kiss me three times (and we'll face our fears)

by driedupwishes

Summary

If only, Riku thinks, his chest clenching painfully as his heart twists itself into knots with the familiar ache of longing. He knows why they’d both gone on separate missions, knows that the realm around him would not have been kind to the other boy, and yet the thought persists. If only-

“Sora,” he breathe, the name like a prayer as it falls from his lips, unstoppable as the boy himself.

(Sora, he thinks, and he’s afraid.

He’s afraid.

But – only for a second.)
this is a love letter. it's probably the angriest love letter to anything i've ever written, fueled mostly by spite and frustration and at least a gallon of my own bitter tears, but. it's still a love letter, to riku and sora and the kid i was when i first played the games.

and now, it's a love letter to you all as well. enjoy.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Riku had felt it, in the moment where Aqua had stepped forward earlier – more so even than their surroundings, she puts the taste of darkness in his mouth the same way Ansem and Xehanort always have, and he’s been fighting back against the taste of it the same way he’s been fighting back against her attacks, like if he can just overcome the taste of stagnant, tepid water collecting on the back of his tongue, he can overcome her as well.

He’s losing the fight, both fights, and he chokes on it, the cloying taste of his own past mistakes as the twisting funnel of Heartless scrapes against his shoulder. He rocks back on his heels, twists to face the oncoming attack as it sways back away from him, trying to assess the situation, trying to see if he’s weakened the monsters at all.

He hasn’t. He’s barely put a scratch on them, for all his best attempts at freeing King Mickey, and he feels his breath catch in his throat as the thing spins and sways, drifting around in a dangerous little circle as if it’s taunting him. He’s strong, stronger than he’s ever been, but for all the bravo he’d put on at Yen Sid’s tower, he doesn’t think he’s strong enough to do this alone.

If only, Riku thinks, his chest clenching painfully as his heart twists itself into knots with the familiar ache of longing. He knows why they’d both gone on separate missions, knows that the realm around him would not have been kind to the other boy, and yet the thought persists. If only-

“If only,” he breathes, the name like a prayer as it falls from his lips, unstoppable as the boy himself.

(Sora, he thinks, and he’s afraid.

He’s afraid.

But – only for a second.)

The funnel shudders, as if it’s heard him, as if it knows who he’s thinking of, but before he can do much more than tighten his grip on his keyblade and ready himself for the next set of blows, the world around them shudders and ripples.

A shift in the air, a flash of light from above, and the taste of ozone blooms on his tongue, driving everything else away. He sucks in a breath, feels the way the power of Light crackles under his skin, and faintly, ringing in his ears like a secret, he hears the sound of a lock clicking over, clicking open.

The darkness around them trembles, pushing back against the light that spills down from above, and in front of him the funnel of Heartless twists and knots itself into an even tighter spiral, but nothing
can stop the wave of power that bleeds out from above, nor the shockwave that echoes out as the boy he loves drops from the sky above and lands at his side, water droplets dancing in the air as Riku finally manages to twist his head and look.

Sora’s beautiful, as he always is, hair windswept as the light from above catches the highlights years of being in the sun have given him, and even though it isn’t a new fact, it’s one that strikes Riku just the same as he watches the other boy land, knees bent to absorb the force of his fall, body bouncing right back up so that he’s balancing his weight on his toes like he always does when he’s preparing for a fight, all without a second’s pause. His head tips up, dark lashes fluttering so that Riku can only glimpse slivers of his bright blue eyes for a moment that feels like it lasts years before, suddenly, he’s hit with the full force of that gorgeous gaze.

Sora beams at him, bright and powerful, the taste of his presence chasing the stagnant taste of rancid water from his senses so that the next startled breath he sucks is all Sora – sunshine and ozone and salt, heady and warm and, above all else, familiar.

“I made it,” Sora crows, delighted, as if he hasn’t done the impossible and unlocked a door to the Realm of Darkness like it’s nothing. He sways forward a little in his exuberance, drifting toward Riku in the same moment that Riku starts to drift toward him, but before Riku can find himself with the armful of boyfriend that he wants, the funnel of Heartless builds in the space across the shore from them, growing taller and wider as if to push back against the bearer of Light in front of it.

Oh shit, I’d almost forgotten about that, Riku thinks, breath catching in his throat as Sora catches his gaze with a grinning glance, the other boy’s expression the embodiment of you know what we should do? His heart lurches, a cocktail of fondness and excitement tripling its pace, and he finds himself answering with a look of his own, lips curling into a grin that he hopes carries his answer of I like the way you think clear as day.

They move as one in the next second and the power of Light flooding through his veins is only topped by the rush of affection and pride he feels for the boy next to him, as they both lift their arms above their heads and call on the keyblade they’d made together, once upon a dream.

Light builds and fractures, rocketing through an array of colors like light through stained glass as it dances over the keyblades that shimmer into existence above their outstretched hands, the two forms of Light and Dark metal twisting and dancing around each other before they come together with a soft, hushed and echoing click.

Sora reaches up, in the same moment Riku does, and their hands come together, not quite on the combined keyblade itself, but just below where the grip of it floats. Their pinkies catch, curling around each other on instinct alone as ahead of them the Heartless seem to sense their imminent doom and build for one last charge, but Riku doesn’t bother looking at them, isn’t concerned at all with their odds now that Sora’s at his side.

Oh god, Riku thinks, as a breathy, airy kind of laugh bubbles out of Sora’s throat, barely loud enough to hear even as close as their bodies come to be, their hands becoming even more entangled as their combined power lifts them up and swings them in an answering charge at the whirlwind of Heartless heading their way.

Oh god, he thinks again with his heart lodged full of light, burning in the hollow of his throat, I’ve missed this.

There’s a flash of light, a surge of power thrumming under his skin, and the funnel of Heartless crumbles under their assault, neatly cut to nothing but sparkling dust and drifting hearts as Riku and Sora touch back down in the water at the shore’s edge on feather-light feet. Riku almost stumbles
anyway, the force of his own racing heart knocking him forward as Sora presses in, victorious and close at his side, and there’s a moment, hanging suspended between them, where their eyes meet and the rest of the world drifts away.

And then, of course, King Mickey falls to a skidding stop in the sand with a muted crash, his small body limp and still, and Riku feels the world crash back into high definition all around them as his heart lurches in his chest anew, this time with fear.

He’s moving before he can think not to, running and leaping to make sure the King’s okay, and much like he could in their earlier clash, he can feel the moment wherein Aqua reappears, like ink tracing, cold and staining, down the length of his spine.

He can feel her charge, can feel the force of her emotions, projected and twisted as they are in this stupid realm of nightmares and hatred, and he knows, even as he tries to stop it, that he’s no match for her attack on his own, not like this, not half twisted around on the balls of his feet instead of his toes-

But it doesn’t matter, because Riku isn’t on his own for this fight. Not anymore.

Light bursts and flares, like a spell Riku has no name for, and sparks kick in the air around them, energy and power crackling just under his skin like fireworks going off in his veins. He breathes, sucks in a breath between barely-parted lips, and in front of him, a beacon of light, a bastion of power and righteousness, Sora has caught Aqua’s keyblade against the guard of his own.

Oh, Riku thinks again, his veins alight with a fire that has nothing to do with the force of Light Sora carries within him and everything to do with how much he simply adores the boy before him.

It’s probably an inconvenient time to want to reach forward and pull Sora into a kiss, but it’s all Riku wants to do anyway. The urge inside him only grows, sparking to all new heights as Sora strains back against Aqua’s yellow-eyed rage, the muscles of his arms bulging as he plants his feet and heaves, until the woman tumbles back through the air the way she came.

There are two options that lay before him in this moment: say something to keep his mouth busy or give into the desperate surge of emotion and want bubbling beneath his skin like a tsunami tide and kiss his reckless boyfriend stupid.

“How,” he breathes out, feeling the corner of his mouth tug into a lopsided, awe-struck kind of smile as Sora bounces forward on his toes and twists effortlessly to meet his eyes. “How, Sora?”

Sora glances up at him, a flutter of coy lashes as a bashful, enticing smile curls the corner of his lips. He laughs, a soft breathless kind of sound, and then holds out his keyblade, staring at it for a moment before it shudders like the world around them had, flashing with a bright light as it transforms before them into a keyblade that Riku’s never seen before, simple and studded in Sora’s hand.

“I… I had a little help,” Sora admits quietly, pursing his lips as he stares down at the keyblade Riku’s never seen before. And Riku, for his part, can only swallow around the lump his heart has become in his throat as he thinks, ah, there he is.

Opens up a damn door to the Realm of Darkness, using the same power everyone’s been claiming him incapable of mastering, and he still tries to give the credit away. Typical Sora.

Sometimes Riku loves him so much it takes his breath away.

He opens his mouth, probably to do something embarrassing like blurt out I love you so fucking much in the middle of what’s clearly about to be a big fight as Aqua staggers to her feet across the
water from them, eyes gleaming with yellow hatred in the gloom, but luckily Sora beats him to it.

“You check on the King,” Sora tells him, smile curling the corners of his lips once more, until he’s beaming at Riku like the sun itself as condensed into one beautiful boy. “I’ll take care of this, okay?”

Riku sways forward, like his center of gravity has shifted, like there’s a hooked fishing line caught somewhere in his throat and Sora is reeling him in, but he can see Aqua gathering herself for an attack over Sora’s shoulder, so he manages to stop himself from sweeping in for a kiss just in time.

“Okay,” Riku breathes out, like a promise. He almost adds kick her ass, babe, because he thinks it’d make Sora breathe out his name in fond exasperation, but before he can Sora is turning to face Aqua’s next charge. Riku watches him for a second longer, heart in his throat, before turning away to rush back to the King’s side and make sure he’s okay.

Sora beats back the darkness in Aqua and then, when she sinks into the murky depths of the water at the edge of the realm, dark bubbling power boiling off of her as she goes, he pauses only for as long as it takes for Riku to sweep the King up and rush to his side.

“Go,” Riku snaps out, the King stirring in his arms as the water swallows the lost Keyblade Master whole. “The King and I will meet you on the island, just go!”

Sora watches him for a heartbeat, then two, eyes glittering and bright amongst the darkest part of their surroundings, and then nods. The determination in his expression is nearly blinding, the stubborn set of his jaw so steadfast and familiar that Riku nearly staggers under the rush of emotion it brings forward.

“I’ll be right back,” Sora breathes, and there’s a flash of light as he twists, plunging himself into the dark waters lapping at Riku’s thighs before he vanishes completely.

The water stills as Sora’s presence fades and the taste of rancid stagnation creeps up on Riku once more. He swallows roughly against the feeling of it clinging to the back of his throat, shaking his head a little as the King blinks up at him and croaks out his name.

“Hold on, your Majesty,” Riku mutters, shifting so that he can hold out his hand to call forth his keyblade.

The King squeaks out something, something that sounds a lot like Riku, it’s dangerous-, but whatever he’s going to say is swallowed up by the ringing in Riku’s ears as he digs inside himself, calling forth the power of Light that he knows hides within his heart, and punches them both through the drifting, hazy line between the Realm of Darkness and Destiny Islands.

Sora, he thinks, lungs squeezed tight, both with the pressure of traveling in such a way and at the thought of the boy he loves. Sora, I’m coming.

They break free of the Dark, break free through the surface of the ocean’s waves, and there, on the beach before them that Riku knows so well, Sora is sprawled in the sun, Aqua’s limp body at his side.

“Oh my goodness,” the King shrills, squirming out of Riku’s grip as Riku fights to find the sand
under his feet. His legs have gone to jelly, much like the last time he travelled this path, and he sags
with a sudden head-rush of exhaustion, nearly pitching face-first into the water once more before
Sora appears like magic at his side.

“Got you,” Sora murmurs, his arms sneaking around Riku’s waist as they stagger together, both
more than a little out of breath. The sun is warm against the back of Riku’s shoulders, the sounds of
the sand and surf familiar and comforting after the too-still silence that had hung around the Realm of
Darkness’ shore, and before he knows what he’s doing, Riku is sinking into Sora’s arms, face tucked
down to bury in the other boy’s neck as somewhere, out above the water, a sea gull cries.

“You got me,” Riku murmurs back, breathing in the faint taste of ozone that clings to Sora’s skin.

You got us all, Riku thinks, as Sora pulls him even closer and bends to press his face against the mess
that’s Riku’s wet hair. You got us all, just in time.

Just like he’d promised. Somehow, Riku isn’t even a little bit surprised.

(Sora, he thinks, and he doesn’t ache.

He doesn’t ache, and he’s not afraid.

Not with Sora here.)

Aqua refuses to budge once she’s woken, even as she wobbles slightly as the fogginess from the
Darkness’ hold slowly fades from her mind, a feeling Riku sympathizes with entirely.

“I’m going to find Ven,” she insists, eyes narrowing at the King, who has been shifting, shame-faced
and awkward, on the sand beside the woman for the nearly ten minutes this argument has gone on so
far.

“Aqua, you need to rest,” the King (stupidly) insists back. Riku watches, leaning against Sora’s
shoulder as his legs still refuse to cooperate completely, as King Mickey reaches beseechingly for the
woman before him, as if she can be coaxed into seeing his version of sense. “Ventus has been safe
for over ten years and he’ll-“

At his side Sora winces, whispering oh, bad move, which Riku finds himself agreeing with as
Aqua’s eyes narrow with the kind of furious, defensive anger Riku knows only too well.

“He’s been left out there for over ten years,” Aqua repeats shrilly, stepping forward toward the King
even as her hands shake, either out of exhaustion or fury, Riku doesn’t know. “And I’m not going to
leave him there for a single minute longer. I don’t need your permission, Mickey, and I’m not going
to ask you for it.”

“Damn,” Riku breathes, feeling his eyebrows arch as the King shrinks in on himself a little at the
rebuke. Sora, for his part, only whistles softly, while off to the side Donald and Goofy try and tumble
into the argument in their monarch’s defense. He leans over, turning his head a little so that he can
whisper in Sora’s ear, and mutters, “remind me to everything I can to keep her and Kairi apart,
okay?”
“Riku,” Sora says, cutting his name in two in that adorable way he does. Riku feels a smile tug at the corner of his mouth and he turns his head, brushing a kiss to Sora’s temple to show he’s (mostly) teasing. Sora, in turn, elbows him gently in the side before bouncing up to kiss his jaw, grinning and giggling to himself as he does.

Riku watches the odd argument still building in front of them for another moment, knowing how it will end and not quite able to push himself forward to meet it. He’s content to lean against Sora, to soak up the warmth of the sun and the sight of the beach they grew up playing on, but he knows Sora, he knows the boy he loves down to his core, and he knows that Aqua’s speech about not leaving Ventus alone for a moment longer is getting to him.

He heaves a sigh when Sora starts twitching at his side, shaking his head a little before he nudges Sora’s shoulder as he pushes off to join the crowd. “Alright, alright,” he calls out, over the sounds of Donald shout-squawking something entirely incomprehensible up at Aqua, who’s doing an incredible job of not freezing him in a block of ice on the spot. “Alright, guys, c’mon, break it up!”

“Riku,” the King sputters, face scrunched up in a look of disapproval. Riku spares him a glance, feeling the corner of his mouth crook up in a smile, when he feels Sora brush past him gently and reach out to clasp Aqua’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, your Majesty,” Sora says, offering them his best reassuringly sunny smile, the one that says he’ll take care of everything and that there’s nothing at all to worry about. “I’ll go with Aqua to wake up Ventus!”

King Mickey jerks up to look at Sora, eyes wide with surprise and no small amount of doubt, and Riku feels the too-familiar tide of annoyance rise in his chest, before he pushes it back down and swallows it whole.

“Sounds like a plan,” he agrees, nodding to Sora and Aqua as the woman jolts and turns to give him a wide-eyed look of surprise. “The King and I will meet you guys at Yen Sid’s tower then.” Out to the side, Donald and Goofy say something, speaking over top of one another until it’s a cacophony of sound Riku can’t pick apart, but Sora turns his head and says yeah, let’s do this, guys!, so Riku assumes they’re in agreement as well.

“But- you guys,” the King murmurs, looking between them all with sad, worried eyes. Riku nearly snorts at the sight, not entirely sure how the monarch is still so worried considering Sora’s blasted through everyone’s expectations of his strength once again, but he lowers himself to the mouse’s side carefully, reaching out to nudge his shoulder with his hand and offer the King his most reassuring smile when he turns to look.

“Sora’s got this under control,” Riku says, darting a glance up at the boy in question, just in time to watch Sora’s cheeks pinken faintly under the praise. “But we need to rest, your Majesty. And Yen Sid will need to know that we’ve found Aqua, right?”

King Mickey stares up at Riku for a long, reluctant moment before he sighs, little shoulders sagging as he concedes his defeat slowly. “Right,” he echoes in a small, defeated voice, lifting his head just a little to peer up at Aqua and Sora, Donald and Goofy scrambling in to frame the pair as if their presence will inspire the confidence the King is lacking. “You all will be safe, won’t you?”

“Of course we will,” Sora exclaims, still beaming down at Riku and the King. He claps his hands together, ducking his head to share a look with Donald and Goofy, and the pair of loudmouths exclaim their support of that statement as well, rushing forward to crowd around the King to better convey their promises of safety and a quick return.
Riku rocks back to avoid getting smacked by one of Donald’s flailing arms, hoisting himself upright with a creak of his knees that makes him feel decades older than he should. Sora laughs at him a little, probably at whatever expression he’s making at the ache in his limbs, and Riku rolls his eyes as he inches around the noisy crowd, until he’s once again at Sora’s side.

“Be careful,” Riku tells his boyfriend quietly, reaching out to catch Sora’s hand with his own. Sora meets him halfway, fingers curling around Riku’s until their palms come together like pieces in a puzzle, and the other boy uses their joined hands to tug Riku closer, turning his body until they’re nearly chest to chest.

“I’ll be as careful as I can,” Sora promises, which means that he’ll do everything he can do avoid danger, unless someone else is in trouble, and then all of his self-preservation is going right out the window. Riku rolls his eyes a little at the thought, snorting when Sora gives a small hey, I promise! and reaches out to poke him in the side, pouting up at him when Riku glances back down. “You be careful too, mister!”

“I’ll be as careful as I can,” Riku echoes dutifully, smirking a little bit at the way Sora scrunches his nose up when he throws the other boy’s words back at him. Unable to help himself Riku finally gives into the urge that’s been eating at him for the past hour, bending down to drop a chaste kiss to Sora’s lips, only for the other boy to grab the collar of his shirt in his free hand and keep him close as Sora goes up on his tiptoes to deepen the kiss.

Riku sinks into Sora, unable to do anything but melt as Sora presses even closer, their noses brushing as they shift their heads into better angles. Sora ends up holding most of Riku’s weight when they part, which is something Riku should probably be embarrassed by, but he’s not, too busy being distracted by the way Sora traces his bottom lip with his tongue just before they separate.

They draw apart slowly, reluctantly, both breathing a little ragged, parted lips brushing chastely once more before Sora drops back on his heels and sighs a little wistfully as a smile curls the corners of his mouth. Riku feels an answering smile tug at his mouth, even as he forces himself to retract the hand he’s wound in Sora’s hair, unsure of exactly when that had happened but not too bothered by it nonetheless.

“If you two are done,” Donald squawks, barely understandable. Riku spares him a moment’s glance, arching his eyebrow haughtily at the magician, who’s standing with his arms crossed, an impatient look stamped across his beak as he taps one webbed foot against the sand.

“Hm,” Riku pretends to consider, dropping his gaze pointedly back to Sora, partially to annoy Donald and partially to watch Sora flush under the attention. “Maybe--”

He starts to duck his head for another kiss, a grin pulling at his lips when Donald positively shrieks at their side, only for Sora to beat him to the punch, bouncing up on his tiptoes once more and dropping a sweet, gentle kiss to the tip of his nose.

“Love you,” his boyfriend says, pink-cheeked and cheery, as he drops back to the balls of his feet and then promptly dances out of reach. “Make sure the King gets to the tower safe, okay? Bye!”

Riku can feel his mouth drop open as his cheeks fill with heat and he knows without needing a mirror that he’s turning nearly scarlet, probably all the way to his cheeks. Somehow, a cute little kiss to the tip of his nose and a cheerful love you is more embarrassing than a full-on kiss. Riku isn’t sure how that works out, considering he’s flustered enough that he can feel his brain shutting down completely, but it is all the same. He makes a noise in the back of his throat, one that’s supposed to be love you too, but by that point Sora has already grabbed Aqua’s wrist and started to tug her away, Donald and Goofy falling over themselves to chase at their heels, until Riku’s left alone on the beach.
“Well,” King Mickey tuts, covering his grinning mouth with one gloved hand. “Good to know some things are still the same, eh?”

Riku lifts his hands and covers his face, breathing through the spaces in between his fingers as slowly as he can. He tries to get his emotions back under control, tries to will his blush away, but his heart keeps racing despite his best attempts to calm down.

“He’s going to be the death of me,” he croaks out quietly, the words barely understandable between the force of his own idiotic grin and the weight of his palms against his face.

“Probably,” the King agrees cheerfully, laughter lurking like a shadow in his voice. “But, I don’t think you’d have it any other way, would you, Riku?”

No, Riku thinks, even as he groans wordlessly into his hands, which only seems to set off the King’s laughter for real. No, I wouldn’t. I’d do everything I could, just to keep this.

