Summary

A girl with hardly any memories, strives to create some of her own. Tasked with the role of a wielder of the Key Yukari is met with the overwhelming struggle of uncovering the past of her ancestors. Through truth, she may release them, but at what cost will it be to the life she has long since been led to believe was her veracity?

Notes

As we walk through the canonical timeline of the Kingdom Hearts Franchise, many character's will have their stories told. Many relationships will blossom and crumble. And all hearts will at some point fall to clutches of heart break. Through the passage of this tale, four original protagonist will lead you through their separate journey's which at first may seems disjointed, but eventually comes together to reveal a greater truth that unites each party.
I ran through the quiet morning air as my lungs filled with the scent of the salty sea. Every step was a quiet one, as my bare toes lightly tapped the surface of the shore. Wet sand squeezed through the spaces between my toes as the water slapped eagerly at my ankles. I stopped near the docks, drawing in a sharp breath as I hopped onto the enormous, vacant board walk. Excitedly, I rushed towards the railing, leaning over it to peer out at the dark blue waters.

Standing there, I felt the ocean spray, mist across my face as I stared out at the faint glow of the sun, peeking at the horizon. The wind brushed, gently through my long black hair, while I strained my ears for the sound of the seagulls that would rise with the sun.

"Sssssssllllllleeeeeeeaaap...."

There it was, right on cue.

I waited again for another familiar cry of hisses but none came.

For the longest time, I had assumed that it'd been some sort of sea creature that waited in the ocean. But the voice only came to me in times of solitude and most often when I would stare out at the waters.

I leaned over and gazed down upon the distorted image of myself, reflecting back at me below. The sound of the water lapping against the docks’ holds was comforting. Settling back, I sank down to the plank of the boardwalk and sat there, dangling my feet over the edge as I waited. My green eyes glanced back the way I'd come every once, and again until a silhouette appeared in the distance.

Promptly, I stood and watched as a boy my age came trotting out of the deep purple, morning shadows. He strode over to me casually, with a medium sized sack slung over his shoulder. Excitedly, I hopped down off of the dock and hurried to meet him at the edge of the beach.

I grinned as I neared him, glancing curiously at the sack in his possession. "Morning, Riku." I greeted.

"Morning, Yukari." He returned, as he gazed down at me with his bright, turquoise eyes. He was a tall boy, standing half a foot over me. His bluish silver hair nearly glowed against the light of the rising sun.

"That the sail?" I asked, in reference to the sack.

"Yep." He nodded. "Hopefully we can have it fixed up and hoisted by noon. It's got a few holes, but nothing too strenuous."

I nodded as the two of us headed back towards the dock. My eyes fixed on the ocean once again. Somehow, this time it seemed to have grown louder than when I’d been alone.

"By the way." Riku spoke out, his voice rising to compete with the sound of the waves gently collapsing, in the distance. "I thought Sora said he would be here with you today, for sure."

"Really?" I smirked, rolling my eyes at him. "This early? You know that guy sleeps like the dead,
right? We probably won't see him until after the sail's finished."

"Of course," Riku chuckled. "I was only joking. We'll just make sure to have him do the rest of the hard work when he does get to the island."

I laughed a bit, feeling that awful sense of dread from earlier leave me.

Approaching the boat, Riku carefully placed the burlap into the bottom before moving to untie the ropes from the dock. Handing them off to me, we worked to neatly arrange them, as we'd been instructed by the adults. Once that job had been done, I made a grab for the oars, handing them off to Riku before using my teenage girl strength to push the boat away from the shore.

Riku hurriedly extended a hand to help me into the boat, to which I quickly grabbed hold. Together we got me safely seated, as we began to float gently away from the dock. I glanced back at the shore, staring off at the line of little wooden boats that had been left for the other kids to take out to the islands, where we were headed.

I turned back to Riku and watched him work at the oars. The boat chugged along atop the surface of the water as waves lapped at the sides. I'd offer to help, but whenever I rode with Riku, he'd always refused it. I hardly doubted he needed the help, but at least it gave me something to do and keep my mind distracted.

At sixteen, Riku was already pretty muscular. It didn't help that his yellow muscle shirt did little to hide this. And it absolutely didn't help the fact that I'd developed a crush on him within the past three years. I could never really explain when or how I started to feel the way I had, but I could only attribute it to the amount of time we'd been spending together, alone more often, the older we got. But I feel, I owe it more to Riku's desire to see what lay beyond the sea.

My thoughts were halted, by the light thud of the boat bouncing against the shore.

In no time we had made it to the island and moved quickly to dock the boat and get to work on our latest project. We walked quietly along the shore side, heading to our work spot. As we did, I gazed out at the network of an interconnected shack and bridge way that the adults from the main land, had worked hard to put together for us when we were small. Imposing looking trees towered over the small bit of land. For years the mass of a jungle like thicket had grown wilder and wilder.

I inhaled sharply as Riku and I headed into one of the passage ways, that led to the side of the island where a thicket of coconut trees grew. Passing over a bridge that stood over a small cliff, we made it to our destination, where our project, lay in assorted pieces-- a raft, that we'd been secretly working on, away from most of the other kids who hung out of the island, still had yet to learn about.

Riku set down the bag he'd been carrying and began to pull from it, a large, thick sheet, which I presumed would be the sail for our small vessel.

"It's... not so bad." I said, observing the tears that spotted the cloth.

"We can fix it up." Riku said as he handed me a sewing kit. The needles inside had been clearly meant for the handiwork of thick leathers and quilting. Still I suppose it would do just fine.

I nodded, taking the kit in my hands and adjusting the sheet so I could count off all of the tears in the material. Silently the two of us went to work, sitting across from each other as we pressed our needles through different sections of the would-be sail. Slowly, my mind began to drift away, as I looked up at Riku who'd been working diligently. His brows were knit in concentration as the light
breeze swept his hair across his forehead. Turning away, my attention was met with the purple sky, bleeding into the orange of the morning sun. The ocean reflected a deep burgundy as, specks of light blue twinkled on the surface.

"You seem pretty distracted this morning." Riku's voice spoke out over the ambient noises.

I didn't bother looking back at him. I knew he'd still be nose deep in the sail if I did. Instead I continued to gaze out at the ocean-- The dread was teetering its way back into existence.

"I... guess, I'm just a little nervous." I slowly began, trying to break up my obvious growing fear of the idea of leaving the Island.

It had been a long time now, but, Riku, and a couple of our other friends had planned to leave the place we'd called home. It was Riku who conceived the idea when we were little kids. Now older and with ample time on summer break, we'd decided to take matters into our own hands to craft a boat to see what lay beyond the vast, infinite plane of blue. The idea that we were alone out here, was a crazy and slightly scary thought. But wouldn't it be even crazier and scarier to find out that all our lives, it hadn't been that way?

I sighed shrugging my shoulders as I looked down at my stitch work. "Never mind. It's dumb." I said, now regretting feeling like a weakling in front of him.

I noticed Riku had stopped what he was doing to look up at me. "It's not dumb." He said. "If something is bothering you, you know you can talk about it."

I glanced over at him with uncertain eyes. I'd kept a lot of things hidden. Not just from Riku, but all my friends. I'd never told anyone about the dreams, or nightmares. And never had I even considered mentioning the voice. At best, everyone would think I'm crazy. At worst, no one would know how to help. It's not like I haven't had my chances. I just... worry about how I'd be treated afterwards.

"Yeah..." I finally decided to say after what felt like a very long and uncomfortable pause. My eyes darted back to the stitching as I tried my best not to feel the stare that Riku had placed on me. I probably had worried him. I regretted it but, I refused to bother with the topic any longer as I insisted on keeping my eyes on my work until we'd finished.

**Kingdom Hearts: Ascendant Recollection**

**Chapter 01**

**Ebbing Summer Haze**

With the rising sun, the air grew warmer and the sky brightened to its stark clear blue. We'd managed to make significant progress on our raft, with the only task left to be done-- mounting the sail, adjusting ropes and harnesses, and making provisions for our trip. Late in the afternoon, our small duo had become a quartet, as the island trickled to life with other kids from the main land, including the two who'd shared in our plans to sail into the unknown.

A girl with bright, rose red hair, approached with a huge bundle of ropes. She dropped them near the raft, where we'd been making very small fixes, to account for any problems we might have on our journey. The idea itself was a bit nerve-wracking but I let it be for the time being.
"Thanks Kairi." I said grinning at her.

"Of course!" She smiled, her violet eyes dancing with enthusiasm. "I'm just so excited. You and Riku have made so much progress without us. I almost can't wait, once we set sail!"

Kairi was a girl of a much slimmer frame than my own. She was fifteen and had about one or two inches on me. She dressed herself, in somewhat of a stylish get up of black and white tank tops, a lavender skort and an array of yellow, black and silver bangles and bands on her wrist. Around her neck, dangling below the black choker, was the necklace she'd always worn, ever since she showed up on the island when we were all little. A pearl-ish like bead hung from a black cord, glinting brightly against the sun's gaze.

Kairi herself had no memory of where she'd come from before. But I had to wonder that even she felt there was something heavily important about that necklace for her to never go a day without it. The prompting of her arrival had been what started this whole ride of preparation for a trip to "anywhere but here." But I could tell that Kairi had to be the most eager of us all, having nothing left but a memory of her grandmother as a constant reminder that she may still have family somewhere out there.

"Once Sora gets his share done, things will definitely start to speed up." Riku’s voice came in from behind me. I glanced back at him as he came away from the raft.

"Hey, I've been doing my part!" Called another voice.

I watched as a boy with spiky chestnut, brown hair and deep blue eyes entered our spot nestled amongst the palm trees, lugging a sack over his shoulder. Plopping it down as he reached us, he let go a combo of rhythmic pants, before wiping the sweat from his brow. "You're the one makin' me do all this work!" He complained.

"That's because you slacked off on helping out on the raft." Riku said with his hands on his hips. He was now looking down at Sora was faux pity.

"What?" Sora, attempted to straighten. "I helped plenty!"

"Yukari did more than you." Riku mocked.

I watched as the two stared each other down. But it was clear that Riku had Sora beat with his collected demeanor. At fifteen, Sora was pretty short, next to Riku. Standing at about Kairi’s height. He was dressed in a red jump suit and hoodie, and strode around in his loud, yellow shoes.

The rivalry between the two had gone on for years, but only seemed to have begun when they entered their tweens. It wasn't really a matter of question, who the fastest, strongest, and probably boldest kid on the island was. I often overheard some of the boys discussing it, and Riku's name always came up. Sora never really let that stop him though, as the two were close friends, and their rivalry never seemed to get the better of them.

"Alright you guys." Kairi announced, rolling her eyes. "We've still got tons to do! Might as well not stand around."

"Yeah, yeah." Sora, crossed his arms over his chest.

Riku shrugged. "Of course. I want to be done with the raft by sun down. You're still more than welcome to help, Sora." He teased.

Sora grinned, but had no words to offer as he started for the raft.
The rest of the day was spent doing the expected—working on the raft and attempting to finish up with the provisions until, even that turned into just relaxing and falling back into the routine of the usual shenanigans we'd often found ourselves getting into. It wasn't long before dusk made itself apparent and the four of us found ourselves lazing about on the now completed voyager.

We basked in what was left of the sun's glow as it began to sink below the horizon. The sky was a blood orange, and the ocean had been tinted pink. As we sat around the raft, we held a small conversation of what we almost always talked about, somehow the topic had only become more frequent as the days of the raft's completion carried on.

"Do you really think, we'll find something out there, if we go to the end of the ocean?" Kairi's voice trickled into the silence as she spoke to no one in particular.

"Dunno..." Sora shrugged, as he worked at what appeared to be a flag. Earlier he'd insisted, we'd needed one. And now he was sanding away at the pole, absent-mindedly as he gazed up at the sky. "I guess, we're just gonna have to find out when we get there."

I sighed, slipping my feet into the shore. The rise and fall of the water, deposited sand on my legs. My eyes drifted up to the sail as I leaned back on my palms. "You never know." I voiced. "Tidus and Wakka claimed to have swam out super far once. Said, they didn't see anything but water all around... Maybe there isn't anything out there."

"We'll find out, when we find out." Riku insisted, setting down a stick he'd been whittling at. "And... say there is something at the ocean's edge- maybe it's where Kairi came from, or someplace new. Had she not showed up, we probably would've never thought there could be other worlds to venture to in the first place. We’d have just kept on living our lives in this same unchanged scenery."

For a moment, everyone was silent as Riku's words carried through the salty ocean air. I wanted to say something-- About the trip, the idea of other worlds, Riku's feeling of just getting out of here, anything. Instead, I let the silence linger long enough for someone else to break it.

"Welp!" Came Sora's voice to my right. He'd sprung up from the raft, having dropped the pole and going into a deep stretch. "I'm goin' home. You comin' back with me Yukari?"

I glanced over at Riku on my left, who'd not removed his gaze from his stick before looking up at Sora.

"Uh... yeah." I answered slowly, rising from my spot.

"I'll head out too." Kairi said. "I'm pretty beat. We should all head back together."

"Yeah." Riku agreed, solemnly.

We made our way back to the docks, where we unfastened the boats and headed back to the mainland. It was then that we all said our goodbye’s and went our separate ways as night began to assert itself. Sora and I headed back to his house, where we'd indulged in one of our favorite past times: Eating.

To make things a little bit clear, I lived with Sora and his family for as long as I could remember. Apparently I had suffered some sort of trauma as a kid, and lost my memories during the events of losing my family. The only odd thing was, that no one would tell me what happened. All the adults said that my mom passed, and my father vanished. None of the kids on the island seemed to know much, either. But it didn't bother me as much as I felt it should have. I suppose you can't miss
something you have no memory of.

In the meantime, Sora and I had basically become like siblings. I looked out for him as he did for me. I helped him with his chores and his homework and in turn, he kept a smile on my face, weather he intended to or not. Our relationship was a really positive one, as he was the slightly older brother who acted goofy, while the younger sister made sure to keep him in check.

Once showered, I threw on an over sized t-shirt and some shorts and joined Sora in his room, with what was essentially a layout of food. We ate and talked the evening away, mostly about random stuff, like how good the food was, what we'd want to eat the next day and etc. Eventually the discussion quieted, as we slowly finished up and gathered our utensils and bowls and took them to the kitchen to clean up. As we did on occasion, we took snacks back to his room and kinda just laid around, reading. I partook in an adventure novel while he skimmed through the pages of his comics.

Partway through my read, my mind drifted to other thoughts. I might sound like a broken record, but yes, I was thinking of the whole ordeal of leaving the island, and most importantly, Riku's odd behavior from earlier. I recalled the distant look in his eyes before he left. There was something about it, I wasn’t too fond of.

"Hey Sora?" I called out to him on his floor. I'd had myself slumped in a bean bag he'd thrown in a corner.

"Hm?" He didn't look up from his comic, but I knew I had his attention.

"Do you think... Riku's been acting a little weird?" I suggested.

Sora put down his book and sent me an inquisitive look. "I'mm... not sure what you mean. Weird, how?"

I hadn't expected to get this much of his attention, but maybe he was feeling it too? "Oh well, I dunno. It just feels like he's a bit more... distant..." I found myself trailing off as a frown took shape on my lips. The image of Riku's solemn expression flashed into my mind.

"Well... maybe." Sora somewhat agreed. "It's probably him thinking about the outside world way too much." He then proceeded to shrug it off, rolling onto his back as he resumed his activity.

Granted, that's what it felt like to me too, but it seemed like there was more. It was as if, I'd struck a nerve earlier when I suggested there may not be anything beyond the ocean. His expression was so... guarded and closed off. I wished I'd just asked him.

Dissatisfied with the outcome of the conversation, I closed my book and released a heavy sigh. "I'm goin' to bed." I said, masking my frustration. "Are you getting up early tomorrow?" I asked, turning at the door.

"Wake me up." Sora said with his nose still pressed into his book.

"Uh huh.. We'll see about that." I grinned, knowingly as I headed off.

Once in my room, I plopped faced first into the bed. I stayed like that for a minute before lifting my head, turning to the night stand beside my bed. It had been littered with keepsakes, nick knacks and photographs of nothing but good times with my friends. All that was missing was blood relatives...

Sitting up on my haunches, I scooted to the edge of the bed and reached for a palm sized wooden
charm, in the shape of a yellow star. Looking down at it, I felt a little better as I ran my fingers over the little scratches and nicks. Turning it over in my hand I found the words "Prop of Riku and Yuka" carved in small, barely legible, letters on one of the prongs of the star. From the same prong, was a wooden leaf, tinted a greenish blue, leading off into a gimp chain that dangled from the tip.

The charm had been made in reference to poupou fruits, which was a special "delicacy" that had the power to supposedly bind two people together for life, if they'd shared one. Riku and I had made it a few years back in secret. It was a weird thing for us to do, considering the whole meaning behind the legend but, the charm itself was tied with good memories. These days I'd been far too embarrassed to keep it with me at all times. Imagine if anyone found out about it!

Exactly!

Besides, I wouldn't want to be caught with it, and suddenly have Riku involved. I mean, his name was on it.

Lying back, into my pillow, I clutched the charm tighter in my hand, doing my best to remain positive. Tomorrow was right around the corner.

As my mind slowly began to turn off, I drifted away into a dream. My dreams, were not the usual kind as, often, I found myself wandering around in places I'd never seen. I had to assume for a long time that if there were outside worlds, these would be it. Yet, I'd never come across much, to discount them as dreams... perhaps not until that night.

As my soul was leaving my body, I was pulled across the top of the ocean's surface. Sea mist, zipping behind me as the water began to blend with the reflection of the sky before it turned to stars. I gazed up in awe at how close I'd come. I didn't have much control over the dreams. I was just along for the ride.

A shooting star suddenly whizzed past me. When I turned to follow it, I was treated to a top down view of an expansive hedge garden that sat within what appeared to be a sort of grand court yard. Enormous white columns rose up into the sky, adorned with intricate, golden designs.

But it didn't seem as though the garden was my focus as I drifted closer towards a hall that opened up to a view of the court yard. A long, expensive looking carpet with golden trim ran the length of the hall. Walking along it was... A duck?

The pitter-pat of his... feet, slapped along the rug as he walked. He was dressed as though he was some sort of mage, as a wizard’s hat sat atop his head. A large grin ran the length of his bill as he seemed in a good mood. Involuntarily I floated alongside him as he walked. I wouldn't bother trying to converse with him, as my experiences with the dreams had led me to realize that if anyone lived within them, they could neither see nor hear me.

The duck... man... continued on until he made it to a large set of doors, towering several tens of hundreds of feet above my head. At first I wondered how he intended to get through on his own. Yet my question was answered when the duck pressed his knuckles to the door, and initiated a sort of patterned knocking. Once completed, a small box outline appeared, and a hundredth portion of the door swung open. I tried not to think too hard about the need for such an entrance, as I followed him inside where I found an impressive space, of near complete... nothing.

The long red rug from the hall, ran the length of this room as well-- all the way down to the other end of it. A throne of fancy wood and gold designs, sat lonesome at the back of the chamber, The echoing of the ducks feet intensified, bouncing off the immaculate marble surfaces.
"Good morning your majesty." The duck began to greet the empty seat, which at first led me to believe he was a bit loony. Yet this was before he began to realize, the room had been empty from the start.

Stopping halfway into the room, the duck glanced around, almost nervously before the golden coat of a bloodhound lit up from behind the throne. Black ears flopped against its head as it trotted over towards the duck man, with an envelope in its mouth.

"Pluto?" The duck trailed off.

I blinked rapidly at the realization that the dog was a pet... to an animal? This had to be some dream I was dreaming.

As I watched the dog let loose the envelope into the Ducks feathered hand, he barked once before running off.

The duck man watched him go, looking right through me as he did. His face growing more nervous by the second before turning back to the envelope, opening it up to a letter. Peering over his shoulder, I decided I would sneak a read.

Dear Donald,

Please forgive me for leaving so suddenly, but trouble is brewing, and there's no time to lose. I'm not sure why, but the stars have been blinking out... one by one. I hate to leave you, but I have to check into this. As the king, I have a favor to ask you and Goofy...

There is someone out there with a Key—the Key to our survival. I need you and Goofy to find him and stick with him! Got it?

Without that key, we're doomed!

You should start by heading to Traverse Town and seek out Leon. I'm sure he'll be able to get you guys pointed in the right direction.

P.S.

Could you tell Minnie "Sorry" for me? Thanks pal.

As my eyes glossed quickly over the contents of the letter, my throat went dry. Nearing the end, the duck sprung up into a full panic attack, screaming and gesticulating wildly before sprinting towards the exit. I turned to rush after him, eager to see how this dream played out but, the second I stepped foot out the door, I was sent plummeting into a chasm of vast darkness that stretched out all around me. My heart thundered loudly in my ears as the air around me ripped the scream right from my throat. The sound of a loud, rattling hiss, boomed from beneath me.

I managed to turn midair to find an enormous creature of black flesh and yellow eyes gazing up at me from the pit below. The gargantuan... thing screeched as it let go the most painful cry I'd ever had the great displeasure of hearing, screaming the word "Slleeeeeeppppp!!" Before opening its maw of red mangled teeth.

I tried, helplessly to stop myself from falling, as I found that I was going to end up in the belly of that thing if I didn't. Of course it was no use. Letting go another disemboweling shriek, I watched
terrified as I plummeted right into the creatures black esophagus, launching myself up right like a spring board, right into Sora's forehead.

"Agh!!" I heard his pained yelling, as he sunk down to the floor, clamping his hand over his forehead.

"S-sora!?!" I exclaimed, looking down frantically over the edge of my bed.

"No, no!" Sora stopped me, as he slowly got up. "I'm alright. It's my bad."

"What... are you doing in my room at this hour--" I asked, as I glanced towards the ticking clock on my night stand. My eyes went wide as I found it read 12:00 p.m.

"We slept in!!" I shouted, leaping from the bed, towards my dresser. I yanked out my outfit for the day and hastily ran to the bathroom.

"Well... yeah, that's why I came to get you." Sora called from near the bed.

I did my morning routine at the speed of light, splashing water on my face, scrubbing my teeth and freshening up every way possible in a matter of a minute before throwing on my shorts and halter top.

"I thought you were getting up early." Sora mentioned, his eyes following me around the room as I hastily yanked on my black, footless, thigh highs.

"Well yeah--" I said, grabbing my usual off-the-shoulder orange, and green backed, shirt, slipping it on and tucking it in to my shorts as I headed out the room with Sora following me immediately behind. Already having been late, I would sadly have to miss breakfast as, the two of us thundered down the stairs rushing out of the door, bidding Sora's mom good bye for the day.

"Just, hurry." I said, running down the path to the beach.

Sora and I hastily untied the last boat and got in. He took up the oars and started rowing as I hurriedly slipped on my shoes that I'd carried all the way to the boat. I let go a heavy sigh as I started to pull back a large portion of my hair and began to braid the lower half of it into a big loose braid. Digging into my back pocket, I pulled out the ribbon I always used to set the braid in, but that hadn't been the only thing that had come out of my pocket.

A loud THUNK resounded in the bottom of our little boat. Sora and I had glanced down to see what it had been, only to find my Poupou charm lying between his feet.

"Is that a--?"

"It's nothing!" I said quickly, swiping up the charm before Sora could even finish his statement.

I found myself blushing fiercely as I silently fumbled with my hair, now working on wrapping a rubber band around a braid, I'd left to dangled near my ear. For a moment, an uncomfortable silence settled between us and lasted a minute too long.

What the heck? I don't remember putting the charm in my pocket. Maybe that happened when I was rushing around the room, getting ready. I probably hadn't realized it while I managed to trip over my things but, somehow the charm made it into my back pocket. And now Sora-- of all people had seen it. I couldn't even begin to imagine what he might have been thinking.

Slowly, Sora went back to rowing the boat.
"So--"

"So--"

Both of us spoke at once. Making eye contact, I caught that awkward glance he gave me and instantly, his ears went red.

"Uh..." Sora began. "I was just wondering, about this morning."

"This... morning?" I asked looking up at him.

"Yeah... well, I mean-- earlier" He corrected himself. "When I came to get you... you were crying in your sleep."

"What?" I asked.

"Hey, I don't know. I thought the same thing. But.. I just wanted to make sure... everything was okay."

I blinked, gazing at Sora with wide eyes. That awful feeling of dread settled onto my shoulders. I felt pretty lame, hiding my problems. But like I'd mentioned before-- I didn't think anyone could help or even begin to understand. I wasn't usually one to complain. I didn't really want to inconvenience people with my problems.

But the way Sora had spoken, wondering if things were alright... Maybe I just needed to be more convincing.

"Things are fine." I told him. For the most part, it wasn't a total lie.

Sora didn't seem fully convinced, but kept his eyes on the island for the remainder of the boat ride. After docking, we were greeted by a few of the other kids who hung out on the island before making our way to Riku and Kairi.

"You guys are late," Riku said. "That's normal for you, Sora, but Yukari? Your laziness must be infectious."

Neither I nor Sora gave an immediate response as we exchanged glances with each other before taking a spot in different places around the raft. Of course Riku caught this as his gaze lingered, dancing between the two of us. But it would be the arrival of Kairi that would dismiss the odd exchange altogether.

"Alright, guys!" She announced. "Lot's to do!"

"You mean Sora's got a lot to do." Riku corrected. "The sail's fixed, the raft is finished-- but of course it's no thanks to him."

"What?" Sora spat. "I gathered a bunch of provisions yesterday."

"Because you slacked off on the raft."

"Gathering necessities is just as important-- and just as tiring." Sora stuck a thumb into his chest and shot Riku a look of resolve. "I'd say I carried my weight. Let's just split the remainder of work!"

"So you can slack off on that too?" Riku rose a brow at Sora, his expression conniving.
"Guys..." I sighed, rolling my eyes. Knowing the look on the boys' faces, I knew what was about to happen next.

"A race!" Sora proclaimed. "First one to the finish has to do all of the provisions."

"Really?" I chimed in, the sound of exasperation already alive in my tone.

"Alright." Riku agreed, without a moment's hesitation. "Sounds like a fair deal. Kairi?"

Riku turned to look at her. Kairi smiled and shrugged, shaking her head. "Yeah, yeah. I got you."

We had all up and headed towards the starting line of a little obstacle course Sora and Riku ran in many instances like these. I stationed myself to the side-- My job would be to ensure a winner in case there was a close call. Kairi was the ref. This activity between Sora and Riku had become a regular occurrence, as the rivalry between the two had grown, stronger over the years. It was always over little things, and today was no exception. As the two readied themselves, stretching and warming up and what not, I couldn't help but over hear their brief conversation.

"So just so we're clear," Sora began. "me winning means, you get to do the rest of the provisions, on your own. And if you win, then I--"

"How about we make it more interesting," Riku stopped him. "and the winner also gets to share a poupou fruit with Kairi."

My heart sunk, at hearing those words.

"W... What?" Sora stuttered. His face turned a light shade of red, but he tried to play it off by looking increasingly perplexed. "What are you talking about--"

"You heard me. Winner shares a poupou with Kairi." Riku smirked.

"But that’s not what I--"

"Alright your two!" Kairi called out, announcing the commencement of their race. "Ready!"

Sora had been clearly flustered. But Riku was well and ready. It was at moment that I realized that Riku may have only said that to distract Sora. But there was still a part of me that thought otherwise.

"Go!"

On Kairi's mark, the boys dashed from their spots, Sora getting a rocky start, stumbling over himself a bit. As the two disappeared into the obstacle course, the sound of seagulls and the waves crashing in the distance, returned with the calm.

"You alright?" Kairi asked, before I could fully relax.

I had realized then, that I was frowning. "Uh, yeah." I said quickly. I didn't bother forcing a smile. But instead, I thought I'd try a little bit of honesty. "I was actually just thinking about this whole... thing we're doing."

"Seeing what's past the ocean?" Kairi inquired.

"Yeah." I nodded. I waited for just a moment before continuing. "Have you ever thought... we might be doing something a little dumb? I mean... it is just a raft."
"Well... actually, yeah." Kairi said. She sighed a kind of wistful sigh as she leaned against the cliff side. A cool breeze brushed by and swept her hair across her face. From a clasp on her belt she pulled out a little trinket of Thalassa shells, she'd been working on for days. She'd mentioned that it was a sort of good luck charm that sailors from the old times, used to ensure they’d be safe on their journey. I wondered if she was more nervous than she let on. "But..." She spoke, breaking through my thoughts. "I think it would still be fun to try and see what sits outside of our little island."

"I mean... but," I drew circles in the sand as I sat cross legged. My thoughts were getting jumbled as I attempted to safely express myself. "We do know that there might be other worlds out there. I mean we have an idea-- since you came here."

"Yeah, but, Yukari... this place has been all you've ever known. You grew up here on Destiny Islands. More than anything, you should be more excited at the prospect of leaving, right?"

I shrugged, pulling my knees into my chest. "Iunno... Maybe." I let go a small sigh as I stared out at the sea. I know if I ever left home, I'd miss it. Leaving would be fun, but would we ever find our way back if we did?

My thoughts were cut short when the sound of panting neared our spot.

"Here they come." Kairi noted, as she put away her trinket.

I readied myself for the end game as the two boys came speeding in our direction. I watched intently as Riku leapt over the gap in the bridge. Sora pumped his arms, shoving his foot into the dirt to propel himself a bit farther. But it only caused him to trip a bit, and he wobbled out to catch himself.

Riku laughed, almost breaking concentration. Still, that didn't stop him from gaining a burst of speed at the last second as he propelled himself across the finish line. Sora had been right behind him, but all his power had been drained whence he saw his defeat. The look on his face was crestfallen as he bent over, gripping his knees, gasping for air.

"The winner is Riku!" Kairi announced. "Looks like it's decided. Sorry Sora."

"C'mon, I want a rematch!" He wheezed. From the look he was giving, I could tell his face hadn't been red from just running.

"Nah," Riku said decidedly. "Have fun with your chores."

"But-- I--!" Sora began to protest, but Riku had stopped him, slapping a hand on his shoulder.

"I wasn't really serious about what I said earlier." He said, low enough for me to catch.

I watched the color come back to Sora's face, as the realization hit him.

I sighed, shaking my head. "You guys are dumb." I mumbled, turning to leave. With not much else to do, I found myself wandering away from the group. Kairi had already went off somewhere, and Sora was now about to become the only active working party member.

* * * *

My feet wandered around the beach as I found random ways to kill time. Picking up shells, skipping rocks, wading in the shore. My mind was constantly drifting back to the dream I'd had last
night. Part of me didn't feel like it was just some dream. The letter had mentioned something about a key, and finding a man named Leon in a place called Traverse Town. Even more disturbing was the idea of the stars blinking out. I thought maybe that was just a normal thing, but after seeing that letter, I can't be so sure.

After some time, I'd reached the old rocky alcove near the water fall, and quietly snuck my way inside. Riku, Sora and I had been calling it the secret place for years. Since we were kids we'd been coming to this place and drawing on the walls, making weird little kid pacts and what not. Over time, the other kids came in here and helped to fill up the cave with drawings as well. In some instances, it almost seemed kind of primitive, but I thought it was unique. Somewhere along the way, Riku and I started to leave secret messages to each other in different locations and we'd both have to look for the next. At first it was just something we did for fun, but later it became a normal thing. I still hadn't found Riku's last message as of late and wondered if he'd even managed to leave one in a while.

Gazing around the small cave like spot, I stopped to stare at the wooden door that sat against the back wall. It was incredibly out of place, and no one seemed to know how it got there. As kids we'd tried to get it open but, to no avail. It was sealed shut with no way in, and who knows if there was any way out.

Looking away from the door, I turned to leave.

"This World Has Been Connected."

I stopped in my tracks, as a voice softly trickled into the caves, echoing around me.

Slowly, I turned, thinking I wouldn't find anything and that I'd just imagined it. But sadly, I was wrong, as I found a sort of... figure. It's posture seemed odd as it stood there hunched over. The lack of form from within made it almost seem as if there wasn't much of anything inside.

"Who... are you?" I asked. Somehow my feet were frozen in place. I couldn't move, no matter what. It was almost as if this... thing was holding me here.

"Tied to the Darkness... Soon to be eclipsed, just like the worlds that have vanished before it."

"Darkness? What a-- what are you even talking about? How did you even get here?" I barraged the guy with questions as if part of some sort of fear response.

This time, the mysterious visitor lifted his arm. Weak, blue and black flames began to swirl around his wrist and for a horrible second, I noticed that he'd began to move towards me.

"You still do not know..." He muttered.

The flames intensified, spreading up his arm. The sagging sleeve of his cloak, now centimeters from my chest. Still, I had no control over my body.

"You do not know...what lies beyond the door!"

The man's voice rose, booming throughout the cave, as the dark flames from his sleeve, exploded around me. I was thrown back against the powerful gust, surging dangerously towards the mouth of the cave.

My eyes popped open, and were treated to the red evening sky.

Had that really been a dream? I sat up and found myself sitting near the poupou tree that sat near
the edge of the ocean. The wind gently brushed my bangs across my forehead. The cool ocean air, lightly salting my cheeks. Gazing out at the ocean, I touched my cheeks that had thankfully been dry and thought back to what Sora had told me earlier about crying in my sleep. I wondered, how often that had happened and if maybe that signified the instance of whether dreams were real or not.

I sighed, frustrated, running my fingers through my hair. "This is just too much..." I grumbled.

"That sounded like a pretty long sigh." My ears perked up at the sound of Riku's voice.

I turned and watched him cross the bridge, that hung over the beach as he approached. For whatever reason, seeing his face made me think of what he'd said to Sora earlier before the race--about sharing a poupou fruit with Kairi. I turned back to face the ocean. Joke or not, that sort of thing still kind of hurt. I admit I was crushing on Riku harder that I would like to acknowledge.

"Is this where you've been all day?" He asked, taking a seat next to me in the sand.

I glanced over as he leaned back on his palm, one leg propped up with his other, resting on his knee.

I didn't respond to his question. Instead the two of us sat there, enjoying the view, and relishing in the silence. That was, until Riku spoke once again.

"Today's our last day here." he said. His voice was soft, like it always got when he went into contemplation mode. "Tomorrow... we set sail."

I looked over at Riku again and saw the small smile that had danced onto his lips. He seemed so peaceful I didn't want to ruin his mood by asking the annoying questions. "You're pretty excited." I noted, pulling my knees into my chest.

"You aren't?" He asked. I could feel him looking at me, as I stared intently into the dirt. "I guess you're not." He finally realized. "You've been acting pretty weird lately. Are you nervous about leaving?"

After all the dreams I've been having as of late, I was more than eager to say, yes. I imagine, that if the dreams hadn't been so... pressing, then maybe I would have been just as excited as my friends. But it was all so nerve-wracking.

"Of course not." I said, choosing the path of a liar yet again. "I'm just really tired. We've been at this for days and my excitement is just eclipsed by the fact that I'm ready to eat a big meal and pass out."

Riku let go a light chuckle. "Uh, huh. Well if that's the case, wanna come over for dinner?"

"Oh, well... I guess." I mumbled. "I'll ask Sora if he's ready to leave."

"I meant, just you." Riku corrected.

I fought the never ending battle of uncontrollable blushing as I watched him get to his feet. "Ahhh.. we.. ah. uh. What?" I inquired, stupefied.

Riku laughed at my reaction. "My mom's making your favorite. I just thought you'd be interested."

I bit my lip as my gaze shifted back towards the sand. Despite everything, my mind was still a mess. I was well aware the he wasn't doing it on purpose but, I felt like he was giving me the run
around.

Wow... at fifteen I didn't think I'd ever think that.

I let go a very sharp, but quick sigh as I stood up. I brushed the sand away from my clothes, fixed my hair and did literally anything I could to keep from making eye contact.

"I think I'll have to pass." I said. "I have to get ready for tomorrow. And let's be honest, Sora's gonna need help prioritizing."

The grin that formed onto Riku’s features was like a breath of fresh air. He nodded understandingly, shrugging his shoulders as he did. "That's fine. I'm heading back, now. Wanna ride with me?"

"Sure." I answered without even thinking. It was sort of a reflex that I had only then cursed myself for.

I followed Riku down to the docks. We passed Sora and Kairi who'd been chatting away as they walked along the shore. I waved at the two and Kairi waved back. At the same time I shot Sora a sort of "go get em" wink, permeating a uncomfortable grin that sprung onto his face. I giggled to myself as I turned to catch up with Riku.

For the most part, the boat ride was calm. We held idle chatter, discussing this and that. The sound of the ocean lapping at the boat somehow eased my nerves. The prospect of food and sleep, was welcomed whole-heartedly. It wasn't until we made it ashore that I could hear the distant rattling of the hiss from that thing, echoing across the ocean. I stopped to stare at the setting sun. Red on the horizon, I felt it's warmth wash over me as it attempted to counter that evil presence that lingered.

"Yukari?" Riku's voices pulled me away from my angsty thoughts. "What is it?"

"...Nothing." Was all I said before turning away from the scene.

We walked the rest of the way back to Sora's house in silence. The sound of our footsteps sifting in the sand, filled the quiet. The chirping of the night time critters began the first notes of their nightly songs. The distant noises of the ocean took a back seat, fading into the whistles of the wind.

"See you tomorrow." I said, once we'd made it to Riku's house.

"Sure you don't wanna come in?" He asked, testing me.

"I'm good." I rolled my eyes. I couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Alright." He shrugged, my smile was infectious as one spread across his lips. "Your choice."


Had I not realized that this might have been my last happy exchange with Riku, I would have stayed with him that night.

Long after a hot meal, I decided to just relax. Sinking into my bed, I pulled out my poupou charm and looked it over. The little nicks caught the light of the moon as I turned it in my palm.
"The winner gets to share a poupou with Kairi." Riku's words echoed in my mind.

Frowning deeply, I tossed the charm onto my bedside night stand and rolled over. Slapping the pillow over my head, I somehow managed to suffocate myself, comfortably enough to pass out.

The dreams came swiftly, but as usual, were unwelcoming.

My body felt heavy, drifting downwards, as I sunk beneath the surface of the great blue ocean. With half lidded eyes, I watched as the rays of moon light spilling into the sea faded, trickling off and becoming distant beams of hope. The deeper I went, the darker it became. With the darkness, came a great feeling of unease. The warm waters turned cold, and my senses turned alert.

"Wake up." A voice reverberated all around me.

The moment it spoke, I found myself lying face down on a solid black surface. Reacting sluggishly, I got up and gazed around, finding that there had been nothing but complete and total darkness all around me. The only thing that existed within the space of complete black was a sort of sphere, that radiated a golden aura. What's more was that there had been a girl, trapped inside.

Carefully I approached the encasement. As I got closer I could make out more details of the girl. She wore nothing but a little black dress that seemed much too small for her. The straps of her dress worked much like a ribbon, lacing around her slender neck. The oddest, and most disturbing feature about her was her face. It's not that she looked terrifying or misshapen or anything but... She had... my face. While much paler in comparison, with her exceedingly long lochs of hair being colored, white-- she could pass as my twin.

But I didn't have any memories of siblings, or even a twin for that matter. I was certain if someone knew about this, they would have told me.

"The time has come," The voice from earlier spoke once again. "Your powers begin to awaken, and a difficult path lay ahead. Still... there is so little time."

My confusion by the words being chanted around me was no more perplexing than the girl who floated before me. Looking up at her gave me vertigo, but I couldn't stop myself from reaching out to her. If this was a dream... then she couldn't have been real. But... if this wasn't?

"Behind you!!" The voice shouted, cutting my trance short.

I spun around, to find a little gathering of odd creatures. I didn't have much of a chance to get a good look at them as I was too busy trying not to get jumped on. Stumbling out of the way, I turned frantically to find, more coming at me. I glanced back in the direction of the girl, but somehow she and her little bubble vanished.

"Wh-ahugh!" The next thing I knew, the ground beneath me disappeared and I was sent tumbling into an even greater chasm of darkness. Instead of the fierce pain of crashing into an unseen ground, I was thrown into a completely different scene. It didn't even take me long to realize that I was standing in the secret place.

But I wasn't alone.

Two figures stood facing each other at the back of the cave, near the door that wouldn't open. One of them was Riku, and the other was the hooded figured I'd encountered earlier that day. But wasn't that just a dream? There's no way that had actually happened.
Watching on, the scene played in silence. But it was clear, that the two had been exchanging words. The conversation seemed to be going smoothly as Riku's lips turned up into a smile.

I frowned, knowing all too well what they had to have been talking about. From my earlier encounter, this strange cloaked figure had pestered me about other worlds, vanishing. And it was on Riku's lips that I could make out the words, "To go to other worlds."

"Riku, No!" I shouted within the dream. But of course it was no use. My voice would never reach him as I was thrown back as a gust of terrible black flames came spewing from the door, throwing me out of the cave and out of the scene.

I was sent tumbling back into the black void, where the little dark creatures began to swarm me. Now able to get a better look at them, they all had small bodies and yellow beady eyes. Antennae on their heads flitted about as they twitched and crept around, ready to pounce. Of course this instinct proved correct as, together, the horde lunged forward to attack. I screamed, uncertain of the outcome, but I was pretty sure it wouldn't be anything good.

Instead of impending doom, a great light, erupted from where my heart was, blinding both me and my enemies. It took a mere second to recover from the flash, but when it did, I found that the creatures were gone, and I was grasping a new item.

It weighed down my hand as any sword would have, but this seemed to be a bit different. This thing resembled the shape of a key, but was, increasingly detailed. A double shafted blade of white and silver, tipped with a heart and flower-like pinwheel design. The hand guard was winged, blending seamlessly into the shaft. What I found peculiar was that my poupou charm, dangled from the hand guard, like a key chain.

"What... is going on?" I asked aloud.

I didn't think I'd get a response.

"The Keyblade..."

The voice from before trailed off. Yet the word itself echoed around me, repeating over and over.

I'm guessing this thing was a... Keyblade.

"Fight!" The voice shouted, abruptly.

I spun around to find yet another swarm of the little creatures dancing about. The voice said, fight, but a little more context would have been nice. I mean, aside from the fact that these guys had tried to maybe, possibly kill me before, what had they done to deserve annihilation?

As the creatures leapt towards me I swung my new weapon out to attack. The weight of the thing was far more daunting than that of a wooden, toy sword. With every blow, I dealt damage. Every swing caused the things around me to explode into little plumes of black flames. I fought my way through the horde, to no avail. They didn't let up and they just kept coming. Somehow I tried to out run them, but still, they overwhelmed me.

I found myself waist deep in the things. They latched on to me, dragging me down as I tried to slash at them. Where one disappeared, five more seemed to take its place. It wasn't long before I was overtaken and forced down in to the sea of creatures.

"Don't be afraid." The voice went.
But if it said anything else, I couldn't hear as I was almost instantly, completely swallowed by the mass.

My eyes shot open and I threw myself forward in bed. Drenched in sweat I attempted to calm myself down, checking myself for bruises, scratches or any sign that maybe the dream, hadn't been a dream. But that was the least of my problems.

Loud rattling sounded in my ears. My eyes shot towards the window as the loud howling from the outside shook them. What in the world was going on?

I got to my feet and rushed towards the window, raking it up. Looking up at the sky, I was more than surprised to see an enormous sphere of... I don't even know what it was, floating in the air. It sat over the small island where all of the kids on Destiny Island, hung out, yet still it was sucking up everything with the ability to be uprooted.

Somehow my mind went back to the dream. I recalled the moment where Riku had been in that cave. What if that wasn't a dream? Then maybe Riku had actually gone back to the Island.

I jumped from my bed and burst through my bedroom door and clamored down the stairs. Sora's mom had called after me, asking where Sora had gone but I didn't stop to answer, and that hadn't made me feel any better.

As I ran to the docks, I found that the Island was in shambles. It was like a terrible storm was about to destroy everything, and I feared that I may not have been too far off. As I untied a boat from the dock, I noticed that three of them had already been missing. For a second, I wondered how stupid could my friends be, yet here I was all prepared to head in to the very eye of the storm myself.

Rowing the boat out onto the waters was an incredible feet. The ocean angrily swiped at my tiny vessel as I made every effort to steer myself without tipping over. But the ocean had bigger plans. Not even ten seconds after I'd exited the boat, intense waves washed up against the shore. The tide rose incredibly fast and swept not only my boat away, but the others and the entirety of the dock.

For a moment I paused, shaking before I turned wordlessly to the sky. The great sphere above my head was black, pink, blue and every colored combined to make something look as evil as it did. Fear had gripped me so tightly I couldn't even verbalize just how distressed I was. I watched hopelessly as the thing sucked up trees and chunks of the island. The entirety of the "tree house" had been fully uprooted and vacuumed into the sky. And that was only before the ground beneath my feet shook violently. I ran away from an edge as the island split between my feet before lifting itself into the air. I was thrown to my knees, the force was so incredible. For a moment, I began to hyperventilate. I was here alone. I didn't see my friends which caused me to think the worst had happened. I dug my fingers into the wet sand, and held on for dear life.

My only solace was a voice that screamed out over the howling winds.

"Yukari!!"

My ears perked up at the sound of Sora's voice. Frantically I looked around for him, only to see him come leaping down from one of the rising land masses above me. He just narrowly missed getting slapped by a coconut after he'd somehow dodged a wooden crate.

"Yukari hold on!" Sora shouted again.

But what good would he have been able to do?

I watched in horror as he was pulled right out of the air. For a moment, he was suspended before
the sphere could managed to pull him into it. But I wasn't about to just let it happen. I wasn't sure how, but I managed to escape the hold that fear had on me as I rose from my spot and dashed towards Sora. Somehow I managed to grab at his wrist whilst simultaneously hooking my arm around the trunk of a palm tree.

"Grab on to my waist!" I shouted.

Sora was on his way to doing so, when another great tremble in the ground caused him to lose his grip. I watched, terrified as I tried to reach out for him, screaming his name at the tip of my lungs. But, even this didn't matter as my little tree, lost the fight with the wind and was uprooted.

I let go of it as it went propelling towards the sphere.

I just want to let it be known that, getting caught in a vortex was not something I would have readily added to my bucket list. Yet, here I was.

"Yukari!!" I heard Sora's voice whizz past as he shot by. But it only took a few more seconds for my palm tree to come back and slam me in the back of the head.

Needless to say, the world around me went quiet as I lost consciousness, whilst still spinning around in the deadly vortex.

To be Continued
A World Beyond the Sea

Chapter Summary

After the destruction of the Destiny Islands, Yukari learns that's she been dumped into a new world. As she searches for her missing friends, she finds herself with not just a key but, a whole list of responsibilities she never ask for.

Kingdom Hearts: Ascendant Recollection

Chapter 02

A World Beyond The Sea

If you're ever to take anything away from my story, just know that, getting inhaled by an enormous island eating storm is absolutely not fun.

Something else that isn't fun? Waking up on a cold slab of concrete. My head pulsed with intense pain. In fact it was probably from that tree that hit me on the way up. I blinked a couple of times, before I realized that my vision might as well have been permanently blurred.

As I lay in an unfamiliar place, trying to recall the last few hours of the evening, I sighed, a bit frustrated as I stared up at the night sky. Spotted with stars, It was nothing in comparison to the spray of twinkling lights that blanketed the night back on Density Islands.

My home...

Thinking back, what had happened to it? What had caused that storm? I remember the dream that showed Riku conversing with that figure in the secret place. He'd made some sort of deal with it somehow and unleashed... that dark... stuff and I woke up to a storm. But, had that really been a dream? And what did happened to Riku? And Kairi and Sora for that matter? I'd met up with Sora when things got crazy but, my other two close friends had been nowhere in sight. I suppose it was time to get a move on.

Sitting up I gazed about my surroundings. I sat in the middle of some sort of enormous court yard. Brick walled buildings surrounded me on all sides with twinkling, light decorations flickering gently in the dark. Street lights lit up the world around me with banners draped upon them reading, District 3.

Carefully, I stood up. Stumbling on my feet, I struggled to make it to the closest wall for support. Had I managed to get some sort of concussion? I blinked back the dizziness and blurred vision as I trudged up the set of stairs that led out of the court yard. At the top, I found a small compartment of houses that led down a pathway towards a pair of large wooden doors.

Pushing past them, I was met with a darkened alleyway, lined on either sides with town homes. Lit windows kept the darkness away as I made my way out of the narrow passage and into a greater plaza that, had me surrounded by shops, hotels, and big bright neon signs which did little to help my head ache. I gazed up at a giant clock tower that shot high above my head, reading just a few minutes past ten.
So far, I was vastly amazed. Everything here was just so... big. Back home, the tallest things we had were the humongous mountains on the mainland that sat lazing against the big puffy clouds that passed by on the horizon every day. Even the trees on the mainland had nothing on the size of these buildings, only growing so high-- often rivaling the size of some of our biggest homes, which were still not as big the shops and hotels around me.

On my way towards yet another set of doors, I found myself being slammed into. The world went completely sideways as I was forced to catch my balance while, a blubbering man, frantically held onto me for dear life.

"H-help me! Please!" The guy sobbed aloud, gripping my shoulders tightly. "They! They're coming this way!"

The man, attempted to hide behind me but, instead dragged me down to the ground with him. I shook him off, and turned to find a group of the little creatures come running in our direction.

For a second. Panic set in.

I remembered that I had only defeated them before in my dreams. I'd been in possession of that weapon-- The Keyblade. But now I was defenseless. How was I supposed to protect both this guy and myself?

I turned back to the man that had been freaking out at my feet as if I was supposed to be able to protect him. But I wasn't really much help either. With one more look at the oncoming enemies, I turned to run. "Let's get out of here!" I shouted to the stranger.

It took him a moment to scramble to his feet. Yet, somehow he managed to trip and fall, crashing right into me once more. I hit the ground hard and everything began to multiply. Pushing myself up, I let go an agitated sigh as I turned to look for the guy. He was there, on the ground, cowering, only now with the creatures hovering over him, as he sat there paralyzed with fear, sobbing uncontrollably.

"What are you doing?" I called out to him, trying to blink the stars out of my eyes. "Get out of here! Run!"

Sadly, even in my attempts to snap him out of his moment of terror, he would not budge. Instead, he stayed there as the creatures went in for the attack, and proceeded to claw out the poor man's heart. I watched as the creatures danced in delight at the retrieval of their prize before the man's body was consumed, only to be replaced by another little black creature.

Feeling a bit frantic, I found myself nearly frozen to my spot. My body suddenly felt like lead. It had to be from the prospect of death now becoming a harsh reality. I managed to stammer out of few words as the creatures lurched toward me. I felt my heart dive into my stomach, and I shut my eyes waiting for the worst.

"Yukari!" I heard a voice call out.

Somehow melting away the fear, the familiar voice shook the terror away. My eyes shot towards the sound of the voice, and watched as the new comer had entered the scene.

"Sora!" I exclaimed delighted to see he was safe.

And it appeared that he was more than that, as he ran towards the monsters, brandishing what looked to be the same weapon I'd received. Although his held a different appearance, sporting a yellow boxed hand guard that connected to a long silvery shaft. The little prongs at the end, opened
up into a true key look, that housed the emblem of a crown.

Sora wasted no time in dispatching the group of little black shadows. And much like in the dream each and every one of them disappeared in a cloud of black smoke. Once he'd taken care of the things, he approached me, as I was still sitting a bit stunned on the ground.

"You alright?" He asked, extending a hand for me to take.

I took it, using his weight to support my unsteady balance whilst simultaneously glancing around to ensure no more of those things would be likely to jump us. "Yeah." I answered. "Thanks... You really saved me from.. whatever those thing were."

"Heartless."

"What?"

"They're called Heartless." Sora repeated.

I looked at Sora suspiciously. "How do you..."

"After I woke up here, I ran into a bunch of them myself." He explained. "A guy named Cid, saved me. He told me I might be able to find you, Riku, and Kairi here as well. So, I went out looking. But so far, I've only found you and of course... more Heartless."

I gazed down at the Keyblade in his hands. I wasn't sure if I should press the issue, or not. But given the circumstances maybe it could wait. "So, are you saying, Kairi and Riku, were there when... it happened?" I asked.

Sora nodded, grimly. A distracted look in his eyes offered more than his words. "...Yeah. I saw them." Was really all he intended to say.

"Did... something bad, happen?" I asked.

But Sora ignored my question, bringing up a new subject. "I've got to get you to safety. Wouldn't want to get jumped before we're prepared. Maybe Cid can help us out with that."

I watched as he pushed open the doors to "District One," as implied by the sign hanging above. I wondered what had happened that I had missed. Sora's hiding the possibility of bad news didn't sit right with me, but it was better to let him figure things out before forcing him to talk.

Following close behind, I glanced around at how much brighter this district was compared to the last two. More buildings, more shops and more lights. It was distinctively homier than the last, but lacked... people. I had to wonder where everyone was. I suppose the threat of those... Heartless, was quite serious, this night.

"So, do you know where this... place we're in, is?" I decided to ask, sparking up another conversation. "I mean, it seems like we finally got off the Island."

"I was told this place is called Traverse Town." Sora responded, stopping near the guard rail that sat before a plaza, spotted with lights.

I gazed around at three enormous doors that seemed to serve as entry ways to other possible areas around the town. "But we didn't even have to use the raft." I recalled. From the dreams I'd been having, I guess I wasn't too surprised about that. "I highly doubted it would have worked anyways."
I caught Sora looking at me from the corner of my eye, but I refused to meet his gaze.

"All of this is crazy..." I went on. "Storms and monsters... what's even going on? Things were so... dull before. Everything's just happening all at once and..."

My words began to trails away as I went to look at Sora. But my gaze found the face of a newcomer who stood just a few feet away from us. Sora noticed and turned to investigate where my attention had landed.

The man standing before us had shaggy, long dark brown hair that went past his shoulders. His facial features seemed soft, rugged and unfriendly all at the same time, as he held it together with a scar that ran the length of his face, between his nose. Adorned with black jeans and a tucked in t shirt beneath his matching jacket, I wanted very much to say something to this guy about his many belts that hung around his waist.

"They know you're here." The guy mumbled. It wasn't until that moment of him speaking that I realized his weapon. It looked like a mix of a gun and-- Okay, get this. His weapon with a flippin' sword stuffed into a gun.

I suppose I couldn't offer too many jokes. Sora was running around with an novelty sized key.

"And they'll keep coming, so long as you wield the Keyblade." The man continued.

I raised a brow. I didn't have my weapon out and on display. "But--"

"Stand back, little girl. This is between me and your friend here."

Offended, I frowned, muttering a quieted, "Rude..." under my breath.

Sora himself, already had a sort of sour look on his face as he gazed over his silvery Keyblade. Sending, testy glances at the guy, I worried of the decision he was about to make. "There's no way you're gonna get this." He sneered. To which, he hastily got into a stance, indicating he was ready to fight off another nuisance if he had to. I also figured it was partly to seem intimidating.

"If that's really how you wanna do this," The man scoffed, readying his gun blade... thing. "Then let's go, kid."

"Now Sora..." I said, trying to allow him a chance to think rationally. "Think about this for a--"

“Aaaaagh!!”

Sora leapt at the guy, screaming his battle cry. The man, didn't even let him get much of a chance as he shot a burning hot, ball of fire in his direction. Sora narrowly rolled out of the way, as the ball of fire continued to come careening right at me.

I launched myself out of danger, cursing Sora's rash decision. I made it to safety in time to watch him jump the guard rail that hung over the plaza, only to be immediately chased into the open area by the man.

I watched on feverishly, as they fought, Sora almost always just missing a deadly blow. He was taking more hits that he was dishing out. It didn't take long for his movements to become sluggish and clumsy.

"Behind you!" I cried out.
Sora had stopped moving for just a second to catch his breath. But it was clear, at that moment, the man was simply toying with him. Another burst of fire shot towards Sora who looked up when he'd heard my voice. Just barely, he scrambled out of harm’s way, only to be met with the man's blade that nearly sliced through his neck.

Sora blocked in time, going on to throw up the man's guard. Gripping his Key with two hands, he prepared himself to run the guy through it seemed. His face was beaded with sweat and worn with exhaustion. Sora was at his limit. This wasn't just some brawl on the beach like we had been used to. This was some cruel reality of the outside world. And in the last few hours of being here, Sora most likely had more time to experience that than myself.

The man spun, effortlessly, out the way as he kicked Sora in the back. Sora stumbled on his feet, trying to keep his balanced, but the man had the upper hand. He wasn't worn out like Sora had been. With the butt of his sword, he slammed the hunk of metal right into Sora's temple and almost immediately, Sora dropped his weapon.

"Sora!" I shouted, leaping over the guard rail, bounding over towards him.

I watched as his body collapsed, hitting the ground harder than what sounded safe.

Conveniently enough for me, the fact that I decided to start running like a psycho, caused the dizziness to resurface. Dropping to my knees, I crouched over Sora's body and latched onto his shoulders. Gently I tried to shake him awake but he was out cold. His head rolled around on his shoulders as a small groan sounded from his lips.

With a bit of a sigh of relief, I let my mind rest easy knowing that he was alright.

"Step aside little girl." The voice of the man throttled in my ears.

Looking over my shoulder, I watched as he came closer to the two of us. I was seeing double at this point but I fought through the wave of nausea that came with it.

"I'm not moving." I said, squeezing Sora's shoulders tightly.

