they could attack Saix from both sides, crossing their keyblades from the right and the left at the exact same time. They had shared so much already that their teamwork was nearly perfect. They were like two halves of the same hole.

“I know you, Isa. You’re the most stubborn person on the planet. Nobody can make you do something you don’t want to do. No way Xehanort’s forcing you to do this, so just stop.”

Roxas attacked from above, meeting Saix’s blade head on. However, that left him open below where Xion attacked by swinging upwards. Saix reeled from the blow but used his strength to grab onto Roxas, slamming him into Xion.

“Even if you’re just Saix, it’s fine. We can find some other way to get your heart back. I promise I won’t treat you any differently, even if you’re a nobody, even if you lose your heart, even if you change you’re still Isa.”

Axel knew he was making empty promises, he knew he was just spewing more lies. That did not stop him. He would say anything, and he really believed at that moment he would do anything to make this fighting stop. He never wanted this. He never wanted to forget about Saix. He never wanted to be forced to choose between his old and his new friends. He knew what his actions were, but his actions and his desires almost never aligned. He wanted to be kind, and warm like the sun, even though he knew he was cold-blooded, with scales, and fangs that dripped poison.

Roxas recovered and held a hand out to Xion helping her get up. The two of them ran forward again, attacking now at the same time. They brought three keyblades down on Saix’s claymore. Saix would have easily overpowered one fo them but had difficulty holding off their strength combined.
“You’re still my best friend…”

Axel said softly, and then he roared up in anger.

“What role are you even playing anymore? The double agent? The hero? The villain? Are you atoning for what you did to the kids by letting them beat you up? You know they wouldn’t want that, you selfish dick.”

But the flame quickly died out.

“You might not come back if you disappear this way. Don’t… don’t go somewhere I can’t follow.”

“Heh.” A laugh emerged from Saix’s humorless lips. “You just care about being left alone.”

“Who wants to be alone? It’s so lonely.” Axel murmured.


“Dude, stop bullying him,” Neku said punching Joshua in the shoulder.

“The world bullies Axel, and I am the world.”

“I am the world. Wow, real humble there. What kind of complex do you got?”

“Should I make a list for you?”

As they were arguing in the background both Xion and Roxas finished their swings on either side of him in a perfect cross slash, tearing through Saix’s cloak down to the fabric of his soul. He collapsed to the ground, ready to fade away and fall apart in pieces.

“No… You let them reduce you to this?” Axel wanted to look away because if he looked at Isa, he would be able to see him crying. He did not want Isa to see his tears.

“I thought… you outgrew the marks under our eyes.” It was too late though. Isa always knew when he cried. Ever since they were young, even when Axel learned to smile to hide it Isa always knew, It was like they were the same person. They shared so much, two parts of a whole, the sun, and the moon were always supposed to share the sky together.

Just like the brat he was back then, he called out. “So?” Axel did not even realize he had started to cry yet. Saix knew before he did. He needed to bring his fingers to his face and feel his fae to know. He already knew what it was like to have someone who knew you better than yourself, but he let that person slip away through his fingertips, he never even bothered to chase them.

“You look… like you need them.”
“Stop it, the whole act. I thought this was all for her.” Axel asked.

Who else would it be for?
There was no way Saix would feel so much for the person who walked away, who made other friends. Axel knew his feelings would always remain the same but Saix had changed, he thought he had at least.

“At first. I sacrificed everything to try and track her down. You’re the one who off and made other friends. Left her and me both in the dust. It infuriated e how you just existed our lives. I lost… all sense of purpose.”

Axel could not stand to be so distant from him. They had been apart for so long after all. He got closer and closer as of gravity was pulling him in. Even though this unbearable sadness was the last thing he wanted when he regained a heart.

The pain of losing a loved one.

“I didn’t forget you,” Axel muttered.

“Yes… I know. You wouldn’t do that. But… I was jealous.” The shadow that Isa could not escape from, those feelings of his that were impossible to ignore no matter how much he rationalized it. He could not stop himself from feeling such an ugly emotion. He could not stop himself from doing such ugly things to his friend. When he went around saying how Lea was the one who betrayed, but Isa turned him into a punching bag for such awful emotions. He could not forgive himself for enjoying it when he had hurt Lea because that meant he was still close enough to Lea, he was still somewhere inside his heart to have hurt him. That was why he deserved to fade away.

“You admit it.” Axel hesitated as he put his hand on Isa’s shoulders. As he saw bits and pieces of Isa fading away, he wanted to grab them and try to reassemble him himself. He still did not want to take the risk of Isa dying. Perhaps because what Isa said was true after all, he knew Isa was choosing to go away and Re-complete in this risky way by himself and Axel could not stand the idea that he was choosing to leave.

“Well, if I make it back… you won’t get it out of me a second time.” Isa no longer had the strength to hold himself up. He could not be proud to the end and die like the villain like he had wanted to. He collapsed backwards and Axel quickly moved to catch him in his arms. The last time he faded away like this he looked up at the moon, at the desires that he could never be reached by human hands and reaching up on it wished on the moon instead of the stars. He had asked the moon where his heart had went. He did not mind throwing away his childhood, even his own heart, all of those things were acceptable sacrifices to bring a friend back. Isa made friends so rarely and cared so deeply that losing them was far worse than even losing his heart. That was why losing Axel had been an unacceptable sacrifice. The only thing he could not bear to lose.

Where was his heart?
He finally found it, as Axel held his fading body in his arms.

“See you, Isa.”

“See you, Lea.”

Sora rushed in to join the fight with Xemnas and Kairi finally. When he took one swing Xemnas jumped back. He jumped atop the great walls that surrounded their battlefields and looked as
“It looks like your heart is already scattering to the winds, Hero.”

“Sora… What is he talking about.”

Sora raised his hand up, to see that the cracks that had appeared in his chest now traveled all the way to his hand. He quickly pulled his glove up higher above his wrist to hide them but it was too late.

Xion and Roxas were also watching him. Xion spoke up because she knew what it was like to have pieces of your existence continually leaking out of you because you were poorly assembled and there were cracks there from our birth.

“Sora. You shouldn’t fight, you won’t be you anymore.”

Sora cracked a smile and hid his hand by scratching at the back of his head. “What are you talking about? I’m always me. Who else would I be?”

He was also, Ventus, Xion and Roxas. The latter two knew this because they had been a part of his heart for so long. Xion did not want to hurt Sora, if her existence right now was hurting him again. “Sora, we’re all here because of you, let us fight for you this time. You can borrow our strength.”

“N-no, I’m always stealing your strength.”

Kairi raised a hand behind him, to turn Sora back to her and get a better look at his face. When she did she was met with that disarming smile of his. The smile made of bright light that pierced straight through you. “Sora, I’m scared you-”

“I won’t go anywhere. I ate the Paopu fruit remember. You’re holding me together.”

“Paopu fruit?”

Neku asked, aloud.

Suddenly, the scenery shifted behind them.

“Look what you did, Neku.” Joshua teased.

“What the hell did I do? I’m not in control of this, that’s always you!”

“We’re seeing this because Sora is remembering this at this moment, sssh let’s watch.” He put a finger to Neku’s lips. Neku frowned, he wanted to remind Joshua that it was the silver-haired boy who usually felt the need to insert his opinion into everything and give commentary but he was distracted by the sudden feeling of sand underneath his feet.

A boy and a girl were sitting on the sideways trunk of a tree.

Behind them on the beach, a boy and a boy were watching. Neku could feel the emotions of the girl
flowing through him once again, but looking upon such a romantic scene Joshua just looked bored.

There were so many expressions that Neku always wanted to wipe off of that smug boy’s face but this one was definitely in the top five. He always acted like he was so above everything. Detached. It was almost impossible to feel like he was a part of the moment.

The waves rolled back and forth on the sand. The sea and the sky were so close. They were both such a deep blue, their souls were made of the same colors. They were like mirror images of one another. Kairi had always been able to understand Sora easier than Riku, the earth was resolute, it was cold to the touch.

Since they were young both her and Sora always thought with their emotions rather than their head. It was a nice feeling always being on the same wavelength as somebody. It was an uncomplicated warm feeling that always glowed in her chest when she was around him.

The sea and the sky reflected one another. If you got dizzy you would probably have a hard time telling them apart, and yet a clear line was drawn between the sea and the sky. They were so close, but there was a border between them. They should have been the same but they were always so far apart.

Kairi had barely seen Sora since they were young. At the time she never wanted those days to end, as Riku drew further and further from the group and grew more and more dissatisfied with their days on the island Kairi thought Riku might be the one to end it. For her, as long as they could keep playing like this, even if they were old people she just wanted things to stay the same between them it would always be fun for her. She got the feeling though that Riku was growing bored with their childhood days. Even if it was enough for her it would never be enough for him.

If that was the choice he made she wanted him to do what would make him happy. He was always acting cocky and brash but the Riku she remembered from their younger days was getting farther and farther away, he barely smiled these days and when he did it seemed like it was all an act. Sora was so simple though, she thought because they were so close Sora at least would be able to understand her.

It was a simple story she wanted to tell, the story of a boy and girl holding hands. They were friends when they were younger and as they grew all their lives their feelings for each other grew as well. The always stayed together, and things always stayed exactly as they did when they were kids.

That did not happen. She lost her heart, Riku left the island, Sora followed him. No matter how many times she reached out to Sora, he seemed to only get farther and farther away. Riku was the one she worried about disappearing originally, she thought Sora would always be close.

Now they were finally able to return to this island for a brief moment and all Kairi could think about was how it was going to end soon. Sora always ran ahead of her. He never once thought what it felt like being left behind.

He was always fighting for her sake she knew. She knew Sora would care about other people for the rest of his life even if he only met them a few times, that he cared about all his friends the same way, that Sora was that kind of person who could genuinely care and believe in someone even from far away.

Knowing all that was not enough. She wanted to keep Sora the person nearby, not the Sora she
knew in her heart. They were already about to grow up and she had barely spent any time with him in three years.

Not only that but she was worried because Sora took the mark of mastery exam and nearly fell to darkness. At that time Riku had been able to save him, but that was just another time of many Sora had risked his life and Kairi did nothing at all.

She wanted him to stay.
She wanted him to choose her.
She was tired of not having a choice and merely watching him, she was tired of what the stars had to say about their relationship.
He was her most precious person and she felt like she barely even knew him.

Neku held his hand on his heart for a moment as he thought about Shiki. While he had fought for her sake for two weeks in a row, how did she even feel? What was she thinking about now? He had a friend now in the real world but he felt like he took her for granted because he could not get over the boy from the UG that was just a ghost in the real world.

“Hey, why’s Riku all alone?”

Sora asked.

“He said he needed time to himself. Let’s leave him alone. Here.”

Kairi pushed the star-shaped fruit in Sora’s face. The fruit that she wanted to curse the stars with. “I want to be part of your life no matter what, that’s all.”

“No that’s not why I’m doing this.
You’re the one who always seems like he’s going to disappear.

“Let me keep you safe.”

As he watched them share the fruit, Joshua was curling a particularly long strand of hair around his finger. “I see. They shared the fruit of fate. That explains it.”

“Huh?”

Joshua snapped his fingers and suddenly, Neku woke up in the real world. When he peeled his eyes open he saw Joshua’s head taking up his vision. What an unpleasant sight to wake up to.
Neku found himself smiling, he had no idea why perhaps he had bad taste.

Joshua wandered away as if bored and then went to inspect Sora’s body in the corner of the room. “It’s just a symbol, it’s a symbol of connection but in the UG symbols are powerful things. They can
be made real by the power of belief and imagination.”

“What are you babbling about this time? You’re like… the tower of babble.”

“Nice try, Neku you’re not going to win any points from me just because you use random bible symbolism,” Joshua said, he flicked his wrist in the air and then showed his hand. Suddenly there was a bright red apple that he held in his palm as if Joshua had plucked it from thin air. “The forbidden fruit, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit they were both kicked out of the garden together. Similar myths appear in different worlds all the time, it’s called the Jungian theory of archetypes. Both stories are about biting into fruit and sharing one’s fate.”

“Oh, so the random bible symbolism is cooler when you do it.”

“Everything is cooler when I do it.” He said it with such utter confidence. Really, what a tool. “Even bit the fruit of fate and became cursed. The moment she ate it she knew it was over for her, so why do you think when she ran to Adam crying he ate it as well?”

“I ask why so Joshua can continue the explanation.”

“He wanted to share her fate. Even if it meant being cursed, he wanted to be cursed with her. That’s the power of human connection, it’s so strong it can even withstand curses. The world outside of paradise becomes bearable if you can connect to others.”

As he gave this explanation with his usual, ephemeral sounding voice he moved the apple around in his hand glancing at its shiny red sides. Joshua always had a fae-like quality to him, to Neku he looked like a creature in the mist, dazzling but the moment you reached out for him he would disappear.

“Well anyway, I wondered if Riku and Kairi being in proximity would affect the healing process at all. So I tricked them into coming to Shibuya, so they would be near him without realizing.”

“Wait, how did you trick them?”

“How do you think so many stores in Shibuya had sales on the same day? It’s capitalism, Neku, do you think they could resist such deals?”

“Not everybody is as nuts about clothing as you are.”

“Fashion is life, Neku.”

“Only if you don’t have one.”

“The tangible connection between them sped intensified the signal of our own connection. Humans connections are wonderfully complex things, so many strings, even I don’t understand how all of them intertwine.”

He looked forward as if he could see them as physical objects. Then he paused for a moment, still looking at the fruit.

“Or maybe it really was the fruit of fate. It’s too bad then, that nobody would ever share it with me,
so I’ll never taste that power.”

Joshua finally raised the apple to his mouth and took a bite. At that exact moment, Neku had stood up and closed the distance between them. They were standing toe to toe. While the apple was still in Joshua’s mouth, Neku leaned forward and bit out of the opposite end of it.

He pushed Joshua back against the wall, like biting out of the apple was some kind of contest. The moment between them twisted into what seemed like forever.

Then, Neku disengaged on his own. He swallowed the part of the apple he had bitten into. As he watched Neku wipe his mouth with his arm, an unreadable expression appeared on Joshua’s face.

“That was my first ever sin.”

Joshua joked, expecting to immediately here Neku’s reprimand. The boy did not say anything at all. He just fell backward and his eyes closed in sleep again.

“Come on Neku, that wasn’t a poison apple like in snow white.”

“...”

“Neku?”
Neither Fool, Nor Joker

The repentant scientist. The forgotten girl. The boy who cried fake. The man who smelled of flowers. The woman who did not want a heart. The knight with nobody to protect. The princess who did not want to be protected. The ghost that haunts Shibuya. The cat that walks in his own garden.

The last actor still had yet to take the stage. He must have been shy, hiding in the backstage, just behind the curtains for so long. He was the snake who slithered into the garden of eden, or perhaps it would be more accurate to call him the cat who snuck his way there.

“SOH!”

“CAH!”

“TOA!”

He grew angrier with each successive kick. The tar road in front of him was stained with graffiti and he seemed to be trying to rid himself of the graffiti in the most obtuse way possible. He was strong enough that as he kicked the earth in a rage it shattered underneath his feet.

The graffiti was black text surrounding what looked to be a blue skull in the center. If one was into occult and urban legends the circular shape of the text led one to believe it was a summoning circle.

It was taboo not just in appearance, but nature as well. The truth of the circle he was standing on and currently trying to destroy in a fit was that it was a taboo noise refinery. It was a tool used by fallen angels to summon the taboo (black) noise into this world that were near impossible to control and attacked everything around them as they violently lashed out. That man was much like the noise he summoned, he had the look of someone willing to devour everything around him without batting an eye. When he finished his final stomp the tar broke into pieces, a wave running through the earth and leaving cracks in its wake.

“Why am I the one that’s so zetta slow this time around! You said I wouldn’t even need to consider them in my calculations that it would be like factoring hectopascals! The information you’re feeding me is so old, it’s already out of style and on the bargain racks!”

He had a scientific way of speaking, even though his voice was overly emotional. Suddenly, he turned and started to kick the pile of junk that was in front of him. With each successive kick he sent car parts, used bicycles, old instruments, all of it flying. The black crow that was sitting on top of the pile, squawked and flew into the air when the rest of the pile underneath it collapsed.

Minamimoto Sho scowled at the bird showing the canines of his teeth sharpened into fangs as he did. “Your information is more garbage than this world is, so how are you going to fix this for me?”

“Squaaawk.”
“I already told you I ain’t going around on more wild goose chases, or uh- wild crow chases. You stupid feathery asshole.”

“Squawk.”

“Well I hope your feelings were hurt. You’ve been making me run around trying to solve an unsolvable equation with half the digits missing.”

“Squaaaawk.”

“Squawk all you want I don’t want to hear it. You lied to me about that damn door, and you told me that all I needed was the heart of a former keyblader and it’d be easy to find one.”

“Squawk.”

“The experiments to turn heartless into noise didn’t work out either.”

“Squaaaaawwwk.”

“I don’t care if one failed experiment ain’t representative of the whole batch, I’m a mathematician not a scientist. There’s nothing artful about science, but numbers were made to beautifully fit together.”

“Squaaaawk.”

“What do you mean ‘I thought you said the world was made up of numbers, so therefore there’s nothing beautiful about it’. Shut it bird, I’m being consistent. I said numbers were beautiful not the world.”

“Squaaaaaawwwwk.”

“Anyway, your information has failed me two times already, so if we repeat this function a third time that means we’ll already be going in on a two thirds probability of failure.”

“Squawk.”

“There’s gotta be another way to reverse engineer this situation into my desired solution. Damn.” Sho said as he gave the pile in front of him another kick causing a tire to be launched and then roll down the side of the road. He caught no attention at all because he was in the UG and invisible to the crowds that passed by the alleyway he was in. Even those in the UG who were aware of the presence of other reapers were not looking for him because they had already written him off as dead. The one who was tuned into everything in the UG and therefore would always be aware of his presence, decided to keep him alive for the moment as he considered him a rogue element that could heat up a game.

A composer without a Producer needed all the people around him he could, and as many fresh perspectives as he could, to stop him from losing interest in the melody and work he was supposed to be doing again. That was a fear so great he would even risk adding a volatile element like Sho back into the mix of things.
“Fine, I’ll listen to you one last time but if your information sums up to be an imaginary number this time, then I’m gonna do things my way. Sticking to rules and planning everything in advance is no fun anyway, there’s no art to it, you’re ignoring the chaos of this world.”

“Squaaaaawk.”

“What the hell do you mean don’t get started about the world again? If I have to keep listening to your squawking then you can listen to me spilling the truth behind this world.”

“Squawk.”

“What do you mean I just think I’m above everything and I’m under the delusion I’m unique? I’m way ahead of the bell curve. I wouldn’t want to be climbing my way to the top so desperately if I could be comfortable being beneath anyone.”

His lips drew more and his scowl turned into a violent smile, like a feral cat baring their teeth. His hair was wild and spiky, only tamed by the red bandana he tied around it and the hat he wore over it. When he smiled so wide, the markings on his cheeks moved like they were whiskers. Despite the mathematical way he was speaking, he was very much tuned into the styles of Shibuya. Trends were just another form of analysis and crunching numbers after all. Fashion was run by capitalism, which was run by money, which was just another number with two decimal points stuck on the end. Which is why he dressed head to toe in black, and wore a double breasted golden buttoned leather coat. To him, everything came down to numbers, and as long as the numbers worked out in his favor they could be justified.

In that sense he had no scruples of who he worked with or what taboo he had to break. The most important element of the formula was himself after all, he always factored himself first and everything else second. He only focused on the end result, deeming everything in the middle just long winded calculations. He loved math but he would sum everything in his head and get angry when you asked him to show his work.

That was Minamimoto Sho, the reckless equation. He let the crow land on his shoulder and then punched his tattooed black hand into his untattooed hand once more, causing a dark smoke to billow from his arm. In front of him a gate of darkness opened up, and what was once nothing more than a cog in the reaper’s game disappeared into the doorway to darkness. Just like the crow on his shoulder had taught him too, when he showed him that if there was no power in their one tiny world that could surpass the composer’s then he could always look elsewhere.

♛

Side A: Twilight Town
Track 11
“Look it’s too complicated to solve by talking! Boys, Romance, Isa, they’re all way too complicated.”

Axel said, standing tall above Kairi.

However, despite the difference in their height Kairi easily got into his face. She did not lose a single step to him. “Well how is not talking going to solve it! We’re already in twilight town, stop being a cowardly lion and go face him already!”

Oh, it was because Axel had a red mane and could roar like a lion and fight with bravery, but then when it came to actual confrontation he suddenly lost all that courage and ran away. Fighting Xemnas and saving the world was one thing, but apparently trying to talk things out like a human being (which he was now after gaining back his heart) was too scary. Riku thought that was a good joke on Kairi’s part.

He had been silently observing the fight in the middle, trying not to take a side. Unless Kairi looked his way, then he was totally on her side because he did not want to make Kairi mad.

Kairi had been kidnapped by Axel once in the past and tried to use bait to destroy Sora and recreate Roxas again, but that was Axel’s desperation not the cool headed person who could move around people as he needed them he was in Castle Oblivion. After that initial bad experience she had been training with Axel’s complete self and her image of him changed. Riku had always thought this, Kairi could sense the darkness in people’s heart due to her innate ability as a princess of heart, but that being said she didn’t really understand why people would choose darkness or foul means of accomplishing things over the light. Riku got the sense that Kairi was disappointed because her current understanding of Axel was somebody who would do anything to be with his friends again, hence why she decided to forgive the kidnapping. The Axel who ran away therefore was falling short of that image.

Riku had figured out all of this but his mind immediately slammed on the brakes when he tried to think of what Axel and Isa’s relationship might be, for some reason that he could not figure out why he did not want to think about whether two best friends who had known each other all of their lives had feelings for each other deeper than friendship.

Just before Kairi could go for the throat (if she could even reach up that high), her argument was interrupted by a calm voice that while restrained, still easily spoke louder than the both of them.

“You’re the one who argued that we shouldn’t live in our real home, and then after that you ran away from here too?”

Axel immediately had the look of the cat which had been caught red handed swallowing the canary. He looked like he wanted to dart away from his owner and into an alleyway to escape all responsibility.

Riku felt a sudden cold front moving in, or perhaps a sudden lunar eclipse obscuring the sun completely. Isa had cool blue hair, and even colder eyes. Somehow, even with him making no expression on his face, the air suddenly became tense and heavy with his emotions.

“Isa! You tattled on me again, Kairi?”

“It was for your own good.” Kairi said, as she shrunk away from the two of them and suddenly Riku found her hiding behind him. Apparently, Kairi who was much more sensitive to the mood than he was, was feeling the pressure worse than he was.

“Lea, relax it’s not like I’m going to hit you over the head and drag you back home. I’m not you, after all.”

“Don’t do that thing where you pretend to be the more mature one! I’m onto your game! Not just me, everybody can see it.”

Axel threw his hands at his side dramatically, gesturing to the two kids in the middle of their argument. Riku and Kairi both shook their heads like they did not want to be included in this.

“I didn’t even come here for you.”

“What? Why not for me?”

Isa just continued walking past Axel not giving him an answer. He instead stood in front of Kairi and Riku. Kairi stood on her tip-toes so her face was showing behind Riku’s shoulders. “You two, I wanted to ask if there was a way for me to learn to use a keyblade.”

“Riku, tell him he’s being suspicious.”

“You’re being suspicious.”

“No, tell him in a nicer way.”

“What? Umm… why do you want a keyblade suddenly, Isa?”

“It’s fine, I’d question your logic if you listened to that request coming from a former Seeker of Darkness without questioning it.”

Sora would have listened to that request without doubting him that much, Riku thought but did not say aloud.

“Roxas, Xion, Lea, all of them have keyblades and are capable of leaving other worlds, but not me. If they were to disappear somewhere I would have no way of finding them.”

“What, so you want a keyblade so you can come chasing me if I run away?” Axel said, pointing at his own chest.

Isa did not even look at him before dismissing him. “If you run away I’ll just hope you stay away this time.”

“Are you seriously saying that after all of this! What’s got you all moody?”
“That’s him being moody…?” Riku said looking back to Kairi.

“I didn’t even know he was displaying a single mood to begin with.” Kairi whispered back.

“I promised to take responsibility for them, that’s why I this time I want to-”

“Ugh, he’s acting all responsible now too.”

“Well, one of us has to.”

“Sorry, not to get in the middle of… whatever this is.” Riku said, raising his voice slightly and looking back in between Axel and Isa. “But neither of us know how to do a Bequeathing to give you a keyblade. The only ones who know how are Terra and Aqua, Terra’s out of commission and Aqua probably won’t trust you she still has umm… darkness issues.”

Riku could understand wanting the power to protect those around you, and thinking darkness could be used for that power. If he had forgiven Axel for taking Kairi captive he would have to forgive Isa as well, those two were so tightly coiled around each other like two snakes trying to devour one another that sometimes their crimes became indistinguishable. He would doubt two people who seemed so different could ever be that close, if it were not his own relationship with Sora. However, he was not thinking about Sora, he was trying really hard not to think.

Isa gestured with an open hand. “Being worthy of a keyblade can’t be that hard can it, if Lea got one.”

“Hey!”

Kairi suddenly spoke up again. “Wait, where did Lea get a keyblade from if nobody passed theirs onto him?”

“I don’t know I thought he just found it lying around or something, like maybe in a bargain bin.” Riku said, shrugging.

“Jeez, why are you all out to get me all of a sudden? Why did I even do wrong? I mean besides, everything.” Axel made a dramatic show of recoiling from the pain of their many scathing remarks as they talked about him right to his face, but despite his dramatized reaction he did not look too bothered. “Well, even if you can’t bequeath it to him there’s nothing wrong with showing him the ropes right? It’s our duty as Keyblade Wielders to protect others and show them the right way.”

“How chivalrous of you.” Isa said in a dry voice.

“See, I can be the mature one too. It’s just pretend, and I’m a better actor than you are.”

Kairi looked at Axel, then to Isa, then back to Axel, before her eyes finally settled on Riku. She leaned a bit too close from behind which made Riku bristle slightly as she whispered into his ear. “What’s with being around Isa that makes Axel’s maturity level drop?”

“Can it even drop that far? It wasn’t that high to begin with.” Riku said with a sigh, before looking up at the two men in front of him. It made perfect sense to him that they both were acting like boys, after all they had both known each other since they were boys. The childhoods they had lost when their worlds fell to darkness, could only be found in each other. If each of them lost themselves they would need to find the other. As long as they had each other they would always have a place to
return to. It was the same way that Riku despite growing up into such a regrettable person, could always smile again like he was just a kid when he was around Sora. There was something about Sora that made him forget all the more complicated things, and remember the good intentions he started out with.