It’s not the first time he’s had that thought, and if there’s one thing Riku is sure about, it’s that it won’t be the last time either.

“Come on, your Majesty,” Riku finally says, dropping his hands from his flushed face and pointedly ignoring the giggles coming from the mouse at his side. “We should probably get going.”

“Aw, shucks,” the King says, clasping his gloved hands in front of his chest, even as Riku calls forth his keyblade to start the trip. “It’s a shame we gotta leave this beach behind. I just love it here, y’know?”

Riku pauses for a moment, eyes scanning over the beach around them automatically – taking in the sandy alcove where he and Sora built castles as kids, the grassy hill just above the sand where they’d curl up and doze in the shade, and the bent old tree, hanging out toward the water on the little jutting island all alone, where he and Sora had climbed up and down the trunk of it so often their hands had become calloused from the bark.

There are so many memories tied to the island around them, to the tree-fort and the rocks on the other side of the cove, to the sand and the surf and the pieces of little driftwood catching on the wet grains of sand as the tide comes in once more. The foundation of who he and Sora are was built here, side-by-side, hand-in-hand, and Riku stares at it, breathless as he realizes he isn’t entirely sure if he really misses it or if he’s just missing the days when Sora didn’t have to bounce out of his reach to save the world every other minute.

“Yeah,” he says, the word just barely steady as it falls from his mouth, a lie he hates to tell when he’s so unsure of himself without Sora at his side. “It’s a good island. But it’ll still be here when we’re done, won’t it?”

King Mickey hums, a sound that’s almost lost under the cry of a distant, drifting sea gull, and then he bounces on his toes, a move that makes Riku miss Sora, even though he’d just seen him.

“It sure will,” he says, pumping one fist in the air. “So let’s get going! We’ve got a lot to update Yen Sid on, don’t we?”

“Yeah,” Riku agrees again quietly, lifting up his keyblade and drawing on the power inside his chest, trying to turn his thoughts toward the old sorcerer’s tower when all he wants to think about is Sora. “We do.”
Light flashes, the world shifts and shimmers around them, and just like that, they leave the beach behind.

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Everyone starts to file out of Yen Sid’s tower once the sorcerer has dismissed them after their complicated, slightly depressing debrief on the battle that looms ahead.

Everyone that is, except Axel.

Riku pauses at the other’s side, making a face to himself for a moment when he sees that Kairi has already snagged Sora’s arm and is in the process of dragging him out of sight.

“Are they serious,” Axel says quietly, his words practically a sputter. “Are we really just going to ignore how weird this whole thing is?”

Riku swallows back a smile as he tucks his hands into his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels as he pretends to consider Axel’s question.

“Which part,” Riku asks aloud, giving the other boy his most innocent look from the corner of his eyes. “The part where Ventus looks exactly like Roxas or the part where we’re going to fight several versions of the same man tomorrow, only one of which needed time travel to get here?”

Axel makes a noise, somewhere between a pained groan and a strangled shout, and then sags like a gangly sack of flour into Riku’s shoulder.

“This shit was so much easier when I didn’t ask stupid questions,” the redhead mutters and Riku doesn’t quite manage to swallow back his laughter as well as he probably should.

“You get used to it,” Riku says glibly, reaching his arm back around Axel to pat him on the back. Axel picks up his head to look at him, squinting distrustfully for a second as he seems to consider the possibility that Riku’s telling him the truth.

“Really,” he asks, somewhere between genuinely hopeful and slightly sarcastic.

“Well,” Riku says, making a face as somewhere down the hall ahead of them Donald starts squawking and shouting at something Goofy’s said. “No, not really. But sometimes there are moments where it all comes together to feel worth it in the end. And then, of course, all the crazy shit we deal with does get a little easier to handle when you’ve got someone at your side, so once we get Roxas back, I think you’ll manage just fine.”

Axel stares at him for a moment, something well-worn and soft twisting his features, like a bittersweet kind of hope, before he visibly gathers his own wits and straightens, throwing his arm around Riku’s shoulders and jostling him a little as he hustles them both forward and out into the hall.

“Sometimes,” Axel tells him haughtily, as if a sharp tone will cover the very real and very fragile emotion Riku had just witnessed on his face, “talking to you helps me remember why we leave all our most invigorating speeches to Sora.”

Riku snorts, not at all bothered by the bluff, though he digs his elbow into Axel’s side all the same.
“Don’t you know, that’s exactly what I’m here for,” Riku retorts, just as haughtily as they start the trek down the spiraling hell-stairs that make up ninety-eight percent of this ridiculous tower. He listens to the sound of Axel’s own snorting laughter for a moment, his chest constricting with relief as some of the tension Axel’s been carrying with him since he’d come back as Lea months and months ago slowly disappears. Smiling a little, Riku offers, “hey, do you want to come to the islands with us?”

Axel blinks for a moment, as if surprised by the offer, and he slows his decent on the stairs, until Riku’s forced to stop as well, craning his head back to see the taller boy. Below them, echoing up the stairs, Sora is calling out their names, while the sounds of Donald and Goofy arguing while the King plays referee get quieter and quieter and quieter.

Aqua and Ventus make no noise, if they’re still in the tower at all. Riku wonders if that isn’t a kindness in disguise, especially considering the blonde’s voice is eerily similar to the pitch Riku remembers Roxas having, back when he’d had a body of his own.

“Axel,” Riku says, feeling his eyebrows scrunch together for a moment as he peers up at the other boy. “You okay?”

Something darts, like a shadow, like a dying ember in a waning fire, across the sharp planes of Axel’s face, there and gone too quickly for Riku to really understand.

For a moment, Riku almost wants to apologize. For all that it’s been years, for all that he’d been desperately following Ansem the Wise’s orders to piece Sora’s memories and self back together, Riku still feels guilt well up in his chest, especially now that he’s seen first-hand how hard Axel’s worked to make it possible to get Roxas back as well.

I’m sorry, he wants to say, that I helped take Roxas from you. I wish there’d been another way. I wish I had tried to look for another way.

But then, just as quickly as it started, just as quickly as that shadow-ember of an emotion had come and gone, the moment between them ends.

“Actually,” Axel says, dropping forward into motion as if he’d never been suspended like a haunting, haunted figure of silence and grief on the stairs above Riku. “Mind dropping me by Twilight Town instead? I’m feeling like ice cream.”

The other boy brushes by Riku without pausing to wait for his answer, the tension that had been sliding from his shoulders back in full force. Riku swallows as he watches Axel march with forced casualness down the stairs, before pushing himself forward to join him, taking them two at a time until he can jostle the taller boy’s shoulder with his own on his way down.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Riku says, even as his heart aches in his chest at the idea of Axel spending the night before their next big fight all alone. “You should check out Scrooge’s new café while you’re there too. Sora says Little Chef’s stuff is to die for.”

Some of the rigidness that Axel’s holding himself with melts when Riku doesn’t try and talk him out of what’s obviously going to be a lonely walk down memory lane. “Little Chef,” he echoes quietly, nose scrunching faintly as he turns to look at Riku from the corner of his eye. “Who the hell is Little Chef?”

Ah, Riku thinks, as they amble down the final steps of the tower and out into the slightly-larger-than-necessary round room at the bottom of all that, where Sora is waiting almost-patiently and Kairi is waiting not-patiently-at-all. This is one of those moments, he thinks, where it’s all worth it in the end.
“The rat that Scrooge hired for his café, of course,” Riku says calmly.

Axel swings to a comical stop, arms pinwheeling in the air for a second before he slaps the side of his head like he can rearrange the sounds Riku had produced with his mouth into a sentence that makes more sense.

“A rat,” he repeats, an octave higher than he normally speaks. “Did you say he hired a rat to cook in his café?!”

“Hey,” Sora interjects, crossing his arms over his chest as his puffs out his cheeks, an expression more suited to a ten year old than a boy nearly eighteen, but one that’s adorable all the same. “Little Chef’s awesome, okay? And he’s, like, super good at what he does too, you should—“

Kairi shoots Riku an annoyed look over as she leans around Sora’s gesturing frame, as if it’s his fault that Sora’s started in on a rant about another of the amazing friends he’s met on his ridiculous and complicated journey. It is his fault, of course, and Riku is already resigning himself to a not-so-quick stop inside the café for dinner, where Sora will more-than-likely want him to come back in the kitchen to help him and Little Chef cook, but Riku has no regrets about this detour in their plans, and so he simply arches his eyebrows back at Kairi and tries not to look as smug as he feels when Sora’s gesturing brings him close enough to reach out and intertwine their fingers.

Axel, meanwhile, is just staring at them all, mouth hanging slightly open as he darts his gaze between the babbling Sora and Riku’s smug expression, like at any moment Riku will cave and admit that Little Chef’s existence had just been a joke.

“A rat,” he repeats quietly. “A fucking rat.”

“A rat,” Riku agrees, just as quietly as he squeezes Sora’s fingers absently between his own. “A very talented fucking rat, from what I’ve heard.”

Axel stares at him for another moment, a dozen or more unvoiced questions bouncing around in his eyes, before he tosses his arms dramatically in the air and sighs, as loudly and theatrically as Riku thinks is humanly possible.

“Y’know what,” he says finally, as resignation falls like a shutter over his eyes, slumping his shoulders with something like exhaustion. “Sure. Let’s go eat something made by a rat.”

“He’s a very talented rat,” Sora insists, gesturing with his free hand as he tugs at Riku with the other. Behind him, Kairi leans comically to the side to be seen so that she can mouth at Riku this is your fault and you should be sorry, before latching onto Sora’s other arm with both of hers so that she can bodily steal him from Riku’s grip.

Riku wrinkles his nose as Sora’s hand slips out of his, pushing back against the childish urge that rises in him to zap Kairi with his gentlest Thunder spell. Instead, he turns to clap Axel on the shoulder, patting the material of the Organization jacket that he still refuses to give up as the taller boy turns his befuddled, defeated gaze toward him.

“Think of it this way,” Riku offers, mouth curling into a grin as the sound of Sora booting up the Gummi ship reaches his ears. “Tonight, you’ll eat something made by a rat. And soon, maybe even tomorrow, you’ll get to drag Roxas in and watch him try and wrap his mind around the idea of a little chef rat. Sound good?”

Axel blinks for a moment longer, opening his mouth before closing it once again, and then he laughs, a soft, scratchy kind of sound that reminds Riku of curling around a bonfire at the beach for warmth
as the stars twinkled above them as kids.

“Well, when you put it like *that,* how can I say no?” Axel shakes his head once more before pushing forward, long legs eating up the distance between the front door to the tower and the tiny Gummi ship parked on the edge of the grass, right before where the world falls away into the glittering sky around them.

“That’s the spirit,” Riku tells him, grinning even more as Axel seems to get more and more attached to the idea of one day introducing Roxas to Twilight Town’s newest café.

He glances back only once, just as the door to the Gummi ship starts to swing shut, and he can’t help but think that Aqua and Ventus look very small, both of them huddled together as they settle down on the steps at the tower’s base.

*Next time,* he thinks to himself as he picks his way through the ship to lean over Sora as he pilots them through space. *Next time, we’ll bring them along too.*

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The sun is still setting, still casting a calming kind of warmth that sinks into his bones and collects in the dark fabric of his clothes, when the sand behind him shifts and Sora throws the weight of his body against Riku’s back.

Riku grunts as he’s nearly knocked over his own knees, dragging his open palms against the grains of sand beneath them as he adjusts back against the body worming its way against his. He almost opens his mouth to ask if Sora had seen the version of his younger self that he’d been talking with earlier or if Riku had been having that conversation in his head (or his heart), but sometimes, Riku’s learned, it’s easier *not* to know the answer to those kinds of questions.

“What’d Kairi want,” he asks instead, sliding one hand back, blinding searching for Sora’s. Sora meets him halfway, wriggling that last inch he needs to slot their bodies together like puzzle pieces, until Riku is reclining in the v between Sora’s legs with their fingers tangled together, grit tucked between their knuckles. Like this Riku can drop his head back against Sora’s shoulder and go boneless against the other’s chest, which is exactly what he does the second the option’s available to him.

“Uh,” Sora answers slowly, which means it’s going to be something Riku will absolutely hate hearing. As far as Riku’s concerned, most of what comes out of Kairi’s mouth sits in this category and has since she learned from Selphie when they were ten that calling Sora stupid was an easy cop-out to listening to his rambling excitement. Though, in Riku’s *defense* (and possibly even Kairi’s) he’s nearly certain that these days she does it on purpose just to rile him up. “She, uh, wanted to talk to me.”

Riku considers sitting up and turning around, so that they can have this conversation face to face, but he’s comfortable, and Sora’s leaning forward to tuck his chin over Riku’s head, so he doesn’t. Besides, he knows Sora well enough to imagine the reluctant puckering of his expression without having to see it for himself. “About what,” he prods as patiently as he can when Sora doesn’t seem willing to elaborate on his own.

Sora waits a beat, then two, as if weighing the words and how he could say them, and then admits,
like Riku is pulling his teeth straight from his gums, “she wanted to tell me not to be my usual, uh, dumbass self and remind me that when I do reckless things, you tend to do reckless things, and it would, um, save her a lot of trouble if I, uh, didn’t do, well, that, so- Riku!”

Riku doesn’t pause from where he’s struggling to sit up, doesn’t stop trying to wriggle out of his boyfriend’s grip for a second. He opens his eyes, only so that he can confirm that the girl in question is still around and glare in her direction, but all it really gets him is fading sunlight directly in his eyes and Sora coiling into a clinging octopus against his back.

“Riku,” Sora whines, half-pleading, half-exasperated against his hair, “you can’t fight her, she isn’t wrong!”

“She’s wrong and I should fucking tell her that,” Riku says, much more calmly than he feels. It’s no secret how much he hates anyone talking about Sora like he’s stupid and since he knows Sora wouldn’t have used the word dumbass if Kairi hadn’t said it first, he thinks the girl’s won herself a spar with a goddamn Keyblade Master fair and fucking square.

In fact-

“Kairi,” Riku yells, squinting against the sunlight directly in front of him. A shadow condenses on the upper jut of the island, where the tree droops out toward the water, Kairi’s red hair gleaming like spilled blood in the light of the setting sun. They’re too far apart and there’s too much interference from the sunlight for Riku to tell what kind of face she’s making at him, but the way she plants her hands on her hips practically screams well, I’m waiting. “Kairi! You’re a sack of--”

Sora slams a hand over Riku’s mouth, sandy palm rough against Riku’s chapped lips, and they struggle back and forth for a moment, Riku trying to pry Sora’s hand off of his mouth so that he can continue to swear at the girl across the beach, while Sora puts all his (admittedly impressive) musculature into keeping the peace.

It only lasts a handful of seconds, a minute at the most, before Riku presses back against Sora hard enough to topple them both on their backs. Sora yelps as he falls back, the sound of his voice nearly muffling the soft squelch that shouldn’t be sounding as he hits the sand, and they both freeze, Sora’s hand half-shoved against Riku’s nose as Riku’s fingers squeeze gently around his wrist.

In the distance, Riku can hear Kairi’s exasperated exclamation of are you two serious right now?! and he hates that for a moment, in the middle of squirming around and weighing the consequences of licking the palm of Sora’s hand, he’d forgotten entirely why their tussle had started. The rest of the world had simply fallen away, leaving just him and Sora, breathless and tangled together in the fading heat of the sun.

And Kairi, as usual, just had to shatter that.

(He swears, she has to be doing this shit on purpose, just to fuck with him.)

Riku takes advantage of Sora’s momentary distraction with whatever-the-hell had just squelched behind his back, peeling Sora’s hand off his mouth just enough so that he yell back, “call my boyfriend a dumbass one more time-“ before Sora talks over him, loudly exclaiming, “Riku, she didn’t mean it like that!”

Kairi’s next response comes out clearly enough that Riku imagines she must have her hands cupped around her mouth, but he’s not inclined to pick his head up to check. “You two really are perfect for one another,” she calls out and somehow, she manages to make those words both a compliment and a criticism, just with her inflection alone. She lets her words sit for a second, the weight of them
pressing against Riku’s heart even as he fights to remind himself that Kairi’s opinion has never really mattered to him, not the way Sora’s does, and then she ruins whatever kindness that sentence might have carried by adding, as loud as she can, “dumbasses!”

“Do you ever regret the fact that you met someone,” Riku asks loudly, even though he’s nearly sure that Kairi’s given them up as a lost cause and is probably in the process of going off to do whatever it is Kairi does when she isn’t purposefully driving him up the wall.

“No,” Sora says, very genuinely, and even though it’s the answer Riku half-expected, he finds his heart lurching and his throat getting tight as affection swamps through him anew.

“Yeah,” Riku murmurs, a dopey kind of smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You wouldn’t, huh?” He doesn’t give Sora time to ask him what that’s supposed to mean, barreling on to a new topic of conversation instead.

“So,” he says, blinking up at the darkening sky above them as Sora’s hand slides down to curl, loose and absent-minded, around the edge of his shirt collar. “What just went squelch?”

Silence sits between them for a moment, weighed with how much Sora obviously doesn’t want to answer the question, and then, as quietly as he can, the boy whispers, “Kairi gave me a paopu fruit.”

Riku stares at the sky for a second longer, feeling his chest constrict nastily in his chest as he fights back against the tide of emotion that statement brings about in him, and then, just as quietly, he says, “oh.”

He tries to sit up, a feeling coiling in his gut that reminds him too much of his days letting Maleficent play him like a fiddle, but he doesn’t get very far, not with Sora’s hand still curled in his shirt collar. He grunts, reaching with fingers that are beginning to shake, and tries to coax Sora into letting go, but his boyfriend is well-versed enough in his history of sudden, tight silences to not know what he’s thinking.

“It isn’t like that,” Sora mutters, sounding embarrassment and maybe a little hurt as he clings to Riku and keeps him laid back flat, turning his head until Riku can feel him pressing his face into his hair. “She- she just doesn’t wanna see us lose each other again, so-“

Riku’s had enough practice dealing with the way his insecurities and jealousies feed each other, making a mountain out of a mole’s hill in his head, and so he breathes, using the hand he has on Sora’s to curl their fingers together as he tugs the other boy away from his collar. This way, the next time he tries to sit up, he can tuck Sora’s arm around his neck and pull him up as well.

Sora sits up with a grunt, slumping down to hide his face against Riku’s shoulder, and Riku lets him for a moment as he breathes, trying to work through the violent mix of relief, grief, annoyance, and fear that’s been living inside him for- for longer than he knows how to pinpoint.

“One day,” Riku says, as dryly as he can, once he’s got the bulk of it managed back down to a size that’s easier to swallow, “that girl is going to learn to mind her own business.”

Sora snorts before he can help himself, lifting their hands to his lips to kiss at Sora’s knuckles, as if

“We’re her friends, Riku,” Sora admonishes him quietly. He doesn’t address that it’s more likely that Kairi will never learn to mind her own business, probably because they both know entertaining sure a lie would be foolish. “She’s just worried about what tomorrow’s gonna bring, like everyone else.”

Riku scoffs before he can help himself, lifting their hands to his lips to kiss at Sora’s knuckles, as if
that will ease away the sound of disbelief he’s just made. “That sounds stupid,” he mutters, pulling away from Sora so that he can twist around until he can start tugging at Sora’s fruit-covered shirt. Sora stares at him for a moment in quiet, open-mouthed bafflement before shifting, lifting his arms to let Riku pull the outer part of his outfit off and fling it to the side.

The sand behind Sora is smeared with the remains of what was Kairi’s gifted fruit, with the rest clinging to Sora’s jacket in what will be a pain to get out in the wash, Riku is sure. A part of him feels embarrassed, both by his outburst and the fact that Kairi still feels the need to push and prod at them, but the rest of him is just exasperated by the meddling.

“C’mere,” Riku mutters, reaching out and holding his arms open for Sora to clamor into. There’s a moment of hesitation, where something plays over Sora’s face too quickly for Riku to understand, and then he has the armful of boyfriend he’s been wanting since Sora showed up to save them in the Realm of Darkness, hours and hours ago. He ducks his head, burying his face in the mess Sora calls a hairstyle, and for a moment, the smell of salt and sunshine and stardust is so overwhelming he can barely think, let alone breathe.

Sora scrunches up in his lap, like they’re much younger than they are, pressing forward so that he can tuck his head under Riku’s chin and hide his face against Riku’s throat. Riku feels his breath get lodged in the space where Sora’s eyelashes dance against his skin and he swallows, as gently as he can, around the old bruise-like pain in his chest at the thought of all that they’ve been through, both together and apart.

(Riku knows that Sora’s had to bear the brunt of everything they’ve gone through and that for the most part he’s had to bear it all alone. The unknown worlds, the new powers and responsibilities, the dangerous people and monsters – Sora has paved the way for them all, stumbling through with a shining hope in his heart as he peeled back all the bad things he encountered so that he could find the good left in the shadows, small and aching though it was.

Sora is strong, stronger than Yen Sid and the King think he is, so much stronger than anyone else seems to realize. Riku doesn’t think the journey he’s been on to try and master the power of waking would have been necessary if anyone considered for a moment everything Sora’s been able to do, without any instruction whatsoever on how the powers of the keyblade actually work. He’d tried to tell them both that, when he’d found out that Sora been sent off with Donald and Goofy once more, but both of them had just given him pitying looks, like they thought he was being biased towards his boyfriend, and had asked him to trust them in this.