The man, let go a sigh, hefting his weapon onto his shoulder. "I don't have time for you. Make this easy and move out of the way."

For a split second I thought back to the dream I'd had just earlier that evening. The Keyblade that formed in my hand when I needed it most. That voice that spoke to me saying I had some power within me, that was beginning to awaken. For a moment, I did hesitate. This was all so new. Things were just... happening so fast. But I wasn't about to let this creep have Sora without a fight.

Shakily, I got to my feet. I tried to control myself as the dizziness attempted to prevent me from steeling my nerves. Cautiously, I held out my hand in hopes to summon the Keyblade as I did before. I didn't know if there was a specific way to do it. Yet all the same I found myself concentrating on thoughts of protecting Sora, getting back to Riku and Kairi and just staying alive.

And somehow that worked.

Within seconds the Keyblade materialized in my possession, weighing heavily down on my right arm as I gripped it after it had appeared. I swung it once, testingly, before aiming it at the man before me, who'd then stopped to, gaze at my Keyblade.

"Another one?" The man said, as though he couldn’t believe his bothersome luck.
"Just tell me what you want." I demanded. But at the same time, I wavered. The spinning world around me forced me to shut my eyes. Clamping a hand against my head, I garnered a sympathetic response from the stranger.

"Kid-- Hey, you alright? Hey!"

But it had been too late.

The world had turned upside down all at once as I felt myself tumbling towards the ground. The sound of my blade clanging loudly as it made contact, left a horrible ringing in my ears. When I hit the stone tiling, the world didn't stop spinning. It was like everything continued on as I felt myself passing through what seemed to be memories all around me. They mixed and blurred together. The cacophony of voices swirling around in my head didn't help the dizziness, but I could just barely hear the sound of faint hissing, coming out over it all.

"Get up." A voice tore through the dream.

My eyes opened abruptly. Glancing around I found myself in a whole different location. The room around me was bathed in a sea of deep emerald greens. The ceiling, the floor-- all of it looking somewhat lavish or fancy, in design. I noticed that I had been lying comfortably in a bed that was not my own. I easily discounted that this whole crazy night might have been a dream, when I noticed Sora snoozing in an arm chair at the foot of the bed. His head hung on his neck, while drool began to slide down the corner of his mouth.

"Oh good." The voice from before spoke. "You're awake. How's your head?? Looks like you got yourself a concussion somehow."

I wasn't sure how I hadn't seen her before but, a girl stood at the bedside. She seemed pretty young, sporting short, dark brown hair and eyes. She wore a cropped tank top with belt straps and khaki colored shorts. Fish nets sat on her arms beneath big orange gloves that matched her ankle boots which housed long, thigh high socks.

As loud as her outfit was, I was surprised I hadn't noticed her when I opened my eyes.

"Uh... It's fine." I said, almost forgetting that she'd asked a question. I lifted my hand to my head, and felt some bandages wrapped around the circumference of my noggin. I suppose it was as bad as I thought.

"Squall didn't even touch you, so I guess he got a little worried when you just passed out on the spot. We couldn't figure out how you got banged up without him even laying a finger on you."

"Uh... well, that might have actually been the tree that hit me on my way here." I confessed sheepishly.

"The what?"

"The name's Leon." The man with the scar promptly corrected the girl, not allowing me a chance to respond. He had also seemingly appeared in the room. His edgy brooding look was almost difficult to notice.

Well when you get hit hard enough...

Ignoring the man, the girl shrugged and moved to Sora. "Hey, wake up, ya lazy bum!" The girl shouted, kicking at the arm chair.
The impressive jolt, woke Sora from his slumber. Upon sleepily opening his eyes, his gaze met
with the girl, who'd been kneeling over him. "Gimmie... a break... Kairi..."

"Kairi?" The girl, inquired annoyed. "The name's Yuffie! Wake up, Nerd!!"

Again she shoved the chair and Sora jolted awake. Shouting expletives.

"Yeah... I think you might have hit this one too hard." The girl said rolling her eyes.

Sora's attention immediately landed on the man, calling himself Leon and stood from his seat,
ready to fight once again. "You!! You're the one that attacked me out of nowhere! What's your
problem?"

"While I am inclined agree that arguing on that notion would seem appropriate at any other time,"
I said, drawing Sora's attention to me. "I think, it wasn't without reason."

Sora quickly looked me over before he realized the bandage on my head.

"Did he beat you up too?" He asked, concerned.

"Tree." Was all I said before he nodded understandingly.

"You alright?" He attempted to confirm.

"Wait, seriously.... How in the world did you get into a fight with a tree?" The girl, now known as
Yuffie, asked.

"Enough." The man's voice cut through each of our words as we all averted our attention toward
him. "We've got more pressing matters at hand. And it's got to do with the two of you, both
wielding the Keyblade."

"Both?" Sora asked, his eyes catching mine.

"I can summon one too." I shrugged.

"Wait... then why didn't you tell me?"

"It doesn't matter." The guy said. "Both of you seem to be the chosen wielders of the blade.
Initially the plan was to get it from you so we could conceal your hearts from the Heartless. I didn't
think you'd come on your own of course, but I was willing to do what I needed to get you to come
along."

"Even if that meant beating up a kid?" I noted. "Sounds like the mindset of a bully to me."

"Regardless." Yuffie sighed heavily. "You guys were running around completely oblivious to how
dangerous of a threat you posed for yourselves. The Heartless can seek you out via the Keyblade."

"Meaning, we don't have a lot of time, before they make their presence known, once again." Leon
went on. "This place is infested. They're crawling around everywhere. It's crazy to even think that
the keyblade chose you two—Kids, of all people."

"Rude..." I interjected.

"Why don't you start making sense" Said demanded. His tone held plenty of frustration in it.
"Maybe explain what's really going on around here."
"Well, okay." Yuffie said, taking a deep breath. From that, I could tell she was about to give us a very condensed version of a story we might well need the full details to. "We're pressing for time so... here goes. So, now you know that, there are worlds outside of your own. But the thing is, they've been a super-secret up until this point. And that's all thanks to the Heartless who've been shaking things up as of late. They're kind of making a grand mess of things."

"The Heartless." I repeated. I was pretty sure Sora said it to me before, but.. "Those are the creatures that keep chasing us around. But what are they really?"

"Those without hearts." Leon confirmed. "The Darkness in peoples' hearts is what attracts them. See that you don't fall prey, for there is Darkness within every heart."

"We've learned that a man named Ansem was studying those creatures a while back." Yuffie continued. "He recorded all he knew about them in a compiled report-- like their behavior and stuff. Too bad we don't have a lot of info on those nasty buggers, but we do know that we could probably learn more about them from that guy's reports."

"Well maybe... you could show it to us, if it's not too much trouble?" I suggested.

"That's... the thing," Yuffie frowned. "We can't."

"Because...?" Sora chimed in.

"Because." Yuffie emphasized, spreading her hand out before her. "We don't have 'em all. We've got like... a few pages with us, but the rest of them are all scattered about the place-- maybe even across the worlds. Getting them back is a real pain."

"So for now... you're saying the only real defense we have against the Heartless that we currently can be sure of is the Keyblade?" I supplied.

"Exactly!" Yuffie nodded, slapping a fist into her palm and pointing at me as a big grin danced onto her face.

"The Heartless, tend to greatly fear the Keyblade." Leon spoke out. "Even as this is the case, they'll continue to seek you out."

"Well... neither of us asked for this." Sora said. "Is there no way to return it or--"

"Obviously not?" Yuffie answered matter o' factly. "Who are you going to give it back to? The Keyblade chooses it's master, and it looks like you two are the new lucky owners! It's yours for good."

"Okay, hold on." I said. This was all coming at me pretty fast. In a matter of just a few hours so much has happened. Now, I'm being force fed a ton of info-- and the 'too long didn't read' version at that. "Can we back track for a second? You're saying that we didn't know about other worlds until now because those Heartless are taking over, right? So then what about us? What happened to our island?? Last we saw of it, it was being pulled apart. Sora, you said, you were looking for Kairi and Riku. Where are they?"

Leon and Yuffie stood there with pursed lips as I listed off my many questions.

"Just because we've got Keyblades, that automatically makes us official monster slayers? Not even any trainers? At least have us be better informed before we get thrown back into it. I hardly know how to use this... Keyblade thing."
"The fact that you're sitting here, right now, possibly means that you're world is gone." Leon finally said. "Mayhaps, it's been consumed by the Darkness whenever the Heartless came. I'm sorry to break it to you, and I don't know how to say it any easier, but you probably won't be seeing your friends, family or world any time soon."

"Leon--" Yuffie's voice was soft, as she seemed to be trying to get Leon to ease off a bit.

"No." But Leon was firm. "This is the reality of their situation. There is no sugar coating it."

I let go a short sigh as I pressed my lips tightly together. I found myself looking at that really, nice rug as I tried to find some composure. I hated that my gut feelings tended to turned out right. But I wouldn't allow myself to believe that earlier today, really was the last day that I would see the ocean.

I looked up at the two strangers, as they both stared at me expectantly. I could read their expressions perfectly. They were sympathetic, but they really were counting on both of us being on board. I looked over at Sora. He looked pretty deep in thought too. But This Leon dude was right. We didn't really have a whole lot of options anyways. We were now, two fifteen year old kids without a home and nothing to our name except our new, very priceless looking weapons.

I let go another a sigh, attempting to articulate my next course of action, before a loud explosion sounded right within the room. That awful ringing caused my brain to vibrate around in my skull as the world started to double around me. Leon readied his weapon, barking orders around the room.

"Yuffie, get a move on! You two are with me. Let's go!" He shouted, as he tore through the mini horde of creatures that entered the room.

I hastily, but carefully got out of bed, which had still managed to be a mistake. Sora who had already summoned his Key was nearly out the hole in the wall when he noticed.

"Yukari, can you manage?" He asked.

Hesitantly, I summoned my Key. Somehow it felt more heavy than I was used too. I suppose a toy wooden sword was nothing compared to this.

"I'm good." I said, shaking the stars out of my eyes. I had to be at least 90% right now. Any less meant... turning into one of those Heartless which, was not an option.

Sora nodded, leading the way out of what I realized was the room of a hotel. We had then, found ourselves in a fancy looking back alley lined with more hotel balconies. Leaping over the side we were met with tons of creatures that spotted the length of the alley. Following the man's lead, the two of us hacked and slashed our ways through the enemy horde with surprising ease. I had initially thought, they would have been tougher to deal with, but the little creatures exploded upon impact of the Keyblade, making contact with their black bodies.

"Where did he go?" Sora shouted, when we'd entered the Second District through a side door of the alley.

The Heartless quickly closed in behind us, right as we slammed the door. Even still, more lay ahead. The court yard was swarming with the things dancing about, and chasing after people who, let's be honest, should have known better to stay inside.

"Who cares, let's just keep moving!" I cried out moving ahead of Sora.

I dashed through another creature that had been chewing on some guys leg. Free of his assailant he
clumsily scrambled to his feet and thanked me frantically.

"Get out of here." I told him. "Make sure you tell everyone else to find safety."

The guy nodded running off as we continued to free others in need of help. But there was no real point. With one defeated, more spawned in its place. It was as if there was no end to these guys.

"Let's get out of here." Sora shouted to me, ducking into the alley that led to the last district.

I followed behind. Once through the door, we were immediately met with the sounds of screaming.

"Save mee!!" A panicked voice, cried out, resonating around the walls of the district three courtyard.

"Fight, Goofy!!" A familiar voice screeched, angrily at the first.

For second I could have sworn, I’d heard that voice somewhere before. As we ran into the square I looked all about myself but saw… nothing. That was until we looked up and noticed the two… animal people fighting for their lives on the tiny space of a balcony above our heads.

A single Heartless had them pinned down, but there was nothing we could do to help them.

"I'm trying!" One of them shouted. This one looked like a sort of black bloodhound, but with the characteristics of a human. He charged towards the Heartless, a bigger one than I'd seen up until now, in attempts to knock it down. But the thing effortlessly swatted the dog out of its, way, sending the dog flying over the side of the balcony.

Sora and I inched forwards with anticipation, as we watched.

"Thunder!" The other voice belonging to a white duck… man?! who went barreling after the Heartless.

Instantly I recognized him from the dream, which would then prove, the dream wasn't exactly that.

"Maybe we should get up there and help them?" I suggested, glancing over at Sora who's eyes were strained on the pair. His features had been knotted into something of painful anticipation, like he couldn’t bear to watch, but he didn't want to look away.

"Ah... I don't think we'll need to be doing that." He said, carefully stepping back. "Seems like they're coming to us."

"Wah--?"

"aaaaauUAAHAAAHHHHH!!!"

The sound of screaming, closing in, caught my attention as I realized, with great displeasure, that the two were now rocketing right in our direction.

Sora and I both moved to escape their trajectory, but found it to be a fruitless effort, as the bodies of the two newcomers collided with ours, sending us all right into the cool pavement.

I can say with unwavering confidence, from the bottom of the pile of bodies, this was not a wonderful place to be.

"Keys!!" The two shouts in unison upon, I assume, at the sight of both of our weapons that had been flung across the court yard.
But their revelation was short lived as an incredible rumbling, shook the ground beneath us. This was then promptly followed by, walls springing up around the yard, and blocking off all of the exits, preventing escape.

"What's happening?" Sora asked aloud, to no one in particular.

His question was quickly answered when a barrage of armored parts came crashing down out of the night sky. All around us, the pieces fell-- an armored helmet, clawed gauntlets, boots and a torso. The enormous clang of metal rattled my insides an shook my vision. It was a great wakeup call but it did little to help my head ache.

At first the pieces stayed in their places, unmoving. The silence of the night managed to come back, as the ringing subsided.

"Uhh..." Sora's voice permeated the quiet. "Soooo.... who are you guys, again?"

"Ah!" The dog, who was comfortably on top of our pile, grinned wide. "The names, Goofy, and this here is Donald!"

"Are you freaking kidding me right now??" I asked, irritated, from the bottom of the heap.

At the sound of my voice, the ground began to shake. The parts of armor began to rattle as they slowly lifted themselves from the ground, and began hovering before encircling us at dangerous speed.

"I don't want to sound too urgent." Agitation, was quite prevalent in my voice. "But maybe this is the best time to get, off??"

It was in that moment that the boys scrambled to their feet. Sora and I made a grab for our weapons before the four of us huddled together, back to back as the parts, violently encircling us, closed in. The wind from the vortex it was creating, throwing my hair every which way. I clenched the Keyblade tightly in my hand, hoping this wasn’t the night of my death.

"Thundaga!!" The duck man, shouted.

For a second, the world around us darkened before the temperature rose, significantly. From the sky, an impressively sized vein of lightning, came down and struck the armor, without managing to hit us. This threw the monster out of its attack. sending it flying across the length of the court yard. Seemingly dazed, but only momentarily, the thing twitched and flinched as it stumbled and floated its way to its feet until all of the parts were in their respective places to form a sort of "body."

"Let's beat him together!" The dog shouted, charging towards the thing with nothing but a shield.

"Attaaack!!" The duck screeched, flailing his magic staff around, while blasting what appeared to be magic spells.

Sora and I exchanged brief glances of blatant awe struck before following the two into battle. I gripped my blade tightly running into danger. My eyes made contact with the torso, section of the thing and noticed a sort of heart design of red and black, with an X mark running through it. Interestingly enough I realized some of the different, little heartless I'd seen, had those on them as well-- the little buggers with the knight helmets seemed like underlings to this guy?

I narrowly missed the swiping of both the clawed hands as I threw myself to the ground. Rolling back to my feet, I continued to barrel towards the thing. Of course, this was all while it was coming right at me.
"Hey!!" I shouted towards the duck. "Can you hit it again!! With that lightning?"

The duck, having caught my attention, furrowed his brow. "I'll need some time!!"

I nodded before I turned to find Sora had paired up with the dog to take down the feet. They were making great progress until they got kicked back and sent flying. I watched with bated breath as the armored boots both came careening in my direction. Skidding to a stop, I hoped to get out of the way in time before they rammed into me.

Unfortunately for me, I took the blow, being thrown back even closer to the massive armor. Stumbling to my feet, I narrowly avoided being crushed to death. I rolled desperately for my life, slashing at the armor as I did so. Aggressively, I threw my blade through one of the boots and it exploded in a grand fit of dark smoke. Sadly, I wouldn't have time to avoid the other foot that had come rocketing right towards me.

But it seemed I wouldn't have to, as the dog, who called himself Goofy leapt in front of me with his shield, braced for impact. Impressively the foot imploded before the dog threw his shield at an on-coming claw.

"Move it!" He shouted, ducking for cover himself.

He didn't need to tell me twice.

I dove to the ground right as my head would have been taken off. The wind, the claw picked up threw my hair across my face, and into my eyes. I watched as it made preparations for a round trip.

"Get up!" Sora shouted, as he yanked me up by the shoulder.

I hadn't even noticed that Goofy had already been back on his feet, with his shield in hand.

"Get ready!!" I heard the duck shouting from across the court yard. He'd come charging our way, with his staff risen over head. "Back me up, Goofy! You two, be ready to finish him off!!"

"Right!" Sora and I exclaimed.

"THUNDAGAAAA!!" The duck shouted, once more.

Again, the atmosphere around us dipped before a vein of lightning, larger and more expansive, ripped through the air. It targeted only the enormous body of floating parts, ripping the claws to pieces and severely damaging the body and head. Both of the remaining pieces clattered loudly to the ground. Goofy flung his shield at the helmet, while Sora and I rushed in after to deliver the finishing blow.

Together, we tore through the twitching torso piece with our blades. The thing shuddered violently before exploding into bits of shrapnel and Darkness that clouded the air.

The boys cheered at the sight of the creature’s demise, while I watched as a shimmering pink, heart floated up into the sky before vanishing into the stars.

* * * *

"So, you guys were looking for us?" Sora inquired.
He and I, along with Leon, Yuffie, the animal duo and a new girl, stood in the middle of the first district. Surrounded by lights, and other dwellers of this world.

The new girl, who had introduced herself to me as Aerith, wore a kind smile. She'd been dressed in a light pink button down dress and heavy brown boots. Silver bangles covered her wrist. Her long, light brown hair was tucked into a braid. At that moment, she had been checking my head wound whilst casting what seemed to be multiple, very light doses of healing magic at it. I wasn't going to insist she stopped, because it was definitely getting rid of whatever concussion I had.

"These two had apparently been sent out to find you, at the request of their king." Leon clarified. "I supposes its only remarkable that there is two of you, but nonetheless, you seem to be prime suspects."

"Request of your king?" I echoed, thinking back to the letter, the duck man had been reading. I wondered if it was pertinent that I shared the fact that I could see things like that through dreams--events of people and places and what not. But, I don't know how useful it would be. They'd probably just find that creepy and invasive.

"You should come with us, on our vessel!" The dog appointed. "We'll be traveling around the multiverse, taking down Heartless together like we just did."

"We couldn't do it properly without a few Keyblade wielders." The duck egged on.

"But, what about our friends?" Sora looked to me, with a hopeless expression on his face. "We still haven't found them and we don't even know if they're okay."

I bit my lip as I stared him. I kindly thanked Aerith, and moved closer to Sora placing a hand on his shoulder. "You said, you looked everywhere in this town." Maybe... they aren't here? Maybe they ended up, somewhere else."

"She could be right." Leon stated. "This isn't the only world out here, beyond yours. If you go with these guys, you're bound to find them."

Sora's frown failed to dissipate even at that bit of confirmation.

"But, you won't be coming with us, looking like that." The duck insisted.

"What's wrong with the way we look?" I asked, furrowing my brow.

"Your faces--"

"E-excuse me?" I put my hands on my hips. If he was trying to say we had to look like animal hybrids to get into their crew, they had another thing coming.

"The frowns, you too have." He clarified. "Our ship runs on smiles. If you guys come with us looking like that, we'll exploded before we make it off world."

I narrowed my eyes. I couldn't tell if this was an exaggeration or not.

"You guys need to be happy!" The dog agreed. "We'll help you find your friends along the way--no problem. We'll all be in this together."

For a moment, Sora’s face was knotted only with concern. I felt like it had been partially my fault for calling out the fact that our island couldn't have possibly survived what happened to it. Even still, he'd been really weird about not telling whatever he omitted when I asked about Kairi and
Riku.

I looked back at the duo and forced a grin, for Sora's *and* Riku and Kairi's sake. I wanted to find them and ensure their safety more than anything. But, if all the worlds were being taken over by the Heartless, then a reunion would be short lived. 'I'll take up, you guys' offer if a smile's all you need.'

Sora looked up at me, curiously.

"We're gonna find them." I told him. "Together-- and with their help."

"And we'll still be helping you guys out too!" Yuffie exclaimed.

I looked over everyone. All genuine, warm smiles across their faces as each of them nodded. Our situation may have seemed hopeless but we definitely weren't alone.

"Yeah." Sora finally agreed. A big toothy grin, grew across his lips. "We'll go with you guys."

The duck nodded, satisfied, as he held out his hand. "Donald Duck." He introduced himself.

"The name's Goofy." Declared the dog, slapping his hand onto Donald's.

They looked to us expectantly waiting to join them.

"Yukari." I said, placing my hand in next.

"And I'm Sora."

After our little huddle we said our goodbyes. The crew each lent us an impressive lump sum of potion's which would help us out with small ailments along our journey. They gave us a bit of money to start, bid us a safe trip, insisted we come back if we found anything useful or needed anything, and sent us off on our way.

This of course, transitioned into getting to see the vessel that Goofy mentioned prior.

On the outside, it looked like a little toy made of blocks for giants. On the inside, would be the homiest, space ship I'd ever had the pleasure to grace my presence with. A quick tour around the ship allowed me the chance to learn that it included, four dormitory rooms. A small men's and women's shower, a kitchen that housed enough room to fit that max number of occupants, a lounge room that Donald corrected as the briefing room, as well as a cockpit where'd we be spending the majority of the flights, prepping for world visits.

"Welcome to our ship!" Goofy announced.

"Get some rest if you need it." Donald suggested. "Who knows when we'll come up, on our next world. Best be prepared for bigger encounters."

"And don't even think about touching this and that like you own the place!" Went a very angry, very squeaky, and very tiny voice.

Our quartet, looked down to find the smallest, cutest, little chipmunks I'd ever seen. Both of them
skittered around our feet, as they attempted to hold our attention due to their size.

"All day I slave away at getting this vessel spotless and ship-shape! So don't try and trash the place, first chance ya get." One of them spat.

I knelt over and picked them up in the palms of my hand. Both of them were dressed in little, yellow aprons. A pocket emblazoned with a cog sat in full view. One of them had droopy eyes and a big red nose, and double buck, gapped teeth, while the other eyed me suspiciously, sniffing at my gloves with its little black nose.

"These two are Chip and Dale." Donald informed, as he headed away from our growing party. "They're the ones responsible for the maintenance of the gummi ship."

"Howdy! I'm Dale!" The red nosed one greeted with a soft smile.

"And you two, take off your shoes when you go into that cockpit!" The one I presumed to be chip, hollered, before they both leapt out of my hands and scurried off. But not before Chip could get in his final, nag. "I won't have ya dirtiring it up!"

"Just make sure to refuel and get some rest." Goofy reminded. "You can join us in the cockpit when you’re ready"

Sora and I nodded as Goofy left us alone near the entrance of the ship. I looked to Sora, who'd been gazing around in complete awe. I had to say this place was amazing, but at the same time, I felt like the rest, Donald and Goofy mentioned, seemed like a welcoming treat after everything we'd endured tonight.

"I guess, I'll go check out the rooms." I said. "Wanna come with or--"

"Sure." Sora nodded.

Together we wandered around until we found the dorms. The first one I found, I decided to claim, plopping myself right into the bed. It wasn't super comfy, but it was still a place to lie my head when things calmed down, I suppose.

The room itself was pretty sweet too. An expansive wall made completely of sealed, air tight glass that showed the stars and things of space that zoomed by. Everything was simplistic. A small locker like closet a desk and chair, and a bed.

I looked up to find, Sora had been gazing out at the view of space. His face on the verge of drooping.

"Sora?" I called him away from his thoughts.

He looked at me, with a changed expression that masked whatever he was feeling. I suppose I wouldn't try to bring up what had been really been bothering him. Didn't want to explode the ship just yet.

"If you get scared, you can sleep in my room." I teased.

Sora grinned a bit, as he joined me at the bed side. Rolling his eyes he sat down. "You think they're okay?" He asked, in a quiet voice.

For a moment, I wasn't sure what I should have said, but I had no way of knowing the truth. "I do." I said, smiling softly at him.
"But the Island is--"

"Who cares about that right now." I stopped him. "What matters is that you and I are together. We're safe. And as long as we stick together, and work with Donald and Goofy, we'll find the others."

"Do you really believe that?" He asked.

"Why not?" I shrugged. "Doesn't make a whole lot of sense not to hope."

For a second, Sora’s face went dark. I could see in his eyes that something had been bothering him.

"What is it?" I asked.

He stayed quiet a moment longer before deciding to respond. "I... I mean, back before we got to Traverse Town... I met Riku in the storm-- on the Island before you came." He twisted his mouth a bit, before continuing. I guess he was still trying to make sense of what he was about to say. "Riku said... He wasn't afraid of the darkness." Sora continued. "Do you think he meant, THE Darkness? The one that has to do with the Heartless?"

I frowned at this revelation. But what could I say? I hadn't been there when it happened. I couldn't even be sure of the context. I shook my head, trying to put it out of both of our thoughts.

"I don't think we should worry about that yet." I supplied, for both of our peace of mind. "We'll ask Riku what he meant when we find him."

Sora nodded quietly. "Yeah..." He agreed. "When we find him-- Him and Kairi. And then maybe they'll join us."

"Quite an idea! It wouldn't hurt to grow the group." A voice chirped, startling both Sora and I. Looking down at the floor, we found a smartly dressed cricket standing proudly at our feet. In a tail coat an top hat, a wide grin spread across his tiny face as he did a gentleman’s bow. "How do you do?"

"Oookay, I guess privacy is out the window." I said under my breath, staring wide eyed at the little bug.

"Whoa.." Sora awed. "You're so small. What are you doing here?"

"Jiminy Cricket's the name!" He introduced. "I couldn't help but over hear your discussion. You say you've lost your world, eh? Well the same thing's happened to mine. So I've taken up residence with the crew and have been sent out to record the goings on for the journey ahead at the request of the King."

"Ahh.." I tried not to be rude and inquire why he'd been eaves dropping. "Sorry to hear about your world. Glad you made it out okay."

"But of course!" The cricket supplied, jumping onto Sora's knee from the floor.

"I'm, Sora and this is Yukari." Sora greeted. "Nice to meet you. I'm guessing you'll be pretty busy with all that writing."

"Oh, of course! Feel free to suggest anything I might miss."

"Yeah, sure." Sora turned to me, as he got to his feet. The cricket, Jiminy, leapt on to his shoulder
as if to hitch a ride. "I'm gonna head to the cockpit with the others. You comin'?"

"Uhh... I think I'll catch a quick nap." I said, eyeing Jiminy. "Wake me up when we're ready for landing."

Sora nodded before he headed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Once alone, I sighed, lying back in the bed. I found myself gazing out at the stars that flew by. Sora's words about Riku hadn't left me. Closing my eyes I hoped that maybe it wasn't something that was cause for concern, but the dreams would ultimately correct that notion.

I was taken to a scene where a communion of conveniently shadowed figures stood around a sort of magical table that projected an image of... Sora Donald Goofy and I, back when we'd pledged our party-ship in Traverse Town. Now feeling very watched, I floated closer, attempting to grasp the going's on.

Within the dark room, low lit by green flames, I gathered that there had been about six shapes, conversing with each other.

"The little brats, took down that Heartless!" One of the voices raged. "Who would've thought?"

"Such is the power of the Keyblade." Went another voice. "Their powers aren't their own."

"Why not just turn them into Heartless and be done with them." A woman's voice happily chimed in. "Solve the problem, quick and easy."

"Those brats' friends, are the king's lackey's. Swoogle me eyes! Their all bilge rats by the looks of them." Spoke another.

"You're know prize, yourself." Went yet another.

"Shut up!!"

"Enough!" A final voice boomed from the shadows. Her voice was the only one to be matched with a face, as she stepped into the little light that danced about the room.

Looking into her yellow eyes, her blacked pupils gazed evilly at the image of our party on the table. Draped in high collared robes of black and violet, her green skin and horned cowl, complimented the cunning expression that Waltzed onto her black stained lips. "The Keyblade has already chosen these two. But will it be they who conquers the Darkness, or perhaps will it swallow them? Either way, we shall watch them closely, as they could pose to be useful. Especially the girl."

Her grin grew wider, and in that moment, it looked as though she had made direct eye contact with my ghostly form, sat across the room. But, before I could take much stalk in the idea, I was thrown into another scene.

Dizzying colors of blue, spun around my vision until I found myself in the strangest, place I'd ever seen. Blue cliffs, rose up around me, ushering heaps of rising... water falls defying gravity in every means possible. Water shot towards the heavens as if this place existed in reverse. What was more, was the chunks of rock, floating through the air. Completely awe struck, I almost hadn't noticed a figure of blue and yellow, curled up atop one of them.

Urgently I found myself reaching out to them. My heart raced at the sight of their waking face, a mess of confusion and fear.
"Riku!!" I shouted.

But of course he couldn't hear me. All the same, he sat forth, gazing about himself as if looking for the source of the voice.

"Where... where am I?" He asked, the silence.

I tried again to call out for him, but was met with no sign of him being able to hear me. My heart, lurched into my gut when I felt myself being pulled away from the scene. The world around me began to darken, and Riku’s image began to blur.

"W-wait! I'm not ready yet!" I cried out to no one. But that didn’t matter. The darkness around me quickly took over. Tendrils of black, smoke and ooze, shot out from the darkness. A hissing sounded in my ears, flooding my body with immediate terror. The pitch black face with yellow eyes and red mangled teeth appeared from within the darkness.

"Sleeeeeeep!!" the thing hissed, coming at me with alarming speed.

I screamed, trying to fight the thing and get away, but realized, I had woken up, back in my dorm upon the ship. Breathing heavily, I checked myself before realizing my face was drenched with tears.

To Be Continued
A Wonderland Deception

Chapter Summary

The gang makes their way to a new world, filled with ups and downs. Still that’s the least of their problems, as the aforementioned underlying force from Yukari’s dreams, poses a new threat.

I quietly slinked into the cockpit and took a seat, in the fourth empty chair, next to an unmanned console labeled "Teeny Fighter Controls." The boys hadn't immediately noticed when I came in as, they had been chattering away. Although Sora seemed to be more or less, listening then having been fully involved in the conversation. He was mostly looking about, taking in all the buttons and switches, and the view of space that hung over our heads, as the cockpit allowed a full 360 view. Amidst his goggling, he seemed to catch me sulking in my seat as when I looked up, he was there on his haunches, resting his chin on my arm rest.

"You okay?" He asked with big, eyes.

"Uh huh..." I responded half-heartedly, as I pulled my knees into my chest on the chair.

"Well... How was your ten minute nap?" Sora supplied. "I thought you were tired."

It was very clear I was in a mood. It was even more clear that Sora was trying to get me to talk. In all Honesty, I truly wanted to say something-- to everyone, but I still wasn't... confident, I guess, about how factual the dreams were. I mean, yes, they seemed incredibly detrimental to share at this point, but how was I supposed to say to a bunch of strangers, and Sora, that I could see things while I slept? I mean, I'd been having these dreams for the length of several months, and only now was the crazy stuff coming to life.

Maybe I should wait.

"You think... Riku and Kairi are together, like we are?" I asked. I wanted so badly to talk about the point in my dream about where I'd seen Riku, but I held back. Besides, I wasn't even sure if everything was legit yet. And if they were... then where was Kairi?

"Hmm..." For a moment, Sora hummed in thought. His half lidded eyes contemplated endless possibilities in a matter of seconds. "Maybe." He finally said. "I mean, it's hard to say for sure at this point. We've ran into some pretty crazy things, but we also met nice people."

"More or less..." I said, recounting the fact, that Leon thought it was a good idea to beat up kids over holding a civil chat."

"And you and me turned out to be Keyblade wielders!"

"Sworn protectors of the world with endless opportunities of death at every turn." I remarked sarcastically.

"They're bound to be just as well off as we are! Who knows, maybe even better."
I looked down in to his deep blue eyes that sparkled with excitement. For a moment, we shared a small grin, delighting in the fact that we could still hope that our friends were in good health wherever they may be.

Yet still... I couldn't help but feel guilty about not sharing what I'd managed to learn.

I bit my lip as I prepared myself to speak. "Sora... I've been meaning to tell you that I-

"We've come across a new world!!" A little voices boomed from all around us. It took a minute for me to gather that it had been chip's voice coming from the intercom that was connected throughout the ship.

"Convenient..." I grumbled.

"Great!" Donald exclaimed, as I watched him hit a series of buttons before realizing he'd thrown the ship into a state of rest. "Let's head out immediately."

I watched as he and Goofy made their way out of the cock pit, confident we'd follow.

"Sweet!" Sora exclaimed, rising from his spot next to me.

I frowned, yet still felt a bit relieved as I stood up and hesitantly followed the boys down to the air lock.

The four of us huddled together around the exit. Donald felt the need to wait until this moment, to lay down a few ground rules.

"Alright." He announced. "Before we head out-- something the two of you need to be aware of, as Keyblade wielders. Protecting the balance and fighting monsters is a pretty big job. But, one thing to make absolutely clear is that you-- under no circumstances, tell anyone you are from off world."

"Why not?" Sora asked.

"To protect the borders of the world!" Goofy stated confidently, grinning as he stuck a finger in the air.

"That's 'Orders' of the world, you dimwit!" Donald corrected

"But that very order is being disrupted by the Heartless, isn't it?" I asked thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure that, whatever world we go to, has already run the risk of having its whole state of peace of coherence pretty much thrown out the window."

"Which is why, stating the fact of us being off worlders, will make an even bigger mess of things." Donald, agreed. I watched as he moved to unlock the hatch. "It's pertinent that we keep business on a need to know basis."

As he swung the door open, we were met by an impressive light show of energy that swarmed around the outside of the ship. A force field maybe? I watched as Donald and Goofy neared the exit, peering carefully outside.

"Now, we're about to set foot on new ground." Donald informed turning back to look at us. "One thing to note is that you, under no circumstances, jump the air lock. Once we get down there, let's make sure to stick together, got it?"

Sora and I nodded, wordlessly.
"Alright. Let's get to it." Donald said, as he and Goofy step foot outside the ship.

For a terrifying moment, I was led to believe, that these two were completely nuts as they had leaped to their deaths.

Sora and I rushed to the exit to catch a glimpse of our new friends, go plummeting to their doom. Yet, once there we found no sight of them. They'd completely vanished.

For a moment, we stood with expressions mixed with awe, horror and confusion-- completely unsure of what to think.

"Do you think..." I finally asked.

"Only one way to find out!" Sora shouted, taking a few steps back.

"Wait a minute, you aren't thinking of-- Sora, no!" I tried to stop him.

"Here I gooo!! Augh!"

As Sora got off to a bit of a running start, he'd accidentally shoved me half way through the exit, sending me dangling over the side. Noticing his mistake, he tried to somehow stop himself, as he reached out to make a grab at me. But he'd been much too late, as he'd sunk into the light that buzzed around the ship.

Breathless, I found myself, once again gripped by fear, as I fumbled to try and keep myself from falling in, as well. But I was hardly holding on by the pads of my fingertips as I slipped and fell away from the air lock and into the bright light, screaming for my life.

Kingdom Hearts: Ascendant Recollection

Chapter 03

A Wonderland Deception

On top of the weird tingling and the slight dizziness from light travel, it was a weird experience to say the least. Getting zapped down to a new world, would have actually been quite exhilarating had it not included falling through a thicket of trees, and smashing my face into just about every single one. When I hit the ground, the loud thud of my head against the thick trunk, almost dulled out the sound of a little girl screaming in fright.

I was starting to have a real bad relationship with trees at this point.

Sitting up, I rubbed the back of my head, and blinked the black dots out of my eyes. Slowly my vision began to clear and the image of a blond girl, in a plain blue dress around maybe... eight to ten years old, fazed into being. She looked at me with big black eyes. Her body language was apprehensive. She seemed just about ready to run.

But... and you know I was probably losing my mind at this point from all the concussions I was getting and what not-- but this girl... actually seemed incredibly... small!

She stood near the sole of my sneaker, blinking fearfully up at me. I wasn't able to really tell, but in comparison to her, I was at a height much larger than the clock tower back at Traverse Town. She was probably no bigger than my pinky.
"Oh! I had no idea you--- How--? You're so tiny! I didn't even see you! "I stammered over my words apologetically, feeling frantic about not having seen her. I could have squished the little girl, and never have known!

"It's not that I'm small, but perhaps, that you still seem to be quite tall."

"Still?" I asked. "You mean I should have shrunk before I got here?"

The girl nodded. "Was that not clear? That door knob specially stated to, sip the drink so you could shrink."

"Ah..." I paused for a moment, rubbing my head once again. Bad enough I had to keep up with this girl's rhymes, but I had no idea what door she was talking about.

Come to think of it, I'd landed in some thicket, without my team. I'm supposing, Sora's fancy somersault out the airlock, left nasty effects for me and my crash landing, alone in the new world.

"Well how do I get to your size?" I asked.

"The shrooms, that around here, loom. Tall they are, but bland tasting treats. They'll help you shrink if you attempt to eat."

I glanced around once again and realized that the trees, I'd come crashing through were indeed not trees, but mushrooms in which the girl had pointed out. In fact, this hadn't been the oddest, thing as I began to truly survey my surroundings. I sat in what I could only assume was more like a great expanse of a possible field. Along with mushrooms, enormous blades of grass shot hundreds of thousands of feet in the air. The base of a giant tree trunk loomed so high up, that it faded out of existence-- or at least just so, that I couldn't make any part of it out from where I sat, at my size. I almost got tunnel vision when a gargantuan butterfly swooped down and picked up such a great wind that it tussled my hair.

Turns out, that I wasn't the biggest thing here. Great...

I looked back down at Alice, nearly shaking from the sheer disbelief of this world's capacity. I don't think I'd have too much trouble keeping the world order intact, here.

I turned to find a mushroom, at my height. Gripping it in my hand, I ran a thumb over it, feeling for the texture. It was a boring, unsuspecting looking mushroom. It was almost impossible to believe that it would make me shrink.

"One bite?" I asked, looking down at the girl.

"That's right!" The girl nodded

Hesitantly, I pulled a small piece from the thing just to test its flavor. I wasn't keen on putting foreign plants into my mouth. Mushrooms were fine, but magical ones from other worlds??

Carefully setting the small piece on my tongue, I bit down and met a chewy texture I really had no tolerance for. I would have spat it out had I not felt obligated to grow smaller. Continuing to process the chewy plant in my teeth, I swallowed and quickly began to feel the effects.

At first my stomach bubbled before bursting into a fit of Butterflies. And before I knew it, the world around me increased in size and I went plummeting, once again, towards the dirt, right at the girl's feet.
I groaned, sick of the falling.

"Are you alright?" The girl asked.

"Quite..." I said with a bit of a cheeky grin, standing and brushing the dirt from my clothes. "So... I'm sorry to bother you but, I'm a bit lost. I was kind of here with my friends, but I've gotten separated from them somehow. Have you by any chance seen a boy with brown hair, dressed in red, come through here-- or anyone for that matter?"

"I wish I could say but, I've been alone this whole day." The girl said, with a droopy frown. "In fact, a little white rabbit is what I'm in search for. But the Cheshire cat failed to give a proper tour. So, now I'm quite lost in this maze. It feels less like hours and more like days. And worst still... the creatures with their odd features. I've been out running them for a while. Although, I haven't seen them in the last mile."

Quickly deciphering her poetry speak, I noted that this girl had been thrown into a pretty odd predicament herself. She was in a place she wasn't familiar with and was searching for a white rabbit, she'd most likely lost multiple times. Some... cat gave her bad directions and now she was here in this thicket, alone. I had to presume that the creatures she referred to were Heartless.

"Well... I don't mind tagging along to keep you safe from the creatures. We can search together to we find who we're both looking for."

"Sure!" The girl cheered, clapping her hands and twirling about, excitedly. "Oh! By the way, how do you do? My name is Alice, and you?"

"I'm Yukari." I nodded, glancing about the path. "Ah...Which way do we..."

"Follow me!"

On recommendation, I followed Alice deeper into the thicket of enormous mushrooms and towering blades of grass. The expansive dirt, crunched softly beneath our feet as we walked. For a good while, the walk had been far from eventful so, I supplemented the silence for a bit of chatter. I asked plenty of questions, allowing Alice to do the majority of talking. At the same time, my mind began to drift away.

I wondered where my party could have turned up and if we'd meet at any point during this visit. I was so... small in the world, it was almost mind shattering. I tried not to think too deeply about it when we passed enormous insects and a bed of rude and pretentious flowers, that hung over our heads, and prodded over our appearances

The wandering came to an end, when our surroundings began to shift from lush vegetation, to a manicured hedge maze. The sound of men, singing a light-hearted tune, hung in the air, and I couldn’t help but notice a strange shift in the artificial sky that boxed in over my head. Sure it was bright and blue, but there was something incredibly off about the place.

"This way, perhaps!" Alice shouted excitedly as she made a sharp turn around a wall of hedge.

"Hey, wait!" I called, chasing after her. "It could be danger...ous..."

My words trailed off as I gawked at what lay before me.

"I... must have completely lost my mind..." I said under my breath as I watched Alice, merrily joined in with what appeared to be a group of... card men.
When I say, card men, I actually mean, they were literally people made of playing cards. Their bodies were a tall length of Bristol paper, decorated with spades, respective to their number. Their heads, hands, and feet were all spades as well. I marvel with confused amazement at their incredible articulation, as they bent and jumped and danced around. All the while I noticed they had been holding paint brushes, dripping wet with red paint. I watched as they messily slapped the paint onto what appeared to be white paper roses that sat, elegantly folded within the beautifully treated, trees that had been forced to grow into the appearance of spades.

The faint, musical number floated about the small clearing, bringing life to the artificial beauty around me. I almost settled into the mood when loud yelling, tore into my ears.

"WHO'S BEEN PAINTING MY ROSES RED!?!?"

My soul nearly left my body, I had been so scared.

The three card men, leapt from their tree and scrambled about the placed until they had the neat idea of stacking themselves together, to hide their presence. Alice, afraid of the disembodied voice, just like the rest of us, had run to my side and cowered behind me.

I did say I'd keep her safe, didn't I?

The world began to shake as, aggravated stomping came from the exit, opposite the way Alice and I came in. An enormous, menacing shadow, crept slowly into view from over the hedge's height. I could feel Alice's grip on my arm tighten. My breath got stuck in my throat as I stood there. I was somehow more afraid of whatever the consequence of painting roses red was, than the actual... thing... that was advancing.

"WHOOOO WAS IT!!??" The voice demanded once more.

From the darkness, the figure emerge and stared wide eyed as a plump, round woman dressed in a regal red and black umbrella dress loomed above us. She had puffy sleeves and a raised collar, that seemed particularly pointed. Her big pudgy face was red with rage. Her hair was a tangled mess that seem more aggravated by her mood than anything. Atop her had sat an itty bitty crown that was barely holding its own.

A legion of card men, came trucking into the scene on either side of this woman. Seemingly very aware of the culprits, they surrounded the three card men who'd made a poor attempt to hide. Ripping them a part, they were dragged over towards the angry woman and thrown down in front of her.

"YOU THREE!!" The woman, exclaimed, loudly, pointing her small, chubby finger in the direction of the guilty party. "WHO!! Painted My Roses Red??!!"

I watched, completely paralyzed as the cards tried their hardest to hide amongst each other, shifting the blame and pointing fingers before finally giving up and admitting to their actions. "W-we did Your Highness." One of them said. "We thought you might... like them r-red."

"Oh? So you did, did you?" The queen asked. Suddenly her beast like features vanished, as she reverted into a friendlier version of herself. But this was short lived as she immediately resumed shouting. "Who Told You, You Could Do Such A Thing!? OOOFF WITH THEIR HEADS!!!"

On cue, red card soldiers emerged to take away the perpetrators, who were dragged away sobbing and begging for mercy, perhaps, never to be seen again. I clamped my molars tightly against each other when the angry peach of a woman, stepped in front of me. Her face was serene, almost as if
she was enjoying a cool summer breeze.

"And Who... might you two be?" She asked. She had that gentle tone in her voice that heavily hinted on apprehensive.

"Alice..."/"Yukari"

Both of us spoke together, afraid that hesitation would get us killed.

The woman... or I supposed I should call her the Queen, eyed us as though we were mere, ugly looking ants. I could feel Alice shaking as she gripped my arm tighter. I would have been too if I hadn't been trying to figure out where to look, out of the lady's royal respect. So I kept my eyes strained on the perfectly trimmed grass beneath my feet.

"Perhaps you already know this, but in case you might need a refresher, I am The Queen of Hearts. And I hereby dub you two guilty of treason."

My stomach lurched from where it had been lodged in my throat. "Tr-treason??" I blurted out.

"Cards!" The Queen shouted. "Take them away!!"

Panic filled me, as my eyes darted frantically about at the card soldiers that closed in on me. I turned, looking for Alice who'd already been grabbed up. She screamed and pleaded while struggling to get free.

"No, no, no! Let me go!!" Alice squealed over the hollering and thrashing.

"Alice!" I shouted. I would have rushed to her aid but, I was grabbed up by a few of the card soldiers. Surprisingly, they were stronger than I presumed, and their grip on me was uncomfortably tight.

I turned my head to search for the Queen who'd put us in this predicament.

"Please!!" I shouted. "We haven't done anything! Let alone commit treason!! Let us go so we can explain ourselves."

"SILENCE!!" The Queen shouted, exploding into a fit of red rage!! "The two of you appear, suspect, as those who've attempt the theft upon my heart!!"

"What?!-- Augh!" I was yanked back by one of the card soldiers, trying to now bind my wrist. "No!" I shouted. "I-isn't there a sort of trial or something?! To prove our innocence?!!"

I watched, as the Queen stared over me, her anger slowly dissipating. Her expression was quickly replaced with that of contemplation.

"STOOPPP!!" She yelled, suddenly.

And everything ceased.

The cards that succeeded in binding my hands, held me by my arms, and shoulders, down on my knees, so I wouldn’t escape. I looked for Alice who was looking up at the queen with a horror stricken face.

"Indeed." The woman, said as a devious grin slowly grew across her face. "A trial, of course. It's only fair. I'll hear your plea, but then it's OOOOOOOOOOF WITH YOUR HEADS!!!
Seemingly used to this sort of behavior, the cards knew exactly what to do. They took no time in shoveling Alice and I out of the clearing, past the maze. It didn't take long before we were roughly ushered into an "open air" court room, existing within the hidden recesses of the hedge garden.

Even as artificial as the hedge maze was, there still managed to be something regal in the appearance of the "room." An enormous long, red rug with gold trim laid, through the center of the area. It looked like a normal court room with jury and judge panel. There was the witness and defendant stands and everything. The only issue was, all the seats were empty.

As Alice and I stood at our separate podiums near each other, I could already feel that this was going to go horribly for the two of us. The Queen sat as the judge, reclining happily in her chair. What we were waiting for, I had no clue at the time, but soon found out when a nervous looking rabbit came running into the scene.

"It's him!" Alice whispered to me, almost excitedly.

I watched as a white rabbit dressed in an a red outfit of puffed sleeves and a fancy frilled collar, darted up the spiral of stairs that wrapped up around a tall pedestal, likely made just for him. Once at the top, the rabbit drew out a horn, and inhaled sharply before blowing out a sort of commencement tune, that settled over the court room.

"Court... is now in session..."The rabbit said, in between labored breaths. I watched as he wiped his brow with a handkerchief and stood silently at the ready.

"These two are the culprits!" Accused the queen, promptly starting the meeting, cutting straight to the chase. She aimed her little gavel at the two of us, waving it back and forth, from me to Alice. "There's no doubt about it. And the reason why? Because I say so, That's Why?"

"Why, this meeting is absolutely flawed!!" Alice cried out, stamping her little foot in protest. "Neither she nor I have done anything wrong!! I don't know whether or not, you're truly Queen. But, I've never seen someone so selfish and... and so mean!"

The Queen let go a very exaggerated gasp, placing a hand at her chest. I glanced about me as the card soldiers all around, came undone and started to low-key panic from where they stood. I could only assume what was about to unfold as I turned back to the Queen of Hearts, now ready to fight my way out of the situation if I had to.

"You dare defy me?!?! Both of you are guilty!!! Guilty of the theft upon the heart of Queen of Hearts!! OOOOFFF WITH THEIR HEADS!!"

The card soldiers leapt into action, moving faster than I could think. They yanked and pulled at my hair and arms, struggling to force me into submission.

"No, No!! Oh, Please!" Alice squealed, as they closed in around her.

"Hold it right there!!" A voice bolted through the air, like a rooster breaking the silence of dawn.

Raking my head free from the grip of one of the card soldiers, I found Sora barging into the court yard, with Donald and Goofy immediately behind him.

"You Dare Interfere With The Proceeding Of This Court!?" The Queen hollered. Her temper completely dissipated at this point. "Mannerless! The Lot of You!!"

"Just wait a minute. We know who the culprits really are!" Sora declared.
"Yeah!! It was the Heartle--" Goofy began to speak, but quickly covered his mouth, realizing he'd almost said too much.

"Hogwash!!" The Queen spat. "You couldn't possibly know what you're talking of, lad. Have you, any proof?"

"Well... uh..." This was where Sora's 'planning' went south. I assumed he brashly rushed in to save the two of us, but with no forethought.

"Very well." The Queen hissed, as she glared infernos in the party's direction. Her nostrils flared aggressively and, it almost looked like steam was spewing out of her ears. "I shall humor your claim. Bring me evidence of these girls' innocence. Fail and it's Off With All Your Heads!!"

At this, the card soldiers, roughly picked both Alice and I off of the ground and shoved us into a cage.

"Until your investigations are through, the Court is adjourned!"

The slam of the gavel marked the definitive end of the session. I could truly feel the harrowing sensation of our predicament, when the boys approached Alice and my, encasement.

"Yukari, where have you been this entire time??" Sora asked, keeping his voice level.

"I'm going to assume it has something to do with my... erm... rough exit." I said, eluding to the events prior without dropping any hints of our being aliens to this world. "I've been here probably just as long as you but, got... 'turned around' a bit." I punctuated my statement with air quotes.

"Well this is a fine mess." Donald said rubbing his temples. "This is what happens when you meddle in the affairs of other worlds. Now what are we supposed to do about... all of this?"

"Hey, I hardly did anything." I snapped a bit, keeping my voice low. "But Queenie up there is impulsive. She does what she pleases, and I for one can't be so sure, that even if you find your evidence, she'll let us go."

"Indeed." Alice whispered, standing next to me at the bars. "It would be a far cry to believe she'd hear it, if you plead."

"Oh--" Sora seemed a bit thrown. "I know it seems a bit hopeless, but we're definitely going to get you guys out of here. Don't you fret."

"Not at all. With Yukari here, I feel I've got a lot of gall." Alice smiled. Her faith in me was shocking, considering I couldn't help her escape the Queen's wrath. I suppose it's more to do with my keeping her company than anything else.

"We've just got one problem." Goofy interjected. "We don't even know where to start looking for any proof."

"There does in yonder woods, reside the Cheshire Cat." Alice suggested. "Do seek him out and ask him where this proof is at."

I realized, Alice had spoken of him before. But, the way she did so made me think he might have been a bit misleading. I would have debated if that were a good idea or not. But before I could speak, the Card that stood guard next to the cage seemed to grow irritated, at our discussion.
"Enough talking already! Get a move on.

Sora gave me one last, worrisome glance before the party strode away.

I sighed as I plopped myself down near the back of the cage. Pulling my knees into my chest, I wrapped my arms around them and tried to keep my thoughts from souring. I watched as Alice took a seat as well, elegantly sitting mermaid style as she clasped her hands into her laps. The look on her face was troubled, which made me feel worse.

"I'm sorry about this mess." I said. "But those guys were my friends. I trust they'll definitely help us out of here."

Alice shook her head. I took it she didn't blame me, considering how we got here. "Of course you aren't to blame. Yet even with your friends help, I'm worried all the same. Without you here, I'm sure I'd have much more to fear..."

I nodded, resting my chin against my knees as the two of us patiently waited for the boys to return. We settled into the quiet, not wanting to draw more attention to our situation. It wasn't even long, before Heartless exploded into the room, with the boys bounding after them.

"Oh no..." I grumbled, as I neared the bars of the cage.

"Here's the evidence your Queen-liness!" Sora shouted, taking down the Heartless as they surged towards the Queen of Hearts. Right as one was about to drive its claws into the Queen's chest, Sora leapt onto the judge panel and destroyed it, sending it bursting in a fit of darkness.

"How Dare You!?" The Queen exploded, probably more shaken at the fact that she'd almost been attacked. "The proof is nothing but a farce!! This is all the evidence I needed to confirm that you are the ones attempting to steel my heart. Off With Their Heads, All of them!! SIEZE THEM!!"

Suddenly, the cage lurched upwards, shooting up towards the sky before locking in place, raised above the court yard.

"Sora!" I shouted to him.

"Don't worry abou-- Augh!!" But his words were cut off when the legion of card soldiers, leapt onto him. To my great dismay, a curtain suddenly wrapped around the circumference of our prison, obscuring our view of the outside.

"No. Nope!" I said, getting up shakily, trying to maintain balance. Carefully I made it to the latch and tried to rip the door open with force. Of course, this thing was high grade, thick metal or whatever so it didn't budge. I attempted kicking it in, but this only managed to rock the cage. Alice yelped in terror, trying to keep her balance.

"Sorry." I told her. "I'm just trying to get us out of here, so I can hel--"

And then it struck me. The Keyblade.

I mean, it was a Key, maybe I could somehow get it to--

"Yukari!!" Alice screamed.

My head shot towards her, wondering what the problem could be. But when I looked upon her, I found, a pool of what looked to be inky darkness, culminating at the bottom of the cage. What was
more alarming was that it wasn't just latched on to Alice, but myself as well.

"Oh Goodness! What is this?!" She cried out, trying to pull herself free, yanking her leg out with her hands. But no matter how much she managed to free herself, the stuff latched back on to her.

What was more frightening was that it began to suck her in.

For a second, panic whipped over my senses and I was frozen in place. My mind raced with frightening possibilities of what would happen if she was completely consumed. Where on earth was this coming from? A dark tendril, latched onto my wrist and yanked me down, into the pool. I fought against it as much as I was able, but when I wouldn't come to the Darkness, it came to me.

Where I thought I was panicking before, I was truly freaking out now. Somehow I was tumbling through an expanse of dark fluid that curled and tightened around my body. I shouted, silent cries that were stolen away by the Darkness around me. I tried to call out to Alice, but it was fruitless. I fought against a tugging sensation that occurred all over my body, like a swarm of evil hands pulling me deeper into the darkness. I fought until I felt another pull, one much more pure, yank me in the opposite direction.

Suddenly, light erupted from my chest and everything came to a halt.

"Sleeeeeepp…" A hiss sounded in my ears.

I found it almost startling. But not as startling as another voice that loudly buzzed through my head.

"Get up."

My eyes, shot open.

Slowly I sat up, with great confusion. The two voices that chased each other in my head, sounded nothing alike. One raspy and evil, while the other was warm and inviting. At first, I wondered if I'd imagined it, before I noticed a body, of pure white, standing near me.

"Stand." The voice of a woman spoke. But even as such, I saw no indication of lips or eyes. Whoever this had been, was a complete silhouette of light.

"Who.... are you?" I asked, a bit apprehensively.

Last time I even looked upon a creature completely eclipsed in black, I was always almost eaten. Who's to say this lady didn't have the same intentions.

"We must hurry, if you want to help your friends." She said, completely dodging my question.

"My... friends?" I asked. "Wait... where am I? What happened to Alice, is she--"

"You are in the Darkness between." The woman, voiced beginning to walk away. Her steps were so light in comparison to my own, against the wet, dark ground. "Your enemies pulled you through it, in order to capture you. Perhaps they intended, to use or destroy you... But ultimately, their intentions are not pure, either way. As for Alice, she has lost the battle with the darkness and was captured. She's already within the enemies grip."

For a moment, I considered her words. "Well... Well we've got to go and save her!" I suggested.

"You are not ready." The woman said. "To face the enemies alone, would be suicide."

I pressed my lips together, knowing any further suggestions, would be met with disapproving
responses. I wanted to suggest taking Sora and the others, but I had no idea what was going on, how I ended up here, or even how I'd get back.

"Due to my deep connection with you... I only managed to pull you away from their grasp."

"Deep connection..." I echoed. "Then... who are you? You seem a lot like that screecher thing. But somehow... different at the same time."

The woman, stopped, to do what I could only assume was ponder. "I suppose one could call us the Ladies of Light and Dark respectively. While I reside within your heart to protect you... she seems only intent on your destruction."

"D-destruction??" I stuttered. "Wait! Do I even get a reason as to why??"

But the woman let go a yelp, clasping her fingers to what I had to assume was her forehead. "I... cannot fully recall." She said. "For whatever reason... those memories are sealed off. I cannot even remember how I came to be here."