Oh, he was not thinking about Isa and Axel at all anymore. He was thinking about Sora again.

They decided to train in the old woods, as it was outside of Twilight Town and it was unlikely that Roxas and Xion would find them in this place due to the bad memories associated with the white mansion in the middle of the woods.

First, Isa and Axel would fight, and then Riku and Kairi would fight. The idea was that Isa would get the idea of how to use a keyblade observing it up close as an opponent and then a fight between two keybladers.

Also, Isa and Axel both looked like they wanted to fight one another. Maybe this is their version of talking, Kairi said with a hopeful ring to her voice. Riku doubted it though. It was true that Sora and him fought over and over again and he was grateful that in the past Sora gave him so many chances, but it was not the fighting itself that made him understand Sora. If anything the fighting made it worse, as Riku’s emotions when brought to the surface for a few moments always managed to sink deeper the next time.

He was jealous at Sora for forgetting him. He was mad at Sora for forgetting Kairi. He wanted Sora to remember him. He wanted to show Sora he was somebody that he could never forget. He wanted to be stronger than Sora. He wanted to forget how weak he felt when Sora left behind. He felt everything at once, and because of that he processed none of it. He kept processing, kept thinking it over, thinking about it only made it worse like picking at a wound but Riku could not help himself.

Even if the surface of the water was calm, there could be terrible undercurrents underneath it. The kind that grabbed you by the foot when you were swimming and dragged you off to sea to drown.

Riku realized as he sat down next to Kairi to watch the opening of Axel and Isa’s spar that he was not even thinking about Axel and Isa anymore, he was thinking about Sora again. He really needed to stop that. Maybe that was why he had started to idealize Sora so much, he was envious of Sora’s ability to just switch his brain off and feel things.

That was probably the right way to do things, following your heart. Someone somewhere once said that hearts lead you the wrong way every time, but Riku’s brain had lead him wrong just as much.

*Maybe it’s not my heart or my brain, maybe I’m just hopeless.* Riku sighed. He turned his head over
to see Kairi smiling as usual, a perfect contrast to the dour face he was making. She was so bright she looked like she might just make the storm clouds gathering around his head disperse all on his own by outshining them.

He noticed once again she had gotten in too close without realizing it. She was leaning her head against his shoulder without invitation. Kairi was like that, inviting herself into other people’s lives, in ways he could never do.

Thinking about Kairi was a little more comforting than thinking about Sora at least. She was right here next to him, warm against his cool body, close enough he could hear her heart beating.

“Jeez, childhood friends are really like that, huh?” She said suddenly.

“Like what?” Riku asked her.

“Well, you get along with each other because you know each other so well it’s like you can talk your own language and always understand each other but at the same time, when you fight it gets really bad because it feels like even more of a betrayal because you think the other person should know you better than yourself, and at the same time hurting them is like hurting a part of yourself.”

The closer you are the more it hurt, basically.
Kairi was so smart with this kind of thing, Riku thought. She was able to put into words what were just feelings for Sora. He was so far behind both of them, he could not even feel things normally.

That was why he always thought Kairi and Sora were more suited for each other. He suspected it as a kid, but back then he wanted to fight against it, nowadays when he saw them from afar sharing the paopu fruit together he just accepted it.

The sea was meant to support the sky. They were so close they were almost indistinguishable from one another, only the boundary line of the horizon separated them. It was the job of the earth to support both the sea and the sky. If they were happy together than Riku would be happy with that, because that would mean they were both here right now.

“That kids are like us, don’t you think?” Isa asked, as he slammed his wooden practice keyblade against Lea’s genuine fire one. He was given a fake sword to fight with as ‘keyblade practice’ but also because Lea did not want to remember clashing with Isa’s claymore at the keyblade graveyard anytime soon.

“No way, we were way cuter when we were kids.”

“That’s not what I mean. They’re both always around each other, but they look so afraid of losing one another, like the closer they are the farther apart they get.”

“I thought friendship wasn’t your thing, it was mine.”

“That’s because in the past I thought I had all the friends I need. I was wrong.”

Axel rolled his eyes as he sidestepped out of the way of one of Isa’s more heavy handed swings. “Yeah, that’s the only thing you were wrong about, not all of those other things. Why don’t you just admit you’re here because you want me to come back?”
“I already told you, if I came back like this you’d never get it out of me again.”

“See. This is your fault. You stay quiet on this stuff forever, then you get mad when I can’t figure it out.”

“You were always so good at reading people and playing them like cards though, weren’t you Lea? Why don’t you play with me like when we were younger?”

“Now you’re just messing with me!”

“Am I being that obvious?”

“Hey…” Axel fell silent for a moment as their keyblades crossed. He saw the flamed edges of his cutting into the wooden ones of Isa’s like it was butter, it was only Isa’s superior strength that was giving him the edge in the fight. “The last time we fought like this, all that stuff you said did you really mean it or were you just saying that because you wanted to rile me up?”

“I already said, you wouldn’t get-”

“Get out with that! I mean I’ve already seen you trying to sink all the worlds into darkness not once but twice, and we’re still here play fighting like when we were kids. Why are you always trying to hide this stuff from me?”

“Lea.” Isa pushed Axel back, causing his feet to drag against the ground. “Which one do you think is the real you? The fool who made everyone smile when we were younger, the card I played to assassinate the organization, or the joker who switched sides for the sake of his friends?”

“So either I’m a fool or a joker? You’re not giving me a lot of credit here.”

“You’re making a good case for yourself by not taking the question seriously.”

“I…” The moment he tried to think about it, Lea froze up. Isa’s icy demeanor had nothing to do with it. Fire was not supposed to take one consistent shape, it flickered from one moment to the next. It was formless, and because of that it could become whatever others who used it needed it to be, it was just as likely to burn as it was to give someone vital warmth.

When he told himself he was just a weapon being used by Saix to take out members of the organization, Axel was able to do anything, he had never felt such a high before. However, the truth was Saix was not even there. The one who had rampaged and lit a wildfire in Castle Oblivion was none other than Axel himself. Wildfire was the wrong word though, it was much more like a controlled burn. He knew what he was doing the entire time, every single move was a precise one, like moving a piece on a game board.

After that though he started to lose control. He burned the people he wanted to protect, and protected those that he should have burned.

Jokers were typically known as wild cards, depending on the circumstances they could be high or
low. Axel was just like that, so much had changed about him so quickly he started to lose himself.

He was a kid in Radiant Gardens. He was Ansem’s apprentice. He lost his heart. He lost his best friend. He died. He had a heart again. Suddenly, there was a keyblade in his hands. How he was meant to be played, how he could best help others, he was losing track of himself, and he had no idea if the actions he made as a nobody were closer to the true him, or what he did when he was younger, or what he did right now.

He just knew he had to live with the actions of all three of them, Lea the brat, Axel the Assassin, and Axel the wannabe hero. When he was younger he had so much more energy, he thought he could do anything, that he would befriend everyone and live on forever in their memories. Now that he was older, he felt like he could not do anything, and he knew how easily he could let friends slip through his fingertips he had watched it happen so many times in the past.

“Then, what about me? Which do you think is the real me, the angry one who goes berserk or the calm one talking to you right now? Which feelings are truer to you?”

Axel struggled for a moment his hand shaking, “I… I… Enough!”

As he said that, both of them flew back. Axel had cast magic to avoid talking, causing a small explosion. Axel was quickly back on his feet and so was Isa, but Kairi got in the middle of them and called off the sparring match by that point. Which meant the two of them were taking their turns to watch right now.

Riku and Kairi were actually able to spar without arguing, which drew confused stares from Axel and Isa who were sitting right next to each other and both leaning against one of the trees.

Riku had to use his off hand as his usual one was still healing. Even using his off hand, Kairi could still tell Riku was holding back on her. The difference between their experience should have been much greater than this, but Kairi was dominating the whole fight again while Riku simply blocked, and parried her blows to the side.

“Riku, you have to take me seriously! The people we fight aren’t going to go easy on me just because I lack experience.”

“If you want a more serious match you could go against Ven, or Roxas.”

“I want you to take me seriously!”

“It’s because it’s me… I have to…” He was dangerous. He made so many mistakes in the past, exposed Kairi to so many dangers when he thought self righteously he was the one saving her, he was the one doing the right thing. If Sora were here he could train Kairi safely. If Sora were here, the two of them of would be able to fight together.

He had tried so hard to stop thinking about it, that it would have been much better if he was the one to disappear and Sora and Kairi were the ones left behind. They were the ones to share the Paopu fruit after all.
Destiny should have favored them, instead it had it in for him.

“Riku, you promised.” Kairi said in a soft voice. “Don’t hold back anymore, okay?”

“Fine.” Riku’s hand twisted on the hilt of his blade. As he did purple fire erupted around it. He brought it above his head and swung down. If only the darkness could eat away at him like it was supposed to. He wanted to stop thinking these things. He wanted to escape the pain of having a heart, just for a moment.

The earth started to shake. It was always so still, that when it moved it was such a surprise. The earth was hardy, but when it finally moved, it broke apart, fault lines developed, it cracked in ways that could never be healed.

Riku swung down again and again. Kairi was not in front of him, he was fighting against himself as always. The self that was left behind. The self that needed to be stronger if he was going to stay with those two. The self that needed to be stronger so that he could protect those two, to continue to support the sky and the sea.

Suddenly, he was brought back to reality by shock when he saw his key hit against Axel’s instead of Kairi’s. He looked to see Kairi had collapsed and Axel rushed in front of her, stopping his blows to protect her.

“Riku, you have to be careful using darkness magic around Kairi. She doesn’t have the same exposure we have.”

He knew.
He already knew, or he should have known rather.
That was why he was always so cautious, because he knew what kind of dangerous person he was. That if he let himself slip even for a moment it was not himself, but everybody around him that would pay the consequences of his actions.

A voice rang in his ears.

*If all you wanted was the power to protect, then why are you always the one who destroys that which you want to protect the most?*

It was his own voice.
Sora broke apart in front of him, smashed like glass and then faded away. There was nothing he could do about it. He was the one who should have protected Sora, but Sora broke himself to that extent protecting him.

Now he was left all alone with Kairi. If he fell to the darkness again Sora would not be there to save him. Sora who should have been the one to protect Kairi. Sora, who saved Kairi. All Riku could do for her was drag her down into darkness with him.

He wanted to run away. The voice in his head was screaming at him to put as much distance as he could between the two of them. Perhaps it was best for him to just continue his keyblade master solo
act and let Kairi train with Yen Sid.

At least that way when the darkness came again to swallow him up whole he would be the only one swallowed. At least that way the next time he fell to darkness he would not hurt anybody. He did not mind if he was not saved again as long as he was no longer a burden on those precious people.

Those people who had saved him so many times already. Kairi and Sora, who saved him just by smiling at him.

He wanted to run but before he could take a single step Kairi’s hand reached out and grabbed him. Even collapsed, looking deathly pale like she was sick, she was easily able to pull him away. The pull of the current was a strong thing after all.

“Where do you think you’re going? My head hurts so bad, I need something to rest it on.”

“No way, have you seen that really tall stick figure? His lap is way too bony.”

Riku did not know how, because he wanted to run away so badly that he felt himself trying to leave his body, but a few minutes later when he regained some of his senses he was leaning against a tree while Kairi was sprawled out on the ground resting her head in his lap.

“Hey, Riku instead of making me show how much smarter I am than you with feelings and stuff why don’t we skip the what is Riku thinking guessing game and have you just tell me.”

“I… I’m thinking something terrible. It’s better kept to myself.”

“Oh come on we’ve known each other for thirteen years. We’re supposed to tell each other all the awkward way too familiar with each other personal stuff. Boundaries are for weirdoes with normal friendships.”

Kairi sounded as lively as ever, even though she needed rest. He knew she was doing it for him. “I saw you and Sora sharing the Paopu fruit. If you did it because you wanted him to be a part of your life, then what about me?”

The thoughts kept cycling through his head and he could not stop them. He remembered finding the drawing Sora and Kairi made of them sharing the Paopu without him. He remembered sitting all alone in Hollow Bastion, coming so far and still not being able to do a single thing for Kairi, worrying he would never see either of them again. Sora had forgotten him and he could not save Kairi. He mumbled underneath his breath all alone somewhere where he hoped no one would hear him, I should have done that fruit thing…

“That was just a good luck charm before the battle. I was worried about Sora, so…”

“It wasn’t just then. Three years ago too, you wanted to leave on the raft without me.”
“Riku, you were getting so restless on that island. I had no idea what you were going to do, but you always made such scary faces when you thought no one was looking.”

“Then, when I threw open the door to darkness to escape the island, you have every right to be scared of me.”

“I wasn’t scared of you.”

“You just said you were! Kairi stop pretending, I know I’m dangerous. I know every mistake I’ve ever made I can’t stop thinking about them, they’re not going to go away if you pretend they’re not there just to be nice.”

“You think I’m being nice…? You think that’s the only reason I want to be by your side?”

“...You didn’t share the paopu fruit with me.”

“You’re right, I didn’t understand what was going on with you when we were younger. I didn’t realize that isolating you would only make the darkness worse. But you know if you’re allowed to be dumb than so am I. But… I’m not scared of you now, the reason I wanted to share the fruit with Sora was because I was scared of him. I was so scared that he was going to disappear. I knew… you’d be there for me no matter what that’s why I always want to be by your side now.”

“That… that can’t be… because you…”

“You see Riku, everything is all or nothing with you. You act like you don’t have feelings but then you always feel things in such extremes. If I need to be saved, you’ll throw your own heart away to darkness and save me no matter what the cost. If you make one little mistake you’re regressing back to darkness and can’t be around me ever again. I don’t know how to deal with that.”

“I… don’t know either.”

Riku hung his head. He wondered why they were even bothering to talk about this then. Neither of them had any idea what to do, just like Sora, he would not come back even if they talked about him. The pain of losing him would not go away for either of them, it would just get worse if they felt it.

Neither of them knew how to lean on each other for support, or be together without Sora. Now as always, they were just being alone together. Even so, he felt Kairi’s warmth on his lap and reached forward to brush her red hair out of her face. His fingers stopped halfway through and he looked at the color of her hair between his fingers.

“Hey, Riku… It’s not fair is it? The light can’t understand the darkness. Do you think if I didn't have a heart of pure light I’d be able to understand what you were going through better?”

“I… Kairi… You don’t have to change anything about yourself.”

All he could think about was the sun in Kairi’s hair, and the way her cheek felt, and how happy he was just to talk to her, when he was terrified of losing her the same way he lost Sora a few moments
"You were always... always, always, always, since we were young I’ve always been…"

Riku remembered his young self watching from behind a tree. He saw Kairi and Sora playing together, they always seemed to fit together more naturally. He knew one day they would grow up, and those two would probably grow together. Yet, he could not stop himself from thinking that he wanted to be able to make Kairi smile that way, he wanted to be the reason she smiled.

Before he could say the words he had kept inside of him for so long, suddenly a scream interrupted their quiet moment in the woods. They all looked towards the haunted mansion, but the scream was coming from the other direction.

"Xion, what’s wrong?" Isa was the first one to ask.

"It’s Roxas! A man in black came and attacked both of us at once, then suddenly he summoned a strange monster and Roxas jumped in the way to protect me. He disappeared with Roxas!"

The girl in the button up jacket and white skirt, whose hair looked like a younger Kairi’s immediately went to find Axel. She was strong enough to fight on her own, but she had no confidence in her own existence, that she was someone who could save Roxas. She had started out as merely a puppet before she made friends after all.

Lea immediately summoned his keyblade to his hand.
Isa summoned his claymore standing next to it.

"Lea, we’re going." Isa said.
"Yeah, I gotcha." Axel replied.

"You guys have been fighting this entire time!" said Kairi in surprise as she got to her feet.
Riku, helping her up by supporting her arm around his shoulder was just as surprised.

"It looks like we found something we can agree on." Axel said, holding his keyblade behind his back and looking like a proper wielder for once. "Those kids are the best parts of us, there’s no way we can lose them."
“Attention all Yoctograms!”

Sho Minamimoto announced through a megaphone. The sandy haired teenager who was only a few centimeters away from him really did not appreciate it. Roxas was held secure to the wall by two pitch black bears. A black snake with two wings wrapped its way around his body making it impossible to move his arms.

He thought these strange creatures were just heartless when he first encountered them, but a keyblade had almost no effect on them. They were not nobodies either. Roxas had never encountered such a monster. He was starting to get annoyed, always being blindsided by things he did not know.

“Hey, you’ve been talking for the past ten minutes straight and I understood all none of it.”

This was all true. Roxas was a nobody born two years ago at the edge of Twilight Town, everything he learned was either taught to him by Axel or his experiences with the organization. He did not have any of Sora’s memories to guide him into the world. Even during the simulated twilight town where he believed he was a normal kid, he was still on summer break. He had not gone to school once.

He was thinking about going, now that all this Xehanort business was over, but now it seemed like the universe had it in for him. It was true Roxas knew nothing about Math, but also this man’s way of talking was extremely annoying for him.

“I said attention-”

“Dude, if you want people to start paying attention maybe start making sense?”

And put down the megaphone please.

Sho tossed the megaphone to the side. He picked up a can of spraypaint from his belt, and began to spray all around the wall in the sewers that ran underneath Twilight Town that Roxas was being held. In a few moments he completed another taboo noise refinery, drawing the graffiti on the wall exactly as he had been instructed to.

He preferred performance art, but drawing on canvas art was basically just geometry. He was using lines combined with other lines to make shapes in a limited plane of space. The same way that all music could be reduced to math, just individual notes that are given form when played together in time. To him everything could be reduced to numbers it was the only way to make sense of the world, such as right at this moment he was trying to do a simple subtraction.

He grabbed Roxas by the face and pulled on the boy’s hair as he tried to push his face into the taboo noise refinery. “Come on, kid. You already have two keyblades, I just want one of them.”

In this case it was more like a division. He was willing to rip out half of this boy’s heart if it meant...
Roxas grit his teeth as he resisted the best he could. He had been treated like a pawn by fate before completely unaware, but at this moment he was particularly confused. He had no idea why this incredibly fashionable youth was manhandling him. “What would a guy like you even need with a keyblade? Oh, let me guess, it’s for some kind of motivation that only makes sense to you.”

“I was hoping for a little reenactment. To set things right this time. I’m going to refactor everything so it all sums out equal.”

“Dude, is your head going to explode if you don’t make a math pun every other sentence?”

“The world’s made up of numbers. Do the math and you’ll find your desired solution. Nothing personal.”

“Of course it’s not personal I have no idea what you’re doing!”

Roxas wanted to scream, not for help but for anybody else to come and kidnap him. He would take Xemnus over this. Xemnas was boring, manipulative, treated them all like puppets but at least he did not try to make so many math jokes.

Suddenly, the two of them were interrupted by the sound of footsteps.

“Rats. No, wait the sound is too loud, this sewer doesn’t have any ROUS’s. Ugh, it’s just a bunch of humans how boring.” As Sho was analyzing the situation before he could run the numbers suddenly in front of him three keyblade wielders, and a man with a very large sword appeared in front of him. He had been given information on the guardians of light but he had no idea who the blue demon looking fellow was, just that his aura reminded him a little bit of the late Higashizawa Yodai.

“How did they find us so quickly?”

Roxas still pinned to the wall raised his head. “I don’t know maybe it was all that shouting with the megaphone earlier?”

“Damnit, why does art always have to get in the way of life? I guess that’s because my life is art!”

Isa and Axel were not tied to a wall, so they did not have to put up with Sho’s grandstanding at all. Immediately without hesitation both of them charged forward, Axel swinging his keyblade in one direction and Isa swinging his claymore in another, the two of them making the perfect complementary cross slash.

Sho looked like he was barely taking the situation seriously, but that was his version of taking things seriously. That was what it was like, to be one of those incomprehensible, uncooperative genius types. The moment he saw the swords swinging in his direction he crossed his arms over in front of his chest and drew out his wings. Three pairs of wings sprouted at once. They were all pitch black and looked like the frames of wings if all the feathers and skin were stripped off.

Two of his wings caught Isa and Axel’s dual attack, holding them at bay for the moment. “I was
wondering if this power would work in other worlds, but since Heartless and Nobodies can appear here this place is probably tuned to a similar frequency of the UG.”

Before either of them could ask what he was talking about, suddenly the wings that were guarding against their attacks completely shattered to pieces. Sho rocked forward his hands still at his side, his fingers curling up like they were claws as his posture became more and more beastlike. Isa looked down for just a moment and saw that the lower half of his body had disappeared and been replaced with what looked a cat’s legs with a swaying tail back and forth.

Then suddenly the world he was standing in disappeared in a flash of blinding light.

 Erdoğan looked around and saw nobody else was in the sewers, it was like everybody else disappeared from the world. A world consisting only of him. He waited for Isa to appear to mock him for having that self absorbed thought.

Then suddenly he noticed a shadow on the ground and saw Sho kick off the ground with his leather boots and rise up into the air. As he hovered there with his hands in his pockets, he looked completely relaxed.

“What were those kitty kat paws a moment ago? Are you a heartless, or did you fuse with a heartless? Hey! Can someone please slow down this is a lot to get memorized all of a sudden I hate being left out of the loop.”

“Lea, there are more important things to worry about right now.”

“Isa? Where did your voice come from? How can you even hear me?”

“I just have a sixth sense for your whining. It’s why I get so many headaches.”

“Oh, there’s no time to be confused by this weird mess of a situation, but there’s time to make fun of Axel.”

“There’s always time for that. I thought you said you liked making people laugh? Don’t you just want to see my smile?”

“Not when they’re laughing at me! Your smile is way too sadistic for me!”

While he argued with a disembodied voice suddenly the reaper in front of him drew a handful of pins from his pocket and threw them up in the air. As they fell back down to the earth they started to glitch in and out of reality their silhouettes flashing the same black and white colors as a television on the fritz.

Then suddenly, there were two large gray and black kangaroos in front of Axel. He broke his keyblade into two chakrams and threw the discs at them, knocking them aside in a sudden blaze of fire. As he held his hand out in the air he rushed forward catching the two chakrams and recombining them for a swing at the reaper in front of him.

Sho disappeared just as he swung and Axel could only slice through his afterimage. As Axel turned
around he saw more of the strange animal-like black noise appear behind him. He was soon surrounded.

At that moment Isa finally saw the reaper appear in the empty sewers that he had been transported to. He raised his voice just above his usual speaking monotone to call out to Axel. “I see him.”

“What do you mean you saw him? He was just here a second ago.”

“He seems to be able to transport between these strange subdimensions at will.”

“Hey, don’t pretend like you know what’s going on, you’re just as clueless as I am.”

“Where’s your beauty?” Sho shouted as he appeared behind Isa, suddenly grabbing him by the back of the neck and deadlifting him in the air. Just like Isa, even though he appeared to be a sleek, cool headed, intellectual thing the moment he started to fight he went berserk. Appearances were deceiving, that was why Sho did not trust the beauty in anything besides number.

“My beauty… what?” Isa only recognized that this man in front of him was starting to talk like Axel when he got too deep and started to drown in philosophy. “What about you? Where are you really? How were you able to separate us so easily?”

At this Sho smiled. He looked like the cat who caught the canary, but this one was proudly smiling at his meal he delighted in the yellow feather that was hanging from the corners of his mouth.

“The breeze could separate the two of you with horrible teamwork like that, it’d be easy as pi.”

Teamwork, Isa surmised. The two of them had to fight at the same time from different dimensions. They were still linked somehow and could communicate but while the link was this weak they could not see each other. Then, he simply needed to work with Axel.

He needed to be with Axel.
He needed to do this together with Axel.
With Axel.
He could not stand to live without Axel, but living with him was just as difficult.

If he tried to communicate with Axel again, the man would spit fire back at him with his flamed tongue. Isa wondered if Axel was that volatile with everybody, or just him. His lips quirked in a rueful smile, if he was the only one who could provoke that kind of reaction that meant he was still special in some way.

This was hardly the time to be thinking about such things though. If Isa had it his way, he would never be emotional at all, because his emotions were simply too much, they were always awful, he overreacted to everything, he seethed about everything, he was resentful, he was jealous, he was petty, and he always knew because his mind so rational that he was in the wrong to feel that way.

Most of the time he was able to push all those emotions away from him. As long as he kept pushing, and pushing, he could control himself and pass for a real person. It was never a permanent solution. That was the terrible thing about emotions they demanded to be felt. Even if you were a nobody they somehow eventually caught up to you. Everything he pushed away eventually fell back on his mind all at once, and it always collapsed unable to bear it, and he was reduced to lunacy.
Isa thought about the moon a lot, ever since his mother had given him a moon pendant to wear on his jacket. It was only natural to prefer the sun to the moon, just like it was natural to seek the light rather than the darkness. If people had it their way, the sky would always be filled with the sun and it would always be light. Despite that, the moon always appeared, nothing could ever stop the night from appearing even if everyone liked the daytime better because they were reverse sides of the same coin.

His emotions never went away no matter how dark they were, no matter how disastrous they would be to feel, just like the moon. That was the two of them, connected like that, no matter how opposite they might seem or how illogical it looked for them to work together the two of them could never be apart from each other.

They were like opposite sides of the same coin. No matter how different they might seem they could not exist without the other. Without darkness, light would not be called light as it would have nothing to contrast with, and darkness only exist because light is shining on something to cast a shadow.

Isa was not that worried that the two of them right now were separated. That they were on opposite ends of the sky, as different as day and night. They had always been like that. One of them cold, numb to emotion, always restraining himself, and the other warm, overflowing with emotion, and letting himself run wild.

How many kinds of friends were there? Isa was not Sora, so he was not the type of person who could befriend anybody he met. There were the kind of friends who got along because they had the same interests. There were the kind of friends who had supportive personalities. There were the kind of friends who only got along because they spent so much time together. Those types did not last forever, because they could be friends without even getting along or liking each other.

Lea and him might seem like that because as long back as their history together stretched, Lea and Isa had been apart just as much as they had been together.

Isa did not think they fit any category of friend he just thought of. That was because both him and Lea would not be their current selves if they had not met each other in the past. They were such an inseparable part of each other’s lives that if the other were to disappear they would be unrecognizable.

That was why they always came back to each other. No matter how many times they ran away. No matter how many times they fought, or took out their pain on one another. Returning to Lea was like returning home. Isa had been several different people, an apprentice to Ansem the Wise, the nobody Saix, and even part Xehanort, but it was only around Lea that he became Isa again.

Isa made the claymore disappear from his hand, and then wrestled with Sho throwing him above his head and escaping his hold. Before Sho could land from being thrown he fizzled out of existence again.