Holding Sora now, as he trembles with too many emotions too name, too many fears and what-if’s and could-be’s, Riku has to swallow back the urge to grit his teeth and scream.

This is just one more regret to add to the list he’s been making over the past few years, but this, at least, he can do something about.)

Riku gathers Sora up in his arms, holds him against his chest as secure as he can, and then, as carefully as he’s able, he leans back and lowers them down against the sand once more. Sora breathes in a shaky, trembling breath against his throat, shifting with Riku in a move Riku isn’t sure if he’s doing entirely consciously, so that their legs are tangled together and Sora’s balanced perfectly on Riku’s chest, and Riku breathes too, as slowly and calmly as he knows how, until he starts to feel Sora’s breathing steady out and deepen as well.

He slides his hands up Sora’s back, letting the other boy process what he’s feeling, letting him cling as tears drop and slide down the side of his throat. It takes a few minutes, from what Riku can tell as the sky darkens overhead and the stars start to come out, before Sora drags in a ragged breath and whispers, “does it really sound that stupid?”
“Me and my big mouth,” Riku thinks, feeling his callouses catch on the soft material of Sora’s tank top. He breathes out carefully, trying not to let the motion turn into a sigh, and gives his words a moment’s thought before he shakes his head against the sand and tugs Sora up a little higher, so that he can tip his head down and press his face against the other boy’s hair once more.

“It’s not stupid to worry,” Riku mutters, as Sora shifts against him and tips his head up just enough that Riku can see one shining blue eye peeking up at him through unruly brown hair.

What little of Sora’s face that Riku can see scrunches up, wrinkles building on the bridge of his nose for a moment before Sora points out, “but you’re not worried, are you?”

(Sora, he thinks, and he’s worried.

But he’s not afraid.)

Riku puffs out a breath that makes the sliver of Sora’s face twitch into a split-second smile, and he shrugs, jostling them both enough that Sora puffs out a breath of his own, the ghost of an almost-laugh that falls, warm and soft against Riku’s throat.

“I’m worried about a lot of things,” Riku admits quietly, trying not to feel like the words are being drawn out of him like splinters from his skin. I’m worried about what we’ll do the day after tomorrow, when we no longer have this war to fight. I’m worried that one day, you’ll realize how much trouble loving me brings you. I’m worried that the only future I have is in battling against the dark, and that’s not a future I want to give you.

“But,” Sora prods, the same way Riku had prodded him earlier, about his conversation with Kairi. Riku almost groans as Sora shifts on his chest, scooting back so that they can look at one another more clearly, Sora’s chin digging into his collarbone, uncomfortable and soothing all at once.

“But,” Riku agrees softly, “I’m not worried about tomorrow.”

Sora blows out a breath that dances like a warm phantom touch along Riku’s jaw, his hands dropping down roughly in the sand just over Riku’s shoulders as the other boy hoists himself up to look at him, face contorted in misery and confusion and pain.

“How,” Sora asks, half-demand and half-plea, and Riku can’t stop the way he reaches for him, wondering if this is anything like how Sora must have felt, facing him down all those years ago in the ruined castle of Hollow Bastion, where he’d been burning up and collapsing in on himself as the Darkness he’d welcomed into his heart twisted him into a monster of a man neither should have ever had to meet.

Riku cups Sora’s face, felling the way the other boy trembles above him like he’s shaking apart, and he feels the corners of his eyes start to sting as he fights to keep his heart from splitting open in his chest. I did this to you, Riku thinks, even though he knows, rationally, that their world would have fallen to darkness even if he hadn’t fallen too.

I did this to you, and therefore I must fix it too.

“Kairi may be worried that we’ll lose each other,” Riku says, the words coming out a hoarse rasp in his throat, “but I’m not. I may lose sight of you for a minute, I may have to fight to get back to your side, but whatever happens, we are going to find each other again.”

The same way we always have, Riku doesn’t say, but Sora sucks in a breath above him, blinking rapidly as he fights back a new wave of tears.
“Riku,” Sora murmurs, teardrops gathering on his lashes, lips trembling around Riku’s name, and he feels his heart lurch in his chest, feels it lodge into his throat as he fights to swallow, sliding his hands up Sora’s jaw to swipe his thumb just under those beautiful blue eyes of his.

“Wherever you are,” Riku promises, his voice still hoarse but his words strong and solid with the force of his conviction, “wherever you go, I will find you. Whatever world, whatever realm, whatever pit or abyss you find yourself in – it will never, ever be too far out of my reach. I’ll look everywhere for you, Sora. Just the way you did for me.”

Sora’s face crumples, but this time when he huffs, sniffling through his nose as he does so, the sound of his laughter is warm, even as it cracks in the middle with the force of his emotions. “That’s not fair,” Sora sputters, shaking his head as much as he can while Riku’s still got his face in his hands. “That’s not- Riku!”

Riku can’t help the way he breathes out a soft laugh at the absolutely indignant way Sora says his name, tugging at Sora a little until the other boy bends down for a kiss. It’s a soft kiss, both of their lips chapped, Sora’s tears dropping onto Riku’s cheeks as their noses brush, and though it only lasts for a few seconds, Riku can almost feel the way his heart expands in his chest with the force of his affection as Sora draws back and sits up, the other boy’s hands drawing up from the sand to rest instead on Riku’s chest.

“I love you,” Riku tells Sora, the words falling from his lips more easily than he could ever have imagined. Above him Sora shudders, his breath hitching for a moment as his lashes flutter shut, and when he opens them his trademark smile is splitting his face, bright and beaming even though there are still tear-tracks tracing down his cheeks.

“I love you too, Riku,” Sora answers, just as easily. He sniffs again, lifting one hand to rub the back of his wrist over his face, making a face at the fact that his palm is covered in sand and therefore useless, and Riku can’t help but grin up at him as the warmth of the moment sinks into him and coaxes all his anxieties and worries to the back of his mind.

“I’m serious, though,” Riku tells Sora, as the other boy shifts back around to settle down on his chest once more. He catches an elbow to the gut as Sora squirms down to lay his head over Riku’s heart, but he takes the jab with barely a grunt, reaching up to find one of Sora’s sandy hands so that he can intertwine their fingers together once more. “I’m not going to lose you, and you’re not going to lose me.”

To punctuate his point, he lifts their joined hands, pulling at the place in his chest where the powers of the keyblade sit like a weight inside his heart, and he can feel it in the air as the keyblade he’s reaching for shimmers into being. Their fingers, intertwined as they had been, are now gripping the hilt of the combined keyblade from their dreams, the metal of it digging into the sand at their side, shining in the dusky darkness of night as it falls around them. Sora stills as he seems to recognize the weapon, chest bouncing as he sucks in a rabbit-quick breath as Riku lifts their arms just enough that the charm on the end can dangle out beside their heads.

The little paopu fruit charm that appears when they combine their powers swings out, the cheery yellow color of it still bright, even as the last of the day’s light fades out over the water at their side.

“See,” Riku says, in a tone of voice that’s probably too smug, especially if Sora’s little snort of muffled laughter is anything to go by. “We don’t need Kairi’s meddlesome fruit, because we’ve already got one to keep us tied together.”

Against his collarbone Sora huffs out Kairi’s meddlesome fruit, shaking his head back and forth so that his hair tickles against the underside of Riku’s chin. Riku shudders, huffing as he ducks his head
to press his lips against the crown of Sora’s head, like that will make his boyfriend stop squirming around when they both know Sora’s hardly ever been still a day in his life. He squeezes Sora’s fingers around the hilt of their combined keyblade once more before dispelling it, reveling in the feeling of Sora’s fingers curling back into the spaces in between his own as their arms drop down to rest against the still-warm sand of the beach.

Sora hums against his collarbone for a moment, as if conceding to Riku’s excellent and fitting point, and then he promptly ruins the illusion that he’s letting Riku have his dignity by murmuring, “you just don’t want to relive the last time we tried to share the fruit, do you, Riku?”

Riku twitches, both at the reminder of the moment in question and at the ticklish feeling of Sora tipping his head up to snicker against his throat. He groans, as loudly and theatrically as he can, reaching up with his free arm to drop it over his face, like that will hide the way heat is creeping into his cheeks as Sora snickers and giggles, the same as he did nearly a year and a half ago when they’d tried to share an actual paopu fruit on this very beach, the night before their Mark of Mastery test.

“I didn’t know they tasted like that,” Riku mutters scornfully, even as the corner of his mouth curls up in a little grin. Sora wheezes, breathing out you nearly spit it out in between his laughter like Riku doesn’t remember, clear as day, nearly spitting the mushy, slightly sour fruit straight into Sora’s face before he’d choked it down as stubbornly as he could.

He hadn’t been able to risk losing his chance at finally sharing the stupid fruit with Sora over something as silly as its taste, but god, if the memory of it doesn’t make his taste buds want to curl up and die.

“It’s okay,” Sora says, his snickering laughter fading out slightly as he squirms around to press a smacking, exaggeratedly affectionate kiss against Riku’s throat. “It’s like you said, Riku; no matter what happens, we’ll always find each other in the end! Fruit or no fruit, we’ve got each other, right?”

Riku breathes in, deep as he can, and feels the way Sora falls against his chest with the motion. He breathes out, just as slowly, and Sora rises, his chest pressing down against Riku’s as the other boy mimics his motions, matching their breathing patterns together, as if it’s just as simple as that.

“Yeah,” Riku murmurs, squeezing Sora’s fingers with his own as he tips his head back to stare up at the stars emerging above their heads. “We’ve got each other, no matter what.”

Despite all his fears, all the nightmares that usually plaque his thoughts as he tries to sleep, Riku finds his eyes drifting shut with ease as Sora slips into sleep on his chest, both of them splayed out on the beach like they’re ten again and napping straight through curfew once more. The future looms, the fight for tomorrow inevitable and with it all that must come after, but Riku can’t find it within himself to be afraid.

The future doesn’t scare me at all, he thinks, eyelids fluttering shut for the last time as he clenches his hand in the back of Sora’s tank top, both to make sure he doesn’t fall and just because. Not when I’ve got you.

(Sora, he thinks, and he drifts off to sleep, peaceful and sure.)
through his damp hair as Sora lazily starts the boot-up tests for the Gummi ship at his back. The island around them is dark, but it’s not still – the wind rustles gently through the trees, the birds coo gently at one another as they wake, and the waves lap, gently, so gently, against the sandy shore as the ocean shifts in its quiet, constant dance.

Even Kairi seems gentle this morning, shoulders slumped as she picks her way across the sand. Gentle and small, with sleepy eyes and mused hair that Riku can barely see as she steps, little more than a softly shaded shadow, out of the dark and into the light coming through the open door of the Gummi ship. She holds herself carefully as she shuffles to Riku’s side, huddled inside a tacky yellow jacket that Riku’s never seen before but suspects is probably Selphie’s.

“Hey,” Riku says – gently, gently, gently, the way he only used to be around Sora, the way he’s been teaching himself to be more often on his own.

“Hey,” Kairi yawns back. Her voice is gentle too, soft and mellow, and Riku can’t help but wonder if she’s still half asleep or if she too feels the shift in the air around them.

He pauses for a moment, unsure what to do with a gentle, sleepy Kairi. He’s never been one to look at the redheaded girl and see sweetness, to see something soft and fragile, but then again Riku’s never been the one to bring out such a thing in her before.

Cute jacket, he almost says, because riling Kairi up is easy for him, the same way Kairi probably finds riling him up to be, but he doesn’t. Instead he watches as Kairi yawns again, watches as he shivers slightly as the cool breeze tugs softly at their hair, and then he throws all caution to the wind.

“C’mere,” he murmurs, making the split-second decision to lift up his arm at his side. He doesn’t feel the cold the way Kairi does, even in his tank top and the spare set of sleep pants they’d scrounged out of the ship, but he’s never been particularly affected by temperatures, hot or cold.

Kairi looks at him for a moment like he’s grown a second head or confessed quietly that he’s actually been in love with her this whole time before, with one last insulting squinty eyed look of disbelief, she tucks herself carefully up under his arm.

Her aloof and vaguely skeptical caution lasts all of three seconds before she sinks her full body weight into the left side of his ribcage, squirming as close as she can until her head’s tipped back against his shoulder, her cold nose brush the edge of his collarbone when she turns her head, humming something tuneless and quiet in the back of her throat as the world turns, gentle and slow around them.

Inside the ship, Sora is humming as well, his voice rises and falling as he sings bits and pieces in a low tone of voice that’s almost on-key. Riku’s never heard this song before in his life, but by the words he can pick out and piece together, he’s guessing it’s a sea-shanty the other boy probably picked up in the Caribbean sometime over the past few years.

It’s a good moment, a gentle moment. He and Kairi haven’t had many of those, but it’s nice. Nicer, almost, than Riku ever imagined their future could be.

“Hey,” Kairi whispers, turning her head and angling her face up, so that she can peer at him through her bangs. Her mouth is pursed with something like determination, or maybe it’s just bullheadedness, but her eyes are shadowed and nearly shy, skittish as Riku watches fight not to squirm against his side.

He squeezes his arm around her shoulders, tugging her impossibly closer as he hums in acknowledgement in the back of his throat. “What’s up,” he whispers back, not sure if they’re
keeping their voices down so that Sora doesn’t hear or just because the easy, soft atmosphere around them demands it.

Kairi’s nose scrunches, a habit all of them have picked up and shared around like a contagious cold throughout their childhood, and when she sighs it’s with enough force in her breath to make her hair dance around her face.

“You do know that I don’t really think you guys are dumbasses, right?”

Riku blinks, mouth falling open as the question catches him off guard. He tries to piece apart why Kairi is bringing this up now, wondering if he’s not the half-asleep one instead, dreaming up something softer and more open than he and Kairi have ever been, but then the girl shifts against his side, huffing a little with antsy impatience, and Riku decides that this is too solid to treat like a dream.

(Even if he knows, firsthand, how solid some dreams can truly feel.)

“It doesn’t matter what we know, Kai,” Riku murmurs, shifting through the different ways he can phrase what he’s thinking as quickly as he can, before Kairi’s patience wears too thin and they break whatever gentle, fragile thing has crafted this moment for them irrepairably. “If you don’t mean it, you shouldn’t say it. I learned the hard way that you can’t cover up your fears with sharp words like that.” He pauses, swallowing a little as he remembers the sick taste of his own bile mixing in the back of his throat with the stagnant taste of darkness, the look on Sora’s face as he’d shouted how worthless the other boy was, how hopeless it was to stop him.

He hadn’t meant it, not a single word, not a single goddamn syllable, but he’d said it all the same. There was only so much that could be written off as dark possession and, at least for that fight, Riku had been in control more than Ansem had, Riku and his ugly, twisted, insecure fears.

“If you’re scared,” Riku continues, lowering his head so that he can rest his cheek on the top of Kairi’s head, fingers curling just a little more tightly around her arm as he breathes in the clear, fresh smell of salt and sand and the coming dawn, “then just say you’re scared. Sora and I aren’t going to judge you for it.”

Kairi huffs at him, a snappish kind of sound, but she only bristles against his ribcage for a second before she deflates just as suddenly, dropping her head against the ball of his shoulder with enough force to knock him back against the ship behind them.

“I know,” she tells him, “I know that. I just- I don’t want to be left alone again, I guess.”

Riku opens his mouth to tell her that calling the people you care about dumbasses is a sure-fire way to end up alone, but he manages to bite the statement back just in time. Instead he sighs, rubbing his hand absently up the fabric of the tacky yellow jacket as he lets the gentle breeze and the sounds of the gentle surf give him the patience he needs to pick apart this conversation.

“Whatever happens to Sora and I, you’re not going to be alone again,” Riku tells her quietly. He thinks this is the root of the problem and his suspicions are proven at least partially correct, if the small noise Kairi makes in the back of her throat and the way she curls against his chest are anything to go by. “You won’t be. You’ve got Selphie, and Axel, and the King too. Hell, you’ve even got Aqua and Ventus now. Whatever we face, whatever we do – you will never be alone again.”

It’s the same thing Riku’s been telling himself since Sora dragged him back to himself, not quite kicking-and-screaming, but closer than Riku likes to remember. He’s been repeating the words to himself for years now, a constant reminder that he’s not the only one watching Sora’s back and keeping him safe, and while once that would have twisted and rotted him from the inside out with
jealousy, he’s come to enjoy knowing that there’s a whole network of people, spread out among the many, many worlds that dot their starry sky that want to see Sora safe and cared for, just like he does.

It makes the impossible feel just a little more possible. Makes the unknown a little more known.

He thinks his words give Kairi some measure of comfort too, because the stiffness of her shoulder where it’s digging into his chest eases, just a little, and her breathing comes more steadily than it had before.

They stand like that together for a handful of moments, too long to call them seconds and probably not long enough to be more than a minute, but Riku has spent a lifetime with Sora, has spent the last two years dating him, and he likes to think he’s mastered the ability to sit and wait while someone else sorts out their thoughts before they speak.

Eventually, though, Kairi seems to finds her words, because she speaks up once more. “Is there anything I can do,” she asks quietly, “to keep you guys from doing something reckless?”

Reckless, Riku thinks, feeling the corner of his lip curl up into a humorless smile. Isn’t caring reckless? Loving with all your heart reckless?

How do you live your life without being reckless? What kind of life would that even be?

Riku huffs out a breath that isn’t quite a laugh, shaking his head for a second against the top of Kairi’s, musing her hair up even more. The sky in front of them has just started to find a shade outside the deepest, darkest blue, the haze of a deep purple beginning to bloom around the edges like a bruise.

“Probably not,” he tells her softly, but not sadly. “You know Sora – you know he’s going to do everything he can to keep everyone safe and happy, no matter the cost. But you know me too, don’t you? And I’m going to do everything I can to keep him safe and happy, so I guess it balances out.” He shrugs, feeling the motion jostle them both further against the side of the Gummi ship, and he can’t help but notice Sora’s stopped singing, though the sound of his faint humming can just be heard if Riku strains to listen. Kairi digs her elbow gently into his gut, as if to say get on with it, I know there’s more, and this time when Riku breathes out, it trembles with the traces of a real laugh.

“Just trust us,” he says, tipping his head back to look up at the glittering pin-points of light above them, the hundreds and hundreds of worlds that spin on, gentle and steady, unaware of each other and yet so closely tied together. “Keep having our backs when shit goes down, and we’ll all be home before you know it.”

Kairi sniffs, turning her face more firmly against her chest, which means she ends up twisting in his grip until she’s pressed less against his side and instead is simply leaning with her forehead against his collarbone, her hands sneaking out of the tacky yellow jacket cocoon she’s made for herself to grip at the material of his tank top.

“Somehow,” she murmurs thickly without looking at him, “it feels like this is the last time I’ll get to see this beach with you two. At least- at least for a long, long time.”

Riku feels the implications of those words gut-punch him, feels the way all the breath rushes from his lungs as Kairi huddles, small and gentle, fragile and yet so, so strong, against his chest. He wraps his arms around her without a second thought, heart caught in his throat as a phantom ache drags sharp claws down his throat.

He knows what feeling she’s talking about, because he feels it too. The pre-dawn morning is so soft,
so gentle, so sweet – idyllic and soft, like it’s trying to apologize for the pain that’s yet to come, to
give them something to think of fondly when the world crashes down around their ears.

He doesn’t know what to say for a moment, heart lodged so firmly in his throat that he has trouble
swallowing it all down. Riku breathes in, and then out, in and then out, and lets the citrus-and-
flowers smell clinging to Kairi’s hair soothe him bit by bit.

“Well,” he says finally, head still tipped back so that he can watch the stars fade, slow and graceful,
back into the sky as it lightens bit by bit. “Then I guess we better make the most of it that we can,
huh?”

Kairi’s grip on his tank top falters before all at once she winds her arms around his torso and
squeezes him as tightly as she can. There’s nothing gentle about this hug, nothing soft or fragile, but
Riku finds that even the parts of this moment that feel a little sharp fit together as well as he squeezes
her back against his chest, ducking his head to bury his face in her hair as he holds her as tightly as
he can.

“You guys are my best friends,” she rasps, words nearly lost in between the fabric of his shirt and the
muted sound of her own sniffles. “You’re both my best friends, you know that, don’t you?”

In the Gummi ship behind them, Sora’s voice picks up to hum another song, this one slower, and
softer, and familiar, in an instant, in a heartbeat, and Riku feels it sink into him, all the way down to
his bones.

It’s a hopeful song. An adventurous song.

A song they’d made together, once upon a dream.

It’s a song to start the day with, fresh and clear and new.

“Yeah,” Riku whispers back, finding that there’s a sniffle of his own lurking in his nose, a hitch in
his throat that he can barely manage to keep out of his voice. “We know.”

Riku holds Kairi close for a long moment more, giving them both time to get their emotions under
control, and then, gently, so gently, he pulls away.

“C’mon,” he says, reaching up a hand to thumb away the evidence of Kairi’s tears, as the girl in
question gives a little laugh and reaches up to drag her palm against the corners of his eyes, were his
had gathered but not yet fallen. “Let’s go grab Sora and watch the sunrise.”

Kairi smiles at him, the curve of her lips highlighted as the sky behind her flushes the same soft shade
of pink as her dress, and then without warning she bounces up on her toes, dropping a kiss to his
cheek with the same lack of flourish that she always drops to Sora’s.

“Yeah,” she agrees, dropping back to her heels with a soft, impish little giggle as Riku blinks dumbly
down at her. “Let’s go watch the sunrise with Sora.”