"Wait... your memories are--"

"But this is not important. Your enemies have sent a heartless out to destroy your friends. You must hurry to their aid, as they cannot defeat it without you."

"Flattering." I grumbled. "But Sora's got a Key too. I'm pretty sure that--"

"Now..." The woman, dubbed as the Lady of Light, threw up her hand and created a sort of... portal made of bright, shimmering, golden light.

"Wait... Seriously?! You can't just throw all of this on me and not even explain!"

"SCREEEEEEEEEEUUUGH!!" A loud hissing sort of cry, sounded from behind us.

I flinched, turning back to peer into the infinite Darkness to see what I knew was approaching.

"You must leave, now." The woman's voice was urgent. "You will get your answers, when we meet again."

"But I don't even know--" 

"SCRAAAAAAAAGH!!"

"Now!!" The Lady of Light grabbed me by the shoulder, and shoved me through the portal. The greatest inconvenience of my days was being tossed through the air twice now. Sadly, where I thought those would be my last times, I couldn't have been more incorrect as I went hurdling through the air, screaming my lungs out as I fell through an enormous room of pinks and whites. The place around me seemed full of three dimensional objects. But, upon passing them, they all turned out to be false, drawn surfaces. I screamed harder when I noticed a large, round table below me, that I couldn't decipher as a real one or a flat 2D plain as I went rocketing towards it.

But I did manage to make out three little figures stood upon the tables top, scrambling about.

I plummeted, right into the arms of Sora who'd ended up crumpling, unable to support the weight of a girl who'd fallen from the ceiling.

"What the heck!??" Sora shouted, picking himself up.
"What is *that??*" I responded frantically, ignoring Sora's mild curses.

Erupting from below the edges of the table, was an enormous... Heartless. For lack of better terms, the thing was odd-- sporting doubled limbed, double jointed legs, that looked good for jumping. It arms were long strips of folded paper like arms that that did nothing more but skilfully juggle batons of fire about while stomping around the room.

The table beneath my butt, had suddenly vanished. My party happily went slamming right into the floor below.

I yelped in pain as I massaged the side of my face. Glancing around at my team mates, they looked a lot worse for wear. How long that they been dukin' it out with... whatever this guy was. I turned to look for the Heartless only find an enormous black shoe coming down upon the four of us.

"SCRAAAAM!!" Donald shouted.

The four of us all leapt in opposite directions, narrowly missing getting squashed like ants. I rolled to a halt and quickly got to my feet and summoned my Keyblade. I glanced about me, taking a mental note of where the boys all landed, before gazing up at the towering Heartless above.

"Can I ask?" I shouted. "What in the world is happening!?"

"Talk later." An unfamiliar voice sung. My eyes darted all around the expansive room in search of the one possessing the voice. It didn't take long to find a disembodied, floating cat head spinning around on the ledge of the gigantic fire place. Slowly, it came to a stop, looking directly at me before it's body, of deep purple and pink stripes came into existence, reclining in his spot-- a big grin spread long across his face. "Fight! For now that the gang is all here, the Heartless can be defeated."

"This was all a trick!" Sora shouted, as he rolled beneath an attack from the papery arms of the Giant Heartless boss.

"A trick??" The cat, who I quickly began to gather was *the Cheshire* cat, tutted. "Nothing of the sort. The Cheshire Cat is always here to help those in need."

Upon those words, the Giant Heartless rose it's fiery batons over its head. Spinning them in its hands, fire quickly began to manifest before it plunged its twirling weapons down upon our party as a wave of fire came surging directly at our quartet.

"Some assistance?" I could barely hear the cat's words as the four us screamed for our lives. I almost hadn't realized the twinkling, magical aura that fluttered brightly around Sora and I. Too panicked to think, I shoved my Keyblade out before me to block the oncoming attack. To my great surprise, a flurry of a blizzard shot from the tip of my Keyblade and swamped half of the Giant Heartless in ice and snow.

"Wak!!" Donald voiced. "You just did magic!!"

No kidding. I could really feel it too, as I suddenly felt completely drained. Much like the Heartless, half of my body from the right arm up and a bit down to my waist was frosted over. I shivered aggressively with teeth chattering as I tried to find warmth, drawing back my key. Looking up, I watched as the Heartless shivered and twitched trying to recover from my spell.

"That was amazing, Yukari!!" Sora shouted, throwing a fist in the air.
"But incredibly dangerous!" Donald added. "If you're gonna use magic, you'll have to focus it. Channel it through your Keyblade. Don't just throw it around recklessly, or you'll burn yourself out."

"Yeah.." I nodded, shaking the cold away. Slicing my Key through the air, I could see it glitter with little flecks of frost. "Sora. We've gotta rely on magic to take it down." I said.

"I mean... I'll try." He said, readying his blade, looking determined regardless.

The Heartless, now somewhat recovered, groaned as he weekly took a step in our direction.

"Looks like that really did a number on it. Sora, follow my lead." I ordered. "Donald, can you back me up with some stronger ranged spells? We're gonna try and freeze it for good, but I think I used up most of my magic already...."

Donald nodded.

"Goofy, we're gonna need you in front to block his fire. Together we can take him down!"

"Yeah!!" The boys all shouted before we broke huddle and rushed into action.

Sora, Donald and Goofy and I rushed the big boss, with Goofy holding up the front. He bravely blocked fireball after fire ball, while we all ducked numerous oncoming swipes of his baton. I could tell it was getting annoyed with us by the way it started stomping around.

Donald held up the rear, casting spells that did more area damage than, to the Heartless-- which was outright perfect as Sora and I hit him with little blizzard spells as we darted around the thing’s ankles.

The Heartless began to slow, stopping in its tracks, bending it's odd legs to their fullest as it crouched down low.

"It's gonna jump!!" Goofy shouted, breaking formation as he ran for any possible cover.

The four of us completely dispersed as it leapt high into the air, nearly hitting the ceiling of the room. It was then that a bright idea formed.

"Donald!!" I shouted. "Watch it's trajectory!! Aim your magic at where it lands. Sora!! Focus on the enemy, keep firing your ice!!"

The boys did just as I'd ordered, casting magical cold spells all over the place. It was only when the thing came back down, that I had grown increasingly worried. Now completely frozen, the Heartless would only be good for a frosty explosion!!

"Duck and cover!!" I shouted, turning to run. Instantly I slammed into Sora and together we'd plopped into a heap on the floor, only to attempt to scramble back to our feet to get to safety.

"Firaga!!" I heard Donald shout as he and Goofy appeared ahead of us.

A big, blazing fire exploded from the tip of Donald's staff, right at the moment where the Heartless hit the floor and erupted into a explosion of snow and ice that, had it not been for Goofy’s shield, would have impaled us all.

For a good while, the frost hung in the air, obscuring our vision. But whence it cleared we found the heartless, frozen and in pieces. While no longer functioning, it had still not completely
disappeared. Sora and I quickly disposed of the thing, sending off yet another one of those large, pink crystalline hearts that floated up into the air, before vanishing out of sight.

"Phew!" Goofy exclaimed, wiping his brow. "Glad that's over."

"Good, lord... What is all that racket?!" A voiced whined. I looked to find a talking door knob yawning sleepily. It's baggy eyes looking our party over with great distaste. "Do humor me a bit and tone down the brawl, could you? A door knob isn't to get any rest around here, he can't..."

The thing, finished off its sentence with a grand yawn, opening it's maw perfectly wide, and holding it just right for us to notice something beyond the depths of his... esophagus.

Suddenly both Sora's and my Key lurched towards the door, as if being controlled by some guided hand. Promptly, a beam of bright light shot from the tips of our blades and right into the door knobs mouth before dying away. A loud clunking noise sounded before the door knob could, conveniently close its mouth.

"What... was that?" Sora inquired.

"Sounded like something... locked." I suggested.

The four of us continued to gaze on as something fell from the door, and rolled onto the floor at Goofy's feet. To which he picked it up to inspect what looked like a sort of bright green rock.

"Ahyuck, it's a Gummi block!" Goofy explained.

"It's doesn't look like a normal piece though. Let's have it here." Donald urged, as he took it from Goofy to look it over himself. As he turned it in his hand, he hummed in thought, furrowing his brows. "Haven't seen one like this before..."

Clapping suddenly filled the air, cutting through our revelation. We all turned back to the newly appeared table that sat in the middle of the room to find the Cheshire cat, once more.

"Superb performance! You're powers certainly do bloom true, if I do say!! Keep it up and someday you'll be florist! I can't wait to see what you'll do next."

I frowned at such a poorly placed pun.

"Who are you, really, Cheshire cat?" Sora asked. The tone in his voice informed me that he'd met with this cat more than he'd liked to.

"Alice is neither here, nor there-- or available for any occasion." The cat echoed. It was only then that I realized that his body had phased out of existence, while his voice reverberated impressively around the great room. "She's passed from this world to where I cannot speak... Borne off by the shadows, she has fallen to the darkness of obscurity. Perhaps, your feminine friend could shed some light upon your situation. Tip toeing around the truth will only get you thrown into deeper Darkness."

All of the boys' eyes landed on me as, I became the new subject of interest.

"Yukari... what's he talking about?" Sora asked. "Does this have something to do with why, Alice... didn't come back with you?"

He, Donald, and Goofy traded worried expressions. I bit my lip, now fearing what I'd been putting off. But if what the Lady of Light had said, about our enemies was true... then I suppose it was
indeed time to tell the boys about the dreams.

"We should get back to the ship." I sighed. "There's... something I've been meaning to tell you."

To Be Continued
Concerned with the events of what had happened to Alice, yet burdened with the intel of a new impending threat, Yukari resolves to inform her teammates about the shrouded figures in her dreams. But, the conversation is cut short when they land in a new world that demands more than brazen strength.

My team and I sat in the briefing room after heading back to the ship and setting it to auto-pilot. Joined by the very concerned slash suspicious expression of my peers, I could feel this weird tension wavering in the air as I discussed with them, the dreams, the people in the dark and how they were apparently after us.

"Huh..." Goofy scratched his temple, thoughtfully. "So you're saying you have a kind of power that lets ya see things... that are happening or might have already happened?"

"Seems fishy." Donald crossed his arms over his chest, closing an eye. "Also, inconvenient. Why can't you see the future??"

I shrugged, as I held my head in my hands. I was still really drained from that overuse of magic on the Wonderland Heartless boss.

"Yukari, how long... have you been having these dreams?" Sora asked, joining into the group discussion. "Is that why...?"

"I don't know about that one." I stopped him, knowing he was about to mention the crying. I didn't want Donald and Goofy more concerned than they needed to be. "As for how long... maybe around a year and a half ago?"

"Why didn't you say anything, to me?" He asked, sounding understandably hurt.

"I mean, I just thought they were really bad dreams is all. Besides... There was... nothing you could do about it..."

My refusal to look into his eyes as I said that, prompted a great, uncomfortable silence. Admittedly, I was still leaving out a lot of information. Like the Ladies of Light and Dark, my awakening powers, and what I had seen with Riku both on the island, and in whatever world he'd end up. I don't know why I was still holding back.

"Okay... well..." Goofy decided to reawaken the conversation. "You said that we've got some baddies watchin' our moves, right? I mean... that sounds pretty bad..."

"Not as bad as them sending Heartless after us!!" Donald screeched. "They're making us work harder than we need to!"

"They're trying to kill us..." I clarified. "More importantly... they're trying to get rid of Sora."

"Just me?" He asked. "What about you?"
"They said something about... using me..." I responded, leaning my cheek into my palm. It was something that I'd completely ignored before, due to Riku's appearance following the sequence but, my curiosity was renewed when the Lady of Light spoke to me.

"Fine... We'll cross that bridge when we get there." Goofy supplied. "What's important is that we now know where that there Heartless came from in Traverse Town--"

"And Wonderland!" Donald input.

"But why are they trying to slow us down?" Sora asked. "They're obviously up to something."

We all sat together, pondering silently for any possibilities. I recounted what happened in the dark void and my conversation with Lady Light. I suppose it was fine to tell them this bit of intel.

"Maybe it has something to do with Alice's disappearance." I voiced.

All the boys looked up at me with big eyes. Half ajar mouths, expressed more words than were being voiced in that moment.

"When I was trapped in that cage... this sort of Dark pool formed at the bottom. It sucked both of us in... I managed to break free... somehow, I can't recall..." I lied a bit.

"But Alice didn't." Sora noted.

"You think, maybe it's got somethin' to do with that there Keyhole we found."

"Or maybe... It's both!" I exclaimed, popping up from my seat.

"That's an idea..." Donald said. "Have you had any dreams to confirm it?"

I shook my head. "I told you everything I've seen for the time being."

A break in the conversation was permeated by the intercom buzzing to life as Chip’s voice squeaked through with an announcement. "Looks like there's another world up ahead guys."

"I guess, we're gonna have to cut this meeting short." Donald sighed. "Maybe after we get through this one, and we see what we see-- we could try heading back to Traverse Town and talk about it with Leon." Then Donald looked at me. "You won't mind telling him what you told us, right?"

I shook my head, wordlessly.

"Good. Then, let's check out the new world."

Kingdom Hearts: Ascendant Recollection

Chapter 04

The True Heroes' Circuit

Going to new worlds was far more mind boggling than I would have been able to assume. With
only two new worlds under my belt, I realized just how... plain, my view of the outside worlds was, when I was back home. Each one was so different, and with almost nothing to compare to, having their own quirks and niches. They were all pretty unique in their own way. So when I mention the incredible culture shock I go through when I visit a new world, I wonder if I'll ever not feel this sensation with every new encounter.

So far, this new world seemed a bit sparse. Our little party stood in the center of what looked to be a sort of courtyard that caged us in with surrounding, marble columns towering high above our heads. The sky washed the area in beautiful blues against the whites and gold of the scenery. Everywhere, spotting the place about us, were lit braziers that accented the opposing, towering structures. The main attraction to the area were the two, enormous statues, what towered high above our heads. Two men, dressed in armor, stood for battle, against each other. Their swords crossed as they stood frozen in an eternal clash.

"Awesome gate!!" Sora exclaimed.

"Ahem--" I heard a little voice clear it's throat, and out of Sora's hoodie came Jiminy.

It was terribly easy to forget he was around.

"This here is, the Coliseum of Olympus." He went on. "Famous warriors from all over the multiverse come to gather at this stadium, regularly to pit themselves against each other in mixed martial arts tournaments."

"Sounds like a lot of destruction of that precious world order..." I mumbled, clear enough for Donald to hear.

He grumbled, rolling his eyes in my direction and I couldn't help but grin. I thought it was funny, but that rule was bound to hold some inconsistencies, right?

"Forget that!" Sora said, stopping in his tracks. His eyes lit up as they locked with mine. A bright smile rocketed across his face. "Jiminy mentioned tournaments! We gotta Check it out!"

"Wait a second- We don't have time to— Sora!!" Donald squawked, chasing after him, as Sora had already gone barreling his way past the gargantuan statues and into the enormous double doors.

"We better go..." I sighed, as Goofy and I followed the two impulsive characters, in our midst inside.

The interior, was just as golden, if not ten times more. It was more like a small lobby that was only the entrance to something greater. Flames in each corner of the room, lit up the place. And in one of those corners was a small... brown hair-legged, red headed goat... man, at work as he was putting up a plaque.

He was the only one around so, Sora approached him.

"Um..." Sora started. But the goat guy stopped him before he could get much of a real word in.

"Great timing. Give me a hand and move that pedestal over there for me, will ya?"

The four of us, turned to find said pedestal, sitting across the room. Its size was comparable to that of a large boulder you'd find blocking a cave entrance. With that being said-- it was huge. Sora would not be able to move it.

My gaze slowly drifted in his direction, and I couldn't help but let go a soft, "Ahhhh... Sora?"
"I got this!" He quickly cut me off.

Eagerly, he jogged over to the enormous block of solidified clay and threw his entire weight against it. Nothing happened, as he let go a couple of dignity strains before giving up just as quickly as he'd volunteered.

"There's no way I could move this thing!" Sora blurted out. "It's way too heavy!"

"What's that Herc?!" The goat guy bleated angrily, turning on us. His face had gone beat red with something that was a mix between rage and mystification. But it was in those couple of seconds where, his eyes quickly registered that one person had instead been a group of people, that his temper dissipated.

"Oh..." He managed. "Wrong guy. Thought you's was someone else. Anyway, we're closed right now, so you'll have to come back during business hours." He turned on our party and made a shoeing gesture with his hand, getting back to his previous task.

"Uh... I'm sorry, but..." Sora wasn't about to quit though. His heart was already in it. "I'm actually interested in entering the tournament."

To this, goat dude burst out into a fit of laughter. He swiveled back around on his little goat legs, just as a tear could be squeezed out of his eye. "You?!? Wanna enter the tournament?! Hahahaha!! That's the funniest thing I ever heard!!"

He proceeded to leap down off the stool he'd been standing on, and strutted over towards the hunk of rock. "Can't even move a lousy..." And then he attempted the move it. "Pedestal!!!"

I nodded, pursing my lips, a bit tired of watching people struggle over pushing a rock across the room. "In any case..." I began. "You think, maybe there's a way we could enter?"

"Yukari!" Donald, snapped.

"What? It could be good practice for us to learn to work together better and use our Keys." I retorted, whispering harshly back at him.

"This ain't no practice run circuit!" The goat man, breathlessly bleated as he came away from the stone. "Hero's only! You wanna compete? Show me your ticket or beat it!"

The four of us, exchanged defeated glances, knowing none of us had, at any point before this, acquired any sort of ticket. So, we left, clunking back through the door we'd come.

"Quite the hospitality, he had." I shrugged, stuffing my hands into my back pockets.

"Stupid ole Goat-Man..." Sora pouted.

"Yeah!" Donald added. "Heros only..." he let go a mocking grumble as he stomped along. "We've got two of your so-called Heroes, right here! Keyblade chosen and everything!! That's gotta be something!"

"And something, that is indeed!" A low voice, slithered in through the boy's complaints.

Our little party stopped and turned towards the enormous double doors, we'd come from. Within the shadows, a very tall blue skinned man, swathed in black robes, looked us over from within the shadows. His yellow eyes almost glowed as bright as the stark blue flame that sat on his head.
"Mmm... I don't like this guy..." I said under my breath as he slowly began to approached. I watched carefully not allowing my eyes to leave him as he appeared to be gliding across the ground, black smoke trailing behind him.

"Honestly, the old goat's gettin' stiffer by the year." The man continued. His black lips hid behind them, small sharp teeth that made me want to distrust the guy even more. "But it would be a shame if we allowed him to ignore young talent, like yourselves."

"And... who are you, exactly?" I asked, as, being in the rear, I was closest to him.

The blue man, scoffed a bit. His lips twitched just so, as though he'd suddenly felt offended. To which he quickly shrugged off, attempting to switch gears. "Meh... Details." He said, reaching his spindly fingers around my shoulder and turned me to face the boys.

I groaned audibly to express my extreme discomfort.

"I see you four are tryin' to apply as rookies. I'm thinkin' I can probably help with that, seeing how you're little band of 'heroes' tickles my interests." The guy leaned in now, his flaming head close to mine. The boys all having been, at this point, captivated by his presence. Slowly he lifted his hand up before my face and snapped. That was all it took a for a glistening, golden ticket to appear from nothing.

"A pass!" Sora shouted with delight. I could see in his eyes as he was itching to grab it up.

"Go on, kid." The blue dude, ushered. "Take it. It should be enough to get you in, to the torny."

"...Mmm.... What's the catch?" I asked, looking distrustfully into his eyes.

"Catch? There isn't any." The guy said, getting suspiciously closer as his elbow locked around my neck. I felt like if I made the wrong move, this would very much go from a chummy embrace, to a vice grip. "I just know potential when I see it. And I can definitely tell from just lookin at you, that ya'll've got the eyes of true heroes."

My eyes carefully shifted back towards the ticket he'd still been holding between his index finger and thumb. My eyes darted around at my team before slowly reaching for the slip of shiny paper. The second I'd had a firm grip on it, the blue guy disappeared in a cloud of glittering black smoke. But of course, not before a an elongated smile slowly stretched across his long face.

I coughed and sputtered, clearing the dust from my eyes, that smelt vaguely of pomegranates and ash.

"Who was that guy?" Goofy questioned aloud.

But no one here would be able to answer his question. I gazed down at the golden ticket which had been gifted to us. Obviously something wasn't right about this guy. It was even more obvious that he had less than good intentions. The way he'd seem to know exactly what we'd wanted... even hinting at how he knew who we might have been, made me wonder if he had anything to do with those less than savory characters from my dream.

"Why don't..." I began to say, my eyes tracing the bright golden trim of our new entry ticket. "we go back and talk to the goat dude again."

* * * * *
"What the heck!?" The goat man, bleated incredulously. "How in holy Hera's name, did guys you get one of these??"

The four of us watched on as he inspected the small piece of paper that confirmed our registration in the tournament to come. No one said anything as to how we'd obtained it, as if we'd come to some sort of silent agreement on the matter. But Sora did step forth eagerly to press the goat once again.

"So this means you're gonna let us compete now, right?"

"Well... I mean... It don't look like I got much a choice with this." The goat dude hummed, putting the ticket away. "But first, I'm thinkin' of puttin you guys through a crash course. Fish tail, over here mentioned how you's four may need to improve your team work, earlier. If that's true, who knows what else, you guys need help with."

"Fish tail?" I narrowed my eyes at him. Was he referring to my hair style?!

"Follow me, right through here." He led us through the only door in the room, through to a dark passage. The sound of our clamoring footsteps slapped against the close quarters as we walked. "Oh, and by the way... the name's Phil. Whatchya rookies, call yourselves?"

"I'm Sora"

"Donald"

"Yukari"

"Goofy!"

The four of us introduced one after the other.

"Alright." Phil's grin could be seen faintly in the dim light of the sconces that lit the corridor. "You four seem pretty eager to go at it. Show me what you've got."

The dark path had finally ended whence we were led into a much more spacious tunnel that broke off into a multitude of exits. Phil led us through one of them. On the other side was what had clearly been an arena set against the stark blue mid-day sky. The stadium itself was empty, indicating that the tournament wouldn't seem to be starting for a while.

I suppose this would give our party a little bit of time to get some practice in.

"Alright, rookies." Phil announced. "Let's go! Show me what you've got so far!"

For a moment, our team kind of just stood speechless, together as we stared Phil down, completely unsure of what to do.

"Uh..." Sora vocalized. "What... What do you want us to do?"

"Fight, of course." Phil said it like it had been obvious.

"Who...?" I questioned, looking around for enemies and or opponents.

"Each other! Last one standing is the winner!" Phil bleated, excitedly. Shooting his tiny fist in the air as he shouted at the top of his lungs, "Fight!!"
The four of us scrambled around a bit once we all realized what was happening. But it seemed this would display who was the most competitive, and who was the most passive as both Donald and Sora simultaneously made the first moves.

"Waak!!" Donald rose his staff into the air. Small bolts of lightning rained down around us, but none of them seemed to hit anyone. Instead, they appeared to serve as a distraction more than anything. I watched as Goofy rose his shield over his head to protect himself, whilst Sora dove in, straight for Donald.

"What are you doing!?!" Donald shouted, bouncing to and fro on his feet. Panic was in his eyes as he tried to read Sora's moves.

"Sorry Donald!" Sora shouted, raising his blade overhead.

I watched as Sora was about to strike Donald down, whilst Donald attempt to smack him away with his staff. As I'd expected, Goofy butted in and broke Sora's attack. Sora, leapt back right as Goofy went in for a counter.

"Thanks for the save!" Donald called out.

"You're welcome!" Goofy grinned, but then his expression quickly reverted back to that of something like determination as he readied his shield. "But now I've gotta take you down!"

He charged Donald who was now running for his life, spamming flame magic at Goofy who'd blocked each attack with his shield. I realized how absorbed I'd been in watching the boys when the sound of footsteps came clunking in my direction.

Almost too late, I summoned my Keyblade as Sora slammed his down onto my own. But something wasn't right. Where once my Keyblade was a bright, silvery double shafted weapon, in my left hand was now a blade, far more reminiscent of a key-- black and gothic in appearance with a heavy chain running through the center of the shaft's designs. From the bat winged hand guard encrusted with a deep violet gem, that encircled the handle, dangled a keychain with a black crown.

"Wh-- Augh!" I cried out, shoving Sora back.

If he'd notice anything different, he didn't bother mentioning it. But that was fine, all the same as I dove behind him and ran in the direction of Donald and Goofy.

"Don't run away!" Sora shouted after me playfully.

I grinned back at him, satisfied that his full attention was on me. I turned to face our remaining party members who'd been locked in an intense brawl- Donald continuously casting spells with Goofy blocking every one.

"Incoming!!" I shouted as I neared them.

Startled, the two stopped what they'd been doing to scream their heads off as I'd come bounding my way towards them. So much so, they had no way to anticipate just what I'd do.

Probably thinking I'd tackle either one of them, Goofy directed his shield towards me. Donald, threw his staff in my direction and shouted, "Freeze!!" Narrowly missing him by a hair, I ducked and slipped between the two's feet. All that was left now, was for Sora to realize what was coming to him.
I turned in time to watch a frozen Sora slip and slide into the other two. Donald and Goofy were knocked out of the way but, shivering, hoodie boy was still coming at me.

I blocked as he rammed his blade down on mine. Catching the look on Sora’s chilled features, I caught a glimpse of bold determination. Maybe he thought he had this in the bag? I smirked, shoving my forehead straight into his, instantly catching him off guard and forcing him to lose a bit of his balance. Taking this chance, I threw up his guard, snatching his Key out of his grip and swiped at his feet, for good measure. I watched as Sora was flung onto his back, hitting the stone beneath our feet, hard.

"We're not done yet!!" Donald Squawked.

I looked up to find him and Goofy come charging at me from a short distance away.

Two to one, huh? Or maybe...

I glanced back at Sora who was officially down for the count. He lay sprawled out on the ground, completely unconcerned of the playing field for the rest of us. Using that to my advantage, I shut my eyes, and concentrated, calling on the power of magic. The last time, I did it, I completely just wasted all of my energy by carelessly flinging out all of my magic at once.

Aiming at the two's feet, I shot a blast of ice that turned the ground beneath them into a thin slippery sheet. It didn't take much for the two's running to turn into slipping and sliding as they slid right into Sora, and went careening over his body and into the dirt.

"And it looks like we've got ourselves a winner!!" Phil cheered, prancing into the arena, where he hopped around the four of us.

Sora sat up, massaging his head. "No way... I want a... a rematch.." He said between breaths.

"Nope." Phil denied him. "I've seen enough. The little lady right here, trumped you all. And I think I see why. You've all got your short comings and I know just the thing to put you guys on track before the tournament starts. Scrape yourselves up off the ground and follow me."

Obviously, we did just that as we shuffled after the goat dude to what appeared to be a sort of outdoor training grounds slash gymnasium. Clearly this guy was a seasoned coach, having everything from the dumbbells to the “save the rag-doll in distress” obstacle course. I gaped about the place for what little time I was able, before Phil broke us up and got us busy with our individual training exercises.

Phil put the boys to work doing various things that seemed to build on their reflexes. He actually set them in the course were they were tasked with saving rag doll civilians as they fought off wooden monster targets. Meanwhile, he kept his focus on me as he had me attacking a poor, sad looking, defenseless dummy. He was giving me tips on how to hit hard and where.

"Don't just throw your weapon around." He said. "It's an extension of yourself-- Like a longer arm. Use it to connect your attacks with your target, not just whack 'em to and fro. Hit em' hard, hit em' right and they'll go down quickly and more effectively."

I drew back my black key, my forehead drenched with sweat. I was exhausted. We'd burned through literally two worlds before this one with zero rest in between. I thought about how we
were preparing for the tournament and that I wasn’t as ready as I’d like to be. Sure it was kind of exciting, but I was nervous about how I’d preform.

"You got a teacher?" Phil inquired, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Hmm, why do you ask?" I lowered my stance.

"During that little buddy brawl, the very first thing you did was stand there and watch to see what your team mates would do-- see how they'd move, who'd attack first. After that, it was like you used their trepidations or short comings against them. Ya didn't land any solidifying hits though. You played really defensively. You seem to know a thing or two about a fight... I think I'd be pretty scared to see you actually start fighting back."

I blushed a little bit. The only things I knew were what Riku taught me. Sure I'd watched a lot of beach brawls between most of the boys back on the Islands. Riku tended to toss me around a lot, just because I was always looking for tips on how to go against different opponents. Sora was fun to spar with, but I didn't think he took it as seriously with me as he did with Riku. But then again, it was all fun and games before. The stakes were a bit higher now. All in all, I found myself relying on my team mates to come through where I knew I couldn't.

"In any case... let's take a break." Phil finished, trotting over towards the boys. "The tournament should start soon. I want all four of ya's to rest up and mentally prepare."

Extending his generosity even further, Phil loaded us up with tons of apples, plenty of water, and lots of pep talk. A couple hours of training and a bit of recuperating was fine by me. It was a nice cherry on top to have the guy give us one more good confidence boost. It was evident he had a lot of faith in us.

"You guys worked pretty hard." He noted, wrapping some measuring tape around Sora's bicep. I grinned, not once considering that Sora would ever grow out of his scrawny boy look. "Your efforts are sure to pay off... erm eventually. But for now, just take everything I put you through in the last two and a half hours and get out there and kick some booty!"

"But wait..." I said thoughtfully. "You said earlier that this tournament was for heroes only. All we did was work out... How does that make us qualified, again?"

"It doesn't." Phil agreed. "But it's not to say that your potential hasn't showed me something spectacular. It's not about how much you buff up your brawn, but your spirit. For example, let's use your heart. You'd want to have a strong, heart before anything else."

"How would I buff up my spirit, then?" Sora asked, after taking a long drink of water.

"Well, that all depends on you." A new voice spoke out. "You'll have to find out for yourselves, just the way that I did."

Our party looked up to find a very tall, and very brawny looking man standing over us. His bright smile radiated in our darkened spot near our gate, where we'd be let out once the tournament began. His skin was a nice sun bathed bronze. Bright blue eyes glistened against curly red hair which was held up in a sweat band. He'd been dressed in a short, brown tunic that stopped dead mid-thigh. I was feeling a little jealous about his insane calf muscles that were wrapped up in his leather sandals.

"Herc!" Phil bleated excitedly as he leapt from his spot. "Let me introduce ya kiddies!! This here is
my protégé! The man I trained to become a true hero! Hercules."

"Just guessing from the looks of your sun beat faces and the fact that you all seem to have been worked to Hades, I'm gonna say you guys are some new trainees Phil took on?"

I looked back over at Sora who was gawping at Hercules's muscles and laughed. "Sorta." I giggled. "We're here for the tournament, so he wrung us out a bit."

"Ahhh I see." Hercules's eyes slowly drifted across each of us. But he didn't seem impressed. More worried than anything, which was a bit discouraging. "Well, you guys had best be careful. I'd been checking over the roster for the tournament and by the looks of it, there are no shortage of shady characters amongst the applications, this year."

"You think someone is leakin' the qualification tickets?" Phil asked, his voice now hushed.

Me and the boys immediately started to catch each others eyes. I think at that moment, we all felt the same thing-- the blue dude from before was definitely on the list of suspects. I mean, it could have been him, but really who's to say there weren't others.

* * * * *

The tournament had finally kicked off and our party was doing well to barrel our way through the preliminaries. We'd gone up against many interesting characters, to say the least but, the oddity in the situation was that there had been quite a bit of Heartless taking up the brackets. Seeing as this was the case, we did well to plow them down. Once we'd finished up our seed, we were sent back to the waiting area, to prepare for the next opponent.

We had been met by Phil on the way in, who'd congratulated our hard work, but that had been the last thing on our minds.

"How are the Heartless even competing??" Sora asked, his voice low as we whispered to each other.

"Yeah," Donald spat. "They don't have the brains to apply for anything."

"Maybe... it's got something to do with those people from the dreams..." I offered, refusing to meet the eyes of my party. That alone brought an odd discomfort to the atmosphere.

"Alright, alright." Phil pulled us apart, cutting the conversation short. "Enough huddle, kids! You're next match is comin' up. Time to head out."

"Who's our next opponent, more Heartless?" Donald grumbled.

I actually caught a glimpse at the brackets and saw that instead of fighting Heartless of any kind, we were going up against what seemed would be a single person. "Well... the board says, Cloud." I noted. "Kind of unassuming, but we'll just have to find out."

And find out we did.

When we stepped out onto the arena, we were met with the most edgy looking guy I'd ever had the pleasure of gracing my eyeballs with. This... Cloud character was swathed in a shroud of a tattered red scarf that practically hid a little more than half of his face away. Bright blue eyes and blond hair flashed against his crimson rags that hid beneath it, a sort of uniform of a dark sleeveless
sweater and worn out fatigues. He had shoulder armor and a golden clawed gauntlet on one arm, and an enormous sword wrapped in bandages in his other. Also... the guy had on tons more belts than Leon, and I wasn't even about to bother counting.

The boys and I stood close together, our weapons out. Sora stood front and center with me off to his left. Goofy took his right, with Donald holding up the rear so he could comfortably cast his magic as we protected him as best as possible.

The first move was made by Donald, who threw out a quick, and small thunder spell. For a second the temperature rose as a bolt of yellow lightning zipped down towards our opponent. To all of our surprise, the guy full on deflected the attack with his giant sword.

The expression on his face was just as dead as when he'd approached. Keeping his unphased eyes locked with our party, he hefted his sword, once. Just barely, I saw his brows scrunch together when his eyes made contact with mine.

"G-guys!! Scatter!" I shouted.

I had no idea what he was planning, but I knew I wouldn't like it.

Sadly, this effort was wasted when he'd sliced through the air and a blast of stinging wind came surging at our party. I braced myself as best as possible, ramming my Key into the ground. Sora was almost swept away but, somehow managed to keep himself rooted when he slipped onto his hands and knees-- his fingers painfully gripping the tile in the ground.

Donald and Goofy were least fortunate, as they were sent blasting out of the arena. I let forth a mild curse but continued to hold on as the winds whipped and snapped, painfully at me on all sides. It only took a mere few seconds for them to die down before the sound of clunking boots, bolting in my direction, captured my attention. I could barely blink as I watched the... Cloud dude, come barreling directly at me. I stumbled a bit, unable to think fast enough as the palm of Cloud's hand, made painful contact with my throat, gripping it tightly to the point where I couldn't even scream out.

"Yukari!!" Sora shouted.

But I couldn't even tell where he was anymore. Cloud continued to run with me in his vice grip a little ways before shoving me straight into the ground. I just barely managed to choke out a stifled scream, the pain was so intense. The wind was full on stripped out of me. To make matters worse, it felt like I definitely cracked something.

With wide eyes, I stared up into the blond man's single visible one, trying to control my breathing, as his hold on my throat only tightened. I tried my hardest to pull his hand away, but it was literally impossible.

"Take this!!" Sora shouted, which was a pretty dumb move on his part. But it did cause the man's grip on my esophagus to ease up.

The guy didn't even turn to look at Sora. He only rose, still latching onto my larynx before flinging me right into him. The sound of our bodies slamming together as we'd painfully collided was enough to make any mother worry. In unison, we both released adolescent cries of pain when the sides of our faces smashed into each other.

I lay on top of Sora, my head completely spinning from the prior lack of oxygen during my time being stuck in a choke hold. I tried to level out my breathing, but I... couldn't. I was having trouble
somehow. Was it because this guy was way out of our league? Dude was fast, I couldn't read what he'd do at all. Even giant Heartless were easier than this. They were slow, and dumb. But this was different. This was terrifying.

"Yukari, a-are you okay?" Sora asked, trying to sit up

I would have moved off of his chest had it not been for the looming shadow that emerged before us. Cloud stood at the ready. His enormous sword hung just a few inches from my back. He had us pinned down, completely rendered spent. I tried to control my breathing as I looked him right in his bright blue eye. Met with a seasoned scowl, I could feel the disappointment coming off of him.

"This fight was over before it started." Cloud said, his voice was low as he spoke. "You guys are just some random kids. What was Hades so afraid of?" But then the look in his eye changed when I noticed him gazing over at the Keyblade in my hand.

Did he know about it? And who was Hades?

A thunderous boom, cut through the air and shook the world around us. Almost instantly, it grew increasingly dark as some enormous creature leapt over the coliseum walls, slamming right down into the arena, completely blotting out the sun that hung high above our heads. Reaching near the size of the whole stadium, was an enormous three headed rottweiler, which growled and drooled as it stood glaring down at us with it's enormous, glowing red eyes. It's three heads were trained on cloud, but I felt some serious anger and hatred brewing in the big hound that could be preserved for Sora and myself as well.

Delayed, but I suppose it was from the shock, screaming erupted all around from the audience. People were running and fighting to get out of the stadium.

As I gazed up at the creature, I felt my heart crawl into my gut. The hot breath that streamed out of the thing's nostrils smelt of brimstone and foul scented ashes. If I wasn't frozen from the fear of being stabbed by Cloud’s giant knife before, I was definitely paralyzed at the sight of the evil looking mutt.

The thing let go a thunderous roar that shook the entire area. I could just barely hear Donald and Goofy screaming for Sora and I to get up, from where they stood nearing the exits.

"C'mon, Yukari!" Sora grunted, pushing me up with him.

"I... I can't! My back, it's-- Augh!" My screaming had come from Sora taking action, and pulling one of my arms around his neck. I yelped in pain, as he held me tight, where the rib in my back had to have cracked from Cloud's earlier attack.

"Sorry..." He apologized. "But we've got to move!"

Another roar exploded across the arena. Sora and I looked back at Cloud who was now, down on the ground, clearly unconscious.

"We gotta help him!" I winced.

But it was clear that my priorities were not in order.

"Move! Move! Move!!" Sora shouted, trying to pull me along as fast as possible, as one of Cerberus's claws was zipping right at us. But there was no way we'd avoid it. Even at incredible limping speed, nothing but a true miracle would be able to save us.
I like to think I have a gift for calling things as I see'em.

The strike from the big gargantuan puppy, never came.

Instead, Hercules took up the spotlight, dashing in to save us, having caught the thing by its claws. Throwing back the creature, he tossed it through the air, causing it to land on its back. But the thing quickly recovered and dashed back in our direction.

"Get out of here!" Hercules ordered us, bracing for impact.

"Let's go, kids!!" I could hear Phil’s voice over the angry barks of the dog.

It pounced and landed right on top of Hercules, shaking the ground beneath our feet and burying the hero under a mountain of drool and fur.

My eyes went wide as I watched. Sora yanked me along, struggling to get us back into the vestibule. We'd barely made it inside in one piece but, we were all together and safe at least.

"What's... going on?" Sora asked, as he set me carefully against the wall.

He didn't really look any better than myself. The spot on his face where the two of us had crashed into each other began to bruise and swell pretty badly, and he had a bit of a limp.

"What was that??"

Phil let go a few nervous bleats. We watched as he paced around anxiously while chewing on his nails. I could see the beads of sweat pouring down his face. "That was freakin' Cerberus, the guardian of the Underworld! I can't even begin to imagine why he could be here." He rattled on. "Herc should be fine. He can handle it! But... but maybe not!! This just ain't good..."

I sighed painfully as I clasped my arm tightly across my ribs. I was still having trouble breathing, but it'd gotten better. I knew I was freaking out, but this just wasn't the time.

"What happened?" Donald asked kneeling next to me. He was no doctor, but I think it wasn't normal for a teenaged girl to be hyperventilating the way I was.

"I think she might have broken a rib." Sora said. "She said her back hurt too much to move. That guy must of really did a number on her."

"I see." Donald reached into one of his pockets, pulling out a special looking potion bottle. It was far more extravagant than the potion bottles I was used to. "Take this. It's an elixir. I don't have enough magic to heal bones, but this should help."

I slowly, and shakily moved my arm to reach for the bottle. But, Sora noticed my struggling and knelt next to me, taking up the bottle in his hands. He'd opened it up and a sickeningly sweet aroma filled the air.

I lifted my head as the elixir neared my lips. I closed my eyes tight when an extremely bitter taste met my tongue but, gulped it down no less. "Ellgghh...." I voiced my very clear opinions on how that tasted. Despite that, I was already feeling better and calmer.

"That should tide you over for now.‖ Donald grinned. I could have been going blind from the awful
taste of the potion but it looked like Donald was smirking.

"We've gotta get back out there and help Hercules." I said.

"Yeah." Sora nodded. The look in his eye was resolute. I was glad that he agreed and wasn't calling for me to stay back and rest at least. Holding out his hand, he helped me up and led the way back out into the arena.

"Whoa, whoa!!" Phil jumped in front of us, his arms spread to stop us, try as he might. "I appreciate the sentiment you two, but this ain't no game! This is for real!"

"We're not afraid." Sora said, standing tall, despite him looking worse for wear just moments ago. "Besides, we've fought bigger monsters than this."

While it was true, this Cerberus wasn't as dumb and clumsy lookin' like the others. This definitely wasn't going to be a risk free fight. None the less I followed Sora past Phil and out into the arena, where we were once again greeted by the big dog looming angrily over Hercules. As we barreled our way in, I'd spotted him right away against the enormous blotch of black fur, holding Cloud in his arms.

The very first thing Sora did was immediately summon his Keyblade, reel back his arm and flung it through the air. The blade went spinning violently towards Cerberus in the most impressive arc I'd ever seen, before thwanking him in the eye.

The mad dog shrunk back angrily, thrashing and belting forth a gut quaking roar as it stomped about. Me and the boys ran past Hercules with our weapons, out.

"Firaga!" Donald shouted, blasting a fire ball at the dog. It howled in pain at the attack.

"Get out of here, Hercules!" I shouted, as Goofy and I stopped before him, ready to ward off any attack.

Thankfully, and surprisingly... he obeyed, nodding as he ran back to the lobby with the unconscious Cloud plopped over his shoulder.

Sora caught his Key when it circled back towards him. This was all just in time for the four of us to scatter under the mighty stomping of the big dog.

For a while, we ran around under foot, taking whacks where possible when the thing stopped thrashing enough for us not to die. I watched as Sora dove in, conking the thing on one of its' noses. Agitated, Cerberus snapped back with its wicked sharp teeth, as though we were the perfect dinner. I whipped my dark blade against one of its legs, and was met with an attack of his whip like tail.

I went zipping through the air, at such an alarming speed, I thought the little broken rib I got earlier was about to be upstaged by a full on shattered spine.

"Aero!" Donald quacked.

On cue, I was suddenly swept up by a gentle gust of wind. It carried me slowly through the air, to safely decrease my flying speed so I wouldn't snap my neck, most likely, before floating me down to the ground.

Donald was at my side, grinning at me.
"Thanks..." I said, sweating bullets at the prospect that I was most likely dang near about to die.

Another roar drew our attention back to the fight as we watched Cerberus rear back on its hind legs. At its gut, I could see what seemed to be a fierce quaking before an enormous knot of something traveled up its throat.

"I don't like that!" I called, backing away.

"Be ready..." Donald suggested, holding up his staff.

But that would do little to prepare us for what would happen next.

Darkness, like inky wet tendrils mixed with hot fire, spewed out of the jaws of Cerberus as he came down on our party. Instantly I got flash backs from the cage with Alice, and I almost panicked.

Would this stuff suck us in too?

Our fate's would be much worse as we were all quickly overtaken by the endless downpour of dark waves, that crashed over us and swallowed us up. Imagine fighting against a tsunami of black water. This was a good equivalent. I could hear the boys crying out as they tried to untangle themselves from the grip, but it would mean nothing as the dark stuff kept coming. The tendrils slipped around my body and tightly squeezed me beyond the point of simply hurting. I was suffocating now, the stuff drifting into my eyes and nostrils. I clamped my teeth together and only accidently opened them when I was forced to draw in a breath.

It was like I was being eaten alive by... well darkness.

I looked around at my companions. Donald and Goofy were nowhere to be seen, but I could just barely catch Sora out of the corner of my eye. He was struggling just as much as I. And I knew in that moment where our eyes met, all I could see was a similar panic and hopelessness we'd shared, back when our Island got swallowed up.

I watched him sink, his head slowly being pulled beneath as tendrils ripped his neck violently back into the dark stuff.

"S-sora!!" I cried out.

But within seconds I was sucked under as well.

With the light immediately consumed, I at first thought that I had died. But in a mere chance of fate, I was lucky to even be left unconscious enough to be encompassed in what felt like a dream.

I drifted through inky black darkness, descending slowly into the darker depths. I fought the urge to close my eyes for, I felt if I did, none of us would able to make it out of this. I blinked rapidly, as I tried to focus on what was ahead of me and noticed my dark Keyblade still clutched in my left hand.

"Oblivion..." I let the word fall from my lips. But it was as though my words weren't my own as another voice spoke along with it-- one that sounded sinister.

Blinking again, I was met with that... Screecher, the Lady of Darkness. I was hardly surprised at this point. The low rattling of hisses flooded my ears, and wrapped around me like a safety blanket. Her black silhouette of a body moved like ink in water, slowly but surely slipping around my form.
"You..." I said weekly, my eyes threatening to shut.

"Me indeed." Came a gentle hiss from the creature. "It would seem that you've found yourself in a bit of a situation. I think that I may be able to help you..."

"Help me...?" I let go a lethargic groan. "Why would you want to help me? You only want... to eat me."

The thing threw her head back as she erupted into a fit of laughter. Her red mangled demon teeth and yellow, unblinking eyes seemed to enlarge when she'd calmed enough to shove them into my face. "Noooo... I don't want to eat you, silly." She chuckled. "You and I are a part of each other. Why… if I ate you, where would I go?"

Obviously that was some real bull. But due to the fact that I could barely move through this dark space, I let her talk.

"No... I just want to be of better service to you." She said, giddily. "Let me lend you my power."

I wasn’t sure why, but her words didn’t immediately register as I was trying to focus about ninety percent of my attention on staying conscious. "The catch..." I blinked hard this time. I knew I was fading. "What is it?"

"Catch??" She looked a bit hurt, but it seemed more like she was faking it really. "Why… there is none. It's either let me help you... Or you and your little band of kiddie heroes die here together-- become consumed by the darkness and turn in to Heartless as you wait for a new set of Keyblade wielders to come trotting along and destroy you for good."

Somehow... that really woke me up. A fate like that would be one to scare any teen straight. I gazed about myself and realized only now that, I wasn't alone. I saw Sora, Donald and Goofy, all floating around me, looking pale and lifeless as they gently hung in the space of deep violets and blacks. Tendrils and inky stuff spilled out of them-- out of their eyes and mouths, which were pried open in fear and pain. Their entire eyes had turned completely black.

"So what shall it be?" The Screecher, called for my attention again. "Stay here and die? Or take my offer to help you?"

I watched as her dark claws crept up to my chest, sinking into my shirt and gently breaking the skin. Surprisingly there was no pain, but the alarming thing about this was that black ink began to flood out of the wounds she created.

It seemed more like she was trying to scare me more than get me to trust her but, either way, my choices were quite limited.

"I'll take your help." I decided. "But only this once."

The Screecher narrowed her eyes. The grin on her face stretched wider than what was normal and I knew I would come to regret my decision. If not immediately, then surely so. She let go a few hefty giggles before raising her voice. "Only this once?" She sounded increasingly amused. "Silly child. Once this deal is made, this won't be the only time you call forth my power! This contract is binding. Without me, you are weak and it shan't take much for you to see that!!"

As she blabbed on about her claim, she swirled around me at dizzying speeds. Before I could even blink she'd pushed her inky body into my own, melting through my pours and squirming into my eyes and mouth before white hot pain flared up inside of my chest and head.
I screamed at the tip of my lung as it felt like I’d been suddenly set on fire. My body felt as though it had begun to move on its own-- the Key in my left hand shot forward and I went rocketing upwards. My body zipped through the sludge and smoke around me, until I was suddenly met with the blinding sun. Cerberus was still attacking, spewing orbs of darkness into the sky with two of its heads while the center one continued to flood the arena with the waves of Darkness.

Levitating before his great size, what seemed to be Darkness of my own, spewed forth, attacking the giant mutt with tendrils that lashed and writhed. It fought back the currents of Cerberus’s attack with no effort, consuming him in a sphere of light and darkness that rose and swelled, throbbing like a pounding heart, into the sky.

"Stop!" A voice shouted in my head. "Stop this at once!! Don't let her take a hold of you!!"

But that was just it-- I had already lost whatever control I had. My body was thrumming with pain now as the sphere began to grow and sprout tendrils of its own. It shot down towards the ground and began to rip through the stadium. The black waves drained through the cracks below, and hungrily began to tangle themselves into the foundation.

"Y-Yukari!!" I heard Sora’s voice over the sounds of destruction. "Yukari, stop! It's over!!"

I strained as I pulled my neck in the direction of his voice. My party members knelt on the ground, trying to keep hold of the quaking world beneath their feet. Each of them looked, understandably terrified.

"Sleeeeeeep!!" The Screecher's voice rung through my head.

This was met with a fierce pain that literally almost made me pass out. Only now had I realized I'd been deceived, but really what could I do?

"Fight it, child!!" The voice from before came back. "Don't let her take you!! Fight back!!"

The voice of the Lady of light, pierced through the Darkness. And in an instant the world around me quieted and the only thing I could see was her.

"The Keyblade..." She said, her hand now on mine. "Let it go..."

"L..." I protested. But why?

"Yukari... Let it go, Yukari..."

"Yukari!!" Sora’s voice ripped through my ears.

An explosion of light burst from my chest and the dark Keyblade shattered to pieces like glass in my hand. My right hand flung forth and summoned the Oathkeeper where light, glared from the tip and bathed the whole arena in a tingling warmth.

Spent to nothing, I found my body falling whence the light died away. The air whipped around me, howling in my ears, carrying with it a gentle voice that was unmistakably the Screecher's. "You are miinne..."

My body plopped with a soft thud onto the deconstructed ground below as an air spell cushioned my fall enough to keep my face from becoming a jelly mess.

"Yukari!" Sora cried out as he and the boys came running over to me. "Yukari, are you okay?!"
Cradled in his arms, I groaned, as I blinked to clear away the black dots. The boy's faces were blurred to heck but, for the most part I think I was pretty okay. Just completely exhausted.

"I'm... I'm good." I mumbled, weekly lifting up my hand to give them all a thumbs up. If my cheesy, not-so-assuring grin wasn't enough to convince them, surely that would.

"What was... all that?" Goofy asked.

I hummed in thought as Sora, for the second time in the last hour, supported my weight, with my arm slung around his shoulder as he helped me to my feet and back to the lobby. Goofy took my other arm when he saw I was a complete wobbling mess. "Honestly... I have no clue." I answered, letting go a week laugh.

And I think for that moment, I was okay with my response. I didn't let it swim in a stirring pot of mixed thoughts and emotions. I made a bad decision and it probably nearly cost me. That Screecher had greatly defined what was holding me back-- fear. Ever since learning of what fate falls upon those who become consumed by the Darkness I've been very afraid of the possible fate in this unchosen line of work as a Keyblade wielder. I didn't want to slip up and lose my heart to Darkness. I didn't want to become a Heartless, slithering through the void searching for my next victim. I wanted to remain myself.

I wasn't afraid to fight, and I wasn't afraid to lose. But I was afraid of the darker fates we couldn't control. And the Screecher somehow knew that, outlining that fear and using it in her favor. She'd tricked me with what I could only assume was a vision... dream... thing that showed me a false fate of my friends so that she could take advantage of me. For what? I couldn't be sure, but I knew that it worked.

In the end, I was just so relieved that... my friends and I turned out okay.

"Well, I think it was some sort of magic." Donald offered, but he didn't really sound convinced. "I'm gonna give you some tips on how to properly manage it."

* * * *

"Man!! I knew I was right about you. Crazy scary when you hit back. A little reckless though, but boy!! That messed Cerberus up so bad he complete vanished!" Phil excitedly greeted us when we'd came sifting back into the vestibule. "Just remember, rule no. 51: Don't get careless. Keep that up and you'll end up turning to dust."

"Noted." I responded without hesitation.

"In any case, you guys rocked that arena. Literally. Takes a ton o' courage to go at it against Cerberus. I'd say you guys have been promoted to junior heroes. But none the less still rookies."

"Whakk!!" Donald was about to go, off. But stopped against his better judgement when he caught a teasing look I'd been shooting him.

Even so, someone seemed at least a little pleased with the new title.

"Heh heh." Sora smiled as he, not so covertly let me go and shuffled over towards the block of stone he'd gone up against when he got here. "Well after taking on some pretty big foes today, I'd say I'm just about ready to try this pedestal again."

Phil let go a laugh. "You really think you’re ready for it?" He questioned, completely unconvincing.
"Why don't you guys all try moving it." Hercules suggested.

"Count me out." I said, tiredly as I took a spot on a stool near the back wall. "I'm tuckered."

"Alright." Sora nodded. "You guys gonna try?" He looked to Donald and Goofy who were already making their way over to him.

On three, the boys pressed all of their weight into the stone pedestal as they slowly moved the thing inch by inch across the floor. I grinned, pretty proud they managed to achieve victory against the big ole' rock. But, once they'd fully moved the thing clear out of its old spot, there beneath it was yet, "Another Keyhole." I voiced.

Sora nodded and got to work, whipping out his blade, and leveled it with the floor. Like before, a beam of light trailed from the Key and into the hole, locking it for good.

"That's the second one..." I said, as the boys huddled back around me.

"We really should get back to Leon about this." Donald suggested. "It could actually be something pretty big."

"Wait, you rookies are leavin'?" Phil inquired.

"Yeah." Sora nodded. "We've gotta get going."

"Sorry to leave so abruptly." I apologized. "What with that giant mess and the whole tournament situation."

"Ehhh, don't worry about that." Phil waved it off. "That's a normal thing. Nothing we can't fix. I mean it does mean the tournament's over for now but what matters is that everyone's safe. You guys just make it a point to swing by every now and then. I'll give ya another good trainin' session, for sure."

"Annnnd, the next time you see us, we're gonna be true heroes." Donald grinned, pointing at Phil as though to solidify a promise.

"I'm sure lookin' forward to that." Phil laughed.
Having visited, one too many worlds that hid within them, a keyhole, the gang heads back to Traverse Town to discuss the matter with Leon, and alert him about the impending threat of the shadowy figures from Yukari’s dream. But due to the events that occurred in Olympus, Yukari is more than concerned about the advancement of her powers, as she seeks out any possible answers to what she truly is.

Donald assured that the trip back to Traverse Town wouldn't be long. Even still I decided to take the opportunity to decompress as I sat in my dorm. I wasn't really sure who was counting but this would be our second night away from home. So much happened since that evening it was almost crazy to think this whole thing wasn't a dream.

Bathed in the light of the stars, I stared into my left hand. I flexed it a few times before holding it out before me. I made an attempt to summon the dark Key, but nothing happened. Frowning I repeated this with my right hand and instantly the Oathkeeper came to me. Why wasn't I able to summon the other one at will? I mean, I did it before earlier today, but I guess I wasn't really thinking when I did it…

Maybe it had something to do with the Screecher…

Was she really trying to consume me? Perhaps not in the way that meant she was actually trying to eat me, but I mean... what if she was trying to take over my body?

I quickly dismissed the thought. That was both weird and creepy. It definitely warranted some inspection but it wasn't something that I wanted on my mind right then.

"Are you trying to call that other Keyblade you were using earlier?" Sora's voice bloomed through the darkness.

I realized I'd still been holding my Keyblade in my hand when I'd looked up towards the doorway to find him peaking his head in. Immediately I dispelled it, but couldn't help but feel kind of weird for sitting in the dark with my Keyblade out.

"So you did notice..." I said, settling back against my pillows.

"Well... Yeah. I just wasn't sure at first." He said calmly. His arms were crossed over his chest while he wore his thinking face. "When it shattered... and you used that other one... that's when I knew I wasn't seeing things-- you have two Keyblades. That's super awesome!"

"Well thankfully I wasn't the only one." I mumbled.

"So... you were using your left hand for that black one." He noted. "Is that Keyblade specific or...?"

"Well I guess." I said squeezing my nails into my palms. "I mean, I sat here for a good bit trying to get it to work and it's just not coming to me at all. But every time I summon the lighter one, it only comes to me in my right hand."
"Well it's a good thing your ambidextrous." Sora smiled, sitting down on my bed. 

For whatever reason, I didn't return it. Of course, this caused Sora's own smile to fade. 

"Hey... remember we can't be sad on this ship..." He tried. 

Without meeting his eyes, I pulled my knees into my chest and let my gaze drift towards the view of the stars that blurred past as we rocketed our way through space. "Did you really mean what you said?" I asked quietly. "About... not being afraid— Back before we went to fight Cerberus."

A small silence rested between us. I wasn't entirely sure why but... the two of us began to speak to each other as if we were prohibited to discuss the matter. I glanced up at Sora, who's half-lidded eyes had fixed their gaze into his hands. He blinked once before speaking.

"Well I meant what I said." Were his first choice of words. "I wasn't afraid to go out there and fight. I felt like Hercules needed our help. I didn't think it was right to stand by while I was able to do something."

"That was how I'd felt too. I didn't even want to leave the ring." I let go an uncomfortable, quieted laugh. "I wasn't scared to help... but I think... deep down, I am a little afraid of the consequences of being a little reckless."