Isa drew his sword again just as several taboo noise shaped like crabs appeared to attack him. He dropped his luna diviner hard on the shell of one of the crabs but it refused to break. He wanted to draw more strength from inside of himself, but he could not bring himself to.
He could tell by logic that he and Axel were sharing some kind of mental link right now, which is why they could talk even in separate dimensions. If he were to go berserk, either the lunar madness would be felt by Axel too, or he might become unable to tell friend from foe and attack Axel anyway.

Which meant no matter what as long as he fought like this he was going to have to hold a part of himself back.

“Jeez, what’s with all the teamwork lately? Is the universe trying to tech me a lesson that I can’t handle everything on my own?”

Axel’s voice spoke up in his ear suddenly.

“It’s been trying to teach you that lesson for the past thirteen years. You’re just a slow learner.”

“He suddenly thinks he’s a wise guy.”

“I can see why you’d be upset. Telling bad jokes has always been your role, not mine.”

“Hey, they were good jokes at least! Give me a little credit here!”

Suddenly, Sho appeared behind Isa again. In one moment he was a man, and in another he looked to be some kind of werecat. When he blinked again Sho was just standing there in his stylish black clothes, no trace of cat on him except for the whisker marks on his face.

Sho did not give Isa time to think, as suddenly he threw a disc with an emblem in the center forward. It looked a bit like the heartless emblem, but rather than a heart there was a skull in the middle and a cross underneath it. The circle glowed with psychic energy and then exploded into several razor sharp wheels that cut Isa in several places.

Axel still did not appear to help him. Isa decided he would just have to tank the attacks on his own.

Sho disappeared, but his location could be tracked easily by sound of his voice. “You’re out of your vector. You’re out of your vector. You’re out of your vector.” He kept chanting it like he had gone partially mad. He glided across the concrete floor of the dried out sewer tunnel as if it were ice and then suddenly crossed the distance between him and Isa.

He kicked forward with his boots, and with unexpected strength Isa was sent flying back. He crashed into a brick wall, and his sword went flying from his hand. “Zetta slow.” The next moment Sho closed the distance between them again, and had his hand exactly on Isa’s chest as he released another psychic blast that loosed discs of purple energy to shred through him. “INFINITY!”

Isa collapsed to the ground. As he was kicked aside by Sho he saw the handle of his fallen sword an arm’s length away. He reached for it, but his arm moved slowly due to his injured state. He always acted so unemotional, but he was this weak when he did not fight with feeling behind it. He wondered if there was ever going to be a medium for him, or if he was doomed to either feel nothing or everything. If the only thing he knew how to do was lock his emotions away until they exploded out of him.
Even after he regained a heart he was still repeating the old patterns of the past. Perhaps it was not about losing his heart after all, he just had been an unhealthy person who was growing up in the wrong way. He tried to remember when he started putting away his heart like this behind lock and key, but there was not that time for that kind of self reflection.

There was a question that had been bothering him for the longest time. If the two of them had not become nobodies and lost their hearts, if they never got involved with the drama and instead played the parts of commoner A and commoner B two city boys who were nobody in particular. In that scenario where they grew up together, would they still have grown apart? Was it just natural for them to change as they grew up?

Grown up?
Hah. That word described neither of them. Axel threw away everything to hang out with his buddies on the rooftop eating ice cream, and Isa threw away everything for the power to rescue one person. Axel was right to say he was just acting like the more mature one, both of them made all the wrong decisions over and over again.

This was the result of that, two men that argue like children whenever they were near each other. He still felt like Isa somewhere deep in his heart, the boy who watched his friend clown around and make new friends all the times self assured he was the closest one because he always followed him like his shadow. He felt like Isa trapped in Saix’s body.

There was no going back now. Whatever their circumstances were did not matter, perhaps they were never going to be normal both former nobodies who had their childhood’s whisked away when their hearts were stolen, but they had to be better for the two children that were depending on them right now.

Isa would never again let his own weakness be taken out on Xion and Roxas. He would never let himself and Axel use those two as props in a game against each other. He had sworn it with all of his heart.

“Soooo zetta sloooooooow.”

He planned on living the rest of his life to make it up to those two, but, it seemed like he was not going to live much longer. Sho raised a hand covered in black ink in the air. One moment Isa saw a man, the next a looming lion about to close his jaws around his throat.

Before he could swing down he was blocked by a keyblade. Riku was suddenly standing in front of him. “I’m not sure how this works exactly, but umm… tap out?” Before Isa could see anything else or what would happen next he disappeared from that world.

“Riku, I know who this guy is…!”

“Kairi, did you realize something about this strange new type of monster we’re fighting?”

“Yeah, this guy he’s definitely a nerd!”

Riku side eyed Kairi, or rather the space she would have inhibited if the two of them were fighting in the same dimensional space.
“I don’t think that’s the most important part.”

“No, it totally is. We need to team up to shove this guy in a locker it’s his only weakness. Also, he won’t shut up and I have no clue what he’s saying.”

“Zetta is a prefix for metric measurements equal to 10 to the 21st. A pascal is a SI unit for pressure, and thus cannot be factored therefore he’s claiming that we’re an impossibility. Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally is a mnemonic for order of operations, Parenthesis, Multiplication, Division, Addition, Subtraction. Some old horses can always hear their owner approaching is another mnemonic for SOH-CAH - TOA which are the trigonometric functions for a triangle. Yocto is a metric prefix equivalent to—”

“Gosh, Riku your biggest muscle is your brain isn’t it.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“...Nerd.”

“Hey!”

“That’s what you get called for understanding all of this nonsense. Accept it.”

Before Riku could respond suddenly Sho appeared behind him. He brought up to block with his keyblade each consecutive hit. This strange fighter was somehow as strong as a heartless all on his own and could take on the qualities of a heartless, yet what he was fighting with did not look like magic but rather some kind of psychic energy.

With each hit, Sho called out another math term. “FOIL! First, Outer, Inner, Last!”

Riku was beginning to wonder if all the math was some kind of compulsion or obsession for him, it seemed to get worse the more maddeningly he fought. A math berserker, this was certainly a first.

Now that he thought about it though, Sora always did get angry when he tried and failed to do math.

Axel sat up from outside the fight. He saw a keyhole appear in the barrier that had been set up in front of them. Just like last time he encountered a winged person, they had a strange system of fighting that seemed to be able to drag people in between mini-created dimensions and lock other people out. The keyhole was probably just Kairi and Riku working together to be able to travel to where Axel and Isa had been fighting and switch out places for them.

Oh, that was what Larxene meant when she told him to use the key to take down the reaper’s barriers. Maybe she was right and he was terrible at this whole Guardian of Light thing. Xemnas had told him as much, that he was just playing at being a Guardian of Light. The same way he played at being assassin for the organization. The same way he played at being the babysitter of both Roxas and Xion.

Was it all just playing for him? He wondered when he had started to play roles like this. There must have been some point in his life when he was just a normal kid. He had a brother raising him, he went to school, he hung out every day with his childhood friend, the two of them bought ice cream together and passed the time talking about nothing in particular.

Axel felt a sudden weight on him and looked over to his shoulder to see Isa resting his head
wordlessly on him, as if he belonged there. Well, he did, but it was just like Isa to always spend so much time pushing him away and then immediately get close like this without saying anything.

“You know I’m starting to think banter and bickering isn’t actually good communication.” Axel said, trying to break the ice because he could not think of anything else to say. Breaking the ice was a terrible metaphor to use. If the ice was isa then Axel had never quite figured out how to break through it. He was supposed to be the flurry of dancing flames, but he had such a hard time melting one person.

“It makes for good flirting though.”

“Geh!” Axel reacted overdramatically, like he had been stabbed. “Y-you!” Feelings were so hard. He had wanted so desperately to feel again, that he had forgotten how hard feelings were.

“Yes, me. How articulate. I thought you were the fast talker between the two of us.”

“See you’re bantering again. We can’t do this, we gotta face the issue. We can’t have a bunch of kids fight our battles again I gotta… I gotta face the issue.” Suddenly Axel let his hands rest on the ground threw his head back and groaned. It was almost nothing like a lion’s roar, it was much more pathetic but it was an outburst all the same. He had a habit of doing these no matter how collected he seemed, like when he screamed what’s your problem at Xion. He just needed to say it, and then it would be said.

Okay, Isa was right he was not in top form when it came to being articulate today.

“Isa, about X… did you like her?”

“Of course I liked her why would I go so far to find somebody if they weren’t my friend-”

“I mean did you like-like her.”

“Are you a teenager?”

“I mean mentally - yeah, kinda.”

It was certainly a romantic notion, willing to give up one’s heart and fall to darkness even sell out yourself just to get a small chance of seeing that lost person again. He obsessively searched everywhere for her, but if he did love her if that had been his motivation in joining the organization, in grabbing at power, then his love certainly was not strong enough.

He watched the boy who wielded dark flames through the barrier in front of him fighting against Sho with the girl. Something about the boy, perhaps his willingness to plunge himself head first into darkness, to wield power to protect those around him, to show what he could not say reminded Isa of himself.

Perhaps the boy had made a similar mistake in the past, throwing himself into darkness in order to desperately search for the girl he had lost. That was why he was so cautious around her now. The way he acted it was like even when around her he was always afraid he was going to lose her, like turning his head away for one moment might cause the dream to end and him to awake having forgotten her.
If he had done such a thing in the past, that would explain the strange condition of his heart half light and half dark, Isa could sense it even if his senses were not as attuned as a keyblade wielder. He had always been particularly good at divining shadows, perhaps because of his connection to the moon.

The boy and the girl were at least doing a better job of getting along than him an Axel. He wielded dark flames and shot forth a dark firaga, while she cast some kind of vine spell in order to try to trap Sho. Her keyblade was covered in flowers, no wonder he treated her like she was so fragile, he was afraid of burning her.

“Do you remember when the two of us sat on top of the rooftop eating ice cream together in our real home?” Isa was still bitter about the forced move to Twilight Town. Never letting things go, ever, is what made him Isa.

“Yeah, the sun set was great that day.”

“You know even though we’re both looking at the same sun set, we’re guaranteed to see it differently. Everybody’s eyes are different, and so is the way they perceive light, and color.”

“Was this just an excuse for another lecture, ya know it all?”

“When X disappeared you were so despondent. You got worried when Ventus never showed up again in the Gardens, and you always got upset when friends moved away, but I’d never seen you that sad before. You looked like you never wanted to smile again.”

“We only saw her a few times, but she was my friend you know. We were the only people in the outside world who knew anything about her, we were all she had.”

Axel was afraid of being forgotten, so perhaps he saw himself in the girl with no memories. Isa had known this now, just like he knew it on that day. “I know. You always made friends easily like that, and you cared about every single one of them. That’s how you are. I promised you that we’d find her, that I’d never stop looking no matter what.”

“So what, did you like her that bad too? Did you want to show me up, and show her you were the real hero searching for her all along?”

“I wanted to keep my promise to you. I can’t smile like you, I can’t say nice words, I can’t get along with everyone I meet, no matter how hard I try I can’t change my nature like that. My first friend was you, my second friend was that girl, I liked Ventus too but… I don’t know how to show you I’m your friend.”

The promise was more important to Isa than his life, and his heart, because he had made that promise to Axel. Axel always made friends so easily, Isa had no idea why he always stuck around the gloomy, quiet boy, who spoke in a boring monotone voice, and always taunted him. He had no idea why he would stay, just that he wanted Axel to stay. That he would do anything for Axel to stay, that he had to prove himself and give a reason for Axel staying.
He could never show it in his words but he had always taken his friendship just as seriously as Axel did. Even if he were not able to make friends, the few he was able to make were as important to him as his life, and his heart.

“I thought I could just do this one thing for you. I should have been able to do this. Why couldn’t I find her? You always did so much for me, you were the only reason I had friends, you forgave me after I betrayed you to join the new organization and I... I couldn’t keep one promise to a friend.”

Axel was starting to understand why Isa always avoided speaking about these feelings. They were nothing like the Isa he usually knew. That was right alway in the past it was always Lea who was the childish one, and Isa acted like the grown up.

The two of them were both children. They were both messes. They had become so messed up, and also messed up in each other, that they could easily get lost in one another. All this time Axel had been worrying about something as silly as Isa loving X all along rather than him.

He went so far just because it was a promise he had made to Lea. Even if Isa could not show it, he desperately wanted to show it, desperately wanted to be close to the other.

“I think we’re overthinking things.” Axel finally said, reaching forward to wrap his arm around Isa and mess with his hair. He did not want to see Isa make a sad face.

Isa’s eyes peeled open and he glared up at Axel. “That’s the first time anybody ever accused you of that.”

“Oh, shut it I’m brilliant when I need to be. Your plots would not be half as good if I wasn’t executing them with my cunning, my grace, and most importantly my style.”

“Yes, that’s what is going to win this match, style points.”

“Hey, it could be! You never know this is a really weird system of fighting. The power of creativity, the power of friendship, are all literal powers in our world don’t underestimate them.”

“Now you’re the one acting like a know-it-all. This is like when you told Roxas all the facts that I used to tell you, and pretended you came up with them yourself.”

“Anyway, as I was saying. It’s complicated, who we are, who we should be. In the past I let everything slip through my fingertips, because I couldn’t decide between the organization and my friends but that’s it... I was making those decisions all alone. We’re together now, right?”

“Together.”

Isa said softly.
He was the one who threw them away. He was the one who decided to abandon them and yet, all he had wanted for so long was to simply return to those days walking through the streets of Radiant Gardens as children the both of them eating ice cream.
For so long he thought it was impossible to gain those backs.
“So, I can be a fool, a joker, and an assassin. You can be an icy guy and a total lunatic. Why are we getting all in a tizzy about which one is the real us? Maybe all of them are real? And even if it’s not that simple, this time when we’re figuring ourselves out we’re not doing it alone.”

“I’ve got you, and you’ve got me.”

“You can just watch me from now on.”

“Okay, show stealer.”

The moon had no light of his own, but the moon came into his own kind of beauty because he was able to reflect the light of the sun. He thought that meant he was only reliant on the sun, that he was looking at the sun without the sun looking back, but… the sun probably needed to see itself to. The sun needed to look at its own reflection just like everybody else did.

Axel cared so much about other people, he wanted to find himself in others, he wanted to live on in their memories. The person who had always reflected him the most was Isa though. Lea was looking at him to find himself again, and Isa was looking at Lea. That thought made him happy even though his face did not show it.

Isa stood up once more. “You’re right it doesn’t matter if you’re a failure of a hero, if you’re a liar, a cheater, a joker, a walking disaster-”

“Are you trying to be uplifting because it’s so not working.”

“Because you do it all in style, Lea!”

“Yeah, yeah, thank you for the applause my ego needed it. Now let’s go, I’m tired of making kids fight our battles for us.”

As the two of them stood up together, Axel raised his keyblade to switch them back into the fight. They looked down at Sho in his noise form below them, his tail swishing back and forth between his legs.

The two of them had appeared high in the air, and while neither really understood what was happening they went with the flow and both raised their hands up at the same time summoning their weapons.

“Isa, let’s drop the freaking moon!”

“Lea, this isn’t the moon it’s just a very large rock.”

“It’s a metaphor!”

“You say everything is a metaphor.”

“Life is a metaphor!”

“Tsk, so dramatic.”

As they finished that exchange suddenly from both of their held up weapons a giant rock that looked perfectly round like a full moon appeared, they both swung down at the same time. Sho hollered like
a cat, while both he, and all of his taboo noise suddenly disappeared in their combination attack.

Axel and Isa touched on the ground at the same time. Isa held a hand out to help Riku up, while Axel helped Kairi.

Parts of Sho’s body were already beginning to fade away. “N-no, I’m not done yet. There’s still something I gotta do… numbers aren’t factored, and the equation is only half solved.”

Riku watched Sho fizzle in and out of reality. He remembered once he referred to his own emotions as an unsolvable equation. Perhaps he was a nerd. Or rather, like Sho he seemed to think in a way that nobody else did.

Sho always fought alone.
His cooperation level was zero. He had everything else, tactics, intel, willpower, decisiveness, performance, a prodigy in all other aspects, but he never had that. His personality quirks went out of control because of it, until he looked deranged to everybody else.

This one time he tried to fight for somebody else of course everything went wrong. Sho smirked as he staggered forward, he looked like he was about to collapse. “The world’s made up of numbers. Do the math and you’ll find your desired solution. I just need to do the math again, my desired… my desire….”

Suddenly he raised his head up and crushed a pin between his hands. “See you Zetta Morons.” He said as he fell backwards into the dark portal that opened around him, his form still glitching, and parts of him fading away and becoming invisible.

“What was the deal with that?” Kairi asked.

“Well it looks like he wants something so badly he’d risk himself and other people, and he claims he’s not done fighting for it and still desires—”

“Man, you totally speak nerd Riku. Don’t you?”

“You’re the one who asked!”

Isa and Axel were not paying attention, both to Sho’s show so to speak, and Riku and Kairi. They rushed past them, helping Roxas down from the wall now that he was no longer being restrained by those strange black beings.

Roxas’ bad mood had mostly dried up now that Sho was no longer gone, though he did not want to hear another math word in a long while. Perhaps that was the Sora in him. “Wow, you guys look way better fighting together than you do fighting each other.” Roxas said.

Isa smiled without even realizing it.

“You think so?”
Even when Neku tried to open his eyes, all he saw surrounding him was darkness. Then suddenly within the darkness, voices spoke up.

“Because I am darkness. And I do stand by your side, I’m the shadow that you cast. How much closer could I be?”

“But I did-

“But I didn’t ask for this. To be sifted apart, nice and neat. We should be free to choose. Not just light, not just darkness. We decide what we are.”

“But Ventus I decide who I am. You see?”

“And what you are is darkness?”

“What I am is darkness.”

“Okay.”

“How is that okay? Vanitas!?”

Sinking in all of this darkness was like drowning. He felt his body go cold, and numb. His head screamed for more oxygen. All he could hear was the faint sound of his own pulse as it got slower, and slower.

At this point anybody would try to swim up. It was a part of the basic instinct to live. Neku was sinking with the heavy feeling that no matter how far he swam, or how hard he beat his limbs against the water he would never reach it in time and break the surface of the water. He could not even tell what was up and down anymore.
He was so deep in darkness he was forgetting what the light even looked like. They said fish that swim down this deep lose their eyes as they evolve because they no longer need to see, they live without light. They do not see others, and they are unseen. There was no chain tied to his foot weighing him down, he was not confined by anything, but the water itself which pressed on him from every angle. He felt its weight from every side. He was being bombarded, feelings that were not his own, friendships that were not his own, and a darkness that was not his own.

He was beginning to forget, the further he sank he forgot more and more where Sora ended and he began. Perhaps Neku was right after all, other people were just dead weight. Perhaps Joshua was right after all, humans were just not meant to understand each other this deeply. Feeling someone’s emotions as your own was painful, being close was painful.

“Understanding people isn’t hard, Neku. It’s impossible.”

Joshua, that was right. There was someone here besides Sora and himself. He opened his eyes again and even in pitch black darkness he saw a single light. An image of Joshua flashed in his mind, he stood there white hair messily falling over his face which wore a self-satisfied smirk as always holding a hand out to Neku. Neku reached his hand out towards the single point of light, before he could touch Joshua’s hand he saw a wave raise up and crash behind Joshua’s back sweeping them both away.

When Neku next awoke he was standing on a hill of broken, and rusted down keyblades thrust into the dirt as if they were gravestones. The graveyard extended out all around him. He saw a walking suit of armor jump in the air over him, and flinched when it passed through his holographic body.

“Are we doing the in medias res again?”

He got no response.

“Joshua? This is the point where you’re supposed to make fun of me, because you have to remind everybody how much of a jerk you are every five minutes.”

There was still no response.

“Josh…?”

Neku’s voice eked out, growing weaker.
Now that he thought about it he had absolutely no memory of how he fell into this dream. The last thing he remembered was biting into the apple with Josh. Perhaps it was a dead apple after all, that sounded exactly like something Joshua would do. He basically acted like a villain, even if he was not technically one.

If Joshua was here he would probably get on Neku’s case for not elaborating on the nuance of that statement. He loved nuance so much, and giving people a hard time. He had no idea what Joshua was doing, leaving him like this, or what he was thinking. The boy was flippant even when in the best of moods.

Then, he had no choice but to press on. If Neku was feeling alone and scared diving down to find Sora, then he could not imagine how Sora must feel right now. Sora’s entire life was his friends, but now he was somewhere none of his friends could reach. All alone on the hill of broken blades he
took another step forward through the memory.

Just as Sora and Ventus were about to rejoin the battle, they watched Aqua and the puppeteered set of armor’s battle with Terranort move past them.

Terranort rushed Aqua with a relentless chain of blows. With nothing more than raw strength, and no regard at all for his borrowed body, he rushed her again and again. The cutting edge of his pitch black Keyblade crashed into hers, and sparks flew between them. She could feel every single hit shaking up her whole body.

Yet even seeing her closest friend mercilessly beat on her like this without hesitation, she could not bring herself to stop holding back. The entire time she had been holding up her keyblade to defend, the few times she swung it was only to parry. Every time she tightened her grip on the handle of her Keyblade to try to strengthen her resolve, she felt Terra’s fingers closing around her neck from that last time fighting in Radiant Gardens. She heard his voice whisper kill me, a phantom whisper she could only faintly remember even though that scene had not played out in this version of events. She remembered her own hand reaching out to grab onto his when they both fell into darkness, and gently brushing her fingers against his rough hand as she sent him away on her glider I’m with you. Eraxus taught her that the darkness could not be saved, only extinguished, but if she destroyed Terra here then everything she gave up to save him would all amount to nothing.

She was supposed to be the one to save those two, she was the Keyblade Master but it was always her failures that doomed them it seemed. She left Ventus behind, and she sent Terra back into the world of light when he was still possessed by Xehanort. She wanted to be strong, cool-headed, like an ocean of water, but instead she was a clumsy little girl whose heart fluttered in anxiety, and so clumsy was she she tripped and then fell into an ocean of darkness instead.

Her grip loosened on her keyblade unconsciously as she continued to beat herself up worse in her thoughts for not being able to bring herself to fight Terra with everything she had, then Terranort was beating her with his Keyblade. Then suddenly she heard an awful clanging of metal as Keyblade hit against Keyblade in the exact wrong way and saw her own blade fall out of her hands and spin into the wasteland below kicking up dirt as it bounced on the ground away from her reach.

She brought both of her hands forward and cast Firaga right in his face. She needed to get back to her Keyblade. She could not believe she was making the same mistake she did in the World of Darkness, letting her keyblade fall from her hands like a clumsy fool. However, Terranort roared like a lion and pushed straight through the explosion of fire that hit his chest.

Aqua had forgotten Terra was like the earth, when he set his mind on something it was like his body was completely unbreakable. That was why in the past she had wanted to rely on him a little bit, he was supposed to be the sturdy one. When Terra fell, everything fell on her shoulders.

She crossed her arms over her chest instinctively, not knowing what else to do. She always thought one day as long as she kept believing, she would be able to walk with him again. Just like Terra told her when they were with Cinderella, sometimes holding onto a dream and continuing to believe even in the worst of circumstances was enough, as long as they kept sharing the same dream it would turn out alright. Her eyes started to close on that dream.

Suddenly, the suit of armor that was fighting with her appeared in front of her eyes before they could fully close. That was Terra’s armor, animated by his will to stop Xehanort, holding onto his
Keyblade, it was the last remaining piece of her friend and he threw himself away so easily. Terranort pushed straight through the armor smashing it to pieces. The sacrifice only bought her half a second but Aqua regained herself, and jumped back on her heel, bounding off her hand and finishing the acrobatic act by landing where her keyblade had landed and picking it up again.

Terranort put Terra’s foot on the head of his armor, and glared at Aqua with yellow eyes a mockery of Terra’s own eyes. “It looks like thirteen years of determination wasn’t enough in the end,” easily, he stomped on and crushed the head of Terra’s armor. Terra’s Keyblade fell out of the armor’s hands. Terranort picked it up and stabbed it into the ground. “One more headstone for the graveyard.”

Aqua’s mind was a flood of emotions at the moment but she still had enough of her sense not to fall for his obvious ruse and charge at him. Ventus however, was not as collected as she was. He immediately raised his reverse grip keyblade behind him and charged into the fray. Terranort toyed with him for a moment deflecting a few of his blows, before slamming his keyblade hard into Ventus’ side and throwing him aside. Sora charged immediately afterwards when he saw how hurt Ventus was, only to be deflected in the same manner.

“Enough. No matter how much you struggle against it, nothing will change. It will be just like last time, you will all lie broken unable to do a single thing against Xehanort.”

“Shut up!” Ventus cried, as he rolled back to his feet and tried to charge again. The exact same result as last time, but Aqua could hear the sound of bone’s breaking as Ventus hit the rocky ground. Terranort raised his Keyblade in the air and slammed it into Ventus’ chest over, and over again. He seemed to be trying to reach his heart the old fashioned way, by breaking his limbs with a blunt object. Even so Ventus grit his teeth hard and stared up at Terranort. “You didn’t break us, no matter what the bonds that tie us together will never break!”

*If Joshua were here he would say something about how cliche that line was.*
*Or perhaps he’d wax poetically about the complicated nature of the ties between humans.*

*Ugh, is it possible to miss an annoyance?*

Neku thought in rapid succession as he watched the scene.

Terranort picked up Ventus by his golden hair, and then slammed his face into the dirt. He dragged him slowly, before slamming him into a wall. “Do you know the reason why you lost in the first place? It’s because of those precious bonds of yours, the strings tying you together were what Xehanort pulled on to make you puppets.”

“Shut up!”

“Aqua, did you ever really know Terra? If you had known him, then why didn’t you see how deep his darkness had spread? Ventus what about you, neither Terra nor Aqua know a single thing about your past.”

“Shut up! You don’t know anything!”

“You don’t know either. You don’t know a single thing. You’re willing to die for these people, but you don’t know anything about them? What kind of friends are you then? What are these bonds
based on? The time you spent together in tranquility? Do all three of you simply want to cling to each other so you’ll have someone after losing everything else?”

“We were friends! We all had the same dream! We all trained together!”

“You’re not answering my question, you’re just spouting niceties. Do you know, Xehanort’s tragedy could have been averted with a simple conversation. You three were such good friends, but you could not talk to each other, trust each other? Why were you all so easy to play against each other until you turned on one another?”

“You were the one who manipulated us, don’t blame us for that! You’re the one who made everything fall apart.”

“What kind of friendship falls apart so easily? Tell me, Ven.”

Terranort said mockingly, in Terra’s voice.