Riku watches her step back and duck into the ship, her footsteps soft and muted against the metal
floor, and all around them the island stirs as the light edges closer and closer to the horizon, painting
the world in muted hues of dawn-to-come.

Soon, Riku knows, they’ll have to board the Gummi ship and go fetch Axel, so that they can meet
Aqua, Ventus, and the King, along with Donald and Goofy, in the place where dark energy is
pooling even now. Soon, he knows, they’ll have to fight, not only for their lives, but also for the lives
of all the people they’ve met on other worlds, all the friends they’ve met and made alone the way.
Soon, Riku thinks, unafraid of what will come as the sound of Sora and Kairi’s footsteps echoes gently against the metal flooring of the ship behind him. Soon, but not quite yet.

For now, they’ve got a sunrise to watch.

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“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Riku hisses under his breath, as the dusty space in front of them where Donald’s just blasted the third missing Keyblade Master into nothing but vapor writhes and swirls with incoming Heartless, which all condense into the familiar, tunneling shape that stretches and stretches up to the sky. Somewhere to his left Kairi lets out half-swallowed gasp, the sound of it almost immediately getting swept up in the building wind around them as she presses in close to Axel’s unmoving body against the rock they’re crouched beside.

If Riku never sees a tornado made of monsters ever again after this, it’ll be too goddamn soon. But then again, that’s kind of the point of this whole fight, so-

Everything happens very quickly after that. The tornado before them grows, more powerful than any other, until it towers overhead at such a height that Riku can barely see it all, even as he cranes his head back to look. As he watches, a branch of the spinning monstrosity breaks off, a twisting spiral of darkness dragging through the air overhead, and he feels the bottom of his stomach drop out a second later as he turns to watch it move against the sky, realizing that standing in the middle of the open area, all alone, is-

“Sora,” he breathes. He scrambles to his feet, barely having a second to hope that Kairi will be enough to keep Axel safe as he skids across the sand to Sora’s side. His boyfriend is frozen, head tipped back to watch with wide, horrified eyes as the Heartless spin and spin overhead, and he finds that he can’t help the way his tone comes out, too sharp and too quick, as he reaches out to tug at Sora’s shoulder as he crashes to a stop at his side.

“Pull it together, babe,” Riku says, a sick feeling in his gut blooming to life as Sora startles and jerks in his grip. He tries to squash that feeling, tries to stomp it out as quickly as he can, but Sora’s eyes are glassy and afraid, the way Riku hasn’t seen them be since they were children and the whole world around them was falling to shadows, Sora’s hand reaching and reaching, but not quite able to grasp his.

“Hey,” he rasps, trying to gentle his words, even as they come out sharp enough to cut his tongue. The monsters around them and the traces of Terra’s presence put the stagnant taste of darkness back in his mouth, but he swallows it down and focuses on Sora instead, reaching out to cradle Sora’s jaw as he leans their heads in until their foreheads knock, ever so gently, together.

“We haven’t lost them, they still have their hearts,” Riku tells him, fierce and quiet. He swallows around the lump of his own heart in his throat, pushing back every frantic, terrified thought in his head, until there’s nothing but the blue of Sora’s eyes and the feeling of the other boy’s breath, puffing warm and gentle against his face.

“But we have to protect them,” he breathes, feeling the way Sora’s trembling goes still at his words. “We have to keep them safe, Sora.”

This close, Riku can’t watch the full force of his love’s determination as it gathers like a force of
nature across his features, but it’s a sight he’s familiar enough with that he still feels the effects of like a phantom tide, dragging through his bones.

“Right,” Sora breathes back, eyelashes flutters like kisses from a butterfly’s wing against the tops of Riku’s cheeks. “Right.” He sucks in a breath, jaw working under Riku’s fingertips, and when he draws back, he draws back with his shoulders squared and his chin raised, a look like trouble stamped across his gorgeous eyes.

*I love you,* Riku thinks, heart in his throat as he watches Sora turn into the Keyblade Master he knows him to be, right before his eyes. *I love you so much, I don’t know what to do with it all.*

Quietly Aqua pads with soundless steps to their side, coming to stand next to Sora as she too lifts her chin to look up at the monsters looming ahead.

“We stand together,” she tells them both firmly, her voice and eyes older than her features, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. There’s a fury that lives in her, one that Riku catches a glimpse of only for a moment, but it’s a fury he feels echoing in his own chest as he too turns to look at the threat before them.

*No more,* he thinks, as the three of them call their keyblades to hand. *You’ll hurt our friends no more.*

Aqua twists back to shout at the King and Goofy, calling out for Kairi too as she tells them to watch over Donald and Axel. The wind howls in Riku’s ears, making it hard to hear, but the King yells something back, something about it being too late, they should head for safety instead, and Riku feels a twist of disappointment in his chest, even though he understands the King’s fear too well.

“There’s no time,” Riku shouts back, voice straining to be heard over the roaring gusts. The twisting pillars of Heartless that twine through the sky are collecting once more, as if they’ve only been bouncing around to scare them and collect more shadows to their numbers, and as Riku watches, they curl back toward the tornado in front of them, building it up even further until the swarm of darkness nearly blots out the muted purple of the sky above.

From there, it’s over almost before it can begin. Beside them, Riku sees more than hears Aqua falter, her keyblade lowering for a moment as she staggers a half-step back. He thinks he hears her voice for a moment, a soft, *no, it’s can’t be-* tucked amongst the noise around them, and then, just as he turns his head, the tornado lashes out and strikes.

Aqua’s body is slammed into the sky and swallows by a pillar of Heartless, Ventus’ still form snatched from the ground. Riku shouts, twisting around to watch it, and before his eyes, the Heartless take Kairi and Axel as well, and then finally the King, Goofy, and Donald.

The shifting mess of dark powers swirls and swirls around them, pressing in on all sides as Riku staggers back and reaches back desperately to find Sora’s hand. Sora reaches back for him in the same second, fingers squeezing Riku’s so tightly he feels them go almost-numb, and they stagger back into each other as their friends all disappear, swallowed by their enemies in a moment that could have been missed if Riku had so much as blinked.

“No,” Sora rasps, just loud enough for Riku to hear. The other boy staggers back, dragging Riku with him as Riku ducks to avoid the monsters above, and together they skid and fall, dust kicking up in the air around them as Sora curls down into a ball, eyes once more glassy when Riku tries to pull him back to his feet. “No, they’re- they’re gone. Kairi and Donald- Goofy and the King- Axel and Aqua and Ventus- they’re all gone, gone forever-“
Riku shudders at the misery in Sora’s voice, hunching down against his body as Sora curls into his side, trembling with the suddenness of it all, with the shock at how quickly the tides have turned against them. Riku can feel the effects of his own fear building on the back of his tongue, his mind replaying the moment their friends’ limp bodies had been tossed into the air and swallowed by shadows again and again, but he pushes it back, focusing instead on Sora as he tips his head down and presses their temples together.

(Sora, he thinks, and his pulse thunders in his ears.

He’s afraid.

He’s so very afraid.

But Sora’s still here.

Sora’s still here and as long as Sora’s here, Riku knows they have a chance.)

“What do we do,” Sora asks, his fingers squeezing Riku’s even tighter, as if he’s afraid that he’ll lose Riku too if he loosens his grip for even a second. “What do I do? All- all my strength came from them, Riku, I-“

Sora’s breath hitches and a tear trails down his cheek, catching on Riku’s jaw as he ducks even closer to be able to hear. Quietly, so quietly he thinks he must have imagined it for a moment, Riku hears Sora continue.

“Alone,” his boyfriend whispers brokenly, “I’m worthless.”

Like a blow stuck against his chest, Riku feels the breath rush from his lungs. He aches, pain a hot spike between his ribs as his regrets crawl like the ant-like Heartless they face so often up the back of his throat, choking him and stealing his breath as he fights to catch it back.

Alone, I’m worthless, Sora’s whispered. In Riku’s memory, like an echo, he hears Sora’s voice, young and childish and oh-so sure, exclaim, my friends are my power!

He wonders how he’d missed it, all these years. He wonders if he’d really been so blind, so caught up in all the ways Sora has saved him over the years, not to see that no one had ever told Sora how incredible he was, all on his own.

Sora’s friends are his power, Riku has always known that. More and more recently, he’s considered himself blessed to be able to count himself within that circle, to know that as he drew power from Sora’s presence, Sora drew power from his as well. But there’s a power that lives in Sora, a power that no one else can replicate or match, and it doesn’t come from his friends, or the hearts that reside inside of his.

It comes from Sora.

Just Sora and no one else.

“It’s over,” Sora breathes, his voice muffled as his throat audibly closes up around a sob. “We’ve lost.“

Riku sucks in a breath, one that trembles and shakes on the way in, and then squeezes at Sora’s fingers between his own, as hard and as tight as he can.

I love you, he thinks, curling in as tight as he can around Sora, his lips catching on the other boy’s
cheek, his temple, against his hair. I love you so much. I don’t know what I’d do without you.

(He thinks of Sora-

He’s always thinking about Sora, but he thinks of Sora now – of the way he’d scrunched up his nose in confusion when Riku had blustered about and suggested he share a paopu fruit with Kairi, of the way Sora had tackled him into a hug, shrieking with glee upon finding him once more in Traverse Town after their world had been torn apart by the Darkness. His hands trembling, and his voice cracking, after Riku had won the keyblade over from his heart. His little jaw clenched as his eyes shone bright as he called the weapon back to his hands and faced Riku down anew.

He thinks of Sora and the misery in his face when Riku had started to pull the Door shut on himself, and of the way he’d known, without a moment’s hesitation in his heart, that somehow, someway, Sora would find him again.

He thinks of Sora – Sora, Sora, Sora, Sora – and how still and quiet he’d been, sleeping in the egg-like creation as Namine worked, and how unnatural it had seemed, the egg more coffin than bed. He remembers Sora’s grip on his hand and the way he’d fought back tears when they were reunited once more in the World That Never Was, the aching, awful crack in his voice as he’d whispered I looked everywhere for you.

He thinks of Sora, making silly faces at the end of the world, just to make him laugh, and of the stretch of endlessly still shore on the edge of the abyss, where Sora had leaned against his shoulder and told him that it didn’t matter what happened now, as long as they were together.

He thinks of Sora, of the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of moments he’s spent with him, spent loving him, and tries to pull the strength the other boy has always given him over the years, so that he can return the favor and be Sora’s strength this time.

Sora, he thinks-

And then he breathes out, and his aching, desperate lungs do not shake anymore.

He’s not afraid.)

“Sora,” Riku says, voice as steady and sturdy as the trees they’d once climbed on the beaches of their home. “You don’t believe that.” He turns his head, pressing his lips against the other boy’s scalp and feeling the way Sora shudders and goes still at his words. “I know you” he murmurs, drawing back as Sora goes slack with surprise, extracting himself from Sora’s grip as gently as he can. His mouth fills with the taste of rancid water, with the inky, sticky stagnant darkness that once polluted his veins, and he knows without having to look that whoever is controlling the Heartless behind them has tired of waiting and is ready to charge. He stands up, ready to face them, and smiles down at Sora as the other boy tips his face up to look at him, misery and surprise both bright in his eyes.

“I know you,” Riku repeats quietly, feeling the corner of his mouth pull up in a soft, crooked little smile. “And I know you don’t believe that.”

He turns then, just as Sora’s lips start to form the shape of his name, and steps forward to brace himself for impact, as in the sky one of the tunnels of Heartless coils and builds for an attack. It moves, too quickly to follow, too quickly to do anything but meet head-on, and Riku surges forward to do just that, pushing forward as he blocks what he can of the attack as behind him Sora seems to find his voice and hoarsely shouts his name.

I know you, Riku thinks as Darkness begins to overwhelm his senses. His vision flickers, all shadow
and yellow eyes, swirling and swirling and swirling before him, and the keyblade in his hands becomes hot to the touch, burning as the Light in him tries and fails to keep the Dark ahead at bay.

*I know you, Sora*, Riku thinks, *and I love you. You can do this.*

The Heartless and the force controlling them coils, builds, surging forward with a blast too strong to keep back, and between one heartbeat and the next, Riku finds himself swept up in it, the Darkness a landside down his throat as he fights against the cloying taste, as he fights to swallow, the world around him going dark. His ears are ringing and the distant sound of a scream barely reaches him through the feeling of cotton that’s dragging through his head.

The world around him shudders, Darkness seeping into his very bones, and then-

(He’s drowning, swallowing and swallowing, but there’s nothing but rot, nothing but stillness, nothing but black-black-black, like ink against his skin, like ink against his tongue, which feels dead in his mouth. He swallows, and swallows, and swallows, and there’s a ringing in his ears, a voice shouting his name.

*I love you*, he thinks, holding onto that thought for as long as he can, even as the Darkness picks him apart like carrion birds would a corpse. *I love you, Sora. I love you so much, Sora.*

“Sora,” he tries to say, but the world is nothing but dark- still and dark, like the inside of a coffin, like the inside of a tomb.

*Sora*, he thinks, and he aches, but he’s not afraid.

He’s not afraid.

He’s not-

- The world around him shudders, Darkness seeping into his very bones, and then-

And then-

(Sora, he thinks, and he aches, but he’s not afraid.

He’s not afraid.

He’s not, he’s not, he’s *not*-

“Riku,” a voice calls, anguished and relieved all at once. He feels odd, buoyant and drifting, and he reaches toward the voice instinctively, twisting as he follows it back to the source. Everything is muted and distant, everything is shadow-dark and hazy-thick, but there’s a bright spot in the dark, coming closer and closer, before-
“Riku!”

Sora barrels out of the darkness, glowing and bright, and his hands are outstretched, fingers curled just so as they both twist and reach until finally, finally, their palms collide once more.

Warmth spreads through Riku, starting in the center of his chest and bleeding out until it sinks into the very marrow of his bones. He breathes in, tugging Sora as close as he’ll drift in this vast nothingness, in this shadowy place between worlds, and Sora in turn tugs him closer too. They’re tangled up in the next second, knees knocking as Sora tightens his fingers around Riku’s, and Riku finds that his chest feels so full of affection that he’s dizzy and breathless with it, laughing in a soft huff as Sora grins at him from only a few inches away.

“I found you,” Sora murmurs quietly, voice thick and soft in the muted hush around them. Riku breathes in, the smell of stardust in his nose as he twists and turns until he can lean his forehead forward against Sora’s.

“I knew you would,” Riku confesses quietly, grinning at the way Sora nuzzles closer until their noses brush. “Never doubted you for a second.”

Sora laughs, a trembling little thing, and Riku feels the way the other boy’s grip on his hands tightens as his breath hitches in his throat. He waits, drifting in the haziness around them, unconcerned as long as Sora’s with him, and eventually Sora seems to find his words again.

“It was you,” his boyfriend mutters, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment, a constellation of tears glittering in the glowing light that’s surrounded them as Riku tries to press closer still. “The light in the dark, the one that saved me.”

Riku can’t help but snort, even as it feels like his ribcage is squeezing around his lungs. “Funny,” he teases, “that’s always been you for me, Sora.”

They’re so close together and the world around them is rosy-gold with the light building around them that it’s hard to tell for a moment, but Riku leans his head back, just a little bit, to see the blush as it crawls its way across Sora’s cheeks, dusting a flushed red along the bridge of his nose.

“Riku,” Sora whines, and his usual flustered squirm sends them both spinning through the murk, legs kicking briefly against nothing at all as this dark in-between place turns, and turns, and turns around them. Riku laughs again, unable to help himself as he squeezes Sora’s with his own, and Sora huffs, rolling his eyes for a second before he adds, “you’re the one who kept me from fading away earlier, aren’t you?”

Sora, Riku remembers thinking, as the Darkness had plunged him down into its depths. He’d clung to the thought of the other boy, sure that Sora would find his strength once more and pull through to save the day, and in the end he wasn’t wrong.

“Wasn’t that hard,” Riku says, shrugging a little in a move that turns them both in the space they’re suspended in. “I knew you wouldn’t give in, Sora. You’ve always been too strong for that.”

Sora sighs at Riku’s words, eyelashes fluttering so that when he leans forward and presses their foreheads together once more, Riku can feel the way his lashes leave little butterfly kisses against the tops of his cheeks.

“I feel strong when I’m with you, Riku,” Sora murmurs, his lips brushing gently against Riku’s with every word. Riku feels his lungs constrict at the thought, his throat closing over with emotion as Sora’s lips tug up into a smile that Riku can’t help but feel like an echo against his own lips.
Around them, seemingly all at once, the darkness presses in, turning their rosy-gold glow into something softer, like fading sunlight. Sora tenses in Riku’s grip, pulling his head back just a little to look around them as they drift up through the murk, and Riku feels the corner of his mouth quirk up in a grin as the power inside him condenses and crystalizes anew.

*The power to protect those I love,* Riku thinks, taking in the way the shadows-and-glow paint Sora’s features into something striking and soft, all at the same time. He swallows past the lump of his own heart lodged in his throat, eyes tracing over the barely-there freckles in Sora’s cheeks, the warm color of his sun-worn skin, the rich brown that dances with little sun-bleached highlights and bright blue of his eyes, the same shade as the sky.

*I love you,* Riku thinks, as he shifts so that he and Sora are once more just connected by their hands, kicking his legs to twist them up toward the soft beacon of light shining above their heads. He grins at Sora’s little startled jerk, squeezing Sora’s fingers with his own in reassurance as he pushes, with all the force of his heart and all the power inside him, up toward that light.

“Don’t worry,” he teases gently. “I’ll keep you safe.”

The world around them surges, the light ahead and above building to truly blinding levels. The last thing he sees, before everything goes fuzzy around the edges of his awareness, is the soft look in Sora’s eyes and the way the other boy’s mouth takes the shape of his name.

*Sora,* he thinks, as a ringing begins to build in his ears, the sound growing louder and louder as they barrel like comets toward the light.

(The world around him shudders, but there is no Darkness, no ache in his bones – there’s only Light, only the taste of ozone on his tongue, only the smell of salt and sun in his nose.

Sora’s hand is in his and suddenly the future doesn’t scare him at all.)

- 

The world around him – flickers.

Riku staggers, nearly tripping over his own feet as they crash back into the dusty expanse of hard packed ground. At his side Sora straightens, dust somehow smeared across one cheek as he scrambles to keep his feet without letting go of Riku’s hands. All around them their friends stand, wide-eyed and pale as shock dances in neon lights across their faces, but they’re *alive,* they’re alive and whole, and Riku feels himself sag with relief as in front of them Donald starts to squawk something that sounds a lot like *you did it!* before Riku feels himself jerked around by the grip Sora has on his hands.

One second he’s trying to keep his footing, knees still a little unsteady from crashing from one pocket of space to the next, and the next Sora’s kissing him, both of his hands curled fiercely around his jaw as Sora drags him down to better kissing height.

*Oh, okay,* Riku thinks, as he lets his knees go out a little, sinking bodily down into Sora so that he can curl one arm around the other boy’s shoulders and bury his other hand in wild brown locks. *This is a much better response to not dying than the one I thought of.*
Somewhere outside Riku’s realm of focus, voices are trying to heckle them, he’s sure. He’s almost positive one of them is Kairi and the other Donald, but Riku couldn’t care less if he tried. Not when Sora feels like a lightning storm, charged as he is with the power of the keyblade, fused with Light and so, so striking. Not when Riku can feel the way the other boy sighs against him mouth, their lips parting for a moment before Sora flicks his tongue out to trace the seam of Riku’s mouth, murmuring his name in a low, aching way that’d be nearly inaudible if they weren’t so close together.

*That’s my boyfriend,* he thinks, blinking in a daze of swirling affection as Sora bounces back out of his personal bubble of space, leaving him to sag like a puppet who’s strings have been cut until Axel steps up to subtly prop him up, muttering and shaking his head the whole time. *That’s the love of my goddamn life right there.*

Nothing the future could bring could stop them, Riku thinks, laughing a bit under his breath as Donald starts shrieking and squawking, waving his hands up at Sora as he flushes pink in the most adorable way and declares he’s not sorry one bit, because *all’s fair in love and war, Donald!*

Nothing, Riku thinks, could scare him in this moment.

Nothing at all.

-  

It turns out nothing really could scare Riku.

Nothing except the sight of Sora, stepping up towards the swirling tornado of Heartless for the second time, chin tipped up and determination stamped on every inch of his gorgeous, dust-covered face.

“I’ve got this,” Sora declares as he calls his keyblade to his hand in a flash of glittering light. Riku feels his heart kick against his ribcage as the boy he loves races forward despite everyone shouting at him to wait, and he’s frozen in place as Sora launches himself up and into the side of the tornado.

There’s a flash of light, bright enough that Riku nearly flinches back, and then Sora’s landing back down on the ground with a bounce of his toes, keyblade fading with a shimmer out of his grip as he cranes back to look up.

Riku wants to race to his side, wants to curl down around him and ask why the *hell* he has to scare him half to death like that every time they fight something, but before he can, there’s another flash of light, and then another, and another and another and another, like stars falling through the sky.

But they’re not stars, Riku realizes, as he twists around to watch them gather.

They’re keyblades instead.