Sora didn't say anything, as he only turned to looked at me.

"After hearing about how the Darkness can swallow your heart, and consume you... I thought about how terrifying that really is. When we all got swallowed up by that darkness... it reminded me of what happened when Alice and I were trapped in that cage. That stuff just latches on and doesn't let go-- And the scary part is how quickly in can overpower you."

Sora's eyes were locked on my face. "Is... that why... whatever that was, happened... back there?" He asked. "With all that Darkness? It was like you lost control... you were super powerful but, you weren't yourself."

I hugged my knees tighter and sighed. "I think so... But even that itself was crazy." I grabbed my head and ran my fingers through my hair, agitated. "I don't know. So much keeps happening, it's so frustrating!"

"...what about the dreams?" Sora went on to inquire. "Do you really not know much about that?"

"Of course not." I said honestly. "I mean... I told you everything. The dream... vision things or whatever they're called-- They started a while back but I don't know why they’re only now becoming relevant. I thought I was just having a bunch of bad dreams at first... but once the Islands disappeared... things started to come together. I didn't want to say anything because well... one, I wasn't sure when the right time would be, and two I didn't want to seem distrustful or like a lunatic. Like--- I see things. That's already a little weird."

Sora blinked at me thoughtfully as he nodded his head. "Well... you'll at least let us know if anything worth telling comes up, right?"

"Of course I--"

SSSSSHOOOOMMMM!!!

Suddenly the ship lurched and rocked sideways. Sora and I were flung off the bed, crashing into the floor. Red flashing emergency lights, lit up the room as the ship’s emergency system engaged
and the alarms screamed to life.

"Wh-- what's happening?" Sora stammered out, as he fumbled to his feet.

As if to directly answer his question, the ship's intercom buzzed to life and a little voice squeaked through. "Sora! Yukari!! Hurry to the cockpit! The ship is under attack!!"

"Under attack!?!" I repeated, hobbling to my feet.

Sora and I hurried up to the cockpit as fast as we were able, while the ship shook and careened from side to side. Once there, we learned exactly why, as Donald was at the helm, steering the ship aggressively through what looked to be an asteroid belt. Looking out at the view of space, I watched a small swarm of ships zip by overhead, whilst pelting us was a spray of lasers.

"Wh-who are they?" Sora asked, grabbing onto the back of Donald's seat.

"Are those… Heartless??" I asked, noticing the emblem on the crafts.

"Yup, and they're tryin' to take us out!" Goofy wailed, his fingers flying across the control panel.

"They're out here too?" I said, feeling the hopelessness of our situation. I didn't think we'd ever catch a break at this point.

"We need you two's help, but I can't have you smacking random buttons." Donald growled as he jerked the steering, hard to the left and the ship made a sharp dip, turning to evade an oncoming assailant.

"Sora! You're gonna take the wheel!" Donald squawked.

"What?" Both Sora and I blurted out.

"He's never piloted a ship before! He can barely row a boat!" I panicked.

"Hey!" Sora snapped at me.

"Yukari, you're with Goofy on teeny fighter, two." Donald completely ignored our bickering. "Hit the activation switch to launch the fighter!"

Sora made quick work at taking over the helm while Donald switched over to the big control panel that spread across the dash. The minute he began to steer, Sora throttled the stick and sent the whole vessel into a dangerous nose dive. Our party screamed in unison, as we went plummeting straight towards an enormous hunk of space rock.

"Pull up, Sora, Puuuull UUUPP!!" Donald shouted

"We're gonna die. We're gonna die. We're gonna die. We're gonna die." I repeated frantically, over and over as the asteroid grew in size, much too rapidly.

Sora released a heavy grunt, straining against the weight of the ship as he yanked the steering back. Upon doing so, the ship jerked upwards in time for us to narrowly miss the asteroid by a hair. But we weren't out of the woods yet as we went flying directly into the battalion of ships, speeding in our direction.

"Yukari! The Teeny Fighter!" Donald shouted, slamming one of the buttons of the control panel. A shield blinked to life around the ship, as we were hit with another spray of light beams. But I could tell the force field wouldn't hold up forever as, with each hit taken, it buzzed and dimmed.
I rushed to the console, where the fourth seat sat. Looking over the dash, my eyes danced about it until I saw the activation switch, in big bold red letters. Taking it up in my hand I pulled it back, and the whole console lit up bright blue. A small ten inch screen blinked to life, displaying a tiny view of outer space whizzing by. It wasn't until the Heartless ships showed up, that I realized I was in charge of controlling this... teeny ship.

"Guys!! They're getting closer!!" Sora warned, struggling to control the gummi. He maneuvered clumsily around in the sky trying to evade. Donald continuously monitored the ships systems as he hit buttons, threw switches and turned knobs.

I looked back to my screen, that had little buttons attached. It didn't take me long to make the connection that I was controlling the little teeny fighter as I pressed some of the buttons. I kept my fire trained on the group of enemies, as they rolled through the air to evade. Of course, they'd be hard to hit. Annoyed, I attempted to follow their actions, zipping around after them and waiting for the just the right second to open fire. Pulling the trigger, the canon blasted a bright beam of light at the enemies and the ships exploded into bits, falling out of the sky.

"Yes!!" I cheered.

"Nice shot!" Goofy cheered.

"More coming up, on your six!" Donald warned.

I pulled my teeny on a tailing enemy and blasted them out of commission.

"Sora! 3 o Clock! Big one comin' up!" Goofy hollered, maneuvering his teeny fighter to defend the gummi.

I followed his actions, taking out the small ships on the way around the Gummi. Everything was going fine until an enormous blast from the aforesaid, bigger ship, blasted straight through Goofy's teeny, zipping past my own and forcing me to lose control.

"ACK!" Goofy cried out.

"Shoot!" I cursed, trying to regain control of my fighter. "I can't... Move!"

ZZZZoooooMMMPPP!!

Another blast from the ship, came back around and completely obliterated my fighter. On destruction, the screen went completely black, and the panel burst into a fit of sparks.

"Ummm!" I turned to Donald who looked at me wide eyed.

"We lost the Teeny ships!!" Dale's voice came in through the intercom.

The Gummi lurched sideways as the big Heartless ship rammed us from the side. The light field around our vessel shattered like glass, and an explosion erupted form our right.

"What do we do?!" Sora panicked, pulling the ship away from the enemy.

"The ship's sustained heavy damage!" Chip announced through the speakers. "We lost one of the engines!"

"We'll have to use the Hyper drive!" Donald shouted.

"We can't!" Dale protested. "The gummi piece used to support that function is incredibly outdated!
The second we use it, it'll burn out and we might sustain heavy losses! We may not even make it to Traverse Town in one piece!"

"We'll. Make it!!" Donald argued, opening up a new panel, labeled Hyper D.G.

"We will??" I asked, my voice cracking. I wouldn't pretend to understand half of the stuff these guys were talking about, but none of it sounded good. If we couldn't fly the ship, how would we make it back to town?

I watched Donald flick a set of switches before pushing Sora off the helm. As he did so, he dodged another oncoming attack from the big Heartless battle ship just as the whole Gummi whirred and hummed. The entire cockpit lit up blue, as the sky around us blurred.

"Hold on!!!" Donald shouted, throwing the helm straight ahead.

Everyone screamed at the top of their lungs as the ship itself zipped forward at what I could only assume was, warp speed. The stars around us became a field of blurred lines, whirring by, forming what looked like a full on tunnel of light that encompassed the entire ship. The Gummi rattled and quaked as it shuffled through hyper drive. A loud bang, sounded from the back of the ship.

"I can't look!" Goofy shouted, covering his eyes.

"Almost.... there!!" With another aggressive pull of the helm, Donald threw the gear forward once and we went faster. An explosion erupted from beneath the ship, and suddenly we were sent hurling out of our warp tunnel and back into the expanse of space.

The good news: we'd made it to Traverse Town.

The bad news? We made it to Traverse Town.

Now, the ship was hurling towards the world, with no sign of stopping.

"Donald!! Stop! The ship!!" Chip shouted through the intercom, urgency much more prevalent in his voice now.

"I can't!!" He shouted, yanking the gear back, repeatedly. But as he did, nothing happened.

"That hyper drive, completely trashed the gummi's navigation systems!" Dale notified. "We're going to crash! Everyone brace for impact!"

"Oh craaaaap!!" I shouted, clutching the arms of my chair.

I could feel the pull of Traverse Town sucking us in. Our landing would be a little more than bumpy as the hull set ablaze when we entered the world's atmosphere. The Gummi quaked, the faster we went, with no sign of stopping or slowing down.

"This is it!!" Dale screamed.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHH!!" The entire cockpit erupted in a fit of screams coming from all four of us as we made contact with the world.

Kingdom Hearts: Ascend Recollection

Chapter 05
"An' you say this happened, how again?" Went the repetitive inquiry, of a gruff looking blond man, that went by the name of Cid.

To catch you up to speed, after our crash landing on the world, Yuffie and Aerith were the first ones on the scene, pulling us from the wreckage of our totaled, space ship. They pelted us with many questions, asking what happened and if we were okay, over and over again. To which we continuously let them know that, indeed, we were fine. Thankfully the ship engaged a sort of safety mode, that sprayed this weird foam everywhere in the cock pit. The stuff was really cushiony and forced everyone together into a safe little ball that tasted, awful.

Just a note but... don't eat the foam.

All while this had been happening, Cid showed up to see what the commotion was and nearly had an aneurism at the sight of the wreckage. Not to mention the fact that Chip and Dale were incredibly ticked off at how Donald had handled the gummi in our last few minutes aboard, trying to escape the Heartless.

All in all, we were safe... but very sorry.

Aerith, seeing the sight of mine and Sora's, matching, glistening black eyes we received as a gift from Cloud, attributed this to something that had occurred during our crash, and decided to tend to us as Donald explained the situation.

"Cid's the one who helped me out when I woke up here, the night of the storm." Sora whispered to me, noticing me staring at him curiously. "Saved me from a group of Heartless and told me to go back out and look around."

Giving him a good once over, I noticed Cid had this sort of old uncle/ young gramps look to him. I couldn't place exactly why. Perhaps it had something to do with that interesting twang in his voice as he talked with a long tooth pick between his teeth. His jaw jutted out to the side, seemingly with intention, and was peppered with a patch of rough stubble. Adorned with goggles, an old white t shirt, an orange sash and baggy pants, the guy looked like he was a rough tough, beat em' up kind of guy.

"The Gummi navigation systems are completely damaged." Chip snapped. He sent Donald a look as he listed off the issues we'd run into. "We blew an engine during a fight with some Heartless, completely lost a lot of the ships integrity. The Teeny fighters are completely gone. The shield is in-operable, the hyper drive is burnt out, and the hull is damaged from crash landing."

Cid let go a long agitated sigh as he stood, gazing upon the wreckage. "This is ridiculous! Don't ya'll know how to fly a ship and fend of the Heartless at the same time?"

Our quartet, hung our heads in shame, guilty of ineptitude.

"Can you at least fix it?" Donald asked.

"Of course I can fix it." Cid, snapped. "Replacing a blown shield-g should be no problem." He waved. "The only issue is, your navigation-g is going to need a massive upgrade, and your hyper drive?? You can kiss that crap good bye. Nothing but junk now."
I wasn't sure why but, all this talk of gummi ships had reminded me about our little find back in wonderland, when we defeated that big ole' Heartless.

"What about that... gummi we found?" I asked.

"Oh, Right!" Goofy lit up. Reaching into his pocket he pulled forth the bright green looking cube that glinted against the light of the street lamps. "We found this, here Gummi block during our adventures. But uh... we don't exactly know it's for."

Cid took up the block in his hands, and inspected it, just about as thoroughly as one could inspect a four sided cube. "You've gotta be kidding me..." He finally said, letting go yet another exasperated sigh. He looked us all over with an expression of sheer disappointment as he held the thing out for us to ogle at.

"This here is a Navigation block. Conveniently this is exactly what ye need and more to solve that there problem for yer navigation systems. It jus' boggles me that ya'll didn' know what this was! Ya'll really flyin' a round in a gummi an don't know nuthin' bout a navigation gummi?? The heck ya'll is? Bunch o' pin heads er what? Interspace ain't no playground!"

"Hey, we're not the leaders of the rocket science team, here." Donald snapped. "We need to use the gummi to get around. There's no helping that we aren't all that well versed in the ways of the Gummi."

"Donald's right." Goofy nodded, giving Cid the puppy dog eyes. It was creepy just how well it was working on me, and I wasn't even his target. "We weren't expectin' to run into so much trouble that we'd damage the ship."

"Awright, Awright... Easy!" Cid said, softly, realizing his temper, too late. "No hard feelings... I already said I'd help you out. I'll fix up yer ship and install the navi-gummi along with it." He held it up into the light again. "This here is gonna do you a lot o' good too. Upgrade your coordinate data base for locations in known interspaces, so Ya'll can go where no man's gone before and all that jazz-- basically go anywhere ya'll want."

"Sweet!" Sora proclaimed. "That'll really help us in searching around for Kairi and Riku!"

"Buuuut!" Cid stopped him.

"But?" I echoed.

"I do this, you do somethin' for me in return. Let's head back to my shop real quick. I'll wrap this... mess up for you as soon as I give you a little job to do."

After thanking Aerith for her medical support, we wrapped up and headed over to Cid's shop. Turns out, it had been right at the heart of the town square, in front of the plaza where Leon knocked Sora around our first time here. Apparently it was an accessory shop of sorts. I guess the guy had a thing for selling magical bracelet’s and stuff but our party was only here for one thing.

"An... exchange diary?" I asked, as I held a slim hard cover book in my hand. There was a little golden clasp hooked from the back to the cover, to keep it locked.

"Wha-- No!" Cid spat.

Wasn't gonna lie... my spirits fell at that response. Opening the book, I fanned through the pages and realized the most peculiar thing-- It was blank.
"It's a real, old book a guy brought in here earlier. Was pretty much fallin' apart-- way too beat up to restore. I tried, best I could." Cid swiped his thumb a cross his nosed and scratched the side of his brow. "Anyway, deliver that for me. Take it to the old house on the outskirts of the Third District. Just look for the big fire sign—You can’t miss it."

"You got it boss man." I said, closing the book shut. "But... didn't we come here for something else?"

"Leon!" Goofy recalled, pointing his finger in the air.

"Right." Donald nodded. "Do you know where we can find him?"

"Probably down in the waterways." A new voice said. We all looked to find Yuffie coming into the shop holding a big box of what appeared to spare parts of some kind. "I brought that stuff you wanted." She said, to Cid. Then turned to us with an eager grin. "I'll take you down there!"

Our gracious, ninja, Yuffie did just that, leading us down through the town's sewer system, via maintenance entry, behind the hotel. The path was cemented through, well enough before all man made structures teetered away as water over took them, and rose through the tunnels. Yuffie told us to keep heading down the only path ahead, before she left us to get back. I was a little miffed, I had to slosh, knee deep through filtered sewer water but, I realized things could have been grosser, as the place was actually much cleaner, and not as funky as I'd imagined it would be. It didn't take long before the tunnel opened up into a cavern like entryway, bearing stalactites and mites, before the water levels thinned and the current came to a stop, revealing a stone path. A quaint little stream gushed by as we walked, following the sound of metal slicing through the air, alongside the soft grunts of Leon who'd been down here training.

He noticed us quickly, as our bottoms were soaked through, dripping loudly onto the stone ground. The place looked like a cozy spot, of what seemed like a very secret passage. Cobblestone, adorned the floor and torches lit the place, luminating the magical looking drawings of a sun that sat on the back wall. A small waterfall gushed and gurgled in a corner. I wasn't sure why... but the place seemed like an upgraded version of our secret place.

"So, you guys found a Keyhole." Leon assessed, once we told him our story. We'd sat around in the warmth of the torch light snacking on rice balls, he had set out for him. His scarred face looked us over contemplatively as he toweled himself off, dabbing away the sweat at his neck.

Funny as it was, with everything going on, I hadn't really had much of a chance to think about eating. And the lack of sleep was suddenly catching up to me now that things had settled down. I munched away, grateful to be able to fill my belly at all for the time being as I listened to Leon, go on.

"Ansem wrote of such a thing in his report." Leon continued. "It was said, that in every world amongst the stars, there is somewhere, a hidden Keyhole. Beyond each of these, lies the world's Heart. But no heart, be it man or world, can truly escape the taint of Darkness. The Heartless do in that taint reside, progressing in the twilight of innocence to manifest and consume the hearts of all. Those worlds that have since been claimed by the Heartless are lost to us now-- Enveloped and shattered in the black night."

Leon’s words might have been smooth and poetic, but they still hit pretty hard. Thinking of Destiny Islands, as... gone was just a hard pill to swallow. I know I had told Sora before not to worry about it, but that didn't mean I wasn't feeling down in the pits about it either.
"That's why you two have to wield the Keyblade. The hearts of the remaining worlds must be locked, to keep them from being overrun and consumed. The Keyblade master is the only one able to complete this task. Seeing other worlds will serve you well."

"But..." Sora finally spoke out. The look on his face was knotted with confusion and deep set concern. "Me and Yukari... We're just..."

"Dumb teenagers..." I mumbled as I finished his sentence. Hugging my knees, I recalled the words of the cloaked... thing that spoke to me back in the secret place.

"You still do not know... what lies beyond the door."

Sora and I were in no way, shape or form, prepared for whatever awaited us in the vast expanse of space. I squeezed my legs tighter, biting the inside of my mouth, anxiously. "Being... the supposed Keyblade Master, doesn't really make me feel any more powerful or dignified. I kinda want to understand everything more. There's still a lot we don't know-- so much we're unprepared for. I have tons of questions and... no one seems to have the right answers."

"Well then." Leon sighed, softly. It seemed that he was sympathizing with my plight. "Tell me what you don't understand."

I looked over at the boys, catching their eyes. Donald and Goofy nodded at me, knowing what I was about to bring up. But Sora seemed a bit guarded. His face told me he had no real idea of whether or not it was a good or bad decision, but he'd had my side no matter what.

It was kind of weird, how I was able to read all that from just a look.

"Well," I blinked. "I wanted to bring it up last time we were here, but I didn't know how..." I let go a deep breath, looking into Leon's solid gaze. "I'm... not sure how. But I have this... weird ability to... see things."

I spent the next thirty minutes explaining in excruciating detail, the dreams, the evil people lurking in the dark, what happened to Alice and more. I mentioned how before the Islands were destroyed, I saw the brief moments of what happened with Donald, how I was able to witness things either in real time or from the past. I left out the bits about Riku, and of course the Ladies of light and Darkness. Those were still incredibly touchy subjects.

"Something about these people, doesn't sit right with me." Leon said, rubbing his chin, thoughtfully. His eyes reflected the fire light but, it was almost like there was something else to it. A bad memory seemed to swim in his eyes. Crinkling his brows, he looked back up at me, expectantly. "What else did you see?"

I twisted my mouth a bit and shrugged. "Mm... nothing else... I haven't really... slept much since we've been so busy."

"Hmm..." He continued to silently ponder. The bit about the evil silhouettes clearly bothered him more than the whole, seeing the past and walking through dreams. "Something about these... six figures, doesn't sit well with me. If it is as you say... we may have a big problem. Otherwise, I can't say for sure why you might be seeing things at all. But it does seem to be coming in handy in terms of intel. Curious... There is someone who might know... I have a feeling you guys were sent to see him."
"How do you know that?" Sora asked, a bit disturbed.

"That book you've got with you." Leon said, like it was obvious. He stood, picking up his gun... blade as if to express that our conversation was through and he was ready to get back to his training session. "I imagine you'd best be on your way, if you've got some sort of errand to run. I can only guess Cid handed that off to you."

The boys and I stood to leave, dusting ourselves off and stretching out as we headed back the way we'd come in. But before we'd gotten too far, Leon stopped us.

"And don't worry--" He said. He looked directly at Sora and myself as he said it. "The burden of the Keyblade master is a heavy one to bear... But you two will be fine. You're not alone. You've got everyone here to help you out. We'll do our part, as best we can."

Sora just straight up nodded. I didn't bother. It's not like I didn't think about that. It was more of the fact that even if we had help, it seemed like a lot was riding on us succeeding through and through. The scary part was not knowing anything. Not just about the worlds, but everything that we still hadn't encountered. We could never really be sure what was waiting out there for us-- not unless maybe I slept for a few days.

After fully exiting the waterways, the boys and I trudged through the streets to get to the third District. Indeed it was near impossible to miss the fire sign that sat ablaze within what was basically a door with a spotlight hanging over it, screaming at us to observe. We took no time in heading through, as the door creaked loudly and echoed into the enormous cavern that sat inside.

"What the..." I voiced, breathless.

Okay, nix what I said before. This place was like a supreme upgraded version of the secret place. It was a literal, giant cave, washed in the blues of the night. A flippin' house sat dead in the center, surrounded by a small lake as the place as completely flooded with clear, sparkling water. A stone pathway made it accessible, prompting our party to cross.

As we approached, I got a good look at the house. It looked old, run down, and like no one lived in it. It was a single story building made of stone, with a cone shaped roof that looked suspiciously like the wizard's hat that sat atop Donald's mage staff. The door was... nonexistent as there was nothing but a piece of cloth draped against the entrance.

The inside wasn't really any better. Cobwebs were everywhere. Dust, coated everything in thick layers. I mean, there was a bed and table surrounded by some chairs, but other than that...

"It looks empty." Sora mumbled staring around.

"Yeah Sora..." I replied. Sarcasm, prominent in my tone. "I couldn't tell from the fact that it's dark and unoccupied."

"But wadda we do?" Goofy asked. "We've still got a delivery to make."

I hummed in thought as I glanced down at the book I’d been carrying before doing another once over of the place.

"Old and musty..." A soft but, incredibly familiar voice whispered into the room.

My head darted around, until I spotted the rose red lochs and the soft violet eyes. What seemed to be a glowing apparition of Kairi, walked along the walls of the rounded room-- Her hands brushing against the dusty stones.
"Doesn't this place kinda remind you of the secret place, back home?" She asked.

My eyes, now perfectly wide, stared Kairi down. Words were caught in my throat as I squeezed the book in my hands tightly. Stunned to see her smiling at me, with a sort of sweet sadness, I knitted my brows together, trembling as I forced myself to speak.

"Kairi?" Instead of my voice, Sora's lit up from behind me.

He could see her too?

No...

I was the one who wasn't supposed to have been able to see her.

"What are you guys talking about?" Donald quacked impatiently.

With great pain, I tore my eyes away from the image of Kairi and locked them with Sora’s, who had been sharing in my incredulous expression. When our eyes met in those brief seconds, we'd managed to share some sort of telepathic conversation.

"You see her too?" Sora seemed to say.

I responded with a very slight nod, mouth still agape. But when I turned back to look at her, she was gone. Instead, she'd been replace by an old man dressed in blue robes and a tall coned cap. His big nose held small, thin wire-framed glasses. Bushy white brows sprouted above his eyes and a long white beard nearly reached the floor, dragging below his chin.

"Wha--!" I leapt back at bit, at his sudden appearance.

He was coming out of a crumbling hole in the wall. It sealed up, upon his stepping through, as he adjusted himself accordingly. "Well I... I nearly missed the landing that time, I did." He said. Then his eyes landed on me. "Hello there. Sorry to give you a fright. And a hello to you all." He then waved his hand nonchalantly at everyone else in the room as he continued in, moving towards the center. "You've come much sooner than I expected."

I hadn't noticed that he'd been lugging a sort of suit case along with him. His thin limbs hoisted the bag onto the table before pulling from it, a stick. "There we are..." He mumbled. For a second, I wondered what good that would do, but then I realized that incredibly, smooth and perfectly carved stick, was in fact a wand. With a few swipes of it through the air, items began to dance out of the bag. At first it was a few obvious things like cups and plates but then flipping... drawers and bureaus, lamps, a table cloth, bed sheets and the like exploded from the thing, resting themselves in the most convenient places around the room.

Before long, the dank, cold and musty home had been transformed into a warm and cozy safe haven. The boys and I had been magically repositioned in seats around a spacious table with full cups of warm... tea?

"Barley, to be specific." The man said, as if reading my mind.

My eyes were on the verge of exploding from my face. "Did you jus--"

"My, is that the book!" The old man, inquired, cutting me short. Reaching across the table for it. Taking it up in his hands and flipping through, with a look of satisfaction. "The binding's almost as good as new too! Highwind's gotten to be rather proficient at book restoration, hasn't he?"
"Uh... So... who are you?" Sora finally asked. "And... how'd you know we were coming? Are you some kind of... Special Heartless or something?"

"Oh, no!! Of course not." The man spat. "I spend most of my time traveling about. It was the King of yours that requested I grant you some assistance. My name, is Merlin. And as you can see, I'm a wizard of sorts"

"The king?" Donald and Goofy erupted beside me.

"Do you know where the King is right now?" Donald asked.

"That..." The old man, Merlin, fiddled with his thumbs as he blinked a bit. "Unfortunately, I do not. We parted some time ago." He reached for the cup of tea that sat before him and took a sip. "I do know the purpose of his travels though. There spreads, as we speak a great discord across all creation. Your king seeks the means by which it might be quelled. And that the end of days shan't envelope us all in darkness...."

For a moment, the room grew intangibly silent as his words brought forth a sort of gloom to them.

"In any case." He continued. "He asked me to provide you a few lessons in the art of magic--especially to you two." His boney finger wagged back and forth between Sora and I. "You've both done quite well, learning to manipulate the Keyblade on instinct alone. Sadly that reliance, denies you both the full capacity of the weapon. Conscious, control of the blades functions is essential to your cause. You mustn't forget that."

"It's great that you mentioned magic, because Yukari is terrible at it!" Donald announced.

"What?? I am not!" I protested, shooting him a glare.

A smirk flitted onto his features, "You're terrible at controlling it. You literally cast spells that are two powerful for you. The first time you casted, blizzard, you really ended up casting blizzaga!"

"Well I'm working on it, Donald. There's only so much time to perfect it." I said through my teeth.

The little snickers he sent me before taking a sip of his tea were provoking me to fly over the table and cast a blizzaga spell right on top of him.

"Curious...." Merlin said, eyeing me thoroughly as he rubbed his chin. "How's about we head in for a quick session? After all, you'll need a few more spells than blizzard. Learning them is important. Whether and how you use them against the Heartless that is... Well, that's entirely up to you. Besides, there may well be a reason why Yukari was able to cast such high level magic..."

Donald and I ceased sending mocking expressions at each other long enough to catch Merlin's ominous statement before he stood up and clapped his hands.

"Any who, let’s get to it!" With the snap of his fingers the boys and I were now in a completely different room. It was spacious, and well lit, and had the same stone wall look of Merlin's place. The wooden floor boards beneath our feet, creaked at the slightest shift in body weight. I had to assumed he'd just moved us... upstairs? Merlin stood before us, waving his wand in a peculiar motioned before a bright, greenish glow began to swirl around both Sora and I. A feeling of intense warmth bubbled and built up in my chest and gut. It wasn't uncomfortable but it was like... getting butterfly’s whilst Downing a bottle of hot sauce and eucalyptus.

"There." Merlin smiled. "Now you've got a few more spells under your belt. Fire and air-- Donald would you be so kind to give demonstrations?"
"Of course!" Donald, quickly agreed, whipping out his staff. He stood at the ready, grinning proudly next to Merlin.

"Alright, good. Now, Sora, Yukari, I would very much like for the two of you to watch and learn." Merlin expressed. "Magic is an old art that lives through us mages. Over time it has slowly faded, but we are giving it a home in the hearts of those, willing to carry that burden. Now, it's not a toy, either, as it's incredibly dangerous! But of course, as you learn to control it, you'll be able to properly handle the more difficult and grandiose arts. Of course there are some limitations and maybe even a few exceptions."

"And those would be?" I asked.

"Oh... those details aren't important. Now let's have a go at it. Concentrate your energy. Imagine you are attempting to syphon a bit of your essence through a funnel. That output should be streamlined, and smooth-- and like a jolt--"

Donald whipped his staff at his feet and shouted a quick, "Wind!" before a small vortex appeared at his feet.

"Well there you have it. This of course is the lowest of tiers. Donald, if you would?"

"Aerora!" Donald let forth of blast of cool air the exploded in the midst of our party. Albeit harmless, it was strong, and its radius blasted against the stone walls, rattling the windows as it did.

"Commendable work, Donald." Merlin said, fixing the hat on his head. "I think those should be good for now, any more will most definitely do unnecessary damage. Now, why don't you two give it a whirl. Let me see what you've got."

Sora went first. Summoning his Keyblade, he held it in both his palms positioned at his center. He took a sharp breath before letting forth a tight, "Wind!" And a little pool of air whirled before him.

"Good!" Merlin nodded, satisfied. "Just relax a bit, no need to be so tight. Keep a bit loose, and leave some room for a wider berth of attack room. Now... Yukari?"

I let go a breath I'd not realized I'd been holding and took a step forward. Unlike Sora, I lifted my Key with only one hand, holding it low and less consciously. Considering Merlin's words to loosen up, I relaxed my shoulders and drew in a sharp breath. As I let it go, I hardly even had a chance to shout my spell of choice as an immense blast of wind exploded from the tip of the blade.

So strong, was the spell that the gust turned into a turbulent vortex that created a new window option for Merlin, destroying the foundation and caving in a portion of the roof. The spell lasted just a moment too long, as I attempted to pull it back. When it had finished, I collapse to my knees, completely exhausted. A very tight pulling at my navel, caused great discomfort as I inhaled sharply.

Sora and Goofy voiced their amazement. Donald on the other hand wasn't so impressed.

"Didn't you listen to anything Merlin said!?!" Donald shouted, shaking his fist about as he ran at me.

"I did!" I snapped, looking up at him from the floor. "Even with concentration, that happened!"

"Why don't we stop, for now." Merlin suggested. He stood at the newly formed hole in the wall, stroking his beard. He seemed more impressed than upset that I'd destroy his home. Then I suppose, he probably could fix it up was some magic. "That was a very concentrated, third tier
wind spell.” His tone was quieted and almost grim. "There's no reason, a beginner such as yourself should even have the capacity to cast it and remain conscious after such a thing. Mayhaps, this hints at some deeper meaning, or you've got potential to be a great mage. Either way--"

Merlin clapped twice and we were all back at the dining table. The barley tea, was still scolding hot. Would I ever get used to magic and just how wild it was?

"I'll send you four off with a lump sum of munny so that you may feed and care for yourselves on your adventures." Merlin said, taking a petite sip of his tea. "You'll need to keep up your energy to sustain your magical spells and of course, keep on your toes. Make sure you get some well-deserved rest tonight, you four are falling apart of the seams . At any rate, Yukari, I'm sure you have a few burning questions you may have wanted to ask. But I very well may not be able to give you any straight forward answers."

"Y-you mean about the dreams?" I asked. I'd just taken a long drag of the tea. Hot or not, there was something healing about it. The effects weren't instant but a nice cool feeling bubbled in my stomach. The exhaustion, I'd been feeling, only seconds ago was dithering. "Is there a reason why I can see the things I do?"

"Why of course, there is." Merlin hummed. "In fact, there was another girl much like you. I met her in passing but she talked of seeing the future, and walking through dreams. She inquired about a terrible evil that was fated to arise, and how the ones she loved would be put in jeopardy because of it."

"Couldn't that evil be what's goin' on now? With the Heartless?" Goofy asked.

"It's hard to say." Merlin said, running his fingers through his beard. "She was in search for answers of changing the fate of those she cared about, giving less than vague details in her inquiry."

"So this girl... she could walk... through dreams." Sora said, apparently thinking out loud. "and could see the future. But Yukari can only see the past and present."

"And I have zero control over when or how these supposed dreams occur." I added. "It's like every time I close my eyes, I see something. Is there a way to shut it off?"

"That... I do not know." Merlin sighed. "Unfortunate as it may be... I Don't have the answers to all your questions. I only hoped to ease your mind at the thought that there is another, very much like you. While it goes without saying, you are a powerful and unique being whose name has been lost to time... Or perhaps it may be just my old aging mind... You must learn to control your use of magic, the visions and keep yourself from falling into the hands of the enemy. You may very well be a useful tool for either good or evil. The girl I met with, sadly had very little luxuries in her situation."

I pressed my lips together, as I stared into my cup. What about the Ladies of Light and Darkness? I could only guess that Merlin didn't know much about that, since he didn't bring it up at all. I already felt pretty naked with the discussion being solely about me. I tried not to catch the worried looks Sora was sending me either, as we stood from the table and prepared ourselves to leave.

"Well you're all welcome to drop by any time." Merlin said, walking us out. "Of course I'll always help as needed. Oh, and before you leave, if by any chance you come across the pages of that book you gave me, I would surely hope that you'd save them for me. For between the covers, their once existed an entire world. It’d be a crime to let it simply, vanish into obscurity."
"Man..." Sora sighed, "There's a whole ton of things we have to keep track of. They just keep adding up."

"Ah, don't worry about that." Donald shrugged. "We'll get through 'em one at a time."

As we headed back through the flame door, I brought up the rear of the party. My head was stuck on that conversation with Merlin. In the end, I was just as clueless about my visions as when I'd come here. Not a bit of what he'd mentioned really shed any light on my situation. If anything I was left with even more questions and even more trepidations. So there was another girl out there like me... but she could actually see the future. I wondered just how much of a hold she had on her powers. But given her priorities weren't the same as mine-- trying to figure out how they worked-- I'd say she was far better off. The part that really didn't sit well with me was the bit about being used for no good, which in turn, brought me back to the vision I'd seen with that woman, discussing my use.

I let go a huge sigh. Pondering, alone, wasn't really going to help. And moping was going to help even less. I patted my cheeks gently and shook away the negative feelings coming on. Right as I was preparing myself to join the boys, something dove into me, shoving me through the gut before hurling me out of what I would come to realize as harm's way. Dizzied, I hurried to regain my senses and turned to find a Heartless getting its head torn through by some cocky guy.

"Riku?" I blurted out, catching the attention of the boys, who'd quieted behind me.

"Wha--" Riku yelped.

I wasn't sure what came over me as it seemed some unseen force was moving my body for me. Excitedly, I launched myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. As I leapt onto him, my feet left the ground, forcing Riku into fully supporting my weight. I could feel his arms wrap around my waist as he caught himself before the two of us could hit the floor.

"You're alive!" I cried out, brimming with joy as I buried my cheek into his shoulder. Squeezing him just a little tighter, the solidity of his presence was that much more reassuring. It was almost as if all my troubles had just faded away.

"Uh... Of course I am." Riku said, chuckling. "You really thought I was dead?"

I pulled myself out of his arms a little bit, grinning uncontrollably. "Of course not..." I'd honestly thought worse. But seeing him here, and feeling his presence was far better than whatever the dreams had attempted to convey.

"Riku?" Sora’s voice was close.

I looked to find him standing next to us, his eyes watered with playful tears of joy.

Sora reached out for Riku's face and yanked at his cheeks, pulling aggressively wherever possible.

"What... are you doing?" Riku questioned, slapping Sora away as he eyed him like he'd lost his mind.

"Sorry, man. I just can't believe it's really you." Sora admitted sheepishly. "It feels like forever almost."
"It's been a day... But you're right to worry." Riku agreed, rubbing his face from the sores that started to redden.

I can imagine Sora had pulled on him real hard to make sure he wasn't some apparition, like Kairi had been. Speaking of... "Where's... Kairi." I asked, my eyes darted around the rest of the third district.

"Oh, you guys haven't seen her either?" Riku frowned.

"No... We thought that, maybe she was with you." Sora supplied.

The three of us, grew silent as our delightful reunion soured at the fact that we were still short one friend.

"Well." Riku shrugged it off. "Let's look at the brighter side of things-- We're finally free."

Free? I thought it was a weird choice of words given that, we weren't exactly being held prisoners on our own home world. But... could that have been how Riku had felt about it all this time?

"We can go, wherever we want and there's no one stopping us!" He continued. "Leave it to me, and we'll find Kairi in no time. In fact, you guys won't have anything to worry about--"

**WSHSHSHS!!**

The sound of metal tearing through the body of a Heartless, gushed through the air. Riku and I turned to find that Sora had been stood, posing all cool like, showing off his Keyblade and his new esteemed job as Keyblade Master.

I sighed, rolling my eyes. Here we go...

Sora turned, hefting the Keyblade onto his shoulder as he smirked up at Riku. "Leave it to who?"

Riku looked, understandably stunned. But something about the vibe he was giving off didn't feel positive. "Sora... how did--"

"I've been looking for you and Kairi." He said, shrugging it off like it was no big thing-- like that last twenty-four hours we'd gone through hadn't been the equivalent of some intense boot camp and we didn’t almost die more than enough times.

"We've..." I corrected, aggressively yanking back Sora's ear.

"Ow- Ow, Ow Ow!!" Sora cried out, trying to pry my hand away, gently pulling on my wrist.

Letting him go, I crossed my arms over my chest and gave him a look.

"Okay, We've... been looking for you." He restated. "And of course, with these guys' help." He nodded at our animal companions who stood side long, watching our banter.

"That's right!" Goofy exclaimed, proudly wrapping his arms around both Sora and I. "These two here are the Keyblade's Chosen!"

But for Riku, those feeling’s didn’t seem mutual. ".Well... isn't that something." He muttered quietly.

There was something cold about the look in Riku's eyes. His whole aura was suddenly distant and his arrival was almost too perfectly timed. Clearly something about the encounter was off, even
feeling staged, seeing how Riku perfectly ran into us without so much as seeming surprised. It was as if he knew exactly where to find us. His demeanor wavered, as I somehow felt a pang of jealousy and betrayal exuding off him. Why those emotions were the one I'd interpreted, I have no clue, but I couldn’t have been more sure.

For a moment too long, Donald and Goofy gushed over Sora and my ability to wield the Keyblade and how it had been an impressive, albeit unbelievable feet. So caught up in this, they failed to realize Riku somehow magically tearing the Keyblade out of Sora's possession.

"So this, is a Keyblade, huh...?" Riku voiced.

Our party fell completely silent and all eyes fell on him.

Riku's eyes drifted across the silver shaft of the blade with a sort of pondering expression. He held it so naturally, it seemed to suit him well. There's no way I could have been the only one here wondering if it was possible that Riku could have been a Keyblader too.

"Hey! Give it back!" Sora whined a bit, reaching out to grab it.

But Riku pulled it just out of reach as he dispelled it, and it vanished. I blinked, a bit surprised. The Keyblade reappeared in Sora's possession, who fumbled with the thing as he blinked confused as it plopped into his palms.

Still, no one questioned it.

"Ahh.. uhm... So anyways." Sora straightened abet, putting away his Key. "You gonna party with us from now on, right? I mean we've got this super cool rocket! You can ride around with us and everything! Donald just let me drive it too, an--"

"Sora!" Donald stopped him.

"What?"

"He can't come with us, don't you remember what I told you?"

"About what? The world order?" Sora questioned, looking absolutely peeved. "What's the difference between him and me and Yukari? I don't really think it's all that fair. Besides, he's my friend, and there's no way I'm gonna just leave him behind!"

Donald's eyes popped, and it was then that I knew Sora was in for a long lecture.

"Hey" I heard Riku whisper.

I turned in response to the gentle nudged he'd placed in the back of my bare shoulder. The grin on his face was a like a power kick to my gut as his lips curved into a sort of playful, teasing, deviant-ish smirk. I had to threaten back a blush as I blinked hard, at him.

"Wanna walk around for a bit?"

"Ah. I ah... Y-yeah." I said, nodding with an open jaw.

I didn't even look back at my crew as Sora and Donald had now erupted into a full blown argument, while I followed Riku out of the pavilion. We strolled along, through the quiet districts until we made it to the back of the upper area of Cid's shop.

Riku and I talked a little about the worlds we had been to-- or at least, I did.
"I mean... It's been a crazy ride so far... but it's so eye opening and so... incredibly different from what I thought we'd find."

"Yeah... You're right." Riku nodded. But his expression was saying something else. Gazing into his eyes, he looked incredibly lonely, even though he'd just found two of his closest friends. I had been about to ask, why he'd looked so... upset when he caught me staring at him with concern, and spoke before I could.

"Sorry." He said, a fake smile waking up on his features. "I was thinking about how it'd be really cool if we teamed up to find Kairi, make sure she's safe and get everyone in one place."

"Oh..." I faltered for a second too long. "Ah... yeah that sounds like such a great idea. But since the guys and I are visiting worlds, I figure we'd find her that way. I mean we don't really have a specific way to track her down."

Riku's expression faltered for just a second, dipping into something that appeared, disappointed. "Ah... I see."

"You know... you could... come with us."

For whatever reason, he stiffened a second too long and I knew he was opposed to the idea. I was tempted to ask him why he would deny the possibility of sticking together. After what I'd been introduced to since our time away from home, it was apparent that every world had its fair share of crazy. And what with the Heartless and what not lurking around... I didn't want to take my chances. But Riku wasn't all concerned by that.

"You know... I was worried about you." Riku suddenly said, switching up the topic.

This... mildly annoyed me. He wasn't even trying to hide it either. "Me?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because you were so nervous about leaving the Islands. I'm actually pretty glad you feel differently about it now."

It wasn't that I felt too differently, I just see things in a new light. Being away from the Islands has really exposed me to a lot of things-- be it danger, excitement, or, in a lot of cases for us, both. "I told you, I wasn't nervous about it." I finally said, pouting.

"Well, you sure weren't excited about it either." Riku teased, ignoring a look I'd sent him. His gaze drifted upwards to the night sky. He paused there for a little while, his green eyes seemed to drink in all the sights around him. I wondered what was really going through his mind. It seemed more like he was weighing some sort of options-- stalling for something. But why was I getting that from him? "As long as you're safe... Then there's no reason to..." He suddenly said.

"...Riku?" I asked.

He stayed there, looking up at the sky for just a minute longer before returning his gaze to mine. He had this, really odd smile on his face. "We're going to get Kairi back. Don't worry."

What? Something was going on. Riku had been acting odd, and this wasn’t something that could be left alone. But what could I tell him? He wasn't going to listen to anything I said—convincing him was out of the question. But, I was just worried. Why act so ominous and distant?

"Hey! Yukari!" A girl's voice tore me away from the conversation at hand and I looked up to find, Yuffie come trotting up the street.
I let go a quick, sharp sigh as I turned to Riku. But, in my intentions to do so, he had up and vanished in literally less than a second.

"Wh--!" I barely had time to process this.

"Oh, where are the boys?" Yuffie inquired, once she'd made her way over.

"I..." I slowly composed my thoughts, as I quickly recounted the last half hour. Riku had definitely been here. The boys had all witnessed him so, there's no chance he was any sort of weird apparition or vision or what. "They're coming..." I said slowly.

"Well good. If you guys are all done with running that errand for Cid, he and the others are waiting for you guys. There's some important biz that needs to be discussed. Meet up, at the accessory shop!"

And then she ran off.

So Yuffie clearly hadn’t seen him.

Either Riku had been invisible or, he was fast.

* * * * *

"Malife--who?" Sora asked.

"Maleficent. She's a witch, kid." Cid supplied.

After meeting back up with the boys and having to explain or... attempt to explain why Riku hadn’t been with me, I informed them of the meeting we were told to attend at Cid's shop. Despite the white walls and the pristine jewelry cases that lined the place, the atmosphere was pretty grim when we'd entered. Immediately we were presented with yet another name we needed to remember-- another problem we had to deal with.

"Aerith mentioned that she'd spotted her skulking around earlier." Leon stated.

"If she's here, then it can't possibly be good." Aerith added.

"But... who is she, really?" I asked. "At least, we haven't heard that name before." I gestured to the boys and I.

"Maleficent is all bad news!" Yuffie spat. "It's because of her that our home world got destroyed. She ran us off the planet with a full blown infestation of Heartless, years ago."

"Huh, a witch who manipulates the Heartless. That spells bad news for us Keybladers." I grumbled.

"Well, that's why I asked you four here." Leon said. "All of you, but mainly you, Yukari."

"Me? Why?"

"It's to do with what you mentioned earlier, about the figures in the dark, sending Heartless after you four. I wanted to know if you'd managed to get a good look at one of them, at all. It would be a big help if you could relay some defining features."

I hummed bit, in thought as I tried to remember the one lady from the dream. "Well... I wasn't able
to see everyone there except, for one person. She was a tall woman all dressed in black. She had horns and her skin was all green."

"That's her!" Yuffie exclaimed.

Leon and his posse, all looked a little more than stunned.

"Are you sure, that's what you saw?" Leon, pressed.

I nodded. "Clear as day, she's the only one I'd be able to point out for you."

"Maleficent, seems to be demonstrating an interest in Ansem's reports." Aerith informed. "It may even be the data and the records within them. Since Ansem documented his extensive knowledge of the Heartless, I'd could only assume that she means to use that to her benefit."

"A benefit to her would mean, a disadvantage to us." Donald noted, looking rightly piqued.

"Exactly." Leon agreed. "Thus far, we've all been out searching for the pages of Ansem’s report. We hope that doing so would keep from her being able to move forward in whatever she may be planning to do."

"Do you know her motive, exactly?" I asked.

"No..." Yuffie shrugged. "But why does that matter? If we nab all those pages before she does, we'll most likely stop her before she starts anything vicious."

I frowned, not so sure about that.

"Finding those pages might mean, figurin' out what this... Malefa--witch, is up to!" Goofy offered.

"I was thinking the same thing." Sora added. "If, anything, it's a start. Knowing is half the battle."

"That's right."

"That's right." Leon stood from his spot near the register, as he'd been resting along the counter. "If we can find more pages, we could understand everything going on. The girls and I will keep searching. But, if you four managed to find any clues and pages, you should make sure to report back and let us know what you find."

"Speakin' of," Cid interjected. "I've managed to make them fixes for your ship. Had to swap out that blown engine, got you some replacement teeny fighters, I had layin’ around. They're not the best but, they'll do. Old spares that were never used. And installed that new navigation gummi, so you should be all set to fly around. I also installed you a new shield. It's a bit weaker than the last one but, hey, I'm working with materials on hand. Only thing is now, you're not about to be hyper drivin’ anywhere. That crap's been out of date for a good while, so you'll need to make full trips to where yer headed."

"Thanks, Cid." Donald sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. "I'm sure Chip's gonna have a field day setting some new rules about handling the gummi."

"Where are they anyway?" I asked.

"Back on the ship, as we speak." Cid replied. "They're ready to head out when you guys are. Make sure ya'll take care of her this time. And of course, don't forget to stop by if you've got somethin’ you want me to add to your ship."

"And do be safe out there." Leon warned. "Things may just get a little more shaky from here on
out."
Heading back to Traverse Town held no concise answers for Yukari, in her short-lived investigation to discover what she might be. Even Riku’s short appearance in the world caused for more concern than, peace of mind, what with his distant and dodgy behavior. But the team managed to at least, learn the reason behind the Keyholes they’d been locking and the name of the possible leader to their adversary—Maleficent, a witch who charges the Heartless. Freshly tasked to lock Keyholes in every world they encounter and nab any of Ansem’s reports they find, the team moves on to their next world.

Sent off with off goodies, such as potions, and an assortment of raw, uncooked goods, from Merlin- and of course warm regards and a hefty receipt from Cid, the boys and I trucked it back to the gummi. We all slumped into the cockpit after receiving a long lecture from Chip and Dale. And after breaking in the new navigation systems, searching for any source of life in the deep confines of space, Donald determined we wouldn't be coming upon a new world for a long while. To which, we all came to a unanimous group decision to just get some sleep.

I dragged myself out of my seat, and out of the cockpit. No one really bothered exchanging words. Goofy bid everyone a good night, even though it was practically morning, and everyone headed into their dorms. Of course, before I did, I couldn't help but notice Sora looked more or less, grumpy. I could only assume it was due to hearing about Riku's disappearing without saying good bye. But then again... it could have easily been due to the fact that sleep was finally catching up to us.

Throwing off everything but my halter top and underwear and not even bothering to take down my hair, I jumped into my bed. I sunk deep into the matters and comforters, blissfully unaware of the ride the dreams were going to send me on.

The second my head hit the pillow, I was greeted to a scene grown-ups bickering in the dark. There shadowed faces were just barely visible, underlit by an image of me and the boys conversing. We seemed to have been back at Wonderland— back when we finished off the Heartless Boss.

"That accursed, feline!!" One of the voices hollered angrily. "We should have disposed of him as soon as he refused our offer!"
"He can't do us much harm." Another voiced hissed. "Rather, we must consider the issue with the
girl. It's bad enough that, the boy's a problem, and they've managed to uncover the Keyhole. But,
how did she manage to evade capture? Could it be that she's more aware of her powers than we'd
assumed? Perhaps she knows of us and our plans? It would be wise to hurry up and eliminate the
boy and try to capture her once again. But this time, we use another method."

So far, these guys were being just about perfectly vague, to keep me from learning anything. No
need to worry about me uncovering their dumb plans. Still, it bothered me that they seemed well
informed of whatever powers I had, where I hadn’t been.

"Calm yourselves." A new voice entered the scene. Into the light, stepped the women of green skin
and dark robes. Maleficent, as the guys back at Traverse Town had called her, stepped into the
single spotlight of the room. Surrounded by her fidgeting companions, she grinned, completely
calm and unperturbed by the situation at hand. "There's no need to rush, matters." She said. "It will
take them far too long to find the others. And whence they do, our plans will already have been set
in motion, and the girl will no longer be amongst their midst.

I did not like the sound of that.

"With each princesses obtained, we quickly grow closer to completion." She continued. “In fact, all
is going smoothly as our pieces are falling perfectly in to place."

I would have been oblivious as to what she meant had the face of a familiar girl not been thrown
into the light.

"Alice!" I vocalized.

But she couldn't hear me. In fact, this had mostly likely happened a good while ago, now. Who
knows? She looked around frantically. Fear and confusion overwhelmed her expression before she
was dumped into an abysmal trapdoor at her feet. And with her descent, I was forced into a similar
drop that made me question if either I as falling or the dream was morphing in an awful distorted
manner that blurred before me.

Everything suddenly came to a halt, and I found myself standing behind a pair of tall, dark clad
figures. Surveying my surroundings, everything was washed in the colors of golden sand that,
minged my eyes. Looking up, I found a cloudless blue sky, hanging overhead-- the bright sun
glaring down on my skin. Oddly enough I could actually feel the burning heat, singeing my flesh.
Where was this?

"The sultan of Agrabah shall, from this day forth, be none other than I-- Jafar." Went one of the
voices, belonging that of a guy.

My head snapped back towards them. I realized that the two had been Maleficent, accompanied
with what I was going to presume was one of the darkened faces amongst her ranks. His features
were quite serpentine. His face was long and his eyes were narrowed slits. He stood grinning, as he
stroked his beard of a curly goatee with spindly fingers. Draped in colors of dark red and black, he
held in one hand, a cobra headed staff. On his head sat a black turban, encrusted with a ruby red
gem.

Jafar huh... This guy must have had some ego on him.

"I do hope you've taken care of the civilians." Maleficent spoke, her voice smooth, as she glided
alongside her companion.
"But of course, my dear." Jafar cooed. "Every last one of them has been rushed out of the city with that surge of Heartless, I sent through."

"And the Keyhole?" Maleficent's tone expressed how unimpressed she was by Jafar's arrogance.

"The Heartless are searching for it now. We shall find it soon enough."

"What of the princess?" She continued to barrage him with questions nonstop.

As if to answer such a question, a red parrot came noisily buzzing down out of the sky. The tips of its wings were colored blue. Its rounded black beak sputtering breathlessly as it landed on his master's shoulder. "Bad news, boss!!" It talked. (What a surprise.) "The girl pulled a vanishing act!"

"Blast... She's more trouble than she's worth, that one." Jafar growled. "This city is old, my friend. To the vermin seeking the means of concealment, are in this place quite numerous. Keep up the search. She can't haven't gotten far."

Without another word, the bird bowed it's head before taking off. The two silently watched as it rose, ascending into obscurity.

"See to it that you find her." Maleficent spoke, a sneer playing onto her features. "That she fulfills her designated role, is the utmost necessity."

"Consider it, done." The man bowed his head, a smirk dancing on to his lips. "With all seven princesses of light, we shall finally be able to unlock the Final Door and attain its secrets. And in doing shall the world be ours for the taking?"

Wait... is that the reason they took Alice? Some door? If they needed, seven girls in total, how many others did they already have? By the looks of it, I couldn't imagine they were in much of a rush as, Maleficent seemed confident that their plans were going smoothly.

"The path of shadows, is laden with perils, unseen." The witch, warned. Her gaze was cold, as she looked upon her comrade with low regard. "Be sure that you do not fall prey to Darkness you so graciously cling to." To this her entire figure erupted in a flurry of green flames that exploded across my vision.

The greens and black of her dark, magical fire mixed until they turned to black and bright blues, churning together before a new scene began to play out. My heart jumped at the sight of Riku as I recognized the scene to be the one I'd been shown the last time. Riku sat on one of the many floating islands of blue rocks, looking a bit dazed and lost. But to my displeasure, he wasn't alone.

"Whatever brings you here, my child?" Went the soft and floaty voice of Maleficent.

Riku's head shot back, at the sound of the new comer. With a guarded expression, he stared on at the green skinned woman. No words came from his mouth, but his eyes said more than enough, going through the obligatory questions of "Who are you and where am I?"

"Why don't you come into my castle." Maleficent chirped, holding out her long, bony fingers. Her gesture seemed sincere, yet shrouded away, was some sort of ulterior motive. "And tell me all about it…"

I felt myself flush as I watched Riku stand with trepidation. I wanted to scream out and tell him to stop. This lady was no good at all. But even within the confines of this being a dream, I couldn't find my voice. Too stunned with grim anticipation, I knew very well what his choice would be.
Apprehensively, he looked about himself, as if expecting some sort of foul play. But, unsure of what other options he had, Riku looked back to the lady, with resolve.

Oh god... Don't do it Riku.

Even hoping against hope would do nothing for me as he moved towards Maleficent. The expression on her face was more than pleased as, when he neared, she swept her dark robes around his shoulder, welcoming him into her company. As she did so, a darkness so pure, swept across my vision and an intense pain took over my senses.

I couldn't see anything as the world had gone pitch black. Still, I could feel an wave of nausea pass over me, as something erupted from my chest, exploding in white hot pain, like boiling water.

In a burst of light, I could see the Screecher's ever growing form slowly wrap around my body. It's silhouette of darkness slowly increased as it's wispy form slithered over me like gentle, but terrifying smoke. From the darkness where her head should have been, large, beady eyes of yellow, appeared against my face. Her maw of red mangled teeth grinned down at me with malicious greed.

"I hadn’t imagined it would be this easy." The Screecher slithered. "To get so close so soon after all these years of waiting for your power to finally manifest... This is far more than I... or he could have ever wanted."

"H-he?" I asked, my voice trembling. Between the pain and the fear I wasn't sure which I was feeling more. Slowly, it was starting to become blanketed by the dark, freezing aura that the Screecher had been swallowing me in. I wasn't sure what it was, about this... thing, but even the last time she'd been this close I found it hard to keep myself conscious. And now, I was faced with that same problem. Even in a midst of the icy black, it was so easy to welcome the silent, accommodating darkness.

"Yesss.. That's Right. Sleaveeeeee---AUGH!!"

The soft cooing of the Screecher was abruptly cut short when a blast of light cut across my vision. In an instant the world around me began to peel and leak away as white bands of light fought their way into the patch black. An ooze like substance melted around me, along the walls of what I realized to be a boxed in prison of darkness. Inky flecks and smoke floated up and around my vision before my attention was snatched up by something, shouting in my ear.

"You let her in!" The voice of the Lady of Light hollered in my ears. Her face was pressed close to mine as she screamed at me like a disciplining mother. "You've doomed yourself, can you not see?! Why on earth would you welcome the Darkness so easily? She is your enemy! Or perhaps you except her, wholly?"

Staring into the white featureless face of Lady Light, I couldn't be sure if it was her stark brightness or her words that had caused me to tear up. A lump formed in my throat as I tried to find words to argue back with but, the tightness in my chest kept me quiet. A palpable fear came shooting back into me as I recalled the moments from the Coliseum—The darkness that swallowed me up and the image of my friends being consumed by it. Clenching my teeth, I bit back the fear that seemed tethered to that image-- the fear I so badly wanted to keep pushed down.

"I.. I was scared!" I retaliated. "I didn't mean to--"

"Ah! Fear!!" The hisses of the Screecher boomed right next to us. I snapped my head in her direction, trying see her as she melded in with the surrounding blackness. But only her eyes and
teeth were of clear visibility. "The best negative emotion of them all!" She howled. "It's your very
terror that gives me strength-- what gives me further power over you!"

I could feel my knees clattering against each other, threatening to buckle. For as the Screecher
came near, her entire form seemed to double no... quadruple in size. Suddenly I felt my heart
slamming into my chest. As the thing looked right at me, I could feel my whole soul drain away. It
felt like I was losing every ounce of my energy-- every bit of my courage.

"Yukari!!!" The voice of the Lady Light, broke through what I’d now come to realize was a sort of
warped illusion as my body went flying into the world of endless black.