“…”

“No, you’re right, you were friends. Terra and Aqua were such great friends until you came along. Did you know, you had friends in the past? You already forgot about them, but, you were the one who ruined them. Then, you met Terra and Aqua and ruined their friendship too. If you had never met them, they would never have been pulled into Xehanort’s scheme for the Kyeblade. If only you had stayed a sleeping princess forever, and not woken up and forced those two to fall to the darkness to try to save you.”

“Don’t listen to him Ven.” Aqua remembered when Ventus asked, with eyes that looked as lifeless as a doll’s, *just put an end to me.* It caused her to rush forward and strike with everything she had at Terra’s side.

“You’re no different. Terra’s more important to you than Ven, isn’t he? If you could choose between them, you could at least save Ven and know Terra is doomed to darkness. It’s because you saved Terra, that you left Ven to sleep for thirteen years. Ven, she picked Terra’s empty husk over you, but that’s how it should be because you only exist to drag our friends into darkness you should have ended a long-”

Terranort was only right about one thing, Aqua had held back for fear of breaking Terra after finally getting him back. Thirteen years of longing could not be ruled by logic. Ever since Ansem drowned her in darkness and made these feelings come up to the surface they refused to go away, because they had always been there. In that moment though when Terra’s voice said that horrible thing to Ven she overcame all of her hesitation at once and her Keyblade glowed with light bright enough to burn. It knocked Terranort’s keyblade away from his hand and sent it flying. She did not hesitate there she pushed Terranort away from Ven causing him to let go of the boy, and then she pushed even further still.

She never wanted to hear Ventus say that again. That his story should just end, that he did not deserve to exist.
Terra’s legs gave out from underneath him, and Terra reached out to catch him. Aqua held the collapsing Terra with a gentle hand holding on the back of his neck. Her other hand still held the grip of the keyblade which had pushed deep enough to impale him straight through the chest. Aqua’s face flickered through emotions, devastation, and then resignation. She gently lowered him to the ground, as if dipping him to finish the end of their dance together with an elegant but forlorn pose. He fell off of Aqua’s keyblade, it slowly sliding out of his chest before he collapsed on the ground.

Aqua thought it was all over, when suddenly one of Terra’s fingers twitched. She saw the darkness from him clear away and reach towards the sky. Slowly he started to lift himself off the ground once more.

“Terra!”
“Terra!”

Ventus forgot about the pain in his body and rushed to join Aqua at his side. Aqua placed a hand on Terra’s shoulder, Ven on the other side the two of them helped pull him up.

“Aqua… Ven…”

“Terra, come back please.”

Sora stabbed his keyblade into the ground to stand up once more. “Terra, your friends are here.”

He rocked forward grabbing the sides of his face, his entire body shook like it was on the brink of collapse.

_Come on power of friendship work please.
I didn’t go through three weeks of hell learning about the power of friendship to have it fall short.
Where’s Joshua anyway?
I keep getting this feeling in my gut he’s going to lecture me when I watch scenes like this.
Wait, do I have Joshua senses?
Are they tingling?
No, stop that, no more tingling._

Neku watched the scene finding himself cheering along with Sora for Terra to overcome. He took a step forward and found his transparent body standing exactly where Sora was, overlapping, almost literally standing in his shoes.

Then suddenly a pool of darkness rose from the earth at Terr’s feet. He threw his head back and screamed in agony, as chains from the ground erupted and twisted all around them. Aqua and Ventus were both lifted into the air.

Sora rushed forward leaving Neku behind. “You have to fight the darkness!” He threw his keyblade in the air to try to land a hit and break the chains, only for Terranort to grab Sora by the face with his free hand. He threw the boy aside again like he was nothing. Sora looked the same as ever to Neku, but somehow he had gotten so much weaker since his last fight against Xion, Saix and Xemnas.

Terranort stood up and slowly removed his hand from his face, as he did chuckles escaped from his
lips. As he pulled his hand away finally he revealed a smile with Terra’s lips. “You’ll never be able
to break these chains, they’re our bonds.”

As Terranort had said before, the bonds between Aqua, Ventus and Terra had only caused them
pain. They were nooses that all three of them had used to hang themselves on. Neku had thought this
way in the past too. When being close to someone who was irreplaceable to him, only scooped him
out, and left him empty in the end when he lost that person. He wondered what was the point of
getting close to others, if relationships were just pain then all he needed was himself.

Relationships were like chains holding you down, in the past Neku had no idea why people willingly
tied themselves to each other. Even now he watched Terra play with Aqua and Ventus in the air,
bashing them against the walls and each other. Sora got up again and again, in order to free them
only to be knocked down again. Each time Neku could see that the seams that were keeping Sora
together got looser and looser.

“You have no power over me!”

“Stop Terra! Please, stop it!” Sora cried out as he struggled. Ventus crashed into him, knocking him
aside and causing him to cough blood as the keyblade fell out of his hands once more.

Then suddenly the chains froze, Terranort seemed to have grown bored of even his sadism. He had
no personality at all after all, no emotions, no heart of his own, he was just one heart possessing
another not quite Ansem’s apprentice Xehanort, and not the full Xehanort. He was no different from
a puppet on strings, and he hated these two people which made him feel emotions that did not belong
to them.

He dragged them up as far as he could into the sky. The sound of chains rattling and winding filled
the air as he slowly raised his hand. “Farewell.”

“Terra…” Terranort heard a single whisper, somehow Ven’s weak voice to him was louder than the
rattling chains and his own laughter. “I kept my promise.”

He dropped the two of them from a height that would certainly be fatal. At that exact moment
something escaped from his shadow and flew up, catching both Aqua and Ven in his arms. The
Guardian Heartless that was always at his back picked the chains up in his hands, crushing them.

“How!? You fell to the dark-”

Before he could even finish he saw a dark hand reaching for his face, the heartless dead lifted him
into the air. He heard the sound of struggling against the bandages that muzzled the heartless’ mouth.
He tore off binds crossing in an ‘x over his mouth, and moved his teeth like a beast while a man’s
voice came out slowly forming words. “One day… I will… set… this… right…” As if he was slowly
learning to speak again as he regained himself, Terra moved the heartless’ mouth repeating himself.
“One day… I will set… this right… I will return to this land and protect… my friends!”

Sora saw the golden shining phantasm of Terra appear for an instant over the heartless, and knew his
heart was still there. He threw his hand behind himself and summoned his keyblade once more. A
beam up light erupted from the end, pushing through the heart of Terra’s body, and the empty hole
carved out of the guardian heartless’ chest. A lowing orb of light returned to Terra’s chest once more
banishing away the dark.

Terra landed on his feet, hair slowly returning from silver to dark brown. “Aqua! Ven!” He forgot
about himself shortly after regaining his sense of self, because those two were more important. Before he knew it, he was lifting Ven up from the ground cradling Ven’s beaten up body in his hands.

Aqua sat up on her own, eyes fluttering as if she was awakening from a dream. “Terra, is that you?”

A single tear fell from Terra’s blue eyes as he looked at Aqua. She was just too bright for him who had fallen into darkness, he knew that but he could not look away. “Yeah. You never stopped lighting my way back.” He said, gazing into the eyes that he had wanted to see for so long.

“You’re here.”

“I heard you too, Ven. You found me just like you promised. Thank you.”

Seeing the happy scene in front of him, Sora did not want to interrupt so he tried to stagger away on his own. “Aqua and Ventus need rest. Terra, look after them.”

Xehanort said he would be broken in battle after battle. He needed to not break no matter what. He had to keep going no matter how his body felt right now. If he made it to the end, he won. That was all Sora understood about the hero’s journey.

“No, Sora. I’m going too.”

When Ven tried to chase after him, worried about Sora’s heart Aqua and Terra immediately grabbed onto him.

“That’s what he wants, for us to make a mistake. To put ourselves in danger.”

Sora, the reckless hero said.

Then, don’t fight all on your own.
Neku thought as he watched Sora stay strong enough just to walk out of sight of Terra, Aqua and Ven and return to the maze, before he started to stagger again.
Neku walked alongside him the whole way.
Sora, you’re supposed to be the friendship guy.
You should know more than anyone else you’re not alone.
Are you trying to prove that you can fight alone?
Are you scared because when you couldn’t fight on your own last time it all fell apart.
Now you’re the one falling apart it’s not any better.
Don’t you know that?
As much as it hurts you to see other people get hurt.
It hurts them just as much to see you get hurt.
If Josh were here I’d sure he’d put it in a more poetic way.
Or maybe a more annoying way, but like annoying in a charming way.
Where is he anyway?

He saw Sora take one more staggering step forward and then double over in pain. As he did so, Neku saw the phantom image of three hands bursting straight out of Sora’s chest. It was like people were trying to claw their way out of him. Then the next moment the hands were gone. Neku must have just been imagining it.
He knew this was only a memory and there was no way of changing the past, but Neku wanted to follow Sora even further. He never wanted to leave Sora alone again.

“Neku, don’t follow Sora anymore.”

_Huh?

“Neku.”

Who are you?

“Who am I? What a ridiculous question. I am, who I am.”

_Oh, it’s Josh._

*Nobody else could answer that pretentiously.*

“Stop following Sora. I thought you were at least smarter than him. Following him this deep can’t save him, your actions won’t make a difference.”

Where are you, then?

“No, don’t find me either. There’s such a thing as getting too close to people.”

Too bad. I’m going to find you, and I’m going to drag you back through Sora’s memories. We’re fixing him together, aren’t we, partner?

“Neku, stop!”

All Neku found was darkness and silence.

Until, a whisper rose up in that darkness.

“I thought you trusted me.”

He forgot who he was.

Then he remembered.

He remembered being a different person and living a different life.

The city of Shibuya was starting to change, on the streets they were saying it would be a cultural center soon. He remembered he was a boy in cheap washed out jeans with bell bottoms like an American style, who only buttoned his shirt halfway up. He remembered having silver hair like his father, but lilac eyes like his mother. He remembered getting stares from people who thought he had foreign blood mixed in with him.
My name is Kiryu Yoshiya, but mother and father call me Joshua. He felt like ever since he was born, he stuck out from the crowds. His parents were kind but not kind enough. They were almost forceful in their kindness. They told their son how special he was and how proud the were at the drop of a hat, but that potential he had started to feel like it was not praise. They said they believed he could do anything and always told him he could be making much more of his life. Potential was just another word for expectation.

Mother had long thin fingers, they were a piano player’s hands. She had become a piano player but gave it up when she found out she was pregnant with him. In her youth she was hailed as a prodigy. Postpartum depression, it was at this time studies on mental health were becoming more and more widespread. After having him she was never the same, she never touched the piano again she said the notes the keys played never sounded the same to her. She would only play for him. His first memories were being taught by her. She was so happy, she said Joshua was born more talented than either of his parents. He was going to surpass both of them. That too, was an expectation.

His mother’s hands reached out and her nails dragged on his cheeks as she tried to caress his face. At first she praised him for every note he played. Eventually if he made a single mistake, she would make him start from the beginning.

His parents never raised a hand against him. They fed him and clothed him every day. They praised him for how brilliant he was. He never felt like he had any right to complain, and so he felt awful for always feeling so restrictive. He felt like a bird in a cage. He was so well cared for, he had no right to complain about the bars he saw around him. Especially since he was too young to fly on his own.

His mother told him every day how she dreamed of being a pianist and how he could live it out for her. His father was a tailor. He always made sure Joshua’s clothes fit him just right. He told Joshua that he was doing this because Joshua was going to become so much more than a tailor’s soon. When he was sad, his parents told him he was wasting time being sad that there was no reason for him to be upset. He learned to always smile because they were right, getting sad, losing time to that, it was inefficient. When his parents said harsh things to him, he lowered his head and simply did as he was told because there was no reason to get upset at his parents who always cared for him.

He went to church every sunday with mother and father. He loved hearing mother sing, her voice was beautiful.

He wished mother’s singing voice could drown out all the whispers of the children at school about the christian child who looked like a foreigner, and acted like he was smarter than everybody else.

He never did homework because he could not focus on it. He was always thinking about three things at once, but never what the adults around him told him to think about. He always aced the tests easily even if he slept through class. When his parents were told what he was doing, they told him how brilliant he was and how they knew he could be doing better. They told him how much it saddened them to see that somebody they knew could do so much was not making the best use of himself.

He never had friends, not once. In the 1970s culture was changing faster than ever, and western styles were becoming more and more popular but nobody talked to the boy who looked like a foreigner in blue jeans.

He read books. He read every single book. He read Dazai Osamu, No Longer Human (Disqualified from Humanity) about a child whose father grew up disapproving of him becoming an artist among
many other things. He realized right then if he told his parents what he wanted to become they would
tell him again how much it saddened them when he let his brilliant potential go to place. There was
no place in this world for him so he imagined one. His imagination grew and grew.

He played piano still even after his mother stopped teaching him. It was strange, his mother never hit
him, she never struck his fingers when he got the keys wrong, but for some reason learning with her
was never enjoyable. She always told him how proud she was to have a son who was a prodigy, and
how much better he should be if only he tried. Pride, prodigy, to him those words that should have
made him feel happy were just a weight weighing on his heart.

By the time he was fifteen years old, he stopped hearing the notes make music when he hit the piano
keys. He was hitting the keys just right, but for some reason he could hear no sound. His mother
cried inconsolably when he said he wanted to give up playing piano. She told him again and again
how happy it had made her listening to him play when she could not anymore.

He was not miserable. He was not being beaten. He was not starving. He had nothing to complain
about his life. He had a wonderful life, he had wonderful parents, he was in a wonderful city full of
so many interesting things, new art trends, new fashion trends.

It was a wonderful life.
He wondered why it was not wonderful for him.
He was not miserable, but he was not happy either.

He was sorry that he was not happy. He was told over and over again how special it was for him to
see the world in a way that others could not, that others would love to be born a prodigy like him.

However, having nobody to see the world in the same way you did, to share the same sky as you,
wasn’t that just being lonely?

He saw things that nobody else saw. He saw ghosts. He had since he was young. His grandmother
passed away in her sleep, but he could still see her. He was terrified the first time, but his parents did
not believe him. He was quick to figure out that no one would believe him so he shut up about it.

One day in the streets he saw two boys running by him. He thought they were just playing around
and looked on in envy for a moment until he saw nobody else looking at them despite the fact that
they were pushing their way through the crowds. They were dead people, but all the dead people
beforehand he had seen just uselessly repeated the same things they did in life as if they had forgotten
they were dead.

He had never seen anything like this, so he followed.
He ran after them and his heart pounded for the first time as he saw them fighting some kind of
monster. He felt like his long dead body was coming to life, like he did not know what it was like to
have a beating heart before this moment.

This feeling was not happiness, it was not misery, but it was not nothing either. After that he spent all
his time on the streets of Shibuya. He skipped class to try to find more evidence of these ghosts
playing a game. His parents raised their voice, his mother started to cry, his father blamed him for her
hysterics but he stopped caring.
He grew more and more obsessed.
He had been wondering all this time why it was only him. Why if he was so gifted, if he was supposed to be so brilliant, if his parents expected so much out of his life…
Then why was he the only one who was living like he was never even alive to begin with?
Every time he saw a passing group of children smile, all he could ever think was that he had never been able to smile that easily, or even walk side by side with others so closely.

*Life for me was one giant bore. Just the same thing, day after day... now THAT felt like death.*

He realized why he saw no value in life, even though he had every reason to be happy.
It was not just that he was an ungrateful child who did not appreciate his blessings.
That was it, the reason why he could not live.
It was because he had not tried dying yet.

He cleaned the barrel of his father’s old revolver and raised it to the side of his head. The most efficient way to kill yourself with a gun was to lift the roof of your mouth as much as you could then swallow the barrel. The next best way was to press it to your temple. Pressing it to the side of your head was the sloppiest way to do it.

Super suicide style.
It was like he wanted to screw up.
Perhaps he never wanted to pull the trigger at all. Perhaps he wanted his parents to discover him and stop him, throw their arms around him finally so he would know what it was like to be held. Perhaps he did not want them to apologize, he never expected that but instead he wanted to be locked away in an asylum for the attempt so he would no longer have to be a part of the world. Perhaps he wanted half of his brains to get blown away but for him to survive. Afterwards when his brains were half gone and he was stupid nobody would praise him for being a genius ever again.
Whatever he wanted in the end his finger flexed on the trigger.
He heard a loud noise like somebody was clashing cymbals together in heaven.
As his consciousness fleeted he was so afraid. His eyes went, then his ears, then his feeling.
He did not realize that he might simply just disappear. He did not want that.

He hoped even if he went to hell for this, there would at least be music in the afterlife.
Even if he was just being tortured in hell, as long as he was able to still observe, feel, and hear he was fine with that.

Sakuraba Neku stared at Joshua’s broken body on the floor. His skull was shattered on the ground and there was a large hole in the side of his face, one of his eyeballs had fallen out and was dangling on a string.

Neku suddenly realized why Joshua wore the same clothes every day. Those were the clothes that he died in. He had no idea how he became composer, or what came after that, but no matter what there would always be some part of Joshua that was just a fifteen year old lost ghost of a boy.

Hanekoma had not lied to him after all, Joshua had been someone who could see the UG even when he was a resident of the RG.

It was the worst revelation possible for Neku to have. That Kiryu Joshua was in fact, a human being.
What a terrifying thing to be.

Joshua’s corpse suddenly raised his head, and tilted it to the side. Red liquid continued to ooze out of his skull. His dangling eyeball bobbed up and down. He opened his mouth only for half of his jaw to hang there as well, as that had also been blown apart. His sole remaining lilac eye suddenly came to life and focused on him.

“I told you to stop chasing memories Neku, now look what you’ve done.”

Joshua’s voice came out of the puppeteered jaw. Neku had no idea what to do, only the sense that he had done something terrible, and the urge to run away from it.

Neku ran away trying to escape his consciousness. Instead he found himself in the consciousness of another. Just like the time he shared consciousness with Lauriam, he could only see the world from their two eyes. He was running through an overgrown forest and looked up to see a large castle bound by several chains.

He looked at his own hands and saw they were fading apart, and realized there was not much time left. Things had gone completely off calculations, and things had gone perfectly according to his calculations. Numbers were fun like that, you could bend them in any way you want.

He had no idea why people painted portraits with colors. Visible light could only be bent into a small spectrum of colors. Numbers could become absolutely anything, all the way up to infinity. That was why as a lover of numbers he had to be flexible willing to do anything.

Oh great, I'm in somewhere even worse than hell and infinite darkness. I'm in pi-face's messed up head. Neku thought.

Sho climbed up the side of one of the towers, and snuck in through the window. He had snuck into this sleeping girl’s room once before to try to snatch away her heart in her sleep, but he had been mistaken. He wanted a heart of pure light that was said to be capable of wielding a keyblade, but he had found the wrong heart by mistake. He tried to take advantage of the connection between the two, but that girl with a heart of pure light always had someone vigilant by her side.

That boy with pure white hair looked smarter than anybody else. He would think they had something in common, if he was not above everybody else in this world.

Anyway, this time he was not here for the girl but rather her shadow. He knew the second he jumped off her windowsill and silently touched to the floor, her shadow would grow larger than herself and project the silhouette of a boy onto the wall. Neku could feel the muscles of Sho's face forming into a smirk, a dangerous one that showed his fangs. “There’s no need to get so zetta angry with me. I just came to talk with you about something.”

“Save it, I have nothing to say to the kind of creep that sneaks into girl’s rooms at night.”
“What about the kind of creep that hides in a girl’s shadow? Are you lonely, or just desperate beyond measure and calculation?”

Neku heard an emotion escape the boy in the shadow. It was easy to pick up because that boy was constantly leaking out emotions.

*Ventus, I’m jealous of you.*

“Ssssh, don’t talk so loud. Don’t you know it’s nap time?”

“Are you a babysitter now? How do you feel about that, fallen from your previous state?”

“Meh. Not like I had anything better to do.”

“Don’t tell me all along what you really wanted to do was play with a bunch of children, and laugh like idiots.”

“Yeah, so what if I have a lame secret desire like that? What are you going to do? Bully me until I cry? Well that’s a terrible idea because my tears turn into monsters that will eat you.”

“You can cling to-”

“Yeah, I’m like so over the villain taunts already. The Old Geezer’s were way more effective than this, and way more convincing. Of course he had the advantage of being the only person I freaking knew so.”

“Oh, did you make friends? One, plus one, plus one, equals three? That’s bad math you know, because you’re not whole, you’re still half.”

“Shut it.”

“You’re not even welcome here. You’re hiding. The moment they discover you, they’re going to get rid of you.”

“I’m so afraid of Venty-Wenty, he might make a speech about the power of friendship and then defeat me with smiles, and the laughter of children. Or whatever.”

“Deflect with humor all you want. You’re never going to exist as anything but a shadow in their world. They allow you to hide here because they take pity on you, but in the end because you choose darkness, nobody will ever choose you.”

The shadow on the wall started to move, it looked like he was trembling.

Sho spoke again, Neku saw the entire world go tilted as Sho tilted his head. Of course, Sho’s view of the world had always been crooked to begin with. “Right now, we can do a special factoring. My body is broken and falling apart just like yours. Noise are birthed from base thoughts, unversed are birthed from based emotion.” He fell forward and looked at as his own hands, they kept glitching back and forth between that of a human’s and that of a cat’s. “We might be compatible. Possess my body and make it whole again. If you had a body of your own you could thrive in any world, light or dark, you would finally be given a choice.”

He stared at the shadow of a boy in front of him.
Perhaps he was Pinocchio and all along desired to be a real boy.
But there was no star for him to wish upon.
There were no stars at all in his eyes because they were just darkness.

Suddenly, Neku’s entire vision was blackened by darkness. The world twisted and turned. Then he looked up again and looked at his own hands, they were neither glitching nor fading away. He felt something terrible in the pit of his stomach and doubled over in pain. He saw black tar falling from his mouth.

When he looked at the puddle of pitch black had had vomited, two red eyes appeared within it, and then a small blue creature climbed out.

Neku no longer had any idea what was going on at all, just that he needed to wake up from this long dream.
Psychedelic

Side A: Twilight Town
Track 13

The moment Roxas reunited with Xion, she protectively glued herself to him. She refused to leave his side since. Riku could understand her feelings. After being apart from someone for so long it was natural to want to always be around them. She wanted to make up for lost time.

His thoughts naturally drifted to Sora. There was a time when all three of them were reunited at the Destiny Islands. Riku wondered why he did not use that time to spend as much time around Sora as he could. They knew the world was going to pull them apart again, they should have been together as long as they could. He thought about the time he almost lost Sora during the Mark of Mastery exam, he should have realized then he really could lose Sora and never left his side.

He was the one who was supposed to catch Sora when he was napping, and keep him on his toes. He had no idea why he had forgotten about that, and started to treat Sora like the chosen hero who was just meant to save everyone. Riku was the one supposed to be carrying those burdens but he felt like he unloaded them all on Sora, causing him to sink. Sora had fallen asleep because of him, sinking and sinking into a deep sleep that even Riku as a dream eater could not devour or dive to wake him up from.

Sora was nowhere to be found. He disappeared from this world. Yet, he was everywhere. Everything made Riku think of Sora. Sora was the sky, no matter how much Riku tried to keep his head down he would never escape from it. The sky was what connected everyone.

The six of them were under that sky still, waiting in line. Riku tried to focus on that instead, because there was nothing worthwhile from him continuing to pick at an old wound. When Riku looked up he saw Roxas’ hand thrust in his face.

“5000 Munni.”

“Huh?”

“You’re paying.”

“Oh. Right, I’m the worst I just remembered.” It took him a moment to remember, even though he swore to himself he would never forget what he did to Roxas. “Those strange new monsters don’t drop Munni like heartless, just these weird pins. What was he calling them again, Noise? Do they emerge from subconscious thoughts like background noise in the brain-”

“Just give up the money nerd.”

*I’m being bullied.* Riku thought as he reached into the leather pouch strapped into his pants with three belts and drew out a wallet shaped like a bat dream eater. Riku had custom made it himself in his spare time with a sewing kit.

When he handed the money over, Roxas stopped and noticed that Riku was using his off hand and
his dominant hand was bandaged over. “What happened?”

“I broke my wrist again because of the old injury from our fight.”

“Oh no, that’s just too bad.” Roxas said in a dry voice.

Roxas went back in line to buy tickets for the trolley ride to the beach. Kairi appeared at Riku’s side and leaned forward to study his face with her hands folded behind her back. “Why is he staring at you like you killed his goldfish?”

“Well, on top of beating him in a fight and dragging him to a digital recreation of Twilight Town where he was tricked into thinking he was a normal kid, with a normal life and normal friends therefore turning his innermost desires against him—”

“Hey, I won that fight! You just cheated towards the end!” Roxas snapped back at them without turning his head around.

“I also once stole 5,000 Munni from him preventing him from going to the beach because Ansem the Wise was too lazy to program a beach. I don’t think his grudge is over any of that though, it’s because Roxas believes I’m the one who convinced Xion to leave.”

Roxas did not hold a grudge against Namine for tampering with his memories and convincing him to return to Sora. He was a lot like Sora in that regard, he was overly forgiving for what others did to him, but if you hurt one of his friends he would hold a grudge forever. Even now Xion was pleasantly waving at Riku while she waited in line, and Roxas when he thought Xion could not see him glared at Riku.

Riku did not mind bearing his disdain. If anything he wished Xion would resent him more. The only reason she did not was because she had so little self value, she thought her decision to return to Sora was the right thing to do and just continuing to exist was wrong.

“Wow Riku, falling to the darkness is one thing but stealing? Since when did you become such a hoodlum? What happened to my knight in shining armor?”

“I don’t ever remember being any of those things!”

He did not mind if Roxas hated him, but Kairi’s teasing was just too much for him. He turned his head noticing that Isa had disappeared somewhere. His eyes widened when he saw Isa return carrying a bundle in his hands.

“Awe yeah, Isa got the ice cream!” Axel immediately pushed the others out of the way and held his hands out like he was begging, only to have a banana placed in his hands. “What is this betrayal? No ice cream? Et tu?”

“You can’t have ice cream for every meal, Lea.”

“What’s the point of having a heart if you can’t enjoy life?”
“You enjoy life a little too much.”

“No, you just enjoy it too little!”

“That’s not true. For me just being by your side makes life enjoyable, Lea.”

“Hey, no fair pulling that line on me when we’re arguing over ice cream.”

“It also makes it insufferable, annoying, frustrating…”

“No, wait you don’t gotta backtrack it that far.”

As Kairi watched Isa and Axel bicker like the were children again it was hard for her to remember the keyblade graveyard and that those two were once fighting each other, keyblade and scimitar in hand like a pair of red and blue demons. She walked over to Xion and whispered. “Are you two really okay with living with Isa like this, especially you Roxas?”