Keyblades that glow, bright and true with the power of Light, twisting and gathering in the air until they make the same tunneling stream that the Heartless have been using to fight them. Riku watches, breathless with awe and no small amount of confusion, as the coiling stream curls midair, skating by low to the ground so that it kicks up Riku’s hair into his eyes, and it’s building speed, building strength, just the way the Heartless tunnel had, until the point it slides past Sora, who-

“Oh my god,” Riku croaks, not sure if he should be alarmed or not by the way Sora deftly hops up
onto the writhing mass of shining keyblades, riding them like the surfboards the other kids had owned back on the islands of their home. He’s a little alarmed, he finds, but mostly he finds himself more than a little awe-struck, mouth hanging open as he leans back on his heels and tips his head back to watch as Sora seems to steer the keyblades around and around before slamming them with a shockwave of power straight into the side of the tornado of Heartless.

“Holy shit,” Axel breathes, the words coming out a little strangled in a way that makes Riku want to laugh. “What the-“

Holy shit indeed, Riku thinks, as Axel’s words are swallowed by the next explosive shockwave of sound and power that Sora’s guided attack on the Darkness gives off. Everyone stagers a little bit, arms flailing out to keep each other upright, and as Ventus slams back into his shoulder and Axel hooks an arm around his throat, Riku lets himself half one shining moment of bubbling laughter as the weight of his own affection claws through him like a tide.

“He really is gonna be the death of me one day,” Riku croaks quietly, not caring if anyone can actually hear him or not over the sound of Sora’s attacks, combined as it is with the roar of the wind and the sound of Donald’s shrieking and squawking as dust gets in his eyes.

(That thought should be terrifying, or upsetting, or sad, but it isn’t, not really.

He and Sora will either live to be ninety, driving each other affectionately up the walls in some adorably over-decorated home somewhere, or they’ll follow each other to the end of all ends, going out with a whisper and a bang side by side.

Whatever happens, Riku is going to be by Sora’s side. Whatever happens, they’re going to face it together.

Side-by-side, hand-in-hand, he and Sora will be there.

Riku wouldn’t have it any other way.)

- 

“If anyone was wondering,” Riku pants, as the replicated body that had housed the thirteen year-old manifestation of his worst mistakes drops to the ground, “fighting a small evil version of yourself doesn’t get any less weird as time goes on.”

“Y’know,” Sora laughs, only slightly winded, even though Riku’s absolutely positive that the other boy has been running around and fighting way more than he has. “I was wondering about that-“

“Boys,” the King snaps, in a tone of voice that clearly says now’s not the time to flirt without the monarch having to bring himself to say those words out loud. Riku barks out a sound that’s almost a laugh as Sora gives a theatrical shrug, winking at him on the tail end of the motion in the way that makes Riku’s mouth dry and his heart soar all at once.

“Well,” Sora says, as the dust settles around them, the fight suddenly over once more as they all peer with varying levels of vague curiosity at the body that’s been left behind. “I guess, if we’re not allowed to flirt-“

“You’ve got other people to help out,” Riku finishes, and it’s true. The halls and walls of this stupid
half-assed maze are echoing with the sounds of other fights, Axel’s voice distant but distinctive, Aqua’s voice even more so. “Go, Sora, we’ll-“

“Catch you on the other side,” Sora finishes this time, giving him the sharpest, deadliest grin in his arsenal, the one that says he’s Trouble, capital T, and he’s about to bring hell down on the heads of those facing him.

(Riku’s been weak for that kind of smile since the beginning, since it’s first appearance when they were twelve and Sora finally started to beat him in their footraces and wooden sword fights. Facing Sora when he’d wielded that sharp-toothed grin and bright-eyed look had been earth-shattering, for more than one reason, when Maleficent had still had his claws in his mind and Darkness had its teeth in his heart.

Fighting beside him when he’s wielding that same look, especially now that they’ve grown together in what they are now, is even more earth-shattering, even more thrilling.

Sora slants a look his way, eyes like blue fire, mouth curled in the wickedest little grin, and Riku finds himself aching with the force of his own reckless, wanton affection.)

“God,” Riku says, feeling his lips curl into his own shark-toothed, trouble-promising grin as he flexes his fingers around the hilt of his keyblade. “Sora, I fucking love you.”

“Riku,” the King says sharply, his disapproving tone falling on deaf ears, especially since Riku’s too busy listening to the wonderful sound of Sora’s laughter as the other boy snorts, the sound breaking into giggles as he lifts a hand to thumb at his nose teasingly.

“Love you too, Riku!” Sora calls, lifting a hand to wave as he starts back-pedaling out of the little asshole-made room they were previously fighting in. Donald and Goofy share an exasperated look before scrambling to follow him, both of them noisy and ridiculous as Sora gives one more cheerful sounding laugh before turning around to run off, out toward the sound where Axel and Kairi’s voices sound.

Riku watches his boyfriend go for a moment, heart swelling with warm affection in his chest, before turning to look down at the trying-to-be-stern monarch at his side.

“C’mon, your Majesty,” he says, finding himself still grinning even though Sora’s out of sight. “Let’s see if we can’t find where those bastards are hiding, huh?”

He takes off at a run, swallowing back a laugh at the sound of King Mickey’s yelp as the small monarch tries to scold him for his language and ends up sputtering as he chases after Riku, following him down the path Sora didn’t take as he left.

There’s still more to the fight ahead, Riku knows. But it’s hard to be worried about it, not when the memory of Sora’s laughter and his knife-like smile is still so bright and vivid in his mind.

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The body of Ansem that Riku had once worn – or maybe it’s better to say that it had worn him – disappears, the same dust-and-hearts drifting up into the sky above them that everything else has given off as it goes. It’s darker now that it had been when they started the fight and Riku finds himself panting, chest heaving with exertion as he lifts his head to survey the field once more.
The King is in one piece, Donald and Goofy too, though all three are battered and drooping with the effort it’s taken to withstand the attacks so far. Still, though, Riku likes the look of their odds for the moment, especially as Sora skids to a stop at his side, a force of nature condensed into one beautiful boy.

Two down, he thinks, tightening his grip on his keyblade, and one to go.

Above them Xehanort laughs a short, bitter sounding laughing, and says something, short and clipped. Riku’s having trouble focusing on his words, a combination of his own heart thundering in his ears and the sounds of his breath rattling in his throat as he tries to catch his breath back from the last round of blows, but the point of it is hard to miss.

Xehanort is mocking them, even though he’s now the last enemy they have before them. Riku feels a surge of anger boil within him, his fingers curling so tightly around the hilt of his keyblade that he nearly can’t feel them at all.

And then-

Riku jolts as Xehanort’s hand twitches, his heart shuddering to a sudden stop as Kairi’s slim body shimmers into being, her pale throat cage by his old and gnarled fingers. Their best friend is trembling, Riku can see that even with the distance between them, but whether it’s from fear or anger, he doesn’t know.

“Let- me- go,” Kairi shouts, trying to twist in the old man’s grip to plant her elbow into his side. The hit connects, Riku can see that much, and he feels his heart lurch in his chest with anticipation, because he’d been the one to teach Sora and Kairi both that move, to get them out of Tidus’ rough housing as kids, and he knows how effective it can be.

But Xehanort doesn’t let her go with a hiss and a swear, like Riku is expecting. He doesn’t even flinch. He just lifts her up by her neck until her legs are swinging through the air, twisted grin growing on his lips as Kairi’s face pales and then goes red.

“Let her go,” Riku shouts and at his side Sora does the same, their voices arching into the air in a combination of fury and alarm. Kairi’s clawing at Xehanort’s hands, kicking back with her feet as best she can as her face starts to purple, but the monster they’re facing is unfazed and nonchalant, shimmering as he is with the power of darkness.

Xehanort opens his mouth to mock them further, saying something about how the time has come, what will they do now?, or something – whatever he says, Riku doesn’t care. He strains with the need to get Kairi out of the old man’s grip, heart hammering in his throat as he tries to figure out how to attack so that Xehanort doesn’t hurt her further, and then-

Xehanort lifts a hand, his keyblade forming in his grip with a soft, quiet malavence. Riku feels his heart stop, feels Sora jerk at his side, and before either of the boys can react, the blade flashes through the air, striking at Kairi’s side.

Kairi thrashes, opens her mouth in a choked-off scream, and there’s a wave of light, building and building to a blinding degree, before-

Before Riku blinks his eyes open and there’s only dust.

There’s only dust and Kairi is gone.

She’s just- gone.
Grief slams through Riku the way it always has, the same way love always has, ripping through him with the force of a hurricane, uprooting all he is as he fights not to fall to his knees. But where he suffers through this tide of grief in silence, hardly able to breathe until it sits on his chest like a weight, like a quiet, festering thing he’ll carry with him for the rest of his life, Sora’s grief has always been loud and stubborn, just like the rest of him,

And losing their best friend, barely an hour after Riku had forced him to them both out of the dark?

(Sora, he thinks, and there’s an agony inside his chest.

And he’s afraid.

But only for a moment.)

Sora is a live-wire of pain and fury, a bomb set to blow as he shakes at Riku’s side, and between one second and the next he launches into the air, throwing himself at Xehanort with a scream that rips through the air as the old man cackles in awful delight.

Light builds, blinding and true, against Riku’s eyes once more, and when it clears, Sora has come to a skidding stop at his side once more, trembling and tear stained. Up on the rocky plateau above, triumphant and proud, Xehanort holds his arm above his head, a cruel, wicked gleam in his eyes as the χ-blade shimmers into being in his hand.

Riku thinks of Kairi, of her slumped shoulders and quiet steps on the beach that morning. He thinks of the tacky yellow jacket she’d carefully laid on the bench of the Gummi ship when they’d landed and the easy, affectionate kiss she’d pressed to both his and Sora’s cheeks just before they’d joined the others at Yen Sid’s tower.

He thinks of Kairi, and his chest aches, but he pushes through that feeling to the other side.

Kairi isn’t lost until they let her go in their hearts completely. And as long as he and Sora are around, that’s not going to happen.

No one else is going to be lost, Riku thinks. A glance to his side, where Sora stands, tells him he’s not the only one thinking that either.

(Sora, he thinks. And he aches, he aches, he aches-

But he’s not afraid.

There’s too much grief in him, for him to be afraid now.)

- 

Riku feels like he can finally breathe again when he lands in the scattered, ruined world where Sora’s forced Xehanort to have their last fight. He can see just from glancing around that the world is shattered like glass thrown against the wall, bits of buildings crumbled and crushed where they lay, sometimes entirely sideways to the rest of the street.

It looks like it had been a beautiful place, once upon a time, but now it’s just another memory, another thing crushed carelessly underfoot by Xehanort’s greed and stupidity. Riku would ache for
it, but he’s got enough on his hands as it is, because Sora’s face is pale and drawn, his shoulders rigid as his chest heaves.

Riku has seen Sora in the aftermath of more fights than he wants to think about, has been on both sides of the battle as well, as friend and foe, and Sora has never looked like this, like one stiff breeze will knock him over, like the world has caved in under his feet and he’s teetering on the edge of collapsing completely. Barring the moment earlier in this endless series of battles, where everyone had been swept and scattered by the Darkness, this is the most defeated Riku has ever seen Sora, and it makes something in his chest lock up and start to shatter.

“Sora,” he murmurs, and before he knows what he’s doing, he’s curling around the other boy, fingers scrambling for purchase in the soft material of his jacket. It’s damp, oddly enough, and when Riku presses his face against Sora’s hair it smells of stale seawater and cut stone, but there’s not time to consider what this means, not when Sora’s as still as a statue in his grasp, not when Terra is stepping forward as a glow emanates from his chest.

Can nothing be simple, Riku wonders, as the heart of a man he’s never even heard of before steps out of Terra’s chest and starts trying to reason with the old evil bastard they’ve been fighting in some form or another for the past five years of their lives. Does everything have to be a big dramatic production with the worse case scenario always on the horizon?

It’s a pointless thing to think about and an even more pointless thing to be frustrated by, but as Sora turns to press his face against Riku’s neck, he finds himself simmering in it anyway.

What good is power, Riku thinks, as Xehanort tries to defend his empty reasonings to a man long gone, if you can’t use it to protect those you love?

What good is power when all it causes it destruction?

(The worst thing about listening to Xehanort prattle on and on about how the world needed to be remade, how it needed to be cleansed of the Darkness that had seeped into it, is that Riku cannot fucking fathom doing such a thing, not now, not after everything that’s happened to him.

He’s done nearly everything he can think of to ruin his own happiness over the years, has ripped and torn all his relationships up by the roots, not only with Sora but with everyone else they know as well, but the damage he’d caused never stuck.

It never stuck, Riku knows, because despite all he’d done, despite everything that’s gone wrong and all the Darkness he’s spread and people he’s hurt, Sora never gave up on him.

Sora never gave up on him and together they’ve built something better than they’d once had, a connection that’s stronger, and softer, and worlds more incredible than the one they’d had together as kids. With Sora’s help, with everyone’s help, Riku has grown into a better version of himself, and he’s so eternally grateful that he’d taken his head out of his own ass so that he could grow into this person that it blows his mind sometimes, how lucky he is to be here.

Maybe it would have been easier, to throw the whole thing away at the first sign of strife, to start anew somewhere else, with someone else, but what would have been the point? How would you know that the world you’re making anew will be better than the one you’re leaving behind?

What would keep you from doing it all over again, from throwing it away to start anew yet again, when it all went to shit once more?

Riku doesn’t understand it, can’t wrap his head around it at all, and it pisses him off nearly as much
as it breaks his heart.)

Whatever the ghost of a man says gets through to Xehanort eventually, but Riku isn’t paying attention to the words themselves, letting the tone of their voices wash over him as he fists his hands in Sora’s shirt and holds him for dear life. His heart is still racing in his chest, as if the fight before them isn’t yet finished, and he can feel it as it creeps closer, knows it’s coming before it arrives, the end of this world drawing near as above them, Kingdom Hearts continues to close the connection from their present to this past.

Xehanort caves, in bits and pieces in the corner of Riku’s vision, and he can feel it as the Darkness the man carries with him like a shroud gives to make way for the other man’s Light. Riku swallows as the taste of their combined presence strengthens and fades, and he can’t tell for a moment if the bile creeping up his throat is from that or if it’s from the sinking feeling of dread building within him as Sora slowly, carefully pulls away from his grip.

“Boy, oh boy,” the King says, chipper and buoyant despite all that they’ve suffered. “Well, I’m sure glad that’s over!”

It feels like all at once the world surges around them, a dam breaking inside their companions as they all start talking at once. Riku watches with a strained sort of detachment as Aqua’s shoulders slump, years of strife and misery lifting from her shoulders, as at her side Ventus and Terra beam at each other in glee. All around them, the world that lives in each other their friends’ hearts keeps spinning, while the one inside of Riku grinds slowly, haltingly to a stop.

Sora’s face is tipped down to the ground and his head is turned from Riku as he steps, slowly, carefully out of his reach. Riku feels the way Donald jostles him as he chases Goofy around in an ecstatic little circle, but the sensation of it is far removed from his mind.

Sora, he thinks, and-

(He could say something, could try and stop this, but grief stills his tongue.

He thinks of the tacky yellow jacket, of small, slim fingers tracing the edge of its zipper with love. He thinks of messy hair gleaming like spilt blood in the glow of the morning sun and glitter of laughter in bright blue eyes.

He thinks of Kairi, her slight frame piled on top of Sora’s when they were children, as the pair of them had tried to hold him to the sand and tickle him until he gave in and cried uncle. Even then he was larger than them both, stronger too, but he’d let them pile on him like a couple of puppies, sand crawling into every fold of his clothes, covering every inch of his skin as they’d all squirmed and snickered and yelped together.

They’d been eight, maybe nine, and by the end of it all, Sora had been sprawled across his chest like a blanket, arms and legs splayed out as he wheezed little bursts of laughter in Riku’s ear and Kairi had been curled up on Riku’s arm, her head tucked between Sora’s neck and Riku’s shoulder as she caught her breath.

“Y’know,” Kairi had murmured, as she’d rolled off of Riku to stretch out in the afternoon sun as the tide had come back in, kissing the edges of their heels with foaming seawater. “I hope our lives are always like this.”

Riku had huffed, because it had been the thing he’d seen the older kids do in response to silly statements like that, even though he remembers agreeing with the feeling. Sora, however, had just sighed, curling one hand in Riku’s shirt as he shuffled closer still, and Riku remembers the feeling of
his smile pressing against his jaw as Sora had turned his face from the sunlight above like it was branded into his skin.

“They will be,” Sora had promised, soft and determined all the same. “I’ll make sure of it.”

If there is anything Riku knows, it’s that when Sora makes a promise, he sees it through, blasting past the bitter end everyone else sees until he finds the sun on the other side of the clouds.

And this is a bitter, bitter end indeed.)

“I’m not coming with you,” Sora says and he lifts his chin to look at their friends without moving his head to face Riku. His face is turned, and Riku knows why without having to ask, because he had once held himself in such a way, as if not looking would save him from the possibility of seeing the disappointment in the face he loved so much, and the knowledge that Sora now fears his reaction makes him want to cry.

Shock ripples throughout their friends, but Riku can’t bring himself to look at their faces, not when Sora’s shoulders are curling up towards his ears, even as his hands curl into stubborn fists at his sides. “I can’t,” Sora says, and his voice cracks, trembling as he forces himself forward to add, “not when- when it’s my fault! I have to- to go, I have to get her back-

“Sora! You can’t,” the King says, stepping in before Riku can figure out how to get the air back in his lungs so he can speak. “The power of waking isn’t supposed to be used that way and you’ve already done it too many times! If you use it now, you could get stuck in the abyss and-

Sora lurches forward with a jerk, lifting his chin so that Riku can finally see head-on the stubborn set of his jaw, the bright flash of his gorgeous blue eyes. The boy he loves squares his shoulders like he’s ready to fight once more, even though his arms are littered with cuts and already-purpling bruises.

He looks seconds from calling his keyblade to hand and telling King Mickey that if he wants to stop him, he’ll have to fight him first, and the sight sends a jolt through Riku that starts his heart beating again like a drum.

“You can’t—” the King starts to insist again, but Riku steps up, holding up a hand to stop his words, swallowing thickly in his throat as he fights back the tide that threatens to burst within him.

He wants to scream. He wants to lunge forward and wrap his arms around Sora and never let go. He doesn’t do either of these things. Instead he steps forward, reaching with a hand that he’s trying not to let shake, and curls his fingers, just so, against Sora’s jaw.

Sora’s eyelashes flutter shut and his expression shifts in a smothered kind of flinch that Riku can only just barely feel under the pad of his thumb. He feels his breath punch out of his lungs with a noise he can’t entirely keep quiet, the corners of his eyes starting to sting as tears build and build and build.

“This isn’t your fault,” Riku tells him, soft and wavering as Sora’s face twitches again with a bone-deep kind of misery. “This isn’t your fault at all, Sora.”

“I have to go,” he murmurs back miserably, slitting open his eyes to peer up at Riku through his lashes. There’s a constellation of tears caught on them, framing the color of blue that has always been and will always be Riku’s favorite color, but despite the pain so stark in Sora’s expression, his stubborn hope still shines through too. “I have to, Riku.”

“I know,” Riku breathes back and even as he swallows back a sob, he feels the corner of his lips turn
up, his throat itching with a miserable kind of laugh he doesn’t want to let out. “I know, Sora, I know. You’re gonna go find her and bring her back. I believe in you, babe.”

Sora lets out a noise that’s too soft and sad to be a laugh, reaching forward to curl his fingers into Riku’s jacket to drag him closer. Riku goes willingly, stumbling forward until they’re toe-to-toe, chest-to-chest, foreheads pressed together as they both do their best to fight back the wave of tears that threatens to drown them.

“What if the King’s right,” Sora whispers achingly, a crack of doubt peeking through his stubborn bullheadedness. “What if I can’t come back to you?”

*Always so sure of everyone’s else strength,* Riku thinks, stroking his thumb along the line of Sora’s jaw as above them, Kingdom Hearts closes more and more and more. *But never as sure about your own, huh?*

*(Sora, he thinks.)*

But he has no doubts.

He’s not afraid.

He’s *not-*)

“But I’ll come find you,” Riku tells him and the words come out steady, even though it feels like his lungs are squeezing themselves empty in his chest. “Wherever you go and wherever you are, remember?”

Sora makes a noise as the dam breaks between them, tears carving streaks down both of their cheeks as he surges forward for a kiss that nearly knocks Riku back on his ass. Riku lets him surge forward, lets the force of it rock him back of his heels, and then he holds on for dear life, kissing back just as desperately, just as brokenly, because as much as he knows this won’t be the last he’ll see of Sora, the finality of this moment is sinking in all the same.

It’s a long, long minute before they both pull away, both still crying, both panting for breath as Riku fights to convince himself to let go of Sora’s face and Sora’s fingers twitch against his chest, like he’s having the same fight with himself, the fight to acknowledge that it’s time to let go, even if it’s the last thing either of them want to do.

“Find Kairi,” Riku murmurs, voice thick and rough in his throat, “and then look for my heart. It’ll lead you home.”

Sora nods, their foreheads knocking together lightly, and then he proves that he’ll always be the stronger of the two of them by pulling away first. Riku lets him go with no small amount of misery, forcing his fingers not to clench in the material of Sora’s jacket as the other boy steps back out of his reach and calls his keyblade to his hand.

Riku does the same, even as he lifts his other arm up to drag his sleeve roughly across his face. Sora’s laughter is small and hushed, aching and cracking, but it’s there all the same, and the sound of it makes it possible for Riku to breathe out a quiet laugh as all around them their friends step up, reluctant and sad as can be.