Blinking, I watched fearfully as the Lady of Light attacked the Screecher with great effort. She
kicked and swiped with agile and grace. Even still her attacks were fruitless as they seemed to have
no effect, phasing right through the dark being, doing her no harm at all.

Laughing heartily, the Screecher threw back her head in sheer delight before snatching up Lady
Light in one swift blow. Her claws clamped tight against Lady's throat. I could do little but flinch
as the creature flung her right at me, shrieking, "Keep clinging to this pathetic Light of yours!!"

The Lady of Light's body made painful contact with mine, slamming right into me. But as she did,
it wasn't the physical pain that seemed to do me any harm. I trembled at the sheer amount of
negative emotions that swam within her, from making contact with her being. The whole front of
my body vibrated angrily with the pain and grief that couldn't possibly be mine.

"Yukari!" She seemed to cry out, but I couldn't quite hear her, as my mind pounded with what
seemed to be a multitude of voices form the past.

"Everything is as it should be!" I heard the Screecher howl, bounding over towards the two of us.
She was so fast, even Lady Light couldn't seem to react quickly enough.

With a single thrust of her arm, the Screecher tore right through the chest of Lady light. Her form
shattered in a fit of glass and hot white fire that nearly blinded me. I already struggled to get away.
But as it would seem, my control over this dream was null in void, as the Screecher continued her
hunt to make a grab at me.

In my fear, I stared directly into her eyes and time seemed to slow. I almost hadn’t noticed as the
white remaining dust particles of Lady light, flitting into my vision before completely
encompassing me in a warmth that somehow was neither comforting, nor reassuring. Unpleasant
visions quickly passed across my eyes. I found myself chasing down Riku as he was ran through a
world that seemed to throb and undulate around me. The purplish slimy walls gave off a sort of
gross and uninviting terrain. Even still I traversed it, slipping after him. He turned to smirk at me
before I was suddenly met with an incredible pain that, once again exploded from my chest. I now
lay in the arms of Riku as he and Sora stared down at me with unforgiving eyes-- their stares
bearing deep into my soul, as if to tell me that, whatever had happened to cause it, had been
completely my fault.

Quickly the visions shifted but, not before the sleeping faces of six girls, including Alice flashed
across my vision.

I was met with a very close up look would what appeared to be two bright violet eyes. Rosy red
locks spilled between them but, they emitted no life. My mind quickly put together that those eyes
had belonged to Kairi. Yet it had only taken seconds for the color, shape and hair to completely
shift, into a more sinister pair of gleaming amber eyes.
Blinking immediately, changed the entire world around me, as I now stood back on Destiny Islands. I stood in the middle of the storm that destroyed our home that very night. What I now learned to be Darkness, and debris whirled violently around me. The Rain whipped at my skin and the wind tore my hair around. Standing before me, on the small plateau next to the oddly shaped poupou tree, was Riku.

He stood with his back facing me, unnervingly still against the chaos around him.

"...Riku?" I called out to him. But I was more than sure that my quiet call had been stolen away by the howling winds.

Slowly, I approached him with an arm extended out to touch his shoulder. But it wasn't until I'd neared him, that I had wished I hadn't, as purple and black smoke erupted from his body. It hadn't been a strong enough gust to push me back but, was evil enough to latch on.

Crying out, I tried to pull away, as Riku's head slowly turned. My eyes widened in horror as I was forced to watch his pale skin and green eyes transform into a grotesque mass or rotting purple flesh, with glowing yellow eyes. His skin melted away and his jaw distended, showing me rows upon rows of sharp red, mangled teeth. Icy, sour breath in the form of, what could only be darkness slithered from between the crevices of torn flesh.

Snatching up my throat, Riku... or the thing... yanked me closer, the fowl stench hanging from its lips, threatening to knock me out in one go.

"The door... Is OPPEEEEENNHHIIIIISSSSSS!"

The hiss of the thing grew in volume. The malformed Riku opted to swallow my face, growing in size—saliva spilled around me, as his teeth closed in.

I screamed.

I screamed so hard I woke myself up, flinging forward in the bed.

Amidst waking, I clamped my hands over my mouth, as I let go heavy breaths.

Unable to decipher the tears from sweat, I slowly moved from the bed to wipe my face in my discarded shirt, I’d left tossed along the floor. I drew in a deep breath, struggling to clear those visions in my dream, from my mind. But it seemed that every time I closed my eyes, all I saw was Riku's distorted form.

There were so many things I'd seen this time around. The Ladies of Light and Dark seemed locked in an endless clash. The Screecher was doing her best to trick me. It seems like she somehow held dominion over my dreams as I couldn’t control any of the events that occurred. But that hadn't been what bothered me most.

Riku...

Something was going on. Something bad. And my dreams were doing great job of being extremely vague enough to make me worry. The only thing I wasn't all too sure about was, that pair of golden eyes...

Getting up, I threw on my shorts and left the rest of my clothes where they lay, on the floor. Quickly making it to the bathroom I doused my face in cool water. While I'd been at it, I undid my hair and attempted to tame it as best I could with a bit of moisture and my fingers. Letting go a heavy sigh, I realized just how tedious things would be for me as we traveled. I didn't have a spare
change of clothes and hardly anything to clean up with. Adventuring was sweaty work after all. I'd need something to deal with that, in time.

Exiting the bathroom, I quietly wandered the ship. It didn't seem like I'd managed to sleep through the whole night, or morning or whatever it had been when we went to sleep. But the ship was quiet, with only the sounds of whirring engines and the gentle beeps and boops that kept the place alive. Curiously I made my way into the cockpit, and was surprised to find someone sitting at the helm.

"Sora?" I called out to him.

He turned in his seat a bit surprised to see me. He too had dressed down a bit. Wearing nothing but his sleeveless jumpsuit, unzipped just a bit for comfort. Swathed in the supple comfort of the blankets from his dorm, He looked a bit disheveled, with his tired eyes surveying me.

"Are you alright?" He asked. "What are you doing up?"

"I could ask the same." I said, moving closer to him.

The chair was big enough for two little fifteen-year-olds to share as he scooched over to make room inside the bundle of a comforters. I gazed up at the starry sky up above us, spotted with nebulas, galaxies and the infinite cosmos. Learning about space back in school had taught me one thing... that the pictures would never do the real thing justice. Just hours before when Riku had gazed up at the night sky, I wondered if he too thought of how infinitely beautiful and horrifying the worlds beyond ours was. How the sky was big and vast. How we would always be looking up at the same sky no matter where we were. That, it was what would connected us. Maybe it was why he was okay running off...

"I still haven't gotten used to everything..." Sora's voice softly entered my ears.

I looked back at him to see he was staring up the passing stars as well.

"Everything we find out here is amazing. It seems like there's just no end." He went on. "I wish we were all together... You, me, Riku and Kairi. That's how it was supposed to be... So why... did he run off like that...?"

Sora's face remained somewhat stoic as he talked. I could only guess how upset he was, but with the whole, be happy only, on the ship, I knew he had to conceal it. Still, I didn't want to see him mask his emotions. I didn't even like the idea of him being upset in the first place.

"You know... after what happened with our island... I was scared."

He paused for a second, his long lashes falling over his eyes as his gaze dropped. At his knees, he had been massaging the fresh callouses he'd received from the journey. Those supposedly sturdy white gloves he wore, hadn't seemed to be doing their job at protecting his hands. I noticed his palms were a bright red and wondered how long he'd been sat up here, anxiously nursing those bruises.

"Before we left... I was kind of apprehensive-- that night, I mean..." Sora delved. His blinks became a little more rapid and uneven as he talked, trying to recall those events and feelings. "I was excited about leaving the islands. More than anything at that point, I just wanted to see what was outside it. But at the same time, I thought about how I'd miss home. And if we left... would there be a way to get back? Back to mom and dad... Tidus, Selphie and Wakka... Back to everyone? Kairi asked me if she'd be able to go back to the Islands, no matter what we found out here... But now I'm kind of
worried if we'll ever get back home.. Back the sea...

"And that fear?" I asked. "What were you afraid of?"

"It's not what I was afraid of. It's who I was afraid for." He cleared up. "The way the Island just got ripped up by the storm? It swallowed everything. The trees... the homes... even the entire sea. I've been so scared for everyone living there. And this whole time I've been scared for Riku and Kairi too. But for Riku to just run off like that... After we'd been looking so hard for him... It's just... not fair..."

Sora drove his thumb deeper into his palm. For a second the lights around us dimmed and flickered. Thinking how it would be horrible to have the crew's last moments be, in their sleep, I gently placed a hand on Sora's wrist.

I hadn't once considered Sora's feelings about leaving the Islands. I mean I felt that he'd been worried, but I also thought somehow he was just better at letting the problems arise when they decided. Back on the islands he was so carefree and nonchalant... And we never actually had real problems to concern ourselves with. Slowly I was starting to realize that the separation of our friends and the destruction of our island, would show a side of Sora that I may not have otherwise known.

"It's okay." I told him, and his sad eyes met mine. "I understand just what you're feeling. In fact... I felt the same way. For whatever reason, I thought I was the only one scared about leaving the Islands."

"Is that why you didn't have any faith in the raft?" He asked, grinning a bit. I knew he'd been waiting to use that since I mumbled something about it during our first visit to Traverse Town.

"Heh... Well I mean... that... and the dreams." I supplied. But then a small frown made itself visible for just a second.

"What?" Sora egged.

"I... It's just..." I found myself struggling over the idea of talking about Riku any further. I didn't want to upset him. But I didn't want to completely leave him with nothing. "...Remember before when you told me that you met Riku on the island, the night of the storm?"

Sora blinked, inquisitively as he scrunched up his features in thought. "Yyyeah?" He spoke with hesitation.

"And you told me, that he said something about, not being afraid of the Darkness right?"

Sora nodded, sure this time, as his eyes widened at the memory.

"Did he say anything about a door... being opened?"

"...He... did actually. At the time things were so hectic I didn't really have a chance to decipher it... but now..."

"You think, you know what he meant. Maybe, he was talking about that door, in the secret place." I suggested.

He furrowed his brows. "Oh... yeah. I hadn't thought about that one."

"Well... what were you thinking?"
Sora took a second, as he looked back up at the view of space, once more. But this time, there was a sort of expression on his face. It was one I didn't often see him make, as I realized he was searching for something deep within the reservoirs of his memory.

"Well... It's nothing like what you have. But the day before the storm, I had a dream."

"What about?" I asked.

"Ahhh... Well it's still pretty hard to say." He tried. "I just remember their being a voice that called out to me. A pair of doors were locked up super tight. But when I opened them up... on the other side... Somehow I made it to this big black monster... It was huge. At the time, I had no idea what it was but now I know that thing had to be a Heartless. I tried to fight it off with my Keyblade but it swallowed me up... the Darkness overtook me."

For a moment we sat quiet as his words faded away against the mechanical noises of the ship. His dream sounded similar to the one I had, the night of the storm. But at the same time, not so much. I wonder if all Keyblade wielders got that sort of dream. Maybe to mark some sort of... awakening?

"And you thinking those doors were the ones that Riku was talking about?" I asked, not so sure I'd be prepared to agree.

"Well I'm not saying anything like that." He sighed. "I just remember the dream... and how those doors seemed weirdly familiar. But either way... what does all that have to do with Riku?"

I paused for a second too long, as I stared into Sora's eyes. I almost faltered, blinking when I looked away.

"I-I think... Riku might have opened that door..."

"What? You mean the one in the secret place?" Sora asked.

"Yeah..."

"Wait, why? What would make you think that?" Sora didn't seemed to take too kindly to the accusation. But it was truth. Regardless of how he felt, I think he should at least listen.

"Because I saw it." I told him. "I saw it in the dream, right as it was happening. Riku was talking to some weird figure in a brown robe. I think it spoke to him... making him promises to finally visit the outside world. All Riku had to do in order to open the door was, to accept that Darkness... You did say, he'd said he wasn't afraid of the Darkness, right? How could he have possibly known what that was before hand? None of us had a clue."

"The brown figure?" Sora said it, as though it was more of a familiarity than a question.

I nodded. "Leon said that every world also has a keyhole. That door, had a Keyhole right in the center of it. Do you think that was the Heart of Destiny Island? And by listening to that robed figure, Riku might have accidentally unleashed that Darkness?"

"There's no way!" Sora spoke defensively now. "Riku wouldn't do that. Besides, we had the raft, we were supposed to use that to get off world."

"But what if that figure told Riku it wasn't going to work? What if he egged him on with real way out?"

Sora shook his head. "Riku... wouldn't do that."
"Weren't you paying attention to what he said." I reminded him. "Back at Traverse Town when we ran into him, he wasn't even surprised to see us. He told us, we were finally free. And what about the sword he was holding. Where did he get that?"

"Yukari." Sora stopped me for a second. "What are you getting at? Are you trying to say that Riku is on the side of the Darkness? That he accepted it somehow?"

I bit my lip, fighting it out in my head, over whether or not it had been a good idea to tell him. It wasn't like things were getting better but, they weren't becoming more clear either. Still, I would rather tell Sora alone, than to talk about it with Donald and Goofy present.

With a heavy sigh, I divulged everything Riku related, I'd seen in my dreams up until now.

But Sora's response to all of it, was, confusion.

"So you're saying that Riku's... working with that... Maleficent... witch, Leon talked about, somehow?"

"I still don't have a lot to go off yet but, from what the dreams are insinuating... I think so."

"But that doesn't make any sense..." Sora said, running his fingers through his hair. "Why would Riku join up with her? There's gotta be a mistake somewhere."

"... I don't know..." I said quietly.

And it felt like that silence lasted for over a minute.

"Well... Until we know more, I think we shouldn't let the unknown change how we feel..." Sora finally said, getting up from his spot under the comforter.

"Of course not." I agreed, shaking my head. "He's our friend. I'd never turn my back on Riku. No matter what." The end of the conversation was punctuated by the sound Sora's growling stomach. To which he hunched over, grabbing it, groaning. "I'm... super hungry." He said, apologetically.

"What about the stuff Merlin, gave us?" I recalled. "Feel like whipping up some breakfast? Maybe we could cook something up for the whole crew?"

Sora eagerly agreed, nodding his head as he hurried to exit the cockpit. I was sure to follow suit but, not before taking one last worrisome glance up the starry sky above.

The next few hours were we were spent. We gawked over the stash of things that Merlin had supplied us. Lots of potions, a few elixirs and set of new vials that I'd not seen before. Blue, Ether, bottles lined the bottom of our bag, accompanied with a note that read, "For you magic. Use sparingly. Good luck." Along with these, were varying ingredients to prepare one huge meal that could very well last us a whole week. An enormous portion of cured meats, sat in the middle of the bag, wrapped carefully in its paper. But this was not without a healthy lump sum of breads and grains to serve as sides for our entrees.

I did most of the cooking, using whatever skills, I'd learned from Sora's mom. I'd never prepared a meal on my own, but I wasn't completely without Sora's help either. Together we passed the time, whipping up a huge, hearty meal that, little by little, woke up our ship mates one at a time. It was even clear to see, that Sora's mood was improving by the time everyone sat together, filling our bellies and holding a loud conversation that included nothing more than slurps and chewing.
"This is pretty Yummy!" Goofy commended, a grain of rice sticking to his snoot.

"Yeah, I didn't think you guys had the skill to cook." Donald snickered.

With all of my power, I held myself back. "Thanks Donald." I spoke through my teeth. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Welp, it's high time Dale and I got to our engineering duties. We'll be sure to keep an eye out for any worlds." Chip informed as he and his brother hopped down off the table, scurrying off.

"Thanks for the food!!" They hollered back together, already disappearing down the ship's tight corridor.

I wondered what it was like to be that small, whilst having such a huge responsibility of maintaining a ship.

"Indeed." Jiminy spoke, looking up from his journal. With a smaller appetite, he'd finished up eating first, and was already at working writing away in his journal. "There's a whole bunch I've got jot down. I need to catch up before we hit our next world."

Everyone was about to leave, clearing away their dishes as they rose. But remembering my dreams, I called for them to stop.

"Wait, guys." I said quietly.

All of the boys stopped in their tracks, their attention now strained on me.

"I saw something in my sleep." I said. "Something big."

* * * * *

"Seven... princesses?" Goofy inquired.

It was after our team freshened up and readied ourselves for the day ahead, that our little meeting took place. Once again, we sat in the lounge as I told them all of the Maleficent related information from the dream. Sora stared at me tentatively, as I spoke. After what I had told him before, it must have been distressing that I only had, consistently bad news to deliver.

"So... Alice has fallen into the hands of Maleficent." Jiminy frowned, cupping his chin as he stood on my knee. "Gee, I hope she's alright."

"Me too..." I said. "But by the sounds of it, I wouldn't think they mean to hurt her..." I tried being optimistic somehow. "They're looking for another girl, apparently. Maybe we'll find them somewhere within the next few worlds? If we can get to her before they do, then..."

"What?" Sora joined in. "What could we do? I mean, sure that's pretty messed how they're going around, snatching girls to unlock some door but... How should we go about stopping them? Guard them until they come looking and beat every last Heartless and bad guy til' none are left? It's not like we know what they're after. I mean, that... Final Door, or whatever could be anything."

"And besides..." Donald interjected. "We don't even know when that vision took place. Couldn't it have easily been days ago? And if that's the case, how many princesses could they have? They might be on their last one."
My frowned deepened. I shut my eyes trying to pull images from the dream-- moments that were fading just as quickly as I tried to recall them. "Seven..." I voiced. "They need seven all together. In my dream, I saw six girls. Six girls, sleeping in these sort of containment... things. Alice was one of them. But somehow, I don't think that vision's happened. Part of me feels like that was glimpse of what will happen..."

"So you can see the future?" Jiminy gawked, a bit.

"I... I don't think so..." I stammered. I almost forgot, that part of the dream was not without being touched by the Lady Light’s form, exploding into my eyes. She seemed to be able to put images in my head. Not exactly something I found exhilarating. And there was still that bit in the dream where both Sora and Riku stared down at me with disdain. I couldn't imagine what I’d done to warrant such looks from my best friends...

"Are you saying they need one more?" Donald asked, urging me to continue.

"No..." I said, carefully. I wasn't sure how I knew but something told me they were still short two princesses. "I don't know..." I sighed. "The dreams were pretty vague as usual."

"Oh..." Goofy groaned. "It seems like those dreams o' yours, give ya just enough information that ya learn somethin' new, but still make ya ask more questions!"

"Yeah... Sorry..."

"Don't apologize." Jiminy said, patting my knee. "If it weren't for those dreams o' yours, we'd still be none the wiser about this entire scheme. The Heartless, the witch and now the princess and a door! Why, I think if you weren't around, we'd all be waddlin' around like chickens with our heads cut off."

I giggled at the thought.

"Yeah, Yukari." Even Donald agreed. "It's not your fault. You're doing your part just by keeping us informed. But at least now we know what to keep our eyes and ears out for."

"But wait..." Sora's uncertainly was prevalent. "Remember how you talked about Maleficent wanting to use you? What if... what if this is what she means? What if you’re one of the seven princesses?"

I stared down into my lap, unable to grasp that at all. "I... don't know about that." I answered honestly. "I don't think I'm a princess but, I can't deny that I'm curious of what Maleficent wants with me."

"There's no way, Yukari's a princess, of all things." Donald spat. "She's got no manners!"

"E-Excuse???" I whipped my head in Donald's direction. "I do too have manners!"

Donald snickered, joyfully to himself. He always seemed pretty happy to tease me when he could.

But Sora's expression didn't lighten up.

In fact, for the next few hours, he seemed to be in a mood. It was like, every time he looked at me he had something he really wanted to say. Had it not been for the eventual discovery of a new world, who's to say how long that would have continued.
The boys and I trekked through what felt like a harrowing expansion of endless sand. No matter where we turned, dirt went on in every direction. It was like a beach with no ocean, only much hotter and less breezier. There was no smell of salt nor sound of seagulls whining in the distance.

I'm pretty sure school had taught me, this was a desert. But with only pictures to go on, I had almost no proof but the sun, angrily beating down on our backs as we walk. Shoes, burying into the sand, made it difficult to traverse the endless hills. Sweat trickled down my face, drizzling lightly into my eyes or mouth. Somehow, the heat made me feel dizzy but not enough that I couldn’t make sure the rest of the boys were doing alright.

Looking back to check on them I saw they’d been holding their own as best as possible. Goofy tried to use his shield to protect himself from the sun's powerful rays. Sora chugged along, just barely ensuring to put one foot in front of the other. And Donald took the liberty of showering us with the mist of ice spells that gave us mere, seconds of cool relief.

We were some, miserable lot.

"It's hooooot!" Sora complained, his face red and his eyes, heavy lidded.

"Where are we even headed?" Jiminy inquired, fanning himself with his kerchief as he rode on Sora's shoulder.

"I don't know but there sure is a lot o' sand everywhere." Goofy chimed it.

"Ahh, phooey." Donald added.

I stared ahead of us, scanning the horizon. Absolutely nothing stretched out before us but, miles of sand. I know this seemed hapless, but part of me felt like this had been the place from my dream. The clear blue skies and the searing heat was enough to hold my certainty.

"We've just gotta keep moving." I said. "There's a princess and a Keyhole here. We need get to 'em before the baddies do."

"Wait, this is where the princess is??" Sora asked, seeming more alive.

"Yeah. At least this seemed like the place from my dreams. Even though I don't know what the princess looks like or, where the Keyhole is... If we keep going, we're sure to find a city or somehthi--"

FWWOOOOOOOOM!!

The sound of wind and sand, exploded from behind our party.

With barely a moment to turn back to see what had caused the entire world to explode, a gargantuan... thing came spiraling directly at us.

"Wwwhaaaagghhh!!" The boys shouted in unison, as our team scattered, just barely missing the deadly blades of a huge creature that zipped between us. Pillars of sand rocketed into the sky, making it hard to see, as the enemy dashed around angrily. It's long, curved blades propelled at a speeds that could immediately slice off a body part.

"Yukari!!" I heard Sora's voice but, just barely. "Are you okay!!"
I didn't have time to answer as the thing was making a round trip, right in my direction.

I leapt to the side, diving into the sand dunes to escape instant death, as I watched an eight limbed, snake-headed... Heartless? soar over me. I barely caught the emblem stitched onto its kilt before it burrowed into the sand. But it wasn't running away, as the ground beneath our feet shook violently before the thing exploded into the air once again. Its white and golden armor glinting in the sun. It's six arms expanded to help it, soar through air while gracefully landing on its feet. The thing was massive, but not bigger than the Heartless in Wonderland, clocking in at around the same height as the Armor from Traverse town. It's red eyes glared angrily about, as it flicked it's serpentine tongue and snapped it's beetle like claws.

"A Heartless!?" Sora managed.

"Is it one of Maleficent's?" Goofy shouted to me, across the sands.

But his question would go unanswered, as the thing rose it's blade to attack. In mere seconds, it dashed towards the boys, who'd managed to huddle up. I panicked. All I saw were my friends getting sliced to pieces. I raced towards them, my Keyblade now in hand, aimed right at the thing. I hadn’t even managed to let a spell leave my lips as a funnel of deadly wind pushed the Heartless off course, sending it flying a short distance away.

But I didn't stop moving as I quickly made it to my team.

"Yukari!" Donald was ready to scold me.

"No time!" I shouted. "We gotta get--"

SKREEEEEEUUUUUGHHH!!!

But the thing was already recovering as it came zipping back in our direction. No one needed to be told to get the heck out of the way. Rushing out of the danger zone, I quickly turned and aimed my Keyblade at the thing. I was determined to cast spells at it until I was unconscious if I had to.

"Fire!" I shouted. And a painful tug, pulled at the bottom my gut.

A powerful fire spell tore through the air and blasted the thing right between the eyes. It went splat, into the dunes, sending sand flying everywhere, raining down upon us. It got back up, its head, jerked in my direction, looking beyond ticked off as it began stomping towards me.

"Thundaga!!" Donald shouted and the Heartless stopped in its tracks, shuddering violently form the spell.

"Now!!" I shouted

The four of us raced towards the Heartless as it collapsed into the sand. But what we hadn’t known, was that it was only feigning defeat.

Just as our quartet, neared the snake boss, it hit us with a surprise attack, slicing it's blade at our party and blasting us all back into the dirt. I yelped out, as I bit my tongue, sent hurdling down the dune. The taste of iron gushed in my mouth as I tried to stop my rolling. But I hadn’t even managed that, as I found myself getting lifted through the air.

Sand whirled around me, trapping me within a violent vortex of dirt. It lifted me, gently off my feet before blasting me straight into the sky. I screamed, as I watched the world around me spin until I was dizzy enough to hurl. Even through exhaustion, I let go horrified yelps when I noticed the
ground approaching faster and faster. But, the death I was so prepared for never came, as I was ripped right out of my trajectory and went zipping through the sky.

"Gotcha!" Went a new voiced.

Blinking, I realized I was now safe with in the arms of dark skinned young man with jet black hair and eyes as we zipped through the air on a.... flying carpet??

"Wha-

"Look out!!" I heard Sora shout from down below as an oncoming blade appeared in our path.

"Hold on!" The new guy shouted. Whilst clamping me between himself and the rug, we veered just in time, to miss being sliced in half. It appeared we'd been moving by magic as, the man did very little to steer the carpet, save for hanging on for dear life.

Sand exploded everywhere as the cobra headed Heartless sliced it's blade through the air, trying to get at us. All the while, the rug zipped, dove, and evaded the danger with zero effort. I barely manage to catch the boys constantly running around for their lives as they tried not to get stepped on, or filleted.

"We gotta do something or they're gonna get crushed!" I shouted, raking myself out of the guy’s grasp.

As the rug, flew straight up into the air, I aimed my key directly at a spot where the thing was going to land. A thin streak of blue light zipped from the end of my blade before sputtering out, falling like sprinkles and evaporating against the warm air.

The spell hadn't been strong enough and I didn't have the energy to cast another.

"Uh, was that... part of your plan?" The guy asked, with uncertainty as the rug did a barrel roll on the way back towards the danger.

"They're gonna die!" I shouted, ignoring him, when I noticed the boys had now all been collapsed in the sand.

Sora struggled to crawl out of a swirling pit of a sandy whirlpool, that was sucking all three of them in. The big Heartless now spun it's blades, ready to blend the boys up into little bits.

"D-don't worry, I got em'!" The guy panicked a bit, fumbling with the sash around his waist. At first, I was trying to figure out what he was doing but, got my answer when he pulled out a brilliantly, shining, object.

"O' Genie of the lamp!" He shouted, hurriedly rubbing the side of the object. "I summon you forth, as the lamp's new Master!"

Upon speaking those words, blue smoke billowed out of the spout, curling around us as we flew. Accompanied with a glittering essence, a whole being began to take shape. From the waist up was a blue, bare chested, brawny man. From the waist down, he was nothing more than the smoke that snaked back into the spout of the lamp.

"HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH--- Hi There!!! How ya doin'. Greetings all around!!!" The blue dude shouted into our ears, as it swirled around me and the new guy before scooping us off the rug and squeezing us together in a big group hug. He quickly set us back in our spots as he continued to fly alongside us. "Great, Genie of the Lamp, at you service! Just rub-a-dub-dub the lamp and your
deepest wishes are granted, at the cut-my-own throat-price of nothing at all!"

He whipped out a couple of party horns, shoved some into our mouths and blew into about three at a time with some serious gusto. Confetti rained down on top of our heads out of nowhere. "Comin' atchya with, one, two THREEEE..." He counted this on his fingers which exploded in size as he did so. "wishes. I can grant you any wish! Just be sure to stay away from forced relationships, askin' for more wishes and..." He got really close to me, covertly speaking well enough for us to hear, "that necromancy life just ain't where it's at. So try to have some restraint."

Shaking the confetti and party horns away, I snapped at the thing, a bit on edge as I watched the cobra headed, beetle Heartless get dangerously closer to Sora.

"Can you just... Save my friends!? Please?" I asked, frantically.

"Ah, ah, ah!" The blue djinn, tutted as it wagged a finger at me. "Now I _would_ help you out, buuut... It doesn't seem to be you, who holds the lamp. Now that guy..."

He motioned to the brown skinned man who was glancing nervously back down at the boys and myself. I gave him a wide eyed look that seemed to shake him out of his confusion. Nervously, he fumbled with the lamp, firmly grasping it in him hands. Holding it up, he shouted his invocation.

"Genie!! I wish for you to save those guys!!"

"Ahh!" The Genie laughed. "One freshly baked wish, comin' right up!!"

With a loud clap of his hands, like thunder, everything was washed in white. It's really hard to describe what it felt like to be displaced, so suddenly. The magic was similar to that of Merlin's but it also kind of felt like it was on a different level. There was something a bit more omnipotent... almost eerily more powerful. I could only be glad this genie was friendly.

Within seconds, I was standing back on land, the boys all splayed about the ground looking beyond exhausted. Right as I was about to catch any of them in any sort of embrace, I collapsed right then and there.

"Oh no!" The dark skinned man, hurried to my aid.

"Whoops?" The Genie, looked mildly concerned, putting a finger to his chin. His expression seemed concerned, he might've gone too far.

I pushed myself up on my elbows, as I denied any help. "I'm fine." I said.

But the look on Donald's face hadn't been so kind. He approached me, beat up an all, with a blue ether vile in hand. He tapped his foot into the sand, waiting for me to recover enough to grab the bottle.

"That was the most reckless display of magic yet!" He quacked angrily. "And one after another! You'll do more than burn yourself out next time. So, I'm prohibiting you from using magic!"

"Whaaaaa??" I whined. Magic was hard, but it was exhilarating. Even if I wasn't good at controlling the concentration of spells, I seemed pretty decent at manipulating it... I think.

"Donald's Right." Goofy added. "We don't want anything bad ta happen to ya'."

Sora hadn't said anything as he crouched down next to me, handing off the ether from Donald. He looked ready for a nap, after that big fight. "But that Heartless was super strong..." He muttered.
"We didn't even get to defeat it. It just came out of nowhere..."

"You mean, Kurt Zisa." The man, explained. "He's been terrorizing the outskirts of Agrabah for good week now-- since Jafar became Sultan. He's been out here, crawlin' around the sand dunes like giant watch snake. How have you not noticed it before?"

The name Jafar was the exact one I heard from the dream. That couldn't have been a coincidence but, I couldn't tell the boys that in front of this guy. Instead, The boys and I exchanged looks. Donald's narrow eyes seemed to be searing holes into each and every one of us. It almost matched the heat of the sun.

"We're... travelers." I decided to say. "We only just got here... We're pretty new."

"Ahh." The man, seemed to take that as truth as he rubbed his chin.

Sudden screeching emanated from the inside of the guy’s vest, pulling our attention directly to him. Out crawled a hysterical little monkey, dressed interestingly similar to the guy, with the same vest and little hat perched on its head. The monkey hissed and screeched angrily, jumping on his owner and pulling at his hair.

"Ahh-- Ow! O-Okay, Abu!"

"What's wrong, with 'im?" Goofy asked, concerned.

"Ah well...." The guy began. "I was originally out here, searching for a way to get rid of a little problem we have back at Agrabah. Jafar didn't actually come to power on good terms. In fact since, his rule began we've had these creatures running everyone out of town. I thought I'd come out here to track down some legendary treasure-- just paid a visit to the Cave of Wonders! And that's when I found this lamp!" He held it out for us all to ogle at. "Unimaginable power lies within."

I realized the guy had completely lost the point of Goofy's question, as he went off on a bit of a tangent. But I was a bit curious. “…Before, you made a wish with that lamp." Then I looked to the blue guy circling about us. "And you said, you could only grant three of ANY wish with a some very specific restrictions."

"Is that true??" Donald perked up excitedly.

"Ahhh, patience, my fine feathered friend." The Genie cooed. "But it's true! Any three wishes! A one wish, a two wish..." He replicated himself as he counted off three fingers again. "And a three wish! Then I make like a banana and split!!" Each of the replicated Genies poofed into glittering dust before the real deal himself vanished. Only his voice could be heard, left behind as it resonated around us. "The owner of the lamp, calls the shot and our lucky winner has already made his first wish--" Then he repaired. "And boy let me tell you, what a wish that was!!"

Ouch... I kinda feel bad now, asking for his help.

"So, now. What shall it be, oh master? What might wish number two, be?"

The guy hummed in thought as he scratched his chin. "Well... how ‘bout makin’ me a wealthy prince?"

"Ohh! Money! Royalty! Fame! Why didn't, I think of that??" The Genie exclaimed, throwing glitter around in the air. Something about his remark seemed a bit sarcastic though, almost like he seemed to have heard such a request many times before. "That's a hundred servants and a hundred
camels! Just say the word and I'll deliver it to you in thirty minutes or less—or you meals free!"

"But I think-- I'm gonna put that one on hold until we get to Agrabah." The guy stopped him. We all watched as he walked a good distance away when he seemed to notice something sticking out of the sand. I quickly realized it to be the very flying rug, that came zipping to my rescue.

I wondered where it had gone.

Plucking it from the dunes, the thing shook itself free of dirt and started flying around, sporadically. This then started the monkey's little tantrum back up as it seemed to realize it's owner might be catching some hints.

Though I highly doubt he got that much. I had to wonder though...

"So... Why a prince, exactly?" I asked. Something about the mention of Jafar, and this guy's wish hinted at something I knew I wouldn't like.

"Welll...." The guy turned a deep shade of red, rubbing the back of his neck. "There's this girl... Jasmine... heh.. But she's princess and I--"

"AGYAKAH!! AGYKAYAKAYAKAY!!" The chimp ripped angrily at his owners vest and hair, screeching violently in his face.

Even the rug had seemed to get a bit wilder at the mention of this, princess. It circled around the guy in quick circles before sweeping itself undeath the guy's feet.

"Wh- what's goin' on with you guys?" The dude seemed a bit ticked off.

"I think they're trying to tell you... something might be up with the princess...?" I let go the wildest guess. Although I was playing off what I'd learned from my dreams.

"Wh- What?" The guy, questioned. "Jasmine?"

I looked back at the boys who seemed to slowly catch my drift. It showed in their eyes as their brows gradually creeped up on their foreheads.

"Ohhh... Yeah! that's right!" Sora seemed to tag in. "We should get back to the city! I think Jasmine's in trouble!"

"What!? Then I gotta get goin' then!" The guy said. "You guys want a ride back? I can't really leave you out here."

"Definitely!!" Donald answered promptly.

Everyone piled onto the rug without another word and we all went zipping across the sands. I had to admit that this form of travel was far better than trekking through the heat. Still I couldn't help be feel bad about wasting this guy's first wish. It also seemed a bit weird to get him moving, just on a hunch. But his monkey and carpet seemed to ease up when we finally headed out.

"Thanks for saving us back there." I told him. "Sorry about... your first wish."

"Naahh. That's alright." The guy, waved it off. "I've got two more. Besides, I couldn't just watch a bunch of strangers get eaten alive by Kurt Zisa."

"Eaten??" Donald echoed.
"What's your name?" Sora asked.

"Oh, right! I'm Aladdin." He introduced, then he pressed his cheek against the monkey riding on his shoulder. "This here is, Abu, my partner in crime. Magic carpet down, here? Well, I found him a while back, on my last trip to the cave. How about you guys?"

"I'm Sora. She's Yukari, and that's Donald and Goofy."

"Nice to meet ya'll." Aladdin nodded.

"Likewise." I said. "How about you, big guy? Is Genie, you actual name?"

"Name, title and job description." He rattled off, flying happily through the sky. But there was something in his tone that seemed a bit melancholy.

"For someone with all that power, ya don't seem so happy." Goofy caught this as well.

"Ah, well, you know." Genie sighed. "Just, doing my best to enjoy what remains of my time outside the lamp. Fresh air-- great outdoors."

"Don't get out much, huh?" Sora frowned. I wondered if he was directly relating to that sentiment, much like Riku. Stuck on a world he couldn't get off. Now free to enjoy the luxuries that existed on the outside. But even then how long would that last?

"Well.. it's comes with the job, kid." The Genie swirled gently through the air as he glided alongside us, his little black ponytail, feeling the rush of the wind. "Phenomenal, Cosmic Powers!!" He exploded to the size of a slow moving behemoth "--Itty-bitty living space." Before shrinking down to the size of an ant. He then popped back to normal proportions. "It's always, three wishes and then back into my portable prison. I mean, I guess I'm pretty lucky to get out every century or three, when some new guy comes along. But even then it's just... 'Yes master. Of course Master. Your wish is my command, Master.' Rinse wash and repeat..."

For a moment there was a silence so palpable it almost turned the air, an icy cold. I wasn't sure if it was the fact that the sun was setting or the Genie's emotions might have really hit us pretty hard. Despite this, Aladdin spoke out, his voice bringing a little warmth back to the our party.

"How about this..." He said. "I'm not wantin' for much... But I'll use my last wish to free you of that lamp? Sound like a nice deal??"

For a moment, the Genie faltered. Completely speechless, he spent a few seconds in total silence before catching his breath. "You'd... do that for me?" He asked, with sparkling eyes.

"Yeah! Sure!" Aladdin nodded. "It's a promise."

"Gosh.... Thanks Al!" The Genie smiled a big warm smile as he continued to keep up with us. "I really appreciate it, even if you're not serious."

By the time we made it to the city, the sun was already low with its edge, just touching the Horizon. Against the purple sky, it was a perfect orb, colored completely red, like I'd never seen back on our island. It washed everything from the sand to the tallest buildings in deep blood oranges. Where the sun couldn't reach, the shadows cast dark purples, cooling the world around us. It almost seemed a bit eerie, coupled with the fact that the streets of Agrabah were completely abandoned.
Aladdin did mention, before, that everyone left but, this was ridiculous.

As we slowly straggled through the abandoned market place, a brisk bit of wind brushed through, alerting our large party to some movement.

"What was that?" Donald asked suspiciously, as he crept toward the noise

"Donald, wait!" I whispered harshly. It could have easily been a trap.

But, he wasn't listening. He continued to close in on a sound that rattled beneath a jumble of over turned wicker baskets. Stopping before the bundle, he slowly rose his staff to cast some sort of spell to draw... whatever it was out. But right as he was about to rain down some heavy duty laundering, I watched as a gentle looking hand, began to lift away the baskets.

"Thunde---Ahhugh!!!"

"Donald, stop!" I cried out, tackling him into the dirt.

Donald let go a flurry of screeching as he kicked and squirmed beneath me. "What's the big idea!!" He shouted once I'd gotten off of him.

"Ah... Some really good advice would be to look, before you leap?" I suggested, motioning towards the spot where the baskets used to be.

Now standing there, was a young woman of dark skin, much like Aladdin's. Her shimmering black eyes stared down at us, with alarm. Her long black hair seemed so smooth and perfect. I felt bit jealous of the sheen as it pooled endlessly around her shoulders, drifting to her ankles. Big earrings dangled at her ears, catching the light of bright red sun that was quickly vanishing. There was something about this woman, that seemed well put together, despite the old robes she had warped around her.

"Jasmine?" Aladdin's voice broke through the tension, as he came running up to her.

That's what it was. She was the princess.

"Aladdin, your safe!" She cried out, finding her voice. "But, who are these people, with you?"

"Oh, these are some travelers I met on my way back here. Meet Sora, Yukari, Donald and Goofy." He pointed at us respectively as we all huddled closer. "Guys, this is princess Jasmine."

"Hello"

"Howdy"

"Whack!"

"How do you do?"

All four of us spoke at once, now that we learned we'd been in the graces of royalty.

"Where is everybody?" Aladdin went on to ask. "Before I left, there were still a few people around. What happened?"

"It's Jafar!" Jasmine, said, keeping her voice hushed, as she drew closer to the party. "He sent another wave of those... creatures, far more dangerous than the last. He had some, woman with him too-- they said they were looking for some sort of... Keyhole, but I don't know what that meant
exactly. Jafar's been searching everywhere for me, but so far, I've managed to avoid capture."

I turned to the boys, who were already huddling up.

"So now, they're looking for Keyholes?" Sora asked.

I bit my lip. "Guess I forgot to mention that." I said apologetically. "But they didn't seem to care about them in the last few worlds."

"Maybe, since we lock up the worlds we visit, it's harder to get the Heartless to work for them." Goofy Suggested. "So, ta keep control over the world, they want to keep the Heartless runnin' around."

"Probably." Donald agreed.

"But what do we do about... her." I lowered my voice a bit, as the two talked. "She's one of the seven."

The boys seemed at a loss for words, glancing at each other, uncomfortably, as we broke huddle. We knew we had to protect her by all means. But after that last defeat, I'm pretty sure confidence was a bit low.

"We have to find Jafar and stop him!" Jasmine demanded. "I don't know for sure what he's up to, but it obviously can't be good. Once we do, we can bring my father back and make him sultan again. Then, all of this mess will come to an end."

"Your father?" I voiced, concerned for his fate.

Jasmine nodded, looking hard, into my eyes. "The original sultan. Jafar's deep-set jealousy, had clearly been festering for quite some time. He made it a point to target him directly, running him out of town, along with all the civilians. When I was sneaking about, to avoid being captured, I remember that Jafar mentioned something about my being part of a whole group of princesses, that would unlock some... final door. I'm guessing this can't be good. I haven't the slightest clue of what that means, or even where these other princesses might be coming from."

"Do you know where Jafar is now?" Donald asked.

Jasmine took a moment to think. But it was when she seemed to have reached a conclusion, that the sound of metal, slicing through the air, silenced her words. Quickly followed by the appearance of a large group of Heartless, the baddies charged into the market place with claws and weapons ready.

"Those are new!" Sora noted.

But we hardly had time to react as the baddies dove right at our party.

Heartless, now sporting wings, came flying into the scene. There seemed to be one for each of us as they tackled the boys and I into the sand. I screamed against the weight of the monster pinning me down-- its soulless, glowing, yellow eyes bore straight into me as it mercilessly kept its claws firmly clamped at my wrists.

"Get OFF!!" I shouted as I struggled, attempting to use my legs to shove it away.

But it seemed to actually think, as it yanked me on to my knees, where I was then met face to face with the sharp end of a Heartless’s sword. My winged captor had not been the only one to
incapacitated me as I glanced nervously around at the boys. Each and every one of us had been at the mercy of the Heartless. Down on our knees, with our wrist forced behind out backs, we were held at sword point.

This was concerning, to say the least. We hadn't even had much of a chance to so much as breath before they made their move. But it was clear they were being orchestrated. No way theses mindless killing machines had the capacity to strategically gang up on us. And when did the lesser ones start getting bigger? We were completely cased in now, as two big round boys came strutting in behind a tall, thin snake of a man.

"Jafar..." Aladdin, sneered, just barely able to safely speak with a blade pressed against his throat. The elongated grin, on the man's face did more than speak volumes as a chuckle escaped his lips. With a wave of his hands, two things happened. A sharp and shrill scream sounded from the back corner where our princess had quickly hid away. But it was obvious that it had been much too late, as a winged Heartless yanked her from her hiding spot. It kicked her until she was unconscious, and her struggling ceased before depositing her into a jar that...(of course)sprouted long, spindly spider legs. With the snap of the evil, Sultan's fingers the thing dashed off, and out of the market place.

"Jasmine!!" Aladdin shouted. But his concerns only seemed to multiply when that red bird, I'd seen in my dream came fluttering into view-- a shimmering lamp now, snapped in between its beak. "Hey! That's--!!"

"Two for the price of one." Jafar slithered. I didn't believe his grin could get any longer but, I've been wrong about a lot of things. "I'll be taking this as well. It's so very kind of you to deliver it to me."

"It was a trap..." I spat. "He must have known Jasmine was here all along and waited for someone to draw her out. He was waiting for you, Aladdin..."

Jafar's eyes seemed to stay on me, for a second too long before he began to advance in my direction. "Ah yes..." He sighed. The one with the gifts. Though I can't see why Maleficent is so keen in your abilities, if you've not been able to predict my actions from the start. I very well could take this opportunity to collect you right now. But I don’t find you worth the trouble."

I took great offense to his statement. He had no idea what I knew. But I guess a person with such a pompous attitude was hardly one to concern myself with.

"It a shame, you find so little value in your opponents." I managed to say.

But this only seemed to confuse Jafar as he rose a brow.

Sharply inhaling, I thought about a great wind passing through the market. Upon releasing my breath, a strong gust, whipped through our party, snatching up Jafar in its midst. The Heartless, now with their conductor being tossed through the air, seemed more concerned with him, releasing our party.

"Now!" I shouted, whipping out my Key.

"Thundara!!" Donald made the first move, stunning the already confused Heartless before the boys and I got to work.

Each of us tore into the Heartless, taking them down before they had a chance to figure out what was happening. Donald and Goofy went in for the two big bodied Heartless, trapping them between a volley of deadly ice magic and shield. Aladdin was with Sora and I, throwing his sword
angrily through Heartless after Heartless.

I dodged a flying one, rolling into the sand, before turning to make a last second toss at the thing with my Keyblade. On contact, the Heartless fell from the air, before fireball went zipping past me, scorching it to cinders.

I turned to see Sora throw me a thumbs up before diving back into another pair. Leaping at a group the seemed to ignore me, I ran after them before they could clock Sora over the head. Tearing through one, I noticed another had vanished into wispy black flames as the face as Aladdin appeared right next to mine, his expression grim, and frantic.

"Jafar's gone!!" He said, with grave urgency. I noticed Abu squirming around at his feet clearly holding his own. But his wild eyes held the same earnestness as his owner's

"What?!" I shouted, quickly surveying the area.

"I watched him disappear into this black.... thing! We've got to get out of here! We're wasting time with these guys!! He's got Jasmine, AND the lamp!!"

"What do we do!?" Sora asked, dodging a Heartless. Parrying it, he sent the thing into the dirt. But not before another one slammed it's sword into his Key.

"We leave these guys behind!!" Goofy cried out, barreling his way towards us, with his shield, throwing enemies out of his way.

Donald was right behind him. "But these guys won't quit!" He said, blasting a wind spell at a few oncoming enemies.

Aladdin tensed up for second, as though remembering something before he released a frantic shout. "Magic Carpet!!" He cried.

The thing appeared instantly, zipping down the way we'd come. It parked itself right in front of our party, hovering at the ready.

"Everyone, on!" Aladdin shouted.

But he needn't bother, as we were already making ourselves scarce. Quickly hopping onto our flying companion, we flew out of the market place at record speed. The wind combed through my hair as we rocketed across the darkening, blood red sky. It's beauty had somehow been tainted by our situation. Jasmine was captured. Genie was taken. The weight of those missing things lay heavy on our shoulders, as there was no way to predict what would happen if we didn't hurry to retrieve what was taken.

"Where... are we going?" I asked.

My voice had almost been stolen away by the oncoming, windy night.

But his response hadn’t come as soon as I’d hoped, causing the tension to only thicken. “The only place I can think Jafar would have ran off too," Aladdin said after a bit of a pause. "The Cave of wonders."

To be Continued
Yet again, The dreams foretold of an existing plot, secretly brewing amongst Maleficent and her consort. Worse still, it would seem that Riku may well be working within her ranks. While Yukari and Sora find this bit of revelation far too disturbing to accept, they keep their concerns at bay for just a bit longer, dealing first with the knowledge that Princesses are being captured to unlock some unknown door. Now chasing tale of the villainous plans, they rush to save the princes of Agrabah before she becomes the next victim in Maleficent’s grand scheme.

Kingdom Hearts: Ascendant Recollection

Chapter 07

No More Wishes

On our way to the Cave of Wonders, Aladdin explained just what he'd discovered, during his last trip there. A place of booby traps and endless treasure that seemed to house the gold of a thousand Sultan's. Donald's eyes seemed to light up at the notion of treasure. Indeed it did seem like something completely hard to imagine. If Sultan's were like Kings... then that had to be a lot of gold. Still I wondered what more could have been waiting within it confines. If Genie had been found down there, then maybe there was something else of greater value than misplaced gold.

It didn't take long for us to arrive at an enormous tiger head, jutting out of the sand. Magic Carpet set us down near the dormant decapitation. For a moment, the boys and I stood in complete awe at the size of the thing. But something hadn’t been right.

"Why is its mouth closed?" Aladdin asked, carefully making his way towards it.

I stared around the area. All life was still except for a dark storm that appeared to linger over head. Part of me felt, that couldn't have been right. But as a denizen of an island, what did I really know about the weather patterns of a desert?

Placing his hand against the tightly packed sand sculpt Aladdin frowned.

"What is it?" Sora asked.

"This... is the entrance to the Cave of wonders." He said.

"Wait... this tiger statue is the cave?" I asked.

"The entrance to it-- yeah." Aladdin nodded. Turning back to the tiger head, he surveyed the thing with a worried look. "But something isn't right..."

There was something odd about our luck today.

As I turned my attention back to the night sky, I noticed the clouds growing heavier and darker. The gentle breeze that accompanied us on our way here, was beginning to pick up. A low howl
rumbled about the area. Had that been thunder?

But I got my answer when the eyes of the tiger suddenly flashed to life with a menacing yellow light and actual thunder shook the sky.

"Get down!!" I shouted, rushing to tackled Aladdin into the sand.

**SHHOOOOOOMMMM!!**

Not two second after my warning, an enormous bolt of lightning struck the head of the tiger and it roared to life. Upon opening it's maw, a swarm of Heartless spilled out in droves.

"What!!" Aladdin shouted. "That’s not… supposed to--!"

"Something's controlling it!" Sora shouted, already diving at the horde.

"It's eyes!" I warned.

This didn't seem to elicit the best reaction from the tiger that growled and thrashed around angrily, writing in the sand. Thunder targeted our group as we ran for our lives to dodge it. But the sudden burst of rain, showering down upon us made it almost impossible to traverse the area.

Digging my hand into muddying dirt, I threw out a fistful at a group of oncoming heartless. This did little to deter them, as they kept on coming.

"Wind!!" Donald cried out, trying to blast the creatures away. Some of these, vanished into wisps of smoke while others got sucked into the collision of rain, lighting and the new forming tornado that Donald only added to.

Unable to maintain solidity, the sand began to mix and pool. Our party did our best to maintain footing, but it seemed whatever spell cast upon the Tiger Head was working against itself. The cave was resisting whatever was controlling it. And that was bad for us.

Water and wind could no longer be absorbed into the pit of sand, we'd been running around in. The cave’s head began melting away, chunks dilapidating into the swirling sand vortex. And the Heartless, and the boys and I were all the next victims. The speed picked up, throwing us around and pulling our group in deeper. For a horrible moment, I was getting flash backs of being sucked in to the darkness back in Olympus, but I don't think this was gonna end any better.

Screaming for our lives, the turbulence of the sand vortex quickly began to overtake us, flushing us all down into the darkness that lay below.

But this black out was short lived as screams rang out all around me, coming from the members of my party. I could feel the raging descent, quickly cut shot by a painful snap that seemed to emanate from my arm.

"Yukari!" Went a voice, shouting out my name. It sounded like Sora's but strained and labored like I'd never heard it before.

My head, ached worse than any time before it. Dizzy from the sand toilet we just got washed down, I fought to regain my consciousness.

"Yukari!! Yukari, hold on!!" Went Sora's voice again.
My eyes slowly opened, and I found myself in some sort of dark labyrinth. But it wasn't at all as wonderous as Aladdin had described. The place was crumbling to bits. Debris, architecture—flippin' full blown columns were collapsing all around me. My eyes followed their descent down into the Darkness that... went on below me!

My eyes shot open, now alert and aware of my predicament. I looked up, at Sora wide-eyed, my heart slamming into my chest as he was barely grasping me by my forearm. He was hanging on to a ledge, to which it was unclear, what had been keeping that stable. I hadn't even breathed when I slipped just enough from his grip to stop dead at my wrist, gravity teasing death too quickly.

I stared right into Sora's eyes and all I could see was fear and desperation. I watched as Sora's face which had been beaded with sweat, strained as he tried to pull me up, whilst supporting my weight. For a crazy second, I thought to look back down, and my brain decided it was a good idea to get sick. Bile rose to my throat, but I wasn’t prepared to let my breakfast escape me. Looking back up at Sora, I tried to drink in what I thought was going to be the last I'd ever see him. The boy I felt really close too, enough to believe him a blood relative-- I never thought I was gonna go out like this to be honest.

Terrifyingly enough, his sweaty palms began to register and my own grip was starting to do less and less. Gravity finally decided to finish its job, slowly pulling me out of his grasp. It didn't even help that we were soaked though from all that muddied sand and rain.

"I got you!" He strained, his breathing heavy and labored. He tired one more time to pull me up but I stopped him, shaking my head desperately.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Or we'll both fall!"

"I'm not gonna let you go!" He protested, fighting me. His eyes screamed angrily at me, telling me he wasn't going to lose a friend-- he wasn't about to let himself be alone.

"I'll cast an air spell!" I tried. "Remember, I suck at controlling my output? I can survive! I'll be okay."

"No—No! Yukari!!"

But he could hardly do much to stop it.

Slipping right out of his grasp, I found myself falling at (shocker) terrifying speeds.

As I fell, the wind whistled around my ears and ripped the air out from my throat. My heart slammed against my chest at the fear of the unknown. I didn't know what would happen, or where the fall would lead. I didn't even think I'd survived. But I flipped forward in the air, facing what I assumed to be the oncoming ground and prepared to cushion my fall.

"A-air!!" I shouted, frantically. But to no avail, nothing happened. I was so scared, I couldn't concentrate. "Air!! Wind!!"

Focus. Relax. Deep breaths. Try not to think about how you’re gonna die.

"AEROGA!!" I shouted with intention to cast the greatest, air spell I could.

For the length of what felt like three seconds, my entire body was engulfed in a sphere of air. It spun around me in a sort of protective bubble that almost barely cushioned my fall, as I slammed chest first into bed of rushing water.
I was lucky it wasn't shallow.

While I fought against the rapid current, I felt the pang of my entire body pulse with pain. It was almost impossible for me to move for a whole, dangerous second. Dazed, I realized what was happening as I swiftly tried to recover, and get myself to the top.

Just barely, in the darkness, I could make out the faintest outline of a possible ledge. Reaching my arm out, I ignored the pain and somehow latched on, and the rest was almost automatic, as I erupted from the water, gasping for air. I hardly had a chance to survey the dark, manmade surfaces of what looked like some underground tomb. Clay brick, lay the foundation, as ancient looking designs, ran about the walls. A slew of rushing water falls seemed to all, empty here.

"Yukari??" A voice called my attention and I almost, lost my grip.

Snapping my head in the direction of the voice, my eyes widened.

"R-Riku--ugh!" I called after him, trying to fix myself, but took a wrong step, and went plummeting straight down, back into rushing current. I took in mouthful of the sewage/sweat-flavored water, and almost got carried away. Shooting back to the surface I gasped for air, as a hand latched on my forearm and yanked me right out of the water.

I choked and hacked, attempting to rid myself of the foul flavor of the underground water, whilst trying my hardest to catch my breath. Wheezing, my lungs and my throat stung with a ferocity. My whole body ached, as I tried to lie down. But the pair of familiar, comforting arms, held me up right. I was too out of it at the time to realize that I was shivering like mad.

"Yukari." Riku's voice called out. "Yukari, stay with me."

My head lulled around on my shoulders as I couldn't be bothered to keep conscious. I'd just used up all of my magic reserves and I was completely drained. To top it off, that fall hadn't done me any favors.

"C'mon." He said. "No way, can we stay here."

Forcing me to my feet, Riku basically dragged me, away from the rushing current where he, carefully set me on a set of stairs.

I groaned a bit, finding this spot significantly less comfortable. It didn't help that the distant sounds of the whole tomb falling apart, resounded in the distance.

Gosh... I hoped Sora was okay.

"Yukari... Yukari." Riku's hands were clasped atop my shoulders as he gently shook me. "Where's Sora?"

I blinked hard and long before opening my eyes to find, Riku's bright green eyes very close to my face. That in itself almost had me shoot back up to where ever Sora had been, as I fought away a blush. But I don't think it was working all that well as I stammered out my words, in that awful, dumb way I did.

"He... Uha...mmm.... We got separated." I hastily outlined, praying it was far too dark to see the color of my face.

The moisture of the air around us smelled a bit, of mildew and wet dirt. It was nothing like scent of the beach and salty air, accompanied with the sound of seagulls and calm waves collapsing in the
distance. I wasn't sure why that thought came to me but, suddenly my heart ached a bit for home.

"Here." Riku said, seeming to have been closely watching me. "Take this."

I looked to find him holding out a small potion vial. With minimal effort, I took the bottle in both hands, gingerly taking little sips from it. I hadn't needed to finish it off. It didn't seem like it was going to help with the exhaustion but the pain, was sure to go away.

"Better?" He asked, his voice was low-- almost soft.

"Mhm..." I slowly nodded, finding it impossibly to looking away from his smile. It was then that I realized just how calm it seemed this far down. I wondered how long it was gonna take for the whole place to collapse. "H-how... did you get here?"

"Same as you guys, right?" He stood, reaching out a hand for me to take. "I got some help."

I didn't like his phrasing, at all.

"I've been around... looking for Kairi. I didn't really expect to meet up with you guys, here."

"W-well..." I said with teeth clattering violently. Once on my feet, I could do little more than squeeze myself tight for warmth. Dripping wet, my hair and close clung to me like a lifeline. "Y-you could've... came with us, a-and we c-ould have split up and s-searched together."