“Huh, why? It’s not like I’m the type to hold a grudge, I’ve got too much Sora in me for that.” Roxas joked in a light hearted way, the boy who had been glaring at Riku a moment ago completely disappeared. Roxas really did look like Sora, with a blonde mop of hair put on his head, his cheeks were round the same way, he had the same blue eyes, he smiled the same. It tugged at Kairi’s heart strings, and Riku could not even bring himself to look at the boy’s face.

“Sora’s memory isn’t even good enough to hold grudges.” Kairi said, nodding.

“It’s not like clobbering him in the Keyblade Graveyard means I forgive him or anything, and maybe the way Saix saw it the only way for him to be redeemed was by death but…” Roxas unwrapped the Ice Cream that Isa had given him. While Isa was being strict on Axel, he alwas spoiled Xion and Roxas trying to make up for the past, the same way Axel was always apologizing over everything. “Don’t you think this awkward situation where he has to live with all of us now and take care of us, is a better punishment than dying? This way all four of us, can live out small punishments every day.”

“It doesn’t seem wrong to you?” Kairi asked.

“We both once thought it was wrong for us to exist. Maybe it’s still wrong and we’ll get punished one day but, until then we’re all still here.” Xion turned around joining in as she leaned her head against Roxas’ shoulder. She did not even seem to realize what she had been doing or the effect it had on Roxas, being close to Roxas was just natural for her. “Besides, I’m pretty sure if Isa wasn’t here, we would have no money, nobody would do any chores, and Axel would be lying on the couch in a diabetic coma.”

As Xion said that, Axel’s voice rose above the others. “There’s nothing wrong with having ice cream for every meal, you’re just an ice cream hater.”

“You know sometimes they put bananas in ice cream.”
“Don’t try to trick me, I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Really, because you act like it.”

Xion finally detached herself from Roxas to go play peacemaker. She tugged at each one of the much taller man’s sleeves in front of her, “We’re never going to make it to the beach at this rate if you two keep arguing. You still need to get changed.”

“Yeah, you boys are all wearing way too much plaid for the beach. You’re going to melt.” Kairi said as she put a hand over Xion’s shoulders, and began leading her to the bathrooms to change.

Before Xion was dragged off, a thought popped into her head. “Axel. Why does Saix still have that scar? Our tear marks disappeared after Re-completing, so….”

Isa turned around hand in the pockets of his long jacket. It was late in the day as they had spent the entire day searching for Roxas and Sho, but because this was Twilight Town the sky was still Twilight. If this were any other world he would be able to see the night sky. Isa’s eyes looked like he was searching for one star in particular, in an endless sea of them.

“Oh, about that…” Axel scratched at his nose with his finger, feeling awkward. “Ya see, he did it to himself to remind us of our missing friend.”

Isa tried to kiss Lea once when they were younger. Before they even met the girl named X, and before they started to sneak away into Ansem’s Castle because the Gardens in all their radiance somehow bored them.

Back in those days when all they had was each other. He tried to kiss Lea. He failed. It was a frustrating attempt. Lea was laughing about something, so much time had passed that Isa forgot what it was nowadays, but back then their days were always filled with laughter (mostly Lea’s).

Isa remembered watching every detail of Lea’s face change as he threw his head back in laughter. There were few people who smiled with their entire face like that, and how had such a memorable smile. Lea’s features were so catlike that every expression he made, was always so sharp, pointed, distinct. Isa sometimes doubted what good of a liar Lea was, because in front of Isa he always seemed like such an open book, living out every emotion to its fullest, every emotion painted colorfully on his face.

A picture was worth a thousand words, but no picture in the world could capture Lea’s smile. That was what Isa thought, he was that beyond words as he watched Lea’s lips. He drew closer and closer, no thoughts, only feelings he was allowing himself to feel and allowing those feelings to move him for once. They stood toe to toe, just as he was about to line their lips up Lea’s head jerked out of the way and Isa kissed his shoulder instead by accident.
Lea knew exactly what Isa had been trying to do, and that made him laugh even harder. Isa’s face reddened, and suddenly he was too warm, so he quickly shoved Lea down out of frustration. He had no idea if Lea wanted the same thing that he did, but if Lea did he would never tell him straightforwardly. For such an open book, for somebody who was always overflowing with emotion like that, he was surprisingly foxlike when he wanted to be.

“Do you ever stop laughing?”

“Heh…”

Lea had fallen on the ground, but he hardly looked bothered by it at all. They were like two kittens play fighting, knocking each other over, clawing at each other, it was all a part of the game to him. Everyone accused Isa of being the cold one, but Lea really did like his games and had no problem having a laugh at Isa’s expense.

He lay there with his arm under his head, and his shirt half pulled up from the fall exposing the right side of his chest. Isa remembered staring for far long than he meant to, only making his teenage confusion about Lea worse.

When he was older, as Saix he would remember that same scene again but when Lea fell on the floor, it was Axel’s face, teardrops and everything that he saw looking back up at him. Isa would wonder what Axel would look like, if he were looking down from above.

Then he would hate himself for thinking about that at all, or letting his thoughts wander to the past again. He was not allowed to imagine such a thing. That was what it meant to be a nobody. Your entire existence was spent longing for something you could never have. His days with Lea existed only in his memories, they were gone just like his heart.

At the moment Isa experienced a déjà vu as he tried not to stare when Lea took his shirt off while they were changing.

Lea was svelte, and yet musculously built. Most of his muscles were focused around his shoulders as before this he did the majority of his fighting by throwing. His body was curvy and feminine because of this, the lines of his sides curved into his chiseled stomach before curving back out to his hips. When he finished pulling his shirt over his head, his hair flattened for a moment before spiking back up in its usual shape.

Isa observed the way Lea’s hair was so long, it fell on his shoulders and the ends brushed against his collarbone. There were so many areas on Lea’s body he could rest his hands on, his shoulders, his broad back muscles, his sharp collarbone, his thin waist, his hips that jutted back out again. Isa had not been allowed to think of that to, he was not allowed to imagine what holding Lea might be like because there was no point in doing it without a heart.

Even with his heart back, Isa was hesitant to touch him. His eyes hovered over the scar that stained Axel’s otherwise perfect waist, it reached from his hip to just below his rib cage. When they were fighting in the old organization, the fake one, Saix snuck an attack from behind slamming his scimitar
into Lea’s nobody. Even though Re-Completing reunited a heart and a body that had been lost from another, any damage taken as a nobody was still present in the body of a somebody.

At the time he lied to Lea, and said the anger that drove him to try to cleave the image of Lea in front of his eyes into two was just a performance, like everything else nobodies did. Isa did feel something at the time, he was happy to see the look of betrayal in Lea’s eyes, and the light slowly dying out from him, because that was the face somebody would make when they were backstabbed by a friend. Isa hated himself for letting their relationship fall so far apart that the only way he could feel their closeness anymore, was the pain they caused each other, the only way he could feel warmth was when they burned one another.

Isa averted his eyes. It was too bright to look at. Just like when he was a nobody, he wanted to stop remembering, the far too bright past. Lea noticed the instant Isa stopped paying attention to him.

“I can’t believe you’re done checking me out already! Have you noticed how hot I am?”

“No. I didn’t notice. Why don’t you try lighting yourself on fire and I’ll look again.”

“I’m far more likely to get freezer burn just by being around you.” Axel was used to being the joker, the liar, the two-faced one, he had no idea why of the two of them it was always Isa’s feelings that were harder to figure out. “Jeez, since when did you get all sensitive anyway? I was the one who was supposed to be the crybaby.”

“You still are.”

Axel reached forward and grabbed Isa by the wrist, he dragged his hand back toward him and forced Isa to put his fingers right on Axel’s scar. The feeling of Isa’s rough hand, rubbing against his skin, the friction it created was incredibly warm.

“Lea-”

“What’s the big deal anyway? It’s just one scar, I see two on your face every time I look at ya’.”

Isa remembered still the night before they both agreed to join as Ansem’s seventh and eighth apprentices. It meant leaving their homes behind, for Isa it was a mother and for Lea it was a brother. Isa had already resolved himself to the sacrifice, but Lea was the hesitant one. Lea was always like that, he never wanted to lose a single person, he wanted things to last forever. He had been exactly the same since he was a child.

Lea was scared they might both disappear the same way the girl did, or one of them might disappear and the other would be left to search for the remaining two all alone. Playing hero as a child was one thing, but they were older now, Isa’s hair had grown long enough to reach his shoulders because he stopped cutting it the day after he met the girl, and Lea’s had grown so long and spiky it had become a mane.

They were no longer the kids who would be thrown out of Ansem the Wise’s castle. Yet, just like when they were children Lea clung to Isa, and started to sniffle. Isa raised his chin to give Lea more room to hide his face, and when Lea moved his head against Isa’s chest Isa rested his chin on the crown of Lea’s head. Lea always cried, but for a cowardly lion he had his own sense of pride, he always tried to hide his tears. Isa always told him he should not bother, because someone like him having pride was pretty worthless to begin with.
That day Lea cried hard, for the friend they had been unable to save, for the people they were leaving behind, for what they were afraid to lose. Lea did not want to forget about that girl ever, just like he did not want to forget about Isa. Isa finally instead of ignoring Lea’s crying like he usually did, and just silently being there as a body he could cry against pushed Lea away from him and picked one of his Chakram’s off the ground.

Without any hesitation at all, or showing any pain on his face, Isa stuck the pointed end at the top of one of his eyes and carved down all the way across the nose and below one of his eyes one straight line, and then drew an opposite line crossing them in an ‘x’. The name of the person they were searching for. “Lea, we won’t lose a single thing I promise. I won’t ever forget about her, I’ll see her every time I look in the mirror.”

His promise, only made Lea panic about the blood that was falling down his face. “Why don’t you ever cry over your own wounds, you idiot?” Lea asked while quickly bandaging up Isa’s face.

“You do enough crying for the both of us.” Isa said holding his hands out once more when his bandages were finished. He let Lea rest his head against his shoulder, and then quickly put his hand over Lea’s eyes to hide the tears. “You should mark your face too, tear drops to stop anymore tears from falling.”

They both arked their faces that night, as a sign of each other’s promise. Axel’s tattoos had disappeared, but Isa’s scars were still there. That was fine, Axel was always the more unreliable one between the two of them.

Several years in the future, the both of them stared at each other’s faces once more, observing every detail, trying to get them memorized. Isa leaned forward again. Axel no longer had to press Isa’s hand against his side, because Isa had started to hold him on his own. He felt their toes touch, he was close, close enough that he felt a pleasant warmth but that was not close. He needed to be closer and closer, he did not care if he got burnt anymore.

Isa’s eyes closed in anticipation-

“Pfffffffft…”

He stopped ust short to see Axel smiling, and watching him with wide eyes.

“Pffffffffffhahahaha, Isa you make such a funny face when you’re trying to kiss someone, it looks like I’m kissing a statue.”

“You’re supposed to close your eyes. It’s proper etiquette.”

“Why would I do that? Then I wouldn’t get to see your stupid face?”

Isa lost patience and pushed him over. His train of thought was Axel might stop laughing if he was pushed. It was incredibly childish. And it did not work. When he landed on the ground Axel crossed his arms over his sides and kept laughing.

“Do you ever stop laughing?”
“Heh… Not when I'm with you.”

Riku was smart, but sometimes he was slow to figure things out.

For example he had known Sora ever since he was a child. That was about thirteen years since they met when he was four and Sora was three. In all of those years he had thought over and over again how important Sora was to him, how he never wanted to live without Sora, but neve once did he realize that the reason why he stared at Sora’s lips when he was laughing was because he wanted to kiss the boy.

Not until he saw those two childhood friends playing out that scene in front of him while he was trying to change with Roxas.

He remembered the many times he had saw Sora take his shirt off to go for a swim, or when he was fighting and his shirt was lifted up just enough by the air to show a peek at his belly. Riku only thought he was staring to see his friend’s progress in his muscles. Sora’s body was thin and he had always been shorter than Riku, but a year ago his upper body finally started to look thin but well toned, rather than just flat.

When he teased Sora about sharing the Paopu fruit with Kairi, he thought he was always afraid that Sora and Kairi were naturally more suited for each other, so his feelings for Kairi would never be returned and one day he would be left behind. He never realized he was equally afraid of his feelings for Sora never being returned, that they both might choose each other over him and he would be the only one left out.

When he was at Maleficent’s side, he was so afraid of losing Kairi he would kidnap princesses and sink worlds into darkness in order to hear her heartbeat again, and see her smile one last time rather than the sleeping expression her empty doll-like body left behind made. Just like he was scared that Kairi might never wake, he was equally scared that Sora would forget about him, that now that he went off and made new friends he no longer cared about Riku who had let himself fall to the darkness in order to help a friend.

What a mess. All this time he thought he was fighting his feelings for Kairi when Sora was no longer around, because he saw the two of them share the fruit and he knew how they felt about each other. He did not want to confess to Kairi simply because Sora was gone, and he did not want to be Kairi’s second choice after Sora. The truth was much messier, he loved them both and he had lost them both.

Even though Kairi was still here, it was Kairi and Sora. It had always been Kairi and Sora right from the start. There was never any room for him to begin with, and yet he let himself imagine these fanciful feelings for both of them.
Kairi found him all alone when they were waiting for the trolley to come. Of course she found him, she always did. He wanted to hide from her in the dark, he kept trying to, but she was always too bright for him.

“Riku are you… I’ve never seen you.”

Riku wiped his eyes. Whatever glint of emotion was in his eyes was gone, whatever stars that might have sparkled in the corners of his eyes when they watered he wanted to smother all of them.

Kairi tilted her head again in concern. Her red hair bobbed as she did. Riku almost wanted to blame her, it was her fault for being so beautiful, in her every motion, in her every action, in every expression of the word and every expression on her face. He was sure anybody who spent a long enough time by her side would fall for her.

He was always by her side in the past. Three years apart had not changed those feelings at all. His hair had been cut, and he grew taller, but he still felt the same inside, he still wanted to always be by her side. He was still that insecure little boy who was afraid both of his friends would leave him behind. He was still that boy who looked at the brilliant stars, and wanted to bring both of his friends to every single world that dotted the horizon so he could see their smiles when they got there.

That was probably just what these feelings were. He was sure Kairi and Sora loved each other in a much better way than he loved both of them. They were each other’s light. He was probably just clinging to both of them, unwanted.

“What’s wrong? Did Roxas bully you too much? I don’t think he actually hates you, maybe he just sees you as a rival.”

“N-no.”

The Riku she knew was always calm, collected, and clear-spoken. Even if he was bad at talking he always seemed composed when he was doing it. Kairi hesitated for a moment. “Riku, you… you were always a lot more sensitive than you ever let anybody see.” The sea and the sky were both formless, the earth was the only one that could break.

Riku had realized it, he loved Sora and Sora was no longer here. He wished he never caught onto these feelings, it only made missing Sora all the more painful. He realized why he never noticed when Sora was fading.

He always, ever since they were young, envied Sora’s way of living by simply following his heart. He thought that was the idea way to live. He was the one who was supposed to keep Sora on his toes, but he admired Sora so much, from such a distance that he became blind to his flaws.

“Riku, I was always happy that I understood you a little more than Sora did since you two were always such close friends and I was the stranger but… some things… I’m never going to understand unless you tell me.”

“I… I can’t stand looking at those two, because I keep thinking about how they’re all together but
we’re not. It’s awful.”

“It’s not awful, it’s just how you feel.”

“It is… These feelings of mine are no good because… I love him, I love Sora.”

Not past tense, but present. Even if he was not here, Riku could not help but continue loving him. He told Kairi right to her face, about his feelings that did not belong anywhere.

Kairi reached forward, laying her hands over his.

“You’re trembling,” she whispered. The earth could shake too.
She slowly entwined her fingers sliding them in between his. “Riku, you big dork. From the way you look, you should be knight-like, and cool, but you’re always stumbling like this and you have no idea how to talk to people.” The Riku paradox, Kairi had explained it many times. She even complained that he showed off in front of everybody else but never her.

She was just rambling to fill up the air between them, because she was afraid of silence. If they lapsed into silence they might never talk about this again. They were always by each other’s side, but neither of them could bring themselves to talk so they might as well have been distant islands to each other.

Then she said in another whisper.
“IT’s okay, Riku. I love him too.”

She thought there was no better way for her to explain her feelings to Riku than those simple words.

Riku heard exactly what he did not want to hear. What he believed all along. Kairi loves Sora, but not him. Even if Kairi was kind enough to accept his feelings, he could not accept them. Kairi and Sora already had each other, and he was the one in love with two people at once.

Before either of them could say anything else to clarify, their Gummi Phones both went off at the same time.

“A call from Namine?”

“A call from an unknown number in Shibuya?”

“We can’t help both of them at the same time, let’s split up.” Riku suggested, a little too quickly.

“Wait, Riku-”

“It’s okay Kairi, you’re strong enough to stand on your own. You always have been.”

Neither of them said goodbye, because they expected to see each other again. Just when Riku was about to leave Roxas stopped him.
“Wait, you’re not going to the beach with us to celebrate?”

“I can’t go to the beach something else came up.”

Roxas just smiled at him.

“I know, I know.” Riku said as he rushed off.

Xion tilted her head to the side obliviously. “Roxas, what do you suddenly look so happy for?”

♫

“Woooow, what an entrance.”

Joshua said clapping. He had been waiting for Riku by sitting on the rooftop of the WildKat cafe in the RG. Suddenly the sky opened in front of him and a keyblade glider appeared. He crossed his legs and leaned in, in anticipation as a man in silver armor walked off, and then pulled his helmet off to reveal a head of silver hair.

“Kairi needed to use the Gummi Ship, so I needed another method of traveling.”

“Color me impressed. Did someone teach you new tricks since the last time we met?”

“No, um actually I just saw Axel do it and figured if someone like him could figure it out than it couldn’t be that hard, and I just… figured it out.” Riku explained awkwardly for a moment.

“Hello there, Riku.”

“Umm… Joshua. Long time no see, but why are you always so high up?”

“Sora asked me the same thing. People like me just prefer high places.” Joshua said, as he toed on the edge of the rooftop, and then jumped down. He used telekinetic energy to slow his descent, so fell with style. When his toes touched the ground he immediately stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“You called me and told me you wanted to talk about something related to Sora?”

“Hm, in fact I was hoping I’d find Sora.”

“I’m sorry, he’s…”

“Well, you’re the next best thing right?” Joshua could not help it, the moment he saw a crack appear in someone’s face he wanted to peer through it. Even if it meant playing their weaknesses like this. He was insufferable like that. “My friend Neku came down with something similar to the darkness that Sora fell into in the dream world. It doesn’t have a name but I’ll call it the sleeping sickness.”
“I don’t remember telling you about that.”

“Oh, I was watching. You put on a good show, by the way, I ran out of bravoes.” Joshua drew his hands out of his pockets to clap again. Joshua and Riku were similar in nature, and that was what made Riku distrust him so much. Riku barely trusted himself. Riku remembered his younger, cockier self, and the way Joshua acted made him wonder what he would be like if he never grew out of that stage. That also made him wonder if Joshua had a quieter, more reflective side that he never showed anybody.

“This world is divided into two just like the world’s you encountered in the dream. Except, this world is separated by frequency. Everything on the UG frequency has to move down a frequency to get into the RG, and vice versa. Therefore, nothing can appear in both worlds at the same time.”

“Except, when I was here the other day I saw a heartless appear in the middle of the street, and people who were not there before suddenly standing there.”

Joshua smiled. It was so nice talking to somebody who could keep up with him. “Which means somebody is breaking the rules of this universe, and crossing the lines in order to experiment. Sadly, the same thing happened to Neku. His body is here in the RG but I don’t know where his heart is.”

As Riku followed Joshua inside, he saw Neku sleeping on a couch. Joshua even went out of the way to readjust the blankets on him.

“It’s my fault.” Joshua said without prompt, but Riku had already been expecting it. “Our frequencies got too close, I guess my dreams were just too much for him to handle.”

“What do you want from me?” Riku asked in his usual blunt way.

“Take off your shirt.”

“What?” Riku’s voice got loud without him meaning to.

“You still have those wings, don’t you?”

Riku realized what he meant a moment too late, and felt bad for getting flustered. He took his jacket off again, and then lifted his white shirt over his head. Joshua circled him until he reached his back where he saw two wings flat on his back that looked like they were two dimensionally drawn in ink. They had the shape and black color of bat wings.

“I wanted to ask you to do the same thing for him that you did for Sora. Go into his dreams and eat his bad ones so he can wake up.” Joshua walked ahead of Riku once more, flicking his hair as he did. “I know you’re not like Sora, you’re not the type to risk your life for what amounts to being a stranger. I can’t ask you to make the same sacrifice you did for your best friend. I don’t have anything to offer you though, all I can ask you to do is save my friend.”

Riku got the sense that Joshua was concealing something still, no matter how heartfelt his pleas sounded. Perhaps because his pleas sounded so heartfelt, Joshua was not the type to speak from the heart. Still, Riku could not figure out what Joshua was hiding with the available information. If Riku was a puzzle, then Joshua was a rubix cube that existed in the fourth dimension.

“Let’s just go already.” Riku said. “You’re right, I’ll never be able to save people the way Sora does,
but it’s not like I’m going to ditch a friend in need.”

“Riku, you smooth talker. You and Neku are just regular poets.” Joshua started to walk ahead, expecting the other to follow. “We need to get to the UG. On a higher frequency those wings of yours will become real again.”

“Is there a portal to travel between the worlds like there was in Traverse Town?”

“Normally the only way to get a living being to the UG, is to kill them.” Joshua turned around sharply, just to see the way Riku flinched. He smiled when he saw it. “I don’t want to get your blood on me though, this is a new shirt. So we’ll go through the sewers instead.”

“Your teasing is almost as bad as Kairi’s.”

“There’s a bigger tease than me somewhere in the universe? I sense a challenge.”

“What have I done?”

The two of them walked the rest of the way to the river. Joshua kept up conversation the entire time, but Riku felt like he was just doing it for his own amusement and not taking anything he said seriously.

They walked into the sewers, and Joshua led him to a staircase that ran all the way up into the ceiling. Riku, following Joshua walked all the way up it, only to see the world inverse on itself and then realize he was walking down the same staircase.

With every step he took he felt a strange feeling on his back. The ink like markings of wings on his back peeled away from his flesh and slowly rose up and spread on their own, they looked like they were ripping away from the second dimension so they could exist in the third. The bat wings flexed until Riku finally turned his head around and noticed them hanging there behind his back.

Joshua had picked Neku up bridal style when they left, and was carrying him that way the entire time easily able to do so despite how skinny he was. They walked through the river once more, but rather than returning to WildKat cafe they walked deeper into the sewers.

Until they arrived in a room with glass floors that had fish swimming underneath them. Riku saw a bar, a foosball table, and a jukebox. The decor of the place was oddly retro. “Where are we-”

The moment he took a step inside he collapsed. He had just fallen asleep. Joshua stood behind him, making a gun with his fingers and aiming it at the back of Riku’s head. He would have done it in a more polite way than casting sleep magic, but he was rude and also impatient.

He laid Neku down on the floor next to Riku. If Riku was the yin from the way he had fallen onto the floor that would make Neku the yang. Joshua never missed the chance for symbolism.

“What a wonderful friend you are Riku, you’ll throw away your heart to save the girl, and throw away your body and become a dream eater to save the boy.” He stepped carefully over Riku’s sleeping form. “I wish I could be as good of a friend as you are.”

That was the truth.
There was only one other person in the dead god’s pad. He was sitting at the other side of a table, already setting up a game. It was an old game from the age of fairy tales that resembled chess.

Joshua sighed. “If it isn’t my dear little math fetishist.”

Sho Minamoto raised a hand and smiled. “Sup, Hectopascal.”
Johsua immediately noticed his eyes were strange. They were off-color, golden.

Dead God’s pad.
The fourth part of the Shibuya River that connects the Trail of the Bygone with the Trail of the Judged. It was one lava lamp short from being a time capsule of the 1970s design aesthetic, but if the designer was asked to justify his taste in furnishings he would say Retro was in.

“Well, well. Moving a major piece already. Bold move so early in the game, are you sure you want to take your finger off the piece?”

“This farce isn’t a teaching match and you ain’t my boss anymore. Make your move already.”

A fallen god and a taboo reaper were enjoying a board game from a bygone age. Their tranquil tableau complimented by a backdrop in which Neku and Riku were sleeping. Joshua was unfamiliar with the rules at first, but he figured them out quickly into the game.

“I have to wonder why you’re doing this. You sure know how to heat up a game, which is why I let you get away with being so naughty, but even watching you all this time I can’t quite figure out how your seemingly senseless actions fall into a pattern. Unless you really are just as desperate as your actions seem.”

“I’m a fallen angel, body and soul. My true mission is to drag god off of his pedestal.”

“You were never even an angel to begin with. There are some reapers who can become angels, but your cooperation scores were always far too low.” Those who stayed reapers forever were fundamentally flawed, lacking in something like they were tainted with original sin. Angels were supposed to be higher beings. Joshua sometimes preferred reapers more though, the only kind of angel he ever got along with was a fallen angel.

“Then, you’re just trying to dethrone me so you can sit here instead? How boring, then this is just a rerun of last time.”

“QED. Class is dismissed.”

“I haven’t been this disappointed in motivation since that Xehanort fellow. Can you believe all of that was just so he could destroy the world and then remake it again? That’s only the motivation of every villain ever.”

“Wait a fraction, wasn’t that your motivation?”

“This isn’t about me.” Joshua said quickly. “I guess in the end it’s still all about you, Sho. You’re lucky I’ve gotten so bored without a certain cool cat around I’ve decided playing this game with you
is worth my time, I could have just buried you under a pile of junk like last time.”

“Awe, why don’t you want to play a game with me? It’s so lonely when you’re not playing games.”

“Because you cheat in all the games you enter.”

“So do you, yoctogram!”

“I make the rules. It’s different.”

It really was not different but Joshua had so much confidence in that statement you might almost believe it was so.

“Whatever, just move your piece so the game can start-”

“Then, I’ll wager my precious Neku and you’ll wager… do you have anything you care about but yourself? I guess I could take your memories.”

“Shut it! You fractal, you haven’t even been paying attention to the lecture!”

“I thought class was dismissed. You should pay more attention to your math puns otherwise you just sound like you’re quoting the material without understanding it-”

“I do have someone.”

Minamoto said, and just like that the bet was made and the final game began. Kingdom Hearts was no longer on the line, and Sora was not even around to save it. There were no heroes, and no villains anymore. They had all gone away with the organization.