“Hey, Riku,” Sora calls out, voice trembling as the King gives the word to lift their keyblades to close Kingdom Hearts above them. “I love you!”

Riku feels his world rock on its axis, the same as it always does when Sora says those words to him,
and behind him, very quietly, he feels Axel and Aqua shift, both leaning in on his sides in the circle they’ve made to give him their strength.

“I love you too,” Riku croaks, and he reaches, pulling at the power inside himself, so that when he clenches his fingers, the keyblade in his grip shifts and changes, shimmering into the dark half of the keyblade he and Sora can combine together. “And I’m going to find you, Sora! No matter what!”

Light is building all around them, power tearing through the air, but Riku can still see enough to watch as across from him, Sora wiggles his fingers, switching out his keyblade for the other half of Riku’s with a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“We’ll find each other,” Sora says, shouting to be heard over the roar of wind as he lifts his keyblade to join the others in giving his power to close this world.

_We’ll find each other_, Riku thinks, lifting his keyblade as well. White light fills his vision as a pressure sits on his lungs and a ringing starts in his ears as he fruitlessly tries to swallow past the taste of ozone on his tongue, stronger than it’s ever been before.

The light grows, and grows, and grows, and the world around them flickers and shifts.

When it clears, they’re back on the dusty world that houses the Keyblade Graveyard, keyblades lifted in an almost perfect circle of power.

Almost perfect, that is, except for the gap where Sora had been.

_(Sora, he thinks, and he aches, but he’s not afraid. He’s not afraid. They’ll find each other. He just as to hold Sora in his heart and – wait.)_
For all that he’s had a lot of practice, waiting for Sora over the years, he seems to have a long way still to go before he masters the skill. Selfishly, though, he hopes it’s a skill he never truly has to master.)

“You can save the King’s perfectly rehearsed speech,” Riku tells Ventus, aiming to be kind, if a little dry, about the whole thing and finding he still bites the words in half with his teeth. “I’ve heard it already.”

(He’d heard it twice, in fact.

Riku still doesn’t know which instance had gone worse – Ansem the Wise’s haughty rebuke in Radiant Garden or the King’s hemming and hawing as he fretted in Twilight Town.

He knows they’re doing this because they care about him and Sora, he knows that, and yet it still pisses him off, the way they handle Sora’s latest reckless journey like a death instead of an absence.

All around him, it feels like everyone has mourned and moved on, but Riku isn’t giving up so soon. Sora’s coming back, Kairi in tow, and when he does, Riku is going to reach out to him, hand and heart as one.

Wherever Sora ends up, Riku will follow. He just has to wait for his boyfriend to bring Kairi back home first.)

At his side Ventus goes still, freezing in place like a child caught out of bed on a school night, and then he sags with a gusty, shoulder-bouncing sigh.

“Well,” the kid mutters quietly under his breath, though not quietly enough that Riku can’t hear him. “At least I can tell Aqua I tried.”

Riku can’t help but snort at that statement, even though it feels like he hasn’t been able to take a full breath in—days. A week now, to be exact.

“Listen,” Riku says, sighing out quietly as he tries to roll out the tension from his shoulders. “I understand that everyone’s worried about me, but—”

“Who says we’re worried?”

Sand shifts under Riku’s outstretched palms as Roxas drops bodily down on Riku’s other side, with the same careless grace Sora’s always had in the moment where he’d forgotten to overthink his movements. Riku grunts at the motion, rolling his eyes at the near abrasive way the other boy’s spoken, and can’t help but wonder how in the world Axel could have been worried about mixing the two blondes up.

“I understand that everyone who’s not an asshole is worried about me,” Riku corrects without a pause. Roxas elbows him in the gut without any force, scoffing obnoxiously and murmuring as if! while Ventus leans behind Riku to hiss Roxas, he’s sad so you gotta be nicer! like Riku’s ears have suddenly stopped working. Riku continues talking despite all of this, feeling a little bit like a kindergarten teacher as he continues to add, “but I’m okay. Sora is going to pull through, like he always does, and when he does, I’m going to make sure he’s okay.”

The like I always do goes unsaid, but by the concern in Ventus’ eyes and the arch of Roxas’ eyebrows, it doesn’t go unheard.

“Well,” Roxas says, shaking his head as he slumps back to his elbows in the sand, turning his face up into the sun above as he closes his eyes. “You’ve got that part right at least.”
Riku blinks, a little surprised by the sudden show of support, and it seems he’s not the only one shocked, not if Ventus’ little squeak is anything to go by.

Just to be sure, Riku asks, “what part did I get right?”

Roxas shrugs, the motion awkward with how he’s holding up his own weight on his arms, and doesn’t bother opening his eyes when he answers. “I dunno, all of it? Everyone’s fretting like this is the most dangerous thing Sora’s ever done, but honestly, I’m not even sure this makes top five. And you’ve looked way more pathetic, so I don’t know why everyone’s pitying you right now.”

Riku blinks at the horizon out in front of him for a moment, trying to pick apart how that exactly Roxas’ remarks make him feel, if he’s relieved not to be handled like a ticking time bomb of grief or if he’s offended by the wording, and then throws all his careful, well-thought-out responses straight out the window and just goes with it instead.

“Wow,” he deadpans, as Ventus skips past sputtering in shock and just puts his head in his hands. “Wow. Out of curiosity, when exactly have I been more pathetic?”

Roxas makes a noise in the back of his throat, peeking open one eye as Riku turns his head to look at him. “Eh,” the blonde says, with a near perfect air of disinterest and scorn, only the bright sea-glass color of his eye giving away the fact that he’s not as unconcerned about Riku as he claims to be. “You were, like, fourteen and angry as all hell? Wore an edgy, stupid blindfold? Challenged me to a fight, like, twice and shouted the whole time until your voice cracked? Any of this ringing any bells?”

Riku sits very still for a moment, soaking up the entirety of Roxas’ comment, and then, completely without meaning to, he bursts into laughter.

“Oh god,” Ventus mumbles from his other side, sounding miserable and strangely young as anxiety creeps into his tone. “Oh god, you broke him. What are we going to tell King Mickey now?”

“We’ll tell him to mind his own fucking business,” Roxas says, sounding a little too gleeful at the thought of swearing at the tiny monarch, which only makes the hysterical laughter crawling its way out of Riku’s throat worse. “And yes, I would tell those exact words to the mouse himself.”

Something tight and painful in Riku’s chest gets knocked loose by the force of his laughter and as he’s wheezing for breath in between snorts and coughs, he realizes with a sudden jolt that the corners of his eyes are stinging and his cheeks are wet with tears. He lifts a hand to swipe at them, alarm rising like a tide in his chest, only to find that his hand is trembling, a faint tremor that blurs the air like a hummingbird’s wing.

Exhaustion swamps through his chest, all at once, like his tight control over his own emotions was the only thing keeping him upright, and he collapses on his back, throwing one arm over his face to hide the tear tracks from the other two. On either side of him Roxas and Ventus have gone quiet, likely watching him have this small ridiculous breakdown like two people trying to figure out if they should run for cover from the oncoming landslide, and so Riku focuses on trying to breathe through the ache in his lungs.

Eventually, after he’s been forced to start sniffling audibly, just to be able to breathe through his nose as tears continue to creep down his face from the corners of his eyes, he manages to croak out, “that blindfold really was terrible, wasn’t it?”

The sand at Riku’s side shifts as Roxas squirms against the ground and he nearly jumps at the feeling of Roxas dropping his hand on his leg to awkwardly pat at his knee. “You looked like a tool,” Roxas
tells him, honest if a little stiff, “and I was kind of waiting for you to trip over a trashcan every time I saw you.”

Riku breathes out another laugh that feels like it tears at the inside of his throat, little broken shards of his own aching heart getting stuck as he swallows and coughs. The sand at his back is soothingly warm and the sun overhead is bright and steady, the breeze off the ocean cool, but not cool enough to keep him from sweating. It’s all familiar enough from his childhood to help ground him and he takes a moment, scrubbing his forearm over his eyes, before he draws his arm back and drops it in the sand, blinking open his eyes and squinting against the sun above.

Ventus is half-leaning over him, eyes wide and worried, bottom lip caught between his teeth as his shoulders hunch helplessly to his ears. A quick glance at his other side shows that Roxas has collapsed to his back as well, though his face is tipped toward Riku instead of up into the sun’s light like before.

It’s all too much for a moment, two of the three hearts Sora carried inside his own looking at him, one with an expression like he’s something breakable and lost and the other with his jaw clenched like he’s preparing for a fight, that Riku has to close his eyes again and just breathe.

Instead of addressing anything about Sora, about why the pair of blondes are even here right now, Riku murmurs, “sorry about everything I did back then. I thought it was the only way to fix things.”

“Eh,” Roxas says again, shrugging bodily enough that his shoulder knocks into Riku’s for a moment. “Don’t worry about it. I probably would’ve done the same anyway.” The boy next to him shifts again and when Riku peeks open one eye, he can see that Roxas is holding out his fist in the air, knuckles turned toward Riku. “We good?”

Riku snorts, ignoring the way it feels like some of the weight he’s been carrying over the years is slowly falling from his shoulders. There’s still an ache in his chest, a pressure in his lungs as he struggles to breathe, but Roxas’ haphazard, seemingly careless forgiveness is a relief to him nonetheless. He lifts his hand to tap their knuckles together gently, finding that he’s smiling a little in the corner of his mouth as he does so.

“We’re good,” Riku promises. He shifts his head to look at Ventus then, holding out the same fist toward the other blonde, who just stares at him blankly for a long, baffled second before Riku adds, “thanks for coming to check on me, Ventus, even if it was only to get Aqua to shut up.”

Ventus makes a face at that, lifting his arm slowly and cautiously before slowly replicating the knuckle bump he had watched him and Roxas do. “It wasn’t only because of Aqua,” he mutters, his tone of voice still achingly, awfully young. “Terra wouldn’t shut up about it too, but we didn’t think he’d be the best one for a, uh, pep talk right now.”

On Riku’s other side Roxas snorts a noise that sounds like a cross between a scoff and a laugh, muttering, “yeah, no offense, but considering the history they both have of being possessed by Darkness, that was probably a good idea.”

Riku watches as Ventus makes a face, a kind of twisting, reluctant expression he doesn’t think Roxas would be able to pull off at all, before the boy murmurs, “you’re probably right,” with a slump in his shoulders not unlike defeat. Riku can’t help himself then, finding himself awkwardly reaching up to pat at the other boy’s shoulder before he knows what’s happening.

“It’s okay,” Riku tells him, smiling a little when Ventus shoots him a surprised look. “You can tell Terra I appreciate the concern too. But I’m not giving up on Sora and until he comes back, I’m not really interested in being anywhere but here.”
Ventus sighs, a soft childish puff of air as his cheeks bulge out for a second, before muttering, “okay,” in a way that makes Riku feel like this conversation really isn’t over yet. The thought drags a new wave of exhaustion through his bones, but he tries not to focus on that, instead letting his eyes drift close once more as the three of them fall into an almost companionable kind of silence.

It should be weird, probably, waiting on the beach for Sora with two of the three people whose hearts his boyfriend kept in his own, but it’s not. The boys are both familiar and not, completely different people from Sora with habits that are eerily similar as they shift and settle at his sides. Eventually, though, the peaceful moment has to come to a close, and this moment is signaled by the slow drop of the sun on the horizon and Ventus’ even slower shift to his feet.

Riku opens his eyes to watch the other boy rise, lips twitching in a smile at the way Ventus wrinkles his nose at how much sand has collected on his arms and in the folds of his clothes as the other boy tries to figure out how to shake it all off without covering Riku and Roxas in it as well.

“Gotta go,” Ventus says, short but not unkind as he finally decides to dust his hands on his pants and be done with it. “Aqua said I had until sun-down before they sent out a search party for us both, so—“

“Ugh,” Roxas groans as he slowly tries to sit up without the use of his arms. He flops back bonelessly on his back twice before Riku reaches over and pushes at his shoulder and Roxas in turn swats at his hands, sticking out his tongue as he finally makes it upright. “She sounds almost as overbearing as Axel right now. Xion said she could buy me a few hours, but I should probably head back to Twilight Town before he realizes Isa dropped me off here on his way to Radiant Garden.”

Riku laughs a little at the thought of Axel trailing after Roxas, desperate to keep his eyes on him lest he disappear, mostly because he’s been in the taller boy’s shoes and isn’t looking forward to reliving that feeling again any time soon. He sits up, the motion much more seamless than Roxas’ two failed attempts, and can’t help the smug look he shoots the blonde as he does.

“That sucks,” Ventus says eloquently, which makes Riku swallow back another laugh. Roxas just shrugs, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips as he dusts off his hands of sand and reaches up to thumb absently at the necklace around his throat.

“Nah,” Roxas disagrees softly, still smiling to himself as he does. “Not really. I kinda like it, for the most part.”

Ventus’ face scrunches up once again, a little bit of horror mixing in with his bafflement, and Riku finds he has to lift a hand to press the back of it against his mouth to stay quiet.

“Well, do you want a ride? I think I’ve got a spare set of tag-along armor you can wear, I’ve just gotta call Terra and Aqua and let them know I’m making a detour.”

Roxas throws up the laziest thumbs up Riku’s ever seen before Ventus plods along the beach, rifling through his pockets as he searches for his Gummiphone. Riku watches Roxas as the other blonde follows Ventus’ departure with his eyes, the other’s face flickering with a moment of solemnness as he goes.

“Y’know,” Roxas says, turning just enough that he can peer at Riku with eyes that cut like broken stained glass, glinting like ice set against the sky as the gaze sends chills down Riku’s spine. “If you follow him, you may never see this island again.”

Him, Roxas says, but despite at least an hour having passed since anyone mentioned him by name, Riku still knows who they’re talking about.
(Sora, he thinks, and he aches.

He aches, he aches, he *aches*.

But he’s not afraid.

He can’t be afraid, he can’t-

Once upon a time such a thought would have put Riku in tears, and then later it would have seemed like a blessing to be free of their small, nostalgic play-land. Now though he’s grown and the beach around him is quiet and settled, the same as he.

“I know,” he answers, the words easy for all they come out rough. He’s known that this is a turning point they might not be able to go back on since Sora had gone still in his arms in that seaside world, crumpled and broken as it had been.

But Sora wouldn’t be *Sora* if he didn’t charge headfirst into saving everyone he’d ever met. And Riku wouldn’t be himself if he didn’t love that about him either.

“Then again,” Roxas says as he staggers to his feet, his movement and words jarring Riku out of his ood person-shaped homesickness for a moment. “It’s not like the rest of us are just going to abandon you two either. I know they all seem like they’ve given up on Sora, but Ienzo’s been developing a heart scanner, one attuned just to you, and Axel’s been bouncing between pestering the chipmunks and Cid to try and make them teach him how to build a ship of our own, so we can open and travel pathways as well.”

The implication hangs, unspoken between them.

*Wherever you guys go, Roxas’* tone and eyes say, *we’ll find you. We’ll give you a way home.*

Roxas shrugs like his words aren’t a big deal, even though Riku feels the way they land, spoken and unspoken, against his heart like a blow. He feels tears start to build in his eyes again and he hurries to wipe them away, smiling a little when Roxas gives him a sharp-eyed look of wary concern over his shoulder.

“Thanks, Roxas,” he murmurs, laughing a little hollowly as his heart squeezes in his chest. “You’re a good kid, you know that?”

Roxas twists to make a face down at him like he’s tasted something sour, the expression so fucking young that for a second Riku feels the way they land, spoken and unspoken, against his heart like a blow. He feels tears start to build in his eyes again and he hurries to wipe them away, smiling a little when Roxas gives him a sharp-eyed look of wary concern over his shoulder.

“Thanks, Roxas,” he murmurs, laughing a little hollowly as his heart squeezes in his chest. “You’re a good kid, you know that?”

Roxas twists to make a face down at him like he’s tasted something sour, the expression so fucking young that for a second Riku feels *ancient*, old and tired and worn thin the way he imagines Yen Sid must feel. He’s not *really* any older than Roxas or Ventus, but somehow he feels it, feels older by a decade or more in moments like these.

“I’m not a kid,” Roxas says, in the most childish tone Riku’s ever heard from him. “I’m just as old as *Sora*, you know!”

Riku can’t help but snort at that, dragging a sandy hand through his hair and shaking his head. He watches Roxas fidget at his side for a second, a soft fond kind of feeling building in his chest.

“Hey,” Riku says, reaching out to nudge at Roxas’ leg with his knuckles, “how’s it going for you? Being free?”

Roxas goes still at Riku’s side and his expression shadows, some of the youthful joy in his eyes hardening like ice as he ducks his head to peer down at Riku’s face. He considers the question for a long, endless moment, emotions Riku doesn’t feel the need to pick apart and name dancing across his
Finally, he says, “it’s good, I guess. Feels a lot like being a Nobody did, which makes me think Xemnas really did lie to us about having hearts. It’s- it’s nice thoguh. I like it.”

Riku waits a beat, watching Roxas shift restlessly on his heels, before he prods gently, “but?”

A sharp look tells Riku he wasn’t supposed to pick up on the unsaid *but* that Roxas had tacked on to the end of his sentence. Riku gives a little shrug in response, nonchalant and unapologetic, and Roxas makes a show of rolling his eyes before he concedes with a little grumble.

“But,” he mutters, “it’s- weird, sometimes. Axel took us to the bistro place in Twilight Town and we got to go back in the kitchen with the, uh-“

“That rat that makes the food,” Riku supplies dryly. Roxas gives him a look, one that says *you're only saying that so I have to acknowledge how weird it is*, and then steamrolls on.

“So, we went back in the kitchens, and Little Chef, like, wanted us to help him cook or something. Axel’s terrible at it and Xion wasn’t much better, but- but I wasn’t… I wasn’t bad. It felt… almost easy, really. And that’s-“

*Roxas doesn’t say, but Riku hears all the same. It's like I'd done it before.*

Roxas’ troubled expression is familiar, but not because it looks like an expression Sora’s worn before. It’s familiar because his face had been similarly clouded the first time they’d met, with rain pouring down on them both and an anxious toxicity in both their hearts.

Riku reaches out, with the same casual gentleness he’s always used to reach for Sora, and flicks the back of Roxas’ knee, biting back a smile when the other boy flinches and yelps beside him.

“What the *fuck* was that for-“

“Listen to me,” Riku says, leaning his hand on the sand to give himself the boost he needs to stand up. He goes creakily to his feet, knees aching a little despite basking in the warm sun all day. “Having good reflexes doesn’t make you a copy and it doesn’t take away from the fact that you are your own person. Even if a part of you remembers being in Sora’s heart, you’re still you, Roxas.”

Silence falls between them for a moment, the sound of the surf crashing softly against the shore filling the air around them. Riku can tell Roxas is squinting at him from the corner of his eyes, but he focuses on the horizon instead as the sun starts to sink toward the sea, trying let Roxas have a moment to figure out what he’s feeling while at the same time trying not to focus on the fact that it’s been seven days since they defeated Xehanort.

“You know,” Roxas says eventually, shifting to bump their shoulders together as he tucks his hands in his pants pockets. “It’s stupid weird, but also really nice to know you as something other than a desperate, angry fourteen year-old.”

Riku barks out a laugh, bumping his shoulder back into Roxas’ before he lifts his arms over his head in a stretch. “Right back at you, man,” he says, grinning to himself as something in his back pops softly. “Now c’mon, let’s go find Ventus before he leaves you here by accident.”

“*God,*” Roxas groans, stretching his arms above his head as well before he follows along behind Riku. “You’d think for an old Keyblade Master or something, he’d be less of a scatterbrain, but he’s not.”
Riku laughs and tries not to think about how much that reminds him of-

(Sora, he thinks.

And he aches, but he’s not afraid.)

“Kinda reminds me of Sora,” Roxas adds, more quietly, mouth curling up in fond lopsided kind of grin as he glances Riku’s way. The words are quiet and casual, but the look in the other boy’s eyes is all steel, sharp and cutting for all that it says he understands, just a little, the way Riku is feeling right now.

Riku swallows roughly, trying to ignore the way it feels like there are glass shards in his throat, and laughs. “Yeah,” he agrees quietly, reaching out to trace the bark of one of the old coconut trees as they go past. His fingers catch on the initials carved there, the rough work of a knife made more uneven by the young hand that had held it over seven years before. The S is too sharp, the R nearly like a blocky B instead, but at least it stayed.

(At least there’s something of Sora, of them, still here on the island- with him.)

Riku wakes up to the sight of Roxas looming over him, bracketed by the lightening sky of dawn. There’s the scent of something sweet and warm in his nose and after a dull minute of blinking slowly and thickly up at the other boy, Roxas sighs, shaking his head a little in obnoxiously broadcasted despair.

“I was wrong,” he tells Riku, who is still trying to muddle through the process of waking up, not even beginning the process of trying to figure out why the fuck Roxas is looming over him like that. “This is definitely the most pathetic you’ve ever been.”

“Thanks,” Riku croaks, unable to produce a better comeback when they both know that he’s probably right. There’s I’m going to wait on the beach for the boy I love and then there’s I’ve been caught sleeping on the beach because I can’t bear to leave for more than ten minutes, and today Riku is firmly in the second category. He sits up, groaning softly at the stiffness in his muscles from sleeping without someone else there to warm him as he lay on the cooling sand all night, and Roxas drops down beside him with his usual careless grace, brandishing a white paper bag between them like a weapon in one hand while the other holds a large white envelope.