Another loud rumbled sounded in the distance. It was a horrible sound, almost like an enormous monster had been howling out in pain. I recalled the noise I presumed to be thunder before we got sucked down into this place and realized that maybe it had actually been the cave.

"We need to get moving." Riku said. "Find a way out of here."

I nodded in agreement, shuddering as I followed him away from the waterfall pit of death.

Our shoes clunked and crunched beneath the alternating textures of sand and stone. The place wasn't really all that bad, and was far more still than I thought it'd be. I noticed a lot of obvious traps that greedy fools in search for treasure would so easily fall for. Although none of that seemed to matter to us. I was more concerned about the look in his eye, when Donald lit up at the word, treasure.

I sighed, hoping that the boys would be alright, and that they got down here in a much safer manner than I did.

"What's up?" Riku asked, stopping right in front of me.

I bumped into him, having been trailing directly behind him. Glancing up, I caught him looking curiously down into my face. It was either because it was super dark or he was trying to see if I was okay.

"N-nothing..." I said. But, looking up at him caused those images from the dream, to jump start in my mind. The monster Riku I'd seen, had to have been just a nice little nightmare element, but maybe it spelled out something he'd been hiding or-- worse-- something to come.

That's when my eyes drifted to his right hand. I hadn't even noticed it all this time. Maybe because it was so dark. But he'd been holding that odd looking sword. The dark braided, grip hadn't been housed within a cross guard like mine and Sora's Keyblades. Instead, his weapon fanned out a bit right at the ricisso. Encrusted with the bright blue eye that almost looked demonic and... kinda real.
The blade bloomed into a red and black, bat wing.

_Soul Eater_

It was like a voice had whispered into my heart, the name of this weapon. I noticed it did that with my Keyblades as well. I say heart instead of head because, while I did hear it in my brain... there was an odd feeling that seemed to pulse through me-- like these weapons were sentient in some way, leaving impressions on the minds they connected with.

"Yukari?" Riku's voice tore me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry." I mumbled. "I guess I'm just a little worried about Sora." It was true but, that's not what I was thinking about. "For all he knows, I might actually be, out of commission forever. And he's probably up there out of his mind debating over whether I'm a jellyfish in the water or not."

Riku's expression softened at my plight.

Goodness gracious. I'm going to have to put some sort of block on this boy, because it was hard to maintain a decent poker face around him.

"I'm sure he'll be fine." Riku placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder and my eyes glanced down, nervously at it before, looking back up at his face. "If what you say is the case, he's probably charging blindly ahead down here to make sure you're alright."

"Somehow, that sounds worse." I frowned.

But then as we looked at each other, neither of us could manage to stifle a laugh. Riku and I burst into a fit of giggling, attempting to make light of the situation. I couldn't understand why, but it felt really nice to just joke a little bit-- Especially with Riku where I felt something about him had been off.

But our good vibes had been quickly dissipated as the sound of plumes of Darkness depositing Heartless, filled the area.

Honestly, this wasn't much of a surprise. I'd been anticipating another attack. But when I looked into Riku's eyes there was something odd about the way he'd been gazing about the creatures. Unsure of what to think of his reaction, I summoned my Key and prepared to fight.

"Riku?" I quickly, called his attention back to the moment.

Riku blinked, looking very distracted. But thankfully he shook it off, readying his weapon as we plunged through the Heartless together.

The little wave, we'd been met with were as strong as the last. But with no magic or distractions, this fight was fierce concentration of skill. I raked my Key, angrily across a small wave of the things, before turning to slash through one about to leap onto my back. I ducked two more, letting them soar over my head, and right into Riku's blade.

The room went silent, as Riku had punctuated that with a, "That's the last of 'em."

But he'd been horribly wrong, as a bigger group appeared, crowding the tight, fit of a cavern space.

Riku let go an agitated growl, as he turned to run, swiping up my wrist in the process and yanking me along. "We don't have time for this." He grumbled.
I wasn't one to argue but, I felt something more to that, than just not wanting to fight the Heartless. And I could have been wrong... but... Those things seemed more interested in me than they did Riku.

Running through the underground labyrinth, we made turn after turn as we worked to avoid the Heartless. At some time, they began to pile up behind us, the noise was like the rumbling of a thousand boar race. It didn't take long for us to make a wrong turn, slipping into a rapid streaming of killer water that shot us down, even further into the darkness. Traps, trailed behind us as we seemed to activate them as was slid. Giant sledgehammers fell after as, in hopes to crush us into mincemeat. I feared, if those didn't managed to kill us, something up ahead would.

Pretty soon we were tossed out of the rapids and into another bin of deadly falls. This time, the fall wasn't long enough to kill us, but that didn't mean it hadn't hurt.

Riku pulled me along, probably noting I was still sluggish from earlier. We swam eagerly through the rapids, but he refused to let go of my wrist. Breaking the surface, we hurried to the land, breathing heavily as we splayed out on the cavern floor, just thankful enough to be alive. But, in reveling in this joy, I noticed something ticking away in the distance.

"Do you hear that?" I asked, sitting up.

Riku rose quietly, straining his ear to hear what I heard.

The sound of distant clinking echoed somewhere within the caverns-- the noise reaching us wasn't really enough to say it was close. It was cave after all. The sounds of the quaking and infrastructure falling apart could very well still be heard, faintly, from here. But that didn't stop us from being curious.

In a silent agreement, Riku and I trudged on, wet and cold as we followed the sound. I noticed the interior design changed after a short while. The bright colors of yellow and gold seemed to bloom back into existence as torches were lit along the walls. This honestly spelled a lot of things like...

"Boss Battle with another big Heartless Up Ahead! Did you make sure to save a potion or two?"

But I hoped I was wrong. I wasn't in the mood to fight any giant Heartless again today-- Especially not without the boys.

The warmth of the torch light helped dry us out a bit and the crunching of dirt beneath our feet brought back a little bit of calm. It was only that clinking sound that seemed to motivate us, and that was not reassuring. But when we saw what it was, my heart jumped into my gut.

"Jasmine!" I whispered, sharply putting a bit of speed into my step.

Riku quickly yanked me back. "What are you doing?"

I glanced back at Riku once I was sure of what I'd seen. A large clay pot with spider legs, walking around. Interestingly, there was no Jafar in sight.

"Earlier, me and Sora ran into this nasty dude." I explained. "He kidnapped a girl. She's in that pot!"

Riku looked at me a bit stunned. Not like he didn't believe me but, more like he wasn't expecting what I'd said. He glanced at the pot that was rounding the corner and we quickly followed after it. We stopped at the next corner so not to alarm the thing of our presence as we watched as it was met with a fork in the road. It nonchalantly choice the right path.

"You're sure that’s the one?" He asked.
"Positive."

Riku looked back at the jar, like he was weighing some risky options. His eyes were locked onto the thing that somehow made me uncomfortable.

"Alright." He finally said, before the thing could get too far. "Let's get after it."

I nodded, as we hurried out of our little hiding spot. Quietly we approached the cross road with the intent to head down it, when my Keyblade spontaneously summoned itself and yanked me back and down the opposing path.

"Yukari, what are you doing?" Riku hissed, his eyes bouncing between me and the pot.

I fought to yank myself back, but the Keyblade seemed to just... have a mind of its own.

"Keyhole...."

"....Keyhole...."

"...Keyhole...."

"...Keyhole."

I stopped struggling once I heard it.

The Keyblade was... talking to me?

"I..." I wasn't sure what I would tell him but, my mouth seemed to move on its own. "I have to go this way."

"What? Why?"

"There's something down this way..." I said, as vaguely as possible. "The fate of this world... depends on me..."

Riku eye's darted to the Oathkeeper in my hand. There was no sting of negative emotions attached to his gaze. Even still he seemed to know what I’d meant.

Riku and I held each other’s stare for what felt like minutes. But it had probably only been seconds, as we realized we'd come to a dilemma. Both diverging paths were important. I couldn't let the princess get away, but I also couldn't let the state of this world remain for much longer knowing that its eventual fate would be for it to end up like what happened to Destiny Islands.

"Then we'll split up." Riku suggested.

"W-what?" I protested. "N...no way! There's no way I'm gonna lose you again and--"

"We'll meet back up." He said, touching my shoulder. "I'll go and save that girl, and then I'll come and find you."
Looking deep into Riku's eyes, I knew he wasn't telling the truth. I knew he was lying about "saving" the girl, somehow. I knew he'd probably been down here searching for her in the first place, and I knew he hadn't originally wanted me around to witness it. This was just a perfect convenience for him, and he knew I wasn't going to fight him any further on it. I wondered just how much he knew. If he was working with Maleficent, he could have easily known about the whole conspiracy- the worlds being swallowed by Darkness and the Heartless and the Keyholes and everything that came with that knowledge.

But what... was he hiding? Why? Why wasn't he fighting alongside us?

"Promise?" I asked him. A frown slowly took shape on my lips.

"Yeah" Riku said immediately.

But he didn't say he'd promised.

Giving up, I nodded before running off, not bothering to look back.

As I ran down the sand laden path, it seemed I'd held my breath. The hopeful side of me, screamed that he was being honest-- that he'd come back. But the logical part my by brain, remained silent, knowing all too well, the presumable truth. I tried my hardest not to let those feeling fester, when I knew I had a job to do.

Soon, voices could be heard, echoing in the distances.

"Haha! Your reputed omnipotence, proves itself true, Djinn." It was Jafar's voice. "Surely the conquest of the world is, to one of your powers, a triviality. Would you care to become an ally?"

It didn't take long for the path to run out, opening up into big rotund room, void of anything really. Peaking in, I noticed the room to had quite a few entrances. On the back wall, was the aforementioned Keyhole sitting still, behind Jafar, and Genie.

It wasn't much a surprise. Genie had made it obvious that whoever was in possession of the lamp, was the master. But Genie himself didn't seem too happy about this, sporting a brooding look, as he crossed his arms over his chest and brought the grumpy sulk meter up to one hundred.

"Surely you jest... oh master of the lamp, sir." Genie grumbled, in response.

"Violating the statutes of our pact, are grounds for removal, Jafar." A feminine voice, eased into the discussion.

"Maleficent!" Jafar seemed stunned, as the dark clad women, glided into the scene. "You misunderstand! It was but a jest."

Maleficent scoffed. "In truth... I wouldn't regret you dismissal. For you are merely an expendable asset in my midst."

Jafar, looked incredibly offended-- speechless at that insult of a truth. I honestly couldn't blame him.

"Jest or no... you have fulfilled your roll with the utmost competence. That boy should have already reached the princess."
"And what of that other girl?" Jafar asked, his words now soured, now that his ego had been hurt. 

"It would seem best, to subdue her, now when she's gone out of her way to deliver herself right to us." Maleficent, chuckled. But with her back facing me, I couldn't really read the look on her face. It was only then when I saw her arm rise and fall with the clatter of her staff, would I find out. Suddenly, my sneak meter had been compromised as enormous dark, horned, tendrils erupted from the sand at my feet. I just barely managed to escape but, it really didn't matter. More shot form the sod, chasing me down-- deep violet columns of evil quickly closed in on all sides.

"Fire!" I cried out, attempting to burn away the plants. But once again, I was met with the harsh reality of having no more energy to use magic, as a painful tug, pulled fiercely at my gut. Stunned with pain, I staggered before just narrowly diving out of the enclosure of deadly plant limbs. But this wouldn't be a successful dive, as I never met the dirt. One of the animated roots, grabbed at my ankle and wrapped painfully around me leg.

I yelped out, now being tossed through the air.

"Kid!!" Genie just barely shouted.

Being thrown about, I could see the look of worry on his face. I went splat, against the floor, the air, exploding from my lungs. I lay dazed, my vision blurring and my head pounded with pain. But the thorns didn't care, slowly wrapping around my form, squeezing, painfully and scraping against my skin.

"You've done well against the Heartless I've sent to destroy your party." Maleficent’s voice entered my personal space. As if her thorns weren't enough. "But it's time for you to part ways with those fools. For, a greater purpose for you lies within my ranks."

"Wh-why?" I asked struggling, in my very painful confines. "So that, you can throw me away, like that hobo over there?!"

"Hobo?!" Jafar snapped.

"No way, am I gonna join a group of dummies, running around, destroying worlds and kidnapping princesses!" I spat. "That would look pretty bad on my rap sheet."

For a moment, Maleficent's stoic demeanor faltered. A light grin played onto her lips, as though I'd amused her. "Silly girl..." She stifled a laugh. "Unlike the merry buffoons in my consort, I've no intention of disposing you. You've no idea what you are, but I can assure you, that you'd be best suited for better things than the leisurely catch and fetch your little group lowers itself to. Even that other boy, saw the benefit in our alliance. And is he not your dear, precious, friend as well?"

My eyes popped at the instant realization of who she'd referred too. But I hardly had time to react as the tentacles came alive again, trashing about. A sudden burst of flames, erupted, above me and the thorns, which seemed to screech in pain, released me.

Mid-fall, I noticed the boys come running into the scene, and took this as my chance to get back at the old witch.

With my Keyblade summoned, I let myself fall in her direction. But upon impact, she vanished. Reappearing at the top of the platform next to Jafar, she stared down at me-- her expression was once again placid.
"Wait!" Sora shouted.

"She's better things to concern herself with, than you my boy!" Jafar growled, raising his staff. "Genie, for my second, wish-- Destroy these fools!!"

"W-what!? Genie??" Aladdin's voice came from the back.

But Genie didn't respond. With his expression hidden behind a dark mask of regret, he moved closer.

Throwing out his palms, he released an explosion of lightening from his fingertips. The boys and I ran around to avoid the attacks, not once even thinking to raise out weapons against him.

"Genie, what are you doing??" Aladdin shouted, as we dove behind a destroyed pillar.

But our cover had been blasted to smithereens as the blue djinn, unhappily released another volley of attacks. Fire balls and lightning rained down upon us. The five of us did our best to huddle beneath Goofy's shield while Donald protected us within powerful force field of an air spell.

"What's he doing??" Donald shouted, fending off another wave. "Why's he attacking? I thought, Genie was on our side??"

"He is." I reassured. Aladdin looked deep into my eyes, grasping hopefully onto my words. "But now he's under Jafar's control. Whoever holds the lamp, is the master, remmber?"

"So we have to get it back!" Sora noted.

"Exactly." I nodded. "Jafar's the current holder of the lamp, meaning we gotta grab it. Sora and Donald; redirect Genie's magic with some air spells. Goofy; you're with me. We're gonna charge Jafar and distract him while Aladdin sneaks up and grabs the lamp."

Immediately we broke off in to our respective pairings as Sora and Donald quickly got to work. Wind exploded throughout the room as Donald masterfully manipulated his air magic, sending the Genie's attacks into the walls. All the while, Goofy and I charged Jafar, as planned. While at first he seemed completely distracted, as he watched with what seemed to be grave disappointment, he quickly caught wind of us, when his parrot began squawking, alerting him of our attack.

"Watch out boss!!" The parrot, shouted. "3 o'clock, some miscreants, comin' up, on ya."

Jafar's head snapped in our direction. Rage brewing in his eyes. Instantly he rose his cobra staff, and the eyes glinted a bright red. Not wanting to find out what that would do, I threw my Keyblade his way, smacking his staff across the atrium.

"Noo!!" He shouted, angrily, but then turned to his bird. "Iago!!"

Without a vocal response, I caught the bird diving right at me with its talons out. It racked it's bird feet right across the back of my neck, raking up my air. I shouted, out in mild pain, but this wouldn't matter as long as Aladdin got the lamp.

"Behind ya' Jafar!!" The Bird, Iago screeched.

"No!!" I shouted, tearing the bird out of my face.

"Augh!!" Aladdin's cries sounded from across the room, as Jafaar smacked him down, off the platform and into the dirt, just as he'd managed to discreetly climb up it.
"Hah! You poor buffoons, cannot hope to touch me!!" Jafar now had a crazed look in his eye as he leapt from the platform and charged in the direction of Goofy and I.

Throwing forth his arm, a surge of snakes spewed from within sleeve of his robes. Goofy attempted to bash them away, but they only grew in size, quickly over taking him.

"I've got you!" I shouted, dashing into help.

"I think not!" Jafar snapped.

I hadn't realized how close he'd gotten as he spewed flames from his breath. An incredible surge of heat and flames erupted, wildly at my feet, quickly spreading across the chamber floor. But I wouldn't let that keep me as I swiped through the blaze, rushing to get to him. Yet somehow, he'd magically manifest a volley of swords from nothing, sending them straight at me. I deflected these with my Key and kept moving.

"Is that all you got, you snake!!" I shouted, now gripping my Keyblade in both of my hands, ready to run him through.

But right as I my blade had met what I had intended to be his body, a loud metal clatter called attention to the golden Corba staff he'd been holding, once again.

"A snake, am I?" Jafar hissed. And I mean, here literally hissed. A serpentine tongue, flitted from between his teeth. His eyes, now emblazoned red, his pupil turning into slits. "Perhaps I can show you, how snake-like I can be!!! Hahahahah!!"

From within the flames, I could see his form completely shift. His neck elongated and his jaw distended. Long, sharp fangs, grew from where his canines had been and a rattling hiss flooded the entire room. Jafar's entire being had been replaced by an enormous Cobra!

In what felt like, one swift movement, he managed to swipe up every one of us, entangling us all within his long, snake body. We all struggled, straining against the prospect of being crushed to death within Jafar's elongated, writhing trunk-like body.

"Djinn, your pathetic excuse of affection for these wastes of flesh, is getting in the way of my victory. If you cannot finish them, then I will!!" Jafar slithered. Squeezing us, even tighter.

I yelped out, fighting against the crushing pressure, that slowly closed in around my ribs. It was then that I felt myself being lifted closer to Jafar’s face--the unpleasant air of arrogance stung my eyes, like the venom was likely to carry.

"Sadly, I cannot, dispose of you, my dear." The Sultan laughed. "Maleficent made it clear, you must be of her party. Yet, knowing you refuse to go willingly, then there is only one way deliver you to her."

This was followed by and intense squeezing, that set my legs in a blaze of pain. I screamed out, trying to rake myself free-- at least get my arms out of his grip, and somehow use my Key. But obviously it would do me no good, as Jafar would relish in seeing me, squirm in pain.

"Hahah!! With you out of the way, I'll do well to rein, undeterred, as they most powerful being of this entire world!! Baahahaha!!"

Gosh, somebody snipe me right now... I think I'd rather much prefer death, over listening to the guy's ego explode to epic proportions. My eyes drifted across the room, grazing over the boys as they struggled to break free. Genie sat in the corner looking sour he could do nothing more than
watch, despite that fact that he held all the power in the universe at his fingertips. It really must have sucked to be--

To be a Genie...

Suddenly my brain started to whir. My eyes shot up towards Jafar, as he continued to laughed, gleefully.

"Actually..." I voiced, breaking through the laughter and the flames, cutting Jaffar short of his evil monologue. "You wouldn't be the most powerful being in this world..."

"What?!" His rattled screech, shook he entire room.

"Ah... Yukari?" Sora's voice chirped from below me.

"In fact, the most powerful thing in this room would be a Genie!" I continued, egging him on as I watched his eyes dart to the very blue Djinn, sitting on the sidelines.

"She's right!" Aladdin’s voice, broke through, beneath me. Glancing down, I noted the look on his face-- as though he was catching on. "Next to a Genie, you'll always be second best. There's always gonna be someone who'd be able to knock you down."

"He's got more power, than YOU'LL ever have!" I finished him off.

For a moment, the serpentine, Jafar froze. His enormous reptilian eyes glazed over, wide with thought. The realization that we had had been correct, was beyond infuriating.

"But, you are right." He slithered. "His power does, exceed my own-- But not for long!" With zero hesitation, Jafar zipped toward Genie, wrapping his reptilian trunk around him, before screeching his petitions. "I demand you grant my third and final wish-- To make me an all-powerful genie!!"

"What?!" I heard Donald quacked.

But this was exactly what I'd wanted.

Genie, looked more or less stunned, at the request. His eyes flitted towards Aladdin and I, accusatively before regretfully raising his palms in Jafar's direction. Magic shot from his fingertips, sprinkling the giant snake in a cloud of magic that smoldered and hissed, encompassing his entire form.

His transformation seemed to be taking mere seconds. His snake of a body disappeared, depositing us on the chamber floor. And while at first, it seemed like nothing had happened, it wasn't until the whole room began to erupt in a loud rumbling, that I started to get a little worried. The ceiling began to collapse in on itself, as structures and debris rained down, dangerously upon us. With an incredible boom, an enormous statute came crashing in from the chamber above, smashing right into the atrium floor.

"Earth Quaaaaake!" Goofy shouted, shield overhead, running past me.

I stood stunned, watching the whole room collapse, as the elongated crack in the floor opened up and spewed lava from deep down below. A great lurching in the room signaled the breaking apart of the chamber around us, coming undone, slowly falling away as chunks of footing, and into the pit below.

"C'mon!" Aladdin shouted, yanking my wrist as he pulled me along with him towards safety.
Looking back, as we ran, I watched as gigantic figure emerged from the glittering cloud above. It loomed over the ever expanding room, as the place crumbled to pieces, as if to accommodate to the size of the Jafar's new Genie form.

A giant, red, bare-chest man, with the same pony tail as Genie, rose to the length of the ceiling. His eyes had been completely yellow, his elongated and black nails, like talons. Now somehow even less pleasant to look at than before, Jafar loomed powerfully over us, laughing at his new found omniscience. He swirled his arms around, testing his boundless might as dark red and black magic exploded to life at his fingertips.

"Are you guys crazy!" Donald shouted. "What were you thinking, giving him the idea of turning himself into a genie?"

"Exactly that." I supplied, summoning my Keyblade. "To turn himself into a genie."

"There's his lamp!" Aladdin pointed out the bright red bird attempting to fly away with the precious treasure. A spouted kettle that looked much like Genie's golden one, but this was a glistening black.

A giant boulder got our party moving as we surged forth as one unit, to grab the lamp. The boys worked at keeping the boulder and debris away, whilst Aladdin and I focused on Iago. Nearing him, I threw my Keyblade, with dangerous speed and precision at the unsuspecting bird. The blade went thwack against its body, sending it falling right out of the air and into my arms.

"This is it!" Jafar's voice echoed throughout the chamber. "This is the power I've so long, sought! Fear me, Maleficent! With such force at hand, the whole world of reality is mine to rule! Mine to Control!"

"No So fast Jafar! You're forgetting one, little thing!"

The former Sultan's menacing cries of laughter died away he noticed me-- a mere spec, below his swelling form. His glowing eyes budged with annoyance. But that immediately turned to fear, as he noticed what I'd been holding.

"You want to be A genie! You got it!" I shouted, chucking Iago aside, sending him flying. Sure enough he recovered, as he frantically flapped his wings to escape. "Aladdin-- Catch!" I shouted. Heaving the lamp, sending it arcing through the air.

Jafar's form vibrated with anger and panic as he watched his tiny little prison, glint against the Lava's luminescence.

Thankfully Aladdin hadn't been far behind, catching the lamp before holding it up, for Jafar to see. "And everything that goes with it! Phenomenal, Cosmic Powers--!!" He went on. Vigorously he rubbed the lamp, and dark clouds of red glittering smoke began to billow out of it. Quickly turning into the third swirling vortex of the day, I was glad to be on the opposite end of this one. The great power of the lamp its self, sucked in Jafar's whole form like a vacuum. Even Iago, who'd still been on his way to escape, ended up caught, alongside his master. Both of their howling cries and pleas, swallowed up, into their tiny, portable prison.

"Itty Bitty Living space" Aladdin finished.

The boys and I erupted in a fit of cheers, at our success. Genie had happily rejoined us, with warm congrats.
"You did it guys!!" He shouted, catching us all in a big hug. "I knew ya could! Sorry about all that before. I wasn't exactly in control of my actions."

"It's okay, Genie." Aladdin said, smiling happily up at the big blue guy.

But our reunion would be short lived as, yet another explosion, blasted from across the now enormous tomb. Light suffused through the chamber, before the sound of a hollow wind, whistling over the sound of falling debris and lava, directed our attention to the Keyhole that sat at the other end of the room.

"The Keyhole!" Goofy shouted.

As if its appearance declared the finale of our adventuring of this world, more debris came crashing down from above. Lava erupted from the pit below, and the platform on which we stood was clearly on its last leg. With a sharp whistle, Aladdin had once again managed to call upon the help of Magic Carpet, who always seemed conveniently, close behind.

"Let's get out of here!!" Aladdin suggested, urgently hopping on to the flying companion.

The boys and I barely managed to get on, as the thing took off without warning. I wrapped an arm around Sora for security, as I aimed my Key at the Keyhole. Once we got near, a bright beam emitted from the tip like every time before it-- this time, the loudest clunk of rotating tumblers, thundered throughout the cavern.

"Locked..." I heard Sora's quiet voice

But we'd completely forgotten the whole reason we came down here. All of us except for one.

"Wait!! What about Jasmine!?!" Aladdin's voice quaked with panic. "We've gotta turn back. Jasmine!!" He began shouting for her as we flew, now redirecting the rug, back in the opposite way of the entrance. The rug careened sideways, almost sending us all toppling in the burning lava below. "Jasmine!! Jaaasmine!!"

"Aladdin, stop!! Jasmine's not here!!" I cut his cries short, clamping a hand on his shoulder. "She's been taken to another world!"

"W-what?" Aladdin responded with confusion.

"Yukari!" Sora snapped.

"Look-- There's no time to explain, but she's definitely not here!!"

A harsh silence, sank between us as I looked into his eyes. That hopeful light we'd shared before our battle with Jafar was gone. Now it had been replaced with the grim realization that, the girl of his dreams, wasn't going to be coming home tonight.

"Wait, where's Goofy!?" Donald shouted, freakin out. Everyone's heads snapped back to find that our green clad companion was gone. Only now he was lying unconscious on a lone hunk of rock, floating down the river of molten lava at alarming speed.

"Goofy!!!" We shouted.

He must have fallen off when Aladdin veered to turn around.

"Genie!!" Aladdin shouted, pulling out the lamp. He must have retrieved it when Jafar lost his
sense of self, to his power hunger. "You've gotta save him!!"

"Are you sure?" Genie looked a bit concerned. "That's wish numbe--."

"Just do it!!"

Throwing out his hands, the Genie forged a sort of magical lasso, that zipped across the molten river. He managed to yanked him back onto the rug, in a zip of light. Magically he'd been restored to the carpet. A panicked Donald held on to his long time buddy, for the duration of the ride, as we shot through the collapsing, Cave of Wonders.

* * * * *

It had been after the sun had risen high in the sky that we began to see the people of Agrabah slink back into the city, and into their homes. Shop keepers tended to their booths, people went about, cleaning the streets, and children brought life and cheer back to the city. Now that the Heartless were gone, Kurt Zisa defeated, and the Sultan had resumed his rule, the place was waking up from its desolate state.

But this would mean little to the one guy still morning the loss of his love. Although the princess had been declared missing, no one felt her loss like Aladdin had. Maybe it was because he knew the truth. That unlike everyone else, she wasn't slowly coming out of hiding from the Heartless surge.

"Yukariiii..." Donald slapped his foot angrily against the sandstone. A glare was, hard set on his features.

"I'm not sorry about what I did." I snapped at him. "Aladdin needed to know, at the very least."

"Take me with you guys-- please!" Aladdin begged, ignoring our argument. "Just so I can find Jasmine and--"

"We... can't." Sora denied him. The look on his face was almost as heartbroken as Aladdin's.

"That's right." Donald looked right at me. "Taking folks to other worlds is a no go. It'd throw everything into chaos."

I rolled my eyes. Wasn't that what we were doing though?

I watched as Aladdin, slumped back in his spot, miserably hanging his head. Just looking at him, sparked up a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Uh... Earth to Al. Hello!" The Genie's voice broke the silence as he floated near his companion. "You still have one wish left. Look, just say the word. Ask me to find Jasmine for you!"

Aladdin's eyes seemed to glaze over as he looked sadly up at the Genie. His mouth opened, to form the demand of a wish. But this would be the last one the Genie would ever grant.

"I... I wish..." Aladdin gripped the lamp tightly in his palms. "For you freedom, Genie."

In an spiral of bright light, magic swirled around Genie's form. The golden cuffs at his wrists dropped away. Legs sprouted from the swirl of smoke that used to be his ghoulish tail. No longer bound to the lamp, The Genie of the Lamp had been promoted to… The Genie—finally free of his
golden prison.

"Al!" Genie looked incredibly stunned, as he watched Aladdin.

"A deal's a deal." Aladdin, smiled softly. "Now you're free to go where you want and do as you please. You're your own master."

"You kept that dumb promise?" The Genie asked, his voice quivered a bit. Hardly able to restrain himself, he scooped up Aladdin in a tight hug, singing songs of praise. "Thank you Al. I'll remember this for ages to come."

Once he let him go, they shared a tender smile. Aladdin somehow fought back his sadness, just for the sake of his friend. Still it hadn't seemed perfectly fair. We'd failed to keep the princess from falling in to the wrong hands. But it didn't mean there wasn't something that we could do about it.

"We'll bring Jasmine back." I proclaimed.

"That's our promise to you." Sora assured.

Aladdin gave a week smile. Weather he believed it or not, there seemed to be some hope sitting in his heart. I could just, see it when I looked into his eyes. Somehow, he believed us.

With our list of thing to find, ever growing, the boys and I made it back to the ship. Another day had come to pass. It almost seemed that we'd been no closer to saving the worlds that when we started. The most we could do was relish in the fact, that we'd saved the fate of three worlds so far - locking their Keyholes any preventing and further invasions or damage form the Heartless.

Sinking in to my chair of the Cockpit, I tiredly waited for us to chance upon another world. Best to catch some sleep if I could.

But somehow it was impossible. All I could think of was my encounter with Riku.

Looking in Sora's direction, I watched as he had been in conversation with the other two. I would hate to sour his mood, by telling him of my latest revelation. I wondered if he'd believe me. I know I was still coming to terms with it, but if what Maleficent had implied was true, then... Riku really must have been working for her. And he really had helped in Jasmine's abduction. Yeah, she relied on Jafar to nab the princess and find the Keyhole, but she probably had little faith in his competence. And so, she brought Riku along as insurance.

What other unpleasant surprises were we bound to encounter next?

_Bleep, Bleep_

A sudden, ringing could be heard through the cockpit and all, quickly grew silent. Donald's eyes searched for the sound until they landed on big, flashing button, I'd yet to notice before hand. It read, "Push me," and upon smacking the button, Cid's face appeared along the glass of the Cockpit—his image moved within the confines of his grainy picture, like a TV without the box.

"Hey Kids!"
"When did you--?!" Donald seemed more taken aback, at the ability to communicate on this level.

"I installed this, last time you dropped your ship by my garage for a body job. I thought maybe Chip and Dale would have told you. Anyways, how it going?"

"Pretty okay..." Sora answered a bit cautiously. "In any case we sealed up the Keyhole in the last world, so that's outta the way."

"We also managed to find one o’ them Ansem report’s, you guys mentioned before!" Goofy exclaimed.

“Really??” I asked aloud. “When was this??” I huddled over Goofy who’d now been held the papers in his hands, having pulled them out of his pain pocket. It was folded, stained with age and crumpled. But otherwise, seemed to be fairing okay.

“Oh yeah.” Sora rubbed the back of his neck looking apologetic. “We found it when he got separated. It’s all thanks to Donald and his greed for treasure--”

“Waaaahkk!!” Donald cut him short, flailing his arms at Sora to silence him.

"Good to hear, kiddies." Cid complimented. "Nice work."

"I… can’t read this..." I grumbled as I looked over the paper.

"Yeah." Sora agreed, joining me over Goofy’s shoulder. “This writing is… kind of weird...."

"Fax it over." Cid suggested. "I'll have it decoded in a jif."

"Fax??" I looked around the cockpit for the machine in question.

But Donald had already been at work, snatching the papers out of Goofy’s hands and making quick work with yet another newly installed application. He shuffled through the papers, passing them through some sort of bar, that scanned them over with a bright little light.

Meanwhile, Cid continued."I got Leon and the girls out on the scene gathering information. Maleficent's definitely on the move. There's been a series of premeditated kidnappings across the multiverse, perpetrated by our good friends, the Heartless. Intel has it that the individuals targeted have a few... er common traits."

For some reason, the boys all looked to me. I sighed, knowing well enough they were waiting for me to spill the beans. “Yeah, we know." I finally spoke out. "There’ve been a couple of girls in the last few worlds that were taken right in front of us."

"What?!” Cid spat out the drink he’d been sipping on.

“See… I had another one of my dreams.." I went on. “Maleficent is rounding up seven girls. I’m not entirely sure what’s so special about those specific girls... but they’re able to unlock a final door."

"Final door?" Cid questioned.

"Yep," Sora nodded. "We’re just as clueless as you, on that one. We’ve got no idea what they’re trying to unlock."

Cid sat there, humming in thought, stroking his stubble. "Well… how’s ‘bout y’all stick to sealin’ keyholes. As fer the report, I’m faxin’ ‘em back o’er to ya’s."
And then it came back to us through the fax machine. Donald grabbed the paper and we all huddled together, to uncover its contents.

I spent countless years of acquiring all there is to know. My knowledge became power, and it is now protecting this world. I brought smiles to people's faces and they respect me... But although I am called a sage, there are things I do not understand.

"Ansem was a scholar and a philosopher who governed over his domain." Cid explained. "Everyone respected him and the world was peaceful."

Everyone's heart, no matter how pure it may be... has darkness sleeping inside. A small amount of darkness can sometimes swell with surprising speed... Given the chance, the smallest drop can spread and swallow the heart. I have witnessed it many times.

Darkness... Darkness of the heart. How is it born? How does it come to affect us so? As the ruler of this world, I must find the answers. I must find them before the world is lost to those taken by the darkness. It is my duty to expose what this darkness really is. As such, I have conducted the following experiments:

—Extract the darkness from a person's heart.

—Cultivate darkness in a pure heart.

"I'm not sure of the details of that..." Cid continued acting as a side commentary while we read. "but he discovered some Heartless in the basement of his castle. Maybe all of the craziness started back then..."

The experiments caused the test subjects' hearts to collapse—even the most stalwart. How fragile our hearts are... My treatment yielded no signs of recovery. It wouldn't do to let the people of this world see such a terrible sight, so I confined those who had completely lost their hearts beneath the castle.

Are these the end results, or is this the realization of the darkness that already existed
within them? Or is this the cause of something entirely different? The only thing certain is that they are completely devoid of emotion.

I must continue my research. It's fortunate that I have numerous samples to work with. They are created one after another. We need to give them a name. People without a heart... Let's call them “Heartless”.

If I study these Heartless and am able to understand their nature... I should be able to discover their purpose and intent of their heart. To begin my study... I developed a machine for artificially generating Heartless. If these Heartless were born naturally from people who lost their heart...

"He synthesized more Heartless?!” Cid exclaimed sounding appalled.

...then it should be possible to synthesize Heartless around the heart's principle. If I improve this machine, it may be a possibility to create Heartless from scratch. When I compare the machine-made Heartless and the natural-born Heartless... I determined that the nature and performance of the two are nearly the same.

But in order the draw more accurate test results... I will place a mark on the machine-made Heartless for identification.

"So, Maleficent abused the machine…” Sora decided.

"She must've created Heartless after Heartless with that thing..." Donald added. “It would explain why the world are getting overrun with Heartless, everywhere she goes…”

“Darkness of the heart…” I echoed the words of the document. “Leon had said something like that as well.”

My eyes met with Sora’s and I wondered if he’d felt what I was thinking. This Ansem guy mentioned how no heart, could escape the taint, of Darkness, just as Leon did. But, it seemed that it was thanks to the negative emotions of anger, hate and fear… But then… Everything felt those sort of emotions. No matter how brave or how kind. Heck, I was always scared, left and right, now that we were journeying across the worlds. Did that mean, at any moment I could be swallowed because of how I felt?

"Ah! Fear!!" I recalled the hisses of the Screecher "The best negative emotion of them all! It's your very fear what gives me strength-- what gives me further power over you!"

I did remember the Screecher mention her alleged tight grip of my heart, thanks to my fear of the Darkness…

"So... is... Kay.... and.." Cid’s garble came back to us in broken bits and pieces. Looking back up to the cockpit window, we noted his flickering, in and out, like crazy. Something wrong with the
signal?

“What is that!?” Donald shouted, suddenly.

The power in the cockpit dipped, and flickered as an enormous creature passed right over us. It shook the whole ship, causing us to lose of bit of control. Through the view of the cockpit, my eyes darted around for another sign of where the thing had gone.

"Behind us!" I cried out.

"Hey... ng on?" Cid spoke again, still very much coming through in broken gibberish. "Before.. it's- --.."

The signal went dead after that.

"Hey!" Donald shouted, trying to get him back. "Hey! Hey!"

The ship bumped into the thing that looked like a gigantic… Whale?? Now we were being pulled backwards and the whole gummi listed sideways. Unable to maintain our places everyone went sliding across the cockpit. Somehow I’d managed to slam into Sora, who yelped out on impact.

The both of us went falling as that ship began to completely flip upside down. In my attempts to grab on to something—anything— my head was met with the painful collision of some stray object. Instantly all hopes to maintain my footing were dashed, as I lost conscious.

The sound of crashing and the ship’s horrible groans, where met with a terrible howling that shook my insides—the most visceral lullaby I’d ever have to pleasure of being the last thing I heard before everything went dark.

To Be Continued
A Tentative Heart

Chapter Summary

Another princess taken, the party resigns themselves to the fact that they’ve lost yet another battle. But what of the princesses could Maleficent possibly want? Yukari learns that Riku is working with the enemy, aiding them in their quest to unlock the final door. But why? And why is Maleficent trying so hard to have her in their midst? These questions are quickly interrupted when something careens right into the ship.

Against the crashing waves and the whine of seagulls overhead, It was nearly impossible to make out the hushed voices of young children. They whispered to each other as though surrounded by prying ears. They hid amongst the shrubbery as they spoke of their little, big plans. A boy with light, chest nut brown hair sat, consoling another girl his age. His deep blue eyes were big and bright, yet eager as he rubbed the back of his friend who’d been shaking ever so fiercely. Her pear green eyes were wide with fear, yet at the same time they seemed hollow and empty. It was as if her doll like features, which had-- in the past-- been so much more stiff and empty, were now breathing with life. Her emotions were becoming more clear by the day. Bright, rosy ears stuck out from her long, messy black hair. She shuddered, violently, clamping her hands together tightly so, her knuckles turned white and her palms, bloomed red like the taint of her lips.

The two had just escaped an ordeal. While playing at the perimeter of the cave entrance, they had deemed the secret place, they were interrupted by the call of something wild. The howling of this unknown creature had come without warning. To the two children, this had been unheard of. Nothing would be able to prepare them for how to approach such an unprecedented threat.

So the two ran. They ran hard and fast, to a place just for them, hiding amongst the coconut trees and shrubbery as they calmed their little hearts, long enough to think of a plan. Through the leaves, small rays of light reached them, speckling them with tiny bits of the afternoon sun.

"I don't know what that was..." The boy said after his breathing had calmed. "But it sounded big!"

The girl left no reply to his response. She only frowned deeper, while staring hard into the sand. The boy wondered if perhaps, she was thinking.

"Maybe... we should tell Riku!" He suggested.

The girl’s eyes lit up, as she looked to the boy. Her expression was hopeful as she knit her brows. Though it hadn’t been quite right, it seemed like she was doing her best. Her eyes almost glowed, they were so bright.

The boy smiled, understanding this response, no less. He stood, and so did she. Grabbing her by the hand, he led her out of the patch and back into the sunlight. For only a second, she felt blinded. But as the white light fizzled away, she could find the blue sky again. The sounds of the waves roared in her ears. The salted air and the smells of the trees and the brush sifted into her nose. Her
long hair billowed behind her, glimmering gently in the sun.

Everything was so bright and beautiful here. But how did she feel the memories of a paler sky, always spotted with clouds and a gentle sprinkle of stars? The sun always tended to poke through the clouds and wash everything in gold where ever it could touch. The brick stone, laid upon the ground was far more stable than the sand that always flooded into her sandals and in between her toes.

But those memories hadn't been hers... Had they?

Even as those details awoke in her mind, they quickly vanished. She knew she hadn't belonged here-- in this place and time. But still she like this beautiful bright world. And she hoped she'd never have to forget it, like that which was quickly fading.

"A monster, huh?" A new voice tore through the sound of sloshing water, pushing up against the beach.

The two children had found there older friend, sitting by the shoreline, just gazing out across the vast ocean. His silver lochs were short and choppy. His bright blue-green eyes surveyed them with a quizzical light. Unconvinced, he crossed his arms and turned about face.

"You sure?"

His reaction to their plight was due, in part, to the younger boy's wild imagination. But looking at his friends again, his green eyes landed on the girl. She stood gently tucked behind the younger boy, keeping her gaze locked on the ground. Her hands were tightly wound up in her dress, twisting it into anxious knots. She always seemed to look uncomfortable around him. He never really got why. She clung to the other boy so much he felt like he'd probably never get an answer.

At first, he thought she was just shy. But when he learned that her silence was consistent with everyone he realized this couldn't have been the case. But he was still patient with her. Given her circumstances, she was probably just adjusting. Living with a different family outside of her own had to be a little weird. And the younger boy never forced her to, but she followed him everywhere. She'd come alive over the past two years. Maybe she would come out of her shell more in the future too.

"Is this true, Yukari?" The older boy asked. "Did you guys really come across a monster?"

"Hey!" The younger boy protested.

The girl, flinched at the sound of her name. Her face quickly shot up to meet his gaze. For a moment, she seemed to second guess herself as she looked away. But then nodded vigorously, as she eyed the boy hopefully.

"Alright then." The older boy smiled, satisfied. He still hadn't seemed to believe their story. But there was a glimmer of excitement in his eyes no less. "Let's go and meet the beast."

With a grave silence, the three crossed the wide plane of the beach. Ducking into the brush, they were once again faced with the howling entrance of the secret place.

"There's the sound!" The younger boy exclaimed. His eyes were wide with terror and excitement. "That just sounds like wind..." The older boy sighed. "It makes weird noises like that sometimes."

"No way! It's a, for real, monster!! I saw it!"
"Tch.. Yeah right..."

But the girl stood there quietly. She was stiff, with wide eyes. She hadn’t been shaking like before, but it was more than clear, she wasn't about to go into the cave. At least, not without the younger boy.

The oldest of the three, looked over his friends, once again. Although unconvinced, he thought it would do them some good if he just played along.

"Well... if there really is a monster in there," He decided to say. "Do you really think we can beat it on our own?"

"Yeah! Of course!" The younger boy responded vehemently. "If it's the three of us, there's nothing we can't do!"

The girl drew in a slow breath to steel herself. Her decision against going into the cave had been altered. Now that her two friends were ready to take on the mysterious beast, she wouldn't allow herself to stay back. She clutched the fabric of her dress at her chest, as she strained her ears, listening again for the sound of monster.

"Do you hear that?" The older boy asked. "We've gotta be careful."

The loud moans of the cave, grew louder, beckoning the children into its depths.

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**Kingdom Hearts: Ascendant Recollection**

**Chapter 08**

**A Tentative Heart**

A loud hollow, howling roared in my ears, pulling me back to the land of the living. I let out an audible groan. I felt like I’d been tossed in to a blender with rocks. Compacted and then spat out, my body ached with a numbing pain. It was only when I recalled the disastrous events of what had transpired before everything went black that my eyes shot open.

The crash!

My vision slowly cleared as I sat up, forcing my eyes to focus. The throbbing in my head was at least bearable, but that was only before I noticed where we had ended up. I mean, it was clear that we were inside the mouth of.... something...

Mountains of space trash and towering hills of wood piles littered the inside of whatever creature we'd been swallowed by. The pink fleshy insides were disturbing enough, but the line of bones, along the top most part of the creature arched overhead, made my skin crawl. Bad enough the acrid smell that lingered through the air, was nearly impossible to get used to. Giant teeth flushed against cavernous wall behind me. Near there, I spotted the wrecked Gummi ship which lay in shambles, stuck amongst the ruin of garbage. I watched as Chip and Dale worked quickly to try and clear the ship and check for any immediate damage.

From the clearly shattered glass of the cockpit, it seemed like we'd been ejected from our vessel. My eyes carefully followed the trail of glass, that did not stop at me. I noticed I'd been sat in a
small pile of broken shards. My gaze continued on until I spotted something several yards away--
an unmoving heap of red and yellow.

"Sora!" I shouted, in a whisper as I shot to my feet, hurrying to his side. "Sora! Sora, wake up!"

Gently, I shook him as the words urgently left my lips. A bit concerned at the lack of a response, I
rolled him over so that I could see his face, clutching his shoulders tight. A quieted, "Riku..." left
his lips in a groan, as his eyebrows knit together, perhaps in pain. I wondered if maybe he'd been
dreaming but, when his eyes slowly opened, the fog seemed to clear.

"Yukari...?" He gently groaned. Sitting up, he looked about himself before yelping out in pain,
clutching his head. "W-where... Where are we?" He asked, drawing his hand away from his face,
and looking up at me with glassy eyes.

"You're... bleeding!" I said, cupping his face in my hands. I hadn't immediately noticed it, but there
was a trickle of blood trailing down the top most part of his head. Though, just a bit smudged from
his hand, it seemed to persist.

"I am--?" Sora seemed not all there, as his eyes continued to focus and unfocus.

Gently, I moved his face around as I inspected for any other wounds. But whence I found none, I
let my thumb pass over his forehead, brushing back his hair. A slightly deep gash raced up, from
the tip of his forehead and into his hairline. It wouldn't be much, but I kept a few bandages and tiny
alcohol wipes from the gummi's first aid stash, in my back pocket. Pulling them out, I cleaned his
wound. Sora winced a little at the sensation, but didn't make any more of a fuss, as I planted the
bandage on him.

"There." I said, inspecting him. One of my hands had still been gently cupped at his cheeks. I gave
him a little smile as I looked him over. I hadn't even noticed the other little nicks and scratches he'd
gotten since we started our quest. But they didn't seem serious.

"Th..thanks..." Sora stammered, his face awash in a deep, blush.

I punched him in the shoulder, hard and he howled in pain. "What's going through your head?" I
 giggled. "Don't be weird."

Rubbing his shoulder, he hadn't removed his gaze from mine. Although now the red had been
drained from his cheeks. I guess I'd read his expression wrong? He opened his mouth to speak but,
seemed like he was debating against it as, his eyes drifted to the moistened tongue we sat upon.
Clamping his lips together tight, I wondered what was going through his head. Although, I never
got the chance to ask, when he opened his mouth to speak again.

"Where... are we?" He asked.

I found it so weird that I couldn't read him in that moment. Normally I seemed to just... know what
people were feeling or thinking from looking into their eyes. But for that second... Sora was
unreadable. I decided that whatever he'd wanted to say, could wait.

"Well, I think we--"

"Knock it OFF!!" A crackly, albeit familiar voice, shouted over my words, coming from a little
ways away.

Both of our heads shot in the direction the yelling had come from. Helping Sora to his feet, we
were easily able to follow the angry shouts to their source. There had been no mistaking that the
disgruntled yelling was coming from Donald.

We spotted Goofy, first, standing near one of the tall mountains of wood and trash as he held his shield over his head. Donald was there too, his head craned back on his neck as he looked up towards the top of the towering heap. He seemed to be searching for something.

"Oh, hey." Goofy greeted, once we'd gotten close enough for him to notice. "You guys alright?"

"Yeah...." I answered, still unsure of the situation. "But… what are you guys doing?"

"And where are w—Ack!" Sora let go a tiny yelp as something came falling out of the air, conking him right over the head. Somehow, he'd managed to catch it as it bounced into his palms. To our surprise, he'd been cradling a small trinket box.

"By the looks of things, it seems we've been swallowed up by Monstro!" Jiminy announced, appearing atop Goofy's shield.

Sora and I huddled closer to Goofy now, not fancying the idea of getting smacked by any more fallen objects.

"Who now?" Sora asked, rubbing his forehead.

"Monstro!" Jiminy repeated jumping on to Sora's shoulder. "He's a whale of a whale!"

"And, I'm guessin' from lookin' 'round here, he swallowed up everyone." Goofy supplied. "And for today's weather, expect showers."

Conveniently, another one of those little trinket boxes dropped down from above and clanged loudly against Goofy's shield.

"Heavy showers..." He corrected

"Hey!! Who's up there!" Donald shouted angrily. It was a surprise he'd not completely lost his voice.

As if it had been some sort of response to his question, the shower of expensive lock boxes came to an abrupt end. From this, a little boy, with a great wide grin on his face, poked his head out over the side of the pile and wreckage and beamed down at us. It only took a moment for him to come trotting down the pile, for me to realize he was no ordinary boy.

A wooden puppet, with no strings attached, walked and talked before us. In his red overalls, blue tie, and feathered cap that sat atop his black locks, the little child, grinned up at us with bright blue eyes.

"How do ya do?" It greeted happily.

"Pinocchio!!" Jiminy shouted, leaping from Sora's shoulder and onto the ground at the puppet's feet.

"Oh! Hi, Jiminy!" The puppet, Pinocchio, seemed to know exactly who our cricket friend was, as he knelt over and picked him up in his wooden hands.

"What in the world are ya doing here?" Jiminy asked.

"Umm..." The puppet took a second to think as it rubbed its chin, thoughtfully before responding. "Playing hide-and-seek."
"I just don't believe it. Here I've been up at night, worried sick about ya. Why, of all the—What the!!"

Jiminy's outburst was not unwarranted, as our whole party was treated to a bit of a surprise. Pinocchio’s little wooden nose, popped from his face, growing longer in size as it sprouted little branches with protruding leaves.

"His nose!" Donald noted. "Grew!"

"Obviously...." I narrowed my eyes at Donald, who narrowed his eyes back.

Pinocchio!" Jiminy gasped. "Are you tellin' me the truth?"

"Yes!" The puppet nodded. But his nose seemed to betray him, growing just a bit longer.

"Looks to me, like you're fibbin'. And you know you're not s'pose to tell no lies." Jiminy scolded, wagging a finger in the puppet's face. "You know that a lie will only grow, until you get caught. Plain as the nose on your face!"

"Sorry..." Pinocchio frowned apologetically. "I'll never tell lies as long as you're around."

To this, the puppet's nose shimmered with a green light, before shrinking back towards his face at a comfortable inch.

"Good." Jiminy grunted, with satisfaction.

"Uhhh..... Hate to interrupt. But..." I spoke out, feeling pretty bad for cutting into their reunion. "How do you guys know each other?"

"Oh! I'm his conscience." Jiminy answered proudly. "A fairy asked me to help him not to stray off the path. Pinnoch's made a real big promise to be good so that one day, he'd be able to become a real boy! But we've been separated ever since we lost our world."

"Oh, that's right!" Pinocchio’s sudden outburst echoed around us as he turned to run off. "Father!"

"Wait!" Jiminy shouted. "Wait, Pinnoch!" Then he turned to us. "That little puppet’s quite the handful. But we've gotta keep after him!"

And so we did. Sloshing through the murky, thick saliva of the whale's mouth, we approached a little spot near the back of Monstro's throat. I'm surprised I was even able to call it cozy, despite where we'd been and all. But in front of us was a fully in-tact, vessel. It was small, and just the right size, for its user-- an elderly man, sporting glasses, and an outfit quite similar to Pinocchio’s. His hair and killer mustache were grayed out but his, bright blue eyes were clearly full of wonder as he turned at the sound of our approach.

It was apparent, he'd not been alone, as on his little ship, which looked more like a small piece of his bedroom, had been a little black cat with curious blue eyes. Near the bed, on the night stand, sat a fish in its bowl, swimming around excitedly as we approached.

"Well would you look at that, Firago." The old man grinned down at his feline. "We've got company. Looks like the whale's swallowed yet another set of victims."
Pinocchio trotted over to the older man and handed him a green gummi block, he'd yanked from his pant pocket. It'd been small, almost like a shard of a greater piece. I noticed as Donald and Goofy's brows went up at the sight of the item. But, the old man looked at it closely through his glasses like he'd seen a variety of them.

"Oh, why thank you my boy." He said, taking the block and placing it into a pile of others, of varying sizes.

"I'm Geppetto, by the way." The man, said, rummaging around a bit. He seemed to be squaring away whatever mess lay at his feet, now that he'd had company. "I thought I recognized a familiar cricket amongst your party."

Jiminy tipped his hat at the man in greeting. "Good to see you're safe, master Geppetto!"

"Likewise, of course." He smiled. "but, ah... who might the rest of you be?"

"I'm Yukari." I introduced. "This is Sora, Donald and Goofy."

"Howdy!" Goofy had been the only other voice to ring through with a greeting

"You trying to use those to get out of here?" Sora asked.

We'd been stood, port bow, as we watched on. That was until the man, Geppetto had beckoned us aboard, explaining himself, all the while.

"Ah yes." He went on to say. "I myself got swallowed by Monstro, too, as you can see. It was only because I was trying to find my boy here, Pinocchio after we'd gotten separated."

Pinocchio had been aimlessly skipping about, after hopping down off the ship. He was slowly making his way, away from the vessel. "I'm gonna go look for more blocks!" He announced, carefree. "Then we can make a huge, ship!!"

"Ah-- S-stay close, Pinocchio!" The man called after him, with a bit of resignation. Then he turned back to us. "After the collapse of our home, I'd been searching far and wide for him. While he certainly is a bit of an impatient youngster, he's still a good boy." The old man sighed longingly as he sat himself down on the edge of his bed. "Ah, I can't wait for the day he'll become a real boy..."

As I crouched down, petting the cat, what had taking a liking to me, I couldn't help but find it curious. These people had lost their home, just like Sora and I, yet somehow they ended up here. Jiminy had been with us, for quite some time, and who knows where else before that. I couldn't imagine, how he'd felt. He said he'd been worried a ton about Pinocchio, but this was the first time we'd ever heard mention of him and his father.

Maybe Jiminy might have been separated long enough to resign himself to the fact that his small family may well have been lost to the stars? Only hope could have remedied such a pain of losing a loved one.

"A real boy?" Goofy had asked. "Jiminy, didn't you mention that before?"

"I did!" Jiminy, nodded, from Sora's shoulder. "Master Geppetto here, made Pinocchio himself. He's a master of woodworks after all."

Geppetto grinned at the compliment, but said little else.

"Any who, it was one night, that a bright, blue light shined in through the window of the wood
shop. After a wish upon a star, the blue fair herself, had appeared!"

"Blue fairy?" Donald inquired.

"Yep! She granted Geppetto’s wish to bring Pinocchio, to life. She said that if he was good, that she would turn him into a real boy!"

I scratched the chin of the cat, trying to think that one over in my head. "So... she gave him a heart?" I asked, aloud.

"Hmm... Well I s'pose she might've."

"That's... pretty incredible." Sora voiced.

I had to agree. I could only imagine that you had to be on some sort of godly level to just... give previously inanimate objects life. And even then, she promised to make Pinocchio a REAL boy? That was wild on its own. For someone to grant a wish like that, on some passing whim... I couldn't imagine, housing any sort of power like that.

“Ahhh!! Help!” The sudden cries of Pinocchio sounded from the end of Monstro’s mouth.

Loud gurgling roars cut through the air and prompted everyone’s attention to the sound of danger. Rushing in the direction of the commotion, our party found the young puppet entrapped within the mouth of a fat, bulbous Heartless. It was like... a mix between a plant and a sort of cephalopod. A curly little sprout grew out of the thing’s head where, tentacles shot from the place its ear's should have been. Leaves and.. root appendages for legs, writhed from just below its cage-like belly.

The stomach, seemed to act as another head, all on its own, as it snapped before clamping its mouth shut.

Pinocchio cried out, again. "Father! Someone! Please, help!” He slammed his little shoulder against the bars... err... teeth, with little progress.

"Pinocchio!" Geppetto hollered, thoughtlessly rushing at the Heartless.

"Watch out!" I shouted.

It had been too late when I noticed the thing whipping out its clawed tentacle to smack the old man away. Thankfully, I hadn’t been the first to catch wind of this, as Goofy dove in to disrupt the attack with his shield. Donald lashed out with a fire spell but, the thing leapt out of the way just in time.

"Pinocchio!" Geppetto shouted once more as his son's cries faded into obscurity with the Heartless’s escape into the recesses of the whale.

"Are you alright?" I asked, helping him up. I managed to catch him sit down hard, from the shock of nearly being attacked. But otherwise he seemed okay.

"My... My little boy." He huffed, breathing heavily. "I don't know what I'd do without him. He's my light! Pinocchio is my light! If... If I--"

"Don't worry." Sora's voice came in gentle, as he gripped the old man's wrist. The look in his eye was sympathetic. "I promise you, we'll bring him back." It was a side of him I felt vaguely familiar
His tender expression was one that seemed, only existed, buried within my memories. For some reason, I could feel the blistering summer heat of the island again. Seagulls whined in the distance. The soft voice of a young boy drifted into my ears.

"Are you alright..?" it went.

Suddenly, the image of a younger Sora reached into was seemed like a small alcove of leaves and shrubs. He was trying to make a gentle grab for me.

"Yukari...?" Sora's little from echoed. But somehow, his face was different.