The final battle this time around was just a game between two brats.
Sho Minamimoto moved a piece on the board. He lounged in his chair with his legs crossed. His trademark hat and bandana removed Joshua finally noticed his usual black hat had been traded for another one. This one was a black fedora sporting a black feather. Joshua would have noticed it sooner, had he not been so annoyed by Sho’s unbearably smug grin.

Sho spoke up noticing the twitch in Joshua’s expression.

“Are you going to be okay, boss? This can’t be easy on you.”

“You’re worried about little old me? Or are you just trying to ferret out my weaknesses?”

“I’m just curious about your heart. Even dead gods have them, don’t they?”

Most people who had met Joshua would be convinced that he did not have a heart. Joshua however was thrown off not by the accusation of having a heart, but rather that Sho brought it up. Reapers dealt primarily in soul, and Sho amongst reapers was obsessed only in numbers. He would probably say something pretentious like ‘the body is merely an ugly, empty, vessel’.

That also sounded like something Joshua would say, but Joshua was sure that would sound a lot better coming from his lips. The Sho that Joshua knew, barely cared about anything other than numbers.

Joshua just ignored Sho’s question and moved his piece.

“You were always the aggressive type. You barely leave your partner space to breathe.”

“Why would I? My goal is total domination. Victory alone won’t satisfy me, this has to be my perfect equation. Call me Euler because everything will sum out to zero from now on.”

The fallen god and the fallen reaper continued their board game from ages past. Were it not for the sounds of destruction the could be heard in the sleeping realm just a few wavelengths above them, this might almost be a friendly game shared between school children in the back of a gamestore in the afternoon.

Joshua would rather settle this with Tin Pin Slammer, but apparently in other worlds this variant version of chess with holographic pieces was all the rage. He made a mental note after this to make Tin Pin Slammer a trend not just in Shibuya but in other worlds. He needed to call scrooge. He spoke up finally, sounding distracted. “The power that you’ve gained could certainly inspire fear in even angels. Say… Are you ever going to tell me what exactly happened to bring you back from erasure?”
“After I was crushed in a pile of junk I wasn’t released. I didn’t become noise, nor did I regain my original form. Rather, my consciousness entered the realm of sleep and I relived my life over and over again, unable to do anything to prevent my end, and unaware I was dreaming.”

“Oh? That sounds an awful lot like hell. Whatever did you do to deserve such a sisyphean punishment? Right, I remember now, you annoyed me and got in my way.”

“Yeah, hell is running the same equation over and over again and expecting a different result. True madness, yo.”

“So you’re saying hell is math? I believe Sora would relate to you there.”

“But, in the middle of repeating over and over again I was infected by a virus. You see, wasting time talking like this is just garbage. Words are worthless. Data relays messages in beautiful ones and zeroes, it’s much closer to the truth. After the virus infected me, I gained knowledge on how toreassemble my body from data.”

“I’ve heard of something like that. In our realm, when reapers die their souls are converted into Noise and lose their free will to exist. It’s a bit like a whole program being shredded apart into its most basic parts of data. The same way a player, is refined to a reaper, and then beyond. All the same data of the soul, it just gets rewritten and reorganized. Your virus sounds a bit too convenient though-”

“The virus exists. Chaos theory is the answer - and the end - to immorality. Heh heh heh… A power not even the gods possess. The power to overturn providence. The ultimate theorem-”

“So, the current you has been remodeled by a virus, yet you retain your sentience? I see… What a perfect playmate for me and my little friends. Really though… Heh hehe… how many times have you remodeled your body by this point? If you perfectly rebuilt yourself from data, and tampered with powers outside of our realm all to gain such a lame power like darkness. Really, isn’t giving your heart over to darkness just a cliche among villains by now? ”

Joshua was not quite an angel, but his wings were pure white. As much of a cackling, wicked villain he might seem at times, his heart was light just by the composition of his being.

“What are you laughing at? It ain’t Zetta funny, the only one who should be laughing is me the villain.”

“Oh, just thinking you’re quite the eccentric yourself. The vast majority of people are stupid and selfish in the most tedious of way, but there are always a few, aren’t there? A few deviant geniuses mixed in among the flock. Like Sanae, obsessed with keeping the balance of Shibuya. And you, willing to do anything for the love of power.”

“Tch. My patience for you can be measured in yocto-seconds, get to the point.”

“No need to get all testy with me. It was a compliment. If you don’t have anything else to love, you might as well love power.” Joshua said, resting his chin in his hand as he observed the board. The board was just a distraction after all, the true game was not even going to be decided by the two of them. Perhaps Sho was right and all spoken words were garbage because everything each of them had said was just a bluff to measure out the other.
The true match would be decided within Sora’s memories, between Riku and Neku the pieces that Joshua chose, and the strange shadow of an oddity that Sho chose to align himself with. Even to someone who was tuned into everything like Joshua, Sho’s current composition confused him a bit, there was no logic to it simply pure, irrational, impulsive emotions. The worst kind to someone like Joshua who was in denial over the fact that he had feelings.

“Love? In this life? Passion? Yeah, right. Ideals are cheap it takes a poor soul to fall for them. The world, this house, the bed you sleep, all of its garbage.”

“What a cool line.” Joshua chimed back. “I’m jealous I didn’t think of that one.”

Up in the rafters a raven which had followed them unseen down into the Dead God’s Pad against all logic, opened its beak and cried out. The cries it made were no different from a normal Raven’s calls, but for some reason the bird seemed like it was laughing.

“Hehehehehe.”

“What’s so funny?”

“I told you. There’s a high price to pay for all of this.”

“And what price would that be?”

“I’ll go back to my time and live out my life. But Sora, you’re done now. Your journey ends here.”

“What?”

“Goodbye Sora. Your time, in this world is-”

Echoes from the past played in his ears, as Riku slowly peeled his eyes open. The last thing he remembered, he was with Joshua. No wait, the last thing he remembered, this was one of his memories.

Riku saw himself standing next to Sora, and felt a chill. There was no one he was more afraid of than himself, after all.

He already knew what happened here he had no idea why it was playing out before him. Even observing it would do nothing to change the ending. He had replayed it in his mind so many ties already. Watching this scene did not make him feel anything, even seeing Sora’s face again, hearing his voice lie he was living and breathing in front of him in a perfect recreation of the memory did nothing.

He just felt pain seeing all of this again.

What they thought was the final battle consisted of Riku, Kairi and Sora fighting against Young
Master Xehanort, Xemnas and Ansem while Xehanort watched in the background. Riku remembered even though he was fighting for his life, he was oddly happy.

Their journey began with the three of them being pulled apart. Kairi lost her heart, and Riku lost himself to the darkness. It was Sora who was always chasing after them. Then in Castle Oblivion, Sora went and took a nap like he always did.

Riku found it funny at the time, Sora was always so carefree, always napping, but even so he was far ahead of Riku. If Sora was in the highest tower in the castle, then Riku started from the bottom of the basement, just trying to climb his way up to him.

Riku had to fight all alone against the darkness. Kairi was alone on that island, left behind by everyone. Then there was Sora who was just naturally the hero of light all on his own, it seemed like he saved people just by smiling.

Sora was the one who ran ahead on the adventures and played the hero. Riku was in the shadows. Kairi was an island. Both of them were struggling to catch up to him. They wanted to be heroes too, the same way that he was by following their hearts. Especially if their hearts would lead them to him.

Their journey began with all three of them being separated powerless to do anything about it, as the winds blew them apart, the waters washed over them and pulled them away, and the earth sank underneath their feet.

All this time they were fighting, just so they could one day fight together. Their journey which started out with them fighting alone, ended with all of them side by side finally. That was why, he was happy. No matter how misguided his wish was, no matter how crooked the road he took getting here, he knew in his heart all along this is what he wanted.

He was finally able to protect those two people. Suddenly though after Young Master Xehanort faded way, to give Sora motivation Xehanort knocked both Kairi and Riku out of the fight and fought Sora alone to forge the thirteenth key.

Kingdom Hearts had been opened before their eyes, and he and Kairi were only spared by Mickey’s timely intervention. He made it to the platform just in time to undo the Stopza that Kairi was under, and free Riku.

Xehanort had already called down Kingdom Hearts and disappeared into the sky. Riku looked up seeing the heart shaped moon rise on the world in front of them, and blot out the sky. He only kept his eyes on it for a moment though, as Sora was a bigger concern, he was brighter than the moon at the moment.

Riku had noticed it when he watched Sora’s clash with Xehanort alone. When the three of them were fighting together, Sora was as strong, and carefree in the middle of battle as always. When he was isolated and fought Xehanort alone, he seemed weaker.

No, that was not true. Riku would not believe it. He knew Sora was not just strong simply because of his friends, he could be strong on his own too. He refused to believe that about Sora, because he wanted Sora to believe in himself.

Sora stopped for a moment doubled over in pain. Riku thought it was just a bad hit he had taken
from the last fight with Xehanort. Until he noticed that Sora’s hands were crossed over his chest. His body rocked forward as he tried to hold himself together. Riku saw bits of light escaping from him and dispersing into the air. He had only seen this kind of injury once before, the time he fought with Xion.

No, that was not possible. Sora was stronger than he was, and he was not a replica, or a nobody. Sora was light itself. He would hold himself together just fine. When Sora turned around his face was streaked with tears and sweat, but suddenly that face cracked into the same smile that Sora always wore. Riku pretended not to notice, because his smile was too bright.

If this were a story you’d be the hero of this world, Sora.
You’re the one who always makes others smile so easily.
So don’t give such a pained smile.

Mickey looked at all the guardians of light gathered. “Aqua, Riku I’ll need both your help if we’re going to push Xehanort out of this world.”

“Understood.” Aqua said raising her keyblade.

Riku stood exactly where he was standing in the memory, just like before he stayed silent.

“Wait, I’ll do it.” Sora said, stepping in front of Mickey and looking up at the moon.

“What?”

“Kingdom Hearts is a much bigger threat. Let me handle Xehanort, while you guys keep it shut.”

Kairi was the one to speak up. She grabbed Sora by the arm. “If this is the final battle we should do it all together one last time. What’s the point of all that training I went through if you’re fighting alone in your final hour?”

“No, I know what I have to do.” Sora brushed her off.

Riku took a step forward. He thought it was odd, usually Kairi understood Sora much better than him. He was the only one though who knew in this moment that Sora was trying hard to stand on his own, struggling with all of his heart. He was trying to prove the world wrong that his strength did not just rely on his friends. “Let him go, Kairi. His heart and his mind are made up. We don’t always need to be right next to each other to be together, as long as we’re believing in the same thing.”

What Riku and Kairi both believed in more than anything else was Sora. Riku knew that now in the present, because Kairi had told him, his fingers wrapped in hers. He started to wonder though, if what they were both believing in was really Sora.

There was Sora the hero of light, who saved the day by believing in his friends, who seemed to overcome any obstacle all on his own with pluck and determination.

Then there was Sora, the reckless, brash youth they had known growing up who was always
napping, and never paying attention when Riku tried to lecture him.

They were both the same person and they had spent so much time with Sora growing up, so how could Riku have possibly lost sight of him?

Riku reached out slowly for the image of Sora’s back, as the light of the memory faded away. At the same time, he saw someone in purple and plaid rush forward. The boy had spiky hair like Sora’s, but his was combed back. Riku had seen him once, or at least he had seen the image of him on the other side of a split apart traverse town.

Neku rushed forward trying to grab at Sora that was walking away. He ran straight through the image, passing through it like a hologram, throwing his arms around it. “Sora, are you stupid?” He fell through Sora and hit the ground. Neku simply got up again and tried to touch the memory one more time. Even though he knew it was pointless, even though he knew it would change nothing, he could not contain himself. “You’re always worrying about everybody else, you think it’s your job to save all of them, but why won’t you let anybody worry about you?”

Neku stood up once more time and swiped at the air as if he was trying to pull Sora’s hair. His hand just passed straight through his head. “What’s your problem? You selfless, selfish jerk!”

Riku wondered why he could not say such a thing to his best friend, to stop him from fighting on his own when he needed to hear it the most, but a near stranger who had only met Sora once could say it.

*Sora, you’re so bright.*

*Your rectitude is bright enough to blind.*

*I’ve always wanted to live the way that you did, following your heart.*

*But I can’t… I can’t do things your way, can I?*

He wondered what love was.
Kairi told him that he always felt too much.
That he was the most sensitive out of all of them.
That he only knew extremes.

*Sora.*

*Sora could fall into any darkness and swim his way out.*

*That stupid grin he’s always wearing. He’s the best teacher I could ever have.*

*Sora can find the brightest part of anything, and pull off miracles like there’s nothing to it.*

*It’s pretty hard not to smile around him.*

*Yeah, well Sora’s a little… hahaha.*

*I try too hard to be the role model. It’s more fun to just listen to my heart. Which is Sora-esque.*

*More than anyone else, I want to see Sora.*
Ansem told him that Sora was a unique existence. That his bonds with others were so strong he could even drag Xion, Roxas and Ventus back to reality and that he could give them a place to belong just by believing in it enough. He made Sora sound magical. He made Sora sound like the hero that Riku had always wanted to be.

Kairi was right. Riku did feel too much. He could not be friends with anybody like Sora could. He always tried to make up for it instead by proving himself. There was nothing he would not do, for those who were really his friends. He had no idea how to put half of his heart into something. He always loved them with his whole heart. Both of them. There was no difference to either love in his eyes, because Riku only knew how to love something with his whole heart.

He did not know what love was. When he loved Kairi, he thought of that girl’s cold body that he held in the clocktower in Neverland and told her he would see her soon. He thought of reaching up at the moon. When he loved Sora, he thought of that boy’s smile, the boy who always clung to him asking him about what world that Kairi came from. He could not categorize these feelings or rationalize them with his mind.

But as he thought about it right now, he realized there was probably such a thing as loving someone too much. Love is blind was a romantic notion but… he had forgotten about a part of Sora. A part of someone he cared about. Their flaws were just as much a part of them as their features.

Riku did not want to believe that Sora was flawed like he was, that Sora could make mistakes like he did. In the end though it just was about himself, wasn’t it? Riku realized in his latest moment of self reflection. It was not something as simple and warm as believing in Sora, it was just that he did not want to believe in himself so he tried to put all of his belief in Sora instead.

Riku looked away from himself to realize that Neku had already gotten ahead of him, chasing Sora into the next memory. He had almost forgotten why he had come here. How self absorbed could he get?

“Look at you, you’re in pieces.”

The memory resumed in the final bout between Sora, Donald, Goofy, and Xehanort. Riku saw Xehanort wielding the Kye-Blade, slicing right through him as he was just a holographic image in the middle of the memory. He looked down and saw he was floating. Underneath his feet, there was a field with a magical circle drawn in the center of it.

Sora and Xehanort were exchanging blows in the air above the platform, while Donald and Goofy acted as support. Sora was fighting wildly. His normal acrobatic style that balanced magic and
strength almost perfectly was gone. Riku had never seen Sora trying so hard to win through strength alone.

Xehanort was in the body of an old man, but he weaved and dodged gracefully as Sora swung in the air with his Shooting Star Keyblade using everything he had. Riku had always thought Sora was the most creative fighter out of the three of them too, as he was the first one to figure out how to shift the form of his keyblade into other weapons. At the moment though he looked too desperate to even think from swing to swing.

Everything so far had gone as Xehanort planned. *You will be broken in battle after battle.* That was Xehanort’s words, and Sora looked like he was playing the part, of a broken hero trying not to fall apart at the end. The missing pieces of himself were falling away with each swing of the blade.

“What a pitiful child. All you’ve done so far is follow the path I set up for you. Your role is over now, why do you continue to fight?”

“Shut up! I will defeat you. I don’t care what your plan is, that’s what I’ve chosen.”

“You’re fighting until you’re basically in pieces. You choose to do this? You just didn’t want the others to see you break apart, that’s why you chose to fight alone didn’t you? Is this just your last hurrah so you can finish me and then disappear?”

“Everyone’s here with me.”

“You still don’t understand a thing. Did you really think you could make up for those deficiencies in your knowledge, just by smashing yourself against your surroundings? Absolutely futile. You gave too much of your heart away to others, perhaps in the past you could simply save the day by believing in the power of your heart, but there’s not enough heart left now.”

“My heart is strong!”

“Sora. Allow me to make it so simple, that even the directionless fool can understand it.” This time he parried Sora’s blow and then his hand, glowing with dark magic reached directly for Sora’s face. He dove straight down and slammed Sora right in the center of the circle. “The only reason you were strong in the first place is because you imprisoned Ventus, Roxas and the puppet in your heart and leched off their strength. Without them you’re nothing.”

Sora’s body bubbled over with a liquid as black as ink. It rose up from his eyeballs and his open mouth, dying his body black slowly, until his entire body was swallowed up by the darkness. His eyes reopened again as he stood up unnaturally like possessed by some other force, and his glowing red eyes fixed themselves on Xehanort.

“Look at you, even the famed hero of light falls to the darkness so easily. Rage, Hatred, you’re fighting me with those now, but unlike Riku you’re not even smart enough to realize it. You’ve just clumsily fallen into the dark, you directionless fool.”

He disappeared into a black mist and rushed Xehanort. The entire battlefield was awash with light and it burned Sora’s skin. When he fought this time, he did not so much swing his Keyblade as he did claw madly at the air like a beast.
Xehanort floated behind him opening up a keyhole as he did and disappeared into space. When he reappeared far above, he looked as he always did, utterly above everything machinations, fate, he observed from afar like he was the one in control. “See, this is why even the light like yours will fall to darkness. The most noble of heroes will always have darkness in their heart. Light can’t exist in an impure world such as this one.”

Sora had no idea what he was saying though, he was out of his mind with rage. He appeared behind Xehanort and began to slash madly at his back again, finally catching him off guard. He clawed, again and again, ravenously trying to reclaim the light that Xehanort took from him.

Sora jumped in front of the moon-like Kingdom Hearts and his shadow grew the longest. Tendrils of shadow grew out from his body, like smoke trying to escape him. He dove down slamming Xehanort straight into the center of the circle for a finishing blow.

Riku could not believe it. Sora harnessing the power of the darkness.

When Sora stood up once more the darkness had washed off of him. Donald and Goofy helped him off the ground, and he saw the platform they were fighting on was surrounded by thirteen high chairs.

Xehanort relaxed from the highest chair, as he flexed his fingers and bombarded Sora once again with light. Then, standing up he jumped from the chair in front of the moon of Kingdom Hearts. He raised up the keyblade, summoning light once more. As he did, the darkness began to eat away at the surface of kingdom hearts, until it was covered in a pale shadow of its former self.

“It ends here and now.”

Sora raised his keyblade to block but it was too late, the dark energy overwhelmed him, eating away at him. It traveled up the cracks of light that were left in his chest and tried to rip out his heart. His keyblade was thrown aside and he floated in the air, utterly helpless.

Sora heard his heartbeat in his ears. He was tired of this feeling, helpless and utterly drifting. He was not going to disappear or fall apart, the ties between him and everybody else were too strong. He just needed to pull back a little bit, on the chains that were pulling his heart apart at the moment.

“I’m sorry guys, let me borrow your strength one last time.”

Sora resisting the beam of darkness, was joined by Donald and Goofy. He dispersed it, and carving a symbol of a crown on the ground beneath his feet summoned a beam of pure light and pierced straight through the dark that was Xehanort.

“Wait… It looks like the idiot won somehow!”

Neku cried out. With the light of the battle faded away Riku could now see where Neku was, he was floating in the air just like him. It was like peter pan had sprinkled both of them with pixie dust.

“Sora saved everybody. He beat the bad guy! That was the final boss shouldn’t it be over by now? How did this happen?”
Riku wondered if Neku was always this talkative.

He met Neku’s eyes finally. Neku looked up and saw white hair. “Josh? No, it’s not…”

They had recognized each other. Sort of.

“It’s my fault.” Riku said holding his hand over his chest, without Sora there it felt like one third of his heart was missing. “Sora saved everybody, but I didn’t save him.”

Riku did not want to see what came next in the memory. It would only hurt him. He had repeated that phrase over and over again as he refused to deal with his grief over Sora. He did not want to realize he loved Sora, because Sora was gone and those feelings had nowhere to go.

People looked away from the darkness for a reason. What good did emotions that were only negative do him? He did not need this grief, this rage, especially when the rage was only pointed towards himself.

Yet he needed to go ahead to chase Neku. He had no idea how he could make Neku stop chasing Sora’s dreams, Sora had not listened to him when he tried to stop him during the Mark of Mastery Exams. However, he did not want to lose another person to the darkness. Riku would dive in head first if that was what it took, until he caught up to Neku.

When they all returned from Scala ad Calem together, even though Xehanort was defeated and it all seemed earlier suddenly they all fell. In greek mythology, as Riku knew it anyway, three hags sharing one eye saw the future and decided exactly when a human’s life would end by cutting a string. That was what it reminded him of, as Roxas, Xion, and Ventus all suddenly were on the ground. Sora had pulled back and borrowed the power from their hearts he had given back to them in order to gain the strength to defeat Xehanort. Now they all lacked the strength to even stand.

Suddenly, everything was falling, like the strings had been cut by a pair of uncaring scissors. Even Terra who had been standing strong with the help of Eraqus heart, suddenly collapsed onto Aqua. It was only the girl’s strength that was holding him up.

Sora still holding onto the Kye-blade looked up at the moon of Kingdom Hearts as it faded away. Perhaps he felt something in common with that fading light. Riku did not know what he was thinking at the moment, but he wanted to know.

He wanted to know how Sora felt. If Sora felt the same way. If he always wanted to be with Riku, too. If Sora really did want to come back. If he wanted to go back to the islands and be three again, instead of one, and one, and one.

Sora turned the keyblade on his own heart. Just as he did when Kairi’s heart was trapped in his chest.

Mickey was the first to notice. “Sora, listen the power of waking isn’t to go chase hearts around.”

Sora shook his head. “It’s fine. Just like last time, I’m going to put the pieces back together in the final world and all of us will be back before you know it.”
Just like that, before Riku could even process what was going on Sora turned the key on himself and disappeared. Riku watched the key fall to the ground in slow motion. He had only realized Sora’s disappearance, when he heard the empty clanging of the metal key.

If only Aqua had not rushed into a battle all alone when she was still weak from being in the world of Dark, forcing them to rip out Ventus’ heart in an emergency.

If only Riku had not reassured Sora that there was nothing wrong with him when he was worried about the strange cracks on his body.

If only Axel, Kairi and Sora did not lose their fight to Isa and Xion, causing Roxas to rip himself out of Sora’s heart and possess the lone body left on the battlefield in another emergency.

If only they had waited until after the battle to slowly restore Xion and Roxas’ hearts in a lab, where it would have been safe.

Ienzo had told him as much. *Within Sora’s heart there are three compartmentalized “boxes” each containing the heart of another. One box holds Roxas. Another holds a second heart that has been with Sora nearly as long. The third has held its heart for much longer. These hearts have melded with Sora’s and no longer have voices of their own. Any attempt to mechanically extract them could prove as dire for Sora as what caused him to become a Heartless in the first place.*

When Sora did no return, Kairi and Riku looked at each other and then the empty space in between them. Both of them could see what was missing. They reached forward each of them grabbing on to an opposite end of the Kye-blade’s strange, ‘x’ shaped hilt.

Sora had gone to the final world. Both of them had faint memories of a timeline that had never happened, where when Sora fell apart the two of them were able to hold them together. The lingering attachments to this world were as strong as chains. They were his closest friends, if Sora gave himself up to save Xion, Roxas and Ventus than they needed to be the ones who saved Sora.

As they raised the keyblade in the air the two of them disappeared once more. Riku felt a strange warm sensation in his hand and looked down to see he was holding onto Kairi’s, as they both dove down to a familiar and yet unfamiliar place.

Riku broke the surface of the water. When he put his hand on the surface, what was liquid once now solidified. He pulled himself out of it through sheer force of will. He looked back and saw Kairi, and dragged her out as well. He looked up, but he was not sure entirely that the direction he was looking was up.

They were in a place where the sea and the sky both reflected one another. It was hard to distinguish one from the other, as Riku saw clouds rolling on the surface of the water he thought if he jumped up he did not know if he would suffocate in the clouds or drown in the water.
He saw on the ground Sora was lying there translucent. Riku stared, trembling, at the outline of his friend. He looked like he was made of cracked glass. Riku had never seen Sora look so fragile.

This time was different, around him there were three people lying there just as empty as Sora was. Xion, Roxas, and Ventus. Those were the three boxes in Sora’s heart. He had come to the final realm to try to reassemble the pieces to put the right pieces in the right boxes.

Riku looked at the sea all around them. He took another step and saw the surface of the sea ripple. Suddenly, floating up from the sea, he saw Sora’s bodies. They were all in the face down dead man’s float. He saw them bob up and down with the water. It was like it had rained Sora, and now his corpses were floating there in the sea.

Kairi moved first, walking over the sea. As she walked she looked like pure light in front of Riku. She knelt down to one of the floating Sora’s, and touched her hand against his cheek gently caressing it as she lifted his head. Suddenly that Sora broke into pieces.

They did that over and over again, finding the Sora’s and breaking them into pieces. Riku looked down and saw that underneath the water, or perhaps the sky he was standing on there was a mirror world. In that world Sora was moving around and doing the exact same thing, collecting the pieces of himself to put into the boxes of Roxas, Xion and Ventus.

However, when they were finished they discovered there were no pieces left for Sora. Kairi and Riku desperately looked everywhere, but as they did they began to sink. The more they struggled against the surface of the water the more they sunk into it. Until suddenly the world around them shattered like it was made of solid glass instead.

Riku saw light again, too much light, he was going to blind. He reached out desperately and grabbed onto Kairi’s hand, pulling her back with him. When they woke up together in the waking world once more, still holding hands, both of their eyes searched for Sora.

Roxas and Xion were both on their feet now, being supported by Axel one child for each side.

Ventus woke up again and he insisted he did not need help and instead moved to the other side of Terra to help Aqua hold him up.

Sora was back too. He was still lying there on the ground. Kairi walked over to him, and put Sora’s head in her lap. Riku sat next to them. He did not feel like he belonged in this scene. All he could do was watch.

“The wind feels so nice. It’s spring on the islands right now. But, it won’t be spring there forever.”

Kairi reached out and stroked Sora’s hair.

“I finally got to fight alongside you. I finally understood you a little bit, what it mens to live like you do, following your heart, not running away, not being left behind.”