“It’s that the sweet smell,” Riku asks groggily, reaching up to rub at his eyes only to halt at the sight of his sand covered hands. Beside him Roxas snorts, their shoulders jostling together as Riku twists to stretch out the kinks in his spine.

“Yeah, they’re called, like, beignets, or something,” Roxas explains as he drops the envelope in Riku’s lap and tugs open the bag and peers down inside of it. The smell of sugar and warm dough gets stronger, almost strong enough to drown out the ever-present salt and brine in his nose.

“Scrooge said that Little Chef learned the recipe from a frog,” Roxas adds absently as he draws out one of the powdered covered treats. Riku blinks, bemused by that statement for a moment as Roxas takes a tentative bite and adds, “does shit like that ever seem less batshit to say?”

Where the hell did you learn to curse like that, Riku almost asks, but in the end he just dusts his
hands free of sand, thumbs at the edge of the envelope and then digs into the bag for one of his own, 
murmuring, “in my experience, no.”

Roxas snorts again, spraying powdered sugar in front of himself in a little cloud, and then shrugs 
expansively as he takes another bite.

“Well,” the blonde says eloquently, “I guess that frog knows their shit, because this is delicious, 
man.”

Riku finds himself snorting a little in laughter at that statement, ducking his head as he takes a bite of 
the beignet he has in his hand, savoring the warmth of it even as his chest constricts with longing. 
_Wish Sora could be here for this_, he thinks, and then he carefully, gently pushes that thought away.

“What’s in the envelope,” he asks eventually, after he’s taken a couple bites of the admittedly 
delicious dough-dessert thing. Roxas shrugs quietly, digging into the bag between them for another.

“Dunno,” he says easily. “Namine was waiting for me last night, though, and shoved it at me, saying 
that next time I went to see you, I needed to bring it.”

“Nice to see all that practice you got delivering fake mail paid off,” Riku mutters. A second later he 
wonders if he shouldn’t have said it, but Roxas barks out a laugh that knocks him nearly sideways, 
their shoulders smacking together as he tosses his head back to knock his bangs out of his eyes.

“Guess it did,” the other boy huffs, lifting his hand to lick powdered sugar off his fingers, only to 
scrunch up his nose when it appears to be sand instead. “Oh that’s wack, man,” he adds quietly, 
under his breath.

“Who taught you how to speak,” Riku wonders idly as he pops the last of his beignet in his mouth 
and dusts off his hands to open the envelope. Roxas snorts, shrugging theatrically with a smug little 
grin, and then shamelessly leans over Riku’s shoulder to see what Namine sent.

A picture slides out the opening of the envelope when Riku tips it over and he holds it up to the 
morning light to study it, chest tight. It’s a drawing, one much better than Riku remembers the girl’s 
crayon drawings being, done with brightly colored pencils and soft smears of watercolor. There are 
two figures in the drawing, wrapped up in each other with their heads pressed together, one with hair 
the color of starlight and the other with hair the color of oak bark. They’re standing in water, framed 
against a backdrop of sand and rock, and there are figures littering the beachy background, figures 
Riku recognizes as well as he does the ones in the foreground.

There’s a redheaded figure, slight and framed in a dress of soft pink, posed in between a figure in all 
white with soft blonde hair and a figure in orange, with curling brown hair.

Riku’s chest aches, the force of his own emotions smacking him in the sternum until it feels like he 
can’t even breathe. He feels Roxas still next to him, barely hears him mutter _oh so she gets to be 
pushy, but when I do it, I’m being a dick_, but it all seems distant and hazy to him.

Numbly he flips the picture over, fingertips tracing the edge of the artwork, and reads _just because 
you’re scared, doesn’t mean you don’t still believe in him._

“One day,” he feels himself say, in a tone of voice that sounds scratchy and uneven to his own ears, 
“that girl is going to learn to mind her own business.”

_It’s the only thing about her that’s like Kairi_, he doesn’t say, but he thinks it all the same. At his side 
Roxas seems to hold his breath before blowing it out explosively, shaking his head near enough to 
Riku’s that he feels the tickle of blonde hair against his cheek.
“Like hell she will,” Roxas mutters, though his voice is soft and fond. Riku flips the picture back over, studying it once more, eyes tracing the tall redheaded figure in the back of the group depicted on the sand, one arm thrown around the shoulders of a shorter blonde figure.

Quietly, unable to say anything else as his throat is closing over, Riku carefully slides the picture back into the envelope it came in before tucking it carefully in the large hidden pocket on the inside of his jacket. It’s a small enough piece of cardstock inside the envelope that it just barely fits, and Riku breathes in deeply for a moment, just to feel the shape of it press against his ribs, and then he breathes out again slowly.

(Sora, he thinks, and he aches.

He aches, and he’s- he’s afraid, but he doesn’t want to be, because he trusts Sora, he believes in Sora, but-

But fear, much like darkness, much like light, much like love, creeps in despite his best attempts to keep it under wraps.

Sora, he thinks, and he’s afraid.

But hopefully not for long.)

Roxas settles back at his side now that the picture is out of sight, shoving half of his remaining beignet in his mouth at one time. Riku breathes out a sound close to a laugh and digs another one out from the bag, and from there they eat their breakfast quietly, sand and powdered sugar mixing into a mess on their hands and laps, and around them the island wakes, slow and steady as the sun rises on the other side of the sand. Wordlessly Roxas brandishes the last beignet at him, the same way he had earlier, shaking the white bag like a challenge, and there’s no pity in his ice-glass eyes when Riku meets his gaze.

There’s only the same understanding that there had been last night, the same flint-and-steel determination that Riku’s always known, on some level, that Roxas had gotten straight from Sora, even though now he’s made it into his own.

“Thanks,” Riku murmurs again quietly. They both know he means for more than just breakfast, but it doesn’t bear explaining, not when Roxas ducks his head and smiles crookedly, eyes cutting away in awkward embarrassment.

“You won’t be thanking me for long,” the blonde mutters, shaking his head ruefully as Riku arches his eyebrows at him. “Ventus took your words yesterday a little too literally, I think. He’s got it in his head that the best way to keep you company and help guide Sora back home is to gather everyone he can here, so-”

Whatever Roxas is about to add to that statement gets lost in the sound of a Gummi ship entering the world’s atmosphere, the whoosh and pop that accompanies it filling their ears like a change in pressure. It’s not one of the smaller ships Riku is more familiar with, but as it swings down from the clouds overhead, Riku can see that it looks like one of the ones Cid’s been working on in Radiant Gardens, one big enough to hold more than four people at a time.

“Well,” Roxas says dryly, raising his voice slightly to be heard over the distant sound of the ship’s engines. “Looks like your summer vacation’s over, huh?”

Riku groans at the sly, completely unapologetic look Roxas shoots him, even as the thought of all their friends trying to cheer him up and guide Sora and Kairi’s hearts home makes his lungs feel like
they’re full of stardust. He struggles to his feet on half-asleep limbs, staggering upright as his back finally pops.

“So,” Riku says loudly, squinting as the ship swings even closer overhead, hovering oddly in the sky when it should be dropping down to land on the other side of the beach, where Riku parked the small ship he’d flown here eight days ago. “Did you happen to remember to leave Axel a note when you disappeared this morning?”

The sky is blue and cloudless, the day gearing up to be beautiful as heat begins to bleed, sluggish with the weight of the tail end of summer, into the air around them. It’s still close enough to dawn that the sand is cool in between his toes and the waves will be cooler still, but there’s enough light to see by, which means Riku can watch the dawning horror break across Roxas’ face with the same clarity the dawning of a new day has.

“Oh fuck,” the other boy swears, just as the hatch above their heads cracks open with a hiss Riku can barely heard over the Gummi engines, and then the redhead in question is leaning out and yelling down at them, one arm flailing as Isa holds stubbornly and with a great day of visible exasperation onto the other one to keep Axel from falling face first out of the ship.

Riku muffles a laugh with the back of his hand, even as Roxas scrambles up to his feet and starts yelling back up at Axel, shouting *I’m fine, you don’t have to be such a goddamn worrywart, I’m not going anywhere!* He watches for a second, amused more than concerned, before giving the whole scene before him a shake of his head as he turns to pick his way across the sand.

If he’s going to deal with the hovering and fussing of almost everyone they know, he’s going to need, at minimum, a shower and a change of clothes.

(He’s going to need a hell of a lot more, though, if this whole thing last more than a day.

But the only way to get through this is to take it one step at a time. Riku learned that the hard way, back when Sora was sleeping while Namine patched up his memories, and it’s a lesson he can already tell he’s going to be leaning on once again.

*Ten minutes*, he thinks. Roxas should be able to buy him ten minutes of peace. Hopefully it’ll be enough to get his head on straight.

It won’t be, he already knows that, but he’ll have to make it work regardless.)

- 

The beach is already nearly full of the people they’ve met in other worlds by the time Riku makes it back to the stretch of shore-and-sand he’s always considered his-and-Sora’s. Mostly it’s people from Hollow Bastion-turned-Radiant Garden, but the King’s entourage is here as well, plus the rest of the keyblade wielders and the reformed members of the old-and-new organization.

Riku wonders if it’s weird for anyone else on this beach, that their fighting styles and the sounds of their voices shouting and snarling in frustration and pain are more familiar to him than their names. It probably is, but like every other odd thought he has these days, he tries not to let it bother him.

“There he is,” Cloud intones, from his spot in the already-dwindling shade near the waterfall. Leon’s skulking at his side, a pinched look on his face that says he doesn’t like the thought of being away
from his world for long, and Riku nearly winces at the sight. Cloud does what Sora and Yuffie have always claimed is his version of a smile, which mostly entails not looking quite as grumpy and closed off as he normally does, and then he flicks his fingers in a half-assed c’mere motion.

Riku arches an eyebrow at the leader and reluctant-still-claiming-he’s-not-in-the-club co-leader of the Restoration Committee before shrugging his shoulders and making his way over.

“Should you two be here,” he asks, once he’s ducked into the shade at their side. He can feel most of the beach at his back register his presence, their concerned gazes like nails dragging down the length of his spine, but he tries not to let it bother him. “I know Radiant Garden’s mostly back to normal, but I thought you guys preferred the hands-on leadership method.”

“We do,” Leon confirms shortly, the corners of his lips tightening into an even deeper frown than before. At the other man’s side Cloud rolls his eyes, just enough for Riku to see, and the corner of the blonde’s mouth pulls up into a crooked almost-grin.

“Mr. Trust-Issues over here couldn’t stand the thought of leaving Radiant Garden in someone else’s hands,” Cloud confesses, dry and flat for all that it’s the most lively Riku’s ever seen him. “But he couldn’t stand the thought of never getting Sora back home more, so—” He spreads his hands in the same gesture Riku’s seen Yuffie do, a helpless little what can you do motion that Riku knows Sora will get a kick out of seeing on the serious blonde one day.

Leon grits his teeth and shoots Cloud a glare that Riku thinks could split a Heartless in two more quickly than his gunblade, and then he sighs, all pretense of not caring vanishing into thin air as his shoulders slump with a weight not unlike grief.

“Everyone deserves a chance to come home,” Leon says quietly, his eyes flickering with pain as he lifts his chin so that he doesn’t have to meet either Riku or Cloud’s eyes. “Everyone else wanted to be here too, but we left Tifa and Aerith in charge of the committee, and I think the others said Ansem the Wise was staying behind too. That should cover our bases for now, at least until we can get this sorted.”

Riku feels something in his chest kick painfully at the other man’s words, his throat closing over momentarily as he tries not to let how much Leon’s words mean to him show. He must not do a very good job at that though, because Cloud lets out a little near-soundless huff that might be a laugh and claps him on the shoulder, almost-smiling at him with eyes that seem older than his twenty-something years really warrants.

“Hang in there, kid,” Cloud says, his voice warm and soft, for all Riku knows that he likes to put up a tough, spiky kind of exterior to keep everyone at arm’s length. “One day the worst part about this whole thing will be the fussing and fretting.”

The corner of Leon’s mouth twitches, a split-second smile that he tries to smother by thinning his lips even further, but Riku sees it all the same.

“He’s speaking from experience,” Leon informs Riku dryly, cutting a vaguely fond look Cloud’s way.

Cloud gives another short roll of his eyes, shaking Riku one last time with his hand still on his shoulder, and then releases him to try and lean back against the same tree Leon is, which mostly results in the blonde tucking himself against Leon’s shoulder and then leaning bodily against the other man.

(It’s casual and vaguely affectionate, especially when Riku takes into consideration the slight way
Leon shifts to accommodate Cloud’s weight, angling his head toward the blonde for a second as Cloud leans back to glance his way.

There’s a quiet, silent conversation that goes on between them in that moment, one that’s foreign and familiar all at once.

It makes some of the tension in his shoulders loosen as a warmth pulls through his chest, seeing the two men Sora always described as closed-off and kinda grumpy share a quiet, soft moment between them. It seems, at least to Riku, that the restoration of Radiant Garden and the work they’ve done together has given them a chance to start healing.

Mostly, though, it makes him miss Sora – Sora and the way everything’s always simple and clean when they’re together, Sora and the way he’s always hanging off of his arm or curled against his back, Sora and the hundreds of thousands of ways Riku loves him.

Sora, Riku thinks. Sora, please-)

“Give us a shout if you need a hand out of a sticky situation,” Cloud says, flicking his fingers in a half-assed you’re dismissed motion that makes the corner of Riku’s lips twitch with the urge to laugh. “We’ll be over here, keeping Leon’s delicate pale skin safe from the sun.”

Says the man who came back from his last wall patrol sunburnt, Leon mutters quietly, as Riku waves a hand and turns to go. He hears the quiet sound of a half-swallowed laugh, one that Riku thinks must be Cloud’s, but he doesn’t turn to look.

Riku picks his way across the sand and out into the morning sun as the sound of Leon and Cloud’s murmured conversation fills the air behind him. All around him their friends are caught up in their own conversations, several of them trying fruitlessly to build sandcastles without first wetting the sand. Riku arches an eyebrow at the small conglomeration of people, Ventus, Terra, Goofy, and Axel among them, before making accidental eye-contact with Demyx as he passes.

Demyx makes a face, lips pressing flatly together as he probably tries to fight back a smile, and then tips his head to the side, where the bucket sits, empty and forgotten behind Axel’s back. Riku swallows back a snort, wondering if the other boy has even given them a hint or if he’s just been letting them flounder from the beginning.

Riku settles down onto the sand toward the slightly quieter end of the beach, where he hopes that he’ll get at least a couple of minutes of peace before everyone begins to descend on him like vultures. So far it seems only the King, Aqua, and Xion are trying and failing to look casual as they watch him sprawl out on the sand, with Roxas making deliberate, desperate eye-contact from his spot at Axel’s side, where the redhead keeps trying to rope him into helping with their sad, sad sandcastle attempts.

Have fun with that, Riku mouths at him, giving Roxas his widest innocent smile, and then sits, letting the sound of everyone’s voices wash over him as he focuses on the way his lungs constrict and expand as he breathes.

(Riku thinks of the tacky yellow jacket and the way slim fingertips had traced it softly one last time before they trudged out to face the last fight.

He thinks of Selphie’s face when he’d marched down road he hadn’t walked since he was thirteen, back stiff and shoulders squared like a man on death’s row as he returned it to its owner.

“Kairi isn’t gone,” he’s said quietly, and his voice had been hoarse with disuse, two days into his own exile on the small island they’d all played on as kids. “She’ll be back. You just have to hold the
thought of her in your heart until she comes back.”

Selphie hadn’t asked what the fuck *that* was supposed to mean, which gave Riku the impression that Kairi hadn’t been keeping as many secrets from the girl as the King wanted her to. She just had squinted at Riku, as if a suspicious expression could hide the fear in her eyes and the shaking of her hands, and had demanded, “you and Sora are going to do something stupid, aren’t you?”

Riku had given her his best flippant smile, but it had come out as a hollow mockery, stiff and out of practice as it pulled emptily at his lips.

“Actually,” he had said simply, helplessly, “we already have.”

He’d turned and walked away then, fighting the urge to hunch to keep his head down as he forced himself to casually tuck his hands in his pockets, and though he half expected her to, Selphie never shouted after him to make him explain.

When he’d gotten back to the beach on their little play island, the King had been waiting, carefully crafted speech, wringing hands, and all.

Day two hadn’t been a good day, Riku remembers, struggling to keep himself from falling back into helpless, agitated grief all over again. Day eight, in comparison, looks only a little bit better.

Someone’s shadow falls across his legs as he’s working on getting the spider-like sensation of frustration that’s dragging across his skin under control. “Is this spot taken,” Xion asks quietly, hovering over him for a moment like a shadow across the sun.

“Knock yourself out,” Riku murmurs, shifting over to give the girl some room, but she doesn’t sit down on the sand at his side despite the dark shorts she wears, deciding instead to crouch, resting on her heels as she props her arms up on her knees.

Riku arches an eyebrow at the somewhat odd gesture, but Xion just smiles at him, crooked and small, and fidgets just a little as she reaches up to tuck her hair behind her ear.

“I know we haven’t met before, technically,” Xion says, ducking her head as her eyes cut out over the ocean ahead, most likely so that she won’t meet his eyes when he twists to look at her. “But I- I feel like I know you, regardless. Either way, I wanted to introduce myself and ask how you are, I suppose.”

She’s a soft-spoken person, nothing at all like Sora, nothing at all even like Roxas or Ventus, but oddly enough, Riku finds himself turning to catch a glimpse of Namine, tucked away as she is next to Isa as the pair watches dry sand once again crumple under its own weight in another failed sandcastle attempt. Namine, as if sensing his eyes, glances up, and she gives Riku the same kind of bittersweet smile she always has, lifting one hand to wiggle her fingers in a quiet *hello*.

Riku smiles back, feeling the crooked and hollow smile that he’d worn when he was fourteen pulling at the corners of his mouth once more, and lifts a hand to quietly wave back. When he glances to his side once more, he realizes Xion is watching him, eyes a shade of blue that’s nearly black, like the night sky as it brushes up against the edge of a far away galaxy.

“Sorry,” Riku says, shaking his head, feeling the hollow smile pulling at his lips smooth away into something closer to a grimace. “Sorry, I- it’s nice to meet you, Xion. And I’m—”

His words fall away for a moment, skidding to a stop as he tries to find a way to answer the question truthfully. *I’m okay*, he wants to say, but he’s self-aware enough to know that while he’s stable, for the moment, he’s not, strictly speaking, *okay*. 
“I’ve been worse,” he says eventually, trying to find a smile that doesn’t feel like a grimace to reassure the girl next to him. “I’ve been much, much worse.”

Xion studies him for a quiet moment, eyes deep and bottomless, mouth pressed into a faint line. There’s a struggle happening in the little details of her expression, in the fluttering of her eyelashes and the way her lip twitches as she chews on the inside of it with her teeth, but eventually she just murmurs, “I guess that was a silly question,” and shakes her head, glancing back down the beach toward the others as she does.

Something wraps around Riku’s heart and squeezes it in his chest and he finds himself moving without completely thinking the motion through, reaching out to drop his hand on the other girl’s head just like he used to do with Selphie, before she started shrieking to high heaven anytime he reached for her hair. He ruffles the dark locks for a moment, smiling at the way the jolt of shock that steals over her face makes her look young and sweet, and then tells her quietly, “it was nice of you to ask, so thanks for that, Xion.”

A soft pink flush crawls its way across Xion’s face, even as a bright, happy kind of smile tugs at her lips. Her shoulders hunch and her head ducks, as if she’s trying to hide, and Riku watches as the girl twists to dart a look back down the beach once more, nearly laughing when he sees Namine make a thumbs up gesture in Xion’s direction.

*Guess everyone else’s had time to reconnect,* he thinks, just as Donald tires of the doomed sandcastle endeavor and Demyx finally breaks, busting out in trembling laughter as Axel whirls, shouting and gesturing in the blonde’s direction.

He tries to drudge up some kind of feeling about that, about the way everyone around him has started to settle into their lives post-Xehanort, post-temporarily losing Kairi and Sora, but the kindest feeling he can pull forth is a soft, aching kind of homesickness.

*Sora,* Riku thinks, and he can imagine, so clearly, the way everything would play out if the other boy were here – how he’d be dumping buckets of water onto the sand to help with the sandcastles, how he’d be poking and prodding at Leon and Cloud to see if he could make them laugh, how he’d pull everyone together, slowly, carefully, until they all felt, for one bright and shining moment, like their hearts were truly connected to everyone else’s.

(*Sora,* he thinks.

And he aches, but at least in this moment – he’s not afraid.

He’s not afraid.

He’s *not.*)

Riku drags himself out of his thoughts with the force of will he’s spent the last five years cultivating, shaking his head a little as he gets himself under control. “So,” he says, trying to resist the urge to clap his hands together in front of him like Sora would. “How are you doing?”

Xion blinks at him for a moment, a slightly baffled expression twisting her nose up into a slight scrunch, before she repeats, “how am I doing?”

“Yeah,” Riku says. It’s an effort to keep from smiling at the momentary show of helplessness in her expression, which makes her seem young and a little bit scatterbrained, kind of like how Ventus seems sometimes trailing after Terra and Aqua. “Are you settling in okay?”