It had been far away, even though he was right in front of me—a blurred mess that struggled to articulate itself. Garbled sounds came out of his mouth, like he was talking through water. Like.. the water that was suddenly all around us, submerging our tiny forms in the massive monster that was the ocean.

For some reason, I panicked. I couldn't swim. Or at least my body wouldn't move as I felt myself struggling to breathe. The pressure was too much for my little form. My long hair slowly wrapped around me, crawling over my vision like Darkness in the water. And with it, a deep rattling hiss, broke through the thick ambience of the ocean.

"Sleeeeeeeeep...."

"Yukari!" Sora's voice shouted. But this time it was stronger-- more clear. "Yukari, are you okay?"

What?

I blinked and found myself back in the belly of the whale. Back in the present. Sora had a hand clapped onto my shoulder as he gazed into my eyes, concerned to say the least.

"Uh... What?" I managed.

"Are you okay?" Goofy asked. "Ya went and spaced out on us for a second."

"Yeah... You sure you're feeling alright?" Sora asked.

A few more blinks was what it took to shake the cobwebs from my brain. Glancing across my team, I shot them all a confused grin.

"Of... course." I managed. "But I think Pinocchio takes precedence."

Obviously unconvinced, the team exchanged a few worrisome glances before we headed into the dark cavernous entrance of what could only be the whale’s throat.

For a good long run, it was dark and moist. The foul smell of the squishy tunnel flooded into my lungs, and I found it hard to fight every urge to gag. Before long, the narrow passage opened up into, what felt like, a whole other universe. The world around us was still squishy and gross, but vibrant. The walls, floors and all of the slimy insides, quivered and undulated about.

"Gross." Donald spoke out.

I couldn’t have agreed more.
The chamber we stood in wasn't as big as the inside of the mouth. The walls, closed in a bit tighter, packed and writhing. We'd only come to a stop because a new obstacle had fallen upon us.

"Uh... Left or right, guys?" Sora asked.

Before us were the entrances to two different paths. Two different gross sections of the whale's insides, splitting off and most-likely dividing until finally dumping into the whale's stomach or bowels. I shuddered to think just how deep we were about to go, to find this Heartless.

Oh the adventurers of a Keyblader.

"We split up." I said.

"Seriously?" Donald asked, looking at me like I'd lost my marbles. "You really think that's even remotely a good idea?"

"Dude... we're inside a whale, not a maze." I retorted. "I'm pretty sure the chances of us running back into each other are high."

"She does have a point there." Jiminy echoed, bouncing up, atop Sora's head.

"See? He agrees." I grinned, confidently.

"What about that there Heartless?" Goofy inquired, a bit of a nervous look on his face. "If it's here, that can only mean, Maleficent might be around right?"

Everyone fell silent for a moment. I hadn't even thought about that. After all, this wasn't a world. It was a giant sea creature floating through space. How that's even possible, is the real mystery on its own. But I wasn't about to start racking my brain on that.

"It doesn't matter." Sora finally spoke up. "Our goal is to get Pinocchio back, no matter what. If we run into Maleficent, we'll deal with her if we have to. But the Heartless and Pinocchio take priority."

Everyone looked to Sora, a bit stunned. Just the idea of him taking definitive charge seemed like a moment of growth for him. Throughout this journey, we'd been through some wild scenarios, but Sora always appeared to approach them with a bit of trepidation. But now, the look in his eye was different. He was determined to get Pinocchio back. I wondered if any of that had to do with Alice and Jasmine, getting snatched right under our watch. The idea of letting that happen again, with Pinocchio, would have been shattering. Especially since Geppetto had looked so desperate to get him back. It was already enough to watch as Aladdin’s eye's completely drained away when he learned the truth. I didn't want my heart to break for another soul who'd lost someone precious to them.

"Then that settles it." Jiminy announced.

"So how about me and Donald, and Goofy and you?" I suggested. "You guys go left, we go right?"

"Wait, why does Sora get, Goofy?" Donald inquired, prepared to oppose.

"A Keyblade, for each party?" Sora noted. "That's not a bad idea. And Donald, you can watch her and make sure she doesn't cast any magic." He laughed.

Donald's face lit up. He grinned, rubbing his bill. Nodding as he gazed at me with a lofty expression.
"Hardy har...." I narrowed my eyes at Sora, who was pretending not to notice.

Our separation was without any other objections. Heading down our designated paths, we hurried through Monstro's insides. The squirming surfaces did little to deter us as Donald and I dashed through the passages as fast as we could. There weren't any Heartless in sight, but that wasn't to say that we hadn't been keeping an eye out.

It didn't take long for the chambers to change around us. It started with small pools of acid. The stuff dripped everywhere from overhead. Then before we could do a double take, we were passing over slimy, make shift bridge ways to avoid rivers of the green, acetic juices.

"I hope Goofy and Sora are okay." Donald said, whence we passed over a pit that seemed to sink further into Monstro's belly. The fact that it was dark and deep, wasn't at all a nice sign.

I drew in a sharp breath as we came to a temporary stop. The way ahead of us was clear but something was off. The loud, near and distant thrumming of the whale's insides which had been all around us, was slowly beginning to make me sick. The heavy vibrations that surged through the enormous creature would have been something I was sure to get used to. Maybe it had been from fatigue or having been beat up from the crash, but I didn't feel too well.

My mind felt a bit hazy, like my brain was being sucked into a pit of fog.

And then the hisses and the crying started.

My eyes darted around. I turned about myself, to see if we'd been followed by crying children and black, face-eating silhouettes, but we'd still been alone.

"Yukari?" Donald's voice seemed to tear through the fog that was clouding my brain. But even then, it quickly got swallowed as his words came in clear only to grow distorted and murky.

"Do you hear that?" I asked him.

But then the crying got louder. Like someone was raising the volume on a little radio, where the sobs had been coming through. Loud static crackled to life, accompanying the melancholic melodies. It grew so loud, it brought back that awful thrumming, that now resonated painfully in my chest. The mixture of static, crying and hisses surged like a powerful wave that crested over me, preparing to swallow me up.

"Yukari! MOVE!!" Donald's voice shot through me.

Involuntarily my body was thrown against the squishy walls of Monstro's insides. It didn't hurt as much as it could have, but whatever had hit me, got me right in my shoulder and upper arm. The pain throbbed. It was like an eight out of ten. When I rose to move it, I yelped out in pain. There was nothing but a blast of fire in that arm.

"Snap out of it, Yukari!" Donald shouted once more, from across the cavern.

Looking up, I found Donald holding his own against the Heartless from before. It thrashed angrily about, swinging its tentacles and spewing what looked like poisonous loogies. Donald managed to either dodge them or burn them out of existence, but it was clear he needed help.

"Get me out of here!!" Pinocchio’s cries sounded from within the belly of the Heartless.

It was then that, I regained my senses. I lifted my left arm, seeing how I wasn't able to use my right any longer, and the Oblivion, sparkled into existence in a show of dark blue and purple flames and
I watched as one of the tentacles were about to swing around, and hit Donald on his flank. I dove in, to intercept, bashing the writhing root away. But the thing got mad. It countered, and snapped at my face with its claws.

"Fire!" Donald shouted, hitting it with a dose of heat.

It screeched in pain, creeping back whilst wildly thrashing at us. I stood my ground, waiting for an opening but, sadly I was in for yet another unexpected ride. Amidst it's thrashing, the Heartless charged us, diving into my personal space. It was so hard to react, I stumbled back as the thing threw its tentacles across the chamber, slapping Donald and I right in the chests, sending us flying it the dark pit, we'd just managed to safely cross.

The wind that whistled in my ears was not without the accompanied, gurgling howls of the Heartless before it darted off. Pinocchio’s fading screams and Donald's rattling cry as he fell alongside me, in the Darkness, were the last things I'd had the pleasure of hearing as my world began to fade.

*****

Glistening tears, gently reflected the sun's distant light, as it sprinkled into the dark thicket. The pit in which the little girl had fallen into, was shallow for an adult, but deep enough for a young child her size to get stuck in. Over and over, she'd tried to climb out, but the steep, dirt walls, were unforgiving and laden with rocks that slit her skin and refused to support her weight.

She let go a few more sobs as she gingerly cradled her cut hands. One of the wounds were deep, and hurt so badly, she could barely use it. She looked up again. The sky was blocked out by the canopy of leaves of the trees that protected her of the sun's heat, but hid her away from her friends.

For a moment, she stopped her whimpering long enough to think. Their game of hide and seek had gone on for a good while. This had been their last round and she wanted nothing more than to not get caught first. In all her previous attempts to hide herself, she'd been caught straight away. This time, she felt she may have been hidden so well, she might not be found.

For how long she'd been in that ditch, she had no clue. It felt like maybe half an hour now. But the others would have been sure to come looking for her. Wouldn't they?

Her bright green eyes began to flood with tears. She wondered if they had even remembered she was playing their game only to recall, all the kids had to go back to the main island with the adults. They'd come looking for her. They find her eventually.

But she didn't want to be there anymore, right then. She wanted to see her friends. She wanted to feel the heat of the evening sun. Through the trees she could see the sky was painted a deep gold. Night time was approaching and she feared she'd be stuck there, alone in the dark.

She shook silently, looking around for another way out. The thought of climbing the walls again, made her heart drop. Her hands had already been raw and stinging from the previous attempts. Her only fear now was that she would tear the skin straight from her bones.

Through her breaths, she heard a sound.

She stood there silently, listening as it grew steadily in volume. It sounded like something bipedal,
walking across the dirt floor of the Island's jungle thicket. The steps seemed slow and careful, but there was no mistaking it. It was a person.

Almost too excited, she let go a quiet cry.

"S...Sora?" She called out.

The noise stopped briefly before picking up speed. It drew closer until coming to a halt, right above her head. The girl's eyes lit up for just a second, until she realized who it was.

"Yukari?" A boy's voice called out but, it was not the one she had been hoping to see. His blue, green eyes gazed down at her with concern. The way the fading light caught his silvery locks, almost made it look like his hair faintly glowed in the evening light.

The girl took a small step back. Her lips were shut tight now as she nervously looked to her older friend. It was clear she wanted to speak to him, but somehow her voice was stuck.

"Are you okay?" The boy asked. "How'd you get down there?"

The girl shook her head to the first question. Then repeated once again as her eye shifted to the ground. He could see that she was growing more anxious. But he wasn't sure what to do about that. She only seemed to relax around one person, and he hadn't been with him.

"Don't worry. I'll get you out." The boy said, gently. "I'm gonna go get the others so we can go an--"

"No!" A little yelp emanated from the child in the pit.

She looked up at the boy now, her bright green eyes sparkling again, as tears began to form. "Don't... leave..." She squeaked.

The boy froze. Stunned, he hadn't been expecting the girl to ever speak to him. But he couldn't think of that now. He scanned the earthen floor about himself, looking for a way to pull her out. With all the resources about him, it didn't take long for him to take hold of a few stray vines and the fallen trunks of young, slim trees.

With his small, hands he quickly got to work. He grabbed up the vines, and started to knot them together with the old stray nature twine he'd found lying around. He remembered what he learned from his dad, with ropes, and fishing, and even the little leaf crafts he'd done with his friends. He made it so there was ample vine to grip before starting for the old fallen trees. They weren't too large, and were only easy to move when he rolled them along the ground. With its weight, he'd keep the vines in place before carefully letting them down into the pit.

"I'm coming down." The boy announced, carefully gripping the roots.

The young girl watched on, holding her breath. She didn't want him to get stuck in there too. But the boy seemed so confident in what he was doing. She'd been amazed at his resourcefulness, but it wasn't enough to stop her trembling.

"There." He said. "I think it'll hold if it's just us. Can you climb up?"

She looked into his eyes, now. She was no longer crying but, it was clear that there was pain, written in her features. Carefully she presented her cut up hands to him, wincing as she did.

He gazed upon them, a look of commiseration in his eyes. He would ask if she was okay but, it was
clear, the answer. She'd been down in this pit for some time now. To make matters worse, she'd been very much alone.

"Don't worry." He said, his voice quiet, for her sake. "You can climb on my back. I'll carry us both out."

The girl's big green eyes, watched him carefully. She noticed his heavy breathing, from the effort. The rise and fall of his chest, and the bits of sweat that sprinkled his brow and chin. He was already exhausted. He'd probably been looking for her for a while. Perhaps everyone had. She couldn't let him carry her up there all by himself. It was then that the guilt began to flood back into her. The thought that she should have let him run back to get help, now slapping her in the chest. It would have been easier for him...

"S... sorry..." She finally decided to say. She didn't want to look at him.

"It's alright." The boy said, with a bit of a laugh.

Looking up, the girl was surprised to catch him smiling.

"I'm just glad you're okay." He continued. "You're so quiet, I didn't think we'd be able to find you. I'm lucky you called out when you did."

The girl's teeth had been clamped so tightly together as she listened to his words. Where she had been so upset and afraid before, she almost couldn't believe how relieved the boy had made her feel. His presence had not always brought her a sense of comfort. While she trusted his judgement, and respected him as if he were a leader, the girl had not once found him to be a source of solace.

The boy held her hands, carefully in his. Cupping them, he gave her a gentle grin. "You can trust me, y'know. I'm gonna get us both out of here."

His contagious smile, quickly spread to her, as she gave him a small, tug at the corners of her lips.

It had been a strange time and place, perhaps, for her to find her relationship with this boy strengthen. He'd promised she could trust him, and somehow all it took were those words, for her to believe it. And for that, she felt just a little braver-- like she'd found a new source of strength, even if just a little.

As the boy turned to ready himself, to climb the steep wall of the pit, he couldn't help but feel giddy. It might have been that need... a sort of feeling of desperation to have her be able confide and trust in him, the way she did the other boy. He wanted to be closer to her. For what reason, he couldn't place. There was something about her that was different from the other kids. Not the fact that she was quiet, and aloof. But the true reasons always eluded him. It was as though his memory had been altered for the sake of her existence. And so he found himself, drawn to her because she held a world of secrets he couldn't begin to understand.

He wanted more than anything to get to know her, and protect her. Yet, it felt like those feelings and desires were implanted right into his heart.

"I found her! And Riku's here, too! They're down there!" A little boy's voice tore through the silent evening.

When the two young children, down in the pit looked up, they found themselves both surprised, yet relieved.

"Sora!" The little girl, shouted, clearly more than eager.
The boy she'd been with, shattered just from the excitement in her tone. He wanted her to be that excited when she saw him.

But he'd have to let it go. Now, the parents had come swarming around the pit, making their way in, to retrieve the children. The little boy's plans to save his friend had been dashed. He wondered, if she'd still have faith in him— If she'd still express reluctance when it came to his presence, or if she'd still smile at him the way she'd done, when they were down in that pit.

*****

"Wake Up!!"

My eyes shot open and I was met with white hot pain, burning at my chest. I didn't have to wonder if there was going to be a bruise later. I already knew there would. To make matters worse, it was possible, that Heartless probably broke another rib.

The sound of sudden gentle whimpering cut my thoughts short.

Lifting my head, I began to truly take in my surroundings. Dark purple walls vibrated around me. Bright green veins webbed in and out of the sinewy surfaces. A bright wave of light danced up the walls to the beat of Monstro's intestinal thrumming. I didn't even need to question where I was, when I saw the shallow rivers of acid that lay all around me. I got lucky, landing on this tiny island.

Attempting to ignore the pain, I pushed myself up. Somehow that had been the hardest thing I'd done in what felt like ages. Even breaking my fall with an air spell, the previous night, had been easier than rising from my spot whilst housing some broken bones. But once I was finally on my feet, things got a tad easier. Looking around, I noticed Donald hadn't been with me. I could only imagine he maybe fell through a different crevice of the whales insides.

I hoped he was alright...

The sobbing drew my attention again, and my head slowly turned back to the only exit of the chamber.

I headed through with nowhere else to go. The sobbing grew in volume, accompanied by distant voices, quietly conversing.

"You know that boy no longer cares about you." I heard a familiar voice say. "He's all but deserted you for his new friends. The Keyblade has clouded his very judgment. You are nothing to him now but a mere afterthought."

I stopped, to listen. Though the words, seemed to echo all around me, they came in clear. It wasn't like the watery garbles of the whimpering. It was like... someone was actually close by.

Maleficent... was close by.

I slowly proceeded forward, heading through another chamber and peeking my head around corners, searching for the host of the voice.

“I can't seem to understand why you even care enough to trouble yourself with his presence.”

"I don't. I was just.. messing around with him a bit."
My feet ceased all movement at the sound of Riku's voice. My chest tightened and my mouth went incredibly dry. Up until this point, I had very little proof that Riku was willingly or even happily working with Maleficent. Sure, he hadn't met back up with me last night after the events of the cave, collapsing. Even scarier, I hadn't even wondered if he'd even made it out safe.

Hearing his voice was great news but... when heard in conversation with that witch...

"Of course, of course." Maleficent's words were drenched in an air of sarcasm. "Forget about him. It will only cause the lingering Darkness in your heart to stir. And it is that Darkness that the Heartless pray upon. Instead, you should focus your attention on that girl. I cannot stress enough, how her presence in our midst is of the utmost importance."

I started moving again-- following the voices as they grew clearer. No longer did they echo through the low level chambers of Monstro's insides. Upon minutes, they were right before me. The witch had been standing over Riku, her black eyes swallowing up his innocence as she prayed on his naivety. What Riku didn't know was cannon fodder for her. She could use it to her advantage, spinning lies however she liked. I didn't know what all she had told him, but I had to assume that the "boy" she mentioned previously had to have been Sora.

I stood myself tucked around the base of a corner. And although I thought myself perfectly hidden, I wondered if Maleficent could sense me like she had done so, before.

"What do you want her for, that could be so important." Riku asked. His body language was clearly untrusting, but his eyes seemed to submit, still looking to the green woman for answers.

"All in due time, my child." She said, grinning. "But know that her importance reaches far beyond the gathering of princesses. Her sleeping power is what I'm after. But I intend no harm to come to someone so rare and precious a gift."

Riku's eyes drifted to the floor. His hand, now clenched tightly at his side. For once I couldn't read him. And I think he was determined to keep it that way for Maleficent.

"Well... She's not... what I came here for." He slowly started, trying to move the discussion away from me.

I wondered why.

"You told me that puppet would be able to help bring Kairi back."

"Kairi?" I let the words fall away from my lips, not even caring if I'd exposed my hiding spot.

Both of the two, averted their gaze towards me. Riku seemed terribly surprised. His eyes widened and his chest went tight. It was clear he was far more shocked to find me there than Maleficent, who was grinning as she watched me slowly approach.

"Ahhh. So I see, you've finally decided to join the conversation." She chuckled. "Why not tell her, Riku? After all, she is someone you can trust."

As she spoke, bright green flames swallowed her up. And even when she had completely vanished, her quiet laughs could be still be heard, fading off until there had been nothing but the distant thrumming of Monstro.

"What... what did she mean?" I asked, not waiting a second longer. "Tell me what? What's happened to Kairi?"
Riku stood a few yards away from me. His eyes had been plastered on the ground-- a scowl had found its way onto his face. His hands, had been clenched tightly at his sides again. Nothing but anger, and upset were coming off of him.

"...Riku?"

He didn't immediately respond. His expression softened long enough for him to blink before he looked over at me. And that's the part I dreaded. That hidden facade I'd so clearly nailed, had finally melted away. Everything he'd been hiding up 'til now, was out on the table. His eyes betrayed whatever words he might have chosen to say. Noticing this slip, he attempted to steel himself as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Kairi's... Kairi's lost her heart." He answered, clearly.

He said nothing else as he allowed me a moment to let those words sink in.

At first, I was a bit confused. Through this journey we'd been thrown into, I'd come to learn a few things. Of Darkness and of Light are the forces that influenced the nature of people's hearts... Leon told us about losing your heart to Darkness, consumed by the Heartless. Ansem's report mentioned the same thing... talking about how he experimented on people using such a thing. And it was that very Darkness that caused his 'subjects' hearts to collapse." In both cases... those people tended to turn into Heartless.

For a second... my chest was seized with an incredible tightness. Wide-eyed, I looked to Riku, thinking the worst. "What... do you mean, she lost her heart?" I asked, an audible break in my voice.

"Exactly as it sounds..." He responded quietly. "Her heart... is gone. She's like an empty body. She can't wake up. And will never wake up... unless she's regained a new heart."

From his description, Kairi hadn't seemed to turn into a Heartless. But that didn't make it any better. She was relatively... dead. A hollow body? No Heart? That just spells eternal sleep. Not waking up is just as awful as her becoming a Heartless. She wouldn't be able to smile and laugh.. and live..

I thought back to the dream I'd had that showed, Kairi's eyes, dead and hollow. Now I knew what that meant. But what about the golden eyes? Maybe... maybe she'd get her heart back somehow...

"I told you... I've been looking for Kairi this whole time." Riku said, tearing me from my thoughts. His eyes seemed vacant... distant... Like he was speaking words he'd been rehearsing over and over again. Words that he'd been trying to convince himself to be true. "I had to go off on my own to find her. Sora wasn't trying to find her. He wasn't trying to find me. He doesn't care. He wasn't worried at all about what might have happened to us. To her... And when I finally found her... She was just... empty... She doesn't even move... She doesn't even... breathe..."

I tried to fight it. I tried to fight the tears the were welling up in my eyes. My nose stung and my heart raced. Riku's words were painful. But still... misconstrued. How could he say.. that Sora didn't care about him or Kairi??

Riku took a sharp inhale before continuing. "So I had to take it upon myself... to find a way to bring Kairi back. Maleficent helped me. She helped me find Kairi... and now she's going to help me wake her up. I don't have to keep looking anymore... I know what I have to do. And that's why I'm here..."
At first I didn't understand. But quickly recalling Riku's words of using "that puppet" to bring Kairi back... my heart sunk.

"Riku... Whatever you're doing... don't." I tried. Fighting the tears now were harder than before. To get that Puppet's heart, he'd have to... I didn't want to think about it. "There's.. There's gotta be another wa--" 

"You don't get it!") Riku stopped me, curtly. "Kairi's lost, her heart." His voice broke. "She's not... she's not waking up. I've tried to..." But he didn't finish. He couldn't

How could he? The possibility that Kairi could have been gone forever was hard for me too. And it would have been even worse for Sora.

Sora....

I remembered that moment in Merlin's house, before it had been reanimated. The old musty brick walls, reminded me of the secret place from the Island. But I hadn't been the only one to think that. Sora must have thought that too. And maybe that's why I saw, a little bit of his... hallucination...? Or whatever it was? I-I don't know... but something told me that, Sora could have been the answer to that mystery. The answer to Kairi being able to get her heart back. He might be the key.

"Maybe... Maybe Sora could help..." I suggested. "He could--"

"It's always, Sora, with you, isn't it?!) Riku snapped, raising his voice to a shout as he turned on me. Angryly, he stomped towards me, closing that space between us. His cheeks were flushed red, and his eyes seemed to sparkle with sadness but glow with anger simultaneously. I caught the rise and fall of his chest, as he attempted to calm his breathing. But something told me that whatever he'd had pent up inside, had been pent up for longer than the time that the Islands had been swallowed.

"Riku-- No. That isn't --"

"Why not, trust me for once?"

"What? I do trust you?" I protested.

"Really? Because that's not how it's felt for a long time." He said, his eyes somehow calmed and that... scared me. "You've always clung to him. You've always had some reason to go chasing after him. Even after we'd gotten separated, twice now... you've still found an excuse to get away from me."

"Riku... that isn't... that's not--"

"True?" He finished for me. But his tone indicated that he hardly believed it. "Then what is it? Do I scare you? Are you afraid of me?"

I couldn't answer him.

Riku had been standing so close to me I had to catch my breath. But it wasn't in that way that I'd always felt before... Like when I got flustered around him. It was in a way that I felt like he was unintentionally crushing me with his emotions. The intensity of his stare he held so fiercely... He hadn't been glaring at me but there was hurt and distrust in his eyes.

Somehow that deterred me from speaking. And it wasn't because he was right, but because he wasn't entirely wrong to think those thoughts. I mean... I did often turn to Sora. I did always try to
run back to him, because of the constant impossible crushing feeling of being alone with Riku. But that wasn't because I was scared of him... Not of him...

When the seconds dragged on too long, Riku's anger seemed to intensify. The air around him was so negative, it was suffocating.

"Forget it..." He said, he'd turned only his head at first. "I don't care what you think... All that matters is that I get Kairi's heart back. I'm... the only one who can."

"R-Riku wait!" I tried to stop him as he turned to run. I made the attempt to grab his hand, but my fingers had slipped through his, like a ghost.

He darted through the exit of the chamber, opposite of the one I'd come in through. I was determined to keep on his tail, but he was determined to lose me. I ran after him, gradually falling too far behind to keep up. I was at such a great disadvantage with the pain in my arm and body.

"Riku, please wait!" I cried out. Even after I'd lost sight of him, I knew I couldn't be too far behind. So I kept going. It was only when double entrances began appear, throwing me off his trail for good. Randomly choosing left and right paths, I kept up my speed, as much as I was able. But the possible broken rib, and the fire in my chest made it darn near impossible to breathe. All judgement had fizzled away when I took my final, left path, and slipped off the immediate edge that propelled me into another drop.

Although this one was a shorter fall, I hadn't been prepared for it as I ran off the edge. I sunk with my foot, thrust out. It's arch hitting the side of the spongy cliff. With poor footing, I careened sideways, and attempted to grab for the ledge whence I'd come from, but ended up slamming the underside of my chin into it, clamping my tongue between my teeth and sending my brain into an unpleasant coaster of pain. I wasn't even able to let out any cries, because the unconsciousness, was hitting me fast and hard.

I think it was the fall that kept me awake.

It was short and unpleasant, landing me in a pit of, slimy mucus like "water" that didn't seem to be acid. I crawled my way out of it as quick as possible, hacking and gagging when I reached "land." My breathing was so ragged and my body was so numb at this point, I couldn't see straight. I got up so fast, that the Whale's insides, seemed to churn around me. But I shut my eyes. I drew in a deep breath and started off again. The hot, moist air wasn't refreshing, but it kept me conscious.

But not alert.

All to suddenly, I collided into something. I yelped out, angrily as that, ‘something’ slammed into my hurting arm, sending it into a fit of raging fire.

What had run into me let go a sharp cry of pain, before a familiar voice brought me back to my senses.

"Yukari?"

Looking up, I noticed Sora had been right there, beside me. His deep blue eyes gazed on, worried. He attempted to helped me up, but when I hissed at him for touching my pain riddled body, he withdrew.

"A-are you okay?" He asked.

Yes.... Was what I really wanted to tell him. But I wasn't. I was hurt and upset. I really wanted to
tell Riku the truth. I... I just didn't know how! In that moment, I couldn't find the words. I was confused and I... was scared. But I wasn't scared of him! It was... ugh... I just... I wanted to tell him the truth. Tell him what I really felt about everything but I... couldn't.

God. I was in a ton of pain. My brain was all clogged up by that and the fear and the confusion.

"My... arm..." I managed to say through sharp breaths.

I tried to divert all of my emotions to that. And for a second it worked. I didn’t know if it was broken or sprained, or dislocated-- All I knew... was that it hurt. So. Much. I just really wished Donald was here. Maybe he had another elixir he could... magically pull from one of those many pockets. Heck, if he had any magic left, maybe he could heal me and I---

"Yukari, calm down." Sora’s voice gently passed into my ears. "Try to breathe. Tell me what's wrong"

It was then that I realized, I was hyperventilating again. Tears, were pouring out of my eyes and I couldn't make them stop. I hurt the guy... I liked... I hurt Riku. Riku was working with Maleficent. He'd probably done some pretty bad things. Kairi... lost her heart. And then... this pain.

There were too many things to regurgitate at this point, I was pretty sure I was at my limit.

"I... I ran into Riku..." I stammered.

But these words didn't appear to come to a surprise to Sora.

"Yeah... I did too..." And he didn't sound happy about it.

The lack of willingness to further broach the subject was more than enough evidence, he may have already heard the grim news. I looked up at him, and noticed his eyes were heavy. A thick fog of pain seemed to mist around him. Yet even though it was clear he was troubled, I could sense something like confliction, eating away at him.

He stood, and offered me a hand.

I hesitated a second to take it. I'd not seen Sora’s face so solemn and contemplative, since the class turtle passed away. I wondered what all Riku had said to him...

"I'm guessing you got separated from Donald, like I did Goofy." He noted, aloud. His eyes were on the next exit.

"...Yeah." I said, taking his hand and squeezing it tight. "We ran into the Heartless... and it did its worst. I passed out, but I don't know for how long. That could have been over an hour ago.."

"Feels like we've been down here for a long time... so it probably was."

Then he looked back at me. It seemed like every time he exchanged a glance, his eyes would darken further. His usual calm pools of blue were tainted with negative emotions. What Sora refused to say... I could feel. The weight of his pain, crushing down on me.

"Back on the ship the other morning..." His voice was so quite. "When we were talking about... everything-- just us. You said all that stuff about Riku. About him and Maleficent... Him and the Darkness... I think about that and everything else so much, I can't get it out of my head. I know I said, that we shouldn't worry about the things we weren't sure about but... How can I not worry?"

His eyes drifted to the ground. "I hadn't wanted to believe it then but... Maybe Riku is... he might
be.... our enemy now."

He turned to me with a look of hurt. A look that made my heart want to implode right inside my chest. I hated seeing him so upset. But there wasn't anything I could offer up to say that would change the situation-- change the way he felt. Change the truth.

"We may have to fight him..." Sora went on. "We could walk through the next chamber and run into him and we may end up fighting. And it won't be like... the way we did back on the Islands... It won't be for fun-- not a brawl between best friends... But a real battle, between foes. And I'm not ready to call Riku my enemy..."

His gaze went back to the exit and he remained ever quiet.

I understood his uneasiness. I didn't want to fight Riku either.

After gathering ourselves, we moved on, silently through the whales lower stomach. The tension was so fierce, I couldn't tell if it was the labor of my bruises and broken bones or the gravity of our situation... but suddenly I felt tight all over. A different pain had ensnared me. And I knew it wasn't something that could be fixed with any magic or tonic.

Before long, the world around us shifted. The terrain was far more slippery than usual. Hot, steaming gasses and singeing acid had been all we could see for miles to come. The end of the rode shortly following as we came to a dead end.

And with it, Riku was there, near the Heartless we'd been after this whole time. In his arms, was the puppet, as he'd pulled Pinocchio from the jaws of the creature. When he'd finally retrieved the small body, the Heartless let go a gurgled roar and vanished in a dark cloud of black.

Sora and I stood stunned as we watched him. Our footsteps had alerted Riku of our presence. And he greeted us with nothing more than a friendless glare. My heart slammed against my ribs.

Pinocchio hadn't been moving. His wooden body rag dolled in Riku arms. I was afraid that the worst had come to pass.

"R-Riku!" Sora got out. "What... are you doing!?")

But did he really not know? Maybe he wasn't aware of Riku's dark intentions or perhaps he still couldn't accept the truth.

"Isn't it obvious?" Riku smirked. "I'm saving Kairi! This puppet will make all the difference. I'll be able to do what you can't."

"What are you talking about!?" Sora snapped. "What's gotten into you? Don't you realize what you're doing!!"

"Are you serious right now?" Riku rolled his eyes as he moved to set the puppet in the corner. "You're telling me you'd make a big fuss over a heartless puppet? You're delusional."

"And you're not Riku!!" Sora shot back, summoning his Keyblade.

To this, Riku's glare returned.

"The Riku I know, would never walk down this path! He'd find another way! Are you telling me you've given up all reason for the Darkness?"
Riku scoffed, summoning his weapon. "Of course, you wouldn't get it... Neither of you would. I'll just have to save Kairi on my own!!"

Riku unexpectedly lunged towards us, with incredible speed I'd never seen him possess. I, who'd not called my weapon, stood stunned at the prospect of fighting back. But Sora was just as ready as he'd said he'd be, meeting Riku's blade head on. He threw himself at Riku, the weight of his Key, taking repetitive dives at the winged sword. The sharp clangs of metal resonated loudly through the chamber. The constant movement of the boys began to stir up tremors in the area itself.

I quickly glanced around, watching as gas, escaped the large sacks that lined the walls. The acid rivers running the length of the room bubbled and hissed. Something told me we'd been in the bowels but, we wouldn't be for long.

My head flung back to the fight, as I heard the cries of Sora disrupt my thought process.

He'd been clutching his forearm now. A thin line of blood trickled from beneath his gloved hand. He stumbled back a bit to catch himself. His breathing was labored and he was clearly exhausted. I mean... we'd all been bent out of shape after that crash. We fought through the night before and hadn't had a break yet. Sora was running on fumes and emotions. This wasn't a fight he was about to win.

"Is that really all you've got?" Riku drawled, his sword risen over head, ready to attack. He stood over Sora with a dark look on his face. "This was too easy."

Time seemed to slow as my heart leapt into my esophagus. Riku was about to bring his blade down upon Sora who stood there dazed and unmoving. Whatever he'd been about to do, Riku would later come to regret his actions. Ignoring all the pain, I surged forth with my Oblivion in hand. I ran at the two and shoved my Key out to block the attack. Clutching it with both hands I screamed at the violent discomfort, tearing my blade into Riku's guard and firing a short burst of electricity into the mix to possibly disarm him.

This only managed to send him wobbling back a bit but, I threw his guard no less. Riku's expression when he'd regained his stance was fierce. Yet I found no true malice in his eyes.

"Lightning?" Sora noted, from behind me.

I noticed the spark dancing at the edge of my vision, dying away on my blade. I had no idea how I'd done that. I didn't even know the thunder spell, let alone have any magic left to use it. And it sure hurt like heck just to summon it forth. Even if it was an unconscious attack.

I stood there shaking now. My shoulder was on fire and I thought I was going to pass out from the pain in my chest. But I fought it. With blurred vision, I started seeing double and even triple. Sometimes, two and sometimes three Riku's stood ahead of me, scowling.

He dashed at me now, with his blade to impale. From his stance, I could read that he thought I'd block his attack. Instead I deflected. His blade scraped angrily along the shaft of my Key before I shifted all of my weight and threw him away from me. He stumbled forward to catch himself before he hit the ground. I quickly dove in after him, with a follow up. But his speed was overwhelming as, he turned to block, but it was clear by the wince he'd let go, he'd been almost too late to do it.

Sora came back into the fray and ripped apart Riku's guard. This had effectively ended up throwing me back as well, but that didn't matter. Sora tore in with more, slamming his key over and over again, into Riku's sword. With every swing, a block met his attack. Riku quickly grew
overwhelmed by the speed and repetition, but he was reading the pattern. And when he'd learned it, he watched for the opening and tore right through.

Sora yelped out, in surprise, trying to recover quickly. But Riku wasn't so forgiving, punishing him with a blow to his forehead with the butt of his sword.

"Sora!!"

I opened my mouth to call for him, but it wasn't my voice that came out.

My head shot in the direction of the entrance to the bowels as Donald, Goofy, and Jiminy made their entrance. They all wore expressions of horror as they'd come upon the scene of three friends, in battle.

"Pinocchio!!!" Jiminy's voice tore through the thunderous, explosions that shook the chamber.

I hadn't noticed it before, but the acid river was spilling onto the edges of our platform. The room had become flooded with noxious gas. It smelled awful but I'm pretty sure it would do more harm to us than just make us want to gag.

"Pinocchio!! What happened to ya!!" Jiminy cried out, approaching the puppet.

My heart broke for Jiminy, but somehow I could still feel a faint morsel of life, beating within the wooden boy.

"Donald! Goofy!" I shouted. "Grab Pinocchio and get out of here! This place is gonn--"

"No!!" Riku shouted.

He'd left Sora and came running in my direction. But I knew I wasn't his objective. He was trying to stop them from taking Pinocchio away.

I hadn't been thinking when I'd done it, but I reached out and grabbed Riku with my hurt arm. I let go a short cry of pain, as he almost escaped my hold. But somehow I threw him back before he could get away and he tumbled to the ground.

"But what about you two!!" Goofy cried out. He'd quickly made it to Pinocchio and ushered him into his arms. "No way, we're gonna leave ya here!"

"Just, Go! Augh--!!" I screeched, as Riku had crashed all of his weight into me.

I crumpled under the pressure, the world spinning now. I tried to hurry back to my feet, but Sora, rushed in and swiped at Riku, who'd leapt back in the nick of time.

"So that's it..." Riku's spat, anger choking his vocals. "You've made your choice. The puppet, over Kairi."

"No one's choosing anything over anyone!" Sora retorted. "But we're not gonna let you do this, Riku!! We won't let the Darkness take your heart too!!"

"Why don't you tell that to Kairi!!" Riku roared, throwing his blade at Sora for what I was about to deem the last time.

"Enough!!" I shouted, jumping to my feet and throwing myself between the two.

I have to lay it all out right now before you start judging me.
In that moment, I wasn't thinking straight. I'd been consumed by an anger that didn't feel like my own. Watching Riku turn into something so angry and misguided, physically brought me pain. It hurt to see him like that. It hurt to watch him fight us and it hurt even more to raise a blade against him, the way we had.

I just wanted *our* Riku back. Sora had been right in a way. The Riku that we knew, wouldn't have done the things he been brought to do. He'd find another way-- a just and clever way. It was clear his decisions were not completely self directed. His heart was tainted with whatever evils Maleficent had fed him. And now he was convinced that our friendship was never real.

I threw my arm out to stop the blade. Too late, I realized what I had done. And too late, it was, for Riku to stop his attack when he'd started it. His eyes met mine and they immediately flooded with horror, as he tried to pull back his attack.

Pain erupted at my perfectly fine arm as a surge of bright blue electricity exploded from it. With wide eyes of pain and horror, I watched as the voltage traveled up my shoulder, sending white hot torture through my arm, that exploded in my face. My skin was hot, and it felt like it was melting off. The tightness in my gut, had wrung so taught, it was as if something popped in my stomach, bringing with it a wave of nausea, dizziness and more pain so intense I would have passed out right there and then.

But that hadn't been the last of it.

Riku's sword was still yet to come. He'd attempted to pull it back but still, an inch of his Soul Eater still met my shoulder. It kept going, passing through my skin and traveling down, past my arm pit and onto the bottom of my rib as I instinctively tried to pull away.

"YUKARI!!" Everyone seemed to shout all at once.

I cried out in pain for mere seconds before being hit with that intense wave of nausea from my gut. That lightening I'd conjured up, had very literally been pulled from nothing, and now I was paying for it.

When my body made contact with the ground, I found that I'd started to hyperventilate. But even that was extremely painful given my previous injuries. My chest tightened and my hands clamped up. I shut my eyes tight against the pain, trying to concentrate on something... anything. But it was nearly impossible with the boy's frantic cries, echoing on the edge of my hearing.

"Yukari!" Sora shouted, my name. "Yukari, st-stay with us! You have to calm down! Donald! Can't you heal her??"

I managed to open my eyes and found that everyone had huddled around me. Riku had been the one cradling me carefully in his arms. His big eyes stared down at me in shock. The realization that he'd started this, was awake in his mind.

"I-I don’t have any magic!" Donald stuttered.

"What abou--!!"

**FWOOOOOMMM!!**

Sora's words were cut short by an incredible tremor that seemed to shake the whole whale. Our party barely managed to keep hold of our spot, as a loud, deep howl thundered through the chamber. Gas exploded all around and acid splashed about, threatening to tag us.
"We've gotta go!!" Goofy shouted, hoisting Pinocchio up, readying to leave.

"But-- Yukari! She-- Wait!!" Sora cried.

He'd looked up to find that Riku and I were already on our way out. Riku had lifted me up in his arms. His hand had been tightly gripping my shoulder. I could hear his heart pounding in his chest, as my head had been leaned against it. Fear had taken a hold of him as he fled with me in his grasp. Out of the corner of my eyes, I watched as a dark sort of wispy portal, sprung up from the ground. A rounded wall of black and blue flames sputtered and moaned before us.

"Riku, stop!!" Sora shouted, running at the thing.

But Riku had already hurried inside. And the thing collapsed in behind us, leaving Sora to call out for us on the other side as Monstro's bowels erupted around him.

To Be Continued
Distorted Dreams Distorted Truths

Chapter Summary

Sora, Riku, and Yukari have become divided, now more than ever. After the events of their fight, inside Monstro, Yukari took a painful blow from Riku which had been meant for Sora. This did pretty well to break up the fight, but at the cost of Yukari’s well being. Too stunned at the consciences of his actions, Riku escaped Monstro through a dark portal. But not before nabbing Yukari and leaving with Sora calling after him.

Blood gushed out of my wounds as I floated in the dark. The pain was somehow bearable but, only if I kept my eyes squeezed tightly shut. My head throbbed numbly and my arm, that had been electrified, felt like it was being pan-seared.

Opening my eyes, I watched as the river of blood flowed out of me. It surged upwards like the rising water falls from that place I saw Riku wake up in, from the dreams. Something a bit more odd... the blood was... black.

This discovery was met by a sharp hiss that seemed to echo all around me. The stream of dark, gushing blood slowly began to morph and combust as an explosion of blue and purple ink, sifted closer to my face. The quiet snickers of the dark creature, prompted her features to morph within the dark, writhing mass. An inky, clawed hand, swarming with worm like tendrils, firmly clamped itself against my throat. In my dazed state, it was hard for me to fight back. Yet even so my fear was very palpable, as my heart hammered out of my chest to the point where I could feel it in my mouth.

"Too easy..." The Screecher hissed. Her red mangled fangs, nearly touching my skin. "You're making this far too easy... you stupid little girl. You know I could swallow you up right now. With my overwhelming presence of Darkness, it could consume you whole--swallow up your heart and take your body."

"W...why? What... What... did I... ever do... to you?" I struggled to ask. The question, only seemed to cause her grip to tighten.

Laughter so sharp, exploded from the Screecher's throat. Her maw had been torn so wide, her head seemed to have grown with every guffaw.

"What did I ever do to you?" She mocked me, imitating my week, and depleting voice. "How adorable!! The little, puppet wants to know just why all of this is happening to her!! Tell me. What's it like? How does it feel to have absolutely no clue who you are or when and where you came from?? No memory of a family, or a home. Even your memories from your childhood are patchy at best! I can't begin to imagine what it would feel like, waking up every day, completely oblivious to your own identity and your true purposes."

For a second, my mind had almost drifted from the conversation. What had she meant, by "When?" I assumed, the where I came from, was easily about my familial origins but, when, was a strange wording choice. Somehow, I managed not to chase that thought too far, as annoyance overtook my still fading conscious.
I didn't need some creature with messed of teeth, goading me on about my lack of memories or awareness of my true self, or whatever. I can't imagine that I'd been born with this... thing inside of me. This thing, that only wanted to eat me from the inside. Someone had to have done this to me. And there obviously had to be a reason for that. But the who, and why, were probably answers I'd never get.

But then, I remembered the Lady of Light. She might know.

"Aww, don't give me that look." The Screecher cooed, gently. Her yellow eyes stung my face with false pity as her grip around my neck tightened once more. Suddenly, I could just make out what appeared to be black, sludge, lapping up at the edge of my vision. Like small waves, they crested around my body. The flood was fast rising, and only incited my fears. I didn't know if I'd suffocate under the control of the Screecher, inside the dreams but, I really wasn't all that interested in finding out.

"I'm certain, that with time, you'll get all those precious pieces of your memories back." The Screecher's voice brought my attention away from the waters, for just a second. "But then again, perhaps not! I'd very much, rather watch you struggle and suffer as you attempt to search for the answers you seek!"

Now the sludge, was sloshing across my face. The foul black waters, teased my throat and nostrils as the Screecher forced me down under. What at first felt like water, now seemed more like slimy tendrils, wrapping around my body, yanking me down into the unknown. The Screecher let go a howling laugh. Her eyes bulged and her grin stretched impossibly farther across her features.

"Your recklessness and ignorance will be your downfall. I hardly need to lift a finger in your undoing as I simply, only need to wait for you to destroy yourself. You've already set the wheels in motion when you accepted my offer of strength. And now it is only a matter of time before the darkness begins to eat you from the inside out!!"

Screeching laughter chased her words as I struggled against the grip of the dark, oozing sludge. Smoke exploded around me as more slimy tendrils erupted from the waters. They snapped at and around my body as they yanked me down under the thick, black ocean. A sickening squelching noise tore into my ears as the stuff closed in, over my face.

Now there was nothing but darkness, as my body was pulled through the black depths of sludge. My mind was a mess of drowsy panic as I tried to think of a way to get free. But even so, what would that really do? Half of the time, it was entirely up to the dreams, what my fate would be. Had this even been a dream? I weakly squirmed around in my confines, the black oozing tendrils fully ensnared around my form like a shoddy cocoon.

And then, I suddenly realized how much comfort I tended to feel from the Screecher's constant holds on me. How there hadn't ever been any pain, whenever she attempted to coax me into a sound sleep. Even her hissing laughter which had never failed to shake me to the core, always managed to bring with it a sort of soothing element. While she herself seemed evil, was the Darkness itself? Was it really such a bad thing to draw upon its power, for the sake of good?

Maybe it was my blatant ignorance, or maybe the Screecher's influence really was getting to me. But in that moment, as my mind, quickly began to shut down, I almost had no problem with whatever fate were to befall me.

That was until, a bright, spear of light came zipping towards me through the darkness. I'd been so out of it, it'd been a whole ten seconds too late that I realized the thing was aimed right at me. Through my chest, the spear of light went. And with it came an unbearable warmth that felt as
though it was melting my insides. Fast expanding, it grew from a radiant little ball at my chest until it burned away the black tendrils and chased away the darkness around me. Loud, pained, hissing resound in my head for just a moment before dissipating. And as it did, the now white world around me faded as I lost any semblance of consciousness.

Kingdom Hearts: Ascendant Recollection

Chapter 09

Distorted Dreams Distorted Truths

"Yukari! Yukari, please wake up!"

My eyes flutter open. But I had not been prepared for the scenario that played before me.

The place was dark. A long, echoing hallway that looked to go on forever. But that may have just been the terrible lighting adding to the place, an extra level of depth. Sconces adorned the darkened stoned walls as eerie, green, flames bounced dimly from within.

Heavy breathing, quickly drew my attention.

At first, I hadn't been sure of what I was seeing. But once my eyes finally adjusted, I froze.

I stood before the scene of Riku, struggling to carry my unconscious body through the dark corridor. His panting and labored breath, bounced off the walls around him as he let go small whimpers and pained cries. He didn’t seem to be struggling with the weight of my body. Instead, his feverish actions hindered more on panic and concern. With his ever quickening pace, his legs seemed to give out from beneath him and he and my real-world self, went crashing to the floor in a crumpling heap.

Hurriedly, Riku got himself up, rushing over to my unmoving form. As gently as he was able he ushered me into his arms, cradling my upper body. He'd tightly gripped the spot on my shirt where my heart was. His eyes were wide with a mix of emotions. Even still it was clear he was fighting back his tears with every fibre of his being. He'd already chosen to keep on a cool headed facade. Yet even now that his mask was beyond cracked, he fought for his life to remain as candid as he was able. Yet, his young heart had betrayed him, and his eyes even more so. As I looked past the violent shaking of his hands, I could see through his eyes, which did him no favors. Clear as day, there was pure anguish in them-- a mix of horror, pain, and anger, swirled endlessly inside him, fighting to gain dominance over his heart.

"This is my fault!" Riku whispered. His breath was tight with regret as his grip on my shirt was even tighter.

Already, this whole scene was giving me a heavy dosage of whiplash. Immediately, the images from the battle inside Monstro came flooding back. But even that hadn't been as bad as seeing myself lying pale and lifeless in Riku's arms. Lightly singed, and washed in a deep crimson, my shirt was proof of the disagreement between Sora, Riku and I. A bright, red, burn in the shape of bolt of electricity, bloomed up my arm, wrapping around it like a dragon tattoo. My breathing was shallow, and almost nonexistent. Maybe it was the blood loss... I couldn't be sure but, somehow I could feel that my physical self was waning.

"Your fault?" A soft voice, sounded from behind me.
I turned to the green face of Maleficent, looking down at the heap of Riku and I. Her eyes held pity, but there had also been something else-- Malevolent Glee.

"Why, none of this is your fault." She said. Her thin lipped smile was perfectly luminiated by the dim torch light. "If it weren't for that boy, Sora, none of this would have happened. You wouldn't have had to fight, and Yukari would not have ended up in such a sorry state. In the end, his selfishness, and a foolish decision to oppose you has caused nothing but more trouble."

"But... Yukari..." Riku's voice was barely audible. He hadn't once tore his eyes away from my fading form. "She--"

"Will be fine, my child." Maleficent cut him short. She remained perfectly patient, as she stood in the torch light. "I will see to it that she is healed. After all, she is an essential part to my greater plan."

She was right. This hadn't been Riku's fault. But it wasn't Sora's either. While she hadn't orchestrated any grand schemes that led to the current turn of events, it had still been her who had planted her seeds of doubt in Riku's heart. She convinced Riku, for who knows how long, that Sora had abandoned him. That he had left him and Kairi to fend for themselves in a place unknown to all of us. All she had to do was be patient. Let the prepubescent minds do their thing, and she wouldn't even need to lift a finger.

In the end, she'd gotten what she wanted. She'd gotten a hold of me.

"Come, my child." She said, holding out her hand. With it came a violent vortex of Darkness that gusted against my dream self.

It blasted me back through the image of Riku, still holding my broken form in his arms and deep into the darkness of the corridor. Quickly this scene melded into another, until a blur of stars raced across my vision. For a moment I was confused. But then I could hear the familiar chatter of my team mates. Turning away now, from what I realized was just the windowed view of space as the Gummi blasted across the stars, I found that I was stood in Sora's dorm aboard the ship.

The boys huddled around Sora's bed as he brooded. His dark, blue eyes met no ones and his head hung solemnly on his neck. I could only imagine that this, hastily assembled meeting had been called, due to his demeanor. Even as a floating dream ghost, I could feel the grave atmosphere that wafted off of him. I had to assume, that with a mood like that, he hadn't been doing the Gummi ship any favors.

"You know what'll happen if you keep this up." Jiminy voiced, hopping down from Donald's shoulder and onto the floor at Sora's feet. "Just try ta keep yer chin up!"

"But it's been three days!" Sora protested. "Three days since we last saw Riku and Yukari. I have no idea, if she's okay, or not. How am I supposed to help being so worried about her? About Kairi?"

Donald, Goofy and Jiminy, stood silent. All wearing frowns, they had no idea what to say. No way to reassure him, and seemingly nothing encouraging enough for him to bounce back. And when the silence amongst the four carried on, for just a bit too long. Sora's voice cut through it.

"Maybe... Maybe Riku was right..." He decided to say. "And I've been wrong this whole time."

I couldn't help but feel a bitter taste in my mouth. Had I been the only one of us that felt no real blame nor responsibility for our misfortunes? Riku hadn't been right. And Sora hadn't been wrong.
It was so easy to take a false narrative for truth, especially when it was based on you, I suppose. But maybe it was far easier for me to tell the truth from the lies, because of my powers. I was able to see the lies that Maleficent spun, the plans the villains had conjured up, and the deception that worked its way through all hearts, touched by the Darkness.

Riku was being tricked. In turn, that was now leading Sora's resolve to waver. If only I was there, I could just... tell him. I could let him know everything.

"What are you wrong about?" Goofy asked, putting a finger to his chin. "Both you and Yukari were worried sick about Kairi and Riku, throughout your whole journey. You hadn't stopped looking for them, once."

There was a glimmer in Sora's eyes. Something I couldn't quite read. While dim, it still seemed like his mood was shifting. "But... But I--"

"Don't worry about it, Sora." Donald stopped him.

Sora's eyes drifted back to the floor. Their light fading, he pulled his feet onto the bed and began to hug his knees. "I just... I want to see my friends..."

I clutched my hand my over heart, feeling the weight of those words.

"Well, Donald and I want to see the king!" Goofy supplied, shooting his finger in the air.

"And I've wanted to see Pinocchio and Geppetto, for so long!" Jiminy added.

They all seemed to chime in to express that, they too had shared the same desires and the pains to see the people they cared about the most. People, they too, had set out to find. But even still, that misery had been no company to Sora as the gloom stayed over him. But he gave them a smile anyway. A big, toothy grin ran across the length of his face, as he finally rose his eyes to meet their gaze.

"Thanks..." He said quietly. His dull eyes glazed over for a second, before he blinked away the would-be tears. "Sorry if I... worried you all. I guess, being sad won't solve anything. And it really won't help me find my friends."

Donald and Goofy, exchanged a somber glance. They did that thing they always did, were it seemed like they'd held a quick telepathic discussion.

"How about you get some rest." Donald decided. "Clear your mind a little bit. We'll hang back in the cockpit, keeping an eye out for any other worlds. Just let us know if you ne--ACK!!!"

CROOOOFWUSSHHH!!!!

A thundering crash sounded somewhere on the ship. The red emergency lights sprung to life, breathing in and out, as alarms blared angrily through the gummi.

"Guys!" Chip’s voice shot through the intercom. "Something’s just tried to ram the ship!!!"

"And it’s coming back for round two!!" Dale cried out.

This was quickly followed by another loud eruption as the ship lurched. The boys, were rocked off their feet, and Sora was thrown sideways off the bed, flying smack, right into my dream self. Where I thought he would have passed through me, like I had, Riku, he collided painfully with my face. Letting go a yelp of pain, he looked up to see what he'd hit.
I held my breath, as I looked on, wide eyed, when his gaze met mine. His now bright deep blue eyes grew as the color drained from his face. "Yu... Yukari!" He stammered.

"You guys better hurry up and get up to the cockpit!!" Chip screamed over the intercom. "It looks like another ship, is trying to ram us!!"

Donald and Goofy had already been out the door, with Jiminy in tow. But Sora didn't seem to catch the urgency of the situation as he was unable to tear his eyes away from my image.

"Sora!! Hurry up!!" Donald shouted, from the gummi's corridor.

"Y-you... you can see me?" I managed to say.

Another crash, forced the ship to jolt. This time I was tossed about until I was thrown right into Sora's body. Like jumping into a rabbit hole, his chest opened up another world from within the dreams, swallowing me in darkness.

Back into the world of black I went, as I tumbled violently, face-first, into a pit of shallow waters. Wet walls closed in around me. When I stood to check my surroundings, I realized they appeared to stretch impossibly high above my head. It was almost as if I'd been deposited at the bottom of a well. While the walls had been steep, their wet, and slimy surfaces would allow me no way to climb out. Sighing, I squinted my eyes to get a gist of just how far up this thing went. The bright spot of light, what hung high above my head, looked to be my only source of light. But from what I could tell from this far down, leaves and what not, snaked around it's opening. Strangely though, I saw no clouds nor color of blue to indicate the sky. Instead it was just a magnificent white that did very little to light up the bottom of the pit.

"Why is he doing this?" A sudden voice whispered harshly in my ear.

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sound of it, whipping my head around in search for the possible creature in the well. Yet, I found nothing and no one. That is... nothing but a new passage way that hadn't been there before.

My eyes widened at the newly formed opening, that hissed and howled behind me. Pained moans could be heard from the darkness within, whispering calls of help-- pleading and begging to be set free. What was a bit more disturbing was that the voices... had been calling out to me. Unnerved by this, I took a very small step away from the new hole in the wall, clutching the slimy dirt and stone that lined the well's bottom. A sudden burst of laughter drew my attention back to the top, where I once again, found the mouth of the well, dressed with leaves and vines.

But when I looked closer, I noticed that hadn't been the only thing there, as a familiar silhouette of a child's head seem to stare down into the well, locking me with their gaze. When, whomever it had been, realized I noticed them, they scurried away. Giggles floated off into the distance as they disappeared.

"N-No! Wait!!" I cried out, moving away from the wall. I tried to catch the child's face in the light, as they ran. But even that was futile. The window to the outside, was a hole, five hundred feet out of my reach. There was no chance of them coming back for me.

"I thought... we were friends..." The voice from before went on. Now it sounded farther away-- echoing quietly from deep within the black tunnel that howled just a bit louder now.

I glanced back up at the well's entrance before staring nervously at the hole before me. I knew I couldn't stay in this spot. I was a thousand percent sure that doing so would have just... triggered
Walking quietly through the darkness with nothing but the reflection of the water as a horribly dim source of light, admittedly, hadn’t been my best idea. My slow sloshing only seemed to grow louder the farther in I went, with the noises bouncing angrily off the walls of what now seemed to be a cave. The moaning slowly intensified with every step I took. I had been trying to push it down this entire time, but fear was slowly stirring inside of me.

I couldn't be sure what was going on, or even if this was a dream, a memory, or if I was really awake. I was moving on my own—not being kartered around against my will. Normally I couldn't do very much in these things but, somehow, I was walking on my own. I felt the cool, waters flush against my knees, wetting up my leggings and shorts. I felt the hard rocks, beneath the water as I slipped and every now again, tripping and cutting my hands against the rough surfaces as I caught myself. Even worse still, I could feel the angry, and terrified atmosphere that threatened to ensnare me the deeper I went in-- the freezing, wet air that carried the moans of... what started to sound more and more like… children.

That's when I stepped on something that wasn't a rock.