Sora’s breathing against her was so shallow. She could feel it still, along with the soft beating of his heart. He had to fight it, he had to keep fighting so he could come back for their sakes. They were almost as the end.
“All things return to darkness. Every living thing will one day disappear. We can’t just destroy the world and remake it in pure light like Xehanort wanted. We have to live in this flawed world stuck in the dark, but it’s because of that we can decide what we want.”

Kairi wanted to shake Sora awake. She was afraid though, that if she touched him any more than this he was going to shatter like the little glass Sora’s they had seen in the final world.

“I understand now why I was so tormented by my lack of strength. I wanted to protect you. I wanted to do it for my own reasons. When I thought I might never see you again, something else became clear to me- what I wanted most.”

The strength of their bonds were still here. That should have been enough to hold him together. Kairi remembered the time in the past that Sora became a heartless. She threw her arms around him, because even as a heartless he was still himself. He returned to her.

“And So, I made up my mind. I decided that I would continue to protect you. I want to be our strength. I know I’m not the only one who can do this but that’s okay. My life will be worth living if it’s for this reason. Even if it all ends in darkness.”

What was so different this time? Why wouldn’t Sora come back?

“Thank you.”

Kairi’s face scrunched up. She tried to hold back the water that was leaking from her eyes. She was enough like water already. She did not need to cry.

“Don’t cry, Kairi…” Sora finally spoke up.

“You’re right, what am I doing? We still have to go to the beach. Sora, please get some rest. You saved everyone this time. We’re all going to the beach together.”

Sora was getting sleepier.
His eyes felt heavy.
Riku watched as they slowly closed. Sora was blown away to some place they could not reach, like a far off memory, or a scattered dream.

Neku rushed forward and tried to grab Sora by his collar. “Really, you’re going to let it end this way after all of that? Wake up! Someone like you is too much of an idiot to die!”

“Sora doesn’t lie at the end of the tunnel, there’s nothing to be gained by chasing this. Just stop and come back with me.” Riku was now standing in front of Neku. The rest of the memory was frozen in place. Riku reached forward and grabbed Neku by the shoulder. “Sora’s gone now…”

It was the first time he had admitted it out loud. The words were too heavy. He felt his body empty out when he said them.
Neku looked back up at Riku. He saw a pair of black bat wings floating behind Riku’s back. “What are you doing here… a reaper?”

Suddenly, all around them noise began to spring from the ground. Riku pushed Neku back and summoned his Keyblade, the large metallic Key returned to his hand the moment he called for it.

“No, wait those are noise! You can’t fight them alone!” Neku said, as he reached forward and grabbed Riku’s hand. The world of Sora’s memory disappeared and suddenly they were on the streets of Traverse Town once more.

“…”

“We’ve reached the middle game already. Now… how to create an upset?” Sho snapped his fingers and suddenly several holographic pieces appeared on the board, surrounding the two pieces that Joshua had left.

“You know, Sho. This virus, chaos theory whatever you call it you can play with it as much as you want, but the gift of chaos still isn’t enough to turn a pawn into a queen.”

Joshua said in his usual haughty manner.

“…”

Joshua continued on taking Sho’s silence as permission. “It would seem I’ve discovered your plans for the grand finale, and the fact that you were merely buying time.” Joshua stood up from the board. As he did so, his shadow extended out from under him. While the Josh standing in front of Sho was the same too smart for his own good teenager, his shadow looked much taller and suddenly began to grow more massive as wings grew from his back. “Are you really going to challenge me head on to a fight like this? What are you up to?”

“Why? Whatever do you mean?” Sho said, watching with a cat like grin on his lips. If he had a tail (which he sometimes did when in noise form) it would be swishing back and forth with the whimsy of its owner.

“I could just end this right here, it’s the obvious loophole in your plan. I didn’t agree to any rules saying we would only fight by proxy, and there’s no reason for me not to clip the wings of your fledgling rebellion right here.”

“Ah… There’s a reason for that.”

“Is that the best excuse you can come up with? You’re resourceful enough to challenge me some other way than head on.”

Sho leaned over the table, his head bobbing with excitement. He looked a bit disappointed that Joshua had not taken his turn yet, as if he was actually invested in the result of the game they were
just both playing to distract the other. “What? Don’t say you actually respect me.”

“I’m judging you by the results, not the content of your character. You’re lying.”

“Hahahaha… ‘Lying’ is a little harsh… the numbers don’t lie! But maybe my chief reason was a little overly sentimental. I wanted to see the face, of my overly smug kid boss again.”

“What about that boy Vanitas? Did you fuse with him just to send him after Riku and Neku?”

“I just thought he looked lonely. So, I decided to become friends with him. Isn’t that what your dumb and aesthetically ugly game is supposed to teach us? We’re better together than we are alone. He and I are even more together than most people now, I always was an overachiever.”

“I see. You’re not even capable of telling the truth.”

“Hahaha Come on, Boss. Even you feel lonely sometimes. I’m sure we could get along, we’re pretty similar. A negative times a negative is a positive after all.” Sho said, continuing on with his obvious lie.

“Is destroying the so-called Omnipotent really all you want? But, I’ll gladly foil your idiotic plan.” Joshua kicked his chair back behind him. Just to be dramatic. His real world body shifted into pure light.

Sho just watched, legs crossed still. The self-satisfied catlike grin had not left his face. His lips widened to show more of his fangs. “You really are a twisted one boss, is this the only way you know how to deal with your subordinates? No wonder nobody likes you.”

”Who cares if a drone like you likes me or not?” Joshua only said it because he knew his inferiority and inability to climb his way up would annoy Sho. He used telekinesis to float the game board away so it would not be destroyed in the fight. Destroying one of Sho's precious art sculptures was one thing, but it was rude to interrupt a game. As a lover of games there was no way he could do that. “You set your ambitions too high, Sho. In the end you’re just another drone. A drone can never get the wings of an angel, simply by wishing for them.”

“And here I thought we could be friends.” Sho said mockingly, as he stood up finally. Behind him six wings spread, but the moment they were brought into this world they shattered. From the shattered pieces pitch black noise rose up.

The battle was over in an instant, just as quickly as it had ended last time.

Joshua had his foot on Sho’s chest, exactly the same as Michael when he kicked Lucifer out of heaven.

“You bore me. In the end you’re the same caliber as Sanae. Six wings aren’t enough to hold my interest.” How would you like to die? In a pile of trash again? Run through by a reaper’s sickle. Checkmate.”

“Too bad taking me doesn’t end the game. You forgot one thing. The king is still in play.”

“What? Sora?”

“The black king, not the white one.” Sho correct. Suddenly Joshua looked down and saw he was stepping on Sho’s shadow. Their two shadows were overlapped. From his shadow a boy emerged,
covered in a black and red suit. Before Joshua could react he was stabbed from behind. He looked and saw a pitch black Keyblade had pushed its way into his heart and was slowly turning as its end stuck out through his chest. His eyes rolled back, and he saw that Vanitas was holding a keyblade with a red hilt.

“Now you can join them, bounding in between consciousness and unconsciousness. Hey, hey, Boss? Who do you think has more darkness, the heart of Shibuya this world, or your heart? I worked hard, but I could only find 3/7ths of the pieces my informant asked me to find so this keyblade is only half assembled.”

Sho got to his feet once more, dusting off his torn clothing.

“Hey, they say the higher rank you are as a reaper the purer your heart becomes. All that darkness won’t go away though right? Darkness never goes away. The brighter the light, the bigger the shadow it casts. Your shadow must be even bigger than Shibuya.”

Sho answered his own question. He picked up his hat once more and put it on his head. “Flawless, calculations and a beautiful finish. Game over.”
“Get behind me.”

Riku said as the floor around both of them began to bubble with blue liquid that oozed its way out of the cracks in the floor. In tandem with the animal shaped noise that surrounded them, unversed rose up and began to dart around. Riku saw many pairs of red eyes glaring at him with an inhuman glow.

He put a hand in front of Neku to push him away, but Neku was not in the mood for cooperation. He pushed back. “You don’t get it, these are noise. You can’t fight them alone.”

“Well unversed aren’t affected by normal weaponry. I’m the only one with a keyblade here.”

“Why are you acting so high and mighty. You’re hitting things with an oversized car key not the legendary sword excalibur.”

“I… I don’t even own a car.” Riku could not think of a better comeback. Why was he so bad at this?

As the two of them were pushing back against one another, the area where they could stand got smaller, and smaller. They keyblade graveyard, the memories of all of his friends, they were eaten up by the noise and unversed in tandem. Overflowing emotions, and overflowing thoughts, they poured out uncontrollably.

The room was going to be flooded with the thing that Riku hated the most. Emotions.

From the deepest part of the pool in the center suddenly a hand burst forth. It was a pitch black hand covered in a tattoo. All five fingers flexed and then the hand’s owner brute forced his way into the dream, leaving cracks in the air around them one of them reaching all the way up to the sky above as he did.

“3 is to point of the 1. 4 the 1-5-9 are 2. 6-5, 3-5! 8-9, 7-9! 32384 62643 38327! And… perfect!” Sho Minamoto pulled himself out of his shadow on the ground and entered in the dream. He smiled at Riku and Neku already cornered by noise and bared his fangs like a predatory cat. “Now that I’ve broken the composer, let’s break his favorite toys.”

“‘Toys?’” Riku said, confused.

“Ugh, Pi Face. Look it’s number one on the list of people that I least want to see right now.” Neku said as he escaped Riku’s hand. Then, he realized what Sho had said. “B-broken? Joshua? No way man. He’s probably just playing dead or faking it to be annoying.”

It was not that Neku did not believe it, but rather he could not. Joshua and him had still promised to meet up at the Hachiko statue. There was no way he could disappear. Joshua was a liar, a cheat, but Neku could not imagine him breaking a promise like that, or… perhaps it was because Neku did not want to imagine it. He did not want to think about Joshua disappearing again.

“What did you do to him…?” Neku asked, feeling his voice beginning to shake. “Hey, what are you even doing here? Is it your fault I’m down here? Hey, hey!” He started to charge at Sho but suddenly
Riku grabbed him from behind again and held him back from the fight.

“Who gives a digit?”

Was Sho’s simple answer.

“It has nothing to do with you anymore. You’re out of the equation.”

Sho arched his back, throwing his hands out at his side. His expression went mad, his eyes bulging, his jaw hanging open with drool falling from his teeth. As he stretched his back to its limit suddenly, as if to prove that he had properly stolen the power he was after, six white wings bloomed from his back. They started just white plumes before they grew into full wings reaching out towards the sky. At the same time six other wings shaped like bat wings appeared beneath them like shadows. Six pairs of wings, for a total of twelve wings, and this time when Sho spread them they did not shatter like before.

He always wondered why his wings always shattered when he tried to take flight. It was probably punishment for a reaper who was not qualified to rise any higher, trying to crawl above his station. Now with Joshua’s wings supporting him, he was keeping them stable.

“Who doesn’t have enough wings now, huh?” Sho pretended not to care what others thought. It was a part of his whole image of being a devious loner and a misunderstood genius. Clearly he had taken some of it to heart though, when he ended up not being able to crack Joshua’s mask at all even though he had been planning for that confrontation all along, but the composer got under his skin effortlessly. He was really sick of it. Who wanted to play games with someone who controlled everything and always had everything work out in their favors.

“Stop it, you can’t fight him or the noise on your own!” Neku said as he struggled against Riku.

“You can’t fight.. If Sora were here, he wouldn’t put your life at risk.”

Sho weighed in, as his wings stretched. From the angle it looked like his wings were bigger than the sky, but that was just a trick of the light. “He’s right! Cooperation is garbage!”

Sho said as he beat all of his wings at once and rushed down. His target was Neku, as he did not even know who the white haired boy was, but at the last moment Riku slammed his hand on his shoulder summoning a silver armor to cover his body, and pushed Neku out of the way and threw himself forward to take the brunt of the attack. Riku flew back, falling into the blue goop with a loud splash.

Riku felt himself sinking again. Just like that dream that started off this whole misadventure. He was always sinking. That day on the island, he held out his hand waiting for Sora to take it while the wave rose up behind him. If only Sora had taken his hand that day, even if they were in darkness then at least the two of them would have been together.

He always wondered why Sora hesitated that day. It did not matter because the wave was coming anyway, and soon it was going to sweep everything away. Not having to think, not having to feel,
perhaps he longed for that. He had no idea why but it was always him who was sinking in these waters. Sora could swim in darkness without even getting wet, but Riku was the one who felt like he was struggling with every fiber of his strength to swim and all he could manage in the end was barely staying afloat.

He was always being thrown in darkness. He was always sinking into it. Why did he have to be the one to take this path? Why did he walk this path all alone? The time he was swept away by the wave and Sora did not take his hand. The time that he held onto Kairi’s body and spoke to her but she did not respond because her heart was missing. The time that he took the blindfold and put it over his eyes to suppress what he felt like was a sea of darkness pressing on his chest all at once.

*Why do I always jump headfirst into water?*

*It’s cold.*

*It’s too deep.*

*I’ll drown.*

Neku saw Riku’s body getting covered in the ooze. He had no idea what was going on, with this unversed stuff, and all this heart junk, even with Joshua’s crash course in his brain the world building still did not make a lot of sense to him. However, if Sho was behind this then something foul was afoot. He heard the sounds a raven’s mocking laughter in the background. *No, perhaps something fowl was afoot.*

Neku was so glad that Joshua could no longer read his mind at the moment. *This is why I always have to be quiet otherwise nobody would believe I’m cool.*

Neku ignored Sho and rushed jumping straight into the odd liquid that ran up to his cargo shorts. He grabbed Riku and started to trying to peel away the blue and red ooze that was covering his body as if to devour him.

“Hey, wake up!”

“Why is it always… me… short end of the stick… so frustrating… trying so hard… why can’t I be a hero too?”

*What would Hanekoma say?* Neku thought. Whatever his version of Hanekoma’s advice was, it was going to be a lot less gentle and a lot more crass.

“Who cares about being a hero, who cares about saving everybody? You gotta save yourself first, idiot! The world begins with you!”

Riku had never been able to forgive himself for not being as Sora was, not as bright, not able to make as many friends. He tried so hard to save Kairi on his own he would have done anything for her, but in the end it was Sora who saved her. It was not like it was a competition, deep in his heart Riku had felt loneliness from both of them, because during that first adventure he had been separated from his two most vital people. However, in the end Riku wondered why he was even there in the trio, he had failed to prove himself useful, he only put himself in danger, why would they even want
him around?

He always wondered why it was he took the long road. He would do anything when he was younger to get off that boring island, a small piece of dirt floating in the water, but Sora had soared away from Destiny Islands and went on to become the chosen hero of light while Riku tried to swim away through the ocean and he only sank. He was a rock after all he could not swim. It was like this entire time he had been sinking. He swam in the darkness which both Kairi and Sora were far above.

He was thinking all this time that the darkness was not needed, but what if it was? Sora was such a powerful light, but in the end his decision to fight Xehanort alone had caused him to lose. Light was great and all, but without shadow it was just incomplete.

A balance. That was why he cared about Sora, that was what they had been at the start of their friendship, when they were around each other the two extremes, the carefree goofball, and the serious one who overthought everything were able to balance each other out.

He finally realized why he kept jumping into that water. It was the only way to learn how to swim.

Riku summoned darkness around him to burn away the goo that covered his body. Neku jumped back to see Riku step out from the flames, in untouched radiant silver armor. Neku exhaled. Riku had just been floundering a moment ago, how did that guy make his recovery look so cool?

Neku looked down and saw he was wearing no armor, except from the stat boosts his incredibly trendy plaid outfit would give him. Joshua should have dressed him in gothic lolita it would have given him higher stats. “I guess you did have a point about me not being able to fight, I don’t have any pins for psyches. Guess we’re both too stubborn for our own good.”

Riku thought stubborn was a good way to put it, stubbornness was the negative form of heroic determination.

Riku reached into the gap between his armor and put his hand in his pocket. He threw a few pins to Neku. “I don’t know what a psyche is really, but I’m guessing instead of magic they use psychic energy in this world in order to make imagination manifest? Then here, the last time I saw this guy he dropped all of these.”

Neku looked through them. “Oooh, free money.” He crushed it in his hand and deposited the yen coin in his pockets. Now he could afford to eat ramen on the way home. He did not trust any of the food in Sanae’s cafe. “Yeah, these are useful. Let’s go then, we’ll make a temporary partnership between the resident bad boys to bring this guy down.”

“I’m a bad boy?” Riku repeated, clueless.

Sho stopped hovering in the air and touched down to the ground. Just like last time he got a major power boost, he looked like he was here to play instead of trying to erase them. In fact rom the way he bared his fangs he looked like he might want to eat them. “What are you going to do with those wings? Someone like you was never meant to fly.” Sho could not come up with a good enough math related insult, so he just repeated back Yoshiya’s insult to Riku. It was on his mind. Still. “Wings like that are filthy with darkness.”
Sho dove down once more. This time the two of them together blocked his blow. Neku next to him was using pins between his finger tips, glowing with energy. Sho’s bare hands both of them pitch black now were enough to crack the barriers Neku was erecting. Riku looked to Neku with confidence. “How can you support me… when I’m… so…”

He remembered what Kairi said. She asked him if he planned on atoning for the rest of his life. If that was the only reason he was fighting now. He had not been able to give her an answer. He still felt guilty, he still felt like he needed to atone, for being the one who survived instead of Sora. Kairi probably did not think about it that way.

He should listen to Kairi more. As smart as he was, she always seemed to know better than him.

“I’ve been so wrapped up in myself that I never saw. I never realized how anybody felt. Sora… Sora’s gone… I’m not Sora and I never will be. But… I’m going to protect these people.” Riku raised his keyblade above his head, in an instant the metallic and smooth key returned to his hand. “Not in atonement. Not because it’s what I think Sora would do. Not even because I am a Keyblade Master. This is my own wish, chosen for myself.”

Dark wings spread out from his back. The bat wings of a dream eater. The emblem of the dream eater burned itself once more on his back on a purple flame melting it into the armor. He only had two wings, and he had fallen far more often than he had flown. He was Icarus if Icarus fell into the ocean because he rushed towards the darkness, rather than the light. It was not much but he was going to fight.

His wish was always the same. From the beginning all he had wanted was to protect these people.

He knocked away Sho using the strength he called on from the darkness once more. When Sho flew back, his wings spread and he took flight in the air. Neku launched himself off of the ground immediately after him with psychic energy.

Riku held out his hand, and took Neku’s in the air. He spun Neku around him and threw him at Sho. Neku’s entire body glowed with a red psychic energy that exploded upon impact. As he fell back down Riku caught him. Neku placed a hand on his smooth keyblade, causing it to glow with the energy of the pins he was harnessing.

Riku flew up once more and rushed Sho in the sky. The two of them met, bare hand against blade. Sho was strong enough that his skin felt like steel, Riku took a hit to the stomach that he failed to block and it felt even worse than steel.

He saw Sora’s hand reaching toward his as the wave came up behind him. He always wondered why Sora did not take his hand that day, but that did not matter anymore. The next time it happened, he would grab onto Sora’s hand and make sure he did not float away.

“Prepare to be iterated!”

Riku understood his math lingo perfectly. “I’m not going to repeat a single one of my mistakes. That’s why I made them in the first place, to learn!”
“Yeah, the only thing that’s going to repeat is your defeat!” Neku called out.

Riku brought the keyblade above his head and slammed it down with everything he had, Sho blocked by crossing his arms in front of his face. The showdown (or perhaps the Shodown, Neku felt bad for making that pun too) was so intense that sparks were flying from his keyblade.

Riku stared into Sho’s eyes and saw nothing at all, not even a reflection.

*What a lonely person,* Riku thought.

When Kairi arrived in the land of departure, Namine was already waiting for her. The usually passive and quiet girl suddenly grabbed at her clothes to get her attention. “Vanitas ran away. It’s all our fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Namine.” Rei said behind her, immediately getting defensive. “Vani is probably just one of those brats that runs away for the attention. It might be my fault, but it’s definitely not yours.”

He was as eager to protect as always. Namine was usually soft, like the soft rolling sounds of the rolling waves she was named after, but at the moment shook Kairi back and forth to vent out her worries. Kairi thought in slow motion as she was being jerked, remembering all the times she had been dragging Riku around and manhandling him, that Namine really was her nobody after all.

“It is our fault. We hid him from Ventus. We should have just told Ven and everybody else to their faces that he was our friend, and we were going to protect him even if they didn’t want him on the island, but we kept him like some kind of dark secret instead.”

Namine was still guilty, from those days that she told Xion and Roxas that they did not deserve to exist. That she let DiZ do whatever he wanted, because nobody’s supposedly did not have feelings or existences of their own. Moreso than that she also knew what it was like to be somebody that everybody just ignored. Even that girl who dressed in white and shone like a soft light, could understand what a shadow felt like. Everybody ignored shadows, and even worse they stepped on them. Nobody ever admitted how close shadows were to them.

Kairi put her hand over Namine’s to calm her down. “Then let’s go, do you know where he is?”

“It’s strange, I can feel him but the world he’s in is split in two.”

“...I went to a world like that. We couldn’t reach the bottom half with a Gummi ship though.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” Namine let go of Kairi and then waved her hand in the air with flourish. As she did threads of darkness appeared between her fingertips, she pulled on them until those threads were woven into a curtain of darkness that was pulled back on her whim opening the doorway to a corridor.

“I kind of… forgot you could do that.”
Namine smiled sheepishly. “I’m not like Roxas or Xion, I don’t have a keyblade or anything but I make do.” She picked up her sketchbook. It was opened to the most recent page, on it was a drawing of Namine, Rei and Vanitas. Namine had been so happy to draw it, because it reminded her of the time she drew Roxas, Axel and Xion after seeing the memory of them all together. She closed the book and folded it under her arm. “It’s okay, I can follow him, the chains formed between people don’t break that easily.”

Rei stepped up behind her and grabbed her on the shoulder. “Wait, it’s dangerous to go in a corridor of darkness wearing just a white dress.”

It was still a possibility that a person could lose their heart if they were not protected against the darkness. They had been using them so liberally lately, it was almost like they had forgotten.

Namine turned around with a carefree smile. “Then, you’ll just protect me, right?” She was not used to smiling like that. This might have been the first time smiling had been so easy for her. In the past they were sad smiles, given because she wanted to be kind to the people she had to convince to not exist so she could reassemble Sora’s memory. This time she could smile because for the first time there was someone she could rely on. She was not all alone anymore.

Rei stumbled backwards, his expressionless face suddenly reddening in his fluster. He suddenly rushed ahead of them, pretending what he was feeling was determination instead. “Then, I’ll go first. Namine you stay close to me… you can even hold onto me if you want… just so I can protect you. That’s the only reason!”

When they emerged out of the corridor of darkness following Namine’s connection to Vanitas, they stepped out in a room with glass floors. Kairi looked down and saw some fish that looked exactly like the kind of tropical fish that swam around her islands.

When she looked up she saw the room was flooded with the strange creatures that attacked Roxas, and unversed. She raised her Keyblade, but Rei was the first one to move. Even with only half a Keyblade in his hands, even with a broken sword he was eager to fight. He had decided to fight to exist in the end after all.

“I’ll hold these off. Kairi, do you know anything about them?”

“Umm… I think something something creativity? That’s what Riku said when he went into nerd mode, and Axel and Isa were pretty useless until they fought those things together.”

That was not a lot of information to go off of. Rei jumped in front of Namine, deflecting one of the monsters with a swing of his broken sword. “I think I’ve got it. Namine, you have to fight with me this time.”

Namine looked stunned for a moment. “I don’t have a keyblade.”

“If creativity is a force of power, then you’re the strongest one here. Come on, if you’ll play white witch one more time, then I’ll be your dark knight.”

Namine looked at her sketchbook. She flipped through the pages and tore out a drawing throwing it onto the floor. As she did, the scribbles from the page clawed their way out of the second dimension
and into the third and joined by Rei’s side, attacking one of the noise and causing it to break apart and disappear.

“He’s so attentive. When I’m right next to Riku it’s like he hardly notices me.” Kairi sighed, and then ran on ahead.

When she made it to the center where all the noise and unversed were emerging from, she saw a white haired boy. Kairi’s heart stopped for the single moment she thought it was Riku, until she noticed the boy’s hair was wavy with loose curls falling from his forehead rather than straight. The boy was smaller and thinner than Riku, he had his arms in t-shape as hung there in midair.

There was a black and blue substance all around the boy, it moved like a liquid but it had teeth. The boy was struggling against it as the blue liquid covered his body. It bubbled up from his neck and tried to wrap itself around his face. He desperately gasped for air like he was being suffocated, and clawed at his neck.

It began at his chest and then spread out like an infection. When it finally covered his head, a pitch black helmet formed around his face making his white hair, and his lilac eyes disappear behind it. Kairi recognized the veins of darkness that were appearing all over the boy’s body, it was the same suit of darkness that Vanitas, Rei and Riku had all worn once.

It was a disturbing scene. If Kairi had to describe it, it was like somebody’s skin had come off and that skin could move and slither on the ground all on its own and it decided to become another person simply by having the skin wrap around the body that was underneath until the original body disappeared.

Kairi rushed forward following her intuition on where Vanitas was. She grabbed with one of her bare hands trying to pull the boy out of the liquid substance that was covering his body and choking him. She had no idea if she could get rid of it with her bare hands, she had just recklessly thought to try.

She tried to rip him out but it did not work, and in her frustration Kairi raised her Keyblade in her other arm far above the boy’s head. She brought it down with all her strength, hitting the boy and trying to dispel the darkness.

The boy finally started to move as if puppeteered around. Kairi brought her keyblade up and fought his forced movements alone. Every step he took, more of those creatures emerged from the black substance leaking out of him.

He opened his hand and summoned a keyblade, pitch black with a red guard. Kairi met him blade for blade, but the way he swung it around it was like he was not even trying. Somebody else was moving his body to fight halfheartedly.

Blow after blow Kairi remembered her training to get the advantage. She twisted her last blow ever so and applied all of her strength to knock the keyblade out of his hand and send it flying. She raised her keyblade up once more, swinging in the opening she had brought herself.

Finally, as she struggled against him she heard the sound of glass shattering. The helmet broke once
more, and she saw a lilac eye appear underneath.

She grabbed him by the neck, fingertips glowing with pure light as she pulled him out burning away the darkness that surrounded him. When Joshua landed he simply looked up at her, a smirk formed on his lips. “Hello Kairi, I’m Joshua.”

“You’re awfully casual for someone who looks like they almost got eaten.”

Joshua sat up. As he did he looked at his chest, his old white shirt had been stained pitch black from the black tar like matter that was leaking out of his chest continuously. Rather than horrified Joshua just looked curious. “I’ve been accused of not taking things seriously in the past, but I have my reasons.”

“They are?”