“Settling in,” the girl repeats quietly, still a little lost. “I- I suppose so. Mostly I’ve been spending time
in Twilight Town, with Axel and Roxas, and Roxas’ new friends there. Namine and Isa join us, when they’re not busy going back to work with Ienzo in Radiant Garden, and recently Ventus, Aqua, and Terra have started to join us as well.”

Riku feels his eyebrows arch in surprise, not having realized everyone had been bouncing around quite so much between worlds. He’d kind of expected everyone to settle back down in their corners, only overlapping when the King or Ansem the Wise called on them, but he thinks in hindsight he should have known better.

This is better anyway, he decides, twisting to take another glance at the mayhem unfolding around them. Livelier and brighter than quietly fading back into their old lives.

(It’s what Sora would have wanted for them, what Sora’s been quietly hoping and dreaming would happen – something like a family, stretching across worlds and hearts alike, so that no one who’s suffered at the hands of Xehanort and the Darkness would ever have to feel alone again.

He’ll be excited about it, Riku knows. Excited to see it with his own eyes, one day.

Riku, for his part, is excited to tell him about it until that day happens.)

“That sounds chaotic,” Riku says, not even bothering to keep the words from coming out soft and warm with the fondness he feels tugging at his chest. “Gotten into any trouble yet?”

The corner of Xion’s mouth quirks up in a vaguely surprised smile and she ducks her head bashfully, shrugging her shoulders a little as she does so. “Not really,” she says, laughter lurking warmly in her words. “Most of the trouble’s been Roxas or Axel, actually.”

Riku fakes a gasp, trying to worm another laugh out of the quiet girl at his side, and hides a grin behind his hand when she giggles happily. “Roxas,” he says, putting as much energy into sounding surprised as he can spare. “Our little Roxas?! Cause trouble?!”

From down the beach, Roxas cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, “don’t say my fucking name like that, asswipe!”

Riku lifts his hands to his mouth, cupping them around his jaw more to make fun of Roxas than to be heard, and shouts back, “love you too, Rox!”

At his side Xion claps a hand over her mouth to stem her laughter, rocking sideways into Riku’s shoulder as she does so. Riku leans back against her to give her a bit more stability, grinning crookedly when Roxas shoots a rude hand gesture his way and is immediately pounced on by not only the King, but Ventus and Aqua too.

“So,” Riku says, as Xion starts to calm down at his side. “What kind of trouble have your boys been getting up to?”

For a moment Xion just looks at him, blinking rapidly for a reason Riku can’t really understand, before very quietly, almost under her breath like she doesn’t want him to hear, she murmurs, “my boys, huh?” She smiles after she says it, glancing down at the sand in front of her knees, and Riku looks away, trying to give her the privacy he can in this moment until she gives a quiet laugh that draws his attention back to her expression.

“Roxas keeps trying to convince Axel he’s Ventus,” Xion says simply, as if this such a thing isn’t the funniest concept Riku has ever heard in his life. “He stole one of Ven’s shirts and sometimes he takes pictures of Ventus wearing one of his shirts and tries to make Axel guess who it is. I can’t tell if he’s gotten really good at impersonating Ventus or if Axel’s just that gullible, but he falls for it a lot.”
“That,” Riku says reverently, mentally filing this conversation away so that he can tell it to Sora later, “is the funniest fucking thing I have ever heard.”

“It is pretty funny,” Xion agrees, giggling quietly again. “They’ve also gotten us kicked out of the bistro a few times, even though Little Chef really seems to like Roxas. And we got in trouble with the, uh, police the other day? Or at least, when they showed up, Hayner shouted oh shit, it’s the po-po, scatter! and everyone ran in different directions, so—“

“What,” Riku sputters, not quite sure if he should be horrified or hysterically amused by the sheer amount of trouble they’ve seemed to get into in a single week. “How?!“

“It was kind of complication,” Xion says thoughtfully, tapping out a quick pattern on her knees with her fingers. “It’d probably be easier to show you the video, actually. We were in trouble for disturbing the peace, or at least that’s what Pence said later.”

“A video,” Riku repeats dumbly, still caught in the grey area that’s quickly morphing into a hellscape of pride and terror all at once. Xion smiles at him, bright and sweet, in a way that’s not shy at all, as if she’s forgotten to be now that she’s talking about her friends, and then nods, shifting on her heels so she can dig her Gummiphone out of her pocket.

“It cuts off way before the police showed up,” she explains, tapping at the screen slowly with her thumb, as if she’s still getting used to the device. Quietly, nearly wryly, she adds, “Isa says that’s probably a good thing, but I wish it had still been going. The looks on everyone’s faces were priceless!”

“I bet,” Riku mumbles, shaking his head a little before he leans over, peering at the phone as she turns it slightly toward him. “How’d the whole thing start in the first place though?”

Xion hums a little before she explains, tapping the button to expand the image on the screen so that the play button is a soft, transparent kind of grey overtop the beginning of the video. “Pence was explaining how in this game he’s been playing, the character you play as carries items over their head, with their arms straight up. He was saying that it would be hilarious if everyone did that around town, carrying around the things they loved and, well—“

Xion leans back a little to make a show of glancing at Axel, who’s apparently figured out the flaw in their dry-sand plan and is in the process of wrestling Demyx into trying to do water magic to speed up the process of their construction efforts. She glances back, shrugging in a way that makes her shoulders bounce, and then clicks her thumb over the play button.

Immediately the tinny sound of familiar voices fills the air.

“I can do it,” Axel says, as the camera focuses in on him, standing in the middle of one of Twilight Town’s streets, about a block away from the bistro. Roxas is standing in between Axel and the camera-man, giving the world at large the flattest look Riku’s ever seen on the boy’s face, and then, as he seems to realize Axel is creeping up on him, cranes his head back to see Axel’s face.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Roxas tells him, arms crossing over his chest. “I’ll kill you, I swear to—“

Axel swoops in, picking Roxas up in his arms with one arm under his legs and one behind his back, and that’s when the real struggle starts. Roxas shrieks, kicking his feet in the air as he tries to flail his arms, and the video turns into a cacophony of noise for a minute as Roxas and Axel both try and shout overtop one another, Axel pleading for Roxas to work with him while Roxas shouts and demands Axel put him down at once.
The sound of laughter starts to bubble up in the background and the camera bounces, one set of laughter closer than all the rest.

“Oh god,” someone, Hayner Riku thinks, shout-laughs. “Oh god, this is hilarious!”

In the video, Axel tries to lift Roxas up above his head by shifting his hands around on the other boy’s body and lifting him straight into the air, but between Axel’s not-so-impressive upper body strength and Roxas’ wiggling, he doesn’t manage it in the slightest.

“Put me the fuck down, Axel,” Roxas roars and Riku feels himself laugh as in the video Roxas seems to realize kicking and flailing is going to end up with him dropped on his head, because he shifts to start trying to curl himself around Axel’s shoulders instead.

“Jesus,” Axel says, loud enough to be heard even as Hayner tips over in the side of the frame and curls up on the ground, laughing so hard it sounds like he’s crying. “Who taught you to swear like that, man? And- ouch, Rox, stop pulling my hair, I’m not going to drop you if you just-

“Oh my god,” Riku murmurs, slapping a hand over his mouth to keep from wheezing as in the video Roxas takes a deliberate handful of Axel’s red hair and pulls on it with a tug that looks like it hurts. “Oh my god, why?”

“I don’t know,” Xion admits, giggling a little as the wrestling continues for a few moments more, Axel nearly getting kneed in the face as Roxas comes very, very close to being dropped.

In the video someone sighs, close enough to where Pence must have been with the camera to be heard, and then Isa shifts slightly into frame as he wanders up to where Axel and Roxas are squirming and bickering about.

“You two are idiots,” the man says, loudly and nearly soft and fond as Axel and Roxas continue on, likely unable to hear him over the sound of their own shouting. In the video Isa twists around, uncrossing his arms from over his chest as he gestures to someone off camera, and then adds, “do you mind? I believe together we can show them how it’s done.”

“Um,” Xion’s voice says in the recording, almost too soft to be heard. Riku finds himself leaning closer to the Gummiphone, peering at the screen through the glare of the sun and straining to hear as Xion’s slight frame comes into view in the video. “Sure, why not?”

“You did not,” Riku murmurs, glancing up at the girl at his side, only to jolt in place as he registers the fact that they’re not alone any more. Isa himself has come to join them, Namine at his side, and behind them Demyx is craned to peer overttop the blonde’s head while Roxas drops bodily down against Riku’s other side, leaning shamelessly over his lap to see the screen.

“We did,” Isa confirms, with no small amount of smugness. From behind him, Axel groans, loud and distinctive as the piercing sound of Donald’s shrieks grows even louder.

Riku glances back down at the Gummiphone just in time to see Isa carefully scoop Xion into his arms and from there lift her, seamlessly and easily, up into the air above his head. In the background of the video, Axel goes still, allowing Roxas the advantage he apparently needed to coil himself like a snake around the redhead’s shoulders, twisting so that his legs are locked around his chest.

“Holy shit,” someone in the video breathes, as Hayner’s hysterical wheezing reaches an almost painful sounding pitch of breathlessness. “Holy shit, he did it.”

“Fucking show off,” Axel yells from around Roxas’ torso, proving himself to be the most likely culprit in the mystery of where exactly Roxas has picked up his language habits from.
Curled around Axel’s head as he is, Roxas reaches out with one hand to point at Isa, his expression quickly morphing into one of dumb-struck delight.

“You’re picking me up next,” he demands of Isa, and there’s one split-second of Isa’s smug expression as Axel’s voice reaches an offended pitch that Riku didn’t even know he could make before the video cuts to a sudden, dead halt.

“Holy shit,” Riku says, as Roxas snorts in the vicinity of his shoulder and Demyx turns, starry-eyed with excitement, toward the straight-faced Isa. He glances up, catching Isa’s eyes with his own, and smiles the first real smile in nearly eight days. “Dude, nice.”

“Isa,” Demyx says, clasping his hands in front of his chest as Namine shuffles out of the way to crouch instead in the space behind Xion and Riku’s shoulders. Riku leans back, just for a moment, to knock his side into her knees, and can’t help the way his throat nearly closes over at the small, almost-teasing nudge that she gives him back.

“No,” Isa says shortly. “I only lift people I actually like.”

“Aww, thanks, Isa,” Xion says, turning her face up to give the looming man a dimpling smile. Isa, proving himself to be human and just as flawed as the rest of them, melts visibly at the sight. Demyx, meanwhile, only sputters, hands flapping around like lost birds in a tornado as he edges closer and closer to the taller man.

“Dude,” Demyx says, as Roxas continues to lean his weight against Riku’s shoulder, even though the video’s over. “Isa, dude, if you lifted me, do you know how tall we could be? Or, shit, wait, if I sat on your shoulders—”

Theatrically, as Isa loudly and pointedly tells Demyx that such a thing is never going to fucking happen, Roxas whispers, “do you think Aeleus could lift Isa while Isa lifts someone else?”

Riku tries to picture it for a moment, the tall, hulking, quiet guard of Radiant Garden lifting Isa straight above his head, while Isa lifted Xion. Realistically, he knows it would be nearly impossible to manage, but on the other hand…

“I think it’d be worth a shot,” Riku tells him, swallowing past the itch in his throat that wants to be a laugh. “Ienzo might be convinced to video it for you, if you ask nice enough.”

“If he won’t, I will,” Namine offers quietly. Riku twists back to look at her and finds her hovering, just shy of leaning on his back, smiling her quiet, lopsided smile as Roxas hisses with quiet victory at his side. At Riku’s look the girl only shrugs, an easy kind of what can you do? that reminds Riku of Cloud’s earlier gesture, and he responds by arching an eyebrow at her to try and convey that she can lean on him if she likes.

The message seems to be conveyed rather well, because after another second of staring at him, Namine shakes her head a little and leans forward, propping one elbow up on Riku’s shoulder as she leans her head towards Xion’s.

“Do you have any other videos,” Namine asks quietly, her voice a soft hum against the ever-present crash of the waves against the shore and the cry of the gulls overhead. Xion shakes her head, murmuring that she’s only had the phone for a couple of days, and then, somehow, all eyes turn to Riku.

“Uh,” Riku says, when he realizes the question is being posed to him as well. “I don’t have anything like that, I don’t think. I just have what Sora sent me.”
There’s a cascade of gasps at the declaration, in surprise and delight instead of disgust, as Riku was expecting, and then all at once everyone presses into his space, Roxas and Xion boxing him in while Namine cranes to see over his shoulder and Demyx abandons tormenting Isa to throw himself down beside Roxas and join in the dogpile as well.

“You have pictures from Sora,” Xion says, young and nearly innocent in her excitement. “Can we see them?”

Riku blinks, caught off guard by the question as an emotion wells within him too tangled and muddled to truly name. Before he can think about it too deeply – before he can get caught in the whirlpool of agony and homesickness and pride and affection that bubbles within him at the moment at the thought of Sora – he shifts so that he can dig his Gummiphone out of his pocket, giving the group around him a dry smile as they burst into obnoxious cheering.

Hours, from that point, pass in the blink of an eye. He has hundreds of photos from Sora on his phone, even though they’ve only had them for the past month or so, and going through them eats through time in a way Riku almost can’t believe. Everyone’s gathered around him in a loose circle when he finally reaches the end of his gallery and when he announces that they’ve run out of pictures, everyone deflates, just a little in disappointment.

“Aw man,” Roxas says as he leans out of Riku’s space and straight back into Axel’s chest. Axel’s only response to this shift seems to be hooking his chin over Roxas’ shoulder and curling even closer, even though the sun’s been beating down on them for hours and everyone is vaguely gross and sticky with the deadly combination of sweat and sand. “Those pirate ships look so cool, Axel, we gotta go!”

“Sure,” Axel agrees easily. “Soon as Cid hurries the hell up and teaches me to fly, we’ll go.”

On the other side of the crowd of people, Riku hears Demyx murmur, “do you think I could get Ienzo to come with me to San Frantokoyo?”

“You have a thirty-seven percent chance,” Isa tells him dryly, pulling the bizarrely exact number seemingly out of thin air, “which, admittedly, is a better chance than any of us have.”

“Don’t worry,” Namine says cheerfully, her words puffing warm air against the top of Riku’s shoulder from where she’s had her head laying against his for the past—however long it’s been since they started this. “I believe in you, Demyx!”

“Aw, thanks,” Demyx says, beaming at the girl cheerfully just before he flops back on the sand behind him. He ends up draped over Cloud’s legs for a moment that stretches almost-awkwardly before Cloud gives him a little nod, which seems to be Demyx’s cue to go boneless and limp in the sun shining above.

Riku hides a smile behind one hand, ducking his head to his chest as beside him Xion lets out a little laugh, and there’s a moment, just before everyone starts to shuffle back to different corners of the beach, seeking out the food they’ve brought with them, where they’re all simply together, basking in the peace of the island around them.

It would be perfect, Riku thinks, if Sora was here with them.

(Sora, he thinks, and he aches.

He aches, and aches, and aches.

And a small part of him-
A small part of him is so very afraid.

The rest of his life stretches out before him, a life just like this, a phone full of images of a boy no longer beside him while everyone they know struggles to help him plug up the holes.

Sora, Riku thinks, and he puts all his heart into trusting Sora, into trusting that the boy he loves will find a way back to him, and the fear edges back to the corners of his mind once more.

Sora, he thinks, and he swallows past the fear.

Sora, he thinks, and he believes.

He believes, he believes, he believes.

And for a moment, while he’s holding his belief in his heart – he’s able to face his fears.

And he’s not afraid.)

- 

The sun is setting.

Out across the water, the sky bleeds orange and red, purple dusting up toward the stars just beginning to peak out. All around him, their friends are doing their best to pretend as if an anxious energy hasn’t begun to creep up on them, but the signs are starting to appear, just like the worlds above their head are starting to shine. Out of everyone, Aqua and the King seem the most worked up, with Leon in a solid third place, and Riku can tell from a glance around the beach that not a single person present is going to be willing to leave him alone here tonight.

Well, Riku thinks wryly as he shifts to lean back on his elbows against the sand. So much for my days spent in peaceful, lonesome vigil.

Just as the thought occurs to him that this is another one of those days spent waiting, fruitless and hopeless, though this time with more company, there’s an almost undetectable shift in the air around them. Riku finds himself sitting up straight once more, heart hammering in his throat, and then, there, out across the water-

There’s a flash of light, rippling like a wave, blinding and bright, and it happens in a second, in the span of half a heartbeat, as Riku curls his fingers down into the warm sand at his sides as he fights to swallow past the lump in his throat, tongue a dry, heavy weight in his mouth. There shift in the air grows stronger, building into a crackle that sits just under his skin, and with it comes the taste of Light, the familiar soft burn of ozone in the back of his throat, and then, all at once, the world flickers.

“It’s her,” Donald squawks, from somewhere on the beach behind Riku. He hears a gasp, probably Goody, and the King’s half drowned out wait, Donald! He can feel the way the people around him are twisting, turning toward the old crooked tree none of them have been able to bring themselves to touch like the most disorganized hive-mind ever, but Riku can’t even make himself blind.

Not when the horizon is shimmering before him, rippling like a veil of water and starlight. Not when his aching heart is racing, beating a staccato against the roof of his mouth as the ground to his right
shifts, someone dropping down to kneel at his side. Their hand grazes gently at the back of his shoulder, just before slim fingers curl like steel bars around the ball of his joint, and the movement somehow manages to be both a tether to the world around him and the push forward he needs to remember how to breathe.

“Get ready,” Namine whispers quietly, her breath tickling the side of his face as she leans toward him. “And tell Sora that we love him, okay?”

Riku can tell the moment Kairi’s form must crystalize in their world, not only because of the second round of gasps that rocket off around him, but because it’s the same moment Sora’s does as well.

Standing in the water, waves lapping lazily against his tights, the boy Riku loves is haloed by the setting sun, which throws his face in a shifting shade of shadows. Riku is on his feet in an instant, Namine’s hand falling away from him like a cut chain as the last eight days of waiting like a coiled spring ready to snap propels him into action, and in the wake of his sudden movement, the shouting around him begins.

Sora’s image flickers, hazy and distorted like a mirage against the glowing red-orange sky. Riku barely even feels the way the salt water slaps against his shins as he hits the ocean at a dead run, desperate to reach the boy before he vanishes once more, and even as the water fights to push him back and slow him down, Riku pushes forward, faster and faster and faster.

Someone’s yelling at him, someone’s whooping in delight, but it’s all white noise to his ears. Vaguely he hears *run, you goddamn motherfucker, run!* And even further away a voice seems to shout *Sora, we’re gonna find you guys, alright? Take care of each other!*

But Riku isn’t listening.

Sora reaches out for him, hand outstretched like a reverse of the day all those years ago as the world around them feel to darkness, and Riku finds himself realizing just how Sora must have felt back then, pushing through the surf and the wet sand underfoot, arm straining to reach as his fingers scrambled through empty air-

But unlike that fateful day, so long ago, Sora’s face is clear and smiling – there’s no fear stamped across his face, no panic bright in his eyes. Instead there’s just a solid, steady kind of calm shining there, one that soothes something inside Riku’s chest even as his heart crests into an even faster tempo.

Sora grins at him, lopsided sweet kind of grin with a glinting twinkle of trouble sparking through his eyes, and he holds his hand out to Riku as Riku reaches back, hand and heart as one.

The world flickers, ozone and sweet rain-dew coating the back of his tongue, and Riku throws himself head-and-heart-first into the power of waking and straight into another world.

(In the moment just before – or just after – or just as the world surges around them, Riku feels Sora clasp his hand, vision whiting out until the only thing he can feel is Sora’s strong calloused fingers curled around his wrist.

“Got you,” Riku breathes, more starlight than actual sound, and he knows, even without being sure of where they are or where they’re going, that’s he’s grinning the same lopsided, sweet kind of smile Sora is, a spark of trouble lighting up the kindling of his soul until it feels like his whole being is on fire.

“You got me,” Sora agrees, laughing as he adds, “and I’ve got you, Riku!”
“Always,” Riku murmurs, ducking his head to kiss Sora as he reaches out with his other hand to
snag Sora’s, twining their fingers together on both hands until they’re locked together as tightly as
can be in this endless space, this place where all their fears and lies melt away. “You’ve got me
always, Sora.”

Sora’s laughter is ozone-speckled and bonfire-warm as he reels Riku in, leaning up against Riku’s
jaw as they hurl through space, and time, and a truly endless number of worlds together, straight
toward the future and straight toward forever.

(Sora, Riku thinks, and he knows that whatever lies beyond this, they’ll deal with it together.

Like this – with Sora at his side once more – he’s not afraid.

The future, he thinks as he reels Sora in for another wonderous laughing kiss, doesn’t scare him at
all.)

End Notes

i have loved kingdom hearts for ten years and this decade long love has left me with a lot of
complicated feelings about it lmao. i wasn't even sure if i was going to post this, but. i wrote it
and i'm proud of it and who knows? maybe this will give someone else like me closure. that
is why i wrote it after all, since kingdom hearts 3 left feeling some type a way, as anyone
who read this could probably tell, so. idk. i love kh. and in some ways, i wish i had loved kh3
more. but that's not really something i'm gonna get into here, so.

i hope you enjoyed!! and if you didn't enjoy, well. sorry about that lmao.

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