It bent awkwardly beneath my foot and I immediately stopped to looked down to see what it had been. Only, the waters were so dark, it offered light just along the surface of the cave ceilings and walls, so I could hardly see ten feet in front of me, let alone, any amount of feet below.

Slowly, I leaned into the waters, carefully plunging my hand in and tearing away the thing that'd gotten caught beneath my weight. When I pulled it out, I felt equal amounts of fear and confusion.

"A...Sh-shoe?" I vocalized.

The shoe had been a silvery looking slipper that could have belonged to a kid no older than myself. Even so, the light that I did have, offered me an extra detail I would have not preferred. Black, splotchy patches worked its way around the shoe. While it was soggy and had been poorly washed of the previous mystery liquid, I was pretty sure that it hadn't been mud this poor girl had slipped in.

Suddenly the moaning and the whispers grew louder. Looking away from my discovery, I found something far more disturbing as the previously barren waters of the cave had now been littered with shoes, scarves, gloves and other miscellaneous clothes items. They bobbed up from beneath the shallow depths. Each of them tattered, and stained with the odd dark splotches. And with every item that surfaced, the whispers only grew until there was nothing but a cacophony of hissing that all greedily attempted to dominate the rest-- all of them striving to be heard over the other.

I trembled, violently as I stood there, gazing around in the darkness at the abandoned apparel. Clutching the shoe, tightly in my hand now, I felt a burning sense of dread seize me as I tried to move. My breath left my throat in quick tremors as I watched as something began to move towards me through the waters. Its path wound and snaked about, as if to tease my ever growing fear.

"He...hello?" managed to speak.

But I really wish I hadn't.

As soon as I'd uttered those words, the whispering stopped. The Cave became dead quiet, and the thing moving beneath the waters ceased.
I tightly held my breath, watching the clothes and things bob gently about the cave. The only noise I could hear was the waters sloshing to and fro, lapping against the rocky surfaces. Even the howling winds, stilled. Only one sound seemed to slither into existence, as a snarling hiss flooded my ears.

Slowly, a head of dark oily brown hair began to rise from the waters, just a few yards away. It was dark, so I couldn't make out every detail but, this... thing had clearly used to be a person. She looked to be a girl, much older than myself. Her body looked further matured and she was, thankfully dressed but, in clothes that seemed... less modern? Her skin, where it was visible, was washed, white and blue from the color of death, and her eyes were just as milky and hollow. In fact... It seemed like they used to be an intense yet, beautiful, silver in life. But now, that beauty was stolen away as her water logged body was bloated with cuts and gashes that leaked dark fluid I knew not to be blood. When she opened her mouth, black ooze gushed from her lips, followed by a deafening hiss, that would light a fire at my feet.

"SLEEP!!!" The girl cried.

And as soon as she did, children erupted from the waters, each of them looking just as undead and bloated as the girl. Although she didn't move, these other kids did.

Slipping and nearly drowning myself, I turned to run, only to realize the water had gotten up to my waist now. I fought against the now rushing current to escape, but it was pretty useless. Turning back, I caught the angry mob of undead children, racing towards me. They crashed through the waters as if it held no restraint on them, all while screaming incoherent pleas and cries for help.

And in only a matter of seconds, the wave of dead kids and I collided as they dove into me, tearing into my flesh with their nails and mangled teeth.

I screamed in horror and pain while I kicked and squirmed from within the mob of kids. Black ooze spilled out of me wherever the children tore open a patch of skin.

"Let Go!!" I screamed as hard as I was able, kicking back heads and hands as I tried to yank myself free. But the water in the cave, only continued to rise. And as I screamed, louder, my mouth was flooded with the disgusting water and goop that quickly over took me. The horde began to morph until it was nothing but a mass of black creatures with red fangs and claws. They snapped and lashed at me, as if trying to tear me open for a prize. But they were interrupted when we all went slamming, into one of the cave walls.

The creatures, which look suspiciously like... child sized Screechers...? fell away from me, peeling off like lifeless corpses as the water around us suddenly disappeared and I was sent plummeting until I landed face first into a wet patch of silvery dirt. But it was clear that I wasn't alone, as I found myself lying at the feet of some... sobbing, whimpering person.

"W-why... is he doing this... We're supposed to be friends." Went the voice of the person.

Immediately, I pushed myself up. The sand, clinging to my soaking wet body, clothes and hair. As I stood there, waiting for the worst, I realized that this had been the source of the voice I heard-- the one that drew me into the cave in the first place. But something had been off. Something... terribly familiar.

Tufts of messy brown hair, sat atop the person's head. A big brown robe, was wrapped around their body, like the odd figure, I'd met back in the Secret Place on the Islands. They'd been clutching themselves tightly as they repeated their mantra in a shaky sporadic way, like they were trying to reassure themselves of something more than confess.
"Why... why...." The person continued, rocking back and forth on their haunches. "We're supposed to be friends. We're supposed to be friends. We're friends we're...we..."

"S..." I started to speak. The more the person, spoke the more, I began to realize just who it had been. And with that realization came the dread. "...Sora?" I called to him, reaching out my hand as I neared him.

"...s'pose to be f--"

And then he stopped.

Slowly, only his head began to turn so that he'd been able to get a look at me. A hollow, cold blue eye stared, sidelong into my own. He’d held my gaze for ten long, painful seconds, before snapping his head back around. Small whimpers threaded their way into the silence, ushering a newer sound, that was like wet scratching. I noted the dampened sand, beneath our feet, but that didn't make any sense. No matter how wet... sand didn't make squelching noises.

"Y-you must think... the ssssame as Riku." He finally said, whispering. For some reason. He'd held his s for a short period, forcing it to sound like a hiss.

"What... do you mean?" I asked, in a small voice, slowly retracting my hand.

"You musssst think... I don't care about our friends... that I don't care about our island... or... ssssaving our home." The scratching and the squelching intensified. "But I do!!" His voice boomed suddenly, as he shouted to the point where it echoed around the dark space. It was then that I realized just how empty the place seemed. No cave walls, no rocks... Just sand. The silence returned for just a moment, as Sora froze, his body arched and crooked as his head was angled upwards...

"S.. Sor--"

"Finding Riku... and Kairi..." He started again. Now it had been clear that whatever that noise was, had to have been him digging agitatedly at something before him. "That was what we set out to do... What I... set out to do! But this... this wasn't what I wanted. This... this wasn't my fault!"

Sora finally turned to fully face me and I almost gagged.

I wasn't sure how the smell hadn't hit me before but, in that second, the smell of death crested over me like a tidal wave. I slapped my hand firmly against my face, as I stared on at the body... of.... Kairi! She lay there, with dead lifeless eyes and pure white skin. At her chest, was an enormous, gaping flesh hole that oozed that black... stuff. At first I thought it was some form of dried up blood, but that didn't seem right. It came out of her eyes in the form of dried tear streaks and spattered her face. Then I directed my attention to Sora.

His wild blue eyes were almost pure white, as he looked on at me with a crazed look. His hands were stained with the black stuff. It was smothered all around his mouth and stained his clothes.

He'd been... Eating her??

Another gag almost escaped my lips as I was on the verge of retching. I didn't even know that was possible in the dream scape but somehow that feeling was palpable. I took a step back, as the sense of urgency overtook me. Fear and disgust, were overwhelming my judgment. In that moment I hadn't even been able to decipher if any of this was real or not.

"It's not what you think!!!" Sora shouted. Black tears flooding his eyes. "I d-didn't... I didn't do
this!!"

I shook my head, taking another step back. "No..." I shook my head fiercely. "You're not... You aren't real! You're not real!"

"It wasn't me!!! I didn't do this!! I wanted to save Kairi!! But how could I do that if the worlds keep getting destroyed?! It would be like what happened to the Islands, wouldn't it?! Just like our home!! I don't want anyone else to have to go through what we did!! But the Darkness will make us stronger. It'll help us!! That's why we've gotta open our hearts to Darkness! We gotta open our heart to Darkness!! We Gotta Open Our Hearts To Darkness!!!!"

Through his manic cries, Sora's eyes, turned pure yellow and his screams had turned guttural. His blackened hands and stained teeth transformed in to red, fangs and claws.

At this point I had already bolted in the opposite direction. His insane hollering stuck on my tail as he followed close behind. Terrified sobbing was forced out of my throat as I had still been fighting against the mortal terror that demanded to overtake me.

"SLLLLEEEEEEEEEEEEPPP!!!!" Demonic cries erupted from Sora's fast approaching form.

I turned only to steal a glance, and see how closely he'd manage to keep up with me. But even that itself, had been a grave error as the silvery sand path had ended and I was thrown into a drop. Whatever screams I had, were promptly stripped from my throat as I plummeted fast and hard through the blackness. But my speedy descent almost instantly turned to a drifting float, as my body lurched to a halt. Suspended through the air now, the freezing air around me smelled awful. Yet even so my eyes were met with a new challenge, as heavy lids threatened to still my waning conscious.

"Sleeeeeeeeppp." The hisses, gently ushered into my ears and I almost conked out on the spot.

But that's just what the Screecher wanted.

"No!" I shouted. "I'm not... going to give in! Nothing... you throw... throw at me will make me... submit.. to you." But my words had been in vain, as it was already so difficult to carry that sentence through the darkness.

Laughter, shook all around me, forcing a deep vibration to seize my body. "Silly girl!!" The Screecher cackled. "Surely, you are mistaken! You believe that I'm piloting this onslaught of nightmares?? How kind, but not quite. For you see, your powers of foresight and after sight are just kicking themselves into overdrive!"

"Wh... what?" I was struggling now, to keep myself upright, as I floated through the dark space.

"Though, now that my hold on you is just about as firm as it can get... I may or may not have some influence over the falsehoods within your visions. But what good is my grip on your sad little heart, if not with the assurance of fear to keep you in place!"

"You.... you don't s... scare me...." I slurred now. My eyes completely shut at the point, as I fought to keep my breathing alive.

"Oh?" Something in her voice made it clear that she thought otherwise. "Then perhaps, you no longer need for me to hold your hand." Her voice thundered around me. And suddenly, my tired state dissipated. Instead, a new kind of threat made its presence clear, as a different sort of Darkness, closed in around me. This one was much colder and more evil, and I could no longer even see my fingers, if I held my hand in front of my face. But not before a shimmer of light
exploded into existence overhead. Quickly, the cascading light began to fade as it slowly drifted through the blackness.

"You have a choice." The Screecher's voice Boomed.

Light flashed, like the shutter of a polaroid and lit up a horrible scene ahead of me. What I immediately realized to be Riku, dangled before my eyes, ensnared in a trap of inky tendrils that latched onto him and even hooked into his flesh. At first I couldn't see his face, as his head hung on his shoulders. His silvery hair, dirtied with the black mess-- turning it an ashen gray.

Though he hung there, lifeless, I could still make out the rise and fall of his chest and shoulders. A feathery light wheeze had been coming from his grayed lips.

"...Riku?" I allowed myself to let his name leave my tongue as I reached an unsure hand towards him.

But that was when the light around me began to slowly fade. And just as so, his head began to rise. Yet his features were promptly hidden away as the darkness fell upon me.

Another eruption of light surged around me. But it had not been Riku that I saw.

"A choice!" The Screecher’s voice bellowed. It rattled my insides and sent a fierce vibration into the back of my skull.

Sora, a different one than that which had chased me before, took Riku's place. As it was him who'd now been ensnared by the Darkness. A burning yellow, filled his eyes. His deep tanned complexion had turned white and clammy. The tendrils he'd been caught in, turned his skin black or blue wherever they touched.

"Yuka...rii" Sora moaned, like some undead thing. Pain replaced his usual comforting smile as his face was contorted into a trap of fear and torture. "Help... me!!" He cried out through a broken rasp.

Just as he began to struggle within his confines, the already dithering light, began to fade once more. And with the darkness, it brought a terrible cacophony of wheezing and moaning. I waited, anxiously for the light to erupt over me once more and expose yet another horrible scene, even worse than the last. Instead, the darkness dragged on a moment too long. I nearly started hyperventilating as the fear began to eat me alive. I could feel something like water and slimy tendrils lap at my ankles. When I tried to snatch away from it, this only caused it to hungrily re-attach itself.

I fought, squirming fruitlessly in the darkness now, as what felt like fingers, brushed against me--my face, my arms, legs; everywhere. I yelped out, terrified now. Shaking uncontrollably. My breathing was loud and ragged, blending in with the hisses and wheezing. My shaking had only increased. For the second time, I thought, why? Why was this happening to me and what did I do to deserve it?? But even in asking myself those questions, something told me, the answers were clear as day.

"You have a choice...." The Screecher's voice was suddenly, quiet and right in my ear. It sat against the cries of whatever had been waiting to reveal itself in the dark. Nothing had stopped. Not the freezing water, or the tendrils or then grasping hands. Yet it all seemed dependent on my choice, if they furthered there torment. But I wasn't dumb. I knew the choices would be unfavorable at best. At worst?
And then, she hissed. "It's either me... or them."

For what would be the last time, light erupted in my face, and I nearly leapt out of my skin. It was like a web of Darkness, tendrils and evil. Hands that belonged to unknown children reached out to make a grab at me. The wave of the disembodied voices crashed into me like a killer whale as the sound literally hurt, lapping at my skin like hot water. But even that hadn't been the worst of it as, my three best friends, Sora, Riku, and Kairi, took up the spot light, front and center.

The tendrils laced, painfully into their skin-- at their arms, their necks, faces legs-- everywhere. They all had the clammy discoloration, tainted with black and blue. Their eyes, burned deep yellow and they were all focused on me.

Kairi let go a shrill and angry scream when she saw me. With some unknown strength, she attempted to pull herself from the web of darkness. But freeing any limb connected to a tendril, seemed to come at a cost. Black ooze, exploded from the wound before another tendril shot through her, keeping her in place once more.

"H-help me!!" Sora shouted, dark stuff spurting from his lips as he spoke. "Help, please!!"

"It hurts!!" Riku hissed, in pain. His voice was weak as he lifted his eyes to meet mine. "Yu... kari... please..." He reached out an hand towards me. And only then did I realize how close they all were.

Instinctively, I tried to get away. But the tendrils around my feet kept me from going anywhere.

"Y-you're not real!!" I snapped. "None of this is real!"

That's what I wanted to believe, anyway.

Everything up until this point, I could feel. All of the sensations were there, the cold, the pain, the fear, the nausea. There was clarity and coherence in this... "dream". Not once had I been able to control or cut off any of the sequences. They just came one after another, chasing each other like some twisted game of cat and mouse. I just wanted out. I didn't want to be here anymore!

More hands sprouted from behind me, this time. They were black, with red claws, and latched onto me, everywhere. I attempted to pull away from them, but in front of me were my tortured friends. My brain raced as I tried to think, but a wall of dark ooze hit me from behind. The claws yanked me back, forcing me inside, but I resisted. I pulled an arm free, trying to get away but more tendrils latched on and wrapped around me. I screamed, struggling to force my way out of the trap. I screamed, until it hurt, staring at my friends as they begged for me to help them. But the tendrils quickly snapped around my mouth and face, cutting off my air supply and ability to see. I tried to tear them away with my free hand, but even that was soon taken over by the tendrils.

"You can either stay here and suffer with your friends!!" The Screecher's voice came from a burst of laughter. She cackled until it sounded like her tone, turned angry and malicious. Next thing I know, I was pulled through what I could only assume to be the ooze and black water, which instantly stripped me of all my survival instincts. My body was now submerged beneath the hungry black depths.

The lethargy came back now, as the cool waters, gushed across my skin. My hair billowed around my face, blinding me for a moment, before the strands cleared and I was met with a horror, far greater than the rest.

I was now floating around in the dark blue sea. What light had filtered in from the surface was just barely making its way down this far. Yet all the same, I wish I hadn't been able to see anything at...
all, as all around me, were the floating corpses of hundreds, upon hundreds of children.

"You can stay here, forever! Sleeping endlessly in this nice, comforting, dark abyss!!" Her laughter echoed softly around me, diverting gently through my ears, as if it had been some sort of lullaby.

My eye lids had betrayed me once again as they threatened to shut forever. But not before I gazed on at the horror stricken faces of the children about me. While some of them held expressions of permanent terror, others seemed to be floating, in peace-- their faces stilled with the facade of tranquil slumber.

Then, something brushed up against me.

I just barely managed to turn my head to find, Kairi's pale body, floating next to me. She, like some of the other children, had looked to be sleeping. Her red hair was like blood in the water, as it floated around her neck. My eyes had drifted downwards to our hands, as I found hers to be tightly clasped within mine. Confused, I turned to my right and found Riku had been there as well, on my right. His hand, held tightly in mine as well. And next to him had been Sora. Yet, there was someone else.

Another girl I didn't know. Her hair was long and white-- so long it appeared to swallow up her form. And her face... Her face was just like mine.

Before I could managed to question who that girl could have been, my lids shut, as if they had a mind of their own.

"Yesss!! Sleeeeeeep!" The hisses, were now soothing as my body, went lax and my head rested against the current of the ocean.

Yet something burned against my chest. An intense warmth, seemed to cascade over my body until it grew so intense, it felt like it had been scorching my skin. My eyes shot open and I found the white, glowing arm of the Lady of Light reaching out for me. When her fingers slipped into the material of my shirt, she yanked, only once and a blinding light flooded my world, bathing it in shower of white and gold.

Next thing I knew, I had dropped to my knees, hacking and sputtering black stuff out of my lungs. I shook like crazy, my breathing was totally out of control-- I was a mess.

"It's alright, child." The voice of Lady Light breathed, into my ears.

My head shot up as I looked straight at her. The place about us was different now. A field of chrysanthemums spread endlessly all around us. The warm breeze brushed, kindly against my face, combing through my hair like a loving parent. The sky was painted red and pink as a sunset burned across the horizon. Nothing about this place seemed at all familiar, or even connected to me. Yet, I couldn't help but get this overwhelming sense of nostalgia. Perhaps it had something to do with Lady Light? Could she have been attempting to manipulate my feelings, the same way the Screecher seemed to?

That's when everything came flooding back. The images, the children, the horrible things I saw. "Sora!" I cried out. "My friends! Those other kids!" I shouted, looking to Lady Light now. She stood calmly there before me but, would remain impossible to read. With no eyes or mouth, I had no real idea of what sort of emotion or possible thought were running through her. I wasn't even sure if my behavior was completely warranted. "They-- They're.. I have to--!!"

"What you saw wasn't real." She said. "The Lady of Darkness was trying to deceive you."
"Bu-but she said, that... she said-- she wasn't in control! That everything was only obscured or... whatever that means!! That sh-she... she!!"

"Shhhhh..." Lady light hushed, as she knelt before me.

Gingerly, she cupped my face in her hands and pressed her forehead against mine. I wasn't sure if it was her doing or not, but a powerful urge to cry overtook me. Shaking the being of light away, I stared back into the dirt. I'd been so panicked I hadn't even realized I'd been pulling at the grass. Roots and dirt, entwined within my fingers. Images of Sora, Kairi and Riku, being entangled in the cobweb of Darkness, flashed across my mind. Shutting my eyes to the unwanted visions, I lowered my head into the blanket of flowers. Sinking my face into the dirt, tears spilled out of my closed eyelids. Loud sobs erupted from my throat. Shaking even worse than before. I grabbed at the stems of the flowers, and pulled angrily at them. When I blinked, my vision blurred and distorted with tears, but I focused my eyes on the white silhouetted woman before me.

"Why... Why didn't you help me? You said that you were meant to protect me!"

"It's not that I didn't help you." Lady Light responded, quietly. "It's that I couldn't. After you'd accepted the promise of power from the Lady of Darkness, my presence in your heart has, since, been waning. I told you before, didn't I? That you'd let her in-- accepted the Darkness and welcomed it wholly and completely. Now that she has a hold on you, it will only grow stronger and stronger until your heart collapses. It's hard to say just how much longer until that happens. And while your choice, to put the use of the Darkness before you in order to protect your friends, is noble. It is also foolish if you have no idea how to control it. And with a heart as fragile as yours... Well.."

"I don't even know how to choose between the two!" I shouted through my tears, now even more angry. "And what do you mean, I don't have much longer until my heart collapses??? What does that mean? What does any of this mean? How the heck am I supposed to even know all of this?? I never asked for any of this! I never asked to become a Keyblade wielder! I never asked to walk through the dreams!! I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing, or why I can't remember anything! Why can't you just tell me? I know you know!"

For a moment there was nothing but the wind, brushing across the plain of flowers. It gusted across my face and pulled my bangs back to reveal my unanswered tears. Lady Light may not have had any features for me to read, but I didn't need them to know that she was pitying my plight.

"I will tell you what I can." She sighed, raising a finger to my forehead. "But, know that all the answers, lie within the Darkness."

"Wh--" Before I could even ask what that meant, Lady Light's finger had sunken into my skull. I felt my eyes, roll back and the world around me seemed to ripple. Like the disturbed surface of a still pond, a band of light stretched across the field and the world around us wiped away to reveal another. The two of us had now been standing atop some platform that floated above the clouds. The sky was a soft orange that drifted into an even softer purple. And an enormous castle hung over head, while simultaneously dropping beneath us. Snaking around the place, were pipes and smokes stacks that took on an invasive look, almost eating the place alive and spewing out smoke in return. This very smoke would be immediately swept away by the heavy yet, lonesome winds gusted by.

"By now, you already understand the relationship between the Light and the Darkness, yes? That
they exist alongside each other-- Opposing forces that have been at odds for centuries. But do you know why that might be?"

I turned back to the Lady Light, contemplating her words. Somehow, my anger and pain had been smoothed away. It was like, the ripple of light didn't just change the dream, it also changed my state of mind. "Well... isn't it like a battle of good and evil?" I asked. "The light represents the good, and the Darkness represents the bad. That's why Keyblade wielders exist. To get rid of the Darkness."

But the being only shook her head. "That would be the ideal way of thinking, wouldn't it? But... Light and Darkness aren't so easily affiliated with good and evil."

"What... do you mean by that?"

"Well... To start.... You can't have one without the other. Even the tiniest of Darkness, lives within Light, and vice versa. For those striving to be sole affiliates of the two, will always fail to understand, that even in the greatest darkness, a light will always be there to shine through. The same goes for the light, in that standing too close to it, you risk casting greater shadows in your wake."

"But then... you were telling me that I've chosen Darkness, like it was a bad thing." I decided to say, after a bit of thought. "But what you're saying now, is... that it isn't... a bad thing?"

"Yes... and no." Was all she said.

"Uh... could you elaborate?"

Lady Light, let go a short sigh as she turned her head to the sky. I wondered what it was that she was thinking, because, she stood still for quite some time before turning her attention back to me.

"In the past... the world was blanketed in the protection of the Light. It grew to a point where people began to fight relentlessly over it—competing for its power, so that they may be able to stave off the impending threat they would soon learn to be Darkness and corruption. And of course... they failed."

"Because... they clung so closely to the power of light?" I interrupted.

She nodded. "Yes... and that desperation led to a time where the world was consumed in Darkness. Yet even still, it was able to bounce back when the pure light eventually restored the world. For you... it's much like that. In truth, the Lady of Darkness and I exist inside of you for a purpose, of which, I have no memory. Whoever, bound us to your heart, must have done so for a reason. I believe it may have been to save you from some horrible threat. But your reliance on us, should never have even existed in the first place."

"...Then what are you here for?" I asked, with a bit more attitude than I'd meant. "And what does that make me? What's this power that Maleficent wants so badly, that I have?"

"The only thing, I can recall is that I am here to protect you, should any harm present itself. But my Darker counterpart... That is much more of a mystery to me than you believe." She confessed truthfully. "I only intervened because it was necessary. The Lady of Darkness has posed a threat. She has deceived you, and is successfully carrying out some sort of goal to consume your heart, and all of your memories. Or at least... what remains of both yours and mine anyway."

"Wait... so you mean that your memories were..."
"Yes." She nodded, solemnly. "I have been residing within you for some time now, protecting your heart for as long as I was able. The battle between the two of us has been going on, for years. But only recently has she been able to break through my defenses. It may well be due to her, learning to devour my memories. By doing that, I have slowly forgotten my purpose for a time. My powers wain and my being will eventually be lost to you. I may not even be able to protect you for much longer. And she's seen to that, with her impressive skill of seduction."

I blushed a deep shade of crimson at her words. Her head slowly turned to face me. Somehow I could feel something like resentment coming off of her.

"W-well... I'm... sorry." I tried. Fumbling with my fingers, I tried to process the severity of her words. Yet somehow, I was so calm, it was a bit unnerving. I was terrified of what that meant for me... What it meant for Lady Light. Once again, I found myself wondering if she had some powerful influence over my emotions. Still, that didn't deter me from feeling worried. "But... what’ll happen to me if my heart collapses? Do I... want to know... what that means?"

"It means... That you will no longer be you."

She let her ominous words hang in the air, as we held each other's gaze. Well, I mean, she might have been able to hold mine, but it was a bit hard for me, since... she didn't have any facial features or.... y'know... eyes that I could stare into.

"As mentioned previous, your heart is already so fragile. Having its influence lean so heavily in either direction is not good for you. It is why I limited my dealings unless necessary. Even too much of my light will do you harm. What you need is balance. If your heart is overflowing with one thing, you will be subject to losing just about everything. Your memories will fade and you will be nothing but an empty puppet. To those who seek your power, you will be an easy target. A vessel to slither into and take hold of. You may even be conscious of something else, steeling your body, but will be powerless to prevent it. All because your heart will be fractured."

"...Why?" I asked, quietly. I wasn't sure how valid her answers were, but somehow I took them as truth. And I've learned, from this journey that the truth is rarely ever pure, and hardly ever simple. "What powers... do I have that anyone could possibly want?"

"Yukari... You are no ordinary, human child." Lady Light sighed. "The reason you, nor anyone around you can remember your parents, your past or even what you are... is most likely the work of someone much like yourself. They may have altered some truths to keep harm from coming to you. But my memories are nearly gone, so I am unable to answer such a question."

I frowned, turning my eyes to the sky. Letting go a heavy exhale, I walked to the edge of the platform. I hadn't noticed before, that it had slowly been moving through the air-- across the sky on some sort of... magical light rail. It hissed, and buzzed as it snaked along, following a path around the enormous castle. As it did, I noticed a giant patch of blue down below us. It looked like a sort of ravine, that had blue floating rocks and... rising water falls! Had this been the place I'd seen in my dreams? It had to be.

Squinting my eyes I couldn't help but notice the familiar colors of red, blue, and green. And something else. Yellow and silver along with an enormous patch of brown. I couldn't have mistaken those blobs for any other group of friends I knew. Sora, Riku, Donald and Goofy were all down there-- along with a new comer. A resident of the world, maybe?

But whatever was going on, was too far away for me to see. And as the platform carried on along its route, the sight vanished beneath a slated path of a stone bridgeway.
"I may not be able to give you the answers you are looking for." Lady Light, hummed, as she moved next to me. "But, perhaps... someone else can."

She held out her glowing white hand, as if offering me to take it. Unsure, I looked back up at her face-- a featureless disk that hummed and glowed dimly in the light. And as the platform chugged along, the sun came out from behind the castle and Lady Light almost turned a deep grey as it flashed against her. Yet somehow now, I could make out what appeared to be striking silver eyes from, beneath her white form.

And in the instant the sun had showed itself, it dipped away just the same.

More questions flared up now. My head was reeling but, did it matter? She might not even understand if I asked. Those memories might be gone. But something told me, that Lady Light knew even less than she thought. Maybe whatever or... whoever altered the truths around me... Altered Lady Light too.

Putting those thoughts to rest, I faithfully took her hand. And just like it had, moments before, the world around us rippled. An enormous white band of light wiped away the entire world, taking with it, the sun, the sky, the breeze and the entire castle itself.

To Be Continued
Unable to wake up, Yukari is stuck in the dreamscape, forced to run from the nightmarish visions. Eventually save by the Lady of Light, the being opts to reveals a frightening truth, that Yukari doesn’t have much time left in this world. Still determined to uncover the truth of what she is, she accepts the being’s invitation, to dive deeper into the dreams.

"I must say.... to bring this girl here as you did, with no vessel-- that was a reckless venture. I've already warned you to stay your reliance on the Darkness. But, worry not, my child." Maleficent cooed. "For she should be fine as of now. She only needs to rest. Perhaps, even in this state, her heart is busy at work."

"Her... Heart?" Riku's voices questioned.

"Yes." Maleficent responded with exuberance. "I realize, I've not yet mentioned to you why this girl is so precious to my cause. I suppose, now is as good a time as any."

I heard them before I saw them. Quieted voices waking up a dark world that slowly faded into existence. Floating down into the darkness, the hollow air around me whistled defiantly in my ears. But as my feet touched down upon something solid, a sharp ripple of light wiped around the outlines of a room. Colors of dull, brown and yellow walls, boxed myself and the Lady of Light, into a plain room with high contrasting emerald green flooring. In one corner was an old desk, holding no signs of use for what could have been years. In the other was a bed, surrounded by the aforementioned bodies that belong to the conversing voices. They stood hovering over a motionless form, staring down at the sleeping, real world version, of myself.

"The girl's abilities, are as old as the ages." She began. Her black dressed lips unable to keep from grinning. "Though I know not what she is, by name, I know of her traits I most definitely require. Much like the old reports that led me to this place, I happened upon another set of records—who’s creator has been lost to time, but the contents bountiful in information that would reinforce my ultimate goal of multi-world conquest. For within this child, lies the ability to duplicate heart and body."

"What?" My outburst perpetuated the silence, as I watched Riku's puzzled gaze settle across the dark clad woman. "Come on..." I rolled my eyes, as I turned to Lady Light. "She can't be serious?"

But the white silhouette of a woman, stood silent. I didn't know what she did or... didn't remember she knew... but this of all things, just seemed... out there.
"What do you mean?" Riku finally asked.

"Why, exactly as it sounds." The witch chuckled. "She can duplicate a heart, or a body, or both. Perhaps even make one up from scratch. Like a sort of container, she may well be able produce a being similar to that of a Heartless but capable of thought and intelligence. Such an incredible power to wield. If only it were in more capable hands... Whether she knows that this ability exists within her, or not won't matter. We will drive it out, and soon we'll become an unstoppable force! No man, nor beast would dare... Could dare, oppose me!"

Maleficent's grin continued to stretch across her face as she rambled on, giddily, at the thought of unimaginable power which—she'd forgotten, she did not possess. I'd like to see just how she thought I'd go along with her plans. Considering the last time she asked me to join her cause, I gave her a big fat no.

Riku stared silently on at my unconscious form. Something in his eyes screamed uncertainty as Maleficent's words did little to convince him. Worse still, he seemed more worried than anything. His knitted brows, revealed a world of concern—like he suddenly didn't like the way Maleficent had been talking. And when the evil sorceress noticed this look herself, she knelt forward to place a slim hand of long fingers atop his shoulder.

"Perhaps... she may be able to do something about that girl, Kairi's, heart." Maleficent's smile had now been running the width of her face.

Riku's eyes twitched briefly but, his expression remained unchanged. Once again it was almost impossible to read him. I'd never really had any issue when it came to stranger's I'd just met. I read them all just as easy as I could Sora. And he and I were super close. So then, why was I having trouble with Riku? Why could I only read him, on and off?

He kept his eyes strained on my sleeping face, not bothering to meet the gaze of the witch, who stood over him. Though this didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. Maleficent slid her fingers away from his shoulders as she slinked back across the room, towards the exit.

"In any case, we've much to attend to." Her voice suddenly sounded like she'd been submerged under a blanket of salt water.

I turned to look at the witch, only to find that the whole world around me had changed. No longer had I been stood in a dark and dreary room. The place was now a sort of ship cabin, as I'd seen plenty from books in school. The golden wood walls, hit with ample lantern light, radiated brightly around me. Everything about the place seemed lavish and comfortable. Not like anything I'd ever seen. The golden plank outlines of the room were accented with the deep reds of rugs, decorative arm chairs and a cushioned benches that line the walls. Gold and valuables spilled from the mouths of chest that sat along the corners, dripping jewels across the floor, hinting that perhaps this ship belonged to that of a pirate. I followed the trail of coins and diamonds to a familiar pair, standing over yet another sleeping form.

"Is this not proof enough?" Maleficent's voice quivered with false emotion, as her eyes traced the form of a younger girl of red hair. "That you can no longer rely on that boy you would call friend?"

I stood speechless, as I watched on. With wide eyes, I stared silently into Kairi’s face. She'd looked fine but she hadn't exactly seemed to be sleeping. It was like what Riku had said to me, back in Monstro. She didn't even... seem to breathe. No movement from her at all. And her half-lidded eyes showed hollowed out pools of violet. But I could still... feel something from her. Though, whatever it was... it was weak.
"Should she fail to regain the heart which she has lost, this girl may never wake." Maleficent's voice vibrated above me. "She'll remain in this state, like a lifeless puppet... forever."

Maleficent's words hit hard. Even harder when considering the words of Lady light who had mentioned my own fate, of becoming something of a puppet if I didn't get my act together. But she also said that being in such a state, would render me a tool to anyone who saw fit to squirm their way into my hollowed form. Would that mean, the same could happen to Kairi?

"Anything..." Riku suddenly spoke. "I'd do anything to save her-- anything to get her heart back."

"Ah... and you can." The witch proclaimed. "For, there are seven maidens of the purest heart. We call them, the Princesses of Heart. Gather them together... and a door to the heart of all worlds, where in lies untold wisdom, will open. There, you will surely find a way to recover that girl's heart."

Riku's gaze had not once met with Maleficent's. With tightly squeezed fist, he stared out the small window ahead of him with an intense expression. It made me feel a bit uneasy but, it was that look on his face that had me realize this moment, had been from the past. Back before the events of Monstro and maybe even before I met him at Agrabah. This must have been after we reunited, back in Traverse Town. It only made sense, if I were just going off of how he'd acted towards us-- towards Sora. He'd been so distant because he'd already been spoon fed a good helping of lies that would convince him that Sora hadn't cared enough about Kairi, because he was off dealing with another task.

But Riku hadn't been made aware that Sora, had in fact, been looking for Kairi. He'd been looking for Riku too. But Maleficent had to tell him whatever she needed to get him on her side.

"And you'll be able to accomplish this task, with the power of Darkness-- The power to control the Heartless!" Maleficent continued.

At those words, dark flames exploded off of Riku's body. The wave of pure evil, surged hungrily as it cascaded across my vision. Alarmed at the sudden eruption of dark power, I took a step back only to go tumbling to the ground. And when I moved to make my way back to my feet, I'd found a large pair of big, yellow shoes, right in front of my nose. With wide eyes, I looked up.

"Sora!" I gasped.

I quickly realized that Sora hadn't been alone, as a group of what appeared to be, sweaty pirates all dressed in striped tees, and torn pants, brandishing long, pointed swords, had been swarming around him. They each beheld conniving grins, of missing teeth, as their bright eyes pierced through Sora.

"What the heck's gotten into you, Riku!?!" Sora shouted, ignoring the men around him. "These guys; the Heartless-- Why are you on their side?"

"The Heartless obey me now, Sora." Riku's voice sounded from behind me. I turned to find him standing atop the bridge of the ship I hadn't realized the scene to be taking place, until then. His eyes were cold and distant, but there was an eerie calm about him now, as he stood staring down his nose at Sora. "I have nothing to fear."

"Don't you get that you're just tempting fate?" Sora yelled, aggravated. "This is the Darkness we're talking about! I've seen enough people get swallowed up by that dark temptation! Even if you're controlling the Heartless now, you think you'll be for long? You're an idiot if you really believe that! Sooner or later, they'll swallow your heart! The Darkness is gonna eat you alive!"
"Pfft! Those people were week." Riku scoffed. "My heart's too strong!"

Riku dove into the crowd, his sword trailing alongside him, ready to impale his target, which I could only assume would be Sora. As I lay at his feet, I felt some instinctual need to get the heck out of the way. The dreams were unpredictable, after all. I didn't want to risk the chance of actually getting impaled one of these times.

But as I rolled to evade his attack, I found that the entire scene changed once again. I was now in a familiar place, drenched in colors of icy blue. The loud roar of water, flooded my ears and the ambiance of the world around me, howled, as if angry at my intrusion. Looking up, I found the rising waterfalls that had plagued my dreams again and again-- As if to say, this place had been the start of everything. Though, something in me felt like it would be the climax. The water, shot up into the orange sky, as if time had been flowing backwards. The small blue bergs that hung in the air, here and there, hummed with some sort of old magic. Quickly, I learned that I hadn't been the only one to inhabit the space.

"Incredible." Riku’s voice sounded from across the blue plane. "Even without a vessel, you've managed to follow me all the way back here."

His arrogance hit me like a brick wall and I looked to find he'd been stood before an enormous figure of brown fur. It wore nothing but dark trousers and a long purple cape, draped around its broad shoulders. It's bright blue eyes searing holes of hatred into Riku's face while growling mercilessly in his direction.

"You took Belle from me!!" The beast bellowed, showing it's fangs, from within it's furry maw. "And as the Darkness fell upon our world, and I was left alone, I could only vow to save her! I simply believed that I would get her back, and I will!! So Hand Her Over To Me!!"

The beast launched himself at Riku, claws out to disembowel. But a smirk danced across his lips as he summoned his dark blade. Within a split second, Riku had vanished, only to reappear above the beast, sinking his Soul Eater into the shoulder of the creature and it let forth a stomach churning cry of pain. Riku leapt off of the beast, who'd began to flail his arms at the boy to tear him from his back. Dazed and in pain now, the creature turned, attempting to brace himself for another attack. But, Riku was just as scary fast as when we fought-- if not, faster!

With his blade out to run the creature through, a malicious expression took over Riku's features. And in that moment, I realized that he had maybe dwelled within the Darkness for far too long. This terrible expression of joy on his face, when doing harm to others or at least dominating them in a battle, was unlike anything I'd seen from him before. And maybe that was just it-- that I'd not been there to witness him fall from grace the way he had. But now that I see the other side of his facade, I was more hurt and stunned than anything else.

The beast, let go another roar, bracing himself for Riku's attack. But it would never come, as a blur of red and yellow slammed into his winged blade-- interrupting the fight.

All eyes turned to the trio of new comers what entered the scene, throwing themselves in front of the beast, to protect him. Donald and Goofy, glared ahead at the older boy, whilst Sora threw away Riku's guard, shoving him back with a look of disappointment.

"About time, you showed up." Riku smirked, not even fazed at the disapproving looks of the party.

"Are you, freaking serious?!" Sora shouted angrily. "This is getting out of hand! You need to stop!"

"Stop what, Sora?" Riku retorted, his eyes narrowed. "I'm doing what I have to in order to help
Kairi-- which by the way you weren't even trying to do. You weren't even trying to find her! You'd really look at me and act like I'm the bad guy here, when I'm doing everything I can to bring her back?!

"Get real, man! What you're doing, is wrong! Hurting other people to help Kairi, is wrong!" Sora spat. His eyes reddening from the intensity of his emotions. "Can't you see that the worlds are at risk? All of the places we've visited are in danger of being consumed by the Darkness-- even this one! And ignoring that, to save Kairi, is wrong too!! You think I don't care about her, or even what happened to Yukari, for that matter! I've been worried sick! I've been looking everywhere-- every nook and cranny. But I still understand what's important. Even Yukari knew what was important! That even if we were all together, we'd have nothing to go back to! Our home is gone! Destiny Islands, is gone, Riku! I've been trying to make it so that we had a place to go back to! Both of us were! And I think whatever's gotten into your head, has messed up your sense of right and wrong!"

For a second, the only sound to be heard was the deafening roar of the rising falls. The mounting tension that hung in the air was suffocating. But Sora and Riku held each other's gaze, relentlessly.

"So that's it..." Riku's voice was quiet now, as he clenched his blade tightly. "That's the only excuse you could come up with-- The reason for you to abandon your friends!??"

Riku dove at Sora, with his... Keyblade...?? sinking it right into his guard.

Wait. Since when did Riku have a Keyblade?

I blinked hard for a second, as I watched the battle unfold. There were a number of things that were off about the fight itself. While not at first noting the shift in the environment, I realized that this must have taken place at some time a bit later. Now the boys were inside, running around in a sort of grand entrance hall. I mean, at least to me, it seemed that way. The shiny cerulean blue floor, etched with an intense floral pattern, glistened beneath their feet. Tall pale columns sprouted up, running the length of the room, with each sitting just a yard or two apart. An incredible, double staircase with gold accents wrapped around a small gurgling fountain, that held a spout, resembling the head of a beast. Something about this place was oddly familiar but I couldn't chase that thought for much longer, as Sora was thrown to the floor.

In his hands, he'd tightly clutched a wooden, toy sword. It was like the ones the kids back home had used for their beach brawls. But, why was he fighting with that? Why did Riku have his Keyblade??

Riku leapt towards the fallen Sora, his... Key held out to impale. Sora, rolled out of the way, just in time, swiping his sword at Riku's feet. With ease, he leapt over the attack, but Sora quickly followed up, making a quick recovery and running his wooden blade into Riku's lowered guard. But Riku scoffed, slamming his blade down onto Sora's, grinning darkly into his friends eyes. Sora struggled under the weight of the attack but pushed the older boy away and thrust the toy at Riku with a grunt of frustration.

A laugh trickled away from Riku's lips as he caught the attack, clutching the wooden blade in his palm. Sora's eyes bulged with surprise. But not before Riku's hand erupted into a fit of black flames. Squeezing his dark clad hand, he crushed the wooden shaft and in one pass it splintered right through the center, quickly turning into a mess of chipped wood pieces.

Sora was too stunned to react, but Riku took this chance to slam him in the side of the head with the butt of the toy sword. He then whirled around and sent a kick into his chest, forcing the younger boy to go flying across the room.
"Sora!!" Donald and Goofy, both cried out. But they hadn't moved from where they stood, just watching the battle play out.

"You should quit while you're ahead." Riku hissed, moving toward him. He chucked the now useless hilt of wood at Sora’s feet. The look on his face was dark and unnerving. His once bright sea green eyes glared darkly at Sora. There was nothing but loathing, coming from his direction. It was so palpable, it seemed like curdling black flames, had been smoldering around his body. Though something told me, that wasn't just my imagination.

"I'm not... leaving without Kairi and Yukari!" Sora announced, struggling to get up, weekly grasping the hilt of what had used to be the toy sword.

"Then the Darkness will destroy you!" Riku erupted.

Angrily, he lunged at Sora, a wave of black smoke exploded from his chest. It quickly wrapped around his form, like a visible aura of dark power. He moved with frightening speed, homing in on the fallen boy. But right as he'd just been about to drive his Key into Sora's body, a loud clang and a flash of dark blue light, flashed across my vision, flooding the room for just a moment.

"Get up!" Donald shouted, casting a cure spell Sora's way.

"But--!" He protested.

Goofy had been the one to stop the attack, punting Riku back, and standing guard in front of Sora, who'd looked stunned. But he hadn't been done, ramming his shield at Riku, further pushing him back. Donald jumped in and casted a flurry of fire attacks. With ease, the older boy threw up his Key to deflect the spell, as a bubble of light, flashed around him, before fading off just as quickly as it'd come.

"Betraying your king huh?!" Riku shouted, rushing the two now.

Donald, jumped back to cast a protective field of air around Goofy just in time, as a volley of dark flames came shooting his way. Goofy then bashed his shield into Riku's face as he met him. Then reeled back and flung his shield out to slap him across the chest one more time, sending Riku, to the floor.

"I ain't betrayin' the King!" Goofy retorted. "And I ain't betrayin' Sora neither! After everything we've been through, there's no way we could just turn our backs on him."

"That's right!" Donald quacked. "You may have the Keyblade now, but that doesn't change the fact that Sora's still fighting for more than just himself! He's fighting for the fate of the multiverse! And we'll do whatever we can to stick by him. Our king will understand!"

Unbridled rage, appeared to flood from Riku's eyes, alone. Balling his hands in to fist, he stood there, no longer chained down by his anger. And as the tsunami of negative emotions crested over him, he took flight, with his Keyblade trailing behind him as he rushed the trio.

"Don't make me laugh!!" Riku roared out.

"Move Sora!" Donald shouted.

But it didn't matter. Riku was fast. And he was upon them before they could even blink.

He blasted through Donald and Goofy who cried out, as he sent them flying. Then he crashed his blade against the broken half of Sora's wooden hand guard, throwing all his weight into him.
Darkness flared up around his body-- shooting off like dangerous fireworks.

"You think you've got what it takes!?!" Riku shouted. "You're powerless!! You're weak! Against the Darkness, and against me!"

A surge of black flames blasted Sora off his feet once more. And as he touched down against the marble floor, the rest of his wooden sword had been reduced to nothing but ashes. Now he lay defenseless there with Riku looking down on him with nothing but pure animosity.

But he had no intention of staying down. "Y-you're wrong... You're wrong Riku!" Sora fought, slowly rising to his feet. "Real power… comes from the heart! Real power… comes from the people around you! The people who hold you up and care about you! …I'll always be strong... And as long as theirs someone out there to think of me, then are hearts will be one. My friends are my power!"

At his words, a light radiated bright from Sora's chest and the Keyblade seemed to react to this. Suddenly, the Key had stripped itself free of Riku’s hold, as the thing melted into an inky mass of Darkness, until it was quickly replaced by his old Soul Eater. The Keyblade then reappeared in Sora's possession, glittering brighter than I'd ever seen it before, almost humming with a burning warmth.

"Your... heart...?" Riku seethed, now tightly clenching his blade— a dark shadow had now fallen across his face. "What good.... would that weak little thing do for you? How can a heart protect anything!!?"

Angrily, he swiped his blade through the air, and a powerful surge of Darkness spilled across the room. It flooded around the boys and even myself, swallowing up the entire room and the scene along with it.

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Now the focus was on Riku, once again. Dark smoke, wafted off of his body as he ran, angrily and alone through what now looked to be the dark corridors from before. He winced and hissed in pain, as he ran. His chest tightly clutched in one hand, with his Soul Eater, clamped firmly in the other. His legs moved on auto pilot as he clambered loudly through the castle. Exhausted and defeated, the pain he felt was written all over his face. He'd relied so heavily on the Darkness to win that fight, but he lost it all the same. With no one to blame, he fled. He'd made a fool of himself and in the throes of pain and embarrassment, he ran away-- From Sora, the light... and even himself.

"What's... happening??" He choked out, agony shooting from his words. "My... heart... feels like it's being crushed!"

For a moment, he faltered, stumbling over his feet. But he didn't stop. He seemed desperate. To what, I couldn't be sure. But it was clear that, even in such a state, something forced him to push on.

"You have some guts, to walk so boldly into the darkness." A deep voice suddenly reverberated through the dark corridor.

Riku slowed to a halt as he searched about himself for the bearer of the voice. For a moment, he stood still, squinting into the black abyss that was the hall before him. Until something slinked into the dim torch light.
"You..." Were the words the escaped his lips.

Finally within view, I stared with wide eyes at the misshapen figure what hid itself inside a swath of brown robes. A small strangled noise formed in my throat as I watched it, slowly glide across the floor towards Riku, his words smooth like honey. Riku's reaction had been more than enough to confirm that he too had met with this mysterious, robed figure, at least, once before now. And I would have been naive to think it hadn't been enough proof to fault him for the reason that the Islands had been swallowed up by the Darkness that fateful night.

"Know this..." The voice from the robes, spoke. "The heart that is strong and true, shall win the Keyblade. For those week in heart, have already failed to redeem themselves."

"You... you're saying that my heart is weaker than his?!" Riku asked, referring to Sora, as though the idea made him sick.

"In that instant, yes." The voice continued. It'd slinked closer to Riku now, only feet apart. "But you can grow stronger. When stepping through the door to darkness, you showed no fear-- No terror! Take the ultimate plunge! Step further into the Darkness and you will become an unbeatable force! Your heart will become even stronger!"

I bit my lip as I watched on, helpless to interrupt this turn of events. Whatever Riku's decision would be... it had, likely, already been made. I was just forced to watch, as he did so. Forced to watch as the figure rose his empty sleeve to Riku's chest and began to chant. Riku's body, seemed to freeze up, jolting from some sudden pain.

And then, just as terribly, dark smoke of blacks, blues and greens, erupted at his skin. Riku's mouth was torn wide open as he let go silent screams that were immediately stripped from his throat. He struggled as pain took over, contorting his face and stiffening his whole body.

"Abandon your confusion..." The voice pressed, hungrily. "Give your heart directly to it-- Embrace the darkness itself!"

Soon the flames engulfed them both, cascading over their forms until, slowly, they began to meld into one another until there was nothing left. Nothing but a heavy presence of evil that lingered in that space.

"I'm sorry..." A quiet voice abruptly tore through the overwhelming silence.

I turned my head to find myself back in that depressing room from earlier where I still lay unconscious in the bed. Riku sat there, staring at the floor with empty eyes. From the look of it, this moment seemed to have taken place before he and Sora met, at the rising falls.

"I didn't mean for what happened... to happen." His words filled the silence in brevity as he spoke to my unresponsive self.

Looking at myself, lying there, I could see I'd regained my color. But still, sleep had ensnared me. Just from watching the turn of events that transpired, I wasn't able to figure out how much time had passed since the Monstro incident. But judging from Riku's worry stricken face, and the way he was muttering to my unconscious form, I'd have to guess three days had turned into several.

"She said you needed rest, but... It just... feels like you're not going to wake up." His voice was quieter now. "Every time I come back here, you're still asleep. You don't move... and it's so hard to tell if your actually just sleeping. I can't help but feel like anything that happens to you from here, is because of me. If you become like Kairi... then... it'll be my fault."
Riku had been gently cradling my scorched hand in his. Tearing his eyes from the floor, he forced himself to look at my sleeping face. But that quickly appeared to be a challenge for him, when his eyes fell across the electric scar that ran the length of my left arm. Whatever magic Maleficent had worked to heal me, it didn't seem to get everything. The red hot marks, flared angrily, flashing memories into Riku's head as he seemed to be recalling those painful moments. Though he tried to forget them as he shut his eyes, they would still be there when he opened them again.

With his head, hanging on his shoulders, Riku hadn't seemed to notice that my sleeping self, had slowly began to open her eyes. But instead of their normal, bright chartreuse, they appeared of almost silvery and dull. Like a sage green, flecked with a starry void.

Then my hand, which Riku had been holding, began to move. It lifted away from his palms and lightly caressed his cheek. Or it had at least attempted to before Riku quickly took notice of the sensation, springing back in his spot. His bright jade eyes, stared on bewildered for just a second, before the shock was quickly replaced with delight.

"Y-Yukari?" He blurted out, clasping my hand to his face.

I felt a blush tickle my cheeks as I watched on, not at all expecting him to reciprocate the affectionate gesture. Though still. I was confused. How was I moving like that... if I was still unconscious?

My real world hand, trailed from Riku's face to his chest. The tickle of a blush turned to a rampaging wave of heat as I watched on, mouth agape. But I had already been getting ahead of myself, as I failed to notice, that my hand had settled where his heart had been. And things only got... weirder.

"This... body... is warm. But also... cold." A voice came from my throat, that sounded like mine but...also not mine? My real world eyes, remained dreamy and half lidded. My lips only slightly parted as I spoke, eyes fixed and body still.

"What are you…?" Riku's words trailed, as he looked more confused than ever.

"You rely on the Darkness but it will only do you harm. It will consume you, if you let it. Stop now… before it's too late."

"Yukari, what are you talking about?" Riku blurted clasping my hand now tightly where it sat.

"I can feel… how deeply rooted that Darkness is within your heart. That anger and spitefulness-- It will lead you down an unforgiving path... If you do not let it go now, then the Darkness will be sure to always have a hold on you."

"What...what do you mean I--? Yukari!"

His cries were due in part to my body going slack, once more. My hand went limp, falling away from his chest and my half lidded eyes, gently closed. Riku's panicked pleas for me to wake up began to fill the room.

"That… can’t..." I managed to say. Though somehow the words caught in my throat. "Lady Light, how could--"

My words halted as I turned to find the being that had led me into this stream of events, hadn't been there. In fact, I think she hadn't been with me since the first sequence change. Though, somehow I could still feel her presence lingering about. Instead I was met with a long stretch of a void-like corridor that strained into an abysmal black. A desolate howl of hollow air passed my ears and I
turned at the sound.

Riku had vanished. And the room and my body and the entire sequence, along with it. But I didn't dare believe, for a second, that I was alone.

"SCRAAAAUUGH!!"

A gurgling cry of hisses flooded the hall, and I had to resist the urge to cover my ears, as a wisp of black came flying out of the darkness.

It latched onto my throat and angrily screamed in my face. The thing was like an amorphous, smoky wisp of evil, trying to take shape, or choose a form as it cycled through the many horrifying entities form my nightmare previous. A crazed Sora, a suffering Riku, that zombified girl, Kairi, and the girl who shared my face-- It was like the thing was trying to decide on how to scare me the best, with a face that could hurt me the most.

I'd been so spellbound by the thing's shifting form, I hadn't realized I'd been plunged into a sharp drop. Looking past the thing's head, I could see what looked to be the edge of the hall I'd been stood in, shrinking away at a frightening speed.

I grabbed at the smoky, formless hands, coiled around my neck, and tried fruitlessly to tear them away. And right as I did, the Screecher's face of solid black, and mangled fangs shot into my face-- her eyes funneling a ferocious loop of reds and yellows as she let loose an angry bellow.

In an attempt to not get bitten, I threw my head aside. But still her teeth, sunk eagerly into my shoulder. I let go a cry of pain, shoving my knee into her shapeless body, trying to get her off of me. But her smoky silhouette of a form only wrapped further around me. The black, stuff began to solidify, turning to ink, as it crawled across my body and into my mouth, eyes and nose. I tried to fight her, ripping away the dark goo, but it was just as useless as any other attempt to get rid of her. Her dark body quickly swallowed me up, bringing with it an onslaught of awful visions.

I watched in horror now as a great big heart of channeling colors of red, green, black and purple, hung over a great big room. The walls were a tangled mess of tubes, and exhaust pipes. The heart, washed the room in its earie light, coloring the blood red floor a flurry of mis-matched hues. At its base was Kairi lying there, just as lifeless, as any other time she had appeared before. Her small frame, was swallowed up by the oncoming surge of Darkness that began to explode from the enormous Heart, what hung over her.

The scene had been made even more terrible when I noticed a few other bodies, lying there next to her. Sora, Donald and Goofy, all lay sprawled across the floor, defeated and unmoving. I tried to move towards them but was unable, as my gaze was fixed to wherever the dream wanted me to look.

My vision then shifted, as Riku's image was all I could see. Though now, he seemed different, clad in a dark suit I'd never seen him wear before. His eyes were wild with. His expression was malicious. Amber pupils reflected the red light that swarmed into the room. And as the smoky tendrils of Darkness slowly began to sift around him, his body began to contort, and convulse. Ragged cries were ripped from Riku's throat as he fought against some invisible evil. And just when I thought I'd seen the worst of it, this great... big... black thing shot out of Riku's chest. He howled in pain as the thing tore and clawed and slithered from his form, crawling its way slowly across, the field of broken bodies.

Its bright yellow eyes, glowed hungrily as they locked onto, what could only be me. At its large head, antennae erupted like long, spindly horns, snaked in a mess of pulsing blue veins. Hisses,
flooded my ears, coming from between the thing's enormous set of greyed human like teeth. It's gums were dark-- black and blue-- Permanently made visible by its lack of lips as it's snarled at me with a seething grimace. The things bulky frame was intimidating enough. Yet, there had been no more body to this thing as it tapered off into a ghostly tail. But the hollowed out shape of a Heart, at its abdomen, forced me to pause.

"SLEEP!!" The thing barked, and a horrible sound emitted from its throat.

It jumped at me with fearsome speed. Unable to move, it caught me in its grasp, squeezing me in its enormous hands. I'd struggled, but it seemed like my will to do anything had been stolen from me. I could do no more than stare, wide eyed into the yellow orbs of the thing as it hissed and snarled.

"Wake up, Yukari...

I had absolutely no time to think, as a sudden image of a man, flashed before my eyes. His amber gaze, held mine with a ferocity and the malignant grin that ripped across his dark face tore another hole of fear into my chest. I was barely able to make out his features of long, silver hair before he roared in my face.

"WAKE UUUUUUP!!" He snapped at me. His form cycling impossibly fast through the series of faces, jumping from Riku to Maleficent, and then Sora, whose eyes were a beady yellow as he howled savagely at me—his mouth, distending into an impossibly large maw of red mangled teeth.

I woke with a start.

My eyes, now wide open, flooded with tears as they spilled endlessly down the sides of my face. Taking long blinks, I wiped the hot moisture from my eyes. And as I slowly began to rise from my spot, I noticed two things right off the bat.

The first was that I appeared to be in some sort of Library. The room, had been flooded with the warm red of the evening sun, filtering in through enormous windows that hung along the walls. The green tiled flooring had seemed much more vibrant than when it sat, dulled in the room I'd seen in my dreams.

The second thing I noticed... which was... really the first thing I noticed... Was that I wasn't alone.

There Infront of me, at the side of the couch I'd found myself woken up on, had been a man. He was tall, blonde and blue eyed. Dressed in dark, grayed fatigues with an old tattered red scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face. And he stood there still as could be with his giant sword pointed right at me.

"...Cloud?"

To Be Continued

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