“Don’t you think it’s interesting to observe somebody struggling against you with everything they have, and then seeing them just fall short because their everything still isn’t enough? I have to give them a chance at least.”

“That sounds vaguely villain-ish.”

“My apologies, allow me to play the role of the helpless victim.” Joshua put his arm over his head, posing dramatically. “Thank you fair maiden, your light has banished away the darkness.”

“What happened to you?”

“Well, I was suffering similar to the way Jesus suffered on the cross.”

Kairi got the feeling this guy was going to keep talking nonsense. “Wait, Joshua. Riku went to you.”

“Hey, don’t get ahead with the plot I still want to talk about the symbolism.”

“Do you know where Riku is?” Kairi said, boldly ignoring him.

“He’s fine. He’s strong you know. He got strong all on his own without you. Besides, the final piece isn’t in play yet.” Joshua said as from the corner of his lips ore of the black sludge dribbled out. He saw a scar in front of him. That girl believed Riku did not need her. He could not help but pull on the stitches, he loved to play with strings after all.

“Riku’s not strong. He’s weak in all sorts of ways, he’s sensitive, and he’s always hurting. He thinks he has to be strong otherwise I won’t want him around, but he’s weak and that’s why I won’t ever leave him alone.”

“Hm. How interesting.”

Joshua dipped his fingers in the black sludge. He drew a keyhole. He might not understand the worldbuilding and mechanics of all this multiverse defender of light stuff yet, ut he was a quick learner. She needed a door to get where she wanted to go.

He sat up once more. As he reclined, the back of his shirt was utterly torn apart. He had scars in
cross shapes on six areas on his back, while three more pairs of wings were spread out from his back lying on the floor all around him. The dark liquid stained the pure white feathers of the wings and made them too heavy for him to move them.

Kairi raised her keyblade and aimed it at the floor. The golden outline of a door opened, just like the time she had rushed to Larxene’s aid. She jumped through it. Suddenly she was standing above the keyblade graveyard again.

She was standing on nothing at all so she fell down. Riku who had been beaten back and cornered by Sho looked up and saw her fall. He held his arms open and caught her.

Kairi looked and saw she was being carried bridal style, she had landed in the arms of Riku wearing silver armor. His usually dour expression changed, and he seemed to smile just from seeing her. His helmet disappeared, and she saw his silver hair fall down, glistening just like his silver armor.

“You really are a knight, Riku…”

“Huh? Why do people keep saying that?” Riku, charming on accident, said as he looked up at Sho above them. Neku jumped into the air and created another shield, blocking Sho’s blow. “Where did you come from?”

“Who cares? I’m going to show up at the last minute and save you just like Sora always did!”

“Mm, no this is definitely Kairi style.”

Riku set her down.

Neku looked at both of them, smiling. “If Joshua were here he would say, when a boss grows way too many wings in these kind of games, that’s the time for them to be put down.”

Sho dove down and came rushing at Riku. In an instant Kairi appeared in front of him and blocked his blow. She spun around with all of her strength to push him back. Kairi raised her keyblade in the air and allowed magic to course through her. From the barren battlefields, green vines grew up and wrapped themselves around each of his limbs.

Kairi looked to Riku.
Riku looked to Kairi.
They both crossed their hands over each others until they overlapped. Riku’s hand still burned with dark energy, while Kairi’s started to burn with the light.
They raised both of their hands together, darkness and light.

Kairi had not been in the dreaming realms with him, so Riku could not exactly match the same kind of combo attack they did with Sora. Instead they moved at the same time for a finisher, leaping up in the air together and swinging down at the same time, one slash of darkness and one of light.
“Take the darkness.”
“And return it to light!”

They said in unison. Their twin slashes light a fire on the ground underneath them, one half black flames, and one half regular orange flames, together each half burned the shape of a heart in the empty earth. The noise and the unversed burned away.

Riku looked up to see the cracks in the sky had spread. A piece of the sky fell down. Sho, in his heavily injured state only laughed. “Anybody can drop an apple, I’ll drop the whole freaking sky.”

It was the last thing Riku heard before he woke up.

♛

Neku, and Riku both woke up at the same time.
Kairi was already standing.
Joshua stood up wiping off his shirt. “Really now, this is my favorite shirt.” He opened up his cellphone casually. From the ceiling, a column of pure white light emerged burning away the black ink, and the noise and unversed that Namine and Rei were still fighting.

Kairi raised her keyblade causing a beam of light to shoot out, she dragged it against Sho’s shadow. His shadow severed from his feet, and took the shape of Vanitas once more.

Sho collapsed to his knees. He was not looking at Joshua or anybody else in the room. “Awe, looks like the kids stole your spotlight. You didn’t get to show up at last minute and be the hero after all, old man.”

He looked to Sanae Hanekoma who was standing in the doorway.

Joshua shrugged. “This wasn’t for your usual nonsense. This was for him, wasn’t it Sho? Your one and only teacher.”

Minamimoto Sho loved math more than anything in the world.

Even if a problem took him hours he always felt elated solving it in the end. There were a lot of things he did not understand, people, the way you were supposed to talk to them, the expressions you were supposed to make around them, how to make eye contact, how to share emotions between friends.

He understood almost nothing about the world outside his room when he was younger, but that was fine. Because he could always make the numbers fit together perfectly. His parents ignored his difficulties, the way he could not get along well with others, how terribly he did in any other subject, and told their son he was a genius.

He loved math more than anything in the world. He worked hard to get into the math program he
desired in university. He was a gifted child after all. The only thing good about him were his gifts, it seemed like the only thing he could make go well in life were numbers.

When he made it through his first semester of class he found out there was nothing good about him after all. What had made him stand out when he was younger, was gone already by the time he was eighteen. He understood high school math and before it just fine, but college math eluded him.

He loved math so much, but math did not love him.

The promising scholarship student turned out to be a washout. He failed his first semester and ended at the bottom of the class. He had been too afraid but at the end of the class he finally found the words to ask the professor for help.

The professor told him no matter how many times he retook the class he was never going to learn the material. That some students were just not meant to learn. Don’t blame the teacher for the student’s inadequacy. He said.

Sho dropped out.
When he did his parents stopped praising him. They realized their son was not a genius but troubled child after all, he was simply troubled. They stopped helping him with his rent soon after that.

Sho wanted to become an artist instead. He had no tools to make art, so he stole junk from the local junkyard. He put his statues together with careful calculations working on them with obsessive precision.

Nobody wanted them.

After he ran out of money he simply stopped buying food. He thought he was living as a starving artist at first, but he was really just starving. The trash man stopped coming to collect his garbage, so Sho kept it in his apartment in the bags hoping he might find some more junk for his sculptures one day.

When his hunger became too much to ignore he tried to call his parents again. They did not even pick up the phone. Out of options he wandered the streets until he saw a particularly empty looking cafe.

“Oh, hey you’re my first customer all day.”

A man in sunglasses at the counter said. When he noticed how thin Sho was, he quickly disguised his sympathy with a carefree smile.

“Hey, this one is on the house for my new regular customer.’

Sho ate the bland tasting sandwich. He immediately knew why nobody came to this cafe. Yet at the same time he realized he had never shared a meal like this with someone before.

As Sho chatted, Hanekoma listened. “Well, maybe you don’t understand numbers in a mathematical way, but you understand them in an aesthetic way.”

It was the first time Sho had felt someone listened to him.
He walked out of that cafe feeling less empty than before. When he made it home he went looking for his sketchpads. He wanted to show Hanekoma at least a little bit more of his art. Suddenly his stomach twisted and he vomitted up the meal he had just eaten.

When someone was on the brink of starvation, a full meal was too much for their body to handle. Shoe leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. He just wanted to rest for a little bit. When he opened them again he would go see Hanekoma once more. He would talk about his art and be understood.

What a sad life he had led. He was led to believe he was more special than anybody else, and that was the reason he was alone. The real reason was much simpler. Nobody wanted to be around him.

He tried to think of memories as he felt his consciousness fading away, but none of them came to mind. He was going to starve here in an apartment full of garbage, never having left a mark on the world. Minamimoto Sho’s eyes closed for the final time. When he woke up again he was in the UG already.

That first day he did not find a single partner. He ran for his life feeling like he would die. He tripped and fell when he was about to be cornered by some noise. At the same time, a door opened to the cafe he had fallen in front of.

Sho looked up and saw the Wildkat Cafe. Somehow he had found himself there again. He was like a stray cat showing up on his doorstep.

Hanekoma held out his hand. “Nobody wanted to partner up with you, huh? Must have been rough. I can keep you company for a little while at least.”

At the end of the week he became a reaper. He had no interest in going back to that world filled with garbage. As a reaper he was finally able to live up to the potential he had been told he had all his life. Noise listened to him better than other people ever had and they completely followed his tactics.

He racked up points making especially high numbers, but even that was not enough for him. He wanted to go higher and higher. He wanted to achieve even more, because his first life had been so wasted and he was thrown out so easily like trash.

He wanted to become somebody irreplaceable in this world. He stopped caring about the rules and went outside them. He moved to the RG again and chased down the composer with a gun, even when he cornered him in a back alley and shot he saw the bullets stop midair.

The difference between them was like night and day. Hanekoma told him once that angels were on another plain of existence. He met Joshua’s eyes once after Joshua had come to claim his proxy.

Fear filled his body and he ran away. He had worked so hard to make his second life worth something, he wanted to assign a number to himself and give himself worth. He did not want to throw away his second life as easily as his first one had gone.

He ran until he made it back into the UG, and collapsed once more. This time Hanekoma found him again. He always ended up at that same cafe, like a lost cat returning home.
“I cheated. Are you going to balance out the rules old man?”

“If cheating’s the only way you can be on even ground then what’s wrong with that?” Hanekoma said.

Sho remembered.
In his most desperate hour he had stared at the test of another and just copied down their work.
He just wanted to stay in the class another week and learn the material.

Hanekoma held out his hand to Sho once more. It was a sight that Sho was completely unused to.
The sight of an open palm, being offered to him and him alone.

“Here, let me show you how to cheat in style. Joshua’s ego is so large he probably needs someone to
drag him back down from his throne every once in awhile.”

In the present time, Sho laughed. A bitter and empty laugh.

“You know I only taught you all those things to use you as a tool against Joshua.” Hanekoma said,
lowering his glasses. The overly casual man with the unbuttoned, not tucked in shirt looked serious
for once.

“That’s fine. Even if I was using you and you were using me, it’s the closest thing I had…” Sho
grabbed onto his fading arm. “It just didn’t feel right. The one who threw open the door to darkness
to this world was me, but you got punished for it. I figured if I the villain made a huge fuss, then the
hero would show up to defeat me. Then I’d set things right.”

“Sho…”

Sho’s vision blurred. “It’s not right. The teacher shouldn’t be blamed, for the failures of the student.”

Sho collapsed to the ground. His hat fell off his head. His hair fell all over his face. Sleeping like that,
he looked oddly childlike in a way he never would when he was awake.

Hanekoma looked to Joshua, who was currently more worried about his ripped apart shirt than
anything else going on in front of him. “Where’s my, Welcome Back?” Hanekoma said, with a tilt of
his head.

Joshua simply looked away. “Why would I say that? Saying that might imply that I missed you.” He
shooed him with his hands. “Why don’t you disappear a little bit longer and see if I miss you then.”

“I get falsely accused, erased, banished, I had to sit at the final world all day talking to stars, I
exhausted myself getting back here and I don’t even get a welcome back. Jeez. Well, that’s life I
guess.” Hanekoma pushed the glasses up back to cover his eyes. “In spite all of that it’s still
wonderful.”

“Yeah, we get it you like to give advice. If you want to help others so much have you considered
helping us clean this place up?” Joshua said, as stingy as ever.

Kairi walked to Vanitas’ side. Riku was right behind her.
His shadow of a body became three dimensional, but even as he took a form he was already falling apart.

Kairi put her hands on her hips. “Why did you run away? Did you want attention that badly? I thought you were done playing second fiddle to the bad guy.”

“Hey, Riku you should just end me.”

Vanitas said, smiling even though there was nothing behind his teeth but darkness because he had not formed his throat and tongue yet. He coughed for a moment and spit up inky blackness, before opening his mouth again formed.

“I think if I disappear I can go to where Sora is and fill the missing pieces in his heart. All I’ve ever wanted is to be complete, I was going to fuse again with Venny-boy and take control but… my standards have lowered since then.”

Riku raised his keyblade in the air.

“It’s fine, I want this. On my own I’m always going to be incomplete. The only reason I have a face to begin with is I’m leaching out of Sora. I’m just a thrown away part of someone’s heart, but finally I can do something good.”

Riku stopped his keyblade just at Vanitas throat. “The reason you fused with him was to trick us into destroying you with a keyblade wasn’t it? For the small chance you might be able to return to Sora if we did.”

Vanitas made no response, only gurgling noises as more ink gathered at the back of his throat.

Riku threw the keyblade away.

“I want to see Sora again more than anything, but I won’t do it. Not this way. Not again.”

Before he could do anything else, Rei appeared in front of him and pushed Riku to the side. “Good, because if you did anything to my friend I would have pummeled you.”

Namine stood next to Vanitas once more. The pieces of Vanitas’ face fell apart and the dark reflection of Sora’s face was no longer standing at them. Namine did not hesitate at all, she reached into the darkness and pulled out a single blue unversed, it looked like a cute tiny creature in its basic form. She held it between her arms. “That’s okay, you can hide away in my shadow as much as you want. One day when you’re strong enough, all three of us are going to stand together.”

Just like the picture that Namine had drawn.
The unversed were made of nothing but unpleasant emotions, anger, jealously, loneliness, but Namine embraced them all the same.
Joshua looked at everybody who had gathered. “Well, I can deal with the rest from here. So how about all of you get out of my house?” He said in a rude way, pointing towards the exit.

Riku picked up the barely awake Neku, and lifted him up over his shoulders. As Neku was dragged away, he reached out at the image of Joshua, but it felt like he was trying to catch up to someone in a dream, the more he reached for them the further and further they got away.

When everybody had cleared out from the room, before Joshua could deal the finishing blow to erase Sho, suddenly a raven swept down from the ceiling.

The raven landed digging its claws into Sho’s shoulders. Its talons dug in, they were sharp enough to cut straight through the fashionable jacket he was wearing. Suddenly the raven spread its wings and its wings grew much bigger than the bird. They became pure darkness, creating a portal for Sho to fall back into.

Joshua pointed. “Okay. Genuinely did not see that one coming."

“You’re probably lying about that too.” Hanekoma said.

“Hey, it’s more interesting don’t you think if an unknown antagonist swoops in at the last minute. At least our little birdie friend was polite enough to say bye be.”

The bird appeared again, just in time to swoop down and collect the hat that had fallen on the floor in his talons. He flew away with another beat of his wings, exiting through a portal of darkness.

Joshua merely gave a bemused smile. “This territory is supposed to be off limits, but those portals of darkness are a hassle. We should hang a scarecrow up or something.”

Joshua looked at Hanekoma.

“What?”

Hanekoma said.

“Well the scarecrow is the one without any brains in the wizard of oz, and your fashion sense is scarecrow-esque. All those stripes you’ve been wearing lately.”

“It’s plaid. It’s in style.”

“It was until you started wearing it anyway.”

“Now you’re just being mean.”

When he said goodbye to everybody else, the first moment that he and Kairi were alone Riku collapsed against a wall. He had done it, he let the darkness in, he threw open the door after finally closing it shut after the fight with Xemnas.
The darkness always came with a cost. His body was racked with pain. Still he looked to Kairi, the person more important than himself. As long as she was alright he would be fine. Their last conversation was unfinished, purposefully so because Riku ran away from it.

As he was forced to relive his worst memories he had come to realize something. He should just say it, those terribly unpleasant emotions that he always hid under the surface. Every time he used the darkness, no matter how deeply he buried them they were dug up.

“Kairi I… I’m sorry. I should have been the one to disappear instead of Sora.”

When he looked into her eyes he saw her eyes were watering. She quickly leaned against him trying to hide her face. It was odd, Kairi was fluid like water itself, smiling one moment, angry at him the next, laughing at him the next, doing something bold and reckless the next, yet all of these flowed into one coherent person. She was so adaptable, always moving herself around her stubborn boys who knew so much less than her about the important things, like feelings.

He had seen Kairi make so many faces, like she was always overflowing with so many emotions. Yet, the sight of her crying was so jarring to him. It was the last thing he wanted to see.

“That’s what I was thinking, all this time… the reason Sora disappeared was because of me wasn’t it?”

Riku flinched. The light was almost blinding. They were both thinking the same thing. They were both blaming themselves.

“Sora thought he had to protect me, that’s why he fought alone. Me, the useless girl from the islands, always struggling and failing to keep up with you two. Maybe… I should have just stayed back and waited like I always do, that’s the only thing I’m good for.”

Kairi collapsed against him. It was like a wave collapsing against the shore. He held firm against her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

“Riku, please tell me the truth. In the end… when you nearly gave yourself away to darkness, when Sora plunged the keyblade in his heart. Every time after that… was I worth saving? Why do you two always fight so hard for someone like me? Why am I… the reason he fought alone. Nobody needs me. They all-”

“Kairi. That’s not true. I don’t believe that. Please, know I don’t. And besides…”

It became clear to Kairi then as Riku held her so tightly.
He needed them both like he needed water and air, he could not live without them.
No matter what, tearing one of them away was tearing away a piece of himself because Riku always put all of his feelings into the people he loved.
He would lose what mattered to him most.

“I’ll always need you.”

As darkness swelled in his heart, Riku felt himself overcome with desire. The feelings that he had pushed back for so long. The desire to be the hero. The desire to be in her eyes. The jealousy of
being forgotten. The desire to be needed by them, as just as he needed them. The boredo of being stuck in the same world. The desire to see the stars with them.

He had always pushed those feelings away, because they were dark, because they were negative, because they could only lead into bad things.

Strict Riku, as rigid as the earth finally gave into desire. He put his hand against the wall and pushed Kairi back. His lips met hers, and he could still taste the saltiness of the tears that had run down her face.

For once, Riku did not think about anything at all.

♛

Joshua and Hanekoma sat on the rooftops overlooking the city. They were the type of people who preferred high places after all.

Several days had passed since then, and Joshua had gotten his shirt cleaned and sewn up. He supposed the rest of the mess had been sorted more or less too, but his shirt was the most important part.

Hanekoma touched the back of his neck, and casually stretched. “Looks like Ikebukuro got erased. All the other districts too. It’s like this whole world is only made up of Shibuya.”

Joshua replied in a deadpan voice. “Oh, Ikebukuro oh no. Whatever will we do? As far as I’m concerned, Shibuya’s the most important city in the world, we make enough culutre for the whole world.”

“Well that’s one positive way to look at the city you almost destroyed.”

“Do you have to remind me of that every five minutes?”

“You might forget otherwise. You have a fickle personality after all.” Hanekoma scratched at the back of his neck. “Shinjuku’s here, but it’s not connected to this city. It’s like it’s own seperate world.”

“So it would seem.”

“Never thought we’d see an actual inversion occur.”

“And so close to home.” Joshua said, flicking his hair casually.

“Right in our own backyard. Pretty unsettling to have noise popping up in the RG. Was it Sho’s tampering or did something else happen?”

“And then there’s that crow. He must have had some reason for using Sho the way he did.”

“What is he a teaser for next time? We’ve got some crazy cats heading our way.”

Hanekoma’s hand traveled to his chin.
Joshua mirrored the exact same motion.

“Which makes this the calm before the storm. There’s no telling what will become of Shibuya… but I suppose that’s their problem not ours.”

Joshua shrugged. His hands looked entirely empty as he threw them up in the air.

“What about Neku?”

Joshua turned away immediately digging his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He drew out a single piece, a white king, from chess or whatever ancient game he had been playing on the board with Sho. “He served his purpose, but I don’t need him anymore. Now that Sora’s here with me, I have the most valuable piece in my hand.”

Hanekoma did not look at Joshua as he walked away. He assumed the boy would storm off in a show of light and feathers just like he had last time. Hanekoma simply looked out to the Hachiko statue where Neku was waiting just like he had in the past. “That’s a troublesome friend you picked there, Phones.”

Neku was waiting by the Hachiko statue as always. When he was able to move again it was already too late and Joshua was gone. He woke up alone once more. He was always waking up alone when Joshua was involved it seemed.

He waited at the Hachiko statue, wondering if Joshua would know to meet him here. On the slimmest chance that he might be waiting too, Neku had sat there all day.

His phone buzzed in his pockets. He flipped it open.

“Hello.”

“Neku? It’s Shiki. Are you OK!?”

He remembered the face of the girl in glasses holding Mr. Mew to her chest. “Me? Yeah… I’m fine.”

“What a relief! It’s just one of Mr. Mew’s seams ripped… and I got this feeling something terrible was about to happen.”

“Nope. Just another day in the RG.”

“OK. Sorry for freaking out. Speaking of Mr. Mew… I’ve gotta buy some stuff to stitch him up right now. Wanna come with?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Well, I was planning to hang out with Kairi again but this time I want her and that boy to be able to spend time together instead of making him carry our bags the entire time.”

“Bag Duty? Okay, sure, why not?”
“Great! Are you at the Hachiko statue again? I’ll just head there, talk to you soon!”

“Sounds good.”

Neku closed the phone.

A few minutes later he found himself being dragged away from the Hachiko statue by Shiki. They crossed Scramble crossing and went further down into the shopping districts of the city. The two of them met up with the white haired boy Riku had met in the dream, and the red haired Kairi.

When Shiki introduced them, she pushed them together causing them to look awkwardly at one another. Eri asked if Riku was single if he wasn’t dating Kairi, causing both Shiki and Kairi to glare at Eri.

In another part of the city Namine and Rei who had followed Riku there to go clothes shopping were off on their own.

Namine picked a dress off the rack and held it in front of her. “How does this look?”

“Namine? That’s like every color, ever.”

“I thought I’d teach you and Vanny that there are more colors than just red and black.”

Rei looked down at his entirely black outfit and felt embarrassed. He crossed his arms and looked away.

“Hehe.”

“Huh? Was that a laugh?”

“It’s just you always make the cutest look on your face when you’re pouting. I want to draw it.”

“No way that’s embarrassing…” Rei said, but he stopped for a moment. “Wait, I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you laugh.”

In another part of the city, Axel was in a panic in the children’s clothing section. “Isa? What’s fashionable these days? I don’t know what kids are supposed to wear! I’m so behind on the times! I thought I was cool.”

“This is why I said we should make a list ahead of time.”

“List this, list that, do you always have to be so controlling?”

“Well, it’s usually one of us. If it’s not you then it ends up being me.”

“This is no time for accurate self reflection! This is an emergency. What if those two don’t make any friends because nobody likes their clothes?”

“Then their best friend would be a man who doesn’t know what the kids are into these days and is no longer hip.” Isa said coldly as he watched Axel continued to fuss over the clothing racks.
“I’m hip! I’m way popular!”

In another part of the city, Elrena and Lauriam were sitting in front of a music store. Unlike everybody else who had carpooled here, they had just happened to be in the city at the same time. If there was a party though, they were the exact kind of people who would crash it uninvited.

Demyx stormed out of the music store in a huff, holding a poster in his hand. “This David Bowie guy totally stole my look!”

Elrena sighed, not even looking at Demyx. She did not want to be forced to acknowledge his existence. “You know if we started running now and didn’t look back, we could probably ditch him.”

“We can’t ditch him, he’s our Demyx.” Lauriam said in an even voice.

Elrena’s face twisted into an unpleasant expression. “Why did you suddenly have to become so nice after getting your heart back? This is exactly why hearts are no good.”

Lauriam merely batted his eyes, and gave a flirtatious smile. “Hmm? Are you saying that because you don’t want me to be nice to be anybody but you.”

“Well, kindness is wasted on other people obviously.” Elrena said.

“Wow, jealous much.” Demyx joined in.

At that point Elrena lost her patience grabbing the poster she shoved it right in Demyx’s face so she would not have to look at it any longer.

♛

The crow landed in the Villainous Vale. The crooked, and hollow castle stretched all around them. In the dark room, the crow finally came to rest after navigating a maze of thorns to get here.

Standing where the crow had landed a moment ago was a man. He picked up the hat he had so carefully carried here, and carried it with both hands. “I’ll find somewhere to put this Brain, I wouldn’t want to ruin your favorite hat.”

Not when it was all that was left of him.

It took a few days before Sho was in a stable enough condition to wake up again. What awaited him at the foot of his bed was a man that looked like a tall shadow.

"Let me tell you a very, very sad story. You had the chance to become the main character of your story, but instead you were cast away from its pages. If you’re gonna cry, now’s a good time. The world is made up of many more stories than just yours. You can find your place here with us."

He paced back and forth as he excitedly told the prelude to whatever story he was planning to tell.
Sho blinked.

“You make even less sense than I do.”

The man turned his head as if oblivious. It had made perfect sense to him. His expression fell. He was only trying to be encouraging. He thought someone just as outside of everybody else's wavelength as he was might understand. A futile hope. He guessed STEM students were never meant to understand ARTS students. “Talking is so hard, life was so much easier when I was a silent protagonist.” He said, in a much quieter voice than before drained of all emotion. He took a bow instead folding his hand over his chest. “You should meet Mally. You’re the first one who wasn’t boring.”

The man sighed, even more emotion draining from his face. When it looked like there was not anything else to lose, suddenly he became lesser, more negative.

“So many different worlds, but the people are all the same.”

He sighed again. For dramatic effect.
He leaned forward and touched his own cheeks, signalling to the whisker marks on Sho’s face.

“Another cat… Well, she got mad at me when I got rid of the last cat. She only likes black cats and black birds, I don't get it... maybe because they're symbols of misfortune..”

Suddenly from above a raven attacked him. It clawed at his face, but he barely flinched. “Awe, Diablo stop it. Just because you’re the favorite you always push me around…”

After he finished swatting the bird away, carefully, because he would be punished if the bird lost a single feather he looked up at the empty castle before him. He left Sho behind on the bed, He needed to go report back in now. As he walked, the man covered his hand with his mouth thoughtful. He disliked talking to others, usually when he did it ended in failures like that. Which is why the only space he was truly free was inside of his own thoughts.

His mind was distracted, dancing, he dug around in his pocket and pulled out a piece he had swiped from the chess board before leaving.

"Why fight over the king? The queen is the strongest. They're getting the chess metaphors all wrong."

He played with the single black queen piece between his fingertips, throwing it up into the air and then catching it.

As he walked he remembered.
He had never gotten to tell his story, Sho interrupted him.
How rude for a new friend to do.

“The story, the sad story, mmm no I’m bored of telling sad stories. Then what should I tell next?”

END

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